

REMEMBRANCES

By Sam Natansohn

“Remember the days of yore” - Deut. 32/7

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We thus honor them because we believe that transmitting their history and ideals is the best way to truly recognize their deeds.

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“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” -Santayana

“The parchment is burned, but the letters soar” -Talmud

PROLOGUE

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The Editor of the Men's Club Shalom asked me some time ago to write a series of articles about my experiences during World War II. I agreed rather enthusiastically, not because I have ample free time on my hands nor because I like to see my name in print. You are all familiar with the general story. I don't maintain that my personal fate was any more tragic (nor was it unique) than that of the other few survivors and the countless not so fortunate. The purpose of this story is to emphasize the need to remember. In this very generation we have stood on the verge of national extinction. While we may have survived physically, the spiritual loss is such that its effects may be by far graver. This story will have served its purpose if it will bring about the recognition of the fact that our physical and spiritual identity is in ever present peril, and that it will take all the vigilance we can muster to assure our continued existence.

This then is a story of what happened to a boy of ten, caught in the maelstrom of events, as perceived by a ten-year-old and related by him a quarter century later.

REMEMBRANCES

I

The air raid sirens wailed early that sunny Friday morning, September 1, 1939, but everyone ignored them, thinking it was another test alert. The town had no newspaper. The few people that could afford radios were not accustomed to getting up early. But as the frequency of alternating alerts and all-clear signals increased, people started to congregate and talk excitedly. Finally about 9 AM the word got around that the war with Germany had started. We, the children, felt relieved, eager, and confident. The heroic Polish Army, with the help of the French and the British, would teach the Nazis a lesson and resolve, once and for all, that obnoxious problem. In addition, the opening of school would probably be postponed. That was great news indeed. We were all issued surgical-type face masks, which, for lack of real gas masks, were supposed to protect us in the event of a poison gas attack. Our group of boys offered their services to the air wardens to assist in directing the people to and from the air raid shelters. The war business was pretty exciting and not bad at all.

Early the next week the situation began to change. With the advance of the German armies, our town, about 150 miles east of the border, became a direct target of air attacks. By Monday all public transport ceased to operate, the railroad was crippled, the roads were under constant strafing, and the first civilian casualties were suffered. Streams of refugees were passing through the town during the night, clogging the one major eastward road. They did not dare to move during the day, for the Stuka dive bombers controlled the skies. There was no organized military activity. Straggling bands of soldiers mingled with the fleeing civilians, looking to discard their weapons and uniforms. Anxiety and wild rumors prevailed in town. The talk at

home was increasingly about leaving for the East, destination unknown, just to escape the oncoming Germans. But that was easier said than done. There was no available transportation. My father wanted to leave on foot by himself, but my mother insisted that either we all go or we all stay. From dawn to dusk my father was looking for some form of conveyance. Finally, on Thursday morning, for an outrageous sum, he purchased a horse and cart from a peasant in a neighboring village. It was high time, too. On that day the authorities opened their food warehouse to the population, an unmistakable sign that they were abandoning the town. So at nightfall, on Thursday, September 7, 1939, we started out.

Our traveling party consisted of about ten adults and ten children, including my parents, grandfather, my thirteen-year-old sister, an uncle, two aunts, and assorted cousins. We were an Orthodox Chasidic family. No one in the group had ever been called upon to drive a cart. My cousin bravely volunteered to be the coachman, and with the youngsters' encouragement the horse started to move. We put the smallest children and our meager belongings onto the cart and trudged alongside. In order to avoid the congestion of the main artery to the east, we took secondary roads in a southeastern direction. The night was overcast but peaceful. We made as good a progress as could be expected. We stopped for an hour for food and rest. We then continued on until we arrived in the town of Dynow in midmorning, having covered some twenty miles. There we stopped, for the Sabbath was approaching. After Havdalah, we wanted to continue our journey, but were told that all the roads leading east were intersected by German spearheads. By Monday morning, September 11, German troops occupied the town.

II

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Rosh Hashana 5700.

The German occupation of the town of Dynow was inaugurated by rounding up the entire male Jewish population in the town square under the pretext of searching for hidden weapons. Actually, there was little searching done; the men were made to stand under the hot September sun with their arms raised. Armed soldiers surrounded the group, carefully watching their prey. Anyone who was spotted wavering or lowering his arms was immediately given to understand, in no uncertain terms, that the order was to be carried out. I was watching from a side street. My curiosity was overcoming my fear. After several hours of standing, the men were permitted to go home, reasonably intact, except for the few who were unfortunate enough to be singled out for one reason or another as a special target of the Germans' attention.

This incident had a sobering effect on the Jews of the town, but some explained it away as occurring in the heat of battle. Rumor had it that the Germans had met with sniper fire several miles out of town. These people found many willing and wishful listeners. This was in spite of the fact that there was probably no Jew in the whole town who was in possession of a firearm, and that the Poles were not the subject of any "searches." However, there was no time for idle speculation. Rosh Hashana was approaching quickly, beginning on Wednesday evening. Most of the German troops left town, leaving behind only a small detachment for administrative duty. By dusk on Wednesday, the voice of prayer resounded clearly in the packed synagogues of the town.

It was difficult to find accommodations for our entire family in this small town, so we had to split up. My grandfather, younger aunt, mother, sister, and myself found lodging with a Jewish baker who lived right across from the main synagogue. He turned over to us the two rooms in which he lived. He and his wife moved into the bakery, which was also in this thatched roof cottage. My father, uncle, aunt, and cousin were scattered in various houses throughout the town. The first day of Rosh Hashana went by without an incident. We went to shul early. We alternated between various synagogues so as to be able to listen to the different cantors. The second day of Yom Tov, Friday, was also proceeding calmly except for a minor disturbance caused by some German soldiers during the Mussaf service. As we were leaving the synagogue after the services, word was passed around that some German units had just arrived in town and that they were making trouble for the Jews. Everyone scurried home quickly through back streets, and within minutes the area around the synagogue looked deserted.

The unnatural calm that permeated the town did not last long. In late afternoon we heard noisy, laughing soldiers approaching. We watched them through the window as they entered the now deserted synagogue and emerged with the Sifrei Torah, the Holy Scrolls. They rolled the Scrolls open on the ground. Many danced and stomped on the parchment. New groups of soldiers soon joined the proceedings. By nightfall the synagogue was set afire. We were sitting in the dark, mouse-still in the corner of the room, not daring to put on a light, not even the Shabbos candles, watching what was going on through the window, which was almost at ground level. The Germans got ahold of the Shames (sexton) and dragged him in front of the burning shul. When he saw the desecrated Scrolls, he rushed forward and tried to pick them up off the ground. The Germans stopped him and tried to make him walk on the parchment. No matter how they beat him, he wouldn't do it. Finally, disgusted, they threw him into the burning synagogue, his last cry being, "Shema Yisroel..."

Having finished with the Shames, the Germans soon started looking for new victims. The sound of rifle butts rapping on doors was heard around us, followed by the screams and cries of women and children. Whole families were being dragged off. Shots were heard in the distance. We moved to the back room, where we cowered silently in the corner furthest from the door. Soon the raps were heard on the door to the bakery. I started to recite silently, "Nishmas kol chai..." for I felt that the moment of death was near. With his wife alongside of him, the baker opened the door. He was asked whether he lived here and whether there was anyone else in the house. To the second question, he answered, "No." The Germans believed him, ordered the couple to come along, and left without entering the house. This gentle man, whose name I don't remember, by his spontaneous act of simple courage saved our lives. As I learned later, the baker and his wife, amidst 300 Jewish men, women, and children — almost the entire Jewish population of the town of Dynow — were murdered that night by the Germans.

