

Chapters of Remembrance

*The Memoirs of
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Volume I: 1905-1945

Translated from the Yiddish by
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Translator's note

I found the typescript of my father's memoirs, with corrections written in by hand, among his effects shortly after he died. I began the translation of the first three chapters -- up to the outbreak of World War II -- soon thereafter, but for various personal reasons I did not feel up to continuing with the project for about a dozen years. I have now completed the following three chapters, covering the war period and its immediate aftermath.

I have tried to be as faithful as possible to my father's style, and the English used is an approximation to how he spoke the language. My only contributions to the text are a few scattered clarifications set in brackets []

1. Childhood

The road grows ever narrower, but the burden of memories grows ever heavier. It is true that as we age we become subjects of the Prince of Oblivion, and many times we don't remember what we did a minute before. But that Prince's dominion does not hold sway over the memories that we took in as children. Not in vain did the Sages assure us that what is learned in youth is not forgotten.¹

And not only what is learned, but also events and experiences of the time are photographed by the inner camera, and the snapshots lie scattered in the attic of the mind. With a little dusting and sorting, they appear before us in all their freshness, as though what they show had happened just a short time ago.

Into our memory have crept in various natural landscapes that we would encounter daily and become closely acquainted with, just as we remember exactly the living gallery of family members and friends to whom we were attached and who, each according to his measure, helped form our character.

Numerous facts and personages demand to be remembered to the growing generation, a "generation that knew not Joseph";² according to the commentary of Rashi, that generation refused to acknowledge that there had been a Joseph. Just as in those days the refusal caused alienation and hostility towards us on the part of the Egyptians, so in our days it causes conflict and alienation in many Jewish families. The problem is that not only will the previous generations, and the past in general, become unknown, but a cult is made of not knowing, so that ignorance becomes a matter of pride!

Who wants to know about the unique Jewish life style of long ago? About the warmth and devotion in the family, about the beauty and symbolism of customs that embellished generation!

In my childhood, knowledge – any kind of knowledge – was a matter of status. People were greatly honored for learning and knowledge. Sometimes the respect was exaggerated; scholars received too much attention, at the expense of plain, honest, virtuous folk. Remarkably, such was the custom even among Hasidim, in contradiction to the basic principles on which Hasidism is built, since its founders regularly stressed that honesty and virtue are more important than knowledge, and human qualities are higher than learning!

From a purely didactic point of view, however, this attitude had a positive influence on the young, stimulating them to learn more and more in order to avoid being lumped with those who were more tolerated than respected. And it should be added that in a small town such as Maleniec learning was no easy matter.

We will yet have occasion to talk of the local "institutions of learning." For now let us go back to the days when the world was seen with different eyes. That world has not only changed its face, but its very foundations, physical and spiritual, have been shaken up.

¹Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat

²Exodus, 1, 8

States and borders – whole empires – have been swept up by various deluges. The greatest and grimmest destruction in our history happened during the Second World War, when thousands of Jewish communities and settlements, rooted for many generations, were wiped out with the greatest cruelty. Millions of our parents, brothers and sisters, spouses and children were tortured and killed with the most indescribably terrifying means – all of it planned and executed by whole cadres of Nazi sadists, the greatest trained murderers in human history!

Yes, today's world is altogether different. The new technological achievements outstrip those days' fantasies about the future, as described by the French writer Jules Verne. But what did Ecclesiastes say? "And the earth standeth forever." Nature per se does not change, it remains almost the same. And the more genuine and wild, the more appealing and beautiful it is.

I don't remember exactly when the sense for natural beauty first awoke in me in that place where I spent my first years of childhood, Maleniec, more village than town. It was probably in my earliest years. Though we left the village when I was a little boy, I remember exactly how enchanted I was by the picturesque scenery that surrounded the place.

To the east there was a large, dark-green wood, with all kinds of trees, young and old, of different species. Every little breeze made them stir and quake. Some of the trees could be seen through the window of the synagogue. More than once I thought that the trees were shaking in prayer like the people deadening inside.

What drew attention to the south was a wide, blue, crystal-clear river, an attraction for good swimmers, since it occasionally flowed in stormy waves. On the west there was a golden, sandy hill, crowned with a sparse patch of slender little trees that looked like a small *yarmulke* on a sandy-haired head. Not far from the hill there snaked its way a narrow, sparkling stream, and next to it a grove of birch trees. We would bathe there, too.

To the north there stretched rows of fields and gardens, which added even more color to the already colorful landscape. Although those fields were open and free spaces, rarely did we walk through them. For one thing, they lacked the powerful attraction of the mysterious, secretive woods, full of fear and danger, whose shade sheltered dangerous creatures, two- and four-legged. For another thing, we felt, without consciously thinking about it, that the fields belonged exclusively to non-Jews, while the woods were public property.

Then we heard tales that the woods were used by dangerous bandits, who hid out in the darkness of the night and who would sneak out to attack passing travelers, robbing them of all their belongings. (Shooting the victims, as is today's "custom," was almost unheard of – the world was not yet civilized enough.)

I still remember that when my father *z. l.* [of blessed memory] once took me on a short trip, my young, quivering heart began to beat faster when we passed a wood and it grew dark. I whispered a little prayer, a kind of *tefilat haderekh*. When we left the wooded region safely I began to breathe more freely.

In general, I could not tolerate darkness; I had a hard time falling asleep in a dark room. I could not understand that one could not see with one's eyes open!

Regardless of the fear that woods cast on everyone, we children were never afraid of "our own" wood, which was always hospitable to us. We would play there at different times and in different places, which we called by specific names according to their topographic position. We would go there to gather mushrooms and to pick berries and flowers. The uniformed and armed forest guards were also largely friendly to us.

Going to the woods was not our only recreation. Another pleasant “sport” was driving a horse. If a friendly teamster were to let me take the reins and drive on my own in specific direction, if only for a short time, that would already be an achievement.

It was mentioned earlier that the fields in our community belonged to non-Jews. The population of Maleniec was “mixed,” composing both Jews and non-Jews. Jews managed the several metal plants, where the great majority of the workers was non-Jewish. I don’t recall any ethnic conflicts. If a non-Jew were to call a Jew by an epithet, it would be at the instruction of another Jew. I remember, for example, that one Jew, named Moyshe Bunim, was called *Tekiah*, because he liked to serve as cantor and to blow the shofar.

There was no church in Maleniec. In contrast, the Jews had a large synagogue with many holy books, a women’s *shul*, as well as a *mikveh* and a sweatbath. There was no rabbi, only a *dayan* who was also a teacher. Neither did Maleniec have a cemetery; when someone died he was taken to burial in the nearest town, Żornów, which was also the residence of the doctor who would come to Maleniec when needed. This doctor, though a convert to Christianity, was on most friendly terms with his former coreligionists. Patients who were not too seriously ill were attended by Berl the barber-surgeon, whose good-natured face was framed by a trim gray beard. We would make fun of the Latin words that he used when prescribing some medicine. He must also have been quick in his prayers, for he was always among the first to leave the synagogue after Sabbath or holiday services.

I cannot recall when I began studying or reading. I must have been very young, because I was made fun of when trying to repeat the Pentateuch verses that I probably heard from my noble older brother Fishl *z. l.*, the kindest and gentlest member of our family. I must have mixed up words and not yet known how to pronounce them correctly.

Since childhood I have looked at books with a special curiosity. When I knew how to read, it gave me great pleasure to open a book and look at it, and when I understood something I was overjoyed. My interest in books became even stronger when my brother-in-law, the sainted Yaakov Bobrowski *z. l.* from Wieluń, came to visit us to “eat *kest*.” He brought with him books that I had not seen in our bookcase; among the books that were new to me I found *Shem Hag’dolim*, a biographic-bibliographic lexicon by Rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulay *z. l.*, known as *Hida*, the famous scholar, kabbalist, and author of more than 80 books in diverse areas.

(The aforementioned brother-in-law was the husband of our oldest sister, Gitl Faygl *z. l.*, a charming, sensitive, and very honest woman, as well as a wonderful housewife. Her clean, beautifully appointed home in Wieluń was warm and hospitable in a truly Jewish way. Her husband was somewhat of a scholar, an intelligent, modest and sensitive man who also read secular books in Hebrew translation. Both were deported from Piotrków by the Nazi murderers and killed in Treblinka, according to eyewitnesses, on the eleventh of Heshvan 1942).

Reading about the life and works of our former great figures, spiritual giants, and the critical appreciation of their creations and activities by the author, a many-sided scholar who had traveled to so many cities and countries, visiting important libraries and meeting great scholars and scientists, kept me in suspense and stimulated my youthful imagination. And if that were not enough, the book was bound together with *Shem Hag’dolim Hehadash*, another biographic-bibliographic book by Reb Aharon Walden *z. l.*, a scholar and bibliographer who continued the work of *Hida*, writing about the rabbis and Tzaddikim of later generations. The author himself was said to be a Hasid of Kock, and he writes about the leaders of Hasidism with love and enthusiasm. ®. Aharon Walden *z. l.* died in 1912).

I don't need to expand on the importance of such a book for someone who was born in Maleniec, where Hasidism was an integral part of local Jewish life; for me, the descriptions of the greatness and holiness of the founders of the Hasidic movement and their successors were as water for the thirsty. It is interesting that I did not share this with anyone, perhaps because my Heder-mates did not read on their own.

Speaking of the Heder and thinking, in retrospect, about my earliest education, I must say that I have in general no bad memories of the Heder. It may be because I never had as a teacher the beginners' *melamed* named Israel Leibush. He was said to be a good person, but, as people have told me, he was the embodiment of the physical and mental *shlemazel*. The name Israel Leibush was used as a synonym for *shlemazel*.

My first rebbe in the heder was Reb Yehiel Meir Grinberg *z. l.* As I can appreciate now, he must have been somewhat infected with the *Haskalah*. According to what I have heard, he read Hebrew magazines and German newspapers. He was said sometimes to get "off balance" and go a little crazy. My father *z. l.* told me that he [Reb Yehiel] once went around the town, crying out in a loud voice, in Hebrew, "the town of Maleniec and its surroundings have become shameful and degraded," a paraphrase of the text of the well-known *selihah* that begins *em z'khor b'rit Avraham*, and going on to decry the spiritual decline of Jews of Maleniec after the death of Reb Yehiel Fishl Levin (the son of the well-known rebbe Henikh of Aleksandrów) and of his son, the noble Reb Pinhas Yaakov, father of the famous Reb Hersh Henikh, lover of Israel and rabbi in Będzin, and of the born aristocracy of the noble soul, Reb Bunim Levin of Łódź, all of them of blessed memory.

There were also other *melamdim* with whom I didn't study; what I saw or heard about in relation to their "methods of instruction" shocked me and I prefer not to talk about them. An altogether different type of *melamed*, however, is worth mentioning: Reb Itshe Meir Birnstock *z. l.* He taught only adults, even those about to be married; he was not only a very learned but also a virtuous man; his warmth and kindness radiated from his bright face. I cannot imagine that he ever, in his whole life, got angry with anyone. Nor did he ever utter an unnecessary word. Being endowed with a beautiful, sweet voice, he could not refuse the demand of the congregation that he lead the *musaf* service during the High Holidays. Our brother Fishl *z. l.* was in his choir. His earthly pleasures consisted of an occasional pinch of snuff and once in a while a well-sweetened glass of tea. Whoever saw him drinking tea could notice that he was thanking the creator for every pleasurable sip.

How I, young as I was, came to his house and was able to observe him for a fairly long time, is still a riddle for me. Did I, perhaps, accompany my elder brother Fishl *z. l.*? I don't remember. What I do remember is that when I was seven or eight years old I was already impressed by the local learned men by means of their conduct and good qualities, by their cleverness and wit. It must not be forgotten that they were all self-taught men who could read several languages and write very well, and who held office jobs in the factories, some of them as bookkeepers. As my father *z. l.* told me (as I mentioned, he was the primary source of my knowledge about the "early times" of Maleniec), some of them read *Hatsefirah* and other newspapers and magazines.

Officially Maleniec was considered a village, but the Jewish way life was on the same level as in larger cities. There were frequent visits by respected rabbis, *meshulachim* (religious representatives) and other important people from the whole country, not to mention Hasidic activists, who felt right at home there. The name of Maleniec became known not only through its

factories, where iron ingots were refined and turned into useful tools that were shipped (by rail, from nearby Kinck) to cities near and far, throughout Poland, but also through the people who developed the place and put their personal imprint upon it.

Reb Leybl Levin *z. l.*, a well-known writer and former editor of *Hamodi'a* in Jerusalem, whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers came from Maleniec, reports (in the book *Y'khahen P'er* about his grandfather, the great Będzin rabbi Reb Hersh Henikh) several historic details about how Maleniec came to be “judaized.” According to him, it had once been a neglected little village with a few broken-down houses that had belonged to Ruda Maleniecka, the residence of its owners. When the rich Jewish woman Tomrel from Warsaw, a well-known philanthropist and the mother of the famous Bergson family, bought out Ruda and all of its surroundings, the area began to change. Tomrel became famous through her philanthropic activities; she supported Hasidim and Hasidic leaders. Among the bookkeepers of Ruda were said to have been the famous Hasidic rebbes, Reb Bunim of Pszyscha and later Reb Yitzhak Worker, of blessed memory.

Later, Tomrel sold the properties to a Polish landowner named Jankowski. This landowner then sold (or leased?) the village of Maleniec to our great-grandfather Reb Hersh Kozłowski *z. l.* of Pszyscha, who was called Reb Hersh Poritz [landowner], because he was an owner of other properties as well (as I have heard, one of his properties was called Kozłowiec and this gave rise to the name Kozłowski). After Reb Hersh visited the village he had just bought, where there was, as I have already said, a large river with many woods around it, he decided to establish factories there and to enlarge the population with Jews. He soon brought in heavy machinery for the fabrication of various iron products. When he formed a *shiddukh* [marriage relation] with the family of Rabbi Henikh of Aleksandrów and took the latter's son, Reb Yehiel Fishl *z. l.* as his son-in-law and the husband of his brilliant daughter Leah *a. h.* [may peace be upon her], he gave the new village as dowry.

Reb Yehiel Fishl was not only a learned man and a Hasidic activist but a good businessman, and he used his talent and energy to develop the factories and to give employment to ever more of the Jewish inhabitants. More houses were built, and friends, relations and just plain Jews seeking a living were invited to settle there, and Maleniec began to be a prosperous Hasidic colony.

Not only Reb Yehiel Fishl, but also his helpmeet, the aforementioned Leah (the sister of my grandfather Reb Fishl *z. l.*) came from Hasidic and rabbinical family. Her father, Reb Hersh Poritz, was the son-in-law of Rabbi Yankele of Brzezin, a son of Rabbi Fischele of Stryków, of whom more will be written. Reb Hersh stood out for his generosity and his kind-hearted support of the needy. In this he was helped by our kind great-grandmother Feygele *a. h.* Aside from his philanthropic activity, Reb Hersh acted as intercessor with the authorities and with the landowners, trying to save Jews from various dangers. In his private life he was very energetic and alert. Our father *z. l.*, for whom helping and interceding in behalf of Jews was second nature, used to give us an instructive account of how Reb Hersh behaved in his rescue work: Once, in a village near Pszyscha, a Jew was sentenced to die. Because of his wide-ranging connections with government officials and employees, Reb Hersh found out about it and quickly ordered his coach and horses and went on his way there, driving at great speed to the place where sentence was to be carried out. As he was approaching he saw from afar that a Jew was being led to the gallows. He quickly leaped out and began waving a white cloth. Since he was known to be an important

personage, the execution was stopped. Then he went to see the appropriate authorities and used his influence to have the sentence commuted.

When he came home, the sexton of the Pszyscha congregation was waiting for him with an invitation to come to the rabbi's house for an urgent meeting; it was concerned with saving the life of a Jew from a nearby village. Reading the invitation, Reb Hersh realized that it was the same Jew on whose behalf he had already acted. He is said to have remarked that if they had waited for the conclusion of the meeting, the Jew would no longer be alive! If you want to save someone, he added, you must begin to act immediately and not think about how to help – it may be too late. This had served as good advice for our father in his communal work and his intercession activity.

The daughter of Reb Hersh and Grandmother Feygele, Leah, continued the generosity and kindness of her parents in Maleniec; she set up a special, large kitchen for guests and any Jews who might be passing through. She gave them food and drink, and she hired people to mend their clothes and shoes. Every guest was given food for his voyage and a handsome money gift as well.

With her good deeds, Aunt Leah (as my mother *z. l.* called her) pointed the way for most of the family, just as her great-grandfather, Rabbi Fischele of Stryków, had pointed the way for her, giving all he had to the poor.

Rabbi Fischele, who was also the great-grandfather of our grandfather Reb Fishl Kozłowski *z. l.* (who died young), was the son of a well-known rabbi in Ukraine, Reb Yosef Yehuda of Balta.

Both of them used to visit Rabbi Ber, the great Maggid of Mezerych, one of the first leaders of Hasidism. Later, Reb Fischele would also visit the well-known kabbalist Reb Azriel Maizlish of Ryczewol and Reb Melech of Lyzensk. He is also said to have been with the Seer of Lublin (Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak Horwitz) and the Holy Yehudi (Reb Yaakov Yitzhak Rabinowitz), of blessed memory. For an unknown reason he was forced to leave Ukraine and moved to Poland. According to some writers he was sent to Poland by his father so that he might absorb the scholarly and Hasidic atmosphere there. He married in Brzezín and settled in Stryków.

He became known for his holiness and simplicity. Great Hasidic leaders would visit him and give him great honors; also, thousands of Jews came to him to ask for advice and receive his blessing. People would give him money and gifts, but he immediately gave them away. He was totally unaware of the significance of money, he measured it only by the joy it gave to the needy person to whom he would give it. His own life was penurious; he lived in a small, squalid dwelling with almost no furniture. He believed in the goodness of everyone and did not want to hear about people's misdeeds; that they must have been forced into them, he argued with his true simplicity, and could not believe that a Jew could sin with malice aforethought.

A great rabbi once said that in order to be simple one must have great wisdom... Reb Fishl must indeed have been a very wise man, if among his followers was the aforementioned Reb Bunim of Pszyscha, who, aside from being a licensed pharmacist, was the most profound thinker of Hasidism and also famous for his keen and witty mind (he was called "the wise man among the rabbis"). Rabbi Fischele's son, Reb Yankele of Brzezín, was also a modest and reticent man, truly humble in his ways. After his father died he did not consider himself worth of occupying his place; when he was ill and suffering (being a sickly man), he never complained.

His grandchildren were an important part of the inhabitants of Maleniec. Of course there were other families as well, almost all of them good and kind people, and observant Jews. I still remember well some those plain Jews and should write about them. But I will only mention those who had engraved themselves in my memory, though may have been quite different in their external appearance, their knowledge and their mentality. Let me begin with one who visited us occasionally, because he was a close neighbor, a cabinetmaker named Moshe Figielski. Very few people knew his family name, because he generally known as Moshe Stolarz [cabinetmaker]. He was a dear, good-natured Jew with a black beard sprinkled with a few silvery hairs, long eyebrows and clear features. On his upper forehead one could occasionally see slices of raw potato peeking out from a kerchief that he wore around his head – a remedy for his frequent headaches (he was not a great believer in medicine).

On weekdays he was busy with cabinetmaking, but on Sabbath and holidays he studied the Humash, Avot or Midrash, told parables repeated sayings. By his speaking style and his way of interpreting and explaining, all in a clear, flowing language, sometimes humming a niggun, he might have been a maggid or a preacher who could attract a great public. But he never complained, and was always contented with his lot. He knew his trade well and must have been a good cabinetmaker. For his sons, also cabinetmakers, Maleniec was already too small. They moved to Łódź, where they found better working conditions, and would come home on holidays, already decked out in “European” clothes.

They were not the only ones. Other craftsmen of the younger generation also went to Łódź, where they received training in their craft and began to better their incomes. They, too, would come home in modern clothes. And some of the younger craftsmen who did not move away also began to dress well. Among them I remember Avrehmele the son of Moshe Yaakov, a tailor with a sharp tongue who loved to argue about different issues, and Leybush, a shoemaker, a mute of great physical strength. Avrehmele’s father, Moshe Yaakov, also a talkative man, was the sexton, a man of medium build with a yellow beard. He was the announcer at all public functions, and even the deaf could hear him. In great contrast to him was another sexton, Shabsay, a tall, thin man whose words could barely be heard. A quiet and modest man was Avraham Schneider, the tailor who made most of the Jews’ clothes.

There were two bakers whom I remember: Shmuel Baecker, at whose place we used to put up cholent and who was one of the psalm sayers at the synagogue, and the red-bearded Yosele Baecker, in whose bakery matzah was made. I remember how every year our mother prepared snacks for the workers employed in baking matzah.

An altogether different type was represented by Yonah the water carrier, a small, emaciated man whose face look somewhat crooked, and was covered with a small gray beard. He gave the impression as though he had been born gray. He always walked slowly, even when he was not carrying any water.

We never questioned how that broken-down weak old man, who could hardly walk or see, could carry the heavy water buckets on his bent and emaciated back. It was especially difficult for us to understand how he could carry water during a freezing winter, when the sandy ground was covered with ice and it is easy to slip and fall! Just as we could not understand how he, Yonah, could remember exactly when and how much water to bring to each one, even though was not, in general, a very knowledgeable person, as we could tell from his praying... And pray he did in a high, squeaky voice.

Since he had no children, he had determined, together with his wife Tsirel, to save money by abstaining from eating, and by putting away penny after penny to order the writing of a Torah scroll to be donated in his name to the Synagogue.

