

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Map-Maker's Words .....	1
Project Introduction.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Editor's Note .....	5
From <i>My Mother's Bequest</i> , a memoir by Moishe Kantorowitz .....	7
Where People Went and Where They Died .....	580
Maps.....	584
Pale of Settlement .....	584
Shershev, 1913 .....	585
Legend.....	586
Shershev by Moishe Kantorowitz, as of 1939 .....	588
Quadrants .....	589
Special Acknowledgement.....	604
Spreadsheet of Details by Occupancy.....	605
Moishe's Oral Notes about Map .....	633
Leuma Lerman Legend .....	640
Shershev by Jacob Auerbach .....	646
Shershev by Robert Nitzberg .....	647
Route from Shershev to Pruzhany .....	648
Route from Shershev to Auschwitz .....	649
German Aerial Reconnaissance of Shershev, WWII .....	650
Map Request .....	651
Aerial Map with Modern Overlay.....	652
Pruzhany.....	653
Photographs.....	654
Acknowledgements .....	654
Appendix.....	688
"Five Liquidated Communities," Mordecai Bernstein.....	688

“Shershev,” Encyclopedia Geographica, c. 1800.....	690
“Shershev,” Polish Business Guide, 1930 .....	691
Oral History by Moishe Kantorowitz.....	692
Shershev History, Jack Auerbach .....	751
Oral History by Jack Auerbach .....	917
“Shershev,” from <i>Five Liquidated Communities</i> (Buenos Aires: 1958), Mordecai Bernstein et al., eds., translated by Leah (Elinor) Robinson. ....	930
Summaries of Shershev Survivor Interviews, Yale Archives.....	1006
“Belevezhskaya Pushka,” Belarus Guide.....	1021
“Judenrat in Pruzhany,” by Avrom Harshalom from <i>Alive in the Ashes</i> .....	1026
“My Town Shershev in the Death March,” by Chaim Malecki from <i>Pinkas Pruzhany</i> <i>Book</i> , Josepf Friedlaender et al, eds. (Tel Aviv: 1983) .....	1034
Fania K., Survivor Interview conducted by Pia-Kristina Svenhard in Sweden .....	1035
Back to Belarus by Leah Zazulyer (Watson) .....	1041
Shershev History, by Harry Siegeman .....	1043
“My Town,” poem by Israel Emiot, translated by Leah Zazulyer.....	1051
“A Little Jewish Girl From Shershev,” by Leah Zazulyer .....	1052
Travelogue from Eastern Europe Trip .....	1059
Travelogue from Celia Denov Eastern Europe Trip .....	1068
“Torontonians Help Reclaim Cemetery in Belarus,” <i>The Canadian Jewish News</i> .....	1070
Travelogue from David Feldman.....	1071
Correspondence.....	1082
Moishe Kantorowitz to Leah Watson .....	1082
Belarus Embassy to Leah Watson.....	1083
Belarusian Ambassador to Moishe Kantorowitz .....	1084
Ken Kantorowitz to Libraries .....	1085
Index .....	1086



The Map-Maker's Words:

"For me these are painful and heart-rendering memories of Shershev...They never fail to move me to tears...They are holier and more precious than anything in the world...I can honestly say that I have spent my entire life remembering.... I feel deeply that my life would not have been complete without doing so. I have filed all these things carefully in my memory and guarded them for a long long time, until I could finally put them on paper."

Moishe Kantorowitz

## PROJECT INTRODUCTION

Even before I had begun on this extended Shershev compendium, I had met Moishe Kantorowitz and read his memoir as well as other related source materials. However, the original of his map was constructed by Moishe along with his book *My Mother's Request* over at least twenty years or more. It consisted of many, many 8-by-11 pieces of ordinary paper precariously scotch taped together until it finally measured the size of a large dining room table. I imagine the pieces of individual paper were added as the project grew in Moishe's mind and his memory flourished. The final product has the texture of fabric, so much has it been handled and folded over the years. (We have included a photo of the artifact itself in the Photos section of this book.)

I met Moishe, a survivor of Auschwitz, in Toronto, Canada, soon after a first trip in 1989 to visit the shtetl my parents, and he, originated in. It is now in Belarus and variously called Shershev/Shereshev/Shereshova. His 800-page book was written in Yiddish and then largely self-translated into English. It was a labor of love, his life time preoccupation, but also a book based on much research and considerable interviewing.

However, it was only after the book was well along in being rendered into English that he allowed himself to reveal to me the existence of the map! Why? Well, memorializing destroyed or violated shtetls in book form has become almost a sacred act in the post Holocaust era—a genre unto itself. Of course Moishe's book is also special because it has great historical and cultural breadth to it. Yet Moishe still felt the obligation to complete such an exacting and elegiac project before allowing himself to be distracted by the map.

Certainly the map is unique as well. It is a visual document, combining both memory and actual visual/spatial components of a somewhat typical pre-war shtetl in Eastern Europe.

Thus I began to badger him to work with me on the map, although I live in Rochester, New York. We worked on it sporadically, schedules permitting. When we did, I wrote on a copy of the map I had reproduced at a local engineering firm with equipment large enough to copy all the little scraps of paper onto one sheet, and more or less simultaneously taped our sessions, scribbling frantic notes as we talked.

We were far from finished with his anecdotal fund of information when he had a stroke. We did some work even after the stroke compromised his abilities. When he died, realizing that I was the primary repository of this wealth of information, this one of a kind format of the life and times of a shtetl, I continued to work on deciphering his handwriting and creating a map legend. Sometimes I sought the decoding skills in Yiddish of two participants in a day program at my local Jewish Community Home. One of them said to me one day when dealing with a difficult section of his handwriting to decipher, "Why are you doing this anyway, when nobody is doing this for MY hometown?!" Even now, I feel keenly the loss of his anecdotal explication of the rest of the map. But I know why it needed to be done! Surely, if Moishe had lived long enough to participate in the completion of his tales about the map it would have been an even fuller ethnographic document.

I think there are errors in this rendering—errors and omissions and confusions—mine, and even Moishe's. But imperfect as this is, it is valuable by virtue of its

uniqueness and thoroughness. In an effort to be as thorough as possible, I have included paper transcriptions of his taped notes and other miscellany.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Unfortunately, like Moishe Kantorowitz, my own husband did not live to see the completion of this project. However, his interest in it, his recognition of its importance to me, and his appreciation of its value as an artifact of social science, was manifested in many, many ways.

I also deeply thank many who have helped along the way. Family: That includes Moishe's wonderful wife Ruth, the faithful and supportive lunch-maker and witness to Moishe's obsession, his son Ken, my son Ian, a genealogical maven, my daughter Elisa, my cousins in Toronto, Celia Denov, Herb and Brina Rose. I'm especially grateful to my husband Jim, who made countless cups of tea and understood the importance of the project. Yiddish Helpers: Faina Maximova and Avrom Zakas were tenacious. Chris Linsner-Cartwright, the faithful and skilled transcriber of the tapes of Moishe talking about his map, who remained patient throughout the years with this project.

David Smith was my initial and essential technological assistant and Paulette Swartzfager rescued almost-lost material essential to the project. I also want to thank Jim Bearden for a variety of assistance. My most profound gratitude is to Laura Sikes, a Ph.D. candidate in history who brought to the project her computer wizardry, her growing grasp of the historical significance of the material, her organizational skills, charm, prodigious memory, and persistence.

Additionally, other interested and informed people about Shershev have been instrumental, patient, and supportive. In Israel: Jay Lenefsky of CPSA and Leuma Lerman, Moishe's cousin. Jose Serlin in Argentina, and especially David Feldman of Jewish Genealogy and Belarus SIG in the USA. And friends have given advice and counsel.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Here is the reason that the reader will find some repetitions and differences in what follows by Moishe:

In the course of Moishe's many years, post WWII, while living, working, and raising a family in Northeastern Canada, he wrote in Yiddish the story of his life. It numbered between seven and eight hundred handwritten pages.

Then, because he wanted the English-speaking readers he sought to have access to the story, he began to translate the Yiddish manuscript, by himself, into English—doing so laboriously with dictionary and grammar book in hand.

When I met him he had already spent many years worrying about what he perceived to be his English-as-a-second-language (or 2nd, 3rd, or 4th!) spelling, grammar, tense and word order mistakes. Sometimes a whole day would be consumed with just one such problem.

Of course I tried to reassure him. I praised his story telling abilities, his memory, the scope of his material and his tenacity. I also explained that a "good" copy editor could fix his errors easily enough. I even demonstrated this by doing some thirty pages myself, as I had persuaded him to submit the manuscript to a contest for publication by Random House Publishers and others. He was a runner-up, largely because of the size of his submission.

However, Moishe was never completely at peace about his translation. Thus he eventually persuaded a friend to do a "cleaned up" version. I know that he was surprised when I told him it had lost some of his original flavor.

Later he worked with a cousin in Israel, with a daughter, and grandchild perhaps, because of this same dilemma. Towards the end of his life, he self published a somewhat abbreviated/or condensed version of the same material-- again with somebody's help.

Therefore, I have reprinted herein the most authentically personal version of his material of which I am aware. It consists of chapters sent to me slowly as they were self translated and then preserved by me on my computer. With the help of a copy editor, we have done our best to clean up the memoir. Given circumstances, only one edit of the document was possible. An initial proofing was done prior to indexing.

Throughout the memoir, we left intact Moishe's tense shifts because they indicate his way of remembering. For him, the line between the past and the present blurred when recalling his experiences during the Holocaust. Insofar as it was possible, the Yiddish cadence and sentence structure of his storytelling has been maintained throughout. Variations in spellings of names and places may exist, despite our best efforts.

Furthermore, to avoid the cost and laboriousness of scanning many pages, I have omitted the version in his self published book called "My Mother's Bequest: From Shershev to Auschwitz to Newfoundland." Copies of this print version book are to be found in the Holocaust Museum Library in Washington, D.C., in the YIVO, archives in New York, in Canadian institutions, in Israel, in the American Embassy library in Minsk, Belarus, and elsewhere by individuals such as this writer.

It is clear that Moishe was determined his children and grandchildren, and future generations be able to read his life's story. That is why we have included it, excerpts from his cousin's manuscript, and other miscellaneous related material with his map.

## Chapter 1

To the best of my ability, I'll try to look back into the furthest corners of my memory to recall the earliest years of my childhood. I was born and brought up in Shershev (Yiddish) or Shereshovo (Russian) in Byelorussia, which was traditionally part of Russia but was then controlled by Poland. I was born of parents whose family history extended centuries back in that town. As the only survivor of the holocaust in my immediate family, I have written about my experiences so that there can be some memory of those who did not survive.

My father, Itzik (Isaak) Kantorowitz, was born in 1892. He was drafted into the Czar's army in 1913, spending a year in Kazan, the capital of Tartar Russia. There he had a hard time convincing the locals that he was a Jew, as they believed that Jews grew horns.

In August 1914, the war broke out. My father's regiment, consisting of three thousand men, was sent west and took up positions near the now-Polish city of Lublin. As it is well recorded in history, in the beginning of the war, the Russian army had tremendous successes against the Austrians. The Russian steamroller moved ahead. Even in retreat, the Austrians inflicted heavy losses on the Russians.

What follows is an episode as told to me by my father. Every word can be believed because my father was neither a braggart nor a boaster. When they arrived at the front, they were ordered to dig in and reinforce their trenches with logs from nearby woods. A couple of days later they moved up and had to build new ones. When their trenches were finished, they received up to a thousand cartridges a day and were ordered to expend them by firing towards the enemy. It did not matter whether there was the slightest chance of hitting a target, they were supposed to expend the ammunition. To fire so many bullets from the long-barreled First World War rifles was not easy. After a couple of dozen shots, the shoulder starts to ache; after a couple of hundred shots, it starts to swell. My father noticed that when a superior was not around, the soldiers would bury the cartridges in the ground under their feet and he too started doing so. This story is an illustration of how wasteful and corrupt their leaders were.

After a few weeks in the front lines, my father and three more soldiers were sent on a reconnaissance mission. They succeeded in crossing behind the enemy lines. However, the next night they were unable to get back to their posts. They were forced to remain behind the enemy lines 4-5 days with no food, hiding out in forests and swamps, until they made their way back.

Their company was hidden in a forest. As soon as they returned from reconnaissance, the company commander ordered the company to fall-in and began to inspect their rifles. After hiding out for a few days in holes and swamps, their rifles were understandably dirty. They were ordered to step forward, their rifles were inspected again, and the inspecting officer slapped father in front of the entire company.

This act was an insult to a soldier. Nevertheless, the officer dared to do it knowing that for slapping a Jew even in uniform, he wouldn't be prosecuted. My father added that he could hear some soldiers behind him grinding their teeth and whispering under their breath *ubyiey yevo* (kill him). However, my father did not dare even to raise his hand, knowing that for such an act he would pay with his life in war.

The senseless slaughter that took place on the western front during the First World War is well known in the west, relatively little is known of the millions senselessly annihilated on the eastern front, especially on the Russian side. Here is an episode in which my father participated and told me about:

Not long after he was slapped after reconnaissance duty, his regiment found itself near some village where they dug in. Even though the Austrians were moving back they left behind a strong rear-guard and his regiment was trying to take them. They would run towards the Austrian position with bayonets at ready and shouts of "hurrah." The Austrians would mow them down with machine guns. After each attack, his regiment was driven back to their trenches.

Since the Russian trenches were within the perimeter of the village, the Austrians set the village ablaze to expose the entire Russian position in the night darkness. It did not take long for the Austrian range finders to find the Russian trenches. They unleashed an artillery barrage whose every shell hit the trench. There were no more thoughts of an attack. Everybody, officers and soldiers, tried to save his own life. The shells were



exploding right in the trenches where the pile of bodies kept on rising. Some soldiers used to try to run back, but were cut down by the Austrian machine guns. Others yelled loud and clear *Poddaymossa* (Let's surrender). Despite the presence of their officers, some tried to do so although the incoming fire made the attempt hopeless.

The pile of twisted, torn bodies kept on growing. Suddenly my father felt a tug at his coat. He turned to see a soldier that was crouching near him pointing to an officer. The same one slapped my father a couple of weeks earlier. The soldier yelled above the sound of exploding shells, "now it is your chance to get even with him." Under the constant cannonade of exploding shells and staccato of machine guns, when every soldier still alive tried to find a hole among the twisted torn bodies of his comrades, nobody would have noticed if my father would have pulled the trigger and fired.

He did not do that. However, the Austrians did the job for him. Less than half an hour later, a shell fell close by. When the smoke cleared, the first thing my father noticed was an officer's cap. Nearby, over fresh bodies, lay the body of that officer with half his head torn off.

The survivors were unable to surrender or retreat, since raising one's head would get it shot off. Therefore, everyone tried to dig his way deeper among the corpses. So did my father. At dawn, my father dug his way out from among the corpses and began to run towards the rear. Because he was running eastwards toward the rising sun, it was difficult for the Austrians to aim. Running, he could see bullets kicking up the ground to his right and left. The ground was full of Russian dead and wounded, some that were still able to utter a word begged him *dobeyey menya* (finish me off). They knew that there was no chance of getting any help. All they wanted was for someone to shoot them out of their misery.

When he finally got out of the range of the machine guns, he began to ask for the command post of his regiment, which was a couple kilometers farther east. He found it. In a few minutes, a colonel the commanding officer of his regiment, a middle-aged man with a noticeable stomach gave an order to those that managed to come back from the front to fall in. They took count. Including my father, there were sixteen men. These men watched in astonishment as their old commander broke down and cried.

Those few survivors were attached to another company and a month or so later, under a similar artillery barrage, a shell tore off two fingers of my father's right hand: the index and the middle finger. It was still late 1914, and my father was taken all the way to a hospital in Moscow. It was a time when the Russian people were patriotic and very much behind the Czar. His daughters used to visit the wounded soldiers in the hospitals and distribute medals. One of the Czar's daughters gave a medal to my father. He even told me her name but at that time, I did not try to remember.

After being discharged from the hospital, my father came home before the German army reached us in 1915. As a former Russian soldier, my father had to report to the German authorities every so often.

My mother was Esther Auerbach. She was a gifted storyteller, an Auerbach family trait, and her stories were spellbinding. I won't even attempt to imitate them. I will only try to tell a few dry facts about her youth that remained in my memory. There was nothing more precious to my grandmother Freida-Leah than her only daughter, my mother was, nor was anything too good for her. As my mother used to tell it, the only tin bathtub in the shtetl was in their house and nobody was allowed to use it except my mother. The same bathtub became ours after my grandparents passed away.

My mother was raised in such pampered conditions until the First World War broke out. Even then, life in Shershev went on almost as before. People knew that a war was going on but what the situation was or where the front was, nobody knew.

The Germans did not need much to drive the Czarist army out of Shershev. They arrived in 1915. The retreating Czarist army broke into Jewish stores and homes helping themselves to anything they could move.

The Jewish population had the choice of going east with the retreating Russian army or remaining under the rule of the Germans, who were, after all, westernized and civilized. They remained.

The Germans introduced new laws and practices, like opening a window for fresh air in winter. For Jews, the most insensitive and embarrassing thing they did was to stop bearded men and look for lice. If lice were found, they cut the beard off right in the

middle of the street. Most men wore beards. To be seen in the street with a freshly cut beard was very embarrassing. There were other hardships, like being sent away from home to work for little pay and constant food shortages and outright hunger.

My grandfather, Laizer-Bear, being over fifty, was exempt from being sent away. Nevertheless, he had a wife and a daughter (my mother) to support, so he volunteered to work in Bialowierza Forest, making shingles. Even with his pay, the two women went hungry many a day.

In 1920 when my parents got married, our part of the world was still in tumult. Of the two main antagonists in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, by then the Soviet Union, was in the midst of a revolution and Germany was tired and exhausted after a humiliating defeat. The Soviet Army, although exhausted after a prolonged war and a bloody revolution that left the country in ruins, was ordered by misled, fanatical ideologues to cross Poland and unite with their likes in Germany. Their objective was a bright future for humanity under their rule.

As they marched westwards through Shershev, Shershev Jews branded them with the name *borvese* (bare-footed). They wore a hodge-podge of uniforms and footwear and carried light weapons of assorted vintages and calibers. There was no visible rolling stock or provisions. Their transportation was by starving horses barely pulling their wagons.

How such a genius as Trotsky hoped to cross Europe with such an army is difficult to understand. No wonder that whatever army the newly created Poland could muster, could beat back that undisciplined, unorganized mass of humanity, an army that marched in tatters and hungry on unknown roads in strange lands.

During that period, on a late afternoon, my parents, just recently wed, were going from my mother's parents to my father's parents. They were going via back alleys, as the main street was full of Soviet soldiers, retreating from their defeat near Warsaw. If they appeared pitiful on their way to victory, one can imagine what they looked like running away in defeat. What was worse was that in that defeat, they not only lost the battle, they lost the spirit and idealism that could bring them on foot and empty stomachs from Moscow to Warsaw. The army had lived not on proper provisions, but on bounty from

peasants and townspeople and, early on, did not supplement its shortages by plunder, as it was usual practice. Now it had lost all its good decorum and discipline.□

Suddenly, in that narrow alley, my parents found themselves surrounded by riders on horseback who demanded everything they had in their pockets. After taking it all and ready to leave, one of them noticed the wedding ring on my mother's finger, promptly demanding it. As if out of spite, the ring would not come off. Without hesitation, the riders ordered my mother to put the finger on the nearby fence. Unsheathing his sword, he raised it to chop the finger off. My mother asked him to let her try it again. He did, and this time the ring came off. They rode off. A short time ago, those same soldiers marched on Western Europe with lofty ideals of bringing it a bright future.

From that year, 1920, the western provinces of Belarus (White Russia) and Ukraine remained under Polish rule, until 1939.

Although I could not have been much over two years old at the time, I believe I remember the house of my maternal grandparents, Laizer-Bear and Frieda-Leah Auerbach, on Ostrowiecka Street. My parents, my sister Sheva (a year and a half older than me), and my grandparents lived there. It was a long, low-lying house, made of standard 6" x 12" timbers from which the Shershev houses were built.

Because the house was very old, its wooden floor had sunk almost to the ground. The floors of the bedrooms, however, were about six inches higher. There was an elevated threshold at the bedroom door and I see myself as a two-year-old child sitting on it. My feet rested on the lower part of the floor. I sang a children's' song about a little room with a hammer, a metal bowl, and other things in it.

I still hear the melodies of a couple of lullabies that my mother sang as she put me to bed and still remember some of the words. The first lullaby was the story of a maiden who was forced to marry the king and leave her true love behind. The words were sad, the melody was even sadder, and the song always made me sad.

The second lullaby was also about a maiden. In her garden was a well to which her lover would come every evening to get his fill of the cool thirst-quenching water. As a child, I took it literally to mean cool water. My mother used to sing to me in Yiddish, but

I later learned the song was translated from the Hebrew poem, *yesh li gan* (I have a garden), by the great poet Bialik. Still later, I realized the poet didn't mean "cool water" literally.

I also remember a morning before Pesach (Passover). The garden behind the kitchen window seemed neglected. The snow recently melted and exposed unkempt garden beds and strewn-around potato stems. It was still too early to plow. My grandfather, Laizer-Bear, put a large copper kettle on the ground in the middle of the garden. He made sure it is not close to the house. He elevated the boiler by means of three stones placed underneath it. Carrying two pails of water at a time, he made several trips to the well filling up the boiler with water. He started a fire under the boiler and shoved the end of a long metal rod into the fire.

After a long while, the water in the boiler started to bubble. At the same time, the end of the metal rod in the fire became flaming red. My grandfather, his hands covered by a rug to protect them from being burned, picked up the cooler end of the rod. He stuck the red-hot end of the rod into the boiler. The water exploded with a geyser of hissing steam and bubbles furiously.

By then, a circle of neighbors had gathered round. Each carried a bundle of cutlery tied together with a single cord with each utensil separated by a couple of inches from the other. It seems like a long string of jewels.

My grandfather took each person's cord, one at a time, and dipped it in the boiling water three times. After the cutlery, he immersed all sorts of other dishes. Several years passed before I learned that my grandfather was koshering our cutlery and dishes and those of our neighbors for Pesach (Passover) so that they would be clean and proper according to Jewish dietary law.

Because my father had been wounded in the past World War, the Polish government gave him a liquor concession in 1924. This allowed him to run a restaurant serving alcoholic drinks and he could sell packaged alcoholic beverages for outside consumption.

The sale of liquor was under strict government supervision in Poland and a permit to sell it assured a reasonable livelihood. Every district had an allocated number of such permits for particular places, so that one had to accept the permit in an assigned place. My father's permit was valid for Wierchy in the district of Volynia. Wierchy was a large village between the towns of Kowel and Kamien-Koszyrsk. The village consisted mainly of workers at two large local sawmills. During the agricultural off-season, many farmers from the surrounding villages also worked in the sawmills.

Because there were only a handful of Jewish families in Wierchy, my mother chose to remain in Shershev. Therefore, my sister and I stayed with her and my maternal grandparents in what had been the house of my mother's grandfather, Nathan-Shepsl Goldfarb, after whom I am named. (One of my two middle names is Nathan; the other is Aaron.) It was almost across the street from our earlier house. Since the earlier house was no longer needed, my grandparents sold it.

The house in which we lived was similar to our earlier house but a bit smaller. Behind it was a shed used to keep winter firewood. Behind the shed was what we called a stable. It was used to store various kinds of odds and ends. I never knew why it was called a stable. My great grandfather was a tailor and I doubt if he ever had a horse, but he might have had a cow.

That house, like the house we had lived in earlier, was about 20 meters back from the street. The space in between was taken up by a well-tended garden. At its end, near the road, grew two big maple trees whose leaves the neighbors used to collect in the fall. They put them under the loaves of bread while they were being baked. A much larger garden was behind the house and had a large pear tree at its left side.

We move to the Kopl Kantorowitz house. A few months later, I caught pneumonia. My grandparents' old house was built in a time when people were more concerned with reserving heat than with having overhead space. Nor was there much concern with having fresh air or faith in the theory that it was desirable. As a result, there wasn't much air for a three and a half year old boy with a bad case of pneumonia to breathe and I had just about stopped breathing.

In desperation, my mother sent for Uncle Shloime (Solomon) Auerbach, her only brother still left in Shershev; the others had left for the US before World War I. When he entered, he immediately noticed the lack of air circulation. He opened a window, picked me up, and took me to breathe the fresh air. According to my mother, this saved my life because I then began to breathe regularly and freely.

On the same day, a doctor was brought in from the neighboring town of Pruzany. Her name was Ola Goldfine and she immediately suggested that I be moved to a larger and roomier place. My mother then decided to move to my paternal grandparents, Yaakov-Kopl and Chinkah Kantorowitz.

My grandfather Kopl, as he was usually called, was a very eminent member of the community of Shershev and its vicinity. He was mayor of the shtetl every other year, alternating the post with a Christian named Szlykiewicz. He was of medium height, broad shouldered with a little protruding stomach, a rosy healthy-looking face and a red beard. Despite his age, he had few gray hairs. My grandmother Chinkah was a tall slim woman with absolute authority in the house. Even my grandfather Kopl, although accustomed to giving orders, submitted to all my grandmother's decisions. At least that is how it seemed to me as a child.

My paternal grandparents were among the few rich members of the community. They had a big house on the main street, which was called Mostowa (bridge) Street because a wooden bridge that crossed the river began on it. The bridge was located four houses away from where they lived.

Behind Kopl's house was a shed, constructed of the same heavy six-inch timber as the rest of the houses in Shershev. The shed served different purposes at different times. During World War I, my grandfather used it to house horses, a wagon, and some farm machinery. I learned later that my grandfather farmed during the four, very lean years of World War I to feed his wife and nine children. My paternal grandparents fared much better than those on my mother's side because my father returned home in 1915 after his release from the hospital and was available to help. His older brother Shevach too had been conscripted into the Russian army. Shevach never returned after the war; he must be buried somewhere in the vast expanse of Russia. My grandparents' other children,

although teenagers, could already put in a day's work and contribute to the feeding and the survival of the younger members of the family.

Throughout a half-century or more, Kopl had a hardware store, which gave him a comfortable living. In my time, the shed behind his house, although partly a woodshed, was mainly a warehouse for the store. We had three rooms in my grandparents' house, but my mother had to share the kitchen with my grandmother since the house was designed for only one family.

I recovered from pneumonia in Kopl's house and do not remember much of the next two years. While we lived with my paternal grandparents, my father's two youngest brothers also lived there. The older one was Hershel and the younger one, Eliyahu, was called Eli. Eli was then a student attending the Hebrew gymnasium (high school) in Pruzany. He used to come home every Friday afternoon and returned Saturday night to attend classes on Sunday. He also used to come home also on all Jewish holidays and during vacation recess.

I see them with pliers in their hands splitting old auto tires. There were no autos or any motorized vehicles in Shershev then and I don't know where my grandfather bought them. The tires were so thick that they had to be split in half and then given to specialized artisans who would make them into clogs held together with rivets and worn on cloth-wrapped feet with long leather straps. This sturdy footwear could last for years and was affordable to the local farmers. My grandfather used to sell them in his store. The bulk of the business in my grandfather's hardware store was selling the metal parts needed to make wagons; like axles, the metal sleeves forming the center of the wheel, the steering mechanism, and rails to go around the wheels. In addition, there was a full line of hardware articles.

By the way, Kopl's was not the only hardware store. My father's brother Reuben, called Ruva, also had a hardware store. The third hardware store in the shtetl belonged to Joshua (Youshuah) Pinsky. All three stores were within 30 metres of each other.



A year after we moved to Kopl's house, a fire broke out on the other side of the river, no more than 100 meters from where we lived. The volunteer fire brigade of Shershev had a couple of dozen men with little training and very little equipment. It was unable to control the fire, which spread and engulfed the neighboring houses up to the riverbank. The river was just a few meters wide and there was danger that the fire would cross it and attack the entire main street, including Kopl's house.

My mother got a wagon drayer to come and load his wagon as high as humanly possible. We set out for my maternal grandparents, who lived over a kilometer from there. I remember that my maternal grandfather came for me in person and did not let me go by wagon. He carried me the entire distance in his arms. (He was in his early seventies and looked and acted like all men his age of that time. That is, he looked much older than a man in his early seventies nowadays.) I recall looking up to the sky while he was carrying me. It was covered with flying sparks and small cinders continuously hovering down toward the ground, showering the houses we were leaving.

Eventually the fire brigade from Pruzany came with a fire truck and with motorized trucks lacking in Shershev. With its help, the fire was finally extinguished. The next morning we returned and found that half a dozen houses had went up in flames the preceding night, but that the fire had not crossed the river. My mother took us two, that is my sister Sheva and me, to look at the devastation and the still glowing cinders.

Even after we moved from their house, I still spent much of my time during the early years of my life with my maternal grandparents Auerbach and often slept over. They lived by themselves, modestly and peacefully. My grandfather divided his time between his children and grandchildren on one hand and his synagogue on Ostrowiecka Street, which was called the "Rabbi's Synagogue" because the Rabbi prayed there. My grandfather was the synagogue *gabai* (warden).

It was a few years later, when I was older and they were already gone, that I realized how much they loved us and how much I missed them.

Almost across from Kopl's house, a stranger opened a barbershop. He was man from central Poland, big bodied with what seemed to me like a very strange accent to me. It was Polish-Yiddish. We were Litvaks (Lithuanian Jews) although we lived in Belorussia, not Lithuania. The barber's name was Shmulevich and he owned a small caliber rifle. Every sunny morning, he would come out with his rifle right after he opened his shop. He lined up a row of bottles or other discarded objects on a fence and shot them down. Whenever he did this, a group of idlers would gather round to stare at the stranger indulging in such a non-Jewish pastime. The result was that he couldn't make a living in Shershev and moved away a couple of years later.

The winter of 1927-28 was a difficult one. I remember getting up and looking across the street, where Hertzke Fishelle's house was supposed to be. All I could see was a smoking chimney sticking out of a mountain of snow. Sometime later, a few neighbors shoveled away the snow from that door so that the residents could get out.

In spring of 1928, we rented a house from Yudel (Yehuda) and Reizl Zubatzky. It was big and fairly new. Reizl Zubatzky kept two rooms for herself, her son Shlomo, two years older than me, and her three-year-old twin girls. Her husband was away, employed as a forest watchman in Volhynia, and rarely came home.

My mother, sister and I lived with my paternal grandparents until the end of 1928. My father would visit Shershev on holidays. The rest of the time, he lived in Wierchy, where he rented most of a locally owned Jewish home. It served as living quarters for my father and housed his retail package store and his restaurant.

We first visited my father in Wierchy in the summer of 1927. I remember one such trip, perhaps because it might have been the first. We had to use several means of transportation. From Shershev, we had to travel for three hours by horse and buggy to the district town of Pruzany, 18 kilometers away. From Pruzany, we traveled 12 kilometers by a narrow-gauge train to get to the Oranczyce-Linovo railway station. Then we went by regular train to Brest-Litovsk, where we changed for a train to Kovel. In Kovel, for the first time in my life, I saw what the people there called an omnibus. It looked like a little bus, but had no motor and was pulled by a team of four horses. Its wheels were like those

of farmers' wagons: wood framed by a metal railing. On one of our trips to Wierchy, a wheel broke but was repaired with a sturdy wire in one of our suitcases, allowing us to complete the trip.

In Wierchy, we moved in with our father in his cramped quarters. I still remember how my father took me to one of the sawmills to show me the huge steam engine. It was at a time when my father still held me by my hand. There in the noisy engine room one of the attendants climbed up the ladder and pressed the steam whistle. It terrified me and I would have run out had my father not held me by my hand.

I can still see the man and wife my father rented the house from. I see their sons, ages 10 and 12, plucking feathers from live geese in the summer afternoon. Each holds a goose by its neck with one hand and plucks its feathers with the other hand. The honking of the geese could be heard far and wide.

I still remember the Jewish poretz (large estate owner). Such Jews were a rarity in Poland because Jews were not permitted to acquire land. However, a handful of privileged Jews had owned land under the Czar prior to World War I and were permitted to continue to own it. The poretz was a tall man, whose estate was near the village. He would ride into the village on horseback, attired in riding boots and breeches, and with a rifle slung over his shoulder. Once he rode into our restaurant sitting on his horse. He always had a pocketful of a particular kind of candy, which he never failed to give me when he visited to chat with my father, which was very often. He even tried to have a conversation with me in Polish and Russian, although I spoke neither at that age.

The two large Wierchy sawmills at times employed several hundred people, including farmers from neighbouring villages who hauled logs to the mill. They were paid once a month. If they needed money before payday, they would get handwritten promissory notes from the owners, payable to the bearer. The few local stores accepted these as currency and cashed them at the mill's office at the end of the month. When the workers had cashed in their notes and had real cash, they celebrated by drinking away a good part of their pay. Many drank to intoxication and had to be driven home by their buddies. Such drinking was endemic among many gentiles in that part of the world. The

handful of Jewish small storekeepers, including my father, as well as Jewish tradesmen and artisans, made a living from this non-Jewish population.

I still remember the Jewish blacksmith and his assistant, a young man of extraordinary strength. A circle of gentiles used to gather around to admire the young Jewish strongman. He would pick out the biggest and heaviest man, lift him over his head and throw him several metres.

My mother, sister and I also sometimes went for summer vacations in a Jewish summer resort called Domaczewo near the river Bug. It was much closer to Wierchy than Shershev and my father would sometimes come for a few days. Getting to Domaczewo was difficult. One first had to get to Brest-Litovsk. I have described the difficulties of this already, since it is part of the way to Wierchy. From there, we took a train that went to Drohhycyzin-Lubelski and got off at Domaczewo, 40 kilometers south of Brest-Litovsk. In Domaczewo, my mother had to do her own baking and cooking. There were no dishes available, either to buy or rent, so half a household of dishes, utensils, clothing, and underwear had to travel with us. I'll never understand how my mother managed this long and tiresome trip with two small children.

Domaczewo was a Jewish shtetl whose inhabitants' main source of subsistence was renting out rooms and cottages to vacationers who would come to spend a week, month, or summer there. They would enjoy walking in the forest with its fresh air and smell of pine trees. I still see in my mind's eye the village and its Jewish homes: a couple of rows of wooden houses built on a sandy terrain. I remember the cobblestone streets where vacationers walked in the late summer afternoon. As an inquisitive child, I used to look in those homes and watch as the local Jews, stripped to their waists except for the *arbah-kanfos* (an undergarment worn by orthodox Jews with tassels on its four corners; *arbah-kanfos* literally means four corners), working in the sweltering and suffocating midday heat to make paper bags for grocery stores to supplement their income.

The main attraction for the vacationers was the surrounding pine forest, where they spent most of their time. I can see the local baker with his large baking pan resting

with one edge on his belly and suspended by a cord over his neck. It was loaded with cookies and other goods that he had spent the long night baking. He walked around the groups of vacationers, especially those with children, shouting "cheesecake, butter cake, jam rolls." I used to find his pronunciation intriguing. His Brest-Litovsk Yiddish was very different from ours.

## Chapter 2

The largest synagogue in the shtetl was called *der groyser beys-midrash* (the large synagogue; literally, large study house). A two-story brick building of which the second floor served as *ezras noshim* (women's section), and the rest of the second floor gave extra height to the sanctuary. The second synagogue was called "the Rabbi's Synagogue." It was where my grandfather, Laizer-Bear Auerbach, was the *gabai* (trustee or warden) up to his demise and where my father had his *shtods* (membership seat) at the eastern wall, the prime area because it faced Jerusalem. The third was Reb Isaac's synagogue, where my grandfather Yaakov-Kopl was a member.

The fourth, the *gemoyerter* (brick building) was an ancient building made of oversized bricks looked as if built the same time as the ancient stately synagogue hundreds of years earlier. For us children, the main attraction of that synagogue was its interconnecting cellars, whose layout we have never figured out. The fifth, the "New Synagogue" in the *hoyf ghesl* (Court Lane) was indeed the newest, built right after the First World War.

Finally, the last synagogue was called the Chassidic Synagogue although in my time there were no Chassidim (a charismatic movement led by leaders called rebbes) in Shershev except for one family that moved in shortly before the Second World War. Still one could find Chasidic versions of the prayer book in Shershev. Even we had some Chassidic prayer books in our house given to us by my paternal grandparents without any explanation.

Prior to the First World War, Shershev had an enormous synagogue considered to be one of the three largest and the most beautiful in pre-partitioned Poland. Its origin was

unknown but it apparently was built about the same time as the *Rad Kromen* (literally, row of stores; a building of stores in the Town Square), judging from the size of the bricks and thickness of the massive walls. It stood at the northeastern corner of the Town Square, but about 40 meters back from the row of houses. This left a large space in front of it that reached to the Town Square. It was assumed that the space was left vacant deliberately so the town's Jews could assemble in times of festivities. The Jewish population of Shershev two centuries ago was twice as large then it was between the two world wars.

There was a local legend about this synagogue, which has enough correspondence with Polish history that it even may be true. Several hundred years ago, Poland was united with Lithuania and became a great power extending, as they used to say, from sea to sea; that is from the Baltic Sea to the Black sea. There then was a queen (by marriage) of Italian descent named Bona. She built a palace in Shershev at the end of what we called the Court Lane. One day as her two daughters went walking into town they were attacked by a swarm of bees. Fortunately, the Jews from the nearby houses noticed it and saved the two young princesses from much suffering and maybe death. In gratitude, the queen built this magnificent synagogue for the Jewish community. It was one of the most impressive synagogues in Poland.

That synagogue burned down in the beginning of the First World War. All that remained were the four massive walls, the ceiling and the impressive four columns on which a massive pediment was resting. It gave the entire front of the edifice a magnificent Romanesque distinction. I can still remember the cavernous inside of the structure with its additional two immense pillars supporting the ceiling, which had not collapsed for 20 years after the fire.

Prior to the fire, that gutted the original synagogue; the Jewish leadership in Shtetl had realized the need for one large synagogue to serve as a gathering place for the entire community. The original large synagogue or *shul* (school) was not used in winter because it was impossible to keep it warm. So it was decided to build a year round structure adjacent to the old synagogue. This is how the new large synagogue, *der groyser beys-*

*midrash*, was built. It was the seventh synagogue in the shtetl and the third to be built of bricks. The remaining four synagogues were built of wood.

I turned five years old that spring in 1928. It was time for a Jewish boy to start *heder* (traditional Jewish religious school). There were a few *melamedim* (heder teachers) in Shershev. My mother with the help of her father, my grandfather Laizer-Bear, decided on a melamed named Kepele Potchinker. He lived with his wife in one of the alleys that run off the main street Mostowa to the swamps that surrounded much of the shtetl. The little street or alley in which he lived was itself a swamp. As best I can remember, it was never dry even during the hot summer days.

The night before my first day in heder, my mother took me to her parents to sleep over. I could never understand why that particular night, before starting heder, one of the most important days in a Jewish boy's life, my mother wanted me to spend with her parents.

The next morning my mother was there bright and early, after breakfast. She took me by my left hand letting her father hold my right hand. Holding hands in this way, the three of us walked out the kitchen into the hallway and to the outside door. My mother and grandfather both stopped at the door and told me to step over the threshold with my right foot first. According to Jewish custom, this was a talisman and an augury of good luck and success. And so we stepped across the threshold as they kept on blessing me with every blessing they could think of. I remember being apprehensive about what it is like going to Heder, but I felt safe holding on to the hands of the two people I loved and trusted most in the world. They were now walking on either side of me like two guardian angels. Thus began the first day of my Jewish education.

Kepele Potchinker, my melamed, was a tall man with a long beard. His attitude towards his little charges was grandfatherly. The system in attending a Heder was that one signed up the child for a *zman* (a six-month period) with the rabbe. There were rabbes that took on only beginners. Others kept their students for a couple of years, accepting

new ones yearly, thus creating classes, or grades. My rabbe took on beginners, let them go after six months, and then started a new group.

My grandfather Laizer-Bear made me a little wooden lantern with glass panes on all sides. One side had a door through which the rabbe used to light a candle for me before I left for home, so I could find my way through the dark muddy alley. I started by learning to recognize the Hebrew letters and from there I graduated to reading slowly from a *sidur* (prayer book.) At the end of the six-month zman, my mother and grandfather came to take me home, just as they did the first day they brought me there. I guess the rabbe wanted to show them that he earned his tuition, so he put me down at the head of the table, opening the *sidur* at random and told me to read. My mother and grandfather were on each side of me but a little to the back. As on the first day six months ago, my mother was on my left side and my grandfather on the right.

I kept on reading to the bottom of the page; not understanding a word, of course. As soon as I finished, a handful of coins began to fall down on the table, some remaining on it and some rolling off the table in all directions. I turned around and asked my grandfather what it meant. His answer was that angels from heaven threw it down, a reward for my being a good student. I could have sworn that I noticed my grandfather's hand disappear behind my back as I looked up while the coins were falling. However, I had so much trust in and love for my grandfather that it took several of my early years before I accepted my original impression.

My formal education was then interrupted until after Pesach of early spring of 1929. That summer of 1928, I slept many nights at my grandparents Auerbach. I will tell you more about them now.

My grandfather Laizer-Bear and grandmother Freida-Leah brought six children into this world: five boys and one girl. Two of the boys died in infancy, the other three grew up healthy. The oldest was Shloime (Solomon), the second was Pesach (Phillip) and the third was Lipah. My uncle Lipah was a volunteer fireman. Once during a fire my uncle Lipah found himself in a burning house while the ceiling, on which some other



volunteers had just hauled up a barrel full of water, collapsed on him. After coming to, he seemed to be in good health.

A couple of years later, he left for the U.S. Shortly after he arrived, he married a woman called Becky (Rebecca). They had only one child, Irving. Unfortunately, my uncle Lipah died in the States a very young man. The circumstances of his death are unknown to me. Nevertheless, my mother always blamed the incident during that fire for his untimely death.

My uncle Pesach (Phillip) left Shershev sometime around the turn of the century to avoid conscription into the Czarist army. My grandparents remained in Shershev with the remaining two children. The oldest was my uncle Shloime, and the youngest, my mother, Esther-Beilah. In the beginning of the 20th century, my uncle Shloime married a local girl, Esther-Libah Winograd and started to raise a family of his own.

My Auerbuch grandparents had a little house that seemed to me like it was in a fairy tale. It was some twenty meters from the road and the garden and leafy trees hid it from passersby in the summer. It had an embankment three quarters of a meter high, made from pine needles held tightly against the wall by a fence. This served to keep the house warmer in the winter. In the summer, women from the neighborhood used to sit on it, telling each other stories and local news with not a small measure of exaggeration. The house stood perpendicular to the street and the entrance was from the side. A low porch led to a wide single door. Behind the main door was a square hall of 2 by 2 meters with three doors, one on each side. The right side door led to a storeroom, where my grandparents kept nonperishable vegetables from the garden, like potatoes, cabbage, beets, carrots, turnips, radishes and the like. My grandmother kept her homemade preserves there too. The second side door led to a single room rented by an old lady named Rachel Krenitzer.

Rachel Krenitzer existed, if this is the right word, by selling milk. Regardless of whether it was in summer or winter, she was up at the latest at six in the morning to go to her milk suppliers: poor Jews, owners of a cow who supplemented their meager livelihood by selling the cow's milk. Rachel Krenitzer used to buy the milk from those poor cow owners and carry it in 2-pail size containers to her customers. We were among

her customers and she used to be at our door before 7:00 AM every morning rain or shine. I can still see my mother commiserating with that woman's lot as she used to watch her approaching our house in the cold wintry mornings, knee deep in snow, with a heavy container in each hand. Rachel Krenitzer had a son by the name of Nathan, married with some children, but he struggled hard enough to support his family and his mother did not want to impose on him.

The third door in my grandparents hall, led to their living quarters, which consisted of a large kitchen, that also served as a dining room and from there 2 doors led to a living room and 2 bedrooms which were not too roomy. In fact, neither of the rooms, nor the house, was big. What was immense was the warmth and love that my sister and I experienced being with them. Those impressions and feelings have remained with me until today, seventy years later. I particularly remember those long gone evenings with my grandparents Auerbach, the little house, the low-lying ceiling, the room poorly lit by the kerosene lamp that stood on the table to make reading and writing easier, the attention they gave me and above all their love.

There wasn't much to do in the evenings, so my grandfather obtained some exercise books for me that were lined and written all over with silvery ink in beautiful calligraphy. The writing was in Latin letters but I don't know in what language. My grandfather gave me a pencil and told me to trace the silvery writing with it. Being left-handed, I initially took the pencil with my left hand. That was unacceptable in those days and I was trained to hold the pencil in my right hand, which took a long time. The result is that despite the fact that I am today fully left-handed I write with my right hand.

In addition to her parents, my mother's oldest brother Solomon (Shlomo in Hebrew, Shloime in Yiddish) lived in Shershev. He was some dozen years older than her and was married to Esther Liba (née Winograd). Their two oldest sons, Jacob (Jack) and David, were living in the U.S.A. They had left Shershev in the early 1920s. Almost everybody in eastern and central Europe wished to immigrate to the US, particularly the Jews. The non-Jews had economic reasons, while the Jews also wanted to get away from the centuries-old persecution and pogroms. I don't think that the U.S. has

ever had any greater boosters than the Jews of Eastern Europe. I feel they were let down heartlessly by the US to perish in the Holocaust.

To have two sons in the US, like Shlomo and Ester Auerbach, had meant a foot in the door. My mother was very close to Shlomo, her oldest brother, who assumed this role by being her adviser, counsel and confidant. My mother also had two other brothers in America. One of them, Leo, had passed away at a young age by then, leaving a wife, Rebecca, and a young son, Irving. The other brother in America, Pesach (Philip), was living in New York with his wife Esther. However, my mother hardly knew them because they left Shershev as young men while my mother, the youngest, was just a child.

Therefore, the bond between my mother and Uncle Shlomo was very strong. We all expected his eldest son Jack eventually to send papers for his father but it only struck home when he actually got his visa and began to get ready to leave.

Whenever I think of those events and go back to those years, I can't help but wonder what it was like for the departing person to leave dear ones and loved ones behind, a place of birth where one grew up, all the friends and acquaintances. In fact, for most of them, their entire world did not extend much beyond the perimeter of the shtetl. It was there where they were born and could trace their ancestry generations, even centuries, back. How immense the world looked to a person from a small town and how forbidding it must have seemed. He must have been frightened to set out across oceans to a distant land, to be a penniless stranger among strangers who speak an alien language.

What was it like for the family members left behind--parents, brothers, sisters and often wives and children? True, family heads left with the hope and intention to send papers for wives and children as soon as it is legally and financially possible. My uncle had it easier than most for he was going to sons already established in the US and did not have to worry about passage expenses. Nevertheless, he still left his wife, and children. The eldest was Chvolkah (Helen), then Avreml (Abraham), Rose, Lipa (Leon), Elchonon (Harold) and of course the youngest Eliyau (Eli), ten months younger than me. Moreover, my grandparents, who were then already in their early seventies? What chance did they have to see their son again? They had seen their other two sons leave more than three decades earlier; to see the last and only son left in Shershev go had to be traumatic. My

mother, who knew only this one brother for most of her life and was tied to him with a thousand knots, had to part with him--forever as it turned out. The year he left was so difficult and traumatic for my mother that I still remember it almost seventy years later, although I was only five years old at the time. Of her family, she alone remained to carry the burden and responsibility of caring for an old father and mother. Since the day of my uncle's departure, there wasn't a day that my mother didn't mention his name at least once. She would wait for his letters as eagerly as a devoted Jew waits for the Messiah. She hoped for "good news" meaning that his older daughter Chvolke (Helen) became betrothed.

My uncle left his wife with a house to cover traveling expenses for the rest of the family two years later, as well as a functioning store, as good as any in Shershev. His plan was typical: to receive his first US papers after two years of residence and then to send for the rest of the family. That is how it happened and thus he saved his entire family from the fate that befell European Jewry.

During the interim, I often visited Uncle Shloime's house. It was so lively, always full of young people, not only family members, but also their numerous friends. All my uncle's children except for the youngest one were between the ages of ten and twenty, each in a different class and each with his or her classmates. That house could have easily been taken at times for a small school or a youth club. I can still see my cousin Abe (Abraham) playing the violin and can still hear my mother praising his talent and extolling his scholastic abilities. Many years later, when we met as adults, I realized how much fate has wronged him. I have no doubt that with a formal higher education he would have attained fame and recognition. Even with his deprivations, he managed to amass enough knowledge to put many academics to shame.

My uncle's other children too were keen and studious youngsters and it seemed that they had a bright future. Yet when they reached American shores, it did not turn out to be fully the America of their dreams.

Among my playmates at that age, I can recall my cousin Eli, my uncle Shloime's youngest son, and his cousin from his mother's side whose family lived next door: Abraham Winograd. I also recall another cousin of Eli's from the same side of the family

a girl by the name of Sara Leiman. The four of us became classmates in the first grade of Hebrew school a year later. At times, I used to play with my cousin from my father's side, a daughter of my father's brother Reuben and his wife Chashkah (nee Pinsky). They had two children at that time, a little girl Michla, two years younger than I was, and a newborn son in 1928, Shalom. It was with Michla that I played when I used to visit them. That little Michla had a head of curly blond hair like her mother.

Once as I was visiting them on a Friday night, playing around a table, Michla, a three-year-old child got too close to the lit Sabbath candles on the table and her hair caught on fire. She started to scream and I, a five-year-old, screamed with her. By that time, her parents got to her and put the fire out but her hair was noticeably singed. This did not interfere with her growing up to be a beautiful young girl only to be murdered at the age of 17 with her family by the Nazis during the slaughter of Drohychin on October 15, 1942.

While my Uncle Shloime was waiting in the US for the two years needed for him to obtain his "first papers" so that he could bring his family over, his oldest son in Shershev Avreml, married a girl from Shershev, by the name of Chana (Anna) Maister. She was an extraordinary beautiful girl, the daughter of Daniel (the blacksmith) and Malka. The hot love affair between Abraham and Chana was no secret in the shtetl. Some 40 years later, my father's cousin in Israel, Chaim Shemesh said to me that a bestselling novel could have been written about that affair. Shortly after the marriage, Abraham left for Argentina, leaving temporarily his wife in Shershev with her parents, until he was able to bring her over four years later.

During the summer of 1930, my uncle Shloime received his First Papers and sent papers to allow his wife, Esther Leibla, and the remaining children to leave for the US. The children were his two daughters, Chvolke (Helen) and Rose, and three sons, the oldest Leepa (Leo), the second Elkhonon, (Harold,) and the youngest Eli (Eliyahu). The emotions unleashed on the day of their departure are difficult to comprehend because the tragedy was that departing, as a rule, was for forever. When my grandparents said good-bye to their son Shloime two years earlier, he was an adult. Now the time came to say good-bye to his wife and children. Knowing how much my grandparents loved their

children and grandchildren and their devotion to them, it is heart wrenching for me to think about it even today. My aunt Esther-Lieba also left behind in Shershev her parents, Moishe and Pesha Winograd, a brother, Israel Winograd, and his wife Genia and their children. She also left behind two married sisters: Tzina Leiman and her husband Feival, who had two daughters, Sarah and Chaya; the second sister was Ghytl with her husband Yaakov-Meir Kabizetsky and her five daughters.

There was tradition in how people left Shershev. The emigrant filled up a couple of boxes or crates, as well as a couple sacks with what were considered indispensables for the New World, like samovars, copper pots and pans, dippers, candlesticks, feather pillows and comforters, some personal clothing etc. They were loaded onto a hired wagon. The wagon owner held the reins to make sure that the horse proceeded very slowly. Those departing followed the wagon, entering every house they passed to say good-bye. After, all we all knew each other from birth. Then many in the families of the houses would start escorting those departing. The procession grew, couple by couple, family by family, through Mostowa Street, the main thoroughfare, and then turned right on Pruzany street to the very end of the shtetl. At that time, almost half of the Jewish population was around and behind the departing family, crying as they were escorting them.

That was how we accompanied my aunt Esther-Lieba and her children. I remember crying as we got back home. How much I understood of what was happening I don't know. It is quite possible that I cried in sympathy with my mother who cried bitterly. I remember that my father put a heap of money in front of me to quiet me down as I was sitting on a table. A few days later, he took it back in the form of a loan. Although my mother and her parents had two years to come to terms with the departure of my aunt and her children, it still was a very difficult moment from which I don't think they ever really recovered. My mother's sense of isolation became even more difficult when her parents, my grandparents, passed away.

In retrospect and in consideration of the events that took place only one short decade later, despite the pain and hurt of parting and the years of longing and yearning, it was a lucky moment. By a fluke of events, they got out of Europe before the time of

Hitler. Their oldest son Jacob, who was the first to set out across the ocean in 1921, was instrumental in their coming to the U.S.

I spent the winter of 1928-29, mostly at home with my mother and sister Sheva. Other less traumatic events took place in Shershev at that time, for example the introduction of the first autobus in the shtetl. It was bought by a partnership of a few local merchants to commute between Shershev and Pruzany, eighteen kilometres away. That bus was parked overnight in my uncle Shloime's shed because its doors were high and wide enough the bus to enter. I still see the name given to the bus by its owners: Warszawianka, which was spelled in large letters on each of its sides. It cut the travel time between Shershev and Pruzany to half an hour. It took three hours by horse and buggy. There was, of course, the small matter of the fare. The bus cost a whole zloty compared to half a zloty by horse and buggy. A zloty was a day's pay for an unskilled laborer.

I recall how potatoes were stored in late autumn. A hole was dug in the ground in which potatoes were heaped, covered with straw and the straw covered with a thick layer of earth. The potatoes were left there for the winter. In early spring, they were dug up, as a rule in good condition, to be eaten until the new crop was ready to be harvested in the fall. This system of preserving potatoes over winter was wide spread in Eastern Europe. However, it happened sometimes that the potatoes froze or rotted, to the disappointment and privation of the owners.

My father would spend holidays with us. He took me with him to the synagogue that was quite a walk, passing by three others on the way. For some reason, I remember Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, best. The eve of that day, my father and I went for *mincha* (the afternoon prayer) distributing alms all around the entrance of the synagogue. I recall the long evening prayer. Hundreds of large burning candles all around gave the synagogue an air of solemn mystique. The prayers themselves were mysterious, awe-inspiring, bewailing, lamenting and heart-rending. At the age of five, I did not understand the meaning of the words in the prayers but the dignity of the moment was enough to instill in me and in all the children, a feeling of respect and solemnity. In the morning, all

the seats of the synagogue were taken and there wasn't enough room for all the children to sit down. Besides, how long can one expect a child to sit? So we used to run around.

My father was a member of the rabbi's synagogue where my maternal grandfather, Laizer-Bear, was the gabai. According to Jewish tradition, one should not wear leather footwear in the synagogue on the high holidays. With the fall, came the Jewish New Year, where Jews spend many hours in the synagogue in prayers. In those days, and even now among Orthodox Jews, it is customary not to come into the synagogue with leather footwear during the days of awe. Synthetic footwear was unavailable and the older men would take off their shoes and pray in stocking feet. (My father, then in his 30s, and others of his age, did not take their shoes off.)

The floor of the synagogue was covered with hay to insulate from the cold the feet of those who wore no shoes. In order to make sure my grandfather had enough hay under his feet, I used to walk around the synagogue pushing with my feet some hay in front of me, depositing it near my grandfather. Not wanting to be conspicuous in hoarding hay, I walked around the synagogue pretending not to notice the growing pile of hay under my feet, as I was shoveling it on the floor. When I reached my grandfather, he was so engrossed in prayers that he wouldn't move his feet for me to put the hay under and I would have to put the hay with my hands under his feet. I suspect at the age of 6, 7 or 8, I was more concerned and attached to my grandfather than to my father, who was away during the first 6 years of my life, except for his brief visits to us or our summer visits to him.

My mother apparently wasn't too keen on sending me to a new heder in late fall, for I stayed home that winter of 1928-29. About that time, violent upheavals were taking place in the land of Israel, at that time called Palestine. The large Arab population turned against its small and defenseless Jewish minority, killing individuals or slaughtering and driving out entire communities like the ancient community of Hebron, killing in the process 70 Jews, among them women and children. At night, while my mother put me to bed, I would ask her why the Arabs would do such things, to which of course she had no answer. However to calm me down she began to say with me the *kreyas shmah al hamita*



(bedtime prayer) ending the prayer by wishing a good night individually to every member of the family including cousins. She said that this prayer would protect me from all evil. I memorized that prayer in a matter of a few days and have been saying it nightly ever since, even in the darkest and most despairing nights of my life. I end by wishing every member of my family a good night, knowing only too well that they are not alive any more, that they were put to death by the Nazis in the cruelest way. However, I hang on to their memory and intend to continue this to my last days.

It was right after Pesach in early spring of 1929 that I started attending a new heder. The decision had been made the previous summer, presumably more by my parents than by my grandfather, to enroll me in a more advanced and progressive heder. There was one in Shershev run by Yaakov-Berl Eisenstein. He was a man of about forty, corpulent in appearance, self educated, who got his early education and experience as teacher from his late father who was known in Shtetl by the name of Chaim the Melamed. Yaakov-Berl ran a heder of some 20-25 boys of different ages and levels. His method of teaching was modern by local standards. Not only did he teach the Pentateuch, Bible and *Mishnah* (a collection of post-biblical laws and rabbinical discussions that forms the core of the Talmud), but even *gemara* (the part of the Talmud, which expands upon the Mishnah). He even taught Hebrew as a living language, which was something new in the shtetl, in direct competition with the Hebrew school that was established in 1925 and numbered some 125 students during the 1930's. Yankl-Berl ruled the heder with an iron fist. I can still see him at the head of a long narrow table around which some two dozen boys between the ages of 6-12 sit tightly together. In his hand is a long thin rod. With a well-aimed lash over a boy's ear, no matter how far away, he keeps boys attending to the lesson. A boy sitting next to him could expect a stab from Yankl-Berl's thick finger that would leave a mark for several days.

Besides the above qualities, this Yaakov-Berl had others: He was a good violinist. In the warm summer evenings passersby used to stop to listen to the sweet melodies pouring out the open windows of his living room. For good measure, he was also a carpenter who made all the furniture in his house, a shoemaker who used to make shoes for his entire family and a violinmaker; his violins were the most expensive in Shershev.

His oldest son Laizer was my age and years later was my classmate in the Polish public school.

I only attended Yankl-Berl's heder from after Pesach to *Shavuot* (Passover to Pentecost) that is the spring of 1929. Then it was time for a formal Jewish education in the local private Hebrew school known as the "Yavneh Hebrew School, affiliated with Tarbut in Shershev." Hence, after the Shavuot holidays in early summer of 1929 and throughout the summer, I was enrolled in a kindergarten affiliated with the Yavneh Hebrew school to prepare me for the first grade. I attended the kindergarten, or *gan* (garden in Hebrew), six days a week except for Saturdays, 4 hours a day from eight to noon.

While not at the *gan* during the daytime, I was mainly at my grandparents Auerbach's house or at my uncle Shloime's. Shloime himself was already in the U.S., having gone there a year earlier, but had not yet been able to send for his family. Many of the nights, I used to sleep over at my grandparents Auerbach. In the early morning or in the afternoons, I used to watch my grandfather growing vegetables, both in front and behind the house. For me he was opening a new world, which I was seeing for the first time with the eyes of a 6-year-old. Vistas I can still remember.

During the summer of 1929, my mother gave birth to my only brother Leibl, which my father soon changed to the Russian version of the name: Liova. For weeks before his birth, my grandmother, Freida-Leah, used to spend a fair amount of time with us. She would speak with apprehension and concern about the upcoming birth. In those days, a birth was a serious event, and complications--even deaths--were not uncommon. There was no hospital in Shershev and the only one to turn to was a midwife. True she looked distinguished and professional, a young Polish woman from western Poland, well spoken and of elegant bearing. Yet she did not look like a miracle worker.

At that time, my father was still in Wierchy. My mother went into labor. As only the three of us, that is my mother, sister Sheva and I, lived alone in that large rented house, my grandmother Freida-Leah spent all that time with us, not letting my mother out of her sight. As soon as the labor pains started, my grandmother sent a neighbor for the

midwife. However before the midwife showed up, my brother was born in front of my grandmother, my sister and me. I can still recall my feelings of panic as well as marvel, looking at the new life my mother just brought into the world. It is difficult to recall or describe the impressions of a six year old when he sees a newborn little soul that just came out of its mother's womb. The little new born baby looked beautiful□ and came into the world with loud cries as if to say why did you bring me into this world to die so young and so mercilessly. My grandparents called my father who came next day to Shershev.

The local *moyhel* (circumciser) was Shmuel Tzemachowitch. His main living was from slaughtering fowl and cattle and from buying the hides of the animals he slaughtered and selling them to the tanneries. He had circumcised at least a generation of Jewish males in Shershev and performed the circumcision on my brother. It was there that he gave him the name of Leibl.

On the day of the circumcision, many children from the neighborhood came around as uninvited guests and asked me to bring them out what was then called *nasharei* (munching food). This consisted of *bob* (large soft beans), *nahit* (a kind of pea), and *yodern* (a kind of pumpkin kernel). Being a benefactor, particularly to the older boys, made me feel good.

### Chapter 3

The Nazis were to treat the gypsies much as they treated the Jews. That is a bond between us. However, I want to describe the past of the Jews of Shershev as I remember it. Therefore, I will not conceal the mistrust towards and fear of the gypsies by the Jews and will portray gypsies as they seemed to me as a child. The crime rate among gypsies was very high, as it often is among disadvantaged groups.

Two young gypsy brothers came to settle in Shershev shortly before World War I. The older one by a couple of years was Vavrus, and the younger was Jan. They married local peasant girls and began to raise families. The small parcels of land they received as dowry fell far short of supporting a family, so they resorted to their traditional trading in horses, which wasn't always fair or honest. In fact, like the other horse dealers in

Shershev (including Jews), they did not always care whether a horse was honestly acquired or just stolen. Horse-dealers could travel a long distance, steal a horse, bring it home and sell it at a bargain price with the hope that the true owner would never come to their area, recognize his horse, claim it, and send the thief to jail. It also worked the other way around. They could steal a horse nearby, take it a far distance away and sell it there. Of course, the government took precautions against horse stealing. Each owner of a horse had to have a booklet called "A Horse Passport," in which the horse was described in every minute detail, so that each horse could be identified. This resulted in a black market on horse passports. The passports of dead horses were useless and did not have to be turned in to the authorities. If a farmer's horse died, he often would sell the passport to a dishonest horse dealer who used it for shady purposes.

Vavrus, the older brother, had at least a dozen sons and most of them were grown men in my time. The sons followed in their father's footsteps and because of their number, the local people feared them. Hardly a Sunday passed when those young gypsies didn't get together with some farmers, local people or from nearby villages, to drink vodka, get drunk, and finish the drinking-bout with a fight. The gypsies always came out on top, and if they didn't, they carried the grudge for a long time. Eventually, a week a month or even 6 months later, they would gang up on that particular peasant or small group of peasants, and beat them up savagely.

The easiest and most effective way to scare or take revenge upon a peasant was to set his buildings on fire. That is, his house, barn, and stable. All farm buildings in our area including the farmhouses were built of wood and had thatched roofs and only one match was needed to set them ablaze. Because buildings on the farms were close together, it was a foregone conclusion that if one building caught fire, the rest would follow immediately. Most of the time, the farmer did not have a chance to save his animals. This was an unmitigated catastrophe for farmers, none of whom could afford insurance. The gypsies had no compunctions about doing this and everyone in the shtetl and surrounding villages knew it and feared them.

It was a Thursday in the fall of 1929, a market day (these occurred on Mondays and Thursdays) when the patriarch Vavrus was driving through the marketplace sitting in

a horse-drawn buggy. A farmer recognized the horse, which was stolen from him some months earlier. By chance, there was a policeman nearby and the farmer alerted him immediately. When the policeman stopped Vavrus and demanded to see the horse's passport, Vavrus calmly gave a jerk on the reins, and pulled away. The policeman, irate, incensed, outraged, or shamed, fired and killed Vavrus instantly.

The shtetl was thrown into confusion. The market place, its center, was panicked. The terrified farmers began to harness their horses, escaping town in a hurry. The storekeepers shut their stores and stands and ran home. It was only a matter of minutes before Vavrus's sons found out what happened. In blind rage, they began looking for the policeman who fired the shot, but the policeman had the good sense to disappear immediately. They burst into the police station ready to kill. Not finding him there, they looked for him at home. Unable to find him, they threatened to set the whole shtetl on fire. The remaining four policemen felt helpless against the two gypsy families, who were known criminals and in such a moment were capable of anything. Having no other recourse, they called for help from the neighboring town of Pruzany. Within half an hour, over twenty policemen arrived and, together with the local police, began arresting the men of the two gypsy families. My mother made Sheva and me put on our overcoats in case we had to run out of the house. We were looking out of the drape-drawn windows, as they were being led surrounded by a cordon of police. It was the first time I saw men in chain and leg irons—very scary to a six-year-old boy.

The people of the region feared the gypsies so much that, although there were three policemen for every arrested gypsy male, the volunteer fire brigade followed the gypsies being marched toward the police station with its equipment ready. They were concerned that the shackled gypsies might somehow still set fire to some of the houses. A couple of days later, my mother took my sister and me to the town square, where we could still see the blood stains of the dead gypsy.

The upshot was that, after a few days in jail, the gypsies cooled off and returned home to continue their way of life. The policeman who killed Vavrus was never again seen in Shershev, supposedly transferred far away.

On the very evening after the fracas with the gypsies occurred, my father arrived from the village of Wierchy to stay in Shershev for good. From the summer of 1928, my mother had been hinting that my father was trying to find a way to get home by transferring his liquor license to Shershev, which was more complicated than it seemed. He finally made a deal with a Pole who had a license for a retail sale of liquor in Shershev and exchanged it for my father's license in Wierchy.

My father rented a store on Mostowa Street, not far from where we lived. The store could easily be attended by one person. If my father had to leave the store for an hour or two, my grandfather, mother's father, Laizer-Bear, would stay in the store to help him out, as he was already retired. The new business was much easier on my father with no more long hours and catering at times to drunks. Now it was a regular store from eight in the morning to six in the evening and the clientele was much nicer. People who did not want to be seen entering a place frequented by drunks came to his store. At worst, the conversation was loud and crude. They came to us, bought the drink, put it in a bag or in a pocket, and went home. We, the children, my sister and I were delighted to have our father home every evening. We did not have to wait for a holiday in order for him to come, nor did we have to undertake an overnight tiring trip to Wierchy for our summer visits with him. It must have been a treat for him too, for he used to spend a fair amount of time with us, his two children.

One evening after my father returned to Shershev, he gave us, my sister and me, a stack of receipt booklets, which he brought from Wierchy. The pages were sticky on one side. My sister and I, not knowing what to do with them, used them to make designs on the wall. Once we made a pattern of a large house on the wall and my father jokingly said it is as big as *bes-hamikdash* (the Jerusalem temple). We children, not knowing what it meant, asked for an explanation, which turned into a lengthy conversation. One of us noted the date on the unused sheets, which was somewhere in the 1920s. The conversation turned to the following decades of the 1930s and then the 1940s until we reached the year 2000. One of us wondered aloud what it would look like to see a figure 2 and then followed by three zeroes. To this, my parents answered that there is no reason

why we children should not live to see it. How wrong they were about my sister Sheva, and my then infant brother Leibl, not to mention two sisters of mine who were to be born later: Sarah and Lieba.

A few weeks later a son was born to my father's brother, Joshua and his wife Mushka nee Leszczyński, who were living in Pruzany, 18 kilometers away. My father wanted to attend the circumcision of their first-born child and decided to take me along.

We took the early run of the Warszawianka bus for the half-hour trip down the cobblestone road. That was my first trip on a Shershev-owned bus. Besides the driver, there was also a conductor whose job it was to sell the tickets, tie down the luggage on the roof of the bus, and help the driver in repairing the flats that occurred quite often on those rough roads. The conductor's name was Moishe Shocherman, whose name will come up again in an event of some years later.

In addition to his married brother Joshua, Sheindl (Shainah), the elder of my father's two sisters, lived in Pruzany. She was married to Laibl Pinsky, who also hailed from Shershev. They had two children: the older Lisa (Leah) was my sister Sheva's age; a son Shalom (Sioma) was born in 1927. He was a sturdy boy, but wronged by destiny at a very early age. He was not a year old when the maid left him in his carriage alone for a minute in front of their house. It happened that a group of boys passed by. Whether playfully or mischievously, one of them pushed the carriage, which tipped over and threw the baby on the cement sidewalk, causing him to bang his head. Only after some time passed, did the parents and doctor realize that the baby had lost his hearing. No effort was too great to help him. The child was seen by the best doctors in Poland and was taken a couple of times to Vienna, at that time considered the center of the medical world. To no avail, his hearing could not be restored and he remained deaf until his 15-year-old life ended in Auschwitz. While alive, his impediment was compensated by other virtues, like comprehension, natural wisdom, consideration, perception, and physical strength.

In the fall, I enrolled in the first grade of Hebrew school and immediately had three friends there. One was Eli Auerbach, my Uncle Shloime's youngest son: Although I was almost a year older than he was, we ended up in the same grade because we were

both born in the same year, 1923--me in February and him in December. The second friend was a little girl, Sarah Leiman, the daughter of Fyvel and Tzynah. Tzynah was my Aunt Esther-Lieba Auerbach's sister. Therefore, we had a mutual aunt in Esther-Lieba. The third was Avreml Winograd, whose father was the brother of Esther-Lieba. The last two, Avreml and Sara, perished in the slaughter of Drohyczyn. There were two more boys with whom I was friends since Grade 1 until we went to Auschwitz, where they were killed. One was Hershel Schneider. I remember his younger brother Shloime's beautiful voice; given the chance and schooling, he could have been a good *chazan* (cantor) or singer. However, Hitler saw to it that none of his entire family remained alive. My second friend was Tevye Krugman, whose father was the originator and main driving force behind the building of the Yavneh Hebrew School in Shershev that opened in 1925.

Our class had between 20 and 25 pupils, mostly boys. In those days, parents put more emphasis on educating the boys, particularly in Jewish matters. The more affluent parents would send their daughters to Hebrew school too, but poorer parents would send their daughters to the Polish school where education was free. In addition, although the Hebrew school emphasized Judaica, its secular Zionist emphasis was too strong and its commitment to orthodoxy too weak for some parents. They kept on sending their children to heder. Only a few girls attended heder and just for some months or a year, while the boys continued for years at a time.

My parents did not hold with inferior education for girls, and when I enrolled in grade 1, my sister was promoted to Grade 3 and remained ahead of me by two grades right through school. A couple of years later, it became compulsory for both boys and girls to attend school.

At the outset of my schooling, I disliked the Hebrew language, maybe because of the teacher, who was very strict with his six-year-old grade 1 children. The teacher's name was Joel Waldshan. He was the son of a rabbi in Shershev, but as Shershev had a rabbi already, he was given the title of *dayan* (literally, judge; he was assistant to the rabbi and in charge of settling disputes and answering questions of law). The teacher Joel had a wife and two sons. The older one Yaakov, my age, was in my class. David, the other son, was two years younger. Yaakov was an excellent pupil, particularly when it came to



Hebrew. A couple years later, he tried his hand at writing poetry. The later events put an end to his ambitions and his life. They all perished in the small shtetl of Ivanevke (Iwanow) near Pinsk.

My parents began to look for a place to move closer to the center of the shtetl. The center itself, was a cobble-stoned square, about a hundred by a hundred and twenty meters, and was surrounded with the biggest houses in the shtetl. Some of those houses had parts of them converted to stores. In two cases, the houses also contained inns and restaurants.

In the middle of the square was the ancient Raad Kromen (row of stores), some 50 meters long and 20 meters wide. Its origin was unknown, but it was built of large bricks that had not been used for over 200 years. Its wide sides faced east and west. The east side had six separated entrances that served as entrances to the six stores on that side. On the west side, there were only four doors that led to four larger stores. There were also three doors on each of the two narrow sides of the building, that is, the north and south sides. In the middle of the narrow side of the building, was an arched thoroughfare.

During the winter of 1929-30, my father bought one of the larger stores on the west side. It was on the most extreme south end of the west side and precisely across from my paternal Uncle Reuben's house and store that was under the same roof. My father bought it from a very distinguished member of the community, Mordecai Leshtshynsky, (Leszczynsky). Mordecai decided to give up his yard-goods store because he was then in his 70s and lived with his daughter Sara-Esther, who was then in her 40's and single. There was little chance, particularly in those days, of a woman getting married at that age. Her father had enough for himself and daughter. He took his unsold merchandise home and slowly sold it out from there. Having gotten rid of his store, Mordecai often came to my grandfather's store to discuss politics. He was an intelligent, well-read man, charitable, respected, and I would add the best-dressed man of his age in Shtetl. I can't recall a time not having seen him in a suit, a freshly pressed white shirt and a matching tie. Mordecai had the *zechus-avos* (ancestral merit) to die in Shershev two days

before the expulsion of the Jewish community, the last Jew to come to *kever-Yisroel* (a Jewish burial in a Jewish cemetery) in Shershev.

Sometimes in the early fall of 1929, on a Saturday afternoon, I visited my Uncle Reuben and Aunt Chashkas's house. My aunt and the maid were still fussing in the kitchen, cleaning up after the Sabbath meal that was a bit late in the day. I noticed a stranger in the living room, of medium height, and a prominent stomach. The stranger looked at me and asked my uncle, "Who is he?" My uncle answered, "It is Itzak's son." When I got back home, I told my parents about the stranger in my uncle's house. They told me that it was Herschel, my Aunt Chashkas's brother, who just came back from the Soviet Union. I found out later that he, Herschel Pinsky, after spending the years of World War I deep in Russia, missed his chance to return to Shershev, and got stuck in the Soviet Union after the Revolution. A dozen years later, he managed to sneak across the border into Poland and back home. Not having much to do in Shershev, he moved to Warsaw, where he established a trucking business.

In late fall or early winter 1929, we moved to a new location rented from Judke, the shoemaker. He had two separate row houses under one roof. He lived one of them and rented out the other. Now we were no more than 100 meters from the town square or the so-called market place. The distance to school got shorter too, by a couple of hundred meters. It wasn't so far before, but to be there by 8 o'clock in the cold wintry mornings in a time when snow wasn't shoveled was no picnic for a six-year-old boy. That winter my mother used to walk with my sister and me to school. Quite often, my grandfather, Laizer- Bear, used to come from his house, in those bitter cold mornings, to walk us to school.

In spring of 1930, my father started to get the new store ready for opening. He decided to have a cellar built under the floor of the store. It was the first time anybody did it in that building. It necessitated lifting out the wooden floors, whose boards were four inches thick and at least a century old. The smell of the wet cement is still in my nostrils. Then came the building of the shelves and counters. My father wanted everything to be just right. He also decided to leave a space between the front shelves facing the door and

the wall behind for storage. For that purpose, metal bars were needed to hold the additional wall. My father took me to the blacksmith to order them. I stood there watching as the blacksmith took out the red-hot bars from the fire, one at a time, and hammered them into shape. I, not knowing better, as soon as the bar lost its red glow, went over and touched it; fortunately with only the tip of my fingers, burning them badly. The next couple of weeks, I attended school with my fingers bandaged. The beneficial part of it was that I could not and did not have to write in school, nor do any written homework.

When our store was ready to be opened, the district government in neighboring Pruzany, decided to send it a commission to check the distance from the store to the nearest church. There was in pre-war Poland a law, stating that a liquor store had to be a certain distance from a church; any church, Catholic or Orthodox. Yet, it was not applicable to a synagogue.

The nearest church, Russian Orthodox, was on Kamieniec Street. The inspectors set out to measure the distance using a 50-meter long tape. Every 50 meters, they would ask a boy looking on to stand there, so that they could see how many 50-meter lengths they had. It sounds like a politically incorrect Polack joke that they did not record the 50-meter lengths they had measured on a piece of paper. One of the boys asked to stand in was a friend of my cousin, Alkhonon (Harold) Auerbach. The twelve-year-old asked me, a six-year old, what it was all about. I guess my answer was not clear enough to him, and he asked my cousin Harold to explain. I mention this episode because he, Harold, is the last of his family that I can remember seeing in Shershev from that moment until the day of their departure a couple of months later. □ The upshot was the distance from the store to the church was sufficient and the store opened on time.

The summer arrived and, with it, the summer vacations. My mother as far as I can remember, was always on the heavy side and suffered from diabetes. The last couple of summers or springs, she used to go to a spa resort in the Carpathian Mountains called Krinica. Leaving a great deal of weight behind, my mother would return much slimmer. She would regain her weight by following year in time to go back to Krinica. Besides the

maid, one of our grandparents, my mother's parents, used to stay with us in her absence. They stopped doing so when our father came back to Shershev permanently.

The first time my mother had a Jewish maid was in 1930. She was Nyomka's (Benjamin) granddaughter. Why do I mention the grandfather, instead of her parents? No, she was not an orphan. It is because Nyomka was the patriarch of the Pampalach. The best way to describe the Pampalach is as a clan, that consisted of about 25-30 families, related to each other biologically or by marriage. Their common denominator was the chronic poverty that afflicted all of them. Their poverty compelled them to take up the not-so-dignified trades and professions in the shtetl. While some of them managed to eke out a living like many other poor Jews in shtetl, the others had to supplement their meager income by being brokers to horse dealers (in itself not a reputable occupation) as well as horse skinning, which took place only when a horse died from sickness, over work, or age.

That girl, named Tzivia, did not stay with us too long. She spent the days with us, meals included, but went home to sleep. Once I recall, someone from her family, brought in some food for her in a tiny pot. It was some kind of a treat. She began to eat it at once. To our question as to what it was, she said it was an unborn calf taken from a recently slaughtered cow. We turned away in disgust.

## **Chapter 4**

The school year started in beginning of September and I found myself in grade 2. The same teacher, Joel Waldshan, whom I feared and hated in Grade 1, continued to teach me Hebrew in Grade 2. I remembered how I feared him and perhaps this fear motivated me to stay a page or two ahead of the class. As each page had a couple of new words, my father would translate for me the evening before. I succeeded in impressing my teacher, who began to treat me accordingly and I no longer feared him. I wondered why I had hated him and his class the preceding year. Hebrew became my favorite subject.

The school was modern for its time. The teachers spoke only Hebrew among themselves, as well as to the pupils in school or in the street. All subjects were taught in Hebrew except for an hour per day that was dedicated to the Polish language. The rest like Humash (Pentateuch), Bible, mathematics, geography, nature study, history and others, were conducted in Hebrew without exception.

Jewish children spoke Yiddish at home, Yiddish among themselves in school, Yiddish in the street, and a kind of Belarus with the Christians. It was no wonder Polish was a foreign language to us, although we lived under the Polish government. It became clear to me in later years that the local non-Jewish population, which was Belorussian, considered the Polish government an occupation regime and resented it. Nevertheless, Jews were persecuted, harassed and oppressed by whichever government was in power, and were not comfortable with any.

In the winter 1930-31, my grandfather Laizer-Bear continued to come for us in the bitter cold winter mornings to walk us to school. My sister Sheva was already in grade four. Her friends used to come to us to play with her.

I continued my friendships with Tevye Krugman and Hershel Schneider and made new friends, each of whom was a year older than me and in the next higher grade. They were Moishe Gelman (Meir Gelman's son), Yosel Leibershtein (Shmuel the photographer's son), and Yankel Neibrief (Sarah Neibrief's son). Although I enjoyed school, I still could barely wait for vacation time so I could get to sleep nights at my grandparents Auerbach.

I endow a yeshiva. There was a yeshiva (an institution of higher Talmudic learning) in the neighboring town of Pruzany. It was attended by local boys and boys from surrounding shtetls whose parents could not afford to send them to high school after they studied for years in a heder, or who wanted them to continue their religious studies for the purpose of becoming rabbis. Some also simply studied for the sake of studying and learning, as required by Jewish tradition.

The yeshiva was supported partly by the Kehillah (organized Jewish community) of Pruzany and by private donations. Those donations were collected by literally knocking on doors of not only the rich members of the community, but of the middle class too. Representatives of the yeshiva even traveled to the neighboring shtetls to visit

wealthier householders for contributions. We were on their list and regularly, every couple of weeks, two elderly distinguished looking men with long gray beards used to show up at our door. As the doors in Shtetl were never locked in the daytime, those two men used to come in right into the living room. We all knew what they came for. I happened to be holding a large coin in my hand that my mother had let me hold for a while. Without hesitation, I gave it to one of them. The man closed his fingers over it ready to pocket it when my mother asked how much it was. There were ten "zloty" coins in Poland, representing ten days work. The man opened his fist exposing a significant coin. My mother hesitated for a moment; it was apparently too large a donation even for our pocket. However, she was unwilling to take it back from him. She said, "it's alright; it goes for a good cause."

The elderly men thanked her profusely, turning to me one said, "may you live to see great-great-grandchildren." Bidding us a good day, the two, visibly content, left the house.

In spring of 1931, we moved again, this time to a duplex house in the very center of the shtetl, on the north side of the Town Square, or the Mark, as it was known. We lived in the half that belonged to Mindel Osherkilers, who had lived there with her only not-very-young daughter. The other half of the duplex was owned by Abraham Kolodytzky, who lived there with his wife and their only daughter, Rivka, a couple years younger than I was. She had a beautiful voice and in 1940, she won a singing contest in Brest-Litowsk. Later, she represented the entire province of Brest-Litowsk in the capital of Belarus in Minsk. Kolodytzky had a yard goods store attached to his side of the house.

At about the same time, my father bought the only still empty building lot in the square, in order to build our own house. The lot was situated on the east side of the Mark next to the der groyser beys midrosh, the synagogue described in Chapter 2.

Partly in front and somewhat to the right of the burned synagogue, parallel to the other houses in the square, was a building lot that belonged to an elderly man by the name of Pellet Aprik. He had left for America as a young man before World War I, and after

several years came back with money—enough to buy a house in the Town Square, a store in the Rad-Kromen, across from his house, a garden behind his house, next to the Shul, and another house in an alley off the main street, Mostowa Street. However, his luck turned around shortly after he returned to Shershev. His big house in the Town Square burned down and he could not rebuild it without insurance. The building lot remained empty and with time, it grew over with grass and weeds. All that remained visible were the large stones that were part of the foundation. So my father bought it from him for \$450 US dollars. This was a small fortune in those times, not only in Shershev but anywhere else too. The world was suffering then the agony of the Depression and for this kind of money; it was possible to build a house in Shershev on any street, although not in the Mark (Town Square).

The rented house we lived in while waiting to build our house had a porch. It was partly enclosed and, for reasons unknown to me, the enclosed part was cool in the summer. One Friday evening, as my father and I returned from the Ostrowiecka Street synagogue, my mother announced that after tonight's meal, we would have something special for dessert. It was now cooling in the enclosed porch. After finishing the Friday night's sumptuous meal, my mother with a touch of fanfare, brought in a large bowl and placed it in the middle of the table. The bowl was full of a reddish fluid. After further investigation, we realized it was congealed. To our question of what it is, my mother answered it was gelatin. Thus, we were introduced to a new treat, what is known today as Jell-O.

In August of that summer, my mother gave birth to a girl. She was named Sara, but we called her Sonia. That made four children in the family.

When the summer vacation ended, my sister Sheva was due to enter grade 5, and I was to enter grade 3. My father, however—and rightly so—decided to transfer my sister to the Polish school, the *powszechna* (public school). He felt that because we live in Poland, we should know the language of the land. The students in the Hebrew School hardly knew it, and only a dozen families in Shershev used it. There were over 100 villages in the Shershev parish where Polish was a foreign language. Lacking sufficient

Polish, my sister was accepted only in grade 4 of public school, though she had already finished the 4th grade in Hebrew school. However, Yaakov-Berl Eisenstein used to come to our house daily to teach her Hebrew. From then on, my sister and I attended two separate schools.

After the days of awe, that is *Rosh Hashana* (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), came the holiday of Succos (Tabernacles). My grandfather Lazar-Bear erected a *sucah*, a booth, or hut in which Jews eat during the feast of Tabernacles to commemorate their accommodations during 40 years wandering in the desert. It was lit by a wooden framed lantern with a candle burning inside. In my grandparents' absence, the candle burnt to the bottom and the lantern caught fire. Fortunately, my grandparents came in as the wall of the *sucah* began to burn. A few minutes later, they would have lost their house, which formed one wall of the *sucah*.

Sometime earlier, during that summer, the members of our synagogue decided to get an additional Sefer-Torah (scroll of the Torah). There was a scribe in Shershev and he undertook the job of writing it. Just about every Jew in Shtetl went to the scribe as he was writing and my mother took me too.

The scribe sat in a separate room next to a large table. On it laid an open Torah scroll, partly covered with writing. He kept writing very carefully on the parchment in a straight line as if the parchment was lined and in amazingly uniform printed letters. There were a few people ahead of me. When my turn came, the scribe, as with the others, gave me the pen for a second and then took it back and wrote a word on the scroll, presumably on my behalf. Understandably, everyone left some change, a contribution towards the Torah scroll.

The scribe was a highly respected man and there were all kinds of stories circulating about his piety and devotion to G-d and the Torah. They used to say that before he had to write down the name of G-d, he used to go to the *mikva* (pool for ritual immersion) for *tvila* (purification by total immersion).

Eventually, the Sefer Torah was ready. The Scribe brought it to the Rabbi, shortly before Rosh-Hashana. From there, it was carried under a *Khupa* (wedding canopy) to our



synagogue with great fanfare. The Sefer Torah under the canopy was surrounded by almost the entire community. As it was getting dark, everybody held a lit candle in hand and the men sang passages from the psalms and other prayers. For us youngsters and even young boys and girls, a first-time event used to come up in conversations years later.

After Sukos, which inevitably brought frost, my father took an expert on trees by the name of Benjamin Goldberg and a representative of the government forestry department to select the trees to be cut for building our house. Goldberg had to select trees from which 12-meter long and 6-by-12 inch beams could be cut for the walls of the house. The forester recorded Goldberg's selections. Then they all left for the forestry department to settle on the price. This process took several days.

Shortly after, peasants from the surrounding villages and some locals began hauling in the huge pine trunks, unloading them on our newly bought building lot, and on the adjoining yard of the large synagogue. An agreement had been made with the synagogue president to allow this use of its grounds. Specially hired men began to peel the bark of the tree trunks, marking them with straight lines by placing thin soot covered cord at both ends of the log tautly, then lifting the middle of the cord and letting it snap along the tree trunk. Each log was hoisted onto two sawhorses on either side. One man stood on top of the log and two below lifting and pulling a long saw up and down to cut the log into the needed building timbers. A couple of crews worked at it continuously throughout the entire winter.

It was an exciting new experience for me. There was no shortage of spectators, children and grown-ups. My friends used to go with me to watch. When with me, they would not be chased away by the workers. My circle of friends became larger during that time, with the addition of two brothers Lazar and Litek Rothenberg, Kalman Kalbkoif, Itzik Maletzky and Meir Kalbkoif. Our group numbered 11 boys. The two Rothenberg brothers lived on the west side of the Mark, Kalman Kalbkoif on the south side, and Itzik Maletzky in the southeastern side, right at the start of Ostrowiecka Street. Meir Kalbkoif lived in a side lane off the Mark, named Zaszkolna. All of these boys, except for Litek

Rothenberg, were a year or two older than I was. Incidentally, the two Rothenberg brothers were each born on February 3: Litek in 1923, and Lazar In 1921.

In early spring of 1932, hired men started to prepare the foundation for the house. For this purpose, large stones from the foundation of the house that had burned down were used together with additional stones brought in from outlying farms. The stones were cemented together into a stone and cement quadrangle that looked like a meter-high fortress. On this foundation, the builders lay the first row of timbers: heavy beams, 10 by 10 inches thick. They were locked together in the corners by niches cut into them. As a good-luck amulet, an old coin, a piece of bread and a grain of salt were placed into a small hole drilled into the bottom beam. It was to ensure the owners long and plentiful life in the new house. (Who could have imagined then that only seven short years later, the Bolsheviks would not only take away from us our new home without compensation, but would tell my father to be thankful that we are not being sent to Siberia!)

The building progressed nicely. The house ran parallel to the square. To the back part of the house was added an extension under which a large cellar was built. In these cement walls of the cellar were niches in which shelves were inserted, that could hold all kinds of jars, pots, etc. In the roof of the extension a *fligl* (a movable part of the roof), was built in so it can be opened over a sukah that could be erected under it.

Two brothers were hired to do the carpentry: Chaim Tenenbaum, with his two sons Itche and Berl, David Tenenbaum, with his son Berl. They made the windows, doors and two porches for the two front doors. The Bolsheviks enclosed one of these entrances when they took our house away from us.

Our home, in which our father put so much of his life and soul, was a big and comfortable house for Shershev and withstood the cold and snow that used to accompany our severe winters. It had a large kitchen and seven spacious rooms, including three bedrooms. One room with a separate front entrance was left empty as my father was planning to open another store eventually. The other three rooms served as a dining room, living room and a parlor. As far as I knew, our house was the only one in the shtetl that had permanent double windows and heavy massive outside doors. It also was the only one with a double floor. There was a space of 20 centimeters between the two floors,

which was filled in with charcoal. The charcoal served a double purpose, to absorb the dampness and to insulate the house.

In the summer of 1932, electricity was introduced in my shtetl. All summer long many of the townspeople watched as workers were digging in tall wooden posts and copper wires are being strung along their porcelain insulators. In most houses, a direct wire led to the single bulb in the house and the proprietor paid a flat rate per bulb. We must have been one of no more than a dozen households that had a meter, since we had electric bulbs in every room.

Electricity brought Shershev into the modern era. With street lighting, one could now walk at night on the wooden sidewalk without much danger of tripping over a protruding board. True, the lights or power used to come on at sunset and go out at midnight, and was accessible to the houses on the main streets. But then again, who would walk in those eternally muddy lanes after midnight? The owners of the power station were also the proprietors of a flourmill, built in 1930, the first in Shershev with an up to date diesel motor. They were Pesach Maletzky and Raizl Zubatzky. Pesach's son Itzyk was one of my friends and Raizl Zubatzky had been our landlady in 1929.

Right after the start of the school year, we moved into our new home. Something unusual happened to me that I cannot explain to this day. A day or two, after we moved in I began to get headaches. The worst used to start as soon as I got out of bed in the morning. They eased up during the day, but the pain never left me completely. I had never experienced headaches before. A day before Rosh Hashana, *mezuzos* (small tubes containing biblical verses on parchment that are attached to the doorposts of Jewish homes) arrived. My father had ordered them in Brest-Litovsk some time earlier. As soon as my father affixed the mezuzos to the doorposts, my headaches disappeared for good. The reader is free to reach his own conclusion.

As I have written earlier, I was even closer to my grandfather, Laizer-Bear, than to my father. While I was in school, my grandfather would bring me different dishes or treats that my grandmother Freida-Leah or my mother had made for me. At 11 o'clock, during a long break in the school day, my grandfather was always waiting for me with

that special treat. While eating, I used to try to talk to him to share my morning experience, but he never failed to remind me, "It is written that one does not talk while one eats." He wanted me to finish everything before the bell.

Despite my delight in watching the house being built during the summer, I did not forget to visit my maternal grandparents, the Auerbuchs. That summer during my many visits to my grandparents, I noticed my grandmother Freida-Leah changing dressings on my grandfather's neck, just at the base of his head. It looked like a fair-sized ulcer. Over the summer, I noticed that it got bigger. They seemed to intend to cure it without a doctor's help since it did not interfere in his daily movements or activities.

Through that summer and fall, my grandfather's neck kept getting worse despite my grandmother's attention and an ointment supplied by the doctor. Finally, the doctor suggested that they take my grandfather to the Pruzany hospital. As soon as the doctors in Pruzany looked at it, they told my mother to rush him immediately to Brest-Litovsk, where there was a much bigger hospital and better-qualified doctors.

My mother then took him to the hospital in Brest-Litovsk, where he was operated on immediately. A couple days after the operation, the surgeon told my mother to go home, that the treatment is a long process and her being there will not help anybody. My mother was pregnant then and had two very young children at home in addition to my sister Sheva and me. So my mother returned home for a few days, leaving her father under the attention of the surgeon and some relatives there.

Two days after my mother returned home, she received an urgent telegram from the hospital to come immediately. In those days, a trip from Shershev to Brest-Litovsk was a matter of 24 hours. I don't know by what means of transportation she got there, I only know that she left immediately. When she got to the hospital, the surgeon informed her that it became necessary to operate on my grandfather again and he could not wait any longer for my mother's consent. He also told her that the operation took place without an anesthesia because of his age and state of health. My mother was permitted to see him. He recognized her and asked if she heard his screams during the operation. She answered: "You know, daddy, I was then in Shershev," to which he said, "You could have heard them there."

My grandfather's condition deteriorated very fast. The doctor told my mother to take him home, as they could do nothing for him. My mother told us his words: "Only G-d in Heaven can help him now."

I don't remember how my mother got him back home. It had to be by ambulance or taxi. He couldn't have withstood a train ride. When I saw my grandfather the next evening, he seemed to be unconscious. The only word he was continuously saying was "Water." Otherwise, he was oblivious to everything else. My mother and grandmother, who were constantly at his side, kept on wetting his lips, as the doctor had ordered us not to give him anything to drink.

Right after school, my sister Sheva and I used to run to our grandparents. There were always people in there, neighbors and members of the synagogue. Maybe because of the many people or maybe because I had never been confronted with a death in the family, I did not realize the severity of the situation.

Two or three days later, coming into my classroom, a classmate of mine, Abraham Winograd, who lived four houses away from my grandparents, unceremoniously told me that my grandfather died early that very morning. The teacher, who came into the class and heard the news, sent me home right away. From there, I ran to my grandparents, where I found the house full of people. My grandfather was lying on the floor covered with a white sheet, two candles in candlesticks, were burning on either side of his head. Bent over him, stood my mother and my grandmother crying bitterly. The other women in the house cried with them.

A few minutes later, a quiet whispering took place between my mother, grandmother, and a few other women. They put me down sitting on the floor, with my back to my grandfather, my grandmother took his hand by the wrist, rubbing his already rigid hand over my back, saying something so quietly, that even I couldn't hear what. The whole process took a minute or two. Today, I still don't know what it meant or what sort of a remedy or omen it was. Nor do I know why they didn't do it to my sister Sheva or my almost 3-year-old brother Liova (Leibl).

The Chevrah-Kadisha (volunteer burial society, literally "sacred brotherhood"), started the *tahara* (purification of the body). That involves washing the corpse and dressing it in traditional *takhrikhim* (burial shrouds). This is done by men if the departed is a male, and by women if a female. I stood by during the entire procedure and watched as they pulled a cluster of dressings out from the hole at the base of my grandfather's head that left a space in which a man's fist could easily fit in. I looked at it in horror; a shudder went through me. In my nine-year-old mind, I could not comprehend what had been done to my grandfather, how cruel and merciless the doctors were to him. I was glad when they put the shrouds on him and wrapped him in his *talis* (prayer shawl), so I wouldn't have to look at the gaping hole in his head.

When they finally put him on the *mita* (literally bed, a bier on which the corpse is placed and carried) and carried him out of the house, I noticed that my school and teachers were lined up in front of the house, waiting for the funeral. As far as I remember or know, this was the only time that the Hebrew School participated in a funeral. It took place on the 18th day of the month of Cheshvan, according to the Jewish calendar. There was a large crowd in the street. The schoolchildren stood two in a row, with the schoolteachers keeping an eye on them.

The body lying on the *mita* was carried all the way to the cemetery on the shoulders of volunteers. To be a volunteer was considered a *mitzvah* (fulfillment of a divine commandment). My grandfather's procession took an unusual detour to the Rabbi's synagogue on Ostrowiecka Street, where my grandfather had been the *gabai* to his very last day. There he was eulogized from the porch of the synagogue and then carried to the cemetery, where his grave was ready and waiting for him.

I looked on with curiosity and grief as they lowered my grandfather into the cold and damp ground. They put four boards around the four sides of the pit at the bottom to form a kind of box. A small white sack was filled with earth and placed under his head. Two small pieces of black broken pottery was placed over his closed eyes and his face was sprinkled with earth from Israel. In each hand, rather between the fingers of each hand, was put a small twig and after being gently but fully wrapped with his *talis*, boards

were put over him that rested on the edges of the four boards that had just been placed in. Thus, there was a kind of box over and around him.

As soon as this was done, men began to fill in the grave while I was looking on with a grieving heart as the cold and damp earth was covering my grandfather, the person I loved most, except for my mother. It was the first time that I attended a funeral and it had to be my grandfather.

My widowed grandmother. My grandmother, Freida-Leah, nee Goldfarb, could trace her ancestry in Shershev many generations. I recall once my grandfather took me with him to the cemetery on the anniversary of the death of my grandmother's grandfather. We struggled through large trees and fallen branches that my grandfather had to throw to the side, so we could reach the gravesite in the old part of the cemetery. The moss on the gravestone and barely legible inscription attested to the antiquity of my grandmother's roots in Shershev.

Nevertheless, my grandmother had no relative in the immediate vicinity in my time and was very isolated after Laizer Baer's death. All we knew is that she had a brother in Simforopol, in Crimea, by the name of Boris-Leib Goldfarb. (He moved there before the first World War, and remained there, corresponding with my mother up to the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in June of 1941. His son, Yosl Goldfarb, lived in Pruzany. They had two children: a daughter Pearl, my sister Sheva's age; and a son Menachem, my age, who survived Auschwitz, and is living now in Louisville, Kentucky.) My grandmother Freida-Leah did not remain long in the house. She sold it and rented a room from an elderly widow by the name of Themma Kwelman. Her new home was on Ostrowiecka Street, as had been her old home, but it was closer to the center, thus closer to us. Themma Kwelman lived with a single son, Abraham, who was the assistant bookkeeper in the local bank, and with her two daughters. The name of the older one was Feigl and the younger one was Ghitl. The source of that woman's income was a store in the Rad Kromen.

It must have been difficult for my grandmother to get used to her new lifestyle, losing a husband after 55 years of marriage, and having to leave the house in which she was born and lived a lifetime. All she had left in Shershev was my mother and us, her

grandchildren. My grandmother corresponded with her son, our Uncle Shloime (Solomon), a prolific and eloquent letter writer, since he left Shershev, but very little with her other son, Philip, who used to write rarely.

Freida-Leah was a loving and wholly devoted person and grandmother, and despite how young Sheva and I were, we understood and felt her love and devotion to us. Now, we felt the time had come to reciprocate in a small way for all we owed her. There was not a day that we did not visit her. If it was getting dark and we had not seen her yet, our mother used to remind us. The 1932-33 School Year, I was now in grade 3. A new principal by the name of Yaakov-Shaye Peker took over. The teacher Joel Waldshan became vice-principal. Another local young man, Yankl Judelewsky, just graduated from teachers' seminary in Vilna and became a teacher too. A teacher named Nitzberg came from the neighboring town of Pruzany and one named Lipkind came from western Poland. Lipkind was a student of law in university but had to give up his studies temporarily for financial reasons.

In grade 3, we were introduced to new subjects, like nature study, geography and even started physics. I can still see myself struggling to understand the map, which showed the Vistula River flowing north to the Baltic Sea. This was upward on the map and I could not understand water flowing upward. I must have overcome the problem, for geography became one of my favorite subjects, taught in grade 3 by the principal Peker. Peker ran the class and the school with an iron hand. His presence in class terrified the pupils. His political conviction was Zionist-Revisionism and manifested itself in his every idea and action, even in his family life. Revisionism and its type of Zionism were previously unknown in Shershev. There were the leftists Zionist organizations like the Hashomer Hatzair or Hachalutz, to which many of the young people belonged, and in which my uncle, my father's youngest brother Eli (Elijah) was very active in the early 30s. However, Revisionism was not socialistic.

We settled in our very own new home. No longer did we have to think of moving. Half of my friends lived within 100 meters from me; I could see their homes from our windows. On the left, on the same side of the market place as our house lived Itzel



Maletzky. His father was a half partner to the flourmill and electric station in the shtetl. Their house was on the very corner of Ostrowiecka Street and the Market Square. In the middle of the southern side of the market, lived my friend Kalman Kalbkoif, whose father was one of the ten butchers in town. Across our house on the west side of the market lived the brothers Laizer (Lazar) and Litek Rothenberg. Two houses to the left of the Rothenbergs lived another friend of mine, Hershel Schneider, who had an older brother Eli and a brother who was a year younger, Shlomo. Other friends who lived nearby were Yosef Leberstein and Moishe Gelman.

I became a close friend of the Rothenberg brothers and spent a lot of time with them. Their father was the bookkeeper of a flourmill that belonged partly to their grandfather, Yoshua Pinsky. Their home was attached to Yoshua Pinsky's house, which was without a doubt the largest house in Shershev. This house, where Yoshua lived in several rooms with his wife, Bluma, also contained his hardware store. However, the largest part of the house was rented out to the pharmacist Baumritter, who lived there with his wife and two daughters in quite roomy quarters. He also had enough space for a large pharmacy and an additional storeroom.

The main attraction of that place for us boys, was not the building itself, but everything behind it. The back yard stretched for many meters. The first thing one would notice was another house that was always rented out. Behind that house, was a row of different buildings, like barns, stables, warehouses, and other buildings that were never used. Behind those buildings, were large gardens with all conceivable kinds of vegetables. In season, nothing tasted better than sweet peas that grew there. We ate them right off the stalk.

Beyond the gardens was our main attraction and challenge. Swamps there continued without end. After taking off the shoes and socks, rolling up our pants as high as they would go, we began to walk slowly into murky water that teemed with all kinds of creatures, beetles of all sorts, sizes and shapes. Crawling worm-like creatures, whose slimy shapes scared us. Most of those swamp and marsh denizens were green to blend

with the thick lush surroundings. Soon we had to take off our pants if we did not want to get a tongue-lashing from our parents.

The challenge was to see how far one could get into that swamp before falling into it over your head. The trick was to use your foot to find a root or vine under the water that was strong enough to support you, lower your weight on it, and look for the next one. The problem, of course, was that some vines or roots could collapse just when you thought you were safe and you would get an unpleasant dunking. The most unpleasant visitors were the many leeches who did not wait for an invitation to attach themselves to your exposed body. Neither the leeches nor the inevitable dunking stopped us from spending many a day of our vacation time in that natural amusement park.

The New Year of 1933 was approaching and I couldn't wait to write the year 1933, the two consecutive 3s after the number 19. It has been my privilege to have written not only the two consecutive numbers 3, but also the 4s, 5s, 6s, 7s, 8s and hope to write the three consecutive 9s too. (I say "privilege," for it is because of the merit of my parents and grandparents in raising me that I ascribe my passion to survive and live to tell their story and mine.) With the winter snow, farmers from the nearby villages, used to start bringing in wagons full, or sleds full, of firewood that they used to cut down in the surrounding forest, and sell to the Jewish population, which was not permitted to cut it. The wood was stacked in the yards and remained there until the next fall. By then, it was good and dry and taken into woodsheds, where it was used for cooking and heating during the following winter. This system of providing fuel was a generations old tradition and the only source of fuel in our part of the world.

The day used to start early since school started at eight. That year mandatory prayers before the classes started were introduced in school. I had to be there at seven thirty and therefore we had to get up before daybreak. We got washed in the kitchen, where the sink was. It was one of two sinks that I knew of in Shershev (the other one was at my grandparents Kantorowitz), and the sink's outlet simply led outside the house. There was no sewage system in Shershev then, nor is there one now, seventy years later. Water had been brought into the house in pails the night before and kept in them

overnight until empty. We had a sheet metal drum with a faucet. The drum held 4-5 pails full of water and stood near the sink. The toilet facilities were outdoors and in winter, especially at night, it was an unwelcome experience. For a reader and city dweller in the 21st century, it might be difficult to understand.

In our home as in the few other better-to-do households in Shershev, the winter breakfasts could consist of pancakes made of buckwheat flour. An old lady used to carry them around to her regular customers every early winter morning in two baskets covered with heavy shawls to keep the heat in. My mother used to look at her with compassion and always gave her a couple more groshy (pennies) than owed. Alternatively, breakfast could also consist of black bread and butter with milk or tea. Usually we had with it "Swiss cheese" (actually produced locally). There could also be honey, halva, or sausage.

The winter attire of the population of the shtetl at that time was barely adequate since local transportation was by foot and exposure to the elements was unavoidable. Worse than the cold were the rain and puddles that caused recurring colds. The snack or lunch taken with me to school was much like breakfast and was eaten during the 20-minute recess at 11 o'clock. In the lower grades school ended at 1 PM. After that, there was food at home to tide us over until dinner, usually at 4 PM. There was nothing tastier than my mother's potato kugel (pudding) on a cold winter afternoon. I can still see my mother turning over the hot earthen pot from which the round pyramid-shaped potato mold slid out on a wide-rimmed plate.

Dinner in winter always consisted of meat and soup, a nourishing and filling meal. Supper with the inevitable bread. In addition, there might be cheese or halvah or smoked whole fish that were available in different sizes, from a sprat to a large herring. Their skin, turned golden in smoking, used to come off easily on the plate. The winter evenings were often beautiful. We children used to go sleigh riding down the only hill in Shershev, from Ostrowiecka Street into the market square. The drop was no more than one meter. We would pile on a sleigh, one on top of the other, as high as we could. One of us running in front pulled the rope attached to the sled. Sometimes, when the sled reached its maximum speed, he would jerk the cord to the side and make the sled tip over,

spilling the bunch of us on the snow. How we then would jump up, exuberantly, enthusiastically, to run up the hill and do it all over again.

Spring thaw.

The warm spring weather would arrive suddenly. The snow on the flat lands began to melt faster than ever, flowing in the direction of the little river that had flooded in fall and frozen over. Over the winter, this huge lake became covered with a thick layer of snow. All this snow melting, when combined with the already flooded river, turned half the shtetl into a sea. As I mentioned earlier, our entire district was a flatland so the water was almost evenly distributed everywhere, covering my grandparents' yard in twenty centimeters of water. There were, of course, houses with water covering the floors. Because of that flat terrain, the water moved away slowly without causing much damage, except for many, many wet floors.

Laundry.

Despite the size and spaciousness of the house, I used to loathe laundry days, which occurred every two months or so. It was a three-day process necessary when the kitchen and nearby rooms were stacked with piles of dirty laundry. First, the laundry had to be washed by hand with the help of a washboard and strong soap. Next, the washed laundry was boiled in a huge copper boiler that was placed over the cooking stove in such a way that it was heated by all four of its burners. After thorough boiling, the clothing was again washed in a washtub to which a tiny tube of a dark blue laundry whitening substance was added with each load.

Not until after the second washing and wringing was the laundry hung out to dry in the sun on a clothesline. On rainy cloudy days, or in winter, it was hung in the attic to dry. Outside in the sun, the laundry used to dry within hours, but in the attic, it took much longer, especially in the winter, when the wet laundry used to freeze before it had a chance to dry and had to be brought into the house still frozen and in the shape of the person it belonged to. It was especially applicable to men's combination underwear, which was always a subject of a remark or joke. When it came to put the laundry away, it had to be done over with a special heavy rolling pin and ironed. Later, my mother and the maid put all the clothing back in its appropriate place. The maid my mother used for the

laundry was Izbyta, who had spent many years in Jewish homes doing laundry and spoke Yiddish as well as any Jew.

Because the laundry days entailed so much work and was such a big undertaking, with constant trips to the well for water, everybody dreaded it and it was put off for as long as possible. Therefore, everybody in the family had cupboards and drawers full of underwear. The more one had, the longer one could delay doing the laundry, but the longer the delay, the more dirty laundry accumulated. At least that is how it was with us and people we knew. I would rather not speculate about how less fortunate people managed.

Pesach (Passover) was the nicest holiday of the year. Right after Purim, one room in the house, in our case, the parlor, was cleaned and scrubbed and declared out of bounds to everybody. In that room, my mother "put-up" mead, for the four cups of wine required for the Seder (the festive ceremonial meal eaten on the first two nights of Passover) that used to be made from sugar, honey and hops, which, after being mixed together, was left to ferment . That was the first step in getting ready for Pesach.

The next step was preparing matzo (the unleavened bread), which were being baked in Shershev. There were three approaches to this. The most common was for a dozen women or so to get together and bake it for themselves in one of their homes, the one with the largest bake oven. This entailed making not only the oven and kitchen kosher for Passover, but also koshering most of the house so that the matzo should not come in contact with anything unleavened. The second approach was when a group of women used to get together to bake for others as well as themselves, so as to earn holiday money in addition to supplying themselves with matzo. The third was the simplest, but only the wealthier housewives could afford it: hire those other women to bake matzo. That was what my mother did.

Every house in Shershev had an oven; the large majority of women baked their own bread, but even the few dozen Jewish households like ours that did not bake made challah white, eggy Sabbath bread). The oven came in handy to cook the traditional Sabbath meal, the *tsholent* (a meat casserole cooked by leaving the oven on from before

the Sabbath so that no Jews would be actively doing the work of cooking on the Sabbath). The bakers of course, had the largest ovens.

On Mostowa Street, not far from us, was a bakery owned by a widow, Sarah Neibrief. Organized matzo bakers used to rent her kitchen, the living room, and a room or two in between, clean it to make it kosher for Passover, and set up an "enterprise." A long table was put in the living room around which a dozen or so women stood, their hair wrapped with white clean kerchiefs, to make sure that not a single hair fell in or on anything that has to do with the matzo. Each of them with a wooden roller in hand rolled a piece of dough into a layer of dough about a foot across. One woman nearby stood bent over a small trough kneading a piece of dough, making a large piece called *moire* that was just big enough to be cut up in pieces to go around to each woman around the table, not less or more. When the chunk of dough was ready to be divided up, the woman kneading the dough pinched off a piece of dough called *nemen* challah and gave it to the man called the *sheeber*, who stood in front of the open oven door where a hot wood fire was burning. His job was to put the raw matzo into the oven and take out the just-baked ones. It was a constant job in front of an opening as hot as a furnace. The man took the piece of dough and threw it in the fire. It was only after this that the *moire* was cut up and divided among the women, to make matzo from it. The *sheeber* was handed the matzo from the *redler*. The *redler*'s job was to puncture holes in the raw matzo, rolling a pizza-like cutter with points on the edge back and forth over the matzo, while keeping a straight line with the help of a rolling pin held against it. All of this took place in the evenings because most of the women were married with families and were busy during the day with their own housework.

For us children it was all stimulating and interesting. The excitement of those evenings, the "to-do," the bustle to watch as it all takes place, the opportunity that might be given to a child to carry the raw matzo on a rolling pin to the table of the *redler* for the finishing process. He would see the matzo passing from *redler* to the *sheeber* and observe the dexterity with which the *sheeber* handles the raw matzos, putting them into the oven and taking the baked ones out.

Matzo for one household was baked in one evening, regardless of the amount, and carried home by the family members late at night in extra specially washed white bed sheets. Traditionally one is not permitted to taste matzo before Pesach, but grownups pretended not to see us children sneak a piece of matzo while carrying it home and eat it on the way. It tasted much better then than during Pesach. We used to bring the matzo into the same room where my mother left the fermenting mead, cover it tightly, not to be touched or even looked at until Pesach eve.

An important part of the Passover diet consisted of matzo-meal and matzo-farfel. Neither was available in a ready-made form, and had to be made before Pesach by the man of the house--in our case, by my father. When I turned twelve or thirteen, I too pitched in. Half a dozen matzos were thrown into a large mortar made from a tree stump and ground with the help of a heavy wooden pestle, which typically had a metal knob at either end to facilitate the grinding or rather the stumping. After a steady ten or fifteen minutes of hard stumping, most of the matzo in the mortar would turn powdery. After sifting it, the powdery part was used as matzo-meal and the pieces were matzo-farfel.

Since matzo-meal and matzo-farfel, were very much in demand during Pesach, the men folks of Jewish Shershev spent the evenings before Pesach at home contributing their part to the holiday. When we boys would go out for a walk in those evenings and pass the Jewish homes, we could hear the dull stumping and reverberation from the matzo-grinding householders pitifully working at this backbreaking task as if G-d wanted them to taste the slavery of their forefathers in Egypt.

Matzo manufactured in Pruzany was also available. It came in 2-kilogram packages. It was square and softer and I preferred it. It was more expensive than the locally made matzo and many households could not afford it.

Goose fat.

The only other item that had to be prepared for Pesach long in advance was goose fat. It started to be prepared about the time of Chanukah (the eight-day holiday commemorating the purification of the temple of Jerusalem by the Maccabees.) My mother used to order a goose from a local Jewish man who supplemented his meager income by fattening geese for the well-to-do housewives. It was called not fattening but

“stuffing geese” (force-feeding), which it literally was. The geese used to be kept all summer in the swampy meadow where they ate their fill of rich vegetation and plant roots. In late fall, they were brought indoors where the owner, his wife, and children used to soak in warm water stale bread bought from the bakers for next to nothing. They would mix it with bran and make long twists from that heavy clay-like mixture. Breaking those twists in 2-3 centimeter long pieces, they would hold the head of the goose with one hand and force its beak open with the other hand and push a lump of that dough down the goose's throat. I can still see that man holding the beak shut with one hand, with the other leading a visible lump in the goose's long neck down into its body. Such force feeding used to last two weeks or more.

Right after Chanukah, those geese were slaughtered by the *shochet* (Jewish ritual slaughterer) and were sold and delivered to the local housewives. It might sound unbelievable, but such an average goose yielded some three kilograms of fat. It was cooked in Passover dishes. The meat was eaten then, but the fat kept for Passover. Some housewives, my mother included, bought a couple of geese: the fat of one was kept for Pesach and the fat of the second was eaten during the winter. In an era of no refrigeration and no iceboxes, the goose fat kept in the cellar remained perfectly fresh, smelling and tasting as if it were freshly made.

Having provided us with three of a half a dozen or so main elements needed for Pesach, my mother turned to getting the house ready. Fortunately, our house was too new to have had the opportunity to accumulate the heaps of miscellaneous items, unneeded and unwanted, that households in Shershev and elsewhere tend to accumulate and hate to part with. Still, cleaning even a new house for Pesach is a formidable task. For instance, washing the windows. Ours was the only house in town with double and permanent windows, with the inside ones swinging inwards, and the outside ones swinging outside. It was necessary to use a ladder due to the high foundation on which our house stood.

The maid, a young strong village girl, was of great help. The closer to Pesach, the more frantic the preparations became. The variety of prepackaged Pesach foods available



nowadays did not exist then and there was no means of refrigeration, so the food could not be prepared more than a couple of days before the holiday.

The day before Pesach eve, the house was all clean and kosher for the holiday. The last couple food articles like meat and eggs that were bought at that time. Eggs were bought by the gross, in contrast to the usual dozens at any other time of the year. Not just one gross either—I recall my parents buying three gross of eggs for Pesach, an implausible-sounding amount, but a correct one. They were the last food items that came into the house before the holidays. The evening before Pesach, the heads of the households (the men) went through the ceremony of *bedikas-khometz* (the traditional ceremonial search for leavened bread).

Ritual baths.

That evening the bathhouse was reserved for the women of the community. It also served as the community's ritual bath. The next morning it was the men's turn to go to the bathhouse.

The bathhouse was the property of the Jewish community. It was an integral part of any small Jewish community in Eastern Europe and was used by the Jewish population only. I used to wonder where the non-Jewish population of Shershev bathed, for there was no public bathhouse in our shtetl and there were no bathing facilities in any home. In fact, as far as I know, we were the only ones in Shershev with a tin bathtub. There might have been a few wooden ones. A bath at home was not such a simple thing. It involved bringing a dozen pails of water from the well and heating it over the wood- burning stove. It was much easier to go to the bathhouse, which was open every Thursday night for women and Friday mornings for men.

By the way, our tin bathtub as well as the Passover mortar and pestle were passed on to us from my grandparents, my mother's parents, Laizer-Bear and Freida-Leah Auerbuch. We had the bathtub because my mother was the youngest Auerbuch child and the only girl. Not surprisingly, she was treated better than the boys were, and when she turned ten or so, her overprotective mother decided that the local bathhouse was not clean enough for her only daughter. Therefore, she bought her a bathtub.

The bathhouse was in a small street by the name of *schul-gesl* (synagogue lane). Once inside, one saw a large furnace with a large gaping opening always ready to take in large chunks of wood which the attendant, Jankel Der-Bedder, would feed between constantly pumping the water and collecting the entrance fee. Jankel was a tall, well-built man. My father used to say that he would have been a strongman had he had a decent meal once in awhile.

The bathhouse was divided into two parts. One formed the bathhouse itself and the second part was the *shvitz* (steam bath; literally, sweat). In the bathhouse were the *mikva* (pool for ritual immersion laid out, floor, steps and walls with tiles) and half a dozen tubs. Each connected separately to cold and hot water and a row of as many overhead showers.

Sometimes one had to wait for a tub, but never too long. The Jews of Shershev did not know how to relax in a tub, especially when others were waiting their turns. Some used to get into the *shvitz*, where mostly older Jews used to lay on wooden benches amidst thick steam and rub or massage each others' backs with the help of short brooms made from young birch twigs. My father was not a steam-bath enthusiast and maybe that's why I am not either. We used to shower after the bath and that was it. Some older Jews used to immerse in the *mikva* as the last act of cleansing.

After our bath, about ten in the morning, my father and I would go home together and eat the last *chometz* (leavened bread proscribed on Passover) meal before Pesach. It consisted of fresh baked challah, just brought from the bakery, and milk. Whatever was not consumed had to be thrown out. It was eaten in a hurry standing at the kitchen door leading to the outside or in one of the woodsheds.

After that meal, we children used to take a wooden spoon with the breadcrumbs from the *bedikas chometz* of the night before to the bathhouse. We would throw it into the flaming furnace, fulfilling the command of *beur chometz* (burning of the leavened bread.)

^ The day of Pesach Eve was a difficult day for all, in particular the women who had to prepare the Seder meal. To ease the long wait for the Seder meal, my mother used

to serve a snack consisting of peeled potatoes and hard-boiled eggs. It was not the fanciest snack one could wish for but it was not leavened and not Pesach food, not dairy and not meat. That is what we were allowed to eat that day.

Finally, the sun began to set. One could feel the festive atmosphere in shtetl. The Jewish homes were spic and span and so were its inhabitants. The women folk began to light the holiday candles and the men in their new or best attire began to make their way to the synagogues. After the short holiday eve prayer, my father and I walked swiftly home, where everything from the floor to the ceiling and every person shone with holiday brightness and splendor. The big table stood in the middle of the dining room covered with seven tablecloths according to tradition, one on top of the other with the best on the very top. The flames in the shining holiday candlesticks flickered happily and the joy and warmth filled every corner of the house. In the middle of the table was the *kharra* (a platter of foods having symbolic meaning in the Seder), prepared before we left for the synagogue. All the symbolic food on it was made by my mother except for the *kharoses* (a mixture of fruit, nuts, spices and wine used at the Passover ceremony as a symbol of the mortar the Hebrews made in Egypt), which the Shershev inhabitants used to obtain from Rabbi Noah Liwerant. It was an old tradition in Shershev to go to the rabbi's house for charoses and at the same time to sign the *mecheeras chometz* (selling of the chometz) roster. Each member of the community used to leave the rabbi something, supposedly for selling the chometz to a non-Jew, as little as 20 *groshy* (pennies) or as much as five "zloty," depending on the financial situation of the contributor. I know that my father was one of the big donors.

This Passover eve contribution was of great financial assistance to the Rabbi. It brought him a couple months income. The only other income the Rabbi had was the selling of yeast on Thursday nights to the local Jewish housewives for baking challah for Shabbos. Nevertheless, he seemed to get by on his income for he managed to raise five children, three of whom attended the gymnasium (academic high school) in nearby Pruzany. We would come home hungry from the synagogue on Pesach eve after that day's light lunch and did not waste any time before proceeding with the Seder, which was conducted in the Orthodox tradition. The food was always good but never as good as the

first Pesach night when we used to eat more than our fill. On Saturdays and holidays the Hebrew school was closed, so we boys spent the time of Pesach playing games using walnuts, the most expensive nuts around. A loss of a couple was a big loss for a little boy.

Among those who could afford it, it was a tradition, almost a "must," to get a new suit for Pesach. The first morning service of Pesach and the preceding Sabbath, shabos hagadol, was when all the men used to go to the synagogue and the time for us boys to show off our new clothes. Some parents who could not afford new suits for their sons used to take their sons' shabos suits to the tailor and have them turned inside out, which made them appear new—that is if the boy had not grown too much over the past year. In the latter case, the suit was good for a younger brother.

I won't describe the women's attire. I'm no expert on that now and certainly was not one then. I don't even dare to try to imagine how the women of Shershev felt the couple weeks before Pesach. I do know how the men folk felt, even more so the women. Everybody looked forward to Pesach with anticipation, hope and joy.

## **Chapter 5**

In midsummer, my mother gave birth to a girl, my youngest and third sister, whom my parents name Liba, after my grandfather Lazar-Bear Auerbach, who had died the previous November. That was the fifth child of my parents and the third girl.

At the end of that August, I started grade four where we started a couple of new subjects: Chumosh (Pentateuch) and Tanach (Bible). We had been introduced to these subjects earlier but in an abbreviated form. We were also introduced to the geography of the land of Israel, then Palestine. I remained indifferent to the other subjects but became obsessed with the land of Israel. My mother used to say, "wake him up in the middle of the night and he will tell you how many cows there are in each kibbutz." Shortly after, the above-mentioned Palestinian geography was introduced to us. We started a project called "fifty years of building." The project referred to the fifty years of rebuilding of the Jewish homeland from 1882-1932. The teacher took us through those fifty years as if we were

living side by side with those early pioneers: Their hardships, hunger and thirst, their defeats and victories, their disappointments and enthusiasm and, above all, their dreams and boundless hopes. Not only did I get absorbed in its geography, but with the ideal of Zionism as well. The teacher of that subject was Joel Waldshan, who had a son Yaakov in my class. A year later when the principal, Peker, left Shershev, Joel Waldshan replaced him as principal of the Hebrew school.

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that it is to my teacher Waldshan, that I owe my awareness of being a Diaspora Jew, my commitment to Zionism, and my desire to help build a Jewish home in the land of Israel. Shortly after, he started teaching us about Israel and its geography. He acquainted us with every town, settlement and kibbutz there. Considering the relatively few towns, settlements, and kibbutzim in Israel in 1933, it wasn't too difficult for a young and inquisitive mind to absorb it all. It is no wonder that after so many years I still remember something. It is well over sixty years since those lessons, but I can still see Joel Waldshan standing in front of his class of ten year olds telling us with so much fervor the accomplishments, daring and heroism of those *chalutzim* (pioneers) as they wade neck-deep in malaria infested swamps to plant Eucalyptus trees and dig ditches in order to drain and dry the swamps to make the land useable; or as they spend nights on guard to protect the newly established tender kibbutzim from sudden murderous Arab attacks; how young Jews from eastern Europe leave behind warm homes and families and set out to a far and hostile land, exposing themselves to all kinds of dangers and difficulties in order to build a Jewish home. In my exuberant imagination, I could hardly wait to become old enough to join the ranks of the *chalutzim* and participate in building the land of Israel. Despite the fate that brought me to Canada, those dreams of my youth have stayed with me ever since.

The exercise book that we used for the subject of the geography of Israel was the heaviest I have ever used. As we learned about each town, settlement or kibbutz, we had to paste in pictures, which we used to cut out from newspapers, booklets or pamphlets, of the places we then were learning about. The more pictures we had, the better. My Uncle Eli, my father's youngest brother, was very active in Hashomer-Hatzair and had access to a lot of printed material about Israel. Through him, I had an inexhaustible source of

pictures, so it was no wonder that mine was one of the two outstanding exercise books in class. The second belonged to Yaakov Waldshan, the teacher's son.

One day close to Rosh Hashanah 1933, I visited my grandmother Freida-Leah Auerbach and noticed an open *shono-tova* (Jewish New Year Card) in her mail that just arrived. It included pictures of the Western Wall, the Tombstone of Rachel and the Tomb of the Patriarchs. It was good material for pasting in my exercise book. Without thinking, I asked my grandmother, "Bobe, kenst mir gebn der Shono-Tova?" ("Grandma, can you give me this New Year's Card?"). She answered, "Yeh mine kind, do kenst hobn der Shono-Tova un mine gout yor oich" ("You can have this card and the good things destined for me too"). To a ten-year-old, sickness is far from mind and death is unthinkable, but to a ten-year-old, a person in their seventies is a very old person. Why would my grandmother want to give me at her old age the good things destined for her? At that moment, I felt as if I were depriving her of something, or better yet, as if she is giving me the most precious thing she has—namely her fair state of health in her old age. I wished she had not said it. Knowing her love and devotion, I knew she meant every word she said and I wanted her to have it.

Court-Lane served as the amusement park for the Jews of Shershev, especially on Saturdays when the Jewish crowd used to walk there under the wide shades of the linden trees or lay on the lush green grass under it. It was a short street, seven to eight hundred meters long, branching westward off the main street, Mostowa. At the beginning of the lane to the left was a large space used for sport activities, behind it was the new synagogue followed by two or three farm homesteads. To the right, behind a shoemaker, lived a government official. Next was a stately home with a large yard. In it lived the Greek orthodox priest with his nine beautiful daughters. Beside that was the Polish public school with its sprawling grounds, followed by the parsonage of the Catholic Church.

In Court Lane, we young teenagers spent many hours listening to the preaching and lectures of our young idealistic leaders, playing children's games and dreaming of the future. The main attraction of Court Lane was two rows of ancient linden trees, one on

each side of the lane. Some trees were hollow, and three or four boys could squeeze inside them at ground level. The rows of trees ended at two perpendicular ditches, one on either side of the lane, wide, deep and thickly overgrown with vegetation and weeds.

Court Lane was reputed to be part of the palace complex of the legendary Queen Bona, the builder of the Large Synagogue. She was believed to have built a palace in Shershev at the end of Court Lane and, supposedly, it was then that the rows of linden trees were planted, extending from the main street to the palace. In order to separate the palace from the town, she ordered the two ditches dug, presumably to serve partly as moats. The road itself continued farther beyond the ditches into the farmers' fields, where it happened that while plowing, the farmers' often uncovered single oversized bricks or even revealed entire layers of the old pathway.

Shershev was almost entirely surrounded by forest, and that is where we boys would wander or explore after the Saturday Cholent meal. (Cholent was a meat casserole dish that was prepared prior to the Sabbath and kept warm over Saturday without any direct involvement of human labor so that the Sabbath would not be profaned.) Our favorite place in the forest was a small area a kilometer out of the Court Lane, which we called the Alderwoods. It wasn't much of a forest, no more than a square kilometer that was constantly struggling for its territory. It was infringed from one side by a thick pine forest and from the other side by the nearby ever-present swamps.

The forest was always mucky if not outright wet and overgrown with all kinds of weeds and vegetation. All of this was covered with a canopy of alder bushes and trees. There, as children, we had the opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the diversity of the bird kingdom in our part of the world. In that thicket, we could observe the birds laying their eggs up to the time the hatchlings used to leave the nest.

Another place where we spent a lot of time observing birds, was the Jewish cemetery on the Bes-Chayim (literally "house of life" in reference to the cemetery) Street. It was called Nowa Street in Polish. There in the old part of the cemetery, overgrown thickly with ancient trees, we climbed among the dense branches. We used to come across many bird nests: some empty, some with bird's eggs or young chicks. We used to

come back often to watch their progress, until one day we would return to find the nest empty. They had flown the coop.

Before the school year in spring of 1933 ended, a rumor spread over the school and in the shtetl that the principal of our Hebrew school, I. S. Peker, the Revisionist-Zionist, was going to set up a Betar cell in Shershev. Betar was the revisionist youth organization. This movement was hardly known in the shtetl and it was doubtful if it would find any followers. It turned out, however, that there were some young men who sympathized with this approach to Zionism, which differed from the dominant Marxist Zionist organizations as Hashomer, Hashomer Hatzair, and Hechalutz. Revisionism was a middle of the road, bourgeois-oriented Zionism, more acceptable to the majority of the Jewish population, which did not look for guidance to Poland's neighbor to the east. The Jews of Shershev remembered how disastrous the economic policies of the Bolsheviks were to them when they were in control in 1920.

Every child nine years old or older could join the organization. Understandably, almost every child in our school joined, knowing that the principal decided to set it up before the new school year started. This organization continued to grow, especially the last couple of years before the war, when the local Polish police dissolved the leftist Zionist organizations, accusing them of communist tendencies.

Peker left Shershev before the start of the school year and transferred command of Betar to a young local man who was the bookkeeper in the local Jewish community-owned bank. His name was Chaim Shemesh; he also happened to be my father's first cousin from the mother's side. Shemesh was an exceptionally gifted person who, from his childhood, used to sit assiduously day and night over books. There was no limit to his quest for knowledge. He was the ideal person to take over the leadership of Betar, but it didn't last long. A few months later, he succeeded in obtaining a much-coveted permit to go the land of Israel then Palestine. He was replaced by another local young man, Yaakov Yudelewsky, who had just graduated from a teachers' seminary and acquired a teaching position in Shershev.



The summer of 1933 went by quickly thanks to the activities in the local hall of Betar where we used to come together in assemblies to be indoctrinated with the ideal and spirit of Revisionist Zionism. Our favorite place was the Court Lane, but we also had outings outside of Shershev.

Rosh Hashanah was approaching and so was Yom Kippur. This period was called the Yomim Nora'im (Days of Awe). Beginning a month earlier, at the beginning of the month of Elul (the last month of the Jewish calendar), a sense of solemnity began intensifying. The Jews of Shershev felt indeed that the Day of Judgment or Reckoning was approaching. There was a very concrete feeling that "This day we stand before judgment."

People were calmer and more polite. The synagogue attendance increased daily. People made do with less gossip, which usually was popular entertainment. In short, people avoided "every forbidden thing." Avrom-Bear, the chimney-sweep, was an old Jew whose job it was to go around the Jewish streets Friday and all other holidays before sunset and yell in a loud voice, "In shul arayin" ("Go into the synagogue"). This was the signal for Jewish stores to close, for Jewish workers and artisans to stop work and for women to light the Sabbath candles. In the month of Ellul, he would go around the Jewish streets between two and three in the morning knocking on doors and shutters and shouting "Get up for slichos" (penitential prayers). Jews would get up early every morning and go to the synagogues. I must admit, however, that most that went were older men. That chimney sweep would go to each Jewish home every Thursday and get a donation for performing that "sacred work." It was 10-20 groszy from a well to do member or 1-2 groszy from a poor member whose own family was starving.

Avrom-Bear was also the only chimney sweep in Shershev. This old Jew, through all his life, would climb on every roof in the shtetl with a small broom stuck on a long thin stick in his hand. He would position himself beside the chimney, jam the broom into the chimney and push it all the way down to the stove below. After several repetitions of this act, he would climb down and empty the stove below of all the soot that came down from the chimney. Yet with all this work, he was as poor as they come and had to support

a wife, a son and a daughter. Both progeny were past the marriageable age for Shershev. The only benefit he could derive from his profession was the fact that his beard was always black and nobody has ever seen his face even a holiday. Yet even Avrom-Bear used to lower his voice before the Days of Awe, which must have been difficult for him, for I believe that he really forgot how to speak in a normal voice. As best, I can remember, his voice always thundered from one end of the shtetl to the other.

We, that is my little brother Liova and I, used to go with our father to the synagogue. The synagogue membership used to arrange for a better *Bal-Tefilah* (a person who leads in the prayer) for the Days of Awe and would not settle for some of our own usual volunteer members. They preferred Yankel Kleinerman or Tzalke fun-di-Zamden (from the sand dunes) or Bendet Lifshitz, who had better voices. Understandably, such ba'alay-tefila did not come free and the entire treasury of the synagogue had to be emptied for such a pleasure, which could cost as much as five dollars.

After the short Rosh Hashanah Eve prayer, the congregants used to wish each other a Shana-Tova (a good year) and go home without the customary short chat. The welcoming greeting coming home was always Leshono Tova Tikosaivu (May you be inscribed for a good year). There was never a hint this being a carefree holiday.

After the Kiddush (holiday or Sabbath blessing on the wine), we used to sit down to the Rosh Hashanah Eve meal, which always started with golden chicken soup with noodles. The noodles, my mother used to say, are very traditional as a reminder of our long lasting *galus* (exile). This dish used to be followed by fish, meat, with *kreplach* (fritters stuffed with meat) and other dishes, but never anything sour or bitter.

The day of Rosh Hashanah used to be spent between the house and the synagogue. We boys used to go to the river and watch the crowd of worshipers that used to gather for *tashlich* (a ceremony of casting sins into a nearby river or stream).

The ten days of *t'shuva* (repentance) between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were a time of subdued moods. Early in the morning on the day before Yom Kippur, all members of the family engaged in *shlogen kaporos* (a traditional sacrifice of a fowl the

day before Yom Kippur). The men would perform the ceremony with a cock and the women with a hen. Shortly after, it was my task to take the fowls to the *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) who lived on Bes-Chayim Street.

The slaughterer, an elderly respectable man, stood on the porch in his backyard, wrapped in a blood stained apron, a long thin knife in one hand. With one hand, he took the receipt that I got from his wife or daughter for the twenty-grosz slaughtering fee for each fowl. After putting the receipt in a nearby little box, he passed the nail of his thumb over the length of the sharp edge of the knife to make sure that there was no adhesion on the knife. (This is a requirement by Jewish law to make the slaughter of animals or fowls as painless as possible and to follow the ancient temple ritual of insuring that a sacrificed animal is in no way imperfect.) After this inspection, he cuts the fowl's neck with a quick slash and throws its carcass down to the ground below. Not losing a second, he turns to the next customer. The just slaughtered fowl convulsed, seeming to try to fly away in its last seconds of agony. It didn't take more than 10-15 seconds before all such movements ceased. I and others used to pick up the fowl and take it home to be prepared for the meals before and after the Yom Kippur fast.

About three in the afternoon on the day before Yom Kippur, the men would go to the synagogue for afternoon prayers. Right inside the synagogue at the entrance, there was a large table on which there were a dozen or more large plates containing signs indicating the name of the charitable organization or purpose for which the alms are being collected. For example: right in front was the plate for the synagogue, next for the beadle, then for the local free-loan-institution, visiting the sick, burial associations and others. Besides these, there were plates for Zionist causes like the Jewish National Fund, Keren HaYesod, Keren-Tel-Chai, for yeshivos, and for poor locals, the neediest of all. Each worshiper had his own preferred charity, to which he would contribute more generously than to the others. One had to come with some change in his pocket, but the sad truth was that most of the attending worshipers could use the money for themselves.

The candles lit just prior to Yom Kippur in memory of the departed were not the short, stubby ones used today. They were waxen candles, 60 centimeters long, 5 centimeters wide at the bottom and 3 centimeters on top. They were lit not at home but in

the synagogue right after the Mincha prayers before Yom-Kippur eve and burned until after Yom-Kippur; that is, until after dark on the following day. Almost all the worshipers used to bring candles, one for each departed. Thus, the synagogue was full of huge burning candles that contributed mightily to the already suffocating conditions of the crowded synagogue. Because of the heat, many of the candles used to start melting and bending. The floor of the synagogue, as I mentioned earlier, used to be covered with hay during the "Days of Awe." Fortunately, some old men used to remain overnight to pray and to watch out for the burning candles. Otherwise, I'm sure the synagogue would have caught fire.

After the afternoon prayers, they would have the meal before the Yom Kippur fast. It always started with chicken soup and noodles. My mother made sure that the food was not salty so that we would not be thirsty during the fast.

Every Jew, except for the bedridden, was in the synagogue for Kol-Nidrei (opening prayer of the eve of the Day of Atonement) and the following Yom-Kippur day. This tempted dishonest gentiles in the shtetl to try to open a door or a window of a Jewish home, knowing that none of the people were present.

The form of the prayers in the shtetl was the same in all its synagogues. The worshipers sang aloud with the chazan (cantor). My father made sure that I participated. At the time, I could already converse in Hebrew, but a substantial part of the Yom Kippur liturgy is in Aramaic and many of the verse prayers (*piyutim*) are in a very difficult Hebrew. I did not understand those prayers fully and my father used to interpret them for me. I believe that my father had a gift for languages. He was fluent in Hebrew although there were no Hebrew schools in Shershev in his youth, and in a Heder (traditional religious school), they did not use spoken Hebrew. He also knew Polish well although he grew up under the Czar, where the study of Polish was prevented. He kept repeating to me, "read and understand what you are reading."

*Nehila* (the closing service of the Day of Atonement) was a difficult time for the fasting crowd, first, because of the solemnity of the hour and, second, due to total exhaustion at the end of the long fast. After the closing prayer, the gabai and some older

members would go outside to see if there are three stars visible in the evening sky. That meant Yom Kippur was over and they could finish the day with *ma'ariv* (evening prayer) and then blow the *shofar* (ram's horn). The worshipers would loudly respond to the shofar, "Leshono Habo B'yerusholoyim" (next year in Jerusalem). They would then hurriedly bless each other with the words "gmar-chatimo-toivo" (may you be sealed for a good year) and hurry home.

My mother and sister Sheva use to leave the synagogue right after *nehila* and go home to get the feast ready. This used to start for my father with a small glass of Vodka and a piece of *lekach* (honey cake).

Sukkoth (the feast of tabernacles) was a long and pleasant holiday that ushered in the beginning of the winter. The first two days and the last two days of the eight-day holiday were full holidays under Jewish law. The days in-between, although part of Sukkoth, were treated essentially like weekdays and called Khol-Amoed. It might sound strange but as far as I remember, the first frost used to come during Khol-Amoed of Sukkoth. This ended the Zielonky (a kind of green mushroom) season that began in late summer and ended with the first frost. Gentiles used to put them in vinegar or marinate them. Jews used to fry or cook them.

The time came to wear galoshes, which, of course, had to be taken off before walking into class. In order to protect the wooden floors from rotting, kerosene was sprayed on the floor every month or so. The bottoms of the galoshes began to blister and fall apart after they first met the kerosene-covered floor.

With the cold weather and short days, our activities became limited and we use to spend a fair amount of the evenings in the local of Betar, where the time used to pass quickly with singing Zionist and contemporary songs, dancing the *Hora* (a sort of square dance associated with Israel) and discussions about Zionism and contemporary problems.

None of us could forget the early spring of 1933 when we heard grown-ups speaking of a man by the name of Hitler who had gained power in Germany. I can still see the concerned faces of my parents and their friends speaking about it. A year later Hitler's name was on the lips of every Jew in Poland. At our meetings in the local Betar,

Hitler's name came up quite often as a Jew hater, but not to the extent and on the scale that turned out to be the truth.

One of my favorite pastimes was reading books that I used to borrow from the Hebrew school library. The library consisted of some two hundred and fifty books mostly originally written in Hebrew, but a few dozen had been translations from other languages into Hebrew. I read a good number of these library books before I left Hebrew school after grade four.

There was also a "Yiddish" library in Shershev founded by a group of young people some ten years earlier. One of the founders and initiators of the idea was my cousin Abraham Auerbach, who had left Shershev for Argentina in 1930. Those young and idealistic individuals saw it as their duty to provide worldly reading material for a Jewish youth of Shershev. The libraries began slowly to move away from the Heder tradition to a more modern educational system that exposed them to new yet unknown horizons. By the time Abraham Auerbach left for Argentina, the Yiddish library had several hundred books.

November used to bring cold weathers but seldom any snow. Yet I remember an eleventh of November when there was snow on the ground. It was Polish Independence Day, but celebrated in the rest of Europe as Armistice Day. Our Hebrew school and the Polish public school would gather on the Sport-Place, a large empty lot at the corner of the Mostowa Street and Court-Lane. We were joined there by the Strzelcy, a pre-military volunteer youth organization to which Jewish young men did not belong, due to the anti-Semitism prevalent in it. Jews had been subjected to enough mental and physical cruelty by their officers while serving the compulsory two years in the Polish army.

We were also joined by another group of men, the so-called "Reserve," consisting of former Polish soldiers of the Catholic Faith, who with the awakening of Polish Nationalism became suddenly very patriotic. Jews or members of the Russian orthodox faith were not accepted into the Reserve, even though they were 80% of the local population. Finally, we were joined by the fire brigade in their uniforms and brass

helmets; the majority of them were Jews. With a wind orchestra in front, all these groups began to march toward the town center. There the orchestra would strike up the Polish anthem and the public was subjected to a few speeches, all similar in content. They told and retold the bravery of the Polish legions in the First World War. The crowd would applaud, listen once more to the national anthem and then disperse. The day was a good excuse for the Polish government employees, including the police, to celebrate, often to excess.

The father of my two friends Laizer and Litek Rotenberg hailed from around the town of Helem. He grew up on his father's estate, where he learned an inexhaustible number of stories and shared them with us boys during the long winter evenings. Some of the stories were from his childhood, which was much different than ours. Some were true and some were fictions. He could skillfully keep us boys hypnotized with his stories for hours. Many of his stories had to do with witches, ghosts and demons. Living in a society where many grownups believed in ghosts, we kids tended to believe in them too. After listening to his stories for a couple of hours, my friends and I returned home after dark. My friends lived in an area where one could see an occasional passer-by at night. I lived across the dark and empty square next to the large synagogue, which at that time of evening was closed and enveloped in darkness. About 20-or 25 meters behind our house stood the ancient synagogue, all burnt out except for its immense walls and imposing façade, with young birch trees grown over its roof. Since the flat ceiling and the upper part was inaccessible to humans, birds and small animals made their homes there. At night, one could hear strange voices coming from that ancient relic; they were rumored to be of ghosts and demons gathering there at night.

As I neared my house, I was also getting closer to the huge shul and its sounds. The closer I got to home, the closer were the sounds, and the more frightened I became. Relief came as I grasped our door handle. The door was not locked until the last one in the family went to bed.

School preparations for Chanukah (feast of the Maccabees) would start a month before the festival. Each grade had its part to perform and each teacher wanted his students to please and be praised by the spectators. Therefore, instead of lessons, a lot of time was spent on rehearsals. At times, these were quite entertaining and the students enjoyed them.

The performance used to take place on a Chanukah Saturday night in the largest room in the school, which had a stage. The public was invited, but most spectators were parents of students, especially the parents of the performers. The performance was a topic of conversation in the shtetl for weeks to come, not so much among the students as among the parents. The parents could not stop raving about their children's' artistic qualities. Some parents were offended because their child was assigned an insignificant part in the play or, worse, was completely overlooked and had no part at all.

Traditionally on Chanukah, we kids used to receive from our parents so called Chanukah *gelt* (Chanukah money); not only from the parents but also from grandparents and even aunts and uncles if we happened to be there at the right time. It was not big money, but it was more than the daily allowance we received from our parents and, also, we could spend it on anything our hearts desired.

The JNF (Jewish National Fund) supporters in Shershev were quite active. Young boys and girls used to go around weekly to Jewish homes with a list of likely contributors to collect donations for JNF and to try to ensure that the contributor did not reduce his or her contribution from the preceding week. There were, however, many Jews who could not afford to contribute anything, and in order not to embarrass them, the collectors used to bypass their homes.

Our Hebrew school, under the name of Bes-Sefer Yavneh al yad Tarbus, had its own method of collecting money for JNF. From the central office of the JNF in Warsaw, they obtained booklets of ten to twelve pages. On each page, there was a map of a certain part of the land of Israel, like the upper Galilee, lower Galilee, the valley of Jezreel, the valley of Sharon and so on. Each page was divided by lines into squares of three centimeters across. Each student would receive a booklet and his or her assignment was



to cover each page with three centimeter across JNF stamps, which cost five groshy each. It took a dozen stamps to fill up a page and ten times as many to fill up the booklet. This was a lot of money for some youngsters who didn't get more than five groshy a week spending money.

Five groshy would buy a chocolate bar or a handful of candy or a packet full of pumpkin or sunflower seeds. Some parents would give their children five groshy to buy a few grams of salami or halva on the way to school to supplement their plain black bread during the lunch break. Some of the kids would sacrifice this delicacy and have dry bread alone so they could buy a stamp and fill up the maps in the booklet sooner. A substantial part of my sister Sheva's money and my money was spent on those stamps.

My sister and I and many others felt affection, commitment and dedication to the ideal of Zionism and the land of Israel to a degree now difficult to comprehend. Such self-sacrifice for Israel among Diaspora Jewish youth is now, I am afraid, a thing of the past.

The importance of collecting money for the above-mentioned purpose was not left only to schoolchildren and their teachers. Young people, teenagers and older, organized evening entertainment for raising money for JNF. The main such project was called a bazaar. It was a weeklong festival that started with a Purim-Ball. (Purim is an early spring holiday in commemoration of the tale told in the Biblical book of Esther.) Working people did not spend late evenings there, but the young and the unemployed did. Dancing would take place in the large room in our school. In fact, the entire school was emptied to be used in the bazaar and classes were suspended for a whole week. We children only spent a few hours sleeping and eating at home. The rest of the time was spent at the bazaar. It was the only time of year that parents allowed their children to come and go as they pleased.

For the opening evening of the bazaar, they imported a wind instrument orchestra from Pruzany, consisting of a half dozen Jewish musicians. The other nights we were entertained by a few local amateur musicians playing string-instruments. Not being

professionals and not having traveling expenses, they charged much less to play. After all the purpose of the bazaar was to raise money.

One classroom was converted into a modest cafeteria where one could buy tea, coffee and kvass (a kind of a soft drink) to wash down the available light sandwiches, jelly doughnuts and other sweets. Another classroom served as a store where merchandise was displayed. Some of it was donated by local merchants, but most of it was donated by manufacturers across Poland. I recall my father's youngest brother, Eli, who, having come for weekends from high school in Pruzany, would sit and write letters to Jewish manufacturers asking for contributions of their product to the bazaar. These contributions were beneficial to both parties. Sale of the free merchandise brought in additional money for the bazaar, while the manufacturer could get his product advertised at minimal cost. Some Jewish firms were far more generous than was warranted purely by business consideration.

With the establishment of Betar in Shershev, there was a campaign to raise money for *Keren-Tel-Chai* (fund for the revisionist organization). However when Jabotinsky quit the old established Zionist organization and set up a new one, he temporarily lost some of his supporters. The reason was that Revisionists had little chance of obtaining a permit to go to Palestine because The Marxist Zionist organizations controlled those permits. This reduced the attractiveness of Revisionism to the Jewish public and, as a result, *Keren-Tel-Chai* never became a serious competitor to JNF.

My mother and my grandmother, Freida-Leah, both decided that my grandmother should move even closer to us. They found a room in a house belonging to a certain Chaya-Liba Shterman, one house away from our house. In the house between the Shtermans and us lived Nachman Feldman with his wife Tzinah and daughter Sarah. Nachman was an upper-shoe stitcher. In my time, he wasn't working anymore but had a couple of young apprentices working for him.

Our two houses were separated by a driveway that led to both our backyards. His house was perpendicular to the Market Square; that is, its narrow side faced the square.

The part facing the square had a haberdashery store. The gossip in the shtetl was that the store was his daughter's dowry. Indeed, his daughter, Sarah, got married shortly thereafter but continued living in her parents' house and ran the store. Her husband Osher, a decent and pleasant young man—found for her by her father in the Yeshiva in Brest-Litovsk—spent all day in the house studying Torah. I doubt if he ever entered the store or knew what was going on in there. As far as I remember, he sat continuously over the holy books, being waited upon by two women, his wife and his mother-in-law, who were doing it with great love.

The main reason my grandmother moved closer to us was her deteriorating health. My sister Sheva and I would visit her intermittently, bringing food so she shouldn't have to cook herself (even though she liked to do so). My grandmother's new landlady, Chaya-Liba Shternman, was then a woman of about fifty, a widow who lived with her daughter Shaina who was already of marriageable age. Mother and daughter ran a small yard-goods store that was in their half of a large house. The other half of the house belonged to *Nechemya der-Shteper* (an upper-shoe stitcher), who lived there with his wife Rivka and three children. Rivka was a daughter of my very first Melamed, Kepele Potchinker.

Some of their children still lived with my paternal grandparents on Mostowa Street: their younger daughter, Pola (Pesi), their second younger son Hershl, and their youngest son Eli, who was nine years older than I.

Another paternal uncle lived in Shershev: Reuben, who was about five years younger than my father. Reuben's wife was Chashka (nee Pinsky). They had a daughter Michla, two years my junior, a son Shalom, born in 1928, and were blessed with another baby boy in the mid 1930s. They named him Shevach after my father's older brother, who perished in the World War, and after whom my sister Sheva was also named.

My father's sister Shaindl lived in nearby Pruzany. She was married to Leibl Pinsky, who, by the way, was a brother of my aunt Chashka Kantorowitz. Both Leibl and his wife Shaindl were born in Shershev but lived in Pruzany.

My father also had a married brother in Pruzany, Joshua. His wife Mushkah gave birth to a son Shalom at about the same time as my brother Leibl (Liova) was born.

Mushkah was the daughter of Mordecai Leshtchinsky, from whom my father bought the store in the Rad-Kromen when he returned from Wierchy in 1930. Reb Mordecai, as he was known in the shtetl, was thus related to my grandfather Yaakov-Kopel by marriage. My grandfather Yaakov-Kopel remained a friend with him up to Mordecai's demise. Their friendship wasn't interrupted even after my aunt Mushkah died in 1934. My Uncle Joshua, her husband, took her to Stockholm for an operation, for which there were neither facilities nor competent doctors in Poland. My Uncle Joshua remained a widower with two small children for a year and then married a single girl from Pruzany, quite a few years younger than he was. Her name was Freida Goldfarb and they had two more children of their own before the war.

A mass emigration from Eastern Europe to the American continent, particularly the United States, began in the nineteenth century. It took in all levels of the population, regardless of nationality or religion, and included many Jews. After the First World War, the gates of the United States were partly closed, and the second-best place became South America. The majority of the emigrants were poor people who worked hard to make a living or couldn't make one at all. Others felt that they could improve their standard of living somewhere else. Still others wanted to escape their mundane small town life and look for a more exciting or a more promising and more assured tomorrow. My father's brother Shalom was in this last category. Of all my paternal aunts and uncles, he was the only one that left his birthplace to look for new horizons in the far-away world. He chose Argentina. I personally don't remember him but as long as I can remember, I knew that my father had a brother in Argentina.

Because of the difficulties of the Great Depression in 1929 and the ensuing years, left-wing politics became popular: socialism or Communism. Idealistic young people saw a solution in helping to build a socialistic society, a workers' paradise, in the Soviet Union. Many of them made the terrible mistake of volunteering to go to the Soviet Union—my uncle Shalom and his young bride Sarah among them. They left Buenos Aires in 1930 for the Soviet Union. The road took them via Warsaw, where my father traveled surreptitiously to visit them. There were two related reasons for my father to be

secretive. First, my father's brother was a Polish citizen and Poland was on bad terms with the Soviets. The border was closed by Poland for Polish citizens and Communists were being arrested and prosecuted. Second, to meet someone traveling to the Soviet Union would make my father a suspect in the eyes of the Polish law; and not only him, but also the entire Kantorowitz clan. His meeting in Warsaw remained secret for a long time.

Shalom Kantorowitz corresponded with my grandparents from the Soviet Union until 1933, when his letters suddenly stopped. The entire family became uneasy, for we had an inkling of the situation in the Soviet Union. Although parts of the rumors were attributable to Polish anti-Bolshevik propaganda, we still knew that people in the Soviet Union walked a tightrope.

In late fall of 1933, a letter came from Shalom's wife—not from the Soviet Union, but from Argentina. It came to my parents and not to my grandparents. She deliberately addressed it to us to avoid having to tell the sad news to her in-laws. She wrote that she gave birth to a baby girl in Birobijan (which was a Siberian territory of the Soviet Union, propagandized as a Jewish homeland). Shortly afterward, her husband passed away and she returned to Buenos Aires with her three-month old baby. I don't know exactly how Shalom died. It was never spoken about in the presence of us children. In my opinion, there were two likely reasons: A sickness, fatal without proper medical attention, or Stalin's terror.

My father and his brothers were not in a hurry to pass on such news to their parents. My paternal grandmother felt that something had happened to her son and finally wrote a letter to her daughter-in-law's parents in Argentina asking them for the anniversary of her son's demise. They took it for granted that she knew the truth and wrote her the date. My grandmother observed a full year's mourning from the time she found out, thus being stricter in observance than the eleven months less-a-day required by tradition.

My father's two younger brothers were single and still lived at home with their parents. They enjoyed listening to music on their record player. In compliance with Jewish tradition, my grandmother removed the arm of the record player, thus preventing

them from using it so that no music would be heard in the house during the year of mourning. She gave the phonograph arm to my father for safekeeping after making him promise not to return it to his brothers before the year was up.

With the demise of my father's brother Shalom, none of the nine children of my grandparents Kantorowitz or their descendants would survive the demise of European Jewry except for Shalom's child and me.

This is how people struggled. Berl Gichman, his wife, his two sons Chayim-Todle and Moshe, and their daughter Malkah lived right on the river bend, a good distance behind the house of their cousins, the brothers Isser and Feivel Gichman. Inside the yard close to Berl's house were a few warehouses, large by Shershev standards. The Gichman brothers kept their wares in them. Their wares were rags that they would buy from the couple of dozen ragmen.

The ragmen used to return home on Thursday evening or early on Friday morning for the Sabbath after a week's business in the surrounding villages, obtaining rags by bartering them for needles, thread, drinking glasses, kitchen utensils, pocketknives and the like. Coming into the shtetl, they would drive their horse and buggy to the Gichman brothers' yard and unload their rags. At times, they also had bristle and horsehair to sell to the Gichmans. In the warehouse full of rags, filth and dust sat two permanent employees all day long, sewing rags together by hand to make large bags and stuffing still more rags or bristle and horse hair into them. The stuffed bags were taken by horse and wagon to the railway station at Linovo-Oranczyce, thirty kilometers away. From there, a train took them to factories in Warsaw. The hair and bristle went to brush-making factories and the rags to textile factories to be made into fiber for new yard goods.

I mention the two permanent employees of the Gichman brothers partly because they were so poor and wretched, and partly because they are among the millions who have nobody left to remember their names. One was a middle-aged man, Rueben Waldman, who was married with half a dozen children. One of his daughters was in my class in the Polish school. He was a tailor by trade. Unfortunately, he couldn't speak or hear from birth. In those days, this was a much greater impediment than it is nowadays.

He could not get employment with other tailors, nor could he get his own clients. The only job he could find was to sew rags into sacks.

The other man was in his fifties. I doubt if anyone in the shtetl knew his family name. His first name was Avromkah. He was a single man, short and stocky with a short gray beard. He spent some years in the States and, apparently due to mental illness, was sent back home. In my time, he lived in a small house on Chazer-Gesl (Pig Lane). It was owned by a widow woman with children. She, poor soul, needed the couple zloty so badly that she let him a room so tiny that only a man five feet tall like Avromkah could stretch his full length on its floor.

Still, despite working all year round, Avromkah could not exist on his pay and used to take off Thursday afternoons to go around to homes to beg for alms. When I got older, my father used to leave me alone to mind the store for a couple of hours during vacation time. My friends used to join me, and if Avromkah came for his weekly handout, he would sing to us Jewish songs he brought from America for a few extra groshy—songs like *Der Talisl*, *Ales oif Steam*, and others that I have since forgotten. The rag men were two wretched, poor things, among many in the Shtetl that nature, fate and humanity wronged so greatly.

The other activity of the Gichmans was food exporting. In summer, many women, Jews and non-Jews, used to supplement their husbands' income by picking blueberries and cranberries in the surrounding forest when they were in season. Some sold them by the tea-glass in the street. However, most of them used to sell them to the Gichman brothers, who would ship them to the larger exportation centers on the same day. Many men, but mostly boys, would pick mushrooms. Some saved them for themselves, but others dried them and sold them to the Gichmans to export abroad.

As for Berl Gichman, in the spring he would rent a couple of orchards from the surrounding large landowners. It was a gamble. If the harvest was a good one, he could earn a few zloty to see him through the winter, but if not, his family went hungry all winter long. In reality, he couldn't win in any case. Even when the harvest was a good one, he was in trouble. Normally, he kept the fruits in the attic over the winter, up to the early spring. His house had no cellar, for it was too close to the river that flooded every

fall and spring, covering the floor of the house. So, he was forced to sell the extra fruits in season for a very low price. The attic was the only place where apples somehow survived the winter, not cold enough to freeze and not warm enough to spoil. Yet spoil they did. So almost every day he and his children used to pick over the apples, taking out those starting to rot to be sold first. His wife used to spend every day of the week throughout the entire winter (except for the Sabbath) selling half-rotten apples. I believe he also kept some apples and pears in the maze of cellars under the brick synagogue located in the lane between my uncle Rueben's house and the rabbi's house in the Market Square. With early spring of 1934, Berl Gichman's wife started selling off their last half-rotten apples from last fall.

## **Chapter 6**

The first vegetable to appear in spring was the shallot. The local farmers would pinch off the long green stems and sell it by the bunch. The stems had to be open to make sure there were no little green worms in them. They then were washed, cut into centimeter-long pieces, mixed thick with water, vinegar and sugar, and served as the first salad of the season, to go with meat dishes.

The first fruits of the season were the early cherries. These were yellow with no particular taste. A couple weeks later the real cherries appeared, dark, red and sweet. Next came lettuce. A week or two later, small round radishes. Then cucumbers, then cauliflower, and still later, the first carrots, tomatoes, beets and the rest of the vegetables. There were no real coolers or freezers in Shershev in those days, yet people needed to keep these perishables as long as feasible.

As soon as the fruits from the surrounding villages appeared in the market, my mother started to prepare them for the winter, beginning with cherries. We had a little wooden barrel at home: some 30-35 centimeters in diameter and 60-65 centimeters in length lying on its side. It was given to us by my grandmother Auerbuch when she sold her house after the death of her husband. I remember it as always full of cherries fermenting in sugar and vodka. It had a faucet on one side to let some of the delicious



cherry-brandy out so that my grandmother, Freida-Leah, could treat her special visitors. She also would fish out a few cherries with a spoon through a large opening on the side that was normally plugged up with a large cork. She would give the cherries to my sister Sheva and me.

This barrel of cherries and brandy was never empty. As soon as the new cherries appeared, my father would buy a pail of them. My mother and her maid would wash and pit the cherries and pour them through the opening of the barrel, which contained some of last year's cherries. On top, my mother would pour a couple of kilograms of sugar and, finally, a bottle of vodka. This brew would ferment for a couple of weeks and turn into a real cherry brandy that privileged guests relished more than the well known Polish Baczewski liquor that my father used to sell in our store. (This little barrel, almost full, was left behind with everything else when we were expelled from Shershev.)

After the cherries came the strawberries. Farmers used to bring them by the wagonload and sell them by the quart (or kilo if the farmer owned a scale). During the strawberry season, we ate them in different ways: plain strawberries with sour cream and buttered bread as a snack or as a dessert. I used to add sugar, having a sweet tooth. In season, my father used to buy ten to fifteen kilos at once. My mother and the maid would pick them over, wash them, put them into a large copper basin, cover them with a thick layer of sugar, and then leave them for 48 hours. By then, the sugar was absorbed by the strawberry juice and vice-versa. The entire copper container was then placed on the stove and cooked for a couple of hours, using all burners. While it was cooking, the foam that formed on top was taken off with a spoon. It was the most delicious thing I have ever tasted.

Next came the raspberries. These were prepared in two ways. One was the same as with the strawberries. The other was to strain them through a piece of linen after cooking them and save the liquid part in a cool cellar for a day or two. It would jell into the highest quality raspberry jelly. The same was done with cherries and plums. Blueberry preserving had an additional purpose. They were preserved, as we used to say in Shershev, so they "should not be needed"; that is, just in case. It was believed that blueberries are a great medicine for stomach ailments, particularly dysentery.

Last to be preserved in the fall were cranberries, which are very sour. To make them palatable, they had to be boiled kilo for kilo with sugar. For me, with a sweet tooth, it was never too sweet. My mother served it with meat for dinner. For winter, my mother used to fill up a shelf full of large earthen jars with cranberry jam. It was also used on bread as a snack.

We would also dry apples and pears, particularly pears because they required less work. They had to be washed, cut in half, strung with a large needle on a fine cord, and put in a heated oven to bake for 24 hours. Apples on the other hand had to be peeled and sliced into thin slices, which required more time. We youngsters did not like them, as much because they were not as sweet as pears.

Although local Shershev farmers produced plenty of cucumbers, most of the cucumbers came from the nearby village of Waszki, two kilometers away, as Waszki cucumbers were cheaper. This village was characteristic of many in my province, Polesie, and the entire Prypec basin. Today one can only read about or dream about them.

The village of Waszki was in the midst of a swamp. Its only connection with the outside world was through a walkway of wooden planks suspended by poles stuck in the swamp. This walkway extended for almost the entire two-kilometer distance to Shershev. In order to sell their produce, the villagers of Waszki carried it on their backs to the market in Shershev. We washed the cucumbers and put them into a large wooden barrel spiced with dill, garlic, bay leaves and other spices. We then topped up the barrel with water and left the cucumbers in the cellar to sour.

A similar process took place during the making of sauerkraut, except that it was done on the living room table and the whole family participated in chopping up the cabbage. While filling up the barrel, some cranberries were occasionally added to give the sauerkraut a nice appearance in the barrel and on the plate. Both items, the sour pickles and the sauerkraut, would last all winter in the cellar, together with the sacks of potatoes, beets, and carrots, not to mention the preserves.

The summer vacation in 1933 was as pleasant as always, yet one could feel uneasiness among the Jews of Shershev. People began reading the newspapers more thoroughly, but nobody told us 10-year-olds the reason.

I recall one day as the newspapers arrived carrying the headlines announcing the death of the most popular Hebrew poet. They read, "Chaim Nachman Bialik Is Dead." I believe that it made a greater impact on us youngsters than on the grown-ups, for we had just begun to study and memorize his beautiful and moving poetry.

Two Jewish newspapers competed in Shershev, the rightist *Der Moment* and the leftist *Haynt*. Both were printed in Warsaw at midnight and arrived in Pruzany in the morning and Shershev at noon. The Shershev franchise for both newspapers belonged to a man by the name of Moshe Bikstein. He would wait for the arrival of the bus with the papers at noon and then distribute them to his subscribers.

For one person to subscribe to a newspaper by himself was too expensive. People formed partnerships of two to four people per newspaper. My father and grandfather were partners to one paper; when one was finished with it, the other got it. If there were four partners to a paper, the paper was in use all day. Some partners used to get it the following morning.

Three kilometers from Pruzany, in the direction of Shershev and a kilometer off the main road, was a village called Shubitch, whose inhabitants were farmers. Next to their fields, was an estate belonging to a Jewish man by the name of Brzyzyski, a decent, respectable, humane, and committed Jew. The main building of the estate was a big house with many rooms. There also were a couple of smaller buildings for the help, a couple of long buildings with individual rooms and kitchens, a few separate cabins, some stables and barns for the few dozen cows and horses, and some sheds for farm machinery. All this was surrounded by many hectares of land and pastures.

The estate was divided in half by a road leading from the estate to the main road of Pruzany, which went to Bialowieza via Shershev. One-half of the forest, close to the village, was on low ground and consisted of leafy trees. The other half was on higher sandy ground overgrown with pine trees. The pine forest attracted many wives and their

children from Pruzany and a few from Shershev for the summer. With the increase in our family, my mother had to give up our yearly summer vacations in Domaczewo, which was over a hundred kilometers away. It was a strain on my mother and my little brother, Liova, as well as my two little sisters Sonia and Liba, who was still an infant, so my mother settled for the much closer Shubitch.

At the Brzezinski's, my mother could rent a large room and a kitchen where she could cook meals for the family. My father used to stay at home to keep the store open and come out on Friday afternoons on the bus that ran between Shershev and Pruzany. He returned the same way on Saturday night.

In those days, fat children were fashionable and fattening the children seemed to be the purpose of going to the country. My mother would spend entire days making us delicacies to induce us to eat more. The requisite was two eggs and a glass of milk 3 times a day. In order to drink the milk, my mother used to bribe me with a piece of chocolate. After this we were suppose to eat a regular meal. Small wonder that we did not want to eat and even my mother's bribes did not help. On hot days, my mother's entire effort was likely to remain on the table untouched. (Those tables laden with all sorts of good food that I refused to eat haunted me throughout the dark and hungry days of Auschwitz, giving me no respite from my regrets.)

The other two families from Shershev that used to spend the summers with us in Shubitch were those of my Uncle Reuben Kantorowitz and Avram Kolodzicky. They, working men just like my father, used to come to the country for the Sabbath.

As far as I remember, the owner of the estate had four sons and one daughter. The oldest, Label, some dozen years older than I, was built like a wrestler. He left for the land of Israel in 1931 or 1932. The second, Peipe, was a tall handsome young man, like the movie stars of old. The third, three or four years older than I was, was called Moniek (Moishe) and the youngest, Yoshpe (Joseph), was my age. Their daughter Minah, some eight or nine years older than I, used to entertain us children with songs. The sound of her voice was that of a nightingale and it kept on flowing from a mouth adorned with the most beautiful teeth I have ever seen. (I heard that she got married before the war and perished in Auschwitz with all the inhabitants of Pruzany including her husband, child,

and youngest brother, Yoshpe. Fortunately, the two middle brothers, Peipe and Moniek, managed to join their older brother Leibl in Israel shortly before the war. By chance, I met the surviving Brzyzyski brothers at a memorial service for the ghetto in Pruzany some fifteen years after the end of the war. It was held in Tel-Aviv at Bet Hachalutz.)

It seems that for my mother, one month of "rest" in the country was enough, and she and the children then returned home. I stayed on for another week or two with my Aunt Chashkah, Reuben Kantorowitz's wife, and her children. I returned home with Rubin on a Saturday night by bus, in this way extending the most enjoyable part of my summer vacation.

For my uncle and me to catch the 10:00 PM bus going from Pruzany to Shershev, we had to leave Shubitch and walk along a field road for a kilometer to the main road. We gave ourselves enough time to get to the road early. Having nothing to do, I stretched myself out on the grass and looked up to the dark blue sky, strewn with countless stars. It was a dark night and it seemed that one could count them all. I think that it was the first time, and maybe the only time, I ever saw such a starry sky.

It was good to come back home to mom and dad and to my older sister, Sheva, who always acted towards me like a devoted big sister and guardian. She imitated my mother, pampering me and giving in to my every whim. My little brother, Liova (Label), was almost seven years younger than I and looked up to his older brother with love and admiration. Then there were my two little sisters: Sonia, then three years old, and Liba, just one and one-half years old. Our family, like many others in Shershev those days, was very tightly knit and raised to be interdependent and devoted to each other. I can recall that by 1934, when my parents used to go out occasionally to visit family or friends for the evening, they had me and my sister look after the little ones. My sister Sheva was not 13 years old and I was only 11. If one of the little ones woke up, my sister and I would take turns holding them in our arms and walking with them back and forth until they fell asleep. We never ran to our parents for help.

The last few weeks of the 1933-34 school year went by fast, but with a touch of apprehension, for my father had decided to do with me what he had done with my sister

Sheva: to transfer me to the Polish school. Because of my poor knowledge of the Polish language, I, like my sister, had to lose an entire school year. Having just finished the grade 4 at Hebrew school, I was accepted in grade 4 of the public Polish school. I considered myself lucky to lose just one year of school, for the boys that had graduated from grade 7 of the Hebrew school at the same time were accepted into grade 5 of the Polish school, thus losing three years while I lost only one. All of this was due to a lack of knowledge of the Polish language, for it is my opinion that the level of education in the Hebrew school of the other subjects was somewhat higher than in the Polish, just as, even today, private school education is usually academically superior to public education.

In the Polish school, I found myself among children who spoke a hardly familiar language, who knew each other but ignored me. They seemed to be rougher in conduct and language. Their dress, and even their smell, was somewhat different. The school was situated in the Court Lane, over half a kilometer farther from our house than the Hebrew school. It had many more rooms, two each from grade 1 to grade 4, and one for each of grades 5, 6, and 7, with class size decreasing due to attrition and grade failure. Grade 5 was usually the largest class, but by the time it reached grade 7, it had shrunk to the usual forty pupils per class.

Being much larger than the Hebrew school, it had a much larger yard, partly surrounded by a fence. The large space between the school and the road was planted with osier (a type of willow tree), which was used by the students for arts and crafts lessons. A sturdy fence separated the schoolyard from the street. Along and behind the fence in the yard was a hundred-meter long ditch that used to be full of stagnant water all year long. In an exceptional hot summer, the water used to dry out for a few weeks and the smell of the dead tadpoles and frogs carried quite a distance. The ditch was overgrown with trees on either side. The most noticeable were a couple of huge oak trees whose branches covered not only the ditch, but reached over the fence and the other side of the road. During the end of August, numerous acorns fell from these trees and covered the road almost ankle deep. Nobody bothered to pick them up.

There were around 450 students in that school compared to 125 in the Hebrew school. Among them were 100 Jewish children, mostly girls. Jewish parents wanted to

give their sons a Jewish education so they would be able to pray and know some of the Torah. This they could only get in the Hebrew school or in heder, so most of the Jewish boys were there. It was not considered necessary for a girl to know the Torah, as long as she knew the laws for women. Therefore, many Jewish girls attended the Polish school where education was free. Other Jewish boys, sons of tradesmen, used to quit school and start learning the trade of their fathers at the age of 12 or 13.

The school building itself was the largest wooden structure in the shtetl and in it were the living quarters of the principal. He was a tall man of about forty by the name of Falszewsky, whose wife was noticeably younger and exceptionally beautiful. They had no children. He was from deep Poland, a former Pilsudski legionary, a fanatical nationalist, patriot and anti-Semite. His outlook was the same as all the other migrant Poles sent to reclaim the Polésie territories for Poland. They alienated the local Belorussian population by acting like their masters.

The school had a large room especially for arts and crafts and an adjoining room for tools. There was also a kitchen for poor and needy children, who would get a bowl of soup during the long break. Understandably, Jewish kids did not eat there for two reasons. First, the school executive would refer such Jewish kids to a Jewish welfare organization who would look after them. Second, Jewish children would not eat in a kitchen run by non-Jews without ritual supervision.

The school office took up a large room having to accommodate a dozen teachers, two of them local men. One of them, a single middle-aged man, Wujtkowsky, lived with his middle aged, single sister and their mother in a huge wooden house that served once as a rich landowner's mansion. This, his ancestral home, for reasons unknown to me, lost its glitter in the last one or two generations. Apparently, the financial situation turned around and the house that once served as the seat of a rich and powerful Polish landowner took on the form of a shabby, threadbare, eerie relic of former glory. Even in the large yard, the fallen fences and neglected orchard added to its ghostly presence. The whole place seemed to be haunted and people avoided it. Even youngsters from the neighboring houses did not dare run in and grab some ripe, appetizing apples or other fruit. They lay there rotting in the weedy, overgrown orchard. I recall as an eight- or ten- year-old boy, I

was taken along to the house on a Saturday afternoon by my Uncle Hershel. He and a group of young men and girls went to visit their former teacher, Wujtkowsky's sister. I vaguely remember the inside of that house, the large rooms full of furniture for which I could not see a purpose: carpets on the floor and more on the walls depicting all kinds of exotic places and fantasies, countless couches and heavily-padded chairs, and a large black grand-piano in the middle of one room. The windows were heavily draped and did not let in much daylight. Even as a 10-year-old boy, I noticed the decadent and worn out look of everything. Wujtkowsky, a Pole whose family had lived under Russian rule for almost two centuries and retained its Polish identity and language, did not feel bitter or hurt by his family's reversal of fortunes. He remained a decent man who fulfilled his job as a teacher exemplarily.

The second local teacher was a man of about fifty by the name of Leonczuk who graduated from a teacher's seminary during the Czar's reign. When the Poles took over the territories of western Belarus and Ukraine in 1920, he remained in his birthplace, Shershev. Although Russian Orthodox by faith, or, as they were called, Pravoslavny, the Poles retained him as a teacher with his slightly Russian-accented Polish. It could have been the shortage of Polish teachers in our part of Poland. Outwardly and in general he made a very good impression on the population and the students, and certainly could not be accused of anti-Semitism. He had two daughters, one who was my sister Sheva's age and her classmate. The second was my age and my classmate. Both were well-behaved girls to whom it made little difference in their friendships whether their classmates were Christian or Jewish.

Leonczuk's only weakness was a desire to drink. As a government employee and particularly as a teacher, it would not be becoming to do it in public at one of the shtetl's four taverns. His wife seems to have forbidden him to drink at home. There was only one retail store, ours, but it was strictly forbidden neither to drink there nor even to unseal a bottle. Every day this teacher on his way to school and back had to pass the Market Square where most of the stores were, including ours. Quite often on his way back from school, this teacher could not withstand the temptation and used to come in to our store for a bottle of vodka. After persistent nagging and pestering, he succeeded in getting my



father's permission to buy a small hundred-gram bottle of vodka, go behind the shelves in the storage space and with one movement; he poured it down his throat.

Wujtkowsky and Leonczuk were the only two teachers permanently employed in Shershev up to the war. All others were rotated in and out every few years.

Of course, the language of instruction in school was Polish but we Jewish children spoke Yiddish among ourselves. The Christians spoke the same White Russian they spoke at home. Conversation among Jews and non-Jews was also conducted in the local White Russian dialect. Among 450 students in the school, probably a dozen or fewer normally spoke Polish. They were the children of the government employees that came from Poland proper to run things.

As an exception to the usual rule, there was one Jewish family in Shershev where only Polish was spoken—the family of the pharmacist Baumritter. In his house, Russian was spoken up to 1930 and then they suddenly switched to Polish. He had two daughters: the younger one, Lola, was in my class; her sister Mira was ten years older. Just before the start of the war, Lola, at the age of fifteen, was already renowned over the entire district for her beauty. Baumritter's sister was the shtetl's dentist. She married in the early 1930s, when she was in her forties. Her husband was a dental technician. They accommodated all their customers and patients in the appropriate language: Jews in Yiddish, locals in White Russian, and Poles in Polish.

My first year in the Polish school was very difficult. I had trouble communicating with my teachers and with the non-Jewish students. Fortunately, some of the Jewish students had the same problem, and as the saying goes, "shared miseries are endurable." My father was also of help. He made sure that I came to the store after school. He would review with me all I learned in school and made sure that my homework was in order.

I still cannot understand where and when my father learned Polish, for his background was Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. Yet he spoke and wrote perfect Polish. When Jews had problems with the government and had to petition or apply to the authorities in Pruzany, they would come to my father to write for them. They preferred him to the local barrister, one of the reasons being that my father did it, as we say in Hebrew, *l'shem mitzvah* (as a good deed and not for pay).

I do not know why, but I developed a taste for Polish history. My father made sure that I memorized each lesson. In every term, I would get the highest mark in it, despite the language problem. My second-highest mark was in mathematics class; I continued to be first in this subject up to graduation. My only challenger in math was the other Jewish boy in class, Laizer Eisenstein, whose father, Yaakov-Berl, had been my second melamed. Yaakov-Berl, by the way, had started giving private Hebrew lessons to my sister Sheva as soon as she transferred to the Polish school, and he then did the same for me. He would come to us at 6:00 PM for an hour to teach us Hebrew. After that, he gave us a half-hour violin lesson,

The order of school days changed for me, too. In the Hebrew school we attended six days a week, excluding Saturday (the Sabbath), while Sunday was an ordinary school day. In the Polish school, we had to attend Saturday under the threat of expulsion in case of absence. However, Jewish children were not obliged to write on Saturday, which they would not do in any case, even under the penalty of expulsion. We Jewish children sat in school on Saturdays without touching pen, pencil or chalk.

Slowly, I started to master the Polish language. Still, I felt that it was not enough. Fortunately for me, the others, the Christian students, had the same problem and we were all held back in this subject. However, because of my good performance in mathematics, nature study, science and geography, I was considered a good student.

I mentioned Wujtkowsky and Leonczuk as fair-minded and decent teachers who did not exhibit anti-Semitism. They were not typical and, in that school, I came face-to-face for the first time with outright anti-Semitism. Of course, I had heard about it, but I really did not understand it.

There were two teachers, a married couple by the name of Gulawsky. They lived on a short little street called Kapielica at the end of Ostrowiecka Street leading to the village of Zaretche. The wife, a tall, aristocratic-looking woman, was aloof even from the other teachers. She taught us drawing and had a talent for art that even we children could appreciate. Her husband, a shorter man, was always seen with his walking cane. It was actually a mountain-climbing stick with a sharp metal point at the bottom and a metal

elongated head on top. One end had an ax-like shape and the other end had a pick-ax point. A story was going around the shtetl that when an acquaintance asked why he needed such a cane when there was no mountain within five hundred kilometers, he replied that it would come in handy to split Jewish heads.

When I was promoted to Grade 5 during the following year, Mr. Gulawky became our gym teacher. One time he took the class for a walk to a nearby forest, by the name of Kupiczter Woods. The forest terrain was covered with conifer cones and the classmates started throwing them at us—the two Jewish boys. At first we ignored it, but instead of stopping, the throwing intensified. The teacher pretended not to see it. Finally, we protested to him. He then turned to the students with those words: "One should not deal with Jews in such an obvious way. One should approach it in a more civilized way, like not give work to Jewish craftsmen or artisans, and more important, not buy from Jewish stores." This was said by a teacher in so-called democratic Poland even before the Nuremberg Laws appeared in Nazi Germany. Still, who could have foreseen what the future held for Europe in general and the Jews in particular?

The year 1934 was ending. Christmas was approaching and the class began to learn and rehearse carols. To me, it was a new and completely alien phenomenon. Jewish kids were exempt from singing but had to attend it, just as we had to attend every Morning Prayer but were exempt from reciting it. Jewish students were also exempt from religious classes conducted for Catholic students by the priest and for Greek Orthodox students by the Greek Orthodox priest, or pope as he used to be called. While we two Jewish boys did not attend those classes, we felt their after-effects right after the class was over. There were insults, name-calling, pushing and kicking that began with renewed rage and fury after every religious lecture.

It all was difficult to adjust to. True, we were exempt from attending classes on Jewish holidays (except Saturdays), but I still missed the pre-holiday atmosphere in the Hebrew school. Instead, we were introduced to a new number of holidays that were unknown to me up to that time. We had celebrated the semi-religious, semi-national holidays at Hebrew School and at home. Now, during these holidays, contact with non-Jewish classmates was cool and limited to discussion of lessons, particularly in math, where we

Jewish boys excelled. When a Christian pupil felt obliged to speak to a Jewish pupil a bit longer, he would be reproached by a friend.

After the summer vacation of 1935, I was in grade 5 and my sister Sheva began grade 7. There were a few Jewish girls and two Jewish boys in her class. One of the girls was her friend, Choma (Nechama) Liverant, the Rabbi's youngest daughter, and the other girl, Tieble Chidricky, had a younger sister who was in my class. The two boys were Laizer (Lazar) Rotenberg, who was one of my best friends although two years older than I, and Meir Liverant, the rabbi's older son. The rabbi did not send his children to the Hebrew school because the religious lessons were not traditional enough for him.

Although I had already spent a year in that school, I somehow forgot over the summer what it was like to spend so much time in a non-Jewish environment. By fall, if the attitudes of the Christian boys towards the two Jewish ones in my class had changed at all, it was for the worse.

The fifth grade was formed from the former classes of grade 4 and thus was larger, both in space and in number of students. There were at least sixty students, among them ten Jewish kids—eight girls and two boys. It is noteworthy that all ten Jewish kids graduated from grade 7 three years later, although the total graduating class had dwindled from sixty to forty. Again, the attendance of Jewish boys in the Polish public school was minimal, for it was of great importance to parents to give a Jewish boy a Jewish religious education, which they could obtain either in the Hebrew school (elementary age) or in a *cheder* (which started with preschool age). This was why there were so many cheders in Shershev although it had an accredited Hebrew school.

I was not the only one to put up with anti-Semitic hostility in school. Jewish students were always subjected to it to a certain degree of it in every grade. It only fluctuated in intensity at various times. In my sister's seventh grade class, some students used to sneak up to a Jewish student and smear the lips of the student with a piece of pork, knowing that it was the most offensive act toward a Jew.

One day, my sister Sheva came home and told my parents that someone did this to her. The story reached my grandfather Yaakov-Kopl. By coincidence, a few days later, a delegation from the department of education in the provincial city of Brest-Litovsk came

to Shershev to see what could be done to improve the state of the school in respect to education, hygiene, discipline and other areas. At that meeting were representatives not only from the provincial capital but from the district town as well. My grandfather, Yaakov-Kopl, attended as the mayor. During that meeting as the subject of hygiene came up and discussion about its budget began, my grandfather announced that he would like to contribute personally a certain amount of money toward buying towels. Everybody looked up in astonishment: firstly, there was no request for donations but only a budgetary discussion; and, secondly, why towels in particular? To that my grandfather answered: so that Jewish students will have with something to wipe their lips after their classmates have smeared them with pork.

The principal blushed a bit and said that the guilty student had been punished for it. To that, my grandfather replied that it was neither the first nor the only such act. The principal promised to put a stop to it. However, as far as my sister and I knew, nobody was reprimanded, nor did these actions stop.

Vavrus, the gypsy patriarch who was killed by a policeman, left some dozen sons of ages ranging from ten to thirty. They were known not only as horse dealers and thieves, but also as violent, vicious fighters feared by the entire shtetl, Jews and non-Jews alike. One of those gypsy brothers, the second youngest, who was a year or two older than I, was in my class. The entire class—in fact, the entire school—feared him. It was not only that they feared him, but also the reputation of his family.

As usual, most students would take a light lunch to school to eat during the long break. It usually consisted of black bread with butter, or cheese or hard-boiled eggs. White bread, challah, or anything baked from wheat was seldom seen or eaten except for the Sabbath, simply because wheat flour was much more expensive. We, being one of the better-off families in Shershev, used to see white bread at home during the middle of the week, too. My mother would make sure that I take a white roll for lunch and not black bread. I used to notice envious glances from other students.

I got an idea. I offered a piece of the roll to that gypsy classmate, who accepted it greedily. From that time on, he became my protector; even the other Jewish boy in my

class benefited from it. The daily piece of roll protected me from many a beating and much shoving, pushing and other abuses.

Unfortunately, this protection lasted only through grade 5. Then the gypsy boy flunked and was held back in Grade 5, while I continued only to see the harassment and persecution return in Grade 6. That gypsy student did not remain in grade 5 long; he gave up school shortly thereafter. When I saw him a year later, it was at the market square, he was a full-grown man hanging around with a young group like him, following in his brother's footsteps, drinking and fighting likewise.

As I mentioned earlier, my gym teacher, Gulawsky, was an anti-Semite. According to the schedule, we had a gym lesson every Friday morning at 8 o'clock. For economy or other reasons, grades 5, 6 and 7 had their gym lesson at the same time under his supervision.

On Friday, May 12, 1935, just after eight o'clock, we were lining up in a row on the sport yard located at the corner of Mostava Street and Court Lane, some two hundred yards from our school, which we had just left. Gulawsky was facing us and instructing us about the exercise. Facing us, with his back to the fence, he could not see the chief of police walking along the other side of the fence. The chief's bearing was unusual, for he always walked erect with a military gait. This time, however, he walked slowly with his head lowered down.

Coming to the fence opposite Gulawsky, he stopped and called out to him. The teacher somewhat surprised, turned around. Seeing the chief of police, he came over to him. They greeted each other warmly being of the same elite Polish class, and after a short conversation, shook hands and the chief went on his way.

The teacher then turned toward us and began to approach our line, seemingly in my direction. Coming within a meter in front of me, he said in a calm and quiet voice, "Kantorowitz, wasz dziadek umarl" (Kantorowitz, your grandfather died.). I was taken aback and surprised. At that time, I had only one grandfather, that is my father's father, Yaakov-Kopl Kantorowitz, and on my way to school, I used to pass by my grandparent's house. I passed their house less than half an hour earlier and everything seemed in order.

How could the teacher know? Did the chief of police bring him the news? True, my grandfather was the mayor, but to those Poles he was no more than a despised Jew.

I said to the teacher, “How can it be? It is no more than half an hour that I passed by their house and everything seemed normal.” This time he answered putting emphasis on each word; I did not say your (*twoj*) singular, I said yours (*wasz*) plural—your Jewish grandfather, Marshal Pilsudski. Pilsudski, the leader of Poland, was a friend and protector of the Jews, which is why Poles nicknamed him the “Jewish grandfather.”

At that moment, as a twelve-year-old boy, I did not realize nor could I form the notion of the amount of weight those few words carried. I don't remember if school continued that day or not, but I remember how my parents and, in fact, everybody in the street was distressed over the news. All kinds of rumors began to circulate about the rising anti-Semitism and about the chances of a war with Germany, although at that time Hitler hadn't yet shown his fully aggressive ambitions, except for annexation of the Saar.<sup>1</sup>

In his youth, Pilsudski was not only a fervent Polish nationalist and patriot, but also an adherent socialist. Pilsudski's friendliness toward Jews was partly due to his early socialistic sympathies, but there may have been a more substantial reason, conveniently avoided in Polish history, like King Kazmir's affair with the Jewess Esther.<sup>2</sup> The *okrana* (czarist secret police) were constantly on his heels. Both his socialist ideals and his nationalist ideals qualified him for a long stay in Siberia.

Once, in Baranowicz, the czar's police noticed him and gave chase. Baranowicz, like most eastern European shtetls, was a maze of intervening streets and lanes closely huddled together, like the Jewish inhabitants in them—as if in proximity or closeness, there was security. Pilsudski, in his desperate attempt to escape, ran into a Jewish home with the police behind him, asking the owner to hide him. The Jew, having little sympathy for the anti-Semitic czarist police and guessing that the young Pole must be a revolutionary of sorts—or maybe just out of compassion or pity—risked his freedom by pushing the young Pole into the next room. He threw large *talis* (a prayer shawl, worn by

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Saarland was a disputed area on the border of Germany and France that voted in a plebiscite to join Germany in 1935.

<sup>2</sup> Editor's Note: King Kazmir, or Casimir the Great, was a 14<sup>th</sup> century Polish king who extended many rights to Jews. According to legend, he was married to a Jewess named Esther; their relationship symbolizes the special historical situation of Jews in Poland.

Jews during prayers) over him that covered his head, most of his face and his body. Sticking a prayer book in his hands, he told him to rock back and forth the way Jews do while praying. When the police burst into the house, looking in every corner, it never dawned on them to look at the Jew deeply engrossed in prayer. Therefore, they went to look for him in the neighboring houses.

Assuming this story is true,<sup>3</sup> Pilsudski never seems to have forgotten the favor that the Jewish stranger did for him, and the deep-rooted Polish anti-Semitism was kept in check while he was in charge. One thing is certain; after his death, persecution of Jews in Poland started in earnest, increasing as time went by.

The mourning for Pilsudski prior to his funeral lasted a week, during which time schools and offices were closed. People spent a lot of time listening to the couple of radios with loud speakers available in Shershev, which were playing funeral marches, or attending memorial services in synagogues. At the end of the week, Pilsudski's remains were laid to rest in the *Wawel* of Krakow (the burial place of many Polish kings and historical heroes). The mourning period continued to the end of the month, after which the country returned to its normal rhythm. Regretfully, "normal" it never remained.

Shortly, after Sukkoth, my grandmother Freida-Leah Auerbuch began to feel weaker and started to spend more and more time in bed. My mother had to prepare every meal for if my grandmother felt like eating. My sister Sheva and I used to go see our grandmother as soon as we got back from school.

Despite the fact that our grandmother lived only one house away from us, my mother preferred to have her with us. Right before Chanukah (the eight-day holiday commemorating the purification of the Temple by the Maccabees), we took grandmother to our house, where she spent the whole winter bedridden. Her situation kept getting worse. The doctor would come and write prescriptions that didn't seem to do much good. Even today, with medicine so advanced, there are no guarantees. One can imagine what it was like seventy years ago. As it was the fashion in those days, doctors ascribed infirmity in the old to old age.



Old and more recent friends and acquaintances of my grandmother and of ours used to come constantly to visit my grandmother. I cannot recall an evening when we were left alone. In addition, members of the Linas-Hatzedek (Benevolent Association) came, volunteers who sat up with the sick to give a night of rest to the members of the family.

On the day of her death, March 28, 1935, it was warm enough to play outdoors without a coat. We were playing near my friend Moshe Gelman's house, which was near "Reb-Isaac's Synagogue," when a woman well known to me, Chashah Krenitzer, passed by. I knew her well, for it was her husband, Nathan's mother, who used to live in my grandparents Auerbach's house. She was the old lady who used to bring us milk every morning, come rain or shine, summer or winter, for as long as I could remember. Chashah turned to me and almost casually asked: How is your grandmother? I, having been home no more than two hours ago answered, "About the same." She, without changing the tone of her voice or without any hint said, "You better go home."

I habitually obeyed older people and went straight home, where I found my grandmother lying on the floor, covered with a sheet, with two burning candles at her head. My mother stood bent over her crying bitterly. Quite a few people were in the house including neighbors, friends and acquaintances, or anybody who just heard the news. The women cried along with my mother. The men stood in silence some with sorrowful faces, others with downcast eyes, yet others in small groups of two or three whispering to one another.

All that late afternoon and evening, people kept on coming and going. Finally, they all left except for a couple of old men who continued to sit with the dead body, reading uninterruptedly psalms through the night. We kids fell asleep. I was awakened at five in the morning by my mother's quiet sobbing. Getting out of bed, I found my mother crying quietly over my grandmother Freida-Leah's body. It did not take long before we were all up, and my father tried to quiet her down a bit, but with little success.

<sup>3</sup> Editor's Note: This story is fairly common in Polish lore. Though the details change, the tale is always one of a Jew effecting the astonishing rescue of the young leader in Baranowicz's shtetl.

The two old men who had sat near the body all night got up quietly and left since they were no longer needed. It did not take long before the townspeople began to gather. First came the women from Khevre-Kadisha (burial society), who started the process of *tahara* (purification: cleaning the body before burial). Others started making the *tachrichim* (burial shrouds). Within a couple of hours, the purification was done and the shrouds were ready.

When I saw my grandmother, Freida-Leah, again, she was already dressed in the shrouds and was being put on the *mita* (bier). Over her was a black covering. Four men lifted the extended handles of the stretcher on their shoulders and in a slow procession began to carry my grandmother in the direction of the Jewish cemetery on Bes-Chayim Street. Behind them followed my mother, father, and us children. We were surrounded by in-laws: Peshah Winograd, her son Israel and his wife, Ghitl, with the children; Peshah's two daughters with their husbands; Tzina and Fyvel Leihman and Sarah and Yaakov-Meir Kabizecky. These were followed by more distant relatives by marriage like Alter Gellershtein and his son Zalman, my uncle Shloime's (Solomon) in-laws, the Maister family, my father's brother Reuben and his family, neighbors, friends and most of the townspeople.

Burial places were not reserved in advance in Shershev. People were buried in rows, one next to the other, in the order in which they were died. As we got to the cemetery my grandmother's grave was already dug and somebody noticed that the grave was exactly in front of my grandfather Laizer-Bear's stone, adding that they must have a lot of ancestral merit to be laying next to each other.

It is contrary to Jewish tradition to take pictures of funerals□. Because my grandmother had two sons in the states, my Uncle Shloime (Solomon) and a younger son Pesach (Phillip), the rabbi, Noah Liverant, gave permission to take pictures and send them to the sons. My mother was so observant of the law that she didn't even keep a picture for herself or for us.

As with my grandfather Laizer-Bear, they covered her eyes with pieces of pottery, sprinkled earth from Israel on her face, put an earthen pillow under her head, and put a piece of twig in each hand. The only thing that was missing was the *talis* (prayer shawl),

which is reserved for men only. This is all that a Jew takes with him or with her into the grave.

With a painful and grieving heart, I watched as my grandmother was being covered with boards and as the first shovels full of earth began to fall upon them. I don't know what was more painful for me then, the loss of my grandmother or the grief of my mother. We always loved Freida-Leah and received ten times as much in return, but only in the last few years had she become an inseparable part of our daily life. She died just as we began to fully realize and understand her love and devotion to us. My mother's heart-rending lament and cries of grief as the falling shovels full of earth were covering the boards, which slowly disappeared as the grave was being filled, should have awakened my grandmother from her eternal sleep.

Now after so many years, close to three-quarters of a century later, I can console myself with the fact that both of my mother's parents were favored with being buried in a Jewish cemetery according to Jewish law. Today, there is no sign of that Jewish cemetery, or any other sign of the over 500-year history of vibrant Jewish life in Shershev. A few years later when my parents, brother, and sisters were annihilated so brutally from this world, there was nobody left to mourn them. There is not even a grave left over which a mourner's Kaddish could be recited. In the mid-thirties, however, normality and sanity were still the order of the day.

Only after I matured did I fully understand how isolated my mother became with the death of her loving mother, who was devoted to her, body and soul. She now had no relatives from her parents' family in Shershev. In neighboring Pruzany, she had three cousins. One from her mother's side, Yosef Goldfarb, was a son of Boris-Leib Goldfarb, who was my grandmother Freida-Leah's brother. Yosef Goldfarb was my mother's age, married with a daughter, Pearl, who was my sister Sheva's age, and a son, Menachem (Marvin), who was my age. My grandmother's brother, Boris-Leib lived with his wife and one son, Yaakov, in Simferopol, Crimea. Another two cousins of my mother in Pruzany were from her father's side. They were daughters of my grandfather Laizer-Bear Auerbach's brother, Elkhonon (Chonah), who died before my time, leaving behind his wife Peshah and two daughters. The elder, Sheina-Rochl (Rachel), was married to Velvel

Chmielnicky and had two little daughters, Chana and Itti. Elkhonon's younger daughter, Taibl, was still single. The Chmielnicky family left for the land of Israel, then Palestine, in that very year, 1935.

With no family in Shershev, my mother used to spend a lot of time thinking and worrying about her brother Shloime (Solomon) and his family in New York. This is why I remember Uncle Shloime and his family so well although I was only six years old when they left. For, in conversation and in thought, they never left our house and my mother spoke of them continuously. She waited impatiently for a letter from her brother with the "good news." The "good-news" was to be that my uncle's older daughter Helen (Chvolkah) got engaged. With my mother, it was more than just a wish; it was a prayer that she repeated almost every day. Unfortunately, that prayer, like many others, was not answered. My cousin Helen died unmarried in New York at the age of seventy-three.

I did not remember the exact date my grandparents Auerbach died. It was only some fifteen years later on one of my first visits to my uncle Shloime (Solomon) and his family in New York that he gave me the exact dates: My grandfather Laizer-Bear ben (son of) Shloime-Chayim, died the 18<sup>th</sup> of the month of Cheshvan T.R.Z.V. according to the Hebrew calendar, corresponding to Oct. 29, 1932. My grandmother, Freida-Leah (nee Goldfarb) bat (daughter of) Nathan-Shabtai Hacoheh, died on the 24<sup>th</sup> of the month of Adar-Shainy T.R.Z.A., corresponding to March 29, 1935. I commemorate those days every year and intend to continue as long as I can.

My grandmother died not quite three weeks before Passover. One can imagine our mood and my mother's state of mind while we were preparing for the holiday. On the first Seder night the atmosphere was so tense that even the small children felt it. It did not take long before my mother broke out in a heart-rending lament in which my sister Sheva and, shortly afterward, I joined her. My little brother Liova (Leibl), who was almost six years old, my sister Sonia (Sarah), three and a half years old, and even my little sister, Liba, a year and a half old, looked at us with large uncomprehending fearful eyes, begging us not to cry.

However, there was no crying the second Seder night. Everyone tried to act normally, if it could be called so. The living must go on with their lives.

Although the sickness and death of Freida-Leah cast gloom over the year 1935, I still found time to play with my friends after school, do homework, and take the private Hebrew lessons from Yankl-Berl Eisenstein with my sister.

In winter 1934-35, our Betar unit received an unexpected and honored guest in the person of our former Hebrew school principal and founder of the Betar organization in Shershev, Yaakov-Shaye Peker. He had left Shershev a year and a half before and now returned as a teacher or, as they were called in Poland, professor, in the Hebrew gymnasium in Pinsk, as well as *mfaked-agalil* (commander) of Betar in the district of Poliese. He received this promotion from Betar headquarters in Warsaw.

Did he really come to visit the organization or did he want to impress the Shershev Jewish community with his double promotion to professor and district commander? Nobody knew. For us young boys, however, it was a real holiday.

On the evening of his visit to our locale, we were all dressed up in our uniforms: brown hats and brown shirts, navy pants and polished shoes. Lined up at attention like soldiers, not daring to blink an eye, we followed our commander as he strode along our lines in his uniform, hoping to be worthy of his glance. Deep in our hearts, we hoped that he still remembered and recognized us. After the command had been given to fall out from the attention stance and the atmosphere became informal, it turned out that he remembered most of us by name.

Some forty years later, I met him in New York at a reunion of holocaust survivors in memory of the ghetto at Pruzany□. It turned out that in 1939, at the outbreak of the war, he was in Warsaw. The high command of Betar managed to get to Romania with the German army in pursuit behind them. From Romania, they got to the land of Israel, still called Palestine then. After many years, he and his second wife and second daughter, Dara, named after his first daughter that perished with her mother in the Warsaw Ghetto, moved to the United States. To the best of my knowledge, he was my only Jewish teacher to survive the Holocaust.

Our original group of six friends had grown to eleven. This increase in size inevitably led to frictions, which eventually led to a split up. If it seems surprising that such a large group held together so long, I think the explanation is that the many Betar activities occupied most of our free time. Hence, in the winter 1935-6, our group of boys began to split into two groups. I started getting closer to the two brothers Lazar and Litek Rotenberg, Kalman Kalbkoif, Meir Kalbkoif and Itzik (Isaak) Maletzki. We met the others of our original group only in the Betar meetings.

With the approaching winter, we boys began to take advantage of the immense expanses around Shershev. As I mentioned earlier, the surrounding territory was as flat as a table. The little river, called Lesna from the Polish word *las* (forest), surrounded Shershev from every side and had its source somewhere in that forest. Seasonally, it would spill over its low lying banks, flooding surrounding meadows, marshes, quagmires, and low-lying fields, changing from a tiny river into a two-kilometer lake. When this lake froze, it became an immense skating rink for us.

The undisturbed ice, when clear of snow, was transparent, and we could skate to the end of the horizon and discover lands and swamps inaccessible to us in summer. Skating over such clear ice, we could see every blade of grass or plant, and even the variety of bugs that went on with their lives below the ice. At that time of year, the ice was thick and safe. Because all weeds and grass were below the ice, there was nothing to obstruct our skating and we could skate for kilometers. On a windy day, we would skate against the wind for a couple of kilometers, which was not an easy task. Having come to our destination, we used to turn around, unbutton the coats and open them as far as they would go. Our coat flaps acted as sails and the wind propelled us back to town. The pleasure of that effortless return ride made up by far for the effort of the previous struggle against the wind.

From time to time, we could see a fish that would leave the river of its summer confinement and venture to forage for a snack among the flattened grasses and weeds under the ice. Some would try to catch such a fish with a club shaped like a mace. They would hit the ice with the club in order to stun a fish within a meter of the point of impact. If that worked and the fish was stunned for a few seconds, there was enough time

to use the club to break the ice, no more than seven centimeters thick, and pull the fish up. All of this is more easily described than it was accomplished. By nature, fish do not linger in one place, but keep on moving. At times, they swim by faster than the blink of an eye, so it was necessary to be quicker than that. However, a few people used to earn a couple of zloty now and then by catching some fish. Some used to make fish traps from osier branches and place them under the ice. Every morning, they would make the rounds by breaking the ice and pulling the traps out. If they were lucky, they would find an occasional fish. Fish, like meat, had to be eaten quickly, as there were no ready means of preserving or freezing perishables.

After I had played on the ice with my friends for a couple hours, it was a pleasure to come home for dinner, which we always ate between 5:00 and 6:00 PM. The winter dinner always consisted of meat, plentiful and nutritious, with soup was served after the meat. That year my father started leaving me alone in the store while he went home for dinner. Earlier, my mother used to feed us and then go to watch the store, while my father used to come home to eat. The walk to the store took no more two or three minutes. In 1934, I would go with my sister Sheva to mind the store for the half-hour, but at the end of 1935 my father began to leave me there by myself. I, a thirteen year old, remained alone in a store with shelves full of vodka, wine and liquor, cigarettes and tobacco. I never had a problem with a customer, even a drunk. Things have changed a lot since then. Who would let a thirteen year old tend a liquor store today?

The lake on which we happily skated during the winter resulted in ice for Shershev in the summer, and I will take this opportunity to tell about it: along the east side—our side—of the Market Square were three brick houses, out of the eight in the square and in town. The one closest to us belonged to a Christian family by the name of Kolosko; the next house over belonged to the family of Alter Gellerstein; next to that and at the very corner of Ostrowiecka Street was the house of the family Maletzky, whose son Itzik was my friend.

The Gellerstein house was not only the biggest on the east side, but also had a lot of land behind it, most of it used for the biggest and best tended orchard in town. While

younger, Alter Gellerstein spent some years in the United States. After coming back to Shershev, he spent his savings on one of the biggest real estate pieces in town, namely this big brick house, the land around it, and a small brick building on the corner of the market square and the main street, Mostowa. This last served as a yard good store run by his then unmarried son Zalman, who was about thirty years old.

The main income of old man Gellerstein and his wife Esther Golda was from the large orchard, his garden, and the rent collected from tenants in part of his house. When his fruits ripened, he used to sit up nights to guard them against thieves. But the main attraction in their yard was their ice chamber. From the outside, it looked like a thatched roof resting on the ground. Opening a side door, one would look down a large hole into the semi-darkness, from which a sturdy ladder was sticking out, leading down into complete darkness. Climbing carefully down and slowly acclimating to the darkness, at a quick glance showed that all the walls around consisted of straw. Coming over closer and with a touch of the hand, you could see that the straw was insulation for the blocks of ice behind it. This ice, buried deep in the ground, served the entire shtetl over the warm and hot months of the year.

The ice was cut from the local river Lesna when the ice became 20 centimeters thick. Hired hands cut it into fifty-centimeter square blocks and hauled it by horse and sled to that ice chamber. It would take a couple of weeks to fill that hole to the rim. The total expense was covered by the Jewish community as well as the Jewish small retailers.

The idea for such ice originated with the local Jewish small retailers whose business consisted mainly of selling soft drinks, called *kvas*. By selling it cold on hot summer days, they hoped to increase their sales. It turned out to be a blessing not only for them, but also for the entire population of Shershev. A piece of ice could help an old person survive a hot summer day. It could lower the temperature of a person with a dangerous fever. True, the supply was not large enough to fill up iceboxes, but, then again, there were no iceboxes in Shershev. The main advantage was that there was adequate ice for emergencies.



My father's three siblings were still living in their parents' home at that time: Hershl, the second youngest brother, the younger daughter Pesl, and the youngest brother Eli (Eliyahu).

Eli was turning twenty-one—conscription age. By Polish law, every male turning twenty-one had to appear before a military medical commission to determine whether he was physically and mentally fit to serve in the army for the draft period of two years. The candidates that were the sole supporter of parents over sixty years of age were rejected, as were those with a young, underage child in the family. This is how my uncle Hershel managed avoided military service. Being born in 1904, he appeared before the commission in 1925 while his younger brother, Eli, was only 11 years old. Eli himself could not benefit from the same exemption because his older brother, Hershel, was still living at home.

Young Jewish men did not want to serve in the army for various reasons. First, there are dietary laws that prohibit Jews from eating non-kosher food. Secondly, the army was saturated with anti-Semitism. Officers, under-officers and ordinary soldiers used to humiliate their Jewish comrades-in-arms on any possible occasion. A sickly young Jewish man was the envy of all his friends because he stood a good chance of being rejected from the army. One way to be rejected was to weigh less than the required minimum of 48 kilograms, so countless Jewish young men tried to lose weight. Many used to form groups to watch each other constantly so that they wouldn't eat or sleep. Often, such groups would spend their days and nights on bicycles, traveling from shtetl to shtetl. Not sleeping at night, they would wander the streets out of sheer boredom, causing damage by removing doors from sheds, pushing over fences and the like. It was all in fun and did not cause serious damage. The victims of such pranks held no grudge; they understood and sympathized with the young men.

The parents of those young men didn't sleep restfully either. No Jewish mother wanted to part with her son for two years, especially when her son was spending all this time amongst *goyim* (gentiles), induced to eat *traifa* (non-kosher food), and not observing the Sabbath. They were required to sleep outdoors on the ground for weeks during maneuvers, even in the snow in winter. The mother would watch her son trying to lose

weight by not eating or drinking, by pushing himself on a bicycle, day and night, to the point of total exhaustion. Among those young men was my father's youngest brother Eliyahu or Eli, who was nine years older than me. I can still see him pedaling his bicycle, stopping to exchange a few words with my father who was his oldest brother. My uncle could speak more easily to my father as a brother than to his father, my grandfather, Yaakov-Kopl. My father served him in two ways: as the brother that he was and as a father figure, being twenty-two years older. In addition to all this, my father was an experienced soldier. He served in peacetime under the czar in Kazan, the Tatar capital, and at the outbreak of world war, he lost two fingers of his right hand when his regiment was sent to face the Austrian and German armies.

One day of that summer, 1935, my father and I were in front of our store and noticed Eli pedaling by on his bicycle. He noticed us too and pulled over. To my father's question about how he felt, Eli answered "miserable," that he could barely keep his eyes open and could hardly stay on his feet from fatigue and hunger. Two months had passed since he started the ordeal of losing weight and he had two more weeks to go before he was scheduled to appear before the commission. He doubted greatly if he could keep it up. To me, he looked like skin and bones. At a meter seventy-five (5 foot, 9 inches), he looked a shadow of his formerly well-built self. To my father's question asking how much he weighed, he answered, "64 kilos." "And how much did you weigh before?" asked my father. "Eighty," was his answer. "That means," said my father, "that it took you two months to lose 17 kilos and you have two more weeks to lose 17 more; you'll never make it. Go home dear brother, have a good meal and go to sleep." My uncle took his advice.

A couple of weeks later my Uncle Eli and all his friends born in the same year faced the military commission. All passed their exams. I don't think any of those dieting succeeded in losing enough weight to be rejected from military service. Their entire effort was in vain. A year later Eli and some dozen other Jewish young men his age, most of them his friends and classmates, were inducted into the army

Still at the home of my grandparents, Yaakov-Kopl and Chinkah Kantorowitz, were their second-youngest son Hershel and their younger daughter Pesl (Pola). Pesl was

a girl of thirty, and was at that time considered a spinster. Her problem was that she could not find a young man good enough for her in Shershev.

In those days, it was customary to use the intercession of a matchmaker. Dowries played a big role in arranging marriages and a well-to-do father could pick the best available young man for his daughter. My grandfather, Yaakov-Kopl, was a rich man and highly respected in the Shershev community. He was elected mayor and representative in Pruzany of the Shershev *Kehillah* (Jewish community). I can remember a few visits by young men who came to meet the prospective bride and her family. They each returned home empty handed. I have a suspicion that my aunt Pesl was a bit fastidious.

My aunt Pesl did find her mate at the age of thirty-one. The man, her age, was from a place called Nieswierz, a couple dozen kilometers from Baranowicz. Nieswierz is well known in Polish history as the seat of the Polish aristocrats, the Radziwils. The shtetl in Nieswierz and all its surrounding villages, fields, and forests belonged to the Radziwils. None of it was ever sold to anybody, Jew or non-Jew. Anyone who wanted to build a house in Nieswierz or in the nearby villages had to rent the land from the Radziwils. The same applied to the fields the farmers worked on. Nearby was the magnificent mansion of the Radziwils, and at a distance were their modern fishponds, to which the local population used to flock to admire their method of fish farming.

Zelik Remez, the man selected as Pesl's husband by my aunt, came from an old, established family with deep roots in Nieswierz. To facilitate attendance at the wedding, the families decided to perform the wedding in Baranowicz, which was equally convenient for each family. Besides, Baranowicz was much larger than either Nieswierz or Shershev and hence there would be no problem finding accommodations for all the guests. The wedding took place in the latter part of the summer. In addition to my grandparents Kantorowitz, my parents, my Uncle Reuben and his wife, my single uncle Hershel, and my two aunts and uncles from Pruzany all attended. The newlyweds remained in Nieswierz, where my new uncle, Zelik Remez, had a leather business.

I spent a fair amount of time in the store doing my homework. My father liked to keep an eye on my studies. One did not have to be an expert to serve the customers. There

was no difference between one bottle of vodka and the other. The same applied to cigarettes or tobacco. There was no fear of robbery. As long as I knew the prices and could add and give change, there was no problem. I had these qualifications. Sometimes a friend or two would come in and the time would pass quickly.

Christmas was approaching. In class, the teaching and rehearsal of carols started again. The conversations in class and out revolved around the upcoming holidays. On Christmastime nights, my parents did not sleep, as it was one of the two best business nights of the year. The Christian population—on the way to Christmas Eve mass or on their way back from it—wanted to drink, and they would come to our house and knock on the door. My father decided to stay near the store, but since it was against the law to stay open at night, my parents worked as a team. When one came in the store with a customer, the other stayed outside to make sure that a policeman was not approaching. If one did, a knock on the door was a signal to remain inside until the policeman passed by. When the Russian Orthodox celebrated their Christmas two weeks later, the same process repeated itself. The very same thing happened on Easter. Although business was good on Christian holidays, many Jews did not sleep well those nights. In many places, particularly on Easter night, pogroms occurred. Fortunately, as far as I know, those nights in Shershev passed without disturbance, unlike in many other places.

To be frank, the five policemen in the shtetl were more lenient to the Jewish storekeepers during those holidays than on Sundays. It is quite possible that they themselves did not want to bother to go out in the street on a festive night to chase the few Jewish storekeepers; they preferred to spend that holiday night with their families.

The Jewish storekeepers played cat and mouse with the police every Sunday. Should a policeman appear, a knock on the door or windowpane by a lookout would warn the storekeeper and his customer to remain inside. It happened many a time that a policeman would hang around for a while, thus forcing the storekeeper and customer to stay inside until the policeman left. The policemen were not easily fooled, and at times they stayed for a long while. The lookouts would put on a padlock on the outside door to the business that was supposed to be closed to fool the policeman into thinking that there could not possibly be anybody inside.

If a policeman noticed, even from a distance, that someone so much as opened or closed the door of a store, that storekeeper was fined five zloty. This was less than a dollar in US money, but could represent a week's earnings to a small storekeeper. The poor unfortunate man had to pay. To challenge the case in court would have been useless. It entailed hiring a lawyer and a couple trips to the court in Pruzany. Besides, a policeman's word was more credible to the court than that of the storekeeper, so the chance of winning the case was almost nil.

I began looking forward to the approaching winter holidays. On school days, I would get up while it was still dark outside and leave the house at a quarter past seven in the frosty morning. By the time I got to school, I could not feel my ears, nose, cheeks; even my hands, despite my gloves, felt numb. However, during school holidays, I could stay in a warm bed as long as my heart desired. My mother, with her boundless love, seldom said no to me, and I took advantage of her by staying in bed until late morning. If the weather was very cold, I stayed home and entertained my little brother, Leibl, with children's stories, which I remembered from when I was his age or read in children's books. At times, I even made up stories of my own. Sometimes, cousin Shalom, my father's brother Reuben's son, joined my audience. He was a year older than my brother was. Those two could sit for hours and listen to my stories, never tiring of them. Still, I used to find time for my two younger sisters, Sonia (Sarah) and Liba, although my sister, Sheva, spent more time with them than I.

I say with pride that my little brother and sisters were brought up to be well-behaved and obedient children, not only toward our parents but also toward others. In general, children in the shtetl were brought up under strict parental supervision and discipline, particularly by the fathers, who kept their sons on a short leash. Granted, there were families where the women wore the pants, but I am speaking in general terms.

Of course, there were no guarantees that a youngster would not go astray, but I do not recall cases where the children were problems. There were children who were more aggressive than others, more impertinent to other schoolmates, but not to the extent one sees or hears about now. If there were a couple such boys in the Hebrew school in my

time, I would not wager an opinion now of what would become of them. They too perished with the entire Jewish community of Shershev.

Still, I must say that there were a few Jews in Shershev with whom the average member of the community would not like to have a disagreement. There were a few middle-aged Jews in the shtetl who were renowned as tough guys from their younger days, and Jew and non-Jews alike avoided their crossing paths. In a sense, it gave the downtrodden, tyrannized Jew a feeling of security to know that some Jews were not afraid to hit back. It also gave roughnecks among the non-Jewish population reason to think twice before starting a brawl with Jews.

With the coming of winter, my mother started mentioning the approach of my bar mitzva. She never missed mentioning that my grandmother Freida-Leah hoped to live to see that day. Of course, we children missed our grandmother immensely. For a long time after my grandmother Freida-Leah passed away, I used to glance instinctively in the direction where my grandmother's bed used to be when I would come into the parlor.

In my youth, there was not much ado about bar mitzvahs, neither in Shershev nor in the region. A few days before coming of age, the boy was shown by his *rebe* (the religious teacher) or by his father how to put on *tephilin* (phylacteries, or prayer amulets). On the Sabbath of his bar-mitzva, the boy was called up to the Torah for *maftir* (the final selection), which consists of two parts: one, reading the final part from the weekly portion of the Pentateuch and, two, reading a designated part of the Bible. Both are preceded by their respective blessings.

Our synagogue shared the common tradition of selling the *aliyas* (the honor of being called up to read from the Torah) in order to raise a few *groshy* (pennies) to support the synagogue. The honor of reading the *maftir* would have a few bidders normally, but the honors on holidays, especially the High Holidays, would fetch bigger donations. The worshippers knew that I would be called up to the Torah the Sabbath of my bar-mitzva. It also happened that another boy whose father was a member of our congregation turned bar mitzva the same week. (The boy's name was Lipa, the son of Gedalia Loshevitzky, who lived on Kapielca Street. That boy, Lipa, had a sister named Beila-Debora, who was my

sister Sheva's age and attended the same grade, although Beila-Debora dropped out of school along the way.) For this reason, during the bidding, the members of the congregation made my father pay a substantial sum for my *maftir*.

As far as I remember, none of my friends had ever mentioned when they turned bar-mitzva, and all of them were years older than I was. For mine, my mother invited my friends on Friday night after the Sabbath meal for cake and tea. This was the entire celebration of my bar-mitzva, and it was more than was done for any of my friends.

I never liked getting up early in the morning, especially in the month of *Shvat* (around February). As a bar-mitzva boy, I was expected to attend the daily prayers, especially in the morning. It meant getting up an hour earlier than usually. Fortunately, the Groiser-Bes-Medrosh synagogue was next door to our house. I confess that after one month of attendance at the services, I gave it up. The idea of getting up so early in the winter morning did not appeal to me. Besides, none of my friends continued to attend the services more than a month or two after their bar mitzvahs—a fact that supported my argument with my parents for abandoning attendance at weekday services.

I spent many of the long winter evenings reading, at times until the early hours of the morning. Sometimes, my mother used to get out of bed to try to persuade me to put the book aside and get a few hours of sleep before going to school. She was concerned for my health, believing that too much reading ruins the eyesight. She had the difficult job of getting me up in the morning after only a couple hours of sleep, when I would leave for school with my eyes half shut. She knew how difficult it was for me to awaken, and I knew how much it hurt her to see me in such a state. My father would never interrupt my reading even if I read all night, which happened few times.

Around 1935, the local branch of Betar moved to the house of Joshua Pinsky. It was not in his main house, but in a totally separate house in his immense yard. It was very convenient for me; all I had to do to get there was cross the Market Square. I spent so much time there playing with my friends, the brothers Laizer and Litek Rotenberg, who were Joshua's grandsons and lived in the wooden part of the house adjoining the main brick building. I was almost part of the family. The two brothers Rotenberg had one elder

sister Pola, two years older than Laizer, and two younger sisters: one Lisa, born in 1927, and the youngest, Mina, born in 1930. The oldest, Pola, studied in the gymnasium in Pruzany, but in 1936 she gave it up and went to an ORT school (Jewish sponsored trade school) in Pinsk to become a dressmaker.

The Rotenberg children had an Aunt Sonia, sister of their mother Rayie (Reitze). Sonia lived with her parents in the main building on the property and she had her own room, probably the most beautifully furnished room in the shtetl. One had to be privileged to be invited into her room, more privileged than we were as twelve or thirteen year old boys. Although Laizer and Litek were her nephews, we went in her room no more than a couple of times, and then only for a quick glance at the furniture, and out. Only the three of us were even this privileged. Sonia was also related to my aunt Chashka, the wife of my father's brother, Reuben, which in a sense made us related by marriage—but this did not raise my status by one millimeter.

Sonia was the only girl in the shtetl whose father could afford to send her to study abroad, and she studied in Prague, Czechoslovakia. During her summers in Shershev, she was very active in Betar. In 1935, she had a problem with a tooth that eventually required an operation and she had to return home. It seems that she lost a year of school credit; in any case, she did not return to Prague. Not long after, she left for the land of Israel. Within a year, she married a close friend and the most respected and admired bachelor in Shershev, Chaim Shemesh. Shemesh was the first commander of Betar in the shtetl and my father's first cousin.

At times, in the unpleasant winter evenings, I preferred to stay home and play with my brother Lova (Leibl) and my two little sisters, Sonia and Liba. I loved those evenings with my family, particularly because of my mother's boundless love and endless affection. Of course, it might seem banal to say my mother was very devoted and loving. After all, how many mothers are not? Still, I feel my mother's unconditional love, selflessness and self-sacrifice kept becoming clearer to me through the six-year-long Nazi night. From the beginning of it, when I still had her, until long after I have lost her. All that has been said and written about mothers and more, be it in prose or verse, was embodied in my mother.



This kind of devotion and love of family characterizes the Auerbachs. I experienced it again many years later when I met my Auerbach relatives in the United States.

In those evenings at home, we children at times used to sing popular or recent songs that we used picked up in school or on the street. At times, our parents used to get carried away and start singing songs from their younger years in Yiddish or, just as often, in Russian, solo or together. To us, the songs sounded antiquated yet haunting.

Some of those Yiddish songs can still be heard from a rare Yiddish entertainer when he entertains an even rarer Yiddish-speaking audience. Sometimes a Jewish audience likes to hear a Yiddish song that they don't understand anymore, but that reminds them of a lullaby that a grandmother sang to them. I can still recall Yiddish songs that I heard from my parents that I never heard again. The songs have disappeared with the silenced voices of those who sang them.

My sister Sheva loved to sing and could learn a song after hearing it once on the radio or on the street. Even my two little sisters, Sonia and Liba, were able to pick up a tune at once. One way or another, singing was often heard in our home.

The spring elicited many activities in and around the shtetl. The farmers started plowing the fields. The Jews who had gardens got busy working in them. Those intending to build houses started in the spring and the carpenters, masons, roofers—who were all Jews—started working. The blacksmiths who, except for one, were all Jews too, got busy servicing the farmers' wagons and shoeing their horses.

Shortly after Pesach, Uncle Eli got the army call-up that he had been expecting for almost a year. At the same time, all his friends in the group that spent sleepless nights and went hungry in order to lose weight and fail the army physical were called up. Understandably, there was a depressed mood in the families of these young men. My grandmother cried continuously for a week after my Uncle Eli, her youngest son, left. My father, as the oldest son, tried to comfort her. I don't know how much help he was.

Uncle Eli was sent to serve near the city of Bydgoszcz, in northwestern Poland in the 16th regiment of light artillery. Two of his close friends from Shershev left with him:

Shlome Krugman and Leibl Neibrief. Others that I remember were Gotl Weiner, David Lifshitz, Gherston Krenitzer, and David Kabizecky. There were others whose names I don't remember.

It was Shlome's father, Chatzkel Krugman, who came up with the idea of a Hebrew School in Shershev and saw it through to fruition. He remained the moving power behind it, and was president of the school committee up to the start of the war. They had four children in the family: the oldest was Shlome who was my uncle's age, born in 1914; a son Mulick (Shmuel), born in 1918; a daughter Chaya, a couple years older than my sister Sheva; and a youngest son, Tevyeh, my age, who was in my class at Hebrew school.

It was a year of growing anti-Semitism in Poland. The Poles did not need encouragement to follow in the steps of the Germans. Not having anyone like a Pilsudski to restrain them, they started their own anti-Semitic campaign. Jews, especially young people, started looking for a way out. The majority wanted to go to the land of Israel, but in recent years, the British government had started drastically to limit and reduce the number of Jews entering what was then "Palestine." To add to the difficulty, the harsh persecution of Jews in Germany increased the demand for visas.

Some got permits to go. These young people belonged to the leftist Zionist organizations that controlled all the permits authorized by the British. Usually, those privileged to get such a permit had to be committed and active member of that organization and pass a *Hachsharah* (a special course for immigrants to Palestine). Getting a visa meant members of one's immediate family, like parents or children, could also immigrate to Palestine. Students and gymnasium graduates could go there to continue their studies in the Hebrew University. Some got their permits as so-called capitalists: those who could produce a thousand British pounds, which was equivalent to five thousand US dollars. This was a huge sum for the poverty-stricken ninety-five percent of Polish Jewry.

Among the few Jews that left Shershev for the land of Israel was our butcher, from whom my mother used to buy meat all the years I can remember. His name was

Leibe Kalbkof. His youngest daughter Leah used to bring the meat to our home twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, and obtain the meat order for the next time from my mother. Leibe had a son or two in the land of Israel and they sent permits for the rest of the family. I don't remember how many children Leibe had with him in Shershev, but besides the daughter Leah, I remember a son, David, who was in his mid-twenties. They all left in 1936 for Palestine.

To everyone's surprise, Leibe's son David and his friend, Yaakov Feinbir, who had left Shershev a few months earlier, returned to Shershev some six months later. The Jews of Shershev could not understand why two young men who succeeded in getting out of Shershev and into the land of Israel would decide to return. Even today, over sixty years later, I still cannot understand it. I met Yaakov Feinbir in Auschwitz in 1943. He looked like all *Musselmänner*, ready for the ovens. (*Musselman* was a term used in the death camps for prisoners who had lost all hope and were resigned to being murdered; it refers to Muslim fatalism.) A couple months later, I heard from an acquaintance that he was gone. As for David Kalbkof, he went through the expulsion from Shershev and perished in Drohychin in the summer of 1942.

Up to the middle of the thirties, there were still a fair number of Yeshuvniks (individual Jewish families or very small groups of families living in gentile villages). They lived there in an alien environment. They rarely came to the shtetl and had little to do with the shtetl Jews. They lived like their neighbors, the Christian farmers, but, despite their isolation, the Yeshuvniks held fast to their faith—observing the Sabbath, keeping kosher, and making sure that their children did not intermarry. They never missed a chance to come to the shtetl for the holidays to attend services in the synagogue. However, from the middle of the thirties, even those individual Jewish families who had lived among the non-Jews as good neighbors for generations began to feel the spreading anti-Semitism, and they slowly started to move into the small and larger shtetls in their area. Still, up to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, there were Jewish families, numbering from one to as many as a dozen, scattered among the non-Jewish population.

I visited one of these places with my father in 1936. The village, Popielewo, was 22 kilometers northwest of Shershev. The name of Popielewo was known to me from before in connection with a story that, if I don't tell it now, will never be known. It will be lost with thousands of other events that took place in the forests and swamps of Poliesie.<sup>4</sup>

On a summery day in 1934, I found myself with some friends on Mostowa Street when we noticed a nice carriage passing by. Next to the coachman sat a civilian with a rifle over his shoulder. This in itself was unusual, for no civilian was permitted to carry a rifle nor, indeed, to possess one. Even more noticeable were the two passengers sitting in the comfortable back seat of the carriage: a man and a woman. The woman was tall and corpulent; if that can be said about the woman, I don't know how to describe the immensity of the man. His height would be difficult to guess because he too was sitting, but even sitting he towered over the woman. Nonetheless, his obesity was unimaginable. Despite their width, he took up most of the two seats. I got a good look at his neck, which was the size of a grown man's waist. We boys followed the carriage for a while, fascinated by both the carriage and its passengers. Who were those two passengers of the extraordinary size?

Historically, Jews were forbidden by law to possess land under the Czars. However, a few privileged Jews were permitted to be landowners through extraordinary exemptions. These very few were rich Jews who, upon gaining the privilege, bought entire estates. Examples were the Porets in Wierchy, where my father ran a restaurant, and the Brzezynskis near Pruzany, from whom we rented for a couple of summers. Such estates passed from father to son, for the Jewish owners were not permitted to sell them to other Jews, and, once sold to a Christian, the property could not return to a Jew. After the re-creation of Poland, the Polish government honored the Czar's law and let these few privileged Jews retain their land.

In the village of Popielewo, a tiny Jewish community existed for generations. Apparently, it was under the protection of a Jewish land-owning family named Satir. They helped to sustain the community by employing some of its members, and they probably also interceded with the authorities on the local Jews' behalf. The original Satir

<sup>4</sup> Poliesie, or Polesia, is region of swampy marshland in central Belarus.

died shortly before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leaving the estate to his two sons. One of the sons had close to a dozen children and the other had just one.

Somehow, after the uncertain and stormy times of the First World War, the only son of the one brother remained in the Soviet Union, while all the children of the other brother stayed at home. By the end of the war the two brothers were gone, and the estate was left to be run by the dozen children of the second brother.

Apparently, there were too many bosses around and the estate proved to be unprofitable. In addition, the Polish government would choke the Jewish landowners with taxes as incentives to sell their land, while the Christian landowners paid only a pittance in taxes. After all, they were the Polish aristocracy. So the few Jewish landowners were forced to borrow money to pay the exorbitant taxes, or else they stood to lose their estates. Because of the dual burden of too many bosses and heavy taxes, the Satir estate was soon in a helpless situation.

On a nice summer day in the late 1920s, suddenly the only son of the other Satir brother appeared. He was the enormous man we saw in the carriage. The story that circulated about him in Shershev and vicinity was that this Satir had worked himself up into a position of great trust in the Soviet Union, enough to have access to foreign currency and a plane, with which he made good his escape across the border to Poland. He arrived from the Soviet Union with enough money to bail out the estate, but with the provision that the children of his uncle—that is, all his cousins—sign over the estate to him. They could remain on the estate and work for him. Being on the verge of losing the estate, they had no choice but to agree.

He was respected by Jews and non-Jews alike, even by the Poles. To them he was a Jew who was willing to forgo a very high position in the Soviet Union, their mortal enemy, and live in Poland. Among other things, he was an excellent shot, and the villagers used to tell all kinds of stories about his marksmanship. He had reason to be good with a gun and always have an armed guard around him: the Bolsheviks did not forget nor forgive betrayers or traitors, and in their eyes he was guilty on both counts. Sure enough, a year or two after we saw him in Shershev driving through his forest, someone fired from between the trees killing him. The killer was never found. In a sense

his murderer did him a favor, for the Bolsheviks came to us in 1939, and, had they have gotten him alive, he would have surely wished he was dead.

Let me now go back to my trip to Popielewo. Shortly before the end of the school year 1935-36, my father had to go there to collect a long overdue debt and I went along. A local farmer picked us up at five in the morning. Having to stop a couple of times in order to give the horse a rest, we reached Popielewo at about noon. Driving through the village, I didn't see a single Jew. After passing the village, we entered a small forest. The Jews lived on one side of this forest in an area called the "Maydan," which consisted of some dozen homes. We stopped in front of one that seemed to serve as an inn. The owner took us into a room that apparently was used as a synagogue by that small community. I noticed a small holy ark standing in the middle of one wall. I remember my father asking the owner, "When do you get a *minion* (a quorum for services)?" The man answered, "Every day." I wondered in amazement that such a small group of Jews could muster daily the ten men needed for a quorum. I was amazed that such a small group of Jews managed to live a full Jewish life among a sea of Christians without going astray or losing a single member of the faith—despite the distance of over five hours travel to the nearest Jewish community.

How many such small (and even smaller) Jewish communities existed in our part of the world will regrettably never be known. Just about all of them lie in mass graves near their homes, the rest of them went up with the smoke of the crematoriums. The Jews of Popielewo were brought to Pruzany Ghetto in the fall of 1941; from there, they were shipped with the entire Ghetto to Auschwitz. Then, in spring of 1936, who could have imagined such a nightmarish end?

## Chapter 7

The Jewish political and economic horizons began to cloud over by the spring of 1936. The Nuremberg Laws that had been passed in Germany a year earlier began to appeal to the Poles too. It started with propaganda against buying from Jewish stores. It followed with rock throwing at Jewish homes and, particularly, Jewish businesses. It

continued with attacks on individual Jews and eventually led to the official first anti-Jewish pogrom of the 1930s in Poland.

The pogrom occurred on March 9, 1936 in the central Polish shtetl of Przytek. A well-organized mass of Polish anti-Semites broke into Jewish homes, stole anything of value, and beat the inhabitants murderously. Not satisfied with that, they broke into Jewish stores, destroyed whatever they could not steal. Many Jewish homes were torched and three were dead: a poor elderly watchmaker, his wife and a third man. Despite the pleas of the Jews, the local police did not interfere and the murderers of these three people were never brought to justice.

At the same time, Arab terror against the Jews in British-controlled Palestine intensified. The British reacted by further limiting the number of Jews allowed into the land of Israel, especially those from Germany and Poland who were trying desperately to escape the clutches of Hitler and Polish anti-Semitism.

To prevent abandoning those Jews to their fast-approaching destiny, the Revisionist-Zionist leader, Vladimir-Zev Jabotinsky, tried to collect a million signatures to petition the British government to increase the number of Jews allowed to enter the land of Israel. This led to a lot of friction between the two main Zionist youth groups, Hashomer Hatzair, affiliated with the leftist Poale Zion, and Betar, affiliated with the right. Those on the left opposed the petition, while those on the right, revisionists, supported it.

The leader of Betar was a local young man by the name of Yankl (Yaakov) Judelevsky, a teacher in our Hebrew school. His mother, Chome-Henie, a widow for many years, was a dressmaker who worked hard to help her son fulfill his wish to become a teacher. She also had two daughters, Eidl and Mushkah, both ardent leftists. I doubt if there was domestic tranquility at home.

At the same time, Hashomer in Shershev was under the temporary leadership of Avraham Aprik. I say temporary, for he had just come for a few months visit from Palestine to see his father Pelet and sister Mali and took over the leadership of the organization. Before Avraham visited, I did not know that Pelet had a son who had left

Shershev in the late twenties for the land of Israel. (At the same time, three sons of Yehuda Weiner had left for the land of Israel. Apparently, Zionism was well and alive in Shershev in the twenties, and *aliya*, immigration to Palestine, was common.)