The German raiders moved further away from the house, but our troubles were not over. From the flying cinders the thatched roof of the cottage began to smolder and catch fire. We moved out of the house into the backyard. We tried to make our way out of town through back streets, but there were Germans everywhere. We then stayed in the yard for a while. Miraculously it began to rain and the fire on the roof of our cottage was extinguished. We moved back in the house. By morning things in town quieted down. My aunt, sister, and myself went out through the backyard, hopping fences and dashing across the streets to find out what happened to

the rest of our family. Again, miraculously, they had survived, hiding in an attic, barn, haystack. We decided to leave town as soon as possible. Again, the children were sent out to see whether the troops that arrived the day before had left. They were gone by noon. We assembled at the stable where our horse and cart were, and tried to get the horse harnessed and hitched to the cart. But our combined knowledge of this operation was nil and we were in no condition to figure things out. The Polish stable boy was of no help. Finally my father had to find a farmer who, for an outrageous payment, was willing to do it. We were on our way by mid-afternoon. In a feeble attempt to hide their beards, the men wrapped kerchiefs around their faces as if suffering from a toothache.

We were going towards the town of Blazowa,, which was the birthplace of my mother and where she had relatives. We entered it late in the afternoon, about the time of Seudah Shlishis. The town was peaceful and of typical Sabbath mood. Our arrival caused consternation; one could hear murmurs — “Reb Yossele Natansohn is traveling on Shabos! And on Shabos Tshuvoh!!!” — but no direct questions. Slowly a crowd began to follow us at a respectful distance, sensing from our appearance that this was no time for ordinary gawking. We reached the house of my mother’s uncle. We found him sitting at the table and singing Zemiros to the departing Sabbath Queen. He was a Jew of patriarchal appearance, white beard and patrician features. He would not permit even our appearance, shocking as it was, to disturb the sanctity and the spirit of the Sabbath. He just motioned to us to take our seats at the table. Only after Havdalah did he ask us about our experiences. Everything was then quite normal in the town of Blazowa. The previous twenty-four hours seemed as though a nightmare.

III

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Life under the Occupation.

We had spent the Yom Kippur and Sukkos holidays in the town of Blazowa, celebrating them quietly in the traditional Jewish manner. We had absolutely no contact with the outside world; no idea of the progress of the war. After Sukkos, my mother ventured to return to our home town (it was safer for a woman) to explore the possibility of our coming back. She found the apartment occupied by some German army officers. In her naivety she visited the town military headquarters and there asked for the return of her home. Surprisingly enough, this request was complied with. Within a few days we were back where we had started from, six weeks later and a century older.

The restrictions imposed on the Jewish population were numerous and severe. All Jews above the age of twelve had to wear armbands with the Star of David on them. This law had the side effect of putting a grave responsibility on children of my age. Being able to move somewhat more freely, we were called upon to perform many responsible and arduous tasks generally reserved for adults. All secular and religious schools were closed to Jewish children. All synagogues and houses of prayer were closed. Congregating for the purpose of prayer was punishable by death. This did not stop us from dav’ning. Virtually every apartment house had a couple of daily minyanim, which were rotated from apartment to apartment in a random pattern.

We children served both as lookouts and to direct the worshippers to the proper place. The Torahs were kept hidden in chests, closets, etc., and only removed when needed. All Jewish businesses which were important to the German war machine were put into the hands of trustees of German origin. Their task it was to ensure that the profits were turned over to the German authorities. The Jewish owners were invariably employed for their knowhow in their own places without any compensation. All other businesses were closed. The Germans dissolved the established community organizations, including the supervisory body, the Kahal. They replaced it by an agency of their own, comprised of opportunists and collaborators, the Judenrat. Their function was to expedite the execution of their masters' orders.

The Jewish population, with its age-long experience and skill in adapting to insufferable conditions, tried under these circumstances to survive. Most of the Chasidim shaved off their beards and sidelocks. The traditional garb was replaced by something more worldly. Some older men, like my grandfather, who were not willing to change their way of life, had to stay indoors all the time. Even then they risked terrible punishment if found by the Germans in one of their frequent raids. All the men were required to work for the Germans, often under conditions of indescribable brutality. Strong young men were captured. They were sent to work, out of town, building German installations, where they were driven to exhaustion and death. The attrition rate in these forced labor camps was such that every few weeks a new raid was staged by the Germans to replenish the spent manpower.

The food supply was poor. With the arrival of the Germans, all the commercial means of food distribution, such as stores and daily open air markets, were closed. The Polish population was issued rationing cards. With these they were able to purchase, occasionally, small amounts of the standard staples such as bread and potatoes. We had nothing; and not even money to buy anything on the black market. The Jews who worked were never paid for their labor. There was no means of income. Any available savings in financial institutions had been confiscated. Any large holdings became valueless when the Germans issued their own currency, exchanging only a nominal sum. Consequently we were forced to barter and trade with the Polish peasants our personal belongings for food. At first, the more affluent traded away jewelry, and then furniture, clothing, silverware, pots and pans, etc. The homes became increasingly bare. The diet consisted almost exclusively of potatoes. The population was ravaged by various illnesses. In the summer of 1940, an epidemic of dysentery broke out, which took the lives of dozens of people daily. The doctors were helpless, having no means to treat the sick, nor any hospital space to isolate them from the remainder of the people. As yet the Germans were taking no overt measures to eradicate the Jewish people, but they were pretty successful in their attrition process.

My father had a foreboding of things to come and attempted repeatedly to flee the German rule. Three times my parents tried to smuggle themselves across the border into Soviet-occupied Eastern Poland, but to no avail. My father was assigned to work in his own roof paper factory as a technician. It was managed by a Volksdeutsche (Pole of German extraction) trustee. This "management" was of such a nature that when a German inspecting commission came to review the operation, the trustee was summarily removed from his post. In his pique he then had my father transferred to work as a janitor at the SS-headquarters in town. This was a horrible job; every day my father came home bloody and bruised from the beatings he suffered at the hands of the SS-men. His body was broken, but not his spirit. I remember him on Yom Kippur day of

1940, coming into the Neilah Service directly from work. His first action was to perform his duty as a Levite by washing the hands of the Kohanim who were about to recite the Priestly Benediction (the day being the Sabbath, the Priestly Benediction was done at Neilah). Fortunately for my father, the new trustee appointed to run the factory needed someone capable to run the operation, so he had my father reassigned to his old job. But the former trustee did not quit seeking vengeance. One day, as I was coming home in the afternoon, and was about to ring our apartment bell, our next door neighbor pulled me into her house. The Gestapo had spent two hours in our apartment and our neighbor thought it better that I not go in. After a while, I saw two Gestapo-men leading away my mother. When I entered our place it was in shambles. My aunt and sister, who were present throughout, said that the Gestapo was searching for an insulting letter which my father had purportedly written to Hitler. We learned later that this was the evil of which my father was accused by the ousted trustee. The Gestapo had arrested my mother, saying that they would release her when my father showed up at headquarters. My other aunt, who saw the Gestapo enter the apartment, immediately called my father at work. He left town on the spot. Reason and experience both indicated that it would be impossible to get a man out of the Gestapo's clutches. The task might be near impossible for a woman. Anyway, there was no guarantee that my mother would be released when my father appeared. The charge itself was so ridiculous that even the Gestapo knew it was false. Had they been serious about getting my father, they could have gone straight to his place of work. My father hid out under an assumed name in a village 25 miles away. Except for a brief visit 18 months later, I was not to see him again.