After many years of heavy labor he managed to save a certain sum of money. Being afraid to keep the money in their wretched house, they decided to lend it to a rich man. They soon found their man: a Jew named Moshe Hayim who was considered to be a rich man. The upshot was that this man went bankrupt, and Yonah and his wife, seeing that their lifelong dream of leaving behind a spiritual child in the form of a Torah scroll had come to naught, underwent a physical and mental breakdown for a period of time. But Yonah did not give up! Some time went by, and Yonah, sick and half-blind, as well as his wife Tsirel, who had always been thin and weak and now was feeling all her strength gradually leaving her, would not accept the idea that they would leave the world without a spiritual heir! And once again they began to save their money until they reached their goal of ordering the writing of a Torah scroll, which was brought into the Synagogue amid dancing and singing. Yonah and Tsirel's joy was indescribable – their old dream had become reality! The whole town shared in their joy.

An “original” occupation for a Jew in those days was held by Mendel Kolberg. He lived not far from our house, so that I still remember him and his family.

He was a tall, massive man, with a typically Jewish face. Every day except for the Sabbath and Jewish and Gentile holidays he would walk a distance of several miles to Ruda Maleniecka, where the post office was, to send off and pick up the mail for the Jews of Maleniec. What still amazes me even today is how this bearded Jew, in his long black caftan, was not afraid to walk alone for such a long way, where not a Jew was to be seen. And he did this summer and winter. I also don't know who paid him for his work. What I do know is he and his family lived quite decently.

There were, of course, other simple and decent Jews, such as Zisl the teamster, a good man who had a lot of patience not only with people but with his horses as well. But I don't remember sufficiently any details that made an impression on me. I don't even remember any particulars about the slaughterer of Maleniec, Reb Hayim Isaac Wagman, who was also the mohel. I remember only that his son Avraham was a very good swimmer.

Of course, I also remember people who impressed me strongly, such as our uncle, Reb Leybele Kozłowski *z. l.*, a small man with a high back, but a wise and learned one; people would listen with pleasure when he would tell Hasidic stories, repeat rabbinical teachings, or discussed worldly news. He would speak in a slow, restrained manner. On holidays he would softly hum a *niggun* or another tune, pleasantly and with feeling. He was one of the factory bookkeepers, and also wrote Hebrew beautifully.

His wife, our aunt Sheydl Lotse *a. h.* (our mother's half-sister from the same father), a granddaughter of the Holy Jew and of Rabbi Shmelke of Nickelsburg, was not a great believer in convention. She was famous for spoiling her grandchildren and always defending them. She would also quote sayings by rabbis, such as “Good coffee tastes better than pious coffee.”

I also remember very well the excellent Torah reader at the Synagogue, Reb Yantshe Krieger *z. l.* At that time I was still ignorant of Hebrew grammar and of the tropes; but I somehow felt that each word was accented just right. Reb Yantshe (probably formed from Yaakov) gave, with his appearance and his manners, the appearance of an aristocrat. But this could not be said of his simple, folksy wife Sorel, who was far from such manners – a simple but

good woman who greatly honored her husband. Their son, Avrehmele, was well known for his jokes and sayings.

I also remember two men, very different in their personality and conduct, who had the same worry – the worry about making a living. According to what I heard at home, they complained heavily, though outwardly they gave the impression of being well to do. They were Yehiel Kirschenbaum and Mordechai Landstein, both from well-established and well-regarded families. And speaking of well-regarded, one should also recall Reb Yosl Pinczewski, a scholarly but very poor Jew, who would not accept anybody's generosity, not even that of our family, to whom he was very devoted. If anything unpleasant should ever happen in our house, he would be among the first to come in order to help; but rarely would he accept a simple invitation to come on a Sabbath or holiday, though he was a widower (twice around) and had to take care of the children by himself. I was once at his house and saw him eat hard black bread and drink cold water. I could not understand it, because he never complained and was always in a good mood. By his second wife he had five children. One of them was a physically well-developed boy with a love and understanding of mechanical work; his dream was to become an automobile driver. He was called Avraham "Poyer" [peasant], because he didn't want to study, claiming that he didn't have the head for it. His older brother Yankl, who later lived in Piotrków, was a fine young man, a Torah scholar and active in community affairs. Reb Yosl also was in Piotrków, among the scholars and the Gerer Hasidim [followers of the Rebbe of Ger or Góra Kalwaria].

His eldest daughter by his first wife, Miriam, lived in an attic of a house in which we had once lived; she was also an honorable woman who went hungry with her husband and children. Our mother *z. l.* would occasionally bring her something, taking care that no one knew about it.

As can be seen, not all the Jews of Maleniec lived comfortably, but the great majority were content with their quiet Jewish life in a place that was far from the noise of the larger cities and was on the byways of Poland, but was known among the Jews.

The great genius and sage, the world-famous Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z. ts. l.* [of righteous blessed memory], whose secretary I was privileged to be during the first years of his rabbinate in Piotrków, once happened to see my passport (when I had just returned from Berlin) in which were to be found the names of Maleniec and Berlin, and remarked that between those two "residences" there had been no intermediate stations.

But the peace and quiet of that first residence came to an end with the outbreak of World War I.

As I have said, people read newspapers there, and we knew about world affairs. The community was shaken up when an order was issued mobilizing all who had once served in the Russian army. I remember seeing the assembly in front of the "Magazin" [armory], and among those who were mobilized was also Hayim Yankl, a Hasidic Jew with a thick, curly, already partly gray beard, a father of grown children. When we later saw him in an ill-fitting military uniform, he looked comical and bedraggled.

In the Synagogue and in the street, groups of people would debate the news coming from the battlefields of the various fronts. Sides were taken; some were for Russia and others (something that we cannot imagine today) for Germany. I understood very little then of war and politics, and I wasn't even curious to eavesdrop on the discussions. Nor did I ask any questions about it of Bunim Schein (a maternal grandson of Reb Yehiel Fishl), who for me was an authority in a lot of matters. I also don't remember a food shortage in the first period of the war.

Only much later did the war begin to interest me, and this was at a time when there were battle positions not far from us; the thunder of cannons and the echoing of machine guns put fear into all of us.

During the war, almost all communications in the country were disrupted. Civilians could rarely travel by railroad. Our father *z. l.*, a lumber and hardware wholesaler who had traveled to many cities, could not even visit his customers; in effect all business transactions had stopped.

Our saintly mother *a. h.*, the unforgettable martyr, a true partner and devoted life companion to her husband, decided to help with earning a living. The good soul of the family, Fishl *z. l.*, though still a young boy but tall and slender, went on the road. If in normal times it can be said that “all roads are potentially dangerous” (Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 4), one can imagine how dangerous they were in wartime. He went to Konck, from where he brought a sack of flour. How he bought it and from whom, I still don’t know; I only know that it was his first trip on his own. Our mother, a first-rate housekeeper, began to bake beautiful and tasty hallahs that were sold to Russian military men who were stationed in our area. I think that once they took some hallahs without paying for them.

And, speaking of the conduct of the Russian military, I cannot forget a tragic and horrible event that happened during their stay in Maleniec, an event that shook us up and made us tremble.

We have already mentioned that relations Jews and non-Jews in Maleniec were not bad. The sermons of priests whom some of the inhabitants might hear in the neighboring town, or the anti-Semitic propaganda and boycott actions led by the likes of Roman Dmowski did not, in general, reach many Polish towns with Jewish populations and barely had any significant influence in everyday life. But there was a great difference between Warsaw, where Dmowski and other sworn Jew-haters fabricated their lies and libels, and smaller towns! There were no “media” yet.

Here and there one might hear a scornful word against the Jews from an angry gentile. In general Jews lived in peace with their non-Jewish neighbors, especially when the neighbors lived in “their” area, neither too close nor too far, as was the case in Maleniec.

Of course there were individuals who carried a hidden hatred of Jews, mainly for economic motives. One of these individuals was a Polish butcher and owner of a tavern located not far from a Jewish grocery store that belonged to Reb Henikh Kozłowski *z. l.*, a cousin of ours. He, along with his industrious wife, Rivka *a. h.*, were capable in business and very successful, provoking the envy of their non-Jewish neighbor. Though he was outwardly friendly with the Kozłowskis, he did not cease to envy them; and envy, as we all know, causes hatred, while hatred, the more it is held in, the more thirsty it is for revenge.

The “friendly” neighbor had probably long been looking for an opportunity of avenging himself on his prosperous Jewish neighbor in a “secret” manner. Such an opportunity presented itself when hordes of Russian soldiers and officers flooded Maleniec. Where does a Russian officer go when he comes to a new place? To a tavern. So that is where the officers gathered to get drunk, as is their habit. The tavern keeper did not stint on drinks, filling their empty glasses while casually talking about his Jewish neighbor and quoting words that he had supposedly heard him say, namely, that when the Germans came, Russian flesh would be cut like sausage...

This was enough for the Russian officers to stamp that Jew as a German spy, and they reported this to their commander, who immediately decided to set the arrogant Jew before a

court-martial, and no sooner said than done. A search for Reb Henikh was soon begun, and he was not found.

On a gray and cloudy Sabbath morning, there suddenly arose cries and weeping: Jews were being pulled out of their houses assembled in a square (scenes that we still remember from the “Actions” of the bloody Nazi period and that still chill the blood when we think about them).

The Russian commander, surrounded by officers and soldiers, turned to the assembly with the following warning: if the spy Kozłowski is not immediately brought here, you will all be shot in the forest nearby!

Our father *z. l.*, in his Sabbath best, like most of the gathering, and speaking in fluent Russian, asked to be allowed to say a few words as the official representative of the Jewish population (*dozor*). Among other things he said that as one who had sworn loyalty to the Russian empire (as all *dozors* had to do), he could guarantee that neither Kozłowski nor any other Jew had used such words. The commander interrupted him, asking him: if you are so loyal, why don't you help us find the spy? Our father *z. l.* tried to speak further, insisting on Kozłowski's absolute innocence, whom he knew well and of whom he was sure that he would never use such words! Once again the commander silenced him and gave him and the assembled a final warning that if the spy is not given over, they would all be killed.

Someone probably told Reb Henikh about what was happening, and in the midst of the panic and deadly fear reigning among the assembled, the “spy” suddenly arrived and presented himself: I am Kozłowski. He was immediately taken aside and the other Jews dispersed. What procedure was followed later is not known. But people saw him being led into the woods, tied to a tree and shot dead. This horrifying news soon spread among the Jews and sunk them into deep mourning. Especially broken up was his immediate family, his wife, his only son Moishle, his sisters and brothers and his mother, our aforementioned aunt Sheyndl Lotse *a. h.*

That tragic incident completely threw me, a young boy, off balance; I began to think about it day and night. The question of life and death, which tortures young minds, took on concrete forms. I also found it hard to conceive how evil people could murder an innocent person through wickedness and falsehood. After all, we all knew Reb Henikh well and knew that this had been a blood libel; the words about cutting human flesh like sausage had been invented by a gentile butcher. Reb Henikh, an observant and God-fearing Jew, in general talked very little and never used such expressions!

Needless to say, from that day the forest lost its charm and power of attraction. Our feet never again trod its ground, which had absorbed innocent Jewish blood.

I don't remember exactly what happened later. I heard that his nearest relatives and friends took care of the martyr's body and brought it to burial in Żornów.

From that day on, the Jews of Maleniec lived in terror, fearing the cruelty of the Russians and the hypocrisy of many Poles. The constant sound of shots only reinforced the fear. We wanted to escape, if only for a while, from a place that seemed ready for violence. The question was, where to escape to? Our father *z. l.*, who had probably consulted the family, decided to move for the time being to Żornów.

We quickly packed a few things and went there. We settled in two places: a part of the family slept in the house of a former maid of ours. In her house she had a laundry mangle, which served as a partition between the part where she lived and the part where we spent nights. I went to sleep with father *z. l.* at the house the Żornów rabbi, Rabbi Gottschalk *z. l.*, who gave us a room, though his house was not too large. I still remember how cold and frosty it was at night if

one stuck a hand or foot out from under the covers. What we had to eat almost every day were potatoes, but we didn't complain; on the contrary, we joked about that food.

Our father *z. l.*, being a *dozor* of the whole region, even took part in public activities there.

In my memory I still have engraved how the streets were inspected by Russian gendarmes who did not spare blows of the whip to a Jewish homeowner whom they didn't like.

I don't know exactly how long we stayed in Żornów and I don't remember any details of our stay in that town, which, though in comparison with Maleniec it seemed like a city, did not much impress me and I wasn't sorry about our return, not considering the fact that we felt somewhat safer there after the tragic event in Maleniec.

When we returned to Maleniec the exchanges of fire between the Russians and the Germans had intensified even more. We felt that the front was getting ever closer. In the meantime news reports were arriving about the great defeats of the Russians on several fronts. We saw in that a finger of God, a well-earned punishment for their murderous deeds and for their cold-blooded shooting of an innocent man such as Reb Henikh Kozłowski had been. We waited impatiently to be rid of the Russian murderers.

It didn't take long before we saw the first uniformed Germans, who were continuously shooting at the fleeing Russians.

The Germans did indeed, in a short time, chase the Russian army from the entire region, but they could not chase away the gnawing pain and sorrow provoked by the senseless murder of a person as close as Reb Henikh. Even when the sun began to shine again, after the dull cloudy days, it could not expel the depression in our hearts or cheer up our downcast spirits. On the contrary, we often questioned the beauty of nature, as if it were teasing us and didn't want to share in our pain! The memories of that black Sabbath pressed on us; the image of Reb Henikh, shot and bleeding, tied to a tree in "our" forest, stood before our eyes and dominated all our thoughts.

Who could imagine then that in comparison with the studied and sadistic mass murderers of the Second World War – the German Nazi beasts – the gangsterlike Russian officers had behaved like humanists!

As has been said, splendid sunny days had arrived; a cloudless sky was reflected in the great, clear, sparkling river; a light, refreshing breeze spread an intoxicating aroma of flowering fields and gardens.

On one of those days there occurred another black Sabbath, this time provoked not by people but by beautiful Mother Nature herself... We never knew the reason, but perhaps those lovely breezes had a great part in the great fire that suddenly broke out.

Huge, spreading tongues of fire began to lick the roofs of the houses, one after another, until almost the entire Jewish part of town had been changed into a bundle of flames, not even sparing the walls of the synagogue. As I was told, there didn't lack people who, when they heard that the synagogue was on fire, neglected their own homes and ran to save the Torah scrolls, jumping into the flames. However, as if to spite us, after all the fine days there began to blow a mean and stormy wind, joining forces with the destructive fire and making any rescue operation impossible.

Where the flames had first begun, people exerted themselves to save the contents of their houses. Our skilful and agile Fishl *z. l.* managed, with great dedication, to get whatever he could out of our house, even from the cellar!

But the fire kept getting stronger. The echoes of the falling houses and the collapsing chimneys still ring in my ears; it seemed to us then that it was like an outcry of pretest against the great evil that had been visited upon a unique Jewish community.

Something that appeared miraculous to us was the houses that the savage fire could not overcome, even though they were in the same vicinity, and some of them actually amid the burning houses; some of them had already begun to sink somewhat. I was as if the line “Who by fire” of the *Netaneh tokef* were applied to buildings...

The great majority of Jewish houses presented an aspect of a great inferno of fire, that raged so wildly that it was impossible even to try to put it out.

Exhausted and sweat-drenched people ran to the banks of the river to cool off from the suffocating heat. That is where all those who had suddenly become homeless gathered, sitting on their packs of bedclothes. Near the water they felt safer.

The great river seemed to have shrunk somewhat, as though to make more room for those who had just become homeless and miserable, who could not now find a place for themselves, though they had always had a place for others – Maleniec had always been known for hospitality!

It is superfluous to add that, because of the Sabbath, not much was taken from the houses, and most had come out of the fire with nothing.

How it was all planned and organized, I don't remember. I only remember that the next day – Sunday – we packed what little we had left and went on the way. Our goal was Piotrków, where we were not strangers. That was the residence of our grandmother Brokhe *a. h.*, who lived there with her husband, Reb Hershl Kimelman *z. l.*, whom she married when she was a widow. He was a son of the rabbi of Będzin, Reb Itshe Kimelman *z. l.*, and was a well-known *mohel* in Piotrków. Our grandmother was a great *baleboste* who managed a fine home. In the years before the war we would go to Piotrków to study in the *hadarim* there, especially Fishl *z. l.*, who became *bar-mitzvah* there. We will yet have an opportunity to write about the Jewish teachers of Piotrków.

When we left Maleniec, we were accompanied by the dumb looks of the skeletons of the houses that stuck out of the smoking ashes, in which there were still hissing, glowing coals.

Under such circumstances we were forced to bid farewell to a place that had for years been a part of our lives. A person is a reflection of the form of the place where he is born, says a well-known Hebrew poet. And that is where I first opened my eyes, where I gave my first cry; I breathed the clean air of the place from the time I was born, and absorbed the experiences, full of fantasy, of the warm and innocent world of childhood.

With heavy hearts we moved away from Maleniec, which we never again revisited, though there remained a partial Jewish community there after the fire. Jews still managed the factories, which were almost unaffected by the fire, and their engines were driven for the most part by the water of the river, which, by the way, also supplied many Jews – not only the local inhabitants – with fresh live fish for the Sabbath and holidays. (If my memory doesn't fail me, the name of that clear, transparent river was Czarna, which in Polish means black.)

The Jewish community would probably still be existing to this day, but what the fury of nature, in the form of the great fire, could not do to Maleniec, was done by the Nazi murderers, the greatest criminals in human history, who came from a “civilized” country called Germany; along with thousands of other flowering Jewish communities, Maleniec was, in the same cruel manner, wiped off the Jewish map of Poland.

On the way to Piotrków we passed many towns and villages. We were indifferent to the whole landscape; even the thick green forests and the beautiful scenery did not draw our attention. Our thoughts were occupied with the events of the past year, about which we did not stop thinking; all the horrifying scenes of wartime in Maleniec stood before our eyes, making us forget the previous happy and beautiful years of childhood.

As I have said, Maleniec was wiped off the Jewish map of Poland. On that map Maleniec was a tiny, barely noticeable dot; but for those who had lived there (about whom Talmud Sotah says, "a place is beautiful to those who live there")... And even for those who had gone there for a visit it had been a kind of Jewish metropolis, because of the unique style of Jewish life there and because of the urbanity of the inhabitants.

It turns out that it was not granted for Maleniec to have its own Memorial Volume, as have come out for hundreds upon hundreds of other cities, towns and communities. Rabbi Shmuel Zaynvil Żorski *z. l.* of Piotrków, a son-in-law of Reb Mendel Levin of Maleniec, began the task of editing of a book dedicated to the memory of Maleniec. He also asked me to participate in the work. I wrote an article in Hebrew and sent it to him, but in the meantime had become gravely ill and died.

Let the lines I have written about Maleniec be a sort of gravestone for such an original Jewish community!

There are still some survivors from Maleniec or their descendants in several countries, especially Israel.

Family names related to Maleniec and descending from Reb Fischele *z. ts. l.* of Stryków are: the Kozłowskis, the Levins (related to the Ger court), as well as some Shapiros and Bornsteins.

2. New Home

Like Russia, the great country on the fringe, so was also Poland, which had been ruled by Russia for many years, backward in technological achievements in comparison with other European countries. Communications and transportation were not well developed either; connections between cities were far from easy, railroad lines were limited and automobiles very rare. Transportation was especially complicated during the war.

Moving away from Maleniec was therefore a problem. But our energetic father *z.l.* found a reliable carter who could take the entire family, as well the goods that had been saved, on his carriage. The family consisted of five souls, because our eldest sister Gitl Feyge *a.h.*, along with her husband Yankl *z.l.*, had been invited for a visit to Wieluń, where his parents lived. Meanwhile the World War had broken out, so that they could not return.

Along the way we stayed at inns, in larger and smaller towns. As far as I can remember we were warmly received. Our father *z.l.* was known to people and was highly respected.

He came from a well-regarded family of some standing in Słomniki, a small town in Miechów district, Congress Poland, not far from the Austrian border, in the Kraków area. He was bright and a good Torah scholar, highly musical, an unusually good Torah reader and a tasteful prayer leader. He was deeply involved in Hasidism and was active in it since his youth, something that, of course, was reinforced after he settled in Hasidic Maleniec.

He was generally well liked, though his external appearance – always neat, with a tendency to elegance; through his sense of humor, his quick sense of orientation and his warmth and friendliness; through his ability to quote excerpts from the Sages or Hasidic sayings at the right opportunity. He was a strongly observant Jew and very strict with himself.

I don't know after whom he was named Simkha Oyzer. The family name, Lubliner, is said to derive from the fact that his great-grandfather Reb Feybl *z.l.* used to visit the Seer of Lublin, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak Horowitz *z.ts.l.*, and was therefore called the Lubliner.

By the way, this Reb Feybl was known as a charitable and hospitable man. He had the custom of personally caring for his Sabbath guests. In order that they might not have to think about how much their host would give them to take with them, he would give them gifts already on Friday.

As an established wholesale lumber and iron merchant, our father was connected with merchants in many cities, large and small, with whom he maintained a correspondence and where he would occasionally travel. But all his trips, near or far, were so calculated that he could return home for the Sabbath.

We can imagine the Sabbath atmosphere that reigned in our house; mother preparing the finest and the best to honor the Sabbath, and father emphasizing the holy and the joyful: the various Sabbath songs, the interpretation of the weekly Torah portion and the wisdom of S'fath Emeth. Then, besides studying Gemara, also Midrash and Zohar (in the summer also Pirkei Avot).

As has already been mentioned, he was the Parnas or Dozor of the town and was constantly interested in how to help people. In the later years, in Piotrków, he devoted a lot of time and hard work to public activity, which will be discussed later. His dedication and constant readiness to do a Jew a favor are indescribable! Indescribable is also the devotion, love and respect that he showed to our mother *a.h.* Of course it was a mutual relationship. She never

thought about herself; she could offer anyone the finest dishes, and hardly ever taste them herself. Not because she was on a diet...