The atmosphere between extremists in the major Jewish political organizations was already tense. The more the revisionists backed the petition for Britain to allow more Jews in Palestine, the more adamantly the leftists opposed it. To promote the idea in Shershev, the revisionist organization invited the entire community (usually the males) to attend a lecture on the benefit of the petition. It was set to take place on a Saturday afternoon in the large main synagogue, which was next to our house and was the locale of functions for all kinds of Jewish activities, like sermons, speeches, orations and alike.

The gathering on that summery Saturday promised to be successful. Right after the Saturday midday meal, the crowd began to gather, each trying to get a seat as close as possible, if they could get a seat at all. The adult members of Betar, dressed in their uniforms, stood in their assigned places. Some were stationed inside to keep order and make sure that there were no disturbances. Others were at the doors to the foyer, and still others at the main entrance and the entry from the foyer to the sanctuary. The so-called guard was there not only to keep order but also to make sure that there is no outburst of any sort from opposition members, who were sure to sneak in among the crowd.

As a thirteen-year-old with no duties to perform, I stood on the porch of our house and watched the large crowd of people entering the synagogue. From my vantage point, I could see almost the whole market square and everybody in it. As I stood there and watched, I noticed a group of about fifteen men from the age of twenty to thirty coming into the square from Mostowa street and walking, apparently nonchalantly, in the direction of the synagogue. This group of people was well known in the shtetl. They were from the family of the Pampalach and their cronies, with whom nobody wished to have a disagreement. They were the town's roughnecks, yet their walk seemed to be purposeful. They were followed by rows of four to six men, members of the Hashomer and Hechalutz as well as formerly active members, who had outgrown the organizations' youthful activities but remained committed to their ideas. There were no youths among them younger than eighteen; they apparently did not want boys to get in their way.



The few uniformed Betar guards were swept aside at the outside door, and again at the second door leading into the sanctuary. Even if there would have been enough of them to do so, they did not dare oppose the hired hoodlums, who might become personal enemies capable of settling scores later on their own turf and time. As they broke into the synagogue, the demonstrators and their hired helpers pulled sticks, stones, and bricks from under their clothes. They used them against the surprised, confused, and outnumbered Betar youths, whose uniforms identified them as targets for the attackers.

I remember seeing my immediate superior in Betar, Motshe (Mordecai) Shocherman, making his way through the pushing and shoving throngs with a blood-covered face. The same with his friends, Shepsl and Itzel Pomeraniec, Reuben Schneider, Ghershon Levkovitz, the two brothers Shalom and Avi (Abraham) London, and others.

The assembled crowd was pushing its way out from the synagogue for two reasons: firstly, to avoid getting hurt in the melee, secondly, in disgust that young Jewish men that were neighbors, went to the same Heder, and played together as children could raise a hand with the intention of hurting one another. For what reason? Trying to convince someone to sign a petition to increase the number of permits for Jews trying to go to Palestine, so they could escape persecution in Germany or Poland?

Within ten minutes, the large synagogue was empty. There was no great damage done to the inside. The harm was done to the members of Betar that got beaten up, and especially to the community's esteem of Hashomer. By breaking up the meeting, Hashomer became a pariah organization in the eyes of many people in town. In a small shtetl where everyone is family, neighbor or friend, such an act is not forgiven easily and may have contributed to the fact that the leftist organization ceased to exist in Shershev within a year.

Jewish life in Shershev began to get worse, slowly but noticeably. The persecution of Jews in Germany elicited not only interest but also concern and sympathy. Much of the gentile population envied the situation in neighboring Germany—that anti-Semitism was not only open, but encouraged and supported by the government. The expression, "Wait till Hitler comes," was constantly heard. Before, I could better endure anti-Semitic

remarks in school because they came from the mouths of children. To hear them from adults was depressing and frightening.

Fortunately, the non-Jewish population did little reading, but the anti-Semitic propaganda found its way around the shtetl and many Jews wanted to leave. Though the Jewish press was full of dispiriting news, one of the Jewish papers was a tabloid that described distant exotic lands; it aroused in me a desire to travel and see them and triggered similar desires among my friends.

We spent many summer evenings walking back and forth on Mostowa Street, from near the market place where Hanania the tailor lived at the corner of Beth-Chayim Street to its other end, where the Pruzaner Street began. This part of the shtetl was totally inhabited by Jews and was the only street with a sidewalk. Its kilometer and a half served as the promenade for the Jews of Shershev. There we boys and many others used to walk while we planned and dreamt of a future—one that the accursed Nazis deprived them of. On a nice warm Saturday evening, the entire Jewish population could be found there. At times, the sidewalk was too narrow to hold them all. The Nazis solved that problem in their way.

Our group of boys had another place where we used to walk and make plans for the future: the meadow along the left bank of the river. It was a stretch of municipal land a couple of kilometers long and a quarter kilometer wide. In summertime, it used to get dry enough to walk over without wetting one's feet or shoes. It had little other use, as it was too wet for cultivation and too poor for growing hay. Therefore, there was never an argument over who was allowed to use it. Christians had better pastures for their cattle, so they did not begrudge the Jews that poor piece of pasture.

The meadow was only a daytime haunt. At night, it was too easy to step into a puddle. We let the wind flow through our short hair, which grew only during the vacation time, as we were not permitted to come to school with hair on our heads. With the wind in our faces or at our backs, we walked and talked about faraway places, exciting events, and the distant, wide world. Above all, however, we dreamed about our own Jewish homeland, Israel. We were ready to do anything necessary to realize the dream of our own independent land of Israel; sacrificing our lives would have been a small price to pay.

Who could have imagined then when that dream became reality a dozen years later, hardly any of those dreamers would live to see it?

As the news from the land of Israel kept getting more depressing, Jewish groups disagreed about whether to answer to the Arab terror or not to. The Revisionists like Betar were very much for answering, but the leftists had the power. We believed that part of the left's ideology was appeasement, which the Arabs took for weakness or outright fear.

The Revisionists finally started to respond to the Arab terror on their own, despite the difficulties they had to overcome from betrayals by Jewish leftists and British persecution, arrest and hangings. This improved the mood in the shtetl. Given a minimal chance, Jews were willing to strike back, even if they had to hang for it. With time, the other Jews in the land of Israel have come to realize that pacifism is an unknown concept to Arabs and the only other alternative is defense. They have learned it fast and well.

Despite these problems, in retrospect, the summer of 1936 was, for us, a pleasant one. We used to go to the nearby forest to pick mushrooms. It required a certain expertise if one was looking for the best, the so-called "Carpathian" mushrooms. I was not good at this, but I enjoyed walking in the forest. I even tried my hand at picking blueberries, but found it boring.

We also spent time doing what we considered swimming. It was more like simply jumping up and down in the water of the little river Lesna that cut through the main street. In a couple of places upstream, it widened to about ten meters and was a meter deep. That was considered deep and wide for our purposes. It was there that the local population used to go "swimming."

The bathers were stark naked. Women found another swimming hole like ours, some distance away. Not only men, but youths and boys too, respected the women's' privacy, for they too bathed in the nude, and nobody walked in their direction.

A couple of years before the war, some young men and women began to wear swimming shorts and suits. Some women began to migrate to the men's swimming hole and, when women were there, men who had no swimming shorts did not get undressed.

They only entered the water after the women had left. Yet men never ventured to the women's side, even in shorts.

Before and after swimming, we used to lay and bask in the sun. For me it was no pleasure, knowing that my skin would soon burn red, and by morning, be covered with blisters. A day later, the blisters used to start breaking and the skin peeled painfully. A few days later, I would do the same thing and go through the same process. I never got used to the sun, but I finally learned to avoid it.

When the school year 1935-36 ended, my report card was better than the previous one. My favorite subjects like math, nature study, geography and history put me among the better students in class. With my school report card, I went to show off to my uncle Hershl, pointing out my excellent mark in physics. I expected a shower of praise, instead he asked me calmly, "And how are you getting on with your private teacher in Hebrew, or with Polish at school?" He knew my weak points. I had nothing to say. He paused and then said, "When you get such marks in languages and literature, then I will be proud of you. Physics is secondary to literature."

For me the end of the school year meant the end of grade five, but for my sister Sheva, it meant the end of attending the Polish school. She was getting ready to enroll in the Hebrew gymnasium in Pruzany. Fortunately, she was well prepared, thanks to the years with the private Hebrew teacher. The other subjects were no problem.

Due to the cost, not many children went to the gymnasium in Pruzany to continue their studies. First, the tuition was substantial as it was a private school. Then came the problem of room and board. In my day, no more than a dozen children from Shershev attended gymnasium in Pruzany, either the Hebrew or the Polish one. That included both Jews and gentiles. The students in both gymnasiums were mostly local.

The out of town students were children of wealthier families from nearby shtetls like Kobrin, Kamieniec-Litevsk, Shershev, Maltech, Seltz, Bereza-Kartuska, Linovo and others. The Jewish children mainly attended Hebrew gymnasium for a couple of reasons. First, the students were supposed to take two foreign languages. One was Latin, which was compulsory in both gymnasiums, and the second in the Hebrew school was English,

the language of the British mandate in Palestine, to help students who wished to go there to continue studying or find jobs. The second reason was much simpler. The administration of the Polish gymnasium was not eager to accept Jews and looked for any possible excuse not to, but some Jews with excellent marks did get in. Among them were two of my cousins, Lisa Pinsky, my father's sister, Shendl's, daughter, and Michla Kantorowitz, my father's brother, Rueben's, daughter. They preferred the Polish gymnasium because graduation might qualify them for one of the five universities in Poland.

With vacation over, the school year 1936-37 began. The atmosphere at home was a bit subdued because my sister Sheva left to study in Pruzany at the Hebrew gymnasium. My parents found room and board for her with the family of Aryeh Zlotick, who was a conductor on one of the buses that commuted between Shershev and Pruzany. This was handy for my parents, as they could send to my sister whatever she needed in a short time, since the bus came to Shershev three times a day.

My sister's departure was difficult on all of us until we got used to it. Though I am sure there were disagreements between my sister and I at times, these were smoothed over by her. Very much like my mother, she was tolerant and forgiving, never carrying a grudge or getting angry at anybody. She returned home every Friday on the four o'clock bus, along with three or four other students at the gymnasium in Pruzany. They would return on the Saturday night bus to be in school on Sunday. My sister used to bring with her many new songs from the bigger city. My young brother and sisters and I used to pick them up immediately and fill the house with songs. When she left on Saturday night, we were gloomy. I am sure it affected my parents more than me, for I would go play with my friends afterward.

At times, the bus did not arrive or depart on time. The main problem was flat tires caused by the sharp little rocks that covered the road—but those were small annoyances. A breakdown of the engine was much more serious. There were no garages in Shershev or in Pruzany. Therefore, the driver had to be a good mechanic and able to make all repairs on the spot, no matter how long it took and regardless of the weather.

In my class of forty students, ten of us were Jews. Two of us were boys: Laizer Eisenshtein, my private Hebrew teacher's oldest son, and me. The eight girls were: Lola Baumriter, Cheitche Chadricky, Nishkah Kalbkauf, Maykah London, Sara Malecky, Reshl Pomeranietz, Rivka Waldman and Feigah—her father's name was Shmuel and I forget the family's name.

The competition between Laizer Eisenshtein and me for first place in the class in mathematics and physics continued. The other subjects were no problem except the Polish language, which gave everyone in the class trouble.

My brother Liova (Leibl) was already in the second grade of Hebrew school and I believed that my father had the same plan for him as for my sister and me. That is, to transfer him after the fourth grade into the Polish school. On the winter mornings, we used to leave the house at daybreak. I used to turn right through Mostowa Street to the Polish school and my seven-year-old brother Liova left through Kamieniecka Street to the Hebrew school.

I was now in grade six. Some of the teachers were being rotated after a year or two. To my surprise, among the new teachers was a Jew from Grodno named Glier. The general Jewish population seemed more surprised than I was. In a time when anti-Semitism was spreading so rapidly in Poland, they sent a Jewish teacher to Shershev! I surmise that it also surprised the Christian population, especially the other teachers. I conjecture that the education ministry got stuck with a few Jewish government licensed teachers and thought that the best place for them would be a faraway place like Shershev in eastern Poland. There, the population was not homogenously Polish and the Jewish teachers would not be so visible, meaning the protests against them might not be loud.

The teacher, Glier, rented part of Alter Geleshtein's house and brought over his wife and four or five-year-old daughter, who spoke only Polish. In no time, she had adjusted and was accepted into the Jewish community.

He taught geography to my grade six class, and the Gentile students in my class did not show him the respect due to a teacher. They were much noisier than during other

classes. We Jewish kids tried to make up for it by behaving exceptionally well, knowing that the gentiles were misbehaving for spite, because he was a Jew.

Another new teacher that year was a young and attractive woman by the name of Lapianka. It seems that she was well aware of her looks and used to dress accordingly. She always used to come into the class in a tight-fitting skirt and an even tighter fitting sweater to accentuate her provocative figure.

I don't know for whose benefit she used to do it. Was it for the male teachers, who were to the best of my recollection all married, or for her 13 and 14-year-old students? If it was for the teachers, I do not know how much success she had. However, she certainly succeeded with us students. Many of us used to catch ourselves thinking about other things during her lesson.

As the new school year started, we were told that new textbooks on the Polish language were being issued. When I opened one and looked at the first pages, I realized that it contained a lot of material of a different and ugly nature. On one of the first pages, taking up the entire page, was the picture of a statue of Christ, standing with his hand stretched out forward. Underneath was written in large print: "This statue stands in the village of (I don't remember the name) on the site of the house where the last Jew of the village lived." The book also contained stories about Jews and how they swindled and cheated the poor Christians. This was the text from which we students had to learn the Polish language and prepare ourselves to life in the Polish society. Is it surprising that anti-Semitism was so rampant in Poland?

What made sixth grade even harder to bear was that I no longer had the protection of the gypsy, Wladek Chubrewicz. Shortly after the school year started in the beginning of September, our class was informed that at the end of the month we would be taken on a trip to Bialowieza, thirty-five kilometers west of Shershev. It had the last herd of European bison in the world. The Russian Czars had erected a hunting lodge, supposedly the largest in central Europe that could compare in luxury with any other on the continent. After World War I, the Poles converted part of that mansion into a museum, while the other half served as a hunting lodge for high Polish and foreign dignitaries.

In the middle of that forest was a small town or shtetl by the same name. I don't know who took the name from whom, the forest from the shtetl or vice-versa. The main industry was servicing the mansion. Some were foresters, tourist guides or held other jobs provided by the administration. Eighty Jewish families made up half of the population. Most were tradesman, artisans and petty merchants.

We arrived there by the bus went back and forth from Shershev to Bialowieza. After visiting the hunting lodge museum, we were taken to a part of the forest where everything had been left untouched. At the entrance to that part of the forest, we were joined by another group of students who were our age. They were from further away and spoke a pure Polish unlike us, who spoke white Russian or Yiddish among ourselves.

When we reached a clearing in the forest and our guide and teachers were busy speaking to each other, I noticed that a few boys from the new group managed to deliver a few punches to one of the couple of Jewish boys in their group. We returned home the same day. On the following morning when I came back to school, I heard the gentile boys in my class speaking with envy about the fact that the others could deliver a few good punches to their Jews and their teachers pretended not to see it. Apparently, I was not the only one to notice it and neither was I the only one to be persecuted. Some had it worse. The anti-Semitic persecution in the school year 1936-37 was the worst I had hitherto experienced.

Right after the mid-thirties, when anti-Semitism began to blaze uncontrollably in Poland, students in universities did not satisfy themselves with hurling abusive language, name calling and physical attacks on their Jewish classmates. They started a campaign to force Jewish students to sit on the left of the class and the university administration went along with their demand. The Jewish students found this administrative act offensive and preferred to stand during the lectures than sit on the left side. There were Jewish students in the universities that would not or could not take the abuse of their Christian classmates and quit school.

Apparently, the antagonism and outright physical attacks of the Christian students on their Jewish classmates did not fully satisfy the ministry of education, who was trying



to discourage Jewish attendance in universities. Not wanting to be embarrassed in front of the democratic world by making it the law that Jews could not attend university, the government decided to annul the validity of the Hebrew gymnasium's status as a high school. This deprived its graduates, numbering in the thousands, the right to be accepted into a university. Now graduates of Hebrew gymnasiums could only apply for entry into the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. When the Hebrew gymnasium in Pruzany lost its official recognition as a high school, my parents were not concerned with the status of higher education. My sister was just entering gymnasium at fourteen, so there was lots of time to think of the future.

I do not want to go into the details of what the Jewish students and graduates of universities had to go through, but will tell the story of one Jewish university graduate from Shershev that I knew personally. His parents lived on Ostrowiecka Street—an elderly couple, Shalom-Yosef and his wife Chaya-Rantshe Farber. Shalom-Yosef was a sheet metal worker all his life, making sheet-metal utensils, containers, chimney tubes and the like. They had a son and a daughter. Their son David was an unusually bright child. Having finished the seventh grade at Polish (public) school, he was smart enough to try and give himself a better future than what he could expect if he remained in Shershev. With his good marks, he was accepted to the Polish gymnasium in Pruzany. However, his father could not afford to keep him there or to pay the tuition. Therefore, David gave private lessons after school and put himself through gymnasium with those meager earnings, graduating with the highest grades in his school. He was immediately accepted to the faculty of law at Warsaw University and he graduated just before the persecution of Jews started in mid-thirties.

He did his apprenticeship as law clerk in Pinsk. After finishing, he traveled to face a panel of examiners in Warsaw, which consisted of well-known lawyers, members of the Polish elite. They did not pass him.

My father visited Pinsk in 1938 and saw David Farber in his modest office, his walls full of shelves laden with books about Polish law. He told my father to pick a book at random, open it anywhere and read one sentence. Then David continued the sentence from memory until my father told him to stop. He did this with a few more books and the

same thing happened. My father realized that the man had memorized the entire collection of the Polish laws. My father never stopped talking about that feat.

Of medium height, Laizer Rotenberg was heavily muscled, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed and with straight blond hair, he looked nothing like the stereotypical Jewish boy of the shtetl. However, he did look like others in his extended family, the Pinsky family.

Regrettably, I don't know the whole Pinsky story. I do know that there were two Pinsky brothers, Shalom and Joshua. Shalom had a son Laibel, who married my father's sister Sheindl (Sheine), a daughter Chashka, who married my father's brother Reuben, and another son Hershel, who managed to get out of the Soviet Union in 1929 and return to Shershev. Hershel did not stay in Shershev but moved to Warsaw where he perished in Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1942.

The older brother, Joshua, had two daughters, the older one Rayah and the younger Sonia. It was Rayah's two sons, Laizer and Litek, who were my friends. The younger daughter, Sonia, left for the land of Israel in 1935, where shortly after, she married my father's cousin, Chaim Shemesh.

Shalom Pinsky died before my time. His brother Joshua with his wife, Bluma, his daughter Rayah, her husband Joseph, and their five children—the oldest a daughter Pola, sons Laizer and Litek and two younger daughters, Lisa and Mina—left Shershev with the expulsion and were slaughtered in Chomsk the first day of Rosh Hashanah, 1942.

The Pinsky men were broad-shouldered and strong, with either red or blond hair and blue-eyes. It was because of Laizer Rothenburg's brawny characteristics that he came in handy in brawls between Gentile boys and us. They used to take over the sport court so they could play ball, but not when Laizer was around.

Although our group was tight knit, I had a closer friendship with Laizer, who was two years older than me and in the same grade as my sister, than with his brother Litek, who was only 3 days older than I was. Laizer, being the oldest and the strongest in our group, was, in a sense, our defender. He would later attend a trade school in Brest-Litovsk. The school had two sections, one for carpentry and the other for locksmith and

mechanical trades. He entered the mechanical section. With his departure, I lost a close friend.

Usually the main meal of the day was eaten between four and five o'clock. As we used to come home from school a couple hours before, my mother always had a snack ready for us to tide us over. Our favorite one was potato *kugel* (pudding). She would bake it in one of the two tile ovens that warmed the house.

In the cold winter days, those ovens had to be lit twice a day. As soon as the wood in them was burned almost completely and all that was left in them were the embers, the cast-iron doors of the stoves were hermetically closed, to prevent the glowing embers from completely burning out and to retain the heat in the oven longer.

The preferred place to stand in the house during the long wintery evenings was by the oven, with one's back pressing against it and the warmth radiating from it dispersing all over the body. This is where we stayed, conversing as well as trying to solve problems, just as it is done sitting around the table nowadays.

My mother baked the potato *kugel* in a fair amount of animal fat. When ready, it was moved to the upper part of the stove where it stood hot until we came home. It was then that my mother would take it from the oven. It baked in an earthen pot, narrow on the bottom and wide on top. My mother would turn it over in the air, holding it over a flat, wide plate, where it would land. A round pyramid-like pudding with a flat top, it was a hot, sweaty, glistening delight that would fill the house with the most appetizing aroma.

After the snack, I would do my homework, which, as a rule, would take two to three hours. By then, it was time for dinner. Most of the time, my mother fed me first so that I could go to mind the store while my father came home to eat. When my father returned to the store from dinner, I would try and sneak out to play, not always successfully. He would ask questions about my lessons, homework and the like. When he finally released me, I knew I had done my work well, though he would say that. He would just advise me to go home to read everything again.

Opposite our store was the house of my uncle Reuben, my father's brother. His hardware store took up part of his house. Sometimes when I dared not to leave the store

and go straight to my friends, I used the excuse that I was going for a little while to my uncle's house, which my father allowed. There lived my uncle's daughter Michla, two years younger than I, who used to be my playmate when I was five and six years old, their son Shalom, a year older than my brother Liova, and their second son Shevach, born in 1935. From their house, I had no problem going out since their back door led into an alley.

Uncle Reuben was a good businessman and a hard worker. He was also successful because he was quick to grasp modern concepts. He was the first and only merchant to buy by the truckload. The benefit was having the needed merchandise on time, and buying in quantity meant better prices. He had three warehouses that always seemed to be brimming full.

In the early thirties, a few Shershev men got together and bought a truck. One of them was Berl Shames, Chayim Shemesh's older brother. Berl was a single man then and lived with his father and sister Esther next door to my grandparents Kantorowitz. Berl and his father Yosl (Joseph) had a garden across the street, and in it a large shed where the truck was kept while it was in town. My uncle Reuben used to hire this truck to bring him merchandise from as far away as Lodz, far across Poland.

A couple of years before the war, my Uncle Reuben extended his business to building forestry and forest ranger stations. These consisted of a half a dozen houses, the most modern in the entire area. They had running water, which could not even be found in Pruzany.

As I mentioned earlier, my Uncle Reuben's wife Chashka was a Pinsky, of medium height, sturdily built for a woman, with blond hair and blue eyes. Their daughter, Michla, inherited her fair coloring from her mother, and from her father her slender build, though not his one meter and eighty-five centimeter height. She was not much taller than her mother, but a couple of years later she developed a figure that was the envy of every girl in shtetl. As a thirteen- and fourteen-year old boy, as I began to take notice of her, an unexplainable wall began to form between us. Gone were the fights and hair pulling of the past. Our friendship took on strict respectability, to the extent that being alone we did

not dare sit next to each other. We were always apart from each other, even when on the same couch.

To my friends and me, the big city meant Brisk (Brest-Litovsk), which was only eighty kilometers away via field road, and by highway 110 kilometers away. It might have been a thousand kilometers. I doubt if more than ten percent of the entire Shershev population had ever been to Brisk. I had passed by the city several times, going with my mother and sister Sheva to Wierchy to visit my father for summers at Domaczewo. All I saw and remembered was the railway station.

The few students that attended out-of-town schools came home for their winter vacation, among them my sister Sheva and my close friend Laizer Rotenberg. In his regulation uniform school cap, Laizer walked in a manner befitting a big city student. We all tried it on, admiring its unique design. He told stories about the big city while we listened in awe. However, it was not his nature to be pretentious for very long. In a couple of days, he was back to being the same good old Laizer we knew.

During the winter of 1936-37, our group of five boys became even closer. At the same time, a group of five girls formed an equally tight-knit circle of about the same age. The oldest, Chayia Chadricky, was my age and my classmate; Lola Baumriter was somewhat younger and in my class. The other two, Mayah Meister and Sheina-Rivka Granat, were a year younger than I; my cousin Michla, the youngest of the group, was two years younger.

It is unclear to me now how we boys started going to Mayah Meister's house, where we met the girls. I do not doubt that it was deliberate, and it became frequent occurrence. We never came singly, but always in a group. Nor did any one of us meet any of the girls by ourselves. In my day, such a thing was unheard of in Shershev. One could see an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old couple in the street, but no younger.

It took another year before we boys and girls dared to go out on a Saturday night walk together. Not, G-d forbid, as couples, but as a bunch. That took care of Saturday evenings. During the remaining evenings of the week, if we didn't spend them in the local Betar, were passed sitting and talking without end about Zionism, the unrest that time in Palestine, growing anti-Semitism in Poland, and the persecution of Jews in Germany.

There was no shortage of topics to talk about. I think we were much better informed about world affairs than boys of fourteen are nowadays.

In the spring of 1937, a series of decrees were issued regarding Jewish homeowners. Mostowa Street, the main street, was inhabited by Jews only. Suddenly, the Poles decided to modernize it. They issued orders to all homeowners to replace the wooden sidewalks, which had served Shershev for a hundred years, with cement ones. This order applied also to half of Ostrowiecka Street, also inhabited by Jews, and the market square, which were the town's commercial center and its Jewish center.

This decree was paired with an even more oppressive demand: all the houses on those streets were to be painted either dark green or bluish gray; and all houses more than a meter from the sidewalk, which almost all were, were to have fences in front, with flowers planted behind the fence. The fences were to be all of the same size and shape and of the same color as the house.

The paint used in our part of the country had a linseed-oil base with coloring added. The thick wooden walls of our houses soaked up dozens of liters of paint, putting a heavy financial burden on the poor Jewish inhabitants of the shtetl—especially when compounded with the other decrees. We had no choice but to comply. Otherwise, we faced exorbitant fines.

No sooner did the Jewish community comply with these decrees than others followed. For example, all the chimneys were to be whitewashed and stay white. All the street gutters were to remain whitewashed as well, which was quite a task. I challenge anybody to keep a chimney white while constantly cooking or heating the house with wood, and if you whitewash a street gutter, see what it looks like after a rain. Sure enough, as soon as rain stopped the five local policemen were out in the street writing out fines. The streets of Shershev were paved with cobblestone, and it is only natural that grass grew between the stones. An order came down to get rid of the grass. One could see grown men, women, and children standing bent over all along the Jewish streets and market place, squatting on their knees or sitting on the ground, trying to cut out the stubborn grass roots out from between the closely set stones with knives. It was futile.

After a couple of hours wrestling with the roots in a most uncomfortable position, one could clear 3-4 square meters. The next day, one might get a bit further. However, by the time a person finished a piece of road—some of which was not even his—the space he cleared when he started a week earlier was sprouting new grass.

Hordes of inspectors and commissioners descended on Shershev and, as I have heard, on all shtetls around. They came not singly, but in twos, threes, and more. Their obvious purpose was to extract as much money as possible from the Jews and do it with a straight face. For example, every scale had to be inspected and every weight had to be punched with the inspector's emblem. This was done every year. In the year 1936-37, however, an entire group came, setting up a workshop and disqualifying every scale as well as every weight. Workers on the inspection team supposedly repaired the scales and adjusted the weights. They charged exorbitant prices for those repairs, close to the prices of new scales. The poor Jewish shopkeepers had no choice but to pay these fees. There was nowhere to go to complain about such outrageous and blatant robbery because they knew it was sanctioned by the government.

Other commissions found other ways of squeezing out every zloty from Jews. I will describe these later.

In the spring of 1937, the first co-op store in Shershev opened. We saw this as an invention of the government meant to deprive the Jewish small storekeeper of his livelihood. In the town square, there were two non-Jewish homes; the co-op was located in one of them. With the encouragement of local officials, some area Christians bought shares in the enterprise and encouraged others to buy there. The windows of the co-op had big signs calling on the population not to buy from Jews. Many went along with such propaganda.

It did not take long before another co-op opened down main street. These co-ops had no substantial effect on our business, but they affected the small Jewish storekeepers—perhaps more morally than materially.

Another example of government interference with Jewish business was in the shtetl of Kobrin. There were two roads leading from Shershev to the provincial town of

Brest-Litovsk. One led through forest, sand and fields, but the distance was only eighty kilometers. The other road by thirty kilometers longer was cobble-stoned and went through Pruzany. Kobrin was on this road, halfway between Shershev and Brest-Litovsk. Its population of some twelve or thirteen thousand was eighty percent Jewish. With such a proportion of Jews, it was only natural that almost all the stores and stalls were owned by Jews.

Before entering the town of Kobrin, one had to pass a large meadow on either side of the road. In the late spring of 1937, the government started building booths and stalls on the meadow. It did not take long to put them up and the government started renting them out to Christians only. No Jew was permitted to run one under any circumstance. The farmers from the surrounding villages would travel to the center of town, to the market square. They continued to do this after the stalls were erected, ignoring the newly erected stores on the meadow, which were not doing well.

That summer on a Monday morning, which was a market day, the police closed up all the streets leading into town, ordering the farmers to unhitch their horses on the meadow. The purpose was to discourage the farmers from going into town to get their supplies and deprive the Jewish storekeepers and small-time dealers of their livelihood. I believe that there would have been a quiet and even harmonious co-existence between the Jewish and non-Jewish population were it not for government interference and church agitation.

The government succeeded only to a limited extent. It failed to realize that the farmers depended on the Jews as much as the Jews depended on the farmers. The most primitive farmer needed a blacksmith to repair his wagon and shoe his horse. He also needed a shoemaker, tailor, seamstress, carpenter, mason, and wagon-wheel maker, not to mention more sophisticated trades. Almost all of these tradesmen were Jews. Most importantly, the farmers needed Jewish merchants to buy their surplus produce. Were it not for the Jews in the small and large towns, the farmer would not be able to sell his produce.



After the implementation of the new laws, the farmers left their horses outside the town and carried their produce on their backs into the shtetl. They were as unhappy with the new decree as the Jews were.

The isolated Jewish families who had lived in peasant villages alongside their Christian neighbors for generations always had some interest in moving to the shtetl. In peasant villages, it was difficult to keep a kosher home, give children a Jewish education and, of course, find a Jewish spouse for a child, so those with the wherewithal were likely to move to the shtetl if they could find a way of making a living there. Some, however, after a lifetime spent in the village, were unable to move. A fair number of Jews were scattered in villages within a radius of twenty kilometers of Shershev, including Suchopola, Chwalow, and Popielewo.

Later in the thirties, the lives of some of these village-dwelling Jews were endangered. I recall a case in the village of Hallen, two dozen kilometers from Shershev, where the villagers tied the door of an elderly Jewish couple at night so it could not be opened from the inside and set the house on fire. They did not expect that the old couple would be able to escape through the windows, but they did and saved their lives.

In the spring of 1937 my Uncle Eli, my father's youngest brother, came home on furlough from the army. He came in full military attire with a sword on the belt. The entire conversation revolved around his service: the sleeping accommodations, food and treatment by his fellow soldiers and the officers.

From among his stories, I will mention this one: A couple of months after he was drafted, they selected all those soldiers who were gymnasium graduates (there weren't many in Poland), to be taken into officer's school. This law applied to every draftee. However, in 1936 the law was unofficially changed. Jews were rejected, including my uncle.

Some days later, he found himself alone for a minute with no less than his captain, who said to him, "Kantorowitz, do not think it was an oversight from above that they did not take you to officer's school. They knew what they were doing. I protested and told

them that you would make a good officer. I don't have to tell you why; you know the reason."

My uncle served in the light artillery, the 16<sup>th</sup> Regiment stationed in the city of Bidgoszcz, northwestern Poland. One of the most important functions in the artillery is that of the layer, who determines the way the gun will be aimed. It has to do with mathematics and, due to his education, Uncle Eli was the best suited for the job and got the assignment. This gave him a high status in his battery and among his immediate commanders, so they did not pick on him as a Jew.

There were in Shershev quite a few bachelors of marriageable age. They were sons of business people or storekeepers. Those young men had no vocation; to learn a trade was beneath their dignity. So they waited for a matchmaker to find them a match from another shtetl and, with the dowry, which was almost obligatory, they would set themselves up in some kind of business. Or else, an established father of the bride could take the son-in-law into his own business. Others among the available bachelors were already occupied in their either own businesses or in their father's family ones.

Three of the most eligible, visible and prominent bachelors in the shtetl were my paternal uncle Hershl, Israel Tzemachowicz, the *shochet's* (ritual slaughterer) son, and Berl Shames, my paternal cousin. Those three bachelors were the closest of friends, always together. I can recall them walking in a group with girls when I was a child. In time, the girls got married while the three of them remained single.

Being involved in business, they did not get together during the week. My uncle Hershl worked in his father's, my grandfather's, hardware store and it required his full attention. Israel Tzemachowicz bought up the hides of animals his father and others slaughtered and sold them to tanneries. Berl Shames was one of the partners to the only local truck, which was used to haul freight to and from Shershev.

In spring of 1937, Berl Shames was the first to leave the trio. He married a local girl, Hellkah Roselewsky, Chaikl Roselewsky's daughter. Chaikl Roselewsky had spent some years in the U.S.A. and came back with apparently a nice bit of money, enough to build a very large house that held a few tenants. One tenant was the law court, which was

closed a few years before the Second World War. That part of the house also served for a while as a Betar local. In another part lived the family of Yaakov-Yeshayou Kwelman. Yet there still was enough room in the house for the owners to live in.

I guess Chaikl did not spend his last dollar on the house because, as far as I remember, he had no visible source of income, yet his family lived comfortably during the last ten years before the outbreak of the Second World War.

After Berl Shames got married, the rest of the trio followed suit. First, Israel Tzemachowicz, and then my uncle Hershl. Hershl married a girl from Kamieniec-Litewsky, her first name was Shaine; I do not remember her family name. All of the grownups attended the wedding in Kamieniec-Litewsky, but we children stayed home.

Kamieniec-Litewsky was not much bigger than Shershev, but its Jewish population was twice as large. There was a large yeshiva (an institute of higher Talmudic learning), the majority of whose students were American young men who came to study, get *smicho* (ordination) and go back home. Many of the Kamieniec-Litewsky Jews made a living from those American students. They could not have done this from the students of the surrounding shtetls.

I still remember when my uncle Hershl brought his bride home. Her name Sheina (beautiful) fit her: statuesque, rounded in all the right places, rosy cheeks on a milky white skin and a good ten years younger than he. Hershl and Sheina moved in with my grandparents, taking up the same three rooms in which we had lived ten years earlier. The reason my uncle came to stay in Shershev was that it was hard for my grandfather to look after the hardware store by himself. Hershl remained for a year until his brother, my Uncle Eli, came back from military service. Then, he and his wife moved to Kamieniec-Litewsky where he became a partner in his father-in-law's business as a *packter* (leasing pastures and cows from estate owners and producing cheese from the cow's milk). The cheese produced in those *packts* was special. It looked, smelled and tasted like real Swiss cheese. It was too expensive for most of the local population and so was exported.

I was particularly close to my two youngest uncles, Hershl and Eli. It was Hershl who taught me to ride a bicycle a few years earlier. He used to leave his father, my grandfather, alone in the store in the hot summery afternoons and run after me, holding on

to the bicycle so I would not fall. I am sure he would rather sit in the store where it was much cooler than be outside, but he played with me.

Moishe Gelman was a friend of mine. His surname means “yellow man,” and indeed he and his father's hair was blonde. He was a year older than I was. He had a sister a couple of years younger by the name of Bunia, and still a younger brother Chaim. His father Meir was a very successful tailor. He had a few young men as apprentices and was considered the best men's tailor in the shtetl. He was always loaded with work, despite his higher charges. He used to make my yearly suits for Pesach. His wife Yente was a dressmaker and she too had a couple girls working for her. Since she was as busy as her husband was, there is no wonder that they made a nice living.

Meir Gelman loved gardening, especially flowers, and in spring he used to leave his work to his assistants and devote his heart and soul to his flowers. It is quite possible that his was the nicest flower garden in town. It was a pity that the garden was behind the house and could hardly be seen by passersby. It seems he did not do it for show but for the love of it.

In the narrow end of the house was a parlor that was surrounded by flowers. Two of its windows faced out to the back, right onto the beautiful flowerbeds. Along this narrow side of the house, Meir Gelman planted grapes. The vines climbed along the lightweight scaffolds, erected half a meter from the house, to the top of the roof. There was just enough room to open the windows and inhale the fragrance of the flowers.

My friend Moishe Gelman and I used to spend a lot of time in that parlor on rainy days, in front of the open windows, protected from the rain by heavy grape leaves, watching the warm rain drops falling and being soaked up by the sea of flowers. I used to get a feeling of comfort, protection, even security. It must have been there that I developed a liking, even affection, for summer rain.

My very closest friend and confidant at that time was Kalman Kalbkoif, the son of Hershl and Yente. His sister Nishka was in my grade in school. There were three smaller children in that family whose names I do not remember. Kalman and I shared hopes of travelling to faraway places and a dream of a Jewish homeland. We so wanted to travel

that we even started building a small boat with Laizer Rotenberg when he came home on his vacation in the summer of 1937. We worked at it for the entire two-month vacation. How difficult and futile our effort was. We expended two months of holiday cutting the timber and making the molding fit the frame. Nobody could have been happier and more enthusiastic than us three boys, thinking we were accomplishing our dream.

The next summer, we made a half hearted attempt to finish the boat, but our earlier enthusiasm was missing. The hours we spent working were more mechanical than creative. Deep in our hearts, each of us knew that we were laboring in vain, but nobody wanted to be the first to say it aloud. The project ended when the school year started and Laizer Rotenberg, the driving force of the project, went back to Brest-Litowsk and we went back to school.

That summer, all the men and some of the women became politicians. If they ran out of topics in world politics, there was always something to complain about in the local *kehilla* (local Jewish community government). The *kehilla* was in neighboring Pruzany and governed all the neighboring shtetls, like Shershev, Linovo, Malech, Seltz and a couple others. Each of those shtetls had two representatives in the *kehilla*, but the majority of its members were Pruzany residents.

Kehilla members were democratically elected every couple of years and there was always dissatisfaction with the results. In Shershev, the same two men were elected time after time. They were my grandfather Yaakov-Kopel Kantorowicz and my friend's father, Meir Gelman (the flower lover). From time to time, Gelman was replaced by Chazkl Krugman.

There lived in Shershev a shoemaker—one of dozens—Meir Chayim. He was very tall man with unusual strength and a loud voice. All week, he worked long hours to provide for his wife and many children. On Saturdays, he got up at six in the morning out of habit, and sat in his favorite place, on the doctor's porch in the market square, his voice thundering half way across the shtetl as he preached world politics.

The doctor had no need to be awakened this time of morning and wanted to sleep in. He told Meir to move on, but next Saturday morning, Meir Chayim was back in his

favorite place holding forth. I doubt if he could read, but he spoke about shtetl politics, kehilla politics or just talked. Nobody wanted to start a discussion with him for fear of getting a punch in the nose. Even outside of that consideration, they preferred to be on his good side.

Another shtetl character I remember was our next-door neighbor Nacham Feldman. Nacham the stitcher, as he was known, used to come in to our house every so often in the evening for a chat. He was a smart man and witty. Being some twenty years older than my parents, they used to speak to him with respect. Since our houses were divided only by a narrow lane that we both used, we used to see each other a dozen times a day, which led to my parents becoming good friends with him. His wife, Tzina was a tall and large woman, friendly and good-natured. She had a motherly approach to my parents. My mother loved her. She resented the fact that Tzina used to go to the well for water, particularly in the winter, when she should have been able to send her husband.

Once sitting and chatting in our house, my mother asked him, “Reb Nachman, how come you always let your wife go to the well for water?” He, without blinking an eye, responded, “Estherke, Estherke, I was and will remain a good son that listens to his mother. When I was a little boy, my mother used to say to me, ‘Nachman, Nachman, don’t go to the well for you might fall in.’ So, even now that I am an old man and my mother is long gone, I still follow her warnings and instructions.” Understandably, we all burst out laughing. It is admirable that this shrewd old man could wiggle out of an embarrassing situation so smoothly and amusingly.

During the summer of 1938, I spent a lot of time in the store reading books sitting behind the shelves. There I could sit undisturbed as long as I wanted, provided I was reading. My father never interrupted my homework or reading. I read lots, at times a book a day.

The only occasional bit of work I did was to help my father unpack the cases of vodka and put the bottles on the shelves. They came in solid wooden cases packed in straw. After the bottles were out of the cases, the straw was put back into the cases, the covers hammered on and put behind the shelves to be used on the next trip.

We had a steady wagon-drawer or coachman, a husky fellow in his late twenties. He lived with his elderly parents and a single sister in a small house at the end of Mostowa Street and was their sole provider. Twice a week he drove with his horse and wagon to the station of Linovo or Oranczyce as it was called in Polish, a distance of thirty kilometers, where he used to pack up the vodka and drive back home. He used to leave Shershev at midnight to be there in the morning. He would pack up all the bottles in the wooden cases and leave for home in late afternoon, arriving back in Shershev at midnight. The next morning, he would leave for Pruzany to get a load of groceries.

One summer evening, this wagon-drawer—his name was Shepsl Rudnicki—came to us and, in his always-polite manner and voice, turned to my father and said, "I came to ask you a favor." It was an unusual thing to hear. He went on to explain that he and a few others got together and were buying a truck, with which they intended to haul freight from Shershev to Brest-Litovsk and Warsaw. However he was short by a couple of hundred dollars to supply for his share. He was wondering if my father could loan him this amount. Of course, he promised to pay back as soon as he could.

This was a lot of money in those days, especially in Shershev. I can still see my father exchange glances with my mother and then walking away into their bedroom, coming back with a handful of dollars. (People in our parts of the world used to put their trust in U.S. dollars, not in the bank.) He handed it to Shepsl, who took it, counted it slowly and carefully, and then put it in his pocket. He thanked my parents nicely, but not profusely or obsequiously, and turned to go out. Just before he got to the door, he stopped and turned around. A reluctant sigh came from his throat and with sincerity and difficulty, he said, "Mr. Kantorowicz, I worked myself up from a horse and wagon to a truck. If I fail, will I be able to end up at least with a horse and wagon?" (That was the first time I heard him address my father as Mr. Kantorowicz. He usually called him Reb Itzik, that is Mr. Isaac.)

It turned out that this ordinary fellow was more farsighted than most of those considered smart members of our community. He did pay in his share of the partnership,

but hung on to the horse and wagon with which he continued to earn his meager existence. With his share of the income from the truck he was paying off his loan.

Two years later, in 1939, the Bolsheviks came and they took the truck away without any compensation. They called this "nationalization." Shepsl was fortunate that he had held on to his horse and wagon. He still kept paying up his loan. He paid it to the very last cent before the war. He was hard working Jewish young man, one of hundreds of thousands whom fate has so mercilessly wronged.

One thing, the peasants feared more than the Jews was a thunderstorm, which was accompanied by thunder and lightning. The peasants' buildings had thatched roofs that could be set on afire by lightning and, sometimes within seconds, the building would be engulfed by flames. Sometimes the farmers had no chance to free the animals from their stables. Any little breeze would carry the sparks to adjoining buildings and neighboring farms.

The Jewish homes had roofs of wooden shingles, which were more resistant to lightning. There was also a volunteer fire brigade, for some reason consisting of only Jewish men. Their equipment was outdated with half a dozen hand operated pumps and some twenty horse-drawn barrels, each mounted on a single axles with two wheels. As there were few wells in the shtetl, during a fire, water had to be hauled quite a distance. The hauling of water in barrels from scattered wells was more of a hindrance than a help.

Finally, in 1937, Shershev got its own motor pump with enough hose to reach from the river to any point in the shtetl. A year later, Shershev got its own fire engine, a brand new shining vehicle, even more modern than in the larger neighboring town of Pruzany. Shershev was not destined to enjoy it for long. A year later, when the war broke out, the Polish government mobilized the municipal fire engine together with the two privately owned buses and two trucks.

In the spring of 1937, the government decided to open a health center in town. They started looking for a suitable place and wanted four roomy bright rooms easily



accessible in the center of town. There was to be a waiting room, an examination room and two rooms for a nurse's living quarters.

They liked our house. Besides being centrally located, it had four rooms facing the front and two front entrances: one for the clinic and the other as a private entrance to the nurse's quarters.

A delegation from the district came to look over our house and the four rooms they needed. After a short discussion among themselves, they made my father an offer. It must have been a tempting one, for my father accepted it immediately after talking it over with my mother.

A carpenter sealed off three doors that connected the front four rooms to the others and we moved all the furniture over to the remaining rooms. Now we had only four rooms and the kitchen. We no longer had a front entrance to our part of the house and had to use the lane between our house and that of our neighbor, Nachman Feldman, who also used that same lane as an entrance to his house.

The clinic nurse now lived at our house in the two rooms designated for her with her husband surnamed Gluszho. Her husband was the youngest of four Russian orthodox brothers who, for some reason, dabbled in other Christian faiths. Some converted to Catholicism and later to Protestantism. Eventually, they returned to their original faith. Being fairly well educated and well to do, having inherited a flourmill and sawmill, they were considered aristocrats and looked it: tall, impressive and good looking. The youngest and most handsome of them was the one who lived in our house. He could not find a suitable, good-looking girl around Shershev and married a girl, the nurse, from some distance away. I will not even attempt to describe her beauty. The local population could not get their fill of looking at her. When the two of them used to walk by in the streets, every head used to turn their way.

There was no room left for a maid. It was the first time that I could remember that my mother had to do without one but, surprisingly, not only did she manage without one, but she was no busier without one. That is, she was constantly busy from the moment she got out of bed early in the morning until she went to bed.

Although I did not realize it then, I have long concluded that the lot of the housewives, even in the better-to-do households, was harder than that of their husbands, the providers. In our family, for example, while my mother never stopped for a moment, my father opened the store at eight in the morning and simply sat waiting on customers. Serving a customer required little effort. All he had to do was to hand him the bottle and collect the money. True, in the busy season in the fall, when a lot of weddings took place, the sales were as large as a hundred bottles per customer and then the bottles had to be packed in sacks between straw to withstand the rigor of the road to a far away village. To do it, one needed special skill that my father possessed. He worked hard most of the year but still had time to read the newspaper and discuss the news with friends and acquaintances, who were all trying to solve world problems. During hot summer days, an additional draw to the store was that it was as cool as if it were air-conditioned.

In contrast, my mother and other housewives spent their time in a sweltering kitchen where the iron plate on the cooking stove made the heat unbearable. Although everybody did some work in our house, the busiest person was my mother. I cannot remember a moment when she was sitting idle, regardless of whether she had a maid. After the cooking and baking, washing and cleaning, she used to sit evenings doing something. There was always sewing and darning, especially darning. Men's socks always needed darning before there were artificial materials like nylon and acrylic. There was only cotton and wool and often a new pair of men's socks had a hole in the sole after the first day of wearing. My mother would make sure that we were always dressed cleanly and properly.

I remember how my mother's work gave me a feeling of being enveloped in secure love. There were two tiled stoves and a baking oven that were heated twice a day in the cold winter days and once a day in spring and fall. On Friday mornings, my mother would get up at 2:00 A.M. and start baking *challah*, the twisted white Sabbath bread. I shared a bedroom with my little brother Liova (Leibl) and my bed stood against the back wall of the bake oven. As soon as my mother lit the oven fire, the wall would get warm and warm, in turn, the bed and entire room. The unusual warmth of the bed and the kitchen sounds would wake me up to a feeling of comfort, the well-being that I

experienced knowing that the person dearest to me in the world, my mother, who would do anything for me, even give her life, was up and watching over me. I knew when I got up, she would have a hot potato pancake, which I love, ready for me, and that in the meantime I could lie in a very warm bed while the outside was bitter cold.

Still, my father was hardly a slacker around the house. One job he did was swaddle any infant children after he closed the store. Due to shortages of certain vitamins in our diet, infants were likely to become bowlegged. To prevent it, parents would swaddle infants from the age of two weeks until they were four to five months old. After he changed the diaper, he swaddled our legs with a cotton strip some ten to twelve centimeters wide and several meters long. He wrapped the infant in this cotton starting from the sole of the feet and going around and around with particular attention to the legs, then slowly went up the body to under the arms. This took a great deal of time, making changing diapers quite a job.

Two countrywide boycotts were taking place at the same time in Poland. One was led by Jews against buying German merchandise. There were signs in the Jewish store windows in Polish and Yiddish, proclaiming, "We don't buy German merchandise." The stores, some of them so small that they had no windows, had the same signs nailed onto the doors. Another boycott, much more intensive, serious and effective, was against Jewish shops and led by the Polish *Endeks*, an anti-Jewish pro-Nazi movement sponsored by the Polish government that was trying hard to deprive the Jews of their livelihood.

The local non-Jewish population, which was mainly Byelorussian, was of two opinions over these developments. They resented the patriotic Polish anti-Semitic propaganda, although its anti-Semitic contents appealed to them. A small portion hated everything Polish, including their anti-Semitic propaganda. They sympathized with the Soviet Union, which meant Russia to them, their own people.

A bill was brought before the Polish parliament to prohibit the kosher slaughter of animals because it was not humane. This rationale was ludicrous. The way every peasant slaughtered his pig or pigs could sicken even the strongest stomach. They loved to drink

the fresh warm blood of the pig, so they drained it of blood while it was still alive. They would try to decapitate the pig with an ax while it was twisting and wriggling, missing several times. Nor did the head come off with just one or two strikes. That however, was considered humane. The instigator behind the bill was a certain Madame Pristor. She moved heaven and earth to get the decree passed.

Jews appealed, protested, and wrote petitions. They tried to explain and justify their practice on religious grounds. Unfortunately, the ingrained anti-Semitism in the parliament was stronger than economic sense, tolerance, justice or respect for other faiths. Eventually the parliament compromised to a degree by allowing a certain minimal amount of meat to be slaughtered according to Jewish religious law. After coming to this agreement, the government let it be known that the total meant animal on the hoof. They knew well that Jews are not permitted to eat the hind part of the animal, and thus halved the amount of meat agreed on in negotiations.

During centuries of persecution, Jews have learned to improvise. Jewish law permits eating the hind of the animal if every piece of vein is plucked out. The problem is that after such a cleaning the meat is so shredded that it is only suitable as hamburger.

The only benefactors of that law were the Polish inspectors that used to visit the Jewish butcher shops very frequently to make sure that the butchers are not selling unlicensed meat. The inspectors however, were not immune to bribes. Knowing the severity of the fine for selling unlicensed meat, they would extract every grosz (penny) from the already impoverished butchers.

Despite the difficulties caused by anti-Semitism, life went on. A couple of young men succeeded in getting to the land of Israel. They were from the early core of the Hashomer Hatzair (young leftist Zionists) and the leadership of this organization felt that they owed them this much. For Revisionist-Zionists, all the official and legal roads were closed and only a trickle managed to get through the *aliyah beth* (the underground route). This was difficult and dangerous.

There was in Shershev a Yehudah Weiner, who had three sons in the land of Israel. I wrote about the three Weiner brothers earlier. Yehudah Weiner had three more

sons in Shershev. The oldest Gotl, was nine years older than me and served in the short-lived Polish-German war together with my uncle Eli. The second son, Rafael, was three years older than me, and the youngest, Pinchas, was a year my junior. Rafael attempted to get to Palestine in 1938 via the underground. He got as far as Constancia in Romania and missed the boat. A second one was being readied to depart some months later. As there was no definite time, Rafael returned home to Shershev. He never made a second attempt. He experienced the expulsion from Shershev and perished in Chomsk on Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) in 1942.

Hashomer Hatzair had ceased to exist in Shershev a couple of years earlier. There was also diminishing enthusiasm among Betar members for many reasons. A member of Betar had no chance to get a permit to go to Palestine; there was a shortage of inspiring leadership; the older members of Betar were assuming responsibility for aging parents; members were being called up for military duty and still others were thinking about their own future and marriage. The teenagers lacked the experience needed for leadership and eventually the local branch of Betar closed. For all intents and purposes, Betar ceased to exist.

My friend Kalman Kalbkoif and I were the official leaders, but there were no followers. There was a loose membership, but no place for meetings. All we did was keep in contact with the leadership in Warsaw and send them a couple of zloty monthly, just to keep in touch. I signed our correspondence with Warsaw as *mfaked* (commander) and Kalman as secretary. All the correspondence, records, and stationery were kept in our attic. This could have landed us in Siberia when the Bolsheviks came, as will be explained later.

Throughout the summer, our store more than any other served as a gathering place for storekeepers who could leave their store under somebody else's attendance, or even close it completely for a while knowing that they wouldn't miss much business. For them a customer was a scarcity and a sale even more so. So instead of spending long hours in the tiny sweltering little four-by-four store waiting for customers that wouldn't show up, they used to close it and come over to us. The walls of the store were a meter thick and

the heat never penetrated them. While cooling off, the visitors would chat about the political situation that was becoming more and more threatening.

A few young men did nothing but sit and wait for a girl with a large dowry. They were idlers or loafers. Not having anything to do, they would come in and spend the time with their peers.

One could hear true news and half-truths, assumptions and wishful thinking. Anything one wanted or did not want to hear. After every lengthy discussion one would turn to my father and ask, "Nu, what do you say Yitzik (Isaak)?" One would think that my father had a direct line to every government leader. At home, my father would repeat and share with my mother some of the conversations he heard during the day. Some were sensible, some naïve, some crazy.

It was no secret that Hitler was building a huge army. Any conversation inevitably turned to talk of war, a topic familiar to my parents. They had experienced it firsthand twenty years earlier during the First World War—my father in the Czar's army and my mother living with hunger and deprivation under German rule. Their stories triggered my imagination and elicited all kinds of fantasies in which I was the hero.

As I have mentioned previously, Shershev had a Jewish library. Its founders were schoolchildren led by my cousin Abe (Abraham) Auerbach, my uncle Shloime's (Salomon) son. They were motivated by a longing for Jewish and Hebrew literature. Nobody was more strongly motivated than my cousin Abe.

But the founders grew up. A couple of them left Europe, like my cousin Abe. Some moved to neighboring shtetls, and the rest had to assume responsibility for parents or got married. One of those grown bachelors was Shimon Izbicky. A tailor by trade, he was intelligent, well-read, and still found time to be active in charitable and public service organizations, particularly the local orphanage.

One Saturday afternoon, he came upon us boys walking in the street. Stopping us, he asked us to meet him next Saturday at the same time in the Hebrew school, which we did. To our surprise we found there a group of boys two to three years older than us. Among them were Motl Notes, Yekutyel Wapenshtein, Nachum Malecky, Moish-Eli

Shocherman and a couple more. Besides them, there was the entire managing committee of the library. I remember a couple of them: Feigah Feinbir and Lipa Elman's older son and of course Shimon Izbicky.

Shimon opened the meeting very professionally and immediately got to the main subject. He spoke eloquently and movingly how of the difficulty boys of our age and younger had, years ago, to raise money to buy the first few books and of their effort in the following years to raise the number of books to the present 850. How much time they had put in to keep the library open in the evenings, so as to give the Shershev Jewish youth a chance to read Jewish and Hebrew books—not only written by Jewish writers, but translated from other languages into Yiddish. He mentioned the desire of our youth for education, but how most of us were limited to a school with only seven grades because very few parents could afford to send us away for further education. “Yet,” he told us, “one can acquire a good deal of knowledge on one's own, and one way is by reading books.”

He stopped for a few seconds, then continued, “I would like to give you an example of one local young man who had an overwhelming desire for knowledge. He sat assiduously over books day and night and acquired so much respect, and was held in such high esteem, that if on a hot summer day he sat down in the middle of the market square, took off his shoes and pulled off his sweaty socks, the finest girl in town would be glad to wash them for him. This young man is now in the land of Israel and his name is Chaim Shemesh.”

I think Shimon Izbicky was carried away to excess by the mood of the moment. However, there is no question that Chaim Shemesh was the most respected young man in shtetl, and the most sought after by girls and parents with girls of marriageable age. I have already mentioned his leadership of Betar. I confess that I felt a bit smug when Izbicky mentioned Chaim Shemesh, for Chaim was my father's cousin. Their mothers were sisters. Unfortunately, Chaim's mother died in childbirth and he was named after her, her name was Chayie-Zlate so Chaim had two first names Chaim-Zelik.

The appeal of Shimon Izbicky worked and we boys took over the management of the library. We spent a lot of time moving the library to a more central location. Not having

funds, we carried the books and shelves by hand, and took turns keeping it open every evening.

The summer vacation of summer 1937 ended and I went back to school. My little brother Liova (Leibl) entered grade three, and my sister Sonia (Sarah) enrolled in grade one. My sister Sheva left for Pruzany to continue in the gymnasium. Although she came home for every Sabbath, it took some preparation to send her off after the long vacation. I used to miss her singing and the catchy new songs she brought home with her. Even my two little sisters Sonia (Sarah) and Liba, both gifted with sweet voices, used to join in. My mother, who also had a good voice, used to nod with approval while listening to them sing. None of us imagined that those were rare, golden moments that would soon disappear forever.

Remembering the anti-Semitic bullying I had last endured in school, I did not look forward to the new school year. To my surprise, I was wrong. Right on the first morning of the school year, when a few Christian boys started picking on us two Jews, a couple others told them to leave us alone. I noticed later that the boys were whispering to each other in a kind of discussion. Apparently, they came to some agreement to leave us alone. The atmosphere in class had changed completely. For example, as the boys used to come to school in the morning, they formed groups, usually by grade. Each joining the group shook hands with everyone else, but they would not extend a hand to us two Jewish boys. Now all this had changed. They started shaking our hands, and without any remarks. All other persecutions had ceased. This happened in the school year of 1937-38, while Polish anti-Semitism in Poland was increasing to its maximum level in 1938. It is well over half a century since then, and I still can only conjecture about what came over the Christian boys in my class that they should change their ways so radically.

One conjecture is that it was the seventh grade, the last year, and maybe the class understood the importance of learning and decided to take advantage of their opportunities rather than pick on Jews. It is true that their unwillingness to attend school disappeared. Not only this, it seemed that the entire class was paying more attention to the teachers than before.



Another conjecture is that the decline in Belarusian anti-Semitism was a byproduct of an increasing hatred of Polish nationalism. The Belarusians considered themselves Russians, or at least closely related, and sympathized with the Soviet Union. Poland was at loggerheads with the Soviet Union and vice-versa. The local people attributed negative rumors about the Soviet Union to Polish propaganda. Perhaps they also became more resistant to the anti-Semitic propaganda because they identified it with Polish nationalism. If so, their sudden turnaround was not primarily due to love for Jews, but from hatred of the Poles.

Still, we had another pleasant surprise that winter in school. Our teacher of Polish in grade seven was the school principal, the very same that a year earlier advise that we Jews should hang ourselves, as long as Poland getting rid of its Jews. During one of his lessons some Christian students mentioned how Jews use Christian blood for matzo.

I always suspected that they knew that it was a false accusation, for every Pesach when we used to bring matzo to school for our lunch, they used to ask, literally beg for it. When I reminded them that matzo is supposedly baked with Christian blood they would laugh it off and ask for more. Still during that lesson they all had serious faces, and one would think that they meant it. To my surprise, that anti-Semitic teacher declared in a clear and loud voice that it was not true that Jews use Christian blood in matzo, nor any other blood, nor anything else except flour and water.

During the winter of 1937-1938, our lives continued much as before. Persecution of Jews continued and there was a sense of dread and foreboding. Jews spoke about politics whenever and wherever they met, in the street, at home and in the synagogue. They did not know what to expect or what decrees the government would promulgate the next spring. Meanwhile the cold winter slowed down the activities of the *Endex* (Polish Anti-Semitic Nationalist Party).

Still, it was the last winter we were unmolested at home. I sat together with my family, doing home work or reading a book and keeping an eye on my eight year old brother Liova (Leibl) and my six year old sister Sonia (Sarah), who was in grade one. I felt smug about being able to supervise them. I also had a hobby, collecting stamps,

which was very fashionable among youngsters in those days.

Around Purim (the holiday celebrating the deliverance of the Jews from persecution by the Persian Haman), tailors and shoemakers got especially busy. Jews who could afford it started ordering new clothing and footwear for Pesach. Christians were getting ready for Easter. As a rule, peasants would drive in from their villages by horse and buggy and come in to the tailor, dressmaker, or shoemaker with their material. The craftsman would take the measurements and start working on it while the farmer sat there and waited. In late afternoon or early evening, his pants or jacket was ready and he used to take it home.

In the second house on Bet-Chayim Street, or Nova, as it was called in Polish, lived a tailor named Zalman Schneider; oddly enough, *schneider* means tailor. A peasant was sitting in Zalman's house and waiting for his order to be finished. The peasant suddenly jumped up and ran out in the street, screaming that Zalman Schneider wanted to slaughter him and use his blood for matzo.

The peasant's timing was excellent. It was Purim time, when Jews start baking matzo, and it was the early spring of 1938, a year when pogroms in Poland became common. Every city, town and village waited for a spark, any spark, to start beating up Jews, breaking windows, robbing stores and homes and, let us not forget, murdering. However, the peasant miscalculated as to the place. His running and screaming all the way to the police station led through the market square and main street, which were inhabited almost entirely by Jews. Therefore, he could not gather a following of impressionable gentiles. Nor was there any reaction at the police station.

The police knew that the whole blood accusation is a farce, but sometimes they found it undiplomatic to argue the point with inflamed pogromists. What completely negated the peasant's clever plan was the fact that Zalman's son, Reuben, a young man in his late twenties who lived in his father's home, was well trusted by the government. He had been appointed *soltys* (village mayor and bailiff) for Jewish affairs when Shershev had recently lost its status as *mjasto* (town) and was demoted to *mjasteczko* (little town or borough). The City Hall was closed and replaced by a *gemina* (municipal office). The

police were not prepared to embarrass their soltys and the Christian population would not riot without the acquiescence of the police. So, for the time being, Shershev got off lucky. Had the peasant chosen a different tailor to accuse, the results might have been less fortunate.

As the snows melted and the roads dried, all kinds of government commissions surfaced: a health commission, a sanitary commission, a beautification commission, a planning commission and a host of other commissions and inspectors. Their only detectable purpose was to find any way to bury the Jewish storekeepers and small dealers with minutiae.

A particularly obvious example occurred in Pruzany: among a dozen or so barbers, there was one by the name of Berestycky. Not only did he have a pure Polish name but he looked perfectly Polish. Four inspectors from the sanitary commission came in, two from higher up from Brest and two locals. After looking around, one of the out-of-town inspectors said with approval; no wonder it is so clean here, it is owned by a Pole. One of the local inspectors said that he was a Jew. So, the four inspectors hung around another couple of minutes and found an imperfection. Of course, the barber was immediately fined.

The atmosphere of hate and pogrom across the land was becoming so bad that when Jews walked along a gentile-inhabited street, they were likely to be beaten up. On April 29, 1938, Poles in Vilna marched in protest against the killing of two Polish border guards by Lithuanian soldiers and attacked Jews in the street, killing one, injuring many, and vandalizing Jewish property and possession.

A month later, there was a pogrom in Brest-Litovsk, a city of 45,000 inhabitants, seventy-five percent of whom were Jews. The several hundred pogromists were no match for such a large number of Jews, but the police interfered. When some Jews started to gather for a fight, police came to arrest them so they would not trouble the mob of robbers. I heard an eyewitness account of this pogrom from Laizer Rotenberg, who was studying there and was present during that pogrom. The pogromists concentrated their destructive effort mainly on the Jewish streets with Jewish businesses. Breaking into the stores and warehouses they helped themselves to whatever they wanted, throwing the rest

out into the street and destroying it. Several days later, one could still see not only the broken doors and windows of homes and stores in the Jewish areas, but even destroyed possessions like the broken furniture, thrown pillows and featherbeds with feathers flying all over. The mob dragged bags of flour, all kinds of cereal, sugar, and grains from the stores. They poured their contents into a heap, drenched them with oil and kerosene and fired them. This was followed by several other pogroms in June in places like Minsk-Mazowiecki, Tarnopol, and Przemyśl.

With the example of the successful German annexation of the Saar and the later Anschluss with Austria, Polish government's appetite for more territory grew. Pamphlets appeared portraying beautiful sandy beaches with blue shores and palms in the background alongside captions like, "We want colonies." The Poles soon realized that the powers with colonies would not give them to them willingly, so they decided to bully weaker neighbors like Lithuania. They later quieted down after failing to provoke Lithuania to war.

Poland still had an appetite for more territory, and the betrayal and dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1938 afforded an opportunity for scavenging German leftovers. The leftover was a piece of adjacent Czechoslovakian territory south of a little river Olza. Mortally wounded and betrayed by the great powers of Britain and France, Czechoslovakia was not in the mood to spill blood on a lost cause while she was being torn apart by Nazi Germany. She surrendered the piece of territory to Poland.

I don't know how heroic the Poles felt after they got that small piece of territory from Czechoslovakia. I do know that in our part of Poland, the population, both Jewish and gentile Byelorussian, were contemptuous of this Polish perfidy. Even the pleasure taken by the Byelorussians in the ubiquitous anti-Jewish laws did not counteract their disgust. They were about as aware as the Jews were of how truly idiotic and blind the Polish government was in its eagerness to imitate the Germans, to fail to see that Poland was to be the next Nazi target.

When the school year ended in June 1938, I got better marks than expected, but it was not a time to celebrate. Hitler had just driven the so-called Polish Jews out of Germany. Those Jews settled in Germany before and during the First World War, became German citizens, and lived there for decades. The Germans picked them up in their homes, ordered them to leave all possessions behind, and drove them to the Polish border. The Poles, in turn, refused to accept them, claiming that they left for Germany before Poland was recreated, so they were German citizens and thus did not have Polish citizenship.

Several thousand homeless Jews were now stuck on the German-Polish border, stranded near a town called Zbonshyn, with no means of support and no roof over their heads. The Germans even refused permission to deliver food to them from the German side. They remained on that border in no man's land with only a few barracks to protect them from rain and the winter of 1938-9. No trace or vestige remained of them after the German attack on Poland on September 1 1939.

A campaign started among the Jewish communities in Poland to provide them with at least food. I still remember the campaign in Shershev, how the entire community gathered in the large synagogue. Rich and poor, each present contributed according to his means. The contributions were announced loudly and clearly. When my father's contribution was announced, I heard a member of the community saying to the one next to him, "Itzik fears that should the Germans come here they will take away his beautiful newly-built home; that is why he contributed so generously." I resented that mean-spirited, jealous remark. Had I have been older I would have told that man a thing or two.

Even with all the ominous omens of what the Nazis would do, family life continued. In the summer of 1938, my uncle Hershl and his wife, Shaina, had left Shershev for Kamieniec-Litovsk to become a partner in his father in law's business. My sadness at his departure was lessened for me by the return of my uncle Eli (Eliyouh) from his two years of army service. These were happy days for both of us. As he was only nine years older than me, I considered him an older brother to look up to. I guess he thought me a good listener. He could not share his army experiences with his fellow army

veterans, who already knew all about it. He liked to reminisce and I was glad to walk with him as he told me about life in the army, even teaching me some of the army songs.

My sister Sheva spent that summer vacation at home, and as before, this time, she brought with her a new repertoire of the latest songs. Some out of town girls, her classmates, came to visit her during vacation time. One was Julie Rogotner and a second was Reshl Shlossberg. There was a third girl. I have forgotten her name and the shtetl she came from, but I remember the beautiful Yiddish she spoke. I can still hear my mother wondering and saying, "How does such a young girl from a small town come to speak such eloquent Yiddish?" Still another of my sister's close friends was Etche Liwerant, the Rabbi Noah's youngest daughter, who finished the Polish school at the same time as my sister and was going now to the Hebrew gymnasium in Pruzany.

I don't remember how and when young men began to appear in our house. They were three or four years older than I was. Like my friends and me, they too used to come in a group, never alone and never remained alone with a girl, be it my sister or her friends. The only thing I had in common with those older boys was the game of chess. They were better at it than me, but from time to time I used to beat one of them. I never wondered why they came to play chess with me. Did they want to play chess or to hang around my sister? I believe the latter is the right answer. After all, my sister Sheva was a good-looking girl, well educated for that time, and was Itzik Kantorowitz's daughter.

My close friend Laizer Rotenberg also came home from Brest-Litovsk for vacation. With his arrival, our group came back to life. He had the qualifications of a good friend-- trustworthy, solid, dependable, not an exaggerator, nor a braggart. His courage and physical strength also came in handy.

The news from the land of Israel was not encouraging. The Arab terror did not let up and there were new Jewish victims every day. My father took comfort in the fact that some Jews retaliated despite the policy of the Zionist leftist leadership that preached a policy of non-retaliation. My mother mourned the new victims.

Once I told my mother that I would like to go to the land of Israel. She would not hear of it. On a second occasion, I asked both of my parents, "Why we are sitting here in Poland, why don't we go somewhere else?" I received a Jewish answer—that is, another

question: "And what will we live on somewhere else? Here at least, we are making a living."

In growing tension and persecution, the summer vacation ended and I enrolled in the Hebrew gymnasium in Pruzany. There were no facilities for further schooling in Shershev and there was a minimal likelihood that a Jew would be accepted in the Polish gymnasium. Just a couple weeks later, my parents realized that there was no purpose in studying at the Hebrew gymnasium. I would waste 4-6 years and get a diploma that was worthless in Poland, since the government deprived many Hebrew high schools of the status to be recognized as proper preparation for university.

In previous years, it was considered beneath the dignity of children of merchants to try to become tradesmen or artisans. However, as of late, with the opening of trade schools, this became fashionable. It was a way to continue one's education when there were few other options. My parents decided to take me out of the gymnasium and enroll me in the trade school in Brest-Litovsk.

The students came from as far east as Baranowicz, Slonim, Wolkowisk and Nowogrodek, and as far south as Kowel and Kamien-Koszyrsk. Some were from the north like the shtetl Molczadz. Others from nearer places like Kobrin, Pruzany, Zabinka, and others. There was a small group of boys from an orphanage in Warsaw. They had grown up in a non-Jewish environment, and they knew very little of Jewish tradition or customs. They spoke no Yiddish and conversed only in Polish, which was strange to us east Polish Jews.

The school had its own dormitory for out-of-town students, to which I was accepted. It was on Trzeciego-Maja Street, No. 66: a large four-story brick building. On the first floor was a kitchen, dining room, shower room, and locker room with over one hundred lockers, one for each student. The second and third floors were all bedrooms with some 15 boys to a room. On the fourth floor were two large rooms, a homework room and a reading room.

My school year in Brest-Litovsk started late due to the admission procedure to the school. As a result, I spent an extra few days in Shershev. I spent a good part of that time

walking with my friends on the windblown streets. We were all depressed. Setting the tone was an unusually large number of ravens. They flew from one naked tree to the other, continuously cawing, like foreboding messengers of the terrible future.

When I arrived in Brest-Litovsk in late fall, what first struck my eye was not my new way of life, but screaming huge headlines in all the newspapers. They proclaimed the news that Poland was now hosting the distinguished guests from Germany, like Goering, Ribbentrop, Himmler and other big shots. They were in Bialowieza taking part in a hunt. The next day, the front pages of the same newspapers displayed large photos of the successful hunt, including rows of the killed animals and their exact numbers. There were over a hundred wild boars, a couple of dozen deer and moose, and an assortment of other animals. I, like millions of other Jews in Poland, marveled at how naïve, deceived, and outright blind the Poles were.

Polish eyes began to open with the onset of winter, beginning with hints in the German press about the free city of Danzig (now Gdansk). The Poles began to sense that it might have been a mistake to follow Hitler in all his misdeeds. Although there were no Polish mea culpas for their persecution of Jews, the mention of Danzig in the German press was enough to distract them from persecuting Jews and into pondering Hitler's intentions concerning Danzig instead.

It became clear that Poland was not powerful enough to reckon with a rearmed Nazi Germany, so the Poles started to arm in their primitive way. To raise the money to build an army, they proclaimed a general loan. This was not done like in other countries by selling bonds; instead they called it a "compulsory loan," knowing that the population had little trust in promises of repayment. Each household and breadwinner was assessed and the assessments had to be paid within a short time.

Here again, the Jewish population bore the heaviest burden. Although but ten percent of the population of Poland, Jews were assessed fifty percent of the total sum. They groaned and moaned having to pay such tributes, which in many cases deprived them of their daily bread and turned comfortable businessmen into petty merchants and petty merchants into beggars.



Given the later Jewish suffering, it may seem unreasonable to complain about taxation to build a Polish army, but nobody could have predicted those sufferings at the time. A North American of today cannot quite imagine the poverty of a shtetl in those times. I remember a petty storeowner in the Rad Kromen, Temah Kwelman. Every Saturday night she would borrow 10 zloty from my father so that she could stock her store. That was less than two dollars. The following Thursday, she would come and return the money. Week after week.

The first Polish mobilization was in March of 1939. The soldiers discharged from compulsory service within the last year were recalled. In Shershev, and I am sure in all other towns and cities of Poland, this mobilization evoked fear and apprehension, despite the attempt by the government to dispel the rumors of an imminent war.

Among those again inducted in the army were my uncle Eli and all his fellow veterans. They were to present themselves at once in the rail station of Linovo-Oranczyce, thirty kilometers away, where further instructions would be given. After that particular part of the war ended; my uncle told me of his experiences. When he arrived on that rail station, everything was in chaos and panic due to lack of organization and preparation by the army. It took over twenty-four hours to get him and others on the train in the direction of Warsaw.

Before reaching Warsaw the train turned north toward east Prussia. They disembarked at the Prussian border near a shtetl, Mlawa. My uncle was assigned to an artillery battery consisting of four cannons. They were ordered to dig in and make covered trenches that served as living quarters.

The spring of 1939 brought open German demands of Poland to return Danzig to Germany, to which Poland replied with continual smaller mobilizations. Poland started a feverish rearmament program. Its army was horse-drawn; except for a few hundred outdated tanks, the entire army depended for mobility on horses. The army began to buy horses from the only source, the peasants. Money was no obstacle, they simply began to print more. All one could see was new bank notes. They paid exorbitant prices for horses,

double and triple the value. Suddenly, the peasants had a lot of money to spend, and spend they did. They spent on clothing, footwear, bicycles. Some even removed their thatch roofs and replaced them with tin shingles. Although this artificial prosperity was, in reality, a bad omen, Jewish petty storekeepers and merchants now began to make a livelihood, for the first time in a long while.

Hitler's Germany was now demanding not only Danzig, but all of Pomerania—Poland's corridor to the Baltic, which divided Prussia into two geographically separated parts. A continual flow of news came via newspapers and radios and some of the Polish complaints were unintentionally ironic: German youths were beating up Poles in the streets of Danzig, breaking their windows and boycotting their stores. That is just what Poles used to do to Jews. Now the Poles of Danzig were experiencing the type of persecution they had inflicted upon Jews.

Poland responded to these threats with more small mobilizations. These were easier to handle and did not produce chaos at the railway stations and panic of the first mobilization of March. Still, the question of whether war would come was replaced by the question of when it would come. The newspaper analysts predicted that it would be in the fall, right after the harvest. Their reasoning was that both the Germans and Poles wanted the crops to be harvested to insure food for the army and the population.

Although their most horrible nightmares did not foresee the cruelty and savagery that the future held for them, many Jews now wished to escape Poland. However, the gates of every country in the world were closed against them. The few Jews that wrote to foreign embassies in Warsaw for visas received outright refusals or, at best, were informed that there was a long list of earlier applicants to be considered before any new applications could be accepted.

I remember how we would sit up at home until long after midnight during the long summer days of 1939 and talk, usually about politics. I think I had a premonition that our lifestyle, quiet and normal, was not to last much longer, for those evenings became very precious to me. I listened intently to my mother's beloved voice, her instructions, fables, and parables, some of which she acquired from her own experience during her younger

life and still others with their roots in Jewish tradition.

The lessons in Jewish tradition were often given by example. I remember that Nathan Krenitzer's wife used to go around every Friday noon to the better-to-do homes, collecting food for the poor so that they should have a challah for Sabbath. When I asked my mother for whom Nathan's wife collected the challah, my mother said that she did not know and did not want to know. It was enough that it was being distributed to the poor that could not afford to bake their own. This was a lesson by example of the rabbinical dictum that the contributor of charity should not know who the recipient is and the recipient should not know who the contributor is. (The rabbis knew how charity could become arrogance in the rich and humiliation for the poor.)

One bit of advice she gave me several times was to defer to others when you deal or negotiate with them. Make sure they get a good deal and give them the impression that they are getting the best of the bargain. I have lived up to this principle all my life. I know it did not help me materially, but it did wonders for my peace of mind. I could lie down and sleep with a clear conscience, knowing I did not wrong anybody or violate any moral standard. My mother's instructions and traditional Jewish upbringing served me as a trustworthy guide in my most difficult times.

Something bizarre happened that summer and my mother was inadvertently involved. There lived in Shershev a widow, Kleinberg, with two sons. Itzel, the older, was my age and attended Hebrew school with me in the same grade until I left for the Polish school. The second son, named Molie, was a couple of years younger and did not attend school or Heder. He could be found anywhere and everywhere, day or night, literally growing up wild. I am sure that his older brother, Itzel, attended school free because his mother could not afford to pay tuition. The poverty in the place where they lived was beyond description. Those two boys were dressed in rags, hand-me-downs from the better to do families in town. Their Sabbath challah probably came from Mrs. Kremnitzer, but I do not know specifically.

That summer morning, as I walked out into our yard, I noticed Molie walking around the rim of the old synagogue ceiling, by then over grown with young birch trees to

a height of some twenty meters. I could not understand how this thirteen-year-old boy could have gotten there. My friends and I and others, including older kids, had been trying to do it for years, without success.

Here was my chance to find out how it was done. I quickly ran across the garden towards the schul, not letting him out of my sight as he walked back and forth along the precipice or the ceiling. I stood silently in a corner waiting to see how he would get down. He disappeared behind some protruding masonry for a while and then reappeared on top of the wall of the hallway opposite me. It was twenty meters from the top of the wall to a ground covered with pieces of bricks. Half way down a partly burned beam was suspended close to the wall. Without hesitation, the boy turned around, and, after lowering himself on his hand, he let himself go, expecting to land on the beam. He miscalculated and missed his footing. Instead of landing on the beam, he hit it with his chin and continued his fall towards the ground. While he fell, his coat opened up like a pair of wings, apparently slowing his fall. He wore a heavy coat on that summer day, proof enough that he was demented. He landed on the ground flat on his back.

I looked at him in horror as he was trying to stretch his arms and legs while he groaned in pain. In fear and confusion, I ran home to tell my mother what had happened. I found her in her usual place in the kitchen and, not wanting to alarm her unnecessarily, I asked her in as quiet voice as I could master, "Guess, mom, who just fell of the schul wall?" Without thinking a moment, my mother answered, "Molie." I was stunned. How could anybody have told her? I was the only one inside the schul that saw him fall and even if not, I ran straight home and nobody could have beaten me to it. Stunned, I blurted out, "How did you know?" In her quiet voice, my mother answered, "I dreamt about it last night. Now my child, go out into the square and get some people to carry him to the doctor."

The square that time of day was alive with people and there was no shortage of volunteers. As we carried him through the square, the group of followers kept on growing. We carried him into the admitting office with the mob behind us. The doctor told us to put him down and ordered us all out. I doubt if the doctor ever got paid for this visit. Molie's mother certainly could not pay for it. It seems that Molie had more than one

life. I do not know how he survived that fall. Suffice it that I saw him climbing the walls of the shul again a few days later.

I have already mentioned how the beautiful Sonia Pinsky married my father's cousin, the much-admired Chaim Shemesh in the land of Israel. That summer of 1939, Sonia came on a visit to Shershev with a year-and-a-half old daughter by the name of Lauma. The child was just beginning to talk and the few dozen words she knew were in Hebrew. In Shershev, it was quite a sensation: a year-old child and she already speaks Hebrew.

Despite our difference in age and family relationship, I felt very close to Sonia, having spent countless hours in the house of her sister, whose two sons were my close friends. There was a continual rivalry between me and my friends, the Rotenberg brothers, to the Israel born baby while it babbled in Hebrew. From Sonia, the Jews of Shershev received personal regards from the over a dozen local youths who now lived the land of Israel, and a detailed portrayal of the situation there. It was the third year of a relentless Arab terror.

In the beginning of July of that summer of 1939, my uncle Eli, who had been mobilized in March, came home on a ten-day leave. In that tension filled summer, when former service men were being mobilized, there leaves were given only in exceptional cases. My uncle earned his during a training exercise by aiming the cannons of his battery on a moving object, a simulation of a tank. They scored a direct hit, thus taking first place in a competition among companies. As a reward, his regimental commander gave him ten days leave.

My uncle arrived under a blanket of secrecy. Not that his arrival was a secret, but where he came from was. Nothing of where he was or what he did was to be mentioned. The local population, Jewish and non-Jewish, came to inquire about their sons, brothers and men folk, and he was forbidden to answer. To us, his immediate family, he confidentially said that he and some others from shtetl and vicinity were with him and many others near the shtetl Mlawka, close to the east Prussian border. Since the mobilization, they were continually are improving their trenches where they were

spending most of their time. Being under strict orders of secrecy, he avoided company and spent most of his time with his parents, my grandparents, and us adolescents, who tried to spend as much time with him as possible.

His few days of leave went by in a blink of an eye. We all accompanied him to the bus, the women with tears in their eyes.

To add to the sadness of Eli's departure, the political situation became even tenser. The newspapers and radios were full of news and the news was not good. Throughout August, there were continual call-ups of men to the army. They were leaving in small groups.

While the non-Jewish population busied itself with the harvest, the Jewish tradesmen, artisans and petty storekeepers became discouraged and apathetic. They lost interest in everything and became consumed by current events. Unable to concentrate on their work, they congregated in the market square in small groups and talked politics. There was no shortage of themes or subjects revolving around the problem of war and what to do when the front line got closer. Nobody had any illusions about the might of the German army, especially in comparison to the Polish army. We expected the Poles to be defeated if her allies, England and France, did not come to help her. Still we expected that Poland to hold out alone against Germany for some six months.

The politically minded residents of the shtetl used to gather daily in our store and discuss the latest news. One turned to my father and asked, "What will we do when the front line gets close and the entry of the German army becomes imminent?" My father answered, "Then we will run to the Russians." "But the Russians aren't letting anybody in even now," said the other. "So we will go against the Soviet bayonets," answered my father. A picture came into my mind: a row of Russian soldiers along the thousand kilometer long Polish border, standing shoulder to shoulder with one knee on the ground, each with a rifle in hand, the butt of the rifle resting on the ground pointing in the direction of the Polish border, a shining sharp bayonet attached to the gun barrel, and thousands of Jews running towards them impaling themselves.

Such prospects of imminent war sobered me and scared me, but I still had optimistic thoughts. I thought that Russians were not animals and that communism was not Hitlerism, that the Communists represent the best of humanity, unlike Nazism, which represented the worst. They would let us in and protect us from the Nazis.

As the end of August neared, the media kept on reporting that the German army was massing on the Polish border and that the Germans were accusing the Poles of all kinds of provocations. The Polish radio kept on assuring the public that her British and French allies would come to Poland's aid should Germany attack. The three of them would defeat Germany in no time. The mostly Belorussian, Ukrainian, and Jewish population of eastern Poland did not have much confidence in the Polish army, and they had too much confidence in the two great powers, Poland's allies, England and France.

On Thursday, August 31, 1939, at about four in the afternoon, the local government plastered large announcements on many walls proclaiming a total mobilization. Groups of people began to form around each proclamation, reading the large print carefully repeatedly, as if by rereading they would get some more information out of it. Those proclamations were over a meter in size and had a heavy red slanted line across it. Every discharged army veteran had received a copy of exactly this proclamation with his discharge papers and an order that if the proclamation itself were to appear in public places, he must proceed to the nearest train station and for further instructions.

The groups of people forming around the proclamations seemed apathetic. They just stood there, staring at the proclamation in silence or whispering one to another. Nobody seemed to want to go home. They just stood there as if waiting for something or somebody. My friend, Laizer Rotenberg, ran home and came back in a minute with a camera to take a picture of this important moment, as he said, for posterity. Eventually, we all dispersed. I admittedly did so with a fair measure of apprehension, but also with excitement.

The next morning Friday, September 1, 1939, the sun shone bright in the sky. Everyone went about his or her business and did whatever they had to, but the lack of enthusiasm was visible all around. The men called up to the army were on the way to the

railway station. I am sure that their families did not sleep that night and now their womenfolk were sitting home in tears.

My father went to open the store at eight as usual. My mother was busying herself in the kitchen and my sister Sheva was helping her. It was too early to start visiting my friends, so I walked out into the yard. A few minutes later, I saw our neighbor's son, Leibl Feldman, pull up to his parents' house on a bicycle, which was surprising. Leibl was a bachelor in his mid-thirties, a broad shouldered robust man who at his age had a fair amount of life experience. He lived in Bialowieza where he and a partner had a trucking business. There were rumors that he was well to do. He would visit his parents in Shershev every couple of weeks, but it was not his way to come on a bicycle. He would come in one of his vehicles. I went into the house and told my mother, who was also a bit puzzled.

We did not have to wait long for the reason. Within minutes, our neighbor, Leibl's father, came in and in a quiet voice asked if any non-family members were in the house. When we assured him that there were not, he told us that his son just came from Bialowieza, which was bombarded early that morning. When Leibl wanted to take one of his vehicles to go to Shershev, the police would not allow him. They had orders to confiscate all private vehicles for the army so he came on a bicycle.

The situation was tense and so was the population, particularly from the previous day of general mobilization. People began to gather around the few radios in town with loud speakers. There were three in Jewish homes: at the druggist's, at the doctor's, and at my Uncle Reuben's. These were put in front of the open windows for all to hear. At ten on that memorable morning, the Polish President Mosczycky addressed the nation in a patriotic speech. He officially announced that Germany had attacked and battles were taking place all along the Polish German border. I still remember a sentence or two he used: "We will fight for every Polish threshold and for every roadside cross." As expected, he finished the speech with a promise of victory, "For G-d and justice are on our side."

One of the first acts of the police was to order my father to lock our store so that alcohol should not be available. The same applied to the other four restaurants in town,



who submitted to the order without protest. They remembered all too well the First World War, when alcoholic drinks were the best commodities to have.

The townspeople remembered other things from that war, like fires that burned houses and all possessions and the plundering by undisciplined and unscrupulous soldiers. To protect themselves, people came up with all kinds of ideas. In our case, we had two large trunks with forged metal straps all around. They must have belonged to my mother's parents, my grandparents Auerbach, who would have used them in the First World War. My sister Sheva and I helped my parents to fill them up with our best clothing, tablecloths, linen, some underwear, silverware and other things considered valuable or precious. We used a couple of large wooden cases in which we used to ship vodka to pack other stuff in. My friend, Meir Kalbkauf's father had a horse and wagon. He came to take it to his large orchard where we buried it all and concealed it so well that a stranger would not be able to tell that the ground had been touched. Of course we were not the only ones trying to protect our possessions. Every family did the same thing to a larger or lesser degree.

Some years earlier, my father had bought in partnership with our neighbor, Nachman Feldman, a garden from Pelett Aprik, who had left for the land of Israel with his daughter Mali. The garden was directly behind a stall of Nachman Feldman, who used it as a woodshed. A stranger would take it for granted that the garden belonged to Nachman. For the last couple of years, my father and Nachman pretended they were interested in gardening there. They were not successful, because they were not really working at it. That year, however, it somehow was a plentiful year. The tomatoes grew abundantly and large on tall stems and the garden beds were thick with thin long wooden sticks around which bean stalks grew. My parents knew that our store full with alcoholic drinks and cigarettes would be a tempting target for thieves and robbers, particularly soldiers, who would throw themselves at liquor sooner than at gold. They also knew that for liquor, one can get just about anything in time of war.

In the quiet of the night, my father and I made a few trips to the store bringing out a couple of hundred bottles of liquor, among them some two dozen bottles of spirit, 96%

pure alcohol, which was twice as strong as vodka and twice as valuable. We packed the spirit and half the vodka in sacks between straw. Under cover of night, we pulled the beanstalks up carefully with the long sticks that they were wrapped around. We dug a hole in the ground and carefully lowered the bags with the liquor in it. After covering the hole, we spread the excess soil over the garden beds and replanted the beans around their long sticks in their original places. The next morning when I went into the garden to see if our work was noticeable. I was very proud of our job. Not only would a stranger not notice anything, but even I could not see anything suspicious.

The police advised the public to build bomb shelters. Nothing elaborate, just a hole in the garden or yard. If feasible, cover it with boards and pile earth or stones on top. I tried to dig a hole in our yard but gave it up shortly. The ground was too rocky.

The most impressive shelter I saw in the shtetl was at the house of Daniel Meister, or Daniel the blacksmith, as he was called. His daughter, Maya was one of the five girls from our group. She told us that her father and brothers built something good. We boys went to see it. It was a ditch a meter wide by two meters deep, dug in a "U" shape, with each side of the "U" some five meters long for a total of fifteen meters. It was quite a roomy shelter! Besides the two openings or exits, it was all covered with boards that were, in turn, covered with a thick layer of soil on top of which was a pile of wood, which had been prepared for use as firewood in winter. With so much room, they not only took in clothing and dishes, but even furniture.

As just about everyone had something buried, people worried about theft, that is, that somebody would dig up somebody else's hole. o neighbors organized night watches. Every ten fifteen neighbors got together and took turns in patrolling the neighborhood. Each patrol consisted of two or three men. In our house, we divided the night into halves. I used to patrol up to one or two in the morning, and my father used to take over after me until daybreak. Apparently nobody slept well, for instead of the expected two or three men on watch, there were always four or five or more. Our patrol was of the market square, walking into yards to look for something suspicious. While walking, we used to

meet other groups from neighboring areas, chat a bit and sit down for a rest. The nights were so quiet and the moon so bright that even the mosquitoes did not dare to buzz. A couple of times during those peaceful nights, I heard the distant drone of a single aeroplane reminding us of the carnage taking place not so far away.

Newspapers failed to appear. The government or, to be more precise, the local authorities requisitioned all vehicles. Some news came via the radio, which only played patriotic and marshal music with constant interruptions of coded commands. Other news came from Pruzany, where they knew as little as we did. One did not have to be a genius to infer that things were not good from the frequent announcements that the army moved to earlier prepared positions.

On the third day of the war, our mood changed for the better when we heard that England and France had declared war on Germany. Those with experience of the First World War, including my father, warned that it would take months before England and France would have enough soldiers to open another front. They hoped that Poland will be able to hold back Germany for the next few months until that time. Nevertheless, in the first week of the war, the Polish army fared more poorly than anybody could have imagined.

The first ten days of war went by uneventfully. One could not believe that Poland was at war. Late one afternoon, a plane appeared overhead. It did not look impressive or threatening. After a couple of circles around the shtetl, the plane opened fire. It lasted no more than ten seconds, if that, but it was enough to make everyone run in all directions. There were no soldiers in or around Shershev or any military installations, and nobody knew what he was shooting at, unless he was trying to "draw the bear out of the forest." In any case, he made another circle or two and went his way, remaining as a subject of conversation for a day or two.

After the first ten days of war, the first refugees began to appear. They were civilian Poles running from the approaching Germans. They were well dressed and looked prosperous. They traveled with their own cars, sometimes even limousines, despite the fact that all private vehicles in our part of the county were mobilized. They

paid good money for whatever they bought and were prepared to pay vast sums for gasoline, though gas was not available in Shershev for any price.

Among those refugees was the wife of the Wojewoda (Governor) of our province, Poliesie, Kostek Bernacki. She traveled in her own car. Her daughter asked the local police for help in obtaining gasoline, but even they could not turn up any, for there was none. Somebody suggested *denaturat* (denatured rubbing alcohol) and the chief of police came to my father and ordered him to give them all the *denaturat* in the store. Their driver filled up the car tank and they drove away.

Over the following couple days more refugees appeared. They were mostly young Poles, many had brand new Belgian-made rifles on their shoulders in much better condition than those the army used. Those refugees also behaved properly, paid for whatever they bought and moved towards the Rumanian border, four- or five-hundred kilometers south. To our surprise, there were no Jewish refugees.

A day or two later we woke up to find out that the local police disappeared. Shershev was without a government or someone to keep order. Although Shershev had not experienced any pogroms in the last couple of hundred years, the Jewish population was very much aware of pogroms that took place in Ukraine and Vilonia, a hundred kilometers to the south. Even worse was the fact that the Christians in and around Shershev were aware of them. They knew that pogromists were never punished for their crimes.

The Jews in Shershev took the possibility of a pogrom very seriously, particularly when they heard some Christians begin to talk of it in the market square. Some prominent members of the community got together and decided to send a delegation to the nearby district town, Pruzany, in the hope that there was still some government authority and to see what could be done. The delegation left town sunrise by horse and buggy. To everybody's surprise, they were back before dark with ten rifles and ten cartridges. The rifles were of a very old vintage but operational. What was to be kept secret was the small number of cartridges. Had the potential pogromists known, it would not have stopped a pogrom. Jewish men, former soldiers who were not mobilized or were sent back home from the railway station during the total mobilization due to lack of uniforms or rifles,

volunteered to patrol the town square. This was where the bulk of the potential pogromists had gathered in the past, especially in the evening.

Now and then, armed men in twos would patrol the Jewish streets and alleys at night. There were always ten armed men in the street, day and night, which held potential pogromists in check and gave a limited sense of tranquility to the Jewish population. However, it was uncertain how long ten armed Jews with one cartridge per rifle could protect the entire Jewish community. There were rumors that the villages around were organizing to join the local non-Jewish population in a pogrom.

There was even an attempt to kill the most feared Jew in town. It was the blacksmith Srulkah (Israel) Meister. He was both strong and fearless. In one of those lawless nights he was sitting at his brother Daniel's house on Kamieniecka Street, which was, except for a few houses, entirely non-Jewish. He most likely came to his brother to discuss the uncertain situation in town, when somebody fired at him from the street. Srulkah had the presence of mind to slam his heavily calloused hand on the glass kerosene lamp, shattering it and throwing the room into darkness, thus depriving the would-be assassin of another chance to fire at him. The people in the house could see someone running away, but did not dare chase a man with a gun in his hand.

From the only (periodically) operative radio station in Warsaw, we gathered that not much of Poland was left. Yet there was no sign of war in our parts. People began to listen to radio Moscow, whose language was understood by almost all. On September 17, radio Moscow announced that there was no more Polish army and that the Red Army had crossed the Polish border.

On the following day, September 18, the German army closed the ring around Warsaw. The Soviet foreign minister, Molotov, delivered a speech on the radio reiterating that the Red Army marched into Poland in order to protect their brethren, the Ukrainians and Belarusians, in time of need. A day or two later, the Moscow radio announced that the artificial Polish government had left the country, leaving their brethren to their fate.

I am not sure if it was the same day or a day later, but at about three in the afternoon, a group of a couple dozen peasants rode on bicycles into town with rifles on

their shoulders. They carried such a diverse assortment of weapons as had never been seen, except in a museum. Some were so old that they really belonged in a museum. These peasants came from the northwest, the only sandy approach to the shtetl. Some of them were known to the local Jews as belonging to the village of Krinica (not to be confused with Krinica in the Carpathian mountains).

They rode right onto Mostowa street and met the first two-man patrol. One of the two was my father's brother Reuven. The two men in the patrol, surrounded by a couple dozen armed men, realized the futility of resistance and surrendered their rifles. The peasants then proceeded towards the market square, disarming the other patrols on the way.

When they entered the market square, they found a large crowd of people who did not know what to make of them. They ordered the storekeepers to open the stores and continue to do business. Our store remained closed because of what we were selling. Their spokesman announced in front of a swelling crowd that they were part of an underground communist organization, there to supply law and order in town until a representative of the Soviet Union arrived. The crowd sighed with relief because they would provide protection against pogromists. Also, some of the local Jews knew some of those men as decent people. The storekeepers opened up the stores. Not being able to enter our store, I went over to see what was happening in my grandfather's store.

A short while later, some of the armed men came in. The man that seemed to be in charge told my grandfather to make sure to stay open until six and to open the next at eight. He seemed to enjoy his new acquired importance pronouncing each word with exaggerated authority. Still, he allowed each of his subordinates to add a remark or two. Despite my mere sixteen years of age and lack of life experience, I keenly observed the attitudes of the armed men. They strode across the heavy wooden floor with a newly acquired confidence, walking over to the shelves, opening boxes, looking into every carton and corner. I heard one exclaiming, "*Eto nashe, eto vsio nashe.*" (It is ours, it is all ours). I felt that all it would take to transform these supposed communist defenders of the beautiful communist ideal into pogromists was a word or a nod from their superiors. I

suddenly saw that these peasants were volatile in temperament and easily convertible from decent humanity to bestiality.

That night Jews did not patrol their streets, nor did they sleep restfully. The next morning these same men attempted to produce some order by creating a temporary governing body in the shtetl. They took over the police station and recruited a few local young men into their ranks, among them a couple of Jews.

A day or two later rumors began to circulate that the Soviet army had entered Pruzany but it took several more days before we saw representatives of the Soviet Union in the form of a couple of truckloads of soldiers. They stopped in the market square and were immediately surrounded by a mob of locals and bombarded by them with all kinds of questions.

The looks and attire of the Soviet soldier were not impressive. The uniforms were very simple and devoid of any decorative additions. Their well-worn boots had trousers tucked down into them, accordion-like, Russian style. Their hats were unattractive with a cloth point on top. Their rifles were long with bayonets on them, they looked even longer towering over the soldiers. The unusually long bayonets had no sheaths and dangled pitifully from the soldiers' belts or were tied with a piece of cord to the gun barrel. The soldiers rolled their own cigarettes in newsprint; for tobacco they used what they called *koroshky*, chopped up tobacco stems. This picture evoked sympathy, even compassion among us, but I will admit to some smugness.

The soldiers conducted themselves decently, even politely, without using a single offensive or vulgar word of the type usual for soldiers. Yet looking at them closely the crowd detected a hidden want and began to shower them with questions about availability of all sorts of items in the Soviet Union. The answer was always the same: "*U nas vsio yest.*" (We have everything.) This answer became so automatic and popular everywhere in the first few weeks of the Soviets arrival that the local Jews turned it into a joke. They would ask them the usual questions: "Is there enough bread in the Soviet Union?" "Yes," answered their spokesman, "plenty." "What about butter?" "Plenty." "And sugar?" "All you want." "Vodka?" "You will get all you can drink." "*Tzores?*" (Trouble or misery in Yiddish.) Not knowing what it meant but not wanting to let them know that they did not

know what it was, the Russians would assume it was an ordinary thing and answer: "Yes, plenty. And we will send you ten carloads soon."

Still, the few Soviet soldiers were welcome guests that first day. We realized that they represented a country and government that came to stay permanently. After all, they had been here for a century and a quarter before, and under Bolshevik rule Jews were not being persecuted. What could go wrong?

In the meantime, we remained under the supervision of the temporary committee, the armed group from Krinica, including a few local men under the command of a man from Krinica named Liesicki.

We listened regularly to our only source of news, radio Moscow. On September 28, it announced that Warsaw had capitulated. Moscow did not hide its joy and gloating about the fall of the Polish capital. On October 5, 1939, Hitler reviewed his troops in a parade march down Ujazdowskie Avenue in Warsaw. The Moscow radio reported every move. We Jews resented Moscow's actions, but at the same time we were grateful to the Soviet Union for coming to us instead of the Germans. We knew the Jews of Poland wouldn't have it easy under Hitler, but no one could foresee what would actually happen.

The Soviets settled into Pruzany. In addition to the military came many civilians, most of whom were party apparatchiks—Communist bureaucratic agents.

## **Chapter 8**

They came to be named "Easterners" by the local people, as they came from Russia, which was to the east. In the two weeks after the Red Army crossed the Polish border, some dozen Easterners came to Shershev. They rented rooms from the locals. Those with families rented parts of homes and moved in with their meager possessions. Soon, more and more started to arrive in small groups or individually.

In the meantime, in the couple of weeks since the fall of Warsaw, the stores had been emptied or sold out. The local populace sensed that not as much was available in the Soviet Union as the first soldiers or civilians had said.



The experience of the First World War taught the people that the two essential items needed in hard times were salt and kerosene. Being an agrarian part of the world, food could be obtained to a greater or lesser degree for money or bartered from the surrounding farms. Salt and kerosene had to be bought from far away, thus making them unobtainable in hard times.

The demand for the two above-mentioned items created a panic in town. People began hoarding, as the stores began to close one after another.

The reason was two-fold: firstly, the storekeepers were deprived of their source of supply, which was mostly located in the western, industrialized, part of Poland, now under German control. However, even the bit of industry in the eastern part of Poland under Soviet control now came to a stop as all commerce ceased to function.

The second reason was that the Soviets devaluated the Polish zloty to the value of their ruble. This made our products dirt cheap, particularly for the Easterners, who bought whatever was available in quantities never seen before. The local population followed their example. As a result, the stores were emptied in no time, and their doors closed.

In that first month of the Bolshevik arrival, the “honeymoon period,” people felt free and liberated. Jews went to the synagogues on Saturday, the Christians to their churches. In general, an elated mood prevailed all around.

On a bright Saturday morning, while my father and I were sitting in the synagogue, my middle little sister Sonia (Sara), who was then eight years old, walked in and told us that the Soviets—or to be more precise, the local police, by then called “militia”—were conducting a search of our house. We left the synagogue immediately. We noticed the first sign that something was taking place as soon as we reached the market square, where our house was. A fair crowd of worshippers from the synagogue next door to our house stood trying to figure out what was happening.

With pounding hearts, we entered our house to find my mother standing in the middle of the living room frightened and confused, with one hand around my seventeen-year-old sister, Sheva’s, shoulders and with the second, around my youngest, sister, Liba, who was not yet seven years old.

The house was full of militiamen, in singles or in twos, looking for something, opening the drawers of every dresser, cupboard and closet. They were all over the house—in every room, in the attic, the cellar and even in the woodsheds.

I mentioned earlier that we buried liquor in our garden, but not all of that which we took from our store. Some of it we just left in the house in closets. It was not hidden nor was it difficult to find. When my father, my little brother and I entered the house, they had found it all and displayed it on the floor. Yet they continued the search. I went up to the attic to see what the militiamen were doing there. As I came up, I noticed a big cardboard box full of stationary, stamps and correspondence that I kept up with the *Ntzivut* (head office) of the Betar in Warsaw. I realized the ignorance of the militiamen, for they looked into that box several times and ignored its contents. Would they have realized what it meant, they would have had enough evidence to send us all to Siberia. To be a Zionist under the Soviet rule was tantamount to being a counterrevolutionary.

A couple of the men went out to our yard and with a long, thin, sharp rod began to prod the ground to see if it had been dug up lately, an indication that there might be something buried underneath. However, the yard had been untouched for ages, except for a small spot where, some six weeks earlier, I tried to dig for a bomb shelter but gave up because of the hard and rocky ground. That spot looked suspicious to them and they kept on trying to stick the rod into it, but without success. The ground remained unyielding to them as it had earlier to me.

At that time, a thought went through my mind: what if they started looking in the garden? However, the garden was behind our neighbors woodshed and by all appearances looked as if it belonged to him.

Not having found any more liquor, the soldier in command ordered his men pack up whatever they found in a straw-filled sack, and they took it away.

It did not take long for us to find out what happened. A couple Jewish young men were carried away with the enthusiasm of the new “liberators,” the Bolsheviks, and volunteered to work and cooperate with them. Any person with common sense understood that if we had not sold our merchandise, we must still have had it. In order to win favors and trust with the Bolsheviks, one had to prove their loyalty by being willing

and ready to squeal on someone, even a friend or relative. Those couple of young men proved their loyalty by informing the militia that we had vodka. One of them, with the ironic name of Tzodik, which means a pious man, later had the arrogance to brag about his role in selling my family out.

My parents were very upset and uneasy about all this, reasoning that if the authorities, by then well-staffed with Easterners who held all the major positions as managers and supervisors, could come in the middle of the day to conduct a search for no reason at all and confiscate merchandise, who knew what else they could do.

The next day, Sunday, I dragged the big box of the Betar stationary, stamps and correspondence down from the attic and threw it into the oven. I watched as it slowly changed it into ashes.

As a couple of days went by and we did not hear from the militia, we began to hope that maybe they had forgotten us; that maybe being in possession of so much vodka, they could not stand the temptation and drank it, annulling the whole affair, erasing it from the paper and from their memory. We began to sleep more easily.

A week or so later, sometime after midnight, we were awakened from our uneasy slumber by a loud banging on the door. In a panic, we all jumped out of our beds and quickly got dressed. Opening the door, we were confronted by two militiamen who came for our father. Without a word, they took him to their station.

Not yet recovered from the last week's horrifying search, confused and scared with the crude midnight awakening, in despair of her husband being taken away, and remembering the ruthlessness of the Bolsheviks during their retreat in 1920, when their soldiers took away her wedding ring and she almost lost her finger, my mother grabbed me and my sister Sheva and with fervent words said to us, "run to the militia and don't let them shoot your father."

Her words left me stunned for a minute. The thought of my father being arrested was frightening enough, but to be shot? It never entered my mind. The two of us set out immediately for the militia headquarters. On the way, many frightening thoughts went through my mind. The idea of my father being shot sped up our run.

Arriving breathlessly at the door of the station, a militiaman barred our way in, telling us to wait outside. We remained outside not knowing what to do. We did not want to come back to our mother not having anything to say. We also understood that they would not shoot our father in the building, but take him outside in the yard, in which case we would see him and implore them to have mercy on him and not to shoot.

With these dark thoughts, we remained standing on the sidewalk in front of the militia station. The yearlong minutes changed into hours.

About three hours later, the front door opened and we saw our father coming out alone, unescorted. We ran over, bombarding him with all kinds of questions. Our father answered calmly that the chief of the militia said that, as the merchandise was not hidden but simply in the house, he should come in the morning to pick it up and sell it the following day in the store.

We felt great joy at having our father back alive and free. Yet it is difficult to fathom the policy of a system where even a positive or benign message had to be delivered in such a frightening way.

In the morning, my father hired a man with a horse and buggy and picked up the vodka, taking it straight to our store.

When my father and I arrived at our stall, the news that there would be vodka on sale had spread around the town, and now there was a line stretching in front of the store. As the Soviet ruble was valued evenly with the previously more valuable Polish zloty, and vodka was in general not to be gotten, it was no wonder that a huge line formed early in the morning.

Fortunately, a couple militiamen appeared to keep order. At first the crowd grabbed vodka. When this was gone—one bottle per customer—the liqueurs went. I looked on as the shelves were being quickly emptied of the expensive Baczewski liqueur, which sold before the war for between fifteen to thirty zloty a bottle and were now being given away for the same amount of almost worthless Soviet rubles. When the liqueur was gone, the crowd began to buy wine, which, to be honest, was of poor quality. Next went the cigarettes and tobacco. At the end went whatever there was left of Denaturat (denatured spirits).

In a matter of a couple of hours, our store was emptied out. We remained with a drawer full of nearly worthless rubbles. It is my opinion that this was the last time that liquor of such quality as “Baczewski” or tobacco of the quality of “Turecki Najprzedsiejsze” was ever sold in Shershev.

My parents looked around the empty shelves and walls of the store with a heavy heart, locked the triple doors that guarded nothing and went home in a depressed mood.

The Bolsheviki wanted to show that “everything is available” in the Soviet Union, as they said. As there was a great demand for salt and kerosene, two items that were plentiful there, they started to deliver.

First arrived a fifty-ton carload of salt to the railway station at Linow Onancyce, thirty kilometers away. It arrived in bulk, like gravel or sand. A hundred local farmers were ordered to go there with their horses and buggies and take along their own bags.

The salt was unloaded in the front part of Kolosko’s house, a Christian who owned one of the two Christian houses in the market square. Before the war, this part of the house was a co-op store opened with the initiative of the Polish government, meant to take away business from the Jewish storekeepers.

The next day, from early in the morning, there was a line to get the kilo of salt allowed per customer. The population’s fear that there might be a shortage of salt drove them to get in line time after time, until the fifty tons of salt was gone. Each customer had to bring his or her own container or little sack, for there were no bags available. I looked at the salt and thought to myself that nobody would have touched this coarse and lumpy stuff before the war. Now they were willing to stand in line for hours to buy a kilo. To think that 50 tons of that stuff was sold in a matter of a few hours, more than it would be sold in Shershev in a year in normal times. After it was gone, Shershev had to wait another two months for more.

Suddenly, something became clear to me and my parents; it happened a couple weeks earlier, before the search. With the first group of Easterners (Soviets) that arrived in Shershev was a single tall man whose face was scarred from small pox, something made him look very stern and unsympathetic. His name was Kulakov.

One evening shortly after the Soviets' arrival, we heard a rap on the door. It was Kulakov. Coming in, he introduced himself to my parents politely and asked forgiveness for barging in. Getting the expected answer that he was welcome, he asked if he might sit down.

My parents spoke fluent Russian, not like the majority around us who spoke with a white Russian (Belarusian) dialect. It did not take long for a conversation to develop. It turned out that he heard that my father used to sell vodka and he was wondering if by chance we might have a bottle left. My father obliged him with a bottle and a lengthy conversation ensued, during which Kulakov asked my father how many bottles of vodka he sold a day. My father answered about one hundred or one hundred and fifty a day. Kulakov's face showed no expression, reflecting conditioning or training that every Soviet functionary must teach himself in order not to betray his inner thoughts and to assure his survival under the Soviet regime. Instead, almost with a boastful tune, he said, "In the Soviet Union, we can sell a carload or two a day." We were stunned. How is it possible? It can't be!

The conversation finally ended. Kulakov thanked my father for the vodka and left. When the door closed behind him, my father turned to my mother and said, "A car load a day? Impossible!"

It did not take long for us to realize that Kulakov was not boasting. When two months later a second carload of salt arrived, the lines were even longer than the first time. It was no secret that every family had enough salt to last at least a year or two, but the fear of a shortage compelled people to buy more. Now we understood what Kulakov meant when he said that in the Soviet Union they sell a carload of vodka in a day.

Shortly after the salt, a cistern with kerosene arrived. But how to get the kerosene out of Shershev? You cannot pour it out of the cistern into sacks or boxes. The local militia went around the shtetl confiscating the barrels from former storekeepers that they used to keep their kerosene in.

Again, some of the local farmers and Jewish wagon drayers were sent with the empty barrels to the rail way station, where they pumped the kerosene out into the barrels and brought them home.

The kerosene arrived in Shershev early in the morning. They were ordered to unload the barrels near our store. At seven in the morning, some official knocked at our door and told my father that the kerosene would be sold from our store and if we, that is my father and I, wanted, we could help with the distribution.

I dressed quickly and went to our store. By that time, the whole town knew of the kerosene and the line seemed to be a kilometer long: men, woman and children, each with some vessel in hand, waiting for that liter of kerosene. As expected, as soon as they got it, they went back in line for another liter.

Although the electricity in town was restored shortly after the arrival of the Bolsheviks, the demand for kerosene did not slacken. By six in the evening, all the kerosene was sold out. Some bureaucrats took the keys to the store and never returned.

With the arrival of the Bolsheviks, we did not see the Red army as such. The small groups or detachments of soldiers that used to pass by and occasionally stop over for a few hours consisted of village boys or peasant boys, good-natured, good-humored and warm-hearted. These qualities manifested themselves often among the Russian masses. Their simplicity or primitivism and poverty used to awaken sympathy and even compassion among the locals. The new authority took over the few former Polish government buildings and rented some space in some private homes.

The school year started late and did not coordinate with all the new Soviet acquired territories. I went back to Brest-Litovsk, back to the dorms on 66 Trzeciego-Maja Street. Changes were being made at school and in the dorms. The Kosher dorms that were under the management of the Jewish Ort became a government institution. The same happened to the school, which was compelled to conform to Soviet whims.

On the very street where our dorms were located, no more than half a kilometer down the road, was a pure race Polish technical school, which was known in the city and its environs as a hot bed of anti-Semitism where a Jewish student would not dare set foot.

The Soviet education department decided to unite the two schools, the Jewish Ort school and that Polish school, a so-called "Technical school."

Before I continue with the events in school, I would like to set apart a few lines to describe the changes that took place in our dormitories under Soviet rule.

The personnel that worked there before, that is, the kitchen staff, cleaning staff, even the house keeping staff, remained the same. After all, they were the working class. However, the manager, the so-called director, was replaced.

The new director was a Jew from central Poland, who apparently had a past association with communism in order to get such a responsible job. I must admit however that if he had, he did not belong to the barely literate Bolsheviks that came from the east (Soviet Union) to manage, bully and rule over us. He belonged to the rare category of human beings that became communists out of deep conviction and with the holy goal of improving the lot of the oppressed masses and creating a better tomorrow for humanity. He was the sort of idealist who could have attained his belief only with the help of the highest intellect and boundless faith. He was also a good administrator. His most outstanding quality, which did not escape our notice, was his approach to us students. He saw and understood each one of us and tried hard to help us as much as possible. It was obvious that he had experience in this field. One evening shortly after my return, the director called us students together and delivered a short speech. The contents of that speech I do not remember any longer, except for his closing remark, which went something like this: "It is said that life is short, but three years is a long time. Remember that you come here to spend three years together, so see to it that you make those three years as comfortable for yourselves and the others as you wish them to be."

For a sixteen year old, those were impressive words that remained in my memory. When I think sometimes of those days, he comes to my mind and I wonder what happened to that gifted, talented and dedicated man. My assumption is that he perished together with the old established and numerous Jewish community of Brest-Litowsk, taking into consideration that the city fell to the Germans within the first hour of the start of the war.

But then, in October of 1939, and despite the fact that the entire population, Jewish and Christian, already understood that the Soviet Union was not the dream they conceived it to be, the mood among the people, especially the youths, was exalted or elated.



Because the dorms were now under Soviet control and rather than Jewish, some twenty-five non-Jews enrolled there. Those were Polish high school students of the upper grades from western Poland, who escaped the Germans and now found themselves trapped under Soviet rule.

They felt uncomfortable among a majority of Jews, and due to the Soviet law of equal minority rights, they had to put up with us. They were unable even to utter the word Jew, *Zyd* in Polish, but had to refer to a Jew as *Yevrey* (Hebrew or Israelite).

In the late months of 1939, great population exchanges took place in the newly acquired Soviet territories, especially on the newly formed borders of the Soviet Union and Germany. Jews from central and western Poland found themselves under Nazi occupation and ran eastwards towards the Soviet Union, and Poles from eastern Poland that found themselves under Soviet rule ran westwards, towards German occupied Poland.

Here one could see the hate and contempt the Poles had for the Russian Bolsheviks. Although it was the Nazis that attacked Poland, destroyed its army, and occupied its land, while the Bolsheviks entered a defeated Poland. Abandoned by her leaders and defenders, they preferred to live under a Nazi Germany rather than the Soviets.

One late fall day, the twenty odd young Poles failed to show up in the dorms. Following the example of many other Poles, they crossed the border to Germany.

Up to then, in all the sixteen years of my life, I have never tasted *traif* (non-Kosher) food. Although it used to intrigue, puzzle me, the look of pork, which was the staple food and source of meat and fat of the local non-Jewish population. Nor did I know of any Jew in Shershev that had ever tasted it, except for those who served in the army but used to give it up as soon as they returned home.

There was the general belief among Jews that pork fat is very healthy, which we rationalized by the fact that non-Jews used to apply it on sores or wounds to speed up the healing.

Our breakfast used to consist of bread and butter with tea or black coffee. When there was no butter, we each used to get a piece of cheese or sausage. One could have all the bread he desired, but the rest was allocated.

With the Bolsheviks, even the bread was rationed for a month, but later there was bread aplenty. In the morning, we used to get three slices of thinly buttered bread for breakfast and three dry slices of bread for lunch.

Fortunately, my parents used to send me from home dry cheese and honey for my bread. The situation for the boys from farther away like Volinia or places like Baranowicz, Slonim, Wolkowisk, Meiczade, Nowogrodek was more difficult. The distance was too great to send perishable food. It was even more difficult for boys from the west side of the river Bug, who were cut off from their families by the newly created German Soviet border.

Slowly our food began to improve; we started to receive cheese for breakfast.

One morning we unexpectedly received a piece of sausage. Immediately a rumor started circulating that the sausage is *Trief* (non-Kosher). I look around my table and others to see that many eat it with gusto, but others hesitate. Finally unable to resist the temptation they start eating it. Everyone at my table was eating it, and so as far as I could see so were the others. I bite into it. The taste is the same as last year's kosher one. I console myself that it may be Kosher.

That night lying in bed, I torment myself with the thought that I made myself unclean because of a piece of sausage. I waited six weeks for a piece of sausage and it will most probably take another six before they will serve it again, if not longer. Was it worth it?

I decided that night, or whatever was left of the sleepless night, not to eat it again. This time we did not have to wait six weeks. Within a couple of days, sausage was served again. This time I did not vacillate this much and ate it, as I realized that sausage will become a frequent part of our diet. That night again I felt a twinge of conscience--more than that, outright remorse--but I slept. When sausage was again served a couple of days later I did not make a big deal of it, but I felt that I had lost something decent, something humane.

We used to spend eight hours at school, four with theoretical lessons and four with practical. The theoretical ones consisted of subjects like mathematics, geometry, physics, metallurgy, and the Russian language. Most of the teachers and instructors were the same pre-war Polish ones. I have however, to admit, that despite the reputation of that technical school as an anti-Semitic reptile hole, the teacher personnel behaved towards the Jewish students correctly. The non-Jewish students found it more difficult, but all they could do was to grin and bear it.

There were quite a few families in Shershev whose joy of being under Soviet rule instead of German did not lift their spirits. I am referring to the families whose husbands and sons were serving or were mobilized into the Polish army and did not return after the war. Among them were my paternal grandparents whose son Eli who was mobilized in March of 1939. This fact affected all of us, his extended family.

My grandmother, Chinka, used to putter around the house crying all day. My father and his brother, Reuben, used to come to them almost every day to encourage them and give them hope.

Finally, my father decided to travel to Brest-Litowsk to see if he can find out something in the provincial capital.

There was no time to write me that my father was coming, so he called me by telephone. This in itself was no easy task. The couple private phones in Shershev were disconnected. The only way was to call from the post office in Shershev to the one in Brest-Litowsk, which entailed my being there at the specified time. It would take too much time to describe the process. Eventually we got together on the phone, my first live conversation on the phone in Yiddish.

I knew than the workings of a telephone, why I was surprised to hear his voice and in Yiddish, I did not know than nor now.

My father arrived with a “small” delay of twenty-four hours, due to the chaotic railway schedule. After finding a place in a boarding house, which some locals secretly ran, my father came to see me in the dorm.

After a long conversation, my father left with the hope of finding out something about his brother. We also decided to meet tomorrow in a restaurant, which were already all government owned.

When I met my father the next afternoon at the appointed place, I found him very discouraged after telling me about his encounter with the Soviet bureaucrats. That got him nowhere. He decided to leave for the railway station that very same evening hoping to get train for home.

As we were leaving the restaurant, I noticed in my father words a sense of resignation that I have never known before. I felt heavy at heart, bordering on anguish. This feeling was not strange to me concerning my mother, whom I loved more than anything in the world. I watched her busying in the kitchen and house from early morning to late at night. She used to make sure that everything was in order and that each of us was looked after. She manifested so much tenderness and sympathy not only for us but for strangers whose troubles and suffering used to move her to tears.

My father, like most fathers in those days, must have learned to control his emotions, at least outwardly, and not to show them, not only in relation towards other, strangers, but even towards their own families.

I never let my children and grandchildren forget that I love them, demonstrating it by kissing and hugging. However, me, my friends and contemporaries in those days had never heard of such affection nor had received it from their fathers. Not even a compliment.

I took leave of my father with the usual handshake and turned in the direction of the dorms. Before I made ten steps, I suddenly felt an acute twinge, a sort of pang of sympathy and love for my father, which was more intense than I ever felt before. I turned back to watch him go in the direction of the rail way station. To my surprise, I noticed that at the very same moment he turned away from watching me walk away. Not wanting me to know that he was watching me, but it betraying his weaker side, namely that he cared and loved me.

At that very moment I asked myself the question; Why did I have to wait almost seventeen years to find out that my father really did care and love me and by the same

token all my siblings? Why didn't he give at least a hint, besides providing us with all the things we needed, which at that time we foolishly took for granted?

Actually, I shouldn't have been surprised, for I knew of any of my friends' fathers or other fathers in shtetl that acted differently,

Shortly after we were informed in school that with the approaching October revolution celebration, there will be a parade in which all schools will participate, including ours.

And so it was that on the October day our school took up its assigned place in the line. Besides schools, there were military units and workers of all sorts. It seemed that there are more participants in the march than onlookers. We marched by a platform of high Soviet civilian and military officials. To my surprise after this platform, there was another one much smaller on which there were German military men.

Some hundred meters or so past the two platforms we were told to disband and join the mass onlookers. We tried to get to the platforms as close as possible, being interested in seeing the Soviet big shots more than the parade itself. As soon as the march was over, cars began to pull up in front of the two platforms and the distinguished guests started to get in.

Something happened suddenly which neither I nor the other bystanders expected. While the Soviet big shots started getting in to their limos, the crowd started to approach the smaller platform of the Germans threatening them with fists and shoving them with all kinds of curses, swearing and abuses in any languages, like Yiddish, Russian, Polish and even German. It is possible that that was the only time when Jews had an opportunity to swear at Germans undauntedly.

The circle of the threatening mob was getting tighter around the Germans and it seemed that within seconds, they would reach them. Apparently, the Bolsheviks foresaw such a possibility and were ready for any eventuality. From nowhere appeared a detachment of N.K.V.D. (Security Police), who surrounded the platform. The crowd knew better than to start with the Soviet security police and stopped in their tracks.

Considering 75% of Brest-Litowsk's population was Jewish and that the German army did get into the city--where in the three-day stay there before the Bolsheviks took it

over, the Germans emptied every Jewish store and many houses of everything--is it no wonder that the Jewish Brest-Litowsk reacted with such hostility towards the German representation.

However, the fact that the Soviets have invited Germans to celebrate with them did not go well with the local Jewish population.

In the fall of that year 1939, the Jewish population of Brest-Litowsk had increased tremendously. Many Jews came there that were retreating from approaching Germans and even more from the occupying Germans. The new border between Germany and the Soviet Union was half a dozen kilometers from the center of the city. It seems that the Germans let the border poorly guarded deliberately so the Jews could get across to the Soviet side.

Brest-Litowsk was full of refugees. Many succeeded in finding a room or rooms or any kind of accommodation; others unfortunately, no. They moved into synagogues, Jewish public buildings into hallways of apartment buildings. The saddest sight for me was when I used to go home by train and see those refugees packed together on the floor and to get to the door leading to the train; one had to be very careful not to step on some refugee laying one next to the other on the floor.

In such crowded quarters they lived, not knowing what to do. The sanitary conditions were appalling and rumors of spreading diseases began to circulate. Their situation became so intolerable that some decided to return home, under Nazi rule.

The winter 1939-40 was the coldest in my memory. The temperature went down to -35C and stayed there for a long time. In those bitter cold nights, the Bolsheviks decided to solve the refugee problem. By then the border between the Soviet Union and Germany was shut tight.

The Soviets brought many cattle cars, and in the middle of the night started rounding up the refugees and locking them up in those cars. This round up lasted three days and the Bolsheviks succeeded in emptying the city of Brest-Litowsk of refugees. Apparently, the Bolsheviks had a lot of experience with transporting large masses of people. I found out later that this happened in many cities and towns in the newly acquired territories.

Why the Bolsheviks did it was not explained, nor did anybody dare to ask. What is true is that there was a law in the Soviet Union that forbade foreigners to be within one hundred kilometers from a border. It is also possible that they feared that among the many thousands of refugees, there might be German spies, of whom the Bolsheviks were watchful.

No matter what the reason, that cruel act of shipping as many as one hundred thousand innocent people to Siberia, which seemed at that time so gruesome and hideous, turned out to be a favor to them. For despite their hardship and suffering in Siberia, the majority of them survived the war.

Coming back to October 1939—at the end of the month, arrived a Soviet manager. A man of about forty in a well-tailored military uniform with the rank of lieutenant. Taking in consideration his low officers rank, I must admit that he had experience in his assumed duty. He stepped into his role with true idealism and exemplary zeal. For example, we had a delivery of firewood, which arrived in one-meter long chunks. The wood was dumped in the middle of the yard and was supposed to be piled into the woodsheds. The Soviet manager could have ordered us to bring it in and stock it up properly. Instead, he set an example and started doing it himself by it moving us to join him voluntarily and earning a lot of respect among us.

I will add that to us, boarders of the dorms, he conducted himself more like a comrade than a superior, taking in consideration that he was at least twice as old as the oldest among us and an officer who used to give orders. Apparently, he had influence or pull in high places, for with his arrival our food had noticeably improved.

By that time, we all knew that it was advisable to keep ones mouth shut and not to talk too much, particularly about politics and criticism of the Soviet Union. However, the event that took place during the October parade remained a topic of conversation in the dorms for weeks. Some evenings later, the new manager himself remarked during a talk to us, how hated the Germans were, giving as an example that event.

He must have felt that it was safe to show his antipathy towards the Germans to an entirely Jewish group of students, considering the fact that the Soviets only “friendly” link with the outside world at that time was Germany and Outer Mongolia.

From home, I used to get mail and parcels regularly, so to speak. In fact, nothing was “regular.” There was no more any means of transportation by bus from Shershev to Pruzany. The buses that used to commute between Shershev and Bialowieza, or Shershev, Pruzany, Brest-Litowsk were mobilized at the outbreak of the war and never replaced. All that was left were a couple of horse and buggy owners--wagon drayers that were trying to eke out a living by driving people from Shershev to Pruzany. At times one could hitch a ride with a passing by Soviet vehicle.

If one managed finally to get to the rail way station in Oranczyce-Linovo, the train was never one time. The waiting time could be anywhere from six hours to a couple of days. It took many months until the trains became more dependable.

I used to correspond often with my parents. One day I got from them a letter in which they informed me that the local officialdom ordered them to vacate the house, giving them three days time to move out. This event needs a little explanation. There was a law in the Soviet Union that one family cannot own a house bigger than one hundred and thirteen square meters. As ours was bigger and one of the most recently built, they decided to what they called “nationalize” it. In simple words, take it away without any compensation.

No court and no appeal could help. Besides, there were a few points stuck against us. Firstly, my parents were considered capitalist; secondly, he was a merchant; and thirdly, my grandfather was the town mayor. Those points made us a very undesirable element in the eyes of the Bolsheviks, an element that could expect at any time a one-way ticket to Siberia.

Not wanting to antagonize them, my parents hired our former wagon drayer that used to haul the liquor for us from Linowo-Oranczyce. He was the same young man that took a loan from my father to buy a partnership in a truck a couple years before the war. During those three days, he moved our furniture and everything else to my paternal grandparents. They moved into the same three rooms we used to live in when I took sick at the age of three.

Fortunately, my parents did not write how they felt having to leave their own house. I remember a little of my thoughts. I had seen before my eyes the attention they



were paying while the house was being built. The local people used to say that my father is putting his body and soul into it, as if he is going to live forever. (How right they were.) Here comes total strangers and tell us to leave it and get out.

In a way, I was glad that I was not there. To have to look at my mother's tears would have hurt me much more than the loss of the house.

It was difficult for me to imagine what it will be like, to come now to Shershev and instead of going to our large and comfortable home, to drive up or walk up to my grandparents house and be content with three rooms and a shared kitchen.

As life has taught me time and time again, the proverb that "if you spend a night with your affliction, it becomes your own." So it was with me. Slowly I got used to the idea.

From my parents later letters I found out that the Bolsheviks "nationalized" seven houses in town, six Jewish and one Christian. All were in the market square, where they were the nicest and biggest houses. I will start with ours, one; Alter Gellershtein, known as Alter Esther-Goldes, two; Pavel Setar (Christian), three; Shalom Aronowicz, four; his brother Reuven Aronowicz, five; Yoshua Pinsky, six; and Chatzkel (Jehezekel) Krugman, seven.

The largest house in town was Joshua Pinsky's, where he lived and where he had his with the family and had his drugstore. All of this was converted into the headquarters of the Bolshevik party. There were separate offices for the first, second and third secretary of the party, as well as offices of the smaller functionaries.

Joshua Pinsky was permitted to live in his second small little house behind his big one. The pharmacy moved to Chatzkel Krugman's house. He, Krugman, was permitted to remain in two rooms attached to his house. The pharmacy owner with her daughter, Lola, and older daughter, Mary with her husband, the town doctor, rented some rooms in the Chazir Alley, and the Aronowicz brothers moved in with one of their brother-in-law's Israel Wisoker.

The Hebrew School was closed and Hebrew was not allowed to be taught. They returned to *Mammah-Loshn* (the mother tongue), Yiddish.

In November, I received good news that my father's youngest brother, Eli, (Eliyahu) returned from German captivity. He was home and well. A couple weeks later, he came to Brest-Litowsk to complete some formalities. We spent that evening together on the run, as he had a few place to go. I admired his collectedness. After all, only two weeks earlier he was in German captivity. How soon he adjusted to normal life.

To his experience in the short war and German captivity, I will come back later. Meantime, I want to return to the settling in of the Bolsheviks on our territories.

Brest-Litowsk was known to have a formidable fortress. As a result, the city suffered much destruction in the First World War. Between the two wars, the Polish government rebuilt the fortress and so did the city. In 1939, the fortress was bombed by the Germans, as was, to a small degree, and inadvertently, the city. However, the city became even of more important strategically after the invasion, because it was right on the newly created German-Soviet border. The Bolsheviks not only rebuilt the partly destroyed fortress but extended it greatly.

The city was full of military personnel and many Jewish families rented them out rooms. The Soviets were not very fastidious, and I am speaking about officers; the ordinary soldiers lived outside the city. The officers were content with two rooms per family. They were not used to anything better. The single men lived two or even four to a room.

What did impress the local population was the size and number of the Soviet tanks and motorized artillery. What we have seen before the war of Polish tanks would look like toys in comparison to the Soviet tanks. As concerns motorized artillery, I doubt if Poland had any.

Almost opposite our dorms were large barn-like sheds surrounded by a high fence. Before the war, the Poles kept some dozen tanks and a handful of armored vehicles. That was all that Poland could afford to keep in such an important strategic place like Brest-Litowsk. The fenced-in yard around those sheds was big enough to conduct maneuvers.

The Bolsheviks filled those sheds and the entire yard with tanks and other military equipments, but nobody had an idea what was really in there because of the high fence.

Meantime, the Soviet Union became entangled in a war with its neighbor in the northwest, Finland, a country with three and a half million people--a tenth of the population of Poland—but who resisted the Soviets with a ferocity as if it had ten times the population of Poland. The Soviets did not expect such opposition, nor did they expect that this small country would put them to shame in front of the whole world. They decided therefore, to use all the forces they had available at hand and overrun Finland.

Apparently, a large portion of equipment at hand was then in the newly acquired territories of Poland. On a bright, frosty morning, the gates of that eternally closed yard opened up and Soviet tanks started to spill out. The gate was on a small side street that led to our wide street, “Trzeciego Maja.” The tanks turned right on our street, passing our dorms, continued on. The secret that they were going towards Finland could not be kept, and did not surprise anybody. What was a surprise was the amount of tanks that were there.

As everything in the Soviet Union was secretive, they kept the tanks from leaving during the daytime hours. However, at night, they kept on going without a break until morning for three nights. Despite the thick snow on the ground, the buildings on the street seemed to shake.

In the middle of the third night, we were awakened by an unusual loud and strange sound. We jumped out of our beds and ran to the four windows in our bedroom. Looking down to the street we saw what seemed like buses, but instead of wheels they were gliding on skies and were propelled by propellers that were mounted to the tops of the roofs. The noise was that of an aeroplane from ten meters away. Several dozen such machines passed by and we spent the rest of the night talking and admiring the Soviet war technology.

During that early winter, a few of the students who lived in the dorms were expelled. It started when a government commission appeared one evening and started to investigate everyone's what they called “social background.” Well, not so much ours as our parents. For example: What was your parents' occupation before the war? What are their holdings? How big is your house? Have you any relatives abroad? And so on.

After that investigation we were told to write home to get from the local authorities a statement of their “social background” and forward it to the director-manager of the dorms.

When my turn came, I already knew that to have been a Zionist was not advisable. All I told them was that my father was a Czarist soldier in the war, was badly wounded and is an invalid. To their question of whether I have relatives abroad, for some unexplainable reason or sixth sense, the word “no” came from my mouth.

The bigger problem was to get the letter on social background from the authorities in Shershev. My father went to that office not expecting miracles. Entering the main room, where a few secretaries were sitting, each at his own desk, he noticed a familiar face. A local farmer’s son used to make violins in his spare time. When I, at age ten, began to learn to play violin, my father bought from him a violin, paying him the full price without arguing. My father went straight to him. After telling him what he came for, the secretary, a bright young man who apparently remembered the fact that my father paid him his asking price for the violin, wanted to reciprocate. He wrote as my father asked, it read as follows: Moysey (Russian for Moishe) Kantorowicz, is the son of Issak who has no home (not mentioning the fact that it was nationalized) who used to receive a war invalid’s pension.

I could not have dreamed of a better recommendation from that slip of paper. When I faced the commission for the second time, I was asked again all sorts of questions, mostly the same as before. Suddenly, one asked me if I have family or relative in the United States. To my mind came my two uncles there, Uncle Shoime with his family as well as my Uncle Pesah (Philip) and his family. Besides them, I had an aunt, the wife of my deceased Uncle Lippa with her son Irving. At that time, I did not realized how much my answer depended on my remaining in the dorms. Remembering the answer during the first interview, without hesitation, I said “no.”

Later, when the commission concluded their work, and the rejected were gone, we started to tell each other how some succeeded in obtaining a favorable report from the authorities. Most of them got it by bribery, which was so prevalent in the Soviet Union.

In the beginning of December, I found out that the department of education, which was situated on Unje Lubelskie, the most beautiful and modern street in Brest-Litowsk, was accepting applications for entry into the teachers seminary, but the day before was the last day to apply. I called them on the phone and was told that if I could bring in my application before five o'clock that day, they would accept it. I set out immediately and handed in my application before closing time, being told there that those with better qualifications have a greater chance of being accepted.

I was not sure if I wanted to change my future profession from a technician to a teacher, but I wanted to have the opportunity of choice.

When I left that office that wintery evening, I felt so delighted, so happy, that now sixty years later, I find it difficult to describe. I do not know even why I suddenly experienced so much joy. The streetlights shone brighter with a holiday sparkle. Everything around me seemed cheerful, simple glorious, all because they took my application, which was far from being accepted into the seminar. Is it because I did not expect much from anybody? Is it because I was grateful for even a little kindness or is it that it does not take much to make me happy?

Nothing came from that application anyway and I remained where I was. Actually, I settled down quite comfortably. From the seventeen boys in our room, my closest friend became a boy from Molczadz, near Grodno, by the name of Menachem Borejszy. His shtetl no bigger than mine, gave us many subjects for conversation and comparison of character and characteristics of its inhabitants. He was a year or two older than I. His father having lost his flourmill to the new government gave both of us reason to dislike the Bolsheviks. Like many others, his father had to resort to bribery in order to get a favorable note from the local authorities regarding his social background. Among others were two boys from Volynia. Both by the name of Shalom Wiess, they were cousins.

Not all was going smoothly among us seventeen boys in our bedroom. There were disagreements, all because of the windows. There were four of them. Those of us who slept near the two ovens were complaining that it is too hot in the room and wanted the windows to stay open. On the other end, those whose beds were ear the open windows

were freezing in that, the coldest winter in my memory. I could not blame them. Fortunately, my bed was in the middle of a row of beds along a wall and was not affected.

Shortly before New Year 1940, my father visited Brest-Litowsk and I decided to go with him back to Shershev, as it was a day or two before the start of the winter vacation.

We got to the train many hours before the train was due to depart in order to get a seat. Despite our early arrival, almost all the seats were taken. We got, however, our two seats one next to the other on the long bench along the wall of the coach.

The time of departure came and went and the train was not moving. All that time more and more passengers kept on coming. Not finding seats, they sat on their suitcases or bundles. It got so crowded that it became impossible to get in or out of the coach, but the train does not move.

We sat there all that afternoon, all night and all the following day. Finally, late the second evening the train began to move. The first station out of Brest-Litowsk was Zabinka, where the train stopped for some hours. Next station was Teweli, where it all repeated itself. In the morning, we reached Linowo-Oranczyce, our station where we got off.

We had covered a distance of barely one hundred kilometers by train and it took us two days and two nights. From there to Pruzany, we had to take the narrow gauge train to cover twelve more kilometers. After waiting for two hours, the stationmaster told us that the train has not left Pruzany on its return back.

Walking back and forth in and around the station, we suddenly came across a Shershev girl by the name of Ghitle Kwelman. As far as everyone in Shershev knew, she left home a month earlier with the intention to cross the newly created border between the Soviet Union and Lithuania, in order to get to Wilno. A rumor had spread that from Wilno, now returned to Lithuania by the Bolsheviks, one could still get to the land of Israel. Apparently, she did not succeed in crossing the border. Not wanting her mother Theme and brother Avreml to know of her failure to get to Wilno, she begged us with tears in her eyes not to utter a word to anybody, not even her mother, that we saw her.

We kept that promise. My father up to his last breath in the gas chamber of Auschwitz and I until now, when I am writing it down on paper some sixty years later. One thing I am sure of: that she never got to the land of Israel. Would she have, she would have found her sister Tzipara (Gitle) Tzemach-Kwelman in Kibbutz Shahar Agolan. She disappeared as suddenly as she appeared. We remained in the station, not knowing what to do. There was no other means of transportation. Being familiar with the regularity of Soviet transportation, we decided to start on foot, with the hope that a Soviet big shot or a Soviet military vehicle will pick us up on the way. The two small suitcases were not heavy, so we set out.

Before we covered half a kilometer we realized that there wouldn't be a lift, the snow was too deep for the unplowed road for any vehicle to pass. Yet stubbornly we continued on that twelve-kilometer track until we got to Pruzany. Getting there before dark, we had a problem finding a place to sleep over. My father's brother, Uncle Joshua, was driven out of his house by the Bolsheviks, and rented a small apartment barely big enough for him and his family. My Aunt Sheindl, my father's sister, and her husband Leibl, afraid they too will lose their house, took in a prestigious Soviet military brain surgeon, ceding to him and his family the bigger part of the house. It happened that in a nearby lane called Rezeki lived two brothers, Nathan and David Kabizecki with their mother. They moved from a village a couple years earlier. Their oldest brother, Yaakov Meir, was married to my Aunt Esther-Liba Auerbach's sister, Sarah. That made us sort of related by marriage, and we spent the night there. Next day we finally arrived in Shershev.

Who could have imagined that four months after the arrival of the Bolsheviks it would have taken three days to cover a distance of just over one hundred kilometers? I will admit that it had improved by the time the winter was over.

It was so good to be back home. True, it was not our house, but still, our grandparents' house. To be with my mother, to know and feel her love, her affection and tenderness. Knowing how difficult it was for her to overcome the recent shock of losing our house. It must have been difficult to try to disguise her feelings, in front of us and to give up wholly and earnestly her time and attention to us children. My sister, Sheva, came

too for the vacations home from Pruzany, where she was studying, and she shared her experiences with our mother.

With my grandparents lived their son Eli (Eliyahu), who had recently returned from the short Polish German war, and a couple of months in a German prisoner of war camp. Now we had the opportunity to listen to his experiences during that time.

This is what he told me: A few days before the start of the war, they knew already that war is inevitable. They dug in deeper fortifying their trenches with logs. Friday, at about three in the morning, the German artillery started to bombard them. His battery with the four light cannons immediately answered. It did not take them long to realize that their shooting back was no more than a joke in comparison to the German fire. While they were shooting with light artillery the Germans were firing with one hundred and fifty five millimeter shells and for each shell they fired, the Germans answered with ten.

Still this artillery exchange went on for three days and nights. On the third night, single soldiers began to appear from the direction of the front. They were ordered by the artillery officers to go back to the front. Instead, more and more began to appear. They too were ordered to go back to the front, but they categorically refused, claiming that there was no more front. As if to confirm their claim, an order came for the artillerymen to put on the bayonets on their rifles and get ready for an expected German infantry attack, as their own infantry in front of them was no more.

It is one thing to find yourself behind the front and fire at an unseen enemy, and something else to find yourself in the dark in the middle of a forest to try to make out an invisible enemy. A couple of hours later, they were ordered to get the cannons out, take as much ammunition as they can and withdraw.

Once the withdrawal started, there was no stopping. It became a race between them and the Germans to see who could get to Warsaw first. On the way, they were constantly exposed to German bombardment from the air and artillery. The soldiers who looked after the draw horses used to get on them from time to time, but my uncle Eli had only a bicycle. Others dragged along on foot. During the two weeks of retreat they had no rest and every soldier was tired, to the extent that my uncle fell asleep a couple of times



on his bicycle and fell off. On the way, some of their equipment and supply was destroyed or lost, they also lost many of the horses to the constant bombardment.

They reached Warsaw on September 15 with two of their four cannons and they immediately dug in. Two days later the Nazi hordes closed the circle around Warsaw in an iron trap.

Much has been written about the siege of Warsaw. I want here to note just one episode of my uncle's experience during that time. Their remaining two artillery pieces were in one hole standing side by side. In a nearby hole were their shells. However, in the hole with the cannons they kept several shells handy. During a cannonade, a German shell exploded in the hole with the two cannons, wounding four soldiers and setting the few shells ablaze. Instinctively the other soldiers jumped out of the hole covering themselves behind the piles of earth around it, leaving to themselves the four wounded and immobile comrades. They all heard their cries for help but nobody dared to get to them for fear that the other shell will explode any second.

It was my uncle Eli who braved that challenge, jumping in and coming out with one wounded soldier, repeating it three more times. The fire did not set up the expected explosion, but burned itself out. His commanding officer shook my Uncle Eli's hand and promised him a medal for bravery at a more appropriate time, which never came.

I will not describe the events that took place in the besieged city of Warsaw in the next dozen days, I will rather continue with its surrender.

On the morning of 28 September came an order for the Polish soldiers to discard their weapons. Some of them were made useless and some left it intact. Some of the operational weapons were appropriated by the Polish citizenry, but the bulk of the weapons fell into the German hands intact. They marched out of the city and were immediately surrounded by German soldiers who broke them up in smaller groups. His group consisting of several thousand men, after a long march, was led into a large building and a high fence around it. They were locked inside, guarded by Germans all around. They used to get a piece of bread with tea in the morning, a bowl of soup at noon and tea at night. The place was near the city of Minsk-Mazowiecki, about fifty kilometers east of Warsaw.

The several thousand soldiers were a collection of men from all over Poland, with many from the eastern parts, and a number from our parts of Poland. Almost daily, some were taken away and replaced by others. It began to look like the Germans were converting this camp into a prisoner of war camp for eastern Poland's citizens. My uncle found among them even Jewish young men from Shershev, like his childhood friend Leibl Neibrif; others were Gotl Weiner, Rafael Lewkowicz, David Kabizecki, Laizer Sznajder, and others. It was rumored in that camp the Germans were gathering the eastern Polish citizens, now under the Bolsheviks, to use as a bargaining chip with the Soviets.

Sometime in November, the date I do not remember, the Germans locked them up in trains and cars, drove them to the newly created German Polish border at Brest-Litowsk, let them out and told them to march to Brest-Litowsk a few kilometers away.

At the border the Bolsheviks were waiting for the POWs, took them by trucks into the city and into the bathhouse. Their disappointment was great when they were told to put on their old and lice infested underwear and their own dirty worn and torn uniforms. They did give them something to eat and a train ticket to go home. This much I still remember from my Uncle Eli's experience that he told me about some sixty years ago.

During that winter vacation, some terrible sickness was going around. The Soviets called it *Mennenghit* (Meningitis), a plague none of us had ever heard of before. The most susceptible to that sickness were children and young children people. Those who caught it succumbed to it.

This sickness, the unusually cold winter and the shortage of all kinds of commodities (which was justifiable) was blamed on the Bolsheviks. They in turn felt offended by those accusations. A rumor spread that drinking vodka and smoking is a good remedy and protection against that sickness. We boys, jokingly, used to add playing cards. That must have been the only time that I tried seriously to smoke. People soon realized that it is no more than superstition. I remained a non-smoker.

For an unknown reason, that sickness was more prevalent among the non-Jewish population. In middle of that winter, the epidemic subsided. Maybe because of severe cold.

In Shershev, a few Jewish refugee families came to stay with relatives. During the round up of refugees in Brest-Litowsk, those families in Shershev as well as in the nearby Pruzany were rounded up too and sent to Siberia. Over winter, a few local families were exiled to Siberia. One of them was a Jewish family that was sent away for the sins of their oldest son, who supposedly collaborated with the previous Polish government. Among the Christian families was the former mayor of the shtetl, Szlykiewicz, who used to alternate with my grandfather as mayor of the shtetl every second year. They too were expecting every day for the Soviet secret police to come for them. People rumored that the only reason they did not was their age: both were in the seventies and I doubt that they would have survived the trip. Apparently, the Bolshevik saw it this way too, and did not want to trouble. Their space in a wagon could be taken up by a younger family who presented a much greater danger to the Soviet Union than my grandparents.

As it turned out, the Soviets did that Jewish family a favor. They survived the holocaust.

The fear among every one, Jew or non-Jew, was greater than before. All it took is a denouncement by anyone and one became a prospective candidate for one-way ticket to Siberia. We had to be careful with criticism or remarks regarding government or its leaders.

One woman succeeded in getting out of the Soviet trap. That woman was Sonia Pinski-Shemesh about whom I wrote much earlier. She came to Shershev in early summer 1939 with a one and a half year old daughter to visit her parents Joshua and Bluma Pinski. In her four years in Palestine, she became a Palestinian citizen and travelled on such a passport, which the Bolsheviks honored, letting her out. By leaving, it saved her and her daughter's lives.

Before her departure, the Soviet secret police warned her not to tell anybody when she is leaving or to take her leave from anybody. She knew already to follow their advice and said good-bye only to her parents and her sister Ryaha and family. When I came home for the New Year 1940, she was already in Palestine (Israel).

It is from her that we in Shershev found out in 1940, that the great Zionist leader Zabolinsky died, when her sister Ryaha received from her a letter in which among other

safe and petty talk, she wrote the following words: our Velvel died. Velvel was the Yiddish first name of Zabotinsky. We knew who she meant.

All Jewish organizations were disbanded or stopped functioning. The Jewish community bank was nationalized, even such a charitable and beneficial institution as Linat Atzedek, whose function was for volunteers to sit with a sick person at night so that the family can get a night's rest, was suspect and prohibited. The Yiddish library that a generation of young Jewish boys and girls labored so hard to create and sustain was closed. The books disappeared. What happened to the Hebrew library in the Hebrew school one can imagine, as even the language was taboo.

Jewish life as such, with its benevolent and charitable organizations, as well as political organizations, ceased to exist. True, Jews spoke Yiddish in the street without fear, even less than before the war, and learned Yiddish in the former Hebrew school. To some, the laws were difficult to adjust to, like working on Shabbat (Saturday) and other holidays. It was something a Jew in Shershev never did before.

About the same time, two more Jewish homes were nationalized. One Meir Yona Reitmans and the other Joseph Tuchmachers. In Meir Yona's house they opened a restaurant and in Tuchmacher's a bank.

The Bolsheviks wanted my uncle Reuven's house badly. Hoping to prevent it, my uncle took in a tenant, a Soviet family by the name of Bobrov, a couple with two teenage children. That Bobrov was sent to set up and manage the government business organization, the sole business institution in the Soviet Union. Under the Bolsheviks, Shershev became a district town where Bobrov was the town and district-manager-to-be.

He got busy organizing a functioning unit made up of local talent, namely former businessmen. Living in my uncle's house, he met my father and offered him a job. The ancient *rad kromen* was converted into a huge warehouse. The thick walls separating the individual stores were broken through, forming one large single unit. One of those stores became the office of the warehouse, but the main office of that organization was situated in Isar Gychman's house, which was nationalized for that purpose. Actually, they were two separate houses under one roof belonging to the Gychman brothers. The other half, belonging to the younger brother Feivel, was converted into a restaurant. The two

brothers were compelled to find their own living accommodations by moving in with somebody else. As in previous other cases, they were not compensated for their homes.

This business organization, or to be more precise “providing or supply organization,” had at its disposal two trucks that used to travel almost daily to Brest-Litovsk for its allotted quantity of merchandise.

They needed a representative of the organization to make sure that they are getting the full amount assigned to them, which by the way was never enough to satisfy the demand. If possible, they would try to get more if need be “on the quiet,” that is, by bribery.

Besides the driver, a couple of strong men used to come along as load hands. One of the drivers was a Jewish man by the name of Eli Neibrief, and one of the load hands was a Jewish young man by the name of Noah Hochman, whom I mentioned many pages before as the young man who served in the Polish army with a blimps detachment. He was accepted despite his Jewishness because of his unusual strength.

My father was assigned to travel with them to fill the above position.

The Soviets started training people for the many new jobs being created. Like teachers, due to the many schools they opened in the villages, bookkeepers, tractor mechanics and operators and so on.

My uncle Eli signed up for a course of bookkeeping that opened in a shtetl Antopol. Being the only one to have graduated gymnasium among the participants, he graduated the two-month course with the highest marks. Coming back home, the same Bobrov, my father’s boss, made my uncle the head bookkeeper.

During that same winter, that is winter of 1939-40, the Bolsheviks set up other offices and organizations. For example, there was one whose task it was to buy up cattle, pigs and even poultry for the government from the farmers, even pig and horse tail hair.

The last pig and horsetail rugs used to be the trade of a dozen or two Jews in Shershev who used to travel in the villages, trading in it with the farmers. It meant a life of eternal poverty and outright hunger for them and their families.

Now they employed those poor Jews in a government organization. If those poor Jews made under the Bolsheviks a better living, I do not know. What I do know is that

they did not work as hard. While before the war, they used to leave home on Saturday night, returning on Thursday night or Friday morning, under the Soviets, they used to come home every night, sleeping in their own bed whatever it was, but better than in the farmer's barns five or six nights a week in summers and winters.

What was also important was the fact that they used to get paid regardless of the amount of business they did. The burden of earning their piece of bread, literally their hand to mouth lifestyle, eased a bit.

Their problem was the same as everybody else's. Now they made more, but what they could get for it and how to do so at official and not a black market prices?

In this respect, their job gave them an advantage. The government business organization sold their products and wares at government prices. To be able to do it they had to get the raw products at government prices too. However, the farmers were not prepared to sell a cow for three hundred rubles, the price of half a dozen bottles of vodka on the black market. In order to entice the farmer or to "sweeten the pot," the village travelers used to bring the farmer to town, where that organization had their own warehouse with merchandise and where the farmer could exchange the value of the cow for items needed at government prices. At such an exchange or transaction, the village traveler would benefit.

This form of exchange or business was applicable only to the newly acquired Soviet territories of Poland. In the Soviet Union proper, all former farmers were long before forced into collective farms that belonged to the government, and the government ruled or bullied them as they pleased. It was only because the Soviet did not want to create a panic among the farmers in the beginning that they treated them with kid gloves.

As there was no regular delivery of goods or a total lack of others, the tradesmen were left with no work. Having no choice they had to join the newly created *artels* (collective workshops).

While there was still some merchandise in *shtetl* that was in stores from before the war, the population that snatched it from the stores at the price of a ruble per zloty, really for nothing. Some storekeepers managed to hide a bit of merchandise that they kept with friends and family for safekeeping, selling it on the quiet and living off the savings.

Those in the grocery business were literally eating their food away. The people that managed to buy, sell, or grab yard goods or leather, particularly for shoe soles, which became exceedingly expensive, kept it for emergencies to sell it for exorbitant prices.

In general, people restrained from dressing up, not to awaken envy among the Easterners (Soviets), who out of jealousy used to refer to them as capitalists.

Over the winter, some more Easterners arrived from the Soviet Union. First, they took over the more important positions in their offices and organizations. However, when those jobs were filled, they gladly accepted lesser positions. For them to come to the western provinces of Belarus or Ukraine was coming to “America.”

They associated mostly with their own, and it seemed to me that they had an unwritten pact to help each other on the quiet. At least, it was so in small places where the *artels* used to the unobtainable leather to make boots for the Easterners.

After the winter vacation, I returned to Brest-Litowsk where life continued on what it seemed to be an even course. All sorts of promises were made for the young generation, above all, a bright future. At times, to an extent, we did get carried away. However, the moment I used to look at the reality, how carefully one had to step forward. How uncertain and questionable everyone's future was. I used to hate them outright.

I used to think of a year earlier when I was sixteen, under a regime to which I felt bitter aversion; yet I did not have to weigh every word or remark which not only could get me expelled from school, but its ramifications and consequences could haunt me for the rest of my life.

Under the anti-Semitic Polish rule, not only could I not criticize the government among Jews, but even among the general public. Now in the “free” Soviet Union, one had to be careful not only among strangers, but even among your townspeople and even neighbors. While we young people could at time permit ourselves to make a frivolous joke about the government, a grown up would not dare to.

What puzzled the Jewish populations, especially in the larger cities like Brest, Bialystok, Lwow and others, was the arrest and sending to Siberia of the leadership of the *Bund* (Jewish socialist organization.) After all the Bund was a socialist organization that even renounced any claim on the land of Israel. So what was their sin?

Quite a few years passed before the Jewish public, or to be more precise, what was left of the Jewish public, understood the reason. At that time, it was a mystery. Admittedly, Zionist leaders were persecuted too, but not to the same extent as the Bund.

Brest-Litowsk, being a major city, had noticeably more and richer people, owners of bigger businesses and big homes or tenement houses that were nationalized by the Bolsheviks were unceremoniously sent to Siberia. Their possessions were appropriated by the Bolsheviks without any compensation.

For *Pesach* (Passover), I came home. It was not like the previous Passovers, although at that time the Soviets did not interfere in preparing for the holiday like in the later years, or maybe they did not want to show their iron fist. In any case, the Jewish housewives could get on with their preparing. There was no more kosher vodka or wine. With difficulties, my mother got some hops and honey. Staying for hours in line for sugar, my mother made mead. As at that time, the farmers were still independent chickens and eggs could be gotten. Some of the pre-war butchers were still working on the quiet butchering and selling meat, so we had meat for the holiday.

Everyone who was now a government employee was ordered to show up to work on the holidays. This, too, was a first for the Jewish in town. The only males that showed up in the synagogues were old men too old to work. A few, using all kinds of excuses, came to work a bit later, managing to go to the synagogue before going to work. For the older men those were trying times.

During those vacations, I found out that the government badly wanted my uncle Reuven's house. It just happened that it was on the borderline of one hundred and thirteen square meters. A commission came and measured it over and over again as if trying to stretch it a little bit more. When my uncle received a letter from them to vacate the houses, he refused. Instead, he took the government to court. The court in turn sent another commission that established that it was indeed on the borderline and allowed him to keep it.

At that time, none of us knew that the Bolsheviks would not give up their attempt to get his house. They just changed the strategy. They set out on a wicked and sinister route, one that only the Soviets were able to conceive.



It was no secret anywhere on their newly acquired territories that former merchants that succeeded in saving a bit of their merchandise were selling it on the quiet in order to get by. They were branded capitalists, thus unemployable by the government. Not having any trade or profession and barred from most office jobs, they faced destitution. Thus, they lived on whatever they managed to salvage from their own stores.

The little business, or selling off, that they were conducting was against the Soviet law. It was done in secrecy with trusted people. It was called "speculation."

The Bolsheviks set out to prosecute my uncle on the grounds of breaking the law, charging him with "speculation"; if found guilty, this charge meant banishment to Siberia for him and his family.

They started quietly to watch him and his house, at the same time looking for potential witnesses. It did not really matter if testimonies were real or false. They were capable to force anyone to say what they wanted him or her to say. For the record, my uncle did sell something from time to time of whatever he managed to salvage of his merchandise, in order to feed his family.

It took the Soviets a couple of months to get enough witnesses, among them a militiaman. All this took place during the spring of 1940.

At the end of school year in the later part of June 1940, I returned home. So did my sister Sheva. At the same time from Pruzany came two of my friends, Kalman Kalbkoif and Moishe Gelman. They started to attend the Hebrew gymnasium before the war. The Soviets converted it into a *Diesitioletka* (ten-year school), where Yiddish was introduced instead of the previous Hebrew, and Russian instead of Polish.

My youngest Sister, Liba was then promoted to grade two, the second youngest Sonia, who was two years older, promoted into grade four, two grades higher above Liba, and my brother Liova (Leibl), two years older than Sonia, still two grades higher.

My close friend Laizer Rotenberg graduated from the Ort school in Brest-Litowsk in 1939, and during the winter of 1939-40 took a tractor driving and maintenance course. Shortly after, he got a job in the newly created and first *kolkhoz* (collective farm) in our area, in the village of Krinica, (not to confuse with Krinica in the mountains), coming

home very Sunday. Sometimes he came home even to spend a night during the week as it was a distance of only nine kilometers.

There were no more young idlers in shtetl for two reasons: first was the fact that a family could use any financial help there was available, regardless of how small the pay was and even with the almost worthless rubles; secondly, the Easterners, the Soviet newcomers, looked askance on young men walking around without work, repeating often one of the well-known paragraphs of the Soviet constitution, “ if you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

With my father’s intervention, I got a job for the vacation time with the same organization in which my father and Uncle Eli worked, the provision organization. My work consisted of putting together the merchandise that used to arrive almost daily and divide it up in six different portions, according to the population of each group of villages. Each village group consisted of about twenty villages with a retail store in each village. Each store had a manager and assistant. Both were government employees. In this way, the government created jobs that did not exist before. That there was nothing to sell did not bother the employees, who were paid regardless. Each village group had a manager and assistant as well as a bookkeeper, thus creating unnecessary new government positions; it was a top-heavy bureaucracy that attached itself to the body of the masses like leaches.

Group managers used to come from the above-mentioned villages a couple or few time a week with several horse and buggies to pick up their allotment of merchandise that used to arrive with the organization trucks from Brest-Litowsk.

Bulk merchandise used to come direct from the Soviet Union by carload to the station Oranczyce-Linovo, things like salt, sugar, kerosene, vodka, cement, bricks, tiles and others. When such shipments used to arrive, entire villages with their horses and buggies used to be sent out to the rail way stations to bring it in.

Even though some items used to arrive in huge quantities, the demand never ceased, even on items like bricks, tiles and cement. Although the building of houses stopped, people kept on buying whatever there was for sale.

The consumption had increased too, to be precise. For example, vodka was hardly used or drunk by Jews. Jews were not drinkers. If a Jew used to take a small drink at a celebration, he used to be considered a drinker. In contrast, at a Christian wedding, everyone got drunk. Another example was sugar. Jews used to use a fair amount of it, while Christian farmers in shtetl used very little; in the villages, they used none at all.

However, with the arrival of the Bolsheviks, things had changed. Not only did the Christian population start using sugar, but on a large scale, and some Jews started quietly to take a drink too.

Candy was a treat for children, and only in the better of families. During the Bolshevik era, it became accessible to all as it was sold at government prices. Even though it used to arrive by the full carloads, enough to last for years in our district in the pre-war times, it was sold in a few hours. It would disappear, not to be seen for months.

Among my co-workers was a local young man five years my senior, Shalom Bernsztein, with whom I became good friends. Our work was physically demanding. The bulk merchandise used to be sent to their destinations upon arrival, but the more valuable items were in part distributed and in part held back. There was a political reason for it; there always was a shortage of things and the Easterners, the big shots, were embarrassed to stand in line for anything, it would have been below their dignity. Besides, the amount being distributed to each customer would not be enough for them. So, by an unwritten law, which was against the Bolshevik dogma, they used to receive their supplies from the main storehouse.

The manager of the warehouse, my immediate superior, himself an Easterner, was named Pietrukiewicz and hailed from Malecz, a small shtetl thirty kilometers from Shershev. He somehow turned up on the Bolshevik side during the First World War, and in 1939 returned with the Easterners to his native region. He made sure that those Soviet big shots in shtetl had whatever they needed. It is reasonable to assume that he did not do it without a wink from higher authorities. Yet it was done in such a manner as to appear that those big shots knew nothing of it.

It was part of my job to bring those items to their living quarters, giving it to their wives while the men were at work in their offices. Among those officials were the first

secretary of the party, the judge, the chief of the militia (police), the chief of N.K.V.D. (secret police), the city major who lived in our house and a few others.

A large assortment of other wares used to arrive in those warehouses, a lot of it already made in Bialystok, manufactured under the Soviet supervision and standard. Like crockery, dishes, utensils, notions, footwear with rubber soles (leather was unavailable), readymade clothes, particularly fleece underwear, gloves, hats, mitts, even dresses and men's suits. However, it was of such poor quality that would it have been before the war, it would have never left the store shelves. Still, people used to line up in front of the government stores from early morning. In cases of sugar, vodka, sausage, chocolate and such, people used to line up in the evening, spending the bitter cold nights outside in order to assure an early access to the store and a chance of buying one of the desired but limited articles.

For a year after the arrival of the Bolsheviks, shipments of candy continued to arrive from Wilno, wrapped in the pre-war wrapping paper that carried a "Menorah" (a seven-branch candelabrum, a Jewish emblem) as well as the name of the firm "Menorah." I used to think of the Jewish owner or owners of that candy factory and how the Bolsheviks deprived them of their lives' labor, and in return awarded them and their families with one-way tickets in a cattle car to Siberia.

From time to time, something good and rare used to come with the arriving shipments of merchandise, items unseen in the Soviet Union like sewing machines, real fur coats, electric kettles, aluminum pots, even good Caucasian wine or even caviar. It used to arrive in small quantities and the public never got to see it or to know of its arrival. The Eastern big shots quietly used to get a hold of it. In fact, I had to bring it home to some of them.

This too had to be done on the quiet that nobody should know, not even the big shots themselves. I had to deal with their wives so that in case that it should become exposed, they, the big shots, would deny any knowledge of it.

Even after breaking this law, the job of making these transactions legitimate used to remain for the bookkeepers and stock keepers of the warehouse. Let me explain: all merchandise used to arrive with the explicit instructions to sell it in the retail

(government) stores. We, in the main warehouse, had no right to sell it, period. To protect ourselves, we used to issue it on an invoice to a store. The store manager used to sign for it, but instead of receiving the merchandise, he received rubles for the official value of the items.

Those big shots were only too glad to pay for it, and for good reason. For example, the official price of a fur coat was four hundred rubles, and none were obtainable in a store, as they used to find their way to the black market and sold for ten thousand rubles or more. The same was applicable for sewing machines, electric appliances and other rare items in the Soviet Union. Is it surprising that they were so anxious to get hold of it?

Items like vodka, in small quantities, used to be held back from the public for exactly the same reason.

When one of those big shots was desperate for a drink, he often used to come into the warehouse using all kinds of excuses to start a conversation, which eventually used to lead to the topic of vodka, at which time he would ask if we haven't got a bottle stuck somewhere. At times, unable to get rid of him, the manager would sell him one. A lot depended on who the person was and his position in the establishment. I recall that when the chief of the militia once came in for vodka, the manager did not dare to say there is none. Instead, he asked him how many bottle would he like.

I packed the desired amount in an empty nails box, hammering the cover down to make it appear unopened, and took it outside. There, in front of passersby, I called out to him aloud: comrade chief, where shall I take the nails to? He answered with the same loud voice, "Take it to the militia headquarters. " Then as if he thought of something he added, "You know what? I have to go later to the station, take it to my house and I will take it from there to the station myself." That was one of the many faces of life in the Soviet Union.

Despite the superficial appearance of comradeship among the Easterners (Soviets) that lived in Shershev, there was an undercurrent of jealousy among them, especially

among the wives of the higher officials who envied each other for the things their husbands provided them with.

They came to us with nothing or with very little and in a short time they started to go out in the street in new dresses, suits and coats. Everyone knew that they got it in the warehouse and others pressured their husbands to provide more and better things.

My job was one of the best one could have in shtetl. After all, all of the merchandise allocated for Shershev and its vicinity passed through our hands unavoidably we benefited from it too. We took the lessons from the big shots, it was they who taught us that when scarce merchandise used to arrive, (and what was not scarce?), to write out invoices to the retail store and pay with rubles, taking the merchandise home.

This was done in strict secrecy and within reason. Still we managed to bring home more than we could use. When we did have more than needed, my parents used to sell it. This too had to be done in strict secrecy. My parents had a trusted middleman by the name of Ghedalia Chydrick who used to come and buy it up, selling it to other trusted clients. Who his customers were, my parents never asked, nor did he volunteer to say.

The entire affair had to be done in secrecy, for would the militia have any suspicion, all they had to do was to stop me on my way home from work. Chances were that they would find something on me. A package of cigarettes or a piece of soap would be enough to send me to Siberia. Even the middleman's coming and going was not done during daylight hours, such was the fear that one of his customers should not be snatched up by the militia.

Our entire life under Soviet rule was steeped in fear. Everybody had to improvise; as the saying then went, "Uncle Stalin gives enough to exist one week of the month, for the other three weeks one has to provide by himself." Taking in consideration those wages in those days, one had to improvise or literally starve.

To say that the government, the militia and the secret police did not know what is going on would be naïve. On one hand, they themselves benefitted from it; on the other, I suspect that they kept a file on each person, setting down in writing everybody's offenses in order to be able later to blackmail them into cooperating with them.

Informers began to appear in the newly acquired Soviet territories. What caused them to do so is not clear. It could be idealism, maybe for pay, show ones loyalty in order to get promoted or outright fear of reprisal by the secret police, namely to be sent to Siberia.

In the middle of that summer vacation coming home after work, I found my parents upset. They told me that a couple hours earlier that a member of the militia came to us telling them to send me to their headquarters when I got back from work.

That supper none of us enjoyed. As soon as we finished, I got up to go to the militia. My parents looked at me with apprehension, not knowing what they want of me or if they will let me go home.

At six thirty, I was there reporting to the person on duty. He pointed at a row of chairs and told me to sit down. There were a couple of men sitting in that waiting room. Some more kept coming. All were called in at intervals to another room coming out and leaving and I am still sitting.

All kinds of thoughts were going through my head. None of them were good. Why am I here? If they want to arrest me, why don't they? Time passes by ever so slowly. It is already nine o'clock, ten and eleven. The last two hours I am all by myself.

Shortly before midnight, I was called into the chief's office. He sat behind a large desk that was covered with a loud red tablecloth that within minutes started to irritate my eyes. The first thought that came into my mind was the question: What is the matter with those people. Don't they sleep at night? They dragged my father out of bed well after midnight a year ago to inform him that he will get his vodka back, and me they keep here until midnight for G-d knows what. How do they keep it up?

After making sure that I am the one they want and that my immediate superior is Pierukiewicz and that his superior is Bobrov, he started asking me about my job, what it consists of, what is the procedure in the warehouse and so on. At the time, they seemed innocent and insignificant questions. However, when he asked me about those not connected with our work, people that come into the warehouse, I became alert and careful with my answers.

After asking me a few more questions, which apparently did not satisfy him, he said, "What happened to the aluminum casseroles that arrived in the warehouse?" For a moment, I got stunned by such a direct question. In total only four aluminum casseroles arrived, which did not see the light of day, as they were "appropriated" by the Easterners of higher rank. The fact that we let them have them was against the law, but what was worse was the fact that it was taken by officials of high status and position, members of the Bolshevik party, which put them and the party in a bad light.

Sitting there opposite him and looking straight into his gray-green eyes, I felt like saying, "Don't you know that your friends and comrades, the so-called liberator (as they liked to be called), have taken them." But I did not dare. At that very moment, I decided to claim ignorance. He continued with the questions about other goods and hard-to-get items. I was waiting for him to ask about the fur coats, of which one I personally took to his home and handed it to his wife, but he knew better, fearing that I might answer on that one.

He continued to ask questions to which I answered, "I don't know." He got so agitated that he said, "You know that your social background is not a good one," hinting at the fact that our house was nationalized, and that my father was a merchant and my grandfather, the mayor (all of which were unforgivable sins). He continued regardless of the fact that our constitution says that a father is not responsible for his son nor is the son responsible for his father; the reality is different. He was hinting that not only I but our entire family might be sent to Siberia. "It will be much better for you and your family if you will cooperate with us."

For the hundredth time, I repeated to him the same words that I don't know what he is talking about, that I leave work at five leaving the others in the warehouse and have no idea what takes place after I am gone. This did not deter him from continuing. "This is what we want you to do: keep your eyes open at work, see what is taking place. Quietly mark all transactions on a piece of paper. One of my assistants will come in supposedly to look around and you will slip that piece of paper to him. This way you will not have to come to the militia station and won't be suspected by anyone at work."



My response was that I had nothing to write down, as I knew nothing. He repeated his words again and again and then said, "Now go home and do what I say."

I got home after two in the morning; my parents were waiting up, not knowing what happened to me. I told them exactly what transpired in the last eight hours and emphasized what the chief was asking of me.

My mother, not giving my father time to digest what I have just said, turned to me, emphasizing every word, "Moishele, remember, never be an informer, no matter what they will do to you or to us. Let them even send us all to Siberia, but an informer never be."

Those sacred words from my mother still ring in my ears. They were and still are my guide and moral motivator through all the years of my life.

As the chief said, a week later one of his assistants came into the warehouse. I knew him, as he too was one of those that used to come in to try to benefit from his position. This time however, he did not ask for anything. Just walked about looking around passing by me several times. I am sure the others were wondering what he came for, but I knew and did not pay attention. After about ten minutes, he left. A week later, he was back again. This time too he left empty handed.

Some days later, an ordinary militiaman comes into the warehouse and out of the blue and starts to ask everyone for their passports. At that time, all residents of the cities and towns had to have passports. Only villagers had none, except those that had to travel to the city. They were required to have their passports on them. It just happened that there were some villagers in the warehouse who had come for their allotment of merchandise. It turned out that not only they, but even all the workers with me had their passports except me. I never felt that I had the need to carry my passport on me. When the militiaman got to me, I, in all honesty, told him that mine was at home. "In that case, said the militia man, when you go home for lunch, bring your passport, for we have to see yours too." It all looked reasonable and straight forward, as he checked all of the ones there, to want to see mine too.

At lunch, I took my passport and went to the headquarters of the militia. I was directed to the passport department where I was received by no less a person than the

chief of the department. Sitting me down in front of him in his private office, divided by his desk, he looked at me and asked, "Well, you still do not know what happened to the aluminum casseroles?" I was amused at the fact that four casseroles can stir up such a fuss that they mustered the entire militia force consisting of half a dozen departments, each with its chief and a dozen or so subordinates, together there were in Shershev somewhere between sixty and seventy men. To count the secret security (N.K.V.D) they were together close to one hundred men, taking in consideration that the Bolsheviks had a militiaman in every village. There were another one hundred and twenty five men in our area, which makes it over two hundred security men in our district. This compared with the five policemen that were in Shershev before the war, covering the same area. Is it any wonder that people were suffocating under such a regime?

My decision was made on the night of my earlier visit to the chief of the militia and the support of my mother. Now I knew that my parents are willing to stand by me no matter what. Without hesitation, I answered him, "No." The chief said, "Give me your passport." Opening it to the appropriate page, he wrote something in it, giving it back to me he said, "Now you can go." Outside I looked in it. There in clear letters was written: the passport is issued according to paragraph eleven of the constitution by law such and such.

This paragraph was known in the Soviet Union. It meant that the bearer of the passport is not a trustworthy person (according to Soviet law (but must submit to certain restrictions. Among those restrictions was one that prohibits the bearer to enter a seven-kilometer wide zone along the border. As Brest-Litowsk was within that zone, I could not return there, thus the end of my education.

A short time later my father too was called to the passport department of the militia, where they wrote in the same couple lines as in mine, thus preventing him from entering Brest-Litowsk causing him to lose his job. Fortunately, he found a job as bookkeeper with the shoemakers' *artel* (communal workshop), whose chairman was a shoemaker by the name of Itshe Rubin who lived on Chazer-Ghesl (the lane).

My top boss, the manager of the entire business organization Bobrov, himself a big shot and party member, who lived in my uncle Reuven's house, was under constant

pressure from the party to get rid of the former merchants that worked for him. He, in a sense, felt persecuted, knowing that the Bolsheviks are trying to take away my Uncle's house. He felt safe in my uncle's house to make a critical but harmless remark against the Bolsheviks from time to time. Still he was very careful not to overstep the line.

However, his wife and my Aunt Chashkah got along very well and trusted each other. She used to confide to my aunt events that took place at the party meetings that her husband was not supposed to tell her, his wife.

It was from her that we found out that the party is putting pressure on her husband to fire my father. When he told them that he could not get along without him, they asked the militia to write in my father's passport the paragraph eleven. A second time she told my aunt that they are demanding of him to fire my father's youngest brother, Eli, from his position as main bookkeeper. He maintained that he had nobody to replace him with.

On one bright day, in walks a young but already fat man with the hands of a lumberjack, with a pock marked face that used to be seen on many Easterners. Apparently, small pox had not been fully eradicated at that time in the Soviet Union, especially in the rural areas. He came to replace my uncle Eli, to take his job.

However, the top boss, Bobrov, was no fool. He was only too well acquainted with the Soviet system of mass-producing thousands of experts overnight. He did not fire my uncle. Just told him to move over to the next desk, vacating his for the newcomer.

It did not take long for Bobrov and all the others in the main office to realize that the new expert did not know from his right to his left as far as bookkeeping goes. The new man retained his title but the main work was done by my uncle.

A week or two later, Bobrov was called to a meeting of the party for a tongue-lashing as to why he did not dismiss my uncle. Here Bobrov had not only had a good excuse but turned the tables on them, his accusers. "You approached me for employing that Kantorowicz and went to the trouble of bringing a main bookkeeper from far in the Soviet Union. Now look what they sent me in. A total ignoramus who has no inkling of what a bookkeeper is all about. If not for that Kantorowicz, I would have to close the entire office." Apparently, his argument struck home. They never again mentioned to him my uncle's name.

The Bolsheviks were not finished with the Kantorowicz yet. That they stopping me from going to school was not satisfactory for them yet. There was a score to settle with me. They wanted to remove me from one of the best jobs in town and maybe replace me with someone that would cooperate with them, simply an informer.

I found out about it later. It happened this way: one day at work, my supervisor Pietrukiewicz tells me to go deeper in the warehouse to get him something. As I pass from one department to the next, I notice a large roll of bank notes on the floor.

Automatically, I picked it up and turned around to go with it to my boss Pietrukiewicz. The moment I turned around, I see Pietrukiewicz coming towards me. In all my innocence, I stretch out my hand with the money asking him if it is his. Yes, he says and without uttering another word, he puts it into his pocket.

A time later, I found out that he too was under pressure to get rid of me. He refused, claiming that as there are always valuable items in the warehouse he must have complete confidence in the workers. Having tested me several times, he has full trust in me and cannot let me go. They gave in.

Still, they carried a grudge against my uncle Reuven for putting up a fight for his house. We knew almost everything they were trying to do in order to make an open and shut case against him. After all, Shershev was a small shtetl. Good friends used to come to him or us and tell how the militia is trying to talk them into becoming witnesses against him.

We did not stand idly by. First, my uncle had to prove that he does not live by being a speculator (a Soviet term for doing business), but is working. Hard physical labor was more “purifying” than office work according to Bolshevik dogma, so my uncle started working at building. We also started to look for willing witnesses to vouch for his honest laboriousness. We, that is, all of our Kantorowicz clan, knew that our adversary, the government, is a formidable one and people were not eager to line up against them. Yet somehow, my aunt managed to get through someone to the local judge, promising him a leather coat, hat and boots as well as a fur coat for his wife. (The above items no amount of rubles could buy). He, the judge, let him know that if my uncle will get a

particular lawyer from Moscow (whose name he supplied), he will try to give a verdict of sorts but no jail term.

At the trial, the militia had some twenty witnesses against my uncle. They all testified that they bought from him goods after he closed out his store. The dozen or so witnesses on my uncle's side testified about his decency, modesty, and such. The credit however has to go to the lawyer, who appealed to the judge saying, "What is his crime, that he sold his own merchandise?" Then with a very loud voice he cried out to the judge in front of the public, but what was more important, he addressed it to the many militia and secret security (N.K.V.D.) men saying, "Comrade Judge, would you sentence a year-old child to jail for eating candy? They have lived under our laws only for a year, do you expect them to know all our rules. They are like one-year-old children." He had a few more hard-hitting arguments that I do not remember any more, but which succeeded in ridiculing the entire case. It was obvious that despite the huge amount of work that the militia put into this case, the big city lawyer made a laughingstock out of them.

The judge seeing the superiority of the lawyer and the embarrassment of the prosecutor took advantage of the moment and pronounced the verdict: a two thousand ruble fine, which at that time it represented four months average pay.

The joy of our family did not last long. The relentless prosecutor appealed the case to a higher court in Pruzany. It took two months for the process to begin, during which time the militia did not do anything, while we tried to minimize the damage done by the witnesses for the prosecution at the first trial.

My parents attended the second process in Pruzany. The number of witnesses against my uncle had dropped to half and some had changed their story in favor of my uncle. The militiaman that was the most important witness against my uncle was in between the two trials drafted into the army and unavailable at this one. The most important thing in favor of my uncle was the telephone call that the judge in Shershev made to the judge in Pruzany inquiring about the process. It was enough of a hint for the presiding judge in Pruzany to understand that the Shershev judge was interested in the case and to understand in whose favor.

The judge in Pruzany, not being under pressure from the local authorities nor from the authorities in Shershev, who could not apply it even if they wanted it, felt free to pass a just verdict. Consequently, he declared that as the prosecution could not prove my uncle's guilt in breaking any law, he is innocent and does not have to pay even the fine of two thousand rubles imposed on him in Shershev.

Our entire family felt relief until we found out that the local prosecutor had appealed the verdict to still a higher court in Minsk. There it seems the case got stuck among other court cases, where it remained from the fall of 1940 until the German attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, when everything turned to dust and ashes. At that time our extended family especially my uncle Reuven and his family continued to live under the Bolsheviks as if our heads were under the guillotine ready to fall at any time.

Half way between Pruzany and the rail way station Oranczyce Linove were military barracks yet from the Polish times. The Red Army took it over extending it considerably, replacing the Polish cavalry with tanks and tractor powered artillery. From the barracks, it turned into a so-called military town, where a large number of civilians were employed. My uncle Reuven found employment there away from the eyes of his prosecutors.

The distance from Shershev to those barracks was some twenty-five kilometers. My uncle used to come home after work only when he could get a ride with a military vehicle and be sure to have a ride back early in the morning before the day started.

There was a law that was called *Proghool*, meaning to shirk from work, saying that if one misses or comes late to work by twenty minutes, one loses twenty-five percent of one's wages for the next six months. A repeat offender gets six months in jail. Under such a regiment, my uncle did not dare to be late to work, and neither did anybody else.

If someone had sometimes dreamed sweet dreams about Bolshevism, they soon evaporated. The Jewish tradesmen and artisans who used to work before the war from early morning to late at night to eke out an austere livelihood might have dreamed about the Soviet Union. They too were disappointed with the reality. True, officially they worked only eight hours in the collective workshops, but the saying, "Uncle Stalin's monthly pay last for one week, the other three one has to manage on one's own" was

applicable to them too. They had to work evenings at home or in the collective workshops on the quiet, under the counter, using when possible the workshops material supplied by the government and thus risking jail.

The varieties of bread, rolls and other baked items from before the war disappeared. All that was available was one sort of bread that looked white and tasted like clay. This bread, weighting four kilograms each, was baked in pans deliberately large and half-baked so that the water in it should not evaporate, therefore getting out more bread than it was supposed to from the amount of flour they used to receive. The extra bread used to be sold “under the table” by the workers in the bakery and divided among themselves.

The same thing used to take place in all other small enterprises that the Bolsheviks set up and managed, like pop, soap and other factories. They employed local artisans and workers.

If the public could have gotten whatever they needed at government prices, the wages could have seen them through the month till the next paycheck. As there was a chronic shortage of even the most elementary articles like soap, sugar and the like, not to mention apparel, clothing, and footwear, the only place to get it was on the black market.

As a result, the government had driven all small business transactions underground, where prices were tenfold the official rate. Unable to make ends meet, people resorted to cheating and outright stealing from the government, creating a nation of cheaters. To add to it they succeeded in turning sympathizers into enemies.

The farmers, whose most precious possession was their land, were being “encouraged” to join the collective farms, which meant to give up their land and cattle, an unfathomable tragedy.

The farmers opposed it with all their might. Deep inside they knew that it was a losing battle and everyday was for them a struggle. Most of them succeeded in holding out the two years under the Bolsheviks and retained their land.

Some individual farmers paid dearly. Bolshevik history is full of such cases. They were the so-called *Kulaks*. Any farmer possessing ten and more hectares of land came

under this category. *Kulaks* (rich farmer) were looked upon by the Bolsheviks with contempt and was persecuted. Some of them, hard-working, honest people were sent with their families to Siberia, leaving behind their farms and everything else.

Still the farmers made out better than the Jewish population. Holding on to their land they could and did sell their produce to the town Jews, who by now were working in government workshops and other installations; they were being paid government wages yet had to pay the farmer black market prices for his produce.

To say that people lived continuously in misery under the Bolsheviks would also be unjust. There were a few short moments of surprise if not joy, now and then, for us blacklisted.

In June of 1940 when the school year ended, my middle sister Sonia (Sarah) was almost nine years old and graduated from grade three. She came home with an exceptionally good school report and an exquisitely decorated certificate stating that she graduated her class with the highest marks. We were certainly proud of her, but even more surprised that the principal dared to award a pupil with the name of Kantorowicz such an award even when she deserved it and was entitled to it. So even for us, a persecuted “capitalistic” family, there was a short moment of pride and maybe suppressed joy.

This does not mean that I, a seventeen-year-old youth, did not have a few short-lived happy moments, if only artificially brought on, under the Bolsheviks. Once we all realized that this is our lot and there is no other alternative we resigned to the situation against our will.

A few of us were employed in the warehouse. I was the youngest, and there was Shalom Bernsztein, a couple of Christian young men, and two retail store managers Asher Pasmanic and Yosl (Joseph) Kiselew. The last two used to help us conduct the illegal transfer of cash for merchandise that the big shots used to take from the warehouse. One could call us a group of conspirators, for had we been caught, we would have been charged as such.

Our mutual fear of being caught held us together and helped cement a trust between us. We used to get together at the house of one of our Christian friends, drink



and eat. Yosl Kiselew was from another city. A couple of years before the war, he came to Shershev to marry the daughter of Chayah Liba Szterman, Szbinah. This was the same Chayah Liba where my maternal grandmother, Freida-Leah had rented a room and lived for a time. She, Chayah Liba has been a widow for many years, supporting herself and her only child, Sheinah, by selling yard goods in her half of the house. The other half belonged to Nehemiah (the stitcher). Behind the house was a large garden and orchard, looked after by Yosl Kiselew.

Here I would like to draw a parallel between two former Yeshiva (an institution of higher Talmudic learning) students, as they lived next door to each other.

Way back I mentioned that our next door neighbor, Nachman Feldman, married his daughter to a former Yeshiva student and how the two women, the wife and mother in law constantly looked after him while he was doing nothing all day. In contrast, Yosl Kiselew, a Yeshiva student too, was busy all day in the garden and orchard. We never saw him being idle.

He was at least a dozen years my senior, conducted himself correctly and was very religious as befitted a former Yeshiva student.

At those get-togethers, after a couple of drinks, we used to eat. Of course, the food was not Kosher. As I used to go there straight from work, I used to tell my mother that I would not be home for supper. My mother did not object to my having a couple drinks, knowing that I will not become a drunkard, but she used to make me promise that I will not eat non-kosher food. I used to promise knowing well that I will not keep it. Afterwards, I used to reproach myself, not as much for eating non-Kosher foods as for not keeping the promise to my mother; I loved her so much and would not want to hurt for anything in the world, yet succeeded in doing so.

What made me even guiltier was the fact that this Yosl Kiselew did drink with us but ate only bread, cheese and meat.

On a bright midsummer morning, a couple dozen young peasants appeared in front of the ancient and once beautiful synagogue, now gutted since the First World War. In answer to the Jewish neighbors' question as to what they are doing there, they replied that they were brought to take apart the synagogue.

At that time, all Jewish organizations had ceased to exist and there was nobody to speak on our behalf. I do not know of anybody protesting to the government; it would not do any good anyhow.

The workers started to collapse the four gigantic pillars of the facade that supported the large triangular pediment. After chipping away the white plaster of one pillar and some brick, they realized that they were putting themselves in danger of being caught under the falling pediment. They constructed a kind of battering ram topped by a long pole with a heavy metal point, thus being able to chip away at one pillar from a distance.

The pillar being over a meter and a quarter in diameter gave them a hard time, but eventually collapsed bringing down with him the huge and heavy pediment that came crushing down from its twenty meter height with a terrifying crash.

Every Jewish heart in shtetl grieved seeing the once beautiful synagogue that represented the pride and glory of our shtetl's golden past, when our Jewish community numbered close to five thousand souls, coming crashing to the ground. I am sure many others took it as a bad omen, although I never said it aloud.

In the next few days, the workers toppled the other three pillars and started on the high walls, which were over a meter thick. They had instructions to save as many whole bricks as possible. Before they could start on the walls, they had to topple the two pillars inside the high hall that supported the ceiling.

Many of us local Jews watched for hours at the desecration those workers were committing, knowing that they are doing it for money and the pleasure deriving from destroying an ancient Jewish holy building. I will confess that I was wishing that a couple of them would get hurt. Apparently, the G-d I and other Jews grew up to believe in had already closed his doors and windows so as not to listen to his people's prayers.

It took the workers a couple of months to tear the walls apart. The last standing wall, the eastern wall, stood alone as if in prayer with the empty niche of the *Aron-Kodesh* (Holy Ark) clearly visible after the many years of neglect since it burned in the First World War. This eastern wall had no windows and stood there, a solid twenty meters high and over twenty meters wide.

The demolishers succeeded to topple the wall in one huge slab. It fell straight, unbroken, with its inside part or face down over the mount of rubble of the previously demolished other walls and ceiling, like a tombstone over a desecrated grave.

When the work was gone, the walls and the thousands upon thousands of intact bricks taken away, the site was only a relic and the remains of once a beautiful synagogue. A testament of an ancient, prosperous and numerous Jewish communities, all that was left was a five metre-high heap of rubble covering the entire space of the former synagogue.

As unbelievable as it sounds, the Bolsheviks had the impudence to publish in their local papers, which used to be printed in Brest-Litowsk, that Shershev was operating a brick kiln where twenty thousand bricks are being produced daily.

To think that this was a daily paper that used to be read not only in Shershev and surrounding villages, but in all the shtetls and towns in the Brest-Litowsk province that knew about the demolition of the synagogue. Yet nobody dared to question the authenticity of that article.

We, that is our pre-war group still remained tightly knit and trusted each other unflinchingly, sharing each other's impressions and remaining dreams, which were slowly evaporating. By that time, we all came to realize that the Soviet Union is a hermetically sealed country. There is no way in and no way out. Even the movement inside was strictly regulated.

With a stranger one spoke about the weather. The only political conversation was limited to heaping abuse on the capitalistic system and countries, especially on Britain the United States. Above all, never to forget to praise the Soviet system and comrade Stalin.

My friend Kalman Kalfkoif might have been more courageous or more carelessly outspoken than I. He worked during the vacation in the department of health. It happened that in the office one of the desks suddenly fell apart. The workers in the office gathered around the table staring at it in silence. Kalman could not stand the temptation and said that what everybody had on his or her mind: "This is a Soviet product." All eyes turned towards him. His boss in a loud and indignant voice reproached him, saying among other

things that we do not tolerate ungrateful nor malcontent people. Yet he did not fire him nor did he report him to the authorities.

With his boldness, my friend Kalman almost got me and him in trouble. One evening as the two of us walked by the office of the *Comsomol* (communist youth organization), we noticed the secretary still sitting alone at his desk over papers. He was a man close to thirty, tall and skinny. He always looked angry and deep in thoughts, and I believe I am correct on both counts. In my opinion, he was a product of the post-revolutionary young generation fanatically committed to the Bolshevik cause, having given up everything life has to offer, including family and friendship. By sitting sixteen hours a day at his desk, he was not the average young Soviet man.

My friend Kalman proposed to go in there and have a chat with him. Why I agreed I do not know. The secretary was a bit surprised to see us, but welcomed us politely not even asking for a reason for our visit.

It did not take long to strike up a conversation. My friend Kalman was the main speaker. Maybe he was bolder than I or maybe did not realize what he was playing with. As the saying goes, “One does not show a beaten dog a stick.” His family was not persecuted as mine was, and I knew only too well whom we are dealing with.

The conversation we had with him so many decades ago is still fresh in my mind. Maybe not word for word, but the text I still remember.

Firstly, he wanted to impress on us the accomplishments they have achieved in the year since they came to us. Like the few high schools that they opened in and around Shershev, health centres, and recreation centers, which served propaganda and indoctrination centers. We countered with arguments about the chronic shortages of everything, even the most elementary items, the difficulties in locomotion and the stifling and oppressive atmosphere they brought with them.

The secretary was well versed in his ideology, and I must admit that he had some good counter arguments. After a while, he proposed, in fact invited us to join the ranks of the *Comsomol* (communist youth organization), so that we can contribute to the improvement of the shortcomings we have just enumerated. Here our conversation turned to the topic of the Comsomol, which the Bolsheviks had tried hard to set up but so far

with little success. In their first year with us they managed to sign up (to recruit) a couple dozen Christian young people and only two Jewish teenage girls. One was Yoseph Maletzky's daughter; the other was Miriam Reitman. They wanted desperately to attract the Jewish youth into their fold and would do anything to get a couple of boys like ourselves, which would serve as an incentive for others to join them.

According to Soviet law, the potential application to the Comsomol had to have a sponsor himself, a member of the Bolshevik party. The secretary was so eager to have us as members that he offered himself as sponsor, thus assuring our membership.

My friend Kalman not only refused his favor, but dared to rub his face in mud by telling him that even the few members that he succeeded in having sign up are not committed Bolsheviks but did it in order to get the privileges, according to members of the Comsomol. The secretary immediately asked him if he heard it from the two girls, naming the two Jewish girls' names. The secretary in a calm voice said: "Oh yes, we can make you disclose the names. I want however that you should spend the night in your own bed peacefully, so I will forget the incident."

When I let myself be talked into coming to have a chat with the secretary by my friend, I knew I will be walking on thin ice, but I never expected to be led so dangerously out on a limb. With the secretary's last remark, my friend came to his senses and became more cautious.

Finally, we started to pretend that we are a bit interested and would like to continue this conversation, to which he replied that we could always find him there and we will be welcomed guests.

I doubt if he has ever forgotten this conversation with us. On our way out, I warned my friend never to play such a trick on me again. I must admit that that night I did not sleep well at all. Fortunately, that was the end of the incident. From that moment on, I avoided the secretary as much as possible, avoiding even passing by his office.

The eyes of the Jewish mothers in Shershev whose sons did not come back from the Polish German war a year earlier had long since run dry, but their hope was rekindled by a letter that arrived to my parents from a friend, Chatzkl Krugman's son, Shloime. Shloime was my uncle Eli's age and was mobilized back into the Polish army at the same

time as my uncle in March of 1939. Unlike my uncle Eli and some of his peers that returned home after German captivity, the Krugman's heard nothing from their son, Shloime, and assumed him dead.

With the arrival of his letter from the Warsaw ghetto, he notified his parents that he was fine and is getting by, but asked his parents to send a food parcel to his former boss who was now in Warsaw.

The letter sounded bizarre, so Chatzkl Krugman came in the evening to my parents to analyze it closer. There was no mention about the war, or about the entire year since then. No mention about his wife either or the reason that he and his former boss are now in Warsaw ghetto and not in Lodz, where his boss was a prominent member of the community and well-to-do even by Lodz standards. Finally, how come such a well to do man should be in need of a food parcel, while he, Shloime, who worked for his boss, is not asking for anything?

My parents and Chatzkl came up with all kinds of assumptions, but the Krugmans left no less confused than before. The law of the Soviet Union permitted to send abroad food parcels of no heavier than two kilograms. How much food is it two kilograms? What does one send and what is of greater importance? We in Shershev who were just learning about shortages ourselves could not have understood the shortages and hunger that Jews in the Warsaw ghetto experienced.

For this matter who could, unless one experiences it oneself.

Chatzkl Krugman who was a well-to-do man with the biggest yard goods store in shtetl before the war, and could easily afford to send the parcel, which was followed by more letters from his son and his sending more parcels to Warsaw. This continued until the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in June of 1941.

The summer 1940 was ending. The Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur came and went. If at the previous New Year and Yom Kippur the Jews were grateful to the Bolsheviks for coming to us instead of the Germans, that gratitude disappeared due to the living conditions under them. If it sounds ungrateful, one has to consider the fact that we did not know the situation under which the remaining Jews of Poland lived under the

Nazi regime, as the Bolsheviks prohibited any criticism of their allies, the Germans. Secondly, the Nazi persecution of Jews only assumed its immense scale after their attack on the Soviet Union. As in the previous year, Jews were forbidden from being absent from work and we considered it a desecration of our holidays. I had to work but like the others. I fasted that Yom Kippur.

We were entering the second year of Bolshevik domination. By winter 1940-41, the former petty merchants slowly found their niches in the Soviet economy. Some got jobs with the government and some managed to eke out a livelihood by being middleman on a small scale.

It was a precarious way of getting by, under the constant threat of being sent to Siberia. They used to buy things from former merchants who managed to salvage something of their merchandise and resell it to someone who needed it and was willing to pay the price. The life of the middleman, or as the Bolsheviks used to call them, “Speculants,” was a hazardous one, and the unfortunate one that got caught paid dearly.

In general, people were getting by as if sitting on a powder keg. In a sense, in order to exist, everybody was breaking the law. It was only a question of how soon one will get caught.

Among many proverbs going around at that time, there was one that categorized the Soviet population in three groups—he that was already in jail or Siberia and is out for now, that is in now and one that will be. Taking into consideration the unofficial figure of imprisoned people (there was never an official number) in the Soviet Union at any time that stood at fourteen million, the proverb was very close to reality.

The Bolsheviks did not celebrate Christmas. Instead, they celebrated New Year’s entire three days. It was one of the two long holidays in the Soviet Union; the second was the anniversary of the revolution. We used to spend those celebrations in the main office of our business organization drinking vodka, being careful not to overdo it in case one might slip a word that they would later deeply regret.

This is how we welcomed the year 1941. Officially, the Soviet policy towards Nazi Germany did not change but one could feel unspoken change. The Soviet paper eased up on the praise they used to heap on Nazi Germany and their victories in North

Africa. In general, Germany stopped being mentioned so often in the paper. One could even hear from time to time a not so complimentary remark about Germany from an Easterner.

There were some Jews and non-Jews in Shershev that were working in or around Brest-Litowsk. Where they worked or what they were doing they were under orders not to say, which in itself was no surprise, as everything was a secret in the Soviet Union, but rumors were circulating that they were building fortifications.

That winter, that is February 1941, I turned eighteen years old. I considered myself grown up earlier but now I was grown up formally. I recall that night laying in bed wondering as to what the future holds for me. I, with all my naivety and youthful dreams still intact, made a resolution to dedicate my life to my people, the Jewish people.

How long this resolution lasted, I do not know, but taking in consideration my situation then and the events that followed, I would say not too long. Would the events that followed taken another course--or at least not occurred on such a scale that shook the world and in the process destroyed a thousand year old Jewish life and existence in Europe-- maybe many others' dreams would have had another ending, among them maybe mine too.

One has to admit that the Soviet propaganda had at times an effect on certain segments of the population, especially on the youth. Their movies used to depict their heroes in a bright light and young people tended to fall for it. Their patriotic and idealistic songs used to seize young and dreamy hearts and move them to tears.

I, myself, with so many unpleasant encounters and experiences with them used to catch myself being carried away with their songs. The reality however, used to bring me back to consciousness, back to my senses.

And so did the winter 1940-41 pass. Pesach was approaching, the second under the Bolsheviks. The preparations for it were not easy. In fact they were even harder than for the previous one. It became more difficult to get white flour (wheat) for matzos as well as for baking. The Kosher butcher was being persecuted even more as they were interfering with the government agents in buying up cattle. The procuring of hops and honey for making mead too became a problem. Somehow it was done.



Actually, we had the best commodity for obtaining anything we needed, much better than money or anything else. It was Polish pre-war vodka, much higher priced than the Soviet one. Of course, one had to be careful, for as I mentioned several times earlier, it was punishable with jail. But what was legal in the Soviet Union? This was the lifestyle and we had to live by it.

In general, the holidays under such conditions had lost much of its importance and holiness. However, Jews held fast to it. Even though we had to be at work, nevertheless we celebrated the *Seydoram*, the festive meal eaten on the two first nights of Pesach, as kosher it was in the pre-war years.

I have already mentioned the large Soviet military forces that were stationed in Brest-Litowsk proper and in the military barracks near Pruzany. I also mentioned the secret fortifications that were being built in and around the Brest-Litowsk fortress. I will also inform the reader that near Pruzany and its outskirts the Bolsheviks were busying in building two military airports, stationing in the town an entire air force regiment wing. The airman, the most privileged part of the Soviet armed forces, quartered themselves with many Jewish families in Pruzany, helping them economically.

To point out the intensity with which the Bolsheviks were building those two airports, it will suffice to say that not only did they employ every available and willing man to work there, but they brought two thousand short-term criminals from inside the Soviet Union to help with the work.

Among the men from around Pruzany that were employed were some from Shershev that used to commute daily back and forth. They used to relate the magnitude of the construction that was going on there.

We, the inhabitants of the area, did not know if it was being done due to the nearness to the border vis-a-vis Germany or if it was taking place right across the entire Soviet Union. We did not have to wait long for the answer. The school year 1940-41 ended Friday, June 20. The very same day in the mid-afternoon, my sister Sheva came home from Pruzany after graduating the final year of the Soviet high school. That night

we had the traditional Friday night meal, not having the slightest inkling that this was our last real Sabbath meal.

The next day, Saturday, I went to work like every other Soviet employee. After work, we all had supper together. During supper my sister told us that a couple days earlier they, the students, were informed that the local students will have to gather Saturday evening in school, from where they will be taken to the unfinished yet airports. There they will undergo certain exercises that will go on through the night. She, my sister, expressed her delight for not having to participate in those exercises, thus home coming a weekend earlier.

There was no mention in Shershev schools about the semi-military exercise, so we accepted my sister's remarks lightheartedly, not giving it a second thought; nor did we wonder or question the reason of the exercise. As for me, it left my mind the moment we finished the meal, when I stood up to announce that I am going see to the boys.

My first visit was at my friend Kalman Kalbkoif; from there we went to get Itzik Maletzky (Malecky). We ask him if he wants to go for a walk; he replied that he is that night on duty in the power station. Here I will mention that in Shershev we used to have power from dusk to midnight. As Itzik was only one year older than I, thus being almost nineteen, he had no authority to start the motor. It was his older brother by two years, Nachum, who went to start it. Not wanting to leave our friend alone for the boring three hours from nine to midnight, we decided to come along and spend the time in contest with the huge and loud motor to see who can be louder. As of late the motor became capricious due to the shortage of proper replacement parts. The large diesel motor had to be started with the help of a tank full compressed air that propelled it at first.

That night, like some nights in the past the motor would not start. After three or four tries, the compressed air was gone and the motor remained silent.

In the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1941 the couple streets and lanes of Shershev were enveloped in darkness. All that was visible were the pale light in the windows coming from the kerosene lamps.

For the Jews of Shershev, the Jews of the Soviet annexed Polish territories, as well as the Jews of all Eastern Europe, it was the last night that they went to bed peacefully. For ninety-five percent of them that night never ended.

The sun rises early in our parts of the world. So it was on that memorable Sunday June 22 1941. Being the only free day of the week, people were not in a hurry to get up and out. When I got out in the street at nine, I noticed a couple groups of people talking with interest but not with concern about the few carts with workers that left for Pruzany this morning, but were turned back three kilometers short of their destination, despite the fact that they worked in the construction of the military airports.

This calmness did not last long. A rumor spread that last night the nearby town of Pruzany was bombarded, which nobody was willing to believe. Shortly after, we could see the entire party leadership gathering in their office, which was in Joshua Pinsky's home. While the meeting was taking place inside, the many militiamen were going from house to house announcing that a general meeting of the entire population would be soon taking place in the market square. Indeed the population started to gather immediately.

At eleven that morning all the big shots in shtetl, with the first party secretary in the lead, appeared on the podium. "Balabutkin" the first secretary began with those words: "Today at the crack of dawn the aggressive Nazi army attacked the peaceful Soviet Union. The Nazi beast stuck its swine's snout in our Soviet garden." From there on, he continued in promising to pay Germany back for its aggression and how the Red Army will make ash and powder of them and so on. The first two sentences got stuck in memory. The rest is a blur. After the speech, the crowd drifted slowly away. Small groups of people remained to discuss and speculate as to what the near future will bring.

For me and my friends, that was the second time in this many years that we were going through such exciting moments. In contrast, however, to the situation almost two years ago, this war was promising to be a more balanced one than the Polish German War.

Indeed, we had seen and heard of the ability of the German army, not only in comparison to the former Polish army, but even to the French modern and mechanized army and its Maginot line, as well as the British at Dunkirk, not to mention the rest of

Europe that fell to Nazi Germany. However, we have also seen the huge numbers of Soviet tanks and numerous armies that appeared a much better match than all previous opponents.

The general opinion in shtetl was that in the worst scenario, the Red Army would have to retreat a bit, and we can decide what to do when the time comes. So far we have nothing to worry about.

That late morning and early afternoon, many planes flew over the skies of Shershev. They flew too high for us to identify them. Walking with my friends in the street, I remarked that today the Soviet flyers are paying back the people and the country for the good life they had in the Soviet Union. There was no doubt in our minds that those were Soviet planes going back and forth on bombing missions behind the front lines and that they must be taking some losses. It never dawned on us that those were German planes flying unchallenged with impudence over the Soviet skies.

The last couple hours of that Sunday afternoon passed in suspense and expectation. The Moscow radio gave little information about the situation on the border, and we, so close to the border--less than eight kilometers as the crow flies--could not comprehend the unusual quiet.

At about six in the late afternoon, as if carried by a whirlwind, the news spread that the Easterners--that is those that came to us from the Soviet Union--are leaving town. As if to confirm the fact, I get to the marketplace in time to see the Easterners were coming from all directions. The single ones and the married ones with their families. All either empty handed or with tiny suitcases or knapsacks. They climb in panic into the overcrowded open trucks that seem to be ready to spill over. There is a shortage of drivers. A couple of militiamen went to Eli Neibrif's house and brought him in. He, Eli Neibrif, was one of the drivers in the supply organization that I worked for. He refuses to go unless Noah Hofman will come along. Noah Hofman was one of the porters in our warehouse and used to travel with Eli Neibrif to Brest-Litowsk for merchandise. A couple militiamen go and bring him. He climbs aboard one of the trucks dangerously overloaded with humanity, and they all depart.

The local Jews are numb at what they see. What is happening here? The huge Soviet Union with its mighty army is going down without a fight? Her representatives are running away the first day of war, being a hundred kilometers by road to the border, leaving us Jews to the mercy of the Nazis? What will happen to us? Is it possible that the Soviet Union will fall apart even faster than Poland?

Suddenly the scorned and despised Soviet Union became dear and loved by us. In an instant we forgot the bad times and looks we gave them. We would give everything to have them back. With broken hearts laden with despair, we waited for further developments.

We lived at that time with my grandparents Kantorowicz. As everybody else, I too left my friends and joined the group of people that was dispersing home heavy hearts, as if the nearness of one's own dear ones would offer some kind of protection and comfort, even strength, for the days to come.

Before dark, my father sent me to his brother Reuven's house. As Reuven did not come home for that Sunday from his work place in the military barracks near Pruzany, we were all worried about him. My aunt was alone at home with the children. With her were her three children, Michlah, two years younger than I, Shalom, a year older than my brother Liova (Leibl), and Shevah, who was five at the time.

As downhearted as we were, I found my aunt and children in a much greater despair bordering on panic. The fact that my uncle was not with them certainly did not help.

Half an hour after my arrival, we heard a tremendous explosion. It came from the air and from the ground with a momentum that shook every house in shtetl. Looking out the window, I saw brightness like a ball of fire that reached high over the horizon that came from the direction of Pruzany.

Even I, with no idea of explosions and who had never seen one until then, could tell that it came from a great distance away and was of a gigantic force. We all got scared but me. Having been sent by my father to be the "man" in the house, I tried hard to hide my fear and lamely assured everybody that there is nothing to fear about. When the second explosion was heard, my cousin Shalom, who just turned thirteen, began begging

his mother and children to lay down with him on the bed so maybe a bomb will strike and kill us all, bringing an end to our fear.

We slowly began to move to the bedroom. By the time we entered it a third explosion was heard. This time the other two joined him in crying. Neither my aunt's nor my clumsy attempt to quiet them down did much good. They slowly subsided, only because the explosions ceased.

We sat like this by the light of a kerosene lamp until the two younger ones, drained, fell asleep. It was midnight when my aunt told me to go home. I did not need much coaxing, wanting to be with my parents. I left quickly.

As I was going home though the dark and silent streets, I had the eerie feeling that the street is already devoid of its inhabitants.

At home, everybody was up except my younger eleven year old brother Liova and my two little sisters Sonia, nine and Liba seven, sitting around the living room table dimly lit by a kerosene lamp. Their lips barely moving, they spoke in whispers as if the Germans were already in the next room.

The few hours of night left passed in anxiety. We were in the street early and so were many of the Jewish men, standing in small groups or going from group to group hoping to hear some news. All one could hear were assumptions to which I could have come myself.

One prayer was on the lips of all the Jews: we need a miracle that the Bolsheviks should come back, now they would indeed be welcomed and appreciated. Added to the concern over the approaching Germans, I also resented and grieved over the fact that while we will be absolute losers, the non-Jewish population will have a double victory. Not only will they get rid of the Bolsheviks but they will also see the downfall of the Jews for whom they carried an ingrained centuries-old dislike and outright hate.

That Monday, too, began with a beautiful sunrise, although the mood of the shtetl Jews was weighed down as if by a heavy stone. At ten o'clock in the morning, in drove one of the trucks that left yesterday with the Soviet bureaucrats. This one was to be fully loaded with the same men, but only the men, there were no women or children among them. For a moment, the Jews of Shershev thought that their prayer has been answered. If

I may be forgiven the l'havdil distinction, I would say that if the Messiah for whom we Jews have been waiting millennium would have come, he would not have been welcomed with more joy than that truckload of Bolsheviks. They in return did not accord us any attention, just went into their party office and shut the door behind them.

After a few minutes, they sent a couple of their own men for Srulkah (Israel) Mayster the blacksmith and ordered him to break open the safe, from which they needed to retrieve some documents. Apparently in yesterday's rush to leave, they mislaid or lost the combination. Now they had to break the safe open. For the constant hammering, they needed several men that kept on coming and going. From them we found out that they just came for those papers and will be leaving again. The exhilaration soon changed to despair. While this was taking place, planes were continually flying overhead. This time we knew whose they were.

Still the presence of the Soviet bureaucrats was a sign that the Germans were not on the outskirts of the shtetl. At noon, we heard the clatter of metal over the cobblestone street and in the market square appeared two Soviet tanks that came from Kamieniecker Street, the closet direction to Brest-Litowsk. The tanks were covered with a thick layer of dust, which was no surprise coming from that direction, the short cut direction to Brest-Litowsk that was sandy and in summer dusty stretch of road. What was disturbing was the sight and number of tank crews that were sitting all over the tops of the tanks. Every available space on each tank was taken up by a tank crewmember that was covered with the same thick layer of dust as the tank itself. All that was visible from under the dust was pairs of eyes turned towards the sky watching out for German planes. The tank crews looked helpless and scared. Apparently, they have already tasted German air attacks and lost their tanks to them.

During that Monday afternoon, a few small groups of tanks passed by the shtetl. One such group seemed to be better organized. They had along with them a large truck full with barrels of fuel. A couple of tanks were driving ahead and a couple behind. From time to time, a single tank used to pass, a single, pitifully lost unit.

At four in the afternoon, the Easterners had the safe opened. Taking their papers, they left in a greater hurry than the day before, abandoning the shtetl for the second time.

The crowd slowly dispersed to their homes in search of imaginary security or at least solace.

Now, having seen the route of the Soviet army in our parts, we all foresaw the downfall of the Soviet Union in a matter of days. We were still alive and did not know what Hitler had in store for us. We knew that we have to go on living.

That evening my father decided to reclaim our house that the Bolsheviks took away from us without any compensation. When the Bolsheviks took our house away from us, my parents hung on to a set of spare keys. The irony of it was that my father and I went that late afternoon using those spare keys to open the doors after almost two years.

The non-paying tenants left the contents undisturbed. True, one could see that they left in a hurry as many items were scattered, but they left everything a family can accumulate. To our surprise, there was everything. They, the elite of the bureaucrats, had apparently had a source of supply unknown to us. Besides the nice furniture and clothing, there was a store full of assorted foodstuffs that was never seen in the main warehouse. I can still see the hundred-kilogram sack of sugar, not loose but in lumps, and the many other things by the dozens of kilograms.

Overwhelmed and frightened by all this, we withdrew; locking the door, we went back and spent the night as before, with my grandparents

The next morning, Tuesday, my parents decided to start slowly and cautiously moving over to our house. Each one of us took something in our hands and we started back home. My mother and sister Sheva began to straighten things out with little enthusiasm, spending most of the time with the rest of us looking out the windows. We were expecting the Germans arrival at any minute, in fear not knowing what it is going to be like or what to expect.

There was no progress in putting the house in order. Soon we found ourselves together looking out the windows at the empty market square, silent and empty as I have never seen or experienced in all my life.

At exactly eleven o'clock a.m., a few German motorcycles pulled in from the south side of the market square, that is from Kamieniecka Street. Each motorcycle had a sidecar attached to it in which another German was sitting, holding on to the two handles



of a heavy machine gun mounted on the sidecar. They stopped in the middle of the square just opposite our house, leaped out of the motorcycle, machine guns at ready. They formed a large spread out circle around the motorcycles.

The sight of the Germans did not disappoint our expectations at all. They looked the way we imagined them to be, with hard, and I would add ruthless, faces. They moved about with well-rehearsed precision and skill, taking in with their glances everything around them. They looked to be as if they were born in their uniforms already machine guns in hand. Within minutes, a few more motorcycles arrived, and seemingly without command, they dispersed to every street and lane, taking up what must have been to them strategic positions.

Within a quarter of an hour, there were groups of Germans all around the outskirts of the shtetl. All of this was accomplished without a loud order or even a single shot. It seemed that they knew exactly where to go and what position to take up in advance.

In my mind, I was comparing the German soldiers to the pre-war Polish ones that we used to see during maneuvers. Their saddened dispirited faces, unenthusiastic slacking response to commands, the ignorance of modernism, the primitivism, the complaisant approach to officers and the open-faced, good-natured smile of the Russian peasant boy did not add up to good soldiering.

Yes, I did assume that those were the elite of the German troops, but even as such, they were impressive, even outright frightening. Some young boys slowly tried to get closer to the Germans challenging their tolerance, but a motion with their weapon was enough to stop the bravest.

Every few minutes more and more Germans kept on arriving by truck and smaller vehicles reminiscent of the latter-day allied jeeps. I would classify them as motorized infantry as there was no heavy weapon with them. As the traffic increased, it just continued via Mostowa Street toward Pruzany.

We postponed moving over to our home until the army would pass in a couple of hours. Instead, as the day progressed, so did the number of the German soldiers. Some did make a stop, but the bulk kept moving on.

After a while we had enough of looking at the Germans. We locked the two front doors of the house and went outside into the yard to sit on the steps of the back entrance as it was still hot at four in the afternoon. There, sitting, we were analyzing our situation. Suddenly we were confronted by a group of German soldiers that found their way through the lane way that separated our house and our neighbour Nachman Feldman. The lieutenant in charged addressed my father with one question: Are you the owner of the house? Hearing the confirmation the officer announced that they are taking over the house temporarily. "But lieutenant, sir, where should we go?" "This I cannot help you with," came the reply. "What about everything inside?" asked my father. "Don't worry, everything will be looked after and remain in its place. You can't touch anything and must leave now."

Therefore, we were expelled once more from our house and went back to my grandparents Yaakov-Kopel and Chinke Kantorowitz. With night, what we considered a trickle of military traffic during the day turned into a flood. Heaven and earth turned into a tide of soldiery. A steady flow of soldiers was pouring uninterrupted over the street. Not only over the cobblestone middle of the street, but on either side of the sidewalk.

My grandparents' house was close to the sidewalk, so we did not sleep much that night. There was no let up to the motion of the Germans. On the second day, tanks and heavy artillery began to pass. It was the first time that not only I, but my uncle Eli, an artilleryman in the Polish army, saw the German mechanized cannons pulled by threaded tractor, like vehicles on which was mounted a platform with four or five benches, each bench sitting four soldiers. When those vehicles used to pass by, the pane in the windows used to vibrate.

The heavy weapon and machinery took up the entire width of the road, and the infantry marched on the sidewalks on either side of the road.

Groups of German soldiers began to break into Jewish homes helping themselves to whatever they needed or could carry, from a needle and thread, to men's underwear, sweaters and shoes, to women's clothing. We did not even dare to protest and were glad when they used to leave the house.

Such reprieves did not last long. Soon another group used to come in to ransack the house again.

As Jews, we were not eager to go out in the street, so we tried to spend a bit of time in the yard, which was quite spacious. It had a gateway that was closed by a high and solid gate. The rest was surrounded by a connected fence that was just as high, made of heavy planks that made it inaccessible to prying eyes.

After locking the front double doors, we used to go out in the yard through the back door for a bit of privacy. This did not deter the Germans too much. Seeing the doors closed from the inside, they used to start knocking on the door with their rifle stocks. It used to happen that after a few knocks, they would leave to go to another house, but if the knocking persisted, my grandmother or mother used to open the door. They would let them in and the soldiers would help themselves to whatever they found of value.

On Thursday the 26, via alleys and yards, I made my way to my friends, the brothers Laizer and Litek Rotenberg. Two of our friends, Kalman Kalbkoif and Itzik Malecky joined us a short time later. In a group, we dared to go out in the street, although the market square was full of Germans. Their march had not slackened up for a minute. We set out in the direction of Kamieniecka Street, the direction from which the Germans were coming.

The second building on the right side of the street was an old Russian Orthodox Church sitting in a large yard. Behind it was a large orchard belonging to the priest of that church. That orchard was referred to as the priest's orchard. All that yard, orchards, and the yard of the nearby priest's house was taken up by German soldiers. Before we got a chance to see what was going on there, a few German soldiers got a hold of us, leading us into the churchyard. One of the things the Germans had already set up was a mobile bakery. Nearby we saw a pile of logs, first quality timber for making planks. A German pointed out some kind of machine and showed us how to use it. It was a power saw. We were ordered to cut the beautiful building material into small pieces as fuel for the bakery.

The nearby German auto repair unit soon found out about the few young Jews and made us pump the truck tires they were repairing. A truck tire needs four to five hundred

pumps to fill it up, which is not an easy task. Before night, a German escorted us home, for which we were grateful.

Apparently, I was good and tired after that day's work, for I fell asleep immediately, unlike the previous nights. How long I slept, I don't know, but sometime in the middle of the night, I was awakened by a loud crash at the door and loud German voices.

How the Germans succeeded to open first the closed in porch door and the outside and inside doors of the house, I don't know, but suddenly they were in the hallway. They had before them three doors, to the right that led to the kitchen, the left one to the part of the house where my grandparents and their son Eli lived and straight ahead, where we lived.

They apparently broke up into three groups, for in no time some were in our living room and at the entrance to one of the two sleeping rooms. By then we were all awakened and almost fully dressed, for we did not get completely undressed since the war began. A couple soldiers noticed my sister Sheva and yelled out *ain medschen*—a girl! I do not know how my mother managed to muster so much presence of mind, in one jump she was at the window, with one motion unhooked the window hooks and pushed the window outward. The window opened to its full extent, and my mother yelled, "Jump out, Shevelah." There was no need for my mother to repeat, my sister was over the window in a second. Seeing her out my mother turned to me and said, "Go with her." Being half-asleep, I did not realize what was happening or the earnestness of the moment, I just jumped. We were in a lane between my grandparents and a neighbor's house. To turn left, the lane led to the street a dozen meters away which was full of marching and riding on German trucks. To the right deeper in the lane and on the left side of it was a Jewish home. Behind it were a few stalls almost touching each other. Parallel to the stalls but behind them was a large stable belonging to a further neighbor Avraham Rosochowski.

Fortunately, the Germans driving and marching by did not notice us, partly due to the noise of the motors and marching feet. To turn left was out of the question, so we turned right. Running by the Jewish home, I did not dare to stop for a couple of reasons. I was afraid that the German soldiers would run after us, and by our stopping, we would

lose some precious seconds. Secondly, by the time the people would wake up and open the door, if they would even open it, what good would running into another Jewish home do if the Germans are after us? All we would accomplish would be getting another Jewish family in trouble.

Running by the stalls, I was looking for a place to hide. Past the stall, was an open and swampy meadow, no place for anyone to hide. The only place in the dark I could find was the narrow space between the stalls and the barn. When we tried to squeeze in between them, we realized that there is a fence running in between that marked the border of the two households.

Unable to get in there, and in fear that the Germans were looking for us, I climbed up the roof. My sister Sheva who was not twenty yet was an agile girl who did not need any help to follow me. The two roofs were so close to each other that there was no fear of falling off or in between. We flattened ourselves on that slanted roof as much as possible not to be conspicuous in prying eyes, awaiting farther developments.

We kept hearing yells and screams in German but did not know if they were coming from our grandparents' house or from the street full of marching Germans. The only solace we found was in the fact that we did not hear the sound of gunfire.

How long we were hiding there, we did not know. It seemed endless, but we later estimated between one to two hours. Slowly, in the dark, we climbed down the roof, huddling close to the fences we got to the window through which we escaped. To our dismay, the window was shut. We dared not knock for fear of attracting the Germans in the street and not knowing who might appear at the window inside.

Having no alternative, we crawled, crouching, along the fence of my grandparents' yard that extended far into the meadow. Approaching the yard from behind, I dared to knock on the door that lead into the yard. The door that led from the house into the yard was locked too, but here I dared to knock. Understandably, nobody in the house was asleep and the door was opened immediately.

Everybody had questions. The essence of the story is that the Germans did not run after us. They satisfied themselves by ransacking the house and left shortly after.

It began to dawn, the time we used to get up those days after the sleepless nights. That morning too, like all the previous mornings that week, was a beautiful morning.

Still they kept on marching. We began to think that the entire German army was passing through Shershev. Neither could we understand how with so much traffic and heavy equipment there were no accidents in spite of our prayers that it should happen.

That Friday morning passed with us in silent prayer for an end to the constant marching of the Germans. Maybe we would get a rest to the constant barging in of the soldiers with their brigand faces slowly emptying the house of everything. We also needed break to go out to the local farmers to see if we can get some food.

Next door to my grandparents in the direction of the market square lived an elderly couple with a single son. The man's name was Mordechai; his son's was Baruch, a young man of about thirty with the nickname of "ox," not because he was a fool or something like it but because of his size. He was by trade a carpenter and built like a wrestler, a six-foot tall man with wide shoulders, barrel-chested and thick arms and legs. He looked as if he could carry a house on his shoulders.

On that memorable Friday June 27, 1941 (the second day of Tamuz), in early afternoon, the door opens up and in comes that Baruch. His face twisted, the hair disheveled, the clothes dirty and soaking wet with sweat, trembling all over. He wants to say something but all he can do is stutter. The words are struck in his throat. Before he manages to get a word out in comes his parents with confusion and fear in their eyes. His father, gesturing in his son's direction, glances at all of us but at no one in particular, asks in a low voice, "Nu, what do you say to this?"

We look at him, at his son, at each other as the unease grows in us. Finally, my father asks "What are you talking about? What happened?" A German soldier entered their house ordered their son Baruch to take a shovel and led him to the large synagogue. There, in the yard of that synagogue between our house, the synagogue, and the mound of rubble left from the ruins of the old synagogue, he and another dozen Jews watched as a number of German soldiers are beating savagely a group of people. When their grisly work was done, the entire group was laying on the ground unconscious. The final act of the soldiers was a bullet to the head of each one of them.

The dozen or so Jews were ordered to dig a hole in the middle of that yard, throw the bodies in and cover them up. There were nineteen bodies, eleven Jews and eight Christians. I like to mention the names of these first Jewish victims of Nazi barbarism in our shtetl and the circumstances that led up to it.

It started with an incident that happened at the end of Bet-Chaim Street, where meadows were stretching far and wide and where Jewish owners of cows and horses used to let their animals graze. Since the sitting at home with the Germans all around was not safer than being out of town and the animals had to be fed, it was only common sense to drive the animals out on the pasture and spend the better part of the day watching them.

A rumor later circulated that a Soviet soldier who succeeded in avoiding German capture, was shot down a low flying German aeroplane over that meadow. This was never confirmed but it served to glorify a Soviet soldier and give a little encouragement to those who prayed for their return.

It is a fact though that on that day the Germans did kill a hidden Soviet soldier in that meadow after a short fire exchange, on their fourth day in Shershev.

In their rage, after tasting blood and for amusement, they rounded up the few men that were on the meadow and began driving them into town. On the way, they dropped into some houses, taking along the males in them.

The largest number of victims was from the Chadricky family who lived on that same street. They were Ghedalya Chadricky, 43 years old, the very same man that used to buy from us merchandise during the Bolshevik era and sell it to trustworthy customers. After taking this Ghedalya, they entered the other half of that house where his brother Moishe lived, taking him, age 45, and his two sons Yosel (Joseph), age 18, and Eli, age 16. From a neighboring house, they took Zusel Pasmanik, and on the street they stopped a shoemaker by the name of Dulman, a hard working man and poor as a church mouse. From the meadow, they took Berl Zatocky age 30, Jehudl Zatocky's (the blacksmith) son, Ghedalya Loshevicky's 14-year-old son, whose name I do not remember, and Bentzys (Ben Tzions) Pittel father, in his late forties. If I am not mistaken, they also took Chayim Majster, Srolka Majster's son. The eleventh I don't remember.

In true Nazi manner, the dozen Jews with the shovels were surrounded while digging by many German soldiers, who were ridiculing and threatening them with being shot--a possibility the diggers considered very real. To encourage them to dig faster, the Germans used their rifle butts on them generously.

After having finished covering the mass grave, the diggers were told to go over to the Jewish houses in shtetl and tell them that if the Jews don't turn in their weapons by four o'clock that afternoon, the entire Jewish population will be massacred.

Those were the first few days of the German campaign in the Soviet Union; even though we knew that we wouldn't have it easy under German rule, we never expected them to be able to slaughter a score of human beings so savagely, without any investigation. Suddenly, we realized who we were dealing with and what we could expect of them.

The most urgent problem for the minute was the German order to the Jews to turn in their weapons. We knew that there is not a single weapon or firearm among the Jews of Shershev, and the Germans can use it as an excuse for a slaughter. We were still naïve enough to think that the Germans needed an excuse for slaughtering Jews.

The fear that our neighbor Baruch felt from what he had just seen and done, burying those people that we all knew from infancy, and the German ultimatum--that same fear overtook us all.

It is almost three o'clock, in an hour and the Germans will start going from house to house collecting together the men in each of them to be shot. The women are lucky, who on earth would touch a woman. G-D, in heaven, what is happening? Is it a nightmare, a bad dream from which I will soon awaken? No, it is not, for when I know I am dreaming I immediately wake up. What should I do? I look helplessly at my parents, at my grandparents; they in return look back at me, at my father, my uncle Eli. The pain, the anguish sets in, the fear confuses common sense. I want to live, I want to run, but where to and how? The streets are full of Germans, until now they were robbers, but now they become bloodthirsty murderers.

No, I will not be shot by them, I will commit suicide. I will hang myself. But with what and how? Yes, and where? I look all over the house; nobody is asking me what I am



looking for. I find a piece of cord, stick it into my pocket and look for a place to throw it over and strong enough to hold me. There is no place from the ceiling, no place to tie the cord up to. I walk slowly out into the yard and look around slowly, yet find no place. I notice the outhouse, enter and look around. Yes, the thin beams on the ceiling will do. I decide to execute my plan as soon as the Germans knock on the door. It will give me enough time to run through the back door into the yard and from there into the outhouse.

Meantime, I come into the house with a ready answer in case somebody should ask me where I was. I would not be lying if I said that I was in the outhouse. Nobody asked me where I was. Everybody was sitting deep in his or her own thoughts, hoping for a miracle.

The marching Germans in the street looked frightening enough until now. Now they look utterly terrifying. Every minute, I glance at the old clock on the wall and listen to the seconds ticking off. I would stop the clock but know that the German clocks will continue ticking.

It is four o'clock. I look out the closed windows. There is no let up to the marching Germans. They pass by the houses as if our fate does not concern them. Those marching on the sidewalks go by as if the houses don't exist. The clock on the wall is moving a bit faster. It is five and six. What are they waiting for? Maybe for nightfall? It comes, and the noise of the passing engines and the sound of the hob-nailed boots continue. We sit until midnight, after midnight. We try to lie down, drained and exhausted from tension and fear. Nobody sleeps, waiting to see the dawn, knowing that it won't bring deliverance.

The unease and apprehension transform themselves into a constant fear that lasted for the next two weeks. If, in the first four nights of the German arrival we managed to grab a couple hours of sleep, the events of that Friday robbed us of it too.

When the Bolsheviks drove us out from our house a year and a half earlier, my father with the help of our wagon drayer, Shepsl Rudnitzky, managed to dig up the sacks of vodka we had buried in our garden and take it along with our belongings to my grandparents. All that vodka, during the Bolshevik era, was in my grandparents' attic.

The Germans having arrived so suddenly did not give us time to hide it better. True, my father did sell some of it during the Bolshevik era, but a lot remained. It was fortunate that while the Germans were coming into the house to plunder, they never thought of looking in the attic, as the entrance to the attic was in the large hallway that was in the back part of the house. To get up there one had to use a ladder. The ladder for that purpose was most of the time lying on the ground. None of them thought to look up, and if even they had, it would be difficult to tell the difference between the matching doors to the rest of the high ceiling.

However, in those trying days, we wanted badly to get rid of that vodka. In the evenings, I started going up there, coming back with a basket full of bottles of vodka. I used to go behind my grandparents stables into the swampy meadow and, turning over the bottles head down, I used to push them one by one into the swamp, deep enough for an accidental by passer not to notice it.

Therefore, I brought down basket after basket full of bottles of vodka that we had salvaged from since before the war of 1939. A fair amount, many dozens, and began disposing of them in a public place, since that swampy meadow was public property.

The bottles of spirit which were ninety six percent pure and not available at all during the Bolshevik era were difficult to part with, as each bottle could fetch a fantastic price and in abnormal times save or buy a life. There was plenty of material in my grandparents stable, and I made from some planks a wooden box. Using some straw, I packed into the boxes the over a dozen bottles, nailing it shut. Under the floor of the front part of the outhouse, I dug a hole in which I deposited the box, covering it with the same black and heavy soil, replacing the floor and spreading the extra soil around, which blended perfectly with the surrounding terrain. Looking around I felt that not only thieves but even the Germans would not search there.

If, in the first few days after the German arrival, one could notice a scarce Jew in the street for a moment, they completely disappeared after that Friday June 27. Not even a woman would dare to go out. Sunday June 29, two days after the slaughter of the nineteen men, at about ten o'clock in the morning, in comes our Aunt Chashkah. If a woman would dare go out into the street, it would be her. Despite the fact that she was in her mid

forties, she still had a full head of thick light blond hair. She had the stocky Pinsky build and the sure gait that characterised the Pinsky family. Only a personal acquaintance would know that she is Jewish. That was the reason that she dared to come to visit us.

It was a week since the German Soviet War began. She informed us that her husband Reuben, my father's brother who was working in the military barracks near Pruzany, returned home three days after the outbreak of the war using back roads, which the Germans were not using. They, my aunt and uncle, remained in their home in the market square and had to endure even more than we from the German plundering.

From then on, my aunt used to come to see us every couple of days, being brave enough to be out in the street. Jews were sitting in their houses in constant fear, huddling together or in corners of their homes in expectation of the Germans who will come for them to take them away or shoot them on the spot.

It was during one of my aunt's visits that I heard her saying: I pray to G-d that I should lie down, fall asleep and not wake up. I noticed that my parents nodded their heads in agreement and understanding. Until that time, such an idea never occurred to me, and I too started to hope for a miracle like this.

Still they kept up marching. If we were getting by on whatever food we used to scrape up in the house, we could not do without water. Early in the morning when the marching Germans were tired from the nights marching and the least disposed to adventure, one of us used to get out with a couple pails to the well for water. One used to meet there a neighbor and exchange the latest news, like who was beaten up or shot over the last twenty-four hours.

As in other shtetls and villages, Shershev too had its own half and complete crazies. Those poor souls did not realize the seriousness of the situation and, getting a chance to sneak out of their homes unnoticed by the other family members, they used to do so. Even those the Germans did not spare and shot them, among them a young girl.

The constant marching through our shtetl lasted three full weeks. The last couple of days we stopped seeing German heavy equipment. All we saw were foot soldiers and horse drawn wagons loaded with supplies. As suddenly as they appeared, it also stopped, and the street fell silent.

Slowly Jewish doors began to open carefully. First a head, and then a person appeared. Neighbors began to gather in small groups to exchange experiences. Nobody dared to move far from one's house.

The night passed quietly. In the morning, not seeing any Germans around, my parents decided to see what is doing with our house in the market square. As we got closer still looking from a distance, my father and I did not notice anything abnormal except that it did not have any sign of life in it. We found the doors open and entered carefully. The house was completely empty. Anything moveable was gone, taken by the Germans. All the house wares, clothing, not only men's and women's but even children's, tools, dishes, furniture, food, everything the Soviet family left in their hurry, plus the things we brought over on the first day the Germans came in (that is on that first Tuesday morning of the invasion, June 24).

We did not know who occupied our house during those three weeks of our absence, but they cleaned out the house, not leaving even an old rag.

That day we carried over a few things from our grandparents back to our house. My father and I spent that night there. Although we did not see or hear any Germans, the fear lingered on. The next day, our wagon driver from before the war, the very same man that moved us out of our house two years earlier when the Bolsheviks took our house away, moved us back in.