In the meantime, my mother was in prison, and being interrogated daily by the Gestapo. We tried to move heaven and earth to get her out. First we succeeded in bribing the prison guard to let her know that my father was safely away and that we were all right. Then we were looking for intermediaries to reach the Gestapo-men on the case and obtain her release. In those days bribery could still accomplish something. The first objective was to see that she be kept in the local prison and not shipped away to Auschwitz or another concentration camp where there would be no hope. After five frantic nightmarish weeks, in exchange for two sets of diamond uniform buttons, we obtained her release. My mother, however, was obliged to report to the Gestapo headquarters every day at 3 PM and identify herself to the officer on duty. This went on for about a year, until the Jews were not permitted to walk the streets. In later years, in the course of their numerous raids and selections, these particular Gestapo men, whenever they came across me, always asked me the whereabouts of my father. I always claimed ignorance.

In the meantime, my father got very sick with pneumonia. Unfortunately, there was no one present in the town who could help him. So every day, after reporting to the Gestapo, my mother took a horse-drawn sled to where my father was. She cared for him through the night. The following morning she was back so that she could again report. The trips themselves were not routine; the winter was very severe that year and the sled was occasionally chased by hungry wolves. Everything had to be done surreptitiously so as not to attract the attention of the Gestapo or their informers. To this very day I don't know how my mother was able to do it, but then it is an old song: Eyshes Chayil Mi Yimtso — A woman of valor who shall find.

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The Beginning of the End.

In the summer of 1940, the German occupation authorities began to restrict the areas in which Jews might live. They ordered that the Jewish population reside only in two separate areas. Initially these were not fenced in. Movement within the town limits was permitted except for the nightly curfew. A few months later an edict was issued which prohibited Jews from entering the better section of the town where the Germans lived, and also forbade us to walk on the sidewalks. Some time later, people who were forced only a year earlier to move into the second area were now squeezed into the living space already occupied by half the town's population. The crowding was terrible. Each room was occupied by several people, frequently from more than one family. Still, the fences were not up and we could move out of the area we lived in. But even that modicum of freedom did not last long. The Germans ordered the erection of fences with gates across the streets leading into the Jewish district. A ghetto was being formed. All the windows and doors which faced the outside world were being walled up. In some cases the Germans went to elaborate detail in creating the ghetto. This effort, in hindsight, was clearly ridiculous, but at the time gave us the illusion of the permanence of the arrangement. Thus, for instance, they included in the ghetto a whole street, several hundred yards long, of attached apartment houses which could only be reached by crossing a street of the Aryan world. This row of houses was an island. All its outside walls were sealed. The only way to move from one house to the other was through special doorways knocked out in walled adjacent houses. The series of passageways has an absolutely nightmarish quality, but then so did one's whole life. In January of 1942 the gates of the ghetto were closed. Anyone found outside without the proper papers and permission was killed.

The living conditions of the Jewish population, which were pretty bad to begin with, by the closing of the ghetto, were aggravated. The food supply dwindled to a trickle. General hunger was prevalent. Dark sour bread was being sold by street vendors in thin slices like a precious cake. Frozen potatoes (not the USA supermarket variety) were a rare treat. All contact with the Aryan world was punishable by death. That increased the cost of food fantastically. The Polish peasants knew they had the Jews over the barrel and their demands were exorbitant. While the well-to-do managed by bartering their remaining possessions and even signing over their property to the Poles for scraps of food, the poor were literally dying of starvation in the streets.

The herding together of the Jewish population also reduced our chances of escaping the Germans' clutches during any of the numerous periodic raids staged in the ghetto. Any German requiring labor could drive up to the ghetto's gate. He would make his request known to the German or Polish guard, who would in turn order the Jewish policeman on duty inside the gate to procure the necessary manpower. This would precipitate a "razia" or manhunt. People would be picked off the streets or from their homes on the spot, and shipped to their tasks, without any knowledge that they would ever return. Few ever did return. The cruelty accompanying these hunts was indescribable. The Jewish policemen did their shameful part. They were a force of about thirty or forty men who were organized to keep some semblance of order in the ghetto.

They were all volunteers and in their zeal to please their masters tried to outdo the Germans in their bestiality. They were mostly young men, from all walks of life, who thought that they were attaining a privileged position which might save them from the common misery. In this assumption they were completely wrong. It is likely they were looking for thrills and lusting for the unlimited power which was theirs over the rest of the Jewish population. It is sobering to think that even we produced such beasts, but reassuring that they were an infinitesimal fraction of the population.

Throughout the spring of 1942, the pressure of the Germans on the Jewish population mounted almost daily. The raids became more frequent, the demands for people more outrageous. Late in May the Germans began to bring in all the Jewish population from the villages and towns throughout the whole country into our ghetto. The whole countryside became "judenfrei," free of Jews. This step doubled the population of the ghetto, from about 12,000 to 24,000. The overcrowding is today unimaginable. People lived in the hallways, passageways, attics, cellars, stairways, and plainly in the streets. The hunger intensified with the influx of this new mass of people.

This June 1942 was the time of my Bar Mitzvah. Throughout these years I availed myself of every opportunity to continue my education, both secular and religious. Credit for this goes to my parents, primarily my mother. Under the most unusual conditions we lived in, a young boy does not realize the need for study. This education was informal, secret, on a catch-as-catch-can basis. I was not studying the Haftorah but the laws pertaining to putting on Tfilin. I was called up to the Torah on a Saturday morning, rattled off my Haftorah in the inimitable Chasidic style. On the next day, my birthday, my grandfather put Tfilin on me. In my father's absence, I became a man.

In the middle of June the German authorities called in the infamous Judenrat. They demanded from them a ransom of 1,000,000 zloty in order to protect the ghetto from an "Ausseidlung" or resettlement. At that time we had no idea that resettlement was the euphemism for the gas chambers. Although we strongly suspected that the people dragged away were not alive anymore, we did not know of the existence of the gas chambers till after our liberation. In 1942, resettlement meant to us working someplace in labor camps in the Russian territory occupied by the Germans. In this we were misguided by our experience. Two years earlier, several thousand Jews from two towns in Western Poland, which were permanently incorporated into the Reich, were brought to our town and released there to share our lot. The Judenrat issued their orders to the Jewish police. Immediately all people who were suspected of having any substance left were rounded up and forced to give up their property. Torture was the order of the day. In a few days the necessary sum was collected. When the money was delivered, the Germans demanded another 1,000,000 zloty assuring the Judenrat that if it were raised there would be no deportation of Jews from our town. The deadline was Monday, June 6. The cruel collection procedures were repeated with increased bestiality, for there was really very little money left in the community. The collection was purely in Jewish hands. It remains the most shameful episode in the long history of the Jews in Rzeszow. Somehow the money was raised again. Monday was declared a fast for the whole community; the atmosphere was that of Tisha B'Av, only immensely heightened. In the evening the whole Judenrat, twenty-four strong, went to deliver the money. Twelve returned alive. The other twelve, including the chairman, were