She was orphaned of her father as a very young child and was brought up by several families, because her mother, a young widow, remarried and had three daughters by her second husband. Nevertheless not a trace of bitterness remained with her. She truly adored her mother and was very close and devoted to her half-sisters. When my father *z.l.* died and she remained alone, a clever Hasid in Piotrków remarked that she would always find a place because she didn't take up any space...

She also had a half-brother by her father, Reb Fishl Kozłowski *z.l.*, a fine man. I still remember Uncle Osher, a scholar and a warm-hearted, fun-loving Jew; Uncle Yehiel, an easy-going and intelligent Jew (his grandchildren are living in Israel, among them a doctor in Haifa who carries his name); I did not get to know Uncle Hirsch, nor his wife, Aunt Hana, but I did know their children; and Uncle Mendel, a tall Hasid (a grandson of his lives in America, and we exchange correspondence when there is a special occasion and on Rosh Hashanah).

By her father she also had a half-sister, Sheyndl-Lotse, about whom I have already written. She had one full brother, Yehoshua, a charming, pleasant and talented man who, however, was not successful in life so that he was always being taken in; he gave me a lot of pleasure with Hasidic sayings. And one full sister, Hinde *a.h.*, a splendid and successful person in every respect.

One gets to know people at a time of sorrow; actually, our parents should have been bitter and desperate: they had been well-to-do and well-regarded people, established in their own home, where they had lived for many years and had married off a daughter, and so on. And now they must take the road and wander, with no means or prospects for the future! But we never once heard them complain about their difficult situation. If they moaned, it must have been silently, because we never heard them...

While we were wandering there was still fighting going on on several fronts (it was a world war!). This was attested by the military transports that we encountered on the dusty roads, Austrian military people of all kinds. None of them ever bothered us. One could not have imagined then that their partners, the Germans, as well as some of them, too, could be such murderers and criminals of the worst kind!

When we finally, after a long and tiring journey, arrived in Piotrków, we were able to breathe more freely. Our grandmother and her husband gave us a warm and friendly welcome. Their apartment consisted of a total of two rooms and a kitchen, but they were large, clean and sunny rooms. Grandmother Brokhe *a.h.* was a first-rate housekeeper. Her third husband, our step-grandfather, about whom we have already written, was friendly to us. He called us “*ir-eyniklekh*” [a pun meaning “her grandchildren” and “great-grandchildren”].

The adaptation to our new place of residence was not too difficult, since, as was mentioned in the preceding chapter, we used to come to Piotrków from time to time and I had studied in the *hadorim* there. The conditions, of course, were quite different. Food was rationed, and people had to stand in long lines in order to receive their portion of bread and other products. But, and I can't explain how, at Grandmother's there was never any lack of food, and even then her house seemed relatively well off.

Our father *z.l.* was going through hard times. Not only was he, who had always been occupied in business, unable to be active, but he had to hide to avoid being taken into forced labor, since he was still relatively young.

A special problem for him was how to give his children a truly Jewish education. Our youngest sister, Judith, was still a baby, but for me and for our brother Fishl *z.l.* he sought and found the best Jewish teachers in town.

My rebbe, Reb Eli Belzicki *z.l.*, was a fine Torah scholar and a strictly observant Jew (a Hasid of Aleksandrów) who also wrote fluent Hebrew. He had read modern books and became aware that they might have a bad influence on our Jewishness, because he regularly warned us not to read any books from modern Yiddish or Hebrew literature. He would also quote for us excerpts from book *Lev Ha'ivri* by the well-known "lover of Zion" Rabbi Akiva Yosef Schlesinger *z.l.*, where among other things is written, "As for books by RMD – do not touch them." RMD means Reb Moshe Dessau, that is, Moses Mendelssohn, the famous Jewish philosopher and pioneer of the Jewish Enlightenment in the 18th century. He was so called because he was born in the German city of Dessau. Reb Eli would tell us that RMD stood for *Rosha* [wicked] Moshe Dessau.

Since this was the time of World War I, Reb Eli *z.l.* kept a kind of diary in which he daily described the important military and political happenings in the world. Many of his students would copy the diary.

Our brother Fishl *z.l.* studied with Reb Avrohm Karman *z.l.*, with whom I had the privilege of studying later. At that time, however, only adults, and mostly exceptional ones, studied with him. Reb Avrohm, the son of a carter, was not only a brilliant scholar, but also a born pedagogue, a gentle person of the highest ethical standards and of deep religious devotion. He had his own method and techniques in teaching. Before we began to study the *poskim* [commentators] (Tur and Shulhan Arukh), we first had to learn all the sources thoroughly. He could always explain the most difficult and complicated questions in a logical and clear manner.

His living quarters consisted of two rooms and a tiny, dark kitchen, but he also had a guest living with him, an old Lithuanian Jew named Reb Shlomo who sold t'fillin.

He charmed his students not with his brilliance and erudition, but also with his honesty and sincerity, with his modesty and simplicity. Rarely did we hear from him a bad word against a person, and he never raised his voice against a student.

Among his students there were some great scholars and famous rabbis. One of his brothers, also a great scholar, a famous Torah reader and a grammarian, taught religion in the governmental elementary schools.

Reb Avrohm's untimely death after a short illness was a terrible and horrifying experience for all who knew him, especially his students. We became aware that he had also been a very clever and quick-witted man in all kinds of matters; desperate people would come to him for advice and would come away encouraged and satisfied.

For secular studies we had private tutors. Nothing was too expensive for our father *z.l.* so that his children could have a truly Jewish education together with general instruction.

He did not want to take advantage for too long of our grandmother's and step-grandfather's hospitality, and made efforts to rent an apartment of our own, first a small one and then a larger one, which we furnished attractively.

As is known, Germany and Austria occupied Poland during the first years of the war. The largest cities in the country, among them also Łódź, which was the center of the textile industry and which also had many German inhabitants, were occupied by the German military, while other cities, among them also Piotrków, were occupied by the Austrians.

Because of the mass confiscations of goods and raw materials, which were sent off to Germany, as well as because of the sharp limitations and strict regulations on commerce on the part of the German occupying power, business in Łódź came to a virtual standstill. The Austrians, on the other hand, did not disturb commerce and did not enforce regulations too strictly. When a part of the goods was sold to them at a set price, business was left alone.

As a result of this situation, many manufacturers and wholesalers, who were able to keep their wares and smuggle them through the artificial border between the German and Austrian zones, moved to Piotrków. In a short time Piotrków became a great center of commerce. Our father *z.l.*, an able and experienced merchant, undertook, together with a partner, to deal with various textile goods and began to make more and more money, saving up enough to buy a house. When he later sold it he made enough of a profit to become a part owner of an apartment house in Łódź.

He was also drawn into public activity, became known as a prayer leader and later as the Torah reader in the Gerer *shtibl* where hundreds of people gathered to pray, rich and poor, young and old, merchants, clerks and tradesmen.

As we know, what is called a *shtibl* was created for a small group of spiritually closely related congregants (who had abandoned the larger synagogues in the community), with its own customs and rituals and, of course, a common spiritual leader. The term *shtibl* [little room] was hardly applicable to the prayer house in Piotrków, with its large number of congregants of various classes. Still, it was called *shtibl*. There were many Talmudic scholars there, as well those who studied medieval books of scholarship and, of course, Hasidic books and Kabbalah.

Actually there were also scholars in the synagogues. But among the Hasidim scholarship was not talked about much, nor was it a source of renown. If scholars were honored in the *shtibl*, it was mainly because of their human qualities. In general, there was great interest in the spiritual condition of the congregants, but no less in their material condition, and efforts were made to help the needy in a quiet, respectful way.

Much could be written about countless congregants of the *shtibl* whose virtues and behavior made them stand out. Some of them have become deeply engraved in my memory, so that I feel an obligation to describe them in a condensed form.

(About those who, in addition to their virtues, were also notable for their faults, I had rather not write.)

First of all I want to mention Reb Yeshaya Wolf Folman *z.l.*, who was also known in other towns as having the mind of a genius. Though he prayed in the Gerer *shtibl*, he considered himself a *Mithnaged* [opponent of Hasidism] and did not, unlike the other congregants, travel to visit the Rebbe.

His brilliance was phenomenal. He had mastered several European languages, was a mathematician and a fine chess player. But above all he was a Judaic scholar.

He had married into a rich family, and, not having to worry about making a living, he used his time to deepen his studies, to read secular books and to learn languages. I became close to him when he already was in his later years, and had the privilege of a private lesson with him. He still sparkled with brilliance and knowledge; he was still being invited, or visited, as a scholar who could clarify difficult and complicated rabbinic legal cases. I actually witnessed some such clarifications, when the litigants were well-known industrialists. I also remember that when he wanted to talk with his wife about something that I was not supposed to understand, he used

French. It was quite a rarity in those days that an older Jew, a great scholar and strictly observant, would also have a secular education.

Another scholar of a special quality was Reb Yukel Horowitz *z.l.*, who was loved and respected by all the Jews, without exception, in the city.

Reb Yukel came from a well-known and distinguished family. After he was orphaned of his still young father, Reb Elozer *z.l.*, he was brought up by his famous grandfather, Rabbi Motel Horowitz *z.l.*, who was the pride of Jewish Piotrków not only during his life but even in later years, when he was cited as a model of intellectual and ethical integrity. Just as is written in the Gemara and the Midrash, that the more a person runs away from honors and positions of respect, the more honors chase him! (See *Eruvin* 13 and Midrash *Tanhuma*, Leviticus 3, Eshkol edition.) So it happened with Rabbi Motel: he was elevated at every opportunity, regardless of his true humility and incomparable modesty. He would not hear of the finest rabbinical positions in Poland, and was not too involved in public affairs. Nonetheless, the *G'dolei Yisrael* [Great Jews] of his time did not take an important step having to do with the Jewish community without first consulting Reb Motel. The same was true in Piotrków, where no decision was taken by the community without his approval. He was a genius among geniuses and a noble among nobles.

Rabbi Motel was also a prosperous merchant and manufacturer, and a great philanthropist. He was also highly esteemed by the non-Jewish inhabitants of Piotrków; Polish noblemen of the region, as well as dignitaries of the Russian authorities, showed him great respect.

It was in such an atmosphere that Reb Yukel grew up. He, too, became known not only for his learning but also for his noble character, his gentleness and modesty. He also impressed with extraordinary good looks: a tall man with a high forehead; an ever bright, kind and aristocratic face that showed tenderness and wisdom and that was framed by a trim, silvery beard.

Once I went to his place on a Saturday afternoon, in order to “be heard”. As soon as I arrived, having been received in a warm and friendly manner, I noticed that a rare kind of nobility was radiating from him. Later, during the lesson and discussion, as I was thinking about his approach to the various Talmudic problems, I felt that there was something higher, something that was not every-day – something that we call holiness – that was an integral part of his whole being!

It was then that I heard him, in the course of his enthusiastic interpretation, raise his voice for the first time. In general he was seldom heard speaking in the *shtibl*, though he would always give a friendly answer to any question he was asked, whether it was concerned with learning or worldly matters, but always in a quiet manner.

He also would not accept a rabbinical post. Near his apartment he had a dry-goods store, where he had employees whom he helped out.

He died when he was far from old. All of Jewish Piotrków was shrouded in deep mourning, everyone bewailed the irreparable loss! Rabbi David Temkin *z.l.*, the Piotrków rabbi at the time, himself a well-known scholar, quoted in his touching eulogy the Talmudic saying (*Shabbath* 105): if one member of a group dies, the whole group should worry; according to some this refers to the death of the greatest, and according to others to the death of the least. The death of the truly great, said the rabbi, combines both concepts: in his own eyes he was the least, but the whole Jewish community he was the greatest, the most beloved and respected!

Another great scholar was Reb Yosef Eisenberg *z.l.*, of a wealthy-scholarly and aristocratic family. He was also a social activist in the best sense of the word: chairman of the Community Council, chairman of the “Talmud Torah” organization, and active in other institutions as well. He had once been one of the richest Jews in Piotrków, but no longer so in my days. He did not complain and remained a generous man. He also had secular knowledge and was said to speak Russian very well. He wrote beautiful, florid Hebrew. He was a close friend of our father *z.l.*

It was from him that my father-in-law, Reb Avrohmstshe Meisels *z.l.*, a Jew who was learned, clever and rich as well, sought information about me, wanting to be sure that his daughter had found the right life companion.

Reb Yosef’s son, Rabbi Leybl Eisenberg, was my father-in-law’s brother-in-law and later inherited the rabbinical chair of my famous grandfather-in-law, Rabbi Meisels of Łask, famous throughout Poland as one of the greatest authors of responsa on *Halakha*. some of which were published in his book *Hidoth Yaakov*. Rabbi Leybl Eisenberg, also one of the great scholars, became famous for his heroic and dignified position against the murderous Nazi leaders, which has been reported in the press and in books about the Holocaust.

Among the younger scholars, two brothers became known: Reb Motl and Reb Noah Znajmirowski, both men of brilliant mind and great modesty.

All of the scholars mentioned above belonged to the so-called middle class. But among the members of the *shtibl* there were also tradesmen and men of no means, who were also fine and learned men. I remember well that a Jew named Moshe Fishl Shapiro would always study the Jerusalem Talmud, which is more difficult than the Babylonian Talmud. Reb Fishl Maltz delved into Maimonides’ *Hilkhot Kidush Hahodesh*; he was a quiet, cordial Jew with a kind face, giving the impression of one who had never in his life been angry. He made great efforts to help the sick and weak, especially those who had suffered a hernia. In the *Gerer shtibl* he did this quietly and on one side so that it would not be noticed.

I see before my eyes the image of Reb Hirsch Heftman, or, as he was called, Hershele Bugajer.¹ He was small and emaciated-looking, and had a clear voice but spoke very softly. He was always deeply involved in a sacred book. Once I overheard him discussing a difficult passage of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch (Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1089-1164, was a famous scriptural commentator, poet, philosopher, linguist, physician and astronomer who with all of that could not earn a living). Reb Hershele lived by the labor of his hands; he earned his sparse living by repairing fishermen’s nets.

There were also outstanding Torah students among the young men. Not all of them showed off their learning.

Along with learning, the *shtibl* also busied itself with charity and philanthropy, which were no less important. Here, too, there was no difference between young and old.

As I think about young men who were active in charity, there comes to me the remarkable figure of Bunim Baumgold *z.l.*, a grandson of the [author of] *Hidushei HaRIM z.ts.l.* He was a blond man with an ascetic face. Little was known about his scholarship; even if he had been a great scholar, no one would have known about it, just as it was not known that he and his whole family were suffering from poverty, while he was busy day and collecting money for other honorable people in need. He did not think of himself and never spoke of himself or his family’s

¹*Bugaj*, name of a nearby river.

situation, which did not come to public attention until he gave up his soul after a brief and painful illness (I was not in Piotrków at the time and know no details about the illness and death).

On ordinary days, New Moon, Hanukkah and especially Purim, men went around the *shtibl* singly and in pairs, collecting money for honorable people in need. No one asked for whom the collection was meant; they gave their contribution, and for the most part generously. I remember that once I was also among the collectors. It was my turn to approach a rich Jew who was a good man but somewhat stingy, who would bargain with me but did not leave until I was satisfied.

I did not agree with everything that I heard and was in the *shtibl*. But I cannot recall anything that left me with a lasting bad impression.

When I became older I became socially active outside the *shtibl*. I do not recall ever having studied in the *shtibl*; I would pray there, especially on the Sabbath and Holy Days. I did study occasionally in the Synagogue.

And speaking of social activity, it is worth noting that World War I brought to Piotrków not only a commercial revival but also a social one, even among the religious Jews who had been accustomed to being tightly enclosed by *halakha*.

Quiet, sleepy Piotrków suddenly awakened. It was also helped to do so by Jews serving in the Austrian army, among whom there officers who were religious and of a Zionist inclination.

Many clubs and associations, which had been banned under Tsarist rule, renewed their activity. Party representatives from Łódź and Warsaw flooded other cities and town, spreading propaganda for their ideologies.

Among those representatives there were also those of anti-religious movements, who turned their attention to adolescents and young people with the aim of liberation from the limitations and obligations of the old way of life and of adaptation to the modern world and to Western culture.

A considerable number of Jewish youth, even some from the *shtibls*, were influenced by this propaganda. The Jewish cultural and artistic association *Hazamir* was taken over by the *Bund*, while the various Zionist group, among them also the *Mizrachi*, concentrated around the *Tarbut* association.

At that time there also appeared in Poland representatives of organized religious Jewry in Germany; in particular, two rabbis became known: Dr. Pinhas Cohn of Ansbach (Bavaria) and Dr. Emmanuel Carlebach of Cologne. The former was a man of all-round culture with great organizational abilities, while the latter, a member of a famous rabbinical family in Germany, was a brilliant orator whose speeches inspired masses of people. Both were military rabbis and were able to move around in the occupied regions.

These rabbis contacted the leaders of religious Jewry in Poland and proposed to form there a branch of *Agudath Israel* that would embrace all Torah-true Jews, just as in Germany. As can be imagined, the responsible leaders of religious and Hasidic Jews in Poland could not take the religious Jewry of Germany as an example and decided to form their own organization of orthodox Jews under the name *Shlomei Emunei Israel*, and to cooperate in principle with organized orthodoxy in Germany.

The word *orthodox*, which in Greek means “right-believing”, was probably then heard for the first time in the Hasidic *shtetls*. The name *Shlomei Emunei Israel* was taken from Scripture (Samuel II, 20).

Before long, meetings with many speeches began to be held among the religious Jews of Piotrków as well. The young people, too, organized in separate groups. Even before there existed a society called *Bahurei Lomdei Torah*, of which Reb Zaynvil Ziareski was the president and my brother Fishl *z.l.* the treasurer. I was still too young to be a member.

At that time our brother married a picture-pretty girl from the town of Sterców; she was a daughter of Reb Yeshaya Wiśniewski, a well-to-do man and well versed in the Torah. It was a beautiful wedding, to which our close family members came from other towns as well. My brother remained in Sterców for a while.

In the meantime, religious schools with regular classes and good teachers, for secular studies as well, had opened. These schools were to replace the former *hadorim*, which was very important. No less important was the appearance of an orthodox newspaper, *Dos Yiddishe Vort*, edited by Reb Nahum Leyb Weingart, who understood how to attract young readers to his paper. He published articles by religious German Jews who were both scientists and great scholars, as well as stories by Dr. Lehmann and others that were fascinating reading. I remember that the paper appealed to me greatly; it strengthened my view that culture and Judaism are not opposites. I remembered how in my childhood I had read in *Shem Hag’dolim* about Rabbi Joseph Shlomo Delmedigo (1591-1655, known as Yashar of Candia), a great Talmudic scholar, physician, astronomer, philosopher, mathematician and master of languages, classical and modern, even Polish. But regardless of his many-sided learning he remained a true believer and toward the end even a kabbalist. He had studied under the great scientist Galileo, one of the founders of modern science, and accepted his theories, as well as the Copernican system, showing that there is no contradiction between Torah and science. He traveled in various countries, visited many libraries and acquired valuable books and manuscripts, sacred and profane, as well as a collection of astronomical instruments. Everywhere he was received with great honors, by respected rabbis as well as by non-Jewish scholars. For a time he was private physician to Grand Duke Radziwiłł in Poland, in whose castle he would study with Jewish students. For a number of years he was the physician of the Jewish community in Frankfurt.

I felt already then that abroad one could have much culture and at the same time be a strictly observant Jew. And this notion perhaps helped me not to be carried away by any of the various ideological currents that were tempting a large part of the awakening youth, especially after the appearance of the new idol of communism, which charmed with its slogans, such as the abolition of poverty and the opportunity for all to enjoy all that was good and beautiful in the world, to which previously only a small privileged minority had access. This idea began to penetrate not only among the poor and dispossessed, but also among the idealists of wealthy families, whose sensitive hearts trembled at the sight of so much need, misery and suffering of so many good and innocent people!

But at the same time we read in the papers about the cruelty and mass executions perpetrated upon the so-called capitalists, and the suspicion arose that behind the mask of humanism there hid an inhuman blood thirst, and this was in sharp contrast to the commandment of the Torah, which teaches us that justice must be sought with justice and not with violence. In general, ethical principles must have a foundation and cannot depend on the mood of this or that leader. Secondly, we do not need to import ideas about love of mankind or social justice – we

have enough of that in our own sources. And also in everyday life we had seen how Jews have striven to help one another, without talking about it. So that all the manifestoes about a new era of mankind sounded like empty phrases.

Reading the book *Der Alef-Beys fun Yidntum* [The Aleph-Bet of Judaism], letters to Jewish youth, by Dr. Hillel Zeitlin *z.l.* reinforced even more my conviction that Judaism and humanism are closely tied together. I considered it my obligation to share my opinions about Judaism with friends and other young people who were at the crossroads and did not know which road to take. I tried to show that many fine slogans can be deceptive, and that in order to oppose a system or a view of life it is necessary first to study it.

I began to organize orthodox young people and to speak for them. I also had occasion to debate with representatives of other parties. The exchanges of opinion were of a peaceful nature, so that I had friends even among my political opponents.

When in November of 1918 Poland's independence was declared, pogroms occurred in many Jewish communities. I personally have no pleasant memories of Polish independence; in Piotrków there appeared Polish "militiamen". For some reason I had to be at the railroad station one day, and one militiaman called me into a separate room and beat me for no reason. I don't remember how I came away. I cannot say that such a happening strengthened my patriotism toward the land where I was born and where I lived for many years; but the Torah tells us not to hate the Egyptians, for we had dwelt in their land (Deuteronomy 23, 8), and as Rashi explains there, even though they had drowned our children, we had received lodging there, and Jews had received lodging in Poland for many hundreds of years! But I could not forget the incident.

It is only after the tragically bloody experience of World War II, when the German Nazi murderers behaved worse than the wildest beasts, that we realized that our Polish neighbors had not been the worst...

