

One More Miracle

The Memoirs of Morris Sorid

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*For my children and their families; and to the memory of my wife,  
Regina.*

## Table of Contents

The Outbreak of World War II.....	1
Collapse of the Polish Forces.....	4
Capture by Red Army .....	6
Capture by Polish Military Police .....	9
Recapture by Russian Army.....	11
Home Again in Pruzany.....	17
Life Under the Soviet Regime.....	19
Teaching in the Communist System.....	24
Home Life.....	29
Banishment to Siberia .....	31
Russian Citizenship and Passports.....	31
The Threat of German Invasion.....	32
German Occupation.....	34
Life in the Pruzany Ghetto.....	37
The Evacuation of Jews from Pruzany .....	45
The Bunker .....	48
Life as a Partisan.....	56
On the Run .....	56
Acceptance into the Chapayev Brigade—Malenkov Otriad .....	59
Facing Danger Within the Otriad .....	63
Acts of Sabotage.....	71
Promotion to Rank of Sergeant .....	73
Promotion to Deputy Commander .....	75
Medical and Food Supplies.....	76
Hungarian Jews.....	87
Songs and Entertainment .....	92

Communist Party Rejection .....	96
A Change in Locations and Regimes.....	100
Life as a Civilian Under Communist Rule .....	111
Map One.....	127
Fear: The Foundation of Communism .....	129
The Yalta Accord .....	129
Fear and Apprehension—Our Way of Life .....	130
Registration for Resettlement in Poland .....	134
Registration to Leave Kobrin .....	144
Election Day and the Birth of Chaim .....	147
Back to Poland .....	153
Shteteen: Stopover to Berlin.....	156
Refugee Camp Foonkkaserne .....	182
Refugee Camp Neu Freimann .....	184
Early Life in Dolgolisk, Poland.....	200
Family Roots and Heritage.....	205
General Family Information .....	215
Sisters .....	215
Chores .....	219
Childhood Games .....	219
Early Education .....	220
Youth Organizations and Activities.....	226
My Bar Mitzvah .....	231
Higher Education .....	232
Talents and Accomplishments.....	233
Military Service in Poland .....	236
The Family Cheese Business .....	245

Courtship of Regina.....	248
Life in America.....	258
Our First Home.....	260
Meeting the Relatives.....	261
Finding Employment.....	262
American Citizenship.....	272
Membership in a Fraternal Lodge.....	273
Family Life.....	274
Bar Mitzvahs of Victor and Harvey.....	276
Jewish Organizations.....	278
German Restitution.....	278
Regina’s Hadassah Activities.....	279
Pruzaner and Vicinity Relief Organization.....	281
Fulfillment of My Promise.....	283
New Business Venture.....	286
Regina’s Illness, Sale of Business, and New Job.....	291
Addendum.....	302
My Father’s Siblings.....	302
My Life in Retirement.....	302

# Introduction

Whenever I experience a challenge in my life, I think of my Grandpa Morris, Grandma Regina, and the last name they chose 58 years ago. (Sorid is a variant of “Sarid”, which means “survivor” in Hebrew). They lived in the forests of Poland and fought against the Nazis. They lost so many dear family members during the Holocaust. They started with nothing in America and worked tremendously hard to rebuild their livelihood. And in the end, while we lost Grandma Regina more than 32 years ago, our family has survived and continues to grow.

These thoughts race through my head with every challenge I face. If Grandpa Morris and Grandma Regina could get through their challenges, I surely can find the strength to get through mine. It’s in our blood to survive any challenge that comes our way. I hope this book inspires all readers, especially those in the family, to keep personal challenges in perspective.

In a few weeks, the Sorid family will get together with Grandpa to celebrate his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday. Four generations of the Sorid family will laugh, eat, and listen to stories about the old country. This is our way of never forgetting the tragedies of the Holocaust and the triumph of our family. I hope this book, originally written on a typewriter by Grandpa during 1999-2002 and copyedited by a professional editor in 2006, will enable future generations to never forget the Holocaust and take tremendous pride in our family’s history and name.

Jonathan Sorid

January 2007

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my family for their help and support in producing this book from the typewritten pages I had written over the years. And to those who saved my life: Ivan Pauk and his family, and Pavel Deba.

Morris Sorid (Moshe Yudewitz)

June 2007

## Section One

“The Holocaust is a central event in many people’s lives, but it also has become a metaphor for our century. There cannot be an end to speaking and writing about it. Besides . . . everyone carries a biography deep inside him.” —Aharon Appelfeld

## The Outbreak of World War II

I remember Wednesday, August 30, 1939 as though it were yesterday. Early in the morning, I had walked down the street to buy a newspaper and saw huge posters attached to the lampposts. I approached one of the posters and read an announcement: "BY ORDER OF THE WAR AFFAIRS MINISTER OF THE POLISH GOVERNMENT, ALL RESERVE SOLDIERS OF THE ARMED FORCES MUST REPORT WITHIN 36 HOURS TO THEIR REGIMENTS. SUBORDINATION WILL RESULT IN SEVERE PUNISHMENT."

I heard people expressing their opinions. Some shouted the inevitable was happening. War. War was at our doorstep. Others were sure that Hitler would not attack Poland, thinking that France and Britain were allies of Poland and would protect their partner and defeat Hitler.

I returned home in a depressed mood and told Regina the sad news. I would have to leave her and our sweet little daughter to go to war. She began to cry bitterly. I tried to restrain my own tears and comfort her. "I will be back soon. The war will not last long. The allies will repel the enemy. The German army will be crushed and punished for the attack." We were heartbroken. Little Tsveeyah looked at us with bewilderment, as though she knew something horrible was happening, but not knowing what.

The news that I was called to serve in my army unit spread as fast as lightening. Relatives came to spend some time with me before I was ready to depart. My in-laws, parents, sisters, brother, and neighbors stood in front of their houses and looked in the direction of our windows. They worried. Mosheh was going to war . . . to the unknown. Later in the day, I began to put in order all of the papers, documents, and certificates that concerned our daily lives. I went over all of the items concerning the household matters, financial obligations, income, payments, and many other details with Regina. We spent the evening reminiscing about happy moments in our life since the day we had met and gotten to know each other, including the Chanukah party at their home during the winter of 1929 to which I had been invited (not even knowing her or her parents). We had fallen truly in love that night, at

the first twinkle of our eyes. Our adventures, hikes, parties, and dances. We remembered our wedding, our love, and the birth of our beautiful child. We talked about our many friends and acquaintances, and about places we had visited together.

The next morning, I went to my parents' house . . . the house in which I had grown up during most of my youth and all of my adolescence. Would I return from the war and see my room again—my table, chairs, and closet? Hopefully, I would. Hopefully, the answer was yes. I had lunch with my family, and then it was time to say goodbye. My mother didn't cry. She never cried, but her eyes expressed it all: love, worries, good wishes, and blessings. I saw tears in my father's eyes. He said, "Moshéh, I wish you good luck. Come back soon, we need you."

I responded, "I am an optimist. I will be home in one piece, with no broken bones." By saying this, I eased the tension in the room. I spent some time with them, said goodbye, and returned home. I played all afternoon with my little daughter, had dinner with my in-laws, and at ten that evening, left the house to the unknown. Regina escorted me to the bus station. My sisters, their husbands, my brother, and some friends came to wish me good luck, and to be with me in these moments of unpredictability. I hugged my wife, pressing her to my heart. We kissed emotionally under the bright moon as we used to before, expressing our love and devotion to each other.

The bus driver started the ignition, I took a seat, and away we went. I waved my hand to Regina. She was crying. The distance to the Oran-chitse train station was twelve kilometers and It took about twenty minutes to reach the station. The train arrived and we clambered aboard and were soon on our way to Brisk. The railroad car was packed. Hundreds of men had rushed to join their regiments. I saw a few acquaintances, but each of us went to a different place. Our eyes expressed the same questions: Will we ever see each other again? Will we come out alive from the war? Most of the men were Bialorussians. Judging from their appearance, they had obviously left their farms, cows, horses, and fields, without having time to leave anybody in care of them or their families. After a while, the tension eased, and we started to sing army and Polish patriotic songs.

The train stopped at Zabinka at 12:10 A.M., on September 1, 1939. I saw a crowd gathered into several groups. Some of them approached the train and shouted that at exactly 12:00 A.M., German planes had dropped a few bombs in the area. I figured I was lucky so far. They had

probably been dropped to destroy the train with the reserve soldiers and missed their target. War. Hitler had broken his promise to Chamberlain that he would not invade Eastern European countries any more.

We arrived at Brisk early in the morning and headed for the barracks. There was mass confusion, panic, and disorder. The commanders and other brass had departed earlier to the north, while the remaining officers were rushing from one end to the other, undecided about what to do.

Suddenly an alarm sounded and we were ordered to take cover. Within five minutes, German planes dropped scores of bombs on the barracks and on the airfield. Again, we were lucky. We were then lined up and given army attire, guns, rifles, canteens, knapsacks, and rations for the day; then we waited for orders. The loudspeaker kept repeating the president's appeal to the Polish public: "We will fight the aggressors. We will not give them a centimeter of our Fatherland. We will not give even a broken button."

I thought, "What a naïve statement. The Polish army is practically nonexistent. How long will it take Hitler's divisions of tanks and his air force to annihilate our disorganized cavalry, our foot-dragging infantry, our horse-drawn artillery wagons, all of which are using old fashioned communication?"

By noon, a battalion of infantry was formed of the reserve soldiers and divided into platoons, companies, and smaller units. As a corporal, I was assigned to leadership of a unit of twelve soldiers in the first platoon. An order came late in the afternoon and the battalion took off in the northwest direction to defend the capitol city . . . Warsaw. We stopped for the night in a village outside the famous Fortress Brisk. As my unit was putting up a tent, a captain strode over to me and said, "Yudevits, *yak siemash* (how are you)?" I recognized him immediately. He was Regina's schoolmate in the Polish gymnasium (high school). His name was Korobko. He was a Bialorussian. I had met him many times when courting Regina. He was a gentleman then and much more at this moment, because he was a doctor with the rank of a captain. It was an unusual act of graciousness for him to contact me.

We reminisced about twenty minutes and before leaving, he said, "We will meet again in Pruzany, I am sure. *Bendzie dobre* (it will be good)." [Indeed, we would ultimately meet up a few months later when Regina invited him to our apartment and we reminisced about our experiences in the war and in captivity as war prisoners.] Meeting a coun-

tryman in conditions of war was like meeting a brother. The twenty minutes of chitchat with the Bialorussian boosted my morale and my pressed mood vanished. I felt more like a soldier about to defend my country. That night, I dreamed of Regina playing with our little daughter, Tsveeyah. When I woke up, I made a promise to myself: I will survive this. I must survive and return to my dearest and most loved ones.

The distance between Brisk on the river Boog and Warsaw was about 240 kilometers. The commanding staff chose country roads, in order to avoid the German tanks that roamed over the highways. It also enabled us to take cover in the forests and bushes, to keep from being detected by German airplanes. In the Russian language, the town Brest is known as *Brest Litovsk*, because it was part of Lithuania many years ago. The Polish government called this the famous Fortress Brzesc on the river Boog. Brest was the town where the communist leader Lenin made peace with the Germans, during the First World War, and abandoned the western allies.

We marched in full gear and it was very tiring. When we passed a village, the peasants handed us buckets with water, some fruits and other things, for which we were very thankful. My unit of twelve men—*druzina*—showed the utmost friendship to one another. This is very important, as it saves lives in combat. As a Jew, I did not encounter any anti-Semitic remarks or disobedience from my *druzina*, or from other soldiers. My rank of corporal, even as a low rank, spoke for itself.

### Collapse of the Polish Forces

It didn't take more than a few days for the Polish army to collapse. The divisions, brigades, and regiments crumbled completely or broke into small units, which then hid in the forests and continued brave attacks on German motorized forces. I remember the night we marched over a bridge. I looked down and saw scores of horses of the famous Polish cavalry. They were dead and scattered over the river, the horse-men also dead on the road or in the water. It was a horrible scene.

We entered a town name Lookov, or Lucov. The houses had been destroyed by the German air force. I entered one house and found dead people on the floor. There was a feeling of apathy among the soldiers, and I could see it also on the long faces of the commanding officers. There was no hope to our winning the war. The Polish government officials had escaped to London to save their lives. We were without leadership. About six miles from a town named Siedlets, we saw the

high clouds of smoke and fires. The whole area ahead of us was burning.

The order from the commanding officer was to retreat. We turned back and proceeded south. The thought was that we would try to reach Romania. We dragged ourselves along the country roads again, hiding in the thick forests and the darkness of night. I must admit that in these conditions—with danger, hunger, thirst, cold nights, and lice creeping over your unwashed body—it is almost impossible to think about the home you had left behind, or about relatives, parents, even your wife and child. You think, instead, about an hour of sleep, about some food to break your hunger, and about not falling into German captivity and possibly being tortured. Nevertheless, once in a while, the thought of Regina and my Tsveeyah overpowered me and such thoughts always made me feel better.

I remember entering a small town with a sign showing it was Vishnits. I was taken aback. My family had lived in this town twenty years before. It was where I had attended my first school called a *cheder*<sup>1</sup> and where my parents had done business. Although we had left in 1919 or 1920, when I was nine years old, as we passed the streets, I recognized the stores and the marketplace. We stopped in the town for about four hours. I approached my superior officer and asked permission to visit some people I remembered. He granted me permission to leave my unit for two hours.

It was the first day of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana. I went to the synagogue and found Jews praying for peace. I told the sexton that I was Meyer's son and that my family had lived in the Dolgolisk farm ranch. The news spread fast among the men and women who were present at the services. They rushed to see and embrace me, and asked me all kinds of questions about my parents, sisters, and on and on. The children touched my bayonet and the stripes on my uniform and wondered, "A Jew, a corporal?"

The people wanted me to stay much longer, but I went by the rules and returned to my regiment on time. Desertion meant death, and, to this day, I am glad I returned promptly. I knew the army would find me

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<sup>1</sup> From the Hebrew word for "room", a *cheder* is a traditional elementary school where the Hebrew language and Judaism basics are taught.

in five minutes, and I didn't want to take any chances. The poor people of Vishnits. The Germans invaded the town, set it on fire, and sent all Jews—men, women, young, old—to the concentration camps.

We continued to proceed south. Only one thought was on everybody's mind: Don't fall into German captivity. During the days, we took cover. We had nothing to eat. Nothing. The only source of food was from the villagers, but they seldom had enough to satisfy our craving for bread and potatoes. We were constantly hungry and miserable.

Ever since I was a youngster and a student in Hebrew elementary and high schools, I had read newspapers and magazines and listened to the radio. I was enlightened about local, national, and international problems, and about political ideas, and economic and territorial disputes between nations in Europe and in Palestine. Very often, I had debated about these things with friends. I was aware of the non-aggression treaty between Ribbentrop, the foreign minister of Germany, and Molotov, the commissioner of foreign affairs of Communist Russia. The whole world knew about this pact, which was signed in 1939. What I didn't know, or even suspect, was that other world leaders didn't know that Hitler and Stalin had decided to share Poland among themselves. The parts of Bialorussia and Ukraine that were under Poland's rule would go to Russia, and the rest of the Polish territory would belong to Germany. They had agreed that the Germans would attack Poland first, and as soon as its army had reached the River Boog, the Soviet forces would cross the border and attack Poland from the east.

### Capture by Red Army

I lived through the implications of their decision and encountered it on September 18, 1939, as a reserve soldier in the Polish army. On that morning, my batallion found itself on the outskirts of a very heavy forest near the town of Chelem. We were about to begin our marching, when we heard a noise of approaching tanks. It didn't take more than a minute before two tanks stopped near the forest. The top of one tank opened and a soldier's head appeared. Something seemed strange to us; he was not a German. Holding a bullhorn in his hand, the soldier spoke in a harsh voice. "We are Russian soldiers. We have come to liberate you from the yoke of Polish lords. Drop your arms and you will live! We bring freedom, good life, and justice for everybody. Comply, or suffer the consequences. If you dare take up arms against the Red Army, you will be crushed to death like worms!"

There was no time for us to think or debate, and the commander of our battalion dropped his pistol. It was a dramatic moment to watch the other officers drop their revolvers, one after the other. Obviously, the rest of us dropped our arms, too.

We were ordered to come out of the forest. The tank operators searched us and didn't find any weapons in our possession. They told us to line up in columns eight deep, in order to be counted. For us, it was a situation of grave uncertainty. We were fearful of what the next step might be. When put into perspective, however, I was comforted by the fact that the Russian army was taking me into captivity and not the Nazis. The Russians separated the officers from the regular soldiers, and we began our march under their strict orders and those of their collaborators. There is a Hebrew expression—*Ma Pitom*—literally, *What, suddenly?* Who were these collaborators, where did they come from, and how did they become collaborators of the Russians on the first day of their invasion?

According to a peace treaty signed at the end of the First World War, a large part of Bialorussia and Ukraine had been included in Polish territory. Ever since then, a strong nationalism had brewed among people in these territories. Nationalistic tendencies in Bialorussia and the Ukraine were illegal, and the Polish rulers had suppressed any such ideas with all their might and rigor. They arrested and jailed anyone caught propagandizing an independent Bialorussia and Ukraine state. In the 1920s or a few years later, the Polish government had built the horrible concentration camp in Bereza Kartuska (in the area of the Brest province), where they took communists, nationalists, and adversaries of the Polish government. Now, when the Russians invaded Poland, they were welcomed by these suppressed Bialorussians and Ukrainians.

Within hours, many young Bialorussian men and women were offering help as guides, or as civilian enforcers in detaining Polish soldiers, policemen, clerks, and others. We were handed over to a bunch of these young Bialorussians and led to the unknown. About four or five Russian soldiers mounted on horses rode in front of our columns. I marched at the end of the war prisoners. To the left of me walked one of the guards. He was a young teenager and could hardly carry his rifle over his shoulder. I remember that I had a new bicycle in my possession. I turned to him and said in Bialorussian, "Comrade Tovarish, I see that you have difficulties walking. Take the bicycle and allow me to sneak into the bushes."

He said, “*Ooderai!*” which means “Get lost!” This was a daring move, requiring *chutzpah* on my part, but I felt it was worth the effort. I dashed into the bushes and hid there for about fifteen minutes. It was very early in the morning. Then I walked in the direction of Chelem. When I entered the town, I tried to find a Jewish neighborhood. In general, the civilian population treated unarmed soldiers indifferently (not particularly friendly) to avoid any appearance of being involved. I asked a passerby for directions and he directed me to a Jewish house. The lady and her husband invited me inside with open arms. They treated me as if I were their own son returning from battle. I stayed with these nice people during the entire day and that night. The next morning, I started my hike home to Pruzany . . . to my most dear wife, child, and family, not having the slightest knowledge of their well being. I thanked my benefactors for their hospitality and parted from them cordially. The lady supplied a couple sandwiches and filled my canteen with tea. I kissed her and promised to write (indeed, a few months later, I mailed them a letter, but never received an answer). They escorted me to the end of the street and pointed to the direction of the train station.

The trains were not running, because the authorities had to alter the railroad tracks to fit the wider Russian trains. I had no other choice but to walk towards Brisk on the river Boog. The walk was about 120 miles, but nothing could stop me from going home to my family, to my dear wife and daughter, Tsveeyah.

I was not the only one marching east. There were many other soldiers who were rushing to their homes. Right from the beginning of my journey, I had gained a companion. Pyoter was a Bialorussian fellow from a village about ten miles from Pruzany. He had to part from his wife and two children at the same time I did, and he was as happy as I to be on his way home. We were in a good mood. No trains were running, so we had to walk. I spoke the Bialorussian language, so we told each other of our experiences. After walking seven miles, we got off the tracks and turned toward a village, which was about one mile from our route. The villagers were Polish farmers. They treated us to a nice lunch and offered to send some extra food with us. They praised us for fighting to save the “fatherland” and also expressed their anger at the Polish government for not preparing the country in how to protect its citizens and towns from the bloody intruders.

Late in the afternoon (we had no watches to know the exact time), we entered another village. Again, we were treated well. We were of-

ferred food, drink, and even a place to sleep in a barn. We had walked about ten miles during the first day. Along the tracks were signs, so it was easy to find out the distance in kilometers.

### Capture by Polish Military Police

We continued to walk for several days. We hoped to reach Brisk within ten to twelve days, but... Whenever there is hope involved and “but” gets involved, it means there is an obstacle in the way. Indeed, on the sixth day of our odyssey, we ran into peril, which almost cost us our lives. On the afternoon of the sixth day, we were minding our own business and trudging along the railroad tracks, when we noticed people in uniforms in the distance. They were Polish military police. We were not afraid, because we had done nothing wrong. Our regiment had been disarmed and we were being sent home, but . . . (again, but). The military police stopped us and asked a few questions. They accused us of being deserters and said we were about to be arrested and severely punished. My heart almost jumped out of my chest in fear. They ordered us to follow them into the forest where an infantry regiment was encamped. We did as we were ordered to do.

There, a lieutenant investigated us. I told him what had happened near Chelem—that our regiment had been disarmed by the Red Army and that we were being sent home. We were placed into a separate rather small tent, our shoes were taken away, and we were put under guard. Before leaving, the officer in charge said that in the morning we would be tried as deserters and shot to death. I am short of words to describe my feelings. My world turned from the hope of seeing my dear wife and child to the thought of being buried in the wilderness between Parchev and Vlodava . . . In the very forests where my father used to sell lumber to merchants twenty-five years before when we lived in Dolgolik. I remembered that my parents used to mention the towns of Parchev and Vlodava and the thick forests near them.

Neither Pyoter nor I touched the meager food we were given. We sank into a deep silence, heads down in the palms of our shaking hands. We deplored our situation. We realized that if we were court-martialed and accused of desertion, the verdict would be GUILTY and we would be killed by a firing squad. We were in a very perilous predicament. The situation seemed especially hopeless, because we had no one who to help us . . . no lawyer, or wives, no parents, no one the soldiers might

interview who could tell them the truth. We felt increasingly desperate, knowing we had no way out.

I reminded myself of a proverb I had read when I studied the Latin language in Hebrew gymnasium (school): *Homo Homini Lupus Est*, which means “A man to a man is a wolf.” A wolf is the only animal that kills other wolves and eats their flesh. A man is apt to kill another man for personal benefits. I committed blasphemy and blamed God for causing a war to satisfy the ambitions of arch murderers and for getting me involved in it to the point that I would be shot to death for a crime that I hadn’t committed.

I began to think how beautiful life could be, how pleasant it was to see the surrounding trees, flowers, wildlife, and to feel joy, laughter, and the smiles of others. I thought about the warm home that I was made to leave. It was probably midnight, and I couldn’t sleep. I was overtaken by visions and began hallucinating. *Regina, my darling, I see you near me. You look so beautiful . . . the same as when I fell in love with you. Your smile is so sweet. I am smiling at our little girl. She is so gorgeous, so great. Tsveeyale, don’t cry, your father will be back. He loves you. He needs you. Nobody will take him away from you.*

The heavy, rugged steps of the guard interrupted my thoughts as he came closer to our tent. I returned to reality. *Death, death, death, for what crime or what sin? I am only twenty-eight years old. I didn’t harm anybody. I didn’t betray or have a fist fight with anybody. I’m not in trouble with the law. I’ve never been arrested and never been taken to the police precinct.* Oh, yes. Once. I remembered. It had happened in the spring of 1930. We had a matzo ball party during the Passover holiday at Regina’s house. We were a bunch of students from the Polish gymnasium and the Hebrew high school. The party was over and we had decided to take a walk in the streets of our town . . . about ten or twelve teenagers, happy, careless, young. Well, I began to sing a Hebrew song, first very low, but gradually inspired by the good mood we were in. Everybody started to sing *Hava Nagilah* loudly. It was about midnight and we were near the police precinct. We heard a whistle and saw a flashing light. Two policemen rounded us up and guided us into the precinct. They were right. We were disturbing the peace by singing at midnight. The captain was a nice fellow and said, “I know how good it is to be young and happy.” He sent us home, but we had to promise him that when the policemen had their party, we would come and sing for them and their wives and girlfriends.

I fell asleep again. In my dream, I saw myself taken outside the field prison and placed in front of the army squad. A captain asked me my last wish. My answer was that I wished to send a letter to my wife. I was handed a pen and paper and I wrote the few words, "Regina, I love you and our dear daughter" and handed it to him.

What a heartbreaking dream. People say that miracles happen. I am very skeptical about this, but what else can you call the event that happened very early the next morning. What else could you call it, but a miracle. We were taken to the headquarters tent and an officer with the rank of major came out to speak to us. "We regret keeping you under arrest during the night. You are free to return to your homes."

We were speechless. I whispered silently, "*Dzienkooye.*" Thank you!

He placed an order to give us breakfast and to escort us from the forest where we had been seized. Happy again, Pyoter said, "We were saved by a miracle, maybe thanks to my prayers." I let him believe that. I chose to believe that the soldiers had learned the truth of the surrender of our regiment near Chelem where we had been disarmed and sent home. I was not in the mood to discuss with Pyoter who was right . . . a miracle or reason. We both were right.

### Recapture by Russian Army

It took us six more days and we entered a town about twenty kilometers from Brisk on Boog—a town called Malorita. The Jewish people there rushed to help us. We were two soldiers returning home. They did not distinguish between nationalities. As they did with other soldiers, we were fed lavishly. We were very tired, so we decided to stay overnight in Malorita.

Two days later, we arrived at Brisk, around noontime. I had been there a few times before, but it looked different now. It was neither bombed nor set on fire, but it looked as if the life in the town had lost its bright color, its complexion. We found out that the town was under Russian occupation. We were also told that the trains in the direction of Baranovitch were running. This is what I had hoped for. I was pretty sure that the third train station in the direction of Baranovitch was Oranchitse, the station I needed to reach. Well, Pyoter was headed in a different direction, so we wished each other good luck, parted, and he went on his way and I headed towards the railroad station.

Suddenly, I encountered a Jewish woman whom I had seen many times before. I recognized her as the one who had worked in a bicycle store in Pruzany. She told me the happy news, that Pruzany didn't suffer during the invasion by the Russian army. Everybody was okay. I am short of words to describe my happiness at hearing those words. I felt some kind of an ease in my body and in my legs, as if something had lifted me up and was carrying me home to my Regina and to my Tsveeyah.

But not so fast, please, hold your breath and continue reading. I went in the direction of the main station and saw Russian soldiers. At the entrance to the station, one was waving his hand and calling out to the Polish soldiers who were flocking inside, like sheep to their barn. The Russian soldier, dressed in a heavy gray overcoat, high boots, and a sort of warm cap that reached over his ears continued waving his hand and calling "*Davay, Davay, Zachodee, Zachodee, Zachodee.*" The word *Davay* means "come on," and the word *Zachodee* means "enter" or "come in."

I entered the station with everyone else and saw hundreds of Polish soldiers lying on the floor and sleeping. Those who were awake kept on asking when the train to Vilno would arrive. Another asked about Warsaw, a third Krakow, and so on. About midnight, a train stopped. Each soldier thought that it was the train he was awaiting and rushed to the door.

It seemed the Russians liked to play games and have a little fun; they kept on asking the confused, tired, sleepy, drowsy soldiers, "*Kooda* (where to)?"

"To Bialystoka" soldiers answered.

The Russian shouted in a loud voice, "*Poyediesh!*" (you will travel). Again, "*Kooda* (where to)?"

"To Bialystoka" the soldiers answered.

The Russian shouted in an even louder voice, "*Poyodiesh!*" and "*Kooda* (where to)?"

The answer was "to Baranovich." This was my destination.

"*Poyediesh!*" (you will travel on the same train). It was in the opposite direction. A third person said he was going to Lodz, a fourth going to Danzig, and so on.

The Russian soldiers had no intention of allowing any of us to go to our destinations. They shoved and pushed the whole flock of us into the cargo cars like they were pushing sheep into a barn. Before I was

pushed into a dirt-filled car, I noticed a smile on the face of one Russian officer. It was a cynical smile, as if he were saying to himself, "I know where you people are being taken." I thought that it probably pained him to hurt so many, but I was naïve.

"Not me," I said to myself, "I am going home. The third station is mine, just after Brisk, Zabinka, and Tevle. I will get off and take the train to my town—Pruzany." Well, I was certainly naïve. I was not smart enough to foresee the next set of events.

Eighty to a hundred people were pushed into train cars that had the capacity to hold forty- five people. We sat on the filthy wet floor and waited. The train moved and no one said a word. We were in shock, almost unconscious. When we had regained our strength, we wondered, "How will this work? Why are all of these people who have different destinations in the same car?" We were locked in a grubby boxcar like herring in a barrel of oil.

In the middle of the car was a vessel made out of sheet metal. It was supposed to serve for a urinal. Somebody started to whisper, and then someone began to talk, and a third joined in the conversation. I soon learned that I was sharing the car with the medical staff from the Brisk military hospital. In the dim light, I also saw that others were highly ranked officers—captains, majors, and even generals, who were obviously ardent patriots of their country . . . Poland.

I was tired, hungry, and thirsty, and so was everyone else. I fell asleep. I woke up and peered through the tiny window and saw that we were passing the station called Tevlee. I began to crawl to the door, excusing myself for the inconvenience I was causing others, saying that I would be getting off at the next station.

The train stopped, I touched the handle, the door moved, and I lowered myself from the train. Suddenly, out of nowhere in the darkness, I heard a loud, harsh command: "*Vernis! Vernis! Bo strelliati boodo!* (Return or I will shoot!)" I opened my mouth to explain that this was my destination and saw a Russian soldier standing on the platform and pointing his rifle at me. It took me two seconds and I was back inside the car. Luckily, I did not pay for my naiveté with my life. I was stupid to not realize that we were prisoners of war being taken to a prisoner of war camp in Russia.

No one in the train car knew this, until I told them what had just happened to me. This was a horrible experience. The disappointment and pain, the wrath of losing our freedom and of losing our fatherland

to the tyrannical brutal communist leader was palpable in the boxcar. In the darkness of the night, in the stillness which engulfed us, a high ranking officer exploded and started to deliver a patriotic speech—a speech with extreme wrath and hate toward the Germans and their allies—the Communists. He repeated the president’s words when the war first started: “We will not abandon our country. We will fight back with the armies of Britain and France. We will not give a centimeter, not a broken button of our beloved Polish land to the enemy.”

I thought to myself, “I am with you, General, but how and when?” I had many questions to ask, but didn’t dare open my big mouth and be in disgrace with my companions in the cinder box. I asked myself why the Polish government had tolerated anti-Semitism. Why hadn’t they stopped the Catholic clergy from inciting the parishioners against the Jews? Why had they discriminated against the Jews, and made it so that a Jew could not even be a government street cleaner? Why hadn’t they strengthened the Polish army, instead of inviting Gehrung, the German minister, to hunt deer in the wilderness of the Bialowieza forest with the Polish minister of internal affairs? Why?

The train moved very slowly, dragging like a turtle. It was wartime and military trains had priority. They would take us off the tracks to side exits for hours and what seemed like days. In the morning, we were given breakfast. Each war prisoner received a “payok” (portion) for the whole day: a pound of bread, a liberal slice of salty Siberian fish, a chunk of hard sugar, and a canteen of hot water. The purpose was to not starve us, but also not to fatten us up.

The train stopped at a station named Bludnia. I peered through the tiny window, which was open, and noticed a girl from Pruzany standing near the exit of the station. I waived my hand and called “Mania, Mania!”

She noticed me, ran closer to the tracks, and shouted, “I am traveling back to Pruzany and will tell Regina that you are alive! How happy she will be!”

I thanked her and felt as if a thousand pounds had fallen off my chest. Regina would stop crying. She would tell my little Tsveeyah the good news, “*Der Tateh wet cumen aheim*. Daddy will come home.” All the miseries that I had endured during the past September days and nights—thirst, hunger, sleepless nights, cold, rain—disappeared from my mind, in view of the good news that Regina would be happy to learn that

I was alive, that we might meet again someday, and that we might embrace and hold each other to our hearts.

The trip went on endlessly. We had several lengthy stops to allow for military trains to pass. The routine was the same every day. We cleaned the barrel holding the waste, we received the same portion of food, and we spent much time sleeping or thinking and reminiscing.

I shared my joy about Regina with an elderly Jewish doctor who sat next to me. My friendship with him had started at the beginning of our journey as war prisoners. The doctor was a very pleasant person. He lived in Warsaw, but had been sent as a reserve doctor to an army hospital in Brisk. I could see by the decorations on his uniform that he was a retired major in the Polish army.

I told him that my elder sister lived in Warsaw before she emigrated with her family to Argentina, and that I was in Warsaw a few times to visit her and a business associate of my father. We had enough things to talk about. I had gone to the theater with my folks and seen the opera *Aida*. He didn't stop talking about *Aida*. Then we talked about the beautiful synagogues in Warsaw, the cantor Serota, and the cantors Kussevitski. We had plenty of time to reminisce about the Hebrew schools, the Yiddish ones, and the famous Polish poets and novelists.

I remember one day when the train stopped, the door was opened to clean the barrel. It was my turn to do it. A woman rushed to the door and handed me a small bag of apples. I shared it with my friend, the doctor. I have no words to describe how grateful he was. He told me that I had almost saved his life (exaggerating). The conditions in the boxcar were hard on him, since he was over sixty years old. I was young and healthy, so I could endure privation easier. My own doctor had told me to eat an apple each day of my life, because they were an excellent food choice for good health and longevity. Indeed, I took his advice, and throughout all my years, I have eaten an apple a day, unless there were no apples to be found (like in the ghetto and in the forests).

Each day during the morning hours or at midnight, an army officer would enter the train car with an assistant to investigate us individually. The officers took turns each night with this responsibility. Some were probably Politrooks—Russian army political leaders. A Politrook was present at every gathering, big or small. His job was to watch and make sure every aspect of life—education, economics, social life, entertainment, tradesmanship—was conducted according to the requirements of the Communist Party.

An investigator's goal was to find out as much information as possible about us and the environment in which we grew up. We were asked for our ranks, names, divisions, brigades, regiments, kind of arms, locations, and so forth. But most of all, the investigators wanted to find out about the officers, army policemen, and staff. Personally, I didn't feel any danger when I was being interrogated. I didn't see anything wrong with being a corporal. My background was good. My father was a farmer, and I kept on stating that I was a teacher. I told the investigators that I had never belonged to a political party.

One night, the investigator asked me for my name, and I answered, "Moysey Yudevits." He repeated my name and said to me in Yiddish, "*Doo binst a Yid* (are you a Jew)?" I confirmed that I was a Jew, and he then continued: "*Hob nit kain moyre, doo west blayibn lebn* (Don't be afraid. You will remain alive)." What an encouragement . . . a statement of hope and of life! I saw in my fantasy a shining light from the darkness of war. I remembered this statement to me my entire life. But these were not the only blessed words I heard. There were a few more in my life. These kinds of words were uttered when my life was hanging on a tiny hair. Not only my life, but that of my wife Regina.

After six days of travel, the train stopped on the Bialorus territory at a station called Niegorrelye, twenty kilometers from the capital of Bialorus, Minsk. From the station, we were taken by trucks to a huge square barn on a collective farm—a *kolkhoz*. The word "kolkhoz" is the abbreviation of the Russian words "*kollektivnoye chazaistwo*," which means "a collective farmstead." It is based on the principle of denying individual farming and, instead, creating a new form of living, a new method of production, a new way of running the economy, a new way of agriculture under the Communist party leadership . . . that of doing things as a community and sharing the profits (those that weren't taken by the government).

Upon entering the big *kolkhoz* building, I saw there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of Polish war prisoners, either standing, sitting, or lying on the bare cement floor. Our group was placed in a certain location and told to keep ourselves together. I found myself next to my friend, the doctor. Obviously, the floor was much more comfortable than the train. We could stand up and even move our limbs and walk in a small circle.

The treatment by the Russian authorities was one of tolerance. No shouting or scolding. We were treated humanely. At noon, we were gi-

ven a *payok*—a ration similar to those we had received on the train. We also received the same thing at dusk. I drank a lot of water, because the fish was very salty. I still had a few apples left and I shared them with the doctor. We were told by the guards that we would be sent home, but they didn't know when. In the meantime, every morning they lined us up to make an appeal. They called our names from the lists they had drawn up, while making their inspections on the train. We had to shout, "I..." Once a week, a speaker would come to lecture us about the war, about the pleasant life in the Soviet Union, and about the generosity of the Red Army for liberating the poor Polish masses from the yoke of the Polish lords, counts, and oppressors.

I could see the expressions of anger on the faces of the war prisoners. I could hear their teeth grinding, as they kept mum. If these patriots had the opportunity, they would have torn the lecturer into pieces, but they swallowed their pride and returned to their places like sheep about to be led to slaughter. You can't do anything, when the sword is swinging over your head.

Sometimes, a group of high ranking Russian officers would enter the barn. We had to stand up, form lines of ten, and look like soldiers, rather than wretched prisoners of war. In mid-December, 1939, some changes affected our situation. One morning, a Russian major strode into the barn accompanied by a dozen soldiers. He took out a list and started to call the names of Polish officers . . . approximately two hundred of them. They were lined up, and then taken away by the armed unit. The next morning, we were told that we would go home very soon. And it really happened. The following day, they gave us tickets to ride on the train to Brisk, and from there, each of us was free to go in any direction. "I am going home," I told myself.

### Home Again in Pruzany

I soon found myself in the station Oranczyce and then on the train to Pruzany. When I reached the station, I stepped out onto the platform and began my last trek . . . the last mile to my sweet home. It felt like I was walking on air. I strode along Seltser Street looking about in every direction. The town had not been destroyed. Everything was in its usual place. A teenager noticed me, grabbed his bicycle, and yelled that he was going to inform Regina. Seltser Street crosses with Kobryner, and the second I made that turn, I saw Regina, Tsveeyah, and Regina's parents rushing to meet me. We embraced and kissed each other, and,

within seconds, a crowd had gathered about us to escort me home. I am short of words to describe this happy moment in my life. Not only in English, but in Yiddish or Hebrew and the two or three other languages I know, it is impossible to put together the proper letters, words, and sentences to express the depth of my feelings and emotions.

Before I walked into our apartment, I told Regina that before I did anything else, I must take a shower. In the building of the mill was a special room with a bathtub and shower. I thoroughly enjoyed this routine, as though it were the first time. I changed clothes and within a few minutes felt like a new man. When I reentered the apartment, I saw a full house of people. My parents, sisters, their husbands and children, my brother, neighbors, friends, and many more kept on arriving. They wanted to know everything. Some jokingly blamed me for losing the war.

I found out that the German army had been near Pruzany, but in the last moment had hurriedly retreated. Indeed, the river Muchaviec, which runs through Pruzany, joins the river Boog, which the German army was not supposed to cross.

The next day, I strolled through the streets of my hometown with Regina. I noticed the changes that had occurred during the three months since I had left for the war. Russian army trucks were everywhere, and all the stores were closed and empty. There was no trace of the Hebrew school. Instead, it was occupied by a Russian language school. A Yiddish school was placed at the end of Seltser Street. No more Polish offices. Their spaces were occupied by Russian and Bialorussian offices. Everything looked so gloomy. I returned from my first walk in the town with mixed feelings. *Is it going to be better now, under the Soviet regime? Who knows?*

## Life Under the Soviet Regime

During my teen and adolescent years, my education had not transpired according to the usual curriculum requirements. As a member of a progressive Zionist youth movement, I acquired some knowledge about different methods of governing—socialism, capitalism, and even communism. Each system had its slogans that were used to stimulate the masses, hoping to convince them to follow its teachings. Listening to what my friends told me, and based on my own observations in my town during the Russian occupation from September 1939 until June 1941, a popular communist slogan came to my mind: *Stary swiet razroosheem, a nowy postrojym* (The old world we will destroy, a new world we will build). Indeed, I saw that the first part of the slogan had taken place in Pruzany very quickly.

I was told that the very day the Red Army occupied the town, many Russian officers had rushed to the stores carrying bundles of new Russian currency—rubles—and had bought whatever their eyes saw and their hands could carry. Next came the crowd of soldiers who did the same thing. Some items had been on the shelves since the times of the Melech Sobieski, but they paid without asking questions about the items. This is a Yiddish expression about a very old item one wears or uses. You say, “This thing is from the times of Melech Sobieski!” Sobieski was a liberal Polish king who ruled in the sixteenth century! Clearly, the Russians weren’t accustomed to having goods of any kind available to purchase in their own country and behaved like a kid in a toy store when presented with the options available in Pruzany.

The merchants collected sacks of rubles, not knowing that they would never be able to replace even a tenth of the merchandise they had sold. The synagogues were closed for prayers and used for storage. The Hebrew elementary and high schools, all the institutions, offices, the Hebrew language library, the Zionist organizations and clubs, the Jewish Socialist Party, the Bund and its youth movements . . . closed! My father-in-law’s grain mill and those that belonged to others were confiscated.

The Bund party had been formed at the end of the nineteenth century. It opposed the Zionist ideas of solving the Jewish question by rebuilding a Jewish state in Palestine. Instead, their goal was to work hand in hand with the Polish socialists to gain full rights for the poor Jewish masses.

The second part of the Communist slogan, “a new world we will build,” wasn’t true. There was no visible trace of rebuilding. The middlemen merchant jobs had been eliminated. In their places, a base was developed that was supposed to get goods directly from the government factory and to the population. Indeed, such a base took its place in Pruzany in the building of the Polish cooperative Rolnick, but there was no merchandise to be seen.

My father-in-law, Chaim Kaplan, and his partner lost their property when the Communists invaded Pruzany. On January 15, 1940, a member of the local Communist Party stalked into the house while I was present. He was accompanied by a Bialorus fellow who used to come in the mill to grind wheat; my father-in-law knew him well. The Communist Party man said, “Listen to what I am telling you, citizen Chaim Kaplan. Until now, the key of the mill has been in your hands, but from now on, by the order of the Communist Party Committee, the key will be in the hands of this man.” He added that Kaplan ought to stay working in the mill three more months and teach this person how to run the business. My father-in-law didn’t dare to ask any questions and simply handed the key over to the man, the same way a mother gives a toy to her child.

My in-laws were glad that we were allowed to remain in the house next to the mill. Thanks to the fact that they had treated their workers nicely and fairly, their twenty years of hard work and money spent securing a business were not spent in vain. The workers, who became the managers of the mill, treated my father-in-law and his partner fairly, too. Each day, they shared with them some flour and oats, which were left at the end of the day. This fit the Communist slogan, “*Kto Beel Nichem Buoodet Vsiem!*” Whoever was a nobody will be a somebody.

Regina got a job in the hospital as a midwife. In those days, only midwives assisted with the delivery of babies. Doctors were not involved, unless complications arose. My mother-in-law took care of our baby, Tsveeyah, and I applied for a teacher position with the board of education.

My parents had been retired since 1938. They owned a cow, which provided enough dairy products for their needs. They also had a piece of land in the back of the house on which they grew potatoes and other vegetables. My mother would bake bread, and, generally speaking, they managed on their own during times of big shortages.

My brother got a job as a teacher in a nearby Bialorus village. He had to learn the Russian and Bialorus languages quickly, and it didn't take him long. My sister's husband got a job in the Russian agricultural sector, and my sister, Lea, worked as a seamstress for a few previous clients.

The husband of my other sister, Liba, became a manager for a household section in the base where all commodities were supposed to arrive. Alas, little merchandise arrived, however, and the little that did arrive was mostly kept for the Communist Party's high-ranking government members. They were on a special list that had priority over everyone else.

The Russian government opened a few places in Pruzany similar to stores, in which some of the leftover wares were dropped off for the needs of the population. Lines formed early in the morning to buy these few delivered goods. The problem was that the list of commodities that had been dropped off was never announced beforehand. After waiting in line for a long time, we could buy whatever was available ("everything goes"). If we didn't need an item, we could sell it or barter for another item. To add insult to injury, sometimes we received a good tip about the store, and after waiting and waiting in line, somebody would announce that the whiskey had been dropped off at another place. By the time we got to the other place, everything had already been sold.

A popular Russian slogan sounds like this: "*Kto Nie Robotayet Tot Nie Kooshayet*" (He who doesn't work doesn't eat.) Everybody had to work. Anyone who didn't work was called a parasite. Some large families designated one person to hunt down goods to buy at stores and then sell them on the black market. This worked, until they were eventually caught.

The mood of the people depended on the sector of the population. Clergy, religious people, and previous merchants walked about with long faces and kept a low profile, like mice under the broom. And such was their appearance. Young men and women who were unemployed soon found themselves working on jobs they would never have dreamed of doing under Polish rule. Most happy were those people who had

been underground communists or even communist sympathizers previous to the war. They appeared in the open and were appointed by the Russian authorities to the best jobs available, like department heads of the police, taxation, town hall, hospitals, and so on.

Jews were not discriminated against anymore. I have in mind those of the poor Jewish population who suddenly enjoyed more privileges than those of the former richer classes in Pruzany. They had access to all walks of life and were appointed to better jobs.

The shortage of some food items and other necessities was replaced by an abundance of music, Russian patriotic songs, movies, and propaganda. In private conversations with people or in formal speeches, the Russians would assure listeners that in Russia there existed a joyous life and “*Oo Nas Vsio Yest*” (everything is there in abundance), “*Radostnaya Zyzn*” (happy life). A few times during the month, big meetings of the population were arranged by the local Communist Party Committee. In the marketplace, the people were required to attend, and they did attend, because they were already aware of the Communist slogan, “*Kto Nie Snamy, Tot Protiv Nas*”—Whoever is not with us is against us.

In the beginning, the boundary from Russia to the occupied territories was strictly closed. But, little by little, certain privileged Jews with relatives in the West were allowed to visit their families. In addition, some people from the East, who were appointed to very important jobs in the occupied territories, would arrive from Russia. In very strict secrecy, these visitors (and even some soldiers) would relay stories about what life was really like in the Soviet Union under the Communist Party and its dictator, Stalin. Word and rumors soon spread among friends and acquaintances that it was essential to be very careful in whatever was said aloud to anyone. In Russia, one had to follow the Party line as it appeared in the newspapers *Pravda* (Truth) and *Izvestia* (News). Later, it was interpreted by kibitzers that in *Pravda* there was no truth and in *Izvestia* there was no news! Everything was simply Party propaganda.

I admit that I made a huge mistake one day during the first week after my return from captivity. Regina had told me that we were required to attend a meeting in the Russian high school, to listen to a speaker who had arrived from Moscow. She forgot to tell me to keep my mouth shut! And so, on a Saturday evening, Regina, her mother, Rasha, and I went to the meeting. The speaker was explaining to the public why the Russians had to occupy parts of Poland, and portrayed the happy life we'd have under the supervision of the Party of Lenin and the shining

sun of the “blessed” leader, Stalin. When he finished, the usual announcement came: “*Voprosy*” (time for questions). Such Russian speakers were eager to hear questions from the public—and also write down what kinds of questions were asked. Everybody was silent . . . except for me. I could not cope with the thought that the two dictatorship regimes—the Soviets and the Nazis—had shaken hands and started such a mass destruction of Europe. I raised my hand and was given permission to ask a question.

“How could the Russian socialist government make an agreement with the bloody Nazis and their leader, Hitler (in Russian the name is pronounced “Gitler”)?” I asked.

My question caused a hiss in the room, because it was too daring a question and it frightened some attendees. But the speaker didn’t show anger or disapproval for my willingness to ask such a bold question, even though it smelled of counter-revolutionism. His answer was short. “Under the Communist analytical teachings of Marx and Engels, everything is possible to explain.”

A few months later, a member of the Communist Party—a Jew—told me that had we been in Russia, I would not have gotten off the hook so easily for opening my mouth the way I did.

I remember a story about a woman named Chamoochke who lived in Pruzany and owned a very small grocery store before the war. She earned a little money from her sales to feed her ten children. People used to describe her husband as a guy who not only wasn’t able to help her, but wasn’t able to help even a cat’s tail. At the beginning of September, when the Russian soldiers started to buy everything they could find (they didn’t rob . . . they paid high prices for everything), the retailers tried to hide whatever they could, because they suspected they wouldn’t be able to replace the merchandize. Later, when they ran out of food for themselves, they were forced to sell some items, like sugar and candles. But they were afraid to sell the hidden items, because it was against the law. They were already marked as capitalists, and doing business on the black market was severely punished. So, those who had things to sell would dump small quantities of the goods to Chamoochke and she would sell them secretly to trustworthy people. Who would squeal on a poor woman with ten children and a husband who was a *schlemiel* (a good for nothing)?

This went on for a few months, until the police found out about the forbidden business conducted in this tiny store. The police arrested the

woman and took her to court. When the ten children saw their mother taken away, they followed her. In Russia, the first question always asked was “*Partinya?*” (Are you a member of the Party?) In the Yiddish language, the word “party” also means “a group of a few people.” So, when the judge saw this woman and asked “*Partinya?*” Chamoochke boldly answered, “Yes!” and waived her hand to include her ten children. “This is my party.”

The judge (who may have been a Jew) smiled and shouted, “*Oode-rai stvojoy partyoy*” (get out of here with your party). He called her back and said, “Go on, go on and sell your half a pound sugar, a quarter pound flour, and some oil, but don’t be caught again by the police.”

We sing “*Vas meer zenen, zenen mir, ober Yidden Zenemir*” (What we are we are, but Jews we are, a Yiddish heart, a Jewish heart of compassion). This story about the woman with ten children was true and it provided the town a good laugh. I purposely include some comical events in this memoir, to let my readers know that even in the most depressing and adverse situations, a little humor always prevails and is most helpful in helping to overcome feelings of despair. Even in the concentration camps, a little humor lifted the spirit and the encouraged hope for survival.

### Teaching in the Communist System

As I mentioned before, at the end of December 1939, I applied for a job as a teacher. I was told by the chairman of the board of education (a Bialorussian from a nearby village who was an underground nationalist during the Polish rule) that all the teacher jobs were taken in Pruzany, but he offered me a principal position in a village three miles from Pruzany, in a Bialorussian school. I accepted the offer. The Bialorussian language is one of the Slavic languages. By being in contact with the Bialorussian villagers, most of the Jewish population spoke their language. I spoke both Bialorussian and Russian, although far from perfectly. But I felt I was ready for the job. It is important to note that, according to the Russian constitution, each state had to maintain its own language and culture as the official language. The Russian language would be treated as a second language.

I was given the proper documents by the board of education and, on a Monday morning, I sat on my bicycle and made my way to the village called Chakhets. I entered the house where the committee members sat and presented my documents to them. They knew who I was,

because when they had taken their rye and wheat to grind in the mill that belonged to my father-in-law, they had seen me there.

The leader of the committee glanced at me, read the documents describing my assignment, and reported it to the other members. I saw on their faces that they were not too happy about it, until one man opened his big mouth, scratched his head, and said, "Look what our government (meaning the Russians) did to us. We just got rid of the Polak who was the principal of our school [they murdered him] and hoped to get one of ours, and, instead, they have sent us a Jevray [a Jew] for the principal of our children's school."

In almost all the Slavic language, a Jew is called a *Zseed*. I remained standing and didn't say a word. I thought to myself, "You will beg me to remain your principal, if I get transferred back to Pruzany." [This eventually happened, six months later.]

The chairman of the Citizens Council read from the document and called my name, "Moysey Meyerovich!" (the father's name is always used when calling the name of the person talked to, and so he said "Moysey Meyerovich." I didn't pay attention to what this fool babbled; he was born stupid and remained a fool all his life. He and the other committee members asked me a few questions about my education and my experience as a teacher. I was very glad to converse with people who had an idea about education. I was accepted by the members and was asked to begin the registration of students in a day or two. The chairman offered me lunch, I thanked him politely, and I got ready to leave.

One of the fellows guided me to the school for an inspection. The school was a large wooden building consisting of five to six rooms and a spacious yard that offered room for outdoor activities. There were enough benches, blackboards, and other necessary equipment to open the school. Part of the upper floor was occupied by a woman with her little child and her old aunt. The lady had been a teacher in the school with her husband, who was killed that September, when the Russians occupied the area in 1939. I was told by some peasants that her husband had tried to spy on the Bialorussian villagers and on their underground aspirations for a free Bialorus homeland. They accused him of interrupting their Russian broadcasts on the radio and similar accusations and, ultimately, killed him.

I found out that my school, as well as those throughout the entire system, was short of paper, chalk, and notebooks. The new government couldn't meet the demand of thousands of schools all over West Bialo-

russia. I went to the local board of education and received one book of history, one book of the Bialorussian language, and another book for teaching the Russian language. After searching my apartment, later, I found two notebooks of Regina's and three notebooks Regina's younger brother had given me. Loaded with these treasures, I arrived at the school on January 6, 1940, to begin my new assignment.

Under the Russian constitution, there was a strict law requiring the educating of children at least through "seven years school" (they called it *Siemi Letki*). For not sending a child to school, one could expect a severe punishment. It was a sad and difficult situation, since there were poor farmers who couldn't afford to buy clothes for their children. The previous regime had overlooked this law, but now, out of fear of being arrested, they brought their children to school, even though they were often poorly dressed and without shoes. During the three days of registration, the lists showed about 160 new names, which were absorbed under the Polish system. The next morning, before I went to the school, I visited the board of education office and asked for three more teachers. I was promised only two, but was happy to see, the following day, that I had a staff of four teachers, including myself.

The first thing we did was form four groups of students according to their advancement in math. The children of all grades had to learn the Bialorussian and Russian languages. I must add that the teachers themselves had to also learn the same languages. The school hours were from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M., Monday through Saturday. The custodian, Paul, lived with his family across the street from the school. His wife Anna would prepare lunch and even dinner for me, and I paid them whatever they asked for this service.

The opening of the school year was very tough, due mainly to the shortage of stationery and books. However, little by little, the teachers and I overcame the difficulties and saw some progress in our work. I would hear good words from the parents of the students, and positive word of our work reached the regional board of education from the village council.

Soon, I encountered a problem regarding the heating of the school. There was not a trace of wood in the storage room. I solved this problem and was later praised at a teachers meeting, by the board of education. I had learned that piles of wood were stocked near the forest and had been confiscated by the Russian government from merchants of lumber and heating wood. I rushed to the board of education and re-

ceived a request to the local forest superintendent to distribute 25 sections of the wood to the school. They were stocked near the village of Chakhets. I received written notice on a Sunday in February 1940. I informed the village council. Within a couple of hours, 25 to 30 villagers rushed with their sleds and horses and loaded up the storage room of the school. This supply lasted through the winter of 1940 and 1941. I describe this event, because it had a very favorable impact on my position as a principal and as an employee of the new government.

The doors were always open for me at the board of education during the period of February 1940 through June 1941, and also during August 1944 . . . until I left Kobrin in 1946. Wood supplies are used up quickly, and when the teachers from the regional schools complained about the cold and said it was impossible to teach, the answer was, "Look what Moysey Yudievits did. Why don't you use your brains like he did!"

I soon encountered an event that scared me almost to death. I had only one history book in the school. The students shared the book during the day and at night. One morning, a student came to me, opened the book to a certain page, and I almost turned blind. There was a picture of Stalin. His eyeballs had been pricked and his face was scratched. It seemed that some of the parents expressed their anger and hatred towards his Communist regime by damaging the face of the so-called "shining sun." I took the book, secretly tore out the whole page, and put the page in the burning oven. No longer was the history book given to the students to borrow. Had an official seen the picture of Stalin damaged the way it was, I would have been accused of sabotage, and punished with ten years of imprisonment ... or even death.

There was also another problem—the matter of religion. It was very well known that the Communists strived to enforce by all means a religiousless society. Stories in the school books ridiculed priests, churches, the clergy, and religious holidays.. The parents were very unhappy about being denied the right to practice their religion and secretly expressed their objections. I was particularly worried, because priests often preached that Jews killed Jesus, and what's more, the head of the school was a Jew. I tried as hard as possible to avoid discussing religion with students and parents. I also ignored the request of my supervisors to keep a record of students who attended religious services in the church. I knew that I was playing with fire, but by the time this situation came

out into the open, the Germans had attacked Russia and such things were forgotten.

In addition to heading the school as the principal, my job included providing classes for adult education, including teenagers and others who were interested in learning about Russian history and the ideology of the Communist party. The sessions took place twice a week in the evening. I found a way to excuse myself from this responsibility, which was a dangerous thing to do. One of the teachers was a Bialorussian nationalist who had been jailed a few times by the previous Polish government. He lived in the neighboring village and was very proud to take on the responsibility of teaching these classes voluntarily.

Another problem I had was arriving on time to execute my job. The Soviet Union considered being late work as a "*progool*" and it was severely punishable. During the winter months, it was impossible for me to ride my bicycle and even hard to walk, so I would leave the house about 7:30 in the morning. Indeed, I always arrived before 9:00 A.M. for the classes.

Now, what about earnings? It seems that the board of education didn't have a budget! We teachers worked hard and long hours and never asked questions about our wages, so we were quite eager to find out when we'd be paid and how much. Finally, about the end of February, 1940, I was instructed to appear after school before a cashier and was handed a bunch of Russian rubles that were obviously newly produced. I don't remember how much my monthly earnings were, but it didn't matter much, because there was almost nothing to buy for the money.

We had teacher meetings arranged by the board of education. We had a teacher's union, but its aim was not to produce better working conditions, but only to demand more productivity on our part and strict allegiance to the Communist system. I remember one incident in particular. At a meeting, one of the attending teachers from the previous Polish government spoke up about Jews being granted higher positions in jobs. It sounded racist and anti-Semitic. One of the board members reacted bitterly against such a statement and finished with this sentence: "The Russian government will eradicate any signs of anti-Semitism with a fire-glowing sharp rod." Such language and such a warning to the anti-Semites made us Jewish teachers feel good, and we became more bold in expressing our opinions on matters, when it was necessary.

The work in the school normalized. The children learned to sing Russian patriot songs, were relatively happy, and were advancing in their

studies. My relationships with the parents of the students were friendly. They convinced themselves that their children were making progress, mainly in the “three R’s,” and were thankful. They were equally thankful for my efforts on their behalf concerning another matter. With the help of the board of education and my connections with the head of regional supply, I managed to have a shipment of shoes and clothing sent to the Chakhets village. The parents had the opportunity to buy the clothes for their youngsters.

Some parents and teenagers would invite me to their parties and dances, but I avoided staying overnight in the village, since I preferred to be with my wife and child. I remember that I became quite friendly with one Bialorussian. His name was Ivan, and three of his four children studied in the school. Ivan was an educated man. I would sometimes stop at his house and have lunch with him and his wife Elena. I avoided discussing politics or criticizing the regime, however, because we knew that “walls have ears.”

I remember that during my time off from school—between December 20, 1940, and January 5, 1941—I was sent for higher course studies in mathematics to the town of Pinsk (about 70 miles from Pruzany). All of the expenses were covered by the government. As a result, I received a diploma, which entitled me to teach math in Russian high schools . . . the so-called “*Dziesiaty Letki*” or ten-year schools. Unfortunately, all my documents disappeared during our evacuation from the Pruzaner Ghetto at the end of January 1943.

In January of 1941, I was notified by the board that I was being transferred to teach math in the Russian high school in Pruzany, during the 1941-1942 school year. When the Chakhets village council learned about this, they rushed to the board and even to the local Communist leaders and asked them to retract the appointment and not remove me from their school.

### Home Life

Regina worked in the hospital as a head nurse and also as a midwife. I remember that one evening in May or June of 1940, she told me that she had delivered a boy whose mother was Jewish and from a town named Krinki. The father was a Russian lieutenant in the Soviet Army. During the eight days the woman stayed in the hospital, Regina took care of her and spent much time sitting next to her bed chatting. The name of the woman was Sonia. I mention this, because our connection

with this woman and her husband was one of many miracles Regina and I were granted that had enabled me to sit now and type the story of my life. I am not a superstitious man, but I believe that even today there does not exist a word that defines how, with the thousands and thousands of Jews who were condemned to death by the most evil murderers in the world, Regina and I survived.

I still had time to play with our daughter during working days, and on Sundays we would take her with us on visits to my parents, sisters, and friends. Economically, we became used to a lower standard of living. Meat and poultry were very scarce. There were no grocery stores, and we had to buy all of our commodities on the black market and pay high prices. There was no shortage of bread, however, and the farmers would bring us potatoes and other vegetables, so we did not suffer from hunger.

We still socialized with our longtime friends. We used to meet at the movies or on other occasions in our homes. We wore the same garments that had hung in our closets before the war. The government didn't have clothing for sale. Public Hebrew teaching, attendance at synagogues, and any other form of religious practice was strictly forbidden. Communist Russia was a religiousless state. We could pray and continue our religious way of life, but only individually. A father could teach his children to read Hebrew prayers in his home, but was forbidden, under threat of severe punishment, to preach or discuss religion. Jews had to work on Sabbath, and the majority of the Jewish younger population adjusted themselves to these orders.

As for me, I had grown up in a traditional Jewish family, but not a fanatic one regarding the practice of our beliefs. My parents were liberal thinkers. Frankly speaking, I had no problem working on Sabbath or eating non-kosher meat. I was not religious, but, rather, secular.

Soviet Russia didn't celebrate Christmas, but New Years was met with great fanfare. I remember that I was given an assignment by the board of education in November of 1940 to form a committee of teachers to prepare a celebration for New Years Eve in the theater of Pruzany. I don't know until this day why they appointed me to do this job, knowing I was available only on Sundays. Anyway, I called a meeting with six teachers from the Russian and Bialorussian schools. We worked out a program that included dancing, singing, reciting, short skits, comedy, and other entertainment. On New Year's Eve, we had a full house of parents and children and we presented an incredibly successful pro-

gram. I sang with the choir and danced with a group of eight Russian dancers called *Levonika*. Regina loved it and enjoyed my participation in this show.

### Banishment to Siberia

I read the daily Russian newspaper, the so-called *Pravda* or “truth.” In order to understand how I felt, I must write the following few sentences. The people were governed first by the chapters of the local Communist Party. Nothing moved without the approval of the Party. Then came the mayor, the police, and then most decisive NKVD (Narodny Kommissar Vnootrennech Del” or People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs.

On a cold, early morning in February of 1941, the news spread in Pruzany that during the night the police and NKVD had rounded up the past leaders of the Zionist organizations, the past leaders of the Socialist Jewish organizations, the past Polish policemen, military personnel, big land owners, refugees who refused to accept Russian passports, and people whom the Communists considered to be disloyal to the Soviet regime. They were given one hour to pack some light belongings and were taken to the train station and placed in cattle cars. Locked to the door was a sign stating “ENEMIES OF THE STATE—STAY AWAY!”

This whole procedure was accomplished the same night in Western Bialorussia and the Ukraine. They were taken east in the direction of Siberia. Among them were many of my friends, their parents, and their families. This event had a tremendously heartbreaking and distressing impact on the remaining Jewish population, as well as the non-Jewish population. But life had to go on. As we were all terrified about criticizing the regime, there was no complaining and no mentioning of the full story to anyone from that day on.

### Russian Citizenship and Passports

Although I am trying to limit my writing to the story of my life, I must describe certain occurrences that didn’t apply directly to Regina or to me. For example, the ordering of the passports. Every person, young or old, automatically became a Soviet citizen and we were supposed to apply for a passport. The government did not issue a simple ID; rather, they issued passports containing twelve or fourteen pages. Neither Regina nor I had any problem obtaining a passport. Since my father was

considered a farmer, my background was “*kosher*,” so, thankfully, Regina was able to receive a passport the same day I did.

However, when Regina’s father and mother applied for their passports, it took more than half a year before they were cleared. Since they were classified as capitalists, as owners of a grain mill, their loyalty to the regime was doubted. Whenever and wherever Chaim Kaplan applied for a job (there were no private entrepreneurs or contracting opportunities), he would have to present his passport. Whenever a hiring clerk examined the passport, he would immediately turn Chaim Kaplan down for employment. No reason was ever given for the rejection.

One evening, I took his passport and looked carefully at each page. Aha! I found it. On the very bottom of Page Twelve of the passport, I saw a tiny number 11. This “11” indicated that my father-in-law was not a loyal citizen! Therefore, he was considered untrustworthy. Remember, I have already written that the attitude in Communist Russia was that anyone who did not work was not worthy of eating. Such a person was considered a parasite. How could Chaim eat, without a job? How could he get a job, when he was classified as untrustworthy? Finally, Chaim acquired a low-paying, backbreaking job in a tannery.