brought back by the burying detail. That same evening the ghetto was surrounded by SS and German police units. It was divided into four sections; the population of the first section was ordered to assemble on a square, which used to be the old Jewish cemetery, in the middle of the ghetto. The people in the remaining sections were ordered to stay away from doors and windows and to remain in their houses on the penalty of death. In the early hours of the morning, the Jews from the first section were herded toward the assembly point. Our windows overlooked the square. We were not in the first group, so I was able to sneak a look at the proceedings. Germans with police dogs were patrolling the streets and checking house by house whether all occupants had left. If they were not gone, they were shot on the spot. Along the way, beatings, kicking, and whipping helped those who did not move fast enough; those who could not were shot. Finally, by midday, over 5,000 Jews — men, women, and children — were assembled in the square, SS-men with automatic weapons surrounding them from all sides. Machine guns and small armored cars were placed at strategic positions. Then the process of selection began. All people who worked for German enterprises with strategic importance were allowed back together with their immediate family to the just vacated area. Each such individual had to have his identification papers stamped. The seal was the passport to at least temporary life. This process took almost all day. The mass of people meanwhile stood in the blazing hot July sun, without food or drink. Every so often a shot would ring out and you knew that it was the end of another Jewish life. You would silently recite “Yisgadal V’yiskadash...” or terrible screams would be heard when someone was beaten unmercifully. Otherwise, deathly silence throughout the day, punctured by the laughter of the SS. There were 5,000 people and now there was silence. Toward the evening the people were ordered into one long column, ten abreast, and marched off toward the railroad station. There they were crowded at the rate of one hundred people into a freight car intended for forty and sent off to Belzec. The march itself was silent no more; when it was over a few dozen bodies marked its path. They, several hundred, were taken out of town and shot immediately, including my grandfather, who only a couple of weeks ago had put on me the Tfilin. The day was Tuesday, July 7, 1942.

This procedure was repeated with the other three sections of town on the following Friday, Tuesday, and again Friday, July 10, 14, and 17, respectively. In one of the “actions” we were involved personally. Since my mother worked as a construction laborer on the railroad, my sister and I were permitted to enter the sanctuary of life, the section of town first vacated. All through this time we were under a 24-hour curfew, with SS troops constantly patrolling the streets. At the end of a ten day period, about 20,000 Jews were “resettled,” about 1,500 were killed on the spot, and about 2,500 were herded together in a small section of the ghetto and permitted to continue being slaves. I lost both my grandfathers, several aunts and uncles, numerous first cousins, and countless friends and relatives. The Jewish community of Rzeszow, some 600 years old, was no more.

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Kaddish.

Of the original population of the Rzeszow ghetto, about 10 per cent survived the deportation wave of July, 1942. They consisted of the family heads who were slaving in jobs the Germans considered important, and their immediate families (spouses and children). They were herded together, some 2,500 strong, in the poorest section of the former ghetto, forming a small, fenced-in, guarded enclave in the now empty confines of the ghetto. The original area of the ghetto was still fenced in and guarded. I was then just over thirteen years old and was assigned to work in a labor column whose task was the methodical cleaning up of the belongings of the deported Jews. Each morning we would enter a house, remove the better furniture and household goods for shipment to Germany, and send the poorer things to warehouses where they were sold at auctions to the Poles. Then we would burn the trash. We would sweep up and clean the empty house and move to the next one. The last trace of the former residents would just vanish. In the beginning it was heart-rending to enter home after home, frequently of people I knew or was friendly with. I would see their possessions, which meant so much to them, being indiscriminately swept aside. (But these were only inanimate objects. Living beings were not treated much better and often worse.) Priceless collections of books, sets of Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud in rare editions and bindings, writings of generations of scholars and sages, all went up in flames. One can't imagine how many books our people possessed. Even the poorest had several books at home. Daily we burned countless thousands of volumes. As a result of this experience I became quite adept at moving and carrying furniture through narrow staircases, and — I developed a lasting passion for the printed word.

My mother was working with my sister, building a railroad line. One evening as I returned from work, she told me that my father no longer lived. She only told me that after the "Shloshim" (30-day mourning) period, so that I would not sit "Shiva." Following his illness of the winter 1941-42, my father found refuge with his sister in a town about 50 miles away. There, at the age of 38 in the town of Tarnow on the 26th day of Sivan, 5702, 16 days after my Bar Mitzvah, he was murdered, together with some 5,000 other Jews. An uncle of mine was on the burial detail. He saved my father's blood-stained cap. He managed to give it to a Polish woman. This woman used to be a governess to my aunt's children. (She was so attached to them that she stayed on the Aryan side of the ghetto as long as they were alive, trying to send them some food through the laborers that were slaving outside the ghetto. There were righteous people among the nations, few in Poland, but of great courage and sacrifice). My uncle bade the woman to seek out my mother and tell her what happened and give her the date for the Yahrzeit. The woman did find my mother, working in the railroad gang, and at the risk of her life gave her the message.

Upon hearing the news, I was stunned, but didn't cry. (I don't think I could cry then, nor was I capable of what one would call a "normal" emotional response). I went to seek out a Minyan so that I could say Kaddish that evening. I was not the only one with this problem; there was then a great fellowship in Israel that was saying Kaddish. Throughout the period of eleven months that I was obligated to say Kaddish I missed services only a few times. There was a

Minyan every morning and evening in virtually every second room, the only thing missing was the Torah.

The Germans could not bear to leave even the remnants of us alone. Five weeks after they went to elaborate procedures to permit the families of slaves who labored at important tasks to be saved from deportation, they attended to that matter too. On Friday, August 8, 1942, after all the labor gangs left for their respective assignments, the Germans rounded up all the women and children that were left behind and sent them away to eternity. The men did not know what had happened; when they came back in the late evening, they found their quarters empty. The hearts of the people were full of anguish and despair. To forestall any outbreak of protest, the guards were particularly brutal that night. They roamed our living quarters, beating up anybody they saw talking. The night passed and in the morning we were driven out to work again. In the diabolical plot to reduce us to mindless automatons, we were deprived of still another shred of human dignity.

VI

Published, March 1970

Day of Judgment 1942.

In August of 1942, I was assigned to a labor gang which worked expanding the railroad station of our town. Each morning we would be roused long before dawn and assembled in a marching column. We would have to step out smartly, to military cadence, on our way to work. We were not very familiar with the German parade formations. Thus every misstep brought swift and brutal retribution. We dug ditches and foundations, toted cement bags and piles of bricks, prepared railroad beds by spreading cinders and gravel, laid down the ties, and fastened the rails. The last task was particularly gruesome because while the Polish laborers were allowed to use tongs, we had to carry the heavy rails on our shoulders and place them by hand.

Each such operation resulted in a severe injury to some of us. Even if the injury was not fatal in itself, it was tantamount to a death sentence by the German guards. I myself had a close brush with the inevitable. A fellow worker had accidentally driven a board with a rusty nail into my left calf. The leg became badly infected and virtually gangrenous. I was afraid to report sick for fear of the "ultimate remedy." Anyway, no medication or treatment was available. For several days, while we marched to and from work, I was shielded by my mates in the ranks from the guards. I stumbled along as best I could and tried to be inconspicuous; I was feverish, in pain, and incoherent. It lasted a while, I don't remember how long, but a minor miracle happened. My leg got better. We used to say in camp that man could survive anything but a bullet.

The food was pitiful; in the morning some darkened tepid water with a slice of bread. A bowl of watery kale soup at midday; at night the same with another slice of bread. The labor was exhausting. As a rule it was twelve to fourteen hours a day. With marching and food distributions it was usually an eighteen hour day, except on Sunday when we would get a few hours off. Occasionally, we would have an extra "treat," a night shift immediately following a day shift and then another day shift right thereafter. The Germans were very "considerate." They remembered when the Jewish Holy Days came and would give us their "preferential" treatment. I remember

one Yom Kippur night well; after having returned to our quarters and trying to start services, we heard whistles outside and were marched off again to work.

That night we were pushing wheelbarrows full of concrete and pouring them into the foundations of a large roundhouse. As soon as the men were out of the earshot of the guards, they started to intone the Kol Nidre chants. Those who knew the words by heart recited them, the other hummed along. The whole Service was performed in that manner; not only the Kol Nidre but also the Maariv, the Piyutim, the Slichos and, since we had all night, verses of T'hilim. It would be an understatement to say that it was the most moving Service I have ever witnessed.