And, speaking of neighbors, I wish to mention our good neighbors of Szpitalna 20, our first independent home in Piotrków; this was the family of Reb Yedidyah Zusman, who was a first-rate *shohet* [slaughterer] and a famous *mohel*, a tall and powerful man, always happy and excited, as was his wife Freydele, a good, pure soul. Unfortunately, these dear, kind-hearted people had to experience shattering tragedies in their family, of which I was a direct witness and which shook me up no little. Three grown children in full bloom were taken away from them, all by tuberculosis. The first victim was their daughter Libe, a tall, beautiful blonde; I still remember how she lay in bed, growing weaker week by week until her young life was snuffed out. This was many years before the black and bloody Nazi era, when human life had become cheaper, and the death of Libe *a.h.* truly broke us up. We never stopped thinking about it. Shortly thereafter their son Shmuel Avrohm, a tall, well-grown young man, began to feel badly, and he also gradually went out like a candle. The last victim was their youngest daughter, Hantshe, a lovely, tender child who had developed well, but several years later she fell victim to the same disease and shared her sister's and brother's fate. We felt as if we had lost close relatives of our own. Only their oldest son, Yisroel Hayim *z.l.*, who had served in the Polish army and was not always on good terms with his parents, remained alive. He later moved to Palestine with his wife. Two of their children, a son who grew up to be a scholar and a daughter, remained with Reb Yedidyah and died tragically in Treblinka along with the other Piotrków martyrs.

We met Yisroel Hayim Zusman *z.l.* in Tel Aviv, in the fine and comfortable apartment of his brother-in-law, a friend of my youth, Avraham Ginot. He was there with his wife and talked about his satisfying life in Israel. They already had married children. His parents would have

been pleased with their “adventurer” of a son, who had dared to go to Palestine against their will. At first he had to work hard, but as he became older he became a kashrut supervisor and a prayer leader in a synagogue. Years later his brother-in-law wrote me that he had died at a ripe old age.

With the formation of the new Polish state there began to develop a lively activity in Jewish society. The Jewish parties were officially organized and prepared to participate actively in the coming elections for the legislative bodies of the country as well as for the local city councils. Special attention was paid to the elections for the Jewish community councils.

I participated strongly in various electoral activities, working to bring success to the orthodox slates, so that the voice of religious Jews might be heard in the public bodies and so that their representatives might have the opportunity to represent their demands and to fight for their fulfillment, no longer relying on strangers as had been the old custom.

As mentioned above, I had friends among the representatives of other groups, from right to left. During the elections we were in antagonistic, opposite camps. I therefore felt very good when in 1922 all the Jewish middle-class parties joined in a united front which in turn joined the bloc of national minorities, that, by the way, was very successful.

Later our father *z.l.* was drawn into public activity. As a leader of Agudath Israel, he appeared in several institutions, especially the Jewish community. What was close to his heart was helping people and doing favors for all Jews. His face would shine whenever he managed successfully to help someone. He did everything with complete dedication.

The generally esteemed scholar and longtime *dayan* [religious judge] Reb Yankl Glazer *z.l.*, who was tragically killed by a bomb in the first days of World War II, once told me that the time when my father *z.l.* was the vice-president of the Community Council of Piotrków was like the “days of Solomon,” that is, a good time (see Gemara *Avoda Zara* 3 and *Yevamot* 24).

In those days a new rising star in the rabbinical world was talked about: a young, multiply talented rabbi in a small town in Galicia, named Rabbi Meir Shapiro, the Glina rabbi (Glina is in Tarnopol district).

It was said about him that he was one of the great Torah geniuses, and a man of high moral principles, no stranger to secular knowledge, and a brilliant orator. It also became known that he would participate in the first countrywide conference of Agudath Israel in Poland, which was to take place in Warsaw.

I came with my father *z.l.*, who was one of the chief delegates. I remember exactly how the varied public paid close attention to the speeches and greetings, but when it was announced that the Glina rabbi would speak, the great hall of Kaminski’s theater became filled, and his speech was awaited in tense silence. He truly electrified the delegates and guests with his speaking, both in content and form. Paying no attention to the presence of illustrious *rebbe*s and rabbis, for whom the *heder* had been for generations one of the hallowed Jewish institutions, that young, dynamic rabbi thundered with his clear, ringing voice, saying neither more nor less that he was appearing as the accuser of the *heder* and as the defender of that young Jewish generation that had abandoned its rows! He asked the assembled public to leave for a while, mentally, the beautiful theater and to enter a Jewish *heder*. He, the educator par excellence, could not accept the fact of Jewish children being educated in small dark rooms, where the hygienic and sanitary conditions were not among the best. Teaching institutions for religious Jews must have the same spaciousness, cleanliness and comfort as secular ones. Every Jewish student who had the will and ambition to become a scholar must receive the same opportunity to study as one from a rich

home. There we already saw a hint of his later institution of higher learning, the world-famous *Yeshivath Hakhmei Lublin*, an institution that he had dreamed about from his earliest youth.

I will not speak too much here about that great man, who became the darling of Polish Jewry; many books and countless articles have been written about his genius, his blessed and successful activity in the field of Jewish education, and his colorful, charismatic personality. I will only mention his rabbinate in Piotrków. That position, which became vacant upon the death of the great Rabbi David Temkin *z.l.*, was proposed to him by our father *z.l.* I don't remember the occasion; I think that it happened when they met on a trip returning from Warsaw. Father *z.l.* was using then halakhic terms from the Gemara *Hulin* about kashrut (whether kosher and non-kosher can mix); if a name is important, then there had been famous names of the great occupants of the Piotrków rabbinate; if one is to talk about "taste", that is enjoyment of a good salary, Piotrków could not boast, because it was not a rich community. Father *z.l.* was surprised to hear the answer, that if Rabbi Shapiro were to receive an invitation to accept the rabbinate that was signed by representatives of all the Jewish parties, that is, if the whole community were unanimous, then he would seriously think about it.

Excitedly, Father *z.l.* brought the good news to the Community Council. At first it was received enthusiastically, since Rabbi Meir Shapiro was loved and respected by all the Jews of Poland, with no exception, even though he represented *Agudath Israel* in the Polish Sejm [parliament].

But when the talk turned to the election, the mood changed; the Aleksandrów Hasidim wanted the longtime *dayan*, Reb Yankele Glazer *z.l.*, who has already been mentioned as a well-known teacher and scholar, to be the rabbi. Many people who respected him as *dayan*, however, felt that he did not have the qualifications to be the city's rabbi. The Radomsk Hasidim put forward their candidate, while the Zionists and *Mizrachi* decided to invite a rabbi who belonged to *Mizrachi*. Thus there arose an intense electoral campaign in which I was an active participant, by speaking and writing. Our father *z.l.* successfully recruited as members for "our" campaign committee respected householders from the most various circles in the city.

I then believed that the election of Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.l.* as the rabbi of Piotrków would be a great achievement not only for the city but also for me personally. And I was not mistaken.

After he was elected and came to Piotrków, he and his rabbinical activity drew the enthusiasm not only of his partisans but also of his former opponents.

During the two years that I spent in his home as his secretary, I never ceased to admire not only his sparkling wisdom and sharpness of mind, his cleverness and genius-like intuition, but also his warm-hearted humanity, his sensitivity, tact and gentleness. His brilliance could also be noted in his writing – he could answer dozens of letters with amazing speed, using beautiful modern Hebrew.

His first speech in the completely packed Great Synagogue was an a memorable experience for the thousands of listeners. Indicating the guidelines of his future activity, he made no secret of his firmness and intransigence where the principles of Judaism were concerned. But at the same time he brought out his friendliness and flexibility in personal matters, presenting himself as a friend to every Jew in Piotrków, but also as the rabbi, whose task it was to stand guard, defending the honor of Judaism and the integrity of the community.

That speech-sermon, which was in every way a masterpiece – rich and deep in content, and by the speakers oratory talent made clear and transparent for everyone – exalted the varied public, which suddenly forgot its everyday concerns. We saw before us not only a new rabbi, but

a rabbi of renewal, vision and creativity. Actually his ideas of Jews and Judaism were rooted in the ancient Jewish past, with nothing added or taken away, but in the ears of the thousands of his rapt listeners they sounded new.

The public left the synagogue excited and enthusiastic, feeling from the beginning the warmth and friendliness of the new spiritual leader.

Since I was later a member of his household, I was able to see that this quality of warmth and devoted friendship was an integral part of his golden character.

And it would be mentioned that his wife, the rebbitsin *a.h.*, the daughter of a a rich and respected family in Tarnopol, also stood out with her touching simplicity and modesty.

Their home soon became not only a meeting place for the learned but an open house for every Jew; not only religious Jews, but also non-observant ones felt comfortable there.

To spend a Sabbath or a holiday there was a true experience, of a special degree of enjoyment. Himself a fine musician, who also composed lovely tunes for various verses of prayers, he would invite to his home the best musicians in town. Not to mention his interesting interpretations of the weekly Torah portion or pearl-like thoughts about the holidays, which truly riveted the listeners.

Incidentally, Rabbi Meir Shapiro's "compositions" for *V'taher libeinu*, *Vayeda kol pa'ul* and other prayer lines soon became known throughout the Jewish world, and even today they are among the most popular tunes, sung at various occasions.

No less interesting was the regular work on weekdays; in the *Beth Din* [religious court] hall it was always lively. Torah judgments from near and far; divorce and marriage matters; and general halakhic inquiries. People were amazed by his wisdom, his understanding of the most complicated problems, and his masterful resolution and clarification of involved and convoluted issues, to the satisfaction of all sides.

In a relatively short time he succeeded in fulfilling the promises he had made when he accepted the rabbinate, namely: that he would bring order to slaughtering and kashrut; that he would arrange *eruvim* [boundaries permitting movement] in the city, and that he would build a new *mikveh* [ritual bath] that would meet all hygienic requirements.

None of this came easy. But thanks to his patience, his blessed energy and his extraordinary tact, many conflicts were avoided.

At the same time he did not cease to plan the realization of his life's dream: to establish an institution of higher learning with boarding facilities, where able students, rich and poor, would have the opportunity of fulfilling themselves in true Jewish learning in breadth and depth; and that, as already mentioned, this institution would be outwardly no less attractive than well-known secular academic institutions.

Not only did he conduct an intense correspondence with well-known activists in Poland and abroad, but he began to acquire students in Piotrków, and also those from other places who came there to take part in the lessons that he gave.

As his secretary, of course, I helped with much of the writing. The first interesting assignment was the orthodox daily calendar, which I prepared under his supervision. For each day there was an appropriate quote from the Sages, as well as the *yortseit* dates of the Greats of Israel, and on the other page instructive biographical notices about them. This calendar was published by the Mesorah publishing house in Łódź. I will allow myself to write about the heart and soul of that publishing house, Reb Avrohm Moshe Grubstein *h.i.d.*, who was killed along with his family by the Nazi murderers. Reb Moshe Grubstein was a learned Jew, a fine man, a

friend to everyone. He could entertain people with his gentle humor and sharp wit. In Piotrków, already as a young boy, he was the expert on world politics. In his publishing house in Łódź he also published a whole series of orthodox textbooks in Hebrew and in Yiddish, as well as magazines and journals. May his memory be blessed!

Interesting incidents could be noted in the *Beth Din* hall. I will mention only two: one concerning a divorce, and the other a Torah judgment.

Somehow, the whole attitude toward divorce and its procedure was quite different then. As is accepted, at first one tries to pacify the hostile parties, proposing a reconciliation. But in this case the rabbi, in general so cordial, friendly and careful, was in a great hurry to complete the necessary formalities as fast as possible. It turned out that the man, a Christian doctor who had a wife and family, while visiting a patient had fallen in love with the patient's daughter, a beautiful Jewish girl; so intoxicated was he with his love that he decided to leave his family and even convert to Judaism. They had an official Jewish wedding, but after a short time he "sobered up" from his intoxication, began to insult his young wife rudely, reminding her constantly of her Jewishness, and took to beating her like a *goy*. Her parents found out about it and turned to Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Piotrków, who had by then become famous throughout the region. With his wisdom and tact he was able to invite the couple and the family. He conferred with each party, pointing out the importance of remaining true to one's faith. As the young wife reported, she was truly gambling with her life. The rabbi therefore hurried the process, fearing that the doctor might change his mind.

The Torah judgment occurred between our father *z.l.*, as the representative of *Agudath Israel* who was responsible for its institutions, and a wealthy householder of a rabbinical family, himself a learned and pious Jew. The orthodox girls' school *Beth Yaakov* was installed in his house, and he claimed non-payment of rent and demanded an eviction.

Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.ts.l.*, with his unusual powers of explanation, tried to persuade the landlord, an older man, to withdraw his suit, reminding him of the words of the Gemara (*Taanith* 11) to the effect that the stones and beams of each person's house bear witness on him... It so happened that in the same house there was a Jewish-owned store that was open on Sabbath, a rarity in the Jewish Piotrków of the time. But, continued the brilliant rabbi, in such a case there applies (according to the Kabbalah) a doctrine of *t'shuvath hamishkal* [counterweight]: in the same house where the Sabbath is violated there are beams that hear lessons about Sabbath observance (in the school) and they will be better witnesses...

To everyone's astonishment, the landlord, a tall, heavyset man, stood up and said in a loud voice, "I want my money!"

In the room there happened to be at the time a non-religious Jew, who asked the rabbi, whom he respected greatly, "How can it be? You, esteemed rabbi of Piotrków, are always telling us to study the Torah and to be an observant Jew, because this leads to kindness. What kind of example of kindness is this Jew, who is learned and pious? A non-religious Jew would certainly have been more moved by your words!"

Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.ts.l.* was at no loss for an answer, and replied, "On the contrary, this Jew gives evidence that studying Torah and observing the commandments have a positive influence on everyone. This greedy landlord, according to his character and temperament, would certainly have been a bandit who would attack people and take their money, spilling their blood if necessary... But the Torah has made him so much gentler that he does not do this; the love of

money has remained with him, and when his rent is overdue he goes to court and makes threats, but does not attack anyone!”

This is a very characteristic and instructive explanation.

Not infrequently do we hear bitter complaints by non-religious Jews against observant ones who are dishonest, who don't help the poor and needy, and the like. Actually this is a valid complaint; our Sages teach us (Gemara *Yoma* 85) that loving God means to make God's name beloved by means of Torah study, honesty in business, good behavior toward people, and so on. The point is, however, that without the learning and observance these people would be worse still!

And not only from his Torah judgments, but from his everyday conversation much could be learned.

In the meantime the idea of the yeshiva/academy had begun to take root and to provoke strong interest in various Jewish circles. Of course, among the Hasidim of Poland there were also those who looked at the idea, if not with suspicion, at least with concern. The good-natured Rabbi Meir Shapiro, trying his best to avoid conflict, did not want to debate them, thinking that if the institution came to be then no one would have any complaints.

Though the projected yeshiva building was intended to look like a fine, modern university hall, its interior was to be tied to the rich past of the Torah. What place could be more appropriate for such a yeshiva than the city of Lublin, which had for many generations been the Torah center of Polish Jewry and had become famous for its yeshivas, which had produced almost all the great masters of halakha and the most brilliant scholar of Poland? The Sages of Lublin had, after all, illuminated the whole world of the Torah!

It is therefore clear that, as he was corresponding with Jewish leaders in many cities, Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.ts.l.* made a special effort to interest the orthodox leadership of Lublin in his plan.

How happy he was when he received the news that a Jewish philanthropist of Lublin, Reb Shmuel Eichenbaum *z.l.*, a rich but kind and modest man, had decided to donate a large lot for the building, and also promised to contribute to the other expenses! Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.ts.l.*, beaming with happiness when he saw the first sign of the fulfillment of his life's dream, nevertheless began at the same time to feel that heavy weight that he would have to bear on his shoulders in order to collect the necessary funds for such a giant undertaking! He decided to travel to rich America for a visit and there to find rich Jews who would have an understanding of his project and who could generously support it. American Jews, after all, were famous for their philanthropy and their deep interest in their fellow-Jews, supporting them and their institutions.

3. Going Abroad and Coming Home

When Rabbi Shapiro was already overseas, there arose an opportunity for me to also travel abroad, namely Belgium. I was invited there by a potential father-in-law, whose daughter I once met in Katowice. They were distant relative on Father's side. Nothing came of it, and it was not among the most pleasant experiences of my life. It was my fault; I was too young, and I was blinded by the trappings of wealth. I found fault with myself, that I had been too spoiled in my young life. I had nothing against the girl, who was ethical and very modest.

Somehow it was a hint of Providence that fate had taken me abroad. I had always striven to acquire as much secular culture as possible and remain a strictly observant Jew, something that was not easy in Poland.

I wrote about my plans not only to my devoted parents but also to my devoted "boss". (In 1929 I took a quick trip from Berlin to Vienna in order to meet my father *z.l.*, who had gone there as a delegate to the international convention of Agudath Israel. Of course, I also met with Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.l.* He then introduced me to his rebbe, the *Admor* of Czortków, whose appearance was regal, as his secretary. This rabbi *z.ts.l.* then said to me, "You have a good boss!" I intend to write more about my visit to Vienna.) I immediately received from him an interesting letter, written with glowing warmth, as well as two letters of recommendation, one addressed to the Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam, Rabbi Dr. Onderwijzer, and one to Rabbi Dr. Hildesheimer of Berlin.

If I were to read today those letters with the praises that were heaped on me, I would certainly blush with embarrassment; but in those days, when one is young, those things are more digestible, and one even tells others about them...

It didn't take me long to choose Berlin, which seemed to be closer, more homelike, and more cosmopolitan than Amsterdam. Late one evening I arrived in the German capital, which was highly lit up and had masses of people streaming in its streets. The Nazi venom had not yet poisoned the people of Berlin, who were courteous and gave the needed information to anyone who was a stranger in that huge, spread-out city.

I was not in the best of moods, wandering alone in that city, where I had no friends or acquaintances, nor too much money in my pocket. But I had no regrets over coming to Berlin. I wish to note here that neither the Rabbi nor my parents were overly enthusiastic about my plans. Still, they gave me their blessings.

After searching I found a hostel where I could spend the night. The next day I made an effort to meet Dr. Hildesheimer, who was one of the well-known Jewish leaders in Berlin and a kind man. My German was not very good, but he was used to Polish Jews and more or less could communicate with them. He knew very well who Rabbi Meir Shapiro, who had also written directly to him, was.

I soon found out that one could not study at the Rabbinical Seminary if one were not also a student at the University, and not having attended a *gymnasium* I could not be admitted to the University. Another question was that of registering with the authorities and obtaining legal residency in Berlin. In my passport I was listed as a journalist, and that profession was suspect to the Berlin police. A Jew who had once lived in Piotrków and then came to own a large house in Berlin had promised to get me registered, but he met with difficulties. Hildesheimer took care of the matter.

I soon began to look for a room, not far from the Jewish neighborhood, and as soon as I found one I became interested in finding a teaching institution where I could prepare for the University. In Berlin there was no lack of such private schools. I found a certain Dr. Danziger, who ran *gymnasium*-equivalent courses that were intensive but fast. I also managed to become acquainted with a variety of people. On Sabbath I went to pray in the *Gerer shtibl*, where I found a friendly and warm environment. People invited me home for Sabbath meals, and those who had no families invited me to fine kosher restaurants. During the week I generally prepared my own meals, and occasionally went to a restaurant where students received a discount.

My parents, of course, were helping me out, but I began to earn some money on my own. On Sabbath afternoons I gave talks about the weekly portion in the *beth midrash* of a well-known synagogue for a small group. This was not at all easy, because I didn't know the language well enough. On the other hand, I had no difficulty with private lessons. Thus, for example, a young man who wanted to enter the Rabbinical Seminary – a very cultured man but with very little Jewish knowledge – turned to me. His father, a well-known rabbi of the main Jewish community (in Berlin there also existed a smaller orthodox community, *Adath Israel*), died prematurely and the son wanted to take his place. He wanted me to help him in Jewish studies while he would help me in secular studies and also pay me. His brother, a doctor, also took lessons with me and paid me handsomely.

When I was admitted to the Seminary, I not only became acquainted with a number of students, but formed this kind of exchange with one of them: I shared my Jewish knowledge with him, while explained “complicated” issues of general knowledge to me.

Incidentally, two close friendships from that time have lasted: one with a veteran leader of a great political party and a prominent member of almost every government of Israel; the other, with a great Jewish scholar of world renown. I am especially close with the latter.

Finally I was accepted by the University. And to tell the truth I should remark that while the lectures in the Seminary, though interesting and also instructive for most of the students, did not inspire me greatly, those in the University truly excited me, especially those by Professors Petersen and Max Hermann (German literature) and Vierkant (anthropology). With this I don't mean to minimize the importance of other professors in other areas (history, philosophy, journalism etc.) who were no less well-known; I am only mentioning those who impressed me the most.

And, speaking of the University of Berlin, it is worth while mentioning that already then, in the years 1927–1930, ever louder voices of Nazi groups were beginning to be heard; while certainly not as wild and reckless as in later years, they were voices of discord in a friendly atmosphere. I remember when students stamped their feet when a professor mentioned the name of Max Reinhardt, the famous stage director, who was a Jew. But in the relations among students no changes were noticed yet. I remember that a young woman student, who sat near me, read the Nazi organ, *Völkischer Beobachter*, and she was far from the only one. But when I asked about some classes that I missed because of a Jewish holiday, she lent me her notebook.

In general Jews lived freely and did not experience any restrictions.

Before my eyes there still appears the imposing image of thousands and thousands of Jews, men and women, young and old, going to the bank of the river Spree, not far from the royal palace, in order to observe the *tashlikh* ceremony on Rosh Hashanah. Jews occupied high positions in all spheres of public life and did not attach any great importance to the mass rallies

and demonstrations of the anti-Semitic Nazis. Who cared if mean dogs were barking somewhere?