We found out later that Regina’s parents were on a list of rich Jews to be picked up and sent to Siberia. It was almost impossible to foresee the future in this troubled world. Stalin sent thousands of Jews to Siberia to die a slow death of hunger, thirst, hard labor, and disease, but those who remained in their towns, streets, and homes were soon annihilated by the Nazis. Most of those who were sent to a sure death in Siberia were still alive after the war. They eventually returned as refugees, kept in Germany or Italy, and then emigrated to the United States or to Israel.

### The Threat of German Invasion

Having secured himself peace with Russia, Hitler did not stop from attacking countries west of Poland. The German army continued to advance without resistance. The Nazis occupied France and turned towards Britain. The British Air Force and Navy, under the command of Prime Minister Winston Churchill, stopped the Germans and held them at bay.

My in-laws had a radio, a German made Telefunken, which they bought in 1937. I would listen to the broadcasts from London, and I understood enough English to grasp the meaning of the news reports.

They warned Stalin that the Germans were preparing for an attack on Russia. The news was secretly talked about in the town, among Jews and others. The Russian government and local Party members ignored these rumors, regarding them as lies produced by the enemies of the Soviet Union.

I remember a meeting that we were ordered to attend on the second Sunday of June, 1941. A special speaker, who had arrived from Minsk, addressed the crowd and ridiculed the rumors. He emphasized that the friendship between Hitler and Stalin was strong and, like steel, unbreakable. He added that those people who continued to repeat the lies would be punished severely. We didn't need a second warning.

## German Occupation

A week later, it was announced all over western Bialorussia and the Ukraine that the weekend of June 20, 1941, would be dedicated to celebrations, fun, and enjoyment. Flyers were handed out, inviting the public to participate in games, music festivities, dancing in the parks, movies, family celebrations, and more. The army would distribute passes to soldiers, members of the air force, and members of the navy over the weekend. "Let the people enjoy themselves," the passes said, "and be thankful to their leader Stalin and the Communist Party for a cheerful life."

I remember it was warm on that eventful Saturday. People crowded the streets and strolled around the parks to watch all sorts of sporting events, mainly soccer (called football there). There were even booths of food for the occasion, where they could buy sandwiches, soft drinks, candy, and more. Young people from the surrounding villages flocked to Pruzany like birds invited to a feast of free bread crumbs.

Everyone was in a good mood. The loud speakers continuously bellowed propaganda. "Look what a joyful life you have! Continue to be merry and rejoice into the night." Dance they did. Then, suddenly, from out of nowhere, German planes appeared and explosions broke out in the army airfields, in the nearby army camps, and in other strategic places! The invasion began at midnight. It is impossible for me to describe the utter panic that engulfed the entire town at that moment. The bombing only lasted two minutes, but this was long enough to turn our military installations into shambles. All of the people rushed to their homes.

Early on Sunday morning of June 22, 1941, we witnessed a dogfight between the German and Russian planes above the skies of Pruzany.

War, war, war was on everybody's lips. The Germans had attacked Russia. The Russians abandoned all of their army installations, posts, airfields, and army camps. The same thing happened with the personnel in the civilian offices of government. Everyone rushed eastward to escape from the Germans, who were heading toward Pruzany.

We were certain the worst would happen, so we decided to leave town immediately. We took our little daughter and placed her on one of our bicycles. I sat on one bicycle, and Regina sat on the other while

we rode towards the Chakhets village to the home of a farmer who lived in the forest. The farmer was the father of one of my girl students. Her older brother attended the adult classes. I knew their parents very well, and this Bialorussian farmer had always been friendly with Regina's father. He would bring rye and wheat to grind in the mill. I hoped he would shelter us from the approaching Germans.

At about noon on that Sunday, we arrived at our destination. We were tired, hungry, thirsty, and scared. The farmer and his wife opened the door and let us in. They knew the situation and understood what had brought us to their premises. My attitude in life was to judge people not by their religion, nationality, or culture; only by their deeds and behavior. I was not disappointed; rather, my beliefs were confirmed at this moment of need. The farmer greeted us in a gracious manner, and his wife rushed to prepare a tasty breakfast for us. They advised us to rest. Throughout the entire day and evening, they tried hard to make us feel comfortable. Indeed, there are many such good people in this world. I tried to pay them for their hospitality, but they refused. They said that the best reward would be for the war to end as quickly as it had begun, and that I could continue my job as the teacher of their daughter and son. The following morning, we left the farmer's house and thanked him and his wife profusely, while wishing each other peace and tranquility.

On our way back home, we encountered many German tanks and armored vehicles heading towards Pruzany. They didn't pay attention to us or to the other civilians on the road. Our parents and families were pleased to see us back home. The town was occupied by hundreds of German tanks, armor, and other military equipment. Each vehicle had a sign posted on it: "IN FOURTEEN DAYS, WE WILL BE IN MOSKVA."

No civilian appeared in the street out of fear of the invaders. On the second day of the invasion, a voice called out, "One man from each family should immediately report to the marketplace, and he should bring a spade with him." Of course, I was the representative from our household, as my father and father-in-law were too old. Over a hundred young men were taken toward the town of Shereshev. We were ordered to fix a road that gave in easily to the German tanks. As we marched in columns, watched by German soldiers, the non-Jewish inhabitants watched us from their windows. We could easily see their complacency with this phenomenon. Jews were being driven like criminals to provide slave labor ... and this was only the beginning.

I remember a conversation I had with a young German soldier, while throwing gravel and dirt in a deep pothole. This conversation happened on the third day of the German occupation. We could understand each other, because of the similarities between the German and Yiddish languages. The German soldier, who was in charge of my group, came over to me and asked me my name and my nationality. It seemed as though he was open-minded and wanted to talk. He said that he was from a farming family. He was glad to serve the Führer, meaning Hitler, as well as his country. The leaders had assured him that when the war ended, all of the countries east of Germany would be under Germany's rule. He would acquire a big chunk of the Ukraine's top land. He would also get as many Polish and Ukrainian workers as he wanted, to do the necessary work on his farm. All they would receive in return would be food and shelter for them and their families. I listened without saying a word. He was clearly a young dreamer who expected to hear my comments on his plans. I don't know what happened to him, and I wonder if he died or if he lived to see the downfall of Hitler and the Third Reich.

The army kept moving quickly eastward. The administration of Pruzany was in the hands of the Gestapo - Geheime Staats Polizei (Secret State Police) and the German mayor. Jews became the bottom of the population, unprotected by law, but dependent on Gestapo orders and demands. A Jewish committee of twelve members and twelve deputies was organized. They were responsible for fulfilling the Germans' demands. In the first week of their presence in Pruzany, the Gestapo demanded a large contribution of gold, silver, leather goods, and more. Regina and I handed over our wedding rings, earrings, and other precious items. My parents, sisters, and in-laws did the same. If we disobeyed these orders, we ran the risk of being shot.

Whenever the Gestapo imposed a rule, fear immediately spread throughout the Jewish population. They would enforce the rule by rounding up whoever was visible in the street and shooting them. This happened in my town. The Gestapo had a list with names of individual Jews. They went from house to house and picked up seventeen Jewish men and women. They took them to a nearby forest, told them to dig their own graves, and then shot them. The Gestapo got this list of names from a few non-Jewish people who had the same disposition for terror as the members of the Gestapo themselves. There is no need to describe the pain and fear that the Jewish population of Pruzany felt.

### Life in the Pruzany Ghetto

On January 19, 1940, when the Communists had confiscated my father-in-law's grain mill, they had not made us leave our house. However, in the beginning of August 1941, the Germans ordered the Jews to form a ghetto. We were forced to leave everything we owned and move into single rooms in this ghetto. Regina's uncle of her mother's side had a house in the center of the ghetto. There were five rooms and a kitchen. Five families, including ours, occupied these rooms, and we all shared the kitchen. Needless to say, we soon experienced a shortage of food and we had nowhere and no means to buy more.

Regina now worked as a registered nurse and midwife in the Ghetto hospital. She had a pass to cross at the gate in order to take care of the women who needed her help during childbirth. She would wear the yellow patch, Magen David, in the front and back of her clothes, as all the other Jews did. She had to walk in the gutter, instead of on the sidewalk like everybody else. She risked punishment by sneaking out cookies and other food for our sweet Tsveeyale. Every day, she brought home a pound of bread from the hospital, which was her payment for a day's work.

Each morning, I showed up at the Labor Department of the Jewish Committee. I was sent in a column, led by a Jewish column leader, wherever the assignment of the day was to be accomplished. Something unusual happened to me while I was working in a huge storage depot. The overseer was a middle-aged German. He began to talk to me, and I found out that he was from the old-timers—a member of the Democratic Party and a Czech by nationality. Cautiously and secretly, he revealed to me his attitude toward the war and Hitler. He was not afraid that I would squeal on him. When I was about to leave, he secretly handed me two loaves of bread. You can imagine my surprise and gratification for the German's good deed. The same thing happened the next day and then again the next day. I remember that Regina took a loaf of bread to our friend, whose husband was among the first seventeen victims of the Gestapo terror.

One of the departments of the Jewish Committee was the Department of Liquidation. Its purpose was to liquidate the demands of the chief of the Gestapo, the German labor chief, and the mayor. My father's cousin headed this department, and he asked me to join his office as secretary. Of course, I gladly accepted his offer, and I was thankful

for being taken away from slaving for the Germans. I would also receive a pound of bread for my work. I shared the bread with my parents and in-laws, and we didn't suffer from hunger. My father's cousin, Solomon Yudevits, tried in every way, both legal and illegal, to bring food into the ghetto. He cared deeply for the refugees and the poor population.

The Germans divided the territory of Poland into a Bialorus province, a Ukraine Province, and an East Prussia Province, the capital of which was Keninsburg. The Jews living in the Bialorussian and the Ukrainian provinces both suffered from atrocious German activities without delay. They were gradually murdered, in various ways. After each act of terror, the Germans would make an announcement that it was done by the local population.

Pruzany found itself in the Prussian Province. For some time, Pruzany was spared from being annihilated. The domineering Gestapo orders over Pruzany came from a pre-World War II industrial town called Bialystok. There were rumors that the Germans intended to concentrate over 100,000 Jews into the area of Pruzany to do slave work for the German army. They began to evacuate the non-Jewish population, and they brought truckloads of Jews from Bialystok. They drove Jews from surrounding towns, communities, and villages to Pruzany under terrible conditions. The Gestapo shot all Jews who could not march as fast as the rest.

The Germans then dropped their plan of settling Jews into areas surrounding Pruzany. Instead, they ordered that even more refugees be crammed into this ghetto where we lived. Now, the Jewish Committee had to provide shelter, food, and clothing for over 6,000 refugees who were dumped there by the cruel Gestapo.

The Germans allowed each of us a small portion—200 grams—of flour. The flour mill had belonged to my father-in-law and partner before the war. The supervisor of the mill would tell the driver who delivered the flour to the ghetto to leave a tiny sack of flour for the Chaim Kaplan family. We shared this flour with our relatives. Also, we would get our meager share of vegetables. This was how we lived.

As I mentioned, I worked as a secretary in the Office of Liquidation where the orders were given to the Jewish Committee. I had to keep a close account of the items and their value given to the German authorities. In retrospect, I remember considering this job ridiculous. It seemed worthless to me and to the others, even in those days. Who would ever believe that a time would come when the Germans would

pay each Jew for each pillow, table, coat, and mattress that they took? I didn't believe we would ever see such a day, and the people in my office didn't believe it either. Still, I was glad not to have to do slave work. I could sit in a warm place in the winter and in a cool room in the summer and listen in on the news others in the office repeated to each other.

Back in July of 1941, when we still lived in our apartment next to the flour mill, we received a surprise visit from my Bialorussian friend Ivan, from Chakhets. We were not living in the ghetto yet. There were no gates and no guards. He came on a Sunday and brought a package of food and handed it to Regina, saying, "I would bring much more, but the punishment for bringing food to Jews is very severe." We thanked him cordially for the butter, cheese, eggs, and fruits, which we saved for our little daughter. After a while, I walked outside with him. In a low voice, nearly whispering, he told me about something that had happened during that summer.

It was the middle of July, and he was cutting the grass in the meadow, when he suddenly noticed two armed men coming out of a nearby forest and walking in his direction. The men wore uniforms that were different from those of the German soldiers. He was scared, but as they approached him, they called that he should not be afraid. They spoke Russian. They were *partisans*. In the Russian language, a *partisan* is a person who fights against a cruel regime as a "freedom fighter" behind enemy lines.

The partisans told Ivan that there were already many of them in the surrounding forests and bushes. Their goal was to do as much damage as possible to the German invaders of their homeland. These people, and thousands others like them, were former Russian soldiers who had escaped from the columns of war prisoners as they were driven to prisoner of war camps in Bialorussia, the Ukraine, and other locations. The escapees ran into the forests, where they met other inhabitants who spoke their language. There were single houses in the forests. Their owners cultivated their acres of land and made a nice living. These Bialorussians and Ukrainians helped the escapees find food and arms. The partisans organized themselves, and as early as August of 1941, they began to commit acts of sabotage against the occupant.

Now, In August of that same year, and while we were living in the Ghetto, another friend, a Bialorussian parent of children who attended school in Chakhets, visited me. He told me that he had met partisans

who begged him to try to get them a battery, so that they could listen to the news on a radio. Regina had a Polish girl friend with whom she had studied in the pre-World War II *gymnasia* (government high school). Her father would change the batteries for everyone who needed new batteries, including my in-laws who owned a radio. On her next trip outside the Ghetto, Regina went to her friend. Her father gave Regina a battery, and, under the threat of punishment of death, she smuggled a battery into the Ghetto. We gave the battery to my Bialorus friend Paul, and he delivered it to the partisans. When I handed the battery to Paul, I also gave him twenty small packages of tobacco for the partisans. I was following the wisdom of a Hebrew proverb. In translation, the proverb says, "Send your bread over the water or ocean, and maybe someday you will find it."

Indeed, we did find it. These actions Regina and I took later saved our lives with the many miracles that occurred in our journey during the Holocaust.

The existence of the partisans—the freedom fighters in the forests of Pruzany—became known to the inhabitants of the Ghetto in the beginning of the winter of 1941. A rumor spread that partisans had killed two or three high-ranking German officers who were on their way from Kobrin to Pruzany. Their car was attacked on the highway that led from Zaprood to Pruzany. A month later, another rumor reached the Ghetto. The rumor said partisans had placed a bomb on the train tracks near the village of Priloocheena. The bomb damaged a train that was carrying German soldiers to the front lines. The Ghetto inhabitants were joyful. Reports of these acts of sabotage kept coming and coming.

As a result of the successes of the Russian partisans, the youth in the Ghetto became obsessed with the idea of escaping to the forests and committing sabotage acts the way the Russian partisans were doing. However, going into the forests empty-handed was both pointless and dangerous. The trend then started to acquire arms by any means necessary. The sources were minimal, but some ammunition was brought into the Ghetto. The Jewish Committee was aware of what was happening, but it didn't interfere.

By order of the Gestapo, groups of workers were sent to the military camps to sort through the various kinds of ammunition left behind by the Polish army and by the Russian regiments. These Ghetto inhabitants would hide parts of rifles, risking their lives as they smuggled out the pieces. Specialists then reassembled the rifles. People also contacted

sources outside the Ghetto to buy guns, grenades, and bullets . . . anything at all was precious and could be life saving.

I remember the day a close friend of mine for about twenty-five years approached me. He said, "Morris, we are trying to organize a partisan band. Would you like to join us?" I asked if I could include Regina. His answer was "no women." I then declined his offer. Indeed, he felt sorry. I was a corporal in the Polish army. I had experience with arms, and I knew how to use weapons. I never regretted my decision not to join them. I would never agree to leave Regina. I would never look for ways to only save myself.

Regina's cousin, Shmerl Elman, brought six rifles into the Ghetto in November of 1942. He worked as a servant in the mayor's house. The mayor's wife, a German woman, treated Shmerl humanely. It happened that a Jew who drove a German pick-up truck had snatched six rifles and was looking for a way to smuggle them into the Ghetto. Shmerl came into the picture. He and his brother Joseph belonged to the partisan gang. Shmerl turned to the mayor's wife and told her a sad story. He said that his mother was really sick and she had no wood to heat up her room. The mayor's wife told Shmerl to take home a bundle of wood. He quickly built a double-decker sled, shoved in the rifles and covered them carefully with wood, kindling, and a blanket.

Shmerl then approached the mayor's wife and said that the guards would arrest him at the gate for having firewood. She advised him to tie the sled to the mayor's own horse-driven sleigh. This is how it happened that the German mayor of Pruzany brought six rifles into the Ghetto on his way to the Jewish Committee! Had the Germans discovered his deed, Shmerl Elman and his family would have been tortured and killed. Who could tell what kind of repercussions it could have had on the whole Chaim Kaplan family and the other members of the Ghetto community.

Tragic reports about the complete cleansing of the Jewish population kept arriving from the towns in Bialorussia in the beginning of 1942. Many Pruzaner Jews, including me, started to build hideout places, in case the German terrorists turned to us next. We started to dig in the ground under a barn in the yard. We did it during the dark of night in the summer of 1942. Everybody participated in this task. First, we had to get rid of the extra soil. Regina would collect small amounts of the dirt and carry it outside. My father-in-law and I dug and brought out many pails of the soil. Regina's brother Samuel, a teenager, was a loo-

kout scout. When our job had been completed, we took apart a storage room and used it to build the bunker, which was the size of half a small car . . . hardly big enough for two people. We installed a pipe to provide the means for fresh air to reach inside the bunker.

I had refused to join the group of would-be partisans, but I had an entirely different plan of my own. Earlier in this chapter story, I mentioned that Regina worked as a midwife in the hospital. She delivered a baby boy to a Jewish woman from the area of Grodno. This woman, Sonja, was married to a Russian lieutenant who became a director of an alcohol enterprise confiscated by the Soviet court. In June of 1941, when the Russians evacuated Pruzany before the German invasion, this man, Ivan, had not been able to escape with them. Instead, he remained stuck in the Ghetto, constantly fearing for his life. One morning, in October of 1941, we learned that Ivan, with his wife and child, had left the Ghetto unnoticed by the Germans. He had reached the forest to join the partisans. I decided that I wanted to find a way to reach Ivan. With the help of his Jewish wife, I felt we would be accepted into the ranks of the Russian partisan army, of which Ivan was the commander.

My Bialorussian friend from the Chakhets village, also named Ivan, who I mentioned before, came for a surprise visit on a bright day in August of 1942. He had received permission to enter the Ghetto to see a dentist. The dentist was the wife of Veve Nitsberg, who had taken me into the Office of Liquidation. Her mother and my father's mother were sisters. Her name was Lisa. From her, Ivan had learned where we lived, so he came to see me. After a lovely chat, we went for a walk and had a conversation about the partisans. He told me that the partisans appeared once in a while in various villages to look for food supplies. In fact, they had recently visited Chakhets during the night. He said that a German unit was stationed in the school where I had once worked. This unit tried to catch partisans and destroy them. To make their job easier, they ordered that ten villagers must be on the lookout for partisans every night. Upon encountering partisans in the village, they were to alarm the village by banging on big bells that hung in the center of the settlement.

At the end of our meeting, I dared to ask Ivan if he would ever be willing to help Regina and me if we were in a time of extreme danger and need. He replied, "Try to come to my house." I admit I did not believe what I heard. However, I stored these words deep in my mind. We shook hands and parted. His words brought me to tears. I told Re-

gina about our conversation, and a spark of hope stirred in our hearts. I remember that on the tenth of November 1942, the president of the Jewish Committee announced that we would be evacuated the next day. However, the Judenrat tried hard to avoid the order, which came from Bialystok.

You can imagine the panic that broke out among the dwellers of the Ghetto. Thanks to their efforts, the Jewish Council managed to persuade the higher authorities to retract the order on the presumption that the people in the Ghetto were employed by the German army. This plan worked, and the Ghetto caught again its collective breath.

The following week, a group of twenty Jewish young people left the Ghetto in secrecy, heading to the forests, in the vicinity of the town of Rozsenoy. The Judenrat cooperated with them, by closing the streets until they had safely gotten away.

We continued to work during the night, building our bunker. One night, my brother-in-law rushed into the yard and told us that a German soldier was walking in the direction of the house where we lived. I rushed out of the yard, closed the door, and met the enemy in front of the house. I noticed that he was drunk. I asked him what I could do for him. He said that he was looking for a woman by the name of "The hippshah Bertah," or the heavy Bertha. I assured him that no woman by that name lived in our house, and I offered to take him to the Jewish police station. He agreed, and I slowly led him to the police and handed him over to the guy in charge. You can imagine what would have happened if, even while drunk, he had seen us digging and building the bunker!

Meanwhile, the chief of the Gestapo, who had been accepting bribes, had left his job. The man who replaced him was thought to be very strict, and there was no way to find out if he, too, would take a golden watch or another gift as a bribe. He showed his ruthlessness by ordering a count of the population in the Ghetto on the tenth of December, 1942. Suddenly, a horrible feeling of dread engulfed the Ghetto. People lamented that the end was coming. Some suggested that we disobey the order, while others urged compliance. A terrible confusion reigned. The leader of the Ghetto assured the crowds that he did not foresee any danger, and he advised us to show up for the counting.

The chief of the Gestapo said that the reason for the counting was to find out the exact number of people in the Ghetto for whom he

needed to provide food. He was lying, of course, because he had already planned for the cleansing of the Jewish population of Pruzany.

A group of people, mainly the intelligentsia—doctors, lawyers, teachers, and others—gathered during the night in an apartment across from our house. About forty of them attempted suicide by swallowing poison. Wood was burning in the stove and they closed the ventilator to prevent the escape of the smoke. At about six o'clock in the morning, my mother-in-law walked outside and smelled the charcoal fumes coming from the house across the street. She peeked in the window and saw a terrible scene . . . people lying on the floor. Among them was the famous Dr. Goldfine. My mother-in-law screamed that people had passed from smoke inhalation, and, within seconds, dozens of people gathered to revive them. Only one out of the forty died.

## The Evacuation of Jews from Pruzany

All hell broke loose on Wednesday, the 27th of January, 1943. Two of the twenty Jewish partisans who had left the Ghetto managed to reenter. They met with the Judenrat to discuss a few matters. They wanted to know how to arrange a massive walkout of about a thousand young Jews into the woods, and they had questions about arms, medicine, clothing, and so forth.

At this time, the chief of the Gestapo happened to drive into the Ghetto toward the Judenrat house. He saw two armed partisans and started to shoot. He killed one member of the Judenrat and wounded a few more, but the partisans managed to escape through a window.

I saw a commotion across the street from our room. I ran out and met my cousin Solomon. I asked him what had happened. His answer was short. "Morris, we are goners. It's over for us." The Gestapo ordered the Yudenrat to stay where they were. At about four o'clock in the morning, the order came from Prussia . . . evacuation of the Ghetto would occur over a four day period.

Within a couple hours, 500 or 600 peasants from the surrounding villages were ordered to come to the Ghetto to take the Jews to the train in Lineve (Oranchitse). Our families were assigned for evacuation on Sunday, January 31, 1943. The Gestapo assured the Yudenrat that the Jews would be relocated to labor camps in different parts of Poland. They would need to work for the German army.

I am short of words to describe the despair and the mental anguish we suffered. On our minds was this question: "Do we go with the other Jews, or do we go down into the bunker?" The main problem was our daughter Tsveeyah. Would she be able to survive in the cave? If so, for how long? Our parents, sisters, and brothers decided for us. "Leave the child with the grandmothers, who will still be above the ground, while you and Regina lower yourselves into the grave. Who can predict if you'll ever be able to see the daylight again?" While we would hope for

a chance to remain alive, the grandmothers would take care of our sweet daughter.

It was a painful decision to make. We hardly slept during the nights; instead, we sat next to our daughter's bed and cried. On Saturday, we carried blankets, twenty liters of water, and about three pounds of crackers (we didn't have any more bread) down into the bunker. I also carried a small primitive stove that ran on kerosene and could serve as a means to cook. I took matches, candles, a small jar of oil, and cotton to make a light. I brought down two sharp axes and a book in the Russian language, *Aspartakus*, about the revolt of the Roman slaves. Regina gave me some medical equipment and blankets to take down. We could not fit anything else in the tiny cave.

During the first three days, the town was almost completely emptied. Sunday at three o'clock in the morning, our family parted ways. Regina's mother took our precious daughter and escorted us with other members of the family to the bunker.

There is a Jewish legend that the Messiah will come when a certain holy glass is filled up with pure, innocent tears. At this moment of parting from our child and family, and departing into the unknown, we could have collected more than one cup of pure, innocent tears. We kissed our young sweet daughter dearly as she looked on with fear and bewilderment. She cried and cried. We never saw her again, and we never found out about the last moments of her life until we met some survivors in May of 1945.

Regina's father covered the opening of the bunker with boards, dirt, and garbage. We were cut off from the daily light and almost cut off of air to breathe. At about seven o'clock in the morning, we heard the screams and shouts of the Germans. "*Raus, raus*. Out, out." Among the wild *raus, raus* of the Hitlerites—the blood-thirsty murderers—we heard the golden crying voice of our darling, unforgettable Tsveeyahlah (of blessed memory).

In a depressed and heartbroken mood, I will now tell you a story originally told to me by the Bialorus peasant who carried Regina's father, mother, and another couple to the station on his sledge. The peasant was from a nearby village. He knew the Kaplan family, because he would bring his rye and wheat to the mill to turn into flour. After the war was over, I met this fellow. He told me that Regina's mother had debated with her father over whether or not they should ask the driver to tell our friend, the supervisor of the mill, that Regina and I sat hiding

in the bunker. Maybe he would be able to do something to help us. The peasant had been able to understand the Yiddish conversation they were having. This peasant told me that he had promised to keep the secret to himself. Indeed, he kept his promise. If he hadn't, I wouldn't be here to tell this story fifty-eight years later.

## The Bunker

Regina and I didn't talk. We lowered our heads into our hands and wept and wept. Finally, we wept until we dozed. When we awoke to our new reality, our grief and pain kept us fastened to our seats for hours. The Nazi murderers had accomplished their diabolical objective. They had "cleansed" the 600 year-old Jewish community of Pruzany.

The deadly silence in our bunker was suddenly interrupted by a shrieking voice. "Regina, Regina, Reginaaaahhh!" The scream came from a woman who had hidden during the deportation and was seeking help. Alas, we were helpless ourselves, subjected to die in our deep grave under the barn.

I struck a match and put the fire to the cotton, which stretched out of the oil-filled jar. I created a smoky light. I also did something that could have cost us our lives on the first day of our sitting in the bunker.

As I said, I had put a primus machine in the bunker. This device could quickly boil water, an egg, and so forth. We were hungry and thirsty, so I put some water in a small container. I made a fire in the primus, and I tried to boil some tea to drink with the crackers. I did not realize that the fire would absorb the little oxygen in our cave. Somehow, I woke up from a deep faint and saw that Regina had passed out, too. I slapped her hard on her cheek and shouted in desperation, "Regina, wake up! Wake up!" After two minutes of shaking, she finally woke up. Oh, mercy was with us again. We were alive! Although I am not superstitious, I always nod my head, as a sign of agreement, when Regina and other people call this dangerous experience a miracle. More miracles were to come for Regina and me.

No more cooking tea. The pipe that stretched to the outside didn't provide enough fresh oxygen. The primus swallowed too much of the oxygen that did come through. If we continued to use it, we would faint again and, perhaps, never wake up.

What did we do next? Nothing, except whisper of our fear of being discovered by the Gestapo or their collaborators, Bialorussians, or Ukrainians, or others, based on the part of the town in which they lived. The Bialorussians and Ukrainians had been sent to labor camps, Thousands of Jews had been sent to Siberia, and now thousands of others had been killed.

Regina and I lay on the hard boards of our encampment, our legs curved beneath us all during the day and night. I had a watch, so I could tell the time. On the second day, we woke up to the noise of talking, laughing, and yelling coming from a nearby brewery. We heard Polish, Russian, and Bialorussian languages coming from youngsters whose job was to dump the furniture the Germans had snatched from the Ghetto into the brewery lot.

As we listened to them having a joyous time over our bitter tragedy, our hearts filled with grief and anguish. Why? Why? Why is nature so beautiful and the human race so hateful and so cruel? Why does the old Roman proverb "*Homo homini lupus est*" (a man to a man is a wolf) prevail in this world? The Romans believed that no animal eats the meat of an animal of his race, with the exception of the wolf. The wolf consumes the meat of a dead wolf, and so were the Hitlerites behaving like such animals.

Regina and I were angry. I quenched my wrath and my contempt for the Hitlerites by reading the book *Spartacus*, which recounted the revolt of the Roman slaves against their oppressors. Each word I read about it, each paragraph, each chapter increased my rage, but at the same time inspired me. Regina and I had to fight against the murderers of our child, our most dear parents, families, and our nation.

And so passed one day, one night, and then a second and a third. We heard the noises of those who rejoiced over Jewish property stolen by the Nazis. I had, in my mind, only one tiny spark of hope . . . Ivan. I kept repeating to myself and to Regina, "Remember what Ivan said in August of 1942? 'Come to me.'"

These few words were our only hope. However, we didn't know if we would be able to reach his house or if he would live up to his promise. He surely knew how dangerous it would be to give bread to a Jew who had been condemned to death. Could we blame him if he told us to go away and that he needed to protect himself and his family? What would we do then, not knowing where to look for partisans? I admit that these thoughts almost succeeded in diverting our fears about the destiny

of our precious child and our other family members. We could not do anything for them, and they couldn't help us.

On the twelfth day of sitting in the bunker, an event occurred that scared us to death. In the late afternoon, we heard steps over our hideout. S t e p ... s t e p ... s t e p Again and again. After a while, we heard somebody scratch the soil over our heads. More and more. We had been discovered. We would be shut out. We would be tortured. The sounds of hands scabbled closer and closer. We would surely be killed. Regina grabbed one axe and I grabbed the other. We stood in readiness to chop off a hand or leg of anybody who tried to take us alive. Suddenly, I heard Yiddish words.

I yelled, "Who is there?"

A voice answered, "It is I . . . Israel. Your neighbor."

Israel, along with another boy and the boy's father and sister had been hiding in a bunker on another street. The melting snow had flooded their bunker. Since Israel knew the location of our bunker, they had come to see if they could occupy our place, if it had been vacated.

We had a conversation with them for about a half hour. Israel, who was known in the Ghetto for being a big speculator, told me that he had placed a great amount of money and jewelry with a Pole who owned a restaurant. He said he intended to leave the bunker with the help of his friend the Pole. He planned to go to Bialystock (he was blonde), and, using his fortune, live as a Pole and get a proper I.D. as a Christian. Israel told me that he had sneaked around during the night and found out that the Germans had loosened their police presence around the Ghetto. This observation was very important, because we were planning to climb out and leave the bunker within the next three or four days.

Two days later, in the afternoon, I heard shouts coming from the direction of the cemetery. After the liberation, I learned that Israel had gone to the Pole asking for help. The Pole had chased Israel away and sent the German police to catch him at a flourmill where he was hiding. They caught Israel, and these were the shouts I heard from the bunker before he was shot do death. The father and his children had gone to the nearby farm ranch that he had owned before the Communist invasion in 1939. He begged the inhabitants for help. Instead of helping, the farmers called the Germans, who killed the victims.

I purposely describe these two events, because it is important to understand the diversity between different people. The way Ivan acted,

as you will see later, was completely different from the restaurant owner, who was greedy to take Israel's treasure.

Late in the afternoon, on February 17, 1943, we wore white shirts over our other clothes, in anticipation of a full moon shining on the snow-covered ground. At nine o'clock in the evening, we opened the bunker and climbed out. We remained lying in the barn for several minutes, because we could not walk. Our legs were powerless after being cramped for so many days. Finally, we stood up and started to walk in the direction of the Chakhets village. We passed an old cemetery and saw frozen corpses of little children and others lying covered by snow. It was frightening and shocking . . . and heartrending. We came out onto a side street, and I suddenly saw two people come out of a building across the street. The man and a woman were walking in our direction. I grabbed Regina's hand and pulled her behind a house. They passed by without seeing us. They carried bundles and had probably stolen things from a Jewish house.

We approached the barbed wire fence that surrounded the Ghetto. I cut it and made a large enough opening to squeeze through. I pulled Regina out after me and we disappeared into the darkness. We stumbled, almost crawling, through the fields, away from a road that led to the village. Slowly, slowly, with our hearts pounding against the walls of our chests, we reached Ivan Pauk's house. I tapped lightly on the window and a woman (Anna) peered out and rushed away. I approached the door when I heard it cautiously opening. Ivan recognized us and said, "What are you doing here? You are supposed to be dead, like the other Jews from Pruzany."

I whispered, "We hid in a bunker and now we are in your hands. You told me once to come to you, if the need ever arose. Please, save us. We only have three hours until dawn."

Ivan had four options. One: He could tell us to go away. Two: He could make a noise, and peasants from the village would finish us up. Three: He could rush and report us to the German police, who were stationed in the school where I had been principal. He chose to follow his highly moral conscience, selecting the fourth option. Ivan kept the promise he had given to me six or seven months ago when he had said, "Whatever will happen to you will happen to us." In Russian, he said, "*Chto boodiet s wami boodiet snani.*" Come in.

He had a wife and four children, ages five to twelve. By inviting us into his home, he pronounced a death sentence on himself and his en-

tire family. He told us to hide under a table, out of fear that one of the children might wake up and notice us. He was also afraid to take us into the barn for fear that a neighbor would hear a noise and call the Germans, and then we would all be dead. It was too early. At about four in the morning, he led us to his barn, and we climbed up a ladder and lay on top of his hay and sheaves of wheat.

In the morning, Anna brought us boiled potatoes and milk. She pretended that she was carrying food for the chickens or the pigs so that the neighbors would not suspect something unusual was happening. Later, Ivan climbed up the ladder and told us an awful story about a situation that could cost us our lives.

As I mentioned earlier, the Gestapo had ordered that the villagers help them catch “the bandits,” meaning the partisans. They had ten men walk patrols during the night, looking for intruders. By 11:15 in the evening, the German police, seeing light in Ivan Pauk’s house, had tapped at the window and shouted, “*Raus, raus. Out, out, you miserable dirty creatures! Tsoo house! Tsoo house! Go home! Go home!*” They left immediately. Had we approached the house forty-five minutes earlier, we would have bumped into the German police and the village security.

I thanked Ivan for this good deed, and I tried to reveal what I had on my mind. I hoped to meet some partisans when they arrived some night in the village. I would tell them that the Jewish wife of the partisan commander Vanika (Ivan) was my wife’s friend. Then maybe they would take us with them. Anna and two older children, Olga and Sasha, brought us tasty food twice during the day. Anna even provided us with blankets and she washed our shirts.

I expected to find partisans the first couple days out of our hide out, but they never showed up. It was too dangerous, because the Germans had increased their scrutiny, and the hunting of partisans had become more effective. I would peer through the cracks in the walls and sometimes see Germans striding along the road toward the place that had belonged to a rich Polish land owner before the war. Now, a German army unit was stationed there. I also saw children playing in the street. They were my students in the Chakhets school before the German invasion.

Day after day, Ivan would come to the barn, and we would talk and talk. I saw that he was engulfed in a tremendous fear for the life of his children, his wife, and himself. He turned white like paper. He told me

that in a village near the town Malch, a whole Bialorussian family had been burned to death with some Jews who were hiding with them. It was a true story. He told me that in a forest near the town of Rozenoy, the Germans had found a bunker with Jewish partisans hiding in it. The Germans had killed nine of them. This story was also true. These people were young partisans from Pruzany. I knew all of them. After the war, I found out that they had not been careful. They had taken a cow from a farmer, slaughtered it on the premises, and brought it to the woods on a sled while the blood drifted over the snow. The blood led the Germans to the unprotected bunker of the Jewish partisans.

There was no way Ivan could build us a hideout on his premises.

His home was not a single house in a forest. It was part of a village, where one building was built next to the other. We started to think about leaving the barn to wander in the woods in an attempt to find partisans. Neither Ivan nor his wife ever suggested to us that we leave the barn, but I knew that we were taking advantage of these people's unusual goodness. I felt that we should not endanger their lives any longer.

The following morning, when Ivan came to see me, I informed him that we would be leaving the barn on March 18, 1943. He said that if his house was in a forest separated from the neighbors, he would not agree to my decision. He would build a bunker and save us until the end of the war. However, in the present condition, it was not possible to dig into the ground and build a bunker. During the next three days, he asked certain trusted villagers about the partisans, their locations, and even the roads that led to them.

On the seventeenth of the month, he came to the barn and gave me the following information. We would have to go on a road that led to the railroad tracks. The tracks were patrolled day and night by Hungarian soldiers to prevent partisans from placing bombs and destroying oncoming German trains. We would have to be careful while crossing the tracks, in order to hide in the woods on the other side. Nobody lived in the immediate vicinity of the tracks. All of the buildings had been set on fire by the Germans to prevent the partisans from getting food and other helping hands from the former settlers. However, he had been told that about four or five miles from the tracks lived a villager and his family by the name Macar. Partisans on their way to fulfill an assignment sometimes stopped at Macar's house to rest. If we could find his house, there was a chance that he could put us in contact with partisans.

Yes, once again we felt we had a tiny ray of hope in a very desperate situation. However, locating Macar's house would be like finding a needle in a stack of hay.

Ivan had a sheet of paper with him. He placed it on a board and drew a line, saying, "When you cross the tracks, try to find this road. Proceed about four miles. You will notice three windmills. About a mile from the windmills, you will find yourselves next to a forest of birch trees. This is the area where Macar lives." Ivan had tried wholeheartedly to help us, again and again. All I could say to him on this day was, "Thank you, Ivan. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

We left on the eighteenth. Why the eighteenth? Not being superstitious, but rather following Regina's wish, I had chosen the eighteenth because the number 8 equals the Hebrew letter *Chet*. The number 10 equals the Hebrew letter *Yood*. When you put the two Hebrew letters together, they become *Chai*, the Hebrew word for LIFE. Regina believed that anything might be a remedy for our plight, even the choice of this particular day for our departure.

The day before, Anna had washed our shirts and underwear. She had also brought us a bundle containing two pounds of crackers and a slice of pork. She said, "I would give you much more, but in case you notice that the Germans are about to round you up, you will be able to drop this small package unnoticed, to avoid being tortured to reveal who gave you the food."

At dusk, we came down from our hiding place. Ivan, Anna, and their children Sasha and Olga met us in the barn on the platform for a farewell. It was a dramatic farewell. We all cried. Anna and Olga embraced Regina and wouldn't let go. My pleasant Regina.

As you see, I haven't mentioned the word God. Not during this tragic moment and not during previous tragedies. I admit I don't want to put on paper my feelings about this. I would have too much to say, much more than what is said in the famous classic poem allegedly sung by the famous Rabbi Itschak from Berdichev: "He complained for the misery we Jews endure." As we took our leave from the barn, I saw that Anna was praying. I thought to myself, "Maybe her prayers will be heard."

We slipped through a rear exit of the barn and avoided the main road through the village. We found the road that Ivan had mentioned to us, and felt we were experiencing great luck. Then we almost ran into danger. About a mile from the outskirts of Chakhets, an elderly peasant

walked toward us. I greeted him in a cheerful voice, “*Dobry vecher*. Good evening.” He replied with the same words and continued walking, minding his own business. He probably thought that we were villagers, because we wore peasant jackets.

Regina said, “Is it not a miracle?”

I said, “Yes, Regina, it is a miracle. But my grandmother taught me when I was young what to tell the bee. You may keep your honey and your sting. No miracle, no danger.” We continued walking in the darkness and approached the railroad tracks. It was quiet all over, no patrol. We crouched down and stepped slowly and silently over the tracks and hid in the bushes. We rested for about half an hour and then picked ourselves up. Our tragic *odisseah* had begun.

## Life as a Partisan

### On the Run

We started our tragic odyssey in the forests and bushes of the famous Bialowiez Wilderness. It was not in the immediate Bialowiez area, but it was in the chain of the most famous wilderness in Eastern Europe, even today. We walked west, the way Ivan had directed us. We were tired, desperate, and cheerless. We noticed a pile of hay off the road. We lay on the hay and fell asleep. We woke up at dawn. Although Ivan had told us that the area was clean of inhabitants, we feared to walk during the daylight. If a peasant came to catch his hay, he might harm us. So we hid in the bushes all day.

At dusk, we started our walking into the unknown. It didn't take long before we had completely lost our direction. We didn't know if we were going east, west, north, or south. All of the trees looked alike, in our despair. We comforted each other. We consumed a tiny piece of the bread and pork. We had to save. Who could tell for how long? During the following day, we hid in the bushes again. Very often during the night, we would hear the awful scream of an owl, as if she blamed us for disturbing the silence of the night.

At night, we would see light coming from a far distance. It did not change its location; it always came from the same direction. I gathered that the light was coming from a train station. It convinced me that we were circling and circling the same area. So we decided to walk during the day and hide during the nights for better orientation.

It was cold, so we would look for a pile of hay, sink ourselves in the hay, and doze and sleep. We would break our thirst by picking up some clean snow or sticks of ice hanging from the branches. While enduring our misfortune, we would bring up our darling Tsveeyale, and whisper to ourselves that she would not have been able to live through this misery, even for a day or two. We tried to justify our decision to leave her with the grandmothers.

On the fifth day of our wandering in the forest, we were almost discovered, and we would have paid with our lives on the spot.

In order to prevent the partisans from approaching the tracks unnoticed, the Germans had ordered that the area near the tracks be cleared of trees and bushes. As we approached the tracks, I heard voices and saw peasants cutting the trees. In my despair, a thought came into my mind. Maybe a peasant would show up about half a mile from the tracks. I could face him and find out where we were. I remembered the phrase “something has to give,” and I felt that I had no choice but to try, since we were lost anyway. So, we hid in the bushes and peered out.

Suddenly, I noticed that one of the men in the crowd, maybe the foreman, was walking in our direction with a hunting rifle over his shoulder and his dog was running in front of him. There was no way we could move and escape. The dog was already about a block from where we were positioned. As you know, dogs have a remarkable sense of smell. I embraced Regina, who was crying bitterly. “It is the end for us. We will have our tragic end in the wilderness in the forest.”

Suddenly, I heard a whistle. The dog turned to obey the command. The man and the dog were running back to where they had come from! We hurriedly left our hiding place, fearful of being caught and murdered on the spot. My first thought was that the foreman had noticed us in the bushes and suspected that a gang of partisans were in the vicinity. He got scared and rushed back to join the others. Who knows? Had the dog started barking at us, we would either have been killed right away or taken to the Gestapo. It would not have made a difference. We would either have been clubbed by the peasants or shot by the Germans. Regina counted this as one more miracle.

On the sixth day of our misery, I tried to quell my hunger and thirst by singing a verse from a Yiddish song in a low voice. *Zoon, do shinst for yeden einem, farvos shinst. Do nit for mir?* In translation, “Oh sun, you shine for everybody, why do you not shine for me?” It is a very emotional expression of suffering that one can still hear sung by women working in factories or even on the stage of a Jewish show.

It seemed to me that my mournful tune reached the sun, and it worked. Slowly, but it worked. We saw three windmills and birch trees. But, before I could rejoice in our luck, I heard a command, “Hands up!” Two armed men appeared before us. We remained standing, with our hands up. They came closer and said, “Hands down.” They asked us where we were going and who we were looking for.

I became dumb. When we were still in the Ghetto, I had heard that the Germans had disguised past Ukrainian war prisoners as partisans and placed them in the forest as spies. The idea that these two men could be German agents struck me. I started to mumble in fear, “We are Jews from Pruzany. We are looking for good people to help us. We are afraid, lost, and dying.”

The older man looked at Regina and shouted, “*Da nie bois, Kaplanadocz.*” Don’t be afraid. “The miller’s daughter.” The other man turned to me and in a commanding voice called out, “And you, the teacher from Chakhets school. Don’t you recognize me? I was a teacher in the village Sheenie.” In Russian, “*Nie poznayosh nurnia yah beel oochitel v derevnie Sheeniee.*”

It was a dramatic moment, which I have no words to describe. Was it a dream, a joke, a hallucination? It was, in fact, the most appreciated reality.

The farmer used to take his wheat to grind into flour in Kaplan’s flour mill. He recognized Regina. The other fellow used to attend the teachers’ meetings during the Soviet regime, and he remembered me. They were partisans. We sat down, and they treated us with bread and pork sandwiches. I never smoked, but I had a small bag of tobacco in my bag, which I handed to them. “Now,” they asked, “what is next? What can we do for you?”

I revealed my plan to them. I was trying to meet the Jewish woman Genia and her husband the commander Vanka Petrov. They replied that they did know Petrov, but they belonged to a different group of partisans. They said they knew where Petrov’s detachment was located. We should remain sitting where we were, and they would go and report back about us and see what happened. It would be about three hours before they would be able to return.

Night turned into day. Darkness was defeated by light. Hope took place of despair, and the desire to live reigned over resignation. Our attitude towards the future days changed from negative to positive, and we waited patiently until their return. While trying to relax, we counted the hours. One, one and a half. Two, two and half. No sign of anyone returning. No voices heard. No partisans coming to our rescue.

We started to worry. I was aware of the fact that the partisans were not eager to accept Jews into their ranks. They considered us to be cowards. “Jews,” they said, “tried to buy their freedom with gold.” The Jew haters spread all kinds of other accusations against us. They even dared

to accuse the Jews of cooperating with the Germans and making deals with them to hurt the non-Jews. Despair and doubt occupied my mind. Maybe the two men didn't belong to a partisan group, and, if they did belong, maybe they hadn't told their leaders about us. If they did, maybe the leaders had refused to care about our plight. Regina started to weep again, and I could not help her. It was an unpleasant situation.

#### Acceptance into the Chapayev Brigade—Malenkov Otriad

Three hours passed. It seemed that we were engulfed in a haze. We napped. Suddenly, I heard voices talking, singing, and giggling. Before I even regained all of my senses, I saw them coming. Some were mounted on horses, some were walking, and there she was, the Jewish woman Genia sitting in a sled next to a partisan driver. They were singing Russian patriot songs. There were about twenty-five of them. They stopped in front of us, and we rose to our feet. Genia shook hands with us. Her husband, the commander, followed her. A few other fellows also came closer.

For a few seconds, a dead silence governed all over, during which they sized us up. Petrov started a barrage of accusations against the Pruzaner Jewish Committee. Why? Why hadn't they organized and sent a massive exodus of a thousand or two-thousand young and elderly Jewish men and woman into the forests? Why hadn't they provided the partisans, who were in the woods, with medicine, clothing, and food? Why?

He expected an answer. Did I have an answer? Oh, yes! I had an answer that would take hours and hours to tell. I wanted to tell him that, indeed, the Pruzaner Yuden Council had cooperated and helped those who were ready to leave and go into the woods. I wanted to tell him that the Jews were locked in a ghetto without any chance to contact the outer world to get arms to protect themselves from being killed by the non-Jews, as they took their first steps toward the forests. Then, there was fear of the possibility of not being accepted by the Russian partisans, and, thus, not being permitted to get food from the villagers.

But . . . I kept my mouth shut. I had almost lost hope when I heard one of the partisans saying, "*Nam zsidov nie nada*," which meant "We don't need Jews." Petrov reacted strongly to this statement and warned that partisan that he would be reported to the commander of the brigade for making anti-Semitic remarks.

For a brief moment, I thought it hadn't been worth the risk to make such a dangerous effort towards survival, if it meant we would be annih-

lated by a shooting squad in the wilderness. However, when I looked into Genia's eyes, I was fairly sure that the plan I had conceived—to porarily hide and then to find partisans— would eventually have a positive outcome. I based my observation not only on the fact that Genia, the wife of the commander, was a Jewess, but also on the knowledge that the brigade did not have a doctor, and Regina could be an asset to them. It would be worthwhile for them to accept us into their ranks. My assumption proved to be correct. In addition, two of the partisans who came to look at us had attended adult classes in the Chakhets school, and they had things to say in our favor.

Petrov turned to his wife and told her to give us the food that she had brought for us. His decision was to leave us for a few days at our hideout and wait for the final word from his consultation with the proper authorities.

They left, and we remained in the bushes. Genia came again at dusk. She brought us more food, some blankets, and two pelts. She assured us that everything would be all right and that we should not lose hope. She came again the next day, accompanied by another woman and a partisan on a horse-driven sled. She told me that three or four of the partisans objected to us, but her husband had told these partisans that if they didn't agree with his decision to accept us, they should leave his *otriad*—detachment. On the fourth day of our detention, two partisans came with a sled and took us to the Petrov Otriad.

It is hard to describe our happiness as our situation went from darkness to brightness. We went from being two lonesome Jews to finding ourselves in a group—a fearless group of fighters against the murderers of our child against the bloodthirsty Nazis and their collaborators.

Genia had a sister in the forest. Her name was Pola. She made us feel more optimistic. She led us to the kitchen area and offered us as much food as we wanted . . . bread, meat, onions, and much more. Petrov told us to build ourselves a so-called *zemlyanka*<sup>2</sup>, a kind of primitive cabin made from branches and boughs and covered with straw, leaves, and chunks of earth.

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<sup>2</sup> From the Russian, literally earth-house. Primitive shelters used by Eastern European partisans.

I didn't encounter any animosity from the partisans. Actually, after they sized us up, many of them began conversing with Regina and me. They even helped us build the *zemlyanka*, and they shared their blankets with us. The ground was covered with blankets. By that evening, we had our own "palace." I was given a pair of Russian army pants and a jacket, and I had to dispose of the black suit that I had worn on my wedding day. I was also given a rifle and a few bullets. I was a partisan ready for any mission.

However, we still faced the deep danger of immediate execution, if they discovered my secret. I had some gold coins with me. The day before we had hidden in the bunker, my father-in-law had given me forty gold coins that he had saved before the Communist revolution in Russia. The value of each coin was five *rubel* (Russian currency) in gold. He said to me, "Maybe these coins will help you someday, if you remain alive." Yes, his intention was noble, but not in a camp with partisans. It would be easy to get rid of the coins, but if the partisans found the gold loose on the ground, we would be accused and then forced to admit, under torture, that the coins had belonged to us. I could not dig a hole near the camp, because we were still under strict watch. But, I had to act quickly and without another day of delay. So, on our third day of being with the partisans, I strode over to Vanka, the commander, and told him I was ready to do the job of security . . . to keep watch.

He was happy to hear my request, as it was a sign that I cared for the safety and security of everyone in the compound . . . and that I was brave. The following day, I was sent about a half mile outside of the camp to stand watch. Four hours of watching and four hours of resting. I had the coins with me in a small glass jar. I also had a tiny spade and a pocketknife. I had planned everything far in advance, even before I entered into the bunker. Now was the time to use the tools. I looked around and saw a very tall, big-trunk tree. I did not hesitate. I scanned the area and saw that nobody was nearby. I sat by the tall tree and surreptitiously dug a hole next to a root. I placed the jar with the coins into the hole and carefully covered it with dirt, branches, and grass. I then returned to my station. It took about an hour before my heart had stopped its pounding. When I returned late in the evening from my assignment, Regina had tears in her eyes, counting my return as one more miracle.

Regina immediately made herself available to those in need of medical services. She had brought with her some antibiotic serum and

needles, aspirin, and other minor medical things. We both spoke fluent Russian, and within a few days we had adjusted to the difficult conditions of the forest. We were relatively content with our new lot in life. We were ready to fight the enemy, and to carry out vengeance for the murder of our daughter and our most beloved people.

Shortly after our arrival, plans were made to attack the local police station in Lineve, also called Oranchitse. Eighteen men were assigned to this daring job, and I was among them. The attack was about seven or eight miles from our camp. Shortly before sunset, we left our camp. I was thirty-three years old and full of enthusiasm for harming the enemy in any possible way. I did not feel any hardship in marching towards the goal of hitting and burning anything and everything that served the Nazi machine.

As we approached the outskirts of the Lineve village, our contacts informed us that the police had just learned of our intentions. They had abandoned the station and disappeared. The station had housed both local teenagers and adults. The decision was made to burn the station. Under the protection of the partisans, another man and I carried two bundles of straw. A third man struck three matches. We retreated. In a few minutes, we gazed at the flames coming out of the police station. Some minutes later, we heard shouts. The cowards didn't dare to pursue us into the woods. We marched to our camp and sang Russian patriotic songs. I still remember some of the lyrics; "*Yeslee zavtra voina, yeslee zavtra pohod? Mee k boyoo segodnia gotov.* If tomorrow a war, if tomorrow a march, we are ready today to fight." I remember it as if it were today. I sang my song loudly. I expressed the whole wrath of my soul toward the German murderers. As the phrase says, "If I am needed tomorrow, I am ready today."

"A good job well done," the commander remarked. His opinion was like a balm on my bruised heart.

After I had been working as a partisan for a week, I learned the strategic situation of our brigade. The name of the brigade was *Chapayevska Brigada Russkich Partisanov* (Chapayev Brigade of Russian Partisans). Chapayev was one of the leaders of the Red Army during the Revolution. The brigade consisted of five detachments, or *otriads*, and a family otriad protected by the other fighting groups. The otriads did not have the same number of partisans as members. Most had between seventy and a hundred-twenty armed fighters. Regina and I belonged to the *Partisan Otriad imeni Malenkovah* (partisan otriad of the name Ma-

lenkov). Malenkov was a member of the Russian government before World War II. The Chapayev brigade belonged to the Brest Litovsk Union of partisan otriads.

One of the five otriads was the strongest and possessed the most arms and the most skilled fighters. They were the first to organize a partisan otriad. They had the most contact with the local population. They were equipped with automatic rifles, and they unofficially held a dominant stance over the other four otriads. They were the first to spread fear among the Germans. When they learned about Regina, they came and took her to their camp so she could give medical attention to two or three wounded partisans. She was there a week. Nobody was allowed to enter their camp, not even partisans from other otriads. They treated Regina very well. They called her *vrach*, which means doctor in Russian. She had some antibiotic serum with her, so all of the partisans in our camps treated her with a lot of respect. The doctors who were stationed in the headquarters of the Brest Litovsk partisan movement also respected her. She was in contact with them while treating heavily wounded partisans in fights with the Nazi murderers.

Regina was also appointed dietician of our otriad, and so she ate by herself instead of reaching for food from the sizeable dish where the other partisans would get their meals. I also learned, during our first week in the group, that in order to get your food, you had to always carry a spoon with you. Indeed, throughout the entire time of being with the boys in the camps, I had my spoon stuck in my high boots, ready to use when the soup was served.

There were only a few women in the Chapayev brigade. Some were single and some were married to partisans. In the Malenkov detachment, there were five women and eighty men. The ranks were as follows: Commander, Deputy, Politrook—which was abbreviated from *politicheski rokovoditel*, a political leader, and represented the line of the Communist party—and platoon leaders. Everyone else was a regular fighter.

### Facing Danger Within the Otriad

Many of the men were friendly, intelligent, well-mannered, and, overall good human beings. However, there were some men, whom I recognized by seeing the looks in their eyes, that were troublesome, because of their rebellious behavior and attitude. Ninety percent of the partisans were soldiers who had fought against the Germans. They had

seen fire and death. They had seen their friends killed in action and left wounded on the fields. They had gone through all of the atrocities of war. As a result, their attitude towards life was so negative that the life of a human being did not hold any value to them.

If you take into consideration the fact that *vodkah* liquor was the most commonly consumed drink each day, you realize that the danger of losing your life did not only come from the Gestapo. The Partisanka was not a heaven. Danger prevailed from both the Germans outside and the partisans inside. There is a saying that a cat has nine lives. Based on the miracles Regina and I had already experienced in our desire to survive, as well as the miracles that occurred during our first three months of joining the partisans, I can surely state that the phenomenon of the cat's nine lives can be applied to us.

Among the group of partisans I met, one stands out in particular. He became an alcoholic. He drank liquor instead of water. As a result, he became delirious. They took his rifle away from him and tried to help him, but their efforts were in vain. He was a burden to his detachment when they went into action, so they dumped him into the Malenkov detachment. Regina was told to try to help him. She spent a lot of time talking to him, trying to convince him of the danger he was causing to himself and to his life. She suggested he stop drinking vodka altogether. Her efforts yielded no results. He was fair to her and respected her. Suddenly, he opened his mouth and yelled, "Mitia (the name given to me) and Regina are spies." He kept repeating these words. "Regina and Mitia are spies." Neither the commander nor the partisans paid attention to his rambling words. Everybody knew that he was delirious and crazy. It seems, however, that somebody informed the leaders of his previous detachment about what was going on in our group with their alcoholic. They wanted to revitalize his morale and show him that they were on his side. They arranged a spectacle for his satisfaction . . . the killing of partisans he didn't like.

Early one morning, these partisans were returning to their camp from a night spent in a nearby village drinking and singing. About thirty of them appeared in our camp, mounted on horses and heavily armed. They ordered Petrov to line us up . . . unarmed. When we stood ready, their leader said, "*Evreyi veestoopit*. Hebrews step out." Regina and I stepped out, as did Genia, her sister Sonia, Pola, and Meyer Soloveichick.

The non-Jewish men and women were ordered to step forward and to turn around and look at us. In front of me stood a bloodthirsty partisan. He was pointing a machinegun at me, and his finger was on the trigger, itching for orders to shoot. Vanika, the commander of these ruffian partisans, said to me, "Tell your life story to the non-Jewish women." He meant to add insult to injury, insinuating that I didn't deserve to be heard by men.

How can I describe my feelings? I can't. This was the end of my life. This was the end of my dreams and Regina's dreams of fighting and retaliating for the brutal murder of our child and of our most loved people . . . of millions of innocent human beings. This was the end of our short lives. I began to mumble, while peering at the guy with the machine gun. His eyes did not express sorrow at being given the job of killing six innocent partisans. On the contrary, he had a spark of joy in his eyes at the chance to be partners with the angel of death.

I hadn't finished a full sentence, when one of the group turned to the gunman and said with a commanding voice, "*Nie strely! Obozsdee!* Don't Shoot! Wait!" He whispered something in Vanika's ear. It was a decisive second of life or death for six partisan Jews. Instead of an order to shoot, we heard a loud drunkard's roar. "*Na koni, na koni!* On the horses! On the horses!" They hopped on their horses and disappeared, galloping away like wild animals.

We caught our breaths, each one of us . . . every member of the otriad. Everybody had something to say. Everyone wanted to condemn this vicious chief of a partisan otriad, this paranoid Vanka, for his devilish plan to kill six partisans in order to entertain the delirious and crazy alcoholic. But, we all kept our mouths shut. Everybody except the Politrook. He strode over to the alcoholic and warned him to never again speak the words that Moisey and Regina were spies. The commander Petrov told everybody to calm down and to return to do his job as scheduled. Again, a miracle.

Before I continue describing our daily life in the forest, I would like to share another tragic event, which resulted in the death of five innocent partisans. When I was the principal of the school in the village Chakhets, I befriended one of the parents. His name was Pavel. Four of his seven children were students in the school. In July of 1941, he also met partisans, while cutting the grass in his meadow. However, unlike my friend Ivan, he kept steady contact with the partisans. Some of them would come to his house during the night and stay for hours.

He was the fellow to whom I had given the battery for the radio that Regina smuggled into the Ghetto. I had also given him packages of tobacco for the partisans during the summer of 1941. The Germans found out about his connection with the “bandits” and came to arrest him. He escaped, so they arrested his wife Helena and hanged her in front of all the villagers. Pavel joined the partisans, and he was welcome in every otrad that he visited. I was very happy to see him, whenever he stopped by to visit us for a day.

Besides the gold coins that I had buried at the tall tree, I still had 400 German *marks* (German currency) in my possession. It was not dangerous to keep this money, but the money didn't have any value in the forest. We didn't buy our food. I had to get rid of the money and the sooner the better, before the commander found out about it. On the first occasion that Pavel came to our camp, I gave him the marks, which he gladly accepted. He sent the money to his old mother, who was taking care of his seven children. She could use the money to buy kerosene, salt, sugar, and so forth.

As I have said, there were six of us Jews in the Malenkov Otriad. Genia, the commander's wife, her sister Sonia, Regina, Pola, and Meyer Solovichick and me. Pola, who was born in Lodz, Poland, somehow found herself in Kobrin during the war. From there, during the massacre of the Korbin Jews, she had escaped and found her way to the Malenkov Otrad in the forests along the river Moochaviets. She was accepted and worked in the kitchen.

Meyer was born and raised in Kobrin. During the destruction of the Jews there, he had escaped. While wandering along the river Moochaviets, he met partisans and was accepted into the Malenkov Otrad in the spring of 1942. As a twenty-year-old, he was strong, brave, and eager to participate in partisan actions. He strived wholeheartedly to get revenge on the Nazis for the innocent blood of his family and of the Jewish people.

When we were accepted as partisans, Regina got to know Pola. She was a very friendly and loveable person. One of the nice, good-natured Bialorus partisans helped Pola with whatever she needed. He fell in love with her. Indeed, it was very hard for a pretty young girl to defend herself from the advances of the many men in the otriad. So, she chose to stay with this particular partisan who took care of her and protected her. Eventually, due to jealousy and other conflicts, they separated themselves from the group and made themselves a nest in a different place.

In our otriad, there was another Russian couple who were married before the Germans attacked Russia. They minded their own business, and they tried to be appreciative in the group, just like everybody else. However, the woman was very beautiful, and it is possible that somebody tried to get a little too friendly with her.

I mention these married partisans, because it concerns a horrible event carried out by the same group of partisans led by Vanika, the murderer. This group was nicknamed *Automattiki*, because most of them carried automatic rifles.

One hot day, we were once again surrounded by the Vanika group of partisans. We were ordered to line up without our arms. Even our commander, Petrov, and his wife and sister-in-law were included in the lineup. Vanika didn't explain the reason for the raid. He ordered all of the Jews to step out in front of the line, and he read more names from a list. The Russian couple I just described was on this list. I saw the same bloodthirsty gunman, his finger on the trigger of his machinegun, pointing it directly at us.

Death was looking Regina and me in the eye once again. I have no words to describe what goes through your mind in the last minutes before an expected hail of machinegun bullets. This time, however, our savior was not the *Politrook* who yelled, "*Obozsee, ni nie strelj.*" *Wait, don't shoot.* He was not present at this execution. Instead, it was my friend Pavel—whose children studied in the Chakhets school and to whom I gave the 400 marks—who fell on his knees in front of Vanika, with his hands outstretched, as if he were begging. Dear reader, hold your breath and listen to what he said to Vanika. "If you are going to kill these two, Moisei and his wife Regina, kill me, too." It is true. He spoke these words. In a weeping voice, he repeated, "If you are going to kill them, kill me, too."

Vanika asked him, "What do you know about them?"

Pavel replied, "You remember when I brought a battery to the encampment and handed it to you? Regina put her life in danger and smuggled a battery into the ghetto. The *tabak* that you got? That was from Moisei."

Vanika told him, "*Otvedi,*" which means "Lead these two away."

Pavel rushed towards us, grabbed our hands and guided us about ten feet away from the others.

Petrov, realizing that his wife, Genia, and her sister, Sonia, were in extreme danger, shouted, "Comrade Vanika. My wife and her sister."

The half drunk Vanika told him, “*Otvied.*”

As soon as the two women were guided to the side, the merciless Vanika called out, “*Poost zseevot.*” *Let them live.* This phrase was a code to the gunman to shoot! Within a second, several partisans fell to the ground, wriggling in their agony: the Jew, Meyer; the couple; and one other. The murderer ordered three other partisans and me to dig a mass grave, while the gunman finished up the job of killing them. While digging the grave, I cried, seeing Meyer’s red hair carried away by the wind. I cried, and so did Regina, Genia, and Sonia. The whole Malenkov Otrad mourned the murders of our innocent partisans.

As I type this line, I remind myself that when I handed Pavel the battery, I had thought of the phrase, “Send your bread on the water, and you may find it sometime later.” When I try to analyze what caused Pavel to endanger his life by standing up for us, I can only conclude that he was a human being with a righteous heart. I was the person who had taught his five children. He remembered that I had taken his children to the Chakhets village booth and made sure that all seven had received shoes. There was almost a complete shortage of everything in 1939. He also took into consideration the 400 marks I had given him for his children. He added in the battery and the *tabak*, and that gave him the courage to risk his own life by begging for the lives of two Jews.

Of course, Regina counted this event as yet one more miracle.