A couple days later, half a dozen Germans with an officer in charge arrived. They drove by every street and lane in shtetl, stopping eventually in the center of town, in the market square. Here they got off their vehicle and walked around the square, eyeing every house. They stopped in front of our house, and after a short conversation among themselves they come in. The officer tells my father that they need our house for an *Ortskommendantur* (local military headquarters).

Again an expulsion? Two years ago by the Bolsheviks and now for the second time within three weeks by the Germans. My father tries to speak to the officer in a good German. The officer asks my father how come he speaks German so well, to which my father replies that just over twenty years ago, they, the Germans, were here for three

years. The Germans look at each other knowingly and I wonder what they are thinking about. Do they think that they will have to leave this place like their forerunners or that this time they came to stay?

The officer thinks for a moment and says, "Good, you can remain in the back part of the house, as long as the front part remains inaccessible to you."

My father thanks him for letting us remain in our house. The next day the Germans hang up a big sign over one of the two front entrances to our house that says "Ortskommendantur."

I do not know how and who arranged it, but within a couple of days, there was a provisional civilian administration in shtetl. There was a police force consisting of a group of young local gentile ruffians that were showing off their newly acquired Russian rifles. The first order of the day was the law that every Jewish person regardless of sex or age has to wear a round yellow circle no smaller than ten centimeters across on the outer garment. Breaking the law is punishable by death.

The Jewish population was ordered to elect from among them ten members to serve in the Judenrat, or whatever you wished to call it. Nobody volunteered, but the fate of the community might be in the hands of such a committee, and an appeal was issued to those most suitable to join. Some responded to the appeal and agreed to take on that very heavy and responsible function. Among them: Yaakov-Meir Kabizecky (who is married to my aunt's Esther Liba Auerbach's sister, Chayie-Sara), Chazkel Krugman, my uncle Reuven Kantorowitz, Avreml Kwelman, Meir Ghelman, my grandfather Yaakov-Kopel Kantorowitz; the others I do not remember.

Officially, they were called "Judenrat," but among us Jews, they were referred to as the committee. Their first function was to submit a list of all the Jewish families and amount of members in them so that they can receive the amount of bread allotted for each mouth.

The next day the Jews of Shershev realize that the allotment is nothing more than outright mockery, as the amount of bread could not sustain the life of an infant. It became a matter of life or death. People started to improvise, taking something from the house, like a dish or garment, to a Christian farmer and try to get for it something in exchange in

food, like a bit of raw flour, or maybe a bit of barley or cereal. Anything will do, like vegetables. A better item might fetch a few eggs or a piece of butter.

There was no talk of meat. A farmer would not know where to ask for a cow; besides the ritual slaughterer would not dare slaughter a cow. A chicken? The farmers became very choosy and did not know what to ask for a hen. Nobody wanted money. The Russian ruble became worthless, the German mark was unavailable and nobody knew its worth.

Whatever the Germans needed or wanted, they took without even a thank you. All able bodied Jewish men were ordered to report to work every day at six in the morning. The order comes from the local authority made up of local Christians. Who appointed them to this office--the few Germans who lived in our house or did they appoint themselves? Nobody knows.

The only place where several hundred Jews could be put to work was the highway. We were divided up into groups of fifty along the road. Our boss was a local Christian who was the road supervisor during the Polish and the Bolshevik era. His job was to keep the highway between Shershev and Bialowieza in good repair. Normally he used to do it himself with a gang of temporary workers. Suddenly he found himself in charge of several hundred Jews and overnight this simple peasant, in his own eyes, became a general.

He used to ride on his bicycle from group to group pointing out every hole or spot that needs repair. The holes had to be filled with sand and covered with cobblestone on top. As far as all of us could remember, the highway from Shershev to Bialowieza has always been in good repair, not only due to the proper upkeep but also due to the very light traffic on it. In fact, I doubt if it was built for heavy traffic at all. The constant traversing of the German tanks and iron threaded artillery pieces grinded many stretches of the road into the ground, leaving it in need of repair.

Despite the fact that the bulk of the German army was by that time deep into the Soviet Union, the traffic on that stretch of road was quite heavy. Some detachment of the army used to pass by without paying attention to us; others used to stop to amuse

themselves with the Jews. As a result many of us used to come home from the day's work badly beaten up and bleeding.

Along the highway, we often used to find unmarked graves of Soviet soldiers, who were shot by the Germans after surrender. At that time, the Germans considered them a nuisance and hindrance in their rapid march eastward.

During the three-week long German march through Shershev, we often used to see single or small groups of Soviet soldiers being led out of town followed shortly by gunfire. Rumors used to circulate that Soviet prisoners were being shot. Now that we were able to move about more freely, we used to come across those graves in fields and meadows around Shershev.

In their rapid advance into the Soviet Union, the Germans succeeded in cutting off many Soviet soldiers from their retreating units. They found temporary shelter in the heavy forest of our territories. Slowly, however, hunger drove them out. Some tried to follow behind the German army hoping to find a way and cross the unmarked front line to get home. Others having seen the disintegration of the Soviet army, in resignation, began to surrender on mass. Still others, out of outright hatred for the Bolsheviks, surrendered willingly.

Nothing good awaited them in German captivity, mostly execution or starvation. It did not take long for those still hiding in forests to find out what the Germans are doing with the prisoners. Instead of almost certain death in German captivity, they decided to hold out in the forest as long as they can.

Those were in fact the first, the avant-garde of the later numerous Soviet and pro-Soviet partisans that the forest of Eastern Europe were teeming with during the German Soviet campaign.

On a hot late July day of 1941, as I was working with my group on a stretch of road, from the forest appeared two young men dressed in Soviet military uniforms. They looked as if they slept in their uniforms on the ground a long time and ate very little. Finding out that we were Jews and not any danger to them, they asked us the direction east and which side roads they should take to avoid Germans.

Having received our instructions, they continued not through the forest, but along the narrow clearing between the road and the forest.

No more than ten minutes later, along comes a local policeman on a bicycle, who we knew to be a drunkard and scoundrel from a long time back. His first name was Tolek. He peddles his bicycle with his rifle on his shoulder. He passes us by slowly looking at us with a visible superiority. He continued and disappeared around the bend of the road where the two unarmed Soviet soldiers disappeared. We heard two shots and a couple minutes later; this same Tolek appeared, coming back in our direction. He passed us again slowly with a wide satisfied grin on his face, the face of a cat that just swallowed the canary.

We asked each other, is it possible that this despicable creature would shoot those two young men? Apparently, it also moved the road supervisor, for he got on his bicycle and drove in that direction. He was back with one comment: a pity, such young men.

A day or two late while working on the road, we notice a long row of horse-driven buggies approaching from the direction of Bialowieza. As they get closer, we see they are farmer wagons loaded to capacity with assorted household goods. As they are escorted by Germans communication with them, it was difficult and dangerous, yet we did find out that they are from villages in the Bialowieza forest, that they were ordered to load up their wagons with all they can take along, leaving everything else behind. The Germans did not waste time in taking for themselves their cattle, other livestock and anything else they can use, at the end setting the village on fire. The escorting Germans were riding on bicycles and it was easy for them to stop for a bit of “fun” with us, the Jews.

The expulsion of entire villages became a daily occurrence. Slowly we were finding out that the Germans suspect them of giving food and help to the remnants of the Soviet soldiers still hiding in the forests, mainly in the largest in central Europe, the Bialowieza Forest.

A few days later, we hear that the Jews of Bialowieza have been expelled, supposedly to Pruzany. The question arose whether we too will share in the fate of Bialowieza Jews, and the mood became even more oppressive. Everyone was wondering



as to what will come next. Right after the army stopped marching by and the supposedly civilian administration took over, there was not a day that did not bring a new decree.

The Gestapo headquarters for our district was situated in Biala-Podlask, a few kilometers west of the River Bug, by car a couple of hours from us. However, the immediate authority over us was in the hands of the German police, so called *schutzpolizei* (protection police) which was situated in Bialowieza, 35 kilometers from Shershev. They got into the practice to come by trucks, suddenly and unannounced, park in front of a couple Jewish homes and, with the help of the local police, used to load up everything in those homes, at the same time murderously beating the inhabitants. They did not stop house-by-house but at random, picking on houses in different streets, thus keeping everybody in constant suspense and fear.

There were times when the leadership from Biala-Podlask used to come along. Then it used to develop into a major operation with many more police and trucks. They used to round up as many Jews, men, women, children as they could into the market square. There, they used to pick out the men, tormenting and torturing them with exercise and what they called gymnastics, kicking them with their boots, beating them with clubs and rifle butts, and, in the process, leaving behind many beaten up and bleeding Jews.

In such cases, those that were working out of town on the highway fared better. It is possible that in such cases the women and children suffered as much, if not more, than the men, having to watch as their husbands, sons, fathers and siblings were going through such torture.

The gathering, or better, the herding of the Jewish population, used to be accompanied by rifle shots that were heard way out of town; for us working on the highway, not knowing what was taking place, it was very alarming.

As I said, the scale of the action when they used to come from Biala-Podlask was immense. They used to drive around every street and lane ordering the Jewish population to gather in the market square. Then go from house to house making sure that there is nobody left at home. Woe to him or her found hiding in there.

They never entered our house because of the Ortscommendantur sign, assuming that there are no Jews living there, yet my mother used to go out with the children into the

square not wanting to risk being discovered at home. My father, knowing what is awaiting him in the square, used to hide in the woodshed. Working on the highway, I was spared this torment. Nevertheless, I used to get a day off and it was during such a day that another attack took place.

Not wanting to go out into the market square but afraid to remain at home, I quickly decided to run to "Doynovka." Those were marshes that began behind Ostrowiecka Street for kilometers in length and in places bottomless. My father decided to join me. I do not know why, for he always used to hide in the woodshed. Did he feel safer in the marshes or did he want to keep an eye on me? I never knew.

In the confusion of running, yelling, beating and shooting, we managed to make our way through alleys to those swamps. There, lying submerged up to our necks in mud we listened in fear and anxiety to the constant shooting that came from the center of town.

What was taking place in town we did not know, but from the yelling, screaming and shooting that reached our ears, we imagined the worst. I prayed with devotion to G-d as never before that he should bring my mother, brother and sisters home safe again. I even made a vow that if they will all come home safe and sound, I will say my morning prayer every day like a devout Jew.

Slowly the firing subsided and finally ceased. A couple of hours that seemed like an eternity later, at about mid afternoon, we started slowly crawling closer to the center via the Christian homesteads on Ostrowiecka Street. When we got to the part of the street where the Jewish homes began, we found out that the Germans had already left after a particularly cruel and indeed savage visit. My father and I ran home to see how my mother, sisters and brother fared after the days ordeal.

From my mother we found out that this time the Germans did not spare the woman and children either. Lining them up four to five in a row, they were threatened with being shot with one bullet per group. My mother could not stop talking about my middle sister, Sonia, who was then nine years old, as she was pushing herself in front of my mother saying, "Mommy, I will stay in front of you this way the Germans will kill me and you will remain alive."

Dear, dear little sister of mine. You naïve, innocent child of Israel, Your cruel fate that evaded you then caught up with you a year and a half later.

That day the Germans singled out the rabbi and the older Jews of the community. They beat up the rabbi terribly and after ordered him to do all kinds of exercise. When they saw that his sweat is taking on the colour of blood, they put him under the water pump ordering another old Jew to pump the cold water over him.

After conducting searches in some of the nearby Jewish homes and helping themselves to everything of value, they left leaving the Jews wondering as to when they will be back. We did not have to wait long. A day or two later, they were back the very same as the last time, from Biala-Podlask, but with a much smaller escort. They immediately called the Jewish committee (Judenrat) telling them that they will be back in five days, and that there better be ready for them two hundred thousand rubles and a kilogram of gold.

The raising of the rubles did not present a problem as they became worthless, but the kilogram of gold did present one in our small, poor shtetl. Men contributed their wedding rings and women their wedding rings and earrings until the needed amount was collected.

Having it all collected, a new problem arose. Where can it be kept safely away from the Bialowieza Germans or the local peasant police? No house was safe, as the searches and plunder was conducted at random. It was decided that the safest place in town is our house, for apparently the Bialowieza Germans could not imagine that in a house with an “Ortscommendatur” sign might have Jews in it.

So it was that a suitcase full of rubles and gold was brought into our house, where it stayed under my parents’ bed until two members of the committee came to pick it up on the designated day. The Germans must have been happy with their haul, for they left the town immediately.

Unable to get enough food, be it by barter, exchange or any other way, we were forced to fill our stomachs with anything that was available. In one of my days off work, couple of my friends and I decided to go to the forest to pick mushrooms. The part of the forest we went to was only two kilometers out of town and well known to us from our

pre-war excursions there. We just got into the forest when we noticed the first Soviet tank. Approaching it, we could see the heavy massive doors wide open, dozens of shell casings lay about as well as dozens of unexploded shells.

We realized that the farmers from that part of the shtetl closest to the forest detected the tanks as soon as the Germans passed by. They emptied the shell casings, helping themselves to the gunpowder and, having no use for the unexploded shells, they left them behind.

The tanks carried no visible scars of battle attesting to the fact that they were abandoned by the crew. We came to two conclusions: that the tanks ran out of fuel and that they realized that the road they would have to take in order to retreat to the east were already in German hands. They either surrendered or tried to make it on foot.

Looking around we saw over a dozen more tanks undamaged like the first one. We did not see the machine guns nor their ammunition, which offered three possibilities; one, it could have been taken along by the crew, by the farmers or by the Germans. It pained us to see the undamaged tanks that fell into German hands without firing a shot. To my mind came the words of David: "How the mighty have fallen."

Such became the routine in August of 1941. Most able-bodied Jewish men used to report for work at six, bringing with them a shovel, ax or pickax, march out to the highway, three kilometers away, work till six and go home. There was nobody with a club over us, but the passing Germans used to stop often for a bit of amusement, making us load up the wheelbarrow with rocks or sand to capacity and push it on the rough road on the run, accompanied by beating.

In the shtetl proper, the riots by the Bialoweza Germans and local police continued. Not only were the Jews in whose houses were plundered being beaten up, but any Jew noticed on the street by the roaming Germans could expect to be beaten, too. As our house was being avoided by the Germans, it became a refuge for neighbors, friends and acquaintances.

Before the war, our store was a gathering place for local Jewish politicians; so now became our house. Those very same men, now dejected and struck with fear, spoke in quiet voices, almost in whisper, talking politics. It did not have the same character or

the speculative assumptions of years gone by; it was more like wishful thinking. Everybody's hypothesis used to circulate around the shtetl and when it used to come back to the originator or its source it was unrecognizable and at time taken for a fact. Even dreams used to be interpreted in countless ways, each to one's wish and liking. In retrospect, I am still not sure if our short-lived optimistic interpretations were intended to give hope and encourage others, or is it human nature to fool oneself?

The only outspoken realist was my father's youngest brother, Eli, the veteran of the Polish German campaign, and he was branded a pessimist for his gloomy predictions. Despite the visible reality, dark predictions and prophecies, nobody foresaw the fast approaching last days of the five-hundred year-old Jewish history of Shershev. The Jews of Shershev tried to explain the expulsion of Bialowieza and Gajnowka Jews by reason of them living smack in the middle of the forest. As Shershev was some ten kilometers away, our chances of remaining were much better.

Still, the Jews of Shershev began to take precautions. We reasoned that in case of expulsion, we would have to leave everything behind. It is worthwhile to try and hide some things. There was the unrealistic hope that the Bolsheviks will return, maybe even over night. The Germans won't have time to empty every Jewish home, even with the help of the gentile neighbors. They certainly won't have time to look for hidden property. We knew only too well that our Christian neighbors would be more than happy with our expulsion. They would be the real beneficiaries. Maybe even they won't be able to find every hidden item.

It was up to every individual's ingenuity to find hiding places. We had two big woodsheds in our yard. Starting with one, we dug in it a large hole in which we buried two large wooden chests full with clothing. Before we lowered the first chest, on the very bottom of the hole, I dug a small hole in which I deposited a small wooden box with my personal mementos, among them my most precious possessions including my stamp collection. Having covered it with earth, we put the two heavy chests on top of it. My reasoning was that if anybody will dig up the chest, they would never think that beneath it, another half a shovel of earth might be hiding something else.

After covering the chests with earth and disposing neatly with the rest, we covered the whole spot with a high pile of wood.

Having finished with this woodshed, we did the same in the other. There we used wooden cases that the vodka used to be shipped in. The same cases in which we buried vodka two years earlier. In those cases went in our silver cutlery, the good dishes, a real china tea set--which my mother used at very special occasions; my father bought it years earlier in a splurging mood--and other things alike. We buried it in the same way as in the first shed.

A year or two before the war, my mother bought a black fur coat made from Alaska seal. She wore it once or twice. I do not know of anyone in Shershev who had such a coat. This coat, some of my mother's dresses, a couple of my father's suits, we hid under a special hiding place we made under the steps leading to the attic. It would take an expert to find it.

Leather was a precious commodity. My father bought a fair amount when the Bolshevik came in 1939, especially sole leather. This we shoved in between the double floor in the back vestibule. From those days of stocking up, we had several new pairs of men's and ladies shoes. This went between the roof beams in the attic.

Pertaining to jewelry, my mother had a heavy gold pin consisting of fused chain-like links, each two centimeters in diameter and over half a centimeter thick. From it, another chain ran down in a semicircle, connecting to the other end of the pin. It was a family heirloom left to her by her mother, my grandmother Freida Leah, along with a pair of golden earrings. The two items my mother did not turn in to the Germans one-kilogram demand. We also had my father's golden pocket watch with an inscription in Russian and a long golden chain attached to it. He used to wear it at special occasions in his vest pocket, with the chain dangling across his middle. Finally, we had a handful of Czarist golden coins. All this went into a glass jar and was buried between the outhouse and fence.

The house still seemed to be full, but we did not want to dig up the sheds too much. It would look suspicious. To dig in the yard proper would be ridiculous as the ground was too often traversed and trampled, to the state that any touch with a shovel

would be a giveaway. Besides, if even we did plan to hide something, we suddenly ran out of time.

Sunday evening, August 24, 1941, right after dark, a military vehicle parked in front of our house. Who and how many uniformed Germans there were I do not know, for a Jew did not go out after dark. Some of the Germans entered the front part, the Ortscommendantur. Through the wall, we could hear loud voices and commands in German but were unable to make out anything due to the thick walls.

About half an hour later, we noticed a group of civilians near and in front of our house. It did not take us long to realize that they were Jews. My father and I quietly went out to see what is happening. They turned out to be the members of the Judenrat. They have just been brought together by the newly arrived Germans and ordered to go around to every Jewish home with instructions that every Jewish male, without exception, between the ages of 16 to 50 should report tomorrow at six in the morning for work.

As uneasy as the Jews of Shershev slept in those nights, the little rest they would have gotten that night was denied them. We sat up that night trying unsuccessfully to guess as to what the Germans had in mind to do with us.

Every minute was long but the morning came quickly. At 6:00, all the town's Jewish males were gathered near the shed of the volunteer fire brigade, a total of some four hundred men. We were surrounded by a detachment of uniformed Germans with the brown cuffs and collars. They were the very same that used to come to plunder from Bialoweza and Bjala-podlaski, the schutzpolizei.

A German asked in a loud voice if there is anyone among us who speaks German. The first to answer was a Jew from Brest-Litowsk who was brought by the Bolsheviks to run the pharmacy in Shershev. To me he looked over fifty, yet he showed up with us. In any case, he raised his hand and came forwards. The German spoke to him in a loud voice, loud enough for all of us to hear. We also understood it. The man repeated it loud and clear in Yiddish with a German intonation, making sure that not only we Jews understood, but the Germans too. Apparently, something was not clear to one of us and he, not realizing the severity of the situation, he interrupted the interpreter with a question. A German barked at him with these words: "Hold your snout, accursed Jew."

The German decree was as follows: We, the men, are to go home and bring back our families with us. All the women, children, young, old, and infirm. Whoever would be found home will be shot. The women shall take with them food for two days. As we Jews are being taken to a labor camp where the men will work. In return, we will receive a roof over our heads and food.

For the past two weeks, since the expulsion of Wjalowieza and Gajnowka, the possibility of such a moment was in the back of our minds, yet when it happened; it came as an unbearable shock. What is going to be with us, what conditions will there be in that camp? Will there be anybody to look after the old and sick, or will the Germans let them expire without medication? Will we get clothes now that the winter is approaching? Will we be permitted to move about? Will we get enough food or will we go hungry...

Suddenly heaven fell on us. What is happening to us? Why and for what sins? What have we done to deserve such punishment? My two little sisters and brother were looking at us and could not comprehend what is going on. What does it mean to leave the house and not to be able to return? Not to come back to their beds at night? The Germans are taking us somewhere, where to and why?

My mother looks at the children and weeps bitterly. It grieves me deeply to see my mother cry. My heart aches as much watching my mother cry as from the misfortune that befell us and maybe more. We don't even try to comfort one another. We were weighed down with heavy hearts.

There is no time to lose; the sun is up and it is warm already. My mother is the most realistic of us all. She tells us to put on a lot of clothing. I put on two suits, one on top of the other besides the extra couple sets of underwear. On top of all this, I put on a three quarter length winter coat. My mother and sister Sheva are helping the little ones to get dressed.

The crowd is already gathering in the marketplace, right in front of our house. My mother prepared a small bundle for each of the children including my sister Sheva and for herself. My father and I do not dare take anything. We do as we are told by the Germans. My father takes an ax and I take a shovel. We leave the house together my father locks the door, putting the key in his pocket.



Outside we gather separately. The men, each with an ax, shovel or pickax to one side; the women, children and old people to the other. The loud crying of the children and subdued weeping of the women can be heard all around as there is an unusual silence around. Nothing looks real, for these very Germans that used to come to plunder, terrorize us yelling and shooting several times a week are now silent, as if they themselves are ashamed of their unholy deed.

It is ten o'clock. The entire Jewish community has gathered. I see sick old people lying stretched out on the cobblestoned square. We take the German warning seriously.

I looked around and made a decision to stop being a boy and act like a man. We heard a command to form a column three abreast. In that part of the square was a well, unused for my time. We were being led past the well and ordered to dispose of our tools, except for ten men that are told to carry shovels. The order to throw away our tools puzzled me. What good are we without tools, unless the place we are going to has better ones? Still I felt uneasiness.

We were led out of the square into Mostowa Street followed by the voices of the crying children and loud wailing of the women. The main street, entirely Jewish, is empty. We march in the middle of the street, escorted on either side by the very same brown-cuffed schutzpolizei.

I looked around at the homes in which Jews lived for generations, for as long as Shershev existed--over five hundred years. Nobody is looking out the windows. One does not see the Jews that used to busy themselves this time of year in their gardens. They are marching now with me to an unknown future, leaving behind everything they toiled for a lifetime and the generations before them.

We came to the end of Mostowa Street and beginning of Pruzaner Street, which, except for the first few Jewish homes, is entirely a Christian one. Here, just like the Jewish street, this one was empty too. It looked as if the fear of the Germans affected them too. Here and there, a pair of eyes looked out through a curtain. I wondered if it is really the fear of the Germans that drove them behind the curtains, or were they hiding their smiles of contentment derived from our misfortune?

We left the shtetl behind. A few hundred meters further, we were ordered to stop. The Germans picked out a couple dozen younger boys taking them to the end of the column. They were told to lead the German bicycles by hand. The officer in charge announces in a loud voice that if any one of us will escape or even attempt to escape twenty-five of us will be shot. We know the Germans and take his word for it.

We hear a command to go forwards. The Germans march along us on either side. Some of them are bending down and picking up heavy sticks, others are taking their rifles off their shoulders. We are ordered to march in step; whoever does not received blows with a stick or rifle butt. But how can you march in step when the German near you yells “right” and the one two meters in front or behind you yells “left” or the one on your side yells “one,” meaning left. The sticks, clubs or rifle butts start falling over us.

The Germans are not particular where the stick or rifle butts falls. It can be the head, shoulder or back. Neither are they satisfied with hitting you once. When they let go of you, you are already beaten to a pulp.

We are perplexed over what is happening. In town, they conducted themselves towards us in a way that was almost human for Germans. Have they brought us here to beat us senseless? How can they expect to get any work out of us? Another hour like this and nobody will be in condition to work. A thought comes to my mind; maybe they are not taking us to work at all. They just fooled us all in order to give us a good beating. If so, what will happen to the woman, the children, and the old we left behind? The old that were laying half dead on the cobble stoned square?

I am not the only one with such thoughts. I can see it in other despairing faces. I hear others being beaten mercilessly, yelling “Shima Isroel” (Hear o Israel, the last words Jewish martyrs utter before expiring). I too am in despair and mad at my G-d for letting it happen.

The cries of “Shima Isroel” become louder and more often. In my hopelessness, I think to myself, “Yes, yes, a lot of good can do you now the Shima Isroel.”

We are ordered to sing. How does one make four hundred frightened, confused and constantly beaten men to sing? The beatings become more savage. We begin to sing, so to say, each his own song. It was a horrible sound carried from four hundred throats

that could have chilled the blood in any human vein or frightened Satan in his lair, but not the Nazi executioners.

How does one describe such a picture where several hundred men are being forcibly driven out of their homes, torn apart from their families, being led on a road to an unknown fate yelling (supposedly singing) at the top of their voices, and being mercilessly beaten by raging mad Germans?

We are being taken over by a jeep that passes us very, so very slowly. The passengers are officers of the very same brown-cuffed police. One with the most insignias seems to be in charge. He looks older than the others. He looks at every face. Having come to the very front of the column, the jeep turns around, coming towards us at a crawl. Now he can see every one of us and is scrutinizing every face. He recognizes somebody. It is Yaakov-Meir Kabizecky, a member of the committee. The jeep stops, the officer gets out and we too are ordered to stop. Yaakov-Meir is taken out of the line and brought to face the officer who asks him in a loud voice, "Have you got leather today?"

I hear whispering that this is the big shot from Bjaly-Podlask who was in Shershev several days earlier demanding leather, which the committee could not deliver. Now in parting he decided to have a bit of fun with the Jews. Not waiting for an answer, he started beating him mercilessly.

That Yaakov-Meir was not forty years old yet, a tall and strong man who could withstand a beating. The Germans kept on hitting him until he ran out of steam, so they let him go. Yaakov-Meir's neck was bleeding badly. Quickly running into the column, he positioned himself between two tall men, putting up his collar. When the German caught his second wind, he began looking for Yaakov-Meir again. He drove up and down the column several times but did not find him. The jeep pulled away.

We resumed our march. Fifteen or twenty minutes later, we were ordered to stop, sit down on the road cross-legged and look straight ahead. Except for the screaming of the Germans or the thump of a stick over a Jewish back, there was a total silence on the road or on the surrounding fields. Suddenly the silence was shattered by a single shot. The ten men with the shovels were called to the rear where we could all hear the order to dig a hole.

Now it became clear to us the reason ten men were ordered to take along shovels as we left Shershev.

The first victim of the march was Avrom Shlomo's (Chinkeles) son, whose name nobody knew. We called or referred to him by his nickname "Kulie" (Polish-Russian for lame or limping), having been born with a deformed leg and limping noticeably. His father died years before, leaving behind a wife and several children. They lived in a little house without floors at the end of an ally near the swamps. They had no visible source of income and lived from alms, dressing in discarded clothing or rags that even the poor Jews of Shershev would not wear. Their poverty was beyond imagination. He was not yet twenty years old, but because of his impediment, he could not keep up with us, and was disposed of in Nazi style.

As soon as the diggers covered the grave, which too was done under constant beating, we resumed the march. We did not have to march long before somebody else unable to keep up with us fell. He was shot and the burial procedure repeated itself. While we, the marchers, used to catch our breath during a burial, the ones with the shovels had no rest at all. Just the opposite, they worked hard at digging while they were being beaten.

The day was a sunny and a hot one for August 25 and we were dressed for December. It seemed that even the heat of the day was against us. Still nobody wanted to discard the outer clothes, desperately hoping that we were being led to a work camp.

We made a couple more stops that morning to bury our dead. Shortly after midday came a sudden order to get off the road to one side, sit down on the embankment with our backs to the road and not dare to look behind. A minute or two later we heard passing trucks from which ear piercing screams from women and children could be heard.

Those were our families we left behind in Shershev. Our mothers, and grandmothers, sisters and brothers, young and old were being driven somewhere. They, noticing us cried out to us, but we were not permitted to look at them.

As soon as the truck passed, we continued the march, stopping only to bury our dead every half hour or so. I was wondering as who will tire sooner: will it be us from receiving so many blows or will it be them from constantly hitting us? How can creatures

like them go on all day long beating and shooting people that they have never seen or known?

In mid afternoon, we reached Pruzany. There at the outskirts of town, at the fork roads leading to Kobryner and Seltzer Streets, on the green meadow, we collapsed, broken physically and mentally. The Germans left to go eat, leaving several guards behind to watch us.

Jews from Pruzany came to see us but we were not permitted to get close to each other. To say something aloud, one risked receiving a good beating. My father's brother and sister came out to look at us, no more than that.

After an hour or so, we continued our march. Until now we all hung on to our extra clothing we were wearing, but in the mid afternoon, battered, exhausted, thirsty and at the end of any hope, some began to discard part of it. Mostly the older among us valued it more than the young did, who discarded layers in the hope of easing the march and maybe saving their lives.

During those hopeless hours, when one of us turned his head and looked back, one could see items of clothing strewn along the road. To a uniformed passerby, it might have looked as if the column of marching Jews were deliberately leaving behind markers in order to find their way back home.

Sadly, if one had come to such a conclusion, one would be grossly mistaken. Those were Jews of Shershev who were by force and violently torn away from their families and homes a few short hours earlier, and now were voluntarily disposing of the last of their possessions--literally, the shirts of their backs.

The march was not getting any easier. Anyone who fell and could not get up or got up to join the march only to fall again was shot. The worst off, were the few men with shovels who had no rest at all. They soon realized that they can't keep it up for much longer and when a German was not looking, used to drop their shovels and continue marching. The Germans did not make much of it, just pointed a finger at the one nearest to the shovel barking, "Pick it up."

At about six in the afternoon, we were led off the main road several hundred meters into a farmer's large homestead. Its yard was large and overgrown with grass. In

the middle of the yard was a well. We were ordered to form a single line for water. While some of the Germans were watching us, the others gathered near the well and as we were approaching singly for a drink and searched us. First, we were told to empty the pockets, warning us that if one of us hid something from them, he will be shot. In this, we had no doubt and gave them everything, even our passports.

Exhausted we stood in a line that seemed not to move. The Germans were thorough searchers. Whatever money we had hidden or sewn into our clothes we gave them.

One of the diggers, running by me and noticing that no German is watching, inconspicuously let his shovel drop. Another German passing by saw the shovel, looking at me hissed, "Pick it up." No sooner did I pick up the shovel when another one went by motioning to me to follow him. I joined a group of five others and the six of us were taken behind a farm building where we were told to dig a hole.

For six men to dig, there had to be room, and the hole was wider than needed for one body. What made us very uneasy was the fact that they took only six diggers and there was no body. For whom then are we digging the grave? Now I also felt the taste of being a digger. The three Germans lowered their rifle butt over any back that tried to straighten up. I don't know if it was due to the hard labor, extra clothing or the fear of digging my own grave, but I perspired so much that my top winter coat was wet. I noticed the others were just as wet.

When the hole was finished, we were ordered to lie in a row face down. I was sure that those were my last seconds and I remember thinking to myself that death is not so terrible. Soon I will get a bullet in my head and my world with its suffering will end. Should I be spared for some reason, I would never fear death any more.

With such "lofty" thoughts, I became aware of other voices. I heard the command "throw him in," then "get lost," followed by a shot. We were ordered to get up and fill in the hole. I looked in and see a man with whom I was well acquainted by the name of Moishe Gleser, who was married to Sara a year ago and a father of an infant. He fell apparently at the entrance to the farm and died instantly, for the bullet that entered below

his right eye tore off a piece of cheek, but neither the torn cheek nor that hanging part of the face was bleeding.

We covered him fast and one of the Germans led us straight to the head of the line to drink. However, before we were permitted to drink, we were thoroughly searched, taking from me every penny my parents gave me before leaving home, including my passport. For the record, it was U.S. currency that we all divided up.

By the time they were through with us, the sun began to set and they started driving us into the barn. I will say that there was plenty of room for all of us to stay, but very few found a space to sit down. As a result, the majority spent the night on their feet.

As they closed the barn door behind us, my father said to me, "If they want to get rid of us now all they need is one match." In reality, he was right, for the thatched room would catch fire like a tinderbox engulfing the building with us inside. However, they did not. Instead, at daybreak they drove us outside in pouring rain, lining us up like the previous day and ordering us to march.

Apparently the idea of marching along a column of Jews in rain cursing and beating them did not appeal to the Nazis, so we were ordered to get off the road and march in the ditch along it. By then the ditch was filling up nicely and we were marching in water anywhere from ankle to knee deep. For us it turned out to be a momentary blessing, for the Germans marching on the road could not reach us with their clubs or rifle butts. It was too good to last long, and at noon the rain stopped and our luck ran out. We were ordered back on the road.

I want to point out that during all that morning we had not lost a single man. The Germans wanted to make up for lost time, so they came upon a new idea. They lined themselves up on both sides along the road for a kilometer or so and ordered us to run under a gantlet of clubs and rifle butts. We only stopped at the other end of the German line.

Understandably we had a couple of casualties either from a disabling blow or from simply unable to run that far for reasons of age, exhaustion or the standing up all night. Again, like the day before, we had to sit down cross-legged until the victims were buried. This time however, instead of sitting on the dry ground we sat in deep mud.

Those of us who thought that the running is one time affair were grossly mistaken, for as soon as we got up from the ground we saw the Germans lining up like before. We ran again and a next time. With each run, the number of casualties kept increasing. It got to the stage that we did not stop to bury two men. We were making stops for no less than four or five. Those that fell were grabbed by the arms and legs by four men and carried along until the stop. As a rule, they were fully conscious and knew clearly what was happening.

One of the drawbacks in running was that if one fell, the ones behind him could, and many times would, trip and at times pile up into a heap. Here the Germans had a ball, thrashing the bodies with all their might. If one noticed the pile up, he avoided it by running around it but thus exposing himself to additional blows. Those on the bottom of such a heap used to be so trampled that they were unable to get up, and thus their fate was sealed.

It suddenly dawned on me that my father, at 48 being one of the older men among us, might fall or trip over someone. I made my way to the rear of the column, from where I would notice him should he be in trouble.

My decision was a timely one. I barely covered a couple hundred meters when I notice people falling one over the other, creating a pile up. I took a good look and noticed my father almost at the bottom of the heap. I do not know where I found the strength, but I stopped in the middle of the running column, anchoring my feet in the muddy ground, I held back those behind me. They had no choice but run around me. Quickly I lifted my father putting his left arm over my shoulder I wrapped my right arm over his waist. I was protecting him from the left side. As we had to be three abreast and everybody in the panic was on his own. A third man joined us. Thus, I have succeeded in positioning my father in the middle, the safest of the three places.

However, holding my father, I could not move with such agility as before and avoid the blows. Suddenly I noticed the end of a club coming towards me very fast. Maybe if I had a free hand I might have succeeded in protecting my head, but I did not. The blow landed on my head and for a moment stunned me, but instinctively I knew I had to run and did so.



I came to my senses immediately and tried to avoid blows as much as I could. I changed places with the man on the right side, holding my father's right arm over my shoulder and his waist with my left.

It happened that when I was on that right side, I noticed a German delivering a blow to a young man who fell. The German was not satisfied with it but continued to hit him. Meantime, we were running we were getting fast closer to them. I noticed that the victim was Motl Shocherman, the twenty-two year old son of Moishe Shocherman. The half a minute running that took us to get to Motl Shocherman; he was already lying motionless by the side of the road. His tormentor taking him for dead or half dead left him and joined the others chasing us. Suddenly with his ultimate strength, Motl made a final attempt to try and get up. Lying on his stomach he succeeded in pushing his upper body up, and from his throat tore a horrible cry. At that moment, another German came along and with a thick club delivered a blow to his neck that made Motl's hands give in, and he fell with his face to the ground. That German left him and continued to run after the column. Motl tried a second time to prop himself up on his hands, a third German came along, stopped, raised his rifle and pulled the trigger. It was the first time that I saw a man being shot so close to me and with such affect. His entire skull was torn off, spraying us passerby with droplets of blood.

We continue running for a couple hundred meters more before we stopped to bury our dead. As soon as we stopped and lined up, out of line comes Moishe Shocherman whose name I mentioned much earlier as the conductor of the bus that commuted between Shershev and Pruzany. He walks over to the nearest German and says to him in a loud voice, "You have just killed my son, kill me too." He did not have to repeat it. They obliged immediately.

A thought entered my mind that maybe the Germans planned to finish us all up this way. During the next run, I began to feel that my father was weakening. As we sat down on the muddy road to bury our dead, a German asked if any of us is ready to dispose of our coats. There were many. A farmer was stopped and we were told that whoever wants could put his coat in the buggy. In no time, the buggy was filled to capacity. The farmer could not believe his luck.

While a hole was being dug for the latest victims, some Germans counted us. Others looked for visibly bleeding men. If the wound was obvious, that man was taken out to join the others waiting to be shot. My best friend Laizer Rotenberg received a blow to the left side of his head and was bleeding noticeably. A German ordered him out, pointed to a group of laying or sitting men waiting to be shot he told him to join them. Two years older than I, Laizer was at that time twenty years old, and in excellent shape, among us always considered a hero. Except for his brother two years his junior Litek, he had nobody among the marching men. If anybody among us marchers would try anything, it would be him.

Still following the Germans order, he began to run towards the group of condemned. Reaching them he did not slow down, passed them by and a few meters further jumping over the ditch that ran along the road he ran into a potato field. He covered several dozen meters before the Germans realized that he is running away. Several of them raised their rifles and began to shoot.

We all looked at it praying that he should make it. He fell. The Germans lowered their rifles and turned their attention to us. At that moment, he Lazar jumped up and began to run again. Several precious seconds was lost by the Germans before they realized that he is running and started shooting. He fell again and again he started to run as soon as they lowered their rifles. For the third time they opened fire, but by then he was on the other side of the field and disappeared in the adjoining forest.

The officer in command announced loud and clear that twenty-five men will be shot. First, they had to count us for the umpteenth time that day. As we sat three in a row, two Germans on either side of us walked along the column hitting the sitting men on either side with a club over the head and continued aloud to count for all to hear.

I do not know if deliberately or not, but every time they came to the end of the column, something did not correspond and they used to start counting again with the banging over the heads.

The diggers started to dig a large grave. It was late in the afternoon, and the Germans started to pick the victims. We were told not to look back while they started to pick those unfortunates from the rear of the column. All we could hear was the word

“you, you.” Apparently, some were unable to get up fast enough, or were not in a hurry to (for who would be?) so we could also hear the blows and the cursing falling upon those condemned.

I could not resist my curiosity to see who they are picking. I lowered my head and turned it around for a few seconds to see that they are picking the older among us. I became apprehensive over my father; I heard them getting ever closer to us. They must have stopped no more than two or three rows behind us when they had their quota filled.

Although the German said they would shoot twenty-five men, they picked out fifteen. Ordering the first five to enter the two by two meters hole, they told them to lay face down shoulder to shoulder. Five Germans fired at the same time into the hole. The next five men were told to lie on top of the five just shot, facedown but in the opposite direction, that is with the faces on the feet or legs of the others. Another volley, and for another five innocent and pain enduring Jewish souls the suffering ended. The same was done to the last five.

By the time the diggers finished covering the grave, the sun that started to appear a short while earlier was setting. We were sitting on the ground wondering as to what other surprises the Germans had in store for us.

## **Chapter 9**

The officer in charge positions himself in front of us, so that we can all see him. In a loud voice he yells “Judenrat” (Jewish committee), step forwards. My father whispers to me, “Now they will finish off the committee.” Those of the committee that are with us step forwards. The officer asks, “Can any of you read a map?” The doctor, a member of the committee, hesitantly takes a step forward. The officer takes out a map from his pouch, shows a point of the map to the doctor and says, “Here you are, seven kilometers down the road is a place called Antopol, from here on you can continue on your own. There you will find your women and children.”

With those words, the Germans turn to the boys holding their bicycles, mount them and without looking around, peddle back the way we came. For a moment we think that it is another German trick, but they disappear in the distance. We realize that we are

free. The first impulse is to fall in each others' arms for joy that we are alive. That joy lasts for seconds, for immediately the realization sets in of the events of the last thirty six hours and the dozens of unmarked graves we left behind. Exactly how many slain there were in those two days nobody knew, but we figured anywhere between seventy-five and a hundred.

What do we do now? We cannot go back. Some of us know this road and agree that it leads to Antopol. Antopol was more or less the same size as Shershev, but with somewhat of a larger Jewish population. Maybe they are still in their homes undisturbed. If so, they will take us in and let us catch our breath, to be among Jews in a Jewish home for a moment.

The group of beaten Jews, crushed in spirit, starts to drag itself forward to look for its wives and children. We are afraid to say a loud word. We speak in whispers. Rumors and assumptions are being mixed with despair and tears. Why? What have we done to deserve it? Where are our families? What have the Germans done with them? With grieving and heavy hearts we drag our heavy feet. It is dark all around. There is not a light to be seen. Not a sign of a human presence.

The four of us, my father, his brother Reuven, the youngest Eli and I are walking together. Each burdened with his own dark thoughts. We make it finally to some houses. It is Antopol but in the street it is pitch dark. The first two men we stumble across are our own, from Shershev. They got here a bit earlier and tell us to be very quiet for there is great apprehension and fear in shtetl, because only today, the Germans came in town collecting two hundred Jewish men. They marched them away. There are rumors that they were shot as soon as they were out of town. Nobody knows if those Germans are still here or if they left to do their gruesome work somewhere else.

To remain in the street is not safe. Some of us go into a nearby yards. We find an open door to a barn where we spend the rest of the night in a corner. With dawn, we are out of the barn into the street. We see others of us crawl out from all kinds of hiding places and holes going in the direction of the town center. We join the crowd. In the center, among Jewish homes, we see two synagogues close to each other as if in one yard. We enter and, to our astonishment, we see our Shershev women and children all over the

yard. Everybody starts looking feverishly for their own families. The women stand looking for their men with expectation and fear. News of our two-day march and its consequences has reached them already. Nobody is in a hurry to tell the newly widowed or bereaved mother of their loss. So they stay there, waiting for their loved ones to appear.

Not finding my mother outside, I run into one of the synagogues where tightly packed women were sitting one next to the other, with children and old people. Some were sitting on their pitiful little bundles; others were sitting on the floor with little bundles on their laps. Among this group of unfortunates, I found my mother and children.

We looked at each other petrified, not daring to ask one another about the past two days. Two steps from my mother sat Sara-Brina Malcek with her old mother Yachna. Sara-Brina's husband Pesach with his three sons, Nachum, my friend Itzik, and the youngest Moishe were all in the march. Her husband Pesach was one of the victims, and at that moment the oldest son, Nachum was just telling his mother about it. She broke out with a loud cry, as did the oldest son and the youngest, Moishe. The only one that did not was my friend Itzik. He just stood there looking stubbornly at a point on the floor without uttering a sound.

Next to them sat the family Rotenberg, the parents of my good friends Lazar and Litek. They were Yosef and Raya with their three daughters, Pola, Lisa and Mina. Next to them was Raya Rotenberg's parents, Yoshua and Bluma Pinsky, both in their seventies.

My mother's face brightened for a second when she saw us, despite the hopeless situation that we all were in, but only for a second, because the reality was too much to bear. There was so much crying, so much despair.

Raya Rotenberg, having heard from her son Litek how the Germans were shooting after her son Lazar as he was escaping, started to lament and mourn him. We started to quiet her down, especially my mother who heard from me that he ran into the forest. She only got quieter after I had sworn on my life that I should only live as sure as he is alive.

It is difficult to describe the lament of dozens upon dozens of women who suddenly found out that their husbands or sons were put to death, or the cries of hundreds of freshly created orphans. There was not time for gentility or niceties, and when a woman with apprehension and fear asked about her husband, one did not hesitate to tell

the truth, regardless of how heart breaking it looked at that moment when that woman broke out with a horrible and unbearable cry.

In our hopeless situation, we did not even notice the absence of any local Jew or offer of any help. From the experience of the last two days we felt that the whole world had rejected us. The absence of local Jews was soon explained, as the fresh grave of the two hundred local men was discovered not far from shtetl. The locals, too, had their losses and their own mourning to do.

Before we had a chance to have a good look at each other or exchange a few words of compassion, members of the local police appeared. Those were of the same category of ruffians and untamed rowdies that made up the local police in Shershev. They ordered us to leave the town immediately and without delay. But where shall we go? The answer was simple: "OUT!! You may go eastwards."

Our family barely had time to get together. Besides the seven of us, there were my grandparents Yaakov-Kopel and Chinka Kantorowitz with their son Eli and my father's brother Reuven, his wife Chashka and their three children, Michla, Shalom and Shevach. We picked ourselves up, with my grandparents in their seventies, and joined the throng in the street barely dragging their feet.

By chance my Aunt Chaska noticed something. Without saying a word, she disappeared behind a house, coming back within a couple of minutes with a loaf of bread under her coat. To our question as to where she got it, she answered that as we were passing by that lane she smelled freshly baked bread. Following her sense of smell, she came to a bakery where, half by begging and half by force, she got the loaf of bread. This was the only food that my entire extended family had for the next two days.

Thus, two days after our cruel expulsion from home, from Shershev, we experienced another one. If we had during the first one a promise of work and a roof over our heads, now we did not have this much either.

So we left Antopol, the entire community of Shershev, minus those that we left behind in the ground during the two days march, unescorted by the local Jews, who were either hiding in their homes or sitting *Shiva* (the seven days of mourning) after the two hundred of their men were murdered two days earlier.

We did have an escort. It consisted of the local police, the so-called Ukrainian police, as those parts were included by the Germans into what they called Ukraine. Those ruffians, still in civilian dress with their Soviet rifles and *automats* (automatic light machine guns), rode alongside us on bicycles while others passed us by, stopping at every farm house along the way warning the farmers not to give us any food or even a drink of water.

Some of us, on the verge of fainting from hunger or thirst, tried to knock on a door only to be refused and driven away. Those farmsteads were a couple hundred meters apart and each had his own well. Those wells never ran out of water and what grieved us in our situation was the fact that they refused us even a drink of it.

To look at the multitude of homeless and forsaken could break anybody's heart. I tried hard not to think of how my parents must be feeling.

Our family walked or dragged itself along. Some passed us and some fell behind. We were just alongside the Pinsky and Rotenberg families. We looked at each other and Bluma Pinsky broke out in a heart-rending lament. My mother, walking near me, whispered, "It hurts me to see her cry like this, they in their age (in the mid seventies) leaving behind such riches (in real estate and land--unquestionably the richest in town), and to find themselves homeless wandering over desolated forsaken roads without a bite to eat or a place to put their heads down."

I don't know if out of sympathy with them or our own hopeless situation, my mother cried with her. It broke my heart, but what could I say or comfort my mother with when I felt so helpless myself?

Some ten to twelve kilometers past Antopol, our police escort turned back. The farmers along the road began to show us more sympathy, permitting us to fetch water from their wells. I even saw a couple cases where a farmer came out on his porch cutting up a loaf of bread handing the pieces to the children.

As the day progressed, so did the hunger, and some parents began to accompany their children in begging for a piece of bread. I looked with pain as my uncle Reuven went with his son Shalom, not quite twelve years old yet, to a farmer's house. When the door opened, the farmer's wife came out on the porch holding a loaf of bread and a knife.

She started cutting up the bread and distributing it to the surrounding mob of children. My cousin Shalom, not being an aggressive child was pushed aside by other boys. My uncle, standing from a distance pointing at his son said, "Please give him a piece of bread." Those words were not easy for my uncle to say, for I noticed a tear rolling down his cheeks. I thought to myself, how can it be, my uncle Reuven Kantorowitz, for sure the richest man in goods and cash in Shershev, stands now begging for a piece of bread?

Our progress on the road was a slow one. We covered about fifteen kilometers when the sun began to set. We are in the middle of a road that runs between fields. We cannot go back and do not know what to expect ahead. Meantime, the night is falling. An entire destitute community under the open sky and nobody to turn to. We have no choice. We got down beside the embankment along the road. Some sit, others lie down.

Maybe some dozed off for a moment. Most did not shut their eyes, still there was not conversation. Everybody is engrossed in his or her own dark thoughts. Now and then a German vehicle used to pass by. They did not stop. Just slowed down to look at the unusual scene that played out before them.

With break of day we were on our feet and dragging on. Those that knew the road said that we were going towards Drohychyn-Polesky, which we reached that afternoon. Drohychyn was so far untouched by the Germans, although the Jewish population of some neighboring shtetls had completely been slaughtered since the German attack on the Soviet Union two months earlier, like the shtetls of Chomsk and Motele. Others, were like the small shtetls of Ivanovka, where all the males were slaughtered on July 6, 1941, or the town of Pinsk where 8000 males were slaughtered on August 4/41. There were rumors that the orthodox priest intervened with the Germans on behalf of the Jews. How much substance there was to this rumor I cannot say.

The shtetl Drohychyn was not much bigger than Shershev but the Jewish population was almost twice the size. We suddenly found ourselves among Jews who, despite their own concerns and fears, responded very warmly. They saw to it that each family got some bread and before nightfall, provided each family with some accommodation with the local families.



It grieves me that I forgot the name of the family that we were assigned to, but it has been almost sixty years and so much has happened since then. They certainly deserve to be mentioned. I do not even remember the name of the street. They did not just empty a room or two for us, as many did, they just took us in with them, vacating beds and welcoming us-- making us feel as if we were family.

They were a family of four, a husband and wife, with a daughter of about thirteen, and the wife's sister. The house was, although not new, big with a large garden in the back. The garden had all kinds of vegetables; the potato bed was over an acre in size.

Wanting to make myself useful, I volunteered to dig potatoes for them, but they would not hear of it. They finally agreed to let me dig only for our needs, pointing out where the good potatoes grow.

A couple days later a few Shershev families moved on the quiet to Antopol, where we have just been driven out from. They had some family there. Meantime the Drohychyn committee started looking for a place to settle the Shershev families.

Eighteen kilometers north of Drohychyn was a shtetl, Chomsk. A month before our expulsion from Shershev, it was said that on the night of Av, August 3, 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* (special duty troops of the SS) slaughtered the entire Jewish population. The local Christian population collaborated with the Nazis, knowing that they will inherit the Jewish possessions. They searched and made sure that not a single Jew remained alive to claim anything.

After the slaughter, they plundered everything the Jews left behind. Now they needed the Jewish skilled tradesmen and artisans to make for them clothes and shoes, or to makeover the plundered Jewish clothes that did not fit properly. Being almost exclusively farmers, they needed blacksmiths, carpenters and others. They agreed to let in between eighty and a hundred Jewish families from Shershev.

Thirty kilometers east of Drohychyn was a shtetl, Janow-Polesky, where a few Shershev families wandered away. Another small shtetl or village of several dozen Jewish farmers' families was situated between Drohychyn and Janow, in a place by the name of Ivanevke. To supplement their income, the Jewish families used to put up vacationers in

summer that came from Pinsk. A dozen or so Shershev families found temporary shelter there. The rest of us remained for the time being in Drohychyn.

We, not wanting to overstay our welcome with our generous hosts, decided to go to Chomsk. Before going there with the children, my mother and I decided to take a look at the place.

It was a nice warm September day when my mother and I left Drohychyn for Chomsk. The road was a bad one. It ran between fields and swamps, kept up by villagers from around that were forced by consecutive governments to dump gravel and stones to keep the road from sinking in the Pripec swamps.

We walked with apprehension, fearing to encounter Germans and, even more, the local police who would recognize us as Jews much easier than Germans. Having covered more or less half the way, I asked my mother if she would like to sit down, to which my mother answered with the question of whether I was tired. I said yes, which was a blatant lie. I was worried that my mother might be tired and this was the only way I could make her sit down.

We sat down on the embankment of the road. After a short time my mother said to me, "I am grateful to G-d that my legs can still carry me; you, an eighteen year young man, are already tired, and I could still go on." I too was grateful to G-d that my mother could go on, but said nothing.

We did not sit long. At about five in the afternoon, we got to Chomsk.

Like most eastern European shtetls in those days, Chomsk's outskirts were inhabited by Christian farmers. We found ourselves in a Christian street. There were few people in the street, but those few Christians that we met gazed at us in a way that told us everything that we did and did not want to know.

Already after passing the first half a dozen houses, I noticed that the few glances that came our way expressed less sympathy than one favors a stray dog with. With fear and dread we continued. The Christian part of the street is a short one and we enter what was the Jewish part five weeks earlier. It is easy to tell by the lack of little gardens in front of the houses; the Jewish homes are closer to the road. The most obvious sign are open doors and windows of the Jewish houses, which served as warm homes for

generations of Jews. The windows with their dark background were like big holes from which the eyes were torn out and the light gone out. The doors big, wide mouths that scream into the street to every passer by asking, "Where are the Jews that lived within my walls for generations? The ones that kept me warm and illuminated, that rejoiced and grieved, laughed and cried? What have you done to them? Why?"

There is not a living soul in the street. Even the Christian neighbors that helped the Germans with so much ardor to do their gruesome work do not come in the Jewish houses. They had five weeks to take everything that was moveable and now there is nothing left to take.

We walk in a dead street among dead houses slowly and carefully as if not to awaken the dead. It looks like we are in the center of the shtetl. It was not quite like Shershev; it had no town square or market place, so the few bigger houses must be the center. There are only three streets extending from the center. We take the middle one. It looks like a former Jewish street. We pass a couple of houses, and notice between the houses a man. He is from Shershev and got here two days earlier but is afraid to go into the street, so he huddles between the houses.

We ask him for Yosl and Brina Pomperanietz. My parents used to be good friends with them. Their haberdashery store was next door to ours. We have heard that they went to Chomsk. The man points to a few houses farther down. We find them and they are talking us into coming to Chomsk. They are two lonely people, have no children and would like to have friends close by.

I look around, at a small house completely empty except for a small table that shakes so badly that even the plunderers would not take it. They are in Chomsk two days and eat potatoes from the garden in back of the house. We are invited to partake in the supper.

We spend the evening in the dark speaking in subdued voices about our helpless situation. The bare wooden floor does not seem inviting, so we sit up till late in the night.

In the morning, after the same breakfast as the supper--that is a few potatoes--Yosl and Brina took us to see the resting place of the Jews of Chomsk. We continued along the same street, which apparently must have been all Jewish; except for the couple houses

after theirs, into which Shershev Jews have moved into in the last two or three days, the homes cried out in loneliness.

We came to the end of the street, whose length was no more than half a kilometer from the beginning to end, and came to where the farmer's fields began. There, no more than fifty meters from the last house, in which only a few weeks ago lived a Jewish family, we see two mounds, one on either side of the road. Each mound was about five meters wide; the one on the right side was some thirty\thirty five meters long, the one on the left side between twelve and fourteen meters long. Their height was about one and a half meters. It was situated between the shtetl and the fields, in the middle of a lush green meadow. Despite the green grass around, there was not a single blade of grass on either of the mounds, as if the grass refused to grow on the mass graves of innocent victims as a protest to G-d and reminder for humanity for generations to come of their cruelty and barbarism.

Yosl and Brina Pomeraniectz told us in halting sentences what took place on this spot five weeks ago. They heard it from the local non-Jewish population that so diligently helped the Germans in their gruesome work.

I would like to repeat word-for-word what I heard from them then and what was told to me by the local gentiles and the dozen Jewish young boys and girls that managed to save themselves from that slaughter. All this was confirmed to me during our three and a half month stay in Chomsk.

It happened on the ninth of Av, August 3, 1941, a day earlier or a day later, when the shtetl was awakened to sounds of shooting and screaming that came from all directions. The shtetl had a population of seventeen hundred Jews and half as many Christians. It had hardly been visited by any Germans in the month and a half since the start of the war, as it was situated on a sidetrack in the middle of the Pripec marshes. Still there were rumors circulating about German atrocities against Jews, making the Chomsk Jews uneasy. The sudden appearance of many Germans in such a violent display manner put the local Jews in panic. Unfortunately, the panic was well founded.

The shtetl was surrounded by a cordon of Germans at daybreak. Others entered the shtetl and began to gather the Jewish inhabitants. In the confusion and as a result of

the shooting and screaming, some Jews started to run. Those were shot while running. This increased the panic and some Jews began to hide.

The Germans, with the very active help of the local Christian population, began to conduct searches, making sure that there is not a Jew left hidden. The entire Jewish population was then marched to the meadow where the mass graves were situated.

All males, a total of four hundred and eighty, were ordered to dig a ditch. When the ditch was finished, the Germans started lining up groups of women, children and old people at the edge of the ditch. A machine gun that stood a couple dozen meters away mowed them down. The bodies, as a rule, fell right into the ditch, and the Germans would line up another group to mow down.

The killing took place in front of the entire community of Chomsk that was watching and waiting for their turn to be shot. While this was taking place, the men were kept busy throwing in the bodies that did not fall inside the ditch and laying them down evenly over the entire ditch.

If the few souls hidden thought that with night the horrible action would stop, they were mistaken. The Germans continued with their hideous tasks all through the night till the next midday, when they murdered the last women and children of Chomsk, as well as the last hidden ones they and their helpers could find.

Satisfied that there were no more Jews in Chomsk (the Nazis were unaware that, in the dark of the night, a dozen young boys and girls managed to sneak through the German cordon), the Germans ordered the four hundred and eighty men to cover up the mass grave--a high heap of humanity consisting of innocent Jewish women, children and old people.

When the men had finished covering their families and loved ones with that blood-soaked earth, they were ordered to dig another ditch across the road. When the ditch was finished, they too, the entire four hundred and eighty of them, were shot in the same manner as their families. They were covered by the gentile population.

The dozen boys and girls that managed to save themselves from that slaughter did not dare to come back to Chomsk. They returned only after we, the Jews of Shershev, came there. Even then they tried as much as possible not to be seen by local Christians

who were not interested in having witnesses to their cooperation with the Nazis in the slaughter of the local Jews.

Our entry into Chomsk yesterday--the walk through the Jewish part of the street, the long till after midnight gloomy and depressing conversation with Yosl and Brina Pomeranietz, the few hours on the bare floor with sinister thoughts in the head, and now the sight of the two gigantic mass graves--was too much for my mother, and she broke out in a heart rending lament. I must admit that, looking at those two mass graves, I tried to imagine what the event must have looked like, but in no way could. The mind could not grasp, it defied comprehension.

In that gloomy and depressed mood, we left Chomsk. We hardly exchanged a few words on the way back. The picture of a dead shtetl and, above all, the two mass graves pressed hard on our mind.

Coming back we shared our experience with my father and sister Sheva. If the younger ones, my brother Leibl, sisters Sonia and Liba, understood all of it, I do not know. I know that they knew fear; I saw it in their eyes.

A decision had to be made and my parents decided on Chomsk. A couple days later, after bidding farewell to our gracious hosts, we left Drohyczyn on foot for Chomsk. We walked into a former Jewish house on the same street where most of us from Shershev were, that is the street at whose end were the mass graves. As we were one of the last families from Shershev, we had to settle for one of the last houses on the street and the closest to the graves. One more family moved in after us. It was the family of Hertzka Kaminker (nicknamed Der Minister).

The house we went into was small, two rooms and a kitchen, completely empty of everything. The local Gentiles left it empty. Fortunately the door and windows were left intact. The little barn in the yard had some hay and firewood the owner prepared for the winter. There was a garden behind the barn with some potatoes still in the ground. Bringing in some hay and spreading it along one wall in one room we converted the room into a sleeping room.

The next morning I started walking over the unoccupied empty Jewish houses, coming home with two old tin cans, a couple of twisted spoons and a knife with half the handle gone.

The larger can was used as a pail, with which I used to go a couple of times a day to the well for water, and the smaller one my mother used as a pot for boiling potatoes three times a day. A day or two later, I found an enamel bowl that had more rust on it than enamel, which we used to wash in, although we had no soap.

My mother's foresight in having us put on extra underwear before leaving home and clothing proved to be a blessing. We could put on our spare set while my mother and sister Sheva tried to wash the dirty ones in water mixed with ashes. After such a wash it used to look a bit cleaner.

We dug up all the potatoes in the garden and took them into the house. Eating only potatoes three times a day, we knew that we would run out before spring.

When we left Drohychyn for Chomsk, we left my father's parents, that is my grandfather Yaakov-Kopel and grandmother Chinka Kantorowicz with their son, my uncle Eli, as well as my father's brother, Reuven, with his wife Chashka and their three children, Michla, Shalom and Shevach.

Several days after our settling in Chomsk, my uncle Reuven came to us to see if it is worthwhile for him and his family to come too. He, like us, came on foot, as this was the only means of movement for Jew and this too was very risky. Like us, he slept on the floor with a bit of hay underneath.

In the morning, I took him to the two mass graves. Standing near him, I watched his face, wanting to see the impression it will make on him. For a moment he remained speechless and motionless, then I heard a barely audible murmur coming from his lips, "G-d in heaven, make them pay for it."

With this picture before his eyes my uncle turned around to go back to Drohychyn. He just stopped to say good-bye, at that moment he was not sure if they will come to Chomsk. That was the last time any one of us saw him. Apparently he decided to remain in Drohychyn. About him and his family I will return later when I will come to events in the Pruzany ghetto.

Under Soviet rule, the Bolsheviks put up a brickyard works near Chomsk where there were several men employed. As there was no owner now, the local authority took it over. Being short of funds and unable to pay the workers, they turned to the Jews for free labor. My turn used to come once a week. There in the middle of fields, we used to help ourselves to the nearby potato fields and bake the potatoes in the fire. They were delicious.

Another place where we unemployable older boys and young men used to work was a dairy, where we used to churn a huge churner all day. The generous manager used to reward us for that day's work with a liter of buttermilk. It used to be a real treat after a constant diet of unsalted potatoes, but we were not destined to enjoy this treat more than a couple of times. There were more aggressive boys than I who became permanent churners for such a highly paid job as a liter of buttermilk a day.

Among the Jews of Shershev that came to Chomsk was a large proportion of tradesmen and artisans. They started to work at their trades and had it much easier than those without these skills. All a tailor or dressmaker needed was a needle and thread. Some procured a pair of scissors or even a press iron. True, those tools were in such condition that even the local plunderers did not want it, but in a pinch and in professional hands, those tools served the purpose. The same was true with blacksmiths, carpenters and other tradesmen.

All the above worked for the local and the surrounding population, all of whom were farmers. They worked either in their living quarters or went to the farmers. In particular, they went to those who had sewing machines plundered from the Chomsk Jewish tradesmen. As there was no money in circulation, the tradesmen were being paid in produce, like flour, potatoes and cereals; sometimes a few eggs, cheese or even a piece of butter.

A week or ten days after our coming to Chomsk, my close friend, Lazar Rotenberg came to his parents in Chomsk. His parents, a brother and sisters, as well as his grandparents, Joshua and Bluma Pinsky came to Chomsk a couple days before us.

Lazar's experience I would like to record in the next few lines. On the second day of our march, as he was running from the Germans in the potato field, he felt a light blow,



like a lash, to one thigh and then to his other. In the excitement of running for his life he took it for a lash from a twig or a potato plant. Still he had the presence of mind to trick the Germans three times by falling to the ground. Reaching the forest he continued to run over wet and swampy ground for a couple more hours. His shoes came more and more of a hindrance so he threw them away.

After spending the night in the forest he lived for the next three days off whatever he could find in the fields. Only on the fourth day did he venture to get close to a village to find out where he was. Having straight blond hair and blue eyes he was taken for a Soviet soldier still hiding out from the Germans. The local villagers who did not sympathize with the Bolsheviks, but nevertheless felt a kinship with the soldier and pointed out to him the safest road east. One villager pointed out a distant road and warned him not to take it, for it leads to Kobryn where there were many Germans.

That was exactly where Lazar turned knowing that Kobryn is eighty percent Jewish, with over ten thousand Jews. Covering few kilometers, he noticed a head a German patrol on a bridge. All the people crossing the bridge had their papers checked except those that were dressed and looked as if they are from the vicinity.

Waiting at a distance, he saw a group of farmwomen getting closer with all kinds of sacks and bundles. Approaching one, he offered to help her with her burden. His offer was eagerly accepted and the women knew not to ask many questions. She took him for a Soviet soldier. The entire German patrol saw was a bunch of farmwomen and a young farm hand carrying grain and vegetables home. They did not even stop to check him.

In Kobryn, Lazar went to the Jewish committee, who sent him to a doctor. Fortunately the three places he was shot through were in the fleshy part of both his legs. Those were the lashes he felt running. Few days later he was informed that the Jews of Shershev are in Drohychyn, from there he was directed to Chomsk. When he came to Chomsk, his wounds were not fully healed, but he could get around. Within a month he was his old self.

One job I and others felt duty bound was to volunteer for was to cover from time to time the partly dug up mass graves, which the local gentiles used to uncover at night in order to search the decomposing bodies for valuables that might have been overlooked by

the Germans during the mass killings. This should give the reader an idea of the kind of people, or rather predators, we lived among.

In the later part of September, when the days became noticeably shorter and the evenings longer, not wanting to sit in total darkness, we used to burn kindling wood in the open door of the brick oven. The light of the burning wood chips was enough to see how to move about in the house. There was no need for much light in a house consisting of two rooms. We had nothing to read; besides, strained nerves would not permit us to sit down for more than a minute or two at a time. So we used to walk around in the house from window to window, looking out into the dark street or yard for a suspicious shadow which would signal the arrival of German or local police.

About midnight, we used to go to sleep on the hay covered floor. If one could call it sleep is questionable, lying there on the floor jumping up to every sound, every distant bark of a dog and running to the window to look for any motion that would betray the dreaded murderers. Before sunrise we were up knowing that the German “actions” (slaughter of Jews) used to start most of the time at this hour of the morning. In such an atmosphere of tension and fear we spent our days in Chomsk.

On Saturdays, some of us young boys and girls used to get together in one of the survivors of Chomsk slaughter, listening to their stories of escape. At times we just used to talk and even tell jokes, at which not only we from Shershev used to laugh, but even the boys and girls of Chomsk. In those rare moments of laughter, I used to look at those young people of Chomsk trying to understand how they are able to laugh after what they have seen and lost. I used to think that in their place I would not even want to listen to jokes, never mind the laughter. At that time I did not know the extent of human endurance, its recovery ability nor the strength of its spirit.

With fall, the weather changed; the street and lanes became muddy from the rain. In such a day I and several others my age were told to move “Sforim” (religious books) from one former Jewish home into another. Both of those houses were in a little lane that extended from the main street, which in itself was not very impressive. Passing by the main street in my group, someone pointed to an ordinary house, saying: here lived the

local druggist with his family, the local Christians intervened in his behalf during the slaughter. They live in the house afraid to go out.

I looked at the house. It did not look empty; it had curtains, but I could not see a sign of life in it from the outside. During the more than three months we spent in Chomsk, none of us had ever seen a member of that family. Some told me they spoke to them. They perished with all the Shershev families on the second day of Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year) on September 13, 1942.

We walked through the muddy lane to the given house, where we found a room half-full, that is heaped from the floor halfway to the ceiling with *sforim* (Jewish Prayer books). It pained me terribly to see it, knowing that their owners are all in the ground and their holy books, which they treated with so much respect and gentleness, not letting them out of their hand without a kiss, are lying here desecrated by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Our task was to take the books to a nearby house. Upon opening that house, we found it full of books. Literally every room was heaped with books from the floor to the ceiling. If there were among them Yiddish or Hebrew books, we did not look. We were too depressed looking at the mute witnesses of a recently slaughtered Jewish community.

What hurt even more was the number of *teffilin* (Phylacteries) that were scattered in the mud over the lane. The local gentiles tore off the *rtzuot* (leather straps of the phylacteries) and broke open the *teffilin* looking for hidden valuables. The murderers with their blood-dripping hands, not content with murder alone, had to desecrate our sacred items. To my mind came the part of the Yom Kippur prayer about the martyrdom of the ten sages, when Rabbi Fishmeal, lifting the head of Rabbi Shymhon cried out, "How is the tongue, skilled in the words of G-d, brought low to lick the dust." Dispirited and sad, we finished our task and went to our families.

Not all Shershev families wanted to stay in Chomsk, where the constant reminder of what happened to the local Jews--which could happen to them at any point--stared them in the face daily. Some dragged themselves from shtetl to shtetl, wherever there were Jews to try to find a place for themselves. Some got to Pruzany. There was a rumor circulating that Pruzany is becoming a Jewish town.

My grandparents, who were with their son Eli in Drohychyn, decided to go to Pruzany, as they had a son and a daughter who lived there with their families. They found a farmer who drove them there. Why my uncle Reuven and family did not do the same will remain a mystery.

In the beginning of October, my parents started talking about Pruzany. There was no other choice, as our potatoes would end in December and that meant starvation for us. If the Jewish community in Pruzany should be left in its place, at least my father had his brother and sister there, who before the war were comfortable.

Still, before we made such a move, my parents decided that my father and I should go and take a look for ourselves. A couple days later the two of us set out for Pruzany, my mother and the children leaving behind in Chomsk. The distance of the eighty-odd kilometers led through forest and fields, a dirt road that used to turn muddy in rain. Even though we took off the yellow stars, we still had to be on guard, not so much of Germans as of local police who could tell easier who is a Jew and who is not.

Before entering a village we used to ask farmers in the fields if there are police in the village. If the answer was positive we used to circle the village putting on extra kilometers. At dark we came to a village and went straight to the village elder, who personally led us to a farmer where we stayed over on hay spread on the kitchen floor. The farmer would not let us leave without breakfast of boiled potatoes washed down with milk.

Before nightfall we reached Malch (Malecz), a small shtetl of seven hundred Jewish souls and half as many Christians. There lived my father's two first cousins. They were the sons of my grandfather Yaakov-Kopel's sister Lieba and her husband Berl Niselbaum. The names of those two sons were Yoshua and Zalman.

Malch was a typical Poliesie shtetl with its small Jewish houses and muddy little street and alleys where Jews lived for many generations, dreaming of going to America or the land of Israel.

We asked and got to my father's cousin Joshua, with whom we spent that night. That evening as we were sitting and talking about our situation, in comes the chief of the local police who is greeted warmly by my father's cousin. Joshua introduces my father to

the chief. It turns out that this chief was also the chief of police in Malch before the war, when my father's cousin Joshua was the *soltis* (village elder) in Malch. The chief escaped the Bolsheviks by going west, to Nazi-occupied Poland. Now with the Germans, he came back to assume his old position.

The chief spent the evening in conversation, during which my father told him about the experience of the Jews of Shershev in the last couple of months. As expected for a chief of police who was under German rule but still being friendly with a Jew, he did not make any comments, just kept on nodding his head lightly. When he left, Joshua said to my father, "Actually he is not a bad sort."

The next morning we left for our destination, Pruzany, a distance of twelve kilometers away. About halfway between Pruzany and Malch used to run a rail way track which, under the Germans, became the dividing line--a kind of border between east Prussia and the German-created Ukraine. There was no permanent border guard, only from time to time a German patrol that used to pass along the tracks.

Before we got to the track, we had to pass a small village. As we walked along the village, I turn my head backward to see, behind us some thirty forty meters, a German walking along with a farmer who is carrying in hand a basket. Without losing time, we slipped into the nearest farmer's house. We were confronted by a middle age peasant woman and her daughter of twenty-two.

The older woman, recognizing us as Jews, asked us with hostility in her voice what we came for. We naively told her that we came in to wait until the German passes by. While we were talking to her, we were hoping that the German did not notice us and won't come after us.

The peasant woman started yelling and cursing us, screaming at the top of her voice that we should get out of her house. To our defense came the farmer's daughter, who kept telling us we should stay and wait until the German to pass.

Within seconds, a heated quarrel developed between mother and daughter. It seemed that the daughter was communistically well-indoctrinated, using Soviet slogans and reasoning in our defense. I could see through the window the German and the farmer passing by. We thanked the girl and walked out. We gave the two men headway and

followed some fifty meters behind them. They crossed the track and turned left on a field path and we went straight ahead in the direction of Pruzany.

Near Pruzany we noticed a large group of Jews returning to town from work. We joined them and got into the ghetto without a problem. In fact, it was not yet a ghetto in Pruzany in the full sense of the word. Almost all of the Jews remained in their homes, except those who lived on the main street, Pacewicz, and its continuation, Pocztow, up to the narrow-gauge railway station. The few Christian homes that were among the Jewish ones were taken over by Jews. The Christians have taken over the numerous bigger Jewish homes on the main street.

Jews from many places that were expelled from their homes were being brought into Pruzany, from places like Bialowieza and Gajnowka, and towns even before Shershev, including half of the Jews from Kamieniec-Litewski. Jews from small shtetls left their homes and places of birth voluntarily before being told to move. They were looking for security or safety in numbers. They were from places like Linovo-Oranczyce, the railway station twelve kilometers from Pruzany, Malech, and Selce, villages like Suchopole, Popielewo, Szubicze and others. To add to this multitude, five thousand Jews from Bialystok were in process of being shipped to Pruzany.

The expulsion of the few Christian families and the huge influx, although involuntary, of Jews, gave the impression that indeed Pruzany is being made into a Jewish town as the Germans claimed. Entering Pruzany, we went straight to my father's sister, Sheindl. There we found, besides her and her husband Leibl, daughter Lisa and son Sioma, my grandparents Yaakov-Kopel and Chinka with their son Eli. They came from Drohychyn a month earlier. To our surprise, we also found there my father's brother Hershl who came with his wife Sheina from Kamieniec-Litewski.

After spending a couple of days at my aunt and uncle's, after much talk, relating and listening, our relatives advised us to come to Pruzany. Having made our decision, we left Pruzany on a Friday afternoon. Because of the muddy road, it took us over three hours to cover the distance of the twelve kilometers. We arrived in Malecz just before dark.

My father had in Malech one more relative, besides the two brothers Niselbaum. His name was Tzalkah (the baker). I do not remember his second name or their

relationship. This time we went to stay there. He was indeed the local baker. A man of about sixty, he lived with his wife alone in the house. I do not even know if they had children. In any case, they lived alone in the house.

That Friday night his wife gave each of us a piece of challah (a twisted white bread eaten on the Sabbath). It was the first time that I tasted challah in over two years, as it is baked with wheat flour that was not available in our parts during the Bolsheviks--never mind the Germans. It turned out also to be the last time for the next four years. We went to bed early, tired from the long walk and the older people after a day's work.

Apparently, I slept well in a soft bed covered with a comforter, for when the first shot woke me it was just past five on the old clock on the wall. It seemed to me as if I just fell asleep. We jumped out of bed and dressed in seconds. It was still dark outside but out of the still darker room, I could see two men running with rifles in their hands, shooting at random into the street. The last two months in Chomsk conditioned us for such a moment.

Not losing a second my father and I run to the door which opened with one kick, without slowing down crossed the street, went through somebody's yard, over a fence and we found ourselves in an open meadow. Just now, we started to run in earnest, away from Malch. It was dawn and I could make out a few more running in the meadow. A few minutes later, it was possible to tell who those people some fifty meters ahead of us were. My father, panting, said to me, "This is the rabbi, his son and the *shamas* (beadle)." Still further to our right, I noticed a girl that used to be my sister's classmate in gymnasium. Her name was Symah Pomeraniec.

Our only objective was to get away as fast and as far from the place from where all the shooting was coming and which is doomed to share its fate with Chomsk. Running I turned my head to see if we are being chased, I noticed several men behind the fence we just climbed. Their rifles were resting on the fence firing in our direction. As I was turning back my head in the direction we were running, I glanced at the girl Symah who at that moment seemed to have lost her speed momentum and fell to the ground. My sincere prayer became even more pleading if it was at all possible that the bullets aiming at us should miss their target.

How far we ran or how long we could not tell, but in the confusion, we lost sight of the others. When we finally stopped to catch our breath, Malch was a couple kilometers behind. We could still hear the shooting but not so continuously as before. In our imagination, we could already see the Jews of Malch being driven to the slaughter. The only road left for us was Chomsk to my mother, sisters and brother.

From a distance, we could see the winding road that leads from Chomsk to Malch, which we, a few days earlier, used. Making it to the road we took I in the direction Chomsk.

After a couple of kilometers, we encounter a tall farmer coming in our direction. When we came face to face with him, he said in Yiddish, in a form of a question, “Jews?” We were taken aback. He noticed it and continued. I am a Jew too. I spent all my life in that nearby village. This morning Germans came to me and ordered me to leave everything behind and go to Malch. We told him what we saw this morning in Malch. However, this only added to his confusion. He continued in the direction of Malch, not having where or to whom to turn. We could not understand that this Jew in his farmer’s attire and looks went on to Malch. How said it is that a Jew who lived a lifetime among Christians could not in a time of need to turn to one for help.

A little bit farther, I noticed in the distance two Germans coming in our direction. Glancing at my father, I saw that he was looking down at the road not to step into a deep puddle and did not notice yet the Germans. Few meters ahead to our right was a single homestead without a sign of life in the yard. I also noticed a well behind the house. Grabbing my father by the sleeve, I pulled him off the road leading him behind the house at the same time telling him that I am very thirsty. From where we stood, we could not see the road or the passing Germans.

Not wanting to worry my father, I lowered the pail slowly into the well, bringing it back even at a lesser speed. Putting the pail on the rim of the well, I drank very slowly. Even when I could not drink any more I still held my face in the pail pretending to drink. My father finally asked me, how much can I drink? I only stopped pretending to drink when I felt that the Germans had passed the house.



After I talked to my father into taking a drink, we emerged from behind the house onto the road. By then the Germans had not only passed the house, but were a nice distance away. I did not say anything to my father just nodded my head in their direction. My father said nothing, but I knew that he understood the reason of my act.

We did not lose time that day just kept on plodding on the muddy road towards Chomsk. There were a few villages on the way. Fearing that there might be Germans in there rounding up the single Jewish families living in the area, we used to inquire before entering a village. If there were, we used to go around them.

Before dark, we entered the village of Minky knowing that there are no Germans or local police, we went to the village elder, telling him that we left Malecz this morning as many Germans arrived, not mentioning the shooting. The local farmers had heard nothing of it so far. The elder said that a couple local farmers have left this morning for Malech and are due back any moment; we can wait and find out if something is going on there.

Within half an hour, the farmers arrived. It seemed that they were ordered to leave Malecz immediately or were not even permitted to enter for they did not know much of what is going on there. All they said to us was “They are shooting ours and yours, but yours more.”

The reason why some of the Melec local non-Jews people are being shot we understood. It was quite common in those days for the gentiles to start plundering the Jewish homes the moment Jews were being rounded up. The Germans wanting to have the first choice could just as easily shoot Christians. Apparently, the couple of farmers did not know or did not understand the reason for shooting Christians, which upset them and spoiled the mood of the villagers.

Where do we go in a dark and rainy October night? My father asked the elder if we could spend the night in the village. Here again he took us to a farmer where we spent the night on a hay covered floor.

We did not have any nightmares, as we could not sleep after the experience of the day—the escape from Malecz, the fear of being shot, the tension of every step. Behind us, Malecz is being massacred. The road to Pruzany is closed. We escaped for a moment with

our lives, now trying to get to Chomsk. Death looms in every village where there are Germans or local police. And when we get to Chomsk, what then? For how long will Chomsk be left alone? Why?

Everybody was up before daylight. The farmer's wife gave us boiled potatoes with some milk. The rain stopped overnight and the road began to dry up, but most of our walk took place across fields and forests, as we had to avoid the villages. About noon somewhere near a forest, we stumbled on a single homestead. We entered the little house and asked for a piece of bread. The farmer's wife took out from a cupboard a crust of dry bread and handed it to us. As she did it, I noticed her looking critically at it. Realizing it meant nothing for two men, she went over again to the cupboard, took out freshly baked bread slicing off another piece she gave it to us.

We left the house, my father holding the two pieces of bread. He looked at it and handed me the bigger piece, which happened to be the fresh one. Without thinking, I gulped it down. It was after I finished my piece that I looked at my father who was struggling with the piece of dry crust. I hated myself for being so thoughtless. However, it was too late. I had eaten it.

In mid afternoon, we entered a little village six kilometers before Chomsk. In another hour and a half, we will be in Chomsk. Not that we had any good news nor were we safe in Chomsk, but after the last two days to be with the rest of the family. No matter for how long, to know that we are still here and together would be good.

Suddenly, from the few houses around appeared a few farmers' children with mocking faces yelling at us. Hey Jews! Where are you going, to Chomsk? There are no more Jews in Chomsk. They are all slaughtered.

The fact that Chomsk's Jewish community has been murdered and if the Nazis have done it once they can do it again with the Jews of Shershev compounded by the fact that we were running from what we assumed to be a slaughter in Malecz, it made sense that it could have happened in Chomsk at the same time.

Here our entire world collapsed. We remained numb unable even to think and the village children jump around us with shouts and laughter. Dimly aware of our action, we get out of the village, if only to escape the laughing children. A couple hundred meters

from the village we stop. The two of us are alone in the world. We have nobody to go to. Nobody to come to. Why did we abandon them? To be with them in their final moments, to hold my little sisters hands at the edge of the ditch. Why did we have to go to Pruzany exactly now? Why did it have to happen? Why? G-d, in heaven why?

In the distance, from the direction of the village is approaching a farmer's horse and buggy. We don't want to hide. We don't want to talk to anybody.

The horse and buggy pull up. In it sits a farmer of about sixty, dressed like all farmers but cleaner and better fitting. With a friendly face and encouraging smile, he offers us a ride. We wonder if he is making fun of us. He has such a good face and is an older man, why would he do it?

We tell him what we have just heard from the village children and that we were on our way to my mother and children. He listens with a serious but critical expression on his face. When we finish he says to us; I am a village elder from not a far away village, if something would have happened in Chomsk I would have known, the children are most likely referring to the original slaughter. Do not be afraid. Get on the wagon and let us get closer to Chomsk.

We had nothing to lose and got on. We started talking. He points at a sewing machine in his wagon and says, "This was a Jewish machine." A friend of his plundered it from a Jewish home. He borrowed it from him as his wife needed to do some sewing. He expressed his sympathy with our plight. Thus listening to expression of compassion for the first time from Christian lips, we entered Chomsk.

The little lanes were empty and quiet in Chomsk that dusk. We thanked the good Christian not knowing that our paths will soon cross again. With great emotion and relief, we greeted and hugged my mother and children.

The news about Malecz soon spread among the Jews of Shershev in Chomsk. Nevertheless, the desperate situation and hunger could not stop some from attempting to get to Pruzany. Within a week, the events in Malecz became known to us. It turned out that the Germans came to Malecz to inform the local Jews that they are being transferred to Bereza-Kartuska, a shtetl some thirty kilometers away with a population of over three thousand Jews. True to Nazi tradition, they came at an ungodly hour of the morning to

assemble the local Jews in order to inform them of their intention, using the Nazi method of screaming and shooting in the air. The Malecz Jewish population knowing what the Nazis are capable of and what they have done to Jews in neighboring shtetls panicked. Some began to run for their lives like my father and I. The Germans seeing Jews running away, no matter the reason, began to shoot them down. The local police did not need encouragement and followed suit.

It only stopped when the entire Jewish population was herded together in the center surrounded by the Germans. It was only then that they were informed that tomorrow Sunday, they are to move to Bereza-Kartuska.

Their crude and terrifying arrival has taken a couple dozen lives. The next day the Malecz Jews left their centuries old homes. They were permitted to take with them a horse drawn buggy full of belongings. The Germans were so sure that the Jews would obey their orders that they did not bother to attend the transfer. A few families took the chance and moved to Pruzany instead of Bereza-Kartuska. Among them my father's two cousins Joshua and Zalman Niselbaum with their families.

After our recovery from the experience of Malecz, my parents concluded that even in Pruzany we would largely depend on help from the family, for whatever money my father and I had with us was taken from us during the march. The Germans took from the women too. The little money my mother succeeded in hiding from the Germans was insignificant, even though it was in U.S. dollars. The jewelry and gold coins was buried in Shershev. To come and get it was out of the question if even it was still there and not found by the local gentiles.

My parents came to the decision that we will remain in Chomsk for as long as the potatoes will last and then go to Pruzany. Late fall is and always was a rainy season in our part of the world. That one was no exception. The mud in Chomsk Street or alley was harder to put with than in Shershev. There at least the streets were cobblestoned and two of them had sidewalks. Chomsk had neither. To go to a neighbor was a problem as we had no proper footwear or attire. So we used to sit on the only piece of furniture we had, a broken bench or on the hay on the floor in the dimly lit room. The only light used to come from the burning kindling in the open door of the brick oven.

In the semi darkness of the room, we could not notice the soot floating around in the air but in the morning in daylight, we could see each other's black and soot-filled nostrils. We, the grownups, were able to wash it out ourselves, but the little brother and sisters needed help. Poor dear sweet children.

We lived in one before the last occupied houses in the street. After it were few more unoccupied Jewish homes. Behind them were the two mass graves.

In the last occupied house lived Hertzka Kaminker with his family. It was eerie and weird to live in the last inhabited house and that Hertzka used to come often to us "to be among living people" as he used to say. During the day, we used to come in to each other's house, simply to escape the depressing atmosphere in the house only to find it in somebody else's.

People in desperation wanted by force to bring salvation by all sorts of rumors and even interpreting each other's dreams. The circulating rumors were not encouraging. Some were well founded and some were just rumors, like the rumor that in some places the Germans killed only the men. That was interpreted that the women are being left alone and safe. In other places was the opposite. In our desperate situation, we failed to see the reality at which we stared every day, the two mass graves in which men, women, and children, young and old lay shoulder to shoulder, without regard or compassion for sex or age. Everyday brought its full quota of rumors that used to upset us to the limits already agitated nerves.

From all my friends at home all I had in Chomsk were the two brothers Rotenberg, with whom I used to spend a fair amount of time. In those days my friend Lazar, the older of the two brothers, the one that escaped during our march, decided at the age of twenty to marry a girl from Chomsk. She was one of the dozen young people that managed to save themselves from the slaughter.

To say that the wedding was a modest one would be greatly exaggerated. It took place without a rabbi, without Kiddush (benediction over wine), just in the presence of two witnesses. The wedding was befitting the times.

With November came winds, cold and snow. Fortunately, it was warm in the house. The previous owner provided himself ahead of time with wood for the winter, which he did not live to see.

On a November day, I had to cut wood in the schoolyard for the school that was now attended only by Christian children, as the Jewish children were lying in the mass graves. The logs we had to saw and split outside and bring it in by the armful inside. As I was coming in to the school with arms full of chunks of wood, I passed the corridor where the pupils' coats were hanging. I froze to the floor. Only a Jew that grew up in our parts of the world would notice and understand it. There in front of me, rack after rack was full of Jewish children's coats. Let me explain. Jewish children outer garments were different from the non-Jewish farmer children ones. While the farmer coats were made of the home spun wool material, the Jewish ones were made from manufactured yard goods. There, in front of me, every single coat was owned only a short time ago by a Jewish child. Now the true owners of those coats were decomposing in the ground, while the children of those who so diligently helped the Nazis in their atrocious and savage act, are wearing their victims clothing. Looking at those Jewish children's' coats, I wanted to scream, "Not only did you murder, you have also plundered.' But what good is the cry, when they are the law, judge and enforcer?

The potatoes in the corner of the room were disappearing fast. My parents started talking about Pruzany in earnest. But Pruzany is at the end of an over eighty odd kilometer frozen and now snow covered road, on which every few kilometers is a village in which there might be local police, Germans or both. For a Jew to be caught by either of them spelled death. We cannot delay the tip either, for the moment we finish the last pot full of potatoes will also be our last meal.

Exactly what day it was I do not know, I only know that it was in the second half of December when my mother boiled the last few potatoes dividing it among us. We put on all the clothing we had and with nothing to carry, we left the house that sheltered us for three and a half months.

After covering a couple kilometers, we reached a forest. Leaving the snow covered road we entered the forest and proceeded at the edge along the road under the

trees that protected us from the falling snow. From a distance, we noticed an approaching horse and buggy. When it came closer, we recognized the same farmer, the village elder who gave us a lift to Chomsk when we were running from Malecz, the same that expressed so much sympathy and compassion for us Jews.

Seeing that friendly Christian, we came out of the forest to greet him. He recognized us too. It led to a little conversation. As we were talking, we noticed at a distance several Chomsk policemen on bicycles with rifles over their shoulders approaching in our direction. The village elder seeing them said as if to himself, what are they doing here, it is not even their territory? Turning to us he asked, "Did anybody see you leave Chomsk this morning?" We said we did not know. He nodded his head knowingly and said, "Go on your way but stay close to the forest, and may G-d be with you." Giving a pull the reins, he started out towards the approaching policemen.

Behind the tree branches, we watched what happened. They met and a conversation ensued which lasted about ten minutes. We watched with relief as the policemen got on the bicycles and headed back to Chomsk.

It is possible that the policemen were after something that the village elder could help them with, so they turned back. It is also possible that a Chomsk local could have seen us leave and reported to the local police who did not want to miss a chance to dispose of a Jewish family by shooting them.

The truth of that coincidence will never be known but I want to believe that the good Christian was sent to us at that moment as if from heaven.

At noon, the weather changed. It cleared and turned frosty. The snow began to crackle under the feet. My two little sisters Sonia going on ten and Leiba not yet eight yet were struggling in the deep snow. So was my brother Leibl, barely eleven. Their little faces red from wind and cold, the eyes tearing from exposure to the hostile weather, holding on to my father's and mother's hands with their bare hands which did not give any sign of sensation. My father still had his worn by now winter coat. My mother was wrapped only in a shawl that was supposed to have protected her from that bitter wind and cold.

That sight pained me terribly. Yet I was trying to imagine how my parents felt. Especially my mother, who since I can remember was so protective of us.

We were forced every hour or so to knock on a door of a homestead that were by the roadside every several hundred meters. Out of compassion, those ordinary farmers let us in to warm up. Some used to give even a piece of bread for the children.

Coming into one house that same afternoon, we must have presented a very pathetic picture, for the farmer and his wife started literally begging my parents to leave with them the three children. That is my brother Leibl (Liova), my sister Sara (Sonia), and my sister Leiba. They were quite outspoken and said openly to my parents in those words: "You know what will eventually happen to you. With you, the children stand no chance. Leave them with us. We will look after them as if they were our own."

We, that is my parents, my older sister Sheva and I, knew that those people are telling the truth. But how do you do such a thing as to leave your own children, you own flesh and blood with total strangers at such a young age. How do you tell your own children, "Dear children, from today on you are no longer ours; you will never see us nor hear from us again. These total strangers will from now on be your guardians. They will feed you and look after you for better or for worse.

Can one imagine the scene when children start begging, pleading with parents not to be left behind with total strangers? Children that are telling parents that they would rather die with them than live without them.

On the other hand, who are those people? Is it a normal reaction of decent people to a heart-breaking scene that moves them for a moment? What will be their reaction an hour or two later when they will realize that they have extra three mouths to feed? Will they still feel the same way or will their altruism evaporate?

On the other hand, in our hearts was still smoldering a spark of hope, no matter how vague or naïve, that we will be safer in Pruzany. Why then would the Germans go to the trouble of creating a Judenstadt Jewish town there?

As for me, I could not have parted with my little brother and sisters. Looking at their tears swollen eyes for fear of having to remain I could not even dream of it I guess my parents felt the same way. We thanked the good people and left.



Before dark, we got to a village and asked for the village elder. We asked him if he could put us up for the night. Apparently, we must have been presenting a pathetic and sorry looking lot, for without a single question he took us to a farmer where we spent the night on the kitchen floor. The following day we again entered a couple farmers' houses to warm up. In one, we were again asked to leave the children behind. This time however, my parents did not hesitate to thank the good people, but gave a negative answer.

In the late afternoon, we approached Malecz with great apprehension. There were no more Jews in Malecz. Not my father's cousins Joshua and Zalman no Tzalka the baker. Nobody, not a single Jew. In fact, Jew was not allowed there. Even if there were no Germans, there was a local police force. To go around Malecz was out of the question. It was too late in the day. We would be stuck in open field deep in snow and perish for sure. Having no alternative we entered Malecz.

What we feared most happened. As soon as we entered the street, we came face to face with two local policemen. I can still see the smirks on their faces, as they were leading us to the police station, most likely planning our execution on the way.

Bringing us into the station, they led us right into the office of the chief. I can also see the surprise on the policemen's faces when they leading us in, saw the chief get up from his seat, stretch out his hand to my father with the words: Mr., Kantorowitz, how are you? We both recognized the chief of police we met at my father's cousin Joshua Niselbaum on our way to Pruzany in October.

The two policemen immediately changed their attitude towards us. Referring to us in their report and saying, "We met these people [he said people, not Jews] in the street."

My father told the chief the reason for our being in Malecz and asked if he can find us a place to spend the night. The chief said that we would have to break up in two groups, as we will be too many for one household. In between, he mentioned that there is a man in Malecz whom we might know. My mother and children went one way and my father and I went to the one the chief said we might know. It was my former boss Pietrukiewicz, the manager of the Soviet warehouse I worked for a year. We spent the night there, reminiscing with him until late at night about the good times in Shershev.

In the morning, we set out on our last leg to Pruzany. The crossing of the railway track, the so-called border, passes uneventfully. We meet no Germans on the border or on the way to Pruzany. Nothing had changed in Pruzany since my father and I left it two months ago. We entered via Seltzer Street, where already the first houses were occupied by Jews.

Despite all the circumstantial difficulties in existence, Pruzany at that time was a safe haven not only for the local Jews but also for the Jews of the nearby shtetls as well as for individual Jews who miraculously managed to save themselves from the slaughter of their respective shtetls and succeeded in getting to Pruzany. Credit for the order and organization has to be given to the leadership of the community that followed the tradition of previous generations of leaders who guided the community with justice, compassion and honesty. That experience and devotion came in handy to the “Judenrat” (Jewish committee) in dealing with the Nazis until the final hour.

A day after our arrival the committee assigned us accommodations. It consisted of two small rooms and a kitchen that we had to share with two women who lived in the same small house. The two women, a mother and daughter who was a teacher by profession were brought to Pruzany from Bialystok. My father’s sister Shaindl and brother Joshua gave us a double bed, a couch, a table and a couple of chairs. We already had more than in Chomsk. The house belonged to a Christian who had to vacate it as it was within the perimeter of the ghetto area.

The allotted bread per person was distributed under the supervision of the Judenrat at a minimal price. Some destitute people could not afford to pay anything. They used to receive their bread free. Thus did the committee made sure that every inhabitant of the ghetto was provided with a roof over the head and a piece of bread.

For some unknown reason, Pruzany enjoyed certain privileges that no other shtetl in our district did. For example, the Germans reintroduced the market days. They used to take place every Monday and Thursday, when the farmers from the surrounding villages used to come to the city to sell their produce and buy other necessities. Those market days were a tradition older than many only could remember which the Bolsheviks abolished. Now it started again, but not like it used to be. In the olden days the farmers could bring

to the market anything they wanted to sell, then go to the stores, many of them Jewish and buy whatever they needed.

There were no more Jewish stores now. Still, some former storekeepers managed to hold on to some of their merchandise and could barter now with the farmers. But most of the local Jews used to barter some of the house items or their clothing for food.

The farmers too had restrictions of sorts. They were permitted to bring in potatoes, cabbage, beets and carrots. No meat, butter, eggs, cheese and alike. Yet some of it found its way into the ghetto via the sack of potatoes. Those who had something to barter with had something to eat. All this was applicable to the local residents who so far, remained in their homes with their possessions. Here I want to point out that at that time the ghetto was as yet not fenced in and accessible in many ways. Thus keeping the food prices reasonable.

The late fall of 1941 was a tumultuous time in ghetto Pruzany. The Germans have just finished transporting five thousand Bialystok Jews in there. Unknown to the Germans, many on the quiet began to move back to Bialystok. The same happened with the Jews of Kamieniec-Litewsky. Some of course remained, among them my uncle Hershl and his wife Sheina.

My uncle Hershl's reason for remaining were the safety in numbers, his financial independence and the fact that Pruzany was incorporated in East Prussia, making us German citizens and thus "privileged Jews" (how naïve). Not to mention the fact that his extended family was there, like his parents, brothers and sister.

This does not mean that local Jews knew no hunger. Here I am speaking of these who always lived hand to mouth, like the many Jewish tradesmen, artisans and even petty merchandise. The Jewish masses that had no savings or merchandise.

However, as long as the ghetto remained open, Christians could get in and bring with them work in the form of raw material for the Jewish tradesmen. Jews could also get out by working in Christian homes.

Despite the tension and uncertainty, life in the ghetto pulsated that late fall of 1941. There were still things and material to fulfill the German demands and when need

be bribes. Everything was done to postpone the inevitable, hoping upon hope of a miracle.

Among others, the Germans had a constant demand for workers. A certain group used to work for the Gendarmerie or as we used to call them schutzpolizei where work meant hell on earth. From there, the men used to come home beaten and bloodied and had to be replaced almost daily. Another place used to be the Ortscommendantur where soldiers from the eastern front used to come for a rest. There were other establishments where physical labour was needed. Many used to go out daily to clean the street of snow. Mainly the main street Pacewicza that used to be a Jewish street. Now taken over by Germans and their collaborators.

For me, Pruzany was a change for the better. No more did I walk among the dead or walking dead like in Chomsk. Here I was among living who dared to hope.

In Pruzany, I found two of my friends. Kalman Kalbkoif lived with his parents and four sisters in one half of a former Christian house. In the other half lived a local Jewish couple by the name of Kotlar. The second friend Itzik Malecky too lived in the same little street called Rezky. He lived with his mother Breina, an older brother Nachum, a younger brother Moishe and a blind grandmother Yachna. Their father Pesach was shot on the march during our expulsion from Shershev.

They too lived in a small former Christian house that consisted of a meter wide and three-meter long hallway and one 3x3 meter room that served as a living, dining, bedroom and kitchen. The hallway besides protecting the entrance to the one room, also served as a storage room. In it, they kept a little turf that the committee used to distribute to the needy refugees.

The turf was to be dug by a group that used to leave the ghetto early every morning. After a march of several kilometers to the peat hole, dig the turf and return to the ghetto after dark.

The work, any kind of work done for the Germans and their Polish fawns, (as many Poles returned with the Germans to where they lived before the Bolsheviks) was done without any compensation. We were grateful if we got away without a beating.

I must admit that despite my previous experience in Chomsk I still did not realize the importance of helping my father in providing the most elementary items for our survival. I use to leave it to my father, not wanting to assume the responsibility, taking it for granted that he will somehow manage.

Among the many regrets this is one for which I cannot forgive myself even today. How could I have been so unfeeling as not to understand, so blind as not to see? After all, I was going on nineteen. Going out to work through the ghetto gate, I used to get a quarter of a kilo of bread, which I greedily used to eat up. I never stopped to think that maybe I should bring it back home. Coming back from work, my mother always had for me a piece of bread and a bowl of soup. I never thought of asking my mother how she managed it, or if she had eaten. True, I never saw my little brother and sister emaciated, but I remember my mother who was always a weighty woman slowly, losing weight since our expulsion from Shershev. Why didn't I think of asking my mother or father if they had eaten, or are they going around hungry?

These are part of the thoughts that haunt me and gnaw at me today.

The feelings of regret and remorse that constantly gnaw at me; I will come back to later if time will be on my side.

The large influx of Jews into the ghetto had stopped but not completely. The difference was that now it was not done by the Germans but by Jews themselves. Now only single individuals or small family size groups used to come in. It was no more than a trickle. Those were Jews that managed to save themselves from their respective shtetls that were slaughtered. Wandering through fields and forests at night, hiding during the day, they managed to avoid Germans and local police and made it to Pruzany.

Some Shershev families in Drohyczyn and Chomsk followed our example too and came to Pruzany in that winter 1941-42.

In one February cold day, the Gestapo, whose headquarter was in Biala-Podlask ordered the Judenrat (Jewish committee) to deliver five hundred Jews, preferably entire families for deportation east. The meaning of such a deportation was no more a secret. The committee was given three days time to deliver those people. Otherwise, the

Germans will do it themselves. Everyone in the ghetto knew that if the Germans will do it themselves, many more lives would be lost.

The committee was faced with a double task. One, if at all possible to annul the decree. The second, if not possible, who will it be? How do you tell someone, you and your family have to die?

The time began to pass in tension, apprehension and outright fear. The out-of-towners or refugees knew that if a list for delivering the five hundred souls was made, it would not be local but contain outsiders, and we the outsiders were doubly concerned.

The committee tried hard to annul the decree. The intermediary was Zalmen Segal, a member of the community, as he was called in the ghetto as the foreign minister. Born in Pruzany, he spent many years in Danzig. There he learned his German language and learned to deal with them. A tall man with a military gait, he looked very much German, and apparently understood their approach, psychology and attitude towards Jews. Maybe because of it he could at times anticipate their next move or intentions. Of course, it was temporary, for at the end, they had outwitted us all.

At that moment, a couple hours before the deadline when the committee was supposed to have delivered five hundred Jews for the slaughter, it sounded like messianic times when a messenger sent by Zalmen Segal from the Gestapo bureau, where he was sitting that evening in difficult negotiations with the chief of the Gestapo, brought the news to the office of the committee. It consisted of three words "it is good."

Although the full text of the negotiations became known only the next morning, the contents of the three words spread within minutes over the ghetto, despite the late hour. It is my opinion that the day was the happiest in the short life in the ghetto Pruzany. When does a pauper rejoice? When he finds the nickel he has just lost.

The success of those negotiations could be accredited to two factors: the talent of the negotiator and the susceptibility of the Gestapo big wigs to bribery. Sometimes money used to suffice, sometime leather boots and coats, fur coats for their wives, liquor and sometimes all of those things. It all depended on the severity of the decree.

From the refugees' point of view, that is the Jews of Pruzany proper, had it much better than they, the refugees. After all, the majority of the locals remained in their homes,

with the furniture, bedding, clothes, dishes, cutlery and alike. They could always find something to barter, no matter how difficult it was to part with. The refugees on the other hand had nothing to sell; all their possessions were on their backs. Anything else was either given by relatives, by acquaintances, by a mercy full Jew or by the committee. To supplement their existence some tried different means like dabbling in anything they could find among the ghetto Jews and with Christians on market days.

A few Shershev Jews living now in Pruzany used to sneak in at night into Shershev and try to collect things that they gave to their Christian neighbors for safekeeping, or simply to get some food by begging. Those who did not dare go to Shershev, as it was life threatening, used to send messages via Shershev Christians to their Christian friends to come out to Pruzany on market days. Some used to ask their Christian confidants to dig up something in their previous yard or in their double caused walls and bring it out.

Of course in such cases there used to get involved a third partner, the Christian that was living at that time in the Jewish home. There were cases that something used to be gotten back. Even a third was better than none. However, most of the time those attempts used to be futile. As soon as the Jews have left the shtetl, the local gentiles threw themselves at the Jewish possessions. When that was plundered, the searches started in the yards and ground.

Hardly anything escaped detection and if something did, the new people that moved in the Jewish homes continued the search. There were cases when the so-called confidants used to share it with the new tenants, forgetting the true owner.

My father did succeed in recovering some leather, which we hid in the double floor of our house. He did it with the help of the nurse's husband, when the couple lived in our house before the war. At the time when half of our house was serving as a health clinic. After dividing it in three parts, there was not much left.

Some weeks later, my father asked the same man to get several pairs of new shoes we had hidden in another place. The man came back claiming that there was none to be found. It is possible that those shoes were found before the new people moved in, it is also possible that those people found it, or...

In any case, this was our last attempt to recover anything hidden in our house or yard. And to think how handy those things would have come in. Throughout the winter, the trickle of Jewish refugees kept on coming into the ghetto. Among them those Shershev families that were really starving. Having no other choice, they were compelled at the risk of their lives to get to Pruzany where despite difficulties they were welcomed. The allotted bread and potato ration could not fill ones stomach and those who could not or were not able to supplement extra food, were at times forced to stretch out a hand that was never sent back empty.

Some refugees, most of them from Shershev, took awful chances in order not to become a burden on the committee or anyone else. There were some Shershev men that used to go on foot, a distance of one hundred kilometer to Drohyczyn. They carried in knapsacks, saccharine and exchanged it in Drohyczyn for tobacco. A couple of them even procured a horse and sled for this purpose.

The Christians along the villages they used to pass soon found out and started to ambush them, taking away the merchandise horse and sled. Having no other alternative, those men had to go on foot by a different route every time. In such a way, some needy Shershev families survived the winter.

I, not being even a partial provider for our family, maybe because of immaturity or maybe because life did not demand it of me until those difficult times, left it to my father. When I think of it, I realize that I don't know what my father did during the time when I was at work out of the ghetto. Nor do I really know to what extent my uncles and aunts helped us. That they helped us this I know, especially my father's sister Sheindl.

It is quite possible that my father dabbled a bit in petty items. It is also possible that my mother did succeed in hiding some valuables from the Germans during our expulsion. To these questions, I will never have an answer.

Shortly before Passover of the spring 1942, the Germans decided to reduce the size of the ghetto. It might have been under pressure from some local Christians whose houses were incorporated into the ghetto. We, living in that area had to move out. We were assigned a room on Nowa Street. It was a big house belonging to a tailor by the name of Berl Cukerman. One room in that house already occupied by a young intelligent



couple from Bialystok by the name of Eisenstein. The husband was the assistant chief of the ghetto police. Always busy at his job, his wife used to come into our room for chat with my mother.

The room we were given was small, especially for seven of us. My sister Sheva had to move to my Uncle Joshua and family who lived on the same street a few houses away. The owner of the house looked to be close to sixty. A bit bent over from spending a lifetime over a sewing machine. A socialist by conviction and like many old time idealists well informed about politics. A worthy and formidable opponent in a discussion, he used to get easily excited. His wife was the exact opposite, a quiet easygoing ordinary woman. Their oldest daughter in her twenties recently married in the ghetto to a refugee from Bialystok. A handsome, like a movie star young man, who most probably married her in order to have a home. He sure deserved someone much better.

Here we were in the heart of the Jewish part of Pruzany. Our street the middle of three parallel running streets; Pozarna, our street Nova and Yatka Street. Streets and alleys where Jews could move about out of sight from prying German eyes.

At that time, the Germans had a better idea of how many Jews are there in the ghetto and so did the committee. With spring, the demand for out of the ghetto workers had increased and dodging it became difficult. I had to appear now every day to be assigned to different tasks.

Around Pruzany, the Soviets started building two military airports. To do that work they not only employed local people, but they had also brought in a couple thousand convicts, or forced laborers as they called them, from deep in the Soviet Union. To house those convicts they built a row of wooden barracks. The convicts succeeded in building several two story brick buildings, accommodations for the military, before the Bolsheviks abandoned everything and ran. Now, under the Germans, their Schutzpolizei moved in the brick buildings. They decided to dismantle the wooden barracks and a large group used to go out from the ghetto to do the job.

The work could have progressed nicely, quietly and quickly, but the Schutzpolizei lived in the nearby brick buildings and they liked to come over to have some fun with the Jews. The work became a torture chamber.

The barracks were built on a sandy ground. The main supports of the barracks were the heavy posts dug into the ground. After dismantling the roof and the wall, the heavy posts had to come out of the ground.

I noticed a German supervising a small group of men digging out a post. He ordered them to dig around the post and let it fall in whichever direction. When the post fell half way, he ordered them to pull it out of the hole. It was never an easy job, but this one got jammed in its own hole and would not budge. The German was standing over them with a heavy club beating them continuously.

I do not know where I suddenly got the nerve to do it. Running over to the being beaten group, I pushed them aside. Jumping into the hole I quickly dug to one side of the hole, jumped out and pushed the post in that direction. Giving a nod to two more men, we put our hands around the post and pulled it out.

Without stopping to straighten my back and fearing the Germans reaction to my intervention, I ran to the next post, quickly digging a narrow, two shovels wide ditch in one side of the post. I pushed the post in that direction. The post fell promptly in the intended path. With a couple more men, we quickly pulled the post out. It was only then that I chanced to take a look at the German. To my surprise, he was looking at me approvingly.

The group around soon caught on and started doing it my way to avoid further beatings. The German comes over to me, sticking the stick in my hand and says, "You take care of them." As soon as he turned away, I let the stick slide from my hand. He noticed it, coming over he picked up the club, while I was getting ready to receive a god threshing. Instead, he simply handed it to me without a word. Again, as soon as he turned away I let it out of my hand. He noticed it again, but did not come over; making a sign of resignation, he turned and walked away.

I believed then and still believe now, that on that day I saved some of my coworkers from a lot of blows, and proud of myself for daring to throw the stick away.

The next day I was assigned to another task at dismantling the barracks. The Schutzpolizei showed up too. I could never understand why they used to come to torture

us. Was it sheer idleness, for amusement or was it plain sadism? Within two weeks, we finished that job and again I began to work each day at another place.

There were two jails in Pruzany from way back. One was built of bricks and referred to as the red jail. The other one was covered with plaster and called the white one. It served the purpose of a jail for many years. Under the Bolsheviks, those two jails served mostly as holding places for criminal offenders as well as political ones. From there they were sent to Siberia.

Under the Germans, those two jails too served as a gathering point from where the arrested were being dealt with in the Nazi manner. That is, to say were sent to their eternal rest. Those arrested, undesirables of the Nazi state consisted of former Soviet collaborators, communists, employs of the Bolshevik party, militia members, Soviet sympathizers and suspected sympathizers.

When in spring of 1942 the activities of the pro Soviet partisans increased, they and their sympathizers, supporters in any way fell in that undesirable category, were arrested. The Germans did not need nor did they look for any proof. All they needed was a name.

It turned into a time to even old scores. A time of revenge, settling old misunderstandings, rivalry and resentments. All one needed was to go to the Germans and tell them that such and such supports partisans. Within twenty-four hours, that person used to be arrested and brought in one of the two jails.

The above was applicable mostly to the non-Jews. It was a time for the villagers, the farmers, to fear each other and mistrust one another. The jails used to fill up quickly. In order to make room for new arrested the old ones had to be disposed of. For this purpose, a couple Gestapo men used to arrive from Biala-Podlask to look over the cases of the detained. The decision was a simple one guilty or not. There was no room for uncertainties.

There was no interrogation, no hearing. It all depended on the whim of the Gestapo representative. As a rule, almost the entire jails used to be emptied after such a Gestapo visit.

Between Pruzany and its railway station Oranczyce was a birch forest, surrounded by a sandy terrain overgrown in spots with bushes. Near those bushes, the Germans decided to make a resting place for all those condemned.

First, a mass grave had to be prepared and it was the Jewish committee that had to send diggers. Thus, the ghetto used to be forewarned about the impending execution. Not only this but also the number of people that will be shot. It depended on the size of the grave.

The Nazis had a prescribed measure as follows: the hole had to be five meters wide and two and a half meters deep. The length depended on the number of people to be executed. Each four meters represented fifty human beings. That is to say, that if the mass grave was twelve meters long it meant one hundred and fifty souls. If sixteen meters long, it represented two hundred.

That hole had to be dug a couple days before the execution. On the day of the execution, a group of thirty men at six in the morning had to be waiting there for the burial. A distance of an hour and a half from the ghetto.

Of course, nobody wanted to volunteer for this job, but as it occurred on the average once a month, many got caught. In one of those spring morning, it was my ill luck to get caught in that group.

In the morning as each group used to march out of the ghetto it was lead by a group leader. Among them was one by the name of Berl Buchalter whose job it was to lead the groups to dig those mass graves and a day or two later to cover the victims.

I was informed the night before to report to work much earlier, as we had to be at the graveside at six. As we left the ghetto, we received a quarter of a kilo of bread and marched away to our destination. After the six-kilometer march, we turned off the road for a short distance.

On a large sandy uneven clearing there was the hole dug in a sandy soil. Judging by its length of about twelve meters, translated into the execution of one hundred and fifty human beings. From the top to the bottom of the hole were steps dug in the sandy ground. Apparently, it must have rained at night, for the steps were partly washed away, which the leader of the group told us to correct. While we were busy fixing the earthen steps a

gendarme or a Schutzpolizei man pulled up on a motorcycle. He inspected our work, at the same time giving our foreman instructions. As soon as we finished our work, the German told us to get behind the bushes some fifty meters away and not to look in the direction of the ditch. Berl, our foreman, turns to us and says, "Fellows, if you have something to eat do it now, for later you will not feel like it." We took his advice and ate our bread.

We did not have to wait long. We heard approaching vehicles. Not being able to conquer our inquisitiveness, we looked through the bushes. Half a dozen of the same Schutzpolizei arrived on motorcycles, taking up positions around the hole some twenty meters from its edge. Behind them pulled up a jeep like vehicle with four men of higher rank, judging by the conduct of the gendarmes. Followed by three fully covered trucks. At the end, another vehicle arrived with a dozen or so gendarmes who took up positions around the trucks including the hole.

Looking from behind the bushes although hiding from the Germans, we could clearly see one truck backing up almost to the rim of the hole. Two Germans opened the back half door of the truck that fell downwards, while the upper part of the back of the truck remained covered with the tarpaulin obscuring the view for the standing inside people. The Germans started yelling *raus* (out) and the people started jumping to the ground and being driven down into the hole using the earthen steps that we fixed up an hour earlier.

As soon as the first truck was empty the second and third follow one after another. The trucks pulled away and the Germans got closer to the rim, but not too close. We noticed that some of them threw something in the hole. A second or two later we heard explosions. Those are grenades Berl Buchalter whispered to us. Frankly, I thought that grenades make a louder bang when they explode. This was no louder than a rifle shot from up close.

Right after the explosion the Germans approached the hole, walking right to its rim, and began to shoot into it. We understood that they are finishing off the ones that survived the explosions. They made sure that nobody is alive, for they hang around the pit several more minutes firing in it from time to time.

Finally, some of them picked up the shovels we left near the pit and started filling it in. Their shoveling lasted a minute or two. Dropping the shovels, they got into the vehicles and into the motorcycles and pulled away, leaving behind the one that came first.

That one yelled at us to come over. This time we did not walk but run. I did not know what to expect running towards the hole, but for a minute, I was thankful to the Germans for throwing the few shovels of sand over the slaughtered bodies.

The hole that was two and a half meters deep was now one and a half; the other meter was taken up by the just murdered mass of humanity whose faces and torn bodies lay under a thin layer of sand just thrown by the murderers themselves.

Each of us grabbed a shovel and started shoveling the sand into the pit. I noticed that some of the sand was beginning to change color, absorbing blood. A terrible thought came to me: If so much blood is being absorbed by the sand on top, what must it be like down below?

We were faster than the blood absorbing sand, and soon all traces of the blood was covered with freshly heaped sand except for the splattered spots on the walls of the not yet full mass grave.

Apparently, the German was satisfied with our progress. He got on the motorcycle and drove away. For the first time we straightened our backs and tried to relax our nerves. Despite the fact that we wanted to get away from there as soon as we could, we had to stop to collect our thoughts.

We noticed that even though almost half the pit was taken up with bodies, there was not enough sand to fill in the hole. Was it possible that the rain that fell the night before washed away so much sand?

We had to scrounge around for pieces of wood even tree stumps to fill up the grave. That day we started out early and got home early too. A day or two later I was assigned to a group of close to a hundred men, whose job it was to dispose of undetonated Soviet bombs.

Here we had to go some five six kilometers in one direction on an unfinished railway embankment built by the Soviets. From there a field road led in to a forest where we saw three huge craters each about seventy five meters in diameter. How deep those

craters were I could not tell, as they were filling up with water up to ten meters below the rim. To my question on the meaning of those craters, the leader or foreman told me that there were three large Soviet warehouses, full with aviation bombs that the Soviets blew up before they drew back or shall I say before they ran away, on the first day of the war. I recalled the three tremendous explosions I heard in Shershev that memorable Sunday night of June 22, 1941.

Not all the bombs however exploded in those three explosions. Many were thrown unexploded over a radius of a kilometer all over the forest with the bombs were also thrown around many detonators. There were four sizes of bombs: fifty, one hundred, two hundred and fifty and five hundred kilograms.

The two German airmen that were waiting for us ordered us to collect the strewn around bombs and stock them up in approximately fifty-ton piles. While they were priming them, we were running to the nearest farmstead half a kilometer away. The airmen used to light a delayed action fuse giving them enough time to run to a previously prepared shelter. After the explosion, we had to run back and start collecting more bombs.

The work was not only dangerous but very hard. The fifty-kilogram bombs we carried on our shoulders. The one hundred one was carried by two men on two hammered-together boards and the two hundred and fifty plus the five hundred ones we had to load on a horse drawn buggy. Carrying a fifty-kilogram bomb to carry on your shoulders for several hundred meters in a thick forest all day is no easy task. The two Germans although serving in the air force were very willing to use their sticks generously. One of them a non commissioned officer carried with him a *Schmeiser* (German submachine gun). At midday they were both warm from yelling and hitting us, the non-comm suddenly points at me and in a loud voice says, "You come here." I was wondering what I had done now. The German takes off his machine gun puts it over my shoulder and says, "Take care of it, now go to the shelter where we keep the explosives, timers and detonators." The shelter was part of the ditch at the main road that was covered with branches and earth dumped on top. I went over there and spent the afternoon walking

back and forth along the ditch. Compared to the others I got off easy that day. The only annoyance was the swarms of flies that kept on biting.

The next morning going to work I yearned for the yesterday when I got off so easily. To my surprise as soon as we got there, the non-comm recognized me right away and motioned to me to come over. This time he gave me his weapon in my hand and motioned with his head in the direction of the shelter. I was wondering if he would give me the three long bullet magazines he kept on his belt. He never did.

The next day I already knew my place. As I was walking back and forth on the road, I was wondering what are the farmers thinking, seeing a young Jew, (as I had a big yellow stars on the front and back of my shirt) walking back and forth without fear nor without interest in them.

Going to and back from work, we used to talk among ourselves about the number of bombs the Germans are now destroying, about the loss and waste of material and what's more the effort and toil that was put in producing all this that is being now so easily destroyed by the accursed Nazis. We were talking of the thousands o innocent Soviet citizens that languished in jails, in mines and work camps to produce it all. So that first the Soviets themselves could blow it up and the rest we are forced to do and all without the loss of a single life of a Nazi.

In between being shifted from one to another job, I used to get away with a day or two staying home. In those off days, and on Sundays, I used to spend a fair amount of time with my two friends Kalman Kalbkof and Itzik Maletzky. Even on work days and the days were getting long, after work coming into our room, my mother had always had something for me to eat. I used to sit down to eat not having the consideration to ask her if she had already eaten or anybody else in the family for this matter. After eating, I used to lie down for an hour and then go to meet my friends. It was only later, after I had lost them that I began to regret my actions. With my friends, the topic of our conversation was about rumors of German defeats and new slaughters of Jews.

Unfortunately, the slaughter of Jews was always proven to be correct. While the rumors of German defeats wrong. For the Germans have just started their summer offensive that took them to the gates of Stalingrad. That early summer the Germans



decided to fence in the ghetto and I happened to be one of many to do the fencing. First, we had to dig posts and then fasten on them a net of barbed wire.

I happened to work on a stretch of fence behind Rezky Street, where there was a large meadow. Our foreman said: Look fellows, there is now nobody to supervise. Let's take in a bit more of the meadow so that the ghetto children will have where to play." We did. When the fence was erected and the German commission came to inspect it, they decided that the ghetto had too much space. They ordered to move the fence right behind the streets houses, depriving the ghetto of the only bit of green grass and empty space. It was also my task to take down the fence and move to wherever the Germans wanted.

The committee was informed that the Germans are planning to create a work camp near Bialowieza, fifty kilometers from Pruzany. It was required of them to deliver two hundred able-bodied men.

To go out daily from the ghetto to work for the Germans and come back at night is one thing, but to be away for a month or two under the constant supervision of the Schutzpolizei is something else. Understandably, nobody wanted to go.

As the style was in all other ghettos, so it was to in a smaller degree in Pruzany. The committees used to relegate the refugees to the most unpleasant places. Again, I am emphasizing, to a smaller degree, it was in Pruzany.

For this purpose, the ghetto committee appointed representatives from all the shtetls that were brought in or came voluntarily to Pruzany. From Shershev they appointed my grandfather, Yaakov-Kopel Now the committee called a meeting of all the representative demanding from them names of people to be sent to that camp.

After hearing their demand my grandfather told them: I can give you only one name. He gave them the name of his youngest son, my uncle Eli. The only unmarried son, nine years my senior.

I do not know if it was spitefulness or maybe helplessness, but they put my Uncle Eli's name on top of the list and he was sent to the Bialowiez camp. The camp or rather the couple barracks they slept in was several kilometers away from Bialowieza in the depth of that ancient forest. During the day, the Schutzpolizei used to supervise them, but before dark, the Germans used to get back to Bialowieza, fearing the partisans that were

operating in the forest. Indeed, they used to be visited by partisans at night quite often. It was the partisans' visits that became the stimulus for a partisan movement in the ghetto.

During the two months of the camps existence, the workers that used to get sick from over work or even due to the beating by the police, used to be sent back to the ghetto and replaced by others.

Here I would like to emphasize the effort of the leadership of the ghetto to insure the safety and lives of the inmates of that camp. For when the work was finished, all the two hundred men returned safely to the ghetto. It was one of the rare cases where Jews returned home after a stint in a German camp. As a rule, after finishing their task they used to be shot or sent to other camps, if lucky. Again, I would like to stress the fact that the Judenrat did everything in their power to ease the conditions in that camp. With the help of bribes, they used to send out several horse drawn wagons with food weekly and when it was necessary, even with a German escort. No wonder that when those two hundred men returned, they had nothing but praise for the committee.

That spring of 1942 a couple more Shershev families succeeded in making their way from Drohyczyn and Chomsk to Pruzany. They were driven by hunger and fear. With the warm weather, the killing of Jews by the Nazi squad and their helpers intensified. Those newcomers used to bring news from all the shtetls where Shershev Jews were dispersed, like Drohyczyn, Chomsk, Antopol, Iwanowo, Janow and neighboring shtetls. The news was always depressing and what's worse, shocking.

We, in Pruzany used to wonder as to how long our luck will hold. As in every place and at any time there were also in Pruzany, foolish optimists that used to find all kinds of reasons and merits for the Germans to leave us alone. They used to justify their argument by fact that the Germans opened a tannery where a good quality leather was produced which the Germans, especially the Gestapo craved so, or that in the ghetto is being opened a workshop in which several dozen Jews will be working at sewing leather around felt boots to be sent for the army on the Soviet front. After all, there was no secret that the German army suffered from the bitter cold on the Russian front last winter and to those naïve optimists, there was no question that the Germans saw their solution to this problem in the couple dozen Jews sewing on leather on the felt boots.

In the category of such optimist belonged only a few local men, but many more women, or rather housewives to whom the very mention of the work slaughter was criminal. Although from a psychological point of view and with hindsight, we can now rationalize the reason.

The does not mean that the Jews of Pruzany were so naïve or foolish to believe that they will be spared the fate of other Jewish committees. To the contrary, Pruzany and many intelligent, realistic and lucid Jews who were active not only in the Judenrat (committee) but in all other social and communal organizations that functioned in the ghetto. Maybe they felt that this was all that could be done, after all, they have managed so far to steer the ghetto clear of catastrophe, in fact unscathed, while all around the Jewish communities have disappeared from the face of the earth. Every day that we survived brought us closer to allied victory. For us refugees who already tasted real Nazi atrocities, the future was very bleak. All we could hope for was a miracle that refused to happen.

If in winter and early spring a few Shershev Jews succeeded to make it from Pruzany to Drohyczyn and back, it became practically impossible in summer. The human anima had tasted Jewish blood and realized that it is wanton, worthless, unprotected and cheap. At time even rewarding to betray, so it started doing it. A Jew on the road could be stopped by a couple or several villagers who used to take everything from him and hand him over to the Germans or local police. They in return used to make that Jew dig his own grave before shooting him.

Some villagers used to satisfy themselves with robbing the Jew and letting him go. Rare was the case when a villager did not rob him and even rarer when a villager let him in for overnight and gave him something to eat.

That late spring of 1942, we found out from a Shershev Jew that made it from Drohyczyn to Pruzany that the Germans requested from the Drohyczyn committee two hundred men for a labour camp. All usual in such cases, the Drohyczyn committee picked the outsiders, in this case, the ones from Shershev. Before taking the local single men, they took among the first many married men from Shershev. One of those taken was my father's brother Reuven who left behind in Drohyczyn his wife Chaskha, a daughter

Michla, two years my junior, a son Shalom a year older than my brother Liova, and a son Shevach, age five. My aunt Chashka remained alone to fend for herself and her three children.

The two hundred men were led away from Drohyczyn, never to be seen or heard from again. Peasants from nearby villages told some Jews of Drohyczyn that they saw those men being led into a nearby forest and killed.

From those scarce wanderers we were told that those ghettos are being divided into two separate ones. They would be called ghetto "A" and ghetto "B." In Ghetto A would be the members of the committee, the ghetto police, employees of the committee. All those needed for the functioning of the ghetto and all those employed by the Germans and their cronies. All others will be living in Ghetto B, qualified as unproductive and thus not needed.

If ever Jews in their long history of persecution did not need division of any kind it was in those days. The Germans understood it perfectly and took advantage of it to the fullest. They succeeded in turning Jew against Jew. Lifelong friends became embittered enemies. Everyone understood that the first victims in case of a Nazi conducted slaughter would be those in Ghetto B. Everybody wanted to get in there and the Germans ordered the ghettos to be divided in two even parts. It was like a drowning passenger boat that has not got enough lifeboats.

How the committees succeeded in carrying out is in itself a wonder. A big part in its execution played the fact that the Germans threatened to do it themselves, which nobody wanted, knowing that it would end with the obliteration of the entire ghetto.

After the division of the ghettos, the inhabitants of the ghetto "B" knew that it is only a matter of time before the Germans will come for them. The Jews of Shershev that were living in those shtetls found themselves mostly in the Ghetto B, due to their status as refugees. Having nothing to lose, tried to get out of the ghetto to make their way to Pruzany. They of course put their lives in immediate danger, whether by getting out or by being caught on the way.

How many Shershev Jews left their ghettos to make it to Pruzany, nobody will ever know. Most of them were caught by the local Ukrainian police and shot. A few made it.

It was from one that made it that we found out that my aunt, my uncle Reuven's wife and three children were let into Ghetto A as compensation for her husband that was one of the two hundred men that were taken earlier supposedly to work, but were shot in the nearby forest.

Pruzany as a whole, including the ghetto was at that time administrated by a Nazi party member. He held the title *Bergermeister* (mayor). There was also an *Ortscommendanture*, a military command that dealt exclusively with military affairs. Its quarters were in the former Polish *Monopoluwka* (Monopol office). It was a fenced in yard containing several brick buildings on Pocztowa Street, that lead to Pacewicza or *Neghydishe Gass* (Rich Man's) as it was called in the old days. It was also the main street in Pruzany.

In the ortscommendanture, beside the administration, the bulk of the buildings were taken up by members of the regular army. Those were soldiers that used to come from the front for a week or two of rest. Those soldiers did require service and what could be better than unpaid Jewish help?

So a group of Jews used to go there daily to put things in order. At the beginning, it was a large group. As things began to fall in lace, the rooms equipped with iron beds, with cupboards, table and chairs, less and less help was needed. In the end, all they employed were six men. I became one of them. Our work consisted of sawing splitting wood, pumping water for the buildings up to a water tower, peeling potatoes for the kitchen, even to scour the large cooking kettles.

Nobody was eager to work there. There were too many Germans around, too many eyes watching. I never cheated on work, as long as they did not beat us, I did not mind them watching. So, I remained there.

"When you chop wood splinters fall," goes a saying. With us, it became literally. We made ourselves primitive knapsacks in which we used to put in a few chips of wood. Not being stopped at the exit of the Ortscommendanture at which two soldiers were

constantly on guard and not being beaten at the ghetto gate for a few chips of wood, we began to fill our knapsacks more.

Notwithstanding the insignificance of a piece of wood at present, it meant a lot more in the ghetto. To us it meant that my father did not have to walk along the street to his sister and carry back a few chunks of wood in a bag. At least we became independent as far as wood is concerned. When I used to come home from work to see my mother heating up some soup for me with the wood chips I brought the day before, I felt that I am contributing something and wished I could do more.

At work, after the noon meal cooked, the Germans soldiers used to give us the large kettles to clean. As a rule, there was something left in them. After having part of it, as we used to divide it among us six, I used to have twinges of conscience for having eaten the piece of bread I got at the exit from the ghetto. After all, I could have saved it and brought it home.

Twice we had successful days. Once they were cooking “bacalla.” This is salted and dried codfish. It has to be soaked in water for a time before cooking. The smell is unpleasant during and after cooking. Many soldiers would not eat it, so the six of us had some to take home.

The second lucky day was when a couple of farmers brought a wooden barrel full of fresh milk and left it uncovered in the middle of the yard. Nobody bothered with it and after a couple hours, it turned sour. We were told to move it behind some distant buildings. Before going home, we looked in it and noticed a transparent liquid on top and a white cheese like substance on the bottom. Pouring out the water, we emptied the white substance in our knapsacks, which served for a while as a sieve. We forced the water out as much as possible, took the knapsacks on our back and carried it into the ghetto.

The exit and entry into our ghetto was less restricted than in ghettos I was told about or read about. By mutual agreement with the Germans, the ghetto committee could and did issue a permit to any Jews to leave and come into the ghetto. As a rule groups leaving the ghetto were accompanied by a ghetto leader or foreman called a “Column-leader.” He carried a permit stating the amount of people he had with him. In our case, six men did not warrant a column leader, so we received individual permits. It meant that

each of us could get our or into the ghetto at will. Still we preferred to enter as a group, by it hoping due to the number to discourage the Germans at the gate from searching. Our knapsacks were not always completely innocent. Working around in a kitchen, we used to succeed at times to put a couple raw potatoes in our pocket. Sometimes a carrot or a beet. We used to bring it in under the wood chips.

That does not mean that the Germans did not conduct searched at the ghetto gates. It is just that we were lucky. There were often extensive searches conducted not only by the police, the Schutzpolizei, but by a group of soldiers attached to communication that were stationed in Pruzany. The name of the officer in charge was Lehiman and they were referred to in the ghetto as the Lehiman gang. They were not satisfied with beating up Jews outside the ghetto, but liked to come in and beat up anyone at random.

They, together with the Schutzpolizei used to stop entire columns on the ways to the ghetto, lead them into a yard and order them to get undressed, looking for any excuse. Woe to the one who even had one potato on him.

At the gate of the Ortscommendantur, where the guard stood, the Germans affixed a billboard on which they used to attach in the morning a couple daily newspapers. Before going in or on our way out we used go glance quickly at it. The headlines proclaimed their victories, telling of the new conquest, giving numbers of prisoners that ran in the hundreds of thousands and their imminent taking of Stalingrad.

We knew that some reports and some numbers are a bit inflated, but we also knew that the Germans are in the middle of their 1942 summer offensive and are advancing deeper into the Soviet Union.

In May of 1942, a Pruzany gentile got in touch with my uncle Leibl Pinsky and handed him a letter from his brother Hershl who lived in Warsaw. I mentioned him much earlier in my memories of 1929. He was the one that secretly crossed the Soviet Polish border and came to his sister Chashka and his birthplace Shershev. He left Shershev for Warsaw shortly after and went into trucking business.

In the letter he offered his brother financial aid via that Christian family. In fact, he managed twice to send over a few dollars before July that summer, before the annihilation of the Warsaw ghetto began. At which time their contact ceased. I can only

assume that Hershl met his end in the gas chambers of Treblinka where the entire four hundred thousand Jews of Warsaw ghetto were put to death. His brother, my uncle Leibl and family perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz six months later. To this event, I will come back later.

Many of those long summer evenings I spent with my friend Kalman Kalbkoif at our friend's Itzik Maletzky in that small one room house where other young men from Shershev used to gather. Besides the news from the front and the constant slaughter of Jews, a new topic arose: the question of partisans. By that time there were in Pruzany a few single men, formerly from Shershev and others from neighboring towns who left their families, parents, sisters, brothers, young siblings and came to Pruzany, the imaginary safe haven.

Only a single young person could undertake such a journey. It was sated with danger. The passing through or even around unfriendly villages and avoiding the local, so called Ukrainian police took youthful strength, agility and courage.

Among those that used to gather at the Maletzkys, were two friends of Itzik Maletzky's older brother Nochum's friends, Shloime Zubatzky and Yekutial Wapenshtein. They have left their families in Chomsk and made their way to Pruzany. It was they who brought me the news that my close friend Laizer Rotenberg, who married the previous fall in Chomsk, had become a father.

We used to gather at the Maletzkys as that small place or rather their little one room house offered us complete privacy, which none of us so called refugees had.

Our conversations were down to earth, but at times led more to like "wishful thinking" than reality. It used to alleviate our strained nerves from the hopeless realities for a moment.

If during those moments of hope we could not being overnight the Red Army to us, we spoke of joining the partisans in the forests. When during such a conversation, I asked the few young men that came to Pruzany by themselves, why don't they go into the forest? They answered that if I will join them, they will go. Here I want to point out that I was the youngest among them, that they were all older than I by anywhere from one year to three. To my argument that I still have in the ghetto my parents, sisters and brother, not



to mention other relatives while they had nobody here to leave behind. They responded that most likely I know that it is safe to remain in the ghetto for the time being. It dawned on me that because my grandfather was officially representing Shershev in the committee, I know more than they. How foolish and naïve we all were...

The railway station Oranczyce that serviced the entire district of Pruzany was twelve kilometers away. Next to it was the village of Linowo, in which a few dozen Jewish families lived. Being so close to Pruzany, some of the families intermarried with members of the Pruzany community. With the entry of the Germans, a handful of those families moved to Pruzany. They too were looking for safety in numbers. The large majority however, remained in place hoping to outlive the German onslaught at home. Groups of Jewish men used to go daily from Pruzany ghetto to work at the railway station carrying news in either direction. On a July day when a group returned from that Linowo Oranczyce station, they brought the said news about that morning slaughter of the entire Jewish population of Linowo. The village was surrounded early that morning. The Nazis went from house to house with a list of inhabitants. After collecting the entire Jewish population, they were taken to the nearby petrol depot, built two years earlier by the Bolsheviks, and surrounded by a barbed wire fence. In that enclosure, in small groups they were lined up at the edge of a prepared hole and shot. Due to the geographical nearness and the close relation that Pruzany had with Linowo, that news made a shocking and lasting impression on the Pruzany community. The outpouring of grief surpassed the combined sadness and loss that Pruzany had shown to all other communities slaughtered this far. This event was too close a call to home. It gave the impetus for young men to think seriously of going into forests and joining the partisans.

That summer the activities of some partisan groups became quite daring. Their exaggerated heroic deeds assumed legendary proportions among the villagers and even more so among the closed in Jews of the ghetto. The Nazis revenge however was swift and merciless. If a German was killed in or near a village, the following day the village was flooded with Germans who used to round up all the men of the village and simply shoot them.

This action or reaction of the Germans became so routine that if a German used to be killed, the nearby male villagers used to run away to more distant villages or to the forest. Staying away a day or two, they used to return home. By then the Germans had already been in the village and had done their savage work. Killing the males that did not run away or hoped to prove their non-involvement in the death of a German.

As a rule, the Germans did not return a second time to the same village to round up the ones that were in hiding.

On a late July afternoon, the ghetto gates on Kobrin and Shershev street opened up and an army of the brown-cuffed police that we gave different names like Schutzpolizei, Schupo, Field-Polizei, or Einsatzgruppen, started passing through the ghetto and out the main market square gate to Pacewicz Street on the Arian side. The ghetto inhabitants estimated them to be a thousand strong. Such a number of executioners we have not seen before. Their appearance caused a panic in the ghetto. Many speculated that they have come for us. The following morning as the six of us workers at the Ortskommendantur had to cut some wood near the local gendarmerie, we saw them billeted in tents nearby. When we left work at six, they were still there.

The next day as we showed up to work a non-commissioned officer led us to a warehouse pointing to some buckets with lime, some trowels, crude paint brushes, bags of cement and sand, ordered us to load it on a truck. We got on it accompanied by two soldiers left town.

We were driven in a northeastern direction towards Pruzany on the highway Brest-Litowsk/Baranowicz. We have barely covered five six kilometers when we notice an entire village in flames some two kilometers off the road. As we kept on driving we noticed one more and again more in the distance. All together, we counted six villages..We and the two soldiers looked at it with surprise.

A dozen kilometers out of Pruzany, we noticed a guardhouse in the distance. We came closer and stopped in front of it. It housed a dozen or so soldiers, two of whom were constantly guarding a wooden bridge that spanned across a river that bisected the road. We were told to cover the walls with a new layer of cement and white wash it, as bedbugs got in the cracks of the walls.

After having finished our work in mid afternoon, we set out for home. On the way, back we passed again the burning villages over which heavy smoke was hanging. Parallel to the closed village but at the roadside, we noticed two women sitting and crying. As we drove by, we yelled to them, what village is it? They yelled back, "Rudniky!" The truck kept on driving.

After getting back into the ghetto, we found out more about that event. Like Shershev with its swamp and forests southwest of Pruzany, so northeast of Pruzany had its own swamps and forests. The river I mentioned in the few lines above, between Ruzany and Pruzany, was amidst impenetrable swamps. On the Pruzany side the swamps borderer on farmland that stretch for kilometers all the way to Pruzany. On the Ruzany side the foliage and reed-covered, impenetrable swamps, which eventually changed into thick forest. The river and the swamp formed a natural obstacle for inexperienced navigators in those treacherous places.

Behind hose impenetrable swamps, the thick forest became a haven that summer for partisans, whose numbers kept on growing. Many of those partisans were local peasants, and so knew secret passages in those swamps though which they used to cross at night to attack the Germans and run back the same way.

The Germans unable to chase them, decided on fortifying individual houses in certain villages converting them into defense positions. This however did not discourage the partisans. To the contrary, it gave them an immobile objective to attack. And attack they did. Crossing the swamps at night, they attacked the fortified house in the village of Rudniky. The Germans, behind sandbags, resisted stubbornly. The partisans, unable to overcome them, set the wooden house on fire. Seeing the house in flames, being sure the Germans perished in the fire and not wanting to hang around for fear that the fire will attract the Germans from Pruzany, they went back the way they came to the forest.

The Germans were prepared for such an eventuality. Unknown to the villagers they built a fireproof cellar in the house. When the house became engulfed in flames, they went into the cellar. Thus survived, losing only three of the twenty men inside.

Before daybreak, all able bodied men left the village fearing immediate German retribution. To their surprise, no Germans came that day or the following one. Slowly they all came back to their families and homesteads.

It was a week later, before daybreak, that not only the village of Rudniky but five nearby villages were surrounded. The Germans picked out every male sixteen to sixty. Taking them behind the villages, they shot every one of them. Ordering the women to load their wagons with whatever they wanted, they drove them out of the villages, setting the buildings on fire.

This crime was committed by those thousand or so Nazi police that passed through the ghetto, and those were the fires of the burning six villages that we saw passing by. Having accomplished their horrible retribution, the German police did not go back to Pruzany. Most likely, there was another such crime waiting for them somewhere else to commit.

Every day of the summer 1942 kept bringing heart-rending news about the Jewish settlements in our area. From the few miraculously saved individuals that managed to sneak into the Pruzany ghetto we used to hear stories of slaughter of partial or total annihilation of centuries old Jewish communities.

With the Nazi introduction of the two-ghetto system, the annihilation of many communities used to be divided in parts-phases. First, the Nazis slaughtered the residents of Ghettos B and later Ghettos A. Some ghettos agony was extended for a longer period of time y conducting slaughters or actions as they were called several times. As an example I will give the town of Kobryn, forty five kilometers from Pruzany where the killers came back four times in 1942 before they killed the last Jew of the community of close to ten thousand souls. Thus ending a five hundred years history of Jewish Kobryn. Those are the dates; June 2, 1942 the annihilation of Ghetto B, June 6, 1942 four thousand more Jews taken to Brona-Gora and killed. July 25, 1942 two thousand more and on October 14, 1942 the last of ghetto "A" were liquidated.

The same fate befell all the shtetls in Eastern Europe that found themselves under Nazi rule. I know of the places in my region. Names so familiar to me that as I read them they sound like a litany with a lament so full of pain that should shatter the heavens.

Names like Bereza-Kartuska, Ruzany, Kosowo, Iwaceicze, Antopol, Horodez, Zabinka, Tewle, Drohyczyn, Janow-Poleski, Motel, Pinsk, Dawidgroder, Olszany, Lchwa, Luniniec, Telechany, Nowy-Dwor, Porozow, Swislocz, Wolkowisk, Slonim, Baranowicze, Nieswicz, Stolbce, And many more. All within a stone's throw of my shtetl, Shershev, where the over five hundred years old Jewish culture and life was snuffed out forever.

It was from those single, temporarily rescued individuals of those places that we learned of what happened there. What took place in the countless other Jewish communities from which not a single soul escaped, we know nothing but imagined the worst. Unfortunately, we have been proven to be correct.

Unable to travel and always under supervision outside the ghetto, we knew nothing of what has transpired in neighboring shtetls. In fact we no longer knew how far we are from the nearest Jewish community.

Late that summer, the ghetto community received an order to deliver fifty able bodied men to the Schutzpolizei for transportation to the town of Wolkowisk, which was being turned, into a camp. The rare reports we used to get from there were shocking. Understandably, nobody wanted to be sent there. The community made up a list and the fifty men were sent away. How many among them were from Shershev I do not know, but one of them was Shepsl Rudnitzky our former wagon drayer that used to haul the merchandise for us before the war. He was the sole provider for his old parents. A hard working honest man. How they fared the remaining few months until the liquidation of the ghetto Pruzany I do not dare to think.

Somehow, we managed to survive that summer on our diet of potatoes, bread and soup. Of course, items like meat, sugar and alike, we had not tasted since we have been expelled from Shershev. Regretfully my parents, sisters and brother had not tasted it any more until they experienced their last painful breath of air in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

For an unknown to me reason, I started to develop boils. They mainly appeared on my legs one at a time. But as soon as one disappeared, a second one appeared.

A close friend of my sister Sheva, by the name of Reshl Shlosberg who worked as an assistant nurse in the ghetto hospital, after hearing from my sister about my problem, said that they deal with it daily and that it is easily cured with an injection of boiled milk.

Somehow my parents got from somewhere a quarter of a glass of milk and she, Reshl, after boiling it, injected it into me. Lo and behold, the boils disappeared. With the approach of the days of awe, that is the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the final phase of the slaughter of Jews intensified. This time it was aimed at the remnants of Ghetto A the so called by the Germans “useful Jews,” or Jewish tradesmen and artisans that worked for the Nazis.

So intense and concentrated was their effort to annihilate the Jews that even their desperate need of the Jewish artisans for the war effort could not save them. As in previous cases, a few single individuals managed to hide, at times for a week or two without food, and get away at night. Most of them fell victims to supposedly non Jewish friends or real and open treacherous characters who after robbing them of whatever they have still had, either killed those unfortunate helpless individuals themselves or handed them over to the Germans or local police.

From a couple of those that managed to get into our ghetto, we heard that somewhere along the way they were apprehended by Ukrainian police who were threatening them with death using a cold weapon. Apparently, to those hopeless, resigned desperate Jews, death by a bullet was neither the worst thing nor frightening enough.

Interesting that in that case, after taking from those Jews everything of value, they let them go. Most likely not wanting to waste the time and effort on rounding up some locals to bury them.

From such strugglers it became known in the ghetto of the annihilation of Ghetto B in Nieswiez on the seventh day of the month of Av, that is July 21, 1942. A couple of months later we heard that Ghetto A in Nieswiez was slaughtered. It took place the ninth day of Cheshvan, October 30, 1942.

In Nieswiez my father had a sister Pola (Pesl) who was married to Zelik Remez, with a son Max age five, and younger children whom I never knew. We never heard from the again.

In one of the sheds in the Ortscommendanture where I was working, I found a German map of our district. I could not get over the accuracy of that map. It covered a territory from Pinsk in the east to Brest-Litowsk in the west. From Nowogrodek in the north to Rowno in the south. I found on that map every trail and every footpath. Not only in the fields but in every town, village and church. I hid it on me and brought it into the ghetto.

I shared my find with my friend Kalman Kalbkoif. A couple days later, my friend asked me to lend him the map as his acquaintance would like to copy it. A couple days later, my friend Kalman tells me that last night, his acquaintance left the ghetto with a group of young men for the forest to join the partisans taking with him the original map.

This was the first group of young people that left our ghetto to join the partisans and fight the Germans. How many they were I do not know. What I know is that in command of that group was Yosel Untershur, who took along his wife and Mordchai Bear Seagal. Those two I knew personally. The one that borrowed my map, Maitchik, I knew indirectly.

The final liquidation of the ghetto in Brest-Litowsk began on October 14, 1942. Two men succeeded in getting away and making their way to Pruzany bringing the sad news with them.

Shortly after the Ghetto A of Drohyczyn, my uncle Reuven's family and Antopol were annihilated. Before we had a chance to get over that news, the Jews of Chomsk were slaughtered. This time the victims in Chomsk were the eighty families from Shershev that settled there after the first slaughter.

Among those eighty Shershev families were my good friend Laizer Rotenberg, his wife and newborn child. As well as his brother, my friend Litek. Their parents Yosef and Rayah with their three daughters: Pola, Lisa and Minah. Plus my friends grandparents Joshua and Bluma Pinsky.

Someone managed to save himself from that, the second slaughter of Chomsk and managed to sneak himself into the ghetto Pruzany to tell the story as it transpired during the final hours of that slaughter. This is what he told us:

It was on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Sunday, September 13, 1942, early in the morning, that Chomsk was surrounded by the Nazi killers. Herding the Jews together without any pretext, they led them straight to the two mass graves of the original Jews of Chomsk slaughtered fifteen months earlier. This time however, the Gentile population did not show as much enthusiasm in rounding up the Jews as in the previous time. The Jews of Shershev had nothing to leave for them. In fact, some of the Gentiles intervened on behalf of the Jewish artisans whom they badly needed.

The Germans obliged by leaving one of each most needed tradesman with his family but picked the ones with the smallest families. For example, there were four blacksmith families: Daniel Meister, his wife and three children: Yosl, Mayah and Reuven. Their oldest son Avreml was already married with a baby and was considered another family. Another blacksmith Srolkah Meister had a wife with several children and so was another blacksmith Yudl Zatotzky with a wife and children. The Germans temporarily spared Avreml Meister and his family as he had only one child.

The same standard was applied to a male tailor and a seamstress. As a seamstress, they left my friend's sister Pola Rotenberg, a single girl age twenty-three. As she was of age and single, the Germans would not allot her the privilege of sparing her parents or her two sisters who were still minors.

With the eighty Shershev families in Chomsk were also murdered the dozen young boys and girls of Chomsk that managed to save themselves from the first slaughter.

When it came to the decision about Pola Rotenberg some kind of disagreement arose between the Nazi killers. Apparently, some of them considered to spare her family. Others disagreed and were ready to dispose of her too. She was ordered to undress the same as all others destined to die. Another Nazi ordered her to get dressed contending that she can be spared alone. Again she was ordered to undress and then again to dress.

Because of my close friendship with her two brothers, Laizer and Litek, I was also close to their older sister Pola. As the events of those days are constantly on my mind, I often



try to imagine how their older sister Pola felt and what went through her mind as she was being ordered to undress and get dressed in front of the ditch filled with dead and half-dead bodies. Bodies of her friends and relatives were among them as her fate was being decided by the whim of a murderous Nazi officer or soldier.

The elder of Pola's two younger sisters, the fifteen-year-old Lisa, developed into a beautiful and very attractive young woman. To such an extent that one of the Nazi murderers watching her getting undressed remarked, "What a pity that such a beautiful young woman has to die." As usual, the Nazis ordered all the Jews to get completely undressed, lining them up at the rim of the ditch they mowed them down.

The five tradesmen with their small immediate families were taken away literally from the rim of the graves and handed over to the local Ukrainian for safekeeping. Those few souls lived together in one house knowing only too well that their time is running out. They were not under lock and key but neither were they permitted outside. The police station was across the street from them and kept an eye on them.

The only single man among them Aaron Bikstein's younger brother, a top notch men's tailor, took the chance one night and sneaked out. He made it to Pruzany. It was from him that we heard the story in such details.

A couple of weeks later rumors coming from Drohyczn spread in the ghetto that the last four tradesmen and their families in Chomsk were killed.

The month of October 1942 was a particularly vicious one for the remainder of the Jews in our part. The savagery manifested by the Nazi murderers is beyond description. I do not know exactly how long it took the Nazis to annihilate the last Jews of Brest-Litowsk, but I know that besides those killed on the spot, the rest were shipped to Treblinka.

What I know for sure is that on October 15, 1942 the Nazis succeeded to slaughter in one day 2,500 Jews of the Ghetto A in Drohyczyn and 2,300 Jews of the Ghetto A in Antopol. The very same day 2,600 Jews of Ghetto A in Bereza-Kartuska were put to death.

These numbers and dates can give us an idea of the amount of manpower the Nazis allotted for this task and intensity with which they were going about the annihilation of the Jews in Europe. I am mentioning a couple of places very close to my birthplace and with which I became emotionally connected during those dark days.

I am not mentioning places a bit farther from my hometown. Places that shared the same fate, unknown to me and where not a single soul survived to tell the story.

In the slaughter of Drohyczyn I lost my father's brother Rueven, his wife Chashka, their three children, Michla age 17, Shalom age 14 and Shevach age 7. My uncle was torn away from his family some months earlier supposedly to go to a work camp. That entire lot was shot outside Drohyczyn as soon as they were led out of town.

As far as I remember, there were at that time some dozen Shershev families in Antopol and even less in Bereza-Kartuzka. However in Drohyczyn were somewhere between eighty and a hundred. Most of them perished in the slaughter of the Ghetto B on July 26, 1942. The rest with Ghetto A on October 15, 1942

The Jews of Shershev being introduced to Nazi brutality right at the start of the war and not having deep roots or commitments to extended families in Drohyczyn were more willing to take the risk and run for their lives, despite the next to nil chances of succeeding.

Indeed, a few days after the slaughter of Drohyczyn, six Shershev men and two women made their way into the Ghetto Pruzany. A distance of one hundred kilometers through forests and field where a Jew would be hunted down like a wild animal.

The names of five of the six men I still remember. They were Chaim Lewkovigch, Pinchus Weiner, Leibl Lebershtein, Avreml Kwelman and Moishe Tilter. The women were Peshkah Zaritzky and Lola Baumriter.

They were indeed sole survivors, leaving behind parents, brothers, sisters and what more, wives and children. Among the eight were four married people.

I do not want to dwell on the moral aspect of that event, nor am I accusing neither justifying it. Who am I to do it? I am leaving it to more qualified people than I or still better to those who were confronted with such a decision.

Apparently someone from outside the ghetto noticed them crawling under the wires and counted them. For the next day, the German gendarmerie came to the ghetto committee demanding the eight Jews.

The usual negotiations started between the committee and the Germans. This time the Germans were adamant and insisted on the handing over the eight Jews. No amount of bribery could change their minds.

I remember that unforgettable morning. The committee, being compelled to hand over the eight Shershev Jews, ordered the Jewish ghetto police to execute the job of collecting them. The police went to the houses in which those just escaped from death Jews were, gathered them in order to hand them over to the Germans.

As far as I know, it was the first time the Pruzany ghetto committee was compelled to execute such a repulsive job like handing over Jews into Germans hands. Up to now, they were always successful in redeeming Jews from German hands. Nor was the Jewish ghetto police conditioned to perform such tasks. To execute such a job the police needed the moral support as well as the physical presence of some members of the committee, which they too lacked.

So the police was accompanied by some members of the committee led by the president himself, Itzik Janovitch, respected and admired by all citizens of the ghetto. They were followed by a crowd of onlookers. When they approached the house in which Gotl Weiner lived and where his by ten years younger, the eighteen-year-old brother Pinchas who just saved himself from the slaughter of Drohyczyn was hiding, Gotl stepped out the door approaching the chief of police and said, "I am ready, we can go."

The ghetto Pruzany was not that large that most people were total strangers. Besides Gotl was known in the ghetto as one of those that risked walking from Pruzany to Chomsk and Drohyczyn and back carrying so called contraband to support his family there. The chief answered: We did not come for you but for your brother. Gotl did not accept it insisting to go with them instead of his brother. The members of the committee got closer and so did the crowd. Gotl tried to reason with the president saying, "The Germans want a Jew, they do not know who he is or looks like." Let me go instead and let my brother remain alive. He is only eighteen years old. We could all see the tears in his eyes as he pleaded for his brother's life.

The moment Gotl uttered those words the mask of the play or charade dropped. Up to now, the committee was talking of the eight men being put in jail while further

negotiations with the Germans for their release will continue. Although everybody knew that this time, the Germans have something else in mind. Now with those words everybody realized that there is no need to pretend.

With a trembling voice, the president Janovitch said; Gotl, I am not G-d. I cannot decide who shall live and who shall die. The Germans want the one who sneaked into the ghetto. I cannot change the fact. It is up to G-d and he made the decision.

The eight people were gathered together. Poor, lonely, forlorn, wretched souls who had already nobody in the world to shed a tear for them. The only one that did have was the eighteen-year-old Pinchas, whose brother was willing to die for him. The others had left behind their families in Dorhyczyn where death had claimed them only a few days earlier.

The Germans put them in jail. For several days, the committee continued to negotiate their release hoping against hope to succeed in freeing them. Meantime, the two jails in Pruzany were being filled up. The time came to empty the jails as usually in the Nazi manner. They ordered the committee to send men to dig a hole in the usual place, six kilometers out of town. A couple days later, they ordered a group of men for the next day to be the grave coverers. When the men showed up the next morning a German told them to go back to the ghetto.

All kinds of rumors began to circulate in the ghetto. Like the Germans decided to stop executions or that the allies cautioned the Nazis against killing civilians and alike. All those rumors stopped when it became known that the Germans want those men back the next day.

When the next day the men returned back from work to the ghetto they told of the killing of three truck loads of people, among those were the eight Shershev souls. Why the Germans postponed the execution for a day became known a couple of days later when two Shershev Christians came to Pruzany and met a Shershev Jew who was working on the Arian side. This is what they told him: A couple of days ago an auto full of Germans drove into town and stopped in front of the house in which Avreml Kwelman used to live. Among the disembarking Germans was Avreml Kwelman who carried with

him a shovel. He led them to a spot near the fence and started digging bringing up a small metal box. With that box, they all got back into the auto and drove away.

The rest of the story became clear to all after the explanation given by two former members of the Shershev Jewish committee that were now living in the ghetto Pruzany. They were Chazkl Krugman and Meir Kabizetzky. This is what they told us: When we, the Jews of Shershev were still living at home the Nazis from Biels-Podlask put a tribute on Shershev Jews in the amount of two hundred thousand rubles and a kilogram of gold. (I have written about it earlier). The gold collected from the community was almost twice as much. It was decided by the committee to keep the extra for an emergency or to be more precise in case the Germans decided to demand more. The extra gold was divided to three parts and three committee members were entrusted in hiding it in a safe place unknown to the others. The committee was sworn to secrecy. One of the three was Avrmel Kwelman.

The rest is conjecture, but it was believed in the ghetto to be a correct one. Apparently when the jail inmates were being loaded on the trucks, in desperation knowing where they are being taken, Avreml Kwelman cried out to the Germans that he will give them gold in they will let him live. They most likely herded the inmates back into the jail, took him to Shershev where he dug up his part of the gold entrusted to him, driven back to the jail in Pruzany and was executed with the rest a day later.

Among the executed was as I mentioned earlier, Lola Baumriter, the Shershev pharmacist's daughter and my classmate. She blossomed in the last couple of years into a beauty and was considered to be not only the most beautiful girl in Shershev but also in the entire district of Pruzany. The darling of every older boy and young men around, among them sons of committee members of the Pruzany ghetto who tried to save her at any price. It was all in vain.

As far as we knew, the Pruzany ghetto was an island in a sea of gentiles. From what we were able to gather the nearest Jewish community was Bialystok, a distance of one hundred and thirty five kilometers away. No more could one find the Jewish shtetls every ten-fifteen kilometers apart, nor the numerous Jewish settlements still closer in

between. The constant question lay heavy on our mind and hearts: How much longer will they let us remain alive.

A partial answer came on November 1, 1942. On that morning as I approached the gate of the ghetto through which I used to go outside to work every morning, I noticed a large crowd at the gate. Getting closer I saw a detachment of Schutzpolizei outside the ghetto and others patrolling the perimeter around the barbed wire fence of the ghetto.

Without an explanation, we were told that nobody is allowed to leave. The crowd continued to grow in front of that main gate as more and more workers were trying to go to work. As the office of the committee was on the street opposite, the gate people began to assemble in front of that building with the hope of finding out what is happening.

Inside, the committee was having an emergency meeting, which was interrupted with the arrival of some Gestapo men. Entering the meeting hall and finding the entire committee present, the German in charge announced that as of this moment the ghetto is in a transitional state, meaning that it can be transferred at any time. Commanding to be given the files of every person in the ghetto, they told the committee members to load it onto their auto and pulled away.

Meantime the crowd in front of the committee office had grown to a size that it took up the width of the street on either side of the building, hoping to find out what there is in store for us, speculating and predicting conceivable and inconceivable things.

The first to appear outdoors from the meeting was Zalman Segal, the “foreign minister” of the ghetto. The one that used to conduct negotiations with the Nazis on behalf of the Jewish community behind the barbed wire fence. His tall slim figure towered over the crowd on the porch. From a thousand throats cried out the question: what does it mean? Have they come for us? Raising his hand in a gesture for silence, from his grief-laden face and twisted lips came a quiet answer as if he would be talking to himself yet was heard across the entire crowd: What makes us better than the Jews of Brisk or Pinsk or Kobryn? Have we got more “Zchut-Avot (ancestral merit) than they? Have we earned it more than they? His uttered few words were drowned out in an outbreak of laments and cries. It was impossible to hear him anymore nor did it make any difference to me. I

turned my steps in the direction where I could find my parents, sisters and brother to spend the last few hours of our lives together.

As I imagined, the news had already reached them and every corner of the ghetto before I got to them. In order to get to our room I had to pass the house owners big living room, which he converted, into a workshop. It usually used to be a noisy place. There was now a total silence. The owner and family were sitting stuck away in the corner of that big room giving the impression as if the room is empty. My entry did not make any impression of them. They barely glanced at me without any sign of recognition. Without even saying good morning, I walked into our room. There I found my parents, sisters and brother. All sitting on the double bed and couch given to us by my aunt Sheindl when we came to Pruzany almost a year earlier. They too got close to each other with the same empty gaze in their eyes as those in the other room and an expression of resignation and despair on their faces.

Without saying a word, I sat down near them sinking in my own thoughts. First came the realization of the imminent and avoidable death and a despairing desire to live or at least to try and save myself. I have to admit shamefully that I was thinking of saving myself without thinking of saving my dear ones with whom as far as I was concerned, I was spending the last hours of our lives. Nobody said a word and if somebody did say something, it was without meaning or value. It was of no importance anymore.

Therefore, we sat until noon listening to the outside that was as silent as a cemetery. It was entirely different than I imagined it would be. I imagined that after surrounding the ghetto the Nazis would enter with shouts and shooting, herding all the inhabitants into the street and from there outside town to be shot. Meanwhile we did not hear any shots or shooting.

The silence was interrupted by my mother who got up to announce that she is going to prepare something to eat. Nobody thought of it nor was anybody hungry, but it gave her something to preoccupy herself with.

The lunch that consisted of dry potatoes went down with difficulty. I decided to see what is going on in the street and at our relatives. On the way, I could see the main ghetto gate. There were still a lot of Germans there, but none of the Jews that were there

earlier that morning. From a few passersby I found out that the committee made an attempt to communicate with the Germans a couple of times but to no avail.

At our relatives, the mood was the same as in our place, but being a larger crowd they tried to be more preoccupied with daily chores and it seemed to me that the time there passed faster. I returned to find everybody sitting in the same places as when I left them. They looked at me with a glimmer of hope that disappeared instantly without me saying a word as it was written all over my face.

After a while we decided to join our relative hoping to find some comfort in dying together and so my immediate and extended family sat there waiting for death, not knowing when and in what form it will come. We sat there together without sleep not getting undressed all night. If someone did lie down and dozed off, it was only for a minute to awaken from a nightmare. Unable to sit all night in one spot, some used to get up and look out the windows or walk nervously around from room to room.

If now so many decades later I have difficulties in recollecting all my thoughts at that time, how can I attempt to describe the thoughts and comments uttered by members of my family then in those desperate and hopeless moments? It is my belief that if anyone of us had any thought of attempting to save himself or herself it was me. For my parents, sisters, and brother there was no hope nor for anybody present there. What was going on in their minds?

And so the night passed. At dawn, we noticed someone sneaking by with a *Tallit* (prayer shawl) under his arm. It could only be a Jew on his way to the synagogue. With my mother's encouragement, I too went to a nearby synagogue. To my surprise, the synagogue was full. The crowd started to pray and after the *Shmona-Esray* (the eighteen benedictions, part of the daily prayer), we recited the *Ovinu Malkeynu* (our father our king, a penitential prayer said on special days). If I ever recited that prayer and paid attention to it, it was that morning. Never in my life have I seen a congregation saying this prayer with so much commitment, with so much dedication, so much devotion and heaven splitting weeping and been part of it.



Leaving the synagogue, I was thinking to myself that G-d surely watched and listened to those fervent prayers. How can he not answer? And so passed the second day in tension and fear.

We could not understand the game the Nazis are playing. What are they waiting for? Some of us suggested the idea that gentiles are digging for us mass graves outside town but it is not finished yet.

The next morning the synagogues were even more crowded than the previous day and the prayers more fervent if it was at all possible. During the day, few more people appeared in the streets. True, mostly on the side streets and alleys. Never the less we began to see people on the street.

And so another day went by. This time rumors began to circulate that the committee succeeded in making contact with the Germans. The Germans requested some things and were satisfied with the response.

Finally, on the fourth day a couple of Gestapo men showed up at the committee office to announce that the ghetto will remain temporary in its place. There was however a new list of restrictions. Among them reduction of rations and the total abolition of exit permits from the ghetto that was so far handled by the committee. From now on no Jew was permitted to go outside the ghetto unless accompanied by a German guard, nor was a Jew permitted to work outside the ghetto unless under constant guard, regardless if with a group or by himself. The large numbers of Germans that have been placed at the three ghetto entrances have been removed, except for one at each gate and the cordon of guards around the fence had been replaced by patrols.

In order to facilitate in patrolling the ghetto fence, the Germans straightened the fence by cutting away parts of the ghetto, thus squeezing the population tighter. One of the ghetto main streets, Kobriner Street, was partly cut off including the building housing the committee. The committee office, which took up an entire building, was forced to move. They picked my uncle and aunt's, Leibl and Sheindl Pinsky's nearby suitable house. They were given in return a big house on Rezký street to accommodate not only my uncle and family but the rest of my extended family like my grandparents and their

son, my uncle Eli, his brother Hershl and wife, my father's cousins from Malecz, Joshua and Zalmen Niselbaum, with their families, who all lived previously in my uncle's house.

The ghetto sighed with temporary relief. We went back to our room with a better feeling than we have left it a few days earlier but also with an increased awareness of our perilous situation. No longer were our exit permits valid and the six of us, workers at the Ortstommendanture had to wait for a soldier that used to come daily for us. We dared not go out of the yard where we worked to read the newspapers plastered on the wall. Even to go from the ortstcommendanture to the wood yard we needed an escort. Because of it we used to miss the leftovers from the soldiers kitchen, which I missed very much, for not only did I miss a midday meal, but also regardless what the soldiers left over or would not eat, it was still much better than what we had in the ghetto.

It was only then that I began to wonder if my parents, sisters and brother were having enough food to fill their stomachs. In general, the food situation in the ghetto worsened. The official ration for the population would never suffice, but the leadership of the ghetto up to now managed to bribe the Germans and bring in more than was the allotment. Besides, a fair amount of food used to find its way through the fence. With the new regulations imposed by newly come Gendarmes and the constant patrols around the fence, it became much more difficult to get in extra food.

With me worked a young man from Shershev by the name of Sholem Berenstein, four or five years older than I. A former Soviet soldier and run away German prisoner of war on whose shoulders lay the responsibility to provide for his mother and younger brother and sisters as his father dies shortly before the war. Necessity drove him to look for some sort of income even more than the other co-workers.

As of lately we began to spend more and more time at cutting wood in the closed in storage yard which was at the outskirts of town adjoining the gendarmerie. The entrance consisted of a wide gate at which was a guardhouse manned by two soldiers who rarely ventured outside, preferring to sit in the heated inside. There really was no need for them to go outside as nobody was coming in or out except for us and the presence of Germans in the guardhouse was enough to keep anybody out. Not that there was nothing to guard. The Bolsheviks left the warehouses there full with spare parts for tanks and

other machinery. I personally saw tank motors in its original packing and who know what else there was in crates and boxes. Many of those warehouses were under lock and key. In one was a pile of discarded Soviet weapons, mostly rifles many with broken stocks but otherwise in functional condition.

The two soldiers at the gate paid little attention to us, spending most of the time sleeping on the bed in the guardhouse and keeping the fire going in the cast iron stove. So Sholem Berenshtein attempted once to go out in the street and come back unnoticed, or maybe the two ordinary soldiers saw but could not care less. Whatever the reason, he started doing it making contact with a gentile across the street some fifty meters down the road. That Christian became the intermediary buying food from farmers and selling it to Shalom Berenshtein. We in return used to divide it up, hiding it as not to look suspicious at the gate and bring it into the ghetto. There Berenshtein had his customers to sell it to. Soon we started to take turns going out that yard and crossing the street to pick up the food. German vehicles used to pass by on the road, but fortunately, none of us was ever caught.

Smuggling potatoes was not a profitable venture, so we concentrated on barley, porridge, grain, beans, peas, even cheese, butter and a couple times whole frozen fish, fresh from the river. Yes, there were a few local Jews in the ghetto that could from time to time permit themselves such a luxury, but a very few and only from time to time and far in between. We, the risk takers could only look at it and dream.

The following morning Shalom Berenshtein used to bring the money to work where we used to divide the profit among us six, retaining the original investment for further transactions.

Not every day could our supplier provide us with something and not everyday did we spend cutting wood in that place. To go to our supplier from the ortskommandantur was out of the question. Those days were lean days for us and our families.

The events of November 1 that put the ghetto "on notice" has shaken the ghetto from its complacency. The inhabitants, particularly the young people suddenly realized how perilous the situation is and started to look for ways to save themselves.

Common sense dictated that the only place where a Jew had any chance of survival s in the forest with partisans or on their own as partisans. But partisans did not accept unarmed men, nor was it easy to find them. They too were constantly on the move, being hunted by Germans, local police, local Nazi sympathizers and other partisan groups of other persuasions like the Polish and Ukrainian nationalistic groups. Those groups were at that time fighting the Germans and at the same time fighting each other. The only thing they had in common was a deep-rooted anti-Semitism and they killed Jews as efficiently as the Nazis.

The only groups that would and at times did accept Jews were the pro Soviet ones. But even among themselves, there was no shortage of anti-Semites that made life for Jews even in their ranks unbearable. Not to mention the ordinary farmer or peasant from whom all partisans used to take away their produce in order to survive. No wonder that many peasants looked upon the partisans as ordinary robbers, and many used to denounce them to the Germans.

A Jewish partisan group found it even harder to survive than other groups due to the element of anti-Semitism that was so wide spread among the population and the phenomenon introduced by the Nazis depriving the Jew of any claim to belong to the human race and designating them to total annihilation.

It was only when Jewish groups have proven themselves to as equal or better fighters than non-Jews that they started to be accepted in non-Jewish groups.

The going into the forest had a lot to do with the elements. If partisans found it difficult to survive in the forest in summer, how much more is it in winter? All the hunter had to do is to follow the footprints of the one being hunted. While a wild animal is created to blend in its environment, can out run the hunter or hid in a hole, a human being can do none of those things. What about the winter cold, when one is forced to spend night after night under open skies? Unable to sleep due to cold, fear and hunger.

I still remember my naïve argument in ghetto during that previous summer, namely that I prefer a night in bed in ghetto than wander about in the forest.

In that argument was applicable in summer, how much more relevant was it for winter.

Apparently, there were many others of the same opinion in the ghetto. Especially after November 1<sup>st</sup> there were many who claimed that we have to prepare ourselves for the forest, but as long as we can remain under a roof, why not? There were however, those who understood that “we might miss the train” so to say. That is that the Germans might surprise us by surrounding the ghetto and take all away before we know it.

The insurmountable problem was the procurement of weapons. From time to time one of the workers employed at clearing the former Soviet military barracks used to stumble upon a weapon or a piece of it, a damaged rifle or revolver, a few cartridge or a grenade. But one could never be sure if it is functional or a dud. But all those finds were not enough to arm even one group of men. The effort of procurement weapons had to be intensified and this required organization and time.

But what will happen if the Germans won't give us the needed time and come for us in the middle of the winter? Having no choice we will run to the forest anyway. No matter what the consequences, we will have time to die.

However, to run into the forest we have to hide out. The “Evacuation” (clearing the Jews out of ghetto) during which the Germans will look “high and low” to make sure there is not a single Jew left in the ghetto. Only after the Nazis will be sure that there are no more Jews left will they call off the guards around the ghetto fence, which will give those that survived the searches a chance to sneak out quietly into the forests. I will say that some of those hiding places were quite ingenious depending on space, availability of materials and finances.

Refugee families were here at a disadvantage. Living in somebody else's homes, most of them like ourselves, a family in one room, could do nothing. There were however, a few refugee families that lived in former Christian homes that were now included in the ghetto. One of them was the family Maletzky who lived in a former Christian house that consisted of a three by three meters room and a hallway that served as a windbreak and a storage place for furs that they used for heating and cooking. Whatever and whenever they had something to cook. The entrance to the room was via the hallway.

The Maletzky family whom I described much earlier consisted of the mother, Braina, and her three sons, Nachum, Itzik and Moishe. The middle one Itzik was my friend. As that house looked so inconspicuous with no way to hide in it, the three Maletzky brothers, I and our friend Kalman Kalbkoif decided to dig a hideout there.

We moved the loose turf away a bit from the hallway's back wall and started digging, before the frost set in. The digging was done in the evenings after work. Filling up a sack full of earth, one of us used to take it on our shoulder, walking around the nearby alleys used to let it spill out slowly on the muddy ground where it used to be trampled in the mud in the early morning so it did not attract attention from preying German eyes.

Not having material to support the walls of the hole nor the ceiling, it remained nothing but a hole in the ground, narrow on top and wider on the bottom.

To say that it was a hideout would be wrong. All it could serve, we hoped, was that having covered it with short pieces of wood and spread some turf over it, it could pass a temporary superficial search. We were counting on the simplicity on the innocuousness of that little house, more than the security of the hide out. We assumed that it was one of the most primitive hideouts in the ghetto, but with our resources what else could we do?

By the way, my close friend Kalman Kalbkoif, his parents and his four sisters too, shared a Christian house with a young local couple by the name of Kotler. That couple too built a hideout in their half of the house. A roomy place big enough to accommodate thirty people, with enough food to last for weeks. It was even rumored that they had a well in there. Of course, they were locals with an extended family that contributed work and materials.

Yet there were a few exceptions. My former private Hebrew teacher, Yaakov-Berl Eisenshtein, though a refugee himself lived in a former Christian house sharing it with his brother-in-law Itschah London. Those two families succeeded in building a double wall in one room that looked to me undetectable, simply a masterpiece of delusion. Of course, they had the privacy of an entire house and yard. Taking in consideration that Itschah London had two grown sons, blacksmiths by trade and the improvisational ability of Yaakov-Berl. It is no wonder they survived the German

searches after the liquidation of the ghetto and lived a life of hunted animals in the forest around Shershev.

A couple years after the end of the war, I found out that the last of those two families, Yaakov-Berl and his wife were betrayed by Shershev peasants shortly before the arrival of the Red Army. How the others of those two families perished will remain a secret forever.

How the ghetto continued with its superficial, “normal” existence, is now difficult to understand less so to describe. I remember when I used to lie down to sleep, my thoughts used to race one after another. Trying to imagine the last hours of my life, the very last minutes before my death. Listening to the regular and innocent breathing of my little brother and sisters, the constant turning and twisting of my parents in that very same double bed as my little sibling. I knew that they too are awake and are hunted by the same thoughts and nightmares as I. Now, that I am a parents and grandparent I can understand how dark and desperate their thoughts were.

Lying on that narrow couch, I used to deliberate and wonder if my digging a hide out for myself was such a good idea. What will my life be worth without my mother if by some miracle I will manage to survive the slaughter of the ghetto? I will admit that the dearest most precious person in the world to me was my mother and I could not imagine life without her. How could I have understood then, my parent’s concern for their children?

Eventually the weariness of the day’s work used to take over and I used to fall asleep for a few hours if lucky. Otherwise only to be awakened by a daylong hunting nightmare.

In the short November and December days, I was the first to arise. The breakfast used to be prepared by my mother the night before. It consisted of a small pot containing three-four potatoes and a piece of beet for colour. She used to cook it in the evening on the small cast iron stove with the wood splinters that I used to bring from work. That stove while in used made our room unbearably hot in the previous summer but turned ice cold in the winter when the fire was out.

Getting up at five in the morning, I used to throw in a few splinters of wood to warm up the potatoes and at the same time taking the chill off the cold room so that the rest of the family would not find the room so cold getting up as soon as I left.

One morning as I was sitting down to eat the few potatoes, my little sister Sonia, who was not quite eleven years old said to me: Moishe, give me a potato. Before I realized what she just said to me, my father responded: Do not take the potatoes from him. He is on his way to work for the rest of the day and we are soon going to have breakfast.

Here I committed a sin, one in two that I committed in my life for which I tried to atone ever since, but in vain, for I am the only one that can forgive myself and I cannot. I did not give her a potato.

All the years, ever since my liberation, I looked for justification for my act, at least an excuse. All I could come up with in my defense is the fact that all the time in ghetto, we never experienced a shortage of potatoes. I knew it that morning too.

Since beginning of December, we stopped going to the Ortscommendanture and spent the entire time cutting wood at the warehouses yard. Two of us six were separated from the rest as they were registered as mechanics. One was from Shershev by the name of Zalmen Rosuchowsky, the second was from Kamieniec-Litewk. They started to work at repairing trucks in the same yard, so we used to see each other constantly.

Their work used to take them in the warehouses of the abandoned Soviet machinery and even in the one with the dysfunctional Soviet weapons. Some of the warehouses were pad locked and when they needed machine parts from there, one of the two soldiers from the guardhouse used to go with them.

The ghetto youth began desperately to look for weapons that were unobtainable. The two mechanics began to eye the discarded ornaments in the warehouse. We all knew about it. We used to see it passing by the wide open doors of the warehouses when the two mechanics used to do some work there under the watchful eye of a soldier. We deliberately did not gaze at the weapons not to arise suspicion by the soldier.

Nevertheless, among ourselves, we began to look for a way to get a few rifles out. An occasion arose sooner than expected.



There lived in Pruzany a man by the name of Itchak Hydamak who was by profession a locksmith, plumber and owner of a bicycle repair shop. In the ghetto, he became a jack-of-all-trades who used to go out to do all kinds of repairs for the Germans.

Doing some work for the Germans, he needed a certain part. Knowing that he might find it in the warehouses where we worked, he went with a German soldier to us. Our guard took him around to all the individual stores, including the one with the weapons. This Itchak Hydamak noticed it. Finding the needed piece of machinery, he left with his guard.

Before the week was up, he was back with another soldier needing something, which was of course in the warehouses where the weapons were. This time he came prepared, pulling behind him a sled stacked high with tin stove pipes. Coming into the guardhouse with his guard, he pulled out a bottle of vodka from his pocket and proposed to have a drink with them. One drink led to a second and the now three soldiers began to feel comfortable. Not wanting to disturb them, he offered to go by himself for the needed part while they finish the bottle. Without hesitation, one of the soldiers gave him the keys. He went straight to the warehouse grabbing a couple of rifle he shoved them into the empty pipes pinching both ends. Taking inconsideration that he was a man in his late forties he moved very swiftly. Before he realized what was happening, he was inside again for more. We did not wait for an invitation, just followed him and started grabbing rifles too. He, Hydamak, turned to us saying, "Take it fellows, now is your chance." From great excitement about the unexpected windfall, we stood in the middle of the yard with the rifles in hand not knowing what to do. Hydamak quickly shoved the other rifles in the stovepipes, squeezing the ends tightly together.

He harnessed himself to the sled and started out in the direction of the gate and guardhouse. Someone yelled, lets hide it. We pushed the weapons under a pile of wood.

I do not know how it happened, but somehow the two mechanics became the sportsman for the six of us. I, being the youngest followed the rest. They, the two mechanics, told us that they are in contact with a well-organized group in the ghetto who are in need of weapons. For the price of eight rifles, the group will accept all six of us.

We, and that group knew the rifle stocks are broken. The Soviets broke them before they surrendered. The task before us was to get the rifles into the ghetto where carpenters could make new stocks. But how?

There was a middle age couple in Pruzany by the name of Helman. They had two sons both in the mid twenties. The elders name was Joseph and the younger Shmerl, who became a kind of helper attendant to the German Burgermeister (Mayor). Not so much to the mayor who used to spend a lot of time traveling around with other Nazi big shots in their Nazi uniforms, but to his wife to whom he became a messenger boy between her and the Judenrat. That is to say, that whatever she needed or wanted, she used to send him for it to the Jews and the Jews produced and delivered. Did they have a choice?

The group partisans, the ones we were to be accepted in, worked out a plan. To this group belonged this Shmerl Helman, the mayor's messenger boy. A sled will be made with a double bottom. Shmerl Helman will ask the mayor for some wood, come with that sled to us for the wood. While some of us will distract the German guard that will come with him (at that time even Shmerl could not move about outside the ghetto without a guard). The others will hide the eight rifles in between the double decks and pile on some wood on top. Then, and only then we will hope for a miracle that he should not get caught at the ghetto gate.

Not only did this Shmerl put his life on the line, but the lives of his family. Ours, the six of us that worked there and our families and maybe the lives of hundreds or even thousands of other ghetto dwellers.

This Shmerl knew only too well what a chance he is taking and how much is riding on his mission. Yet only a couple days later he appeared at the gate of the yard harnessed to a fairly large sled made in the ghetto by a young but good carpenter with the name of Hershl Morawsky. He is accompanied by a rifle-toting soldier. They approach us, the soldier looks around and sees piles of wood.

I do not know if because of the cold or sheer boredom, the soldier turns around, walks back the few dozen meters to the guardhouse and disappears inside. Now we are alone. We quickly take off the top covering of the sled put in the rifles, replace the cover and pile on some wood. We still have time to exchange a few words and wish each other

good luck. The soldier comes out of the guardhouse. Shmerl hitches himself up to the sled and they leave the yard.

We continue our work but constantly glancing in the direction of the gate expecting at any minute a bunch of Germans to come for us. In such tension, the workday comes to an end. Our guard appears to lead us back to the ghetto. Only after passing the gate, we realize that our fear was a bit exaggerated, for why would a German gendarme stop to search a single Jew who is constantly under guard and apparently has the German's permission to take along with him a hand sled with pitiful wood splinters.

On everybody's mind pressed the gravity of the situation and the ever-present question: Will the Germans let us spend the winter in the ghetto? The barometer of that moment became the factory in the ghetto where workers used to put on leather soles on felt boots for the German army. Like a clock, a big military truck used to bring raw material and take back the already made boots. It was said that as long as the Germans are bringing material we are safe. Should they stop the delivery of the raw material it will be a bad omen.

One of the first days of January happened to be a beautiful day and the two soldiers from the guardhouse came out for a stroll in the yard, which bordered with the land on which the soviets were building a military airport.

## **Chapter 10**

The Soviet erected buildings now housed the gendarmerie or, as they were known to us, the "Schutz-Polizei" or the "Brown Cuffs." A couple of them strolled over to the two soldiers for a chat. As they were on the other side of the fence, they had to speak loudly. I, being the closest to them, could overhear their conversation. After exchanging a few polite words, their conversation turned to the topic of the Jews. I clearly heard one gendarme saying that if the Jews won't be taken away by the end of this month (January), they will remain until spring.

I took this remark seriously, for it came from reliable sources, a gendarme who told it to another German, neither of whom were concerned with the Jewish problem and

could not care one way or the other. I did not like what I heard, and all that day had a bad premonition. When I got home, I shared the news with my parents.

A few days later, we, that is part of our future partisan group, held a meeting in the quarters of the mechanic from Kamieniec-Litewsk. He and his wife lived in Moishe Glotzer's cramped attic on Kobriner Street, almost opposite my uncle and aunt's house, which now served as the office of the Judenrat.

At that meeting, I told them what I overheard at work, hoping to add some urgency to our plans. Everyone present had his own interpretation and expressed his opinion, but nobody was in a hurry to rush into the forests in January. To be honest, neither was I. The meeting ended with no decision and we went home via back alleys.

I, like everyone, dream in my sleep. Some were good and some bad, some I had forgotten immediately and some after a time. A few stayed in my memory forever. Still, I never believed in them. Although my mother's dream of Molly Feinberg's falling off the ancient *shul* (synagogue) in Shershev did come to pass, I never paid much attention to dreams.

In the middle of January 1943, I dreamt that I was on a train. The train stopped at a railway station. The station itself was a non-descript, one story, quadrangular building with two square windows on each side. A low roof leaned in on all four sides to the center, and the walls were plastered in a gray color. I did not know why but that building seemed very repugnant to me, yet in the dream I knew that I have to get off here.

I woke up in a distressed mood with a bitter taste in my mouth.

Due to the increase in guards around the ghetto fence, the shortage of many articles became acute. The first victims were the refugees, many of whom depended partly on the Judenrat.

In those January days of 1943, my diet consisted of the few potatoes my mother used to cook the previous evening, the piece of bread we used to get for going out of the ghetto to work and the soup my mother used to concoct and save for me for when I got home. What the other members of the family were eating that January, I did not know and am now ashamed to say I did not ask, which I regret even today, not that it would have helped them anyway.

In the third week of January, the military truck came on their weekly visit to pick up the felt-soled boots that were being made in the ghetto, they did not bring with them any raw material. That was a bad omen for the ghetto. There were those that made nothing of it. Others shrugged their shoulders. I am sure that among them were many that saw the unavoidable impending catastrophe much earlier, but did not want to say so aloud and make the gloomy atmosphere in the ghetto more depressing.

The few groups of partisans that had gotten out of the ghetto into the forests had a hard time. Some of them were accepted into the established partisan groups, others tried to fend for themselves. They used to get food from the peasants, sometimes by persuasion and sometimes by force, but were always on the move between attacking and escaping the Germans. They were hard on their clothes, especially the footwear. The best and safest place to get more was the ghetto. To be more precise, the Judenrat, which had to have leather and leather boots at all time to pacify the Germans.

Nobody in the Judenrat was surprised when, during their late night meetings, a couple of Jewish partisans appeared asking for good clothing and footwear. They used to get it and get out of the ghetto that same night under the cover of darkness.

Of course, such transactions used to be conducted in total secrecy, for in this case, their secrecy meant the continued existence of the ghetto and the lives of its ten thousand habitants.

Tuesday the 26<sup>th</sup> of January is, according to the Jewish calendar, 20 days into the month of Shvat, and it was my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. My loving and devoted mother never failed to remind me of my Jewish birthday, even in the darkest and last days of the ghetto.

The next day Wednesday, we, the six workers, held a meeting with some of the other future partisans. It was again held in the quarters of the Kamieniec-Litowsker couple, across the offices of the Judenrat. The meeting did not last long, as nobody had any new plans or ideas; additionally, we did not want to walk in the street late at night, as it was prohibited to be outside after dark. Nobody cherished the idea of coming face to face with a Nazi at night. Even though we used to start our meetings after dark, one could claim still to be coming from work up to seven o'clock, but not later.

The meeting was over at eight thirty and we started downstairs. The exit led to the yard. From the yard, we walked to a wide gate that opened into Kobriner Street. The wide gate was higher than a man and there were no cracks in it that one could look through into the street. In the gate was a little door that we had to open carefully because it squeaked. As soon as we touched the door, we heard an auto stop in front of the Judenrat across the street. In the deathly quiet of the ghetto night, we heard as the doors of the auto opened and a voice said, "Willy, keep guard," then the sounds of steps as they ascended the porch. There was the loud opening of a door and five or six seconds later, several shots.

We remained frozen to the ground, for up to now we had not heard a single shot fired in the ghetto. No more than two minutes later, we could hear the Germans leaving the Judenrat, getting into the auto and pulling away.

We immediately heard talking and yelling in Yiddish. Opening the little door in the gate, we noticed a crowd gathering in front of the Judenrat. It did not take long to find out what happened. As the Gestapo men entered the Judenrat, they found most of the members present, including the president Itzl Yanovitz (Janowicz). Among the present were two armed partisans who had come from the forest with a list of things they needed. As faith wanted, the Gestapo men walked in on them. The two armed partisans, seeing the Germans enter, jumped up and ran out the back door. The Germans, noticing armed men running out, pulled out their handguns and started firing indiscriminately, killing one member of the Judenrat and the night watchman and wounding several others.

The Gestapo men, in the excitement, forgot to say what they came for, or maybe they wanted to play cat and mouse with the Jews. Whatever the reason, all they said was that they wanted the partisans by eleven o'clock that very evening. Otherwise, they have their own method of dealing with the situation.

All the Judenrat had was a couple of hours. Who the two partisans were was known. One was Mordechai -Bear Segal, the second was a young man from Bialystok whose name I do not remember. Those two partisans had family in the ghetto, and on their way out, they stopped over and took along a couple of their brothers.

They got out of the wired fence minutes before the Nazis reinforced the guard around the ghetto. Whoever tried to follow them just a few minutes later was shot at the fence.

The Judenrat called a hasty meeting at which it was decided to arrest a member of each of the two partisan families, in the hopes that they could pacify the Nazis for the time being and be able to negotiate with them later. In the worst-case scenario, they would sacrifice the two men as the two partisans.

Everyone in the ghetto realized that the Germans will not let us off with the delivery of the two supposed partisans, but that was what they initially demanded.

After hanging around the Judenrat for an hour and having found out this much, I went home to my parents, sisters and brother. This time, I did not have to be careful walking the dark ghetto streets. The ghetto was not asleep; it was swarming like a beehive. The reinforced Nazi guards around the ghetto could plainly see it but did not react.

No one in our room was sleeping. Neither was anyone in the whole house. My parents were too upset, too depressed and too nervous to be able even to sit down, so they stood in the middle of the room looking at each other and the children, unable to say anything.

After telling them what took place in the last hour (not that they did not already know), I revealed to them for the first time the fact that I belonged to a group that is planning to run to the forest and join the partisans. The expression on their faces did not change. My mother turned to me and said, "If there is a chance to save yourself, try it, may G-d help you."

I went out to see if there is any news. Kobriner Street, where the Judenrat was, was full with people, especially around the Judenrat. It was about ten thirty in the evening, half an hour before the deadline. Suddenly the main ghetto gate opens and a German auto drives in and stops in front of the Judenrat. Although it was night and Jews were not allowed to be outside after dark, nobody made a move or attempt to go away. I was wondering if we have suddenly become so brave or were we just resigned to our fate.

A couple of Germans got out and walked into the Judenrat. Everyone was waiting in tension for the reason for this visit, wondering what calamity would befall us now. What new decree? A minute later, they are out, proud and arrogant as if they have just conquered the world. In a precise military gait, they step down to the auto, and the driver opens the door and salutes smartly. They pull away.

Before anyone has a chance to ascend the steps of the porch, the door of the Judenrat opens. One member appears and announces that the Germans revoked the demand for the two partisans, for in any case the ghetto will be evacuated (the German euphemism for slaughter or kill) beginning tomorrow. The evacuation will last four days, during which two and a half thousand people will be taken away daily. They even left behind a map showing which part of the ghetto will be emptied each day.

Immediately, assumptions and accusations started to circulate around the ghetto. The assumption was that the two Jewish partisans had been betrayed by a couple of non-Jewish partisans that were supposed to have been waiting for them on the outskirts of town. The accusations were about the two Jewish partisans. There were those who contended that, were they good Jewish boys, they would have stayed home and it would not have come to this, or if they wanted to be partisans, they should have stayed in the forest and not put the ghetto in jeopardy.

The argument was solved the next morning at nine o'clock when four hundred sleds entered the ghetto. These were peasants from the surrounding villages, who told us that they were ordered at noon the day before to show up at the ghetto fence--way before the incident with the partisans occurred. It became clear to all that the event with the partisans was coincidental.

We, living on Nowa Street, were supposed to be leaving the ghetto on the first day, January 28, 1943. On the same short street lived my father's brother Joshuah, with his wife Freda and their three children. For our comfort, my sister Sheva used to sleep there. The others of my father's family, like his parents, my grandparents Kantorowitz, my father's sister Sheindl, her husband Leibl and their two children, my father's brother Hershl and his wife Sheinah, my father's youngest brother Eli and my father's two cousins from Malecz, Joshuah and Zalman Nyselbaum, and their families all lived in one



big house on Rezky Street. During that night of despair, my parents decided to go over to Rezky Street in order to spend these last hours together.

How can one describe our feelings, sitting there in despair and mortal fear of the impending death of a thousand faces that was waiting for us? Yet I will shamelessly admit that my thoughts were mainly preoccupied with saving myself; I reasoned that if anyone of us has any chance, it is I. I was a member of a group of young men that was preparing to go into the forest. What chance had my parents, sisters and brother to save themselves? What went through their minds that night?

At daybreak, as we were getting ready to go over to Rezky Street, my mother turned to me and said, “Run over to your uncle Joshuah and call your sister Sheva. Let us be together before we die.” At that moment, I glanced out the window and noticed my sister Sheva coming towards us. She was walking slowly and calmly, looking ahead; her face was pensive, I would say serene, as if she has already resigned her fate and made peace with it. Despite the fact that I had struggled with the idea of having to die all that night, I felt a shudder that would not leave me.

As soon as my sister Sheva entered, each of us picked up the little bundle my mother had prepared and we walked out into the cold January dawn. Walking along that windy, cold street, I went back in my thoughts thirteen months to December of 1941, when we dragged ourselves together for three days on our way from Chomsk to Pruzany. Suddenly, despite the bitter cold and fear we had felt, it became a sweet memory in comparison to this moment. Then, in spite of the fear of being caught, the cold and the hunger, we could look forward to eventually getting to Pruzany. Now, looking at my little brother and sisters, watching their little cheeks turn red from the wind and cold, my heart was crying out to G-d, “Why?” I looked at my mother and tried to tell myself that the dampness on her face is from the blowing flurries and not her tears. My father walked silently, trying to keep the little ones together as if to make sure that death does not miss them. Again, the question that never left me since I have seen the first German cried out in me, why? Why do we deserve such a cruel end? What have these little children done to deserve it?

The ghetto streets were quiet. One could not hear a yell or scream, nor a shot. There was not a single German in the ghetto but we could see many around the fence. Here and there, one could see a person running across the street. Despite the fact that everyone knew when they would be “evacuated” and could postpone it for a day or two by just crossing the street, hardly anyone did so.

Entering my uncle’s living quarters, we found them all sitting together in one room. The mood was dour, with us trying to make conversation in fits and starts, exhausting one topic and starting up again with an unimportant remark or statement. All of this was a futile attempt to keep away from morbid speculative conversations like, “Have the Germans already dug graves for us or will we have to do it ourselves?” Or, “Are the graves nearby or will we be taken to Brona-Gora? (A railway station between Bereza-Kartuzka and Iwacewicz where many of the Jews of Bereza-Kartuzka, Ruzany, Antopol and other places are buried.)”

During such a conversation, I asked my uncle Eli, my father’s youngest brother who saw action in the Polish German war, “How long can a person go on suffering before death if a bullet strikes the body and not the head?” “It depends on where it strikes,” he answered. “If it strikes a major organ like the lungs, stomach or even intestines, the body has a tendency to develop a high temperature which usually brings with it a loss of consciousness. If the bullet strikes the heart, death is almost instant. However if the bullet does not strike a major organ, a person might lay in a mass grave in horrible pain for hours and even days.”

Such was the theme of our conversation during that depressing Thursday morning, January 28, 1943, when two and a half thousand souls was taken out of the ghetto, a conversation to which my brother, the thirteen-year-old Liova (Leibl), my eleven-year-old sister Sonia (Sara) and my nine-year-old sister Leiba were listening. My older sister Sheva, who turned twenty-one five months earlier, listened attentively to the conversation but did not participate.

In retrospect, nobody said much, everyone was engrossed in their own thoughts, which we used to say it aloud from time to time. I watched as my aunt Sheindl, my father’s sister, tried to explain to her fifteen-year-old deaf and dumb son Sioma (Shalom)-

-that exceptionally bright, strong, redheaded boy--what was happening now in the ghetto and what will happen to us. I could see that he understood everything his mother told him. One could see it in his face, but his face kept on expressing one question that none of us could answer, namely, *why*?

At about three in the afternoon people began to appear in the street. My father, uncles and I went outside to find out what was taking place. Within a quarter of an hour, the alleys and lanes came to life. People were eager to listen and share their experience.

Here is what happened. At nine in the morning, two of the three ghetto gates--the main gate in the market place, opposite Kobriner Street and at the end on Seltzer (*Dambrowska* in Polish) Street--opened up and the German gendarmerie escorted four hundred peasants into the ghetto with their sleds. They were led to the following streets: Cerkewna, Strazacka, Nova, Yatka, Gensza, Mieszczanska and Shull-Hoiff. They were lined up along those ghetto streets opposite the Jewish homes, from which the inhabitants started to emerge in silence. The women came out with faces red from weeping, the men with bent heads, and all one could hear was the sobbing of children.

Six persons were ordered in each sled; no more, no less. Each person was permitted to take along a small suitcase, either a knapsack or just a little bag. Bringing out and settling the old and infirmed down in the sleds, especially when families tried to be together, and the thorough final search of the houses by the Nazis all took a couple of hours. Finally, the mournful procession of two-and-a-half thousand souls started out on their final journey into the shadow of death.

They left via the Seltzer Street gate. As soon as the last sled left, the gate was shut. Half a dozen Germans took up position around it and nobody was permitted out or in, even a German.

The horror of the reality shook the ghetto population, especially the young, some of whom still believed that the Germans are bluffing. Now with a quarter of the population gone, no further proof was needed.

That evening there was extreme agitation and total confusion in the ghetto. Young people started to look for a way out. Many tried to get closer to the barbed wire hoping to find a less-guarded stretch of fence. Unfortunately, it was in vain; the Germans knew only

too well how to keep Jews confined. At fifty-meter intervals, they put two men, one a gendarme and one a local volunteer policeman. They kept walking back and forth from the two opposite sides towards each other, thus keeping their assigned fifty meters always in sight. With electrical lights on each post of the fence and pistol flares, which they used to fire at any sound, the ghetto was tightly closed.

It is no wonder that when a few brave young men fell dead at the wire while trying to get out, hundreds of others began to lose courage and hope. As a result, collaboration and contact between the organized groups ceased. It seemed that everyone had to fend for himself, and so it turned out to be. Those who had weapons started to whisper and scheme on their own and for themselves, forgetting their commitment to those that procured the weapons.

In reality, one cannot blame them for acting this way, as it was obvious at that moment that a group would never make it to the outside of the ghetto. If there was any chance at all, it would be for a single individual or maybe just a small group.

I spent that Thursday night outdoors. To be more precise, I spent it near the wire ghetto fence, hoping against hope that maybe a watchman will get distracted long enough for me to get out. Now and then, I used to come in the house to try and persuade my two uncles Hershl and Eli to join me at the fence. I was hanging on to the hope that maybe there will come a chance for us to get out of the trap and make it to the forest.

At that moment, I did not even think of the difficulties that would await us should we even make it there. My thoughts were how to avoid the imminent death awaiting us from the Germans. My uncle Hershl had of late developed severe back pain and he felt that he would not be able to run any distance. My uncle Eli, a healthy twenty-nine-year-old man who went through the Polish German campaign with distinction four years earlier, did not want to think about abandoning his parents, my grandparents Kantorowicz.

That night, too, nobody slept in my uncle's quarters. The outside door was unlocked and I used to come in from time to time to find them sitting up exhausted from lack of sleep, but even more from despair and agony. If someone would lie down and doze off for a moment, they used to wake up with a startling scream or cry.

So passed the night of Thursday into Friday, with the young people of the ghetto trying to outsmart the Germans and see how close they could get to the fence before being noticed.

Later on that night, I heard that several small groups succeeded in making good their escape. Apparently, a group of armed men managed to bribe a local policeman to let them through while his partner, the German, was patrolling near the far end of their territory, looking away from him.

There were many others along the fences nearby that were waiting for a chance to get out who, noticing the armed group getting out, started to follow them. This whole affair took only a few seconds, then the Germans turned around. The local policeman, noticing the German turning around, fired, killing one man instantly. The others retreated into the ghetto. Still, thirty-odd young men made it out. Among them were the three brothers Maletzky--my friend Itzik, his older brother Nacham and the younger Moishe.

This event took place at the end of Rezky Street, the very street where my family was spending their last hours together with my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. As luck would have it, I was then at another spot along the fence. In another place near the former Polish gymnasium, another group succeeded in making it out. Among them was my cousin Lisa Pinsky with her boyfriend Yudel Rubin.

I heard of the successful escape of the first group within fifteen minutes after it happened. But I only found out about the second Friday morning, having returned to my family after spending the night running around the ghetto fence in a futile attempt to get out. As I came in, I found everybody talking about Lisa's successful escape. I went over to my aunt Sheindl who was in the kitchen to ask if she heard any details. All she knew was that, according to what she was told, there were no bodies around the place the group got out. Then she turned back to half-heartedly busy herself round the cooking stove as if to make breakfast, which was the farthest thing from anyone's mind.

And so passed the second night of siege for the remaining citizens of the ghetto, who sat in cold sweat counting the diminishing hours of their lives. How is it possible to describe the mood, the morbidity, the anguish that existed in every house? Wherever you turned your head, be it your father, mother, sisters, brother, grandfather, grandmother,

uncles, aunts, cousins by the dozen, you saw someone you loved who only hours from now will be dead. Their bullet-riddled bodies will fall into the gigantic pits waiting for them, some falling down dead, some half dead. The dead will be the lucky ones. The half dead will expire in pain and prolonged suffering, either from cold, bleeding to death, suffocating under the falling bodies or being buried alive...

At nine o'clock on Friday morning, just like the day before, the German escorted another four hundred sleds into the ghetto. This time they parked along Seltzer Street and Holender Street, and on all of smaller streets and alleys in between like Potapuwka, Polna, Długa and Cmentarna.

Before the sleds began to be loaded, some of the younger men started up a conversation with the peasant sled owners. They found out that they took yesterdays Jews to the rail way station Oranczyce-Linowo, twelve kilometers away, where they were loaded into cattle cars. What happened to them later on they did not know. Some of the peasants mentioned that on the way to the ghetto that morning they saw a couple dozen dead Jews scattered along a section of the road some three kilometers from Pruzany. They even described the victims' attire.

The young men having heard the news slowly melted into the side street and spread the story in the ghetto. The description of the attire was so precise that some of the families could identify their sons and daughters. In that confusion, I found out that among the dead were the three Maletzky brothers. Of course, the whole story could not be verified, but I nor anybody I know ever heard of those Maletzky brothers again, nor of the others with them.

The expulsion of the above-mentioned streets took place with the same German precision and efficiency as the day before. If any beating, cursing or yelling took place, we would not hear anyway, being a couple streets away. I do not recall any shooting. The Germans were doing a thorough and clean job. Besides, it is much easier to handle a living Jew than a dead Jew. A dead one does not obey commands.

Friday's expulsion ended at the same time as Thursday's. As soon as the last sled of the convoy with the two and a half thousand souls left and the Germans shut the gate, people appeared in the street. That late afternoon, I heard that some young man whose

names I do not remember passing from Shershev Street to Kobriner found himself in front of the main ghetto gate. Apparently, he looked very suspicious, for the Germans did not pay much attention then to the goings-on in the ghetto. He was stopped, searched and they found on him a number of detonators. They beat him up and let him go. At other times, they would exact a price in the hundreds of lives for such a crime. Their action proved again that as far as they are concerned, we are already as good as dead.

This action only confirmed our greatest fear, that we faced the concluding chapter in the Nazi program of the solution to the Jewish problem. Still, it is difficult to understand and appreciate the human desire, drive and lust for life. For, despite all indications of the last two days and contrary to common sense, there were still some that dared to hope that we are being taken to labor camps and stubbornly refused to believe that we are being led to the slaughter. Adherents to this belief were among the locals. It is possible that the comparative tranquility of the ghetto Pruzany in comparison to others instilled a false hope in some. Maybe it was a result of a desperate desire for life in conjunction with a heart-rending cry to heaven, "No, it cannot happen, you cannot do it!"

Among the young of the remaining half of the ghetto population, new groups were being formed. These less-than-successful groups were trying to entice new, more dependable members by claiming possession of weapons. I was approached by a young man from Shershev, Reuven Winokur, who showed me an impressive handgun. I took it from his hand and pulled out the magazine in which there were two cartridges. Without a word, I handed it back to him. With such an arsenal, I would not feel much safer than with my bare hands.

Of my very close friends, all I had left was Kalman Kalbkuf, who was living with his parents and sisters on Rezky Street. My other friends, like the brothers Rotenberg, Laizer and Litek, my friend Meir Kalbkuf, were all slaughtered with their families in Chomsk; my friend Itzik Maletzky, with his two brothers, I had just lost the night before. Kalman and I decided to make an attempt that night to get out by ourselves. We made plans to meet up after dark.

Getting home, I repeated everything I had heard in the street, which they had already heard anyway. I mentioned that tomorrow, Saturday, the Germans will come for

us. The sleds will drive into Rezky Street and some will park in front of the house in which my entire family is now living, and take us all to our death. We were hoping to remain another day, that is until Sunday. However, there were not enough people left in the original assigned streets, like the west side of Kobriner Street, part of Polna, part of Seltzer and Browarna, to make up two-and-a-half-thousand souls. Therefore, the Germans will take in Rezky, Brisker, or New Shershev Street as it was called, and the small alleys in between.

Who can understand what it was like and how I and all my extended family felt when I announced the above? True, as I mentioned before, they knew and expected it. Still, to hear the confirmation from my mouth, even though I was really whispering it sounded like thunder. Still louder was the silence that followed.

Maybe there is an explanation that I do not understand or maybe their heart and feelings were so numb from pain and despair that they were unable to cry, but whatever the reason, none of them made a sound. They just remained standing, avoiding each other's glances. A little while later, they started to turn away from each other, so as not to look in each other's faces. A corner, a wall, a window--anywhere was better than to see your own hurt, suffering and despair reflected in someone else's face. The most difficult task for me was to see my brother, Liova (Leibl), and two little sisters, Sonia and Liba, huddled to my mother, as if she could protect them. Without a word, their eyes looked up to her, saying all that their lips could not utter.

Having arranged to meet my friend Kalman, I told my mother that I am going again to try my luck at the fence. As if knowing in advance that I will not succeed, I did not say good-bye to anyone. I took the improvised knapsack I made earlier from an old sack and some rope, in which my mother had put my pitiful possessions of underwear and clothes, and I left the house.

The lanes and alleys were teeming with young people that were even more desperate to find a way out than in the two previous nights. We became part of the crowd that was constantly moving from spot to spot along the barbwire fence. As we became more aggressive, the Germans became more alert and quicker on the trigger. And so I spent the third night at the fence running around in helplessness and despair. I, a twenty



year old man in the prime of my life and condition, felt completely exhausted, both physically from not sleeping three nights and being constantly on my feet and psychologically from the tension of the those three days. At times, I felt like going back to my parents, throwing myself in any corner for a couple hours of sleep and perishing with them. Anything, as long as there will be an end to it.

With daybreak, I returned to my parents and family. As in the previous couple days, they were fully dressed and looked completely exhausted. In my lifetime, I have seen many walking dead, but this time they were my father, mothers, sisters, brother, grandparents, uncles and aunts with their children. They walked around mechanically from room to room as if in a trance. They were supposedly getting ready for the trip. According to the German instructions, everyone could take along a small suitcase or a knapsack. They were preparing theirs as if they believed that the Germans were taking them to a work camp. Watching them pack, the biggest fool could tell that their hearts and souls were not in it.

As the saying goes, “time waits for no man”; so were those horrible yet precious final minutes of their lives. Time was running out and everyone was aware of it.

I stood in the middle, not knowing what to do or what to say. Indeed what could I have said and what was there to say? In one room stood my uncle Hershl, bent over a small valise that was sitting on a chair, arranging things in it for the trip. In the other corner over another valise was my uncle Eli, preparing it for his parents, my grandparents, Yaakov-Kopel and Chinka. Suddenly, my uncle Hershl while still packing started to sing, *Aily Aily Lomo Azavtony* (G-d in Heaven, Why Have You Abandoned Me). Those words are not only part of Jewish Liturgy, but they have been extended and incorporated into a Yiddish song that has heart rending words regarding the centuries old persecution of Jews, befitting many dark periods in Jewish history. But if there was ever an appropriate time for these words, it was then. If G-d did not respond, he must have been in a deep, deep sleep that lasted a long time.

Through the entire German occupation and Nazi horror, I never cried. But the closest I came to it was then. I slowly turned around to leave the room when I heard my grandmother say, “They are taking us to the slaughter and he is singing.” My poor

unfortunate grandmother. The last few days and nights affected her badly. She failed to recognize that it was my uncle's prayer, a cry to heaven.

I left the room and started to wander aimlessly around the big house. Suddenly, I came to a door that I had failed to notice previously. The door led into two large rooms that served as a hiding place for all the medicine that was in the ghetto, about which the Germans knew nothing. Now it was not on shelves but knee deep on the floor, trampled into powder and mixed with crumbled glass jars.

This destruction was done by a few young men that were tipped off by the Judenrat, with instructions to make it unusable to the Germans. Those young men made a good job of it. Looking for other hiding places, they unintentionally broke through a boarded up door that led to my relatives' quarters.

So many lives in the ghetto had depended on medicine's help, lives that might have overcome the difficult times and maybe even the Nazi terror. Now, the sight of the destroyed medicine shook me out of the delirium into which I had momentarily sunk and gave me the push into reality and sobriety that I needed at that moment. I had to make a final decision: to stay here with my dear and loved ones and share their fate or hide out for a few hours and try to get out once more at night.

The decision was made by my mother who came quietly over to me and said; "Moishela, time to go and hide yourself. The Germans will soon be in. Then it will be too late."

I wanted to start saying goodbye but did not know where to begin. Shall I start with my parents or grandparents, uncles, aunts, their children or the farther relatives, my father's two cousins, and their families from Malecz? So far, nobody cried aloud, even though everyone's hearts were breaking and crying beyond imagination. If I start saying good-bye, the well of tears, ready to burst, will not shut off. My mother noticed my hesitation and understood. She took me gently by my hand and quietly said, "Come, I will accompany you to the porch."

Since my early years, I always felt that I was my mother's favorite child, if there is such a thing. Only parents know the answer and let it remain with them. How did my mother feel when she took me by my hand for the first time in probably ten years,

knowing that it is the last time in her life that we will be holding hands in our lives? What thoughts went through her head? Did she think of the time she held my baby hand when I tried to take my first step? Did she think of the times when I was two or three years old, walking with me on the sidewalk and holding my hand to make sure I did not run into the road? Or when I was four or five and she led me to the Heder? Holding my hand to kindergarten? Or still later to Hebrew school? What was she thinking about in those few precious moments? One thing I am certain of. In her heart, she was praying so ardently, so passionately on my behalf that it moved heaven and earth. Otherwise, I would not have survived.

On the porch, my mother stood almost calm and said, "Remember my child, you have two uncles in America, my brothers Shloime (Solomon) and Pesah (Phillip). If, G-d willing, you will survive, go to them and tell them how we lived and how we perished. Remember my brother Shloime's address." My mother said it out loud, "Solomon Auerbach, 2133 Daily Avenue, Bronx, New York." I did not mark it down for two reasons. Firstly, I had no pen and paper on me, and secondly, I had very little faith in my chance of surviving.

As soon as she finished giving me the address, my mother said to me, "Nu, Moishela, go my child." I was waiting for my mother to take me in her arms to kiss me, expecting a flood of tears. To my astonishment, she made no move in my direction. She just stood there as if petrified, motionless, looking ahead into the street and not at me. Seeing that I am not moving she added, "Try to get out tonight. Should you not succeed, you will be leaving tomorrow with the last group. I am sure the Germans will let us live near the pits for a day or two before they will shoot us, so we will see each other tomorrow evening." I agreed with my mother, adding, "Yes, we will most likely see each other tomorrow night." I knew only too well that by tomorrow night, my dear ones will all be dead. Thus, we were thinking that we were fooling each other to ease the terrible pain of parting.

I understood that my holy and loving mother said what she said in order to make my leaving easier. Still, my mother did not make a move. Realizing that she feared an uncontrollable outpouring, I decided to go. As I stood on her right side, I bent down a bit

and kissed her on the right cheek. My mother did not move. Without another word, just hoping that my mother believed that we would see each other tomorrow night, I started down the steps of the porch.

Having covered ten or fifteen meters, I stopped to take another look at my mother, whom I loved more than anybody in the world and whom I would never see again. She was wearing a dark skirt and my aunt Sheindl's sweater. I noticed that my aunt's sweater fitted her nicely, even though my aunt was a slim woman and my mother used to be on the stout side. It suddenly occurred to me that my mother might have been hungry many times in the last year and a half and I did not realize it. I also realized that my mother might catch a cold standing outside without a coat on the 30th of January, and as long as she could see me, she would stand there. Almost by force, I turned and walked away quickly.

My mother's strangely numb behavior during our parting puzzled me for many years. I understood that her heart was so full with pain that it could not bear an emotional parting, but my mother was an exceptionally warm, affectionate and sympathizing person. How could she control herself so well?

Many years later when I read Rabbi David Volpe's book, "In Search and in Silence," where he says that in time of colossal emotion only silence will suffice. Quoting the Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Volpe adds that "The cry one holds back is the most powerful one of all." How befitting for my mother's behavior then.

Dear mother of mine, I have fulfilled your bequest. I survived to tell not only your brothers, but I lived to tell their children and grandchildren. One more thing mama, your legacy is now being passed on to your great grandchildren.

My legs carried me down Rezky Street towards the little house where the three Maletzky brothers lived with their mother, Brina, and grandmother, Yachna, a completely blind woman in her late seventies. As I mentioned before, the three Maletzky brothers managed to get out two nights earlier but were been shot outside of town. Their mother knew nothing of it and nobody was in a hurry to tell her. Now I went to the hiding place we had dug there in spare room. I asked my friend Kalman Kalbkoif to join me, but he had no confidence in that place. Besides, he was planning on joining his neighbors who

were living in the second half of their house and had a much better concealed hiding place.

I did not have to wait long. Seeing some men running by looking for a place to hide, I offered them ours. Soon we had more than we could accommodate. I do not remember who they were, except that there was one from Shershev whose name was Reuven Hochman. He was a man of about forty who was somehow related to the Pampalach clan. We could barely fit in the dugout. Brina Maletzky covered the opening with small boards and spread turf over it.

It was very uncomfortable in there as it was too cramped, with closed air and the ceiling, that is the few boards overhead, too low. We sat one on top of the other bent down as far as we could. Suddenly we heard as somebody shoveled away the turf overhead and then removing the boards. I look up and see my father with my little thirteen-year-old brother Liova (Leibl).

Pushing the others aside, I stood up and asked what happened. My father spoke to me with a voice I would never have recognized. My father's voice was always strong and confident, even authoritative. Now he spoke to me with a voice full of despair and anguish, as if all the Jews under Nazi Germany were speaking through him. "Your mother thinks it would be a good idea if both of you should hide, maybe one of you will manage to get out through the wires and who knows, maybe survive."

By the time my father finished saying these few words I managed to straighten myself and noticed that I was sticking out head and shoulders over the rim of the hole. Now I understood why it was so cramped and suffocating in that hole.

I glance at my little brother and notice that he is still a little boy, barely reaching under my father's arm. Before I managed to say a word came a flood of voices from underneath, as if from a chorus, full of protests and screams, which turned into a jumble of words and shouting, "There is no more room here for anyone. We are already suffocating. What are we going to do with a little boy at the wires and should we get out, do you think we will look after him? He will only be a hindrance." To my father they yelled, "How dare you shove away the turf from the boards to expose our hiding place!"

To say that I was thunderstruck would be an understatement. Those were the same people that I gave a hiding place, which they desperately needed not more than half an hour ago. Now they turned against me, my father and brother. But if they behaved this way, total strangers, what about me? Here I committed the greatest crime in my life, which still haunts me today, especially the first week after the event. I listened to the others complaining and yelling and did not say a word. True, I was no more the boss here, but at least I should have told them off. After all, it was my hiding place that I dug with my own hands and I invited them into. But I kept quiet. Why? Did I feel that I was now at their mercy? Why did I keep quiet? For that keeping quiet, I have not so far asked G-d for forgiveness. I do not dare, for in my book I do not deserve it.

From the ghetto was coming the sound of neighbors' horses. At any minute, the gate could open and the Germans with the farmers with sleds could come in. My father took my little brother's hand saying, "Let's go." There was barely room enough in that narrow hallway for them to turn around. I stood in that hole watching them walk out hand in hand, never to see them again.

I squeezed myself back into the hole, Brina Maletzky covered again the opening with the small board dumped some turf over it, and we remained in the dark. Shortly after, we started hearing the expected voices of the Jewish inhabitants, the peasant commands to the horses, and above it all the voices of the accursed Germans driving the Jews out of their homes to their death.

Apparently, Brina Maletzky with her blind mother left their little house on time and quietly, for we did not hear the usual abuse, swearing and curses from the Germans inside as we would have otherwise. We could, however, clearly hear a German coming in to make sure that there is nobody left in the house every quarter hour or so. The reverberation of their booted steps shook the floor of that little house.

Around two o'clock that Saturday afternoon, there was a dead silence in the ghetto. We moved away the boards and crawled out into the day light. There was no sign of the Germans and a few Jews began to appear in the street. Many seemed to wander, lost and bewildered, not knowing what to do or where to turn.

That afternoon, I passed several times by the house from which my entire family, immediate and extended, was taken away. I did not dare enter it. I wandered around the still partly populated part of the ghetto that was suddenly so strange, without a person I loved or cared for, with nightmarish thoughts in my head of how my dear ones would perish. I conjured up the most horrible visions, which only the horror of my present reality could trigger. Afterwards, I found myself back near the Maletzky's little house where I was hiding a couple hours earlier.

Through the little low window, I noticed some people inside and I walked in. I found there less than half a dozen Shershev Jews, among them one by the name of David. I do not remember his family name. He lived in a little lane off Chazer-Ghesl, making a living as a horse dealer and a village peddler. With those two sources of income, he and his family barely survived. The second there was Moishe Tuchmacher. Both men were in the early forties, married with children. This Moishe Tuchmacher, unlike David who was a pauper, was a well-to-do man in Shershev with a big house in the market square.

The conversation revolved around those that had been taken and about the chances of getting out tonight. All present were single individuals who lost their families in the last three days, or even earlier in Drohyczyn or Chomsk. In general, the conversation was confusing. Everyone wanted to talk, not having the patience to listen to others, hoping by talking to ease his own state of mind and the heaviness of the heart.

In the middle of that tumult, the door opens and in walks in Isser Gichman, a man of the same age as those mentioned above. He was a close friend of Moishe Tuchmacher and on the same level of respectability. Like Moishe, he had sent his wife and children off to the slaughter that very day. The two friends, seeing each other, fell in each other's arms. For a split second, their faces lit up as if they had won the lottery; then, instantly, their faces twisted, distorting in terrible pain. They both burst out in a heart-rending cry.

Even though everyone present was in deep grief and aching over his own losses, it was difficult to watch the two middle-aged men crying in each other's arms. They, like the others in that little room, had parted with their families forever, deciding to spend the last night in the ghetto in an attempt to get out.

To be honest, it occurred to me to question if such an act is proper, that is to let your family to go the execution and try to save yourself. Yet I realized that there was no great accomplishment in going with them, and the desire to live is immense.

Before I could give this thought any attention, I saw as David that horse dealer gave a bang with his fist on the table and said in a loud voice “Now I feel better. Let them know what it is like to be without a wife and children, as I have been in this ghetto for the past four months ever since I lost mine in Drohyczyn.” In astonishment, I looked at that man, not believing what I had just heard. I wondered how a man can even think such a thing, never mind to say it. This man survived Auschwitz, went to Israel, died there at a ripe old age and was brought to a proper Jewish burial. None of those present there wanted to bother answering him. Everyone felt dejected, too depressed, too tired and maybe already indifferent to the pain around them.

We remained there till after dark, when we went outside to try on the fourth and last night to get out. We tried to keep an eye on three particular men. Among them was Yankel Winograd, who was considered to be the tallest man in Shershev. He was a very resourceful man in his early thirties who went through the Polish German campaign and managed to come to Pruzany under the German occupation when no Jew was permitted to travel. He enjoyed certain respectability in the ghetto.

In the ghetto’s last death throes, many looked to him for advice or simply followed him and his two companions. He was very selective with his company; one was a man from Antopol who was every bit as imposing as Yankel, if not more, and the second man was from Kobrin and just as impressive. Those three walked around the lanes and alleys like everybody else, looking for a weak spot or a break.

The Germans understood only too well the mentality of the still remaining Jews in the ghetto. Because of the attempts made during the previous three nights that they successfully frustrated, they knew the ghetto Jews would be more aggressive on the last night. They decided to discourage us from such attempts. As soon as it got dark, the Germans started shooting into the ghetto. Unlike the previous nights, when they shot at visible targets, this time they fired for no apparent reason, not at real or imaginary targets.



It became dangerous to cross a street, especially Kobriner Street that faced the main ghetto gate and cut the ghetto in two.

Many believed that the best place to make a break was Old Shershev Street, which was divided along its length. One side of the street was in the ghetto, while the other side was inhabited by Christians. All that divided us was the barbed wire fence and cobblestone road. Once you made it to the other side of the street, you could disappear in the Christian populated alleys. So indeed, many attempts to escape were made along that street. That night, one could find a group of young people behind almost every house, waiting for a chance to get out.

Standing there, I suddenly noticed three silhouettes running outside the fence across the cobblestone street and instantly disappearing among the Christian houses. At that moment, all I heard was one shot. In that split moment, I recognized the three men by their attire. It was Yankel Winogard in his revamped Polish military uniform he used to wear in the ghetto, the man from Antopol in his Soviet-style sheepskin coat and the man from Kobryn in his short coat, riding pants and high boots. As far as I know, they were the only ones to have made it out that night from that spot.

Despite the difficulty in moving around, we continued to wander from place to place, exhausted and half-asleep from four sleepless nights hoping for a miracle. And so passed the fourth and last night in the ghetto. With daybreak, everyone started hurrying to make decisions. The gathering point became Rezky Street, where one could hear all kinds of suggestions. One proposed resistance. There were still a couple rifles in the brothers Nathan and David Kabizetzky's hiding place. Somebody asked how many cartridges were. "Sixty," came the answer. Somebody pointed out the fifty armed German men that just arrived at the main gate from the so-called Lehman-Gang. This was a special signal group, part of Steuergruppe H.G., whose job it was to maintain the telephone lines in our area. But above all, they excelled in beating up Jews, although that was not their department. They never left a Jew outside the ghetto without a beating. For amusement, they used to enter the ghetto and beat up any Jew they met in the street. Those fifty Germans came to the main gate to feast their eyes on seeing the Jews being taken to the slaughter.

The man that pointed them out said, "With the two rifles and sixty cartridges, you want to take on those fifty men, never mind the hundreds that came especially for us?" Besides men, there were a lot of women in the street, many of them mothers. Hearing talk of resistance, many started crying, lamenting and accusing the proponent of resistance of trying to provoke the Germans to kill us.

These of course were local women who refused to accept the fact that we were being taken for destruction. Some of my acquaintances were still talking about hiding another night and trying again to get out. Other suggested we look around in the empty houses for food. I do not remember if and when I ate during those four days. If I did, it was very little. We ran into a few nearby empty houses. Most were modest as far as food goes. In some, we found potatoes, carrots, beets or uncooked cereal, nothing ready to eat. In a couple, we found food that really surprised me, like sugar, fat, and oil; food that I have not seen since leaving Shershev.

In one house, we found a stock of Czarist silver rubles. For a moment, we started to fill our pockets with it, but immediately realized that it would weigh us down and make a jingling sound. In my pocket, I had some twenty or thirty marks my father gave me and twice as many dollars my Uncle Hershl gave me Saturday morning before I left for my hiding place. I took a few silver coins and left the house.

Outside, I met my friend Kalman Kalbkoif and asked him if he made a decision. He decided to hide in the hideout that was in the other part of their house, although the other people hiding there claimed that there was no room.

With daylight, the Germans stopped the shooting and we were able to move around. We wanted to see the spot where the three big men managed to get out last night. Approaching the fence within two meters, I shuddered in disbelief. There on the other side of the fence, right in the middle of the street, lie the three men, Yankel Winograd with his two companions, dressed in the very same clothes I saw them in a few hours earlier, running across the street outside.

How did they get there? I saw them running into the alley across the street with my own eyes, already outside the ghetto. During that night, I passed by this place several times and did not see them. Within minutes, our group grew bigger and some started

proposing all kinds of assumptions. One came up with the idea that, besides the line of guards around the ghetto fence, there might be another one-half a kilometer away, which depressed us even more.

With such despairing thoughts, we started back to Rezky Street, just in time to see the farmers' sleds turning into Rezky Street from Kobrin. My close friend Kalman disappeared, most likely into his neighbor's hideout. I had no wish to hide alone in the previous place. Besides, I had nobody to cover it with turf like I had the morning before.

I looked at all the men that spent the last four nights with me around the ghetto fence, settling down into the sleds under the swinging clubs of the watchful Germans. Everyone was trying to sit near family, friends and acquaintances, wanting to spend their last hours on this earth together. There were many single men like myself whose families left earlier, and they remained to try and escape. To me it made no difference with whom I shared the sled. My family left yesterday on their final journey. Still, I react when I see Shalom Berenshtein approaching my sled. He is the one with whom I worked for a year under the Soviets, the former Soviet soldier and escaped prisoner of war and who worked with me outside the ghetto until the last day. He sits down to my right and I find myself in the middle on the three-seat board. I do not remember who sat to my left, nor the three men behind me.

The sight of entire families trying desperately to sit together made me feel painfully guilty. It was yesterday at this time that my family was being loaded on sleds. They too wanted to sit together. Did they? Or were they been torn apart and put in different sleds for that last trip? My effort to get out of the ghetto was in vain. I should have been with them, but instead I abandoned them when they needed me most.

At the same time, I felt a temporary relief at not having to look as those poor souls were herded by the accursed Nazis, who showered them with curses, swearing, name-calling, abusive words and above all clubs. Only now did I realize how "polite" the Nazis behaved towards the Jews of Pruzany. The first two days, Thursday and Friday, the expulsion took place in streets we could not see. Yesterday, Saturday when my family was taken away, I was in hiding in a hole in which I could hear little and see nothing.

Now on this Sunday morning, the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1943, the picture revealed itself in its entire gruesomeness and horror.

Who can imagine what it is like, an entire family being led to the slaughter; grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, children and grandchildren? Poor, broken Jews, exhausted after years of persecution, herded by beasts in the image of men who are treating them as if they were the scum of the earth. Who can imagine this, who can comprehend and describe it?

It took a couple of hours before the caravan started to move. The sleds travelled from Rezky to Kobriner via the market square to Seltzer (Dombrowsky) Street. The sleds moved slowly one close to the next. Between each dozen or so sleds traveled a sled with Germans, who kept a watchful eye on the sleds ahead of them. We reached the ghetto gate, passed it and left the ghetto behind. Suddenly an immense longing for the ghetto overwhelmed me. Everything in it assumed bright colors, even the Nazi guards at the gates seemed tolerable.

We were now in the Christian part of the town. I am sure that, like me, many thought of getting off the sled and disappearing among the Christian houses. I look back and see some three or four sleds behind me a sled with Germans, their rifles ready. We are approaching the end of the town where the snow covered fields stretch for kilometers. The last building is Krucel's flourmill. The Bolsheviks nationalized it in 1939, taking it from its Jewish owner. We are slowly passing by the wide-open gate of its yard. Suddenly Shalom Berenshtein gives me a poke in my side with this elbow and says, "Are you coming?" Before I had time to digest what he had just said, he swings his feet out, gets off the slow-moving sled and without looking around, walks straight into the gate in which a half dozen peasants stand looking at the passing Jews.

I look with astonishment as he walks straight by the peasants in the gate and into the wide yard. Not only did the Germans not see him, but it seems that neither did the peasants, as if they were afflicted with blindness. At that moment, I called myself by the worst names in my vocabulary for passing up such a chance. It was not just an ordinary loss. My life was at stake, and I lost it as if at cards.

After my liberation, when the remnants of our people in Europe were gathered in refugee camps, in Germany, Austria and Italy, I met a former partisan from Pruzany who told me that he served in the same partisan detachment as Shalom Berenshtein. I heard from this partisan that Shalom fell in the battle of Berlin just a couple days before the end of the war. Among other praises about him, he used these words, "He killed more Germans than you have hair on your head." I know an exaggeration when I hear one, but there is no doubt in my mind that he was a brave partisan. Honor to his memory.

We left Pruzany and were in an open field. The farmsteads scattered over the wide space seems so undisturbed, so tranquil. From my sled, which is roughly in the middle of the caravan, I cannot at times see the beginning or the end of the procession. My eyes wander from the endless line of sleds to the serene farmhouses, where the farmers went about their household chores, indifferent to the fact that almost under their windows, two-and-half thousand Jews are being led to the slaughter.

It is a frosty day, but there was no wind nor a cloud in the blue sky. I look upwards and wonder why the sun shines so brightly while looking at what is taking place before her eyes. Why doesn't she blot out her light and envelop the earth in darkness, as dark as the place we are being led to.

From a distance, I see a small village of a couple dozen houses. The village runs perpendicular to the road, so from a distance we can see what is taking place in it. A good part of our caravan has already bypassed the village. Suddenly eight or ten men jump off some sleds and run into the village. The column of sleds stops, some Germans instantly take up positions around us. A few go inside the village to round up the handful of Jews who were trapped now, not having anywhere to run. In desperation, they try some doors but they are shut tight. A couple try to run into the snow covered fields, but they are picked off easily by the German rifles. The others are being ordered to go back to the sleds. As soon as they turn around towards the sleds, they are shot in the back. The only one of those few men shot there that I knew was David, who was known by his nickname "Palena." He was a broad shouldered single man of thirty.

We moved on. Roughly half way between Pruzany and the railway station, Linowo-Oranczyce, the Germans created their German Ukrainian border. There by the

roadside were stationed a group of German border guards. They lived in a fortified dugout for fear of attacks by partisans. All one could see when passing by were the four little windows aboveground from which machine guns stuck out. That dugout was situated on the left side of the road, after which a pine forest began. It was not an old forest, nor a thick one, and its branches started 6-7 meters above the ground. There was no foliage of any sort below them. Still, it offered some protection.

As soon as the first couple dozen sleds passed the dugout, several dozen men jumped off the sled and began to run into the forest. As at the village, the Germans formed a chain of guards around us while others started shooting at the fleeing men. The escaping men were at a double disadvantage. Firstly, because the very white snow made their dark figures clearly visible, and therefore they were easy targets. But their fate was really decided when the border guards opened up with their machine guns. We watched with pain in our hearts as, one after the other, they fell to the ground. The Germans went over from one to the other to make sure that they were all dead before we continued further.

An hour or so later, we arrived at the station Linowo-Oranczyce. We were driven a kilometer past the station out of sight of the local population. There on the sidetracks stood some twenty-five cattle cars whose little windows were boarded up. The snow around was trampled and the entire place was surrounded by local Ukrainian police supervised by Germans. The Ukrainian police consisted of volunteers who gladly collaborated with the Germans for various reasons. The things they had in common was their centuries-old hatred of Jews, their dislike of the Soviets, the quest for power and the search for self esteem, the irresistible desire to plunder Jewish possessions and the unsatisfied thirst for spilling Jewish blood. When it concerned Jews, those Ukrainian volunteers fulfilled their duty with fervor, surpassing the Nazis in cruelty.

As the line of sleds pulled up to the empty cattle cars, the Ukrainian police chased the Jews off the sleds. If a suitcase or a knapsack caught a Ukrainian's eye, he ordered the owner to leave it right there. Woe be to the one who did not comply immediately.

The peasants, the owners of the sleds, tried to take advantage of the poor unfortunate Jews and benefit from their misfortune. Older Jews having sat immobile on

the sleds for four hours stiff and frozen, and had difficulties getting off of them. By the time they managed to straighten their backs or regain mobility in their limbs, the farmers used to give a whip the horse and quickly drive away with the Jewish person's meager possessions still on the sled.

Who paid attention to the screaming Jews amidst the crying, the lament of the women and the swearing, cursing and beating of the Germans? Besides, they would not react to it anyway, as the Ukrainian police relieved many Jews of their possessions in front of the Germans.

As I was approaching the cattle cars, I kept an eye open for familiar faces, especially for people from Shershev. Apparently, others had the same thoughts in mind, for within a wink of an eye, I was surrounded by almost a dozen men from Shershev. Some of them I still remember, like the two brothers Shepsl and Itzl Pomerantz, their brother in law Berl Tenenbaum, Leibl Feldman and Ghotl Weiner.

Sometime in early November 1942, right after the ghetto Pruzany was put on notice to be ready for "evacuation" at any time, I decided to look, observe and remember as much as possible all that is happening with and around me. If this was to be my fate, then I wanted to look at it clearly, discerningly and lucidly, for this would be all I could expect of life. It is my belief that this decision helped me remember important and less important events from those days that many of my contemporaries have long forgotten.

I looked closely at what is going on around and saw that the Germans are loading five cattle cars at a time and counting heads. As the doors of the cars were about a meter above ground, some of us were told to put long boards leading from the ground to the floor of the cars to serve as ramps. People were walking up and filling the cars to capacity. The Germans were not particular who got in as long as they had the required numbers of people inside. Then they would slide the door shut and seal it.