Only the great scripture scholar Rabbi Hayim Heller, whose home I visited occasionally (Rabbi Meir Shapiro had written a warm letter about me to him, too), warned that if Hitler were not swept away in time, the Jews would suffer greatly. Not in vain did the Sages tell us, “a wise man is better than a prophet” (*Baba Bathra*, 12).

And this was said at a time when the political skies seemed to be clear and no one had an idea of the coming black clouds.

Among the tourist who came Berlin from the whole world there were, of course, also Jews, especially from Poland, who then went from Berlin to the various spas of Germany, or who came to visit medical specialists. In Germany they could move more freely than in their own country.

I recall a memorable visit to Berlin by the famous and universally esteemed *Gerer* rebbe, Rabbi Avrohm Mordechai Alter *z.ts.l.*, known not only for his scholarship and brilliant mind, but also for his encyclopedic knowledge and for using words sparingly. To my surprise I had an opportunity to talk to him there. It is interesting that a short time later, when my late brother, Fishl *z.l.*, happened to be in *Ger* (he was in general an eager traveler), the rebbe asked him, “You have a brother in Berlin, is he here to?” Hasidic “experts” saw this as a kind of command for me to go to *Ger*.

It so happened that I was in Piotrków at the time, visiting my parents, and the family decided that I should go. The rebbe gave me an ancient book, which he had bought or borrowed, and asked me to return it to a book dealer in Berlin, which of course I did. Much has been told and written about the wisdom, learning, tact and generosity of that rebbe. I will only relate what Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.l.* once told about a meeting with him.

It happened on that epoch-marking day of the laying of the cornerstone of his *Yeshivath Hokhmei Lublin*. Tens of thousands of Jews had come to Lublin for the occasion, among them famous rabbis and rebbes. The sensitive and tactful Rabbi Meir Shapiro, founder and builder of the yeshiva, found himself in a dilemma: his own rabbi, the aristocratic Rabbi of Czortków, had specially come from Vienna, and was properly the one to be honored by beginning the ceremony; on the other hand, there was present also the *Gerer* rebbe, the “king in Israel” (as Rabbi Shapiro called him), and most of the tens of thousands of Jews had come because of him – would they not see that as a lack of respect for their champion? And so as Rabbi Shapiro, unable to find a way out, was thinking about the matter, the *Gerer* rebbe suddenly came to him and said, “Since I don’t know what the custom is at a cornerstone-laying ceremony, I would like the Rabbi of Czortków to be the first,” taking a load off his heart.

And, speaking of Rabbi Meir Shapiro *z.ts.l.*, it is my pleasant duty to recall that he too came to Berlin in order to raise funds for the Lublin yeshiva. I was with him during his entire stay. The public meeting that took place was presided by the well-known philosopher and writer Dr. Nathan Birnbaum, one of the founders and first theoreticians of Zionism, who later returned to religion and called for a sanctification of the life of the Jewish people in order to realize the spiritual mission that was entrusted to it. I also accompanied the Rabbi when he visited wealthy and respected Jews in Berlin. It is interesting that not one mentioned the danger of the Nazi movement.

The same was true of my close acquaintances, such as Rabbi Avrohmshe Preis, a wise and scholarly Jew, who had a great real-estate business and whose fine, spacious office I

occasionally visited (he took me out to restaurants from time to time); Simkha Steiner, a shopkeeper whose frequent Sabbath guest I was; the young Weinstocks (he was a partner in a large business with his father and she came from a scholarly Hasidic family in Kraków, a gentle and charming woman in every respect) – not one assigned any importance whatever to the parades of the marching communists in East Berlin or the mass meetings of the Nazis in the west of the capital, where the wealthier people lived, though in some press reports the anti-Semitic slogans used by the Nazis were mentioned.

As is turned out, there was a hidden hatred of Jews among a majority of the German population, which was reinforced by the political and economic rise of the Jews after World War I, during the Weimar Republic.

Jewish swindlers, whose financial scandals were broadly spread through the press, did not help honor the Jews' name, though at the same time there were similar scandals among non-Jewish business men and financiers.

The difficult international economic situation caused by the financial crisis in America was felt with special gravity in Germany, from whom America demanded reparations; banks folded, factories closed, and the number of unemployed began to rise – in 1930 there were already millions and a year later the number doubled. The Nazis exploited the situation and began to catch fish in shallow water.

In 1930 the Socialist Chancellor Hermann Müller resigned and was replaced by Brüning of the Catholic Zentrum party, who ordered new parliamentary elections. To everyone's astonishment the Nazi party won its first victory and became the second-largest party in the country!

When, around that time, I went home for a visit, my return was put in question. Newspapers were beginning to report the wave of anti-Semitism that was beginning to spread over some German cities.

My father *z.l.* was at the time the manager of a cooperative bank, and I temporarily helped out there. How terribly disappointed we were to learn some time later that a supposed friend who had been hired as cashier had systematically robbed him!

It was the beginning of hard and bitter times for Father *z.l.*, who was a deeply honest man, and his health suffered at the very thought that people who had trusted the bank would lose money. It took time to get rid of the thief, pay of the debts as much as possible, and to liquidate the bank under its current name.

It's a terrible feeling, a gnawing pain, when one is so unjustly and so bitterly disappointed: taking a friend into an institution into which my father *z.l.* had put so much effort and energy, and which he tried to expand, in order to help the friend to make a living, and so much for gratitude! The man did not appear like a thief, and probably began by taking small amounts, but small became large and large became larger. The Sages have already taught us that if a man sins and then sins again, it will seem to him that it is permitted (Gemara *Yoma* 86).

Though Father *z.l.* was far from vindictive, the incident caused a wound that never healed.

At the time I was meeting girls from different families. Since my hasty trip to Belgium I was cautious and did not think of "what will people say," only of what was right for me; of course, in this I had my parents' respect.

Once, some close acquaintances suggested that I go to Łódź in order to meet a girl whose rabbinical family of many generations interested me, because I knew about the family from books.

On a cold winter evening in Łódź, not one of the cleanest or most elegant cities, I telephoned the Majzler (Meisels) family and informed them of my planned visit. They had already heard about me from Reb Yosef Eisenberg *z.l.*, the famous scholar and community leader in Piotrków and the father of the sainted Reb Leybl Eisenberg (who later became the rabbi of Łask and my father-in-law's brother-in-law). I was therefore invited in a warm and friendly way.

When I arrived at the apartment on Sienkiewicza 63, one of the cleaner and newer buildings in Łódź, I noticed, in the not-too-brightly lit, modestly furnished dwelling, a slender girl in a dark-green dress with a charming face and intelligent, penetrating eyes. Our first exchange immediately attested to her wit and intelligence. The mother was an easy-going, bright woman, but one could immediately see her kindness as well. The father, who at that time was also mild and easy-going, exchanged some Torah sayings with me and seemed to be satisfied. With the daughter I spoke of various worldly matters. We had no trouble answering each other and decided to meet again the next day. I somehow began to feel that she was the one for me.

But, as is usual after such a brief acquaintance, after the initial excitement comes a cooling-off. But this was more a matter of thought than feeling. Her attitude to orthodox and traditional Judaism was not parallel to mine. I, since my earliest youth, had striven to create a kind of synthesis of humanism and Judaism, far from either extreme.

Observance of Jewish laws and customs was, to me, a matter of course; I had seen in Berlin how great scholars and scientists observed them in all detail. I also believed that such observance helps us in relations with people, accentuating our ethical and humane side.

My new friend had not only not read about nor studied Judaism, but her father, with his strict ways, had provoked in her a negative attitude toward it. He was a scholar of the old style; though he was a skillful business man who knew his way around the world of trade, he would hear nothing of Jewish philosophy, and modern orthodoxy was not to his taste, either. He knew how special was his only daughter, whom he loved very much and for whom he was afraid that she might fall in love with a non-religious Jew or even a non-Jew, so that he restricted her severely and often deeply wounded her. He did, however, send her to a private *gymnasium* where there was no trace of Jewishness and where her close friends were also far from Judaism. She, though, was nationalist-minded and spoke of Jewish people that would be "modern", and that Jews would settle in the Land of Israel. Being a young graduate (she finished at sixteen), temperamental and eloquent, smart and witty, she had, of course, joined a Zionist youth organization.

When her father found out about it, he complained to the principal of the *gymnasium* (which was one of the best); the lady replied, however, that a fire can be put out with rags, implying that Zionism was a lesser evil, better than communism anyway! In those days, as I have already mentioned, communism penetrated many wealthy Jewish families and influenced some of the young people who were seeking an ideal in life.

As we continued meeting – since I began to like the girl more and more, not to mention her famous family – we discussed from time to time problems of Jews and Judaism. And when it dawned on me that she would become my life companion, and that we would help each other build a Jewish home, I realized that though it isn't so easy to root out prejudices that have been building for years, she would surely change her mind when I would share with her the small

amount of Jewish knowledge that I had acquired in the last years; she would get to know a kind of Judaism that is different from her father's. She was, after all, younger than I, was of good character, and must be kind, having such a kind and good-hearted mother.

We began to talk seriously about our future. I mentioned my plans of completing my studies after our marriage.

After more than a year of meetings, I asked my dear brother, the sainted Fishl *z.l.*, to go to Łódź with me for a “word”, as it was called. My father *z.l.* had a foot problem at the time and could not come. Besides I didn't want to bother him before I was absolutely sure. It is only after we had “officially” taken each other's hand, and my brother had returned home satisfied, did a correspondence begin between the *mehutonim* and my future father-in-law Reb Avrohmstshe Majzler *z.l.* came to Piotrków; he was happy to learn that I also came from a good family.

Since we had been “going together” long enough, relatively speaking, we agreed on a wedding date, the first day of Nisan, 1933.

Meanwhile I received a rare opportunity of visiting, together with my fiancée, her famous grandfather, the Rabbi of Łask, who left an unforgettable impression on me. He was one of the great geniuses of Polish Jewry, outstanding for his humility, simplicity and nobility of character. He was loved by the entire population, even non-Jews. He came from a long rabbinical line and had been rabbi in Łask for over fifty years. He died shortly before our wedding. Of course we went to his enormous funeral, in which not only the townspeople took part, but the most important rabbis of Poland, who eulogized him.

When the time of the wedding came near, we both asked our parents to make it a modest event, limited to the closest relatives. Neither one of us wanted a parade of hundreds of guests on such a serious day. But my father-in-law claimed that people would suspect that he, a wealthy Jew, was doing so because of stinginess. The fact is that he was not nearly as stingy as people said. True, he would haggle over small sums, but if money was needed for something important, especially something constructive, such as helping someone to start a business or learn a trade, he was far from stingy.

More than 600 people came to the wedding, which was done in regal style. Immediately after the Seven Blessings we took a trip to Warsaw for a honeymoon and had an enjoyable time. Who has not seen the Jewish Warsaw, swarming and pulsating with life, in all its colors, can hardly imagine what Jewish life means. By accident we stayed in the same hotel (not a luxury one) as the great Jewish leader Zev Jabotinsky *z.l.*, an outstanding writer and orator, a man of vision and practical wisdom. His room was guarded by two Beitar members; not that anyone was afraid of an attack! In those days, even in anti-Semitic Poland, one felt much safer than today in New York or Los Angeles. It was a kind of symbol of sovereignty for the future Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

We managed to return to Łódź for Passover and experience the holiday amid the family.

Regardless of our previous theoretical discussions we kept a Jewish home, where kashrut and Sabbath were observed, as were Jewish laws and customs in general.

We also had several friends who were cultured and deeply religious people, some of them professionals – lawyers, doctors, journalists – and some religious scholars. Let me mention some who tragically perished, with their families, at the time of the gruesome mass destruction.

One of our closest friends was the sainted Leybl Horowitz *z.l.*, with whom I had been friendly for many years before my marriage. He was of great lineage, a splendid man inside and out, of noble character, sensitive, a dear soul with a talent for writing. He perished along with his

lovely and elegant wife Mala and their only son Noah (Noli). May their memory be blessed! A frequent visitor was Yosef Grynchwajg, a young and able lawyer, officially a member of the Zionist-Revisionist movement but an observant Jew, with a gift for languages and a fluent speaker of Hebrew. He married just before the war; of course we went to the wedding, which was attended by most of the educated young people who belonged to various branches of the Zionist Organization. At that wedding there were also hundreds of guests. He and his family are also among the martyrs cruelly murdered by the cursed Nazi assassins.

Another friend who was a Sabbath visitor was Reb Hayim David Rozanes *z.l.*, who was my close friend. A scholar in the best sense of the word, a man of deep thought, he would certainly have been a prominent philosopher at a famous university if he had had the opportunity. But because of his modesty and lack of support, he became a teacher at a religious school in Łódź, at not too high a salary, which was not even paid regularly, so that his living was precarious. He had a wife and a child. It was a pleasure to hear him. He clothed his deep ideas in a fine form, in word and writing. Not a trace is left of him or his family, either. My his righteous memory be blessed!

Among our close acquaintance was also Pinhas Lubinski and his family. He was very bright, a lawyer and a religious man. His wife, Frieda, came from the Markus family of Kraków; she was a granddaughter of the famous philosopher and writer, Reb Aaron Markus *z.l.*, who was born in Germany and yet was enthusiastic about the Hasidic movement, about which he wrote a book (in addition to other interesting books). We met the Lubinskis at various occasions. Pinhas perished in the bloody destruction; may his memory be blessed. The wife and family managed to survive.

Let me also recall another member of our circle of acquaintances, the aristocratic Rabbi Simkha Trajstman *z.l.*, a member of the Łódź rabbinate who was very popular in Łódź because of his nobility of character, tact and intelligence. My acquaintance with him was through the aforementioned *gaon* Rabbi Hayim Heller *z.l.*, whose student he had been, and who stayed in his house when he was in Łódź. He and his entire family were exterminated by the Nazi murderers. The last time we saw him was on a certain Sabbath, during the first few weeks when the Hitlerites had arrived in Łódź, and had called him, as a representative of the rabbinate, as well the Sochaczew rabbi, Rabbi David Bornstein *z.ts.l.*, for a “hearing” with the Gestapo chief. Rabbi Simkha *z.l.* somehow managed in some unnatural way to sneak in to our place and shared with us his impressions of the unexpected “visit.”

Speaking of our friends and acquaintances, I have quickly walked through my seven years’ stay in Łódź, the walk really was not so quick or easy. As I have mentioned, I thought about completing my studies. Meanwhile, nothing came of going back to Berlin. My wife, who had from her youth been influenced by Zionism and had desired to go through *hakhsharah* and go to Palestine as a pioneer, proposed to me right after our wedding that we go to Palestine, and that I would perhaps have an opportunity to continue my studies there. As an only daughter, it was difficult for her to rebel when she was still with her parents. Now, being independent, she wanted to live out her ideals. I wish to remark here that, though I spent many years of my youth and much of my energy on behalf of the Agudah movement, believing that that was the only way of preserving Judaism, I became aware during my years in Berlin that it was not only not the only way, but that there were other, even better ways leading to a comprehensive, authentic Judaism. I had observed the religious youth among the university people, consisting of Agudah and Mizrahi, and noticed that in regard to observing Jewishness there was no difference between

the groups; on the other hand, the virtues of friendship, relating warmly to everyone, and a love of people in general were far more prominent among the Mizrahi youth. Of course, my outlook on Eretz Israel also became different. And when my wife insisted that we speed up our *aliyah*, I agreed with her.

As is known, *aliyah* to Palestine was limited; the British administration furnished the Jewish Agency with a certain number of certificates, and these were distributed in the various countries. For so-called capitalists, however, they presented no difficulties. Since we still had our dowry (though the dollars of which the dowry consisted had lost much of their value), we turned to the Palestine Office for a certificate and received a positive answer.

We began to get ready for our journey; we sold our furniture and gave up our apartment, which was in my father-in-law's building and which had been carefully decorated before the wedding.

Suddenly my mother-in-law became ill. She was taken to the hospital and after a short time died at the age of 49, an event that shook up the entire family. She had been bright, good-hearted, gentle, generous in the old style, helping the needy in a quiet and respectful way.

Of course this created a new situation. We had to postpone our journey, since we could not leave my father-in-law alone. And if this had not been enough, he too became ill, after a few months, with an ear infection and had to be taken to Warsaw where he underwent a delicate operation. My wife stayed with him the whole time. Since we had given up our apartment and furniture, we temporarily moved in with him. It took months before he became himself again.

In my father-in-law's building there also lived my brother-in-law, my wife's older brother and my father-in-law's only son, Itshe *z.l.*, an intelligent and truly religious young man, gentle and modest. He had a wife and two young daughters, all of them eventual victims of the Nazi murderers. Also, of the whole family of his pious wife Bronka, a dear, pure soul, a great-granddaughter of the famous rabbi of Gostynin, Rabbi Yehiel Meir Lifschutz *z.ts.l.* – known as the “good Jew of Gostynin” or the *T'hilim Yid* [Psalms Jew] – not a trace was left. May their memory be blessed!

My wife also had a half-brother, Yeshaya Yaakov (Salek) Weltfried *z.l.*, from a rabbinical family (Rosprze). My mother-in-law had divorced her first husband when she was 17 or 18 years old. Salek was a capable real-estate manager, a clever and good person. He was one of the survivors; his only child Yitzhak (Jurek) and his intelligent and cultured wife, Rachel, of a well-known family of wealth (Lipszyc, her mother was of the rich and philanthropic Kuszmirek family), perished in the camps. May their memory be blessed forever! My brother-in-law died in Israel on the 17th of Tammuz, 1977. His second wife, Miriam (Marysia), née Foerster, also a fine person, still lives in Israel. This brother-in-law of mine, though he was far from a man of means and lived by his work as a bookkeeper, nevertheless, not forgetting his tragically lost family, would not take any money from the German government!

I have described my wife's immediate family, to whom she was closely tied and became even more so now, after her mother's death.

As I have said, we had our room in my father-in-law's large apartment, where we lived with him. Of course by this time we could no longer think about our *aliyah* to Palestine.

Meanwhile a new member arrived in the family. More than two years after our marriage our son Yaakov (Coby) was born. He was named for his great-grandfather, the Łask rabbi *z.ts.l.*, who has already been mentioned. We had a traditional *bris* and *pidyon haben*. He was born on the 2nd of Iyar, 5795 (May 5, 1935). We then moved to our own apartment in the same building.

The following year, after a brief illness, my dear father *z.l.* died. The world truly became dark for me. We all sat *Shiva* in Piotrków and could find no consolation. A home that for so many years been a gathering place, not only for the family but for many community functions, was suddenly destroyed. Our dear mother, the martyr, moved to Wieluń to be with her eldest daughter; there she was received with open arms, and in all the remaining years was treated with great respect and warmth.

At that time I already had a position in a cooperative bank, in which I had also deposited money. In a certain measure I derived satisfaction from my work at the bank, where I had the opportunity of getting to know various people.

In order to say kaddish for my father *z.l.*, I joined a prayer group, not far from where I lived, whose members mostly tradesmen, simple but good Jews. I was amazed to discover that among them there were people, including the Torah reader, who suffered hunger and did not have enough bread to feed their families. In general it was possible to see Jewish poverty in the rich industrial city of Łódź. It was heartbreaking to see policemen chasing young Jewish boys who had tried to sell fresh bagels in the street, taking from them all they had.

This is not to say that there was no charity among the Jews of Łódź. In fact there were all kinds of philanthropic institutions, maintained by the Jewish community, as well as private charity organizations. But it was difficult to fight poverty among Jews. Let it be said for the sake of truth: the situation was much worse among non-Jews!

As soon as I finished saying kaddish, I joined another prayer house (at Manat's, Cegielniana 4), where I met my friends, the lawyer Meir Shimon Reichman (who survived, lived for a time in Argentina and then in Israel, where he died), and the aforementioned Yosef Gyncwajg; may their memory be blessed.

On a Passover we went to Wieluń, where my mother was living with our oldest sister and brother-in-law, about whom we have already written. There was also my brother-in-law's father, Reb Meir Bobrowski *z.l.*, who was a dear, good-hearted Jew, a Torah scholar and deeply religious; he was happy whenever he could do someone a favor. He and all his children and grandchildren, as well as his wife, from a distinguished family, perished tragically in the bloody deluge together with the millions of Jews, may their souls be bound in the bundle of life!

Time does not stand still. Our son turned two years old. His physical development was normal, that is, he laughed and he cried, he passed through the usual childhood diseases, sometimes with complications, which made us edgy and nervous. His eating habits could more than once exasperate his sensitive mother. On the other hand his mental development surprised not only his family, but also other people who got to know him especially the doctors who treated him. They saw in him a phenomenal child. When he was two he was already beginning to read. He had taught himself. How? We don't know exactly; what we do know is that his first learning material consisted of the inscription, in large letters, of the name of the school that was across the street from our apartment. Who taught him the letters? Maybe it was our Jewish maid. He attracted the attention of strangers at a railroad station, when we would go on a trip with him, or in a park, when we would go for a walk, by reading aloud signs or newspaper headlines when he could barely walk. It did not take him long to learn to read Yiddish and Hebrew. He learned many Hebrew letters from announcements in which the same name was printed in Latin and Hebrew characters, that he could compare... Then he began to ask us and our acquaintances and quickly learned also to read the prayer book.

He also had musical talent; if someone began to sing something he would immediately recognize the tune, and he himself sang Polish and Hebrew songs.

With each month, as he grew older so grew his interest in reading. What was most interesting was that he remained a child and played with other children. He could not understand that other children could not read certain words.

Some doctors thought that he should be held back as much as possible, by taking his books away and the like. But most recommended that he not be bothered, since it wouldn't help.

At that time, in 1938, a crisis occurred at the bank where I worked. The managing director (from a distinguished family – his father had been in the Polish Senate) suddenly disappeared. He had secretly been transferring money abroad by way of Gdańsk, and that was illegal in Poland. When he found out that he was about to be arrested, he fled. People who had all their savings in the bank came storming in, demanding their money back. The management and the board of directors met. Money began to be paid out, but there was not enough for everyone. I managed to save a part of my deposit. Some employees were also arrested but were later released. After many stormy meetings, with the participation of the representative of the cooperative society that was responsible for the bank (that representative was, by the way, the well-known and talented journalist and orthodox activist, Reb Isaac Baer Ekerman *z.l.*, a friend of mine who was famous for his ready wit), it was decided to liquidate the bank. It took some time to settle accounts, to accumulate all the assets that belonged to the bank, and to determine the creditors' and the bank's debts.