Vanika Plantovski was responsible for one more terrorist act. *Samogon* means homemade whisky. When World War II broke out and liquor wasn’t readily available, villagers learned how to make it themselves. They brewed *samogon* mostly for their own use, but they also used it to bribe partisans when they raided the villagers for food. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with that,” I had said to myself, whenever I accepted bottles of *samogon*. But *samogon* was responsible for another senseless tragedy. There were four women in the evil Vanika’s otriad. Two of them were married to platoon leaders. In the beginning of the summer of 1943, Vanika returned from the village. He brought four or five bottles of *samogon* back with him. He called the female cooks, handed them the *samogon* and ordered them to hide it in a place where nobody would be able to find it and drink it. In the afternoon, he left the camp again. Regina was in their camp attending to a heroic partisan who had been wounded in a raid on a German unit. She had already been there three or four days.

The next morning, Vanika returned. As usual, he was more than half drunk, and he demanded the *samogon*. The woman rushed to bring it to him. *Oy vey, Oy vey*, what a misfortune. The bottles had disappeared. Some partisans had sniffed out the *samogon* and stolen it.

With a voice full of rage and anger, Vanika ordered the full membership under his command to line up unarmed, with the women at the end. Regina was in the tent changing the bandage of the wounded fellow, and Vanika ordered her to stand in the line, too, next to the last man in the line. Vanika pulled out his revolver and killed the woman who stood at the end. Then he killed the one who stood next to her. Regina turned about face and began to run into the bushes. The bandit ordered his deputy, who was armed, to run after her and kill her. Regina fell to the ground, and the armed man stood in front of her with his finger on the trigger of the gun he was pointing at her. She begged him, "Please don't kill me. Please don't shoot."

Suddenly she heard the wounded partisan yelling, "Regina, save Regina. Save my savior, Regina. Bring her to the tent. I need her help."

Vanika called to the deputy, "Don't shoot, don't shoot."

As Regina hurried back from the bushes, this murdering partisan leader stopped her and ordered her to save the life of one of his platoon leaders whom he killed. He had been standing in back of his wife and she had been Vanika's fourth woman victim in his massacre. The bullet that penetrated her and also hit the face of her husband. He had fallen to the ground, just like the four female victims. Vanika ordered Regina, "Save this partisan," while waving his revolver over her head. She put an injection of some drug into his already dead body. Of course, her effort was in vain.

And all the while, the wounded partisan in the tent kept on screaming, "Regina, Regina." She rushed into the tent and continued to apply the medicinal salve onto his wounded arm. She remained there until the horrible ordeal was over, working in an agonizing and heart stopping shock. Two days later, she returned to our camp and told me about this massacre and her miraculous survival. Yes, she had received one more miracle.

These events that took the lives of ten partisans (five men and five women) were not the accepted policy of the partisan movement. They were the terrorist acts of a deviationist who deserved to be shot to death without a trial. Indeed, had he lived one more month, he would have

been sentenced to death. However, he was killed by German bullets a week later, while on his way to spend the night in a faraway village.

Similar isolated events happened in other brigades by drunkards and conscienceless men. They were killed themselves, when justice prevailed in the partisan ranks. I was told of a similar massacre in a group of partisans where six boys—young Jews from Pruzany—were rounded up by a crazy partisan alcoholic and shot to death. I tried to learn the details, but I could not get any more information about this tragedy. I did learn, however, that the murderer paid for this act with his own life.

Another time, on my way to the headquarters of the *Brest Litovsk* partisan movement, I saw a brigade commander investigating two civilians who had returned home, after escaping from a German slavery camp. We heard him yelling to them, “You served our enemy?” He shot them on the spot. I heard that he was later tried and shot to death.

I compare the way these events happened in the concentration camps and in the woods for a reason. In the camps, before the Jews were thrown into the ovens, the victims suffered hunger, thirst, beatings, blows, lashes, and hard labor in freezing conditions. And, when they reached the status of *moosool man*, they were rounded up and thrown into the gas chambers. The victims in the woods didn’t suffer as much, before they died. This observation of mine is not a consolation for the families or relatives. None of this should have happened at all. There should not be terrible wars among nations and killings among people of different nationalities or ideologies. I speak little of what is in my mind in memory of our little daughter Tsveeyah, who lost her life in Auschwitz at the age of five. Blessed be her memory.

From the time of our acceptance into the partisan ranks until the end of June 1943, Regina and I had a very tough time. As you have already read, we miraculously survived, thanks to the interference of just and pious people who carried their God in their hearts. I want to name some of these people: Ivan and his wife Anna, Pavel Deba, the Partisan Politrook who called “*Obozsdec, nie strely,*” the Jewish woman Genia, the wounded partisan who called out to save Regina, and others who helped us in our distress.

During these three months, we didn’t sit with folded hands and wait for the worst. Both of us had gained a reputation in our otriad that we were able to not only save our own hides, but also to participate in the struggle to cause the German war machine as much damage as a fifth

column. Hundreds of miles from the front lines, Regina was busy taking care of the sick. I went several times to get food with the other partisans. I also went on security assignments and other missions.

After the defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad, in January of 1943, the direction of the war turned in favor of the Red (Russian) Army. Retired Russian army officers were dropped by planes into the partisan establishments to form order in the brigades, detachments, platoons, and in smaller units. A retired Red Army captain arrived in our brigade. He had the authority to handle the matters of law and order accordingly. His presence caused a new spirit in the camp. The loudmouths no longer tried to enforce their personal rules. Nobody misbehaved, and nobody committed crimes in the villages and among the peasants.

### Acts of Sabotage

In an effort to catch the partisans, the Germans would put traps on the roads and paths that the partisans frequently used. The partisans did the same thing, in an attempt to destroy German police, cars, and even their convoys. The partisans called these kinds of traps *zasadas*. The most important act of sabotage was to destroy the trains running in either direction to the frontlines, carrying manpower and arms.

Until the time when Russian planes dared to throw some supplies to the partisans, the explosives needed to make bombs were derived in the following primitive way. Some bombs that were dropped by different armies during the war didn't actually explode. They remained on the fields and in the forests. These bombs were picked up by the partisans, who then defused them. Some men knew how to handle these dangerous things. Using a chisel and a hammer, they would take the explosives out of the bomb and use them to make other dangerous bombs. These partisans also learned how to create fuses.

Other important acts of sabotage involved disrupting communication by burning bridges, telephone poles, hurting German phone operators and policemen, confiscating supplies that the farmers were delivering to the Germans, and other acts of diversion.

In telling my life story, I frequently use the first person pronoun. I am not a braggart, and I am not boasting that only I deserve recognition and praise. Regina and I went into the woods to survive and to contribute to the destruction of the Nazi army, even in the least way. As Jews out of the ghetto, we both strived to prove ourselves. We both tried to

show that we could fulfill any given mission, like any other partisan. I, personally, felt it was important to prove to the others and to myself that I was not a coward and that I was ready and willing to be included in any group effort to sabotage the Germans.

Before you read about the following event, it is necessary to take a look at Map One. Note that Pruzany is in the north and Kobrin is in the south. A line of railroad tracks ran from west to east. I circled the place where our partisan brigade was located. On Map Two, the trains that ran from the west, passing Brest and continuing on to Minsk, became a good target for our brigade. By damaging them, we could delay the manpower and equipment needed to fuel the German war machine that operated inside Russia. In order to prevent the partisans from approaching and planting a bomb between the tracks, the Germans built bunkers. German soldiers stayed in these bunkers to protect the tracks both day and night.

One such set of bunkers was placed along the tracks north of the village Preeluchina (seen on Map One), north of our camps. When the German soldiers didn't get enough food, some of them would cross the tracks on Sundays and enter the nearby villages to beg for bread, cheese, and eggs. They would barter and trade for mirrors, needles, thread, and other small items.

The commander of our Malenkov otriad decided to make a *zasa-da*—a trap. A group of eight partisans, including me, was given the mission to look into this event. Early on a Sunday morning in June of 1943, we hid in the stalks of rye and wheat and waited. I was told to climb a tree to observe the terrain. At about eight o'clock in the morning, I saw nine armed German soldiers approaching the area. I reported their arrival to the unit, while keeping my eye on them. When they were about 200 yards from our position, I shimmied down the tree and joined my teammates. When the Germans were about 50 yards from us, we shouted "*Rooki Vierch!* Hands up!" Three of the nine escaped, while the other six fell to the ground. I yelled at them to keep their hands up, and they obeyed without pulling out their guns. We took them as prisoners to a nearby village and ordered three horse and buggy setups. We tied our hostages' hands before placing them in the wagons. When we passed through the village on the way to our base, the villagers praised us and gave us flowers.

Our arrival, with six prisoners, caused a tremendous surprise and satisfaction in our otriad camp. They were seated at the table and served a

full breakfast. Later, they were taken to the headquarters for questioning. I was the interpreter. They told me every piece of information we needed to find out from them. The brigade commander praised us for a successful job. My commander gave me one of the six revolvers that we got from the prisoners.

#### Promotion to Rank of Sergeant

Our commander was given a job in the headquarters. Another partisan replaced him. This new commander was a good-natured guy from Mosckva and he was not an anti-Semite. He was well behaved and didn't drink too much *samogon*. In July of 1943, I was called to appear before this commander of the brigade. He asked me about my background. He was pleased to hear that I had come from a farming family. After a short conversation, he said that he was elevating me to the rank of *starshina*. In other words, I was now equal to the rank of a sergeant in the regular army. Aside from participating in any mission, my main job would be to deliver supplies to my detachment. This assignment was very important and also very dangerous. I would never know when I would run into a *zasada* or when a farmer would rush to a German station.

At our meeting, the brigade commander praised Regina for doing such a wonderful job healing the sick and wounded and for extending her medical help to the villagers, who were our friends. In retrospect, I am still thinking about exactly what persuaded the commander and other partisans to select a Jew for such an important assignment. I have some ideas. When asked to tell about myself, I told them that I didn't drink a lot of whiskey—which they apparently considered a valuable asset—and I took my responsibilities seriously. I also told them I had an abundance of energy, which might prove helpful, considering the conditions in which we found ourselves.

My commander and the other partisans applauded my appointment and wished me good luck. I was given permission to choose a special unit. I selected nine brave and pleasant men. Among them were two local guys who knew the area, the roads, and the distances between towns. Most importantly, they knew the dangerous areas. I instructed them in the rules I wanted them to observe, while performing *bombi-oshka*: 1) Act fast, while negotiating with locals about bread and food; 2) Don't talk with or fall in love with any local girls; 3) Accept as many bottles of *samogon* as are offered, but drinking on the job was forbidden;

we would find good use for it later; 4) Vigorously search for pigs; pig meat was our best source of nourishment in the forest; 5) Confiscate any Jewish items, even sewing machines; 6) Notify other unit members immediately upon any anticipation of danger; 7) Seize sheep, poultry, blankets, army clothes, soap, salt, and any other item of usefulness, as needed; 8) Avoid taking any jewelry or beads that were part of typical peasant decorations; and 9) Explain briefly, but clearly, that we were not thieves, but quite simply fighters for a better future.

The following week, our group headed out to gather food items. We visited the nearby villages, most of which were about four to six miles from our base. The area was free of Germans, as they didn't dare enter a town in small groups. Of course, we could never be sure. They would often arrange a *zasada*, which could take lives unexpectedly.

The first *bomboishka* under my command was considered successful. We impounded a pig, bread, potatoes, onions, and more. Nobody on my team became inebriated on the few bottles of *samogon* we were given, and we served it to the partisans during lunch, in small quantities. My superiors and compatriots were very pleased with the mission we had accomplished and continued to be, with each activity that followed in the subsequent weeks, until the liberation.

On the way back from a *bomboishkam*—which usually took place at midnight—we would often stop at the house of one of the local guys, whose name was Vasika. We would take four or five chickens with us, and Vasika's wife would cook them for our middle-of-the-night supper. When we awoke from our much-needed nap, the chickens were ready to eat. After enjoying a good meal, we would return to our base on wagons loaded with food items. Vasika's house was in an isolated area, but even so, we had security on watch, as we did whenever we rested. A German raid could always happen. This was the nature of our lives in the woods. The one word, both spoken and unspoken, was always the same. *Voina*. War. The fear of danger prevailed above everything else in our consciousness.

Sometimes, the members of my unit would meet an old gypsy fortune teller at Vasika's house. The boys would ask her to read their palms or their cards. Once, in 1943, I joined the guys and the gypsy read my palm. She told me that I had lost many family members and that, someday, I would be recognized and elevated. She also told me that a long trip to some place far away awaited me. I was sure she didn't know I was Jewish.

### Promotion to Deputy Commander

The gypsy's second prediction happened fairly quickly. By the order of the brigade leader, I was appointed as deputy commander of the Malenkov Otriad, in November of 1943, second place in the leadership command. I was able to take possession of the certificate of appointment when we left Pruazany, in June of 1946. I have copies of this document, which gave me increased authority to make decisions regarding the missions and activities under my charge. It is impossible to describe the details of all the many actions in which I was instrumental during my *partisan*ka, but I will write of the most important events. They won't be in chronological order; I will simply describe them as they come into my mind.

### Sanitation

Sanitation was literally impossible and conditions were unbearable. Use your imagination. We had no warm water, no soap, and no privacy. We wore our clothes twenty-four hours a day for weeks and months on end, with our rifles and revolvers at our sides. Once, during a *bom-boishka*, I asked an elderly woman if she had some soap to spare. She apologized nicely and said, "I have none, but I will teach you how to make it. If you can get some caustic soda power, place it in a kettle with the unusable parts of animals . . . like heads, legs, and so forth. Add some water and simmer it under a low flame until it is thick. You will get good results."

As a partisan, I did business with an elderly German who was the headmaster of the railroad station in Tevli (on Map 1). The peasants from the nearby village of Kozishtse had to repair the tracks whenever we partisans damaged them. One of the farmers from this town became very friendly with this German. I knew who he was, because I would often take a few partisans with me to spend time with the farmers, who would provide me with information concerning the movements of the German army. [Generally speaking, all of the areas along the tracks north of Orantshts Linovo, Tevli, and Zabinkah were under German control during the daytime. However, from late afternoon until early morning, these areas were under the control of the partisans. The Germans didn't dare to disturb our movements during the nighttime.] I approached this particular peasant and asked him to find out if the

German could get me caustic soda. A few days later, he told me that I could get it in exchange for *shpeck* . . . pork.

The next evening, I brought my farmer friend a slice of pork. Less than two days later, I received a bag with the needed ingredient for making a batch of soap. I collected half a kettle of unused meat, dumped everything else inside the kettle, added some water, and put two women in charge of keeping a low flame under the kettle until the meat had completely melted. The next morning, I opened the kettle to find a thick layer of soap. *Soap!* The whole partisan gang was as ecstatic as I was, as they peered at the golden product. We cut it into small slices and let it dry. Thus, our soap problem was solved. The issue was not only resolved in my otriad, but also in others, as we shared the soap and the recipe for making more with other brigades. The upshot of this simple achievement was tremendous. The uninvited “visitors” on our bodies had to evacuate the premises...

### Medical and Food Supplies

The problem of obtaining the pharmaceutical items that Regina needed to heal the sick and wounded partisans was solved the same way I got the caustic soda. I would give my friend, the farmer, a chunk of pork and a list of the drugs she needed, and he would deliver it to the German at the Tivoli railroad station. In a day or two, the German would travel to Brisk (a one-hour ride), and I would get the supplies from the farmer. In fact, the German was eager to do this business with me. He used to ask the farmer who walked at the station, “When will the Judeh (Jew) partisan need more stuff?” As they used to say, pork talks.

There were often rumors that the Germans were preparing to raid our camps. We were ready to defend ourselves and to teach them a lesson. In order to protect the sick, the elderly, and the children, the commander of the brigade chose an island in an isolated area in the middle of a lake. Regina and her patients were placed there, until the danger was over. She and the others were taken there on a small boat, but we had to deliver their food by walking in the deep water that reached to my shoulders. In one hand, I held my rifle over my head, and in the other hand, I carried a bundle of supplies. I remember it was a very hard task that took more than a week. It was tough to endure.

There was always a problem of food. We partisans had to get it from the farmers, without paying for whatever we got from them. We

didn't steal from them, and we didn't beg for bread or potatoes. They knew we were fighters against the Nazi murderers and killers whose main goal was to enslave the people of Eastern Europe, after taking away their land, and to annihilate the Jewish population completely. Partisans called the act of raiding a village *bombioshka*, taken from the word bomb. It did not mean, however, that we would attack a village in order to get food. On the contrary, we approached a village in strict silence, secretly. We were forbidden to take items that weren't needed for the use of the partisans' daily lives and goals. For example, we only took jewelry, beads, pictures, and so forth, if they were Jewish items that had been confiscated by the Germans.

In the beginning of the partisan movement, the villagers would often resist. They would even rush to the nearest German unit and report the presence of partisans. When we arrived in 1943, the villagers were all educated to our methods and didn't seek German protection. Only people who lived close to the towns or near German army camps dared to ask the Germans for protection.

The main and most important food for the villagers was (and still is) pork. They raised pigs and slaughtered them, when the layer of fat was one inch or more. After the fat was heavily salted for a certain amount of time, it was used in raw slices for frying. They also fried the fat for other purposes. The partisans confiscated pigs as often as they could. So farmers would sometimes hide their pigs.

The farmers were ordered to deliver a monthly contingent of meat, produce, poultry, eggs, and other food items to the German locations in Pruzany, Kobrin, and the other places they had offices. To fulfill this order, a convoy of loaded wagons of food, as well as cows and sheep, had to sometimes use the roads near the forests. Our friend, "the eyes and ears," would tip us as to when and where such a convoy would be traveling. They were always escorted by the Bialorus police. We would place a *zasada* and open fire when the convoy was a hundred yards from our positions. The escorts would disappear momentarily. We wouldn't waste time directing the convoy into the woods. After unloading the food, the peasants and their horses returned to their villages. To add insult to injury, I used to write a receipt in the name of the warriors against Fascism, Nazism, and Hitlerism. I would sign them: MOYSEI, THE JEW.

It was no wonder that the *bomboishkas* and our other activities angered the Germans so much. They found out from the farmers that I was the son-in-law of the owner of a grain mill in Pruzany.

Once, I went to a village with my group, and we stopped to see a friend of ours. The farmer told me that a gathering of villagers had taken place recently. The German speaker had angrily shouted, "You must catch that Jew from Pruzany—the miller's son-in-law! For delivering him to me alive, you will receive a reward of 50 kilograms of sugar, and you will receive 20,000 marks for his head." I found out, later, they used the same tactic not only in their fight against the partisans, but also in Warsaw, the capital of Poland. The squealers were nicknamed *Shmaltsov-nicks*, from the Jewish word *shmaltz*, which means FATS.

The farmers obviously didn't deliver me to the Germans. They didn't even try. They knew they would be burned alive, if they angered the partisans by handing me over. We had a drink with the farmer, and I thanked him for this information. It meant that I—a Jew from the ghetto—had managed to cause some kind of trouble for the murderers of my people.

We learned that a convention of otriad brigades and commanders in the area would be held at the end of August of 1943 and our camp had been chosen as the site of the gathering. As a host, I discussed all the details of the forthcoming dinner with my commander, Sienika. He agreed with me that it would be proper to serve *pelimenikas* (chopped meat wrapped in dough, like Jewish *kreplach*). Early in the morning, I advised the cooks to choose the best meat we had in storage and to cook the dish for about forty guests. The conference started at nine o'clock in the morning. Lunch was scheduled for twelve o'clock noon. I was seated next to Sienika, as a deputy commander. I was also invited to participate in the discussions concerning our tactics for sabotage actions against the Germans.

At about 11:30, I saw Regina approach the area where the meeting was being held. She gave me a frantic sign, and I rushed to meet her. In a frightened voice, she said, "The *pelimenikas* are bitter . . . worse than pepper." I sped to the kitchen area, grabbed the pail with the cooked food, carried it deep into the bushes and poured it out. Not one of the guests saw what I did. There was enough other food on the tables by now—bread, cheese, boiled potatoes fried with fat, a big bowl of sliced pork meat, called *salo* in Russian and *slonina* in Polish, and a few bottles of *samagon*—and the *pelimenikas* weren't missed. The guests enjoyed the meal. My superiors were happy. They even pointed out that I was responsible for planning and preparing the delicious lunch, with the help of the cooks.

When our guests had left, I told the whole group of Malenkov partisans why the *pelimenikas* were bitter and couldn't be served. The cooks had made a mistake. They had prepared the ingredients in the wrong pail. They had used one in which chunks of explosive materials were crushed. While crushing the materials, some powder had penetrated deep in the crevices where the tin is put together and the seams met. When the operation of crumbling the chunks was over, the pail was washed and put away, not to be used for cooking. The residue could never be washed off completely.

Had Regina not tasted the *pelimenikas*, they would have been served to the echelon of partisans, and I would have been shot on the spot. I would have been accused of trying to poison the partisan leadership of the Brest Litovsk Province. Regina would have been put to death next, and then the cooks, and on and on. I'm sure my immediate supervisors would have stood up for me and prevented my death, but Regina was instrumental, as a dietician, in avoiding a devastating tragedy. Once again, she had her miracle.

#### More Acts of Sabotage

The partisan sabotage act of wrecking hundreds of kilometers of railroad tracks in one night is mentioned in many books about the resistance in World War II. The distance from our camps to the railroad tracks was about five miles. We considered it close by. Small units from otriads far away from the railroads would stop at our camp for rest and guidance on their way to place a bomb or to do some other act of sabotage. Because of my line of duty as second in command, I would join these groups of six or seven people and participate in the sabotage acts. I remember meeting two particular Jews in one of these groups. The name of one man was Malahovski, and I don't remember the other one's name. They were among a group of seven partisans. Their mission was simply to damage a train. I escorted them. Malahovski told me that in the East (west of Minsk), there were partisan Jews who had performed many acts of sabotage, and that they spoke Yiddish among themselves. This information surprised me, and I was very happy to hear it. They were glad to see that I was a high ranking officer in a partisan otriad. We parted after our mission was completed and we wished each other good luck.

Long ago, when Regina and I had sat atop the grain in Ivan Pauk's barn, he had told me, during one of our conversations, that he had an

aunt who lived in the village Linovo, near the railroad station Oranchitse. The partisans sometimes performed *bomboishkas* there. He requested that if I ever became a partisan and had a chance to be in Linovo, I should try to locate his aunt's house and introduce myself. He would be happy to hear about us. It was a pleasant aspiration, albeit an unlikely one, but, nevertheless, I promised him that I would fulfill his wish. This conversation took place in the middle of March of 1943, and now, in September of 1943, it was time for me to locate Ivan's aunt.

One afternoon, we gathered a group of ten partisans to go to Linovo to perform a *bombioshka*. I told the guys to be very polite and temperate to the people in Linovo. They should ask for products that were necessary for our existence, in order to fight against the oppressors and the murderers of innocent people. I don't remember the last name of Ivan's aunt, but I knew it then, and I told the guys that my intention was to locate her house. One fellow in our group was from Linovo and knew where she lived. The distance to the village was about ten kilometers. We crossed the most dangerous place—the railroad tracks—and entered the village very cautiously, securing ourselves by placing scouts at the ends of the village. The boys began their work of gathering items of needed food, and I entered the house where Pauk's aunt lived with her family. The woman was scared to death, when she saw three armed partisans. This reaction was typical of people who faced partisans entering the villages for food. Although the farmers were always afraid of the Germans, they were sometimes afraid of the partisans, too. In many cases, although not in our group, partisans didn't behave politely. They could be brutal, not only demanding food or clothes, but also misbehaving sexually and abusively.

Well, the woman rushed to the pantry and brought out a large loaf of baked bread and a bottle of home-brewed vodka. She spoke pleadingly, "My darlings, please take the bread and the vodka and have good luck on your way back to your *zemlyanka*."

I opened my mouth and immediately broke the tension. In a firm voice, I said, "*Da nie boys Ivan Pauk's Ciotka*. Don't be afraid, Ivan Pauk's aunt." The woman almost fainted. Tremendously surprised to find out that in front of her stood the very Moysei about whom she had heard multiple stories from Ivan and his wife Helena. I returned the bread, but she insisted that I keep the whisky. She assured me that the next morning, she would rush out and report to Ivan and Helena about the guests who had visited her family.

Regina and I were with the partisans over a year and a half. To remember all the details that happened to us, with us, about us, from the time we entered the bunker at the end of January of 1943 until the liberation on the eighteenth of July, 1944 is now almost impossible. I do want to discuss the Vlassovs, though. Vlassov is the name of a very prominent Russian general. When World War II broke out, he was the chief commander of a Russian army in the Ukraine. When German forces reached the Ukraine, Vlassov betrayed his Soviet motherland and became a traitor. Instead of fighting, he chose to surrender the Russian elite army and to serve Hitler's goals—to help the Nazis destroy his motherland and enslave his countrymen. General Vlassov's army counted more than a million people.

It is not my job to describe the way Vlassov's soldiers were utilized. Many became brutal guards of the concentration camps. Many were murderers who killed the Jews during evacuations, and many of them were disguised as partisans and placed in the forests to find out the real partisans' locations, their camps and bases, and to be guides when the Gestapo arranged for the German army to raid the partisan camps. The Vlassovs were extremely dangerous and cruel, without compassion, and bloodthirsty, not only to Jews, but also to their own, and mainly when partisans fell into their hands. They were even worse than the Polish *Armia Krayova*.

Once, while we were on our way to fetch food in a village about eight miles from our base, we were tipped off by a farmer that we would find about four or five strange-looking armed Russians in a certain house. He was told about them by another villager. Since we were a group of ten partisans, we decided to challenge them. We surrounded the house, kicked open the door, and saw them sitting around a table, enjoying a sumptuous supper. We shouted. "*Rooki verhit!* Hands up!" When they raised their hands, we disarmed them and began an interrogation regarding who they were. We knew right away that they were not Russian partisans; their ammunition was German, their guns, boots, and shirts not native. They smoked German-made cigarettes. In the beginning, they tried to convince us that they were, like us, fighting the Nazis. When I asked them what their particular mission was and the brigade to which they were members, they mumbled. It didn't take much persuasion to get them to confess that they were disguised Vlassovs.

I ordered two members of my squad to get horses and to rush to notify my superiors about the situation. Within three hours, my com-

mander and five more partisans arrived at the house. It took some time to question the Vlassov men, to find out more information about the Vlassovs in general and them in particular. They probably wanted to please Sienika, my commander, and bragged that they had personally participated in the cleansing of some ghettos and in killing Jews. Well, they got an excellent reward for their murderous acts against innocent Jewish people. They were lowered to the bottom of a deep lake to enjoy fishing! They remained there eating fish forever, their hands tied. When this procedure was over, we continued to fulfill our mission and returned to our base with a generous supply of confiscated food and two pigs.

Miracles, miracles.

My job was not only to supply food for the detachment, but also to participate in raids. Once, we had to deliver two badly wounded partisans to a secret place where a Russian commercial airplane would land to deliver ammunition and then carry very sick partisans to a hospital back in Russia. The provisional airfield was in the vicinity of a small town named Motelle, where the first president of the state of Israel was born—the famous scientist Chaim Weizmann. The distance from us was about sixty or sixty-five miles. Ten of us went to a nearby village and harnessed three horses to three buggies. The next day, we were ready to leave with the sick men.

On the third day of our traveling over country roads, we found ourselves in an area where some partisans had run into a *zasada*—a trap. We heard shouts coming from a village in the direction in which we were heading. We secured the three wagons with the sick men in nearby bushes. Six of us headed on foot to help the partisans in their fight with the enemy, even though they were unknown to us. This was an unwritten rule. We were always brothers-in-arms.

We were informed by escaping villagers that about fifteen partisans were fighting with a German unit of about twenty men. I marched next to a platoon leader, a Bialorussian friend from a village near my home town of Pruzany. When we were accepted as partisans, he had given Regina and me a helping hand on many occasions. Suddenly, a bullet hit my friend and pierced his neck. He fell at my feet and another partisan and I tried and tried again to revive him. Alas, our attempts were in vain. My heroic partisan friend was dead. We didn't hear any more shouts. It seemed that the fight was over. We carried our hero to the nearby for-

est, dug a grave and buried him there. Why him and not me? I wondered. We had walked next to each other, almost holding hands.

Regina had an answer. I had been granted one more miracle.

When our boys went on a dangerous mission, she would occasionally join them, in case they needed medical help. Sienika, the commander, had given her a small pistol and asked me to teach her how to use it. I remember how happy she was to receive the gun. She said to me, regarding its use, "If to die is for a cause." She used a Hebrew phrase, which I translate: "If somebody is coming to kill you, kill him first."

Fortunately, she never had to use the pistol, and when she went with the boys on an assignment, she always had an escort who carried her needed equipment. Regina was in contact with the doctors whose base was at the headquarters in the forests near Motelle in Bialorussia. The name of one was Dr. Bleemovits. I was told that he became the chief doctor of the Israeli army in 1948.

Our scouts informed the brigade commander that once or twice during the week a convoy of five and sometimes eight trucks traveled from Brisk to Pruzany. He decided to take action. A group of about forty well-armed partisans (eight to ten from each detachment) took up positions on both sides of the road that led from Zaprod to Pruzany. I did not participate in this action. It was a heavily wooded area, favorable conditions for a nice trap. The partisans heard the noise of the approaching echelon. They let the first vehicle pass and then opened fire. The second truck was hit hard and stopped; so did the others. The battle lasted only a few minutes. The results were that eleven Germans were killed and a few escaped deep into the woods. Much armament fell into the hands of our boys. Four partisans were wounded, and they were sent the next day to headquarters for treatment.

Among other important documents confiscated in the raid, the partisans brought back a bag containing letters from home to the Germans on the front lines. The Yiddish language has many German words in its vocabulary, so they gave me the letters to read. I could not make out most of them, because they were handwritten and very hard to read; however, there were some typed letters. A *fraulein* (girl) wrote to her boyfriend that she wanted him to send her some clothes from the Jewish women in Poland. She emphasized it would not matter if the clothes were stained with blood. She would wash and clean them and make them fit to wear. One woman wrote to her husband that she needed

clothes for her child, and toys, and added the same phrase: *even if they are stained.*

Many of the Jews in the Pruzany area knew what was going on in the resistance movement that began in Pruzany in the summer of 1941. Some of the Jewish youth had secretly started to form groups and to arm themselves. One group of about twenty young men and women left in November of 1942 to find a partisan brigade in the forests north of Pruzany in the Region of Roozsany. During the evacuation from Pruzany, on 29 January 1943, a couple more groups managed to escape into the forests and join the previous groups. Among those who joined from this latter group were two of Regina's cousins, Louis Elman and Joe Elman. Both survived the war years.

Regina and I were in the forests of the Kobrin area south of Pruzany. Ivan Pawook once told me that the Germans had followed various traces left by the youth and killed them. One Bialorussian from the village found himself among the partisans in the Chapayev brigade. He was a coward. In order to avoid fighting, he chose to switch from one partisan establishment to another. In the fall of 1943, he reached the partisans in the forests of Roozsany and met some of the Pruzany Jewish boys. He told them about Regina and me and about our position in the Malenkov detachment, Chapayev brigade. When he returned, he relayed news to me about them.

When we met after the war was over, in the refugee camp New Freiman, in Germany, Max, one of the three brothers who had survived, told me the way that the Bialorus had portrayed me: *yediet na koniu e spevayet* "He rides on a horse and keeps on singing." Indeed, he didn't tell a lie. When returning from a successful mission, I always sang.

On a clear morning in the spring 1944, a group of about thirty partisans headed in the direction of the Oranchitse station intending to burn the police station and capture policemen. As we were about one mile from our destination, we saw a large flock of sheep far away on a meadow. It was in line with my position as chief of food supply to take a look at the sheep. I picked a guy to accompany me, and we headed towards the shepherd and his flock. When the teenager who was minding the sheep saw us, he made an effort to escape, but we stopped him. He was the son of the local police commandant. He was afraid we would kill him. He cried bitterly and begged, "Please, please, I didn't do any harm to anybody," and so on..

I saw before my eyes the thousands of innocent Jewish youngsters who had and were continuing to lose their lives by the hands of the Gestapo and their collaborators. This boy's father may have been one of those who killed the children from Linovo, but I did not have the slightest desire to kill the boy. I ordered him to direct the sheep towards the forest and had him join us with the sheep for about a quarter of a mile into the woods. I told him to tell his father that a Jew from Pruzany had him in his hands and had let him go.

The police disappeared and the partisans burned their station to the ground. Everybody returned to the base happy, and especially when they saw my helper and me herding a flock of sheep. Indeed, it had taken us about four hours to make the trip to our base. We counted ninety in all, and it was called the partisans' sheep month. The pleasant taste of those roasted mutton still returns to my mouth. Partisans from far away came to lick a bone. Of course it gave Regina and me much satisfaction, that, as a Jew from the ghetto, I managed to produce such blessed things as soap for everybody and an abundant supply of meat for the hungry fighters.

A platoon leader in the strongest detachment once asked a partisan on a mission to bring him some beads, lipstick, and other items for his girlfriend. The not too smart partisan, who wanted to please his superior, fulfilled the request and took from a girl items that were forbidden to touch and gave them to his platoon leader. But the platoon leader got smart and changed his mind . . . he decided not to accept the gifts. To add insult to injury, the father of the girl was an anonymous collaborator of the partisans who secretly provided much needed information. The next morning, he met his partisan contact and reported the stolen items. The partisan was arrested and put on trial. He was an uneducated local fellow, who could not comprehend why he was being accused and tried for fulfilling an order by his superior. But the platoon leader denied that he had ever spoken to the lad about a present for his girlfriend. The whole membership of the brigade was present at the trial. The verdict was that the young partisan was to be shot to death, and he was executed on the spot, in front of weeping men and women. The partisan's pleading and even some intervention from the commanders didn't stay the execution.

I describe this event, because if one of my group members had committed such a crime, I would have been accused also, as the head of supply. But I was smart. I always warned the guys before each action,

“Do not touch anything on our forbidden list. Play safe.” Thankfully, nobody ever complained against my men.

## Hungarian Jews

The railroad that led through Poland to the front lines was guarded by German soldiers. In 1943, however, the Germans were replaced by Hungarian soldiers. The Hungarian government decided to collaborate with the Hitlerites and started to send Jews to the concentration camps and the young to labor camps.

Look at Map Two. You will see a few important locations where we partisans made our visits almost every afternoon and evening. Usually, the police and small units of Germans were reluctant to interfere. Among the villagers in Priluchina, Vorotna, we had friends on whom we could rely (remember the deals with the German stationmaster) for information and supplies. Mounted on horses, we once stopped in Priluchina (see a circled village very close to the tracks on the map). It was the end of December in 1943 and early evening. We never went there during the daytime. It was very dangerous. There were five of us, including the commander. As usual, we began to mingle with the population.

One villager strolled over to the side, pointed out a sign, and I followed him. This farmer told me a story, which we had heard before, about Hungarian Jewish young men who visited the villages, bagging food, bread, and supplies. He added that on Sundays, early in the morning, some Jewish young men dressed in Hungarian army attire walked into the villages near the railroad tracks and traded items food. They had bartered needles, small mirrors, combs, and other items for bread, cheese, eggs, and butter. They refused pork, however, because it wasn't kosher. They had gotten their items in the PX. They stayed in bunkers next to the Hungarian soldiers who were assigned to watch the tracks. I asked the farmer to mention to them about my presence in the fort with the Russian partisans, and that I urged them to be extremely cautious during their Sunday walks in the village. The farmer had learned to speak a little bit in the German language. When he informed the young Jews that Jews like me lived among the partisans, they were taken aback. Indeed, they had been sent to the Hungarian units to work

like slaves, performing endless chores. They wore similar army clothes, but they were not armed.

And so this particular peasant became a go-between between the young Hungarian Jews, who were labor camp slave, and me. In one message, I advised them to arm themselves, if there were ever a proper occasion, and to escape into the wooded area near the village of Vorotna (see Map 2). In the meantime, we had to evacuate the forests in the Kobrin region, and the contact I had with the young Jewish men was interrupted. Most warriors from the Chapayev brigade returned to our previous locations at the end of April 1944.

When we met with the peasants again, our Bialorussian collaborators, I told them about the Hungarian Jews and appealed to them to let me know if and when they ever learned that the Jews had been able to run away from the Hungarian bunker tracks, as I would be able to help them. I was so informed at the end of 1944. Mounted on horses, we were covering the Vorotna area, when a peasant told me that some Jews had come into the village during the night and were hiding in a barn at the edge of the farm. We rushed there and, when we opened the barn door, we counted twenty-eight Jews.

There has never been born, to this day, the poet or writer who is able to depict the pain of a million and a half innocent Jewish children who were thrown by the murdering Hitlerites into the gas chambers. If no poets or professional writers have been able to fully capture this horror of this genocide, then it is understandable that I do not have the words myself. I can say the same thing about describing this particular event. It is impossible to describe the absolute joy of those Jews as they heard me speak to them in Yiddish. They were religious Jews, and they thought that the prophet Elijah himself, or at least one of his messengers, was standing in front of them, to come to their rescue. They were unarmed. They had run away, because the Hungarian soldiers had told them that before they could be captured by the Russian army, they would kill them. They were hungry, thirsty, and filled with a hopeless despair. In that moment, I saw myself wandering through the forests with Regina, searching for partisans.

I told them that I would try hard to help them, but I had to report the situation to my superiors. They watched wide-eyed, as I thanked the Bialorussian fellow for letting them seek safety in his barn. I asked the others with me to bring them some bread and water to break their hunger.

We returned to our base. I reported the situation to my commander, and we both decided to see the commander of the brigade. He was a former colonel in the Red Army who had escaped from German captivity, before arriving in the Kobrin area forests. I had met him on different occasions and found him to be a friendly person and not an anti-Semite. We relayed the story to him. I explained how they had gotten into the bunkers with the Hungarian soldiers in the first place. I emphasized that they were performing slave labor. Their family members had been killed in Auschwitz. I asked the leader for permission to bring them into the forest. I indicated that among them were barbers, shoemakers, tailors, and others who would be very useful in the base. Sienika, my superior, added a few good words, and permission was given to take them in.

A group of partisans joined me and we returned to Vorotna, where we harnessed seven horses and wagons. That evening, we arrived in the camp with our new recruits. As I said, they wore Hungarian army uniforms. On seeing this convoy, some partisans grabbed their rifles, ready to shoot them. Of course my superior and I explained the entire event and they were left alone. The cooks put some food on the table, and after they had eaten, I pointed to the place where they would have to sleep . . . under the sky.

The next morning, we showed them how to build a *zemlyanka* using branches, straw, and blankets. They had with them some religious items, tefillin, phylacteries—small boxes which are strapped to the left arm and the forehead during praying—and also tallit—a striped tasseled shawl worn during certain prayers—and prayer books. I advised them to put these items away for the time being, because they would not appeal to the Russians, who were brought up by the Communists against religion of any kind. According to the teachings of Lenin, religion is the poison of a population.

The next day, I assigned different jobs to these young men: the cobblers were to repair our shoes and boots, the tailors to mend our clothes, the butchers to help in the kitchen, and the others to fetch dry branches for our fires to tend to the cows and horses. I told them not to hang out in groups, in order to avoid suspiciousness and cause the partisans' wrath. They were fed like the rest of us and were very happy to find a heaven in the forests of Bialorussia, rather than above them in the sky. They were diligent in performing their various assignments. We spent some time talking about the tragedies happening to our people.

They told me that they were very eager to participate in some sabotage activities.

One evening in the middle of June, 1944, when I returned from an assignment, I strolled over to the Hungarian tents. I noticed that a few were missing. The partisans told me that, in the afternoon, the platoon leader, Grisha, had lined them up, and from his talking and gestures, they had understood that he was asking who among them wanted to go on a sabotage job. All of them had raised their hands, and he had picked three fellows. They had left with him and another five partisans. I had a premonition that something tragic was about to happen. The following day at noontime, Grisha and the other five partisans returned without the three Jews. When I asked him about the three, he babbled that they had run into a *zasada* (a trap) and during the fight with the Germans, they had been killed. No one believed him. My superior gave orders to arrest all six of the men who had participated in the mission. He ordered three of them to take off their shoes. They were the shoes the victims had worn. The six were questioned by the brigade commander, by the Politrook (political leader), and also by the captain. They admitted that after returning from their mission of burning a bridge, three of them had become jealous of the Jews who were wearing almost new army shoes, so they had shot them to death. The verdict was a death sentence for the three murderers. The other three, including Grisha, were sentenced to twenty years in prison, after the war ended. The execution of the three was performed in the beginning of July 1944, about two weeks before we were liberated by the Russian Army force. The remaining twenty-five Hungarian Jews were taken by the Red Army as war prisoners.

In 1946, before we left Kobrin, I met a Czechoslovakian fellow who had also been taken as a war prisoner. He told me that he, many more war prisoners, and the Hungarian Jews had been transported deep into Russia. They were “re-educated” in Communist ideology and sent back to their native countries to preach the teachings of Lenin and Stalin. I read about this many years later, in various publications relating the stories told by Hungarian Jews who had been war prisoners in Russia.

Throughout the years, I have thought often of the twenty-eight young Jews I met in the barn. What would have happened to them had I not led them to our base in the forest? I doubt if they would have been able to last long. They were unarmed, they wore Hungarian clothes, they didn't know where to turn, and if they had been spotted by parti-

sans, their end would probably have been the same as that of the three who were murdered for their shoes.

Many years ago, I wrote a letter to the Yad Vashem Museum (the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem). *Yad* means hand and *vashem* means name; the phrase means, "Give us a hand and a name." In the letter, I described the story of the twenty-eight Hungarian Jews I appeared to have saved from sure death in May of 1944.

## Songs and Entertainment

In rain and in shine, winter and summer, when hungry and when satisfied, we partisans lifted our voices in song. Singing softened the pain in our hearts, boosted our moods, and created a more positive attitude. Singing helped us overcome the difficulties in our lives. I was blessed with a nice voice. I sang with the Ukrainian partisans . . . Ukrainian songs, Bialorus songs, Russian patriotic songs, prewar songs, and so forth. Regina also sang, sublimating her grief in the lyrics. The villagers told us about the reactions of the Germans, who were guarding the tracks. They would say, “Partisans, good. Germans *shlimm*.” The partisans had it good, in their eyes, and the Germans had it bad.

We had a partisan comedian in our group, too. He would tell humorous stories of daily life in Russia, and keep us laughing to the point of tears. Well, it wouldn’t be humor without serving some Jewish mimicry, along with jokes about other nationalities.

Our mission was not to sit in the forest and sing. I describe this experience, because it was a part of our life in the woods. Of all the songs we sang, I liked one special heartwarming partisan song. Throughout the fifty-four years since the liberation, I have sung it to myself whenever I am depressed and even when I am joyful. I sing it when I am entertaining my friends, and I sing it when I simply have an urge to sing. Regina liked the song, too. We used to sing it together sometimes. The melody is very beautiful and sometimes caused us to shed a tear. It is a story about a young man who is called to defend his motherland during the Second World War. The song talks about the heroic soldier fighting the enemy, longing for home and, ultimately, his happy return from battle when he is reunited with his wife and family.

The lyrics reminded me of having to leave Regina, our child, and our family on August 31, 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, and finding myself in a storm of fire and war. I am going to immortalize this song for my future generations in Latin letters, and then I will translate the stanzas in English.

## Soldat Geroiy—Heroic Soldier

1

*Slooshali otriadee pesniu frontovooyoo  
Bzdveenooteeye brovi, szsateeye serts  
Rodina poslala v booroo ognievooyoo  
K boyoo snaradila vernovo boytsa*

2

*Na proshchanie seena mat potselovala  
Na proshchanie moozsa obniala zsen  
Dolgo nie shodeela eez mostika vagzala'bzgliodom pro-  
vazsala loobeemovo dvooga*

3

*Vot onice v doroge zalieglee v trevoge  
Oo boytsa na serdtse spriatane pismo  
lootshe lootshe smert na poli che pozor v nievolee  
lootshe zlaya poolia chem. Vraga kleimoh*

4

*No poka chto poolia memo proleticla  
No poka chto smertee preestoop otdalion  
Ee opyat v atakoo Kapeetan Batalov  
Na geroyski podvig podniat Batalion*

5

*Bomba razarviotsia sertse sodragniotsia  
No trastees ot bombee smicleem nie k leetsoo  
Bomba razarviotsia sertse sodragniotsia  
Peredai vintovkoo otvazsnomoo boitsoo*

6

*Shol boets v atakoo oonosia otvagoo  
Na granatnoy roochke nie bzdrotniot rooka  
Prehodeelos toogo geetlerovskim slogam  
Ot evo stalnoho ostroho kleenka*

7

*Ex Moskvee velikoy veediet podvig vodeena  
Kazsdovo geroya kazdovo boytsa  
Poloocheeli bandee gitlerovskih polcheeshts  
Poloocheelee normoo stale ee svints*

8

*Pochtelion prechodit pisemtso preenosit  
Ee znakomee poachers poznayot semya  
Poskazsetie lioodiam esli eto sprosiat  
Chto nie zra poslala Rodina menia*

9

*Oh! Kakaya vstrecha boodiet oo vagzala  
 V dien kogda s pobiedoy skonicheetsia vojna  
 Ee peesmo rodnoye mat potselvovala  
 Ee na samom sertsee spriatala zsená*

Translation—The Heroic Soldier

1

The otriads listened to a war song  
 Strenuous brows, pressured hearts  
 The Motherland sent him into a fiery storm  
 To fight was assigned the faithful warrior

2

At farewell kissed him his mother  
 At taking leave hugged him his wife  
 For a long time, she did not get out of the station bridge  
 With a glimpse she escorted her faithful loving husband

3

On the road they had to rush for cover  
 Close to the soldier's heart is hidden a letter  
 Better death on the battlefield, than disgrace of a war  
 prisoner  
 Better a bad bullet than the enemies enslavement

4

But for the time being the bullet omitted him  
 For the being time was no access for the death  
 And again for an assault, the Captain Batalov  
 To an heroic attack led the Battalion

5

A bomb had exploded, the heart quivered  
 But trembling from a bomb is not becoming to the daring  
 face  
 A bomb exploded, the heart shivered  
 Hand over rifle to the next bolded guy

6

The soldier walked to the attack fully charged with bold-  
 ness  
 Holding the grenade his hand does not tremble  
 Indeed, they had it very tough to the gangs of Hitlerism

From his sharp from steel made sward

7

From the big Moskau, the effort is observed by the Motherland

Of each hero, of each warrior

They, the gang of Hitlerites, the murderers

Received a portion of steel and copper

8

The mailman arrived and brings a letter

And the known handwriting the family recognized

Tell the people, if they will ask

That not in vain, I was sent to do the job

9

Oh! What a joyful encounter will be at the station

The day with full success the war will end

And the letter was kissed by the mother passionately

And close to her heart it was concealed by his wife.

I find many similarities between the song and my situation in September of 1939. At the train station in Bludnia, I had been elated to notice a woman from Pruzany named Mania Berestovitski. I waved to her and she recognized me among the war prisoners in the box car. I hoped to return home and be met by my loving wife, child, and family. However, in July of 1944, when we were liberated by the Red Army, there was nobody to meet us at the train station; there was nobody to be kissed and hugged. Instead, we mourned their tragic deaths in Auschwitz.

Years ago, I recorded some Yiddish and Hebrew songs on a cassette tape. Among the songs I sang is this particular Russian song. In my opinion, the melody is sentimental and sweet, and the lyrics are superb.

## Communist Party Rejection

I remember when, on August of 1943, all of the partisans of the Chayev brigade went on a mission to damage the railroad tracks in the vicinity of Malets. We had explosives that had been dropped by a Russian plane in the airfield near Pinsk. That very evening, the tracks from Brisk to Baranovich were damaged by hundreds of partisans who participated in this daring action. It took the Germans three to four days to replace the tracks. The time lost was huge, in war time. I participated with my group in this mission. We took advantage of the fact that we were near villages that had not been raided, and we made a very successful *bombi-oshka*. The local police disappeared from the surrounding area out of fear they couldn't control the multitude of partisans. We brought a few pigs, army clothes, and, of course, much *samogon*—homemade whisky—with us.

As I mentioned previously, some element of order was in place among the partisans, thanks to the arrival of the retired Russian captain to our brigade. I was on good terms with him, because most of the time, he would come to dine with us. He liked the ribs of young pigs. Sometime in September 1943, he ordered a meeting of the entire membership of the brigade, and he spoke about the importance of becoming members of the Communist Party. I thought to myself, “*Oy vey*, another misery. Don't I already have enough?”

He continued, explaining that in order to apply, we had to have a Communist member recommend us and this member had to know us well and be able to guarantee that we were of good behavior, trustworthy and loyal. When our application would be approved, we would first become a candidate for three years. Then, if approved, we would become members of the Party. He also said that, because of the present conditions in the forests, he was authorized to make concessions. He assured us that when the war will be over, the members of the Party would be considered the elite. They would get the best jobs and have many other privileges. He urged us to take advantage of this opportunity the easy

way. I thought to myself the Hebrew saying, “*Keep your favor. I don’t want your honey and I don’t want your sting.*”

Most of the partisans were reluctant to go forward with the idea, and they didn’t get in line to be first. So, the captain talked to some of them individually. When he approached me, I used the tactic that people had known me only a short time . . . only six months. In addition, I was from the western part of Bialorussia, so I had never met a Communist who would be able to pledge for me. He tried to persuade me that my record as a loyal partisan spoke for itself, and, indeed, he began to use this ploy to pressure me.

Being that the first meeting did not yield favorable results, he called another general meeting of all of the partisans in October of 1943. This time, he used harsher language. He said, “Under the Russian system, we don’t give orders. We propose; we suggest. This is more than an order, because if one does not cooperate, we conclude that he is against us. *Kto nie smami, tot protiv nas.* He who is not with us is against us.” This expression was a very popular one in Communist Russia.

One could interpret the captain’s mood—an inner rage almost—as a threat. Regina whispered to me in Yiddish, “You play with fire.”

The captain started a roll call and handed out applications for us to fill out. The thought came to me that we might die in action tomorrow, so why worry about the day after tomorrow. But, if I refused to apply, I would be pinpointed as a disloyal partisan today. The consequences would be very unfavorable. I took the application and signed it. I agreed to proceed, as I was told to do.

Regina said, “Remember, Mayshe, I believe in miracles.”

The war continued, and I temporarily forgot about the episode. Then, one day in January 1945, I was minding my business as the principal of a Bialorus high school in Kobrin (thirty miles from Pruzany). I was invited to the local office of the Communist Party. I was informed there that my application had been approved; I was now a candidate in the Party. They congratulated me for such an important achievement, and they even offered me a drink and a salute . . . *L’chaim*, to life.

I had to show face, but in reality, I became very upset. I had been hoping for another miracle: to be able to emigrate to join my two sisters in Argentina. These hopes were now gone with the wind. Before leaving the office, I was told that I would be called upon to appear before the higher authorities for final approval and installation.

Three months passed and I was called to appear in Brisk at the headquarters of the Party. When I arrived there, I met most of the partisans with whom I had spent over a year and a half. We were happy to greet each other and chat. One by one, we were called before the deciding committee, and one by one, came out announcing, "*Preeniat*, accepted." My turn came. I strode into the office and saw a high group of brass and gold—about twelve of the highest ranking army officers and civilians. They asked me about my family status and mainly about my social stance. They also asked about my occupation before the war. I said that my father was a farmer, that I myself was a Hebrew teacher, and I had married the daughter of a miller. A miller was considered a capitalist, according to the Communist way of classifying merchants.

The chairman asked me to enter another room for a few minutes. When I was called back, the same man had a short speech. "We saw your record as a loyal partisan," he said, "and your wife Regina's, too. You both served the Motherland remarkably, and, in the future, you will be rewarded for this by our great country. However, regarding membership in the Party . . . we have decided for the time being to put your application to the side."

In reality, their decision was discrimination against me because I was a Jew, but in this case, it was also my good luck. When I came out, everyone asked me what had happened. They asked why the procedure had taken such a long time. I put on a face of misery and said, "Alas, not accepted." The boys felt sorry for me and tried to console me, saying that when the war ended, they would review my application again. None of the fellows could read in my eyes how happy I was to see my application put aside. It was the first step toward being rejected, and another step toward the U.S.A.

On my way to the forest, I met a Jewish woman from Odessa at the station. She worked as an inspector on the Board of Education, and she had visited the school in Kobrin, where I had been the principal. She recognized me and wanted to know what kind of problem had caused my traveling to Brisk. When I told her about my rejection from Party membership, she exclaimed—as if she had read my mind—"You are a lucky person. You'll go to America." She continued, "I wish I had such a miracle that I was expelled from the Party, but I am stuck with it."

When I told Regina the good word—rejected—she didn't say anything. She simply started to count the miracles that we had encountered until that moment in time. Of course, it was another miracle to not be-

come a member of the Communist Party. I would have been afraid to apply for emigration from Russia, out of fear that I would be sent to the White Bears—Siberia.

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## A Change in Locations and Regimes

Rumors spread that the German army was preparing a massive attack on the partisans of Bialorussia, in order to secure a retreat from the eastern front. The Nazi army had suffered tremendous losses on the battle front and, to add insult to injury, they didn't lick honey from *Diadia Moroz* (Uncle Frost). Thousands and thousands couldn't take the cold Russian winter. Many of the German soldiers froze to death. The Germans wanted to cleanse the forests of partisans, to avoid additional losses from a fifth column in the woods. They included, in their assault, elements of their infantry, air force, tanks, artillery . . . a division of great strength.

I remember a meeting of our brigade leadership in the beginning of February 1944, where a serious debate took place regarding whether or not we should remain and accept a fight or leave the Kobrin area forests and move the brigade to the forests in the region of Pinsk. This area had a nickname: Pinsker blotes (blotes-deep marshlands). Indeed, the area was almost clear of German forces, as the roads were not fit for heavy equipment during eight or nine months of the year.

The decision was made to move, without delay. We secured whatever we could and, at midnight, we began our new odyssey. Armed, and loaded with backpacks and water containers, the whole brigade headed over country roads eastward. Regina and six armed partisans were responsible for two carts that carried three sick and one wounded partisan. There was one more cart with two small children and two elderly citizens, escorted by two partisans.

[Find Kobrin on Map Two. Pinsk is located to the east. In a wide region of Pinsk and its vicinity, a concentration of scores of partisan detachment brigades were encamped. In 1942, they faced many German assaults, but the Nazi army was beaten hard by these partisans.]

During the first night of travel, we journeyed about twenty-five kilometers. It was a dangerous location and we were watchful. At dawn, we stopped in a heavy forested area to rest and to prepare ourselves for further movement. The problem was that we had to cross a wide country road . . . almost as wide as a city block. This road had been built by the French army, when Napoleon attacked Russia in the year 1812. The road was named the Napoleon Tract. German cars, trucks, and other vehicles kept on moving in both directions.

It was not the time for a shootout. We had to be careful not to start a fight we couldn't win. The aim was to cross the road and to continue to our destination. Our scouts kept a watch on the road and, at dusk, the armed parties took action. We took up positions to protect the sick and wounded. I selected ten partisans and joined Regina's convoy. It was a dramatic moment when I showed her, again, how to pull the trigger on the pistol she had in her hand. "In case we face the German murderers," I told her, "be fast. Shoot them, before they have a chance to kill you!"

It took us about an hour to thoroughly check the road. Then we moved quickly and were lucky to cross the Napoleon Tract safely. Within three minutes, we were all on the other side of the tract. We continued our journey during the nighttime. Our armed men were always ready to defend us. It took us about four nights to reach our destination. The leadership of the Brest Litovsk partisan movement assigned us an area in which to settle, and also indicated the villages we could turn to for food.

My position as deputy commander became more challenging. I had to supervise the erecting of tents and the supplying of food in an area that was very poor. At moments, I felt increased anxiety. During December of 1943 and January of 1944, before we had evacuated from the Kobrin area, I had managed, with my group, to secure nine barrels of fat pork. We salted it heavily and hid it deep in the ground, in order to use it during the winter months. I thought to myself, *if we have this kind of treasure now, when we will be forced to settle in the wilderness of Pinsk, we will be very happy when the cold weather comes.*

Among the scores of detachments in the area, we were considered as refugees. In order to secure some meat, we had to travel about twenty miles where the partisan heads allowed us to confiscate a cow or some sheep. There was always a shortage of bread, potatoes, and other neces-

sities. It was not a problem of sabotage, but a problem of existence and sustenance.

The Red Army kept on advancing west. The American forces and the Allies kept on hammering the Nazi army. Italy pulled itself out of the German coalition. There was hope that the war would end within a year or two. Hope for survival grew among us.

Regina was accepted as a nurse in the medical department of the Bialorussian headquarters of the partisan movement. She was two months pregnant, and when the head doctor, Dr. Blimovich, advised her to undergo an abortion, she refused to do it. Obviously, she had a premonition that she would survive the war, and she wanted to have the baby. At dusk, we would sit at the campfire and reminisce about the happy Hanukkah party at her parents' home, when we had first met. I was eighteen and Regina fourteen. Regina and her schoolmates came from a different environment. They had studied at the Polish gymnasium (high school) and spoke only Polish. I had studied at the Hebrew privet gymnasium, and spoke both Hebrew, Polish and Yiddish fluently.

These twilight evenings were times of songs, humor, jokes, and the rebirth of love between Regina and me. We reminisced about our hikes, bicycle rides in the summer, and swimming at the Muchaviec River, when her younger brother, Sioma, and a dog named Topsick would join us. We reminisced about the fun at parties and of our dancing the tango, the waltz, and the Hora, Hora, Hora, (an Israeli folk dance) until late in the evening. We reminisced about the moments of our parting with our dear, lovely, sweet, blond Tsveeyale, and of our families and friends. Regina would often cry bitterly. *Where is she now, our little daughter? Is she still alive? Is she hungry? Thirsty? Is she cold? Who takes care of her? Her grandmothers?* We would cover our faces with our hands and sink into deep thoughts, until we would wake up to reality, sitting at the campfire in the wilderness of Pinsk County. It was a painful time, but we were hopeful that we would survive and be able to raise a child partisan. [As I am typing these lines, the then expected child partisan is now our big fifty-five year old son Victor.]

The months of February and March passed, and, somehow, we managed to carry on. The cleansing of partisans in West Bialorussia by the German army took place as planned. The Russian soldiers (among them Jewish boys and women) were full of wrath and anger at the enemy and would not let go, hurting them hard during their retreat.

To add insult to this horrendous act, the famous Jewish journalist, Illy Ehrenburg, wrote daily articles in the newspaper *Pravda*, in which he portrayed the horrible destruction that the German army had perpetrated throughout the Motherland Russia. The Russian soldiers read how the German murderers had mistreated their wives, their daughters, and their houses, while burning down whole villages. Elderly people and innocent children had been killed mercilessly. The Russian warriors read how the Nazis—the blood thirsty Hitlerites—turned their land into an inferno. Ehrenberg used his sharp pen to encourage, to stimulate, to add burning powder in the hearts in the consciences of the fighting Russian people, to avenge the crimes that the enemies had committed.

The Chapayev Brigade Command decided to leave the elderly, the sick, the wounded and the few children in the Pinsk area, and to send the bulk of our fighting partisans back to our previous bases. Regina was also left with the other women. From our old posts, we would send food back to those who were left behind. And so, at the beginning of April, 1944, the majority of our brigade returned to the Kobrin forests. I was very, very disappointed upon my return. The nine barrels of pork had disappeared. This time, the Germans who raided the camp hadn't committed the crime, but the local population. We were all angry. The commander Sienika said, "We will find out who robbed us of our food,

and we will teach them a lesson." It took a week and our real friends, the farmers in the area, informed us that six peasants had dug the ground during the night, a few days after we left the region, and pulled out the hidden barrels with our pork. During the following week, we raided the homes and the barns and stables of these six farmers and took away their cows, horses, and wagons. The farmers explained that they had thought we would never come back, but this was a poor excuse for their actions. It was not acceptable, in a time of war.

The roads were still not safe. The Germans kept on mining those that were used primarily by the partisans. I remember an evening when we rushed off to perform a *bombioshka*, and one of our fellows stepped on a mine. The raid was completely interrupted. Instead, we had to carry him to a safe location, get a horse and buggy to tote him, and return to our base. The doctor in our otriad did whatever he could to save him, but the injured partisan remained crippled and limped forever afterward.

I remember another time, in late 1943, when we were on our way back from a successful and completed mission of burning a bridge be-

tween Zaprood and Pruzany. We headed towards a village we had never visited before. It was too close to a German base. When the first wagon neared the house, a mine exploded, the horse was killed, and one partisan who was walking alongside the wagon lost his right hand and damaged his face. Regina did what she could to provide medical care. The partisan was rushed to the Pinsk area, and, from there, taken by the first available plane to Moscow.

We had a few cows in our compound, which we had confiscated on a raid. We prepared a few barrels of meat heavily salted for preservation, a few sacks of potatoes, loaves of bread, some onions, garlic, used clothing, and other necessary items, and loaded it all onto two wagons which we had also confiscated from collaborators with the Nazis, and sent it to our partisans who had remained in the Pinsk region. Traveling there was dangerous, but everything reached its destination. I did not participate in this trip. Regina sent a message to me that she was okay and hoped to be united with me soon.

My main job was now to secure a steady transporting of food to our people—the refugees in the forests near Motile. It was not easy to get this needed supply. We had to perform *bomboishkas* almost twice a week and reach villages and settlements far away from our base. The good thing was that I had fellows in my group who knew the region very well. I remember that we decided, once, to raid a village that was one or two miles from Pruzany. About dusk, fifteen of us left the camp, and by midnight we had secured the area well enough to act. There was an abundance of Jewish goods in each house we visited. The boys grabbed watches, silver items, Polish and Russian army clothes, Soviet army canned food, salt, and other valuables. Suddenly, our guards rushed from house to house shouting, “Niemtsy, Niemtsy (Germans, Germans)!” We heard shots coming from the army camp, which was about six kilometers from Pruzany. I ran out of a house that was located near the outskirts of the village to join the other unit members. But myself and the another partisan found ourselves separated from the rest of our group. We could not proceed the way we had entered the village, in order to keep from falling into the hands of the murderers. We then lost direction to our base and had to stay in the forest all day. It was nighttime before we could continue on our way. Finally, we arrived in the village of Sosnoovkah, my father’s birthplace.

At about twelve o’clock midnight, I tapped on the door of the last house in the village of Sosnoovkah. The peasant and his wife thought

that another *bombioshka* was about to take place, but I told them my name was Moysey, and I was Meyer's son. I added that about twenty-three years ago I had been in their house with my father during the summer months, assisting during the hay season on the part of the meadow that had belonged to my grandmother Mindl. They were shocked. They remembered my father and me, and didn't know how to please me and the partisan Kola, who was with me. We told them that we were lost (I was not afraid to tell them the whole truth). They served us a good meal; then we fell asleep and stayed there the whole day.

At dusk, we left, after getting the right directions in how to return to our camp. We arrived at our camp around midnight. The entire unit awoke and were happy to see us alive and not injured.

Some farmers had told our scouts that they had heard from somebody, who heard from another source, that the Germans had caught us and put Kola and me in prison in Pruzany. Everyone celebrated our arrival with a cordial full glass of samogon. This was the norm for such an occasion. I joined them, but consumed only half a glass!

Whisky is a very popular beverage in Russia and other Slavic countries and certain elements of the population drink until they became drunk, and then they like to sing. I remember a case with a partisan from another detachment who found himself drinking in a village. The farmers wanted to get rid of him. They placed him on a cart, led it to the road and left him there. The horse continued on down the road, until it reached the barrier in front of the police station at Oranchitse. The police saw a drunken partisan on the wagon and turned the vehicle 180 degrees on the road, so the horse could return to where it had come from. Partisans from our brigade, who were performing an ambush, spotted the cart and the passenger and brought them both to the base. The policemen were local guys who preferred to return the partisan to his unit, rather to hand him over to the Germans.

I mentioned before the name of a Jewish girl from Lodz, Poland (Pola), who was in the Malenkov Otrad, where a Russian partisan took care of her. They didn't evacuate themselves, as we did, when we knew the Germans were planning their raid in the forest. When we returned to the Kobrin area, some peasants told me that the couple had been captured by the Germans during the raid and killed. During the short time that Pola was with us, she had become very friendly with Regina. In fact, when the first convoy of food arrived for those we had temporarily left in the in the Pinsk area, Regina's first question to those making the

transport had been, "Is Pola alive?" When they told her the bad news, she cried and mourned her death, as if Pola had been her sister. Over the years, whenever we would reminisce about our experiences in the *partizanka*, Regina would mention the beautiful blond girl, who a Bialorus partisan had tried to save and ultimately failed.