As I reflect back on this vivid memory, I conclude that in the sense of worshipping the Almighty or even pleading with the Lord for a better fate, this was not a religious act. Rather, it was an act of defiance. It was very pathetic in its scope, but nonetheless of great spiritual strength and value. It emphasized the faith and conviction of Jews who, in their darkest hour, at the time of their virtual extinction, proclaimed the indestructibility of the Jewish teachings, of the Jewish heritage, of the Jewish spirit. Would only our youth of today have this strength!

Needless to say, virtually all the prisoners fasted on Yom Kippur, again not as a religious act, but as an act of Judaism. And the day Service of Yom Kippur was recited in a similar manner during the following day shift.

By November of 1942, the population of the camp was reduced by "natural" and forceful attrition, capably assisted by the German police, to about 1,500. However, even that number was too high. On November 15th, the people were once again driven onto a large square encircled by barbed wire and surround by SS-manned machine guns. At one corner of the square was a table at which sat a group of Gestapo men with a list, and another long, painful and deadly process of selection began. As it states in the Unsane Tokef hymn recited on High Holy Days: "...Mi yichye Umi Yomus..." who shall live and who shall die... Except that it was not the Allrighteous One who sat in judgment. A few hundred people were killed in a nearby forest, a few hundred more were deported and then murdered. Less than half the Jews who left their quarters returned to them that evening.

VII

Published April, 1970

An Epitaph for a Sister.

Once I had a sister. She was about three years older than I. In the fall of 1942 she was not quite seventeen. She shared our travail all through the war, but in the fall of 1942, with continuing deportations and incessant eradication of the Jewish population in the labor camps, she decided not to wait docilely for her fate. She wanted to escape. After several weeks of trying, she finally managed to obtain an identity card made out to a girl her age of Aryan descent and one that vaguely fitted her description. After managing to place her photograph on this document, in a clumsy and childish bit of forgery, she succeeded in leaving her labor gang, which, like mine, worked on the railroad. (A lot of planning and careful timing went into this simple maneuver, but that is not essential to the story). The idea was to move to a different city

and live there as a Polish Aryan, under an assumed identity. It was supposed to be much easier for a girl. In fact a number of Jews survived the war in this manner.

My sister, however, did not get very far. During a routine identity check on the train, a Polish railroad policeman spotted her for what she was, a frightened Jewish girl, and turned her over to the Germans. It is a sad and shameful fact that throughout the war, the Poles were particularly eager and unmercifully skillful in spotting Jews posing as Aryans. The Germans could not have found more than about ten per cent of the Jews hiding out, but the Poles had an uncanny knack for it. In most cases they cooperated gleefully with the Nazis. The going reward for delivering a Jew to the Germans was a kilogram of sugar and a liter of vodka.

My sister was placed in a regular criminal prison, in the town of Przemysl, some 50 miles from the town we were in. From there she wrote a letter which a kindly guard managed to forward to our camp, where it finally reached us. (There were always a few, but very few, righteous Poles among the despicable majority). The letter was written on a scrap of paper, actually on a piece of a page from the entry book of the jail. I still have this letter. I translated it because I consider it, subjectively of course, very eloquent and moving. (There are many obscure references in the letter, which I shall explain parenthetically, which were put in to make it more difficult to trace, in case it fell into improper hands).

My dearest and most beloved Mother,

I already wrote once yesterday, to let you know, but I am not certain that you received it, so, just to make sure, I am writing again. These are the twists of my fate. On Saturday the friends of Jerzy (the Polish policeman in our town) took me to the people living on Jagiellonska Street (the Gestapo headquarters in our town were on this street). I was there until Tuesday and then was brought to this boarding house (jail), the same in which you were two years ago. If I could only leave it as you did and see you again, Mother!

There are other customs here; we wait for the so-called action and then we go to the place where Milek E. (a boy shot by the Gestapo in our town) went. You see, my dear Mother, I am writing about it coolly and calmly, and I think about it the same way. I got used to it, although it is very difficult...How difficult, you alone, Mother, can understand and you do understand. But don't cry because I do not cry either. I spilled all my tears during several sleepless nights. Now I am sleeping already and think only about you two. These thoughts do not leave me for a moment. Isn't it true that you thought that I am not alive anymore and here I am writing to you? Then do not cry, believe in God because I believe in Him. I believe that I will meet my father in the other world and he will take care of me. I won't be alone. You, Mother, remember to take care of yourself and of my little brother. Live for him and to avenge our innocent blood. This is my last and greatest request to you.

But do not worry, it is not as terrible here as it may seem to be. We laugh and occasionally we sing. For instance, today we sang carols. We do not suffer hunger. It is possible to get food from the guards for money, and while they took my money away, there are others who share with me.

I have a big favor to ask of you, Mother. Try to get a little of the powder from Henek W. (a dentist who was known to have a little cyanide poison) and bake something with the powder in it. Try to send it through a Catholic, perhaps two different times — one may reach me. It is

possible to leave it at the gate with my name on it, it may succeed. Don't despair, Mother, this is the one solution that I have in order not to suffer terribly and not to see others tortured. Don't shudder, I beg you very much, I am very brave, I am your daughter... I love you very, very much and therefore I beg you to do it.

Forgive me everything and write me a long letter. Sell all my things that may be left. It is a pity to save them. There is a greater pity for us that nobody saves us. Don't reproach yourself, you did everything in your power to save me. God wanted it different, so resign yourself to this fate without a word. This is what I think and say, "Fate wanted it differently." It does not matter. I am no better than thousands of others. Don't send money because it will get lost and who knows whether I will still be here.

My beloved little brother! Though I was frequently bad to you, please forgive me. I regret it all and only wish the you could repay our beloved and really irreplaceable Mother all her miserable moments. Now she has only you, so be polite and obedient, so that you may not regret it bitterly. You have only one mother and I know what that means.

I kiss you all a million times and be well.

Your Rena

One can imagine the state we were in when we received the letter. My mother tried everything in her power, including asking a German railroad official to intervene on my sister's behalf to help, but to no avail. Even the cyanide was not available, but I don't think my mother would have sent it. Strangely enough, my sister was released from jail and placed in a Jewish labor camp in Przemysl. Either the Germans needed workers or they thought that the ultimate outcome would not be very different. From there we lost all contact with my sister.

In talking to survivors after the war we have been able to reconstruct the following: After working for several months in Przemysl, the remnants of the Jewish labor force, including my sister, were transferred to another infamous labor camp. There they slaved for about half a year. In the fall of 1943, my sister was shipped with a whole transport of others to the death camp in Auschwitz. They arrived in the afternoon and had to go through the ghastly selection procedure before the notorious Mengele. Some of the people in the transport were selected to work, and survived to tell the story. My sister was at the rear of the column. Mengele got tired from his exertions. All the people in the second half of the column were sent to the gas chamber.

VIII

Published December, 1970

Of Beasts and Men.

Toward the end of 1942, the Germans transferred to the SS jurisdiction over the remnants of the Jews in the camp. One morning we were marched off to the municipal bath for the rare luxury of a shower. When we came out, our clothes were gone and we were issued some old rags which had red paint stripes on them, and wood-soled shoes. When we got back to our quarters, all our belongings were gone. Gone also were my Tfilin. They were the only things I had left to remind me of my father and sister. He had given them to me and she had embroidered the Tfilin

sack. By sheer coincidence I got them back a few days later. One of the fellows from my room was working on a garbage detail. He found the Tfilin on a trash heap. At the risk of severe punishment, he hid them on his person and then brought them to me that evening. I have them to this very day.