Of all the employees I alone remained. Of course it was no longer in the large offices at Piotrkowska 6, but in a small room at Piotrkowska 9, which the owner of the building, Nata Ofman, made available for the purpose. (If I am not mistaken, he had been a member of the bank's board). There I would go for several hours a day and busy myself with numbers and accounts.

I don't remember how long I worked there. But I now had more time to play with our son and to receive guests and relatives.

From time to time we would be visited by my youngest sister Judith from Piotrków, where she lived with her husband, the sainted Michael Cederbaum *z.l.* They were married in 1934. My sister was famous in Piotrków for her external appearance. Her husband was the only son of Reb Yankl Cederbaum *z.l.*, the owner of the famous Cederbaum printing house, which printed various prayer books and Pentateuch's that were distributed throughout the world, wherever Jews lived. My brother-in-law was also pleasant to look at, intelligent, delicate and a consciously religious young man. He perished in one of the German death camps. May his memory be blessed, and may his soul be bound in the bundle of life!

After the war my sister married the well-known activist and orator for Po'alei Agudath Israel, Reb Shimon Zuker *z.l.* He was born in Włocławek and was orphaned of his father when he was still a very young boy, who already had to help his mother and sisters make ends meet. When he was a little older he became the breadwinner and also had time to engage in public affairs. He was one of the pioneers of the Po'alei Agudah movement, traveling around cities and towns and making speeches that were enthusiastically received. He had been married to Esther Bobrowski, who had been a Beis Yaakov teacher in Włocławek, a fine woman in every respect. She was the daughter of my sister's father-in-law in Wieluń, the aforementioned Reb Meir Bobrowski *z.l.*, and perished tragically with their wonderful children in the Nazi hell. Shimon Zuker *z.l.* knew my sister well. And when he found out she was left alone, he made efforts to

find her. After their wedding they lived in Paris and then moved to New York. Though he was deeply involved in business and later also in real-estate management, some of the properties being in neighborhoods where it was dangerous to walk, he always found time to help people, which he did with fiery enthusiasm. He absorbed his warmth from the Hasidic environment in which he was born and raised. Even in the death camps he became known for getting more food for the sick and weak, truly risking his life in the process.

He became especially known for his successful rescue work after the war; he saved hundreds and hundreds of children who had survived in Poland and neighboring countries by hiding in various places. He exhibited not only organizational abilities but also indescribable dedication. Most of the children ended up in Israel.

And this was at a time when many of the survivors had plunged into business in an effort to get rich by any means possible. He himself, though relatively young, was an experienced businessman, since, as already mentioned, he had already begun to do business as a young boy in order to help his widowed mother feed the family. The unbearable situation of the lonely and miserable children, however, absorbed him completely, so that he had no time to think of anything else.

While living in Paris he continued with the rescue work and began to be active in business as well; he did the same when he moved back to Bergen-Belsen, where we lived. He was never rich but always behaved in a generous and aristocratic way.

We will have another opportunity to write about my brother-in-law *z.l.* after his move to New York. Meanwhile, let's go back to Łódź, to the time when I was out of a job and was planning to open my own bank with partners (among them Rabbi Dr. Yitzhak Levin, a many-sided scholar, a man of tact and fine manners; in Łódź he was a member of the city council, and in America a history professor at Yeshiva University and a world leader of Agudath Israel). I also had the promise of a representative of the largest cooperative association to help legalize the bank.

At that time the mood among Jews was tense; anti-Semitism had grown after the Polish foreign minister, Beck, had tried to ingratiate himself with the Hitler government. When the arrogant and criminal Germans tore off a piece of democratic Czechoslovakia, the Poles insolently also occupied a part of that country, claiming that it had once belonged to them. Jews, and all those with a sense of justice, were indignant with the representatives of England and France, who had given their agreement to the robbery, bowing before the robber. The ingratiation with the Hitlerite Germans did not help the Poles when Hitler took on them a few months later, demanding the return of the city of Danzig and other concessions, military and political. Now the leaders of England and France acknowledged that their policy of appeasing Hitler had been wrong by far.

The newspapers carried opposing views: some held that war was imminent, while others were sure that Hitler would not dare wage war against the "strongest" powers of Europe. The opinions of individuals were similarly divided.

With every passing month the mood became more edgy. But no one had supposed that war would break out so quickly! We also did not know how empty were the boasts of the Polish leaders that they were so ready for an attack that they could immediately launch a counteroffensive and after a few days march into Berlin!

Needless to say, in such an uncertain situation we were not too involved with the plans for the new bank.

4. War

On the first of September 1939, an exceptionally beautiful, clear and sunny day in the smoky and dusty city of Łódź, we suddenly heard a roaring noise of airplanes that circle above the tall smokestacks of the great industrial city. We didn't know whose planes they were. The Polish radio, which suddenly went from bragging to stammering, brought unclear news in incomplete sentences; what we managed to understand was the warning to beware of the gas attacks that the enemy uses when he first enters a city. Instructions were also given on how to protect oneself in case of such an attack. My heart still feels torn when I remember the struggle that I had with that little angel, my brother-in-law's sweet little daughter, who would not let a mask be put on her, but cried aloud... we tried to close her mouth, fearing that she might be poisoned. It turned out that the German bandits did not use gas then. Besides, they tried as much as possible to spare the city of Łódź, which had a large German population; indeed, later Łódź was included in the district that was "united" with Germany, while most of Poland belonged to the so-called *General-Gouvernement*, with Kraków as capital. The name of Łódź was changed to Litzmannstadt (in honor of a German general).

The Polish radio became almost mute. All that was heard was weak, scratchy march music. We soon understood that something was not right with the Polish government and its "powerful" armies, that had been so bragged about for the past few days. Here and there we could see a seemingly lost Polish soldier, in a wrinkled uniform, barely walking but constantly looking around himself. This was the first day of the war. Everybody, Jews as well, could still walk freely through the city streets.

No one could imagine that the next day Jewish Łódź would turn into an accursed hell.

Whenever the potential war was discussed, and people, on the basis of reports from Germany and of the accounts of Polish Jews who had been forcefully and unjustly expelled from their homes, would express their great fear of a German invasion, I would try to reassure them. My argument was that I had lived in Germany for years and that I could not imagine the Germans behaving as they were being described.

I soon realized how naive I had been. As soon as they entered a city, they would, with the help of the local *Volksdeutsche* [ethnic Germans], attack Jewish stores and homes like savage wolves. They would grab people to do heavy labor and beat the workers till they bled, some of them being shot to death just like that. On entering they broke in doors and beat the inhabitants on the head, so that people went with them immediately, some of them never to return.

I cannot forget what happened in my home. I somehow had the premonition to lock and latch all the doors. My wife was not at home at the time. Only our four-year-old son was asleep in bed. Suddenly I heard the sound of the door being broken and savage yells; not thinking, I went out through a side door and went up to the attic. I was there for a few minutes and then went down, noticing that the doors had been broken open and the child was still quietly lying in bed. My wife justly complained, how could I have left a child alone? Though at the time we didn't know that the murderous Germans were "hunting" for Jewish children, that question pained my conscience for a long time.

As we were later informed, many of the Jews who had been taken for "work" were sent away or shot dead. I saw in the incident the hand of Providence to keep me alive, as I saw it again more than once in later years, when I was in the greatest danger and managed to survive in a way that could not be explained logically. On that day, in my apartment at Cegielniana 25, on

the third floor, when I heard the storming of the door, my instinct said to me: run! I had never been in the attic; I didn't even know how to get up there. But in a flash I was there, hearing the banging and ripping out of doors, as well as screams like those of a wild pig. After a few minutes quiet returned, I went down and saw my child!

There soon appeared notices by the new authority announcing restrictions of movement for the Jews as well as the confiscation of their property and businesses. Failure to comply with any order was punishable by death.

The authority, that is, the infamous Gestapo, also found a Jewish activist and named him head (*Ältester*) of the Jews. Just how the devilish Gestapo managed to pick that particular Jew, I don't know. He was Mordechai Hayim Rumkowski, a tall man with disheveled gray hair, a Zionist and the director of a Jewish orphanage. Most of the survivors of the Łódź Ghetto think of him as a criminal who sacrificed Jewish lives for a whim of his. He was a man with dictatorial tendencies, and woe to him who dared to contradict him. A minority of survivors point to his positive activities, such as his concern for Jewish education, shown by his organization of a network of Jewish schools, adult classes and the like. He is also said to have helped rabbis and teachers. His defenders concede that his greatest error was to believe the German murderers and to show no resistance to their draconian demands; he had an illusion that if he cooperated with the Germans he would succeed in saving more Jews. He therefore introduced an iron discipline. All told I was under his regime for about six months, and only once did I come across him, by accident; he impressed me as a wild, crazy man who looked down on everyone.

The Gestapo ordered him to form a community council of respected individuals who would be confirmed on being presented to the Gestapo.

The bloody murderers had, of course, planned everything beforehand; as soon as the candidates were presented to them, they were arrested and, except for one or two, were never seen again.

Among them were prominent community leaders, industrialists, as well as professionals, from all Jewish circles.

To my surprise, I received an invitation to go and work in the office of the "new" community. This probably happened through the initiative of our good friend, Rabbi Simkha Trajstman *z.l.*, an aristocrat in the fullest sense of the word, about whom we have already written. He didn't like Rumkowski's methods from the beginning and he moved to Warsaw.

In the office I met many people I knew, journalists and writers, among them the now well-known writer Yeshaya Spiegel.

Among the first tasks of the community council was the regulation of the forced labor that the Germans were demanding of the Jews. The community was obligated to present the necessary number of workers every day. Every Jewish inhabitant was required to register for work, but could also pay to have another worker sent in his place; there was no lack of unemployed people, poverty grew from day to day, so that people reported to work voluntarily.

This was an attempt to avoid the breaking into Jewish homes in order to grab Jews for work, as the *Volksdeutsche* liked to do.

At first we worked in the old headquarters of the Jewish Community at Pomorska 18. Later we were moved to Cegielniana, 19 or 21, very near my house. We were paid with products that were essential in those days, since it was becoming ever more difficult to find food, even at higher prices. My saintly mother, who was visiting us at the time, was truly a blessing for all of us with her help and her genius for housekeeping; before we could turn around everything was

done, quietly, without her appearing to do anything. Since we had always had a maid, my wife had never done any so-called hard work, and now, being meticulously clean, she washed the floors and the like with her own hands. As a result she got a skin inflammation and had to see a dermatologist. Being sick was not among the most pleasant things in those days.

But, as was said, nothing was lacking at home. My father-in-law, who had been a prosperous financier, would remark repeatedly that we were living beyond our means. Now, when he would visit, he would remark that we were “living like people,” admitting that our way of life had been the correct one, because even at a time of crisis such as this one we got by better than he did...

He asked us to take money from him in dollars, but we didn't need it.

When he was called by the Germans to show where he had his wealth, he immediately, in his way, indicated the bank where he kept his securities, cash in dollars and in gold, jewelry and the like. He himself went with the robbers and gave them everything. My wife, his only daughter of whom he was so proud, accompanied him and later told how even those robbers were amazed that this Jew was giving them so much money, and they even gave him a receipt. This proved very useful to him later, in the closed ghetto, when rich Jews were called by the murderous criminal police to give up the rest of their hidden fortunes, he was able to show the receipt and so was saved from the inquisitorial investigators, who barely let anyone out alive.

In that fearful mood of terror, when Jews realized that their lives were not safe, hundreds and thousands took the road, with a few possessions in hand, toward Warsaw and from there to Russia. Some of them remained in the Polish capital, which had not yet been occupied by the Germans.

In Łódź the situation was becoming more difficult day by day as new decrees were being issued. Particularly upsetting was the decree concentrating all the Jews of Łódź in a limited area, in the poorest quarter of the city. Our son learned, after a few days, to read German in Gothic characters and to his great sorrow read that he had to leave his beautiful room, so beautifully decorated and furnished with made-to-order furniture.

According to the order we were allowed to take nothing from our homes, except clothes and some bedding.

Immediately there began a furious hunt for living quarters; no one, not even a large family, could ask for a whole apartment—after all, it was necessary to find housing for 200,000 people in a small, very limited area. The head of the housing department of the Community, the lawyer Naftalin, a friendly man, whom I asked for an apartment, explaining to him that I had a child and that my mother was visiting, not only soon let me have a place at Aleksandrowska (Limanowskiego) 28, but also promised to find a place for my brother-in-law Icio *z.l.*, who had two children, near mine.

The “move” began in February of 1940.

Who has not seen the wandering of thousands and thousands of old people and tiny children, pushed and bloodied by the German police who would beat on the head someone who would bend down in order to pick up a fallen package, has not seen the meaning of degradation and cruel treatment, worse than four-legged wild beasts!

Our assigned home was not free yet. To our surprise we found a place to move into temporarily. The helper in the office where I worked lived in the area and cordially invited us and gave up to us the only bedroom with its two beds, while he and his family “moved” to the small kitchen. It is hard to imagine such generosity, but it was a fact! When we admired his

sacrifice and kindness, he remarked, laughing, “for you people from the rich area it would have been hard, since you are used to many rooms—dining room, nursery, bedroom, and so on, and all would be taken up, but in our one room there is room for everybody!”

Finally we got our own rooms, and I resumed working in the same office but now in the ghetto, at Podrzeczna 10.

People did not cease streaming in, not only from the various neighborhoods of Łódź, but also from surrounding cities and towns; the ghetto became narrower and closer. It was winter. The sky was covered and the dark rooms became even darker; a kind of depression took hold in the dark rooms of the “new” office as well. The conditions became worse in every respect. The ghetto was still open, and there were still people who could move in and out, bringing food and articles that could no longer be found in the ghetto itself.

My brother Fishl *z.l.* often sent us messengers (people who did not look Jewish would travel as “Aryans,” using documents as Poles), asking us to come join him in Piotrków, which belonged to the “Gouvernement” and where life was easier.

At last we decided to go there. But how? My brother’s messengers gave us the addresses of people who specialized in smuggling travelers along byways, avoiding the official border posts. They charged a lot but could guarantee nothing, that is, we had to pray that we could make it across safely!

We made contact with one such specialist, reputed to be an honest man. My father-in-law *z.l.*, apparently, had some dollars left and wanted us to take them, but we took only what we needed and took the road, deathly afraid. But along the entire route hardly anyone bothered us. In Tomaszów, another industrial city that was already in the Gouvernement, we got off for a while in order to rest, and we met Jewish manufacturers from Łódź whom we knew. Following a wink from our “guide,” the carter, horse and cart were reattached and we went back on the road to Piotrków. It was there that we were first stopped by the German police, who ordered us immediately off the cart, because Jews were not allowed to travel on wheels! So we walked for a stretch and then, when no one was looking, we climbed back on the cart and arrived in Piotrków on April 1, 1940.

Our brother *z.l.* received us warmly and cordially and gave us his bedroom, even though he had his in-laws from Sterców, with their family, staying with him. In addition, he invited guests from among the refugees who had been expelled from Gniezno (near Poznań) and been brought to Piotrków.

My mother *z.l.* stayed with our youngest sister Judith Cederbaum, where my older sister and her husband, the Bobrowskis from Wieluń, were also staying.

When we arrived a spring breeze was blowing, and it seemed as if we could breathe more easily. Although Piotrków had been one of the first cities where a ghetto was set up and the black symbol of the German death’s head that marked the ghetto boundary put great fear into us the first time that we saw it, we felt far freer than in Łódź; people still lived outside the ghetto and Jews could still move freely about the city.

The president of the Community, Mr. Zalman Tenenberg, a former instructor in the ORT school and a leader of the Bund, knew how to “bite into” the Nazi mayor Drechsler and some of the Gestapo people, and therefore the pressure was not felt as strongly in Piotrków, at least not at first.

Our brother Fishl *z.l.* was also a member of the Community Council, which consisted of representatives of all social groups. He was in charge of the provision department, which was

one of the most important ones at the time. It was not accidental that he was entrusted with such a position, which required clean hands, honesty and sensitivity to human needs. He was the essence of kindness. His whole day was taken up with helping the needy, and there was no lack of these. He made special efforts to support needy people who had once been generous donors in an honorable way, and he sent foodstuffs to their homes without giving the correct address. In this task of helping the respectable needy he had the collaboration of his friend Reb Moshe Nordman *z.l.*, also a Council member, a devoted community leader and a kind man. Of his family there survived one daughter, while he and his family perished in the hell of Treblinka, together with tens of thousands of martyrs from Piotrków, may their memory be blessed!

In the Community administration there also existed a department of social self-help, which at first had been supported by the American "Joint" (a worldwide aid organization for Jews), and occupied itself with helping the sick, the weak etc. Its main source of income had been the monthly dues of the members. The department was headed by the universally esteemed and popular leader, the martyr Jakub Berliner *z.l.*, a longtime leader of the Bund, a member of the City Council and a former president of the Jewish Community.

The following episode is testimony of his tact and kindness: he once came to visit my father *z.l.*, who was not feeling well. He was offered, as was the custom, a glass of tea, pastry and fruit, but he steadfastly refused. He then quietly turned to me (we were on friendly terms) and asked me for a head covering... Once I found one for him, he accepted the proffered hospitality. He did not want to hurt my father's feelings.

I began to work in this department a short time after arriving in Piotrków. Among the people working there was M. Sternfeld, a well-known accountant and also a fine man (whom the Germans later "sent away" and nothing more was heard of the intelligent, sensitive Moniek), as well as young Shapiro, a follower of Jabotinsky *z.l.* and himself an capable man with a talent for organization.

I remember that on one Passover eve Berliner *z.l.*, who did not like to boast, told us that we could have a peaceful seder because he was sure that all the needy had been provided with matzoth, potatoes and whatever else we had.

After Sternfeld's arrest we were all beaten down. We were hoping that he would soon be released. His "crime" had been to organize a flower day in order to collect money for social self-help.

Once I was invited to a small meeting (only a few people were called) concerned with doing something about education for Jewish children. I was interested in a Jewish education for our five-year-old son, who was reading books in Polish and German but not in Hebrew or Yiddish. These languages were not even mentioned in the private kindergarten to which we had sent him, and in general he was not satisfied with the teaching there. I therefore asked a well-known Hebraist, Reb Yosef Berish Rozenblum, a former Hebrew teacher in the *gymnasium* and a talented writer, to give my son private lessons, and he agreed. Being himself a talented man, he soon noticed our son's ability for languages, and would tell us about his progress. Reb Yosef Berish was also a member of the Community Council and perished with his family in that infamous Treblinka. May their memory be blessed!

From Łódź we had brought some jewelry and whatever else we could salvage from our apartment, and from time to time we would sell some of it to non-Jews through middlemen.

As I said, the unjust arrest of such a powerful talent as Moniek (Moshe) Sternfeld *z.l.*, who had been the head of the social self-aid department, provoked great consternation in

community council circles. The Gestapo people, whom we had been bribing, had informed no one. The person who worked with them the most was Szymon Warszawski, the vice president of the community council, a Jew who had once been a scholar, had a good head, had been a rich business man and used his business talent in dealing with the Gestapo. He did not have the idealism of the great majority of the community council members, who all did what they could to save Jewish lives; Warszawski had been active in the business association and a member of the Łódź chamber of commerce. He participated little in Jewish social and cultural affairs, though Jewish life was not foreign to him. For example, later, in the Bugaj labor camp he allowed the opening of a kosher kitchen for those who wanted to eat kosher food, and showed respect to someone who was considered a scholar.

At that time my tender and delicate wife began to feel ill, with a slight fever that she couldn't get rid of. On the advice of a doctor she went away for a few weeks to a village not far away, where the air was clean and clear, and where city people used to come for rest and relaxation during the summer. She came back feeling much better, but the higher-than-normal temperature remained; new decrees and reports about the terrible conditions for Jews in other ghettos made her forget her physical condition.

Bad news also arrived from Łódź, where the ghetto was tightly closed, hunger was catastrophic, and people were besides themselves with need. Hearing about it, we felt guilty over having a life that, relatively, was not bad, while the remaining family in Łódź was hungry and living in prison.

We therefore felt happy when we heard that in Warsaw there was the freight company of Kahn and Heller, whose official business was the transport of goods from Łódź to Warsaw, but who for a certain amount of money also brought people out of Łódź. They were said to have the approval of the Gestapo.

To our bitter disappointment, the Gestapo suddenly stopped the transports from Łódź to Warsaw, and arrested one of the partners. We never saw the money again and didn't even think about it; our thoughts were with the suffering families, whom we couldn't help. All we had from them was a personal message brought by a young woman, who truly risked her life, penetrating into the Łódź ghetto and sneaking out to get back to Piotrków.

According to information we received after the war, most of the family died of starvation and epidemic diseases, and were buried in the Jewish cemetery in Łódź.

Though conditions in Piotrków weren't nearly so bad as in Łódź, there was no shortage of the hungry, especially among the hundreds and thousands of refugees who were steadily arriving in Piotrków from various cities and towns in Poland, near and far. The Community Council tried with all its might to supply all the homeless with a roof over their heads, lodging them in social halls (such as the Maccabi), neighborhood synagogues and Hasidic *shtibls*, as well as the Great Synagogue, in addition to private residences; there was practically no Jewish home where there were no refugees. The Community also provided clothing and, to a modest degree, food.

The Piotrków Community also had to provide, every day, hundreds of Jews for forced labor. Every Jew, from 14 to 60 years old, was called to such labor. Whoever did not go had to pay for a substitute. In many places the work led to death; more than one person died either at work or after returning home.

