

NEEDLE and THREAD

A Tale of Survival from Bialystok to Paris



by CHARLES "SHLEIMEH" ZABUSKI

as told to JUNE SUTZ BROTT

NEEDLE AND THREAD

A Tale of Survival from Bialystok to Paris

by CHARLES "SHLEIMEH" ZABUSKI

as told to JUNE SUTZ BROTT

Popincourt Press
Oakland
1996

Digitized by Project Zikaron
Touro University-NY Libraries
www.zikaron.tourolib.org
2026

Copyright © 1996 by June Brott
All rights reserved

Text and cover design by Sara Glaser
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 0-9654629-1-9
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-92709

Digitized by Project Zikaron
Touro University-NY Libraries
www.zikaron.tourolib.org
2026

Foreword

BY SAMUEL P. OLINER, PH.D.

Although it boggles the mind, there are still those who, perhaps not even malicious at heart, say "Enough already" about the Holocaust horror and human depravity. Despite the thousands of pages that have been written about the Holocaust, I feel that there are tens of thousands of true stories that will never be written because the victims and witnesses have perished.

Needle and Thread, a book sensitively written by June Sutz Brott, is an important contribution to the endless saga of the Holocaust. The story told to Brott by Shleimeh Zabuski, her survivor cousin, is filled with details of the day-to-day horror and unspeakable cruelty that he suffered and witnessed.

This book is short, fact-packed, and very readable. It tells of Shleimeh's growing up in Bialystok; the initial experience with the Nazis, who conquered Poland in 1939; the Nazi withdrawal after the Stalin-Hitler agreement that allowed the Soviets to occupy western Poland, including Bialystok; life under the Soviets; the second arrival of the Nazis in 1941, after they invaded the Soviet Union; the establishment of the ghettos; Shleimeh's experience in extermination and concentration camps, including Majdanek, Blizhin, Flossenburg, Lehren Lagen, Auschwitz, Birkenau; the loss of Shleimeh's family; the liberation; and the renewal of life.

Are there too many stories of the Holocaust? No. In fact, there are too few. Living historians like Shleimeh Zabuski—and other survivors who feel compelled to rescue the memory

of those who suffered and paid the ultimate price—honor us by telling the stories so we will learn the lesson of what did happen and what can happen when justice, compassion, mercy, and moral responsibility desert humanity.

Needle and Thread—suitable for all readers above the age of fourteen—is clear, comprehensively written, and so engrossing that readers will want to know what happens on the next page and the next page.

Corrections and Additions to Needle and Thread

Pages iii–iv:
Samuel P. Oliner, Ph. D. is the director of the Altruistic and Prosocial Behavior Institute, Humboldt State University.

Page ix:
Fred Rosenbaum [*not* Rosenberg] is the founding director of Lehrhaus Judaica.

Preface

BY JUNE SUTZ BROTT

In my family's Chicago house, a brown-tinted photograph hung above the fireplace. That picture—taken in 1929 in Bialystok, Poland—haunted me during my grammar school years. Fifteen unsmiling faces gazed out at me, all unfamiliar except for one: my father. The others, I was told, were my grandparents, three aunts, four uncles, and six cousins. I was particularly drawn to one cousin—a sweet-expressioned boy with large eyes, his arms around his parents.

Whenever I asked why my cousins never came to visit us, my father always seemed uncomfortable and evasive. It was my mother who eventually told me that everyone in the picture had been murdered.

"Because they were bad?" I asked.

"No. "

"Then why?"

"Because...because...just because they were Jewish."

Eventually, I learned more about the picture and about Bialystok, where my father, Ben Sutz, was born in 1895. After an especially terrible pogrom in 1906, his parents (my grandparents) decided to get him out of Poland. Hidden in a hay-filled wagon, Ben was smuggled out one moonlit night by bribed Poles who took him to the port in Gdansk. Put aboard a ship bound for America, he carried a basket filled with sausages and bread, and he wore around his neck a tag with the Chicago address of an aunt and uncle.

Ben went to night school, became an American citizen, and in 1917 married Bertha Goodheart (Gootar), an immigrant from Russia. In 1929 Ben visited the Bialystok family he had left twenty-two years earlier. He persuaded his family to pose for a photograph, but he couldn't convince them to move to America. Long accustomed to Polish antisemitism, they hadn't yet heard much about Hitler, and they never could have predicted the fate of Europe's Jews.

Because I grew up assuming that all those relatives had died, I was surprised to discover, as a young adult, that one person actually was alive: my cousin Shleimeh, the boy with large eyes. I knew only that he was thirteen years older than I, had somehow survived slave labor and death camps, settled in Paris after the war, opened a ladies' tailoring shop, and called himself Charles, a name that sounded in French somewhat similar to Shleimeh, his Yiddish name.

I met my cousin Charles for the first time in 1970 when he came to the U.S. with his wife Adela, also a concentration camp survivor. We wanted to talk with each other, but we had no languages in common. A few years later, when my husband Gene and I visited Paris, I met him again, briefly, but our superficial conversations were disappointing, limited by a tourist vocabulary.

After Adela died in 1985, Charles retired, visited the U.S. again and stayed in our Oakland home. The time was fortuitous: it was Passover, I was between jobs and freer than usual, he had learned some English, and we spent many hours together, communicating as best we could. I wanted to know about our vanished Polish family, but Charles—who for forty years had been silent about his wartime experiences—staunchly resisted all my questions. Finally, I convinced him that if he, the sole survivor and eye-witness, refused to speak, then the saga of our Bialystok ancestors would be lost forever—to me, my father, my four brothers, all our children, and even to Charles' own son.

We set to work on my dining room table—Charles at one end and I and my word processor at the other. As Charles reluctantly began to tell the stories he had tried so hard to forget, generous friends who spoke Russian, French, Polish, or Yiddish translated his words into English. I asked questions and he answered; his responses prompted me to probe deeper, and that further stimulated his extraordinary memory. Once Charles began talking, he did not stop. As previously unvoiced recollections spilled out, frequently he and the translators and I would weep together. Sometimes for long periods he sat alone, near a window, gazing at trees and sky, speaking quietly into a small tape recorder. The result of all our sessions: a remarkable, intense exchange that stretched over a decade and eventually became this manuscript.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to help Charles—Shleimeh—tell his story, which belongs among other volumes of Holocaust literature.

Oakland, California, 1996

Dedicated to my father
Benjamin Sutz,
to my mother, Bertha Goodheart Sutz,
and to the memory of the
grandparents I longed for but never had,
the aunts and uncles I never met,
and the cousins I never played with.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The secrets in Charles' memory were unlocked through the help of talented translators who spoke French, Polish, Russian, or Yiddish: Armin Brott, Eleanor Cohen, Sylvia Herring, Sarah Willis, and Maurice Zabusky.

Among those who read the manuscript and made helpful suggestions, I am grateful to Ruth Eis, Rebecca Fromer, Hadassah Kramer, Irena Narell, Pearl Oliner, Samuel Oliner, Fred Rosenberg, and Paula Friedman. Special thanks to Nelda Cassuto for her editing expertise.

I appreciate the support and encouragement of my husband Gene and my children—Armin, Tamar, and Rachel.



Italicized names represent Nazi slave labor and/or death camps to which Shleimeh and other members of the Sutz/Zabuski family were taken.

Table of Contents

GROWING UP IN POLAND

My Father's Regret / 1
Tea or Cake / 5
Zayde / 11
Reluctant Tailor / 19
Teen Years / 27

THE RUSSIANS

Communism Up Close / 39
A Beautiful Stranger / 51

THE GERMANS

The Sewing Machine / 56
Our First Son / 65
Sunflower Seeds / 80
Two Students / 90
Over the Fence / 96
A Spool of Thread / 107
Potato Pancakes / 112
The Apple / 122
Two Turnips / 130
Bread / 137

BEGINNING AGAIN

First Freedom / 143
A German Woman / 153
Adela / 157
Paris / 165

Epilogue / 171
Family Tree / 182

CHAPTER 1

My Father's Regret

My father's sewing machine. That is the first sound I remember. The whirring of the wheels, the t-t-t-t-t-t-t- of the needle in and out of fabric, the rhythmic clanking of the foot treadle.

My father's tailor shop was crammed into one room of our apartment in Bialystok, Poland. When all three sewing machines were working at the same time, the noise was terrible. Once, the apartment above ours became vacant, but when prospective tenants heard the clatter, they refused to rent it.

My father frequently worked at night, and it was sometimes so noisy I couldn't sleep. But I got used to it. In fact, when he didn't sew at night or when he was just quietly cutting fabric for jackets, trousers, or army uniforms—then I couldn't sleep at all, because it was too still.

Sometimes when I was playing in father's shop, he let me spin the wheel of a sewing machine. Then, while he sat sewing by hand, he would often say, wistfully, "Ah, Shleimeh! Do you know how close you came to being born in Argentina instead of Poland?"

"Yes, I know, papa, but tell me about it again," I would always reply.

"Ah, Shleimeh! Our lives would have been so different in Argentina...if only...if only...." He would sigh, but never finish the sentence.

Stories about the enchanted land of Argentina mesmerized me, so I never tired of hearing how it all began. How my father, Mordecai Zabuski, and my mother, Sarah Sutz, fell in love and

became engaged. How he and Lev, his best friend, also engaged, dreamed of a better life than what they knew in Poland. How in 1918 they sailed to a new frontier in Argentina. How, before a year passed, the men had located jobs, apartments, and had written their fiancées that everything was ready for their arrival, including plans for the weddings.

But Sarah Sutz and her girlfriend never arrived. Sensational reports about white slavery trickled down even to the poor Jewish section of Bialystok, where the Zabuski and the Sutz families lived. Whispered rumors told of terrible things happening to young, attractive girls who dared to travel alone on passenger ships. Such women, it was said, were charmed by sweet-talking men whose business was prostitution traffic; girls even ended up in bordellos in the Middle or Far East. These reports frightened Sarah and Anna and their families. To stay in Poland was definitely safer, the young women decided, so they asked the men to return. Father told me how he and Lev—who had so eagerly awaited their brides—were shocked, disappointed, perplexed. But they must have loved their women very much because in 1920 they left Argentina and sailed back to Poland, the very country they had so joyfully left just one year earlier.

"I made a horrible, horrible mistake," my father told me many times when I was older. "I realized it the moment I stepped off the boat at the port in Gdansk and saw the eagle on the red and white Polish flag. I was so overcome with despair I nearly passed out. I couldn't believe it—I had come right back to a country filled with poverty and misery—especially for Jews."[1]

As a child I didn't know, of course, what Argentina meant to my father; I heard only exotic tales about a magical place where restaurant waiters brought him as much red wine as he wanted. In Poland we saw red wine only once a year—at Passover—and even then, there was just one bottle for the whole family, so everyone could have only a little taste. In

Argentina, father said, after dinner the waiter would pick up the tablecloth, together with all the plates and dishes, and throw out everything. I couldn't imagine anything so wondrous as disposable utensils.

Compared to colorful Argentina, Bialystok seemed hopelessly gray, old world, poor, and superstitious. People struggled to keep going in any way they could, frequently combining old wives' tales with faith, especially in times of illness. When I came down with childhood scarlet fever, my mother immediately told me to walk across a bridge. When that treatment failed, she took me to the rabbi of Bialystok, who tried a different cure. To ward off the evil eye and make me well again, the aged rabbi gave me his own name—Hertz. But when that extra name didn't help either, my mother finally took me to a doctor, and eventually I did recover completely. But for many years after, I was called Shleimeh Herzeleh.

Growing up in Bialystok, I saw how Poles hated Jews and how Jews hated and feared Poles. When I heard my father recall the 1905 and 1906[2] pogroms he had witnessed as a child, I understood the attraction of Argentina: wonderful opportunities and freedom from antisemitism. When he set off to South America in 1918, Bialystok's Jews were suffering from economic problems as well as antisemitism.[3] World War I had ended, so Bialystok's renowned textile industry was no longer busy transporting wartime materials for the German army, and the city's factories and machines were no longer making uniforms and blankets for the Polish army. Because the products Bialystok manufactured during a three-month period were sufficient to supply the population for an entire year, during the other nine months the city's industries were depressed. Factories were idle, and disheartened workers received no unemployment benefits. Employers refused to hire Jews, and many Jewish merchants, factory owners and workers left for Rumania, Yugoslavia, Australia, Palestine, North and South America. While the majority of Jews in Poland were struggling with

severe hard times, my father was in Argentina, having his first taste of religious freedom and economic opportunity.

In 1920 my father married my mother, Sarah Sutz, in Bialystok. In the same year Poland became an independent nation after having been divided among Germany, Austria, and Russia for 100 years.[4] Josef Pilsudski became head of state and marshal of Poland, Polish nationalism soared, and so did Polish antisemitism. The customary abuses became worse. For example, Jews traveling between Warsaw and Bialystok were no longer being simply ridiculed; they were pulled off trains, beaten, robbed, had their beards sheared off.

I, Shleimeh Zabuski, was born on August 24, 1921. As I grew up, I suspected my mother must have regretted persuading my father to leave Argentina, but she never expressed such feelings, at least not in front of us children. I was sad that my father apparently had lost the inner fire that had once inspired him to forge a new life—as far away as possible from Poland.

Notes

1. Mordecai Zabuski grew up during the reign of the hated Czar Nicholas II (1896–1918), who furthered his predecessors' pogroms, massacres, and ritual-murder charges against the Jews.
2. The June 14–15, 1906 pogrom was a repetition of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom.
3. Under the guise of Polish nationalism, the government instituted a severe economic boyott against the Jews.
4. In February 1917, the Russian Revolution broke out, forcing Nicholas II to abdicate.

CHAPTER 2

Tea or Cake

In the center of Bialystok stood the *Sztotzeiger*, the tall four-sided clock tower, used as the city's fire lookout. My father was a member of the Volunteer Firemen's League (which was 90 per cent Jewish), and I still remember the shrill sound of the alarm siren.

The tower—surrounded by many shops—was where my father spent much of his time, since tailoring was a seasonal business and there was no work for nearly half the year. So he would sit around with the other unemployed men, waiting, hoping for someone to come along and hire them. Like many other tailors who did contract work and were dependent on their bosses, my father waited for his boss, Barchat, who in turn was always dependent on last-minute customers.

My mother would say, "Mordecai, you have such wonderful hands. You can make fine trousers and sell them yourself in the market!"

"Sarah, I'm just a good worker...I'm not a businessman," my father always answered.

I don't know how my mother really felt about my father's situation, but if she was angry at him, she never showed it in front of me. As a result of my father's meager six-month income, my family was the poorest of the Sutzes or Zabuskis. My parents struggled to support their four children—I, the oldest, my sister Blumeh, my brother Benjamin, and my baby sister Rivka. Being poor was certainly not pleasant, but I did learn some things—lessons that probably helped to keep me alive

later. Emotional support was a luxury I didn't know about or expect. I don't recall any experiences as a young person when anyone—even my mother—encouraged me to do or to be anything. Yet it was my mother who first taught me how to adapt to adversity. She was always supportive. When I think of my mother I remember her photograph hanging on our living room wall, taken when she was a nurse during World War I. I liked to look at her smiling in her nurse's uniform and headdress.

When any of us children complained or had troubles, we would each go to her, and not to my father. Often at night I told her I was hungry.

"You'll sleep better if you don't eat," she would reply.

Even as a child I knew that was a ridiculous response, that you can tell something like that to your head, but not to your stomach. But much later I realized that perhaps by giving such answers, she helped herself to deal with the enormous frustration she silently endured. After a while, I think I even began to believe that an empty stomach could actually mean a better rest.

While learning early to tolerate discomfort, I also discovered that complaining was no remedy for disappointment. Once, when I was about ten years old, my mother took me to a shoe store, so I believed I was going to get new boots. We found a pair that I thought was beautiful. They fit and they were just what I wanted, so I expected her to buy them for me. But when the clerk set the boots back in the box and took them away, I was puzzled and asked my mother to explain what happened.

"We can't afford them," she said simply. I felt angry, deceived, deprived, furious that we were too poor to have something I wanted.

The boots became for me the symbol for accepting contradictions, a reminder that *wanting* something very much in no way meant actually *getting* it. I remember sometimes having tea and sometimes having cake, and although I always wished to have them together, I never did. I accepted discrepancies—without being either bitter or angry—because I understood

what was most important: to keep going, in spite of everything. Looking back, I see how this attitude perhaps helped me later to deal with the Germans' demands. My only weapon was a passion to survive. I had already learned early that in the hard moments of life, one is always alone, so I had to find a source of encouragement within myself.

Even though my family had little of life's extras, the Sabbath was special. On Friday evenings, my grandparents invited my family for dinner. I can still see my mother lifting her shawl from her shoulders, placing it over her head and then lighting and blessing the Sabbath candles.

"*Rabbenu shel olam*...Master of the World," she would begin softly.

When I asked her what she was saying, she would reply, "I am asking God to give us the blessings of good health and a good life."

First we ate the *challah* my mother braided and baked. Next, the Sabbath soup, followed by Grandmother Tzivi's *gefilte* fish, chicken stewed in soup, the *knaidlach* (matzo balls) and fruit compote. I rarely cared for soup.

"Shleimeh," my mother would whisper, "Even if you don't like the soup, pretend you do, so you won't influence the other children." After she said this, I would usually wind up making myself eat it.

On Saturday mornings we liked to drink tea, but since religious Jews weren't permitted to light a fire or cook on *Shabbat*, we had to make special arrangements to get hot water. This was not a simple task. Once, on a warm spring day—when I was outside in the street playing with my friends—my mother called me to fetch the hot water. I was having fun and was annoyed to be disturbed so I began to cry, but she insisted I come into the house to get the *tchainik* (teapot).

I grabbed it from her hand, determined to speed as fast as I could so I could get back to my friends. But it was hard to run

because everything was muddy outside after an earlier rain. I whizzed along—barely avoiding skidding—past the market, up Stolarsky Street, to the corner house. Dashing up the eight steps, I knocked at the apartment of the family that had devised a clever system for supplying hot water. On Friday nights they turned on the hot water faucet, letting it drip throughout the Sabbath into a nearby container that sat on their coal-burning stove. By using this setup, the family avoided hiring a *Shabbos goy* (a nonJewish person) to turn on the fire, thus enabling them to provide water to their neighbors—for five groszyn, payable only before or after the Sabbath.

Breathless, I rushed into the apartment, barely saying hello. I filled the *tchainik* with hot water and dashed out, resuming my former breakneck speed, eager to return to my playmates. But I stumbled, falling down all eight steps and plunging into the very mud that I had luckily managed to avoid earlier. The hot water spilled out, burning my legs (I was wearing short pants). I was in terrible pain and felt so angry and miserable I threw myself deeper into the mud, even rolling around in it.

Then I picked up the teapot—now empty—and ran home, weeping. When my mother saw me, I began crying anew and complained bitterly.

"If you hadn't sent me there, I wouldn't have fallen into the mud and if I hadn't fallen in the mud I wouldn't have spilled hot water on myself, and I wouldn't be burned and...."

My mother did not answer. Quietly, she washed off the mud, patted oil on my burns and gave me a total change of clothes. I went back to my friends and she went herself to refill the *tchainik*.

For our Saturday afternoon meals, we usually had Shabbos *cholent*, a one-dish, golden-brown concoction filled with stuffed *kishke* (animal intestine), gizzards, potatoes and a little meat. My mother prepared *cholent* on Friday afternoons and—along with about fifty other neighbors—brought it to Shaikeh, the local baker. He set all the *cholents* in the big oven, where

they slowly baked throughout the night. The next day we did not have far to go to pick up our *cholent* because the bakery was located on the ground floor of our Stolarsky Street apartment building, which Shaikeh owned. During the cold, short winter days we especially looked forward to, and counted on, our warm Sabbath meal. But one Saturday, something happened.

It all started with Irina, a Polish woman. Although very few Jews could afford a *dinst maidele* (maid), Irina had worked for many years for a nearby Jewish family. Each Friday before Shabbat she brought a *cholent* to Shaikeh and on each Shabbat afternoon she picked it up, steaming hot, and carried it back to her employer's home. After Irina married a Polish man, she stopped working for the Jewish family. But one Friday afternoon she apparently decided to make her own *cholent*, so she brought it to Shaikeh. Since he knew her, he set her pot in the big oven along with the others. The next morning, though, he noticed a strange smell. After looking over dozens of *cholents* and much sniffing, he discovered the alien odor: it was pork and it came from Irina's *cholent.*

Shaikeh had to maintain his reputation in an observant Jewish community, so he had a big problem on his hands. He did not know whether Irina had forgotten the *kashrut* rules or had deliberately disregarded them. But he felt he had no choice: he threw out the nearly fifty *cholents* that were by then hot and ready to be picked up. I remember the consternation of dozens of families when they learned that, instead of the traditional hot dish everyone so eagerly awaited, they would have to go hungry that day.

When Shaikeh's daughter got married, he decided to give her our apartment, so we moved to Mazowiecki #48, a building with many apartments rented mostly by Jewish families. At one end of the building's large courtyard, the Polish landlord—a big, strong man—fixed up a little workshop, where he prepared

kielbasa sausage and ham that he sold at a small storefront. All day he cooked and all day we smelled pork.

Although we were poor, along with all the other Jewish families in the building, we tried to help one another. Once, when my mother was frying potato *latkes* (pancakes), a neighbor who had ten children sent one child over to borrow our skillet. Mother offered to clean off the oil first, but the child said her mother would prefer the pan as is. Later we learned that the woman could afford to buy only potatoes, which were cheap, but not oil, which was expensive. From then on, each time my mother loaned the pan to that family, she managed to put in some extra oil.

On the days the landlord collected rent, we were frightened because he would always be drunk and wield a big knife, an effective threat since most of us had so little money. As time passed, he became drunk more frequently and also demanded more money. So we decided to move again—this time to Skorzana #3, just next door to Zayde, my grandfather. And I was very happy about that.

CHAPTER 3

Zayde

I remember my grandfather, my Zayde. He and I had a very special relationship; I was his *ainekel* (grandchild), the first son of his daughter Sarah. Zayde always wore high boots, and he had a big gray mustache. He had a strong, lively, and affectionate personality—very different from my father, who was pleasant but cool and rather weak. Compared to Zayde, in fact, my father was a negative role model for me; perhaps that's what made me determined to become a more forceful person than he was.

Growing up, I was at Zayde's house more than in my parents' apartment, which was next door. Zayde enjoyed being with me and I liked being with him, especially since both my parents were busy during the day and had little time for me. My mother was busy caring for little Benny and Rivka, my father was either at home sewing or out looking for work, and Grandmother Tzivi was at a factory, sorting old clothes and rags into piles of wool, cotton, and silk. Zayde had a chimney sweep business, but he usually worked only in the mornings, so most afternoons I visited him. His food probably was no different from my family's, yet everything tasted better at his place. Everything of his, in fact, seemed different and better to me—the low stone fence in front where women would sit and talk, the trees in the garden, and even the *sukkah*, the little temporary booth we built and decorated every year during the *Sukkot* holiday.

Zayde had two daughters and five sons, so I had an aunt Chamchi, my mother's sister, and five uncles—Benny, Zundel,

Yankel, Yossel, and Moishe. Three uncles were in Bialystok and one, Benny, lived far away in America.

Zayde was religious and devoted to the synagogue, where he served as *gabbai*, the one who organized daily prayer services, holiday festivals, and study sessions. I often went to services with him and also accompanied him on Friday afternoons to the local bathhouse, where he regularly prepared for the Sabbath. In the sauna-like steam room, he climbed to the highest step; he liked it best where it was hottest. He wanted me to go all the way up with him, but it was too hot for me.

"Ahhhh, mmmmm...oih...," he would sigh with delight, looking down at me from the top. "Tell me, Shleimeh, what do you know about pleasure? Ah...it feels so good up here!"

Zayde wouldn't come down until he was red all over, and then I had two jobs. First, I poured on him a *sheffeleh* (a bowl) of cold water. Then, for about ten minutes, I beat him with soft switches made from birch-tree branches. "Ahhhhh...," he would murmur with delight, assuring me that I was helping him "get the circulation going." I wondered if the branches hurt his skin, yet I could see how much he enjoyed this custom, which he claimed originated with the czars.

After dressing in fresh clothes, we walked to the courtyard of the bathhouse, sat down on a bench, and had a picnic, a real *moultzeit,* a meal we'd brought from home. Zayde—still red as a beet—was very happy, and so was I.

I can recall only one time when Zayde got angry at me. I used to play with the neighborhood children in a nearby park, having a wonderful time diving into, and hiding in the grass, which was several feet high. One day while we were playing soccer, a boy who was about to kick the ball accidentally kicked me very hard in my lower leg. I fell over, moaning, doubled up with pain. My friends got scared, so they ran to tell Zayde that I'd had an accident. Luckily for me, he was home

and came over immediately, but the first thing he did was to give me a smack.

"Zayde! I'm in such pain and you come along and add to it?" I cried, indignant.

He was indignant too. "Shleimeh, I told you not to go out and play. If you had listened to me in the first place, you wouldn't be hurting at all!" Then he called a *droshka* (a one-horse wagon with a driver) and took me to the hospital. We were there for about an hour, and I felt happy in spite of my pain: I had salves rubbed onto my wound, got a massage, and had my leg bandaged. Then Zayde hailed another *droshka* and took me home. What a luxury—to ride in a coach twice!

Before 1920, Zayde was a chimney sweep for the Russian army barracks, under the czars. After Polish independence, he kept up his business and was called *Chajkel der koimen kerer* (Chaikel the chimney sweep). He carried a little notebook with the addresses of where all the jobs were located, and although he never actually went up on a roof to clean a chimney, he came back home just as black and filthy as Uncle Yankel, the only son who worked in the business and the only one who actually climbed up on roofs. Yankel, who was about twenty, had a stuttering problem and was nicknamed *Yankel Mumak*. I wondered if Zayde, who also sold ladders, got covered with soot just from walking by the houses and making sure that his workers didn't break any roof tiles.

My Uncle Zundel, who was never interested in the chimney sweep business, played the mandolin. As a child, I remember his favorite song, "Volga, Volga," an old Russian folk tune. Once when I was with Zayde, several of Zundel's friends rushed in, very agitated, and reported that Zundel had been arrested for communist activity. If something wasn't done fast, they feared, Zundel might never leave prison alive. Zayde was terribly distressed. Although I was only about ten, I knew that Zayde disapproved of Zundel's communist ideas: not believing

in God, calling religion the "opiate of the people," and criticizing religious people for praying while others were hungry. But in spite of their different religious and political philosophies, Zundel was still Zayde's son.

"How can I help get him out?" Zayde implored Zundel's young friends.

"You have to get some money," they said. "That's the only way we can get him out of the country."

Zayde opened a drawer. "Here...take whatever you need," he said, handing over all the money he had—the month's business earnings.

After a time, Zayde received a letter from Zundel with a postmark from Montevideo, Uruguay. Zundel described his escape to South America and his marriage to Esther, another young communist from the nearby town of Brysk. I missed Zundel and his songs, but I liked the idea that he was in the same faraway South America, where my father had once attempted to settle. One day Esther's father, a *felcher* (a Russian medic) came to Bialystok to introduce himself to Zayde and Tzivi. I couldn't take my eyes off his long white beard, which looked like the beard of Karl Marx. My mother extended her hand to greet him but he, being very religious, refused to touch her, of course. I was surprised that a father (he had six or seven children) wouldn't shake hands even with the sister of his son-in-law.

Zayde and Tzivi also received letters from their son Benny in Chicago. These letters especially interested me because I was so proud to have an American uncle, and I was fascinated by stories of how he had been spirited out of Poland after the terrible 1906 Bialystok pogrom. Zayde told me about that three-day attack, which began on June 1, a "Green Thursday"[1] Christian holiday. The police planned it to begin just as a Russian Orthodox procession arrived near a newly built church in the "new" section of Bialystok. Each time I heard the story, I was frightened. Zayde and the family hid in the cellar of their house while

half a mile away hooligans with crowbars, knives, and axes attacked Jews who lived closer to the church.

The police and the soldiers smashed doors and windows of houses and stores, looting and pillaging everything in sight while bandits burst into Jewish homes, killing everyone they found. I was terrified hearing how the attackers gouged eyes out with their fingernails or stuffed their victims' cut-open stomachs with feathers, or removed heads or organs from small children. Zayde said Bialystok's Jewish hospital overflowed with people visiting the hundreds of wounded. The hospital courtyard was filled, stacked with more than 80 murder victims; their blood, he said, trailed from the hospital to the street. I tried to imagine the horrible scene of funeral wagon after funeral wagon, and coffin after coffin—stretched from the hospital to the Bagnowke Cemetery, where the dead were buried in one mass grave. Zayde told me that after the 1906 pogrom, Jewish self-defense groups were formed and they often intervened to foil more government-sponsored attacks.[2]

In 1906 my Uncle Benny was a feisty 12-year-old and his mother, Grandma Tzivi, worried about him. She feared he would follow in the footsteps of his Uncle Daniel, her younger brother, a "soapbox orator" who criticized the Russian government. Daniel was killed by police in 1905. After the 1906 pogrom Tzivi and Zayde decided that Benny must leave Poland. On a moonlit night in 1907 they placed around his neck a tag with the address of Fanny Cohen, Tzivi's married sister in Chicago. My grandparents gave Benny a basket filled with bread and salami and then hid him in a hay-filled wagon. They bribed Polish guides to take him across the Polish-German border, bring him to the port at Bremen, and see that he was put aboard the *Rhein*, a German ship headed for America.

As a young boy I found stories about Benny thrilling and adventurous. I yearned to meet him but never imagined it would happen. Then, one day he suddenly appeared in Bialystok, twenty-two years after he had been smuggled out. No

one knew he was coming. From the train station, he took a horse and buggy *droshka* to the Hotel Ritz, checked in, and then went to find Zayde's house. Although he could not read the street names, which were written in Polish and not Russian, as when he was growing up, he did eventually locate Kupietsky Street. There Benny noticed an older man cleaning the street. They looked at each other: a tall, blond, well-dressed stranger, carrying a briefcase, and an elderly gray-haired worker with a bushy mustache, a broom, and loose pants tucked inside his big boots. Zayde told me he suspected Benny was a *comornik* (tax collector), so he thought, "Let him look all he wants; I'm not going to talk to him." Benny, assuming the older man was a Polish janitor, didn't want to waste time trying to speak to someone who certainly didn't know Yiddish. After a while Benny did find his brother Yossel's house on nearby Molinovsky Street. "Yossel?" Ben whispered, uncertain whether the grown man who opened the door was the little boy he had last seen twenty-two years earlier.

"Are you...are you Yossel? I'm...I'm Benny...your brother from America." Benny stammered.

The two fell into each other's arms.

"Did you see Papa yet?" Yossel asked.

"No. I saw only a Polish street sweeper near father's house."

"That wasn't a Polish street sweeper," Yossel said. "That was Papa!"

After Uncle Ben and Zayde's emotional reunion, they and Yossel went together to tell the exciting news to Tzivi, who was working in the rag factory. The day after Ben's arrival, I was the center of attention on my street. My famous uncle from America was really there! I got to see the fancy Hotel Ritz where he was staying, but I was crushed when they wouldn't let me go inside Uncle Ben's room. I was too little, they said; I did get to see an elevator, though, for the first time in my life.

On Uncle Ben's first evening, the whole family was together and I was constantly tugging at his shirtsleeves, refusing to

leave him alone for a minute, wanting him to pay attention only to me and to stop talking to the adults. At one point he became irritated and told me to leave him alone.

"Who is this kid who keeps bothering me?" he said to my mother.

My mother was shocked. "Benny! That's my son Shleimeh!"

Uncle Benny took a dollar out of his pocket and handed it to me. "Now get out of here," he said. "Let me talk to your mother for a while."

I was deeply insulted. The dollar, however, soothed my feelings so much that I ran out into the street, eager to show friends my vast new sum of money. I was the happiest boy in the world.

Because the police were suspicious of strangers, Zayde worried about having to explain Benny's presence in Bialystok. It was safest, he decided, to pretend (outside the family) that Benny was a suitor for my mother's unmarried sister, Chamchi. At the urging of Uncle Benny, the Sutz family's joyful reunion was documented when the family posed for a group photo. Benny had to lend Zayde a tie, and we children dressed up in our best hand-me-down clothes, which didn't always quite fit. I stood on a chair in the back row, one arm around my father, and one around my mother, who held my baby sister Rivka.

Shortly after Uncle Benny returned to America, Chamchi got engaged. Fortunately, she had a nice dowry. Benny had given her American dollars, which made it possible for her to marry Yankel (I now had two uncles with the same name). Zayde was very happy at the wedding—almost as happy, I think, as he was three years later at my bar mitzvah in August of 1934. He was proud that I had studied hard and chanted well from the Torah. As was the custom in the synagogue, women were not allowed to enter the men's side, but on my bar mitzvah they did something extraordinary—they came right into the men's side, throwing candy at me (a folk tradition), and then carrying me off the *bimah* in their arms! Everyone was astonished!

This remarkable occurrence happened, I knew, only because

I was the grandson of Zayde the *gabbai*, a highly respected figure in our Jewish community. Zayde was so pleased he insisted on giving me 10 groszyn every day. That was a lot of money for me and by the end of the week I had enough to go to the movies.