Our official designation was now SS-Judenzwangsarbeitslager Reichshof-Ost (SS forced labor camp for Jews, Reichsdorf-East). The camp commandant and his deputy were members of the SS. The SS used the inmates not only to perform all necessary menial labor but actually to enrich their personal coffers. For a fee they offered the services of the prisoners to other Germans. Thus, if a German wanted to have a pair of shoes made, he could come to the camp headquarters and have a Jewish shoemaker take the measurements and perform the task. The SS would then bill the client for the service. Even the billing was done by the inmates. In the same manner services in other crafts were also offered. The German army would be billed for truckloads of laundry which were done by the prisoners. All the money went to the SS, which was a corrupt and parasitic “state” within the “Thousand Year Reich.”

My task at that time was to keep the fires going under the kettles in which the laundry of the German soldiers was boiling. I was there early in the morning to get the fire started. During the day I was loading and unloading the six kettles, stirring the laundry, and stoking the furnaces. It was hard work but at least I was inside. For a while I was also the runner between camp headquarters and the building where all the craftsmen were working. (I was about the youngest in camp). I would wait in a little cubicle near the office where the German customers would come. If one of the artisans was needed, I would run full speed to call him, and he in turn would respond on the double. The job itself was easy, but fraught with unpredictable peril. One was always subject to the whims of the several SS men who were usually hanging around at headquarters. If one of them were in a bad mood, the consequences were frightening. Fortunately, after several weeks I was put back to the relative security of my previous assignment.

The deputy camp commandant was a dog fancier. He had several large police dogs in a kennel adjacent to the laundry in which I worked. I watched them enviously because their cuisine was infinitely superior to ours, and I watched them fearfully because they were fierce man-killers. Each morning at roll call, five or six men would be selected for the dog training detail. They would wait for hours until the deputy commandant would emerge smilingly after his breakfast (at about 10 AM). Then their frightful duty would begin. They would be made to run and the dogs would be set upon them. Of course, no protective padding of any sort was provided. I can still hear in my mind the cries of the men as their flesh was being torn to pieces. At best the men would return from this duty with severe flesh wounds. Some did not survive this training. This was going on for quite a while, until the camp commandant realized that the attrition rate was a little faster than planned. (Incidentally, the above was among the official charges leveled by a German court against former SS-Oberscharfuehrer Oester during his trial in 1969. I was one of several people who testified at a hearing at the West German consulate in New York. He was convicted of this and other war crimes and sentenced to a few years in prison).

Of all the relatives that we had in town only one first cousin of mine was still in the camp. She was an eighteen year old girl whose mother and four other sisters were deported. She managed to hide her youngest sister, then about six years old, through all the “actions,” and she

was keeping her hidden even in camp. Not even I knew about it. It was inconceivable to imagine all the difficulties this girl went through to try to keep her sister alive. To no avail; one day the child was discovered, the Gestapo was called in. A tall, big Gestapo-man took her by her hand and started leading her out of camp headquarters. She saw some prisoners watching the scene with tears in their eyes, and said to them, "Do not cry, I am not afraid, I am going to my mommy..." The Gestapo-man led her past me, where I was loading baskets of clean laundry onto a German army truck. He led her behind a building. A shot rang out. The Gestapo man appeared alone, buttoning his gun holster. I looked up at the German soldier who was driving the truck; he was crying.

IX

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Escape.

There were no major deportations in our forced labor camp in the period between November 1942 and September 1943. Compared to six such actions in the summer-fall of 1942, life was relatively tranquil. With the exception of incidents of the type just described, the only causes of death were malnutrition, exhaustion, or a combination of both. So was any illness or injury that was noticed by the guards.

We marched off to work before dawn every day of the week, returned late in the evening, received our meager portion of watery kale or beet soup, and collapsed on our pallets. We were like automatons, trying to go about our paces, with the least possible expenditure of energy and trying desperately to stay out of the way of the guards.

In this robot-like existence there were a few people who tried to maintain the spirit of the inmates. One of them used to softly sing Jewish folksongs. They were songs of lament and sadness, but they at least reminded us that there once was a reality which was quite different from the present. Others spoke of socialism, of a future in Palestine, of a better world and of brotherhood of men. Those who listened were entranced, like children listening to a good storyteller. These stories were about as relevant as Grimm's fairy tales. By and large, the people were totally stupefied. They just tried to survive the next hour without any plans for the future.

The women's camp was a block of three buildings enclosed by barbed wire. The wire was not electrified, and one section of the fence was not well guarded. So I used to sneak in occasionally at night, by burrowing under the lowest strand, to spend a few moments with my mother. On the way back I would carefully obliterate all traces of the passage. (Incidentally, the cot next to my mother's was occupied by Mrs. Zinnemann, the mother of the award winning movie director, Fred Zinnemann).

I enjoyed the full cooperation of the other prisoners during these brief visits. They would stand guard and warn me of any approaching danger. These few minutes with my mother gave us both a little bit of inner strength in our struggle for survival. However, even this barest of existence was not to continue to be ours. One September morning in 1943, we found that the camp was surrounded by units of the Estonian Waffen-SS. We were in the midst of another deportation action. About 700 of the 900 inmates were being sent away. I too was included in the

group. However, in a momentary confusion arising mostly from the inexperience of the Estonian SS guards, I was able to sneak unnoticed into the group designated to stay. Thus I survived one more selection process.

Our duties now were mostly those of a cleaning detail, making sure that anything valuable still left from the original population of 24,000 Jews in the Rzeszow ghetto would be sent to Germany or assorted for auction sale to the Poles. We were housed in a single building, men and women together, and I was back with my mother, who had miraculously also survived the selection. This building stood alone on a little square, in the middle of several square blocks of empty buildings which once housed the Jews of Rzeszow. The whole area was still surrounded by a fence and its perimeter guarded. If we ever doubted it before, we knew now that our days were numbered. As soon as our task was finished, we would go the way of the others. Anyone needing further proof got it one day in October when half of us were deported. Again my mother and I survived this action. I'll never know how.

Just about that time, my mother received a crumpled note from a Polish woman who used to nurse me when I was a baby and then was our sleep-in maid. The note was brought by a man who was on a work detail outside the camp and who was given it surreptitiously at a moment when the guard was not looking. The note said that she, the woman, was sick for the past several months and that she would like to speak to my mother at a certain place and time. This place was a catacomb-like cellar in a certain house on the camp perimeter, where it was possible to talk to someone from the outside who was in an adjacent cellar. My mother managed to get to the place and speak to the woman. The woman said that she would like to save our lives, and that we should try to escape and come to her house, where she would hide us in her cellar. My mother was extremely grateful, but asked her whether it would perhaps be possible to hide some more people. My mother had particularly in mind three of our cousins who were still with us and who were the only ones left from a once numerous family. The woman said that it would be impossible in her house, but that she would try to persuade her widowed sister, who lived in a cottage out of town, to hide the three people. A meeting was arranged for a few days hence, to provide an answer and to arrange for a date.

You can imagine our feelings when we heard this news. For the first time in years there was hope that we might survive this ordeal. My mother met the woman again and it was decided that we should try and get away on November 10th or as soon thereafter as possible. Her sister also agreed to harbor our three cousins. We had to get some clothing which wasn't marked by the paint stripes that identified us as prisoners. We stole it from the warehouses, which were full of goods for shipment to Germany.