Particularly deep concerns were caused by the demand to provide people for work in camps in the Lublin region. When some 900 workers were sent, a few days later there came

terrifying stories about the inhuman conditions under which the men were forced to carry out the hardest labor, with no food to eat and no place to sleep, and being murderously beaten by the SS. The workers' parents sent them food packages through the Community Council; also, a delegation of the Council went there and distributed some clothes, food and money among the workers. Many of them were shot dead while working. Helping the workers was the responsibility of Mr. Gomberg from Łódź, who had moved to the Piotrków ghetto with his mother and who was an energetic and dynamic man. At the beginning of 1941, leaders of the Community undertook a rescue operation aimed at bringing home the exhausted workers, many of them sick and maimed, and, together with Mr. Gomberg, they succeeded – an important, encouraging experience.

Jews in Piotrków and its region continued to be occupied in all kinds of work. Local industries began to employ Jews, for example the well-known Hortensja, Kara, and Feniks glass foundries. They exploited the Jews by paying them a pittance, but conditions were much better. The general manager of Hortensja, Christmann, though he was a German, had Jewish friends and was said to help Jews quietly. Also the Petrikauer Holzwerke [Piotrków wood products factory], which occupied the buildings of the Piotrkowska Manufaktura textile plant (which had belonged to a Jewish industrialist in Łódź and all of whose machinery had been confiscated by the Germans and sent to Germany), took on Jewish workers. The managers of this factory, Dietrich and Fischer, were Gestapo men and we will have more occasion to talk about them.

The Community also organized a “shop” in the former ORT school, where hundreds of men and women worked in a variety of trades. The work was done for the Germans, providing them with linens and clothes; it was said to be for the German military.

Speaking of trades, it is worth mentioning that tradesmen such as tailors and shoemakers who, with the help of the Community, worked for the Gestapo, the police and other agencies of the occupying power, were privileged: they could move about everywhere, and their standard of living was like that of a superior class.

Not in vain do the Sages of the Talmud (Gemara *Sanhedrin*, 29) tell us that, as people have reported, in a seven-year famine, no door of a tradesman was touched, that is, he never suffered from hunger, because a tradesman can be paid in food for his work. And this is what we saw in the ghettos.

The Community Council also maintained a series of useful institutions, such as aid for mother and child, a medical clinic, a dental office, a pharmacy, a people's kitchen and a special kitchen for needy notables. When a typhus epidemic brought out, a special sanitary commission was created, chaired by Dr. M. Jakubowicz, that saw to the cleanliness of the homes, the bathing of the Jewish residents, and the disinfecting of clothes. I also worked with this sanitary commission for a while.

Until this day I don't know how the Community had the financial resources to pay for all these expenses, in addition to having periodically to pay various contributions that were demanded of the Jews, and the costly gifts that had to be given as bribes to various officials and their assistants. The Social Self-Help Committee of the Community, which solicited monthly contribution from every non-poor Jew, was at first—before the United States' entry into the war—considerably helped by the American Joint Distribution Committee.

The Jews of the Piotrków ghetto made great efforts, especially in 1940 and the first half of 1941, to adapt to the new way of life and to events that more than once shook up the Jewish population, hearing that so-and-so was shot dead for no reason, that others were sent away, and

that some Jews were beaten or tortured for no reason. We would adapt to some new order, such as the one to give up all furs and jewelry, by quietly selling such goods to non-Jews for food or money. There were people with non-Jewish buyers who risked their lives by leaving the ghetto, though every Jew had to wear a white cloth with a Magen David. Mostly this was done by people who worked outside the ghetto, and would go out in groups.

After the German attack on Russia, June 22, 1941, the atmosphere became tenser. Also, the underground resistance movement intensified its activity. The leaders of the movement in Warsaw were in contact with the socialist leaders in Piotrków, among them those of the Bund.

But the activity of the underground organization at that time was limited to distributing anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi propaganda material. Only a few Bund activists took part in it, though a greater number knew about it.

It happened that while the police were searching for smuggled valuables on a train, they noticed a suspicious-looking suitcase, and a Polish woman passenger pointed out the woman who was the owner of the suitcase; the latter was immediately arrested, because police found illegal newspapers and other propaganda materials, as well as a list of several Bund leaders and their addresses.

After an inquisitorial hearing by the Gestapo, using their horrible methods of unbearable torture, the woman gave the name and address of the person who had supplied her with the propaganda material. The train conductor also revealed, under inhuman torture, names of Bund activists who had been dealing with the illegal literature.

During the first days of July 1941, on a Saturday, the Community Council chairman, Zalman Tenenberg, was arrested. Darkness overcame the ghetto; the news spread that all Council members had been arrested! Actually, only members belonging to the Bund and other workers' parties were taken. A wild chase of Bund activists began, with the threat that if they were not found, others would be taken in their place. Hearing that, Jakub Berliner, one of the most popular and best-liked community leaders in Piotrków, turned himself in voluntarily to the Gestapo. Tenenberg, who was "friendly" with several Gestapo men, to whom he had more than once given sizable gifts, behaved with courage and dignity. The remaining council members tried to intervene on his behalf on all fronts but to no avail. It is worth reminding that the city commissioner Drechsel, with whom Tenenberg was well acquainted, was no longer in Piotrków; his place was taken by Buss, who was better "acquainted" with Warszawski.

After an investigation that took ten weeks (how could the people bear it?), almost all those arrested were sent to Auschwitz. Three of the arrested labor activists who did not belong to the Bund were freed. Two Bund activists had managed to hide.

Only a few days after the sending away, some of the wives received telegrams announcing that their husbands had died of diseases... People who had seen how the arrestees were led out of the prison, barefoot and with hands tied, broke into weeping in the street and tore at their hair, seeing how activists who had dedicated themselves to the Ghetto Jews and who had a short time before been respected by the same bandits were being led to slaughter.

This event was a bad omen concerning the future existence of the ghetto.

Warszawski was the chairman, and his vice-chairman was Itshe Feiner; the council members were: Attorney S. Zylbersztajn, Michal Herz, our dear brother Fishl z.l., Moshe Nordman, A. Samelson, and Judge Bornsztajn as General Secretary.

The aforementioned were the active Council members; of the less active ones who had belonged to the previous council, the following remained: Sz. Zygielman, M. Michalson, M. Goldblum, B. Zylberszac, and others whose names I don't remember.

Meanwhile, rumors had spread in the Ghetto about mass murders and evacuations in other cities. Not all, including the writer of these lines, believed them. Only our brother Fishl *z.l.* was steadily pessimistic.

When the news arrived about the mass evacuations from Warsaw and other ghettos, even the "nonbelievers" lost their optimism; the community tried to open new shops in which work would be done for the Germans, and as is known, workers were spared.

In 1942 people arrived from a number of cities that had been evacuated, and brought horrifying reports about the evacuation actions, provoking panic among the Jews of the Piotrków ghetto. The panic became even greater when the Council was informed that even in Radom, which was in the same district as Piotrków, was subjected unexpectedly to an evacuation action. From a reliable source the community was informed that the Gestapo was preparing a new list of the Jewish population for specific purposes.

Somehow a cloud settled on Fishl's good-natured face. Only later did we find out that Warszawski had revealed a secret to him, namely, that first of all older people would be sent away, that is, that we would lose our dear mother, whom we loved as life itself. If so, he said, there was no point in staying alive; this is what he said to a friend.

In the last months of 1942 it became clear that an evacuation action would take place in Piotrków as well.

A certain part of the city, of very limited area, around the so-called Jews' Street (Stara Warszawska), was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. This happened during the High Holy Days. The mood was desperate and depressed; many *minyans* were arranged in private homes, and all were filled to overflowing with worshipers, who poured out the bitterness in their hearts and fervently prayed for the disappearance of the Evil Empire from the world.

People also tried to acquire "Aryan" identity papers, and for large amounts of money or valuables hid themselves and their remaining families with non-Jews. Very few of these people managed to survive. Others built bunkers in order to hide temporarily until after the "action." Somehow it all seemed like a bad dream, especially for those who would not and could not imagine all the gruesome facts that people had been telling about other cities, which were being systematically emptied of Jews.

Gradually we could see that it was no dream and that even Piotrków, regardless of Warszawski's "good" relations with the Gestapo, would not avoid the destruction.

First of all, suddenly all the Jews from the surrounding cities and towns were brought into the restricted ghetto, and all those who worked outside the ghetto were ordered to take all their goods out their homes and to remain at their work places.

A terrible panic was provoked by the news that altogether 2,000 Jews (out of 20,000) would be left in Piotrków. And Warszawski is trying to increase the number to 3,000.

In order to assure that nothing would happen to me, my dear brother Fishl *z.l.* entered me into the *Ordnungsdienst*, that is, the Jewish "police"; all the other Council members did likewise: Itshe Feiner with his brother David (a good friend of mine, a handsome, learned and talented man, who perished with his wife and his beautiful only daughter, may their memory be blessed!), Warszawski with his son-in-law, and Zylbersztajn with his son-in-law; also Blachman, Poznański, and others.

Our brother *z.l.* knew that I had a distaste for the police force. The reason was that I had once noticed, when I was working in the Jewish Self-Help office, how a Jewish “policeman” was beating a Jew in the courtyard of the Community House; I got very upset and I said out loud that I was ashamed to be working under the same roof with a Jew like that. My words reached Chairman Tenenberg *z.l.*, who got angry with me and wanted immediately to remove me from all Community work. However, my good friend Jakub Berliner *z.l.*, who was kindhearted and influential, intervened on my behalf with the chairman and nothing happened. Now, it was explained to me, it was a matter of life and death, so that I agreed to put on the hat. At this opportunity I will mention my “activity” as an official member of the so-called *Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst*. According to the Sages (*Shekalim* 83-42) we must justify ourselves before people just as before God.

First of all I will indicate the fact that I could not have been active, since after the resettlement I took over the management of the provision department that was directed by Fishl *z.l.* Occasionally I was sent to carry out a particular mission. One evening the “commander-in-chief” of the *Ordnungsdienst* called a meeting of all official members, without exception, and reminded us that a grave danger threatened the Ghetto population if a sufficient number of workers was not presented. I wanted to get out of the job, but another “policeman,” a simple and decent man (there were many such), met me in the street and asked to join him in checking on a man who did not show up for work. I went along because I wanted to get it over with. The Jew came along immediately. Had he been reluctant, or asked to be let off because he wasn’t feeling well, I would certainly have tried to influence my companion to pretend that we hadn’t known of him.

In another case I went alone to see a woman (I may have known her sister), and when I saw her I told her that they were looking for her. I don’t deserve any thanks for that, but that was what my conscience dictated.

One of the survivors of Piotrków, who to my astonishment became an official representative of the survivors (no one elected him, and I still don’t understand it), was said to have told something unpleasant about me. When I once met him accidentally, he didn’t say a word about it to me. As I was informed, he had accused me of nothing more or less than having indirectly caused his mother to be sent away!

At first I couldn’t understand what he meant. Some time later I remembered that when I was the manager of the Bugaj kitchen, where food was distributed to the Jewish workers of the *Dietrich und Fischer Holzwerke*, his mother was employed there peeling potatoes (her husband, Reb Yitzhak Aaron Sochaczewski *z.l.*, a respected and well-known man in Piotrków, perished tragically in the Piotrków ghetto). One time the administrator of the kitchen, Mr. Leyb Fiszbom *z.l.*, came in and bitterly complained that the woman was doing poor work and leaving peel on the potatoes. I went with him to talk to her and told her to be more careful with the peeling, because this was food hungry and hard-working Jewish people. As is known, from time to time people were sent to other camps, and after a length time the woman was also among those sent away; her son seems to have thought that there was a connection with the comment about how she peeled potatoes, of which no one knew besides me and the administrator!

I heard from someone of yet another baseless and silly complaint to the effect that the Goldschneider family claimed that I had helped “send away” a sister of theirs. I know some of them; a brother of theirs had married a sister-in-law of my Fishl *z.l.* As I have said, I had nothing to do with any of that; it’s simply a stupid and senseless mistake!

I will not say much more about Mr. S., since he is unfortunately now a dweller of the dust. He was a very religious man but far from intelligent. Had he talked to me about his complaint he would have been relieved and not have had to repeat silly suspicions.

More than once I risked my life because I said what I thought; once it was about the Gestapo murderer Putzala, who wanted to know who was the “cheeky Jew”; people quickly took me away so that he wouldn’t see me. Another time I told off Chairman Warszawski, before whom all trembled, using quite strong language. He hit me and took away my supply-room keys. Eli Gelade *z.l.* was present when this happened (which was later, in the small ghetto). Let me go back to the time of the transition to this ghetto and the beginning of the evacuations.

With lightning speed the news spread that the ghetto was surrounded on all sides, and announcements were made about which streets were to be emptied of their Jewish inhabitants.

Who among the survivors does not remember those bleak, dark days, when even the cloud-covered skies wept along with us! It was in the first days of Heshvan, 5703. If my memory still serves me, we had a minyan in the newly acquired “home” of my brother, the martyr Fishl *z.l.*, and we said Kaddish for our father *z.l.* whose Yortseit is on the 8th of Heshvan.

Indelibly engraved in our memory is the tragic, shattering image of the thousands and thousands of Jews, standing assembled in the gigantic square of a former military base, arranged in various groups, closely guarded by German and Ukrainian murderers. One of the groups was made up of members of the Community Council; my brother *z.l.*, holding his youngest son by his hand because of his poor physical development. Darkness and destruction appeared on his usually bright face. In another group were my oldest sister and her husband, may their memory be blessed; they were unfortunately bitter over our lack of interest in them, not knowing that nothing could be done. Our sainted mother never complained; I will always remember her touching words: Oh well, I am going with hundreds and thousands of other Jews, whatever happens to them will happen to me; I just hope they take care of *Yidisl*, who is so young! (She meant Judith *z.l.*, the youngest in the family).

One must have a heart steel and iron, hearing such words or looking at the fearful helplessness of our sister Gitl Feygl, and not bursting. Perhaps these were signs of spiritual and physical atrophy; our thoughts and emotions were beginning to be dulled.

When the evening hours neared and hundreds of people were gone from the assembly square, we saw the destruction: our dear mother, my oldest sister and brother-in-law, Fishl with almost his entire family – all had been “evacuated.” We were overcome with a frightening darkness and emptiness! And let me reveal a secret here: until I arrived at the Buchenwald concentration camp, I believed that all these people were being sent to places of work and that healthy people would survive even hard labor. I simply could not imagine that the Germans, whom I knew from my time in Berlin, could be worst than the wildest animals that might break free from their iron cages. Not once did I argue with people about that; they thought I was a *Yeke* and very naive.

As it later turned out, the majority of the Community Council had been sent away, among them the well-known Piotrków rabbi, Reb Moshe Hayim Lau *z.ts.l.*, a famous activist and a talented orator. As I later read, he was active in helping people, as he spoke German very well. He is also said to have encouraged the people to be ready for *kiddush hashem*.

Warszawski, who seemed to feel guilty about not doing enough to save Fishl, left me the keys of the provisions center, as though to make up to me. But later he criminally neglected to keep Fishl’s oldest surviving son from being sent away, together with others, from his Piotrków

work place to other camps where he did not survive. I still feel torn up over not having done everything possible to keep him in Piotrków. I had no idea that he was to be sent away. I don't know if I could have accomplished anything, but my conscience would have been clearer. My sister Judith *z.l.* appealed to Warszawski, and he answered her, "You aren't sure that you won't be sent away." I have already written about my meeting with him about the matter. I no longer wanted to see him, though this attitude was dangerous.

That "reception" at Warszawski's took place in the summer of 1943, before the liquidation of the so-called Little Ghetto. Until then, that is, from the second half of October 1942, I was employed in the provisions department, which was housed in two rooms at the corner of Jerozolimska and Stara Warszawska streets. The warehouse contained mainly flour, sugar and jam. Those staples were given out to people only if they brought a paper signed by Warszawski.

But there came people without such papers, and begged for a little jam, and people who had papers begged for a little more because they had more people, and the like. It was not easy to refuse people who were asking for such trifles... But what to do? From time to time some water would be added to the jam. In this I was helped by my fellow provisions worker, Mumek Goldfrajd *z.l.*, a fine and good-hearted young man, who blended the water in so well that it could not be noticed, and no one ever complained about the quality; still, after a while we both felt that one should not use such dishonest means!

Fishl *z.l.* was the head of a much larger warehouse with far more articles, and was also a respected member of the Council, friendly with everyone and trusted by all. If a needy person turned to him for help, he would consult with another competent Council member and give as much as was possible. I didn't have such independence.

5. Lost Family and Friends

Let me write a few words about my unforgettable brother, whom I have already mentioned several times.

On the outside – tall and slim, with a charming, pleasant appearance. A trim black beard framed his kind and bright face; behind his glasses sparkled angelic blue eyes, in which sadness and worry could be seen. Only the closest family members knew the reason for that: his youngest child was physically undeveloped from birth (mentally, almost normal), and this had a powerful effect on a sensitive and delicate person such as Fishl. His oldest son, Srulek (Israel) *z.l.*, was also an impulsive child. In those days it was not known how to deal with such a child, especially when he is smart, kind and talented. He was “fought” with, using overly harsh discipline, while his younger brother Szlomek *z.l.* was given more privileges and the like. This was very hard on Fishl *z.l.*, but he strove to keep a harmonious household. His wife *z.l.*, an attractive woman and a good housewife from a small town, believed that strict methods would be more effective with Srulek’s impulsiveness, not knowing that being ill treated and degraded would make him bitter and angry.

The truth is that there are many lively and temperamental children who have no desire to learn subjects that don’t interest them. And in part the fault could be the teacher’s. Our mother *z.l.* considered him a good and kind child. As I have said, Fishl suffered in silence over his relationship with Srulek.

When the whole family was sent away, he was at a labor camp. When he returned and found out about the disaster, he completely collapsed. Gradually, like the rest of us, he recovered and became accustomed to the hard conditions and loneliness. His being unjustly sent away in turn, with other transports, shook us up and angered us so much that I ran to see Warszawski and, as I have mentioned, quarreled with him, forgetting that I was playing with fire. My conscience is yet today in pain over not having done enough to prevent the outcome, though I don’t know how: I have a nagging feeling that Fishl *z.l.*, for a child of mine, would have done something, and this sometimes weighs heavy on me.

For Fishl *z.l.* was indescribably devoted to the whole family, also that of his wife, Mirl Mindl *z.l.*; after the outbreak of the war, his in-laws and their family had to leave their town of Sterców and moved into Fishl’s apartment, where they were received with great hospitality. Fishl related to them with love and respect and supplied them, as much as he could, with everything they needed.

In business he was hard-working and scrupulously honest, and enjoyed a great friendship with his partner, Reb Motl Goldblum *z.l.*, an able and intelligent Jew, who had once studied the Talmud. They jointly owned a flour mill and a sawmill.

He was generally unassuming. I remember that once when he was visiting the Rebbe in Ger (I have already written about it; he was not a great “pilgrim”), one of the most respected men in town, among the leaders of the *Gerer shtibl*, had fallen ill, and Fishl had been asked to “mention” the sick man to the Rebbe. He wrote a letter home about it, and I was astounded: I had not known how well he could write Hebrew, using highly appropriate expressions.

As I have said, he had been pessimistic from the outbreak of the war, and saw the Jews’ situation as bleak.

Reliable people have told me that only about a week before the move to the Little Ghetto he took a ritual bath in the Mikveh, telling a close acquaintance who happened to be there that he was purifying himself.

David (Dudek) Lewkowicz *a.h.*, of Piotrków, who had been assigned to a commando in the Treblinka death camp, reported that the Jews of the Piotrków “transport” we killed (in the gas chambers) on the 11th of Heshvan, 5703; this is the said yortseit of our Piotrków martyr. Where and how Fishl’s oldest son perished, we have no idea. May their souls be gathered in the bundle of life!

After the mass evacuations, there remained thousands of apartments and valuables worth many millions. All of that had to be sent to Germany. Of course the murderers stole for themselves whenever and wherever they had an opportunity. But officially everything had to be sorted, and many Jewish workers were employed in the task. Those workers, who worked outside the ghetto (at the so-called *Befehlstelle*), were moved in and out under police guard.

Hundreds of Jews who had been hiding in various bunkers during the evacuation sneaked in among the workers returning from the work places and so managed to return to the ghetto, which was guarded by police.

As has been said, the Little Ghetto was to contain 2,000 Jews. It could immediately be seen that the number was much greater. One or two informers were found, and a hunt for the “illegals” began; some Jewish “policemen” played a sad and criminal part in hunting down the “guilty,” bringing shame to the Jewish identity that they bore.

The “illegals” were moved into the Great Synagogue, which was already like a ruin and where the sanitary conditions were horrifying! Macabre scenes were played out in and around the synagogue; Gestapo men tore suckling babies out their mothers’ laps, split open their little heads and then set them on fire in front of the mothers, whom they later shot dead.

A few people managed to get out of that hell, because they were tradesmen or were employed in certain factories. Some individuals were also ransomed by their families; thus, for example, parents gave themselves up in order to save their children. Women who had children there would not leave without their children. Those who tried to escape were shot immediately. Still, there were individuals who survived and got back into the ghetto, buying their lives for a large sum of money or valuables.

Those who remained in the synagogue were brought out in groups and taken to the nearby Raków forest and shot. The first group offered some resistance; the Jewish men (of which the first group was made up) would not strip naked as ordered, and even threw themselves upon their murderers. Though they were almost all shot dead, a few managed to escape during the brief struggle. The later groups (several weeks later) already knew about the graves prepared for them and wept at their own funeral, crying out *Sh'ma Yisrael*, and some recited Psalms.

Between 500 and 600 Jews were shot in the Raków forest by the German murderers.