The German army was beaten hard by the Russian forces, who were under the command of the famous generals Zsukov and Rokossovski. When the Nazis had invaded Poland, on September 1, 1939, they had bragged that, in fourteen days, they would be in Moscow. They ended up retreating in misery and shame. And whatever the Russian army did not accomplish, *Diada Moroz* (Uncle Frost) did. It was the same bitter cold that had destroyed Napoleon's army. The partisans sometimes picked up German soldiers who had looked for cover in the forests.

Some years later, in a speech at a memorial meeting at the Beth El Temple in the Rockaways, I told the story about a German officer who was kept prisoner by our detachment. I was the interpreter: He said that he had a wife and children and wanted to live and return to his family. "Well, I'm a Jewish partisan." I said, "and I don't know if my four-year old daughter is alive or if she has been murdered by you or someone like you!"

Many Bialorus or Ukraine peasants who collaborated with the Germans tried, in their last days, to appear super friendly to the partisans. So, too, did the members of the local police units. Many of them ran into the forests and asked for mercy. I remember the first half of July 1944. One morning, a group of policemen from the Linovo Police Station appeared at the outskirts of our forests. A farmer, a friend of ours, came and reported that the policemen wanted to surrender to us, rather than fall into the hands of the Russian army security units. The mediator went back to them with a message that they should line up with their hands above their heads. We did not want to have a fight on our hands only a few days before liberation. They obeyed the order. Ten of us approached the eighteen policemen. They had their hands up, until we collected their arms. After we had searched and checked them out, we allowed them to go with us to our camp.

We placed them under guard and began to question each of them as to how they had behaved during their service as policemen. Had they shown initiative or had they reluctantly fulfilled their assignments. We knew which of them were corrupt. The partisans who came into the for-

est from the nearby villages had kept an account of each policeman's cruel behavior. Now was the time of repayment for their crimes. Those policemen who felt guilty didn't dare to head to the forests to look for mercy from us; they disappeared and were picked up later.

Most of those who came to us were treated humanely, except three, who got a heavy beating from Sienika followed by one from me, for their mistreatment the Jews from Pruzany who were taken to the train in Linovo, in the days between January 28-31, 1943. We knew they were among others who had mercilessly badgered the unfortunate victims who waited for the trains and then robbed them of their bundles of personal effects, and even beaten them to show their superiority.

Sienika questioned the three first. They admitted that they had harmed the Pruzaner Jews when they waited for the trains. When he finished, I asked them about their behavior with the Jews at the station. They denied wrongdoings, but their attitudes convinced us otherwise. Sienika picked up a rod and used it over the three until he became tired. He turned to me and said, "Now, Mitia, it is your turn."

Now, fifty-seven years after that event, I still see that scene as it happened in the forests of Kobrin and Pruzany. All the wrath that built up in me during the preceding days, months, and years erupted. The anger and insufferable pain, the incessant longing for my most loved daughter, the cherished Tsveeyah, and my never-ending suffering after parting from our precious child . . . all these feelings found their solution in the use of the rod until it broke.

Although we felt in the air that the Red Army would arrive in the region shortly, the Chapayev partisans did not sit with their hands folded. Some units received an assignment to derail the German trains, some to disrupt communication by burning bridges and cutting the lines from telephone poles. My unit continued to perform bomboishkas, for our own sustenance, and to send food to those who were stationed far away from us in the area of Pinsk. We got a great deal of satisfaction from confiscating the food and cattle that the farmers had to deliver to the German quarters in Pruzany and Kobrin. In the beginning of July 1944, we had in our possession about forty cows, some sheep, and ten horses. I was in contact with Regina. She informed me that she was all right and still working as head nurse and midwife. She was never hungry and stayed in a "zemlyanka" with two other nurses.

About the 10th of July, 1944, we started to hear the noises of artillery explosions, which the boys recognized as those from Russian ca-

nons. We also heard airplanes flying from the east. These were pleasant sounds to our ears. They were signs that the Russians would soon arrive. We fantasized about the day we would unit with them. How would we greet them? Well, it happened on the 18th of July, 1944. Our security guy gave us a sign that some strange armed people were seen heading in the direction of our bases. Yes, these were the Russian heroes in the gray clothes. They arrived along a path in the woods that led to our camp.

I had seen them once before, in the second half of September 1939. It was the day I saw them raise their heads from the tops of their tanks and shout loudly, "We came to liberate you from the yoke of the Polish oppressors." They had come hand in hand with the Nazis and their partners, to divide Poland and grab a large bone. I was happy, then, to be taken as a war prisoner by the Reds and not by the Germans. But at that time, it was an event with an unknown future. I saw them now as liberators from the murderers of my people, of humanity. Remember the Russian song which I typed and translated? The last part begins with an exclamation, "Oh! what a meeting it will be, when the war will end." I did not meet my most dear and loved ones as the song said. I met the Russian soldiers. They were as dear to me as if each and every one was my brother . . . a friend who offered years of his life to come and save me from the lion's mouth, from the beast who intended to find me and chew me up.

Our battalion, headed by Major Sienika and myself, identified itself. It is hard—impossible—to describe the major's surprise in finding in the forest wilderness, fighters against the Nazis and Fascist. And much more was his unbelievable surprise when he learned that I was a Jew. He was a Jew, too, from Odessah. Tears appeared in his eyes when he said he passed many hundreds of *shtetlach* (small towns) in Bialorussia, in the Ukraine, and didn't see any Jews. They had been slaughtered like sheep, and, now, he was seeing before his eyes a partisan Jew, a fighter and an officer in a detachment of Russian partisans. We treated each other with what we had . . . a small portion of samogon for a *l'chain*—cheers. They treated the boys with cigarettes and some American *toonkah*—canned meat.

The soldiers and we partisans spoke briefly about our experiences, about the nature of our resistance, about derailing trains and searching for food. And then it was time to part. But I asked the major about the twenty-five Hungarian Jewish slave laborers who escaped and found

themselves in our camp. I told him about their unfortunate situation. They could no longer be with us, because we expected to be incorporated into the Red Army and continue our fighting. He told me that he would take them as war prisoners and send them with their other captives to be taken care of. I wished them good luck.

In 1946, I met a fellow from Czechoslovakia who was also taken as a war prisoner at that time. He told me the Hungarian Jews eventually were taken to the area of Tashkent, in Middle Asia. They were reeducated in the Communist teachings of Lenin and Stalin and sent back to their native lands, when the war ended. I would have been the happiest person in the world, if I could have later met some of these Hungarian Jews whom I helped to survive the war.

The Russian battalion left in the direction of Kobrin, to be united with their regiment, which had liberated that town and vicinity earlier that morning. According to instructions from a higher command, the Chapayev Brigade of partisans had to resolve itself and follow the army to the vicinity of Kobrin. It took us a whole day to collect our possessions and equipment. The Commander Sienika and I rushed on mounted horses to the nearby villages and said goodbye to our friends. We were all happy to greet each other as free people. (Dry, no drinks.) Late in the afternoon, on the 18th of July, 1944, we left our caves and headed toward Kobrin.

A few partisans were appointed to tend the cows and the horses until they could be given over to the proper authorities. The Malenkov Otriad settled for the night in a village about three miles from the town.

I don't believe I remembered to tell you the origin of the name Malenkov. Malenkov was a member of the communist political bureau. After Stalin's death, he served for a short time as the head of the Russian government.

While serving in the Malenkov Otriad, we had slept in the barns and in stables, wherever we could find a space and a bundle of straw to lie on and to put our heads. Now, as we entered Kobrin, the Bialorus peasants' wives brought out tables on which they loaded great supplies of food, including bread, cheese, slices of pork, eggs, honey, butter, and many other items. Their husbands placed bottles of samogon (home-made vodka) and glasses on the tables. Sienika and I saw to it that no one became drunk, by rationing out the drinks. We celebrated our liberation singing Russian, Bialorussian, and Ukrainian songs until mid-

night. A peasant arrived with an accordion. and young boys and girls danced in the middle of the village until dawn.

I heard an elderly woman shouting, "Rejoice brothers and sisters. Rejoice. Be happy. First we got rid of the Polish lords, now we have done away with the Nazis. We will have our own Bialorus free country." Alas, she either forgot or purposely avoided say the word Communists; she forgot that the Russian Communist government had occupied the area during September 1939 until June of 1941.

I thought of Regina and hoped that we would be united in a few days. I wanted so much to see her, before I would have to be drafted into the regular Russian army and have to continue fighting against the Hitlerites. I placed my hand on the "royal pillow" (a bundle of straw) and fell asleep.

## Life as a Civilian Under Communist Rule

At dawn, I was awakened by a loud voice calling, "Mitia, Mitia, Commander Mitia, where are you? I have a message for you!" I dashed from the barn and met the messenger. He told me that my wife Regina, myself, and eighteen other partisans were to report at ten o'clock the next morning to the office of the executive chief. The messenger didn't have any details. Well, all kinds of thoughts came in my mind, but I could not solve the problem. I could not foresee the good news my fellow partisan messenger had carried with him.

We nineteen partisans (Regina was still in the area of Pinsk) met at eight in the morning and headed for Kobrin. We were from different detachments, but we knew each other. None of us could figure out the reason for our being singled out of the rest guys from the brigade. We were met at the outskirts of the town by military police and led to a tall building that appeared to us to be a past Polish City Hall. When we entered the building, we were cordially greeted by a man and a woman who introduced themselves as the chairman of the Regional Executive Committee and the first secretary of the Regional Branch of the Communist Party.

The Communist Party was the decisive authority for all walks of life of the country. The Communist laws went hand in hand with those of the army. As soon as the army occupied Kobrin, within mere minutes, the Party started to function. The woman's surname sounded Jewish to me. She was born in and lived in Minsk, the capital of Bialorussia. They served us breakfast and the man and the woman praised us for being partisans and for fighting against the evil Nazis.

After breakfast, the woman read our names. I was the third name mentioned and Regina was the ninth. When she finished calling all our names, she told us the reason why we were assembled. We had been selected to run the administration of Kobrin and the surrounding region, as soon as the military left town. It is impossible to describe my happi-

ness and that of the other partisans. We would not be integrated into the army after all, but become, instead, heads of various departments of the Kobrin region.

Now, the chief started to assign us to our specific jobs. They already had the records of our activities in the partisan brigade, so the chief said to me, "The record shows that you did an outstanding job in supplying food for your detachment. I would suggest that you accept the office as head of the department of regional supply." I thanked him kindly for having confidence in my ability to perform such an important job, but said that, if possible, I preferred to have a job in education. After conferring with the woman, he came up with the proposal that I should take the job of chairman of the regional board of education. I said I would gladly take this job, but I felt that since I had not been educated in the Russian schools, it would be very hard for me to do a perfect job. I would rather take the job of a principal, but if he would permit me, I would like to recommend a man I knew who was a loyal partisan and highly educated. It was agreed. Different administration jobs were assigned to the other partisans in attendance and the meeting was over.

Before we left, the chief turned to me and said. "*Tovarish* (comrade), the schools will not open until the fifteenth of September. In the meantime, I want you to be my secretary."

I was highly pleased to hear these words and thought to myself, "A Jew from the ghetto, condemned to death by the Nazi murderers, and look what is happening." I was told by the chief that I should plan to start my new job the very next day. Well, I had no idea of what to do next. I found out the name and location of the person who was in charge of taking care (custodian) of the Bialorus High School. I walked directly to his house and introduced myself, adding that my wife would arrive in a few days.

Generally speaking, the population had been living in continuous fear. Ever since the war had started, in September of 1939, there had been no rest for either the Jewish or the non-Jewish population. So, when the custodian and his family saw that I was Jewish, they remained calm. They were a family of four, parents and two girls, and their apartment had only four rooms. Still, I asked them politely if I could occupy one room, until I could find a place to settle with my wife, who was pregnant. They gladly agreed, so one of my goals was accomplished; I had a place to sleep. Next, as mentioned above, I had to secure some-

thing to eat and to drink for Regina. I knew that there was a shortage of food in the area. I turned to the custodian with my next plan.

“I have the opportunity to acquire a cow for free. Would you agree to keep it in your barn, if I agree to share the milk with you?” Leon agreed wholeheartedly. I knew I had to act fast, before I missed the opportunity to fulfill this new goal. I rushed with Leon to the village, where we stayed overnight. I met with my superior, Sienika, and told him about Regina’s pregnancy and that I would like to take a cow, in order to ensure she would have some milk and cheese. Vanka praised me for being so devoted to my wife and said, “Mitia, *tovarish moy* (Mitia, my friend), go to the field and take *two* cows.” He added, “Regina cured our boys when they were sick and wounded. She deserves much more than a cow.”

We parted on friendly terms and I took Leon with me to get the cows. We found the herd on a nearby pasture. Leon chose a beautiful cow, put a rope over her neck, and we marched with our cow toward Kobrin. As we approached the outskirts of the town, *oy vey, oy vey*, what do I see? A group of former partisans was marching on their way to the train station. They had already been drafted into the Russian army and were being taken by train to their first destination for training.

Well, I was somewhat embarrassed to be marching with Leon and a cow while my friends were marching off to war, but they called, “Mitia, Mitia, we wish you good luck.”

I wished them the same. We did not see each other again. When the war was over, I met a fellow partisan from a different detachment who told me they had undergone training in the town of Baranovich. From there, they had been sent to different army units and continued to fight the Hitlerites. I don’t know—but I hoped—that all of them returned to their homes and loved ones safely. Sienika and a few more partisans found themselves on an additional list and were also given jobs in the administration, in various small towns in the vicinity of Kobrin.

That first night, the custodian’s wife invited me to have supper with them. She had already prepared the room for me and I knew it would feel good to sleep in a bed with a pillow under my head. For almost a year and a half, I had been sleeping in a bunker, on the crop in Ivan Pauk’s barn, in a pile of hay while searching for partisans, and in a *zemlyanka*—a cave in the woods. I did not want to burden my hosts with providing me with food, so I had some dinner in the cafe in town, which

consisted of cabbage soup, bread, some vegetables and an apple or pear.

I had lived through a busy day, but had accomplished several things. I had been appointed as a principal of a Bialorussian high school; I had been chosen as the secretary of the chief region of Kobrin and its surroundings; I had met the custodian of the school and secured a temporary residence; and I had received permission to fetch a cow in partnership with the custodian.

I had also managed to part in good faith with my partisan superiors, and even by those who went on to Baranovich for training.

The next morning, on the 19th of July, I started to work as a free human being . . . as a temporary secretary. The office consisted of two rooms. I was stationed in the front room and the chairman in the back room. In Russian, the office was called *Rayeespolkom*, which was the abridgment of *Rayonny Eespolnitelny Commitet* (Regional Executive Committee). The first few weeks, among other activities, I had to approve of various people for different jobs. First, I had to find out of the background of each applicant, before introducing him to the chief. If the person was accepted to the suggested job, I would then fill out the proper forms and have them on hand when the applicant went to his new work destination. It was easy for me to express my opinion about the applicants, because most of them were partisans with whom I had gone on many assignments to punish the Nazis. The partisans appreciated my efforts to assign them to a job, and in some cases, they later reciprocated what they had considered a kindness.

It is important to remember that in the Communist Soviet Union, it was easy to get into trouble. Once you had committed a minor offense, the authorities would often attach some additional fault to it, until it became a big crime. You could be arrested, not knowing the nature of the so-called crime, and be tried and convicted. This was the main reason why I had not accepted the job as chief of supply. I remembered the winter of 1939, when all the merchandise in the prewar stores was bought within a few days, and no one could buy anything for the rubles that the merchants received from the Russians as payment. I knew that there was likely going to be a shortage of everything, starting with needles and thread and including shirts or shoes or lipstick for the women. The tiny, tiny little bit of merchandise that would arrive in Kobrin, I would have to supply first to the elite Russians. All the while, I would be building the wrath of the lower echelon . . . the local citizens with whom I had to

live. Indeed, what I had foreseen happening to the partisan who took the supply job was that he would eventually be accused of discrimination, for supplying sugar and other commodities to particular people, and be tried and jailed.

In front of Leon's house, an army unit had put up a temporary camp. I became friendly with a Jewish truck driver, and when I told him about Regina, he suggested that if we were to drive along the highway on which the women were marching to Kobrin, we may be able to meet them and give Regina a ride. The next Sunday morning, he took an army vehicle, and we drove about sixty miles, but we did not meet the marching women or see the wagons on which they were carrying the sick and injured partisans we had left in the villages. People said they had seen them passing and they had probably taken off to a village for the night. Our effort was in vain, but at least I had tried to help her. Regina arrived ten days later and was happy to drink a glass of milk from a formerly partisan cow. We named the cow Partisanka.

Regina was tired, after making such a long trip on foot. She had also lost weight. It took a few days for her to regain her strength. We had to start our new way of life from scratch, as we had nothing—no furniture, no kitchen or bedding supplies, no books, no anything. The most precious assets we possessed were our reasonably good health and the energy to overcome future difficulties. We knew we had to build ourselves up, in order to be ready to start our family.

Leon's wife and daughters were very friendly to Regina. One of the girls was sixteen. Regina suggested that she teach her how to become a nurse. She was very happy to hear this offer. In fact, Regina prepared her so well that, when she took the test and passed, within three months, the girl got a job in the hospital as a nurse. Her family never forgot what Regina had done for their daughter, and, later, reciprocated graciously when Victor was born. They would baby-sit for him and buy him toys.

For the moment, the most precious asset we had was our cow, Partisanka. Regina drank as much milk as she wanted, which was very important, because of the shortages of other kinds of food. As I mentioned before, a battalion of Russian infantry had taken temporary residence across the street from Leon's house. The cook saw Regina and me walking one day, and noticed that she was pregnant. He called me and handed over a plate with meat and slices of bread, also a container filled with soup. He did this quite often after this, and it helped Regina and the forthcoming baby stay healthy. He would say, "It is my hope that

somebody is helping my family in Tashkent, the way I am able to help people in Bialorus." The cook was one of many good people that we met in our long journey from the bunker to the USA—the "golden land," as it was called by the immigrants.

The town of Kobrin had not been destroyed by the Nazis. Some buildings and houses were empty, because the inhabitants, called *mishling*, had escaped with the arrival of the Russians, for fear they would be mistreated. A mishling means that one of the couple was married to a German and had served as a policeman or other official. Regina and I would search these houses and pick up linens, which Regina would wash and save for diapers, and other items we could use for our expected baby.

I would see the Bialorussians, both young and old, wearing slippers made out of parchment on which was written the Jewish most holy Torah scriptures, also scrolls of the *megilah*, which is read on Purim. I would stop the people and point out what they were wearing and tell them they were stepping on matters that were holy to Jews and asked them to take it off their feet. They would obey immediately. I also found pieces of soap on which one could read three letters R, J, F, which meant *rein Juden fat*—pure Jewish fat. This was soap made in the concentration camps from the fat that ran from the bodies which were thrown into the ovens. When we lived in Kobrin, I kept some of these items as a reminder of what my people had suffered, but I was afraid to take them with me, when we left the country.

After an interruption living as partisans, Regina and I continued to reminisce about our long odyssey. We were still heartbroken and sad, as we went about establishing our new life. Despite being free, we were constantly unhappy. We were desolate. We felt depressed, because we didn't know anything about what had happened to our most beloved little daughter Tsveeyah, or to our parents, sisters, brothers, friends, and relatives. Were they still alive? If so, then where? Maybe we could help them. There were, of course, endless rumors. We knew that the Jews from Kobrin had been deported to Brona Goora, and they didn't exist any longer. The Jews of Pruzany were under the jurisdiction of those in the German province of Prussia, where all the orders came from Koemisberg. The Hitlerites tried to hide from their countrymen the horrible atrocities they performed against the Jews in Eastern Europe. Regina started to write letters to the Red Cross, to Russian government agen-

cies, to any source somebody mentioned, but her efforts were all in vain. We could not find out anything about our family members.

Regina was in her ninth month of pregnancy, when she suddenly felt a craving for herring. She wanted only a small piece of herring. Herring, herring, herring was the only thing on her mind. She could hardly tolerate the cabbage soup. Herring was what she wanted. My goodness, where was I going to get it for her? There was no way to please her and no way to buy the fish, because there were no stores selling herring. But life had taught me to overcome obstacles, and to work harder at solving problems. I decided to ask the army cook.

The next morning, I stood close to the fence and the cook noticed me. He walked over and we expressed our typical Russian *zdrastvooytie*, "How are you? I am fine." And then, as though he could read my mind, he asked me, "What can I do for you?" I told him my problem. He told me not to worry and walked back to his cooking tent.. It took him no more than five minutes, and he was back. He handed me a huge Siberian herring. "*Ladno*," he said. In Russian, it meant *beautiful*. It is a typical Russian expression of cooperation. "Okay, hurry to your apartment and feed Regina as much herring she wants." What a brilliant Bialorussian soul! Regina ate the herring, and in her happiness asked me to take her to the fence. There, she thanked the man for his extraordinary gift.

Well, I felt that I ought to find a way to reciprocate for his kindness. I asked Leon to try and get me a bottle of whisky and promised to pay as much as required for it.. Indeed, he got the whisky from a friend. As soon as I received some payment, when the schools opened, I paid with great gratitude. When I handed the bottle to my friend the cook, he was overjoyed. He said again, "*Ladno*. You will hear from me again."

In my conversation with people, I often used a humorous Chassidic phrase that emphasized their belief in the mysterious ways of the creator. For example, when I asked a Chassid, "Why does a sinner succeed in his life, when a righteous man has a miserable life?" I would usually be told, "Who knows the Creator's ways?" I relate this short story now, not to express a belief, but a thought . . . we can never judge the nature of a human being..

Many of the events that occurred during the years Regina and I hid from and fought against our enemies, I considered mysteries. Listen to this next mystery. The army battalion that had been encamped across the street from Leon's house had orders to leave. I saw and heard a

commotion, while they made their preparations. Their tents were already folded, when something extraordinary happened. It was approximately the 20th of August, 1944, and about eleven o'clock in the evening, I heard somebody tapping at the window. I peered out and saw the cook. He motioned for me to open the door. As I did, he threw a big bundle inside and quickly disappeared, without uttering a single word. It was part of the underlining of a tent. This was a fabric that could be used in many ways. Indeed, Leon's wife sewed shirts, blouses, and other garments from the fabric. I am not superstitious, but is there an explanation for such mysterious behavior? Of course, Regina would call it yet one more miracle!

Mysteries, miracles, whatever you want to call them, Regina and I experienced many of them. The result of their occurrence is that I strongly believe in the goodness of human nature. Alas, there are many rotten apples in the human race, but the tree always grows new good ones.

By August of 1944, a bundle of used clothes arrived in Kobrin, and it was brought to the office of the Regional Executive Committee, where I was serving as the temporary secretary. My job was to give the clothes to needy people. The chief officer called me into his office and said, "Open the bundle." I did as he asked. He selected some dresses, a jacket, a suit that fit me perfectly, shirts, and other items. Then facing me, he said, "Take these home." I did. Indeed, we found ourselves wearing these used but clean civilian clothes with great joy. More and more used clothing arrived from the USA.

At the beginning of September 1944, I was called by the Board of Education to open the Bialorussian Junior High school in Kobrin. I quit my temporary job and started my new job. The Board assigned teachers to the school, and we began the registration of students. Not even one Jewish child appeared. A junior high school in the Bialorus system usually started at the seventh grade, but we started ours with the fifth grade. Among the teachers were six women from the region of Minsk, one Polish fellow, and myself. We worked out a system following the detailed instructions from the Board of Education and started teaching.

We had about one hundred and fifty students. Although I was a principal, I also had to teach. My subject was general math and, sometimes, geometry. There was also a Russian high school in the area that went through the twelfth grade.

Communist Russia consisted of fifteen states, including Russia, Bialorus, Ukraine, Georgia, Siberia, and others. The states were not independent. They were ruled by the government in Moscow, which was controlled by the Communist Party. Each state had its own language, as Bialorus had its Bialorussian language, and Ukraine had its Ukrainian language. But all the Russian states proffered the Russian language.

The principal of the Russian high school, as well, as the head of the Board of Education were also partisans from the Chapayev Brigade. We knew each other and kept our friendship strong, until the time we all left Kobrin. There was a shortage of books, of stationery, of pens, pencils, and other items, but each teacher worked whatever they had in order to gain some progress in the students' achievements. Their efforts paid off. Parents of the students, mostly farmers, showed their appreciation in a favorable way. Twice a week—Mondays and Thursdays—they held farmers' markets in Kobrin. Early in the morning, some parents of our students would stop first at the schools, before taking their products to the marketplace. Before classes started, they would sell their products to the teachers, whatever was available and needed. A short distance from the building where the Bialorussian school was conducted, a Polish family had owned a very nice house. They had collaborated with the Germans, so, when the Red Army moved into Kobrin, they had to run off and escape with all the others who feared the Russian wrath. It was not difficult for me to receive permission to occupy this house. It was a comfortable accommodation and completely furnished, including household utensils, dishes, and bedding. But the most important thing was that there was a garden in front of the house where the family had planted all sorts of vegetables and herbs . . . everything from garlic and onions to tomatoes and lettuce. In addition, there was a small orchard with a few fruit trees. Once again, we were lucky. All of these products ripened at about the same time we took over the house. I would take apples or pears to school to treat the staff, and they were short of words to thank me. Another amenity on the property was a barn, big enough to hold our cow and the hay to feed it during the winter months. The most popular item in those days was vodka (whisky). For vodka, you could trade for anything available, and even things not readily available, especially when it concerned contact with army men and a means to travel distances. I had two bottles of homemade vodka. It was called *samogon*, which means self-run. One Friday afternoon near the beginning of September, 1944, I went to the outskirts of the town and re-

mained standing, keeping a bottle of *samogon* in my hand. When I saw a vehicle approaching, I raised the bottle and waved it in clear sight. The driver stopped, after seeing the bottle, and shouted, “*Kooda?* (where)”

I said, “Pruzany.”

He answered. “*Davai, davai.*” *Give, give.* “Come on, come on.” Within a moment, I was standing in the truck on my way to Pruzany.

The driver let me off in the central part of the town near the marketplace, where I saw the mall—a quadrangular brick building called *radskromen* “line of stores.” It housed over forty stores. From there, I walked a short distance to our family house, at 14 Shereshever Street.

The buildings had not been burned down. Neither had the attached dwelling, which contained two apartments belonging to my two sisters Leah and Liba. The apartments had been occupied during the German occupation of Pruzany by German folks. They had escaped, upon the arrival of the Russians, around the eighteenth of July, 1944. When the Jewish partisans from the *partisanika* returned to Pruzany, they found their own homes burned and they had taken shelter in my family’s apartments. When I met some of them, we all cried bitterly, expressing our pain and sorrow. Why had we survived when our most dear, most beloved family members had been taken from us? We still did not know their lot. I met Regina’s two cousins—the brothers Shmerl and Joseph Elman. They were among the second group of Jewish partisans who had managed to sneak out from the besieged ghetto on that infamous Friday evening of January 29, 1943, to make their way into the forests. We reminisced until late in the evening.

Next morning, I took a stroll through the streets of Pruzany. Ruins and more ruins everywhere. The tall building where the Hebrew high school had been located was not burned, but it looked sad and abandoned, as though it were complaining, “Where are my Jewish students? Their voices? Their laughter?” Alas, everything as I had known it was destroyed forever. I continued my walking, crossed the road, and approached the Yiddish school. I was met with the same stillness. No more recitation of poetry. Unfortunately, the students and their parents and teachers had been mercilessly wretched from their nests and taken to who knows where.

It was Saturday. I remembered that before Regina and I had left the building, which was on the premises of the grain mill, in June of 1941, I had buried some jewelry under a tree in front of a window. The jewelry belonged to Regina’s mother. She had inherited it from her mother. As

I describe what I dared to do on that day in August of 1944, I still shudder to think of danger I was putting myself into. I strode briskly to the premises of the mill, approached the tree and removed a small knife from my pocket. Then, I began to dig the soil. I dug everywhere around the tree for the next two minutes. I found nothing. The jewelry was gone. Somebody had stolen it. I rushed out of the yard and felt my heart palpitating hard enough to break bones! Had I been spotted by somebody? Had they notified the police? If so, I would be arrested for trespassing on a Russian government property, and they would surely add other sins to this crime.

I don't remember how I got home to Kobrin. Probably the same way I had gotten to Pruzany. I cannot explain how or why I dared to do that forbidden thing. But this was not the only time I put myself in deadly danger. In the middle of September, 1944, I traveled to Pruzany again. This time for an important reason.

As you know, my father-in-law, Chaim Kaplan, was a miller. He knew hundreds of farmers, among them the one whom we had met during our wandering in search of a partisan group to join. Near the end of June, 1941, when we got the order to leave the apartments and enter the ghetto, my father-in-law had met a trustworthy peasant, a Bialorus man from the village of Shenee. He had told the fellow to come to us and to take some clothes. Just to take them and hide them, either to keep for himself or to give back, if we were to ever return alive. The farmer came the very next day and carried out two bundles of clothes . . . men's clothes and also women's dresses and so forth. Now, about the fifteenth of September, 1944, I decided to go to the peasant and try to redeem some warm clothes for us, before the winter arrived.

I don't remember how I made it, but I found myself in Pruzany and stayed overnight at my friend Isaac Auerbach's apartment. Next morning, I turned my way in the direction of the village Sheni, about two and a half miles from the town. And again, I don't know where I got the nerve for such an endeavor. Probably because I had been a partisan and grown fearless. I was young and I was "free" and I possessed the ambition of a Jewish fighter against the most ugly creatures of humanity and their Nazi collaborators. I have maintained this sense of boldness throughout my entire life. When I strolled into the village, some people stopped me to talk. They knew me as Kaplan's son-in-law. They wanted to know how I had survived and what I was doing now. They were friendly.

I learned from one of these people where the farmer lived, and soon I was tapping at the door to his house. The woman who answered the door immediately recognized me and greeted me cordially. She served me lunch and said that her husband was working in the field. She pointed out where he was and I went to see him. It is hard for me to describe our meeting. Semion was his name. I noticed tears in his eyes. Without my asking him, he said. "I have some clothes hidden away. It is all yours." He interrupted his work and we went to his house. He was eager to help me with whatever I needed. After spending over two hours with them, I was ready to leave for home. Among the items I took home with me were two sheepskin jackets and two pairs of shoes. I told them to keep the rest. The farmer harnessed his horse and took me to Pruzany. Next morning, I made my way back to Kobrin. The jackets served their purpose, until we left Russia in July of 1946.

The teaching situation in the Bialorus school kept on improving. The Board of Education began to supply copy books and other necessary items for the students, also history and other needed books. By the middle of September, 1944, we received payment for our work and it seemed that life was returning to a semblance of normalcy. The parents of the students were happy that their children were once again learning, and they showed their appreciation. Some of them lived close to the school and often spent with some with us after school hours. They knew that Regina was expecting a baby, and they told me that when the time came, whether it was night or day, they would take her to the hospital. My life sometimes required favors from people, not necessarily only Jewish people (remember Pauk?), and I was grateful for the kindnesses of anyone.

Regina went into labor in the middle of the night. I went to the home of one of the closest parents, and he understood the reason for my tapping on the window of his home. Within ten minutes, he had his horse and wagon at our door, waiting for Regina to come out, and within a short time we were entering the hospital doors. Our son was born, without complications. We named him Victor in remembrance of the victory of the free world over Nazism. A few days later, one of the other parents took Regina and our son home.

I want to emphasize that I always tried to compensate for the generosity of those who gave so freely of their time and material goods, not only as a thank-you, but because it was necessary for us all to help each

other. For example, when someone needed help in their work assignments, they would turn to me and I assisted, as much as I could.

Leon's wife and her older daughter attended to Regina and little Victor. He was a good baby and, very soon, he let us sleep through the night. As I mentioned before, Regina had been able to pick up used bed sheets and other useful items that had been left in the houses of the Germans or their collaborators. She made diapers from the sheets, and Leon's wife sewed shirts for the baby, or made blankets and other necessary items for him. There was not a place to buy these things in Kobrin.

One day, while attending a Farmers Market, I noticed that a baby carriage was for sale. I bought it and Regina was so happy to have it. Leon tended to our cow, so we had sufficient milk in the house. We also had bread and eggs, and had money to buy potatoes and any vegetables or fruits we didn't get from the orchard or our garden. We also secured hay for the cow for the winter. The parents of my students would stop at our house to sell the hay to me, instead of carrying it to sell at the farmers market. I would pay whatever they asked. They knew we were Jewish, but this didn't stop them from being friendly to me. Some of the women were friendly to Regina, too. When they saw her walking and pushing the baby carriage with Victor in it, they would stop and look at the baby. As usual, they would admire a baby partisan.

Well, we considered Victor as a partisan, because Regina conceived when we were members of the Malenkov partisan detachment of the Chapayev Brigade in Brest Province, Bialorussia. Both Regina and I were proud to show off our offspring.

Regina and I knew that our cow was about to give birth to a calf. It takes about nine months from the time when it conceives to "drop" the calf, but about a month before this, the cow stops giving milk. It needs the milk to feed the calf. I have no words to describe our joy, our excitement when this happened. The cow gave more than double her usual supply of milk. Regina would drink two to three liters of milk each day, and she had no problem nursing the baby. There were no formulas for bottle feedings in those days. Breastfeeding was a normal and natural method for nourishing babies and toddlers.

Leon took his share, too... about two gallons a day. We had enough milk to cook cereal, use milk with potatoes, and milk with bread. We left milk in a jug for a couple days and were able to produce cream and yogurt. Once in a while, we would put together our supply of milk with

Leon's milk, and when we had accumulated enough cream, Leon would make butter and cheese. I knew the process for making butter and cheese, but I was too busy teaching to do it. Readers of this memoir will likely find it humorous that we were so thrilled to have a cow that produced daily milk and that we could, sometimes, produce butter and cheese. It is so easy, these days, to dash off to the store to purchase items from an enormous choice of such basic provisions. Since World War II, people have not been without necessities to the degree they were during those hard times. The simple foodstuffs that graced our tables, because of our luck in owning a cow, were savored and appreciated to the same degree people today relish a gourmet meal at the finest restaurant.

Most of my daily activities were devoted to my duties as principal of the junior high school. I remember that in November of 1944, we received a letter from a government office in Brisk to appear there at a certain date. We were puzzled. What could be the reason for such a summons? In those days, the unexpected was always on our minds. On the given date, we arrived on time at the designated office. I recognized several people who had been past partisans, some from my detachment and some from other groups. Obviously, we were very happy to see each other, and to learn about work assignments, family matters, economic problems, and so forth. We kept reminiscing, until we were called into the office.

There were several high-ranking officers of the Brest Litovsk Province (county), and also from the State of Bialorussia. They made several speeches praising and thanking us for forming a fifth column during the war, for helping the Red Army to defeat the Nazi armed forces, and for saving the Motherland Russia from the vicious murderers. When this was over, each of us was called separately by name and handed a medal for bravery and a special certificate. Then we received another surprise. The First Secretary of the Bialorussian State (the Head of the State) personally handed each of us an envelope containing money. A short note explained that the money was given according to the rank we held in the Partisan movement. When the ceremony was over, we were treated with a *Smaltsi* (schmalts in Yiddish means fat) dinner, and then we were allowed to return to our homes.

Evidently, this type of ceremony was repeated in few other regions of Bialorussia, but not throughout the entire country. The Pruzaner group of Jewish partisans, who had heroically fought the enemy, were not

called and never received any distinctions or money. They were told that the command that operated in the forests of Rozsenoy, which included also the Jewish partisans, did not keep an account of the partisans or present any evidence that they had served, so they were left out of the largesse. Among those who received nothing were Regina's two cousins, (Regina's father and their mother were brother and sister). Their names were Shmerl and Joseph Elman. Both survived. As I write this memoir, Shmerl has already passed away. Joseph is alive and well.

Regina and I returned from Brisk and found little Victor smiling at us. He had been well taken care of by Leon's wife, but he was happy to see us. We counted the money we had been given and it amounted to 70,000 rubles, a payment that was equal to that of a major in the Russian army; my portion was 38,000 rubles and Regina's came to 32,000, a payment equal to that of a captain, as she was considered a high-ranking army nurse. Many years later, I showed Regina's certificate to the family and then it was lost.

We thought hard about what to do with the money. Our friends, Leon and his wife, advised us to buy a little pig. They would take care of the animal for us. As you know, pork is not considered kosher (proper), according to Jewish laws. Until the breakout of the Second World War, Jews observed this law. My mother bought only kosher meat. But when I served in the Polish army, the Jewish soldiers did not receive kosher dinners. We ate what we were given and any kind of meat, including beef, mutton, and pork.

Regina was more observant than I about various kosher rules, despite the fact that I came from a more observant family than she had, when growing up. Her parents were more modern. As a member of a progressive Zionist youth movement, my friends and I liked salami, any kind of salami, no matter where we bought it. It tasted great and I never got sick of eating this kind of sandwich.

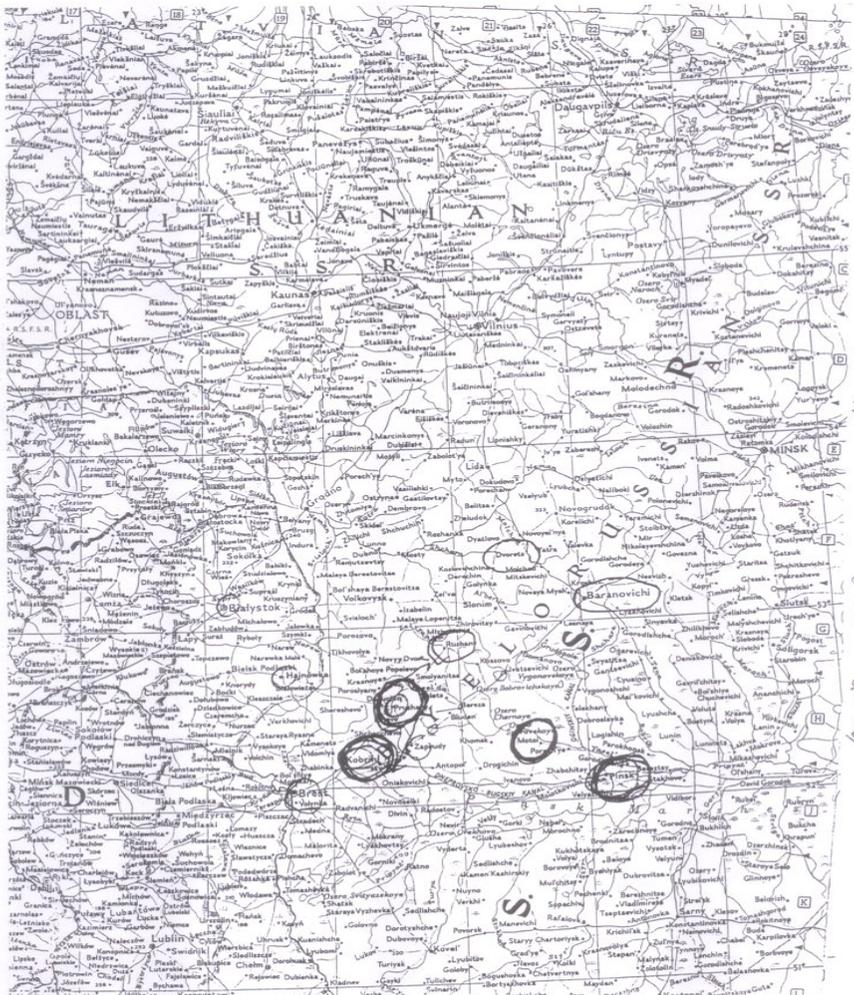
Now, after hearing Leon's advice, I hesitated for a moment, but quickly regained my composure. "What a good idea" I said. "We have to care for our sustenance and for our survival. We'll purchase a pig." Why should I observe the dietary law, after living through such appalling tribulations? For whom? For what purpose? For my dear four-year old daughter, who had been murdered by the Nazis? That very next Thursday, Leon and I went to the farmers market. We saw a Bialorussian farmer with two small pigs for sale. The money in those days did not have much value. There was a shortage of everything and inflation was

very high. The problem was not how much anything cost, but where we could buy what we needed. Well, I asked the farmer how much he wanted for one piglet. He answered. "I need 40,000 rubles. Not a *ko-peikah* (a Russian penny) less, take it or leave it." I paid what he requested and he put the piglet into a bag and Leon carried it to our stable.

Leon immediately made a fenced pen for the little pig. He fed it with some milk and was happy to be the co-owner of a cow, a pig, some chickens, four rabbits, and a small orchard. Having good friends like the Leon family, a position as a principal of a school, and an open door to any office in the community was an asset. I could walk in any place in Kobrin as a partisan dealing with partisans, by whom the town Kobrin was administrated.

As I describe these situations and all the minor steps I made in striving for survival with my wife and child, I am amazed that I was able to feed my family, when there was such a shortage of everything all over the territory. My possessions were priceless, compared with today's standard of living. I speak nothing but the full truth. I am not in any way exaggerating. I was considered a capitalist. (A remark: I describe the events of my life not chronologically. I put them on paper as they appear in my mind.)

Map One



# Map Two



## Fear: The Foundation of Communism

### The Yalta Accord

The Nazi army kept on losing their battles in the war. Thousands and thousands of German war prisoners found themselves in war prisoner camps, feeling degraded and looking dirty and unshaved—like miserable creatures rather than human beings. No one doubted anymore that Hitler and his allies had lost the war. When President Roosevelt of the USA, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Britain, and the dictator of Russia, Stalin, met in Yalta, Iran to decide the future of the European states, Stalin gained what he wanted. Namely, Bialorussia was united, east and west. At the same time, the Ukraine's east and west were united. Stalin compensated Poland by cutting off parts of Northern Germany and a wedge from Prussia. Poland became a Communist state under Russian reign.

Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to Stalin's demands. Russia suffered the most from Hitler's dream to create a strong Nazi Reich (government) in Europe, which would last a thousand years. I remember a classic answer when the Pope's name came up, as someone who wanted to join the conference. Stalin asked jokingly, "How many divisions has the Pope?" No wonder the Communist system was hated by most of the Russian citizens, and the neighboring countries feared it so greatly.

The following joke was told to me by a Russian soldier returning from active duty. When the aforementioned Third World Allies traveled to Yalta, the driver had to stop the car, because a cow stood in the road. Roosevelt stepped out of the car, and, with his cane, tried to chase the cow, but in vain. Then Churchill got out and angrily shouted at the animal, but also in vain. The cow simply looked at him as if laughing in the face of the strong leader of Britain. Stalin rushed toward the cow and embraced her, whispering something into her ear. The cow immediately trotted off the road. The other world leaders asked Stalin what he had said to make the cow run away so fast? He replied. "I told the cow, 'If you don't get off the road this very minute, I'll put you in a col-

lective farm.” For telling such a joke, in those days, you could expect to be punished severely.

### Fear and Apprehension—Our Way of Life

Once, when we invited some of my acquaintances over for an evening meal, a partisan prosecutor, who was among the invited and had enjoyed a couple drinks, said to me joking, “Mitia, (this was my name in the partisans) I see much evidence to convict and deport you to Siberia for at least eight to ten years. You live too richly. You remind me of a capitalist and we hate capitalists.” I did not pay attention to what he said and neither did the others present. We just laughed, but all of us lived the inner fear that unwarranted jealousy might stimulate a desire to complain to the proper Committee.

He was right, though. They were hardly able to secure a piece of meat for their families during most days and weeks and now they were having a meal of meat and other tasty things, as much as they wanted to eat. Meat, meat, where did we get meat? There was nowhere to buy it. Where did we get enough meat to serve guests? I told them where. “You want to know where? Very simple. When our calf was two months old, I asked Leon to slaughter it and cut it into as many kinds of meat as possible. We didn’t need the calf. I didn’t intend to sell it. We needed food for ourselves.”

Although Leon was not a partner to the calf, I gave them a nice chunk of it. We salted the meat and kept it in the basement. We ate meat every day, so we used it up during December, when it was cold and the meat would not spoil. That was a very good time to invite and treat a few people to a good dinner that would include both meat and vodka. I had learned an old adage since childhood: Live and let live. I had always tried, during my lifetime, not to exploit somebody’s fine treatment, but always to return kindness and generosity with good treatment. It has always paid off.

Under former rules of Communism in Russia, citizens were constantly under strict and secret watch by members of the Party. There were “rats” (informants) in each factory, in each office, in each institution, in each neighborhood. They were both volunteers for this dirty work and people who were forced to become tattlers. The staff in every school was instructed to find out from the students about their parents, their conversations, and their opinions about the system.

I remember a midnight visit in January or February of 1945. I heard somebody knocking at our window. I peered out and saw one of the teachers in my school motioning to me to let him come into the house. He was of the Polish nationality and a friend. When he stepped into our kitchen, he began to cry like a baby. I asked him what had happened. Had he and his wife had a fight? Was she ill? The man caught his breath and said, "I am afraid to death . . . so afraid, so afraid." He spoke in Polish. The previous day, he had been visited by someone from the local branch of the Communist Party with a message from the first secretary of the Party. The teacher was invited to have a friendly conversation with him at ten o'clock in the evening. The visit was to remain a secret. When he arrived at the given time, the head of the branch had first tried to find out about his background. He was not a member of the Communist Party.

After a short conversation, the chief told my Polish friend that he was bestowing upon him a very important mission, namely that he should become an informer about the parents of the school children and his fellow Polacks. He instructed him on ways to find out what they thought of the Party, the Soviet government, about Stalin and so forth.

He was to keep this mission a secret, even from his own wife. I quieted him down and we spent some time, in the dark, talking about the problem. We were both pained that such a gruesome task should be required to complicate our already troublesome lives. My friend added that he had been ordered to show up in a month's time with the information he had gathered.

A couple of weeks later, a teacher by the name of Anna told me that she wanted to talk to me about a very important matter. I knew that she was a member of the Party. She had formerly lived in Minsk and had been sent to teach in my school in Kobrin. I also knew that she carried with her the Red identification booklet. She was a very nice person and very friendly with Regina. She loved to play with baby Victor when she saw him. I was concerned about her request.

After school, she came over to me, looked around to see if anyone was watching us, and said in a low voice, "Dmitry Meyerovich, [in the Russian language, a person is called by his first name plus his father's first name, for example: Jonathan Victorivich. For females, the suffix is Ovna, as in Samantha Jonathan Ovna.] be careful. Be very careful," She continued, "I recently attended a meeting of the Party members, at which the topic was education of the children of this population. One

member of the Party, a Jew, said that it would be proper to keep an eye on the principal of the Bialorus school. He said that you were from the western part of the Bialorus, under Polish rule before the war. He added that you were a partisan. It is important for you to know how we teachers under my supervision conduct the propaganda against religion in the school.”

I thanked her very much for the secret information. If it had become known that she had revealed it to me, she would have been severely punished. I discussed the matter with Regina, and made sure she would be careful never to mix in any politics into her conversations with anyone. As for me, I learned how to manipulate. When it came to any mention of religion, churches, priests, the clergy, and so forth, I always turned the other way or disappeared entirely. I did not want to be present or seen as a participant in any such discussion with anyone.

Indeed, when the war was over and the authorities searched people to be sent to Siberia, I heard that some teachers in the region were severely punished for anticomunist activities. A Jew against a Jew, it didn't matter. In order to cover yourself, in order to look for a better career, according to the Party's stand, all such means were justified. My philosophy was that if a bad situation called for doing a bad thing, you were justified in doing it, because you were forced to do it, in order to survive. Sometimes, one has no other choice. But if, while doing this bad thing, you show initiative by adding unnecessary harm to the subject, then it is wrong, cruel, and immoral and deserves to be condemned. The following is a classic example.

When we were in the Pruzany Ghetto, we had to fulfill all kinds of the Germans' demands, like confiscating furniture, china, gold, silver, leather goods, and other luxury items. The job of collecting these things from the Jewish population was given by the committee to the Ghetto's Jewish police. Now, one policeman would approach the given family and announce the Committee's requests of whatever he was told to get. This man had to do this, because the Ghetto inhabitants were under the continuous threat of death. Another policeman, before he had even said a word to the owners of the house, would break the windows of the living room. He was considered mean and unnecessarily brutal and deserved to be condemned. The Jew mentioned above who spoke against me did it on his own initiative; he wanted to show his loyalty to the Party, by trying to bury someone else.

But, despite these incessant kinds of miseries and fears, the staffs of both the Russian high school and the Byelorussian school were praised.

The students progressed in their knowledge of the Russian and Byelorussian languages, and in math and other subjects.

Whenever an inspector from the Board of Education came from the county office to check out the schools regarding matters of education concerning the older population, he would stop at our house to get a tasty meal and a treat of whisky. I always had this bitter stuff in the house, but I usually refrained from drinking it when I was by myself. Some parents would give me homemade whiskey before New Year's or on other occasions and it was handy to have for entertaining guests. Even the mayor of Kobrin would stop by and we always found ourselves reminiscing about the partizanka, while sipping some samogon, as we used to do in the forests.

Early in December of 1944, the schools received notice that a few days before the New Year celebration, the teachers would receive some meat for the holiday. At the end of the school day, the teachers went to the custodian to get their portion of meat. However, they did not receive quality meat, but rather the bones of the slaughtered animals, ribs, heads, and legs. The custodian said he had been told that the best meat went to the county office to make salami. We did not have a choice but to boil a cabbage soup using the bones and then throw them out.

Early in January of 1945, the school was visited by the representative of the Teachers Union. At the meeting, the teachers complained about not receiving the promised meat, and having to settle for nothing but bones. About a week later, I was called into the local office of the Communist Party and given a big scolding for not educating the staff to understand how the system works. Namely, they should never complain about the decisions of the Party. If it was decided to make salami for the higher leaders of the Party or of the government, they had no right to say a word against that decision. I got the message and was grateful that I didn't get into big trouble, given the fact that the new member of the committee had already spoken out against me on another occasion. But, my friends—the partisans with whom I used to meet in our house for a glass of whisky and a slice of meat—backed me up and trouble was avoided. My friend, the Polish teacher who was ordered to report such incidents, had to report this meat episode at his next call to the investigator.

### Registration for Resettlement in Poland

After the conference in Yalta, a warmer wind began to blow in the country. A new law appeared in the newspapers, that the inhabitant Polaks and Jews had a right to leave Bialorussia, or the Ukraine, to be resettled in Poland. They would be given transportation and they could take their domestic animals, farming equipment, furniture, and other possessions with them. The farmers could be placed on better soil and in better houses in the territory of Germany, which the government of Russia would confiscate from the Germans.

It didn't take long before a committee was formed in Kobrin to handle these matters. The committee consisted of representatives of the Polish citizenry and Bialorussians. All we had to do was to appear before the committee and prove that we were a Polish citizen before the war, get our documents, and wait for the day of departure.

Well, the Polkas—mainly farmers, because the elite and other were sent by the Soviets to Siberia in 1940—were very happy to learn of this deal and started to register and prepare themselves for the exchange. Stalin issued this ordinance, because he wanted to get rid of the minorities, in order to claim later—in the event that the agreement would be on the table for discussion—that only the Bialorussian and the Ukraines inhabited their countries. Anyway, the *Polaks* went to Poland, even if it was a Communist Poland, because it was seen as better to be in Poland, than to be under Russian rule. This reminds me now of a sad Yiddish song we sing even now, when reminiscing about those times when we were refugees in German DP camps and other place:

Ah vohin zoln mir gain, ver can entfer mir?

Ah vochin zoln mir gain, ven farschlosn is yede teer?

Translation: Where shall we go, can one answer me? Where shall we go, when each door is locked?

When I read about it in the Russian newspaper *Pravda*, a pleasant feeling passes through all my body. To the West, to the West, away from the cold, freezing, freedom-less East. But, a few seconds later, I feel a horrifying fear. Regina, our child, and I did not want to wind up in Siberia.

I heard that the few Jews in Pruzany were going to register and to travel to Bialystok, which was under Polish rule. Well, they were either

single or married without children, but we were already a family. I was afraid to appear before the committee. I was even afraid to be seen near the committee or its office. I was considered by the authorities to be a good loyal citizen, an educator, a past secretary of the county's highest official. I was friendly with the prosecutor, with the mayor, and so on.

And all of a sudden, I was eager to pick up my *peklach* (meaning my belongings), and run away with my family to the West ? Such news would not be well received.

Regina and I could hardly sleep during the night, because of this tough dilemma. To register or not to register? Yes or no? These thoughts kept me like a prisoner day after day. If I registered and we decided to leave Kobrin, where should we go? The war had still not ended and we could go only to Poland. And once there, I would not be a free man. I would be in an anti-Semitic Communist Poland, where the Jews were as mistreated as in those pre Second World War days. Can the leopard change its spots?

In March of 1945, I told Regina that I was going to register the family to leave Russia. "I want you to come with me," I said. "Wait across the street and watch the office, in case the NKVD (National Commissioner of Internal Affairs) arrests me for trying to leave Russia, even though I have the right to register, as a past Polish citizen. You will know what happened to me." I walked in the direction of the office and noticed several uniformed officers, not the kind of uniforms worn by the regular police. I immediately froze in place, fear rising like bile in my throat. I am not ashamed to call it a kind of momentary paranoia. I was sure I would be arrested if I took one more step toward the office. I pointed to Regina, who was still watching me, and motioned that she should follow me back to the house.

In February or March of 1945, we had two visitors . . . accountant friends during the Russian occupation in 1939, who had worked at the Russian bank in Pruzany. When the Germans had attacked, in June of 1941, and when the Russian officers rushed to escape from Pruzany, these friends had been given preference and, somehow, they had managed to survive. They had been living someplace in the Soviet Union, where the German army had not reached, and now, they had recently returned to Pruzany. When they learned that Regina and I lived in Kobrin, they had decided to come visit us.

We were very happy to see them and to reminisce about the past. We treated them with

dinner, during which we spontaneously started to sing Hebrew and Yiddish songs in very low voices. We kept on singing deep into the night, and it felt like a new soul was born in our bodies. It was so sweet, so exciting, so encouraging, that I remembered their visit for many years to come. We discussed the possibility of our returned to Poland. They had an inbuilt fear, the same as mine. However, we decided to take the risk and register, they in Pruzany and I in Kobrin. Because they were single, they would register first, and would let me know how it went. I waited and waited and never heard. I learned that the registration would extend to the middle of May, 1945.

And then, on the 8th of May, the happy news arrived. The war was over! I rushed to register, but I was told that the registration had closed. No more applications were being accepted. One employee told me that in the town of Baranovich, the committee might still be active.

And so the very day that people were dancing in the streets, because the war was over, I found myself on a train, mending a broken heart and almost resigned to the fact that I was too late to register. The trip to Baranovich took three hours. I arrived there at noon and was given the same negative answer. The registration was over. I have no words to describe my distress. I had missed the opportunity. I had not acted properly during the given time period. All kinds of depressing thoughts came into my mind. We would be stuck in Kobrin forever.

Regina was also very heartbroken. We lost our stamina to act the way we did before. We tried not to show the bitterness that engulfed our minds and our souls. My only hope was that maybe the registrations would be resumed someday soon. One of my friends hadn't registered either and remained in Russia. Another one had and found himself in Israel.

I must write now about Ivan and Anna Pauk, the farmers who had given us shelter in their barn at the time when we sneaked out of the bunker. In order to describe what we did for them, I have to first tell the story about a lady doctor named Olla Goldfain. She lived and practiced her skills in Pruzany, until she was taken to the train station together with the other Jews. At the last moment, she had jumped from the train and was able to reach a convent. Thanks to one lady member of the convent (a nun), Dr. Olla survived the war. She returned to Pruzany and to her previous medical practice. She became so busy that she could not manage to see all the patients that came to seek medical help.

Now, it happened that the youngest daughter of the Pauks, our friends, was very sick. They came to Pruzany and tried to see Dr. Olla, but their attempts were in vain. A nurse told them that she could give them an appointment for three weeks later. When we found out about the sick daughter of our friends, that she may not survive if she didn't receive immediate attention, Regina wrote a letter about it to Dr. Olla Goldfain. A few days later, we heard from our friends the Pauks that Dr. Olla immediately took care of the sick girl and gave her the medicine that saved her life. The Pauks were very happy and thanked us cordially.

Then came another case where we had the opportunity to help the Pauks. At the beginning of 1945, we received a letter from Ivan Pauk, that he had received a draft card from the draft board in Pruzany. He had found out that Olla Goldfain was to be one of the doctors who examines the draftees. Regina wrote another letter, and when Ivan secretly handed it to Dr. Goldfain at the hearing, she declared him not fit for combat. Ivan was sent to serve in the far East, near the Chinese border, where he stayed until the war was over. The entire time he was in the army, I sent money to his wife Anna and to their children.

Our neighbor, a Bialorussian, had a very vicious dog. The yard was fenced, but just in the area back of our house, there were very wide cracks. Regina was very busy, one day, and didn't notice that little Victor had crawled out of the house. He kept on creeping, until he saw the dog in the next yard, and traveled until he found himself sitting close to the animal. When Regina rushed about to find the child, she almost fainted. When she approached the fence, the dog started to bark, as if he was ready to break its chain and attack her for trying to take the child from his possession.

She called him, "Victor, *koom tsoo mir*. Come to me." Victor merely looked at her and smiled. After about five minutes of this routine, she ran to the neighbor and was happy to find the lady home. The lady rushed to the dog and snatched him away from his babysitting duties. Victor did not understand the danger of his experience, but his mother cried hysterically. Her baby had been in grave danger, but apparently the dog had liked him. The neighbor corrected the fence, so Victor could not crawl anymore to meet with his pet.

As I mentioned before, we had a few chickens. We would take a few unpeeled potatoes outside to feed them. It seemed that Victor liked potatoes, too. When Regina wasn't watching him closely enough, he would try to bite on the potatoes he found on the ground. When I

would come home from school, Victor would rush to me and climb up my knees and into my lap. When his mother would call him, he ignored her, even if she tried to bribe him with something.

In May of 1945, Regina conceived again. We wanted a larger family. She hoped it would be a daughter . . . a replacement for our beloved Tsveeyale; but we were very happy, when it was a boy. You can often hear women talking about their children this way: a son is your son until he finds a wife; a daughter is daughter for the rest of your life. We considered ourselves lucky to have two fine and healthy sons. Self-evident, this time, was the fact that her pregnancy would take place under better conditions. We lived in a house. We were free, and not afraid of raids by the Germans, as had happened so often when Regina conceived in the *partisanika*.

During the summer of 1945, the Russian army returned home, so called in Russian, “*Na Rodinoo*” to the “Motherland.” They would occupy the schools, during vacation time, and any other places they could find to stay overnight or for a few days. I met many Jewish soldiers, and shared with them our experience during the war. Some of them found out what had happened to their families and were brokenhearted. I remember a Jewish captain who told me that, according to certain rumors circulating among the officers, Stalin intended to deport the Turkish population from the Island Kreem, which is near the Caspian Lake, and have the Jews settle there, to be a Jewish province or state. The Turks were not faithful, and had collaborated with the German army. They were sent to Siberia, when the war was over. This rumor was very exciting, but it proved to be false. Instead of a country, the murderer Stalin ordered the arrest of all the Jewish intellectuals—doctors, writers, poets, musicians, teachers, and others—to be shot to death. Again the rumors circulated, that this was the result of aspirations for a Jewish independence—a Jewish state in the Crimea Islands. The killing of Jews was the truth; the other rumors were just that . . . rumors.

You remember the story of how I had hidden five golden ruble coins near a heavy tree, while standing on guard protecting the partisan otrad? Well, it bothered me that we could use the coins and I knew where they were, but it would be difficult and potentially dangerous to retrieve them. Finally, I decided to go back into the woods, where our detachment had been located, and try to find them. Now, I realize it was a life-threatening decision.

The dangers were many. How would I get to the forest? Suppose an army truck driver dropped me off at the area I pointed out to him, and I walked into the woods and lost my way? This was a very big possibility. The forest was thick and immense. As you know, the Chapayev Brigade had been liberated by the Red Army in July of 1944. We had left the forests and followed the army in the direction of Kobrin. Then the draft board had started to call up army recruits from the civilian population up to the age of sixty and even to sixty-six. Many men, who did not want to serve had escaped into the same forests where we partisans had been located only a short time before this. It could be risky to put myself into the same territory with frightened men who were not under any particular leadership. And there could be no end to other unforeseeable difficulties.

My plan was to stop at the home of a fellow who lived near our camp. Of course, I had no way of knowing whether or not he still lived there, and even if I were to locate him, I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't harm me or turn me in to the authorities. Another problem was how I would make my way back home, if and when my excursion was completed.

Of course, I also worried about what would happen to Regina, who was pregnant with our baby, and to our toddler Victor. Was I crazy to even contemplate going on such dangerous mission? Had I lost my mind? Well, I have no good answers, as I think about these things in retrospect. I ignored every threat I could think of. I was fearless. Maybe I was obsessed with the notion that I had been a partisan and had escaped death many times. I felt I could do it again.

I don't remember how I got to the forest, probably by stopping an army vehicle and handing the driver a bottle of *samogon*. Although my fear level was high, luck was with me. I found the fellow I was looking for at the same location where he lived before the war. When I entered his shack, he was surprised to see me. He told me about the dangers that lurked in the woods. I told him the purpose of my trip, by telling a little white lie. I was cautious about mentioning the word gold. It might be a red flag and put my life at risk. Instead, I said that when I had joined the partisans, I had my diploma with me . . . the one I had received when I graduated from the teachers' college. In order to save it, I had hidden it in a hole which I had dug at the base of the tallest tree near the camp. I needed the diploma; without it, I could not work as a teacher.

Good enough. He took a spade, made a slight dig in the place I pointed out to him and very quickly pulled out the jar with the coins. I immediately reversed my story and explained to him why I hadn't felt I could tell him the truth from the beginning. If we hadn't found the jar, the word "gold" needn't be mentioned. He understood and didn't ask me any questions. We went back to his shack, where his wife prepared a nice snack. I gave him two of the coins and he was very happy. He gave me a bottle of *samogon* and guided me out to the road. There, he stopped a passing army pick-up truck, and I soon returned to my home from what could have been a very dangerous mission. I sold the coins and received \$2500 for them, which was very useful in our future odyssey.

One of the orders passed down from the Communist Party leaders in our community concerned the payment of taxes. The farmers—mostly Bialorussians—were made to bring to Kobrin a portion of their produce production, as part of their obligation, in this case, potatoes. The fellow who was in charge of handling this project was a neighbor of mine. I remember an early morning in the fall of 1945. As was my habit, I walked over to our barn to see if the shepherd had taken our cow to the pasture. The door to the barn was open. I peered inside and was literally stunned by what I saw. I had purchased a second little piglet, after butchering the first one for food, and lying right next to him in the pen was a huge hog of about 300 pounds or more! I stood there gaping at this sight, completely puzzled as to how the hog had gotten there, without my knowledge. Who could it belong to?

I strode over to my neighbor's house (not the owner of the dog) and tapped on his window.

He peeked out from behind the curtain, as if wondering who was daring to waking him up so early. I asked him if he owned a huge hog? He nodded. He, too, was stunned speechless, when I told him that it was in my pen and had obviously waddled over to visit my little piggy. Well, he was profusely thankful that I had come to tell him, rather than butcher it for my own use. He thanked me many times. But he didn't feel that a thank you was good enough. "Listen, Moysey," he said. "I am going to do something for you, for your kindness. Come in to the office of agriculture. I will give you a certificate saying that as a principle of a school you are entitled to receive fifty kilograms of potatoes for the whole winter. Come tomorrow morning to the place where the farmers drop of their potatoes for the government to place in storage."

When I arrived the next morning, he took the certificate and ordered one farmer to haul his wagon with potatoes to the school. Then, my neighbor returned the certificate to me and told me to return again the next day. The next day, the farmer carried even more sacks of potatoes to the basement, as he was told to do by my friend and neighbor.

This procedure was repeated the next day as well. I showed the certificate to the clerk who directed the traffic of delivered produce, and I had already in the basement about 300 kilograms of potatoes. I showed this document six or seven times. Well, it was not considered stealing. I got the potatoes legally. Each time the clerk sent a wagon of potatoes to me, he gave me a confirmation slip, until I had about 1,500 kilograms of potatoes in the basement. I shared some with every staff member in my school and they were so grateful and happy.

Every time I met my neighbor, he greeted me with a lovely smile for saving his pig in my barn. If the pig had walked away from the immediate area, somebody would have snatched it away and my neighbor would have lost it.