Considering the chaos and the confusion around, one could say that the loading of the cars was done in comparative order. During the loading, I saw an occurrence (or shall I call it a phenomenon) which is worth mentioning and difficult to understand. Maybe psychiatrists can explain it.

No one was anxious to be driven into the cattle cars. So as long as we could, we were trying to avoid being herded in them. Yet I tried to see all I could of what was taking place around us. There were some heart-rending scenes taking place in front of my eyes. As I mentioned earlier, the Germans used to count the amount of people entering, or rather being pressed into, each car. Having forced in the prescribed amount, they used to unceremoniously stop the flow and divert the flow to the next car. In that helpless and desperate moment, families wanted to be together and indeed die together. How tragic it was when the Germans used to stop the flow of people exactly when a family was half way in while the rest was told to go into the next cattle car. No amount of begging, pleading or imploring could help. The door was shut in front of small children while their parents remained outside or vice versa, in front of wives with or without children while the husband was taken to another cattle car. Old people, sick people and infirm people were separated from their families or caretakers.

I looked with wide-open eyes at the barbaric treatment of innocent souls being taken to the slaughter. Three and four generations went to die together.

As the loading progressed, I suddenly noticed that some people began literally pushing their way into the cars, as if deliberately, almost by force. I could not understand it then nor can I now. It seemed that the German were surprised too, for one yelled out: "Crazy Jews, what are you pushing for? Do you think that we will leave you here?"

I tried to understand and maybe solve this incomprehensible phenomenon throughout my life without success. What was it that, considering the fact that this train was the only means that could take them to their death, made it suddenly beckon to them as a safe haven?

Here, too, I will admit that the shortage of space on the train did cross my mind and the prospect of remaining behind did not appeal to me. I also knew that the end would be the same. Still, I preferred to be buried with all the others. Is it possible that those that earlier pushed to get inside the cattle cars had the very thoughts but could not control them?

Eventually, it came my turn to enter a car. At twenty, I was agile and quick and was one of the first to make my way to a window. Although the windows were boarded



up, there were spaces among the boards of about a centimeter wide, big enough to tell if it was day or night. I could even see some movement or objects from a distance. I positioned myself at the window surrounded by the few Shershev men. The car was filled up in no time. The sliding door was pushed in place, locked and sealed. We remained pressed together in the dark.

It took a while to get used to the dark, coming in from the bright sunny outside. Slowly we began to distinguish and recognize faces. Still, one could not see further than two meters away. Whoever had family, friends or acquaintances started calling out for them. Others were calling names hoping that a friend or an acquaintance will answer.

In between the calling out of names, the screaming of children, the crying of infants and women, the groans and moans of the elderly and the sighs of the beaten-up, it was difficult to talk. Besides, what was there to say? We all knew what was awaiting us when we get there and we knew where we are going. If the Germans have not killed us right outside Pruzany, then they are taking us to Brona-Gora, where they have slaughtered some of the Jews of Bereza-Kartuska, Ruzany, Pinsk and other neighboring places.

And so we stand, leaning one on the other, exhausted spiritually and physically. It has been four nights since I slept. I spent them along the ghetto fence, barely ate anything, possessed with but one thought: how to get out of the ghetto? Now everything is lost. There is nobody left of my family and I am sealed in a cattle car that will take me to the same place and maybe to the same ditch in which my family is already in their eternal sleep.

The outside noises are getting quieter and soon disappear. In the car is quieter, too. When an infant is not crying one can hear the footsteps of the guards around the train interrupted by a command in German.

Outside is dark, but in the car is pitch dark. The train has not moved yet. We know that once the train starts moving every minute will bring us closer to our eternal resting place, but what life is it to stay here pressed together like herring in a barrel? Barely on our feet, inhaling the continuously heavier and more suffocating air that is being mixed with the smell of people relieving themselves as they stand on their feet, being pressed so tightly together.

Finally, one hour after midnight, the train began to move. First slowly back and forth then towards the west. We were too tired, too exhausted and resigned to our fate to wonder why the train was going westwards instead of eastwards towards Brona Gora.

The train dragged itself. At times, it used to speed up but not for long. We made stops, sometimes short ones and sometimes longer. And so we passed Brest-Litowsk in early Monday morning and continued farther west. In some still intact families, there began to awaken a spark of hope that we are really going to work camps in Germany. Their reasoning was that if the Germans wanted to murder us, why drag us so far from home when they could do with us as they have done with the surrounding shtetls and towns, killing them on the spot.

The last couple of months a rumor started circulating in our ghetto that something very bad is taking place near the railway station Malkin on the line Brest-Litowsk to Warsaw. Most Jews in the ghetto did not even know where Malkin is, and if something bad is taking place there, how could it be worse than here? We knew that we were like an island in the middle of the sea, that there are no more Jewish settlements around us. So what can be there worse than here? And so the rumor died down.

It just happened that in our cattle car was a traveling salesman by the name of Kava who used to travel to Warsaw almost every week and knew the layout of every station on the way. That first of February as we stopped at a station some fifty kilometers before Warsaw, that Kava looks out through a crack in the boarded up window and says, "When our train starts up and turns right we will be going to Malkin. It won't be a good sign. But if we will continue straight, we will be going towards Warsaw." And so it was that our train went straight ahead towards Warsaw. None of us had known of the existence of Treblinka just past Malkin, nor what Treblinka meant.

We did not go far before we entered a nice-sized city with a large railway yard. I looked out through the crack between the boards and saw many railway lines. Looking across to the other end of the rail yard, I saw a line of men, all of them with their backs to us. On each back was a yellow Star of David. As I was looking at them, I noticed a tall man and next to him a shorter, noticeably older and somewhat stooped man. The tall younger man made a motion with his head towards the older as if to point us out but did

not turn towards us. The older lowered his head even more nodding with his head as if to say, "Yes, another trainload of our brethren to the slaughter." This picture that lasted only a few seconds engraved itself in my memory forever. It told me so much. We remained standing on that station a good while.

Between us and the line of the Jewish workers, many freight trains and freight cars were being shuffled back and forth. After a while, a freight train parked alongside us, no more than twelve fifteen meters away. The locomotive was unhooked and the cars remained motionless. About a quarter of an hour later, as we looked through the crack, we noticed somebody crawling underneath the parked freight train, coming up almost in front of our car. It is a tall man, not what one would call Jewish-looking, with no yellow star on his coat. He looks back and forth, throwing darting glimpses in all directions. We hear him say: "Yidden (Jews) save yourselves. You are being led to the slaughter. Break out of the cattle cars and run wherever you can. We were eight thousand Jews here in Minsk Mazowiecky and now we are two hundred left working on the railway track expecting any day to be murdered by the Nazis." Having said it, he disappeared among the railway cars.

Again, there was a tumult in the car--should we or should we not. At least we will die trying to escape. The getting out from the car is not the biggest obstacle. The boards over the little windows can be beaten out. The jumping off from the running train is seldom fatal. More dangerous is the German who stands on the elevated platform behind each car.

We start hearing the lament of older people and mothers of small children, claiming that they will be shot in retaliation for our escape. The truth is that neither their complaints nor their lament was the reason for our remaining in the car. The real reason was that we all knew that our attempt to escape was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. That is, we would be escaping from the Germans only to fall into Polish hands. So we stayed.

As we were leaving Minsk-Mazowiecky, a group of Polish railway men got on our train. Why the Germans permitted them to get on and to what purpose we did not know. Those Poles positioned themselves on the buffers between the cars and tried to

communicate with us. It is from them that we found out we are going to a place called Auschwitz, a name we had never heard. They, the Poles, tried to do business with us and sell us bread and water, claiming that where we are going we will not be needing money nor jewelry. Their prices were a hundred dollars and up for a slice of bread and even more for a bottle of water. Others simply asked for our money as we will not have the need of it where we are going.

From our car, there were no transactions with them, but from our conversation with them, many questions have arisen. What kind of place is it “Auschwitz” and why won’t we be needing money and jewelry but bread and water?

At about six in the evening, we were passing Warsaw. From my spot at the boarded up windows, I kept on looking through a crack at the continuous rows of tall buildings, four, five, and six stories high. Every window was lit up brightly. To me they looked joyful and festive. Again, the omnipresent question hit me with intensity, “Why?” What have we done to deserve it? Here in front of me live a million Poles, judging from the brightly lit windows continuously celebrating and our destiny, while our fate is to be led to the slaughter.

In deep despair and with an aching heart, I turned from the window, thinking to myself that it won’t make any difference if I see a couple more kilometers of this brightly lit city or not. In any case, within a few hours or a day, I will be dead.

And so I spent the second night leaning against the car wall. I felt indifferent to what the next few hours might bring. I was too tired, too exhausted from the last several days and nights. With no feeling, simply numb both physically and mentally, I stood against the wall, unable and unwilling to move or to look out through the crack for a familiar name of a station or town.

With the break of dawn, we arrived at a large railway station where we stopped. As it got brighter, we could make out the many railway lines that ran parallel to our tracks. Shortly after, Polish railway workers began to appear who knew not to get too close to our train or to start a conversation. The only thing we found out was that we are in Czenstochowa.

After a couple of hours at that station, the train began to move again at a slow pace, stopping often. At midday, the train stopped in the middle of nowhere. Looking through the crack, I could see a young pine forest about thirty meters away that ran along the railway tracks. The ground was covered with a pure and untouched white snow, which was remarkable, as up to now whenever we stopped the snow on the ground was trampled and dirty. Maybe that was the reason that I kept my sight on that spot a bit longer. It seemed to me that some shadow or shadows are moving about in that young forest. Sure enough, seconds later I could see human forms moving in the forest and getting closer to the edge of our train.

The crack in the window could accommodate three pairs of eyes, so three of us looked on as some men in British uniforms appeared at the edge of the forest. They were close enough that we could see the inscription on their shoulders. With unbelieving eyes, we read “Palestine.”

Instantly the news spread over the car and whoever had any strength left tried to push his way to the cracks to see with his own eyes the miracle. We immediately started talking, rather yelling to them in Hebrew that we are being led to the slaughter. They in return not getting any closer kept yelling, “Lo, lo, atem nosym lichyot velo lamut.” (No, no you are going to live and not to die.) Suddenly one of them left the safety of the forest, runs across the thirty or so feet of snow covered ground, pulls out a chocolate bar from his pocket and shoves it in the crack of our window. The soldier prisoner runs swiftly back into the forest to his friends.

A minute later, the train started moving and the Hebrew-speaking English-uniformed soldiers quickly disappeared from our sight. The chocolate bar that our benefactor shoved into the car was taken by the man that stood by my side. He took off the wrapping and we noticed that the bar consisted of little squares. It was four squares wide and twelve long. A total of forty-eight squares, each just over a centimeter in size. Those by the window decided to divide it among us, a square each. Needless to say, more than half of us did not get any, but everyone understood that it was impossible to cut the tiny squares in half.

This event with the British Hebrew speaking soldiers is still before my eyes, even though it happened much more than half a century ago. It was not always like this. There was a time when I myself began to doubt if this really happened. In order not to interrupt the trend of my thoughts in the middle of this bizarre and unbelievable event, I will skip for a moment a couple dozen years and continue with this unique story.

In the camps, we were all too preoccupied with our daily struggle for survival. There was not the time, will or disposition to share each other's experiences. Each of us had enough of his own to think about and was not in the mood to listen to others. Of those in the cattle car with me, the majority that even entered the camp perished during the months and years there.

The first couple dozen years after our liberation each of us survivors was busy not only trying to make a living, but what is more important trying to rebuild his or her shattered lives. We tried to let a scab form over the terrible wound with which each of us came out from the camps and the six-year-long nightmare.

For us survivors, life after the war was too strange, too unfamiliar. We found difficulties with every step. The adjustment took up our energy and all our time. There was no time to waste on events gone by or to share memories and reminisce.

It was in the sixties and seventies when I would come to New York to the *Azkara* (memorial gathering) of our ghetto that we started sharing experiences. At one such gathering, when I mentioned the story about the Hebrew-speaking British soldiers, I noticed the skepticism of the listeners. There were a couple men from Shershev at the gathering who were with me in that car. When I turned to them for confirmation, they let me down. They did not remember a thing. During the later gatherings, I looked for someone to confirm my story. But to no avail. It came to the point that I myself began to doubt that this event occurred. I feared that in those conditions and in such a situation I might have not been fully conscious or had even been hallucinating, despite the fact that I knew that I was right.

Once, while attending an Azkara for the ghetto Pruzany that took place in Tel Aviv, I met a man from Pruzany by the name of Kalman Grossman who was living in Jerusalem. He came to Tel-Aviv to attend the Azkara. A couple days later, we met in

Jerusalem. As is usual with survivors of the Holocaust, particularly from the same ghetto, we compared notes. During our conversation, he mentioned that he too, like myself left Pruzany with the last transport Sunday, the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 1943. Without thinking, I asked him if he remembered something unusual that happened a few hours before our arrival in Auschwitz. He thought for a moment then said, “The only striking event that I can remember is the event with the Jewish soldier prisoners of war.” It turned out that he was with me in the same cattle car and remembered even the chocolate bar that one of them pushed in through the crack in the boarded up window. To his statement I answered, “Kalman, you have just returned my sanity to me.”

Some years later, a Shershev Jew arrived in New York, a survivor of the Holocaust by the name of Moishe Khidritzky (Chadricki). His destiny led him from Auschwitz back to Shershev, where he spent many years. In his old age, he managed to get out and come to the United States.

Shortly after his arrival, he was interviewed by the Shoah organization that is collecting testimonies from survivors. The interview was conducted in Yiddish and he sent me a copy to look at. To my surprise, he too mentions the Hebrew-speaking soldiers in his interview. Apparently, I was not out of my mind then and I hope that neither am I now.

And now let me go back to where we left off, namely to the train on the way to Auschwitz. The event with the Hebrew-speaking British prisoners lifted momentarily our spirits, but not for long. The complete exhaustion, the feeling of being closed in a coffin like railway car, the suffocating air and the apathy that comes with total resignation contributed to our delirious state.

I would say that most of us in the car were in a stupor when the train started to slow down, giving us the impression that it is going to stop for a change. I looked through the crack and awoke with a start. I see before my eyes a quadrangular one-story building with two windows on each side and a roof leaning from each side to the centre. The building is plastered in a gray-beige color. I see before me the very same building I saw in my dream two weeks ago while still in the ghetto. The sign on the building reads “Auschwitz.”

The train does not stop, but just passes by and picks up some speed. I think to myself, “How can it be that I saw that very building in my dream?” The only difference is that in my dream there was no sign on it. What does it mean? How can it happen? What sinister omen is it? My despair comes back with greater intensity than before. I have a premonition of things so gruesome, so appalling, that the fear of that unknown transcends the fear of death.

The others in the car are indifferent to what I have seen. They did not dream my dream. Fortunately, I am not allowed to stew in my nightmare. I feel the train is again slowing down and it comes to a sudden stop. Before I have a chance to put my eyes to the crack, I hear yelling and commands being given in German. The barking of dogs simultaneously the door of our car slides open with momentum and a rough voice shouting “Raus!” “Out!! Everybody out!”

The almost atrophied bodies start moving. The Germans hurrying them on with screaming and yelling. In their hands were leashes with vicious dogs baring their fangs at the end. Before I reach the door, I decide for the umpteenth time to see and hear all that is taking place about me. Not that I should be able later to talk about it; no, for this I held out no hope. But to be fully conscious to the last moment. This is my life. This is what life has to offer me and I accept.

I was one of the first to get to the door. The floor of the car was about a meter above the ground and made a good vantage point. Despite the perilous situation I was in, I ventured to glance around. Right below me along the train, on either side, swarmed with SS men. Many of them ran from car to car yelling like wild animals and beating anyone that did not move fast enough. Opposite our train some thirty or forty meters away, I saw a high barbed wire fence whose beginning or end I could not see. Beyond the fence, I could see countless rows of barracks, all the same style, size and shape. Many of the rows of barracks were fenced off from the others by barbed wire fences. From the distance I could see many watch towers.

As soon as I jumped off the cattle car, I found myself between two SS men with clubs in hand yelling, “Able-bodied men on the other side,” pointing in the direction of



the long barbed wire fence. Anyone who did not react immediately despite the confusion received a paralyzing blow from the club.

In my opinion, it is humanly impossible to describe what took place there. The fear, the panic, the confusion and the tragedies that took place before my eyes. Men being torn away by force from wives and children, sons from parents, mothers from children. All of it was taking place at once. Wherever one turned his head, one saw heart-rending scenes. I had nobody to say goodbye to. I could not even if I wanted to. The SS kept chasing the men to the other side. On that side, our group kept on growing as more men kept joining us. The SS were sending over to us men from age fifteen to fifty. As our group grew, the SS men were trying to keep us busy, drilling us in falling in, to five in a row. No matter how we did it, it was not good for them and with the help of their clubs, we kept repeating it over and over. It occurred to me that the SS are trying deliberately to keep us men busy so we should not see too much of what is taking place all around. This reinforced my decision to keep my eyes open.

Looking around as I was running back and forth, I was thinking of what it was like yesterday when my entire family arrived. How my little brother and even smaller sisters were huddling to my mother, if they found each other in this confusion of this milieu. I thought of how they could have used me when they needed me so badly. I felt a terrible guilt. Yet, in a strange way, I found gratification in that I did not have to see them being tortured this way.

Those that could get off the cattle cars by themselves did so in a hurry. Others like children and older people were helped. Still others had to be carried off. The little suitcases or knapsacks that each took along from Pruzany had to be left right there on the train platform. The mass of humanity that had just descended from the cattle cars were facing the SS. At the same time, we were being pushed backwards against the cars along the length of the entire train. I would estimate that the mass of people was about two meters deep. All of the able-bodied men are on the other side, on my side. The women, children and old people are being held in check by a couple dozen SS men along the train. A huge SS man appears. He is almost two meters tall and almost as big around his middle. To me he seemed to weigh two hundred kilograms. In his hand, he held a

bullwhip that was at least four meters long. He goes back and forth along the mass of women, children and old people, whipping them mercilessly. I think to myself, how can you, beast (although in the image of man that you are), be so cruel and torture helpless innocent people before their death? Why can't you leave them alone in those last minutes before they die?

I see a tarpaulin is being spread on the frozen ground and look in horror as SS men go along the mass of women and children, tearing out infants from their mother's arms and throwing them onto the tarp. The infants fly ten meters in the air before landing on the tarp. They fall on it or one on top of the other. Some hit the tarp with an ear-splitting scream. Some land hitting their little infant heads on the protruding hard frozen ground and are either knocked out or killed instantly. These are the lucky ones. For the ones that are alive, a much more gruesome, much more hideous death is awaiting. It was days later that I found out that those little pure innocent souls, abandoned by G-d and at the mercy of human beasts, were thrown alive in the furnaces of Auschwitz's crematoriums.

As those infants were being thrown, their mothers try to run after them but are being beaten back by the SS men's heavy clubs or clubbed to the ground and dragged back to the others. I look and think how cruel death can be. I no longer think or ask myself why we deserve such punishment. I only ask why death does not come easier and wonder how many forms and faces death can take on.

SS women go along the mass of humanity at random, picking out younger woman from about fifteen to thirty-five and lead them to a side. We, the able-bodied men, are finally lined up in a line. At the head of the line, I see an SS man. As the line moves slowly forward, each one of us approaching the SS man exchanges a few words with him. The SS man makes an effortless motion with his finger. To the right; you join the group that is forming to his right along the wire fence. To the left, you go back to the mass of humanity along the train to join them in their fate, which is not only known to the Germans but is already clear to us too.

Some, seeing that they are being sent to women and children and realizing what it meant, tried to go in the opposite direction, namely to the ones chosen for the camp.

Unfortunately, they could not fool the watchful eyes of the SS men, who would chase those poor souls to those condemned to death with hard blows of their clubs.

With unbelieving eyes I see some SS men pick out ten old Jews with long gray beards and tell them to pick up the four corners of the tarpaulin, on which now lie a meter-high pile of innocent and holy Jewish infants. Some of their pure souls had already left their tiny bodies. With blows and curses, they force the ten old grandfathers and great-grandfathers to tie the four corners, together making it a huge bundle.

I can still hear the whimpers of those holy little souls and the thuds of the blows that fell on the backs of the old men, among whom I am sure there were some who had in there their own grandchildren or great-grandchildren. I wonder how can G-d look upon it and not react. Yet nothing happened. The murderers went on with their grisly work. The clouds became heavier and darker that late Tuesday afternoon, February 2, 1943.

A truck pulled up. It is open and behind the cab the rear part is surrounded by a three-quarters-of-a-meter-high fence. It turns around and backs up to the huge bundle of dead and dying infants. The back door falls downwards and the SS men order the ten old Jews to lift the huge bundle of infants onto the truck. The old men strain themselves under the blows of the SS men, at first without success. But the heavy blows from the clubs win the struggle and the old men manage to put the bundle of infants on the truck. The back door is closed and the truck pulls away.

As soon as the truck is gone, another one appears. This one also turns around. The ten old men are being led to a side, where a specially built stepladder stands. Quite an impressive construction, which I did not notice previously in the confusion. The old men bring this stepladder over to the rear of the truck and the women, children, old people and those rejected at the selection start to get on. Within seconds the truck is full, the rear door is closed by the old men and the truck pulls away only to be replaced by the next one. Again the process of the stepladder is repeated, truck after truck.

Slowly, I am getting closer to the SS man at the head of the column. The one that makes the selection. The closer I get to him, the more my thoughts were beginning to be preoccupied with my immediate situation. I, as did everyone with me, knew that my life, or at least my immediate survival, is in the hands of that SS man. It all depended on his

whim. A couple more men ahead of me and here I am in front of the creature that holds my fate, my destiny in his hands. He glances at me with an expression of indifference and even boredom. With the speed of lightning, a thought goes through my head that I mean nothing to him and that with the slightest motion, he can send me to my immediate death. Fortunately, he does not keep me waiting but says: "How old are you and what is your trade?" "Twenty years old and a locksmith by trade." He makes an indifferent motion with his hand indicating the direction of the camp, where the fittest were being gathered.

I make a quick turn left and with a dozen long strides, I find myself among the group chosen for the camp, which in the meantime is being drilled by some SS men. As before the selection, a SS man stretches his arm in a direction and tells us to fall in. The SS man turns and we have to do it all over.

Our group keeps on growing and the lines are getting longer and the running further. A few more SS men join in to keep us moving and avoiding their blows becomes more difficult. The running around keeps me too busy to be able to see all that is taking place, but I am aware that trucks are coming and going, taking the women, children and others away. We are all tired and wonder how long this will go on. Suddenly the SS man stops and waits until we all line up, five in a row. A few more SS men and officers come over. One in command gives an order and they start us counting. Once, twice and more. They want to make sure there is no mistake. We stay in line, not daring even to whisper a word. They, the SS, are having a little conversation.

I used the quiet of that moment to glance across to the cattle cars in which we arrived an hour and a half ago and I freeze in horror. I don't see a living soul. The cattle cars are there with their sliding doors wide open. The bundles that its passengers brought along lie scattered in front of the length of the train. But where are the over two thousand living souls that stood there an hour and a half ago? How could they have gone so quickly? They disappeared. They disappeared and with them their screams, their cries and their lament. All that was left along the empty train was an empty frightening and deadly silence. Who could have imagined that at that very moment their screams, cries and laments were being choked off by a deadly gas that is depriving them of their last breath of air...Who could have imagined that a human mind is capable of conceiving such a

hellish device as a gas chamber, in which as many as two thousand human beings--man, woman, child, healthy and infirm--can be forced to enter, locked hermetically and made to breath poisonous gas until they expire?

Five abreast we were led into the camp. The entry or gate was quite unassuming and once again, we were counted as we were passing it. I remember my decision to try to see everything and try to make sense of it. Indeed, as soon as we entered, I noticed a well-fed man dressed in a striped jacket and pants with a club in his hand mercilessly beating another man dressed in the same striped attire, but this one looked like he had not eaten in months. He was an emaciated caricature of a man who attempted to protect himself from the blows with his weak clumsy arms. The helpless soul did not even make an attempt to run. Instead, he was holding on to an empty wagon. He moved with difficulty around it, falling every few steps. The hitter kept on hitting that poor man even when he was lying on the ground. The unfortunate fellow made a couple attempts to get up only to fall again under the blows. As we were passing, I looked back to see what happened. I saw that poor soul lying on the ground and the big bully was still hitting him. It was clear that he intended to finish him off with his club.

Such was the picture that played out before me the first two minutes after entering Birkenau or Auschwitz II. Better still, Hell itself. As we proceed, I see a wagon pulled by two horses approaching. The horses look well fed and the two young men on the seat with their distinct Russian faces look even better fed. They seem to be content, for they converse and laugh heartily. I take notice of this contradictory observation in my first three minutes in camp and come to some conclusions.

We find ourselves in front of one of the countless barracks. Its doors, like a gate and just as wide, opens in both directions, eager to take us in. The barrack is ten meters wide and forty meters long. There is no floor, so the ground serves as one. In the middle, along its length, is a brick partition that looks like a chimney lying on its side that was some sixty centimeters high and just as wide. Two days later, I found out that indeed its function is both to serve as a stove and chimney (which never worked).

This lying chimney served in the barrack as a partition. Along one side of the partition were two rows of desks. Behind each desk sat a man dressed in what seemed to

me a pair of pajamas. This turned out to be striped concentration camp attire. Some SS men were walking back and forth behind those men, keeping an eye on them and on us.

We were ordered to stand on the other side of them. There, for the first time, I came face to face with Capos. This word derives from two German words: Comrade-Police. They walked among us supposedly to keep order. They too were prisoners like us, but with a few exceptions; namely, they were mainly hardened criminals that were brought from German jails to serve as trustees. Their task was to supervise the inmates using SS methods; that is, with the help of clubs, shovels, pickaxes or anything that was handy and if nothing was available, they used their hands and feet to hit and kick the poor inmates.

The very first capos were only condemned German criminals, but with the growth and enlargement of Auschwitz, the demand for capos increased. This demand was filled with Polish inmates, of whom there was no shortage.

In all due respect, however, I would like to add that not all the capos fell into the same category, especially when it came to craftsmanship, expertise and other specialized work was in the hands and heads of the thousands of Jews that arrived continuously. In the last two years, the Germans also started to appoint Jews as capos to run those enterprises unofficially.

I hope to touch upon the topic of capos, foremen and overseers several times later on. In the meantime, let us return to my arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Here in the barracks, all the yelling and beating is done by the capos. The SS are there to make sure the capos are doing their job satisfactory. Someone announces loud and clear that everyone whose family name starts with the letter "A" should step over the partition and present himself in front of a desk in the first row.

The people behind the front row desks are asking questions writing things down on questionnaires, asking again and finally sending them to the desks behind them. The proceedings at the second row of desks are short; they are back over the partition and not allowed to mix with us.

So it continues letter after letter until they get to the letter "K." I step over the partition and position myself in front of a desk. Behind the desk sits a Jewish young man

a couple years older than I. He does not look emaciated but his face is pale, actually white. I wonder at such whiteness. He picks up a questionnaire from a pile of them, and looking up at me with visible compassion, he tells me to empty my pocket.

I have on me the dollars my uncle Hershl gave me on the last Saturday before I went to hide in the hole and my entire family was taken away, plus the few marks with which I used to do business outside the ghetto. As I reach into my pocket, I feel the few Czarist silver rubles I took from an empty Jewish home on Sunday morning shortly before I got into the sled. I put it all on the table. An SS man notices the money and moves closer. The man behind the desks asks me with a stern voice, "Is this all?" "This is all," I answer. While the SS man picks up the money and throws it in a nearby basket, the man picks up a pen and asks me my name, age, trade or vocation and a couple more questions that are insignificant. Then he asked one that stunned me. It was, "What is the reason for your arrest?" It sounded to me so preposterous that I started to suspect some trap behind the question. It seemed to me that my "interrogator" deliberately let me think a few seconds, maybe in order to point out the absurdity of all the process. In a place where ten thousand people were put to death daily, what purpose did all those questions serve?

He looks around. Seeing the SS man walk off, he says to me quietly: "I know the answer but I am ordered to ask regardless." He filled in the line, asked me one or two more paltry questions, put the questionnaire on another stock, gave me a small piece of paper and says, "Step to the desk behind me and give him this scrap of paper."

At that desk, too, sits a young Jewish man, about the same age as the one in front with the same white face of a dead man. His desk is completely bare except for two sharpened goose feathers held together with a piece of cord and next to it an ink well. He takes the piece of paper from my hand and tells me to roll the sleeve of my left arm up to the elbow. He dips the feathers in the ink and glancing at the piece of paper tattoos on my forearm the numbers nine, nine, three, four, seven. The tattooing in normal times with such a crude tool would be painful but at that moment, I did not pay attention. It was only the next day that my forearm swelled, but then I was confronted with other problems and could not pay attention to it either. As soon as I received my number, I joined the other

tattooed ones. From then on, as far as the Germans and camp administration were concerned, I was only a number and was referred to as such.

The registration process took several hours. How many exactly I do not know, for our watches were left on the desks together with the rest of our possessions. It must have been somewhere between nine and ten in the evening. As soon as it was over, in came a group of prisoners accompanied by several SS men. They came with bags and began to fill them with everything they took from us. The money, rings, watches and even documents. Having taken it all, the inmates carried it out followed by the SS men.

We were led to a nearby barrack, told to get completely undressed and were shaven from top of our heads to our toes. As soon as one was shaven, he was disinfected by a man who stood near a big barrel full of some kind of a liquid. The men wore a thick mitten, which he used to dip in the liquid and smear the entire body with it. That liquid had the tendency of making the skin red and itchy, which in return brought on a desire to scratch.

After shaving and disinfecting, we were led into an adjoining barrack that was the bathhouse, leaving behind all our clothes except our shoes and belts, which we were permitted to hold on to. As soon as the water started running from the showerheads, many of us started to drink it, as none of us had any water the last several days. The attendants of the bathhouse, themselves prisoners like us, seeing us drinking the water cautioned us not to drink it as it was contaminated. They told us that due to that water, there was a typhus epidemic two months earlier that caused the death of half of the inmate population in the camp.

The bathhouse attendants were the first Jews from France that were brought to Auschwitz. Originally, they came to France from Poland between the two world wars. As foreigners, they were the first to be expelled from France. On July 16, 17, and 18, 1942, they were rounded up and a couple days later were in Auschwitz, where they received the numbers starting from the late 41,000 up to the middle of 42,500. Thus in camp they were called "the forty-two thousands."

Having come to France from Poland, they spoke an excellent Yiddish and Polish, but among themselves, they spoke French. I doubt if they have so fast assimilated in



France as to the point that French became their mother tongue. I would rather say that French gave them a feeling of cultural superiority over their former countrymen in camp, the Jews of Poland.

With us from Pruzany came a young man who originally was from Warsaw. How he got to Pruzany in the early days of the war I do not know. That night he was with us under the shower, paying little attention to warning of the attendants and continuing to drink. One of the attendants came over to him and slapped his face. Instinctively, the young man made a motion as if he is going to strike him back. We all froze anticipating something unpleasant. I glanced at the attendants and noticed that they too had the look of anticipation. To everybody's relief, the young man restrained himself and everybody relaxed. We quickly learned that there you do not strike back.

After the shower, wearing nothing but our shoes and belts, we were led to the next barrack where piles of clothing were on long tables. Behind the tables stood some prisoners who, as we were passing by in a single line, used to throw at us a pair of drawers, an undershirt, a jacket and a pair of pants. Besides the couple of SS men there were capos and their helpers with their clubs, making sure that we moved quickly.

As one would expect in trying times, there each received the opposite of what he needed. A big man received a pair of pants that would not get on him, while the slim one had to pull his up constantly, or the tall one's pants reached half way to his knees while the short one had to roll his up. There was no such thing as asking for an exchange, so we tried to exchange with one another while getting dressed under the blows of the supervisors. The caricatures into which we suddenly were transformed were to say the least comical, if it was not for the tragedy that brought us to it.

And so outfitted, we were led that bitter cold night of February the second into an empty barrack. It seemed that this barrack was assigned especially to accommodate the new arrivals the first night in Birkenau (Auschwitz II). Before we were told to lie down on the bare bunks, we were ordered to line up our footwear along the flue that ran almost the full length of the barrack. We took off our shoes, boots and whatever footwear we had and lined them up as ordered by the capos under whose supervision we found ourselves now. They ordered us to get on the three-tier-high bunks and go to sleep.

Despite our exhaustion and the many sleepless nights, none of us could shut our eyes on the hard boards. An hour later in came a group of capos with their assistants. They looked over our footwear, picked out the best pairs, took them and threw the rest of our footwear on one pile. As they were going out, one yelled “Get your shoes.”

I came to Auschwitz in a pair of high leather boots given to me by my uncle Eli at the start of the evacuation. As soon as the capo yelled, “Get your shoes,” everyone jumped to get his, knowing that some will remain without any. I grabbed a pair of boots that looked very much like mine. I pulled on one boot and it fit perfectly. I am lucky that I got my boots. I pulled on the second but my foot does not get in all the way down. I looked around for another boot but the pile of footwear disappeared. Everyone of us grabbed whatever he could. Some, as expected remained without any. I am stuck with a boot in which my heel does not fully fit inside it and I tiptoe on one foot.

We do not even bother to lie down on the hard bunks, just remain standing and bracing ourselves for the next surprise. We do not have long to wait. It is dark outside at four thirty in the morning when one gets out of the “warm” and “comfortable” bed in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

We are driven outside that February third. Despite the dark, the camp is lit up brightly and one can see as clearly as if it was sunny midday. We are lined up five abreast and ordered to march. It seems to me that we are going in no particular direction. We turn right, then left again, right and so on, back and forth several times. We finally stop some distance from the barracks and are told to remain standing in line.

We stand there exposed to the subzero wind with our freshly shaved heads, our feet in shoes with no socks, dressed in a pair of drawers, undershirt, jacket and pants. No hat, no sweater, no coat, scarf or gloves. Our heads and ears take the brunt of the wind and cold.

Dawn comes at six and we do not move. From a distance, we see detachment after detachment of inmates marching out to work. Meantime, we are literally numb from cold.

At mid-morning, a couple of SS men approach us. The capo stands to attention and reports to them. We are told to march and are led from one part of fenced-in barrack to another. The entrance is simply a hole in the fence and after going through it, we are

between two rows of new barracks still unoccupied. The ground below us is clay-like and the barracks sit on the same ground. We are marching along the two rows of barracks, almost to the very end. On the left of us, around the last few barracks, we notice groups of inmates. A rumor spreads quickly among us that some of them have been recognized as being from Pruzany, but nobody is sure.

We turn left and march in between two barracks. We stop and are lined up in a straight line five abreast. Here the ground is pure clay and it feels as if we are sinking in it. I notice that the new man that is going to be in charge here has an armband on which it is written *blockaltester* (block elder). He is a tall, well-fed man in his late twenties. Exactly what his armband meant we did not know, but we recognized him to be a big shot of sorts by the size of the club in his hand. He spoke to us in German with a very noticeable Polish accent. Seeing him having difficulties with German I was wondering why he does not speak to us in Polish since he knew that we are former Polish citizens. It dawned on me that he does it for the benefit of the SS men around.

When we were finally standing in a straight line to their liking, we were suddenly ordered to squat. This is not difficult for a young person, providing one remains in such a position for a quarter of an hour. It is a different story when one is over thirty-five and is forced to remain in such a position for an hour or two. There is a limit to how much one can stand when the lower parts of the legs become numb and the knees cry out in pain. A person can only bear so much. The desire to stretch the legs becomes a need. The older men began to do it and it was here when the *blockaltester* came into play. Standing behind us, with his assistance of the *stubendienst* (room orderly), he began to beat anyone who even tried to stretch a leg. There were some that fainted in that position and were beaten mercilessly while they were lying on the ground, oblivious to what was happening.

While we were squatting and being beaten, a SS man delivered a speech. All I remember of that short speech was that he compared a concentration camp to the military, which is based on discipline. If we will be disciplined and obey all the rules, he said, we will be fine.

Most of us did not understand what he said. This was obvious from our faces, distorted by pain, so the SS man turned to the *blockaltester*, telling him to repeat it in

Polish. After the blockaltester repeated some of the SS man's words in Polish, he added a question. "Well," he said, "Now do you know what a concentration camp is?" We, in all our innocence, answered "no," The blockaltester, with a smile on his face, said "Well then, you will find out." We understood and took it as a warning but never imagined to what extent it would be applicable.

While all this was taking place during our welcome speeches--hours long squatting and other so-called "sports" in the camp language--a group of inmates gathered near us. These were not the ordinary inmates in the camp. The ordinary ones were working all over the perimeter of Auschwitz-Birkenau under the unimaginable conditions that existed there. Those gathered near us were the so-called "prominent internees" in camp language. They were the capos, blockaltesters, stubendiensts and their cronies, a bunch of sadists and murderers that at times used to make the SS men look almost human. In short, the scum of humanity.

Those prominent prisoners stayed there watching as our immediate supervisors or trustees are exercising us and beating us mercilessly. The trustees' buddies kept on encouraging them and advising them how to deal with us. From time to time, some of them used to wade in between us with their sticks. The few SS men, becoming bored with all of this, walked away, leaving us at the mercy of the above-mentioned murderers.

In late afternoon, we noticed a group of men approaching. In front walked a short man in civilian clothes, but the clothes were marked with red stripes like some of our supervisors'. This man had an armband with a different title. It read *lageraltester* (camp elder).

Judging by the respect the other big shots showed him, we understood that he must be a very big fish. We watched him walking by slowly in riding pants and polished boots, stepping nonchalantly on the clayey ground. He looked at us with so much scorn, with such contempt that it made our blood congeal in our veins. So this is the man, supposedly an inmate like all of us, in whose hands the destiny of all inmates lie. As if to confirm our thoughts, he orders us to straighten our lines and slowly starts to walk by the first row, looking everyone straight in his eyes. He stops in front of a tall man and orders him to come forwards two steps. The lageraltester looks at him and so do we. He is close

to two metres tall. I do not recognize the man and quietly ask around. I found out that he is one of a group of Dutch Jews that joined us this morning as we were entering this part of the camp.

I glance at the Dutch Jew and see that the lageraltester stand close to him menacingly holding a club in his hand. He asks him, "What is your profession?" "I am a salesman," came the answer. Poor unfortunate soul. In his naivety, he did not realize that this is exactly how the Germans are looking to stereotype a Jew, as a salesman.

The club in the lageraltester's hand raised up high and came down with force on the Jew's head. Blood started running over his face, but he remained standing. This infuriated not only the lageraltester, but also those who came with him. With his nod, they surrounded the man, hitting him mercilessly. In a minute his head and face became a mass of blood, and the big man fell down. One would think that they would let him go now, but no. It was clear that the man was unconscious, but the beating went on. When they finally gave up beating him, they began to kick him with their boots. They left the motionless body only when it came time to go into the barrack. The double gate-like doors opened and we were herded inside, accompanied by blows and curses. It is not easy to imagine the confusion in the barrack among the mixed-up, beaten, bruised and panicked inmates.

We are some three to four hundred men in almost familiar surroundings. It was the exact same type of barrack as that in which we were registered, and like the one we slept in last night. It conjured up experiences that we would rather not remember and worries about what the night held for us. We look around. The same heating duct ran along the length of both walls between the three-tier bunks. The bunks are two meters wide by two-and-a-half long, and the space between each bunk is about seventy-five centimeters. The bottom one is twenty-five centimeters off the ground, the middle one a meter and the third a meter seventy-five. The bunks are bare and damp. I do not know if the wood is still green or if the rain or melting snow comes in through the roof. I notice a small partition at the front near the entrance to the barrack. The ordinary door of that cubicle is closed and I wonder what is behind it.

After being broken up into ten to a group, we are assigned bunks. Mine is the middle one. It is better than the bottom one but we must sit bent over as the top tier would not allow us to straighten up. After a while, everybody's back is aching.

The block leader announces that we are going to get bread. We are told to get on one side of the flue. Some stubendienst position themselves on top of the flue to make sure that no one tries to sneak across it in order to get another piece of bread. The clubs in their hands discourage anyone from trying. From the one side of the barrack we advance to the end of the flue, receive a quarter of bread and go over to the other side.

This process takes about an hour and we return to our bunks. We look at the pieces of bread and come to the conclusion that we might survive on it. Despite the fact that we have not eaten for some days, nobody is hungry, yet we start to eat. It is after we finish the bread that we realize how thirsty we are.

We are told to go to sleep. The shoes go under the bottom bunk and the jacket with the pants under our heads. We are not permitted to sleep with clothes on. For the ten of us we are given one blanket. As soon as we take our jackets and pants off, we start to shiver. We try to lie down on the hard and damp boards, only to find out that there is not enough room for the ten of us. After pushing, shoving and wrangling we finally succeed to fit in the two and a half meter long bunk by lying on our sides, pressed tightly together.

The blanket, no matter how we placed it, be it lengthwise or widthwise, in no way can cover the ten of us, and a struggle begins between the two at the extreme ends. Each wants a piece of blanket to cover himself in the unheated barrack, lying only in his underwear on the damp boards. The name calling, swearing and berating goes on until, one after another, we start to complain of pain in our arms, hips and sides that came from lying on the hard boards. Individually, we cannot turn on the other side, so we decide to turn over all together.

Despite our exhaustion, nobody sleeps. About midnight the door of the barrack opens up and in come several trustees of the kind that welcomed us some hours earlier with their clubs and blows. They approach a couple of bunks and pull down the blankets revealing some of the occupants in pants and jackets. A hail of clubs fell on them. Their screams were unbearable. I notice that under some blankets, others began to take off

jackets and pants. The trustees or capos notice it too and begin to run along the rows of bunks beating everybody, not even bothering to pull the blankets down.

Having satisfied their desire to inflict pain upon others, they warned us against putting on our clothing and walked out. And so lying, on the bunks and shivering from cold, we survived to four-thirty in the morning on Wednesday, the fourth of February, nineteen forty-three.

Then the wide doors of the barracks opened up. The blockaltester with a couple stubendiensts, their ever-present clubs in hand, stand at the doors. A couple more are at the rear of the barrack, swinging clubs and chasing everyone towards the exit. In a blink of an eye, we pull on our pants, jackets and shoes and join the pushing and shoving crowd that is trying to dodge the blows.

We are finally outside. It is dark, but here too all is well lit. All around in a large circle that takes in the few nearby barracks stand SS men with rifles at ready. I realize that they watched us all night and are in a bad mood. The blockaltester and stubendiensts want to placate the SS men by beating us continuously. They are trying to line us up in neat rows of five, but it is not easy with people that went through what we did in the last couple of days. We find the ground that was yesterday soft and clay-like is now frozen and uneven. It must have taken an hour before they got us standing to their liking. We are told to remain standing like that, at attention.

How long can a man remain standing like this after what we endured? It was bound to happen. Somebody had to be the first one to move, be it a shift of the hand or foot, whatever. The blockaltester with his stubendiensts regrettably notice every move and the guilty one gets beaten up. The longer we stand, the more of us commit the crime of stirring or making a move and the clubs keep on falling over our heads and backs.

Two SS men are approaching. They must be of some rank for the SS guards assume a more dignified stand. Our blockaltester warns us to obey his command properly or else...

As soon as the two SS men are near us, the blockaltester yells "attention." We raise our heads and stretch our necks like string instruments. One of the two SS men comes over closer and starts counting us, making sure there are five in each row, and says

something to the other one, who writes something down in his notebook. Then they are gone in the direction they came from.

By now, it is daylight. I notice that our SS guards are gone too. We are told that breakfast will soon be served consisting of tea. We have to wait a long time before it arrives in metal barrels with covers. We still stand five in a line. The first in line gets a red bowl with some kind of liquid in it that is supposed to be tea. He is told to share it with the other four in his line. We are all thirsty and notice that the first guy seems to hold the red bowl to his mouth too long. The man behind him is not worried. He knows that there will be enough liquid for him too. But the fourth in line is worried that it might not be enough for him, and the fifth is sure that there will not be any for him. He starts yelling, "Nu, enough already, leave some for others." Some listen to such an appeal and pass the bowl to the one behind him. Others continue to slurp. The last one or two in line move forwards to take the bowl by force. A struggle ensues and the result is that the liquid spills on the ground.

We are dismissed after the "breakfast" to remain outdoors within the confines of the two barracks, ours and the next one. Some braver ones stick out their heads from behind the barrack to have a better look around and find out that in the next barrack are the men from Pruzany that left a day before us, that is on Saturday.

The more courageous take the chance to run over to the next barrack when our overseers are not around or preoccupied. We find out that in the barracks numbers fifteen, sixteen, seventeen and ours, eighteen, are housed the men from the Pruzany Ghetto that have been selected for the camp. Each transport from Pruzany, beginning with the first one that left on Thursday, January 28, 1943, is in a separate barrack. The first is in number 15 and we, the last transport, were in number 18.

I was sure that my uncle, my father's youngest brother Eli, age 29, would be there. Unfortunately, I did not find him. After a long search and inquiring, an inmate in that barrack told me that my uncle went voluntarily with his parents, my grandparents, refusing the German offer to join those selected for the camp. Our overseer eventually noticed that some of us had visited the barrack next door and quickly put a stop to it.



We were forced to remain outside without hats on our shaven heads, without coats or sweaters. In order to keep a bit warmer we began to huddle to the wall of the barrack and one against one another ten, fifteen or twenty men deep. At noon, we were driven back into the barrack. Standing on one side of the flue, one by one we approached the end of the flue where each of us received a red enamel cup that could hold no more than a third of a liter of liquid. A stubendienst standing near two large wooden barrels filled with a soup put the ladle in it and filled our cups. Having received the warm dinner, each went over to the other side of the barrack. Some of the stubendiensts were standing on the flue watching and making sure that nobody steps over it and joins those that have not received their soup yet. Woe to him who tried and got caught.

After we finished our dinner, we were told to hang our enamel cups on our belts for use the next day. As there was no water, the cups remained unwashed.

We were driven outside. All day long, we saw countless groups of prisoners going to and from work. Where to and where from we did not know; the camp was too immense. Their appearances gave us the shivers. We got to know those creatures much better when we became like them.

From where we stood, we could see that we were at the edge of a huge camp. The twenty barracks that we took up four of formed the extreme extent of the camp. There were some building farther north but we had no idea nor concept of what they were.

Opposite our barracks to the south, work continued in extending the camp. Work continued on every level, from digging ditches, leveling the ground, building roads, digging in fence posts, stringing barbwire, erecting barracks and everything else that has to do with building.

There before our eyes rose a gigantic camp whose extent we could not see. Along our row of barracks. After ours, number eighteen, was one more barrack that was empty. In the other direction, westwards, past the four barracks occupied by us inmates from Pruzany, over a dozen barracks were empty and inmates were working inside erecting bunks. Opposite the last few barracks in that row, some fifty meters north, stood a low-lying brick building with a square chimney of ten or twelve meters high.

This brick building was surrounded with an extra fence, despite the fact that it was already in the camp and was surrounded by one fence. This inside fence had its own guard towers, which made it unique. The terrain between the building and its fence was thinly overgrown with pine trees of about twenty centimeters in diameter, which permitted us to see what was taking place in the yard.

The first morning in that part of the camp, which was later named the “gypsy camp,” there was no chance to start a conversation with other inmates who arrived earlier. In the afternoon, when the inmates passed by our barrack, some of us succeeded in exchanging a few words. Our first question was, understandably, “Where are our families?” I will never forget the answer I received. Even though I did not understand it at that time, I used the same answer myself later on when asked the same question by newly arrived prisoners.

The answer was given to me by a young man not much older than myself. Pointing with his finger, which was attached to an emaciated forearm, in the direction of the only visible brick building, indeed the one with the square chimney, he said to me, “Do you see the chimney which is belching fire and smoke? Through this chimney your family went to heaven.” I looked at him not understanding what he said nor what he meant. At that time, I thought to myself that he lost his mind, which did not surprise me considering the condition we were in.

Before dark our supervisors appeared. They came out from the barrack where they sat in the heated small partition. We repeated the morning drill. We are chilled to the bone, our bodies are numb, but the club is an effective instrument and the drilling resumes. During the day, the clay melted and we sink deep in it. It is difficult to lift the feet, but the blockalter and stubendienst are generous with their clubs. We stand again in rows of five and do not dare to move. It’s getting cold and the wind goes through our jackets and undershirts.

Finally, a few SS men arrive. The same two as this morning are counting us again. The roll call, or “appell,” is over and the wide door of the barrack opens up. We are told to get in, but nothing is easy in Birkenau. A couple of the stubendienst stay behind while some more are at the door. The ones from behind are hitting and driving us inside, while

the others at the door are indiscriminately hitting the heads and backs of the stampeding prisoners. The nearby SS men are also hitting with their rifle butts.

We are finally inside, driven to one side of the barrack and as the previous evening, one by one we cross over to the other side with the ration of bread. As soon as the bread is distributed, we are told to go to the bunks. Everybody runs to one. It is not important who lays where as long as I get a space to lay down. Let it be on a damp and hard board. All I wanted was to lay down out of the wind, if not the cold.

I do not know anybody on the bunk. Who cares. We ate the piece of bread and shared our experiences of the day. I find out that some in our barrack made it today to the fourth, last barrack that holds the people who left the ghetto the first day, Thursday, January 28.

We speak in whispers, but we manage to converse with the upper and lower bunks. From those who manage to exchange a few words with the older inmates, I find out that they too got more or less the same answer as I and are just as puzzled. A few did however manage to have a lengthy conversation with inmates that have been here weeks even months and heard stories from them that did not make sense. Stories that I would have been embarrassed to repeat for fear of ridicule, although I went through the two-day march from Shershev, saw with my own eyes the two mass graves in Chomsk, spoke to individual Jews that saved themselves from slaughters in places like Drohyczyn, Kobryn, Antopol, Bereza-Kartuska, Brest-Litowsk, Slonim, Wolkowisk and others, all of whom made their way to ghetto Pruzany and brought with them their stories of horror. They came to save themselves, unfortunately, as it turned out, only to share their fate with the Jews of Pruzany and perish in Auschwitz. I and the rest of the new arrivals to Auschwitz-Birkenau knew only too well what the Nazis were capable of doing.

Still, my mind could not grasp, could not understand what was taking place here. Why would the Nazis would drag us half way across Europe to kill us here? Is not there enough burial space around Pruzany? Why should they take up railway car space with Jews when they are in need of them for supplying the eastern front? What does it mean logistically to gas people by the thousands, day after day, in addition to burning the bodies? Unbelievable! Impossible! It makes no sense. Is it possible that they want to

obliterate any trace of their crime? Nonsense! They are leaving behind mass graves of Jews near every shtetl and city in eastern Poland and in the conquered Soviet territories. Why should they suddenly want to erase any trace of their crime? Is it possible that they have finally realized that they are losing the war? We Jews could have told them that in the winter of '41 or '42, although it was more wishful thinking than prophecy. Nevertheless, we could foresee Hitler's defeat in the beginning of 1943.

Why would someone come up with such a Dante-esque notion like gas chambers and crematoriums? Do they now want to cover up their crime? And in general, how can the human mind conceive such an idea, how is it capable? I will admit that if we were told by the other inmates that our families were taken away a few kilometers further and shot, we would have understood and believed it, but to come to terms with such a bizarre story as gas chambers was unfathomable. Finally, we settled in the bunk with the conviction that it was a made up story by our tormentors to make our life more miserable.

The night went by in aches and pain. At midnight, we were visited by our torturers who again pulled off the blankets to make sure that we did not sleep in our clothes. Again, the bitter cold forced many to put on their pants and jackets. Those that were discovered were left beaten up and bleeding. Very few of us slept and none rested at night.

In the morning, we followed the same routine as the before. The same lines. The same supervisors with the clubs. We got acquainted with a few more abusive words in German. All the trustees talked, or yelled, and cursed in German. I began to wonder if the German language consisted only of abusive words and curses. There was the same disorder at the serving of the boiled water with blueberry leaves that passes as tea, and after we remained outside, leaning against the barrack wall and huddling against one another.

Slowly we got used to the surroundings. Some ventured away a bit farther, trying to exchange a few words with the passing inmates. Their capos and foremen, the *vorarbeiter*, interfere with our attempts to start a conversation with them. They take out their anger on their underlings, the dozens of emaciated, wasted-away inmates, by hitting them mercilessly. I look at the clubs falling on the starved bodies and wonder how those

bundles of bones hold together. They, the unfortunates, are looking for a chance to sneak away from the hard labor and constant beating for a moment's respite by hiding behind our barrack or among us.

Here, when they are among us, we can converse with them. Again, they repeat the story we heard yesterday about our families. We can see the sincerity in their emaciated faces. Faces that reflect bitterness, pain, desperation and a need to be believed. One of those walking skeletons sees the doubt in my face and grabs me by my sleeve and pulls me out from behind the barrack to have a better look. Pointing to the brick building with the smoke and flame-belching chimney, he says, "Do you see that crowd of Jews in the fenced in yard of that building? You better have a good look at them for you will never see them again." With those words he left me there staring at the multitudes with the yellow stars on their garments, while he went back to join his group.

I look. It is not possible to count them from a distance of seventy-five meters. They are all standing and move about from group to group. I can easily identify an overwhelming number of children, women and old people. I would estimate them to be around two thousand souls. They stood there for a couple more hours before they entered the building. I kept an eye on the building the rest of the day, but never saw one living soul come out.

Before dark, we again went through the barbaric act of being counted and driven into the barrack. In the bunk, exchanging information of the day, we found out that the Jews we saw were from Bialystok. I believe that that was the only transport of Jews from Bialystok ghetto that was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau; the rest were sent to Treblinka.

As I lay down on the hard bunk, I felt a terrible thirst, as I had not had anything to drink since January 31. In fact, all of us were thirsty, but where does one get water? We knew that there was plenty of snow on the roof of the barrack and that the little windows above could be opened, but it was prohibited to do so. Apparently, my thirst overcame my fear of being caught, for I got to the window and came back with a handful of snow, which I let melt in my mouth slowly. Regretfully, I became thirstier than before. This was an addition to all the inconveniences. Thus went by the night of the fifth to the sixth of February.

That morning I turned twenty, according to the world calendar. The day started as usual. I do not remember if I got a mouthful of the so-called tea or not, but right after its distribution the blockaltester came with a list and called out some numbers.

They were the numbers of some fourteen-year-old boys who were selected to enter the camp when we arrived. It seems that the Germans realized that such young boys would be of little use and decided to get rid of them. They were told that they were being taken to another part of the camp where they will receive better nourishment. There were about six boys in my barrack and some in each of the other three. These two dozen or so boys were led straight to the crematorium.

One of those boys taken from my barrack left behind his father. Father and son were from Hajnuwka and were brought to Pruzany ghetto with the rest of that community in the fall of 1941. As soon as the father realized what happened he broke down in a heart-rending lament. It happened that the lageraltester passed by a few minutes later. To everyone's surprise, he stopped to find out why the man was wailing. When he heard the answer, this man, the very same one that welcomed us upon our entry in that part of the camp by demonstrating extreme barbarism when he and his companions beat the Dutch man to death, walked over to the crying father and with as much compassion as such a brute could muster said to him, "Too bad they took your son away. I will be needing shortly some blockaltester and I will appoint you as one." I doubt if his words were of any consolation to the crying father at that moment. But when the rest of the barracks began to be filled with freshly arrived gypsies a couple weeks later, he became a Blockaltester.

In an ironic way, the event with the fourteen-year-old boys eased my conscience a bit. The first couple of days, despite my own hopeless situation, I was being gnawed at by a feeling of guilt for not standing up more insistently to the men in my hiding place in the ghetto when they refused to let in my thirteen-year-old brother Leibl join us. Of course, there was the question of passing the selection upon arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which no thirteen year old in our transport did. Now that the Nazis took away the fourteen year olds, I knew that he would have been taken for sure, and who knows how they died. Did the SS drive them into the gas chambers together with a transport of freshly arrived

Jews? They certainly would not use the gas chambers for them alone. Did they shoot them? Did they kill them with injections or simply slay them with clubs?

Now I knew that my brother did not have to confront death alone, as he would have should he have been with me. At least he was with his parents and sisters as they undressed together and walked into the gas chamber together; he most likely clung to them to his last breath.

Regarding the bereaved father in our barrack, I would say that, in a very rare instance of compassion, the lageraltester most likely saved his life. By promoting him to Blockaltester, he raised him to the highest position in camp an inmate could achieve, second only to himself, ensuring him all the food he wants and protection from any other inmate. I found out after the war that this man came out alive from that hell, which was an accomplishment in itself, especially for a man his age. Frankly, I wonder sometimes what moved that murderer, the lageraltester, to have compassion for that unfortunate father and to want to relieve his pain, in a place and a time where ten thousand lives were being put out daily and to which task he contributed his help. And so went by the sixth day of February, my twentieth birthday.

Our midday meal used to consist of a cup full of soup. Every second day, the alternate days, we used to get half a cup of soup and two or three boiled potatoes. As the number of inmates increased in our part of the camp, the soup and potatoes began to be delivered in wooden barrels loaded on a wagon and pulled by inmates. Due to the clay ground, the wagon used to stop some hundred meters away from the barracks and we had to go and fetch them by hand. Four men were needed to carry a barrel of boiling hot soup over the clinging clay ground, making sure that it did not spill.

For constantly starving men who wanted to stay in the comfort of our bunks, work was hard but it had benefits, too. Somehow many of us managed to get spoons, and while carrying the soup, one could hold the bottom of the barrel with one hand while with the other try to skim off some scalding hot soup and gulp it down, providing the accompanying Stubendienst is not watching.

For the dozen or so men that used to be picked to carry the barrels, the days we used to get potatoes were better. It is much easier to throw a potato in the mouth, even a

hot one, than to try to bring a spoon full of liquid to your mouth while carrying a heavy barrel on a treacherous terrain. One can also put a couple potatoes in the pocket and hope that he will not be searched when they bring the barrel into the barrack. Unfortunately, I was only picked a couple of times to carry the barrels, during which time I succeeded in slipping some potatoes in my pocket. By that time, our thirst was replaced by a gnawing hunger and the few potatoes did not satisfy it.

One morning a week or so after our arrival, right after receiving our “tea,” when as a rule we used to be dismissed and permitted to hug the wall and press against each other for warmth, we were told to remain standing in line. After a long wait, we were approached by a small group of inmates accompanied by two SS men. The inmates were dressed in standard camp uniform, but it looked much better on them, as if made to their specifications. We were told to open our mouths and stick our tongues out. The well-dressed inmates paraded by each row looking at our tongues, one of them marking down the numbers pointed out by the others.

After they left the Blockaltester called out the written down numbers, getting them together, he led the ten men away. Shortly after, we found out that those well-dressed inmates were Polish doctors who worked in the *krankenbau* (camp hospital). Part of their job was to weed out anyone suspected of being sick, which they did by glancing at our tongues. Two hours later we found out that those men were led to one of the crematoriums. That selection committee began to return twice a week, never leaving empty-handed; that is to say, they were always writing down some numbers.

We constantly kept an eye on crematorium number three, as it was the closet to our barracks and very much exposed in our direction. It was some two weeks after our arrival that we noticed the yard of the crematorium full with people, more than we ever seen before. We watched as part of the crowd was being driven inside, but many remained outside. They were still there when we were driven inside the barrack for the night. Even the next morning, after being counted and having tea, it took a couple of hours until they were driven inside. Poor, wretched, pitiful, holy Jewish souls had to spend the bitter cold night outside. In their merciful ignorance they must have spent the



entire night praying to be let inside, not knowing that for them death was waiting with open arms.

Here I would like to remark that although the official date of the starting date of crematorium number three is end of April and beginning of May 1943, this crematorium was functioning full blast when we entered the part of Birkenau (Auschwitz No. 2), later called the Gypsy camp, in the beginning of February 1943. To this fact can attest everyone who came to Auschwitz from ghetto Pruzany and spent the first six horrible weeks with me there.

As difficult as it was to put up with the hunger, cold and beatings, the blatant stealing of our food by our overseers, that is the Blockaltester and Stubendiensts, was unbearable. We watched with envy as they filled up bowls full of soup for themselves, and by cutting the bread in quarters, they take out a thick slice from the middle of each loaf. While we had to share one blanket between ten, the Stubendiensts that slept in the barrack with us had several blankets each.

A few daring young men in our barracks managed to get a hold of one of their blankets, cutting it into meter long and half-meter wide pieces, and they wrapped those pieces around their upper parts of the bodies, pulling their undershirts over it.

It did not take long for our overseers to find out and a search began. A couple managed to discard the blanket pieces before the searchers got to them, but those that were caught were beaten, their wrists were tied behind their backs, a rope was passed over that tie and they were pulled up and left hanging from a barrack beam. They screamed then cried and begged until they fainted. It was then that they were taken down. What happened to them afterwards I really do not remember.

One morning we were driven out in a downpour. It was so bad that the SS men that used to conduct the twice-daily appell told us to get back inside. The half a dozen or so men from Shershev in our barrack tried to keep together. Those were the same men that traveled with me in the same cattle car. I will mention again those that I remember. They were: Gotl Weiner, the brothers Shepsl and Itzl Pomeranietz, their brother-in-law Berl Tenenbaum and their cousin Leibl Feldman. The other couple I do not remember.

During the appell, which lasted at that time not much more than fifteen or twenty minutes, we got soaked through. We stood in the barrack dripping water, being grateful for not having to stay outside. Suddenly I heard a subdued voice saying, "Moishe." I turn around and see Gotl Weiner. He motions with his head to follow him. We come to a corner in between two bunks. There on the bottom bunk sat the few Shershev men staring at a red bowl. I bend over closer to see in the dim light and see the bowl is full of potato peels.

Gotl gives a nod and everybody's hand reaches out. The potato peels were lying overnight outdoors on the ground and in the rain. It absorbed it all, the rainwater and the tiny little stones from the ground that cracked between our teeth, but we ate it anyway. I found out that Gotl took a chance when the Stubendienst was looking the other way. He grabbed a bowl, scooped up the potato peels and brought it into the barrack. We were grateful for the treat.

In mid-February, we were all moved to the neighboring barrack. That is, from number eighteen to nineteen. So were all the other three barracks that held the men from Pruzany. I made sure that I got a bunk not too close to the rear of the barrack, where two large wooden containers sat for use as toilets during the night. As the containers were opened, they used to smell up the rear part of the barrack. Every morning, those that slept near them had the job of carrying those containers out and emptying them in the public outhouse.

Taking into consideration the many cases of dysentery and the state of the inmates, one will understand that that part of the barrack did not present a pretty nor pleasant picture. Still, those that used to spend a couple of nights in the vicinity got used to it and did not mind the offensive smell. In fact, they had an advantage. As the stubendiensts were not anxious to visit that part of the barrack, the inmates in that corner were left alone. I never visited that corner. Most of us urinated outdoors and the only time I had a bowel movements in the six weeks I spent in Birkenau, I managed to do it outdoors.

After the middle of February, it got a touch warmer. Enough to change the frequent snow squalls during the day into light rain, which softened the ground around the

barrack even more. Who gave the order or who thought of it nobody knew, but a couple days after we were moved to the next barracks, after the appell, we were ordered to remain in line. Our stubendienst lined us up in a single line, led us to a mound of bricks, where we were told each to stock up five bricks one on top of the other. We picked them up from the bottom and holding them in front of us, we walked in a single line. Eventually we formed a large oval walking behind each other. There was no beating or yelling. We just continued to walk. At first, it was not difficult and made no sense. By the time noon came around, it became tiresome. We halted for our cup full of soup and, after finishing it, continued with the bricks. By the end of the day, we were good and tired.

Because of the warmer temperature and rain showers, the ground around the barrack, especially where we used to fall in for the appell, became a clay swamp that we had to stay a foot deep in it twice a day, morning and night, for an average of two hours each time.

It occurred to our Blockaltester, the same big, well-fed Pole that gave us the memorable welcome a couple weeks earlier, that if a hole was be dug in the middle of the ground, the water would drain in the hole and the place will get dry. There was never a shortage of shovels in Auschwitz. He picked some men and a hole was dug. Two meters by two meters and two meters deep. The Blockaltester did not take in consideration the fact, or maybe he did not know, that water does not flow freely through clay.

## **Chapter 11**

Since we started to carry bricks, we were also made to carry sand. We were told to put our on jackets backwards, that is with the front to be buttoned in the back, thus forming a kind of apron in front. We were led to a mount of sand, holding out the bottom of the jacket, and a couple of shovels of sand were dumped in it. And so we used to walk around with the sand all day long. Although the sand was not heavier than the bricks, maybe even lighter, nevertheless, we were just as exhausted as from carrying the bricks.

The clay ground refused to part with its water, even though the two-meter deep hole we dug was half-full. The lageraltester came in person to examine the situation. He called together the three blockaltesters from the nearby blocks that had the same problem. They all decided that instead of us walking around all day with sand, which served no useful purpose, we should go to the mound of sand and dump it on the appell grounds.

The next morning, right after the appell, we were told to put our jackets on backwards, go to the sand heap, bring the sand and dump it on the appell ground. The blockaltester said that he wanted it finished by two o'clock. Nobody hurried us nor chased us, so we continued at the speed of the days before, which was relatively slow. Two o'clock came and we were far from finished. It seemed that in the last few days we were lulled into a state of complacency, from which we were brutally awakened that afternoon.

At two o'clock, the lageraltester appeared. He looked at the appell ground and said something to our blockaltester, who in turn called together his assistants, the stubendiensts, and gave them some kind of an order. They dispersed over the camp and were back shortly with capos, vorarbeiter and stubendiensts. This group had an ominous look about them, which they did not even try to hide. They spoke among themselves with anticipation, looking at us with contempt as they started to break the handles off the shovels.

We, standing in a long line five deep, were wondering why they were breaking perfectly good shovels. It became clear to us as soon as they started swinging the long shovel handles. They lined themselves along both sides of the muddy road from our barrack to the sand mound. Leaving a space of three meters between them, they impatiently started swinging the sticks again.

We were ordered to squat. The blockaltester says to us, "I told you to have it finished by two o'clock and you did not, so now you will get your punishment." He ordered the first line of men to stand up and yelled, "Run for sand."

The approximately sixty to seventy men on the first row set off between the two rows of overseers who stood with their sticks held high. They ran with bent heads and shoulders and the sticks were falling on them relentlessly. At the sand mound, they

received one or two shovels full of sand and then ran back. The running back was much more difficult than getting there. The road is narrow and strewn with piles of sand, heaps of brick and stones, plus other discarded pieces of building materials. Woe to him who spills the sand or falls. But even those who did not fall got beaten just the same.

I squat and think to myself: considering that seventy men have to keep running approximately one hundred meters in each direction while being beaten by several dozen overseers who do not care where their sticks fall--how long can it go on?

The answer comes soon. I can see some people with bleeding heads and faces, with bleeding knees and legs from falling over heaps of bricks or sharp rocks and from tripping over construction wood pieces with their protruding nails and other sharp objects. Quite a few were already limping, but still running out of fear that falling might spell death.

It lasts for half an hour and it is obvious that at any moment they will start falling and not be able to get up. The blockaltester calls a halt. They are driven together, a beaten, sweating, and blood-soaked mass. They collapse unable to catch their breath. The blockaltester commands the second line to stand up from their squatting position and take their place. They too get the same treatment as the first ones. I wonder, how long can those overseers keep it up? Do they not get tired? I wonder if I will be able to take it and I shiver. The hours squatting will not be of any help when it comes to running. My legs are already numb. Among the ones that just went through it, some that are laying motionless. Will I make it?

The second line has finished and they are not in any better shape than the first ones. They fall down in the same state as the others. The blockaltester steps in front of us and I am bracing myself for his command to the third line. I am in the fourth line and by the time they return I will not be able to move. Instead he says to us, "Look at your comrades and remember that if you do not obey orders this is only a sample of what will happen to you. Now get up and finish your work." Two hours later when we were lining up for the appell, we stood on a dry sandy ground.

The next morning when we were driven out to the appell and tea, we carried out the bodies of those that died overnight as we did every morning, except that usually there

were one or two dead, never more than five. That morning we carried out twenty-eight as a result of the previous day's treatment.

Despite the fact that the number of inmates in our barrack and the three nearby kept getting smaller as a result of indescribable hunger, malnutrition, cold, beatings, non-existent medical help and non-sanitary facilities, the camp administration did not replace them with other newly-arrived inmates. We found out that the camp administration intended to keep our four barracks quarantined for six weeks and from there to send us to another camp to work.

In the later part of February, one of the stubendiensts in our barrack announced that we were going to get washed. We have not washed since the first day of our arrival when we were shaven, disinfected, showered and given underwear, jackets and pants. In fact, we had not even seen water, except the so-called tea or the dirty puddles on the ground.

We were led to the very first two barracks in our row of twenty barracks, near the entrance through which we were brought to this part of the camp. It turned out that the very first two barracks are actually public outhouses and washrooms. At first, all I could see was an empty barrack with the inevitable flue that stretched the full length of the barrack. Halfway between the flue and the wall, and just as long, on either side of the flue stretched a wooden box of some fifty centimeters high and seventy-five wide. On top of the box, in two rows, were round holes of twenty centimeters in diameter every seventy-five centimeters. On the two long walls of the barrack at a meter off the ground were fastened twenty-five-centimeter-wide wooden troughs that held cold water. We were divided into groups of fifty, ordered to take off our jackets and undershirts and get washed, without soap of course. I was in the third or fourth group and when I got to the troughs the water in them was so cloudy that I could not see the bottom through fifteen centimeters of water. Before I even stuck my hands in the water, I asked someone the meaning of the long wooden box with the holes in it. The man just said; look in there. I walked over bringing my face closer to a hole. Before I even got to it, I smelled it. Still I looked in and saw the deep long hole in the ground and the boards that held the earth from falling in. I estimated the amount of the round holes to be between sixty and eighty.

“If there are so many toilet seats in this part of the camp, how many prisoners do the Nazis intend to squeeze into it?” I thought to myself.

I still remember how disgusting it was for me to stick my hands into the trough after examining the very public toilet. But I did it and even splashed some of the murky water on my face. Without towels I wiped my face with my lice infested undershirt and pulled it on, as I was cold. Besides, the shirt would dry on me sooner than off. At the same time, I remarked to someone near me that I felt dirtier now than before.

For the record, I will mention that after about three weeks in there, we were all, without exception, lice-ridden. It is only a wonder that no one contracted typhoid fever, which would have meant the end of most of us.

A couple days after washing, right after the morning appell, as soon as the SS men left us to the supervision of our overseers, we were surrounded by the stubendiensten who conducted a thorough search of everyone of us. What they were looking for we did not know. Before dark, when we were finishing with the evening appell and were due to be driven into the barrack, the blockaltester called out one from our lines, a young man from Pruzany a year or two older than myself by the name of Laizer K. The blockaltester put him with his back to the rim of the hole that we dug for the water to run off a week or so earlier. With a loud voice the blockaltester said, “I will not kill you today. I will drag it out for several days.” Having said this, the blockaltester delivered a blow to his face with such force that the young man was lifted up from the ground before falling into the hole. I have mentioned earlier that the two-meter deep hole was half-full with water, and when the young man fell in, he was totally submerged. When he stood up, the blockaltester ordered to get him out. There again he stood with his back to the hole, dripping ice-cold water from head to toe. The blockaltester delivered another blow and when he got out, he hit him again.

After the third blow and dunking, we were driven into the barrack. The next morning, that young man went through the same three immersions and the same in the evening. We were beginning to admire the young man’s fortitude. The same happened on the third day. That evening at the appell, we could see his strength was at low ebb and we began to wonder if he would survive another day. Not that death distressed us anymore;

by then we had seen enough of it. Our barrack was getting noticeably emptier, but those that had gone, often perishing through the selections by the camp doctors, died during the night from the beatings, hunger, and contracted diseases they were afraid to admit to for fear of being taken away to the gas chambers.

This case was different. Here a young man, unable to resist incomprehensible hunger, knowingly risked his life and stole two cubes of margarine from the blockaltester, who in turn stole it from us starving inmates by giving us smaller pieces than was coming to us so that he could gorge himself with our food while we were expiring from hunger.

Of course, our sympathy was on the side of that young man who took from the blockaltester that which was rightly ours. We also admired his bravery, which to be honest bordered on irrationality or even madness.

That night, we noticed some activity in the blockaltester's partitioned-off corner. In the early morning when we were being driven out the barrack, we noticed that we had a new blockaltester. After the appell, we found out that the night's activities were a result of the sudden dismissal of our blockaltester, who was sent away on a transport--that is, to another camp. The new blockaltester knew nothing of the 'crime' committed by that young man, Laizer, and as a result, his life was spared. Laizer survived the camp and is today a successful businessman in Philadelphia.

Our new blockaltester was a German with a green triangle, which categorized him as a *Berufsverbrecher B.V.* (professional criminal).

Since I am mentioning triangles, I will explain what those triangles represented. Every inmate in Auschwitz-Birkenau was obliged to have his or her number that they received upon arrival in Auschwitz marked on a piece of white material sewn on their jacket and pants. The piece of material was about twelve centimeters long and three centimeters wide. It was sewn chest high on the jackets and had a painted triangle of two and a half centimeters in size in front of the number. The colors of the triangles identified the reason the internee was arrested. The triangle pointed downwards, with its base on top.

I will start with the most prevailing colors first: red, *Schutzhaftling*, preventive custody, political internee; black, *Asoziale*, antisocial (A.S.O.), an imprecise a concept that included prostitutes, gypsies, saboteurs and anything that could not be put a finger



on; green with the base pointing up, blockaltester or *Berufsverbrechers* (B.V.), professional criminal; green with the point up standing on its base, *Sicherung-Verwahrte* (SV, PSV) preventive custody, i.e. after serving the sentence passed by the court they can be kept indefinitely; violet, *Internationale-Bibleforsher* (I.B.V.), Jehovah's Witness; purple, Catholic priests and monks; pink, homosexuals; letter E, *Erziehungs-Haftlinge*, prisoners sent for reeducation whose chances of getting out were very slim. There were a few inmates that carried a circle that was five centimeters in diameters on a twelve-centimeter square white background. The black circle meant *Straf-Kompanie*, penal colony; red circle, *Im Lager*, liable to attempt escape or attempted escape--those were not allowed outside the camp proper.

But by far the most visible and numerous triangles in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the more than forty surrounding affiliated and subservient camps, the so-called *Ausen Lagern* (outside camps), were the Jewish triangles. Those, the Jewish triangles, actually consisted of two triangles. One was the usual red political triangle and the second was a yellow one that was superimposed over the red one, pointing in the opposite direction; that is to say, with the point up. Thus, it formed a two-colored star of David. Jews represented over seventy-five percent of the inmates of Auschwitz and over ninety percent in adjoining Birkenau.

All inmates of Auschwitz-Birkenau that had red triangles (political internees) had printed on their triangles a single letter that identified their country of origin. For example, Poles had a letter "P," Frenchmen an "F," Dutchmen an "H" and so on, except for Germans and of course Jews. Apparently, the Jews country of origin made no difference to the Nazis. We were all destined for the ovens.

Shortly after taking over the block and settling in, our new blockaltester dismissed a couple Stubendiensten and appointed new ones. They were men from our block; that is, our own from Pruzany. To be a Stubendienst meant the end of the constant nagging hunger, thirst and exposure to winter cold, and protection from everything that could lead to a horrible and torturous death.

In return, however, such a person in most cases had to renounce or sacrifice all human principles. One had to forget friends, neighbors acquaintances and even family by

turning against them, joining those who, in order to save themselves or in order to prolong their life for a little while longer, helped the SS in converting the camp into the hell it was. I do not know if those people found it difficult to overcome the change or if they were creatures of such low character to begin with. Maybe I am being too harsh on them with my judgment. Maybe they were too weak to endure the hunger and beating and gave in to temptation. How can one understand now what it was like at that time?

In any case, we were happier with the couple new stubendiensten from among us than the other non-Jewish strangers that treated us with such cruelty. Among the stubendiensten in the three neighboring barracks that housed the other inmates from Pruzany were two Jews from France, one by the name of Freihight, the second by the name of Zulty. If they were any better than the other non-Jewish stubendiensten, I do not know. But the fact that they were stubendiensten was enough to instill fear. Tall and well fed, they always kept each other's company and did not associate too much with the other non-Jewish stubendiensten.

Once, finding myself near a neighboring barrack, I noticed the two of them sitting on a bench having a conversation. They were totally oblivious to us and spoke quite loudly. Even though many of them preferred to speak French, they spoke Polish or Yiddish when conversing about everyday events. As I got close, I heard one say to the other, "Ale ten wladek ma wspanialy cios." (There now, Wladek (Wladyslaw) knows how to deliver a magnificent punch.)

This remark was made regarding a Polish blockaltester in one of our four blocks. After almost an entire month in Birkenau, I had heard and almost gotten used to many unpleasant, offending and repulsive words or statements, but that remark horrified and stunned me. I could not imagine how a Jew could admire a non-Jewish blockaltester for his talent in hurting and killing people. Before I had the time to fully digest what I just heard, I heard the other one replying in clear, Polish-accented Hebrew, "You son of a bitch, he killed four hundred Jews during one night! Is that what you are praising him for? Is that what you are glorifying him for?"

In that moment, two facts were revealed to me. One, that the blockaltester from the nearby barrack was capable of killing and did kill four hundred Jews in one night;

second, that one of the two Jewish stubendiensten still had in him the decency and moral fairness to berate his equal for admiring that scoundrel and murderer. I am mentioning this incident in order to give the reader an idea, a concept, of the depth to which a human being can sink, and the worthlessness of a human life in Auschwitz.

At the end of February, the days became longer and somewhat warmer. No longer did we huddle to the barrack wall or with each other. Instead, we began to explore the layout of the accessible part of the camp. We began to pay more attention to the nearest crematorium, number three, which was constantly belching smoke in the daytime and sheets of fire at night. At times, we used to try and guess how many Jewish souls had been driven inside on a particular day. At other times, we guessed how many were killed during the month we had been there.

In our barrack, the crowded bunks had long since disappeared. Now there was room for everybody. The inmates fell victim to the frequently conducted selections, beatings, hunger and sickness, all of which led to the crematoriums.

We waited impatiently for the end of the six weeks that we had to spend in quarantine in order to weed out the sick and weak. In this respect, the Nazis succeeded very well. In fact, it worked better than expected. They had gotten rid of the weak and sick, but they also managed to make many healthy men sick as well.

There was talk that in the work camps, the food would be more plentiful. Even the new block secretary confirmed as much. The new secretary from the French transport, the so-called the forty-two thousands, was tall, handsome, cleanly dressed and never raised his voice. He was always polite, despite the fact that he outranked everyone in the barrack except the blockältesten. He did not fit in with the crude, vulgar and murderous bunch of overseers around him.

The days stretched out like years due to the constant beatings, hunger, filth and the lice that crawled leisurely over us, even over our jackets for all to see.

A few days before the end of February, as we were driven into the barrack for our lunch of a cup of soup, we were told to remain inside. We remained in the barrack for the rest of the day. It was only the next morning when we were driven out for the roll call that

we noticed some barracks across from us were occupied. We were not permitted to get closer. Nevertheless, during the day we found out that the new arrivals were gypsies.

The gypsies, unlike us Jews, did not go through any kind of selection. They were simply taken from the train--entire families, men, women, children and baggage--led to the barracks and assigned a bunk per family. This event became a daily occurrence for a while, and sometimes we were permitted to remain outside and watch their arrival and assignment to the barracks. The two rows of barracks were being filled up fast with gypsies and it was then that this part of the camp became known as the "Gypsy Camp."

Blockaltesters were sent in from the older part of the camp, as they had experience, but the stubendiensts were chosen from among the newly arrived gypsies. The first couple of days, they were confined to the barracks and were not even counted. They were left alone. Nobody raised a hand nor even a voice at them. They have come from their homes with their possessions, bulging suitcases, money and food. The first few days they looked with contempt at the camp soup that was brought to them and refused to eat it.

We, barely surviving after a month on our starvation diet, began slowly to get closer to the gypsy barracks hoping to benefit, although we were chased and beaten by the blockaltesters and our own stubendiensten. Still the hunger used to overcome the fear, so I moved slowly towards a gypsy barrack. Suddenly the door opened and out came the blockaltester. Before I could take one step backwards, he noticed me, called me over and told me to stand at the big wide closed door and not to let anyone in or out. Without another word, he walked away.

I know that no manna will fall for me from heaven by standing outside at the closed door. Seeing the blockaltester way off, a good distance away and getting farther, I take a chance, open the door, slide in and close it behind me. I start out very slowly along one side of the bunks on which entire families sit with heaps of assorted luggage. About halfway down, I notice an old gypsy woman sitting on a bunk among a pile of assorted suitcases and bags. She looks at me dispassionately, but I can see wisdom and experience in her tired eyes.

She winks at me and nods with her head. I stop and look at the old and wrinkled face that projects so much life experience. She pulls a red camp bowl out from under an old blanket, half-full with yesterday's congealed soup, and says to me in German, "I need the bowl."

My spoon is always at hand and I stick it unpretentiously in the congealed soup. The tasteless, cold and lumpy soup barely slides down my throat. I wonder how clean it is after staying uncovered all night under her bunk, but the hunger conquers all. Still, I remember thinking to myself, "Look and see what you have turned into. Did you ever imagine you would eat something like this in your life?"

I am almost at my last spoonful when, suddenly, the door opens and the blockaltester marches in. I gulp down what is in my mouth, put the spoon in my pocket and run towards him and the door, as that door is my only escape and salvation.

His curses and the club fall on me simultaneously and follow me down a good part of the road. When he finally lets me off and turns back to the barrack, I stop to wonder if it was really worth the beating I just received for the half bowl of yesterday's soup.

The gypsy transports keep on coming and their passengers are assigned barracks. They have to carry their own baggage, but get help as soon as they enter our part of the camp. Around the newcomers, there are always blockaltesters, capos, stubendiensts and other freeloaders, all with the intention of benefitting from them. After all, they did not come in empty-handed like the Jews, who had everything taken from them before entering the camp.

There were musicians among them who brought with them their instruments like violins, guitars, mandolins, and accordions. As the beginning of March as it got warmer, they formed a couple of bands and used to give concerts in the middle of the afternoons. The men with long hair and clean-shaven faces used to dress in their Sunday best and try to go for walks on the clay road, trying hard not to dirty their shoes--an impossible task. Some of the women tried to do the same in high-heel shoes but gave up after a short attempt.

A couple more days go by and we notice that not only the camp bread becomes precious to them, but the soup too. We start to wonder how long it will be before they will look like us.

In mid-March, right after roll call, when we were normally driven into the barrack for the night, we were ordered to remain standing outside. Shortly after, we joined with the others from the other three barracks. Now we were all together, the men from the Pruzany ghetto who had been selected to enter the camp. In total, we numbered just over twelve-hundred men when we arrived at Auschwitz. We were lined up in a long line, five in a row.

A detachment of SS arrives and we are being counted. I look around at those in my barrack and realize that many of those who came with me are missing. Especially are noticeable is the absence of the many Dutch Jews, whom I did not know personally but were noticeable because of their language and height. Now there were hardly any to be seen.

We are being counted by the SS men over and over. There are barely eight hundred of us in total, from the twelve hundred from Pruzany, one hundred Dutch and two hundred from Bialystok that joined us as we entered this part of the camp--the so-called gypsy camp, which indeed it became as soon as we left it that very evening.

Here, I want to submit the exact number of men and women of ghetto Pruzany that entered the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in the four days of the evacuation and arrival in Auschwitz. Included are the first and the last running numbers tattooed on the arms of the men and women on each of those four days entering the camp.

<b>Left Pruzany</b>	<b>Arrived Auschwitz</b>	<b>No. of Women</b>	<b>No. of Men</b>	<b>Rec. # from - to Women</b>	<b>Rec. # from - to Men</b>
<b>1/28/1943</b>	1/30/1943	275	327	32604-32879	97825-98151
<b>1/29/1943</b>	1/31/1943	32	249	33325-33357	98516-98765
<b>1/30/1943</b>	2/1/1943	180	313	33358-33537	98778-99091
<b>1/31/1943</b>	2/2/1943	105	294	33928-34033	99211-99505

The above details are from the archives of the Polish State Museum in Auschwitz-Birkenau (Oswiecim-Brzezinka) which include the investigation files of the Gestapo activity in Eastern Prussia in which Pruzany was included at that time. There are also the files of the court records procedures, as well as the verdict of the court in which the accused Gestapo men appeared.

The trial of those responsible for the deportations from the Bialystok, Grodno and Pruzany Ghettos took place in the German town of Bielefeld and are generally referred to as the Bielefeld Trials. Presiding was Judge Witte, assisted by Judge Hoppe and Dr. Gaebert and a sworn jury. The accused Gestapo men were Dr. Altenloch, Heimbach, Errelis and Dibus. The organizers and supervisors of the transportation from Pruzany to Auschwitz were Kriminal Oberassistent Wilhelm and SS Rottenfurer Muth. The verdict was announced on May 14, 1967.

The SS men counting us talked in a loud voice, so we now know how many we are from all the four barracks taken together. The number is frightful. The mind does not want to accept it. Is it possible that we are only eight hundred men left from fifteen hundred? Is it possible that a half of us perished in a period of six weeks without even working? What is the sense? What is the reasoning in keeping us in quarantine for six weeks, during which time half of us died from beatings, hunger and disease, while the other half is in such a state that it would not be able to put in a day's work?

It all suddenly looked so senseless, so absurd, so ludicrous. We just stood there not knowing what to say or ask one another.

They finally got their numbers straight. We were surrounded by SS men with rifles at ready and ordered to march. We march through our part of the camp, through the very same hole in the fence entered six weeks ago. We march on a dirt road. On either side of us are barbed-wire fences. It seems we are between two camps. The one on the right looks a bit older and the one the left is brand new. It is a couple of hours since the sunset, but the camp is so lit up that even a fly could not hide. We march along railway tracks and I recognize the spot where we arrived and disembarked. We pass by a long stone and brick building that is being built, which will later be known as the guardrooms.

There is empty space afterwards on either side of the dirt road. After less than an hour's walking, we find ourselves between what seems like stables. Suddenly, as we come out from behind those buildings, we see in front of us a tall, well-lit metal gate over which were fastened to two metal rods in a semicircle, in which was set a black metal letter a sign that read: "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work Makes You Free).

We stop in front of the gate. I am in the first row and, while we wait for the others to catch up, I look around. I see the camp is surrounded with a double barbed-wire fence that is electrified. Around the outside of the barbed wire fence, there is a solid cement wall of two and a half meters high. I realize that the cement wall was not built to stop escapees, for it is humanly impossible to get through the two electrified fences and the SS men on the guard towers all around. I come to the conclusion that the solid fence is to stop others from looking in.

I look up again at the sign that says "Arbeit Macht Frei" and think to myself, "What mockery!" In the last six weeks in Birkenau, I got acquainted only too well with the Nazi's promises, with their respect for human life. "Aren't they ashamed, even before their own men, to put up such a glaringly flagrant and deceitful sign?"

Through the gate, I see large buildings looming inside the fence. They appear even bigger behind the lampshades that illuminate the camp. I look at the difference between this camp and the one we left behind an hour ago and wonder what this one holds for us.

From the nearby guardhouse appear several SS men. Two of them open the wide gate and we begin to march in while being carefully counted. We are being led between rows of two-story brick buildings to the very end of a row, next to the fence. As soon as we enter the building, I can smell the unmistakable odour of disinfectant, which reminds me of the shower for which I have been longing so much. The filth on our lice-ridden skin is a centimeter thick.

In groups of two hundred, we are being shaven completely, disinfected and showered. We receive a set of underwear, a pair of pants and jacket, a cap in the shape of a beret and a coat. The coat is made of the same material as the camp uniform, that is the striped pajama-like cloth, and has no lining, nor does it give any warmth. But still, it called a coat.



By the time we all went through the entire process it was daylight. We were driven outside and watched as the work groups were being formed to go to work. As soon as they left, we were taken to the appellplatz (the roll call square), which was in front of the kitchen. There, we were divided into specialized work groups. This was done by the overseers under the supervision of the SS. There were a lot of tradesmen or artisans among us that were needed for the rapidly growing camp and the industry that was being developed in the vicinity. During the process of assigning work, the SS did not miss an opportunity to have their bit of fun with us. One of them announced that they needed typists. There were a few typists among us, but many figured that they could assure themselves an easy job and claimed to be typists. After the SS had their share of fun with them and a good deal of mockery, they sent them all to work unloading trainloads of bricks, stones and sand, which turned out to be one of the worst places to work. When they called for locksmiths, I stepped forward. In all we were a group of some twenty men. We were taken to Block 18, which was opposite the kitchen.

I will take a moment to describe the layout of the block. Unlike Birkenau, where the buildings were referred to as barracks, which they were, in Auschwitz I, the buildings were referred to as blocks. They were two-story brick buildings divided into two separate entities. The first floor and basement was under one blockaltesters jurisdiction, and in our case, that was block number eighteen. The second floor and attic was run by another blockaltester and his own Stubendiensten and was called 18A. Block 18 and Block 18A were two separate entities, completely independent of each other, not interfering in each other's business, even though they were under the same roof. In fact, even the entrances were separate. While Block 18 used the front entrance, Block 18A used the side one.

We are being led through the front door into a long hallway, at the end of which is another door leading outside. The floor of the hallway is clean and we notice several doors leading off of it. We are led to a door with a number four over it. We are welcomed by a man of about thirty, of medium height, who would be referred as stout in normal times. Such a terminology did not exist in Auschwitz. It would have to be invented. His triangle is red with the letter "P" for Polish. He looks us over pretends that he is pleased with the fact that we are Polish Jews, as it will be easier to communicate. He asks where

we are from and when we tell him we can see the blank look in his eyes. While this almost cordial conversation goes on, he mentions that he is the stubendienst in this *stube* (room). The door suddenly opens and in comes the blockaltester, the one that brought us into this room, and disappeared during our conversation with the stubendienst. He holds four or five loaves of bread and explains to us that this bread does not represent our daily ration, which we will get tonight. This is a personal present from him to us. He stands and watches as the stubendienst cuts it up and divides it among us. We exchange glances and I wonder if we are not dreaming, thinking about the reception we received in Birkenau six weeks ago.

The stubendienst assigns us bunks. I am assigned bunk number sixty-four. Here I have a chance to look around the stube, which is one of the four on this the main floor. It is fully separated from the others with a solid stone wall. The two doors leading in are on either end of the room, leading to the long hallway, which in turn connects to the other three rooms on the floor. There is also a door which opens into the public toilet, another to the washroom, and yet another to the room of the blockaltesten.

As one enters our stube there are three-tiered bunks on either side. In front of you is an empty space of two by four meters, taken up by a table. A space of almost a meter wide runs the length of the room to the other end, where there is the same space and table. This connecting passage is the main passage of the room. The rest of the room is taken up with three-tiered bunks, except for a couple very narrow passageways, just wide enough for emaciated bodies to squeeze through in order to get to their bunks. The bunks are individual, about sixty centimeters wide. They are fenced in with low boards so one should not roll off. On each bunk, there is a straw sack and two blankets, one to sleep on and the other to cover with.

The Stubendienst tells us to take off our shirts, turn them inside out and look for lice. We are sure that we have no lice--only a few hours ago we were shaven from top of the head to our toes, disinfected and well scrubbed under a hot shower. How can we have lice? The stubendienst insists and we obey. Lo and Behold, we find lice in our undershirts. Where do they come from? The answer comes from the Stubendienst himself. You cannot rid yourselves of lice with one disinfection and a shower. They bite

into the skin and lay eggs. We continue our hunt for lice and squash them between our thumbnails.

At noon, we receive a red enamel bowl and line up for our soup. We do receive a full litre of soup, and even though it is three times as much as in Birkenau, it does not satisfy our hunger.

We spend the afternoon with the stubendienst, who acquaints us with the regulations of the stube, the block and camp. How to make the bed so it is straight as an arrow. Where the toilets are, with their individual enamel seats. Where the washroom is, with several long troughs over which there is a constant flow of water day and night. The walls of the washroom, troughs and floor are all tiled. We are informed that no one is allowed to enter the washroom with his shirt on. The punishment is severe for disobedience.

The longer he speaks the more threatening his voice becomes, and his attitude, almost fatherly this morning, is slowly being replaced by that characteristic Birkenau air. Without exchanging a word between ourselves, we begin to understand that it would be advisable not to underestimate his unfinished sentences, which ended mostly with, “if not...”

Shortly after six, the working groups or “commandos” began to return from work. Our stubendienst, whose name was “Kazik” (Kazmir), led us outside and put us in the line with the others from our block who just returned from work.

The blockaltester knows that his twenty new arrivals, which are called “Zugang” in camp language, are unfamiliar with the appell procedure. We, the six hundred men in our block, line up ten deep to facilitate the counting. The method of counting is such: As we are lined up in straight lines like soldiers, an SS man comes over to do the counting. The blockaltester yells, “Achtung” (attention). We pull in our empty stomachs and puff out our bony chests. Again, we hear him yell, “Mutzen” (hats), and everybody, like a perfectly synchronized machine, grabs with his right hand his cap and takes it “ab” (off). Every hand pulls the cap off the head and brings it down with a loud slap to his thigh. The SS man walks slowly by the front row, making sure there are nine more behind the one in front, counts the front row, gives a nod to the blockaltester and walks to the center of the

appellplatz to report his findings to the “Rapportfuhrer.” We hear again, “Mutzen” (hats), we bring our hats to our heads, “Auf” (on), and leaving the caps as they land on our heads, we bring our hands down to our thighs with a loud slap. If one is a split-second late, it is heard immediately and the culpable parties get a good thrashing from the Stubendiensten.

After a few dozen tries and many blows, we respond to the command like old pros. From where we are, I can see the assembled in front of block seventeen, sixteen, fifteen and fourteen. They are all going through the same exercise.

The SS man that counted us goes to the center of the appellplatz, where, from nowhere, appears a small portable stand. An SS officer stands nearby with a book in hand. The SS man comes over, salutes and reports the number of prisoners he just counted in his assigned block. The officer marked the numbers down and added them up. By the time this was done, the lagercommandant showed up. As he was approaching that portable stand, we could hear the command “mitzen ab” and this time the entire camp did it simultaneously. The officer who did the total adding and who was addressed as “rapportfierer,” according to his function not according to his rank, quickly marched over to the camp commandant, saluted and reported to him the number of prisoners. As soon as this was over we heard the command “mitzen auf” (hats on) and dismissed.

For the record, I will add that the name of that SS officer, the “rapportfierer” of Auschwitz, was Oswald Kaduk. He was one of the top functionaries in the Auschwitz death factory. He succeeded in avoiding justice for forty years and, when finally caught and brought before the court, he was one of the very few Nazis that refused to express regret for his part in the Holocaust or his actions in Auschwitz. I can still remember how we used to try to stay out of his sight, never mind his reach, when he used to walk into the camp. And to think that this man was accountable only to the camp commandant, Rudolf Hoss, under whose command one and three quarter million human beings were put to death, among them a million and a half Jews.

As soon as we were dismissed after the appell, some of us went back to the stube. Some began to look around the nearby blocks for others from Pruzany. We did not remain

outside long, as at eight thirty we had to be back in the stube. If we expected something to eat that evening, it was in vain. All we got is a few mouthfuls of the bitter, watery tea.

At exactly eight thirty, the sound of a gong was heard all over camp. Our stubendienst, Kazik, yelled in a loud voice, “Stubensperre” (room curfew). Nobody is allowed outside the room except to go to the washroom, which was across the hallway, almost opposite our room. We hear his voice again, “louse appell” (lice roll call). Everyone takes off his shirt, turns it inside out and starts looking for lice.

My bunk is the middle one. On the bottom, one I see sits a man in his mid-thirties whose number is 42000. Exactly forty-two thousand. By his number, I can tell that he is from France. He is of medium height, broad shouldered and not at all emaciated. I quickly realize that he is from the same French transport as the prisoners we met in Birkenau and he is not hungry. Who is he? Still, he has a friendly face and is not at all hostile. I say to him a few words and he is curious to start a conversation. He turns out to be a very nice man. He is trying to help with the only thing he has, camp experience. As we talk, a tall man over six feet tall comes over. According to his red triangle, I can tell that he is a political internee and the letter “P” tells me that he is a Pole. The French Jew, whose name is Fish, welcomes him with a polite, “Good evening, Mr. Leon.” The other just as politely answers, “Good evening.” I see we have a new neighbor. With those words, he puts one foot on the side board of the bottom bunk, grabs the side board of the third bunk, puts his other foot on my second bunk and propels himself onto the third bunk.

Not having slept the previous night and knowing that there is a straw sack with a blanket over it waiting for me, besides one to cover myself with, I could not wait to lie down, despite the hunger.

Another gong and I hear the stubendienst’s voice, “Lights out,” and everything is suddenly concealed in darkness. A bit of light enters through the two little windows in the doors. They come from the washroom across the hall that is always lit.

It seems I just shut my eyes when I hear the gong. Right after, the light in the room comes on and the thundering voice of the stubendienst yells, “Auf stein” (get up). He told us yesterday that we get up at four thirty. Is it already four thirty? Has the night already gone?

Everyone jumps off the bunk, pulls on his pants and pulls off his shirt. We have forgotten that we wash in the morning and we are not allowed in with our shirts on. The water runs constantly and cannot be stopped. I stick my hands under the rapidly flowing water and my fingers get numb from cold. I splash some water over my face and neck and realize that I have nothing to dry myself with. All other inmates have some sort of towel but the newly arrived have none. We use our shirts to dry ourselves. We get dressed and line up near the table in the back of the room where the *Stubendienst* is handing out one a quarter of a loaf of bread and a tiny piece of sausage to each prisoner.

I see the so-called “prominent” inmates sitting at the other table in the front part of the room. They are a capo and about half a dozen of his assistants, the *vorarbeiter* (foremen). I recognize among them the Pole that I met yesterday, the one that sleeps on the third bunk over me. They are being served by a Pole of about twenty five by the name of Zygmund W., who slices bread for them not from the quarters but from a whole bread, and spreads margarine over it and covers it with slices of sausage. They sit calmly, eat slowly until they are full, and wash it down with the same tea that we get, but they sweeten theirs.

I have not the slightest idea how and where they get whole loaves of bread or cubes of margarine. The slices of sausage that are covering the margarine on their bread are thicker than the slices we get. I know not to ask and wait patiently in line for my piece of bread and tiny piece of sausage. I get my piece of bread and it seems to me that the man before me got a bigger piece. I get upset; fate short-changed me this morning. I glance once more at the piece of bread in that other man’s hand and I am not so sure if his is any bigger than mine. I get the piece of sausage, which is less than a centimeter thick, and am driven outside where we are being lined up for the *appell*, like yesterday.

We practice the on/off exercise with our caps several times and hear the *blockältester* announce that the new arrivals of yesterday shall line up with the D.A.W. group after the *appell* is over. As soon as the *appell* is over, we hear the command “*commando eintreten*” (fall into work groups) all over the camp. Everyone is running to his “commando” (group) where he works. Our commando went by the name of D.A.W. (German repair shops). It was the largest in the camp, numbering twelve hundred men.

We are divided up in groups of hundreds, five men abreast, twenty rows to the hundred. In charge of each hundred is a capo who appoints ten men of his hundred to be in charge of another ten. The ones in charge of the ten marks down their numbers and pass it on to the capo. I can hear an orchestra playing and see groups of prisoners marching towards the gate. It is not day yet but everything around is well lit up. We are not delayed on the way to work and are one of the first to leave the camp. After all, we are twelve-hundred men and very important for the German war industry, as well as for the extension of the camp proper. I see the first hundreds already marching ahead in military fashion and I do the same. As we are marching, to my left I am leaving behind the camp kitchen with its tall chimneys. Past the kitchen there is a green lawn with rows of chairs, on which sit a couple dozen musicians in their freshly cleaned and pressed striped camp uniforms. The conductor, on a pedestal, conducts the orchestra very professionally. We turn left towards the gate, trying hard to march to the beat of the march they are playing. I try hard to be abreast with the other four in my line. At the gate stand several SS men of different ranks. They count very precisely but do not interfere in our march. Out of the gate and I feel better. I can turn my head even look around. The ones around me are all from my block. Most of them Poles. They see that I am a newcomer and ask where I am from. Receiving the answer that I am from Poliesie, their curiosity is satisfied and they do not ask anything more. I think to myself, "One country and I couldn't be more than five hundred kilometer from them, yet they do not even know what to ask, as if we are not from the same country or even the same world."

During the Polish era, the majority of the Christian population in our parts of the country considered the Poles strangers and the feeling was mutual. Even now the Poles do not want to know and do not care what is happening in those eastern parts of the former Poland.

We go on for about a kilometer and turn into a yard of a large factory. I see a large four-story brick building painted white, and across from it are five large wooden barracks in the style of the Birkenau barrack, but much wider and very much longer.

I hear again the command, "Commando eintreten" (Work groups fall in). Everybody runs to his assigned place except us, the twenty men locksmiths from our

“stube” (room) and some fifty carpenters that were assigned to Block 18B, which took up the second floor and attic in our block.

We are approached by a few capos and foremen, or *vorarbeiter*. They read out everyone’s number. They know already everyone’s trade and where to take him. We are broken up in smaller groups. The carpenters in small groups are being led to the two large barracks and into the four-story brick building. The large barracks are being called halls. The locksmiths are divided into two groups and taken into the third and fourth hall. I am directed into the third hall. Entering, I notice rows of partly or completely dismantled ammunition wagons around which prisoners are working. As I pass by, I notice that the wagons without exception are to a certain degree damaged, some beyond repair. Along the walls of that large barrack are workbenches, near which more inmates are working.

The capo, a short, broad-shouldered man with the thin, twisted face of a criminal and a green triangle to go with it offers me a skeptical glance, fastens a piece of metal in the vise and hands me a file. I took the file in my hand, not understanding precisely what this test was. Just because I know how to file does not mean to me that I am a locksmith. At school in Brest-Litowsk, I made more complicated work than this, and I still did not consider myself to be a tradesman.

The moment I apply the file to the metal, I can tell that the metal has too much give and has to sit deeper in the vice in order for me to file it properly, but I do not dare move it. After all, the capo put it this way and who am I to correct it. So I start to file.

The capo looks at my filing approvingly, then asks me why I did not lower the piece of metal deeper into the vise. I tell him that he put it there and told me to file. Without a word, he and his foreman turned away and march off towards another new arrival to put through the test. One of his foremen takes me to a workbench around which some eight or ten men are working. Turning to one of them, apparently the one in charge of the group, he says, “Here is your new man” and walks away. The nearby workers look at me first inquisitively and I return the same look. We are looking at each other’s triangles and I do not see a single Jewish star. What I see is dissatisfaction and outright hostility in their faces. They turn around as if I was not there and go back to work.



My immediate boss shows me where to find the needed tools. He points at a demolished ammunition wagon and says, "Start taking it apart." Our work consists of dismantling the damaged ammunition wagons. They are entirely made of metal and most of the joints are welded together. Still, there is a large amount of nuts and bolts that give strength to their construction. Partly due to the damage and partly to the design, it is difficult to get to the many screws. In order to get to them, one is forced to crawl in the narrow and tight compartments of the wagons, and their damaged state complicates the process even more.

With me at the workbench are a couple Poles, three or four Czechs and as many Russians. The Czechs are older men, some in their thirties, the others in early and mid twenties. The Czechs and Poles wear red triangles (political), the Russians black. The work is strenuous but nobody stays over you with a stick.

Exactly at twelve, we hear a loud whistle. Everybody drops his tools wherever he stands and runs outside. In the middle of the factory yard are formed five long, single lines of prisoners supervised by capos. At the head of the capos stood the "uber kapo" (head capo.) With their yelling and sticks, they keep our lines in order. I notice that every inmate has a red bowl, except the newcomers. It does not take long and we too get those standard camp bowls and wait patiently for our soup.

Among the kapos, I notice a large man and as for Auschwitz a very old one. I estimate him to be between fifty and sixty. He walks along the rows of prisoners without a stick or a sound. I come to the conclusion that he must already have such a reputation that he has no need for a stick or to yell. He turns around and I notice the Jewish star, or rather, the two triangles of red and yellow superimposed over each other.

A few days later, I found out that this man is originally from Berlin and goes by the name of Rosen. By profession, he is an engineer who designed and manufactured all the machinery before the war that was now in this plant and who keeps the entire plant running, as he was the only person who knew their complexity and was able to direct the repairs when they broke down. For this purpose, he had a couple dozen mechanics to his disposition and was appointed capo over them. I also found out that this man never raised his voice to anybody and certainly not a stick. Every morning, he gathered a minyan of

ten men to conduct religious services, for which if were caught he would have most likely paid with his life.

I get my liter soup and relish every spoonful. Before I know it, the liter of soup is gone, and I scrape the empty bowl with my spoon until it is as clean as if I washed it. I think to myself how nice it would be to have another liter.

Everyone hides his empty bowl around the workbench and I do the same. The spoon remains in my pocket never to be parted with. Who knows when an occasion might arise when I will need it.

At six o'clock the whistle blows. The workers tidy up in a hurry. The foreman makes sure the tools are back in place and everybody runs outside to fall in the respective groups of a hundred men with whom he came to work. We are counted by the capos and start the march back to camp.

As we pass the camp gate, we are again closely counted. We march on. To the right plays the orchestra and to the left Block 24 seems to be unoccupied. We reach the end of that block and turn right, passing by the kitchen, and we are in front of our block, eighteen. Again, we line up in lines ten deep. A few minutes later, we stand again like well-trained soldiers being counted by a couple of SS men. We go through the same procedure as in the morning with the hats on and off. Shortly after, we are dismissed.

I can now move around freely, but where do I go or what do I do when the hunger muffles all feeling and occupies all thoughts? I am unable to think about anything else but food and start wandering among the blocks. Maybe something will come my way. But nothing does. The buildings are made of brick, the ground a solid asphalt and the inmates...a human diversity of suffering beyond imagination. I see some well fed prisoners. These are the privileged ones and the prominent ones in the camp. They are the blockältesten, capos, stubendiensten, block schreiber (block registrar) and others without ranks that were given good positions. They are all well dressed in clean and freshly pressed uniforms. They walk erect, almost with a military gait and with a noticeable aloofness. Most of them wear their green triangles as if it was a badge of honor, having completely forgotten that it identifies them as professional criminals, never to be released.

There are others among the elite besides the German criminals. Some are Polish inmates, mostly with red triangles, political prisoners, many of whom belonged to the Polish intelligentsia. Some of them managed to get themselves comfortable jobs, or, I would rather say, positions.

But by far the overwhelming majority consisted of emaciated, hungry, starving, walking skeletons. In camp slang these “Muselmänner” (Moslems) consisted almost entirely of Jews, except for some Russians and Gypsies, who were barely noticeable among the multitude of the Jewish walking skeletons. Their deep-set eyes, the sunken, almost transparent cheeks, the protruding jaws, the dry lips that could not shut over teeth expressed so much suffering and hunger that for a moment I felt myself to be fortunate compared to them. A question came to my mind and I asked myself, how long will it be before I will look like them?” Depressed and in shock, I returned to my stube where I took off my shirt. Turning it inside out, I began to look for lice.

Compared to the bunks in Birkenau, the bunks in Auschwitz were comfortable. At nine o’clock, the lights went out and everybody laid down to sleep. The hunger however was so intense that I could not shut my eyes. I start thinking of the food I ate at home before the war. About the food that I did not like and refused to eat, or that I left on my plate to be thrown out. I think of home, my dead parents, sisters and brother, grandparents and reprimand and scold myself for becoming so unfeeling, so morally degraded that instead of grieving and mourning the loss of my family, I think of food.

Yet the exhaustion of the day that started at four thirty in the morning, the twelve hours long workday and the constant nagging hunger took its toll and I fell asleep.

The days became a routine. To my surprise, a couple of days, later right after returning from work and after the appell (roll call), we line up block after block on the appellplatz in front of the kitchen where each of us inmates receives half a loaf of bread and a slice of sausage. I found out that this extra half a loaf and the slice of sausage, which is called *tzulage* (additional) in camp, is a twice a week occurrence. I eat up the half loaf of bread and the piece of sausage and am surprised to find out that I am still hungry.

A few days go by with me working and thinking continuously about food. On Sunday, we sleep in an extra half an hour and get up at five. After the appell, we receive the regular quarter-loaf of bread and a small piece of cheese that smells terrible. I hold the piece of cheese for no more than two minutes before it is gone, and during the day, I wash my hands several times, yet I can smell it on my hands the next day.

The stubendienst orders everyone to shave, not only their faces but their heads too. There is a professional barber in our stube, a Jewish man from France who is referred to as the block barber. There are a hundred men in our stube, an impossible job for one man. He shaves only the big shot prisoners like the Stubendienst and his assistant, the capo, and the half dozen foremen. To shave us ordinary inmates, he picks three men from among us to do the job. In return, the three men will receive an extra liter soup at noon. The three chosen are not barbers and are about as handy with a razor as me. As a result, when the job was done there were quite a few walking around with cuts to their faces or heads as if after a brawl.

I down my liter of soup in seconds and my stomach feels as empty as before. I look with envy at those who are still eating theirs and are savoring every spoonful. I am mad at myself for having eaten so fast and having to look now at the others still eating. A couple of us are ordered to collect the bowls, take them to the washroom and wash them. It is one o'clock Sunday afternoon, when the Stubendienst yells "bet rue" (bed rest) and all of us have to lie down for two hours. "The accursed Nazis," I think to myself. On one hand, they are killing thousands of innocent people daily and making us work until we fall dead, and on the other hand, there was the hypocrisy of giving us two hours bed rest every Sunday afternoon, for which we will repay them by working twice as hard tomorrow.

After the two hours rest, the prisoners are told to write letters home, except of course the Jews, who have nobody to write to, and the Russians, I presume for security reasons.

The first Sunday was unfortunately the last quiet Sunday for us Jews for a long time. The following Sunday, right after the appell, the capos started the rounding up "volunteer" workers to unload building material from rail cars. The material consisted of

bricks, stones, sand, cement, planks, entire logs and the like. The supervisors were a mixed lot from all blocks that consisted of capos, foremen and their cronies who were eager to please the many SS men around by beating the emaciated bodies of the starving inmates, an action that delighted the SS man who used to roll in laughter.

Of course, I was taken too and came back to the camp at noon for our liter of soup. After six hours of such work, we returned to the stube beaten, bleeding, and barely dragging the feet, where we got our liter of soup. The remaining hours of the Sunday, we spent licking our wounds and cuts. The hunger became a constant companion that did not leave me for a moment, but all my plans to satisfy it remained a dream.

The oversized barrack in which we worked was heated by tin ovens. They were made out of large petrol barrels that stood upright. Their tops were cut away and lowered inside, halfway down the barrel, where inch-size holes were drilled. The tops were replaced with a flat piece of tin. In the lower part of the barrel were a few holes for creating a draft. The upper part of the barrel was filled with burning sawdust and covered with the piece of tin. An attached tin flue led to an opening in the ceiling.

Several days later, I notice that the Russian inmates working with me are stringing potatoes on a piece of wire and lowering them into the fire to bake, bending the upper end of the wire over the rim of the stove. To my question as to where they got the potatoes, I got no answer. As the hunger drove me to despair and my mind was constantly occupied with thoughts of food, I began to approach the pile of garbage that the kitchen night shift threw out that lay in front of the kitchen every morning. It consisted of rotten vegetables and potatoes that even the SS men saw as unfit for the prisoners. One morning before lining up for work, I went over and started to rummage in that garbage heap. From nowhere, there appeared someone with a stick and drove me away.

It occurred to me to get up before the gong, that is before four thirty in the morning, to run across to the heap of garbage. This entailed risking my life for it was forbidden to leave the block before the gong. Nevertheless, I got dressed in the dark stube, lying on my bunk in order not to rouse suspicion. I sneaked out of the room into the long corridor and through the main door outside to the pile of garbage. There I filled my pants pockets with the rotten, oozing potatoes. Entering the block, I did not dare to enter

the stube as it was close to sounding of the gong and I might be noticed. I went into the toilet and spent the next few minutes in fear somebody should find me there. As soon as the gong sounded, the entire block came to life and became a beehive. In that tumult, I entered the room, and, quickly taking off the jacket and shirt, I went to the washroom where I became one of the crowd.

The rotten potatoes were an oozing mass, and they kept filtering through my pants pockets like through a strainer, dripping down my legs, my pants and on my shoes. Once at work, I strung them on a piece of wire and baked them in the oven. While the Russians used to put in good potatoes that would come out nicely baked, mine were rotten to begin with and came out as pieces of an indistinguishable burned substance.

I knew that those burned pieces of rotten potatoes have no nourishment value. Just the opposite, I can get sick from it; but for the moment, something went down my stomach that made me feel as if I had eaten something.

One morning, after I worked there for about two weeks, our capo passes by and notices the pieces of wire hanging out from under the tin plate covering the stove. Lifting the cover, he saw the strings of potatoes. His face turns angrier than usual and with his harsh voice he thundered, “Whose is it?” I am astonished to see the four Russians, whose potatoes they really were, pointing their fingers at me. I was hurt and offended knowing that these young Russians hailed from deep Russia, where fellowship is a virtue and anti-Semitism is officially strictly prohibited. Since I had been working with them, I succeeded in establishing a rapport of sorts with them, speaking their language and having been, as of late, a former Soviet citizen, too. It appeared to me that they accepted me as one of their own.

Without a word, the capo handed me over to one of his vorarbeiter, who tells me to follow him. We leave our “halle” or workhouse, number three, pass by halles two and one, and we find ourselves at the edge of a huge lumber yard, which I will refer to by its German name, *holzplatz*. He leads me through rows of piles of timbers and planks of assorted lengths, thicknesses and widths. He leads me to a group of working inmates. The foreman comes over and my escort says to him, “Here is one more for you,” and then turns around and leaves.

My new supervisor barely offers me a glance and barks at me, "Go to them," pointing with his long stick at the nearby group. I go over to the group and see before me a couple dozen young Jews like myself, confused, bewildered, battered, emaciated bodies with protruding bones wrapped in a gray, colorless skin. They are bending over and straining to lift boards that are thicker than themselves and loading them on a wagon. I suddenly feel a terrible pain in my back and immediately realize that the foreman had delivered a blow with his stick. His words thunder, "Did you come to observe?" I run at once and start lifting a board. It is much heavier than I thought. After sitting outdoors for months, it had absorbed a lot of water. Now it weighed much more than it should have. I strain myself and lift one side. Someone else at the other end does the same and we throw the heavy board into the wagon. We are working with all our strength, but the foreman goes around and hits continuously. I would have liked to ask him why, but I don't dare.

I see others working with their last gasp and he is even harder on them. "What kind of a creature are you?" I think to myself. "Do you require harder work of us or do you do it for no particular reason?" It turns out that the answer to both questions was yes.

The wagon is full of thick and heavy boards. We harness ourselves to the wagon while others take up positions around it, and with encouragement of the foreman's stick, the wagon begins to move slowly forward. The wagon is so heavy and I can see the others straining with their last ounce of strength as the stick keeps on falling.

We reach a piece of road where the ground is a bit firmer and the wagon moves easier. The foreman disappears for a moment and is back with a long stick. He shoves the stick in between the spikes of the front wheels and the wagon comes to a stop. The foreman in an uncontrollable rage starts hitting blindly and indiscriminately over heads, shoulders and backs. He stops in front of a young man--now a caricature of a former young man--and starts hitting him mercilessly. I see that the young man is trying hard to stay on his feet and I wonder why. Maybe if he fell down the foreman would leave him alone.

The heavy blows are too much for that exhausted soul to withstand and he falls. The foreman delivers a few more blows to his head to immobilize him. With his boot, he delivers a few kicks to turn him around, face up. We watch in horror as the foreman puts

his stick across the poor young man's throat, steps with one foot on one end of the stick and brings the other foot on the other end. The skinny neck does not resist the weight of the well-fed foreman--the German criminal with the green triangle who is actually a "Silesian," who spoke German and Polish but considered himself German. We look with sympathy and fear as his tortured soul expires before our eyes.

The foreman knows only too well when one is dead. He picks up his stick and, without missing a beat, starts swinging it at us. He pulls out the long stick from between the wheels spikes and the wagon moves again.

We stop in front of another group of workers. Their foreman is a tall man with his left arm completely missing. He has a red triangle with the letter P for Pole. In front of him is a little stand on which there are some papers. The men under his command are measuring and stacking up the planks and timber according to size while he, the foreman, writes the information down. I look at those workers with envy and feel sorry for myself. We unload the wagon and go for another load. Again the pummeling, the beating, the back breaking under the heavy timber, and I wonder how long can I survive in here.

The mid day whistle comes as if the Messiah. On the way to lining up, I notice a red camp bowl stuck among the timber pile. I pick it up and go to line up for the soup. During the midday break, I strike up a conversation with my coworkers, a sorry lot of beaten, broken young Jews. They tell me that the group I work with is called *commando holzplatz* and it is a *straff-kommando* (penal company); all those that commit any transgression are sent to work in this factory. The group consists of some fifty to sixty men depending on the mortality rate, which is ten percent per day on average. The foreman's, whose acquaintance I had the misfortune to make that morning, was named Pilarek. Pilarek has an assistant, a Polish prisoner who is not much better than himself. There is a capo, a German prisoner with a green triangle (professional criminal) who leaves it up to Pilarek to do the grizzly work, and there is of course a *schreiber* (registrar).

After the break, we went through the same hell of loading the planks. We carry boards. They are thick and heavy and we carry two at a time. One is unable to put them on his shoulder so somebody lifts up one end and you put your shoulder under it, a second



man carried the other end. I think to myself, “What crime have I committed that I should deserve such an end?”

We carry them in a long line with Pilarek at our sides hitting constantly. He concentrates in particular on the legs between the knee and the ankle. We can hear as the stick lands on the bony legs of the unfortunates who, under the heavy weight of the boards and the fear of dropping them, cannot even make attempts to avoid them.

Pilarek finds his victims and an unfortunate young boy falls with the boards. He does not get a chance to get up. Pilarek’s heavy sticks keep on falling over him without a stop. At the beginning, the boy covers himself with his hands and arms, but soon he cannot move them fast enough. Then they cease moving and the boy lies helpless under Pilarek’s blows. With a few more blows of the heavy stick, the boy lies motionless and Pilarek is placing his stick across his throat.

I look with horror at the macabre scene and see myself under his stick. I feel grief for not leaving the ghetto together with my family. I could have spent two more days with them in the train and gone together into the gas chamber. Why did I have to suffer the past two months? The hunger, the cold, the beating, the anguish, the agony, the pain and for what? With such disheartening and dark thoughts passed my first day on the holzplatz. At six o’clock, the whistle blows and we run to line up in our hundred. A capo supervises to make sure we are five in a row, twenty rows to the hundred. The hundred is divided in ten groups, two rows to a group, one of the ten is appointed to be in charge of every ten. He has the numbers of the ten under his charge and makes sure they are all present.

The man in charge of our ten is a Pole of about thirty five and unlike the others in my group, who are all Poles and seem to have good and assured positions in D.A.W., he behaves himself humbly and speaks to me, the only Jew, decently. The others ignore me as if I was not there, which suits me fine.

I do not know what happened to the murdered members of the crew until I turn around and see at the end of the last hundred a covered wagon being pulled by prisoners. Until then, I did not know what was in it.

After the appell, when I sit on my bunk and take off the soggy shoes that I received upon coming to Auschwitz from Birkenau, I notice that my feet are swollen and

I wonder what they will look like tomorrow after work if I survive the day. I am totally exhausted and morally broken. I stretch out on my bunk asking G-D why I deserve this. With dark thoughts on my mind, I fall asleep.

When I am awakened by the gong, I ask G-D why he has not taken me to him. Why he is exposing me to another day like yesterday? How well it would have been to fall asleep and not to get up.

I am again in my formation of a hundred and the entire commando of twelve hundred with me from D.A.W. starts out. Again, after getting to the factory, we hear the command, "Commando eintreten," and everyone runs to his group. Yesterday morning I was running to fall in with halle number three, but now I have to go to the penal commando. I feel that today is my last day on earth, but what is worse is the way I have to part with the world—by being beating and throttled by the murderer Pilarek.

We fall in. The schreiber checks all the numbers. A few are missing and we all know that their tortured souls expired over night in the block. The group that measures and stacks the planks is separated from us and led away by their one-armed Pole. We who remain are being divided into two groups, one under the supervision of Pilarek and the other under the supervision of his Polish assistant.

The work is the same and the Polish foreman yells and hits too, but not as much as Pilarek. He hits and beats if we do not move fast enough or if one tries to pick up a lighter plank or log instead of the closes one to him. We strain with all the strength we have left, but at least the Polish foreman does not stop the wagon wheels from turning. The two Poles that joined us yesterday for whatever sin they committed are not with us today. I ask my coworkers how come? They were in better shape than we. I am told that Poles or even Russians do not remain to work on the holzplatz, they are eventually taken other places to work. It is only the Jews brought to this commando who are condemned to remain here and to end their short lives in suffering.

Even though the beating under the Polish assistant was less intense than under Pilarek, the work was not. With a sigh of relief, we welcomed the noon whistle. I find the red bowl that I hid yesterday, stand in line and get my soup. I eat fast, for I was told that the capo took some men to "Canada" (a name given to the group that worked at sorting

the belongings of Jews brought to Auschwitz). The prisoners working in “Canada” often left their soup and our capo arranged to bring it and distribute it among us. It was not for our benefit that he made this arrangement. He used it as a pretext to enter that fenced-off place for his own benefit.

As our capo escorted the soup carriers out of that fenced up and guarded place, he succeeded in becoming friends with the capo of the group working inside, and I am he sure befriended the SS men who searched the soup carriers on their way out, even putting a stick into the soup containers to make sure there was nothing in it except the soup. Still my capo, a German with a green triangle, knew how to fool the SS men and succeeded during those trips in smuggling out a fortune.

Thus, it was that right after I finished my soup that we, the workers of the timber yard, lined up among the piles of timber and received a bit of additional soup. This time I ate slowly and savored every spoonful. I barely swallowed half a dozen spoonfuls when we hear the whistle that signals the end of the mid-day break. Before I have a chance to take another spoonful, the foreman is near me and with his large hand grabs the bowl saying, “Daj me tego” (Give it to me). I still want to salvage another spoonful when he thunders, “Zostaw lyzke” (Leave the spoon). He takes the bowl, spoon and the bit of precious soup from me and hands it to a passing Polish inmate.

The loss of the bowl was a loss but not as great as the bit of soup. The spoon too was a loss for spoons were not supplied in the camp.

That very same afternoon I overheard my Polish foreman saying to a couple of passing Polish inmates, “I do not like to supervise Poles. I cannot beat them and yelling at them does not work. But I do not mind beating Jews.” Still, I have to admit that the second day was easier than the first and under the Poles' supervision, there were no deaths.

That day after the appell, entering the stube, I was called over by a French Jew of the forty two thousand who said to me, “I saw you working under the supervision of Pilarek. I too work on the holzplatz, but under the supervision of the tall Pole with the one arm. I want to give you one piece of advice. If you want to live a bit longer, do not attempt to bribe Pilarek. Tomorrow is when they distribute the *tzulage*, the extra half a

loaf of bread and a piece of sausage. He will expect you to bribe him with it so he will go easier on you. Give him nothing, for if you do, he will expect it every time and without this extra food, you will not last more than a few days even if he does not hit you.”

I took his advice seriously. The next day I had Pilarek for my foreman and it was as bad as the first day. The only short escape I discovered was in the outdoors toilet. It was exactly as in Birkenau, a long box with several holes in it, except that it was smaller, consisting of about a dozen holes. That little building served as a short-lasting refuge where we used to catch our breath and lick our wounds. The only problem was that there was a sort of supervisor appointed by Pilarek whose job it was to make sure that nobody over stays, or rather, over sits, his allowed couple minutes. That man fulfilled his duty to the letter, otherwise he would have become Pilarek’s victim.

That third day I barely survived. Returning to camp right after the appeal, we received the *tzulage*, the additional half a loaf of bread and the piece of sausage. The piece of sausage I exchanged with a Pole for a quarter loaf of bread. Most of the Poles had enough bread and craved sausage. For me, the piece of bread was more filling.

For a small piece of bread, I bought a little cloth pouch in which I put one ration of bread for the next day. The remaining half a loaf I ate, but I still remained hungry. The following day I came to work with the remaining piece of bread in my pouch, dangling from my belt for all to see, including Pilarek. I will admit there were others like me.

I expected a rough day, but not as rough as it turned out to be. It made the previous day seem like child’s play. I could not understand where that beast got the strength to hit so much without a break. He did not forget me either. As two of us were carrying two heavy boards, with me in front and another man on the back end, Pilarek, got a hold of me. After a few blows on the back, he started hitting me on my legs in his usual style. Now I really understood how that young man felt on my first day under Pilarek. I no longer felt the blows, for the part of my leg between the knee and ankle was one unbearable pain.

Just as suddenly, he let go of me and started on someone else.

How I survived that day I do not know, but I managed to get back on my bunk. My legs were covered with bruises, one on top of the other, of all conceivable colors, and swollen

to four times their normal size. I took off my shoes that were oozing from walking all day in mud and puddles of water created by the constant rain. Taking off my jacket and shirt, I entered the washroom and stacked my legs under the constantly running cold water. After a while, my feet began to feel better, or maybe they became numb. They felt like ice to the touch. In this condition, I stretched out on my bunk. The total exhaustion put me to sleep in minutes.

Still, I went to work the next day. That morning we were bringing in planks into the main factory building, the four-story stone building. On the way out, I asked an inmate for directions to the toilet. He directed me to the basement. I sneaked away from my group and made my way there. There were individual toilets in a tiled and heated room. To my surprise, I found there the decent, humble Pole, who held the job of looking after the toilet room and making sure the inmates did not hang out there. I asked him if I am permitted to use the toilet and he nodded with his head.

I did not feel like leaving that warm place under a roof, not fearing a blow from a stick. Yet I did not want to take advantage of his hospitality nor to impose on him, so I thanked him and left. That day after work when we lined up in hundreds on the factory lot to go back to camp, he asked me where I worked. When I told him on the holzplatz, he said I could come whenever I wanted.

I learned how to avoid working under Pilarek's supervision as much as possible and preferred to work under the Poles. From them I would get beaten up, but not killed.

A couple more days pass and it is Sunday again. Again, they are rounding up "volunteers" to go unload trainloads of bricks, stones, sand, cement, logs and train rails. I look for a way to get out of it. The recruiters are already in the stube and are driving Jews out. There is no place to hide. I look around quickly and see they are too busy pushing and hitting. I slid under the bunks. It is a tight place, barely enough room for my head to squeeze under. There is no problem with my body. I lie quietly and hope that nobody notices me. From my position on the floor, I can see many shoes passing by me. I know to whom they belong. The shiny boots to the SS men, the polished, almost new leather shoes to the blockaltester, capos, and their assistants, and the worn out or wooden-soled shoes to us dejected, exhausted, hungry and hopeless Jews.

Nobody noticed me sliding under the bunk. They were not looking for me. In the stube, it is quiet now. I slide out and look around. Nobody even noticed me getting up. I look at the faces that remained in the stube, like the stubendienst Kazik (Cazmir), his assistant Wladek Schultzk, who despite his German name is a Pole through and through, and a raving anti-Semite who never misses a chance to tell how he and his classmates used to break the Jewish store windows in Poland before the war. I see the capo of the first halle, Janek G., with half a dozen of his foremen, among them the man who sleeps on the bunk over me with the number eight hundred and five. Even their personal attendant, a Pole by the name of Zygmund W., is there. Well let it be so, I think to myself. They are big shots, but I see ordinary Poles who work alongside the many Jews in D.A.W. Why have they been left alone while every Jew in the stube was taken? I can understand that they have left a German by the name of Lawrence, who had a red (political) triangle, a man over fifty with a very good personality that evokes respect from his appearance and even more from conversation. He must have been some high official or politician in pre-Nazi Germany. He would not be taken to such work, even though he had no rank or position in camp. A few Poles look at me smiling mildly as if to say, "You managed to wiggle out of it," but there was no malice in their faces. I feel uncomfortable by myself, the only Jew in the stube. The Poles stretch out on their bunks for a nap, but I am uneasy. They might come again for more.

Nobody comes. There is an unreal silence in stube with no Jews to yell at or beat up. The stubendienst does not yell at Poles. There is a moment of tranquility in hell. Noon is approaching. The stubendienst orders me to take the red bowls from the cupboards and place them on the table. Some prisoners bring in a large wooden barrel with hot soup. It will stay hot until the "volunteers" return, when it will be distributed. I am told to sweep the passages between the bunks and throw the bit of dirt in the tile stove that warms our room. I finish my job just before the volunteers return.

They come in dirty and covered with dust. Many are beaten up and injured from the sharp objects they handled. I can see they had a hard morning. They scrape as much dirt off their clothes as possible and line up for their liter of soup. The stubendienst, Kazik, dishes out everybody's soup and orders me to collect the empty bowls. After

stacking them on the table, he tells me to take them to the washroom and clean them. After I washed them and put them back in the cupboards, he handed me a bowl with soup. If, dear reader, you think that this extra liter soup calmed my hunger, you are grossly mistaken. If you find it difficult to understand, you know not what hunger is.

The following week at work was no different than the previous one. One might be amazed at how much a person can take, particularly when one is young and is in good health. Besides, I think that Pilarek realized that he will not get anything from me and eased up. Not that the work was any easier, it is just that I learned something. I started to go daily and more than once to the toilet where the timekeeper was the Pole that was in charge of our unit of ten. There I could sit for ten or even fifteen minutes at a time.

It happened once that that timekeeper told a young Pole to get off and out. The young man turned to him and said, "Why do you let that Jew sit here, he was here when I came in." To which the timekeeper answered, "He works on the holzplatz the entire day in the cold and in the rain. You, however, work under a roof where it is warm. Besides, you do not overwork yourself anyway." It was then that I realized how noble a man he is and how high his standard of morality is.

Our capo's greed was a blessing and a curse for us. His access to the yard of "Canada," which bordered with the yard of D.A.W. and was separated by a wire mesh guarded by SS men, supposedly to get the soup that was left, was not for our benefit but for his. Under the pretext of the soup, he used to smuggle out Jewish belongings of money and jewelry that were being sorted and collected there, and whose owners were just being burned in the crematorium.

I will admit that the extra bit of soup had to a small degree helped us to endure the ever-present hunger pangs and maybe extended the life span of some of the victims by a few days, but the negative side of it was that the combination of cold soup with the weakened digestive system of the inmates who had no resistance after a twelve-hour work day in early April and being exposed to constant, sometimes freezing rain, meant that the soup would go through the body shortly after swallowing it. Dysentery in our state, as a rule, spelled death. This sickness, without medical attention, can exhaust a healthy and

well-nourished person in a matter of days, but it can kill a hungry emaciated exhausted body within the same length of time and it did.

Among our group, those that Pilarek did not finish off perished this way. The only available medicine at the time was charcoal pills. The instructions to follow were not to eat or drink anything for forty-eight hours and take two of those pills three times daily. Not to follow those instructions to the letter meant that the entire effort would be in vain. If it was difficult to resist hunger, it was more so the thirst. Some were strong enough in character to resist temptation, others could not resist taking just one sip of the water that spelled death.

Those charcoal pills were not always available, so as a substitute some gnawed on a piece of partly burnt wood that could easily be found around. If chewing the pills blackened the teeth, mouth and lips, the piece of wood blackened the face and hand that held it to the mouth.

In our group of fifty-sixty men, almost half always had blackened faces. They were candidates to die within the next four or five days.

I did not remain immune to dysentery and one day was stricken with it. I made many trips to the toilet, but just before the workday was over, I was unable to get to the toilet in time and dirtied my underpants, something I have never done. In panic, I did not know what to do.

Coming into the stube after the appell, I asked the French inmate, the one that advised me not to bribe Pilarek, where I could get a pair of underpants. "For a ration of bread, I will get it," he replied. I had my morning ration as I was not eating, trying to cure my dysentery on my own, so I gave it to him, wondering at the same time where he would get a pair of drawers. He sticks his hand in his straw sack on which he slept and, after rummaging in it for a little while, he pulled out a pair of well-worn drawers covered with chips of straw.

I think to myself, "Learn, boy, learn. The man arrived into this camp six months before you, look how much he learned for that time, to foresee any contingency, even to provide a pair of drawers." Taking the pair of drawers, I went into the almost empty



washroom, where I undressed and washed in the ice-cold water. I pulled on my newly bought underpants, leaving the dirty ones behind.

As I laid on my bunk, washed and in a clean pair of underpants, without fear of being caught with dirty ones, I suddenly realized the blunder I just committed. I just gave away an entire ration of bread, a day's worth of bread. It was worth a human life (for I have seen men killed for less than this) for a pair of drawers that I have just left behind in the washroom. I could have washed my own dirty ones and still have the ration of bread. To be honest, I did not know that I could wash out a pair of drawers in the washroom or anything else for that matter, especially dirty underpants. What was my hurry? The drawers would have dried out on me and besides, it was only coloured liquid that stained them to begin with.

One is a hero when one is successful. It could have happened that the blockmaster could have come in and if in a bad mood, he would have left me dead.

Still, I learned something from that event. In the last two weeks working in the timber yard, I had the opportunity to see many so-called "musselmänner" (prisoners reminiscent of walking skeletons) with the coal blackened teeth and lips, which signified that they will collapse at any moment, if Pilarek did not get them first. I also knew that if I want to live a bit longer, I am not to touch any food or drink for the prescribed forty-eight hours.

From carrying the heavy boards, my bony shoulders first become red, turning later into blisters which used to crack and turn into sores that would not heal. I started putting my cap on my shoulder under the jacket to cushion the pressure; it helped, but not enough. So, I picked up some dirty old rags for cushioning.

After another week, I became an old timer on the lumberyard. Pilarek eased up on me a bit. He stopped hitting with the intention of killing me outright, but only enough so as not to be left out of the gang. The Polish foreman was even speaking to me from time to time; nevertheless, he continued hitting me, apparently to remind me who he was and who I am.

I used to think that I had no more weight to lose. Sundays, when we got shaved, face and head, sitting on the wooden stool, I would feel as if my bare bones were touching

the seat. Still, with each passing Sunday, it was getting worse until I no longer could sit on the stool.

Still, the worst part was the constant nagging hunger that would not leave for a second. The most trying time was coming back from work right after the appell when we had an hour before the searching for lice in our shirts. I used to spend that time walking all over the camp looking for something to eat, knowing that I would not find anything. The hunger drove me to unreal thoughts, like wishing to have teeth of steel so I could bite into the brick walls of the blocks.

After an hour of looking and searching, I used to come back to the stube more tired hungrier than before, if that was at all possible. Taking off my shirt, I would start looking for lice, which to my surprise, I used to find.

The Stubendienst used to inspect our shirts. At random, he used to pick out half a dozen or so of us and himself look at our shirts. Of course, he found some lice. As luck would have it, one evening he picked me for inspection. Understandably, he found one. The following evening after the appell, the Stubendienst took four of us to the bathhouse for disinfection and shower. My Stubendienst wanted to have his fun so he asked the Polish prisoner that worked there to aim a powerful hose at us. The water was ice cold and knocked us down and pushed us along the slippery boards up to the wall. Changing the direction of the hose, the water pushed us to the opposite wall. The Pole with the hose was not particular where he aimed the water, be it body, head or face. When he finished, I could not catch my breath due to the water he was aiming in my face. Now the bundles of bruised bones had to pick themselves up and stand under the boiling water of the shower.

If we suffered from the plague of lice, it was nothing in comparison to the swarms of fleas that inhabited the entire camp and from which there was no hiding place. As a result, when we got up in the morning, our bodies were covered with countless tiny red dots from their bites. Not having a mirror, I could only see the faces of others and imagine what I looked like.

Showers or individual disinfection did not work against the fleas. They were everywhere. They were in our bunks, in the cracks in the wood, in the straw sacks we slept on and in the blankets we used to cover with and on the floor.

The camp administration proclaimed war against them, about which I will write later.

Surprisingly, time did not stay still, and what is more, I was still alive, which must have been a great surprise to my overseers and was an even greater surprise to myself. I felt, however, my strength ebbing and my time running out. There is nothing of me left but skin and bones. I could collapse at any moment, if not from Pilarek's beating, it will be from hunger. Which of the two would come first, I did not want to know. It was going on three months of me being here. Even according to Nazi admittance, an inmate could not survive more than three months in camp unless he got extra food. This extra food privilege excluded Jews, who were not permitted to correspond with the outside. Usually they did not have anyone on the outside, since their families and relatives usually came with them or separately to Auschwitz and went right away into the gas chambers. All others, except Russians, could and did correspond with their families and received food parcels from home. Here again, I like to point out that there were inmates who worked at jobs where they could procure food or other things that could be exchanged for food.

All those better jobs or positions even ranks were taken up by German and Polish prisoners, which led to a constant struggle between the inmates of those two nationalities over the control of those choice positions. Not only did that struggle go on between those two groups for good jobs, but over ranks, too. If and when a blockaltester or capo left Auschwitz (involuntarily) to go on a "transport" to another camp in Germany, both of those groups attempted to replace that man with one of their own.

In any case, inmates from other nationalities were not in such dire need of food as we Jews were, nor were they being forced to do the heavy work that we Jews were doing. Thus, they lived in relative safety and waiting for the war to end. We Jews, the majority in Auschwitz and in almost exclusive Jewish Birkenau, were relegated to doing the most exhausting work under the most inhumane conditions and were falling dead by the droves.

During this time, I had a second bout with dysentery that almost killed me. Is it then a wonder that I felt that I was on my last leg? In early May 1943, I felt that my end was near. At that time, I had three hellish months of Auschwitz experience behind me and knew exactly where I stood. I did not think that I would last through the week.

A couple days later on Sunday evening, as I stayed near the bunk with my turned-out shirts in my hands, looking for lice, the Pole Leon Kulowski, the inmate number eight zero five, who was sleeping on the bunk above me, was making his way through the congested hallway to his bunk. Apparently, I was in his way, for he asked me to let him pass. As a rule, he used to spend the hour or hour and a half between the evening appell and lights out with the other prominent inmates around the front table, where no Jew dared to sit down. He would only find himself among us on his way to the bunk. This time he noticed me and asked, "Where do you work?" "On the holzplatz," I answered. "Under whose supervision?" "Under Pilarek," I said. "How long have you been working there?" "Six weeks," I replied. "You survived there under Pilarek for six weeks?" he asked with astonishment. Without a word, he turned to capo Janek G., who was his capo by the way--his supervisor but also his friend--and with a loud voice so the capo could hear over the noise in the stube, he said, "Janek, take him with you to the halle."

Here I would like to point out that the capo Janek G. was the capo over halle number one, a carpenter shop where one hundred and fifty prisoners worked. It was part of D.A.W. complex where twelve hundred men worked, more than half of them carpenters. The capo answered him with the same loud voice, "You know, Leon, that I cannot take him from there without his capos permission."

I never expected that someone will ever intervene on my behalf in this hell. Suddenly I saw a tiny spark of hope. I grabbed the opportunity and said, "My capo said that he has no more use of me and I can leave whenever I want." "If such is the case," said the capo, "tomorrow (Monday) morning when we all get to the factory and you hear the command, 'commandos fall in,' you line up with my people."

Next morning as we got to the yard of D.A.W. and I heard the sound of "commandos fall in." Instead of running to my former group, I ran to the group of halle number one. Before we go into the halle to work, the halle schreiber (registrar) walks by and checks off every worker from his list. He gets to me and says, "What are you doing here?" With apprehension, I answer, "Ask the capo." The registrar turns to the capo, who is some twenty meters away, and yells, "Mr. Capo, what about him?" pointing to me. The capo looks at me and says, "write him down."

The entire group enters the halle. Everybody goes to his place and I remain standing. The capo leads me to a workbench at which a French Jew works. He is from the forty two thousand transport and went by the name of Itzik. The capo says to him, "Here is your helper." The man is so busy at his work that he does not even look at me. As soon as the capo walks away, that Itzik says to me, "Do you see what I am doing?" While standing near him for two minutes, I had noticed that he managed to fit four "L"-shaped metal brackets in each of the two halves of the window's wooden corners and attach the two half windows to the window frame with the help of four hinges, making them ready to be put into the windowsill.

In my life, I have never seen a craftsman working with such speed. To his question, I nodded my head, not understanding his hurry. "Here I can work by myself," he said, "you will just be in my way. Do you see the line of people over there?" He continued, pointing at a few men staying in line near a wall, "You stay in that line and when an unfinished wooden window is ready, bring it to me."

I do not exactly understand what he means and he does not attempt to explain. I go over to that line. There are about six or eight men ahead of me, each waiting for a wooden window that is being glued together in front of us from prefabricated pieces. As soon as one is ready, the first in line takes it to his master craftsman.

It is obvious to me that I will have to wait in line for a window some ten minutes, and I utilize the time in looking around and striking up a conversation with the others in line. They tell me that there is no beating in the halle. The capo carries no stick, but the inmates work hard on their own initiative. The capo used a carrot instead of a stick. As reward for producing the greatest amount of work in each department, the capo gives that inmate an additional liter of soup. It is for that liter of soup that those craftsmen work harder than they have ever worked in their lives.

"How lucky I am," I think to myself, "that I am here instead of the holzplatz, spending a twelve hour work day outdoors, exposed constantly to the freezing rain or wet snow under Pilarek's constant beating, with the knowledge that within a matter of a few more days, I will succumb to his stick." Here, under a roof in comparative warmth, without the beatings, I simply do not believe my good fortune.

I am next in line. I grab the window and run to my boss. As soon as I put it on the workbench, he says to me, "Run for another one." The distance to the line is some twenty-five meters. I cover it in a couple of seconds and I am back in line waiting for ten to fifteen minutes to get a window. I wonder if it is a sweet dream in the middle of a nightmare. I look around and see a couple more young men from Shershev. They are older than I and carpenters by trade. I see the two brothers Shepsl and Itzl Pomeranietz. Shepsl is ten years older than I. Itzl is two years his junior. He participated in the Polish-German campaign, was taken prisoner and remained in Nazi occupied Poland until the German attack on the Soviet Union, when he made his way to Pruzany. There he found his parents, brother and sister, Drezl, who married to a Shershev young man Berl Tenenbaum during the Bolshevik era, a carpenter who works there too. I am delighted to find some men from Shershev.

The morning goes by quickly. The whistle tells us that it is noon and we get the bowl of soup. I enter the halle with my soup and eat sitting with my townspeople under a roof where it is warm. I have just finished my soup when I see my boss-master, the French Jew, passing by. He says to me, "Come." Without a question, I follow him up to the door of the office. Near the door, I see a small barrel with soup. Around it, I see the capo, a couple foremen, the halle registrar and the Pole who attends the capo and the foremen. He is also the one who dishes out the soup.

The schreiber (registrar) calls out the numbers of those who produced the most in every part of the production chain, like who made the largest number of window parts, who glued them together, who put in them the largest amount of brackets and hinges and so on.

I look on as every well-performing, fast worker approaches and gets a liter of soup. I see my boss walks over and get his. He looks around and notices me at a distance and says in a loud and indignant voice, "Nu? What are you waiting for?" I walk over slowly, hesitatingly, wondering if I will get the liter of soup or a blow with the dipper over the head. The fellow pours me a ladle full of soup and I do not believe my eyes. Am I dreaming?

After the break, everybody goes back to his job. A short while later, as I am putting down a window on the workbench, which was not far from the side door through which all planks and timber, were brought in, the wide door opens up and in come my former co-workers from the lumberyard with heavy boards on their shoulders. Leading them is the murderous Pilarek. He immediately noticed me. Approaching me, he said, "What are you doing here?" Out of sheer fear, I could not open my mouth. Not that I had to tell him anything. Pilarek knew that in the factory he had no authority. As soon as his men dumped their loads, they all left.

It was no more than ten minutes later when I see my former capo, the capo from the holzplatz, marching into the halle and going straight to the door of the office of my new capo Janek G. I knew immediately that this was a bad omen.

As a rule, capos in D.A.W. did not visit departments under the authority of other capos. Therefore, when this capo entered, he was noticed by everyone in the halle. A couple minutes after he entered the office I was called in there. As soon as I closed the door behind me, my new capo says to me, "You lied to me. You told me that you have his permission to change jobs. He is here to take you back," and points at my former capo.

True I did lie to him, but did I commit such a big crime by telling a little white lie in order to save my life, even if temporarily? I know whom I am facing. The better one of the two capos, Janek G., who took me into his part of the factory, did it because of the intervention of his friend Leon Kulowski. He, himself, does not owe me anything, nor do I mean anything to him. I am just another Jew, one of thousands that die in this kingdom of death daily. He will not jeopardize his friendship, or even acquaintance with another capo, especially a German capo, for the sake of a Jew. The second, my former capo, was the German with the green triangle under whose supervision half a dozen Jews died daily due to hard work and beatings, and whose authority is now being challenged by a half-dead Jew who he now came to claim in order to make an example for the others.

If I had something to say in my defense, I do not remember, but I remember that before I had a chance to open my mouth, my new capo gave me a slap in the face. I do not remember feeling the slap but I remember noticing the floor coming towards me.

Suddenly I realized that I am lying on the floor and hearing my new capo saying to me, “Pick yourself up and get out of here.”

Getting up I think to myself, “It was too good to last.” Was it worthwhile to taste a couple hours of rest in order to be beaten to death by Pilarek? As if going to my own funeral, I am going out the office with the intention to walk through the halle door to the outside, where Pilarek is waiting to finish me with his stick. I barely manage to walk two or three steps from the office when I am confronted by Leon Kulowski, the one who got me the new job to begin with. He, just like everybody else in the halle, noticed the capo of the lumberyard walking through and entering the capo’s office. When he saw me being called into the office, he immediately guessed what it was all about and knew how it would end. By the time he got to me, it was all over. He grabbed me by my shoulders, pushed me to the wall of the office next to the door saying, “Stay here, and do not move from here.” He stepped into the office. Within six or seven minutes, he was out giving me a friendly slap on the back he said, “Go back to your job.”

How I felt at that moment is now, over fifty years later, difficult to describe. It will suffice to say that I knew then only too well that he just saved my life. (Thank you, Uncle Leon!) Today, fifty-plus years later, that episode is still vivid in my memory and before my eyes. Through all those years, my gratitude towards that man, my benefactor, did not diminish nor did it lessen by an iota.

When the production of windows was finished, we started making barrack walls. They were the very same as those in Birkenau in which we spent our first six weeks. They were standard size barracks that were be bolted together from parts that we were making, the so-called “Pferdestall-Barracken, Typ - OKH No. 260/9” (Prefab Stable Huts—40 x 9.5 m., 2.65 m in height).

If those particular barracks were destined for Birkenau, which was continuously expanding, or other camps I did not know. I know however, that the building of those parts went on for a very long time. As building the barrack parts required several men, the competition for speedy production could not be continued and I stopped getting the extra liter of soup. The gnawing hunger did not let up for a moment, and the worst time was between the evening appell and lice appell.



Here I want to mention that the battle against the lice was won about six weeks after one was found on my shirt and the special treatment in the bathhouse. At that time just about everybody in our stube or in the entire block or even in the entire cap had lice. It was only thanks to the perseverance of the camp administration that we got rid of them.

Each block was being taken to the bathhouse once a week, leaving our dirty underwear on a pile in the stube. After a hot shower, we ran back naked to the stube, where we used to get clean underwear. Interesting to mention that no one got sick from going from under a hot shower to the block naked, be it summer or winter.

Since the moment the Pole Leon Kulowski intervened on my behalf, thereby saving my life, I kept looking for a way to reciprocate for his deed. But how? The only tangible item in camp was food, but here the shoe was on the other foot. I was the starving one, not him. He was the big shot, the foreman, under the protection of a powerful capo who was his close friend. How could I reciprocate?

All the big shot inmates had enough food and wore brand new clothing that fitted them as if made to measure. Their footwear was the best that Bata of Czechoslovakia could make; they had come to Auschwitz on the feet of Czech Jews. The Jews went straight to the gas chambers, leaving their footwear and clothing for others to wear.

Even those big shots' underwear was the best and weren't thrown on the pile with the others before a shower. Their attendant, the young Pole Zygmund W., used to find somebody to do their washing and shoe polishing. It occurred to me to ask my benefactor Leon Kulowski if I could polish his shoes. He agreed. After several evenings of polishing his shoes, I was approached by their attendant Zygmund asking me to do the shoes of the other big shots. I accepted his proposition gladly. Firstly, I wanted to be on their good side. Secondly, I did not hold anything against the capo for the slap on the face in his office. I knew that he could not act any other way. Thirdly, the most important reason was that I hoped for some reward. It came on Sunday when we received our soup in the stube. They, the prominent inmates, rarely ate the soup. They used to take a couple of spoonfuls, turn their noses up and leave it. Their attendant, Zygmund W., would find a hungry Pole and give it to him. That Sunday, however, he did not look for anyone, but gave it to me.

If anybody thinks that with a couple extra bowls of soup one can fill up a hungry stomach that was empty for continuous three months, they are grossly mistaken. In any case, it was not enough to affect the kind of hunger we knew in Auschwitz.

Nevertheless, that Sunday was a good day for me. I do not know if at that moment I realized how low I had sunk morally, that a couple bowls of soup could bring the heavens down to me. But then again, who can understand Auschwitz except the ones who were there?

Shortly after becoming their shoe polisher, I also started to wash their laundry. Their shoes had to be polished almost every day as the grounds of the factory turned muddy due to the frequent rains. In the beginning, their attendant gave me a piece of soap to wash their laundry, for the small piece of soap we received once a month did not produce suds. The piece of soap got was the size of a matchbox. One could never wash a shirt with it and hope to make it look white or clean. On either side of it were imprinted three letters, R.J.F., which gave credence to the rumors circulating in camp that it was made from the fat of Jewish bodies that were being burned in the crematoriums. We inmates had good reason to believe those rumors. Those three letters only substantiated our belief, as the three letters R.J.F. stood for “Rain Juden Fets” (Pure Jewish Fat). We knew only too well that the Nazis were capable of doing this. We also suspected that they were deliberately imprinting those three letters on the soap to add insult to injury. To laugh in our faces so to speak, by showing us how lawless their world was and how wanton, immoral and merciless they were. That’s not to mention the fact that they were showing us how abandoned we were by an indifferent and uncaring world.

However, the soap that Zygmund gave me he got through negotiations that took place in camp. The soap found its way into camp from the continuous trainloads of Jews that were being brought to Auschwitz from Nazi-occupied Europe. The newly arriving Jews were being led straight to the gas chambers and their belongings were being sorted to be shipped to Germany, but the inmates working at it used to manage to sneak some of it into the camp. True, they risked their lives by doing so, but some did it to help a relative or friend.

It should be emphasized that those working at assorting the luggage of the constantly arriving Jews were in an ironic way considered the better off in camp. If any Jew would dare to hope of surviving the camp, it had to be them. Still, they did risk a lot to carry something from their work place into camp in order to help somebody else. Things like a piece of soap or a box of shoe polish could fetch a daily portion of bread. This was a testament to the measure of devotion that some had to relatives or friends and the price they were willing to pay to help them.

A couple weeks later, Zygmund tells me that he has no more soap. Handing me half a loaf of bread, he tells me to go and buy some somewhere. Fortunately, I knew a man in our stube that, seeing me washing their laundry once, asked if I need soap. This time I approached him and bought a piece from him for half a loaf of bread.

It is worth mentioning that during the entire year that I did their laundry and was buying soap, I never succeeded in profiting even one bite of bread through the soap transaction, nor did I ever get rewarded with a piece of bread. Those big shots used to pay me up with the soup that they seldom ate anyway, while the nagging hunger kept on gnawing at my insides without respite.

The end of April and the month of May were very difficult. It seemed that there was no way to satisfy my hunger. All my thoughts were taken up with thoughts of food. How I regretted the times when my mother had put food in front of me and I refused to eat. Those thoughts used to alternate with thoughts of my family who perished in that very place, and I used to reprove and chastise myself for having thoughts about food.

The only day that common sense would dictate that I should have been full was Sunday. It was on Sunday that, besides my liter of soup, I used to get one for collecting and washing the bowls of our stube. This was in addition to the couple of liters that Zygmund gave me for doing the laundry and polishing the shoes. Still, I never felt full. True, the soup was 95% water, but it went into my stomach. Yet I never felt even a temporary fullness.

Once, marching to work, we bypassed a line of empty freight cars that apparently have been unloaded the day before. They must have contained raw turnips, for there were tiny turnips scattered nearby. They were no more than two centimeters across. They were

shriveled, pitiful things, not even fit for camp consumption. The cars were no more than ten meters from us, but to get out of line was prohibited. To try and grab a couple tiny turnips and get caught meant at least a good beating or worse. I could not stand the temptation. I ran out and grabbed a few little turnips. Luck was with me. None of the capos or SS men noticed.

A few days later, passing the same way, I noticed tiny beets. Again, I ran out and grabbed a few without being seen. The following morning when I was urinating, I noticed that my urine was red, but a day later, it returned to normal. I understood that it must have been from the beets.

The many trainloads of Jews from across Nazi-occupied Europe not only brought valuables and clothes with them, they also took brought provisions for the trip. Many did not finish all their food or, taking in consideration the state of mind they were in, did not eat at all and arrived with their provisions intact. There, upon arrival, the food and anything else they brought was of no more use to them, as they were taken straight to the gas chambers and eternal rest, leaving all they brought for the living.

Because of the large diversity of baked goods, they could not be used as a daily ration for the inmates. The administration decided to make a soup from it that was called *Khlebuyka* from the Polish word *Khleb* (bread). This soup sometimes contained pieces of cake, which gave it a sweet taste. There was not enough bread soup to go around the entire camp, so every evening a different block received it.

The evening when got the soup, I would get some from my superiors whose laundry I used to do. A few times, it happened that I had what I thought morally to be enough and I wanted to share some of the soup with someone less fortunate than me.

Above us on the upper level in Block 18A slept a young man from Shershev by the name of Moishe Eli Shocherman, some three or four years older than me, a carpenter by trade. He was a very likable young man with a good disposition. He worked in the alley next to us in D.A.W. Whenever we saw each other during the noon break; he always had a joke, a smile or a cheerful word.

Several times, I took some bread soup up to him, not that I could not eat it myself, but I wanted to share my temporary good fortune with a friend. Behind the last row of

blocks, that is behind Blocks 1 to 11, was a long walkway. It was cobblestone, paved unlike the rest of the camp, which was asphalt. Part of that walkway had young birch trees on either side. That walkway served as a gathering place for many inmates, especially Jews, on Sunday mornings. One could hear many European languages there, like French, Flemish, German, Polish, Czech, Slovak and Greek, all coming out of Jewish mouths. However, the prevalent language was Yiddish.

It happened that in my early days at the camp, that I met there a friend from my childhood days, Herschl Schneider, one Sunday morning. We were both delighted to see each other, indeed like long lost friends. Although my stomach growled from hunger, as I am sure his did, we did not want to part and walked around for a couple of hours oblivious to the mob around.

We met on a couple of consecutive Sundays and then our meetings stopped. Why we stopped meeting, I do not remember. It could be that I started to do the laundry for my superiors, or maybe had to wait for their soup, my reward for my labor. After all, the extra soup on Sunday sustained me to a certain degree till the next Sunday. It is possible that Herschl Schneider stopped coming for whatever reason. In any case, he was my only childhood friend that I saw in Auschwitz and spent few hours with, talking about home and family. How dear those hours were. I do not even know how, when and in what circumstances he perished.

From my latter-day friends, I was the only one that ended up in Auschwitz. Of the others, Itzik Maletzky was shot after escaping from the ghetto, Kalman Kalbkoif hid in a hiding place in the ghetto, was found and shot, Meir Kalbkoif perished in Drohichyn, and the brothers Laizer and Litek Rotenberg perished in Chomsk.

A few weeks after losing contact with Herschl Shneiderl, I met Yankl Feinbir. He was a man some twelve years my senior, that is a man of thirty-two, when I saw him in Auschwitz. He looked as emaciated as did we all, which surprised me for in Shershev, he was considered a resourceful young man and I expected him to be able to fend for himself, even in Auschwitz.

Speaking to him I had an urge to remind him of his foolish act he committed by leaving the land of Israel, then Palestine, in the late thirties after spending six months

there and returning to Shershev. How happy he could have been now. He had returned to Shershev to end up in Auschwitz. Of course, I said nothing. I did not have to.

The constant arrival of trainloads of Jews brought about the distribution of bread soup twice a week. While eating or sipping the soup, I could not drive out of my mind the thought that I am sipping Jewish lifeblood. They, the Jews who brought the bread, are being burned now in the crematorium and I am eating their bread. I am sure the same thought occurred to the hundreds and thousands of other Jewish inmates while eating that soup. Yet I looked forward to the days when we got the soup at night. If there is a moral justification for our eating the soup I cannot say now, but I do believe that one that was there and tried to extend his miserable existence for an extra few days has the right to give an answer.

Not being a carpenter, I worked as an assistant, thus being forced to work at different jobs and places. Still, I did some work and even learned to use carpentry tools. Because the great majority of tradesmen and artisans in eastern Poland were Jews, it is no wonder that of the hundred and fifty carpenters in our halle, one hundred and twenty five were Jews. Of them were some twenty-five from the ghetto Pruzany alone, and among them some half a dozen were from Shershev. Others were from Grodno, Wolkowisk, Bialystok, Mlawa and elsewhere.

At the end of May or beginning of June, the capo's attendant, Zygmund, called me into the office and gave me a tin of canned meat to bring into camp. To say that I was happy with this mission would be a lie, for the SS would quite often conduct searches at the entrance of the camp, and woe to him who was found with something illegal. A man from my stube was caught with a tin of shoe polish. He was taken to the "bunker" (a punishment block) and was never seen again.

What choice did I have? To refuse would mean losing not only the bit of soup that I would get from him, but also expulsion from the halle back to the holzplatz. Fortunately, there were no searches that day and I passed safely. From then on, I seldom returned from work without carrying something illegal. To my daily problem of trying to procure a bit of extra soup was added the fear of being caught entering the camp with something forbidden.

Usually it was a small item like a tin of sardines, fish or meat that could go into a pocket, but I would put it into my pouch in which I carried the extra piece of bread from the tzulage to eat at work. On the way back, the pouch would be empty, so I smuggled the tin in it. Tying the cords of the pouch to my belt, I slid the pouch inside my pants, letting it tangle between my legs.

With such masses of inmates marching in from work, searches could not be thorough, and on a hungry, emaciated, starving inmate, one was not likely find something of value. So the searcher used to be satisfied by feeling the pockets and protruding lumps of the loosely hanging jackets on the inmates' skinny bodies.

Once, a searcher found my pocketknife on me. He must have liked it, for he put it in his pocket and let me go. I considered myself lucky. To make the searches more thorough, the SS men discontinue the searches at the gate, as they delayed the counting, and ordered the marchers to continue into the camp and line up on the appellplatz in front of the kitchen. The surrounded inmates were then searched more thoroughly.

During that time, Zygmund called me in the office and gave me a round tin with fish to take into the camp. It must have weighed a kilogram. I put it into the pouch and tied it to the belt as any other time. I looked down to below my stomach and saw the immense bulge that even a blind person would notice. I knew that if there was a search it would spell my end. I wanted to say no but I did not dare. My only hope was that that day they would not search. Nevertheless, even without a search, it was very noticeable and I could be stopped at the gate.

We march to the camp. The gate gets closer and my fear more intense. We pass the gate and are in the camp. I am ready to start breathing easier when suddenly we are encircled by SS men and blockaltesters and led to the appellplatz to be searched.

Now, I think to myself, I will pay for everything. We stand in rows of five and being searched by five men. They stand in front of us and we approach them five at a time. I know that as soon as the line of five in front of me gets through, the searcher will immediately notice the bulge under my stomach. I spread my legs apart and putting my hand in my deep pocket, I push the can deep behind me and bring my legs together. The bulge disappears, but what it looks from the back, I do not know. The SS men and

blockaltester might see it but I cannot help it. I approach the SS man keeping my feet close together. He slides his hands over my pockets and around my waist and says, "Go." With my first normal step, the heavy tin in the pouch swings forwards and it is back in the previous place where it cannot be seen from the back. With fast steps, I go to the block. After the appell, when I gave the tin to Zygmund W., he was astonished. "How did you do it?" He asked. I just shrugged my shoulders. What could I have said? That deep in my heart, I still believe in miracles? That in a deep and hidden corner of my heart, I believe that my mother's soul watches over me? And where? Of all places, in Auschwitz?

With time, I became the regular transporter or smuggler for my superiors. It got to the point where I was seldom coming into camp from work without having something on me that could send me to my death. Among the few prominent inmates in my stube, were two *vorarbeiter* (foremen) with black triangles indicating that they were asocial or saboteurs, a rarity among Polish prisoners. Both were in their middle twenties. One was a well-fed man by the name of Lutek. He indeed was a professional criminal. Mostly a petty thief and like many in his profession, he was mischievous yet fraternal. He sympathized with the underdog and oppressed, including Jews. No wonder he was liked among the Jewish workers in the halle. With his reputation as a criminal, he was respected among his own, the Poles.

Quite often in the evenings, the big shots used to sit around the table telling stories about life before the war. I recall that Lutek told a story about his town, Krakow, and how in his early career he used to break into Jewish homes on *Kol Nidre* night (*Kol Nidre* is a prayer recited on Yom Kipper eve), knowing that there were no Jews at home because they were in synagogues that night. He even knew how long that prayer took and what time the worshippers got back home. Still I never heard him utter a contemptuous word about Jews. I have the feeling that he yearned for the Jewish Krakow, which he knew was no more.

Apparently, his acquired profession took the better of him, for seeing the riches that are arriving daily with the thousands of Jews; he decided to take advantage and try to benefit from it. He managed to reach to the higher ups in the camp administration and be



transferred to Birkenau, as it was closer to the arriving trains and the source of the valuables.

When Lutek left our stube, his bunk was in an honorable place, right near the table around which all the big shots slept, and a Jew would not be allowed to sleep there. It was given to Leon Kulowski, my benefactor. Leon's bunk was taken over by a newly arrived Pole of somewhere between fifty and sixty years old. I doubt if there was an older inmate in camp. The man, by the name of Szewczyk, was patronized by the much younger Poles who provided him with an easy job due to his age. This man, thanks to the many ample parcels that he used to get from home, managed to survive at least until we parted in 1944. It was thanks to those parcels that doors opened for him. Even the well-fed stubendienst who assigned him the bunk on the third tier used to look up to him like a dog waiting for something to be thrown to him, while the old man used to sit on his bunk opening parcels. There was usually something for the stubendienst as a rule, a piece of cake or some other sweets.

That Mr. Szewczyk kept to himself. Firstly, because of his age, he was twice as old as the older men in our stube were, and three times as old as many of us, including myself. Secondly, he used to receive more and better parcels from home than the other Poles in our stube, which no doubt caused envy among the Polish inmates that they skillfully concealed.

We, the Jewish inmates considered him an angel and it was no wonder. While most non-Jewish inmates looked upon us Jews with scorn, he acted towards us in our stube with compassion, demonstrating such with his actions. As I mentioned earlier, he used to receive parcels regularly. Besides everything else, each parcel contained two loaves of bread. When he was through with putting everything away, he used to spread his jacket on the bunk and cut up the two loaves in pieces. Handing me the jacket full of bread, he used to climb down from his bunk and taking the jacket from me, he used to say, "You do not need it so badly as those poor souls," motioning with his hand in the direction of the other Jews in the stube. He used to start handing out a piece of bread to every Jew, making sure that every Jew got a piece. The only one that did not was I, and G-d only knew that I could use it, but that did not diminish my respect nor lessen my

deference for that saintly man who proved to me in that, even in this hell called Auschwitz, there are still people with morals and principles who can rise above the multitude to give hope--and yes life, for bread was life--to the hopeless.

Sometime in June, the camp bakery needed some carpentry work to be done. The SS chief of the bakery asked my capo to send some men. Among the half a dozen men was a man from the Pruzany Ghetto named Hershl Morawsky, a top-notch carpenter who the capo used to send to many outside places where something could be acquired on the quiet for him.

Understandably everybody would have liked to work in the bakery where, regardless of the many watching eyes, one could swipe some bread and eat it on the quiet, even hide a piece of it on oneself. The bakery used to bake the regular bread for the camp and a special white bread for the prominent sick inmates, for whom the doctors used to prescribe that bread. It was that white bread that my capo and his buddies craved.

Hershl Morawski used to find a way to get this bread and bring it safely to the factory, but it was up to me to get it into the camp. Every day before leaving the factory, I used to go to the office where the attendant, Zygmund, would give me a white loaf of bread, which I used to stick behind the belt of my pants. Wearing the buttoned-up jacket, it could not be detected. During the frequent searches, I used to push out my chest and pull in the stomach--if one could call it stomach--so it formed a cavity that could have hidden two loaves.

Right after entering the camp, we had to fall in for the appell. After the appell, we were permitted to enter the stube. I had to pull the bread out from under my jacket and be careful not to be seen by anybody. Of course, the French Jew that slept below me and the saintly, elderly Pole, Szewczyk, could not help but see it. A couple of times, he warned me saying, "You should not do this for them. For you will pay with your life for it."

How could that venerable Pole understand that I was risking my life daily so that they, the big shot inmates, would pay me off with the couple liters of soup a week that they would not eat? Not to mention that I was doing their laundry and polishing their shoes. Yet, without that extra soup at that time, I would not have survived and would not have lived to write about it.

Up to now, I have depicted most Poles in a negative way, even with scorn, with very few exceptions, like the Polish bathroom attendant that used to permit me to spend extra ten or fifteen minutes under a roof and in the warmth every time I had the chance to disappear from the murderous blows of Pilarek's stick. That Pole did not owe me anything nor did he know me, except for my number among ten that he was to check off on his list on the way to and from work. He did not know my name even, nor did I know his. Or the Pole, Leon Kulowsky, who got me the job in the carpentry shop and protected me from being thrown out when my former capo came to claim me back, which in a sense would have spelled my doom. Or the elderly Pole, Szewczyk, who used to divide some seventy slices of bread among the seventy Jews in my stube, in a time when hundreds or thousands of starving Jews paid with their lives while trying to procure a mouthful of bread or a couple potatoes. Whether that piece of bread saved a life is difficult to say, but in a place and at a time where one hour could be decisive, not to mention a whole day during which one's life could turn upside down and very often did, if that piece of bread helped that particular inmate to survive that day, then who knows if that piece of bread did not contribute to the survival of one, or more than one, Jew.

I have already mentioned my benefactor, Leon Kulowski, yet I would like to add that even when he was moved to a more prestigious bunk next to the table, he kept on protesting to the stubendienst about his assistant, by the name of Wladek Shultz (a Pole), constantly beating the Jews for absolutely no reason what so ever. If there were such decent Poles in the other stubes, I would not know, for all the Jews on my block were in my stube. A Jew would not dare walk into another stube.

Even after Leon Kulowski was moved further, he was still bringing over his soup to me on Sundays and once or twice a week in the evening when we got the bread soup.

It was in the middle of June 1943, after coming from work to the camp, right after the appell, we passed a very strict selection during which several young Jewish boys from my stube were marked down. They were young men--really no more than boys--my age and younger from Holland and Belgium. They were fine and intelligent young men who were brought to Auschwitz three months before me and by June were completely

exhausted, literally skin and bones, the proverbial “Muselmann.” In them, I saw the reflection of myself, and I wondered how long it would be before I was in their place.

The process by which the selection of the Jewish inmates took place was as follows. Selections were conducted only on Jews. When the evening appell was over, all Jews were ordered to remain in place while all other inmates were told to go into the blocks and were locked in. The Jews were then ordered to get completely undressed, taking the bundles of clothes under one arm, we were marched five abreast, block by block, to the front of the kitchen where, among a group of SS men, stood the infamous angel of death, Doctor Mengele. There, surrounded by SS men, blockaltester and other trustees, we lined up in a single file to march by the dreaded Dr. Mengele. Before approaching him, many used to put out the chest, taking in as much air as possible to expand the stomach in order to appear a bit heftier than they were in reality. With an ardent prayer in our hearts, we confronted our destiny.

It was then that our prayer was most sincere. With the thought that only G -D can help, we passed by him. Unfortunately, not every prayer was answered. All it took was the pointing of the finger or the slight motion of his hand to send you to your death. The moment you were pointed out, a blockaltester or capo immediately wrote down your number and sent you to your block. The next morning as we got up, the block schreiber (registrar) came into our stube reading out the numbers of those unfortunates that were marked down. Collecting them, he would lead them out to the appell where they stood separate, as if they were already dead. After all others went to work, the poor souls were gathered from all their blocks and led on foot the three kilometers to the Birkenau gas chambers.

It was a strict selection, which I want to substantiate with figures. Taking in consideration that there were seventy Jews in my stube and six or seven were marked down, this constituted ten percent. The same percentage was applicable to every block in Auschwitz. Considering that in Auschwitz proper, there were eighteen thousand inmates, of whom seventy-five percent were Jews; one has to conclude that somewhere between twelve and fifteen hundred Jewish inmates were taken from Auschwitz alone. As Birkenau numbered twenty-two thousand and ninety percent of them were Jewish, the

number taken from there in that selection was much larger than in Auschwitz proper. In general, the selections in Birkenau were conducted with much greater severity than in Auschwitz. I shudder to think about the twenty-seven thousand Jewish women that were interned in Birkenau who represented ninety-five percent of the total female inmate population. Here we are speaking about a time when selections for the gas chambers among the Jewish inmate population was not an exception but the rule, the working principle of Auschwitz in summer of 1943. As soon as the arrival of trainloads of Jews eased up a bit, when the gas chambers stood empty for a day or two and the ovens of the crematoriums began to cool, the Nazis started to select the weaker, exhausted souls in the camp and replace them with the newly arrived healthy men that kept coming continuously.

I started to write about that particular selection to point out the uniqueness and special character of the Pole, Leon Kulowsky. When, after the above-mentioned selection was over and we were all back in the stube, the depressing mood was so heavy that it reflected on some of the non-Jewish faces. It just so happened that as we came into the stube, we saw a barrel with bread soup. As a rule, the sight of food used to improve our mood. Nevertheless, after the cruelty of the selection, with those marked down among us, the prospect of a bit of soup failed to cheer us up.

As I stood near my bunk, which was above the bottom one and at the height of my arms, with my elbows resting on the bunk and me supporting my chin with the palms of my hands, trying to recover from the experience of the last hour, I was approached by Leon Kulowsky who, with a worrisomely quiet voice asked, "Did they mark you down?" Just as quietly, I answered, "No." He turns around, walks back to the place at the table where he just sat, picks up his bowl of soup, brings it over to me and says, "Here, try to put some weight on."

At that time, I was well acquainted with the layout of the camp. I knew which commandos were in which block, from block number one, where the bathhouse was, up to block number 28, which was the Krankenbau (camp hospital). Block 24's main floor contained a displayed collection of Jewish religious articles, and the floor above was a brothel frequented by privileged non-Jewish inmates. Block 25 was the canteen and next

to it, a wooden barrack that was called the *Packettenstalle*, where parcels for the inmates used to arrive and be inspected. Block 11 was where the Nazis kept four hundred young Jewish women, on whom they performed all kinds of terrible operations and experiments. As a rule, they were kept inside the block and no inmates were allowed in, but from time to time, they used to be escorted by SS men on a walk around the camp.

We used to see them sometimes on a Sunday, walking in slow steps like at a funeral, which in a sense was their own. The mortality among them was immense, but those that died or were killed were easily replaced by new Jews constantly arriving in Auschwitz. The Nazis had an inexhaustible source of guinea pigs, which unfortunately came in the purest human form.

Next to Block 11 was Block 10, which was better known by its fearsome name, “the bunker.” It was famous for its “stehzelle” (standing cells) where inmates were crammed in individually or in groups of four, with no room to sit down. After standing all night, they had to go to a twelve-hour workday for a certain number of days or weeks. Of course, many succumbed to this treatment. For a lesser crime, inmates received 25 or 50 lashes. Not many survived fifty. There was a stone wall between Blocks 10 and 11, in front of which many people were executed.

Poles especially feared the bunker. Some individual Poles were brought from jails and others straight from homes or streets, arrested for real or imaginary crimes. Many were accused of anti-German activities. They were kept in camp, and after some weeks or months, real offenders were taken to the bunker and shot. However, the great majority were kept in the camp. Jews feared the bunker less as our fate was to die anyway. For us Jews there was no hope of getting out alive, while all others had sentences to serve. Besides, gas chambers and selections were reserved for Jews only.

Still, for any transgression in camp, Jews were sent to the bunker. Some got out after a few days; others not at all. In my stube was a young man from Pruzany, whose first name was Yankl. (I forgot his family name.) He was caught at a gate search with a small tin of shoe polish, taken to the bunker and we never heard of him again.

The SS man in charge of the bunker was a tall, husky redhead who carried animosity towards Russian inmates. Whenever he walked through the camp on his way to

the bunker, he never missed the opportunity to kick the Russian prisoners that came his way. At such a time and place, it was strange to see him kicking non-Jews while there were so many Jews around.

Shortly before I left Auschwitz for Sosnowitz, that SS man ceased to be seen. There were rumors that he had an affair with one of the Jewish girls in the experimental block and supposedly tried to get her out. He was caught and sent to the Russian front. How much truth there is to that story, I cannot say. However, it was the rumor that was circulating.

The above-described SS man had a couple subordinates in the bunker, a Pole and a Jew. Who the Pole was, I did not know nor do I know now, but the Jew was known to me. In fact, he was known to most Polish Jews. He was one of a handful of Jewish strongmen that traveled the hundreds of shtetls in pre-war Poland to show off their strength. I saw one like him in my childhood in Shershev, Gustav (Gershon) Breidbord, the youngest brother of the most renowned strongman in Poland in the twenties, Zygmunt (Zusie) Breidbord.

A couple years before the start of the war came to Pruzany, he was such a strong man. His name was Jakob Kozeltzyk (Kozelczyk). There was talk that he hailed from the nearby shtetl of Krynek (Krynky). I did not see his performance, but I remember the talk that was going on about his strength for many months after.

Apparently, he also impressed the Nazis with his physical strength, for upon his arrival in Auschwitz, they appointed him to work in the bunker. It was in late June or the beginning of July 1943, as we stood block by block in front of the kitchen to receive our extra half a loaf of bread and sausage, that I noticed two men approaching in our direction from a distance. They had to pass by us as we were blocking their way. One of them was the tall redhead SS man in charge of the bunker. The other was dressed in camp attire, but heftily built and taller than the SS man was. I had yet to see in Auschwitz a tall, well-built, well-fed prisoner. As they got closer, my astonishment became greater, for I noticed by his triangle that he was a Jew.

As they pass us, the big inmate puts out his hand, in which he carried a whole loaf of bread and two pieces of sausage. Handing it to me, he said, "Here, have it and share it

with your comrades.” It took me several seconds to realize what had happened. A total stranger had just handed me a whole thing of bread. In my great excitement, I cut it into four pieces and gave three quarters of the loaf to three nearby inmates. After I had done it, the other inmates around poked fun at me saying, “You fool. You had a whole loaf of bread in your hands and gave it away.” Other inmates around asked me if I knew the man. Receiving a negative answer, they told me that it was Jacob Kozelczyk. I found out that summer that from time to time that Jacob Kozelczyk entertained the SS and even the prominent inmates of the camp by showing off his extraordinary strength. In fact, I heard about him from the big shots in my stube when they came back from his performances, which they were permitted to attend. How they marveled and admired his strength.

That summer, the camp management organized a few Sunday afternoons of entertainment for the entire camp. The main organizers were the block altesters and capos. This was the contradiction of Auschwitz. For those big shots, it was the best place to spend the war year, while for others, there was not even a place for burial, so they were burned and their ashes were thrown into the Vistula or scattered over the surrounding fields.

They used to erect a temporary arena on the appellplatz where wrestling or boxing competitions took place. Of course, the participants were not Jews, for what Jew had enough energy to waste? I recall a clown act performed by two German inmates. They were both professional entertainers and at the same time professional criminals. They must have been good in both professions, for their performances were excellent, but still they were lifers.

In time, a loose circle was created among the inmates from the Pruzany Ghetto that worked in our halle. During the noon break when we received our soup, we used to go down in the cellar of the halle, which was never used except for under-the-counter dealings conducted by the privileged inmates, like the inmate from Grodno that was by trade a shoemaker, yet he worked as a carpenter. True, there were others that were not carpenters including myself, but that man, Margolis, was kept in that factory as a shoemaker instead of a carpenter. He sat in that cellar and on the quiet make and repair



shoes for the convenience of those big shots that preferred to wear made-to-measure shoes instead of the ones available in camp for the inmates.

That shoemaker, Margolis, was especially busy that spring and summer making sandals for the influential prisoners. Because of it, I got myself into trouble and could have lost my distinguished job as a shoe polisher and laundry man, not to mention being kicked out to the holzplatz.

It happened on a July day when we were coming back from work. Under my jacket, I was carrying a pair of sandals made by Margolis for the capo or his assistants. As we approached the gate, we were stopped because other commandos were ahead of us that were held back at the gate. A rumor spread in our ranks that a very strict search was taking place and the other groups were waiting their turn to be let in and searched.

I knew that I would not pass a thorough search without them detecting a pair of leather sandals under my jacket. I did not want to throw them away and did not dare to keep it on me. We were still a distance from the gate, in between the rows of the pigsties that looked more like stables where they raised pigs for the SS. There were plenty of heaps of garbage, building material, tools, and other stuff, so I stuck the shoes into a pile of garbage. I knew that the inmates working there were on their way to camp or inside already and that tomorrow morning we would pass the same place before they would get there.

Some five minutes later, we resumed our march into the camp. Past the gate, we were dismissed to fall in for the appell. Apparently, somebody higher up was satisfied with a partial search. As soon as I entered the stube, I told Zygmund what I had done and assured him they were in a safe place and I would be able to retrieve it tomorrow. I could easily see the resentment in his face. As if out of spite, we had bread soup that evening, but I did not get theirs.

The next morning as we marched out to work, we passed by the place where I had hidden the sandals. I ran out of the column and, grabbing the sandals, stuck them under the belt. I brought them back to Zygmund in the office. Within a couple of days, thanks to the intervention of Leon Kulowski, we made up and things returned to the way they were.

By the way, I will mention that the shoemaker, Margolis, a man of about forty, tried to live by the rules of the Jewish dietary laws to the extent that he would not eat the piece of sausage that we used to get twice a week, but exchanged it for bread. He went further than this. If, once in a blue moon, he found a grain-sized piece of meat in his soup, he would throw it out. For the reader's curiosity, I will say that in a boiler in which a thousand liters of soup was cooked, one kilogram of ground meat was added.

As that cellar was used only by that shoemaker, we, the group from ghetto Pruzany, used to gather there during the midday break which lasted an hour, discussing politics. Quite often, we listened to a young man from Gaynuvka by the name of Diesatnik, also from our ghetto, who had a pleasant voice as he sang sentimental Russian songs, of which he had a large repertoire. Whoever is familiar with the wealth of old Russian folk songs will understand what I mean.

Sometime in July 1943, the camp administration decided to rid the camp of the plague of fleas. Block by block after the evening appell, we were led to the bathhouse leaving our clothes and underwear in the stubes. While we were being disinfected and showered in the bathhouse, special disinfection commandos would seal the block hermetically and fumigate it. Returning from the bathhouse, we had to stay outside in the nude for hours while the building was being aired to make it safe for us to come in. After a couple treatments, we finally got rid of the fleas.

On one of those summer Sundays, I happened to meet Shloime Pasmanik, a friend of my uncle Eli. He told me that several months earlier he was sent to an affiliated camp, Shventochlovitz, where he worked in the coalmines. He took sick and was sent back to Auschwitz into the *krankenbau* (camp hospital). Fortunately, he got better after a couple of days and was discharged, thus avoiding the SS doctors' weekly selection in the hospital, from which, as a rule, the sick were taken to the Birkenau gas chambers. That was the only time I saw him in Auschwitz and it seems that none of our townspeople who survived knows where and how he perished.

In places where capos could not stand with sticks over the tradesmen inmates in their charge as they could in our factory, the camp administration thought of another incentive to make tradesmen produce more. They came up with awarding the inmates

camp marks for those that produced more. A certain number of marks were given to each capo to distribute amongst his men as he saw fit. It was entirely up to the capo's discretion.

For those camp marks, one could buy a few cigarettes when available, half a liter of sauerkraut or half a liter of snails marinated in mustard. Those two above-mentioned food items had no value, for what good is half a liter of mustard with a few snails in it when the stomach is crying out for a piece of bread or potatoes? The only good item was cigarettes. They could be exchanged for a piece of bread or a few potatoes. As soon as it became known in camp that there were cigarettes available in the canteen, those that had marks went to buy them.

The canteen, like the parcel post, the slaughterhouse and other good camp positions, were taken up by Polish inmates. A member of another nationality had no chance of working there. Even German inmates could not get in there.

That evening the place was mobbed. I finally make my way through the mob, get to the counter and hand my five marks to a young, ambitious server. The young man glances at me and sees a Jew. "You are here for the second time tonight," he yells at me. He runs out from behind the counter and, grabbing me by my lapels, he starts shaking me and yelling, "You are here for the second time this evening. Admit it."

Scared and confused, not knowing what is going on or what crime I have committed, I answer, "No, I have not been here before." Within a blink of an eye, there are half a dozen Polish workers around me, while my accuser, now holding me with one hand keeps on sticking his index finger of his second hand in my chest yelling, "I caught him. He is here the second time this evening." One of them positions himself opposite me and asks me "Is it true?" I answer with a desperate "No, it is not true." He gives me a punch in the face and I notice that the ceiling is going in circles while the floor seems to come towards me. I notice suddenly that I am lying on the floor surrounded by the same group of Poles. They look at each other as if deciding what to do with me further. From somewhere appeared another Pole, of medium height and age, slender in build, dressed in a nice inmate's uniform with a very distinguished and aristocrat face. "What is happening here?" he asks. Before anyone of them had a chance to say anything, he continued. "You

do not do those things.” One of them protests; but he is here for the second time this evening. The man answered with the same calm voice. “You do not act like this. Let him go.” He turns around and walks away.

The others disperse too. However, that young Pole who originally accused me of having been there before takes his revenge. He still has in his hand my five marks. He walks over to the counter and stamps them. I read the stamped marks. It says “Not valid for cigarettes.”

I leave the canteen hurt for being falsely accused and what is more deprived of the few cigarettes that could have fetched me a piece of bread but thankful to G-D for sending that nice Pole in time.

Sometime in August, our capo somehow arranged to send a group of carpenters from our halle to the women’s Krankenbau (hospital) in Birkenau. At that time, we did not understand the reason for it. True the women’s Krankenbau barracks needed repairs, but it was not so urgent to have to send carpenters from D.A.W. There were other carpenter commandos in Auschwitz smaller and less specialized that could do the job. Besides there were carpenters in Birkenau proper who could do the job. It was obvious that it was in our capos interest to send men from D.A.W. especially from our halle.

He never failed to send along Hershl Morawsky. His best craftsman and confidence along with a few other good carpenters and their assistants who were being changed every few days. A few times I was sent there as an assistant carpenter.

On one of my “outings” there I watched the treatment of a group of women prisoners that where being supervised by a woman capo who tried to find favor in the eyes of the SS around. The group numbered some thirty women who were harnessed to a huge roller two meters high as it was lying on the ground and four meters long.

It was steered by a large wagon shaft that the poor unfortunate women were pulling over a piece of road covered with crushed stones. They kept on pulling it back and forth. The women capo with a green triangle identifying herself as a professional criminal and prostitute kept on beating them at the same time heaping at them all kinds of abusive names, curses, swears that even the SS men could have taken lessons from her.

When they stopped at noon, they got their soup and I moved closer. To my surprise, I recognized among them a girl from Shershev by the name of Feigl K. She told me that it is a penal group in which she was sent for some camp transgression.

Surprisingly this girl survived Auschwitz, one of the half a dozen Shershev girls. Her hard life in their poor home before the war has conditioned her to the rigor and harshness of camp.

Between the work in the halle and some outside work, the summer of 1943 came to an end. In a sunny early fall day, I was again in the hospital section of the women's camp in Birkenau. As we worked independently without supervision of the SS men or foreman, whenever there were no SS men or local capos around, some of us used to leave work to wander around the women's hospital barracks in the hope of finding something to eat. For me that dream never materialized.

As I passed a row of barracks, I notice that in front of three of them with wide open doors, stands a well-fed woman with a stick in her hand. Each of the three women has the unmistakable green triangle of the German prostitute-criminal. I deliberately walk by slowly and look in. However, because of the bright sun, I see nothing. It seems to me as if someone deliberately has darkened the windows running along the top skylights on both sides of the roof top. I walk by again and look in with more intensity but still see nothing.

That there is something inside prohibitive I am sure. Possibly food? Maybe. One overseer notices my curiosity and says; "You can go in." I stop perplexed. If one is permitted to go in, why is she guarding it? What has she in mind? She can hit me anytime. She needs no excuse. Yet she does not look threatening and says again. "Go, go in. I will not hit you." I walk through the gate like door. It takes me several seconds to get used to the darkness but slowly start to appear before me a picture that takes away the rest of my breath that the smell did not as I came in. I manage to make out the familiar three tier Birkenau bunks. Slowly I begin to see spread out on the bunks naked bodies. Some motionless, some half sitting, some sitting. The sitting ones move very slowly with no purpose. What are they? I think to myself. They must be human but not of this world. Around them or on them are leaning others, some leaning against each other. Some are squatting, some are quiet others gesticulate strangely. Some sit on the edges of the bunks

immobile as if frozen. The narrow space between the bunks is crowded with the same creatures who barely seem too move. Even the long flue running all the length of the barrack is covered with bodies. They sit, toppled over. Others are trying to sit them down again but have no strength to lift them and they remain on the barrack's muddy earthen floor.

At first glance, I take those creatures to be men for their upper parts of the bodies gave no indication of anything else but I soon realize that those were once women.

I was used to having seen men "muselmanner" but could never imagine what women "muselmaner" might look like. How can one imagine. We were in Birkenau in such a barrack three hundred men. Here I was looking at the same size barrack that held at least twice as many women condemned to death. How long they were there, I could not tell nor did I ask. They were kept without food or water most of them already in delirium waiting for the SS to take them to the gas chamber. Everything seemed unreal as if I would be looking at an old faded slow moving film. One small creature reminiscing a skeleton, no more than three meters from me, started to mutter to me incoherently and tried to drag herself closer. As soon as she freed herself from the mass of wretched souls around her, she started to shuffle towards me. Now I could see her fully and jumped back as I noticed part of her innards were hanging and reaching to the ground from between what was supposed to be her legs now finger thin bones covered with gray skin. The sight was so frightening that I ran out of the barrack.

At that time I was long enough in Auschwitz-Birkenau to have seen many unbelievable things there, but the picture or scene I have just seen surpassed the most horrible thing I have ever seen in my life. It was everything: frightening, terrible, revolting, heart rending and incomprehensible. It was something from another world that comes only in a nightmare.

In the late afternoon when we got together to return to the D.A.W. factory, we were told by a couple of our men that dared venture deeper into the camp, that a very intense and concentrated selection took place in both men's and women's camps in Birkenau. The result or part of the women's selection I had seen an hour earlier.

The return trip to the factory passed without anybody uttering a word. We were all thinking about the selection conducted in Birkenau and about the thousands of young lives that were picked out to be taken to the gas chambers after months of slave labor, torture, and pain, trying to survive in inhumane conditions with the misleading hope that maybe , maybe ...

After returning to camp as soon as the appell was over, we Jews were lined up for a selection, which was as far as I know the most intense and severe in the camp for my time and apparently the history of the camp.

The next morning I found out that it is Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). The Nazis, may they fry in hell, knew how to make our Holy Days, and Days of Awe unforgettable.

Although newspapers or radios were not permitted into the camp, still a trickle of news used to filter through from time to time. I do not know how but a piece of a page from a German newspaper suddenly appeared in our stube and started to circulate from one to another. Everyone was eager to read it. I too.

On that small piece of paper, no more than a dozen lines, I read, "In the last few days, the Soviet command has awarded ten thousand Jewish generals and officers of the Red Army medals for bravery. Let the German people and army take note of it and keep it well in mind to make sure that no Soviet soldier ever sets foot on German soil."

For us Jews in our stube, there could not have been any better news except the news of liberation, but I noticed that the Poles in our stube were not at all happy with the news. In fact, they tried to belittle it by saying that there are not as many Jewish officers in the Red Army, or that the Germans deliberately wrote it in order to motivate and add incentive for their soldiers to fight harder.

A couple weeks later on a Sunday afternoon, a rumor spread in camp that in an hour or two all Jews of Auschwitz #1 will be taken to Birkenau meaning to the gas chambers.

If there ever were Jewish inmates in Auschwitz-Birkenau that mentioned the word surviving the war, it was no more than wishful thinking that will never be realized. We knew only too well that the Germans cannot and will not let live any witnesses to the horrible crime and mass murder they are committing here.

## Chapter 12

Knowing that the Germans were retreating on the Eastern Front, the rumor of us Jews being taken to the gas chambers sounded logical and believable. My Capo, Janek, sitting on his bunk almost opposite me, thus making me the nearest Jew to him at that moment, said, "Juz Najwyższy czas" (It is high time).

His expression grieved me deeply for I did not expect to hear it from him. After all, eighty percent of his workers were Jews whose craftsmanship and hard work made him the most influential capo in D.A.W. Moreover, he said it to me, the one who risked his life so many times by bringing things in the camp for his comfort and well-being.

It is very difficult to describe the feelings and thoughts that went through my head. I felt vexation, grief over having had to spend nine months in this hell of Auschwitz, only to die now that my situation was just beginning to stabilize.

The time ticked by terribly fast, while I cried in anguish to God that he should stop time forever. In my despair, I forgot that I have hidden in my straw sack a ration of bread that I kept in reserve. I quickly got it out and ate it up, not having a reason to save it any longer. So, we sat on our bunks waiting for the announcement to line up in front of the block to be led to Birkenau.

The afternoon became evening, and it was quiet in the stube as well as in the entire camp. We figure that the Nazis are waiting for night to commit their grisly work. It is nine o'clock and the gong sounds, signaling "lights out." We get onto our bunks and wait for the lights to go on and the blockaltester's announcement for us to get out. I try to imagine how they will take us. Will they let us get dressed or will we be forced to march the three kilometres from Auschwitz to Birkenau naked in the September night? We know in fact that no inmates have been gassed while dressed; all victims were made to undress first.

Eventually the exhaustion of the week's work and the tension of that day take over. Before we know it, the gong is ringing. It is four-thirty in the morning; everyone is rushing to straighten their bunks, get washed, stay in line for a piece of bread and fearing the new day.



About a month later, as the denizens of our stube were getting ready to settle in for the night, one of the foremen, a prominent inmate who slept in the place where the other big shots slept, said aloud, "I feel terrible, I don't know what is happening to me." All those around him looked at him inquisitively, and the twenty-five year old pole with the nickname "Cygan" (Gypsy, in Polish), who a couple of months before expressed his incomprehension over the fact that the Jews in our stube let themselves be pushed around and beaten up by the stubendienst Kazik. Such a remark was a direct challenge to the authority of a stubendienst, especially when it was said by a Pole to another in front of a stube full of Jews, which infuriated the stubendienst even more. Such a remark could be inferred as a call to resistance in a place where thousands were put to death daily.

The law of Auschwitz and other concentration camps was that a stubendienst is the sole authority in the stube, only capable of being overruled by the blockaltester, who as a rule was more of a sadist and murderer than the stubendienst.

The stubendienst controlled himself, knowing that the foreman had a few friends, among them the Capo Janek, a man with authority. To take them all on could end with his downfall, so the stubendienst took another approach. "Do you want to tell me that you would dare hit me back," he said to Cygan. "Look at you and look at me," he continued, and indeed he was right, for although they were both the same, average height, Cygan was a slim young man while the stubendienst Kazik weighed at least a hundred kilograms, a good part of which was muscle. "It makes no difference," replied Cygan. "Even if I knew that you would break every bone in my body, I would still hit you back."

Here the stubendienst realized that the other refused an honorable withdrawal from the argument, so he accepted the challenge answering with a provocative, "Do you want to show me what you would do to me?" Here the big shot Poles intervened, and with the Capo in charge, they made peace between the two.

This Cygan, who dared to stand up for himself, looked very sick now. His face, swarthy for a Pole, was now dark gray and distorted. One did not have to be a doctor to know that the man was sick. His friend wanted to take him right away to the Krankenbau but he insisted on remaining in the stube overnight. Why? I didn't and still don't know even until this day. Poles were not being taken from there to the gas chambers. The gas

chambers were an "exclusive privilege" for Jews. With his connections, he would have received the best medical attention that Auschwitz had to offer there. Still, the next morning he remained in the stube when we went out to the appell and to work. When we came back after work, his bunk was empty.

The following evening, after returning to camp and after the appell, we were ordered to go to our stube. The blockaltester announced that as there was typhus found in stube number four (my stube). The stube was being quarantined. We were to remain in the stube until further notice. We were to use the toilets only while the others in the block are at work. For emergency use, a large barrel was put in the less honorable part of the stube, as far from the place of honor where the big shots slept as possible--that is in the exclusively Jewish section of the stube.

Nobody was allowed outside the stube. Our bread and the Auschwitz tea were brought for us to the door, as well as the soup at noon. It was after the deliverymen left that we opened the door to take it inside.

At the start, it felt like a holiday for us, especially for the Jews who used to work hard for twelve hours a day on a nagging, hungry stomach. Now imagine sitting in Auschwitz all day long, undisturbed, lying stretched out on the bunk and sleeping to your heart's content; to only get up to receive the piece of bread in the morning and your soup at noon.

The first couple of days I was very hungry, as we did not get the extra half of bread or the bread soup twice a week. But after four or five days, we all lost our appetites. I was able to satisfy my hunger with half the piece of bread in the morning; the other half I hid in my straw sack.

The reason for the lack of appetite I would attribute to two reasons. Firstly, we were confined to a very small place, that is, to lying on the bunk almost motionless. The lack of motion, the confinement with a hundred others in close quarters with doors and windows closed and a large wooden barrel that was being used constantly as a toilet, which filled up the room with an unbearable smell that was enough to make everybody sick. This compounded with the rumor that began circulating in the stube that the

Germans are planning to transfer us to Birkenau (read: gas chambers) was enough to take our appetite away.

It is interesting to mention that while the rumor about Birkenau was taken very seriously by us Jews; the Poles shrugged it off, refusing to believe that Poles would be taken to the gas chambers.

To be locked up twenty-four hours a day with a hundred people one can't help but overhear all sorts of conversations. I, having my bunk close to the big shots, had a good spot to be able to listen to their conversations. I found out that Cygan contracted his typhus from a girl in Birkenau women's camp. The Birkenau camp was terribly filthy, full of lice and other vermin. It was never fully eradicated of typhus.

I listened to stories of their escapades, which were maybe somewhat exaggerated or boastful. All their thoughts were directed towards women. One of the things that became clear to me as I was listening to their conversations was that the reason for our overseers' eagerness to find work for us in Birkenau women's camp was the women, and we carpenters served as their access.

It was sad to listen to the boasting of some of them, as they were bragging how they could buy the favor of any Jewish girl for a portion of bread. Poor unfortunate Jewish children, innocent, untouched by men, were brought to that place inviolate. But here they were degraded to a situation that forced them to sell their innocence and dignity for a piece of bread. None of this saved them from losing their young, tormented lives in the gas chambers of Birkenau.

We remained quarantined for two weeks. At the end of the two weeks, we were taken to the bathhouse, disinfected, showered and upon our return to the stube, we received clean underwear. The next morning we went to work.

I have never really spoken to a S.S. man except the usual "Jawohl" (Yes, sir) to an order, which usually sounded more like a bark than a human voice and most of the time was accompanied by a blow from a stick or a kick with a boot.

That summer of 1943, sometime in August, I heard a S.S. man speaking with a human voice. It happened when the capo had to send some carpenters to a S.S. officer's house to do some repairs. The house was in the town of Auschwitz proper, a distance of

three or four kilometres from camp. As usual, a couple of assistants went along with the carpenters. I was one of them.

During the day, the terrain around Auschwitz-Birkenau, a perimeter of several kilometres in which the inmates worked, was surrounded with a chain of watchtowers that were manned by S.S. men with machine guns. The towers were close enough that there was no chance to break through. There were, however, a couple of roads that led from the enclosure to the town and in other directions. Those roads were guarded by the S.S. men, and anybody who was going in or out the chain of watchtowers had to have a permit, like the few civilians who sometimes supervised work there. Even the S.S. accompanying prisoners had to have permission to come or go.

Three S.S. men were assigned to accompany eight of us men from the moment we left the enclosure until we entered it. In the morning, after coming to the factory, getting our tools together took an hour. We set out on our own to the end of the guarded perimeter where the three S.S. men were waiting for us. They led us to the S.S. officer's house. There were a couple of other groups of prisoners who were cleaning the yard and landscaping it. Another group was repairing the fence and still another was putting down hardwood floors in the house. Each group came with their own S.S. men. There were over a dozen of them. Why so many to guard us? Apparently, they realized they were overstaffed too, so they came to some understanding and soon half of them disappeared, taking a holiday.

For those inmates who were working outside the D.A.W. factory and could not be back at noon for their soup, the rations were to be kept until they returned to the factory at five in the afternoon. Thus, we had to work the entire day until five o'clock on the portion of bread that we got five in the morning.

One of our three S.S. guards was a man of about forty, not young for an ordinary S.S. man. We took the chance to approach him to ask if he would escort us to the guard chain from where we would walk to the factory, receive our soup, and come back to the same spot where he left us off. From there he could escort us back to the city.

What we did not tell him was that by doing it we planned to get an extra liter soup. By arriving during the soup distribution, we could just line up with the others and

get our liter of soup. Afterwards we would just as quietly sneak out and nobody would be the wiser. Upon returning to the factory, we would also get the soup that had been set aside for us. The S.S. man, after a short conversation with the other two of our guards, agreed.

At eleven thirty, we told him that it was time to go, as the distribution of soup started at twelve and it would take us half an hour to get there. To our surprise, he told us to start going and followed us, while the other two guards stayed behind in the officer's house.

We can't believe what is happening. He is breaking all rules. We are eight men and the regulations call for three guards to go with us, and their orders are to keep us all day. But who are we to argue? We start going, not lined up like in a drill but as a group, and he walks behind us. When we distanced ourselves from the city and there was nobody around, for no reason whatever and to nobody in particular, the S.S. man said, "One dog is dead, now it is time for the other."

We knew what he meant but didn't dare to say anything. We didn't even dare to turn our heads to look at him. A day earlier, a rumor spread that Benito Mussolini had been arrested by the newly formed provisional Italian Government. I think to myself, "Does he want to provoke us, or is it possible that he has realized that the war is lost and wants to repent?" Still, we were glad to hear such words coming out of a S.S. man's mouth, even without knowing if they were sincere or not. Now, in retrospect, I believe that they were sincere.

He brought us to the guard line, repeating a couple of times that we should be back at one o'clock, dead or alive.

We worked at and around the S.S. officer's house for a couple of weeks, yet we never saw the officer at home. His wife, however, a young, good-looking blond with a one-year-old baby, was constantly at home. They had what one would call a maid. She was a middle-aged woman, an inmate like ourselves with a violet triangle that classified her as an "Internationale Bible Forsher Vereinigung," that is, a Jehovah's Witness. Those people were all Germans; the males refused to serve in the army and they wouldn't work in any ammunition factory or in any way contribute to the war effort. All that Hitler

demanding of them was to renounce their convictions, which meant their faith. They categorically refused and preferred to spend their time in a concentration camp. To be candid, I would say that those in camp had it better than many soldiers on the Russian Front and were definitely more secure with their survival. As a group, they were treated better than any other was and were given good positions.

That woman inmate conducted herself in the S.S. man's house as if she was a member of the family, looking after their baby and eating with them. In fact, she gave me an apple. That was the only fruit I tasted from the moment the Germans entered Shershev until my liberation, a total of four years.

During the couple of weeks that we worked there, there were times that other wives of S.S. officers came to visit. They were all about the same age, well dressed, and some had small children. Because of the work going on and the banging in the adjoining rooms, they were compelled to speak loudly or raise their voices from time to time.

The bit of German that I know comes from Yiddish, which derives mainly from German, and the words that I learned in the Ghetto and camps--consisting mainly of rude names, curse words, abusive words, invective and degrading words. Although I did not pay particular attention to their conversation, I came to the conclusion that there were nicer Germans than the ones I was exposed to from morning to night.

In late October, when the days got much shorter, the commandos that worked outdoors began to return to the camp at sunset. The important commandos like ours, the D.A.W., remained on the job until six o'clock. At sunset, extra S.S. would surround the factory and to escort us back to camp.

We Jews preferred doing this extra work, as the selections that took place in winter were conducted outdoors right after the appeal and the Jewish inmates had to undress and stay naked until the selection was over. Meanwhile, for those of us that worked, later the selection was conducted in the bathhouse. During one such selection in the bathhouse, I slipped on the wet boards of the huge room. Fortunately, Dr. Mengele was conducting a conversation with another S.S. officer at the time and had his eye averted for a second. That gave me time to jump up and continue walking by him.

And so, in anguish, hunger, despair, and helplessness, I arrived the middle of December 1943. The Poles in our stube were becoming a little sentimental. They talked among themselves about the pre-war Christmases. They wondered what was going on now in their homes, what preparations were taking place. To us Jews, it seemed so trivial, so insignificant in comparison to our calamity. They were sorry for being unable to be home with family to celebrate Christmas and for the loss of a couple of years of freedom. We all knew that Germany was losing the war and that the Poles would soon be free to return home, where their entire families were waiting for them. We Jews came here with our extended families and saw them go up in smoke and flame. We also knew that in the last moments before the war ended, the Germans would kill the last Jews in their hands.

On Christmas Eve, the Poles had a feast in the stube. The big shots took up their places around the table, which was extended to make room for more Poles. The others took up places on the surrounding bunks. Each of them contributed some goodies from their parcels that they all received from home. We Jews sat on our bunks watching as they ate their fill, our mouths watering.

The Poles asked Leon Kulowski to address the group, as he was the most suitable in such a situation. It was no easy task to address imprisoned Poles in a concentration camp and not to overstep the line. He knew that he was walking on thin ice, but he made some sort of speech.

It snowed that night. We did not go to work on Christmas day, but we did the day after. As we marched out that morning to work, our surroundings, for as far as we could see, were covered with a pure white blanket of snow that hid for a moment the purgatory beneath it. An hour later, the whole terrain was trampled by the human caricatures that turned it back to its original hell.

In those conditions, I lost count of the days, weeks, and even months. I didn't even know when the month of January 1944 came and went. Suddenly it was February 1944, a year since my arrival in Auschwitz.

In mid-February, a fair-sized group of workers from our hall started to work near Birkenau at building barracks for the Luftwaffe. Our work consisted of installing windows and doors. The barracks were in the middle of an empty space, a kilometre from

the nearest building. Because of the cold, the work progressed slowly. We put up with the bitter cold both in and outside of the windowless and doorless barracks. We worked for ten hours a day on empty stomachs, plus the hour march each way to and from our workplace. The walk to the factory dressed in our camp garb was unbearable. We could hardly hold our spoons because it was so cold. On our return to the factory, we got our allotted soup that we were supposed to get at midday.

By mid-March, this part of the job was finished and we started to build individual outhouses for the expected airmen. Because of the shortage of material at the site, the Capo decided to build them in the factory, in our alley. Every morning S.S. truck came to the factory. Eight or ten of us would haul a couple of outhouses onto the truck. Then our group got on, plus a couple of S.S. men, and we proceeded to the Auschwitz gates to Birkenau. There the S.S. used to leave us alone, coming back at five to take us back to the factory.

During my time in Auschwitz, there were a few attempts by prisoners to escape, usually by Poles. For Jews to escape would be senseless, for if even they succeeded in getting out, which was in any case doubtful, where would they run? The very first Pole would betray him, and if not the first, there were many others who would. However, Poles could run. They had families, friends, and acquaintances with whom they could hide. Still, some of the few that managed to get out were caught and were put on display, dead, at the gate of the camp. Others were hung in public on the appell ground for all to see.

Still, I felt that I must at least think about escape, for when I would be sent into the gas chambers, a fate of which I had no doubt, I wanted have no regrets over not having tried to save myself.

To be honest, I approached the whole idea halfheartedly, remembering my attempt to get out of the Ghetto. I reasoned that if I could not and did not get out of the ghetto, my chances of getting out of Auschwitz were non-existent. Nevertheless, I planned.

My plan was as follows: since our group began travelling by S.S. truck daily, hauling out houses to Birkenau, our S.S. escort has never checked the inside of one-- not while putting it on the truck, not while leaving Auschwitz's guarded perimeter, nor upon



entering the Birkenau perimeter. Our plan was to enter an outhouse as it passed both the Auschwitz and Birkenau guard perimeter. Once inside the Birkenau perimeter, the guards used to leave us alone. I would come out and hide in one of the many empty barracks. When it would be discovered that I was missing, the search would take place in the Auschwitz perimeter, for nobody would know that I ever got out of Auschwitz and into Birkenau. After two or three days of not finding me, the guard around the perimeter would be taken off during the night as was usual. As all inmates were in the camp proper, I would make my escape.

The plan had some merit and to me seemed achievable in theory, but my co-workers had to know about it, as they were the ones that used to put the outhouses on and off the truck. As soon as I told them my plan, they turned on me with accusations and charges of wanting to kill them. "You know," they claimed, "that once it becomes known that we helped out in the escape, or even knew about it, we are doomed. They'll hang us all." With their protests, my plan of escaping from Auschwitz ended.

After this event, I stopped going with that group to Birkenau and remained in the halle, where I would have rather been working anyway. Twelve working hours outdoors and the wait for the soup until six o'clock did not appeal to me.

That winter, that is 1943-1944, all of the groups working outside the camp used to return at dark. As far as I know, only our Commando D.A.W. worked until six. As soon as we would leave work, the night shift would take over. There was talk that our working later spared us from having to go through a couple selections. Apparently, the "Angel of Death," Dr. Mengele, did not want to wait or waste his time on conducting a selection on a few hundred Jews when he had thousands in front of him.

Although the S.S. tried to keep us in total isolation from the world, some news used to filter through, and we knew that the Germans were falling back on the Eastern Front. Exactly where the front was at a given time we didn't know. It was up to anyone's imagination and prayer. However, the good news from front did not spell good news for us Jewish inmates, for we knew that the Nazis would not let any Jew survive the war. We also knew that the red army is getting closer to us and with it, so is our end. Yet our

desire to know that Germany was losing the war was greater than the realization that we would not see it, and we used to rejoice with every German loss on the front.

In the middle of an early spring night in 1944, we were awakened of the wail of the camp siren. Usually the wail of the siren was a signal to alert the S.S. to the fact that an escape had been made or attempted. But this used to happen during daytime hours, while the inmates were outside the camp and within the guards' perimeter. It never happened at night, for there was no escape from within the camp. The entire camp was one large slab of asphalt surrounded by two rows of electrified barbed wires, around which was a tall solid cement wall. All this was brightly lit and surrounded with many guard towers manned by S.S. men with machine guns.

Only in the morning did we find out that it was an air raid, the first in the history of Auschwitz. There was no damage to be seen; in fact, we didn't even hear a single explosion. One thought was on the minds of the Jewish inmates, namely, how lucky we would be to die from an allied bomb instead of having to be driven by the accursed S.S. into the gas chambers.

In early April 1944, the snow was gone and the sun soon dried the large, partly paved square between the main factory building and the subsidiaries of the D.A.W. One morning, as we came to work we noticed part of the square is taken up with large wooden crates that have been brought during the night.

During the midday break when we were getting our soup, I noticed some inmates standing very close to those crates, looking inquisitively and intensely at them. As I walked over, one of the inmates pointed out to me a certain spot, a board of a crate. I see writing and begin to read. It is written with a pencil, partly a letter, partly a will and testament. Above all, it is a prayer to anyone who will read it. I look at the hastily written Jewish letter and read, "Let it be known that the Jews from a camp worked with these crated machines up to now, and their last assignment, which will be their last task in their lives, is to crate these machines. For right after the crating is done, they will be taken to the open pits that are already waiting for them outside the camp."

Their plea was that maybe somewhere in a camp a Jew will read it and by some miracle survive, and that he should tell that in that given place was a camp that was liquidated on such and such a date, its inmates put to death.

We started looking for more messages and found many. Some were only names, others just short messages. Others were quite lengthy messages. But all, without exception, contained a farewell word to the reader, and to life itself.

How many thoughts came into my mind I would not try to enumerate? But I remember thinking about how long it will be before we will be writing such messages and wondering if there would still be a Jew in the Nazi domain left to read it. Judging by the countless trainloads of Jews coming daily to Auschwitz and being sent straight to the gas chambers, I doubted that the legacy of those writings on the crates would ever be told.

Now, well over half a century later, I realize that it was a mistake not to try to remember the name of that camp and its history. But then again, who would think that he would live to write about it?

A couple of weeks later, on the morning of the Fourth of May 1944, before we were even driven out of the stube to the appell, in comes the block schreiber and reads out two numbers, mine and another man's. He tells us that today we are not going to work and that right after the appell we should return to the stube.

Every inmate dreaded to hear his name being called out; it always bore bad news. I knew, however, that I didn't do anything wrong, so I came to the conclusion that it was concerning a "transport." The word "transport" meant, among other things, to be sent to another camp, which was not welcome news.

Even though Auschwitz was hell on earth, some inmates, those that were still alive, managed to find for themselves a kind of niche in the camp structure by which they succeeded in surviving for days, months and even years. The trick was to be able to procure for oneself somewhat more to eat, just enough to sustain your emaciated body. Here again I am referring to Jewish inmates who had no outside help. The bottom line was the ability to get some extra food. The constant arrival of Jews from Nazi-occupied and Nazi-allied countries inadvertently contributed to the availability of more food than

in other camps, even those affiliated with Auschwitz. For example, the bread soup was only distributed in Auschwitz.

Some Jewish inmates, small in number, were fortunate to work in the "Auhamungs Kommando," otherwise known as "Kanada," where, despite the watchful eyes of the S.S. and constant threat of death for the slightest transgression, they used to manage to get some valuables out and exchange it for food.

Such places of work or positions did not exist in other camps and the inmates had to make do with their allotted ration, which could not sustain a working man for longer than three months. No wonder nobody wanted to be sent on a transport to another camp, as it meant losing whatever survival mechanisms they had developed.

As soon as all commandos (work groups) left the camp, the block-schreiber took the two of us from our stube--me and the other man, who turned out to be the man from whom I used to buy the soap to wash my superiors' laundry. His name was Leibl (Leon) Bliskowsky. A short man, he was eighteen years my senior, almost twice my age. He hailed from the village of "Jalowka" near Bialystok. He married Moishe-Mendl Gordon's daughter in Pruzany a dozen years earlier. Up to the war, he lived in Jalowka where he and his father owned a flourmill. In 1939, when the Bolsheviks came, they took their mill away, "nationalizing" it. Deprived of a livelihood, Leibl, his wife and child moved in with his father-in-law in Pruzany. Two years later, they shared the fate of the entire Pruzany Ghetto. They were brought to Auschwitz, where his wife and nine-year-old daughter went straight to the gas chambers, and now we were sharing an unknown future.

The registrar led us out of the block to where the registrar from Block A was waiting with one man. He was a tall, well-built man of close to fifty, but seemingly agile for his age. By his number on the jacket, we can tell that he is from our Ghetto. He tells us that he is from Maltch (Malecz) and his name is Shmuel (Samuel).

We are led to the bathhouse, a preliminary step to transportation. We are completely shaven, disinfected, given clean underwear, a clean jacket and pants. We are a group of close to two hundred men. I hear Jewish, Polish, Russian, German, and Greek being spoken, and one prevalent language, which I had never heard before.

It is way past midday and there is no sign of soup and the stomach growls. Finally, two trucks arrive without roofs, but the entire trucks are covered with a tarpaulin. We climb in and are in total darkness, we don't know in which direction we are going.

After many hours of driving, we stop and get out. We stand on a small elevation. Before us, we see a small camp consisting of half a dozen low barracks and a couple of smaller buildings, all coloured green with black tarred roofs. The most unusual thing was the fence surrounding the camp. It was an ordinary wooden fence that one puts around a garden, a fence that could not stop a cat from getting in or out, never mind a man. While my mind was not on escaping at that moment, the whole thing seemed bizarre.

We were divided into two groups and each group was led in the first two barracks. Inside, we found two-tiered single wooden bunks. In each bunk were a straw sack and two dark brown blankets. We were not permitted that evening to leave the barracks, but looking out the windows, we realized that the Germans left nothing to chance. Ten metres outside the fence and twenty metres apart stood a line of S.S. men all around the enclosure. There were electric lights on the fence, not like on the Auschwitz fence but enough to light up the fence and the entire enclosure.

Next morning right after the appell we were divided in work groups that were assigned and ready beforehand. Among the two hundred inmates were half a dozen Germans. One came as a lageralterster (camp elder), a second as an arbeitsdienst (general work supervisor), a third as the Lager Capo, (camp capo), and the others as blockaltersters (block elders). From the dozen Poles that came with us, seven were cooks for us prisoners and a couple of them cooked for the S.S. From the remaining three, one was the lager schreiber (camp registrar). The other two were appointed capos. The minority were sixteen Russians that were suppose to receive the same treatment as us Jews, but they had the additional job of carrying the soup container into the camp, for which they received an extra litre of soup plus the privilege to scrape the bottoms and walls of the barrels.

Only we, the remaining hundred and fifty Jews, were left to do the heavy labour. Among us, the largest group consisted of newly arrived Italian Jews, who were given the number one hundred and eighty thousand and up. Except for a couple of them that spoke German, we could not converse with each other. They came in uninformed about Jewish

persecution and were completely bewildered and lost. The foreign German language, the yelling, the cursing, and the beatings confused them totally. They looked like a sorry lot.

The few remaining Jews were we three from the Pruzany Ghetto, one from Grodno, a couple from Silesia, and two to three each from central Poland, Germany, and France.

We were immediately told our reason for being there and the purpose of our work. Up to two days ago, the small and unguarded camp was occupied by six hundred French volunteer workers. They were ordered to vacate the camp and told to find accommodations in the nearby city of Sosnowiec, three hundred metres away. Our task was to fence in the camp as required by concentration camp law. That is, we were to build a double barbed-wire fence through which electric current flowed. The wires had to be strung on regulation cement posts. After we fence ourselves in, a large zugang (shipment of prisoners) will arrive from Auschwitz and we will start working in the nearby ammunition factory.

We started to build the fence. Here too, like in Auschwitz, we got up at four thirty in the morning. Right after the appell, we got a loaf of bread for three men. At midday, we had the customary liter of soup and a cup of camp tea at night. The loaf of bread we had to divide ourselves between three of us. We three, that is Leibl Bilskowski, Shmuel Rosenboim--originally from Maltch (Malecz) but from our ghetto--and I, became partners. We had to share a loaf of bread, cutting it up into three even pieces, which wasn't an easy task.

How do you divide a loaf of bread and feel satisfied that neither you nor your friend has been wronged, not by a bite of bread or even a crumb, for bread is valued more than life? If one piece looked somewhat larger or smaller than the others did, we used to cut a piece from one and put it on the other. After each portion passed the scrutiny of each one of us and we all were satisfied that they were equal, one used to turn around so as not to see the bread behind him, and a second would point at one portion and ask, "Who is this portion for?" He had to say for whom. Of course, we had to take turns in turning around and pointing. In this way, we made sure that nobody was wronged.

Here again, we Jews returned to the strict camp ration. The big shots, like the blockaltesters and capos that dished out the soup, took for themselves all they wanted--not to mention the cooks, who would make for themselves all kinds of delicacies. Even the Russian prisoners who were working with us used to get an extra liter of soup for bringing it out from the kitchen. For us Jews, there was no opportunity nor chance for an extra spoonful of food.

The shape of the camp was rectangular. Facing the northern, narrow side of the camp, some twenty metres away from the gate, was a long barrack-like building that contained the living quarters of the S.S., the living quarters of the camp commandant, his one-room office, and the kitchens.

Facing the S.S. barrack and kitchen, one could see a road running on the left, close to the camp fence, and it was a kilometre further to the ammunition factory in which we were going to work after we were fenced in. Past the road to the left, some three hundred metres away, were the outskirts of the town of Sosnowiec.

On Sundays, we could see the Polish inhabitants walking leisurely at the edge of the city a couple of hundred metres away. We could see their smiling faces, their warm embraces; their young lives were soon to be cut short.

Our first task was to walk to the factory. Each of us took a bag of cement weighing fifty kilograms and carried it on his back to the camp. Exhausted and hungry, I felt that at any minute I would collapse under its weight. But this would spell my end, so I summoned my last bit of strength to bring it to the camp. The only respite came while walking back to the factory for another load.

Within a few days, one of the empty barracks filled up with sacks of cement and we started trekking to the factory to retrieve iron wires, one centimetre in diameter and five metres long. Those wires, or rods, were needed for the skeletons of the cement posts of the camp fence. They were tied in bundles and carried by two or three men. Carrying those bundles on our shoulders reminded me of the holzplatz in D.A.W., but I must admit that it was more bearable without the murderous Pilarek around.

We started making the cement posts. First, the heavy wire skeleton was put into the post frame and the frame was filled with freshly mixed cement. We were divided into

groups. Each group was assigned a certain task--one group was to make the wooden post frames, another was to make the wire-post skeletons. The cement was in a mixer. One group would bring the bags of cement from the barrack, while another had to carry the sand and others worked at the mixer. The capos did not spare the stick, but worse were the countless S.S. men that watched us day and night. Many of them were young men straight out of the S.S. training school, men with lots of ambition and vigor who would not leave us alone for a moment. Worse than them were the *arbeitdienst*. Ours was a German inmate in his mid twenties, handsome, and well built with a red (political internee) triangle. This was unusual in itself, as nearly all German inmates with red triangles were middle-aged men. Young German inmates usually had green triangles that meant professional criminals. When he would come to see how the work progressed, his behavior towards us made the S.S. men look like angels. We could not understand, for as I mentioned earlier all German red triangles were political prisoners—Hitler's opponents, respectable people. How is it that this young German with a red triangle was such a murderer?

Several days later, this young German had a disagreement with the *lageraltester*. As a result, the *lageraltester* demoted him to an ordinary foreman over the sand haulers, the group in which I worked. There couldn't have been worst news for us. We began to wonder how long we would last under his supervision. To our surprise, he told us to put down the baskets and delivered a short speech. He tells us that our group will be the best group to work in. Most of the men in our group are Italian Jews. He asked one of them how to say, "To stop." The answer comes, "Fermatedi." And the word for "forward?" "Avanti." He repeats the words a couple of times. We pick up the heavy baskets and walk. Twenty metres farther he yells "Fermatedi." We put the baskets down for a couple of minutes and hear "Avanti." We pick them up to stop again twenty metres further.

We are confused as are the S.S., who walk away in disgust. As if in spite, he always makes us stop when the *lageraltester* passes by. What's worse, he makes us stop when the camp commandant passes by, the big, fat S.S. man who instills fear and trembling in us whenever nears.



As days go by, our foreman starts to talk. We find out that he was a Gendarme assigned to the Krakow district. His work was with the department of supervision over the Krakow Ghetto. He told his stories with visible longing for the days when he was dealing with the Ghetto, when he used to walk in and come out with a briefcase full of German marks.

How does one characterize a type like him that belonged to the Nazi police? The so-called "Schutzpolizei" were part of the "Einsatzgruppen," the very same organization that from the middle of 1941 to the fall of 1942 killed a million and a half Jews in cold blood, from infants to the old and infirm, not sparing a single soul. They threw people half dead in mass graves, burying many alive. He betrayed his leader, the fuehrer, and the party to whom he swore allegiance by stealing. When caught and sent to Auschwitz for punishment, he could murder or, when it served his purposes, act like an angel.

To our advice that he should not antagonize his superiors, he replied, "Have no fear, I know the law better than them, and I'm acting accordingly." What did we Jews know about laws? All we knew was that for us Jews, the exit from the camp was via the crematorium chimney. In the end, he was sent back to Auschwitz; whether as a punishment or to get rid of him, we never found out.

The barracks took over were neglected and the rain used to come through the roof. A few of us were given the task of tarring over the roof, and I was one of them. We had to melt hard lumps of tar and spread it thickly over the shingles. Although it was May, to stand all day on the roof, exposed to the wind, was far from comfortable and caused us to take frequent trips down to urinate.

Another problem was getting the tar off our hands, which was impossible until we received a jug of sulfuric acid. After pouring a few drops in the palm of the hand and quickly rubbing it all over the hands, the tar would start melting. We immediately had to stick our hands under running water. They would be clean but very red and raw.

We finished that job in a week. By that time, others had started to plant the fencepost. It seemed that the Germans planned to enlarge this camp, for they started to fence in a much larger area than the few barracks needed. Some system was eventually

organized so that some were still making the cement posts, while others were bringing them over and laying them down near the holes and another group inserted them.

Once, the washer on which the drum of the cement mixer rested broke and had to be replaced. As the mixer was the most important piece of machinery to our job, the camp commandant himself supervised the repair process. It was no easy task--it required lifting out the mixing drum, which was a metre and a quarter in diameter, made of heavy sheet metal and caked with cement. It had a half-metre long shaft protruding from the bottom of its center that fit in a bearing. It took as many people as could get around the drum to lift it out and lower it to the ground. The old washer was taken out and the camp commandant himself put the new washer in its place. Doing it, he said clearly, "Nobody should touch the washer while we are lifting the drum to put it back in its place." If taking the drum down was difficult, the putting it back was much worse. Firstly, it now had to be lifted from the ground, and the shaft had to go into the bearing without touching or moving the washer. After many tries, and superhuman exertion, we had the shaft right over the washer. Suddenly, one man suddenly stretched out his hand and touched the washer. I don't know if it seemed to him that the washer needed adjustment or the devil himself made him do it. We could not hold the drum and dropped it to the ground.

It is impossible to describe the rage of the camp commandant and the sight of the three-hundred-pound S.S. man hitting, and when he fell, kicking the eighty-pound Dutch Jew. After that, we didn't need encouragement to lift the drum, and the cement mixer was soon operating again.

The digging on the posts was progressing nicely when the commandant noticed that they were not in a very straight line. He ordered them dug up and redone. More men were sent to do that job, including me. Having experience with digging posts from the Ghetto, I started lining them up. This time they remained in the ground.

Slowly, the previously innocent little camp began to look like a concentration camp. The posts were all in and we started to string barbwire on them and attach powerful electric lights on posts five metres apart. They brought two doctors from Auschwitz, both Hungarian Jews. They partitioned off an empty barrack and converted it into a krankenbau (hospital). From another barrack, they partitioned a small place and called it

bekleidungs-kammer (clothes-room). They even sent in an inmate to run it, making him a capo--a Jew from France by the name of Fuchs. The S.S. sent in a truckload of underwear, and from then on, we used to change our underwear weekly. As far as going to shower, we could go any time, even daily.

Apparently, the German-Polish alliance of the inmates that existed in our camp and ran it internally did not approve of having a Jew with the rank of capo. A couple of weeks after his arrival, he left on a S.S. truck to Auschwitz to exchange the dirty laundry. The inmate alliance of the German-Polish blockaltesters and capos conducted a search in the Bekleidungs-Kammer and found some valuables. They reported it to the camp commandant. In the evening, when Fuchs returned, they gave him a good beating and the next day sent him out to work building a road adjoining the camp.

A young ambitious S.S. man kept an eye on him all that day, torturing him continuously. Before we had to return for the appell, he shot him. He was replaced by a German inmate with a green (criminal) triangle who arrived with a group of inmates to replace those that died or were beaten to death. Among the new arrivals was a man from Pruzany by the name of Noah Treger, a barber by profession who became the barber for our S.S. guards.

By the end of June 1944, the camp was ready: the fence was in place with bright lights on the posts, all lit up night, and new watchtowers were equipped with powerful projectors and machine-guns. We were told to expect a zugang of new inmates.

The next day they arrived, some six hundred and fifty Jewish men. They came from a work camp called "Pionki." They had been brought to Auschwitz, where they received their tattooed numbers, went through all the formalities like shaving, showers, receiving clean clothes, and were sent on to us.

They were acquainted with life in camp. It seemed that they had a nicer reception upon arrival in Auschwitz than many other groups. They didn't even go through a selection, maybe because they were not as emaciated as the Auschwitz inmates. In fact, they looked like a healthy group of men between the ages of twenty to forty. They came dressed in civilian clothes that had a long wide red stripe on either side of the pants and a red cross painted on the jackets. Their shirts, which were supposed to serve as

undershirts, were new or almost new, which did not escape notice of our overseers. The first thing they did was order the new arrivals to take off their nice shirts and give them standard camp undershirts.

Those new shirts were brought by Jews from all over Europe to Auschwitz, and were now on the backs of the newly arrived Jews. They became a type of currency in the hands of our overseers. They could be bartered with the civilian Poles that worked in the factory for meat, sausage, butter, and liqueur.

We were divided in two twelve-hour shifts. The day shift went to the plant while the other shifts remained behind, along with the inmates who worked in the camp--people like the cooks, cleaners, and the big shots like the lager altester, the blockaltesters, the lager schreiber, the lager capo and the two doctors. In a word, the "prominentia." The other big shots, like the capos, went with us to the factory.

The factory was about a kilometre from the camp and the path was well worn, first by the French workers' feet and later by us. A wide trail led to it from the camp. Halfway along was a small lake, some hundred by a hundred metres in size. The camp, trail and factory ran along the outskirts of the city Sosnowiec, three hundred metres away. Before the war, the factory produced wire. The Germans converted it into an ammunition factory by dividing it into two parts. In one part, they produced one-hundred-and-fifty-caliber heavy-artillery shells. In the second part, they produced eighty-eight millimetre anti-aircraft guns. I found out later that those guns were at that time the best of its kind.

Upon entering the plant, we were divided in two groups. One was taken to where the shells were being made and the other to where the cannon barrels were being made. We could not go to the part of the factory where the rest of the cannons were being made, for it was in the part of the plant outside of the fence. The part we worked in was fenced in by us at the same time as when we were erecting the camp fence.

In that factory were employed six hundred French civilians, two thousand Poles from the city and vicinity, and now eight hundred Auschwitz inmates. There were only two entrances in the fenced part of the plant and there was an S.S. man at each of them. The civilians had to show an ID at the gate, which was a busy place due to the large number of workers going in and out.

When the fence around the camp was finished, there was no need for S.S. to guard us, so some were recalled back to Auschwitz—mainly the young ones. Later on, more S.S. men were taken away and replaced by older men in air force uniforms. Nevertheless, there were still enough S.S. men to make our lives miserable.

With time, heavy traffic at the gates meant the guards became lax in checking I.D.'s. The women didn't really have to show theirs at all, as there were no women prisoners working there. As for the men prisoners, we had all clean-shaven heads, while all of the civilians had hair on their heads.

The civilians were not so eager to reach for their I.D.'s every time they passed the gate. Usually they just walked past the gate unless the guard was a stickler, and most S.S. men were, in which case the civilians grudgingly showed their papers.

The very first day we were assigned as assistants to the civilians, the Poles and Frenchmen. I walked into the part of the factory where I was assigned to work and saw gigantic lathes where people were making cannon barrels. In that part of the factory, there were thirty Jews assigned as helpers to the Polish and French tradesmen. Our job was to sweep the cement floors around the machines, pick up the metal shavings, and hand the tradesmen wrenches and other tools. In short, we were errand boys.

Here, for the first time, my skills from technical trade school in Brest-Litowsk came in handy. Although our capos came to work with us, they had no concept of what was going on. The work was very specialized, and there were plenty of engineers and artisans to supervise us.

I was assigned to a Frenchman who operated a large lathe. In the first couple of hours, he noticed that I had some knowledge of lathe operation. He encouraged me to try to work on it. When his eight hours shift ended and a Pole came replace him (the factory ran twenty-four hours a day), he told the Pole that I was a tradesman and he should let me work a bit on the lathe. The Pole was delighted and let me work on the crude parts of the barrel. Convincing himself that he could depend on me, he walked away to socialize with other workers.

We worked twelve-hour shifts while the civilian workers, the Poles and Frenchmen, worked eight. In this way, I got to know all three men that worked at that

particular lathe. The capo was seldom seen and the civilian workers had no authority over us, except when it concerned work. I walked around, seeing the immensity of the place and everything it takes to produce a cannon barrel. I learned that a cannon barrel is not made from one piece of steel, but consists of seven individual tubes that went one into the other. Each tube or casing had to be precise to one five hundredth of a millimetre and each lathe had a special part to perform.

We made the innermost casing on the lathe where I worked. It didn't take long for the supervisor of our part of the factory to notice that my civilian boss was loafing around while I was doing the work. He soon made me an independent worker. From then on, I spent twelve hours a day, six days or nights a week, at the lathe. We used to alternate—one week we worked day shift and the next, the night shift.

Next to me was another lathe that was run by three men, two Poles and a Frenchman. They had very little to do with each other, and especially little to do with the Frenchman. As soon as the eight hours were over all rushed home, not wanting to spend an extra minute in the factory. The two Poles thought very little of the Frenchman, although to me he seemed to be more worldly than them. To my regret, I never got to know him for two reasons. Firstly, because of the language problem; secondly, he had the tendency to spend every free moment with his fellow Frenchman working nearby. Frankly, I don't blame him, to be so far away from home—and not entirely voluntarily—in time of war, longing for dear ones. At times like those, just the sound of the mother tongue can give some comfort.

I became very friendly with one of the two Poles. His name was Tadek Indelak and he hailed from Katowice, ten kilometres away. He used to commute to work daily. He was a friend in the full sense of the word. Polite and trusting, he used to confide in me as if I were his childhood best friend. He shared all his innermost secrets, even about his relationship with his girlfriend, with me.

Quite often, he expressed his sympathy with the Jews, not using the word *Zydzi*, a derogatory and disrespectful word, instead saying *ci ludzie* (those people). He was careful not to use the words “arrested” or “intern” to refer to me. When he would speak about my

past, he didn't say, "Before you were brought here" or "Before you were arrested." He used the words *w cywilu* (in civilian life). This shows the decency of that young man.