For the weeks following my bar mitzvah, I went with Zayde to the synagogue every morning. Grandma Tzivi prayed at home, *shokeling* or swaying up and back, and sometimes weeping as she read *Tzena Rena*, a Yiddish prayer book especially for women. Zayde prayed three times a day, but after the morning service I had to leave him to work at my father's shop. These synagogue visits with Zayde were precious because in the fall, I knew, I would return to school and no longer have the luxury of morning walks, prayers, and what I liked most of all—conversations with Zayde, especially on Friday afternoons after the bathhouse.

Notes

1. Green or Maundy Thursday of Easter Week commemorated Jesus' last supper and his washing the feet of his disciples.
2. A large monument was erected near the mass grave in the Bagnowke Cemetery. After WWII, Poles vandalized it, breaking it into three pieces and discarding it near the outskirts of the cemetery.

CHAPTER 4

Reluctant Tailor

I never wanted to be a tailor. Yet, I became one because of what happened on the first day I attended *Powszechna*, the regular Polish high school.

School was very important to me. At twelve I had decided that I wanted to "be somebody" when I grew up, and that meant I would need a better Polish education. Since the age of six, I had attended Yiddish schools where we had only one hour of Polish each day. I kept thinking about how much I wanted to learn Polish, but since I already knew what it was like to want something but not get it, I wasn't surprised when I was sent to a Yiddish *Folkshul* instead of a Polish gymnasium.

In front of the *Folkshul* was a little kiosk with candy, chocolate, cakes, and bagels. Like most other kids, I was a *nosher*, always wanting a snack. One morning, before going into school at 8:30, I had twenty *groszyn* in my pocket, so I bought a piece of chocolate. By the time I left school at four o'clock, I was very hungry. I stopped at the kiosk and looked longingly at the bagels, realizing that in the morning, when I wasn't hungry, I bought chocolate—just to have a snack. As a result, in the afternoon, when I was really hungry, I had no money left to buy anything. In the future I thought about this incident often because it taught me an important lesson: to think ahead beyond my immediate wants of the moment.

At lunchtime, students who lived nearby went home to eat while others brought lunch from home. I was especially grateful because every day my mother brought food to me and my

sister Blumeh. My mother, I believed, was the best and the prettiest in the world, and I was always so happy to see her coming that I would run up and throw my arms around her neck.

Blumeh, on the other hand, reacted very differently. She never embraced or thanked our mother, but she usually made some critical remark, such as, "Why don't you dress nicer when you come to school?" or "Why are you always wearing that shawl!"

Mother never answered, but from the tears that welled up in her eyes, I understood that she was hurt and puzzled by Blumeh's reaction.

When I turned thirteen, the subject of my education came up again and my mother, Zayde, and I had a long discussion. I was thrilled when they decided that I could go, finally, to a regular high school, where I would learn how to read and write Polish. My future, I felt convinced, was wonderful. Everything was arranged with the school director, and on the first day my mother came to register me. She wanted to see my first class, so we went together to the room, but we were a few minutes late and the class had already started. As soon as I entered, a boy in the first row started yelling *Jeszcze jeden zydek* (another Jew!). Immediately, others joined in, shouting the same thing.

My mother was scared. "Shleimeh," she whispered in Yiddish, "Let's get out! They'll kill you here!"

I was frightened too, yet I wanted to argue, to persuade her to let me stay, but she was adamant. So we went home. I was utterly crushed, realizing then that I would never learn how to read or write Polish well, that my dreams of a bright future were shattered.

I never did find out exactly what my mother reported to my father about this school incident, but he later said to me, "Well, since you don't want to go to school, then you'll come to work for me."

His words stunned me. Surely, I believed, he knew how much school meant to me. And I thought he had realized that

I never wanted to be a tailor. Yet he was implying that, somehow, I was to blame, that I had been avoiding going to school.

"But, Papa," I stammered, "It...it wasn't my fault!"

At that my father slapped me. It was the first and only time that he ever hit me. I suppose we both felt terrible about what happened, but neither of us—ever—spoke a word about it.

So my father had won. He had always wanted me to work with him and finally I would. Zayde appeared pleased too, but I believe he truly regretted that I wasn't going to study Polish, as well as many other subjects. He was, after all, in an awkward situation—between his son-in-law and his grandson. And so I began to be a tailor. I didn't like this situation, but I made up my mind to be good-natured and adjust, even though it meant putting aside forever other desires and careers.

About this time Yankel (Aunt Chamchi's husband) joined my father's shop. He was honest and hardworking and soon my father made him a partner. Before long, I was able to sew a pair of pants all by myself. They were nicely done, but it took me a whole day to do what my father could accomplish in only an hour. To help me learn more about tailoring, my father sent me for a week to an uncle who was an expert at making pants. I suspected the week also represented something special for me because of my disappointment about school.

The uncle lived in Wysoki Mazowieck, a very small town that was to Bialystok what Bialystok was to Warsaw. When the bus from Bialystok arrived, all the residents came out to the station, which was located in the tiny town square, and greeted the passengers as though they were long-lost relatives. In the evenings, after I finished working with my uncle, I went for strolls with a girl who lived nearby. In less than ten minutes, we walked around the entire town.

The uncle had two sons, about eighteen and twenty, who were active in the Zionist youth movement (*HaShomer HaTzair*) and eager to get away from Polish antisemitism. They hoped to settle in Palestine, which was then controlled by

Turkey. Although warned against attempting to get to Palestine by crossing through Turkey, the two decided to try. Watching his sons ride off on their bicycles, my uncle cried. To him their leaving was a tragedy. (Later, I learned the brothers had indeed been stopped in Turkey and were forced back to Poland.)

After my training with the uncle, I returned to Bialystok and my father's shop, where I ran into a serious problem. The other workers started giving me trouble, calling me a *soldatsky syn* (a daddy's boy). I resented their remarks because although I was only thirteen, I worked twelve hours a day, the same as Yankel and my father. It was the custom that bosses put in more labor than the workers, so I was actually putting in longer hours than the workers who were complaining about me and I was also doing jobs at night, such as rolling thread onto spools by hand because my father couldn't afford to purchase ready-made ones. I wondered if the workers were jealous of me. Since childhood, I have always been the type who moves quickly and has an abundance of energy, so I sometimes was impatient with others who worked at a slower pace. The situation made me very angry. I yearned to be more independent and to earn money, but I hadn't yet been paid by my father.

My feelings and resentments swelled up inside me until one day I told my father I wanted to work for someone else. My very understanding mother located and paid a Mr. Mielnicki to teach me, in his home shop, the craft of custom tailoring for women. In Mielnicki's shop, I had several responsibilities. I had to get the irons ready for pressing, which meant putting the coals on, lighting them, and then blowing on them until they glowed. I also had to collect the chamber pots from my boss' baby and empty them into a toilet located at the very end of a hallway. In addition, I had to go shopping for supplies.

One day I was told to get a spool of black thread from a shop at the other end of town. When I returned, Mielnicki said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you that I need also a spool of gray thread." So I went all the way back. When I returned, another

worker said, "Shleimeh, I want you to get me a slice of *synke* (ham)." So I had to go out a third time and buy the ham on the sly, because it wasn't kosher. Whatever I was asked to do in my new job, I accepted. The experience with my father had been good training; it helped me develop a strong character and an ability to swallow my pride—which I had to do many times also at Mielnicki's. Although I hated the type of work I was doing, I was at last a "real" worker and no longer "the boss's son." I joined the *professionalen farein* (trade union) and agreed to put together a library for workers, an experience that would prove valuable several years later.

After a year apprenticing to Mielnicki, I began doing hems and linings of sleeves. One day I showed him a lining I was very proud of.

"*Es is mechaye—su kukin,*" I said. (This is wonderful— take a look.)

"This?" he said, yelling at me and pointing to the lining. "You call this a *mechayeh?* A *mechaye* is a nice piece of chicken. Or a piece of *gefilte* fish!"

I was hurt. This insult, on top of other unpleasantness (such as still not being paid for working) made me think I wouldn't be working there for long. Then something else happened that turned out to be the last straw. During a Jewish holiday period, I expected to get some nice tips while delivering several pieces of finished clothing to our clients. But instead of sending me alone to make the delivery, Mielnicki sent along his son Moishe. Just as I was about to take in a coat to one client, Moishe grabbed it from my hands, took it in, and got the tip himself; I was furious and began thinking even more seriously about quitting.

Then a big surprise came along that helped me leave Mielnicki for good. The workers from my father's shop came to me, asking me to come back to work, and promising to consider me an equal! I didn't hesitate for a minute and I also didn't mind returning to tailoring for men. In fact, I felt so relieved that I

ran all the way home to my father's shop, which at that moment looked very inviting: several sewing machines, two pressing tables (one for small items and one for large); a table for the assistant presser; and a large table for cutting the fabric that was brought in by my father's bosses, the Barchat brothers, who were still giving my father contract jobs when they got orders from customers.

Although I was glad to be in my father's shop again, I still was not getting a salary. When I asked him, finally, why everyone else was getting paid and I wasn't, he seemed to joke but I felt he really was serious.

"I worked for you all my life," he said. "Now it's all right for you to work for me for a little while."

I didn't like my father's response at all, but I had learned to keep silent. I felt sorry for him, observing how upset he was by frequent anti-Jewish incidents and sensing he was recalling his regret about leaving Argentina.

One Friday afternoon, he asked me to go to the Barchats and pick up the payroll so we could pay our employees. As I left he called, "Shleimeh, don't come back until you have the money."

As I entered the Barchat apartment, I noticed their sister, who was deaf and also couldn't speak, standing near the window. She didn't turn around when I entered, although I expected that she would have felt my footsteps as I came in. I sat down, waited, and after a while one Barchat brother came in.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I've come to collect the money for my father's workers."

"I don't have any money," he said. "Come back Monday."

"I can't. My father told me not to come home without the money."

"So stay here," he said and left.

A little while later the other Barchat came in.

"What are you doing here? It's almost Shabbos," he said.

"That's exactly why I'm here," I answered.

"I don't have any money," he said. "Didn't you already see my brother? What did he tell you?"

"He said he didn't have any money."

"So why are you still here?"

"Because I'm not going anywhere without the money," I answered. They were holding out on me, but I wouldn't give in or give up.

Barchat began to get angry. Suddenly, the sister turned around. Even though she had been facing the other way, she must have guessed what was going on. She began speaking in sign language and it was clear that she was angry. Then Barchat left the room and returned a moment later with his brother. The sister pointed at a dresser and from one drawer the brothers took money and gave it to me. I ran home quickly. To everyone's great joy, the workers got their pay. And I was able to go to the movies with money that I had earned myself, for the first time, because after the Barchat incident, my father and I made a salary arrangement.

From that day on, for the rest of my life, whenever I go to get something, I always think about that experience. I say to myself, "Shleimeh, don't come back empty handed." My father really taught me something.

Because the tailoring business was seasonal, for long periods we were without work and then suddenly we would have big jobs. Once we received an order from abroad to make coats of very thick material, which required a special type of thread. But because that thread was too expensive, nobody took the need for it seriously, and we made the items with normal thread. Several weeks later, however, the entire order was returned; we had to take the linings out and do all the seams over. In spite of this fiasco, my father's shop did fairly well that year.

In fact, that summer we even managed to take a vacation, which meant renting a small wooden cabin in the Ignatki Forest. The cabins, which had electricity, were owned by Poles who rented to Jews and others during the summer. For a few

glorious weeks we all breathed fresh air. One day, while I was swinging in a hammock, three men came up. I recognized them as other Bialystok tailors who resented the fact that my father, and not they, had been lucky enough to get the big coat order from abroad. "Look who's here," they said, "the son of Motke the *pais* (sideburns)." Jealous and apparently wanting revenge, they started pushing the hammock so hard they knocked me out and onto the ground. I yelled loud both from pain and fear, and the men eventually took off.

By the time I was sixteen, a young adult, I was an experienced apprentice. After giving up the goal of being excellent in school, I decided to become excellent in tailoring. The more I worked with my father, the more compassion I felt for him, and even though our natures were radically different, we began to establish a real rapport, a relationship that would in the future be tested in ways neither of us could have imagined.

CHAPTER 5

Teen Years

One Sunday in 1937, while the country was commemorating the death of Marshal Pilsudski,[1] I was working in my father's shop. All day flags flew at half mast, with a black band that signified mourning. One of our neighbors, two doors away, wanted to hang a flag in front of his house, but since he didn't have a proper black band, he hung out a black sock instead. A Polish policeman who was walking by saw it and apparently considered the sock disrespectful. He angrily attempted to pull it down, but in the process of climbing up the house wall, he tore his *plaszcz* (coat). Shouting and swearing, he threatened to fine the owner of the building and demanded to know where there was a tailor who could repair his torn jacket. The neighbor, of course, sent the soldier to us.

During that entire previous week, our shop had been silent: we had no work. But on that particular Sunday a big order had come in, so—although it was illegal to work on Sundays—the machines were going at full capacity. When the soldier entered our shop, he insisted that my father fix the coat and he also declared the shop liable for a fine for working on Sunday. My father, struggling in broken Polish, protested, pleading with the soldier to be understanding because if the authorities learned about such a fine, we would have terrible problems. What saved the day was the beautiful mending job my father did. Indeed, the soldier could barely find the original damage.

"Then give me enough money to buy a half bottle of vodka," the soldier demanded, coercing a bribe in exchange for

a fine. At that time a half bottle of vodka cost about one *zloty* and ten *groszyn*. My father handed over one *zloty*, but the soldier became furious, hurling antisemitic insults and screaming, "What? Do you expect *me* to kick in the ten *groszyn*?"

My father gave him the additional coins. From then on, every time the policeman caught us working on Sundays, he insisted on collecting his bribe—the vodka money.

I hated what my father had done, yet I understood the reason for it when I thought of the humiliation he must have felt. I never guessed then that sometime later I might find myself in similar circumstances.

The people who worked in my father's shop were the most interesting characters I ever met. One remarkable man with unique talents was Pesach Cygel, an advocate of Esperanto,[2] and a charismatic speaker whose appearance was striking. He was tall and had black hair and mulatto-like dark skin. I was attracted to Pesach because he was different from anyone I had ever met.

Pesach was intrigued by stunts related to the occult. He liked to tell me to hide something, and then he would take my hand, hold his fingers on my pulse, and eventually lead me to the very place where I had hidden the object. As a variation, he would tell me to pick out a certain page in a book. Using the same technique, he would turn the pages with my hand, still feeling my pulse, until he found the right one. I was mesmerized by his powers, and only much later did I realize that he was employing the same principles as those used in lie detectors.

One day I was alarmed to hear Pesach announce that he was going to do a dangerous experiment and would then die.

"What? Why?" I was very upset.

"If you want to bring me back to life, you'll have to do something very special," he cautioned. Then he gave me instructions on what would now be called "pressure points." Sure enough, when he appeared to be unconscious, I did what he said and "brought him back to life."

Pesach also had a bizarre sense of humor. On another occasion, someone rushed into the shop, declaring that Pesach was dead. We all sped over to his house and were relieved to find him very much alive, standing near his open window.

"What are you all doing in front of my house?" he called out.

After we told him why we had come, he laughed. "If you say somebody's dead when he's not, that means the person will live a long time," he said in Yiddish.

When our shop got busy and we needed more help, my father often sent me to Pesach's house to tell him to come down, fast.

"What?" he would yell when I knocked on his door.

"Come and work at my father's," I would shout.

"Wait a minute." Then he would open the door and invite me in for breakfast, which consisted of a piece of black bread, oil, salt, and a glass of water (the same kind of breakfasts I had enjoyed with Zayde before I started working). For most Jews at that time, butter or milk was too extravagant and fruit almost unheard of. I do recall once being lucky enough to have a piece of orange, which my father had somehow obtained when my mother was ill. I saw a banana for the first time when Aunt Chamchi gave one to her son, little Shleimeh, when he was about three or four years old. Until today, the smell of a banana reminds me of how much I wanted to taste that luxury but couldn't.

Whatever money Pesach managed to save, he spent on travel. While most Polish Jews never left the country, he had been all over the world. I lost track of Pesach after he got married; he left for Argentina and planned to send for his wife when he got settled there.[3]

It was in my father's shop that I became politically aware. There were frequent and spirited disputes, especially between Pesach, who was a Zionist, and Mendel, who was a communist[4] at a time when communism was illegal in Poland. Mendel

was so devoted to communist activities that, in fact, he spent more time in prison than at work. He frequently got himself arrested after acting out one of his favorite antics. For instance, he would take the red hammer-and-sickle flag, tie it to a string, attach a rock, and throw the flag over a power line. In order to get the flag down, the fire department had to set up and climb their ladders. Then, of course, they would send the police to pick up Mendel. My father called Mendel the *haranjy,* a rank in the Polish army from which one was never promoted. Although Mendel would sometimes ask for a raise, my father would reply, "*Haranjy!* You're still assistant presser, still doing the same work. If you were at least a full presser, but you spend so much time in prison, you never improve your skills."

When I was sixteen I fell in love with Mia, the daughter of a very pleasant man who was a tanner. She and I had played together in the tall grass near my house since we were small. Mia liked me a lot, too, but Zayde objected to our friendship.

"She's not a girl for you," he insisted, because her family had come from Bialystok's *chanajkes* section, an area frequented by prostitutes. When Mia was hospitalized for appendicitis, I wanted desperately to visit her, but Zayde refused to let me go. I was heartsick. It seemed our love was coming to an end. However, I did get to see Mia just once more, rather unexpectedly, on the day my mother, I, and the younger children went to Ignatki forest for an outing. We were all having a lot of fun together, running barefoot in the grass, when suddenly a thunderstorm erupted.

"Kids! Let's go! Quick!" my mother shouted. I wasn't ready because I had to tie my shoes first. "Shleimeh! Put your shoes on later! We have to get out of the forest! Now!" she yelled.

I got up, shoes in hand, and we dashed out of the forest. At that moment a bolt of lightning struck the tree—exactly where I had been a moment earlier. As the tree fell, I gasped, relieved that I had come close to, but missed, death—a sensation I was

destined to feel again many times in the future.

We were all so flustered by the storm that when my mother pointed out that the new apartment of Mia's family was near the edge of the forest, we decided to go there for a few moments to calm ourselves. Once inside, the first thing I did was rush to the bathroom, a result of the recent fright plus the excitement of seeing Mia again. She wore a school uniform and introduced us to a young man wearing similar clothes. I realized he was her boyfriend and that both were university students. They comfortably belonged to a world I once had so much wanted to be part of. I felt jealous, sad, and also sharply aware of how little, in fact, Mia and I ever had in common.

Since my early teens I had been so busy working as an apprentice tailor that after a while, I forgot about school and about having a more active social life. What helped, I'm sure, is that most other young men I knew were in a similar situation. Since we didn't know what an easy life was, we didn't yearn for it. We had very little money for entertainment, so our few social pleasures were mainly dancing or excursions to the forest.

Once, Shmuel, who worked in our Skorzana Street shop, asked my father for permission to bring a few friends (boys and girls) over to dance in our large workroom.

He and I pushed all the furniture off to one side or carried it into another room where, fortunately, we had a gramophone and had collected some records. Shmuel was a very good dancer and so was I. The girls found me attractive, so they were happy to teach me, and then, since I learned quickly, I taught my friends whatever I knew. We were having a great time when suddenly the police came. Apparently suspecting that the music was a cover-up for a communist gathering, the officers asked all our guests to produce their papers. Lucky for us, no one in the group had problems. We figured that communists thought dancing was only for capitalists.

* * *

My friends and I went frequently to the forest, and to this day I recall many painful events that occurred there. One spring, for instance, all the Jewish schools organized a big picnic for the *Lag B'Omer*[5] holiday. Hundreds of Jewish children were singing, dancing, and playing games in the forest. But the festivities ended abruptly when antisemitic hooligans appeared and began attacking the children—beating them with their hands or with anything they could pick up. As the children's cries were heard all the way back to the houses near the beginning of the forest, word traveled quickly that Polish Jew-haters were killing children again. Although Polish police were stationed inside the forest, as usual they did not intervene.

On such occasions—and there were many—the biggest and strongest Jews in Bialystok would come running, especially the *tregers,* or porters, who usually got to the forest first, carrying sticks and knives or whatever they could find. I and several others who worked in my father's shop would drop what we were doing and also rush to the forest. As we yelled at the Polish thugs and attacked them, the police would ride up on horseback and begin beating us. Even so, we felt that we defended ourselves and were proud—at least for that day—that our boys had taught the antisemites a lesson.

On another occasion, shortly before the war, three friends and I went dancing at the Ignatki Forest Cafe. Even though we were afraid of getting attacked by Poles, we sat at a table, had a drink, and each asked a girl there to dance. But we didn't stay long after a group of Poles entered; we knew there would be a repetition of what each of us had experienced previously. When Poles saw Jews dancing, instead of being polite and sharing room on the dance floor, they would verbally abuse us and also bump us so hard with their shoulders we would nearly fall down. The same thing would happen when we met Poles walking on the sidewalk.

One day a Jewish boy and girl sitting on a bench, kissing,

were bothered by three Poles who came up from behind and began insulting them. The couple got up—perhaps to leave, perhaps to answer the Poles back. No one knows. One Pole took out a knife and stabbed the Jewish boy three times. He died as the attackers fled. After the girl told what happened, the police reluctantly arrested the three boys. At the trial, the girl identified each of them, pointing out who did the stabbing, who held her boyfriend's hands behind his back, and who struck him on the head. The three Polish boys received light sentences and were freed from jail in a short time.

Because we grew up with Polish antisemitism, we were accustomed to such incidents and treatment. German antisemitism I was not personally familiar with, but more and more we were hearing terrible stories about what was happening to Jews in Germany. Many were trying to get to Poland, and some famous German Jews—like Einstein and Freud, it was rumored—were fleeing to America. Everywhere, Jews talked about these reports and most, not all, were worried. Some claimed they weren't upset because the Germans surely would treat the Jews the same as they would treat the Poles and not single them out as Jews. Others had even read Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which exposed his intentions, but like the rest of the world, they didn't take his ranting seriously. We also heard rumors about Germany and Russia secretly planning to divide Poland between them.

It was 1939, I was young, the high holydays were approaching, so I tried to be optimistic. Yet, I felt afraid. And so did my grandparents, parents, and family.

Notes

1. Pilsudski was a national hero who led an assault on the Red Army in a 1926 *coup d'état,* ending Polish democracy and instituting a dictatorship.
2. Esperanto was an international, universal language invented by Dr. Ludwig Zamenhof, an eye specialist and a Jewish Bialystoker who died in 1917. He dreamed of world peace and believed a common language would inspire cooperation among former enemies.

3. Before Pesach's wife could leave, World War II broke out, and she was among the Jews herded into the ghetto. One day when a bomb exploded, Pesach's wife, among others, was killed in a horrible fashion. Her dismembered body was found in a tree. I never heard anything more about Pesach.
4. Years later, when the Russians occupied Bialystok, Mendel was the first to be arrested, as a Trotskyite. That was his reward for all his years of working for the communist party.
5. The *Lag B'Omer* holiday commemorates a time when the ancient rabbis used a picnic as a pretext to hide Jewish studying, which was forbidden by the Roman rulers of Israel.



Left: Bialystok, 1924. Sarah Sutz Zabuski and Mordecai Zabuski with Blumeh and Shleimeh (standing).

Below: Bialystok, 1929. (Seated from left) Uncle Yossel Sutz, his son Moishe Sutz, Grandma Tzivi Sutz, Blumeh Zabuski, Benny Zabuski, Grandfather (Zayde) Chaim Sutz, Benjamin Sutz (father of June Brott); (Standing from left) Shayne Sutz, young Uncle Moishe Sutz; UncleYankel Sutz; Sarah Sutz Zabuski with baby Rivka; Shleimeh Zabuski, Mordecai Zabuski; Aunt Chamchi Sutz.





Ignatki Forest, Bialystok, 1935. Shleimeh (center) with friends. Pesach (left), a butcher, died in the ghetto. Yossel, a factory mechanic, was taken to "work" in the first ghetto roundup and never came back.



Bialystok, 1932. The Volunteer Firemen's Brigade had almost 1000 volunteers, 90 per cent of whom were Jewish.The tall man, second from left, is Yossel *"der shtarker"* Sutz, Benjamin Sutz' brother and Shleimeh's uncle. From *Bialystok Photo Album* edited by David Sohn. New York, 1951.

Bialystok, c. 1940. Funeral of Shleimeh's grandmother Miriam Zabuski. From left, Aunt Chaya Zabuski; Shleimeh's father, Mordecai Zabuski; Aunt Rivka Zabuski; Sarah Sutz Zabuski; Uncle Moishe Sutz; Blumeh and Benny Zabuski (Shleimeh's sister and brother); Aunt Chamchi Sutz.

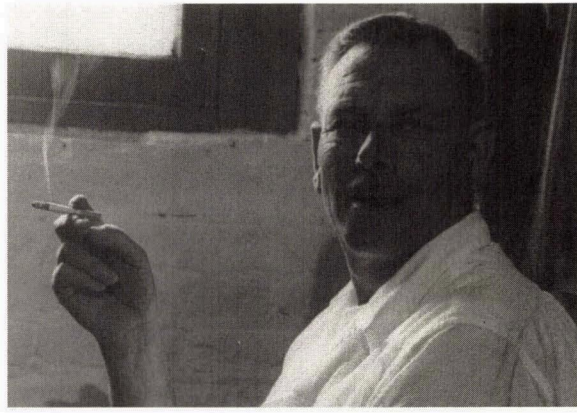


Bialystok, 1938. Mordecai Zabuski and Sarah Sutz Zabuski (Shleimeh's parents).





Bialystok, 1930s. Rivka Zabuski, Shleimeh's aunt, with her husband Moishe, tailor and volunteer fireman. Rivka, pregnant with her fourth child, died with her other three in Treblinka. Moishe died later in the camps.



Montevideo, Urguay, c. 1940. Uncle Zundel Sutz, called "George" in Spanish because he looked so much like King George. Zundel and his wife Esther had two girls, Nina and Judith. After he died of cancer (1969), Esther, Nina, husband Luis Osin, and children Chaim and Yael emigrated to Israel.

CHAPTER 6

Communism Up Close

On the second day of Rosh HaShana, when most Jews were in the synagogue, the terrifying news was transmitted over the radio:

"The Germans have invaded Bialystok! The Germans have invaded Bialystok!"

It was September 15, 1939. For any Jew who had thought or talked about leaving Bialystok, it was too late. What the most pessimistic had predicted all along was coming true before our eyes.

By midday, platoons of German soldiers were firing into the windows of houses. Citizens hid inside, terrified. For the next ten, terrible days everyone was in a panic. What could we do? Bialystok was in chaos—no law, no government control, just anarchy. Both Poles and Jews broke into the flour storage facility, which was located on our street. In the bedlam, some intelligent people brought knives, slit open a flour sack (which weighed about 220 pounds), threw half of it on the floor, and hauled out the other half by hoisting the sack across their backs. To discourage this looting, the Polish firemen rushed in and began hosing water at people. The wet flour, of course, became a gluey mess. So in the process of "protecting" the flour from being stolen, the authorities destroyed it!

Because of the war, Polish money was worthless. Zayde pasted up old bills on a wall in his house, saying, "They are good for only one thing: to wipe your bottom." Other people said the paper was too hard and not good even for that. Most

stores closed down. The Jews, who owned many of the shops, wanted to close up, preferring to keep merchandise for their own use rather than selling it cheap or for worthless money. But the Germans ordered that all stores be opened and they forced owners to stand in front of their shops; anyone who hesitated was shot—as other Jews watched. Then the Germans ordered those watching to remove and bury the bodies.

The Germans came into our neighborhood and took hundreds of Jews away, supposedly "to work," but according to witnesses, they were actually taken to the outskirts of the town and shot. Someone, somehow, would manage to escape, miraculously passing for dead while usually buried under corpses, but eventually crawling out to tell the story.

We were frozen with terror. In the midst of the daily killings and brutality, the rumors we had heard seemed to have come true: Germany and Russia agreed to divide Poland between them. On September 21 three Russian airplanes soared overhead, flying very low. At first we were hysterical, but then we saw the planes were dropping only flyers, not bombs.

"What does it say, Zayde?" I rushed to bring him a sheet.[1]

"Well, " Zayde read, shaking his head, "It seems that Russia is going to 'liberate' part of Poland from the Germans."

"But what will happen to Bialystok? Will it belong to Russia or to Germany?"

Zayde declared that we were part of White Russia and the Ukraine, so we were "being liberated" by the Russians.[2] After the Germans' vicious ten-day reign, I watched goose-stepping Germans march along one half of the street while on the other side Russian trucks rolled in and soldiers jumped off. People were tossing flowers and kissing and dancing in the streets. In all wars, I suppose, people kiss and throw flowers, hoping that the latest conqueror will be better than the previous one. Some Poles waved goodbye to the Germans, calling out *Auf Wiedersehn*, which I interpreted to mean that although Poles had

themselves suffered under the Germans, they nevertheless were pleased when Germans killed Jews.

Most Poles embraced the Russians. The Polish communists welcomed them and urged them, as "soul brothers," to come to church as a sign of their triumph. The Jewish communists wanted the soldiers to come to the synagogue as a similar sign. But the religious Jews spat at the communist Jews, who had always made a point of mocking Jewish traditions and smoking conspicuously on *Shabbat*. No one then suspected that soon the "good Jewish communists" would be arrested, accused of being Trotskyites or Zionists or Bundists. Most Jews, though, were glad the Russians were replacing the Germans, rationalizing that the Russians were the lesser of two evils and wouldn't hate them as much as the Germans did.

The Russians set the Bialystok clock tower to Moscow standard time, sang Red Army songs in the streets, and started publishing the *Bialystoker Stern,* a new Soviet-controlled "Jewish" newspaper with a communist orientation. Because of the Russian-German peace pact, the paper deliberately concealed the Nazis' treatment of Jews. It was only through the grapevine that Bialystok Jews learned that Polish Jews in German-occupied Poland were being humiliated, tortured, and murdered.

It wasn't easy to escape from German-controlled areas because the Nazis wouldn't let the Jews leave. Many thousands, however—from Warsaw, Lodz, Krakow, and other nearby cities and towns—managed to flee on foot toward Bialystok, believing it would be safer under the Russians than under the Germans. But when these refugee Jews arrived at Grodno and Malkin, cities on the border of the Russian-German frontier, they were stopped by Russian guards and faced with desperate options: attempt to get to Bialystok illegally, or go to Russia. Going to Russia meant giving up Polish passports, becoming Russian subjects, and losing the right to return to Poland. Some, fearing that Bialystok was overcrowded, elected

to go into Russia. Others, whose families were left behind in former Polish cities, found the Russian option unacceptable. People who couldn't quickly decide what to do were immediately packed off to Siberia or forced back into German-controlled areas or ordered to remain in frontier cities. Many—half-frozen by brutal weather—somehow managed to get illegally into Bialystok, where they sought shelter.

The housing situation in Bialystok was desperate. Many houses were occupied by Russian officials, soldiers, and their families. Many apartment buildings had been converted into factories. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of refugee Jews from Nazi-occupied areas were streaming in. To absorb such numbers[3] was terribly difficult for Bialystok Jews, most of whom were poor. We did not have spacious homes or enough public places to accommodate the refugees, yet the community managed to open dozens of public kitchens, give free lunches, and find the homeless a place to sleep at night in the synagogues and in schools. Many new arrivals found work as artisans, hired secretly by factory owners. Sometimes Russian soldiers actually helped refugees by requiring local families to take them in. So my family, like others, posted a notice that we had a room available. The newcomer who moved in with us was Basia, who had fled from German-controlled Poland. She became the seventh person in our small apartment, joining my parents, sisters, brother, and me.

Basia moved into the room that had always been my father's tailor shop. That room was available because the Russians took over all property, accused shop owners of exploiting their employees, forced shops to close down, and insisted that all bosses find new jobs elsewhere as "workers." So my father took several of his sewing machines and set up shop with other former managers, but even then he worried. The new arrangement was also precarious because the Russians continued cracking down on managers and frequently sent them off to Siberia. Refugees were nervous too because they were required

to have Russian passports and they feared the secret police, who surrounded places where refugees were known to hide, then arrested them, and loaded them onto trains for Siberia.

When my father's shop was shut down, my Uncle Yankel and I lost our jobs too. Yankel, the son-in-law of a former boss, didn't have enough money to take care of his family, but eventually he located work transporting wood on a horse-drawn cart. I, the son of a "hated boss," couldn't work in another factory nor could I find employment in the shop where my father worked; the men there were in their fifties and considered me, at eighteen, too young. The only job I could hope for was to substitute for someone who was ill. I tried that one day when Basia, an acceptable "worker," was sick and worried about losing her job as a hand finisher in a tailor shop. She asked me to replace her until she felt better. I was glad for the opportunity and hoped to keep on working at her shop. I filled out the necessary registration papers (including my name and address), but unfortunately, I didn't work there even for an hour before they discovered that I was the son of a boss. I was told to leave immediately.