Once again, our cow stopped providing us with milk, as she was about to give birth to another calf. Despite this, we were not hungry from lack of essential food. We had potatoes, we bought bread, we still had pork. The very fat part of the meat is salted heavily for preservation purposes; it can be used with bread, in cooking soups, and also for frying. We also had some eggs, when we could find where the chickens had laid them! Sometimes it took me a long time to first find the nests in the barn, in the yard, or in the barn attic, before I could return to the house with a basketful of eggs.

The students in my school showed encouraging progress, and at teachers or parents meetings the staff always got good marks. But Regina and I were still depressed about missing our opportunity to leave for the West. Even Poland, which was also a communist state under Stalin's boot, had a tiny crack in the window to the West. We heard that Regina's two cousins, Shmerl and Joseph, the Segel brothers, the Rosenbaums, and other Pruzsaner Jews partisan survivors had left Bialorussia to the West. We were indescribably worried about our future. We heard only slight hints that the registration to leave Russia would be renewed. It gave us some hope.

The rumors were based on the fact that not all the Polish population had registered, and Stalin wanted a complete cleansing of this minority.

A few Jews lived in Kobrin and I used to meet them occasionally. One was a native of the town, but the other was from Warsaw. They had been in the Red Army and were discharged when the war was over. I became very friendly with the fellow from Kobrin. We trusted each other, and when we were alone, we would talk about our life before the war, and about the present and future under the Communist regime.

He told me, once, that he and the other Jew had found a way to earn some income. Namely, they would go to a nearby village and purchase a few kilograms of *slonina*—salted pork in Polish. They would then travel with it to the capital Minsk and barter the fat pork for both hard and soft leather pieces. This kind of underground activity was forbidden by law and severe punishment would be meted out to whomever was caught doing it. My friends would return from Minsk on the late train at midnight, in order to avoid being seen by any evil eye . . . I mean the police.

I knew about this operation, but never in this world would I expect them to put me in trouble as a collaborator, because of my knowledge. One early morning, I was about to check on the cow and when I opened the door to our vestibule . . . oh, my goodness! what did I see? It was a sack with leather—a full sack of punishable contraband. I rushed to the home of my friend and woke him up. I ordered him to come immediately and take away the dangerous (worse than explosives) material. I literally chased him from our premises, saying, “Go, go, go fast!” The next day, he came to apologize for what he and his friend had done. He said they were afraid to carry the sack to their place and thought that my vestibule was the safest location to drop it off during the night. With such friends, the proverb says, who needs enemies?

There is no need to speculate what would have happened to me and even to Regina, if the police had found the contraband in our vestibule. If the policeman were to be a former partisan from my old brigade, maybe I would have stood a chance. Maybe, I could have persuaded him to look the other way, but I doubt it. On the other hand, if I been reported to the NKVD *Komisar Vnootrenech* (Internal) *Diel* (matters), they would surely have accused me of being a leader of a ring of speculators on the black market, of betraying their trust, and on and on. The verdict would have been fifteen years hard labor in Siberia or death by a firing squad.

Fear. It was always with us.

Regina added this event to her list of miracles. We had been granted so many during our years of wandering in World War Two. Since we came through this one without even a broken bone, I forgave my friends for putting us in such a hazardous predicament. They promised not to travel any more to Minsk or to deal with black-market contraband. They lived up to their promise, and I did not hold any enmity against them.

## Registration to Leave Kobrin

Regina's and my highest hopes were finally realized. The registration process allowing us to leave Byelorussia was opened once again.

This time, I did not hesitate. I walked straight into the proper office and signed the application for my family to return to Poland. No questions were asked. I received the needed documents and *haida!* (Polish for *away we go!*)

As I stepped out from the office, whom should I meet? *Oy vey. Oy vey!* It was Sashka, a past partisan friend who was a veterinary doctor. When the Germans attacked Russia, in June of 1941, he hadn't managed to escape, but had been stuck in Kobrin. Sashka hid as long as he could and, then, not having any other choice, he found himself in the bushes, near the forest. He was hoping to meet partisans. It just happened that I was returning from raiding a village for food with the group under my command. He ran out of the bushes, identified himself as a captain in the Red Army, and begged for mercy to take him with us into the forest. Well, I did not want to make such a decision on my own, as he was an unknown. I told him to remain in the bushes and wait until I could get permission to bring him in. I gave him some bread, cheese, and fruit and promised to see him as soon as possible.

When I reported the incident to the superior command, they praised me for acting properly and for not taking him with us. Who knew whether or not he was a spy. On the other hand, if the man were honest, we would have to accept him. I was given permission to question him and to use my judgment. Next morning, I took the Politrook fellow with me who was in charge of political clearance; his job was similar to that of a *mashgiach*. A *mashgiach* is the name of a Jew who checks out the slaughter house, or a butcher store, or restaurants, to see if the meat is kosher. Anyway, a group of five of us met Sashka in the bushes.

We thoroughly questioned him, he proved to be suitable to be a partisan, and we accepted him into our ranks.

Sashka was thankful, indeed, immensely grateful for what I did for him. Later, when he had established himself in our otriad, he expressed his pleasure to me. "Mitia (my partisan name), I will never but *never*, forget the loaf of bread and other food you gave me when I was so hungry I thought I would die, while hiding out in the bushes."

I describe the story of this particular event, because Sashka instilled in me a fear regarding our decision to leave Russia. He saw me coming out from the Registration Committee office. He was taken aback and asked, "Mitia, did you just register to leave Russia? I must say I am both surprised and disappointed. Russians saved your life! We need people like you to restore the Motherland."

It was not the right occasion or time to make an attempt to win in a such a touchy discussion, when you are still in the lion's throat. I put on a sad face, and said, "Sashka, I feel great sorrow over leaving Kobrin, where I have so many former partisan friends. I have a good job, a nice apartment, and I am honored to be a principal of a Bialorussian school." Although my grandmother had taught me to always tell only the truth, so that I would never have to remember what I had said, at this moment I used another white lie. It would not harm anybody. "But I'm afraid I must leave and travel to Lodz (a very famous industrial town in western part of Poland) to be with my oldest sister. She survived the concentration camp and Auschwitz and finds herself very sick in a hospital. We lost our whole family and she cannot travel to be with me. I must travel to help her. It is my duty. And as you know, Poland is also a Communist state, so actually it doesn't make any difference if I am here or there."

Sashka shook his head, and as we parted he said, "Mitia, wherever you go, we will catch up with you." These few words sank to the depths of my mind, until my eyes saw the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.

When I told Regina about our registration, she was happy. When I told her about my conversation with Sashka, she felt the same fear I was feeling. We remained standing, staring at each other, totally engulfed in thinking about what I had done. We would leave Bialorussia and travel to Poland . . . but where in Poland? The Polish emigrants who had already left Kobrin had been assigned places in which to settle. The farmers had been assigned farms in territories that had been confiscated by the Soviets. All the other members of Polish nationality had the addresses of their former homes, if they had left one. Entire Polish towns,

however, had been cleansed of Jews, by the murdering Gestapo and their collaborators. We had no answer to our painful question.

Many years later, we heard a pretty Italian song, *Que Sera—* whatever will be will be.

We had made it to that point in time and we would not lose hope for the future.

## Election Day and the Birth of Chaim

On a November morning of 1945, I noticed a military car had stopped in front of the entrance to the school. A tall and imposing army man got out and strode toward the entrance. A wild thought passed like lightning through my mind. Was this the result of my conversation with Sashka? Had he spoken ill of me to the authorities? I felt fear rise to my throat. I could feel my heart pounding against the walls of my chest. Not now. Not when we were so close to leaving the country. You may wonder, why I was so fearful of some last minute reprisal. I was a decorated partisan, supposedly entitled to some degree of privilege and protection. I remembered what the assistant principal had told me in confidence and of what kind of assignment he had been given. Daily life consisted of walking on eggshells. I knew I was walking on them at this very moment.

Those days, under Communist Party rule, anything was possible. Somebody could have turned me in for supposedly committing a false crime, for speaking ill words against the system, or as a retaliation for my trying to leave the country. Anyway, within a minute, my sense of fear vanished. The military man was a major in the Red Army. He shook hands with me, gave me his name and rank, and said, “On the tenth day of February, 1946, we are holding elections throughout the entire Soviet Union. We want the people to have a hand in electing the highest leaders in the country. For voting purposes, the town of Kobrin is divided into two districts. I am the chairman of the election board, which will be housed in the Bialorussian school. I would like you to be my assistant—deputy chairman of the elections.”

I was, needless to say, dumbfounded.

The major continued. “One of your duties will be to activate your staff to go from door to door and register the people to vote, after school hours. Each teacher should pick a neighborhood and arrange to explain the nature of voting in the Soviet Union, at Sundays meetings. They should invite the candidates to meetings and introduce them to the

population. Of course, all these activities will be accomplished voluntarily.” Before the major left, he added that the school would get a telephone and I should stay in contact with him, to report how things were proceeding.

Although this event happened more than fifty-six years ago, I am as shocked now as I was then. In normal times, I would have been happy. To be assigned as the deputy chairman of an election district serving the highest Russian government was certainly an outstanding honor. I should have been proud of myself—a Jew who was not even a native of Russia, but originally a Polish citizen. I was being empowered with the authority to decide who was not allowed to vote. I would head a staff of secretaries until the day of the election. Yes, it was an honor, but, I could not rejoice over this assignment. I had already given up my Russian citizenship and accepted the Polish one, when I had registered to leave Russia. Now, I had a serious dilemma. Would I be punished for saying nothing about this to the major and, essentially, accepting the job? Would my registration be cancelled?

All these thoughts had gone through my mind, as I was talking with the major, but in the Soviet Union, you didn’t have a right to express your objections. There is a saying for this: “*Nie znayesh?-naoachim, nie chochesh zastavim.*” It means, “You don’t know how? We will teach you. If you refuse to do it, we will force you!”

The very next morning, a telephone was installed in my office. I approached the teachers and suggested that we divide the district by streets. I also suggested that they should join the teachers from the Russian schools and start by forming teams of two. They should meet after school hours to prepare lists of eligible voters. Some of the staff whispered to those next to them, “Let them sell us shoes, socks, and clothing. Whatever comes to town is shipped directly to the boutiques of the privileged. But like the French say. ‘*volens nolens.*’ We don’t have a choice. We must do this, whether we want to or not.”

During December of 1945 and January of 1946, the teachers and others walked from house to house and prepared the list of future voters. I examined the list for the street on which Regina and I lived and found our names there. I had increased anxiety. I wanted to be removed from my job. I decided to speak to the mayor of the town, who had been a partisan in the brigade. Each time, he would say, “*Mitia, ladno* means everything is okay. Don’t worry.”

But I did worry. Regina was expecting another baby. She was due to deliver during the second week of February, in 1946. How would having our names on the voting list affect her?

The elections were held on the tenth of February. Everything was ready. The largest room in the Bialorussian school was furnished with tables, chairs, and booths, which were covered with slogans of the Communist Party, pictures of Stalin, Lenin, Woroshilov, Kaganovich and of other leaders of the Soviet Union. The day before the election, I was told to spread a rumor that the first two hundred voters would receive candy and cookies as a reward for voting. The election was scheduled to begin at six o'clock in the morning and to close in the early evening.

I arrived early on election day to preside over the activity. I saw a line of about two hundred people, including mothers with their children, eager to be the first to vote and to receive the cookies and candies. I drew a line behind the last person and then handed out the expected reward. The treats were supplied by a local warehouse, which had been ordered by the mayor to provide them.

All the while I was performing my duties, I was thinking of Regina, who was due to give birth at any moment. I hoped that the infant in her belly would wait until after the elections to make his or her appearance. It was not to be. Imagine the stress that engulfed me, when Leon approached me about eleven o'clock. Regina had needed to be taken immediately to the hospital. He had rushed to the neighbor's house, and this neighbor had hitched up his horse and wagon and taken her, along with the custodian's wife. Once in the hospital, their daughter had taken over Regina's care.

I wanted to be with her during such an important time in our lives. I approached my friend, the mayor, and whispered to him about the situation. I asked him if he could possibly replace me. He explained me that I must be present. My absence may cause a problem. However, I could take a two-hour lunch break and he would replace me until I returned. I knew I couldn't afford to get in trouble for any reason. Not when I was presiding over the elections when I wasn't even a citizen anymore and didn't have the right to vote. I remained on duty, with one eye on the clock.

By one o'clock, the mayor returned from his lunch and I rushed to the hospital. Regina was happy to see me and understood why I had been delayed and why I could only be with her a short time. I was lucky

to have access to a telephone. I made several calls and the nurses informed me each hour about the birthing progress. Little Victor was being taken care by the custodian's wife. She told me later that he was confused. He spoke a few sentences in the Russian language and kept asking, "Mama, where is Mama? Papa, where is Papa?" It was heartbreaking not to be with my son and my wife.

It was expected that all eligible voters would arrive within the designated time period and cast their ballots. So by four o'clock that afternoon, I sent messengers to those who had failed to show up and had them escorted to the voting hall. Many complied, although reluctantly, and others were drunk and didn't understand why they were being bothered. What I expected came to pass. A messenger came to me and reported that he had knocked at the door of Moysey Yudievich's home and no one had answered. Luckily, he didn't know my surname. I stood mutely and listened to my name as it was called as an absentee. It seemed to me that I was standing on a floor of red-hot coals. The mayor tried to calm me down, assuring me that even if my situation became known, no harm would come to me. I hadn't committed a crime and as long as I breathed the Russian air I was serving the "Motherland Russia."

About six o'clock that evening, I received a call from the hospital that Regina had given birth to our child. It was another son! I whispered the Jewish greeting used for centuries on such occasions. *Mazal Tov*—good luck. My wish was carried by the air waves to Regina. My mood changed immediately from being nervous to being cheerful. I didn't pay attention to whether or not they called out my name a dozen more times as an absentee voter. My mind was occupied on the thought . . . it's a boy, a boy, a healthy boy! Born in Kobrin, Province of Brest, Litovsk, Bialorussia. [Actually, Harvey is listed as being born on the thirtieth of September, 1945. The reason I had to change the date was that when I registered to leave for Poland, I was told by the chairman of the committee that only those people were allowed to leave Bialorussia, who were born before December 31, 1945. I had no choice but make him older by a few months. It is possible that I mixed up the dates!]

At nine o'clock that evening, the major showed up and thanked me for a job well done. He said, "Collect all the ballots, but do not count them. Just make four or five packages and tie them with a string." He presented me with an already prepared report, written by him. It said: OUT OF 3,660 ELIGIBLE VOTERS, 99 PERCENT VOTED. OUT OF THESE

VOTES, 98 PERCENT VOTED FOR THE PARTY OF LENIN AND STALIN.

Since the party receiving the highest percentage of votes automatically received all the other votes, it meant that the candidates of the Communist Party won the elections by 100 percent. It was signed by the major, as chairman of the voting district. The major continued, "You will read the results of the elections to the representatives of the unions and to any others present. After this, we will celebrate the success of the election with some vodka and sandwiches." The celebration lasted until late at night. Throughout the evening, I made several more calls to the hospital. I could not leave the election hall until the office hierarchy was ready to leave. Unfortunately, he was "half in Yiddish" or as it is otherwise known *farshnioshked*—half under the influence of whisky.

Early in the morning of February 11, 1946, I got a ride to the hospital and found Regina in good health, and our new son, a cute little fellow, also in good condition. After a few days, Regina and I named the baby Chaim. When we came to the USA, one of my cousins suggested we call him Harvey, which sounded somewhat like Chaim. Regina's father shared the name of Chaim, so our son carries his grandfather's name. In Hebrew, Chaim means "life."

The next day, Victor was happy, because his mother was home and she had brought him a baby to look at and to pet. I was happy, because the mother and child were healthy. It is hard to describe the feeling of surviving all our hardships, while building a family. The births of our sons meant that our generations-old families of Abraham Meyer Judovich and Rachel, and the Chaim and Rasha Kaplans were not wiped out by the murderous Nazi beasts, but would continue to exist forever. It was a pleasant feeling and both Regina and I were extremely joyful. Soon after the election and Chaim's birth, I remembered the event of the captain insisting we form an underground Communist unit among the partisans of my detachment. I had not been afraid to tell him why I would refuse to sign such an application. The doctor had said to me, "Moisei, don't sign. You will go to America." I was lucky and had been rejected, so now Regina and I looked forward to the day we would receive permission to leave for Poland. From there, we hoped to emigrate to either the United States or to Argentina to join my two sisters.

When we received notice of the date of our deportation, I made arrangements with the parents of one of my students to take us to the train. The moment finally arrived. I received a postcard stating that our day of departure would be the fifth of June, 1946. So, we had a month

to prepare ourselves for the trip. We were in high spirits, but as I write about this event in retrospect, I know the pleasure I felt was due to the fact that Regina was well, that we had two beautiful sons, and that I had survived the Communist elections with “no broken bones.” I had been lucky, once again. No one had discovered the secret the mayor of Kobrin and I had kept to ourselves that night. While everyone was speculating on the whereabouts of a mysterious Yudievich, he was in that very room presiding over the voting fiasco.

## Back to Poland

Yes, we were happy to finally take our leave of Bialorussia and to return to Poland. But, happy about what? Did we know where to go? Did we know how long the trip would take? Did we know what kind of people we would meet at the end of our train ride? Did I know if I would be able to find work in our new destination and earn enough money to sustain our standard of living? What I knew was that I was taking my family on a train to the unknown. I had no idea of what I would feed them on the train. I had many questions, but few answers. I focused on one thing only. Leave. Leave, without seeking answers to your questions. I would figure out the answers as the problems arose. The custodian and his wife were again exceedingly helpful. Leon slaughtered the pig, which weighed about 120 pounds, and made salami and heavily salted slices of pork, so that it would not spoil during our trip. He placed the pork in a valise. My intention was to sell some of the pork and the salami and buy food, whenever we reached our new homeland.

I had to overcome another major difficulty. When I told the Board of Education chairman that I was leaving for Poland with my family, he was unhappy, but sympathetic. He said, "I cannot stop you from leaving Bialorussia, but I can insist that you get a replacement to finish the school year as principal of the junior high school, before you leave."

This was a very serious demand and hard to fulfill, because there was a shortage of skilled people for this kind of job. I turned to some of the staff, but no one wanted to take on the responsibility of becoming a principal. I was frantic. This was the way it worked then. I must get a replacement, or perhaps my leaving would be prohibited. After talking and talking and presenting my desperate situation to everyone in the school, one teacher finally agreed to take the task upon herself to enable me to resign. The chairman of the Board gave me a very good letter of recommendation, iterating the characteristics of my work as principal of the Bialorussian High School in Kobrin.

During the last few days before our departure date, we said our goodbyes to our friends and acquaintances. Then on the fifth of June,

we put our bundles on the wagon. Regina, our two sons and I started on our next odyssey together. We had decided to take our cow with us, and I led her with a rope I had tied to the back of the wagon.

Regina boarded the boxcar, and I handed her all the bundles, valises, and packages holding our worldly goods. As I was about to lead the cow into the car, I was stopped by an officer and told that I needed to present a statement from a veterinarian that the cow was healthy. Frustrated with this last minute snag, I quickly made my way back to Sasha, the partisan vet, who had once told me "We will reach you, wherever you will go." Nervous about his reception and willingness to grant my request, I showed him the cow. Fortunately, he gave me the needed document, but not without repeating his threatening words. "We will reach you. You will not run away from us." I took this threat very seriously, until we finally reached the shores of the United States of America.

While leading the cow back to the train, I met a young Jew, Sam, who had just been freed from his service as a soldier that very morning. He was feeling anxious, because none of his family had survived the cruelties of war and he was alone. I told him to rush to the committee and ask permission to leave Bialorussia. Fortunately, my advice proved solid, and I took him into the box car with us. He was very helpful during the trip, which lasted an entire week. The little ones had a tough time. We had no proper food to give them. Chaim was breast fed, of course, but Victor had to exist on little more than boiled eggs, which I prepared before we boarded the train.

We were three adults, two infants, and a cow, all traveling to Poland, without a destination. No one would be meeting us. We had no house awaiting our arrival. We decided we would sit on the train until it came to a complete stop. This was the only way we could leave Bialorussia and we were determined to do that.

The issue of food was not only a problem for us adults, it was a problem for the cow. Although I had taken a few bundles of hay, they only lasted three days. Then the cow grew hungry and unruly. She bellowed loudly and tried to bolt from her confines. The cow wanted more sustenance. I found a way to please her. I had foreseen this event, so I had taken a sickle with me. Whenever the train stopped for more than a few minutes, both Sam and I would hop off and cut some of the grass that grew along the tracks. We would throw it into the car and make the cow happy for a few more hours.

When we left Bialoruss, we had gotten rid of the medals awarded to us for our service as partisans. We were afraid to take them with us, because there were rumors that we would undergo a thorough checking by an electronic device and may have trouble. So, what did I do to save the certificates? We had a big ball of wool yarn that Regina was intending to use to make something for the baby. I had carefully folded the paper certificates into small squares and rolled the entire ball of yarn over them. We were not checked, after all, but, in those days, who could be sure what might happen. Maybe we would have been sent to the White Bear—Siberia.

On the fifth day of our journey, the train stopped in the town of Lodz for about eight hours. I exited the train and took a walk in the streets of the town. Imagine my surprise, when I met two young Jews.

They told me that at a nearby house, a few other Jews were temporarily stationed—. Jews who had also recently left Russia. I rushed to this house to find out where these Jews were headed. When I entered the dwelling, one of the Jews told me that, ironically, they had spoken with my sister Liba's husband's (they perished) brother, Shmooel Pelerstein, the day before! He had asked them to be on the lookout for his relative and family, who might stop in Lodz on their way to Poland. Shmooel had instructed them to inform me—if they should meet me—that his destination was the town of Shteteen. Shteteen was a port town on the Baltic, which the Russians had taken away from Germany and given to Poland. Shmooel had also given them an address where I could find him.

I was overjoyed with this information. I rushed back and told Regina. Our mood drastically changed for the better. We had miraculously received an unexpected tip as to where we should stop. We had a destination and a goal. We'd travel to the town of Shteteen and meet my brother-in-law's brother. Perhaps this town would become our new home base and we'd have a family member there to make us feel welcome.

## Shteteen: Stopover to Berlin.

Shteteen (in German, called Deershaoo) is a port town on the Baltic Sea. It belonged to Germany until the end of the Second World War when the Russian government gave the whole province to Poland as compensation for territories that Russia had taken from Poland . . . namely Western Ukraine and Western Bialorussia.

Our train finally came to a stop and we climbed out, tired, dirty, and hungry. We stood in the street with our luggage and our cow, wondering where to go. I urged Sam to check out the neighborhood, to see if he could spot a vacant house. Within thirty minutes, he returned with the news that there was a windowless empty building nearby. He had also spotted a station wagon driver who had agreed to take us there. We boarded the station wagon and Sam led the cow. In a few short minutes, we reached our “hotel” accommodations. I want to stress that we still had our suitcase of pork and salami, which we had avoided eating in order to have something to sell upon our arrival.

Before we started to take care of the youngsters, I knew I had to get rid of our most dear treasure . . . the cow. I would not simply abandon it. I walked a short distance and saw a German fellow. He gladly agreed to buy the cow and offered me fifty marks for it. I was happy to hand the cow to the man, because I knew I had secured a good home for the animal, which had served us so well during the two years she was in our possession.

I learned from this man that there were close to 20,000 Jews living in Shteteen. I was astonished by this news. How did it happen that so many Jews had decided to make their new home in a formerly German town? This phenomenon and the activities of the Jewish brigade in Europe when the war was over—mainly in Communist Poland—had a profound role in our next move. Here is a brief recapping of the story of how Jews wound up in Shteteen.

History of Shteteen

On a freezing night in February of 1940 in occupied Poland, the Russian Security Police had rounded up all those people whom they considered disloyal to the Russian regime and deported them in locked cargo train cars to Siberia. Among them were a few Jewish families from my home town of Pruzany. When the war was over, these people were allowed to leave Siberia and to travel wherever they wanted. Among these detainees were thousands and thousands of Jews. They left Siberia and settled temporarily in Middle Asia, mostly in Tashkent. Then came the time when these former Polish citizens could leave Russia for good and travel back to Poland.

Life is full of unexpected surprises. Those Jews, who were once considered enemies of the Russian government, had lived through their ordeal until given the opportunity to travel west. Those who chose to remain in their towns and in their homes had been killed by the Nazis. The Jews from Tashkent and other towns were given free traveling rights. They boarded trains and, in June of 1946, arrived in Poland. But they did not want to stay there and return to their birth towns. They did not want to remain in unsafe Poland . . . in the land where Jewish blood had spilled into the streets. So, they remained on the trains until they stopped in Shteteen. And, now, Regina and I were doing the same thing.

The Polish government was in favor of this choice. They were more than glad to get rid of the Jews who had survived the war. Some might demand their homes, their stores, their factories, or other confiscated goods. I don't know when, but a committee of Jews was formed in Shteteen, and it headed Jewish affairs, economics, health problems, and other concerns. To the outer world, we were considered refugees . . . stateless.

#### United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association

Forty-four nations held a conference at the White House, on November 9, 1943, and formed an institution they named UNRRA, which means United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association. The stated purpose of the agency was the repatriation and support of refugees who were to come under Allied control at the war's end. Various civilian relief teams were charged with a long list of relief efforts and for certifying several welfare agencies, especially those who directed their operations in refugee camps. They started sending trucks with food to camps, towns and areas with a significant number of refugees. Not only food,

but also clothes, and medicine. We benefited from these rescue shipments.

Now, when the war was over, Germany found itself occupied by our four allies—the USA, France, Britain and Russia. The USA headquarters was in the city of Munich, in Germany. The Jews who survived the concentration camp Auschwitz, and others, rushed to the American occupation zone. They were settled in different refugee camps.

No Jew wanted to remain in Shteteen for good. Everybody looked for a way to go further west. Their destination was Berlin, where a Jew's committee was very active on Jewish affairs. Once they were able to reach the Jewish committee in Berlin, they found themselves under American supervision. From Berlin, these refugees were sent to different camps in Germany, mostly in the part that was under USA rule.

UNRRA continued to send huge trucks with food for the refugees on an almost daily basis. The drivers would unload their trucks in Shteteen and return empty to Berlin. When you are in need, you learn many inventions. Some Jews got friendly with the drivers, who agreed to load up their empty trucks with Jews and drop them off in front of the Jewish committee in Berlin. For payment, of course. The drivers would then bribe the guards on the boundary between Poland and Germany. They would hand them a few bottles of whisky and away they went. When such a truck laden with food would arrive in Shteteen, dozens of Jews—mainly the young ones—would follow the loaded truck. When the truck was emptied, the “*machers*” would take action. *Macher* is a Jewish nickname for someone who arranges illegal things. In this case, it represented those who took money for finding a place on the empty trucks for Jews wishing to go to Berlin. There was always a crowd pushing others away, in order to climb onto a truck. Whoever didn't have the required dollars was removed from the truck.

What did this have to do with us? After a few days, I also approached the *machers* and begged them to take my family to Berlin. I had enough money, which I had gotten from selling our apartment in Pruzany. One *macher* was very nice; he wanted to help me, but he said it would be impossible to board with my entire family. The crowd was too unruly and it was no place for a baby and toddler. He advised me to look for other ways to reach Berlin. He even mentioned the word Breicha—escaping.

What is Breicha? It is the escape to what is known today as the state of Israel. Until May of 1948, Israel existed under the mandate of

Britain. This right was given to England, by the so-called League of Nations, to fulfill the promise of the Belfour Declaration to build a home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Indeed, after First World War, Jews—mainly young people—started to migrate to Palestine. Jews called it Eretz Israel—the land of Israel. In my opinion, the book *Exodus*, by Uris, is worthwhile reading, to learn about this phenomenon in Jewish history. Although it is a novel, it is based on truth. When WW II broke out, about 600,000 Jews lived in Erets Israel.

As the war continued, mainly Israeli Jews wanted to join the Allies and fight against the Hitlerites. After many negotiations and increased pressure, the Britains finally agreed to incorporate a Jewish brigade, which bravely fought against the Germans with the British army. In May of 1945, when the war was over, many soldiers from the Jewish brigade remained in Europe to perform a very important mission. Not one, but a few missions. England had closed the migration doors for Jews wanting to live in Palestine, so they formed an organization and illegally led contingencies of Jews from the refugee camps to Erets Israel.

Another sad thing took place during the war years. Many Jewish families were able to secure homes for their children in the homes of non Jewish families, for the purpose of hiding them from the Nazis. This took place mostly in Poland. We had tried to place Tsveeyah with a Polish family, but, unfortunately, the plan failed. Some of those children were converted to Christianity. When their surviving parents returned to get them, after the war, many of their foster parents refused to give them back. By this time, they had learned to love them as their own. The members of the Breichah (in Hebrew means escaping to Israel) were able to bribe some of these people and to release many of these children to their parents. They also searched for many children who were orphans and took them illegally to Palestine. Many members of the Breicha visited the refugee camps and tried to lead those interested in leaving to Palestine. Money talks.

Among the Breicha, former soldiers were representatives of different parties and organizations in Israel. They tried to canvas future members for their ideological movements.

### A Way Out of Poland

All this I learned in the first few days after we sold our beloved cow. Our first night, we had slept in the windowless building found for us by Sam. I was not afraid of thieves, because we had nothing to steal. How-

ever, Sam and I still kept guard. The next morning, we went to the official site of the Jewish committee. First of all, we had to see a nurse who checked us out and, especially, the health of the boys. We were then put on a list and received some food, dishes and utensils. I also located and went to the place where I expected to meet Shmooel, but I learned that he had already left the town. However, his friend promised to help me in our further journey.

Later, I learned that Shmooel Perelshtein had left Shteteen for Berlin. The group with whom he tried to cross the boundary between Shteteen and Berlin had been intercepted by the guards, and they were robbed of all their possessions. Among the Breicha members who hung out in the area of Shteteen was Shmooel's brother-in-law. Shmooel had met him in Shteteen. Before leaving for Berlin, he had asked his brother-in-law to try and meet up with me when I arrived in Shteteen, and then to help me leave Poland for one of the refugee camps in Germany.

It is, indeed, a small world. On my fifth day in Shteteen, I met this guy, whose name was Bielecki. As it turned out, I knew him fairly well. He was born in Kobrin, fifty kilometers from Pruzany. In the late twenties and the beginning of the thirties, he had studied in the same Hebrew high school I had attended. He was two grades lower. Now in Shteteen, we reminisced and continued to talk about those good old days. Finally, I asked him to help me get out from the anti-Semitic country. This was on a Tuesday. He said, "Mosheh, come out to the main street between ten o'clock in the morning and one o'clock in the afternoon this Thursday. Keep walking along the street from one end to the other, up the street and back again. Don't stop. At a certain moment, you will hear the word '*amchoh*' (*amchoh* means 'your people' in Hebrew). You will see two men. Respond with the same word, '*amchoh*.'" This was a kind of a code, whereby Jews could identify other Jews. Since June of 1946, the Breicha's activities in Poland were considered illegal. Everything had to be done in secrecy. Bielecki continued, "Follow these two guys, wherever they go. They will help you."

Before I parted from Bielecki, he turned to me and said, "Morris, if you have some dollars, you will do a great service to the Breicha, if you lend me some of it. You will get it back from the Israeli representative, as soon as you arrive in Munich."

I was in a predicament. I had \$600, which I had obtained from selling the golden coins, and \$100 from selling the apartment. Well, I did not hesitate. I gave him the money. He gave me a tiny piece of paper

with the words “600 FOR THIS MAN” scrawled on it, followed by his signature. I didn’t know what to think of myself now. Was I right or wrong to hand over my only monetary treasure, leaving me without money and with a wife and two small children? But, in thinking about it, I realized I had sought the help of a friend. Should I refuse to trust him? My common sense told me to be a *mentsh* (a good person). I told Regina about my meeting with Bielecki and we both relaxed. Bielecki served in the Israeli brigade.

On Wednesday, I went to the Jewish committee. I got some food and met two guys from Pruzany. One was a barber, who was busy cutting hair and making money. The other was a young fellow of about twenty who had lost his family, was penniless and destitute. I promised to help him.

On Thursday, at the designated time, I started my marching along the main street of town, minding my own business. About eleven o’clock, I heard the word “*amcho*” spoken directly behind me. I responded. *Amcho*. Nobody paid attention. *Amcho*. I glanced around and saw two young fellows. I followed them, as instructed. They entered a small coffee house on a side street. I, too, entered the coffee house. They motioned for me to sit next to them. While drinking, one of them spoke to me in Hebrew, in a very low voice. He asked me the size of my family. I remembered what I had promised Moshe, the young fellow whom I had met at the committee. I said, “There are five of us. Myself, my wife and two young children, and my wife’s brother.” One man asked our names.

The other man then gave me instructions. “On Sunday, at ten in the morning, you and your family should board streetcar number three. Place yourselves in the last car. Stay there until the streetcar stops. Exit the streetcar and follow a crowd of people, without asking any questions.”

During the next few days, when I was trying to arrange our transportation, Regina did a tremendous job taking care of our sons under very trying conditions. Moshe had moved into our windowless building and was helpful bringing food for us all and candles to light up our room, when darkness came upon us during the evening hours.

On Sunday, we reached the place where the streetcar started its route. We sat in the last section and got out when the streetcar stopped.

Moshe carried the heavy suitcases. Regina carried the children’s belongings. I carried both children—Victor on my back and Chaim in my

arms. We saw a few people walking in the direction that led to the edge of the town. We followed them. It was a hot July morning. Very tiring. But we trudged along, trying not to lose sight of the people ahead of us.

After an hour or so, we reached a mansion-sized house and entered it through the front door. We were led by a young girl into a room and told us it would be ours during our stay in this building. Moshe was given a bed in another room with single people. The place looked as beautiful as we imaged one might be in heaven. We washed the boys, changed their clothes, and then were startled by hearing a call to come for lunch, at the stroke of twelve o'clock.

There were maybe a hundred people in the house, mostly young people who kept on singing *Hava Nagilah*—Let us be joyful. Lunch consisted of white bread, eggs, cheeses, tea or coffee, and special food for the children. In the beginning, I was puzzled and didn't understand what was happening. But it didn't take more than a half hour and I found out about this mysterious place. This mansion had once belonged to a wealthy Nazi. He was killed during the war and his family had abandoned the building. With the permission of the government, the house was taken over by the Breicha. It served as a transit place for children who were released by the Breicha or other nationalities, and for some people like ourselves, who wanted to leave Poland and didn't have a way to fulfill our dreams. And so, Bielecki, who was also a member of the Breicha, had arranged our meeting with the two other Israeli Breicha fellows, and everything had worked out exactly the way it was planned.

We were more than comfortable. We had a nice room, good food, and the company of other people like ourselves. There were other children who liked to play with our two little boys. More people arrived each day, as we waited to see what would happen next. On the tenth day of our stay in the mansion, the same two *Breichanicks* told all the elderly people to assemble in the big salon, for an important announcement.

I must interrupt the chronology of our story to insert the following information. The Hitlerites did not want to perform a mass killing of Jews in Germany. There were German citizens who opposed the Gestapo arrests and murder of innocent people. So, in 1942, the Nazis put the Jews on passenger trains and sent them east to the occupied territories in Russia. Most of these victims were brought to the Bialorussia capital of Minsk. They chose the young and the most able to do hard labor. Most of the elderly died. When the war was over, those German Jews

who were liberated by the Russian armies were put again on trains and sent back to Germany, to their homes and to their past neighborhoods.

At the meeting in the mansion, the Breicha fellow told us that we were not considered surviving Polish Jews. We were officially considered German Jews who had been deported to Bialorussia and were now returning to our prewar homes, business, and neighborhoods. We were to have all our things packed and ready for the trip in the morning. A train running from east to west would stop at the nearby station and take us to Germany. We were given German names and surnames. We were told not to converse in either Yiddish or Polish, only in German, if we knew the language. It was best not to talk at all on the train. "Keep your mouth shut!" we were told.

The next morning, we were lined up before a transit office, which consisted of Poles.

They told us to open our suitcases for a checkup. When I opened my suitcase, they were so startled, their jaws dropped to their chests. They saw the big slabs of salted pork and told me that I was not allowed to cross the border with this precious commodity. They confiscated it. My appeal to them to leave some pork for my oldest child was a useless exercise. I was left without an ounce of the meat I had saved for so many days in order to buy provisions for our children. Of course there was no such law, concerning the carrying of pork over the boundary. These were merely thieves, who committed a crime against the welfare of my children. This was one of the grievances that I carry in my memories against some Polish officials.

We were placed in the passenger train, which took us west to Germany. Again, I wondered exactly where in Germany we would end up. Young Moshe, the single fellow traveling with us, didn't care where we landed, but I was the father of two little boys and I had many concerns about where we would spend the night and how I could obtain food for them. Until we crossed the border between Poland and Germany, we sat like mute people. Nobody said a word. The controller checked our identifications without asking any questions. Obviously, everything had been arranged with the officials by the Breicha. I finally felt comfortable that giving my money as a loan to Bielecki had been the right thing to do. It had served a good purpose. My family and I had crossed the border into Germany legally, without any difficulties or undue trouble.

After the train crossed the border and headed into Germany, it started to stop at each station. Many people boarded the train, Germans

and others. At about three o'clock in the afternoon, a lady boarded the car where my family was sitting. There was an empty seat next to mine and she took it. When she heard Regina and me speaking Yiddish, she was surprised and said, in Yiddish, that she was also a Jew . . . an American Jew. She couldn't speak Yiddish very well, so we started a conversation in English. I spoke English much better than she did Yiddish. I briefly told her our story of survival. She wanted to know our destination. I said we had no destination and that I was concerned about where I could secure a place for us to spend the night.

Then this lady smiled. She told me not to worry. "I will take you to Munich and place you in the transit building, where Jewish refugees are staying temporarily until they are sent to refugee camps. I am a social worker for the Jewish HIAS organization—the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society. Our organization started way back in the 1880s, when Jewish people first rushed to America to escape from the pogroms in Russia. As the name indicates, its purpose is to help new Jewish immigrants. It exists even now, and we are here to help the immigrants from Russia as they determine their new home destinations."

Upon hearing this incredible news, our moods changed significantly. We were no longer depressed and, once again, smiles lit up our faces.



Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid) and Victor, Kobryn, Poland, 1945



Regina Yudewitz (Sorid), Kobrin, Poland, c. 1944-5



Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid), Harvey (l) and Victor (r), Neu Freimann displaced persons camp, 1946



Hashomer Hatsair, a Zionist-socialist youth movement, 1928. Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid) was the leader (2<sup>nd</sup> row, 3<sup>rd</sup> from left); Ida Yudewitz (Gonilski) (top row, 2<sup>nd</sup> from right). Ida emigrated to Argentina before the start of the Holocaust.



Chaim and Rasha Kaplan (nee Galpern), parents of Regina, Pruzana Poland, c. 1914. The Kaplans perished in Auschwitz in 1943.



Family photograph, at home of parents of Regina, 1938. From left, Chaim Kaplan, Regina Yudewitz, Shmuel Kaplan, Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid), Rasha Kaplan.



Tsveya Yudewitz, 1939, the first child of Moshe and Regina; sister of Victor and Harvey. Born Dec. 15, 1938. Perished in Auschwitz, Feb. 3, 1943.



Neu Freimann displaced persons camp, 1947. Victor, Moshe (Morris), Harvey, and Regina Sorid.



Regina and Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid), Kobrin, Poland, 1945



Yudewitz family photo, Pruzany, Poland, 1937. Top row, from left: sister Leya and with husband Velvel Goldberg; Regina and Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid); sister Leba with husband Jeshaiiah Perelshtein; Middle row, from left: Yosef Gombinski with mother Malka (Moshe's sister); Rachel and Meyer Yudewitz (Moshe's parents); Sheleem Yudewitz (brother); front row, Masza Gombinski.



Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid) with students in a Hebrew School in Neu Freimann displaced persons camp, 1947.



Szubitsch Farm, Pruzany, Poland, 1933. The farm was owned by a Jewish family named Bzezinski. In front, from left, Moshe Yudewitz (Morris Sorid), Regina Kaplan. In front row, far right, Leibel Shapiro, Moshe's best friend, who introduced Moshe and Regina in 1930. The two were married in the summer of 1935.



Sorid family photo, undated. Victor, Regina, Harvey, Morris.



The Bar Mitzvah of Victor Sorid, 1957. From left, Morris, Harvey, Regina.



Lidia Gvay (Pauk) with husband, Pruzana, Poland, July 9, 1991. Lidia's father hid Moshe and Regina in his barn in Feb.-March 1943, saving them from certain death at the hands of the Nazis.



Morris Sorid (r), with friend Shmuel, at Beth Moses cemetery in Long Island, New York. The memorial is to Pruzany Jews. 1948.

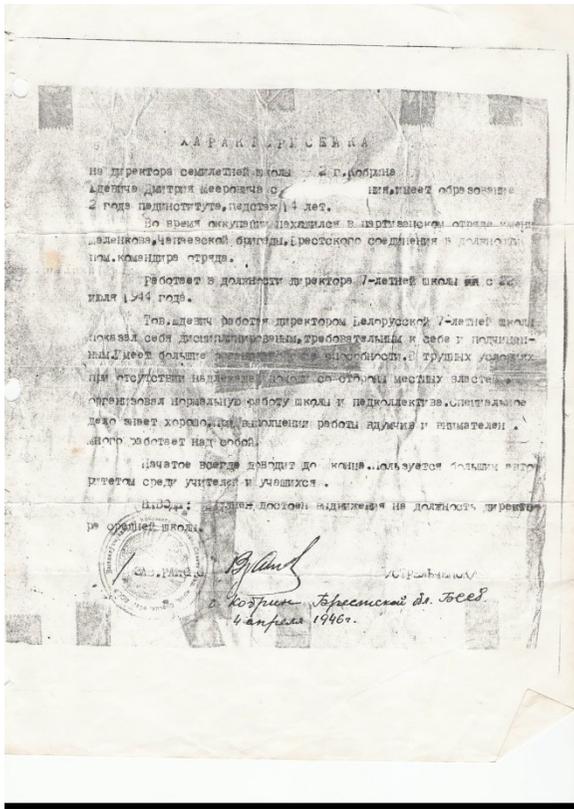


The 95<sup>th</sup> birthday party of Morris Sorid, Feb. 26, 2006, New York. In foreground, Samantha Sorid and Morris Sorid. Standing, Robyn Sorid, holding Chloe Sorid.



(Top) Certificate. Belorussian Command of the Partisan’s Movement: July 25, 1944. No. 1486. The undergoing confirms that Yudevich, Dmitriy Meerovich, truly served in the [Malinkov] partisan unit from March 8, 1943 until July 25, 1944, in the rank of ...Starshina...[Assistant to the commander on economy matters.] This document further requests that local government authorities offer Yudevich, D.M., assistance in securing a domicile and employment. [Signature illegible]

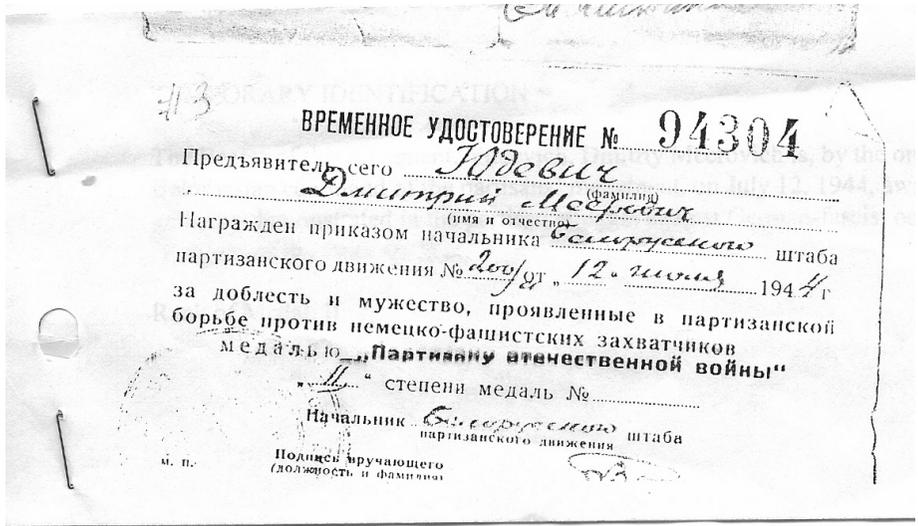
(Bottom) Certificate For Participation in the Great Patriotic War. Yudevich, Dmitriy Meerovich, by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of USSR, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Awarded the “Medal for Victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945.” By the name of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR this medal is imparted on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1946 by Lieutenant Colonel V. Ershov.



Character recommendation from the director of the junior seven year school of the town of Kobrin...In the time of the occupation he found himself in the Partisan detachment of the name Malinkov, Chepayev bBrigade of the Brest province. In the capacity of deputy commander...Comrade Udievicz working as a director of the 7 year junior Belorussian school proved himself disciplined, demanding of himself and those under his supervision. He has excellent organizational abilities. In difficult conditions, lacking support from local authorities, he organized normal operation of the school and pedagogical staff...He is worthy to be nominated a director of a high school. Signed, Strelchenov. Kobrin, Brest County, Belorussian Province, USSR, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1946.



Certificate of honor for Lidia Pauk, awarded the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" for help rendered to Jewish persons during the period of the Holocaust. Yad Vashem, Dec. 9, 2001.



The bearer of this document, Yudevich, Dmityriy Meerovich is, by the order of the director of the Belorussian command of the partisans' movement, on July 12, 1944, awarded for fortitude and gallantry demonstrated in the partisan struggle against German-fascist occupiers, the medal of "Partisan of the Patriotic War."

## Life in a German Refugee Camp

When World War II ended, on May 8, 1945, Germany was divided among the USA, Britain, France, and Russia. The USA occupied the part called Bayern (Bavaria) and its surrounding area, and placed its headquarters in Munich. Many Jews had been liberated from the concentration camps. None of the victims wanted to return to their birthplaces in Poland. They didn't want to return to Poland, where anti-Semitism still prevailed. They remained in Germany, because the Allies were in charge.

Large numbers of Jews had been liberated by the Russian forces in the spring and summer of 1944—Jews like Regina and me. Few of us wanted to remain under the thumbs of the Communist regime. We all needed a place to live. So the occupying Allies, excluding Russia, formed refugee camps in the territories under their occupation. Until they could decide what to do with all the refugees on a permanent basis, they placed them in past German army camps and in Nazi settlements out of which the former inhabitants were ordered to leave, taking only their personal belongings.

I was told that about 600,000 refugees remained in the American Zone. I am not sure about this, however. Those from the concentration camps settled immediately in camps that were close to the place of their liberation. Those who arrived from Shteteen and from other European locations were placed in transit camps, from which they were later sent to the more established refugee camps. Each camp chose a committee. In Munich, a central committee had been formed.

Refugees were given private places to live and whatever food, clothing, and other necessities they required for their specific needs. After a short time, some refugees provided services to others, in order to earn a private income.

### Refugee Camp Foonkkaserne

While traveling on the train to Munich, the social worker from the United States was eager to learn more about Regina and me. I told her about my being a Hebrew, Bialorus and Russian teacher, and also about

our survival. When we finally arrived at the transit camp, which was located in a past German army barracks, we were placed in a big hall with literally hundreds of other men and women. They had been assigned a space to live in the hall, with only blankets to separate the sexes. Nearby was a huge dining room where we were given adequate food and also special food for the children. The barracks were overcrowded, because there were very few places the great numbers of refugees could be sent. The previously established camps had been closed and were off limits. When there was no more room available, the local committee of camp leaders (often American officials) refused to accept more settlers. So the conditions were far from being ideal, especially for those of us with small children.

I learned that representatives were canvassing for people who were skilled in needed professions. I was registered as a teacher. One day, I was approached by a man who interviewed me and offered me a job of principal of an existing Munich Hebrew high school. I refused to accept the job, because I was not ready to accept such a responsibility. First, I had to take care of my children and my wife, who were undernourished and exhausted after our long and arduous trip from Kobrin. Victor had become very thin and Regina was weak.

Day after day passed by with no change in our situation, and then a week lengthened into two or three weeks. The leaders of the transit camp could find no other camp that would accept us.

Somehow, word reached my former schoolmate, Sender Zakheim, about our being located in the transit camp called Foonkkaserne. He and another Pruzaner had found themselves in the refugee camp called Feldafing. He had survived the Auschwitz concentration camp. I cannot adequately describe the joyous moment I had when I suddenly saw Sender standing in front of me, followed by my closest friend Leibl Shapiro and his lovely wife Helen. Regina couldn't believe her eyes either. What an incredible surprise. We went outdoors for a walk with our sons and our dear guests. They told us that in a camp called Neu Freimann, about ten minutes from the camp in which we were living, another Prussian group was gathered, and among those living there were Regina's cousin, Shmerl Elman, with his wife Rachel, and his cousin Joseph Elman, both of whom had survived the war as partisans. So, once again, we had new hopes and new encouraging thoughts about a future that might involve reaching a safe shore . . . with relatives.

As soon as the news of our presence in the Foonkkaserne reached Regina's cousins, they came to see us and we discussed how we could join them in Neu Freimann. The camp was closed for more people, because all the buildings were occupied with four families sharing four rooms and a kitchen. Regina's cousins decided to approach the leader of the camp and inform him that their cousin—meaning me—was a Hebrew teacher and was waiting in the Foonkkaserne camp to be transferred to a displaced persons camp. When the leader, a young Jewish man from the Bronx, heard the words “a Hebrew teacher,” his reaction was a loud command, “Bring him here immediately.”

### Refugee Camp Neu Freimann

Neu Freimann was a family camp and had many young children.

They had already established a school, but did not have enough skilled teachers. The Elmans hired a coachman and brought us to the camp that afternoon. We remained standing in the street, because the office was already closed. Louis Elman could not take us even for the night, because they lived in one small room with a newborn baby. Joseph had no room for us either. He lived with another fellow in a tiny room.

The solution came when Hershl Segel, also a Pruzaner, walked over and said to me, “Meisheh, *koom tsoo mir*—come to me.” He also lived in one room, but his wife Tseerah and tiny daughter were spending a few days in a convalescent facility. So he gave us their bed and he placed himself in a corner on the floor. Hershl had been a neighbor from the old country. He survived with the partisans. His first wife had died in a concentration camp, and he had married Tseera Aizner, who had lost her husband and survived with partisans. She was Regina's friend and schoolmate. I was very thankful to this goodhearted man and have never forgotten what he did for us.

The next morning, I met a few Pruzaner men and women who had survived the war. They had been liberated by the American forces and settled in Neu Freimann. There were the three Siegel brothers—Ely, Sam and Max—and also Ruby Bosniak and his wife Marshah, who had married after the war. There was Teddy Kraener, Jack Rosenbaum and his wife, and Mishka Faitelevich and Z Braverman. I name them all, because they were very dear to Regina and me and we considered them members of one family. We had all lost so many of our blood relatives and we considered it a special joy to be surrounded by so many friends

from our past lives. There were many more in another refugee camp by the name of Feldafing and also in other camps, whom we were very happy to meet later on. Those I described had traveled from Auschwitz to Tashkent, and then to Shteteen and on to Berlin, to the Refugee Camp Foonkaserne and then to their one room in Neu Freimann.

The very next day, Regina and I were temporarily placed in a barracks, and then, only three days later, we were given a room in a facility with three other families, to share one kitchen and one restroom. Neu Freimann—in German called Zidlung—was a settlement of about a hundred or more one-family duplexes. Only ten minutes by car from Munich, it had been originally built by the Nazis for working class people.

In May of 1945, after the war was over, the camp ended up in the American zone. A Jewish army officer ordered the Germans to leave their homes, and it became a refugee camp for elderly Jewish survivors and for those with families. It was known as a family refugee camp.

The UNRRA organization supplied all the food for us refugees.

The settlement was divided into blocks. A block representation would receive the dole out of groceries and then he would give an even portion of items to each individual. We received four portions each week. The largess contained bread, flour, sugar, canned goods, coffee, a carton of cigarettes . . . and frankfurters. At first, we had no idea how to use the frankfurters, so we ate them uncooked, as we would have eaten salami. They were precooked, fortunately. The Germans paid a high price for Camel cigarettes and this was considered one of the most important items to receive in the handout. If you didn't smoke, your share could be used for bartering purposes.

In the camp, some more industrious people established special businesses. There was a grocery store owned by past concession members. There was a beer and soda store. Some butchers managed to deal with the camp police and smuggle in a cow, an ox, or some sheep and then butcher them to sell meat.

There was a particular business called the "script" business. It worked this way. The American soldiers were paid not by dollars but by scripts. In the States, a script had the full one-hundred percent value. But in Germany, the soldiers who needed the money would sell their scripts below this value. An American army camp was set up about a mile from the refugee camp. Many soldiers had "circle" friends who would come and visit them. These girls would get scripts from their lovers' scripts. The girls needed German marks, so Jews would buy their

scripts from them. Then there were soldiers who went on furlough. They would buy scripts for a lower price, say ten to twenty cents, and then in the States, they would sell them for full value. How much they made for the transaction depended upon how much they paid for the dollar. So, some residents from Neu Freimann were ingenious in how they could make some spending money. Some also supplied the soldiers with wine, liquor, and other items in these dealings.

I was a teacher of Hebrew and history in a school established by a couple of refugees, P. and his wife N. Spector, who had arrived in Neu Freimann before we did. I met a group of very pleasant people in this school. Among them were Ben Shuster and his wife Dvorah, also Sam and his wife Zlatah Gloger. Ben was also a teacher. Sam worked at the base where the food was distributed to the *bloko* representatives.

The school was under the supervision of the Board of Education of the Central Jewish Committee in Munich. The pupils spoke Yiddish, Russian, and Polish. They were of various ages and levels of knowledge. However, the staff worked to divide the groups into proper grades and classes. When I started teaching, in August of 1946, some subjects were taught in Yiddish. Being a professional teacher, I tried my best to establish Hebrew as the only language used for the teaching of all subjects. The teachers who knew Hebrew cooperated gladly. It took us up to nine months to reach our goal. The students finally learned Hebrew enough to speak it among themselves, even after school hours. The school was Zionist oriented. We first learned and then taught the students Israeli songs and tried to apply as much of an Israeli spirit as was possible.

I remember when a member of the Israeli Board of Education visited the school in 1948. He was very surprised to find a school where all the subjects were taught in Hebrew. He listened to how the pupils had possessed knowledge of the language. He offered me a principal job in an elementary school in Israel. He promised me an apartment with a garden, where we could plant seeds of vegetables, and also other benefits. I thanked him very much, but I did not accept his offer. I was determined that Regina and I should eventually travel to Argentina or to the USA.

None of the teachers were paid for their work, nor were any of the other people, including the camp committee members. The only compensation for our work was an additional portion of food, supplied by UNRRA or by HIAS, which was and still is a charity organization in the

USA. HIAS still provides economic help to needy Jews throughout the world.

With the receiving of four cartons of cigarettes each month, I could already obtain enough money to purchase extra things for our children. But, in addition to my work in the school, from eight or nine morning until two or three in the afternoon, I instigated private lessons for people who wanted to learn the Hebrew language. There was a great demand for this, by those who planned to settle in Israel. I would get forty to fifty cents an hour per student. Most of the time, I would conduct three or four lessons a day. I would come late home and hardly see the kids, except on Saturdays. We needed the money to buy meat, milk, eggs, butter, cheeses and other items. We were a family of four and the provisions we received from the UNRRA and the joint distribution organization were not enough.

One day, I traveled by bus to Munich and then by street cab to the Israeli representative of the state of Israel. I handed him the tiny note that Bielecki had given to me in Shteteen and the man did not hesitate for a single minute. He pulled out \$600 from a lockbox and gave it to me, with a thank you for my loan. I hadn't been at all sure I would receive my money, as promised, but it gave me a good feeling to know my friend hadn't taken advantage of my impulsive generosity.

The parents of the school children were very pleased with our work. They expressed their satisfaction and gratitude during parent and teacher meetings and also in private. It was an interesting situation. Most of them had managed to start up a private business of some kind, dealing in scripts, groceries, the selling of cigarettes imported from Denmark, boxes of candy, oranges, even the hides of animals. Some bought watches from the Germans called "Stoppers," and gold and diamonds, obviously Jewish. Some even became rich, and we teachers were made to teach their children for only an additional portion of food. I thought it was not fair, so I spoke to the teachers and we decided to bring these grievances to the attention of a few parents. It worked. It did not take more than a week and a committee formed by the teachers had collected a sum of marks from the parents who were in business. They divided this sum equally among us teachers. This system continued every month as long as the school existed.

Thanks to the efforts of the Jewish Central Committee, our school was soon approved by the German Board of Education and was included as part in their system. They sent a committee to determine the

degree of our teacher education. I showed them the letter of recommendation given to me by the head of the Board of Education of the Bialorussian school, to prove that I was registered as a qualified teacher in a high school. The German Board of Education put us on a payroll and we were paid accordingly, in German currency marks.

I am still receiving a monthly check from the Germany social security system, and paid according to the time I was approved by them. Added to this record is my college education, plus the time when I was interrupted from my teaching career, between 1943 and the time I was included in the German education system. It comes to an average of \$170 dollars a month. Every dollar helped then and continues to help.

Our work in the school did not mean only teaching. We used to prepare all kinds of special appearances by the children, where we performed skits, sport exercises, singing, musical instrument concerts, Hebrew songs, Yiddish, Polish, Russian . . . everything children could possibly do to showcase their talents. The Jewish American soldiers arranged a trip to the garden of the Reich's Chancellery, where Hitler reported committed suicide on April 30, 1945, and also to a salt mine. We had a good time. Before Chanukah, the Jewish soldiers used to bring gifts, toys, candy and other goods for the children; they did the same thing before other holy days.

I mentioned before that the school was Zionist oriented. It was my hope that, someday, this would help those who planned to migrate to the Erets Israel (Palestine). Meanwhile, the *Aleeyah* had been closed, under the pressure of the Arabs. *Aleeyah* is the Hebrew word for 'going up the hill'; in this case, going to Erets Israel meant an act of an exaltation, of going to live in the Holy Land. The British state department issued a "white paper," that prohibited any Jews from the refugee camps to make *Aleeyah* to Palestine.

In 1947, I was surprised to receive a letter from the HIAS office in Paris. It contained permission for us to travel to Paris and, from there, the HIAS organization would send us, legally, to Paraguay. From there, we could cross the border into Argentina, to unite with my sisters. It wouldn't be a problem, because of the open borders in South America. After a certain time, we could become legal residents of that country and be able to work and make a living.

This plan had been instigated by my sister Malkah, who wanted to help us out of the predicament we were in. The letter emphasized that if I accepted the suggestion, our arrival in Paris would have to take place

within ten to fourteen days. I was hesitant to accept the plan. I thought it might be too risky, to take such a chance with two small children. It was a long trip and having to cross the border between Paraguay and Argentina, and then to remain an illegal emigrant in Argentina for any amount of time was, in my judgment, a very precarious enterprise. I thanked them very much and explained why I had to refuse their offer. I don't regret it.

To live in the refugee camps forever was not a future that appealed to the hundreds of thousands of Jews, who had already survived the concentration camps, or banishment in Siberia, or a life in the forests, as partisans. But all the doors out seemed to be closed. Only those who had immediate family members in the USA were given visas and permission to travel there. Their numbers were very small. Among them was one of our teacher, Ben Shooster and his wife Dvorah, and another couple, Sam and his wife Zlata. [We met them many years later, in Florida. They were also snow birds. They lived in Baltimore and spent the winter months at Delray Beach in a condo unit next to Huntington Lakes. We associated with them as friends.]

I learned much later that a cousin of mine (my father's sister's son) had also survived the war and had lived in a nearby refugee camp. He accepted the proposal from HIAS, traveled to Paraguay, and eventually joined his two brothers and a sister in Buenos Aires, Argentina. We met him, when he visited my sisters in Argentina, in 1977, while we were there on a visit.

The wrath against the Germans, for the killing six million Jews and the destruction of thousands of Jewish communities, prevailed in our consciousness and in our attitudes. It was difficult to live in the camps as a displaced person, with no real country ties. Added to this daily reminder of our plight, the Bavarian German air was hard on Regina's breathing. She started to get asthma and bronchitis attacks. When she was suffering from such an attack, she would become weak and powerless and unable to care properly for the boys. At such times, I would rush home from school, after asking a mother of a student to bail me out until the classes were over for the day. I recall that quite a few times I had to rush her to the hospital, where she would stay up to four days. I would remain home from work to care of the kids. Whenever this would happen, some of the mothers would take them for couple hours so I could visit Regina in the hospital. When the attack of asthma was over, I would bring her home.

I had saved up most of the income from my private Hebrew lessons so I could afford to buy kosher meat. I purchased this kosher meat from a butcher who managed to do this kind of illegal business, thanks to the fact that the leader of the camp looked the other way. A good slice of meat, at that time, meant a fat portion. Lean meat was considered low-grade meat. We still had the pre-war mentality. Fat food was appreciated. When a person looked too thin, people thought of him as a sick person. My friend Harry Siegel—the one who gave us shelter when we arrived in Neu Freimann—was a partner in this butcher shop.

When I would come to the shop to purchase meat, he would load me up with nice fat slices of beef. Our friend Sam Siegel—no relationship—would complain, “When Morris buys meat, Harry sells him a fat portion of beef and when he wants nice meat, he gets the most lean meat.”

Spending weeks and months in the displaced persons camp was depressing after a while. We saw no future and our morale was dwindling. We longed for a home. We wanted to become productive people in a country where we were accepted and respected. We longed to become citizens and to forget the years when we were refugees. But, there was no country that would accept a few hundred thousand Jews. USA congressmen and senators used to arrive in the camps to find out about camp conditions and how we were getting along. They would return to their duties and make their reports to the proper institutions. Representatives from the League of Nations would also arrive and, upon returning, gave evidence about the suffering in the camps.

The Germans became more and more insolent. They wanted to get rid of the refugees. They knew that the occupation would likely end and we refugees would have no way to return to a normal life . . . one that would allow us to earn a decent living to provide for our children’s future.

## A New Dilemma: Israel or America?

All kinds of rumors circulated among the refugees concerning emigration to the USA. I remember when P.S. approached me one afternoon and told me a secret. He was involved with the management of the Neu Freimann camp and had just received word that between seven and ten o'clock that night, a committee would be accepting a certain number of visa applications to the USA. He suggested that Regina and I should take advantage of this opportunity. I agreed and thanked him for thinking of me. He was the principal of the Hebrew school. Regina and I called a taxi and secretly rushed to the American Consulate. Yes, we registered, but nothing positive came out of it.

In a day or two, the news spread in the camp and throughout the area that the teacher Moshe Judevich and P.S. had secretly learned how to apply for a visa to America. Scores of people came over early in the morning or late in the evening to question me. They begged me to get them an application and a visa, as if I were a *macher*! A *macher* can do things the average person cannot do legally, sometimes by paying off or bestowing gifts on those with authority. A *macher* often commits crimes, like leading people through one boundary to an other, when it is illegal to do so. If caught, a *macher* is severely punished. Clearly, I was not a *macher* and had no intention of becoming one! My protests didn't help. When I tried to explain that, indeed, I had filled out an application, but only as any other person could do. But my protests fell on deaf ears. The petitioning lasted about two or three weeks, until the more illuminated people stopped coming and bothering me.

Another problem Regina and I were trying to deal with concerned the boys. We wanted to fulfill the Jewish requirement of circumcision.

In the first part of the Torah, it is written that our forefather, Abraham, was the first to announce that there is only one God who rules in the world. God made a covenant between Himself and Abraham. In Hebrew, this covenant is called Briss. Traditionally, this covenant is meant to be kept and performed on the eighth day after the birth of a

Jewish male, in the ceremony of circumcision. The skilled person who performs the Briss is called a Mohel, in Hebrew. Even secular Jews wanted to have their infant sons circumcised. Under the Communist regime, Jews were prohibited from performing a Briss, and Jewish males grew as nature demanded. If uncircumcised Jewish men wanted to live in Israel, they could not be called Jews until they performed what is required by Jewish religious laws. They could undergo this procedure by producing only a drop of blood.

When the boys were born, I thought that we would never have the opportunity to move to the West; certainly, I never dreamed we'd be able to travel to America. The Jewish religion, as well as any religion, did not officially exist in the Communist Soviet Union. People could teach their children to pray and to perform what their faith required, but only in the privacy of the home. No one was allowed to preach or to study openly about Jewish holidays or religious ceremonies. From the moment we arrived in the Neu Freimann refugee camp, this problem of how we could perform the Briss procedure on our boys turned into a serious dilemma in our daily life.