The plan was to attach ourselves to a work detail, which would go out of the camp in the afternoon to work in an adjacent building. Then we would detach ourselves from the group. The nature of the detail was such that a few persons would go back and forth between the building and a small, unguarded, but locked camp gate. Since the gate was in sight of the building, it was frequently left unlocked, with the detail guard keeping an eye on it. The constant movement of people back and forth facilitated our plan because it was hard to keep track of everybody in the detail. Thus, not only was our escape feasible, but it might also go unnoticed until the evening with the daily count-off (It has to be emphasized that it was never too difficult to escape from our

camp. The only problem was that once outside there was no place to go. For the bounty of 2.2 pounds of sugar and a quart of vodka, the Poles would point out the escapees to the Germans.)

November 10th approached. Our excitement and tension were indescribable. Just as we were about to make the break, one of us who went out on the outside detail earlier to survey the situation returned. He informed us there was increased Gestapo patrol activity on the town's street. We realized that this was the day before Polish Independence Day, which falls on November 11th. It was usually celebrated by some show of force of the Polish anti-Nazi partisans. We abandoned the attempt. We waited till the 12th, but again there were Gestapo patrols on the streets. We waited another day, until Saturday, November 13th. We decided to go. The plan was that we would split into three groups; my mother by herself; my two cousins, my other cousin, and myself. We would make our way to the woman's apartment by three different routes at intervals calculated so that we would arrive about 10 minutes apart. The woman's door was supposed to be open, but we were not to enter if there was anyone in the hallway. My nerves were so on edge that in the last minute, I went into hysterics and refused to go. I kept saying that we'd never make it, and if the Gestapo were to catch and torture us, I would be unable to keep my mouth shut and would betray everything. I wanted to die in a group and not alone by torture. I was carrying on like this for about 10 to 15 minutes, but finally I calmed down and was persuaded to go through with the operation. My cousin and I were the first ones to go. We grabbed a couple of empty cement pails and joined some of the other prisoners who were leaving the camp, through the small gate. Fortunately there was no guard at the gate. When we got to the building outside, we waited for the first opportunity to sneak away from the working gang. We moved into an empty room where we quickly shed our outer striped garments and hid them. Then we made our way through a back window, into a courtyard, and then the street. We were out and it was easy. We were walking at a slow pace, so as not to attract attention, seemingly nonchalant but inwardly scared to death.

We reached the woman's house. There was no one in the hallway, so we approached her door and tried to enter. The door was locked. We knocked a few times, but no one answered, there was no one home. Afraid to attract attention and at our wits' end, we started on our way back toward the camp, thinking that we might be able to sneak back. But just as we were approaching the building that we left but a short while ago, we decided to try once more for freedom. We turned around and headed back. This time the door was open. Inside we found my mother and my other two cousins, all of whom were frantic with worry. Apparently the woman stepped outside for a few moments, particularly since she expected us since the 10th and she hadn't heard from us. She had already given up hope that we'd ever make it. She led us down to the cellar which was to be our hiding place and where my cousins were to spend the night, before going on the morrow to her sister's house.

She padlocked the door behind her, leaving us in the darkness. We made it, we were "free."

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Liberation.

The cellar in which my mother and I were hiding out was a deep, windowless, underground chamber which was used for storage. Each tenant in the apartment building had such a padlocked cellar in which to store potatoes, wood, and coal. (No central heating in these buildings). Several such cellars were grouped off into a passageway that was also padlocked. Thus we were under double lock and key, except that the key to the first lock was held jointly by several tenants, who of course were unaware of our existence. As soon as we heard anybody opening the first door, we quickly extinguished the little kerosene lamp we used for light and sat there silently and breathlessly until the person departed and we heard the sounds of the door being padlocked again.

Our accommodations in the cellar consisted of a bundle of straw that served as our bed. We were not complaining. At least we now had a chance, no matter how infinitesimal, to survive. Rats were our frequent companions, particularly during the night, but we got used to them. Each morning our keeper would bring us some food and water in a pail that she would ostensibly use to bring up some potatoes or coal. She would carefully time her trips so that nobody else would be in the cellar at the time. We lived in this manner for over four months. We spent our time in endless games of solitaire and reading any printed matter voraciously. The good woman would bring us a newspaper hidden in the pail each morning, and occasionally a magazine or book. At the risk of her life and that of her husband's and daughter's (her daughter was three at the time and unaware of our presence), she tried to save us and even make our life as bearable as possible. She would even go to another part of the town where she was not known and purchase a German newspaper or magazine for us.

Such purchases would have been very suspicious in her neighborhood, where she was known as not being able to read German. (In this manner I taught myself German). Even her meager food purchases, which were difficult enough in those days and done mostly through bartering in the black market, had to be carefully arranged and distributed among different suppliers so as not to arouse suspicions as to the larger than usual quantities. All this just out of the goodness of her heart, out of compassion for some people she knew. We had no money to pay, and no money could pay for what she was doing; we only had a few pieces of better clothing and household items that we had hidden away among Polish friends before we were locked into the ghetto. These we gave her, but they were barely, if at all, sufficient to cover the food expense. She was a poor woman (her husband was a simple railroad worker), hardly literate... Yes, there were and are righteous people among all nations, and we should always remember that.

One day, sometime in the late winter of 1944, the woman came all excited into the cellar, saying that the Germans just ordered all occupants of the house to clear out within 24 hours so as to make room for the German troops. She would try to find room with relatives, but she did not trust them with our lives. She would try to persuade her sister, who was sheltering our three cousins, to harbor us as well. So off she went to try and make arrangements for our safety as well as find some shelter for her family. All of this had to be done within a span of a few hours

because the curfew started at 8 PM and lasted till 6 AM, and she had to be out of the house by 9 AM the following morning. She left us in despair. Not only were we not sure that her sister would be willing to hide two more people, but even the trip to her house was very dangerous because the town was teeming with retreating German troops (that is why they needed additional quarters).

After what seemed endless hours, the woman returned and said that her sister agreed to harbor us as well. We agreed that it would be best to leave at twilight, when our physical appearances would be less noticeable, and not too close to curfew hour, when there might be increased patrol activity. She would leave the doors of the cellar open and we would try to sneak out unnoticed through the courtyard and into the back street. She would be waiting a block ahead and would lead us to her sister's place, about two miles out of town. We insisted that we would follow at a distance of a couple hundred yards so that there would be no danger of implicating her in case we were intercepted.

This plan went through without a hitch. For the first time in many months I was able to breathe fresh air, catch a glimpse of the fading daylight, and stretch my legs. We walked through a crisp, cold evening, yet we were too preoccupied with other thoughts to be able to enjoy what was, for us, a very rare treat. We arrived safely at our destination and were reunited with our companions, who we had last seen during our escape. Our guide had to sleep over in her sister's house because curfew hour was approaching; she hadn't packed her things yet and she would have to leave her house early next morning.

The strangest thing about this incident was the fact, which we learned a few days later, that the very night after we left our cellar hideout, a water main burst in the immediate vicinity. The whole cellar was flooded, practically to the ceiling. Had we stayed in the cellar we would have either drowned or, had we screamed and been discovered, we could have been shot. In either case our shelterers would have shared our fate. Thus the German order to clear the building, which had brought us initial despair, turned out in the end to have saved our lives. This was another instance of what one may call a strange twist of coincidence and another may call a miraculous finger of Providence which was absolutely necessary to occur if we were to survive those reason-defying days. Individual skill, ingenuity, resourcefulness — all were important and necessary, but they alone were not enough; one had to have lots and lots of 'mazel.'