My Uncle Moishe on my father's side was also a tailor, and he too was accused of exploitation and forced to close up shop, even though his four workers praised him as a good and fair employer. Moishe, who was also a volunteer fireman as well as a medic, was later appointed fire chief. When he was asked to get four assistant firemen to help him protect a factory, he immediately "hired" his four former employees.

When the occupation first started, some Bialystokers were cooperative, believing the Russians truly were liberators. For myself, I wasn't sure. I was required by the Russians to join the *Komsomol*, the communist youth group. In the beginning, I thought that perhaps socialism or communism was good or at least better than Poland's previous government. But as time went on I became more and more disillusioned.

"Everything for the workers," the communists said, which

sounded fine. But then they added: "Hebrew teachers are no good" and "Zionists are no good."

I began to see that communist "idealism" was peculiar: You were either a communist, like they were, or you were their enemy. If they were short of workers, for instance, they preferred to hire no one rather than someone like me—the blackballed son of a boss, "an exploiter of labor." I decided then that while it wasn't necessarily stupid to be a communist, it was certainly stupid to be a Jewish communist.

As the economic situation in Bialystok became grimmer, I accepted the fact that I could not get work as a tailor, so I began looking desperately for another job, one that would get me an identification card that specified I was an employee, free from the communists' criticism and suspicion. Luckily, I found work at a Russian-controlled factory that made patterns for clothing. Ironically, I wound up working as a guard, helping the Russians protect the factory against fire or other sabotage by Bialystokers or others who were anti-Russian.

At the factory, I was assigned a uniform: dark blue jacket with yellow buttons and a belt, epaulettes and an insignia with three stripes. My dark blue hat had a round top, a visor, and an insignia; my black leather boots were soft, with accordian-like tops that I could push down or pull up. Wearing my uniform gave me a feeling of status, and although I knew it was superficial, sometimes it came in handy because I was able to go to a special shop inside the factory to buy food (which was better than what was available at outside stores). To buy food outside the factory, however, people had to queue up, and I hated to see them crowding together and pushing, so several times I organized them into an orderly line. I was surprised how agreeable they usually were—probably because my uniform gave me a measure of authority.

I worked as one of 12 men on revolving, eight-hour shifts. Each of us was assigned a wooden baton, but no other weapon.

Four guards worked each shift—one stationed at the factory entrance, one inside the factory, making rounds of the four floors, and the other two guards outside, circling the property.

One day shortly after I started working, I was patrolling the outside of the building when suddenly a uniformed NKVD[4] officer jumped over the rail surrounding the factory. I waved my stick and yelled, "You aren't permitted to be in here!" and I called the other guard to help me. But the Russian officer pointed a revolver at me, pushed me aside, entered the factory office, and picked up the telephone. Without even looking at me, he made a report, claiming the guards were so inadequate that he had easily entered the building. Of course he didn't mention that he had a revolver and I had only a stick.

I was relieved that I wasn't fired because of this incident, which was serious because the Russians rightly feared sabotage. Prior to the Soviet occupation, such problems were unheard of, but afterwards many local residents tried various ways to foil the Russians. Because sabotage by fire was common, I wasn't surprised when one day during a work shift, a Russian officer questioned us guards about what we would do in case of arson. One man said he would take sand from the barrel and throw it onto the fire; another replied he would pour water on it; the third said he would use rags to extinguish the flames.

These responses, I observed, did not please the officer. I understood what he wanted to hear, so I told him what I had learned from my father, a volunteer firefighter for many years. "The most important thing is to prevent a fire, not to fight it," I said, and gave several examples, such as enforcing the regulations against smoking. This answer seemed to satisfy the officer, who then told us to return to work. The whole situation and the questions seemed ridiculous to me because anyone who wanted to start a fire could do so easily. This incident was one of many that sharpened my ability to see through political veneer and to discover ways to survive.

During the winter, I was assigned the night shift as both fire-

man and guard. The *kessel-kaiser*—the man in charge of keeping the furnace going—shoveled coal into the furnace, and sometimes I amused myself for a few minutes by shoveling too. The whole factory was heated by this furnace, which was almost as huge as a locomotive. One night during my rounds of the building, I found the *kessel-kaiser* fast asleep, with a half-empty bottle of vodka nearby. I should have scolded him and made a report, but that would have meant big trouble for him. If I hadn't stopped by, the fire would have gone out from lack of coal, and the whole factory would have stopped functioning; he would have been charged with sabotage, arrested, and imprisoned. I woke the man, warning him that if it ever happened again I would have to make a report. He understood and didn't drink on the job again.

After a while I was transferred to the factory's inside entrance. I got the job because the former guard, an old Polish man, was let go. He couldn't write in Russian, which I had taught myself to do, so he had often asked me to help him while I was doing my rounds. As an entrance guard, I sat inside a locked area enclosed in glass, from which I could see everyone who approached. My job was to request and check identification papers for every person who entered the building. One day the factory director, a young and attractive Russian woman, entered, and since I knew her quite well by that time, I greeted her and let her in without asking for her papers.

I was shocked when suddenly a second woman—who looked exactly like the director—entered. When this woman began shouting at me, I realized that the real director was the second woman.

"What are you doing? Why did you let her go in?" she screamed, pointing to the first woman. "What are your instructions?"

"I thought she was you," I stammered, embarrassed, looking from one to the other.

"Well, she happens to be my twin sister," the director

snapped. "But anyone who wanted to sabotage this factory could try to look like me and enter!"

I apologized profusely and felt grateful I wasn't fired.

Eventually, the Russians seemed to feel that the sabotage situation was getting under control, so they decided to eliminate some firemen and guard personnel. (Some of Bialystok's would-be saboteurs probably were discouraged after hearing that those who were caught were being sent to Siberia.) Six of the factory's twelve guards were fired, but I was fortunate that the director arranged for me to be transferred.

My new job was in a factory that made linen. I checked in arriving truckloads of cotton, filled out papers, and brought them to the factory office. I frequently came into contact with the clerks and accountants, and we had a pleasant working relationship. They soon recognized that I was bright, energetic, and capable of more challenging work, so they offered me some administrative office tasks, but unfortunately I didn't have enough training for them. I would certainly have been qualified if only I had had the opportunity to continue high school when I was thirteen, instead of becoming an apprentice tailor. I felt very disappointed.

One afternoon, another job opportunity unexpectedly came my way. A Polish worker who was frequently drunk wanted to leave the factory early, but the Russian guard refused to let him go. The two got into a fight, the Pole was arrested, fired, and I was assigned to his job.

I learned that linen was a newly created fabric that resulted from blending, in a huge machine, several kinds of cloth—like the cotton, wool, or silk rags that Grandma Tzivi sorted. I often thought of Grandma Tzivi because the kind of sorting work she did was necessary before my factory could create linen. Each day I took linen material from the machine, measured it, marked it into lengths, and weighed it. I had a lot of energy and tended to move quickly, so I finished all my work in four hours although my shift was eight hours. Because I didn't like hanging

around doing nothing, I inquired about other work from the factory manager, whom I had met several times at Russian dances on May 1st celebrations and other holidays. By revealing to her that I had time on my hands, I unintentionally subjected myself and two other employees to an efficiency survey. I first realized this when I saw the manager's secretary standing at a little distance as we worked. For most of the eight-hour shift she looked at me, then at her watch, then back to me. As a result of this "test," one worker was fired, and I and another were instructed to share work formerly done by three people.

A few days later, I again finished all my work, and as I had nothing to do, I wandered to another part of the factory to observe how the mixture of fabrics wound up as linen. First, the *chlopak* (cotton) was packed down, then wool pieces were added, and so on with many additional levels of material, like a cake with multiple layers. Then everything was compressed together, filling the air with a tremendous dust. People who had to breathe this air were given milk to drink because, supposedly, it helped clear the dust from their throats so they could swallow more easily.

After some time, this compressed mixture was put into another machine whose end product was linen thread. A different machine put the thread onto big spools, which were placed on looms and then woven into linen fabric. The next step in the process was my job, measuring and weighing the newly made fabric. While it was interesting to see what other factory workers did, I couldn't keep wandering around for hours, so again I told the manager I had extra time. The result: the second worker was fired and I had to do all the weighing and measuring alone. Even so, by the next week I had streamlined my procedures and managed to complete in six hours the work formerly done by three people in a total of 24 hours. And I still had free time on my hands.

Everyone noticed that I was an outstanding employee. That's probably why I was appointed to the factory committee

and asked to organize a library for the workers. Since I was familiar with the structure of the factory and knew exactly how to proceed, I went directly to the manager, telling her I thought it was necessary to buy certain books, newspapers, brochures, etc. When I asked for expenses to cover these purchases, she was agreeable and the factory committee approved. But later, when I asked for a raise in salary, I discovered something curious about Russian "values." When I was one of three workers, I had been making 150 rubles; I continued to make the same salary while I was doing all the work alone. When the manager refused my salary request, I was taken aback. "Why do you want a raise?" she asked.

I was surprised and thought she was trying to embarrass me. She murmured something about all the money staying in the factory and that salaries weren't important. So I learned more about communism in practice—I could spend as much as I wished on the library because the purpose was to bring ideology, propaganda, and culture to the workers. Such an idea—apparently common in Russia—was totally foreign in Poland.

After putting together "my" library, I prepared a book review of our first library purchase, Maxim Gorki's *The Mother*. During a lunch hour, I told a group of workers about the main character—a good mother who went to a factory to bring her son food and to distribute communist literature. After a while, I was pleased that more and more employees were using the library. Eventually we even devised a system for checking out books.

Because I had a talent for sketching caricatures, I was asked to make portraits of the *stakhanovites*, the factory's best and fastest workers. They, like I, were commended for their excellence but were not rewarded financially. In addition, I also made sketches of the twelve leaders of the Politburo, with Stalin featured in the center. Then, in my capacity as a "cultural and political facilitator," I was told I would soon receive yet another new assignment.

About this time I learned that my Uncle Yankel had been hurt in a bad accident when he and his horse were transporting a load of wood. A motorcar came by, Yankel's horse became frightened, bolted, and threw Yankel down. The horse galloped through the city, dragging Yankel, who was caught in the harness. Although an experienced rider, perhaps Yankel had been too confident, disregarding warnings that his horse was young and somewhat wild. At the hospital Yankel's leg was operated on in eighteen separate places. I couldn't see him because I had to work during the day and no visitors were permitted at night.

All around me, I observed how people were changed by the war and its perpetual undercurrent of tension. I felt myself changing too, but the most important force in me was a powerful drive to live—to keep on, to stay with my family. No one knew what lay ahead for any of us, yet I understood that in order to survive we would have to adapt to whatever occurred. I did not know then that my career in the factory would shortly end. Nor that I was about to fall in love.

Notes

1. Zayde had learned to read and speak Russian before Poland's independence in 1921.
2. The Stalin/Molotov/Ribbentrop nonaggression pact took effect on September 25, 1939. Russia took the eastern provinces of Poland, including Bialystok. Germany took over most of western Poland including Warsaw, the Polish capital.
3. In July 1939 Bialystok's population was about 100,000, with the Jews numbering about 50,000. By October 1939 the Jewish population swelled to about 200,000, half of whom were refugees from Nazi-occupied areas in Poland.
4. NKVD preceded the KGB.

CHAPTER 7

A Beautiful Stranger

One day after working at the factory, I came home, opened the apartment door, and was startled to see a very beautiful young woman lying on the sofa bed in our living room. She was covered with a blanket, so I had no idea of her size or figure, but her eyes were very dark, her hair long and black, and her face lovely. When we looked at each other, I felt a sudden electric shock pass between us. Her name was Henia, and I fell in love with her immediately.

In the next room I was surprised to find a second stranger—a young man named Abram Cymberknop who, I was relieved to learn, had no relationship with Henia. He and Henia had been hospitalized (for severe frostbite) in the Juchnowiecki Street Hospital, where they had met my Uncle Yankel Silbersztein (Chamchi's husband), while he was recuperating from the leg injuries that would leave him permanently lame. The first time my parents went to see Yankel they asked which room Silbersztein was in.

"Which Silbersztein?" the nurse replied.

"Yankel," my parents answered.

"We also have a Henia Silbersztein, from Warsaw," the nurse said.

In the hospital, Yankel became friends with Henia and with Abram. When they were each well enough to be released, neither one had a place to live. Yankel, knowing that Basia had already moved out and that my parents would be required to offer the extra space to other newcomers, invited Henia and

Abram to stay with my family. The two young people moved in right away—Henia in the living room and Abram in my father's former workshop.

While listening to this story, I didn't leave Henia's side for the entire evening. I was totally smitten by her. She told me she was from Warsaw and when the Germans came, she—and thousands of other Jews—tried to escape and flee to Bialystok. They did not know how the Russians were treating Jews, but they imagined that anything was better than the German brutality they were actually witnessing. After Henia managed to get as far as the frontier, near Bialystok, the Russians refused to let her enter. The weather was bitter cold, her clothing inadequate, and after being forced to remain out in the open for several days, she developed such severe frostbite that her toes were stuck together. Eventually Red Cross ambulances brought her and many others suffering from exposure to the Bialystok hospital. Because she still wasn't strong enough to stand on her feet, she had to remain in bed while recuperating.

Leaving Warsaw must have been horrible because Henia never spoke about what happened to her family—except to say that the Germans killed her very good friend on the first day of the occupation, and that she expected an uncle from Warsaw to arrive soon in Bialystok.

Although I was only eighteen, I was so much in love with Henia I couldn't think about anything or anyone else. Secretly, I was pleased I had a nice uniform to wear and I imagined that it impressed Henia when she saw me come home each night. I was grateful that while I was working my mother was taking care of Henia, Abram, and also Yankel, who lived nearby. My mother's previous nursing experience was useful because, in addition to her work at home, she earned a little extra money for the family as a private nurse, giving injections.

As the weeks went by, Henia felt better. When her toes began to separate, I helped her take off the bandages, and I held her hand as she put her feet down for the first time in months.

New College Library
Hebrew College
160 Herrick Rd.
Newton Centre, MA 02459

Standing, she was smaller than she appeared when lying in bed, and she had a beautiful figure. The first time she was well enough to leave the house it was very cold outside and we bundled up, happily huddling close together in a large *sanki*, a winter open-air carriage.

"Veey...OHHHH!" the driver shouted each time he whipped the two horses.

Henia laughed with pleasure as the bells jangled around the horses' necks. She and I had many wonderful times together. We even went to the movies, which were preceded by dancing, and we were always the first on the floor.

When I thought of Henia I became like a drunken man, yet it took me weeks to get up the courage to kiss her. We were very much in love, wanted only to be together, always, and our feelings for each other weren't secret. One day I overheard my parents talk about limiting opportunities for Henia and me to be together, but it was too late—our love was too deep to be stopped.

One day Henia's uncle arrived, locating her after the hospital gave him our address. He seemed intent upon returning to Warsaw, saying that if his family wasn't going to survive, he preferred to go back and die with them. I began to worry that perhaps Henia would want to go back with him. One evening, after announcing that he was going back to Warsaw, he turned to me.

"Shleimeh, what are your intentions regarding Henia?"

"I want to marry her," I replied without a moment's hesitation. "So you can go back to Warsaw with a tranquil mind."

My response certainly didn't come as a surprise, yet he, like everyone else in the family, was concerned that I wasn't old enough to marry. I was too much in love, though, to listen to any advice other than from my own heart.

I don't remember much about our actually getting married; it's as though I were a stranger at my own wedding. All I recall is what Uncle Yossel told me: "Leave the arrangements to the

adults, Shleimeh; you're too young." I want to remember more, but can't and wonder why. Henia and I lived together as man and wife in the same room where I first saw her. She was more religious than my family, so she prepared kosher meals for the two of us, and my mother fixed separate food for the rest of the family. Henia cried frequently because she missed her family, although she still didn't speak much of them and I didn't press her. I wondered sometimes if she were hiding something from me but I never asked.

One day Henia received a letter instructing her to go to the passport office. I was worried because the Russians were demanding that the new arrivals either accept Russian passports or be sent to Siberia as enemies of the regime. I went to the passport office with Henia but was ordered to leave. Later, I was greatly relieved to learn that she had been detained because the authorities suspected that she, like many others, arranged a false marriage only in order to obtain the legal right, as a spouse, to live in Bialystok. But our marriage was legal—we had a Russian civil ceremony in addition to the Jewish wedding.

My sister Blumeh, meanwhile, fell in love with Abram and they also were married. Abram, a handsome man, was an unusual type in Bialystok. He not only looked Polish, but he also spoke Polish extremely well, like the few exceptional Jews who went to the university or the *powszechna* school. At first Abram and Blumeh lived in my father's workshop room, but they had to move after the Russians began forcing groups of Jews to live in Slonim, a town about 100 kilometers outside Bialystok. It didn't take my family long to recognize Abram's character: he was a manipulator and a cheat. Every morning at the Slonim market he purchased poor quality merchandise, like watches, and sold them mostly to soldiers. Sometimes the watches worked until the soldiers returned to their garrison, but when they stopped working, the soldiers would come back, protest, and demand to be repaid. Sometimes Abram paid the money back and sometimes he ran away to avoid being caught.

His behavior reminded me of a story about a man who sold counterfeit dollars.

"Why do you sell fake money?" people asked.

"I have a wife and four children. I must live."

"So why don't you sell real dollars?" the people asked.

He answered, "Oh...I didn't think about that."

Abram was such a character.

One day some members of the Jewish council, which worked for the Russian police, came to our house intending to arrest Abram. But they left when they found him sitting and drinking vodka with a Russian NKVD officer whom he was friends with. After that, Abram's friendship with the Russian officer protected him, so he preferred to remain in Bialystok instead of living in Slonim. He was the type of Jew who caused Jews even more problems. Once, when Henia and I were riding our bicycles, we passed in front of a Russian garrison. A soldier, probably one cheated by Abram, shouted at us, "Go back to the *Tolchock*[1]! (the market). That's where you belong!" So because of someone like Abram, others had to suffer.

Although we did hear occasional disturbing reports about what was happening to Jews under the German occupation, under the Russians we felt that life was relatively normal. We had Jewish newspapers and theater, and we were busy with our own lives. After a while, Henia didn't want to stay home all day, so she found a job setting type. I was a happily married man, busy working at the factory and delighted when Henia became pregnant. And so our life continued—until 1941—when the Germans invaded Bialystok for the second time. From then on, nothing was ever the same again.

Note

1. A typical antisemitic remark, implying that the Jews' place is just in business, not "here" with Poles.

CHAPTER 8

The Sewing Machine

Early in the morning on June 22, 1941, a massive explosion shook our house. The impact of the blast threw Henia and me out of bed. I rushed to my parents' room and found that they too had been knocked to the floor. Airplanes buzzed and bombs exploded. Terrified, we ran out to the street and witnessed an air battle between heavy German fighters and the Soviet Army's familiar light planes, which seemed to be losing.

"The Germans broke the pact with the Russians! They're invading Bialystok!" my father shouted. We looked at each other, too frightened to imagine what it all meant, too panic-stricken to speak.

Amid cries of the wounded and dying, battalions of German soldiers swarmed among the destroyed homes and buildings. One of the first targets the Germans bombed was the Russian army barracks, which was separated from our backyard by a field planted with cabbages. Taken by surprise, the Russian soldiers had no chance to resist. The wounded tried to escape—turning to nearby Jewish neighbors, who took them in. Several bleeding soldiers stumbled into our house and my mother quickly became a nurse again, ripping up cloth to make bandages. Although hopelessly outnumbered, many Russian soldiers fought the Germans, struggling hand-to-hand right down to the bathhouse, where many Russians—they loved the hot water—had been bathing. There they were easily slaughtered.

Bialystok was in total chaos. Poles and Jews were running in all directions, frantically repeating contradictory reports. First

the Russians denied they were at war with Germany, then radio instructions urged everyone to flee.[1] I feared that Henia and my family would all be killed. Russian prison guards began leaving their posts, and the released prisoners rushed out and immediately began looting.

We vainly hoped the Russians would somehow repel the Nazi attack, but we saw their officers and soldiers abandoning us, hurriedly loading jeeps with their wives, children, and possessions. When some Russian soldiers climbed into a truck near our house, my immediate impulse was to grab Henia, who was in her ninth month, and jump onto the truck too.

"You can't come...you're not Russian," the soldiers shouted, pushing us back.

I was infuriated, but moments later that truck blew up, machine-gunned by a German plane. I felt, again, that I was supposed to have died, but somehow, I had escaped death once more.

Pursued overhead by Nazi airplanes, Bialystok Jews jammed the highways, fleeing toward the Russian interior. The escaping Russians apparently thought they too would be safer heading East, toward Minsk, but they didn't know then—nor did we—that the Germans were already there too.

Seeing Germans again on Bialystok soil struck terror in our hearts. My father and I tried to comfort my mother and Henia, but we all vividly remembered the short but terrible German occupation we had endured in 1939, and we could no longer minimize the recent horrifying reports we had heard about how the Nazis had been murdering German Jews. While Russia occupied half of Poland, we managed a semblance of normal life, but with the Germans—everyone was afraid.

"The sewing machine!" my father suddenly shouted. "We've got to get it back before the Germans find it!"

He was right, but I couldn't imagine how we could bring the machine home from the factory; if we were seen carrying a sewing machine, or anything else, the Germans would take us

for looters or thieves and arrest or shoot us. In spite of the dangers, though, we determined to get back our old German-made Singer. We were convinced that somehow it might come in handy in the future. Putting our heads together, my father, Yankel, and I planned an early morning run, the safest time because the Germans forbade the Jews to be out at night.[2]

Getting into the factory wasn't hard—it was empty and the Nazis hadn't yet discovered it. The risky business was to get the machine home from the shop. Yankel and my father decided to carry it while I would walk ahead of them, on the lookout for soldiers. We started out early, before most people were awake. We crept along the side streets only, my father and Yankel stepping inside doorways and courtyards while I slipped ahead of them, street by street, nervously scouting for Germans. When the way was clear, I whistled. When soldiers were around, I ran back and hid in doorways too.

The journey from the factory back to our house—normally a twenty-minute walk—took two nerve-wracking hours. We arrived home exhausted and tense, but relieved. My mother and Henia had been terribly frightened, aware of what the Germans might do if they had caught us.

At last, after a forced two-year separation, the machine was once again in our possession—the faithful, precious, old Singer with pedals; it had been our family's bread and butter since I was born. We quietly rejoiced, as much as we could considering that our world was rapidly crashing down; we hid the machine in the apartment, risking the danger of being caught with it.

Something else in our apartment was also dangerous: my stack of Russian books and a pile of rubles, which I intended to spend on additional printed material for the library I had organized at the cloth factory. Fearing that the Germans would catch me, I didn't know how to dispose of this Russian "evidence." To return it to the factory was too risky.

Deciding to get rid of everything fast, I hurried to Zayde's

yard on Plutanova Street and, with my own hands, dug a hole and buried everything: the propaganda material, the coins, and all the medals and decorations I had received for being an outstanding worker. As I replaced the dirt and patted the ground smooth, I felt I was ending one era and beginning another—one of unknown, unimaginable terrors.

At first, the Nazis claimed they would protect us Jews from the Poles, but that was just another of their seemingly endless lies. We were already well acquainted with Polish antisemitism and knew that some Poles took great pleasure in watching the Nazis mistreat us. Whenever Poles felt like it, they would elbow Jews off the sidewalks; the Nazis, however, decreed that Jews couldn't appear on the sidewalks at all. We were permitted only one place to walk—in the middle of the street. Other Nazi decrees soon followed: no schools, no theater, no movies for Jews. Each Jew was ordered to wear a yellow star, visible at all times.[3] We had to find our own material and then make stars of a specified size. People who didn't have anything yellow took a bed sheet, or anything else, and dyed it. We were bewildered by this humiliating order.

"Why do we have to do this? Why? Why?" Henia cried over and over again.

"I refuse to wear a star," I declared, indignant. But I changed my mind after learning that any Jew caught without one was shot immediately, as an example to others. Henia brooded. I wondered if she regretted leaving Warsaw and coming to Bialystok.

The Nazis particularly enjoyed taunting the Chassidim, the religious Jews. At the marketplace, where people stood at tables and sold their merchandise, I watched, horrified, as Nazis ordered Jews into the middle of the street, encircled them, and forced them to dance, clap, and sing. The Germans amused themselves with the pious men's beards—shaving one side of their faces and then ripping off the rest, flesh included. Meanwhile, laughing Nazis took pictures—as they did in

1939—to send to their families in Germany. I could hardly believe what I saw; I was enraged and also helpless, knowing that if I tried to protect any of those poor people, I would be shot instantly—and my family would be even worse off without me.

Two days after entering Bialystok, the Nazis ordered that a *Judenrat* (a Jewish Council)[4] be formed to convey to the Jews whatever decrees the Nazis ordered. The Nazis demanded that within 48 hours we surrender jewelry, coats, bedding. Whatever else they wanted, they just took.[5] Even before the *Judenrat* was functioning, the Nazis came daily to different parts of the city, claiming they needed people to "work." This too was a lie. The thousands of men and women being rounded up were forced into slave labor, beaten, tortured, and made to work under terrible conditions. Thousands also were trucked to the outskirts of the town, where they were murdered. Occasionally, someone who was left for dead, would escape, find a way back, and tell what the Nazis were doing. Each day we became more frightened and anxious. We heard rumors that the Germans were planning to push all us Jews together in certain streets, evicting us from our homes and separating us from the rest of the citizens. But we didn't want to believe it.

On Friday, June 27, 1941, we were warned of an impending roundup in my neighborhood. Desperate with fear, we wanted to hide, but didn't know where or how. Aunt Chamchi convinced us to hide where she worked, in the beer factory near the river, so my family and a few neighbors—about twenty of us—followed her. At first the Polish owner refused to let us into the empty factory.

"If the Nazis find you here, you'll all be killed and so will I," he insisted.

"Don't worry," Chamchi replied. "Where we'll hide the Nazis won't come."

"Where will you go?" he asked.

"Where the ice blocks from the river are stored," Chamchi answered.

The boss reluctantly agreed—Chamchi was a valued employee, excellent at her job of putting corks into bottles—and she led us down underground into a cavelike room, deep in the cold earth. We had to hug each other to conserve heat. Many hours later the factory director told us the Nazis had left the area, and we came out—frozen but alive. Emerging into the street, blinking from the light and warmed by the sun, we smelled smoke and a strange, horrible stench.

While we were hidden, the Nazis had streamed into the streets—killing, wounding, beating. They forced Jews inside the Great Synagogue on Suraska Street and then hurled grenades inside. Flames shot up immediately. While my family had been below ground, numb with cold, nearly 2000 Jews were being burned alive in the synagogue inferno. Shocked and despairing, Henia and I looked at each other without exchanging words, understanding that we and our family had escaped death that day, perhaps only to suffer worse later.

A few Jews were saved by a Polish watchman, the synagogue's *Shabbos* caretaker, who opened some doors when the Nazis weren't looking. After tiring of burning Jews, the Nazis moved through other Jewish sections of Bialystok, forcing residents to put out the flames; many died from the smoke and fumes.[6] On more than thirty streets, Jewish homes were gutted, and men were hauled out and shot in front of their wives and children. Finally the Nazis left for the day.[7]

A few days later, at four in the morning, the Nazis blocked off several streets, dragged 300 men from their homes, lined them up, and "selected" who would live and who would die. Men with calluses on their hands were freed (for that day) but all the smooth-handed "intellectuals" (mostly lawyers and doctors) were taken outside the city and shot.[8]

On July 5, "Black Saturday,"[9] Gestapo officers captured thousands of men, loaded them onto trucks, and took them to

Pietrasze or to an unknown destination where they were supposedly "needed for work." But none of these people ever came back. Fearful wives, mothers, and children protested to the Nazis after their husbands and sons had been gone for some time.

"Why do you keep rounding up more and more people? Why don't you take other men and let our husbands and sons return?" they cried. The men would be returned, the Nazis claimed, if the panicked wives and families gave ransom—large amounts of gold, silver, Soviet rubles, and other valuables. After the *Judenrat* delivered the ransom, the Nazis announced that the victims would never return, that they had been sent away to labor camps in Germany. The ransom "promise" was yet another Nazi lie. July 12 was another Black Sabbath for thousands of Jewish men and young people.[10]

We were all short of food, so everyone was concerned about stockpiling. My brother-in-law Abram, with his scoundrel's knack for exploiting such situations, one day left the house carrying an empty basket.

"Don't worry, don't worry. I'll bring you some food," he told us.

On that day Poles who lived in the country came to Bialystok with their wagons loaded with potatoes, vegetables, eggs, and other foods. Instead of money, they asked for payment in clothes or jewels. Abram stood in the middle of the street, insulting them, asking, "How could you sell all that stuff to the Jews? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? We Poles are going to die from hunger!"

No one guessed, of course, that Abram was a Jew because he spoke Polish without an accent. Just as he had hoped, the Poles sold him so much produce that he had trouble carrying it all back to the house, and of course he got it all for a very low price. This incident was very much out of character for Abram because he definitely was not the altruistic type, but for once we enjoyed a rare opportunity: having him share something with the family.

Rumors about a *ghetto* soon became facts.[11] In August the Germans ordered all the Poles living in the designated area to leave, so the Jews could move in. Where were the Poles to go? To the houses the Jews were forced to vacate—houses like those that belonged to my parents and my grandparents. We were told we had less than three days to get moved.

I was especially worried about Henia. Under the best of circumstances, she was very sensitive, and the natural discomforts of her pregnancy were being sharply increased by the terrible fear and anxiety we all felt about moving into the ghetto. We couldn't imagine what it would mean to live in a ghetto. The tension was terrible. What lay ahead? What would happen to us? What would we do? Why did the Germans want to isolate us? Did they intend to kill all of us?

Henia wept, clutching her swollen belly. "In the ghetto you can't work. We'll have no money. How will we eat? How will we feed the baby?" she lamented.

I couldn't answer. Her questions tore at my heart, especially since I realized she could go into labor at any time.

Notes

1. At this time Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov delivered his historic address conceding that Hitler had deceived Stalin and declaring that a horrible war between the two nations would lead to grim consequences.
2. The Nazis imposed a curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m.
3. The Jews had to wear a yellow badge on the left front and also one on the back of their upper garments.
4. The Chief Rabbi Gedalja Rozenman was ordered to form a twenty-four-person *Judenrat* (Jewish council) through which the local Nazi authorities could issue all kinds of ordinances and regulations affecting the Jews. Every order was to be carried out in 48 hours, under threat of severe sanctions.
5. After losing their possessions through Nazi arson and robbery, Jews were hit by hunger and poverty.
6. The synagogue was still burning 24 hours later, on Saturday morning, when the Nazis ordered Jews to put out the flames.

7. Thursday, July 3, 1941 was the first mass slaughter. The murdered 200 were called "Thursday martyrs"; they were tortured all night. Pietrasze Field was a forest about two kilometers outside the northern edge of the city, in the direction of Waszlykowa.
8. The thousands who were taken away on Saturday, July 5, 1941 were called "Saturday Martyrs."
9. About 5000 Jews were shot and buried in a mass grave on July 3 and July 12, 1941. The grave was about one-half mile into the Pietrasze Forest. Today, a memorial monument at the site states, "Here lie the bodies of 6,000 victims brutally murdered by Hitler fascists in the years 1941 to 1944." No mention is made of Jews.
10. On Friday, August 1, 1941, the ghetto was completed and included several streets: Czestochowska, Polna, Kupiecka, Lipowa, Ciepla, Jurowiecka, Fabryczna, Bialystoczanska, Neuwelt, and adjacent streets.

CHAPTER 9

Our First Son

"*Mach schnell! mach schnell!*" Hurry! Hurry!

Between August 1 and August 3, 1941, we were ordered to move to the ghetto. Frenzied German soldiers shouted, pushed, cursed us. We grabbed only what we could haul on our backs or pack into a small wagon or cart. Although my family was rather poor, each of us had accumulated certain personal items, and in our panic it was confusing and painful to choose quickly what to take and what to leave. We snatched minimal bedding, clothes, cooking utensils, and the sewing machine, which we knew was illegal. Frantically, we took it apart and packed the pieces separately.

I felt dazed as I turned back to look for the last time at all that was familiar: our beds, furniture, my brother Benny's chess set, the little carved-wood vase my mother always put on the table each Sabbath, the family portraits of my aunt Chamchi's wedding, my Uncle Zundel in Uruguay, Zayde, my smiling mother in her World War I nurse's uniform, the 1929 family gathering when Uncle Benny visited Bialystok. I imagined the faces of my ancestors looked sad, even frightened, as though they knew they were being abandoned forever.

The ghetto was several miles from our house and we were forced to walk. From the moment we stepped out onto the street, which was jammed with people, the Poles and the Germans taunted us. What a pathetic spectacle we were. The elderly, women, small children dragging their possessions. Young and old with bundles on their backs, many weeping, too

shocked and confused to speak, bewildered to leave familiar possessions and surroundings for unknown reasons.

Even though I was used to Polish antisemitism, I was still stung by the intense hatred directed at us in our pitiful exodus. As we slowly dragged along, many Poles stood by, laughing. Others stole, pulled things out of our hands, whisked up items that accidentally fell from carts or wagons. A few Poles brought horses and wagons to help Jews move, but in return they usually demanded the best furniture, jewelry, or other merchandise, all of which was more valuable than cash. Countless personal, cherished articles fell into strange hands.