We realized that eventually we would emigrate from Germany and find ourselves among family members—among Jews and in a Jewish community that may frown upon our lack of compliance. Also, the future of our boys was an important consideration, when it came to various registrations in schools or camps. After several serious discussions among ourselves, we decided to find a way to arrange for the proper performance of circumcision for our boys. Luckily, we found the way it should be done, in a safe way and with very little pain and suffering.

In a Munich Jewish hospital, three brothers by the name Peisachowich were doctors; all of them had all survived the war years as partisans. I approached the one who was a surgeon and relayed my problem to him. He agreed to act as their *mohel*. In order for the process to be considered kosher, I arranged for a rabbi to be present at the procedure. He would recite the proper prayers. On a summer day afternoon in 1947, we brought the boys to the hospital and the circumcision was performed successfully. We stayed with the boys overnight and hired two nurses to watch over them. They stayed in the hospital three or four days. Our sons returned to our temporary home as “kosher” Jews.

The pressures regarding the solving of the refugee problem increased with each successive week. Finally, the League of Nations passed a resolution to create a Jewish independent state in Palestine in

November of 1947. The Jews from the refugee camps and from all over the world were allowed to migrate to Palestine to make a permanent home.

President Franklin Roosevelt passed away, and Vice President Harry Truman became President. Then, he was nominated by the Democratic Party to run for President. In his campaign, he promised that if he were elected as President, he would allow 200,000 Jewish refugees to emigrate to the USA. The situation for emigration from Germany opened two possibilities for Regina and me—to travel to Palestine or to America. Representatives of the Zionist organizations urged Jews to register and travel to Palestine; however, many preferred to wait for the opportunity to emigrate to the United States. We were among the latter.

I had many relatives in America, including uncles and cousins on both my mother's and fathers sides. Regina also had aunts and cousins on her mother's side. During the time we lived in the displaced persons camps, I had been in contact with my sisters in Argentina, and with my uncle Morris Yudievits, who lived in the Bronx in New York City, and also with my uncles and my cousin Abe Block. His mother's name was Doba and she was my mother's sister. Abe was the "speaker" for the family on my mother's side. His letters and Uncle Morris's writings were very encouraging. They urged us to not make any decision, until we were certain we couldn't get to America.

Regina, who had studied in the Polish government schools, had become an ardent Zionist. She suggested we should travel to Israel. My opinion was that due to the war in Israel, when seven Arab countries attacked the new reborn Jewish state, I was not ready to travel with two little kids and be drafted into the army and have to leave Regina on her own again. Considering this and encouraged by our relatives, I decided to travel to America. My conscience was clear about this decision, because I had never received any favors or any other benefits from the Zionist organizations.

When the registration to Israel began, some local Zionists tried to persuade me to make *Aleeyah* to Israel. I gave everybody who approached me about the matter the same answer—I was taking my family to America. Although I was accused by some, I said I was not a hypocrite to urge others to go to Israel and to be the first to get a visa to the USA.

For some reason, I needed our camp identifications. I searched and searched and could not find them. Regina had been out of the

house and she arrived at the peak of my frustration. She asked me what I was looking for. She smiled and said, “Oh! the IDs. I have them in my pocketbook. I just registered our family to travel to Israel.”

Well I was stunned, but I was not angry at her. I understood her feelings about living in a Jewish state and bringing up our children to be proud Jews. Of course, we discussed the problem and came to an agreement. We would travel to America and, at the first opportunity, we would take a trip to Israel. Regina made me promise that we would make the trip to Israel. I gave her my solemn promise. I went that very day to the registration office and asked for our names to be crossed off the list of those who wanted to emigrate to Israel.

## America, the Beautiful

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)—which became a part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in March of 2003—required three affidavits from American citizens who wanted their relatives to emigrate to the country. One was to name the sponsor, the second was to name the place in which they would live, and the third was to prove that a job had been secured for the immigrant.

The first to emigrate were teenagers. Most of them did not have a relative who could meet the three demands, so the HIAS had a list of people in the USA who agreed to adopt the youngsters into their families; then they sent the affidavits to the proper consulates. The youngsters came to the States under the surnames of their adopting American families.

Few of the elderly refugees had relatives in the United States either. So, once again, the HIAS organization stepped up to the plate. Many well-to-do American Jews put their names on the lists of HIAS, declaring that they were willing to take on the responsibility of supporting any Jewish refugee family allowed to enter the country. My Uncle Sam took on himself to be our sponsor. A sister of Regina's mother named, Feigl, agreed to take us into her apartment, and her son, who had a candy store in Manhattan, agreed to secure a job for me. These three relatives mailed the affidavits and an application to the USA consulate in Munich, Germany.

After an influx of the inhabitants in the New Freiman refugee camp had emigrated to Israel and to other countries, those who remained waited for a visa to America. But soon, the school closed, and it did not take long until we had orders to evacuate the camp. I don't remember the exact date, but I do remember that I was notified by the council that an application had been placed for my family to receive visas to the USA. Regina and I were under enormous tension, because we wanted

to travel to the USA soon. It was an exiting feeling, the anticipation of once again becoming citizens of a country, and what we considered the best possible choice. Each day on German soil seemed to drag by at a snail's pace. It required patience to keep from becoming edgy.

In April of 1946, we had to move from the Neu Freimann refugee camp, because it was returned to the German administration by the American authorities. I was recommended by somebody and a German family rented us a room. I don't remember how we managed with our needed requirements for daily food. One thing I am sure . . . we were not hungry. I had money, so we probably went to a local restaurant for dinner. Regina had her hands full caring for the boys, as there was not a way to maintain a real household in such cramped quarters.

Soon, I received a letter from the consulate to appear at a certain date in order to go through a civil marriage, since Regina and I had no formal document to prove that we were married. The American authorities wanted to ensure that we were married and that our children were our legal offspring. There were other procedures that we had to deal with, but we were young and the thought that someday we would reach our goal and be able to build our nest in a free country kept us going. The thought of becoming Americans lifted our spirits and made us strong and resolute.

When all the paperwork had been completed and all the required documents were acceptable to the authorities, we were notified of another date . . . the date to appear in the American consulate to get our visas to enter in the USA. Finally, we were given the right to travel to America. It was a dream come true!

We did not have to pay for our passage to the States. All the costs were taken care of by Uncle Sam . . . which means the United States government. We were given the choice to travel by ship or by a Pan American plane. Actually, there was not yet a commercial flight available from Germany to the States. But, according what we were told at the time, some planes were flying to Germany with a large contingency of students who wanted to visit the area. So, instead of returning empty, these planes were loaded up with the new immigrants.

In the beginning, we were hesitant about flying, but I remembered a day in 1933, when I had served in the Polish army. The captain had taken our battalion on a daylong boat trip. I had become so seasick, I thought I would never recover from it. I was certain I was vomiting the

food I had eaten two years ago! So, my answer was that we would prefer to fly to our new destination, rather than going by ship over the ocean.

The day given to us for our flight was July 8, 1949. I rushed back to our one-room apartment and wrote a letter to my cousin, Abe Block, and notified him that we would be arriving on a Pan American flight on the designated date. I had a huge wooden trunk and I packed all our belongings in it. Most consisted of all our *shmates* . . . a Yiddish word meaning rags or old worn-out clothes. We had some nice things, too, like new featherbeds, pillows, some good dresses which Regina had purchased in Munich, and two almost new suits of mine. On the set morning, we arrived to the airport and shipped our baggage. After waiting for about three hours, we boarded the plane. I anticipated discomfort on the plane, because I also hated to swing on swings, but it was all right.

We were fed a delicious dinner. The boys were happy with the new adventure and so we were off to America! To America, the beautiful! A country where no one had the right to wake you in the middle of the night and order you to spy on your neighbor or to spy on your coworkers and where you could speak freely about the government, without fear of being killed.

The plane landed in the afternoon at an airport in New York. It was called Idelwild then; today it is known as Kennedy International Airport. I remember seeing a white building in the middle of a field, with little traffic around it. All the passengers disembarked and formed a line. A clerk called out the names of the people and directed them to board a waiting bus. Finally, everyone had boarded . . . except for us. Our names had not been called! I strode over to the desk and asked the attendant on duty why we had been left on the tarmac. I spoke to him in English, because I had retained enough knowledge of the language from the days in which I had studied in the Hebrew high school in Poland, in the late twenties. I noticed on the man's uniform the four letters HIAS. Then I understood what had happened before he even offered me an explanation. He explained to me that all the other emigrants had come to the United States with the help of HIAS, so they were being taken to a shelter prepared for them by HIAS members. Since we had obtained our visas based on an application from my family members, they were responsible for picking us up from the airport.

I realized, at this point, that our relatives expected us to arrive on the eighth of July, and we had arrived two days earlier. As we were left

alone, I walked inside the terminal and told them that I was sitting with my wife and two little boys outside and that my relatives didn't expect us for two days. It was getting dark and I didn't know what to do. It didn't take more than five minutes before a bus stopped in front of us. The driver told us to enter. We did. The bus stopped at a bus station on a busy street. I later found out that it was Penn Station. There, we were placed in a corner area, on the floor. The kids were hungry, thirsty, and unclean, but they fell asleep. Happily, I remembered that I had the addresses and telephone numbers of Cousin Abe and others. I walked over to a stall, where a lady clerk was looking out and told her my problem in broken English, and asked her to help me reach my family. She gladly complied, looked at the number, and dialed Abe. No reply. She dialed Uncle Sam. No reply. Then she dialed Uncle Morris. He answered the phone. The lady informed him about our presence at Penn Station. He was happy to hear my voice and told me not to worry. He would arrive as soon as possible to pick us up.

We waited and waited. At about nine o'clock that evening, my uncle and Regina's cousin arrived. It had taken them almost two hours to drive from the Bronx where they lived. My uncle had called up Aunt Feigl. She lived on the east side in Manhattan, near the Williamsburg Bridge.

We arrived at her house very late in the evening. But in the meantime, this goodhearted woman had prepared a nice snack for us. The boys were fed and then they fell immediately asleep. Aunt Feigl lived in a tiny three-room apartment. It was on the first floor of a three-story apartment building. We were exhausted and left conversation about our trip for the morning.

Early in the morning Alex Ravits, Aunt Feigl's son, and his wife came to meet their new relatives. We were in the category of what Americans called "greenhorns" or "greeners." I asked one of my uncles, "How long will I be a greener?" His answer was, "Until another greener arrives in America."

## Section Two

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances—to choose one's own way."  
—Victor Frankl

## Early Life in Dolgolisk, Poland

I remember Dolgolisk. This was a huge farm in the vicinity of the towns Wishmits, Parczew, Vlodava, Biala Podlaska, and surrounding villages Opola, Raboovka and others. The farm belonged to a Russian general. He raised cattle, horses, and sheep and also cultivated farming land for growing different crops, like wheat, oats, rye, and barley.

I was born in Dolgolisk on February 28, 1911, as the fifth child to my parents, Abraham Mayer and Rachel Kayla (maiden surname Karlits) Yudevits. My parents moved from Pruzany (Poland), where my father's parents lived, to Dolgolisk, and opened a dairy business, mainly for the production of Swiss cheese.

According to what I was told many years later, my arrival caused much excitement, joy and happiness in the family. My father was jubilant, because a son was born. A son was the fulfillment of his long-time dream. In those days, in certain Jewish orthodox circles—and even in present times, the birth of a boy, particularly a firstborn son, was considered more important than the birth of a daughter. Why? Because a son goes to *cheder* (a traditional religious Jewish school for beginners). A son learns to pray from a *sidur* (a daily prayer book). A son learns the *choomash* (Pentateuch), and *Mishnah* (the collection of past biblical laws of the second century, B.C.). A son studies the Talmood, and a son can become a Rav (rabbi). At the age of thirteen, a son becomes a Bar Mitzvah boy and is eligible to make the tenth person to a minion (the minimum required for certain religious services). A son can become a *chazzan* (cantor). And most importantly, a son can recite Kadish (a prayer of mourning), in times of need. A son also takes dowry when he marries, and a son carries his father's surname into future generations.

The gaiety in the family became greater, due to the fact that the day of my birth was also the holiday of Purim feast (Purim is a historic workday celebrating the deliverance of the Jews from the prosecution by the Persian Haman, an anti Jewish Persian minister prominent in the Esther story which tells of his ignominious defeat.)

The old Polish midwife ordered my mother to stay in bed for eight days, the time required to recover from childbirth in those days. I was wrapped from neck to toes with a wide linen cloth, to make sure that my legs and body would grow straight. Obviously, superstition prevailed in those days, too, so in order to protect me from an evil eye, several leaflets containing verses from the Book of Psalms were pasted on the wall over my mother's bed. In addition to this, a *melamed* (teacher of children in a cheder) stood near my crib, accompanied by a dozen of his small disciples from the nearby town. They chanted proper prayers to chase away ghosts and demons who were apt to harm me. This superstitious act was performed during the next seven days. On the eighth day of my birth, a *mohel* performed the circumcision and I was given the name Mosheh Zayiv (Wolf). When the ceremony was over, the invited guests were rushed to a lavish Purim feast of all kind of meats, fish, fruits, soft and hard drinks, and everyone sang Purim songs and told stories and jokes about the downfall of Haman. For my family's closest neighbors and acquaintances, an open house took place until late in the evening.

My four sisters—Malkah, Ida, Leah and Liba—were evidently excited about having a baby brother. They would stay at the crib for hours and watch the movements of my eyes and lips. They would rush to the orchard and bring me flowers, and when I cried, they fetched my mother to change my diapers or to feed me. I was a healthy child and my infancy proceeded in a normal manner. The first of anything brought much joy and excitement to all: first smile, first sign of teething, first attempt to crawl or first attempt to stand up.

We were the only Jewish family living in Dolgolisik. The other eighty inhabitants were workers in the farm and were of Polish nationality.

My family's Swiss cheese business was very profitable, and my father also had another source of income. The owner of the ranch had him do business with Jewish merchants who purchased available timber, cattle, grain, fruits and other commodities. He would be given a commission when the deals were completed.

My older sisters attended the government schools. They learned Polish, Russian languages, math, geography, and world history. A Hebrew teacher was hired for them, and he taught Jewish subjects—Hebrew, Yiddish, the Pentateuch, and also writing and songs.

I remember playing with the Polish children of my age and the owner's mansion. I remember the tall and thick trees on both sides of the avenue, which led to the general's palace. Sometimes I would enter a

Polish neighbor's house. They were fond of me. I liked to look at the huge pictures on the walls, especially a painting by the famous Polish artist Mateyko. I would shed tears looking at the war between the Polish cavalymen and their enemies. They attacked each other with swords and spearheads. Blood was all over the canvas.

I would raise my head and look at the storks standing on their long legs in their nests atop the trees. They would migrate to the south for the winter and return in the spring and rebuild their nests. I would count the colors of a rainbow, when one appeared in the sky after a light shower and return of the sunshine. At dusk, I listened to the noises coming from the lake. This was, in my imagination, the way frogs prayed before retiring for the night.

My sisters would take me with them whenever they went to pick blueberries or mushrooms in the garden. It was fun. I picked the good ones and stayed away from the poisonous ones.

My favorite domestic animals were horses. They still are. I once asked a New York policeman if he would trade his horse for my new Ford car, but he refused!

My father would say the blessings with me over the food I ate. My mother taught me these prayers and also the ones I'd say before going to sleep. My sisters pampered me both collectively and individually. Malkah would sing songs in many languages and Lea would tell me stories about wild animals, lions, tigers, bears, and wolves. Ida would tell me stories about the Baba Yaga and Liba would play dolls and checkers with me. My mother would give me leftovers to feed the birds. They would surround me with "tsvit, tsvit," as if saying, "Thank you, little boy." Indeed, I was a happy child and I had a wonderful childhood.

Five years of my pleasant life in the farm ranch passed rapidly. Five years of playing, running around, climbing on trees, waking up very early to look at the sunrise, or watching the sunset at dusk. Finally, on my birthday of Purim 1916, my father told me, "The time has come to start learning in a *cheder*. Registration in the town's cheder took place twice a year—after the holidays of Passover and Sookot (the feast of the tabernacle). My mother took me to a barber in the town, and then bought me new shoes, shirts, and other proper clothes. I was ready to become a *cheder yingl* (boy). I remember the Sunday after Passover of 1916; my parents packed me a lunch . . . enough dairy, fruits and vegetables to last for a week. I said goodbye to my sisters (they cried bitterly), and went

away to Wishnits, to the cheder. I still remember my sisters running after the buggy and shouting *Mazal Tov* (good luck)!

During the registration process, my mother made all the arrangements, including the plans for my living at the teacher's house as a boarder. On Fridays, my parents would come to take me home until Sunday morning. Upon our arrival, the teacher, or *melamed*<sup>3</sup>, greeted me in a very friendly manner. He told me that my name *Mosheh* was an important name, because a famous *Mosheh* had liberated the Jews from slavery in Egypt—*Mosheh Rabeynoo*. I peeked inside the cheder and saw about twenty children of my age sitting around a table ready to learn the day's lesson.

When my parents left, I became very sad. I realized there was about to be a significant change in my life. No more playing with the Polish kids, no orchard, no climbing on the cherry trees, and no more simply frolicking away of every day. I became moody. I didn't talk. I didn't say a single word. I gazed out the window and cried. I was homesick. The Rebbe's (the teacher was addressed *Rebbe*) wife tried to comfort me with candies, cookies, and other sweets, but it had no lasting effect.

At nightfall, I was given a place to sleep on a couch she had placed in a corner, which was separated from the cheddar area by a curtain. The next morning after breakfast, I was ready to start my schooling. The cheder boys arrived one by one. I looked them over in bewilderment. The expressions on their faces showed that they were as bewildered as I was. Our attire and general appearance was totally different. I wore a short gray jacket over a white shirt, my hair was cut with no side curls, and I had a cap with a shining visar on my head. They wore long black frocks, called a *chalatl*, with a belt called a *gartl* around their waists. Their heads were covered with a round black cap in the shape of a deep saucer. The hair along their temples grew in long side curls. I soon noticed that our Yiddish dialect was quite different, too. I said: *koom aher* for 'come over here,' and they would say, *keem aheir*. Their parents were Chasidim. My parents and ancestors were Litvacs. Chasidism was a religious movement founded in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, organized into groups that were devoted to particular rabbis and

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<sup>3</sup> Derived from the Hebrew word for *to learn*.

generally stressed pious devotion and ecstasy more than learning. Litvacs, like Lithuanian Jews, were a more skeptical, rationalistic, learned, strictly observant people.

That Friday, when my parents came to get me to spend Sabbath with them, I demanded that they buy me an outfit like the ones the other boys were wearing. My parents complied. Once I looked like all the other boys, it didn't take long before I started to speak in their accent.

## Family Roots and Heritage

Unfortunately, our days at Dolgolisk were numbered. Economic strains forced us to close the dairy business. I remember the morning in July of 1918 when we left Dolgolisk and began our journey to Pruzany, where my father's family lived. I was seven years old. I remember two loaded buggy carts. We—my mother, two younger sisters, my baby brother Shylim and myself—were seated in first cart, driven by a hired coachman. The second buggy, driven by my father, held my two older sisters. A cow was attached to each cart by a rope. In all these years, I even remember the names of the cows. The one following the front cart was named Doonia and the other was Doosia. My father's brother, Yankl, was also with us. His job was to tend to the cows.

The trip took seven days. Many years later, when the whole family would reminisce about life in Dolgolisk and the trip out of there to Pruzany, each of us would cite a different memory. My mother would always say that the trip was a difficult one. With a year-old baby and me as a rambunctious youngster, there were bound to be problems over several days. We grew tired easily . . . and bored. Uncle Yankl and my father told about the difficulties in feeding the cows and the horses. Luckily, there was always an abundance of grass in the ditches beside the roads. Whenever we came to a stop for an hour or two, Yankl would grab the sickle and cut a bag of grass and feed the cows. My father would assist the hired coachman and hang a special sack filled with oats over the heads of the horses. All of them pitched in to milk the cows every morning and evening so that we could drink this gift with our bread crackers and fresh fruit. We had also packed several sacks of potatoes and whenever we stopped long enough, my sisters would haul some dry wood chips, make a fire on the side of the road, and boil the potatoes along with some eggs. My sisters liked to describe this chore and also our sleeping arrangements. As soon as it grew dark, our traveling would stop for the night. They would spread big blankets at the side of the road and the whole group would fall asleep in the open, under

the twinkling stars and shining moon. The men would take turns standing guard.

Sometimes we had to pass through a village or a town. My father would rush out and buy some food, including butter, cheeses, fresh rolls, kosher salami, cake and even candy. Although the travel by cart was difficult over a week's time, the family made it a fun event and, always, we were thankful that it didn't rain and the sun wasn't too hot. In retrospect, it seems to me that this trip gave me my first taste of endurance during difficult times.

I remember arriving in Pruzany and traveling down Kobrin Street. Many people looked at us with astonishment, as if asking, "Who are these people with two cows?" Growing up on a farm-ranch, Pruzany seemed like a huge metropolis to me. Kobrin Street was constructed of cobblestones and sidewalks lined it on both sides. Trees sheltered the walkways. I saw many young children with backpacks over their shoulders, probably rushing to their schools, and adults of all ages, who hurried in every direction. From my perch at the front of the cart, I eagerly observed the traffic, the houses, and the passersby.

As we approached a wide crossing street, I noticed a huge square building containing stores. It was the town marketplace. Many wagons and their horses were parked around the building and the horses were feeding from bags hung over their heads. The people near the carts were clearly farmers. I recognized them by their suntanned faces, by their clothes, and by the merchandise they were hauling from the wagons for sale at the market.

My mother had told me that our destination was Grandma Mindl's house, which was on the outskirts of the town. She was my father's mother. We crossed a bridge and turned left on Zabroad Street. For some reason, the people looked different to me . . . not like those we had seen on Kobrin Street. Happily, they were speaking a language very well known to me . . . Polish, the language I spoke fluently. When we reached Grandma Mindl's house, she greeted my father and mother enthusiastically, because they hadn't seen each other for ten or more years. We youngsters were kissed and hugged and exclaimed over.

My sisters and I entered the house and immediately met Aunt Sheindl, my father's sister. We saw that her face was marked with scars. I was told, later, that when she was her teens, she had been frying eggs on the stove and, by mistake, had dropped some oil on the flames, which caused a fire. A wind blew flames into her face and she suffered

severe burns. Luckily, her eyes remained untouched. She also hugged and kissed us heartily. Besides my Grandma and Aunt Sheindl, we met my Uncle Yudke. My Uncle Yankl, who had traveled with us, also lived in the house.

I was told that we would be living in Grandma's house with everyone else, until my parents could rent an apartment in town. We were placed into two rooms and told that we would share the salon, the kitchen and storage room with the others.

I was very tired, as were my sisters and everyone else. I remember my grandma pampering me, as if I were not pampered enough by my parents and sisters. I was her first male grandson born to her oldest son—my father, Abraham Meyir.

It didn't take long for other relatives to come to the house to see the newcomers. Uncle Joseph, my father's brother, and his wife Bobl arrived first. Then Aunt Peltah, my father's sister, and her husband Menasheh came. They were eager to find out about our life on the ranch and to wish us a happy and productive future in our new place of living. I was too young to participate in the excitement of the members of the family who had come to greet us, but I watched and listened. Soon I found out more about the size of the immediate family. Namely, there was Uncle Morris, my father's brother who lived with his family in the town of Kobrin, another brother who lived in New York, and my father's sister Taibl, who lived with her family in Kobrin, too.

After a week of resting, reality took place. We were a family of eight. My father had to find some way to provide the necessary income for our daily existence. My grandmother could not help us much. Sheindl was a seamstress, so she had some income. In addition, my uncle Shlomo sometimes sent a few dollars from New York. But, none of this was enough income to support all of us. It was a good thing that my parents had decided to take the two cows along, when we moved from Dolgolisk. They provided us with enough milk and the products you could make from the cream. As always, we had potatoes, bread, and some vegetables, so the family didn't go hungry.

A helping hand came from my mother's family. My mother had also come from a large family. Her parents had passed away during the First World War, and most of her siblings lived in America, including brothers Meyir David, Harry, Shlomo, Moshe, and a sister, Dobe, who all lived in New York. Another sister lived in Boston, and another sister had been evacuated during the First World War to Minsk, in Rus-

sia. As soon as we arrived in Pruzany, my mother wrote a letter to the oldest brother, Meir David, telling him of our plight, and within a month, she received a hundred dollars from him. Such gifts of money from family members were important to our survival.

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The following family history was told to me by my sister Malka, who shared the information with me during a visit to her in Buenos Aires, in 1977. My grandmother Mindl was born in 1850 to her parents (father's name not known to me) and mother Itka, on a farming estate named Rovno, about eighteen miles from Pruzany. They owned the ranch, which they had received as an inheritance from their ancestors, the E. P. Epelbaums. My great-grandmother Itka gave birth to five children: three sons, Aharon Meir, Lipa, and Itschak, and two daughters, Mindl and Esther. The ranch was completely paid for, so my ancestors had enjoyed a good income and lived comfortably. Lordly, actually! Aharon Meir, the oldest son, had been accepted into a government university and had also been educated in Jewish studies.

It was at the end of the first millennium (990) when many Slavic tribes united, accepted Christianity, and the country named Poland was born. The territory belonged to many counts and dukes, who were ruled by kings. When there was not a male heir in a dynasty, another dynasty of kings followed. Jews who lived in Germany were invited to settle in certain Polish towns in the beginning of the twelfth century. Around the third decade of the eighteenth century, there was not an heir in the ruling dynasty. The dukes could not agree on another candidate to become king. The neighboring countries to Russia—Germany and Austria—took advantage of the situation and each occupied a big chunk of the territory. The dukes could not unite an army to fight back. Thus, Poland was divided and lost its independence.

When I was a teenager and studied the history of Poland, we were told that when the dukes held a session to choose a king of Poland, they could not come to an agreement. After debating and debating, they adapted the following resolution: Early in the morning, a committee would wait at the outskirts of the town. Whoever first approach the capital town of Warsaw would be elected as the king of Poland. Well, guess who approached the town? It was a Jew. The dukes—probably representatives from the Sobeskis, Potoskis, and the Chartoryskis—honored their decision and crowned the poor Jew as king of Poland.

But, they found a way out of their dilemma. They made him king for only a single day!

Pruzany and the whole surrounding area found itself under Russian reign, which lasted until the end of First World War. The ruler of Russia was not called a king; he was called a tsar. The English spelling of tsar is czar. Therefore, the country was called Czarist Russia. It was a huge country, consisting of many smaller countries of different languages, different cultures and different people. Among others was a country named Belarus; in English, the name means White Russia. Pruzany was included in Belarus country. The capital city was Minsk. The main province city was Grodno. Villagers surrounding Pruzany spoke a language similar to the Russian language, but it was not quite the same. I have provided all of the above information as a preface to understanding the events concerning my ancestors, my father's family, and Regina and me. The events happened in different times, even in a different centuries.

In 1863, the Russian czar came up with an evil decree that affected not only Jews in general, but my great-grandfather and grandmother Itka and their families. The decree forbade Jews from owning or to renting big farms or ranches. This decree concerned my ancestors, especially my grandmother, Mindl Eppilbaut. I don't know what happened after this decree went into effect or how my ancestors dealt with the situation . . . whether they were able to sell their ranch or if it was confiscated. All I know is that my grandmother Mindl and her mother Itka soon found themselves living in a small village called Sosnoovka. About fifteen Jewish families lived in the village, among about a hundred-fifty or so Belarus farmers.

My great-grandfather was a well-known scholar in Jewish studies. He was not a rabbi and never had a pulpit in a synagogue. Neither was he the head of a Yeshiva. He was more like an inspector of *yeshivot* and other religious educational institutions. He would travel from one such establishment to another and was one among three who would examine candidates who wanted to become rabbis. If they possessed the proper amount of knowledge, they could be approved for the profession of a rabbi in a community.

When my grandmother Mindl reached the age of thirteen, her parents found a proper young man named Shylim, who agreed to marry her. Their surname was Judevich. Mindl gave birth to a large family. My

father was the first born child and was named Avraham Meyir. He became known as Meyer Judevich, as spelled in Polish.

My father attended Jewish religious schools and acquired considerable knowledge in Jewish studies. [His father—Grandpa Shylim—was also highly educated in Jewish studies and was also a cantor.] When my father grew up, the time came to look for a bride. My grandma's brother, Aharon Meir Epelbaum, was a lumber merchant. He would travel to look for and buy trees from forest owners. It happened that he had to attend a meeting with some Jews who were in the same kind of business. He stopped at an inn to have lunch with them and, by chance, he saw a girl named Rachel. After speaking with the owners of the inn—Itshak and his wife Liba—about their daughter, it was decided that she would be a good match for Avraham Meyir. This unintentional meeting led to a marriage between my father and my mother. This was in the beginning of the twentieth century, in the year 1900.

I don't know why and exactly when, but my grandparents Shylim and Mindl moved from Pruzany and bought a house on Zabroad Street. They built a huge structure in town and began a business that produced bricks. After my grandfather passed away, during the First World War, the brick production ceased to exist. When my family first arrived in Pruzany from Dolgolisko, the building was still there. The house that belonged to my grandparents in Sosnoovka had burned down during the war, but the farm land was not being used by anyone. It still belonged to my Grandma Mindl. When my father looked for an income source to support his family, his mother told him that he should claim the property in Sosnoovka. He took me with him, using our horse and buggy, and we traveled about twelve miles to the village. The farmers there were Bialorus people. Some of them remembered my father and were very friendly to us.

One farmer, by the name of Oolas, bought a slice of this farmland that now belonged to us. My father retained the meadow for himself, in order to make hay for the cows. He used the money he received from the sale of the land to rent some farmland closer to Pruzany, on which to grow potatoes and other vegetables for the family and also for sale.

My father had specialized in the knowledge of how to produce Swiss and Muenster cheeses. After his marriage, he looked for a farm where he could buy enough quantities of milk to start his own business. With the help of some important connections, the young newlyweds found such a farm, Dolgolisko. It was far away from Pruzany, but near

the surrounding towns of Vlodava, Parchew, and Vishnits. It was in the province of Lublin, in Central Poland. We lived here, until circumstances changed and we were no longer able to make a living here.

The first thing my father did, after we moved to Pruzany, was to register me in a *cheder* to start my schooling in Hebrew. The place was called the cheder of the yellow Melamed . . . a person who teaches young Jewish boys. The word *melamed* comes from the verb *lamod*, which means “to learn.” Another name for ‘teacher’ in a *cheder* is *rebeh*. The premises of a *cheder* usually consisted of only one room. There were *chedarim* for beginners and for advanced students. Each *cheder* contained about thirty students. My melamed’s surname was Gelman. Next to his *cheder* was a small kitchen and, behind this, another small room. When I joined this *cheder*, I saw that there were others in the household. In addition to the rebeh, there was his wife and four older children, three boys and a girl. The oldest son’s name was Eliyohu.

My lessons began about nine o’clock in the morning and ended in the middle of the afternoon. We studied in groups, and we were not allowed to leave the room, even when we had completed our assignments. There were no modern sanitary facilities in any of the houses or businesses in the small towns in Poland, and no indoor running water. In the small *cheder* yard, the melamed had a small structure called an “outhouse,” which students could use when needed.

A melamed could not afford to own a big house, so the room of a *cheder* was a small one. As a result, some students, out of boredom, were unruly. For this reason, the rebeh kept a disciplinary whip handy, in Yiddish called a *kantshick*, and, when needed, he would use it to place a couple well-placed lashes on the troublemaker. Fortunately, I never received any lashes, because I was attentive and respectful. I was placed in the more advanced group of students, because I already knew the alphabet and read Hebrew from a *Seedoor* (a Jewish prayer book).

As a boy child with four older sisters, I had been treated very tenderly by my parents and pampered by my sisters. Because of their care, I grew up to be obedient and well-behaving. Other punishments the melamed would use were to order a boy to stand in a corner of the room, to pull the ears of a rabble-rouser, or to pinch his upper arm. Worst of all was when he would tell the parents about a particular boy’s misbehaving. The father would punish his rascal son by placing him over his

knee, drawing down his pants, and placing some lashes over his bare behind.

During the first two weeks of my enrollment, my older sister took me to the *cheder*. After I learned the way, I went by myself. After breakfast, which consisted mostly of some milk and cereal, my mother would make a sandwich, using two buttered slices of bread, and wrap it in a brown bag and away I'd go. After school, I would play outside at the lake or in the meadow.

No other Jews lived on the Zabroad Street, so I didn't have nearby friends with whom to play. My friends were the cows and the horses, whom I liked to tend. It seemed to me that the animals appreciated my friendship, because the cows would greet me with a loud mooing and the horse would neigh and come galloping to my side.

My sister Libale registered in a Polish government school. Leya was accepted as a student by a seamstress and learned to be a dressmaker. Malka and Ida busied themselves with all kinds of activities, mostly tending to the cows and helping my mother. My father succeeded in his farming efforts and we were all kept busy digging potatoes and storing them for the winter.

When World War I ended, Poland gained back its independence. However, the eastern boundaries between Poland and Communist Russia were not stable. At the beginning of 1920, the Polish army, under the leadership of President Marshal Joseph Pilsudski, moved its forces East and almost captured the capital of Belarus—the town of Minsk. The Russian army opposed this invasion, defeated the Polish invaders and continued moving West. So, in the summer of 1920, the front lines reached the area of Pruzany. Pruzany found itself under Communist Russia occupation. I remember a few events during that invasion.

During the bombing of Pruzany, a shell hit a window of a Jewish house and killed the mother of a boy who attended my *cheder*. When the bombing stopped, several other boys and I walked in the streets and saw dead soldiers lying in the middle of the road. Another time, we heard the sound of an approaching airplane. We rushed outside to see it, because we were eager to watch a plane in flight.

Then something tragic almost happened to our family. In a nearby village, the staff of the Bolshevik army was stationed, under the leadership of their leader Trotski. One night we heard a knock on our front door. Three Russian soldiers came into the house and ordered my father to go with them. Their unit needed a guide to show them the short-

est route to a certain destination. He didn't have a choice and went, as ordered. We were scared to death. We thought that our father would never come back. Happily, he returned at dawn and hid in the barn. He told us that he had escaped. It was a good thing, because only a few weeks later, the Bolshevik army had to retreat in a hurry and never stopped at our house to see if he had returned.

The Communist army left Poland, a peace agreement was reached between Poland and Russia, and life was we had known it almost returned to normal. Belarus was divided between Poland and Russia. A similar thing happened with the Ukraine country. Half was put under Polish rule and half under Russian rule.

At the end of 1920 and in early 1921, things turned for the better.

My mother's brothers, Sam and Harry, sent us a couple hundred dollars and my parents rented an apartment in town. We moved to a two-bedroom apartment in a house on Seltser Street. There was also a big yard, a barn for the cows and a stable for the horse. I began studying in a more modern cheder and advanced my knowledge of the Bible and the Hebrew language. I was already ten years old.

In addition to farming, my father bought two manually-operated machines to produce millet and buckwheat cereals. However, my father was busy taking care of the farming chores and securing hay for the animals and bread and potatoes for the family, so the burden of running the two cereal-making machines fell on our mother. This was hard work. First, she had to dry the grain in an oven under low heat and then run it through a splitter, knocking off the tough outer skins of the grains (called bran) by rolling them with special sticks. This process was called breaking. Then she had to blow the debris away by using a built-in blower in one of the machines. The buckwheat went through a similar process, but it ran through a split into a tiny opening between two stones, operating like in a windmill. The rolling of the stones would force the outer skins of the grains to come off. Kasha cereal was then ready for sale. I can still visualize my mother sweating and turning the cranks of the machines, never complaining, never saying, "I am so tired." I inherited this attitude towards work from my mother Rachel (of blessed memory). We children did not let the whole burden remain on her shoulder, of course. My sister Liba and I devoted our free time to bail her out as much as we could.

We all consumed the cereals she made every day and were kept free from hunger. There were many people who were hungry, because

the war had ruined almost everything and many could not make ends meet. There were some kitchens, financed by USA charity organizations, that provided free meals for the most destitute.

We earned a good income for our family, after opening this cereal business. The owners of grocery stores would make purchases at wholesale prices and then sell for retail. Obviously, they made a profit and so did our family. Word spread in the farming villages about our business and then many farmers would arrive to produce their own cereals from their own grain. We would charge them for use of the machines.

And so our family managed to rise from its near poverty, when we had to move to Pruzany from our home in Dolgolisko, after losing the family business. Father supplied the family with our essential needs with his farming—potatoes and other vegetables—and milk from our cow, the income from the cereal production provided a means to purchase clothing and to pay our apartment rent, and gifts from my mother's brothers from the USA of \$100 for Passover and \$100 in the fall provided extra income for emergencies. Our family soon caught its breath and my two oldest sisters no longer had to bake bread to sell at a stand in the main market.

In 1922, I attended a Hebrew school. A Jewish doctor was sent by the government Board of Education to check out the health situation of all the students. When he checked my health situation, his opinion was that I was undernourished. He recommended that I stop attending school for two or three weeks. I was upset by his decision and decided to fight back. In Pruzany, there was a Polish physician by the name of Dr. Patsevich. My mother gave me five Zlotys (Polish currency, worth one dollar) and I went to see this doctor by myself. Although skinny, I felt that I was healthy. My lungs were healthy and I didn't carry any communicable disease that would endanger other students. My sister wanted to join me, but I refused. I remember that I had to wait for my turn . . . about five hours. My mother had given me two slices of bread and butter, and I ate those, to quash my hunger. With tears in my eyes, I told the doctor the reason I had come to see him. He checked me out, and I noticed an expression of anger on his face. He told me that there was nothing wrong with me. He gave me a note to give to the principal of the school, requesting that I be allowed to return to school immediately. I was happy to know that my stubbornness had resulted in overturning the first doctor's diagnosis.

## General Family Information

### Sisters

My sister Malkah was intelligent and a beauty. She was tall, slim, and educated in Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and Hebrew many years before when we lived in Dolgolisk. My father had hired a modern teacher by the name of Zselazo (it means 'iron' in Polish) for her. Malkah also had a pretty voice. She sang Italian arias and even taught me Hebrew songs. She made friends easily and young bachelors kept an eye on her. I remember one fellow with a nice family background who proposed to her, but, in those times, there was the problem of a dowry. Before the engagement, the parents of the bride would have to promise a certain amount of financial income as a daughter's dowry. In 1922, my parents could not afford to promise a few thousand dollars, so the deal was over.

Then my uncles wrote that a bachelor, whom they knew, would be traveling to visit his parents in Poland and he wanted to meet Malkah. He was immediately taken by her beauty and charm and proposed marriage. No dowry was needed, as this was not the American way. I was too young to understand why, but my sister refused to marry him. In 1923, she married a nice young fellow from Warsaw named Itschak, who worked as a cutter in a big clothing factory. He was a nice young man and they soon had a son whom they named Joseph.

It is important to discuss how marriages were arranged in those days, because I had several sisters. Most Jewish families had large families when I was a child. Boys were usually favored, because they were not considered a burden as they grew older. Daughters, however, presented a problem for those whose income was limited. Parents were responsible for providing their daughters with a dowry of money and, sometimes, a year of board and room expenses, when they married. Love had very little to do with anything. Marriages were "arranged" in those day, by the families. While it was hoped that a good match would stimulate love for each other, it was more important that the simple

“welfare” of the couple was considered suitable. Few girls were educated beyond high school. They learned no particular skills for jobs in industry. Some became seamstresses, but most simply learned how to cook and sew and care for children. Some did become teachers.

At the same time, in the summer of 1932, several events took place in my family. My sister Leah married and moved out of the house. Her husband, Velvl Goldberg, was a partner with his father and brother in a wholesale Kosher meat enterprise. They also ran the slaughter house. Leah stopped working and was happy with the match.

When Leah moved out of our house, my oldest sister Malkah and her now two children moved in. Her husband Itschak had lost his job. The owner of the clothing factory could not withstand the competition and the high taxes the Polish government imposed on the manufacturers forced him to close his business. My brother-in-law had foreseen the calamity a few months before it happened and had contacted my sister in Argentina. She advised him to prepare himself to emigrate to Buenos Aires, Argentina. As soon as he became unemployed, he got a passport and a visa to travel there. He went by himself, with the assurance that he would send for his family as soon as he had found gainful employment and found them a place to live. And so Malkah and her ten year old son Joseph and six-year old daughter Masha gave up the apartment and moved from Warsaw to our family in Pruzany. Of course their board and education were taken care by my parents.

Joseph was accepted into the third grade of the Hebrew Tarboot school where I had studied, and Masha attended the first grade. They did not know Hebrew, so during the time until I had to leave for the army, I devoted much of my time to my nephew and my niece. When I left, my brother Shylim helped them. Since our apartment consisted of only two bedrooms, my sister Liba and Malkah with her two children occupied the parlor, and my brother and I shared the salon. We made room for everybody. Business was good and my parents did not consider it a burden to help Malkah and her children in such a time of need.

Itschak was a cutter and as soon as he learned a little of the Spanish language, he opened a tailor shop in Buenos Aires and began to make some money. He was helped by my uncle Joseph, who had migrated to Argentina several years prior to that time.

After World War One, Argentina was one of a few countries that had opened its borders to immigrants. The government’s goal was to develop industries in a country that was mostly agricultural. Jews from

eastern Europe, due to bias and economic discrimination, found it proper to emigrate there. My father's brother Joseph and his wife Bobble and their children; my father's sister Peltah and her husband Menashe and children; my father's brother Yehoodah, single at that time; my sister Ida and her husband Yakov (he was also my father's brother) and their three sons; and, later, my sister Malkah and her husband and two children; and my father's sister Taiblah and her husband Barooch all lived in Argentina and, thus, avoided suffering during the Holocaust. Taiblah's youngest son did not travel with his family to Argentina, however, he managed to survive the Holocaust and, after the war, found himself in the American zone in Germany. In 1946 or 1947, he went to Paris and from there to Argentina in an illegal way, to settle there with his brothers and sister.

My sister Ida was also a pretty young lady, with a sense of humor. She would tell me stories about bears, lions and other animals. Her smile was charming. When the girls would take me with them to go to pick berries or mushrooms in the forest, Ida kept me near her, so that I wouldn't get lost. She was almost the same age as my father's brother Yankl. In 1921, Yankl traveled to Argentina. He remained living there and wrote back to ask my sister Ida to come to Argentina to marry him. According to Jewish law, a female is allowed to marry an uncle, but a male is not allowed to marry an aunt. Ida agreed and, in 1923, she left us. I remember joining my father, when he took her to the train station at Lineve. Ida often wrote letters to us. She was happily married and enjoyed her life in Argentina, even though she missed all of us.

My sister Leah married a fellow from Pruzany in 1932, and as her dowry, she received an apartment in a new two-family house which my father had built in 1931. Then, my sister Liba married a bachelor from Pruzany named Jeshaiah Perelshtein and received as her dowry the other apartment in this same building.

It might be interesting to know exactly how my father came to build these apartments and how he was able to finance them. I stated before that my father was born in a Bialorus village Sosnoovkah, which was Poland, under Russian occupation. During World War I, the village was burned almost completely, including the building that belonged to my grandfather Shaylin and Grandma Mindl. When Poland gained back its independence, the government helped the Bialorus farmers to rebuild their houses on their previous locations. The farmers were offered the right to cut the necessary trees in the governments forests, out

of which they cut proper timber and they rebuilt their houses, stables, barns, and storage buildings.

My grandparents' lot where their house and buildings had once stood remained empty. Eventually, my grandma Mindl sold the lot to my father. She needed the money, and my father could afford to pay for it. I remember that before we bought the house, my father was notified by the local government authorities that he had a right to get as many trees as were required to build a house, wherever he chose. The offer had a time limit of a full year and then it would expire. It was a good offer, but there was no convenient way for my father to utilize it. He eventually found a way. He traveled to Sosnoovkah and took me with him. He approached a farmer who had three adult sons and offered them a deal. He would sell them his lot, which they could use to build a house for one of the sons, but, instead of money, which they didn't have for such things, they must agree to cut down and give him a supply of the log from the forest, after my father got the necessary permission.

The farmer and his sons gladly agreed to such an offer, as it was a bargain. The permission to cut the trees was granted. I remember when I traveled with my father to the forest near the town of Shereshev. Once there, the forest guards chose a few trees, which they promised to let the farmer and his sons cut down and take to us in Pruzany. The farmers brought the trees to the sawmill in our town. They were sawed into proper building beams and boards and stored there.

When we moved to our own house, my father got permission to build an apartment house along Jurizdika Street, beside our house. He hired builders and the farmer and his sons returned to haul the lumber from the sawmill to the site, and the work began. Until now, my father had not needed to spend any money, but as the construction process progressed, large amounts of money were needed to pay the builders and to buy additional products. Although he had saved some money and the family cheese and cereal businesses were doing well, he did not have enough cash to immediately cover expenses. He had to borrow money, at a high interest rate. This caused a financial crisis in our family, which lasted about five or six years. My school tuition and that of my brothers were paid, but not as easily as before, but we were never sent home from the classes for nonpayment on time.

The two beautiful apartments were a source of great pride; they even came with a huge cellar beneath each one. As planned, my father

gave one apartment to my sister Leah when she married, and the other apartment to my sister Libah when she married, as their dowries.

These two buildings were not burned down during the Holocaust. They provided shelter for Pruzaners and other Jews in the vicinity who survived the war. Eventually, my sister Libah's brother-in-law claimed ownership of one of them and sold it for some peanut value.

At the time, I was living in Kobrin and journeyed to this city, near the beginning of 1946, to claim the ownership. I didn't know that relatives of my sisters were occupying them. I sold one apartment on Juresdika for 10,000 rubles. While in Pruzany, I changed this currency at a bank and received \$100 in American currency. I did not claim the other apartment, because it belonged to my sister Leah. I knew that her husband's sister lived in the USA and his brother lived in Germany in a refugee camp. I thought the time might come when they would travel to Pruzany and claim their brother's property. I left it unclaimed.

### Chores

In the summer months, my father would travel to Sosnoovka to make hay in the meadow he had inherited from his parents; he would take me with him. We would stay for two or three days, at a peasant's home, and then return to Pruzany with three or more wagons of hay. Father would cut the grass and my job was to turn it over the next day, so that it could dry faster. Then I would help load the wagons.

I stayed busy and was helpful in doing my share of household chores, too. Since we had no running water in the kitchen in those days, even in big towns, I was responsible for providing water for the kitchen. There were water wells located in every town, and we'd have to walk with our personal pails to extract water from them. The distance to the well closest to our location was about a long block and a half away. Whenever I was home, I would check the water supply and if the pails were near empty, I would grab them and go to fetch fresh water. It was not an easy task, but I wanted to help my mother and even my sister Liba as much as I could..

### Childhood Games

Even though I was busy with my daily chores, I always found time to play with my younger brother Shylim or with friends. The most popular game we played was called Palanta. In an empty lot, we would place a small stick in the ground. Then, at a distance of about twenty-thirty

meters, we would draw a line to stand behind. One of us would throw another stick and try to knock down the one poking out of the ground. If we failed, the next kid tried to do it. If he was successful, he would earn a point. We would decide ahead of time how many points we had to earn to become the winner.

Another game was called Boundaries. We would draw a square in the dirt, forming four corners. One kid would enter the square and another player would throw a ball at him and try to hit him with it. The kid in the square could run anywhere within the square to dodge the ball. Whoever hit him got to take his place in the square.

We played other games called Hide and Seek, Cops and Robbers, and Policeman. During Poorim, we disguised ourselves and walked into certain homes singing, "*Haint is Poorim morgn is ois git unz a groshn, oon traibt oonz aro.*" It meant, "Today is the holiday Poorim and tomorrow it is out. Give us a penny, and chase us out."

At Passover, we played with small welsh nuts. We would put welsh nuts in a long line, at a certain distance from each other. Then a kid would slide a ball at the line, trying to hit a nut. If he succeeded, he took all the nuts below the one he had hit. Another game involved tossing the smaller nuts into a small hole in the ground. The challenger had to guess whether the number tossed was either an even or odd number. If he was right, he got to confiscate all the nuts in the hole.

We played also football (soccer), and card games, like 501 or one called 66; later, as a teenager, I played chess and many other games. In the winter months, we had snowball fights, built snowmen, went sledding and ice skating. In the summer months, we went swimming and horseback riding.

### Early Education

In the fall of 1922, I finished my studies in the modern cheder. The *melamed* took in a new set of students and I had to look for an institution with a more advanced teaching program. My parents did not want to send me in a Polish government school, where learning was free of charge, because, with my birth order coming after four older sisters, they were uneasy about how well I would do in such an environment. My father wanted me to attend a school where the emphasis was on Jewish subjects.

They devised a plan to send me to study in a *yeshiva*. This is an institution of higher Talmudic—Orthodox Jew—all-day studying. The head

of yeshiva in Pruzany was married to somebody in our family, so my father took me there, to ensure I was being placed in good hands. The yeshiva was in a synagogue . . . a rundown place. I saw a bunch of boys sitting on benches around a huge table. The Rosh (head) of the yeshiva sat at one side of the table. Each student had a book, which was called a Gomorrhah—the part of the Talmud that comments on the Mishnah, which is a collection of past biblical law and rabbinical discussions of the second century a. c., forming part of the Talmut. The word *yeshiva* means ‘sitting’ in Hebrew. In those days, a boy would literally sit all day long and study the Talmud, while moving the upper part of his body forward and backward and chanting the sentences in a special melody. No math, no languages, no history. Simply studying for the sake of studying. The goal was to become a Rav—a Rabbi. After the Second World War, the nature of a yeshiva changed. These days, a yeshiva is a regular school for both Jewish boys and girls.

From the first moment I first entered the yeshiva’s large room, I did not like it. I returned home and told my parents that I would not go there anymore. Well, it just happened that a modern Hebrew school named Yavneh had opened in Pruzany. One of the teachers was married to my mother’s relative. When he found out what was happening with my education, he suggested that my parents register me in his school. They agreed, despite the fact there were still economic difficulties and they had to pay tuition.

The Yavneh school contained five grades, but planned for seven grades in the future. I was classified as a fourth grader. I remember that I started my studies there in January of 1922. The school was located in a building that belonged to an Orthodox Russian priest. It was not next to a church. My class consisted of about thirty students of both sexes. This was a Zionist-oriented school, one of hundreds of similar institutions in Poland, Lithuania, Rumania, and other places. The main office of these schools was located in the capital city, Warsaw.

The name of this network of schools was Tarboot schools. The word Tarboot means ‘culture’ in Hebrew. The school in Pruzany was the Yavneh school of the Tarboot net of Hebrew schools. Since my Hebrew education was shaped in this school system, including my attitudes, my philosophy of life, and because I met many of my closest friends here, I feel it is important to tell the background of Yavneh.

A few decades before the start of the first millennium, the Romans attacked the Jewish state of Judea (Juhuda). The Roman army, under the command of Titus, besieged the capital of Jerusalem, but had difficulties in conquering it. The Hebrews put up a strong defense and were determined to protect their country. In addition, the town was protected by a thick brick wall and the Roman soldiers were hesitant to approach it.

After three years, one of the Jewish scholars decided to get out of the besieged town and to save Jewish culture, in case the Jews would lose the battle and be assimilated, in captivity. He had his students put him in a coffin. They approached the guards of the inner gate, pretending that he was dead, and asked permission to take the body out of Jerusalem to a burial field. Permission was granted. The man climbed out from the coffin and approached the Roman leader Titus, begging permission to open a religious school. Titus sent him and his students to a small settlement, where the scholar, whose name was Jochanan ben Zakkai, opened a Yeshiva and continued to teach Talmood and other Jewish studies.

Historically, Yavneh is considered the place where Judaism was saved from being extinct. The town exists to this day in the modern state of Israel. Yavneh was a Hebrew school—a nonprofit Zionist-oriented institution. Ironically, the committee was always short of funds to pay the teachers even a meager salary.

The curriculum in my school contained the same program as the Polish Government elementary schools, but all the subjects were taught in Hebrew. Some courses were also taught in the Polish language . . . especially Polish history and geography. Once or twice during the school year, an inspector from the Polish Board of Education would come and check out the situation in our school. Classes began at nine o'clock in the morning and ended at three in the afternoon. There was a break of fifteen minutes after forty-five minutes of studying, so we would run around in the yard and play.

Most of the time my mother would give me a roll for lunch. Or I would run home during a period of thirty minutes, when the teachers had their lunches. My mother or my older sister would prepare a fried egg to serve with pumpernickel bread.

The Yavneh school received no funds from the local government or from the central one. The school's budget had to be covered by the parents. Tuition was about around twenty zloty a month (four dollars).

Some parents got a break, including my parents, because the economy was still suffering and my younger brother, Shylim, was accepted into the Yavneh kindergarten and they had to pay for both of us. When the tuition was not paid in time, the treasurer would hand the teacher a note and the teacher would send the student home. It broke the student's heart, as well as the teacher's, but there was no other way to keep the school from closing. Obviously, the people were poor and could not meet the demand on time. Fortunately, neither my brother nor I were ever sent out from classes. My parents, even with their meager income, saved whatever they could and paid the tuition on time.

The different subjects in the Yavneh school were taught by different teachers. I was very fond of learning Hebrew literature, history, and geography. In both the fourth and fifth grades, I had difficulties with mathematics and geometry, because I hadn't learned these subjects in the cheder; other students who received their initial education in a cheder suffered the same plight. But, I caught up in the following two years and would get good grades at test time.

Most of us in my class liked our geography teacher the best. His name was Mr. G (the first letter from his surname). He had lived a few years in Palestine and his teaching was very interesting. He used to tell us a great deal about places in Palestine, which we had read about in the Bible. Mr. G was also our choir instructor and he taught us both modern and Hebrew songs that were popular among the first settlers in the Kibbutzim (a kibbutz is a large collective settlement in Israel). He was a man who had a great attitude toward life. He was demanding of us and expected order, discipline, responsibility, bravery, and truthfulness.

We boys liked the sports' exercises. On Fridays, Mr. G would take us on a march, in parade style, throughout the neighborhoods near Tserkevna Street, where the Yavneh school was located. While we marched, we would lustily sing Hebrew songs and people would rush from their houses, shops, and places of employment to watch the Yavneh students perform. Mr. G was a role model for us. We greatly respected and loved him. The teacher's name was Mosheh Greenwald.

I sang in the choir of the school. I had a fairly nice voice, probably inherited from one of my grandfathers, who were both cantors. Once a year, the school would prepare a play that was performed in the town theater. Almost every teacher would prepare his students with some kind of a piece in Yiddish. I not only participated in the sports activities and in the choir, but also in these plays. Once, I portrayed a cobbler.

My mother came to see these performances and enjoyed them very much.

Once a year, in the spring, the students and teachers would go on a picnic to the Shoobich ranch. The owner was a Mr. B, whose sons attended classes in the Turbot school; he allowed us to spend a very pleasant day in the forest on his property. The day of the picnic was called Lag Baomer. This is a historic day honoring 24,000 students, headed by the scholar Rabbi Akivah, who joined the hero, Bar Kohbah, in a revolt against the Roman forces, who were occupying the state of Judea two-thousand years ago. Lag Baomer comes from two Hebrew letters that stand for a number: L means 30, and G means 3. Thus, Lag Baomer is 33 days from the beginning of the Passover holiday. I believe that Lag Baomer is celebrated even today, by school children in Israel. The picnic was indirectly a Zionist rally, to express the desire of the Jewish people to create an Israeli state in Palestine, which was under the mandate of Britain. We students would march in columns, carrying blue and white flags, with the Star of David in the middle of the flag. We sang Hebrew patriotic songs. The whole Jewish population in town came out to enjoy the joyful and exciting day.

Well, not the whole Jewish population.

Some people did not enjoy this event.

Ever since the Jews were driven out of their land, some two-thousand years ago, they never stopped in their striving to return to Tseeyon (Zion). They expressed their desire to return to Jerusalem in prayers, poems, songs, even in their wish to travel to Jerusalem for a visit or to die in the Holy Land. It was the Austrian Jewish journalist Theodor Hertzl, who, after the Dreifoos Process (trial, judgment) in France—where a Jewish army officer named Dreifoos was falsely accused and tried for treason and expelled to an island to die—wrote about the anti-Semitism feelings in the world. (Dreifoos was later proved to be innocent of the charges against him and regained his freedom.) Hertzl came to the conclusion that the only way to solve the Jewish question was to create a Jewish state in Palestine, so Jews could leave the *diasporas*. The first Congress of Jewish representatives from European countries was in Bazel, Switzerland, in 1897, after Hertzl formulated, in his writings, the Jewish longing to return to Jerusalem in a political movement, in the world arena.

The Zionist movement included Jews of different ideologies, religions, secularists, socialists and others. Most had suffered in one way or

another from the pain caused by anti-Semitism. But, as Shalom Aleichem, the famous novelist, wrote in one of his stories, diversity can be expected. He wrote that twelve Jews were out in a boat, which took on water. They debated among themselves how best to save their lives. The twelve Jews came up with thirteen ideas. So it was among the Jews in the *diasporas*.

Many Jews were against the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine; they were even against teaching in and speaking the Hebrew language. They did not cherish any desire to travel to Palestine out of religious conviction. In fact, they denied religion. They were mostly ardent socialists. This phenomenon appeared also about the last years of the nineteenth century, under the name Bund, which means Union.

And so, there were two political movements among the Jewish masses in the *Shtetlach* (means small towns), whose main offices were in the larger towns. The Bund organized Jewish schools that maintained the Bund ideology. The ideology of the Bund was to join the socialist party of the non Jews and help them fight for better economic conditions for all the people, Jews, Christians, believers, nonbelievers . . . everyone. A fight for the working people throughout the world. The Bund cherished the Yiddish language and soon established schools alongside the Hebrew Tarboot schools, where Yiddish was the language in which all the subjects were taught.

These Zionist and Bund ideas had a tremendous impact on lives in Shtetlach among both adults and teenagers. These segments of the Jewish population either willingly or unwillingly estranged themselves from each other. For example, I was brought up in school to become an ardent Zionist and I avoided friendship with any kids my age who studied in the Bund Yiddish school. We never had any discussions with them. We simply avoided each other.

### Economic Conditions and Emigration

The Jewish economic situation in the Shtetlach (small towns) was grim. There were no industrial enterprises and the Polish government and local authorities discriminated against the Jewish young men and women, who couldn't obtain jobs to earn money for their existence. They had no expectations for a better future. The only alternative for them was migration to another country. But where? America had closed its doors. Only those who had close kin there or who had migrated before the war received visas to unite with their families there.

Argentina opened its doors and many Jews, including my uncle Yankl and my sister Ida, made their new homes there. Another place to travel was Palestine, which was under the British mandate. So, many more adventurous young men and women traveled there looking for a future and, at the same time, wishing to fulfill a Zionist mission to build Jewish towns, villages, as a basis for a future Jewish state. This idea of establishing an increasingly more visible Jewish presence in Palestine became the main goal of the Zionist movement. It was also their aim to change the Jewish way of earning a living, from owning a grocery store or candy store, to becoming a nation of productive people from all walks of life, including farmers and builders, who made their living with sweat and muscles.

#### Youth Organizations and Activities

One of the Zionist youth organizations in Poland was called Hashomer Hatsair (Hashomer in Hebrew means 'guardian' and Hatsair means 'young one'). This name differentiated from the Hashomer, who were Palestinian guardians of the Jewish settlements. The main goals of the Hashomer Hatsair movement were to send emigrants to Palestine, to push for a Jewish State, to build farms in Palestine in the spirit of socialist ideas, to learn and speak only Hebrew, to change the mentality of the Jews from a diasporas-thinking people to those who thought and acted with the idealism of Zionism and Aleeyah. Aleeyah, in Hebrew, means 'to go up,' and in this use, it means to emigrate to Erets Israel—the land of Israel.

In order to accomplish these goals, the Hashomer Hatsair organization attracted the young Jewish youth by opening a Boy Scout organization. It attracted many kids from the Tarbut school, including me. Groups were formed. The leaders were also lads in their teens or a little older. We met in an empty house at the end of Kobrin street and spent time with each other playing games, singing, and listening to stories about the first settlers in Palestine. The house was offered for temporary use to the Boy Scouts by Chaim Kaplan, whose daughter later became my wife Regina.

The Boy Scout ideology complemented the philosophy taught to us in the school Yavneh, where we practiced the principals of good behavior, honesty, integrity, helping the needy, being obedient to our parents and so forth. My brother Sheelym was also a member of the Cub

Scouts, the group for younger boys in the Scout organization. I learned the Morse code, but only the Hebrew alphabet letters.

My friends and I joined the Hashomer Hatsair organization, which had an entirely different set of ideals and goals. I remember when a delegate from the headquarters came and demanded that the oldest members leave their homes and enlist in units where they could be trained as farmers, builders, and factory workers. They would then wait in these camps until they received a certificate from the British commissioner to make Aleeyah—travel to Israel. By doing these things, they would fulfill many goals. The most important were to become a productive person, to build a future Israel state, and to live using the principles of socialism. No exploitation! The elderly members had their choice . . . to obey or to be expelled from the movement.

In 1927 or about that time, three of my friends and I became the leaders of the local organization. At that time, I had stopped going on Fridays to the ranches to help out with the family cheese business. We had reliable workers and I wasn't needed except for the summer vacation months. I became the secretary of the local Hashomer Hatsair. Among other duties, I had to write reports to the headquarters in Warsaw. I also issued bulletins and conducted educational activities for the younger members. We would meet on Friday evenings and on Saturday afternoons. We would talk about Erets Israel, about the Arab resistance to our building a Jewish state, and the British mandate. We would also sing Hebrew songs and dance the Horah, a dance in which the participants place hands on each others' shoulders and dance in a circle while singing Hebrew songs. I was a steady participant in this dancing, which lasted sometimes for hours.

Very often, we had conventions of representatives from the Kens (Ken means nest in Hebrew). Most of the time, I was among the delegates attending the meetings in Kobrin, Pinsk and other places. My parents would not stop me from traveling, because I earned money from tutoring to cover my own expenses. I didn't have a bicycle yet and the distance between Pruzany and Kobrin was twenty-eight miles. I had friends there that belonged to Hashomer Hatsair and I would sometimes devise clever ways in which to get a ride there and back to see them.

I would sometimes take members of the Hashomer Hatsair who were under my supervision on a one-day hike and, sometimes, even on three to five-day hike into the forests near the small town of Malch. We

would walk to the destination, carrying small tents and backpacks filled with food, dishes, teabags and sugar, a portable cook stove, and other essential equipment. We would purchase milk, eggs, bread and other food items from the Bialorussian farmers. They were very friendly. We would sit around the fire and sing until late in the evening. These were outings to remember for a lifetime and, fortunately, I have done just that.

My social life consisted mainly of activities with the members of the Zionist organization. We had to move to a different location, because the owner of the building we had been using—Chaim Kaplan—planned to build a flour mill in it. I subscribed to the daily newspaper, which was Zionist-oriented, with a neighbor. He would get the HINT (name of the daily) in the morning and keep it until four in the afternoon, when he gave it to me. Later that evening, I would give it to a schoolmate who couldn't afford to pay for a paper. As a teenager, I liked to be aware of world news, but I was interested primarily in news about Erets Israel.

Radio was a fairly new phenomenon in Pruzany. The first time my friends and I heard a broadcast was in 1927 or 1928, when the Bund Party had a radio installed. We had to pay a fee to listen to an hour of Polish music or some other program.

I also kept abreast of news by subscribing to a Hebrew monthly magazine, which was issued by the headquarters of the Hashomer Hatsair organization. It contained articles of the Zionist nature, and also on subjects concerning the ideals of socialism and communism and their differences. When I read such expressions as "*progress*," and that the goal of communism was to destroy capitalism through revolutionary means and that Party members would approve of all measures to reach this goal, I paid close attention to what I was reading and, especially, to which direction the organization was moving.

Finally, as a teenager of eighteen, I devoted even more time to learning about socialism and communism. I read a book about the Polish socialist leader Kautski and one on Karl Marx. Then, I read in the *Hashomer* magazine that the Hashomer Hatsair intended to become a political party, in order to be considered an organization that could be classified a so-called second-and-a-half international. Capitalism was first international, Socialism was second international, and Communism formed the third international. To be in between these idealisms meant I would have to adapt to the idea of living in a *kibbutz*—a collective farm in Palestine. The thought of losing my individuality and

my own initiative and to be made to obey the rules of the accepted decisions, even if I were against them, made me think about my future as a member of the organization. Well, after a few months of testing my conscience, I came to the conclusion that if I had any doubts at all about my being able to live by the edicts that I was preaching to the younger members of the organization, I would have to resign from my assignments. I felt I could no longer hold a membership in the organization I had cherished so much during the previous six years, because I did not want to be a hypocrite.