The second Pole, a few years older than the first at age 35, was not so polite when speaking of Jews, although he showed a fair amount of tolerance towards me. He justified his decency toward me by saying that I was the only craftsman among all the other Jews who worked in the plant, the only one working independently on a lathe. It did no good telling him that I came from a shtetl where all tradesmen, craftsmen and artisans were Jews and that in all the shtetls around me it was the same.

His girlfriend worked in the same factory. She was a girl of about my age, about twenty. When they worked at night on the same shift she used to visit him during the half-hour midnight break, when all the civilian workers got a meal. They came to the factory kitchen holding with their food. They would sit down to eat while we inmates watched with our mouths watering.

I used to watch as my workmate's girlfriend took two mouthfuls of food, turned up her nose and throw it in the garbage can. I used to think to myself, "She knows we are hungry, why doesn't she offer her leftovers to me or one of us instead of throwing them out?"

A few nights later they both came back from the kitchen, he with his container of food and she empty handed. I understood that she did not approve of the factory's food and would rather not bother taking it. Another week or so passed and again we were working the night shift. At midnight break, the civilians went to get their meal. I saw the Pole coming alone from the direction of the kitchen, holding a container of food in each hand. He walked over to me, stretching out one arm with a container towards me, and said, "This is from my girlfriend. She wants you to eat it." I took the container and looked inside. I saw that the food was untouched; it consisted of a heaping ladle full of mashed potatoes covered with gravy, and on top was a warm piece of sausage.

I hadn't seen such food, nor did I dare dream of such, for years. After I finished eating and scraped it clean, I turned to go to wash the container. The Pole would not hear of it, saying that his girlfriend would wash both of them. When I asked him where she was so that I could thank her for such a treat, he replied that she was embarrassed to come

over so I should not feel obliged to her. This happened several times. Yet her boyfriend used to tell me that she did not like Jews and that I was the exception. It was too good to last. A short time later, she got a permanent day job in the factory, and the day shift did not get lunch at factory.

I became increasingly close with the first Pole, Tadek Indelak. After many conversations, I discovered that he came from a poor family. I realized that if he did not help me with food, it was simply because he has nothing to give. He ate the midnight meal with much gusto.

One day, he asked me if I could procure a pair of camp drawers for him. This question intrigued me very much, especially knowing as I did that camp underwear was made using a special design for prisoners. They were a medium blue color with narrow dark blue stripes. He told me that an acquaintance of his got a pair from an inmate for a loaf of bread and succeeded in dyeing them to a darker shade that made them unrecognizable.

A few days later when we were changing the underwear, I tore my pair into two pieces. Instead of turning in a pair of underwear, I threw just half a pair on top of the pile of dirty underwear. The stubendienst saw me throwing two items, a shirt and underpants. A week later, I threw the other half. In this way, I was left with an extra pair. The next day I took that pair to work and gave it to Tadek. The following morning he brought me a loaf of bread.

And so we started to barter. Every two weeks, I brought him a pair of underwear and he, in exchange, would bring a loaf of bread. The loaf of bread was far from satisfying from my hunger, but it helped.

The big shots in camp now had one of their own in the clothing factory and started dealing with the civilian Poles in the cannon factory. They did not barter for bread, for they had enough of this. They wanted sausages, meat and liquor. Each of those big shots, like the blockaltesters, capos, registrar, and others, found from among us a confidante who became the middleman between them and the Poles in our factory. The big shots decided on the price, while we Jews had to haggle with the Poles.



There was a lager capo, a German inmate with a green triangle of about sixty who looked and acted as if he had spent his life behind bars. He approached me and proposed that I should be his middleman, which I gladly agreed to.

The camp Capo did not go with us to the factory. His job was to see that the camp yard, barracks, washrooms, and bathhouse were all in running order, not that he lifted a finger to do anything. Rather, he ensured that others did it. One of his jobs was to stand at the gate and help the S.S. men count as we were marching out in the morning and returning. When it became known that we were stealing things from camp and selling them to the Poles, the S.S. started to search us on our way in and out of the gate. This lager capo used to help them search us.

While searching others, he used to bring a little flat package to me. Pretending to search me, he would place it in my jacket and let me through as if he just finished searching me. At work, I would open it up and offer it to Tadek Indelak, quoting the price the Capo gave me, adding half a loaf of bread for my trouble.

Those transactions took place two to three times a week. Having tested me and finding me trustworthy, he started bringing me the nice shirts that the six hundred and fifty Jews from Pionky were told to take off when they came to us. Those shirts were unobtainable in war-torn Poland and were worth a kilogram of meat or even a bottle of liquor.

For my trouble, I never received more than half a loaf of bread, which I shared with my friend Leibel Bliskofsky, one of the two partners in our bread ration. By that time, our third partner was moved to the other shift and to another block. The two of us remained friends and shared every bit of our food. I was the bigger earner, although he tried to reciprocate. We received a few cigarettes a couple of times during that era. I, a non-smoker, gave them to Leibel, who did smoke. The next morning as we received our bread, I saw Leibel cutting off a piece of his bread and sliding it over to my side of the bench. I asked what it was for, and he answered the cigarettes. I am so glad that I did not accept the bread. Otherwise, I would not forgive myself, even today.

As in Auschwitz proper, so here in Sosnowiec the privileged or prominent inmates had it relatively good. For us Jews, our fate seemed to be to remain locked up

until the end of our lives, regardless of how long our miserable existences may last. The only way out for us was the crematorium. For the Germans, Poles, or Frenchmen, it was only a matter of time until the war came to an end and their sentence would be resolved. Their personal desire was to stay alive and make being there as bearable, as comfortable and as pleasant as possible. To this end, they organized different amusements. Of course, the object of their ridicule and mockery was the Jews.

All these started with our first lager altester, a German inmate in his mid-thirties with a green triangle. He was giant of a man who took delight in seeing Jews being beaten. He introduced boxing matches at which two starving Jews were fought it out with bare fists, bruised faces and bleeding noses for a piece of bread.

One such match got him once so excited that he wanted to participate himself, but what sense would a match make between a 6'4", two hundred and fifty pound man, against a 5'8" man weighing ninety pounds. So, the lager altester called for a volunteer. As the majority of the inmates at that time were the Italian Jews, his call had to be translated into Italian.

To everybody's surprise, a young man stepped forward. We all thought that he did it as a joke or that maybe he didn't understand the challenge. A German-speaking Italian Jew explained to him twice more what it was all about. Nevertheless, the young man insisted on challenging the lager altester.

The two of them got into the temporary arena. The lager altester was taller by a head than his opponent, weighing three times as much. It looked laughable. The lager altester sent for two pairs of boxing gloves that he had made, and the two faced each other. Again, the lager altester turned to the interpreter and said to him, "Tell him," pointing at his opponent, "not to be afraid to hit me back, make him understand it." When the Italian heard what the interpreter said he replied, "I am not afraid of him. He should be afraid of me." His reply brought a smile on everyone's face--such empty bravado.

When the bout started, we all realized that the Italian Jew was an excellent boxer and was not joking when he said that the lager altester should be afraid of him. When the fight was over, the Jewish young man was the undisputed winner despite the opponent's size, weight, and strength.

I will admit that notwithstanding the embarrassment, the lager altester took the defeat in good taste. Some of the big shots gave the winner some extra bread, for which he had worked hard and justly deserved.

That same lager altester left the camp for Auschwitz a couple of weeks later due to a nagging sore that developed on his leg. In his place came another lager altester, this time a German with a red triangle (political internee). He was a man of about fifty whose face expressed both intelligence and authority. Now and then during the appell, he would speak to us for a few minutes issuing new orders or decrees. One couldn't help but admire his bearing, voice, and diction, which aroused so much respect that even the S.S. men, who were always yelling, would fall silent and listen to him.

On our way to and from work, we had to sing. We Jews did not feel like singing, but the dozen and a half Russian inmates, who were fed better and had hope of getting out alive, sang patriotic Soviet songs. Eventually, my friend Leibel and I joined them in singing. To us, it was a secret protest against Nazism and all it stood for.

When the S.S. found out the meaning of the words, they forbade us from singing Russian songs, so we started to sing vulgar and crude Polish songs. The more obscene they were, the more Polish Jews sang. Especially many sang when we used to line up in the factory in order to march back to camp, when all the Poles would be watching us and listening. This was a sort of protest, mixed with contempt for the guards, the people around us, and humanity at large.

One summer morning, as we were going back to camp after a nights work, we saw a man fully dressed floating face down on the water in the small lake halfway between the factory and camp. It was clear to us that the man was dead. At the time, we did not pay too much attention to it. The next day in the factory, we found out from some civilian Polish workers that it was a Jew who apparently committed suicide.

Every Jew in the camp talked about it and I am sure that everyone was bothered with the question, "What drove him to it?" How did the Jew manage to stay alive until the middle of 1944? Was he paying to be hidden at the home of a Pole and when his money ran out, he was driven out? Or maybe the Pole feared for his life and told him to go. How

hopeless was his situation that he was forced to commit suicide? What a tragic story that man took with him.

It seemed to me that at that time, I felt sorrier for him than for myself. As far as I was concerned, my fate was already sealed. It was only a matter of time. For that poor Jew, every minute, every hour was a struggle. How many times a day did his mood change from hope to despair? How many times a day did the sky fall on him? Is there an end to Jewish suffering, to Jewish misery? Does it always end in death?

That event stayed on my mind for a long time. He was no ordinary *mussleman*, not one of the bags of skin and bones that were falling by the hundreds daily in the camp. This Jew dared to fool, to outsmart the Germans, and tried to survive them. To me he was a falcon shot down in flight.

We did not work on Sundays. On sunny Sundays, many of us would sit on the ground, leaning against the barrack wall and watching the civilian Polish population walking leisurely on the city sidewalks a stone's throw from us. We used to feel a terrible melancholy enveloping us, as we couldn't help but think of our final moments. Yet, during the two hours of compulsory bed rest on Sunday afternoons, we used to lie on our bunks and dream aloud about a miracle that we fervently prayed should happen—namely that we should somehow come out alive. What would we do with ourselves? Many of us wished to be guards at gas chambers into which the victorious army would be herding the Germans, just as they were herding us Jews into now.

How naive we were to think about surviving, and we were even more naïve to think that the world, the leaders of the powers whose armies were now squeezing the Germans from every side, would give a damn about the Jews. We certainly didn't think that the Allies would let Germany get off with the symbolic hanging of a couple of dozen mass murderers while they let the other thousands upon thousands of murderers and their collaborators get away. Worse still, that they would let them into their own countries while keeping the doors closed to the few remnants of European Jewry that survived.

Our camp numbered close to nine hundred men, ninety-five percent of them Jews. Now and then, a group of new inmates arrived from Auschwitz to replace those that died (and only Jews died). The non-Jews were all German, Polish and Russian prisoners. They

all were a privileged group, holding the best positions as block altesters, capos, and cooks. Even the Russian prisoners had it better than us Jews. The dozen and a half Russian inmates were a mixed lot and kept to themselves. Only my friend Leibel Bliskowsky and I were treated warmly; because we spoke Russian and came from the Eastern part of Poland that was annexed to the Soviet Union in 1939, we were considered countrymen. We found out that among them were four Red Army Lieutenants. One of them was a Jew by the name of Naftaly. The Germans did not know that he was a Jew, but a couple weeks later, he made it official. His status did not change because of it, for once you are in Auschwitz you cannot go lower. Amongst the Russians were also two former Ukrainian policemen, that is to say Nazi collaborators. They must have committed some transgression to get them sent to Auschwitz. Among them were a few former Soviet soldiers from different detachments. While they were telling each other stories from the front, I overheard one telling how, during a retreat on the Ukrainian front, a truckload of Soviet Jews escaping the German advance caught up with them. The Soviet soldiers forced the Jews off the truck and, abandoning their position, sped away into the Soviet Union, leaving the Jews at the mercy of the approaching Germans.

They were a mixed bag of individuals from different parts of the Soviet Union and with different outlooks and characters. The officers and a couple of the former soldiers were decent people. One of them, the oldest in age at somewhere between forty-five and fifty, the Russians called "Uncle Ghrysha." He was close to one of the lieutenants, a tall handsome and well-built man who used to listen in on our conversations. Uncle Ghrysha started questioning me in midsummer about Auschwitz and especially about Birkenau. He wanted to know every detail. He asked about every step the trainloads of Jews went through from the moment they arrived to the moment the doors of the gas chambers closed behind them. He even asked about the process of burning the bodies and disposing of the ashes. He himself had been brought from jail, spent in one day Auschwitz, went through the entire process of admittance and was sent on to us to Sosnowiec.

I was intrigued by his questions, but less than two months later I understood why he was so interested. At about ten in the evening when I was working night shift, we suddenly heard a piercing whistle. Most of the machines fell silent and I could hear the

capo yelling, "Fall in, everybody fall in." By the time we were lined up properly, there were S.S. men swarming all around in the commotion. We were counted several times and it turned out that we were two inmates short--Uncle Ghrysha and that tall handsome red army Lieutenant. The S.S. immediately started a search and we were ordered to return to work. The search continued all night with no success; they were not found.

In the morning, the Russian prisoners were ordered to take off their civilian clothes that were marked with wide red crosses and were given the standard Auschwitz striped, pajama-like uniforms. Their leather footwear was taken away and they were given shoes made of cloth tops with wooden soles.

It didn't take more than two weeks before the old story repeated itself. We were counted and this time four prisoners were missing. The S.S. conducted a search and come up with nothing.

The first two escapees simply turned their clothes inside out so that the red crosses on their pants were hidden, put on civilian caps gotten from Poles to cover their shaven heads and simply walked by the guard, who did not bother to check their I.D.'s. The second group apparently didn't have any help from the civilian Poles. They just simply overwhelmed the guard--a man of about fifty, not a S.S. man but dressed in an air force uniform the fence post--then the four inmates ran away. The next day, a truck arrived with S.S. men and took the remaining dozen Russian prisoners back to Auschwitz.

Two days later, the camp commandant ordered us to plant two wooden posts a metre and a half apart and to fasten a piece of pipe two and a half metres off the ground, connecting them. The contraption was to be put in the middle of the appell square.

We were speculating about the purpose of it. The next morning as we were sleeping after a night's work, the door of our barrack opens up and in walks in two of the four escapees. They were the two younger ones of the four. One, named "Misha," did not look to be eighteen. He was a nice quiet young man. There was talk that the other, in his mid twenties, was a German collaborator and a policeman.

As soon as they came into our barrack, which was where they were sleeping previously, we all got up. Suddenly the purpose of the two posts with the metal bar across became clear: it was a gallows.

We all wanted to know what transpired with them since their escape and what happened to the other two that escaped with them. Our entire barrack consisted of Polish or Italian Jews who were never close to them. The only two that were close to them were Leibel Bliskowsky and I. However, we did not dare ask questions in such a moment.

The two escapees sat on a bunk facing the window. Looking out they could see the appellplatz on which stood the newly erected gallows. The younger of the two, Mishka, turned to me and asked, "When did they put up this *turnik* (Russian horizontal bar used in gymnastics)?" "The day after you escaped," I answered, thinking that since they were not caught the first day after their escape, this would drive away any sinister thoughts. It seemed that for a moment, I was able to set their minds at ease. But after the distribution of the mid-day soup, the camp capo came in with a razor in his hand and started to shave their necks. Their composure broke.

After the capo left, there was a dead silence in the barrack. Many long minutes passed before we started to whisper to each other. But those close to them didn't dare to utter the merest sound.

The two condemned men again sat next to each other, looking out the window. The younger one murmured something to himself as tears rolled slowly down his cheeks. Nobody went over to speak to them. I felt that was my duty to go over more than my friend Leibl's, because of the age difference. But what was there for me to say? Still, I went over and sat down near the younger one, joining them in looking out the window. Now, being close to him, I could identify his murmur as an old Russian parting song from a son to a mother. This song I heard for the first time from my parents when we were in Chomsk, when we were sitting in the dark in the long evenings in 1941. In those despair filled nights, my parents used to hum this song quietly sometimes. A depressing song befitting a hopeless situation. Today, I am not sure if I said something to those two escapees or not, but if I did, I doubt if they heard or paid attention to it.

The barrack door opened and a couple of S.S. men marched in with some capos. They took the two escapees into the washroom, and soon they emerged with their hands tied behind their backs. We were ordered out of the barracks and told to form a large quadrangle around the gallows. Every S.S. man and guard entered the camp, except those

on the watchtowers, and formed a circle around us. For the first time I saw them pointing machine guns at us in the camp proper.

To me, to all of us, this display of force looked ludicrous. What were they afraid of? That we would oppose the hangings? They were beating us, torturing us and killing us daily with no resistance of any kind, without even a word of protest. What did they think we would do now?

The lager capo tied two nooses on the metal bar, put a short bench underneath and told the two Russian escapees to get on. They had to be helped, as they found it difficult to climb up with their hands tied behind their backs. There they stood with their nooses dangling in their faces while the *rapportfuhrer* (S.S. registrar) read out to them their death sentence in German. Not that they understood, nor that it mattered to them. The camp commandant nodded and the camp capo kicked the bench out from under them. Their bodies were taken to Auschwitz that very same afternoon.

Among the six hundred and fifty Jews that came to our camp from "Pionky," one could find a diversity of characters and intellects, from total ignoramus to Ph.D.'s--one had a Ph.D. in chemistry. Some were ordinary Jews, humble, meek and unpretentious; others were self-respecting, even vain and proud--maybe too much so for their good.

One of them I will mention. He was a young man named Chatzkl Silverberg, in his twenties and from the city of Radom. We were in the same barrack and worked the same shift. Because of our close age and my months spent in Auschwitz, he "bent his reverence" and picked me to be his confidant.

Once, during our night shift, he approached me and pointed discreetly with his eyes in the direction of a young girl who I had never seen at work before. He said to me, "You see that girl? She is a Jewish girl, a very close friend of mine since childhood. She has Aryan papers and passes as a Christian. Somehow, she found out where I am so she applied for a job in that plant with the intention of getting me out of here. She has connections to make Aryan papers for me and a way of getting me out of here." "So what are you waiting for?" I asked him. With a solemn face, he answered, "I don't want to owe her my life." I looked at him as if he had lost his mind.



The girl worked there for about a week. Unable to talk him into bending his pride, she left. After the war, I found out that he did not survive the difficult last couple of months before liberation.

My close friend, Leibl Bliskowsky, worked assembling the cannon barrels. As I mentioned earlier, the canon barrel consisted of seven separate tubes that fit into each other. The innermost of these consisted of two parts. The lower part took the impact of the explosion during firing and got damaged much sooner than the upper part, so it had to be exchanged often. Those two inner parts were joined by precision-made grooves. In order to save labour and material, only the lower part would be changed. The joining of those two parts required delicate work with hammer file and specially made tools. One excessive motion with the file or slam with a rubber hammer could create many hours of extra work. Still, Leibl and his Polish civilian co-worker managed to sabotage those locking mechanisms in such a way that could not be detected during the final inspection. As a result, many of those cannons were being sent back for repairs after a short time in service.

Leibl became good friends with the Pole he worked with, who was a true socialist and as such carried no animosity towards Jews. Once he offered to sell Leibl a handgun for ninety marks. The idea of possessing a weapon appealed to me very much, for after the successful escape of the first two Russians and two out of the second four, the idea of escaping reawakened in me. Unfortunately, procuring the ninety marks proved an insurmountable difficulty.

This Pole's socialistic leanings were apparently well known, for some time later on a dark night, one of the directors of the plant we worked in, a Pole and Nazi collaborator by the name of Zabicky, was assassinated. The Germans, with the help of the Polish collaborationist Police, arrested Polish workers from the plant, among them that Pole, under suspicion of having something to do with the assassination. However, no proof could be found against the men and two weeks later, they returned to work.

During the midnight break, we Jews gathered in quiet corners of the plant to conduct political debates. Often, the civilian Polish workers joined in. Not fearing betrayal from either side, we exchanged ideas and opinions freely. During such a

midnight break, I walked over to my friend Leibl for a chat and found him deep in conversation with several inmates and Polish civilians. During the conversation, one Jew said, "If we should survive," but before he had the chance to finish, he was interrupted by a Pole who said loud and clear, "If you will survive we Poles will finish you off." I noticed that a couple of the Poles felt uncomfortable with his pronouncement, but nobody chastised him for it.

I have not mentioned our third partner, Shmuel Rosenboim (Der Maltsher), since he started working in the other shift. However, in one event he still played an important part. It happened on a day in fall of 1944, before dark. We are standing in formation, ready to go out to work, while the dayshift was just coming in from the factory. As usual, there are S.S. men to escort us. There are a couple of non-commissioned S.S. officers around. I watch with astonishment as Shmuel Rosenboim walks out from the formation that has just returned from the plant. Under each arm, he carries fair-sized parcels. He walks over to one of the officers, hands him the two parcels, turns around, and joins the column that is marching into the camp. Each of us started to speculate about what just transpired. It turns out that Shmuel Rosenboim was the middleman between the top inmates in camp, like the lager altesters and civilian Poles. He used to barter clothing provided by the capo in charge of the clothing room for food delicacies unavailable to the public in Germany. These big shot inmates wanted to find favor in the eyes of the camp commandant, and arranged the procurement of two turkeys for his birthday party.

Somehow, Shmuel Rosenboim succeeded in worming himself into a cozy friendship with some influential inmates who had a close relationship with the highest authority in camp, the camp commandant himself.

The camp commandant was a typical S.S. man of the old guard who joined the S.S. in the very early years of the Nazi regime out of necessity. Without education or moral depth, he quickly adjusted to the S.S. environment. The brutality required during the thirties did not bother his conscience. To rise from being a window washer to his S.S. rank he had to excel in his unquestionable devotion and cruelty. His evilness manifested itself not only towards us inmates, but even towards his equals.

When the allies liberated France, many Nazi big wigs found themselves back in Germany without the high positions they held in France. The Nazi hierarchy appointed many of them to work in factories. Such a man was sent to work in our factory. What his assignment was, we did not know, and I doubt if even he knew. He would wander around aimlessly for a couple of hours a day among the workers and noisy machines.

How it happened I don't remember, but I remember this middle-aged German starting to beat up one of the inmates. He only stopped when he ran out of steam and started panting. Within a few minutes, I saw the Lager (camp) commandant striding in. His appearance and threatening looks made us inmates uneasy. The three-hundred-pound S.S. man, who we have just seen for the first time, was ruffled in his uncontrollable rage, the flaps of his unbuttoned, long, black leather coat flapping like two forbidding wings of the angel of death. It threw fear into us as we wondered who would be his victim this time.

To our astonishment he strides over to that new arrived German big shot, almost yelling, says to him, "What right have you to order around my men?" It was the first time in camps or in ghetto that I heard a German referring to us Jews as men. It seemed that the camp commandant didn't receive a satisfactory answer, for he raised his voice even higher. Apparently, the commandant won the argument, for from then on that German had nothing to do with us inmates. We knew only too well that the camp commandant didn't do it out of love for us Jews; rather, he resented the fact that the German interfered in matters that under his jurisdiction.

From time to time, a civilian Polish worker or Frenchman let one of us work at the lathe, but not willingly. There were two reasons for their reticence. First, they were afraid that if a Jew learned to operate a lathe, they would lose their job. Second, should the learner by chance make a mistake or cause any damage, they would be held responsible.

Such an accident happened. A young boy of no more than eighteen tried to perform an operation on a gun barrel and took off a fraction of a millimetre too much. Instead of blaming the civilian who was supposed to watch him, the young boy was held responsible by the foreman. At that time, it was considered sabotage. However, since the

damage could be repaired, the camp commandant ordered that he be given twenty-five lashes. He was taken to a secluded corner of the plant, where an S.S. man delivered the lashes. According to regulations, the camp commandant and the camp senior were present. At six in the evening as we were lining up to return to camp, I noticed the young man, or rather boy, a couple of rows in front of me. He stood there weeping like the child that he was from the lashes, lashes that at times killed men.

We stood there surrounded by the S.S. guards that were escorting us to camp and by the hundreds of the civilian workers. The camp senior, seeing the crying boy, walks over to him and says, "What are you crying for?" All the boy could utter was, "I am innocent." The camp senior looks at him and right there in front of the S.S. and all the civilians says, "You are innocent?" The capo says, "I am innocent and I've spent fifteen years in a concentration camp, what are you complaining about?" I was surprised at that boldness of the camp senior to proclaim his innocence in front of all the S.S. and the civilians.

At times, I reminisce about the several hundred Jews who were with me in that camp, Sosnowiec. The majority of them were in their late teens and in the twenties. They demonstrated all kinds of potential talent. A few of them showed virtuous qualities as singers, entertaining us, if somberly, with old-timey, sentimental Yiddish songs while we were getting ready for bed at night.

I know of two from that group that survived and are now *chazonim* (cantors) here in Toronto. There were among us men in their late twenties and thirties that studied in Austria, Italy and even Germany up to the mid-thirties. Others were artful storytellers with inexhaustible sources of tales from personal life.

One's family name was Warner; his given name nobody knew nor did anybody care. He was in his mid twenties, of medium height, with no outwardly Semitic features. He was intelligent, keen and clever, characteristic of Yeshiva students from times gone by. But his most noticeable virtue was his wit. He could not utter two sentences without squeezing in a joke, and they were always amusing.

What I want to tell about him is the way this intelligent and apparently shrewd man got himself into Auschwitz. He was born in Germany to, as far as he knew Christian parents and of course was not circumcised. He served in the German army and in late 1943 was stationed in Paris. As with many soldiers, he was not happy with life in the army and was longing for home, particularly a rich and comfortable home like his parents had. His father was a movie producer. In late 1943 or early 1944, he heard from a friend that Jewish men were not serving in the Jewish army. The idea stayed in his mind and after ruminating for a while, he remembered his father mentioning once that one of his parents was Jewish. Not realizing the consequences, he ran to his captain asking to be released from the army. The captain told him to get out, thinking that it was a joke. Werner, however, insisted that it was true. The captain then told him to go back to his quarters.

Two days later, he was given a ticket home. Somewhere along the road, he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz. Werner unfortunately was shot during our march from Sosnowiec to Mauthausen in the second half of January 1945, when the prisoners of Auschwitz and all of its affiliated camps were being marched deeper into Germany. With his death died his dream of producing a movie about the war.

From the friendlier civilian Poles, we knew much about the military situation. We knew that the Red Army was already at the Vistula River. It was so near yet, for us Jews, so far. We understood that with the next push or offensive, the Red Army would reach us. Would the Germans wait until the offensive to annihilate us or start sooner?

And so the autumn passed accompanied by the dream of liberation. Not having any connection with Auschwitz, we knew nothing of what was taking place there. Of course, trucks used to go back and forth between us several times a week, and sometimes a block elder or capo used to get a ride, but they did not share news with us.

Christmas eve we went to work. The civilians were allowed to go home two hours early. The Poles I knew came over to wish me a happy holiday. Suddenly, all the engines stopped for the first time since we started working there. The silence was eerie. We sat or stood in groups, not knowing what to do with ourselves. In that strange stillness while all

the civilians, all the free people left for their homes or families, we felt the deep hurt and pain for everyone and everything we had lost.

There was no reason for us to stay in the plant. We were lined up and marched to the camp. To our surprise, we received peeled potatoes and a spoonful of jam with dinner. When we finished, we received another portion of potatoes, this time without jam. It was the first time that I went to sleep without hunger pangs since I came to camp.

On November 17, 1944, I came to work the night shift at 6 p.m. Everything in the plant seemed normal, although a certain tension could be felt among the workers. A day or two earlier, a rumor spread that the Red Army started an offensive along the Vistula River. Common sense dictated that the Germans would do something with us Jews. The question was, would they take us to Birkenau to be gassed or will they shoot us here? One thing we were sure of was that they would not leave us here alive. If there was ever a time to try to save ourselves it had to be now.

Our work went on, but at a very slow pace and the management did not pay attention. We inmates kept on walking from one another asking for ideas or advice. The closest friend I had there was Leibel Beilofsky and I wanted to be alone with him for a few minutes. But as soon as I went over to him, there were instantly others around. We simply had no chance to be alone. It was because of our longer stay in Auschwitz that others thought that we might have some sort of solution to our critically desperate situation.

In this confusion, time was running out. At about 10 p.m. that evening, we heard a whistle and I noticed a large number of guards at the entrances. We were ordered to line up in order to go back to the camp. I thought to myself, the game is over. In they will take us to Birkenau or shoot us in the camp.

As we lined up five in a row in the factory surrounded by our guards, all of the lights suddenly went out and there was total darkness throughout the entire plant. I realized that then was the time to run and hide in the factory, but I needed a few seconds to get used to the darkness in order not to avoid S.S. men. They were everywhere. Those were precious few seconds that I wasted, for as I was preparing for the dash, the lights

came on and I missed the chance. I looked around and saw that all the rows were even. Nobody was missing, probably for the same reason.

I knew then that for the second time in my life I missed the chance to save myself. The first time occurred as we were leaving the ghetto, when Shalom Bernstein gave me a prod and told me to come with him. While I was hesitating, he got off the sled and walked into Krucels mill. Now, again, I missed my chance.

We were led into the camp and told to prepare for a march. We each received a whole loaf of bread, which I immediately cut into quarters and put in my pockets. We were told to each take a blanket. We remained outside until 5 a.m. the next day, January 18, and then we were let out of the camp, five abreast, into the unknown.

We walked through Sosnowiec as the city was just awakening. It had been a long long time since I walked in a street between houses. Now and then a person walked by, looking at us with curiosity but not stopping.

I'm too busy looking around the houses and streets to notice our guards. Finally, we are out of the city and in an open field. The road we are on is covered with snow but well used. The wind cuts my face and penetrates our flimsy coats, chilling us to the bone. I notice that some of us have wrapped their blankets around themselves and I do the same. The blanket does break the wind. Now I observe our guards and am surprised that I didn't notice earlier that the entire complement of our guards, mostly S.S. guards, has changed. More than half of them consist now of older men of between forty and fifty. They are dressed in air-force uniforms. To a twenty-two-year old, a fifty-year old is an old man. They walk stooped along our lines. The collars of their coats are up as protection against the wind. They don't look at us, seemingly preoccupied with their own thoughts. They only straighten up and become aggressive when a S.S. man gets close.

The S.S. men have a new role. They walk up and down our column making sure there are no stragglers. If someone falls behind, he is beaten; if this does not help, he is ordered to get off the road and is shot. At the very end of the column, I notice a couple dozen of prisoners are pulling and pushing a fully loaded farmer's wagon. With nightfall, we enter a town called Boiton ("Biton" in Polish.) We are locked inside of a school. At least we are protected from the wind and there is enough room to stretch out. I eat up a

quarter of my bread and make sure the other three quarters are deep in my pockets. Apparently, I slept well, for when I woke up before daybreak I found only two quarters of my bread. Overnight somebody helped himself to one quarter. I missed the loss, but in all honesty, I did not begrudge the thief. I knew very well the feelings of hunger.

With daybreak, we were driven outside to continue the march. Not receiving anything to eat or drink, I ate one of my two quarters of bread. We continued marching all day long. It was already dark when we passed through Guwice (Gleiwitz). On the other side of town, we were herded into some public building in which there was hardly room enough to lie down. In the middle of the night, I got up to use the washroom and had literally to tread on people to get there. When I finally made it back to my room, there was no thought of finding a place to lie down. I had to spend the rest of the night on my feet. That morning, I finished my last quarter of bread, not knowing that that was the last piece of bread, or any food for that matter, I would see for the next two weeks. After marching the whole day, we were locked up again in some building where we were just as tightly crowded as in the previous one.

That night, because of the cold, I had again to use the washroom. Having learned my lesson the previous night, I wasn't about to spend another half a night standing, so I urinated on the floor lying down. The blanket in which I was wrapped sucked up some of it, but by morning, it was dry.

That morning I had nothing left to eat. In the wagon that some of us were forced to haul laid the guards' knapsacks. Below the pile of knapsacks were many loaves of bread and tins of meat and other assorted cans of food that the guards ate while escorting us. Those pushing the wagon tried to stick their hand in the wagon to pinch off a piece of bread. If a guard noticed, he would give the guilty one such a beating that he would remember it the rest of his shortened life. Worse still, if a S.S. man noticed, they took the transgressor to the side of the road and shot him. It was even worse for those who were harnessed to the wagon. They had to pull with their last bit of strength without having a chance even to try to get a piece of bread.

Not having eaten for days, we were barely able to drag our feet, but for those pulling the wagon it was much worse. They would fall away and be replaced by others. If



someone that fell could still get up, he was sent back to the marching. If not, he would be dragged off the road and shot. I would have liked to be one of those pushers, but what if they made me pull the wagon? Would I last until the evening? I decided not to volunteer.

That night we were herded into a school building. It was a large, two-story building, well lit, and roomy enough to walk from room to room and floor to floor. We could easily see the guards outside. A few of my acquaintances approached me to suggest that if I went with them we would make an attempt to escape. Their plan was to jump together from the window onto the guard below, throw a blanket around him and make a run for it.

It was a bold idea, but to me it was impractical. Where would we go, hungry, exhausted, in prison garb and on German soil? To me it meant suicide. I refused to join them and they would not go without me. With daybreak, we continued our march. At about ten in the morning, we entered a town of some twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants.

We are being led down what seems to me to be the main street. It is a cold, sunny morning without wind, so it is bearable. Our camp commandant walks in the middle of the street as usual. On one side of him marches the rapportfuhrer, and on the other an S.S. non-commissioned officer, whom we referred to as the executioner, as he seemed to take delight in shooting prisoners. Behind them, we march five in a row, a long line of *haftlinge* (inmates) surrounded by guards and a large wagon at the end.

It is what I would call a typical German town. There are people in the street, they look at us with curiosity, and yet they have an expression like they would rather not see us. Their faces betray tension and anxiety. From the sidewalk, they yell out to our camp commandant, "What shall we do? Shall we run or stay?" He yelled back to them, "No, no, stay, you have lots of time." From above me comes a voice. I look up and see a hefty young blond German woman leaning out from an upper floor. She says, "We are not moving, we are not running, we have no fear."

The camp commandant beams along the street as people keep on asking him what to do. He is now a big man, the former window washer. People are asking him advice, showing him respect. In his wisdom, he tells them all to stay.

I don't believe my ears. Is it possible that the Red Army is already so close that Germans will become refugees, leaving behind their homes and possessions? Are they indeed losing the war? I realize that my situation is hopeless and I will not see the final victory. But to see Germans on German soil contemplating to run from the approaching Red Army is never the less exhilarating.

That evening, we reached a town Ratibor or Rathamer. I am not sure of the name, for we were in both places. We were led up a large ramp into an unheated slaughterhouse. The building was made entirely from stone and cement. The huge slopping slaughter ramp was still wet and slippery from the day's slaughter. The smell of blood and intestine hung heavy in the air. It was so cold that we spent the night hugging each other in order not to freeze. In the morning, I saw a few of our men lying on wet slaughter platform dead, their bodies noticeably swollen. How they got to that platform, I don't know. Death could have come from many quarters, like exhaustion, hunger, cold, or a beating during the previous day.

It is already daylight, yet we are not moving out. An hour goes by and another. At ten o'clock, we hear a rumor that they are going to cook soup for us and we get livelier. It's been almost a week that we had anything cooked, and four days since I had anything to eat or drink. How long can we go on like this? If somebody would have told me in Sosnowiec that I could go for a week without food or drink, I would have laughed in his face. Yet here I am, still alive and on my feet.

Around one-thirty in the afternoon, we are lined up for soup. Some bowls appear and the first couple dozen receive their soup, but suddenly they run out of bowls. The others will have to wait until the first group finishes and turns in their bowls. They have not finished their soup yet when, suddenly, in walks our rapportfuhrer with a group of S.S. guards. They order us to fall in, not giving a chance to the few who have it to finish their soup. We are driven outside and ordered to march quickly.

We are proceeding much faster now. I can feel the urgency, the haste in their purpose. The first thing that comes to my mind is the bowl of soup that I have been deprived of. I wonder how the few that did get the soup but didn't get the chance to finish felt. The other thing that puzzles me is the sudden hurry. I notice that we are not marching

on a main road as before, but on a secondary one between snow covered fields where every couple of hundred metres or so stands a farmstead.

There is no lead up to our march. It is starting to get dark. A column of German soldiers caught up to us and passed. They are dressed in ordinary Wehrmacht uniforms. Each of them sits on or runs along a small farm sled that is pulled by an undernourished horse. All we can see in the sled is a bit of straw. As they pass us in a single line, they gesticulate in such a way as if to say, "It is all over." Some of them say in Ukrainian, "In a couple of hours, you'll be free." I suddenly realize that these are Ukrainian volunteers who joined the German army. The mind is unable to except such good news. However, as if to confirm their words, we suddenly hear the staccato of machine guns coming from behind us, about two kilometres back. Is it possible that the Red Army is this close?

We enter a small forest that is crawling with German soldiers working feverishly at mining the trees. I see them tie three to four sticks of explosives around each tree trunk, about a metre above the ground. I realize that they will detonate them when the Soviet tanks enter the forest (or even before) in order to form a barricade against the tanks. The soldiers were so absorbed with their work that they didn't even glance at us, as if close to a thousand men passing no more than two metres from them under guard were ghosts.

It is night and we are still marching. This is the first time we have moved at night. I know that the Russians can't be far behind. There might be a chance to sneak away, but then what? Go back into the forest, where I'm sure to be caught by the soldiers? To wonder around front line? To hide in some bushes, either to freeze or die of hunger? So we keep on marching, for we must. Anyone who falls behind is shot. Around midnight, we started to slow down. It is that our air force guards, all older men, began to tire.

I don't know how to describe that night. After an endless march, we could tell by the thunder of the cannons that liberation was only a few kilometres behind. Yet, so far, we were still in the hands in beasts. The march continued. Before dawn, as I dragged my feet, I noticed that my eyes were closing and I was falling asleep. Drained of strength, beyond exhaustion, and walking in a daze, one prayer kept repeating in my mind, "Let me just once more have a warm drink, even the so-called camp tea, and you can put an end to my anguish."

The total exhaustion and cold keeps closing the eyes, they just don't want to stay open. We walk like drunkards. Each one wants to hold on to the next guy, who shakes him off. He has enough trouble walking on his own.

### **Chapter 13**

With daylight, the sleepiness eases off a bit. The march continues. The road, although a secondary one, looks abandoned and so do the scattered farms around. From time to time, we hear an explosion but cannot tell the direction it comes from. There is not a living soul in sight. Total silence. However, we hope that the Russians are getting closer. We pass a cluster of houses. Am I seeing or imagining a person's head in a window? Otherwise, there is total emptiness.

Some kilometers further, we get to a crossroads. Here we see a scattered vehicles packed with civilians. In mid afternoon, we approach a town. Our march has changed begun dragging. I cannot tell if it is due to the guards' exhaustion or lack of yesterday's urgency. In any case, we are taking our time and I look around. Ahead of us is a bridge over a river. In fact, the town's outskirts start along the opposite bank. As we set out on the bridge, I notice that the bridge is quite high above the river and it give us a good vantage point. I look around and notice a long row of shallow holes along the far side of the shore, and in each of them stands or sits a single soldier.

Even to me, an inexperienced in military matters, the whole thing looked very unprofessional. They looked exposed not only to artillery but even to rifle fire. The tiny holes could not protect them from anything. As we get closer, I realize that those are boys of not older than fifteen or sixteen years. I think to myself, "They will not save Germany."

However, the moment we entered the town, my opinion changed dramatically. There was a constant traffic of military trucks coming and going in all directions. There were soldiers at every street corner busying themselves with different kinds of equipment. Officers were walking purposefully and were stopped every so often by countless gendarmerie patrols checking their papers. I noticed that they were stopping mostly officers, seldom an ordinary soldier.

Our camp commandant in all his glory and size walked down the middle of the street, flanked by the Rapportfuhrer and the executioner. We were behind him surrounded by the guards. This however did not stop a couple of gendarmes from stopping and asking for his papers, which he obliged with great fanfare. He said in a loud voice, with dramatic wave with his hand in our direction, "And these are all my people," taking in with one sweep guards and guarded.

We are passing by a van around which a few gendarmes are gathered. One of them decides to open the rear door. As the door opens, a pile of cartridge belts falls down to the ground. One of the gendarmes yells out to our guard, "Here take some bullets. You will need them." One of our guards yells back, "We have enough." A quarter of an hour later, we leave that town behind. Shortly after, we are driven into a barn where we fall down, exhausted.

Where are they taking us? How much longer can we keep going without food? After forty-eight hours, we can sit or lie and speak freely. Everybody comes up with assumptions. Others come up with worthless plans. Somebody proposes to hide in that huge barn full of hay. The Germans counted us as we were driven inside the barn and they are sure to count us in the morning. They will look for us, find us and shoot. What to do? Our chances of surviving are slim. Yet the Russians are so close and getting closer by the hour.

In the morning, we were counted and some were missing. A few S.S. men remain behind. What happened, we do not know. When the S.S. men caught up to us, the barn was already out of sight and earshot.

To avoid traffic, we are led down a side road that runs through open fields. The wind blows through the blankets and penetrates every bone in our emaciated bodies. In spots, the blowing wind deposited a lot of snow on the road, which makes the going harder. The only part of my body that has not felt the bitter cold during the march so far is my feet. Suddenly I feel as if I stepped with a bare foot into a pile of snow. I pull my foot out of the snow and notice that the entire bottom of my shoe is gone.

This is all I need now, I think to myself. How long can I go on with a bare foot? We had no socks. I knew it I had to do something in a matter of minutes. In desperation, I

ripped off a piece of blanket and wrapped it around my bare foot. Tearing off two longer strips, I used them to fasten the first piece tighter, and so I proceeded with one foot in a shoe and the other wrapped in a rug.

At noon, we got to a wider and better road. At first, I did not notice it but there was a fair amount of traffic, all moving in our direction, of people on foot. I start taking a better look and see people of all ages, men and women, many with knapsacks on their shoulders and others with suitcases. Some were pulling a small sleigh loaded to the hilt. Still others were pushing a baby carriage piled high. Slowly, my frozen mind starts to realize that they are Germans running from the Soviet onslaught.

I try to imagine how they must feel. Only a couple of years ago they ruled over Europe, now they are reduced to homeless wanderers. Yet they do not awaken in me pity or sympathy. They catch up to us but they are not in a hurry to overtake us, as if they feel safer near us.

We are pleased with their presence. Not only the middle-aged air force guards, but even the SS men behave properly in front of the German civilians. They not only stop using foul language and the beatings, but what is more important, they stop shooting those that cannot march. Instead, they order some of us to help the weak ones to continue. With our experience, we know that this will only continue for a few more hours, until we are herded into some barn along the way while the civilians continue. Then everything would return to the way it was. Still, even a temporary respite is welcomed.

It is getting dark and we are marching. It is midnight and we are still plowing on. The night is bright. I can clearly see the faces of the civilians that walk alongside us and recognize some from this afternoon. How gladly I would change places with them, even in defeat. My common sense tells me that our guards will be with us until the last one of us collapses. They, the guards, might be homeless for a little while, but they will live.

Sometime past midnight, we get off the main road and go into a large barn nearby. In the morning, after leaving behind a large number of dead that died during the night, we continue our march. This time we are on a very remote road that leads through a small forest and snow-covered fields. One would think that we are on a trip to discover new horizons, as there was not a sign of a human being.

Suddenly, we began to see dead bodies lying along the roadside dressed in the striped camp uniforms. What we could not tell was if they are a couple of hours ahead of us or a couple of days. We no longer needed road markers, as their bodies indicated the direction of what lay ahead for us. That night, again, we slept in a barn and in the morning, there were some of us missing. As we started marching away, some SS men began to search in the hay. In the last couple of days, our guards had lost every pretense of civility. If someone fell down, regardless if he tried to get up or not, he was dragged off the road and shot.

That afternoon, another group of inmates caught up to us. They were about the size of our group. They were guarded exclusively by S.S. men, but what took us aback was the fact that their capos and blockaltesters carried weapons and played with them like children with toys. Those camp big shots had green triangles, and having gotten hold of firearms, they kept on shooting the inmates at will. That group was somehow mixed in with us and I saw with my own eyes as one capo of that group shot three of his inmates in front of us for no reason at all. In fact, he shot them in the back as they were marching.

Our guards did not interfere with the others. In fact, it seemed that they were oblivious to what was taking place around us. The only conclusion we inmates could come to was that the S.S. guards came to a satanic agreement with the big shots of that group, since those big shots were Germans and criminals, to dispose of the several hundred Jewish inmates and disappear in the confusion of the fast-approaching front. Of course, some asked where those inmates got the weapons, to which the others answered, "From SS men who deserted." The inmates of that group were so perturbed, agitated and in such a terror, that in spite of the half hour that we were marching together, we did not exchange two words with any of them and did not find out what camp they were from.

As suddenly as they appeared, so they disappeared. Their guards have driven them into a little forest. Their desperate gazes and the deep resignation on their faces are haunting me still.

Again that night, we were driven into a large barn. The hiding in the hay became a daily event. The guard used to start looking for hidden inmates as soon as we were driven

outside, even before they started the count. We got used to the shooting of those found hidden, as if that was how it was supposed to be.

Every evening, as soon as we were driven into the barn, I would tighten the piece of blanket around my foot and retie the two strips of blanket, for they used to slacken during the day. I could not do it during the day, for I would have to step out of the line and bend down, and any SS man would gladly shoot me for doing so. Besides, my hands were cold and my fingers so numb that I could not do anything with them. A couple of days earlier, I had to urinate during the march and was unable to button my fly. I left it open, buttoned my camp coat over my pants and continued. The next day, I was unable to button my coat and marched with the flaps of my coat clapping in the wind. The only bit of protection from the wind was my shrunken blanket, which I was using piece by piece to wrap around my bare foot.

The following few days and nights were like walking in a nightmare. I could not discern between being alive or dead. No more was anything of any importance or interest. I no longer bothered to look back to see how many people and who was being shot. I lost count of the dead, nor did I remember the number of days we had been marching. I no longer felt hunger pangs or thirst. I lost count of the days since I ate my last piece of bread. I was surprised that I am still alive.

It had to be around January 28 when we were driven out of a barn and led down a field road for about two kilometers. We were marching through a large farm, passing by large barns and stables. At the end of the farm near some sheds, I noticed some freight wagons, their wide doors were open as if they were beckoning us to get in. We were told to get in. In the confusion and bustle, I noticed one shed some wooden boxes with raw potatoes nearby. Not caring anymore, I left the line, ran over to a box and grabbed a handful of potatoes and put them in my pocket.

Even now, I do not know if it was an act of indifference to the consequences or was if I in a state of delirium. In any case, for whatever reason, I got away with it. The doors slid shut and padlocked. We remained in total darkness. Apparently, they prepared enough wagons for our entire camp. As there were already so many of us missing or dead, there was enough room in each car for each one of us to sit on the floor. Although the



wagons were unheated and the walls and floor were made of ordinary boards, they broke the wind that had accompanied us for the last eleven days and cut our flesh like knives. We folded our blankets and sat on them. As our bony backsides were hurting from sitting on the wooden floor, it didn't take long before the cold penetrated our camp uniforms and we began to shiver. We decided to pair up. We used one blanket to sit on and wrapped ourselves with the second.

After many hours, the train begins to move. We do not know in which direction nor do we know what is going on outside. The walls of the cars are solid. There is a narrow crack between one side of the wall and the roof, large enough to tell if it is day or night, but impossible to see out of.

The train ride drags. It makes many stops, some short ones and others long. We lose track of time. It gets difficult to differentiate the length of time between each stop or the length of the stops themselves. It makes no difference anymore. When the train stops, so does the banging of the wheels. A dead silence overwhelms us. Slowly some start talking with low voices, not out of fear but for lack of strength. In our semi-delirium, we attempt to speculate on our next torment. Will they keep us here locked until we are all dead or are they taking us still to another camp? The conversation leads to the subject of food. How long can we survive without food? It is already twelve days that we got anything to eat. We have held out longer than I ever imagined possible. How much longer can it go on?

The topic turns to cannibalism. One mentions the liver is the most nourishing part of an animal and assumes that it is applicable to a human too. I look around in the almost complete darkness of the wagon and wonder, "Whose liver will I be forced to eat, or will it be mine that will be eaten?" Someone points to a couple bodies already lying motionless on the floor. A shiver goes through me and I turn my head away. At that moment, I resolve that no matter what, I will not eat human flesh. If somebody wants to, let him wait and eat mine. I see that nobody makes a move towards the two bodies. It seems after all that talk the thought of cannibalism is alien to our nature. And so passed the first day and night.

With the break of day, which we can tell by looking up to the crack above our heads, I eat one of the five raw potatoes in my pocket. It does not satisfy my needs, but the constant feeling of nagging hunger had left me a few days ago. I was so numb that I no longer felt hunger or thirst.

The following four days were a confusion between reality, lucidity and delirium. We did not know where we were being taken nor did we care. Mentally we had already resigned from life. Still, I ate one raw potato every morning. On the fifth day, I finished my fifth and last potato.

That very day at noon, our train stopped. By the voices outside, we could tell immediately that we arrived at our destination. A few minutes later, the doors slid open and we were told to get out. How many remained in the wagons, dead or dying, we did not know. Those that could still stand up were lined up five abreast and ordered to march.

The road was uphill and I found it difficult to march. After several dozen metres, I began to fall back. Two of my close acquaintances grabbed me under my arms and helped me walk. One of them, by the name of Leibl Washkiewitch from the shtetl of Lomza, my age, was holding me with powerful hands. I asked him how he mustered so much strength to hold me up after not having eaten for over two weeks. He told me that while we were being loaded onto the train cars by some big shots, like the blockaltesters and capos, he happened to enter in the same car as them. In several places where they made stops, the local authorities brought some food for us inmates. Those big shots accepted it on our behalves. They took it into their car and ate it themselves, never sharing it with us. They had so much food that they did not mind if he helped himself to some.

After several hundred meters walk uphill, there appeared a wall before us built of large rectangle stone blocks that gave the appearance of a fortress. I was too weak and too exhausted to care about further surprises, or in fact about what was going to happen to me. At that moment, I did not realize that I was facing the gates of Mauthausen.

The large entrances of the camp open up for us and we are being led in. Our guard remains outside. They do not follow us. We are under new authority. We are surrounded by new strange capos who are leading us between two large stone buildings. We remain between the two stone buildings a long time, when suddenly two large wooden crates full

of sliced bread is brought to us. Each of us gets a slice of bread. It was the first piece of bread for me in two weeks and my first bite of food in sixteen days other than the five raw potatoes.

We are being counted several times and are told that out of the almost nine hundred that left Sosnowiec seventeen days ago, we are four hundred including all the big shots of which none perished of course. Those big shots included the camp altester, the blockaltesters, the capos, the office staff, cooks and their helpers. Some fifty men in all, all non-Jews who were not treated like the rest of us and were receiving food every day. That leaves only three hundred and fifty Jews that survived the march from Sosnowiec to Mauthausen.

By then we Jews had forgotten what day it was. One of us asked one of the trustees for the date. The second of February came the answer. Something clicked in my mind. Somehow, the date was registered in my memory, but in the state I was in, I was barely aware of what is taking place around me. Then it hit me. I remembered that on the same day, February 2, two years ago, I arrived in Auschwitz. What a coincidence.

It turned out that we were next door to the bathhouse. We were ordered in and got undressed. Our hair was cut and with a blade--a stripe five centimeters wide running across from front to the back on the middle of each head. Like in Auschwitz, here too we were permitted to hold on to our belts and shoes. Those whose shoes were falling apart or who had lost a shoe, like myself, received a pair of shoes that had a wooden sole and cloth top.

After all this, we were led into the shower room. I felt so weak that I sat down on the floor. I do not know if we got much cleaner, as we had no soap. After some minutes under the showers, we were driven into an adjoining room where each of us received an undershirt and a pair of drawers. No pants, no jacket, no coat.

As we were leaving the bathhouse, we were registered. You gave your name, age, nationality and profession. Unlike at Auschwitz where they tattooed your number on you, there they gave you a small piece of tin, two centimeters wide and six or seven long, on which your number was impressed. I received number one hundred and twenty five

thousand, four hundred and sixty five. With it, each of us received a short piece of wire to tie the number around the left wrist.

Dressed only in underwear, we were led out that February 2 into the wintery outdoors. After lining us up, we were led through the camp whose buildings were made of stone blocks. They seemed to be built to last forever, or at least for the thousand years Reich that Hitler promised his people. We entered a separate part of the camp where I saw a wooden barrack surrounded with a barbed wire fence and guard towers. Next to that barrack, there was another one just like the first one, but this one was not fenced in nor were there guard towers. We were led inside that barrack and ordered to sit down on the floor. We were to spread our legs so another person could sit between us, and he spread his legs so the next one could get in. And so we were squeezed in, one into the other, taking up the entire floor. The barrack was completely empty of bunks except for a room in one corner in which the Blockaltester and his stubendiensts had their accommodations.

It was late afternoon when we were packed in there, and we were still sitting there in the evening. The one good thing is that it is warm when one leans against the other, but it is difficult to sit. We were not allowed to move and the floor was hard and hurt the behind. With daylight, we were given permission to stand. Our overseers, the stubendiensts, were not Germans or Poles like in Auschwitz. They were Spaniards. Those inmates were supporters of the Republic and were fighting against Franco. When Franco took power, they escaped to France, where the French sympathized with them. However, when Hitler occupied France, they were arrested and sent to concentration camps as anti-fascists and anti-Nazis.

Here I would like to point out that during my short two-week stay in Mauthausen, I noticed that despite the fact that there were capos and stubendiensts among the Spaniards, they did not manifest that inherent anti-Semitism that was so prevalent in Auschwitz among Germans, Poles, Czechs and Russians.

That morning we each received a quarter of bread and at noon the bowl of soup. It was only then that our hunger had awakened anew. We remained in that barrack all day, watching through the windows as inmates were continuously dragging bodies to the

crematorium from the neighboring fenced-in barrack. We found out that the neighboring barrack served as a penal barrack in which inmates breaking the law in camp were held under inhumane conditions. The day before our arrival, the six hundred inmates in that barrack decided to break out. The result was that every one of them was shot.

The second night in Mauthausen, we tried to sleep lying down. Surprisingly, we succeeded thanks to a bit of ingenuity and above all, the sticks of the stubendiensts. We were ordered to lie on our sides as close to each other as humanly possible.

In the morning, we received the quarter of bread and the soup at noon. What we could not understand was the fact that we are not going out for the reveille, nor were we being counted indoors. This compounded by the fact that we were still in underwear created suspicions, which turned to rumors that they are going to dispose of us. That same evening we received a whole loaf of bread. This was the first time in the history of the camp that happened, in any camp as far as I knew. This really confused us, but the joy of holding an entire loaf of bread in our hands chased away any dark thoughts from our minds.

Who can imagine the feelings we had about possessing an entire loaf of bread? Not only during the years in camp did I not possess an entire loaf of bread, but ever since we were driven out of our homes in Shershev, bread had become a luxury. After four years of constant hunger, I was looking at the bread and could not believe that it was mine. The camp experience dictates that you should eat when you can, so we ate the bread to the last crumb.

Regarding the bread, we heard all kinds of assumptions. The most reasonable was that the camp expected a large arrival of inmates from camps who were being transported deeper into Germany. However, that arrival or transport did not materialize, due to the thousands that fell on the way like we had. Their tortured bodies laid by the wayside indicating the direction to the Nazi concentration camps. We were eating their bread, wondering when and who would eat our bread.

A couple of days later, we received pants and jackets and were transferred to another barrack that had three-tiered bunks, like those in Auschwitz. That barrack served as a transition barrack in which new inmates from other camps were brought in, while

others were taken away daily to other camps around Mauthausen. On the bunks in Auschwitz, we slept singly, but here in Mauthausen we slept two and three on a single bunk. I remember one night four of us shared one bunk. Not only did we lie on our sides, we had to lay with our heads in opposite directions--that is with your neighbor's feet sticking in your face. In that barrack we became mixed with inmates from other camps with whom we had no prior contact. All we had in common was the fact that we were Jews and expected same final fate.

Once we received our outer clothing, that is pants and jackets, we had to show up to the appell. We also could move about in the camp, hoping to find something to eat. Mauthausen at that time was overflowing with inmates brought in from all the camps in Polish territory, including Auschwitz. Many were simply dragging themselves through the camp with one thought in mind: find something to eat. Some volunteered to go to work hoping to find food there. I was fortunate enough to be taken with a group to work in the kitchen. "What could be better than to work in a kitchen?" I thought to myself, "At least I will get a bowl of soup." We were led into a cellar where we saw some fifty Soviet prisoners of war peeling potatoes. They were all invalids. Each was missing one or both legs. The mystery to me was that the Germans bothered to amputate their leg or, while at the same time they were shooting thousands of perfectly healthy Soviet prisoners--something I saw with my own eyes.

As I peeled potatoes, I slowly I worked my way closer to the Russian soldiers, and the reason they'd been saved became clear to me. On their well-worn uniforms, I noticed their ranks. The lowest rank was of a major. Is it possible that the Nazis kept them as bargaining chips?

The bowl of soup I hoped to get did not materialize, but I did succeed in slipping a few raw potatoes into my pocket that I ate on the way to the barrack. I was not fortunate enough to be picked for the kitchen again.

In those days, many transports of inmates arrived. These were not freshly arrested people from the outside. They were tired, hungry, emaciated, exhausted inmates from other camps being marched into Germany as the German army was retreating, or rather falling back, under the onslaught of the Red Army. Although the greater part of inmates

perished in those marches, the remnants were overrunning the remaining camps, creating a problem for the camp authorities.

One early evening during my short stay in Mauthausen, a large transport of inmates arrived from Gross Rosen. If it really was from Gross Rosen, I am not sure, but that was the rumor. Nobody was permitted to get close to them. They were let into the bathhouse and after the hot shower, they were driven stark naked outside where they remained over night. They stood there hugging the stonewall, huddled together when we left them that early evening. In the early morning when we went over to see them, only a handful was still on their feet, but they were near collapsing. The rest were lying on the ground motionless. We were not permitted to watch them and were chased away. We were later told that there were twelve hundred men in that group. All perished in that mid-February night of 1945.

Mauthausen, just like Auschwitz, had its affiliated camps. The largest of them were the Gusen 1 and Gusen 2. Each held twelve thousand inmates. In Mauthausen, they used to tell horrible stories about them. It was a known fact that each day, five hundred inmates used to leave Mauthausen permanently for the two Gusen camps. and as King Solomon said: "All the rivers flow to the sea, but the sea does not overflow." So it was with those two Gusen camps. Between those two camps, five hundred souls were worked to death every twenty-four hours.

Mauthausen itself had horror stories of its own that were known almost in all the concentration camps in Germany. It was infamous for its stone quarry. I remember how a trustee, a gypsy inmate sitting on his bunk on the third tier in our barrack looking down on us, said, "You Jews think that you have it tough here; you should have been here in 1939 when they brought Jews from Germany and Austria who made to work in the quarry. Back then, fathers and sons used to jump down from the top holding hands, almost two hundred steps down into the abyss. Their bodies would be torn to shreds from the sharp edges of the rocks below."

A day or two later, I happened to come across a group of the *strafkompany* (penal colony) that worked at the quarry. They were led to a pile of stones where each had to pick up a stone, put it on his shoulder and carry it up all the way to the top, the entire two

hundred steps, dump it, and go down for more. They were not permitted to pick up a smaller stone, but had to pick up the one in front of him. They were doing it twelve hours a day without rest.

One morning, in the middle of February, the block schreiber called out some numbers. Among them was mine. He took us to the appellplatz. There we were joined by many other groups until we were a group of about five hundred men. We were led out of the camp and marched on a side road. We were in farm country. Every couple of hundred meters, we saw a farmhouse with a couple of outbuildings. The snow had begun to melt and we could see the black fertile soil in spots. Nobody was looking out their windows, nor did anybody look at us passing by. The locals were used to seeing inmates.

Suddenly we are among a few wooden barracks and in front of us is a wide high gate. We are already used to the sight of those gates. Nevertheless, we are wondering what is behind them. We are led inside. Our escort of SS men remains behind and we are surrounded by a group of new overseers. The majority are Germans with green triangles. They recognize or have been informed that we are a group of Jews. We have the letter “P” for Polish on our triangles; we have not yet gotten the yellow inverted triangle identifying us as Jews.

As the majority of us in Sosnowiec were Jews from Poland, when we received our pants and jackets, we received at that time our triangles and ordered to put on the initial of the country of our birth on it. All of us put the letter “P” for Poland. I, not knowing if our camp commandant brought the archives with him, I was hoping to get by as a Russian who stood a better chance of surviving than a Jew. So, I marked a letter “R” on my triangle. The two weeks in Mauthausen, nobody seemed to notice or made a fuss over it, and I was hoping that this “R” might fool the Nazis.

We are told that we are in Gusen 1. Our new overseers do not let us wait to find out who we are dealing with. They refer to us by our pure Jewish names, like Shloimkah, Yankelah, Moishelah, Berelah. They pronounce the names with a clear Yiddish accent, but with so much mockery and contempt that we immediately realize what kind of Jew-haters we find ourselves among.



A couple of more big shots approach us. One with a list starts reading names. One name sounds familiar, Rosen. I look around and see the former capo of D.A.W. in Auschwitz, the older Jew, the engineer and inventor who supervised the repairs of all of the engines in the factory. He was maybe the only capo who never raised his voice or hand against anybody. He was the one who used to gather a quorum for Jewish prayers every morning, despite the danger. I never had anything to do with that man, never speaking to him, but when I saw him suddenly in that hell, I felt as if I saw a long lost friend.

They led away those half a dozen or so men, and then started to break us up into smaller groups and assign us to different barracks. Along with a group of about fifty, I was assigned to block 15. Half of the fifty were from Sosnowiec camp. All were acquaintances and some were friends.

The barrack I was assigned to was in a corner of the camp. There was one more barrack behind us, number 16. That barrack was as late taken up by German inmates, professional criminals, who recently volunteered to join the army. The Germans were at that time so short of men that they were willing to overlook their crimes, as long as they volunteered to serve in the army.

Those criminals were dressed in the African corps uniforms for which the German army had no need anymore. The African corps ceased to exist with the German defeat in Africa. Those half inmates, half-free people, were hardened criminals who had become foremen, capos and blockaltesters in camp. Because they co-operated with the SS by doing their dirty work, they were allowed to go out of the camp for training and gymnastics. Of course, they received better food and conducted themselves even more arrogantly than before.

Our barrack, although wooden, was a bit better than the Birkenau ones, the so-called *pferdestallbaraken* (horse barracks). It consisted of two stubes. In between the two rooms were the entrances to the barrack and a separate room for the blockaltester. The blockaltester, a tall slim German with a green triangle, was earlier the lageraltester, but was demoted to blockaltester for some transgression. His legacy as a murderer was no secret and followed him everywhere.

Our group was led into one room, which was full with three-tier Auschwitz-style bunks. Unlike Auschwitz, where we slept singly, we were paired two per bunk. My partner was a boy of my age who was with me in Sosnowiec, Henry Czesielski (or Tsheshelsky). He came late to Auschwitz, but spent four years in labor camps prior to Auschwitz. We were the first Jews in that barrack. Besides us, there were another fifty inmates in that room, mostly Russians. The stubendienst was a twenty five year old Ukrainian from former east Poland, a raving anti-Semite.

We did not receive any food that day. When I lay down the bunk, I was surprised to find so much room and thought to myself, "Here we are, two grown men on a sixty-centimeter wide bunk, and we could find room for one more."

The gong woke us at four thirty. The lavatories were in a small adjoining building. As I got in there, I noticed in the right corner a large wooden barrel the height of a man. One had to stand on his tiptoes in order to look inside, and all of the inmates who had already lived there did look in right after they came in. I became curious myself and looked in. For a moment, all I could see was water almost to the rim. A closer look exposed a pair of shoes swimming upside down in the water. Looking closer I noticed a pair of legs leading downwards. The first thought that came in mind was that the man committed suicide. Turning to the closest person to me, a Russian inmate, I said, "He must have had enough." The Russian looked at me as if to say, "Do not be such a fool." He quietly said, "They drowned him." There was no time for questions. I ran back to the stube to get my quarter of bread and ran outside for the roll call. Right after the roll call, we were lined up and marched out of the camp together with all the inmates. We did not march far when I noticed at a distance of three quarters of a kilometer, a long row of barracks in the direction we were going.

As soon as we got there, the entire column dispersed into the barracks. We, the newcomers, remained alone. A few SS men appeared with some overseers. They called out our numbers and assigned us to the different barracks. I was led into a wooden barrack not wider than those in Birkenau, but much longer. Along the two walls of the barracks were lined up turning lathes, each operated by a single man. Every ten or twelve lathes formed a separate unit that performed a specific task. Over each group, there was

an appointed supervisor called *einsteller* (adjuster) whose job it was to make sure that the cutting blades on the lathes were placed properly. The lathes were automated and the operator did not have to be an expert. His job was to put in the piece of metal, secure it properly in its proper place, check the cutting knives to make sure they were not dull and push a button. The machine did the rest. When finished, the operator took out that part, checked for the correct measurements and put it on a specially designed wagon. When the wagon was half-full, it was taken to the next section. The *einsteller* had to know about lathes and how and where to fasten the cutting knives so they would cut just the right amount of metal.

My *einsteller* was a young Russian of my age. He noticed the letter “R” on my triangle, took me for a Russian, and in no time, we became friends. Our capo was a Lithuanian. He was the first and only Lithuanian I ever met in a concentration camp. He was friendly to the Russians but hates Jews. He spoke Russian well and German. He was polite, taking me for a Russian.

At noon, we got our soup. I had no problem with the work. I did not even need the *einsteller* to adjust the knives. Just the same, he came over for a chat. I was eager to speak with him. He had been there some time and knew the camp. I could learn from him. He too wanted to speak with me, to find out about other camps. He wanted to know all he could. Of course, I had to fulfill my required work, but I knew I could do it and so did he. I found out that all of the twelve thousand inmates in this camp, Gusin 1, were working in this factory and producing six hundred light machine guns every twenty-four hours. The factory consisted of a row of wooden barracks, and in each barrack, a different part of the machine gun was being made. In our barrack, we were making the gun barrels. My *einsteller* told me that if a worker did not fulfill his quota, he was hung right on the spot in the factory. The executions were conducted under the supervision of the *ubercapo* (head capo), who was nicknamed “the general.” He was a German inmate with a green triangle. He was feared by the inmates even more than the S.S.

From this young Russian *einsteller*, I found out about the unspoken phantom of Gusin. It consisted of the group of “commando” fireman. This was a group of hardened German criminals sentenced to life or long terms who had to make the camp their home

for a long time. Those people, without principles or morals, realized once in jail that it was better for them to be on the side of the oppressor than the oppressed and collaborated with the S.S. fully. As a sport, they used to wander around at night and if they found a lone inmate, they would drown him in the huge barrel of water that was in every lavatory. When I heard about them, it became clear to me what had happened the first morning in our lavatory.

At six, we finish work. According to camp regulations, we line up five abreast and marched off to the camp. We are counted at the wide camp gate, and as we enter, we go to our barrack to line up for the appell. We get nothing to eat, not even the weak tea. I have nothing to do, so I go to explore the camp. The entire camp consists of wooden barracks, except a large storehouse and the kitchen, which are both built of bricks and stone. There is a bathhouse, a krankenbau and the inevitable crematorium. I also came across a couple of firemen swaggering in their fancy uniforms with more arrogance on their well-fed faces than the S.S.

If my previous camps had on them the obvious stamp of hunger, Gusen 1 deserved the top prize. This I noticed immediately, drawing from my more than two years of camp experience. Returning back to the barrack, I took a better look around at the room and my roommates. Half the roommates were Jews that came with me, a few Poles, a few Frenchmen, few Dutch and a few Belgians. All of them were receiving parcels from home until recently. Now they were waiting impatiently for the defeat of Germany. They were just starting to feel hungry, as their parcels had dried up. Their homes were now liberated, beyond Nazi reach. The only others besides Jews that had not been receiving parcels were the Russians. They had been in Gusen for some time already, and some of them had succeeded in finding a niche in the camp system by which they managed to procure extra food.

One had to admire their desire, their ardor for living, and their ability to improvise and to make do. To a degree, I would say they were very foolhardy when it came to procuring food. Their reckless behaviour brought on inhumane and terrible punishment, as I saw a short time later.

A Russian teenager stole a piece of bread from another. The wronged Russian denounced him to the blockaltester. We were awakened in the middle of the day, as at that time we worked night shift. We lined up and the blockaltester said to us, "You will now witness the punishment for stealing bread." Turning to the young thief, he said, "Do you have any friends you would like to say good-bye to, for you are going to die."

None of us took his words seriously, and I doubt if the young Russian did either. Still, he shook hands with the few Russians in our stube. The blockaltester with the help of the Ukrainian anti-Semite tied his hands behind him and led him to the lavatory as we were following. They led him to the large barrel filled with water. The blockaltester, with the help of the stubendienst, lifted him up and they threw him into the barrel, head first. I was not too close to the barrel, but when I saw his body going over the rim, I turned away. I do not even know when his body was taken out and away.

So far, we Jews walked around with our red triangles with the letter "P" on it, which identified us as Polish political prisoners, and I with the letter "R" was being taken for a Russian by those who did not know me personally. Some dozen days after my arrival, during the midday break when we were receiving our watery soup, I noticed some Russian inmates carrying bowls with soup. I noticed the direction they were coming from and went there.

I entered a small stall and saw in the middle of the floor a barrel of thick noodle soup with a few Russians standing around it. To the side, there was a short line of Russians forming. One of the Russians near the barrel had a ladle in his hand and was dishing out the soup while another was writing down the recipients' number. Desperate for food, I got in line. When my turn came, the man that marked down the number asked where I work, not knowing me. With a nod of my head, I point to the barrack. He writes down my number and I receive a liter of noodle soup as thick as if it was cooked without water. The one that wrote my number down said to me, "Remember to bring the two cigarettes tomorrow." I assure him that I will. Eating the soup, I am trying to figure out how those Russians managed to swipe a barrel of such good soup, for it certainly was not for us inmates. It had to be for the S.S. The bowl of soup did not satisfy my hunger, but I

was pleased with the unexpected treat. As far as payment goes, I never had cigarettes nor did I ever see those Russians again.

Some days later, as our einsteller was adjusting the blades of the lathe, he cut off a finger and was taken to the camp hospital. Our capo, the Lithuanian anti-Semite, came over to me and appointed me the blade adjuster. He told me that it was my job to make sure that the blades on the lathes were properly adjusted and the lathes were always in working condition. Somebody else takes over my lathe and I assume my new job. I think to myself, "Would that anti-Semitic capo appoint me blade adjuster if he had known that I was a Jew?"

As I can move about now, I can admire how well the work is organized. How raw material is delivered to each lathe and taken away to be delivered to the next lathe for the next operation. How well and quickly weapons are being produced by starving prisoners. The some fifteen lathes under my responsibility are producing machine gun barrels. The first lathe gets a piece of rusty steel some sixty centimeters long and less than five centimeters thick. Through it, there is a barely noticeable hole. By the time this piece of rusty steel passes through all the fifteen lathes in my department, the final product is a brand new shiny machine gun barrel. Nobody stays over you to rush you, nor are those that work at the lathes being beaten. We all know what is awaiting us if we do not fulfill the quota. In contrast, those that work in the so-called transport column, hauling the raw material, are constantly chased and beaten all day long. They used to fall by the dozen daily. I used to see them bringing in the heavy rusty metal all day long and think of my work on the holtzplatz in Auschwitz.

At noon, we get the liter of thin soup, which I swallow in a minute. After everyone gets his soup, the capo calls the blade adjuster for seconds. I stand last in line, unsure if I qualify or not. The Lithuanian capo makes no fuss and pours me another liter. I do not believe it. It is too good to be true, and I wonder how long my luck can last. The hunger takes its toll continuously; even among those that work at the lathes, the mortality due to starvation is immense.

In my group, the majority of the workers on the lathes were Jews, most of them from my stube. I could not see it so much on myself, but I could see it on them--how they

were being spent, literally burning out. Coming to the barrack after a twelve-hour day, our Ukrainian stubendienst would punish us for not making our bunks straight enough. He mercilessly used a piece of thick cable over our shoulders, back and backside. I too was privileged to be treated this way by him a couple of times. It would leave marks for weeks.

Putting in a twelve-hour workday on a quarter a loaf of bread and a liter of watery soup a day, how long can a tired and exhausted human being go on? Is it then surprising that the mortality was so immense? The fear of not fulfilling the norm was great and people became panicky if they were falling behind with their work. When I worked on the lathe, I had no such problem. My training at school in Brest-Litowsk and my experience in Sosnowiec camp came in handy. Others however, found it difficult. Quite often, I would leave my place and go over to the next guy to help him catch up. The Russian einsteller tolerated it. Now that I was the einsteller, I was free to do with my time whatever I found necessary, as long as it did not interfere with the gun barrel production and all lathes were operating. So, I will now say with a little pride that at times I did help my friends and brothers in need with their work, as that was the only thing I was in a position to do for them. With one of them, I spent a year after liberation in Southern Italy in a refugee camp called Santa Marina Di Leuca. There, on occasion he used to say to me, "Moniek (the name the Polish Jews gave me), you saved my life many times in Gusin." I did not feel that I was doing such a great deed when I was doing it, nor when he used to remind me after the war. But now, over half a century later, it feels good to know what I have done.

As I said earlier, the extra liter soup was too good to last. An order was issued in the camp that all Jews had to put a yellow stripe above their red triangles. The next day at work, nothing seemed to have changed. At noon, we lined up for our soup. I got my soup and drank it quickly to be ready for when they called the einstellers. They called and I was in line. My next comes. The Lithuanian capo took a look at me, saw the yellow stripe and said, "You do not get extra soup. You are only a temporary einsteller." I left the line heartbroken. The extra liter of soup kept me going, at least for the time being. Now it would only be a question of weeks before I collapsed like so many before me.

It is April. The snow is gone and it is warm in the sun. Every couple of days, new workers from other camps arrive to replace the departed. In my place comes a Pole, a former capo from some camp. He was a well-fed young man with no inkling of what is going on here, but he is a former capo and a Pole to boot. He gets the extra bowl of soup and I do the work. His work.

It is a sunny afternoon. From nowhere, sirens suddenly start to wail. All motors stop and the capos yell, "Run to the air shelters!" I run with everybody else, not knowing where we were going. We run through fences, over grassy ground to the nearby hills. I see holes in the hills like caves, which we were driven into. Inside I see long corridors in which prisoners are working. They are using pneumatic drills and chisels with which they are slicing away chunks from the stone walls and ceiling, making the tunnels wider and longer. The part that I can see is roomy enough to take in our entire factory. Sure enough, the tunnels are lined with different machines. Some were just standing there as if temporary. Others are already sitting in cement and connected with electric wires to somewhere, as if all they require is the push of a button.

While still in Mauthausen, I knew that every day inmates were being taken to the nearby towns to clean up after the frequent allied bombardments. We all knew that Germany's industry was being destroyed from the air. As I was looking at the maze of tunnels under the mountain, I was overwhelmed at the Nazi accomplishment in digging themselves underground in order to protect their war industry. At that moment, I was concerned with the ability of the allies to destroy it.

The alarm did not last for more than half an hour and we started to return to the two kilometers back to the factory. To get there, we had to run. On the way back we walked. I had no more strength to run and apparently neither did others. As we were walking back, I noticed among the young grass, a scattered cloverleaf that I pinched off and put into my mouth.

For me, it was the first air raid in Gusin, but certainly not the last. The process started repeating itself several times a week. The running became more difficult each time. Yet, for all those alarms, I did not hear a single explosion in or around the camp. It was for me a great puzzle why the allied planes did not bombard the wooden barracks



that stood no more than ten meters apart and produced six hundred machine guns every twenty-four hours. One bomb could have incinerated the bone-dry barracks that would have burned like sulfur.

We could tell that the situation for the Germans was getting worse by constantly occurring shortages of raw material. Twelve-hour shifts were shortened to eight. That is, we worked from six in the morning to two in the afternoon and the second shift lasted from two in the afternoon to ten in the evening. The factory was idle at night for the first time. Even the thin soup became thinner. There was nothing to put in it. The distribution of the soup that used to take place at work was now taking place in the barrack. The morning shift that used to start work at six A.M. received its soup upon returning from work, that is about three P.M. The evening shift that used to start at two P.M. got its soup at noon.

The distribution of the soup was done by the blockaltester. We would line up in a single line, each with a bowl in hand, and the blockaltester, dished out a full dipper of a liter of soup as we approached the barrel. When the soup became so thin in these last days of the war, we started to wrangle for a better position at the barrel. We wanted to be either in the first few, as something might float on top and the distributor might fish it out and give it to you, or one of the last ones, as maybe there was something on the bottom.

The irony of all was that we ordinary inmates were literally dying of hunger while our blockaltester used to walk around in the barrack drunk. It is difficult to understand or even imagine such a contradiction, but this was the reality of the concentration camp.

About ten days or so into April, a rumor spread like wildfire that the six hundred sick inmates in the krankenbau had been gassed. As there was no gas chamber in Gusin, the S.S. was ordered to board over the windows and doors and make the hospital airtight, leaving a small opening for a can of gas. The result was that all the six hundred patients died. What was however surprising was the fact that the majority were non-Jews. They consisted mostly of Russians, a few Poles, Frenchmen, Dutch, and Spaniards, and there was talk about a couple of Germans having died.

After this was confirmed, we Jews lost our last shred of hope completely. If they could do this to non-Jews, what chance of getting out alive did we have? In such a mood,

we continued to lie down, get up and go to work. A couple of days later, as we came back from work dejected and depressed, but still with the constant hunger, we lined up for the liter of liquid they called soup. As soon as the blockaltester opened the barrel and dipped the ladle in it, we started jockeying for a better place in the line. The blockaltester, lifting his eyes from the barrel says, "You stupid Jews. What are you pushing each other for? I have received orders that as soon as the other shift returns from work tonight, I am to take you all to the krankenbau, where all the Jews in camp will be gassed."

So, I thought to myself, this is the end. It should not come as a surprise. I knew it all along that this is how it would end. But from knowing is different from when the reality arrived. We did not push each other anymore. We took the bowl of soup with indifference, knowing that this was the last meal that any of us would ever have.

As if to confirm what we had just heard, two capos walked by. One opened the door and yelled in, "Lagersperre." That meant that nobody is allowed outside. We could not even go out to confirm with Jews from other blocks what we just heard. The Ukrainian stubendienst hammered down a couple loose boards in the floor. I thought to myself, "How foolish of him. What Jew would be stupid enough to try to hide under the floor in front of a hundred people, and what good would it do him?"

I get up on my bunk. My partner in the bunk works in the other shift and I envy him the fact that he does not yet know the terrible news and is spared the last agonizing hours. I sink into my thoughts and go through all the suffering. All the agony of the last years, especially the over two years in Auschwitz. To have suffered so much. So much. Who could recount all the suffering that I went through? Every minute. Every agonizing day. The hurt, the beatings, the hunger, the hopelessness, the despair, the anguish. I felt so much remorse, so much regret for having slaved so much, for all the torment, the torture, the drudgery that I had to go through. For what? So I can die a couple days before liberation?

I suddenly felt a terrible regret, a heart-rending remorse for not going to death together with my parents on that memorable Saturday morning, January 30, 1943, when they all, my parents, sisters and brother, were taken by sled to the railway station. Instead, I chose to remain another night in the ghetto to try to get out. Deep down, I knew that if I

had not succeeded on three consecutive nights to get out, how would I make it on the fourth, the last day? I could have spent two more days with my loved ones. I could have passed two days in the cattle cars with my parents and helped them with the children, my sisters and brother, in the final and agonizing moments of their lives.

How can I describe how and what I felt then? How can anybody? Is it humanly possible to recall the dark thoughts that went through my mind then?

It was a long wait until ten o'clock. I fell asleep. In all the dreams I ever dreamed in the camps, I never dreamt about the future. It was always the past or the present. Now, a couple of hours before I was to leave this world, I was having an extraordinary dream. I was standing somewhere near railway tracks and I saw a train passing by very slowly. The train was full with passengers. In fact, it is so crowded that some are sitting on top of the train. Others stick halfway out the windows and doors. The passengers are dressed in civilian clothes and are waving to me. I recognize many of them. Jews from France that were with me in the same stube in Auschwitz; others that were with me in Sosnowiec and still others that I met right here in Gusin. I call out to them, "Where are you going?" And they reply, "To Switzerland." I woke up. What a sweet dream and what a bitter reality.

Again arises in me the question. In fact, it never left me--Why? Every Jew in the room is either sitting or lying on his bunk absorbed in his thoughts. Hardly anybody says a word. If they do, it is a whisper. I do not feel like talking. What can anybody tell me except to imagine our last moments? If somebody's imagination is richer than mine, he will make it more gruesome than I can conceive of. The time drags and yet passes too fast. The minutes are long but the hours very short. I wish it was in my power to stop all the clocks in the world, so that ten o'clock will never come.

It is nine o'clock. In another hour, the second shift will be back. I know that we are not the only ones that the Germans have decided to get rid of. They want to kill every Jew under their jurisdiction and intend to accomplish it. Is it possible that there will be no Jews left in Europe? I lie down and listen to outside sounds and I wonder, do miracles still happen?

I hear the shuffle of feet. The treading of shoes. They are here. Holding my breath, I am waiting for the blockaltester's command to fall in. He most likely wants to have his

fun and is letting us stew. Slowly, I raise my head and look around. I do not see him and the newly returned workers go straight to their bunks and lie down. I ask my partner of the bunk, Czesielsky, if he heard the news. He says no. He is too tired for conversation. I am not sure if he heard me. In a minute, he is asleep.

I lie on the bunk. An hour or two later, I fall asleep. I am awakened by the gong. It is four thirty. I do not believe I am still alive. We come to the conclusion that the blockaltester, the drunkard, played a callous joke on us.

One can feel in the air the approaching end of the war. Some inmates that go to work daily on the main road tell of heavy military traffic and frequent air attacks on them. Our soup gets even worse and we get an eighth of a loaf of bread instead of a quarter. In mid-April, French, Belgian, Dutch and Danish inmates are collected, but not those of the Jewish faith, and are taken away. Rumor had it that they were being sent to Switzerland. With that lot went one young French Jewish inmate that was with me in the same stube in Auschwitz. He was with me in Sosnowiec and came with me to Mauthausen and finally to Gusen. How he managed to get in that group is a mystery to me.

We start realizing that slowly the non-Jewish inmates are being treated differently than the Jews, particularly those from Western Europe. What remained in camp were some German criminals, the majority of whom were being trained as soldiers. The others were Poles, Russians and Jews.

A few days after the departure of the western European inmates, right after the morning appell as we were getting ready to go to work, we Jewish inmates are told to go back into the barrack, as we will not be working today. Immediately the question arose, "Is it what the Blockaltester mentioned some days earlier about taking us to the bathhouse to be gassed?" When all the work columns left the camp for the factory, our blockaltester comes in and announces that we Jews will soon be going to the camp canteen for parcels from the international Red Cross. He tells us to pair up and that one in each pair shall take with him a soup bowl.

We listen in astonishment. What new trick is this? He already told us that we will be gassed. We were ready then and ready now. What is this kind of deceit? Will the red

camp bowl calm us? Behind the window, we see blockaltesters, capos, foreman and other kinds of overseers gathering en masse, each with a heavy club in his hand. Now we know that they will lead us to the bathhouse--but why all this tumult, this agitation? We Jews know how to go to the gas chambers.

About eight o'clock, in walks the blockaltester. We stay in twos as ordered. He tells us to follow him. As we start coming out of the barrack, we expected the clubs to start fall on us. But no. The blockaltester walks calmly and we follow with the overseers all around us. They do not act hostile toward us in their usual style. We are going in the direction of the canteen. At the entrance to the canteen stand two overseers. They tell one of the first two men to take off his jacket and they let the two men in. A minute later, the two appear at the door with beaming faces. One is holding the red camp bowl, which is now almost full with some kind of meat. The other has his arms around his bulging jacket, which he is carefully carrying. We start going in two at a time, coming out with loaded arms and lining up two in a row. My partner is Leibl Waszkiewicz. We walk into a large room. Halfway across the room is a counter behind which stand a few overseers and some S.S. men. One inmate brings out a tin. Opening it with a can opener, he dumps the contents into the red bowl. I see solid chunks of meat. The other, with a knife, opens a sealed carton and dumps its contents onto my jacket, which is spread out on the counter. I do not believe my eyes. In front of me is a heap of biscuits, marmalade in plastic bags, cubes of sugar, a couple of tins, packages with cigarettes, tins of sardines and even chocolate bars. The S.S. men grab from the top of the heap the chocolate, sardines, cigarettes but do not bother to look inside. One of the S.S. men says, "Get going." I grab the jacket and run out. Outside, we joined the others who are staying in pairs. One is holding the red camp bowl with the meat, the other a jacket full of goodies. All the trustees that have accompanied us from the barracks are still around us with their clubs in hand, very alert as if ready for action. We cannot make sense of it all. Are they going to lead us to be gassed and those parcels are only to mislead us?

It does not take long until we are back all together. In pairs, we are following our blockaltester and our escort is all around us. We are just passing by the first barrack after the canteen when a dozen or so Russian inmates run out from behind that barrack,

throwing themselves on a few of us, knocking jackets out of hands as the goodies scatter all over the paved ground. The Russians are throwing themselves on it like starving animals. (Who knows better than us what hunger is?) Our escort starts clobbering them indiscriminately. The few wronged inmates pick up whatever the Russians did not succeed in grabbing and we continue going. The same thing happens as we pass the next block and the next all the way to our barrack. Now I understand why the camp administration sent with us such a feared escort. If not for them, we would have returned to the barrack with nothing.

The whole thing seems strange. Our escort consists of blockaltesters and capos. The very same men that until now have beaten us, tortured us, and killed us are now walking along with us to protect us. We are still inside the camp: Jews, condemned to die, and they, the hardened German criminals with their armbands and heavy clubs. It is just as easy for them to deliver a blow to a Jewish head as they are now doing to a Russian head. What is happening here?

We reach our barrack, number 15, not the hospital for gassing. Our escort remains outside and disperses. We get onto our bunks to divide our treasure. My partner, Leibl Waszkiewicz, and I get on my bunk. (My bunk partner Czesielski has another, closer friend with whom he shares his loot.) We open my jacket and find items I have forgotten existed. Besides the biscuits, we have sugar cubes, marmalade, a can of condensed sweet milk, and four packages with twenty cigarettes in each. We each take two packages of cigarettes--a cigarette is worth a liter of soup, even if it is only boiled water with a few tiny dried pieces of turnips swimming in it.

We eat everything and look around as everybody else is eating. At three o'clock, the first shift will come from work. If they will not try to take whatever we have left right away, they will try it at night. In whichever camp we are, we are always the downtrodden and everybody bullies us.

After drinking the thick sweet milk, we start the beef. After it came the biscuits, marmalade and ovalmaltin. We do not leave anything. The safest place to hide food is in your stomach. It is surprising how much a stomach can hold. All I have left are a few cubes of sugar, which I keep in one pocket, and the two packs of cigarettes in the other.

Those parcels gave us encouragement to go on living.

In the morning, we noticed the price we paid for those parcels. If not half of us, at least a third could not get out of their bunks. They too were afraid to leave any food and finished it all. With sadness and indeed with pain, we, the younger and healthier prisoners, watched as those whose stomachs and intestines were ruined by years of hunger, starvation and lack of proper nutrition, succumbed to normal food. Unable to cope anymore with decent food, they all expired within three days.

I do not want to minimize the importance of those parcels. Without question, they sustained the lives of many of us, maybe even mine. They gave us the impetus to hold onto life at the most difficult time in camp. It was the first time since we had been confronted with Nazism that we saw a sign that someone, somewhere, cared or even thought about us.

The work in the factory went on despite the shortages of material and the critical situation on the front. The shortage of food in Germany was reflected in the camp where they started to divide a loaf of bread between twenty inmates. Still, we continued to run to the shelter when allied planes flew by. When air raid warnings took place in the camp, there was nowhere to run. As of recently, the allied flyers became so daring that they flew low enough that we could see their faces. One day the allied planes shot and killed many horses on a road parallel to the camp a couple kilometers away. The butchers from the nearby villages cut the bony parts like the lower legs nobody wanted and gave it to the camp. There was no meat on the bones, so they chopped the bone up and used it in the soup. As the Blockaltester was dishing out the soup, it was my good fortune to get not much soup. Instead, I received an entire horse's knee. The knee took up the entire dipper. As I said, there hardly was any soup and of course, no meat, but there was a yellow jelly like substance between the joint that tasted delicious to me, the starving skeleton. Right there and then I made myself a promise that should I get out alive, I would cook myself a horse's leg.

The next day we went back to the usual boiled water with a few tiny pieces of dried turnip floating in it. Still I succeeded in finding a barrack in which some Russian inmates managed to steal a barrel of soup everyday and sell it for cigarettes. The going

price was two cigarettes for a liter of soup. True, there was not much to the soup, but I traded for it anyway

Despite the obvious signs that the war was drawing to an end, the camp discipline did not slacken by one iota. It was as strict as if the Germans were the victors. It was still controlled by the S.S. and their accomplices, the overseers like the blockaltesters, capos and their cronies. This fact enraged the inmates, who felt that in the final days of the war and certain defeat of Germany, those criminals should have tried to atone for their conduct up to now.

I am not sure if it was the first or second of May, but at about three in the afternoon, we had just received watery soup when a couple of SS men walked into the barrack. Without even looking at us, they went over to the wall onto which a blackboard was nailed. The blackboard was covered with all kinds of warnings concerning the behavior of the inmates. All those warnings ended with those words, "Will be shot." The two S.S. men tore off all those warnings, stuffed them in a bag and left.

Their action created a topic for conversation and assumptions. It also sneaked into us a spark of hope that we might, just might live to see the liberation. Thursday, May 3, we worked, but the work proceeded sluggishly. The next day, Friday, May 4, we went to work as usual six in the morning. But it became clear at the outset that it was not an ordinary day. The motors and lathes were running, but we walked among them talking to one another. The capos pretended not to see.

Somewhere between ten and eleven, I leave my lathe and go out to have a look outside. I lean on the barrack wall next to the door in case an S.S. man appears, so I will be able to sneak back in. It is a sunny beautiful day and the sun warms the emaciated body. I relax for a moment and let my guard down. Suddenly I notice two S.S. men passing by me. It is too late for me to get back into the factory barrack. They look at me and smile as they go by. They are so close I can touch them. They wear no caps and their dark blond hair is messed up by the wind. I note that their jackets have no epaulets and the collars are missing the SS insignias.



That was the first time that I saw an SS man smiling to a Jew without the mocking expression. Even to me, the pessimist, the German defeat is obvious. Will they let us see it?

At two o'clock, we line up and go to the camp. We find the second shift in our barrack, which was supposed to be at work already. They did not go. The barrack was full of rumors. After the appell, nobody went back to the barrack. We were going to others where maybe they know more.

Behind the camp was a grassy overgrown hill two or three hundred meters high. We look as soldiers are digging in cannon, and shortly after they start shooting over the hill to the farther side. At eight thirty, we are back in our barrack, but sleep does not come easy. The cannon shoots continuously and the mood is tense.

About ten at night, the door suddenly opens and income several well-dressed and well-fed inmates. They tell us to wake each other up. They are Poles and Germans, all with red triangles--political internees. They tell us that the war is coming to an end, but so far, we are under German jurisdiction. We are to pick a few strong men to stay on guard all night. Should an S.S. man come into the barrack, we should throw him out. Should he try to shoot, we should kill him. In any case, we shall resist.

Did I ever dream to hear such words in camp? I cannot even visualize that we should be able to hit back at an S.S. man. I cannot even grasp such a moment. Still I hear such words from the mouths of prominent inmates. By their attire, they were themselves overseers of sorts. They leave us, making sure that our appointed guards have something in their hands to defend themselves like a club, an ax, a hammer, or even a stone. Anything.

It is quiet in the barrack, but the shooting goes on. Shortly after midnight, we hear a powerful explosion. We run to the windows and see that on the spot where the cannon was, a huge fire is burning. The experienced among us say apparently the Germans themselves blew up the cannon and now the ammunition is burning. The fire burned a long time but the shooting stopped.

The gong woke us the usual time, four thirty in the morning. We fall in for the appell to be counted. It is five o'clock but nobody mentions the word work. We receive a

thin slice of bread and hang out around the barrack for a while. Slowly we start drifting further away. The camp is full of inmates. Everyone is excited but tense. People keep on asking one another if he heard something. The others do not know anything, but there is no shortage of assumptions, conjecture or plain guessing.

With some friends, I take a walk over the camp. Here is the bath house to which we were led a couple of times, where we stood under the showers and our anti-Semitic stubendienst, that Ukrainian, Stasiak, kept yelling and hitting us. It was here that, after the shower, not having towels to dry ourselves, we had to put on our dirty underwear that we had just taken off. A short distance away is the krankenbau in which six hundred men were recently gassed. The windows were still boarded up since that time, but the doors were ajar. We did not want to go in there. A few steps further is the crematorium where a couple of hundred bodies were burned daily. We pass barracks that a Jew would not dare enter that housed the prominent inmates, the big shots. Interesting that they are not visible now. They who were once everywhere, with well-fed faces and sticks in their hands. Now the camp is full of musselmanner and half-musselmanner. The prisoners were reminiscent of skeletons, emaciated, exhausted, dejected caricatures of human beings. I look around and see many Jews, but also many Russian prisoners. We Jews look much worse than they. I am not surprised. We have just gone through an ordeal that started for some when leaving Auschwitz and was still going on. The Russians, however, have not known any other camp but this one, and many found their niche in its system. True, this camp was no summer camp, but they had it better than the Jews. The Polish inmates in general looked much better than we or the Russian prisoners did.

No S.S. man is anywhere to be seen in the camp. The only Germans in camp are the inmates, former blockaltesters, capos and vorarbeiter, who are now walking around in their African corps uniforms and are very much visible among us. In mid afternoon, we hear screams. I look around and see a group of prisoners on a roof of one of our camp barracks. They scream and point in the direction of Gusin 2. I knew of Gusin 2 as having a reputation as being worse than Gusin 1, if such a thing was possible. The crowd of inmates starts climbing on the roofs of the barracks. When I got there, all I could see was

the camp itself, about a kilometer away. Apparently, the first group on the roof saw a column of tanks near Gusin 2 and came to the conclusion that they were American.

At about five in the afternoon, the blockaltester starts getting us ready for the appell. Somehow, it takes him longer today. The first two lines are in place, but the couple lines behind are restless and do not stay properly. The blockaltester and his assistants yell commands and they almost get us all in line. Suddenly, those closest to the exit start breaking lines, and soon all of our lines fall apart. Those near the back start running. Others follow them and almost immediately, we are all running.

I run with the crowd, not knowing where and why. People run from every barrack in the direction of the appellplatz, the main reveille square that is right in front of the wide gate at the entry into the camp. The square is filling up fast with inmates. The gate is wide open. In front of the gate on the outside stands a small open vehicle (later to be known to me as a Jeep). Two soldiers are standing in it and two are nearby. Their uniforms are unfamiliar to me. One of them is a black man, the first I have ever seen in my life, and I come to the conclusion that those are Americans. It is so crowded that I cannot get closer, so I try to move back. I realize that I can see better from a distance than from up close.

With unbelieving eyes, I see the guards on the watchtowers behind the electrified fence climbing down, taking with them their machine guns or rifles. They do not carry them like soldiers, but are pulling them or dragging them by the straps on the ground. I see an S.S. man dragging his machine gun by the strap, making sure that the barrel points to the back. We see him and he sees us looking at him. He smiles to us, but it seems to me that I detect hidden fear behind his smile. The Nazis are coming down from the watchtowers, but many more are coming out from their nearby barracks just outside the gate. They are prepared and ready. They come with knapsacks on their backs and almost all of them have a suitcase in each hand. They come over to the jeep, throwing their rifles on the ground. They unbuckle their military belts on which hang a bayonet, a revolver and a couple leather cartridge holders with bullets and throw them all down. Those that come off the watchtower are throwing their weapons at the feet of the Americans first, and then they enter their barrack and come right out with knapsacks and suitcases. I realize that

their belongings were already packed earlier and all they were waiting for were the representatives of the allies. Yet, they guarded us to the very last moment.

I look around and notice my Blockaltester. He has a red mark as if he has a cut across his cheek. I figure that he fell running to see the excitement, but I notice that his face has a worried look. As soon as our former guards got rid of their weapons, they lined themselves up three abreast without any command and remained standing, waiting for an order. When finally the last of them came out, I would estimate that they numbered close to three hundred men. So far, the inmates stood inside the gate, blocking the others at the exit. Suddenly the mob of inmates run out of the gate and start taking away the guards' suitcases and knapsacks. I look on with astonishment as the heroic S.S. men, who only half an hour earlier had full control over our lives and deaths, stood there motionless, letting themselves be relieved of their possessions without a word of protest by the just-freed inmates. I do not see among the grabbers any Jews, nor among the joyous and jubilant former inmates. We Jews stand singly or in small groups, looking on like uninvited guests at a celebration.

We, the permanent dwellers of the bottoms, the obscure, the destitute, the lowest in the abyss, the remnants of entire families, towns, cities and camps, have nothing to celebrate. It reflects in our eyes, in our faces and in our conduct. I stand by myself and look at the event that is taking place before my eyes as if I were looking at a film. I feel that I am not there. Only my atrophied invisible ghost floats around here.

I talk to myself, "Moishe, do you see and realize what is taking place here? Do you know that you are free? You survived Hitler and lived to see the defeat of Germany. You went through so much suffering. All in order to see this moment and you lived to see it. Rejoice. Be happy." In a blink of an eye, the events of the last four years run through my mind. The expulsion from Shershev, Chomsk, Pruzany, Auschwitz, Sosnowiec, Mauthausen and Gusin. Yes, I am alive, but whom have I got left? No father, no mother. No sisters or brother. No grandparents, uncles or aunts. Not even one cousin left of my family in Europe. What have I got to celebrate?

Our former guards, having recovered from their sudden loss of their belongings, received an order to march. They set out in an unknown direction, followed by an American jeep with its four-man crew.

I hear loud noises. I turn my head and see a large group of people running from a far corner, our corner of the camp. Those are the German inmates, the hardened criminals, former big shots, trustees, blockaltesters, capos and foremen, who recently volunteered to join the German army. They are still wearing the African corps uniforms and are very noticeable in the crowd. Their reputation as S.S. collaborators and cruel supervisors is well known among us, and the mass of inmates throws itself at them in rage. The accumulated months and years of wrath spilled over and the crowd did not let up until they were all dead. Although their greatest number of victims was Jews, the only ones that did not participate in that grisly slaughter were the Jews.

Having satisfied their thirst for revenge, the mass of former inmates began to disperse to the barracks. As I walked into our barrack, I saw a couple of men eating soup. To my question as to where they got it, they told me in the next barrack where the German prisoners-cum-soldiers were quartered. I grabbed my bowl and ran. Although their barrack No. 16 was next to ours, by the time I got there, the barrel of soup was empty. I was among dozens of others who started looking around, hoping to find something to eat. Unfortunately, I was too late. What I did find was a pair of men's socks, which I immediately put on. They were my first pair of socks since I arrived in Auschwitz.

The hunger did not let up. Since we are free now to move about after dark, we start wandering to other barracks. Maybe we will find something to eat. I remember walking into a barrack where close to the door stood a small cast iron stove. Next to the stove stood a young Russian holding in his hand a freshly skinned rabbit hide. He sticks an end of the hide into the fire, waits a moment for the hide to singe and as soon as the hair is gone, he bites into the raw skin. He holds the end of the skin tightly with his teeth and pulls with all his might to tear off a piece. He succeeds and chews that piece a long time. Finally, he swallows it. I realized that in that barrack, I will not find any food. Exhausted and hungry, I return to my barrack to sleep.

There is no going to wake us but we get up the same time anyway. We start forming groups, friends, acquaintances from the same former camp. Nobody wants to be alone. We to form a group. Besides me, there is Czesielsky, my partner to the bunk, Waszkiewicz from town of Lomza, a fellow by the name of Szloime, one Jablonowicz from around Grodno and Heniek, from upper Silesia whose family name I do not remember. What I remember is what he told me while we were still in Sosnowiec. He was a few years older than the rest of us and got married while still in his shtetl's ghetto. Shortly after, he lost part of his index finger. When and how he came to Auschwitz I do not remember.

We walk around the camp looking for something to eat. Many are leaving the camp and my comrades suggest that we do the same. I insist that I will not leave the camp on an empty stomach. As we get to the center of the camp, we see a mob of former prisoners besieging the camp magazine. They are trying to get in through the barred windows, as the door is impregnable. They succeed finally to break the metal bars of a window. The window is a good meter and a half off the ground and everybody wants to get in. Once you are in how does one get out when the mob is pushing to get in? Eventually we realize that we have to let those inside out before others can get in.

The first from inside appear on the windowsill with a large unopened case of margarine. The moment he jumps down with the case in his arms the crowd throws itself on him. In less than a minute, the heavy cardboard case is torn apart and the half kilogram packages of margarine snatched by those who got close to them. The same thing happens to everyone who comes out through the window. We decide to work our way to the window, send one of us in there and as soon as he jump down the windowsill, we will throw ourselves at him. Of course with everyone else nearby.

Sure enough, we manage after a struggle to get to the window. One of us gets in and appears soon with a case of margarine. After the ensuing struggle, we manage to hold on to six packages of margarine. We stop to think what to do with it. We decide to continue looking. After a while, we find a few acquaintances. They somehow managed to get some potatoes, which they are right now boiling in a pail over an open fire between the barracks. For two cubes of margarine, we buy a partnership in the potatoes and wait

for it to boil. In such cases, as if in spite, it does not boil. After a long wait, we notice bubbles around the rim of the pail and we think that the potatoes are cooked. We pour out the just starting to boil water and grab the potatoes. They are still raw....

For two cubes (packages) of margarine, we buy two packages of half a kilogram dried and pressed onion. We join the exodus from the camp. My desire not to leave the camp hungry did not materialize. All I have on me is the camp uniform and I carry my blanket. The march from Sosnowiec to Mauthausen taught me not to part with it.

My friend and I pass through the now wide-open camp gate. Not understanding and not realizing the importance of that moment in our lives. Hungry, exhausted and dejected we are placing our first steps into a new and strange world leaving behind a world capable of unimaginable cruelty that we knew so well. A world that succeeded in depriving us of everybody and everything we had. Just like newcomers into the world, we do not know what this world is like and what the future holds for us. We do not think like what is conceived now a days as normal people. The camp is still in every part of us, in every fiber of our bodies. The first instinct of the primitive man is food. Everyone around us is looking for it and we join the mass, the flood of humanity. We go in search of food but also to distance ourselves from the camp. Away from this place. The farther the better. We are now part of the mass of people. It seems that we are taking up the whole road. As far as my eyes can see in front of me and behind, there are people like me.

A short time later, we reach a main road that is just as crowded as ours. To our question as where they are coming from, they answer Mauthausen. Ah, yes, I remember Mauthausen. Where to are you going now? Some shrug their shoulders. They do not know where to. Just following the crowd. Others say Linz. I have heard of Linz. When I was in Mauthausen, they used to take people daily to clear the streets of Linz after air raids. Now on a wider and straighter road after joining with the people from Mauthausen, one can only guess the amount of prisoners held in Nazi Germany. To think that on a short five-kilometer stretch of road were the three camps of Mauthausen with its fifteen thousand inmates, Gusin A with twelve thousand and Gusin B with as many.

There is no traffic on the road. The whole road is ours. There are no American vehicles. No German nor civilian. On both sides of the road every couple hundred meters, are

single farmsteads. It occurs to us to try a farmhouse for food. But no matter where, we try others have beaten us to it.

We see a side road leading to a village some two kilometers away. Nobody wants to leave the main road but the hunger does not let up and we go. A middle-aged woman answers the door. We give her the two packages of margarine and the two dried and pressed onion and ask her if she can give us something to eat for it. She tells us to sit at the table saying she will be back shortly. She disappears behind a door.

We sit on chairs and look around not daring to say anything. It is a small brick house. The furniture is well used. We get the impression that it's not a rich home. A good quarter of an hour passes and she is not back yet. Did she go for the Germans? The fear of Germans did not disappear overnight. Another few minutes pass by and she walks in with a large frying pan in hand. The pan is full with potatoes fried in margarine and onions. It fills the room with the most pleasant aroma. Needless to say, that it was the tastiest meal in years. True we could have used more. We thanked her nicely and left to join the others on the road.

We started to encounter groups of German soldiers. They carried no weapons. At least as far as we could see. Whenever they found themselves in the midst of us and someone frowned on them, they kept on saying: We are not Germans. We are Austrian. As if it was made any difference from their or our point of view.

A couple hours later when our hunger that was not satisfied earlier awakened again, we started looking for out of the way places. We knocked on a door and an elderly woman answered. Not having what to barter with, we simply asked her for something to eat. She started to tell us that she is a poor woman and that her sons pay is a small one. One of us asked her what her son did. To which she responded, "He is only a guard in Mauthausen." We shuddered. Here we felt we have the right to take whatever we felt like, but in front of us stands an elderly woman. We turned away in disdain.

On the way back to the main road, we reproof each other for letting her off so easy. Joining the crowd on the road, we pointed out the house to a group of Russians. From a distance, we saw them leading a goat from that yard. Their conscience did not



bother them. At that very moment, I was thinking about us Jews with our scruples and ethics. Is it then a wonder that we are being taken advantage of by anyone and everyone?

With the approaching night, we started looking for some shelter. To go into a German house we did not dare so we decided to sneak into a barn when it will be dark. We sat by the roadside a long while and finally found our way inside a large barn. It must have been a large farm for it had several farm buildings. In one of them, we found a huge bin full of dry corn kernels. We spread over it a couple of blankets and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, a couple of men came in. Seeing us sleeping on the corn kernels, they started laughing. From their conversation, I gathered that they are farm hands on this farm. We could not fall asleep expecting the German owner at any minute to evict us. During the night, one of us mentioned that corn kernels are edible. To me it was something new, so we started to plan how to take some with us.

Before daybreak, we filled a small bag with kernels and quietly sneaked out of the barn. Half an hour's walk down the main road, we found a tin can. Filling it up with kernels and water, we started to cook it. We cooked it for hours and they were still not soft. Too hungry to wait any longer we started to eat them. We spent the entire morning cooking the kernels. It was almost midday when we started out on our way to Linz. A couple hours later, we could almost make out the city in the distance. I started feeling bad and developed a terrible pain in my stomach. I could not continue further. I stretched out on the young grass, knowing that something was wrong with me. I told the others to go on. I did not want them to watch me expire. The boys would not hear of it. After lying for a while, I had to muster all my strength in order to get up and we slowly continued on. To be precise, none of us felt good. We came to the conclusion that it was due to the uncooked corn kernels that started to expand in our stomachs.

At about five in the afternoon, we made it to Linz. It was part of Linz that was called Auhoff that lay on the east side of the Danube. To us small town folks, everything in Linz seemed large. The three, four and five story buildings whose length and width stretched from one to the next corner of the street. The tenement houses formed quadrangles that had large gates in the middle that served as entry to the yard. It was in the yards that all the entrances to the apartments were.

We walked around in the streets that looked almost deserted. Here and there, one could see a figure that disappeared quickly in one of the gates. We meet an American soldier. He is slim but close to two meters tall. He speaks to us but we do not understand him and we follow him to a nearby gate. We enter a large yard and first thing, I notice are children playing. Children. Children that I have not seen in so long except for those being driven into the yard of the crematorium number three that was so close to our barracks in Birkenau. These children are playing games. Running, laughing. Unconcerned and ignorant of the world we are coming from. How beautiful their world looked in my eyes. With lightening speed appear to me the visions of my little brother, Liowa and my two little sisters, Sonia and Liba who were so cruelly, so mercilessly taken away from this world. I am brought to reality by the laughter and chatter of the children in their “soothing” for me, language. The pain in my chest swells and the ever-present question arises. WHY?

I turn my head not to look at them and notice groups of women sitting comfortably on chairs and benches conducting “Gemutlich” relaxing conversations. Many of them are knitting at the same time. The not so deep engrossed in conversation notice us intruders and start giving us annoying and suspicious glances.

We follow the American soldier who is leading us to one of the doors. The door is locked. The soldier moves back a couple steps and with momentum, he throws himself forwards kicking in the door with his foot. The slam of the door startles the women in the yard who look now with obvious fear towards the open door. The soldier waves with his hands signaling we should go in but he stays outside. I think to myself. Why don’t you lead us in? We do not dare go into a German house by ourselves. But the soldier does not move. He just waves his hands for us to go in. After several minutes waving his hands, the soldier waves one more time in a gesture of disgust and walks away.

The completely closed in and surrounding yard reminds us of the camp and we get out of there. We start wandering aimlessly around the empty street and alleys. We see from a distance a military truck and assume that it is an American.

It will soon be dark and we do not want to have to spend the night in the street. We start looking for any place, a hole to spend the night in. We come to a wooden fence

beyond which we see stocks of boards of all sizes. We climb over the fence and indeed, it is a large lumberyard. Almost in the middle is a wooden shed, which turns out to be the watchman's quarters. In a part of the shed is a small room with a hammered together bed made of boards. The so-called bed is almost two meters wide. The "bed" contains a straw sack, a sheet and a blanket. There is also a cast iron stove, and a few utensils. Everything looks like it had been left in a hurry. Not waiting for an invitation, we pile into the bed. To our surprise, the two-meter wide bed is wide enough for the six of us.

(THE WAR IS OVER.)

*Where People Went and Where They Died*

**Shershev/Shershev March**—The city of Shershev was forcibly evacuated on August 25, 1941

“Kulie” Shlomo, son of Avrom; deformed leg

Moishe Gleser, newlywed; husband to Sara and father of an infant child

Moishe Shocherman, bus driver, asked to be killed after his son Motl was shot  
Motl, 22; son of Moise

Pesach Malcek, husband of Sara-Brina; father of Nachum, Itzik and Moise

Nachman Feldboim

Dedalya Chadritzky, who along with his family were some of the first people murdered by the  
Nazis in Shershev

Moise, his brother

Yosl and Eli, his two sons

Pasmanick Zusel

Dolman

Berl Zatoocky

Yehudl, his son

Kaminker

Zisl

Saposhnik

**Drohiczyn**—Liquidated July 26-Oct 15, 1942. Between eighty and one hundred Shershev  
families perished in Drohiczyn.

Reuben Kantorowitz, Uncle, father’s brother; among 200 men who were led into the woods and  
shot month before the liquidation on the pretense of going to a labor camp

Chashka Pinsky Kantorowitz, Reuben’s wife

Michla, daughter; two years younger than Moise; 17 at death

Shalom, son; b. 1928

Shevach, son; age 7

Avreml Winograd, father was the brother of Moise’s aunt, Esther Leiba Auerbach; in Moise’s  
class at school. Parents presumably dead in Drohiczyn. too.

Sara Leiman, daughter of Fyvel and Tsynah. Tzynah was Esther Leiba Auerbach's brother; in Moishe's class at school. Presumably her parents died in Drohiczyn too.

David Kalbkof, son of the butcher Leibe Kalbkof; left for Israel in 1936 when he was in his mid-twenties, but returned to Shershev a few months later.

Mier Kalbkof, school friend of Moishe.

Family of David (unknown surname), a horse dealer; lived off Chazer-Ghesl; very poor. David survived the Drohiczyn massacre and ended up in Pruzhany. David survived Auschwitz and died in old age in Israel.

*Drohiczyn Massacre Survivors:* Six men and two women. All of these survivors left their families behind, who perished. Four of them were married and left behind their spouses. All were executed in the Pruzhany Ghetto shortly after their arrival.

Chaim Lewkovigch

Pinchus Weiner, younger brother of Gotl; eighteen years old

Leibl Lebershtein

Avreml Kwelman

Moishe Tilter

Peshkah Zaritzky

Lola Baumriter, daughter of the Shershev pharmacist; Moishe's classmate; the most beautiful girl in the district

and an unknown survivor

**Chomsk**—Liquidated on Rosh Hashanah, September 13, 1942; eighty families from Shershev perished there; there was an initial mass killing of Chomsk natives, after which expelled Shershev families settled in the victims' homes

Rafael Weiner, three years older than Moishe

Laizer Rotenberg, one of Moishe's closest friends; survived a gunshot wound suffered during the march from Shershev

Wife, newlywed

Newborn baby

Yosef and Rayah Rotenberg, Laizer's parents

Litek, Moishe's close friend

Pola, seamstress; aged 23; single

Lisa, 15; very beautiful

Minah

Joshua and Bluma Pinsky

Daniel Meister, blacksmith

Wife

Yosl, Mayah and Rueven, their children

Averml, their eldest son, was temporarily spared along with his own wife and infant child as he was a blacksmith

**Malch (or Malech, Malecz)**—Most Jewish residents were forced to move to Bereza-Kartuska in Fall of 1942

Symah Pomeraniec, slightly younger than Moishe, a schoolmate of his sister

Tzalkah, a baker; around sixty, relative of Moishe's father

Wife

**Pruzany**—Ghetto Liquidated December 28 and 30, 1943

Itzik, Nacham and Moishe Maletzky, brothers; friends of Moishe's, especially Itzik

**Auschwitz**—The transports from the Pruzany ghetto arrived on January 29 and 31, 1943. Most were murdered the same day they arrived.

Itzik Kantorowitz, Moishe's father; b. 1892

Esther Auerbach Kantorowitz, Moishe's mother

Sheva, 25

Liova (Leibl), 13

Sonia (Sara), 11

Leiba, 9

Yaakov-Kopel and Chinka Kantorowitz

Eli Kantorowitz, 29; Moishe's father's brother; Polish Army veteran

Sheindl Pinsky, Moishe's father's sister

Leibl, her husband

Sioma (Shalom), 15; deaf and dumb

\*Lisa, a daughter; escaped the ghetto along with her boyfriend Yudel Rubin before deportation to Auschwitz

Hershl Kantorowitz, Moishe's father's brother

Sheinah, his wife

Joshuah and Zalman Nyselbaum, cousins of Moishe's father

Their families

Brina Maletzky, who helped Moishe hide from the Nazis

Her mother, who was blind

Moishe Tuchmacher, early forties; married with children; hid with Moishe; his family had been killed already in either Drohichyn or Chomsk

Isser Gichman and family

Nathan and David Kabizetzky

Shepsl and Itzl Pomerantz, brothers  
Berl Tenenbaum, their brother-in-law

Leibl Feldman

Gotl Weiner

Hershel Schneider, Moishe's childhood friend

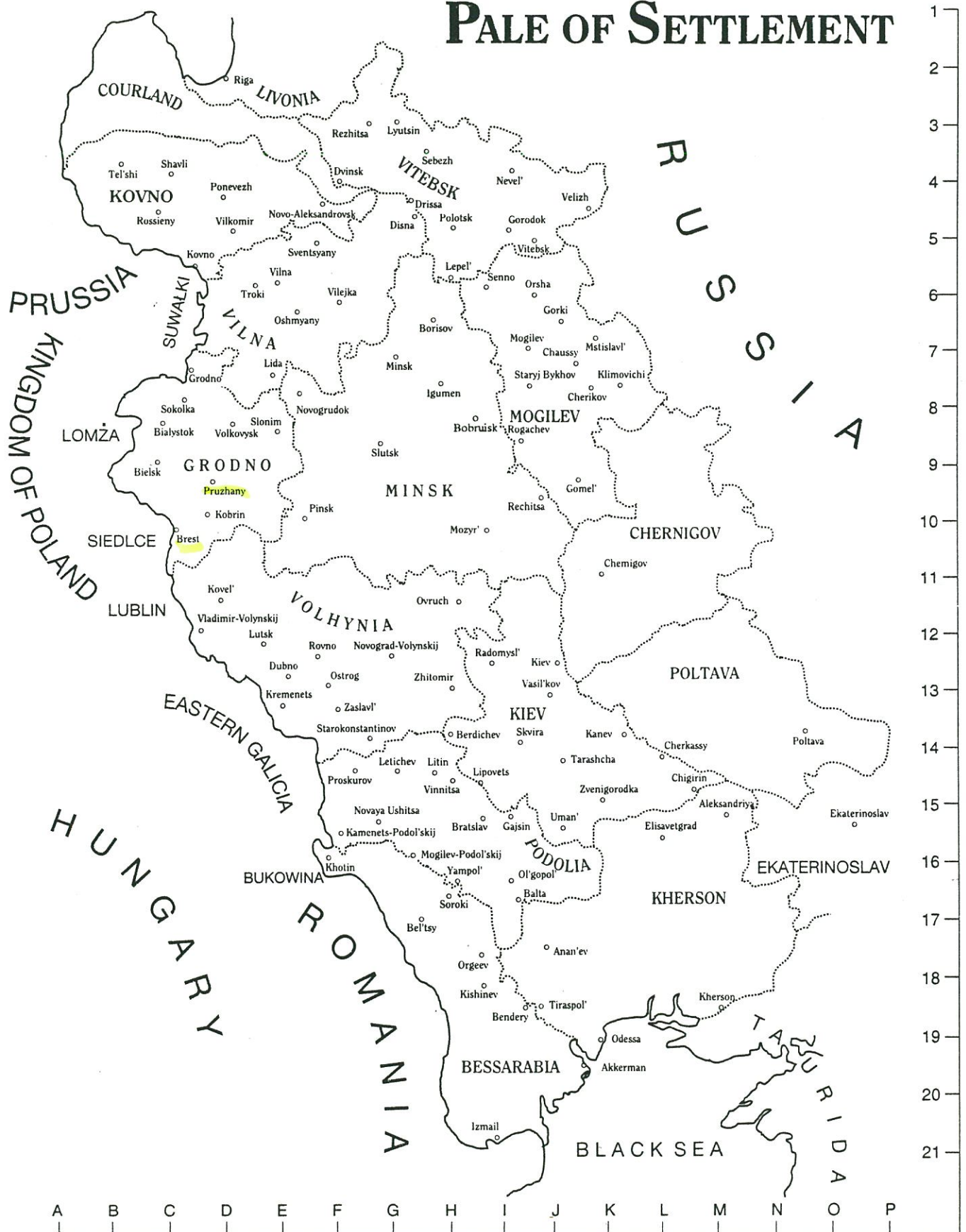
Tevye Krugman, Moishe's childhood friend

### **Partisans**

Shalom Berenshtein

*C-Maps from Our Trip via Tex*

# PALE OF SETTLEMENT





1913 Grodno Province Land Survey  
Large Map on display in  
Mayor's Office  
(as translated by Bella Velikovskaya)

# ШЕРШЕВА

Гродзенскай губерніі, Пружанскага ўезда,  
або нязначнага прадназначанага ўпрыгаворанага  
составлена ў 1913 г.



**Street Names**  
PRUZHANSKAIA  
LIPOVAIA  
MOSTOVAIA  
NOVAIA  
OSTROVETSKAIA  
KAPLITSKAIA  
KAMENETSKAIA

Peasant Lands

Church Land

A Small Village

Peasant Lands

State Vegetable Gardens  
(marked in blue)

Numbers 40's and 50's - wooden quarters  
(marked in orange)

Гродзенскі павет

Списокъ примечаній

1. Church etc.
2. Roman Catholic Church
3. Synagogue etc.
4. Prayer Houses etc.
5. Bathhouse etc.
6. Wooden Bathhouse etc.
7. Almshouse etc.
8. Two Year School etc.
9. Church School etc.
10. Trade Rows etc.
11. Post Office etc.

Примечанія

Peasant plots marked with roman numerals  
excluded from the pale of Shershev

Signatures

Peasant plots marked with roman numerals  
excluded from the pale of Shershev

583



Dear Leah,

I am back home and after a very pleasant phone conversation with mayor this morning I am ready to answer your questions.

**1) The numbering system:**

1. A church
- 2) Polish Roman Catholic church
- 3) Synagogue
- 4) Praying houses
- 5) Stone bathhouse
- 6) Wooden bathhouse
- 7) Almshouse
- 8) Two year school
- 9) Church school
- 10) Trade rows
- 11) Post office

2) **40's and 50's** - wooden quarters , marked in orange

3) **State vegetable gardens** are marked in dirty blue, margin is reddish  
**Peasants' plots** are marked in yellow, margin is orange

**4) Street names**

PRUZHANSKAIA

LIPOVAIA

MOSTOVAIA

NOVAIA

OSTROVETSKAIA

KAPLITSKAIA

KAMENETSKAIA

5) **Scale: 1 English inch = 25 sazhen**

6) It is written on the map that **peasants' plots marked with Roman Numerals on this map are excluded from the pale of Shereshevo.**

Dear Leah,

I don't have any files, concerning Shereshevo. I was there several times only escorting people and because of that and because the people there are very kind and openhearted I can in some way help you.

Hope I managed to do this.

If you have more questions, please ask. **My SKYPE address is balsam52**

**Best wishes,**

**Bella**

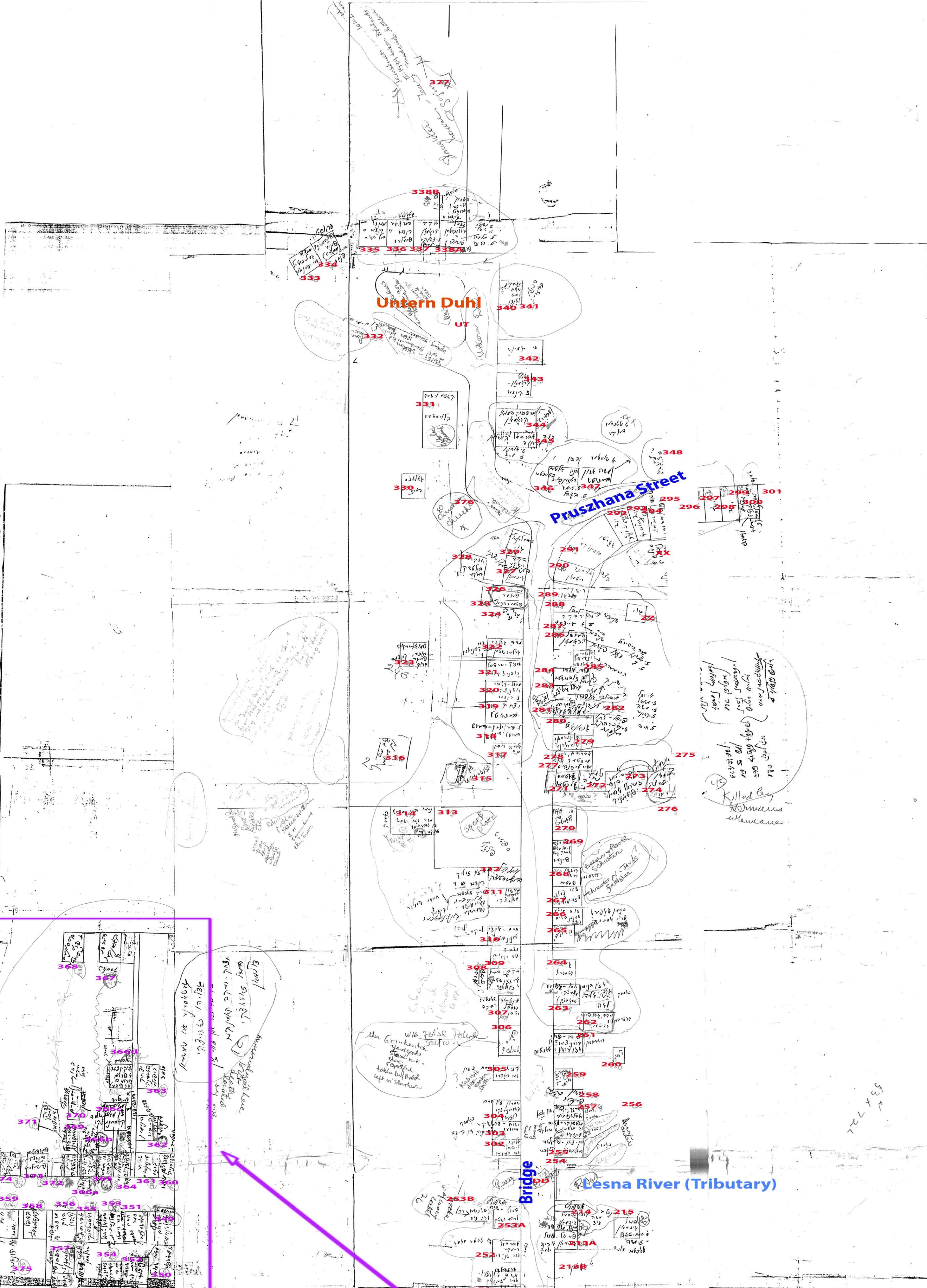
Existing buildings

1. Church
2. Roman-Catholic church
3. Synagogue
4. Prayer- houses
5. Brick bathhouse
6. Wooden bathhouse
7. Alms house
8. Two-year elementary school
9. Parish school
10. Commercial rows
11. Post office

Note : The plots marked I, II, ... IX, X are beyond Shershev's boundaries

Surveyed and arranged the plan  
The Grodno province land surveyor (signed)





(In an attempt to provide additional detail about a subset of dwellings numbered 195 - 250, the map maker duplicated and separately numbered the above dwellings as 349 - 375. Therefore the boxed area does not represent the actual placement of these dwellings.)

English  
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Russian  
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of  
dwellings  
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map.

Handwritten note in Cyrillic script, possibly describing a specific location or feature on the map.

Handwritten note in Cyrillic script, possibly describing a specific location or feature on the map.

Handwritten note in Cyrillic script, possibly describing a specific location or feature on the map.



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12

13

Untarn Duhl

Pruszhana Street

Lesna River (Tributary)

Mostara Street (later called Pietrski Street)

Hasergesl Street

Cemetery Street

Staravetska Street

Kaminetski Street

School Street (School Street)

(In an attempt to provide additional detail about a subset of dwellings numbered 195 - 250, the map maker duplicated and separately numbered the above dwellings as 349 - 375. Therefore the boxed area does not represent the actual placement of these dwellings.)



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 Haver -  
 1939 taken  
 made with bottle  
 1000

338B

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שילח

346  
347  
Pruszhana

376  
Christen  
Chick

Handwritten notes in a large oval area on the left side of the map, including "5-15-1000" and "1000-1500".

323  
Handwritten notes in a box.

316  
Handwritten notes in a box.

Handwritten notes in a box at the bottom left, including "Public School" and "B.H. Farmhouse".

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Handwritten notes in a box.

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Handwritten notes in a box.

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Handwritten notes in a box.

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Handwritten notes in a box.

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Handwritten notes in a box.

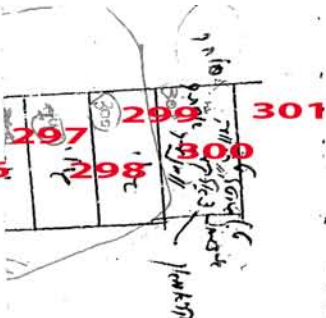
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Handwritten notes in a column of boxes on the right side of the map.

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Handwritten notes in a column of boxes on the right side of the map.

Handwritten notes in a box at the bottom right, including "Schuster" and "Feldsher".

Street

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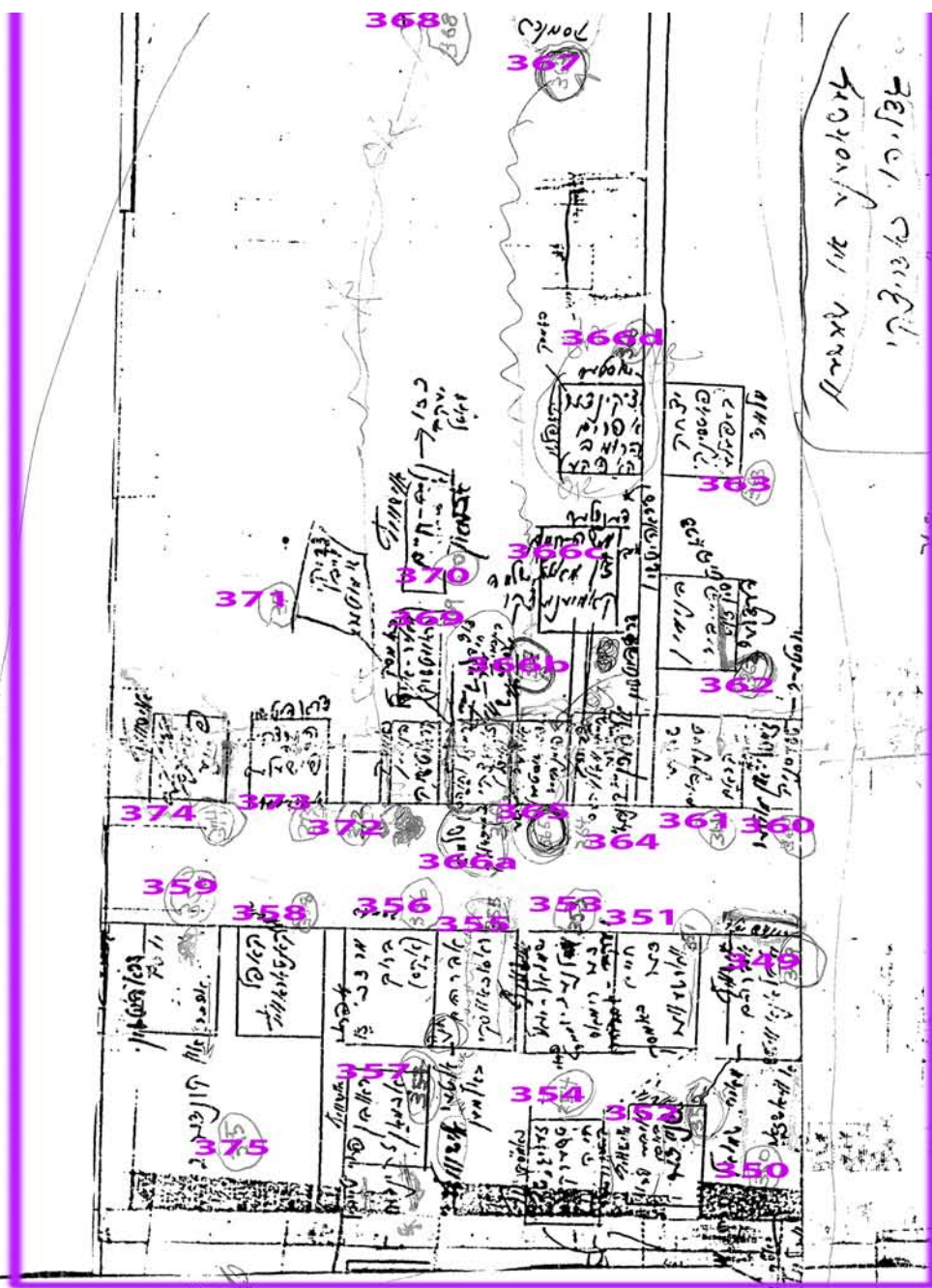


עצומה  
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הקמת  
ממשלה  
חדשה  
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הקמת  
ממשלה  
חדשה

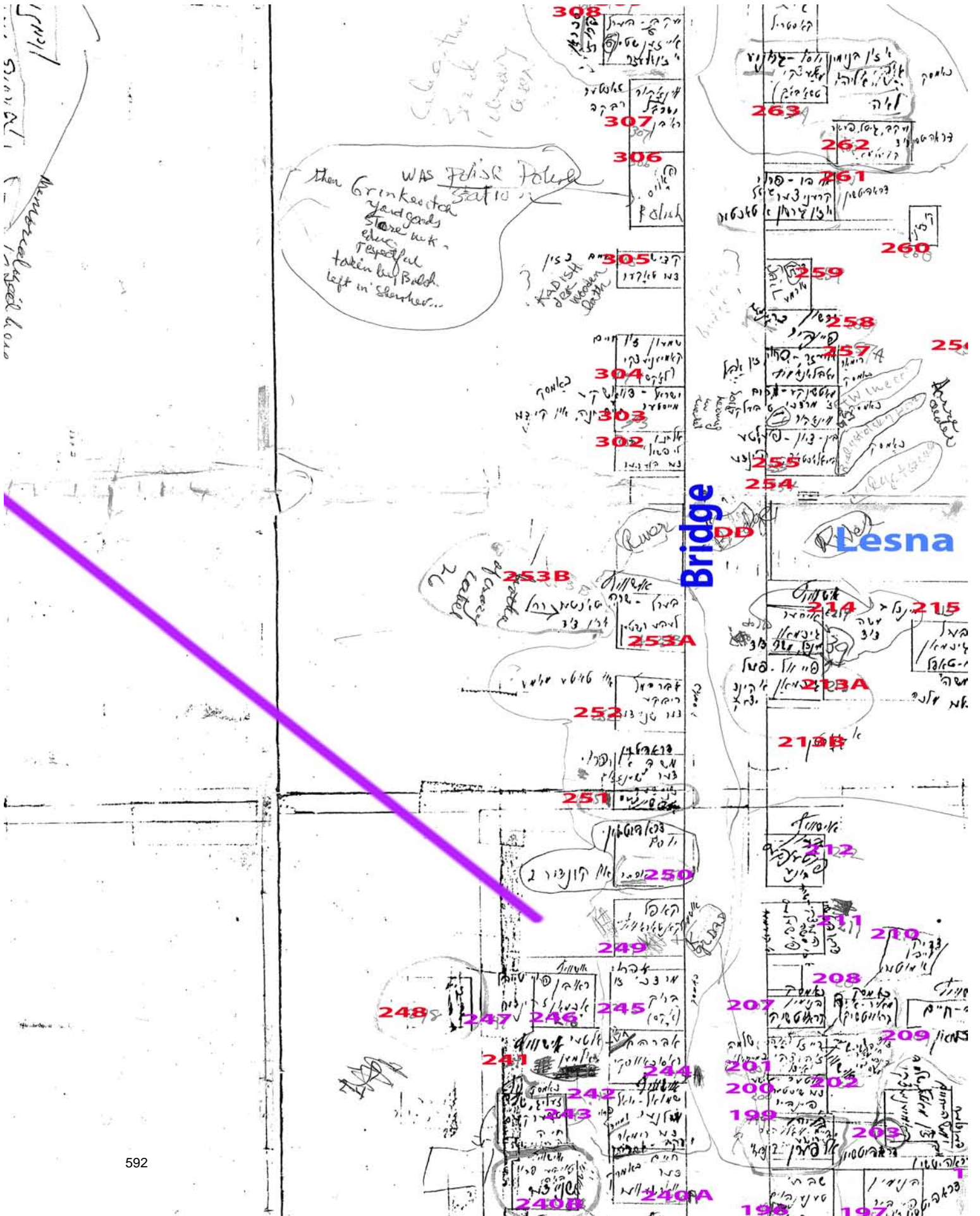
(17)  
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when



361. 362. 363.  
 364. 365. 366.  
 367. 368. 369.  
 370. 371. 372.



( In an attempt to provide additional  
 detail about a subset of dwellings numbered  
 195 - 250, the map maker duplicated  
 and separately numbered the above  
 dwellings as 349 - 375.  
 Therefore the boxed area does not represent  
 the actual placement of these dwellings )





## River (Tributary)

12  
14 6  
5  
2/6

2/2 → 150  
2/2 → 150  
2/2 → 150

[illegible]

206

205

in the family

1844

Christian P

Q sayin 2  
among feet  
with knee  
one flooded  
2 ft...

had 2 sons  
1 criminal  
2 poor 1 sick --  
me, I'll swim as  
in the river  
her words -  
washing  
cleaning  
DK her hands

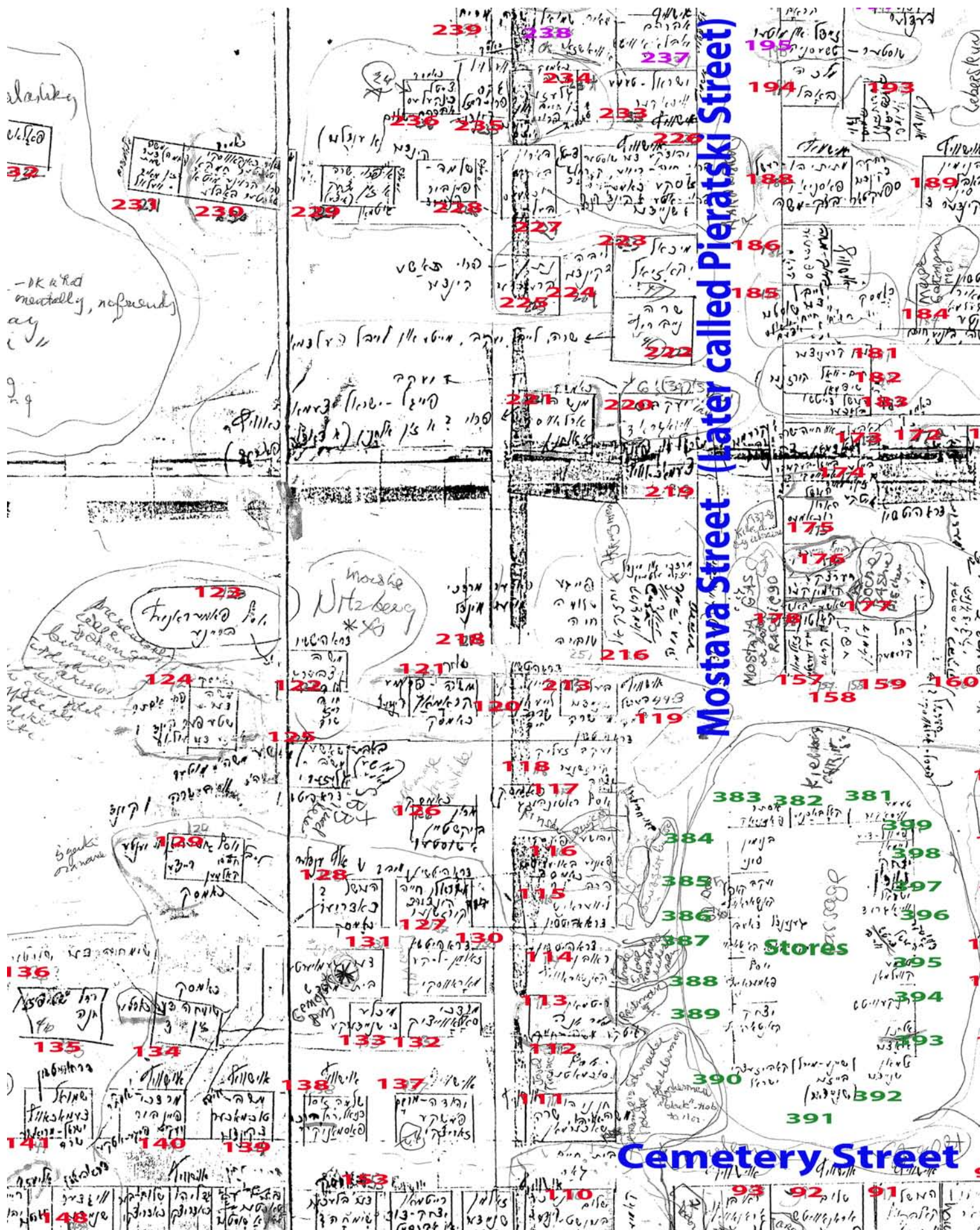
Amber Chabot

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143

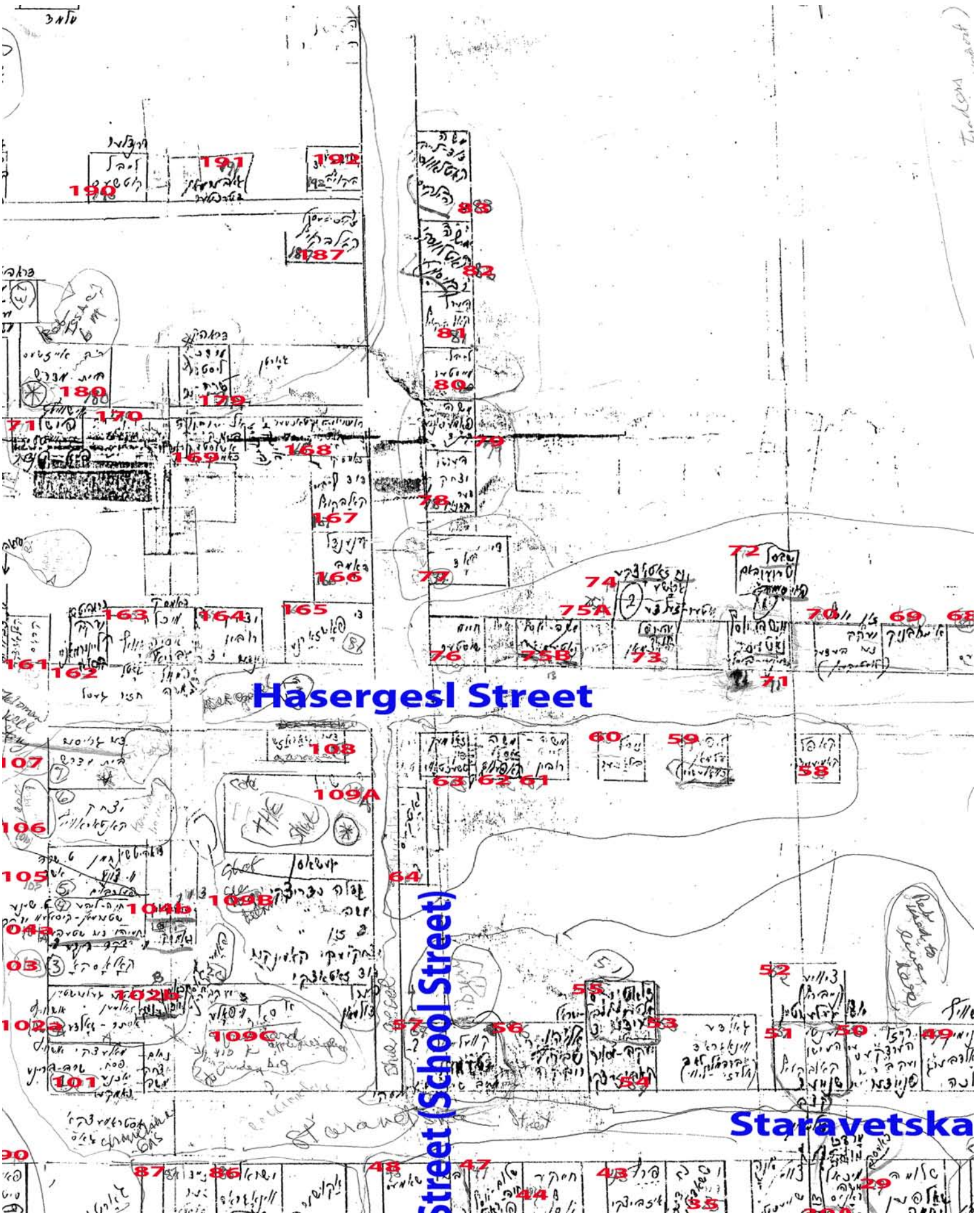
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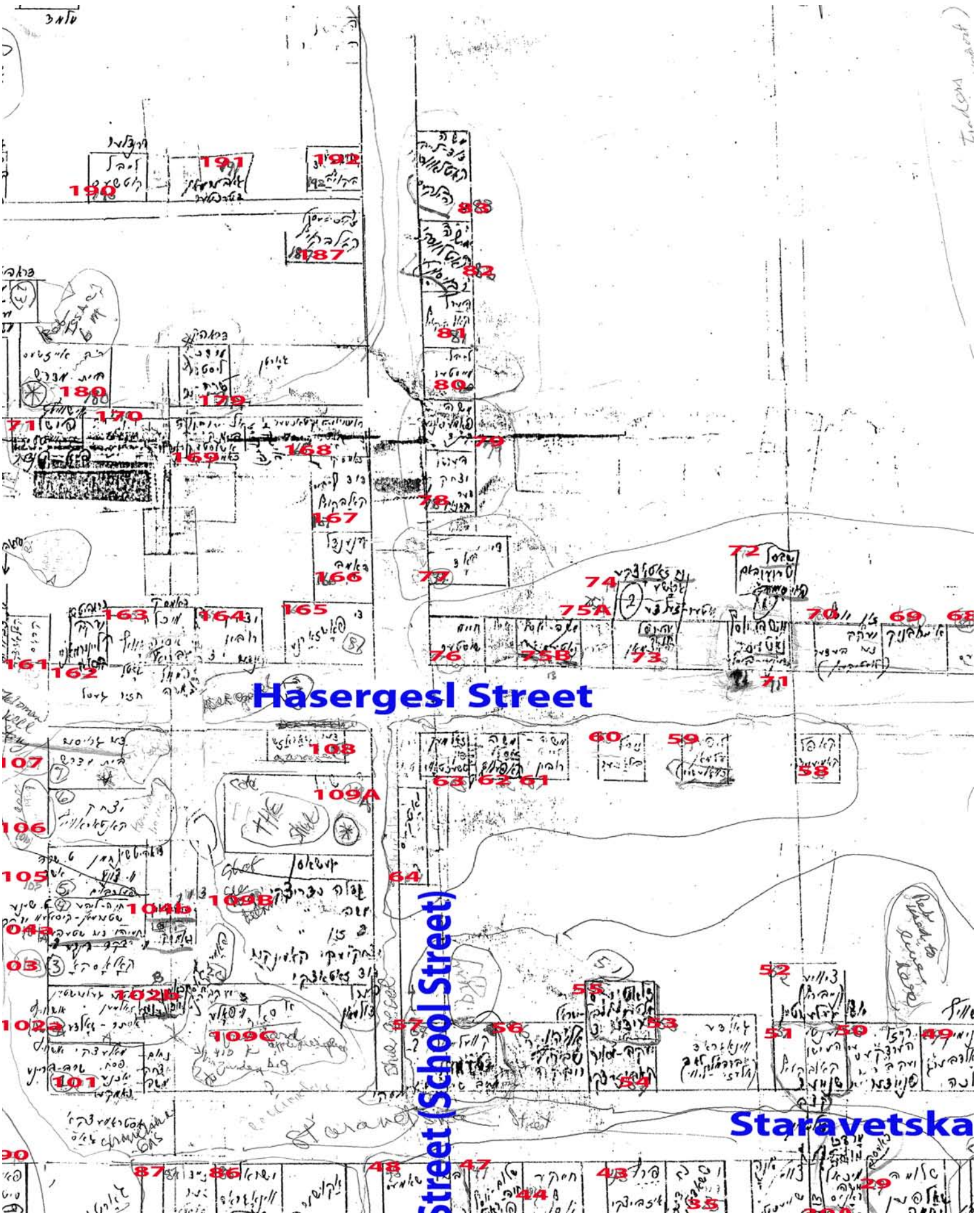








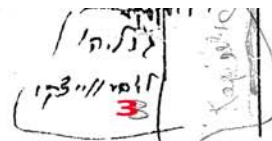
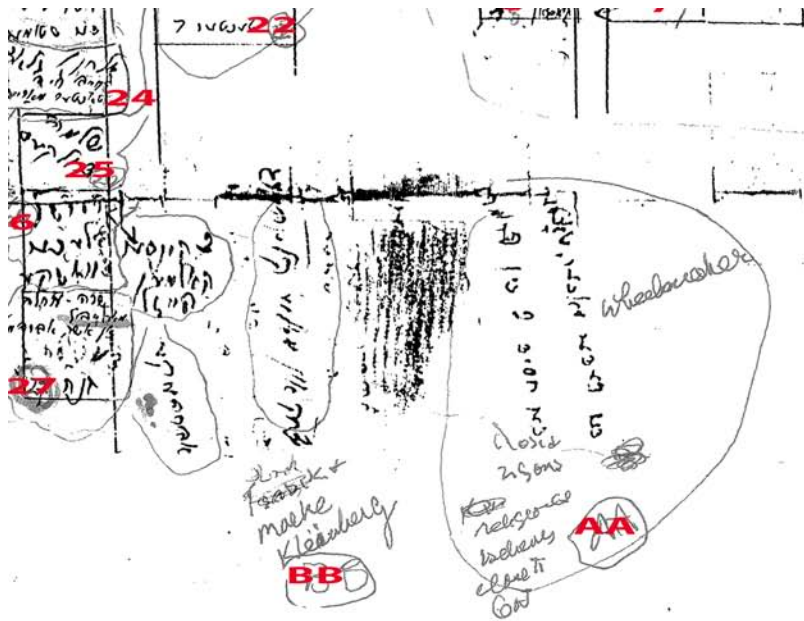












His house

### **Special Acknowledgement**

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the later involvement of Leuma Lerman and her husband Gideon. Leuma, Moishe Kantorwitz's Israeli cousin, has done an incredible job of refining the map legend by addressing the issues of additions, omissions, duplications, and substitutions for many items.

In the interests of "best possible practices", with material such as this, I have endeavored wherever possible to keep all alternative data in each category. Thus the informed reader, as well as the interested reader, may have to wend his or her way through multiple entries ultimately necessitated by the untimely death of this map's maker, as well as possible shifts in households due to differences in years of residence, possible failures of memory, legibility, and spelling options.

HOWEVER, AN EXTREMELY SIGNIFICANT DISCOVERY BY THE LERMANS INDICATES THAT MOISHE, AN AMATEUR CARTOGRAPHER AT BEST, BEGAN TO DETAIL WHAT IS LISTED AS #212-237 BUT THEN RAN OUT OF ROOM AND DETAILED THOSE HOUSEHOLDS TO THE SIDE AND DUPLICATED THEM BY USING # 349-375. THUS, THESE ARE A SPATIAL MISREPRESENTATION. WE HAVE INDICATED THESE AREAS ON THE MAP ITSELF WITH THE COLOR PURPLE AND A BRIEF EXPLANATION.

Leah Watson/Leah Zazulyer

### "Raad Kroman" Market

50 long and 20 meters wide. Brick. Passage way thru center, left/right (?)

Market days Monday and Thursday.

Numbered on Map	Merchandise	Last Name	First Name (Husband)	First Name (Wife)	Commentary
381		ZUCKER		Teme	
382	Sausage				non-Jewish-kielbasa
383	Haberdashery	POZNIAK		Esther	* Haberdashery (Moishe's word for general merchandise)
384	Leather	SINAI	Benyomin		either for shoes or complete hides
385	Storage	KANTOROWITZ	Jacov Kopel		Belonging to Moishe's grandfather
386	Haberdashery	DOMB		Grendl	
387	Warehouse				Belonging to Moishe's grandfather
388	Haberdashery	POMERANTZ	Yosl		
389	Liquor	KANTOROWITZ	Yitsok		Bought from distinguished elder Mordecai LESHTCHINSKY, father of his sister in law
390	Haberdashery	KABEZETSKY	Jacov Meir		cotton, pins, thread, ladies stockings, elastic, shoelaces, shoe polish, soap, tin pins, dishes...a general store.
391	Tailor	BAZER		Shaindl Mirel	
392	Unknown	SCHNEIDER	Zalman		
393	Haberdashery	GLOTSER	Elanu		
394	Yard Goods (?)	RINKEVITCH / GRINKEVITCH (?)			
395	Haberdashery	KVELLMAN		Teme	
396	Unknown	DAITCH	Hershl	Rebekah	
397	Haberdashery	WINOGRAD	Israel		
398	Hardware	LANDUN/LONDON	Yitsok		
399	Haberdashery	LEHMAN	Fivel		

Locations						
Numbered on Map	Last Name or Names (Could be more than one family unit or genration)	First Name (Husband or other men)	First Name (Wife or other women)	Probably Children	Fled or Taken To	Commentary
1	KALBKOIF	Jakov Lebes				
2	LABEVITSKI					
3	SINKVELL	Avrom		Jacov Yitsok		
4	JACOBVITZ	Zelick				
5	RAAB	Moishe (Mordecai)				"Raab"-- refers to the village of Raibitch, where this person came from presumably
6	BEZROOK / KANTOROWITZ	Jacov				
7	KAMINKER / KLINERMAN	Jacov / Jacov	Faigl (KLINERMAN ?)		Chomsk	
8	LEBERSTEYN / KOGIN	Label-Choske	Cena			
9	NIEBRIEF	Jacov				Butcher, (Kosherer)
10	VAFENSTEYN	Jakov, Issak				
11	VALDMAN	Raikin/Rahim, Label				
12	CHOMPKE / SCHNEIDER	Avrom				Nickname Chimke for Chaim. Was a Tailor
13	PAPALONEN	Boruch	Raishe-Rochl	3 Children, Moishe		"Faktir" -- a person who rents land and cows and makes a kind of swiss cheese.

Numbered	Last Name or Names	First Name	First Name	Probably	Fled or	Commentary
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<b>on Map</b>	<b>(Could be more than one family unit or generation)</b>	<b>(Husband or other men)</b>	<b>(Wife or other women)</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Taken To</b>	
<b>14</b>	KVALIK (?)					"The Kvalik" (dictionary kval)--spring, source, well. (Recently Moishe suggested this might be a Mr. Kavalik, an old man who was known only by his last name and lived alone. Moishe said that the name means "Give Me A Piece"; a Russian word. Man had no occupation; did nothing. (I note that on this map Moishe never uses "The" for a person, only for a place. So I don't know if this is Mr. Kavalik or a well! But obviously such a man did exist, somewhere in the shtetl!.)
<b>15</b>	OCHMAN/ACHMAN	Noske		Fraike, Motel, and...?		Horse Trader
<b>16</b>	RAGOVIN	Zisel Meyer		3 Girls		
<b>17</b>						THE RABBI'S SYNAGOGUE, Kantorowitz's place of worship
<b>18</b>						Went to America and came back. No name
<b>19</b>	KAMINKER	Hershke				
<b>20</b>	PITE BEN ZION	Dovid				
<b>21</b>	FISHMAN and ?	Chaim	Yaul	Josef, Dovid		Hatmaker
<b>22</b>	YANOFISKY	Shmuel		Chaim-Mendel, Label and 7 daughters		
<b>23</b>	REITMAN	Beryl				and Josef Reitman who cannot speak

<b>Numbered</b>	<b>Last Name or Names</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Probably</b>	<b>Fled or</b>	<b>Commentary</b>
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<b>on Map</b>	<b>(Could be more than one family unit or generation)</b>	<b>(Husband or other men)</b>	<b>(Wife or other women)</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Taken To</b>	
<b>24</b>	GLATSER	Altman	Chaia	daughter Maisha		
<b>25</b>	DURLKES	Shloime				
<b>26</b>	BLECHER	Hirsch	Dvoshke	Kalman, Raizel		
<b>27</b>		Moishe	Sora	Asher, Avromal		
<b>28</b>	LIFSHITZ			son, Yitsok, daughter Chaia		
<b>29</b>	GALPERIN	Schloime			Chomsk	Nechema Zipe ?
<b>30A</b>	ROHANES	Mordecai Mikel Moisha				the rich man (bais, vov, huf, sameth)
<b>30B</b>	DUHLMAN					
<b>31</b>				Leibe, Hinde, two sisters		
<b>32</b>	IZBITSKI	Schmoen				
<b>33</b>		Israel Ziske				"the Malamid"
<b>34</b>	LIFSHITZ (Ben-Don, son of)	Elizer	Rochel-Leah			man who knows much, Groneye (f.) ?
<b>35</b>	SINTER	Moishe				"der stoller" = carpenter, cabinetmaker.
<b>36</b>	ZATOTSKY	Dovid				
<b>37</b>	KRAVITZ	Yitsok				
<b>38</b>	BIKSTEYN	Moishe Chanen				good man who tells stories
<b>39</b>	TSOONER	Shine-Perl	Raisl	Riva and Label		the Baker
<b>40</b>		Maier-Chaim				"the schuster"
<b>41</b>	BAVEL/BAVITS	Mordecai Jacov	Broche			
<b>42</b>	EISENSTEIN	Chaim		Maier, Itsok, Itche		
<b>43</b>	IZBITSKI	Peretz				Shoemaker
<b>Numbered</b>	<b>Last Name or Names</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Probably</b>	<b>Fled or</b>	<b>Commentary</b>

<b>on Map</b>	<b>(Could be more than one family unit or generation)</b>	<b>(Husband or other men)</b>	<b>(Wife or other women)</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Taken To</b>	
<b>44</b>	NIBOSTCHIK	Josef	Chike (?)			Merchandise
<b>45</b>	IRIKMAN	Zvi, Grishe ?				
<b>46</b>	KRUGMAN		Rosa, Minkes (?)			
<b>47</b>	FARBER	Scholem Josef, Ranter,	Chaia	Dovid		
<b>48</b>	RAKALEFSKY	Berl	Elke	Mikel		Shames
<b>49</b>	GOLDBERG	Benjamin	Malke		Auschwitz	
<b>50</b>	HERSKVER	Jakov	Raizel			Possible tailor, The rabbi used to live here but moved
<b>51</b>	KOLBKOIF, DULMAN	Hersh, Katsof	Yente			Daughter-in-law lived in this house
<b>52</b>	NYBRIEF GELERSTEIN	Zvi				Related to DUHLMAN, or in business with
<b>53</b>	VINOGRAD, LEVY	Lech, Avrom	Golde	Aliza		
<b>54</b>	KABAZITSKI	Jacov Meyer				
<b>55</b>	ZATINSKY	Alter	Lube	3 children		
<b>56</b>	NYBRIF	Eliahu	Rifke			
<b>57</b>	KVELVEL, SMILOFSKY	Label, Jacov, Shloime,	Chaia		Chomsk	
<b>58</b>	KAMINETSKY	Kapel				
<b>59</b>	ELMAN	Lipe (?)				(chavalesin)==breeder/keeper of ??? Son in Israel
<b>60</b>	BLECHER	Nisel				
<b>61</b>	RUBIN	Moishe Lieb				
<b>62</b>	KAPALONICK	Moishe	Zisl (?)			
<b>63</b>		Zalman				from Chertof
<b>64</b>						Meat Store, not kosher,not Jewish
<b>65</b>	KATOFISKY	Yuni				
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<b>66</b>				4 children		Shoemaker
<b>67</b>	SOREMAN	Moishe, Motel	Miriam			
<b>68</b>	SIRKES	Chaim				
<b>69</b>						A chabadnik
<b>70</b>	LUSTIKMAN	Josef	Sora	Jakov (?)		Takes care of bathhouse. Means a man who makes many jokes.
<b>71</b>	NATES/H	Moishe	Shaina	Josef, Baile (?)		
<b>72</b>	TANNENBOIM	Shapsel	Simca			
<b>73</b>	REITSMAN	Hersh				
<b>74</b>	ZATOTSKI	Grusha	Zelda			
<b>75 A</b>						Unreadable
<b>75 B</b>	NOTERMAN/MIN	Josef	Maishe			
<b>76</b>	SCHUSTER	Chaim				Shoemaker (?)
<b>77</b>						The Bath
<b>78</b>		Hersh Yitsok				The horse person
<b>79</b>	POMERANTZ		Maishe	Baby		
<b>80</b>	MAISTER	Label				
<b>81</b>	KALKOV	Beryl				
<b>82</b>	KATLOFSKI	Moishe				(Boisn/Boism? meaning unknown) Moishe Kantorwitz thinks this is a surname.
<b>83</b>	KATLOFSKI	Moishe, Dovid-Labe				(the hilkes= wooden bats? )
<b>84</b>						"Akosherka". Midwife, non Jewish, trained, from elsewhere. Husband a lawyer, a public defender. Defended Jews too.
<b>85</b>	VALDSHIN					
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<b>86</b>	VINOGRAD, POMERANTZ	Israel, Josef	Brina			
<b>87</b>	BLECHER		Zidel			
<b>88</b>						Chassidic Shul
<b>89</b>	MALETSKY	Mikel, Zibashki				Location was a mill in 1931. Left with three sons for ghetto; never seen since.
<b>90</b>	SITOR	Pavel				Gentile, dentist/house
<b>91</b>	KALBKOIF	Hershl	Yente	5 children, son Kalman	Auschwitz	
<b>92</b>	ARONOVITZ	Sholem	Shira	two children	Auschwitz	restaurant, Inn
<b>93</b>	ARONOVITZ	Ruben	Leah	two children	Auschwitz	doctor, adjacent
<b>94</b>						Der Kloster, remains of / site of former eastern orthodox church, bell tower
<b>95</b>						The Priest's house and Orchard
<b>96</b>			Leah			Josef, cousin of map-maker
<b>97</b>	MAISTER	Daniel				
<b>98</b>						The Hebrew School
<b>99</b>						Gersl son of Hershl, from market handler
<b>100</b>	HOFFMAN	Nahum, Fishl				
<b>101</b>	MALETSKY	Nahum		Yitsok, Raizl, Pesach, Yachne, Moishe, Sora-Brina	Auschwitz	

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<b>102A</b>	GELSTEYN / GELLERSTEYN	Alter / Zalman	Esther- Golde		Auschwitz	Father in law to Amoch (?). Had a "miracle" garden, big, with apple, pear, peach trees.
<b>102B</b>	ADELEVSKI	Yudl (?)	Haminja (?)			
<b>102C</b>	POMERANTZ	Josef		Jacov, Brina		
<b>103</b>	KALOSKA / KATOSKA (?)					Possibly Christian
<b>104A</b>	STERMAN- KISOLOF	Chaim	Liebe	Shaina, Jacov, mem,vov? yud, hey, nun?		Steper = sticher, using a machine that sews two strips of leather together? makes holes? Rifke
<b>104B</b>	YUDLEVETZ		Romena			"dalet shin vov pay or fay kof shin yud final nun" (?)
<b>105</b>	FELDBOIM	Osher	Sora	Jacov (?)	Drochitcyn	house, 1931, \$450.
<b>106</b>	KANTOROWITZ	Yitsok				
<b>107</b>						107 The "Groise" Synagogue
<b>108</b>						108 The Garage
<b>109A</b>						The "Cold" Shul
<b>109B</b>	CHDRITSKY, DULMAN, KAMINKER	Gedalia, brother of Gedalia (Listed here as shot on march), Zalman, Dovid		2 children, Yitsok-Jacov?		Father of man we met in Brighton Beach
<b>109C</b>						Fruit garden
<b>110</b>	BERNSTEIN, NARDIM	Scholem, Chaim,	Neché	3 children	Auschwitz	Old folks home
<b>111</b>	SOCHERMAN		Chane Sora		Auschwitz	

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<b>112</b>	TUCHMACHER	Joseph, Labe Zustein			Auschwitz	
<b>113</b>	REITMAN	Maier, Yankle, Itke (?), Maier- Yone			Auschwitz	
<b>114</b>	KANTORWITZ	Reubin			Drochitchn	
<b>115</b>	LIVERANTZ	Peretz, N... (?)	Chava		Drochitcyn	also nun hay? and fay or hey vov raish? bais or kof?
<b>116</b>	BIELEVSKY	Yehoshua	Fania	Chaia	Chomsk	Druggist
<b>117</b>	ROTENBERG	Josef	PINKSY daughter		Chomsk	Rothenberg and Pinsky were both rich
<b>118</b>	KERSHNER	Jacov, Zelig, Yitsok			Drochitchyn	Hatmaker
<b>119</b>						Number ommitted from Map
<b>120</b>	FANLID (?)		Leah, Sora, Mira		Drochitchyn	
<b>121</b>	KROMAN	Moishe	Fruma	Two children, Binele and ?	Chomsk	Kremer
<b>122</b>	NITZBERG	Masihe, Labe	Mira, Raizl, Sora		Drochitchyn	
<b>123</b>	POMERANTZ	Josef	Brina			
<b>124</b>		Moishe	Esther	One son / Der Molar - house painter	Chomsk	"der Steper" = machine that stitcher probably uses for shoes
<b>125</b>	GLEZER (?)	Moishe	Bobbe Soche, Malle (?)		Drochitcyn	Glazer (?) Soche Boshe Blecher lived here
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<b>126</b>						Was an orphanage for a while
<b>127</b>	KIRSHNER	Israel-Chaim		2 children	Drochitchin	Hatmaker
<b>128</b>	ZELMAN	Hershl, Caskle			Chomsk	From Chadree. "alt endler/handler". Old merchadise.
<b>129</b>	GUTERMAN, KALMAN	Label ,Josef, Hyman	Toibe (Toibl)		Chomsk	Yente (?) - name or description for Toibl. Raide or Raitse (male or female, spelling (??))
<b>130</b>	MOROVSKY	Zalman	Lake (Leah)		Drochitchin	Library
<b>131</b>						"Der Gemoiert" Syngague. Brick
<b>132</b>	SOLOVETCHNIK	Mordecai				
<b>133</b>		Mihkele "The Schneiderke"				A Tailor
<b>134</b>		Tevye		3 sons	Chomsk	The Shuster
<b>135</b>	STIFSON		Rochel	Chana		
<b>136</b>		Schimke "The Heather"		3 sons		Lit fires (?), caretaker
<b>137</b>	ZARETSKY	Yehuda- Mordecai	Peshke		Auschwitz	
<b>138</b>	PASMOINIK	Schloime, Daniel	Rochl		Auschwitz	Zisel, Brochl (?)
<b>139</b>	TUCHMACHER	Moishe- Label		3 children	Auschwitz	
<b>140</b>	FEINBEER	Mordecai- Shloime		Jacov	Auschwitz	Faige, Yutke (?)
<b>141</b>	DEMOCHOVITZ	Schmuel	Miriam, Sora		Drochitchin	

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<b>142</b>	KRONSTADT	Pinchas, Itsok- Moishke	Leah, Cinke, Mina, Reizl		Auschwitz	
<b>143</b>	KAMINKER	Moishe	Fagel	Jacov, Zamel, Berl + ?	Chomsk	
<b>144</b>	BAISER	Yitzok- Zuker,		Israel, Feigle and Leah	Chomsk	
<b>145</b>	SCHNEIDER	Shloime	Reizl	3 children	Chomsk	Maier Adelson
<b>146</b>			Shaine-Meryl	Granddaughtes Faige and Maishe	Chomsk	A Grandmother
<b>147</b>	REITMAN	Eliazer, Yehuda		2 daughters, Miriam/Mire, ?	Drochitchin	
<b>148</b>	SCHNEIDER	Vigdor			Drochitchin	
<b>149</b>	SCHNEIDER	A brother, son of Amir- Mayer				"chak stoler"=carpenter,cabinetmaker
<b>150</b>	CHADRITSKY	Sholem-Ber			Auschwitz	
<b>151</b>	CHADRITSKY	Gedalia			Auschwitz	
<b>152</b>	SAPOSHNIK			Daughter Malke	Chomsk	A shoemaker
<b>153</b>		Shimca "Der Blecher"			Chomsk	makes tin/sheet metal, roofs, a tinsmith,
<b>154</b>	NIEBATSKI				Auschwitz	Schneider (A Tailor)
<b>155</b>	REITMAN	Isak Dovid		2 daughters	Auschwitz	son of Abravel
<b>156</b>	SCHNEIDER	Zalman				Schneider (A Tailor)
<b>157</b>	GELERSTEYN	Zalman				A Storekeeper
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<b>158</b>	ELMAN	Lipe				
<b>159</b>			Rochelle "Der Kremerke"			Der kremerke (A Storekeeper)
<b>160</b>	KALATSITSKE	Avrom	Rivke	Devorah	Drochitcyn	A Storekeeper
<b>161</b>						Kalasitske Store
<b>162</b>	KLEINERMAN	Jacov			Drochitcyn	A Storekeeper
<b>163</b>	ARONKEVITZ	Moishe, Mikel	Rivke		Chomsk	Gotel (?)
<b>164</b>	RUBIN	Yitsok		3 children		
<b>165</b>						Di Pashzorne,=Polish word: place of fire station
<b>166</b>	DOVID	Genedl				
<b>167</b>	KALBKOIF	Dovid Label			Chomsk	
<b>168</b>			Ike	1 daughter		Bakeries
<b>169</b>	BINKES	Zalman	Chana		Chomsk	A Shoemaker
<b>170</b>						Unreadable
<b>171</b>		Hersh		Faigl	Auschwitz (?)	Possibly pertains to #180
<b>172</b>					Drochitchn	Unreadable
<b>173</b>	ZELMAN	Chaim	Sora			
<b>174</b>	ASOFSKI (?)		Baile	Son		Bagel Baker
<b>175</b>	RUHAMES	Aaron				
<b>176</b>	BERITSKI/BERITISK/BERLITSKI / KAMINKER	Hersl	Raizl			
<b>177</b>	BLECHER		Soshe Boshe			Little store that sold caulk
<b>178</b>	KALTON	Zalmen				Store
<b>179</b>	LISTVINSK	Mordecai	Sora- Ester		Drochitchn	A garden next store
<b>180</b>						Reb Isaac Shule

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<b>181</b>	KRENITZER	Nissen				
<b>182</b>	SHIPMAN	Chaim-Vall				Kortzner = barber
<b>183</b>	DITSHER	Hershl				The Blecher= tinsmith
<b>184</b>		Maier, Bonye, Mache	Yente, Chana, Gilde		Drochitchyn	
<b>185</b>		Label, Chaim- Agoles (?)		Adem =son in law	Chomsk	Schuster
<b>186</b>	SPECTOR	Baruch- Maishe			Auschwitz	Store
<b>187</b>	KALBKOIF	Dovid				Son of Labes
<b>188</b>	PASNIACK, SPECTOR	Matishu- Heshl/Hershl, Moishe Boruch	Rivke	2 children	Auschwitz	
<b>189</b>	SINE (?)	Benjomin	Babel	3 children	Auschwitz	
<b>190</b>	KATCHES	Labl				A handler - merchandise (?)
<b>191</b>	GOBERMAN			2 daughters		
<b>192</b>	KALBKOIF	Schmuel, Dovid				
<b>193</b>	LEBERSTEYN	Schmuel	Lena- Dvora	Sina, Judl (?)	Auschwitz	
<b>194</b>	BABEL		Malke			
<b>195</b>	CHESNICK		Zaidel			Schuster
<b>196</b>	TENNEBOIM	Shabes				Store
<b>197</b>			Benjomin	Had a son	Drochitchyn	A handler whose son was sent to Siberia (?)



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<b>198</b>	PATSHINKE	Yitsok				"Malamid" - Teacher. "Kepele" - hat maker or nickname?
<b>199</b>	ALPERIN	Aleichem		4 children	Drochitcyn	"Vallenker"= wool maker, dealer, spinner (?), maker of wool rollers. "Vallenke" were thick, pressed felt boots used instead or inside leather boots.
<b>200</b>	FEINBEER	"Alter der Zishe"				Schuster
<b>201</b>	ZIKITSKI	Schloime Yidel	Raizel-Leah	2 girls	Auschwitz	Could relate to # 202
<b>202</b>		Dovid, Maishe	Chia	3 children	Auschwitz	Could relate to # 201
<b>203</b>	KAMENETZKI	Maishe	Chaim	Motel, Schloime	Drochitcyn	handler (.i.e. businessman),
<b>204</b>	KAPLIN	Efraim	Chike	3 children (?)	Chomsk	Shoemaker
<b>205</b>	KAMINKER	Hershl			Chomsk	
<b>206</b>	BOYSOONES			2 daughters		
<b>207</b>	KRAVCHIK	Benjamin			Chomsk	
<b>208</b>	KRAVCHIK	Maier			Chomsk	
<b>209</b>	ACHMAN/OCHMAN	Labe Hyman		2 sons Jacov, Motl	Auschwitz	
<b>210</b>	ZADIK	Zabn				Mother lives with him (?)
<b>211</b>	FISHEL	Hershe, Maishe			Drochitchn	A kremer (storekeeper)
<b>212</b>	FOTANKES	Sine	Buna		Auschwitz	
<b>213</b>	GICHMAN	Fivel	Perl	a child, Yitsok	Auschwitz	Had a garden (?)
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<b>214</b>	GICHMAN	Aiser	Mindl	Moishe, Dovid	Auschwitz	
<b>215</b>	GICHMAN	Berl		Chaim-Topel, Moishe, Malke		
<b>216</b>	KRUGMAN, EISMAN	Mordecai Haskel, Tevye, Yankle Schloime, Chaim,	Mudle, Faige			
<b>217</b>	GALENBERG	Josef			Chomsk	a Pinsker.
<b>218</b>		Mordecai	Mindel			No readable last name (?)
<b>219</b>	SHEMAHOVITZ		Mirl, Peshe			
<b>220</b>	VILAGRAD	Jacov				Galenberg's father-in-law
<b>221</b>	ARLOVES/VETZ	Menashe, Jacov	Faigl-Sorl		Chomsk, Auschwitz	See arrow. Zemach son, a "darf fater"= a village father? leader? post person? pasture?
<b>222</b>	NEIBRIF, HELMAN	Label, Yacov, Maishe	Sora			See arrow.
<b>223</b>	KAZIAL	Michel				
<b>224</b>		Label		2 children		
<b>225</b>	KRENETSER	Natan	Chia	Children		
<b>226</b>		Alter, Hindle	Mira-Riva		Chomsk, Auschwitz	Jehuda the shuster, Alter is a tailor
<b>227</b>	RUCHONETZ	Aaron	Belke	3 children		
<b>228</b>	FEINBEER	Schloime				A handler

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<b>229</b>	GOOTMAN	Sora		Son Itsok, Daughter Ida		
<b>230</b>	RANKOVTSKI	Maier	Yael, Bronya	Chamke, Babele	Chomsk	Bronya alte mother
<b>231</b>		Moishe	Chava	sons Maier, Velvel		"der Schmid". From or to Slomsem?Slonim?
<b>232</b>	PALASKI	Unknown (?)	Unknown (?)			Christian. Had 2 sons, one a criminal, one poor and sick mentally with no friends. A saying among Jews, that when river overflows two feet, "Me, I'll swim away with the river." Referring to her status???? Her work, washing and cleaning...
<b>233</b>	VINECOR	Israel- Tevye			Auschwitz	
<b>234</b>	GLEZER	Moishe	Chana	Two sons Itsok, Label. Two daughters	Chomsk	
<b>235</b>	OX (?)	Velvel	Raizel	Children. Not sure of number.		
<b>236</b>	CHINKELES	Avrom- Sholem	Zitl		Chomsk	
<b>237</b>	YABLONOWITZ	Avrom			Auschwitz	"an Antopoler". He came from the nearby town of Antopol.
<b>238</b>		Maier- Schmul				"A Warsawer"
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<b>239</b>			Sora-Miriam		Chomsk	
<b>240A</b>		Chaim			Chomsk	"A Warsawer".
<b>240B</b>	SCHNEIDER		Toibe and? Grandmother		Chomsk, Auschwitz	
<b>241</b>						is really part of 244
<b>242</b>	MILNER, GORIN/GORZIN	Schmul, Jacov	Yeal, Mindle from Vilna	One girl, child	Auschwitz	"the rimer". belts for wheels of leather
<b>243</b>	STERKES	Zedik	Chia		Chomsk	
<b>244</b>	RASCOVSKY	Avrom	Chana	Alter, Zalman (?)	Auschwitz	
<b>245</b>	GENTSER	Mordecai		Boruch meaning an "ox" (?)	Chomsk	
<b>246 and 247</b>		Reuben	Tiebl		Auschwitz	Achman's child (?)
<b>248</b>						No readable (?)
<b>249</b>	KANTORWITZ	Kopel			Auschwitz	
<b>250</b>		Josef		and two children	Drochitchyn	
<b>251</b>		Maishe		3 children	Drochitchyn	Schneider, "the beautiful talker".
<b>252</b>		Avromal	Rivke		Chomsk	The schneider
<b>253A</b>	LEBERSTEYN	Berl	Sora		Auschwitz	
<b>253B</b>				daughter Rochl, son Aron Dovid,		see 253A, brother of "crazy" Label
<b>254</b>						Bridge tower--JAN is the name on it.
<b>Numbered</b>	<b>Last Name or Names (Could be</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Probably</b>	<b>Fled or</b>	<b>Commentary</b>

<b>on Map</b>	<b>more than one family unit or generation)</b>	<b>(Husband or other men)</b>	<b>(Wife or other women)</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Taken To</b>	
<b>255</b>	BIALISTOCHKE	Ben-Zin	Pelte	Children (?)		horse dealer, close living to river.
<b>256</b>	VINECOR	Mordecai	Miriam (Belke's daughter) ?		Chomsk	Nickname "Machimke".Sold herring in market.
<b>257A</b>	ALBLONOVITZ	Eliezer	Unkown wife	Abel	Chomsk	A rimer
<b>257B</b>						Same information as 256 (?)
<b>258</b>	FINEBEER	Gersh		Two childern		
<b>259</b>						The Toorme-= Jail. Used for thieves and drunks, i.e. not the big jail in Pruzhany for serious crimes. Few Jews ever in this.
<b>260</b>						a cousin, but no indication of whom, but off side of 261
<b>261</b>	KRENITZER	Eliohun, Avrom	Gitl	3 children, son Gershon, a daughter, and (?)	Drochitcyn	
<b>262</b>	KELMAN	Jacov, Dovid	Gitl, Peshe		Drochitcyn	
<b>263</b>	MALETSKI	Josl	Gronye	a son Benjamin, Jacov, Leah	Chomsk	"tchabach"= ? Moishe speculates it is a nickname.
<b>264</b>	CASTZIL/CASTRIL.					Christian
<b>265</b>	SHAPIRO	Bejamin	Esther	A daughter		Bakery
<b>266</b>	TANNEBAUM	Dovid-Gote	Gitl	3 children		
<b>267</b>	JAVITS,/DJEVITZ					"Der Felsher". A cross between a pharmisist and a physician's assistant. Christian
<b>Numbered</b>	<b>Last Name or Names (Could be</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Probably</b>	<b>Fled or</b>	<b>Commentary</b>

<b>on Map</b>	<b>more than one family unit or generation)</b>	<b>(Husband or other men)</b>	<b>(Wife or other women)</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Taken To</b>	
<b>268</b>		Gershon	Rachel		Dorchitchn	Shuster
<b>269</b>	FEINBEER	Michel, Raishe, Label, Mapel (?), Tevye,	Gitl			
<b>270</b>						The Post. Run by gentile woman imported from west of Poland. Locals could only speak Belarusian, etc. So officials needed to speak Polish.
<b>271</b>						Zalman's daughter of 272
<b>272</b>		Zalmen		2 daughters		Family of row # 271? Der Lock Lax? / Salmon? Lock? / Curl? Varnish?
<b>273</b>	PATASHNIK	Avrom-Berl, Tevye, Israel	Chia-Hinde			
<b>274</b>	MALETZ	Arke (Aaron)	Wife (?)		Auschwitz	
<b>275</b>		Schmuel	Wife (?)	3 children		
<b>276</b>	ZINFZIK/ ZINPZIK	Schloime and Motke	Wife (?)	2 sons	Drochitcyn	zayin, yud, nun, pay or fay, zayin, yud, kof --- Moishe is not certain of spelling)
<b>277</b>	TENNENBOIM	Avrom				see 271/272
<b>278</b>	MAISTER	Avrom	Raisl			
<b>279</b>	KALINERMAN	Alter	Yarone			
<b>280</b>	GRANAT	Fivel, Sender	Rochl			Schneider - Tailor
<b>281</b>	LIKOVITZ					The "lefty", Zalman, Chiam, Molke, Rafael... Readability (?)
<b>Numbered</b>	<b>Last Name or Names (Could be</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>First Name</b>	<b>Probably</b>	<b>Fled or</b>	<b>Commentary</b>

<b>on Map</b>	<b>more than one family unit or generation)</b>	<b>(Husband or other men)</b>	<b>(Wife or other women)</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Taken To</b>	
<b>282</b>	GASPERN		Belke			Children (see 283)
<b>283</b>	GALPER	Maier, Getsl / Glister	Belke, Malke	Chia, Brina, Moishe, Motl		Belke referred to as "viblke" = little wife. Also to side, "gentile", Thomas (?)
<b>284</b>	ZILBERSTEYN	Moishe	Elonya	Label		
<b>285</b>	RINKEVITZ	Alte		Had a daughter		Kremenke
<b>286</b>	KROMAN	Hersl, Jacov	Chia, Rochel			Father of the widow (?)
<b>287</b>	SCHNEIDER	Label	Chaia- Rivke			(adem), father in law Chaim Schneider
<b>288</b>	SCHNEIDER	Label	Chia, Rebekah	Had a son and daughter		A person on who one can count
<b>289</b>	KALZOF	Rishke				A gentile, man who buys and sells cows and horses.
<b>290</b>	REITMAN		Aliza			
<b>291</b>	BOTNAKS/BOTNISKIN					Garden (?). Word for butcher of to side?
<b>292</b>	TOLIK					Gentile
<b>293</b>		Daniel				Gentile
<b>294</b>	WINER	Yehuda Alter				Businessman
<b>295</b>	LIFKOWITZ	Zalman, Shime, Motel, Raphael	Rochl			"Vall" (Wool ?) machines (?)
<b>296</b>						Gentile
<b>297</b>						Gentile
<b>298</b>						Gentile
<b>299</b>						Gentile
<b>300</b>						Gentile

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<b>301</b>	WEINER	Yitzok, Adam	Sulke, Esther, Gitl, Rivke			people who buy and sell. (mother in law of (?))
<b>302</b>	LIPSHUTZ	Eliahu				"The Blecher". Tinsmith.
<b>303</b>	MAISTER	Israel	Dvorhke	Chaim, Chana	Chomsk	
<b>304</b>	KAMINETSKY	Shimen		son Chaim		"Lokes", noodles
<b>305</b>	KADISH			two sons		"The tacker", turn on lathe? / wooden lathe?
<b>306</b>	GRINKEVITCH / RINKEVITCH (?)				left in Shershev	Polish. Was Polish depot (?), then owned by Grinkevitch - educated, respectful, taken by Bolshiviks. Yard goods store in market (?).
<b>307</b>	VINECOR	Israel-Ruben	Rivke	Rebekah		
<b>308</b>	EISINSTEYN	Yakov-Berl		Eliezer		Skolna /Szkolna Prooza==Polish for(street) "behind the shul". The Rebbe=teacher in Moishe's first cheder. Jewish name of the street, is Hasergesl. Pigstreet. Jewish origin of this name unclear to Moishe.. However, Moishe has not placed this Polish named street near the synagogue beside the Hasergesl. Error? Or another synagogue?



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<b>309</b>	TANENBOIM	Yitsok				Glassmaker, sacren froze? Zinele?
<b>310</b>	TANENBOIM	Chaim- Indyk? = turkey, Yitsok?	Leah/Lake nickname			
<b>311</b>	MALETSKY, A/LINOVITZ	Gersh, Moishe		Sora		Chana's uncle, Kinsmacher=tricks and Hershke
<b>312</b>	BIALISTOOTSKI	Vevl		a son, Zelik. Children ?		
<b>313</b>						Sportsplatz, mostly empty meadow. Boys would play there Saturday afternoons. Maybe 100-80 yards long.
<b>314</b>		Avromal	Mia		Chomsk	The New Synagogue. Moishe the Shames.
<b>315</b>	KANOCHOWITZ	Labe	Gitl?			Galuch? Gr. Orthodox priest, Baronovitz
<b>316</b>						Gleb with his daughter
<b>317</b>	RUBIN / RUVN (?)		Aliza, Chana			Written as "The Ruvn / Rubin" - pertains to the Rabbinate
<b>318</b>		Isak-Hersh	Lipe			? Two other words on map ?
<b>319</b>	BIADATCH	Itsok				
<b>320</b>	RUDNITSKI		Mindl- Dobe	3 kids		
<b>321</b>	RUDNITSKY	Itsok Yashe	Pesl			
<b>322</b>	GELERSTEYN	Moishe	Golde			man who lived near a well

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<b>323</b>		Schmuel and Jacov, Boruch	Faige, Iache	4 or 3children		
<b>324</b>	RUIZL	Yitsok				
<b>325</b>	POMERANTZ					
<b>326</b>	POMERANTZ	Avrom	Pelte			? Unreadable on map ?
<b>327</b>	MALETSKI/GICHMAN	Benjamin, Jacov	Rishke			
<b>328</b>	BILCHE/BILKE?	Yudel	Bilche/Bilke			
<b>329</b>	ANELNAETZ					A gentile
<b>330</b>						Galich House, Priest
<b>331</b>						Catholic Church, Kloster
<b>332</b>						Glusko Mill, four Christian Brothers, sold 1936-7 to Jews until occupation by USSR. Flour mill.....To Mi.....??? my house????
<b>333</b>	GELERSTEYN	Moishe				from Der Krenitzer shtetl
<b>334</b>	PASMINICK	Maier	Finia/Faina		Drochitchyn	
<b>335</b>		Mendel	Chia	4 kids		"Balegole"
<b>336</b>	STOLER	Hershke		4 children, Fivel....		Stal means stall or stable. Stoler is either his name or occupation.
<b>337</b>	KROMAN	Yacov	Sulke	Label ?		
<b>338A</b>	GELERSTEYN	Baruch,	Rahila (Rochel)	4 children, Avromal...		Buys and sells.
<b>338B</b>	GELERSTEIN	Zabel	Sora	Isaih, Josef, Malke, Rosa.		Kids are 338A or B?

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<b>339</b>	GELBSTEYN	Aaron	Rochel	4 children, Avromal...	Drochitcn	Similar to information in 338A and 338B
<b>340</b>	LANDOW	Itsok-Meyer, Sholem, Aba				
<b>341</b>						This is not a house. Beside 340 is written Secona Pruzhana. Secona means dangerous, awful, threat. Refers to location? personality? Nearness to Dul?
<b>342</b>						N... (?) Not certain of info on map (?)
<b>343</b>	KORMAN	Gatl/Gotl			two children	
<b>344</b>	KROMAN	Mordecai Schmuel				Tbilisi??/ Treblinka??
<b>345</b>	KVELLMAN	Katzof, Avrom	Chia			"Katzof," man who buys and seels meat
<b>346</b>	ROSENBOIM	Alter	Chana	two sons, two daughters, Riva, Babel,...		
<b>347 and 348</b>	BIDITCH	Moishe	Chai-Leibe Arun	Daughters, Chai-Leah, Belke and sons, Moishe, Yitsok,Benke, Maier		Schuster?
<b>349</b>	YABLONOWITZ	Avrom			Auschwitz	From Antopole

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<b>350</b>		Meyer-Schmuel				Called a voyager, a man who travels to find people, stuff.
<b>351</b>		Chaim			Chomsk	
<b>352</b>	SCHNEIDER ?		Toibe		Auschwitz	
<b>353</b>	MILNA/REIMER	Schmuel, Jacov	Yael			One who grinds. , one who makes wheels. From Warsaw.
<b>354</b>	CHERKIA	Zelik			Chomsk	"Shadkun" = matchmaker
<b>355</b>	RACSOHAVSKI	Avrom, Alter, Zalman,			Auschwitz	
<b>356</b>		Mordecai Baruch			Chomsk	Did he have oxen (?)
<b>357</b>	ACHMAN/OCHMAN	Ruvn	Taba	5 CHILDREN	Aushwitz	
<b>358</b>	KANTORWITZ	Kopel			Auschwitz	
<b>359</b>		Josef				a "poyer", a couple or pair. See also 375.
<b>360</b>	CHESNIK	Zisel	Esther			the mother (?)
<b>361</b>	TANNENBOIM	Tevye				Store owner
<b>362</b>	HANDLER (?)	Benjamin			Drochitcynn	buying and selling (?) Hi / Ber (?) "Hi" (Life)-Ber (m) (?)
<b>363</b>	PATACHINSKY	Yitsok	Gefele (?)			Malamud
<b>364</b>	ALPERN / REZITSKY			Schloime, Raisel, Chava	Drochtchyn	
<b>365</b>	FEINBOIM	Alter				schuster, glass worker
<b>366A</b>	ZIBITSKY	Johanes, Yudel (?), Sloime	Raizl	2 little girls		

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<b>366B</b>	ZUCHERMAN	David Chaim, Motel, Benjamin (?)		3 children	Auschwitz	
<b>366C</b>	KAMINETZKI	Moishe- Chaim		sons Mote? and Schloime	Drochitcyn	
<b>366D</b>	KAPLAN		(?)	3 children, Efroim, Fruma, Kafke/Kapke	Chomsk	schuster
<b>367A</b>	KAMINSKER	Hershl			Chomsk	
<b>367B</b>	KAMINETSKI	Moishe- Chaim		sons Motel, Shloime	Drochitchyn	
<b>368</b>		Boysenus	(?)	2 daughters		
<b>369</b>	KRAVCHIK	Meyer			Chomsk	
<b>370</b>	ACHMAN/OCHMAN	Chaim		son Jacov- Motel	Auschwitz	
<b>371</b>	TSADIK	Label				A mother lived there also
<b>372</b>	KRAVCHIK	Benyomin			Chomsk	
<b>373</b>	FISCHEL	Hershl			Drohitchn	A kremer, storekeeper
<b>374</b>	FOTERKES	Aron	Brina		Auschwitz	
<b>375</b>		Josef		2 children	Drochichin	Goes with number 359
<b>376</b>						Eastern Orthodox Church
<b>377</b>	OCHMAN/ACHMAN	Alter				Slaughterhouse... Jews built WWI... taken over WWII Bolsheviks made into bathhouse
<b>378</b>						Eastern Orthodox Cemetery and old Chapel, 1500 - 1890
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<b>379</b>						Jewish Mill--Pinsky, Rothenburg, (?) Ackerman and three others
<b>380</b>						Jewish Cemetery
<b>AA</b>				2 sons		Hasidic, Wheelworker. Religious. Believed he and God close.
<b>BB</b>	KLEINBERG	Itsok	Malke			
<b>CC</b>						Way to Vashke Village over swampy area on boards on ground. Bogs, Gentiles, maybe 100. Grew cucumbers. Off Karpralinska Street, beyond the Christian cemetery
<b>DD</b>						River and bridge
<b>PP</b>						Pac/sinic (spelling ?) Village, approximately 3 k. toward Bieleviesh Pushka from fork in road at highway--right road to Pruz hany and left toward Pac/sinic (spelling ?)

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<b>UT</b>						Untern Dul, historic site, masacure by Russians of Polish patriots; Jews forced to dig/watch. Zamdin a word used also, meaning sandy area. Untern Dul means under hole. Moishe's grandmother recalled this story.
<b>SS</b>						Village "Staravola", half way? before highway, to Pruzhany. Farmers.
<b>XXXX</b>						see near 294 Vall, Te Shin yud yud nun aiye = Tsine?? Machinen, Tshifer/ue, Chana, 5 children, Raphael, Pincus, Gotl- -----wool machine (?)
<b>ZZ</b>						Gentile

### Street Summary

If there were other street or lane names, they are not noted or recalled by Moishe.

**Piereskego/Piereski Street;** was Mostova Street. He was Polish minister of Securities, killed, underground in Poland 1936. Mostova means bridge in Polish. Unofficially a part called Koscielna Street, Church Street, Untern Duhl.

**Hafgesel Street:** Haf means a fancy courtyard and it also means a king's court. Or rich landowner's domain. Legend is two moats at one end. Farmland all around, layers of bricks. Mansion or palace there? Moats for defense? Hafgesel was all the way to Mostova. "In my day we'd play there in the weeds and pools of water."

**Hasergesl,** ==Pig Street; street with name of unknown origin near site of historic "The Cold Shul"/see story of Queen Bona and the bees.....(various corruptions of words possible for Hasergesl.) About ten houses to the left, as per Moishe, lived a rich person with a big yard

**Cemetery Street** becomes Nova Street, left. Starovetska Street to right.

**Kaminetska Street,** long, once all Jewish,-- many gentile families later. Maybe 200 Jewish families originally. (See 1908 insurance/fire story in Moishe's book)

**Pruzhany Street,** a right curve toward that town and crossing the highway so to speak.

**Karpralinska Street** (Spelling (?), beyond the Christian cemetery. Nearby five little streets in the area, including Shul Street.



### Nearby Village Summary

See above, SS, PP, CC

Chidree, 5 k, toward Bieleveshka Puschka, through the forests, was site of lumber operations; primarily Christian, but some Jews worked there also. Paternal grandfather did as a sawer of trees/logs, and could whistle/imitate the zazulya bird, the N. European cuckoo, thus took the name Zazulyer/Zazshulyer, he who can imitate the zazulya bird, on the advice of the Old Ukranian and Old Polish lumber workers when it was decreed that Jews have surnames. Unlike the N American cuckoo, it is a predatory bird that lays eggs in other bird's nests. The old French verb for to twitter like a bird is gazulye. Some small percent of old French and old Italian exists in Yiddish. Celia's and my father lived in Chidree; Max til he boarded in Shershev for chadre--elementary and pre school. By the time of cheder for my father (age 3?) the family had returned to Shershev proper. My father and his sister Dora spoke of the kind of dugout where they resided as a part of a kind of lumber camp near Volyvald, i.e. in/of the forest.

*Commentary by Leah Zazulyer (Watson)*

### Garden / Orchard Sites

1929 Autobus to Pruzhany cut trip from 3 1/2 hrs. by horse and cart to 1/2 hr. Called Warszawianka. Parked in uncle Shloime Kantorwitz's shed ? . Bus conductor and ticket taker, in addition to driver, Moishe Shocherman.? Cost: one zlotzy. 1/2 zloty for bus. Average laboroer's salary 1 zloty a day.

No Hospital until 1993.

Christian Mayor Szijkiewicz. Alternated with his paternal grandfather Yaakov Kopel

#### Moishe Notes 4

Klezmer played at simchas, and an official orchestra. ;died out; non Jews wind instruments, firehouse.

Staravestas, Eastern Orthodox group, not ay ay ay

Chess, Yes. Cards, “no” lower class to play for money.

860 books in library in 1920.

Celia” Auerbach married in Krenetza, village, came here, parents against marriage; class, blacksmith her dad. \$ years later ticket from Argentina. Remained for the 4 years with her parents in some seclusion his his parents. Had 2 daughters, have ph.dis in edu. Wife was a beautiful girl. Coveted her too.

Moishe’s last 24 hours in Shershev, the 3 brothers bribed way out, polish police, but caught in Maletsky House in Pruz.

39. Gihman, double house, big business, bought up schmatniks. Gihman sent his females out of town, to AnshovitsSp?? but Moishe felt guilty to leave family.....Gihman’s son in law to Winograd older brother, Fivel Disagreement, used cane, restaurant, lots of drunks.

When older everybody had a nickname.

Nitzberg, Maishe, quiet, nice, 40, Heb. teacher, harness maker. Heb teachers stayed here. DK why?? Perished in Drogchin. Leah, wife, talker, loud voice, like from a bas, barrel. Older daughter, Chaia, oldest daughter joke re laundryness who came to marry a goy , Isbette/ Shershever. Chaia came from school, hungry. nothing. gornish a yiddishe family. Not goyish family either. Landress spoke Yiddish of necessity. Well to do to goy. Leak Many had laundress problems to get water.

In Moishe’s house ws a laundry; took piled up in cupboards dirty clothes, and to over months worth, 3 days to do, copper kettle, stove, boil. Blue color blocks, whiting. progressive if had washboard. washed 2 times, rinsing; hung to dry, house full, ropes in attic; would freeze stuff on line.

Wells 1. in market, ancient not used. 2. new in market, artesian sank pipes and fire pumpers used i. Moishe went 75 meters to a well. 15-20 wells by bridge. But by 1920 3 wells. How placed: in non jewish streets for goyish cattle, every 10-15 houses. Wooden. Filled up this like labs,, metal of wood in bathtub from pails. In Pruz. single men, Iser Gichman walks in mk house with Maishe Boof. These 2 smiled then changed then cried. A 3rd

person, Label Zast pounded table and such, now know how good to live with out wife and kids. Survived, Isael, near Netanyu. “Pumpalack” Yid, a tribe of families, stick together, related by poverty. Moishe refuses to see him in Israel, married again and solder in Israel

A “stepper” makes the top side of shoes. A neighbor Reb Nachman, he never went for water. In winter slippery icy. Made his wife.

Moishe’s ma never did spoke to him, winter his mother warned him never go to well as you might fall in and still I am listening to my mother...mostly men. goyish girls barefoot went for water. See 5 in region of market near K. wells were wood, began to be cement. Plenty water for table. 2 houses, his family had sink water, none in school; no well by heb school. No gutters either. the roof with lap poles, big. Many rolled and smelled in summer.

Man who walked to Bialystock and lived.

Goys were unruly to him 40 in class, 10 Jews, 8 boys. Sent from Warsaw thot he’d be oka in less anti semitism in Syhershev. Pruz worse. Brisk even worse. Polish school, 1 Jewish leader, early 30’s from Grodno. Principal said, “ we don’t care if you hang yourself, just so long as you get out of here”. But principal chastized kid for blood/matzo fable..

41. Kavilik. Soreon his head, sat in bed, big man, clying, recovered, wife, ws in UsA and came back to Sh.

Returnees, pre ww 1. to make \$, to improve.

Ivan goy, the fish. Ivan would sa, all the jews throw under bridge except Jovans, Moishe’s grandpa and Beryle Ritman.

42 Beryll Ritman in USA returned, gave money to Cyhritian neighbors. Gave his produce and he lived on their produce. Deaf and mute son, classmate of Moishe miriam,daughter.

45. killed by German when came to P ghetto from Drochinnyn. Chaim Lebersteyn, Pincus Winer, Lebel Lebersteyn, Moishe Tinter,,don’t be a fool, don’t be a tinter., Avreml Kreitman, Lola Baumriter, Peshe Zhretsky. Moishe kaminker was supposed to be, ws shot.

Squealer to Germans: ? Schwartz. short, beefy, was fed, knew his brother, nicer. In Heb: msof r moser, squealer, passer. A Pruziner.

46 Shrer Nibref, widow. had a son 10 ears. Chased to go to shul or yortzait.

47 Michael Kazal

48 Schoime Sneider, son rouged cheeks, shaved, clothes horse, to Tashkkkent.

49 a Salmon SneiderMomser, illegitimate schrew, became a village elder, Chaia Y

49 b brothers Berl, police used him as a squealer. Bolsheviks arrested and sent to Siberia. Parents went voluntarily to Siberia.

Chimney sweep, son, daughter illegitimate. Remarried...single.

51 Yankel Kobialtsky, from village, married my aunt's sister. Jewish education good for villager. 2 brothers, Dovid and ?, in Auschwitz. Went to Germany after liberated, became policeman. Story spread in refugee camp, shot after war.

Survivors

Los Angeles: Sime Kaminker

Feigl Krawchuk (Sweden)

Moshe Hamentz Yakabovitz.

Rifke, Miami. 2nd married name: Krasner?

Dr Itchi Simemaker,,, husband,: Pruziner

3 to Toronto.

Voters: boxes, ballots, numbers, in police station

No official Bundist activities. 50% Zionists. 30 % leftist/zionist. Till 1933 no rightist Zionists revisionists.

Socialists persecuted in Sh by police.

In 35 or 36 family came to Shershev, wheelmakers, carpenter, chassidim, melodies, daven, had vodka in shul, dance, holding scrolls, all stayed.

Leftists against signing the Jabotinsky petition to Brits let in 1 million Jews to Palestine. General meeting of whole community. Sat after in Groise Bh.

1:30 mob, poor folk, went in guards fight, hired hooligans against mtg, led by leftist, broke up meeting. Some women believe the step by step amn was holy.

Youngest survivor in Auschwitz: David Waldshan, born in 1929. Poem: who is there, a good boy?

Poets and writers Waldshan, teacher's son, Davod's younger hated then loved, hard to part with him. Raconteur of Israeli hardship.

Bath: men fri a.m., woman Thurs eve. boys peeked. Not a mikva.

Death in childbirth. Some.

Boble de Kop, married, Ruchamas, Caruss, socialize, bold, lazy, took in kid, brought niece Rifke.

Reb of cheder: Yankel Bell, violin maker, taught Moishe.

Orphans, or adopt,

House Names,

Library

Menstruation

training of rabbis in general by shul but filled how, aas chometz collection

Moishe says: Shershev was Polish before and up to 1795. Russia, Germany, Austro-Hung then split Poland up, with Shershev in R., Poznan in G., and Krakow in Austro-H. Shershev again became Polish in 1918-20. During Russian period Polish language languished, Eastern Orthodox church came to the fore, as did what is now called Belarusian language.

The Pampalochs/Pompalochs, a word Moishe uses, not in any dictionary, were poor not respected bad, aggressive people. Some 15 families maybe. One didn't associate with them and one avoided them. They had a patriarch named Yumke. They lived scattered thru the town on the littler streets "gesels". They picked fights. They had no set trades, no stores. If a horse died, for example one might be used to skin it. Or they might have been used as middle men in horse trading deals. Some were balegole maybe. (wagon drivers) They were not the respected and cared for poor, not the real poor. One would not even hire them to chop food. They had been in Shershev at least 50 years that he knows of. Were of no particular region or appearance as Moishe recalls. While they may have attended religious services they did not participate in charitable giving. Did their children go to school? Dunno. Yumke was called "The Boss", probably his real name was Benjamin. Once he imported a saxaphonist from Pruzhany for a son's wedding. Considered outrageous to do so.

Remember Moishe says that Shershev was a smuggler's center until 1795. It was a route out from boys being grabbed, "chopt" and taken at age 8 or 9 to live in foster homes in Russia and be groomed for the army. The smuggling was, according to Moishe, to the USA. Anyway it was westward..

Klezmer played at simchas, and an official orchestra existed but died out. It included non Jews for wind instruments. Met at fire house.

Moishe says the Staravestas were an Eastern Orthodox group, not so "ay ay ay".

Chess club existed. Cards, as thought to be lower class to play for money.

There was 860 books in the library in 1920.

The Gihmans had a double house and big business and bought up "schmatniks"--i.e. rags or such. He sent his females out of town.

When older everybody had a nickname.

Maishe Nitzberg was quiet, nice 40 yr old Heb teacher and harness maker. His wife Leah a talker. She had a voice like from a bottom of a barrel. Older daughter Chia. They had a gentile laundress who spoke Yiddish. In Moishe's house there was a laundry; it was piled in cupboards for a

month. It took three days to do, using a copper kettle on the stove which had boiling water. Blue color blocks of whiting were used. You were progressive if you had a washboard. Two washings, rinsing, hung to dry, house full, ropes in attic; would freeze stuff on line.

Wells: 1. in market, ancient, not used. 2. new in market, artesian sank pipes and fire pumpers used. Moishe went 75 meters to a well. 15-20 wells in town. By bridge. But in 1920 3 wells. In non Jewish streets for goyish cattle, every 101-15 houses. Wooden. Filled up this like labs., metal or wood in bathtub from pails. Later cement. In Pruzhany some for single men, who sometimes enjoyed being apart from their womenfolk. Sinks were not common. No well near Heb. school.

A "stepper" akes the top side of shoes. A neighbor Reb Nachman never went for water. Made his wife do it even in slippery icy winter.

There was a man who walked to Bialystok and lived.

Gentiles were unruly to him in school. 40 in class, 10 Jews, 8 boys. Anti-semitism worse in Pruzhany and Brest. But principal chastized kid for blood/matzo fable.

Kavilik, a big man with a sore on his head who sat in bed crying, but recovered. His wife was in USA and came back.

Ivan was a gentile who dealt in fish.

Saying: don't be a food, don't be a tinter.

Schoime Schneider had a son with rouged cheeks who was a clothes horse and went to Tashkent.

A couple of squealers to Germans: Schwartz? Schneider?

No official Bundist activities. Fifty percent Zionists. 30% leftist/zionists. Til 1933 no rightest zionists or revisionists. Socialists persecuted in Shershev by police.

In 1935/6 a family came who were wheelmakers carpenters, chassidim, had vodka in shul, danced, holding scrolls, stayed. Leftists against signing the Jabotinsky petition to British to let in 1 mioion Jews to Palestine. Meeting of whole community of a Sat afternoon in Broise Synagogue. A mob came; hired hooligans paid by leftists people thought.

Some death in childbirth.

No	Last name	First name	Wife	Children	Fled or taken to	Commentary
<b>2</b>	LABEVITSKY	Gdalyahu				
<b>3</b>	KWELMAN	Avraham-(Avreml)	Sheine			
<b>5</b>	WETSHE	Mordechai				"REIB"???"רייב"
<b>7</b>	KLEINERMAN KAMINKER	Yakov Yzchak-Yakov	Feigl		Chomsk	
<b>8</b>	LEBERSTEIN KOGAN	Leibl	Chashke		Pruzhany Ghetto	
<b>10</b>	WAFENSTEIN	Yekutiek-Eizik				
<b>11</b>	WALDMAN	Reuven-Leibl		6 children		Tailor. "was poor and wretched. Dumb and deaf from birth."
<b>12</b>	SHNEIDER	Avrom	Chaike (Chompke?)			Tailor
<b>13</b>	"BARUCH DER PAPIELEVER"		Reishe-Reishl	2 children		
<b>15</b>	Ochman (Hochman)	Noske (Nathan)		Froike, Motl, Noach		
<b>16</b>	<u>ROGOVITZ</u>	Zisl-Meir		2 daughters and 2 sons		
<b>19</b>	KAMINKER	Hert <u>z</u> ke				Nicknamed "der minister"
<b>20</b>	FITEL	Dovid Ben-Zion				
<b>21</b>	FISHMAN	Chaim-Yoel				Yosef-Shmuel Der Kirzner ???
<b>22</b>	<u>YANOVSKI</u>	<u>Shmerl</u>		2 Sons: Chaim-Mendel, and Leibl, and 7 daughters		
<b>25</b>	<u>Drulkes</u>	Shlomo- Shloime				
<b>30A</b>	<u>RANIS</u>	<u>Mordechai</u> <u>Michael</u> Moish				



<b>32</b>	IZBITSKI	<u>Shimon</u>				
<b>38</b>	BIKSHTein	Moishe	Chana ?			the franchise for distributing the Jewish papers from Warsaw to the subscribers in Shershev belonged to Moshe Bikshtein.
<b>41</b>	<u><b>YAKUBOVITZ</b></u>	Mordechai	<u><b>Bracha</b></u>			
<b>42</b>	<u><b>EIZENSHTein</b></u>					
<b>44</b>			<u><b>Chaïke</b></u>			
<b>45</b>	SHURUKMAN ?		Zivye ?			

HOUSE No.16-17 in the map and in the Legend –The house of Joshua Pinsky - additions, corrections and remarks

**116 and 117** were actually **one** large brick house, the largest house in Shereshev (see page 47 in Moishe's book)..

It belonged to (my grandparents) **Joshua and Bluma Pinsky**.

**The house (116-117)** was later confiscated first by the Russians, then by the Germans, (who turned it to their headquarters, and allowed the family to live in the backyard), and after the war, by the Russians again, who turned it to the town's hospital.(see a photo of the house)



**No.117 in the map & legend** is the northern part of the same big house (**116-117**). In this part lived:

**- Joshua and Bluma Pinsky**

and Joshua's elder daughter Raya, with her husband and 5 children:

- **Joseph and Raya Rotenberg,** with their children:
- **Pola, Leizer, Litek (Litman), Lisa and Mina.**

They all were were **slaughtered in Chomsk on Rosh-Hashana 1942.**

In this same part of the house was also the family's large store of hard-ware and building materials.

In this part of the house had lived (in her beautiful room described in Moishe's book) my mother **Sonia Pinsky**, until 1935 when she left for Eretz-Israel.

All the above is described in Moishe's book, page 47 and other pages.

**No 116 in the map & legend** is the southern half of the Pinsky's house.

This part was rented to the only pharmacist in Shereshev, whose name was **Baumriter**; There is a mistake in the legend: the name is **Baumriter**, not Bielevsky. Although I new it from my mother's stories and my father's written memoirs, I also searched through Moishe's book from the beginning to the end, and there is no mention of the name Bielevsky in Shereshev. I suppose that the mistake is a result of the fact that the word Baumriter is not clear in Moishe's original map. I have no doubt that the pharmacist's name was **Baumriter**,(I don't know his first name\*) and he lived in Pinsky's house with his wife **Fany (Fanya)** and 2 daughters, **Mira** and **Lola**, in the back of this house.(See page 79 in M's book).

In the front were: the pharmacy and the medicines and drugs warehouse (See also page 47 in the book).

The Baumriter parents and their daughter Mira with her husband were slaughtered in Drohycin, Lola Baumriter escaped the slaughter there, to be slaughtered in the ghetto of Pruzhany.

-----

. \* The name Joshua in the legend is Joshua Pinsky's name and not Baumriter's

The correct legend should be:

No	Last name	First name	Wife	Children	Fled or taken to	Commentary
<b>116</b>	Baumriter	?	Fany (Fanya)	Mira	Drohycin	Pharmacist
<b>116</b>				Lola	Pruzhany ghetto	
<b>117</b>	Pinsky	Joshua	Bluma	(Raya,(Married to Yosef Rotenberg) (Sonya left to Eretz-Israel)	Chomsk	
<b>117</b>	Rotenberg	Josef (Yosef)	Raya (ne Pinsky)	Pola, Leizer, Litek (Litman), Lisa, Min	Chomsk	5 children

## **HOUSE No 250 – the house of my grandfather Yosef-Meir Shames**

### **Background**

In this house my grandfather **Yosef-Meir** lived with his first wife **Chaya-Zelda** (ne Granitzky), sister of Chinka (ne Granitzky) Kantorowitz , wife of Kopel Kantorowitz (Moishe's grandfather).

**Yosef-Meir** and **Chaya-Zelda** had 5 children: Sheina (Sheindl), Zeidl, Ester. Berl (Beryl), and Chaim.

The mother died giving birth to Chaim. Chaim was my father. In his BRITH (circumcision), he was given the name Chaim-Zelig, after his mother's name Chaya-Zelda.

The 2 eldest children left to U.S. :

Sheindl left in 1912' when she was 17.

Zeidl left with his wife Reizl in 1920.

Ester married David Gruskin in 1928, and they lived in the house. They had 2 children, and earned their living from the small grocery that was in the front of the house.

Chaim, my father, left for Eretz-Israel in 1935.

Berl (Beryl) married Elka (Helka) ne Rachelevsky (Roselevsky) in 1936/7 and they lived in her parents' house (**NO 48** in the map) – see below.

Yosef Shames died on January 1939.

His second wife Malka, the stepmother of the 5 children, had died in 1934.

So, in 1939-1940, the beginning of WW2 (the time described and documented by the map), the situation was:

**In the house of Yosef Shames, (NO 250 in the map) were living: Ester (ne Shames) and David Gruskin with their two children.**

No	Last name	First name	Wife	Children	Fled or taken to	Commentary
<b>250</b>	Shames	Yosef-Meir z"l	Chaya-Zelda z"l Malka z"l		Died before WW2	
<b>250</b>	Gruskin	David	Ester (ne Shames)	2 children	Drohycin	

## **HOUSE NO 48 – the house of Rachelevsky**

### **Background**

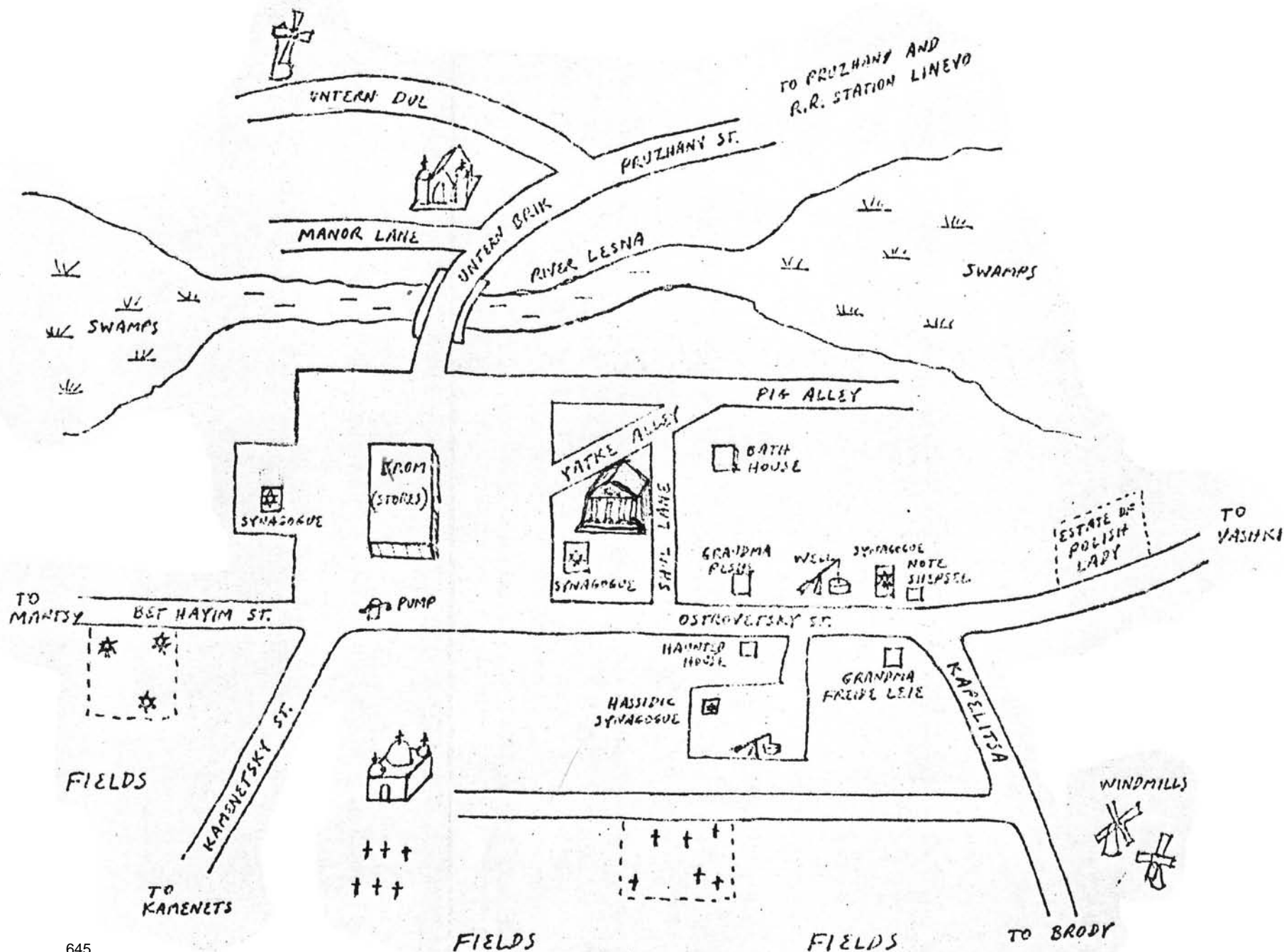
In Moishe's book he writes the name as Roselevsky. This is not correct. In his map Moishe wrote the correct name: **Rachelevsky**. I know it for sure. My father mentions the name many times in his memoirs. The father's name was Reichl Rachelevsky, his wife Malka, and their 2 daughters Sheina and Elka (Helka). (I believe they had also a son, Moishe, who went with his father to U.S. whereas the mother and 2 daughters remained in Shereshev to take care of her old parents).

My father was in close relations with the family: together with Sheina they were in the committee of the Hebrew library in Shereshev; Elka was for sometime his girlfriend until he left for Eretz-Israel. So no doubt that he knew the name of the family. Moreover,

My father's brother **Berl Shames** married **Elka Rachelevsky** in 1936 or 1937, they had 2 children (unfortunately I don't know their names), and lived in her parents' house (**NO 48**). I have no exact information about the place and circumstances of the end of Berl, Elka and their 2 children in the holocaust.

So the legend should read:

No	Last name	First name	Wife	Children	Fled or taken to	Commentary
<b>48</b>	Rachelevsky	Reichl	Malka	Sheina (left to USA) Elka (married Berl Shames)		
<b>48</b>	Shames	Berl	Elka ne Rachelevsky	2 children	???	



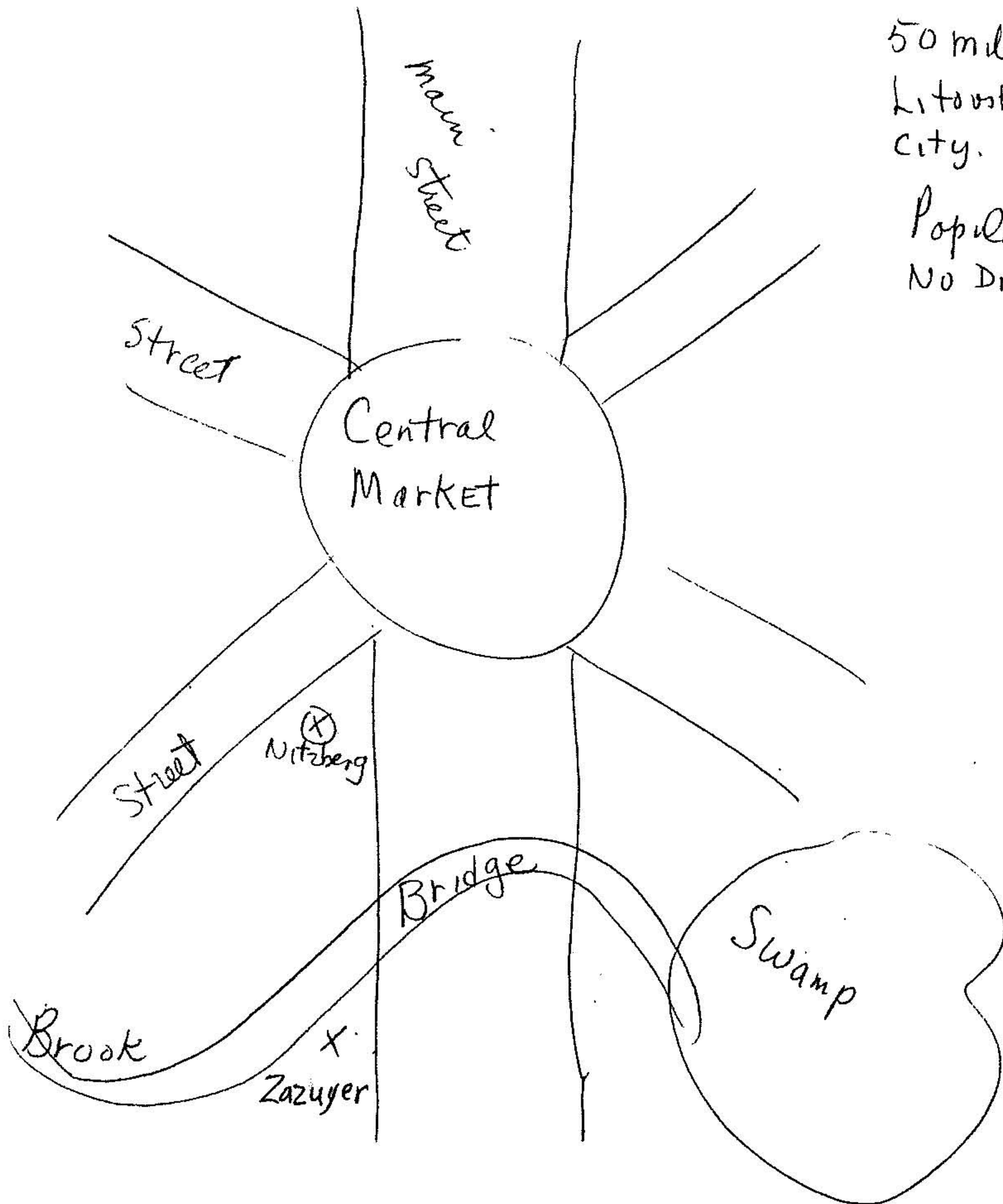
Map of Shershev per Robert Nitzberg

No fire dept.  
1 wooden synagogue

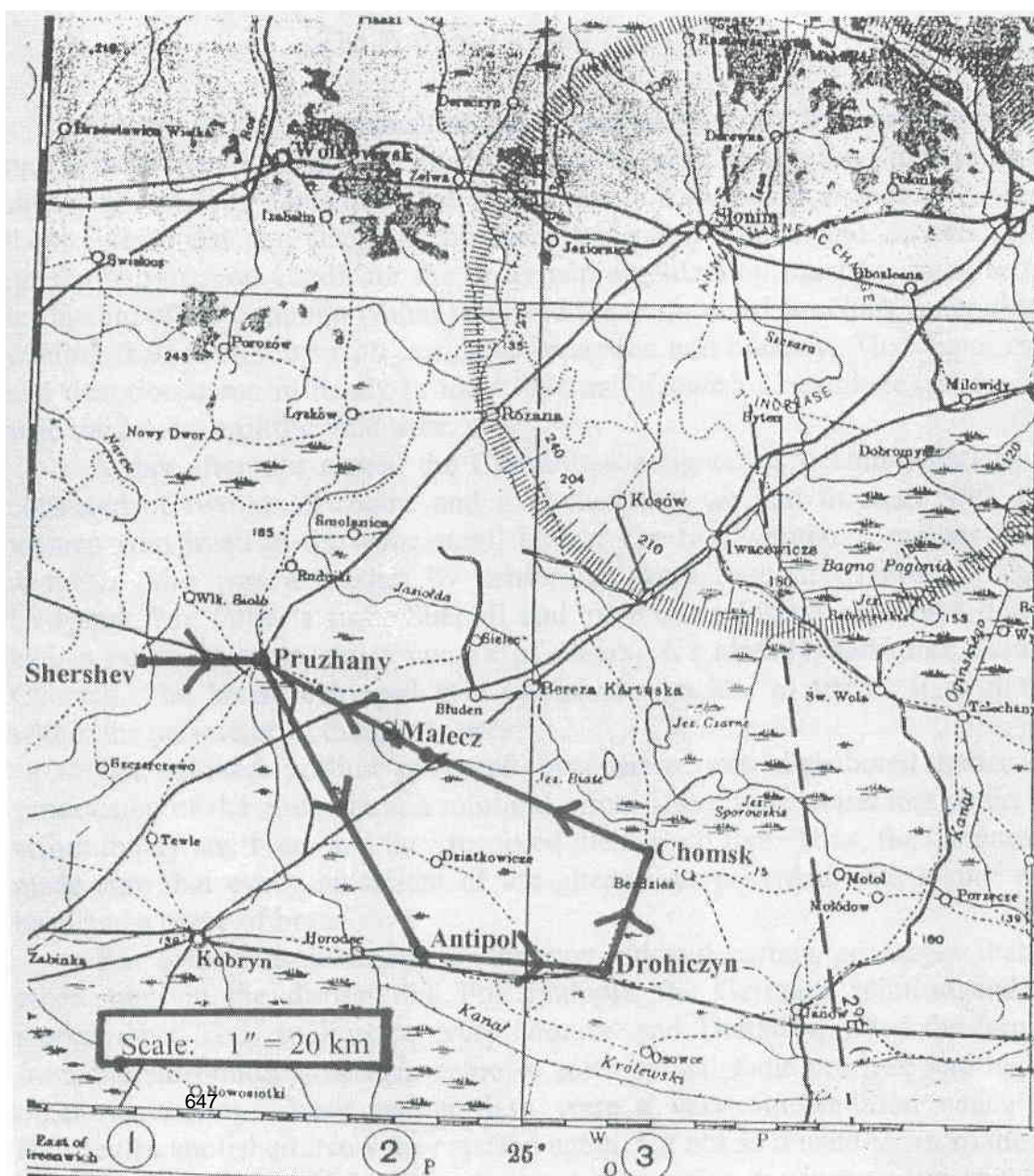
20 miles from Pruzhna  
a R. R. stop.

50 miles from Brest  
Litvsk, a major  
city.

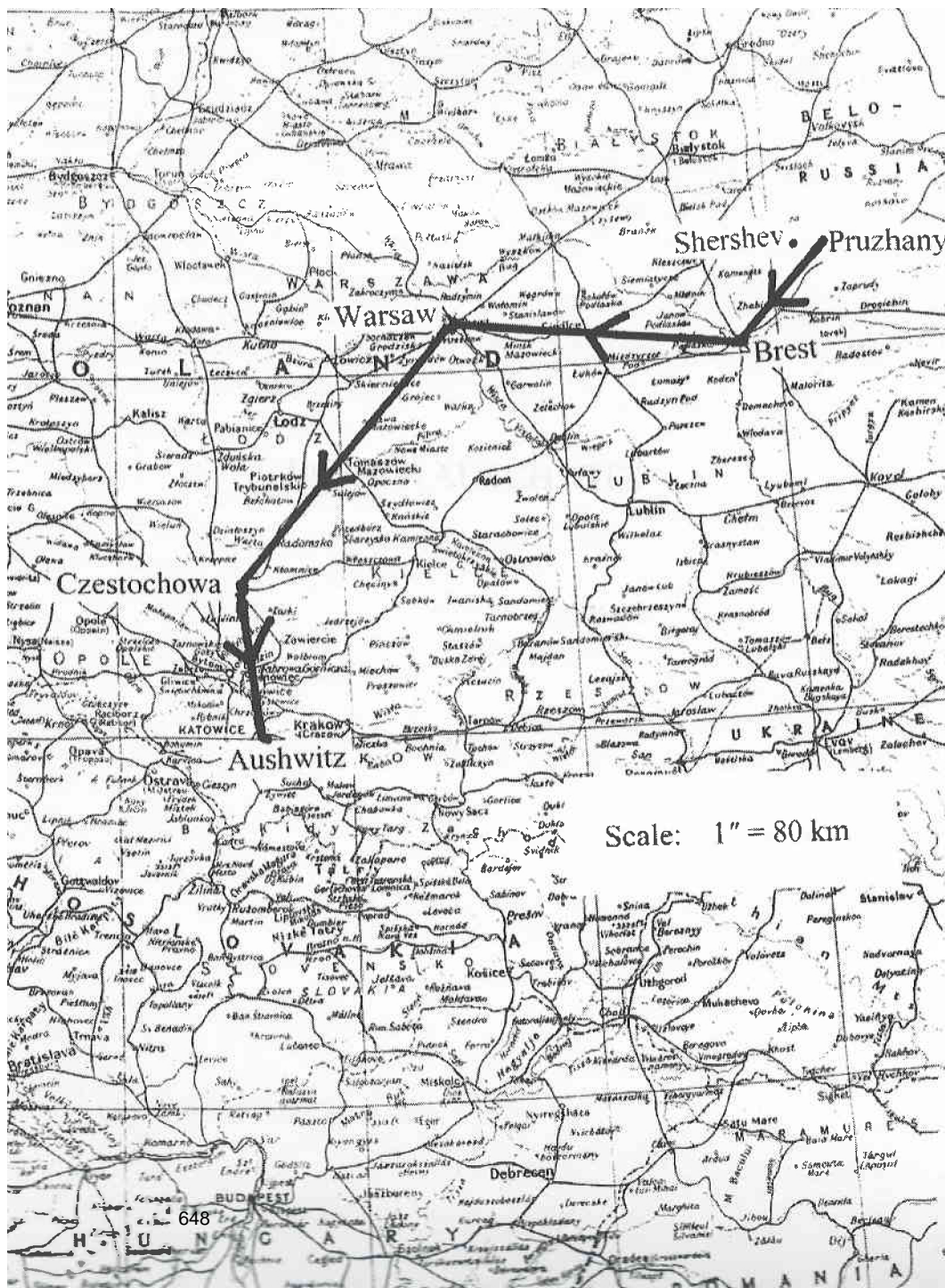
Population 10,000?  
No Dr. or dentist













Nr.1240©

4 8 9

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931



48 Baldwin St.  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
April 17, 2000

Cartographic and Architectural Branch (NNSC)  
National Archives and Records Service  
8601 Adelphi Road  
College Park, Maryland 20740-6001

To whom it may concern:

I am doing a genealogical project, and am interested in getting copies of the German military aerial maps from World War II of the following towns, which are now in Belarus:

Shereshevo, 52'33" N 24'13" E  
Khidri, 52'32" N 24'03" E  
Pruz hany, 52'33" N 24'28" E

I understand that you may be able to tell me the record numbers of the relevant photos and give me a list of vendors who can obtain copies for me. Thank you very much for your help!

Sincerely,

Ian Watson



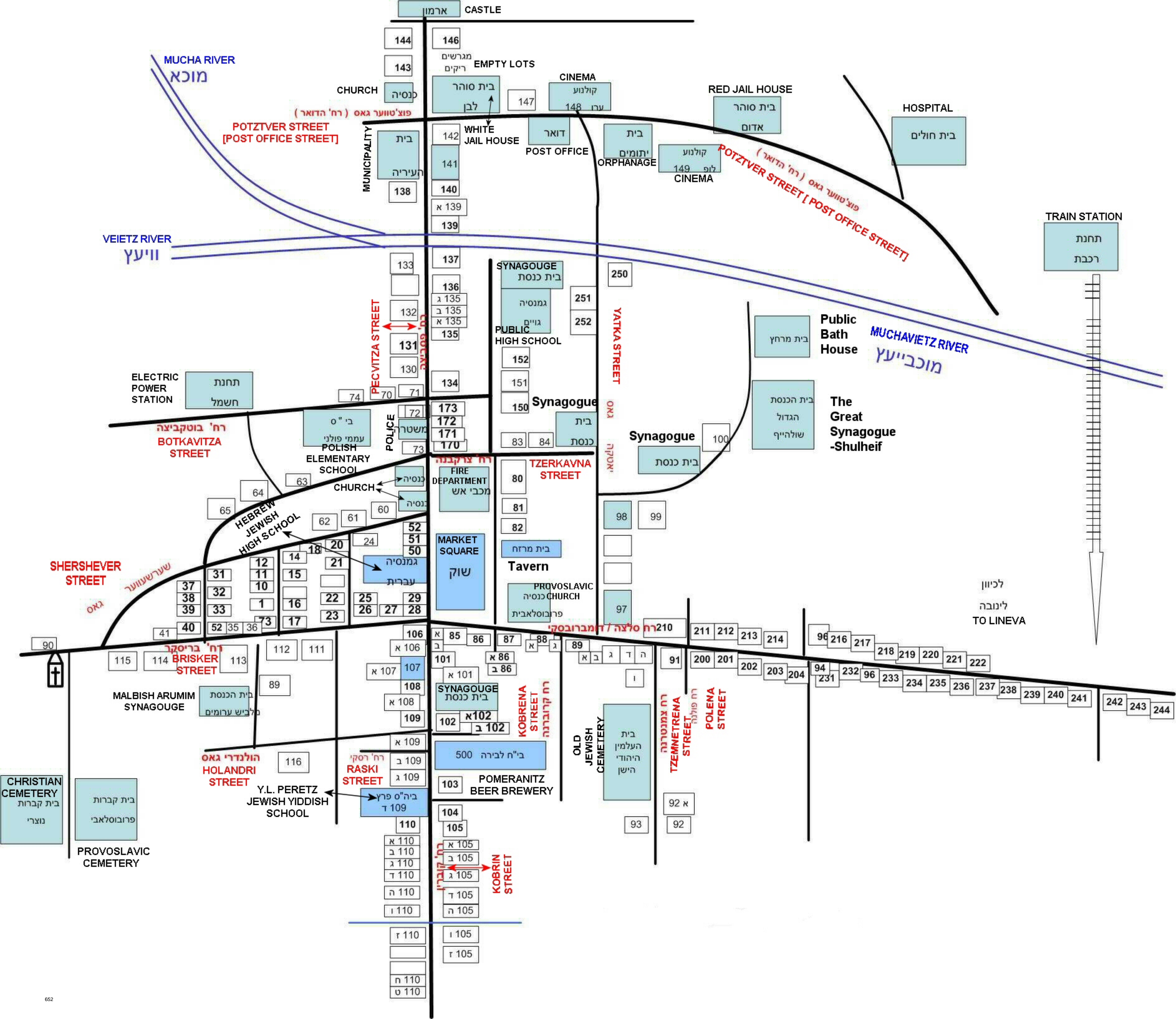


931

N: 1240 ©  
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651







### **Photography Acknowledgements**

Several people took the photographs in the following collection. Sincere thanks go to Ian Watson, Leah Watson, Dave Feldman, Celia Denov, Leuma Lurman, and Guy Salimano.