Meanwhile, the Germans amused themselves taking photographs, saying they would show their families how Germany had conquered the Jews. My brain was suddenly flooded with stories Zayde told me. Scenes of nightmarish pogroms. Poles coming out of church, enflamed by their priests' sermons, throwing stones, shouting "You killed Christ!" I thought of how many times Jews had to run home, hurriedly fastening the shutters to protect themselves from angry mobs. I wished I could hide somewhere, safely huddled together with my family. But there was neither hiding place nor safety any more.

Our tragic caravan numbered fifteen: Henia and I, my parents, my grandparents, my sister Blumeh and her husband Abram; Rivka and Benny, my little brother and sister; Uncle Yankel, Aunt Chamchi and their son Shleimeh; and my uncles Yankel and Yossel. Little Rivka kept crying as we trudged along. "I'm tired. Where are we going? What's happening? When are we going home?" She asked over and over again.

My mother struggled to hold back her tears. "You see, Rivkele, all the other Jews are here too, so we're not alone. We must do as all the others do. Everything will be all right." But Rivka wasn't soothed; she kept crying.

Among the jeering Polish bystanders, I recognized one very blond young Pole I remembered from when I was working for the Russians. He was a real hooligan, always butting into the

food line without waiting. One day, deliberately using my factory uniform for authority, I scolded him for shoving in line. When he resisted me, I pushed him and he fell into the gutter. I wondered if he would recognize me and harass me and my family, but fortunately he didn't spot me—perhaps because he was amused, gawking at the dismal trail of despondent Jews.

As we came within blocks of the ghetto, some Jews suddenly bolted off and ran toward the forest. I too had an urge to escape rather than risk whatever lay ahead in the ghetto. But I was part of a family and I had responsibilities.

Our apartment in the ghetto had four rooms and a kitchen, big enough for our family, but not for nineteen—my family plus a family from Tomashev, with two parents, a thirteen-year-old girl and an infant. We were lucky to have a place to go, thanks to Grandma Tzivi's resourcefulness.[1] Other Jews had to search desperately in the ghetto for a place to stay, so for them life was an even worse shambles than for us. Many were stranded, sleeping on the street until they found some housing. Formerly wealthy citizens were immediately reduced to poverty level. Many had no stove or sanitation and no place to wash themselves or eat or sleep. Some built fires on the street to cook soup. I felt sorry for them and, whenever possible, I brought them extra food when we were lucky enough to have some.

In the first few days of living in a severely overcrowded, barricaded enclosure,[2] I often thought about those Jews who had fled into the forest and wondered which dangers were greater: theirs or ours. They had to hide from Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians. It was well known that anyone who delivered a Jew to the Germans would get a reward—a pound of sugar, perhaps. So if people wanted sugar, which was almost impossible to get, they just hunted down a Jew or denounced one they knew was hiding.

Although most Poles who hid Jews did so because they were paid, to be clear with my conscience I must state that some did

it out of kindness and even paid with their own lives if the Nazis discovered what they were doing.

Each morning in the ghetto thousands of Jews, mostly men, were rounded up to work as slaves in various parts of the city. These people—unlike the thousands taken "to work" before the ghetto was established—returned to the ghetto at night and were locked inside, after being thoroughly searched to prevent any food smuggling. The widows and families of the men who had vanished never stopped longing for their lost relatives. Women whose loved ones didn't return were given nicknames based on the last day they had seen their husbands or sons or brothers. I especially remember a song[3] about Rivka the Saturday woman *(Rivkele di Shabbosdiker)* whose husband had been taken on "Black Sabbath," July 5, 1941.

Rivkele, the victim of Saturday,
Is working in the factory,
Twisting threads together.
Fashioning a length of rope.
Alas, the somber ghetto
Lasts too long
And with a heavy heart,
I feel so sorry for her lot.

Her devoted man, Hershele,
Is gone, is no longer.
Since that Saturday,
Since that hour.
Rivkele is in mourning,
Crying day and night.
And now she sits
At her spinning wheel
Lost in deep thought.

Where is my beloved man?
Is he alive somewhere?
Perhaps in a concentration camp,
He works hard without rest.
How bleak it must be for him there
How bitter it is for her here.
Since that Saturday,
Since that hour.

Shortly after we arrived in the ghetto, Henia went into labor. Under normal conditions, having a baby was a joyful event, but in those days, nothing was normal or joyful. When Henia was due, all the neighbors knew it because they heard her screams. Our baby boy, born in our apartment, was delivered by the same small, strong midwife who had delivered three generations in my family: my mother; my brother, sisters, and me; and my own child. We welcomed my son and named him Yechiel after Henia's father. He was the twentieth soul in our cramped apartment. We didn't know what the future held for him, but we understood with chilling clarity that we were only at the beginning of a dreadful and cruel time.

My father, who had always been a quiet man, now rarely spoke at all. Although he would smile occasionally at his baby grandson, mostly he sat alone, head down, staring vacantly. Jammed into the ghetto, bereft of the fragile security he once had as a breadwinner, struggling to get food, withstanding continuous assaults by the Germans, filled with anxiety and fear, his spirit was crushed. I felt sorry for him. When his eyes looked faraway and tragic, I wondered whether he was thinking about Argentina.

We were always hungry, always searching out every possible way to get food, just to survive. The ration the Nazis gave us was meager, barely enough to keep us alive. Commonplace items became treasures. Potatoes were a luxury; a whole potato could be a complete meal. When we were lucky, Zayde used

the potato skins and made a kind of vodka. Then he created a little space in one of the bedrooms and night and day he began brewing fake vodka. I don't know how he mixed it, but he put it in liter bottles and it tasted better than other people's *samogon* (hooch or home-brew). He said he could make much more if he had a bigger place. Once, he asked the *Judenrat* for equipment and space, but they had no interest in producing vodka in the ghetto, and after a while, Zayde dropped the whole matter.

In the beginning, the *Judenrat* asked people to volunteer for the ghetto police force. The first batch of volunteers were Jewish crooks, the city's lowest form of life. One group called "The Black Hand" terrorized and blackmailed people, sending their victims a paper stamped with a black hand. These criminal types didn't last long as members of the *Judenrat* police after they realized they couldn't make money. The second wave of "volunteer" police came from the intelligentsia, a lot of mama's boys who believed it was safer than doing other work. The *Judenrat* was responsible for directing traffic in the streets and also for clearing away all residents when the Germans entered the ghetto because they were afraid to walk out in the open. The *Judenrat* police—about 200 in number—wore uniforms, boots, and an arm band with a star; they carried clubs, whose blows were very painful, and I happened to be frequently on the receiving end.

During her pregnancy, Henia had been healthy because during the Russian occupation we all had enough to eat; however, in the ghetto, there wasn't enough food, so she didn't have adequate milk to nurse the baby. At the age of one week, Yehiel, too weak even to cry, died of malnutrition. Everyone in the family wept and tried to comfort us. Aunt Chamchi took me in her arms and we cried together. Henia was broken-hearted and also very weak physically. She didn't eat or speak, but recited Psalms day after day.

Grandma Tzivi, a woman of very strong character, didn't want me to bury my own child. She was already toughened by many trials, tragedies, pogroms, and seeing her own young brother die after he was shot by the Russian police. Tzivi wrapped my baby son in a cloth and buried him close to the ghetto wall, near Zabia Street, in a place the Germans designated as our ghetto cemetery.[4]

For some Jews the cemetery represented the end of life; for others, it meant a potential preservation of life. At the ghetto wall near the cemetery, quiet transactions often took place. Jews needed food, which Poles had; Poles needed goods, which Jews had. The transactions, I believe, began one day when, during a funeral, a thin woman in a tattered, soiled coat knelt in front of a grave, weeping. Speaking in Polish, swaying up and back, she half-talked, half-mumbled in a singsong way.

If someone from the other side
were listening...
I will be here this evening
at 6 o'clock
with a fine fur coat.
The Germans have decreed that everyone has to bring
their fur coats to the Judenrat...
Instead of giving my coat...
to the Germans for nothing...
It's better to sell it to the Poles...
and let the Poles throw us food over the wall..

To disguise what she was really saying, she would occasionally sob in Polish, "Oh, my darling, you died so young..." or something similar, so that any Germans passing by would think she was innocently mourning.

Later that same day, when the evening patrol guard had moved away from the wall for a few minutes, the fur coat was

thrown over from the ghetto side and food was thrown back from the Polish side. From then on, Poles waited at the wall to hear messages from the Jews. Such transactions were frequent because the Nazis often decreed that all furs, jewels, or other objects be brought to a central spot in the ghetto. Then the Germans would take them. This was out-and-out robbery but we could do nothing about it except try, as the woman at the grave did, to swap goods for food rather than give something to the Nazis and get nothing in exchange.

Gradually, everyone got used to doing business over the cemetery wall, which was really more like a fence made of boards. In fact, in some places where the boards were broken, the Jews and Poles could even see each other. One day, while the Germans were away from the wall, a most extraordinary transaction took place. One whole section of the wooden boards was opened up and at that moment, exactly according to plan, a cow was quickly passed into the ghetto from the Polish side, and the boards were replaced. It was a risky operation, but then, every day in the ghetto was a life or death risk.

The Germans needed people to labor outside the ghetto. Getting permission to work outside was considered very lucky and also very dangerous. If ten people were needed, 100 came, each hoping to be chosen. The rejected people were sometimes so reluctant to leave, they refused to disperse until *Judenrat* members struck them with their clubs. I became obsessed figuring a way to get work outside the ghetto because those who went outside frequently came back in the evening with potatoes or bread. Everyone in my family was hungry and I was desperate to get food for them. An opportunity presented itself after Abram, my brother-in-law, went into the Jewish "town hall" in the ghetto and received permission from the *Judenrat* to work outside. His papers indicated permission for only one person, but we added a zero after the one, fixing it to look like permission granted for ten people to leave. The next day we did get

ten people out. After that, however, Abram went out just once, and I became the only one in my family to go out regularly.

It was very difficult to smuggle food into the ghetto. At the outer gate I had to bribe a Nazi to let me through. If I passed that barrier, I then faced the Jewish police, who were stationed inside the two entry gates. They confiscated any goods that Jews brought in, often taking things for themselves. If I had a sack on my back, they would grab it, saying, "Well, we have to eat too." I was desperate but determined to figure out a better way, so I suggested to my uncle Yankel that we make a plan: I would smuggle clothes out from the ghetto, sell them, and buy food with the money I made. Then, at a certain section of the wall at a specific time, I would throw over a bag of food—potatoes, carrots, bread, beets, or cucumbers—and Yankel, Chamchi, Henia, or someone else in the family would be stationed there, waiting to catch what I threw.

We carefully timed this nerve-wracking scheme so that the Nazi patrol would have just passed. We were lucky that it worked. If the Nazis had caught us, we would have been killed. Because everyone was scrambling to get food, the ghetto atmosphere was thick with tension and many lost hope; some were so despondent they killed themselves. A former teacher of mine was the first suicide in the ghetto. Bad as it was, Jews did not kill each other for food—they just stole. Abram, meanwhile, managed somehow to acquire better food than the rest of us, but since he was not the sharing kind, the family was jealous and resentful. Quarrels were inevitable and frequent.

One day my mother suggested that she come with me outside the ghetto because she wanted to visit Bella, a Polish woman who had been the concierge at my brother Benny's school, which wasn't far from our pre-ghetto apartment. Bella frequently had come to our house after school to summon Benny (a chess champion at twelve) to play chess with the teachers and the directors. Bella often had something to eat

with us, and the two women became quite friendly. My mother, hoping Bella would remember us, believed she might help us if she knew of our desperate circumstances.

Aunt Chamchi also decided to join my mother and me, so when we left the ghetto in the morning, it appeared that we were all going to work. I carried things I intended to sell—women's lingerie, bras, and panties that belonged to my grandmother and my aunt. At Benny's old school we found Bella and she and my mother fell into each other's arms, crying, each overjoyed to see that the other was still alive. They hadn't seen one another for a year, and during that time many Poles too had been killed by the Germans. Bella had aged a lot. She lived alone at the school, which was closed since all the Jewish children had been taken to the ghetto. She had no work, no bosses to supervise her, no salary, and next to nothing to eat. Obviously, Bella couldn't help a family of nineteen in the ghetto.

In a house across the street from Bella lived a Polish woman to whom I had sold items on previous visits. Since I was already known there and it was clear that I was Jewish, I felt safe leaving my mother and aunt with Bella while I went across to conduct business. I don't know why, but that particular day the Polish woman who had previously bought clothing from me seemed irritable and offered only half the value for what I was selling. I left her house feeling angry, and perhaps that made me less cautious than usual. Without looking right and left to see if any Germans were around, I went out into the street. Unfortunately, the German barracks were nearby and sure enough, some soldiers were passing by. They were not on duty but just out for a walk, but that didn't matter because a German could do whatever he wanted with a Jew, anytime.

So the Germans stopped me, looked at my yellow star and asked what I was doing outside the ghetto. I was twenty-one years old, but they spoke to me with the familiar form "*du*," an expression used in German to address people you are very familiar with—relatives, close friends, and all children. That

form when spoken to a stranger was insulting, which I'm sure was what they intended. Searching me, they discovered the little money I had, money to buy food. I had only silver, not the ordinary paper *zlotys*. "Ah, these are nice souvenirs for us," the soldiers said taking away my coins, looking through the clothes I carried, and putting some items into their pockets. Then they said, "Come with us."

Meanwhile, as all this was going on, my mother, who was watching from across the street, fell to the ground, fainting from fear. She was terrified that the Germans would arrest me, and she knew that she and my aunt could not return to the ghetto without me and my pass. The soldiers took me to the market square on Piaski Street. I figured they couldn't take me to the police station because even they didn't have the right to steal the things they took from me. Their purpose, I realized, was mainly to scare and bully me, and when they later released me, I rushed back to the school. My mother and aunt were relieved that I was safe.

"Shleimeh," my mother looked at me, "I'd prefer to drop dead in the ghetto than ever come out again."

"Please stay here with Bella a little while longer," I pleaded. "I still have a few clothes to sell and I'll get some money."

For the second time I returned to the house across the street. From her window, the Polish woman too had witnessed the entire scene of what had happened to me with the soldiers. She bought all the clothes the Germans had left me and paid normal prices, probably because she had a bad conscience. I gave all the money to Bella, who agreed to go to the market and buy whatever she could find. Luckily, nobody found out about the incident with the soldiers, and we were fortunate enough to return to the ghetto without attracting the attention of either the German or the Jewish police.

Back in our apartment, my mother brushed aside tears and said, "Shleimeh, all those times you went out of the ghetto in the morning and came back in the evening—with food for your

wife and all of us, we had no idea of the risks you were facing. For us it was just a routine thing, but now—now I understand the dangers." Although I continued to go out, we never discussed the subject again. And I never told anyone about how I survived other dangerous incidents, when I went outside and removed my yellow star. Sometimes Poles, who recognized Jews easily, stopped me, demanding that I open my bag to prove that I wasn't carrying arms. So many other things happened to me that, if my mother had known, she would have felt even more hopeless and desperate.

Everyone knew that the Jews who were locked up in the ghetto were available to anyone who wanted bodies for slave labor. One day a Gypsy foreman (Gypsies had not yet been targeted for extermination by the Nazis) requested a group of Jews to work outside the ghetto, repairing a roof. Never in my life had I held a hammer in my hand and I didn't know anything about roof repair, but the desire to live and sustain my family gave me a burst of courage; I declared myself a roof expert and I forgot to be afraid. I didn't know then that in the years ahead I would preserve my life again and again by claiming to be expert at several other "careers."

The roof in question, which was located in a prison, had been damaged by prisoners who had set fires and escaped each time an occupying power (Germans or Russians) left the town. The Gypsy I worked for was an artisan who made various kinds of copper cooking pots, a Gypsy specialty. He ordered our work crew, as a first step, to remove snow from the roof, which was pitched; to do this we had to grab onto the roof with one hand and sweep off snow with the other. Next, we were told to go to the workshop inside the prison, where we prepared the roof covering; finally, we carried the material up to the roof itself.

One day, on my way to the workshop, I was stopped by a prisoner who looked familiar. He was a butcher, imprisoned by

the Jewish authorities for charging more than the going prices. He recognized me.

"Ah, remember? You used to buy meat from me," he said. "And now I see you're lucky. You go in and out of the ghetto. Can you do us a favor and bring us cigarettes? We have money."

Coincidentally, I had just had the good fortune to buy ten packs of cigarettes in the ghetto, so the following day I brought some to the prison and sold them to the butcher, without making any profit. When I saw the Polish prison guards watching me, I realized that I should have brought cigarettes for them also. As I placed a load of roofing material on my shoulder and began carrying it outside, the Polish guards started throwing rocks at me. I wasn't hurt, but I worried the rest of the day that I might get into some kind of trouble. After work, we went as usual to the exit, but that evening the prison commandant stood in front of the door, blocking it.

"Who among you sold cigarettes today?" he demanded.

My heart sank. "I did," I answered. "But I didn't sell them to make money. I just provided a service for the prisoners."

"Well, that doesn't matter," the commandant retorted. "I'll have to make a report about this—and you will be put into prison."

A wave of panic swept over me, but I was lucky once again. Near the exit stood a Polish prisoner who had witnessed the scene between me and the butcher.

"This young fellow is just *to jest biedny zydek* (a poor Jew). He wasn't doing business," the Polish man said to the German officer. "And the guard denounced the Jew just because he didn't get any cigarettes himself."

I held my breath.

Then the commandant turned to me. "If you're going to work here, you shouldn't have anything to do with the prisoners." And with that he let me leave. I was grateful to the Polish prisoner who spoke up for me, but I was still afraid of being

sent to prison, so I decided not to go out of the ghetto for a while. I told myself I must find a way to work inside.

But the next morning, when I heard a call for twenty men to work outside, my resolve failed. I didn't even ask where they were going; I just left with them. We wound up at a slaughterhouse, where our assignment was to gather up the animals' excrement. As usual, the Nazis made us work in the most demoralizing way possible, ordering us to pick up the shit in our hands and then drop it into a big hole. At the end of the day, we were exhausted, but all twenty of us had to stand up in a truck while we were taken back to the ghetto. At least ten men were so weak they could barely get off, so the Germans simply picked them up and threw them down on the ground, as though they were already corpses.

Again, I determined not to leave the ghetto to work. But times were terribly difficult; we had run out of clothing to sell or exchange on the outside, so I was lucky to find work in the ghetto factory that repaired boots for German soldiers. They used only the finest leather, which they acquired by force from any source they could find. This factory felt like a relatively safe place because the Nazis needed their boots, so although ghetto Jews were constantly rounded up, the Germans didn't come to the boot factory unless they were really desperate for people. Some of the sewing machines had previously belonged to Jews but the Nazis had taken them. I worked with Yankel, Aunt Chamchi's husband, stitching together pieces of leather for the foot of the boot. The work was very precise, and anyone who did poor stitching got fired, which meant a quicker death. We worked ten hours a day and could return to our apartments for lunch. Although we were terrified of getting caught, we continued to keep my father's sewing machine hidden in our little concealed room.

The boot factory was so comparatively "safe" that often we didn't know what was going on in the rest of the ghetto. When Yankel and I returned to the apartment in the evening, we were

always afraid that everyone might be gone. One night we found Blumeh in despair because Abram had disappeared. No one was certain what happened to him, but everyone knew that he was not well-liked. He had developed a notorious reputation, dressing in leather boots just like the Germans, and although he had lived in our apartment, he had never helped us.

Somehow Abram had gotten hold of a German driver and a truck filled with cigarettes, which he sold immediately (except for some he brought home and locked in a cupboard). We learned that a few days before Abram disappeared, several of his informer-friends had come over to play cards. They demanded he pay back some money he had either lost or borrowed. He refused, cursed them, and they left. Later, German soldiers found Abram somewhere in the ghetto and arrested him. About a week later, a Polish man came to our house. We could not figure out how he entered the ghetto or got our address, but he asked Blumeh to give him money so Abram could purchase things in prison. I don't know whether Blumeh gave the man anything. She probably had nothing left to give since Abram had lost all their money gambling at cards.

Notes

1. Before the war, Tzivi worked with a Polish woman. The two arranged to switch apartments. The Polish woman moved to our former apartment on Plutanova and we moved to hers on Kupiecka Street, which was part of the designated ghetto area.
2. The Jews were forced to obtain materials to build a fence around the ghetto, a massive jail for 60,000 Jews.
3. This song was actually a poem written by Pesach Kaplan—author and chronicler of the Bialystok Ghetto. Kaplan dedicated the poem to the "Saturday Martyrs," who were never seen or heard from again.
4. Several days after the ghetto was established, an area was set aside called Zabia Cemetery, located at Polna Street behind Katok's mill. The Nazis forbid Jews to bury the dead in the old Bagnowke Cemetery because it was outside the ghetto and Jews were not allowed to leave.

CHAPTER 10

Sunflower Seeds

Overcrowding in the ghetto was terrible. The ghetto was a massive jail in a too-small area, crammed with more than 60,000 Jews. Everyone was tense, wretched, hungry, exhausted. In our apartment, nineteen of us were jammed together, sharing whatever sparse food I brought. We had only one tiny kitchen and of course everyone wanted to prepare food at the same time. To add to the complication, Henia insisted on eating kosher and my mother, who had her own ways of doing things, found it very difficult not to get the dishes mixed up; she and Henia barely spoke to each other. Our life was unbearable.

The German policy of daily roundups heightened our fear and desperation. At first, all Jews were ordered to gather in the town hall. Then the Nazis would seize a certain number—from 500 up to 5000. Men were always taken first. After a while we understood that "work" could mean forced labor or beatings or torture or death. When we heard that a Nazi roundup was imminent, everyone attempted to hide—in the gutters of houses, in dug-out bunkers underneath, or in a concealed room inside an apartment. From inside the hidden room in my family's apartment, we pulled a big wardrobe across the door opening so that the Germans couldn't see from the outside that anything was behind it. We removed the outer handle from the door, tied a rope onto the inner handle, and made a hole in the door so that we could push or pull it.

One day, while we were hiding in that room, Nazis entered our apartment. We heard them asking each other, "Where are

the Jews?" After knocking on all the walls of the apartment, they slammed the door and went upstairs. At that time the Jews who lived above us had not hidden themselves. I heard the Germans' boots, their shouts of "*Raus!*" (out!) and the children crying, "Mama! Papa! What's happening to us!" The little ones shrieked as they were pushed, tumbling down the wooden stairs. Terrified and heartsick, we remained in the concealed room for another hour or so. When all was quiet, we came out and went down to the street.

Amazingly, we were becoming accustomed to horror: revolting, shocking sights, newly killed bodies of children, parents, old people. After the Germans took their roundup quota and left, the *Chevra Kadisha* (volunteer burial society), who worked for the *Judenrat*, removed the bodies and took them to the cemetery. Once the bodies were out of sight, ghetto life returned to "normal" as people ran to see if their friends or relatives were safe. Any time, families could become separated forever.

During the roundups, when the Nazis entered an apartment to grab people, they also pillaged—snatching up anything they wanted. Then, after the Germans left with their captives (dead or alive), Jewish survivors rushed into the same apartments—frantic for food or extra clothing because the winters were fiercely cold. Jewish pillagers, if caught by the Jewish ghetto police, were taken first to the Jewish prison, then turned over to the Germans, who soon killed them.

Because so many Jews were hiding, the Nazis sometimes had a difficult time collecting a specific number. Other times they didn't make their quota because they murdered so many Jews in the process. During the raids, some Jews—known to be informers—had special "passes." They were always in the streets and safe, left alone by both German and Jewish police. Such Jews we knew and despised. Once I saw an informer punished. A male informer, hoping to save his own life, told the Germans about a whole family hiding in an apartment not far

from our house. The Germans searched that apartment but found it empty. Another known informer, a Jewish girl who also had a pass, yelled out in German that the Jews were hidden outside the building. The soldiers came out of the house and began searching the grounds, but again they didn't find the family.

"Well, you haven't looked well enough," the girl said.

"Why are you trying to help us catch Jews?" asked a soldier, walking up to her.

"I'm just doing my job," she responded, getting slightly hysterical.

"I'm just doing my job too...because you are a Jewess," said the soldier. And he took out his revolver and killed her.

After the soldiers left, all the Jews came out of hiding and everyone spat on the body of the dead girl. It was a disgusting sight. There are always some people who are willing to become traitors.

On another occasion, after being warned about an imminent roundup, we all crowded into our little concealed room—including the family from Tomashav, the parents and their child, a few weeks old.

"It's not possible for you to hide here with a baby," we said to the mother. "If the baby cries, the Germans will hear and we'll all be dead."

The child's father was indignant. "Either all of us go in or none of us goes in," he insisted. But he added, "I'll do all I can to keep the child quiet."

Silencing our misgivings about the baby, we stayed in the hidden room for at least an hour—without saying a word, hardly breathing. Then suddenly we heard the Germans enter the apartment. Seeing no one there, they began, as was their custom, to tap the walls, searching out any hollow hiding places. Just then the baby started to cry but only for a moment. Immediately, the Germans stopped talking. They were silent,

listening. Inside the concealed room, where we could hardly breathe, I could feel our hearts stop beating. The Germans remained in the house for some time, speaking among themselves, and after a while they left.

Carefully, we pushed aside the wardrobe and came out, gasping from tension and lack of air. Then we noticed the baby. It was dead. When the child had begun to cry, the father decided to sit on his head, smothering him. Everyone felt terrible and we all began weeping. We were alive and that tiny child was dead. Then we realized we had a new problem: how to dispose of the body. Finally, the father decided to go to the outside toilets and place the body into the latrine. We were all sick with grief, but we knew that was the only safe thing to do.

A few days later, we had another fright when the Jewish ghetto police came to our door, claiming they had reports that my family was illegally keeping in our house children who were not part of the family. This complaint resulted from the fact that neighbors discovered the dead baby in the latrine, which was a public outdoor toilet. What happened next was terrible. The Nazis ordered the *Judenrat* to force the parents to remove the dead child's body from the latrine—with their bare hands—and carry it to the cemetery on Zabia Street. There, the mother and father dug a hole, placed the body in it, covered it with dirt, and put on a marker. Today I'm sure there's nothing left—just a spot where cows come and eat the grass that grew over that tiny corpse.

The Germans in Bialystok took all their orders from, and made reports to, their superiors in Berlin, who meticulously checked all records. The Berlin authorities demanded an explanation when, for example, they discovered discrepancies in the production records of a Bialystok factory that produced cooking oil made from sunflower seeds. The Bialystok Nazis, who had been stealing sunflower seeds by the truckload, concealed their theft by falsely accusing the Jewish factory workers. Some

Jews of course did steal, but only for food and only in amounts small enough to sneak into the ghetto—in their pockets or in their pants, which were gathered at the bottom. When we heard rumors that ghetto Jews were being blamed for the missing sunflower seeds, our already weakened spirits were further crushed, and we became extremely agitated, worrying what would happen next.

On December 31, 1942, the police ordered Jews to assemble in Petrowski Square, the ghetto's main plaza. Our apartment (on Kupietska St. and the Bialystok River) bordered the prison and was in front of the plaza, which we could see from our window. On that day, Henia, I, and the rest of our family nervously watched a terrible spectacle.

The Nazis had arrested three men, accused them of stealing the sunflowers, and condemned them to die. The Jewish police set three stools under a scaffold structure, which the Nazis had ordered the *Judenrat* to build. Each of the three men was led out, ordered to stand on a stool, and forced to wear a sign that said, "This is how we treat thieves." I watched in horror as nooses were tightened around their necks and the Jewish police kicked out the first and the second stool. Then, the third man suddenly found the courage to shout out, "You're hanging us, but you too will hang! You will lose your war!" In a furious rage, the overseeing German officer himself kicked the stool out from under that Jew.

This event was to be an example to the rest of us. The bodies were left dangling on the scaffold for about three days. Within moments after the hanging, however, the Germans proceeded to celebrate New Year's eve by getting drunk and shooting off their pistols and rifles. Polish people and also Germans call December 31 *Saint Sylvester,* and in years gone by Jews too would have celebrated the new year by drinking champagne at midnight, dancing, singing, telling funny stories, and wishing each other good health, wealth, and success. But on New

Year's Eve 1942 I wondered if I would ever again celebrate a *Sylvester* day or if I would ever be able to forget that tragic *Sylvester* in the ghetto.

As a community we were demoralized and nearly broken; personally too, I was in a tormented state of mind. Henia was pregnant again, and I worried whether this baby would live or whether it would be better not to be born at all. We wondered when the war would finally end and if we would be alive to see it. Henia bore a second child at the end of July 1943. But by then, life had improved somewhat. The ghetto community was better organized. We managed to grasp some kind of life—with a ghetto theater and even a hospital. Our food was better since I was stealing regularly, and Poles were coming into the ghetto to buy because we still had, from what we had taken from our former homes, a greater variety of material goods than they had. Although many Jews had already been deported, those of us remaining were in constant fear, but struggling to maintain some hope.

When I came to the ghetto hospital to pick up Henia, she handed the baby to me, although my mother was standing on the steps in front of me. I expected Henia to give the baby to its grandmother, but the relationship between my wife and my mother had further deteriorated. They each resented the other so much that Henia refused to let my mother even touch the baby. I believe that if only we had lived under normal conditions, in our own apartment, we wouldn't have had such family clashes. Fortunately, Henia loved my Grandma Tzivi and my aunt Chamchi.

While the birth filled us with uncertainty about what kind of life would be possible for a child, on the other hand, just having a baby was a joyful event. For years, ever since I had told my parents I wanted to marry Henia, I felt an undercurrent of resistance. They had objected not only because I was only eigh-

teen at the time, but also because they found Henia strange since she never talked about her family. All their concerns had not mattered much to me, of course, because I had been in love. Somehow, the presence of a baby in the house seemed finally to bring the family a little closer together. In fact, after a while, even Henia and my mother began to get along better.

To get food was a constant struggle, but we managed somehow to scratch out a semblance of life, getting accustomed to the ghetto's everyday brutalities, fears, and hardships. I was determined to provide enough for the baby and for the rest of my family, but then, one day everything changed.

On August 16, 1943, the Germans decreed that in 24 hours all Jews were to assemble in the central plaza, with no more than one hand-carried bag each. There had been rumors for some time that the ghetto would be liquidated and the Jews deported, yet when the actual order came, we weren't prepared to believe it. Even though the *Judenrat* had put up posters announcing "Bialystok is becoming *Judenrein* (free of Jews)," and even though we were sure by then that Jews assigned to "work" were really going to Treblinka to be killed, we felt completely taken by surprise.

"I'm not leaving. Let them kill me here," Zayde declared when he heard the decree. "It doesn't matter where we're going, they're going to murder us anyway."

Henia and I didn't know what to do about our baby son. To keep him with us meant his death for certain. We heard that the safest place was in the hospital and indeed, when we brought the child there, the midwife said, "If you want your baby to have a chance to live, leave him here." He was our second child, and we dreamed we would survive to see him grow up. It was heartbreaking, but we left him at the hospital.[1]

We returned to the apartment, still anguishing over the baby, desperately wondering what steps we could possibly take

to avert the latest Nazi decree.

"We'll have to take another chance and hide. Maybe not everyone will leave the ghetto. Maybe some will remain," Zayde urged, convincing us to try to stay in the ghetto. He said each of us should climb up on the roof and stretch out in the gutter, where nobody could see or find us. Henia, I, and ten or twelve other people in my family did this, and we stayed hidden for several hours. When the Germans shouted *"Alle Juden, Raus!"* we shrank down even further into the gutters and did not budge. But later we heard calls in Yiddish.

"Yidden, kumt arois—they're going to evacuate the ghetto. If you are found in it afterward, you will be killed! They will shoot you on sight!"

After the Yiddish warning, we decided to leave the gutters and come out. The other Jews were already gathered together, and the *Judenrat* commandant was standing stiffly at attention. The Nazi commandant walked up to him and sharply slapped him across the face. When I saw that, I realized that everything was over for us.

The Nazis corralled us into the garden of the ghetto hospital, forcing us to remain there for several hours. At one point I suddenly noticed that the hospital fence, which was part of the ghetto wall, was opened. The last time the fence had been open, I saw a cow pass through, but now I saw something very different: a group of a dozen Jewish partisans dressed like Russians, with boots and kaftans, but holding machine guns. They had been hiding in the forest outside the ghetto and decided to attack after learning of the Nazis' liquidation plans. A woman next to me saw them too and cried out, "Jewish bandits! *Yiddishe gazlonim!*"

The group rushed into the ghetto and immediately began firing. One partisan threw a grenade at a German tank that was parked next to the hospital gate on Ciepla Street, and a moment later the tank exploded. Soon ghetto streets were in flames, gutted by the Jewish resistance. People ran every which

way to find cover; some—like my family—hid in the hospital's cellar. The Nazis opened fire from all directions, killing many Jews. The young resistance fighters threw grenades at well-armed Germans who, from their motorcycles, sprayed gunfire, slaughtering the young attackers, who fought to the death.