I remember the scene when I handed over my letter of resignation and canceled my membership in the Hashomer Hatsair. I was heartbroken over my friends' reactions. They were shocked and asked me to reconsider my decision, but their arguments were in vain. I never regretted my decision, because I felt that I would not be happy to live in a kibbutz, even if I would be elected to be the leader of one. In fact, and this is the truth, more than one of the leaders who had preached to the others about *Aleeyah* (migrating to Palestine) and living in a kibbutz, chose to remain in the Diaspora.

My friendship with the other members of the organization was not interrupted, however. About fifty years later, when I visited Israel with Regina, we were invited by my friends to visit the Kibbutz Negba in the south, and we spent a nice couple days with them reminiscing about the time in our youth when our Pruzany Jewish community was alive and flourishing.

I was not lonesome as a teenager. I participated in many activities in the Hebrew Gymnasia. For two years, I was the head of the school's library, which contained mostly Hebrew books and magazines. We had lectures on Sabbath and in the afternoons, we wrote and presented variety shows, in which I always sang in the choir, and I had important parts in school plays and various sports' appearances.

Two or three times a year, the Zionist organization would have a flower day. About a dozen pairs—a man and a woman—would carry a cardboard sign on which colored streamers and paper flowers were attached. The pairs would stop passersby and try to pin one of the flowers on their lapels. Few people would refuse to wear the flower, and they would insert some money into the blue and white *pooshkeh* (box). This money was assigned to a fund that would be used to buy land in Palestine. The fund was called "*Keren Kayemeth Lisrael*"—Jewish National Fund.

Once, I was almost framed when a very dangerous issue came to light. Among the Jews in Pruzany were a few young boys and girls who were active in an underground communist activity. One young fellow, my age and height, used to travel at night to the Belarus villages and agitate the peasants to become underground (*tovarishes*) friends and members of the Russian underground Communist group. He attended once such session in the Peredielsk, the village in which I would spend considerable time at our ranch *pact* attending to the cheese production. The *Porits* (Hebrew word for a big land owner) was an ardent fighter *against* the communist underground movement. Another neighbor, who was friendly with the Count of the Peredelsk ranch, met me in the street and told me that the *Porits* had gotten word from the villagers that very often underground communists would agitate the Bialorus farmers to join them in their cause and that I was one of those rabble-rousers. He added that the owner of the ranch intended to report *me* to the secret police, and to throw out the cheese making business from his ranch!

This outrageous frame-up caused me extreme concern. I knew right away how such an entrapment against me had started and developed. The real fellow who came to the village of Peredelsk (his name was S. S.) was my height and age. Since he always arrived late in the evening and met the would-be candidates in the communist underground movement near the forests, those who spotted him thought I was the guy who had come to lure them into his communist net. One of the villagers told the *Porits* (ranch owner) about this meeting and mentioned my name as the agitator.

I informed my father and he rushed immediately to the ranch owner in Zasimovich, where we had a cheese making pact, and told him about the frame-up. I went to a lawyer, whose son was my schoolmate and friend, and had him contact the *Porits* as well. The Zasimovich *Porits* listened and was taken aback by the explanation. Both intervened on my behalf. The *Porits* traveled to the ranch in Peredelsk and persuaded the owner that I was innocent of the charges against me. The lawyer wrote a letter in which he emphasized that the villagers were wrong and had mistakenly identified me as the communist agitator.

Needless to say, I was greatly relieved when this ugly matter was over and my good name had been restored. A few days later, when I arrived at the Peredelsk business, the owner met me with a smile and said, "How could the villagers possibly accuse you of such a crime?" I told him that I was afraid, even though my name had been cleared, because

the police might send me to taste the tortures in the Bereze Kartuskah concentration camp. The count laughed. The next morning, when he was about to travel to Pruzany, he called me to him and said, "As compensation for your groundless suffering, I want you to go with me to Pruzany." This was an incredible offer on his part. Imagine me, a Jewish boy, being allowed to sit next to a Polish bigwig landowner. Of course, I was more than happy to accept such an honor.

When he was ready to travel, he told me to sit next to him in the buggy, to which two horses had been harnessed. When we arrived in Pruzany, the coachman was told by the Porits to gallop down the most important streets so that many of the citizens could see me traveling with him.

Then we stopped in front of our house, where many neighbors ran out to watch me climb out. I thanked the landowner for the pleasant ride. I was happy and the Porits left smiling. I had to tell the neighbors that the reason for the ride was a way for the count to make retribution for the false charges against me by the villagers. This event was the talk of the town for a long time.

### My Bar Mitzvah

The meaning of the word Bar means 'to be able to do' and Mitsvah means 'a good deed,' and more literally . . . a commandment. Until a boy is thirteen, according to accepted thought in Jewish families, all the actions of the son are credited to his father, whether the boy's behavior is good or bad. When the son turns thirteen, he is considered as an adult and, thus, he becomes responsible for his own actions.

When I became 13, there was no fuss in becoming a Bar Mitsvah boy. There were no parties, no invited guests from out of town, and no magnificent celebrations. My father took me to the synagogue. After I read the Haftorah—passages from the book of Prophets—I became responsible for my deeds. The most joy I had was the fact that through this short ceremony, I became eligible to be considered as a tenth to a minyan.

My father announced from the podium in the synagogue, "*Barooch shepatraanee meonshoi shell zeh.*" He said it loudly, so all those present could hear it. The translation is: Blessed it be, because I became exempt from allegedly being punished, because of him (my son)." My father bought me a set of Tephilin Phylacteries and I learned how to put them on. I remember that before I went to school, I would rush some-

times into the synagogue, with the intention to be the tenth to a minion. I felt very happy the day when there were nine Jews waiting for a tenth and I had reached my goal. People praised me and I felt proud of myself.

### Higher Education

The school years 1922-1926 passed by and I graduated from grade seven in the elementary school system. I was fifteen, going on sixteen, considered fairly old, but I hadn't been able to start the Hebrew Yavneh school until some time after we had traveled from Dolgolislo to Pruzany. My parents wanted me to continue my education and so I wanted this for myself, too. There was a Polish government high school, a seminary, in Pruzany. If I completed four years here, I could be accepted in a two-year college to become a teacher in the public schools. My parents and I decided I should try to do this. We knew, too, that there was discrimination against Jews in the education system, as there was in the other Polish government branches; nevertheless, I wanted to try my luck. Because it was unconstitutional to blatantly discriminate against Jews, the authorities often wanted to save face by allowing a candidate to slip through the system. They would accept a Jewish boy or girl into the public high school. I had a close friend who wanted to do the same thing, so our parents hired a Polish teacher to prepare us for the test, which was scheduled for the beginning of January 1926.

My friend and I studied diligently, day and night—Polish history, geography, math and other subjects. We even learned Polish patriotic songs, in case we would have to prove our allegiance to the country. The day of the exams, we found ourselves in a big room with at least thirty other candidates, mostly Polaks and three or four Bialorus boys. Both oral and written tests were given over a period of two days. One part of the written test concerned our knowledge of the Polish language. We had to write a short essay about rain! Two days after we took the tests, we were notified that we had both failed. There were no explanations given. We were not given the scores of our various exams. Of course we knew the reason, without being told. We had been told we could take the exams, but in the end, there was discrimination against Jews.

It did not upset us much, however, because in January of 1926, the headquarters of the Tarbut movement opened a Hebrew high school in Pruzany under the name A.D. Gordon Hebrew High School. Now, twelve years of education would be available to Jewish students, just as in

the public schools of Poland. The tuition was high, because the school did not receive financial support from the government and the organized Jewish community could not afford to spare funds.

Again, all the subjects were taught in Hebrew, even the Latin language. Indirectly, its purpose was to prepare us students to know the language, as it was the official language in Eretz Israel. There is no need to brag. When reading the Hagadah during the seder on Passover holiday, there is one phrase: *koolanoo chachonim* which means 'we are all smart.' Every student was diligent and everyone studied hard. However, some students in the elementary school who had difficulties would come to me for tutoring. Throughout my five years of high school, I always had two and sometimes more tutoring students. I earned five zlotys a month from a student . . . an amount that equals about one American dollar in those days. I could have managed without this tutoring income, because my parents could easily cover even my pocket money, but it gave me a feeling of personal satisfaction to earn these extra dollars on my own. I could afford to see a movie and to treat my brother or sister Liba to the movie, and sometimes even a friend as my guest, or I could take them for a glass of soda and a candy. I made time for everything required of me, including studying, doing homework, helping in the family business on Fridays and Saturdays, and being active in the Boy Scout organization.

There was another very serious event in my life that occurred in the years before I met Regina. My sister Ida, who lived in San Chuan on the south western border of Argentina, had written to my parents that she would like to have me come to Argentina after I graduated from high school, to study in a university and become a doctor. She would assist with the tuition and other fees. I gladly agreed to this plan. Ida sent a hundred dollars as a deposit on a ticket to travel there by ship. I applied for a passport. The local Polish office dragged its feet and didn't reply to my application until 1930. Then they sent a short notice denying my request for a passport, because I had reached the age of twenty-one and was eligible for enlistment in the army. So my golden opportunity to become a doctor in Argentina was never realized.

### Talents and Accomplishments

All of us, during our lifetime, have times of distress of various degrees and characteristics— like health problems, economic problems, family and relationship problems and so forth. But we also possess qual-

ities and talents that can bring us significant joy, when they are discovered by friends, by neighbors, or by organizations to which we belong. In this memoir of my life, I have already described and will describe even more certain things that occurred that affected my plight, including hardships, miseries, and woes. But during my lifetime, I also experienced many moments when I was thrilled by the admiration and praise of different people, at different occasions, and in different places. People complemented me for my singing, for my being handsome, for my appearing on the stage, and for being intelligent, hardworking, and accomplished in so many areas.

Now the question I have in writing about these latter truths in my memoirs is whether I should keep them to myself in order to avoid being criticized by my readers, or whether I should include them, because they happened and they are as much a part of my life as the hardships. After debating the issue, I have decided to include them. That being said, I shall continue with the following stories!

During a period between classes, several of us seventh and eighth grade students found ourselves playing in the school yard. Two lady teachers walked the area, to be watchful for problems and to maintain order. Suddenly, they stopped next to me, and one of them said in almost a whisper, "Of all the sixty boys we have been observing, you are the most handsome!"

During the wedding feast of Aunt Sheindl, when I was nine years old, my grandmother Mindl's brother picked me up and placed me on a table. He said, "Sing a song, Mosheh, a Yiddish song!" Suddenly, everyone present was demanding a Yiddish song. I sang a song my sister Malkah had taught me. I still remember the applause and the praises, kisses, cake, candies, and sweets the guests gave me. They said I was the star of the wedding.

Although these events occurred during my youth, I am still receiving compliments from people. On March 2, 2002, two days after my ninety-first birthday, I went to the temple where I am a member. I conducted a Hebrew class there once a week, and also a Yiddish speaking class. I did this voluntarily, and I was much appreciated by the members of the committee. I had become friendly with the conservative rabbi and often conversed with him about various subjects during the reading of the scroll. The rabbi invited me to read the Haftorah. As I strode up to the podium, he stopped me and insisted that I first sing a Yiddish song. Needless to say, I was shocked. To sing in a temple in

front of 650 parishioners, at my age? He would not let it go and then I heard voices from all around me. “A song . . . sing a Yiddish song.”

I complied. I sang a song about a man who came into a town to look for a job as a cantor. So on the Sabbath, he was tested by a shoemaker, by a tailor, and by a blacksmith. I sang the song, imitating how each of them expressed their excitement with the working tools they used during the weekdays. When I finished singing, I heard an uproar in the temple. People applauded enthusiastically and provided me with a standing ovation. The Rabbi kissed me, and the president of the temple showed his great satisfaction. I asked the congregation why they call the Yiddish language *Mame Loshon*. I told them it was because *Mame* means ‘mother’ and *Loshon* means ‘language.’ When the *Mame* starts yakking and yakking and yakking, the *Tate* (father) loses his *Loshon* . . . his ability to talk! The applause grew even louder and people laughed heartily. At the end of the services, when I walked toward the exit, men and women stood on both sides of the aisle and shook hands with me. They followed me all the way to my car, praising my song, my beautiful delivery of it, and my sense of humor.

Remembering this event as I write about, I feel very happy and proud of myself. Is this boasting? I don’t think so. Does this event deserve to be told in my life story? Yes, it does. I experienced many similar happenings like this one during my many years of life. I was blessed with the ability to sing well, to tell humorous stories and jokes, and even to dance, and I made good use of these God-given talents.

## Military Service in Poland

At the age of twenty-one, every young male had to register in the Polish draft and serve in the Polish army, if mentally and physically fit. The length of service depended on the specific branch in which one had been trained. There were always certain boys who tried to avoid the draft. For instance, they tried various means to make themselves unfit to pass the medical test. One guy went to an ear doctor and asked to be made deaf in one ear. Unfortunately, he not only lost his hearing, but became mentally ill for the rest of his life. Other young fellows tried to lose so much weight that they would be rejected from serving in the army for being too weak to perform duties.

Graft and corruption were also used to avoid the draft. I wasn't interested in deforming myself or losing my self-respect, in order to become a draft dodger. I remember the day I received a summons to appear before the draft board. Among other members of the Board was the *Porits* of the ranch where my family had one of its shops to produce Swiss cheese. He knew me very well, because I spent so much time at his ranch. He was an influencing member on the Committee. Ahead of me in the line was a very good friend. It seemed to me that he had lost a great deal of weight. As he appeared before the assigned physician, the *Porits* looked at him as a candidate and said to the doctor. "Surely we don't need such a miserable looking fellow in the famous Polish army. He will not last even a week among the ranks of our soldiers." My friend was dismissed and told he never had to appear before a draft board again. Now, it was my turn. I removed my shirt and the doctor began to examine me. The *Porits* slapped me lightly on my shoulder and said loudly, "*Panowie* (gentlemen), this is a soldier! Look at him. We need only these kinds of youngsters in our famous army."

I thought to myself, "Thanks for the compliment, but who needs it at a time like this!" I didn't blame my friend for using any means to avoid serving in the army. His father had passed away and left a hardware business for him to run. His mother could not take care of the store, as she had three other children. My friend stopped his education and devoted his time to the business. Had he been drafted, and had to be away for two years, the business would be ruined and cause untold problems for the family.

Finally, in March of 1932, and while Regina was in college, I received orders from the local draft board to report for active service in the Polish army. My regiment was to be stationed in the town of Tchev, in northern Poland, about fifteen miles from Dantsig and my first day of duty would be April 1, 1932.

Before I left home, my family and friends held several dinners, and Regina's parents and brother attended. The day before I left, they invited me to their house for dinner and wished me a safe journey and the strength to endure whatever difficulties I should encounter during my time of service. I visited my sisters, wrote to my relatives in Argentina, and made good use of the three weeks before I had to report.

When the day arrived, my mother baked cookies to take with me and packed them carefully into my knapsack. My sisters brought me candy. My father read a special prayer for my safety. It is called *Tfilath* in Hebrew (the prayer). We all walked to the train station, a huge group of us. I boarded the train with many other young men recruits.

I recognized many in my train car, mainly Ukrainian and Bialorusian lads who were leaving their farms and villages to serve the Polish government. There were two other Jewish recruits whom I knew well. One was a neighbor who worked in the barbershop where I had my hair cut. He stuttered and I wondered why he had been enlisted. The other was my friend from the nearby town of Shereshev. We sat together and our conversation turned to matters concerning our eighteen months of active duty in the infantry. After these first eighteen months, we'd have to serve another three months in the reserves and then another three months after three years had passed.

The train taking us to Tchev stopped early in the morning at our destination. Army police were waiting for us at the station and ordered us to line up in rows of four and then they marched us to the site of our regiment. Upon arrival, we were assigned to our battalions. I was sent to the infantry battalion and my two Jewish friends were assigned to an artillery battalion and to another infantry group. My immediate superior held the rank of corporal. He could be recognized by the two stripes on his epaulets and the front of his cap. He slept with our unit in the same barracks. His superior noncommissioned officer was head of our company and had three stripes on his uniform and cap.

This first day was busy and confusing. We had to register and then shower, before having a medical checkup. We were asked to run fast from one place to another to be assigned our uniforms. One sergeant

handed out shirts, another pants, another socks and shoes. If the pieces we were handed didn't fit, we'd have to run the circuit again. There was a lot of shouting to add to the chaos. Taunts and jeers, like, "This is the army, not your mama's kitchen!" added to our misery. It was meant to reeducate us and adjust us to military discipline. I was assigned to a unit of mostly Polish-born soldiers and three Bialorus and Ukrainians. I was the only Jew. I turned over all my civilian clothes for storage and was given a small cupboard in which to keep my personal belongings.

The next morning, my entire battalion lined up for a captain, who told exactly what to expect. We were no longer individuals. We had no voice as to how our daily lives would be spent. We were the future defenders of Poland and we were expected to follow the strict rules of the army, which would be enforced by our immediate superiors and higher-ranking officers. Discipline, obedience, duty, and the fulfillment of orders. These were our sole concerns. For serving our country, we would receive a small payment, in addition to our room and board.

We were also told to devote all our time and energy into thinking about how to best fulfill the requirements of the army, and not on thinking about our families.

The barracks themselves were fairly new. The rooms were large and a hallway divided them. The equipment was modern and in new condition. I was impressed and happy, since this place would be my home for the next several months. I had an upper bunk. The lights were extinguished by eight or nine in the evening, after we had received the order "*Cisza nocna!*" meaning SILENCE AT NIGHT! Although this was much earlier than we normally went to bed, we usually fell immediately to sleep after a long day of hard work. A bugle call awoke us at six in the morning. We all rushed to get ready for breakfast. We had to eat whatever was served and, of course, no kosher meats were served to army recruits.

The first day, we were given rifles, swords, a canteen, a small spade and a few other pieces of equipment and ordered to the training field. We spent several minutes doing exercises and practicing our marching. Then we were taught how to take apart our rifles and clean them and the use them, in target practice. At noon, we'd return to the barracks for lunch in a huge room with tables and benches. Our main dinner was served at this time and included soup, meat, bread and some sort of dessert. In the afternoon, we'd practice marching with our full equipment, listen to lectures and whatever else our superiors felt was impor-

tant. Before hearing the order for “silence” again, we’d have to polish our shoes to a high shine and check to ensure that we hadn’t lost any of the tiny nail studs inserted into the soles of our boots to help preserve them. We’d also ensure that no buttons were missing from our uniform and that all our equipment was laid out in proper order, just in case we were awakened for a hurried emergency roll call.

A corporal was in charge of each room, but a lieutenant was in charge of each barracks. At night, the corporal had to answer to his superior that all his charges were in their beds and everything was in order. If the officer was in a bad mood or if he simply wanted to have a little fun with us tired soldiers, he would enter a room and make an unannounced inspection. If the room wasn’t immaculate, with our shined shoes lined up correctly by our beds and our uniform properly folded, he would exact punishment on us, usually through a regimen of more exercises. Sometimes he would enter our room in the dark during the night and place a few pieces of straw under our beds. Then he’d snap on the lights, make an inspection, find the straw, and accuse us of not suitably cleaning our room. We’d have to dress in ten minutes and go outdoors for a hard session of marching and exercises.

Our small wages hardly covered the cost of toothbrushes and toothpaste and stamps, so we could send letters home. But, we were young and it didn’t take us long to adjust to our new routines and to the discipline imposed upon us. At the same time, we got to know more about each other and about those who lived in other parts of our same country. Those who came from the northwestern border had a touch of German in their speech and behavior. Those who came from the southeast were mainly farmers who had experienced little of modern facilities or culture. Generally speaking, I did not encounter any anti-Semitism. I spoke Polish without an accent, and I was able to perform whatever calisthenics and other physical activities were required of us, with equal agility to the others, if not better.

My education served me well. Whenever the lieutenant addressed our company concerning Polish history, geography and government and would ask for input from us, I always knew the answers. He asked once about my education and I told him I was a graduate from the gymnasium. According to my education, I should have been placed in a battalion that trained officers, but because of discrimination practiced in Poland at that time, I was denied this privilege. Later, I considered this particular rebuff to my advantage. When the Russians defeated the

Polish army, they rounded up about 11,000 Polish officers and took them to the forest near Smolensk. These prisoners were killed. Many decades later, the Russians accused the Germans of committing this massacre and the Germans insisted the Russians were responsible. Finally, a few years ago, the Russians admitted that their NKVD had destroyed all these Polish officers and buried their bodies in a mass grave. Who can tell what may have happened to me, if I had become a Polish army officer. Instead, I became a mere Polish recruit and performed my duties as required . . . and lived to see another day!

I did find time to think about my family members and about Regina. I wrote to them and they wrote to me and we kept up with each other's lives. I counted the days when I could return to them all . . . especially to Regina, my sweetheart and the one I loved so much. I would describe everything I did from dawn to dusk.

From my very first day in the Polish army, I was determined to prove to everyone that a Jew was as capable as any of them in fulfilling any task. My goal was to rescind any feelings of bias or prejudice that any soldier or officer may have about me. Fortunately, I had the physical and intellectual ability to do this. My hard work on the ranch and helping with the dairy duties gave me the required stamina to do the physical work, and my studies gave me the ability to learn any theoretical material. Besides being industrious, I was capable of enduring any adverse conditions, including the varied weather conditions of extreme heat, cold, rain, snow, and even thirst and hunger.

Once I had settled into my routine, I met a Jewish corporal by the name of Zusia. I had known him several years previous to our recruitment, while we were members of the Zionist young organization Hashomer Hatsair. He lived in Kobrin, not far from Pruzany. Our meeting came as a surprise to both of us and we grew closer in our friendship. He had been chosen to become a leader of a unit because of his capabilities and bravery. He assured me that I would soon enjoy the same promotion.

On the eve of Passover holiday, Jewish soldiers were led under the command of Zusia to the nearby town of Tchev and a Jewish house, where the Jewish community had prepared a lovely *Seder* for us. We were met by the cordial owner of the house and, after a brief ceremony, were treated to a holiday dinner containing Matsah, dumplings, meats, and all the other traditional foods we were accustomed to eating with our families. Zusia told me it was a tradition for the Jewish community

to invite the soldiers to the first Sader each year. Afterward, we sang all the usual Passover songs. The locals wanted to know where we were from and about our families. It was a pleasant way to spend this special day. Zusia thanked the owner of the house and the committee members and then we marched in our columns back to our barracks. Locals from the town stopped to watch us as we marched in perfect union and rhythm.

Surprisingly, we were invited back the next day for the same sort of celebration and again the next day. Now we felt we knew the local Jewish community and we were more relaxed. I chatted with the president of the Tchev Jewish organization and his older son, who studied in the government high school. He also attended the Zionist youth group. I mention this, because many years later, I read an article about an uprising in the town of Vilno against the Nazis during the Holocaust. I noticed the name of this very lad as one of the leaders of the Resistance movement. He had studied to be a doctor at the university in Vilno and had been stranded there. Alas, this brave fellow did not survive the war.

Sharing these holiday *saders* with the members of the Jewish community was not only a pleasant experience, but a memorable one. It uplifted my spirits and morale, as well as those of the other Jewish soldiers, something we needed while so far away from our families.

Every couple weeks, a Catholic priest would come to our training base for a religious service. We Jews had to attend, as well. We would simply sit on the grass field with the others and make no comments, while pretending to listen to the sermons. One Sunday, a soldier spoke up after the service. "We Poles believe in God, but our enemies, the Germans, believe in the same God. Isn't there a contradiction in fact that the same God is with us, but also against us?" The priest did not respond and the religious service came to a rather abrupt end. This soldier was quite suddenly transferred to another regiment. He was obviously a socialist or a communist and quite daring. Too daring!

After serving three months, my recruitment and training period came to an end. A certain number of soldiers were chosen to attend special training in the officer training school to become corporals and sergeants and leaders of platoons. I was the only Jew selected for this training, which took another three months. I was elevated to the rank of corporal and assigned to head a unit of twelve soldiers with whom I spent my remaining eight months in the army.

In December of 1932, I was given a two-week furlough in order to visit my family. Regina was still in Warsaw studying at the nursing school. I split my furlough and spent half with my sister Malkah, in order to see Regina, and the other half in Pruzany with my family. Regina was proud of the insignia on my uniform and cap. She visited me at Malkah's apartment for special dinners in my honor. We went to the movies in the evening and walked through the famous Saski Gardens, and used the streetcar system to get to museums. My parents and other sisters were happy to see that I was in good health and in excellent spirits. I visited both Lea and Liba in their homes. Everyone was eager to hear about my army experiences.

I even spent an evening with Regina's parents in their home. They treated me well and eager to learn about my adjustment as a soldier. They were proud of my achievement in receiving the rank of corporal and her brother enjoyed touching the award pin on my uniform. Regina's friends arranged a small party for me and since it was during the Chanukah season, the hostess prepared very tasty potato latkes. We spent a pleasant evening, but it would have been better if Regina had been there with me.

I also took some time to visit with friends in Pruzany and we reminisced about our childhood experiences in the Hebrew Tarbut school and in high school. Everyone had special stories to relate and we laughed a great deal. Since Pruzany was such a small town, most people recognized me as I strolled through the streets and would stop to talk with me and express their pride in my achievement. On Saturday, I went with my father to services in the synagogue and, again, I was surrounded by teenagers who were eager to know that Jews could attain the same accomplishments as non-Jews.

I spent time with both of my parents, my grandmother Mindl and my aunts and uncles. When it came time to leave, Regina's mother sent a cake and some cookies that she wanted me to share with Regina when I stopped off in Warsaw to see her, My sisters both handed me some sweets and my mother presented me with a container of butter mixed with honey, saying, "Share this with the girl you love!" She also sent some for my sister Malkah.

Before I left home, I fulfilled another one of my goals. I knew that the very evening I returned to the military base from my furlough, I would be assigned to night watch, as the officer in charge on my unit. Part of my duty was to ensure that each room in the barracks remained

heated during the night hours by inserting small logs of wood into the furnaces. In order to ignite these fires and get them to burn well, I had learned in my youth the importance of having smaller pieces of kindling handy. It isn't possible to light a fire by simply using a match. Such small pieces of kindling weren't always readily available on the base, however, and I didn't want to get myself in trouble by failing to produce quality fires... A few days before returning to my base, I went to the barn and chopped a bundle of slender pieces of soft wood to use for this purpose. I placed my bundle of kindling into my knapsack and carried it all the way back to my camp.

That evening, I did my rounds, saw that all my men had fulfilled their required duties and then called out my order for "silence." I lighted my fires in each furnace, using both matches and the kindling I had brought from home. They ignited immediately and soon burned beautifully, warming the brick tiles, which soon spread warmth throughout the room and the barracks hallway. At midnight, the officer in charge strode into the building. I rushed to salute him and to make my report. He noticed how warm the building was and commented on his pleasure. He wrote a flattering report in his daily record book that during his inspection on New Year's Eve of 1932, Corporal Moyzsesh Yudievits had performed admirably. "A job well done." This was a nice addition to my military record.

Very often, a few corporals would meet during the lunch period and talk about our units, about the command above us, and other things of interest. I remember one story about a corporal that was related many times. I don't really believe the story and feel that it was more of a joke, but it is worth telling. A corporal rushed to meet an on-duty lieutenant who had entered the hall at the stroke of midnight for the usual inspection and report. The corporal was so excited, he spoke while saluting, "Lieutenant, sir! One of my soldiers has been arrested, two left for the mall in town, and all the others are at the latrine relieving themselves." Well . . . in Polish, it sounds more humorous!

There were times when a quarrel was taking place that a Polak would shout, "You Jew pig!" The Jew would reply, "You are a Pole pig," and then both would stomp away. But I remember that in the early 1920s, a law was strictly enforced by the Polish SEIM (House of Representatives) that if a Jew called a Pole a Polish pig, he would be punished with imprisonment up to three years! Unfortunately, this nearly happened to me once. A Pole shouted, "You Jew pig," at me and my tem-

per got the best of me. I shouted back, "You Polish pig!" He threatened to report me to the authorities. It was a serious incident. I acted immediately and reported it myself to my superior commander. Within a week, I was called into the battalion chief's office to discuss the matter. The captain was known as an officer who demanded discipline, not only from the regular soldiers, but also from the commanding staff, which included corporals. After making the formal introductions, the captain asked me to tell him about the event. In my fluent Polish, I said, "During the cleaning of the rifles, the soldier showed negligence to his duty by refusing to bring the weapon to the proper shine. Then I called his attention to this matter and ordered him to continue working on his rifle, he called me a 'Jew pig.' I wasn't pleased with his disobedience to my order or to his lack of respect for my position."

I noticed a look of understanding on the captain's face and quickly added, "I lost my temper and I greatly regret that I called him a 'Pole pig.'" It was not proper for me to do this."

The soldier was called into the office to give his version. He did not deny any part of my version. He was chastised by the captain for not only insulting a Jew, but a Polish patriot, a devoted soldier of the Polish defense forces, and a corporal who carried on his uniform the hard-earned distinction of an eagle. The captain stopped his rhetoric and peered at me. "I accept your sincere apology. Continue to demand from yourself and your subordinates only the highest form of discipline and obedience." The soldier was confined to the barracks every weekend for two months.

From that day on, I seemed to be under this captain's watch and good grace. When our unit was transferred for war games to the town of Torun, I was ordered, instead, to join the captain's staff at the headquarters, where I acted as a messenger between the high command and leaders of the platoons. Of course these were the days when there were no modern means of communication. Whenever I carried these messages, I had to loudly call out the names of the sergeants in order to find them. They weren't always happy to have a corporal relay messages from the captain.

During Passover of 1933, the Jewish community again provided seders for the Jewish soldiers. It was now my responsibility to lead the units to the town of Tchev. I was responsible for their appearance and behavior. I took this task seriously and am happy to report that no incident occurred to bring dishonor to the troops under my watch.

## The Family Cheese Business

In the fall of 1923, my father started the same cheese business he had conducted for so many years in Dolgolisk. He knew how to prepare the formulas by extracting a certain liquid in cows' milk, which allowed it to be made into Muenster (monster) cheese, which would be shaped and pressed in special wooden forms. The raw product was kept in a basement, where it was salted and cured for about three months to make it ready for sale. Only about five percent of this cheese was sold locally. Almost the entire amount of cheese was sent to the capital city of Warsaw

My father had contacted the same broker with whom he had dealt for many years. This broker then sold the cheese to jobbers at a wholesale price, depending on the quality of the cheese. After deducting his commission, the broker would send the cash he had collected to my father. Well, I have no words to describe the joy my father experienced, after receiving the first full payment for the first load of cheese he'd made in Pruzany. He paid the farmer for the milk he had purchased and there was an ample amount of profit for our family and for expanding the business. The production of this cheese was considered by the local and central government authorities as a farming enterprise and was, therefore, free of being taxed. And the license only cost my father three zloty (60 cents) a year. These two issues counted the most towards making the production of cheese a good and profitable family business.

During the winter of 1923-24, my father had gotten rid of any unnecessary farming employment and equipment, but we still kept the horse and wagon and also the kasha and millet machines.

In the summer of 1925, my father made agreements with two more owners of ranches. One was a ranch in the village of Zasimowich, which was about four miles from Pruzany. The other one was near the village of Peredielsk, about six miles from Pruzany. My father approached the owner and discussed the possibility of starting the production of cheese. If they were to agree upon various issues, the owner would have to enlarge the number of cows in his herd to a minimum of 40 to 80 cows, and also provide a place where a cellar could be established. My father would buy the milk, paying a certain price for each liter and would start the production of cheese. The owner liked the idea and within a week invited my father to the ranch, where all the details were discussed. It

was decided to start the production as soon as possible. The rancher began to increase his stock of cattle and some of his workers built a cellar.

My father then went to a town where there were people who knew how to make Swiss or Muenster cheese and hired specialists who could make it for him at the ranch. He also hired local young men who would serve as their helpers. We had a horse and wagon, so my father would travel from one place to the other to make sure that everything was being run efficiently and satisfactorily. Our greatly enlarged pact business—which is the Jewish name for the business of producing Swiss or Muenster cheese—prospered very well. (*Pronounce pact as you would say pocket.*)

Early in my teens, I became actively involved in this part of the family business. I remember participating in the early preparations of opening the business, by fulfilling certain errands and ordering specific wooden forms, which were needed to shape the cheese rounds. The entire family was excited about this enterprise, and we hoped that it would solve the economic difficulties which we had endured since being forced to leave Dolgolisko. During school vacations—July through August—I usually worked at one ranch or the other.

In 1927 or 1928, my father opened another pact on a ranch about twelve miles from Pruzany, called Horodechno. Every Friday afternoon and until Saturday noon, I would replace my father. I did not have to work hard there, but merely to be present and keep an eye on the workers. My father considered this a tremendous help in running the business. However, even after school reopened in the fall and I had to attend classes, I helped with the packing of the cheeses, to make them ready for shipping.

The owners of the ranch consisted of a family of eight—the parents, two daughters, and four sons. I considered then, when I was a teenager, and still do in my old age, that this family represented an upper class of people in the Jewish community of Pruzany. They were a family of high moral standards. Whenever I took my father's place in the business, Mrs. B would invite me to join the family at their Friday night dinner, and I enjoyed their hospitality very much. The oldest son, Israel, was my age. We became friends and saw each other often. On Saturday morning, I would join Mr. B and older boys and go to a nearby neighbor, where there was a Minion—a group of ten male Jews over the age of thirteen who performed the Sabbath prayers as a group. Sometimes,

when the reading of the scroll was over, the cantor would invite me to read the Haphtarah (a chapter from the Prophets, which had to be read with a special melody, which I knew well.) When we returned from the services, Mrs. A would invite me to the Sabbath meal, which contained a course called *cholnt*—a baked dish of meat and potatoes—kept warm from the day before, because of the prohibition against cooking on the Sabbath. I was treated very well by every member of the family. I considered them as a role model of a Jewish family, and they had a significant influence on my attitude towards life. Throughout all my life, I have respected the B family and remembered them with love and respect.

Money came in almost every week and the members of my family were provided with everything we needed—better food, clothes, footwear and household goods. It was no longer difficult to pay the tuition required by the Hebrew school, or to purchase school uniforms for my brother Sheeliym and me. The family business was so good, in fact, we enjoyed prosperity. So, near the beginning of 1928, my parents bought a house in Pruzana, at number 14 Shereshev Street. It had four rooms, a kitchen, a big yard, and a fenced lot in the back. My parents paid cash in dollars . . . over \$1,500. The house was situated in a nice neighborhood not far from the water well and near the marketplace and the school.

The cheese making in Peredelsk continued three more years until my father gave it up in that location and opened another one in a ranch closer to Pruzany. My sister Liba had graduated from elementary government school by this time and became involved in the family business. Her job was to sell the cheese to the local grocery stores and to collect payment for the merchandise. As I mentioned before, my father had to pay down the debt he had incurred by borrowing money to build the two apartment houses, so this income was critical. Little by little, however, our financial situation eased. Until my sisters married, the apartments were leased to other couples. This income was designated to pay the debt. The fact that the cheese business was free from being taxed was the main reason our family was able to repay the creditors, within five years. After that, we didn't have to tighten our belts any longer.

## Courtship of Regina

I had a good ear for music and could absorb the melodies of songs with little effort and deliver the tune correctly. I sang a great deal throughout my entire lifetime. As a child, I sang with my father during the Friday evening Sabbath meal. I sang Yiddish songs with my sisters, and also various Polish, Russian, and Hebrew songs and melodies. I sang in the school choirs, in the army, when I traveled, and with the partisans. I expressed in the songs my feelings at the time. I sang of happiness, sadness, anxiety, triumph, love, and disappointment. I danced Israeli dances, modern dances, waltzes, and others. Why do I mention this? Because all of these talents served me so well when it came time to court my future bride. I was able to use my singing to catch the heart of my future lovely wife, Regina Kaplan.

In the pre Chanukah season, in Pruzana, in the year 1930, my close friend Leibl (Lewis) S. met me in the street and told me that a girl by the name Regina Kaplan had arranged to give a Chanukah party for some of her schoolmates . . . both boys and girls. I was invited to attend the event. Upon hearing this, I was surprised. It had never occurred to me that Regina Kaplan even knew who I was. She was a young girl studying in the Polish Government Gymnasium at the time I was in the eighth grade of the Hebrew Tarbut Gymnasium. I knew her background. Her parents, Chaim and Rasha Kaplan, were a very prominent family and lived in one of the most beautiful houses in town. I knew who Regina was, only because I had seen her sitting on the porch of this splendid house on several occasions. But I had never paid much attention to either her or her girl friends . . . not even to the boys who were her schoolmates. I thought for a moment about the invitation and said to Leibl, "I don't have anything to lose, so I'll go with you."

Regina and her mother were very friendly and greeted me with a smile. I introduced myself, and then looked at the other invitees. There were already several boys and girls there. They spoke Polish. It sounded strange to me, but I reminded myself that, as a guest, I should not make

any remarks about this and simply adjust myself to the environment in which I found myself

The Kaplans lived at the end of Kobrin Street, in a two-family house. In the other apartment lived another family. The Kaplans and this other family were partners in a grain mill. Leibl and I were invited to enter the guestroom, where we were introduced to the rest of the company. I was interested in my surroundings and took in the beautiful modern furniture, a piano, nice pictures on the walls, and much lamplight. *Volens, noleans* (liking, not liking), I joined the crowd in speaking in Polish. I knew the language fairly well and even spoke without an accent. It didn't take long and, as usual, I was in a good mood, and made quick conversation with the other boys and girls.

After a while, the most important attraction of the evening arrived . . . namely, the very tasty Chanukah pancakes and trimmings! I ate more than my share and enjoyed it immensely. It was nothing new for me to be with people, to sing, to tell jokes, and to contribute a share to the success of a party. The ability to be entertaining had been a part of my life since childhood. I started with a joke and found the others to be more than appreciative. Leibl and I entertained with some Polish songs, before moving on to Yiddish, and Hebrew Chanukah songs.

I didn't need to be told by Regina (she was called Rivche) that she was enjoying my presence. The sparkle in her eyes when they met mine spoke for her. I was duly impressed with her and spent considerable time flirting with her throughout the evening. Her looks caused quite a stir in my heart and soul, and this beginning spark determined our future. We shared mutual feelings. It was love at the first sight.

During the party, Rivche's mother sat in the next room and was aware of everything going on. Her father had left for the evening, to have a business meeting with his partner, and Rivche's little brother was sleeping. When Rivche's father came home, he sized us up then turned to me. "Are you the fellow who showed me the machine your parents used to produce clean the husks from the grain to produce clean milled cereal?"

"Yes, I am," I replied, politely. "I led you to the barn and showed you the machines and how they were used."

He added, "I wanted to find out if the same kind of machines could be installed in the grain mill. We ended up ordering bigger machines, and they've been very useful for us. Our business has grown considerably."

I nodded. My parents had not worried about competition, because they had stopped operating the machines, when our cheese business became successful. They sold our machines to a fellow in a nearby town.

This short conversation was my first with the father of my future wife.

At midnight, Leibl and I thanked Regina's mother, for arranging such a fun Chanukah party, and Regina, for inviting us. The other boys and girls followed us. The various boys each took a girl home, so none would have to walk alone so late at night. We offered our help, but they said they didn't need it.

Too late, Leibl and I realized that we had not acted right socially. We had gone to the party empty-handed, without a gift, or candy, or flowers. We both felt ashamed of ourselves. We hadn't known of this social grace. At our social gatherings in the Hashomer Hatsair meeting hall, we were not expected to bring gifts. We simply arrived and danced and sang Hebrew songs. I remember now, however, that a certain doctor in Pruzany would often come to the hall to spend a Friday evening with the Hebrew-speaking youth and listen to our singing, and even join us in dancing the *Horah, Horah*. He would usually bring some cookies, candy, and other sweet, which we greatly enjoyed. But the competing rightwing organization—the Beitar—tipped him off that the Hashomer Hatsair was a leftwing Zionist organization, so our provided of sweets never returned to our social gathering, but carried his treats to the rightwing Zionist youth.

A day later, I saw Regina and thanked her again for inviting me to the Chanukah celebration. I asked her if she would agree to go for a walk with me some day. It happened that Leibl had met Pola at the party and had also asked her if she would agree to meet with him. The result of our inquiries was that the following Sunday, the four of us met at a corner of the main street and strolled around for about an hour—no handholding and not even the tiniest sign of any form of intimacy, simply walking next to each other. As was the accepted form of manners in those days, the male walked to the right of the female, next to the curb, supposedly to protect her from any harm that might come from a vehicle or runaway horse.

At sunset, I escorted Rivche home and we remained standing at her gate and chatted for some time. Chatted about what? A boy had to be a gentleman, through and through. To ease the tension of the moment, I told Rivche a story about a girl who was mentally impaired. Before her

first date with a man, to whom she was introduced by a matchmaker, her mother told her that, in order to make a good impression that she was both learned and smart, she should say something clever and sharp. The girl did as she was instructed. Throughout their conversation, she would suddenly call out, "Razor blade, razor blade!"

Regina laughed. We didn't need to use such gimmicks to make our conversation interesting and pleasant.

I asked Regina for another date. She graciously agreed to meet the following Sunday. On the way home, I knew I was falling in love. We began to date more often, going to movies, having a glass of soda water and a candy or, sometimes, ice cream in a ice cream parlor. The way Regina responded to my invitations for dates, I assumed that she was as eager as I was to spend time together. We very often went on double-date with Leibl and Pola or other schoolmates. I would meet Regina, as often as it was possible.

After courting her for about two months, she started to invite me to her parents' house, mainly on Sundays when we both were off from school. Regina played the piano and I would sing whatever song she was playing. Her little brother, Sioma, loved to listen to our singing and playing, and whenever I would come into their apartment, he would run to the corner where the piano stood and stand there waiting for us. I sensed that Regina's parents were fond of my visiting Regina in their house. Her mother would join us sometimes in a conversation, about what movies we had seen and about our experiences in the schools we attended. Her father would chat with me about Palestine, about the ideology of the different Zionist organizations, and about the nature of my family's cheese business. It appealed to him very much, because of the freedom from paying taxes. As I mentioned before, it was considered part of the farming business and farmers did not have to pay taxes.

Regina's parents were married in 1914 and she was born in 1915 in Pruzany. The First World War was in full swing. Due to a reason not known to me, her father was discharged from the Russian army. During the next few years, he became partners with a couple others in a tobacco and cigarette factory. When the war ended and Poland gained back its independence, in 1917, her father was fortunate to receive from the government a concession to distill whisky. It was a very profitable enterprise, so Regina's father and his partner became wealthy people.

In addition, Regina's mother had inherited a store in a so-called *Rad Kromen*—a line of stores in a huge brick building. Rasha Kaplan operated a successful liquor business in this store.

Regina was raised by a governess. Her parents sold their house on Reska Street and bought the most beautiful house on the main street, which was called Dr. Patsevich Street. The way Regina described it to me a few years later, it was a very comfortable house, furnished with the most modern furniture, which was purchased in Warsaw.

The Kaplans led a lavish style of living. Her mother arranged parties and scores of guests would come and felt happy to be considered as a friend of Chaim and Rasha. Whenever a theater troupe would arrive in Pruzany, Rasha used to invite the whole cast for supper after the show was over. In addition to entertaining townspeople, Chaim would give large donations to charitable organizations and institutions. He reached out to whomever asked for help. He supported the rabbi and donated money to Zionist funds, like Keren Kayemeth, the Jewish National Fund, and to the other main Zionist fund, Keren Hayesod. The goal of Keren Kayemeth was to purchase land in Palestine from the Arabs and any other sellers. The main goal of Keren Hayesod was to build roads, settlements, and hospitals in Palestine.

Regina grew up in a Zionist-oriented family and in her teens she joined a Zionist youth organization named Hechahluts Hatsair. *Chaluts* means pioneer settler in Palestine. *Hatsaeer* means the young one. When I first met Regina, I did not know about her being a member of Hechahluts Hatsair, but at our first date after the Chanukah party, she told me that she and her friends were members of the local chapter of this Zionist Youth Movement. They meet once a week in the meeting hall and studied about the goals of the Zionist movement. They sang Hebrew song, participated in the Horah dancing and other Zionist activities. As a Zionist myself, I liked knowing that Regina and her school friends were, too.

The Polish state at the time of gaining its independence, in 1917, counted about thirty million people. A third of this population consisted of minorities: Jews, Bialorussians, Ukraines, Germans, and some others. There were about three million Jews. Poland was a republic headed by a president and so-called ministers of various divisions branches of the government. The judiciary system was based on a constitution, and on a house of representatives which was called the SAIM. The members of the SAIM used to protect people's interests. According to the constitu-

tion, the rights and obligations of all citizens in Poland were equal, the same to all its citizens. In reality, however, the Jewish people were treated with negative bias, and discriminated against in many walks of life. Due to this kind of treatment, many Jews lost their businesses. I have inserted this background history, in order to better explain what eventually happened to Regina's successful family businesses.

Chaim Kaplan decided to build a grain mill on the grounds where he had a cigarette factory with his partner, a man from the nearby town of Shereshev, whose names initials were M.A.. Together, they built a motorized flour mill named Mlyn Chaim Kaplan, in Polish. Each of them owned fifty percent of the business. The income from the business came from two sources. First, the farmers from both nearby and further away villages brought their grain to the mill, had it made into flour and paid cash for this service. Second, Kaplan and his partner also purchased rye and wheat, and sold the flour made from these grains to bakeries. The business was profitable, despite there being four other grain millers in Pruzana. There was enough work for each mill. On the outside, everything looked very good. Chaim Kaplan was considered one of the richest Jews in Pruzany, but in reality, the family was always short of cash and soon had to lower its lavish standard of living, dressing, and spending.

Their financial crisis was due to several things. The partners had to spent a great deal of money to build the mill and to pay off the large debt incurred when they purchased the generator and machines used to grind the flour from a Swiss company. They also had a huge overhead, including the payroll for thirty or forty employees who worked in the mill. Plus, the business incurred high taxes.

At the same time, the Polish government issued a law that only Polish national war veterans who had participated in gaining the Polish independence could own a concession to sell whisky. The veterans had the right to lease this privilege to anyone for a high yearly price. Rasha, Regina's mother, tried such a lease for a year, but the business was not profitable enough and the Kaplans closed the liquor store and leased the empty store to a clothing merchant. Chaim Kaplan and his partner lost their concession to distill whisky. It was given to a native Polak. Then, in order to meet their mortgage payments, Chaim Kaplan borrowed a few thousand dollars from different people at very high interest rates.

After the Chanukah party at the Kaplan house, I started to visit Regina at her house, not only to sing with her, but to help her in her studies of general math and geometry. All this time, my parent knew of her from my sisters and neighbors, but had not met her. Their meeting occurred after unusual circumstances. I had had an accident while riding my bicycle. I had tried to avoid hitting a cat that ran into my path and lost control of the bike. I fell and was knocked out. When I woke up, I saw many people in the living room who had come to find out about the state of my health. Among the others I saw was Regina. She was sitting in a corner of the room with a friend and smiled when she saw me open my eyes.

When I met Regina the next day, she described her fear to me. When a girlfriend had rushed to tell her about the accident, she could not stay a moment longer at home, but had rushed to find out what happened to me. She added that my parents and sisters were very courteous to her, and she was pleased to meet them.

Sometimes Regina and I would go with L. S. and Pola to see a show or a movie. I remember that, once, Regina's father asked the guard of his grain mill to harness the horse to their elegant sleigh and take us for an evening ride in the streets of Pruzany. We always asked some friends to join us. It was much fun. By 1932, Regina and I were talking about plans for our future. We dreamed about living in a small house, having children, and being forever happy with each other, just like in the fairytale stories.

Regina told me several stories about her childhood. One, in particular happened when she was seven years old. One morning, when she left her house, she noticed a money bill on the sidewalk. It was twenty zlotys. She picked it up and waved it in the air, shouting, "Who lost twenty zloty? Who lost twenty zloty?" Obviously, the first passerby was smarter than little Regina. He grabbed the twenty zloty and said, "Girl, try to find some money tomorrow, too. I will be here to pick it up again." Everybody laughed. She defended her action. "My mom taught me that if I find something valuable, I should return it to the person who lost it, and so I did. Did you lose it?" Everybody laughed again at the naiveté of an honest child.

A popular game played at the parties of teenagers was called Flying Post Office: One teen would be appointed as a letter carrier, and all the others would be assigned a number; sometimes the number was attached to their garment. Everyone would receive several papers and be

told to write letters to whomever they chose, saying whatever they wanted to say. The letters were then placed in a box and the letter carrier called out the numbers at the top of each letter. The person with that number would fetch those letters. The letters were not signed by the writer. A shy writer could make his or her feelings for someone known and remain incognito. I remember what I wrote in two notes to Regina. One said that I would like to know what the sparkle in her eyes meant. I wrote the question in capital letters so that she couldn't recognize my writing. The second letter I wrote in regular script, hoping that maybe she *would* know it was from me!

During the summer months, when Regina and I enjoyed vacations from our school studies, we often spent time swimming and having picnics on the shores of the Moohavets River. We would take her younger brother with us. Siomah was about eight years younger than Regina. Regina was born in 1915.

In June of 1932, Regina graduated from high school and received a diploma. Very few Jewish young people were accepted into Polish government schools and few of those who were went on to graduate and receive a diploma. Even with a diploma, however, it was difficult for them to obtain permission to further their education in government sponsored colleges or universities. A few male Jews were accepted for studies in law or psychology or medical school, but few women. Regina decided to work toward becoming a registered nurse and midwife. Few doctors in those days delivered babies and she felt this would be a good way for her to earn a living. She applied and was accepted in a two-year college for nurses in Warsaw.

She began her studies that fall and rented a room with a family recommended to her by my sister Malkah, who still lived in Warsaw at the time. Regina's parents financial situation was still suffering, as they still had a debt to pay off. I missed Regina while she was in college and we corresponded by mail, pouring out our feelings for each other in poetic terms.

I remember two other events that happened in the summer of 1930, when I graduated from the Tarbut Hebrew high school. My sister Liba had many girl friends. They were older than I was. Among them was a cute girl named G.D. Her father had left for the USA before the outbreak of the First World War. Her mother Mrs. D, and G.D. finally received visas allowing her and their daughter to join him. In the summer of 1931, a letter arrived at my house from the USA addressed to

me. It was a letter from G.D., written in English. As I mentioned in my previous writing, we had studied English in the Hebrew high school, so it was easy for me to read the letter. She asked about my graduation and how I was spending my time. She also included a postcard showing the high-rise buildings in New York City. I replied and continued to correspond with her, without having any serious thoughts regarding the reasons why G. might be writing to me. My sister Libah was more suspicious. She suggested that G. may very well be intending to come back to Pruzany, after becoming a USA citizen, in order to marry me and take me back to America with her. Well, although I had courted Regina for only a short time, I loved her very much. I stopped corresponding with G.D. from that moment on.

Many years latter, in 1950, I found out G's telephone number. I called her up. She was happy to learn that I had survived the war and invited Regina and our two sons and me to her house for a visit. On a Sunday afternoon, we took the train from Brooklyn and traveled to the lower East side in Manhattan. They lived on East 13th Street. She and her husband greeted us very courteously. Mrs. G.D. was also at the house and I remembered meeting her once in Pruzany. We spent a lovely afternoon. Then, in a private moment, G. whispered to me that she was very disappointed when I had cut off our correspondence. She admitted that she had started to write with the intention to merry me, exactly as my intuitive sister Libah had predicted. I whispered to G. that her letters had come too late, because I was already deeply in love with Regina.

G.D. was a good-looking young girl, and she was a beautiful woman when we met her in 1950. She had married a cousin and had two children. Who knows what my future would have been had I not met Regina in 1930 and lived, instead, in the USA with G. during the war years. Of course I don't know and never have regretted the turn of events as they had played out. I had a happy life with Regina. We loved each other in times of joy and in times of unbearable sorrow during the Holocaust.

## Section Three

"No one yet knows what awaits the Jews in the twenty-first century, but we must make every effort to ensure that it is better than what befell them in the twentieth . . . the century of the Holocaust." —Benjamin Netanyahu

## Life in America

My first morning in America, I gazed out the window of my aunt's apartment and saw an amazing sight. Dozens of cars were parked in the street. They had been there all night and nobody was worried that they would be stolen. Astounding! A little later that day, something I had heard in Poland before the war surprised me, too. I had heard that, in America, the trains ran above the rooftops. It really was true! I saw it with my own eyes. Yes, trains were running above our heads. What a sight!

Within a day or two, however, I became aware that another phrase I'd heard used in Europe was completely false . . . money did *not* grow on trees and it did *not* flow in the streets! I saw people rushing through them and if there had been money there, they would surely have been gathering it up. I asked Aunt Feigl, "What's the rush? Where is everyone going?"

She said, "They are speeding to the trains to be on time to their jobs. Too many times late and they may lose their employment." Several thoughts came to my mind with that reply. What kind of employment would I find in America to take care of my wife and children? I reminded myself of the speeches made by the Zionist leaders. Sometimes, they had read letters from those who had migrated to the USA. One letter, written by a former business owner in Poland, had said that the only job he could find in New York was as a chicken feather plucker. I was not depressed with this thought. I accepted the realization that although I was thirty-eight years old and, despite the hardships I had endured to that year of 1949, I would not lose hope. I would continue to row the boat to a safe and comfortable shore.

Peering through the window, I saw the building of the largest Jewish daily newspaper, *The Forverts*, or the way the Americans called it, *The Forward*. It was a good omen. I would look forward, not backward.

On the third day of our staying at Aunt Feigl's apartment, several relatives came to see us. The first one was a cousin by the name of Abe

Block, who brought his wife Rivkah. In my memoirs, I have mentioned him again and again as the person to whom I owe much recognition and my gratefulness and appreciation for being so helpful with both action and advice the day we arrived in Neu Freimann in Germany. Now, Abe told me we would have to stay in Aunt Feigl's apartment six more days, and then the apartment that had been rented for us would be completely furnished and ready for our use. I couldn't believe my ears . . . it was such good news.

During that week, many more relatives came to see the *greeners*: aunts, uncles, cousins, their spouses, their children and even grandchildren. Were they disappointed with what they saw and heard? I think most of them imagined they would be meeting two adults and two little boys who had just arrived in the big city of America from out of the wilderness of war torn Poland, what we call today ragamuffins. Perhaps they thought we would be shabbily dressed, be poorly educated, and be devoid of any trace of manners or proper behavior. How surprised most of them were when they saw the *greeners*, who were not green at all. They looked at the beautiful Regina and could not believe their eyes. She was beautifully dressed in modern clothes and spoke in fluent Yiddish. Considering the hardships our sons had endured during our long trip, they were in good shape and were well-mannered, using the words "a *dank*," meaning "thank you for the candy and toys" whenever a gift was handed to them.

Also, dear readers, use your imagination when considering the impression I made on the *mayivins*. *Mayivin* in Hebrew means 'one who is an expert in appraising things,' like cars or jewels. I spoke with them in English. Whatever I knew in English, I said properly, using the right tenses . . . present, past, future and so forth.. They—the experts—soon learned that we attended gymnasiums, even colleges. In short, they were surprised, but glad, to know that we were entirely different from what they had imagined us to be.

Regina and I had many relatives in the United States. I am going to name all those whom I remember. First relations on my mother's side: uncles Sam, Harry, and Morris Karlits and their spouses and families; Aunt Doba Block and her children; Abe and his wife Rivkah Block. Then cousin Leonard, cousin Walter, cousin Esther and her husband Joe.

Next on my father's side: Uncle Morris Yudevits and his wife Esther and their children. There was also an Uncle Solomon whom I never met.

On Regina's side were Rasha's sister Feigl and her son Alex Ravits and wife who never moved out. There was one more sister, but I forgot her name.

### Our First Home

That first week passed quickly. One morning, I noticed a car stopped in front of the building. Cousin Abe walked in and said, "Let's go. You are moving to your apartment today. The rent is paid for four months in advance." We took our belongings, thanked Aunt Feigl for her kindness and hospitality, and went with him. The car stopped on Floyd Street, in downtown Brooklyn, in the area off Broadway and not far from the Saratoga train station. Abe and the driver carried up our belongings and even our young son Chaim to the first floor apartment.

When I first saw it, I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a two-bedroom apartment, fully furnished with new furniture and even a refrigerator. I looked inside the freezer and saw that it was loaded with meat and all kind of other frozen foods. All we had to do was to start cooking and eating. In the living room was a television and even pictures on the walls! This was called a railroad style apartment. In the two-story renovated building, the first floor had once been a large store. The second floor was occupied by a middle-aged couple and their two teenage sons. In the attic, a religious young fellow lived alone.

That very first day, I toured the neighborhood. There was a coffee shop on the corner. Next to it was a kosher butcher store. About two blocks down the street was a Waldman grocery store. I was told that the origin of the famous chain of Waldman super markets came about during the Second World War. It was a small grocery on Dekalb Avenue. Very often, when we shopped there, we would see Mrs. Waldman at the register. The public school was only a short distance from where we would be living. We took our sons the very next day to register them. They were both accepted in the pre school kindergarten., but after only four weeks, Victor was placed in the first grade.

Cousin Abe Block came to find out how we were managing. He was pleased to find out that the food, which he and his wife Rivkah had placed the day before in the refrigerator, was very useful on our first day and highly appreciated. Abe also notified us that we were invited for

dinner at Uncle Sam's house on Friday evening and we would have the opportunity to meet even more relatives.

The people on the second floor were very friendly. They were also survivors from the Holocaust. Originally born and raised in Poland, they survived the war in the then Soviet Union. They had beautiful voices and would sit and sing Russian and Yiddish songs so superbly that no paid concert could surpass it. Regina and I would join them sometimes, adding Hebrew songs to the repertoire. Neighbors and passersby would often stop and listen to our singing. In our songs, we expressed our sorrow and pain on losing, in such a tragic way, our most dear and loved family and friends. Some songs expressed our feelings of guilt. Why were we alive and all of them dead?

### Meeting the Relatives

Abe Block's sister Esther and her husband Joe Mandell were also wonderful mentors for us. We were always so grateful for their loving care and assistance. On the day of Uncle Sam's dinner party, Joe came to pick us up and took us first to his apartment. There, we again met his wife and also Aunt Doba who lived with them.

At dusk we traveled to Uncle Sam's apartment at 25 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. We learned that this was one of the most prestigious streets and neighborhoods. We walked into a very beautifully furnished apartment on the sixth floor and were greeted warmly by Aunt Fanny, Uncle Sam, and their son and daughter. More and more guests arrived. The table was ready and Regina and I were placed next to the host and hostess. A tasty Friday evening (pre Sabbath) meal was served, during which little conversation took place. It seemed that, in addition to maintaining good manners, everybody was too hungry to talk or to ask questions.

When the meal was over and before dessert was served, everyone stayed at the table to listen to our story of hardship, fear, and survival during the war years. I described the discrimination against Jews by the Polish government both economically and politically, and the anti-Semitism by the Catholic church, which made our lives in Poland so miserable. I told of the outbreak of World War Two, the invasion by the Nazis, our escape in the bunker and then in the forests as partisans. I expressed our good fortune of being captured by the Russians rather than falling into the hands of the Hitlerites. I continued with a discussion of our situation during the Soviet's occupation. then the

German occupation, the Ghetto, and the liquidation and destruction of the Jewish population in Eastern Europe. They sat as if glued to their chairs and listened and listened, often with tears in their eyes.

Aunt Fanny also expressed her hardships and suffering during the war. She told of the time the baker had refused to slice the bread for her and the butcher had stopped delivering meat. She was about to add more stories, but Uncle Sam stopped her from talking. I listened and was surprised by what I was hearing. What a reprehensible way to treat fellow Americans, when over six million of their Jewish family members and friends and neighbors—martyrs all—had had lost their lives at the hands of the bloodthirsty Nazis.

Uncle Harry asked me details about their sister . . . my mother Rachel. With tearful eyes, I described the last moments I had spent with my parents and sweet little daughter, before I had left them and my sisters and brother, before going with Regina into our bunker hideout.

Everyone expressed their sorrow, adding that they did not know what had happened in Europe to the Jews during the war. They were not aware of the German atrocities and killings. They listened carefully, when I told them about our survival. They could not digest spiritually the thought of how we had been able to endure living over eighteen months as partisans in the forests and bushes. They praised our bravery in fighting the Hitlerites, rather than making ammunition and bombs for the German army in the concentration camps. Except for Cousin Abe Block, few of my relatives had heard about the Jewish resistance or about the uprising in the Varshava Ghetto or in the town of Bialystok.

As a tribute to the Jewish holocaust martyrs, I emphasized that each and every Jew in Europe had carried in their consciousness the desire to seek revenge for the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their accomplices. Many had done so in one way or another, but the majority of the Jews did not have the opportunity to accomplish their desire.

### Finding Employment

Well, after a few days of hospitality from our relatives, I was faced with the problem of employment and earning money to take care of my wife and children. I decided to find out if there was a possibility for me to teach, not in an English language public school, but in a modern Hebrew elementary or high schools. While living in Neu Freimann, Germany, I had heard and remembered the name of a Professor Foyersztejn, a famous Hebrew scholar in New York. I looked up his

name in the telephone book and found his number. I called and spoke with him in Hebrew. I asked him for an appointment, to which he gladly agreed.

At a certain hour the following day, I appeared on the upper west side in Manhattan. I had with me a letter from the Jewish Central Committee stating that I was a teacher in the Hebrew secondary school in Neu Freimann and asking that whoever would be presented with the given affidavit assist me in establishing myself in gainful employment.

Professor Foyersztejn listened to my story of survival and to my expectations of a future in the USA very carefully. He acknowledged my fluency in Hebrew and told me that the proper person I should approach with my request of employment was the head of the Hebrew Teachers Union. He gave me the address and telephone number. He even called up Mr. G and arranged an appointment for me, that very same day. His office was in midtown Manhattan.

I appeared in Mr. G's office and went through the same procedure, presenting my letter of recommendation and telling him about the Holocaust, my survival, and my emigration to America. I was eager to hear an encouraging word from him. Instead, he informed me that there were only a few Hebrew schools in New York, which were closed during the summer months. They would not need additional teachers for the fall term. He also stated that they were in financial trouble and could hardly pay their employees even a small salary.

After a while, he added that since I had four people to feed, he would recommend that I try looking for a job in the garment center on the west side. Maybe I would be able to get a job as a trousers presser.

Once again, I remembered the letter from the immigrant who became a chicken feather plucker.

I thanked Mr. G. cordially for the appointment and made my way back to Floyd Street. I was disappointed, of course, but not bitter against the people whom I had met and asked for help in finding employment. Indeed, in those days, there apparently was no network of secular Hebrew schools, the way we had in prewar Poland. There were a few Yeshiva and Talmuding schools, but they didn't need any more faculty members. Well, the Yeshivas were not supported by the government Board of Education, and constantly suffered from lack of funds to sustain their never-ending expenses. It was a few decades later before most of Jewish children in New York began to study in modern Yeshivas; the

tuition was very high, making them unaffordable for the majority of Jews.

You have to understand that my relatives were eager to learn the results of my interviews. I forgot that Cousin Abe Block was coming to see us that very evening. Before I could real relate to him my day's results, he surprised me with a check for \$600. He explained to me that when my uncles, Sam and Harry Karlits, learned that Regina and I would be coming to America—thanks to President Truman's promise to let in two-hundred thousand Jewish refugees—they had rushed to pay this amount of money to the passenger ship company, which allegedly would bring us to the shores of America. But they learned that the right of immigrate to the USA came with free transportation. We did not have to pay even one dollar. We came by plane and our expenses paid by the government. So my uncles collected their deposit from the ship owners and saved the money for us. Abe added that the uncles had also collected contributions from relatives from Regina's side of our family, and with the sum of over \$2500 or \$3000 had been able to furnish the apartment and purchase food, and to pay for half a year of rent in advance. In those days, the rent was \$50 a month. I was very thankful to Abe for all his efforts on our behalf, because I learned later, from Uncle Harry, that Abe was the one who had done all the work of finding an apartment and buying the furniture. It was a relief to know that my family had housing and would be fed, while I tried to find gainful employment.