Shershev Synagogue, destroyed by fire in the pre-war era.

# Cover photo

## My maternal grandmother's funeral Frieda-Leah (Goldfarb) Auerbach (1860-1935)

Photo taken at the cemetery in Shershev next to the headstone  
of my grandfather Lazer-Ber Auerbach (1857-1932)



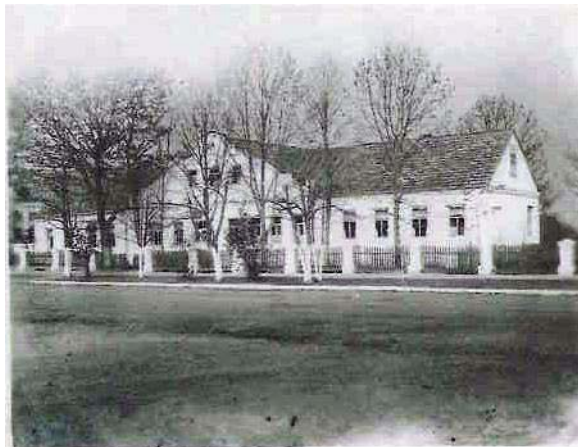
- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1 Sarah Kabizetsky              | 9 Esther-Beila Kantorowitz – My mother |
| 2 Sheva Kantorowitz - My sister | 10 Malka Meister                       |
| 3 Reuven Kantorowitz – My uncle | 11 Nachman Feldman                     |
| 4 Moishe Kantorowitz            | 12 Yaacov Meir Kabizetsky              |
| 5 Liova – My brother            | 13 Zalman Gellershtein                 |
| 6 Pesha Vinograd                | 14 Alter Gellershtein                  |
| 7 Feivl Leiman                  | 15 Sonia Kantorowitz - My sister       |
| 8 Isaac Kantorowitz – My father | 16 Frieda-Leah Auerbach                |







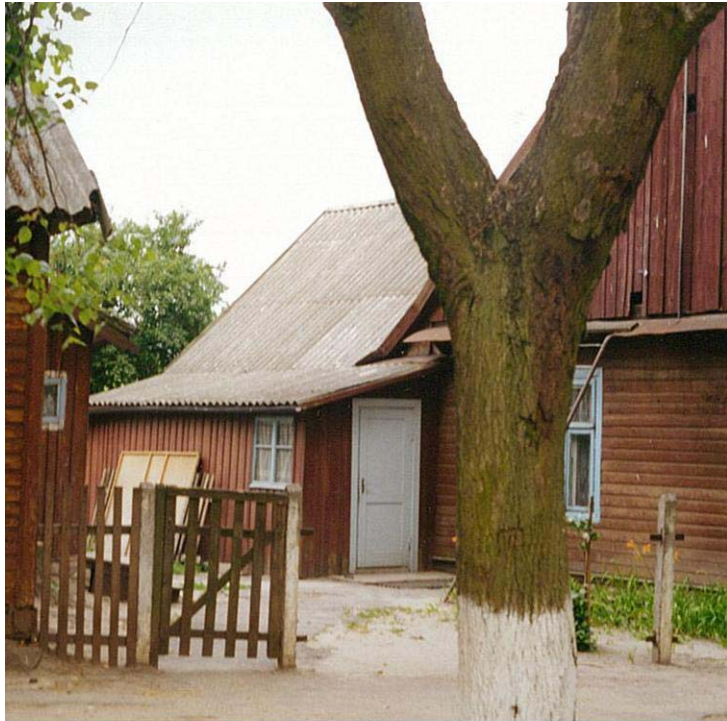
Possible wedding photo from Shershev of Mordecai Pozniak and unknown woman, c. 1920. Brought to Chicago by Leah Zazulyer's grandmother to her daughter.



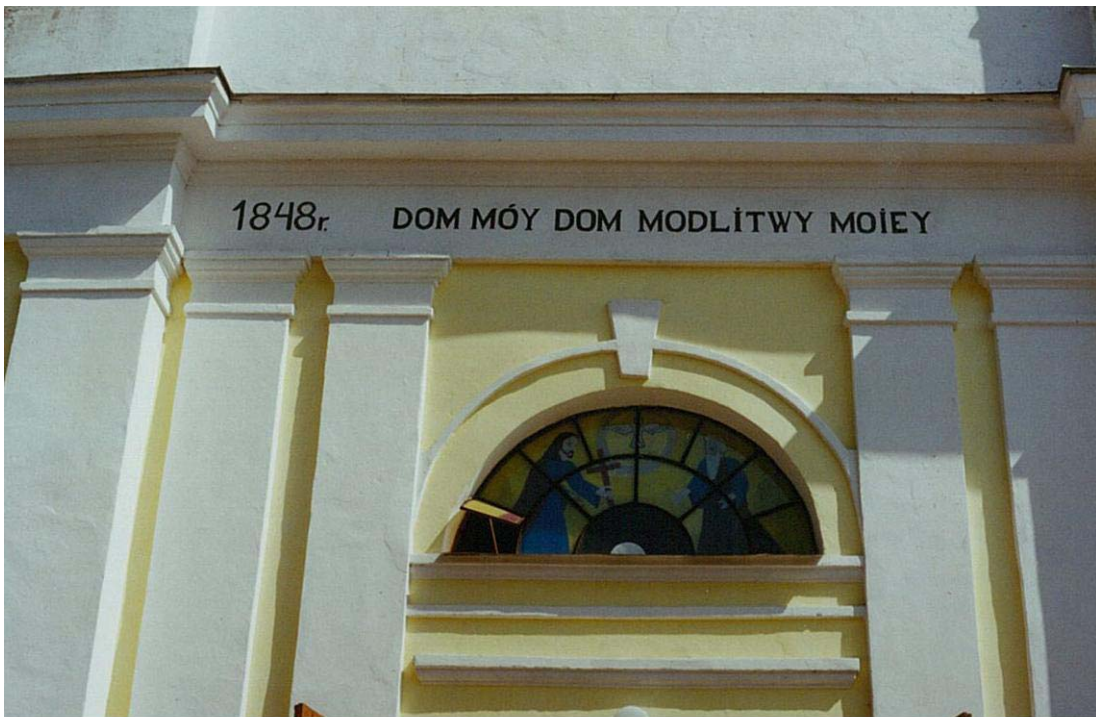
The Pinsky House, c. 1930? This was the largest house in Shershev and atypical in its grandeur.



Shershev Auschwitz survivors, 1948. There were eleven altogether.



Shershev backyard belonging to Josel Lebersteyn, an Auschwitz survivor, 1989.



Shershev Catholic Church, 1989. Built in the 19th century and recently refurbished.





, 1989.



One of the few remaining upright, intact gravestones at the Jewish cemetery in Shershev, 1989.





View from Jewish cemetery in Shershev, 1994.



Houses around what is now Shershev's central square, 1989. Photo includes former Kantorowitz family home.



Droshky (cart), 1989. This type of conveyance was typical in pre-automotive Eastern Europe. Horse and driver not pictured.





hky with horse in front of the Catholic Church in Shershev, 1989.



Pripachick stove complete with sleeping platform, 1989. These wood-burning stoves were common to the region and used for cooking and heating.





Moishe Kantorowitz family home in Shershev, c. 1930.



Former site of the Largest House in pre-war  
Shershev, c. 1989.



Lebersteyn home, rear view, 1989.





Lenin statue in Shershev town center, 1989. This is located in the former market square, which was then called Raad Kronen. Statue has since been removed.



Bridge in Shershev overlooking the Lesna River, 1989.



ershev, 1989





In back of Lebersteyn's house, 1994. It was common in the area through the 1990s to have an outhouse rather than indoor plumbing--even in the Mayor's office.



The postmistress of Chidree and a friend, 1989.



Pottery displayed in Pruzhany historical museum, 1989,





Procession in front of the Catholiic Church, 1989



View of the former location of Raad Kronen marketplace, 1989





Sherhev road sign at entrance to shtetl, 1989.



Typical Shershev home, 1989.



Street typical of the region, 1989.



Belltower of former Eastern Orthodox Church, 1989.



Typical Shershev home, 1989.





Moishe and Ruth Kantorowitz





Moishe Kantorowitz in Canada

## Introduction

## FIVE LIQUIDATED COMMUNITIES ( Kihilas, from Heb.)

In the many hundreds, actually thousands the number reaches, of the Jewish communities which were exterminated in a bestial way in the third destruction by the impure\*hands of the Nazi Holocaust, may their names and their memory be wiped out. [\* as in ritually impure as contact with lepers, etc. may...etc, always said after mention of Holocaust]

A third of our world nation was destroyed through the cruelest strange deaths. [a strange death= a misha mashone]

It is but not realized to Hitler and his gang his devilish plan: to wipe out the Jewish trace from the world. Slaughtered and gased; burnt and tortured, have really the brown terrorists six million of our brothers and sisters----It rescued itself survivors/<sup>remnants</sup>~~remnants~~ from among the victims through a miracle in order to be a living witness of the horrible/<sup>cruelest most</sup>crimes of the history of the world in general known and of our Jewish martyrdom history in particular.

There remained not only the numbered few that were able to escape ~~~~~ the remnant of the exterminated communities not only the individuals (Heb.) "one from a city two from a family", there also remained those hundreds of thousands that (idiomatic) left before their time through various ways from the old homes who went through/ experienced the Nazi devastation/ on whom befell the Nazi disaster.



Those who were not slaughtered, those who were not burnt, those who were not gassed--together with those who descended/originated from the old homes, who with years back rooted themselves in new homes took upon themselves the task--

TO MAKE ETERNAL their destroyed homes, worried that their memory and their holiness should remain for generations and generations.

In the hundreds there are already today all kind of books of records--they are called memorial books, almanacs, and the like, that must remain eternal monuments, symbolic monuments for the holy communities who fell under the ax of the swastika hangmen.

However, there was generally (one verb:)rooted from generation to generation a style of living of our cities and small towns yet it the historical genesis was different and the development of individual communities. Each religious community has its own history of its origin/development up the mountain and down the mountain. (idiom: its high points and its low points)

Each shtetl and small town in the general panorama of the communities shone (lit. brought the sun in) with her own brilliance it added another nuance from the play of colors from our Yiddish creative rainbow which from East Europe gave light to all.

*to be continued*

**Szereszów**, mko nad Lśną, w pobliżu jej źródeł, pow. prużański, w 3 okr. pol. i gm. Szereszów, o 14 w. na zach. od Prużany a 168 w. od Grodna, na pld.-wsch. od puszczy białowieskiej, przy dr. z Grodna do Kobrynia. Z trzech stron otoczone nieprzebytymi błotami i topielami, z których bierze początek rz. Lśna (Leśna), z czwartej zaś piaszczystą, prawie nieurodzajną równiną, ma 750 dm., prawie wyłącznie drewnianych i 9196 mk. (4217 męż. i 4979 kob.), w tej liczbie 4831 żydów.

Posiada cerkiew par. murowaną, kaplicę prawosł. na cmentarzu grzebalnym, kościół kat. mur., synagogę mur., starożytną i dość okazałą, 9 domów modlitwy żydów., zarząd okr. polic. dla pięciu gmin powiatu (Szereszów, Horodeczna, Staruny, Suchopol i murawiewskiej z urz. gm. we wsi Ogrodniki), zarząd gminy, zarząd miejski, st. poczt. Mieszkańcy trudnią się oddawna pędzeniem dziegciu. Na początku b. wieku żydzi tutejsi prowadzili na wielką skalę kontrabandę, która zupełnie ustała po zniesieniu kordonu granicznego od granicy królestwa. Parafia praw., dekan. szereszowskiego, ma 5273 wiernych, 1 cerkiew paraf., 2 filialne i 3 cmentarne. Dekanat (błahocześnie) szereszowski obejmuje 10 parafii (Sz., Suchopol, Rzeczyca, Kotra, Wiexnia, Murawa, Dubina, Białowieża, Cichowola i Narewka), 10 cerkwi paraf., 5 filial., 6 cmentarnych i ma 28,192 wiernych. Kościół par. kat., p. w. św. Trójcy, w 1848 r. przez parafian z muru

from Encyclopedia Geographica (Powszechna) describing Shershev about 1800

Shershev, near the source of the river Lsna (Lesna), 18 km west of the town of Prużany, 210 km from the city of Grodno, northeast of the forest of Białowieża. Shershev lies on the road from Grodno to Kobryn, surrounded on three sides by impenetrable swamps, the source of the river Lsna. However the fourth side borders on a sandy almost unfertile flat plain. Shershev has about 750 houses almost all built of wood, 9196 inhabitants (4217 males, 4979 females). This amount includes 4831 Jews. It has a district stone Catholic Church with a cemetery, a very ancient and impressive brick synagogue, nine Jewish synagogues and a police station for the five surrounding districts (Shershev, Horodeczna, Staruny, Suchopol and Murawiew) The village of Ogrodniki has a district office, municipal office and post office. The locals have been employed for years with the production of tar. At the beginning of the last century the local Jews used to deal very actively in Contraband which ceased due to the removal of the border between Russia and Poland. The orthodox parish of the Deacon of Shershev has 5272 faithful, one parish Church, two affiliated and three cemeteries. The local Deacon takes in 10 parishes (Shershev, Suchopol, Rzeczyca, Kotra, Wiexnia, Murawa, Dubina, Białowieża, Cichowola and Narewka).

## BASIC FACTS - SHERSHEV

### 1930 Polish Business guide

Town, district of Pruzana, seat of the city court, law court in Grodno, 3310 habitants. Train station (28 km) at Linowo, the Zabinka-Baranowicze line, . Region (the regional office is in the town of Szereszow) and including: Kupicze, Lozowka, Kociolki.

[Home Page](#) [Index to Exhibits](#) [People of Shereshev](#)

## Moishe Kantorowitz Oral History Tapes

### Malch Memorial:

The only problem is I don't know the names.

One Malcha Jew decided to come visit Malcha two to two and a half years ago. Things were not too good there as you can understand. I suppose he was generous as a tourist should be and he got familiar with the Malcha mayor.

He got an idea his home or somebody else's that they should erect a monument in Malch. He went back to Israel and they raised some money, I don't know exactly how much. They forwarded the money to Malch to the mayor. There was of course a problem. They wanted to have the monument, the stone, whatever you call it, they wanted it to be written in Hebrew. There was no Jew around to handle it except for Brisk. But now, I was told some thousand seven hundred Jews – they are not from Brisk, they are mostly people from Russia, from White Russia, and there were those who knew Yiddish and Hebrew and they wrote it down. In short, they managed to get a stone carver. Malch has one monument built by the Bolsheviks in the center of the market square. Around the monument there are twenty three stones and each stone carries a name of one of the Malcha Christians dead who fell in the partisans during the Nazi occupation. So there are large stones and there's one space at the beginning so they decided to put the stone in memory of the Malcha Jews. They decided it was a good time to make introduction, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war; there were three or four Malcha, I'm not sure, it'll be on the picture, I don't know at the moment but we'll see (Looks at photograph or picture with Leah).- there- there are three Malcha, now that is my distant relative by marriage. His sister was married to my father's cousin Shmeul Chomsky.

The others I don't know. (Rozhany and Bereza-Kartuzka). [Leah: These people are all from Israel?] These people are all from Israel. Eleven all together... there are a couple missing. This young man is my father's cousin's grandson – he is Israeli born. He went to visit his great grandmother's and great grandfather's birthplace. This is Malch...the town square [Leah: It looks pretty prosperous compared to Shershev. Shershev was somehow pushed aside during the last fifty years, for whatever reason, I don't know. And Malcha's prosperity has grown... and this up here is written in Hebrew in memory of the 750 Jewish souls .. (reads Hebrew and translates-) In memory of the 750 Jewish souls in Malch who lived here for hundreds of years, slaughtered by the Nazis in the year of their holocaust. [Leah: So it's very elegant.] Yes, it's 1942, 1943. So that's the mayor, this is the stone and the mayor's very generous - it took place exactly on the ninth of May which is the anniversary when the Russians or the Bolsheviks celebrate the defeat against Germany. See here in this picture... this is the Israeli flag. (points to various people in another picture... Russian former fighters wearing medals... Malcha.) [Leah: That's very touching] Yes. (Turns to another picture) This is the house of my father's first cousin in Malch... tip top shape, Good house managers (balebatim) ... fixed in good condition.

### Bronnaya Gura/ Wine Pits/ Malch and Region/ Expulsions

Not far from Malch, there were wine pits - between R. and B.K - wine was barred for many years in the thirties and all along there were huge holes in the ground and the Germans filled them up with Jews from around these places. So Malch Jews were expelled in the fall of '41 to B.K. But the B.K. Jews were slaughtered in the fall of 1942, three to three and a half thousand, the Rozhany Jews, just as many, (Antipoli, Dorgichin, Yaneva, part from Pinsk, )... they were all brought to the place called Bronnaya Gura. I wanted once in my life to visit the place and there were fifty thousand souls that are buried there. The Nazis of course dug them up and burned them before the treaty. The Bosheviks erected a monument... it says **fifty** thousand citizens, not a word about Jews. [Leah: Where is this?] R. near B.K. (Leah: So not all of the Jews were sent off to Auschwitz?) No... Pruzhany was, I guess you could say fortunate... Pruzhany was the only one in a radius I would say of a hundred and thirty-five kilometers, the closest community to Bialystock that was partly taken to Auschwitz, all the rest were taken to Treblinka. All the other places around from Baranovitch all the way to around Pinsk itself and all its surrounding, all were either slaughtered on the spot or brought to Bronnaya Gura, mostly on the spot. Like Chomsk or Moteli and Terechan, the rest, in 1942 already, were brought to Bronnaya Gura. I'm sad to say that this place is hardly mentioned in the history of Jewish mass burial places. Leah: What accounts for the difference between the areas that were taken to Auschwitz and the other areas?] I don't know. The only reason I could give, and this is only a partial reason, is that a lot of these communities were slaughtered in 1941 as soon as the German army marched past the towns they conquered, in some cases completely and in some cases partially. They moved with lightning speed. At that time there were no gas chambers and no crematoriums. The death camps came into existence in 1942. In 1941, the Eisengrappers kicked them out of town and machine-gunned them for no reason at all. Shershev and Pruzhany were bypassed so was Kobrin and so was Antipol and Drogichin, except they took 200 Jewish men and took them out of town and shot them for no reason. However in Chomsk they took nearly everybody, 1680 souls in one day. They moved on the side roads and in this community they liquidated entirely in Moteli, the same thing. They didn't touch Dorichin. In 1942 it became a systematic, organized, well planned annihilation of the Jewish communities. (Leah: This is very interesting because as you say there is no literature about this at all... I mean Babi Yar...) Babi Yar? - the original massacre of Kiev Jews was about thirty-three thousand (see also Russian massacre of Jews at Babi Yar under Stalin), but in Brona Gura it was fifty thousand.

### Pictures (YIVO)

School model of main street in Pruzhany.

It looked nicer in my day.

The big “cold shul” in S. Oh my, the Great Shul, Groise Bes Hamigdish.

Lebersteyn’s father took pictures of this one shul (town photographer), standing at the corner of my house. He took it in the 1930s in pinpoint and worked on it because it was clouded. I remember he enlarged it about 15 inches large. We were just boys, I was playing with his son. He sent it to the US. It must have been to YIVO. And this must be that photograph.

This was a huge building – you cannot tell from the picture because it was taken from far away and the people alter the perspective. As boys we took a long long stick and tried to push the locks open, but we couldn’t. I always estimated that the pillars were about 20 meters high. Unbelievable! Huge! Huge!

Another was taken from the opposite corner but it didn’t come out.

When we left for Auschwitz, the photographs were abandoned. The Gentiles helped themselves to everything that was in the Jewish homes and these few photographs they gave back to us when we returned.

### Orchard Area

Alter Gellerstein owned this orchard. Fire in 1908. Near bell tower of old monastery which became a two-story building where Lebersteyn worked as a barber. They wormed by setting fire to straw or leaves underneath the trees.

My uncle’s, grandfather’s and father’s store were right around the corner from each other. They were right there on the other side. Nachman Terman’s house, our house behind it, and then the B.H. My uncle left for USA in 1938. Auerbach’s house was on Staravetsky Street. They used to call the river “Der Yam” (Hebrew for “the sea”).

This picture is before my time. I can see it by the dress. It’s very Russian.. the hats. [Leah: And this would be the rabbi?] It could be a rabbi, I don’t know. Judging by the caps and the coats... and by the boots... in my day we didn’t wear high boots. Oh ya, this is taken during the first world war or even before. Oh my. That’s on the bridge to school, to the blacksmithy. His name was Shmeul Schmid...Church Street palace...Pruz hany Street, etc. Staravetsky Street, etc.

### Catholic Church

This is the Catholic church... [Leah: This was in the cemetery... this was near the center]. This was a two story building ... this church is gone. This is in the Christian cemetery.

### My Mother's Postcard

[Leah: This is the postcard I spoke of ... you can keep that ... it said on it "As a keepsake or souvenir I am sending you my picture together with your dear - ?, (there's a word I can't read) and I wish you Alte and Toibe together with your mother health and luck...your mother with the children, it should find you in your best situation" ... 1920, which is when my grandmother came. Signed: Mordecai Pozniak 1920 5 Dumbrowsky St, Pruzany

This is your mother? [Leah: No. I don't know who that is. I sent it to your friend in Florida. And he thought it was his older brother and that maybe this was his wife.] He wasn't sure? [Leah: Well, he thought so. He was eight and his brother was much older. He was pretty sure it was his brother] He had another brother-Rueven. Now he's eighty five years old. [Leah: My father was born in 1895 and my mother in maybe 1897 or something like that.] ( [Leah: When you look at that photo, does that look like a wedding photo?] No. It's just a picture. [Leah: Who would have taken this picture? ] Could have been. The photographer, Smulke, I don't think he lived in P. in 1920.

### Uncle Robert's Map

Leah: I have some stuff about my family and I also have a map of my family which my uncle made and I don't know if it's right or wrong.] [Well, he said that my father's family lived here and my mothers family lived here ... Only a few houses were on the street by the bridge.

### Hafgesel Palace

Hafgesel Palace with two rows of linden trees boys could squeeze in and out of. Thick. Two moats on either side of the road and on the field side the pharmacist used to unearth bricks.

### Memory/ Size/ Marketplace

The marketplace in my mind was very big as a child. I never saw anything bigger, nicer. There is a story from a newspaper about a grandmother who talked her whole life about a beautiful chandelier in the synagogue. When she was taken to visit people's houses she always said it didn't compare to the chandelier in her memory. Until finally she went to Carnegie Hall ... and finally she met her match.

### The Nature of Memory/ Chickens/ Auschwitz

I have a picture of the Block A building where I was in Auschwitz. When I took a look at it later it didn't look so big, so impressive and I thought to myself "Are these the same blocks of Auschwitz???" I remember them as being so big. Similarly with the house my father built in 1932, it was well built, the best house, etc. and now I look at pictures of it and it's just a house. As children, everything seemed bigger and better. Even I

remember in Montreal, there was this Jewish delicatessen and this man would come there and he'd say... Oh the way things used to smell in the old country...Es iz gevven a smaker! (It was a smeller!) Why were the chickens so good at home? Because the peasants would come with their horses and turn the horses around so they could eat hay and the chickens would eat the horseshit. So the chickens smelled so. He said to the man how many chickens a week did you eat in the Shtetl? Here you eat chicken all the time... no wonder it is not so wonderful. In our memories the town remains bigger and nicer.

### Fantasy (Story from Auschwitz)

This is about a man who believes everything he says even though it isn't true. His father he believes he is a landowner, a Pommeschik. I had to wake him up. He believed his father had horses and cows and parachik, farm hands, even when poor Gentiles and certainly not Jews could own land. I'm not lying to you. I had to say to him "Herschel, Herschel, you're talking to me, a Shershever! I remember going around all year without shoes to save them for winter time. The man's father was a butcher and in Shershever terms he made a living. Maybe someday you'll meet him. Superficially the fact that he can't sign his name, all right. In order to escape reality, he had to make up stories, and I understand that, but I give him credit where credit is due. He succeeded in doing something which generations of scientists could not have made... do you know what alchemy is? He succeeded in making something. I'll tell you how. If you saw a ring in Auschwitz it had to be gold, usually a wedding ring and usually Jewish, and you didn't question it. (Leah: Why did it have to be Jewish?) Because the people in Auschwitz were overwhelmingly Jewish, only 22 and a half thousand were gypsies. A million and a half Jews. The gypsies were left alone for six months with their possessions and families. So ninety-nine percent of the inmates were Jewish. If you had a chance to deal with a Pole and you sold him a ring, it was without question gold. So he was able to fake even the ingot of 14k and I'll tell you how. He worked in a factory, a smelting factory, and they used to bring in airplane motors from downed planes and melt them. I don't know how many worked there, they had several hundred. They took the pistons and smelted them in one place and the copper in another place... Now airplane engines are quite complicated. They have pipes, copper pipes, and the color of copper and gold, even if you are not an expert, were indistinguishable because you know there are all kinds of colors of gold. So they used to take a copper pipe which was the size of a human finger and cut off a slice, let's say a quarter of an inch, and there was everything available there, and they polished it up till it looked like a ring. He made himself out of a very hard steel a little chisel. He put the ring on a vise and with the chisel inside the ring he put a plain strike of one line, then he put a mark this way and the other way and it would look like a "K". .. and then made the 1 and the 4 for fourteen. And those Poles that worked there wouldn't know the difference between copper and gold. God forbid if you had been in Auschwitz and someone gave you a ring... you would have believed that it was gold, To test it you would have had to put chemicals on it. But by a fast look you grab it and put it in your pocket (you would be fooled). (Leah: Were they brass rather than copper pipes?) Maybe. Between copper and brass I'm no expert. So there was an alchemist. Have you heard such a story? (He asked to have the tape turned off to speak ill of



another.) There's an old saying, "This person is an honest person because he has never touched the truth." It's intact yet.

### Renewing the Moon Tradition

(Leah: I want to ask you about this tradition of my father and grandfather going out once a month in the moonlight that my father wrote about in his memoir.) Yes, once a month, it's called in Hebrew "to renew the moon time". The new moon is the new Jewish month. For Orthodox Jews, they would go out, say some prayers, and in fact jump up and down and say a couple times "As I jump towards you". So, it is not just a tradition, it is an orthodox Jewish ritual. Yes, I can remember from my childhood they would do this, usually in front of the shul (B.H.). Usually they like to get a minyan. It would be at sunset when it got dark and you see the new moon, a crescent. It was a great sight.

### Kamentska Street/ Insurance After Fire

The core of the shtetl was Jewish and the surrounding area were local peasants. The K Street was, except for four Jewish homes, entirely Gentile and it was the longest street in the shtetl. I would say it must have housed about 200 households. This used to be a Jewish street. .. and I'll tell you something interesting, after the 1908 fire an insurance agent from P. came out and wrote policies for everyone of them and pre-dated them and they collected insurance... I don't think a Jew would have dared to do this. In those days, who knows how often the mail went. I heard this story in Shersheva, it was going around. Oh Shersheva has a lot of stories... it is much more picturesque than P. And also, the assortment of characters... the variety. There are things I can tell to children and things I can tell to adults. That's why in my writing I didn't want to ... In my book, those people have become absolved of everything because of the tragedy of what happened to them. Shersheva just had an enormous assortment of characters... not just because it was my town. I have documented papers taken from a Polish geographical book last century that Shersheva had more than ten thousand inhabitants and more than five thousand were Jews (? Date)

### Mostova Street-

This part is called Koscielna Street. Church Street, also called Untern Duhl, never called Koscielna Street officially.

### Untern Duhl 1865

This is the name of what the Jews called the area. You never hear it referred to like this (unofficial name). The Duhl... in Russian it's called the Dol which means the swampy lake). The Poles in the late thirties dug it out and put in embankments, with dry shores, it became a nice little lake. When the Catholic Church down the road was improving the road in the thirties, they dug and they found a skeleton in the sand. My grandmother used to tell me that she remembered as a very little girl that the entire population was forced to go to the banks and watch as some Polish revolutionaries were shot there by the Russians.

(1860's because there was a Polish uprising in 1863). Polish patriots made an uprising against the Russian occupiers then.

### Old Mill

Glucko's Mill. Four Christian brothers owned it. In 1936 or 1937 they sold it to a few Jews and in 1939 the Bolsheviks took it over. (in the vicinity of the Duhl).

### Hafgesel

Haf means a fancy courtyard and it also means a king's court. Also a rich landowner's domain. Legend is that at the end of this street there were two moats. There was farmland all around and the farmer used to plow and they found layers of brick. So the conclusion is that there must have been a mansion or palace there. The moats were for defense reasons. I believe that they didn't want people to come across in the town. In my time it was weeds and overgrown, still water in the moats and good grassy land and as boys we used to come and play around there. Hafgesel was all the way to Mostova Street.

### A Polish Public School

I went there for four years. Seven grades. It was one main building and two side buildings... it looked like an "H". A one story wooden building. Up to grade four there were two classes. In grade five we were united into one class and by sixth grade many had dropped out. The few Jews who went to the school were mostly girls, which I describe in my book. It was important for Jewish boys to learn Yiddishkeit. So they either sent them to Cheder which was cheaper than the Hebrew school. But the girls, it wasn't considered so important for girls to be educated, they were often sent to the free Polish public school. There were ten Jewish children in his class of forty, two boys. The problem with the Hebrew schools was that there were no higher schools then. So if you didn't learn Polish you were in trouble. There was a Hebrew Gymnasium in P. or a Polish one. From a Hebrew school in S., one would not be accepted in a Polish Gymnasium. That's why Jewish boys who wanted to go on would graduate from Hebrew school in seventh grade and then go on to the Polish school in S. where they would be set back three years. (started in Grade 5 to learn Polish) No Jews went directly to the Polish school. But two girls did... my cousin and the pharmacist's daughter. (Usually, Jewish boys who went to the Polish school first went to the Hebrew school, then went to the Polish school, were demoted, matriculated for some years and then were eligible to go to a Polish Gymnasium).

### The River

In some places it was three meters wide in dry season; in wet season six or seven. In the Spring or Fall it turned into a sea and covered all the swamps here and there was flooding. The yards, but not the houses were flooded. One Christian house had a woman who said "I need a boat to get out." It was very flat. It was so flat that from the

river to the marketplace we would get on a sled and go down. Only a meter and it was considered a mountain. So Staravetsky Street was slightly sloped. In my book I call it Oistrovetska Street.

### Vashkeye Village

This was a swampy area where they grew a lot of cucumbers and people were very poor. They did not have a road to the village... they had planks over the swampy land. Along the way, off Kapralinsha beyond the Christian cemetery (marked 1580). One Jewish family, he was a balagole, a wagon driver/ drayer, and only a few other houses. There were about five little streets in the area, one called Shul Street. Nobody lived on this street. It was the back of the cold shul and there were slaughterhouses there. Shul Street also had a Polish name (unpronounceable). There was a little street with mills. Maletsky lived there. In 1931, a large motor (for the mills) was brought to town... a large crate pulled by six or eight horses. In 1932 they extended the mill by attaching to it an enamel electrical generator. That's when Shershev got electricity. The Great Shul was brick and two story. The Great Shul is not the same as the Cold Shul. The second floor was for women. Built before the first World War. It was built because the Cold Shul could not be kept warm and could not be used in winter. In summertime they used it for special occasions. A shul was bigger than a B.H., which could be in a room. My house was right in front of the Great Shul. Shershev was 61 kilometers, 38 miles northeast of Brest.

### War Invalids/Zloty/Kamenetska Street

My father paid 450 zlotys for it, would you believe it, in 1931. Jews could buy land then to build a house, especially from another Jew. At that time a dollar was eight zloty. And on the black market it was worth nine. A man had to work a day in Shershev to earn a zloty. My father was considered one of the nine richest men in town. He had a liquor store. He was a war invalid... the fingers of his right hand. The Polish government recognized invalids as their own, regardless of where you were fighting. My father was a Czarist soldier because at that time, around the first World War, Shershev was under Russian control... but the Poles still recognized him as a war invalid. Licenses were a privilege allowed to invalids. There were five in Shershev. Four belonged to Jews and they had to pay plenty for them, and one belonged to a Christian. This was compulsory war service. This was not for ordinary handicapped people. My father bought the land from Aprik whose house had burned down in the First World War. It was one of the last houses built in Shershev by a Jew. There were only five Jewish homes on the whole street. Kamenetska Street. It used to be an all Jewish street, 200 houses, then it became mostly Christian.

### Leah's Mother's House

Right next to the orchard where the fire started in 1908. The orchard was adjacent to the monastery with the onion-domed bell tower that was torn down and replaced by an ugly two-story commercial building. There was an Eastern Orthodox monastery/church. Behind it (or next to it) was a huge orchard and it was called Galuch's Sud which means

priest's orchard. There is a story that the fire actually started in a house on Hafgesel Street and the wind blew the fire to the orchard and eventually half the city was burnt. It is possible that if you lived close to the market area in those days you were more prosperous, but in my day there were hardly any Jews left on that street.

#### Pinsky House/Promenade Area

I did not draw the houses to scale on the map. The Pinsky house was the big white house. The Pinsky house was enlarged from its original size. This house was wooden originally and then there was a part made of brick attached to it and a part that was whitewashed. In 1941 or 1942 this house burned down along with the rabbi's house and my uncle's house and four other houses. I suppose that the Germans connected the buildings to make it even, to look like one. Later the Russians established a hospital in this building.

This area was a promenade and also contained one of the two Christian stores – a general store that sold groceries. We would promenade Saturday night, summer evenings, especially the young people. From Hananya's house to Omlansky's house. In the mid 30's, a cement sidewalk was put into the area... maybe '34 or '35. People chose this as the promenade because the sidewalks were originally wooden and the other sidewalks were cobblestone or plain mud and not so nice to walk on. And these were the only cement sidewalks on the Jewish side. They passed a law. This was basically the main street and this was a Jewish area.

#### Leah's Father's House Area left/right Hafgesel

The Hafgesel was along the street on the other side from the bridge, along the river, and towards the new elementary school around the corner from the old yellow library. Next to the bridge were the Bialystocky's house and Wineocor's house. I (Leah) took these across the street, diagonally from the bridge, beside the library. Near Kaddish Tocher's house. He was a turner of wood. Another house in the vicinity of Leah's father's house was Fienberg's. And Gershon and Rachel's house also. He was a shoemaker.

#### The Christian Feltsher

His name was Javits. Not a doctor. He was a middle-aged man with children... kind of like a medic. And it was a bigger house. He was a tall man. This was in the vicinity of the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The Catholic Church was small. The Eastern Orthodox Church was probably re-located after the fire in 1908.

#### The Bridge Tower

Each town had a patron saint and Jahn (John) was the one of Shershev. This was a Catholic tradition. In Polish it was called the Jahnov and a service was held in front of it at some time of the year.

(appropo some confusion... "Never argue with a Shershever!")

### Cemetery Street

Called Nowa in Polish. Malet (Kaminsky) lived on this street. A little farther was another little street, a Christian street, and another mill. The Jewish cemetery was about fifty yards past the Jewish mill. Parallel to Stravetsky Street was Hazergesel (meaning Pig Street). I don't know why it was called Hazergesel... it was before my time ... but they must have done something there. It was near Shul Street.

### Six Shuls/Bes Hamigdesh

There was the biggest one, the Groise Shul..., then there was my father's one, the Rabbi's B.H. In 1932 or 1933 my grandfather moved and then he went to the Groise B.H. but my father stayed at the Rabbi's B.H. The Rabbi's Shul was a rented building, whereas the Groise was owned by the community, but my father stayed with the Rabbi's B.H. because it was closer to my mother's family. And my mother's father was a Gabbai at that shul. Moishe says that a Gabbai is a warden or trustee of a public institution or manager of the affairs of a rabbi and you had to buy your seat in shuls and my father had an eastern wall seat, so why lose it. I don't know how much a seat cost. Another shul was called Rabbi's Isaac's Shul where my paternal grandfather used to go. There was also a Hasidic Shul. One could deduce that there had been Hasidic followers in Shershev at one time, but nobody remembers when. Chaim Malet's father used to go there. The Hasidic one was the smallest and was right near the power station at the mills. There was one called the Gamoyeter Shul, it means mortared. This was unique...made of stone (or is he saying brick?), very old design. It had cellars or tunnels that led from one to another and we kids would explore. It was dark and scary and sometimes in winter it was used for fruit storage. The walls were very thick so the temperature was very cool. Then there was one called the Nier which means new. Near Hafgessel. Near the sports field. The shul was right behind that. It was built right after the First World War... it was fairly new.

The Rabbi Isaac Shul, the Rabbi Shul and the Nier Shul were the same shape and size and were made of wood. The shuls in Shershev were undistinguished. The Groise was whitewashed brick. There was one rabbi for the whole town. Every Jew was supposed to know prayers and the instructions of what to do and how to behave... so you just waited for a minyan. There was a minyan every Saturday and every morning and sometimes there were one or two or three evening services.

### The Rabbi's Other Jobs/Yeast/ Pesach

The rabbi lived in a house near the marketplace. And the rabbi used to make (supplement) a living by selling yeast. He would sell yeast for Shabes. Thursday night the women would go and get the dough which would rise overnight for Friday morning. You could get yeast from other non-Jews, but the Jews wouldn't think of it because they did not want to cut into the rabbi's income. He only sold to the Jews but there was a

rumor that a few Jews didn't go to the rabbi because they believed that the rabbi was a few pennies more expensive. We would go Thursday night and the rabbi already knew how much yeast my mother needed and he was busy and his wife was busy. He had a scale like in a drugstore and the rabbi's wife would put ten decos on the scale and cut and I would go and bring it home. (Leah: It was holy yeast but what interests me is that this poor guy had to sell yeast to survive... he had all of Shershev here...) His other income I forgot to tell you about is that the Mishna tells us we should not have "chomets" (tainted, unleavened bread) in the house before Pesach. In order to make sure that you don't own it, you sell it or give it to the poor. If you didn't clean the house thoroughly and by mistake a piece of bread was left there it made the entire house unclean. So you signed a paper and gave it to the rabbi that said "I'm telling the rabbi to sell all of my possessions to a non-Jew for the period of the Pesach holidays...the whole house essentially." You didn't actually sell the whole house, it was called selling chomets. Then the rabbi found a non-Jew who bought it for let's say two zlotys which was about thirty or forty cents. So the non-Jew owns the entire shtetl and everything in it for the eight days. Each member of the Jewish community would leave the rabbi a present ... not a present, but a payment "for his fatigue". So he depended upon the community to leave him these payments to supplement his income. This effort of cleaning your house and taking the stuff to the rabbi was a three or four day effort. In response to Leah's questions... while the rabbi sold the actual goods, the contract for the house he tore up after Pesach. What did the non-Jews get out of this? The rabbi shared a small percent of his payment either directly or as a discount. That was part of the deal of a rabbi's income and that money that was given might have covered two or three months worth of living expenses. According to Moishe, the rabbi gave the Christians part of the money the Jews gave him so that at that point in time neither the Jews nor the rabbi owned the chomets. (I still believe that some of those goods also were given). I am sure this was done in every shtetl... it was part of the understood routine to support the rabbi. (of course, most of the outlying peasants were illiterate so that they would not have known what they were signing anyway. I have heard that rabbis used to sell candles in other shtetls for Friday nights. This rabbi was distinguished looking, tall for us... about 5'10", broad shoulders, handsome face. He was very trim ... he did not wear "payes" (long curly sideburns) like the Hasidic. I'm sure he had them but they were combed back and his beard was well-trimmed. I probably never spoke a word to him, but people respected him and he was our authority in the shtetl. I don't recall him visiting our house or anyone else's house, but I suppose he did if there was a disagreement or another issue. The rabbi was in the Groise Shul in the evenings when he and some students would discuss the commentaries. He would make comments on the readings. Why the men didn't come to the Shul in the evening where the rabbi was there probably had something to do with politics, who married whom, etc. Why they didn't combine and make one really nice shul, I don't know. There must have been friction amongst the membership. So I suspect that the Groise Shul probably had seventy or eighty members and the one my father went to maybe fifty (out of about 350 families at that time- late 1930's). Each shul had to have a Torah, but they were simple and there wasn't a lot of silver, etc. The money was raised for a wooden building. The lights were kerosene lamps or candles, very inexpensive. (Electrification came to the town in 1932) The lights were used only at night for a short time. The main expense was wood for fuel (wooden stove).

### The Shames

Each shul had a "betl" or a "shames" (like a janitor) who was amongst the poorest of people in the village. In the shul next to us, they had a small, scrawny person - really he was pathetic to look at. He scrounged a living. One shames I remember never looked at anyone, he always looked down. In my shul we had a hunchback. I suppose he must have had a family. He would sweep the shul out and clean the windows once in a while and the doors. And for this he used to go around to all the families every Thursday, to the fifty or sixty families in the congregation, for alms. Some people could afford ten groshen, some maybe twenty-five. He maybe collected a zloty a week... it was a very hard life. Usually, the shames was a pitiful person. There were more degrading jobs, but they paid better and you didn't have to beg. A worse job was skinning a dead horse. But for the shames job you didn't have to have any intelligence, any ambition. It was not a paying job. They were usually people who could not find what else to do and people looked upon them with pity or compassion. However, in my father's shul, Moishe the shames was a very learned man who used to sit every day after prayer and teach the old men who were members of the community for an hour or hour and a half. For a couple of months he taught me. He was the exception. If a shames was a man of education, sometimes he got tutoring jobs on the side.

Some shameses lived in the shul itself with their family... in a back room or something. In the new world, a shames was more like a custodian. Not a great job, but not pitiful...treated with more respect.

(note: Leah's paternal grandfather Aaron was a shames in Toronto. Probably he had a salary of some sort. He had been a tree feller and missed the outdoors and was not happy being a shames.)

### The Chimneysweep

There was another person who went through the streets calling people and telling them it was time to come to shul.. He was also a chimneysweep. His name was Avrom-Ber. I don't know how old he was because I never saw the skin on his face... he walked around covered in soot. I think he even looked that way on Saturdays. I don't think he could be scrubbed clean. He had a wife, a son named Rhul, and a daughter named Marianna. People were very careful about their chimneys. The non-Jewish farmers had thatched roofs and once a spark started there would be a fire and it would spread. All the Jewish homes except for two or three were shingled. Everybody made sure that their chimney was clean. A chimneysweep was an important job. On Fridays he was hired to run through the streets shouting "In Shul arin!" which means literally "in shul going". When people heard this, they would leave whatever they were doing and go wash their hands and clean up and go to shul and then afterwards come home for the Sabbath meal, and the women would know that it was time to start lighting candles.

### The Horse-Skinner

The horse skimmers were not scrawny, they were well-built. No one wanted to take up with them because they were tough and they were horse dealers, but also horse thieves. A couple of the horse dealers actually behaved and did not deal in stolen horses.

### The Nine Most Prominent Families in Shershev

They were all merchants. My neighbor was Haskel Krugman. I remember sitting on the porch one day and my father said that he was one of the richest people in town. In some of the stores you could buy anything for-- five zlotys? My grandfather and my father and my uncle had stores in this market region.

### Mark - Stores

- 1. Teme v Sucker: yard goods
  - 2. Another store: not Jewish, for kielbasa meats.
  - 3. Esther Pozniak: habedashery/gallanteria
  - 4. Benyomin Sinai: leather, either for shoes or complete hides
- There was a passageway where some merchants would put tables before the First World War and sold to people going in and out of the passageway, like a sidewalk sale. After the war the merchants closed up the passageway and divided it into four stores, two of which opened this way and two that way.

### Marketplace Stores and Other Stores

- 5. My grandfather's - he used it for storage.
- 6. On the other side was a woman named Gendel Domb, Domb means "oak" in Polish. She too had a habedashery.
- 7. My grandfather's - he used it for a warehouse.
- 8. Yosel Pomerantz, habedashery (Moishe uses the word habedashery for general store)
- 9. Moishe's father's liquor store. Mostly sold to Gentiles. There were certain seasons or times, for non-Jewish weddings, I think they were mostly in the fall and they would come and buy 100, 120, 150 bottles of vodka. You could stand up three days in the store and not sell this. The Shershev region, they used to say, had around a hundred and thirty-five villages and they all had to come to Shershev for their liquor. I think it's exaggerated. It could have had thirty-five, not a hundred and thirty-five.
- 10. Jacov Meir Kabetesky, habedashery. cotton, pins, thread, ladies stockings, elastic, shoelaces, shoe polish, soap, tie pins, dishes... a general store. There was no ready-made clothing to be purchased in Shershev. Everything was made except for socks and some people made socks too. Too expensive to buy ready-made.
- 11. Sheindel Mill Bazer. She was red-headed and had a habedashery. Leah: Was one habedashery different from another? Nah... the goyim used to shlep from one to the other ... the storekeepers- "Come to me, come to me!" What a life, I'm telling you.
- 12. Believe it or not this store was closed alot. A man called by the name of Zalman Schneider who bought it for a nodem (dowry) for his daughter. In those days, a store like this was worth \$700 -\$800. I remember before the war my father was offered five



thousand zlotys which was about \$1000. He bought it for her as a little bit of temptation she would get married: he was a tailor. He must have saved the money... some people did. He had a few people working for him. One of the richest people in town was a tailor. She was a year or two younger than I. When the Bolsheviks came, they sent the entire family to Siberia and the father died there and the rest are in the States.

Around the corner...

13. Chaim Glotser, he had a habedashery.

14. Rinkavitch, a comfortable man moneywise, a gentleman. Yard goods. Always well dressed, polite. Two daughters, one was with my sister in class and one was with me.

15. Tema Kvellman... the same story, habedashery.

16. Hershel Daitch - I don't remember his last name but people used to call him this. His store was on the opposite side of the passage.

17. Israel Winograd - same story, habedashery.

18. Itzak London. He was by trade a blacksmith but he opened up a hardware store.

19. Fievel Leiman, another habedashery. His daughter was a classmate of mine.

The only thing they didn't carry in the habedashery was say kerosene. You couldn't have kerosene because it would smell up the store. There were little stores that sold kerosene... it was a big selling item.

There were four little stores... one...two...three...four.

This one right by Staravetska Street was little and brick and sold yard goods - Gellerman.

A. On this side here- Soshe Boshe Blacker, "an alte bobbe" (an old grandmother)... I don't know exactly who she was. If she had three dollars worth of merchandise it would be alot. There stood about half a bottle of herring and about a dozen blocks of lime for whitewashing. I think she had nothing else... believe me, I wouldn't know. I don't know what you would call her store. A very small business. I don't know how she got that name. (Much laughter about her.)

B. Another little store was Chaim Kaminker. He had about the same thing, except a little bit more.. what else could he have... maybe some salt, some sugar. Surely there were no grocery stores. Maybe a little bit in houses. Herschel, a brother of Chaim, bought it for his daughter as a dowry also.

C. One more, Raizel Beretsky... can't remember what she did.

D. Aaron Ruhamis - he made men's caps and there were quite a few makers of caps in Shershev.

All told there were about 67 stores that include the 19 in the marketplace and the little in house things like those four we just talked about and then there was

Aaronovitch- two brothers Chaim and Ruben. One had a little restaurant and a hotel, four rooms. Leah: Who stayed in the hotel? Once in a while in a blue moon a Polish government employee would stay there. Jews didn't stay there. Celebrities stayed there. A strong man who lifted weights which was a Jewish profession in Poland. (Leah has used a small e and House 31 for this one).

Leah: Who ate in the restaurant? Gentiles. In Yiddish the restaurant was called Shenk, which means tavern, pub, saloon, bar. Officially, no Jew ate there because it wasn't kosher, but young people would sometimes hide in the bushes and consume what they'd bought there. It was owned by a Jew, but on the weekends the Gentiles would come and sit on the steps and drink vodka with maybe some herring or sausage. Fights and breaking furniture. He got the non-kosher sausage from the kielbasa store... he wouldn't go himself, but sent his maid. So that was the hotel restaurant... no running water, no indoor plumbing.

grocery store 1931/doctor/ druggist

Next to him we had a grocery, nice for Shershev, built in 1931. It was modern and comfortable. The hotel and restaurant was built before the Second World War. It was built by the brother who took the house and made it into a grocery store. And part he rented out to the doctor... a Jewish doctor. A young man. He came in about '36 or '37, I don't remember his name. He lived in house of the druggist's widow who had a daughter of marriageable age. Her name was Mary (Miriam?). The widow was a very shrewd woman and she made him very comfortable and she had her daughter married off to a doctor one year later. The druggist lived right here at the very corner of Kamenetska and Cemetery Street.

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name. (Much laughter about her.) (Elsewhere he adds half a barrel of herring. The peasants liked her as she had such an unfancy house. Married a tailor. Daughter 50. Hefty. Also a son.)

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Right next to this corner there lived a family name Bernstein who had a general store. We used to buy our pencils and exercise books for school there.

Across the street and a few houses down lived Chananye Bes Schneider, a men's tailor. The whole family worked there. One was a carpenter.

And then Yudel Tuchmacher, he had a brick house. He also had a grocery store. He had a partnership in the sawmill that the four Christian brothers had and he also had a partnership in a truck. A comfortable man... a rich man in Shershev. (In the Yitzkor book a Tuchmacher had the original clothing factory in Shershev that made serge for military uniforms.)

Reitman, a little yard goods store.

Uncle Reuven Kantorowitz, my father's brother; he had a hardware store. Of course he competed with his father's hardware store. Don't mark it down, in cash I think he was the richest man in the shtetl. In 1941 (?) 2 houses burned down. In a metal box were jewels, money...but in time he was sent to the ghetto.....

Here was the Rabbi Lieberan's (spelling) house.

#### More About the Pinsky Family

And then there was Pinsky's house, the white big house, the biggest house in the shtetl. He too had a hardware. His house was so big that some of the rooms were dark because in those days they built rooms with partitions, and some of the rooms had no windows. I remember when I used to play with his grandson we used to run through the rooms and some had no windows at all. Behind his hardware was a drugstore and an apartment. It was big. His daughter's house was attached. Besides all the property he had a share in a mill (he was the bookkeeper), he also had the tar and pitch for roofs business. He was a very comfortable man. Pinsky's daughter was married to Rothenburg. They rented out one room to the harness maker Maishe Nizberg. He was my parents' age... my father was born in 1892. I had a Hebrew teacher in Hebrew school whose name was Nitzberg.

#### A Little More About the Nine Richest Families in Shershev/Clothing and Shoes

The nine rich people lived around the marketplace except for Maier Gellman the tailor. He lived near the Rabbi's Shul. He was the only worker... a man's tailor. He had three, four or five apprentices. They worked under him, he was the top tailor. He cut and they sewed it. The tradition was to have a new suit for Pesach. Not everybody got one, but if you got one it was at that time of the year. Sometimes you would get a pair of pants or a jacket that you had to have for school, but not a suit. A suit cost, I would estimate, two or three dollars, maybe four for a man, in those days, twelve or fifteen zlotys. It was the material because labor was cheap. The shoes were made. You went to the leather shop and picked out the leather and then took it to the man who made the uppers who was called the "stepper". There were one, two, three, four steppers in Shershev. There were a lot of trades people, not so much business people. The non-Jews went to the trades people also; the Jews could not keep them busy enough. And with the uppers you would

go to the shoemaker and you would settle on a price before anything else. We used to actually go to the store and buy the sole and bring it to the shoemaker. Soles were usually one inch thick. Or if you trusted the shoemaker, you could get his sole, which might be of a lesser quality. The shoemaker made the insole, which had to be very good of course. I remember that a factory-made pair of shoes in Pruzhany, which you could not get in Shershev, cost fourteen or fifteen zlotys which would be three to five dollars. It was expensive, let's face it, but they were more stylish. If you were a young man who could afford it, and maybe if you were ready to get married, you went to Brest or Pruzhany for those shoes. These were dress shoes, for a dance or a marriage, maybe fifteen to twenty-five zlotys.

Men's shirts or underwear were also handmade.

#### About the "Kato'ch" or plural Katoch'es

There used to be a legend about the capmaker Arkial Chomets' wife Bobble. (But Moishe also refers to them elsewhere as Aaron and Bavel Ruchmanetz) She was a socialist from way back at the turn of the century. The legend was going about that when the Russian Revolution started back in 1905, there used to be a debate society called Katoche (the coop) that met in the communal place where they baked bread and challah and also had katoches, coops where some people kept their chickens. The story is that when Bobble was a young girl, she ran to open the fence or the wire crying "Freedom for the Chickens - Out of the Kitchen". I don't think her husband was a socialist. He liked to tell stories. He was a Russian soldier during the First World War and during the Revolution, he was stopped and they said "Are you for us?". He said, "What do you want from me? I'm a soldier and I want to go home." So they let him go. For small town people, like in Shershev, he had been around. They adopted a girl, her name was Belke...from a relative in Bialystok. She called them father and mother which was very unusual for Shershev. They were radicals. At the turn of the century there was a lot of radicalism everywhere particularly among the Russian peasants and poor working classes. So it penetrated even to Shershev and there were some radicals and even revolutionaries who might not have openly but secretly sympathized with the Russian Revolution. There were other socialists in Shershev, but the phrase "free the chickens" stuck with her. Maybe she was a little more active.

#### Progressive cheder teacher/art/bread sculpture/father's linguistic abilities/family abilities/Moishe's higher educational aspirations/his son

There were no public educational institutions in Shershev, but Jewish people did get some education, particularly boys, even if it was not formal. Some of the cheder teachers were quite progressive. My father even had one who taught him art. He used to have to bring a piece of bread from home to make a thick dough and form figurines, a habit which remained with him.

Until the war he would sit at the table and take a piece of bread and make little horses or all kinds of things like animals. He used it like clay, even eating with one hand while he

would do this. So for a teacher to teach this was unbelievable, but he was relieving them a few minutes from studying the Torah. I don't want to brag, but my father could speak Russian without a detectable accent. I don't know how my father did it, but when the Poles came, he was the unofficial application writer. In those days they didn't have regular assessments. If you had a decent house and dressed decently, you had to pay or go out of business. So people used to apply to the government, but they had to be able to write that petition. People would come to my father and ask him to write, which he did for free, to have their taxes lowered. I actually don't know where my father learned Polish, but he spoke perfectly. In my father's day, ninety-five percent of the people in the school did not speak Polish. The cheders taught people to read prayers and it wasn't until my day when other kinds of reading and schooling occurred. I recall that the Hebrew principal spoke only Hebrew when he was on the street or among Jewish people. That principal would say to my father when he came into the store, and I am not bragging, "If I had to find a man with whom to speak proper Hebrew, it would have to be you." My father has a cousin in Israel, ninety-two or ninety three, who left in 1932. He was so learned that everyone respected his knowledge and learning. Another cousin, who lives in the States and was also very accomplished, recalls that this first cousin would write commentaries in the old Gothic German in the margins of the Torah when he had nothing to do. These were people who really did not get a formal education, but his children in the US with PhDs could ask their father anything they wanted to know. He was a walking encyclopedia.

(Leah: What would have happened to you if you had remained there?) I don't know. Maybe I would have been a locksmith. What future was there for a Jewish boy in Poland? Maybe I would have gone to Israel. For Jewish boys to go to Polish schools was expensive and you had to be selected. The Polish simply wanted to stop the flow of Jewish students to higher education. They picked half a dozen, one in this city and one in that, and gave them the right to attend a Polish school. But that didn't guarantee that you could go to a Polish university, so they would go to Israel if they could afford it. In eastern Poland there were Zionists who wanted to go to Palestine, but in central Poland there were a lot of very religious Jews and also the Bundists who wanted to remain in Poland and unite with Polish working class. In eastern Poland there were more Misnagidim, the more enlightened and worldly Jews. So even if you finished high school, you still had nothing to do except be a teacher or a tradesman and it was a bit degrading to be a tradesman. You did not marry a trades person lightly and the two most common were tailor or shoemaker. But then they opened a trade school where you could learn a trade properly. It was slow... you started by bringing the water from the well for a few years... some were a messenger boy and so on for a long time... it was degrading before there were trade schools. You went to school for four hours, mostly courses particularly associated with your trade but also math and science. These schools were already acceptable to Jews who could afford to send their son outside of Shershev as to Pinsk or Brest. I went to Brest and there were two courses, one in carpentry and one in blacksmithing which is mechanics actually. I was in carpentry because it appealed to me more. They merged the Polish trade school with the Jewish high school and thereby raised the level of education. I went there for a year. I wanted to be an engineer and this desire stayed with me for many years and maybe because of this my son became an

engineer. (His wife: “A Jewish mother would say he wasn’t cut out to be a doctor because he didn’t like blood.”) I blame myself then that he didn’t become a doctor. My son was allowed to enter an institution of higher education without taking the exams. He lives in Toronto... he’s into computers now too. He’s very handsome... and quite religious. (looking at his wedding pictures from 20 years prior,)

(Moishe’s list of the 9 richest men in Shershev from other notes:)

1. Yeshia Pinsky, see above. He was the richest by far, in real estate. Tar for tarring the roofs, turpentine. And tar was used if you put a post into the ground, to hold it. He also owned forest land.
2. My uncle, Reuven Kantorwitz, see above. Hardware store also. He was on the same side of the market as Pinsky, with the rabbi’s house in between.
3. Haskel Krugman, president and founder of Hebrew school, 1925. He was the third richest.
4. Sholem and Ruven Aaron Novitch, (the last name could be Aaronnovitch) brothers, see above.
5. Moishe’s Father.
6. Moishe Tuchmachmer, see above. He had a grocery, but he too had partnerships in a horse and a truck and he was in wholesale groceries.
7. Gelman, see above.
8. Moishe’s grandfather, hardware, married rich, mayor to 1939, alternating with Slecovitz, every second year, a gentile. See page 527 and 526,(of the Yitzkor book) Der Magistrate. Empty space with weeds, built house.
9. Maletsky, owner of 6-8 houses, bought pieces 1932, extended, the generator, electricity, electric station, mill.

#### Yitzkor Book Discussion and Life in the Pruzany Ghetto

Moishe has not read most of the Yitzkor Book.

Pruzany had a very vibrant active Jewish community... about ten thousand inhabitants, six thousand were Jews. It had a Gymnasium, which Kobrin, though much larger, did not have. Pruzany deserves great credit because during the Nazi era another six thousand Jews were brought in from the surrounding area. For example, Shershev people were first taken to Antipole and to Drogichin although another hundred or hundred and twenty or so, like my family, managed to come directly to Pruzany. And also Anevka. The people from Bielovezia, about a hundred people, were brought straight there as well. Half of the Kamenetz population was told to go there. That’s another fifteen hundred or so souls. And above all, five thousand Jews from Bialystok, the Germans intended to take them all to P., but then for some reason they stopped and somehow the majority went back after 1941. Some stayed because they preferred being in new place and others because they couldn’t afford a horse and buggy to take them back. As I was saying, Pruzany deserves great credit because the Jewish community and the Judenrat welcomed them all, gave them a roof, not delicacies of course, and a portion of bread, even if they couldn’t pay for it. The Pruzany Jewish community responded to the appeals of the



Judenrat. It wasn't like this everywhere, for example not Lodz or Warsaw. It's possible that the burden was heavier in other places. Warsaw had four hundred thousand Jews to begin with. So to absorb just as many would have been difficult. Maybe it was because Pruzany was smaller it was easier to control... whatever reason. They made everyone welcome and protected most everybody's life with the same passion and dedication. For example, in the late fall of 1942 when nine Jews escaped the second slaughter, they came to Pruzany and somebody outside the ghetto noticed nine Jews sneaking into the ghetto. The ghetto had a fence around and was guarded at the gates. So you could penetrate the fence at night, or even sometimes during the day, if you knew how to go about it. Those nine souls, one of them a woman, knew how to get under the barbed wire. But somebody noticed them and reported it to the police and they came the following day and demanded the nine people back. And the Judenrat tried so hard... they offered them anything they wanted as the price for these nine, but there was no go. I know this story because the girl amongst them was the daughter of the druggist from Shershev and the son of one of the important people in the Judenrat was madly in love with her. He made his father not leave a stone unturned... to pay any price. And of course they were executed. And everybody knew how much effort was made. And they did it even though they were not from Pruzany, they were from Shershev, and they would have done it for anybody. Whomever was caught outside the fence, smuggling or whatever was against the German rules, every effort was made to save them and sometimes they could, until they ran out of things to barter. As far as I know, no ghetto managed to protect its inhabitants as fully as the Pruzany ghetto. In my time in the ghetto, which was a year, I cannot recall one Jew who was shot. Death was the exception, until of course the end came, and we were evacuated... then life became cheap. It was the end of the ghetto, period. The president of the Judenrat was Janovitch, to whom I tip my hat. I recall an event about firewood.

How much can you smuggle in to a ghetto of ten thousand so they would bring it in secretly by tearing down fences. Now there were some butchers' slaughterhouses or rather stores within the ghetto that were not being used for anything. They were too cold to live in, to put people into, so the Judenrat decided to tear them apart and distribute the wood to the refugees because they could not afford to pay for the wood. (Leah: So who did pay for wood?) This firewood was given particularly to the refugees from the outlying shtetls who came with nothing and the butchers, some thirty or forty of them, were not happy, but the head of the Judenrat came with the Jewish police and said that if he had to he would do it by force. He made a speech that chastised them for being so selfish. He didn't read it, he just spoke it.

#### Life in Pruzany Ghetto, continued

And the butchers turned around and walked away. He shamed them so much I was overwhelmed... it really was something.

The head of the Judenrat in ordinary life had a yard goods store. People appreciated his leadership and intellect because they elected him the President of the Judenrat. He must have been a well-known personality and in that critical time he proved to be a leader.

### Smugglers in Shershev/ The Bravery of Smugglers to and From the Pruzany Ghetto/ The Liquidation of Drogichin

Shershev was a smugglers' paradise. Smugglers went from Russia into Poland and Germany and into America. (Leah: Does this mean people or goods?) At that time when it was described as a smugglers paradise it was bigger than Pruzany. Shershev Jews were much more colorful and different from those in Pruzany. In Pruzany people were "solid balebatim" which roughly translates as respectable good managers, bourgeoisie. There were no shocking or world-shattering events or people there.

Shershevers had a name, so to speak, and everyone was surprised how come there were some tough guys there and some of those tough guys were able to escape into the forest. Some of those traded with the people in Drogichin. Some of those people, including my uncle Ruven, decided to remain there. And also Chometz. And the contact with those two towns from the Pruzany ghetto was done by people from Shershev. For example, Chaim Malet will tell you that in 1944-42 he became a smuggler between Pruzany and Drogichin. His uncle managed to get a horse in Pruzany. It was a very undernourished horse and probably cost him next to nothing, but at that time you could get out of the ghetto at night fairly safely because the ghetto was not fenced in until winter 1941-42 so you could drive a horse and sled in safely. I was one of those that had to fence it around. Chaim would smuggle, I'm not sure, I think it was yeast from Pruzany to Drogichin and in the other direction he would smuggle tobacco leaves. Unfortunately the peasants realized that the Jews were smuggling. Horses and sleds would run through the villages very fast, but outside the villages they would stop when the horse was exhausted and couldn't run anymore. Then the peasants would come and turn over the sled and find the yeast. They didn't care about the horses because they were undernourished. Chaim was afraid to do it anymore because they could have killed him just as well, but other Shershevers did during that period. Of course, one could bypass villages by walking in summertime, but not in winter. Maybe some of the smugglers snuck into a farmer's barn and he didn't know it or maybe they paid him something. But these tough smugglers were the only people who kept relatives informed between Pruzany and these outlying shtetls.

The Germans divided the Jews in Drogichin into ghettos A and B and had a new policy of not killing them all at once. Everyone wanted to be in ghetto A because in ghetto A they put the workman and tradesman that they needed so people thought they would live longer in ghetto A. And that created friction, you can imagine, because if you were in ghetto B you would be the first to lose your life. So then we found out that ghetto B was liquidated. My aunt and family perished in the second slaughter in ghetto B.

In Drogichin, the Germans had wanted two hundred able bodied men to work. The Shershever refugees in Drogichin were the first ones who were sent away to the Germans. Before he left, my aunt's husband and family were in ghetto A. At first she was allowed to remain in ghetto A, but then she had to go into ghetto B because of course he and the other two hundred men never returned. It's not really clear whether they were

taken to work or just taken out of town and machine-gunned. A month or two later, the Germans came in and finished off ghetto A. It was the Shershevians who were originally the only ones who would dare to go in and out without permits. If they had been caught on the road between Pruzany and Drogichin they would have been shot.

In general Pruzany was a prosperous little town. The Judenrat bribed their way until the last moment.

### The Name Shereshevsky

In my time there were no people with that last name in Shershev, but there were many people with that name in Russia. All of them would have come from the region. There were a lot of writers with that name, pages and pages, in a book in a Jewish library in New York City. In the Polish encyclopedia Shershev at one time had ten thousand inhabitants. If it had been a normal world and we could have dug into Shershev history, who knows what we might have found. And those that survived didn't care because we were busy healing our wounds. And if it were not for the Holocaust, I probably wouldn't have looked into the Shershever story.

### Moishe's Grandmother's Favorite Stories

She is the one who told me about the Untern Dul.

Another story... there was a very rich man, Tuchmacher, who made material, would invite the whole community every Saturday afternoon for tea. Everyone in Shershev would go, have tea, and then leave and go home to make room for the other people. And she would treat everyone with tea after dinner on Shabbes.

And I remember another story about a bear's fat. Somebody was sick and the bear's fat cured him. I don't remember if they put it on his body or he ate it or what. There were bears in those days, not in my time, though a few came back before the war, but she was talking about bears roaming. Something about the story I don't remember, but it wasn't kosher... but the rabbi permitted it. She remembered this from maybe 1870 because she was born in maybe 1860.

My cousin, who was born in 1904, tells the story about his grandfather and he being in the forest making shingles. They found something like a puddle near a tree. They didn't know what it was, it looked like vomit. The non-Jews there ate it and said it was the milk of a moose.

So much has been lost. My grandmother's brother had been a registrar and had these old books. The books were given to my mother and we kept them until 1941 when we were driven out. I am sure that everyone was there - those were the records of the entire Shershev Jewish community. I am sure that they were thrown out or used as spare paper. There were no records left in Shershev after the war. Shershev passed through too many hands.

## Languages in the Area

We called the language Goyish. It was White Russian, but not pure. The accents were different a hundred kilometers away. We had an entirely different word in Shershev than in Drogichin (80 kilometers away) for stove. They say “put it on the choopke” and we said “habela” or “hoybin”. (Leah: Even the Shershev words are idiomatic: Both the old and the new dictionary lists “horbe” and “oyven”. My best guess is that choopke came from the same root as pit, hole, destruction--as in horbn, the Hebrew word for Holocaust/destruction.)

The peasants who came into town - what were they? You see we were almost on the border ... only fifty kilometers south was Ukraine... the Germans didn't want a White Russia, they wanted only a Ukraine, because the Ukraine collaborated with them. So the Germans divided the area by language (Ukraine vs White Russia).

*End of first period of working with Moishe. Post Stroke Interviewing Begins*

Questions: (Based on re listening to prior 4 tapes)

Was there only one fire station?

Yes. It consisted of a building built of wood - six inch thickness. Hall inside with chairs, of course, and a stage. All the performances in the town took place there and public gatherings. Otherwise it was empty. In the corner were water barrels.

Do you know of Aron Abromov Itzak Nitzberg? (He was my grandfather.)

Yes. There was Moishe Nitzberg. He was a harness maker. He had three girls, the oldest, older than I, was Chaya; the second was around my age- Raizl; Sora who was younger than I. His wife I knew, she was a Shershevian. Her father went once to the States. He was one of those many men who went to the United States, worked, and then came back and bought a nice brick house. He had an orchard near the center and he enjoyed working around it. There was never any talk of selling it. It was not the same orchard as the one near the priest.

Where was the promenade?

From here to there... it was a Jewish street. We would not walk there at night because there was a part where you had to walk on timber... a walkway suspended in the air... you wouldn't make it at night. We would walk there Saturday morning or noon...out to the end of the village, where you picked up a piece of the road and then the timber started.

Was the doctor here by the grocer a Jewish doctor?

Yes. He came here because he could not find another place. There weren't any doctors in Shershev or for twenty miles around. He had a standard education which became more with practice than schooling. He became a doctor just before

Pilsudski died in 1935, because after that it was nearly impossible for a Jew to become a doctor. He came to Shershev about the same time that Pilsudski died. He came as a single man, available I guess you could say. The druggist's wife was a very smart woman and she made sure that the "boitchkel" came in often enough to see her marriagable daughter, Mira was her name, and before he knew it there was a wedding.

The dentist was a woman, she was the sister of the druggist and if I haven't got any teeth it is because of her. Her name was Baumreiter. She moved to Pavel Satir's house. He was a local goy. He too went to America. He and Goroshka were the only two non-Jews who lived near the marketplace. With a bit of money one could be comfortable in Shershev. He saved up money and he bought a good brick building in Shershev... a nice brick home. He was an older man in my day and when the Bolsheviks came they nationalized the house, they kicked her out and she rented, there most likely. They were quite comfortable. The dentist, she was an old maid so to speak, but she finally got married in her later years. She used to have trouble with her eyes. And oh so many times she used to put in the needle just to kill the nerves and she could never find the opening - ach!

### Lola

Lola was the druggist's younger daughter (and the younger sister of Mira) and I must say she was the most beautiful creature that God ever created. She looked like her mother. She had the name - that she was the best looking girl not just in Shershev but in Pruzhany too. Not so tall... not dark hair... oh my, you know its hard to describe her sixty years later, but that every male was in love with her, I have no question. She was a nice girl and she was the druggist's daughter and they were the only Jewish family that spoke Polish. Until about 1931 or 1932 they spoke Russian and we used to say in Russian to tease her, "beautiful Lolitchka... take a look at her" which was making fun of the way her mother used to say to her "Lola, take a look at this...".

She died when she was about sixteen or seventeen in Pruzhany. She was a fast runner. When they came for the group in Shershev, hers was one of the few refugee families who were left out... her brother-in-law was a doctor, so they didn't kill them. (The women and children actually went in a wagon when they left Shershev.) She went to Antopol and then to Drogichin. They remained there while my family moved to Chomsk. Sixteen hundred were slaughtered in Chomsk the month before we came and we took the empty houses and the gardens... potatoes were still in the ground.

In the final slaughter of Drogichin she saved herself, I must say she was very athletic. And she ran from Drogichin to Pruzany with eight other people (See Tape 3 story of Pruzany ghetto). The group of eight men and Lola made it to the ghetto, but somebody informed the Nazis about them and the Nazis insisted they be delivered. No matter how hard the Judenrat tried, they could not protect them. They took them all together and put them in jail on the Christian side. What didn't the ghetto offer for them!! It came from above that this was the only group of people that couldn't be bailed out. I don't know if

the decision by the Nazis was local or from the regional office. The chief got stubborn and insisted upon punishing them. In Pruzany there was one of the Judenrat, I don't remember his name, he was very comfortable, I think he was a doctor... there were a few doctors in Pruzany... his son had fallen in love with Lola. The Judenrat member's son pressed him to get Lola released... he tried for a week but couldn't do anything. ( Leah: In some notes Moishe I have the impression Moishe said she was pregnant. Also that she had a more agreeable personality than the older daughter Mirra who married the Jewish doctor. Currently, Moishe says she was not pregnant when I checked back with him. It is not on the tape, just in my notes.)

(Leah: Lola is an unusual Jewish name.)

Lola is derived from "Michael". It is a biblical name... her Hebrew name would be Mikhala. You have to understand that Shershev was very religious. And they named their older daughter Mira which is close to Mary.

### Nahum the Toyber

This was a long street (see map)... two miles, all farmers. And there were three Jewish homes at the end. One was Nahum Hoffman. He was a blacksmith and he lived at the end of a Goyish street and they needed him very much. He was as deaf as I am. He was interested in reading the newspapers. He was referred to as "Nahum the Toyber". Everybody knew who he was... he was the blacksmith.

His son was in the Bolshevik army and survived and married a Gentile...he is dead now. (There were three Jewish boys who were in the Russian army. A few died in the Polish army or maybe the Germans picked them out as Jews.) They had a son and he went to Israel.

### Hafgesel

It should really be pronounced as "Hoifgesel". It was one of the poorest regions of the area. It had little streets... it was behind the Cold Shul. Shershev was surrounded on three sides by bogs and this street was already in the bogs. A long time ago the fire station was in that vicinity. That was one of the old streets... it was very swampy and very wet, you couldn't dig a basement.

### Tourist Pamphlet

(Leah had purchased over the web a Russian or Belarussian pamphlet on Shershev translated into English for her by Isaak Kobylansky, and is asking questions related to its contents.)

A village headman directed a village, like a mayor, but not much authority. Shershev was under the Russians for a hundred and fifty years more or less. They tried to Russianize it. They succeeded, the population did not speak Polish, or Russian either... they spoke Belarussian. For example the police were sent in (there were five of them in

Shershev and the chief), originally they were all Poles along with the teachers, until the Russian occupation. (The trees that the boys climbed that he mentioned in an earlier tape were linden trees.)

According to the pamphlet, there was (in the 1500's) a palace on Linden street... where was Linden Street? Moishe says that he does not remember a Linden Street in his day, or a palace.

### Slaughter House

I was six or seven years old when they built the slaughterhouse. Before they had a slaughterhouse, I suppose they killed meat in a field or a garden. They had to cover it so that the blood would not show on the surface of the earth. The rabbis would come to the slaughterhouse to inspect it. I remember the stomachs of the animals huge bags, flies all over...ugh. I would go there as a kid, to me it was interesting. Not too many kids went there: it was outside of the main part of the town.

### The Grosse Shul and the Destruction of the Cold Shul

The story goes that when the Shershevian Jews living in the USA learned that Cold Shul had burnt down(around the time of/ during World War One), they sent in twenty thousand dollars from the United States. By that time the Shershevian community in New York was bigger than in Shershev. Originally, the money was sent for repair but the big drawback of the Cold Shul was that it couldn't be warmed up in winter. The Jewish community discussed what to do with the money... should they fix the Cold Shul or build a new one right in front. The money really wasn't enough to fix the Cold Shul so they decided to build a new one, closed in all around and with stoves. (Some of the Christian churches in Europe were not big, but once they built cathedrals they tried to heat them.) For warmth, this new shul was brick instead of stone and the walls were built twice as thick.

The Bolsheviks ransacked what remained of the old shul and they tried to pick out the good bricks and carted them away. Early on there was a brick factory in Shershev which was written about in the Brest papers.

The whole community could get into the Cold Shul when there were four hundred and fifty thousand Jews...two hundred and fifty years ago. When I saw it after it had burned, the decorations and paintings were already gone. The ceiling remained. In the center there was a stage (called a bimah) and two huge columns that supported the ceiling. After the fire, the bimah was gone but the two pillars were there. When I was eight or ten it was dangerous... pieces of cement used to fall there. It is hard to imagine how huge it was and cavernous inside. As children we would go inside and try to get to the top and couldn't. It was about fifty yards wide. During the war, the Germans made it into a horse stable.

(Leah: This Cold Shul my father remembered for its decorative painted flora and fauna on the ceiling and walls and the decorative wrought iron fence outside--though he left

Shershev at age 10. Imagery of a visual sort was not encouraged in the Jewish religion in those days, so both the size and the style of the building, sometimes referred to as stone and sometimes as with marble, were deeply impressive to Shershevians, and certainly to my father even at his age. He claimed that he remembered exactly the design of the wrought iron.)

### The General Question of the Number of Shuls

There was a whole street with shuls only on it in the town of Slonim, a town with a famous Yeshiva. One right after the other.

Why so many shuls in Shershev? When a group wasn't satisfied with a particular shul, they got together maybe a hundred members and said ok we will build another shul.

All shuls had the same philosophy. How did a person choose? One story is that a man didn't like his neighbor so he said, come on let's build our own shul.

There were six shuls in Shershev but only one rabbi. Some people decided to bring in a separate rabbi, a "Shershever Yaisha", (a good, respectable, honored man).( aleph, yud, shin, hey ) The older people said "why"? How is he going to make a living? So some people decided to get rid of the second rabbi - they supposedly cut off a pig's head and hung it on his door. He went away. In my life there was a rabbi and also a dyan who was like a rabbi. This happened many years before my time.

The rabbi lived near the Rove or Rabbi Shul and that's where he used to go on Saturday. We used to go there too. The other shuls used the system of minions. You don't need a rabbi to worship. Anybody who thought they were secular didn't go, like the druggist.

### Area Where My Father's House Was

There was a house of Belke Mordicai Winecor, a slim older girl. Next to the bridge. They sold herring in the marketplace. She was older than I was....

I left Shershev when I was eighteen. (Does this mean he left Pruzany Ghetto for Auschwitz then? At another place does he say he was fourteen at the start of the war?)

### The Jail

Who got sent to jail for what:? For three days, short times, as in not reporting for war. If a son was the only breadwinner in the family, he wasn't drafted according to the czar's law, but six days in a year he has to donate to public work. If he doesn't show up they send him to jail for two or three days. Or if somebody was drunk they kept him overnight. Most of the drunks were non-Jews. There were a lot of Christians living outside of the town who came in to do their shopping.

It was mostly goyim (gentiles) who were in jail. It wasn't such a bad place. I remember there were windows you could look in, a wooden cot of some sort. The police were not



Jewish. There was a judge and a court and a lawyer. The last two or three years it all disappeared. If there were domestic fights they sometimes did not report them because they were embarrassed. I am not sure what happened. (Leah: Also recall there were Jewish religious/communal law governance bodies.)

### My Second Cheder Teacher and His Murderous Brother

(Map #16b) Yankel Berl Eisenstein - he and his wife were hiding near Shershev for a couple weeks before the end of the war... they escaped from the Pruzany ghetto. I don't believe it, but somebody told me. He was a son of Chaim, I don't remember... I wasn't around at that time... but he was the son of a professional melamed (teacher). He was also handy, he made violins that were very expensive and he played violin which was beautiful. And he taught himself by ear. In fact they say he used to make shoes for his family, he didn't buy them. It was a capable family.

He had a brother, may he forgive me, he would be a hundred years old now. The Poles wanted to get rid of him... he got an application for the States. The American consulate wanted a letter of good behavior from the police for every person. He didn't have a particularly good record. He was arrested for murder. (He came from a good home, his father had a very good reputation and his brother too. They used to say that in his house there wasn't a piece of furniture that he didn't make. Everything... tables, chairs, couches, his bed.)

He murdered a man, a Goy (Gentile). He had a Jewish partner and they were well-known in the town. The man who was murdered came from a village and came into the house at night and got him out of his bed. He knew there was a couple hundred dollars there because either the murderer or the partner had just come back from the United States. They didn't give him the money he asked for and he shot him and he ran away. The robber lived for a couple of hours so he told the police the whole story. The murderer had a reputation so it wasn't hard. He was in jail and then he got out because the only witness was the man's wife and that was not good enough. He had an advocate and he got off. Before I forget, he used to smoke cigarettes and they were expensive, but he wasn't generous with them. He would smoke a few and then, since he was embarrassed not to pass them around, he would throw them away, so people would pick them up. So the police were so anxious to get rid of him that they gave him a good report. I met him once many years ago, but stories of him were floating around all the time. I pretended I didn't remember him. In America he behaved himself, he became a photographer, I don't know what kind. He was about twenty years older than I am. When he left I was about twenty years old. He was about thirty-five when he did the murder. His first name was Gedalia. The murderer's brother was my teacher.

### Immigration from Shershev

There were a number of people who gathered in New York after the war. There was half of Shershev in New York. I remember there was a picture of a wedding there and my parents looked at it and could name every person in the picture. In the Jewish section of

the New York public library I read that Shershev had five and a half thousand Jews at one time. With the big immigration from 1880 to 1920 it ran down to nothing... there were about one and a half thousand Jews at the time of the Second World War and maybe twice as many a hundred years before that. The big figure comes from before 1795 when the Polish border was closed.

### Schools /Cheders

I was in Eisenstein's school for a couple of months, from age 4 to age 5. Then I went to the Hebrew school. (Number 18)

### Pinkus Kronstat, window pane maker

(19) His daughter might still be alive in Israel. His profession was putting panes in the windows. I remember there was a fire in the Hebrew school. They put it out, but he stood there with his fists clenched because people took out the panes of glass and broke them. I shouldn't say anything about a dead man.

### My First Cheder Teacher

(16a) There was a long table with a couple dozen boys sitting around it. The rabbi held a rod as thick as two fingers. He sat at one end and took a flick of the rod (whip) and never miss aimed. It would burn like anything. We were afraid of him.

But he was not the first one. At the first cheder I went to my teacher was Kapple Pochenka. He never hit anybody, he never yelled at anybody. It was customary to stay at the first cheder for about six months. I remember like now when my mother and my grandfather came to pick me up the last time. He sent all the kids away except me and he gave me a chair and he took a chair and he sat down and he said "read"... I was only four and a half and I didn't know anything. He gave me bigger size print and somehow I felt better with that and I read and suddenly change started falling from over my head onto the table. And I thought, but I wasn't sure, that it was my grandfather's hand that had disappeared because my grandfather was more like my father to me because my father was living in another village because he had been given a lessee's liquor license for the other village because he was a war veteran. My grandfather said "An angel, a malach, has come because you are a good student." I didn't know the alphabet when I came but I was reading from the Siddur. (Daily Prayer Book.)

Then I went to the second cheder (Eisenstein). This was near the bridge. He was the teacher with the whip (osier - made with a willow vine). He was a nice man, a strong man, but I was afraid of him.

### The Hebrew School/Classmate/Death From Food After Liberation

(18) There were many teachers there. There was a local teacher Barkin. He survived Auschwitz and I met him in Washington.

Oh yes, didn't we have homework!

The principal's name was (Yud Shin) I.S. Becker. There was one tough guy who he kept after the lessons. He kept this student an extra hour and pushed him... almost threw him.. into the corner and the boy wouldn't give up but slowly, slowly. The boy was Dovid Lebersteyn, Yankel Leberstein's cousin. He was in grade 7 when I was in grade 3. He never really straightened up, he was a chance taker, he would break into a garden. But he didn't pick on people, he was basically ok. He survived Auschwitz. After the war he started talking to me in Polish and he said he was from Shershev. At first we didn't recognize each other, but then we did.

He survived Auschwitz, but only for a few days, and I think it was because he ate too much. There was no amount that you were able to eat and if you didn't pay attention to this you didn't survive. Quite a few people died from food - we got parcels from the Red Cross and it killed half of us.

There was a very poor experience a few days earlier, before liberation. They took all the French and Dutch and Danish and Belgian prisoners, all kinds of non-Jews, they took them all away we didn't know where, to another camp. So the Jews lived in Malthusen so some person rushed to be the first, thinking maybe there will be a piece of something on top of his soup. He would push a bit in the line. The guard would say "You stupid Jew, what are you pushing for... I have orders at nine o'clock to take you all to the bathhouse."

Before, two weeks earlier, they took six hundred sick men from the hospital and put them into a bathhouse and boarded up the doors so they were airtight. And they were mostly non-Jews, Russians, Poles, there were three Germans, and they turned on the gas. There was no higher authority. The commandant was actually a Nazi. I remember lying in my bunk and thinking why did they waste two years to plan to gas us now. I fell asleep and I heard a train with all people I knew and I said where are you going and they said they were going to Switzerland. I wake up, it was a beautiful dream and I think now that I won't have to go and die... Nine o'clock came and the new shift came and the old shift came back to their beds and I am waiting cause they have to get up and they go to sleep and the next morning they wake up and go to work. And the same thing again.

(You said Mathausen, weren't you in Auschwitz?) Auschwitz was evacuated the 17th of January and then we went to Gusen...? then to Mathausen.

(Ok, so now we're up to the Polish school?) Oh, I would rather deal with the Germans than the Poles, I hate to say it.

There is no anti-Semite like a Pole. Prime Minister Shamir said "The Poles get it in their mother's milk."

### The Polish School

(20) I finished four classes in the Hebrew school and then I went to the Polish school but I didn't know any Polish. The population was White Russian and they spoke White Russian, Belarusian. I went into the fourth grade in the Polish school and I didn't know what world I was in. My father sent me to the Polish school because we lived in Poland and he thought we needed to know Polish. I don't know where my father learned Polish, but it was rare in Shershev. He didn't send me to Polish school because he was my father, but because he was an educated man. He knew Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, and German. I had hoped to go to Israel. People were still going to the US but it was very difficult. I graduated too late (in terms of the war) to do any of that. My uncle went to Israel from Shershev in 1928 as a seventeen year old boy. I planned to go to university in Israel. Right after the First World War people were able to go. In those days it was very difficult to get papers. It was too late in 1922 for his brother to go to America so he went to Cuba. They didn't know the language when they came.

There were about a hundred and twenty-five Jewish students in the Hebrew school and about two hundred and fifty in the Polish school. They used to say for girls it didn't matter if they knew to peel potatoes with the sharp end of the knife... but with my father it was a different story ... my sister was a year and a half older and she went. In fact my father would do a good deed for the Jewish community and write applications for the Polish government.

(Leah remembers her father telling her that his rabbi's daughter taught him the Roman alphabet so that he could address letters from his mother to his father, who had gone ahead to Canada with some of the children. He felt that knowing the Roman alphabet gave him a leg up when he arrived there.)

I went to Polish school until I finished seventh grade. So I learned Polish there. As soon as the lesson was over you had to be prepared for the pushes and the kicks from the other kids, and particularly it was difficult when they had religious education once or twice a week for the Catholic kids and the Eastern Orthodox kids. As soon as they burst out of classes they used to take it out on us... unavoidable, expected.

### Two Gypsy Families in Shershev

(Some of what follows is extrapolated from Moishe's prestroke Chapters 1-7 in his book, because his version on the tapes pertaining to the map was so difficult to make sense of as to who did what. Thus, wanting to leave some of his tape language intact means that essentially some aspects of the story are repeated twice below)

There was a family of gypsies. All the goyim were afraid of them... fortunately they didn't pick on Jews. The goyim used to go into a Jewish restaurant (???) after church and sit down and buy the gypsies drinks and not a Sunday went by when there wasn't a fight with the goyim, rocks etc.

Fourth class wasn't bad, but in my fifth class there was a gypsy, Vladik. First of all, everybody knew he was a gypsy and not to step on his toes. And he was a big cheese too

and he wasn't particular if it was a Jew or not a Jew. So I got an idea. I used to take rolls to school and I noticed he looked at them jealously. So once I gave him a piece. Whenever I thought he was going to kick me or push me, I would offer him a piece of roll and it didn't take long before he was my defender. Without the gypsy I wouldn't have survived and because of me the other Jewish boys survived also. They did not bother the girls. The gypsies would have lived if they could in the Jewish neighborhood in town. They wouldn't dare to live in the Jewish neighborhood, but if Jews happened to be on a street with Gentiles they could be beaten up. But the gypsies were the bosses, the balebotin. They lived in Shershev on Kaminetska Street.

There were two gypsy families in Shershev. Two young gypsy fellows came before the First World War. The younger of the two was Jan. He died. Their last name was Tsubrevitch. They married local farmer's daughters, but despite dowrys were also in the horse "business".

One, Vavros, had a very bad name. He had eight or ten or twelve sons, and one daughter. They were always together and if there were two or three or four Gentiles, the gypsies didn't spare them. The Gentiles were afraid to hit back. Vavros was shot in the middle of the marketplace in 1929.

How it started... Vavros was seen in the marketplace in a stolen horse and buggy. Policemen were summoned and asked to see his horse passport. Vavros jerked the reins and tried to get away. The policeman became irate and fired and killed him. The fear was so great. There was one younger son of Vavros, if he was my age that was alot and I was six years old and he was smaller than I was. The five Shershev police couldn't do anything with him. They were afraid and so Vavros and other gypsies escaped. Shops were closed and farmers left town immediately. The sons looked for the police to take revenge for their father's death. Threatened to burn the village down. Therefore the Pruzhany police were called in. They were 3 to 1 against the gypsies, but still the Shershev fire brigade assisted them out of fear. Moishe's mother and he and his sister put their coats on in preparation for if they had to leave their house in a hurry. But the gypsies did not burn down the town. The policeman who had shot Vavros never reappeared, perhaps having been transferred. It was to one of Vavros's youngest sons that Moishe gave his roll pieces that first year in the Polish school--until the son flunked out or left.

The police started looking for Vavros, so Pruzany sent in twenty-five men, a couple wagons full. (They had two jails.) The Pruzany police went straight to the house of the gypsy and they were sitting in the house. They said they were going to burn Shershev down because the Shershever people did not protect their father. The father was driving in the marketplace on market days, which were Monday and Tuesday, with a stolen horse. A gentile recognized him and there was a policeman who said "That's my horse, you stole it." The policeman tried to stop him but the gypsy whips the horse, the policeman pulled the trigger, and the policeman disappeared right away. It was summer but my mother put on her coat in case they were going to burn down the town. That was the first time I saw a man in irons on his hands and his legs. And the Shershever fire

department was following them. They took him to Pruzany and put him in jail. They calmed down a little bit and they let them out and it was “shah”, still. Then they disappeared.

The other gypsy family was older and had two sons, the older John and the younger son, I can't remember his name, who could dance. The Jewish girls couldn't stop talking about him and how he could dance. Who wasn't afraid of them. (Why weren't you afraid when you gave him the roll?) I took a chance when I gave him the roll. I gave him a piece of roll every day. I remember once he had a pocket of apples and I asked him for one and he said “if I give one to you I'll be hungry.” I spoke to him in White Russian which was the language of the streets. I learned it on the streets. Nobody spoke Russian in Shershev, just White Russian.

### The Horse Thieves

They used to bring them to the Polish border and Shershev was on the final Polish border when Poland was destroyed in 1795. They used to bring them to the Russian border and from there they would go to the States legally. (????)

### The Memorial Effort for Nineteen in Shershev--see Moishe's circle, west center of map

When the Germans came into Shershev they rounded up nineteen men, eleven Jews and eight goyim and they took them behind the shul. They were accused of protecting Russian soldiers. The story goes that a Russian plane landed. I don't know how they chose the nineteen but they took them out of their houses and took them all around the town and shlepped them to the marketplace, across the marketplace into the front of the demolished pieces of the Groisse Shul and they clobbered them to death. And they buried them right in front the shul, right near our house.

(Moishe is pointing to a circle to the west center of the map where these people were listed by Moishe to memorialize, but he doesn't recall all the names. What is written on the map is as follows: ) These were the ones that were killed in Shershev, before the German evacuation of Shershev. WWI? or WW2? Moishe tries names: Gedalye Chdritsky; another man (?name) and his two sons; Yakov Meyer; Itsak Jacov Kamininker; Berl Zatotsky; Dulman; After they were beaten to the ground and were unconscious, they each got a bullet to their head.

Chdritsky was a short man, maybe five-two, a protruding stomach a bit fat. He's dead already, I don't want to speak about him, I didn't know him well. He was buying from farmers and trying to sell to Jews and trying to sell to farmers, he hung around with not so complementary not so nice an element, like thieves.

### Yankel Maier Kaminker

He was a nice person, he was a driver of a horse and buggy, known as a droshke, to Brest which took twenty four hours round trip if the road was good, about eighty kilometers.

They were field roads. In the fall or winter he would carry a sled and then he had to come back with the sled or if the weather changed, he had to load the merchandise from the wagon onto the sled.

### Berl Zatotsky

Zatotsky's father was a blacksmith and so was he. He wasn't married, he was a young man. Average size and height, on the skinny side as blacksmiths usually were... they worked hard. His father was a "koch lefler" (a "stirring spoon") in city affairs. (This is a reference to someone who is into everything...knows everything that is going on.)

### Dulman

A middle-aged man of fifty or fifty-five who looked seventy-five, a shoe-maker but had poor skills. In the summertime, he built roads six or seven days a week. I don't know very many shoemakers in Shershev who would hire themselves out. Maybe he liked it better than staying home with his wife there.

These nineteen were picked up because they were in the pastures looking at the cattle and they rounded them up there. They took Chdritsky out from his house. I don't know why that was, whether they saw someone going into his house. This happened in 1941. They let them go and they said to them "You'll go to your Jewish friends and tell them to give up their weapons. If you don't we will kill you." The war started on a Sunday morning and this was the following Tuesday or Wednesday. At the time there was no Judenrat, so there was no organized body to talk with to negotiate with the Germans. They were marching through the city without a stop twenty-four hours a day. Must have been the whole of Germany was marching there, on their way east.

### Moishe Shockerman

He or his son was a bus driver from Shershev to Pruzhany and the son was killed...

### 21 The Judenrat

I don't know exactly how it was organized. The Germans let them know that they wanted a Judenrat and they should submit names. The Germans probably approached the Christians first to get a list of names. I had an uncle, Rueben Kantorowitz, he came to negotiate with my father, his brother, to accept a position. People wanted to join but they were afraid, they didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing. My grandfather finally accepted.

The Judenrat included my grandfather, my uncle, Haskel Krugman the doctor, (the pharmacist had died already), Yankel Meyer Kabizetsky, a storekeeper who sold novelties and small stuff like candies, shoelaces, socks. He was chosen for the Judenrat because he was an intelligent man. He and my father, who was next door, would quote passages from prayers to each other. The son-in-law of Yudel Zaretsky was also on the

Judenrat. The wife had just finished high school, which made her a learned girl; she was pretty and young, maybe twenty-two. He was not from Shershev and was quite a bit older. He looked maybe twice as old as she. He was a carpenter. (See Moishe's book for a more detailed description of the ten men chosen for the Judenrat. It also said that Germany attacked Russia in 1941.)

So far the people mentioned were in the more affluent part of town. Farther away from the marketplace there was a bookkeeper in a mill by the name of Josef Rothenberg. He was from Chelm and was also on the Judenrat. He would keep us awake all night telling stories. Also Yosel Pomerantz, a storekeeper, he looked distinguished and had a very nice appearance...six feet tall, that's tall for a Jew. I don't know how much of learning he had. He was not exceptionally learned, but he knew a bit of Polish. He was more respected by the goyim...he looked respectable. Maybe the rabbi was also on it, Haskel Krugman. If I were picking, I would have picked Moishe Tuchmacher. He was wealthy. In 1857 one of his ancestors established a clothing factory in the town. Who else would I have picked? A person of prestige and success. It was already a time when learning didn't count for as much in the town as money or business.

### 23 The Gelman Family

Meyer Gelman might have been on the Judenrat. He was a good and rich tailor. He always had two or three apprentices and his wife was a seamstress. Non-Jews used to go to him. He was the assistant to the Burgermeister. (A Christian and a Jew every year would divide the leadership of the town. My grandfather was the mayor in town every second year.)

Meyer Gelman's child Bunye was a girl, she might have been thirteen or fourteen. Moishe was one of my best friends, about a year older than I. Meyer was the only Jew that I ever saw with a beautiful flower garden. In their yard there were a lot of flowers and they grew grapes which covered the front windows. I liked to sit inside their house in the rain and watch through the vines on the windows.

I don't know what happened to Moishe. We used to dream and talk idealism, about the future, about Israel. My mother would say "You see our whole house, if somebody would fill it up with gold, I wouldn't let you go." She guarded me, that's why I am safe today... everyday three or four Jews were killed.

### When Was the Judenrat in Operation?

It took the Germans about a month or six weeks to run through Shershev. They entered June the 22nd, (1941) it was Sunday; two days later, the 24th, they were already in Shershev. The Judenrat was organized in July and we were driven out to Antipole August 24th. It took two days. And from Antipole, overnight, we dispersed to Drogichin and Chomsk, etc. (Drogichin was untouched but eighteen kilometers from there was Choomsk which was completely slaughtered. Many of us made our way to Pruzhany eventually. In January of 1943 (check year), the ghetto was liquidated and February 2nd



we arrived in Auschwitz. It took the Germans about a month or six weeks to run through Shershev.

(from Moishe's book - 2,600 slaughtered in ghetto in 1942 ... don't know where this fits.)

### The Cold Shul

Nobody knew the secrets of where the shul came from, but people started looking into things and they discovered that Queen Bona built a bunch of stores called the Rat Komen. That became the marketplace people thought. I would never dare to approach my father and ask if he knew the story of the shul. As a rule you should respect parents, there was a certain degree of fear. My father never let me say, or sit, or converse... he would say go read, go study. It didn't matter what.

I grew up in Poland and learned Polish and until recently, still corresponded with a Pole, now sixty years later a former inmate of Auschwitz who is 87 or 88 and is blind... he has to look at a human face close up. To be honest I had no sympathy for Poles, in my writing I mention that there was no sympathy for the Poles. But there were scattered ones, I knew three Poles that were really good, really decent people. One Pole who slept in the bunk on top of me (in Auschwitz we had three story bunks) he used to get a parcel every two months and his family must have been comfortable. I was about twenty and he was older, maybe fifty-five or sixty. He slaughtered a pig, his own pig, and for this he was sent to Auschwitz. You were not supposed slaughter even your own livestock. (He lived near Auschwitz.) So the Poles would slaughter cattle in secret. Somebody squealed on him and every two months he would get a parcel, about two kilos of bread. As soon as he got it he would climb up in his bed and get a knife and cut it into slices under his jacket. I would stand on the floor and watch out. Then he would take off his jacket and put all the bread into the jacket. He would tie the jacket up with the sleeves. He would climb down, and he wasn't a young man, and he would give me some bread but he would say "You don't need it so badly, give it to Jews only, not other ethnic folks in the barrack." (Moishe remembers the Polish words that he said this with.) (His number was 8088... Moishe's number was 99347 and his friend Karchinsky was 99349)

Sometimes when I was sick the Kapos would give me a little soup but I don't remember anyone giving me bread and I was very disappointed. Nobody else gave me bread.

You could get packages in Auschwitz, but there was nobody to send the Jews packages.

There was one Belgian Jewish boy who received a parcel that consisted of matzos. I remember I asked him if he wanted to trade the matzo for a piece of bread. He didn't share. He was already married then. Before the war, he was a high school teacher. He was drafted as an officer, he was a Polish aristocrat. His mother was a personal friend of Pilsudsky's mother. Fortunately the Germans didn't know about it. He was an officer in the Polish army and they decided to escape. Went from Poland into Czechoslovakia and

then into Hungary. At the border they were stopped by the Hungarian police and asked who they were and were taken into the police station.

I have between 700 and 850 letters from the one who gave me the bread. He is dead now. After the war he finished medical school and became a surgeon. He found out that a fisherman makes three times as much money as a surgeon in Poland so he applied and they took him as a doctor... a fisherman's doctor. I met him in St Johns – his boat came to St Johns. They were very plain letters because he had to be careful in Poland under Soviet occupation. I would write him every Sunday. I used to be on the road in between and when I had nothing to do I would write him so I wrote more than he did. He was a nice gentleman. The Poles who slept in the same room as him used to call him the Jewish uncle. In the barrack there was a Pole, Vladik Shultz, in charge who would beat people up for no reason and he had an assistant, Sheismeister. Shultz was an anti-Semite like you've never seen one. He used to get a group of Poles together in a room and tell them what they did before the war... throw stones at Jewish stores, at houses, at people. He disliked Jews so he would beat them for any reason. The good Pole ("my Pole") used to scream "I cannot stand the cries of those people, why do you beat them?" Shultz was a murderer for absolutely nothing.

When we marched out of the barracks in the morning, we marched out in groups of one hundred if there were that many in the barrack. In our barrack there were 1200 people. We were divided into hundreds and each hundred was divided into tens. This was to report in the morning to the Kapo. Each Kapo was in charge of one hundred. The Kapos were Jewish; I was beaten by Kapos too. One in ten had to report to the Kapo how many men were there; if not he had to get somebody else. I happened to work in the carpenter shop where there were not too many Jews. The foreman was a Pole, a decent man. When he was counting off the numbers he noticed that 99348 was missing. ... All the Poles in the carpenter shop were very strong. One was exceptionally strong... before the war he worked in a metal factory. While we stood waiting to be counted these people talked and talked every day about how they went fishing, etc. The one Pole who was in charge of the ten, who was an ordinary man, he was very quiet, I didn't know his name... we were all called by the number.

Shevshek was the Polish man who got bread.

I came to Aushwitz as a locksmith. I had been kicked out of school because I didn't have a legitimate passport. I didn't want to steal from the Bolsheviks. I worked in a supply magazine in Shershev and they came to take the passport. They told me to take my passport and go to the police station (#41). In Shershev there were five Polish policeman. After the Bolsheviks came, every government employee was a member of the NKVD. I came into the police station and they asked me for my passport and I said it was at home. It looked so innocent, I was the only one there who had no passport. If people travelled into Shershev they had their passports, but people who lived there, why should they carry their passports? So I went home for lunch, and took the passport back to the police station. The chief of police asked me if I wanted to cooperate. I didn't know what he meant. He asked me "What happened to the fourth pot?" He had received four

aluminum pots and I knew what had happened but I didn't want to tell him. He said, "Don't you work around here?" I said Yes. "Didn't you pocket it for somebody?" No I didn't, I don't know what happened to it. "Give me your passport. Your passport was issued under Paragraph 11, a special paragraph. You can't go farther than 70 kilometers from the border". And since Brest was 43 miles from Shershev, I couldn't go back to Brest where I was going to school. I dropped out of school. This was in 1940. (The pot thing was bogus – it hadn't been stolen, it had been paid for and acquired legitimately.)

The boss of the one business organization lived in my uncle's house. His wife was friends with my aunt and would gossip. The boss was interrogated about why he had these Jewish Kantorowitzes in his employment. My father's youngest brother, around 28 or 29, was the head accountant. This man made my father his assistant, and nobody was hiring. And I was working in the marketing and I wasn't supposed to be anything. I would make out the invoices for the liquor. The official price of a bottle of vodka was eight rubbles and a few kopecky. There was an effort to keep the vodka away from the Russians. This all occurred before the Germans came, when the Bolsheviks were in charge (started in 1939). My sister had been in a Hebrew teachers gymnasium in Pruzany until the Bolsheviks came. She graduated in April 22, 1939, a Friday. That next weekend they took over houses and bikes and the drugstore. After the Bosheviks came, Hebrew was forbidden. They told Pinsky to move out of his house. There was a safe with important papers which they couldn't open. So they got trucks. The Bosheviks came in 1920 but they got kicked out. At that time they were disciplined, with high ideas to conquer Europe. In Shershev, they wouldn't pick a pear without asking. This was under Trotsky. When the earlier invasion of Bosheviks occurred they were defeated and they broke ranks and retreated to Shershev. The Jews were surrounded by Bolshevik horsemen one of whom noticed a woman's gold ring and asked her to take it off. They had already chopped off the finger of another person so she took off her ring and he put it in his pocket. In defeat they simply took whatever they needed. The horses needed feeding, for example, and they took food and money and marched back to Russia. The Poles were gentle people and they didn't take the land that they could have based upon their victory so they gave Kiev back to the Russians. At that point they preferred the Russians to the Ukrainians.

In 1939 the street Mostova was renamed Pierotsky Street, after the Polish defense minister (internal affairs). "Most" means bridge in Polish.

### Recap Soche Bosche Blecker

Soche Bosche Blecker did not live where her store was. You could buy the whole contents of her store for five dollars: barrel herring, caulk, not much more. She was an older lady. I don't know why I smile when I think of her.. the peasants used to like to go to buy herring there. The peasants didn't like to go into some stores in Shershev because they were considered fancy.

Soche Bosche Blecker had a daughter who looked to be at least fifty then. She didn't look too young and she was quite hefty. And there was a son, a Moishe too. (Among the

Jews, Moishe was a very common name.) He got married and I buried him. A good looking fellow with a weak heart. He dropped on the march to Prujany. The son was a tailor and looked well fed. We had to dig his grave. There were six of us and it was big and I remember thinking well, soon it will be over and I'll be dead. We were told to lie down, face down, and I heard a little noise... one shot. He was shot in the upper cheek and it was torn off. He wasn't breathing he was dead already. I suspect that he actually died because of his heart disease. (refer to book where he says it is explained)

### Newspapers

In southern Poland there were plenty of Jews, all the way to Krakov, to Lodz. Polish papers did not come to my house. Two main papers from Warsaw called The Moment and Today, and two papers from Pruzany, The Voice and one other, came to Shershev. The Moment was a rightist, a Shabatinsky Zionist paper. The Hint (Today) was a more leftist paper. The Voice was more left.

#21 The canton owner of the post office, blacksmith too, hardware. Polish employee, mail from Pruzany. Newspaper came from Warsaw to Brest to Baronvitch to Shershev.

### How Moishe and His Wife Ruth Met

Moishe's wife talks about how they first met. He was working on a farm. He had a plaid shirt and an accordion and it was love at first sight. She was twenty... "too young". "Her parents wanted her to go to college; she was accepted at McGill, but she didn't know what she wanted to do. Instead she decided to work in Montreal but she would go back for holidays to her small town of Brockton, Ontario. She met Moishe. Her parents thought he was very good looking, very polite (he gave them the European treatment, pulled out their chair, etc.), but they were concerned about his ability to make a living. It was Pesach and Moishe was coming to the house for the Seder. My father had brought home a whole carp and my mother was not ready to start cleaning a carp. Moishe said he would clean it. There was a shed in the yard and Moishe went with the white shirt with the long sleeves and he cleaned and cut that carp and did not get a drop on himself. Her mother was thrilled. Her father said 'He's a good boy, they'll do fine.' " So Moishe sold the farm and they moved to Montreal. They were in Montreal for six years and he worked seven long days in a delicatessen. They finally moved to Halifax, NB in 1956.

When I went to Montreal, I didn't know what I was doing. I had a partner and after about two years we parted. In Nova Scotia he became an itinerant salesman selling dry goods, clothing. At first I was working with someone from the old country that he knew but then he went on his own for thirty-three years. It was very hard work. "I had a big truck, but before that people used to walk from one village to another to sell their wares. I traveled four or five days a week. My customers would say here my son, come in and spend the night with us. It was small townish, like Shershev. Because I had come from small town life, I could adapt to life there."

### The Polish School Principal Killed a Child

When he left he had the fire brigade and an orchestra. I don't know why he killed a child... I remember it as though a dream. (This is not the story of the cousin of Lebersteyn who threw a child against a wall and almost killed him. This was a Jewish teacher to a Jewish child.) I have no idea how he killed the child but I remember that when he left he left with honors.

Every one of the six shuls had a cheder and maybe there were a few more. You decided which cheder to send your child to based upon loyalties and which was cheapest. You could bargain and if the rabbi was poor enough he would say "yes". The Polish man Leah met in Shershev who remembered being a schoolmate of Moishe's said that there were rich Jews and poor Jews, but on the sabbath all Jews put on their good clothes and walked by the river. Moishe's grandfather used to put on a traditional kapote (long gabardine coat, traditional) for the sabbath; my father didn't.

The cheapest thing in Shershev was wood because the forest was near but I remember that there were two houses in Shershev that did not have wooden floors. (24a) One of the people with the dirt floor was called "the limping one" or the "Chinkele". In that family there was also Tsitl and Abramov Shalom. The mother would collect rags and she gave the rags to her children. There was no man in the family. I was only four or five when her husband died and all I remember is that for Purim he would put a saddle on his back and get down on all fours. He would go very fast, it was amazing.

(24b) The second family with a dirt floor was a "Smatekirer" (rag carrier)... he collected rags over the weekend and then he would clean them and sell them. The family names were Israel Yankev, Yafa, Fagel, Boruch, Kinder

Things were sold on market day, a Thursday. People would come for many miles to buy. There were no cars. Out of the 350 homes in Shershev there were tailors, shoemakers, dressmakers, etc.

(25)Greek Orthodox priest, Galekh or Goluch, with nine daughters, with nine beautiful daughters. They were good looking. The youngest was in my class. He was the pope (priest). Galekh is Christian and Pope is Greek Orthodox. Don't remember his name.

There was not a poor section and a rich section of town, but generally speaking, the richer people had houses closer to the center of town (on the main streets and near the market).

In my time, there weren't too many Jews out in the forested areas. There were some Jews in Staravolia Dorf(2 or 3 families)and Sharpapoli (22 km from Shershev and I happened to be there). Once upon a time there was this man Satya, who died in the first World War leaving behind two sons one of whom had eight or ten children and the other had one son. The one son went to Russia. He was very bright and he became a Communist. He was there all those years and I suppose he was trying to get out.

I remember when I was between eight and ten, two people came to Shershev in a fancy wagon, fancier than a droshkye. In the front was a driver; in the back were a man and a woman and the man was the largest man I have ever seen in my life. The woman would not put you to shame, I remember she was blond. She didn't look Yiddish and neither did he. He had a neck thicker than my middle. In my life I have never seen anyone bigger than this. There was a village twenty two km from Shershev, Popiyalevl, where there was a big Nazi battle. The man was from that town where there were ten or twelve Jewish families. The village was divided into two. There was a crossroad and the Gentiles and the Jews were on opposite sides of it. The couple came to our house, I was about 10, and they noticed the corner where we kept the Torah. My father was actually just going out to collect the monies. The big man was obviously an important Jew from that village and he asked my father if he had a minion and he said "Sure". We found out that among the 10 or 12 Jewish families in his village, they had a minion every morning.

This boy about my age told me the story about his grandfather. One night the gentiles tied the doors closed and set the house on fire. They did not realize that the Jews would be able to get out the windows. The house burned and the roof collapsed. This story happened in the village of ?. The grandfather escaped, went to Poland and got rich. He came back and offered to his cousins that he would pay everybody's debts if they would deed the town to him. The farmers used to come and tell us how good a shot he was... at ten meters he could shoot two boxes of matches and hit both of them. He was killed about a year before the war and I would not be surprised if it was his cousins who killed him. They felt that he cheated them out of their possessions, there was a beautiful home, a factory for candles. His wife wasn't Jewish. He used to go and shoot an animal, a deer or a moose, which was kosher. And then he sent for a kosher slaughterer. Some of his cousins went to Israel.

Were there any crazy people? Yes, how could there be a Jewish town without crazy people.

### Crazy People

Label Lebersteyn was in America. In those days they didn't play around with people, newcomers. He was meshugge and they shipped him out of Shershev, he came to his mother and made messhuge business in Shershev. She didn't want to put him in an asylum I guess. There were asylums, not in Shershev and not in Brisk, but close... I don't remember where. As a kid I remember his mother was a baker... very tasty bread. She would leave him alone in the house sometimes. When he was shipped back from America she kept him in the house for a while and then she let him out. He used to march in the street. He had a brother named Beryl who died in Auschwitz. (26) When he came back from America the Bolsheviks were here and it was well established by then that he was crazy, everyone knew it. When the Germans came he was walking the streets and they stopped him and shot him, and he wasn't the only person shot that way.

There were some other people who moved to Shershev from Poland a couple years before the war. The father was a Hosid, a very elderly man. He had two sons. One son worked

for the father who was a wheel-maker. The other one turned religious and sat all day long in a shul studying. He studied with a certain teacher that women used to go to primarily. He became more and more fixated and eventually he went insane. He used to walk the street one foot ahead of the other (heel to toe). The Nazis told him to stop and he didn't so they shot him.

There was a Jewish girl also. Her name was Malcha. She lived near the river. Her father was Beryl Gichman (sp?). Something went wrong with her and she lost her mind and disappeared. In Shershev if anything happened you knew it right away. She walked into the river. People chased her with sticks to try to get her out of the water. The father's brother was Chaim Gichman. They were fruit sellers. They would go to the farmers and buy the whole crop.

Moishe's most unforgettable character in Shershev was Abrom Abromke. He went to America and was sent back because he was mentally ill. He brought songs that he used to sing such as Alles is of Steam. He had a job with the Gichmans who used to buy all the rags in Shershev. They would take them to Bialystok. So Abromke and another Jewish man who was deaf and dumb would sit together all day long and sew together the rags to make bags and bales. These guys were not sent back at immigration, they were deported. They lived in America for so many years until they were discovered.

In those days, they didn't seem to distinguish between mental retardation and mental illness. (There were plenty of words for lame, deaf, and mute in Yiddish.)

(Moishe doesn't remember anyone in Shershev who was blind.)

### Prostitutes in Shershev

I wouldn't say that there were any prostitutes in Shershev. Pruzhany yes, that I know. When they brought a couple thousand Jews into Pruzhany during the times of the Pruzhany ghetto, there was a girl from Bialystok dishing it out to the chief of police. "You wanted me to make money on my backside."

### People With Red Hair

My grandfather died in the seventies and he had a head full of red hair. According to Moishe there were quite a few people in Shershev with blue eyes and red hair. Not every Jew in Shershev fit the stereotype. For example, the Pinsky family and some of my ancestors (and Leah's paternal great grandfather and paternal grandmother). Celia tells a story about her father going to shul with his father and becoming lost and when he was asked who his father was he said "Der Roite" meaning "redhead".

Moishe says there was no hierarchy of treatment in Shershev based upon skin and hair color.

### Women Who Didn't Get Married

(27) The father, who had a yard goods store, had a daughter who must have been fifty and she never got married. Her name was Sora Esther. The father's store was part of a building that my father bought. She was dependent upon her father for a living. At first his business was in the house so they didn't have to pay taxes. Her father was the best dressed man in Shershev. I cannot remember him without a white shirt and tie. He died on Saturday evening and was buried on Sunday, and on Monday the Jews were expelled from Shershev. We didn't know we were going to be expelled but we knew that people in other shtetls had been so we weren't too surprised. Why didn't she get married? Maybe she wanted to take care of her father, and as time went on, she didn't get younger.

(The leader of the Pruzany ghetto was names Yanovitch.)

### Orphans in Shershev

There was an orphanage in Shershev. I remember a picture when I was five or six. The orphanage was supported by the community or by a committee. In the picture of the orphanage committee there is a young woman who married my father's cousin. She wasn't Jewish. Her father was the richest man in Shershev as far as real estate goes, and was a big donor. She was the only girl in Shershev who was able to travel to Prague to study. She chased my cousin to Israel where my cousin said they had a romance that would have made a beautiful novel.

If parents died, would someone in the family take in the children? Moishe assumes that the orphanages were especially for poor children whose parents were dead and had no relatives with money enough to care for them or parents who were alive but could not afford to take care of their children.

The orphanage was by the river... The children were very poor and undernourished in the photograph. This was the period between the two wars which was a very depressed time. (In those days TB was a death sentence.) I remember a young man who was self-educated and they took him to a hospital in Pruzhany by horse and wagon. When he came home he participated in a discussion group. They were discussing Sholom Asch, a book about fathers and sons. I had not read the book and did not read it until many years later, but I remember that he spoke with so much feeling. He was the only orphan that I knew who came from Pruzhany and died in Shershev.

### Doctors in Shershev

As far as I can remember there was a Polish doctor and he left. And then a Jewish couple came, a handsome man. He came and brought some furniture and he stayed in Shershev two or three months and then they left and another doctor came. This is the one whom the dentist's daughter ran after and didn't let him out of her sight.



### Medical Care in Shershev

If you were sick you went to the hospital in Pruzhany. If you couldn't you stayed in Shershev and waited for the end of the story. There was a feldsher was like a physician's assistant, who didn't know as much as the doctor. He was young and he had children. He charged three zloty and the doctor charged five.

There was no Jewish midwife. People were delivered at home by a cusarke who was a midwife, but she was a Gentile. Her husband was a lawyer, but not a complete lawyer. When my brother was born I was barely seven years old. My grandmother sent someone to bring back a cusarke, but by the time she came, the baby was born. She cut the umbilical cord. There were people who acted like midwives among the Jews to help. She had equipment. She was nice and people listened to her. I don't remember people dying in childbirth, but there must have been.

The average family size was five or six. (There were six in Leah's mother's family and in her father's family there were six also.) There used to be a style in Shershev to go and lie down on the sabbath. (Moishe joked about there being a siren to let you know it was time to lie down.) How long were they supposed to lie down? Moishe giggled and said something that we could not understand. Moishe says that I remember reading a Yiddish book as a child in which a man says on Shabes... I still had my cholent in my stomach,-- i.e. one could nap a long time! (oven cooked casserole with beans? Meat? Put to cooking the day prior. So no cooking took place on Shabbes.

The siren going off on the sabbath was a joke.

### What People Did on Sundays

Sunday was a Yiddish Sunday. You snuck into and opened the store, paid the fine. When I went to Hebrew school it was open on Sunday. When I went to Polish school it was closed on Sunday, but they allowed us not to write on Saturday or holidays. We just listened. I remember the last lesson on Saturday was drawing, the teacher was named Gorofsky... She was talented. One Saturday, in the fourth grade of the Polish school (actually fifth grade age) I went over innocently and asked if we could go home an hour early because there was no point. So she announced that the Jewish kids could go home except for Kantorowitz. I didn't argue with the teacher... you didn't speak back.

### Clothing

I wore men's regular clothing - slacks and a shirt. Had to wear a cap in the Polish school. There were no uniforms for girls. On Shabes, we put on our good clothes.

### Adoption

There was a Jewish couple... he was a hat-maker and she was a seamstress. Her name was Boble de Kop. She had a big head. Her husband was not from Shershev, his name

was Ruchmanas. During the First World War he was a Russian soldier. The Bolsheviks came after him and he said "Leave me alone, I am a soldier from the front." Very socialisticly-inclined and very politically oriented. There was a Jewish boy from Bialystok whose parents didn't have much and so he couldn't finish school. They sent him after a seventh grade to learn a trade from Ruchmanas who was a lazy man. Once they brought in a niece, Rifke, and they adopted her and she would call him Feder (uncle).

### Committee for the Poor

There was a committee who would go every Thursday or Friday to collect money from the balebatim (good managers/people of consequence) to care for the poor. After a while it became a more formal organization.

### The Bath and Mikveh

A huge building. When the Bolsheviks came they took it over. Women took their baths on Thursday and the men on Friday morning, prior to the Sabbath. Thursday night we boys would go over to see the outlines of the females taking their baths. We never knew who it was through the window, but we guessed about it. This was not the mikveh, this was the bath. The mikveh was in the same large room, but not in the same bath as the men used. It was used for purification after menstruation.

### Musicians

Our klezmers did not travel from town to town. First of all, Shershev had an official orchestra, non-Jewish, who belonged to the fire-fighters. They played wind instruments. They used to march in all the national holidays. These musicians were not necessarily firemen.

There was a group of Jewish klezmers but they died out and did not look for new members. There was a group of Eastern Orthodox men who used to play mandolins and guitars and they lived on Staravetska St. and they were not aye-yi-yi, but they were cheaper than bringing in someone from Pruzhany.

My own teacher of music made violins and taught me to play violin. I stopped it when the Bolsheviks came... a misfortune.

### Games

I played chess as a child. My parents wouldn't let me play cards so I had to play cards on the quiet. I played "twenty-one". But since then I haven't had a card in my hands. I played cards for money.

### Library

We had a library with about eight hundred and sixty books in 1920. The library was started by volunteers after the First World War and Moishe's cousin in the US was one of the founders.

### Ornaments

They would make little ornaments, baskets, etc. out of straw, bullrushes, reeds.

### Diminishing Number of Jews in Shershev Area

Around two hundred years ago, Shershev was bigger than Pruzhany. First they smuggled people out of Shershev so they wouldn't be drafted in the czar's army, then they smuggled horses.

The smuggling stopped in 1895. In short, Polish society was pulled apart three times, the last time was 1895. Russia took the biggest part of Poland, and Germany and Austria each took smaller parts. The capital then was Lodz. Krakow, the former Polish capitol, was taken by Austria. Then Poland ceased to exist and the Russians extended themselves as far as Warsaw. Shershev literally disappeared. The population dispersed. When the border was moved, the Jews lost their livelihood and dispersed themselves toward the west. Many decided to go to America. From 1849 there were three and a half thousand Jews and then there was a constant diminishing of the population.

By the time of the Second World War, some people were fortunate to die with a full stomach and some not. Some people literally died in the street because they had nowhere to go and nothing to eat. Ninety percent died because of starvation. In some cities actions (against the Jews) occurred several times, section by section. Moishe remembers that when they took some of the Jews to Pruzhany ghetto (and on to Aushwitz) they borrowed Polish sleds to get to the train station because it was winter. Twenty four hundred passengers a day for four days.

Every family has its own story to tell. One of the prominent members of the community was Haskel Krugman. He was the rich one, as my father used to say he was one of the balebotim. In the 20's he had the idea to open up a Hebrew School.

The library moved at some time. Today it is above the bridge, I think. The orphanage was for a time in the Pinsky house.

### I Remember Nuske nickname for Nathan (sp?)Ochman

Nuske Ochman lived here and he had three husky sons. They were dealing in horses. Have I told you a story about the middle son who was stopped for riding a horse in the middle of the night and the policeman asked for the horse's passport. So the son said I don't have it, I'll go home and get it. The police took the horse to the police stable and they said fine, go home and tomorrow morning bring the passport. He had no choice since the horse was stolen.

So he went home, and instead of going to bed he looked through the pile of passports for dead horses he had collected or paid for and found the one most likely to be compatible. He then decided to go back that night, when the police would be sleeping... And sure enough, the policeman was sleeping in the middle of the floor. So he went to the stable to get the horse and stuffed rags in the horse's mouth (so he wouldn't make a sound) and took him home.

The next morning he took the chosen passport to the police station. The police said, ok, take your horse. ... they took him to the stable and the horse wasn't there. The chief of police understood what had happened and the policeman did too and said, "Well, you won."

#### The Girl Left Behind By Auerbach

His family was against him marrying her because her father was a blacksmith and Auerbach's father had a store. Would you believe there were classes in our little village? They married and four and a half years later... he sent her a ticket. They were married before he left in the village of Krenitsa. He went to Argentina and then to the United States without her. She came four years later when he had saved up enough money. She remained with her parents and hardly went out and the two sets of parents had very little interaction. She was a beautiful girl. I'll tell you the truth, I was interested in her but she was older.

Their daughters both have PhDs. Times have changed... I am sure that their grandfathers couldn't sign their names.

#### The Polasky Family

There was a woman named Polasky, a Christian woman, she lived among the Jews. Sometimes the river flooded and spread out. She was trapped in maybe two feet of water. She had two sons, one a criminal and the other mentally sick. He had no friends so he couldn't have fit into Shershevian society. There is a Russian saying, "And I, poor me, I'll swim away with the river/ like the river." I don't know what she did for money but she did sometimes take in washing. She didn't have a regular job or occupation. I don't know what happened to her husband.

#### 39. The Gichman Brothers

It was a double house. Two brothers, Iser and the younger, Fivel, a short stocky man. Iser walked with a cane. There was nothing wrong with him. His brother had a restaurant and he was having to do a lot with gentile drunks. He used to stay very professional. Big business men in Shershev. They used to buy up schmatniks, odds and ends, rags.

Gichman was a son in law of Winograd. The Gichmans and the Winograds lived in the same double house. The Winograds had relatives in the United States who would send them letters containing money ( "money letters").

There were a lot of drunks in his restaurant because he put up with it until his brother-in-law came in with a cane.

#### Moishe's Last Night in Shershev - Sending the Others Ahead

My last twenty four hours in Shershev I was alone. My parents had left the day before. I thought maybe I would manage to smuggle out. I came out of the hole in the ground that I was hiding in with other Shershevians. There was a house, a blind mother with three sons and her husband was shot by the Germans before. And we used to come there to discuss politics sometimes. The three brothers, Nahum, Yitzok, and Moishe (the middle one was my age, maybe a year older) made their way out of the ghetto the first night. They succeeded in bribing a Polish policeman and they went back and forth about twenty five meters and the Pole said he didn't see them. Later they were caught in Pruzany at the Maletsky house by the Polish police. I didn't go with the sons because I didn't see it happening. Things changed in a minute... either you were out or you were shot.

See map #39:Gichman sent out his wife and children ahead on a transport to Pruzany ghetto. I felt subconsciously guilty that I had stayed in Shershev an extra night and did not go with my family. In that house there were only men because they had sent their families ahead thinking that they would somehow get out. I felt guilty to have abandoned my family. And also in the house that night was a man nick-named Moishe Boof. He had also sent his family ahead. (It took me a long time to find everybody's last names for the book because when older everyone had a nickname. I was too young to have a nickname.) Every male had the idea of sending their family ahead, I guess, to live another night.

At first, Gichman and Moishe Boof smiled and said how good it was to live without their wives and children. The two men grabbed each other, they had known each other for years. In one moment they smiled, but in the next moment it changed and they both started crying.

There was another small man who was dealing in, I don't know what, maybe horses, and he pounded the table and said..."Now I am living, without my wife and children." He escaped from Drogichin. Even though I got so mad at that man but I didn't dare to say anything. Anyway, this man survives Auschwitz and went to Israel to Netanyu. Have you ever heard the expression "Pumpalack" in Yiddish... it's a tribe of families, stuck together, maybe related by poverty. He was one of them. His name was Label. I was visiting Israel, but I didn't want to go and see him. He married again in Israel, he became a soldier and the army was happy with him.

I was in Pruzany with my two uncles, my father's youngest brother and one older. The younger (28 or 29 years) one got a cramp in his back. Moishe said, let's go together and maybe we will make it. He said no, I can't run, I can't walk. The oldest came to Auschwitz and he was selected by the Germans to work. Even though the other was a healthy young man, he got stuck with my parents and grandparents. (killed)

#### Josef and Bryna Pomerantz

Very presentable man. Spoke nice, looked nice. He sold dishes and lots of things to the Polish aristocracy (police, teachers, magistrates, etc.). They came to his store in Shershev. The government used to send them in. They were all strangers. They were trying to Polanize the population.

#### Maishe Nitzberg

He was a harness maker. He was a nice man. He was twenty years older than I so I certainly did not associate with him. He used to talk a lot, he had a lot of small talk to tell. All the Hebrew teachers who came to Shershev stayed in his house, I don't know why. This man died in Drogichin.

His wife was Leah and his oldest daughter was Chaya, Raisl was the second, Sora was the youngest. Leah was quite a talker with a loud voice. Her voice was bass like it came from a barrel. Chaya who was four or five years older than I.

I'll tell you a story about Chaya. There was a joke going around that there was laundress (named Isabette) who came to Shershev. She worked for Jewish people and she knew Yiddish better than I do. Chaya came from school and she was hungry so she had some soup and she said "Mother, the soup does not have a Jewish flavor". So Leah said, "Ok, let's give it to the gentile." The laundress tasted the soup and said "Leahinke, Leahinke, it doesn't have a goyish flavor either." This was a joke that went around the shtetl for a couple of years.

#### The Laundry

It was not like today when you can throw a couple of pieces of clothes in the washing machine. The laundress who spoke Yiddish was more popular with the Jews. In our house the laundry took three days. It used to pile up. It was kept in cupboards. The kitchen wasn't big enough to keep it in the kitchen. When the laundry woman would come and pull it out, you couldn't cross the house. It would be a mountain... a month's worth. It was terrible, the laundry, the bedding, the bed covers. The laundress would fill a large copper kettle (cauldron?) with water to boil. She would add blue color blocks, to whiten. Then they used to wash it in warm water. We were progressive because we had a wash board. Blocks of soap. Washed again. It was murder, believe me... laundry all over the house. In winter they would put it under the roof on ropes and it would freeze. Many people had laundresses who would come to them. They were occupied every day. The problem was to bring in the water. You have to go to the well to get the water.

## Water

There was an ancient well in the marketplace that was not used, except by the firemen. In the early thirties there was a well in the middle of the market. Shershev got a water pump and they used to attach it to that well and there was always plenty of water. Not everyone had a well. We had to go seventy-five meters to get our water. In 1920, according to Moishe's cousin's primitive map there were three wells. In my day there was one in the central marketplace (which was an artesian well because they sank pipes) and there were about fifteen or twenty other wells. They were placed in the non-Jewish streets, every ten to fifteen houses, so that the cattle could have water. To fill up your tub you made a few hundred trips to the well.

We had a neighbor who was by trade a "stepper" who made the tops of shoes, Reb Nachman. He was a big husky man. He never went for water. To go for water in Shershev in winter was a chore, you had to go on slippery icy roads, you had to hammer down to get the water from the well. He never went for water, he made his wife do it. My mother never spoke to him.

In our house my mother never had to go... she had two men, my father and me. My mother one time asked Reb Nachman, "Why do you make your wife Esther go for water. Nachman was a smart man, he said to my mother, "When I was a small boy, my mother said, Nachmanke, don't go to the well, you can fall in, and may she rest in peace, she's been dead forty years already, I am still listening to my mother." Sometimes in the winter the non-Jewish girls went barefoot to the well for water, but most of the time it was the men's job to go for water.

(See 5 in region of market near Kantorowitz.)

There was a well not far away from the Jewish cemetery. In my time they built three mills and the mills had to have water. There was so few mills because it was an effort. They started to make cement walls, so they sank pipes. A man would slide down the pipe with another extension and another extension until it was enough. I don't remember any old mills with pipes, they all had wooden frames. AS the men dug out they would slide the pipe down. There was no trouble with water in Shershev, there were swamps all around. A family had to go to the well maybe once a day unless they were doing a big job like scrubbing the floors. It was uncomfortable, I can tell you. There were two houses in Shershev that had an outlet for sink water... ours and my grandfather's; nobody else had it, not even in school. In school we had to go to a well. There was no well nearby the Hebrew school and I don't remember if there was one near the Catholic school. Maybe they weren't right near the school because of safety. There were trenches by the school where the snow would melt and just stay there. There were big tadpoles. There were so many of them and then in the summer the water would dry out and they would rot and smell and there were a lot of trees that would drop their leaves.

## How We Learned About the War

I remember somebody from Bielewiesh the day the war started in 1939. Label Selborn? He was on a bicycle so my mother was suspicious. He was a young single man, but not so young that he was of the typical age to be married. He had a good business in Bielewiesh. He had buses and trucks. He never came with a bicycle. His father came in and said "How do you like it? There's a war, bombs." It was on the radio already.

#### A Jewish Teacher in the Polish School

The Jewish teacher came from Grodno. His name was Rudman. He was the only Jewish teacher who came to that school and he was there about three or four years. The non-Jewish students took advantage of him. They wouldn't listen to him and the Jewish students tried to make it up to him. There were forty in a class, ten were Jewish and eight of those were boys (Same figures elsewhere?). The principal started talking about the Jews for some reason. He got so excited; he said, "We don't care if you hang yourself, just get out of here!" He calmed down and realized what he had said and he said to the Jewish teacher "These unruly boys got me so excited that I said something I shouldn't have said." An anti-Semite he was, but he had his pride not to make up stories. I remember once in a class he said, "Well you know, it is said that the Jews use the blood of Christian children to make matzo. Don't you believe it." You know if you came to Poland in those days you might have the impression that it was Jewish because there were so many Jews there.

The school didn't specifically hire him... he was sent from Warsaw. I think that the school didn't want a Jew in a very anti-Semitic environment. I think in Shershev people didn't care that much. (the population was very mixed) Pruzhany was more anti-Semitic. Brest was even worse. It was a big city and was 45 percent Jewish or more. I once went into a department so that somebody could give me some advice and was told "stay where you are." And then in 1934 it had changed and I went with my father to see a doctor and we went to a park and it was beautiful. When Pilsudski died in 1935, anti-semitism began to flourish again. There was a pogrom in 1938 in Brest.

#### 41. Kavalik

He had a sore on his head. I remember the medication was to help; I don't know how much they prayed. He was to blow the shofar. He was a big man sitting in bed with something on his head crying. He recovered. He had a wife, she was an American. He was one of those Jews who went to America and then came back.

There was a time, before the First World War especially, when people would go to America for two to five years. They would save maybe two hundred, five hundred, a fortune...

#### People Who Left Shershev to Come Back

To us came a Christian in 1938. He came to my father and takes out of his wallet a five hundred dollar bill and says I'd like to change a hundred to get Polish money. He came back to us in '39 or '40 and had another five hundred and my father said "All you can get



now is eighteen rubles." So he complained to my father that he had already sold some money to another Jew and had already done better... my father said go back to that person and maybe he will give you more.

When the war came they were stuck there, but they had left to come back. There was a story that you had to prove you had maybe ten dollars to be allowed back in. I can tell you that my cousin followed the more typical pattern of growing up, going to school, going to university, getting a job, and then some other job after permanently emigrating.

#### 42. Beryl Reitman

Went to the US and came back with a pocketful of dollars and he gave it to Christian neighbors. Maybe he gave it to them with interest, but they never paid him back so he would come into town and would buy produce from them and he lived on their produce. He had a good name with Gentiles.

Other family: Josef Reitman, Beryl Reitman, Elhanan Liftshutz, Gotzer, Miriam. (People related to Beryl? Plus??? Schlomo...? Grazing the map and trying to decipher names)

#### Ivan

Ivan was a Gentile who peddled fish. Every Friday morning he used to be in the market. Ivan would say "Shershevites, throw all the Jews under the bridge except (Moishe's grandfather) and Beryl Reitman." This was because Beryl gave them money and my grandfather loaned them money too. He had a son who couldn't speak... he was deaf and mute, and I think he had a daughter who went to class with me.

#### Jews Killed After Returning From Drozychan

Eleven Jewish men killed by Germans

Chaim Lebersteyn,  
Pincus Winer,  
Lebel Lebersteyn,

Moishe "Tinter", (this is not his last name but a nickname. Occupation was tinter, ink is tint. Not a complimentary nickname. A saying in Yiddish, Don't be a fool, don't be a tinter. Forgot his last actual name. According to the dictionary a tintler is a scribbler and to tintlen is to scrawl, scribble, smear.))

Avremel Kvellman

Lola Baumriter, (the beautiful one)

Peshe Zharetsky,

Moishe Kaminker was supposed to have run away with them, but he was shot.

#### The Squealer in the Pruzhany Ghetto

When they started in earnest in 1942 to clean up the Jews, there were two ghettos. The men from the second ghetto made their way out. The Germans came and demanded eight men--- Pruzhany ghetto. There was a Jew that people used to say was a squealer. He went to Auschwitz and survived it. Last name Swartz. He was my age, shorter, beefier, and he had a brother whom I knew. Brother was nice. The squealer had a reputation in the P. ghetto. Yiddish word is moiser (s?) ( Hebrew word moser? To denounce or betray or inform against is maser, mem sameth, resh, final nun.) Means little fellow according to Moishe K.. The Judenrat tried to bail them out and failed, the only time they failed.....The squealer was a Pruzhaner.

#### Polish Police Station...not for Jews

(Do not know what police station has to do with Grinkavitch)

Grinkavitch, had a store, an educated man, he couldn't help it being among Jews all day long. A gentile. Suspect he was in America for a while. Had money. Remained during German occupation. They took over the whole building.

(I think this refers to the ghetto in Pruzhany.)

The Germans came and took him to jail, maybe a week or two and then they cleared them out. The Gestapo commissioner used to come from another town and would look over the papers and clean out ninety percent of the jail. This would happen again and again.

I went there once for a burial. It was in the vicinity of YescoBialik???? ( I think he is at least referring to the region around Bialystok, because its Jews were brought to the Pruzany ghetto.)

There were six Cossacks who came from Pruzhany. We used to go there to this region for work. They picked our group and said "Follow me." They took us about six kilometers in a group to dig. It had been raining and I could tell there were wooden steps down into the hole(s), which were almost washed away... There was one German gendarme who told us what to do. When we were finished digging, he told us to go into the bushes twenty to forty yards away and not to look in the other direction. Who could tell a Jew not to look in the other direction? So we looked. Three trucks came that were all closed up with canvas. One backed up and you could hear the words almost which were "Raus! Raus!" which in German means "Out! Out!" It took only a second for all of them to jump out of the truck onto the steps...about a hundred and fifty people. The truck pulled away and as the Germans pulled away they threw a few grenades into the flooded hole where the steps were. They all had rifles, they didn't choose to use their revolvers, and they went around and shot everyone who moved. They covered up the faces and the dead bodies. They dumped the bodies in the hole and told us to cover up the hole. I could understand why they covered the faces, so we wouldn't see who they were, but the bodies must have been torn by grenades and perhaps that is why they covered them up. It was something. The foreman, Label Hochhalter, had said to us before, if you have something to eat you better eat it now because you won't want... that's right, he knew because he was experienced and we were new. The holes, would you believe, were half full with people they shot. And we didn't have enough sand to cover

up all the bodies. We were finding roots from heavy, bigger trees and we threw them in on top.

### Shera Niebrif

The son might still be alive. They had a son who was nine or ten years older than I and his brother was a year older than I. She was a widow and I remember his mother chasing her younger son to go "in shul arien". His name was Maishe and he was maybe ten then. (see notes about Louis Niebrif from Yale archives?)

### Mikhail Kozol

He had a dry goods store.

### Rochel the Milkhafer

His (?) mother had a room with my grandparents. She used to go all summer and winter to sell milk in the morning.

### Zalman Schneiders and Son and Brother

Oh, they were sent to Siberia I thought. There were two brothers, Beryl Schneider who had a store in the market ... it was here, in the very corner. and Zalman (Zosche) Schneider. Zalman had a son they used to call a momser don't mark it down... (it means bastard, illegitimate child). In Shershev, his mother had the child maybe two months early, or whatever. He was a shrewd fellow. Ohhhh, so smart. In 1935, '36, or '37 he became a village elder and the police were quite sympathetic to him... he came in handy. If you wanted to know what was going on by (with)Jews just ask him, and they found it out too from him. You had to be very careful what you were saying around him ...he informed the police. He never got married. People knew he was a squealer. When the Bolsheviks came in he was arrested and they sent him to Siberia. Don't know who turned him in, could have been a Jew or a non-Jew. Only the squealer was sent to Siberia. (see Squealer story on Tape 10.)

Zalman Schneider's other son Lazer was nine years older than I. He was the only male that I ever saw or heard of who used to put rouge on his face. Why? I don't know... he was good-looking. He used to shave every day and wear nice clothing. I suspect that he was his mother's favorite. Then there was a girl about my age, Chia, and a younger boy named Yusuele, a couple years younger than I.

The police arrested the son. People thought they all would be sent to Siberia. I thought so too, but years later I spoke to a woman in Israel who said that the parents were not sent, but asked to join their son in Tashkent. The son was sent to jail. Because all of them were sent to Siberia their lives were saved during the war. After the war they returned home to Shershev and then to Poland and then to Germany. They came to Canada and I was at Lazer's wedding in Canada. They left Canada shortly after and

moved to New York. The only one who was missing was the father Zalman, who died in Siberia. They made a living in Siberia somehow... the squealer would have finagled. At the wedding somebody said "Shershevians did very well in New York... they live in hundred thousand dollar homes." I remember my aunt in New York who was very poor when she came was sitting next to a woman in a committee who said, "You see, there is no such thing in America as ancestry, (yokes) there is only money." My aunt said, "Those people before they left Shershev bought silver cutlery and never paid for it and never came back for it. I wanted to tell her that if she would have paid me for the silverware, I would have had some drinks too."

### Other Illegitimate Children

There was a koymen-kerer, a chimney-sweep, in Shershev and he had a son and a daughter, ten, twelve, fifteen. I was still a younster and they were grown up. They said his daughter had an illegitimate child. She did not get married, neither did the brother. To begin with the brother had no trade and the father was a chimney sweep; he used to sweep every chimney in the shtetl. He was poor and couldn't afford a dowry.

### Kabizetsky (or Kabizinsky?)

He married my aunt-by-marriage's sister. They came from a village, but I don't remember what village. They already had been living in the town. For coming from a village, he was fairly educated... a learned man. He has two brothers, David who died in NY, and the other I don't remember. He was in Auschwitz with me and after the war they went to Germany and I went to Italy. They remained in Germany and they were former Polish soldiers so they knew how to use weapons. They became policemen. There was a story that circulated in their refugee camp after the war that some Germans noticed that these Jewish boys were wandering around carrying guns or rifles. They went to the forest and they shot Kabizetsky's brother. Some of the other Jewish refugees in the camp told the Americans that this had happened. It's in my book.

There is one Shershevian in Israel and once a month or every six weeks I call him up. You met Chdritsky in New York. I write him letters. Forty-two from the town of Shershev survived including some from a family that were in the Russian army. Only a few were women. Eleven of those forty-two came back to the village and only two or three stayed in the village. The rest went to other countries. No Jews are left in the village...they died, and I only can write to Chdritsky. I can account for six as being alive nowadays... three in Canada.

Leah: any women?) One woman was Sime Kaninker and she lived in Los Angeles, but I don't know if she is alive now. The other was Feigl Kravchik. She left to live in Sweden. The third one was Mushke Hamainyetz, her maiden name was Yakabovitz. She married a Shershevian man after the war. Muskele... Rifka-Rochel Krasner Her maiden name was Rubin.. Her father's name was Yeche. They had two sons who are doctors.

There was a Mr Schneider mentioned in the book who went to Siberia, his mother and sister also.

There was a woman named Gelman. She got married in Poland. The war started and she wanted to escape the Germans so she came to Shershev with her husband and kids. The Bolsheviks came and they shipped her out to Siberia, this in spite of the fact that the Gelmans were a very legitimate, liberal family. She complained that she was born in Shershev, but it didn't help. So she survived. She is in Europe. I don't know her married name.

### Voting

Jews were allowed to vote in the elections in Poland, but you had to be twenty-one. My grandfather used to bring home boxes with leaflets. I don't remember what the ballot looked like, but I remember my grandfather with stacks of paper seven inches high. People used to vote at the police station. I would say that in Shershev that there were no official Bundists or Bundist schools. I believe that fifty percent were Zionists.

### Voting continued and Politics

A certain percentage of the Zionists, say ten percent, were Leftist Zionists. Till 1933 there were no Rightist Zionists in Shershev called Revisionists. There were only Leftists. In 1933, the principal of the Hebrew School was a Rightist. The Rightists leaned towards a Rightist independent system in Israel, the leftist were Socialists and wanted a socialist state. The last couple of years they were persecuted in Poland. The momser was a rightist who was in cahoots with the police.

I am not sure of the year, 1935 or 1936, Jabotinsky promised to sign a petition to the British government to create a Jewish state and let in a million Jews from Germany and other places. The Leftists were against it as far as I can remember because they wanted to establish a socialist state. We decided to have a general meeting of the whole community. It was on a Saturday afternoon in the Groise Shul. I remember standing on the porch, which was quite high, and seeing the crowd come in, which was quite large. The common denominator was the poor people who stole horses and other things...tough guys. I remember they came in from the main street from the circle... into the front rows walked a couple dozen of these guys. They had guards, the Betar. They picked a fight and people started running. The hooligans came in with bars and sticks and started beating people .. they were paid by the Leftists to be against the Rightists. The meeting was to gather signatures for the Jabotinsky initiative.

I belonged to some of these Leftist groups and they would talk about Socialist doctrine. The Revisionists claimed to believe in a Democratic government. Some of them had uniforms which they wore. Six hundred men marched in Brest. They imitated the Nazis. In Shershev, for the first couple of years, they didn't present a serious threat to the Leftists. There weren't Bundists in Shershev but there were in Pruzhany. When I was growing up there were basically no Chassidic Jews in Shershev. In 1935 or 36, there

came an elderly man with a wife and two sons and by profession they were wooden wheel makers. In a sense they were carpenters... they were not rich of course. They were the only Chassidim I ever met and they were different, their customs were different. Once they came to synagogue with a bottle of vodka. And they danced with the scroll and nobody went home until the end of the davening. Not a single soul walked out. He began to walk with a limp and there were some women in town who thought he was a holy man. These women would come and ask him to pray for them and he would take payment. He was called the Rebele, which means the "dear little rabbi". When he prayed he would start singing in the middle of it.

### The Waldshans

There were no poets in town, a couple of amateurs maybe. I had a teacher named Waldshan. I hated him the first year and then I loved him. It was hard to part with him. He was a Shershevian born and a lovely teacher. As I wrote in my memoirs, his son David would get a certain stylistic stride when he would write (sing?) about the hardships of the first pioneers in Israel, how they worked, they suffered, their sicknesses. Some people believed that the boy's father wrote the articles that he published in the school's newspaper.

I hated the teacher at first because I didn't take to Hebrew and he taught in Hebrew. Then I decided to memorize a song. I practiced it with my father in both Hebrew and Yiddish. Suddenly I became the best pupil. I remember it was a Hebrew poem where a rider comes to the house and says "Who there is a good boy? In the dark, in the the night, open up the gates for me." And I remember the picture on the page and I memorized it and the next day we studied it. The teacher's oldest son became a teacher and his younger son became a writer. David Waldshan was born in 1929 and he was the youngest survivor in Auschwitz. I don't understand how the Nazis allowed him to get by and go with the able-bodied men. He survived and he came to the United States. He had a cousin, also David, who lived in Bieleviesh village and all of the people from that village were sent to the Pruzhany ghetto.

## INTRODUCTION

When two Jews from Eastern Europe meet for the first time, the following exchange almost invariably takes place:

"Where are you from?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know--a little town, a shtetl."

"Whereabouts, Poland?--Galicia?--Roumania?"

"Well, its on the border between Russia and Poland; used to be Russia under the Tsars, then belonged to Poland, now under Russia again--the Soviets."

"I am also from Russian Poland--Vilner Gubernia. You know?"

"Sure, who doesn't know Vilna? The 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'! I myself am from Grodner Gubernia, not far from Bialystok."

"Really? I know some people from Bialystok--Mandelstein, Zalman Mandelstein. Maybe you know him?"

"Well, I am not from Bialystok, but from a small shtetl nearby--Bolotna, not far from Malybrod. Have you ever heard of them?"

"Bolotna? Malybrod? No, doesn't sound familiar. Maybe you know Hradovka? That's where I come from."

"Hradovka?--No, never heard of it."

Hundreds of little towns, some no bigger than hamlets, scattered throughout Eastern Europe, were the home of three or four million Jews prior to World War II. An additional three million or so inhabited the large cities in the same region. The small

town was called shtetl--the Yiddish diminutive of shtot, meaning city. Though most of them were hundreds of years old, going back to the 14th century or even earlier, few can be found on regional maps, and only those located on important crossroads, railway junctions or river crossings were known beyond their immediate vicinity.

Up to the time of my childhood, during the first decade of this century, there was little intercourse between these communities. Transportation was by horse and wagon, over wretched sandy or muddy roads; railroads and paved highways connected only the large cities; telephones were nonexistent; and mail was delivered at most once a week. The general poverty precluded travel except for urgent reasons, such as important business deals; undergoing an operation in the nearest city which had competent doctors or a hospital; meeting a prospective bride or groom and their parents; and similar weighty matters. Such a trip, when undertaken, was planned for weeks in advance, the whole town knew about it, and the traveler was encumbered with commissions, letters and messages to be executed and delivered to relatives and friends at the destination. Conversely, on the rare occasion that a stranger appeared in town, he found himself besieged with inquiries about people in his own town who were known to local residents, and he too was given letters and messages to be delivered upon his return home. These tasks were accepted as a matter of course, and were usually executed faithfully--first, because it was a mitzva, a good deed; and second because one never knew when he himself might need such a favor. In the main, the town's residents never ventured beyond its precincts, and spent their lives there from birth to death, just as their parents and grandparents had done before them. Their dwellings might have been crowded, but there was no shortage of room at the cemetery just



outside of town.

Though largely isolated from one another, these small communities were nevertheless alike in their general setup, since they had all developed according to the same pattern, dictated by restrictions imposed by the governments under which they lived. But in the course of time each area evolved its own unique attributes--in dress, social customs, dialect, and even religious practice. While all East European Jews spoke Yiddish, an admixture of words from the prevalent local languages enriched and diversified the Yiddish of each region, in addition to a liberal sprinkling of Hebrew words and phrases, often badly garbled in the process.

The economy of the shtetl was based on the peasantry of the neighboring villages. Constrained by government fiat to live in the congested small towns, forbidden to own land outside of their boundaries, barred from service in the extensive bureaucracy and from most of the professions, Jews were perforce reduced to earn a living by commerce or manual trades. They became the middlemen who bought the peasants' surplus products for resale to the cities, and the purveyors of goods and services that the peasants needed. Except for the few prosperous individuals who operated taverns, small industries or wholesale businesses, most Jews eked out a living as storekeepers, shoemakers, tailors or other such manual artisans.

Throughout the centuries, despite discrimination, persecution and occasional pogroms, these Jewish communities stubbornly held on to the faith of their fathers, passing on the old customs and traditions from generation to generation. Study of the Hebrew Scriptures was a must for every boy, and learning was held in the highest respect. There was hardly any illiteracy among Jews, most of whom knew at least one

other language--that of the people among whom they lived. But secular education was held to a minimum by government limitation of the number of Jewish children who could be admitted to official schools, and to some extent also by the attitude of ultra-orthodox Jews who feared, not unreasonably, that young people might be led astray from the righteous path and learn the ways of the Goyim. And why drink from strange wells when all wisdom can be found in the Talmud?

However, toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century fresh winds began to penetrate the shtetl. A number of thinkers among the more emancipated West European, primarily German, Jews started a movement to draw their coreligionists into the mainstream of modern life, to eradicate the lingering ghetto mentality, to lift them out of the morass into which they had been pushed by ages of discrimination and persecution. Secular education was seen as the imperative first step toward this end. As this movement, known as Haskala--Enlightenment--gradually spread to the then Russian provinces of Poland, Lithuania and the Ukraine, a number of private Jewish schools, endowed by wealthy Jews and supported by public contributions, were established in the larger cities. These schools were patterned after the government Gymnasiums, and produced a new generation with a basic grounding in social and natural sciences, eager to learn more about the wide world beyond the horizon. The spirit of Haskala engendered a new Yiddish literature and a rich culture, unique in its amalgam of old folklore and modern thought.

These new trends brought about a restlessness among the youth, a thirst for education, an urge to break out of the confines of the shtetl. Emigration to the newly discovered by them Western World, especially America, with its freedom and promise

of a better life, seemed to be the best way out. The rash of pogroms which erupted in the 1880s provided an additional impetus, and the great migration to America began, to continue in ever increasing volume until it was interrupted in 1914 by the First World War. Large-scale emigration resumed after the war's end, but was greatly curtailed by the First Quota Act of 1921, and then abruptly brought to a trickle by the severely restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, which practically shut the "Golden Door" presided over by the "Mother of Exiles" the Statue of Liberty.

Despite the loss of population through emigration and the ravages of the First World War the shtetl continued to exist and even thrive during the next twenty years, now under Polish suzerainty. Then, in September 1939, came the German onslaught and occupation of Poland. The Nazi's proclaimed "Solution of the Jewish Question" began to be implemented at once. Within three years the total Jewish population, men, women and children, after degradation and torture, was exterminated. The local gentiles, some of whom participated in the atrocities, were at first stunned by the massacres, but after the initial shock wore off they gradually appropriated the Jewish houses, stores, and whatever other property, accumulated by generations of toil, was left behind. The shtetl was wiped off the face of the earth. It exists only in memory.

PART ONE

OLD ROOTS



## CHAPTER ONE

## MARCH OF TIME

## 1. Origins

When at the age of four weeks, in the summer of 1903, I was being carried by my mother through the market place for the first time (of course I was carried-- who ever heard of baby carriages?), she was accosted by Feivl Zelde's, the town buffoon.

"Mazel Tov, Esther Liebe, Mazel Tov to you! Nu, let's see what Shleime produced?!"

Though taken aback by the coarse expression, mother unfolded the blanket in which I was wrapped and, with a bashful smile, presented her first-born. Feivl took one look, spat three times, and yelled out at the top of his lungs:

"Oy, what an ugly creature! Everybody come and look! Tfu, tfu, tfu!"

Mother, in telling this, never failed to add:

"Of course, Yankele always was a beautiful child, but what could one expect from that paskudniak, good-for-nothing Feivl?!"

I have heard this story repeated so many times that I can visualize it in every detail. Here is the buxom young woman, herself only nineteen years old, in a print cotton dress buttoned up to the neck and reaching down to her ankles, picking her way gingerly over the cobblestones of the wide square, full of concern for the precious little bundle cuddled in her arms, returning after an absence of several weeks to the store which her husband had been tending by himself all this time, and inwardly

relishing his expression of pleasure at seeing her and the baby. And here is this rowdy with his mean jokes, trying to embarrass her in front of all these people who joined in the merriment. No wonder the incident figured so often in her reminiscences about my childhood.

I imagine that my mother must have been accompanied on that occasion by her mother-in-law, my grandmother Freide Leie—I cannot conceive that this dainty little woman, always impeccably dressed in black satin, with her mania of overprotectiveness for her offspring, would have permitted her first grandchild to be carried through the streets without her supervision. I am also convinced that Feivl must have received a good talking-to for his impudence.

This then was my public introduction to the little town which, tucked in between the dense pine forests on the edge of the vast Pripet marshes, seemed to me as I was growing up to have been cut off from the rest of the world. The life of its inhabitants seemed to flow in an unvarying pattern, established a long time ago and passed on from one generation to the next. The Russians called it Shereshevo, to the Poles it was Szereszow, and to the Jews Shershev. It was a typical small town in the so-called Pale of Settlement of Tsarist Russia, celebrated in literature and legend under the Yiddish name shtetl.

The region in which the town is located has been fought over for centuries by the nations surrounding it. Up to the end of the thirteenth century there was no established suzerainty over the land. The Mongol Kipchak Empire which dominated Eastern Europe for three hundred years, and whose hordes overran the area in its westward sweep, exercised only sporadic control over the primitive Slavic tribes who were scattered in

the forests or tilled the poor soil, mostly as serfs of Polish or Lithuanian landowners. After the Mongol tide receded to the East the territory came alternately under the sway of the kings of Poland or Lithuania, whose tenuous authority was periodically put to test by roving bands of Ukrainian Cossacks from the shores of the Dnieper. These were fierce brigands, free from allegiance to anyone or anything other than their own unbridled nature, whose raids left death and destruction in their path. They professed the Greek Orthodox faith, and vented their wrath on Jews and Catholic Poles. The most devastating raid occurred in 1648 under the hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky, when hundreds of towns and villages were put to the torch and their population massacred. More than one million people perished in that year, six hundred thousand of them Jews. Khmelnytsky served as the prototype for Taras Bulba, the hero of Gogol's novel by that name, in which the life and mores of these Cossacks are vividly portrayed. They later became allied with their coreligionists, the rulers of Muscovy, and the Ukraine eventually was absorbed into the Russian Empire.

With the increased power of the Tsars both Lithuania and Poland lost their independence and came under Tsarist rule, with parts of Poland having been annexed to Austria and Prussia during the partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795. Our area remained part of Russia uninterrupted until 1915, when it was occupied by the Germans during the First World War. Even though I was just about entering into my teens at that time, my prior schooling and reading had left me with a predilection for Russian culture, which permeated and intermixed with the Jewish ethos absorbed in the bosom of my family and the atmosphere of the shtetl.



## 2. Vestiges

Each of the dominant powers left its mark on the native population. While the majority professed the Orthodox faith, there was a sizable segment of Catholics and a small number of Protestants, reflecting respectively the Russian, Polish and Lithuanian influence. Intermarriage between these races and miscegenation during the Mongol occupation was evident in the physical traits of the people--fair and dark complexions; blue, gray and brown eyes; Caucasian and Mongoloid facial features. The expression "Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tartar" is not just an empty phrase. There were even some small colonies of Germans and wandering bands of Gypsies in the area. All this had a marked effect on the language of the local population, especially the peasantry. Through a bizarre mixture of words and phrases from Russian, Polish, Ukrainian and other tongues they evolved a unique dialect of their own, dubbed "Goyish" by Jews for want of a better term. Even the Mongols, who disappeared from the area five hundred years earlier, left some vestiges of their speech, as in these counting-out rhymes still current at the time of my childhood:

Aing'ee, baing'ee, goopee, daing'ee;

Akhchi, bakhchi, gammi, dakhchi;

. . . . .

and

Beyek, beyek, izbadan;

Sigany, sigany, kutbalan;

Kuty, pekuty, kutbalasty;

Yashi, bashi, bubikhan.



While the opening syllables of the first rhyme are obviously based on the first letters of the Hebrew alphabet (aleph, beth, gimel), there is no mistaking the Mongolian or Tartar flavor of the other sounds. The first rhyme, incidentally, was a curious mixture of seemingly meaningless words, superstition, and revolutionary content. The two given lines were continued in Yiddish rhymes, which translate as follows:

On the roof a red rooster stands,  
 Flaps his wings, in loud voice portends,  
 Not one, not two, not three, not four,  
 Not five, not six, not seven, not eight, not nine,  
 No man in vassalage should bend his spine.

"Red rooster" was a well-known euphemism for the flames shooting up from the landowners' manors set afire by peasants during uprisings. As for the negative countout, it was a stratagem for warding off an evil eye and for confusing Satan, the Evil One, since he might become unduly interested on hearing of so many children. A similar remedy was in the word "Kinanoreh", a contraction meaning "Let no evil eye see it" used by rote whenever a favorable circumstance was mentioned: "They are, kinanoreh, in good health; they have three children, kinanoreh;" etcetera.

Educated persons spoke Russian or Polish, but even they interspersed their speech with catchwords and expressions from each other and from "Goyish". Words from all three idioms were also absorbed into and became part of the Yiddish language.

### 3. Rise and Decline

Jews have been living in Shershev and in neighboring towns at least since the

early 1400s, and were already of sufficient importance in 1433 to be mentioned by a local notable in a report to the Polish-Lithuanian king Jagiello. By the middle of the nineteenth century they constituted a majority of the town's 10,000 population. It was a thriving community then, containing some small textile factories, flour mills, a tannery, and a brewery. An outstanding industry was the production of wooden shingles for roofing, which were sold to other communities in the region where the forests did not have the straight-grained and knot-free pines, perfect for shingles, which grew in abundance in our vicinity. All these industries were operated by the wealthier Jews and provided employment for many workers, Jews and gentiles. A lively trade in grain and livestock was carried on by itinerant merchants with the peasants of the villages scattered in the area. The large number of storekeepers and independent artisans also shared in the well-being of the community.

This rather prosperous period received a jolt in the 1880s which set off the decline in the town's good fortune. Up to that time all roads in the area connecting the small towns and villages were nothing but rutted wagon trails which turned to mud after a good downpour. They were practically impassable during the fall rainy season and the spring thaw. It was not uncommon for travelers, driver and passengers alike, to have to dismount and even help by pushing the heavy wagon whenever the usually scraggy horse, despite the generous use of the whip and shouted imprecations of the driver, was unable to pull the wagon out of the mire. As long as this condition prevailed in the entire area no town had an advantage in this respect. About 1880 the government began building a crushed-stone highway through the region, primarily for military purposes, using its multitude of recruits as a workforce. This highway, or



chaussee, was originally projected to go through Shershev, but bypassed it in favor of another town twelve miles away, allegedly because the army surveyors were bribed to change the original plans. The resulting diversion of traffic from our town brought about a gradual transfer of most of its industry and commerce to other localities, with the consequent impoverishment of its residents, many of whom moved elsewhere in the province or emigrated to seek their fortune in other countries, primarily in America.

By the time of my childhood in the first decade of this century the textile factories, brewery and tannery were gone. Two of the three tall windmills just outside of town, with their immense slatted vanes, were not working, and even the third one was idle most of the time. The two unused ones became a favorite target for youngsters exercising their skill in stone throwing or vying with each other in climbing up the vanes, leaving many broken slats in the process. The wind, powerless to rotate the blocked creaking vanes, howled through the openings between the slats and contributed to the destruction. The shingle industry was reduced to provide only for local consumption. The big merchants disappeared and only small storekeepers and artisans remained to eke out a living. The town's population dwindled to 5,000—one half of its former number.

From about 1725 to the late 1800s, for over a hundred and fifty years, Shershev was noted as the seat of several learned rabbis, whose renown spread far and wide through the land. Some of them published commentaries on the Talmud and carried on a correspondence with rabbis in other communities who sought their opinion on abstruse points of Jewish law and its application. This succession of great rabbis coincided with the period of the town's prosperity, and must have contributed to its development. But

men of fame and distinction are all too often lured away by prosperous communities and institutions from poorer ones, and so it was that with the decline of our town's fortune came also the loss of its preeminence as a seat of rabbinical learning.

The fame of its rabbis did not save Shershev from acquiring in earlier times the dubious reputation of harboring a den of smugglers. The smuggling was not of merchandise, but of men. During certain periods of the last century conscripts were required to serve in the Russian army for as long as twenty-five years, which for a Jew meant the end of his identity. Even after the term was reduced, the known brutalization of barrack life, anti-Semitic discrimination and abuse, and the impossibility of following religious precepts in the army led to efforts to avoid conscription by all means. It became a common practice for young men to starve themselves for months before they were due for medical examination, in the hope of being rejected because of their emaciated condition. Many went so far as to maim themselves by cutting off the right index (trigger) finger, by inducing lameness, or by ruining the sight of an eye. There was of course also bribery of the examining military doctor and other members of the recruiting commission. However, the surest escape was to go abroad, but men of military age were not given passports for foreign travel. That is where the smugglers came in.

These men had a widespread network throughout Russia's western provinces, their connections running from officials who issued passports in false names or with incorrect ages, to border guards who could be relied upon not to be too inquisitive, to guides who knew the pathways and river fords along the border through which one could get across undetected. They worked in league with confreres on the other side,



in Austria and Germany, who had similar connections in their countries. The dense forests and swamps around Shershev facilitated the activities of the adventurous spirits in town who engaged in this dangerous business. In addition to reluctant recruits, people sought by the police for revolutionary actions were also spirited out of the country in this way. This activity persisted through the first decade of this century, and was stopped only by the outbreak of the First World War.

One person involved in this underground traffic was a distant relative of ours from a neighboring town, Kamenets. I learned this from overheard whispered remarks about his being an "agent." Late one evening in 1910 he suddenly appeared at our house in a state of frenzy. He had been tipped off by no less than the Kamenets Pristav (Chief of Police) himself, with whom he had been doing "business," that he had been denounced by one of his own collaborators and that an order for his arrest was imminent. The fugitive asked to be hidden for a few days until his associates could get him across the border.

To let the man stay at our house was out of the question--a stranger was a novelty in the shtetl and word would soon get around. We had at that time a half-interest in a cow, the other half belonging to my grandmother's brother. Since neither partner had a barn, the cow was housed in a small shed rented from a gentile. So into the shed the terrified man went, and spent two days and two nights with the cow, until a "friend" took him away in the middle of the third night.

I met this relative in the United States many years later and was quite disappointed. Instead of a romantic adventurer I found a very ordinary New York-neighborhood Jewish grocer.

## CHAPTER TWO

## STILL WATERS

## 1. God's Creatures

Shershev was situated on both banks of a small river, Lesna, which flowed sluggishly through it before spreading into a swamp on the outskirts. It was spanned by a wooden bridge, about seventy-five feet long but too narrow for two-way vehicular traffic. When two horse-drawn wagons approached simultaneously from opposite sides one had to wait a few minutes for the other one to cross before crossing in turn. The bridge was the only connection between both parts of town, unless one was to wade across the swamp--not difficult during the dry summer months. In winter everything froze solid and it was no problem to get across on foot or by sleigh.

During good weather the river's only sandy bank near the bridge was alive with barelegged women, their long skirts tucked in high above their knees, washing their laundry in metal basins, slapping the clothes with wooden paddles over flat stones, or rinsing them in the stream. It was unseemly for grown men to stand about gawking, but we boys had no such inhibitions and hung around ostensibly fishing or looking for frogs, but not missing the intriguing female contours revealed by the clinging wet garments. Our "fishing" was done with a string tied to a stick, the hook made of a rusty pin with a piece of bread crust for bait--at least that was used by me because of an aversion to worms. None of us ever caught anything, and I doubt if any fish were around with all the commotion of the washing. We were more successful with frogs,

which were grabbed with bare hands, taken some distance away from the water, then watched as they jumped back to the river, under our prodding. We never harmed them otherwise--we were taught compassion for "God's creatures." Pigs, of course, did not come under that category.

Of all "God's creatures" our tenderest feelings were reserved for the birds. The town was full of sparrows, and we could tell the deep-brown males from the grayish females. They were all over the place, and used to swoop down on the still steaming horses' droppings on the cobblestones, chirping, squabbling and pecking away for all they were worth, and in no time the dropped balls were transformed into a nasty mess spread about the pavement. Crows were the next abundant species, and flew over the houses in swarms, wheeling and turning as if on command, their flapping wings and strident cawing drowning out all other sounds. They nested in the trees around the Russian church and the cemetery behind it, and never alighted on the ground. Then there were the storks, which we saw high in the sky flying in V formation southward in the fall and back again in the spring. They built their nests of dry twigs on the thatched roofs of the peasants' houses, and could be seen standing there on one red leg, their heads and enormous beaks turning in circular motion while producing a series of sharp clacking sounds like that of two boards being struck against each other. I do not recall ever seeing two storks together near their nest, supposedly because one remained to guard the eggs or fledglings while the mate was feeding in the swamp on the plentiful population of frogs, leeches, small water snakes, and fish. After catching the prey they would throw it into the air with an upward jerk of the beak and catch it again on the way down, repeating the performance again and again until the food was



in proper condition to be swallowed or taken home to feed the nestlings.

The birds we loved most were the swallows, black except for a bright red spot on the throat and red markings under the wings which could be seen only when they were in flight. They used to appear every spring and we knew then that the harsh winter is definitely over. Their nests were built out of mud, usually in clusters, right underneath the eaves, and it was believed that the same birds came back to their own nests each year. The house of my maternal grandmother had two such nests, and we kids were delighted to watch the swallows dart like lightning just past us, disappear from view, dart in from another direction again and again, and only then, apparently satisfied that no danger lurks, disappear into the nest opening. We guarded "our" nests with a sense of proprietorship and chased away other birds and cats if they came too close. Though we heard faint peeps, we never saw the young come out and learn to fly. They either did this early in the morning when we were still asleep, or else remained in the nest until ready for flying. One fall day after the birds were gone both nests fell down during a strong squall. They were never rebuilt again.

## 2. Landmarks

Not far from the bridge, in the center of town, a sprawling open area constituted the business section, market place, and fairground. In the middle of this space stood a massive fortresslike rectangular structure, with thick masonry walls, transversed by a wide arcade for pedestrian passage. The building was honeycombed with about twenty-five stores, and the arcade contained a number of closet-like niches used as trading posts or stands. Each store, or krom in Yiddish, was a cubicle about ten feet



wide by eighteen feet deep, without windows, the walls lined with shelves and the floor encumbered by wooden boxes, barrels and sacks, perhaps not unlike the old-time American country store. It had one solid door of rough wood on heavy hand-wrought iron hinges, and next to it a similarly constructed Dutch door, the bottom half of which formed a counter when the upper half was open. The storekeeper (kremer in Yiddish, kremerke for female) sat on a high stool behind the counter, or often stood just outside the door, calling out his wares to every passerby. The high stool had a double purpose: first, to afford a view across the counter; second, and more important, to provide warmth during the frigid Russian winter. For underneath the stool was placed a cast-iron pot filled with glowing charcoal, which exuded enough heat for comfort, especially for the women who draped their long skirts like a tent all around the stool while sitting on it, the heated air thus being directed upward to keep their bodies warm even on very cold days.

These "firepots" provided an obvious and inexhaustible source of wisecracks at the expense of the "hot women" and their husbands who knew of no better way of keeping them warm. Occasionally the women indeed got more heat than bargained for, when a flaring ember would shoot out of the pot and singe their underclothes down to the skin. But that was only one of the minor hazards of being a kremerke.

The houses surrounding the market place and in the adjoining streets were occupied by Jews. Most were one-story wooden structures with shingled roofs, standing close to each other, with usually a small yard and vegetable garden in the back. There were a few brick houses belonging to the well-to-do. Every back yard had an outhouse, since indoor facilities consisted only of chamber pots for use at night and in winter.

These outhouses were about the size of a telephone booth, erected over a pit, and deliberately left open on the bottom of the back to allow access to the roaming pigs which used to feed on the excrement. Pigs were not supposed to be in our area of town, but they got there anyway and presumably found their way home again, although occasionally a peasant woman would walk about in search of a lost one, calling out loudly: "Vas, vas, vas! Vas, vas, vas!" The Jewish boys made a sport of chasing these pigs with sticks and stones, especially when they got near or into the vegetable garden. In such events the women would raise a cry: "Children, children, quick! A pig is in the garden!" and the hunt was on, the trampling kids adding to the damage caused by the animal. Though we knew that the pigs were given to rooting in the excrement, and looked about for the presence of one in the vicinity before going into the outhouse, it was startling just the same to suddenly hear a grunt under one's bare buttocks while squatting there. Many a time was I scared out of my wits by such an unexpected visitor.

The gentile population lived on the outskirts, nearer to their fields and pastures. Their houses were even smaller and poorer than those of the Jews, generally with thatch roofs, but they were spaced much farther from each other, had large fenced-in yards for their cattle, and tremendous barns for storage of hay and grain and for housing the cattle in winter. What I admired about them was the profusion of fruit trees and garden flowers which the Jewish houses were generally devoid of. Many gentiles also had their own wells since they needed a lot of water for their cattle, whereas the Jews had to use public wells often situated a considerable distance away from their houses.

There were two churches in Shershev. The Russian Orthodox church, with one



large and two small onion-shaped cupolas, was in the center, not far from the market place. The Catholic church with its Gothic façade stood across the bridge on the other side of town. Four prayer houses, in quite ordinary buildings, were scattered conveniently in the Jewish section. And there was the Great Synagogue--the Shul--in the center of town, but that deserves a special description. The only other public facilities were a poorhouse and a communal bathhouse with a ritual bath as an adjunct, maintained by the Jewish community. Otherwise there were no public buildings--no school, library, postoffice, hospital or police station--not even a jail. The small police contingent occupied a rented house and used one of the back rooms as a lockup. Fire-fighting equipment consisted of two large wooden water barrels mounted on two-wheeled undercarriages, with attached hand pumps and hoses, which were hauled to a burning building by hand, or by horses if they could be procured quickly enough. Fires were a constant threat, especially in summer when wind-blown sparks would ignite one after another of the crowded wooden houses, sometimes wiping out entire streets.

One such conflagration remains vividly in my memory. My grandmother Freide Leie and her daughter Esther Beile, each holding one of my hands, half dragged me while running through the flames on both sides of the street, heading for refuge in the nearest swamp. Many other people were running hither and yon, some carrying bundles or a single household article, crying, yelling, all half crazed with fear. Wind-driven embers and flaming roof shingles were flying over and around us, and the crackling, hissing flames were shooting up to the sky. I kept on closing my eyes against the heat and glare, and suddenly began shivering from the abrupt change in temperature when we came into a side street and dropped on the ground under some trees to catch our

breath. That was during the groisse sreife (big fire) of 1908 which devastated the center of town and was talked about for years thereafter. Our houses--each grandmother had her own house--escaped the fire due to their location away from the center, nearer to the gentile houses on the outskirts.

### 3. Tse d a k a

The destruction of a house was always a major catastrophe to the owner. With the exception of the rare person of means who may have been able to save some money, the average Jew, even of the middle classes, had trouble enough to provide for the immediate daily needs of his family, let alone accumulate savings. When his house burned down, usually with everything in it, he at once became a pauper, without a roof over his head. There was no such thing as insurance, no banks to borrow from (and what bank would lend money to a pauper?), so the only recourse was to charity.

Charity, under the Hebrew name Tsedaka, has been rooted in the Jewish ethos since ancient times, and was practiced almost as an eleventh Commandment. There was no Jewish home, no matter how poor, which did not have a little blue and white box (the national Jewish colors), known as pushke, into which a copper was dropped whenever possible for charity. Usually the money was donated for such local needs as paying cheder tuition for a poor boy; aiding a widow with small children; providing a dowry for an orphan girl; and for supporting a yeshiva or home for the aged. But it would take the contents of thousands of pushkes to help a man rebuild his house, and in the case of such a calamity as the "big fire" local means were totally inadequate. Only an appeal to all the Jews of the province, and beyond, would avail in such a situation.



An appeal of such magnitude was made through the dispatch of an emissary, known as shaliakh, or several of them, to travel from town to town and plead for donations for the homeless victims. The emissaries carried letters from the town rabbi, usually in Hebrew, detailing the extent of the disaster, expounding the virtues of Tsedaka with citations from the Talmud, and appealing for help. Upon arrival in each town the letter was presented to the local rabbi, who would read it from the pulpit to his congregation in the synagogue, adding his own appeal for generosity as a great mitzva. The shaliakh too would make a statement and answer questions from the audience, and often go from house to house to make the collection.

In addition to the emissaries, who usually covered the small towns, letters were dispatched to the community heads of large cities with similar appeals. Though the response in all instances was wholehearted and generous, it often took a year or longer before enough money was collected to rebuild the houses destroyed by the fire. Meanwhile the homeless were crowded in with relatives, in the poorhouse, or in the prayer houses if no other accommodations could be found.

The selection of an emissary was not a simple matter. The man had to be unencumbered with personal affairs, permitting his absence from home and family for many months; sufficiently articulate to convey the urgency of his mission; and trustworthy enough to remit all the collected money, the accounting for which was far from foolproof. Nevertheless, suspicions and accusations sometimes arose, leading to dissension in the community, with the shaliakh's life made miserable whether or not he was guilty of any malfeasance.

Making life miserable for public figures was a sport zestfully engaged in by the

shtetl Jews. Powerless to openly resist the government autocracy, they vented their frustrations against their own people of some prominence. Within the Jewish community, democracy reigned supreme, at least in vocal expression, and no one was immune from criticism, including the rabbis.

Each shtetl typically had only one rabbi--there was neither the need for, nor the means to support, more than one. His most vexing task was to resolve personal disputes in a Din Torah, or judgement according to the Torah, still occasionally resorted to today by Orthodox Jews. Although both sides voluntarily agreed to put their case before the rabbi and abide by his decision, the losers sometimes accused him of unfairness or partiality, and did not hesitate to air their grievances in public, or worse.

One such incident, still talked about during my childhood, had occurred about twenty years earlier. It involved a decision that one of the two ritual slaughterers did not fully observe the prescribed rules in butchering an ox, and that the meat was therefore unusable by Jews. This was a severe blow to several butchers, who protested that the ruling was based on a technicality and that the rabbi favored the other slaughterer. They were supported by a number of households who were faced with a meatless Sabbath.

The following morning, a Friday, a pig's ear was found nailed to the rabbi's door. In consternation the venerable old man refused to pass through the door, the only entrance to the house, and did not allow anyone else to do so or to pass food through it for fear of contamination. He declared a fast until the door is removed and replaced by a new one, and also proclaimed an anathema against the perpetrators. Legend had it that several of the suspects had met with untimely deaths, and that the rabbi himself died within a few days from the shock of the desecration.

## CHAPTER THREE

## TWILIGHT ZONE

## 1. The Shul

Now about the Great Synagogue--the Shul. Unlike the two churches, whose counterpart could be seen in any other small town in the area, the Shul was unique, differing radically from the modest houses of prayer used by Jews in that part of the world. Were that building seen at a distance in Greece, it would have been taken for an ancient temple dedicated to Zeus or to one of the lesser Greek deities. For it was in that style--a huge, massive rectangular structure, its façade of four towering columns topped by a triangular pediment with a sculptured frieze, but without portrayal of human or animal forms. Though in places the ravages of time had taken their toll, the columns and walls retained the whiteness of the masonry, and the roof was mellowed by a light-green patina. In the interior the ceiling was supported by four similar columns, complete with Doric capitals, resting on circular bases. On the eastern wall, surrounding the richly embroidered velvet curtain that covered the niche for the Torahs, was an immense wooden panel, carved in bas-relief with an intricate design of vines, flowers, birds, deer, and other animals. This had originally been gilded and painted, but only traces of the colors remained. On the opposite side was a gallery for the women, reached by two ornate staircases; and high up in that wall was a sculptured round opening which may have held stained glass at one time. The interior had no pews other than masonry



ones forming part of the walls on all sides. The raised pulpit of elaborately carved wood still stood in the center between the four columns.

Although the Shul was held in great reverence, it was entirely unsuitable for our small community, and no one could remember when, if ever, it was used for religious services. However, two rites were from time to time performed in the open square in front of it: weddings and funerals. Wedding ceremonies were deemed to acquire added sanctity when performed in front of the Shul and usually took place there, weather permitting. Funeral services were held there only on infrequent occasions, for persons distinguished by piety, learning or other good deeds. In such cases the bier was placed in front of the Shul (never inside--it is forbidden by ritual law), and the eulogies were delivered from the Shul steps. This was a signal honor and a mark of utmost respect on the part of the community.

No one really knew how old the Shul was or under what circumstances it was built. Many stories were current about its origin, the most plausible one featuring as protagonist a beautiful Italian lady, the wife of a very rich and powerful Polish nobleman. While visiting one of their estates in our vicinity, she was attacked by a swarm of hornets and would have been stung to death had she not been rescued by some Jews who happened to be passing by. In gratitude the magnate had the Shul built as a gift to the town's Jews. This story gains credence from the historical fact that the famous Polish king Stefan Batory was married to an Italian, a member of the noble Sforza family of Milan. She personally owned extensive tracts of land in our region, and reportedly built a Catholic church in neighboring Pruzhany in the 1530s. It is probable that the Shul dated from that period.



It is noteworthy that Batory and his predecessors favored the presence of Jews in Poland as being conducive to the economic development of the country. He augmented the privileges given to them by prior Polish rulers, and bestowed upon them the right of governing their own communities and the power of taxation for their maintenance. In this propitious climate it would not have been out of character for a Polish nobleman to build a house of worship for Jews. If this conjecture about the origin of the Shul is correct, it would indicate the presence of a sizable Jewish community in Shershev in the early part of the sixteenth century, strengthening the supposition that the first Jewish settlers arrived there in the fifteenth century or earlier.

Whatever the origin of the Shul, there is no doubt that it was very old, and it always aroused the curiosity of visitors. During the First World War I saw German officers taking pictures of it, and after the town became part of Poland an official government commission came to photograph and make inquiries about the building.

## 2. Ghosts and Children

For me and my playmates the Shul was an object of mystery and fascination. As a holy place unused and uninhabited by humans, it was obviously haunted and populated by ghosts and demons, especially at night. One of our favorite pastimes during the long summer twilights was to huddle up in some out-of-the-way nook and repeat weird tales overheard from grownups. One such "true" story was of the ordeal that befell Shmuel Elie the cripple, so named because of his lameness. He was on his way home on Friday afternoon from trading in the villages the whole week, but his heart was heavy because business was bad and he had not earned enough even to buy proper Sabbath food

for his wife and children. Suddenly, on a lonely stretch of road, he caught sight of a calf, standing and moaning pitifully: "Maa . . . maa . . . " Shmuel Elie looked about but no people were to be seen. He went over to the calf which did not try to run away--it just stood there looking at him with its calf's eyes, hanging out its tongue and continuing to maa . . . maa . . . " The Lord of the world, blessed be His name, must have heard my prayers and sent me this calf so that my family should not be in want during the Sabbath," Shmuel Elie said to himself. He put the calf in the wagon behind him and continued on his way, happy with his unexpected good fortune, and not paying attention to the unusual shying of his horse. All of a sudden he heard an eerie giggling behind him: "Hee, hee, hee . . . Hee, hee, hee." He turned around, and there in his wagon instead of a calf was a scrawny old woman, in tatters, her disheveled gray hair twisting in the wind, her nose like a beak, her eyes like two fiery coals, and her toothless mouth grinning at him. In horror he whipped his horse into a gallop, but the "hee, hee, hee" became louder, she stretched out to him her bony hands with nails like claws and squeaked: "Come be my husband, hee, hee, hee . . . . Take me to be your wife, hee, hee, hee . . . . " At this Shmuel Elie remembered the holy incantation and yelled out: "Shma Yisroel . . . !" A loud screech was heard, and the phantom disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Shmuel Elie did not stop whipping his horse until he reached town and began yelling: "Help, Jews, help!" He was taken off the wagon half dead from fright and brought to the rabbi, who recited with him the prescribed blessing for escape from grave danger. Only then did Shmuel Elie come back to himself and was escorted home by a deputation of Jews who also provided him with food for the proper celebration of the Sabbath.



Many of these hair-raising stories had the Shul as the sphere of action. It was "known" that at one time a Jew passing the back of the Shul at midnight suddenly noticed something red in the center of the white wall. As he watched, the thing started to move in his direction, twisting and wriggling like a snake, and he realized that it was a long red tongue coming right out of the wall, about to coil itself around him. He did not remember anything else, but was found the following morning lying in a dead faint with his hands firmly clutching his tsitsith--the ritual fringes worn by all religious Jews. It was surmised that he grabbed them instinctively before he fainted and was thus saved from worse harm.

Despite these horror tales we were brave enough to explore the Shul's interior in the daytime. Once we found a narrow wooden stairway leading up from a corner of the women's gallery. Three of us climbed up the rickety steps through layers of dust and cobwebs and found ourselves in a vast attic, crisscrossed by thick beams and rafters supporting the roof. In one corner there was a pile of torn prayer books, their yellowed pages crumbling to the touch. At spaced intervals in the floor were large circular holes through which heavy chains with lamps on their ends hung from crossbars. The lamps were apparently hoisted up through these holes for repair or refilling with kerosene. I became quite dizzy as I bent over to look into the interior deep down below me, and nearly fell through the hole. We beat a hasty retreat after that, and never ventured up there again.

That ghosts were not to be trifled with I learned to my own sorrow. Across the street from my grandmother Peshe's house there stood a hovel which had been deserted for many years. Its roof was partly caved in, all windows were broken, and the entrance

door was hanging askew on one hinge. It was sitting about twenty feet back from the pavement, and could be reached through a narrow alleyway alongside a tall wooden fence, which separated it from the house of my best friend, named Yankl like myself. The hovel, of course, often figured in our stories, its reputation for being haunted heightened by the arcane profession of its onetime owner, that of a menaker--one skilled in the removal of certain veins from slaughtered animals to make their meat kosher. It was always referred to as "Nissen menaker's house." Naturally, the place was often explored by us in the daytime, despite the filth from stray dogs, cats and mice. One evening, as we were matching boasts about our respective bravery, I took up a challenge to enter Nissen menaker's house after dark. My pals watched in a group at the entrance to the alleyway as I proceeded gingerly along the darkened passage, my heart thumping violently and my eyes trying to discern what lurks in the spaced shadows cast by the boards of the fence against the moonlight. After what seemed like eternity I reached the entrance and touched the hanging door for support before examining the interior, when a horrible groan or croak pierced the dead stillness. All I remember is the sight of the other boys scattering in all directions as I was running with all my might toward grandma's house. I was told later that I burst into the house in a cold sweat, a wild look in my eyes, mumbling incoherently about shaydim (spirits). I was put to bed and stayed there for several days, shivering and tossing in hallucinations. My parents and grandmothers had the fright of their lives, and after learning from my pals what happened, resorted to a time-honored remedy--that of "pouring wax." An old peasant woman, reputed to dabble in witchcraft, came to the house, poured molten wax into a dish filled with hot water, and gazed intently at the shapes



being formed while mumbling some mysterious words. She finally pronounced that I had been frightened by a pig, and there the matter rested until I recovered my normal self.

Not all our stories were scary. Many of them, of folklore or Talmudic origin, were edifying and moralistic. Most of these had ancient Israel, particularly Jerusalem, as their locale, as in the following tale.

There were once two brothers who dwelt in the land of Canaan, tilling the soil and tending their flocks. One was unmarried, the other one was blessed with many children. One night at harvest time, as each was watching the reaped grain in his own field, the first brother said to himself:

"It is not fair that I should have as much grain as my brother. I need only enough for myself, but he has so many mouths to feed."

With that he shouldered as many sheaves as he could carry and stealthily deposited them next to those of his brother, then returned and went to sleep peacefully. The other brother, having awakened in the middle of the night, also bethought himself:

"How lucky am I to have a wife and many sons who will take care of me in my old age, but my poor brother--who will help him when he is no longer able to work?"

He then also took as many sheaves as he could carry and put them quietly next to his brother's sheaves.

In the morning both were surprised to find their crops undiminished. They repeated the act the following night, but again found nothing missing in the morning. On the third night, as they were walking laden with the grain, they met halfway, fell into each other's arms, and vowed that henceforth whatever belongs to one also belongs

to the other. The place where they met was on Mount Moriah, and on that very spot later stood the Holy of Holies of Solomon's Temple.

Children often took the leading parts in our stories. A Greek sage, having heard of the precocity of the children of Jerusalem, went there to find out for himself. Within sight of the city walls he came to a fork in the road and asked some children who were playing nearby which was the shorter route. One of the boys replied:

"The one on the right is shorter but longer; the left one is longer but shorter."

Puzzled, the sage took the right fork only to come to a deep ravine which could be crossed by goats, donkeys and young boys, but was impassable for him, so that he had to retrace his steps and take the left fork.

Upon arrival inside the city the sage gave a small coin to a boy and asked him to buy enough food to last for a month. The boy returned and presented him with a bagful of salt. He asked another boy to buy him a dozen apples, making sure that they are all tasty. The boy brought the apples, with one bite taken out of each one. "I made sure that every one of them is really tasty," was the explanation.

A famous trial was taking place in the city of Prague, so the story went. Two merchants had adjacent stores, with only a thin wall between them. One was a draper, the other a dealer in oil. Late one day, at closing time, one of the merchants watched through a crack in the wall as his neighbor counted the day's receipts, put the gold and silver coins in a leather bag and hid it behind some merchandise. The watcher then ran into the street with a hue and cry that he had been robbed, accusing his neighbor of the theft since he was the only person in the vicinity at the time. To the police officers and assembled crowd he described the leather bag and the amount of the gold and silver



pieces therein, and demanded that the neighbor's premises be searched. This was done despite the other's protestations, the bag was found and impounded as evidence. At the trial each man claimed that the money was his, witnesses appeared to testify to the honesty of both men, other witnesses made derogatory statements against each of them, and the affair became the talk of the town with the partisans of each side engaging in heated arguments. The trial judge was in a quandary, anxious to do justice but unable to decide for want of corroborative evidence.

One day as the judge was walking through the town park deep in thought about the dilemma, he came across a group of Jewish boys playing out the case. He hid behind some shrubbery and watched as each "merchant" stated his case as the rightful owner of the money and as "witnesses" appeared to testify pro and con, until the "judge" gave an order: "Bring a bowl filled with hot water!" When the order was complied with he directed that the gold and silver coins be dumped into the water, stating: "If the money belongs to the oil dealer blotches of fat will appear on the water's surface, showing that he handled the coins with his greasy fingers. If the water remains clean, the money belongs to the draper." The judge, overwhelmed, came out of his hiding and told the boy "judge" to take him to his parents, whom he asked to come to court with their son the following morning. As the session opened he ordered a bowl of clean hot water to be brought, then reenacted the procedure observed in the park the day before. Sure enough, the water became thick with blotches of oil, and he announced his verdict in favor of the oil merchant. As the audience applauded and praised the judge's sagacity, he called the boy and his parents to join him at the bench, and after explaining what happened exclaimed: "It is this boy who deserves your applause and praise, for he is imbued with the

wisdom of Solomon!"

The emotional effect upon young children of the type of stories told during our twilight sessions should not be underestimated. I was seven or eight years old at the time, and after my studies with Zhuk, as will be told later, these stories were relegated to a childish past. But they were not forgotten, and lurked somewhere in the subconscious. Eight years later, at the age of sixteen, I considered myself quite a sophisticated young man, with a rather limited formal education, true, but fairly well acquainted with the Russian, Yiddish and western literature, and imbued with the ideas expressed therein. With the ardor of youth I was already bold enough to proclaim to my father, a practicing but tolerant Jew, that I was an agnostic and would not observe the dogmatic religious prescriptions, since to do so without belief would be hypocritical. We were at that time under German occupation of the First World War and a strict night curfew was in effect. I was then infatuated by my first love, and could not forgo the pleasure of remaining at the young lady's home for hours past curfew. One late evening, as I was stealing homeward through back alleys, I suddenly became aware that I was approaching the rear wall of the Shul. The image of the long red tongue darting out through the wall came to me in a flash, and I instinctively shrank back in terror. There was a strong impulse to retrace my steps and go home through another alley. I also became aware that the protecting exhortation "Shma Yisroel !" was in my mind, with an urge to be pronounced. At the same time the ludicrousness of the situation dawned upon me-- that I should be so strongly affected by an absurd old tale. But reasoning did not help, and the fear persisted. Despite the impulse to go in the opposite direction I forced myself not to give in to the irrational feeling, realizing that I would later have to live



with the stigma of having succumbed to superstition. Calling upon all the willpower at my command I very deliberately and unhurriedly walked ahead, keeping my gaze directly upon the wall, I cannot say whether in provocation or for protection in case something did happen. But despite all my resolution the sense of fear remained until I was some distance past the danger spot conjured up by the hidden memory of the apparently long-forgotten tale.

## INTRODUCTION

When two Jews from Eastern Europe meet for the first time, the following exchange almost invariably takes place:

"Where are you from?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know--a little town, a shtetl."

"Whereabouts, Poland?--Galicia?--Roumania?"

"Well, its on the border between Russia and Poland; used to be Russia under the Tsars, then belonged to Poland, now under Russia again--the Soviets."

"I am also from Russian Poland--Vilner Gubernia. You know?"

"Sure, who doesn't know Vilna? The 'Jerusalem of Lithuania'! I myself am from Grodner Gubernia, not far from Bialystok."

"Really? I know some people from Bialystok--Mandelstein, Zalman Mandelstein. Maybe you know him?"

"Well, I am not from Bialystok, but from a small shtetl nearby--Bolotna, not far from Malybrod. Have you ever heard of them?"

"Bolotna? Malybrod? No, doesn't sound familiar. Maybe you know Hradovka? That's where I come from."

"Hradovka?--No, never heard of it."

Hundreds of little towns, some no bigger than hamlets, scattered throughout Eastern Europe, were the home of three or four million Jews prior to World War II. An additional three million or so inhabited the large cities in the same region. The small

town was called shtetl--the Yiddish diminutive of shtot, meaning city. Though most of them were hundreds of years old, going back to the 14th century or even earlier, few can be found on regional maps, and only those located on important crossroads, railway junctions or river crossings were known beyond their immediate vicinity.

Up to the time of my childhood, during the first decade of this century, there was little intercourse between these communities. Transportation was by horse and wagon, over wretched sandy or muddy roads; railroads and paved highways connected only the large cities; telephones were nonexistent; and mail was delivered at most once a week. The general poverty precluded travel except for urgent reasons, such as important business deals; undergoing an operation in the nearest city which had competent doctors or a hospital; meeting a prospective bride or groom and their parents; and similar weighty matters. Such a trip, when undertaken, was planned for weeks in advance, the whole town knew about it, and the traveler was encumbered with commissions, letters and messages to be executed and delivered to relatives and friends at the destination. Conversely, on the rare occasion that a stranger appeared in town, he found himself besieged with inquiries about people in his own town who were known to local residents, and he too was given letters and messages to be delivered upon his return home. These tasks were accepted as a matter of course, and were usually executed faithfully--first, because it was a mitzva, a good deed; and second because one never knew when he himself might need such a favor. In the main, the town's residents never ventured beyond its precincts, and spent their lives there from birth to death, just as their parents and grandparents had done before them. Their dwellings might have been crowded, but there was no shortage of room at the cemetery just



outside of town.

Though largely isolated from one another, these small communities were nevertheless alike in their general setup, since they had all developed according to the same pattern, dictated by restrictions imposed by the governments under which they lived. But in the course of time each area evolved its own unique attributes--in dress, social customs, dialect, and even religious practice. While all East European Jews spoke Yiddish, an admixture of words from the prevalent local languages enriched and diversified the Yiddish of each region, in addition to a liberal sprinkling of Hebrew words and phrases, often badly garbled in the process.

The economy of the shtetl was based on the peasantry of the neighboring villages. Constrained by government fiat to live in the congested small towns, forbidden to own land outside of their boundaries, barred from service in the extensive bureaucracy and from most of the professions, Jews were perforce reduced to earn a living by commerce or manual trades. They became the middlemen who bought the peasants' surplus products for resale to the cities, and the purveyors of goods and services that the peasants needed. Except for the few prosperous individuals who operated taverns, small industries or wholesale businesses, most Jews eked out a living as storekeepers, shoemakers, tailors or other such manual artisans.

Throughout the centuries, despite discrimination, persecution and occasional pogroms, these Jewish communities stubbornly held on to the faith of their fathers, passing on the old customs and traditions from generation to generation. Study of the Hebrew Scriptures was a must for every boy, and learning was held in the highest respect. There was hardly any illiteracy among Jews, most of whom knew at least one

other language--that of the people among whom they lived. But secular education was held to a minimum by government limitation of the number of Jewish children who could be admitted to official schools, and to some extent also by the attitude of ultra-orthodox Jews who feared, not unreasonably, that young people might be led astray from the righteous path and learn the ways of the Goyim. And why drink from strange wells when all wisdom can be found in the Talmud?

However, toward the last quarter of the nineteenth century fresh winds began to penetrate the shtetl. A number of thinkers among the more emancipated West European, primarily German, Jews started a movement to draw their coreligionists into the mainstream of modern life, to eradicate the lingering ghetto mentality, to lift them out of the morass into which they had been pushed by ages of discrimination and persecution. Secular education was seen as the imperative first step toward this end. As this movement, known as Haskala--Enlightenment--gradually spread to the then Russian provinces of Poland, Lithuania and the Ukraine, a number of private Jewish schools, endowed by wealthy Jews and supported by public contributions, were established in the larger cities. These schools were patterned after the government Gymnasiums, and produced a new generation with a basic grounding in social and natural sciences, eager to learn more about the wide world beyond the horizon. The spirit of Haskala engendered a new Yiddish literature and a rich culture, unique in its amalgam of old folklore and modern thought.

These new trends brought about a restlessness among the youth, a thirst for education, an urge to break out of the confines of the shtetl. Emigration to the newly discovered by them Western World, especially America, with its freedom and promise

of a better life, seemed to be the best way out. The rash of pogroms which erupted in the 1880s provided an additional impetus, and the great migration to America began, to continue in ever increasing volume until it was interrupted in 1914 by the First World War. Large-scale emigration resumed after the war's end, but was greatly curtailed by the First Quota Act of 1921, and then abruptly brought to a trickle by the severely restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, which practically shut the "Golden Door" presided over by the "Mother of Exiles" the Statue of Liberty.

Despite the loss of population through emigration and the ravages of the First World War the shtetl continued to exist and even thrive during the next twenty years, now under Polish suzerainty. Then, in September 1939, came the German onslaught and occupation of Poland. The Nazi's proclaimed "Solution of the Jewish Question" began to be implemented at once. Within three years the total Jewish population, men, women and children, after degradation and torture, was exterminated. The local gentiles, some of whom participated in the atrocities, were at first stunned by the massacres, but after the initial shock wore off they gradually appropriated the Jewish houses, stores, and whatever other property, accumulated by generations of toil, was left behind. The shtetl was wiped off the face of the earth. It exists only in memory.

PART ONE

OLD ROOTS



## CHAPTER ONE

## MARCH OF TIME

## 1. Origins

When at the age of four weeks, in the summer of 1903, I was being carried by my mother through the market place for the first time (of course I was carried-- who ever heard of baby carriages?), she was accosted by Feivl Zelde's, the town buffoon.

"Mazel Tov, Esther Liebe, Mazel Tov to you! Nu, let's see what Shleime produced?!"

Though taken aback by the coarse expression, mother unfolded the blanket in which I was wrapped and, with a bashful smile, presented her first-born. Feivl took one look, spat three times, and yelled out at the top of his lungs:

"Oy, what an ugly creature! Everybody come and look! Tfu, tfu, tfu!"

Mother, in telling this, never failed to add:

"Of course, Yankele always was a beautiful child, but what could one expect from that paskudniak, good-for-nothing Feivl?!"

I have heard this story repeated so many times that I can visualize it in every detail. Here is the buxom young woman, herself only nineteen years old, in a print cotton dress buttoned up to the neck and reaching down to her ankles, picking her way gingerly over the cobblestones of the wide square, full of concern for the precious little bundle cuddled in her arms, returning after an absence of several weeks to the store which her husband had been tending by himself all this time, and inwardly



relishing his expression of pleasure at seeing her and the baby. And here is this rowdy with his mean jokes, trying to embarrass her in front of all these people who joined in the merriment. No wonder the incident figured so often in her reminiscences about my childhood.

I imagine that my mother must have been accompanied on that occasion by her mother-in-law, my grandmother Freide Leie—I cannot conceive that this dainty little woman, always impeccably dressed in black satin, with her mania of overprotectiveness for her offspring, would have permitted her first grandchild to be carried through the streets without her supervision. I am also convinced that Feivl must have received a good talking-to for his impudence.

This then was my public introduction to the little town which, tucked in between the dense pine forests on the edge of the vast Pripet marshes, seemed to me as I was growing up to have been cut off from the rest of the world. The life of its inhabitants seemed to flow in an unvarying pattern, established a long time ago and passed on from one generation to the next. The Russians called it Shereshevo, to the Poles it was Szereszow, and to the Jews Shershev. It was a typical small town in the so-called Pale of Settlement of Tsarist Russia, celebrated in literature and legend under the Yiddish name shtetl.

The region in which the town is located has been fought over for centuries by the nations surrounding it. Up to the end of the thirteenth century there was no established suzerainty over the land. The Mongol Kipchak Empire which dominated Eastern Europe for three hundred years, and whose hordes overran the area in its westward sweep, exercised only sporadic control over the primitive Slavic tribes who were scattered in

the forests or tilled the poor soil, mostly as serfs of Polish or Lithuanian landowners. After the Mongol tide receded to the East the territory came alternately under the sway of the kings of Poland or Lithuania, whose tenuous authority was periodically put to test by roving bands of Ukrainian Cossacks from the shores of the Dnieper. These were fierce brigands, free from allegiance to anyone or anything other than their own unbridled nature, whose raids left death and destruction in their path. They professed the Greek Orthodox faith, and vented their wrath on Jews and Catholic Poles. The most devastating raid occurred in 1648 under the hetman Bogdan Khmelnitsky, when hundreds of towns and villages were put to the torch and their population massacred. More than one million people perished in that year, six hundred thousand of them Jews. Khmelnitsky served as the prototype for Taras Bulba, the hero of Gogol's novel by that name, in which the life and mores of these Cossacks are vividly portrayed. They later became allied with their coreligionists, the rulers of Muscovy, and the Ukraine eventually was absorbed into the Russian Empire.

With the increased power of the Tsars both Lithuania and Poland lost their independence and came under Tsarist rule, with parts of Poland having been annexed to Austria and Prussia during the partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795. Our area remained part of Russia uninterrupted until 1915, when it was occupied by the Germans during the First World War. Even though I was just about entering into my teens at that time, my prior schooling and reading had left me with a predilection for Russian culture, which permeated and intermixed with the Jewish ethos absorbed in the bosom of my family and the atmosphere of the shtetl.

## 2. Vestiges

Each of the dominant powers left its mark on the native population. While the majority professed the Orthodox faith, there was a sizable segment of Catholics and a small number of Protestants, reflecting respectively the Russian, Polish and Lithuanian influence. Intermarriage between these races and miscegenation during the Mongol occupation was evident in the physical traits of the people--fair and dark complexions; blue, gray and brown eyes; Caucasian and Mongoloid facial features. The expression "Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tartar" is not just an empty phrase. There were even some small colonies of Germans and wandering bands of Gypsies in the area. All this had a marked effect on the language of the local population, especially the peasantry. Through a bizarre mixture of words and phrases from Russian, Polish, Ukrainian and other tongues they evolved a unique dialect of their own, dubbed "Goyish" by Jews for want of a better term. Even the Mongols, who disappeared from the area five hundred years earlier, left some vestiges of their speech, as in these counting-out rhymes still current at the time of my childhood:

Aing'ee, baing'ee, goopee, daing'ee;

Akhchi, bakhchi, gammi, dakhchi;

. . . . .

and

Beyek, beyek, izbadan;

Sigany, sigany, kutbalan;

Kuty, pekuty, kutbalasty;

Yashi, bashi, bubikhan.



While the opening syllables of the first rhyme are obviously based on the first letters of the Hebrew alphabet (aleph, beth, gimel), there is no mistaking the Mongolian or Tartar flavor of the other sounds. The first rhyme, incidentally, was a curious mixture of seemingly meaningless words, superstition, and revolutionary content. The two given lines were continued in Yiddish rhymes, which translate as follows:

On the roof a red rooster stands,  
 Flaps his wings, in loud voice portends,  
 Not one, not two, not three, not four,  
 Not five, not six, not seven, not eight, not nine,  
 No man in vassalage should bend his spine.

"Red rooster" was a well-known euphemism for the flames shooting up from the landowners' manors set afire by peasants during uprisings. As for the negative countout, it was a stratagem for warding off an evil eye and for confusing Satan, the Evil One, since he might become unduly interested on hearing of so many children. A similar remedy was in the word "Kinanoreh", a contraction meaning "Let no evil eye see it" used by rote whenever a favorable circumstance was mentioned: "They are, kinanoreh, in good health; they have three children, kinanoreh;" etcetera.

Educated persons spoke Russian or Polish, but even they interspersed their speech with catchwords and expressions from each other and from "Goyish". Words from all three idioms were also absorbed into and became part of the Yiddish language.

### 3. Rise and Decline

Jews have been living in Shershev and in neighboring towns at least since the

early 1400s, and were already of sufficient importance in 1433 to be mentioned by a local notable in a report to the Polish-Lithuanian king Jagiello. By the middle of the nineteenth century they constituted a majority of the town's 10,000 population. It was a thriving community then, containing some small textile factories, flour mills, a tannery, and a brewery. An outstanding industry was the production of wooden shingles for roofing, which were sold to other communities in the region where the forests did not have the straight-grained and knot-free pines, perfect for shingles, which grew in abundance in our vicinity. All these industries were operated by the wealthier Jews and provided employment for many workers, Jews and gentiles. A lively trade in grain and livestock was carried on by itinerant merchants with the peasants of the villages scattered in the area. The large number of storekeepers and independent artisans also shared in the well-being of the community.

This rather prosperous period received a jolt in the 1880s which set off the decline in the town's good fortune. Up to that time all roads in the area connecting the small towns and villages were nothing but rutted wagon trails which turned to mud after a good downpour. They were practically impassable during the fall rainy season and the spring thaw. It was not uncommon for travelers, driver and passengers alike, to have to dismount and even help by pushing the heavy wagon whenever the usually scraggy horse, despite the generous use of the whip and shouted imprecations of the driver, was unable to pull the wagon out of the mire. As long as this condition prevailed in the entire area no town had an advantage in this respect. About 1880 the government began building a crushed-stone highway through the region, primarily for military purposes, using its multitude of recruits as a workforce. This highway, or



chaussee, was originally projected to go through Shershev, but bypassed it in favor of another town twelve miles away, allegedly because the army surveyors were bribed to change the original plans. The resulting diversion of traffic from our town brought about a gradual transfer of most of its industry and commerce to other localities, with the consequent impoverishment of its residents, many of whom moved elsewhere in the province or emigrated to seek their fortune in other countries, primarily in America.

By the time of my childhood in the first decade of this century the textile factories, brewery and tannery were gone. Two of the three tall windmills just outside of town, with their immense slatted vanes, were not working, and even the third one was idle most of the time. The two unused ones became a favorite target for youngsters exercising their skill in stone throwing or vying with each other in climbing up the vanes, leaving many broken slats in the process. The wind, powerless to rotate the blocked creaking vanes, howled through the openings between the slats and contributed to the destruction. The shingle industry was reduced to provide only for local consumption. The big merchants disappeared and only small storekeepers and artisans remained to eke out a living. The town's population dwindled to 5,000—one half of its former number.

From about 1725 to the late 1800s, for over a hundred and fifty years, Shershev was noted as the seat of several learned rabbis, whose renown spread far and wide through the land. Some of them published commentaries on the Talmud and carried on a correspondence with rabbis in other communities who sought their opinion on abstruse points of Jewish law and its application. This succession of great rabbis coincided with the period of the town's prosperity, and must have contributed to its development. But

men of fame and distinction are all too often lured away by prosperous communities and institutions from poorer ones, and so it was that with the decline of our town's fortune came also the loss of its preeminence as a seat of rabbinical learning.

The fame of its rabbis did not save Shershev from acquiring in earlier times the dubious reputation of harboring a den of smugglers. The smuggling was not of merchandise, but of men. During certain periods of the last century conscripts were required to serve in the Russian army for as long as twenty-five years, which for a Jew meant the end of his identity. Even after the term was reduced, the known brutalization of barrack life, anti-Semitic discrimination and abuse, and the impossibility of following religious precepts in the army led to efforts to avoid conscription by all means. It became a common practice for young men to starve themselves for months before they were due for medical examination, in the hope of being rejected because of their emaciated condition. Many went so far as to maim themselves by cutting off the right index (trigger) finger, by inducing lameness, or by ruining the sight of an eye. There was of course also bribery of the examining military doctor and other members of the recruiting commission. However, the surest escape was to go abroad, but men of military age were not given passports for foreign travel. That is where the smugglers came in.

These men had a widespread network throughout Russia's western provinces, their connections running from officials who issued passports in false names or with incorrect ages, to border guards who could be relied upon not to be too inquisitive, to guides who knew the pathways and river fords along the border through which one could get across undetected. They worked in league with confreres on the other side,



in Austria and Germany, who had similar connections in their countries. The dense forests and swamps around Shershev facilitated the activities of the adventurous spirits in town who engaged in this dangerous business. In addition to reluctant recruits, people sought by the police for revolutionary actions were also spirited out of the country in this way. This activity persisted through the first decade of this century, and was stopped only by the outbreak of the First World War.

One person involved in this underground traffic was a distant relative of ours from a neighboring town, Kamenets. I learned this from overheard whispered remarks about his being an "agent." Late one evening in 1910 he suddenly appeared at our house in a state of frenzy. He had been tipped off by no less than the Kamenets Pristav (Chief of Police) himself, with whom he had been doing "business," that he had been denounced by one of his own collaborators and that an order for his arrest was imminent. The fugitive asked to be hidden for a few days until his associates could get him across the border.

To let the man stay at our house was out of the question--a stranger was a novelty in the shtetl and word would soon get around. We had at that time a half-interest in a cow, the other half belonging to my grandmother's brother. Since neither partner had a barn, the cow was housed in a small shed rented from a gentile. So into the shed the terrified man went, and spent two days and two nights with the cow, until a "friend" took him away in the middle of the third night.

I met this relative in the United States many years later and was quite disappointed. Instead of a romantic adventurer I found a very ordinary New York-neighborhood Jewish grocer.



## CHAPTER TWO

## STILL WATERS

## 1. God's Creatures

Shershev was situated on both banks of a small river, Lesna, which flowed sluggishly through it before spreading into a swamp on the outskirts. It was spanned by a wooden bridge, about seventy-five feet long but too narrow for two-way vehicular traffic. When two horse-drawn wagons approached simultaneously from opposite sides one had to wait a few minutes for the other one to cross before crossing in turn. The bridge was the only connection between both parts of town, unless one was to wade across the swamp--not difficult during the dry summer months. In winter everything froze solid and it was no problem to get across on foot or by sleigh.

During good weather the river's only sandy bank near the bridge was alive with barelegged women, their long skirts tucked in high above their knees, washing their laundry in metal basins, slapping the clothes with wooden paddles over flat stones, or rinsing them in the stream. It was unseemly for grown men to stand about gawking, but we boys had no such inhibitions and hung around ostensibly fishing or looking for frogs, but not missing the intriguing female contours revealed by the clinging wet garments. Our "fishing" was done with a string tied to a stick, the hook made of a rusty pin with a piece of bread crust for bait--at least that was used by me because of an aversion to worms. None of us ever caught anything, and I doubt if any fish were around with all the commotion of the washing. We were more successful with frogs,

which were grabbed with bare hands, taken some distance away from the water, then watched as they jumped back to the river, under our prodding. We never harmed them otherwise--we were taught compassion for "God's creatures." Pigs, of course, did not come under that category.

Of all "God's creatures" our tenderest feelings were reserved for the birds. The town was full of sparrows, and we could tell the deep-brown males from the grayish females. They were all over the place, and used to swoop down on the still steaming horses' droppings on the cobblestones, chirping, squabbling and pecking away for all they were worth, and in no time the dropped balls were transformed into a nasty mess spread about the pavement. Crows were the next abundant species, and flew over the houses in swarms, wheeling and turning as if on command, their flapping wings and strident cawing drowning out all other sounds. They nested in the trees around the Russian church and the cemetery behind it, and never alighted on the ground. Then there were the storks, which we saw high in the sky flying in V formation southward in the fall and back again in the spring. They built their nests of dry twigs on the thatched roofs of the peasants' houses, and could be seen standing there on one red leg, their heads and enormous beaks turning in circular motion while producing a series of sharp clacking sounds like that of two boards being struck against each other. I do not recall ever seeing two storks together near their nest, supposedly because one remained to guard the eggs or fledglings while the mate was feeding in the swamp on the plentiful population of frogs, leeches, small water snakes, and fish. After catching the prey they would throw it into the air with an upward jerk of the beak and catch it again on the way down, repeating the performance again and again until the food was

in proper condition to be swallowed or taken home to feed the nestlings.

The birds we loved most were the swallows, black except for a bright red spot on the throat and red markings under the wings which could be seen only when they were in flight. They used to appear every spring and we knew then that the harsh winter is definitely over. Their nests were built out of mud, usually in clusters, right underneath the eaves, and it was believed that the same birds came back to their own nests each year. The house of my maternal grandmother had two such nests, and we kids were delighted to watch the swallows dart like lightning just past us, disappear from view, dart in from another direction again and again, and only then, apparently satisfied that no danger lurks, disappear into the nest opening. We guarded "our" nests with a sense of proprietorship and chased away other birds and cats if they came too close. Though we heard faint peeps, we never saw the young come out and learn to fly. They either did this early in the morning when we were still asleep, or else remained in the nest until ready for flying. One fall day after the birds were gone both nests fell down during a strong squall. They were never rebuilt again.

## 2. Landmarks

Not far from the bridge, in the center of town, a sprawling open area constituted the business section, market place, and fairground. In the middle of this space stood a massive fortresslike rectangular structure, with thick masonry walls, transversed by a wide arcade for pedestrian passage. The building was honeycombed with about twenty-five stores, and the arcade contained a number of closet-like niches used as trading posts or stands. Each store, or krom in Yiddish, was a cubicle about ten feet



wide by eighteen feet deep, without windows, the walls lined with shelves and the floor encumbered by wooden boxes, barrels and sacks, perhaps not unlike the old-time American country store. It had one solid door of rough wood on heavy hand-wrought iron hinges, and next to it a similarly constructed Dutch door, the bottom half of which formed a counter when the upper half was open. The storekeeper (kremer in Yiddish, kremerke for female) sat on a high stool behind the counter, or often stood just outside the door, calling out his wares to every passerby. The high stool had a double purpose: first, to afford a view across the counter; second, and more important, to provide warmth during the frigid Russian winter. For underneath the stool was placed a cast-iron pot filled with glowing charcoal, which exuded enough heat for comfort, especially for the women who draped their long skirts like a tent all around the stool while sitting on it, the heated air thus being directed upward to keep their bodies warm even on very cold days.

These "firepots" provided an obvious and inexhaustible source of wisecracks at the expense of the "hot women" and their husbands who knew of no better way of keeping them warm. Occasionally the women indeed got more heat than bargained for, when a flaring ember would shoot out of the pot and singe their underclothes down to the skin. But that was only one of the minor hazards of being a kremerke.

The houses surrounding the market place and in the adjoining streets were occupied by Jews. Most were one-story wooden structures with shingled roofs, standing close to each other, with usually a small yard and vegetable garden in the back. There were a few brick houses belonging to the well-to-do. Every back yard had an outhouse, since indoor facilities consisted only of chamber pots for use at night and in winter.

These outhouses were about the size of a telephone booth, erected over a pit, and deliberately left open on the bottom of the back to allow access to the roaming pigs which used to feed on the excrement. Pigs were not supposed to be in our area of town, but they got there anyway and presumably found their way home again, although occasionally a peasant woman would walk about in search of a lost one, calling out loudly: "Vas, vas, vas! Vas, vas, vas!" The Jewish boys made a sport of chasing these pigs with sticks and stones, especially when they got near or into the vegetable garden. In such events the women would raise a cry: "Children, children, quick! A pig is in the garden!" and the hunt was on, the trampling kids adding to the damage caused by the animal. Though we knew that the pigs were given to rooting in the excrement, and looked about for the presence of one in the vicinity before going into the outhouse, it was startling just the same to suddenly hear a grunt under one's bare buttocks while squatting there. Many a time was I scared out of my wits by such an unexpected visitor.

The gentile population lived on the outskirts, nearer to their fields and pastures. Their houses were even smaller and poorer than those of the Jews, generally with thatch roofs, but they were spaced much farther from each other, had large fenced-in yards for their cattle, and tremendous barns for storage of hay and grain and for housing the cattle in winter. What I admired about them was the profusion of fruit trees and garden flowers which the Jewish houses were generally devoid of. Many gentiles also had their own wells since they needed a lot of water for their cattle, whereas the Jews had to use public wells often situated a considerable distance away from their houses.

There were two churches in Shershev. The Russian Orthodox church, with one



large and two small onion-shaped cupolas, was in the center, not far from the market place. The Catholic church with its Gothic façade stood across the bridge on the other side of town. Four prayer houses, in quite ordinary buildings, were scattered conveniently in the Jewish section. And there was the Great Synagogue--the Shul--in the center of town, but that deserves a special description. The only other public facilities were a poorhouse and a communal bathhouse with a ritual bath as an adjunct, maintained by the Jewish community. Otherwise there were no public buildings--no school, library, postoffice, hospital or police station--not even a jail. The small police contingent occupied a rented house and used one of the back rooms as a lockup. Fire-fighting equipment consisted of two large wooden water barrels mounted on two-wheeled undercarriages, with attached hand pumps and hoses, which were hauled to a burning building by hand, or by horses if they could be procured quickly enough. Fires were a constant threat, especially in summer when wind-blown sparks would ignite one after another of the crowded wooden houses, sometimes wiping out entire streets.

One such conflagration remains vividly in my memory. My grandmother Freide Leie and her daughter Esther Beile, each holding one of my hands, half dragged me while running through the flames on both sides of the street, heading for refuge in the nearest swamp. Many other people were running hither and yon, some carrying bundles or a single household article, crying, yelling, all half crazed with fear. Wind-driven embers and flaming roof shingles were flying over and around us, and the crackling, hissing flames were shooting up to the sky. I kept on closing my eyes against the heat and glare, and suddenly began shivering from the abrupt change in temperature when we came into a side street and dropped on the ground under some trees to catch our

breath. That was during the groisse sreife (big fire) of 1908 which devastated the center of town and was talked about for years thereafter. Our houses--each grandmother had her own house--escaped the fire due to their location away from the center, nearer to the gentile houses on the outskirts.

### 3. Tse d a k a

The destruction of a house was always a major catastrophe to the owner. With the exception of the rare person of means who may have been able to save some money, the average Jew, even of the middle classes, had trouble enough to provide for the immediate daily needs of his family, let alone accumulate savings. When his house burned down, usually with everything in it, he at once became a pauper, without a roof over his head. There was no such thing as insurance, no banks to borrow from (and what bank would lend money to a pauper?), so the only recourse was to charity.

Charity, under the Hebrew name Tsedaka, has been rooted in the Jewish ethos since ancient times, and was practiced almost as an eleventh Commandment. There was no Jewish home, no matter how poor, which did not have a little blue and white box (the national Jewish colors), known as pushke, into which a copper was dropped whenever possible for charity. Usually the money was donated for such local needs as paying cheder tuition for a poor boy; aiding a widow with small children; providing a dowry for an orphan girl; and for supporting a yeshiva or home for the aged. But it would take the contents of thousands of pushkes to help a man rebuild his house, and in the case of such a calamity as the "big fire" local means were totally inadequate. Only an appeal to all the Jews of the province, and beyond, would avail in such a situation.



An appeal of such magnitude was made through the dispatch of an emissary, known as shaliakh, or several of them, to travel from town to town and plead for donations for the homeless victims. The emissaries carried letters from the town rabbi, usually in Hebrew, detailing the extent of the disaster, expounding the virtues of Tsedaka with citations from the Talmud, and appealing for help. Upon arrival in each town the letter was presented to the local rabbi, who would read it from the pulpit to his congregation in the synagogue, adding his own appeal for generosity as a great mitzva. The shaliakh too would make a statement and answer questions from the audience, and often go from house to house to make the collection.

In addition to the emissaries, who usually covered the small towns, letters were dispatched to the community heads of large cities with similar appeals. Though the response in all instances was wholehearted and generous, it often took a year or longer before enough money was collected to rebuild the houses destroyed by the fire. Meanwhile the homeless were crowded in with relatives, in the poorhouse, or in the prayer houses if no other accommodations could be found.

The selection of an emissary was not a simple matter. The man had to be unencumbered with personal affairs, permitting his absence from home and family for many months; sufficiently articulate to convey the urgency of his mission; and trustworthy enough to remit all the collected money, the accounting for which was far from foolproof. Nevertheless, suspicions and accusations sometimes arose, leading to dissension in the community, with the shaliakh's life made miserable whether or not he was guilty of any malfeasance.

Making life miserable for public figures was a sport zestfully engaged in by the



shtetl Jews. Powerless to openly resist the government autocracy, they vented their frustrations against their own people of some prominence. Within the Jewish community, democracy reigned supreme, at least in vocal expression, and no one was immune from criticism, including the rabbis.

Each shtetl typically had only one rabbi--there was neither the need for, nor the means to support, more than one. His most vexing task was to resolve personal disputes in a Din Torah, or judgement according to the Torah, still occasionally resorted to today by Orthodox Jews. Although both sides voluntarily agreed to put their case before the rabbi and abide by his decision, the losers sometimes accused him of unfairness or partiality, and did not hesitate to air their grievances in public, or worse.

One such incident, still talked about during my childhood, had occurred about twenty years earlier. It involved a decision that one of the two ritual slaughterers did not fully observe the prescribed rules in butchering an ox, and that the meat was therefore unusable by Jews. This was a severe blow to several butchers, who protested that the ruling was based on a technicality and that the rabbi favored the other slaughterer. They were supported by a number of households who were faced with a meatless Sabbath.

The following morning, a Friday, a pig's ear was found nailed to the rabbi's door. In consternation the venerable old man refused to pass through the door, the only entrance to the house, and did not allow anyone else to do so or to pass food through it for fear of contamination. He declared a fast until the door is removed and replaced by a new one, and also proclaimed an anathema against the perpetrators. Legend had it that several of the suspects had met with untimely deaths, and that the rabbi himself died within a few days from the shock of the desecration.

## CHAPTER THREE

## TWILIGHT ZONE

## 1. The Shul

Now about the Great Synagogue--the Shul. Unlike the two churches, whose counterpart could be seen in any other small town in the area, the Shul was unique, differing radically from the modest houses of prayer used by Jews in that part of the world. Were that building seen at a distance in Greece, it would have been taken for an ancient temple dedicated to Zeus or to one of the lesser Greek deities. For it was in that style--a huge, massive rectangular structure, its façade of four towering columns topped by a triangular pediment with a sculptured frieze, but without portrayal of human or animal forms. Though in places the ravages of time had taken their toll, the columns and walls retained the whiteness of the masonry, and the roof was mellowed by a light-green patina. In the interior the ceiling was supported by four similar columns, complete with Doric capitals, resting on circular bases. On the eastern wall, surrounding the richly embroidered velvet curtain that covered the niche for the Torahs, was an immense wooden panel, carved in bas-relief with an intricate design of vines, flowers, birds, deer, and other animals. This had originally been gilded and painted, but only traces of the colors remained. On the opposite side was a gallery for the women, reached by two ornate staircases; and high up in that wall was a sculptured round opening which may have held stained glass at one time. The interior had no pews other than masonry

ones forming part of the walls on all sides. The raised pulpit of elaborately carved wood still stood in the center between the four columns.

Although the Shul was held in great reverence, it was entirely unsuitable for our small community, and no one could remember when, if ever, it was used for religious services. However, two rites were from time to time performed in the open square in front of it: weddings and funerals. Wedding ceremonies were deemed to acquire added sanctity when performed in front of the Shul and usually took place there, weather permitting. Funeral services were held there only on infrequent occasions, for persons distinguished by piety, learning or other good deeds. In such cases the bier was placed in front of the Shul (never inside--it is forbidden by ritual law), and the eulogies were delivered from the Shul steps. This was a signal honor and a mark of utmost respect on the part of the community.

No one really knew how old the Shul was or under what circumstances it was built. Many stories were current about its origin, the most plausible one featuring as protagonist a beautiful Italian lady, the wife of a very rich and powerful Polish nobleman. While visiting one of their estates in our vicinity, she was attacked by a swarm of hornets and would have been stung to death had she not been rescued by some Jews who happened to be passing by. In gratitude the magnate had the Shul built as a gift to the town's Jews. This story gains credence from the historical fact that the famous Polish king Stefan Batory was married to an Italian, a member of the noble Sforza family of Milan. She personally owned extensive tracts of land in our region, and reportedly built a Catholic church in neighboring Pruzhany in the 1530s. It is probable that the Shul dated from that period.



It is noteworthy that Batory and his predecessors favored the presence of Jews in Poland as being conducive to the economic development of the country. He augmented the privileges given to them by prior Polish rulers, and bestowed upon them the right of governing their own communities and the power of taxation for their maintenance. In this propitious climate it would not have been out of character for a Polish nobleman to build a house of worship for Jews. If this conjecture about the origin of the Shul is correct, it would indicate the presence of a sizable Jewish community in Shershev in the early part of the sixteenth century, strengthening the supposition that the first Jewish settlers arrived there in the fifteenth century or earlier.

Whatever the origin of the Shul, there is no doubt that it was very old, and it always aroused the curiosity of visitors. During the First World War I saw German officers taking pictures of it, and after the town became part of Poland an official government commission came to photograph and make inquiries about the building.

## 2 . Ghosts and Children

For me and my playmates the Shul was an object of mystery and fascination. As a holy place unused and uninhabited by humans, it was obviously haunted and populated by ghosts and demons, especially at night. One of our favorite pastimes during the long summer twilights was to huddle up in some out-of-the-way nook and repeat weird tales overheard from grownups. One such "true" story was of the ordeal that befell Shmuel Elie the cripple, so named because of his lameness. He was on his way home on Friday afternoon from trading in the villages the whole week, but his heart was heavy because business was bad and he had not earned enough even to buy proper Sabbath food

for his wife and children. Suddenly, on a lonely stretch of road, he caught sight of a calf, standing and moaning pitifully: "Maa . . . maa . . . " Shmuel Elie looked about but no people were to be seen. He went over to the calf which did not try to run away--it just stood there looking at him with its calf's eyes, hanging out its tongue and continuing to maa . . . maa . . . " The Lord of the world, blessed be His name, must have heard my prayers and sent me this calf so that my family should not be in want during the Sabbath," Shmuel Elie said to himself. He put the calf in the wagon behind him and continued on his way, happy with his unexpected good fortune, and not paying attention to the unusual shying of his horse. All of a sudden he heard an eerie giggling behind him: "Hee, hee, hee . . . Hee, hee, hee." He turned around, and there in his wagon instead of a calf was a scrawny old woman, in tatters, her disheveled gray hair twisting in the wind, her nose like a beak, her eyes like two fiery coals, and her toothless mouth grinning at him. In horror he whipped his horse into a gallop, but the "hee, hee, hee" became louder, she stretched out to him her bony hands with nails like claws and squeaked: "Come be my husband, hee, hee, hee . . . . Take me to be your wife, hee, hee, hee . . . . " At this Shmuel Elie remembered the holy incantation and yelled out: "Shma Yisroel . . . !" A loud screech was heard, and the phantom disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Shmuel Elie did not stop whipping his horse until he reached town and began yelling: "Help, Jews, help!" He was taken off the wagon half dead from fright and brought to the rabbi, who recited with him the prescribed blessing for escape from grave danger. Only then did Shmuel Elie come back to himself and was escorted home by a deputation of Jews who also provided him with food for the proper celebration of the Sabbath.



Many of these hair-raising stories had the Shul as the sphere of action. It was "known" that at one time a Jew passing the back of the Shul at midnight suddenly noticed something red in the center of the white wall. As he watched, the thing started to move in his direction, twisting and wriggling like a snake, and he realized that it was a long red tongue coming right out of the wall, about to coil itself around him. He did not remember anything else, but was found the following morning lying in a dead faint with his hands firmly clutching his tsitsith--the ritual fringes worn by all religious Jews. It was surmised that he grabbed them instinctively before he fainted and was thus saved from worse harm.

Despite these horror tales we were brave enough to explore the Shul's interior in the daytime. Once we found a narrow wooden stairway leading up from a corner of the women's gallery. Three of us climbed up the rickety steps through layers of dust and cobwebs and found ourselves in a vast attic, crisscrossed by thick beams and rafters supporting the roof. In one corner there was a pile of torn prayer books, their yellowed pages crumbling to the touch. At spaced intervals in the floor were large circular holes through which heavy chains with lamps on their ends hung from crossbars. The lamps were apparently hoisted up through these holes for repair or refilling with kerosene. I became quite dizzy as I bent over to look into the interior deep down below me, and nearly fell through the hole. We beat a hasty retreat after that, and never ventured up there again.

That ghosts were not to be trifled with I learned to my own sorrow. Across the street from my grandmother Peshe's house there stood a hovel which had been deserted for many years. Its roof was partly caved in, all windows were broken, and the entrance

door was hanging askew on one hinge. It was sitting about twenty feet back from the pavement, and could be reached through a narrow alleyway alongside a tall wooden fence, which separated it from the house of my best friend, named Yankl like myself. The hovel, of course, often figured in our stories, its reputation for being haunted heightened by the arcane profession of its onetime owner, that of a menaker--one skilled in the removal of certain veins from slaughtered animals to make their meat kosher. It was always referred to as "Nissen menaker's house." Naturally, the place was often explored by us in the daytime, despite the filth from stray dogs, cats and mice. One evening, as we were matching boasts about our respective bravery, I took up a challenge to enter Nissen menaker's house after dark. My pals watched in a group at the entrance to the alleyway as I proceeded gingerly along the darkened passage, my heart thumping violently and my eyes trying to discern what lurks in the spaced shadows cast by the boards of the fence against the moonlight. After what seemed like eternity I reached the entrance and touched the hanging door for support before examining the interior, when a horrible groan or croak pierced the dead stillness. All I remember is the sight of the other boys scattering in all directions as I was running with all my might toward grandma's house. I was told later that I burst into the house in a cold sweat, a wild look in my eyes, mumbling incoherently about shaydim (spirits). I was put to bed and stayed there for several days, shivering and tossing in hallucinations. My parents and grandmothers had the fright of their lives, and after learning from my pals what happened, resorted to a time-honored remedy--that of "pouring wax." An old peasant woman, reputed to dabble in witchcraft, came to the house, poured molten wax into a dish filled with hot water, and gazed intently at the shapes



being formed while mumbling some mysterious words. She finally pronounced that I had been frightened by a pig, and there the matter rested until I recovered my normal self.

Not all our stories were scary. Many of them, of folklore or Talmudic origin, were edifying and moralistic. Most of these had ancient Israel, particularly Jerusalem, as their locale, as in the following tale.

There were once two brothers who dwelt in the land of Canaan, tilling the soil and tending their flocks. One was unmarried, the other one was blessed with many children. One night at harvest time, as each was watching the reaped grain in his own field, the first brother said to himself:

"It is not fair that I should have as much grain as my brother. I need only enough for myself, but he has so many mouths to feed."

With that he shouldered as many sheaves as he could carry and stealthily deposited them next to those of his brother, then returned and went to sleep peacefully. The other brother, having awakened in the middle of the night, also bethought himself:

"How lucky am I to have a wife and many sons who will take care of me in my old age, but my poor brother--who will help him when he is no longer able to work?"

He then also took as many sheaves as he could carry and put them quietly next to his brother's sheaves.

In the morning both were surprised to find their crops undiminished. They repeated the act the following night, but again found nothing missing in the morning. On the third night, as they were walking laden with the grain, they met halfway, fell into each other's arms, and vowed that henceforth whatever belongs to one also belongs



to the other. The place where they met was on Mount Moriah, and on that very spot later stood the Holy of Holies of Solomon's Temple.

Children often took the leading parts in our stories. A Greek sage, having heard of the precocity of the children of Jerusalem, went there to find out for himself. Within sight of the city walls he came to a fork in the road and asked some children who were playing nearby which was the shorter route. One of the boys replied:

"The one on the right is shorter but longer; the left one is longer but shorter."

Puzzled, the sage took the right fork only to come to a deep ravine which could be crossed by goats, donkeys and young boys, but was impassable for him, so that he had to retrace his steps and take the left fork.

Upon arrival inside the city the sage gave a small coin to a boy and asked him to buy enough food to last for a month. The boy returned and presented him with a bagful of salt. He asked another boy to buy him a dozen apples, making sure that they are all tasty. The boy brought the apples, with one bite taken out of each one. "I made sure that every one of them is really tasty," was the explanation.

A famous trial was taking place in the city of Prague, so the story went. Two merchants had adjacent stores, with only a thin wall between them. One was a draper, the other a dealer in oil. Late one day, at closing time, one of the merchants watched through a crack in the wall as his neighbor counted the day's receipts, put the gold and silver coins in a leather bag and hid it behind some merchandise. The watcher then ran into the street with a hue and cry that he had been robbed, accusing his neighbor of the theft since he was the only person in the vicinity at the time. To the police officers and assembled crowd he described the leather bag and the amount of the gold and silver

pieces therein, and demanded that the neighbor's premises be searched. This was done despite the other's protestations, the bag was found and impounded as evidence. At the trial each man claimed that the money was his, witnesses appeared to testify to the honesty of both men, other witnesses made derogatory statements against each of them, and the affair became the talk of the town with the partisans of each side engaging in heated arguments. The trial judge was in a quandary, anxious to do justice but unable to decide for want of corroborative evidence.