From the cellar we heard shooting and gunfire and saw flames, but we didn't learn until later that the partisans had started fires in all four corners of the ghetto. Their noble but failed strategy was to rescue thousands of Jews, taking them into the forest while the Germans were distracted trying to put out the fires. We stayed in the cellar for the rest of that night. In the morning, the Germans shouted, "Everyone must gather in the plaza. We are going to evacuate the ghetto."

By the time we arrived at the plaza, we were weak from lack of water and food and had dropped our suitcases and packages, which had become too heavy to carry. In the square, nearly 60,000[2] of us stayed for the rest of that day and all night. The following morning, railroad freight cars—cattle cars—began arriving. Pushing and hitting, the Germans separated us into groups and shoved us into the trains, shouting *"Rechts!* Right!" to those who were strong and possibly useful for slave labor, and *"Links!* Left! " at women, children, and old people. My mother, grandmother Tsivi, my sisters Blumeh and Rivka were all pushed to the left. I never saw them again.

After several hours all the cars were filled. We were crushed like sardines with space only to remain standing. People were fainting from thirst and dying of heat. Some began licking the bars of the railroad car, which were cold, and their tongues got stuck. When the train stopped the first time, we saw that the guards were Ukrainian and Lithuanian as well as German. Some Jews, desperately attempting to get water, began taking off their jewelry, trying to bribe the guards to bring them something to drink. Some lucky enough to be near the windows were able to purchase water. But everyone was so desperate to

drink that people smashed and trampled each other as they threw out gold. Still, most couldn't manage to catch even a little liquid.

Some frenzied Jews tried to tear out the bars from the car. Others shouted, "Don't jump out! don't jump out!" Anyone plunging out the windows was shot immediately by German soldiers stationed on top of the cars. To prevent more Jews from trying to escape, the soldiers began firing inside the trains, through the windows. I flung myself down on top of Henia, covering her with my body to protect her from the gunfire. One young man near us was hit and he cried in pain all the rest of that excruciatingly long journey. And in this brutal manner, we arrived at Treblinka.

Notes

1. After the war I met the midwife. She told me the Germans took all the babies from the hospital, put them on a cart, and buried them alive.
2. The number of Jews in the ghetto remained approximately the same because those sent to work or extermination camps were continually replaced by other Jews, who were deported from smaller communities.

CHAPTER 11

Two Students

Many, many hours later the train finally stopped. At first, it seemed we were at a railroad station. Soon, however, we realized it was really the Treblinka concentration camp. Here, the Germans disconnected part of the train, which remained in Treblinka while the other section continued on. The people pushed off the cars in Treblinka were the ones who had been told to "go to the left" during the separation at Bialystok. I worried about my grandmother and mother and sisters. No one could possibly have imagined what was going to happen to them. Only much later did I learn that they were herded together, told to prepare for a "shower" by removing their clothing, eyeglasses, jewelry. In the "shower" they were given bars of "soap,"[1] each marked with the letters "R.I.F."—which stood for "*reine juden fetts*"—clean Jewish fat. The soap was made from the fat of Jews who had been killed before, but of course the new prisoners didn't know this. Then the Germans bolted the "shower" door and threw in a Zyclone B gas bomb. After a few seconds, everyone inside was asphyxiated. Jewish slave-prisoners were forced to remove the dead bodies and take them to be burned in the ovens. Then the next batch of victims, waiting in line, were directed to the "shower."

Before long, the still-attached portion of the train, in which Henia and I were crammed, pulled out of Treblinka. I wondered how Henia, in her despondent state, could "work" at whatever camp we were going to. The train stopped finally at

Majdanek. There the Germans rushed, pushed, shoved us from the cars so fast we spilled out, colliding and tumbling one on top of another. Immediately another "selection" was made—separating the men from the women, the ill from the healthy, the dead from the living. In an instant, Henia was ripped away from my side and I lost sight of her terrified face.

Then I—together with the other men—was pushed into a large room; we were ordered to take off our clothes and were issued striped prison garb. Next we were ordered to real showers, and then all our hair was shaved off. At least 24 hours had passed since we'd left Bialystok, and we had had neither food nor water. I was faint, so weak that by the time we were finally given something to eat, I fell on it, gobbling it up, ignoring the fact that it was an unappetizing gruel. Yacov, a man I knew in the ghetto, took one sip, spit it out and muttered, "no good!" (*soldatzy syn)*. And he refused to eat any more. I looked at him, realizing how radically different we were. He apparently did not intend to adapt to yet another horrible situation although he had managed to survive the ghetto. I recalled a young partisan[2] in the ghetto, a Jew who had blinded a Nazi by throwing acid into his face. As a result, the partisan himself was killed, along with many other Jews. I wanted to live and I knew that I had to eat in order to stay alive. Yacov lasted only a few weeks in the camp.

I had been led to believe Majdanek was a work camp,[3] yet I was nervous and suspicious.

"How long are you at Majdanek?" I asked an old, bearded Jew who was lying on the floor.

"One week."

"How is it you're lying on the floor? Don't you work in this camp?

"I prefer to die than to work for *Yekes* (slang for Germans)," he answered.

His words sent a chill through me. On one hand, I felt sorry for him—old, ill, crushed in body and in spirit. On the other

hand, I also felt a wave of contempt, a kind of fear mixed with anger, and I thought to myself, "I'm not going to remain here and wait for death like you, old man. I survived two years with the Russians and two years in the ghetto. And if I got through all *that,* then I'm not giving up now."

I didn't understand why, but I knew I was determined to figure out some way to adapt, in spite of hardships. The next morning I awoke fiercely hungry and set off to find the kitchen. I was surprised and happy to discover two cousins working there, pretty young women related on my father's side. We greeted each other as unobtrusively as possible, and they said they would come back that evening and bring me something to eat.

Later in the day I spotted my brother Benny and also another relative on my mother's side, Uncle Moshe Sutz.[4] That night, my girl cousins came into the camp and brought me a large package of food, which I gratefully shared with Moshe. Life in Majdanek was difficult and dangerous, and since the girls had more experience there, I asked them, "What can one do to survive here?"

"The best thing is to throw clothes over the wall and the Poles will throw back bread," they answered. I determined to keep their words in mind until an opportunity presented itself, and one did—the very next morning.

We were ordered to work sorting all the clothing we prisoners had taken off—piles of pants, shirts, and other items. In the pocket of one jacket I found German marks, which would have been valuable in the ghetto but were worthless in Majdanek. Jewels, however, were another story. The Germans had demanded, when we first came, that we give them any jewelry we had. Later, I learned that some Jews buried their jewels in the fields of the camp, not knowing of course that Germans, with field glasses, were observing them from a distance. After noting the hiding places, the Germans later went out and collected for themselves the very items the Jews believed they were safeguarding.

All day, we prisoners carried piles of clothes from one building to another. At one point I spotted Moshe, slipped him a pair of pants from my pile, and whispered that he should hide them somewhere in our barracks. Had a German seen me give the pants to Moshe, I would have been shot. It was a risk, but any act of self-preservation was dangerous. And if Moshe and I succeeded in getting bread, then we could prolong our strength and therefore our lives.

When I returned to the barracks after work, Moshe told me he didn't have the pants anymore, that someone had stolen them from him. I felt hungry, frustrated, disappointed, but determined to find my cousins again in the kitchen. They would certainly get something for me to eat, I thought, but when I went into the kitchen, I did not see them. To ask questions was dangerous for me as well as for them, so I said nothing and returned, hungry, to the barracks. I knew I'd have to find some way to stay alive. I worried how Henia was faring, how her spirits were, and if she was getting enough to eat.

To the Germans, Jews were merely slaves to be used for whatever labor they wanted done. Once, after a rain, we were ordered to do plowing work in the nearby fields. The earth was very soft, so after a few minutes our clog-like shoes were covered with mud. My group of about ten prisoners was guarded by a sarcastic young soldier who delighted in making fun of us. I'm sure that none of us prisoners had ever plowed before, so we must have looked especially ridiculous working in such weather and wearing such inappropriate clothing. The soldier was particularly abusive to one young prisoner who was working next to me. Although I too was inexperienced at plowing, I was getting along all right, but my poor neighbor wasn't. He would get one foot stuck in the mud and wouldn't be able to work. Then, instead of plowing, he would spend his energy fighting to loosen his stuck foot. When he'd get one foot free, the other one would get stuck.

"You're too delicate to work, aren't you!" The soldier snarled, after hurling insults. "You Jews can't do any honest work! The only thing you're good for is business and ripping off other people!"

My neighbor stopped, stood still, and leaned up against his shovel. Then he stared directly into the soldier's eyes. The German, red with fury, screamed that a Jew had no right to stop working or to look at him in that way. Turning his rifle around, he approached closer, about to strike my neighbor with the butt.

Suddenly the prisoner began screaming and the soldier jumped back momentarily. "I never learned how to work the earth because I was at the university," shrieked the young Jew. "And you don't learn how to plow at the university!"

"You? A Jew at the university?" The enraged soldier screamed back. "Are you making fun of me?"

"It's the truth," the prisoner shouted. "Two months ago I was still a student, studying geology. And at the university I wore regular street shoes. And if you were here in my place, you would be even more laughable than I am. But unfortunately for me, I am a Jew and you are the one with the rifle, guarding me."

The young soldier was speechless for a moment. "I too was a geology student at the university," he said.

The two began talking. Their conversation must have gone on for a half hour. They spoke in a very educated German, and I was sorry I couldn't understand what they were saying. After this interlude, the soldier stopped insulting us and our work day went very well. The situation was ironic. Under other circumstances, that German and this particular Jew might have been the best of friends.

When the Germans had particular needs, they located among their slave laborers people with certain skills. One day the *Lagerführer*, the camp commandant, stood up on a high

table and asked for all shoemakers and tailors, adding that wives would be allowed to accompany husbands. I was one of the first to volunteer, and I immediately began looking for Henia. After a few hours I spotted her near a little water fountain[5]—surrounded by hundreds of people desperately squabbling and pushing, trying to get a drink—but in a moment she and I were separated by the crowds.

Then the tailors and shoemakers were ordered to go into a building. As women were permitted to enter, I stood on tables, along with other men scanning the crowd and calling out the names of wives. When I saw Henia I called out to her, but then something terrible happened. Too many women had come in and when the Germans realized that many were actual wives and many were simply "extra" women, they ordered them all to leave. My heart sank. I caught a last glimpse of Henia being driven out, along with the other women.

After that, I never saw my wife again.

Notes

1. Some scholars have questioned the accuracy of stories about the R.I.F soap, but this is what Shleimeh recalls.
2. Itzhak Malmed, a resistance fighter and ghetto hero, threw acid into the face of a Nazi soldier. Blinded, the soldier fired several shots at the fleeing Malmed, but one shot went astray and killed a fellow German. The Jews were told to turn in Malmed or the Nazis would retaliate by shooting 1000. When Malmed learned of this threat, he agreed to turn himself in. He was hanged on February 8, 1943. And the Nazis also shot 1000 Jews.
3. Majdanek was both a concentration and extermination camp, located on the eastern outskirts of Lublin, just five kilometers from the town's center.
4. Moshe Sutz was the brother of Uncle Ben Sutz of Chicago.
5. Charles visited Majandek in 1992 and located this same fountain, which looks as it did when he last saw Henia.

CHAPTER 12

Over the Fence

One day in Majdanek we were informed that the tailors and the shoemakers were to be sent to another concentration camp, Blizhin. First, we were ordered to give back our striped uniforms and then we were issued civilian clothes, taken from the heaps of clothing once worn by Majdanek's dead prisoners. Before leaving, I looked for my cousin Moshe but I couldn't find him.

After many days of miserable travel on cattle cars, we finally arrived at Blizhin. I forgot how weak and hungry I was in my joy at finding my father, Uncle Yossel, and Aunt Chamchi's husband Yankel. Most Blizhin prisoners, we discovered, were Jewish Poles from Tomashav. They had heard about guerrilla bands and uprisings in Bialystok, so they referred to us Bialystokers as "partisans."

We were issued pants and shirts made of a very thin sheeting fabric, dyed blue or black. Surreptitiously, we gave our civilian clothes to the other Jewish prisoners, in exchange for bread, which they had obtained in the same way we had done in Majdanek, by throwing clothes to Poles on the other side of the camp fence.

Life in Blizhin was similar to life in the previous camps. In the morning the *kapo*[1] responsible for the barracks entered the block shouting "*Aufshtehn! Schnell! Verflucht noch mal*" (Up! Quick! Again, dammit!) and various other insults. He would hit a head here, shoulders or legs there, whoever and wherever he could strike. Very few were lucky enough to avoid his

blows. Then he would order us to the outside area, where prisoners gathered, and force us to stand straight for a minimum of one hour.

"Take off your hat!" he would suddenly shout.

So we did.

Then immediately he would order, "Put on your hat!"

So we did.

He repeated such commands over and over. We were sick, exhausted, cold, and hungry because we had had nothing yet to either eat or drink. Then the *Lagerführer* would arrive and inspect us as though we were soldiers. We had to continue to stay upright, without moving. If an exhausted prisoner fell down, the commandant would kick or hit him until he no longer moved. And if, after being beaten, the prisoner could still move on the ground, but wasn't able to stand up, then the German would fire a bullet in his head, as an example for the rest of us. Such an example was effective. It worked because the fear of death is something that can't be described. Suddenly you become strong, and you don't think anymore that you are hungry or thirsty. After seeing a fellow prisoner killed, the rest of us would be fired by a momentary life force, and we became different men. The *Lagerführer* recognized this, which made him even angrier because he no longer had an excuse to kill anybody. But that's the way it was. When we were working, we would get hit for no particular reason and have to stop because of the pain. And then we would receive another blow—because we had stopped working.

After the morning call, after the *Lagerführer* finished killing or wounding his "examples," he would shout *"Eintreten!"* (Into the circle!) and we had to run, queuing up for the "coffee." We called it "sock juice" because it had the color of coffee but certainly not the taste. Even in the "coffee" line, we were pushed, shoved, hit. Everyone was in a hurry to get something to drink because at any moment the Germans could call us for work.

Most of Blizhin's camp guards were Ukrainians, who could usually be bribed to keep quiet during our over-the-wall business. But one day the Ukrainian guards left and were replaced by German soldiers transferred from the war front because they were wounded, crippled, or disabled in some way. We worried that our barter periods were over because we feared the Germans much more than the Ukrainians. The entire first day we wondered what we could do.

"I'll take a chance," a fourteen-year-old prisoner said. "I'll talk to the watchman in the tower." Approaching the German, the boy said, "Before you came to this camp, the guard you replaced was able to pile up lots of money for his family. If you're interested, you can earn extra marks too."

"What must I do?" the soldier asked.

"You just have to tell us when any Poles are approaching the wall. And you have to warn us if any Germans are coming."

"*Yawohl,*" he replied.

Just then, the German noticed a Pole arriving and he gave us the go-ahead sign. So we threw over a pair of pants and the Pole threw back some bread over the wall. But there was a problem. Near the wall were two small, parallel barbed wire fences, approximately four meters apart. Because the Pole didn't throw hard enough to clear both fences, the bread fell on the ground between them.

The guard was irritated. "What am I supposed to do now?" he asked.

Several of us prisoners were standing together watching, so we suggested he take his bayonet, spear the bread, and throw it over the second fence, where we could reach it. And the soldier did it.

The bread-and-clothes-exchange was one way people got along, managed to stay alive, and found a way to get a little extra food. But not everyone had the spirit and the resourcefulness to search out food in order to prolong life, and no matter what one did in the camp, hunger was constant. Everyday we

saw starved people—young and old—who looked like living skeletons. Each morning the dead were gathered and their bodies placed near the toilets. Anyone who sat on a toilet seat would have his feet resting on these lifeless, emaciated human shells.

When we received our meager daily ration of bread, I ate mine immediately while my father cut his in two, ate one piece, and hid the other in his pocket. In the morning, when we received the sock juice (which at least was hot), my father would cut his remaining piece of bread into two pieces and share one with me. I took the bread, but with a very heavy heart.

"You need this, you're older than I am," I would say to him. "You must also live. Eat it!"

"No," my father would always insist. "If *you* live, then I will also. But without you, Shleimeh, I couldn't survive."

Taking a piece of his bread, I felt, was like taking a piece of his life. Finally, I couldn't bring myself to do that anymore, so one day I said, "I'm taking bread from you for the last time. But I'll do everything possible for both of us to eat."

Soon after, the chief of our barracks, who seemed to have a streak of pity for my father and me, offered to give us work.

"It's very hard but you'll be able to get more food, and you'll also be the first to be served," he said.

The offer sounded too good to pass up, so I jumped at the chance. And with a name like Zabuski, I liked the idea, for a change, of not always being served last. The work my father and I agreed to do was to carry out huge, extremely heavy buckets of feces and urine and throw them into a huge hole about 40 meters from the barracks.[2] During the day, prisoners could go to toilets, but during the night the barracks were locked, so everyone defecated in containers inside the room. When my father and I began to walk, carrying buckets together, I tended to be ahead and he behind, but we soon realized it was necessary for both of us to be even. If I walked a little faster than he, we might spill the contents and then the Germans would have killed us.

This horrible work was very difficult, especially for my father. Although he was only about 45 years old, the severe camp conditions had drained him of much of his strength. I thought about asking Yankel to do it with me, so I could at least share my extra food with my father, but the work was also too hard for Yankel, who had been lame since his accident with a horse. Yankel couldn't bend his knee, so when he and I traveled together in trains from camp to camp, he stretched his leg over me and didn't take space from anyone else.

I also thought about doing the work with Uncle Yossel, who would have been a good carrying partner. He and I had always tried to help each other whenever possible, and he was a man of incredible strength. In fact, he was so exceptionally tall and strong we had always called him Yossel *der shtarker* (the strong). But Yossel was no more. He had disappeared one day. He was a good carpenter and cabinetmaker and could have been useful to the Germans, but they were jealous that a Jew could be taller and stronger and blonder than they, the super race, especially since most of the Germans in Blizhin were weak or wounded. Perhaps that's why they gave Yossel the hardest jobs to do. He told me several times he didn't know how long he could endure such brutal work. And then one day I didn't see him anymore. I don't know for sure how he died, but I know the Germans killed him.

There was no one who could help us, so my father and I continued on our own. But I was worried about him.

"Shleimeh, I can't go on anymore," he would say after a few steps.

"It's only five steps more," I would say.

"I can't," he would moan, exhausted.

"But now it's only four steps more," I coaxed.

And so for each step of the 35-step distance I had to encourage him, to give him heart.

"Come on, just a little more. Then we'll get some extra bread!" I would plead.

We did this job for several days before finally giving it up. At first I thought the promise of extra food would give us more determination to live, but this job was an extra one, in addition to our regular work in the tailor shop. I also didn't know that this extra job required us to remain on call for three hours, which meant standing outside—in the rain or in an icy wind or under a broiling sun. I never thought I would say that an extra crust of bread or soup wasn't worth the trouble, but finally I did. The price we had to pay was too high. I knew I would have to figure out some other way to get more food.

In the tailor workshop, my father, Yankel, and I worked together repairing German uniforms and painting some of them white to camouflage German soldiers serving in Russia during the winter. One day the German foreman brought a pair of his own civilian pants and ordered my father to alter them, a demand he knew would put my father in a very dangerous situation. When the alteration was nearly finished, three German soldiers happened to enter the workshop. I was afraid that if my father was caught with the foreman's pants, they would accuse him of illegally working on civilian clothes in order to sell them for bread. In order to conceal the pants, my father started to lift up the cover of his sewing machine. Fearing that he would be caught, I grabbed the pants from his hands, but I didn't have enough time to hide them myself.

The Germans caught me. They ordered me to the far end of the workshop, forced me to lean over on a table, yanked down my pants, and each soldier took turns, lashing me fifty times with a whip. My flesh bled, swelled, stung, and the pain was excruciating. To protect myself, I put my hands over my buttocks.

"Take your hands away, Shleimeh!" another Jewish prisoner shouted to me. "If your hands swell, you can't work. Better they should lash your buttocks than your hands."

The pain was so unbearable I lost control of my bowels and

fainted. The Germans threw water on my face and told me to go to the lavatory. That was the first time I was whipped. Through this punishment, I was paying for other Jews who, like myself, engaged in the high-risk practice of selling clothing in order to get bread. To be caught in any act of consideration for another prisoner meant death at the worst or injury at the least. For warning me to protect my hands, the other prisoner was whipped too. The Germans said he was lucky to get "only" forty-eight lashes.

On another occasion, a well-intentioned kindness by the camp's prisoner-chef resulted in additional physical trauma for my father. Once, when we were in line for soup, my father and I recognized the chef. He was Eli Okon, the son of the landlord of our Skorzana Street house in Bialystok. Eli told us to come back for a second serving after everyone else had eaten, and he gave us an extra portion. By the time we came out of the kitchen, though, it was late and no one was in the camp square any longer. We were afraid.

The German *Lagerführer* saw us and shouted "*Aysik! Aysik!*" (Isaac). That's what he called every Jew. My father and I began running and he ran after us, swinging his club, trying to hit us because we were late. I urged my father to run ahead so the German would strike only me, but my father argued, insisting on going behind me. I then moved behind him, but not fast enough to prevent the German from striking the back of my father's head. Blood immediately began streaming down, which apparently satisfied the German, because only then did he let us go.

When we returned to the barracks, I took off my shirt, dipped it in water and cleaned my father's wound. Then we ate our "extra" soup, the little that was left in our cups, which we had somehow managed to keep a grip on while we were running.

A few days later, I went alone to get some extra soup and again had to wait until everyone else was served. Eli gave me a

refill, and this time I left quickly, believing I could safely get back to the barracks. But I was mistaken again. It was later than I realized and I was panic-stricken to find my barracks doors already locked. There was nothing to do except wait outside in front of the door. After a while, as I feared, a German came by with several prisoners, other late stragglers he had picked up. Marching all of us to the camp entrance, he ordered us to stand up all night in the freezing cold. The tower guards, warmly dressed and well armed, stood watch over us. I knew my father would worry and wait up for me all night.

To further prevent any of us from possibly sneaking out from under the guards' watch and re-entering the barracks, the German double-checked all the locked barracks. Shivering, we watched one guard go to a women prisoners' barracks, unlock the door, and enter. After a while he came out and another German went in. We understood then that at night the soldiers would go in whenever they wished and rape any woman they wanted. I thought of Henia, of my mother, of Aunt Chamchi, and I felt crushed by fury and helplessness. By the next morning, I was half-frozen, weak from lack of food and sleep but cheered by the relief on my father's face when he saw I was still alive. Together, he and I walked to our jobs at the camp tailor shop.

One day my father caught his finger in the needle of his sewing machine. The cut was deep and the finger kept bleeding, so he tore off a bit of his shirt, made a bandage and continued to work for the rest of the day. By the following morning, though, his finger was black, and a strip of inflammation extended up his arm. We didn't know what to do. He was in too much pain to work, but if he didn't, he could be shot. Going to the *krankenbau* (infirmary), we feared, might be like condemning him to death, but after a while his pain was so extreme we felt that, regardless of the risks, we had to attempt to get medical help.

In the infirmary there happened to be a Jewish doctor from

Bialystok, Tuvya Cytron. He said that without antibiotics or injections to stop the infection, there was nothing else to do except to amputate the arm—and that would have to be done without anesthesia, which was forbidden to prisoners. In the camps, the only anesthesia was periods of unconsciousness caused by blows to the head.

Dr. Cytron was a good man as well as a good doctor, and I begged him to save my father, the only person left in my family. I don't know how he managed it, but Dr. Cytron found some pills and said that maybe they would help. It was a miracle. After two or three days the black strip lowered and receded. We put iodine around the finger and although the injury wasn't entirely cured, my father seemed out of mortal danger. We were grateful to Dr. Cytron, knowing that he risked his own life to help us. I felt sure that if we had met a less humane doctor in the infirmary, my father would have died from the infection.

Although unable to resume his normal work load immediately, my father had to appear in the shop, so I covered for him by doing some of his work. The foreman realized this but did not say anything; he knew he owed us a favor since it was because of his civilian pants that I suffered a severe and unnecessary beating rather than expose him to the other Germans.

Just as my father was recovering, I began feeling ill and weak. It was typhus, rampant as a result of utterly unsanitary conditions in camp. Everything, especially ourselves, was filthy. The Germans didn't give us soap or towels and we had a change of shirts only about once each month. To clean ourselves we had to tear off the lower part of our shirts and use that as a washcloth. From under our arms and from our pubic hair, we could pull out hands full of lice. Then we would throw the insects on the ground, trampling to try to kill them. I tried to fight off the typhus, but I was too weak, my vision was blurry, and I had a high fever—I guess it must have been about 103 or 40–41 C. I had no choice but to go to the camp hospi-

tal. I was put in a room with a glass door. Through it I often saw my father, a hazy silhouette, standing, and somehow communicating that he was okay and I shouldn't worry about him.

My fever was so high I could eat only soup, so I hid my bread ration, intending to give it to my father. But when I tried to get up, I was so weak, I passed out, and when I came to, my bread was gone. Anyone could have taken it, even someone who, in normal life, would have been the most gentle and generous person. But in the camp, anyone lucky enough to find bread certainly would not be noble or altruistic enough to give it to another person. With people all around us close to dying, a piece of bread was a way to cling to life a little longer. The urgency for bread, combined with the way the Germans treated us, turned the camps into schools for savages and transformed many of us into beasts.

After several days in the hospital, I was awakened one morning by a knocking against the wall, close to my bed: I knew it was my father. He came around to the window and handed me a ration of *white bread!* I knew how much white bread "cost." He must have deprived himself of two days' ration of black bread in order to trade for one piece of white. Such an exchange was very dangerous because one had to deal with the Poles, since white bread was something never seen as part of the camp ration. My father's self-sacrifice was extraordinary.

Eventually, I began to feel better, and since I knew the Germans cleared out the hospital once a week, I was eager to get out.

"Don't get out yet," my bed neighbor cautioned. "You aren't even in condition to walk."

"But what if the Germans come and get us here?" I asked, recalling rumors that anyone still sick after a week was shot and then cremated.

"That's a risk we must take," he answered. I realized that the risk was perhaps less in Blizhin than in other concentration camps since Blizhin was a work camp, and the Nazis needed

people like us, who had valuable skills such as tailoring and shoemaking.

Although my fever was lower, I was still very weak. But in order to "prove" I was still sick (in case I had to), I followed my neighbor's advice: putting my hands around the thermometer to force the temperature to rise. I decided it was worthwhile to get another day in the hospital because the food was better there than outside. In the hospital, at least, it was easier to get extra portions because people were dying, so the food of the dead was immediately snatched by the living.

Later that same day I left the hospital and returned to the barracks. My father and I fell into each other's arms, crying. Coming out of the infirmary was like returning from the world beyond, like coming back to life. He explained he had done some trading and I soon discovered that the little sack over his shoulder contained extra bread, which we shared.

Sometimes I think that I was able to retain a shred of compassion and humanity only because my father and I cared for and aided each other. Although I never imagined then that I would survive and one day tell the things I saw, I do remember thinking that if—somehow—I did manage to stay alive, then my soul would have become so numb, that I would never again have the capacity to cry. Concentration camp life hardened us so much that often we believed we had no human feelings left at all. And sometimes we even acted as though we had no feelings. I remember one such occasion—a dreadful experience—that happened at Blizhin.

Notes

1. Kapos were Jews—big, strong, types—who were forced to carry out the Nazis' orders or be killed themselves. Kapos were given whips and ordered to beat the Jews, and if the kapo didn't hit hard enough to satisfy the Nazis, a second kapo was forced to beat the first one, to illustrate how it should be done.
2. The persons who did such work were called *Scheisskommandos.*

CHAPTER 13

A Spool of Thread

Usually, every morning all Blizhin prisoners were ordered to gather in the center of the camp. On one exceptionally cold morning, though, we were roused at an irregular hour, so we knew something unusual was going on and we were fearful. For more than an hour we stood, shivering, wondering what would happen. Finally the camp commandant appeared, the one who called all Jews *Aysik* and who had beaten my father on the head. For a few minutes he spoke with several *kapos,* who then came toward the lines of prisoners, shouting one name: Polaski!

When Polaski, a very thin but extremely tall man from Bialystok, came forward, the commandant accused him of stealing a spool of thread from the workshop and announced that his punishment would be death.

Polaski, with tears rolling down his cheeks, said he took the spool only to remove a small amount of thread and he intended to return it. But the commandant, a man without pity, didn't want to listen. He ordered two *kapos* to select four prisoners and since I was unfortunate enough to be standing in the first line, I was one of the four chosen.

A German soldier ordered us prisoners and Polaski to come behind the barracks, where we were told to pick up shovels. Then we were marched into the woods outside the camp. Secretly, I hoped the orders were something meant only to frighten us, that Polaski wouldn't actually be killed. But I knew that we would probably witness the shooting of this poor man and then we would be forced to bury him.

The wind was icy and the earth was covered with snow. I was lucky to be wearing shoes with wooden soles; some other prisoners had only rags wrapped around their numb feet. The soldier, warm in high boots and a long leather coat, carried a revolver and a rifle. After we marched about 100 meters into the forest, the soldier ordered the four of us to begin digging a hole, while Polaski stood, watching and crying. Between sobs, the desperate man begged to know—speaking in a combination of German and Yiddish—why he would be killed for such a small offense.

"*Schweig, verfluchter Jude!*" (Shut up, damned Jew!) the soldier shouted at him.

Now, as I look back, I realize that we four prisoners had already become so desensitized by life in the slave labor camp that we were behaving automatically, like robots. I know, of course, that we each had feelings of grief for Polaski, but we ourselves were petrified, realizing that if we revealed the smallest sign of compassion for him, we too would die. So we listened and dug and didn't utter a word.

As we scraped aside the snow, we found underneath a carpet of pine needles in white sand, typical of a young pine forest. But when we tried to push our shovels into the earth, we struck something hard. Looking closer, I was astonished to discover bones—a thick, deep layer of human bones that were close to the surface of the ground. Those bones, I learned later, belonged to the thousands of Russian prisoners massacred by the Germans before the Jews were brought to Blizhin. The layer of bones was so deep it was impossible to dig, so the German ordered us to move to another site.

As we began to dig again, I thought to myself: here we are, five Jews and one German. And I had a crazy fantasy—imagining that suddenly a group of Jewish partisans would miraculously appear from behind the trees. They would shoot the German, free us prisoners, and together we would escape into the

woods. I fervently imagined this as we scraped aside the surface snow, for the second time. But again, the ground was too dense with human bones. The German officer, getting angry, ordered each prisoner to separately search out and find a site without bones. Finally, one prisoner located a spot where he was able to dig his shovel a few feet deep, although bones were there too, but seemingly not so many.

So this was to be the site of the grave. While Polaski cried, the German told us to outline on the surface, with a shovel, the length and width of the hole we were to dig. The sand was so thin that every time we tried to make a mark the shovels hit bones. As we were ordered to remove the bones from the earth, the sand fell into the trench made by the shovel markings.

The first prisoner began digging and as he became tired, the German demanded that another replace him. We saw the German was getting very nervous. Generally, such a job would have taken no more than half an hour; but more than an hour had already passed because of the bones and the sand.

We had to dig an especially long hole because the man was very tall.

"*Schnell!* Hurry up!" the German shouted, cursing "Dirty Jews!"

I was the last to take a turn digging. By then the hole was quite deep, so when I stood up, I was surrounded by earth nearly up to my neck.

"Finished!" the German shouted at me. "Get out! Quickly!" I was frightened. I had no experience with thin sand or digging a grave or climbing out of holes in the ground. But I knew I had to get out fast. I reached up and put my hands on the level ground, trying to pull myself out. Suddenly the thin, sandy ground collapsed on that side, falling into the hole and covering me up to my knees.

The soldier took out his revolver. "Get out the sand that fell into the hole and get yourself out quick or I'll kill you and

you'll stay here with Polaski. That hole is big enough for two," he screamed at me.

I was terrified of staying in the grave. I called out to one of the other prisoners to give me a hand because I didn't know how to get out without knocking more sand into the hole. In my entire life I never performed such a gymnastic jumping feat as I did then. In a remarkable surge of unexpected, momentary strength, I pulled myself up using only my arms. The other prisoner also had an extraordinary burst of strength; he pulled me up and I didn't touch the side of the tomb or knock sand in again.

Crawling out onto level ground, I gasped with relief and amazement. Before I could catch my breath or slow my pounding heart, the German told the condemned man to get into the hole I had just escaped from. Polaski, still crying and begging, was ordered to his knees. Then, as he entered the hole, the sand rapidly collapsed around him. I realized in a flash how close I had come to being buried alive. In an instant, the German leaned over the hole, took out his revolver and shot Polaski in the head. He was not yet dead when we were ordered to throw the earth over him and refill the hole quickly. My fantasy wish returned and I furtively looked around once more to see if...maybe...Jewish rescuers were hiding nearby. But of course no one came to help us.

Then the German ordered us to put the shovels over our shoulders and march in a line back to the camp. The *kapos* and all the prisoners were still waiting, standing in the same place, frozen. Of course the commandant was no longer there; he wouldn't stand out in the cold. When the *kapos* saw us returning, they ordered the prisoners to disperse. We four started to go behind the barracks to return the shovels, but we couldn't move because the other prisoners instantly surrounded us, asking what had happened. The four of us, sick with emotion, couldn't even open our mouths. I remember that I began to cry, managing only to stammer, "Please don't ask...." I was filled

with terrible guilt at participating in such a horrible act. I could not bring myself to talk about it then or for many, many years after.