I reluctantly listened to the union manager explain what was involved in becoming a pants presser. The job simply did not appeal to me. Then I learned that Uncle Morris Yudevits, who lived in the Bronx, owned a small grocery store there and was thinking about retiring. After speaking with him, he said he was willing to sell me the store. He relayed this idea to my other uncles, and even suggested I should work at the cash register for a while, to see if I liked the business. Uncle Harry, who was next to Abe in his efforts to assist me, advised me to travel to the Bronx to check out this possibility. I must emphasize that I spoke English and did not have any difficulty traveling on the trains and finding my way around.

The next morning, I showed up at the store and was placed at the register. I quickly learned how to operate it and I began my job of checking out customers and collecting money for the merchandize they

bought. My uncle asked for about \$3,900 to cover the cost of the store merchandize. He did not ask for additional money for "good will."

My uncle Harry considered this offer and thought I should maybe buy the business and give it a chance. But Uncle Morris Karlits had another thought. He said that a grocer has to keep the store open a minimum of twelve hours a day. Traveling to and from the Bronx would take between three and four hours a day, and I would need another one or two employees to work in the grocery store with me. Regina would be busy with the boys, and moving to the Bronx was out of the question, because there was a shortage of empty apartments in New York. Uncle Morris asked me, "Will you be able to run a grocery in the Bronx by yourself?"

Of course not. Well, that put an end to the discussion of owning a grocery store. I had a telephone installed and we discussed these ideas with Uncle Harry. After a full week of my being in America, I still had no idea of what I could do for a living. I did not possess the skills of a carpenter, locksmith, or cobbler. I had always been a teacher. So what should I do? I had in the bank savings account about \$1,400, but I knew it would dwindle down fast.

I remember an early morning on the fifteenth of July, in 1949. Uncle Harry called me up and said, "Come to work in my soft drink factory." He owned it with a partner. He added that he hoped for something better and easier for me, but for the time being, there was no alternative but the factory. I knew where the factory was located and I boarded the bus. It took me fifteen minutes and I showed up for work.

The soda factory carried the name Minck Soda Shop. It was actually run by Charlie, Uncle Harry's son-in-law, and the partner's son-in-law.

My job was to take the soda bottles off a conveyer belt, as they traveled from the machine, and place them in cardboard boxes. The bottles traveled quickly and endlessly! I stood at my post and started to catch the bottles as they arrived, placing them into the boxes and even folding the box tops, so I could stack them to one side. I don't know where did I got the *koyach* (Hebrew for strength) to move so fast, and to prove to the four of them that I could do the job. Although I had arrived from a ghetto, and had been accustomed, as a partisan, to sleeping only two and a half hours in my clothing in the swamps and forests, before living as a refugee in the Freiman camp, finally arriving to the United States, exhausted and worried about the future . . . I did not want to give them the impression that I was weak and needy of their pity. I sweated profusely, but I was determined to do the job so well that the

machine would not have to stop and wait until the shoot was cleared of bottles. I still remember the faces of approval of the four onlookers.

Another worker of Polish nationality showed me how to grab the filled soda bottles and insert them in the right place. This Polak became one of my good friends for many years to come.

No one could get a job, in those days, without being a member of a union. Laborers in the factories were either full-fledged workers or seasonal union members. The latter were needed only during the hot summer months. In order to become a union member of the first category, you had to stay on the job a minimum of six months. But it so happened that there was very rarely a job needed for six months. I would be employed in the soda factory at the most for only three or four months during the summer of 1949. What did uncle Harry do? He invited the union delegate to the office. Then he called me in and relayed to the delegate my story of my survival from the Holocaust. He appealed to the Union delegate, who had only a few years ago worked for him in the factory, to issue me a full-fledged union card. His appeal touched the consciences of the delegates and, in a few days, I became a union member with all full rights and privileges.

The bosses soon saw that the first job I had been given was too laborious for me; they instructed the foreman, a Puerto Rican, to place me in an easier position . . . that of visually inspecting the soda bottles as they came out from the washing machine! My job was to eliminate any bottle that had not been washed completely, for example, if a bottle contained a straw or some other trace of dirt. It was an easy job, but the bottles ran so fast that I missed a few. When a dirty bottle passed into the soda filling area, the foreman would stride over and place the dirty bottle in front of me, walking away without saying a word. It would make me feel like two cents. The consolation was that about the same time a picture appeared in a New York daily of a Coco Cola or Pepsi Cola bottle with a large foreign object in it.

My foreman was actually quite satisfied with my work. Indeed, he treated me very well. It was a hot summer and we often had to work overtime. The basic pay was \$1.25 an hour, so my weekly earnings were about \$50 for five eight-hour workdays. Due to an exceptionally hot season, however, my check was for about \$80 a week. Regina was very happy that I was able to bring home more money. Even when I brought home only \$50 dollars, she put away five dollars in the savings box. With an increased check size, she could save even more. We did this

for the rest of our lives . . . saving a portion of every check for future needs.

The man who mixed the soda flavors had to leave his job and someone was needed to replace him. The foreman assigned me to this job. He gave me the formula involving exactly how much sugar, flavoring, and water to use for each hundred gallons of a given kind of soda, like orange, ginger ale, root beer, strawberry, and others. This was a very important job, because if you put in or left out the wrong amount of sugar or water, the production wouldn't meet standards. However, mistakes did happen. The foreman would taste the first bottle coming out of the filling machine and then either halt production or let it go through. Yes, I failed one or two times. But, Bill the foreman would comfort me with the knowledge that this had happened before and would likely happen again in the future. The busy season of the soft drink industry lasted until Labor Day. Although the weather was still hot, the seasonal workers were told not to come to work any more a day after Labor Day. This applied to me, too, so I remained home. A day after I had been home, Charlie, Uncle Harry's son-in-law rang our bell. When I opened the door, he said, "Morris, hurry up and come back to work."

As soon as I walked into the factory, Uncle Harry introduced me to a man who was one of his best customers. The man purchased truckloads of soda from the Minck Soda Shop at wholesale prices and sold it to his customers, mostly grocery store owners. He was a distributor. Mike would stop at Uncle Harry's factory almost every day and load up his truck with boxes of soda. Uncle Harry probably gave Mike a break on his order, providing he would hire me as a helper on his truck. I heard my uncle whisper to Mike to treat me nicely. The job of a labor assistant was not new to me, and so, on the second Saturday of my arrival to the USA, I was hired as a helper on a truck of a company, which I later learned belonged to my relatives Abe and Leonard Block, whose partners were also my uncle Morris Karlits and two more fellow, whose names were Louis and Harry. These five partners owned a company named Famous Beer and Soda Home Delivery. Along with my job at Minck Soda, I looked for additional employment on Saturday.

They also owned a warehouse where many different beer breweries would deliver cases of beer and store them until they could be distributed to individual stores. The FAMOUS company partners also had over ten trucks in Brooklyn that would deliver beer to the homes of its cus-

tomers in the whole New York City area, including Long Island. Each driver would load up his truck with cases of both beer and a variety of sodas, according to anticipated needs for the day, and leave to deliver them to the customers on his list. He would collect the money for the merchandise, return to the garage at the end of the day, and turn over the money to the managers.

This kind of action was called running a route, in this case a beer home delivery route. Some routes had more customers, some were smaller. Abe told me that the bigger routes used assistants to the drivers and they were paid about ten dollars a day, by Famous company. I asked if I could get the job as a helper one day a week, in addition to my employment at Minck soda business. His reply was affirmative. The next Saturday of my landing in the USA, I appeared before Lewis, one of the partners, and was introduced to the young driver for whom I would work as a helper for the day. I was glad to earn that extra ten dollars, in addition to my salary at Minck.

I worked for this soda delivery man a whole week. Mike was a very nice man and he treated me well. He would haul the cases with the filled soda bottles by himself and had me take the cases of empty bottles from the store and place on the truck. During the day, we stopped at about thirty grocery stores. At the end of the week, Minck company paid me the regular amount of \$50 (40 times \$1.25). This job eventually ended, too, but my caring Uncle Harry had already arranged for a steady job for me. He spoke to the Famous partners, and they accepted me as a helper for any of their delivery men who needed a driver. My salary was set at \$75 a week. The amount of hours depended on when the job for the given day was completed.

I arrived for work on my new job on a Monday, and Uncle Morris assigned me as helper to my cousin Joe Mandel. We traveled in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn and stopped at private homes, according to whichever ones were on list for the day. On each individual customer slip was the date of the previous delivery, the date of the next delivery, and how many cases of which kind of beer were expected, and the size of the bottles. Sales were only made in full cases, and not individual bottles. When we stopped at a house, Joe would grab a case from the open truck, place it on his left shoulder, and carry it up to the customer's house. He would either get paid on the spot or leave the delivery on trust to collect the money next time. The price of twenty-four pints of beer in those days (1949-50) was about \$3.50, depending on the brand

of beer. Joe would pick up the case with empty bottles, and after marking the resale on the given slip and the date of the next delivery, he would return to the truck and drive to the home of the next customer. If needed, he would bring also deliver a case of soda, either with twenty-four regular sized bottles or twelve larger bottles.

Joe had steady customers for whom he delivered the same number of cases each week. For others, he had to ask for the amount needed and what kind of beer. There were others, called “stiff” customers, who had to be asked several times if they were interested in home delivery, before they finally signed on. After this procedure was finished, Joe would return to the office, count the amount of money he had collected during the day and put it into an envelope, and hand the envelope to one of the owners. The slips were checked the following day, most of the time by Uncle Morris. The amount of cases Joe took in the morning had to check with the amount he sold during the day, plus the amount of empty cases he returned. The same double-check system was used for the money in the cash envelope.

A bundle that did not prove to be fully correct was put on the desk and, the next day, Joe would have to go over and over his records, until he found where the error occurred. Generally speaking, the drivers were honest and trustworthy people, but a control system was still required to ensure the business prospered. Joe would mark, sometimes, that the customer paid for the case of beer when, in reality, he had left it on trust. When his bundle was checked, it would show he was short of money. Joe would remember in his mistake right away.

The routes to which I was usually assigned often involved walking up stairs, sometimes to the fifth floor of a building. This was especially true on Fridays, when the delivery route included customers on the east side of Manhattan, from Fourteenth Street to East 96 Street. A case of twenty-four bottles of beer was heavy, but the driver and I had to do this many times each day. Sometimes, a driver would take advantage of me and make me carry the heavy stuff. On days we had to deliver the beer in Long Island, the routine was easier. The other three days, mostly in Brooklyn and Queens, I would get tips from customers, which could amount to another \$15 to \$20 during the week. Not bad!

Uncle Harry did not rest. He wanted me to learn how to drive a car and a truck. Indeed, this was a necessity, in order to be able to make a living in the USA. He had the right idea. Since Famous owned a company car, and since I was a relative, and also a friend of Lewis’ brother

in the old country, Uncle Harry thought it was only right to allow me to use the car to learn how to drive. He found a man who was willing to teach me the art of driving. This man was none other than Cousin Joe!

The request was approved by the partners, without hesitation.

Joe took me out on a Sunday morning to begin learning how to drive on the company's car. I must admit that I was not an easy student.

In the old county, I had learned how to harness our horse to the wagon and to maneuver the horse where I wanted it to go with no problems. I could plow straight rows in the fields. But horses are not cars. For some reason, I had difficulty in operating all the gears and foot pedals and the several buttons on the dashboard. However, thanks to the fact that Joe possessed unlimited patience, I finally learned to drive, and soon passed the driver's test. Once I had a driver's license, I even learned to drive a truck.

As company driver with a route in Long Island would sometimes let me drive to the next stop, if it was on the same street or around the corner. I am thankful to him even today. It is hard to believe, but only a short time later, I drove a truck by myself, in Brooklyn, Manhattan and Long Island! I still could not drive a car by myself. I needed someone on the seat next to me.

In the second half of 1950, two longtime beer drivers quit their jobs. The partners decided to name me to take over the routes of one driver, Jonathan. This was a daring challenge. I already knew the system for conducting company business. I also knew the streets of some routes, but I had only been in this country for eighteen months and I recognized the full responsibility of task being given to me.

I visualize, now, my first day as a beer delivery driver. Early on a Monday morning, I showed up at Famous warehouse. Cousin Abe took me to a truck that had already been loaded with cases of beer and soda. He checked the merchandise for the number of cases for each size of bottles. He handed me a bundle with customer slips and said, "Your job today is in Greenpoint in Brooklyn. Good luck." The truck I was given was considered an open truck; the cases of beer and soda were stacked on a platform. I pulled out of the warehouse and thought, "Lucky me." I lived on Floyd Street. Regina and I would often stroll along Manhattan streets with the boys and either stop into shops to buy things or to do window shopping. I was enjoying my new life of freedom.

I stopped at the home of the first customer on my list and sold a case of twenty-four bottles of beer and another case of twelve large soda

bottles. I was paid by the customer and instructed to return the following week with the same order. I thanked him and was pleased that I had made a good beginning. I became more self-confident. I continued from customer to customer, and with each success, I became less anxious. On Friday, I had to cover the route in Manhattan. For my deliveries in Long Island and Greenpoint, I worked by myself. The other three days, I had a helper.

The owners employed a man to canvass the city for new customers. There was also a group of firefighters from a neighborhood fire station who would canvass accounts on their days off, and sometimes bring in a dozen or so new orders. It would take me much more time to finish a day's work, because of these new stops. There was only one criterion used by the company owners to appraise how successful we were in our job . . . whether we increased the number of cases of beer and soda sold, or whether our numbers decreased. Fortunately, I kept my route on a fairly stable level, and even increased sales in both Greenpoint and Brooklyn. In these areas, the population consisted of Russians, Polacks, and Irishmen, who were well-known as "drinkers." It was easy for them to find out that I was a survivor from the Holocaust. They liked to talk with me in their mother languages of Russian, Polish, and the Ukraine language, and to find out about the Holocaust. Despite being busy, I would always stop to chat with them a few minutes. Because I was friendly with them, they would recommend me to their neighbors and friends to order their beer from me, thus giving me new accounts and bringing me more money.

Once, the drivers in Brooklyn and in the other branches went on a strike. The Famous Beer Corporation in the Bronx agreed to reduce the deliveries to five days instead of six days a week. My daily load was increased due to this change and others, but I was still left with the Manhattan route, which involved a long and hard day of climbing four or five stories of stairs with heavy cases hoisted onto my left shoulder.

My weekly salary was increased to \$100 a week, with federal taxes paid by Famous, plus tips that amounted to about \$20-25 each week.

Not only did I increase the number of customers on my routes, but I increased the amount of beverages they purchased and, thus, the company profits rose and so did my income. I remember Cousin Leonard saying, "Morris should go for his own business." He meant that I should buy a route for myself. In the beginning, I didn't pay attention to

these remarks. I thought I was not ready for it financially, and I was reluctant to give up a secure job.

Uncle Harry got word from a beer route man, who used to buy soda from Minck Soda Corporation, that there was a beer route for sale. The man wanted to retire and was ready to sell it. I was encouraged to look into it. I met the seller and he showed me his bundle with slips of dependable customers and his old truck. Then he asked for the “good will” charge, because it was an already established business. If I am not mistaken, he wanted \$15,000, paying \$10,000 in cash and the rest of the debt in installments. He ensured me that all his customers lived in Brooklyn and not higher than the second floor. He emphasized that, after expenses, he earned between \$150 to \$175 a week.

Uncle Harry told me that he would help me with \$3,000. The seller expected an answer the next day, as if a crowd of buyers were in line to make the purchase. When I came home, I compared my current job as an employee with that of being an owner of a business in the same line. Surely \$150-175 was more than the \$100 I was earning, but his truck being sold with the business was ten years old. I considered the repairs this truck would need and what could be used to make deliveries on days it was in the repair shop. I thought of the possibility that customers would not remain loyal to me. I considered who would deliver the beer if I couldn't work a day or longer, due to sickness or some other reason. After much thought, I decided not to buy the route, but to look for another business opportunity. I cordially thanked Uncle Harry for his good intentions, notified the seller about my decision, and continued working for Famous.

### American Citizenship

A week or two after our arrival to the States, Cousin Abe took us to the proper office to fill out an application to become American citizens. Rules required that we learn to speak English within five years, that we understand the Constitution and be able to answer several questions regarding important events in the history of the country, like the names of the early and significant presidents, the current President and vice president, the governor, and so forth. In July of 1954, we were ordered to appear before the emigration office, in order to to arrange for our swearing-in ceremony and approval for citizenship.

On the appointed day, Abe Block took us to the office. As we approached the doorstep, I said to Regina, “What would you think of our

changing our last name of Yudevits to a symbolic name . . . one that will signify our survival from the Holocaust?" Regina gladly agreed to the name of Sorid. When we appeared before the judge, he asked us if we wished to change our name and he approved our request. And so, dear readers, we have the name of Sorid to this day. Sorid in Hebrew means "survivor from a disaster." In modern times, has there ever been a bigger disaster than the Holocaust?

My oldest sister happened to be in New York for a visit. She and several of our relatives attended our swearing in as American citizens in Brooklyn on that special day . . . the Fourth of July, 1954 . . . on the grounds of the then Brooklyn Dodgers. We were not the only ones to receive our citizens papers; there were scores of other Jewish survivors standing with us. We enjoyed the procedure and never forgot it. Every Independence Day celebration thereafter was personally special for us.

In the next federal election, we were proud to register to vote as free Americans, knowing that our votes counted and were not part of a farce.

### Membership in a Fraternal Lodge

One of many problems we faced in those first months of living in America was the joining of an organization that would secure us a burial and a burial place. In the old country, every town had a cemetery in which deceased Jews were buried . . . the same grounds for rich or poor. Such a system was not in place in the United States. There was no one burial institution or cemetery for Jews. Such decisions were to be made individually by each citizen and most places were organized according to what one could afford. We learned that there were several types of fraternities or labor union temples that one could join and, by becoming a member, reap various benefits, among them the right to be buried in a specific cemetery.

Regina and I decided that it was important to secure our future burial site, in order to avoid any unnecessary headaches and troubles down the road. Cousin Abe suggested I should join the fraternity to which he and other family members belonged. Regina and I agreed and we applied for acceptance. The name of the fraternity was the Universal Lodge of the Knights of Pythias. In order to be accepted, I had to pass three rankings, which would prove I deserved the honor of membership. Cousin Joe Mandel secretly tipped me off about the procedure. He said that, during the questioning period, the director and several

other members would test my attitude toward life and my character, not so much for the sake of seriousness, but to cause a lot of fun and laughter during the meeting. He emphasized that they would try to break my spiritual balance by calling me all sorts of insulting names and by accusing me of being not loyal to my friends and so forth. Joe advised me to keep my cool and not to explode with anger and stomp out of the room.

I understood the situation very well. On the predetermined date, I strode into the meeting room, accompanied by Abe. The first rank drilling began. It occurred exactly the way Joe had described. I was verbally abused, yelled at, belittled, and made to feel essentially worthless. The purpose of the ritual was to strengthen my character and ensure that I was worthy of being called a man fit to be a Pythian. I was glad Joe had warned me ahead of time.

This was in 1952. After being accepted into the organization, I went to a meeting downtown in the court area. It was on the twelfth floor of the building. The meetings were off limits to wives or girl friends. When the meeting was over, by 11:30 P.M., almost all those present crammed into the elevator. It refused to move. Due to the late time, we knew no one was attempting to press the button on the main floor of the building. We stood there, jammed like herring in a barrel. We could not get the door to open and the elevator would not move up or down. It was a dangerous situation, because we were running short of air. Several of the older men were finding it difficult to breathe. Somehow, we managed to get the elevator to move. Needless to say, we were greatly relieved.

Following this incident, I didn't attend anymore meetings. First of all, I found it too difficult to stay up so late and then get up before six o'clock in the morning. Secondly, I did not want to leave Regina alone, when she had been without my company all day long. Also, the topics and discussions did not interest me. So I paid dues every year until recently, when I was considered a paid-in-full, lifetime member. Because all the lodges kept on shrinking in numbers, as the members passed away, several lodges united and took different names. My lodge became the Danon Lodge

### Family Life

Regina and I continued to "Americanize" ourselves with each month we spent in our new country. Regina gradually picked up the

English language. She had made contact with some of her friends who had emigrated to the USA a few years earlier and enjoyed a social life with them. She attended English-speaking classes in the evening at a nearby school.

In 1951, Aunt Doba learned that a neighbor of hers had an apartment for rent. I didn't hesitate to grab this opportunity to live closer to my relatives. Again, the school and shopping were within walking distances. Uncle Harry would come every Sunday to visit his sister Doba, and he would call us and the kids to join them. The apartment was on Harvard Avenue, on the corner of Blake Street in Brooklyn. We lived on the first floor in a two-bedroom apartment. Although it was furnished, we brought the furniture from our former apartment with us, bought some new items and got rid of the old ones.

I never brought up the subject, and Regina never mentioned any desire to look for a job, even when our sons reached the age when they could manage during the two hours between three and five in the afternoon, the time they came from school until most workers returned from a nearby job. What's more, Regina never mentioned that she was a registered nurse and midwife. As much as we could have used the additional income, I supported her decision to be home with our sons and to be actively involved in women's groups that worked for the support of Israel. She found satisfaction in doing that. Of course, in those days, most women stayed home to raise their children.

The children learned diligently in their new school and would get good marks on their daily work and on their report cards. They picked up an English vocabulary very fast and made many school friends. We tried to ensure they felt equal to their schoolmates as far as their clothing and other childhood needs were concerned. Each age brought new requirements, because of their growing interests. I remember buying them roller skates and, after a long day of tiring work, taking them outside, one at a time, to teach them to skate. We deprived ourselves of some necessary things and invested as much as possible in our sons' education and well-being. I have no regrets in doing this. On the contrary, I am happy with our decision.

Although our sons never asked for pocket money, I knew that they usually spent all their weekly allowance during the school week. On the weekends, I would ask, "How much do you need?" If they asked for three dollars each, we would give each five dollars. Our hands were

open for our children, but we certainly couldn't provide as much as their more wealthy friends received from their parents.

Although we were busy during the weekdays, on weekends we would take the boys to see a movie. We liked to go to the theatre in Brooklyn and watch the Yiddish shows performed by the famous Milly Pickan or actors Schwartz or Lebediev. We would also take the children to visit our country friends (in Yiddish, *landsmen*) who were people from our mother country, town, or area. We would also call our friends, relatives, and acquaintances on the telephone or invite them to visit us.

As a music lover, I wanted our sons to learn how to play an instrument and to sing. My parents had bought me a violin when I was a boy, and I studied with a professional teacher of music. I was also able to play all kinds of melodies by ear and hold a proper tune. I found out that a retired music teacher was giving lessons on the accordion to the landlord's son. Regina and I did not think twice. We bought an accordion and paid for music lessons for our sons, too. I remember that during her installation as an officer of her Zionist organization, Regina arranged with her committee to have the boys and me entertain the group with our singing. Victor was also slated to play the accordion.

One of our sons mentioned to us that a friend had a set of encyclopedias in his house and he liked reading them, when he was there visiting. Regina and I called up the proper store and asked for someone to visit us about this matter. The fellow brought the newest issue of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Every month or so, we would receive and pay for the next book in the series. The boys used them often all through their school years. Years later, one of them took the set of books to his home. I kept the dictionary and still have it to this day.

### Bar Mitzvahs of Victor and Harvey

As in most American Jewish families, the Karlits or Yudevits families often gathered to celebrate special occasions. Bar Mitzvahs were celebrated for every boy who reached the age of thirteen, when he assumed his religious responsibility. Bat Mitzvahs were celebrated for every girl assuming her responsibilities as an adult Jew at her thirteenth birthday. We were always invited to attend these events. Cousin Abe would arrange for somebody should pick us up and take us home. We never left the children by themselves. We hired babysitters.

Regina and I were very eager to give our sons a proper Jewish education. I selected an afternoon Hebrew school run by the Zionist Al-

liance. They both learned to read the Hebrew texts and to converse somewhat in Hebrew. When they were about to reach the age of ten, I prepared them for the Maftir in the synagogue. They had to say the proper blessings and chant the purported Haftorah of the given Sabbath.

When they were properly educated in Jewish law, Victor was *bar-mitsvat* in 1957 and Harvey a year later. Their performances in the nearby temple were so outstanding, people asked who had taught them. We invited our relatives and other countrymen to attend the reading of the Haftorah and to a reception in the Synagogue's hall. We hired a musician to entertain the guests. We did it according to our tradition. Each of our sons received a gift of money that would be saved for their education.

About this same time, around 1958, when Victor was fourteen, he took out working papers because he wanted to make some spending money. He asked me if he would be able to work as my helper on Saturdays. The owners agreed and told me to pay him ten dollars for the day. I remember that I had Victor help me cover the Saturday route in Bay Ridge Brooklyn. Of course, I didn't have him carry the cases past the first or second floor, but to satisfy his curiosity about the type of work I did day in and day out, I let him carry lots of cases of twenty-four bottles of beer and also had him stack the empty bottle cases. After several hours, I saw that he was growing more agitated with the nature of my job. The hours were long and the work involved hard physical labor. On the way home, I told him that his mother and I had saved a little money every week and had a savings account at the bank with over \$10,000 in it. My intention was to find a good business to buy . . . one that wouldn't involve such hard physical labor. The notion of saved money and a potential new business cheered Victor considerably, and he stopped worrying about the toll my job was taking on me.

In the meantime, although he was only thirteen years old, Harvey got working papers, too, and soon found a job as a dishwasher or waiter in a restaurant. Although he didn't make great wages, it was enough to provide him with pocket money. At least he did not need an allowance anymore!

## Jewish Organizations

### German Restitution

When we still lived in the refugee camps in Germany, rumors spread among the displaced Jews that the German government was looking for ways to rehabilitate the Jews for the atrocities committed by the Nazis. And, indeed, in 1951, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer approached Israeli President Ben Gurian and offered restitution money to the State of Israel and also to the individual survivors from the Holocaust.

This phenomenon caused hot and bitter debates among the Jewish circles in Israel and throughout the world. Some leaders and individuals approved the offer out of necessity, others rejected the offer for moral reasons, believing it was simply the covering of blood with money. It was a painful decision for everyone to make. Germany was eager to rehabilitate itself in words and deeds for what the Nazis had done.

I remember the debate between Begin—who was himself a survivor and a leader of the right wing party and later prime minister—and Ben Gurian. The Israeli press published articles and opinions day after day.

Finally, Ben Gurian shook hands with the visiting President Adenauer and they reached an agreement. Ben Gurian based his decision on the need to sustain the life of hundreds of thousands refugees who had arrived from the DP (Displaced Persons) camps to settle in the small fledgling Erets Israel. Within a short time, scores of ships with machinery and other needed goods arrived and soon turned the poor state into a world famous industrial country.

About this same time, so-called restitution offices opened in New York and in other cities and towns throughout the world, where survivors could register to receive the purported compensation known as *vider gut machoong*, meaning “to make good again.” The applicants were checked over by a German doctor, before being paid. If psychologists found them in good health, they would often reject their

applications, despite the fact that they had been held as prisoners in a concentration camp.

I asked the question, along with thousands of others, “What about me?” I stated, for instance, that Regina and I had survived the war only by hiding from Nazis in the forests. We had been deprived of the ability to continue with our work or to earn a living. I appeared before the German doctor, and when he read the report about my mental condition from my personal doctor, he did not question me and let me go. I was quite surprised, sometime later, when I opened a letter from the restitution organization and found a check for a few thousand dollars as back payment for the years I wasn’t able to work as a teacher. Regina did not have a report from a doctor, so it took about thirteen years for her to receive a check. My restitution payments, consisting of a few hundred dollars monthly, have arrived every month as a lifelong pension. I am sure that our martyred relatives approve our decision to accept these checks, which helped our children receive their education and us, in our old age.

### Regina’s Hadassah Activities

In 1951, the Israeli government made an agreement with the Chase Manhattan Bank to sell Israeli bonds in the United States. Its purpose was to help the Israeli economy. When Regina read about it, she came to the conclusion that if we were not making *aleeyah* in Israel, we had to buy and sell Israeli bonds . . . a way to help the country of her dreams.

So how did she go about doing this? One afternoon, as she was leaving our apartment, she saw an elderly man sitting on the stoop of the next building. She smiled and said, “Hello, have you read in the daily newspaper about the selling of Israeli bonds in the United States?”

“Yes, I have,” he replied. “In fact, I’m interested in buying a thousand-dollar bond, both out of patriotism to the Jewish state and because they pay a higher interest rate, but I have no way to get to a bank to buy one.”

Regina did not let this opportunity go by without taking action. She told the man that she was willing to go in the bank and buy him the bond. In Yiddish, they say *geredt un geton*— spoken and done. The neighbor was pleased that Regina wanted to do him such a big favor. He told her to wait for him and he returned to his apartment. Soon, he returned with a \$1,000 check made out for an Israeli bond. It was still

morning and the boys were in school. Regina rushed to the Zionist office three or four blocks away and requested a bond for our neighbor.

The clerk in the office asked her, “Which organization or party are you representing? Who should receive credit for this sale?” Regina did not understand the questions. It took the clerks several minutes to explain the meaning of the words “crediting the organization,” and, even after making the transaction, she didn’t fully understand. The clerk gave her a proper receipt for the money and promised to mail the bond to our neighbor.

When Regina returned home, she met a neighbor who lived in the same building as Joe and Estrer. She was so excited about making the bond purchase that she stopped the neighbor and told her all the details. This woman just happened to be the president of the local Hadassah chapter. Hearing Regina’s story and seeing her devotion for the state of Israel, she decided Regina would make a perfect member of the organization. They met a few times after this and I don’t need to tell you what happened next. Regina became an ardent member of Hadassah.

The following brief account explains the meaning and origin of this name. About two-thousand years ago, the Jews lived in Persia, which is today’s Iran. One of the king’s ministers, Haman, was not respected by the Jews. In fact, they mocked him for his arrogance. Angry and determined to get even, he talked the ignorant king into killing every single Jew in his kingdom, by trumping up a story about their danger to the king’s realm. A Jewess by the name Hadassah or Esther had caught the heart of this king and, as a result of her clever interference upon hearing of the scheme, she had the king reverse his usually unbending edict. Instead of killing the Jews, the king granted the Jews permission to arm themselves and kill their enemies, including Haman and his followers. In memory of this event—which Jews consider the first potential Holocaust—we celebrate the joyous Holy Day, Poorim. The story is told in the Bible, in the Book of Esther.

In respectful memory of Hadassah Esther’s intervention, by which the Persian Jews were saved from elimination, a woman by the name of Hentiyetta founded a Zionist Jewish women’s organization, over a hundred years ago, and named it Hadassah. Regina became very active in the local chapter. She attended all the meetings and even addressed the gathered members on subjects pertaining to events in the history of the Jews in the Diaspora. Within two years, she was elected as president of

the local chapter and soon became a committee member of the regional Hadassah, whose offices were located in the court area of Brooklyn.

In the summer of 1954, Hadassah raffled a new car to make money for the organization's activities. On weekends, I would drive the car to busy corners in Brooklyn or to Kats Delicatessen in Manhattan, so that Regina and other friends could sell the raffle tickets.

At one Hadassah meeting in our apartment, I sang in Yiddish a song which I wrote. It was a humorous parody that described the household duties of a husband whose wife is a president of Hadassah: cleaning, shopping, cooking, taking the kids to school, and so forth. It was a tremendous hit. I sang it to the tune of *Toomba Lalaika*.

#### Pruzaner and Vicinity Relief Organization

With the emigration of refugees from the D. P. camps in Germany, many received visas to travel to the USA and many others made *Aleeyah* to the state of Israel. When we arrived in New York, many of us from the same area of Poland formed what we called Landsmen (country men) and named our organization The Pruzaner and Vicinity Relief Organization. Our main goal was to arrange a once a year an academy in memory of our most dear and beloved countrymen who had perished by the brutal hands of the Nazis and their associates. In addition, our goal was to accept donations to support those who had survived and were either sick or could not earn enough money to sustain a meager standard of living. Our general meeting took place on the last Sunday in January. During this meeting, we remembered all those who had perished in the elimination (cleansing) of the Jews from the Ghetto Pruzany, which lasted for four days—January 28-31, 1943.

Regina and I never missed this memorial event. The program consisted of speeches by invited speakers, poems, partisan songs, and a religious ritual that ended with Kadish . . . a prayer said by a mourner.

These meetings afforded us an opportunity to meet friends and acquaintances who lived in the Bronx or in far away communities. The donations, which were collected by those in attendance, were deposited in the bank and checks were mailed twice a year directly to these who were considered needy. Through these past many years, I faithfully attended the committee meetings. Since 1981, I have had to fulfill the duties as the president of the Pruzaner and Vicinity Relief Organization.

When the Landsmen first established themselves, they had good jobs and the donations reached between fifty and a few hundred dollars

from each member. Those who received our checks expressed their thanks in letters that were read during the memorial meetings.

When our children were young, they would ask us where their grandparents were and why they never came to visit us. They would talk about the about the gifts their friends received from grandparents at birthday celebrations and other occasions. We avoided giving them the right answer. It was too painful for us and we knew it would be too troublesome for them to accept. Explanations would be too complicated and emotional. Only when they grew older did we try to relay to them something about the meaning of the word *holocaust* and of the annihilation of so many members of our families and our survival.

## Fulfillment of My Promise

Regina took care of the household and our children, but at the same time, she devoted a great deal of time in her work in Hadassah. It made her happy, even though she often felt like a small fish in a big ocean. She planned and conducted her chapter's meetings and participated in fund raising, bond selling, and traveling to Manhattan with a dozen other Hadassah members to study the Hebrew language, as if I weren't a good enough teacher for her.

Despite her busy outside activities and my workload five days a week, however, we had time to socialize with our friends and acquaintances. I mention, again, how much they enjoyed hearing me sing, but, sometimes, we would go to local dances. I was adept at many styles of dancing. Some of our friends were not. Regina was so good-hearted, she would urge me to dance with her lady friends, when their husbands' two left feet kept them seated, rather than whirling their mates on the dance floor. Regina would tell me, "Go and invite her to a few dances, Morris. Look how unhappy she is." Well, what wouldn't a husband do for his wife, especially one as sweet and uncomplaining as mine. Regina was not a jealous person and I did not give her reason to be one, so I would dance with her friends.

In the summer of 1961, while Regina and I were relaxing one evening, she said in a very soft voice, "Morris, do you remember?"

"Remember what?" I replied.

"Your promise to me. Do you remember when we lived in New Freiman and I wanted to make *Aleeyah* to Erets Israel? I even turned in our ID cards at the Zionist office for registration to go there." She sneaked a look at me to see my reaction. "Do you remember that I refused to go back for the IDs when you were upset, because you wanted us to come to America? I didn't make a fuss when you marched to the registration office to take back our cards, because you promised me that after we had settled into our new lives in the United States, and at the first good opportunity, we would go on a trip to Israel. You said that if it

weren't possible for both of us, I could travel there by myself." She looked directly at me. "It's time for you to fulfill your promise, Morris."

"Yes, I remember the promise," I said, "but, in my opinion, it is still too soon for the trip."

She objected strongly to my unsatisfactory reply. She pointed out several reasons why it was important for her to make the visit. I finally said, "Go ahead. Get ready to fulfill your dream. I am not ready to join you, however."

It didn't matter if I went with her or stayed home, she wanted to make the visit. Although I didn't like the idea of being left alone with two teenagers, a promise is a promise. Also, I understood why it was necessary for her to go. As president of a chapter and a member of the regional committee of Hadassah, she often urged other members to visit Israel, even if they had no intention to settle there. It was important for her to show them that what she advised others, she fulfilled herself. She could speak more convincingly, if she had first-hand experience.

Regina began making preparations. We did not have relatives in Israel, so she contacted my sister Liba's brother-in-law and his wife. They promised to host her in their apartment. I put aside the needed amount of money for her trip to Israel, which was scheduled for February of 1961. Lena, Victor, Harvey, several other friends and I took Regina to the Kennedy Airport at the appointed day and time. She left with the intention to stay in Israel for a minimum of three months. We sent with her all our love and best wishes for a wonderful experience and safe trip.

Regina attended the trial of the Nazi murderer known as Adolf Eichmann, who had been captured in Buenos Aires, Argentina, by secret Israeli Mossad agents. He was the high-ranking Nazi and SS Lt. Colonel who facilitated and managed the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. He was indicted on fifteen criminal charges, including those of crimes against humanity. Fortunately, he was convicted and executed by hanging. He deserved this punishment.

Regina mailed us letters once a week in which she described the way she felt about being in Erets Israel. She visited many interesting sites and was impressed with what the Israeli settlers had accomplished in such a short time. She went on tours and saw the Israeli army units, which contained both men and women soldiers. She was proud of them. She also visited the Wailing Wall. In Hebrew, the wall is called

*Hakotel.* It is the remaining western wall of the temple in Jerusalem where Jews had come for centuries to pray and to lament its destruction. They would write *akulets* (prayer requests) and push them into cracks in the wall.

Thinking of Regina's description of the wall, as I write this memoir, I remember a joke that had been told about Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, when he visited Jerusalem, in the early 1970s. Golda Meir was Prime Minister of Israel and went with him to the Wailing Wall. He saw people sticking notes into the cracks between the bricks of the wall and asked Golda why the Jews were doing this. She replied, "They are expressing their wishes to God." Kissinger asked if he could do the same. She replied, "Why not? You can ask whatever you wish." So he wrote a note and stuck it into the crack of the Wailing Wall.

When Golda asked him what he had written, he said, "I wrote that I was praying for peace among the Israelis and the Arabs and that Israel would agree to give the Arabs Jerusalem and as much territory as they want. I also asked to let those who ran away in 1948 be allowed to come back" He added, "I hope God reads the note."

Golda replied. "Mr. Kissinger, I'm afraid you're just talking to the wall!"

## New Business Venture

Regina's trip had brought about another interesting event that greatly affected the quality of our lives. Another Polish emigrant friend had a brother in Israel. When J. R. learned that Regina was traveling there, he came to our house and asked Regina if she would agree to take some money to his brother. We knew this man, who had also been a Holocaust survivor and a partisan. Back in the days when my family operated its buckwheat cereal machine, this man would come and fix the equipment. He was a skilled carpenter. When Regina's father built his grain mill, this same man had built the grain bins and other necessary equipment.

During my conversations with J. R., he told me that he had worked in a food store ever since his arrival to America in 1949. For the last five years, however, he and his wife had owned their own grocery store, leasing the space from the facility's owner. Now, this property owner needed the space for his own business, and J. R. and his wife had to look for another site for their store. Without hesitation, I asked him if he were interested in having a partner for the venture. He was surprised by my question, but immediately agreed that it would be a good thing. We knew each other well and we knew we would get along as work partners. We decided to look for a good grocery store site, in a neighborhood that was convenient to both of us and that would ensure a steady and growing business . . . one that could support two families.

It took only a week for J. R. to inform me that he had found a possible grocery to buy. It was part of a franchise of a well-known food chain and was located on Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn. It came highly recommend by a salesman with whom J. R. had dealt before. We bought the store for \$18,000 good will, plus dollar per dollar for the inventory. We were to be ready to take over in just two weeks.

Now I had another problem so solve. I had to give notice to the Famous Beer owners that I was quitting my job with them. I called up Uncle Harry. He was glad that I was entering such a great business ven-

ture with a partner I knew and trusted, and he took it upon himself to inform his brother Morris Karlits of my decision.

The following morning when I came to work, I was met by L. H. and Uncle Morris. I said, "Good morning," and it seemed that each of them had a full glass of water in their mouths, because they could not reply. They were visibly angry. They complained that they were sure to lose a well running route, if I quit on them. They hardly spoke to me. I swallowed the lump in my throat and continued to do my best possible job during the two weeks of my notice, but a heavy cloud hung over me. When my two weeks were up, I left Famous.

Even my cousins Abe and Leonard were unhappy about my departure. My leaving did hurt the business a little bit, but on the other hand, there was no future for me in continuing to work for them. They realized this and, in time, wished me luck. I was punished, however, by having my name removed from the health insurance benefits of Famous. It was too expensive to get a policy on my own and, unfortunately, we went without health coverage.

A new phase in my life had begun.

I took out a check from our bank account and paid my share of the grocery business and became a partner in a Key Food store. The nature of this chain of stores was that we would get the merchandise for a lower price than from a distributor. We had to put down a deposit of \$4,000, which remained in an account without interest, as long as we stayed in business with the chain. I learned to operate the cash register and to run the system of buying at wholesale and selling at retail prices. I enjoyed meeting our customers. I was happy and content. No more climbing of stairs.

But my happiness was not complete. I missed Regina, and I had our two teenagers on my mind. Regina had arranged for them to eat dinners at a nearby restaurant, and I gave them money to buy needed food. But I did not have enough time to keep a close eye on them during the six days of the week the store was open for business. I remember one incident, in particular, that caused me great concern. I came home from the store around six o'clock one evening and found a house full of boys playing a "hot" game of cards. I can't remember if I was angry or not, but I do remember that I stated in a commanding voice, "Okay, boys, enough is enough. Home you go! Now!"

One of the boys turned to me and proclaimed, "Why did you have to show up right now, Mr. Sorid? Is it necessary to disturb our game?"

I suspected that he had lost some money and was about to get it back. Victor confirmed my guess later.

Regina ran out of money, during her three-month visit in Israel, and I had to wire her more through Western Union. I had to borrow it from a friend, because I had used our savings to purchase the grocery store.

The business enabled J. R. and me to take home about \$200 a week each, plus groceries for our families at wholesale cost. My partner's wife would come afternoons to help out, whenever we became too busy to handle things ourselves. When Regina returned from Israel, she would also help out three times during the week.

There is not much to brag about regarding the life of someone who worked in the food selling enterprise. I had to be on the job six days a week, from six in the morning until seven in the evening or even later. I often returned to work at the store after having dinner. Most evenings, all I did was relax for a few minutes, read the paper, watch the news, and then retire. On Sundays, I had to do paperwork, go through stacks of bills, pay what we owed, and take care of other matters.

The shoppers in our store were mainly a mixture of Americans from varied ancestral backgrounds. They lived in the city public housing units or The Project, as it was often called. They were nice people and good customers. We hired two hard-working youngsters who did the unpacking and stacking of cans and other products on the shelves. They also carried up the boxes of goods from the basement, where the food truck would unload during the once-a-week delivery.

The business flourished and everything ran smoothly . . . until some teenage outsiders started a drug epidemic near our store's location. Then everything changed. We had to watch the store more carefully. At one time, we even caught a grown man stealing a package of cold cuts from the refrigerator. We also had two robberies and lost about \$100, when the perpetrators grabbed cash from the registers and ran out of the store.

Once, a girl brought back an opened bottle of milk and said it was sour when she opened it the day of purchase. We didn't handle the situation correctly. I use the word 'we,' because I consider that in a partnership—which is good when it is good and the same way when it is in trouble—both owners are responsible. We made a mistake. Instead of returning the girl's quarter for the milk or offering her a new bottle, my partner refused either solution and, instead, told her to leave the store.

Within a few minutes, her mother and a few more reinforcements appeared in front of the store and began shouting at the partner. Suddenly, someone shouted that my partner had struck the girl and thrown her out of the store! It was a dangerous situation. Threats were made and many in the street called for a retaliation for the alleged abuse of the girl. Of course, this was a false accusation. She had not been physically mistreated in any way. The crowd outside the store became bigger and louder. I did not want to notify the police, feeling it might aggravate the situation.

My partner's wife became concerned about the safety of her husband and urged me to do something. I stepped outside and turned to the crowd, asking them to please disperse. I promised to take care of the incident in a satisfactory way. The girl's mother understood the message and called to the crowd to leave. The next morning, I met with the girl's father to discuss what had happened. As a result of our meeting, the guy thanked me and said the case was closed.

I remember another incident. The owners of a candy store next to our grocery kept a vicious German Shepherd dog on the premises. One morning, I stood next to the door of the candy store trying to help the owner carry in the newspapers he sold to customers. Usually, the dog was kept in a cage, but this time, as the owner opened the door, the dog jumped outside and attacked me. The owner tried to pull the dog away, but he wasn't having any luck. The dog was too determined and too powerful. Luckily, a police squad car stopped and the officer got the dog off me. I wasn't hurt, but the dog had ripped a pocket from my jacket. I got away with only a few moments of real terror. The owner apologized to me. I did not intend to press charges over the attack. And again, case closed.

Once during the winter, there was a huge power blackout in the whole metropolitan area of New York City. It occurred late in the afternoon, when the store was filled with many customers. My partner grabbed the cash and checks from the registers, to ensure no one could take them, and I tried to move people out of the store, before they could grab things from the shelves. Before locking the door, I took a box of matches and a box of candles from the shelves, in case I needed them at home. As I began to leave the store, about ten guys headed menacingly toward the shop, just as a few real kid customers tried to stop me. "Morris, don't leave now. This is the time to do business," they said. "We need candles." But my partner and his wife had already gone

home, taking the store money with them. I turned to the children I recognized and said, "Come with me and I will give you candles to take home." I strode purposefully in the direction of the police station. They followed me, while I was handing out candles. The troublemakers saw that I was leading them in the direction of the police station, and they turned around and walked away. I had recognized some of them and knew they were involved in drug dealings. Their intention was obviously to enter the store and, in the darkness, grab whatever they could lay their hands on. Fortunately, thanks to my real kid customers, another disaster had been avoided. The gang members did not try to force me to open the store in view of the children.

I remember a situation in which we had a loss of a couple hundred dollars. A fellow would come in to buy groceries that usually came to about fifteen dollars. He would pay with a money order that he had purchased at the nearby post office. The check was always for forty dollars. He would hang around the store for a few minutes and then stop at my partner's wife's register. She would give the allegedly good customer his change . . . usually about twenty-five dollars. Neither she nor I had looked carefully enough at the checks. Unfortunately, we had made a foolish mistake. It wasn't until we had used about fifteen of these checks (and paid bills with the money) that we learned the checks were really for *four* dollar each! This clever thief had redrawn the word "four" to appear to be to "forty" reducing the letter U in a way it hard to notice. We learned, later, that the thief had used the same trick at a liquor store insurance company. The thief disappeared, but was finally caught about nine months later after a similar violation. He was tried and sentenced to three years in prison.

## Regina's Illness, Sale of Business, and New Job

When Regina returned from Israel, she worked three afternoons a week in the store, alternating days with my partner's wife. This was the second half of 1962, continuing into 1963.

Our lives took on a semblance of normalcy again. We were partners in a good business, the boys continued their studies through high school and both had entered colleges. We counted our blessings. Then, in the fall of 1963, Regina complained of not feeling well. She went to see a doctor, and then another and another, and none of them could help her. Finally, at the recommendation of friends, she went to see a specialist in Manhattan. Since she did not have a problem with using the public transportation system, she said she preferred going to the appointment by herself.

About noon of that particular day, she called me at the store. In a broken and weepy voice, she told me that she had a very serious health problem . . . the most dreaded C word . . . cancer.

Dear reader, I have no words to describe the shock that overwhelm me as I listened to her crying over the phone. What had caused this horrific disease? We had no understanding of it, as people do today. Did it have anything to do with her lack of proper care during the Holocaust? A dozen questions came to both of us and we had no answers.

Regina continued. She needed an operation. The doctor making the diagnosis was a famous surgeon. He had performed surgery on Evita Peron, the wife of the president of Argentina, so we had no reason to doubt his word. I tried to calm her down and said I would meet her at home, as soon as she returned from Manhattan. My partner's wife came to take over my register, and I left for the day. I knew I had to take off whatever time was necessary to see Regina through this crisis. The next day, I took Regina to the Memorial Hospital in Manhattan for tests.

Surgery was performed in the spring of 1964 and, thankfully, it was successful. During this hard time, friends who owned cars helped us out with transportation and for the next few weeks, many women friends

brought meals and helped with dozens of other errands and necessities. Since Regina could not work her usual three afternoons in the store, I hired extra help to replace her and paid for these services from my own pocket. Regina recuperated quickly, but I still had to take care of her at home and take her to Memorial Hospital for follow-up visits to her doctor.

The environment in the neighborhood of our store worsened, and it had an affect on our business. Drug addicts would come in and try to walk out with cans of beer or soda without paying, or they'd hang around in front of the store and do their dealing. It kept many regular customers away. Regina wanted me to sell my share in the business. I tried to persuade her that we made a nice living and we should remain in the grocery, but she was worried about my safety. Within three months, we had two more holdups. I also noticed that my partner and his wife walked about with long faces. After a great deal of thought, I finally approached him and offered to sell my share in the store.

It took another three months for the sale to go through, during which time we reduced the stock and hired an appraiser to estimate the worth of the merchandise. My partner paid me what was coming to me and also half of my original deposit. In the fall of 1967, I was once again without a source of income.

Somehow, I had to find new employment that would enable me to take off, whenever necessary, to take Regina to the doctor for checkups. It was hard on her, mentally, to deal with a life-threatening disease and I wanted to "be there" for her. The question was, what possible job would give me the opportunity to come and go as I pleased, and if there were such a job, how should I go about finding it? I will admit that it often felt as if the ground were burning under my feet.

It was a depressing situation. We had increased expenses, including doctor bills (I did not have health insurance), two sons in college, rent, food, utility and phone bills, household needs and a long list of other things too numerous to mention. I knew I had to find something quick. I did not suffer from depression, however. Feelings of desperation don't help. They merely aggravate the situation. But what should I do?

Then I remembered that a taxi driver lived in a building near ours. I had met this young fellow a few times in the past and had often chatted with him about politics. I knew he was a college graduate who had given up a good job as a court secretary in order to become a cab driver.

When I met him two days later, I did not start with a discussion of

politics, but got right to the point. I told him my situation and asked his opinion regarding the possibility of my becoming a cab driver. In this line of work, there is no fear of competition, because there is plenty of work for everybody who wants to work long hours and be in traffic all day long. He explained the nature of the business.

Many years ago, the city of New York had issued 11,000 licenses for cab drivers. No one could drive without one of these licenses, which came in the form of a metal tag that was welded to the top front of a yellow cab. It was called a medallion. At the time, the cost was minimal—ten dollars. The cab business was a good one in New York, because few people could afford to purchase a car after the war. In addition, few apartment buildings provided garages for the cars of tenants and there was little space available in the streets for parking. Taxis were, therefore, a common mode of transportation for everyone. For this reason, many men (and some women), who had no other trade and could afford to buy a car, would buy a medallion from the police department and become a taxi driver.

Of course, there were business people with broad vision and imaginations who had foreseen the possibilities available for a future in this line of business. They bought hundreds of medallions and hired drivers for their fleet of cars. Although they soon made up the majority of the 11,000 registered medallions, there were also individual owners of taxis. As the economy grew and as more and more huge worldwide corporations erected high-rise buildings in New York, the taxi industry became a good source for making money. That was the reason Larry had given up his previous good job. He was making more money as a cab driver.

Larry told me that your earnings depended on the number of hours you spent driving customers around the city each day, and how many days you were on the job. Income also depended upon whether you catered to long distance or short distance customers. He told me I would have to pass a driver's test given by the police department. Then, I had to pass a health test and a written test, showing I knew the geography of New York's five boroughs.

While talking with Larry, I knew immediately that this was the job I needed to have. Larry wished me luck. I was very excited about my decision and could not sleep that night. Thoughts came to mind all through the night. Was I making a too hasty decision? Would I be any good at this kind of work? Would I be able to earn enough income?

Finally, I said to myself, "This is it, Morris. If anybody can do it, you can."

My past job with Famous beer had taught me I could experience joy through the use of my great resilience and plain work hard. The next day, I went to the police department and asked for and received an application. The application listed about two-hundred locations in metropolitan New York. I was told I would be given a test on twenty of these locations and I had to get passing marks on a minimum of eight locations on the written test. The geography test. My goodness, what did I know about Manhattan? Yes, I had driven the beer truck in New York, but my route had been limited to the East side, between First and Third Avenues only. I didn't have any idea where the hotels were, or the hospitals, the government offices, or the banks or schools.

Again, I asked myself what I should do. The only answer was to study the two hundred locations and hope I would be tested on those areas I knew the best. Yes, I was more than a little apprehensive. On the day of the written test, I tried to relax with a *c'est la vie* attitude. When I received the twenty location questions, I took the maximum amount of time given to me and wrote out my answers. Then I had to play the waiting game.

Two days later, I received the good news. It is hard for me now to describe my joy when I learned I had passed the exam and would be granted the right to buy a medallion. Three days later, I was called to the police department and given a license to drive a cab in New York. I must confess that I praised myself as a genius! I had not failed the written test and it had been written in English. NO. Sorry. Not a full genius, only half a genius, because I answered only forty percent of the test correctly! But, no matter. It was enough to earn a license. Now, half my battle was solved. But, I still had to figure out how to buy a medallion and a new yellow car.

The taxi commissioner had no authority to issue additional medallions over the already issued 11,000. So, I had to find a seller of a medallion, and I knew its value was about \$20,000. One broker after another told me that the private taxi drivers were holding off selling their medallions, because they expected the city government to raise the fares paid by the public. When that event took place, they expected to get a better price for their medallions.

Once again, our son Harvey helped solve my problem. He found a taxi broker in Queens, who had a driver willing to sell his medallion, but

negotiations on the price were a waste of time. The fellow wanted \$24,000. Period. I had no choice other than to pay what he requested.

A day later, with the help of the broker, I bought a yellow Ford taxi and was ready to start a new type of employment. Actually, I did not have to pay the full amount at once; the broker advised me that nobody paid the full price. He said I should have a bank finance the medallion and car over forty-eight months, and pay the loan on a monthly basis with a low interest rate.

I was told that anyone who wanted to go into the cab driving business on his own should first try to work for a company of taxi owners, called a "garage." Several drivers related the difficulties of driving in traffic ten to twelve hours a day, of sitting with an empty cab while waiting for a customer, of waiting at the airport to get a fare, and of being repeatedly disappointed after sitting and waiting and then learning the next fare was only a short trip to Queens or to a hotel near the airport. The garage system provided a steady income. I had thought that working for a company was the right thing for me to do, but I was so eager to get to work, after getting my medallion, that I decided to buy and drive. By the way, at that time, a company driver used to get only forty-five to fifty cents of the dollar plus tips.

I remember my first day as a cab driver. Early that morning, I turned the corner at the end of the block and a lady halted me by raising her hand. She scooted onto the back seat of my cab and give me an address in Borough Park Brooklyn. Well, I had heard of Borough Park before; I had been taken for a ride there by Joe Mandel. But I had a problem. I had absolutely no idea of how to get there! I did not give in to my frustration. I turned and smiled at my customer. "Ma'am," I said, "this is the first day in my new job. I am trying to make a living as a cab driver. I bought the medallion and this cab only two days ago. I'm so sorry, but I don't know how to go to your address. I would gladly take you there, if you would be so kind as to direct me." As the words poured from my mouth, I knew I was chattering, but I was becoming so emotional from my frustration, the words seemed to run out by themselves. I recognized that my fare was a Jewish woman and I hoped she would be understanding.

She said, "Don't worry. I will tell you how to go." She instructed me block by block and after I had stopped in front of her building, she paid the fare and even tipped me. But as she stepped out from the car, she said, "Sir, I am a religious woman, and I am going to give you my

blessing as recognition for my being your first fare. It is my prayer that you will be spared from any accidents, and most of all, that you will not be held up by any robbers or murderers.”

I thanked her cordially and took off to find my next customer.

Dear reader, I am not a believer in superstitions. I never have been. But I must admit that the blessings of this nice lady made an impression on me. I believe her wishes and prayers were fulfilled. I had no accidents while driving my cab and was never robbed by a customer. Perhaps I shall become a believer, after all! At ninety-two, I might need such blessings more than ever.

After I dropped off this lady, I drove along Flatbush Avenue and picked up people going to the Wall Street area. I continued to pick up fares all day long, and collected whatever the meter indicated, plus tips.

I returned home about seven o'clock in the evening. I was happy with my day's work, and I had over \$100 in cash income for the day. Regina was also happy.

The second day and the third proceeded well, too. On the fourth day, a man said to me, “Why aren't you activating the meter when you stop for a red light?”

I turned my head and said, “I'm sorry. I don't understand what you mean, sir.”

He said, “When you stop for a red light or for any other reason, the meter is supposed to remain ticking. If you don't press on the proper button, it stays still and you end up losing money. You are paid for your time, as well as distance.”

Well, his words showed how unprepared I was in the technique of cab driving. But I learned the ropes, sometimes the easy way, like when my customer told me about how to activate the meter, or sometimes the hard way, like when I learned the strict rules of the taxi commissioner. One of the most rigorously kept rules was that I could not refuse to take a person to his destination, even if it was a far distance or if it was not in a safe area of the city. I could not pass up a fare, unless I had turned on the light at the top of my cab to show I was off duty. Of course, overcharging what the meter stated was also a big violation. If a customer reported me for any reason, I would be called in for a hearing. If found guilty, the commissioner was authorized to issue a severe fine or to take away my right to drive the cab for days or even weeks.

I quickly learned that my best income would come from taking a fare to the airports, and then getting another one right away to take back

to the city . . . without waiting in line an hour or two only to be stiffed with a short ride and no tip. I also learned the “art” of the taxi driving trade. However, I cannot brag. There were drivers younger than I, and more experienced and better drivers, and those who worked fewer hours and made more money.

In the meantime, Regina was feeling better and better. As she gained strength, she was able to do the most necessary household work. She had to see her doctor about once a week. Because of my new job, I was able to stop my work and drive her to Manhattan, not returning, sometimes, for six hours. I had to make up the time lost by working on Sunday, when it was allegedly my day off.

Time passed quickly. Before I turned around, it was 1969. Regina and I were thrilled to learn from her doctor that, after five years, she had earned a clean bill of health. She was cured of her cancer. We were all happy . . . our sons, our relatives and friends. Regina found satisfaction, once again, in her work for Hadassah, selling Israeli bonds and participating in other activities connected with Israel.

I don’t remember what year I bought a car. All what I know is that I gave the car to Harvey, who was studying in Brookline College near Boston and needed it for more convenient transportation. Sometimes, he would drive to our apartment to see his mother, or to bring me a nice present—a few parking violations tickets! He would not hide them, but leave them on the dashboard. I would not say a word, but take them, while smiling and thanking him for remembering me. Fortunately, the tickets were only small fines of \$5 each. Harvey tried to avoid being ticketed, so sometimes I would find items that had been left by in our car, like the cane of a disabled person and once a priest’s hood.

I didn’t mind driving in traffic, but it was stressful being always mindful of the commissioner’s rules, especially when I wanted to refuse service or pass up a potential fare. I must admit that, after a long twelve-hour day and I was driving home along Third Avenue and trying to catch a fare going to Brooklyn, I would not be happy, when somebody would stop me and ask for a ride to the Bronx. Sometimes, I would tell a little white lie to get out of it. In such instances, I always felt guilty and I worried that I might be turned in, but I knew I wasn’t causing undue frustration. There were always many other available cabs in the area. The safest thing for me to do was to turn on the sign OFF DUTY and forget trying to earn one more fare.

Some taxi riders don't speak to the drivers, but tourists would often ask me what country I came from. They would recognize, from my accent, that I was not a native American. Driving into New York from Kennedy Airport would take between forty-five and sixty minutes, so there was considerable time for talking. What does a survivor talk about with his fares? Once my fares learned I was from Poland, they usually wanted to know about the war and my survival from the Holocaust and the Nazis. They wanted to know what it was like to be a partisan, hiding in the forests and perpetrating havoc on the Nazi plans for destruction of villages and people. I avoided talking about politics or religion, because these topics tended to antagonize some people.

Four customers waited for me as a group early in the morning along Flatbush Avenue. They became my steady riders. It was a very profitable ride, because each one paid the full fare of about four dollars apiece for his particular destination.

On Saturday mornings, our savings bank was open for a few hours and I would usually stop by to make a deposit. Sundays, when I wasn't driving the cab to make up lost time, I paid our bills, calculated other obligations and duties, watched the news, and also my favorite show . . . *Sixty Minutes*.

In 1971, Regina again brought up the question of our visiting the Jewish state of Israel. At this time, I was as stubborn about making such trip as I had been the first time. I told her that we had already lived in America for more than twenty years and I didn't think I was interested in making the trip. I liked my routine. But I rarely took a summer vacation and Regina was insistent that we spend some time relaxing. So we made arrangements and I took off for five or six weeks. By now, our sons were on their own. We could afford the trip.

We rented a room in a private house with the right to prepare meals. We fixed a light breakfast for ourselves and then ate dinners and suppers at a nearby restaurant. In Israel, folks had their dinner at noon, like in the European countries.

We took tours to different parts of the country. We met many friends, including some of my schoolmates who had studied in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem after emigrating to Israel. We stayed two days in the Kibbutz Negbah, which was opened many years ago by the members of the Hashomer Hatsair organization, to which I had belonged. We spent one weekend at another friend's house. He was one of the friends with whom I tried to be accepted into the two-year Polish

government teachers' school and were rejected, because the anti-Semitism and racial bias in Poland. We attended a session of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) and visited the Golan Heights, and spent time with an army unit. We really enjoyed the trip, especially visiting ancient places that are mentioned in the Bible or Jewish history books. Time went by too quickly. We returned to New York tired, but very happy that we had made the effort to see Israel.

Not long after our return, a new cloud covered the bright shine in our life. Regina started to feel sick again. From the moment I purchased my cab, I had installed a two-way radio. Anytime Regina needed me, she would communicate with me by calling the dispatcher. I would rush home. But Regina had seldom dispatched me in recent years. Once again, however, I had to drive her to the Memorial Hospital for tests, and, again, her doctor told us that she had a very serious case of cancer. It had returned. Her symptoms included a high fever and general weakness. Regina's health kept on deteriorating.

Victor came from Atlanta to see his mother and Harvey did the same. Our friends extended a helping hand. We all tried to do whatever possible to help restore her health. But the medicines and treatments for cancer in those days were not as effective as those today. We felt so helpless. During 1973 and part of 1974, I devoted most of my time to taking Regina for treatments or visiting her in the hospital. In April of 1974, after spending some time in Memorial Hospital, Regina, my dear wife, mother of my sons and grandmother of their children, passed away. Only a few hours before, my sons and I had visited her for the last time. I was sixty-three years old.

The funeral was attended by our relatives, our friends, and many members of Hadassah and other Zionist organizations. In the mourning tributes, the speakers brought out the beautiful features of Regina's character and her devotion and love for the state of Israel. I remember receiving many cards of sympathy and consolation, and a check of \$250 made out in memory of Regina Sorid from her friends to the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem.

According to Jewish tradition, the mourners—mainly males—are obliged to stay in the synagogue during the prayers. A certain mourning chapter from the prayer book, called *Kadish*, is read. This obligation must continue for a full year from the date of the death. I knew that my sons would not be able to fulfill this duty, so I hired a rabbi from the

temple in which Regina and I were members to do this for us. He said the Kadish three times daily during the prayers, in her memory.

Regina's miracles had finally run their course, but she would be the first to admit that she had enjoyed more than her share.

NOTE: 2006

If Regina were still living today, she would likely echo these words of Abba Eban, especially in light of the troublesome situation in which the world finds itself, due to Islamic terrorists:

"Zionism is nothing more—but also nothing less—than the Jewish people's sense of origin and destination in the land linked eternally with its name. It is also the instrument whereby the Jewish nation seeks an authentic fulfillment of itself. And the drama is enacted in twenty states comprising a hundred million people in four-and-a-half-million square miles, with vast resources. The issue, therefore, is not whether the world will come to terms with Arab nationalism. The question is at what point Arab nationalism, with its prodigious glut of advantage, wealth and opportunity will come to terms with the modest but equal rights of another Middle Eastern nation to pursue its life in security and peace."

"No one yet knows what awaits the Jews in the twenty-first century, but we must make every effort to ensure that it is better than what befell them in the twentieth, the century of the Holocaust." —Benjamin Netanyahu



## Addendum

### My Father's Siblings

First my father, then Moshe, Joseph, Taibl, Shlomoh, Peltah, Sheindl, and Jehudah.

### My Mother's Siblings

Aharon Meir, Harry, Shlomoh. Morris, my mother Rachel, and then Dobah.

### My Life in Retirement

I spend most of my time in Rockaways, New York, and the winter months in Florida. Until midday, I spend my time in the Senior Citizens Center, only a five minute drive from my apartment. I exercise, listen to lectures on various subjects, sing, and participate in many other activities before having lunch. I avoided the Center in previous years, but when I reached ninety one, I changed my mind and find that I enjoy it. Most of the afternoons, when the weather is nice, I spend the time on a beach of the Atlantic ocean, only a five-minute walk. I don't go into the stormy water; I usually sit on a bench and read and watch how the waves advance and retreat. It is relaxing and it allows quality time for reminiscing about my long life.