One day as the judge was walking through the town park deep in thought about the dilemma, he came across a group of Jewish boys playing out the case. He hid behind some shrubbery and watched as each "merchant" stated his case as the rightful owner of the money and as "witnesses" appeared to testify pro and con, until the "judge" gave an order: "Bring a bowl filled with hot water!" When the order was complied with he directed that the gold and silver coins be dumped into the water, stating: "If the money belongs to the oil dealer blotches of fat will appear on the water's surface, showing that he handled the coins with his greasy fingers. If the water remains clean, the money belongs to the draper." The judge, overwhelmed, came out of his hiding and told the boy "judge" to take him to his parents, whom he asked to come to court with their son the following morning. As the session opened he ordered a bowl of clean hot water to be brought, then reenacted the procedure observed in the park the day before. Sure enough, the water became thick with blotches of oil, and he announced his verdict in favor of the oil merchant. As the audience applauded and praised the judge's sagacity, he called the boy and his parents to join him at the bench, and after explaining what happened exclaimed: "It is this boy who deserves your applause and praise, for he is imbued with the



wisdom of Solomon!"

The emotional effect upon young children of the type of stories told during our twilight sessions should not be underestimated. I was seven or eight years old at the time, and after my studies with Zhuk, as will be told later, these stories were relegated to a childish past. But they were not forgotten, and lurked somewhere in the subconscious. Eight years later, at the age of sixteen, I considered myself quite a sophisticated young man, with a rather limited formal education, true, but fairly well acquainted with the Russian, Yiddish and western literature, and imbued with the ideas expressed therein. With the ardor of youth I was already bold enough to proclaim to my father, a practicing but tolerant Jew, that I was an agnostic and would not observe the dogmatic religious prescriptions, since to do so without belief would be hypocritical. We were at that time under German occupation of the First World War and a strict night curfew was in effect. I was then infatuated by my first love, and could not forgo the pleasure of remaining at the young lady's home for hours past curfew. One late evening, as I was stealing homeward through back alleys, I suddenly became aware that I was approaching the rear wall of the Shul. The image of the long red tongue darting out through the wall came to me in a flash, and I instinctively shrank back in terror. There was a strong impulse to retrace my steps and go home through another alley. I also became aware that the protecting exhortation "Shma Yisroel !" was in my mind, with an urge to be pronounced. At the same time the ludicrousness of the situation dawned upon me-- that I should be so strongly affected by an absurd old tale. But reasoning did not help, and the fear persisted. Despite the impulse to go in the opposite direction I forced myself not to give in to the irrational feeling, realizing that I would later have to live

with the stigma of having succumbed to superstition. Calling upon all the willpower at my command I very deliberately and unhurriedly walked ahead, keeping my gaze directly upon the wall, I cannot say whether in provocation or for protection in case something did happen. But despite all my resolution the sense of fear remained until I was some distance past the danger spot conjured up by the hidden memory of the apparently long-forgotten tale.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## TOWN MEETS VILLAGE

## 1. Coexistence

The population of Shershev was almost equally divided between Jews and gentiles, but the economy of the Jews depended mainly upon the peasantry of the neighboring villages whose combined population exceeded by far the total of the town's 5,000 residents. These villagers were equally dependent upon the Jews for essential supplies and services, and for disposing of their surplus products.

Except for the police, clergy and some impoverished Polish gentry, the town's gentile residents were not much different from their village cousins--perhaps a little better dressed and more refined in manner and speech. Like the villagers they tilled their fields, raised cattle, hogs, sheep and fowl for their own use and for sale; and engaged in handicrafts that almost made them self-sufficient. They milled their own grain and baked their own large round dark-brown loaves of rye bread--rye being the chief grain crop, although some wheat, barley, buckwheat and oats were also grown. They churned their own butter by hand in wooden churns, and made very tasty cottage cheese. They had plenty of fruit--apples, pears, plums and cherries, and an abundance of vegetables--cabbage, carrots, beets, turnips, cucumbers--but lettuce, tomatoes and corn were unknown. In the autumn their garrets were filled with dry peas, beans and lentils in burlap sacks, and plaited strings of onions and garlic hanging from the rafters. Next to bread, potatoes were the most important staple. They were stored in deep pits lined

with straw, to be dug up in spring for sowing. Added to all this were mushrooms and berries picked in the woods, eaten fresh in summer and dried or made into preserves for the winter. An occasional piece of pork or lard from a hog usually slaughtered for Christmas or Easter, complemented this simple but nourishing and plentiful diet.

The peasants also produced much of their own clothing. They grew flax which was worked into excellent homespun linen for towels, sheets and undergarments. Long strips of linen were also used for foot wrappings, to be worn with the homemade bast shoes; the lapti, since leather shoes and boots were a luxury, usually worn only on Sundays to church. It was not uncommon to see villagers walking to town with their footwear in their hands or thrown over their shoulders, to be put on only upon reaching the outskirts. Pressed-felt high boots, known as valenki, were worn in winter, with mittens, scarves and head coverings made of homespun wool. A prized possession was the kuzhukh, a sheepskin short coat with the fleece on the inside, and an indispensable accessory was the torba, a large catchall leather bag slung over the shoulder on a wide leather strap, usually worn only by men. Many poor peasants, who could not afford leather, had their torbas made of burlap, with a sturdy rope serving as a shoulder strap.

If the modern woman's handbag, with its plethora of gewgaws, seems bewildering (to a man, that is), the torba was a veritable storehouse of things ordinary and arcane. It always contained a hunk of black bread and a piece of hard cheese, bacon or dried fish; a knife; a corn cob pipe and a pouch of makhorka, the coarse veins of tobacco leaves that produced a nauseating miasma when smoked; a piece of flint, a steel bar for striking it, and some tinder (matches were too expensive); and a lengthy

piece of twine or rope, for any emergency. The torba might also contain a horseshoe or two; some rusty nails picked up on the road; harness parts and household articles to be mended in town; quantities of dried beans, peas or lentils, in small linen bags, for sale; and sometimes the carcass of an unlucky rabbit killed on the way. Good behavior was often exacted from Jewish tots by threats of being sold to a "goy" and be put in his torba.

Though supplied with the basic necessities through their own labor, the peasants still needed other essentials, the money for which was obtained by sale of surplus produce, a sheep or a calf, and by working as laborers in the forest during the winter. They also sold pelts of animals, mostly rabbits but occasionally otters and foxes, which they trapped; and fish, mainly perch and pike, caught in the numerous streams of the area. The peasant women also contributed to the family income. Though they worked alongside the men in the fields during the sowing and harvesting seasons, they had the additional tasks of tending to the cows and pigs, raising chickens, and taking care of the vegetable gardens, on top of the usual home chores of cooking, washing, sewing and mending clothes, churning butter, making cheese, and looking after the children. During the long winter evenings they spun flax and wool, wove the first into linen towels and sheets, and knitted the wool into mittens, socks and headwear, the towels often embroidered in colorful patterns. All these products were for home consumption as well as for sale to the townspeople.

With the proceeds the peasants bought salt, sugar, soap, kerosene; axes, saws, shovels, rakes, hoes and other hand tools; harness gear, cooking utensils, and other manufactured articles they could not fashion themselves. An occasional bottle or two of vodka

for the men and some items of finery for the women--no woman would be seen in church without her gaily colored kerchief on her head, and no girl would think of going to a dance without some ribbons entwined in her braids--were also a must. Then there were services the peasants needed: horse shoeing, wagon repairs, tailoring, boot mending, and repair of household articles. For all these goods and services they depended upon the Jews, who were also the buyers of their products, thus bringing about a lively intercourse between the two disparate segments of the population.

The Jews were congregated in the towns, large and small, not by choice but by compulsion. The Pale of Settlement was a circumscribed area in the western part of Russia designated by the Tsarist regime as a place of residence for Jews, who were not allowed to live elsewhere in the vast territory of the empire, except by special permission. But even in the Pale there were severe restrictions on their living conditions, occupations and education. Jews were not permitted to own land other than small plots for houses within the boundaries of towns, thus preventing them from engaging in farming. Though subject to draft into the army, they could serve only as common soldiers and were not promoted to the officer class. The civil service was closed to them; they were excluded from the police and the railroad administration; and it was a rarity for a Jew to be found in the legal and educational professions. Their entry into the medical, engineering and other scientific fields was curtailed by the rule that Jews could constitute only five percent of the total enrollment in institutions of higher learning. For this reason Jews aspiring to a higher education or profession often went to study in Germany, Switzerland or elsewhere in Western Europe, if they could afford it.

Because of these restrictions Jews were perforce reduced to earn their livelihood



by commerce, industry and service occupations. Hence the profusion of Jewish storekeepers, itinerant traders, tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, repairmen, and ordinary laborers. A few became small manufacturers, wholesale grain and cattle merchants, and lumber contractors. These were generally more prosperous than the storekeepers and artisans, most of whom led a hand-to-mouth existence. Essentially they were all middlemen, catering to the needs of the peasantry and providing the necessary link between the latter and the urban population of the large cities.

## 2. The Market Place

The common meeting ground between Jews and gentiles was the town's market place. The local residents did their trading during the weekdays, but the big market day was on Sunday, when the villagers came to town to attend church--many villages had no churches--and to take care of their mundane affairs. On that day the place was packed with peasants' wagons, shafts raised vertically to provide more parking space. There were cows, pigs, sheep and fowl brought for sale, and lively bargaining went on all over. Cows' udders were examined for presence of sores, squealing pigs were hefted aloft to gauge weight, and fowl's feathers were ruffled to see if the skin was yellow with fat--the fatter the better. All this was accompanied by shouts, recriminations, swearing and curses until a mutual slap of the antagonists' hands signified that the deal was made, and both parties repaired to the nearest inn to seal the agreement with a few shots of vodka. Horse trading was one of the most important activities at the fair, and horse stealing was not uncommon. Many fights broke out, especially in the afternoon when the "goyim" had already fortified themselves with monopolka--the

vodka produced under government monopoly. Not a few men were down on the ground in a drunken stupor, wallowing in the horses' droppings and urine, oblivious to the commotion around them. Peasants often urinated next to their wagons, since the few public toilets were out of the way on a side street and there was not enough of them for the huge throng. Here and there a group was gathered around an accordion player, hopping and stomping to its lively tunes. There were enough sights, sounds and smells to satisfy any curiosity seeker.

In the stores every transaction was a tug of wits or will between buyer and seller. First the merchandise was carefully selected from among the number of the same items available. Next it was tried out if at all possible. A comb, for instance, would be pulled through one's matted hair to test the strength of its teeth. If it broke in the process due to exertion of too much force, it was proof that it was no good in the first place, the deal was off and the storekeeper lost his cost of the comb. A penknife was tried out for sharpness on a small piece of wood or on one's fingernails. Lengths of pink, blue, green or yellow ribbon would be entwined in a girl's tresses to get the opinion of companions about which color was more becoming. A pair of stockings could not be tried on, so it was examined even more thoroughly against the light, after sticking the hand inside and spreading out the fingers, to make sure there are no flaws. When the selection was finally made the haggling would start over the price, the customer offering half the amount asked, the seller swearing that his own cost was more than that, each side giving in a little at a time until the bargain was struck. And as often as not the bargaining would be accompanied by recriminations, insults and curses—it was all part of the game.

Among the storekeepers both husband and wife were involved in the business, since

the store had to be open for long hours and the woman also had to do the housework, shop, cook and attend to the children. But on Sundays and other market days all available family members, including children from the age of six or seven, were recruited as salespersons or watchers. On those days the stores were thronged with shoppers who could not be trusted to resist temptation. Stealing was a time-honored practice if one could get away with it, and the torba was very suitable for dropping things into underhandedly. When caught in the act, the peasant usually returned the stolen article, spat contemptuously and walked away. However, if a thief became recalcitrant, a shouting dispute arose, with witnesses on both sides joining in and an amused crowd gathering to watch the outcome. The commotion usually went on until one of the two strazhniki (policemen) appeared, listened to both sides and made his decision, from which there was no appeal. Fear of the police was so strong that these two men, armed with revolvers and long sabers in black scabbards dangling at their sides, exercised undisputed control over the populace, and their word was law. Since the peasants' propensity for thievery and the Jews' reluctance to court trouble were well known, the strazhnik's ruling usually was in favor of the storekeeper, the stolen item was returned, and peace was restored. No arrests were ever made in such cases.

The frequent fights that used to break out were usually limited to fisticuffs between drinking companions, encouraged by friends and other onlookers with: "C'mon, Mikola, smack him on the jaw!" or "Attaboy, Petrukha, paste him on the mug!" "Knock his teeth out, his teeth!" while the women were screaming: "Batyushki, good people, stop them, stop them, they'll kill each other!" After a while one of the older men would calmly pronounce: "Alright boys, you've had your fun. Enough!" where-

upon half a dozen hands would grab each of the combatants, blood was wiped from the faces, a fresh bottle of vodka was uncorked by a smart whack of the palm on its bottom, and everybody joined in the celebration. These fights left no hard feelings, the police seldom interfered, and business went on as usual in the market place.

Occasionally, however, fights took on a different dimension. One of these I witnessed from a safe distance. A peasant from a nearby village recognized his horse, stolen several months earlier, being offered for sale by a group of gypsies. These swore that they had bought the horse in a town many miles away, but the peasant, abetted by his co-villagers who also recognized the horse, accused the gypsies of the theft and demanded its return. Other people joined in, the mood became ugly, and a general brawl ensued, during which one of the gypsies flashed a knife and cut a peasant's face. One of the peasants then grabbed an ax from his wagon and hit a gypsy on the shoulder. By then the full police contingent was on the scene, a shot was fired in the air, the brawling ceased, and the knife and ax wielders were arrested. The next day they were taken in chains to another town to be imprisoned pending trial, since Shershev had neither jail nor court. The cause of the dispute was never resolved--during the melee the horse disappeared, apparently spirited away by one of the gypsies.

Unlike other people, who used the public bathhouse, Bobbe Leie took weekly baths at home in a large wooden tub, for which pails and pails of water were heated in a copper cauldron standing on a tripod over a wood fire. The rim of the tub was just about on a level with my eyes as I toddled up to it, naked, to be lifted inside for a scrubbing. At bedtime during the winter she would help me get undressed near the white-tiled stove while at the same time warming a featherbed against it, to quickly wrap me in it and carry me to bed. On summer evenings there was a different daily routine. At dusk, just as the herds were coming in from pasture, we would go to a nearby peasant's barn where the peasant woman would fill a glass with warm milk straight from the cow's udder, which I drank on the spot. The glass was brought along by grandma because the peasant's utensils were not kosher, and besides she did not

The forests in our province abounded in tall firs very suitable for shingles because of their straight-grained and knot-free wood. After the trees were felled and cleared of their branches, the trunks were sawed into two-foot-long logs which were then split into wedge-shaped slats about five or six inches wide. These were then smoothened with a wide two-handled plane, and the thicker edge of the slat was grooved so that the thin edge of another one would fit into the groove. Grandpa occasionally did this work at home, and I loved to watch the dexterity with which he clamped the slat into a wooden vise, glided the plane along the flat sides to produce a thin shaving that curled up with the movement of the plane, and then formed the groove right through the center of the

thicker edge with a special tool. This was the most critical part of the job, requiring a keen eye and a steady hand, because the edge was only about half an inch wide, and if the tool went off center and cut the groove's shoulder the shingle was spoiled. Sometimes grandpa let me "help" by placing his hands over mine on the handles of the plane and glide it slowly to produce a shaving all of my own. The pungent resinous odor of the pine was most pleasant and considered healthful, and the shavings made fine kindling for starting a fire. When I got older I used to whittle an occasional shingle that got spoiled into a saber, dagger or rifle, the possession of which automatically made me a general when playing war with my friends.

Wars were known to us kids from the Scriptures as well as from overheard talk of adults, so games of war were often played by us: Jews versus Assyrians or Philistines, Russians versus Turks, or Poles versus Cossacks. But sometimes there were real battles, between boys from different heders or streets. They started with taunts, progressed to pushing and punching, and often developed into throwing rocks. Most of the time the combatants were dispersed by grownups, but the fighting always stopped if one of the kids began bleeding or crouched in pain from a direct hit. In such event the victim's pals would raise a howl: "Look what you did, you killed him!" At this the victors, not the vanquished, took to flight in fear and with a feeling of guilt. There were, by the way, two standard remedies for a bleeding head: application to the wound of either some soft black bread from the inside of the large brown loaves available in every household; or of some thick cobwebs just as easily available from any barn or outhouse. These must have been effective--no mother ever lost a son in our wars.

We had no doctor in town, only a feldsher--a sort of medical assistant or male

nurse--whose usual prescription for backache, fever, or any other malady the cause of which was not readily ascertainable, also was, like the remedy for a bleeding head, one out of two: either leeches or cupping. Leeches were plentiful in our swamps, and the disgusting creatures always stuck to our bare legs whenever we waded there. Cupping was done by holding the opening of a small thick glass cup over a lit candle, and then quickly applying the cup to the back or side of the patient so that the flesh was drawn into the semi-vacuum created as the warm air inside the cup cooled. If these remedies did not help a more drastic cure was sometimes resorted to: bleeding the swollen protuberances created by the cupping, the incision being made by the town barber with his razor. The basic idea in these cases was to draw out the "bad blood" which caused the illness. If the patient died, well . . . , one did whatever one could, so it must have been God's will.

The described remedies, though common, were not universal and sick people often were taken in a wagon bumping over the cobblestones and the ruts in the dirt roads to the nearest city, Pruzhany, which had a doctor. He was a Pole named Pacewicz, a pleasant elderly gentleman with a drooping white mustache who acquired considerable experience during his many years of practice and pursued his profession seriously and competently. The trouble was that he could not always be found at home after undergoing the bone-jarring trip of about four hours, since he was the only doctor serving the two towns and several nearby villages, and was often away for hours or even for days. It is anybody's guess how many lives would have been saved if we had a resident physician or at least a telephone in town, not to speak of an automobile.



regularly, especially when he was "chopping" sugar. I had learned that his sole occupation was to drink tea all day long, filling glass cups with hot water from the steaming samovar that grandma brought in to him. His sugar came in enormous cone-shaped loaves which he used to break up into small bite-size pieces with the aid of a "sugar chopper," consisting of a heavy board to which one long blade was rigidly attached sharp side up while another blade, with its sharp side down, was hinged at one end and would swing down to meet the other blade and cut the sugar placed between them. This fascinating operation always drew me into the parlor, sometimes to be unceremoniously chased out, but more often to be greeted with "kum aher yungatch" ( come here little rascal ) and be rewarded with a piece of sugar which promptly went into my mouth.

Incidentally, I do not recall ever seeing granulated sugar in Shershev, and tea was never sweetened by melting sugar in the glass, except for very young children. The usual method was to drink tea v'prikusku, that is, by placing a small lump of sugar in the mouth and taking sips of tea which was sweetened by contact with it in passing from lips to throat. This was more economical, and only gluttons "wasted" sugar by melting the lumps inside the glass.

In his youth Froim Meir served in the Tsarist army, and remained loyal enough to cooperate with the Russians during the last Polish uprising in 1863, for which the insurgents put a price on his head. He hid out in a disused well for several weeks, but one of his sons was killed by the Poles in revenge. After the bloody suppression of the rebellion he was rewarded by the government with the monopoly to brew beer, which made him a rich man. Despite the good rent he was paying he was requested to vacate

## 5. The Authorities

During this relatively prosperous period father's standing in the community, already quite high, was further enhanced by his appointment to the position--unpaid--of Kazionny Ravvin: official registrar of births, deaths and marriages among the Jewish population. His Russian had considerably improved, and he developed a cordial relationship with the "authorities." These comprised the Pristav, who was Chief of Police; his assistant, the Uryadnik; and the two Strazhniki (policemen) whom they commanded. He was also friendly with the Russian Orthodox priest and other members of the local gentry, including the pisar, who was the official protocol writer. This was an important position, since any application, complaint or similar document had to be written in nice legible handwriting on specially stamped government paper which was taxed per sheet and was a good source of revenue. All such documents had to be in prescribed form of address, paragraph, margin and language. It was most important to know what title to give the official to whom the document was addressed: His Honor or High Honor; Excellency or High Excellency; and even His Grace to a very exalted personage. Any misstatement of title or the omission of the "High" was often cause for summary rejection of an application or petition. It also was not safe to resort to flattery by giving a "High" to someone not entitled to it because it might be resented by his superior if the case had to be reviewed by the latter. The pisar, therefore, though of very low rank, played a prominent part in the dealings of the people with the officialdom.

All these notables were customers in our store, and we carried certain products

such as fancy bonbons and biscuits, chocolates, sardines and sprats in tins, special teas, and similar luxury items just for them, because no one else could afford them. Unlike ordinary mortals they often bought on credit and sometimes ran up considerable bills, presenting a problem if they did not pay within a reasonable time. Sending dunning notices was out of the question, so a propitious opportunity had to be found for a gentle reminder, which usually brought a settlement of the account. One of the favorable aspects of dealing with them was the absence of bargaining--to do so was below their dignity, and they also knew that they were not being overcharged.

I recall the feeling of awe that overcame me when father took me with him during Passover to present the Pristav with some matzoth, a flask of red wine, and Passover cake, all in a basket covered with a white cloth. Few Jews were granted the honor of being received by the Pristav at his home; and while the gift was a sign of respect and friendship, I strongly suspect that a twenty-five-ruble banknote somehow got mixed in among the matzoth, to make them even more palatable. To render "gifts" to officials was not resented--on the contrary, the feeling was that "abi er nemt" (so long as he takes) things will not be too bad.

And speaking of matzoth, whenever Jewish boys ventured into the gentile neighborhood during Passover they always carried some matza in their pockets to give to the gentile boys who would sing out: "Zhid, Zhid, day matzu!" (Jew, Jew, give some matza!) The poor gentiles ate mostly the excellent, but coarse, black peasant bread, and savored matza as a rare delicacy. The term "Zhid" used by them was not offensive since it just means "Jew" in Goyish and Polish, but it is derogatory when used by literate Russians, the proper term for Jew being "Yevrey" in that language.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

## 1. Obsession

One of the many calumnies spread for centuries about Jews was that their paramount aim in life was the acquisition of money. Not only the ignorant rabble, but men of culture as well gave voice to this canard, as witness Shakespeare and Dickens with their portrayals of Shylock and Fagin, to cite just two examples. The disproportionate number of Jews engaged in commerce and business was cited as proof of their acquisitiveness. Conveniently forgotten was the fact that for centuries they were forced to live in crowded ghettos, forbidden to own and work the land, and barred from the professions and civil service. Despite their reputation as skillful businessmen, or perhaps because of it, they were excluded from merchant associations, such as the Hanseatic League, which monopolized trade and commerce and thereby enabled their members to amass huge fortunes--no opprobrium was attached to their exploits! In fact, most Jews earned their living, and a meager one at that, by the sweat of their brow as tailors, shoemakers, weavers, blacksmiths or common laborers.

If Jews as a people do have a collective obsession, it is with education, the quest of knowledge. They truly are the "People of the Book" in every sense. Many shtetl communities had no doctor, pharmacist, watercarrier or chimney sweep, some not even a rabbi of their own. But there was no shtetl without a heder for teaching boys the Scriptures and at least the rudiments of Hebrew and Yiddish writing.

## 2. The Heder

The heder was always at the home of the rebbe (teacher), who should not be confused with the Rov (Rabbi) who was the ordained religious head of the community, nor with the Hassidic Rebbe--the generally hereditary leader of devoted adherents who revere him as a holy man imbued with miracle-making powers. Our rebbes were ordinary Jews who earned a living by teaching.

Boys usually began attending heder at age six, but many started when only five or even four years old. For this reason some rebbes had assistants whose job it was to get the tots to and from school, often carrying them piggyback, especially in winter. The introduction into schooling on the first day was usually attended by the boy's parents or other relatives, who customarily dropped some coppers or even a silver coin unto the book from behind the child's back as soon as the scholar repeated the rebbe's opening lesson: "Komets aleph O!; Komets beyss Bo!" This was accompanied by the exclamation: "Look, an angel threw money for you because you are learning Torah!" though few of the youngsters were fooled about the source of the bounty.

The method of instruction was generally the same in every heder, but the conditions depended upon the rebbe's ability, temper, and available space in his house. In my first heder, which I entered at the age of six, the approximately twenty-five pupils sat close to each other on hard benches at both sides of a long narrow table, reciting in unison with the rebbe a designated passage from the books in front of them, at the same time pointing with their finger or a small teitel (pointer) to each word in the text. The rebbe walked around the table behind the students, observing and listening to each of them,

and woe to the one who was not pointing to the right word at the right time--a slight slap on the head or a tweak of the ear would effectively rouse him from his dreams and bring his attention back to the book. As often as not the rebbetzin (rebbe's wife) was in the same room cooking, washing dishes or clothes, plucking a chicken, or what not, while her and the rebbe's own brood of tots were crawling all over the place and annoying the scholars, sometimes to the latter's amusement, which was cause enough for another slap. This went on from early morning to late afternoon, with only a break for lunch, consisting of a roll or bread and butter, and an apple or pear, which the children brought with them in the morning. For a drink there was always plenty of water from a wooden barrel in the corner, dipped with a tin cup attached to the barrel with a rusty chain. Heder was attended year -round, summer and winter, six days a week, with time off only on Saturdays, holidays or when the child was sick.

The memory of my heder days would not have been very pleasant had I remained with this rebbe, who should have been pitied for his poverty and the wretched, nerve-racking conditions under which he had to live and work. However, at the age of six these considerations never entered my mind, and the enthusiasm with which I started heder was waning quite rapidly. Luckily, an odd and unheard-of incident brought a sudden end to my studies with him and I was sent to another rebbe, a man named Avrom Velvl.

When it was time for me to enter heder my parents sent me to the one nearest to our house, the one described above, either out of a sense of neighborliness or to spare me long walks. They were apparently unaware of the atmosphere prevailing there. As for me, since this was my first experience, I naturally took it for granted that heder was supposed to be like that, and dutifully attended without complaint. I received my share of slaps



and tweaks and bore up under them. But, spoiled as I was by my two grandmothers to whom I was the first grandchild, such punishment was apparently not effective enough to keep me in line, so the rebbe undertook to give me a whipping. I had seen this being done to other boys and accepted it as a matter-of-course. I stretched out on the bench, face down, the boys around me eagerly watchful, and the rebbe bent over me, birch twigs ready in one hand while trying to pull down my breeches with the other. This indignity proved too much for me. Instinctively I kicked out with both legs hitting the rebbe in the stomach, jumped up from the bench and dashed out through the open window which was almost on a level with the ground outside. That spelled the end of my studies with this rebbe, I dare say to our mutual relief. And that was how I came to study with Avrom Velvl.

Avrom Velvl was a tall stately Jew with a shock of brown hair framing his yarmulke (skullcap) and a luxurious reddish beard all but hiding his chest. When many years later I saw a representation of Michelangelo's Moses the image of Avrom Velvl immediately came to my mind. In addition to being a rebbe he was also the hazzan (cantor) in the synagogue on our street. He had a rich baritone voice which he used very effectively, especially in leading the prayers on the High Holy Days. His rendition of Kol Nidrei at the opening of the Yom Kippur services was a truly awe-inspiring introduction to the significance of this most solemn Day of Atonement. And it was this man who became my second and last rebbe.

In comparison with my first heder the new one was bliss. True, the method of instruction was the same, with the boys sitting around a long table intoning the text in unison. But there was no chicken-plucking rebbetzin to be seen, no tots crawling about,

and no slaps or tweaks. Avrom Velvl was patient and forbearing. If a child began day-dreaming a gentle reprimand brought him back to earth. A faltering boy was given individual help. But for me the greatest delight was the rebbe's melodious voice singing the passages of the Bible, which I quickly learned to repeat with all the nuances, to his great pleasure. After a few months Avrom Velvl earnestly urged my parents to apprentice me to him as a meshorner, to be taught the cantorial melodies which I was then to sing with him at the services in the synagogue. This was vetoed, but at his insistence I had my debut as a soloist about a year after I began studying with him. On the Shavuot (Pentecost) holiday he came to our house, and before the assembled relatives and neighbors I sang the beautiful ancient poem Akdomus Milin which in many stanzas, beginning consecutively with the letters of the entire Hebrew alphabet, proclaims the glory of the Lord in terms of the natural universe. The performance was a great success, at least as far as my parents and the rebbe were concerned. On many occasions, and many years later, I heard my mother relate with pride the to her unforgettable event of that Shavuot, which incidentally is my birthday by the Jewish reckoning.

It is to be noted that the heder was for boys only. There was no similar school, or any other type of school, for girls. With some exceptions, such as the lighting of candles at the advent of Sabbath, women had no direct part in the performance of religious rituals. They were not required to say the three prescribed daily prayers; were not eligible to fill the quorum of ten, the minyan, obligatory for services at the synagogue--in fact they had to be segregated from the men there; and were not called upon to lead in the prayers or to publicly read chapters from the Scriptures. Women were supposed to bask in the glory of their righteous husbands, and were vouchsafed a place in



heaven alongside of them. However, despite their subordinate place in the rites, women were certainly not exempt from religious duties and responsibilities. All the six hundred and thirteen prescriptions for virtuousness, the Tar'yag Mitzvoth, except those specifically reserved for men, were incumbent upon them. Women were highly esteemed in their own right as wives and mothers--after all, only a child born of a Jewish mother is considered a Jew according to the Rabbinical Law!

In the family, despite the accepted attitude that men were the heads, women were equal partners in actual practice and often predominated in decision-making. Many women worked alongside their husbands as breadwinners, in addition to caring for home and children. Nevertheless, when it came to schooling, women took second place and no hederes were established for girls, presumably because they did not have to read the Scriptures in the original Hebrew. But since the need for their literacy was obvious, they were taught to read and write Yiddish by parents, older brothers and sisters, or private tutors. The rudiments of Russian and arithmetic were also learned in this manner, by boys as well as by girls. Any further study was left to the ingenuity of the "graduates."

### 3. Books as Bombs

The above-described educational "system" was unexpectedly roused out of its drowsiness by a remarkable man known to me only as Zhuk. He appeared in town in 1911 from I do not know where and set about persuading the rich and influential members of the community to establish a modern school. It was not an easy task by any means--after all, why make such a radical change in the manner of bringing up children when the time-honored method was quite satisfactory? Would it not spoil the children and put

newfangled ideas into their head? Would it not, God forbid, lead them away from tradition and Jewishness? And where was the necessary money to come from? The opposition was fierce, but Zhuk pressed on, pointing to the rut to which the young generation was doomed by the existing situation, the opportunities for a better and richer life education would bring, and the fact that the government's educational restrictions were deliberately designed to keep Jews from advancing their position in society. There were enough forward-looking men in town to give Zhuk strong support, and the project was approved. Two spacious airy rooms were rented and outfitted with desks, blackboards, and a supply of textbooks for the teaching of Russian, arithmetic, history, geography and general science. Attendance was from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. with a five-minute break each hour and a full hour for lunch, during which the students were free to play or relax in the adjacent large yard. The enrollment of about thirty, which included a few girls, was divided into two grades, one in each room. Corporal punishment was replaced by a rating system for proficiency and conduct, from a low of one to a high of five. For the first time in people's memory a real school came to Shershev, for girls as well as for boys, and with a curriculum for a general education--a far cry from the narrow limitations of the heder. This was truly a revolutionary innovation which opened new horizons for the student body, of which I had the privilege of being a member.

The two years that I studied with Zhuk affected profoundly the course of my future, and the studies probably had a similar effect upon a number of the other students. But it was not only the new setup, despite its importance, which brought this about--it was the personality of Zhuk that made us aware of the beauty of language; the logic of mathematics; the progression of historic events that led to the social and political system

under which we lived; and the physical wonders of the earth we inhabited. He taught all these subjects himself, and had an unerring way of making us understand and appreciate the knowledge he imparted; and of arousing in us a desire to know more and more. Zhuk was the personification of a great teacher, whom we all loved and admired. To my deep regret, I know nothing about his personal life, not even his given name. Just Zhuk.

To describe Zhuk solely as a great teacher, laudable as this may be, would however show only one facet of the man's worth. There was much more to him than that. His appearance in our small town could not have been motivated by pecuniary considerations. Excellent pedagogue that he was, he would have commanded a higher stipend in a larger and more prosperous community, where he would also have found an intellectual and social milieu more akin to his spirit. He was in his thirties then, of medium height, rather portly, with a ruddy face, walrus mustache and close-cropped hair, contrary to the fashion of the time. He apparently was unmarried--at least he lived alone in Shershev. What then made him come to our out-of-the-way place? The answer lies in his deeds. He was seized with a passion to better the life of his people, to help them rise from the morass into which they had been thrown by discrimination and oppression, to dissipate the ghetto mentality and bring them into the modern world with a sense of dignity and self-respect. The means to that end he saw in education. He was a revolutionary, like the Russian Narodniki who "went to the people," but his weapons were books, not bombs. That is why he fought for weeks with our "town fathers" with cool, reasoned arguments until he persuaded them to provide the money for a modern school where secular studies could be pursued, not just the Scriptures and the Talmud as in the heder and yeshiva; and what more, that girls should be taught along

with the boys! Referring to the official government educational restrictions against Jews (who were limited to only five percent of the total student enrollment even where Jews comprised a majority of the population), Zhuk kept on hammering: "They have built a wall around us, they want to keep us in ignorance and subjugation--we must breach that wall, we must strive for enlightenment and freedom by all means and at any cost!"

Zhuk remained in our town for a little over two years, long enough to see the school firmly established, and satisfied that his successor, whom he guided and trained for a while, would adequately continue on the course he had mapped out. And then he disappeared, as suddenly as he came, presumably to surface in some other backward community and fight another battle for his cause--the education of Jewish children.

Zhuk did not leave our town however before launching several of his students (he would have dearly loved to do it for all of them) on the road to further progress. Because of the very limited funds available, our school was designed to provide a two-year course of study paralleling that given in the official government schools, the Gymnasiums. Under the prevailing system it was not obligatory to enter a Gymnasium at the first year level. A properly prepared student who passed examinations in the prescribed subjects could be admitted directly into the second, third, and other levels, on an equal footing with the students promoted from within the Gymnasium. That is what Zhuk had in mind. Although the five percent limitation still applied, it was somewhat easier for a Jewish student to enter at a higher level because many gentile students dropped out after the first or second year due to poor scholarship or their parents' economic situation. Accordingly, when the first group of graduates completed his two-year course he began a campaign to urge the parents of the best qualified ones to send them

to an official school for further study. There was of course no such school in our town, so it meant being sent to a large city, involving considerable expense for room and board in addition to tuition fees, books and expensive clothing--students had to wear prescribed uniforms in those schools. Although quite a few of Zhuk's graduates were equally qualified, the parents of only seven boys, myself included, could afford it. Thus it came about that these seven fortunate boys, at the age of ten or eleven, were sent away from home "into the world." Never before had anything like this happened in Shershev.

Although I do not know of any specific cases, other boys might have been sent to study away from home, but not in secular schools. Ultra-orthodox parents who wanted to further their sons' religious education could send them to a Yeshiva, usually also located in a larger city. There the students led an almost monastic life, spending years in pouring over the pages of the Mishnah and Gemara from early morning to far into the night, discussing and arguing over abstruse points among themselves and with the guiding Rabbi, until, with God's help, they became great Talmudic scholars or were themselves ordained as Rabbis, to the glory of their parents and of Judaism.

These religious students, known as Yeshiva b'ahurim, led a unique existence. Impoverished for the most part and living away from their families, they depended upon charitable townspeople for subsistence. It was considered a great Mitzva to support these pious young men who devoted their lives to Torah study, so many families "adopted" a student to have his meals one day a week at their homes. Thus every student had to eat at seven different households each week, accepting whatever fare the host could or would provide. This was known as "eating days," often followed by

"and swallowing tears" --an apt metaphor for the life they led. Hand-me-down clothes, often too large or too small, covered their usually emaciated bodies, and the hard synagogue benches served as their pallets. Most of them ended up as sons-in-law of well-to-do Jews who were glad and proud to have a "scholar" in the family even if they had to support him the rest of his life.

There was current a story about a wealthy but uneducated Jew who asked the Yeshiva head to recommend a fine young scholar for a son-in-law. "But you have no daughter," said the puzzled rabbi. "So what," retorted the man, "I can well afford to have a son-in-law in the house!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## BREACHING THE WALL

## 1. Brest Litovsk

The inclusion of my parents in the category of those who could "afford" to send a child to study in another city was an overstatement--"manage" would have been a more appropriate term. I doubt if my father, despite his epithet "Shlëime der kremer," would have been able to cover the full cost of my study and residence away from home were it not for the generosity of my mother's sister Henye and her husband Osher Kagan, who lived in Brest Litovsk and graciously offered to take me in as a member of their family.

Brest Litovsk, called Brisk in Yiddish, was then an important garrison city of fifty thousand inhabitants, about half of them Jews. Situated on the river Bug (Boog), a tributary of the Vistula, it was an industrial, commercial and shipping center, as well as a key railroad and highway junction. The city was a military stronghold, and its fortress was considered by the Russians strong enough to withstand the onslaught of any enemy from the West.

Brest had three formal boys' schools: a Gymnasia (Gymnasium); Realnoye Uchilishche (Science High School); and the Yevreyskoye Uchilishche Tamarina (Tamarin Jewish School). The first two were subsidized by the government and were practically out of bounds for me, because of the ardent competition for the few places available for Jewish students. It was rumored that without a substantial "gratuity" no Jewish boy

## 2. The Big City

Brisk opened new vistas for me. I will never forget that first train ride, accompanied by my father, and the arrival at the railroad depot. We started out in the early morning of a hot late-summer day as passengers aboard the town's only means of transportation--a large four-wheeled wagon drawn by a team of brown horses. It had only one bench, a hard wooden board up front spanning the width of the wagon, serving as seat for the wagoner and one of the passengers, sometimes with a small child squeezed in between them. The other passengers, as many as six or even eight, had to find room inside on the thick layer of straw covering the bottom, sitting on their bundles or valises and jockeying for the best position to enable them to stretch their legs. The travelers were not picked up at their homes, but had to trudge with their belongings to a designated location on the market place. For most people travel was a rare event, so family members came along to say a last "fohr gesund" (travel in health), and to give some final



advice and admonition. My mother, grandfather (the other one was in America), both grandmothers, and assorted other relatives and friends were also there to see me off-- just think of it: Yankele was going away from home for the first time in his ten-year life, to study in an "official" school in a mysterious big city, and will not be seen for six months, until Passover, and maybe not even then, but in June when the school year is over! Thus a goodly crowd was gathered at the departure scene, busy with kissing, hugging and wiping tears, the wagoner meanwhile shouting for everybody to get on board. Then came a concerted rush to climb into the wagon, with bickering about places, location of luggage, and what not. Finally all passengers were ensconced more or less comfortably, the driver flicked his whip, and the wagon began to move with a clatter of its iron-rimmed wheels over the cobblestones, accompanied by a waving of hands and handkerchiefs, and final shouts of good-by.

After about an hour's bone-jarring ride over the cobblestones we reached the chaussée where the ride became much smoother and much easier on us and on the horses.

Some stops were made on the way for refreshments, which everybody brought along, for attending to natural functions, and much needed stretching of our cramped bodies. The horses too <sup>had to be</sup> ~~were~~ fed, watered and given a spell of rest. By late afternoon we arrived at the nearest railroad station, Linevo, where we were to take the train for Brisk. Father bought a third class ticket for himself and a half-fare ticket for me, and we settled down to wait for the train in the absence of information about the exact time of its expected arrival. It was a long wait, at least for me, anxious to see a real locomotive pulling a string of cars, which I theretofore <sup>had seen</sup> ~~saw~~ only in book illustrations. I hung about the rails outside hoping to catch a glimpse of the approaching locomotive. Finally there

was heard a steady rumble and we noticed a light which became brighter and brighter, "coming at us with great speed. We all moved away from the rails for fear of being "sucked in under the wheels" as someone warned us. Within a few minutes the engine, puffing plumes of black smoke and pulling several cars behind it, slowly came to a halt with a hissing and clanging. We made our way to the third class in the rear and settled down for the trip.

Third class meant sitting on bare wooden benches running the length of both sides of the car. Luggage was stowed underneath the benches. A lantern at each end provided just enough light to pick one's way through the outstretched legs and protruding bundles in the narrow passageway. We managed to find seats, but people entering at subsequent stops had to stand or sit on their belongings in the passage. The passengers were a motley assortment of black-caftaned Jews with dangling earlocks, others in European dress like ourselves, some gentile townsfolk, and a few peasants. They were all men--women were not much given to travel in those days.

I was keenly disappointed that we traveled at night, having looked forward to taking in the sights on the way, though it probably would not have been possible to see anything anyway through the smudged and smoke-blackened windows. Tired out by the long day's events I fell asleep leaning against father, awakening to the comings and goings when we stopped at a station. Once during the night I was roused while the train was in motion--a conductor in uniform, carrying a lantern, was checking the tickets and questioning some not-so-young-looking persons about their half-fare tickets. He was also shining his lantern underneath the benches looking for "rabbits", the Russian term for stowaways. He found none in our car, and I fell asleep again to be roused by

father at break of day as we were approaching our destination, Brisk.

Here I found enough to make my eyes go round. The station itself was the biggest structure I had ever seen or even imagined. The roof, even loftier than in our Great Synagogue at home, was supported on the inside by crisscrossing steel girders. Tremendous plate glass windows were looking out on the wide covered platform leading to the trains; and on the opposite side facing a wide square where scores of cabmen lined up their elegant-looking one-horse carriages. There were brightly lit and gaily decorated shops inside the station, and rows of comfortable wooden benches for waiting passengers. Outside were the hooting and puffing locomotives, the long lines of cars clanging and bumping into each other, porters with numbered brass plates across their chests trundling handcarts laden with trunks and valises, and hawkers offering cards with names of hotels or lodginghouses, loudly extolling their virtues. And the crowds! Where did they all come from? Officers in resplendent uniforms, ladies in gowns of every hue in the rainbow and flower-bedecked hats, civilians in fine suits or frock coats carrying silver-headed canes, all intermingled with police and railway guards, uniformed young students, ordinary townspeople and even some peasants. All this was beyond anything I ever imagined.

Next I knew we were in a droshky, one of those cabs that were lined up in the square, luxuriating on the soft leather seats during the ride into town. Just beyond the square we crossed a high arched bridge from which the city could be seen spread out as far as the horizon. We proceeded noiselessly on the rubber-rimmed wheels, except for the clip-clop of the horse's hooves on the smooth pavement (what a relief from the clatter of the ironbound wagon wheels at home!), along a wide boulevard lined with

shady trees through which gleaming shop windows could be seen on both sides, the sidewalks already heavy with pedestrian traffic despite the early hour--never before had I seen such sights.

Three events that stirred up our community during my childhood stand out vividly in my recollection. One was the death of Tolstoy in 1910, when I was barely eight years old. He was greatly respected and admired by Jews not only as a writer, but also for the humanitarian idealism he espoused in his later years, which brought him into conflict with the reactionary hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. I can still see small groups of people standing in the market place, with sad expressions on their faces, talking about the "groisser mentch" (great man) or "sheiner mentch" (fine human being). Many young people donned tolstovkas, long shirts worn over the trousers which Tolstoy affected as a symbol of simplicity, with black armlets as a sign of mourning.

The second event was of much greater importance and created universal consternation among Jews and right-minded non-Jews alike. This was the Beilis affair, which happened in Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine. Mendel Beilis, a Jew, was arrested in 1911 on the accusation that he killed a twelve-year-old Christian boy in order to use his blood in baking matzoth. This vile calumny was not new. It was used by Jew-haters during the Middle Ages to incite the ignorant populace, and thousands of Jews were murdered in Western Europe in mass attacks on the ghettos, despite the lack of proof and even judicial acquittal of the accused. Those outrages were ascribed to the barbarism of the Dark Ages, but that such an accusation should seriously be made, and by an official government

agency, in the "enlightened" twentieth century came as a shock. The accusation was at once taken up by the notorious reactionary and anti-Semitic Black Hundred organization, which started a vicious campaign for vengeance against Jews, with the slogan: "Beat the Yids and save Russia!" The horrible prospect of the reoccurrence of the pogroms which had shaken the Pale of Settlement within recent memory stirred the deepest fears in the Jewish communities. Fortunately, there was a great outcry not only in the world press but in a large segment of the Russian press as well, and public protests were made by European, American and Russian intellectuals and official leaders. A noted Russian lawyer, Vassily Maklakov, offered his services to the defense and played a prominent role in the protracted and acrimonious trial.

A police investigation early in the case established that the slain boy's mother was consorting with a gang of common criminals, one of whom was her lover. The latter was suspected of being the murderer because the boy was a hindrance to the liaison, but no definite proof was obtained. The police report was suppressed by the prosecutor on orders of higher authorities, but the several defense lawyers, aided by public opinion, succeeded in entering this evidence into the proceedings. On cross-examination they extracted an admission from the original accuser, the prosecution's star witness, that he really did not see Beilis at the place where the body was found, as he had previously testified. The case was tried before an all-Christian jury which unanimously acquitted Beilis in 1913, two years after his arrest.

One can understand with what eagerness and trepidation the newspapers' arrival was awaited in the Jewish communities during those two years, and how every word relating to the trial was weighed and measured for any significance it may have on the

outcome. This affair demonstrated the power of public opinion even against such an autocratic regime as that of Tsarist Russia. If the world had reacted in the same manner against the Nazi atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s, millions of their victims might have been saved from the gas ovens. But this time there was silence. None of the world's rulers, including President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and the Pope, raised their voices in vigorous protest. Worse yet, the "democratic" and "humanitarian" countries, including the United States, shut their gates and would not admit those Jews who managed to escape to France, Holland and Belgium, and were left there to be rounded up by the Gestapo and shipped in cattle cars to the extermination camps. The British Government, in the most perfidious act of all, refused to allow the entry of the refugees into Palestine, despite the importunities of its Jewish residents and their readiness to take care of all newcomers; and despite the Balfour Declaration's promise to establish a Jewish "National Home" in the land. True, there were many individual Christians in Europe who, even at the risk of life, helped the persecuted Jews to escape or to hide, and one nation, Denmark, stands out as a shining example of virtue and humanity. Led by their valiant King Christian X, the Danes, though under Nazi occupation, refused to surrender their Jewish citizens for deportation and saved all of them by transporting them secretly to Sweden, which of course could not have been accomplished without the cooperation of the Swedes. The rest of the world stood silent, inactive, or even connived with the murderers. And so six million Jews and untold numbers of other innocent human beings went to their death in a barbaric orgy surpassing anything that took place even in what we self-righteously refer to as the Dark Ages.

Then came the outbreak of war in 1914. The fateful events leading up to it,

beginning with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife at Sarajevo, naturally shocked the people of our town as elsewhere, heightening the impatience with which the newspapers were awaited and giving rise to heated discussions. Strange as it may seem, there was no great apprehension. Temporary economic difficulties and restrictions were foreseen, but no major disruptions since we were several hundred miles away from the German border and did not expect the fighting to reach our area. The Russian troops were marching to war as if to a picnic, confident in the strength of their numbers. "My ikh shapkami zakidayem!" (We will smother them with our caps) was the war cry. With the mighty British dreadnoughts--I remember pictures of them in an illustrated Russian magazine, Niva--and the vaunted French army as allies, Germany was expected to be vanquished in a matter of months. Little did we, or anyone else for that matter, suspect that the war would drag on for over four bloody years; that it would topple the crowns of Russia, Austria and Germany; and that within one year the German army would be in our town. Until that happened life continued in a fairly normal way, up to the time we were shaken out of our fool's paradise by the roar of the cannons.

To end in a minor key with the newspapers, I recall a news item that was making the rounds somewhat surreptitiously--the discovery of a cure for syphilis, Salvarsan, known then as Six-Hundred-Six. Not that the Jews were overly afflicted by this malady, but there was pride in the fact that the discoverer of a remedy for this age-old scourge was a Jew, Paul Ehrlich. There was even a humorous and rather risqué ditty recounting the trials and tribulations of a would-be Casanova, until

A Jew named Ehrlich then arose  
And prescribed a healing dose  
Of ointment Six-Hundred-Six.



## 2. Literature

There was of course no library in town, and the few books possessed by individuals were treasured like Holy Writ. Like newspapers, these too made the rounds among friends and acquaintances, those on the bottom of the list waiting for months before getting a chance to read them. They were read not just for entertainment, but for the thoughts and ideas expressed in them, explicitly or implicitly. Accordingly, even more than the newspapers, books were discussed, analyzed and argued over *ad infinitum*.

There was no question of choosing what to read--we read everything that was available. The books were in Yiddish or Russian, most of them originally written in those languages, but quite a few were translations from foreign languages. Despite the haphazard course of our reading, or perhaps because of it, the literature we so avidly absorbed was of considerable extent and diversity. It included poetry, novels, plays, history and short stories, ranging from the classics to what were then modern writers. We had no modern Hebrew books, only some magazines containing short items and poems.

Though Yiddish was spoken universally by European Jews for several hundred years, Yiddish literature of any significance did not develop until the second half of the nineteenth century. Despite its importance as a *lingua franca* Yiddish was disdained by the educated, who referred to it as "jargon" or more charitably as "mamme loshen"--literally: mother tongue, but carrying the connotation of woman-talk. The occasional books that appeared were aimed at the uneducated, mainly women, who did not know Hebrew which was the exclusive medium for scholarly writing, contracts, official documents, and important correspondence. In the mid-1800s arose the Haskala (Enlightenment) movement which *inter alia* brought the acceptance of Yiddish as the recognized language of

the people. This led a number of writers, who theretofore used Hebrew or the languages of the countries in which they lived, to turn to Yiddish as their medium.

The first to gain prominence as a modern Yiddish writer was Sholem Yaakov Abramovich, generally known by his pen name Mendele Moher Sforim. His works are permeated with compassion for the poor and underprivileged, and he castigated the leaders of the Jewish establishment for exploiting the people and enriching themselves at their expense. Mendele may be compared to Charles Dickens in the way he exposed the callousness, greed, and hypocrisy of the wealthy upper crust of society. His books became very popular and led to mitigation of some of the evils he brought to light. We had several of his works, the one best remembered by me being Di Takse (The Tax), dealing with the impost levied on meat by the city fathers ostensibly for charitable purposes, but actually for lining their own pockets, to the detriment of the poor who could no longer afford to have meat on their table even for the Sabbath.

Next came the universally beloved Sholem Aleichem, the pseudonym of Sholem Rabinovich, who has been dubbed "The Jewish Mark Twain." In a series of novels, short stories and monologues he depicted Jewish life in the shtetl and in the large cities through the adventures of a gallery of ludicrous but sympathetic characters whose names became bywords in Yiddish speech. His humor was so infectious that it brought gales of laughter even when reading the many tragic situations which fill his books. His writings were aptly referred to as "laughter through tears." While Sholem Aleichem's works have been translated into many languages, much of the piquancy of his humor is lost in translation because of the impossibility of conveying in a foreign tongue the idioms and malapropisms he put into the mouths of his characters. Even so, enough remains to make

a reading of his translated works rewarding. Witness the tremendous world-wide acclaim of the musical "Fiddler on the Roof" based on Sholem Aleichem's unforgettable character Tevye the Milkman.

Most of Sholem Aleichem's works were available in our town and were read privately or in groups, providing a welcome lighthearted counterpoint to the weighty literary fare we otherwise were immersed in. We also had some short stories of Yitzhak Leib Peretz whose searching writings reflected a rather pessimistic outlook; and the works of two outstanding poets: Hayim Nahman Bialik and Shimon Shmuel Frug. Some of their poems were in Hebrew and in Russian, as well as in Yiddish, and a number of them were set to music, becoming great favorites among the songs of the time.

A much greater variety was available to us in Russian literature. First and foremost, as I am sure it is to the present day with any Russian reader, came the two great poets Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov. Every young student in Russia knew by heart and delighted in reciting short poems and excerpts from longer ones by these two masters of lyric poetry, unexcelled since their tragic deaths in duels in 1837 and 1841 respectively. I cherish the possession of two volumes of the complete works of these poets, in beautifully illustrated editions of pre-World War I, and still delight in rereading for the hundredth time some exquisite verses and experiencing the same thrilling sensation as when I hear a great artist's rendition of a familiar aria from an opera or a favorite passage from a concerto. So Pushkin and Lermontov we read, recited, sang, and plagiarized for versified missives to girl friends.

Of the Russian prose writers we read Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Gogol and some less prominent authors. The discussions following the reading of each book revolved

## CHAPTER TEN

## SOUNDS OF MUSIC

## 1. The Kapelye

Music was another attribute of culture we were largely deprived of. In books we came across references to operas, symphonies, concertos, cantatas, but what they sounded like was left to our imagination. We also knew the names of some composers--Tchaikovsky, Beethoven and Vivaldi stand out in my memory, the last one as a violinist rather than as composer. I recall how frustrated we were upon reading Tolstoy's Kreutzer Sonata--what overpowering passion lurked in that music that seemed to unite the two performers in a spiritual state of sublimity, and drove the protagonist to kill his unfortunate wife? We did not know. We were like blind people anxious to fathom the glory of a sunset or the splendor of the rainbow.

The only instrumental music we were exposed to, apart from the occasional peasant accordionist rendering the lively Ukrainian tunes, was that of the town kapelye, comprising a fiddle, bass, trumpet, and cymbals. This "quartet," though quite proud of their musicianship, had to depend on more prosaic occupations for a living, since they played only at weddings and there was not enough of those for earning their daily bread. As they shambled along the rough cobblestone pavement they were always surrounded by a motley crowd of youngsters, who relished the rare spectacle of the little fiddler with his scraggly beard and the tall skinny trumpeter in the center, flanked on each side by the corpulent bass player and the cymbalist, the latter's jacket flying up

every time he raised his arms to strike the two metal plates high over his head, while the bass player kept on jerking his clumsy instrument upward to prevent it from striking the cobblestones whenever the straps holding it around his shoulders were pulled down by its weight, the kids mimicking all their movements as well as the tunes.

There was one phonograph in town, probably an early Victor Gramophone, with a large horn and a turntable that had to be cranked by hand. It was owned by one of the wealthier families in a house on the market place, and they often played it near an open window or on the porch facing the square, which invariably attracted a fair audience of music lovers. Unfortunately, the only records they had were of cantorial singing, and even that came out raspy and scratchy, with the singer's voice turning into a drawn-out whine as the spring began winding down. On rare occasions I heard the organ as I chanced to pass the Catholic church when its doors were open, and thus perceived just an inkling of the glory of this instrument. I was sorely tempted to linger and drink in more of the majestic sounds, but it was not proper for a Jewish boy to loiter near a church, and as for going inside it was out of the question--it would not have been welcomed by the worshippers and would have brought down anathemas on my head and on my parents from the Jewish community. And that was the total extent of my exposure to music, with one exception: the unique instrumentalist, a young man who lived on a side street, and played the violin. I first heard him by chance on a summer evening when I ran with some other kids through the back yards and happened to pass near his open window. The sounds that came out of there made me stop--sounds I had never heard before. I stayed outside the open window, and returned there on many evenings during that summer to listen to the melancholy sweet tunes he produced, which often brought tears to my eyes. I have no

idea where he learned to play--for all I know he may have been self-taught--but he must have been some kind of musical genius. The passage of time may be enhancing my youthful perspective, but I feel that under proper circumstances he might have become another Heifetz or even a Mozart.

## 2. A Cappella

What we lacked in musical instrumentation we made up in song. Just as with reading, and even more enjoyable, singing was a group activity engaged in by anyone who could carry a tune, and by some who only thought they could. We had quite a repertoire-- not only the folk songs and wedding tunes passed on from generation to generation, but many new songs in Yiddish, Russian and Hebrew. Some of them were revolutionary songs which echoed back to the years 1905--1906, when the turbulent winds penetrated even into such a God-forsaken backwoods town as Shershev. A number of stories were current about those exciting years, when there was a "Brothers and Sisters" group in town. They used to meet secretly in the forest where they listened to fiery speeches, sang inflammatory songs, and perhaps undertook more effective deeds in furtherance of the cause.

One undertaking may have been the procurement of weapons, and my father apparently had a hand in it, although he was not to my knowledge a member of the group. I have a vivid recollection of an evening in our house, with father standing near the table in the living room examining a revolver by the light of a kerosene lamp, while mother agitatedly moved from one window to another to make sure that the outside shutters were closed tight so that no one could peek in, at the same time urging

father to put the thing away, hide it, get rid of it. There was good reason for her fear: possession of firearms could lead to a trip to Siberia--in chains! Father had apparently just returned from a shopping trip to another city--there were some open crates of merchandise in the room--and must have obtained the weapon on order from a trusted person, since I am sure he had no use for it himself.

An unforgettable incident which happened to me about the same time shows that the anti-government agitation was open enough not to have escaped the ears of children. One of my playmates lived next to the police station, with a high wooden fence separating the two back yards. My friend and I stood on our side of the fence, chanting at the top of our voices: "Doloy Tsar, Doloy Tsar, Doloy Russkiy Gosudar!" (Down with the Tsar, Down with the Tsar, Down with the Russian Autocrat). One of the policemen started running toward us on the other side of the fence, holding up the scabbard of his saber to prevent it from getting between his legs, and we stampeded in terror before he could get to us. I could not have been more than five years old at the time and did not know the import of the words, but was apparently aware that the song was an irritant to the police.

All our songs were learned by heart after having been transcribed into "song albums" which everyone fashioned for himself. Like the books, they were in Yiddish, Russian and Hebrew, and some of the songs were available in two or even all three of the languages, in excellent translations that were attuned to the same melody. Some idea of the flavor and import of these songs may be gained from the following excerpts, freely translated from the originals as I remember them.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## RITES OF ADOLESCENCE

## 1. Boys and Girls

In all times and in all places the age of pubescence has been idealized more than any other stage of man's life. It is the time of yearning and restlessness, of rosy dreams and bitter-sweet melancholy, of sublime exaltation and dark despair--all due to the burgeoning awareness of the opposite sex as the embodiment of heavenly bliss. The poets glorified it as the golden days of spring; religions and societies gave special meaning to it with sacred rites and taboos; but the awakening youth has generally been left to its own devices in groping its way through the delicate phases of courtship and intimacies leading to the realization of that bliss, epitomised in one word--love.

The term "love" was not bandied about lightly in the shtetl. Young people usually consorted with each other in groups, and it was unseemly for a boy and a girl to go off by themselves away from the group's protective ambience. They took pains not to display their attachment to each other in front of their companions, lest it disturb the atmosphere of collective comradeship. A declaration of love was taken very seriously as a solemn pledge of permanent relationship.

Our town had some Hassidim, distinguished by their long black caftans and dangling earlocks, whose children were not given the same freedom of association as those of the Misnagdim--literally: opponents. The latter, though observant Jews, did not reject all worldly progress as profanation. The Misnagdim wore modern European



dress, trimmed their beards, and did not shy from strange women as from the plague. They showed an interest in Olam Hazeh (This World) as against the main concern of the Hassidim with Olam Habah (The World to Come). They also exhibited a healthy skepticism toward the "wonder-working" Hassidic rebbes, just as they often took to task their own ordained rabbis.

The Misnagdim even went so far as to circulate irreverent anecdotes about the Hassidic rebbes. One of these related to the practice among the believers to send a newly married woman, who did not conceive within a reasonable time, to the rebbe for his blessing. If the young woman became pregnant shortly after the visit it was ascribed to the holy man's intercession. The wags added an incontrovertible proof of the rebbe's powers: that the child invariably looked just like him! No wonder they were stigmatized as "opponents", which to the Hassidim carried the connotation of apostasy.

The Misnagdim, among whom our family belonged, allowed their young people considerable freedom in their social life and activities, provided of course that they did not overstep the bounds of propriety, or leitishkeit. The very young children had no problem in finding playmates--they made friends, fought, and made up again with the neighborhood kids who usually were also their schoolmates. Boys played with boys and showed no interest in girls, except to tease them and demonstrate their masculine superiority. Girls also kept their own company, and did not hesitate to reply in kind to the boys' insults, not infrequently getting the better of the verbal exchange. As they grew older, however, a process of selection set in and friends were chosen on the basis of common interests as well as social status. It was not so much a matter of snobbishness (which did exist) as of adjustment to reality, since the differing economic conditions

of necessity led to a parting of the ways. Most of my own childhood playmates, for instance, from the age of ten and even earlier, were enlisted to help in providing for the family either by working with their fathers or being apprenticed to learn a trade, while I continued to study and was even sent away to school in another city. This situation, together with the awakening interest in the opposite sex, led to the formation of different groupings among teen-age youths of the town.

Unlike the simple association of children, that of adolescents was more formalized, especially among the opposite sexes. It was customary for these to become "officially" acquainted before they could meet on a social basis. One way of accomplishing this was for a brother to introduce his sister to a friend, and vice versa. Boys and girls could also introduce their friends of either sex to the new acquaintances. The most popular meeting ground though was the Hoif Gessel (Manor Lane) --a wide alley bordered by old trees which was on the edge of town. It must have been part of an estate at one time, but in my days there was no sign even of an ordinary house there, not to speak of a manor. It was a favorite place for boys and girls to walk by twos or threes on Saturday afternoons, in their best clothes, often carrying books and ostensibly engaged in "serious" conversation, but more interested in the groups of the opposite sex than in their own companions. A dropped book or handkerchief which a boy gallantly picked up, or an apology when two groups met head-on--often deliberately contrived--brought an exchange of shy glances, courteous remarks, some giggles, and an acquaintance was established. Frivolity was not considered in good taste, and idle chatter was taken as a sign of lack of culture--hence the books and "serious" conversation--but pleasantries were permitted once the ice was broken. After one or two

more encounters and the introduction of additional friends on both sides a kruzhok (circle) came into being, and no special excuses were needed for further social intercourse.

Circle members gathered at each other's homes periodically and spent the time in communal reading, discussions, singing, and games. The latter were generally also on the serious or educational side, for instance "Charades"--the equivalent of the French Tableaux Vivants--wherein one or more participants enacted historical or literary characters or scenes which the others had to identify. Another favorite game was "Flying Letters" wherein each participant addressed an unsigned note, not necessarily complimentary, to any other person, leaving to addressee the guess of the sender's identity. Not surprisingly, the guesses were quite accurate most of the time, despite efforts to disguise the handwriting. However, this game occasionally brought about embarrassing or even painful situations, as when a recipient of unpleasant remarks developed a grudge against a mistakenly supposed sender; or conversely, when the recipient of a love note was filled with rosy dreams about the wrong person, and suffered keen disappointment when the dreams were deflated. There was no dancing in the circles, at least not in the one I belonged to, mainly because of the absence of music.

Before long a process of pairing off would set in, but the couples remained in the circle and did not usually go off by themselves until they, and often also their parents, decided on an eventual permanent relationship. Many factors were considered, especially by the parents, before such decision was reached: social status, family background, economic situation, liability to military service, and so forth. The feelings of the young people toward each other were of course a strong factor, but not always the decisive one. The wise parents kept a vigilant eye on the company of their children, and tried to steer

them away from anyone deemed unsuitable before the attachment became too strong. There were occasions when the youngsters rebelled and insisted on their choice despite their parents' objection, leading to domestic clashes and discord, but most of the time a meeting of minds was achieved and the problems were resolved without a complete break in the family harmony.

Older folks were generally so taken up with their occupations and family matters that they had no time for social affairs. For men the synagogue was a common meeting ground, especially after services on Saturday, when religious questions, politics, and business matters were discussed and sometimes quarrelled about. Women always found time to chat with neighbors in the back yard or in the market place, the main topics being children and mutual acquaintances whom they could gossip about. During the Passover and Sukkot holidays it was customary to visit relatives and friends en famille, and spend a pleasant afternoon around the samovar over glasses of steaming tea, cakes and preserves, while rehashing family affairs and matters of general interest. The largest assemblages, however, occurred at weddings, when all relatives and all friends had to be invited and in which indeed the whole town participated in one way or another.

## 2. The Wedding

Although marriages reportedly are made in heaven, providence usually took on the guise of the shadchan (matchmaker) to carry out its design. Even when the young couple knew and cared for each other, and the parents were agreeable, it was deemed unseemly to have direct talks about practical arrangements, such as the bride's dowry, amount to be contributed by the groom's father, how the wedding expenses will be shared,

the groom's ability to support a family, where the married couple will live, and other such important questions. Even if the parents on both sides were not averse to settle these matters among themselves directly, how could one deprive an honest Jew of his livelihood? So the shadhan was sent for, and the good man began running from one household to the other with proposals, suggestions and compromises, always extolling the virtues of each young person to the parents of the other one and elaborating on the great benefits that will accrue to each family from the union. If too much resistance was encountered he would try to enlist the aid of grandparents or influential family friends, and sooner or later both sides found themselves in agreement and were ready to write Tnoyim (contract of betrothal) and set a date for the wedding.

Like all other important events, weddings followed a prescribed ritual. I vividly remember the wedding of my mother's sister, my aunt Henye. The groom was Osher Kagan, a member of a Brisk (Brest Litovsk) Hassidic family which, however, did not observe some of the more esoteric customs of the sect, including their mode of dress. Their match was brought about entirely by matchmakers, one on each side, since the families lived in different towns and did not know of each other's existence until the shadhans got to work on them. These fellows did not sit around waiting for business to come their way. Each of them was constantly on the lookout for eligible marriage candidates, and carried with him lists with all basic details relating to the prospects. These lists were exchanged with confreres in other towns, permutations and combinations were constantly concocted, until one set fell into place like in a jigsaw puzzle. A match between people from different towns was both a dream and a nightmare for a shadhan since the fee was much higher if success was achieved, but the difficulties of bringing

together two families totally unknown to each other were quite formidable, involving correspondence, procurement of testimonials, and travel of the parties to and fro for personal acquaintance, with the loss of time, effort and expense if the deal fell through.

This preliminary stage provided excitement enough, but nothing compared to what went on during the weeks preceding the actual wedding. First and foremost, of course, was the bride's trousseau: studying the latest modes in the illustrated magazines specially obtained for the occasion and the interminable rehashing of the merits or shortcomings of each individual style, color, flounce, and whatnot; selection of the fabrics; visits to the tailor; etcetera, etcetera. Shoes presented a special problem--fashion called for high heels, but the bride was taller than the groom, so a compromise had to be made. Other family members also required new outfits, especially the bride's two unmarried younger sisters. Meat, fish and other provisions had to be arranged for in advance--there was no such convenience as the modern caterer or supermarket. Finally, quarters had to be found for the sizable suite of out-of-town guests accompanying the groom. There was enough commotion for a lifetime, and the details were talked about by the women for years thereafter.

At last the day arrived, a bright cloudless summer day. The wedding took place at the bride's, that is, grandmother Peshe's house. From early morning the men were banished to shift for themselves, and the house was filled with women and girls who busied themselves around the bride whom tradition required to fast on that day. By noon she was enthroned in the parlor surrounded by the female companions, the fiddler from the kapelye appeared together with an adjunct known as badhan (not to be confused with the shadhan!), and the ritual of Bazetzen di kalle (Installing the bride) began.

The fiddler struck up his most heart-rending tunes to accompany the badhan who began a mournful recital, in verse, of all the wonderful things the bride is to give up: light-hearted girlish freedom, shelter of parental home, closeness of relatives and friends, cheerful association with boon companions, and so on, and so forth. This was followed by a catalogue of what awaits her: life in a new and strange abode, with a man whom she hardly knows, with responsibility for her own household, a husband, and yes, for children who are to come. This monologue began with the traditional phrase: "Kallele, kallele, vain, vain, vain!" (Dear bride, dear bride, weep, weep, weep!), and continued interminably in a plaintive singsong with appropriate gestures and grimaces. Needless to say, the bride and companions did not fail to heed the badhan's admonition, tears flowed like water amid the kisses and embraces, and a grand time was had by all.

One component of the above ritual, a must among the very orthodox, did not take place at this wedding. This was the ceremonial cutting off of the bride's hair and fitting her out with a sheitel (wig), to be worn for the rest of her days. I heard later that some of the groom's Hassidic relatives were quite upset about this flouting of tradition, but the bride's more worldly family, abetted by the groom who obviously liked the bride well enough as she was, prevailed and my aunt went to the canopy with her own hair intact.

By mid-afternoon the groom arrived on foot, preceded by the musicians, all four of them, and followed by his suite and a host of kids gleefully jumping all around them. Then the procession formed, again led by the kapelye. The groom walked arm in arm with his parents, followed by the nearest relatives, followed in similar fashion by

the bride and her relatives, the rest of the participants making up the rear. The host of kids was now augmented by many curious grown-ups. The entire procession marched to the open square in front of the Shul where the Huppa (wedding canopy) was set up. This consisted of a rectangular piece of red velvet attached to four poles held aloft by men chosen for the honor. The traditional marriage ritual then took place. The bride and groom, flanked by their parents, faced each other under the Huppa; the rabbi chanted the blessings and read the Ketuba (marriage contract); the groom placed the ring on the bride's finger while reciting the prescribed Hebrew phrase beginning with: "Harey at . . . " "With this ring thou art consecrated unto me in accordance with the Law of Moses and Israel"; each took a sip of red wine from a goblet which was then smashed under the groom's heel in commemoration of the destruction of the Temple; and the ceremony was over amid embraces, kisses, and shouts of: "Mazel Tov!" The whole assemblage then retraced its steps, the new couple walking side by side, and the musicians playing their merriest tunes.

During all this time feverish preparations for the wedding feast were going on at home, by devoted neighbors and hired help. Long tables, improvised out of boards placed on trestles, and benches borrowed from other houses were put along the walls of the largest room which had been emptied of other furniture. White cloths were spread on the tables, which were then set with silverware and dishes, mostly also borrowed; baskets of sliced halla; and bowls filled with pickles and radishes. A few bottles of wine and vodka were placed at strategic locations. In the kitchen cauldrons of soup with chicken, meat, noodles and potatoes were steaming. Peppery gefillte fish was being portioned out to serve as the first course. Other pots containing compote and tsimmes (a dessert of



prunes, raisins, carrots and dried apples) were also kept warm, everything ready to be served. One large table laden with food was placed outside in the yard for the poor or anyone else who wished to partake of it.

When the procession arrived all the men crowded around a barrel of water just outside the entrance in order to wash their hands and utter the prescribed blessing before going inside. The newlyweds were then escorted to the head table and the guests were seated about them according to rank, age, and closeness of relationship. A number of the young people and all small children were put in another room since there was no place for them at the large tables. The badhan and musicians were relegated to the kitchen for their meal, and waited there until called upon to resume their roles. We did not have the present barbaric custom of assaulting people's ears with a deafening cacophony while they eat. A festive meal was a serious business of enjoying the food and the pleasant conversation of table companions, which our guests engaged in leisurely, topping off the repast with glasses of hot tea and cake.

When it became evident that everybody had enough and refused urgings to have additional helpings, the badhan appeared once more on the scene. Standing in the center of the room and holding a scroll which he consulted from time to time, he began a sing-song recital of the gifts bestowed on the newlyweds. Each donor was mentioned by name, occupation, relationship, and standing in the community, with appropriate laudatory remarks and embellishments, including jocular asides which aroused much merriment. If the gift was a tangible item, such as tableware, linen, jewelry or a pair of candlesticks, it was exhibited before the assemblage to exclamations of approval: "Oh, how beautiful! Very nice! Let them use it in good health!" This was the time for a good

badhan to demonstrate his skill, for it required great tact and use of circumlocution to praise the generosity of a rich man who made a miserly gift; to laud the virtues of a notorious double-dealer; or proclaim the sagacity of a known simpleton--all without giving offense and being entertaining at the same time. There were badhans whose art made them famous throughout the country, not unlike some humorous television stars of the present day.

After the repast and the badhan's act were over, the musicians were recalled and the dancing began. The elders came first, hopping and jumping to the best of their ability but without touching each other, the only contact between two dancers being a colored kerchief which each held by one end. The groom's relatives, the Hassidim, to whom dancing was an exalted expression of faith, especially distinguished themselves with extravagant movements and body contortions. Their dancing was accompanied by loud singing, without words, of intricate melodies being intoned by the constant repetition of: "Oy, oy, oy; ay, ay, ay; chiri biri bim; chiri biri bom!" When they had enough the younger people took over, dancing the quadrille, the waltz, the sher (a type of cutting-in dance), and the unique Jewish breigez tantz (quarrel and reconciliation dance). The merriment went on for hours until everyone became exhausted and retired to their quarters, but not without a final round of kisses, embraces, and renewed shouts of "Mazel Tov!" Some of the out-of-town guests remained for several days, but gradually all went their way and tranquility returned to the household, bringing with it the routine activities and cares of everyday life.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## DAYS OF JOY, DAYS OF AWE

## 1. The Sabbath

In contrast to the drabness of the weekdays and the turbulence of the Sundays, peace and serenity descended on the Sabbath. The preparations for it began on Thursday evening when the women prepared dough in large oblong wooden troughs, kneading the mixture of flour, water, eggs and other ingredients until proper consistency was obtained. The mess was then left to rise overnight. At sunrise on Friday the large baking oven was heated for about two hours with a stack of thick logs, the women meanwhile fashioning the dough into braided oval loaves, and rolling some of it into sheets for making noodles. This was a tricky job, because the noodles had to come out as fine as possible. To that end each sheet was flattened with a rolling pin to a uniform thinness, then rolled up to form a multilayered tube which was sliced with a very sharp knife like one slices a salami, exerting just enough pressure to cut the dough without getting the layers stuck to each other. I know what it takes to do it right--I tried it, but got only lumps of dough instead of long fine strings of lokshen, noodles to the uninitiated.

After the logs burned down, the charcoal was raked out into a metal pail and doused with water, to be saved for heating the samovar. The oven was swept clean of ashes and the prepared loaves placed inside with a long-handled wooden shovel. A delicious aroma soon spread throughout the house, and before long the loaves were brought

out, now golden brown, and worthy of the name halla -- the bread to grace the Sabbath table.

We children always had a special treat on those Friday mornings: teigakhtz -- a crisp thin potato pancake baked in shallow pans in front of the roaring flames. We used to eat it even before we got dressed, crunching the crackling rind and running for second helpings, our faces and hands dripping with fat. The mere thought of the taste and smell of that teigakhtz is enough even now to make my mouth water.

After the baking was done a general cleanup began, usually by the girls who were old enough to help. Pails and pails of water were fetched from the well about a quarter of a mile away from the house. These were emptied into a large wooden barrel standing in the entrance hall, enough to last till Sunday, since one did not go for water on the Sabbath. Several kettles and pots full of water were placed inside the oven for heating. Glassware, silverware, the brass samovar were polished to a sparkle, special attention being given to the two Sabbath candlesticks. The unpainted wooden floors were scoured and covered with homespun linen runners in the passages. This done, the younger children received a good scrubbing with the hot water from the oven, and finally the older girls washed their long hair and in nice weather went outside to dry it in the sun. In late afternoon everybody donned their best clothes and were ready to mekabel Shabbos (greet the Sabbath) at sundown.

Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, mother was busy with preparation of the meals for the twenty-four hours of the holiday, since no cooking or even heating of food is permitted during that period. The messiest job was cleaning the fish: removing the scales, head, tail and innards. The meat was then removed carefully to preserve the

skin intact, boned and chopped finely with a mixture of pepper and other spices. The concoction was then replaced into the skin, the spine bones reinserted in the proper places, and cooked with onions and carrots--to be served up on Friday evening as the famous gefillte fish, without which no festive Jewish dinner is complete.

A greatly interested participant in this proceeding was our old yellow tomcat who invariably showed up the moment the fish-cleaning began, meowing and rubbing himself against mother's legs until he received the innards, which he had to content himself with consuming in the back yard. Incidentally, when this cat became quite old and a great nuisance, it was decided to get rid of him. Father put him in a sack and let him out in a village about a dozen miles away. But old tom was not to be so cavalierly deprived of his homestead. He was back in a few days, bedraggled and mangy, but ready for his square meals as well as for the harassment we kids used to inflict upon him. He was reluctantly allowed to live out the rest of his allotted days on this earth without any further attempts to rid ourselves of his presence.

After preparation of the fish came the meat. The fact that it came from ritually slaughtered cattle was not yet sufficient for it to be ready for the pot. It had to be rubbed down with coarse salt and left for at least an hour on a gridiron or slanted board so that all the blood would be drained off--only then was it sufficiently kosher to be eaten by an orthodox Jew. As for chickens, they were always bought live from a peasant, after ruffling the feathers and blowing on the down to see if the skin is not blue but yellow with fat. Since many households kept their own chickens for the eggs, one that stopped laying would occasionally be consigned to the pot. In either case it entailed a trip to the shohet (ritual slaughterer). They were plucked by the womenfolk in the yard

or pantry, depending on the weather, the feathers and down being preserved for pillows or featherbeds. The women always wore kerchiefs at this work to prevent the fine down from getting entangled in their hair. After being plucked, the chicken was always opened with a sense of foreboding, because if an unusual blemish, such as an enlarged or spotted liver, was found it had to be taken to the rabbi for a ruling whether it was kosher or treif (ritually unclean). In the latter case it could not be eaten by a Jew and was either discarded or given away to a friendly gentile. On such, happily rare occasions, we were deprived of the customary *pièce de résistance*--the proverbial mama's chicken soup--and had to make do with an improvised substitute, usually some of the beef or veal reserved for the cholent, the main Saturday afternoon dish.

Cholent was a stew of meat, potatoes, onions, carrots and other vegetables, cooked only in earthenware pots. Since no cooking was allowed on Saturday, an arrangement was made by a number of neighboring households whereby the one with the biggest oven would fire it red hot on late Friday afternoon, all the participants would bring their pots, each bearing some mark of identification, and place them in the oven which was then sealed with clay, to be opened after everybody returned from the synagogue about noon on Saturday. Each housewife then reclaimed her stew, piping hot and done to a turn. Incidentally, the breaking of the clay to unseal the oven was also prohibited, it being considered work, so by prior arrangement it was done by a gentile boy, for proper compensation. One wonders what would have happened if the boy failed to appear to unseal the oven--it certainly would have ruined the Sabbath as well as the stew. However, no such calamity ever occurred, presumably by provision for a substitute Shabbos goy as such hired hand was called by Jews and gentiles alike.

By late Friday afternoon all preparations were finished and the housewife had her chance to wash up and get dressed in her finest. And then, just as the sun was setting and the first stars became visible, she received her reward for her toil and trouble. For it is the lady of the house who has the honor to signalize the advent of the Sabbath. By that time the festive table was set, with the halla, covered with a white cloth, and a carafe of red wine for the Kiddush (Blessing) in front of father's seat and the gleaming candlesticks gracing the other end near mother's seat. At the appointed time, with the whole family assembled around the table, mother would cover her head with a shawl, light the two candles, circle her outstretched arms like the wings of a bird three times around the flames, then cover her face with her hands for a few minutes murmuring inaudibly a prayer from her own heart, in the deep silence around her. There was something mysterious in this ritual, something harking back to ancient days, to times past memory, primitive, incomprehensible, but at the same time serene and reassuring -- a sense of peace and security amid the encroaching threatening darkness.

The importance of the woman in the Jewish household is further highlighted on Friday evening after the men return from the synagogue and before the meal is served. It is then, in recognition of the role played by the woman in the maintenance of the family that the husband sings the encomium Eshet Hayil (A Woman of Valor) dedicated to his wife and the mother of his children.

## 2. Passover

The holidays presented an even greater contrast to the drab everyday routine. Pessah (Passover), celebrating the exodus from Egypt and the transformation of the

erstwhile slaves of Pharaoh into a free people, was the most joyous one. Preparations for this holiday began several weeks in advance with arrangements for baking matzoth, the unleavened bread in the form of large wafers which can now be bought in every supermarket in the United States not only on Passover but throughout the year, except that ours were round, not square. These had to be of utmost purity and devoid of any contamination by hametz (any leavened substance) to such a degree that the various utensils and tools used in its preparation, even the oven in which it was baked, had to be cleansed in a specially prescribed way. For this reason one house in each neighborhood, usually that of a baker because of its large oven, was consecrated for that purpose and a specific time allotted to each household for its use. All participants had to wear clothes that were thoroughly cleaned, because even a crumb of bread was deemed cause enough to vitiate the purity from hametz. We kids felt quite self-important when permitted to help carry the flour and utensils, all wrapped in immaculate covers, from our house to the place of baking. A special treat was to be allowed, after proper purification, to make the fine perforations in the flattened sheets of dough with a sharply toothed metal rowel attached to a wooden handle. When ready, the matzoth were carefully wrapped and placed in a large two-handled wicker basket, carried by two people. The average family baked from twenty to thirty pounds since it was the main staple and had to last for eight full days. At home the basket was set down in a previously prepared special corner where other Passover foods such as wine, dried fruit and nuts, jars of chicken fat, were also stored. This corner became strictly off limits to the children until the advent of the holiday.

This period was also the occasion for outfitting the family, especially the children,



with new clothes, the old ones having been outgrown or reduced to tatters during the long winter. Since ready-made clothes were unheard of it meant trips to dry goods stores for selection of fabrics, then to the tailor for measurements, then again for fittings of the loosely basted garment, and at last for trying on the almost finished product for final adjustment. Shoes too were custom made in this manner. Not every child received a new outfit--only the rich could afford that. Some had to be content with hand-me-downs from an older brother or sister, or a mother's dress would be altered to fit a child. All this involved consultations within the family and with the tailor. Great excitement reigned, because new clothes were seldom gotten more than once a year.

About two days before the holiday a thorough housecleaning was made. Spring was usually warm and sunny, so all movable furniture was carried outside for scrubbing and disinfecting with kerosene. Featherbeds and quilts were draped over fences or ropes for airing. Inside the house doors, windows, floors and the remaining furniture received a similar treatment. The older children were recruited to help while the little ones were constantly being shooed out of the way. The last day was spent in cooking, baking and frying, all in special dishes that were used only on Passover, having been stored away the rest of the year. A lot of work went into preparation for this holiday, but it was all done in a spirit of cheerfulness and a feeling of renewal, in harmony with the young greenery of the trees, the busy sparrows and darting swallows, and the first spring flowers, all proclaiming the awakening of life and redemption from the bondage of the long harsh winter.

The eight days of the holiday were spent in prayers at the synagogue, feasting, visiting relatives, and relaxation. The first evening set the keynote for the festivities

with the Seder, the ceremonial feast beginning with the "four questions" asked by the youngest child as to "Why is this night different from all other nights?", receiving in reply a recitation of the story of the Exodus as related in the Haggada. And indeed there was a difference. Seder in Hebrew means order or arrangement, and the Passover dinner was so named because it followed a set procedure, unlike other holiday dinners. To begin with, a special roomy seat, with pillows at the back and sides, was prepared for father so that he could recline and bask in presumptive luxury. Then a bowl of water and an embroidered towel were brought to his seat for the prescribed washing of hands before a meal, so that he would not have to go to the pantry for this purpose. These were symbolic gestures of freedom, of being his own master in contrast to the slavery endured in Egypt. The drinking of at least four cups of wine during the course of the meal, at stated intervals, had a similar significance. But the misery endured in captivity was not to be forgotten--on the contrary: the injunction is to pass on the story of the Exodus from father to son, from generation to generation, and that each person is to consider himself as if he had been personally redeemed by that momentous event. The Haggada begins with these words: "This is the bread of affliction (pointing to the matzoth) that our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt!" ; followed by the invitation, as befits a free man to extend hospitality: "Let all who are hungry come and partake of our food!" The recital then continues with: "Slaves were we unto the Pharaoh in the land of Egypt . . . " and relates all the great events which preceded, accompanied, and followed the liberation: Abraham forsaking idolatry to serve the Lord, God of Israel; his advent into the land of Canaan; subsequent migration to Egypt; enslavement of the children of Israel by the Pharaoh; the hard labor and suffering they endured;

Pharaoh's refusal to release them until forced by the ten plagues; passage through the parted waters of the Red Sea which then engulfed the pursuing Egyptian host; wandering in the desert for forty years, miraculously sustained by manna; receipt of the Law at Mount Sinai; and final return to the land of Israel. The Seder is interspersed with many blessings and tasting of symbolic foods, shared in by all the participants.

Strangely enough, Moses, the foundling who became a prince of Egypt, who led the revolt against the Pharaoh, who delivered his people out of bondage, gave them heart during the long years in the desert, proclaimed the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, and brought the Israelites within sight of the Promised Land--this great leader's name is nowhere mentioned in the Haggada! All the stupendous achievements are ascribed therein to the omnipotence of the Lord.

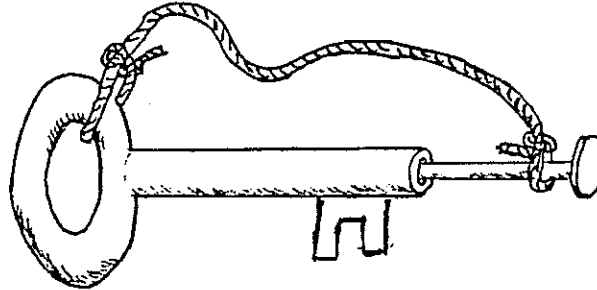
The children, free from heder for the duration of the holiday, took full advantage of their liberty and the fine spring weather by running about the streets, showing off their new outfits, and their pockets bulging with walnuts for a special game played only on Passover. Seven nuts were placed in a row about six inches apart, and each player rolled his favorite "shooter" pebble or metal ball trying to hit a nut in the row, preferably the one at the top, a hit winning all nuts below the one knocked out. Another popular game called "Chizhik" was played with a square wooden peg, tapered at both ends, with the Roman numbers I--III--V--VII scratched on the sides. The player threw the peg on the ground to see which number came on top, then would hit one of the tapered ends with a stick, causing the peg to fly up in the air, and had to hit it in mid-air to go as far as possible in a given direction. This was not as easy as it sounds. Every try counted, whether or not the peg was touched, and when struck it would often go

in a different direction from the one intended. The player had as many tries as the number originally shown, and after these were used up the distance of the peg from the starting point toward the designated direction was measured off in paces, and that was his score. The next player then took over to try his luck.

"Chizhik" was our baseball, and we played it all summer, unlike the nut game which was played only on Passover for the simple reason that we had no walnuts during the rest of the year. The peg game, however, had one serious drawback. Since playgrounds as such did not exist in the town, we of necessity played in the courtyards between the houses, where all too often the game would be brought to an unscheduled end by the tinkling of a broken window pane, with painful consequences to our parents' pocketbooks and our own buttocks.

As a matter of fact we never had any manufactured toys. Everything was improvised or adapted to uses not originally meant for. Although we sold fishhooks in our store, I was not allowed to take one because: "This is not a plaything, and besides it is dangerous--you might stick yourself!" So I had to use a rusty pin found somewhere. Buttons, all kinds of buttons, were our medium of exchange, a less common one being worth several of the ordinary ones, with the military-type brass (gold in our parlance) ones having the highest value. Sticks served as lances, thin slats of wood became swords, and pebbles made fine bullets. Pieces of elastic from torn garters connected to a forked twig became fine slingshots, a weapon much favored because of its use by David in his battle with Goliath, and we too became quite skilled in its use. We even manufactured "real" guns. In every household could be found rusty old keys, the kind with a hole bored lengthwise into the stem. To make a gun out of it, all we needed was a nail that fitted

snugly into the bore and a longish piece of string. The point of the nail was blunted with a stone, the string was tied to its head at one end, the other end was tied to the loop of the key, and the gun was ready for firing except for powder.



That presented no problem. Matches were filched from the kitchen, the sulfur was scraped off and tamped carefully into the bore of the key stem, leaving room for part of the nail to be inserted and act as the firing pin. The firing was accomplished by holding the center of the string so that the "gun" was properly balanced and swinging the contraption to make the nail's head hit smartly against a wall, compressing the sulfur which exploded with quite a bang. Most of the time the nail just shot out and the "gun" was ready for use again. But it also happened that the key itself burst apart, with even a bigger bang. The last time this happened one of the kids received a fragment in the leg, luckily causing only a flesh wound. That finally roused our parents, slaps were liberally distributed all around, and an end was put to our not so innocent gunplay.

The only tools we had were what we could find at home: a hammer, scissors, a small handsaw. Every household had an axe for splitting firewood, but its use was strictly forbidden to us, just as we were not allowed to handle the sharp kitchen knives. Yet two in our gang had treasures which were the envy of the others. My namesake Yankl, whose father was a locksmith, had a usable, even if rusty metal file (he was

also the chief purveyor of keys for our "guns"); and I had a real two-bladed bone-handled penknife which was "borrowed" from our store. I do not think that I ever possessed anything which I cherished more than that beautiful penknife. And what use we all made of it! Sticks were whittled to sharp points to become spears; old shingles were shaped into daggers and sabers; we made pegs for "Chizhik"; we even made a small cage out of twigs with a trap door manipulated by a string, and waited for hours for the birds that never came to peck at the bread crumbs we sprinkled inside.

Girls too had to fashion their own playthings. Dolls were made out of discarded pieces of cloth, with beads or tiny buttons for eyes. They were helped in this by their mothers or older sisters who at the same time taught them how to sew. Their games were mostly of the "playing house" kind: being mamas; taking care of their "babies"; having visitors; and other such "girl stuff." The only game they had in common with boys was hide-and-seek. Girls also did quite a bit of running about, but not so much as boys--they were usually apprenticed at a tender age to help with the household chores and care of the ever-present infants. There was good reason for inclusion in the man's morning prayers of a sentence thanking the Lord for not having created him a woman!

### 3. Shavuot through Simhat Torah

Seven weeks after Passover came the next holiday, Shavuot (Pentecost), which usually fell in June. My recollection of it brings to mind two special features: covering of the floors with fresh green reeds, armfuls of which we kids gleefully fetched from the swamps; and the traditional blintzes and cheesecakes which we even more

gleefully dispatched. The emphasis on greenery and dairy products no doubt stems from the days when Jews were farmers and herdsmen in their ancient land and celebrated the gathering of the first crops and the weaning of lambs and calves at this time of year.

Next came a grouping of holidays in the fall, beginning with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year; followed by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement; Sukkot, the Festival of the Booths; and ending with Simhat Torah, which marks the completion of reading of the five books of the Old Testament, one chapter of which is read each Saturday in the synagogue. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are known as Yomim Noroyim (Days of Awe), because it is believed that the destiny of every person for the coming year is preordained and irrevocably sealed on those days. Accordingly these High Holy Days were devoted to solemn prayer and fasting (on Yom Kippur only). All manifestation of frivolity was forbidden. The entire community, young and old, gathered at the synagogue to hear the shrill tones of the shofar (ram's horn), no doubt used in ancient days to call the people together on important occasions, and to take up arms in time of peril. Joshua most likely used the shofar at the time the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. The eerie sounds of this instrument served to heighten the feeling of awe on these holidays, and the mood of solemnity was further enhanced by the garb of many of the old men who in addition to the tallith (prayer shawl) wrapped themselves in a kittel -- a pure white shroud that covered them from head to foot. The chants at the services on these holidays were very elaborate, notably of the Kol Nidrei at the beginning of Yom Kippur. A good hazzan would embellish the traditional tunes with variations and cadenzas of his own; and when these met with approval of the critical congregation his fame would spread far and wide throughout the province.

Three archaic rituals worthy of note were connected with Yom Kippur. The first one took place at home during the morning preceding the holiday. It was known by the Hebrew word for sacrifices: kapporot, or kappores in the vernacular. The male children gathered around their father who held a live rooster by the legs and circled the wing-flapping bird three times about his own head and the heads of the boys, while chanting a Hebrew phrase consigning the rooster as a sacrifice for the life and health of the group. The same ritual was performed with a hen by the mother on behalf of herself and the female children. What effect this had on our future well-being is not for me to say, but the fat soup and boiled chicken consumed that evening were very good indeed.

The second ritual took place at the synagogue throughout the same day. This was called malkot or malkes, meaning flagellation. Starting in early morning penitents appeared at the synagogue, prostrated themselves on the floor on a spot covered with reeds, and received thirty-nine blows with a sort of cat-o'-nine-tails, administered by the shammus (sexton). Only relatively few persons, mostly old men, submitted to this scourge as an atonement for whatever sins they may have committed during the year.

The third ritual was actually part of the Yom Kippur services--a recitation of forty-four sins or transgressions, each preceded by the words "Al het . . ." meaning "For the sin of . . ." The enumeration included, among others, the following: hard-heartedness, false utterance, unchastity, deceit, disrespect of parents, evil thoughts, violence, profanity, overindulgence, usury, arrogance, covetousness, pride, envy, and perjury. At the mention of each sin the worshipper was required to strike his breast with his clenched fist. Since this recital is repeated four times during the day-long



service, it meant a total of one hundred seventy-six blows. Unlike the malkot, the Al het self-punishment was administered by all, except that the strength of the blows depended upon the depth of devotion rather than on the degree of guilt.

The climax of the Yom Kippur service comes at sunset with the chanting of Neilah, the closing prayer. This is the last chance of beseeching the Heavenly Powers for a propitious judgement, or for amelioration of a dire lot already proposed before it is irrevocably sealed. The doors of the Holy Ark, symbol of the Heavenly Gates, were thrown open for the Neilah. The worshippers, already exhausted by the twenty-four-hour fast and continuous praying, gathered their last strength to raise their voices in supplication, resoundingly seconded by the women in the gallery, swaying to and fro, their heads wrapped in the black-striped prayer shawls, and tears streaming down their faces and beards. With final blasts of the shofar and the appearance of the first stars Yom Kippur came to an end, and everybody repaired to their homes to break the fast.

Four days later began Sukkot, the Festival of the Booths, commemorating the forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, dwelling in tents. These four days were devoted to the building of a sukka (booth) by each household. Most people nailed some boards to a wall of the house to form a lean-to, with only some crosspieces on top to hold green boughs which traditionally served as a roof. This makeshift structure was meant to be the symbolic residence of the family for eight days, and as a token thereof at least one meal was eaten there each day. Unfortunately, the weather at that time of year was usually rainy, windy and cold, preventing many people from carrying out the custom. Nevertheless, many others, the very pious ones, complied with the requirement despite the adversities. Our family

was among the fortunate ones to have the sukka inside the four walls of the house, due to the foresight, when the house was built, to hinge a section of the slanted roof so that it could be raised vertically, thus exposing a part of the interior to the open sky.

The last day of this holiday period was Simhat Torah, and that was celebrated joyfully by everybody, old and young. In the synagogue all scrolls of the Torah were taken out of the ark and carried round and round, the more pious men hopping, dancing and singing at the top of their voices only four words: "Sissu vesimhu besimhat Torah!" (Rejoice and exalt in the festival of the Torah!) As the procession went by people reached out to touch each scroll and then brought the fingers to their lips. But we youngsters had the grandest time of all, since almost everything was permitted. We played pranks on each other and even on adults, carried blue-white flags with the Star of David in the center and an apple stuck on the shaft, and ran in and out among the crowd almost knocking people off their feet. The main excitement came after dark, when we wrapped some rags at the end of long sticks, doused them with kerosene, lit them and marched with the smoking and stinking torches in front of the synagogue, the onlookers, especially the women and girls, oh'ing and ah'ing but giving us a wide berth. The real heroes were the few daredevils who would take a mouthful of kerosene and squirt it out in a spray against a lit candle, creating a momentary fireball to the delight of the rest of us. It is a wonder that no house was ever set on fire and no one suffered any serious burns during these escapades.

#### 4. Hanukka and Purim

The only other holidays were Hanukka and Purim, the first commemorating

the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greek oppressors; and the other the thwarting by Mordehai and Esther of Haman's plot to massacre the Jews of ancient Persia. These were really semi-holidays, not requiring cessation of everyday activities, and were national rather than religious festivals.

Celebration of Hanukka was a family affair, with lighting of candles on eight successive days, eating potato pancakes, and playing of indoor games, notably the spinning of a four-sided top called dreidl which had the Hebrew letters Nun, Gimel, Heh, Shin standing for the phrase: "A great miracle happend there." This refers to the tradition that after the Temple was purified of the defilement perpetrated by the heathens a small cruse of sanctified oil was found, enough to burn for only one day, but by miracle it lasted for eight full days. It is customary to give money to children on this holiday, the so-called Hannuka gelt. Children were told the epic of the struggle of the Jewish people, under the leadership of the Hasmonean brothers, for freedom and independence; and were encouraged to sing Zionist and patriotic songs.

Purim was celebrated by reading the Book of Esther in the synagogue, the youngsters creating a racket with rattles and other noisemakers at every mention of Haman's name. A unique custom of this holiday is to send gifts of fruit, nuts, candy and cake to relatives, friends and neighbors. So the streets were full of children, bundled up against the cold, trudging back and forth through the crunching snow and carrying dishes of goodies covered with white napkins. Since it was acceptable to utilize what was received in composing the gifts being sent, many items after making the rounds wound up in the end with the original donor. But this of course was expected and taken with good cheer.

Another feature of this festival were the "Purim Players" --people who dressed up in costumes representing Mordehai, Ahasuerus, Esther, and Haman, as well as other Biblical characters, going from house to house to enact the story with song and dance, and receiving money or other gifts for their performance. All in all it was not a bad way of keeping alive the memory of a victory over a tyrant who tried to undo the Jewish people more than two thousand five hundred years ago.

Such was the shtetl, and such was the life of its inhabitants. Throughout the tapestry depicting their struggles and achievements, joys and sorrows, drabness of everyday existence and spiritual sublimation during times of festivity, one motif predominates in the grand design--the sense of tradition, the adherence to old Jewish values, the feeling of belonging to an ancient and indestructible people--all epitomized in three Yiddish words: "Dos Pintele Yid" --the undying spark deep in the heart of every Jew.

To put the life of the shtetl, as hereinbefore described, in its proper perspective it should be borne in mind that the period the narrative deals with, namely, the first decade of the twentieth century, marked almost one hundred years of peace in our region, which had not undergone any major disturbance since Napoleon's Grande Armée marched triumphantly toward Moscow in 1812, and scampered back in disarray through the frozen fields and marshes in the winter of the same year. This long era of tranquility lulled the shtetl into a state of serenity, gave it a sense of permanence in which life seemed to proceed in an orderly well-regulated pattern, established since time immemorial and not subject to change. Of course there were variations: ups and downs, rich and poor, success and failure, quarrels and reconciliations,

sickness and recovery, birth and death--the full range of human experience. But that was all part of the pattern, was accepted as natural, and seemed to be destined to continue till the end of time. Well, the end of time came much sooner than expected. It came with thunder and lightning, with fire and sword, uprooting the long-established order of things, and changing forever the destinies of men and the course of their lives. The cataclysm was engendered by the outbreak of the First World War.

an unfamiliar and hostile populace, also seemed quite foolhardy. And finally it was reasoned that the Germans, a cultured and civilized people, whose language was similar to Yiddish and who did not oppress the Jews in their own country, could not be worse than the Russians. The Jews therefore stayed to await their fate, together with the vast majority of the gentile population, especially the Catholics and those of Polish descent who never had too much love for the Russians anyway.

Then the cannon roar drew nearer, the retreating Russian troops, now disorganized, were moving ever faster and faster, and it became evident that the arrival of the Germans was not far off. Word got around that the Russians were setting fire to everything before their final departure, and that it was not safe for Jews to be in their way at such a time. We began hiding whatever valuables we had, some in a concealed cellar underneath the large oven in grandma Leie's house, and others in a deep pit dug in the garden among the tall pole beans, where it was hoped not to be readily noticeable through the greenery. We were among the very few Jews who owned a team of horses and a large wagon, so we piled it high with the most essential portable belongings such as clothing, linen, utensils, and all the food we could gather, ready to move at the last minute should we be forced to do so. All stores had already been shut and locked for several days, and lookouts were posted around the market place to see and report on what was happening.

## 2. The Cossacks

The final act was played out soon enough on a hot summer day. A troop of mounted Cossacks rode into town, broke open every store in the market place, looted what they could carry with them, smashed and ruined everything else, then threw it

all into the square and set fire to it. The stores themselves could not be burned due to their brick and stone construction, but some of the wooden doors were ripped off the hinges and thrown on the pyre. While this was going on we moved with our horses and wagon through back streets to a swampy meadow outside of town, where we found many other families who hoped to find refuge there from the dreaded Cossacks and the expected conflagration.

The events of that day, the night we spent under the open sky, and of the following morning are unforgettable. The shells at that time were flying over our heads with a piercing shriek followed by an ear-splitting explosion. The people were huddled in groups underneath the wagons, trees and bushes, cowering in terror, crying, praying and reciting Psalms. The shelling was not too heavy--about one every five minutes or so--and only one actually fell and exploded in the immediate vicinity. Luckily no one was hurt because the shell penetrated deep into the soft marshy ground and threw up a geyser of muddy earth as it exploded. The only damage was a broken spoke of a wagon wheel hit by a shell splinter. During that afternoon we saw an airplane for the first time. It was apparently a German reconnaissance plane which made a wide circle above us and disappeared toward the West.

We were not worried so much about the shells as about the Cossacks, who were considered the greater danger. The fear became almost a panic when two of them rode into our encampment in late afternoon, looked about and galloped off. The horrible thought occurred to everybody that they would return later with others, perhaps during the night, and stage a pogrom. Frantic efforts were made to get the young women and girls out of sight. Some were placed inside the wagons and covered with the household

things. Others dirtied their faces with mud and put on men's or old women's clothing. Terror seized everyone, not knowing what will come next.

Sure enough, just about sunset, the Cossacks returned, six or seven of them, but their quest was for horses, not women. They ordered the unloading of several wagons, in a hurry, using their sabers to cut the ropes that held the piled up goods in place. Ours was among those chosen for the honor, so everything was thrown down into the mud, and we were glad to get off only with that. But then the Cossacks demanded that a driver be provided as well, and the agonizing choice fell upon Zeide Leiser Ber, in the hope that because of his age he would not be forced into more arduous or dangerous activities. With tears and bitter hearts we watched him drive away across the bridge on the road leading to the nearest town, Pruzhany, not knowing what will happen to him or if we will ever see him again. But he was back two days later, tired and hungry but unharmed. The escaping military and civilian traffic got snarled up at a crossroad near the edge of town, and in the confusion grandpa managed to get away. He could not come back sooner because in the meantime the wooden bridge was burned down and he had to wait until a temporary span thrown across by the Germans was open to civilian traffic.

Needless to say, no one slept a wink during that night, which however passed without any untoward incident, even the shelling having stopped. Early the next morning a scattering of shells flew over our heads, but exploded on the other side of town, and within a short time we saw the signal we were waiting for--the wooden bridge over the river and some nearby houses burst into flame, and we knew that it was all over. The relief felt by all was epitomized in the shout of one of the Jews in the encampment:



"Gott tzu danken, mein huiz brent shoin!" (Thanks to the Lord, my house is burning already!) The Germans entered the town about two hours later and immediately joined several of the townspeople who were already trying to stem the conflagration. It was quickly brought under control, with only the bridge and three adjoining houses completely burned down. We returned to our homes and found them undamaged and unlooted, but it took several trips to the meadow to bring back the soiled household things which were thrown into the mud when our wagon was taken away.

### 3. Under German Rule

Our life under the German occupation continued for about three and one half years, until the spring of 1919. Though the actual battles on the Eastern front during this period were being fought deep inside Russia, far away from our region, we were not spared the vicissitudes inherent in living under enemy occupation in time of war. Some of them, like the shortage of food and other commodities and the disruption of travel and communications, were a direct result of the movement of the opposing armies, the physical destruction of life and property, and the flight of large numbers of people from the towns and villages. Others were brought about by actions of the German administration in exercising its control over the population of the occupied territories. There is no reason to doubt that what took place in our town had its counterpart in countless other such towns throughout the province.

On the first day the Germans arrived notices were posted demanding the surrender of all weapons and the reporting of any Russian soldiers who either deserted or remained behind inadvertently; and establishing a dusk to dawn curfew. Violations

carried severe penalties, including shooting upon failure to stop when challenged by a patrol during the curfew. These orders were accepted as necessary and reasonable wartime measures, and presented no problems. The Jews had no weapons and knew of no Russian soldiers who may have remained in town--if there were such they would have looked for shelter among their gentile coreligionists. The ban on staying out after dark was irksome, but was hoped to be only temporary. However, the next order, quite unexpected, caused considerable resentment. This required that every person, young or old, male and female, must go to the public bathhouse once a week to get washed with some stinking disinfectant; and while the people bathed their clothes were fumigated and thrown back to them all crumpled and reeking of an odor akin to naphtha. This measure was of course aimed at getting rid of the lice which admittedly were prevalent in the populace, and preventing the spread of disease, especially typhus, which as we later learned had broken out in a number of other towns. But no reason or explanation was given when the order was issued, so it seemed to be an arbitrary effrontery and many people did not comply with it.

Since it would have required a lot of record keeping to determine who did or did not comply with the order, the Germans resorted to a typically highhanded method for getting the desired results. Without any prior warning a number of two-man patrols armed with shears appeared in the streets and began to stop women and bearded men, and compel them to submit to inspection of their hair and clothing. If in their judgment there was any indication of infestation, the women's long hair and the men's beards were forcibly snipped off on the spot. The shame and humiliation of the women was nothing compared to the shock suffered by the men, to whom the loss of the beard was

a sacrilege. Universal consternation gripped the community when the Dayan's beard was cut off right in the market place, despite his pleas and struggle, and the horrified poor man ran home in tears, with both hands covering his naked chin. These brutal measures could have been avoided if proper warning had been given, but they achieved the desired result. They brought on an orgy of cleaning and washing the likes of which had not been heard of, with a consequent lessening of infection and disease. There was no typhus in our town during those years.

Another edict, during the severe winter, required that one window in each house be opened for an hour at a specified time, patrols going through the town to enforce compliance. This order however was easily circumvented by the simple stratagem of having children posted at strategic locations to watch out for the patrols and warn the household of their approach--after all, an open window could rapidly chill a warm house, and firewood was expensive and hard to come by in the middle of winter.

Though unaccustomed to the above changes, people quickly realized that they were beneficial and began complying with them. Another innovation met with immediate wholehearted approval and cooperation. Most of the town's streets were paved with cobblestones in the center, but not on the sides along the houses. During the rainy fall season and the spring thaw one had to wade ankle-deep in slush and mud to get to any house. Under the direction of the Germans the inhabitants built narrow sidewalks made of boards in front of, and on the approaches to their houses, to everyone's satisfaction.

The Germans did not always resort to force to secure cooperation--they also used the carrot, a very slim one to be sure, but preferable to the stick. Thus they enlisted

hundreds of people in gathering mushrooms and berries by offering to buy any amount delivered to them. Picking of these gifts of nature in the forests surrounding the town was always carried on by the populace, but usually by children and only for personal consumption. There were several varieties of mushrooms to be found there, some of them poisonous, which we learned to recognize. Of the edible ones we picked only two kinds: the ones with a deep-brown head and creamy undersides, the boroviki, were the best--excellent for sautéing and also for drying, in which form they were used as an ingredient in soups and stews (when I came to New York I found these dried mushrooms on sale in stores in Jewish and Polish neighborhoods); the others were the yellow lisitchki, which were not suitable for drying and had to be consumed while still fresh. It was great fun to go in a group into the forest, carrying wicker baskets, and looking for the boroviki which were often concealed under the pine needles and required a sharp eye to be detected. When one was found the cry "I've got one" would resound and everybody converged on that spot, because it was known that others would be found in the immediate vicinity. It was not considered good sport to keep quiet about a discovery, and anyone who did that was ostracized from the group. The lisitchki were more plentiful, grew in clusters, and their bright yellow color stood out vividly against the brown needles and green underbrush so that they could be seen at a distance.

We always left on these excursions early in the morning to get at the young firm mushrooms which came up during the night, especially after a rain. One of the older and more knowledgeable kids acted as leader and had to be obeyed. It was about an hour's walk along a sandy road to the nearest forest, which began resounding with shouts, laughter and banter as soon as we arrived. At midday we gathered for a picnic lunch of

bread, cheese, hard-boiled eggs and fruit, and usually started homeward, unless the morning's pickings were meager, in which event we tried for another hour or so to increase the take.

Not all the time spent in the forest was devoted to the search for mushrooms--there were too many other fascinating objects to attract our attention. Though there were wild animals in the forest we never saw them--our clamor probably drove them deep into the interior. But there were birds flitting among the trees or sitting on slender branches which rocked gently as the birds alighted on them. These birds were different from the ones we had in town, and we did not know their names. There were yellow-spotted lizards darting about or sunning themselves on rocks. Occasionally a snake would slither by, making us cringe in fear and throw stones in its direction to drive it away. And there were wild little flowers and brightly speckled poisonous mushrooms, not to be touched but attractive to look at. And so the hours were spent until it was time to trudge home, tired but happy and full of new impressions and a sense of adventure.

Berry picking was also pleasurable, but not so exciting as the hunt for individual mushrooms concealed under pine needles. We had four species of berries: tiny but delicious wild strawberries; two kinds of blueberries; and a variety of small cranberries good only for preserves. Each grew in its own season and in different locations. Since they grew in patches, all that was needed was to find one and pick as much as you want. This was more like work, especially with the strawberries which grew close to the ground, making it necessary to crouch or crawl on one's knees to get at them. Additionally, the baskets full of berries were quite heavy and made the homeward walk

really tiring. Berries however had this advantage over mushrooms: they could be eaten during the picking, so except for the cranberries we used to gorge ourselves on them to the point of getting sick.

With the offer of the Germans to buy these products all this changed. The forests began swarming with young and old in the hope of earning a few marks to supplement the family income which shrank abysmally under the occupation. This took all the fun out of our former adventures in the forest. It became work to earn some money instead of a leisurely picniclike outing with friends to gather the fruit for our personal consumption. Furthermore, with all the people now in the forest it was picked clean in no time, and we often came home with empty baskets.

There was another item the Germans wanted: a certain fine yellow powder found inside the rotting trunks of dead trees and in some reedy plants. It was rumored that they used it for medicinal purposes and paid well for it because it was very scarce.

One other innovation the Germans brought about was the growth of tobacco, which had never been cultivated in our parts. They promised to pay well for it, and so every household set aside a section of their vegetable garden for planting tobacco, our family included. It turned out to be a backbreaking and unrewarding task. We had to learn how to care for the plants, when to pick the leaves, how to thread them on strings and hang them up to dry, and at what stage they were acceptable to the purchaser. It required a lot of watering, which meant carrying pails and pails of water from a well some distance away. But despite all our efforts the plants wilted or became mildewed, the leaves did not cure properly, and in the end we had very little to show for our trouble. We gave it up after two summers, defeated by our inexperience and the unsuitable

climate, and went back to beans, carrots, beets, cucumbers and potatoes, which provided some sustenance during those years of want and privation.

The described changes and innovations instituted by the Germans can in general be charged to the credit side, despite the at times rough method of their implementation. Though they were made by the occupation authorities because it suited their own purposes, the population as a whole benefitted from them. But there was another side to the ledger.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN      PAWNS OF WAR

### 1.    Prussians and Swabians

Within a short time after their arrival the Germans took a census of the population and an inventory of personal property, with emphasis on cattle, horses, fowl and grain. A tax was then levied on the owners, not in money but in kind: so many liters of milk or pounds of butter per cow, so much wool per sheep, so many eggs per hen, so much grain per acre, and so on. This tribute fell heaviest on the peasantry, but the effect on their living standard was minimal, since it represented the surplus they usually sold to the townspeople. Jews were taxed mainly through the labor of tailors, shoemakers, blacksmiths, et cetera; and by requisition of merchandise from storekeepers against payment in German paper marks, which the peasants also received for their products and which were quite worthless except for trading with the soldiers. Trade among the local population was either through barter or with prewar Russian silver coins.

Some months later the Germans began to exploit the extensive forests in the region, cutting down trees for lumber, firewood and for production of charcoal and turpentine. For this work they wanted as many people as they could get, both male and female. They started a drive to recruit volunteers on promise of a small daily wage plus food and lodging in the forest. Since many people found themselves without any other means of earning a living, they applied for this work, including my grandfather Leiser Ber, to whom the prospect of working again in the forest was quite appealing.



However, the number of volunteers was not enough to satisfy the demand, so the Germans resorted to force, taking one person from a family which had two or three able-bodied men, unless they were engaged in occupations which were otherwise useful to the authorities. Peasants, for instance, were exempted during the plowing and harvesting seasons, but were recruited for work during the winter months. And finally the Germans began apprehending young people in the streets indiscriminately, and shipping them off to the forest. This was the manner in which I, then just fifteen years old, became a forced laborer in the famous Belovyezh forest preserve, erstwhile the hunting grounds of the Polish Pans and the Russian Tsars.

The heavy taxes imposed by the Germans and their economic exploitation of the country's resources, though resented, would not have antagonized the people so much were they not accompanied by the arrogance and contempt displayed by them toward the native population. To outfit their Kommandantur which they established in one of the nicest houses in town after unceremoniously ejecting the owners, they arbitrarily requisitioned furniture, bedding, linen, and anything else that took their fancy. Any service they wanted was never conveyed as a request but as an order, which had to be obeyed at once if one did not want to have his face slapped. Failure to step aside and make way for them on the narrow sidewalks led to a kick or a slash with a whip, often accompanied by coarse invectives of which the most favored was Schweinhund. It made no difference whether one was young or old, Jew or gentile--all were treated as less than human. Even the gallantry occasionally shown to a pretty young woman had the air of a favor bestowed on someone not really worthy of it, and was insulting rather than pleasing. No opportunity was ever lost to show who was master and who was slave.

The described attitude sometimes led to outright atrocities, having no purpose other than dispelling boredom. The Herrenvolk were quite inventive in finding amusement suitable to their sense of humor. During one sub-zero winter day they had a lot of fun in grabbing peasants in the market place, putting them under the pump and drenching them with water, clothes and all. Another time they harnessed a bearded old Jew between the shafts of a wagon and made him play the role of a horse, whipping included. Then they had races: teams of men were made to pull the large water barrel, normally used in case of a fire, a designated distance at top speed, timing them and placing bets on which "contesting" team will win. These things did not happen too often, but a few instances were enough to demonstrate the superiority of Teutonic culture.

To set the record straight I want to emphasize that this wanton display of arrogance and insensibility was exhibited primarily by the shiny-booted Junkers and their noncommissioned underlings. There was an inordinate number of these in our small and out-of-the-way town. Some were technicians assigned here because of their skill in management and exploitation of natural resources. Many others, though young and healthy, apparently never saw combat duty, having been posted to soft behind-the-lines jobs through influential connections. They strutted about the town in immaculate uniforms, kept clean and well-pressed by their orderlies, always wearing leather gloves, and acting for all the world like tourists on vacation rather than soldiers in time of war.

The common soldiers whom these officers commanded were an altogether different breed. They were older men from the reserves, either unfit or not needed for front-line service. Most of them were Swabians who did not have much love for the aristocratic and haughty Prussians who treated them with the same disdain they heaped

upon the native population. These men were homesick and worried about their wives and children at home, and found some solace in the company of local families with whom they established cordial and even friendly relations. They understood and sympathized with the misery of the townspeople, and before long a barter system developed which was beneficial to both sides, the soldiers exchanging stolen army property for things to send home to their families. The first item traded was salt, not the ordinary table salt but some large-grained yellow stuff that was said to have been used for their horses. We used it as a substitute for the other kind which became completely unavailable, soaking it to get the yellow stains out, saving the water for boiling unpeeled potatoes, and using the dry crystals left for table salt, still yellowish but acceptable under the circumstances. Another item traded was a dark jellylike very sweet substance they called marmalade, which became a substitute for sugar. They also traded bread, hardtack, tinned meat rations (not eaten by Jews for fear it contained pork), and soap. When the soldiers became confident that they would not be betrayed, they began selling or trading horse blankets which were in great demand for conversion into suits or coats--cloth of any kind was just unobtainable.

My brother David who had outgrown his old clothes had a suit made out of one of these blankets. They were grayish-green, the usual army color, which would have been fine except that they had two wide black stripes near the ends and the words Deutsches Reich, also in black, stamped on them. Since not enough cloth was left if the stripes and lettering were cut out, the blankets were usually dyed black. Unfortunately our dye was not good enough to match the black of the blanket, so David's jacket came out with a conspicuous stripe across its back, from shoulder to shoulder.

The poor kid was very unhappy, but had to wear it for want of anything else.

Of the most coveted items that occasionally could be gotten from the soldiers, for a very stiff price, were carbide lamps, or rather lanterns. As the town had no electricity, kerosene lamps were used for illumination. It did not take long for the stock of kerosene to be exhausted, even though we tried to stretch out the supply by burning only tiny lamps with open wicks which reeked and smoked while providing no more light than a small candle. They were dubbed kurniki (smokers). When the last of the kerosene was gone we resorted to burning thin sticks of pine kindling which smoked even more. Candles, while they lasted, were saved for the Sabbath blessing by mother, and toward the end these were cut to small stubs, long enough to last through the Sabbath meal, such as it was. Under these circumstances a carbide lantern with its bright white light was a treasure, and people were willing to barter valuable items for it. It was of course used very sparingly, since a resupply of carbide was also not so easy to come by.

All these products the soldiers traded for Russian silver coins, tableware, copper candlesticks, pieces of old lace, colorful peasant kerchiefs, and the excellent home-spun linen towels that the women embroidered in beautiful designs during the long winter evenings. After the German mark became the established currency money was used to carry on trade with the soldiers.

There was also a certain amount of purely social contact, the soldiers naturally being anxious for the company of the opposite sex. In this they were more successful with the gentile girls, the puritanical Jews keeping their daughters under strict control. The officers occasionally organized dances, but they too had to rely mostly on gentiles for dancing partners. The music was provided by a small army band or played on a

piano which they "borrowed" from an elderly lady, an impoverished descendant of the old Polish nobility, who lived alone on a small estate at the edge of town. She was the subject of much gossip and curiosity on the infrequent occasions that she appeared in the market place. She always arrived in her one-horse light carriage, which she herself drove, wearing a shiny black satin dress with all kinds of ruffles, white lace gloves, and a brimmed hat held down by a white scarf tied under her chin. This was a rare sight indeed in our town. This Polish aristocrat never made peace with the Russian usurpers of her land and in her patriotism always insisted on speaking only Polish. She must have spent innumerable hours playing Chopin *études*, nocturnes and mazurkas on that piano before the Germans took it away, which undoubtedly was a grievous loss to the lonely old lady. Incidentally, this was the first piano I ever heard being played, the music being audible through the open windows as one passed the Kommandantur.

## 2. Voluntary and Forced Labor

In the spring of 1917 I became a wage earner, by getting a job in the creamery which the Germans established for processing the milk that all cow owners were forced to contribute. They took me on because I spoke an acceptable German and could read the Gothic script. My job was to check off the deliveries on the "milk tax" roster, and to act as interpreter when necessary. The pay was one mark per day, but more important was the occasional permission to take home some skim milk or whey, most of which was being fed to the piglets the Germans were raising. For us it was a welcome addition to our scant diet.

I worked together with several soldiers who operated the separator and other

implements for making butter and cheese. They were all older men, and befriended me, the Bursche or Junge who no doubt reminded them of their own boys in distant Bavaria, snapshots of whom they proudly showed me. There was no sign of animosity or disdain toward me because of my Jewishness--on the contrary, they seemed to take a certain pride in my knowledge of German, deficient though it was, and were positively delighted when I recited Heine's "Die Lorelei" and Goethe's "Der Erlkoenig"--poems which I learned from that much-abused German teacher at my school in Brisk. Though quite proud of the feats of their army, these men did not conceal their disparagement of the swaggering young officers in town, who in their judgement should be at the front. They all longed for the end of the war and return to their homes and families.

One of these soldiers gave me a military map of our town and vicinity which astonished me. The map showed not only every street and back alley of the town, but the exact location of the landmarks: the two churches, the Shul, the three windmills, and the Jewish cemetery outside of town. Topographically it showed the forests, swamps, high grounds, the roads to all the surrounding villages and their condition--paved, sandy or swampy. Considering the relative unimportance of Shershev and its location hundreds of miles from the pre-1914 border, this was amazing evidence of the thoroughness of the German military planning, and must have contributed in no small measure to their success in overrunning half of European Russia despite the predominance of the Tsar's manpower. It is doubtful if the Russian general staff, not to speak of low-ranking personnel, had such detailed information about their own country as given on that map.

My job at the creamery lasted only two and a half months, to my regret and

I hope that of my friends there as well. One morning as I was on my way to work two armed men, not from our garrison as was evident from the different uniform, stopped me and "recruited" me for forest work. My protestations that I was already working for "them" were disregarded, and I was taken home to get some warm clothing and say good-bye to my parents, whose pleas of course made no impression upon them. I was then marched to the Kommandantur where about a dozen other boys and men in the same predicament were assembled. We were put in a truck, together with two guards, and transported to the previously mentioned forest, the Belovyezhsкая Pushcha as it is known in Russian. It was my first ride in a motorized vehicle, which I would have enjoyed much more under other circumstances.

Upon arrival at the control center I told the registration officer that my grandfather was already in the forest as a voluntary worker, and asked to be assigned to his group. Surprisingly enough the request was granted and I was brought to a large dugout which he shared with several other men. The dugout was about six feet deep, with a slanting roof, so that one wall on the inside was higher than the opposite one. Walls and floor were of beaten earth and four small windows were set in the higher wall, just on the level with the outside surface. Wooden planks lined all four sides, covered with straw-filled mattresses. The only other furnishings were a rough long table with equally rough benches on each side, and an iron stove in the center with a metal chimney poking out through the roof. I was assigned a place next to one of the windows, alongside the space occupied by grandfather.

Grandpa, an experienced woodsman and a hard worker, was valued by the group overseer, so as a favor to him I was assigned to "easy" work--removing the

branches from felled trees with an axe, and then cutting the trunk into segments with a long two-man saw, with an older man as a partner. Working with the axe was not bad—in fact I really liked it—but wielding the long saw was a different matter. The wood was green and full of sap, which caused the saw to bind after it penetrated the trunk a few inches, especially since in our inexperience we caused the saw to wobble and not go in a straight line. At times the saw would get stuck so fast that no amount of pulling would set it free. In such case we had to use the axe to chop out some wood near the cut in order to budge it out of the groove. Needless to say, the overseer was disgusted with us, yelled and cursed, but obviously realized that we did the best we could. On one occasion an officer in a natty green uniform came by as we were struggling with our stuck saw, watched for a while as we pulled and tugged, then hit me on the head and hissed out: "Verdammt Jude" (Damned Jew). The blow on the head did not bother me, but the hateful insult made my blood boil. He was a young man, rather handsome, whose face with its blond little beard is engraved in my mind because for weeks thereafter I daydreamed about meeting him in some situation where I could get even with him. The passage of time has not dulled my hatred for that contemptible bully.

Life in the forest was tolerable, considering the circumstances. We rose early in the chilly morning, braced ourselves for a run to the latrine and to the water pump for washing, then to the field kitchen with our utensils for steaming "coffee" and our daily ration of a pound of bread and marmalade. The dark brew that passed for coffee was chicory mixed with some other ingredient; the bread was heavy and soggy, and reportedly contained ground acorns or chestnuts; and the marmalade was a very sweet tarlike paste the composition of which nobody knew. But the appetite whetted by the invigorating



forest air and hard work made us relish the ersatz food and wish for double portions, but only the "coffee" was not rationed. Ravenous as hungry wolves we took our breakfast on the spot, sitting on stumps or logs, taking several gulps of the hot liquid with every bite of bread and being careful to save enough for the rest of the day. For lunch we received soup made of potatoes, turnips or cabbage; and for supper a similar soup, but with some fat and even floating bits of meat, probably pork. Darkness came early under the green canopy of the trees, so after some necessary chores such as washing or mending clothes everyone was soon stretched out on his mattress and the dugout resounded with a cacophony of snoring.

My city clothes and shoes, not too good to start with, practically fell apart within a week from tramping through the thick and damp underbrush. Grandfather managed to procure a pair of old army pants and knee-high boots, both too large for me. That was no calamity, but unfortunately when they got wet the boots became limp like dishrags and collapsed about my ankles, whereas the pants became stiff like leather and chafed my skin with each movement. I had to resort to wearing my own tattered pants as an undergarment to prevent getting sores all over. When I took these garments off at night and placed them near the stove to dry, the pants actually stood up by themselves as if a body were inside, whereas the boots fell into a heap and had to be propped up with sticks, as otherwise it would have been impossible to put them on in the morning if they stiffened into this twisted shape after becoming dry.

This primeval forest preserve, encompassing several thousand square miles, was known to be full of animals: wolves, foxes, lynxes, deer, and even bears. The prize animal though was the zubr, an almost extinct species of bison found nowhere else in

Europe or the rest of the world. The zubr was said to thrive on a certain reedy grass which grew there, and which was used as flavoring in an expensive vodka appropriately called "Zubrovka," distinguishable by one long spear of the grass inside the bottle. During the three months I spent in the forest I never saw any of these animals, presumably because the presence of so many people and their noisy activities drove them into the interior. Once my partner and I came across what looked like a thick yellowish pancake, about a foot in diameter, spread out on the usual forest detritus underneath a large tree. We were told that this was the curdled milk of a cow zubr which had lost her calf and got rid of the excess milk by leaning her hip against a tree and pressing the other hip so as to squeeze the udder and squirt out the milk. The peasants among the work force ate this stuff, claiming it to be nourishing and tasty.

### 3. . Deportation

During the evening of January 27, 1943 the Gestapo chief of the town appeared unexpectedly at the Judenrat office and encountered two armed partisans, who had just arrived to arrange for delivery of provisions. The men ran away at once--they did not fire at the hated enemy, in compliance with the conditions set by the Judenrat, but he emptied his revolver in their direction, without hitting them. The partisans managed to get back to the forest, but the Nazi continued shooting, killing one of the Judenrat people and wounding three others. An ultimatum was immediately issued to deliver the two partisans by midnight, on pain of severe reprisals. Compliance was obviously impossible, but even before the deadline expired an order arrived from the Gestapo headquarters in Bialystok that the ghetto be liquidated.

The speed with which the liquidation of the ghetto was ordered and carried out must lead to the conclusion that the plan for the action and the details of its execution had been worked out and in readiness for some time, just requiring a signal for its implementation. Even the well-oiled German administrative machine could not have organized it in a bare six hours of a winter night. For at dawn the following morning the ghetto was surrounded by a large body of Germans and their Ukrainian auxiliaries, machine guns at the ready, and a train of six hundred sleighs from the nearest villages was lined up on one of the principal ghetto streets. The Judenrat was told that everybody is being evacuated to work camps, but no one believed it. Each adult was allowed to take only one knapsack (few had them and used sacks or pillowcases) of food and clothing. About twenty-five hundred people were chased out of the houses

with curses and beatings, loaded on the sleighs and driven to one of the railway stations in the area. There their bundles were taken away, ostensibly to be put in a separate car, and they themselves were crammed like sardines into freight cars, the doors were sealed, and opened only forty-eight hours later, when the train arrived at Auschwitz.

Upon receipt of the evacuation order the Judenrat formally released the resistance group from the restricting conditions and announced that everyone was on his own, to do what he thought best. About two hundred young men and women, some with arms, made a concerted attempt to escape to the forest. Due to the increased guard all around the ghetto only a small number reached the partisans, the rest having fallen in the fight to get through. Many also tried to escape from the sleighs en route to the railroad station, but none of these succeeded, having been mowed down by the German and Ukrainian guards.

It took four days to empty out the Pruzhany ghetto. The final transport left on January 31, 1943. The Jewish community, which had existed there continuously for six hundred years, was wiped off the face of the earth.

LEVINE: Do you remember going anywhere with him or any particular experiences you remember with him?

**AUERBACH:** The only thing I remember from that point of view about him is that he let me "help" him, quote/unquote, to make shingles. He had a special clamp that he would put these things, thin slats of wood, say of about a yard in the length approximately, I cannot be sure of that. And you had to make it very smooth so we had a, I forgot what you would call this. A sharp, a sharp knife with two handles on each side. There was a name for this. I cannot think of it. "Let me try it." He hold my hands, my little hands, on the two there, the two handles, and I was going on with it. And the trickiest part was these shingles, they were thin on one side, very thin, and much thicker on the other side. And on the back of the thicker side was a groove where the next shingle, the same part of the next shingle would fit into it. This was a very tricky thing, because you had to make the groove just in the center without diverging even one tenth of an inch to the side, otherwise there would be a leak when the connection is made. That, of course, I spoiled quite a few shingles on that side. But these were probably already spoiled, he wouldn't let me do it in good ones, but I remember him.

LEVINE: So was that considered a good, an occupation that was a skill, a very skilled kind of carpentry?

**AUERBACH:** It certainly was. It requires, first of all, a good, a lot of stamina. Because he had to go to, he didn't start with the pieces of wood that he worked on. The starting was to go into the forest and fell trees. It so happens our neighborhood had a, quite a lot of very straight pine trees that did not have any knots in them except way on the top. And when you cut them down you could easily split them into segments lengthwise that became shingles. So he started working, most of the work was done in the forest cutting the trees and sawing the stem of the trees into the proper length, then splitting it so as to produce as many and equal fitness of shingles as possible from each segment. That was a very highly-skilled job, and hard work, too.

store and also for other stores. So my mother was busy in the store, and my grandmother, Freide Leah, decided that she is going to raise me, and she did. For the first three or four years I lived in her house, and I hope I'm not talking too much at length here.

-- 8 --

LEVINE: No, this is very interesting.

AUERBACH: If you want these details, they are interesting.

LEVINE: Yes, very interesting.

AUERBACH: Our town did not have a, the houses in our little town did not have out, bathrooms, obviously, they had outhouses. So to take a bath you had to go to the public baths. There was one for women and one for men, naturally. Freide Leah was too much of a lady, in her point of view, anyway, and so respected by everybody, she would not go to a public bath because of the other women. So her husband, my grandfather, constructed a bathtub for her from wood. Now, I don't know how it was done, but I do know there was a bathtub in her house made of wood. Apparently he was quite skilled at it. He made it for her. In order to take a bath, the water, of course there was no such thing as running water. You had to go to a well quite a distance away. There were about four or five wells in the whole town. Take along one or two pails. If you're strong enough you took two pails. You filled the pail or pails at the well. You had to carry it home, then put it into a pot to heat it, to heat it, not with electricity, not with gas, but with, on a wooden fire, obviously, on what they call a tripetchok. You know the famous song, "Pripetchok burn the fire up." That's Yiddish. And the pripetchok is a space just before the big oven, a flat space where you could build a fire from wood or coal. And there's a very famous Jewish song about that, a little fire burns there. And sometimes they had kindling burning there when they wanted to preserve the kerosene, not to use too much of it. That's the only illumination they had, this kerosene. So they used kindling on the pripetchok, on this place. So this is how you took a shower. You had to get the cold water, then heat it, then pour it into the tub in the proper mixture of cold and hot. Not, but I, what makes it so vivid in my mind is that I remember myself cuddling up naked to that tub and being taken inside to be washed together with her, so I'm sure I could not have been more than a year-and-a-half or two years old, because the, shall we say, the attitude was, what's the word I'm looking for, not promiscuity, but . . .

-- 9 --

LEVINE: Modesty?

AUERBACH: Modesty. That's the word I'm looking for. It was very, very strong. But I must have been very young, so as the little child. And, incidentally, I was always healthy and that. With her daughter, who is my aunt. She had only one daughter. She had three sons and one daughter, this grandmother. And I remember her helping me get into the tub, because my grandmother could not help me. She was already in the tub. But those are the memories I have of my, my paternal grandparents.

LEVINE: How do you spell tripetchok?

AUERBACH: Pripetchok? P-R-I-P-E-T-C-H-O-K. Pripethchok, from the Russian, it's a combination of words. It means "near the stove" or "in front of the stove." That's what it means.

LEVINE: Well, how, what effect do you think it had on you in your lifetime of having been raised by this very respectable and looked-up-to grandmother for those first four years?

AUERBACH: I hate to say, but I think I inherited a good deal of the uppiness or the uppity-ness that she had. I do know that when I played with kids later on, I almost invariably was the leader. Now, I don't know why, but I must have inherited that from her, of getting my own way, so to say. ( he laughs

)

LEVINE: Now, how about your other grandparents, the ones on your mother's side?

AUERBACH: My other grandparents are a totally different breed. My grandmother was, also had a store of her own. But she, instead of having three sons and one daughter like my other grandmother, she had four grand, four daughters and one son. That made all the difference in the world. They had to be married off, and that took a lot of doing and a lot of money. And the son was the youngest, and unfortunately he was also sickly. So very early, even before my birth, I think, and probably about 1901 or 1902, and there was a history to that, too, which I'm not going into. There was a story about how they came to America, how I came to America, finally came here. He couldn't make a living. The girls, they couldn't, there was no work for them. They had to be fed, and you had to have a dowry, nadden. The Yiddish word for it is nadden, it's a dowry. You have to pay money. The bride had to pay to get a groom. That's the way it was. Anyway, he left for the United States at 1901, 1900 or 1901, I don't know exactly when. I know it is before I was born. And there is a very interesting story as to how he came to the United States, but we don't want to make it too long.

-- 10 --

LEVINE: Well, this is so interesting, and it pertains to how you came. So why don't we . . .

AUERBACH: Right, right. He's the one who brought me here.

LEVINE: Now, who are you talking about now, your . . .

AUERBACH: That is my maternal, maternal grandparents. Now, I'll talk about the grandmother. She, as I said, had to tend the store and was very busy. And the girls, when they grew up, helped her, of course. But for a while, after my parents were married we lived, she had a larger house. My mother, who was her daughter, and my father lived in her house together with the other three girls and the son. It was a pretty good-sized house, but it was, there was no place to dance around there, I can assure you. But she used to, had to come home, and some of the daughters would tend the store, or two of them. And she had to take care of the kids. By that time there were already two of us, later on three. And the only way she could control us was by telling us stories. And these were for the most wonderful literature I ever had and I ever heard, I can assure you. Whether she invented them or remembered them, but we used to stand near her fascinated and listen to every bit. And every time she used to catch her breath, actually, to stop to think maybe some more details, we would pull her long skirts and say, "Bubbie, nou, Bubbie, nou." Bubbie means grandma, nou, come on, give us some more. I remember it. ( he is moved )

-- 11 --

LEVINE: That's wonderful, that's wonderful. Can you remember any of the flavor of the stories?

AUERBACH: I'm sorry, I'm so emotional.

LEVINE: Oh, no.

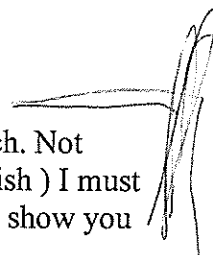
AUERBACH: I'm too emotional about it.

LEVINE: Well, it's a beautiful memory.

AUERBACH: Yes. I remember the stories. I remember some songs she taught us.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Can you, could you actually sing something of it?

AUERBACH: She used to take our wrist, the back of the hand, and hold onto it, like a pinch. Not pinch, hold onto it, and move it up and down. And this is what you sang. ( he sings in Yiddish ) I must translate it. It's very important. Hit, hit, little mallet. Come to me in my chalet, we'll say. I'll show you





something, something made of isin, that has something in it. A team of horses are racing. The bride and groom are in a hurry. They are coming to the gate, which is open, and then they go to sleep. It rhymes, of course. ( Yiddish ) The bride and groom are sleeping. There were so many stories that she told us.

LEVINE: What can you say about her influence on you? Do you know how that affected you and your family?

AUERBACH: I, the only thing I can think of is my love of literature, love of stories. You know, from my past experience that I am, I write, I'm a writer. I've written a book, and I've written many stories about my experience, incidentally, as an immigration officer. I have about ten or fifteen stories based on actual immigration cases that should be very interesting to read, but I imagine it's not popular enough. Whatever it is, I sent them away to some publisher. I was not lucky enough to have it published.

-- 12 --

LEVINE: Well, I don't know if you . . .

AUERBACH: They are available. If anybody is interested I would be glad ( he laughs ), I would be more than glad to submit them to any publisher. I'm not interested in the money for it, I can assure you, but they are worth reading, because the American public, now especially, doesn't know what immigrants had to go through. And my stories deal not only with immigrants but dealing with illegals. As an immigrant inspector, one of my jobs was at first to inspect the aliens coming in aboard ship. We used to go to the ship to meet aliens, inspect them over there, and also take some of them to Ellis Island and inspect them there.

LEVINE: I think that that would be well to save until we get to that aspect of . . .

AUERBACH: The only reason I'm mentioning is to say these stories that I'm talking about are all based on stories of immigrants who were illegally here and who were caught and how . . .

LEVINE: Oh, very interesting.

AUERBACH: They suffered, or either became legalized or had to be deported. It was very tragic, most of them. But they actually are actual stories. In any event, they talk about the influence of my maternal grandmother. By the way, her name was Pessie. You would spell it Bessie here, like, but with a P. And ever since I can remember I loved reading, I never played ball as a kid. I used to run around and do all kinds of things. We used to play all kinds of games, hide and seek, and things of that sort. But any time we got a book, then everything was forgotten, including lunch. And from that day to the present time I am a voracious reader. And I think I inherited it from her stories. I think so. That's only guesswork.

-- 13 --

LEVINE: Well, now, your grandfather, what was his name?

AUERBACH: You're talking about my maternal grandfather? His name was Moses, Maishe.

LEVINE: Were you close to him at all?

AUERBACH: I never really knew him. As I told you, he immigrated to the United States before I was born. And he came, there's a very interesting story about him if you, it's all right if you want to hear it.

LEVINE: Yes, I think that would be good.

AUERBACH: The way he, the reason he came is because, as I told you, he had four daughters later on to marry off. With my, after my mother was married he had three others to take care of, and he needed the money for that, so he went to America. But the second daughter had to be married, I think it was some years later, possibly about 1907 or 1908. He had been in the United States for a number of years,

things of that sort, and they would bring it to the small town and sell it to the wholesalers in the town and make a profit at it.

-- 15 --

LEVINE: What was the store that your mother ran? What did they sell?

**AUERBACH:** The store was, they call it a general store, mostly for things that peasants used to buy, things that the peasants mostly needed. There was some salt, for instance, there was salt that they would buy. They would buy some type of food that they could not get. They ate very little of it. They would buy cloth for making clothes. Not ready-made. We didn't have any ready-made. They bought metal dishes, things that they, anything that they couldn't manufacture themselves, they had to buy.

LEVINE: Was your family considered sort of in the middle of the economic . . .

**AUERBACH:** We were economically of the upper strata. Below us were the tailors and the shoemakers and the peddlers and some other workers who worked, hard labor, building houses, for instance. They helped, they were the, what do you call a person who works on doyensbuilding a house?

LEVINE: Construction?

**AUERBACH:** Construction. They have the Yiddish word, yestoya. I cannot think of the English word. Carpenter. You see, the Yiddish word gave me the English word, carpenter, and things of that sort. But the merchants, most of them, they weren't, money-wise there wasn't much difference. Of course, the upper shift were the learned people, the rabbis and the (?), the assistant rabbis and the learned ones, the educated people, they were the top layer.

-- 16 --

LEVINE: So the top layer was determined by education rather than money.

**AUERBACH:** By education, the intellectuals. That was the top layer. Money-wise they were not necessarily the top. Next came the merchants, and then came the workmen, we would call them.

LEVINE: I see. Now, what was the main occupation of people in that shetel?

**AUERBACH:** The main occupation of the Jewish people or the Gentiles?

LEVINE: Well, both.

**AUERBACH:** Well, the Gentiles, I'll tell you, most of them worked on the land. They had fields, and that was their, that was their income. They all had big gardens, too. Everyone had a tremendous garden with planted vegetables and things like that they used to sell. And some of them also used to work in wintertime, when there was nothing to do in the gardens or in the fields, they would hire themselves out, the peasants, I'm talking about, to work in the forests felling trees and helping to ship the, if there was a lot in addition to the shingles, there was a lumber industry that whole trunks of trees used to be shipped to countries that didn't have forests, even to Germany. That's what I understand. But the trunks had to be brought. How do you bring them far away? Not, we had no railroads, we had no cars. An automobile I saw for the first time in 1917, and that was during the war. We didn't have any such things. So they lumbered these only in wintertime when there was snow down there. The Russian winter, when it comes, came in in November, October, November, stayed until March. There was snow on the ground and it was freezing, there was no such thing as a thaw, except on a rare occasion, and even then it lasted maybe a day or two. So they had sledges, sleighs. They would put the trunks on the sledges and pull them by horses out of the woods to the nearest river that was not frozen. And, you know, the largest, most of the small rivers were frozen. But the nearest one, not frozen, and then they would put it, tie it together and float it to Germany. That's what I understand. Because Germany was a highly industrial country, as we know, and they needed the lumber.

Saturdays she went to schul, and I went to schul with my father. Schul means to the synagogue. And I really didn't have much to do with her at all. For that matter I didn't have much to do with my father, except on occasion when he used to take me with him to the forest when he, I told you I had a carriage, when I did the lumbering, when I had a contract to lumber the trees, you know, to ship them to Germany. I had that for about two or three years. So I used to ride with him, and I used to, occasionally he would let me ride on top of the horse. That was, of course, quite an achievement for a youngster like me.

-- 21 --

LEVINE: When you, let's see. So the war broke out, and you were still there. What do you remember first hand about that period of time?

AUERBACH: You're talking about the 1914?

LEVINE: Yes.

AUERBACH: Well, the first thing, of course, is that we had to give up school. The war broke out in summertime, and that was no school. And it didn't have any affect upon us. Some people were recruited into the army, some of the youngsters. That was, of course, quite a tragedy. Nobody wanted to go, but you had to. But we didn't know anything of the war until the Germans came in, and that was in 19, I think they came in in 1915, a year after the war started, I think. And I remember there were so many horrible things happened.

LEVINE: The Germans came into your town?

AUERBACH: The Germans came in and they, of course, issued some strict orders. First of all, there was curfew. You couldn't go out at night at all. And you had to observe certain regulations as far as cleanliness. And this was a good thing that they did. Sweeping the houses, keeping the outhouses clean, and things, you know, we had no doctor in our town. Believe it or not, there was no doctor in our town.

LEVINE: What would you do if someone were sick?

AUERBACH: You had to go to the nearest town, a four or five hour journey by horse and wagon. Anyway, then they requisitioned. They put a tax on every peasant to give so much potatoes and so much milk. They found out, they had taken a count. You know, when I talk about English, I forget my English when I talk about them.

-- 22 --

LEVINE: A survey?

AUERBACH: Not a survey. There's a better word for it.

LEVINE: Statistics?

AUERBACH: In any event, they went from the peasant to peasant to find out what they have. How many cows, how many horses, and so on. A record, they made a record of it. A list is the best word. They made a list of the, everybody's possessions and how much land they had and how much it produces. And they had to give. You know, Germany was not an agricultural country. So everybody was taxed a certain amount. They would have to bring it in, and it was all shipped to Germany. Of course, it was all used for themselves as much as they can. And they also, whatever work they had to do they just would catch people in the street. They took me. I was fifteen years old. No, I was fourteen years at that time, when it happened. They took me in the middle of the street in the marketplace, put me on truck, shipped me off to the forest. Luckily there was somebody with me, people around there, that told them, "Tell his mother that he is going to work." I worked as a slave laborer for them until they were driven out, until the end of the war.

LEVINE: Whippersnapper.

**AUERBACH:** Whippersnapper. I call him a little bastard, in the fancy uniform, dressed to kill, in the forest, mind you, comes over and says, "I'm a policeman." And he slapped me in the head. "Verdammt Jude." "Damn Jew." I get angry even now. I would like, I felt like killing him, and I'll never forget it, the insult of this guy. I'm a damn Jew because I was all of seventeen years old. No, what am I talking about, seventeen. I was fourteen years old. And no experience with wood. I was taken out of school. It made me, I don't think I ever hated anybody as much as I hated this guy.

LEVINE: Well, then, the war was over by the time you left for America.

**AUERBACH:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. After the war was over, of course, the Germans went away and, incidentally, when the war started, before the Germans came in, you don't have much space, much time.

LEVINE: I think what we're going to do here is stop and I will change the tape before we start into something that I don't want to interrupt.

**AUERBACH:** Okay.

LEVINE: Okay? So we'll pause now and begin Tape Two.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now with Tape Two, and I'm speaking with **Jacob Auerbach**. And we were talking about after the First World War in Russian Poland and what the situation was like at that time. So you were saying?

-- 26 --

**AUERBACH:** I was saying that in 19, when the Germans first came in, before the Russians departed, the Russian troops departed, they burned everything. They burned the crops, they burned the villages, they burned some houses, so as not to leave anything for the Germans. So there was tremendous poverty. Some of it was built up during the years that the Germans had occupied. But once they moved away there was really a scarcity of almost everything. A scarcity of food, scarcity of clothing. Nobody bought any clothing. Nobody saw any clothing. Scarcity of medicine. We never had, whenever we had a drugstore, a druggist in town, but we, for years there was nothing to re-supply the medication. We didn't have a doctor in town.

LEVINE: How did the people . . .

**AUERBACH:** So, is that, I'm coming, I want to tell you what happened. Shortly after that some miracle happened to us from a country called the United States of America. The United States, that was, of course, after the war was over, after, new. They knew, after fighting, the GI's fighting in Europe and so on, what conditions were, so they, the United States organized ARA, American Relief Administration, to provide food for the devastated lands that suffered during the war. From nowhere trucks came into our little town laden with the kind of goods that we never had. We never had it in the peaceful time, all being given away free, all the things, that they had to bring things that could be preserved. So they brought beans and lentils, rice, flour, sugar, salt. Uh, herring, barrels of herring, something the Europeans Jews, the Europeans in general. Herring is a very important staple. So they had herring brought. I don't remember whether they brought any frozen things. I don't think. I don't remember. But anyway, whatever they were giving away, it was preserving us from starvation. You know, I cannot stop being moved emotionally talking about it. I am a softie.

-- 27 --

LEVINE: I think that's a good thing.

**AUERBACH:** And they set up a town committee to supervise the distribution. The committee made a list of the whole town population. Not much. You know, it was only about, as I told you.

LEVINE: About what?

**AUERBACH:** Maybe, I would say, about twenty-five hundred. I don't remember, really. There were not much. I would say about two thousand at the most, at the most, in good times. I think after the war there were fewer, I think maybe about fifteen hundred. Anyway, they rented a big place, a building that had an inn which, of course, nobody used an inn since the war broke out, but it has a large room. And this committee made a list of the townspeople, how many children, how many adults, and what the conditions were, and decided by the volume available how much they can distribute to each one. Let's say they knew they had a thousand pounds, let's say, of rice. And if they had five hundred people to give to, five hundred families, whatever it is, they would give each one two pounds, things of that sort. And I was one, I was at that time a youngster. I was about seventeen years, no, I was fifteen years old. It was in 1919, so I was sixteen years old. I was one of the workers, because of my education, I knew how to write, how to keep records, having, I told you, only seven kids ever went, ever went to a formal school. So I, being one of the "educated" quote/unquote kids, so I worked for them, but I didn't get paid any money. There was no money, so the workers would get an extra, say, half a pound of this or that. It was a very big thing to take home. There were many mouths to feed.

-- 28 --

LEVINE: Did the people in the town, the Gentiles and the Jewish people, did they get along well?

**AUERBACH:** Yes.

LEVINE: Both before the war and after?

**AUERBACH:** Both before and after. They depended upon each other. The peasants needed certain things. They needed articles of, for the work, shovels and rakes and ploughs and horseshoes and fixing wagons and clothing and nice things, too, kerchiefs to dress up, ribbons, hair ribbons. A very favorite for young girls in the peasants on Sundays when they went to church to have ribbons in their hair. And then they had to buy knives and forks for the house and dishes, even though some of them used to make dishes out of wood, you would be surprised, they had it. And cloth to make linen. So they needed the Jews for that. The Jews needed them for the, first of all, to sell their goods to, and also to buy their produce, to buy the apples and the potatoes and the pears and plums that they used to grow. So it was a mutual, a mutual trade.

LEVINE: Were the Jewish people in town all religious? I mean, was your family a religious family, would you say?

**AUERBACH:** Well, if you say "all religious," it depends what you mean by the word religious. They were many like myself, and some of my friends, who were not really religious, but we observed the rules because we didn't want to hurt our parents, and besides we would get slapped on the face if we didn't observe it. The father is that you went, when you have to do it, but we were already the educated, the modern life. We already, we read literature, we read Russian literature, and we sang Russian songs, and we knew about love from books, naturally. We were still kids. And we went with girls, and they had little groups where we would read together aloud and discuss things and all that. It was a different generation altogether. My father was very tolerant, and he was very proud. I mean, everybody was proud of the kids who could know Russia. It was a big achievement.

-- 29 --

LEVINE: So you really, you really were considered important and kind of in the lead.

AUERBACH: Well, I was important, important, no. I didn't do anything for them. But I was the elitist. I taught my younger brothers and sisters Russian. I taught them, and taught them to read and to write. I used to tell them stories and tell them fables, and I used to re-tell them the stories that my grandmother used to tell me, when she was no longer available to tell them the stories.

LEVINE: Can you remember one of those stories?

AUERBACH: I remember some, some stories, not with all the details.

LEVINE: Just a rough idea. It would be nice to have one of those stories on the tape.

AUERBACH: Well, I would have to think about it. I couldn't just rattle it off the way it is. But I know they, they involved, put it this way, a merchant. I remember one story involved a merchant who was traveling. Like my father, I told you, he was traveling to sell and to buy. He was traveling on a winter day and he was attacked by wolves, and how he tried to defend himself. And by saying a certain sacred word he was saved. The wolves ran away. That's one of the stories. Stories about brides and grooms, how they met, and how the chatkan brought them together, and what happened then and so on and so forth. They were mostly girlie stories, women's stories. About, some of them were very pious men, very poor men who were very pious, and how the Providence brought them a living, because they didn't earn anything, they couldn't work. They were crippled, or whatever the case was. But somehow some miracle happened and it was all on the moral side. Every story had a little moral to it, that you should remember that things are not so bad. That you have to be good and have to help somebody and so on.

-- 30 --

LEVINE: If you had to think of the, maybe the major moral lessons that you learned within your family before you came to this country, what . . .

AUERBACH: Well, the family, I must say, I must say it was that grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was the only one that told the stories. Morality you learned the cheder, you know, you have to do good, you have to be pious, you have to do this and that. I mean, you know that. That was the school. But as far as the other things, there's no, what I was saying is that you learn, you have to have good sedaka. Sedaka means give money to people who are poor. There is an English word for that. Uh, when you give money to poor people, what do you call it?

LEVINE: You call it . . .

AUERBACH: Alms. You see, when I speak about it it's my old, my old language, the Russian and the Yiddish come back to me, but the English disappears. That shows you the importance of what you learn as a child, how powerful it is. That you have to give, and not to put anybody to shame. If somebody makes a mistake or something or gets hurt or does something wrong you correct him and help him, but don't make fun of him. And, of course, learning. That was the most important thing. Learning was the acme of achievement, to learn naturally the Jewish laws and the Bible and (?), which are the higher echelon, and so on. It was all on the basis of morality. And we also heard stories of vicious things that were being done to Jews, partly through historically, partly imagined, I suppose. But everybody knows through history that Jews suffered plenty. Being burned at the stake and then the ghettos and things of the sort. So many of the stories involved unpleasant things, involved atrocities that were done to Jews.

-- 31 --

LEVINE: Were you friendly with children, Gentile children of your age, when you were growing up?

**AUERBACH:** No. There was no friendship in that true sense of friendship. There was no animosity, but we had nothing to do with them. They lived in, the town was divided. The Jews lived in the center. The synagogues were over where the marketplace was, and the Gentiles were in the, you might call the perimeter, where the fields were, so they had access to the fields. And we really never got together with them. Oh, occasionally they would come to the marketplace and try to make fun of a Jewish boy, call him, "sheed, sheedas." Like they say, shilling, or, uh, what is a, uh . . .

**LEVINE:** Italian? Guinea?

**AUERBACH:** No, an American, a derogatory term for Jew? Kike, all right, like a kike or something like that. And we would answer in kind, call them dumbbells, or call them ignorant or something, otherwise. But there really wasn't any kind of a thing. And my father, I told you, he traveled around the villages. He was actually not only respected but actually loved by many of the peasants because he was a very honest and straightforward man. He was a very poor businessman because of that, because to be a good businessman you have to know how to cheat a little bit and to lie. Over there, here, too, the same way. Let's not kid ourselves. He couldn't. He would tell you exactly what the thing was worth and what you have to pay and how much he can give, and not like to cheat, and they knew it. They knew it so well that when they have, many peasants would come to him when they had some kind of a confrontation between themselves, a dispute about something, they would come to him to resolve the dispute and they would accept his word for it.

-- 32 --

**LEVINE:** Wow, that's quite an honor.

**AUERBACH:** He was, but my mother was not happy with it. He couldn't make a living. There were children. He was too honest. He never made, she really tended the store, and there was very little business came from him. He felt terrible about it, I know, but he couldn't be otherwise. He couldn't compete with the other tradespeople.

**LEVINE:** Okay. Well, let's move along to your decision to leave. What did you bring with you when you left for America? What did you take along?

**AUERBACH:** Can you, can you shut it for a minute, stop off.

**LEVINE:** Okay. We're stopping here briefly. ( break in tape ) Okay. We're resuming now, and the last question asked was what did you bring with you when you came to the United States.

**AUERBACH:** The most important thing that I brought with me to the United States was the English language that I taught. I explained before how I taught it. But it actually almost ruined my chances of coming to the United States. I'll answer first the physical part as to what I brought with me. We were after the war, we had nothing. We would have starved if not for the ARA, the ARA that I spoke about before, we probably would have died of hunger, many of us, become emaciated. So there was nothing to take. I will say that I think I mentioned that the steamship ticket for coming to the United States was made for my uncle, my mother's brother. He couldn't come, or his mother didn't, my grandmother didn't want him to come, and I was given the steamship ticket. I had to go, to send, I had to make about two dozen different kinds of these papers: Medical certificates, birth records, police records, statements from my parents that they have no objection to my travel, statements from the local authorities that I don't owe any money to anybody. That had to be gotten. These had to be sent away to the American consulate in Warsaw, which was quite a trip. In Europe in those days you didn't travel, so that was mailed to them. Then the consul sent you an appointment when to appear for the hearing, and presumably there you had to get the visa and go from there to America. I did all that, sent everything away and received the notice to appeal to the consulate. And it was I think some time in February if I'm not mistaken. Now, in order to go to Warsaw, I had never been on the, oh, I had been on the train only

once when I traveled to my school in Brest-Litovsk. You had to go by horse and wagon and by train. It was a, first of all, you're going away forever because you knew that you'll never come back and you'll never see your parents, you'll never see your brothers and sisters, your friends, and so on and so forth. So it was quite an ordeal, the tears and the goodbyes and so on and so forth.

-- 33 --

LEVINE: Was there a send-off? Was there some kind of a gathering?

**AUERBACH:** There was, I'll come to that. I'll come to that. There was no gathering. We didn't have parties. But I was put on a horse and wagon in order to get to the railroad station because, as I said before, it was several hours' trip. And literally the whole town came out to say goodbye, so to say. That was the custom. It was somebody going to America, to America, it was like going to heaven. And they all walked after it until the crying and blessing and all kinds of things. I'm not just talking about my family. That was done before. Until the driver got tired of it and realized, whipped the horses, and off we went. But before this blessed event happened, there became a problem. Upon receipt of the notice from the consulate that I have a date, and they usually gave you at least about a month ahead. The problem is what am I going to wear? What I have, the sleeves were up to here, about almost to my elbows. I hadn't had a suit made for about five, four or five years. What I did is hand-me-downs from someone, from my uncle, who is about several years older than I am. You couldn't possibly think of traveling to America, traveling to Warsaw, in that outfit. Money wasn't available, cloth was not available. Everything was destroyed after the war. My mother came to the solution. She had a cape, a black cape, that was made for her at her wedding. Now, don't forget, I was already almost seventeen years old, seventeen years old. She may have probably wore the cape. If she wore it ten times in her life would be a big thing. What occasion was it to wear a cape, on a wedding. In a wedding if it happens to be winter, not in summertime, or other occasions like that. But anyway, she wanted to know whether that cape, we called the tailor and they took measurements of me and my length and width and everything else and the cape. And they made the big pronouncement, he can make a suit out for me, a pair of trousers and a small jacket. And that is what I wore on my way to America, nothing else. No top, nothing else. I had one shirt I wore. Not the kind of shirts we had here. One shirt I wore, one other shirt I took along for the road. ( he laughs ) I had one pair of shoes and one pair of socks to change, the shoes that I wore, and one cap. I think that's about all. Oh, I'm sorry, the most important thing, my books! Without the books I wouldn't budge. I could only take so many, the most important ones. I still, incidentally I still have the books which I brought with me. ( he is moved ) In 1921, I hope you'll excuse me for being so emotional about it.

-- 34 --

LEVINE: That's wonderful. Is one of the books the book that you learned English with? Was that one of yours?

**AUERBACH:** No. That one I had to give back. Don't forget, I borrowed it from the man. This one I gave back. But I do have some of the books which I had in school, from (?) my school. Anyway, this is my equipment, and even though I already have, by that time, the steamship ticket that my grandfather sent, I told you, for my uncle. And the steamship ticket was for a date much later than that. I couldn't get an earlier date, I don't remember. So the idea was I would come home to say the real goodbye. This was just a goodbye to go to Warsaw. But I made up my mind that I will not come back. That I will wait out as much time as I need in Warsaw, because the emotion, the emotion was too strong. And, besides, I wanted to be in the world to see, to see the big capital city of Warsaw. I was never in any big city except Brest-Litovsk, my little town. And I had a relative down there with whom I could stay in the meantime. I wouldn't talk about him, a very interesting episode with him, too. But whatever the case is, so this is my equipment for America, and I didn't intend to come back. I had an affidavit. In order to get



the visa, you had to have an affidavit from a relative, a close relative, in the United States who promised to, that you will not become a public charge. My grandfather sent it to me. And I presented it, I came to the consulate. I had an appointment for a certain date. I come in, and I had my passport, all Polish passport. I had the passport ready with all the, as I said before, these little papers of medical certificates and permissions and so on and so forth. And I presented all that, and not a word is said. I can see it, like, now. A small room, like a little office. An officer, not in a uniform but apparently, obviously who is the officer, whether he was an assistant consul, whatever it is, I don't know, was sitting at the desk, and two chairs on the side. On one was an interpreter, and I was on the second chair. The officer, say, we'll call him the consul, okay, started asking me a question. "Is this the affidavit of your grandfather?" And the interpreter interprets immediately in Yiddish, "(Yiddish)" And I being a smart aleck and figuring that I know English show off, I says, "Yes. This is my grandfather's affidavit." I could see the officer stiffen as if somebody hit him with something. He pushed over the affidavit to me, in front of me. He says, "Did you change this?" I took a look. A word was changed. The affidavit was not made in his handwriting. Obviously the notary public made it. My grandfather didn't know how to write English. So apparently he put down, instead of putting down grandfather he put down something, father, or whatever it is, and changed this later on to grandfather. It was obviously changed. The same handwriting, the same ink, it was changed. But the consul, seeing that I know a little English, thought that I made the change, that it may have been uncle instead of father or grandfather, whatever it is. In other words, the degree of relationship may not have been strong enough. It may have been cousin. I don't know. In any event, there was a change made. I think it was the biggest blow I ever had in my life. He refused to give me a visa. I explained to him how I learned English. I explained to him that it looks like the same ink, that I couldn't possibly have imitated it, and so on and so forth. It didn't help. I was refused the visa, but the only thing he did for me, he says, I said, "I am going to write back to my grandfather to send a new affidavit, but I don't now how long it will take." "Well," he says, "I'll give you a visa as long as we can, three months from now." He gave me a visa in May. That was the luckiest thing that, the luckiest. The other one was the hardest thing that happened. That was the luckiest thing, which I'll explain later. Anyway, I immediately walked to my relative's place, and you can imagine what my mood was. Beautiful bright snow, beautiful day, it was February. And here the accusation was hurting more even than not getting the visa, accusation of fraud. So I immediately, right then, the same afternoon, wrote a letter to my grandfather, explained what happened, and mailed it in Warsaw, right then and there, and then went back to the consulate and told him what I did. And I could see a change in their attitude, that they were already sorry what happened, but it was too late. Anyway, I'll make a long story short. I had to come back. I couldn't stay there for three months. It was from February to May. I couldn't stay in Warsaw. So I had to travel back to **Shershev**, undergo the departure business again, come back to Warsaw a second time, go to the consul. And this time they didn't even look at the affidavit. I got the visa pronto, in a matter of ten, fifteen minutes. And then, of course, I still had a day or two to visit and see around the city, and then made my trip to America. I will just enumerate the stages of the trip. By train to Danzig. Danzig was a free city at the time. It didn't belong neither to Germany nor to Austria. From Danzig we went, oh, in Danzig we underwent quarantine for fourteen days. We were put in quarantine, in isolation. We were inspected every day. We were given injections every day for fourteen days, everybody. And from there, from Danzig we went by small boat to Hull, England. From Hull we went by train to, Hull, and what other city? A different city. ( he blows his nose )

-- 35 --

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

**AUERBACH:** I have it. ( sound of rustling papers is heard on tape )

## Shershev.

In the period of the former Polish republic, Shershev belonged to the voievodshaft of Brisk-Litovsk.

Jews are already mentioned in Shershev in 1583.

In agreement with the resolutions of the Lithuanian Council of the Land <sup>of Lithuania</sup> in 1623, Shershev belongs to the Krayz ("circle") of Brisk (Grail).

In 1766 there were 973 Jews in Shershev.

At the census of 1847 the Jewish community of Shershev numbered 3,773 souls.

At the census of 1897 Shershev had 5,079 inhabitants, of whom 2,553 were Jews.

In 1910 there was a Talmud Torah in the town

(From the Russian Jewish Yevreyskaya Entsiklopedia of Brokhaus - Efron, vol. 16, p. 14.)

In the chapter titled "The textile industry in Bialystok up to 1880", which Avrum-Shmuel Hersberg published in the second volume of Pinkes Bialystok (New York, 1950) are given, among other things, the following facts about textile factories in Shershev.

### In the Krayz of Pruzhen

In the town of Shershev was a wooden building, rented from a local inhabitant, the factory of the merchant of the first guild Shaul Levin. It was set up in 1818 as a weaver's shop with five looms. In 1828 it produced dark-green, blue and black cloth, of quality higher than that used for soldiers' uniforms : 190

pieces, 4,750 arshin [a measurement]; beyke [a kind of cloth] and flannel: 22 pieces, 730 arshin; woollen blankets, each of them three arshin in length: 850 pieces. These wares were sold in various Russian towns. The number of workers was 41, of both sexes, fray gedungene [literally: "freely bargained for, hired": this must refer to a labor practice]. Among them were 21 Jewish men and 12 Jewish women.

In the same town, Yosl Tukhmakher [n.b. the surname literally means "cloth-maker"] set up in 1828, in a rented house, a weaver's shop with one loom. In 1828 it produced cloth in dark-green, blue and black of quality higher than that used for soldiers' uniforms: 8 pieces, 184 arshin; beyke, flannel: 15 pieces. 525 arshin; blankets: 500. The merchandize was sold in various Russian towns. The number of worker was 16, including the pakhter [someone who rents a property], Yosl Tukhmakher himself, who was the master. All the workers were Jews, 8 men and 7 women.

ZUNDL YABLONOVITSH

### OUR HOMETOWN, SHERSHEV.

I write the following lines at a time when Shershev has already been reduced to ruins, when my hometown has been destroyed. It is not the history of Shershev I am writing here. These are pictures that live in my memory. Of course, I may have forgotten some things, or have left someone out. But this was unintentional. We are dealing here with events that took place decades ago.

\*

Shershev, in the gegnt (region) of Polesie, belonged in the time of Tsarist rule to the gubernye (government) of Grodne, and to the oyezd of Pruzhene (before the Polish paviat). The town was located at a distance of 15 kilometers from Pruzhene. It was reached by the highroad that led to the pushtshe ( ) of Bieloviezh. From the highroad, a paved road, 3 kilometers long, led into the town. This road was called "the Brukouke".

Shershev had approximately 2,000 inhabitants, most of them Jews.

Before the outbreak of World War One in 1914, Shershev, as has been said above, belonged to Russia. In 1915 the town was occupied by the Germans. They stayed in it until the end of the war. After 1918, the town was transferred from one authority to another: first the Bolsheviki, then the Poles, then the Bolsheviki again, or other groups and bands. Not until the peace between Poland and Russia did Shershev belong to Poland, until September 1939.

In September 1939 Shershev, together with the whole eastern part of Poland, was occupied by the Red Army during the German invasion of Poland. The town was under Soviet rule until June 1941. Then it was occupied by the Germans. After Hitler's defeat in 1944-45, the town was returned to Russia.

Shershev considered itself an old town. It was said to be centuries old.

Shershev was built in an old-fashioned European style: wooden houses, covered with wooden tiles [shindl-dekher]. Some houses, especially the peasants' houses at the edge of the town, were thatched with straw.

The main streets were paved and had wooden sidewalks. Shershev had four main streets, in the pattern of a cross. Their names were: —

① PRUZHENE STREET with [the] Bridge Street, which crossed a [roy] through which flowed water from the river. Over the ditch there was a wooden bridge.

② KOMINIETSK STREET.

③ STARIVESKE STREET.

④ BEYS KHAYIM\* STREET  
("Cemetery Street")

There were also smaller streets, for example Untern Dol [i.e. "beyond or beneath the valley"]. This small street looked like a valley, in the middle of a pit from which yellow sand was dug. Around this pit was a circle of houses. The older people used to say that the pit was made in the time of the povstanye (Polish uprising) when many people were killed. Indeed, when yellow sand was dug there, human bones were found.

There was also the Heyfgeist which with its lovely appearance and densely-growing, tree-lined avenues beautified Shershev. This was the place for summer walks.

From the central streets, yet other small streets branched off, looking like the veins of a human body.

The "heart" of Shershev was the market, where there was also a "circle of stores", built in stone, where Jewish storekeepers sat waiting for a customer.

### THE FAMOUS GREAT SYNAGOGUE

The great, old synagogue, built in stone, resembled a temple with its artistic architecture. Two wide round columns at the entrance strengthened the impression the synagogue made. Inside, one was captivated by the artistically carved Ark and by the wonderful murals. These decorations were very old. Even the grandfathers did not know when the synagogue had been built.

The many fires which had, at various times, destroyed the town, had spared the synagogue.

One of the worst fires happened in about 1908. People wanted to smoke out the worms from the trees in the priest's orchard. A thatched roof caught fire and a terrible conflagration ensued. More than half the town burned down. This was one of the biggest fires. Houses near the synagogue burned, but the synagogue survived.

The synagogue also stayed intact during World War I.

But shortly after World War I a small fire broke out in the Shul-gas ["synagogue street"]. Then the synagogue did burn. It was not rebuilt. American landslayt sent money to repair it, but the work was not carried out. With the money from America and with the help of local householders, a large stone besmedresh (study-house) was built near the synagogue. It was the biggest in the town. This was where the town asifes (communal meetings) and gatherings were held.

Apart from this besmedresh, Shershev also possessed "Reb Fyzhes Besmedresh", "The Rabbi's Besmedresh", "The New Besmedresh" and "The Hasidic Besmedresh".

The Jewish community also owned a hegdesh (a kind of house for poor people who were traveling through), a town bathhouse and a rabbi's house.

Of religious officers, we had a dayen, a shoykhet (ritual slaughterer), a mohel (circumcizer) and a hazzan (cantor).

Every synagogue had its shames. There was also a Shul-rufet (person to call the congregants to the shul). Every Sabbath eve and holiday eve he walked through the Jewish streets crying: "Jews, to the synagogue!"

At this point we should also mention the religious teachers and their schools: these belonged among the religious institutions of the town.

We had a khevre kadishe (burial society) which was in charge of preparing corpses for burial. But it was also involved in, and in fact played a leading role in, Jewish town-affairs.

In the houses of study, the authoritative people were the gabbais. They were also leading figures in matters outside the besmedresh.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

The administrative leader of the town before 1914 was a pristav ( ) with several uryadnikes ( ). It was possible to buy oneself free from them, or get them to do something, in return for a glass of vodka or a ruble.

There was a sud (law court). It was in Khaykl's house on Starivieske Street.

In charge of the Jewish population, its evidentsyes ( ), was a 1886G ( ), a member of the sprave ( ). Ever since I can remember, it was Mendl the 1886G ( ). People rarely knew his surname.

For ~~who were?~~ <sup>the</sup> pney (leading people) of our town, which was, incidentally very close to our "markhes" (state), belonged also the felsher (standard Yiddish: feldsher) (a half-doctor) and the pharmacist.

The law-court had a lot of work. Quarrels over a bit of land; between farmers; fights, fires, robberies. It was always the stronger who won. Jewish disputes were usually settled by the rabbi or the dayen.



### EMPLOYMENTS OF JEWS.

There were Jewish merchants (perve-gildenikes) who traded in leather, fur and grain. There were forest merchants who dealt in timber. A very considerable number were village merchants who traveled from village to village, buying up various kinds of produce and materials from the peasants. The storekeepers used to buy their wares in the bigger towns such as Warsaw, Brisk, Bialystok and Slonim. The main trade went through Pruzhene. Every day there journeyed to Pruzhene, and back again, two wagoners with large wagons drawn by horses. They carried both merchandize and passengers. There was also trade with Bialowiezh.

Most of the artisans were tile-makers. The surrounding forests were full of spruce trees which were suitable, because they could easily be split, for the manufacture of wooden tiles. The Shershev tilemakers supplied the whole region with tiles. There were also carpenters and makers of trunks (rustic wooden bauln). Jews were shoemakers, tailors, hatmakers, barrelmakers, smiths, butchers, wagoners, horse-traders, and <sup>there was</sup> one clockmaker.

On Christian holy days (Khoges), fairs were held. The market and the streets in the center of town were full of farmers' wagons, which brought produce and were reloaded with the city wares that were bought.

## WORLD WAR ONE

One day in 1914 came the unhappy news: war. The mobilization was announced of men between the ages of 18 and 45. Within months, the closeness of the front made itself felt. The town was full of Russian military, cossacks, Circassians and ordinary soldiers. The townspeople — whoever was able to — got a horse and wagon ready, in case they had to abandon the town.

And so it was that on a certain day the command came to leave the town, because a battle was about to begin. Most of the people, some in wagons and some on foot, carrying their portable property, left town and took to the roads.

The richer people traveled deep into Russia. Many people hid in the forests. Some did not want to abandon the town: they took refuge in the stone synagogue.

It took several days before the Germans entered. The shooting stopped and the townspeople began moving back in. Half the town was burned down and in ruins. Many of the townspeople, especially of those who had gone to Russia, did not return.

The situation became desperate. Former employments (trade and crafts) no longer existed. Jews turned to various lines of work. They walked across abandoned fields and dug potatoes. They sought out maize and milled it in hand-querns (zhornes). In summer they went into the forest to pick berries and mushrooms. Many went to work for the Germans.

There was a shortage of products, especially of sugar and salt: these items were completely lacking. Saccharine was used instead of sugar. Salt was brought from Pruzhene. People would walk there (no wagons were making the journey there) and obtain this costly item.

The young people used to travel to Bielowiezh, where they worked in the forests.

People could not trade: it was forbidden. (As a matter of fact there was no money to trade with, nor any wares.) Life became very primitive. People ate whatever there was, on the spot. They sewed no new garments: they repaired the old ones.

Already at that time the Germans showed their brutality. Jews endured at their hands various forms of harassment and insult. The Germans cut off the beards of elderly Jews and the braids of the girls.

The period of German rule ended with the beginning of revolution in Russia and the conclusion of a peace between Russia and Germany. One fine morning the Germans began to leave the town in a hurry. They tossed their weapons into the river. The Bolsheviks occupied the town without firing a shot.

The Bolsheviks introduced new regulations. They formed a civil committee with civil police who kept order. People began to earn very good money. The military paid for everything with new money (rubles), but as it turned out later, the money had no value.

### POLISH RULE.

Russian rule did not last long. Conflicts with the Poles began. The town began to be shuttled to and fro between authorities.

During this period, the second tragic event occurred. One day, when the Polish military had to withdraw and they left the town, one soldier stayed behind in the town. He entered various houses and<sup>940</sup> robbed the Jews. This angered some of the Jews and they

went outside the town, chased the soldier, beat him up and took back the stolen objects. The soldier caught up with his division and told his command (Komande) what had happened. Late at night a band of Polish soldiers showed up and tore into the town with much savagery and shooting. Everyone was terrified. First the soldiers summoned the rabbi and gave him an order for all the Jews to assemble in the synagogue. The younger ones were taken to the headquarters of the division, for the soldier to identify those who had beaten him. Of course the guilty parties went into hiding in advance. The commander announced that if the guilty ones were not surrendered, every tenth Jew would be shot and the town would be set on fire. The Jews lived through that night in deadly fear. They offered money in exchange, but it did not help. The Jews were beaten and all the streets were searched, until one of those who had beaten the soldier was found. He was Aaron the butcher. They tortured him horribly and shot him. With this they sated their fury, and left the town.

Several times, Shershev was the site of fronts, positions and battles, until Polish power consolidated itself.

### LIFE IS BUILT

When the war ended, life gradually began to return to normal. American landslayt began sending support and a committee was founded, which took charge of distributing the aid. It came in the form of produce and clothing. A kitchen was opened to supply soup and other nourishment to the needy. This eased the difficult situation and satisfied people's hunger.

Polish rule became stronger, and life began to run on more ordinary tracks. Socially, too, the town began to revive. A social movement began. Modern lecturers appeared, representatives of various  
<sup>941</sup>organizations. Instead of the sermons of the old-time

preachers and religious emissaries, the public heard speeches, lectures, and propaganda for the Zionist movement. Committees were established for the סלעו'ס חנ"ך קרן ("Fund for the existence of Israel") and for the איו"ח קרן ("Foundation fund").

Youth was drawn into this activity. At the beginning: without any organization. Later, the Hashomer Hatsair was founded, which from the start became the center of all the young people's lives.

Then the library began to come into being: Yiddish and Hebrew books were collected. Later this was the Tarbut Library, which in its last days owned 800 books and a reading room, where Jewish newspapers and pamphlets were received.

There were also young people who started an amateur theatrical club and occasionally put on Yiddish plays.

With the help of our American landlady, the Yavne School was built. As well as classrooms, it had a library and reading-room. (On the Yavne school, we will present a special essay later on.)

There existed in the town a Gemes-Khesed bank which gave loans to the needy.

We also had a קצ"ח-ח"ס ( ) which occupied itself in helping the sick, in going to ח"ס ( ), in helping with medicines and treatment, etc.

The town developed. One novelty was the omnibus, which began to run in place of the former wagons. Every time the omnibus arrived, it was a big event in the town. Young and old would go to the market in the evening to meet it. It came into town illuminated with lanterns.

At the same time, in approximately 1930, Shershev was the fortunate recipient of electric light: another novelty and another example of progress in the community. Motorized mills replaced the windmills.

The people, too, seemed to have changed in their customs and manners. After the years of need and discomfort during the war, people began to dress better and to take an interest in fashion. They began to go in for entertainment. On Sabbaths and holidays they went for walks in the Hoyfgesl.

Jews worked in fields leased from priests. People walked there too; young people played and sang.

#### THE FIRST CELEBRATION OF THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

There were frequent Jewish celebrations of national holidays, especially when there was a Yavne school. But very dear to memory is the first celebration of the Balfour Declaration. It seemed wonderful to us in Shershev. The guards in their uniforms, with Jewish banners going before, organized a demonstration. In long, disciplined ranks, singing Hebrew songs, the demonstration went through all the streets of Shershev.

Remembering this splendor, the grief becomes still heavier. They were not fated to see their dream come true — a Jewish country. Only very few of them are in Israel. Most of them died at the hands of the Nazi murderers.

#### THE MAGISTRAT AND THE GMINA

To begin with, the Poles established for us a magistrat ( ). Kopl Kantarovitsh was appointed mayor. The Jews had the majority in the town council. Among the council members were merchants and craftsmen.

But later on the Polish authorities, with the intention of mayorozirn ( ? ) the Jews, added many surrounding villages to the town and created a gmina (Jewish community). Here, the Jews were now in the minority [i.e. in Shershev and surrounding villages regarded as a unit — E.C.R.].

In general, the notorious policy of anti-Jewish discrimination had now begun. The crushing taxes, dues of all kinds, hit the Jewish population worse.

Our non-Jewish neighbors, too, began getting up to anti-Semitic tricks. One day the mieshtshanes (townspeople) waited with sticks and would not let the Jews' cattle through to the pasture. The way led through the Gentile streets. It came to blows. There were court cases. The court sentenced the Jews to pay for the right to pasture their cattle on the Jewish community's meadows.

For ages past, the Jews had gathered dry branches in the forests for heating. This was free, without any charge. The farmers and the miestshanes stopped that too.

Neither were Jews allowed to pick berries and mushrooms. The baskets in which they had gathered berries and mushrooms were taken away from them.

At the fairs, various incidents began to occur regularly. Hooligans carried out antisemitic propaganda there. It often happened that the Jews chased these antisemitic agitators away, but the mood was heavy and oppressive.

More and more often, we heard the slogan "zhidi do palestini" in the streets. (shkola povshekhna).

It was the same story in the Polish folkschool.

Many Jewish children were pupils in this school, together with Christians. The Jewish children had to endure various insults and hurts. This happened in the night-classes as well.

Various evening events and dances were held at this school. At first, Jewish youth participated. Later, from 1927 on, it became impossible for Jews to take part in these evening events.

However, we lived, <sup>worked</sup> created, wheeled and dealt, studied. In spite of the surrounding hatred and provocation, life ran its normal course. The older generations lived out their lives in the Houses of Study, in the various kheures (societies), shas, mishnayer, Khaye-odem [these are names of societies for purposes of study etc. - E.C.R.]. Political discussions, also, took place in the Houses of Study. The young people had their library, in the reading room. Those who belonged to Hashomer Hatsair used the headquarters of that organization.

To our account of the town's way of life we should add the "Siem" that the Shas society held every year, upon [the completion of studying] a mesechta (tractate of Talmud). On this occasion a Siem ha-toyre was held. The society made a feast where the students - the Jews, and their teacher - the rabbi - rejoiced.

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Our town was not big, but it had its charm. Its houses, most of them made of timber, were clean, warm family-nests.

Every day, every week had its routine, which had been the same for many, many years: the pattern of work, of spending time together, of preparing for Sabbath and holidays.

It was not an opulent life of luxury, but it was beautiful, rooted in tradition - even if lacking in the comforts of today.



Water came from wells that were owned in common, or from the pump in the marketplace.

We knew nothing of central heating. A Kostyar ( ? ) of wood was stocked up for the winter.

Most families owned a cow, which provided them with milk, cheese and butter. Chickens were kept.

Sabbaths and holidays were celebrated simply but with dignity. Every holiday had its well-established customs and practices.

Weddings, circumcisions and other occasions of Jewish rejoicing were celebrated. These celebrations brought the whole town together.

When, on the other hand, a tragic event occurred, the town shared its grief. The whole town attended each funeral.

There were quarrels too — over private matters or public questions. But they were always among ourselves, in our own society. The rabbi or mentshn (people) would settle the disputes, not permit injustices.

Then the great catastrophe happened which destroyed Jewish life. Together with all the other towns, great and small, our dear town of Shershev fell beneath the marauding ax of the Nazi bandits.

Those who were in that inferno tell of that dark period. They, the witnesses of those bitter times, the only survivors, describe our destruction in the second part of this pinkes (record).

(Caption to go with picture on page 527 of original: "The Hebrew School Tárbut in Shershev, together with the Hashomer Hatsair on a LagBomer excursion".)

\*[Translator's note: I have generally used the form Reb, "Mr.", in this section. There may however be instances in which "Rabbi" - as a title preceding the name - is a more appropriate translation - E.C.R.]

### \*RABBIS OF SHERSHEV

Shershev was famous for its great rabbis. One of the best-known was Reb Pinkhes Mikhael, who later became famous as a great bal-moyfes (miracle worker). The following text is a fragment of a monograph by the well-known Jewish scholar E. Ben-Ezra. The title of the monograph is:

"Reb Pinkhes Mikhael of blessed memory."  
(Published in Brooklyn, 1953.)

Reb Pinkhes Mikhael was born in about 1808. His father was Reb Yitskhok - Ayzik and his mother was Brayne-Henge. He was born in the town of Shershev, Grodne gubernye. Reb Ayzik was the grandson of Reb Yehoshue Pinsker, a descendent of Reb Eleazer of Amsterdam, the author of Maase Rokeach. On his mother's side he was a descendent of the Baal Panin Meirut (Reb Meyer Ben Yitskhok Ayznshtat - see below under "Editorial note").

Reb Pinkhes Mikhael was his parents' only son. But he was not spoiled, like other only sons. From childhood on he devoted himself to the Torah and to the service of God. His parents freed him altogether from material worries and from the yoke of having to earn a living. He sat constantly, day and night, studying the holy texts.

Of teachers who left some mark on him, and who had a great influence on him, we know only of Reb Osher Hakoyen, the author of Berakoth Rosh. Reb Pinkhes Mikhael exerted himself to follow in the footsteps of his teacher, and to follow his example of modesty. Until he was fifty years old, he did not want to accept the post of rabbi - like his teacher Reb Osher.

In his writings, also, he followed his teacher's path. Reb Osher had written a book on the tractate Nozir. Reb Pinkhes wrote a composition on the same tractate. It is true that the work of Reb Pinkhes Mikhael is not so full of pilpul (closely-reasoned, sometimes hair-splitting argument) as is the work of Reb Osher Hakoyen.

Like his teacher, he devoted himself to his studies with great diligence and slept very little. But his father, appealing to the honor that is due to a father, ordered him to sleep for an hour every afternoon. From his father Reb Ayzik he inherited his love of Jews and his devotion to matters of tsedoke (justice; helping poor people with money etc.).

As was customary at that time, his parents arranged a marriage for him when he was very young. He married Mushke, the daughter of the wealthy Reb Yekhiel Mikhl of Pasval (who was one of the grandchildren of the Baal Seder-Hadorot). His wife kept a store. She supplied the entire income of both of them. She released him from the yoke of making a living, so that he could devote himself to study.

Already in those days, when he was still a young man, Reb Pinkhes Mikhael gained a reputation as one who swam freely in the sea of the Talmud and its commentaries. He began to correspond with great Torah scholars on matters of Halakhah. They all became aware of his acuteness, his analytical system of solving various problems (literally girses, "variant readings"). He began to compose his own Khidushim (original observations) on Shas, Rashi, Tosaphot, Rif, Rash and Ran (the last three are acronyms of rabbis). Out of these observations grew

a very weighty (in both senses of the word) book. His observations were published forty years after his death in the book Divrei Pinkhes : it was published by his grandson Ayzik Rabinovitz.

Shershev, the birthplace of Reb Pinkhes Mikhael, was famous for its rabbis, its great figures of Torah and wisdom. The position of rabbi was filled by Rabbi Reb Dovid, the author of the book Khumot Yerushalaim (on the Orekh Khayim). Of this rabbi it is said that, following astronomical calculations, he wanted to establish three days of Rosh Khoydesh; and that he used to read the megillah also on Shushan Purim.

Another rabbi of the town was Reb Pinkhes ha-Levi ben Ezriel Amsterdam, author of the work Nakhles Ezriel (on Yode-Dea).

Dayen in Shershev was Rabbi Reb Ayzik Hakoyen, the author of the book Shaari Yitskhok.

The leader of the Jewish community in Shershev was Reb Osher Hakoyen, the student of Reb Khayim Volozhiner. He was the author of the work Berakoth Rash, on the tractate Berakoth; and of hagoes (annotations) on the works of Rashi and the Tosaphists, and also Berakoth Rash on the tractate Nozir, and hagoes and explanations of the commentaries of Rashi, the Tosaphists and the decisions of the Rambam.

At first, Reb Osher Hakoyen did not want to use the Torah as a source of income. Until his fiftieth year he was a merchant in Shershev, where in his spare time he would sit and study Torah. At long last the parneysim (communal leaders) of the town persuaded him, and he agreed to accept the position of rabbi of Shershev. But

he was not rabbi there for long, because the leaders of the Jewish community of Tiktin (Grodne gubernye) had their eye on him, and in 1853 he became the rabbi of Tiktin.

When Reb Osher Hakoyen left Shershev, the leaders of the Shershev community started looking for a rabbi who would fit the rabbinic tradition of the community. At last they appointed Reb Pinkhes Mikhael to be Reb Osher Hakoyen's successor. In him, they saw someone who resembled their great former more-deasre (teacher), an expert on the Talmud, on the Rishonim and Akharonim, and moreover a modest person with dignified manners.

When Reb Pinkhes Mikhael assumed the rabbinic crown, he did not change his previous way of life. He behaved as modestly as in the time before he became rabbi. As before, he acted towards the ordinary people as a friend and a brother. He listened to their conversations; he joined them in their grief and helped them in their need. He was especially loved by the children. He treated them with great respect and addressed them as "ir" (the polite form of "you" in Yiddish).

Although he had the common touch, Reb Pinkhes Mikhael was a great Torah scholar. He was a center to which people came from all directions. On the one hand, famous rabbis sent him their shayles v'tshuves (questions and answers, responsa) on Halakhah and on practical matters. On the other hand, ordinary people began to come to him, wanting advice, directions on how to live. His house was open to all: to the poor, and to those who were in trouble.

Thus he was rabbi of Shershev for six years, until 1864. Then a new chapter opened in the life of Reb Pinkhes Mikhael. In that year he left his birthplace, Shershev, where he had grown up and become famous. He settled in the town of Antipolye, in the gegnt (region) of Kobrin, Grodne gubernye.

He was rabbi there until 1890. On the first day of the month of Adar in that year, he fell sick with typhus. He was sick for more than two weeks. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of Adar he passed away.

#### Editorial note:

The book Maase Rokeach, by Reb Eleazer of Amsterdam, was first printed in Amsterdam in 1740, and later appeared in another edition in Mohilev in 1804. It is a commentary on the Mishnah, and also contains some khidushim (new observations, interpretations) and mysteries of Kabbalah.

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We should say more about Rebbe Meyer ben Yitskhok Ayznshtat, the Baal "Panin Meirut", from whom Reb Pinkhes Mikhael was descended on his mother's side.

This Reb Meyer ben Yitskhok was known in the scholarly and rabbinical world as the Maharam Ash. Maharam means [acrostically] "great teacher Rabbi Meyer", and Ash means the town Ayznshtat in Hungary. The name of this town was customarily written with the abbreviation Aleph-Shin.

Ayznshtat was the main city among seven communities in Burgenland, known in Jewish history as the Sheva Kehiloth ("Seven [Jewish] communities"). To the Sheva Kehiloth belonged, as well as the capital Ayznshtat, also Matersdorf, Lakenbach, Doytskreyts (called by the Jews "Tseylem" [= "cross"], Froyenkirkhen, Kitsee.

Rabbi Meyer was born in about 1670, a descendent of a very famous family, related to the celebrated Shakh. He was a son-in-law of the then well-known shtadlen (intercessor for the Jewish community) and leader of the Jewish community of Poyzn, Reb Meyer Sokhatshever. He was supported by his father-in-law for ten years, and studied Torah. But something happened to the father-in-law that compelled the son-in-law

to earn a living and accept a rabbinical post. In the introduction to his book *Panim Meirut*, he tells about this in the following words :

[There follows a passage in Hebrew.]

Briefly, this means that after being supported for ten years by his father-in-law, the leader of the community of Poyzn, and after having studied in his great synagogue which was full of holy books — there occurred the libel on twenty-four Jews, who were brought to trial in the tribunal of Lublin, bound in chains. They were threatened with death. His father-in-law, the leader and wealthy man Moyshe Sokhatshever, took their part. Thanks to the favor he enjoyed in the eyes of the Polish King, and of the courtiers, (or "[great] lords" : harn), he succeeded in getting the endangered Jews freed. The libellors were punished with enormous fines, in the thousands and the tens of thousands. But for his rich father-in-law, who had thrown both his soul and his fortune into the cause — as ~~it~~ is well-known both to the leaders of the galil [ ] of Poyzn, and to the rich men of the holy community of Lublin — it was a disaster. He had lost both his own fortune, and that of his sons.

It was then that he (the son-in-law) accepted a position as rabbi of Shidlovtse (gegnt of Radom). Later, through the recommendation of the famous hoxx-liferant ( ) Shimshen Vertheymer (the founder of the

financial company Vertheymer [Wertheimer?] in Germany) he became rabbi in the famous German Jewish community of Worms, in 1700. Later he became rabbi of the celebrated community of Prosnitz in Moravia. There, Reb Jonathan Eybershiitz (Preger) of later fame was, as a young man, educated in his house. In 1714 he became rabbi of the principal town among the "Seven Communities", Ayznshtat, where he continued to serve as rabbi for both town and countryside until his death on June 7, 1744. On his gravestone are inscribed these words:

[Inscription in Hebrew]

Rabbi Meyer had six sons and two daughters. They [i.e. presumably the sons - E.C.R.] had very important leading positions in Jewish religious life. They were rabbis and authors of works, and they also published the works which their father had left in manuscript form. His sons were:

① Reb Yitskhok. A son-in-law of Rebbe Tsvi ben Yankov Ashkenazi, known in the world of rabbinic scholarship as {i.e.} "Khokhem Tsvi". Reb Yitskhok was rabbi in Niesvizh and later in Byele-Podlask and Slovabitsh.

② Reb Mikhael. Died young. His son was rabbi of Kletsk.

③ Reb Eleazer. Rabbi of Shidlovtse, in the town where his father had been rabbi before.

④ Shapsi (Sabbatai). Earlier: rabbi of Byele-Podlask; later, of Shershev. When in Shershev in 1765, he gave his haskome (permission) to the book Meori Ash that had been written by his father, and that was printed after his



father's death (1766, Furth). In the same book (page 86) are his two comments dated the sixth of Tammuz 1745, and signed "Shapsi hakoth ["the small, insignificant one"], of the holy community of Shershev."

This son of Rabbi Meyer, Shapsi, lived to an old age and was rabbi of Shershev for a long time. On the seventh of Tammuz, 1777, he gave his permission to the book Atores Yosef, by the rabbi of Liskov Reb Yoysef Ber Ruber, which was printed in Zhulkev in 1778.

⑤ Moyshe-Yehude. Rabbi, like two of his brothers before him, in Byale. He had a tragic experience there on the day of the King of Poland's coronation. It took place on June 8, 1764. In his introduction to his father's book, Or Ha-Granoz, which he published, he relates the following:

[text in Hebrew]

From this we learn not only of his personal losses, but of a very interesting historical fact. There was a change of monarchs in Poland. A band of robbers attacked Byale-Podlask. It was given a privilege (special license) to rob for not more than three hours (!); but the robbers were not well disciplined and their work of looting for a full twenty-four hours. The great synagogue and the Besmedresh (House of Study) suffered terribly. The robbers stole the fine clothes of the rabbi and his family, leaving them stark naked. It is also known that the robbers left Byale and went to Brisk. There, they apparently began to sell their stolen property. The leaders of the Jewish community in Brisk

decreed a kheyrem ("excommunication"): that anyone who bought stolen goods from the robbers must give them back to [the original owners,] the householders (balebatim) for the price they had paid for them — without making a prute (small coin) of profit. This, writes the rabbi of Byele, helped his community very much.

(6) Binyumin. Rabbi in Lakenbakh (on the "Seven Communities") and later in "Ungarish Brod" (Hungarian Brod<sup>(=Ingarish...?)</sup>).

The two daughters of Rabbi Meyer, Khavé and Brayndl, were also wives of great scholars of that generation.

This is the lineage of Reb Pinkhes-Mikhael on his mother's side. As we have seen, one of Reb Meyer's sons, Shapsi, was rabbi of Shershev for many, many years. Perhaps the name of Reb Pinkhes-Mikhael's mother, Brayne-Henge, is connected with the name of Reb Meyer's daughter, Brayndl.

(26

There was once a Jew in Shershev by the name of Markl (Markl Bar [or Ber? ג'א] Volf Pomeranyets). Various causes drove him to cold Siberia, to the town of Irkutsk. Older people of "that" generation tell still, how Markl's mother, poor thing, shed bitter tears over the tragedy which had befallen her and Markl: he was exiled among non-Jews in cold, terrible Siberia and was removed and estranged from Jewishness. Great was the grief of his parents over their unhappy, lonely

[this line is a quote in Hebrew:]

"Son, who <sup>(was)</sup> is [ ? ] among the Gentiles." ]

And for a long, long time, the "banishment" of Markl was the main conversational topic among the inhabitants of Shershev; until the matter was gradually forgotten, just as many other things were forgotten from "those" good times, when the local Jewish settlement stretched from the end of Kamenyetsk [street] to the end of Pruzhene Street. (Nowadays, these are "gentile streets".)

\*This account is taken from the pinkes of the general private Hebrew folkschool "Yavneh" [run] by "Tarbut" in Shershev. It [i.e. this account] is on the subject of the school, which by then had existed ten years. It was printed in Shedlets in 1935.

...פניא דר פניא דר פניא, <sup>Subleading: a</sup> [Hebrew line]

But it is difficult to measure the worth of a Jewish soul. From Siberia, even, there began to come messages of greeting from the exiled Markl, who had worked his way up "there", become a "wealthy man" - a "pyervi-gildi - kupyets", [Russian expression]... Even "there", Markl had not forgotten his Jewishness; his warm Jewish heart could not be chilled even by cold Siberia. True, "Markl Velvl's" [i.e. Markl, son of Velvl] became, "there", "Mark Vasilyevitch", but his native town of Shershev, and its Jewishness, remained deeply rooted in his heart, he carried <sup>in his heart</sup> the Jewish spark from his home; and when the "gracious Tsar" forgave the "sins" of the Jewish people (granted an amnesty, that is), Markl too was able to get out of Irkutsk for a while, and came to Shershev to visit his family's graves. "By then, he was grey and old" - such is the report of the ancient householders, natives of Shershev, who were still young at that time.

#### THE CHARITABLE GIFT.

Markl's father, Volf, left when he died a piece of land and a house on Kamenyets Street. In the house lived Markl's sister-in-law, the widow of his elder brother Zelik. Markl bought the "inheritance" from his sister-in-law; and bought in addition a larger area of land and another house from Herr Yitskhok Stolar (adding up to an area of 15 by 80 klafter). He gave this to the Jewish community of Shershev, to build a hegdesh [= poor-house]. The income from the hegdesh he allocated to paying for the education of poor Jewish children in Shershev.

## THE WILL.

Markl returned to Irkutsk. More than one young man of Shershev, probably, owed his "poorhouse" school-fees to him. (Unfortunately, we possess no documentation of this.) But Markl, when he was in Shershev, acquainted himself with the low educational level of the Jewish children in his native town. He, the "pyervi-gildi-kupuyets", could not understand how the Jews of Shershev, "ardent" Jews, full of yidishkeyt (Jewishness), could be content with the heders (religious schools) in which their children were preparing to be "healthy" invalids and "lively" ne'er-do-wells [or "idlers" - translation of baklonim] for the rest of their lives. Herr Markl "took a risk" [or "gambled"] and in his will, which was drawn up by the notary in Irkutsk, Vladimir Goryevitsh Razumov on November 12, 1910, he decided to help his brothers in Shershev to found a modern school for Jewish children. Among the 14 points of the will, which contains various family instructions, number 2 is as follows (in the translation from the Russian original):

"In the name of the God of Israel, I, the merchant Mark Vasilyevitsh, Marcus, son of Volf Pomeranyets, in the case of my death leave the following directions:

"In the town of Shershev, in the oyezd of Pruzhene, Grodne gubernye, a school is to be founded to teach Jewish children Hebrew literature, religion and Russian literature, on condition that the school shall give the students a well-rounded education, and prepare them to be loyal citizens of the people and the state. To build the school, I have decided to use a plot of land in the above-mentioned town, Shershev, on Komenyetsk Street, which I bought from the heirs of Zelik Pomeranyets: his widow Feyge Pomeranyets and her neighbor. The land is 80 klafter (sazhen) long, and 13½ <sup>958</sup> klafter wide. Besides this, I leave capital of 13,000 roubles,

of which 10,000 roubles are to be put into a state bank in perpetuity, in cash or paper bills, on condition that the profit shall go to pay the pension of the teacher and the annual expense of running the school; and the 3,000 roubles are to be spent on building a brick house for the school, on furnishing it and buying teaching materials.

"I have already given the 3,000 roubles, for the above-mentioned purpose, to the committee of the "Society for the spread of education among the Jews of Russia". The practical accomplishment of this matter has been undertaken - with thanks - by the "Society for the spread of education among the Jews of Russia", whose headquarters is in the capital city of Peterburg, on Zamyatina Street no. 4. If the above-mentioned society is unable for any reason to carry out my instructions, then my heirs will do so. They will exert themselves to build the school, and receive from the above-mentioned society the 3,000 roubles.

"Once more I emphasize that the school is to be founded unconditionally, in the town of Shershev and not in any other town. The future management of the school, its leadership and its practical educational activities, are to be supported on the responsibility of the Jewish community in the town of Shershev - in the persons of a <sup>committee</sup> elected by the Jewish community and consisting of four members under the chairmanship of the local rabbi and the supervision of the "Society for the spread of education among the Jews of Russia". After my death, the guardian of the school will be my son Moyshe Pomeranyets; after him, the oldest member of my family - in order [of birth]."

and how deeply

We can see from this will how far, the exiled, and yet near, Markl Pomeranyets understood the noble mission of educating the children of the Jewish community of Shershev -

## IN THE YEAR OF DESTRUCTION AND RUIN

(in the First World War)

But it was not fated (and perhaps Shershev was not worthy?) that the will should be carried out, and that the Jewish children of Shershev should be rid of the old, narrow, moldy heder-buildings, and get their education in a modern school. The terrible, fatal year 1914 came quickly upon them. The younger, better energies of the local Jewish society were torn away from their home to the various positions and fronts of the war. Those who remained in the half-burned town, the old people and the juveniles, were occupied with the daily problems and worries that have etched themselves in all our memories... The former Rabbi, Rabbi Yitskhok Meyer Meyerovits, who had the will in his charge, left the town at the time when the front approached Shershev (in 1915). When the rabbi left, the matter was entirely forgotten about. In the "tsavoe-hayzer" [buildings erected under the terms of the will? - TR.], there live during the war the widows and "victims of fires," [belonging to the families] of various former local "kley-koydesh" [= religious officers: rabbi, gabbai etc.]. The town became impoverished. The German occupation completely ruined the town. The typhoid epidemic, which came in the train of the combatting armies, snatched away many dozens of young lives prematurely. Because the occupying soldiers requisitioned the foodstuffs of the [local] population, the famine increased and the result was countless deaths. The edict concerning "tsvangs-arbet" (= forced labor) came from the German occupying force. A shameful hunt after the young people began. Some were sent to different places. Some escaped by a miracle, taking any route they could. Some of these ended up in the bigger towns where the persecutions were, to some degree, weaker. Others

went to a konditsye [ ] run by a Jewish farmer, and so on.

Study-houses were transformed into hospitals and theaters. The casualties of the war were treated there. Money was collected for the destitute, before they became sick... Elderly people were driven into the bath-house, where with cold, cynical brutality their beards were shaved. Among those who lost their beards was HaRav Avrom Ahron. He had stopped in Shershev to replace HaRav Meyer Yitskhok Meyerovits. The brutality reached its climax: Reb Avrom Velul the melamed (= teacher in a heder), Reb Sholem Pinski and other old, infirm Jews were put in harness and used to plow the gardens... Various vegetables were needed for the occupying forces in Shershev!... In those difficult times, no one was interested in such "frivolities" as schooling and education. Meanwhile, as a result of the war, there were great political and economic upheavals in the world. People were cut off (?) from their friends in Russia, not to speak of Siberia.

The 3,000 roubles in the keeping of the "khevre-mefitsi-haskole" [= society for the spread (?) of education] disappeared together with the "khevre" itself. No more news arrived about Markl. Of his goodwill and noble plan there remained (as a remnant saved from destruction) the above-mentioned place. (The two houses were burned during the Bolshevik invasion). This was a memorial to a "Jew, who was once in Shershev."

YOUR HEIRS, SHERSHEV !!!

Between the houses of two Byelorussian farmers, on Kamenyets Street no. 11, there was a big empty place that waited for its redeemer. In Pruzhene lived Markl's relatives,



dark [i.e. deplorable; fig. use of word tunkl - Tr.] morning they came to Shershev and sold "their" inherited piece of land to a certain farmer, Kaleneyko, who sowed a grain-crop on the land. The farmer, afraid of the Jews of Shershev, did his work in the morning hours on Saturdays, when the Jews were comfortably asleep, resting their weary bones after the days of earning a living during the week.

### THE [ 1<sup>?</sup> ] FROM SMALL TO GREAT

However, the neighbor Danyel Mayster accidentally noticed the farmer's work. He ran and raised an outcry; he roused up the leaders of the community: Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman, Yoysef Pomeranyets, Yoysef Pantel and others. With the speed of lightning, the whole town was on its feet. It seemed that they felt the danger that threatened the future education of the young generation in Shershev. After much argument, they drove the farmer from the place by force. They appointed a powerful guard, so that the farmer would not resume his invasive work.

On Sunday, V. 12. 1924 [I do not know if the Yiddish numerical order means the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> month or the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the 5<sup>th</sup> month - TR.], at eight o'clock in the morning [therefore more likely to be May than December - 7  
REF Khaykl Nirenblat 2.L., Reb Zalmen Livkovitch  
(REF Khaim Tenenboym)] local carpenters.

Reb Dovid Tenenboym), in haste and at no charge, laid to "podrubes" [ ] for a school building: the podrubes were manufactured at no cost by almost all the smiths of the town. The historic day will stay etched in our memory for ever, because it marked the beginning of a new era, an era of extraordinarily hard work by the dogged parents in the field of modern education, in awakening the national spirit of the young people. The

building committee, which was founded on the same historic Sabbath and which was headed by the untiring, energetic and stubborn man, full of initiative, Herr Yekhzekyel Krugman (he has worked ceaselessly up to this day), understood that if the opportunity was not seized to wake up the energy of the petrified, backward elements in Shershev, then it would not happen in hurry. The prezes (=chairman), Herr Yekhzekyel Krugman, brought all his initiatory power to bear in organising the members of the building committee, and arousing in them the ambition to carry out the noble undertaking of building a schoolhouse for the children of Shershev. The active, stubborn Herr Shloyme Averbukh helped a lot; he is now in America.

It is worth emphasizing that not a single communal shilling was at the disposal of the chairman... Herr Yekhzekyel Krugman was not the kind of person to be easily discouraged. With his iron determination to carry out his plan in full, he was not put off by the lack of money. He paid for the necessary building-materials with his own money, or put them on to his account.

#### SOURCES OF INCOME, "FROM THE THRESHING-FLOOR AND FROM THE WINE-PRESS"

Due to his initiative the young people were organised, and they formed a drama group which played from time to time, in order to raise sums of money for the school, which was then being built. Among the members of the drama group, the one who was most distinguished for altruism and devotion on behalf of the school was Herr Moyshe Mordkhe Grelman. In spite of his poor health, he appeared on stage and performed in top-ranking roles. Moreover, he was until his death an active member of the

building committee, and later, of the school committee. May his memory be honored! The dramatic group consisted of the following people: (1) Moyshe-Mordkhe Gelman, (2) Shmulitsh the barber, (3) Lerer Rak Shmuel, (4) Kantorovitsh, Ruven, (5) Kagan, Hirshl, (6) Bubl Rakhamer, (7) Kantorovitsh, Khashke, (8) Pomeranyets Sore, (9) Kirzner, Ester-Lea, (10) Feldboym, Sore, (11) Alter Rasikovski, (12) Shimen Leyenman. Herr Krugman also had the task of creating for the production the appropriate mood (by agitation) in the population, so that people would visit the theater in droves.

It is remarkable that his social and commercial sense never failed him, when he looked for the other sources of income that he created. A characteristic source of income, that shows how devoted, body and soul, Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman was to the idea of a school, was: the esrog business that he founded... In 1924 esrogs, for various reasons, were a great rarity. He opportunely brought an esrog from Warsaw, and the whole town used it. A comparatively large sum of money resulted from this and was devoted to the building.

He thought of carrying out a "plet-aktsye" [ ] and of other one-shot sources of income. His impulsive spirit was not completely satisfied, however, until he founded (with great effort and superhuman energy) stable, permanent sources of income, such as neydarim [ ] for weddings, Yom Kippur collections, payments for ritual slaughter, interest from the burial society, grants from the magistrat [ ] interest from the sale of heaven, weekly subscriptions from the population of Shershev and payments for authorizing birth-certificates. For this purpose, special "year witnesses" were appointed who, whenever a birth-certificate had to be authorized, took a certain fee for the school. By such ways and means the idea of a school penetrated the broadest masses, until everyone formed the

image of the school as the darling of Shershev's Jewish community. This was a very important, educative proof for the conservative elements, which are not absent from any town, especially a small town. The task was carried out excellently by the recognised and worthy activist and chairman, Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman. All the permanent sources of income lasted, more or less, until the years of crisis, and until the Kehillah came into existence in Shershev. At that moment, everything was erased from the surface, as if with a magic wand. It is true that many of the sources of income were dependent on the conditions of the time; but many were affected, too, by the weariness and exhaustion of the chairman. The active members left, and "one person on the front is no soldier", as the proverb says.

#### UNLESS THE WHOLE TOWN BUILDS, THE WORK OF THE INDIVIDUAL WILL BE IN VAIN!

Such was the slogan proclaimed by the building committee that was founded on that historic Sabbath.

#### THE ENTHUSIASM

Thanks to the well-organised building committee, an atmosphere of extraordinary enthusiasm was created. Everyone helped with what he could: with a donation, or with labor - like the Jews of long ago when they built the Tabernacle...

I still see before my eyes an impressive picture, which illustrates most clearly the assistance given by the town in building the school, and the enthusiasm. It was O'N 5110 [Khalemoyd Sukes], in 1924, on a beautiful sunny day. The streets were alive with well-rested people in carefree holiday mood, Khalemoydnikes. I was walking with them.

Suddenly: a dense crowd of people, old people, young people and small children... And voices crying up to the sky:

"Rocks!" "Here's a rock!" I stopped and saw: a dozen wagons, driven by our communal leaders with the chairman, Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman, at their head; around them: the real schoolchildren!... They were collecting rocks for the foundation of the school building. Every rock called forth great jubilation on the part of the activists, as if they had found something wonderful. Every rock was accompanied by the exultant shouting of the crowd of children. And now they had found the biggest rock of all! To lift it, at least a dozen strong hands of Esau are needed... I don't know how much strength was required to roll the rock into the wagon, which could scarcely tolerate the load. It must have been done with hidden strength. In a state of this sort of enthusiasm, <sup>the</sup> potential energy in people is revealed. I thought: "A person would be able to achieve wonders, if this kind of enthusiasm could be aroused in him". For much of this enthusiasm, perhaps 99% of it, we can thank the chairman. A great psychologist has said: "In order to bring forth enthusiasm in another person, <sup>bring forth his</sup> or a belief in anything, it is necessary for the first person to be himself full of the same enthusiasm or belief, right to the depths of his soul." Whoever saw this scene was easily convinced that the young man who was in charge of collecting the rocks owned it [i.e. enthusiasm] in a great measure

פ'עג'יג' |'ג' |'ג'ג'ג' |ג' |ג'ג'ג'

[

]

The heirs did not give up "their" inherited plot of land. After the farmer had been driven from the site, the heirs took the community leaders to court for taking possession of "their" property... And when the court found that

the inherited land belonged to the city, they took the matter to a higher court. Not wanting to waste energy on such matters, the building committee decided to make a peaceful settlement with the heirs. For this purpose a delegation was chosen of : HaRav Reb Avram Arn Valdshan, Herr Shmuel Mayster and Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman, who travelled to Pruzhene on October 27, 1924. They discussed the dispute for a whole night with the rabbi of Pruzhene, and then with Herr Zalmen Grinzburg, and did not reach any agreement. It was not until the next morning, in the Hotel Galubovitsh, that the disagreement between the different parties was settled. The heirs were given 125 dollars. The contract which the heirs gave to the Jewish community of Shershev, is as follows (in literal translation from Hebrew):

" By the help of God, as a permanent proof and fact before the Jewish community of Shershev, will serve the statement signed <sup>hereunder</sup> by us, the brothers Borek and Moyshe-Shmuel Pomeranyets, that the plot of land in the town of Shershev, on Kamenyetsk Street, which we inherited from our parents, and which we sold to our uncle Markl Pomeranyets, who gave the above-mentioned land as a donation to the Jewish community of Shershev for the purpose of building on it a Talmud Torah building, we have, with our good will, arrived at a mutual agreement about the above-mentioned plot of land, receiving as compensation 125 dollars. From now, and for the future, the land belongs to the Jewish community of Shershev, which can do what it likes with it. Neither we nor our children have any hereditary right to the land. We sign the above with our good will and we confirm that, without <sup>being</sup> forced or pressured, we have settled the dispute with the Jewish community of Shershev,

on Thursday, the second day of the month of Markheshvan, in the year 5685 [1925], in the town of Pruzhene." Signed: Borekh and Moyshe-Shmuel Pomeranyets. The above-mentioned settlement took place according to Jewish law, in <sup>our presence and</sup> front of our eyes: Herr Borekh and Herr Moyshe-Shmuel Pomeranyets signed with their own hands. To confirm this, we sign below, on the above-mentioned date. Signatures: Shmuel Pinski, Fayvl Galubovitch.

#### THE ORGANISATIONAL PREPARATIONS FOR THE SCHOOL YEAR.

At the end of 1926, the building was nearly finished. In order to form a basis on which, immediately after the school had been built, a normal and appropriate <sup>complex</sup> for children could be organised, the building-committee invited Herr Yankev Shraytman of Pruzhene, who is today the general secretary of the "Histadrut of Teachers" in Poland (and was then a graduate of a seminary), to visit the <sup>local</sup> teachers, in order to establish which of them would be suitable as a future teacher in the school. Those who were chosen were: the writer of these lines; and Herr Bokser who, following the same recommendation, was engaged from the Vilna Teachers' Seminary. We were both entrusted with the task of dividing the school-age children into classes and getting them ready for the new school year. We pioneer teachers worked in extraordinarily difficult conditions in a house rented from Herr Asher, the barber. We sat in two cramped rooms, together with children of various ages and degrees of knowledge, and labored at the "sacred craft", enduring trials on all sides. After much effort we succeeded in dividing the children into three groups. We invited Frayln [= Miss] Glotser from Pruzhene. After five

months of hard work we were able, more or less, to bring all the children up to the same norm of knowledge, and to introduce them to the discipline of school life. In this way we laid the foundations on which, later, would have to be built the whole inner work of the school, which would form the corresponding outward aspect of education in the years to come.

### THE FOUNDING OF THE SNIF "TARBUT" IN SHERSHEV.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, 1926, the building committee contacted the central "Tarbut" in Warsaw with the goal of creating a legitimate SNIF - "Tarbut", in the name of which the school would be opened in the new school year 1926 - 1927. The central committee, with Herr Moyshe Gordon at its head, then took an intensive, serious interest in giving us the appropriate information and interceding with the relevant administrative authorities. On April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1926, took place the official general meeting at the house of Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman, where a SNIF - "Tarbut" committee was elected and constituted. The apothecary Herr Eliyohu Boymriter, of blessed memory, was unanimously elected as chairman. On April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1926 the SNIF - "Tarbut" was confirmed by the authorities and entered into the register of the societies and organizations of the Krayz [ ] of Pruzhene - under the number 243.

### THE FIRST INSPECTION

The SNIF - "Tarbut", wanting to convince itself of the progress of the children, invited the then and well-known pedagogue of the "Tarbut" school in Pruzhene, Herr OKin. He inspected our school on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1926. He acquainted himself with the pedagogic work of the school



and the conditions in which it was being performed. As part of the entertainment of the visitor to Shershev, a meeting of the people was arranged in the large bes-medresh (House of Study). The speakers were the writer of these lines, and the visitor, Herr Okin. The visitor impressed the Jewish population of Shershev favorably. He created a <sup>pleasant</sup> atmosphere around the school.

### THE KHANUKES-HABAYIS ["HOUSE-WARMING"]

After hard work and extraordinary efforts on the part of the building committee, we at last merited to celebrate the Khanukes-habayis holiday. Whoever did not see the joy spread out on the faces of the members of the building committee, has never seen any really happy people in his life! This was especially noticeable in the case of the chairman Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman, who was devoted with life and soul. He had reason to rejoice, seeing the fruit of his hard work. (Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.)

On the Sabbath פסח'ס [ ], 1926, the building committee, together with all the sympathisers, celebrated the Khanukes-habayis [house-warming]. The teacher of the "Tarbut"-school in Pruzhene, Herr Tinski, was invited. There was an intention to engage him as the official of the school. On the Sabbath, after prayers, came the guests who had been invited, with the Rabbi Reb Noyekh Liverant at their head. We celebrated in a very elevated mood, expressing our good wishes, and also our appreciation of the <sup>worthy members of the</sup> building committee. Special thanks were unanimously given to the tireless מלאך-עושה [worker for the good of the community], the chairman of the building committee Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman — and <sup>to</sup> the American aid-committee, which had helped to build the school. After eating sweet things and drinking a glass of

shnaps, the celebrants departed in a happy mood.

### THE COMMITTEE OF PARENTS

With the khanukes-habayis, the noble, inestimable task of the never to be forgotten, worthy members of the building committee came to an end. Now a second task appeared: to organise the school for the new school year, 1926-1927. The task consisted of organising the teaching staff and bearing material responsibility for the school. On the same Sabbath, in the evening, a general meeting of the parents' committee was held in the big besmedresh (House of Study). The young people also participated. The guest, Herr Tinski, lectured on the topic: "The Hebrew school and its importance for the revival of the national spirit." Following this informative lecture there was a secret ballot to elect members of the parents' committee. The following were elected:

- 1) Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman (chairman)
- 2) Herr Avertakh, Shloyme
- 3) Herr Kantarovitch, Kopl
- 4) Herr Kantarovitch, Ruyn
- 5) Herr Sheynboym, Borekh Zelik
- 6) Herr Kabizetski, Yankev Meyer (secretary)
- 7) Herr Shnayder, Zalmen
- 8) Rasikhovski, Avrom
- 9) Herr Maletski, Peysakh

As honorary members, the following were unanimously elected:

- 1) The rabbi IC N N R [ ]
- 2) The apothecary, Herr Elyohn Boymriter of blessed memory.

## THE TEACHING STAFF IN 1926-1927

- 1) Shkeyn - principal
- 2) Diamant,
- 3) Yoyel Valdshan,
- 4) Rabinovitsh,
- 5) Grurevitsh, B.

The year in question, in its main pedagogic work, can be characterized as a year of unceasing struggle with the deeply rooted bad tendencies of the children, and of searching for means to alleviate the material situation. The question of discipline was never taken off the day's agenda. Psychological descriptions of the students' characters were carried out, and the methods appropriate to each kind of <sup>juvenile</sup> character were adopted, in order to improve it. From the programmatic, didactic point of view the work was not satisfactory. There were various reasons for this. Many of them had nothing to do with the teaching staff. The causes were that the Tarbut school network in Poland was not <sup>yet</sup> fully organised, and the as yet incomplete school-inventory and lack of necessary teaching materials.

The methodological aspect of the work went in the direction of, and followed the instructions of the modern pedagogic handbooks. The work of the teachers was very much disturbed by the mood of apathy which got the better of them, on account of irregular pension-payments and the <sup>economic</sup> dispute between the teachers and the school-committee, especially about wages for the two months of vacation. The "vaad" [council] wanted to recognize [only] six weeks [of vacation]. The issue even led to a <sup>teachers'</sup> strike lasting two days. The teachers got involved in no cultural activities except the school.

THE YEAR 1927/1928

The teachers:

- 1) Broymman - acting chair of the teachers' council.
- 2) Goldberg, Mushe.
- 3) Valdshan, Yoyel.
- 4) Gurevitch, Borekh.
- 5) Modrikamen.

During this year the teachers introduced no novelty or changes into their pedagogic work. It followed step by step the achievements of the previous year. There was even a perceptible decline in some respects. There was no mutual understanding among the teachers with regard to their methodological and didactic practices. To a certain extent, there was a spirit of "anything goes",

"שכל דבר" "לכל דבר" "לכל דבר" "לכל דבר"

[ ]

There was no head teacher to take responsibility for the pedagogic work of the school. Herr Broymman was appointed acting chair of the teachers' council. Except for the work of the school, no cultural activities for young people were organised.

THE YEAR 1928/1929

The teachers:

- 1) Shnayder, Yankev. principal
- 2) Bushinski, Sh.
- 3) Broymman, Shimen.
- 4) Grober, Dobl.
- 5) Valdshan, Yoyel.
- 6) Modrikamen.

This year brought with it many positive changes in all particulars. It could therefore be called a year

of achievements. From the program<sup>m</sup>atic, didactic point of view, a tremendous change occurred. There was a normal, stable program: the teachers worked on the material in advance, according to a plan. They divided it into the months of a whole year. There was system and a sense of responsibility in the work. The topic of Erets-Yisroel was used by the teachers at every opportunity, and the work of the K.K. "L. [

] among the children was very lively and interesting. Apart from this, cultural work was also carried on among the young people in the form of lectures on the following subjects: history, literature and political economy.

### THE YEAR 1929/30

1. Shnayder, Yankov - principal
2. Buzhinski, Sh.
3. Grober, D.
4. Valdshan, Y.

The work of this year was a continuation of the previous year, together with improvements. A warm, friendly environment was created around the school. The authority of the teacher grew in the eyes of the population of the town. In this year, the <sup>first</sup> graduation of the seventh class took place (not a normal graduation, as the children had not attended the school from the first class on). This year, also, was arranged an impressive exhibition of the children's work, reflecting all areas of study.

THE YEAR 1930/31

The teaching staff: 1. Kutshinski, M. - principal

2. Kutshinska, Dvoyre.

3. Trunskia, Taybl.

4. Valdshan, Yoel.

This year, the pedagogic work was like an imitation of what went before. There were no innovations. There was no corresponding sense of responsibility and appropriate dedication on the part of the teachers. In general, this year can be designated as one of decline.

Cultural work, apart from the school, was expressed in the organization of the graduating students under the name

"וְיָדָא בְּיָדָא - וְיָדָא בְּיָדָא"

THE YEAR 1931/32

The teaching-staff:

1. Peker, Yankov-Simkhe (Peker) - principal

2. Valdshan, Yoel

3. Nitsberg, Yisroel

4. Hoxhberg, Dvoyre

This year was correctly named "the year of organization". Excellent, disciplined work was carried out by the teaching staff. As a particular example, the administrative work will serve. The school archive was organized this year. Until then it had been in a state of chaos.

## THE YEAR 1932/33

The teaching staff:

1. Pekar — principal
2. Valdshan, Yoel.
3. Yndeleviski, Yankel.
4. Hoxhberg, Dvorne.

The value of the pedagogic work of the teaching staff was expressed in a written evaluation in the inspection-book of the inspector of the central "Tarbut" Herr A. Eynshteyn. The literal translation of the Hebrew text reads:

"Three years have passed since my last visit to our "Yavneh" school of the SNIF "Tarbut" here in Shershev.

"I emphasize with pleasure the progress of this teaching establishment. This time I found good organization and pedagogic initiative, a sense of responsibility for the educational work of the school, based on a complete Hebrew education. I emphasize in particular that in spite of the difficult material conditions of the institution, the teachers (especially the diligent principal, Herr Yankel-Simkhe Pekar) display great devotion to the cause of pedagogic completeness, and I say to them: More strength be to you! May their devoted work be an example to all our activists in the field of Hebrew education." Shershev, 7.1.1932 (July 1, 1932)

The Inspector of the Hebrew "Tarbut" schools in Poland, A. Eynshteyn.

This year saw the second normal graduation of the seventh class.

## THE YEAR 1933 / 1934

The teaching staff:

1. Valdshan, Yoel (principal)
2. Lifkind, Osher
3. Yudelevski, Yankov
4. Skubelska, Sheyne

During this year, the school changed over to a co-operative basis. The school committee bore no material responsibility for the teachers' salaries (except for an obligation to pay a few hundred 2lotys). The new economic arrangement, to which the teachers were unaccustomed, provoked misunderstandings which resulted in a worsening of the work, although the organisational and also the pedagogic part of the work was on an appropriate level. Taking into account the abnormal conditions, the government inspector who visited the school on February 21, 1934 acknowledged the great progress made by the children.

## THE YEAR 1934 / 1935

The teaching staff:

1. Valdshan, Yoel - principal
2. Yudelevski, Yankov
3. Skubelski, Sheyne
4. Pomeranyets, Lea
5. Zundovitsh, Yankov

This year brought a deeper pedagogic and methodological involvement, and innovations, in the work. The teaching staff fulfilled their task with full responsibility. The administrative and economic side of the work was worthy to serve as a model example.

977 There was unbroken contact between teachers and parents.



There was harmonious co-operation with the school inspector; a constant correspondence with the government inspector, and with the central "Tarbut" on the subject of pedagogic problems in the work of the school. A colossal amount of repair was carried out in the school, thanks to which the school acquired the appropriate aesthetic appearance. For the higher classes, a club for reading and entertainment was organised, and also an orchestra of ten children. Cultural work (apart from the school) was carried on, in the form of lectures on the subjects of literature and hygiene.

The year can rightly be called a year of reforms in the school. As an evaluation of the organisation of the school during the year, the following letter from headquarters, dated October 10, 1934, will serve:

This is the letter:

" To the pedagogic leadership of the 'Yavneh' school in Shereshen [sic].

" A reply to your letter of October 25, number 218/34, from the account protocols of the pedagogic council. In the or. 316.20157 [ ] we have been able to look at your efforts in the direction of deepening the bases of teaching in the department, and bringing system and order into the daily work.

Signed: Grinwald, Moyse

Rabinov, Borekh "

#### THE CELEBRATION OF THE SCHOOL-GRADUATION

While the school existed, two celebrations were held, to mark the graduation of the children in the seventh class. The first graduation was in 1929-1930. The second was in 1932-1933. The latter was especially remarkable for its impressive celebration. More than a hundred people

took part. Representatives of all the institutions and local organisations greeted and wished luck to the graduates in their lives. We were greeted warmly by our brothers and sisters in America. We cite here the worthy text of the greeting, which shows the devotion of our Americans to the town of their birth, Shereshet and their intelligent grasp of modern education for the new generation.

"Most respected friends!

Fellow townspeople, energetic upholders of the educational institute "Yavneh" in Shereshet, great-great-grandchildren of Rebbe Yokhanan ben Zokhai of blessed memory.

Worthy friends! I am very, very happy to have the honor and pleasure of greeting you, heartily and joyously, in the name of the Shereshet Landslayt in New York, the Shereshet support society, the Shil (synagogue? or school?) in Bronzville and the newly-founded Ladies' Auxiliary. We take this opportunity to tell you that our soul is ruled by the thought and emotion which are now with you in our old hometown, Shereshet.

"On account of the great distance across the sea, and other circumstances, we cannot visit you now. But with an expression to you of our deep, heartfelt sympathies, we take part in your great celebration. We all wish you a happy holiday, which will without doubt fill everyone's hearts with fresh energy, courage and spiritual resolve to continue the sacred work of educating a future generation, which will bring honor to its people and beauty to mankind. We know quite well what you have gone through in the seven years of your

existence. We can imagine your struggle, your disappointment and everything which is only to be expected, given unforeseen causes and the eternal conflict between theory and practice: they are always at it, hammer and tongs, but that should never hold us back, because the principal strength to which we owe our resistance to all attacks, is our tragic but noble history — in the most difficult conditions and terrible times, we never gave up. No persecutions have been able to weaken our spirit, <sup>stained</sup> our honor in our own eyes. Grief and pain have not made our soul petty. This is our strength, with which we will overcome the present crisis; and we will go forward with victorious steps, accompanied by courage and the perpetual optimism of the Jews.

"On this path, you and we will continue the noble work of educating a generation which will bring honor and raise the cultural level of its hometown Shereshev, and of Jewry everywhere.

Secretary: David Gringold.

New York, July 6, 1933."

#### THE GRADUATES AND CHILDREN WHO ATTENDED THE SCHOOL.

32 children — 21 boys and 11 girls — graduated from the school after having gone through 7 classes. According to their present level, the qualification can be made:

Apart from this, the number of children who attended our school was 60-70. They are all in the organisations "Hashomer hatsa'ir" [or] "Roter" The ...

cultural  
occupied in organisational work. Most know  
a trade (see Table, page 544 [in original]).

### EXCURSIONS

Apart from visits in the region nearby,  
two large excursions were planned by the teachers  
to Byalovyezh, in the years 1928-1929 and 1933-  
1934. The participants were children in the higher  
classes, and young people who visited the school.  
The teachers and the children spent whole days  
in the dense virgin forest of Byelovyeshe, looking  
at the beautiful, splendid panoramas of nature and  
at the various plants. They also visited the museum  
which is in the former royal palace, and the  
living 087215 (? ).

[p. 544 in original: Table  
of figures not translated.]

### THE TRADITIONS OF THE SCHOOL

Every Hannukkah, the schoolchildren organised  
an evening with a colorful program. The evening  
always made a good impression on the guests. On  
Lag Be'omer there was a magnificent children's  
march, with national banners, through the streets  
of the town, and an excursion into the forest.

### INSPECTIONS.

In the years 1926-1927, 1929-1930, 1932-1933 and  
1933-1934 the school was visited by the inspector of the  
Hebrew "Tarbut schools" in Poland, Herr A. Aynshteyn, and  
the principal of the "Yavneh" school in Pruzhene, Herr  
Grinvald. In the years 1930-1931, 1931-1932 and 1933-1934.

the school was visited by the Government inspectors Herr Zavadzki and Herr Leshnikovski.

### THE CHILDREN'S LIBRARY.

When the school was opened, there were already books in a very limited quantity. Thanks to the teacher who organised various events, the library developed more and more. Today the library numbers 513 books: 362 in Hebrew and 151 in Polish. In the year 1931-1932, principal Feker laid the foundation stone of a pedagogic library for the teachers. The library now numbers 153 books - 18 Hebrew books and 35 Polish books.

### VARIOUS ACCIDENTS IN THE SCHOOL.

As a result of carelessness there were three accidents in the course of the ten years: in the year 1927/28 a child put a corked bottle into the hot stove. The student Lea Tenenboym, at the request of a younger schoolmate, wanted to take the bottle out; but the bottle exploded with terrible force and ripped off the upper lip of Tenenboym, and slightly wounded several children. In the year 1932/33, at the end of the school-year, the teachers organized an excursion with the children into a nearby forest. In the forest, the student Sore Basikhes (12 years old) strayed away from the teachers. She was attacked by a 16 year old non-Jewish boy, who wanted to rape her, but this was prevented by the accidental appearance of some of her fellow students at that place. On Sept. 9, 1934, the Christian Paulina, servant of the school, heated the stove on Saturday morning and left. The floor of the stage caught fire - this was next to the stove - and, later, the walls.

Children who happened to be in the courtyard of the school,

noticed the fire; they gave the alarm about the conflagration. Neighbors ran up and, with great effort, localized the fire.

#### THE "TARBUT" LIBRARY OF THE TOWN'S "SNIF"

The founding of the "SNIF"'s "Tarbut" library sounds like a legend. In 1923 a group of children, aged 14-15, got together and decided to found their "own" library. The leader of the group was Avrom Avertukh (a son of Shloyme Avertukh). They donated their last, saved-up groshns [small coins], bought children's books and called the library "סניף", [

The bookcase was in the house of Avrom Avertukh. There, the children gathered, and read with confident joy the books in their own library! Gradually, the library came to the attention of other young people, who, with difficulty, became readers in it. The demand for books increased; then they decided to open the "locked door" to everybody! They gathered the courage to carry out, from time to time, fund-raising campaigns among the inhabitants of the town — and the library grew as if yeast was in it... In 1928 the library had 250 books.

Meanwhile, in 1925, a second group of young people — khayim Shames, Avrom Kvelman, Yitskhok Tenenboym, Alter Rasikhovski and Zeydl Beydatsh, of blessed memory — founded among themselves a reading-room in the house of Rokhl Glotser, and called it "פרייזא-לייטענע", [ ]. But the reading-room was soon closed. A certain sum of money remained in the communal chest. What should be done with it? The comrades discussed the matter. They could not come to an agreement. But then they decided to buy the works of Mendele Moykher Sforim. This awoke the

"real appetite" of the friends. They became fervent, serious advocates of the plan to create a great library in the town. From time to time they put on theatrical performances and various other events. The library developed more and more; the attendance of readers increased. Their taste was developed by the books that were acquired... On March 3, 1927, the library was legalized under the name of the SNIF "Tarbut". It then held 180 books. The founders decided to combine with the "סניף" - library [ ] and thus form one large, general library for the town.

After much negotiation between the representatives of both libraries, a contract was agreed upon, containing large discounts for the founders of the "סניף" library. Thus a mutual agreement was arrived at. The 250 books were given to the SNIF "Tarbut" library, which now held almost 400 books all told.

The library now contains:

Hebrew books	.....	300
Yiddish books	.....	500
Total	.....	<u>800</u>

The board of the library consists, now\*, of the following people:

1. Avrom Kvelman
2. Leybl Faynbir
3. Yitskhok Kirzner
4. Yankov Yudelevski
5. Moyshe Yakubovitch.

\* Throughout, the year 1936 is meant.

[ Photograph ]

[ Table : on p. 547 of original ]

### THE KEHILLAH IN SHERSHEV \*

(In the years 1928-1935)

Every new phenomenon in life calls forth opposition on the part of conservative elements. The Kehillah in Shershev, also, provoked strong opposition. <sup>לכאן ולכאן</sup> [ ], its functions were still very weak, but gradually one notices more breath of life in the kehillah. The thought is becoming more familiar, that there must be a boss over the property of the town, and that [the] influence [of such a boss ?] on cultural, societal and religious life is a condition of the age.

\* This account was published in the above-mentioned "Pinkes" of the general private folks-shule [people's school] "Yavneh" run by the Tarbut in Shershev.

This short account, and also the budget of the kehillah, complete the work of Z. Yablunovitch on Shershev, which is published in the introduction to the section "Shershev" in our pinkes.



## ITS FOUNDING

In 1928 the leaders of the Jewish communities in Pruzhene received instructions from the Interior Ministry to hold, in their Krayzn [ ] (Pruzhenė, Shershev, Lineve and Arantshits), elections to the Kehillah. Two representatives of the leaders of the Jewish community in Pruzhenė traveled to Shershev, called together the important citizens of the town for a meeting, where an electoral committee of 16 people was formed (half of them being artisans, and the other half merchants). The electoral committee carried out a registration of the population of the town and of the surrounding district. The elections took place in July 1928. The ballot-box [literally "urn"] with the votes was taken to Pruzhenė. As a result of the elections, two parneysim [ ] were elected in Shershev: Herr Kopl Kantorovitch and Herr Meyer Gelman.