In the camps, most people were totally alone and had no idea what happened to their relatives and loved ones. I felt lucky to be together with my father. Our father-son ties helped us stay alive spiritually as well as physically because we had complete trust in each other, and we each would have given up our life to save the other's. My concern about him prevented me from losing hope altogether, especially after my wife and everyone else in my family was gone. So life went on and we managed to get along somehow in Blizhin for approximately one year—until the end of 1943, when we were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

CHAPTER 14

Potato Pancakes

Early in 1944, after many wretched days in cattle cars, we arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As usual, we were pushed, hit, and hurried, stumbling out over the many prisoners who had died during the journey.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was an extermination center as well as a work camp, so when I saw Jews alive and working, I felt momentarily encouraged. But my optimism ended almost immediately. A big, strong, and brutal *kapo*, Pincus, took away all our hopes.

"You're not here on vacation! You came here to die!" he screamed, cracking his whip.

The first night we were shoved into Gypsy Camp, an area where at one time many Gypsies were confined. My father, Yankel, and I, with the rest of our Blizhin transport were forced to spend the entire night on a cold cement floor, with no covers. I think the rheumatism I still suffer from is due to many such experiences.

As new prisoners, we heeded what the older ones told us—that previous transports had it even worse than ours, that Auschwitz was, in fact, a "paradise" compared to how the Germans usually greeted transports: picking out prisoners who walked weakly, shoving a stick under their necks and strangling them on the spot. We were told that Pincus especially enjoyed ordering weakened prisoners to do violent exercise. Those who could do it survived; those who couldn't were sent to the gas chambers.

The next day we were isolated from the other prisoners and put behind barbed wire, in a quarantined area. The Germans knew we had been exposed to typhus in Blizhin and they did not want us to infect other slave prisoners at Auschwitz. We stayed outside the whole day and were not given any work to do. Since I could see the guard tower, I watched each time the shift was changed. At one point I saw a guard throw something down on the ground that looked like a piece of bread. Without thinking how dangerous it could be, I began to undo the barbed wire (I had already discovered it was not electrified), went through the fence, and ran to the other side. At this very moment, however, another prisoner was doing the same thing. We both lunged for the bread, each grabbing a piece.

"Let me have it! I'll divide it evenly," I said.

But we were both too hungry, too suspicious, too damaged to trust each other. So we began quarreling. The German guard, shouting and scolding us for crossing the barbed wire, demanded that we return to the quarantined area. Then he marched us to a cell block and ordered us to lean over a waist-high horizontal chimney that stretched all along one side. Taking out his whip, he lashed each of us twenty-five times on the backside. Then he took out a knife.

Now, I thought, we're finished; this is the end. But instead of attacking us, the soldier took out the bread he wrested from us in the field; he divided it, giving each of us a piece. That German was older than most of the other guards and also kinder. I was so weak, so famished that I felt that small piece of bread was worth twenty-five lashes.

One day, while still in quarantine, I had an extraordinary experience. A Polish prisoner who worked as a *schreiber* (a secretary) came to Birkenau.

"Is there a tailor here?" he asked.

"Yes, I am a tailor." I was the first to raise my hand.

"Come follow me," he motioned. "We need to go into the

women's camp to find a sewing machine."

After the *schreiber* told the guard we had come to get a sewing machine, she let us pass through the entrance as she shouted, "One *schreiber* and one *häftling* (prisoner)!"

Once inside the women's camp, I was stunned by an atrocious sight: a group of naked women, their hair completely shaved off, their emaciated bodies just skin and bones. It was difficult to recognize them as females.

The *schreiber* told me to wait outside for him while he entered the block to look for a sewing machine. Immediately after he disappeared, at least twenty women surrounded me. I must have looked very good to them—I had clothing, with pockets, and malnourished as I was, I more closely resembled a human being than they did. They stroked, caressed, fondled me, begging over and over for *kitchikenyer, kitchikenyer*—a little bread, a little bread. I was getting scared as the women kept closing in on me. Managing to break away from them, I ran to the cell block the *schreiber* had entered and I went inside too.

"You have no right to enter here! It is only for people who work!" shouted a female *schreiber.*

Only after I explained that I couldn't stay outside because of the women prisoners, she allowed me to enter the cell block which, I saw, had a real tailoring workshop. Nearby were three men and the Polish *schreiber,* who was surprised to see me inside. But after I told him the story, he asked me to sit down and wait for him.

Then I saw something I could hardly believe. A woman appeared—a well-dressed, pretty woman with long hair. The *schreiber* picked up his briefcase, took out a little parcel, then followed the woman into a room. After ten or fifteen minutes he returned. Then, one by one, each of the other three men took out a parcel, entered the same room, and came out after a short while. So I realized that the woman was a prostitute. After the last man came out, the *schreiber* turned to me.

"Do you want to go too?"

I was shocked—too stunned to speak. I had forgotten that I was a man. Except when urinating, I was unaware of that part of my body; I realized I no longer had any urge or even a consciousness of sex anymore. Besides, I had no package of food to give to the woman.

"Then let's go back to the camp," the *schreiber* said, shrugging his shoulders. His whole story was just a ploy—pretending to need a sewing machine in order to get to the prostitute. He couldn't have entered the women's camp alone, but by bringing a tailor he appeared to be on official business. For a while, after returning to the quarantined area, I was still thunderstruck at the sight of such a healthy-looking, attractive prostitute. But I realized she would not be around for long. Everyone knew what a pretty woman's choice was: be a prostitute and delay death, or be killed right away. The Germans always murdered women after they used them. I wondered about my beautiful young girl cousins I had seen briefly in Majdanek.

When the quarantine period was over, the Germans took away our names, the last shred of our tattered dignity, and we became numbers. This newest humiliation began one morning at roll call, which started, typically, with the Germans rushing, shoving, pushing us into line, cursing and striking us if we did not move fast enough. Next, the commandant would usually call roll by name. On that morning, though, something was different. The *kapos* were especially violent and we didn't know why. Ahead of me in line I could see people pass near a table and then go out of sight, but I had no idea what was going on.

The only positive thing about being in line was that my father was in front of me and Yankel was behind. As we were shoved closer to the table, I saw a Polish prisoner sitting, with a needle and a bottle of ink. The Pole wore a triangle, signifying that he was guilty of a political crime. It wasn't until my father was shoved directly in front of the Pole that I saw what was happening. Soldiers ordered him to roll up his sleeve and

expose his forearm. Then they held his arm down while the Polish prisoner dipped a needle into the ink and repeatedly punctured my father's skin to read *B1938*. After a moment, I too was forced to thrust my arm down. My flesh began to swell immediately as the Pole jabbed the needle in and out. In a minute *B1939* was bloodily engraved on my inflamed and painful arm. Yankel, who was behind me, became *Number B1940*.

So in this manner the Germans had found yet another vicious way to destroy us. We had become beasts, branded like animals, no longer men, no longer people with names; we became just numbers. For a moment, I had a flash of black humor: Perhaps with a number instead of a name that began with "Z," I wouldn't always be last.

For the next several days, we prisoners remained in quarantine—weak from hunger, demoralized from abuse, and now in pain from the wounds on our arms. After the swelling went down and the scabs healed, the Germans felt assured that we would not spread the typhus we were exposed to in Blizhin, so we were released from quarantine and began the "normal" prisoner work at Auschwitz.

The Germans were sadists and the work we were forced to do was stupid, senseless, and very hard. We had to dig long ditches or trenches, and after they were completed, we were ordered to put back the same dirt we had just dug out. We had to carry heavy burdens on our shoulders—supplies for making railroad tracks. But instead of choosing people who were the same height, so the weight would be divided, they maliciously selected short and tall people together. The short people didn't get the weight and the tall ones had more than the full brunt. Some days we had to push freight wagons to a certain destination and then push them back again. Why? What was the purpose? To physically weaken us? To decrease the number of people in the camps? To prepare us for being killed? Or perhaps just to humiliate and demoralize us?

One day a German came to show us how to work. Using a pickax, he began breaking up the dirt; then he took a spade and, like a farmer, returned the dirt to the earth. "Now," he told us, after quickly doing a section in about five minutes. "You do it like I did!"

Everyone tried, but when nobody could work as fast as he did, he became angry and started hitting us. After all, he was in good physical condition.

To survive, one needed a lot of courage and also a lot of strength. Always I looked for ways to keep going, a chance to stay alive, an opportunity. Once I managed to get a job filling in for the regular *stubendienst* in charge of cleaning the block, in which fifty to 100 prisoners stayed. I knew him from Bialystok, where he was the Jewish police chief, the one who was slapped by the German commandant just before the Jews left the ghetto. Because he had developed a rash or eczema, the Germans forbade him to touch anything until the condition cleared up. The block *heltzter* (elder), a Polish criminal, told me that the Germans were looking for a replacement, so he chose me and for five days I was in charge of cleaning the block. While I was doing this job, my father and Yankel were sent to work outside the block.

One evening when my father returned, I saw blood on the back of his head. He had been hit because he wasn't strong enough to do the work. I felt very bad. Had I been out there with him, I would have helped him, as I usually did, and probably could have prevented him from being injured. When the *stubendienst* recovered, he reclaimed his job and I was glad to resume outdoor work and again be close to my father and Yankel.

One morning as we were getting ready to leave for work, a German entered the block and spoke to both the *stubendienst* and the Polish block elder. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but after a few moments the Pole called to me, "Come

here! We have to do some work!"

The Pole instructed me to bring along someone else too. I didn't know what to do. Was the work very hard? I wondered if I should take my father, who was getting generally weaker and was still hurting from the recent blow on his head. Guessing that the work would require some strength, I decided to take Yankel, but I was surprised at his reaction.

"What do you want from me?" he started to scream.

Even though he and I were close and watched out for each other, the pressures and tensions of living in camp made everyone jumpy and suspicious. Yankel thought we had been accused of something and imagined I had put the finger on him as an accomplice.

"Don't be afraid," I told him. "We're just being called to work."

He and I were taken to an empty barracks block and instructed to clean it, preparing for the arrival of a new transport, Jewish prisoners from Lodz. Inside the block was an iron stove, heated by coal. Yankel and I made a fire and we baked potatoes that Jews from the other blocks had hidden. Since we had been assigned to the block and therefore had a right to be there, we felt safe; I regretted not taking my father with me because he could have kept warm while I did the work. But it was too late. He had already been taken that day to outside, heavy tasks. That evening, though, when we returned to our barracks, I had a nice surprise for him. He was exhausted and weak, so I felt good to give him warm potatoes to eat.

As Yankel and I continued working, we talked about how fortunate it would be if, instead of doing outside work, we too could be assigned to cleaning the block. But soon another opportunity arose, convincing me once more that chance occurs in multiples.

One night a Russian prisoner—the chef of all the kitchens—came to our block, announcing that he intended to take a warm shower and he demanded that we get him some soap. Since

some of the Jews had just eaten potatoes and weren't hungry at that moment, they sold their bread rations to other Jews, getting soap in exchange. So by the following evening the Jewish prisoners were able to give the chef some soap.

The next day the chef came again, this time asking for a good massage—"so the skin becomes red." I gave him a rubdown and after he was satisfied, he said he would give us better soup the next day.

"When you come, have one person bring a kettle," he instructed. "Tell us the number of people in your block and you'll get good soup."

Since Yankel and I had performed most of the special services for the Russian chef, people felt that we two should be the ones to take a kettle. But we were afraid. How would the Germans react? Perhaps we would be punished and sent directly to the crematorium. Worried as we were, we felt we couldn't pass up the opportunity.

When we went to the chef, we discovered that he intended for just Yankel and me to have a big kettle, with enough soup for fifty people, our reward for assisting him. We were frightened to take such a big quantity for ourselves, yet we didn't want to lose this precious chance. So the two of us hoisted the huge kettle between us. Meanwhile, the rest of the block heard about it and by the time we returned to the barracks, at least 100 hungry people were already lined up, all claiming to be friends of mine.

"Shleimeh, you remember me, I'm a good friend of your father."

"Shleimeh, I knew your mother!" And so on.

After ten or fifteen minutes, the soup was nearly gone. Yankel and I had hardly enough for ourselves.

One day the Polish block elder ordered Yankel and me to do a very strange job: make him potato pancakes. We wondered how we could possibly fulfill this outrageous demand, but

eventually we figured out a way. Through an elaborate series of negotiations, we managed to sell bread to get margarine to fry the potato pancakes (*latkes*). Yankel improvised out of tin a kind of grater to chop the potatoes. While we were frying our first batch, the good smell wafted out to the German chief of the block.

"You damned Jews, what are you doing?" he shouted.

We told him we had potatoes and wanted to make pancakes, but of course we didn't dare tell him that we had been ordered to make them by the Polish elder. Assuming that the pancakes were for us prisoners, the German threw them down to the floor. He was furious.

"You'll go to the furnaces and go up in smoke!" he shrieked.

When we tried to explain to the Pole what had happened to the *latkes* that he wanted so much, he too shouted at us.

"I don't care what happened! I don't want to know what happened. I demand you make other pancakes for me tomorrow!"

This was a man we feared. He was always beating Jews with whips, never satisfied until he saw blood. That same evening, after repeating all the negotiations and exchanges, we made a new batch of potato *latkes*. The Pole ate them, yet still wasn't entirely satisfied. He also wanted vodka. But since we had neither money nor goods to barter for vodka, he refused to let Yankel and me get the job of cleaning the block.

We had gone to so much trouble and had taken such dangerous risks for the pancakes only because we hoped he would assign us to that inside job. Now all our hopes were dashed and the opportunity we wanted so badly was lost.

The next day Yankel and I were sent to one place to work and my father was sent somewhere else. When we returned at night, I was despondent to find that my father was gone. And I never saw him again.[1]

Note

1. After the liberation I searched the survivors' lists for my father, but I found no one named Zabuski. I asked several survivors if they knew about my father and I learned that he had been sent to Buno Lager, a very tough labor camp that was part of Auschwitz. He survived there until the last *Toten Marsch* (Death March).

CHAPTER 15

The Apple

We prisoners were beginning to notice some changes in the Germans, but we didn't dare risk speaking to each other about it. The Germans were behaving more and more brutally, and fewer soldiers were around—except when there was a punishment or a killing. Clearly, the Germans were preparing themselves to claim that it was the *kapos*—not they—who were perpetrating abusive treatment. And the elite German SS had started to remove their identifying insignia so they wouldn't be recognized.

After a new transport arrived from Lodz, my block was ordered to work at another concentration camp—Lehren Lager. We were forced to march for several days and nights, staying at different camps along the way. On one rainy day an incident occurred which, more than fifty years later, I still remember every time I see an apple.

The Germans were, of course, well dressed in protective clothing while we prisoners were drenched to the skin, our legs heavy with exhaustion and our stomachs crying from hunger. I remember thinking to myself, "How long will this last? Will we ever get out of here? Will we survive?"

Suddenly I heard a crunching sound. Looking all around, I saw that the German soldier who was escorting us had an apple between his teeth. I watched him bite it. Immediately, saliva filled my own mouth and I couldn't take my eyes off him. My attention was so riveted on the apple that all at once, my legs weren't so heavy and I felt strong. In my imagination I was eat-

ing too. I wondered: Is this a dream? How could the German go on eating so slowly and for such a long time? I would have eaten that apple in only three bites. It seemed he was eating so slowly and deliberately just to torment me. I felt ready to pounce the moment he would throw the apple core to the ground. Some of my fellow prisoners watched too, transfixed, following the soldier's every biting motion.

Finally the soldier threw the core down on the earth and began to move his leg as though he would stamp on the core with his boot. But I was faster than he. Fairly flying, I jumped, snatching the piece of apple. I began eating with such concentration, I didn't even feel the rifle against my head, and I ran back to join my companions. I don't know whether they were jealous because I snatched the apple core or whether they felt pity because the soldier was running after me, striking me all over.

Only when I finally returned to my place in the line did I realize how severely I had been beaten. I wondered whether all those knocks and blows were worthwhile for such a little piece of apple. Yet, even such a tiny morsel quieted my hunger momentarily and it also revived my sense of taste, reminding me of long-forgotten flavors from the past. I flashed on a childhood memory: On my way to school, I passed a little shop where Pesze,[1] my mother's cousin, sold fruits. One day she offered me an apple as a present. Although apples were neither expensive nor rare in Bialystok, that particular apple seemed special, and I felt extremely pleased. I ate it with real gusto, relishing it.

The German's apple core also brought to mind another memory—this one from the ghetto. One day an S.S. officer suddenly burst into our house, violently kicking the door open and breaking the lock. Later, I understood that he didn't want to contaminate his hands by touching our door handle. Once inside, he spotted a dish of apples on the table and shouted,

"*Shmutzige Juden*! (Dirty Jews!) Why is this dish uncovered? It's not hygienic!"

I wondered whether the apple-eating soldier had beaten me with his rifle because he also was concerned about hygiene, since the apple had been on the ground when I picked it up. The Germans are a clean race, unwilling to tolerate dirtiness. They had no pity for us prisoners or the millions of dead, shot, massacred, deported people. Yet they cared intensely if a fly touched an apple.

When we finally arrived at Lehren Lager, we discovered that the camp was not fully constructed. When the Germans asked if any of us knew something about carpentry, I said *yawohl.* Yankel, who actually did know something, and I were ordered with other prisoners to build blocks of barracks. Every evening we went to a nearby camp to sleep; every morning we left there without eating and did hard labor all day at Lehren Lager. At noon, we had only a little bit of soup. At night, we returned to the first camp, so exhausted and famished we could hardly walk or speak.

One night as we were stumbling along, we saw a German in civilian clothing walking towards us. He was a journeyman carpenter with whom I had worked one day on a barracks roof.

"Heads up!" he shouted.

We didn't know what he meant. Did "heads up" mean to watch where we were going so we shouldn't bump into him? Or did "heads up" mean to keep up our morale?

After we finished building the new block of barracks, we lived in it for a while and then were sent to a new work site five or six kilometers outside of Lehren Lager. There we were ordered to put up paneling in eighty offices of a large building. This was a good job and not very difficult. Yankel and I usually worked together, but one day we were joined by two Polish electricians who had been arrested in Poland and sent to Germany to work.

"Hey, don't be in such a hurry," they said when they saw Yankel and me working as fast as we could. "This is a great gig. If you finish too quickly, you'll just get sent back to the concentration camp. If you stay here, you'll have more chances to eat."

I realized their advice was wise and from then on, unless a German was yelling at us to hurry, we worked at a normal pace. Unlike Yankel and I, who were "slave laborers," the Poles were considered "forced labor." They were not inmates of the concentration camps so they were treated much better than we were.

At the end of a corridor (near the bathroom), we set up our "workshop," a table on which we prepared the pieces of paneling. Every time the German office workers needed to use the toilets, they had to walk right by us—so close they nearly had to touch us. Because they didn't want to have direct contact with us "filthy Jews," they physically avoided us but subjected us to a variety of verbal abuse.

At lunchtime, we could smell their food being prepared in the lunchroom where they ate. The aromas sharpened our constant, intense hunger. After they finished eating and left, Yankel and I would come in with paneling across our shoulders, appearing to work, but really hoping we could find some leftover food to grab. Learning something about German psychology, I noticed that when one German came out of the lunchroom alone, he often would give us a piece of bread or something. But when several came out together, they would yell at us for daring to enter just as they were leaving. Each German was afraid to be civil in the presence of another; they dared to be kind, if at all, only when alone.

So many times I asked myself how I managed to survive. Others have asked me too. The answer? I wanted to live and I snatched any chance I could. Sometimes I was lucky enough to experience some "good" moments, and they helped me to keep going.

One good moment occurred when we were paneling the office building. Each office had a phone, and the switchboard was in the first office, where two young German girls worked. In this office Yankel and I tried to work quickly because one girl, a member of the Hitler *Jugend* (Youth), let us know by the expression on her face that she hated us and would enjoy an excuse to denounce us.

The other girl, however, spoke to us one day.

"Why are you here? What have you done?" she asked.

"We're Jewish," Yankel and I answered.

"That's the only reason why you're here?" she questioned.

"Yes," we said.

"It's not only because they're Jewish," the first girl snapped at her co-worker. "It's because of them that the war started. They plotted with Americans and the capitalists all over the world. It's their fault that German soldiers are dying."

The nice girl didn't reply. The next morning, as she walked by us on the way toward the bathroom, she took out from her pocket two small packages of food, handing one to Yankel and one to me. We went on like this for three or four days; she gave us a piece of bread, either with margarine or sausage. We never spoke for fear of endangering her as well as ourselves, but she could see from our faces that we were grateful. When we finished our work in the building, the Germans moved us to outside work and we never again saw this rare, kind young German woman.

Shortly after this, Yankel and I were assigned again to work in the courtyard of the same building complex. One day Neiman, the German engineer in charge of the entire area, came out of his office and approached us.

"I want you to make me a sled for my grandson," he said.

I was worried. Making a sled was a job that required real skill, yet we couldn't admit we weren't actual carpenters because we would lose our good work assignments or worse, our lives. Yankel and I discussed what to do. Then we remem-

bered an old Russian carpenter, also a prisoner. We convinced him that if he didn't help us building the sled, we would not only lose our jobs, but we would be shot.

"Don't worry," the old Russian said finally. "I'll help you."

By the end of a week, the three of us had built quite a nice sled. Then we had to bring it to Neiman.

"Go ahead, you take it," Yankel insisted. He was even more afraid than I.

I overcame my trembling and went to Neiman's office.

"I hope that your grandson will be able to use this sled in peacetime and that the war will soon be over," I said, handing him the sled. My remarks were noncontroversial, I thought, so I was shocked when he began screaming, insulting me, calling me *verfluchter Jude* (damned Jew).

"How dare you say the war will be over?" he demanded. "We haven't even conquered the English or the Americans yet!"

I was terrified of his anger and aware of my own rage too. Instead of getting a little extra food—which I expected—he threw me out of the office. When I reported to Yankel everything that happened, he too began yelling at me.

"Who the hell told you to say anything? Why didn't you just give him the sled and keep your mouth shut?"

I felt terrible and regretted what I said. For the rest of that day, Yankel and I worked, but we were petrified that at any minute Neiman would come and it would be the end of us. We were relieved to survive the day and get back to our camp that night. The following morning, we were assigned to work inside Neiman's building, to put up more paneling. Suddenly Neiman came close to where I was working.

"Follow me," he said sternly.

This is it, I thought. How stupid. After so many years of surviving and then to die just because I said some idiotic thing. Neiman directed me to his office. As he closed the door, I witnessed a transformation. He became a different person. Turning to me he said, "Yesterday I yelled at you. But you were

right." Tears came to his eyes. "This war has already cost me the life of my son, who died on the Russian front. He was the father of my little grandson. My youngest brother also died. And the worst thing is, we'll lose the war anyway. We'll never make it to England. Or to America."

Then, looking me straight in the eye, he added, "What I have said to you is between us. Never tell anyone about it. Keep it a secret for the rest of your life or the two of us will be dead together."

I couldn't reply. I was stunned, thunderstruck by his words. Then he gave me the package I had hoped for the day before and I left. Because I was in Neiman's office for a relatively long time, Yankel, who had been hanging around waiting for me, was half-dead from fear. Near hysterical, he believed that whatever had happened to me would also happen to him. When he saw the package I was carrying, he heaved a sigh of relief. We shared a big loaf of bread and a large pat of margarine, but I never told Yankel the words Neiman spoke to me.

In the early days at Lehren Lager, a *kapo* accompanied us to and from the work site. But after a while, since only Yankel and I were working on the new building, our escort changed. An old German *Wehrmacht* soldier, about 70 years old, was assigned to march us back and forth to work. After a week, the three of us became friends. He told us sad stories about his family, and we told him some of ours. Each of us brought a small canteen of soup for lunch (although his was far better than ours). He preferred to eat at the mess hall with the other German soldiers, but he trusted us so much he would leave his helmet and rifle in our little "shop" and go off to the barracks with the other Germans. At night, he came back to fetch us, along with his helmet and gun. Sometimes Yankel and I looked intently at that rifle, filled with fantasies about escaping. We said to each other, "We've got a rifle but we can't do a thing with it. We are in the middle of Germany. Where can we go?"

* * *

Every morning one of the female secretaries who worked in the office we remodeled asked me to bring her a bucket of coal. In exchange she always gave me a little piece of bread. One morning when I opened the door to the office, I saw her on the couch making love with a German. Embarrassed, I grabbed the coal, closed the door and started to leave. But the German shouted at me to come back, demanding to know what I was doing there. The woman explained that every morning I brought her coal for heating.

"Well then," the German replied, "You probably have a good stash of things. You probably have some cigarettes hidden away too."

I understood what he was getting at. It was familiar; the same thing had happened to me at Birkenau. In order to get him the cigarettes he demanded by the next morning, I had to sell two pieces of bread. This went on every day for nearly a week until he received the usual ration of cigarettes allotted to all the German soldiers. Then he told me I didn't have to bring him cigarettes any more; so Yankel and I were able to eat our bread ration again, without fear.

These experiences were some of the best I had in the camps.

Note

1. Pesze Sutz Barlasch, who lived at #1 Slajova Street, was the daughter of Hershel Sutz, Zayde's brother. The sole survivor of Pesze's family was my cousin Ayzyk, whom I rediscovered in Bialystok in 1993.

CHAPTER 16

Two Turnips

Every day I thought of my father. I was tormented, believing that if only I had been with him, I could have helped him, and maybe he would still be alive. At first I thought I would lose my will to live, but it seemed that thoughts of him made me even more determined to stay alive.

My experience at Lehren Lager, compared to other slave labor camps, was relatively good, so I felt apprehensive when we were sent to another labor camp—Flossenburg. Once again the familiar pattern began: forced marches, exhaustion, hunger, beatings, sickness, death. Crammed into cattle cars, we moved ahead for a few hours; then the train would stop and for several days we remained in the same spot—crushed together, confined, with no food and no toilet facilities. Sometimes the Nazis' war needs took priority over the rails, so we had to wait until the tracks were clear again. Sometimes we would be dragged from the cars and forced to march to another camp, where we would spend the night; the following morning whips and guns would drive us back to the train cars again.

The Flossenburg camp was located on top of a hill. By the time we arrived, we were terribly weak, but the Germans beat us, forcing us to hurry up the steep incline. Many fell. I saw and smelled black smoke spurting across the sky from the camp's crematoria. On the first morning I witnessed a typical concentration camp scene: dead bodies sprawled on the ground near the toilets, waiting to be picked up and carted into the ovens, which were located next door to our block.

I found Moishe, an uncle on my father's side. He was very ill. I remembered him well from Bialystok, where he had been a volunteer fireman and a paramedic. Moishe told me that in Flossenburg the Germans burned in the ovens only people who were already dead from overwork or illness—unlike Auschwitz-Birkenau, where living victims were gassed to death as soon as they arrived. Moishe was too ill and weak to work, so Yankel and I, fearing the Germans would shoot him, put him in my bunk and kept him close to us for most of the first week while we waited for work orders.

When work crew assignments were made, I was picked along with about 700 other prisoners to go to Ansbach, a community near Flossenburg, about 44 kilometers from Nuremberg. After hearing that the work crews would be away for several weeks, I said goodbye to Moishe, who was still sick, and to Yankel, whose leg was hurting. My group marched to the Ansbach train station, where we were ordered to repair train tracks that had been destroyed by British bombs. We had to quickly clean up and clear away the wreckage of a derailed train because the Germans wanted to transport their urgently needed soldiers. To force us to work fast, all day long the guards would beat us frequently on the head and shoulders.

In Ansbach I saw again the familiar German maliciousness in the way they deliberately selected the most inefficient combinations of prisoners and forced them to work together at a specific job. The Germans constantly cursed and yelled at us, forcing us to hurry, prodding and hitting us with rifles while at the same time the *kapo*s stung and cut us with their whips. We weren't allowed one minute of respite all day. Every evening the work group was smaller; those who couldn't stand the brutal work pace and the beatings collapsed or were shot. I was glad Yankel and Moishe weren't working with me; neither one could have kept up. And if my father had been with me, I don't know how I would have been able to help him.

The working and living conditions in Ansbach were terrible.

Because there were no barracks, prisoners had to sleep on the grandstand steps of the town's "circus building." We were cold, inadequately dressed, and streaming torrents of rain ruined our flimsy shoes, so we had to work in our bare feet at very strenuous and grueling tasks. When the Germans realized we couldn't do such heavy work in our bare feet, they eventually decided to issue us boots. And when the weather was so bitter cold that even they, warmly dressed, saw it was too difficult for us to work, they occasionally permitted us to build a fire.

One night my group of about twelve men huddled around a fire. Earlier that day, working underneath the railroad cars, I had found a turnip that had probably fallen from a train before the tracks had been bombed. I kept it hidden in my pocket, imagining I was the only one who had the good fortune to have a little something to eat. It was extraordinary that during the whole day I was able somehow to postpone eating it. Before, whenever I had found some grain—even mixed in with dirt, mud and sand—I immediately gobbled it up. Finally, after savoring all day in my imagination how good the turnip would taste, I placed it carefully on the fire, assuming that no one else saw me. I was mistaken. Another prisoner had also found a turnip and placed it on the fire. After a few minutes we each removed our treasures. Mine was the bigger one and I saw the other man take it.

"Give me back my turnip!" I yelled. When he refused, I felt as though he were taking a part of my life. Infuriated at the possibility of being cheated out of the larger turnip, which was rightfully mine, I began yelling again at the other man. He also started shouting. Our noise attracted the attention of the German soldier guarding us. Recognizing an opportunity to amuse himself, he grabbed both turnips and threw them into the lake, which was very close to our campfire.

"You want turnips?" the German yelled. "Go get them!" And he pushed both of us into the lake.

I was livid. I wanted to kill the other prisoner and also the German.

The water was very cold and deep and we were soaked immediately. In this new and urgent predicament, all thought of the turnip vanished. Again and again the other prisoner and I tried to get out of the lake, but each time the German kicked us back into the water with his booted foot. Wherever we swam, he ran along the shore, shoving us back in. I wished to grab his boot and drag him into the water but I knew, even as defeated as I was, that I would wind up being shot. All I could think of was how much I wanted to eat that turnip, which had already sunk to the bottom, in water too deep to dive into. I felt myself growing weaker and weaker, knowing that if this struggle continued much longer, I would surely drown. I began reviewing my life, noting how this situation was only one of many in which I had risked my life to save my life. And after all I had gone through, how awful, how stupid it would be to die over a turnip!

Just then, I heard the *kapos'* whistle and the sound filled me with a burst of hope because it was usually the signal for the prisoners to gather. Once again, luck had intervened to save me. When the soldier left us, hurrying away to find out what the signal was about, the other prisoner and I scrambled out of the water. Exhausted, drenched, shivering with cold, we dragged ourselves to where the other prisoners were gathering.

The *kapo* told the German that the Red Cross would soon arrive, supposedly to check out the hygiene and general conditions at the camp. All of us prisoners knew these visits were a complete hoax. The Germans would clean up certain parts of the camps, show the Red Cross selected areas and successfully trick them into believing that the sole purpose of the camps was "work." I felt only scorn for the Red Cross and how easily it could be duped.

The soldier, apparently wanting to make a good impression on the Red Cross, ordered me and the other soaked prisoner to

dry our clothes by the fire. We stayed there a long time, and although our clothing didn't get completely dry, the opportunity to stay warm probably saved us from catching pneumonia.

After several weeks of work, we finally finished restoring the railroad track in Ansbach, and returned to Flossenburg. About 700 of us had started out but only 350 survived. I immediately searched for Yankel and for Moishe in Flossenburg but could not find either. I don't know if they were taken off to work somewhere else or what happened, but I never saw them again. For the first time since the war began, without my father or any relatives, I was totally alone and my spirit plummeted.

A few days later, another transport of prisoners arrived at Flossenburg. When I saw their pitiful condition, I realized I was healthier than I thought. One of the new prisoners approached me.

"You don't recognize me?" he said. "I'm the doctor from Blizhin—Dr. Tuvye Cytron[1]—the one who saved your father."

He was so thin, ill, weak and filthy, I didn't recognize him. We hugged each other and cried. Since I was the most senior prisoner at Flossenburg, I took him into my block, put him in my bunk, cleaned him up, and gave him whatever food I had. He was very weak, but he asked about my father. I explained that we had been separated at Birkenau, but I realized that Dr. Cytron's questions reminded me of how bad I felt about my father. If he had still been with me, I might still have been able to help him, to carry him, to feed him, and perhaps we could have remained together for several more years. But my father was gone, and I could not expect help from anyone else because I understood that most people look out only for themselves.

Having another person to care about made me feel almost human again. I was grateful to have Dr. Cytron. By the end of the week, he was stronger and, in fact, felt well enough to start helping other sick people in the camp.