Our accommodations in the new hiding place were quite different. For once we had daylight, which seeped in through a small translucent window. Our harbinger was a widow with two sons, ages 14 and 12, who lived in a small straw-thatched hut. There were three rooms in this hut, a kitchen, a bedroom, and a storage room off the kitchen where we were. The storage room was locked at all times; in one corner of it we dug out painfully and slowly a hole underneath the floorboards, just about large enough for all of us to be able to squeeze into in the event anyone wanted to enter the storage room. We could only dig at night. The dug out soil was passed along in buckets and spread outside in the garden by the two boys. During the day we had to be extremely quiet because all noises could be heard through the thin kitchen wall.

When anyone entered the house, we virtually froze all our movement and tried to breathe as quietly as possible. At times there would be visitors in the house for a few hours, and this could become quite difficult. We had a drill practice in case someone wanted to enter the room; our hostess was to go into an elaborate routine, searching for the key, and at the same time draw

the visitors to the bedroom part of the house. In the meantime we would silently lower ourselves into the hole underneath the floor and replace the floorboards. We had this operation down smoothly, and fortunately had to put it into action only a couple of times.

We lived in this manner for several months. Although we did not dare to get close to the window for fear that someone might see us, we were able to observe the arrival of spring and then that of summer.

Our hold on life and sanity during these days became more tenuous and difficult. We could hear every word spoken in the kitchen. Several times visitors to the house made remarks which we construed as potentially dangerous or threatening. Our nerves were very much on edge.

In June we learned about the invasion in Normandy. The news brought about a surge of hope for a quick end to the war. But that did not materialize. We were in greater despair than ever. Amidst all this, our hostess was the calmest, most cheerful, and most composed of all, although she had the best reason for being upset.

About the middle of July we heard from our shelterers that large bodies of troops were passing westward through the town in a manner indicative of retreat. The house was standing only about a hundred yards off the main East-West road in that part of Poland. We could hear a continuous roar of engines, going in the western direction, as we were told. At night, when we put our ears to the floor, we heard or imagined hearing distant thundering, the sound of guns. It became evident that the Russians had mounted another offensive and were rolling the Germans back westward. We were hoping and praying that the momentum of this thrust would not be spent before they reached us. The offensive had started about 120 miles east of our location.

As the days passed, our excitement mounted. We heard that the movement of troops had increased and it was even more chaotic than before. Finally we could hear the gunfire even in daytime. The Germans were evacuating their administrative offices. The most certain sign of abandonment of authority was that the population was plundering the warehouses, undisturbed.

Then one evening we heard a lot of German spoken in the fields around the house we were in. A few soldiers and an armored car spent the night in the garden, and from their conversation we gathered that the Russians were very close. We spent the night lying awake silently, hoping. Shortly after the dawn the soldiers left and it was very quiet except for the occasional bursts of gunfire.

We were situated in a village, on a hill, about two miles east of the town, and separated from the town by a river. At about 9 o'clock in the morning another group of German soldiers came to a brief rest near the window of our room. They were the demolition squad, who were supposed to blow up the bridge across the river. They were concerned about getting to the bridge in time. They left and we got bolder and moved closer to the window to watch the scene. Shortly thereafter we saw some German soldiers running across the fields, shooting occasionally at an invisible enemy. Again it became quiet.

Then, from across the field, we saw a tank move out from what seemed like a cluster of trees, and crawl in our direction. At the same time some figures in strange uniforms appeared in the field suddenly, moving across, seemingly without hurry. The Russians were here. We moved out of the storage room across to the bedroom to get a better look.

Another tank was coming down the narrow village lane, in front of it ran a young blond soldier, one of the crew, to direct it. He saw us in the window, no more than 15 feet from him, and he turned to us and yelled: "Dozhilistye?"... "How were you able to live this long?"... This was our second birth, the date July 31, 1944.

Note: I would like to mention the names of the people that saved our lives, not that names matter, but for the record, they are Karola and Kazimierz Kusnierz and their daughter Maryla (then three years old, but who now has a son of her own), and Maria Wisniewska with her sons Jozef and Ryszard.

EPILOGUE

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During the past years the Shalom has generously allotted a space in its pages for a brief accounting of my experiences as a Jew in Nazi-occupied Poland. Having come to the point where I have survived this ordeal, it perhaps is appropriate to attempt to outline in what way these events contributed to the development of my attitudes on life. What follows here is a highly subjective analysis of what I think I learned during those years.

The two areas of relationships most drastically affected by the type of existence I recounted are those of man toward God and man toward fellow man. The inevitable question has been asked a thousand time, "How could God have permitted all this to happen?" I do not subscribe to Elie Wiesel's accusation that "God is a murderer." God did not murder anybody, man did.

While one may agree that God, being the Creator of everything, may be also held accountable for the existence of evil, one cannot say that God is responsible for evil. Man was given the ability to choose between good and evil, and the responsibility is all his. I strongly believe that man is responsible for his actions. In any case, it is naive to assume that God's ways are to be rationalized or analyzed by human thought processes; by the very definition of divinity, they are inscrutable. It is, of course, extremely helpful in one's personal relationship with God to endow him with human attributes and visualize Him in anthropomorphic terms. But in a sophisticated, monotheistic religion such as Judaism, this is an oversimplification that does not bear analysis.

Thus I feel that one's faith in a Divine Being should not be shaken or weakened by the slaughter and untold suffering of innocents. On the contrary, one could see the clear necessity to live up to His precepts, to shape the world according to His Law, so that such carnage will happen no more.

It appears that even though one's faith in God could be maintained in spite of all the tragedy, one's faith in man would need reexamination. And yet, paradoxically as it may seem, if I learned anything during those years, I learned to believe in the inherent goodness of man. It is true that I witnessed cruelties and sadistic behavior of the most bestial kind. But this is what it was, the behavior of beasts, not men. These creatures had the shape of men, but they could not be

classified by any stretch of the imagination as human beings. On the other hand, I saw time and time again acts of human kindness, compassion, understanding, and self-sacrifice. My life was saved by the selfless courage and quiet compassion of several persons. These were simple people with no other goal than that of seeing life preserved. How many times have I seen that one or more of the prisoners would shield or protect, if at all possible, another one who was in somewhat worse condition, even if it meant a rain of painful blows on their martyred bodies? And what about those who quietly shared their meager food rations with those dying of starvation? Of course there were the human hyenas who stole bread from the weak. But they did not count; what counted were the men who lived up to their name, who were living (if not for long) proof that we retained our human dignity, in spite of all the Nazi efforts to dehumanize us. This is the ultimate victory, that even those in death enjoyed over their oppressors: the victims remained human.

I have come out of all this without hatred; I do not hate the Germans. I just feel a terrible loss, an endless pain for all the people, for all the children, for all the suffering, for all the terrible waste, for all the full lives that could have been and never were. And I feel a great compassion for my people, for all the tortured Jews of my and all the other generations, whose only offense is that they attempted to live, whose mere existence aroused the violence of the barbarians throughout the ages. I feel very proud of my people, not because they got Nobel Prizes or scholarships to Harvard, but because our ethos, our culture, our Law does not permit such killing, such sadism, such barbarism.

We have survived not because of our might or physical prowess but because of our Law. I wonder whether all this has been in vain. Will we, through our own negligence, dissipate our heritage and lose the identity that so many have died for?

Will our self-indulgent youth, so intent on doing “their thing,” drift away from K’lal Yisroel, collective Jewry, because, in their shallowness, they consider the values which have kept us alive old-fashioned? I have learned that one cannot continue for very long by being self-centered. I hope that the next generation, rather than contemplating their own navels, will reach out to others, to try to reach a universal understanding and bring an end to the nightmares of our age.