An account<sup>of the proceedings</sup> was sent to the administrative authorities: this was not confirmed for the Kehillah until five years had passed. On January 8, 1933, was organized the division of the Kehillah in Shershev, with its center in Pruzhenė. The secretary, Herr Yankov Meyer Kabizetski, was elected by the parneysim. As time went on, the "Yavneh" school lost the sources of income, e.g. the percentages on kosher slaughter and ṭ"n [ ? ], which had been acquired with difficulty by the prezes (chairman Herr Yekhezkiel Krugman. With

difficulty, the chairman succeeded, at the budget-meeting, in obtaining a relatively large grant for the school. Unfortunately, however, this remained on paper only. Taking into account that the expenses of the Kehillah, as an institution embracing the whole


town, were very great, and that its income, on account of the strong opposition of the population, were small, it is understandable that the kehillah could not possibly pay the grants it had promised.

Finally, thanks to the efforts of Herr Yekhezkiel Krugman, it was settled that the institutions, including the school, would receive 50% of the income, every month, paid in cash.

#### THE REGULATIONS IN THE TOWN.

During the existence of the kehillah, the parneysim carried out colossal repairs in the public bath-house, which was very dilapidated. The activities of the kehillah, in detail, are reflected in the following budgets:

[Lists on p.549 of original; omitted here.]

[see   
end  
of  
translation]

## THE GENERAL "GMILES-KHSODIM"- FUND IN SHERSHEV.\*

### REPORT

At the start of its activities, the "gmiles-khsodim" fund in Shershev developed its work very feebly. There was little money in the fund, and the number of loans distributed was insignificant.

Due to dissatisfaction with this state of affairs, a meeting was held, attended by 45 members (it took place on April 15, 1935, at the headquarters of the "Tog-heyim" ("Day-home"). At this meeting were expressed clearly the demands of those who were assembled, <sup>an institution of such</sup> vis-à-vis <sup>first-class importance</sup> as the "Gmiles-khsodim" fund; and that the situation that had prevailed up to now, could no longer be tolerated in the future.

After quite a long discussion, it was decided to vote for a temporary organizational committee, which would last 3 months.

\* This report on the "Gmiles-khsodim"- fund in Shershev is also from the cited pinkes of "Yavneh". We <sup>also</sup> have here, in the history of this institution of mutual aid,

the list of members, of at least 100 names, and the kind of social help they received. Incidentally, it can be seen from the list that some individuals, belonging to the fund, lived outside Shershev (Brisk, Pruzhene, Byalistok).

To the temporary committee were elected the following gentlemen, in alphabetical order [i.e. in the Yiddish text - TR.]

(1.) Grikhman, Iser, (2.) Valdshan, Nottl, (3.) Visoker, Yisroel, (4.) Tenenboym, Shapsi, (5.) Lindin, Yitskhok, (6.) Sini, Binyomin, (7.) Pomeranyets, Yoysef, (8.) Kozyol, Mikhael, (9.) Kantorovits, Ruvi; (10.) Koloditsky, Avrom; (11.) Kiselev, Yoysef; (12.) Kleynerman, Yankel, (13.) Krugman, Yekhezkiel, (14.) Rakhames, Arn. Total: fourteen people, among them five from the previous committee and nine newly-elected.

At the meeting to decide on the structure of the committee, which was held right away, on the same day, these people were elected:

As Chairman - Herr Yisroel Visoker

Secretary - Herr Yoysef Kiselev

Treasurer - Herr Yekhezkiel Krugman

Members of the presidium - Avrom Koloditski and Yitskhok Lindin.

The loans committee was joined by <sup>(1)</sup> Mikhael Koziol,  
<sup>(2)</sup> Shapsi Tenenboym,  
<sup>(3)</sup> Iser Grikhman.

The audit committee - Yankel Kligerman, Mikhael Kozyol, Ruvi Kantorovits, Binyomin Sini.

The newly elected committee developed an activity of feverish intensity. At the meeting which took place immediately the following morning (June 16), the chairman Herr Yisroel Visoker suggested that the wealthy members of the board should, on their own initiative, lend the "Gmiles-khesed" fund certain sums of money without interest.

Weighing the importance of the proposal, that is, that if the members of the board did not, themselves, want to help the institution with interest-free loans

then the "Gmiles-Khosidim" fund could not exist - those present showed an exemplary pattern of behavior, not only in fine words, but in deeds, and decided that they themselves would give ~~free~~<sup>voluntary</sup> loans, without interest, to the institution they represented. The first to speak up was the author of the proposal, chairman Herr Yisroel Visoker, with a loan of 100 gildn for a period of 6 months, without interest.

Then the following made their offers:

Herr Yekhezkiel Krugman	-	100 gildn
Herr Iser Grikhman	-	100 gildn
Herr Yoysef Pomeranyets	-	100 gildn
Herr Mikhael Kozyol	-	50 gildn
Herr Binyomin Sini	-	50 gildn
Herr Ruvn Kantorovits	-	50 gildn
Herr Yitskhok Lindin	-	50 gildn
Herr Shapsi Tenenboym	-	25 gildn
Herr Avrom Koloditski	-	25 gildn

The rate of payment for members was fixed at ten groshns a month. The chairman, Herr Yisroel Visoker, having a full sense of the responsibility and seriousness of this matter, and wishing himself to serve as an example to other people suggested that everyone present should pay his membership dues for a year in advance.

The suggestion was accepted unanimously, and all the members of the committee paid their dues on the spot.

The amount of each members contribution was calculated at 5 gildn, which was divided into 3 payments: immediately upon paying out the first loan, 2 gildn were subtracted, and the rest - in 2 amounts of 1.50.

The loans themselves - a sum of up to 40

gildn, and to be paid back within 5 weeks.

Loans are given out twice a week, on Tuesday and on Saturday evening.

At a meeting, which was for the purpose of giving a report, and which took place on July 30, it was established that in the 2 weeks since the "Gmiles-Khsodim" fund came into existence, 30 members had joined. 105,50 zlotys were paid in contributions. Deposits: 575 zlotys. Members' fees: 12,30 gildn.

11 loans were paid out at the average rate of 330 gildn.

On July 10 there was a meeting of the credit committee, consisting of Mikhl Kozyol, Iser Grikhman and Shapli Tenenboym. They agreed on credit for 42 members, according to their financial standing, at an average sum of 1,695 zlotys.

Likewise, the audit-committee (consisting of Yankov Kleynerman, Mikhl Kozyol, Ruwn Kantorovits and Binyumin Sini) audited the books on July 15, in the presence of Chairman Herr Yisroel Visoker and the treasurer Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman - and established that everything in the best order.

#### THE LOANS OF HERR ZOREKH BIRENBOYM.

After the "Gmiles-Khsodim" fund had proved popular and beloved thanks to the tireless and exemplary work of the members of the committee, the news about the young, much-needed institution reached the landslaye of Shershev abroad.

Then, in a letter, our fellow townsman, the respected activist and worker for the community Herr Zorekh Birenboym of Petakh-Tikvah (Erets-Yisroel) offered to give the "Gmiles-Khsodim" fund an interest-free loan of 500 dollars, for a period of 3 years.

The board of managers, which met on August 2 considered Herr Birenboym's proposal very seriously. After a lively discussion, it was decided, for the time being, to apply only for a loan of 300 dollars. As a guarantee for this amount, Herr Birenboym was to be sent promissory notes of the general value of 1.600 zlotys.

Herr Zorekh Birenboym, however, having full confidence in the committee, did not wait for an answer and for promissory notes, but sent, on August 17, to the address of Herr Yekhezkiel Krugman, for the "Gmiles-Khsodim" fund, a check for 550 dollars.

500 dollars as a loan, and 50 dollars as a donation to the fund.

Then the committee accepted the loan, with the condition that Herr Zorekh Birenboym was to change the 500 dollars into Polish zlotys according to the daily rate of exchange (5.25 zlotys); and decided to express their thanks to Herr Zorekh Birenboym.

Of the 500 dollars, it was meanwhile decided to exchange only 50. The rest (450) remained, for the time being, in effective [?] dollars. In accord with a later decision, a further 100 dollars were exchanged for zlotys.

At the beginning of September, Herr Zorekh Birenboym of Erets Yisroel spent some time in Poland, and visited his own native town of Shershev. On this occasion was held a celebratory meeting of the whole committee, headed by the respected guest.

The Chairman, Herr Visoker, gave an exact report of the activities of the general "Gmiles-khsodim" fund in Shershev. The number of members had grown to 75, borrowers - 46, loans given out: the general sum of 1.276 zlotys.

Every member can get a second loan, three days after repaying the first. The size of a loan has been raised to 50 zlotys. The loan-office, which was formerly open only twice a week, is now active every day from 7 to 9 in the evening (in the house of Herr Yekhezkyel Krugman).

The honored guest, Herr Zorekh Birenboym, showed great interest in the work that had so far been accomplished. Following his suggestion, it was decided that in future, sums larger than 50 gildn would be made also. He appealed to the members of the committee to take an interest; and asked that as many people as possible should benefit from the "Gmiles-khsodim" fund.

As for the loan of the 500 dollars: since the money in the "Gmiles-khsodim" fund are given out, and banked, in zlotys only, Herr Birenboym took cognizance of this and decided that the committee should change the whole sum.

, according to the daily exchange rate. The debt was changed, to the value of 2.625 gildn, and the committee obligated itself to repay the loan within 3 years.



It was given as a warning, that in the case of a change in the exchange rate, the management board must change the money in its loan-bank into dollars again.

"The management board of the 'Gmiles - Khsodini' fund in Shershev hereby expresses its great gratitude to the respected activist and donor, Herr Zorekh Birenboym of Erets-Yisroel; and we wish him, in the name of all the members, happiness and success in his life. Blessing and success on all the work of his hands!"

At the same time, an appeal was made to all our landslajt from Shershev in America and other places, that they should interest themselves in such an important institution as the "Gmiles-Khsodini" fund, which helps with interest-free loans the ruined population of Shershev, giving them the possibility of supporting themselves by their impoverished sources of income.

May the blessings and wishes of the local Jewish inhabitants cheer their distant landslajt, and interest them in their native town and in its "Gmiles-Khsodini" fund, which alleviates and fights the dreadful impoverishment of the Jewish settlement.

פֿאַר אַלע אַרבעטן פֿאַר אַלע אַרבעטן

[ ]

may  
and they succeed in all the work of their hands, as is the wish of;

The Management Board of the  
General "Gmiles-Khsodini" fund  
in Shershev.

Chairman - Yisroel Visokyer

Secretary - Yoysef Kiselev

Treasurer - Yekhezkl Krugman

Members of Presidium - Moyshe - Elyohu  
 Zilbershteyn, Yoysef Pomeranyets,  
 Fayvl Granat

Credit committee - Iser Grikhman, Mikhl  
 Kozyol, Shapsi  
 Tenenboym

Audit committee - Sini, Binyomin,  
 Ruwn Kantorovits,  
 Mikhl Kozyol  
 Yankov Kleynerman

THE MEMBERS OF THE GENERAL "GMILES - KHSODIM" FUND  
IN SHERSHEV.

1. Zorekh Birnboym, Petakh Tikvah.
2. Yisroel Visoker.
3. Yekhzeziel Krugman.
4. Yoysef Kiselev.
5. Yoysef Pomeranyets.
6. Iser Grikhman.
7. Ruwn Kantorovits.
8. Binyomen Sini.
9. Shapsi Tenenboym.
10. Mikhl Kozyol.
11. Moyshe-Elyohu Zilbershteyn.
12. Fayvl Granat.
13. Yankov-Meir Kobizetski.
14. Yankov Kleynerman.
15. Avrom Kvelman.
16. Bobl Kaminyetski.
17. Sore Naybrif.
18. Berl Kalbkoyf.
19. Moyshe Kaminyetski.
20. Yisroel Vinograd.
21. Avigdor Shnayder.
22. Shimen Izbitski.
23. Borekh Faktor.
24. Bobl Rukhames.
25. Avrom Rusukhutski.
26. Mordkhe Krugman.
27. Moyshe Nimblak.
28. kopl Kantorovits.
29. Yoysef Shames.
30. Meir Galperin.
31. Leyzer-Levi Vinograd.

32. Moyshe Pomeranyets.
33. Moyshe-Moysef Notes.
34. Moyshe Tukhmakher.
35. Yitskhok Kantorovits.
36. Yitskhok-Hersh Kamenyetski.
37. Bendik Lipshits.
38. Feygl Vinograd.
39. Hersh Kalbkoyf (Ben-Avrom)
40. Eliyohu Naybrif.
41. Shmuel-Moyl Milner.
42. Hershl-Yitskhok Osipovitch.
43. Yitskhok Shnayder.
44. Yisroel Shnayder.
45. Yankov Shnayder.
46. Meyer Gelman.
47. Kheml Izbitski.
48. Fayvl Tenenboym.
49. Avrom Grvif.
50. Yankov Grikhman.
51. Moyshe Nidberg.
52. Yehoshua Pinski.
53. Dovid Fishl.
54. Yehuda Biltshik.
55. Teme Kvelman.
56. Sheyne-Mirl Bayzer.
57. Sholem-Ber Khadrivski.
58. Leybl Lebershteyn.
59. Genendl Dumf.
60. Yisroel Vinokir.
61. Alte Gustman.
62. Yankov Midlenski.
- 997 63. Shloyme Faynbir.
64. Khaimi Tenenboym.

65. Zelik Niborshtik.
66. Rivke Volingels.
67. Fanye Baumritter.
68. Abdiyohu Shnayder.
69. Moyshe Vayner.
70. Moyshe Kravtshik.
71. Gedalye Khadritski.
72. Moyshe Gellershteyn (Brisk).
73. Arn Gellershteyn.
74. Shmuel Lebershteyn.
75. Zalmen Fridman (Brisk).
76. Alkane Lipshits.
77. Yankov - Yeshaye Kravtshik.
78. Yankov Zaydman (Pruzhene).
79. Hertske Fiskeles.
80. Pinkhes Kronshtat.
81. Gershon Faynbil.
82. Mitskhok - Dovid Raytman.
83. Arn Lernkind.
84. Simikhe Niborshtik.
85. Shloyme Fishman.
86. Hersh Kalbkoyf (Ben-Eliezer).
87. Alter Kleynshtit.
88. Leyzer Raytman.
89. Shloyme Feldman.
90. Moyme Katowski.
91. Yankov Katowski.
92. Moyshe Sokher (Brisk).
93. Fayvl Lehman.
94. Khayke Makhleder.

- 95. Nosh Krenitser.
- 96. Frime Revzin (Byalistok)
- 97. Lea Pomeranyets.
- 98. Moyshe - Arn Baydatsh.
- 99. Khaim Selik (Brisk).

The members of the "Grmiles - Khsodini" fund belong to the following occupations:

10 - merchants

9 - storekeepers

9 - shmatnikers [?]

6 - butchers

5 - tailors

5 - shoemakers

4 - grain-dealers

4 - locksmiths

3 - tilemakers

3 - waggoners

3 - carpenters

3 - seamstresses

3 - traders with the countryside

2 each - bakers, teachers, barrel-makers, pitchmakers,  
(tar)

1 each - miller, secondhand salesman, horsedealer, official, dyer, photographer, pharmacist, dentist.

Here we have a typical vista of the social make-up of Shershev, in the 1930s.

TABLE (page 544 of ~~5~~  
original)

## Statistics of graduates of "Yavneh" school

Unemployed - 9

Artisans - 3

privately - 2

Teach children privately - 4

Finished polytechnic - 1

Merchants - 1

Finished teachers' seminar - 4

Finished Hebrew "gymnasium" - 3

Attended "gymnasium" - 4

[continued  
on next  
page →]





[Table on p. 547 of original]

Statistics of "Yavneh" school in Shershev Children Lit  
"children's movement" during 9 years.

<u>School Year</u>	<u>I</u> Boys   Girls	<u>II</u> Boys   Girls	<u>III</u> Boys   Girls	<u>IV</u> Boys   Girls	<u>V</u> B/G	<u>VI</u> B/G	<u>VII</u> B/G	<u>Total</u> B/G
1926/27	10   8	7   3	7   11	12   7	10/5	10/9	-/-	99
1927/28	6   6	9   5	4   9	11   7	6/5	8/4	-/-	80
1928/29	11   14	3   12	11   5	3   6	6/4	6/1	7/7	96
1929/30	11   7	19   6	4   6	10   4	-/-	8/-	7/2	85
1930/31	9   24	15   8	13   7	10   3	4/9	-/-	-/-	102
1931/32	8   11	10   19	15   7	16   8	-/-	9/4	-/-	107
1932/33	14   17	13   16	14   10	13   8	11/4	-/-	7/2	129
1933/34	12   17	14   20	12   10	14   8	11/5	5/3	-/-	131
1934/35	11   15	14   18	7   14	13   11	12/9	10/7	-/-	141
1935/36	7   17	13   17	7   13	13   10	11/9	9/6	-/-	132

[Table on page 549 of original]

### Budgets of Shershev Kehillah, 1933-1935

(these were part of the Kehillah-budget of Pruzhene, which included the "autonomous" part of Shershev. All sums are in Polish zlotys (gildn).)

### 1933

#### Income

Kosher slaughter	1.500
Burial society	500
Births and weddings	200
State	2.600
<u>Total</u>	<u>4.800</u>

#### Expenses

School and ח"ס [?]	1.500
Orphanage	700
Women's society	400
קצבת-ח"ס	200
Wood for the poor	210
Passover donations	200
Library	50
Public bath, and cemetery	500
Secretary	300
Payments to Pruzhene	300
Journeys	120
Shames	60
Paper	30
Unforeseen	230
<u>Total</u>	<u>4.800</u>

## 1934 - Income

Kosher slaughter	3.800
Birth certificates	200
State	1.312
Burial society	500
<u>Total</u>	<u>5.812</u>

## Expenses

Slaughterer	1.800
School	1.200
Orphanage	200
Women's society	100
7330-HJ'S	200
Doctor	300
Secretary	400
Payments to Pruzhene	360
Library	50
Passover donations	100
Public bath	500
Bank debts	100
Sick fund	125
Paper	30
Journey expenses	120
Unforeseen	227
<u>Total</u>	<u>5.812</u>

**Female Survivor.** B. 1926. **Shershev.** Interviewed at age 70. 8 siblings: Sipora, Yezak, Hersch, G-- , Heya, Perl, stepmother after hers died when she was ten. Step sibs, Fradel, Hersh, Maishe. Family life good. Father leather salesman, shoemaker, comfortable. Went to Heb school, Yavne, then war. School good. All subjects in Hebrew except Polish. Both sexes. Relations with Poles deteriorates with war. Generally Jews lived alone. Poles said to them, "Jews go to Palestine". We played ball, biked, checkers, spent time with our large family, esp. Shabes. Fairly typical. Family unaware of events in outside world until 1939 when Russians came, then '41 the Germans. Russians took away everything: no school!, our housing, possessions. When Germans came 12 people shot in front of synagogue. In 6-7 months chased to Chomsk, men walked woman and children in wagons. In 6-7 month ?? Dad depressed and wants to go back to Shershev. Hopes Christians will help. Jews in S. were gone, there were graves, blood oozing from graves. Dad had a premonition, decided to go to a Christian friend's dacha in Poland. In P. Ghetto, one room housed 6 or 7. Ghetto 3 blocks, walled eventually. Smuggled in and out. Taken to Lineve/to train to Auschwitz by sled or sleigh. Three days and nites. Her Dad said get out first of the cattle car, they shouldn't see my kids one by one. Her cousins died on train. One barrel for toilet. At deembarcation the separation. Dead baby stepped on etc. on floor of train. Wanted to go with family. Not permitted. Dad taken away in jeep. Dad gave her money to hide in her shoe. Auschwitz: undress, give up clothes and possessions, shave, tatoo, shower, work. Shaved by other prisoner kapo. Saw crematoriums. Didn't realize. Got up 2 a.m., watery coffee in courtyard; 6a.m. roll call. If number missing had to be found, searched for. Hard labor.

**SAVED BY A POLISH KAPO WHO SAT ON HER AND SAID THERE ARE NO MORE JEWS LEFT IN HERE.**

Once fell asleep at time of morning roll call (appell) and thus locked in. Hit on head twice hard by kapo and reported. A few hundred people worked there then came back to camp at 5 for lunch/soup. Nite bread, margarine? And rarely a bit of liverwurst. Medical care a deadend to crematorium. Wore stripes and red kerchief for that group. Tatoo if it had a triangle meant Jewish. "YOUR LIFE WAS NOT ALIVE." With every new selection some were taken to the crematorium. In "Canada" there was more food. Liberation so called walk, legs frozen, couldn't walk for three months, sick. Marched to Neustadt camp. There six months, near Munich. Life in N. better, to show world, but Germans said, WHO TOOK CARE OF YOU, GOD? Helped by friends. ( Duos.) Masha Pozniak. Was 15/16 when went to Auschwitz.

It was worse after A. No food, family, goals. Walked----thru' fields, boarded trains free, got to Brisk. Then Polish. Shershev Russian. Pole said **RUSSIANS WILL SEND YOU TO SIBERIA.** He put us on train to Bialystok. Cleaned, cooked, stole soup, cleaned bathrooms, suddenly found friend, married with two kids. He was a watchmaker. Suggested going to Warsaw. Said no. In two weeks my friend died of typhus. Went , joined youth group headed for Palestine via Italy. One guy said there are some Lithuanian on this train. Went to refugeecamp in Germany, met husband there. Three armies liberated, din't know what to do, no money, stole from German houses, fields, potatoes, killed a goose by wringing neck and made a soup which made me sick. Got

clothes from people. Refugee camp was Felderfink, in one room with buddies, There 1946-48. Discussed our lives. Smuggling. HIAS, uncle of husband in USA, salesman. Worked cash register. Two sons, doctors. MY BEST FROM MY WHOLE LIFE. MY GRANDSON ( 5 years) SAID TAKE OFF YOUR NUMBER IN CASE THE BAD PEOPLE COME AND HURT YOU AGAIN.....GOD WAS GOOD TO ME, I LIVED. 33868triangle.

(Rivka is a tall very handsome and well proportioned woman, with baleful eyes and a suffering tone. Tough with an underlying edge of hysteria. When I met her in the car to and fro the Pruzhany memorial in Miami, she told be she was raped and tortured or experimented on in Auschwitz. Her husband alludes to this in his interview. She does not touch the subject.)

**Male Survivor, Pruzhany B. 1923.** Dad Wolf., down to earth, University of Kiev grad. with 2 MA's; civil engineer, engineer of dye silk. Created mouth prosthesis--2 years study in Germany. Mother Maishe, dentist. Lab in house. Pruzhany 6,000 Jews, 4,000 Gentiles. We lived together but had free access to each other. Dad philanthropic and on boards of Yiddish Folk Shul, TOZ org for poor. Secular, but in Khillel as respected. Mother beautiful, educated. Had three sisters, one eloped to USA. One brother, a CPA, one a doctor in Moscow. Grandfather was foreman of highways, poor.

Jews didn't know of Ribbentrop Pact, was secret. Germans came to Pruzhany. Then left. Then Russians. Liked Russias in lieu of Germans. 2 cousins in Otwock, escaped. Russians poor. Confiscated. Drank, even shaving lotion. But allowed yiddish school. Germans chose dad to be interim school supervisor. Brother taught. I had scholarship to Bialystok Gymnasium. June 21 Party. There were no Russian planes to fight German planes. Waited to go into Russia. Russians at nite escaped but left the Jews. I went to Russia, rejected at border, went back. A Bundist tailor was shot. No consumer goods thru lines, even for bread. Bundists were socialists and anti communist. I went back to P. Was in Novagroduck camp sheltered for 6 weeks. Walked at nite only to P. No food, water. Stole. Dogs barked. Blisters, unkempt. Escaped when stopped hidden in a wagon by driver who "covered" for him; gentile. Grandmother thought he was a beggar. Mother fainted

The SS used her, promised to help find him. Mostly a closed ghetto, later. 3 or so streets. 14 people in our house. All German dentists at front. Poles also treated and allowed in. Judenrat organized labor dept. Judenrat stopped raiding, said we wil choose. Germans agreed. His Dad in charge of liquidated goods, as 1,000 fur coats. so could also go to Poles to buy linen, silver, etc. Head of Judenrat was Itche Yanowitz, mill owner, respected, "You choose others" they said. Dad interim.

Since Mother busy, her mother did the housework and child care pre war. Mom arrested as socialist. Lova, his brother. Good looking, smart, went to Nice. 1938 Univ. of Warsaw, quota, stood and take notes only; beaten. Brother 13, sent to Vilna gymnasium, only Jew. Mom would wash her Dad's feet. Masishe her name. Non Zionist, Yiddish folk schul, not Yavne Hebrew school. Friday still had yiddish traditions. Papers Yiddish Life and Yiddish Voice. Brother chemist, poet, wrote articles for more secular Y. Life. A friend who wrote for other paper, daily polemics between them in print. Despite politics family friendly with all Jews.

When I am ten, ice skate, fell in, severe strep, scarlet fever, quarantined wth grandma. Parents dentists allowed to see him only thru window. Then got nephritis....Tutored...applied to gymnasium, 3 months too young. Dad complained. Took. #2 in class. No sports, a nerd, math whiz. Girls no. Happy to be tutored, no dancing. Fun was walking to library. Wanted to be Dr. 1938 Germany, discovered sulfa, rare form of abcesses. Transfusion with own blood creates fever; kells germs. He helped build his ghetto shelter.

Russians sent us wherever, needed teachers, sent to Bialystok. In Auschwitz made a medical orderly.

Antisemitism in Pruzhany subdued until WW2. One political party very anti and staged a pogrom. Mayor was Jewish. No intermarriage. His own sons marry gentiles.

Judenrat did not need to select for transports. One murder, Lehman, decided to have fun with chief rabbi, jumped on him, cut his beard, dragged. Judenrat bought them off weekly, Judenrat rationed food. Cousin breaches wall, punishable by death; Judenrat bribed guards. A model ghetto til Bialystok Jews came, swelling population with 4,000 to 10,000 Jews; epidemics, starvation, beatings. I got hepatitis and was in bed for six weeks. Jews made a makeshift hospital in the old gymnasium. There was a decision by 30 people to have a mass suicide, sedatives were supplied by the Judenrat (!) We went to gentile hospital, delirious and people spoke only Yiddish. A Jew from France had aspirin so stole his food. Used felt boots called volinkas. pruzhany had a brick factory.

In three camps: Dachau where British Israeli forces tried to get money and forgeries. In Lagersberry got scabies. Got terrible secondary infections! Very contagious! Germans feared get it. Treatment was Sulphur: Mitegal. Got some from a Pole who got some from his mother on the outside, he a political prisoner. Auschwitz (sequence?)

This Polish guy liked me; I knew Polish and Polish literature. Kinship was formed. When the Hungarian Jews demise was accelerated by Eichman, kids were put into flaming ditches screaming, brought by lorries. . Never told my kids this story.

My paternal grandfather died in Minsk in 1934, Noah. My number, 98048 triangle.

(Saul Nitzberg is a well spoken well educated doctor, who already in Pruzhany lived an advantaged and much integrated life. Parents had big status.) (Three people with the name Nitzberg were interviewed by Spielberg. Had prior contact with 2 of them years ago that led to no clues for our family although they certainly were later in years than my mother/family.. One lives in Israel and I did not listen to that tape as it was in Hebrew. )

**Male Survivor, Shershev, B. 1921. 76 at age of interview.** Interviewed in Australia  
Father David born in Lodz. Mother Pearl, from Shershev. Dealt in cattle. Hard life.  
Siblings: 2 brothers Hershel and David, 3 sisters, forgot names. Only Friday, Shabes was  
not hard. Religious family. Big extended family. Dad worked until war then went to  
Auschwitz via P. Ghetto. **TOOK ALL HORSES TO PRUZHANY GHETTO BUT NO  
FOOD..** Lived there until 1942. In a flat, slept on floor, foraged in country for food.  
Snuck out, begged for bread and potatoes. 10,000 in P. ghetto. Mother nice. Father  
taken away from ghetto in couple months. One morning 80-90 to train to Auschwitz.  
Pushed out the dead bodies. Family and siblings to gas. Am only survivor. No inkling  
about rest. 1 slice bread...

Labor work, sands, bricks, cements. 1 year in Auschwitz. 2 years in Flossenbergr in  
Germany near Widen. Work! Hungry! **RISK: LAY UNDER CLOTHES. FOOD. 2  
DAYS LATER ANOTHER PRISONER TRIED TO AX ME IN MY BED FOR MY  
FOOD.TWO IN A BUNK, STOLE MY BREAD, I COMPLAINED IN MORNING TO  
KAPO. HE CALLS ME AND WHIPS ME 25 TIMES WITH A RUBBER HOSE..**

Cries: Americans gave him a life, food. **IN MY DREAMS IT IS HARD TO  
LIVE.** Wanted to go to America or Canada. Able to go to Australia. Work. via Jewish  
committee. In the bush!. Hava Gela. Came to Australia with 2 friends. A long line ,  
people scream. It was a glass facory in Carelton. Big beer bottles in factory. I said I  
couldn't do this, left, told landlady. she helped me get a doctors certificate. Said I  
wanted 8-5 job in city. Didn't even know where the employment office was or how to  
talk to them.They said can start today. I said, no, must rest today, start tomorrow. Job  
was moving sheep carcasses on a line to be cut up. Another employee said, looking at  
you, this is not for you, go to the boss and tell him you lost your family and ask him to  
help you. So in three years I learned to be a butcher. Married. 1950 Esther Ben Porat.  
She was born in Israel and came to Australia as a baby. With partners I bought a butcher  
show. Smiles at own children... At the glass factory, workers lived in camps. Two year  
contract. Long trip to and fro and nightshift. 2 train stops.Wrong train, another train ,  
cries, **I AM NOT A DUMMY!** Awful. Decided to look for a room in Melbourne by a  
Jewish woman. . No. Had chains on the door. I frightened people. Didn't know  
language. The way I looked. Some gave me food. One lady said yes, and gave me a  
room with a lock. Stayed 3 years. Back and forth to work over an hour a day on trains.  
She saved my life. I quit that job and sold cigarettes, watches. When I went home,  
nothing, nothing in my life. The lady said don't go to get killed. I gave her money. She  
helped me with my papers. I had gone from Germany to Italy to Melbourne.

(Ben Pitel has forgotten AND suppressed much.....At first he talks like a zombie. Then  
during the immgration story he weeps. His daughters say he is not a talker, but did this  
interview, he says, because he was asked. ....Can't tell where the dementia and where  
the post traumatic syndrome end and begin. In a way he remembered more horrible  
memories of coming to Australia than of Auschwitz. A tall man with haunted eyes. In  
earlier picture lanky and less haunted looking. No word re his wife. His english  
desperately limited and hard for him to use fully now, if ever. Picture of him as young  
man in 1915. Would not recognize him.)



**Female Survivor, Shershev,** Father Wole, a butcher also vegetables which he bought in small outlying villages and brought in to S. Mother was a dressmaker, esp. for gentiles. She was the oldest. Had 3 brothers, Slavi, Maishe, Yudel and a sister. We had no fights and were happy. Went to Heb. school. Lots of friends. We didn't cook on Sat; had a goy come in to light the stove and milk the cow. Had cholent. Were orthodox and had a large extended family. Best memory?: I cry a lot, miss them. Was unaware of anti semitism growing up, most goys were nice to family. Lots relationships with goys, rented land and planted potatoes, hired them to till. However, there was some anti semitism and threats to kids to cut out tongue, vandalism, and were told to be careful and not talk back.

Mother wrote letters to USA wanting to come. Her sister in law, beautiful and jealous, feared mother would burden her brother... We became aware in 1939 of trouble. Russians took 50 people. We shared flour, veggies, baking. House: 2 bedrooms living room, kitchen, garage for horse and cow. We sat and talked....when Russians there, in house. At night we all stayed in. **WE WERE ALWAYS IN THE HOUSE! MY WHOLE LIFE WAS SPENT IN THE HOUSE, COULDN'T GO OUT!** Services were held only during the day. **WE DID A LOT OF FANTASY TALK ABOUT GOING TO THE USA.**

When the Germans came we hid under the bed. They came into house looking for men; told to go get chickens. Men gone all day then home at night. Women acted as decoys in front of house. Random shooting by Germans because the Russians had shot down a German airplane. (Verbally she mixes up Germans and Russians as she talks.) Women and children went to Antopoli and the men to work. Antopoli was empty. The Germans had cleared it out. Were there briefly. Tried to go to Mother's uncle in Pruzhany. The roundup before going: just took food. Other things not allowed. Terrible, scary, knew our lives in danger. Happy to reunite with menfolk in Antopoli. There for few weeks, slept on floor. Little food, had dry bread. Tried to go to P by walking. Took a few days. Ghetto still open then and there was buying and selling from outside the ghetto. The Khillel took care of everything. My uncle had everything. We wore stars. Uncle was a shoemaker. In my free time I was in the house with family, warned not to go out.

When liquidated my father and brother refused to go into hiding. Wanted to be together, told that work camp would be destination. Sleights to trains. Trains were where the separation occurred. Mother told Germans that I could work, so Germans took me away to work. She was trying to save my life. We thought Auschwitz was to work. My father asked me where my mother was. My older brother gave us soup and then I never saw him again.

In the ghetto **PEOPLE WALKING ONE ON THE OTHER.** No food. Alone with family. Thought to hide, with Fanny Kravchek my friend. Worked in fields, then took work was with shoes apart for re usage. Kapo was German woman. Spent 2 1/2 years in Auschwitz. Worked on shoes all the time. Slept on bunks with a pad and blanket. Hair shorn. Then went to Bergen Belsen. Medical experiments, those in special barracks for sterilization. Hid jewelery and hid my younger brother who delivered bread, which I then hid and sometimes a bit of salami and cigarettes, a barter item. Months before end of war. **IF YOU WERE CALLED OUT NAKED FOR THE ROLL CALL YOU KNEW IT WAS TO GO TO THE GAS CHAMBERS....** Holocaust did not affect

way I raised my own children... I cry all the time...never discussed what happened to me with them.

Remember friends in Shershev....Label, Zundel.....had no home.....

In Auschwitz the guards were mean and I feared them. They spoke Geman. I had a close friend from Shershev. We comforted each other and said if we lived we would go to UsA. Very sick when uncle brought into P. ghetto. Laid in bed. Then sick in Auschwitz and when Kappo came she said get up and sit in chair and helped me to sit and to walk, to prevent my being sent to gas chambers. No talk of escape;too sick, tired. No talk about God, just trying to stay alive.

March to Bergen Belsen. We lined up first day of, walked 3 months before end of war. No idea war was ending. We were in BB but bread had been poisoned, nothing to eat. Slept on floor....toilets? Nothing to eat, drink, to do. Died fast. DIDN'T KNOW OUR OWN BODIES. Brother on march asked what happened to M and P. Last time I cried and moaned, waiting to die. Wanted to live to go to USA. Liberated by British, liberation soup. No desire to go home. Train to Felderfane and to USA I year later to uncle.

My uncle guilty because he had not brought family here pre war. I was at their home one months. Landsman came, got me a job as a finisher by dresses; later a better job. Gave my check to my aunt; nothing in bank. Had no goals, was 25 in 1945. Was in NYC 2 1/2 years. Went to cousins in L.A. 4 months. Went to Oxnard with friend from Pinsk. Married. Linen shower. Husband: Leonard.

Nightmares. IN DREAMS WE TALLK YIDDISH. My parents, not my siblings. Knew no english. Husband knew english. Learned with my daughter and grandchildren.

(Sime is a very freckled, blue eyed woman with a beautiful face and bone structure. She had a sheltered childhood and especially spoke of being trapped inside here and there during the Holocaust. She spoke simply but had a kind of fierceness in her manner of factness and piercing steadfast look into the camera. In better times she would have been a happier person. )

**Male Survivor, B 1914, Shershev**, 82 at time of interview. Lived with mother in a nice house in center of town, Sara, nee Unterstub. Mainly Jews in center of town. Dad named Lazar. father went to USA. I was born in WWI. He returned in 1918. So went to Poland then USA 1922. Sent monthly money. Mother did nothing. Three kids, Louis, Martin, Jack. After Jack, Dad left. She never remarried. Dad died after couple years. Before he died had apt. and visa for them. Died suddenly. Consulate refused, so had nobody and no money to support us. That was the Amer. C. in Poland. So we remained, stuck, in Poland. Mom then got insurance. \$4,000 and bought house in Pruzhany. Grocery. Went to modern Heb school Tarbut. Went to Zionist organization. Aware of anti semitism. Tried to go to Israel, 17 18, prepared to go to kibbutz. In Poland the Bundist organization members hit him over the head. Tried to emigrate but because of Bevin, no Jews allowed in Palestine. 1935. Then army called him. Was about 18 in 1933--35. Trained in artillery. 1935-37. Only few jews in battalion. Anti semitism: "Dirty Jew", Go to Israel". After Pilsudski died, made to clean up after horses. Pilsudski called THE JEWISH GRANDFATHER.

Life for Jews deteriorated. No jewish officers. name calling, sticks. Came home and was at my house for one year. 3/29/39, a mobilization and was sent to German border til '39. Stationed in little villages. Then war. I was at the first line Germans destroyed. 2nd line was at Warsaw in 2 weeks. Polish army broke. Prisoner of war. Few months. Poles give us out to Germans.

Minsk exchange of prisoners. Russians refused to trade. Back to Gemany. Again to border and exchange, Feb. 1940. Came home...Russian were there, took our house and we lived in one room in back--4 people plus grandparent. The commander in NKVD lived there. Mother had bakery. We all worked. Mother not religious. No sympathy for Russians in the town. They took us to work.

After Germans, death march to Antopol. On way cousin buried alive. Shot Jews. Maishe Glezer Blezer. Polish mayor rejected the Jews, the Germans had left. Sent us to Droichin. Scared. 20-30 people killed in March. Cousin got heart attack. Fell down.... In Droichin found out Chomsk people back to town. (Mass grave.) We took Chomsk houses. I the oldest took chance and went to Pruzhany, smuggled in. Dangerous. Went with gentile in horse and wagon. Feared Droichin will be like Antopol, sans Jews. Found room in P. snuck in. Brought mother and brother. Sister and family left in Droichin. My mother tried and did bring my sister. She went; powerful lady. Til P. ghetto liquidated. Was there end of 1941 to 1943 Jan. In 4 days all emptied out. Hard life, my brother and I lived in the bakery; had to smuggle in wood to make bread. Zavel Zanelefsky was on the Judenrat, a go between German mayor and Itsok Yanowitz, pres. There were Jewish police in ghetto. Poles and Belarusians at the wires of the fence....Germans used the Poles. Judenrat gave out jobs, as Germans need became evident.

WHAT HAPPENED TO PREGNANT WOMEN. NO DOCTORS, NO NURSE. TOOK BABIES AND ELDERLY SHOT, BEFORE TRAINS TO Auschwitz. 80-89 people in cattle cars. Like herring to Auschwitz.

We had some little attempts at schools in the ghetto. Of outside news we heard only rumors. No news at Auschwitz. Said it was labor camp. Brother and b in law and I tried to hide in a basement when liquidated. some boys went into partisans. Came at nite and asked for boots etc. German major walked in. Shooting....Liquidation. 10,000 in ghetto. I had family ties, no father, so did not go to partisans. By streets, my mother's

sister, baby, grandmother to train...worked in horse barracks in Birkenau, 4-5 to a bunk. 2nd day, dirty work, dig, carry, carry back. After one month went to Auschwitz. # 99407 with triangle. Called to gas with numbers. WE DIDN'T HAVE NAMES IN AUSCHWITZ.

Never spoke to my children about all this. I missed MY father. Worked in A. as carpenter, baker, chauffeur. The first with Jack Neibrief and Jack Neuman. The last with Label Feldbaum/ar. We helped each other. Later sent to coal tunnels. Sneaked from trains. BROTHER TO COALS. WENT TO SS AND SAID TAKE HIM TO GAS CHAMBERS. I TRIED TO STOP HIM GAVE HIM BREAD AND LIVERWURST. Brother in law went to USA in 1946. It was closed then, Palestine also.

I went to carpentry factory. Couldn't do it and was hit by gentile kappo. Went on own to try bakery, not sent. Short so took. But Kappo from carpentry reported it. Searched 3-4 months and could stay in bakery. Punished with wet towels, whip to rectum can still see wound scars, and to feet. Thrown out. Almost dead. Friends in bakery. Back to dirt...Poles and Jews separated on different sides of barracks. Polish doctor, a political prisoner, send him back to bakery. Sent to Bratislava. Took brother into bakery. Mengele came to the barracks....every couple weeks; skinny people to gas chambers. YOU MUST HELP YOURSELF.

Was sent to A. from Birkenau because they needed to work on the train station. 50-60 people. Loaded cement and wood on dollies, 1944-Jan 1945.

Death march, if you couldn't go they shot you. Then to Griessrosen, running in snow. No room for Jews. Poles first. Then to Flossenbergr, wearing just our stripes. If you tried to run away the dogs would kill you. Then Gravinke. Then Buchenwald. Feet blisters and pus. Some friends said come and we will help you. They went on. Next morning US Army. THEY TOOK ME OFF THE HEAP OF THE DEAD. Buchenwald was dynamite, but the Germans had no time to "pull the trigger". US came earlier. Opened my eyes and was in a bed! 4/11/45. Met a friend knew from bakery in Shershev. Didn't recognize each other. Dovid Lebersteyn who was my neighbor. We were sick. Go to hospital. typhus. He died. Started to go to Poland. Horse and wagon to Lodz. Bialystok, back to Lodz. Trains ridden illegally, to Prague, to refuge hotel. Rumor brother in Italy. Met soldiers from Israeli part of British army. Helped. Passed to Italy. Found brother and brother in law in Italy. Stayed 6 months. To Germany in 1946. In DP camps 45-49. Waiting for USA emigration. Toronto Canada, wanted young men. Made self younger.

Married 1947 in Germany in DP camp: Rose Friedman. Daughters in N. Jersey; embroidery shop 49-84. No money, no trade, no language, sick of bakeries. Brother and Meyer Krasner gave me money to buy a machine. Paid back. Have set aside money for children and grandchildren's college. DREAMED TO BE A HUMAN BEING AND NOT BE CALLED BY A NUMBER! I PICK UP MY EYES TO THE SKY IN THIS COUNTRY THE FIRST DAY AND SAID WHO IS GOING TO HELP ME! GOTTA HELP MYSELF. MENGELE WAS WAITING FOR US. DREAMED OF BREAD ON MY OWN. NOBODY DREAMED. Wife survivor too, of Auschwitz. GOD, MAD ON HIM. BELIEVE NOT TOO MUCH. I'D HAVE TO HAVE A BIG DISCUSSION WITH HIM, WHY? THE CHOSEN PEOPLE??!! I HOPE NOT TO BE ALIVE IF MORE HAPPENS TO THE JEWIS PEOPLE.

(I do not remember him.....)

**Male Survivor, Pruzhany.** Father, Kopel. Restaurant owner. Mother (nee Yudis/Fox/Foks) cooked day and nite, never say her except at night and on Shabes. Had

three sisters, Shania, Gitel, Bina and brother Label. Girls all slept in one bedroom and brothers slept on kitchen floor. The other two rooms of the house were for the restaurant. Dad not orthodox. Restaurant open 11 to 7 except Shabes and Sat morning..

We were a close family and had food and clothing. I helped in restaurant. My dad also did other varied work to support family. Dad said, now kids older, help so we can live a little. Dad said, NOW WE HAVE TO GO TO AUSCHWITZ AND DIE THOUGH KIDS OLDER CAN HELP A LITTLE. Mother's grandfather had 18 kids. Told that in Brest blood oozed from the mass graves for 3 years. Dad survived Auschwitz, Gr....? and Buchenwald, but died of food shortly after liberation. Sister killed thrown to wire and ripped by dogs prior to Auschwitz in P. ghetto. Had gentile friends, played with, neighbors, was teased some, but in '38 '39 antisemitism. Nites dangerous, robbed, beat, break stores. Had had non jewish friends.

During Russian occupation, store closed, house full of soldiers. Took Dad to woods. Had chickens, cow, money. Gentile farmers helped us and even in ghetto threw things over wire fence like hams, eggs. Hard but survived.

In '41 Germans. Bad. Killed. Robbed. Cow, clothes, house. Into ghetto. Ghetto was 5-6 blocks, wire fence and with Jews from other cities, 10,000. Congested. Had to get your own food. Two families one room. Pruziners helped the newcomers. Smuggling. Went to work. But. Pay off. Dealt in cemetery with Poles at nite.

AT AUSCHWITZ I WAS HIT ACROSS MOUTH AND BROKE ALL MY TEETH. I HAD TO BREAM THEM OFF WITH PLIERS, WHAT WAS 1/2 LEFT. Bleeding. Dirty rag. They hit me with water filed pipe. Didn't know about Auschwitz. Threw babies to metal poles to kill. Birkenau, worked in clay up to knees. Lack of food, always hungry. Endurance good. He and father picked to go to Auschwitz from Birkenau. RAN WHOLE NITE TO CATCH UP WITH FATHER. I WAS LEFT IN BARRACK BUT RAN THRU FIELD TO AUSCHWITZ; STOOD BY DAD AND THEREFORE AS WE WERE TO STAND IN ROWS ACROSS OF TEN, THE LAST GUY AFTER I CROWDED IN WAS SENT BACK TO BIRKENAU--TO DIE..

Another thing I remember, was working leveling land for munitions factory. Three people on plank. Had never been up on a plank, never painted. One man dropped off the plank and it tipped. Brother in law jumped on his place on the plank. It saved my life. We made screws, 400-500 people Would beat us some. Mengele watched to see who and especially why we survived. Mengele present at beatings. Saw my Dad 2 x. unrecognizable toward the end.

Railroad worst job, each bring dead bodies back. Death march, over bridge, blew it up, let out all non Jews, Jews told to dynamite area. Made deals with red cross for food.

Duo with sixteen year old who was giving up. Said No. Carried him in water up to here. Climbed trees. 24hours.....Hear Russian voices. You're free. I find 6 friends, took tarp off German truck and made a tent. Russians gave us food. Diarrhea. Russian said eat only bread and potatoes. Went 7-8 kilometers. Man gave us food, room and misc. Refugees of all kinds. Did not want to go back to Poland/Russia. Met my brother in law Eli and friend. U.S. took them to Buchenwald away from Russians. Then to Hamburg where was in a camp with Polish antisemites. Then to DP camp, Felderfink, for our region. The smell from the death camps for miles....Jewish kapos. The young castrated etc etc , or opened their heart or stomach. This bunk mates told.

THERE WAS A GENTILE FOOL IN Pruzhany TOWN, FRIENDLY, OWNED RESTAURANT. IN GHETTO SAID I WILL TRY TO HELP YOU GO TO THE PARTISANS. COME TO MY HOUSE HE SAID. LIVED BY ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH. DUG TUNNEL FROM HOUSE TO CHURCH. HELPED 100's GET OUT THAT WAY. WENT 4-5 K TO HOUSE/STABLE. TAKE YOURSELF; GIVE ME YOURSELF...ONE HALF HOUR LATER,SS AND POLISH POLICE CALLED HIM BAD. TOOK PEOPLE OUT OF TUNNEL AND KILLED ALL BUT ONE. I TRIED TO FIND HIM AND HIS HOUSE AND HAVE REVENGE. NO LUCK.

(Meyer is a tall handsome articulate but not subtle person and is intense and excitable. Not an intellectual. Alludes to medical experimentations that his wife might have had. Well fixed in Pruzhany. Family prominent but in commercial vein. Pretty integrated with gentile population. Those in P. more so perhaps than in S? )

**Female Survivor, 1915, Pruzhany.** Pruzhany was a cultivated city. My Father was religious. I had an uncle in the USA. He offered to adopt one of the children, since he had none. Chava 13. Mother cried. Like lost to us. I would bike around the city.

Russians when they came shot all the Bundists. In the Pruzhany ghetto husband decides we should flee. Don't say goodbye, take matches, shovel. In the forest we made a big grave and covered it and lit a fire in it at night and roasted potatoes. One day I woke up and thought I was blind.(Reason??? Stress?? Night blindness??) SHE SAID TO THE PARTISANS, I AM BLIND, SHOOT. Husband said I will go back in and take your mother out. Germans followed, killed. Grenade. Overnight gray hair. Another marriage at 45 to Dr Nitzberg in Calif. Yosel Unterstub was her husband. HER FATHER PUT ON TSFILN AND TALLIS TO GO ON THE WAGON TO...PRUZHANY?? AUSCHWITZ??. Hit killed. PARTISANS KILLED WOMAN WHO SCREAMS ABOUT HER DEAD BABY.

ONCE A SPY, GERMAN, HE WAS BEAUTIFUL LIKE I NEVER SAW, ON A SUMMER NITE, STARS... Partisans gave me a gun and told me to watch the spy. Questioned him in the morning. Screams. They shot him. When I was upset they said remember he killed your family. Germans burnt all of Pruzhany.

Later I worked in a hospital, married, had baby.... Gave a letter to an American soldier to mail to HIAS and was found by USA relatives.

(Did not hear the complete tape; do not know how her first husband died. Gertie was still a very pretty, flirtacious person; a rudimentary command of english. Seems to have been very comfortable in the partisan role and accepted by them despite gentile partisan-Jewish tensions...Her "cuteness" must have helped. Lusty. Did she go to Auschwitz? )

**Female Survivor, 1915, Shershev. Interview in Yiddish**



Father Matis, watchmaker, like a gold smith,--i.e. highly skilled-- clocks too, worked in house, made a life, also had a store. Mother in house. Sisters: Visha, Chia Sora, Rifke. Brothers: Mordecai, Mendel, himself. Cries as he names siblings. We had a "kind" life. But it was also a hard life.

One bed for the girls, one for the boys. Garden. I worked in the garden. Once or twice a week at the most we had a little "fleish" (meat/chicken). Had cow so had milk. Family not orthodox, but went to shul for Shabes and holidays. Father "davened"--prayed, mother "bentch licht"--lit Shabes candles, had a Shabes table, and remembers the man in the shtetl who went around calling "arien in shul" before the time to go. I went to shul with my father, and on Shabes afterwards walked around, with friends, belonged to youth organizations, liberal ones, and included Poles. Went to Cheder, and to Polish shul to learn reading, writing and a little math. Went to Hebrew school....Had to earn a living...

Sister Rifke has a store with ice cream, candy, soda. Went to help. Would bring ice into cellar in winter, cover with straw, to make ice cream. Other sisters were tailors in the house. All brothers zaigerers, watchmakers. I learned it too when young. You ask: Don't remember if I had a Bar Mitzvah.

The town had Poles, Ukrainians, Russians. Had gentile friends but majority were Jews. In the end the gentiles were not friends. They would jeer, hit, call us "behamis"---wild animals.

I REMEMBER WHAT IS IN MY HEART: Went to live in Sonefka/Jonefka (sp?) near Bieleviesh. Had a shop. 50 Jewish families only. Friends with Pole. Bread in bakery one mile away. Give him none, the Germans said, no don't give him any he is a Jew. Our wood came from the forest around, and I had helped the Pole and he had bought a watch... Cries.

The Germans bombed. Cries. Heard about war from gentile. No radio, or papers. My wife was in the street...."Macht zu gornisht".....it makes nothing.( Doesn't matter.) Screams, hitting "far gornisht"--nothing., etc. "Screchlech"--Terrible. All this prior to the coming of the army. My shop/house was burnt. Ran. Saved nothing. No silver or gold rings, no money, and in middle of night went to Pruzheny ghetto by foot, 4-5 hours, 10 miles, one hour if we had been able to take a bus. Didn't know what will be and where to live. Roads with sharp pebbles, had no shoes. Cries. Fifteen shot, rabbi, doctor hit the hardest by the Germans. Cries.

In ghetto did various work for clothes, food. The most prestigious were chosen for the Judenrat. Was happy to get to Pruzhany. You ask DID I THANK GOD/ NO HE DIDN'T HELP! I was with my Dad in Shershev and in Pruzhany and in Auschwitz. My eldest brother had lung sickness and had been sent to Pruzhany for the better, drier air than in Shershev. He came back to Shershev for Shabes, and sold suits and clothing. I remember him from when I was a small boy only. A special loving person.

Women and children in one barrack. 17 barracks. Four years in Auschwitz. Cold. Little to eat. Terrible roll calls. "Appels." Then in a "darf"--village, Blagahoer/n (sp?) in the marshes.Went to Warsaw. Cries. Burned all the houses. Worked with Polish watchmaker. Wanted to go see what was happening to mother and brother. Far away.

WOULD HAVE TO BE BORN A WRITER TO TELL ALL THAT HAPPENED. Cries. WORLD HARD FOR JEWS. I THOUGHT OF FAMILY WHEN FREED. TWO BROTHERS WERE BOTH IN PARTISANS... I TRAVELED ON ROOFS OF TRAINS.

Went to Bialystock, then to Warsaw with others. With smugglers to Germany, to Berlin, Lansberg, Felderfink, found landsleit, connected to UNRRA, worked at this and that, like putting powder on the streets....Married wife 1950. Went to an uncle in USA in Brooklyn. Worked for ....years....for Longeen watch company for poor wages. Taken by relative or friend to factory,BUT WITHOUT WINDOWS! Couldn't stand that so went back to Longeen. Then had own business in home....

Wife: Maisha, Mashke, from Shershev, but met in Bialystok. Married 55 years. My number 99004. Hers 33617. She says: He was a good man, cries, he provided all that we needed, have no complaints. I was a Shershever too and I said come to me in Bialystok. Two children, Martin, daughter, Naomi. Children not present at taping. \$ grandchildren also.

(These notes are incomplete....because the audio tape I was allowed to make of him was faulty. He had a sweet smile, a gentle, handsome face, and a refined, thoughtful, obviously intelligent manner. He cried often and spoke of betrayal by alleged gentile friends. His family was clearly more secular than some. I note that I met this man in person some ten or so years later than the probable interview date, at a memorial meeting in Florida I attended. He was then 89 I believe. He said little. I gave him a copy of a photograph of his eldest brother Mordecai and Mordecai's possible wife on a postcard that was hand carried by my maternal grandmother to my mother when my grandmother and the rest of the family came to Chicago after WW I--where my mother and her older sister were living/working in the garment industry. It was the only picture he had of this brother who was tall, dark, handsome, and became a partisan... My mother kept this photograph and the message on the back for all her years in her bottom bureau drawer with other cherished items. I suspect she loved Mordecai. And he her. The message was addressed to her and her sister and wished them well and health and was signed Mordecai Posniak, in Pruzhany. There was much between the lines... That would have been just after the war. The woman standing next to him seated in a chair is carrying a bouquet of flowers. Rubin would have been around eight when Mordecai moved to Pruzhany for better air and for his health. See above. I connected the photograph and Rubin by way of Moishe Kantorwitz. )

PLEASE NOTE: SOME SENTENCES IN ALL THE ABOVE INTERVIEWS ARE IN CAPITALS. THEY ARE OF SPECIAL INTEREST TO ME FOR ONE REASON OR THE OTHER AND NOT OTHERWISE SIGNIFICANT.

# BELAVEZHSKAYA PUSCHA

Located part in Belarus and part in Poland Belavezhskaya Puscha is the Europe's last surviving primeval forest. And as such it is placed on the United Nations World's Heritage list. The harsh realities of a transition from socialist to capitalist economies are endangering Belavezha forest today on both Belarusian and Polish sides as it is being used for hunting and forestry.



The words "Belavezhskaya Puscha" are familiar to every Belarusian. The word Puscha is one of the most expressive and euphonious in the Belarusian language. The word's sounds make the listener imagine a primeval forest which has preserved its prehistoric nature. As for the name Belavezhskaya Puscha, it appeared in Lithuanian and Polish chronicles in 1409 and has lived till today. The forest acquired its name thanks to the white tower (Belaya Vezha) which was erected more than 700 years ago (between 1276 and 1288) near the small town of Kamianiec. The original name of the tower is Kamyaneckaya Vezha - after the name of the town. The tower ( "vezha" in Belarusian) had strategic military purpose - to watch the approach of enemy troops.

At that time the tower was surrounded by dense forest. Now only from the top of the tower can one see an immense space of forest. Nowadays Belaviezhszkaja Puscha is what is left of the primeval forest which in 12th century stretched from the Baltic sea to the Buh river and from Odder to the Dnieper river.

The first mentions of Puscha appeared in 983. An archeological investigation showed that in prehistoric times bull, cave bear, north elk, and mammoth lived on the territory of today's Puscha. As for man, science is silent as to when he appeared in the Puscha. By some sources, only a tribe of Yacviahs lived here as mentioned in the Kievan chronicles. The origin of Yacviahs is unknown. In 983 Kievan Prince Uladzimir began to force Yacviahs out of Puscha. Lithuanian Prince Traiden in 1281 "succesfully" finished the extermination of the ancient tribe. The rest of Yacviahs were assimilated by Belarusians. On the other hand by other sources Yacviahs lived far North from Puscha and never settled here. In 10th-13th centuries, Puscha was home to Slavic tribes, and archeological evidence (graves, artifacts etc.) indicates mixed influences of the Western Slavs (Masovian type culture) and Eastern Slavs (Dregoviche type culture). The history of the region has been re-written many times to different political and ethnical tastes. And so instead of deciding which is true we leave you with both theories :)

The first attempt to profit from Puscha dates from the middle of the 16th century. During the reign of Polish King Sigismund August, four iron producing plants were built on the territory of Puscha. At the same time collection of resin, distilling of tar, and burning of coal started. The industrial development of Puscha flourished during the reign of the last Polish King Stanislaw August. Rivers flowing through Puscha were cleared and the floating of timber to Dancig began.

In 1795 after the division of Poland Belaviezhskaja Puscha found itself a part of the Russian empire. The empress the Katherine the Great distributed the Puscha among her servants who took part in the subjugation of the forest territory. Since then the ancient forest has suffered from both natural disasters and human activities. In May 1811 Puscha suffered from a conflagration which was extinguished only in the middle of October by rains. The fire caused the number of animals living in Puscha to decrease sharply. But not only the fire was the cause of the decrease in the number of animals. In 1812 the forest became one of the theaters of the martial operations of Napoleon. The French troops were followed by the Austrian troops of Schwarzenberg. All these troops needed food, which it found in Puscha. In the thirties the Puscha was often visited by boat builders from Petersburg who found in the forest very rich resources of timber. Three thousand people were involved in the cutting of the oaks and pines there. At the end of the forties of the last century the Puscha suffered another mass cutting. In 1864 the first twenty noble elks, which had been exterminated by 1705, were brought from Germany and released into the terrain of the Puscha. In 1888 the Russian tsar Nicolas II took Puscha's lands under his patronage. Word War I did not bypass the ancient forest. German invaders constructed 300 km of rail roads and in two years cut down and took to Germany 4.5 mln cubic meters of the best timber. Exploitation of the forest did not terminate after the war when Puscha was acquired by Poland. Every year more than a million cubic meters of timber were taken to England. In 1939, after the Soviets "liberated" Western Belarus, Puscha was declared a state reserve. The silence did not last long. World War II began and Puscha was again occupied by Germans. During the war the library and scientific archives of the forest were burnt down. After Puscha was cleared of Nazis, the forest resumed its reserve status. Many well known scientists came to study the natural heritage of the Puscha. In 1944 part of the reserve was given to neighboring Poland.

### **European Bison - Zoobr**

reaches of the Kuban River (North Caucasus) only.

During World War I destruction of the population of the rare animals began. Last bison of Belovezhskaya Pushcha was shot in 1921 while last Caucasian one was killed in 1927. Two years later, in 1929, some bison from European zoos were brought to the park. By the beginning of World War II there were 19 animals in the park yet some of them were killed during military actions. In post-war period the restoration of the live-stock began. As a result of protection of the animals and some other bio- and technical measures the number of bison increased up to 70 during next twenty years.

You can easily find wild boars through out Belovezhskaya Pushcha. There live also wolves, lynxes, polecats and ferrets, weasels, foxes, martens, ermines, raccoons and other forest inhabitants. Beavers and otters dwell along rivers and forest brooks while old woods swarm with hares. Fir woods are rich in squirrels. The most numerous rodents are mice whereas the most common insectivorous are moles and shrews.

The world of birds in Belovezhskaya Pushcha is even more various and rich. Along with typical western species (for example, red kite or canary finch) here you can find Siberian species (three fingered woodpecker, long tailed tawny owl) as well as birds of North deciduous forests (green woodpecker). Furthermore, there are more than 20 species of predatory birds, plenty of wood game. Various hazel-hens are especially numerous in Pushcha. It is the very place where most of the capercaillies living in the country are concentrated, where black storks build their nests and some pheasants have been brought to breed.

In short, you can see a lot in Belovezhskaya Pushcha. By the way, for visitors there is a museum with a lot of interesting - things exhibited such as paintings with episodes of medieval hunting, stuffed animals from Pushcha and others. For those who are hungry there is a restaurant with exotic dishes. A lot of species living in Belovezhskaya Pushcha are kept for visitors in special hedged areas and cages. So you can enjoy the landscapes with bison, elk, wild boar, vole, fox, bear and so on as long as you wish.

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In 1957 the reserve entered another stage when it was turned into a hunting reserve. Power keepers treated Puscha not as a natural heritage but as a place for rest and hunting. However, it is worth mentioning that the new status contributed to the improvement of the living and working conditions of the workers of the forest reserve. A hotel, school, museum, and administrative buildings were erected very quickly. At the same time governmental residence was built in the part of Puscha called Viskuli.

### **European Wild Horse - Tarpan**



The World learnt about Viskuli in December, 1991 when the USSR ceased to exist. It is in Viskuli where the leaders of three Slavonic republics of the USSR were summoned to dissolve the Soviet Union. Belaviezhskaja Puscha proved its historical significance having become a noticeable point on the political map. The same year the hunting reserve was dissolved. Belaviezhskaja Puscha was declared a national park. The residence in Viskuli acquired the status of governmental residence of the Republic of Belarus.

On December 14, 1992 UNESCO included the ancient forest on the list of the World Heritage of Humankind. A year later UNESCO gave the Puscha the status of biosphere reserve. Thus Puscha entered a world system for surveying changes in the environment.

Belaviezhskaja Puscha gives strength to all of us. It carries the feeling of eternity, kindness and peace.

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#### **Other links to the information on Belavezha:**

- [Belavezhskaya Pushcha - 21st Century site](#)
- [Frank Nature pages on Belavezha](#)
- [Mammal Research Institute Polish Academy of Sciences, Bialowieza, Poland.](#)
- [European Bison](#). also here [Zubry.com](#)



## THE JUDENRAT IN PRUZANY

To further their dealings with Jewish communities throughout occupied Eastern Europe, the Germans ordered the establishment of Councils of Jews ('Judenrat').

Lucy Dawidowicz, who researched the subject thoroughly, recounts in 'The War Against the Jews' that Hans Frank, the governor-general of German-occupied Poland, issued a decree establishing Councils of Jews as early as November 28, 1939. Jewish communities numbering 10,000 were required to choose a Judenrat comprising 12 members; larger communities were to pick a 24-member council. In practice, the S.S. sanctioned councils of varying sizes. In many places, the Judenrat was chosen from the already decimated ranks of public figures; but not every community had sufficient personages of a high caliber.

Everywhere, the German decree gave rise to painful soul-searching. The Germans made it plain that the Judenrat would be required to obey their instructions, but most Jews – leaders and rank and file alike – held that

while abiding by the new regulations, the body should function as a community council. Many were convinced that the perilous times called for a liaison to represent the Jewish community's interests vis-a-vis the authorities, and intercede with them on its behalf; in the absence of such a body, Jews feared a harsher fate – under direct German control or, worse yet, under the domination of Poles, Ukrainians or citizens of the Baltic states. On the other hand, forebodings were expressed that the Judenrat would enjoy no autonomy whatsoever, serving merely as a cog in the repressive apparatus created by the Germans. It was widely feared that the Judenrat members would be rendered dispirited and impotent by the calculated regimen of terror the Germans introduced immediately upon their arrival.

Of those who consented to serve as Judenrat members, most did so hesitantly and after considerable soul-searching; as a rule, they were motivated by a sense of duty and responsibility towards the Jewish population. Under German pressure, each community reached decisions on the establishment of a Judenrat, and its composition, in great haste. With communications and transport totally disrupted, there was no way of consulting persons outside the community. On political or ideological grounds, and a reluctance to tarnish themselves by contact with the Germans, most party leaders – right, left or Bund – declined to join the Judenrat. However, as the authorities chose a Judenrat to their own taste wherever the local community was slow in so doing, the balance was tipped in other communities, inducing them to establish a council of elected delegates.

The Germans saddled the "Councils of Jews" with heart-rending tasks. One was to submit lists of candidates for deportation. In September 1941, the Germans directed the Bialystok Judenrat to deport 4,500 "non-productive"



Jews to the Pruzany ghetto. Ephraim Barash, head of the Bialystok Judenrat, had the lists drawn up in accordance with the uniform classification imposed everywhere by the Germans: criminals, prostitutes, welfare recipients, and the unemployed. Those initially brought to our ghetto consequently included numerous anti-social elements who were gravely detrimental to its social fabric.

Another task imposed upon the Judenrat was recruitment of forced labor to serve the Germans. In many places, forced labor affected the poor more than the rich, for persons of means could buy themselves out by paying a forfeit to the Judenrat. The Judenrat utilized the money to fund community welfare projects.

Being required to finance a broad range of welfare projects, as well as shielding their community from particularly harsh measures by the Germans, the Judenrat subjected community members to a variety of taxes: there were income, residential and burial taxes; taxes on ration cards, on hospitalization and sanitation; from time to time, special taxes were levied from the wealthy, particularly when the Judenrat was required to raise large sums to meet German extortion. Like forced labor, taxation sparked confrontations, some community members refusing to pay the taxes the Judenrat demanded of them.

Another source of revenue was industry. Bialystok, with its 40,000 Jews, maintained over twenty factories and workshops manufacturing a variety of finished products for the German army. In Lodz, with over 160,000 Jews, as many as 117 factories served the Germans. In 1941, production in the Lodz ghetto grossed over 16 million marks, most of the sum deriving from forced labor (at starvation wages) and the rest – payment for commodities (at the lowest imaginable prices, fixed arbitrarily by the Germans).

In many places, the Judenrat was detested by the local community. Some dubbed the Judenrat 'Judenverrat' (betrayal of the Jews). A ghetto diarist recorded sardonically: "The German leech was followed by the Judenrat leech." Another wrote: "The Judenrat lives a life of depravity, and dies a death depraved seven times over."

Since 1945, controversy has raged about the Judenrat issue: in their loyal service to the Germans, did the councils effectively betray their own people, or did they endeavor to ride the blows, winning time for their communities and aiding them as far as was feasible under the constraints of the Holocaust? I do not claim to be a historian; certainly I am no fit arbiter to pass judgment on others, particularly on a matter of such gravity. However, the experience of Pruzany shows that we would probably have been far worse off without the Judenrat.

In Pruzany, the Germans did not wait for the formation of a Judenrat. The S.S. lost no time in imposing a regimen of terror, designed to break the citizens' spirits and produce unthinking compliance with German commands.

One day, they arrested several dozen townsfolk, executing them on the town's outskirts. Only now did the Germans order the Jewish inhabitants to choose a council to represent them vis-a-vis the authorities. Initially numbering five persons, the council elicited German permission to coopt additional persons, membership ultimately rising to twenty-four. Those appointed initially ensured that the later additions represented every group and class in the community. We in Pruzany were fortunate in having a Judenrat composed of persons who were acceptable to the general public and who did their best for the common good.

Up to January 27, 1943, the head of the Pruzany Judenrat was Yitzchak Janowicz (on February 2, 1943, he



was put to death in the gas chambers and cremated, along with his wife Valja and their young son Mordechai). His deputy was attorney Ze'ev Schreiberman. His chief aide was Eliezer Schein, who came from Lodz; Schein worked day and night directing the council's internal affairs. Zavel Segal was the liaison with the authorities – an office which, exposing its bearer to extensive contact with the Germans, carried many risks. Food distribution was the responsibility of Shlomo Yudewicz.

The Judenrat's members also included Abraham Breski, a fervent Zionist and editor of the Zionist "Pruzaner Sztyme". Residing close by, Abraham was of my parents' age and on friendly terms with them. He and I maintained that friendship in Israel, till his demise.

The Judenrat was kept busy. At the very outset, the Jewish population was given twenty-four hours to hand over half a million rubles, two kilograms of gold, ten kilograms of silver, all furs and 100 pairs of boots. Each passing day brought demands for other items in varying amounts: pillows, blankets, mattresses, beds and furniture. After a time, a decree denied Jews the use of the sidewalks, requiring them to walk in the street. They were likewise forbidden to live on Dr. Pacewicz Street and May 3 Street, or in the adjoining alleys; all Jews resident in that quarter were forced to move. Finally, on September 25, 1941, the Jews were ordered to huddle into the ghetto, which included Dombrowska and Kobrinska streets as far as the bridge, Brzeska Street to Scherschewska Street, and all the intervening alleys. The quarter was fenced off with barbed wire, with the main gate located in the street between the Yudkovski house and the line of stores.

The Judenrat was required to comply with the demands and orders issued virtually daily by the German military commander. Anxious to alleviate conditions in the ghetto

and ease contacts with the authorities, the council shouldered a range of organizational and economic tasks. Reflecting every sector of the community, it functioned in an atmosphere of cooperation, mutual trust and dedication to the public good. The council effectively controlled every sphere of ghetto life. Its members were put to the test when numerous Jews from other towns were brought to the ghetto, making it necessary to find them accommodation in the already prevalent overcrowding.

Important lessons had been learned from the Soviet period. No private businesses were permitted in the ghetto, all commodities and apartments being placed at public disposal. The economy was collective in the fullest sense. In this manner, numerous difficulties were overcome. There was no profiteering in foodstuffs. All artisans were employed in workshops belonging to the council, which also received the pay of those employed by the Germans outside the ghetto.

Some 6,000 Jews were brought to the Pruzany ghetto – 4,000 from Bialystok, 2,000 from the townships of Schershev, Seltz, Hainowka, Bialovez and elsewhere. The Germans supplied the ghetto with food in very frugal amounts: 200 grams of bread per head per day, and a few potatoes, there were almost no deliveries of meat. Nevertheless, although virtually doubled by the transports hauled in from the surrounding areas, the ghetto population did not go hungry. In its quest for food supplies, the Judenrat resorted to various means – including bribes to S.S. men – ensuring that the needy all received food from the shops, the bakery and the storehouses. Most of the time, the Council stores offered bread and potatoes in unlimited quantities and at low prices: bread at 2 marks a kilogram and potatoes at 4 marks a 'pud' (one 'pud' = about 16 kilograms).



The Council also took steps to provide accommodation for all of the ghetto's inhabitants. This task grew harder with each passing day, as the ghetto was progressively reduced in size. The Germans would notify the Judenrat: "Such-and-such a street is to be cleared and removed from the ghetto confines." Council members had to relocate the residents of the street to be evacuated to the ghetto's remaining streets. It was necessary to decide where to billet the displaced families. Initially, the Jews were housed in the homes of Christians who had been moved from the ghetto to other parts of the town. Later, the Judenrat set about reducing the living space allotted to ghetto dwellers: families occupying two rooms or more were cut down to a single room, to make space for other families. Our home, which remained within the bounds of the ghetto right up to its final evacuation, housed families displaced from other streets. The problem was exacerbated when the Germans deported Jews into the ghetto from other communities.

Anxious not to be caught unprepared and risk irritating the Germans by a failure to meet their demands on schedule, the Council operated a special workshop preparing reserves of various items for storage in ghetto warehouses, ready to meet any demand.

The Council supplied labor to factories owned by Germans or by Christians working for them. For example, 200 persons were sent to pave a highway, their livelihood being provided by the ghetto. On top of the beatings they suffered, Jews got half the pay given to Christians employed in the same jobs. My father found work as a Judenrat employee. My mother knitted articles of clothing for the Germans. I became a servant to a German family whose head was brought into the area to act as bank manager. My job ensured me sufficient food, and I could also pilfer a little food and cigarettes to take home. For

the first time in my life, I was required to fight for survival: the ghetto taught me the basic rules of that contest.



## TERROR IN THE GHETTO

Being confined to the ghetto, we knew nothing of developments at the various theaters of the battlefield, where the Germans were beginning to suffer setbacks; but we did sense their viciousness growing with each passing day. Initially, the German army had reaped success on every front. On July 25, 1941, it was already locked in battle with the Red Army on the outskirts of Smolensk. On Stalin's orders, the Russians initiated their "scorched earth" policy: on August 27, they demolished the Dniepropetrovsk dam. But their efforts were to no avail. On September 18, the Germans cut off the Crimean peninsula. Kiev fell. On October 6, the Germans launched their assault on Moscow, and the Soviet government hastily removed itself from the city. By the 26th of the month, Odessa and Kharkov had fallen, and Leningrad was under siege.

But then the tide began to change. On November 30, the Russians recaptured Rostov; Zhukov launched his counter-offensive on December 6, and on the 14th of the month, the Germans were forced back from the outskirts of Moscow.

In North Africa likewise, the tide was turning. On November 4, 1942, Rommel was defeated at El Alamein. Four days later, Allied forces landed in French North Africa. The British recaptured Tobruk and Benghazi. Rommel was checked at El Ageila. Shortly afterwards, the British Eighth Army entered Tripoli.

The Germans, being aware of the situation at the battlefield, responded with savage fury against the captive population they held in thrall. From time to time, German soldiers forced their way into the ghetto, where they went on a rampage of robbery and violence. Particularly outstanding in this regard was a Nazi sergeant named Leiman. One day, he picked on the local rabbi and a group of elderly Jews: having ordered them to enfold themselves in their prayer shawls and *tefillin* (phylacteries), he commanded them to dance and sing for him in the street. Finding this pastime amusing, he repeated it time and again, inviting his comrades to watch the show. Sergeant Leiman was ultimately persuaded to desist when Judenrat members collected money to offer him a payoff.

At dawn on November 1, 1942, large German units surrounded the ghetto. Machine guns were positioned at regular fifteen-meter intervals. No one was permitted to leave. Persons employed outside the ghetto had their exit passes suspended.

The ghetto inhabitants were overcome with panic. "What's going on?" they demanded of one another in terror. "There's no way of knowing," came the response: all contact with the outside world had been severed. Everyone in the ghetto was infected with a fear which grew with each passing hour.

A joint decision to commit suicide rather than fall into the hands of the S.S., was adopted at a meeting of the ghetto's intellectuals - physicians, teachers, attorneys, etc.



— including Dr. Olia Goldfein, Feivel Goldfein, Dr. Rosenkrantz, his wife and baby, Dr. Pik, his wife and their baby, Josef Schreiberman, his wife and baby, the wife of Velvel Schreiberman and their son, and Fania Pomerantz and her daughter.

That evening, they and their families congregated at the home of Velvel Schreiberman, the deputy head of the Judenrat, where they proceeded to carry out their awesome resolve. Poison injections were given — to the children initially, next to the women and, finally, to the men. Schreiberman was chosen to wait to the end, to ensure completion of the task.

However, he soon realized that no one had died; the poison had merely put them to sleep. In desperation, Schreiberman kindled the charcoal stove and blocked the chimney, filling the room with a dense cloud of asphyxiating smoke.

Dawn having broken in the meantime, troubled townsfolk in quest of news now began knocking at the door of the Judenrat's deputy chief. "There's no reply," the firstcomers told neighbors who arrived in their wake. "Let's break in!" someone suggested. "Something may have happened to the Schreibermans."

The front door was broken down to reveal a gruesome sight. Prompt resuscitation efforts saved most of those in the room, with the exception of Zelig Goldfein's son-in-law, Zvi Nitzkin.

A few days later, with the same abruptness that it had been imposed, the siege of the ghetto was terminated. Exit passes were reissued to persons employed outside the ghetto, and food supplies renewed; there were even a few allocations of meat, a ration for each inhabitant.

It emerged subsequently that the blockade was part of a systematic German effort to dull the alertness of the Jews, so as to facilitate their planned extermination.

One day, the Nazi commander announced his intention of carrying out a census in the ghetto. "All inhabitants are to report outside, in lines of ten." Such were the precise instructions.

The Council of Jews tried to persuade the Germans to conduct the count by means of home visits. Michael (the son of Eilياهو) Birnboim was appointed to conduct the census, and assistants were placed at his disposal. The latter went from door to door, filling in detailed questionnaires which served for preparation of a well-ordered card index; this was presented to the Nazi commandant.

"It's not good enough!" declared the officer. "The census must be conducted in the manner I laid down." He promised that no harm would befall the Jews as they reported for the census.

There was nothing for it but to obey. All of the ghetto's inhabitants — men, women and children — lined up in the open air, standing there from early morning till midday. It was noon before the Nazi commandant put in an appearance. He counted those present, determining that the ghetto numbered 9,976 inhabitants (of whom 6,000 were local residents, 2,000 from Bialystok and 2,000 from the nearby townships — Schershev, Hainowka, Bialovez and Maicz).

On completion of the count, we were dismissed to our homes, with no harm to any of us. Why, then, was the census held at all? In all probability, for the sole purpose of disseminating fear and uncertainty. The flames of apprehension were fanned by rumors of killings, massacres, deportations and wholesale annihilation; the accounts poured in from sundry quarters, near and far.

"You can't trust rumors," said the more hopeful souls. "They're designed to break our spirits and make us downhearted. Each passing day brings closer our deliverance."



and the downfall of our tormentors!" Such hopeful sentiments were mistrusted by the more skeptical. Declining to wait for salvation, some – young people in particular – resolved to flee the ghetto and try their luck in the nearby forests.

I was too young to consider flight, but others older than myself slipped out of the ghetto. Those who absconded hoped to join the partisan bands active in the nearby forests. A few did indeed enlist with the partisans, but others were rudely rejected, some even being handed over to the Germans. Of those young men who contrived to find a haven outside, some would return periodically to the ghetto to acquire food and other necessities, updating the inhabitants on external events, they offered the ghetto its sole connecting link with the outside world.

On January 27, 1943, at seven in the evening, two young townsmen now with the partisans – one was Mordechai-Ber Segal, the son of Shlomo Segal – walked into the Judenrat offices to demand money and boots. The head of the Judenrat, Yitzhak Janowicz, promised to meet their request; while they were in conversation, however, the head of the local Gestapo entered.

"Who are you?" he asked the two young men imperiously. As they stood there in a daze, he seized them and searched their clothing. His hand brushed the pistol one of them had concealed under his coat, whereupon they both hurled themselves at him, flinging him to the floor before making a bolt, followed by several other chance visitors to the office.

The Gestapo chief scrambled to his feet and opened fire with his pistol, instantly killing the building's watchman, an elderly man from Bialystok, and severely injuring Judenrat members David Rosokhovsky and Zisha Spektor. He arrested Judenrat members Yitzhak Janowicz, Ze'ev Schreiberman, Shlomo Yudewicz,

Abraham Breski, Feivel Goldfein, Lebenhandler-Levitzky and Michal Janowicz, accusing them of contacts with the partisans. He insisted that they reveal the names of the two partisans.

"We don't know them," the Council members said, feigning innocence. "They forced their way in under the threat of arms." Furious, the Gestapo chief stalked out of the building. Within a short time, the ghetto was surrounded by a reinforced cordon. All Judenrat members were ordered to report at the Council offices the following morning at six, for sentencing.

Yet again, terror filled the hearts of the ghetto's inhabitants, who remained sleepless all night. At the stroke of six the following morning, January 28, 1943, the Gestapo chief stalked into the offices of the Judenrat to notify its members that the residents of certain streets – 2,500 persons in all – were to prepare for departure within a few hours.

"They are being sent to work in Silesia," announced the Gestapo official. "They are to take all family members, including the elderly, babies and invalids. They are authorized to carry small packages, and are advised to take their money and jewelry, and all valuables." Thus commenced the evacuation of the Pruzany ghetto. It took four days to complete.



## AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In directing the ghetto to prepare for evacuation, the Germans notified us that we were to be sent to forced labor camps. We were told that each person could take only what he could carry. My mother hastened to sew 150 dollars into my shoes and those of my brother. On first reflection, he and I thought of fleeing to the forests, to the partisans. The ghetto was now encompassed by a barbed wire fence, but there was a gap through which people could make a getaway. On reaching it, however, we changed our minds and returned home.

"We shall remain together!" we declared, true to the traditions of the Jewish family.

The ghetto was evacuated in four transports organized by S.S. officer Wilhelm Vemos. As the transports were not closely watched en route, a few dozen deportees made a getaway, but only a handful survived. Among those to escape was Dr. Olla Goldfein, who slipped away from the first transport and spent 18 months masquerading as a nun. Roaming across Poland, she learned of the mass annihilation. After the war, Soviet Jewish writer Ilya

Ehrenburg summoned her to Moscow, where she gave testimony about the horrors of the Holocaust. She returned to Pruzany, which was now empty of Jews; from there, she went on to France by way of Czechoslovakia, Germany and Austria, ultimately reaching Israel.

The first transport, comprising 2,500 Jews, left Pruzany on January 29; the next day, following "selection", 602 Pruzany Jews – 327 men and 275 women – were admitted into the camp. From the second transport, which set out on January 30, those taken into the camp numbered 281 – 249 men and 32 women; from the third, which departed on January 31, 493 persons – 313 men and 180 women – reached the camp. My family was included in the fourth transport, which left the ghetto on February 1; of this shipment, 294 men and 105 women were admitted into the camp. Due to traffic congestion, the last two transports reached Auschwitz on the same day, February 2. Of 9,161 Jews hitherto resident in the Pruzany ghetto, 1,775 men and women ultimately reached the Auschwitz camp.

The final transport included most of the members of the Judenrat. Many of them took the precaution of pinning their emblems of office to their sleeves, in the hope that, on reaching their destination, this would earn them better treatment from the Germans.

We did not know what the future held in store for us. Although alarmed and dismayed by this abrupt uprooting and our imminent journey into the unknown, we were not as yet in fear of imminent death. In the worst event, the townsfolk reassured one another, the Germans would employ them as forced labor.

We were taken from the ghetto on peasants' sleds, six persons on each sled, traversing the 8-mile route to the Linova rail station, where a narrow-gauge track led to Oranazyca. At Linova, we were loaded onto a freight train, with 120-150 persons crammed into each of the



Chaim Malecki

## MY TOWN SHERSHEV IN THE DEATH MARCH

When the Germans entered Shershev in June 1941, first 13 victims fell, both Jews and Gentiles. Panic fell on the Jews. It was not long before the Germans ordered all Jews between 16 and 70 to gather in the market-place, and wear warm clothes for going out to work. Whoever did not turn out would be killed.

I was 15 and exempt from the call-up. However, my father was weak and I couldn't agree that he go alone. We said goodbye to our family, lined up in rows of three. Thus began the death march.

When we passed by our homes, we did not notice a living soul. All our relatives had been led away by other murderers. Laughing faces could be seen from the windows of houses of the Gentiles; soon, they would take over the home and all the property of the Jews. Walking was difficult and people began throwing their packages away. The Germans beat people up with thick sticks. 18 of us fell before we reached Pruzana. The Pruzana Jews tried to help us to no avail. They were not even allowed to bring us a little water. We rested by the Krutzel steam plant because the murderers had tired of beating us and they sat resting.

Then we continued in the direction of Linewe (Oranczyce). Again, people fell on the way. The Germans locked us up in the cowshed together with many cows. We were like herring stuffed in a barrel. A few hours later, we heard shouting in Yiddish. It was our relatives, who had been brought on carts and left outside the cowshed.

I saw how the Germans shot Moshe Shucherman, who barely walked and held his son's hand. His son asked the assassins to kill him too after they shot his father and they duly complied. 20 year-old Lejzer Rotenberg was severely beaten. He was covered in blood, but tried to escape. The Germans shot and missed. He disappeared into the nearby wood. The Germans killed 15 Jews on the spot as punishment for Rotenberg's escape. We experienced two more days of hardship until we reached Antopol, where we met our relatives. We are dispersed in the towns of Drohiczyn and Chomsk and our fate is the same as the other Jews doomed to destruction.

I and a few other Shershev Jews succeeded in escaping to Pruzana. There I learned about the killing of my parents and relatives. I became an orphan. But



Fania Krawczyk  
Född 1920. Polen.  
Religion: Mosaisk.

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Fania K. from Shershev or Shereshev (This is the Polish spelling you have.) - Szereszow lived/was living in the ghetto in Pruzana from September 1941 until January 1942, when she was sent to Auschwitz because she was Jewish.

*Did you know, before you were taken, that the Germans sent innocent people to concentration camps?*

I knew that the Germans brought innocent people to death.

*In that case, how did you find out? (Radio, rumours?)*

I found out through people in the ghetto that had managed to escape. In Bronnya Gora/Brenegora, not far from Beresa Kartuska was a grave with all the Jews from Polosie.

*How did the people in your city or village react when people were taken away?*

"Some of the citizens were indifferent, while others showed compassion, and then others, not only plundered our possessions, but also helped the SS and Gestapo, to catch the people that had hidden ~~hid themselves~~ ~~them-selves~~, by pointing out their hiding places, that the Germans would not have found, because they didn't know the area."

*At what places were you held in captivity and during what times were the said captivities?*

Fanny was in the ghetto in Pruzana from September 1942, until the end of January 1943, and there after in Auschwitz from February 1<sup>st</sup> 1943, later in Ravensbrück and in Malchow. (never heard of this. check spelling)

what happened between January 42 and Jan 43???

"We had a terrible journey. We were forced to walk to Leslau. If anyone could not walk, they were ~~she~~ was shot. In Leslau we were packed ~~into~~ open wagons ~~waggon~~s, stinking, half filled ~~half filled~~ with snow. We were 120 in each wagon ~~the wagon~~. We travelled for three days without food. In the beginning of February we arrived in Ravensbrück. Here we were placed in tents, 1600 people. (in one tent or in all?)

The time in Ravensbrück lasted for three weeks, and then we were sent on a transport to ~~Malchow~~.

*Can you with some examples, estimate about how many people died in the camp?*

"In ~~To~~ Birkenau ~~we~~ arrived together with 300 other women. Forty five survived. The others fell victim to the selections. One transport came with German Jewesses; ~~there~~ ~~ey~~ were 180. After three days none of them were alive. Of a transport with 1 500 Greek women, 15 survived et cetera. et cetera."

*Have you seen a gas chamber and in that case where?*

"I saw the crematoriums that were ~~was~~ next to our camp. They belched out fire from the chimney constantly. I saw the storehouses for the clothes. After the arrival ( of the transports (note from 1945)), there was a gas chamber for disinfection of the clothes. 200 Jewish men who worked by the crematoriums were taken there. Out of fear that they would resist (the Germans (note from 1945)), they were told they would get other clothes, and would be sent to other work in Germany in a

workcamp. Instead of giving them clothes, they shut them in, and after a few minutes, their dead bodies were taken out and were brought to the crematorium to be burnt."

*Have you personally been beaten?*

During a certain period during the winter of 1943, we were given "extra rest", every Sunday. We were being awakened every morning at three o'clock, (instead of normally four o'clock). We stood until 8 in the morning. After 8 we were forced to carry sand in our coats. In order for us to carry a lot, our coats were turned and buttoned on the back. German female prisoners poured the sand. Of course each and everyone of them tried to pour as much as possible. So I loaded thusly, we had to run fast to a given place about 250 meters away. And above us stood guards with dogs. If any of us were late due to unloading of the sand due to the pouring of sand, the dogs were set upon them hounded on her, and our bodies were often bitten. Still to day I have marks and scars of the being bitten.

*What was the worst experience for you?*

My worst experience was the separation from my parents, ~~who~~ that were taken to be gassed, and the separation from my sister that lived with me for six weeks in the camp.

*DidHave the stay in the camps given you only unpleasant experiences, or ~~were~~ have there been any "bright" moments?*

~~The~~To the brightest moments during my stay in the camps were the bombardment of our factory, because I thought that that death was the only one thing, apart from the gas, that could hit us. We (hoped for or prayed for?) asked for as long as possible bombardmentsbombardement as possible.

*Describe shortly how you were liberated and what impression the liberation made on you.*

I did not believe it was true. In Auschwitz Red Cross cars would take people to be gassed. (Pia...is she sure? I knew they carried Zyklon B into the camps because it was originally a disinfectant.)

*What punishment would you suggest, if you were to decide what would be done to your tormentors?*

If it was in my power, I would do the same to them, burn the family, and I would not allow that they in the last minute would bring a little water to their only surviving sister. Exterminate them as they exterminated the Polish Jews. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

*Are you longing for your home country?*

I long for my homecountry.

*What would you wish for your future?*

To find those of my close relatives that have survived, and to finally find some peace.

*How many of your close relatives were alive at the outbreak of the war?*

When the war broke out the family consisted of 6 people, me included.

*How many of them do you know are dead?*

I am the only one left, no one is alive.

*How many of them have died in work- or concentration camp, to your knowledge?*

One sister in the camp, the others went straight from the wagons ~~waggon~~s to the crematorium.

I found Fania, now Fanny K. in Sweden. She lived a few blocks from me. She was the first person I interviewed, and when I asked her to tell me about her family, she burst in to tears. I did not know what to do, should I turn off the taperecorder or let it roll (play?)e? After a while she had composed her self and we could continue.

Fanny moved between now and then in very high speed, and I have tried to put some kind of chronological order to the interview.

- My name is Fanny. I was born in – it was Poland before – White Russia/Belarus, in Szereszow, 18 kilometers from Pruzana. My mothers name was Bobel, she was called Jenny...My fathers name was Fiszel. Then I had a sister called Judith, and one called Leah (in english) Leja.
- And your brother?
- His name was Judel. He was 13 years old when he arrived in Auschwitz.

The family had a little farm, and they had a horse, a cow and hens. In the wintertime the father made shingle ~~ships~~ to cover the roofs to protect it from rain. The M ~~m~~other took care of the household, but sometimes worked in her sister's bakery.

The house was both a stable and a home. In the wintertime they didn't have to go out to feed the animals, they just crossed the hall.

- And then we had a basement with an earth floor (or earthen basement; what you have is okay) earth-basement (can't find the right word for that), and our own well on the property. Towards the middle of the 30s (it was actually 1932) we got electricity in town, but only a few hours.

Eectricity meant wet that had an electric bulb, with a long cord that you carried from room to room. It was a rather hazardous thing to do, since it started burning every time there was a short-circuit. At 12 o'clock the electricity was turned off.

The family had no radio, and it was only the doctor and the pharmacist that had a radio, so in connection with the outbreak of the war, everybody stood outside their windows and listened to the news.

My ~~The~~ family was rather well off, but they were not rich. They did not have to starve, said Fanny.

- We had our own potatoes, bread. We had milk, eggs, turkey, things like that. We had cucumbers that we preserved and sunk in to the well, and when we picked theum out in the wintertime, they were always fresh and good. And we picked mushrooms but we didn't preserve them, but dried them. Dried the blueberries. We didn't need to buy very much. It was another world.

In connection with the Sabbath on the Friday, you placed the dishes in a big oven that you walled in (a cassarole called cholent, i.e. could cook over the Sabbath) ~~don't know how to translate this~~, since you can't cook on the Saturday according to Jewish tradition. Even the neighbours would come placed their dishes in the big oven, and they often paid ~~ved~~ with firewood. On Saturday morning you made tea out of the water that had boiled on top of the oven, and after the sSabbath Fanny's grandmother would pick up the coals from the oven, and sell ~~old it them~~ to the tailor who used them in his iron. That way she made earned some money ~~some earnings~~.



Fanny shared the bed with her grandmother. She died of cancer one day when Fanny was at home alone, she died on the same day and the same time, as the grandfather, but ten years earlier. (Who died first?)

- Then, when I grew older I had my own room, where I had my sewing machine and... We had four rooms and a kitchen. In one room there were only flowers. You put in double windows in the winters, and you put cotton wool between the windows, and a little green. And the roof you painted every year... chalked (whitewashed, actually) the walls. ... The floor you handscrubbed all the time every time. The toilet was outside. It was another (possibly better to say just a regular instead of standard) standard outhouse (The word for toilets outside houses). The children should have seen what it was like... It was a completely different world.

The family spoke several languages, Yiddish, Polish, Russian and even Hebrew. Fanny spent 6 years in the Hebrew school.

- The books we had to buy our selves. At that time we were three or four pupils sharing one book, so you had to run to each other and get the books. Some had their classes in the mornings, others in the afternoon. There were no free school meals either.
- What did you want to become?
- I had no thought of "becoming" something - I became a seamstress. When I was 13 I started working. There was nothing else to do for a girl. The parents thought it was good to have a profession, if the war came.

Fanny was trained by the seamstress of the village, which in fact meant that she worked for free, took care of her children and cleaned the house on Friday. But she - it was a good seamstress, and Fanny got so much in tip when she delivered clothes, that she eventually could buy her own sewing machine. But after a year, when she was about to start to get paid, the seamstress took another apprentice, who that was treated the same way.

The family lived next to the (there were six in S.) synagogue, so close that a horse and carriage could barely pass between the buildings through the houses. I wondered if she came from a religious family.

- It was more ordinary, nothing excessive. We celebrated the Sabbath, we had religious days. We had the synagogue next to us, we could never do anything that wasn't permitted on the Sabbath (Shabbat is the Yiddish/Hebrew word).
- Because other people saw it?
- You didn't want to... You respected others.

In see prior spelling Szeroszow the Jews lived in the centre, and the Christians in the outskirts of the settlement. Fanny said that her family never had any problems due to them. One of Fanny's aunts lived 100 kilometers from Szeroszow, and she used to visit her and her cousins.

- It was very pleasant. We were at all the Christian weddings. Before the wedding the youth gathered to bake a mint cake, so everybody joined in and also sang and danced. And then in connection with the wedding, you travelled with horse and carriage and had a chest/coffer that you drummed on, so that people would give wedding-presents. It was a tradition. It was very funny for me. I spent a lot of time at my aunts.

Fanny's cousins joined the partisans during the war, and for the longest time she hoped that at least some one of them would have survived, but none came back.

- How was your father?
- Very kind... When someone came and was hungry... You know, at that time there were people who begged for food, it was their profession. It doesn't exist in Sweden, but they walked from city to city. On Friday evening my father used to come in, and he walked back and forth, back and forwards. "How many are they?", my mother used to say. My father could not sit down and eat, if he knew that there was someone without food. My mother used to say: "I can take one or two, but not 5-6 at the time." "Yes, but then we can eat something

else.” If someone came that was hungry, he would ~~rise~~ <sup>rise</sup> up and say “Sit down and eat”. My mother was angry many times, she thought there should be a limit to everything.

- Where did he get it from?
- He had become like that, he could give away everything. He had had a very sad childhood. His mother died in childbirth, and then his father remarried, and they had eleven or twelve children, so he was really raised like in the old days. He used to talk about how mean they were, he had to do everything, he had to steal potatoes ~~in from the land ground~~ – they gave him nothing to eat. So he had a very sad childhood. Then he married my mother and then they lived their own life.

But it wasn't easy for Fannys father to receive help him self. When the Germans came, the Jews from Szereszow were taken to Ukraine, where they were kept in a synagogue, but Fanny and her family were offered a place to stay with a family they knew from before. In the morning, when the father was standing praying, a man came in and gave him a bucket of potatoes, so they would have something to eat.

- And my father...I see him in front of me. He said: “It is very hard for me to receive. I have given a lot, but...the most important thing is that one can help others.” I see it in front of me...
- My father, he always said. “Don't save money in the bank. There are Bolsheviks-Bolsheviks, CossacksKosacks and there are Poles. But, one thing children, if you can help someone, you should do it, you'll always get it back. “ And I have had difficulties many times, but there is always someone who helps – I don't know how it happens.
- How was your mother?
- She came from another kind of home. She was good, but she was not always happy ~~as that~~ father could give everything away, while the children didn't have food. Fanny laughed a little at her mother and father.

I wondered if Fanny remembers what they looked like, and she started crying again.

- I see them, in all situations...
- Do you dream about them sometimes?
- Yes, it wasn't long ago since I talked with my mother...it was like she was standing there. It was a beautiful dream. My parents would not ~~have lived to day~~ <sup>be alive, or, lived this long</sup>, but one would have wanted a sister. It has been such a long time now, and you would imagine that it would be over/be gone by now, but it isn't. When you had a family and children and work...you lived in another way. But when you grow older...
- It comes back?
- Yes...

There were about 1 500-1 600 Jews in spelling Szereszow. Out of these there were only five women and a few men that survived. Fannys is the only female survivor living in Sweden, the others live in the US.

- When did the persecution start, how did you understand that something was about to happen?
- Well, it was the war. We did not know what was going on in Germany. We didn't know anything about the destruction of the Jews.

On September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, when World war II started they escaped into the forest to the forest – they were going to hide from the Germans. Fanny said it was laughable to think that they could hide, there was no place to hide. This time the Germans only passed by, after having executed ten young Jews. They were forced to dig their own grave, and then they were shot. In a little autobiography ~~biography~~ Fanny has written that the families had to bury their own children. Then the Germans left and the area was under Russian rule until June 1941.

When the Germans came back they forced all the Jews out in the square, and forced the doctor, the pharmacist and a rabbi to undress, and then they had to run naked through the village.



They destroyed synagogues, tore up the Torah ~~Scrolls~~ scrolls, (I think scrolls is capitalized here) went to houses and destroyed them, and showed a lot of cruelty. They were worst to the children.

- Then they woke us up in the middle of the night, they said we were to be counted. In ones nightgown, maybe grabbed a dress – we never came home again. Trucks arrived. Women and children on the trucks, the men had to run on the side. The ones that couldn't handle it were shot. There were dead people lining the road. They took us to Ukraine.

Ukraine has been mentioned before, and the family decided to run away from there to the ghetto in Pruzhna, where they had relatives and friends. To take that risk, was to challenge death. They walked during nighttime, through marshland and forest. It took them three days and nights, but then they were reunited. Fanny managed to make it back to Szereszow, and saw that their house was gone.

- My mother was devastated. Then father said that there will always be a place to stay, so many people have died, so we'll find a place to stay.

Before they were sent to spelling Ukraine, that have sensed that something was about to happen, so they gave some of their possessions to a Polish man.

- We thought he should take our horse and our cow and some things. The rest we don't know who took., but ~~he~~ ~~the~~ ~~got~~ ~~took~~ the valuables, our land, everything. Then he came in to the ghetto in Pruzhany once a week to sell things. I would not have recognized him, but the horse recognized us, and started to neigh, and we went up the horse to pat ~~it~~ him. The Polish man would not say hello to us. "But you can give us some potatoes", I said, "they are ours." He laughed at me straight ~~in the~~ to my face. Then I said to him: "This war will not last for ever, we will settle our accounts. " I know some people that would have been scared had we returned home. If they are alive, I don't know.

Would she still look him up?

- No, I don't know if he lives or not, but it is barred by the statute of limitations (preskriberat, is the Swedish word). But the Poles were not G-d's best children, they unfortunately helped the Germans..

Fanny had a permit, so she could work outside the ghetto and get food to the family. She worked ~~wroked~~ at a photographer's place and was paid in sugar, butter and bread. Since she was scared to lose ~~these~~ ~~d~~ items if she went in through the regular way ~~in~~ to the ghetto, she tried to get in when it was dark. She was met by her parents who lifted up the barbed wire so she could creep under, but a Jewish Police caught them and took everything away from her.

- I said to him, "I will forget the Germans, but I will never forget you, and if I survive, we will settle this." Later he came to the US, and when he heard I was alive he got scared and changed his name and moved, and no one knows where he is.. the poor fellow. I would never have hurt ~~hear~~ him. You can't revenge everything, but it hurt.

Fanny had an offer to be saved from persecution. It was a priest who suggested she would move to his sister who lived far away in Poland, and live as a Christian.

She told her mother about the offer, and she started crying and said that this was a fate that you would not wish upon your worst enemy, to get married and have children and that they should be forced to change their religion and their identity, but if she could save her self that way, it would be the best thing she could do.

- But I didn't and I am glad I didn't. I would never have forgiven my self if I had. I was with my parents until the end.
- When you came to Auschwitz...Did you know where you came to.
- No...they drove us in...trains that you take cattle in, and several people died along the way. When we arrived we were separated. They were standing with a truncheon, hitting right and left. One of my sisters went with my mother, and my brother left with my father. My brother came running back with a photo, and he said: "Here is a picture. They are going to kill us."

They knew what would happen. ~~In~~At the same time they cut our hair and ~~burned~~tattooed our forearms with the numbers. I have a very weak memory of...some things have just dissappeared.

- Did you have a chance to say goodbye to your parents. Fanny shook her head.
- You thought they would come to another camp. We didn't know, not until we came to Auschwitz and I saw the crematorium. I lived next to it.
- But did you understand what was going on?
- You saw everything. There were people there and they told you. "They burn, it is a crematorium." Then you saw what it was. You didn't want to believe it, you thought it was a dream. You reacted in a strange kind of way...but unfortunately.. You never saw the sky, only smoke. I was there 3-4 times, and said I wanted to go, but they told me to leave.
- I don't understand.
- I wanted to die, I couldn't cope any longer. ~~My~~The fingers were swollen, I had rashes all over, I couldn't walk. No shoes, no clothes, nothing, like a ragdoll, and ~~spelling~~diarrhoea and rats and everything, you couldn't cope. It was the only way to get away from it. I was there three or four times.
- And they didn't want you?
- No, it was...packed, they said come back next week. (If you wish to use the english: Person, go away "Mensch, geh weg!" In Yiddish it would be Mensch, gai avek)
- That is strange.
- Yes, it is, it was odd, I also think it is strange.

Fanny goes on to tell about her life in Auschwitz. She gives an account about the people in Block 25, waiting for execution. She tells about her sister's death. Executions she saw, for example the ~~attempt~~try to execute Mala Zimetbaum. (Who she?)

She tells about how she was saved.

Her time in Sweden, and what as become of her life.

She got married, and had three children, but the first child, a girl, died at birth.

Eventually she got some ~~reparations~~money from Germany and bought a small summerplace, where she felt at home. She and the family, until the boys moved out and created their own homes, have lived all the years in Sweden, in a one room apartment.

She has never returned.

- Would you like to return?
- I don't know. She started crying again.
- Do you think you would find some peace of mind if you did?
- No...the only thing you think about is that the children should see where I was born, where I grew up...We all look for our roots; this is where I lived, here lived my aunt, my grandfather, this is where our school was – if it is still there – I don't know.

She talked about the atmosphere there, the people...all is gone, she doesn't even know if the graveyard is still there.

As the only survivor she owns a lot of houses there, her grandfathers, the aunts...and the land. She still dreams about all the people. One day she ~~said~~sayed she had dreamed about the family being out in the ~~forest~~forrest picking mushrooms, and another time her mother stood in the room, another time both parents, they didn't look sad.

- I was about to talk to them, I didn't know where I was.

She talks about her life as a survivor, what it has meant to her children, to have a mother that is constantly worried that she will ~~lose~~lose them.

In connection with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peace she became very sick. I was warned by her children that she screamed a lot, and I came up to the ward, to find an almost unconscious Fanny

calling in Yiddish for her mother. For a while her survival was in jeopardy, but she made it, and is still here, ten years later.

In the summer of 2003 I visited spelling Szereszow. Fanny had asked me to take photos of the Hebrew school and the graveyard.

It turned out that much was changed. And that all the synagogues were gone, destroyed by the Germans, the old churches had been destroyed by the Russians, and the Hebrew school that had been used by German soldiers, had burnt down by mistake, when they heated up the place too much in the freezing cold winter.

The graveyard was not taken care of at all.

But I was very happy to be there, as I have lived with spelling Szereszow for so many years, through my friendship with Fanny, and I took a lot of photos.

I don't know if I did her any favours by doing this. It was a big dissapointment to her. She hardly recognized anything on the photos, but for an old monument, not far from where her own houes had been.

But she also said that it was a relief for her. I had, through the guide found out that everyone that had returned after the war, was dead, so there was no one to talk to, no one to return to.

All is gone, there is no one to see – she never has to return.



## BACK TO BELARUS

Leah Zazulyer

Recently I took a trip to the village my parent's left before the first world war. Shershev is and was a small town, known amongst Jews as a "shtetl". It is some eighteen kilometers from the city of Pruzhany and within a day's drive from the metropolis of Brest-Litvosk, also known as Brisk. Brisk was one of the Soviet "hero cities" during the second world war. Shershev used to be something like what Americans called a western "frontier town". During modern times Shershev has been occupied by Poles, Russians, and Germans. Originally it was part of the land holdings of Queen Bona of legendary fame.

It was still as my parent's had described it in many ways. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. So I did both...

For generations this village had been home to as many as twenty-five hundred Jews, as well as Christians. Forty-two of its Jews survived Auschwitz. Eleven returned to the shtetl for a period of time, but they were no longer alive or in residence when we visited. None of its five or six synagogues are in existence, including the imposing one that Queen Bona gave to the shtetl in gratitude after some Jewish boys rescued her from a swarm of bees in the mid-fifteenth century. By contrast, the impressive Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches are in use and being refurbished. One of the very old Christian cemeteries was exquisite.

Although Belarus today is one of the last bastions of Soviet style life, Shershev and its environs was poor, rural, yet retained a bucolic quality. Shershev is about an hour's drive from the famous Belovishka Preserve with its ancient trees, bison herds, scientific station, crumbling hotel, and shared history among nations. My father's father was a woodman in the nearby forests and they had lived in a "dug-out" and also in something like a migrant camp, during the first years of my father's life... When the Jews were required to take last names, my ancestor called himself Zazulyer, which was already his nickname, because he could imitate the zazulya (cuckoo) bird so well.

We met and exchanged gifts with the mayor and city council. The mayor was a large commissar-like woman. But the city council included teachers and librarians. English is taught in the high school. Later we visited the remarkable if small library, in a quaint yellow wooden house with carved ornamentation at the roof and windows.

The old Jewish cemetery was in dreadful condition. The Nazis had used many of the headstones to pave a road to the nearest rail station in what is now called Lineve. An elderly arthritic "babushka", whose cottage bordered the desolate cemetery, offered to show us around for money. Of course I did not find the burial place of the two year old aunt for whom I was named.

We found the areas where each of my parents had lived as children, though we were unable to identify their precise houses. How meaningful this was to me! I stood on the bridge over the Neiman river looking out at the marshy grasslands and felt certain that as children my parents had stood there too, looking out as far as they could see into the unimaginable world beyond Shershev.

In the two little stores I looked in vain for a souvenir. There was too much candy, but good bread and some cookies-- much like the ones I had eaten from Jewish bakeries as a child in the United States and still do. On the counter, displayed like pronged diamonds, were two separate pyramids of six tired-looking oranges and six lemons. However, the local Catholic priests, who helped us a great deal, shared a bountiful meal with us. One of them drove us in his rickety car far into the hinterland to look further into our family history.

My cousin, who was with us, developed a seriously infected finger. As a result, I can tell you all about what medical treatment in Belarus is and is not! I found myself thinking it was a blessing that anybody in my family survived life in that village in the years not just before electricity, in-door plumbing, bountiful markets, and efficient transportation—but before handy doctors, hospitals, and an array of antibiotics!

The rail station in Brest from which we journeyed back to Poland, was a fine building with rococo decorations surrounding its vaulted magenta ceiling. The entire area looked like something out of an eighteenth century Tolstoyian novel. However, the process of going through customs, or even their style of cleaning the waiting room, was done in a chilling Soviet manner... Nobody we spoke to wanted Lukashenko to be re-elected. Yet everybody expected that he and the other “black car people” would retain their offices and their powers.

I am so grateful that my parents talked to us as children about their early years in Shershev, and that I was able to visit during my life time, if not during theirs. I wonder if they would have wanted to return for a visit? It was my son who made our very complicated travel arrangements, but it was also he who exclaimed as we walked about, “It’s just like they/you said it was!”.

I was born in Shershova, in the district of Pruzhany, in the province of Grodno, in upper White Russia, in 1895. My young parents had been left poor. When my grandfather died creditors popped up like mushrooms overnight. His supposed affluence disappeared with him. Father was seventeen when he became a tree-feller and sawyer at the edge of the Forest of Bielovezh.

At that time the aromatic dark greens of the forest belt wound its patterns in all directions, southward across Central Europe, and by various names over many countries. Not observing national borders, it climbed over mountains and spilled down the valleys in varishaded forms as it encroached into the plains.

I was brought to Chadree, a hamlet ten miles from Shershova in the middle of the forest, as soon as my mother was able to travel. My mother used to say that I was but a year and a half old at a wedding in Chadree, which, years later, I described.

I recall that when I was two years old, sitting on our cottage doorstep, the peasant women would come wandering out of the woods with their scythes, carrying large bundles of new-cut grass or firewood. Some were driving their cattle home from the meadows in the interior of the forest. Their songs combined with the lowing of the cattle, echoing through the evening like a far-off chorale inside a dark, receding wood.

Often I can still smell the *zubrova* (sweet hay) that the zubers (European bison) loved so much. They were the only herd left in Europe, kept in park-like captivity in the forest. We would sometimes see them coming out of the depths of the forest to browse around its fringes. It was strictly forbidden to kill them. But every few years, the czar and his retinue would come to the summer palace near the town of Bielovezh, and stage a shooting party, at times giving audience to a few grieving peasants.

I remember vividly my first impressions of the inky forest at night, and of music, in the form of half-chant, in connection with our prayers in honor of the full (?) moon. Father would put on his prayer-shawl and from our hut cross the lonely dirt road to where the forest began. And I always followed. We would stand blinking at the moon. I held the serviette-covered tray, on which lay a candle, the goblet, and the decanter of wine. Father would light the candle and pour the goblet full. His prayer echoed through the forest. He would drink first. Then I would sip, the powerful aroma striking my face. Father always made it apparent that a child's participation made the occasion even more holy, as Mother's and Sister's beaming eyes confirmed when we returned to the hut.

The Czar's forests are clean as a hound's tooth, and the moon is the symbol of periodic renewal, cleanliness, and rebirth. For me, I recall, the moon seemed to emerge from far behind the dark treetops, and proceed to admire itself in the pond by the edge of the forest. The breeze would die to a whisper. The odor of pine was overpowering, even to one born in it. "The moon won't look at me, Father. It's

winking at the stars down in the water," I'd complain. He would laugh till the forest seemed to join in to scare me.

[The forest was a half-good, half-bad monster which swallowed stray children, but over which the moon kept a watchful eye.]

We had our *misnagid* chants - these use a special kind of note, which it is forbidden to print in the Torah. They have to be learned and remembered by the person who leads them. My father, having been tutored privately in the country, could remember every note in the long services he was often called into town to sing for holidays. Going to town for these was a memorable event for us. That's where, at the age of three, I also first heard the regular cantors.

When I was five and had to go to *cheder* we moved reluctantly back to Shershova - ten miles of green, solemn, perpendicular trunks from Chadree. My older brother had already been boarded there with the family of a rebbe who conducted *cheder* in his own home. Now a town dweller, I was allowed to accompany my mother and the others back to my forest on berry-picking expeditions. With Mother as scout, no one ever got lost in the woods. It was as a returning visitor that I really got to know them.

The rest of my knowledge of the forest I gleaned from my father. He had worked for a family that leased the local lumbering rights from the government. By the time we moved to town, however, that section was cut. For a short period after there were still smaller sections nearby on which he continued. He and the peasants would live in the woods in makeshift huts of logs and bark and sticks. But soon he found himself following the forest belt almost to the borders of Galicia. I used to listen to his tales for hours. Later, in Canada, introduced to the mysteries of geography, there was my magic fairyland, my forest, smacked over the map in various colors.

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When I was eight and a half, in 1903, my father wangled a steamship ticket out of my mother's brother in eastern Canada. The next year, my older sister and brother followed there. All three now worked in my uncle's clothing factory in St. John, New Brunswick. And the following year they felt rich enough to send for my mother and the rest of us kids: a baby boy of one, my brother Tevye, and I, the oldest, ten and a half, Herschel. Wish I'd kept that name.

We went by horse and cart to the rail line at Linowo, then through Wilno to the Baltic herring port of Libau [now Liepaja in Latvia - IW], where we boarded the first steamer I ever saw. We sailed through the Kiel Canal and cut down the North Sea to Hull. We had our steamer tickets from Liverpool and just enough rubles to get there from Hull. But we were detained, for a month, to be cured of trachoma, of which Tevye and I had a "touch." How we managed to raise the money to subsist and send a telegram to Canada, would be better answered by some kind English Jews.

I remember, in the Kiel Canal, two days out from Libau: Just before our steamer pulled off from the dock, the woman next to me sat her baby on the flat wooden rail as we watched the workers. The ship blew its whistle. The baby's shoe fell off and onto the guard-log floating below. The mother cried out; a dockhand, noticing the poor foreign woman's poverty-stricken look, wound a rope around himself. Putting it over a capstan, another laborer lowered him down and a moment later pulled him up again. He threw the little shoe over our deck as we slowly moved away. There I had added to my education the agility and training of the Northern Europeans; the regard of one poor working person for another poor passenger; the utter disregard for her nationality, or his; and last but not least, the utter disregard for the chance that the ship might grind him against the shiny side of the weed-grown dock as we headed forward and the ship swung inward again.

We landed at Quebec, took the train to Montreal, then changed to cross the St. Lawrence and head southeast to St. John, where I stayed five years and made six grades of school.

Our family of seven then moved to Toronto. I already had to go to work. Soon I discovered that I could go to night school at Toronto Tech, where I was interested in a course in free-hand drawing. I won a prize and the third winter found me attending the regular art school's evening classes.

In my village, only the few rich had ever heard of vacation. We had the Sabbath, and religious holidays. This could be why we were so religious. In fact we lived from Sabbath to Sabbath, otherwise life for us youngsters would have been awful, since on weekdays we were quite hungry. In the summertime, we could trudge to the forest to pick berries, or mushrooms, but not without a license - it was the Czar's. Few folks had fruit trees or more than a tiny garden. If it wasn't for the sauerkraut barrel we would have suffered from pellagra more than we did.

When I came to Canada I could, if I wished, have meat three times a day, or drink cocoa till my head ached. That was vacation - what more! In the summer the fog would roll away from the wharves in St. John. On and off the sailing ships I could fish for smelts and tommy-cods and laugh at the little sissy kids. For a vacation, I thought one had to be sick. Until I was eighteen I could not afford a so-called, real vacation, but soon I was succeeding in the toy business in Toronto by day and attending art school by night, and there was now the sketching camp on summer weekends.

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White Russia, or the Northern Ukraine, is a beautiful but flat country broken by rolling land, peat marshes, meadows, and (by far most memorable to me), great, clean, forest-belts. Our little town drew its so-called industry from the forest - particularly hand-made roof shingles, but also tinsmiths, tailors, trunk-makers and shoe-makers. Other towns had their pottery, brick-firing sheds, and yards, or they

were market centers for produce and products. Often the type and condition of the soil determined the prosperity of an entire town, both Jews and Gentiles.

[These little towns were old, and also had their history through wars, rebellions, and so forth, merely because they stood where they stood, on highways or byways.] [cut?]

In Shershova the Jewish people were the town, except for the few Russian officials - post-office, assessor, and a policeman or two. The rest of the Christian population were peasants. With a few exceptions, they had their own plots of land which began at the outskirts. They played no part in the inside flow of events nor in the social life, except on Sundays and holidays when they would flock in by horse and cart to go to church. They also came to use the public bath, to trade their wares, and to buy their salt, Swedish herring, strips of iron nails, and shingles, or to order a pair of shoes. If they were prosperous, they might buy an overcoat or dry goods from the Jewish tradesmen. And last but not least, they came to get drunk. A wife would patiently tuck her husband away in the straw of their cart, and herself drive the horse back home. Sometimes the wife would even join her husband and sleepy kids for a much-needed half-sitting snooze. The horse would find his own way, breaking into a trot for the last few miles. He fed on a mixture of meager oats and hay, in a rickety barn which was a lean-to to the peasant's thatched-roof hut. This retention of animal heat was essential, because the peasant was poor and lived without money. Heavy clothing and shoe-soles were still made from animal skins, and a horse, ox, or wife drew the plow. Even taxes were usually paid in farm goods. These were raised on poor, rain-soaked, undrained land. Much of it was sandy, only good for potatoes, or the better kind, for rye.

Most of us in town had a little garden-plot of potatoes and beans and a few carrots. I never knew or saw a tomato or melon. No grapes, either tame or wild. Berries, yes - the forest was literally carpeted with blueberries. One could pick them if one bought a permit. Those kids who were old enough to walk for miles to the forest and back, and help lug the stuff, would follow our mothers to do so. For this we were allowed to play hooky from school.

The local officials did not interfere in our lives. As a matter of fact Jew and Gentile got along famously there, for each household was a veritable manufacturer. Some had apprentices, and each brought his stuff to sell on the huge market square from which the main road and the other smaller ones radiated. Market days and holidays brought jugglers, gypsies, and even one-tent circuses to the square. In the middle of the square were town pumps for fire-fighting, and stalls where shopkeepers set themselves up during the daytime. In winter they sat over charcoal fire-pots to warm up.

It's amazing how little we kids demanded of life. We would go visit the square to listen in to a discussion of one of the weekly newspapers. It came to but a few citizens who could afford it, and from whom the rest got all the news of the outside.

Masticated, digested, and rehashed, we would bring it into the houses sometimes before our elders heard it.

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I was brought up in the Orthodox Jewish religion, but none of us were fanatical, least of all my parents. My grandfather had even maintained a private tutor, in the country. I am far from being an Orthodox person now, having my own ideas about deity, creation, and science.

In our district the Jews were of a strain typical of the forest belt that ran into Central Europe. My father, and grandfather, and great-grandparents on his side were forestmen - honest, intelligent, tall, wiry, and erect even into old age.

Not many Jews lived easy, even in Poland and Ukraine, certainly not in Russia. Our charities were an all-year-round function, even to providing dowries for the poor girls.

Our sector, for the most part, were Misnagdim (liberals), in contrast to the Hassidic (ultra-orthodox) sect. The few Hassidim and their families had their prayer meetings in their little synagogue. Not knowing their religious philosophy, we considered them a bit on the fanatical side - gooky. [In Galicia though the Hassidim ruled the roost. My father had worked and lived among them, as I said, after our part of the forest had been exhausted.] But in our town their was little fanaticism. Its life did not center around the Rabbi, who often in other sectors held his position and influence by inheriting his father's house and followers. On the other hand, our people, including the laymen, were great Talmudists, often secretly well-versed in the classics of the Gentiles. To the Hassidim, we looked and acted almost too much like any Gentile European.

The most impressive thing I remember was the Sabbath. We lived for its coming, since the meals were better and our clothing newer and cleaner. Everyone who could went to the services in the various synagogues and meeting-places. The "Shul," the main one, which stood off the square, had a special history. It was of classic architecture, and inside, the east wall had the great altarpiece where the holy scrolls were kept. They were decorated with the lions of Judah upholding the carved tablets with their ten commandments, all of this connected by a delicate tracery of ornamental floral wood-carving. This artwork was the only kind I knew, except the hand embroidery of roosters and flowers at home and the similar handiwork on the peasants' garments.

I knew the various Slavic people with their different dialects. I used to hang around at the market places, and listen when they came to the house to visit my father. Yet I knew very little of the language. At home we spoke Yiddish - there was little *need* of the other languages. On one end of the street lived a Polish family, and next door to us, past our garden, there was a White Russian family. They, and their boy, and the

Polish girls, could speak Yiddish better than I. They all had their own short school terms in connection with their own churches. I knew their honest lives, their religious holidays, their art, their ikons, and their holy lithographs in full gorgeous colors, at which I could only allow myself the luxury of stolen glances. Their literature I garbled in English, later.

I remember the pleasant surprise I felt when I first discovered from a Gentile friend that he had a Christmas. I had been feeling sorry for him.

I remember and know more about these people than some foreign-affairs experts who see everything from the standpoint of what's-in-it-for-us. Their concepts of borderlines are phony. Their impossible demarcations will never stand put, not in the Baltics, in Poland, in the Balkans, or in the Himalayas.

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My father married my mother for several reasons: because she was beautiful, a cousin, and an orphan. The latter two reasons were chiefly my grandfather's. My father had just turned sixteen and was, he used to claim, already a reliable grown man. My mother was twenty; it was a sin for a girl to pass twenty unmarried. My father didn't fight my grandfather. If it was a *mitzvah* to marry an orphan, a related orphan, fine, a cousin, *fine*. She was poor. No dowry. Fine with him. Grandpa would provide until Father could.

She was from the nearest little town, where we/they later moved. Father had seen her once, when he was about fourteen, and she a very fair and copper-haired girl who had long before lost her mother. He had barely seen a Jewish girl other than the one or two pimply ones, older than himself, at the manager's (?) house, with whom he had practically grown up. Mother to him, despite having no formal education, was citified and sophisticated, angelic, and had a rich Yiddish vocabulary. She had the proper word for everything. Yet she could barely sign her name - though she could read Yiddish quite slowly.

My mother was an orphan. My brothers and I each married either motherless or fatherless girls, or both. That was the humanisitic quality of our people showing through. This proves that the "strong" do *not* conquer the weak.

My mother, to this day, thinks that all men are honest and all women are good. Even though my father was often gruff and angry - especially to me, who often got the beatings. One doesn't beat a daughter, nor my brothers, the older one a delicate child and another a scrofulous youngest who took our last pennies for cod-liver oil. That left me. But I wasn't robust. I was wiry like a rake, and sallow to the point where I suffered from pellagra in winter. Our neighbors would refer to me as the one who looks like a dead crow in the snow.

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When Father came home to town from the woods for the Sabbath, he would give me my weekly reading and translation assignment. He'd yell at me, as a good strict father was supposed to, till the window panes rattled.

A Jewish father in the old country simply had to test out his children's education. Religious education, that is; there was no other worth considering. The first two years of *cheder* were spent just in learning the Yiddish alphabet and learning to read. Worldly education, the luxury of addition and subtraction, was obtained in the very early morning in a class conducted at someone's home for an hour. There I learned to write the few words I knew of Russian and Polish, and do sums in simple arithmetic. We kids would congregate there at seven in the morning and be back in *cheder* by nine, meanwhile having run into the synagogue to say our morning services. The religious teachers would look down their noses a bit at these "worldly-knowledge" teachers. Not essential, they said.

We had to stay at regular *cheder* until five with a break to go home for lunch, unless we brought lunch and used the extra time to play. In the winter, we'd come back after supper for evening sessions until 9:30; then we had nothing to do but go home and go to sleep. Six days a week, no vacations except on holidays, which is why we liked holidays so much. I suppose that our only good things came in the form of religious life.

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[I think there are bits in the next few paragraphs that exaggerate the cultural harmony.....there was no Golden Age....but still he has a point, basically]

[here bist dah & forest sense?]

In the old government of Grodno, the forest of Bielovezh had kept secrets, taken sides, and sustained forest-lovers in their fights against oppressors. It sheltered overtaxed peasants, and those persecuted for their religion, during the uprisings of the Middle Ages, the Polish revolution of 1831, and the other one, in 1862. But Bielovezh, my relatives say, was flattened during the 1914-1918 holocaust. The little herd of European bison was slaughtered, not as oxen at the altars of old, but wholesale. Trees, people, and creatures alike were mowed down in the name of bigger and better war.

Once or twice I was lost in the forest, because of the trees, I'd suppose. I had seen the road, and run to it, but couldn't see our lone hut though it was only five hundred feet away. I took off in the wrong direction. The road took an L-turn to the north, and, if I had kept on, I would have probably reached Shershova, had I lasted that long. But a peasant saw me and carried me piggy-back to my mother. I was simply one of "our children," to him. The peasants were like brothers and sisters to my parents. They didn't know the meaning of hatred or anti-Semitism.

Why not? The only reason I know is that the Gentile church leaders there were not bigoted. Had they been, during the time rioting spread through the rest of the Russian Pale, you can rest assured we would have known. But when we moved to town, the priests assured us that there would be no trouble. If, on market days, a drunken peasant got troublesome, he would be put away where he could sleep it off.

I know about the Polish revolutionaries because my great-grandfathers hid them in their attics, and in their forest hideouts, and brought them food at the risk of their own lives. Simply because the Poles had treated them as human beings, as equals, more or less. Up to that time, that is.

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The still forest is never still. The modernist cannot cope with it. Only the traveler knows that the forest is up long before dawn, and is everchanging in form and color and texture. Only he who comes as a child, poet, musician, in awe, wonderment, and humility, can know its sounds.

The trees rub and scrape and gently creak at one another, giving off a sweet resinous sound. In warm breezes the sounds are like music; in arctic weather they are eerie with the weight of ice.

Even in its greatest silences, at night, ....a tiny mite will come whispering and mocking into your eardrums. 'Bizzz-z-z; bizz-st dah? Are you there? Are you ther-r-r-r?'

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Patterns, images, incidents, and haunting scenes begin to reenter my mind as if tumbling and somersaulting over each other. Things to tax, elate, and overcome me. I wanted to stay on and receive these crazy-quilt mental notes for storage purposes. But these moving kaleidoscopic things were torturing my now feverish condition. It was a thousand times more trying, than trying to take in, remember, compare, and do justice to a large picture gallery of many galleries, and departments in one session. Of water-colors, etching, drawings, oil paintings and sculpture all together, is actually, physically tiring.

## מיין שטעטל

און ווען איך וועל אהין דערגיין,  
וועט זיכער שוין דאס הייז נישט שטיין.  
און בלייבן וועט צו טאן אַ וויין  
ווי אַ מאָל, אַ מאָל אַ קינד.

און ווי אַ מאָל אין מאַמעס שוים  
די מעשה אירע לאַזט זיך אויס:  
— געווען אַ מאָל, געווען אַ הייז,  
נישטאָ, נישטאָ אַצינד.

און צווישן ציגל, הויפּנס אַש,  
רוינען-גראַז און קייט און סאַוש,  
פאַרגאַנגענהייט וועט טאן אַ טאַש  
דער ווינט.

נאָר וואָס געווען וועט זיין שוין ווייט,  
אַזוי ווייט פאַר נייער צייט,  
נייע צייט און נייע לייט —  
דאָס מעשהלע פאַרשווינדט.

## MY TOWN

... And when I reach there,  
surely the house will no longer stand where it was.  
All that'll be left to do is stare, and cry  
like I sometimes did as a child, long long ago ...

and sometimes, just as then, on mother's lap,  
her story ends with a gap:  
— Once upon a time, there was a house, perhaps  
now there isn't, oh there isn't no!

Amidst bricks and piles of ashes,  
dirt and soot and wild grasses,  
the wind will have trashed the past  
I used to know,

for what was will now be long-gone,  
far too distant for a new-age song;  
new-time's wrongs, newly respectable throngs--  
and the little tale disappears, just so ...

[Siberia, in labor camp]

## MY MOTHER, A LITTLE JEWISH GIRL FROM SHERSHEV

(Written by Leah Watson in simple English for high school students studying English in Shershev around 2009)

Once upon a time a baby girl was born in *Shershev* to a Jewish family. Shershev is what Jews called the town, and the Yiddish word *shtetl* means town. My mother was named *Toibe*, the Yiddish word for the bird called in English a dove. It is a small white or gray bird with a soft, repetitive cooing song, something like a lullaby. Her name of endearment was *Toibele* which means little dove. Perhaps she cried softly when she was born.

My mother was a beautiful baby with big brownish- greenish eyes we call hazel in English, and golden hair. She was the second of six living children... The eldest child, also a girl, was named *Alte*, (meaning the oldest). *Fradel*, (from the word for happy) was my mother's younger sister. Her brothers were *Tevye*, *Baruch*, (blessed) and *Maishe*, (from the word Moses). I think there was at least one other older child who died in infancy. He or she was never mentioned...

My mother's parents were *Aaron Nitzberg*, her father, and *Rebeka Rochel Kozak*, her mother. Aaron was an orphan, probably from Pruzhany, where his family had been in the lumber business. Why they died, or how they died, or even their names my mother did not know. Aaron was a shinglemaker, and my mother always said he was a gentle, sweet, thin man, and a little sickly.

My mother's mother was another story: She was dark- eyed, dark- haired, and rather tall, with a serious or maybe stern face. Her own father, my mother's grandfather, *Alter Kozak*, was a tall, handsome dark-haired man who was probably a teacher. People respected Grandfather, called *Zaide* in Yiddish, in the shtetl, although they might not have always agreed with his ideas. He had what were modern ideas in those days about birth control and inheritance, and who knows what else. He had only two children, Rebeka and her brother *Velvel*, and Alter believed that both his son AND his daughter should share equally in whatever worldly possessions he might have when he died. His wife was named *Peshe*, meaning she was born around the time of *Pesach* or Passover, also known as The Last Supper for Christians. Nobody remembers her last name.

There is, however, a picture of my mother and her sister leading *Peshe* around by the hand when she was old and blind. The ground is snowy and my mother is about eight years old. Mother looks serious, even a little scared. All three of them are dressed in their best, so it must have been an important day when the picture was taken. My mother remembered her Grandmother, called *Bobe* in Yiddish, as grumpy. Why my grandfather's name was Kozak nobody can explain. Was he a child born of a rape by a soldier? Did he look like somebody's idea of a Russian Cossack?

And my mother's father's name, Nitzberg, I once read in a book, meant that during the 1700's some ancestor of his had lived in Koenigsberg, up by the Baltic Sea, a city which was then called Nitzberg, after the Prussian king Nicholas, and still later was called Lemberg. True? Maybe. Supposedly my mother's father's brother, name unknown, fled to Sophia, Bulgaria at some point before the First World War and was a cabinet maker. That's all she knew about her uncle...

But one thing is probably true: My mother's father and mother married partly because her father could help out an orphan. Maybe he was even something of a relative?

My mother grew up in a typical wooden house on a street then called Kaminetsker, with many Jewish people and homes. I imagine the house was not very big. It was on the right side and just below the square, facing away from where the mayor's office is these days and the little park or square where the Jewish merchants in those days had approximately twenty little stores in a covered marketplace. Of course the house had no electricity, no indoor plumbing, no refrigeration or regular stove. It probably had a timber floor, a cellar, and low ceilings. It did have a pripichek, a large tile stove that heated the house, more or less, and had a kind of shelf on top of it where somebody slept. How that person was chosen I don't know. At least sometimes it was my mother.

You see my mother was born way way back about 1897. But people didn't really keep track of birthdays in those days. I don't know why, except that so many children died in infancy of various diseases, and life was hard enough anyway, so just staying alive and getting enough to eat occupied them. Over a hundred or more years ago there were maybe 250,000 Jews living in the Shershev shtetl and vicinity. By the nineteen hundreds there were about 150,000. The Jews had dwindled because of poverty, pogroms, and emigration. And after World War II, only 42 people from the shtetl had survived Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp, and only eleven returned to the village for a time after the war, but most didn't stay. They emigrated to Ukraine, Russia, Canada, United States, and Israel.

Originally, according to books I've read, the king invited Jews into what is now Belarus to be merchants, money lenders, and skilled workers. That was back in the 1700's. One of the most important shops in Shershev way back then wove cloth and made uniforms for soldiers.

I think leading her blind grandmother around was not my mother's only chore as a child. Everything, just everything needed children to help---washing, getting water from the nearest well, cooking, stoking the fire, gardening, collecting plants, preserving food for winter, sewing clothes, taking care of the younger children, and so many other things that children don't have to do these days, or do as much. There is even a special word in Yiddish for taking a coat or dress, turning it inside out, ripping it apart. and resewing it for the next child in line on its "wrong" side.

In those days girl children didn't go to school. Sometimes they did have tutors if they were more prosperous. But one reason the Jews were so valuable to the Belarusians is because they had a long time tradition of literacy. They could read and write! The gentile peasant farmers often were illiterate. The Jewish girls did not study Hebrew, and only read the Old Testament, called the Torah, in Yiddish from a special prayer book just for them. Nevertheless, learning began with the alphabet and prayers at about age three for the boys. To this day Jews are often referred to as "The People of the Book." But some older Jewish students went on to learn Polish, Russian, and other languages, and

went to gymnasiums and trade schools that taught in those languages, even as far away as Brest---if their families could afford it.

The first years of school were called *cheder*. Everybody spoke Yiddish at home. Yiddish was a language that originated about one thousand years ago in the Rhine Valley. It is in the Germanic language family, but with most consonants written as in Hebrew, and vowel characters as in a Romance Language. It is written right to left, like Hebrew. Over the years it had acquired many Slavic words, as well as some from Old French, Old Italian, and even Latin. And nowadays English. It is still a living language.

People were poor. Even the richer people were poor. Life was hard. Wars and foreign invasions made it even harder. Yet family life was sacred and close. Every Friday night my mother's family had some special white bread called *challah* and maybe some chicken, or chicken soup with dumplings called *knaidlach*, or a noodle pudding called *lukshin*. Many, many potatoes were eaten in a variety of ways. Especially during the winter months, there were few vegetables---pickles from cucumbers, potatoes, beets, and cabbage could be stored or preserved, and that was about it.

My mother said that she lived next door to the orchard and house of an Eastern Orthodox priest. There was a church nearby then. The tower remains. But now there are just a few shops in a newer building. I suppose that some of the apples from that orchard were eaten by children who climbed over the fence.. I could still see the apple trees when I visited Shershev a few years ago. You can too.

When my mother was about ten years old a terrible fire started in that orchard. The priest had lit supposedly contained fires in order to kill the worms that infested the apples. But it was windy and the fire became unruly. Soon nearby houses began to burn and not much longer after that the shingled roofs of most of the wooden houses in the shtetl began to catch on fire. The year was 1908. Many Jews who have written about growing up in Shershev remember that fire. Perhaps your grandparents did too. There was a great deal of damage to the town. And remember, water to fight fires had to come from wells. There was a fire truck in Pruzhany later on, and still later I think one in Shershev itself. But not then.

I don't know how much of my mother's house was burned or charred. But she was always very nervous when she talked about that fire, or fires in general. She was sent in, or ran in, but probably was sent in, being small and quick, and always eager to help, to rescue the heavy brass candle sticks that were the family treasure because they were lit, and prayers said over them every Friday night at the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, the day of rest. I have those candle sticks in my house right now. They are over one hundred and fifty years old and very very heavy. Nowadays brass candles come mostly from China and India. These did not. I have seen similar ones in museums. They were made in Russia.

There were hardly any toys as we know them now for children to play with. At *Chanukah* time in November or December, lead dreidles were spun. (The Jews used a different kind of calendar.) They were a four-sided top with the Hebrew letters standing for the phrase "a miracle happened here". My mother learned the story that was always told about how the Jews in ancient times in The Holy Land, fighting for their freedom and identity, only had enough oil for one night. Somehow, the story goes, it lasted for

eight. That's why my mother learned to light candles for eight nights. The candle holder had eight branches or holders and is still called a *menorah*. Very thin, crisp, potato pancakes, called *latkes*, were cooked, and songs, as always, were sung. So my mother learned to spin anything and everything for fun. I wish I knew more about what kind of games they played and whether they sewed themselves dolls, used stones for games, ran races or what.

My mother learned to sing many songs, to dance in a circle waving a white hankerchief, a dance called the *Sherelle*, and to be close to and caring of other people--- family, neighbors, and townspeople. Of course she had to be careful of many things too-- of sickness, of the angel of death, of mysterious and scary things in the night, and of doing wrong. Sometimes a chicken was swung around in a circle above an adult's head to ward off evil and then killed. Sometimes people were given two names in order to fool the angel of death. Marriages were often arranged,, but at the same time there were many songs about boys and girls meeting in the forest or fields and falling in love. My mother had a special friend named *Mordecai Bosniak*. Sometimes he would wait for her by the garden gate. Speaking of forests, the nearby Belaviesha Pushka was a dark and mysterious place for my mother and her friends, but they knew it was vast and full of ancient animals like bison, and huge very old trees.

Life was particularly hard after the First World War. Everybody was so poor and actually sometimes hungry. So when my mother was about twelve her father took her aside one day and explained that she really needed to eat the lima beans that were growing in their garden even though she didn't like them. Because he was so kind and patient with her, she did eat them. Her memory of this conversation was one she cherished all her life.

Soon he set forth on a long journey to the United States, hoping to arrive at the home of his wife's brother Velvel Kozak. He had just enough money to get there. It had taken a long long time for the family to save enough money for him to take the trip. There must have been a great a deal of discussion about this among my mother's parents and grandparents. The plan was that he would get a job, some kind of job, maybe helping Velvel with his peddler's cart, slowly save some money, and eventually bring over the rest of the family. Velvel lived in Chicago, a very big busy city even then. My grandfather only knew how to make shingles and live in a village on the edge of a great forest.

There was a saying in Yiddish in those days that children who went to another country became "paper children", because only in letters was there a chance of hearing from them again. (*Papirine kinder*).

Mother remembered the goodbyes, the long way through the forest to the train station where he went forth by horse and cart called a *droshke*, and how much she missed him every single day. For about six months she waited to hear that he had arrived safely and wondered about his daily life so far away. After all, in those days there were no computers, telephones were rare, and telegrams were uncommon too. How she missed his gentle ways; how much more help she had to be to her mother and the younger children. She really worried about him and if she'd ever see him again....In vain the family waited for a letter from him but none came.

One day, about six months after he left, he came back to Shershev, walking slowly down the road! He had come back as slowly as he had left--by train, by ship, and then on foot. At first he was just a black speck in the distance. As he came closer and was recognized, my mother's mother fainted! He looked exceptionally weary. And sad. He had been rejected at the port of Baltimore because of a lung condition. Was it tuberculosis? asthma? emphsema? Nobody knows. Whatever it was, it was serious enough that it prevented him from entering the United States. Nor did my mother ever know how he obtained the money to make the trip all the way back home to their little wooden house. For my mother it was a day of both sadness and joy. She could see how tired and ill he looked.

The next year my mother's oldest sister Alte was sent on the same perilous journey. My mother then became the oldest child and had more responsibilities and chores. Her sister went to live with her uncle in Chicago and almost immediately went to work sewing in a large factory six days a week. Alte was just barely old enough to legally obtain a passport and travel as an adult alone.

About a year or two later it was decided that my mother should also make the journey on her own. I believe it was 1913. Mother always described how the town followed her to the place of departure by droshke, and then waited for the train, weeping. Somehow she managed to find her way to the ship that sailed to the new world. It arrived after many days in Halifax, Canada, and from there a train connection took her and some of the other emigrants to Chicago. All the way across the ocean she worried that she would not recognize her sister when she arrived, or that her sister would not recognize her! After all, people change a lot as they become fifteen and sixteen. And the trip itself was difficult on board ship, because she was in steerage in the bottom. Sure enough, one on one side of the chain link fence, the other on the other, the sisters crept along looking for each other, asking over and over if they were each other's sister by calling out each other's names, Alte? Toibe?

All her life my mother would tell us about being hungry on that train trip from Halifax to Chicago, and how a vendor came through the train selling things. My mother had never seen a banana and bought one with the little money she had. It was very adventuresome of her to buy something she had never eaten. But what did she know? She threw away the banana and ate the peeling. Whenever my mother told her own children this story we would all laugh--until she cried. For her, this was the story that said more than any other about traveling to the United States, alone, as a teenager.

Soon she too was sleeping at her uncle's apartment. He was not as gentle a man as her own father... There were five grown cousins sleeping cross-wise in one bed. She also went to work sewing in the garment industry, in a big, dusty factory with many floors, rows of sewing machines, long hours, six days a week. It was a building that was either too hot or too cold, and certainly had no fire escapes.

But no matter how hard my mother and her sister worked, paid by the piece, they could not earn enough money to bring their family over before the beginning of World War I in Europe. Day and night she worried and cried, or tried not to cry about it. Although she was always a brave child, now she had to be even braver. And after a long



day at work she went to a night school class set up for emigrants in order to learn the English language--how to speak and read it. I wonder if she ever fell asleep in class? She wanted more of an education but never could obtain it. She loved music and loved to sing. She wanted to take voice lesson and sing opera. Instead she went to opera performances whenever she could afford to buy a ticket.

Unfortunately, she never saw her Father again, because he died before the end of the war from his lung condition and lack of good food and medicine. Her mother hid in the river banks from the German soldiers who invaded the town, and her smallest sibling, Maishe, cried in hunger and some said he should be silenced so he would not alert the soldiers to their hiding place. Her pretty little sister was hidden in the cellar from soldiers.

In 1921 the remaining members of the family, weak from hunger and dispirited by war, and exhausted by the journey over, joined my mother and her sister in Chicago. Life was not easy even then. But lima beans became one of my mother's favorite foods. It was all that she had left of her father. She had only one photograph of him, taken when she was about twelve.

When her mother arrived in the United States, and journeyed to Chicago, she carried with her a postcard of a tall, handsome man seated in a chair in a garden under a big tree beside a jagged fence in Shershev. It was signed Mordecai Bosniak. Standing next to him was his bride holding a bouquet of daisies, like in the romantic Yiddish song *Margaretkelach*, in which a young person pulls off the petals of the flower one by one reciting the names of possible lovers. That card told her, indirectly, that he was married and no longer waiting for her. She kept that postcard in her bottom drawer until she died. Now I keep it in mine

Not too many years ago, strangely enough, I met a man who was Mordecai's youngest brother. Himself an elderly man, he told me that Mordecai had gone to Pruzhany and would only come home on the weekends. When World War II was at its worst, he escaped from the Pruzhany ghetto and joined the Partisans. He died during the war in the forest. When I gave his youngest brother, who barely remembered what Mordecai looked like, a copy of the postcard, he cried. It was his only picture of any of his eight brothers and sisters or his parents, all killed because of the war and their Jewishness.

I first visited Shershev in the late 1990's, with my husband and son. Our son was the very first person in our family to journey to Brest and then to Shershev when he was working in Europe after finishing college. Another time we went with my cousin Celia, who was responsible for restoring the Jewish cemetery a couple of years ago. One other time, Celia and I went with about thirty people whose ancestors had all come from various near-by shtetls...

Each time I have been there I have been overwhelmed by the thought that if my parents had remained in Shershev they probably would have been killed during the first or second World War. Moreover, I might have been killed or starved to death or taken off to a ghetto or a concentration camp--just because I was Jewish. On the other hand, I loved visiting Shershev and being so close to the forest and trees, and the fields of flowers and geese, and I cherished the friendliness of everybody I met. Even the bread seemed familiar. When I first came I went to the cemetery to try and find gravestones of

my ancestors, especially that of a two year old great-aunt for whom I was named. What I found was that the Nazis had used many of the gravestones to pave a road through the forest to the train station at Lineve, which used to be called Oranchichi.

I was so sorry that my parents were not alive to hear about our trips and see the pictures we took of how things in Shershev had changed on the one hand, and not changed on the other. Sometimes they really missed Shershev. Can you imagine what it felt like for me to visit? (And my father's family also came from Shershev, and lived in a very humble house closer to the bridge. When he was a baby they had also lived in Hidree near the forest.)

I wanted to write this little story about my mother so you would have some idea of what it was like to be a Jewish child growing up in Shershev once upon a time. Now I hope you will write me back about your family and your experiences growing up there! Maybe someday we will meet each other. Even share a banana together.

And by the way, your school already has a copy of a whole book, in English, about Shershev, written by a man called Moishe Kantorowitz, who survived Auschwitz and came to live in Toronto, Canada. He spent years and years writing this book, first in Yiddish, then translating it into English. It's called MY MOTHER'S BEQUEST. I brought it to your school the second time I came.

## Eastern European Trip, September-October 2005

KRAKOW: Arrived early to see a friend who unfortunately had the flu. Thus stayed pre tour in the new Sheraton-Krakow, across from the historic palace, with which it clashes. Lavish food, rooms, pool, exceptional employees. Poles rather resent the hotel; costly at a time of inflation and unemployment etc... Krakow, undestroyed in WW2, is old and much of it lovely. The immense central square as big as Mex. City's. The central park, University. Places the Pope worked and lived. The hourly trumpeter at the top of the cathedral who breaks off to memorialize early invasions. Our group first went to a Galician Jewish photo etc. museum established by a former BBC photojournalist who has made huge tableaus of photos of Jewish remnants in rural Poland. Stunning. Located in the old restored in large measure: (cemeteries, synagogues, restaurants, Helena Rubenstein's house, etc) Jewish section now as well a teeming lively youth hangout. Dinner, and a program of Yiddish song via a local group and professor at Jagollonian Univ. Touching. Visited friend's artist friend in old Jewish section (orthodox and poor Jews; rest were integrated) in a true bohemian apt full of colors and fanciful decoration. A metal sculpturer of life size trees. Lunch in the small historic Saskia Hotel where Jim and I stayed when I lectured years prior. Better beet borscht than my mother's. Susan Sontag wrote novel *The Actress* about a 19th c. actress who stayed there... The vast former Guild Hall full of crafts... My old compadre in the Jewish Cultural Center where I lectured. Meeting with the various tour members at a dinner served baronial style. Group includes some graphic artists from Univ of Ill. Some Jerseyites who are related to the youngest brother of the man in the "mystery" picture my mother kept of her teenage boyfriend... Some Pole hating Jews, some very observant modern Amer. Jews, some not--a diverse assortment of people. Our USA coordinator a powerful, obese, quixotic, controlling, heart of gold guy. The overall tour sponsors, from Minsk Eastern European Heritage Preservation Org--an American named after FDR with a Belarusian wife, totally wonderful people. Instead of returning once more to Auschwitz and Birkenau with tour, I opted to wander about Krakow... and to meet up with Ian's young friend's sister who came down from Warsaw to see me. Both these young women, representing the "new" Poland, have fine degrees, distinguished jobs, are lovely, vital, and wonderfully warm kind and generally optimistic. The world needs such young people. We walked talked and ate pieroshke, strudel, tea. Too short a visit. Such a dear person. Given record of Kroc Trio doing Jewish melodies; also extensive diverse historical Chopin compendium. DEPARTURE FOR MAIDANEK Death Camp by bus : Thru' the golden country side for hours of early morning bus ride, then went to this wooden, extensive, horror..paths paved as usual with gravestones from nearby Lublin city Jewish cemetery stones. Various types of death chambers, pits, ovens, windswept barracks, the ironically named field called the "rose garden" where Jews who could work were sorted from those put to death. Since I had interviewed a man in a nursing home (for the Spielberg Foundation) who escaped from M., who began throwing things at me at tense moments, and whose blonde Chopin piano competition winner and 4 yr old son were marched to death when the women refused the Nazi offer to kill their children in exchange for their work lives..... I was especially moved by the place, and the urgent effort of the university student guides to tell us every every thing..... In the distant vista was Lublin.

LUBLIN: I was unprepared for the historic beauty, history, hilly terrain, Jewish presence historically in Lublin. Again time constraints prevented our journalist-guide from fully doing justice to the task even of seeing at least the old Jewish section. She and I have since corresponded, since the Yiddish poet I am translating went to a famous huge Yeshiva there in the late 20's and then return from Siberia by way of Lublin to Warsaw. Without what she showed told and gave me, I would never be able to translate these reference laden, history steeped poems. Lublin was both a center of traditional and Chassidic masters... Interestingly, she had a deep friendship with the last Jews in Lublin, who at 85 referred to her as their granddaughter. Now she is studying Yiddish which is being taught at L. University by a Pole somewhat trained in NYC. Many of the students seek to learn more about Polish history by learning Jewish history. I consider it a great pleasure to have met this lovely person. I have sent her a copy of my favorite out of print beginners' Yiddish book. One day I want to visit Lublin again. Various factors including my cousin's scratched cornea requiring treatment, plus of course our overly zealous coordinator, meant that we left Lublin for the border late and arrived at midnight. Huge numbers of anxious and silent people, goods inspections, dogs, cars, border guard of both nations, etc. Flood lights. Lots of silence on our bus and in the long lines. Fortunately with what was called a collection of \$50. "greasing" money by one of our many guides, we did not have to disembark and have our luggage inspected and our large bus was allowed to go to the head of the line. Three hours later, we left. Why? Because one of our group did not have an entry visa, only an official invitation. This entailed who would go back with him, who had the proper papers to do so, a thorough grilling of this fruity guy, a judicial magistrate, and endless other negotiations for how he was going to get back, return etc etc etc. Meanwhile we all sat in stony silence. Real Soviet style stuff. To further increase the surreal aspects, a couple of the group were trying cell phones to their relatives in the path of Katrina. Overall a bonding experience... We shared nibbles and nervousness and were relieved that he let the bus go thru sans the magistrate and a guide who slept where ??? and waited for the next not so nearby morning train to Warsaw.

BREST (BRISK) BREST-LITOVSK) We arrived, bedraggled, at the dubious Brest Intourist Hotel at 3a.m. It is as it was in 1993 and in 2000. One must stay there and only there. Only changes include an erratic money machine, a plexiglass guard window before the clerks, one who spoke english, a money exchange booth (still not willing to accept anything but brand new spotless small denomination dollars...fearing the counterfeit) a few more light bulbs at the dingy bar, and a kiosk of scant exorbitant souvenirs. The prostitutes and drug sellers were still there. My room on the top floor was reached by the old old elevator--scary. While I stood my ground to get some dude (gangster type) to help me into the elevator with my luggage, that was not the usual drill... On the top floor, which I admit had a dandy view of the ugly part of Brest, the corridors were dark and a light switch not obvious. The room, and this was a deluxe one, was clean and adequate, though the shower doors didn't slide and the towels were miniscule. (Aha I had brought a washcloth!) It was a small room barren of all but an elaborate light fixture a platform bunk, and a grotesque brocade chair and table, big ashtray.. (THE light fixture factory is in Brest.) The TV only received Belarusian stations. The bed sheets were gaudy kid style cartoons. The phone did not reach the lobby, etc. In the middle of the night loud men and prostitutes came to rooms down the hall and in

the early morning I heard vomiting. Several of the more handsome men in our group received proposition phone calls toward midnight, meaning that the desk people were in cahoots... The next morning we had a group breakfast that mostly omitted the good black bread from yesteryear and was generally pretty authoritarian and poor. The so called coffee cake was eggless bread dough topped with sugar. As if they couldn't decide whether to be really really Belarusian or western...The waiters were surly. Our coordinator's elaborate "American" pre planned menu stuff was of no avail--as I could have told him, and only added to the poor service.

So that day we walked to the old Jewish section, some went to the Archives, we saw the nearby E. Orthodox Cathedral---lovely but in dire need of outside repair, and well attended for morning mass, and we walked to a museum of confiscated art---mostly smuggled icons taken back at the border. We also visited the nearby state department store. Unlike in my prior visits, this had lots of goods, fancy goods, cosmetics, imported and good foods,etc etc. Costly though. Many there buying or looking....maybe some like in a museum? Bought a fine pair of leather shoes two toned for \$35.00. They were made in Russia? Italy? Gorgeous intricate Belarusian straw flowers for about 25 cents each. Again, the odd combo of nice goods or okay goods, and prices mostly sky high.I have forgotten the salary scale but it doesn't compute with average earnings and price of goods. Yet the mere fact of the good being there is some sort of peculiar progress, or perceived as such. On the sidewalks,many women in pointy spike heels. Many men in old old sneakers, suits . Still the eastern european penchance for red henna hair for women and black for men. Awful. Beautiful flocks of starlings swooping across the sky . In the evening some of us walked a few blocks to what was an Indian Restaurant opened in 2000, and then fabulous food priced American. It had become a more diverse restaurant, with excellent food, still pricey, and a certain tinge of Mafia like/prostitution/pimp quality as well as a place to really really dine well if one had money. We ate and drank well...and returned there every evening in various groupings, once with my having to "insist" on a table though they said no but had many empty. My companions were amazed and joked with hilarity at my ability to "work" the system. Me too Various versions told us about that.....That phenomenal restaurant in the midst of provincial Brest, had everything in cuisine from everywhere. Its history obviously complex. (Originally a chain out of India here and there in the world.) A few days later our driver took us on a tour of Brest, a sprawl of a city with mostly apartment hi rises except for old shtetl like houses, being remodeled,down by the Bug River where the old Jewish section was. The main cathedral is a tremenous stunner. Surrounded by beggars. The wide esplanade with trees down the center was still beautiful, as one of my oldest cousins remembered it from her childhood. Brest was once a lovely provincial city. Now it is mostly Stalinesque except for remains of the former era. A beautiful marquetry mural in the post office is the only good Stalin era landmark. The huge and I mean huge hero city fortress and museum complex complete with blaring patriotic songs is hard to believe as one approaches its size and sound. Off to the side of it is a very fine old ethnographic museum showing 13th c. life in the area. The train station built in the 19th cen. has a magenta and gold interior and restaurant area. It could be in a Tolstoy novel. Tall, big, imposing. Brest was the place where the buggies/wheels were changed between east and west, and Brest was generally an historic and key spot. Then. The Friday nite of our time in Brest, we attended an elaborate service at the local Jewish

organization. A motley crew, the theme was the dedication some attended of a monument that day to honor Began who had come from Brest. The reigning rabbi was chassidic, about 26, with a teenage like wife and a two year old who knew to remain quiet, and an infant. Other members of the range of remaining jewish families spoke, keened, fed us elaborately, and welcomed us in solidarity. It was a mournful occasion and I particularly regretted the fact that the most lively presence monetarily and otherwise in Belarus is often the very very orthodox. Both in Poland and Belarus and no doubt Russia, the secular jewish life is not well understood.... Visiting from Minsk, was the black political and economic officer of the USA Counsulate. Turns out he and I were both from L.A. and knew some interesting people in common and we had a delightful chat. Nice guy. He said he could only trace his people back to the slave ships so he envied those who knew what shtetl etc. our families had come from. He is setting up a historical center at the Embassy and was especially happy that I offered to send him the book about my parents' village that the Torontonian I know has done. In addition, on the bus coming into to Belarus I had described the Survivor Mitzvah Project started by Dovid Katz (Luminary Yiddishist) to help indigent elderly Jews in Eastern Europe. Delivery has been a problem... I collected some 600 dollars from our generous group and was able to give/send it to needy people either that night or the next day via our coordinator. A woman in Grodno has made it her life's job to distribute money and meds etc. thruout the region and takes only her expenses. Very satisfying to do this. Can supply info for those wishing to do so from USA. But to read the descriptions of the needy is to be overwhelmed. Most of them are old, sick, poor, without reparations, with paltry pensions and alone alone.

Our beloved super competent, and worldly guide Irina Pyshnenko, the one we used in 2000, joined us in Brest and for the next three days, with stalwart sandwich lunches, we drove the hour to and back from our shtetl Shershev to our hotel "haven" in Brest. Very outspoken then and now about politics in Belarus, she nevertheless explained to us that Lukashenko was a mixed phenomena...

SHERSHEV/SHERESHOVA: Our first day was a Saturday. We visited by pre-arrangement via our guide, the fine mid 1800's Catholic church and modest and unchanged parish house (albeit with, unique, indoor plumbing), where we, and especially my then sick cousin had been so befriended in 2000. The current affable guitar playing priest, Father Yashke, feed us. He had commanded a shambles of a rickety bus to bring people in from the boonies on Sundays, including numerous children. It had a sign on it that said In God We Trust. He joked that he had been "demoted" to Shershev, because being Polish, he had first been trained in Krakow then stationed in Kharkov in Ukraine. The former priest, a charmer, had been assigned only to Pruzhany, 18 k away, a booming town and former mercantile center, which has grown in parishoners. (Former army barracks there had become a hospital for Chernobyl victims in 2000.) He showed us the arduous, expensive restoration going on, with non local workers, and no help from the Vatican, tho' Pope John's picture was on a kind of billboard at his roof level. He then then took us a few streets, paved and then dirt, to the house of an elderly widowed parishoner living in her parent's farm. In her 80's, she was beautiful with earth gnarled hands and a weathered face but remarkable blue eyes and posture. All about the house were rugs she had woven or crocheted.. Like houses there, her interior had high beds, elaborate wall, table, and bed hangings of fabric, etc. She was lived alone, tended her garden, and would

not talk of her daughter whose photo she had displayed. She brought out dog eared photos of her all- girls -class at the local Polish school and named all the Jewish girls that were her friends. She really wanted only to dwell on those happy girlish memories....lamented the passing of her happy childhood, and was fearful and tearful if pressed to do otherwise. The wooden house was spacious and solid. Countryish. The garden extensive. Her dirt road had many architecturally interestingly detailed houses along it. We took many pictures and bid her an affectionate farewell...Driving then down the main street we saw there were more cars than in 2000, an expanded grocery shop (small!) a liquor "warehouse", expanded hardware type store, (formerly the Soviet store) an expanded bakery full of what our guide called "Jewish" bread and such, (all recognizable to us as Americans), a new grotesquely out of keeping non local bank building like a tall parody of a Hansel and Gretel house; Lenin's statue in the former Jewish market square/then park/had been removed and a small monument to agricultural fecundity placed there along with many many marigolds etc. A larger than prior Saturday bazaar out of Brest was tented on the main street, but had closed by the time we arrived in the area to eat our prepared lunches. Next stop was the school, in session half days on Sat. There are 2,000 people in Shershev now. All grades in this school. We delivered Moishe Kantorwitz's masterpiece rendered into English to the capable english teacher and her headmistress and had a very warm and connecting chat with them. The teacher was young, from there, had gone to Bialystok for school, married, and come back with family to work, live, sew her own above average fashionable clothing, etc. They were very thrilled to get the book, some 800 pages originally in Yiddish, by a survivor of Auschwitz who was a teen in 1939, which recounts life in Shershev when it had 2,500 Jews, than 1, 500 Jews, and now none. I was so pleased to have helped him a bit with his english translation and his overcoming his initial reluctance to send a copy to Shershev. They will write him....

Despite the generally pleasant school interior, the in house bathroom was an ancient horror, and computer barely possible. I had fantasies of sending all kind of material to that school....Late in the afternoon we drove the 5 k. to Chidree, where my cousin's father and my father had spent some early infant time in crude circumstances. My cousin's father was then sent in to board at age 3 with a family to go to religious school. Later the family moved back to Shershev in time for my father to attend cheder.. Chidree was then a logging outpost nearby the huge and famous Bieleviesh Forest Preserve-- fought over by nations, playground of the Czars, bison refuge, and promise to Goebbels by Hitler. Chidree is and was actually two villages, Big and Little. Each has 4-6 houses and varies with the population as to its name. Clearly languishing since 2000, most residents were in the field digging their potatoes. Children from town had come back to help. We chatted with locals...took pictures. Eastern Orthodox crosses in the field.. Many houses were abandoned or used for wood and other storage. One nearby dacha of recent affluence was unmistakably a country home for some rich Brestian. While only 5 k, from Shershev, the single dirt ratty road was a nightmare, though it was dry this time. Not only did we lose our way there, which normally took about an hour, but on the way back the car stalled, its carburetor clogged with dust. Only by repeated blowing into the tube did the driver get it to start again. Otherwise, we might still be there, lost on the edge of the vast, darkening forest of which my father spoke with some remembrance of his childhood awe....At that night's dinner we had the unpleasant task of ditching our 3rd

Shershev traveler, who though a person of known consequence in the USA, was irascible and an alcoholic. We managed to do this, despite his lengthy rage at our rearranging life to his advantage. However, the group dinner involved young people from the Brest Jewish Community who performed skits, dances, and were obviously keen on their Jewish heritage. It was an arresting and fun evening. Dinner, typically, took hours and hours. Sunday back in Shershev, we visited the Eastern Orthodox Church across from the Catholic. Women and men seated outside awaiting service separately--as if once in a week relief from togetherness. We had not seen the interior in 2000 as it was then being restored. For a village church it was opulent and beautiful. Candles could be bought expensively to put on one side for the living and the other for the dead in a lovely center altar.. Few children were there. Unfortunately we missed meeting the priest in his nearby house with turquoise and yellow folk motif fence. Replacing an old E. O. Church in the center of town, this one, probably dating from about the same time as the Catholic, also led us eventually to visit the old (1500's) EO Cemetery at the left edge of the town center. Here, the few last Jewish survivors who had returned from Auschwitz and remained, were buried in a faded but still colorful cemetery. It was our impression in 2000 and now that the EO Church has a reputation for cooperating with or kowtowing to Stalin....and that the Catholic church is in ascendancy in Belarus. Next door to the Catholic church is a pharmacy staffed by a trained person, complete with an ample refrigerator for drug storage. Newish. Likewise a small two storied hospital with 2 internists and one pediatrician, built in 1998 was down left of the center square, along with a nearby new library, much bigger and very pleasant appearing with a skilled librarian and a charming children's room. The former and very nice young librarian who was a grandchild of Shershevians, had become the chief of the fire brigade...Reminded me of my childhood local library in L.A. On one wall was a saying, "Our Pruzhany Region is Very Dear to Us!", underneath a lovely straw wall/ window frame flower decoration--exactly like the one given as one of the gifts to us in 2000. Above the library is a music school where piano, accordion, and chorus lessons are available. Also a new phenomena in Shershev! At my delight in seeing the wall decoration I had laboriously carried to my home in 2000, the library called its maker and we went to visit his farm area slightly out of town. It was picture perfect, with aviaries, carved wood ducks in the yard, flowers, trees, a bird sanctuary and a rambling wooded house decorated inside and out with skill and charm and some fine icons and china.. The artist, perhaps Ukranian, had moved to Shershev 25 years ago with his wife and two children...all very very blond.. Notable was a facsimile of a samovar made entirely of straw and rattan. He sold us upon request mushroom gathering baskets, though we insisted on giving him twice what he asked. He then gave us homemade bread and wonderful honey which we shared at dinner back in Brest with the group. We demurred when he tried to give us an entire honeycomb. In the midst of this idyllic setting sat his tall beautiful 13 year old child, in a wheelchair, dying of Duchenne muscular dystrophy, meaning by age 20 or so. He missed being at school. He had a tutor, was gifted in math and art. And shy. Despite the language barrier, I tried to convey something of my (prior teaching of such children) knowledge of his son's prognosis and to wish them as long a life for him as possible. He thanked me very solemnly. It was a moment when the barriers and boundaries of country language and politics were erased for me...and then I hope. And even in the west, there is nothing new under the sun for Duchene M.D. I have since learned...



We went to the Jewish Cemetery such as it is...still desolate and unfenced etc a bit outside of town to the right of the square. A man was walking his goat in the cemetery. Like so many older people we met, if they survived they were marvelously hardy looking....He had married a widow and moved to Shershev. He loved Lukashenko he volunteered. Across from the cemetery we talked to another family, whose grown children were lolling about the yard drunk. He remembered the Jew we had met in 1993/2000 and said he was his best friend. He gave us the name of a woman closer in, near where my mother's house had been, who also knew him. All these people were in their 80's. We also drove to the area where the Untern Duhl (Literally Under Hole) was--but found nothing. It was a pit dug when the Russians shot Polish patriots, pre ww2, and the Jews were forced to watch. Bones were later dug up. And we circled the center town river, very dry then, and saw geese wandering by in flocks as in a picture book along the banks.. We walked by the (only?) 2 story apt building where a Chernobyl family was relocated--kind of refugees.

Curves and colors and folk motifs could be seen at bus shelters along the highways to Shershev and in house "gingerbread". Most of the original wooden houses in Shershev have not been cement blocked over or painted in soviet colors of yellow. We then went to visit the woman who knew Lebersteyn and still corresponded with Chdritsky in Brooklyn. She (and her very skittish Downs Syndrome and psychotic granddaughter visiting for the summer from Sochi,) invited us in for pancakes, showed us letters from Chritsky who had survived the war in Chidree and Shershev, told us about how she had been an orphan taken in by Jews whom she then saw being dragged off. Tears. More tears when we gave her a bit of money saying that Chdritsky would want us to do this, and before we could take her picture she removed her babushka and combed her hair. Another beautiful kind wonderful elderly alone woman. After the pancakes and tea with real sour cream, preserves, she walked us around and about trying to guess which house near the old E. O. priest's orchard (site of a famous 1908 fire to worm his apple trees of which my mother spoke) might still be the house of my mother's family. After we ditched our box lunches by giving them to our driver, our guide took us to the local restaurant, in the former Great Synagogue. The food was delicious, the place humble and transformed, and the head cook's father, 91, whom she called to come was, unfortunately not home. We then drove the 18 k. to Pruzhany to see what had happened to it in the five years. Seemingly thriving too. To my cousins special joy the town?? had built a fence around the large former Jewish cemetery, placed a marble obelisk and a marble engraved plaque memorializing the Jews of the region including Shershev most of whom had been taken first to the Pruzhany ghetto and then to Auschwitz. That date was the day my cousin was born. Tired on the drive home!

Monday we returned to Shershev for an appointment with the mayor, also awaiting sewer inspectors.( Despite being a mayor, she, like the pharmacist etc etc and certainly houses in general, had raunchy outhouses.) A plant lover, drooping from two wall planters were vines of what is known as the "wandering Jew" plant....how ironic. No visitors from America since we came in 2000. She had lost much weight, had many gold teeth, was more relaxed less "Soviet", without her city council present, and talked to us about Lukashenko in a way that made us understand some things: Because he is a village boy, was a star athlete, and because so much of Belarus is rural, he has instigated some rural development policies that please: Shershev has given over its forested area to

the Bieleviessh Preserve, and thus has that revenue for city affairs. Lukashenko has decreed that by 2008 designated regional rural areas shall all have a hospital, pharmacy, cinema, local industry (furniture factory in Shershev now) and gas (wood burning the norm) fuel pumps for cars etc. Clearly Shershev is on an upward trajectory and population is returning some. The mayor, elected, hopes to win another 4 years, and even the number of flowers around the town attest to something happening. She also mentioned that Lukashenko has wholesome family/children....comparing them to the graft ridden children, allegedly, of the newly elected Ukraine president. Afterwards in talking to our guide again about all this, we saw that Lukashenko's paranoia, dictatorship, election fraud, and very anti western anti capitalist attitudes toward all manner of things, has a warped utility. Pensions, tho meager, have increased, consumer goods. etc. My question was and still is-----why oh why do leaders, sometimes with some good predilections originally, all become paranoid dictators? Is it that power corrupts? Or is it much deeper and more complicated? We visited the large day care center ranging in age I think to 7? housing 90 children, but down from a former figure. The young staff was in great ratio. Cheerful and wholesome, it lacked the usual plethora of equipment and toys seen here, but was full of bright colors and fun activities. The nap room was all done in lavender coverlets, cutouts, etc. One 3 year old, lagging at her meal responded to the headmistresses' request that she acknowledge us very very promptly and properly. A projected indoor pool area, instead of languishing had become an indoor garden room. Delightful. Gymnastics were strong.

When I tried to press them about children with disabilities, I got an interesting answer-- yes there was some special help for children with problems....but overall the attitude was that it was the teacher's responsibility, job, to help these kids. Different than here. I mentioned the boy with dystrophy and they said his bright and charming sister, 5, attended. We walked about trying to film the architecture. My camera had developed a problem; my cousin had a video camera with her.

Throughout this shtetl visiting time we heard daily tales from fellow travellers of wonderful even miraculous connections and discoveries in the shtetls and towns they were visiting.. Many of them were first time travellers to this or any European area. We made a video of our sagas, which I have yet to see.

BRONNYA GORA: Half way to Minsk, several hours, is a little known killing field for 50,000 Jews, 16, 000 from Brest in one 24 hr period. Was a Soviet war prisoner camp now has a Bel. garrison. The village is very small and simple. Its children lined the dirt roads waving and smiling at our bus. Not the first they had seen as tourists. Nearby is a tallow factory and trains go by every few minutes. In the forest where the pits were are the memorials. Religious members of our group said prayers, the Chassidic Rabbi from Pinsk came with some students--in their black hats and garb. He was charismatic, charming, talked aptly in parables but of course would not touch my offered hand.. The local history high school teacher brought some of her students and her copious research, including passport photos and grizzly German picture blowups. And the trains kept chugging by...eerily. We were told that when the Soviets were near the area the Germans dragged the Soviet war prisoners out, had them dig up the pits of the 50,000 Jews, layer them with wood, undress, and then the Nazis shot the Russians into the pits and set them on fire. Really! Thereafterwards we went to a local middle school famous on TV for its folk orchestra with handmade wooden instruments, costumes, accordians,

dancing. We needed that cheerful contrast. They had a great thing they did with the backs of wooden spoons held like chopsticks. Gragers, other nameless gadgetry.... I could write a book about Belarus highway toilet stops, as our bus facilities were broken. We drove the rest of the 5 hours from Brest to capitol Minsk.

MINSK: Our hotel was very fine, the food there and elsewhere in town excellent including a myriad of forest mushroom dishes., the town cosmopolitan, though full of architecture of every epoch and occupation--Austro Hungarian, Soviet, Belarusian, Modern, etc. While the rest of Belarus that we saw remained constantly alien on some level, Minsk one could pretend was part of the world as we know it as Americans. Too simple, but... Part of the pleasure of being in Minsk was getting to know our Belarusian/American Tour Leaders better. Particularly Galina, a one in a million person with a huge range of skills and talents and a personality that smoothed everything for everybody with tireless efforts and enormous charm...Born in St Petersburg close to the WW2 siege of near starvation, she and her mother had fled her bohemian artist father (who remained and survived) just prior and come to Belarus where she had eventually first become a translator under the tutelage of a brilliant and sophisticated teacher in Brest whom we met... A bus tour of the town as well as a walking tour of market areas off the broad main street added to our knowledge of the city and its vibrant and robust secular Jewish organizations, such as governmentally subsidized theatres, community centers, social services, etc But yes, Lukashenko is known as an anti-semitic as well..We visited a memorial to a large little known but important death camp in the Minsk vicinity. (Forgot name.) The memorial consisted of dozens of steps into a pit area shaded by chestnut trees. The railing down these many steps was made of connected Giacometti like sculptures of naked and emaciated adults and children hands linked, in agony, being led to their death in such a pit. From the bottom of the pit, looking up, they appeared to be falling falling falling. Memorable. At our last dinner we concluded our taping of individual sagas, adding to it at my suggestion two especially tender ones by two non Jewish spouses on the trip. As the woman from Costa Rica said, with tears, "So much pain..."

As it happens since returning home I have had the opportunity to be in contact with a 26 year old Belarusian poet Valzhina Mort, currently temporarily living on the west coast. Her poetry is dissident and despairing and distrustful of love/men...Her pen name hints at death. She has been beautifully translated by the wife of a major USA poet.. In Belarus itself much drastic academic and theatre persecution has occurred of late, and various protests continue to date...The effort to dislodge Lukashenko from another illegally obtained term of office seems dubious.

Leaving Minsk was relatively easy because a group of us were all flying to Frankfurt via Lufthansa. Frankfurt airport has never been an easy place, and this time the German airport inspection did not suffice; another USA one immediately followed. A late plane made it necessary to stay overnite in our capitol DC. What a drag. By the time I had gotten to Minsk and its long evenings of dining and talking, and for some time after, my sleep patterns were beyond jet lag into nights of hour by hour total chaos...

This is a trip that I would not have gone on without the urging of my cousin, and Jim, and my frequent flyer mileage.. I am glad I did. Leah

## Memories of Phone Conversation with Celia About Her Trip to Shershev 2007-10-05

In the cemetery, when brush cleared, many unmarked mounds. (Stones removed to build road to Lineve by Germans???)

The monument was ultimately done in Belarusian and English; Franklin and Constantin decided in quiet conversation to the side not to have it in Yiddish and/or Hebrew! The Ideology Officer had them take the phrase about persecution out...Celia regrets not having had a rabbi at ceremony; she said Kaddish.

The fence parts were stored at a neighboring house. That person has become the caretaker. He came from Chernobyl. The wind brought much of the toxin from C to Belarus, some of which is devastated.

The fence and brush workers were paid on a daily basis by Robert acting as paymaster--\$2 a day.

At the ceremony of dedication, the Catholic priest participated, Father Yasha, the Eastern Orthodox one did not (met but not friendly, wife odd) the former mayor, current male mayor, school principal, teacher, etc., and many older people, including probably the woman who is friends with Chdritsky in Brooklyn. She and other older people had had Jewish childhood friends. She cried. Celia regrets not having more time to visit with the old people.

Visited old mayor, who had come to ceremony with pictures of all of us, including Ian, from prior first visit. She lives in the "high rise"---4 or 5 stories--apartment building off lane across from school. Not comfortable about her abode when Celia visited, gave her a scarf. "See how we live here!"

Irina did not come from Minsk to translate etc., because Franklin had arranged for Constantin to come and translate etc. He is the son of the opposition leader; was capable and energetic and facilitated. (He assisted the large group when we were all in Minsk on prior trip.)

Celia visited hospital in Shershev. In some ways like a nursing home for the elderly. Apologized to for not having coffee for her and Franklin. But at the end of the tour doors were flung open and in a room was a sumptuous banquet, all kinds of food, which they sat down and ate despite the fact that they had planned to be elsewhere.

Eastern Orthodox priest claimed that the 3 Jews buried in the old EO cemetery had converted. (??)

Celia taken to Ruzhany, the twin city so to speak of Pruzhany. (Have read about it on web I think or some book. Interesting history. Old. P. more mercantile. The Bimah in R. maybe 5 ft high, magnificent. Cemetery needing restoration. Synagogue?

Celia thinks maybe the Agricenter taken to was near R. Shershev slated to have one in 2009.

Quirky people: Lozman, the cemetery facilitator from USA. Lives in grand house near Albany. Original work in restoring cemeteries done using Dartmouth and Conn. U. students in summer. Article in Forwards some years ago. Controlling person. Knows Franklin.

Franklin asked at S. hospital what they needed....didn't list equipment but basics such as sheets and towels. Voluntas, the British humanitarian org. he is in charge of in Minsk...also Galina's work in deinstitutionalizing children....Cramped apt with their two adult kids and Galina's mother. Galina daughter works for US embassy.

Someone suspects Franklin of being CIA.....quirky. Was photographer in Montreal.....Rhodes scholar Oxford.

Answer to question Celia and I had when in Minsk prior about why our group tour was not taken to Jewish Center/Museum, impressive, in Minsk: Irina took Celia this time. Apparently Franklin and they on the outs. Some allegations of misuse of funds by him. (I guess from USA/Canada Jewish Agency??) Irina is not on outs with them. Some strain between Franklin and Irina. (All that tension between ultra orthodox and not orthodox in providing/being official in Belarus, Russia, Poland, ??etc.)

Group dinner in restaurant in Minsk...in former Synagogue.

Old mayor in Shershev confirms that restaurant across from office a former Synagogue, added on to.

At ceremony kids from class read essays and got prizes. Lozman donates camera and ipods to school.

Celia buys two embroidered runners from sick child's mother. \$25 each. (Soldout of basketry.) Catholic priest asks Celia if she thot price too high. Celia agrees but explains wants to help them Child (with MD?) still alive but very frail....They are Catholics

Felt Shershev, an agarian area, many of which in B. continuing on upswing. Franklin agrees and feels that in that respect Lukushenko positive. Belarus economy propped up by Russia.

Fence pieces carried to cemetery on droshke by horse.

People expressed strong approval of cemetery restoration...."the right thing to do".

Outhouses STILL.....

# Torontonians help reclaim cemetery in Belarus

By ANDY LEVY-AJZENKOPF  
Staff Reporter

A town that was once home to little more than 3,000 Jews in prewar Russia now has its shtetl's cemetery back.

Thanks to the efforts of Toronto couple Celia Siegerman Denov and Robert Bell, the Jewish descendants of families from Sharashova, Belarus, now have a physical reminder of what was once the town's Jewish minority.

Siegerman Denov, a retired social worker, told *The C/JN* her father and his family immigrated to Canada from Sharashova in 1905.

The restoration of the cemetery was officially completed in September 2007 at a ceremony that was attended by Sharashovans, local politicians and dignitaries.

Siegerman Denov first became interested in restoring the cemetery after a cousin, who was working in Moscow in 1990, visited Sharashova in the early days of glasnost — when Russia opened up for renewed tourism — and discovered there were still some Jews living in the town.

At the time, she said, "the cemetery had been completely abandoned and was in very poor condition. In fact, it was so overgrown the [headstones] had fallen into the ground."

But it was still not as desecrated as other Jewish cemeteries of the region had been, she said.

Siegerman Denov visited her ancestral home for the first time in 2000, while on a trip with her cousins.

"When I first got to the cemetery area, I couldn't find



Celia Siegerman Denov contemplates the new monument she helped erect at the Sharashova cemetery [Robert Bell photo]

it. I was actually standing on it, but cows were grazing on it," she said.

On a return visit in 2005, Siegerman Denov had the good fortune to befriend Franklin Swartz, an American Jew living in Minsk, Belarus, who also happened to be the executive director of Voluntas: The East European Jewish Heritage Project — a charity that negotiates with the Belarus government to allow Jewish cemeteries to be listed as protected historic sites.

According to Siegerman Denov, Swartz quickly became an essential guide and interpreter and helped to obtain permits for the eventual restoration.

She also acknowledged the help and guidance of Michael Lozman, head of the charitable Eastern European Jewish Cemeteries Project Inc. in Albany, N.Y. ([www.restorejcem.org](http://www.restorejcem.org)), who also travelled to Sharashova with her.

The project, funded by the United Jewish Federation of Northeastern New York, collects contributions from the community to help "restore cemeteries... destroyed by the Nazis."

However, the cost of restoring the cemetery proved prohibitive until recently, when the Siegerman family was able to put nearly \$20,000 together to privately finance the construction of a new metal gate and perimeter fence — about 1,500 metres long — and the erection of a cenotaph commemorating the Jews buried there and those lost to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Its inscription reads: "In loving memory of the once

vibrant Jewish community, with fervent hopes for a peaceful and just world for all. In memory of those who were deported to Auschwitz January 30 - February 2, 1943."

Though Bell and Siegerman Denov had to run all their wording and construction plans by a municipal "ideology monitor," they managed to get the work done by enlisting the help of the local townspeople.

Bell noted that Sharashova is still a small village in which many buildings are still without modern plumbing and people continue to use outhouses as the norm.

As such, the townsfolk relied on horse-drawn carriages to transport segments of the new fence to and fro and used scythes to clear the cemetery grounds of weeds.

"The local authorities advised us against using wood for the fence," Siegerman Denov said. "Because it could be taken down and used for fuel."

While on the trip, Lozman arranged for Siegerman Denov and Bell to meet with local high school students to talk about the Jewish community of Sharashova and ask them to write essays about what they knew of the Jews and the Holocaust.

"The elders in the village remember what happened to the Jews," Siegerman Denov said. "One boy wrote that his grandparents remembered the Jews. But the Jewish community was a bit of a mystery to them."

Still, when the cemetery was finally re-opened in early September, Siegerman Denov said she witnessed many of the town elders paying their respects and crying in front of the newly erected monument.

"Locals spoke and thanked us for doing this," Bell said. "Everyone in the village seemed happy we were there. Not just for giving them work, but for doing the right thing after all these years."

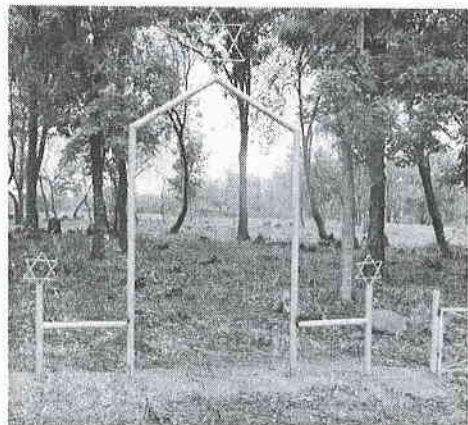
Bell noted that there wasn't time to raise all the headstones, and Siegerman Denov said she plans to return to Sharashova in the future to complete the work and add a Hebrew inscription to the cemetery's monument.

She called the endeavour "one of the most fulfilling and moving things I have done in my life."

Siegerman Denov and Bell also urged others wishing to restore cemeteries in eastern Europe to contact Lozman and Swartz, and to do so soon.

"There are so many abandoned Jewish cemeteries in eastern Europe. The time is right now, as governments are open to protecting [them] and urban development is imminent."

For more information, contact [cdenov@aol.com](mailto:cdenov@aol.com).



The new gates and fence at Sharashova's Jewish cemetery [Robert Bell photo]



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## Feldbaum Family Trip to Poland/Belarus 2007

**Introduction** – Motivations for trip

**Background on Shereshev** – History of Feldbaum and Zafman families in Shereshev

**Trip Planning** – Thoughts on planning your own trip

**Entering Belarus** – Difficulty in crossing the border into Belarus

**Shereshev** – Visit to Shereshev

**Brest** – Short stay in Brest and train to Terespol

**Białowieża** – Visit to small town in Poland along the Belarus border

### **Introduction**

For the past several years a group of our cousins have been researching and recording data about our ancestors. The project was started by Rachel Feldbaum Zafman when she dictated our family history, as she remembered it. She was about 90 at the time, and her memory was perfect, including her recall of names and dates. Several years later, after she died, Donald Messenger, the great grandson of her sister Malka, took over the task of updating the information. He has now been joined by David Feldman, Aaron Reznick, and Sonny Zafman in the role of recording our family history.

While we had identified a great deal of our family history, we still wanted to see what life in the old country was like. To this end, Martin (Sonny) Zafman and David Feldman decided to make a trip to the area where our ancestors came from. Rather than go with a larger group, we decided to coordinate our own trip, which allowed us to completely customize our travels to our needs.

The article below covers our trip planning, travels in and out of Belarus, research in Belarus, visiting the town of Shereshev in Belarus and the town of Białowieża in Poland. In addition to our thoughts on the trip, there are some very old family photographs taken in Shereshev and Białowieża, along with numerous pictures taken on the trip.

### **Background on Shereshev**

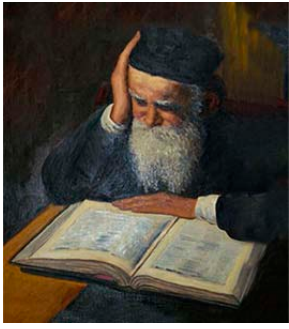
The first known record of our family name, Feldbaum, is Matas Feldbaum, who was born in Shereshevo around 1750. He is our direct ancestor – Martin's gggg and David's ggggggrandfather. Shereshevo is in Grodno Gubernia, Belarus (Gubernia is the administrative-territorial division in the Russian Empire and in the USSR from 1708-1929). Since Shereshevo is so close to the Polish border, it has changed hands many times from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. More recently, the town is referred to as Shereshev, and that is the name we will use throughout this document.



The picture on the left is our ancestor, Aaron Feldbaum (standing on the right), and his brother Nachman, with their mother Zelda, taken in Shereshev around 1875. The Feldbaums lived in Shereshev continuously from at least 1750 until 1942. This was when the Germans emptied the town of all the Jews by killing them and/or transporting them to Pruhzany, Belarus, where they placed them in a ghetto, and many died. Those that survived the ghetto were sent to Auschwitz on January 29, 30, 31, and February 1, 1942, where most of them were sent directly to the gas chambers.

Our family had only one survivor living in Shereshev just prior to the war - Laibel Feldbaum, the son of Nachman Feldbaum, who was Aaron's brother. After he was liberated from Auschwitz he spent a few years in Displaced Persons camps in Europe until he finally came to America.

Aaron Feldbaum married Yuddis (Judith) Smorgon, and in 1881 left Shereshev and moved to Białowieża. They had 11 children, and both Martin Zafman and David Feldman, the two people who went on this trip, are descendants of Aaron and Yuddis. Martin's mother, Rae Zafman, was the second youngest daughter of Aaron and Yuddis, and David's grandfather, Herschel, was Aaron and Yuddis's oldest son. For details on the Feldbaum family home in Białowieża and the nearby cemetery in Narewka, see the Białowieża link at the top.



Aaron and Yuddis Feldbaum and their children all immigrated to the US or Canada between 1902 and 1921. Today there are over 250 descendants of Aaron and Yuddis who have been born in the US and Canada.

The picture to the left is from a painting of Aaron Feldbaum studying the Talmud. The original photo, taken by a WPA photographer during the Depression, hung in the New York Historical Museum, and was used for decades by the Hallmark Card Company on their Passover cards. It also appears on Page 1 of the *Pictorial History of the Jewish People*. The original photo was apparently taken on a weekday at the synagogue in Brooklyn where Aaron went every day.



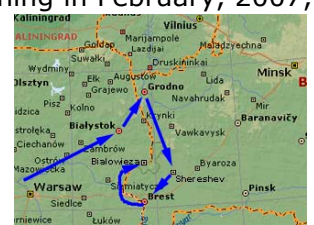
In addition to the Feldbaum ties to Shereshev, Martin's father, Israel Zafman, and his family can be traced to Shereshev to about 1735. The picture on the right, taken about 1916, shows Martin's father, Israel, standing in the back with his parents, Pesha Feiga and Moshe, and his younger brother, Irving. The picture on the left is of the Shereshev fire department, taken about 1918. Israel Zafman is second from the right. Israel immigrated to the US in 1920.



## Trip Planning

Here are a few notes on coordinating your own trip, especially if you are going to Belarus. A good guide and driver are a necessity. In addition, you will need to get a visa to go into Belarus, which requires getting a sponsoring company as part of your visa application, usually set up through the company providing the guide. You need to start your planning early and finalize your itinerary so it can be included in your visa application (the visa application process takes about 8 weeks). We started our planning in February, 2007, and we departed the US on May 25.

Flights going directly into Belarus were not as convenient so we chose to fly to Warsaw, and then take trains to get us close to Belarus, where our guides could pick us up. This was not a good idea, as is detailed below. Based on our experience, we would recommend either flying or taking a train into and out of Belarus.



The map to the right shows that we started in Warsaw, then took a train to Bialystok. From there, the guide and driver picked us up, and we went to Grodno for research. After two days in Grodno we drove to our family hometown of Shereshev, and spent the night in Brest. We then took the train across the border to Terespol, Poland, and another guide and driver picked us up and took us to Białowieża.

## Entering Belarus

The afternoon we arrived in Warsaw we dropped our bags in our hotel room, and took off for an extended walking tour of the city. Much of Warsaw was destroyed during World War II. When it was rebuilt under the Communists, the architecture was modest, functional, and drab. The one wise thing that the Poles did during rebuilding was to restore a section of the city to be an exact duplicate of Warsaw before the war. It's a charming area called Old Town. There are many shops, galleries, bistros, and outdoor cafes. The picture at the right was one of the memorials of the Warsaw Ghetto that could be found in Old Town.





On Sunday we left Warsaw by train to go to Bialystok. Bialystok was also destroyed during WWII. It has been rebuilt with no effort to capture the beauty of the historic city. There is very little industry there, and it's a quiet city, with the exception of the traffic between Poland and Belarus, as a result of its location on the main highway between the countries.

On Monday morning, May 28, our driver and guide came to the hotel to pick us up, and take us across the border to Belarus. Our guide was able to read, write, and speak Russian, Belarusian, Polish, English, Hebrew, and Yiddish.

That trip into Belarus turned out to be a challenging journey. We drove from Bialystok to the border in a relatively short time. As you can see from the picture below and to the left, the line of cars was very long. There were three lanes of traffic - the extreme right was for trucks, the middle was for cars going to Belarus, and the left lane was for opposing traffic that just crossed the border into Poland. The line for cars was over a mile long. We got in line, and after waiting almost 3 hours, we had only moved about 50 feet. At that rate it would have taken us days to get across.



David asked Martin for his passport and walked to the front of the line with our guide to see if they could expedite things. David told the border guard that he was traveling with an old man who was not feeling well, and he was worried about his health. The guard looked at the passports, and told David to go back to the car and move to the front of the line. They stopped the oncoming traffic so we were able to get to the front of the line. While the guard was "processing" us he stepped out of his booth to get a good look at me. He asked Martin for his medical insurance documents. Martin showed him what he had, and he decided that they were not adequate. He made Martin buy special Belarusian health insurance for a total cost of \$4.00, and he sent us on our way.

As soon as we crossed the border our guide asked to see the insurance document, and she started to laugh. The piece of paper was an advertisement for something that had nothing to do with health insurance. It seems that this was his way of getting a bribe.

## Research in Grodno

Once we got into Belarus we drove directly to the Central Archives in Grodno. The archives building can be seen in the picture on the right. Here, too, it was necessary for our guide to give a "gift" to the director. By doing this she smoothed the way for us to start our research.

The picture below and to the left is the main office in the Archives. As you can see, most of the records are either in card catalogs or binders – we did not see any computers. Every item in the Archives is documented in a master index. The index is kept in a journal much like an accountant uses. Nothing there is digitized, microfilmed, or reproduced in any other way to make it easier to find information. We spent the rest of the day looking through the indexes and listing all the documents that had the name of Shereshev, Feldbaum, or Zyzvich. At the end of the day, we gave the list to the assistant who said that she would have the documents ready for us the next morning.

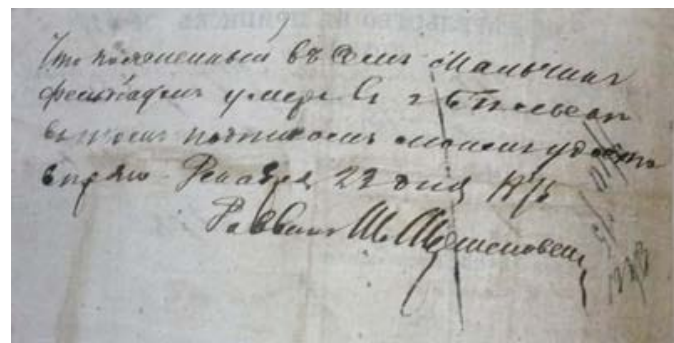


When we arrived the next morning she had a pile of the original documents from the archive. Our guide started to go through these old files, some of them almost 200 years old. The original documents were filed in leather-bound books that were falling apart. The leather was mostly cracked and peeling. Some of the books were 5 or 6 inches thick with documents. The room we did the research in can be seen in the picture on the right.



We found information about our maternal grandfather's brother, who left Shereshev with his 8-year old son during the time a census was taken. The two documents on the left show the front and back of the revision record form, necessary to prove that he had reason not to be home when the revision was taken. When he returned, his son was not with him. Apparently, his son died in 1875 while away with his father. We assume that our great uncle took the

boy to get medical help but was unsuccessful. On the back of the census form there was a statement that attested to the fact that the boy died. The back was certified and signed by Rabbi Shereshevsky.



The Director of the Archives allowed us to photograph each

document with our own cameras. We did have to pay about \$5.00 for each picture. We needed the pictures so we could have a hard copy of the actual document that our guide would be able to translate for us. The other documents we found are shown in the pictures on the right. They are written in Old Russian Cyrillic. A great deal of the information we found gave very detailed descriptions of our families' residences, including building materials, size of building, number of rooms, and whether or not there was a business in the building.





On our last night in Grodno our guide arranged to have a Holocaust survivor take us on a tour of the city. His name was Tzvi Hosid, and he was born in Grodno, and returned there after the war. The tour focused on the Jewish history of the city. He took us to the Grodno Synagogue shown at the left. We were allowed to go inside, and the picture on the right shows the interior. The synagogue was quite beautiful, outside and in, and it's rather obvious that there are no longer regular services held there.



We toured the Ghetto, and he described to us what life there was like. The pictures to the left show the entrance to the Jewish Ghetto and the memorial plaque that honored them after the war. While we were standing at the entrance, Tzvi told us of his daring escape from the train on the way to Auschwitz and his joining the resistance for the duration of the war. Tzvi was so thoroughly steeped in the history of the city that he captivated us with its history and stories. After the tour we all went to dinner, and he continued to tell us stories about life in Grodno before, during, and after the war.

## Shereshev

The drive from Grodno through Pruzhany to Shereshev was a pleasant one. The land is flat, and we were able to see what life must have been like at the turn of the last century. The bigger cities like Grodno, Pruzhany, and Brest show little trace of what it looked like 100 years ago because they were mostly destroyed during WWII. In Pruzhany we did see several old houses that were once owned by Jews, but there were very few of them. The Jewish cemetery in Pruzhany has been mostly destroyed. A memorial was erected at the entrance to the cemetery.



The picture to the left shows a stork. There were literally hundreds of these huge birds' nests on many buildings, poles, and any other available above-ground structure. Some of the nests were almost 4 feet in diameter.

When our parents and grandparents lived in Shereshev and Białowieża, a trip to Pruzhany was a long, tiring one – about 15 kilometers. Traveling that distance by horse and wagon on unpaved roads took its toll on the people. They only traveled

back and forth on special occasions.

Today the trip took about half an hour on a road that had no traffic, but did have more than a few potholes. Still, it was an easy trip.

A few hundred yards from the outskirts of the city there is a road sign that announces that we have arrived in Shereshev. The picture on the right shows the sign that stands on the road from Pruzhany at the entrance to the village. The sign is written in Belarusian Cyrillic and reads "Sheresheva". The Jews called it Shereshev. This picture was taken at the height of the local rush hour - notice that there isn't one vehicle in sight. We stopped the car, walked to the sign, and took pictures of it. It is so hard to describe the feelings we had - we were about to walk in the same streets that our ancestors walked...







As we began to walk around, our guide told us that we had an appointment with the mayor of Shereshev. His name was Vadim Malyshkevich. We went to City Hall (see picture at left), where he was waiting for us. He seemed genuinely happy to see us. He didn't speak English so our guide did the translating for us. He was warm and gracious, and asked us a bunch of questions. He said that he was born in Shereshev, and he told us a bit of the town's history. He was sad that there are no records of any Jews ever living in Shereshev and that he knows that we had a major role in the development of the

village. He was unhappy about this because the Jews were so much a part of the city's history.

We asked the Mayor if we could take his picture and he agreed; however, he insisted that he sit at his desk and made sure that he was centered properly beneath the Coat of Arms of Belarus and the picture of Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus.



We told him that our ancestor, Matis Feldbaum, was born there in 1750, and that Martin's gggggrandfather, Nossel Zydzick, was born there in 1735. He asked us if we had any pictures of Shereshev, and David said that he did. David then downloaded pictures from the Feldbaum/Feldman website, and gave them to him.

We asked the Mayor if he had a map of Shereshev, and he produced a huge 5' X 7' map, dated 1911 (shown in the picture to the right). It shows every street, house, and house number. In addition to the map, the mayor gave us a copy of the Coat of Arms of Shereshev, and a picture of this can be seen on the left.



At the time Martin didn't realize that we had the address of the house that his great grandfather, grandfather, and father lived in. It was on one of the documents that we found in the Grodno Archives, but hadn't yet translated. The house that Martin's father, Israel, lived in for about 25 years, was assessed a real estate tax of 20 rubles in 1910 and 1911. There was one other house in Shereshev that had the same assessment. It was the lowest real estate assessment in town, which means that it was the smallest, least expensive house in town.

He then invited us to have lunch with a few of the local politicians in what we think is the only restaurant in town, called Raisa Bulchuk, owned by a woman who lives in Shereshev. She also owns 6 other restaurants in the surrounding area. She, along with the Mayor, hosted the lunch. There was no menu - the waiter just kept bringing food, and we kept eating. We also partook of the customary rounds of vodka that go with every meal. We were each given shot glasses, and had to have 3 shots of the strongest vodka we have ever had. It was potent.



The inside of the restaurant can be seen on the left, and our meal is shown on the right. We noticed a moon-shaped window cut into the door of a very small building in the back, and subsequently, found out that there is no

indoor plumbing anywhere in Shereshev. Each house has its own well (or a shared well) in the yard that supplies them with water.





The mayor told us that there are only a few people left that remembered what it was like before the war. One was a lady with whom he had arranged a visit for us in her house (picture at left).

When we drove up to her house, she was waiting for us in her yard. Almost every house in Shereshev had a garden, either in front, in back, or on the side, as did hers, where they grew their own vegetables. If they had more than they needed, they sold the excess at the market.

The pictures to the right and below show the main room in the house. It probably looks exactly the same as it did 75 years ago. It was immaculate and quite comfortable.



The main room was a multi-purpose room. It served as the dining room, living room, and bedroom. Notice the huge bed pillows. The carpets on the walls serve two purposes. First, it's decorative, and second, it's utilitarian. It keeps the drafts out, and prevents the heat from escaping in the winter.



The furniture was quite old, but in excellent condition. We suspected that there had been no changes in the house since it had been built. It gave us a great opportunity to see how the people live now, as well as 100 years ago.

We then sat down at the table shown to the left, and talked with the elderly woman through our interpreter, our guide. We asked her what it was like before the war. She told us that she remembered that every Friday evening a town crier went around calling, "Shabbos, Shabbos", to let everyone know that it was time for the

Sabbath to begin. She told us stories about going to school with the Jewish children and how everyone got along. She also had some photographs of herself when she was a student in elementary school. It was a mixed group that included the Jewish children who went to the secular school.

We asked her if she knew what happened to the Jews - she told us that one night they all ran away, leaving everything behind, and that no one was killed. We respectfully told her what happened to our great uncle, Nachman, who lived in Shereshev, and that he and his family perished in the Holocaust. She remained silent, as did we.

Martin asked her if she had a pripichuk. He didn't know if she would laugh at him, or be embarrassed because she didn't know what it was. Much to the surprise of all of us, she said, "Yes", and invited us into her kitchen to see it. Her pripichuk can be seen on the left.



When Martin was a young boy, his father told him stories of what life was like in the "Old Country". He described in great detail the many roles of the pripichuk, a wood-burning stove. First, it was an oven that provided heat for the entire house. It was also a cooktop where the food was prepared. In addition, it served as the clothes dryer. (See the picture to the left with the clothes drying on it.) However, in the winter it was mostly used as a bed because it was the warmest place in the house.

To sleep on the pripichuk, first a sheet was spread over the sleeping shelf. On top of the sheet was placed a "perineh", a goose down-filled comforter, which acted as a mattress and softened the "bed". A person slept on top of this perineh. A second perineh was used as a blanket. Sonny's father claimed that sleeping on the pripichuk was as warm as toast and extremely comfortable. Our hostess was very proud of her house, and she showed us the heavy perinehs that were on her bed.



The mayor then had someone bring us to the Jewish cemetery in Shereshev. It was heartbreaking because it had been almost totally destroyed. The graves were destroyed by the Germans, by townspeople who used the stones for building materials, and by the locals who destroyed them for the fun of it. There are only 2 or 3 gravestones that are still standing, but leaning, and will eventually fall. The majority of the remaining stones have sunk into the ground so that only the top one-third or less is visible.

The harsh seasonal weather softens the ground, which subsequently cannot support the full weight of the stones, so they have sunk into the soil over the years.



As you can see from the picture on the left, goats freely roamed the cemetery. There were many fragments of stones with engravings on them. The picture on the right was the most well-preserved of all the stones that we saw. We took pictures of all of the stones that were in any way legible, and sent them to Israel to see if they could be translated.



When we were finished taking pictures at the cemetery, we just drove around and took some photographs of the town. The pictures shown here show how little has probably changed from when our ancestors lived there. As you can see, transportation is pretty basic, from the horse-drawn wagon to the frequently seen bicycles.



A street scene on the left shows houses that probably look exactly the way they did when our ancestors were living there.

On the main street through town we took a couple of pictures of houses showing the shared wells (see 2 pictures on the right). People have to draw water from the well for all of the bathing, cooking, washing needs, etc. As already mentioned, each house has an outhouse in the back, as does the restaurant and all other buildings.



The house next to the elderly woman had a huge wood storage area. Even though it was summer time, there was wood stored for heating the stove for cooking and making hot water. We assumed that in late summer they would have to prepare a great deal of firewood to last through the winter.

While we were driving around, we never saw any automobiles, but did see animals such as the geese shown to the left.



Before we left Shereshev we wanted to see the house where our grandfather/great grandfather's brother, Nachman Feldbaum, lived. In 1891 he moved to a nearby town, which we also visited, and details on this are below. A family member had given us a picture of what she thought was Nachman's house. In doing research before going on our trip, we ran across a beautiful story written by Moshe Kantorowitz about his life in Shereshev from 1933 until he went to Auschwitz in 1943, how he made it through Auschwitz, and how he ended up immigrating to Canada. His story can be found at: [http://cpsa.info/shereshov/my\\_mothers\\_bequest.pdf](http://cpsa.info/shereshov/my_mothers_bequest.pdf). If you have not already read this story, it is well worth the read.

In Moshe's story he mentioned his next-door neighbor, Nachman Feldbaum, many times in the book. Moshe had a picture of his house in Shereshev in the story, and it was the same picture we had which we thought was Nachman's house. Both the Kantorowitizes and the Feldbaums had some of the larger homes in Shereshev so when the Germans arrived, they wanted to take over these houses for their headquarters.

Unfortunately, when the Germans demanded Nachman's house, apparently he didn't move quickly enough so the German SS guard shot him in the head in front of his family. Eventually, the rest of the family met the same fate, except Nachman's son Laibel, who was with Moshe at Auschwitz and did survive the war.



Having a picture and knowing that Moshe's house was on the market square and that Nachman's house was right next to it, it was not difficult to find both houses. Both of these houses can be seen in the picture to the right. The aqua-colored house on the left is Moshe Kantorowitzes', and Nachman Feldbaum's is the brown one on the right. The area in the front of these houses is currently a park, but before the war it was the market square. It was disappointing that no one was home because we would have loved to see the interior. We did walk around the house, and to the left is a picture of the back of Nachman's house.



We have an old picture from Nachman's house showing his wife Tzina and his daughter Sarah standing in front of the house. The sign on the door behind Sarah shows a picture of a shoe, and says "Gentlemen" (in English) - Nachman and his brother Aaron were both cobblers. This picture was taken about 1920. While Nachman's house shown above has 4 windows in the front, on a blow-up of the picture an outline of where the door that Zelda and Tzina are standing by can be seen.



## Brest

After spending most of the day in Shereshev, we decided to leave for Brest, where we were going to spend the night. Brest, like many of the other cities we visited, was badly destroyed during WWII. Most of the buildings were post war, Communist-style architecture, with little or no personality. As we knew from our planning, our Belarusian guides were not able to go easily into Poland. They had to get a special temporary pass, which costs about \$60, which they did in order to pick us up in Bialystok.

So we arranged for another guide and driver to assist us in Poland. The following morning after breakfast our driver and guide took us to the Brest Railroad Station, where we were going to take a train across the border into Terespol, Poland. While this was a much easier and more pleasant way to cross into Poland, it still was not simple. When we got to the train station, we had to wait outside a special room for those exiting Belarus. Our wait was about 30 minutes because no one was there yet. After going through many lines we were finally allowed to get on the train. Unlike airports, there were no carts available for helping with moving the luggage around, and getting on the train with our luggage was no small task.

The entire train trip was supposed to take 18 minutes to get from Brest to Terespol. However, there were problems with other trains in the way, and the short trip took much longer. Getting off the train was not easy either. Rather than being allowed to get off the train, security people came on board and checked



papers, and actually went through luggage one person at a time. We were glad we were in the front of the train so it did not take that long for us.

Our Polish guide and driver were waiting for us at the train station. They, too, were most pleasant and extremely knowledgeable. We asked the guide if he had ever heard of a Polish King named Sabetski, and he immediately told us the exact date of his reign in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was a walking encyclopedia, and even though it was a little hard to understand his English, he added so much to our understanding of the area.

## Białowieża

In 1881 our grandfather/great grandfather Aaron Feldbaum and his wife Yuddis Smorgon Feldbaum, who were young newlyweds, moved from Shereshev to Białowieża, which was about 15 kilometers to the west. From the 1600's until World War I Jews were restricted to living in certain areas within the Pale of Settlement. Białowieża was outside the Pale.

Białowieża (pronounced B'ya-yo-vesh-ia), which is now in Poland, had no Jews living there until the early 1880's. It was the home of the winter hunting palace of the czars, and Jews had not been permitted to live in such close proximity to the royal family. We don't know why the Czar changed the policy and allowed Jews to move to Białowieża.



The town of Białowieża is located adjacent to the Białowieża National Park. This park is the oldest in Poland, and its history goes back to 1921 when the forest district "Rezerwat" was created. The park is 26,000 acres, of which 11,725 acres are strictly protected. The European bison is the symbol of the Białowieża National Park and the entire Białowieża Forest. The entrance to the park can be seen to the left.

Aaron and Yuddis bought a house on the main street of town, where all of their 11 children were born. Three of the children died at a very young age. The family lived in the house for 40 years. They left in April, 1921, to go to America to join their 3 children who had immigrated before World War I. The picture at the right shows Aaron and Yuddis, 5 of their children, one son-in-law and two grandchildren, taken in about 1909. All of their older children had already immigrated to the US.



When Martin Zafman was a small boy, his mother, Rachel Feldman Zafman, told him many stories about her life in Europe before they came to America. She often described the house in great detail, and she was especially proud of the fact that her house was the only one on the main street to have a "bay window" in the front. Her brother-in-law, Chaim Krugman, used the bay window as his shop where he repaired watches and sold jewelry. There used to be a short flight of stairs that led from the street into the house.



In addition to knowing roughly how big the house was and what the house looked like, we also knew it was on the main street down from the entrance to the park. At the park we got a detailed map of the area, and found the main street we were looking for - it was called ul. Waszkiewicza. The first part of the street had some stores and restaurants, but after the first street it was entirely residential. It did not take us long

to see the house that met the specs exactly, but we decided we should drive up and down the street to make sure that there was not another house that fit the description. There was no other house that matched exactly what Martin remembered from the stories that his mother told him.







The picture above and to the left was what we saw. It was the only house with a bay window on the main street that was well over 100 years old. While the house seemed small across the front, the house was quite long, as can be seen from the side view above and to the right. Given that there were 11 children and 2 adults, we felt comfortable that it was big enough to accommodate the family.

Martin also had mentioned about a separate room on the back, and sure enough we found one, as can be seen from the rear view, shown in the picture on the left.

Perhaps you can imagine our joy when we found the house. It was so special for us to see the house that some of our parents, grandparents and great grandparents were born in. It's difficult to describe our emotions when we walked around the house, walking on the same ground as our ancestors. The stories that Rae Feldbaum (Rachel) told her son Martin immediately came to life, and we were transported back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. It was a very emotional time, and undoubtedly, the highlight of our trip.

Our next and final stop was Narewka, which is the location of the Jewish cemetery for Jews buried in this area. The road between Białowieża and Narewka is a single-lane dirt road that cuts right through the Białowieża Forest (Bialowiezka Puscha). The Narewka cemetery is on the outskirts of the city. If our guide didn't know exactly where it was, we would have passed it by and never found it. It's right in the forest on a hill sloping down to a small valley, but is not identified in any way. So it was quite surprising to learn how many local people knew of the Jewish cemetery.

We had a picture of a gravestone of a son-in-law of Aaron and Yuddis, who died around 1924. The picture on the right shows Aaron's and Yuddis' second oldest daughter, Reina, with her 2 daughters, Bella and Lily, at the gravesite of their husband and father, Chaim Krugman. This picture was taken in the Narewka cemetery some time after 1924 and before 1929 when they immigrated to Canada. When Reina and her 3 children immigrated to Canada in 1929 they were the last members of our family living in Białowieża. This was fortunate, since during the week between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur 1941 the Jews of Białowieża were sent to the Kobrin Ghetto where they all perished.



Compared to Shereshev, the Narewka cemetery was in much better shape, but nowhere near its original condition. After looking for over an hour, we could not find any family members in the cemetery. The area around the gravestones was quite overgrown, and there were no organized rows to follow, rather, just random grave markers, some close together, others quite far apart. We took pictures of over 50 gravestones, and some of the ones in better condition can be seen to the left. We also sent these pictures to Israel to be translated.



We would truly love to help bring the cemetery back to its original state, but, unfortunately, it's just not realistic. Walking around the gravestones and reading as much Hebrew as we could really moved the clock back in time for us, albeit for a brief time.

APR. 19/95

DEAR MRS. WATSON,

I FINALLY GOT AROUND TO SENDING YOU THE COPY OF MY COUSIN'S AS YET UNPUBLISHED BOOK, CONSISTING OF SOME 380 PAGES.

AS HE HIMSELF ADMITS THE LAST HUNDRED PAGES ARE OF LITTLE INTEREST ~~TO~~ ANYONE EXCEPT TO FAMILY MEMBERS. THAT INCLUDES THE ENTIRE PART III (THREE).

HOWEVER THE FIRST 229 PAGES, UP TO THE END OF CHAPTER XVIII (EIGHTEEN) MAKES FOR INTERESTING READING (AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED), AND THIS IS THE PART THAT HE WOULD LIKE TO PUBLISH UNDER A NEW TITLE, CHANGING THE NAME FROM

"THE UNDYING SPARK" TO "FROM STETEN TO METROPOLIS" OR SOMETHING LIKE IT.

AFTER YOU HAVE READ IT AND IF YOU KNOW OF ANY PUBLISHER THAT YOU THINK MIGHT BE INTERESTED, I WOULD APPRECIATE IF YOU WOULD LET MY COUSIN KNOW.

PLEASE KEEP IN MIND THAT MY COUSIN IS A MAN OF 91 AND FINDS IT DIFFICULT NOW TO WRITE. HOWEVER YOU CAN GET IN TOUCH WITH HIM BY LETTER WHICH WOULD BE EVER BETTER THAN BY PHONE.

IN ANY CASE, HE WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE YOUR OPINION REGARDING THE BOOK.

HIS ADDRESS IS; JACK AUERBACH

467 WEST WALNUT ST.

LONG BEACH N.Y. 11561

PHONE 516-432-0281

WITH BEST WISHES TO YOU AND FAMILY  
FROM RUTH & MYSELF

Mosick

*A*  
*for addendum*  
*probably not on computer*  
**Leah Watson**

---

**From:** Vikhnina, Alla A [vikhninaaa@state.gov]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, November 15, 2005 4:53 AM  
**To:** fam\_wats@geneseo.edu  
**Subject:** thank you note

Dear Mr. Watson,

My name is Alla, and I am the assistant at the American Embassy in Minsk, Belarus.

In response to your email addressed to Dereck Hogan we'd like to put together a thank you letter for the Belarusian village survivor, who is so kind to share his book with us. If possible, could you please provide me with his name and address, so that we can format the letter accordingly. To the best of my knowledge, Dereck will then forward it to you to pass it onto the writer.

I really appreciate your assistance in this matter.

Best regards,

Alla A. Vikhnina  
Pol/Econ Assistant  
US Embassy Minsk, Belarus  
Fax/Tel: +375 17 210 1313  
Tel: +375 17 210 1283 x4530  
Mob: +375 29 333 5090

This email is unclassified based on the definitions provided in E.O. 12958

*fraddeu  
probably not on  
computer*

Minsk, Republic of Belarus

June 20, 2006

To Mr. Moishe Kantorowitz  
24 Leith Hill Road #1709  
Willowdale, Ontario  
Canada, M2J-173

Dear Mr. Kantorowitz,

On behalf of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk, I would like to express our sincere gratitude for sharing your book with us. Your book will help all of us in the Embassy, including my American and Belarusian colleagues, expand our knowledge about yesteryear in a Belarusian village and learn more about its Jewish past.

I thank you again and wish you best of health for many years to come.

Best regards,

George A. Krol  
U.S. Ambassador to Belarus



Ken Kantorowitz  
3 Regatta Cres  
North York ON M2R 2X7  
CANADA

May 23, 2005

To whom it may concern:

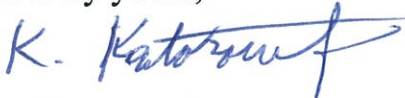
My father is an Auschwitz concentration camp Holocaust survivor. This year as we remember the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of the concentration camps, my father has completed a 15 - year project - to document his life and times starting in a small predominately Jewish shtetl (village), Shershev, on the Russian-Polish border in the 1920s and 1930s, personally commemorating hundreds of people who perished without graves.

His account of the war, the persecution and expulsion of the Jews from their shetls, the ghetto, and then the desperate struggle for survival in Auschwitz and Mauthausen death camps are told in first person narrative – the last eye witness account of what happened.

If you feel that this story, told in the enclosed book, has a place in your library, please accept this contribution. If you feel that it is not appropriate, I would ask that you return it to me at the address above as we have a limited number of copies.

Thank-you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely yours,



Ken Kantorowitz

Phone: (416) 226-1316

Email: ~~kkantorow@pathcom.com~~

1Kantorow@muhallum.ca

Anti-Semitism 72, 89, 90, 92, 94, 96-98, 107, 116-117, 121,123-124, 128-130, 135, 149-150, 154-155, 158, 185, 189, 209, 350, 448, 456, 542, 548, 551-552, 564

Appell 412, 419-423, 425-426, 437-440, 445-446, 451, 453-454, 458, 460, 462, 466, 474, 476-478, 483-484, 489, 492, 496, 498, 501, 503-504, 509, 517, 520, 544, 550, 558, 563, 565, 435, 438, 445, 473, 482, 521, 546, 565

Auerbachs 19, 28, 34, 46, 59, 82, 98-99, 101,115, 201, 255

Auschwitz 33-34, 49, 86, 117, 120, 201, 330, 335, 378, 390, 393, 396, 399, 400, 402-403, 404, 413, 419, 421, 426-427, 429, 432, 433, 435, 438, 443, 445, 451, 453, 461, 467-468, 471-472, 474, 476- 482, 484, 486-487, 489-493, 497-504, 507-511, 515, 517-520, 522, 527-528, 541-545, 547-548, 552, 556-558, 564, 566-568, 400, 404, 406, 413, 415, 416, 426-427, 432-433, 488-489, 494, 548

Bank 49, 66, 124, 145, 163, 206, 222, 534

Bathhouse 59, 60, 204, 402, 460, 467, 479, 484, 493, 496, 502, 515, 541, 545, 550, 558, 559

Bialowieza 5, 85, 129, 130, 162, 170, 194, 256, 258, 259, 261, 262, 263, 265 296, 323

Bialystok 209, 214, 296, 308, 309, 315, 343, 360, 415, 432, 433, 472, 502

Blacksmith 14, 23, 37, 115, 138, 172, 175, 241, 249, 283, 290, 338, 352

Blockaltesten 429, 436, 444, 551, 405, 406, 409, 412, 416, 417, 418, 419, 421, 422, 423, 425, 426, 427, 428, 430, 431, 435, 436, 437, 440, 455, 459, 461, 474, 478, 491, 492, 542, 547, 551, 555, 556, 558, 559, 561, 565, 566, 406, 422, 430, 431, 435, 473, 503, 505, 509, 510, 514, 537, 540, 541, 547, 559, 560, 562, 564, 567, 426, 490, 557

Bolsheviks 44, 66, 119, 120, 146, 151, 178, 179, 180, 181, 183, 185, 186, 187, 188, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 195, 196, 199, 200, 201, 204, 205, 206, 207, 210, 211, 213, 214, 218, 220, 221, 222, 224, 225, 226, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 240, 241, 242, 249, 251, 252, 254, 256, 257, 263, 264, 265, 290, 291, 295, 297, 308, 310, 315, 317, 331, 348, 382, 464, 502

Brest-Litovsk 12, 14, 15, 40, 45, 46, 77, 94, 132, 135, 138, 143, 145, 157, 160, 161, 162, 185, 186, 189, 191, 192, 194, 196, 199, 200, 204, 205, 207, 209, 210, 211, 212, 220, 229, 234, 235, 238, 241, 265, 332, 337, 339, 388, 413, 442, 511, 553

Businesses 10, 32, 36, 62, 76, 80, 106, 109, 110, 120, 134, 137, 140, 141, 151, 157, 159, 169, 170, 176, 183, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 220, 222, 225, 233, 329, 390

Kapos 400, 403, 404, 406, 409, 414, 422, 431, 440, 441, 442, 443, 444, 446, 447, 448, 450, 451, 452, 453, 455, 456, 457, 461, 462, 463, 464, 465, 466, 467, 470, 472, 476, 477, 478, 482, 483, 484, 485, 486, 487, 490, 491, 493, 498, 503, 505, 506, 509, 510, 511, 512, 514, 515, 519, 520,

521, 522, 524, 526, 527, 537, 540, 541, 542, 547, 549, 552, 553, 554, 556, 559, 560, 562, 564, 567

Cemeteries 36, 48, 49, 65, 100, 101, 345

Christians 9, 39, 90, 91, 92, 94, 105, 110, 117, 118, 119, 120, 124, 128, 129, 130, 137, 138, 139, 147, 154, 155, 156, 157, 174, 179, 183, 186, 195, 205, 213, 226, 231, 249, 255, 256, 256, 260, 263, 267, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 293, 294, 296, 298, 299, 301, 304, 305, 308, 309, 310, 313, 314, 329, 342, 349, 351, 352, 379, 382, 441, 522, 527

Collaborators 205, 283, 366, 384, 520, 523, 550

Communism 66, 78, 79, 169, 176, 178, 186, 230, 317

Craftsmen 93, 156, 463, 486, 513

Despair 181, 239, 241, 268, 278, 279, 345, 363, 366, 370, 375, 390, 394, 447, 490, 497, 518, 521, 556

Drochitcyn 14, 23, 34, 117, 282, 282, 283, 284, 288, 289, 291, 294, 296, 311, 314, 324, 325, 326, 335, 337, 339, 340, 340, 341, 377, 378, 413, 471

Farms 9, 30, 31, 44, 64, 83, 85, 109, 120, 138, 146, 156, 179, 208, 208, 211, 225, 225, 226, 226, 255, 256, 258, 272, 275, 281, 291, 294, 295, 298, 299, 301, 304, 305, 306, 307, 333, 350, 533, 534, 538, 546, 571

Farmers 8, 10, 13, 30, 31, 52, 65, 82, 83, 84, 85, 109, 115, 117, 138, 139, 146, 183, 184, 207, 208, 210, 213, 225, 226, 248, 256, 262, 281, 283, 284, 290, 294, 299, 300, 301, 306, 307, 308, 309, 317, 322, 328, 349, 376, 381, 383, 385

Foremen 319, 321, 323, 328, 400, 414, 440, 442, 444, 446, 447, 448, 449, 450, 452, 453, 454, 456, 459, 464, 467, 474, 487, 491, 491, 506, 507, 525, 547, 559, 567

Gentile 13, 14, 70, 71, 107, 117, 123, 126, 128, 129, 130, 132, 156, 157, 158, 255, 263, 286, 287, 288, 291, 293, 299, 302, 313, 329, 338, 343, 347, 349

Gestapo 259, 311, 312, 317, 324, 344, 347, 360, 433, 527

Ghettos 87, 103, 120, 132, 232, 289, 296, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 318, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 344, 345, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 372, 376, 377, 378, 379, 380, 381, 382, 385, 387, 388, 392, 393, 401, 410, 413, 415, 416, 419, 432, 451, 471, 472, 476, 482, 484, 496, 498, 502, 504, 507, 508, 525, 529, 556, 568

Guards 63, 106, 119, 122, 294, 295, 328, 329, 347, 348, 355, 356, 357, 360, 361, 412, 434, 494, 495, 499, 500, 511, 520, 521, 524, 530, 531, 533, 535, 537, 540, 542, 562, 563, 570

Gymnasium 10, 61, 103, 114, 116, 126, 127, 131, 139, 154, 160, 161, 207, 211, 297, 367

Gypsies 29, 31, 95, 96, 129, 412, 416, 419, 430, 431, 432, 445, 491, 545

Hebrew 7, 10, 18, 20, 23, 27, 28, 33, 34, 35, 38, 39, 41, 42, 48, 62, 63, 66, 70, 72, 74, 85, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93, 94, 102, 103, 111, 116, 121, 126, 127, 128, 131, 152, 153, 160, 161, 165, 167, 187, 195, 206, 211, 293, 352, 373, 391, 392, 393, 428

Cheder 17, 26, 27, 28, 34, 39, 70, 72, 89, 123, 165, 373

Hitler 25, 34, 71, 72, 97, 121, 123, 152, 159, 162, 164, 169, 178, 242, 495, 542, 566

Italians 16, 495, 503, 506, 516, 521, 526, 553

Jerusalem 15, 32, 57, 71, 131, 392, 393

Judenrat 255, 261, 265, 277, 308, 311, 324, 325, 356, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 372

Kibbutz 62, 63, 201

Kosher Food 7, 55, 56, 59, 117, 139, 149, 185, 188, 210, 227, 234, 235

Krankenbau 418, 479, 484, 486, 491, 508, 550, 555, 556, 564

Lageraltester 406, 407, 416, 417, 422, 503, 506, 547

Liberation 354, 383, 392, 489, 496, 523, 527, 533, 553, 556, 562

Marriage 16, 23, 38, 49, 78, 100, 114, 151, 201

Mauthausen 527, 540, 541, 542, 543, 544, 545, 546, 554, 558, 566, 569, 570

Mengele 478, 496, 499

Merchants 25, 76, 130, 134, 138, 161, 162, 164, 194, 211, 218, 221, 233

Mostowa 9, 17, 24, 32, 41, 56, 64, 72, 77, 106, 118, 122, 124, 128, 136, 145, 176, 243, 267

Newspapers 63, 85, 148, 162, 164, 168, 173, 329, 348, 489

Non-Jews 12, 14, 20, 39, 59, 61, 81, 89, 91, 93, 94, 95, 109, 112, 117, 117, 119, 124, 137, 138, 149, 161, 167, 168, 175, 187, 187, 189, 204, 205, 234, 240, 286, 299, 304, 317, 350, 350, 362, 428, 475, 479, 481, 518, 541, 555, 558,

Orthodox Christianity 14, 26, 37, 61, 64, 72, 90, 93, 110, 147, 245, 282



Ortscommendantur 259, 265, 310, 327, 329, 332, 337, 349, 354

Partisans 257, 317, 323, 324, 330, 331, 333, 337, 350, 356, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 383, 384

Peasants 6, 29, 30, 30, 43, 139, 146, 149, 156, 156, 157, 163, 164, 175, 176, 177, 185, 227, 243, 256, 261, 295, 326, 333, 350, 350, 353, 359, 362, 365, 368, 376, 382, 384

Pesach 7, 18, 19, 21, 27, 28, 45, 55, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 100, 115, 142, 155, 156, 210, 234, 235, 279, 310

Playing 22, 23, 62, 64, 75, 98, 99, 113, 204, 230, 347

Police 31, 66, 73, 96, 97, 98, 110, 121, 138, 156, 157, 170, 172, 174, 177, 179, 191, 205, 214, 216, 217, 255, 259, 261, 262, 269, 280, 281, 284, 292, 294, 295, 299, 300, 302, 304, 305, 307, 311, 315, 324, 325, 326, 327, 329, 330, 332, 334, 336, 339, 341, 350, 384, 385, 507, 523

Propaganda 79, 120, 124, 137, 149, 155, 230, 234

Pruzhany 9, 10, 11, 12, 24, 25, 31, 33, 37, 39, 46, 49, 50, 57, 61, 75, 76, 77, 78, 85, 86, 87, 91, 101, 103, 109, 111, 114, 118, 120, 126, 127, 131, 134, 138, 143, 145, 146, 154, 157, 160, 161, 173, 174, 177, 178, 194, 200, 201, 202, 205, 211, 223, 224, 235, 237, 239, 243, 253, 258, 271, 275, 289, 293, 294, 295, 296, 299, 301, 302, 304, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 317, 318, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 337, 338, 339, 340, 341, 342, 343, 345, 355, 356, 363, 368, 369, 378, 381, 383, 385, 387, 392, 393, 395, 403, 405, 410, 411, 413, 416, 419, 420, 425, 427, 428, 432, 433, 438, 464, 472, 476, 480, 481, 482, 484, 502, 504, 509, 566

Rabbis 11, 17, 18, 34, 39, 42, 61, 94, 100, 160, 165, 261, 293, 297, 303, 374

Railways 12, 80, 135, 164, 170, 174, 183, 189, 190, 296, 308, 318, 320, 331, 358, 364, 383, 388, 389, 390, 391, 393, 413, 433, 556, 557

Refugees 173, 174, 192, 192, 193, 205, 205, 310, 312, 313, 314, 315, 323, 325, 326, 330, 351, 352, 358, 383, 532, 553

Restaurants 7, 12, 13, 35, 118, 170, 190, 206

Rivers 9, 11, 14, 50, 54, 68, 80, 81, 104, 106, 124, 125, 146, 158, 188, 259, 332, 333, 349

Sabbath 23, 36, 55, 56, 62, 65, 67, 68, 80, 82, 86, 92, 95, 107, 112, 113, 117, 148, 154, 165, 236, 297

Schutzpolizei 249, 265, 267, 310, 315, 316, 319, 323, 329, 332, 335, 357, 344, 507

Shershev 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63,

64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 77, 80, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 90, 91, 94, 95, 98, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 109, 110, 112, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123, 124, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 143, 145, 146, 147, 150, 151, 152, 153, 156, 157, 159, 161, 163, 165, 167, 170, 173, 174, 178, 183, 184, 185, 187, 189, 194, 195, 198, 200, 201, 204, 205, 206, 207, 213, 215, 216, 220, 222, 223, 224, 227, 229, 230, 231, 232, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 240, 248, 249, 250, 253, 255, 256, 257, 259, 263, 264, 265, 267, 269, 270, 271, 275, 278, 280, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 287, 288, 290, 291, 292, 293, 295, 296, 300, 301, 302, 307, 310, 311, 313, 314, 321, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 335, 337, 338, 340, 341, 342, 343, 348, 353, 354, 358, 369, 370, 375, 377, 378, 379, 380, 385, 387, 392, 393, 413, 419, 420, 464, 470, 471, 472, 481, 487, 496, 543, 566

Shtetls 4, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 17, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 30, 31, 35, 38, 39, 40, 42, 44, 45, 51, 53, 54, 59, 61, 66, 67, 68, 70, 74, 77, 78, 80, 81, 89, 90, 91, 93, 95, 97, 99, 106, 107, 109, 110, 111, 112, 114, 115, 117, 117, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 130, 132, 134, 136, 137, 137, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 143, 144, 146, 152, 153, 160, 161, 163, 167, 168, 172, 173, 176, 177, 184, 191, 199, 205, 207, 208, 212, 213, 216, 222, 228, 228, 229, 232, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 243, 249, 250, 253, 253, 254, 255, 261, 262, 263, 268, 278, 280, 282, 282, 283, 284, 285, 286, 288, 293, 294, 296, 301, 302, 308, 308, 311, 313, 323, 324, 326, 334, 335, 335, 343, 388, 414, 481, 481, 513, 513, 540, 568

Siberia 44, 97, 151, 180, 193, 194, 205, 209, 210, 211, 214, 216, 217, 218, 219, 226, 233, 317

Soldiers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 72, 103, 107, 108, 139, 157, 163, 168, 171, 173, 174, 177, 178, 180, 181, 185, 196, 198, 202, 203, 204, 243, 244, 245, 246, 248, 249, 250, 253, 257, 258, 291, 310, 327, 328, 329, 332, 339, 348, 348, 349, 354, 354, 355, 356, 357, 381, 391, 392, 393, 437, 444, 489, 489, 496, 519, 527, 533, 534, 544, 558, 563, 565, 570, 572

Sosnowiec 504, 505, 510, 515, 519, 526, 527, 529, 532, 541, 546, 547, 548, 553, 557, 558, 566, 568, 569

Storekeeper 14, 31, 110, 111, 137, 138, 140, 151, 157, 163, 164, 168, 176, 179, 183, 184, 208, 309

Stores 4, 10, 13, 14, 16, 31, 35, 67, 90, 93, 120, 121, 138, 149, 156, 157, 158, 164, 176, 178, 179, 206, 208, 211, 214, 215, 309, 355

Stube 436, 437, 438, 439, 442, 445, 446, 447, 448, 453, 455, 456, 458, 460, 462, 467, 469, 472, 474, 475, 476, 477, 478, 479, 480, 482, 483, 489, 490, 491, 492, 493, 497, 501, 502, 548, 551, 552, 557, 558

Stubendienst 405, 406, 408, 409, 411, 411, 412, 417, 419, 420, 420, 421, 422, 424, 425, 427, 427, 428, 429, 430, 430, 431, 435, 436, 437, 438, 439, 439 440, 444, 446, 456, 460, 475, 477, 491, 514, 542, 543, 548, 551, 553, 556, 564

Students 10, 17, 18, 27, 41, 50, 74, 88, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 116, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 135, 141, 155, 161, 185, 186, 187, 189, 193, 197, 227, 236, 526

Swamp 2, 17, 17, 51, 51, 52, 58, 63, 65, 84, 104, 118, 118, 247, 252, 252, 260, 270, 284, 291 333, 333, 421

Synagogues 11, 15, 16, 16, 17, 17, 25, 26, 37, 40, 41, 42, 43, 47, 48, 60, 61, 61, 62, 64, 65, 67, 67, 68, 69, 70, 70, 71, 73, 82, 98, 99, 112, 113, 117, 120, 122, 123, 155, 159, 165, 179, 179, 192, 210, 210, 227, 228, 229, 248, 278, 279, 346, 347, 347, 358, 474

Tailors 8, 62, 80, 124, 138, 142, 152, 156, 157, 290, 314, 338, 339

Teachers 17, 27, 34, 38, 39, 47, 48, 50, 50, 62, 63, 66, 74, 75, 89, 90, 90, 91, 92, 93, 96, 97, 103, 112, 121, 126, 128, 128, 129, 129, 130, 154, 155, 189, 189, 199, 199, 207 308, 352,

Vacations 10, 14, 37, 39, 41, 52, 81, 85, 86, 87, 94, 124, 127, 135, 143, 154, 160, 161, 200, 202, 204, 209, 210, 212, 217, 229

Villages 2, 8, 8, 13, 13, 14, 30, 32, 41, 43, 52, 58, 80, 82, 84, 85, 92, 109, 117, 118, 119, 120, 129, 138, 139, 148, 156, 175, 176, 185, 201, 207, 208, 211, 212, 213, 219, 220, 229, 253, 258, 283, 284, 291, 294, 295, 296, 298, 299, 300, 301, 304, 305, 307, 308, 314, 317, 325, 326, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 337, 362, 377, 383, 384, 502, 561 570,

Women 5, 19, 26, 47, 48, 55, 56, 59, 60, 61, 62, 67, 69, 77, 81, 89, 99, 100, 111, 125, 126, 136, 143, 168, 170, 227, 240, 250, 259, 261, 266, 267, 270, 277, 278, 279, 287, 291, 302, 303, 308, 325, 333, 334, 340, 365, 380, 385, 387, 395, 396, 397, 398, 415, 430, 431, 432, 479, 480, 486, 487, 488, 493, 511, 536, 572

Work 357, 445, 458, 480, 553

Yiddish 1, 6, 15, 20, 39, 55, 72, 91, 115, 130, 149, 153, 160, 161, 177, 189, 191, 195, 206, 211, 265, 293, 298, 360, 371, 393, 402, 428, 471, 496, 526, 546