In Flossenburg, the soup server was a young Jew who tried to pass himself off as a Pole. Perhaps he thought he could get

away with it because Flossenburg prisoners represented many nationalities—Poles, Jews, Russians, and many others. In the beginning, we thought we might get some extra consideration from him, so some Jewish prisoners whispered, "Since you're a Jew, let me have a little bit more." The young man would respond, however, by knocking the bowl out of the prisoner's hand. The result: no soup at all. After this, we took whatever he gave us without complaining. But we despised him.

One day a new camp commandant arrived at Flossenburg. I was surprised to see it was Neiman, the Lehren Lager engineer who had asked me to keep his secret. He walked up to the front of the food line to see what kind of soup was being given out, and I happened to be there at that time. I recognized him immediately, but I didn't show it. After a moment, he spotted me and our eyes met. He understood from my expression what I wanted. He walked over to the Jewish Pole, pointed me out with his finger, and instructed him to give me two rations of soup every day. That day, while Neiman stood by, the young Jew served me two rations. But the next day the Jew told me to move on even though when I looked at him, I asked with my eyes for the additional ration that Neiman instructed him to give me. I didn't really imagine he would give me extra soup without Neiman being there to watch, but I was satisfied that the bowl was full—instead of the usual half-empty.

So life went on this way for several weeks until one day we were informed that Flossenburg would be evacuated. Instructed to separate ourselves by nationalities, the Jews, the largest group, gathered in one place, and the Poles, the fewest in number, in another. The young Jewish fellow who ladled soup tried to enter the Polish group, but he didn't stay there for more than a few seconds.

"You're a Jew! Go with your own kind!" the Poles shouted, throwing him out and angrily shoving him toward the Jewish group while he loudly protested, denying he was a Jew. In a moment, the Jews pushed him into their group, encircling and

knocking him down. Although I was not near the center of the action, I knew what was going on. In a minute this man, who was hated by every Jewish prisoner, was stomped to death. It happened so fast, so unexpectedly. He had made so many of us suffer for so long that our fury exploded at what seemed like an opportunity for justice.

We left Flossenburg in the same manner in which we arrived, just reversed.

The Germans and the *kapos* shouted, pushing, threatening, insulting us as they drove us down the hill. There rail cattle cars awaited us. Again, we were loaded in like beasts, packed so tightly we could hardly move. For an entire day we traveled without any food or water. In the evening, the train stopped for a few minutes as some Germans threw in several loaves of bread. When the train started up again, a huge brawl broke out as everyone tried to grab a piece. A few people snatched several while many wound up with none. I don't remember whether I managed to get any or not. Perhaps I don't remember because I was so astounded by the sudden sound of airplanes flying above us that, for a moment, I forgot hunger and everything else.

Note

1. Dr. Cytron lives with his family in Israel.

CHAPTER 17

Bread

As the roar of planes overhead continued, the train screeched to a halt, and the Germans opened all the railway cars, hurrying us out, ordering us to throw ourselves on the ground. I was in an agitated state, filled with questions but no answers. Whose planes were flying overhead? Why had we left Flossenburg? Where were we going? What was happening in the war?

In the immediate bedlam, many prisoners recognized an opportunity and took the risk of running off. The Germans went after them, shooting and killing many. Just then Zelig Berkowitz, the barber from our Flossenburg barracks, came toward me with an old German *Wehrmacht* soldier, about 70 years old. Zelig knew I was in the habit of always carrying a needle and a spool of thread with me, so he asked me to repair the soldier's hat, which had just ripped while he was hastily climbing out of the train. I quickly stitched the hat, and the soldier took a piece of bread from his pocket and gave it to me.

After several minutes the mysterious planes were gone and we were shouted back into the cars, jammed together as usual as the train began moving. The bread I had just eaten gave me a surge of strength, and I felt my brain beginning to work. I knew that somewhere in the train there had to be bread and I was determined to find it.

Much later the train stopped again and we were all told to move out, fast. But not everyone could move—many were wounded or dead. We were ordered to remove and stack the dead outside and then carry out the wounded. I seized the

opportunity to search for the railcar that I believed must contain bread. I was sure there had to be one.

Scanning the train, I saw that all the cars that were open contained people. From a distance, though, I spotted one car with locked doors and suspected that something valuable must be concealed there. Many prisoners were milling around that car, but I fought my way through the crowd and planted myself directly in front of the locked car. "Shleimeh," I told myself, "Don't move from this spot!"

I sensed that, with all the troubles on the train line, we probably had a long march ahead of us. And I knew that what was behind the locked doors contained the key to staying alive, to giving me enough stamina to endure a little longer. So many times I had seen what happened to prisoners who weakened and fell down during the marches: another prisoner who still had any strength left would remove the shoes from the fallen, who no longer needed them. I didn't want that to happen to me, so I stood my ground in front of the sealed train car.

A few minutes later a German officer arrived and demanded eight volunteers. Instantly, fifty or more people began pushing their way to the front, but I was already there and I extended my arms out to the sides, retaining my good position by holding back as many others as I could. More soldiers arrived, striking the crowd with rifle butts, driving away everyone other than the eight of us who were selected.

One officer opened the doors to the sealed car and my heart began beating fast when I saw many closed sacks, each containing bread. The Germans, I understood, kept the bread in that car for themselves. While we prisoners had to fight among us over the scraps the Germans threw at us, they had unlimited quantities to satisfy their own hunger.

Tossing out two blankets, the officer ordered each prisoner to take hold of one corner, spreading the blankets out flat. Then he threw sacks of bread into our blankets, threatening us of course not to touch the bread, but just to carry it, following

a soldier escort, who happened to be the same old German whose hat I had just repaired.

The sight of bread and our proximity to it made us ravenous. Since the old soldier couldn't be everywhere at once, when he marched with the front group, the four prisoners in the back tore open their sacks and gobbled up some bread. When he moved to guard the rear group, the prisoners in front snatched bread. We marched for about one kilometer, came to a house, and unloaded the contents of the blankets inside. Then we returned to the train for two more loads. After the second trip, we had already regained some of our strength from gulping the bread—without being discovered. We needed to take more bread and also conceal it, so we filled up our pockets and also managed to find a few moments to tie strings around the bottoms of our pants, stuffing bread into the legs. While doing this, we thought the old German was out of sight, but he had returned without our seeing him. Discovering what we had done, he became enraged. As he ran over to us, intending to pull the strings out from our pants and demand we return the bread, he fell. His bandoleers came off, and his bullets scattered all over the ground.

At that moment we prisoners were standing very close to the house, clutching two bread-filled blankets, so we went inside, unloaded, then came outside and helped the soldier pick up his bullets. By then his anger seemed to have dissipated and he pretended to ignore the scene he had observed moments earlier.

Since he had to remain at the house to guard the bread, we ran back to the train to rejoin the other prisoners. Shocked, we found no one at the train except a few soldiers guarding the dead and the wounded. While we were unloading bread for the Germans, the march had begun. We explained to the soldiers that we had been taking bread supplies to the house and we wanted to rejoin our group.

"You're not going anywhere," the soldiers said. "You'll stay right here with us."

We were frightened. Staying meant the Germans would certainly kill us. We begged the soldiers to let us go, imploring them to let us run and catch up with the other prisoners.

Looking at each other, the soldiers shrugged. "Move out then. Go! Fast!"

We ran. Eight prisoners together. Each of us must have been tempted to take this chance to hide in the forest, but it was too dangerous—surely the Germans would shoot us. So we continued running ahead for several kilometers, wondering if the planes we had heard before had been American, hoping that if and when we joined the others, we might be liberated.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, feeling breathless and weary but relieved and safer, we caught up with the rest of the prisoners. They immediately noticed our pants, bulging with the hidden bread. Surrounding us, they suddenly were all our best friends. Some told me how they had saved my life; others recalled how long we had been together at other camps, and what favors they had done for me. I wanted to shout that no one except my father had ever given me any bread, that when I did have extra bread, I shared it with others. The seven other prisoners were having the same problems I was, and in three minutes all our bread was gone. The eight of us had not even a single crust left.

Rejoining the march, we trudged along until nightfall, when we stopped in front of a farm and the Germans distributed cold potatoes to us. After eating so much bread, I needed a drink but there was nothing, so I took a potato. As soon as I ate the first one, I had a terrible stomach ache and a few moments later had to go to the bathroom. But the guard who was watching us wouldn't permit me to leave the group.

The march resumed and after several more kilometers we came to a forest lake, where the Germans ordered us to bathe. I took advantage of the situation to relieve myself in the bushes. Then the Germans divided us into groups of nine or ten, threw blankets to us, and we bedded down on the forest ground. One

blanket for each group wasn't enough, of course, so each of us pulled in a different direction. Soon I had no blanket at all. My stomach still hurt very much, so I got up and went to the bushes. Lying down again, I tried to pull some blanket over me to protect from the cold night air, but the blanket struggle continued until dawn, when we were ordered up and onto the road again. None of us knew then why the Germans had fed us and ordered us to bathe. Later we realized they had a good reason: the Americans were very close by and the Germans wanted us prisoners to look as good as possible.

The march continued and my stomach ached terribly the whole day. That night we stopped at another farm and spent the night on the straw in a barn. I became sick again so I got up, banged on the door, asking the Germans to let me out. I was permitted to go that time, but the next time I needed to relieve myself again, the soldiers refused. "Do it where you are. No one can come out any more," they said. Other ill prisoners also were refused permission to leave. The smell in the straw was terrible.

Early the next morning, the Germans threw open the barn doors, shouting "*Alle Raus!*" (everyone out!) I was so sick I could not walk even ten steps. Exhausted, dehydrated, in pain, feeling no strength left, a fearful scene filled my mind: I envisioned myself lying by the side of the road, near death, seeing someone take off my shoes.

"*Alle Raus! Alle Raus*," the Germans repeated their shouts and everyone lined up. I was the last, struggling, doubled over, dragging to keep up. But just as we were ready to leave, the gates to the farm suddenly broke open.

Then an incredible scene occurred—something we had dreamed of but never believed would really happen. Our mouths were agape as we watched the muzzle of a tank's barrel advancing through the gates. The first thing I saw was the star on the tank. I didn't know whether the tank was American or Russian, but I thought that the Russians would have had,

along with the star, a hammer and sickle. Then I saw a black-skinned soldier sitting on the turret, wearing a helmet with a star. Other soldiers emerged out of the turret. Their helmets were covered with camouflage markings. They were Americans.

We prisoners were shocked, overjoyed, couldn't believe our eyes. The moment the Germans saw the American soldiers, they began throwing off their uniforms; they were wearing civilian clothes underneath. They broke their rifles over their knees—probably afraid they would be shot by any prisoner who got his hands on a working gun. And then they ran.

We didn't care what the Germans were doing because we were so excited to see the Americans, who were on the way to liberate other camps. Prisoners began running off in all different directions. I crossed the road, entered a farmhouse, and found fresh food on the table. Probably German civilians, who had been eating, fled when they saw the Americans. The sight of food dazzled me. I forgot I was sick with dysentery. I forgot I had to relieve myself every few minutes. I forgot the horror of not having had food for so many years. I began eating everything on the table—cheese, butter, bread, even a piece of sausage. I tasted everything. Spotting a bag on the floor, I began filling it with everything left on the table. And then I started to run.

CHAPTER 18

First Freedom

To this day, I have no recollection of how I ended up at Veterfeld, a German village several kilometers from where the Americans freed us.

I knocked at the first house I came to, entered, and saw a group of French prisoners playing cards. Nearby was a huge basket of German paper money, and each time a player won, the loser would throw down a large package of this nearly worthless money.

"I don't need anything to eat—just a place to stay," I told them, aware my illness was returning. I had made a bad mistake by eating too much of the first food I saw.

They didn't understand Yiddish, but when I said I was Polish, they directed me to a house across the road. Feeling extremely sick, I stumbled to the door and knocked.

"What do you want?" a voice from inside called in Polish.

"A place to stay, somewhere to sleep," I answered in Yiddish.

"Go away!" the same voice said. "There's no room here!"

I realized that other prisoners who had been liberated before me had quickly occupied all the available places. I was just about ready to plead again, when another man spoke, someone who must have recognized my accent.

"Hey guys! He's one of us. We *have* to let him in."

I staggered inside, sank down on the floor, and crawled to the bathroom, moaning. I doubt that anyone else was able to use the bathroom because I was in it every other minute. The

people in the house, who were all from Grodno, were eating quite a spread. I asked where they had found so much food, although I was too ill to do much more than watch.

"It wasn't so easy," one said.

After being liberated, they stopped at houses in the village, desperately seeking something to eat. The German civilians claimed they had nothing, that their food had already been taken.

"But when we entered a house and searched, we found plenty," said another newly freed prisoner.

I became close friends with Karol, the man who had spoken up for me. Realizing how sick I was, Karol tried to find help. He went out on the road, flagged down the first vehicle in a Red Cross convoy, and said he had a very sick friend who needed urgent medical attention. After the attendants asked his nationality, they told him a Polish speaker was in the second vehicle. That Pole couldn't understand Yiddish, but he said that in the third vehicle there was an "American who talks the way you do." That American—a Jewish medic whose parents came from Minsk, Russia—indeed had nearly the same accent we did, except that he pronounced my name as *Shloimeh* instead of *Shleimeh*.

The medic followed Karol to the house and took one look at me.

"M'darfim shism" (He ought to be shot), the medic said. He shook his head as though I were hopeless.

I felt despondent.

Karol was infuriated. "What? How can you say that? After all Shleimeh has been through? After all the suffering he endured just to stay alive? And you want to shoot him *now?* No! You have to help him! You must do everything you can to help him stay alive!"

The medic hesitated. "The only thing I can do is give him some medicine that we give to soldiers with dysentery," he said.

"But the best thing would be to feed him rice and black coffee."

After consulting the other Jews in the house, Karol decided we could not trust German civilians to give us rice or even to help us find some. So he and the others located a locked but well-stocked food store, broke in the door, took a package of rice, and brought it back to the house. Karol cooked it, urging me to eat although I still felt terrible and was totally uninterested in food.

Since the liberation, many things were happening. Although I was too weak to leave the house, I managed to drag myself to the window. I saw Russians and Poles and French pass by, each waving their flags and singing their national songs. They were certainly all anxious to go home. I had no home to go to. I had already lost all my family. Why return to Bialystok? It had been destroyed—both the houses and the people. Although I felt terribly alone, I was grateful for my new friends, especially Karol, Mendel, and Dora, a woman I met after the liberation. I felt so close to Dora that I called her my sister, and I missed her very much after she married and left Germany.

The survivors, grouped by nationality, were allowed to take trains to return home. Many friends I had met in the first days of the liberation came to the house and we hugged goodbye. I wished them *bon voyage*. My eyes were filled with tears—happiness for them and sadness for me. I was all alone. I was feeling desperate, discouraged, exhausted, hungry, without any hope of ever making it through all alone. I even thought about giving up and dying.

We survivors of the death camps were called Displaced Persons (DPs) and many wound up living in DP camps.[1]

During and after the liberation many German soldiers went into hiding. When the allies were close, many German soldiers shot prisoners and tried to disguise themselves by putting on the dead prisoners' striped uniforms. Since they obviously looked much healthier than we did, they were easily spotted

and caught this way. Other Nazis in hiding were found by DPs (former prisoners), some of whom were physically strong and organized themselves into a voluntary Civil Patrol. They wore colored arm bands, and recognized many Nazi soldiers who apparently felt safe enough to come out of hiding. During the forced marches of the last few weeks of the war, some Nazis had been especially cruel and we vividly remembered how they shot in the head any prisoners who weakened or began to fall. Eager for revenge, the DP Civil Patrol once collected five or six Nazis, marched them to the village cemetery, forced them to dig holes, and shot them with revolvers picked up in abandoned German houses. Before long, the Americans set up a military jurisdiction[2] in the village and prohibited the Civil Patrol from capturing any more Nazis.

One day a tall, well-dressed man carrying a rucksack came into our house. He spoke English but claimed he was Russian. My friend Mendel invited him to eat with us. Although I was still too sick to eat with them, I noticed that after a while Mendel left the house and returned later with several American soldiers. They arrested the man, who was really a German officer. His rucksack contained a revolver, a camera, watches, jewelry, and gold rings.

Although I was still very sick while convalescing from dysentery, and in spite of my feelings of depression and loneliness, I nevertheless felt lucky just to be alive. I began asking myself why I had survived. During my most difficult moments, I had learned to tell myself, "Hang on! You must keep living. You're the only one left, so you must tell what happened." Yet, after the liberation, some people behaved so terribly to us that occasionally I wondered if it was worth it to have survived, to have endured all we had gone through.

German soldiers and civilians, for example, were treated well. Considered prisoners of war according to the Geneva Convention, they were put into Prisoner of War (POW) camps and informed of their rights, which included visits from wives

and families, who brought them food and clothing. We Jews wondered why we had not been entitled to the same rights when we were prisoners in the German camps. We asked, but we received no answers.

Even though we Jews were finally freed, we were still treated as if we had no value. The Americans made the German POWs work at transferring fuel from Veterfeld's abandoned dump to vehicles that needed fuel. I observed that the German POWs were entitled to an hour for lunch. This off-time apparently was a problem to the Americans, who were in a big hurry to move the fuel faster, so they made us survivors (who were not entitled to an hour for lunch) do the work instead of the Germans. We could hardly get angry with the Americans since they were our liberators, but we resented that anyone who wanted cheap labor could and did use Jews.

I was also perplexed by the fact that many American soldiers were sleeping with German women. For them, sex was probably just an uncomplicated physical need, but I saw it as a form of support for Germany's rape of Jews. Of course, some Jewish survivors also slept with German girls. Perhaps in addition to the general pleasure of sex, it was an unconscious form of psychological revenge for a Jew to go from being considered nothing—vermin—to being desirable and performing an important function for another person. On the other hand, some German women even wanted to marry Jews, perhaps feeling they were doing some sort of penance.

Meanwhile, Karol continued bringing the food and taking care of me, so little by little my strength returned. And then, just as I was finally back on my feet, Karol began complaining that he wasn't feeling well. A week later, he fell seriously ill.

"Karol, what's wrong?" I was very concerned.

"I think I have a high fever, but I don't know...," he replied weakly.

Worried, I ran out and found a Red Cross doctor who agreed to see my very sick friend.

"Typhus," the doctor announced after examining Karol. Ordering an ambulance, he brought Karol to the hospital. When I visited him the next day, orderlies at the hospital entrance refused to let me in.

"Your friend is dying," they said.

Distraught at this news, I wandered for several hours up and down the street in front of the hospital. I couldn't bring myself to go home. I was tormented, recalling when I had typhus in the concentration camp and my father brought me a piece of precious white bread. If I had managed to survive typhus even under horrible, filthy camp conditions, I reasoned, how dreadfully unjust it would be if Karol died while in a real hospital.

Heavy-hearted and nearly weeping, I recalled a Yiddish song Karol frequently used to sing, and I began whistling "*Kum Tsurik Tsu Mir Mein Zoshele*" (Come Home to Me, My Zoshele). A few seconds later, I was shocked to hear a response. From Karol! From his room on the fourth floor, he had heard me and whistled back the same tune.

I knew then that the orderlies had greatly exaggerated Karol's condition. If he had strength to whistle, he had a chance of living and I was determined to see him. But how? I was on the street, he was on the fourth floor, and I wasn't allowed to enter the hospital. I scanned the building and observed water pipes running up and down on the outside. If I wanted to see Karol, I would have to do something that, for me, was incredible. I was never an athlete as a child although I had done a little swimming and a little running, yet I remembered my extraordinary physical feat of climbing out of a grave; so I decided to risk yet another "impossible" feat. Oblivious to everything except achieving my goal, I began climbing up the water pipes as though it were something I did every day.

When I stepped on the landing outside his window, I called, "Karol! Tell me, what do you need?"

"Water. Water," he moaned. "If only I had some water, I know I'd feel a lot better."

I climbed back down the pipes, returned to our house, and located a canteen. After filling it with water, I returned to the hospital, and climbed up the pipes again. But this time I didn't stay just on the landing, I actually entered Karol's room and gave him the water. After drinking, he said he felt better. I told him to hide the canteen under his pillow and take water whenever he needed it.

The following day I attempted to visit Karol, but again the hospital orderlies wouldn't let me in. So I stood in the street, whistling, and Karol whistled the same song back. We repeated this every day and gradually his voice became stronger. After some time, he would get out of bed, stand near the window, and the two of us would talk while I stood on the street. He was released from the hospital eight days later. A strange twist of fate had cemented our close friendship: He helped save my life when I was desperately ill from dysentery, and I helped him when he had typhus.

Later, when Karol was feeling stronger, we talked about moving to Schwandorf, which we heard was a small, beautiful city not far from Veterfeld. We could have stayed in the liberated camps of Landsberg or Feldafink, as thousands of others did, but even though the people there were free, the camps were still surrounded by barbed wire. Neither Karol nor I ever wanted to live again behind barbed wire.

In those days, transportation was difficult and trains were not yet back on schedule, so we decided that Karol and two friends would hitchhike to Schwandorf and check out the housing possibilities while I stayed in Veterfeld with the baggage, which was too much for us to carry. I didn't like the idea much because I was afraid to stay alone, but they promised to return quickly and two days later they did. This time, though, they arrived in a jeep driven by the American Jewish medic whom Karol and I had befriended. The medic (he was also living in Schwandorf) and Karol's friends reported that housing was good there, so we piled all the luggage into the jeep and headed

for Schwandorf. But by the time we got there, all the lodgings were filled with other DPs. So after all our efforts to get to Schwandorf, we wound up going to Fromberg, another village a kilometer away. In Fromberg, we found an empty factory that served as a temporary home. It had a shower, a room we could eat in, and two empty rooms. Six of us lived there.

Every day we went to Schwandorf to look at the survivors' lists, posted by the Red Cross and other organizations. I searched for members of my family and for Henia, but after a few weeks I gave up because, as I had known all along, they were all dead and I was completely alone. One day, however, Karol discovered the name of his wife Zoshele, who had been taken to Bergen Belsen. She was not only still alive, she was also close by—in Veterfeld.

"Karol! Congratulations! Go get your wife!" I said, expecting him to be overjoyed at this news. But he was not.

"I never want to see Zoshele again," he murmured.

I was shocked. Then he told me he was still hurting from a painful experience he had with Zoshele in Auschwitz. While Zoshele was in the women's compound, Karol was forced to work as a *lado kommando*, taking away the clothes and personal items of Jews sent to the extermination showers. The prisoners always found money, jewelry, or something in the pockets of the clothes. Although ordered to give to the Germans everything they found, prisoners tried, whenever possible, to keep something for themselves. So Karol managed to put aside some money, which he exchanged for food, and he would throw bread to Zoshele over the wall. Thanks to Karol, Zoshele had enough to eat.

Then, like many people who seek more after they already have whatever they need, Zoshele apparently began looking for something else. The something else arrived one day when a male worker, sent into the women's compound to do some job, seduced Zoshele. The next morning, as usual, when Karol brought Zoshele her food, the other women in the compound

related that she had cheated on him. Perhaps they were jealous that they didn't have husbands or anyone else to care for them the way Karol did for Zoshele. Whatever their motivations, Karol was crushed and angry. He stopped giving food to Zoshele and instead gave it to the women who had told him about her infidelity. Karol never heard another word about Zoshele until after the liberation. When he saw her name on the list, he could remember only how she had betrayed him.

I argued, trying to persuade him to see the situation differently. I reminded him that when he was in the hospital, he kept singing "Come back to me, my little Zoshele!" even though he was sick with fever. "Karol," I insisted, "What happened in the camps was horrible—nobody behaved normally. If you had been in her place, you might have done the same thing." I wouldn't stop talking to him. "Karol! Now you know she's alive. How can it be that you don't even want to see her?" I scolded him.

After a while, Karol started listening to me. One day he left Schwandorf (where he, Mendel Gorbulsky, and I had eventually moved into one room) and rode off to Veterfeld, pedaling on one bicycle and pulling another one beside him. The following day, he returned—with Zoshele. She moved in with us, the fourth person in our one room. After a while, Karol and Zoshele joined some young Jews in Schwandorf who organized themselves to form a kibbutz and move to Palestine. Although I was happy for them to be starting a new life in a new country, I was also sad to be separated from Karol.[3]

Mendel and I continued sharing the room, which we were grateful to have because housing, even on a temporary basis, was getting harder to find. Once, when Mendel was away for just a few days, an American soldier asked me if I would be willing to leave my room for an hour or so. I agreed. As I left, two soldiers arrived, with chocolates, cigarettes, and two German girls. Afterward, I found the room in perfect order except for a few condoms.

In Schwandorf I was delighted to once again meet Dr. Cytron. He looked fit and well dressed. Although he didn't have an office, he made house calls and wrote prescriptions. When he decided to move to America, we held a going-away party for him.

Time passed quickly as we were learning to adjust to "normal" life, compared to what we had known during the war.

On the first anniversary of our liberation, several hundred men and women went back to Veterfeld. We wanted to see again where we had been when the Nazis fled and the Americans first entered. Not everyone was as lucky as I had been. Just outside the town, a big cemetery was filled with gravestones of people who died shortly after the liberation. Before we left the cemetery, each of us picked up a few stones and loaded them onto our vehicle. As we drove out of Veterfeld, we threw the stones at the windows of the houses—a sign of our repressed hatred and wish for revenge.

Notes

1. Displaced Persons' camps were created in the summer of 1945 by military authorities of the liberating Allied armies and the UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation administration. The purpose: to provide temporary shelter for Hitler's victims and to help them readjust to normal life. Jewish organizations played major roles: JDC (Joint Distribution Committee), the World Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Conference, and the Jewish Agency Committee.
2. The 1944 Yalta Agreement established the basis for the U.S., British, and Russian occupation of Germany. More Jewish survivors flocked to the American-occupied zone in Germany than to other zones.
3. Many East European Jews had strong Zionist sentiments, so they preferred to emigrate to Palestine. The Jewish Agency for Palestine helped, even though the British government was hostile. U.S. immigration quotas at that time were strictly limited, and many other countries had closed their gates entirely.

CHAPTER 19

A German Woman

During the war many German women who became widows sold their late husbands' clothes. So it was quite ironic that male Jewish survivors who urgently needed clothing sometimes wound up wearing the civilian garments of dead German soldiers. Often I was uneasy, wondering if what we purchased might have belonged to someone who had beaten us or who had killed Jews. But there was no other solution.

Frau Ellinger, a widow who lived near our warehouse in Fromberg, sold us her husband's clothes in exchange for food.[1] She sometimes allowed me to use her sewing machine, so I could alter clothes to fit me. But since she was a busy seamstress herself, her machine was not always available, so I was on the lookout for a sewing machine for myself. I found one after I met Raize, a beautiful young German woman. Her husband had been killed on the Russian front and she had a little boy about five years old.

Raize's uncle was the innkeeper of a guest house where my friends and I drank beer. She had some sort of body rash which, according to her doctor, was due to a vitamin deficiency that could be cured by milk. Since we DPs could easily get bottles of concentrated milk, I gave her some. She was grateful to me for that, and since she knew I was looking for a sewing machine, she offered not only to let me use hers but also to do alterations at her house, where she lived with her parents. I accepted, of course. Raize's parents were happy to have me around, but her sister wasn't. I suspected she had probably

been a member of the Hitler youth.

With food ration coupons, I purchased a used bicycle from a German. (Without coupons it was impossible to buy anything at that time). With the bike I was able to make daily round trips to Raize's house, which was one kilometer from Schwandorf (where I lived) and two from Fromberg.

I had a lot of sewing to do since all my friends gave me their clothes to alter, and other people also brought me various jobs. I took pants apart, made them smaller or bigger, turned up cuffs or changed shirt collars. I preferred to do tailoring instead of joining some of my other friends, who were in business buying things in the American zone and selling them to Germans for triple the price. They rationalized their contacts and transactions with the Germans, perhaps, as a gesture of getting even.

One day while I was working on Raize's sewing machine, an American soldier came to the house and gave some flimsy excuse for wanting to talk with Raize. He came back the next day too and brought her some food and a pair of nylon stockings. That night he stayed in the house after I left work.

After a while, Raize seemed to fall in love with me, and I developed some feelings for her as well. I was twenty-four and it had been several years since I had touched a woman. On one occasion I was invited to stay for dinner with the family, but when we finished it was quite late. Since I had to come back early the next morning to finish a lot of sewing, Raize's parents suggested I stay overnight and sleep on the cot in the dining room.

That night I woke up sensing the presence of someone nearby. I opened my eyes and saw Raize, holding a lighted candle. She leaned over, kissed me, and motioned me to follow her in the dark as she led me to her bedroom. There were two beds, one for her and one for her sister, who was sleeping quite deeply. Raize pulled me into her bed. It was the first time in many years that I touched a feather pillow and a comforter; the fresh smell of sheets was like a dream. We made love. I was out of practice and I was also a bit cramped and nervous, fearing

that I would wake up the rest of the family, asleep nearby. Afterwards, I returned to my cot and went back to sleep, exhausted but happy to feel like a man once again.

The next day the American soldier came again with his military truck and offered to take Raize, her son, and me to harvest blackberries—while he finished a few hours of deliveries. Raize brought a basket for each of us, so after a while I suggested we each pick berries separately. A few minutes later, after the little boy wandered off alone, I took advantage of the moment to lie down on the ground with Raize. She did not resist. When we got up, her dress was stained with blackberry juice, which made us laugh quite a bit. Later, the American, as promised, took us back to the house.

That night I took Raize out to dinner in Schwandorf, and we spent the entire evening together in my one room. Whenever I had a rendezvous with Raize, she always compensated me affectionately in her own little way. But my idyllic time with Raize didn't last long. Some of my buddies were jealous that I had found a room to live in and also that I had a beautiful woman, so they started showing up at Raize's house and making propositions she couldn't resist because they were richer than I. They showed her all the tempting merchandise they had; all I had to show was my work on the sewing machine.

When one of my buddies claimed that Raize had slept with him—and lots of others as well—I refused to believe it. But he suggested that if I wanted to see for myself, I could meet him near a certain apartment at four o'clock the following day. That afternoon, at three o'clock, Raize told me she had to go to the dentist. After she left, I hopped on my bike and followed her. I saw her come out of the apartment with a man. When she saw me, she started crying and begged me to forgive her. I rode my bike directly back to her place, packed up all my stuff, and left. I never saw her again. And my buddies never went back to her either.

Note

1. The American military sources provided most of the food, shelter, and other assistance for DPs. The major relief agencies, UNRRA and the Joint Distribution Committee, added supplementary support.

CHAPTER 20

Adela

One day my friend Avram Unglick, who had lived in Fromberg with me, announced excitedly, "I'm going back to Poland, Shleimeh. Will you watch my things while I'm gone?"

"Sure," I said, "But why are you going back? Did you get good news?"

"Yes," beamed Avram, who frequently checked the names on the list of survivors.

"My cousins have been freed by the Russians and they're back in Klobuck, our hometown."[1]

While Avram was gone, my friend Jacob Chalef and I found in Fromberg a first floor apartment that belonged to Frau Heitzer. She had heeded General Eisenhower's edict commanding that all DPs be housed wherever there was a place for them. Jacob and I had some food and we shared it with Frau Heitzer, who was a very nice woman and also a good cook. Whenever we brought her meat and fat, she prepared for us something especially tasty with potatoes, fixed in different ways.

Like many Germans, Frau Heitzer appeared to know nothing about what happened to the Jews during the war. One day she showed us a mink coat. When I remarked that it was very expensive, she said it was a gift from her husband, who had been killed at the Russian Front. She seemed confident that we would believe her. I realized right away that the coat had undoubtedly been stolen from a Jewish woman who had been sent to a concentration camp. From the way Frau Heitzer spoke, though, it seemed she wanted us to believe that the German hus-

bands had simply been away from home, working to earn money so they could buy expensive presents for their families.

When Avram returned from Poland two weeks later, he had with him his cousins Adela and Roske, as well as four other young women. What a sad sight those girls were—thin, exhausted, wearing tattered clothing. To get from Poland to Germany they had to cross the border illegally, which meant walking miles and miles through Czechoslovakia, then climbing over the mountains. And all this without much eating or sleeping. The girls, especially Adela and Roske, looked as though they hadn't slept enough for years. I liked Adela immediately and especially wanted to help her, so I showed her our shower, where she could clean up.

The girls needed a place to stay but the factory where we had previously lived wasn't suitable for them. Frau Heitzer agreed that Adela and Roske could live on the second floor of her house, and I helped the girls settle in right away. The next morning, I went upstairs to see how they were getting along. They were still in bed, looking weary, and feeling very hungry. Because they were too weak to shop for food and since they had no ration tickets, Jacob and I invited them to our place to eat. Afterwards, I took them to the city hall where they signed up with the Americans to get official papers. The UNRRA documents provided us with identification and enabled us to get rations and supplies—enough to get by on—plus chocolate, canned meat, cigarettes, and powdered milk.

The next day, Jacob went upstairs to the girls' door. They were still very tired and very hungry. After years of war and concentration camps, Adela couldn't sleep well and she needed to regain her strength. Jacob and I brought the girls downstairs, where Frau Heitzer prepared a meal for us. Since Adela had hardly anything to wear, I contacted my seamstress friend Frau Ellinger, who made a dress, skirt, and blouse for her. As she gradually felt stronger, Adela became refreshed and I realized she was a pretty young woman.

In Fromberg, there were many more men than women and a number of men (including some who had formerly hung around Raize) started paying attention to Adela, which helped increase her self-confidence. Just my luck, I thought. I had a difficult time persuading the guys that it was not only serious between me and Adela, but also that she preferred me to them—in spite of their businesses and all the money they made. Finally, they started to leave her alone.

Gradually I learned that Adela also suffered from her war experience. When the war started, she tried to go with her brother and a sister over to the Russian side, but she was forced to return to Klobuk, her birthplace. After the Germans occupied nearby Czestochowa, close to the German border, she worked hard in several Krupp arms factories. One day the camp commandant assigned her to work for his family, at his house, which was around the corner from the camp. Adela was treated like a member of the family, even eating with the commandant's wife and two children. At home the commandant was a good father and husband; in the camps he was sadistic and personally killed many prisoners. When the work camps were evacuated, the slave prisoners were sent to labor and extermination centers. The commandant told Adela, "*Es tut mir leid.* I am sorry, but you'll have to leave with the other prisoners." The children cried and begged their father to let Adela stay with them, but he refused. From then on she was beaten by *kapos* and mistreated the same as other prisoners.

Both Adela and I kept trying to contact relatives. I had already placed my name at the Red Cross and the City Halls, letting everyone know that I was alive, hoping the American family would find me because I didn't have their address. I knew only that I had an aunt and some cousins on the Zabuski side and an uncle on the Sutz side. Adela was doing the same thing, but she was luckier; she learned that her brother Jacques was living in Paris. Adela's cousin Rachel, who was at

Feldafink, the former concentration camp, knew the brother's address, so we decided to go see her. Survivors were living in the former prisoners' barracks (without guards, of course) while readjusting to a somewhat normal life and waiting to rejoin their families in various countries.

It was a long train ride from Schwandorf to Feldafink, and by the time we arrived at the camp we were very tired, hungry, and thirsty. Because the transportation was poorly organized, we had to walk a lot. By the time someone showed us the kitchen, where we could get some food, it was closed. So we started walking again. All of a sudden a man called out, "Shleimeh, you're alive, you're alive, it's true!" He threw himself around my neck, and kissed me repeatedly. We recognized each other from Bialystok and told one another how we had been liberated. Then, after a moment, to my great surprise, he abruptly left, saying he was busy and had some urgent errands to do. We hadn't dared to tell him we were hungry and thirsty, so we continued searching for Adela's cousin.

While we walked along, Adela recognized a girl from Klobuck, with whom she had been deported. They fell into each other's arms.

"You must be hungry and thirsty," the girl cried. "Come over to my block!"

The three of us walked, arm in arm, and I felt ashamed at the difference in the welcome between the Bialystok man and the Klobuck woman, who also invited us to stay overnight in her block.

The next morning, on our way to find Adela's cousin Rachel, we passed in front of the kitchen, which was then open. The chef, who had a large beard and wore a hat and apron, shouted, "Shleimeh! Don't you recognize me? At Flossenburg we slept together in the same bunk!"

I looked closely at the man for a moment and then recognized his eyes. I recalled how he, Haim, had told me that his wife and children had been savagely killed right in front of him.

I could never forget his horrible account.

"Why did you grow that beard?" I asked, curious.

"It wanted to grow and I let it," he answered, laughing.

"Come on, be serious."

"It's a sign of thanks to God, who let me save my life."

"And what about your wife and children?" I asked.

"You're right, but what do you want?" the man replied. "Maybe it's a little bit self-centered on my part, but he left me alive—and I choose to thank him in this way."

Thank God? I didn't recall ever thanking God. Haim's words reminded me of an incident in Auschwitz. I saw a prisoner friend suddenly bolt away from our group and run toward the barbed wire. The tower guard aimed his gun at the man, screaming at him not to come any closer. But my friend, running faster and faster, threw himself on the electrified fence and died instantly. The guard hit the alarm, a siren went off, the electric wires stopped working, and the man fell to the ground. I too almost wished for such a swift death myself. But then, as I looked at that same barbed wire, I also raised my eyes to the sky and addressed God, wishing that I had the kind of religious faith my Zayde had.

"So...God??? Help me!" I had almost yelled. "If you're there, God, then this is the time to help me." Then I looked down at my chest and realized that, although I was nearly a skeleton, I did have a bit of flesh still left on me. At that moment, I realized it might be possible for me to survive.

Standing with Haim outside the kitchen in Feldafink, I again raised my eyes to the sky and, for the second time in my life, I addressed God.

"Did I survive, thanks to you? If so, why? Why me? I would like to believe in you, God, but there are so many questions to ask. About my wife. My two children. My parents. My grandparents. And all those who did not survive that terrible nightmare. Why did you let them die? Since you can't give me

answers to those questions—well, then don't ask me why I don't believe in you! I do, however, respect those people who do believe in you."

After saying goodbye to Haim, Adela and I found her cousin Rachel, who was getting ready to leave for France. She gave us the address of her sister, who was in contact with Adela's brother in Paris.

In April 1946 Adela and I decided to get married. I could not have married a woman who hadn't experienced some of the same things I did during the war. Only someone who also suffered could understand me—and I her. I knew of only a few situations in which a deported Jew like me married a woman who didn't know about the occupation and the war, or who had been in the "free zone," or was hidden by nonJews.

I talk about Jewish women because very few deportee men married nonJewish partners. Perhaps some did in Germany, probably because a few German women with guilty consciences felt they could redeem themselves by becoming good wives to Jewish husbands. But such women were a minority.

A few days before our wedding, Adela and I visited her cousin, Avram Unglick. He had been living for a while in a village near Bayreuth and was working near an inn where Germans gathered to drink beer and eat sausages. For our wedding celebration dinner, Avram requisitioned two calves from a nearby sausage factory. He also had ordered a truck to take us back to Fromberg, so we put everything inside: cold cuts and two cut-up calves in ready-to-cook pieces wrapped in plastic bags, covered by other material.

The truck driver, Adela, and I were about halfway to Fromberg when a group of American soldiers pulled us over. Although they weren't military police, we were nervous because what we were doing was risky. All food was to be obtained only with ration cards; otherwise, it would appear that we were bringing in merchandise to resell on the black market.

"Where are you going?" the soldiers asked.

I hesitated. "To Fromberg."

"Say, that's not far from Schwandorf. Could you give us a ride?"

The soldiers got in and sat down right on top of the bags of meat. I breathed a sigh of relief later when we arrived in Schwandorf. The soldiers thanked us for the ride and they gave us cigarettes and chocolate. Because of their presence, we had not been stopped along the way.

Adela and I were married in the large hall of the Fromberg Inn, which our German neighbors helped us clean and decorate. We invited all the Jews of Fromberg, Schwandorf, and Weiden, and also other friends. The Fromberg mayor, his assistant, Frau Heitzer, and Frau Ellinger were among the guests. The Schwandorf rabbi performed a Jewish ceremony and the mayor a civil ceremony. Half the village was outside, watching through the window. At the wedding feast everyone enjoyed the meat and cold cuts that Avram had procured for us. We also managed to come up with many bottles of beer, which had been in the basement of the inn and were given to us by the aunt of my former friend, Raize. The inn was used again for a wedding ceremony later when Avram Unglick married.[2] Many other friends also married and left for America, France, Israel, and other places.

Before long, Adela became pregnant. When the Fromberg residents heard the news, she was the talk of the town. Frau Heitzer and Frau Ellinger were very kind to her; neighbors brought us milk, cream, and fresh eggs; our dining room table always had flowers on it. In spite of these kindnesses, Adela and I knew we did not want to settle in Germany.

I had always wanted to go to Paris and since Adela's brother resettled there, we decided to move. I felt more secure about finding work after three Frenchmen came to Germany to recruit workers—especially tailors— since most of France's tailors had been deported and murdered.

The day we left Fromberg was a big event. More than thirty people accompanied us to the train station—the Mayor, Frau Ellinger, Frau Heitzer, and other people from the village. They cried as though they were losing close members of their family. I cried too, but for a different reason. That same day I learned sad news about my dear friend Dora, who became ill as she was about to give birth. The doctor gave her a choice: either she could live or the baby could live. Dora chose to die. When I heard this, I wept like a little child. During the long camp years, I often believed I would never again be able to cry. Weeping for Dora, I realized I was becoming a normal man again, capable of feeling grief, and able to express deep emotions and deep caring.

Notes

1. Many Jewish survivors, from Poland especially, felt that that it would be easier to get to Palestine from Germany, that U.S. administered zones were the best, and that the civilian population of Russian-occupied Poland was still bitterly antisemitic. A wave of pogroms started in 1946, such as the July 1946 pogrom in Kielce, Poland, where 42 Jews were murdered.
2. Today Avram lives in Tucson, Arizona.

CHAPTER 21

Paris

We arrived in Paris at the *Gare de l'Est* station, where we were met by Adela's brother, Jacques, whom Adela hadn't seen for more than fifteen years. Jacques was a well-known leader of the French Communist Party, and after the liberation he had been honored by General de Gaulle in a military ceremony. That night we stayed at his place, and in the morning he took us to a one-room apartment on Boulevard Messene, which had been one of his numerous hiding places between 1939 and 1945 while he was working in the French Resistance and also directing a group of foreign resisters. Jacques had used many false names and frequently changed his residence.

Jacques was a great idealist. He dreamed of helping rebuild Poland and so, less than a year after we arrived in Paris, he, his wife and daughters left for Poland. Adela and I with our infant son, Maurice, felt very much alone. We didn't yet know French well, didn't have ration cards at first, and were very short of money. So we wrote to all our relatives in America, and during the following year we received news about the family.

Adela's American relatives wrote us, telling how they too had "suffered" during the war. "We couldn't get stockings," they said.

On the Zabuski side, we heard from the widow of my father's brother Baruch "Peike" (Whiskers) Zabuski, who lived in New York. Before World War I, Baruch and his wife had lived in Poland, and I vaguely remembered, as a child, that my father and I took them to the train station when they left for

America. After my uncle died, his wife raised four sons and two daughters by herself. America was, she told me, not what a lot of people imagined—it was not a place where you could just lean over and pick up gold from the street. She probably had hoped Adela and I would move to the U.S. too, but we had come to Paris intending to stay. This aunt, together with her children, purchased and sent me a Singer sewing machine, which helped me greatly in those years. My father had established a sewing workshop in his apartment in Bialystok; I established a sewing workshop also, in my Paris apartment.

My uncle Ben Sutz in Chicago wrote that he and his wife, Aunt Bertha, wanted us to come to the U.S. In fact, without even asking our permission, they sent us all the papers, including his bank account number to prove that he was capable of supporting us, so we wouldn't become a charge to America. Even his friends, who didn't have children, said they would be willing to "adopt" us. Had we accepted Uncle Benny's offer, we would have had no financial difficulties and, even more, we would finally be reunited with family. Ben had four boys and a girl, and was the manager of a large supermarket. But Adela and I were tired of traveling, we were starting to speak and understand French, I had a steady job, and I was already making a living. We were too exhausted to move again, to learn yet another language, to adapt to yet another culture. And besides, we had a small child. So we refused Uncle Ben and Aunt Bertha's offer, and we remained in Paris. That may have been the biggest mistake of our lives.

In Paris, Adela and I began to reconstruct our lives. We made a home in a second-floor apartment on Popincourt Street, but we could never forget what we had endured. Memories from the war haunted us. We always wondered whether somebody was behind the door; we always thought we heard someone touching the knob. Whenever a neighbor came home late and slammed the door, I feared it was a *stubendienst* or a *kapo* coming to drag me off to roll call, where I would have to stand

for endless hours. When Adela served me a full bowl of soup, I looked at it in disbelief. I was suspicious, wondering if the dish was really full or if she had just added a lot of water. Every time I held bread in my hand, I remembered the camp block and how we divided each piece into eight sections. Often, when I would take the Metro, I was afraid to stand close to the tracks, for fear that someone would push me, so I waited until the train came to a complete stop before I would approach the cars.

Adela and I each frequently had terrible nightmares. She often woke me up in the middle of the night because I was yelling or talking, soaked in perspiration. Our nightmares and fears went on for many years, but they gradually lessened as we became more "normal" people.

In Paris I learned that Pincus, the vicious *kapo*, was sentenced to death after many Jewish witnesses testified against him.

Sometimes we wanted—or at least tried—to just forget all those terrible times, but we were often reminded of them in a humiliating way. For example, when we applied for *videraut-machung* (reparations), we had to see specialist doctors if we claimed a particular injury or disability. During the war I had been struck very hard on the head, and since then I frequently had fainting spells, and I also could not hear out of one ear. But neither the lawyer nor the doctor believed me, and the specialist doctor asked me to come several times, testing my hearing with the most modern equipment. He finally believed me only after I had a fainting spell in his office and actually fell off my chair. I also complained about rheumatism symptoms that resulted, I believe, from many years of lying on the ground or on cement, or standing for hours, drenched, in the rain and cold. I felt vindicated when x-rays showed proof of the damage I was claiming.

Adela also went once to a doctor for the *viderautmachung*.

"Tell us about your life in the concentration camps," he

said. "Then I'll know which diagnosis to make and at what percentage I can evaluate your case."

Adela became extremely upset and began crying. When the doctor tried to quiet her, she shouted at him, "You want me to live again all the nightmares of the war? All the sufferings I want so much to forget? And why? Just for the little money the Germans will give us? How dare you!"

In 1947 I met a doctor who was visiting my boss' wife when she was ill. "How is it possible," I asked him, "that I still have boils on my neck and arms? I can't seem to get rid of them. What should I do?"

He didn't answer immediately. "You wonder why you have boils, but the doctors wonder other things," he said, shaking his head. He told me that two hundred doctors from all over the world were meeting in 1947, to examine cases like mine.

"Psychologists, psychiatrists, and neurologists are wondering: *By what miracle are such people still alive?* How could you endure those years of suffering—without sleep, without good food, without vitamins, and always with the fear of death? When I see you, Shleimeh, when I see how fast you walk, how fast you work, the courage you have, the life force you have...I don't understand how this is possible. And I don't know if we will ever know the secret!"

I too was—and am—amazed at how some of us survived. Luck played the first and most important part. I believe everyone wants to live, but besides luck, not everyone has the courage. Those who suffered in the camps for many years required a very strong character in order not to break down, in spite of all the terrible problems. Many others were not strong enough to withstand the traumas. In retrospect, I understand how people come to a point when they simply can't endure anymore, when they have to give up. I think sometimes of the man who said he would rather die than work for the Nazis. Perhaps for him, dying was a kind of revenge.

But strength of character alone certainly didn't determine

whether people survived. Some had physical limitations beyond their control. People who had dietary or stomach problems or who were accustomed to proper eating and good food—they were the first to fall. Some religious Jews refused to work on *Shabbat* or holidays or eat nonkosher food. But after a while, they remembered that Jewish law insists that it is permissible to violate *mitzvot* (commandments) in order to save lives. Those who refused to eat or to work were killed right away. Often I recalled a popular saying about army life: On the first day, soldiers couldn't eat cheese because bugs were on it; on the second day, they ate the cheese; and on the third day they ate the bugs. Everything is a matter of getting used to, of conditioning.

After the war I discovered that a distant Zabuski cousin from Belgium was alive. We had been together in Auschwitz one Yom Kippur eve. He told me that, since the liberation, anytime he went to the synagogue he refused to put on a *tallit*, a prayer shawl. However, inside his jacket he had a sewn-in pocket, in which he carried his tallit. But he would never put it on.

One day, he said, a rabbi commented to him, "You were lucky—you survived the camps. So why don't you thank God?"

My cousin answered, "Because I—who ate *chazzer* (pork)—stayed alive while those who were praying were killed."

"Those who died had suffered enough," the rabbi replied, "and God took them unto him. You hadn't suffered enough at the time, so God let you live some more."

My cousin told me that he found the rabbi's answer so infuriating that it served only to further convince him not to believe in God.

I myself do not believe in God, but I respect people who do. I know that in life one must have something to cling to. A

drowning man grasps at anything floating on the water, hoping it will save him. In the camps, when I looked up to the sky, wondering about God, it gave me a bit of strength to go on a little while longer. Of course it isn't God's fault that I am the only one left from my whole family. But when I think of all the death and all the suffering, I do recall that the ones who suffered most at the hands of the Germans were the believers—the ones with beards, *peyes*[1] and *kippot*.[2]

Adela and I didn't stay in contact with our German friends from Fromberg. Perhaps we became too absorbed in making a new life in Paris. Perhaps, after a while, we wanted to forget as much as possible, to avoid thinking about the old life and the old memories.

In 1973 Adela became ill with Alzheimer's disease and little by little over the next ten years, she lost her memory. Even so, we took advantage of those years as much as we could, traveling to Switzerland several times, to Belgium, Italy, and the U.S. In 1983 Adela died. In 1985 I retired and once again traveled to see my family in California.

Now, more than fifty years after the war and thirteen years after Adela's death, I go to the cemetery and still say *Kaddish*.[3] Perhaps I have more respect for the words I say than I have for God himself.

Notes

1. *Peyes* are long earlocks worn by religious males.
2. *Kippot* are skullcaps worn during religious services or worn all the time by religious Jews.
3. *Kaddish* is the Hebrew prayer said specifically for the deceased.

Epilogue

BY JUNE SUTZ BROTT

In August 1993 my husband Gene and I traveled with a scholar-led group to concentration camps and Jewish sites in Eastern Europe. After booking the tour, we discovered a wonderful coincidence: Shleimeh would be in Poland at the same time—for the fiftieth anniversary of the Bialystok ghetto uprising. So while our tour group was in Krakow, Gene and I traveled to Bialystok to share the commemoration with Shleimeh.

On August 16, a Polish driver/translator met us early in the morning at the Warsaw train station and drove us along the straight, flat road to Bialystok. We passed idyllic scenes—farms, small towns, many forests, farmhouses, hand-stacked piles of hay, horse-drawn wagons, and people at the roadside selling blueberries and mushrooms—the same kind my relatives might have eaten? In one forest, we paused for a silent walk, wondering whether partisans had hid here or if the Warsaw-Bialystok road was the same one the Nazis traveled on, stopping only to hunt down and murder Jews.

By early afternoon we arrived at Bialystok's Crystal Hotel and met Shleimeh and his wife Simone. Shleimeh directed our driver, leading us on a tour of the city I had heard so much about but never expected to actually see. I felt as though I possessed multiple, spinning heads—viewing Bialystok through my own eyes while at the same time wondering how that city looked to my father and my grandparents.

Few of the old landmarks exist.

"See that corner? That's where the Hotel Ritz used to be. Uncle Benny—your father—stayed there in 1929," Shleimeh says. The Ritz was the city's first building with an elevator. Shleimeh points out a modern apartment building, the site of the former fish market area, near where our grandparents lived. Grandfather Chaikel's neighborhood synagogue has disappeared. We drive by Bronitzky Park, where Shleimeh remembers hooligans attacking Jewish children, especially on holidays.

On Zabia Street we stop at a lovely, peaceful park, rich with trees, grass, and flowers. "In the ghetto we lived over there," Shleimeh says, pointing to a cluster of trees near the far end of the grass. "And the ghetto cemetery was right here," he says, nodding toward a large carpet of colorful flowers, surrounded by a wrought iron fence. Buried here are Shleimeh's two sons—the infant who died of starvation in the ghetto's first weeks and the baby who was left with a midwife when the ghetto was destroyed. After the war, some survivors returned to this site, dug up the ground, and found 3,500 skeletons of Jews murdered by Nazis during the 1943 ghetto uprising. All the victims—babies as well as adults holding children in their arms—had been shot or buried alive.

On Malmeda Street, Shleimeh pauses in front of a large building with a small plaque, marking where Itzhak Malmed was hanged for throwing acid in the face of a Nazi soldier—and where the Nazis shot 1000 Jews in retaliation.

Bialystok's famed Great Synagogue is marked now by a barely visible little Polish/Yiddish plaque on a brick wall at #2 Suraska Street. While this historic building was ablaze and a thousand people inside screamed to their deaths, Shleimeh and my family were hiding in the icy bowels of a wine factory. "For days afterward, we smelled smoke and burned flesh," Shleimeh remembers. "We wondered whether we were lucky to have saved our lives or if worse evils lay ahead."

On Piekna Street, across from the Premiera restaurant, we

pause at the ruins of a smaller synagogue that once served the Piaski District. On Warszawska Street, Shleimeh points out Bialystok's oldest hospital. Built in 1840 as a Jewish hospital, it actually served the entire city. This was the hospital where, after the 1905 pogrom, my father saw piles of bodies lined up and blood dripping into the street.

Hand in hand, Shleimeh and I walk through the Bagnowka cemetery, one of Poland's largest Jewish cemeteries. Tombstones are broken, vegetation is overgrown, the weeds are waist high. A chipped, black granite monument stands in memory of the victims of the church- and government-backed June 1906 pogrom, the one that convinced my grandparents to pack up my father and smuggle him out of Poland. Also in 1906, while Jewish Bialystok was being attacked, a new church was built, a tall-spired city landmark that we frequently drove past.

Driving along the northern end of town, we search for the Pietraze forest, a remote area that the Nazis used as a killing ground. A very small sign directs us to a dense forest, where we drive half a mile along a rough dirt road before coming to a vast, silent clearing.

"When I was in the ghetto, we knew about this place," Shleimeh whispers.

A few people—left for dead by the Germans—managed to escape and tell others about it. Here, surrounded by fragrant birch and pine trees, the Germans shot and buried 6000 Jews in a mass grave on July 3 and July 12, 1941. The ground we walk on is a soft, thick green carpet, a grassy cover fertilized by human bodies. In 1944 this field's secret was discovered by the Russian army. A single stone—tall, grim, and black—tells: "Here lie the bodies of 6000 victims brutally murdered by Hitler fascists in the years 1941 to 1944." Nowhere are the victims identified as Jewish. Shleimeh lingers in front of the obelisk.

"We are standing on holy ground," he says, eyes closed.

Nearby, two crosses and a flame mark the site where, later, about 100 Poles were killed.

Beyond the outskirts of Bialystok, we visit the town of Tykoczyn and its synagogue-turned-museum. Late afternoon light slants across the restored interior, highlighting the Hebrew prayers printed on the walls in letters large enough for everyone to read.

We end our tour in time for the evening reunion. In the banquet room of the Crystal Hotel, energy radiates from the more than 100 gray-haired men and women survivors, fighters beyond all comprehension, gathered to greet people they had not seen for fifty years and to commemorate an era they would never forget. They came from America, Israel, South America, France, Germany, Australia. They embrace, kiss, weep, laugh, remember, speak in a half-dozen languages. Cameras flash, shutters pop.

Shleimeh introduces me to people I had "met" in this manuscript. I am thrilled. Eli Okon,[1] the man who gave him an extra serving of soup. Dr. Cytron[2]—tall, dignified, and frail at 90, the physician who saved the life of Shleimeh's father. Jacob Swierdlow,[3] the barber who actually knew both the Sutz and the Zabuski families in Bialystok.

I wondered about these survivors. What was the source of their vitality, their life force? One woman from Australia perhaps summed up the attitude of others who had lived through the Nazi period.

"*Carpe diem,*" she says. "*Carpe diem!* (Seize the day!) Make the most of every day. Tomorrow you don't know what will happen, and yesterday is already gone."

The public commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary began on August 17 with an opening ceremony in the 1700s-Branitzsky palace, the city's most elegant building. The grand ballroom was filled with dignitaries, government officials, priests, and more than a hundred Bialystok-born Jewish survivors who returned to the city they were expelled from half a century earlier.

Sitting next to Shleimeh, I think about his mother and my father, a sister and brother whose lives were so different. If my

father had not been packed off to America, I too might have been born in Bialystok, sent with the family to the ghetto and later to Treblinka where, as a small child, I too would have been killed along with my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Lekh Rudkowski, the president of the Bialystok area, was the first speaker. "I'm glad to welcome you back," he said to the Jews. "I want you to all feel at home here."

Jews feel at home in Poland?

"We believe the Jewish chapter in Poland is not finished," said a representative of the World Federation of Polish Jewry. "We have a great history of 1000 years of living together, and we should study that for the benefit of both nations."

A great history?

Gene and I skip afternoon presentations so we can return to Warsaw, catch an overnight train to Prague, and catch up with our group tour. Before we leave, though, Shleimeh and I decide to call my father in Sun City, Arizona.

"Uncle Benny!" Shleimeh shouts. "We're in Bialystok."

"You're where?" my father shouts back. "Bialystok? Bialystok! Really?"

"Dad—Shleimeh and I are here—where you were born," I say, taking the phone.

"Could you find our street? My family's house? Is...is anything left?"

"It's gone, Dad. Everything's gone," I tell him.

Even though he's silent, I know my father is grateful that Shleimeh and I represented him, that his parents and brothers and sisters are not forgotten, that we are honoring their memory.

My father, Shleimeh, and I are more than just links connecting California, Paris, Bialystok, and Arizona. We are also links to the past.

Notes

1. Eli Okon lives in Philadelphia with his wife Martha, his children, and grandchildren.
2. Dr. Tuvye Cytron came from Israel with his children and grandchildren.
3. Jacob Swierdlow, a widower who lives with his family in New Jersey, was a barber in Bialystok. He remembers cutting the hair of the Sutz males.



Fromberg, Germany, 1946. Shleimeh and Adela.



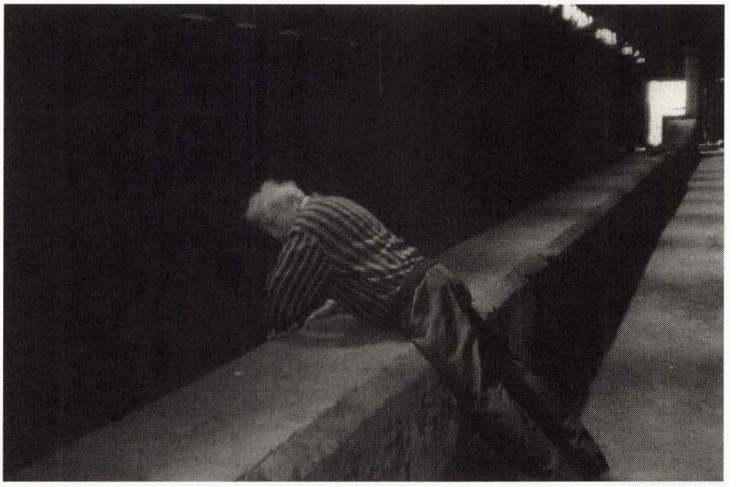
Fromberg, Germany, 1946. Shleimeh (upper left), Adela, and Jewish survivor friends.



Paris, 1992. Shleimeh at the Pere-Lachaise cemetery, near a memorial to 95 Jews who died at Flossenburg.



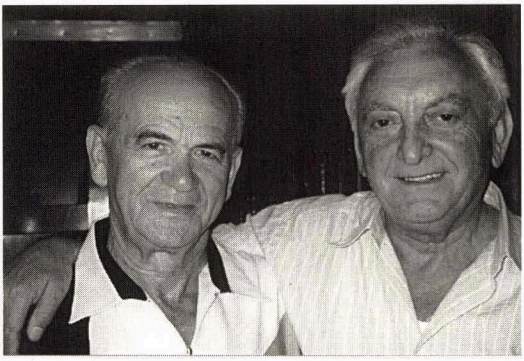
Paris, 1992. Shleimeh speaks to his son, Maurice, who translates French to English for June.



Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1992. Shleimeh stands in the same place where he was whipped 50 times for trying to protect his father.



Bialystok, August 15, 1993. At the 50th anniversary of the Bialystok ghetto uprising. Shleimeh and Dr. Cytron, who saved the life of Shleimeh's father in Auschwitz.

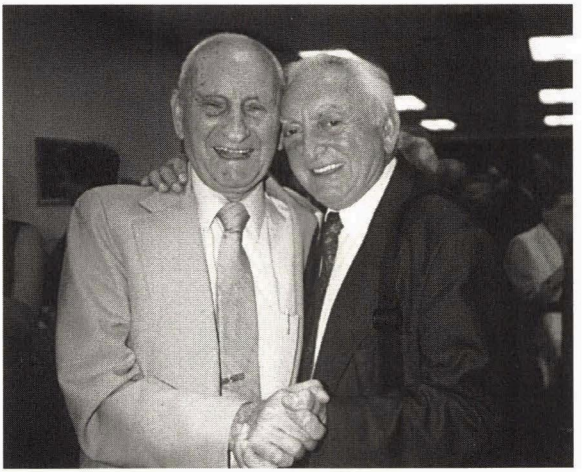


Bialystok, August 15, 1993. Shleimeh and Eli Okon, the cook in Auschwitz who gave Shleimeh an extra portion of soup.



Bialystok, August 15, 1993. June Brott and Shleimeh at the monument commemorating victims of the 1905 pogrom.





Sun City and Phoenix, Arizona, October, 1995. Above: Shleimeh and his wife Simone with Benjamin Sutz, on the occasion of his 100th birthday. Below: Shleimeh with Ben (his uncle and June Brott's father).

The following Sutz/Zabusky Family Tree includes only the Sutz grandparents, the children of the first generation (all born in Bialystok), and the cousins of the second generation. Dates are approximate; some information was not available.

All starred names indicate individuals who were murdered in Treblinka, were killed or worked to death in slave labor or extermination camps, or died in some other way at the hands of the Nazis.

Chaim Sutz* (b. ca. 1874) **Tzivi Spivak*** (b. ca. 1876)
married in Bialystok ca. 1894

Benjamin Sutz
b. 1895

m. Bertha Goodheart
(1917, Chicago)

Children
Frank Sutz, b. 1919
Roy Sutz, b. 1925
Robert Sutz, b. 1929
Richard Sutz, b. 1932
June Sutz, b. 1934

Ben Sutz has 16 grandchildren and four great grandchildren

Sarah Sutz*
b. 1900

m. Mordecai Zabusky*
(1920, Bialystok)

Children
Shleimeh Zabusky,
b. 1921
Blumeh Zabusky,*
b. 1923
(m. Avram Cymberknopf,* 1941)
Benny Zabusky,*
b. 1925
Rivka Zabusky,*
b. 1929

Yossel Sutz*
b. 1901

m. Shayne _____*
(1922, Bialystok)

Children
Michaela,* b. 1923

Zundel Sutz
b. 1907, d. 1969
in Uruguay

m. Esther Weisman
(1928, Montevideo, Uruguay)

Children
Nina b. 1930, Uruguay
Judith b. 1946, Uruguay

After Zundel died, Esther, Nina, her husband Luis Osin, and their two children settled in Israel. Judith, her husband Arocena, and their two children live in Montevideo.

Yankel Sutz*
b. 1908

m. _____
(ca. 1929, Bialystok)

*Several children**

Chamchi Sutz*
b. 1910

m. Yankel Silberzstein*
(1930, Bialystok)

Children
Little Shleimeh,* b. 1933

Moishe Sutz
b. 1917

Shleimeh Zabusky

m. Henia Silberzstein* (1940, Bialystok)

Children
First son,* b. 1941, d. 1941
Second son,* b. 1945, d. 1945

m. Adela Unglick (1946, Fromberg, Germany)

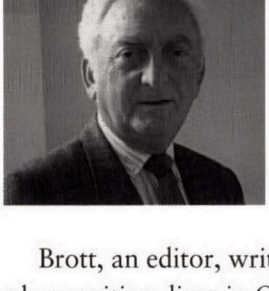
Children
Maurice, b. 1947, Paris, France

m. Simone Fremont (1986, Paris)

NEEDLE AND THREAD
A Tale of Survival from Bialystok to Paris

Needle and Thread is the result of a decade-long collaboration between two cousins—June Sutz Brott of Oakland, California, and Charles "Shleimeh" Zabuski of Paris, France. Brott's father, Benjamin Sutz, and Zabuski's mother, Sarah Sutz, were brother and sister, born into a large family in Bialystok, Poland. In 1908 Benjamin, twelve, was spirited out of Poland and settled in America. Sarah Sutz Zabuski remained in Bialystok and was murdered, along with most of the family, during the Holocaust. Her son Charles survived; however, for 40 years he refused to speak about what he had seen and experienced.

Brott, who had been haunted since childhood by an old photograph of the Bialystok family, eventually convinced Charles to talk. The two cousins—meeting with translators in California and in France—produced *Needle and Thread*, an important contribution to Holocaust history. Zabuski relates an eye-witness account of post-World War I Poland, the Russian occupation, the German invasion, the ghetto, the concentration camps, the liberation, and the fragile beginnings of a new life in Paris.



Zabuski, after retiring as a tailor, wrote and spoke about his memoirs in Yiddish and French. He also became a journalist for *Undzer Vort* (Our Word), the only Yiddish daily newspaper in Europe. Active in the French Jewish community, he arranges yearly *Yizkor* (memorial) ceremonies for Bialystoker Jews.

Brott, an editor, writer, and teacher of workplace writing, lives in Oakland with her husband. They have three children and two grandchildren.

In October of 1995, Zabuski joined the entire American Sutz family to celebrate the 100th birthday of his Uncle Benjamin Sutz (Brott's father), who lives in Sun City, Arizona.



01095
9 780965 462914
$10.95
ISBN 0-9654629-1-9