It was said that Warszawski had “negotiated” with the Gestapo that 2,400 Jews would be left in the Little Ghetto; in fact there were in the so-called “Block” more than 3,000. People were constantly sneaking into the Block. Some individuals also escaped from the ghetto. Almost every day the bodies of Jews shot dead were found in and around the city.

German and Ukrainian murderers would also come into the Block and shoot Jews.

We once heard that, unexpectedly, Itshe Feiner, the vice chairman of the Council, was shot dead when he stepped out of the Community office into the street. As was later reported, the Ukrainian guard in charge of the Block had wanted to shoot a madman who had been hanging

out in the Council yard and took Feiner for the madman. It was interesting that no one apologized for the mistake! And Itshe Feiner *a.h.* was acquainted with Gestapo men. We had given him a large diamond (the most valuable of my wife's jewels) in order to save our mother. As has been mentioned, that didn't help at all.

In February of 1943, 250 men were sent from the ghetto to the Skarzysk munitions factory. A month later, 250 women and some men were also sent to the same factory.

At the first the relatives maintained contact with the deportees through non-Jewish messengers. One such messenger was caught, and he gave out the names of people in the ghetto, who were taken to the cemetery and shot. The Skarzysk workers who had been in touch with their families were sent to Auschwitz.

Among the first group sent to Skarzysk was, I think, Fishl's son Srulek *z.l.*

At the end of March, when winter should end, the few Jews who had been squeezed into their tight quarters in the Little Ghetto, on the south side of the Jews' Street, began to tremble again.

Surrounded by menacing barbed wire, we felt as though in a narrow cage, which, however, was convenient for the killers, to pick their victims at will in order to murder them.

The streets on the opposite side, where the orphaned Jewish houses were, empty and miserable, with their broken-in doors and open windows looking like skeleton eyes, cast a deathly fear with their oppressive cemetery-like stillness.

But occasionally could we hear the howling of the Nazi jackals, who were breaking down walls and tearing up floors, looking for the legendary Jewish treasures.

As has been said, the atmosphere was constantly suffocating, laden with a gnawing fear, not only of tomorrow, but even of the next hour. We tried to push through the vegetative life in that narrow cage, which was far from monotonous; whole staffs of murderous brains in Berlin, Krakow and Radom saw to it that Jews in ghettos and camps should not be bored. The elaborated all kinds of plans of mass murder, but always painted not only with "neutral" but even with attractive and seductive colors.

Those plans, which were never made public, were intended the keep the terrified Jewish herds in the ghettos in a constant state of tension. Every day – a new decree, a new disaster; but each time so colored that its aim could not be grasped.

Thus, for example, more than once there arrived a transport of food precisely before a "partial" deportation or before the carrying out of executions, like feeding chickens before slaughtering them.

And that was how that sadly famous day seemed at the end of March. Outwardly, a day like any other of the gray and leaden ghetto days, those cursed days mentioned in the *Tokhakra*, of which it was said, "In the morning ye shall say, 'would that it were evening'." And in the evening were impatient for the next morning. Days that we wanted to get over as quickly as possible, sending them off into the vanishing past and awaiting for a shakeup of the world or a global earthquake that would at once wipe out all the evil!

Only the pale sun of late winter, hiding behind the stone houses of the ghetto, sent an occasional ray onto the frozen roofs, as if trying to melt the ice; the ray did not reach the human shadows of the ghetto prison. The bodies were too stiff, their souls too frozen. Each one was like a withered member, like a still trembling bird that had been shot down, with no wings or feathers; one had lost his parents, another his wife and children, yet another his brothers and sisters, and so on. The ever growing pain of each one surrounded him like a wall!

Who could have thought that that day happened to be Purim, the happy holiday of the Jews? Did anyone in the ghetto really know the date, in particular a Jewish date? Perhaps those who, with utter dedication, kept up the practice of Judaism—and there was no lack of such, truly risking their lives!

There were also exceptional people among the nonreligious, who would peek at the illegal newspapers sneaked into the factories by leftist workers, and then smuggle them into the ghetto. One of the “smugglers” was our friend, the Zionist Youth leader Feyvl Steinberg *z.l.* More than once he was able to infect desperate people with his optimism and give them courage. Feyvl *z.l.* was also a fine person. He would visit us at our place at Stara Warszawska 29. Once I noticed him whispering to my sister, my wife and other people who happened to be there. Of course I was curious about what news he had brought from outside the ghetto. I don’t remember exactly what I was told. Only later did I find out that on that day the aforementioned Dudek Lewkowicz *z.l.*, who had amazingly managed to escape from the Treblinka extermination camp, had returned to the ghetto, and reported all the details about how the thousands and thousands of the “evacuees” from Piotrków had been killed, among them most of my family. Knowing of my optimism and my hope of again seeing my family, he didn’t to sadden me and to destroy my naive and childish illusions. May his soul be gathered in the bundle of life!

And when a truck full of gendarmes arrived, on that bleak day, at the house at Jerozolimska 12, where (as has been said) the Ghetto Committee was located, no one could imagine that we were about to experience a wild orgy and a bloody burlesque of the Jewish Purim. On the contrary, a hopeful mood dawned and threw some momentary light on the darkness of the ghetto. There was some whispering, and the rumor spread that there would be an exchange of Jews in various in Poland for German citizens living in Palestine (in the Sharona colony), as had been the case of Yaakov Kurtz, Rosenthal and Ickowicz, well-known pioneers and residents of Palestine who were visiting relatives in their hometown of Piotrków and could not return because of the outbreak of the war. But in Palestine efforts were made in their behalf, and all three were sent back on the basis of an exchange of Palestine citizens who happened to be in Nazi-occupied countries for German citizens living in Palestine.

Yaakov Kurtz had also been, as I recall, a candidate for the “commander” of the Jewish ghetto police. After returning to the Land of Israel he wrote a work of documentation, *Sefer Ha’edut*, in which he describes the beginning of the horrors and the destruction of Jewish life in Poland.

Since the news came back that all three had safely returned to the Land of Israel, people believed that this was the continuation of the exchange, to which the criminal hypocrites of Nazidom attributed great importance, emphasizing that “for the time being” only a limited number could enjoy that privilege – all told ten people! And they had to have university degrees.

Such hypocritical and deceptive tactics were used by the Nazi bandits in all of their criminal actions; they never dared to unmask their murderous face; they always hid, as if they were afraid of the tortured slaves of the “weak” race. They tried to drug and put to sleep the little remaining watchfulness, using various lightning rockets to blind the eyes of those whom they wanted to exterminate, so that the Jew, trembling in deathly fear, could not penetrate the masked intentions of extermination, which were stamped by official Nazi leaders as “foreign atrocity propaganda, spread by Jews and by enemies of the German Reich.”

It seemed as if the Teutonic heroes, who had defied the whole world, were simply afraid to reveal the whole truth to the desperate Jews of the ghettos; perhaps because, if the latter were

to know that they had nothing to lose, they would avenge themselves on those who planned their murder: one would grab an axe, another a butcher knife and get rid of some of those “heroes,” as happened in Warsaw and a few other ghettos. This is why they would not risk revealing all, and felt more secure by deceiving the “smart” Jews.

And to our great shame, this “trick” usually worked.

More than one of us was caught in the web of this arranged and manufactured naïveté; more than one of us (as already mentioned) believed that they would yet meet many of the “evacuated” families, which had only been sent away, as it was said officially, to work in the Ukraine or the other occupied territories. We therefore made peace with the idea that it was worthwhile to suffer and bleed and bear up under the tortures, shame and persecutions in order to push through until the storm was over!

After all, each one of us was sure that Hitler’s defeat would come, since he couldn’t wage war against the whole world! We wanted to live long enough to see the defeat of the greatest and worst enemy of the Jews in all of Jewish history.

By methodically and systematically eradicating from us, from the first minute, every bit of feeling of pride and self-esteem, those bloody enemies of ours succeeded, unfortunately, in degrading many of us to the level of primitive creatures, who thought and dreamt, especially when we were in the concentration camps, mainly about a piece of bread or a potato, sometimes even forgetting one’s nearest relatives! In place of common sense and national dignity, it was an animal instinct of self-preservation that took over and ruled us, dictating that we pull back to the passive line, as in the well-known principle of “*shev ve-al te’aseh ‘adif*” (sit and don’t let yourself be preferred).

This will perhaps give a partial answer to the critics of various camps, who complain about why the Jews vegetating and languishing in the ghettos and camps did not try to find such a murderous enemy; why we didn’t organize uprisings as some Jews have done and managed to save some Jewish honor, if not themselves.

It’s easier to accuse many years later, when one is in a totally different environment, free among free people, able to do speak and do what one wants and where one wants.

First of all, as it already has been written about, one tends to forget that large and powerful states, with strong armies and with modern weapons, gave up their pride even faster in order to save human lives; second, and this has also been mentioned, the malicious enemy, by means all kinds of deceitful tricks, tried hard to hide the tragic truth from us, until we were on the edge of the valley of death or until we found ourselves in the slaughterhouse, from which only a few individuals or small groups were saved by accident or by a miracle. But by then we already were shadows that barely moved; spiritually and physically atrophied, not in condition to reflect or even to think.

On that Purim afternoon there was more movement in the tight ghetto than on any other day. There was a buzz in the courtyard of Reder’s house, where the Jewish ghetto committee met. That was the assembly place of the “elect,” who were to be exchanged; they had all arrived with their baggage.

The first one to appear was Stanisław Zylbersztajn, who looked deathly pale and resigned. He had come with his white-haired wife and was walking like a lamb to the slaughter. Everyone remarked that he looked completely broken.

As a rich, assimilated Jewish lawyer and a son of a former head of the community, the late Wilhelm Zylbersztajn, he had been highly regarded in the circles of the Polish intelligentsia. More than once did his blood curdle because of the disgrace and degradation he had to suffer as “chief commander” of the so-called *Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst* (Jewish police).

As was later shown, he was better oriented about the situation and had learned about the criminal hypocrisy of the German gangsters; for his first reaction to the “exchange invitation” was a pill with poison, which he was ready to swallow but the people around him tore it out of his hand. He then asked those leaders of the committee who had not been invited to take care of his only daughter.

After him came, “privileged” to belong to that group, the well-known and respected Dr. Maurycy Brams, accompanied by his wife, his black-haired little daughter, and his sister-in-law (one of the Kagans).

Now that unassuming man and devoted Jewish community activist, who had, especially after the outbreak of the war, demonstrated indescribable dedication to needy Jews, happened to be very optimistic. Dr. Brams, from whose ascetic face looked out kind, innocent eyes, was quite sure that he would be sent to a country where he and his wife could breathe free, be independent, and from there be able to ease the suffering of the Jews remaining in the ghetto. Word has it that he already had plans for organizing the relief effort.

He, a man of crystalline clarity, nobility and honesty, could not imagine how much cruelty, brutality and falsehood lay hidden in the minds of the sadistic murderers who wore a mask of cultured men. Only in this way can one understand his behavior and his good mood as he cordially said good-bye to everyone he met, because in general he was a logical and rational person.

Quite different was the mood of Szymek Sztajn. That young Jewish lawyer, sparkling with life and wit, educated and brought up in the Jewish high school, active in Zionist endeavors, immediately had a fearful premonition and tried to make different plans for getting out of it. A few hours before he was to report he came to us in our room and thought about a place of refuge, about how to escape, but it was already too late. According to later reports he joined the group with his mother.

The psychiatrist Dr. Leon Glater was also among the invited who came to the assembly place, and all together the Gestapo and Schupo could find only nine “elect.”

When the nine were invited into the waiting car, the mood in the ghetto became nervous and tense. They were accompanied by searching and inquisitive looks. Imagination painted colorful pictures about their distant and long voyage. And it should be remarked that, as it was told, there were also many who envied them.

The car took the people in the direction of the Sulejów road. Supposedly they were being taken to Radom, to whose district, as has already been mentioned, Piotrków belonged under the Nazi occupation. There our townspeople were to join a larger transport and, together with the “privileged” of other ghettos, go on their way.

On that night the Jews of the Piotrków ghetto did not use up their allotted contingent of sleep. A sense of stinging doubt nagged at our hearts; disquieting thoughts burrowed into the minds of many who were worried about the fate of their “fortunate” townspeople.

The next morning, at daybreak, real darkness came to the ghetto. Even the pale sun hid its face in shame. A thick and sticky fog, which darkened the little streets, had spread over the

nervously twitching human shadows; their pale, frightened faces seemed to be covered in cold sweat.

With lightning speed everyone was shuddering under the unbelievable reports about the startling, blood-curdling scenes that had taken place at the Jewish cemetery.

Well-informed individuals described gruesome details of how the diabolic executions had been carried out.

In order to dress it up in the form of a parody, they had, “as is written in the Jewish megillah” (relating to the ten sons of Haman), completed the “minyan” with yet another Jew, a cemetery worker, who was taken into the elite group of the Jewish intelligentsia.

Beside the freshly dug grave, which was surrounded by gendarmes, police as well as soldiers and army officers armed with modern machine-guns, the entire Nazi corps of the Piotrków district had assembled. There was drinking and partying and even reading of a kind of megillah before the fiery “exchange.”

Eyewitnesses who were Polish policemen told about the sadistic and macabre scenes at the cemetery: how Dr. Brams completely fell apart, seeing how his lovely little daughter was pulled into the grave; and how Szymek Sztajn appealed to the “conscience” of the police chief Muschala, begging him to save the lives of innocent people. The gangrened Nazi heart remained ice-cold. “*Befehl!*” (“It’s an order!”) was the laconic answer, accompanied by a satanically cynical smile.

Once again the “heroism” of the mighty Nazi warriors was laid bare; as we see, those vampires were afraid to tell the truth even to that small group of defenseless Jews; in order to distract their attention they had been led around the whole city. Only at nightfall were they quickly taken through side streets to the Jewish cemetery, and then even the optimists saw their catastrophe.

A few days later it became known that the same bloody spectacle had been put on in other ghettos and than hundreds of Jews had been killed in the same way. In Radom, for example, the propaganda for the “exchange” had been so powerful that people had considered it a privilege to be on the exchange list for Palestine.

In the great sea of tears in which are still bathing, weeping over the horrible deaths and indescribable suffering of millions of lives, of parents, siblings, spouses and children and all those near and dear, not knowing where their bones might be, and not for whom the appropriate lamentations have not yet been created, additional tears must be shed for those ten victims of the evil empire.

The tears for those martyrs had not yet been swallowed when soon there came another bloody number, a new execution by firearms; tens of young, vibrant lives were cut down. Some of them were found with “Aryan passes”; others with documents according to which they were preparing to escape; and those who were found with nothing were also included in the mass execution at the cemetery.

And that was how misfortunes were woven like thick, bloody ropes; day in and day out, not leaving a breathing pause for thinking about what had happened yesterday or just an hour ago, and making us forget about yesterday’s happening, just as in the words of our sages (Gemara B’rakhot 13): the later misfortunes make one forget the first.

In April of 1943 the news began to spread that preparations were being made to liquidate the ghettos. The German gendarmes allowed no one to leave the ghetto, not even workers who had been daily taken to their workplaces. Only in the afternoon did the reason become known for

the Jews' not being allowed to leave their place of confinement. The uprising of the Jews in Warsaw began to irritate the Gestapo's pride and they feared that Jews in other places might revolt as well.

Of course, no one had any illusions about the result of that revolt, considering the enormous military might of the Germans, with the best weaponry in the world, capable of crushing whole countries in a matter of a few days. Nonetheless, it spurred some young idealists to decide to buy weapons and go into the woods, where they would meet with representatives of the partisans. The Pole who had worked with these young men at the Hortensja glass works and who had supplied them with false papers and weapons was the one who led them into the forest. While there they discovered that they were surrounded by German police. The Pole managed to escape. When they began to shoot in the direction of the Nazis it turned out that the bullets were not the right ones. They were immediately captured and under severe torture they admitted that they had planned to join the partisans. Soon thereafter the Jews who had helped them were also arrested, as was the Jewish policeman who had led them out of the ghetto. All of them, six in all, were taken to the Jewish cemetery, where they were shot. Let their memory be honored!

The rumors about the closure of the ghettos were repeated and by July of 1943 it was a certainty that they would soon become reality. Officially, some 1500 Jews would be left in Piotrków, employed in the Kara and Hortensja glass works and in the Bugaj lumber mill. At those workplaces barracks for the workers would be put up. Warszawski bargained for 1720 Jews, that is, 220 more than previously decided. The remainder, some 1500, were sent to camps: Bliżyn, Pianki, Starochowice, and others. A sign at the Piotrków railway station read *Petrikau ist judenrein*.

In that way the Nazis' diabolic plan to exterminate the Jews of Poland was carried out; the remaining Jews were not a part of the general population but integrated into the labor camps.

Of the 1720 Jews, 1000 were sent to the Bugaj, to the Dietrich & Fischer (both Gestapo men) lumber mill, and the remainder to the glassworks.

At the Bugaj Warszawski became the camp chairman (*Lagerältester*) while in the glassworks the leadership was taken over by Salomon Gomberg. The transition from the ghetto to the Bugaj, which I had to make with my little family, was far from easy. Not that we had much baggage to carry; the German had already seen to it that most Jews were reduced to indigence. The problem was about how to find a place where we could put our heads down. We wanted to be noticed as little as possible because of our only son, for children were like thorns in the savage, beastly eyes of the Nazis! So that a little room of our own was simply a matter of life and death. Of course it was a matter of influence; whoever was closer to Warszawski would have a better chance.

I have already mentioned that I did not have good relations with him; later, some acquaintances informed that I had been threatened with being sent away. According to them, I had thrown the keys of the provisions room at him, after Fishl's only remaining son had been included in the deportation to Skarzysk.

In the end we managed to get a tiny room together with another couple, Józiek and Madzia Żarnowiecki; he was a locksmith, a productive Jew who was counted as a camp employee. I was given a job as manager in the kitchen; I have no recollection of how it happened. I cannot recall ever having made an effort with anyone about it. And that was an important and responsible position! We had to produce, every noon, meals for a thousand people,

and *parve* ones for those who kept kosher. Seldom did we take home some soup for ourselves. Only those who had places of their own could prepare some food for themselves.

How five people could live together in a room, barely the size of a closet, is something that today I have a hard time picturing. I remember that we were literally suffocating. Nevertheless there was peace and friendship among the roommates. The late Mrs. Żarnowiecki, born Madzia Friedman, was originally from Lutetów, near Wieluń, and was a highly intelligent, splendid person; she had been raised in a *halutz* spirit and had attended a Hebrew secondary school. She survived the war and was liberated together with my wife in the Bergen-Belsen camp. Madzia's generosity and devotion to us are shown by the following fact: right after liberation my wife, along with thousands of other survivors, came down with typhus, and epidemic that swept the camp and left only a small number of survivors. Madzia wanted to help my wife and was ready to give her a twenty-dollar bill that she had managed to hide during all the years of wandering and strict searches by specialists; had it been found on her, she would certainly have been immediately shot to death. And yet she was ready to give it away in order to save the life of a friend from camp.

Madzia (Mira) later married Gershon Pipe (Givoni), who had come to Bergen-Belsen as a representative of the Jewish Brigade (about which more will be written) in order to help organize the so-called illegal aliyah (*aliyah bet*). Gershon and Mira are prominent members of Kibbutz Yad Mordechai. We have visited them several times, and they have visited us in Los Angeles.

Our little room was often visited by several people after a hard day's work, among them: Benjamin Rozenberg, a *halutz* activist with a fine singing voice in which he sang moving Hebrew songs; Kopel from Kalisz; Misza Helman, the teacher from Łódź; Sala Zeligman, who was also a fine singer. (Her father, Shmuel Eli, a good friend of our family, had been a social and labor activist in Piotrków and had sung in a choir with famous cantors in Piotrków. And when after the liberation he came to Milwaukee, USA, he also became socially active. May his memory be blessed!)

But it should be remarked that an evening when it was possible to sing and hold discussions was exceptional. Overall, the steady danger of arbitrary, cruel measures was always over our heads.

For example, some of the Gestapo people could not accept that the number of Jews in the labor camp was greater than had initially been decided. In both camps (Bugaj and the glassworks) they soon began to compile lists of 220 Jews who were to be sent away to other labor camps.

In addition there were orders to give up all possessions that had remained. Every so often random executions were also carried out, not to mention bloody beatings of the workers by some Polish factory guards as well as by the managers, the Gestapo men Dietrich and Fischer, who would also incite their dog to attack and bite the Jewish workers, though they had themselves praised the productivity of these workers, for whom they were responsible, and this was their pretext for not going to the front.

Besides the little rooms for the families there were dorms for men and women, installed in one of the factory buildings, where prayers were also held.

The residential conditions and the food were better at the glassworks than at the Bugaj; by contrast the work was much harder there. In particular the *Volksdeutscher* (ethnic German) Herford, one of the managers of the glassworks, created difficulties for the Jewish workers and embittered their lives.

Every so often there would be a little concert, arranged by our friend Sewek Leber *z.l.* Among the workers there was a professional violinist, H. Kaczka *z.l.* But in the midst of a concert there might be a sudden “roll call,” actually a search for useful objects that had not yet been taken away.

Here I would like to recall an interesting episode from one of these searches. In one of the dorms at the Bugaj lived a formerly rich cabinetmaker alongside a very clever foreman, who was known as *Draykop*. He was a rabbi’s son and had himself been a yeshiva student, but was far from religious. After a search it turned out that the cabinetmaker had lost a valuable diamond, which he had hidden somewhere in the dorm. No one doubted that his clever neighbor had taken advantage of the search and taken the valuable object for himself. It was only after the war, when both the cabinetmaker and the foreman were no longer alive, that one of the cabinetmaker’s relatives confessed that he had taken the precious stone. This should serve as a lesson for all of us, that it is easier to suspect than to reach the truth!

As I have already mentioned, I was not on the best of terms with Warszawski. I don’t remember the reason, but I lost my position as the kitchen manager and became a simple worker, outside the factory, in the production of charcoal. I felt somewhat freer and was able to come home earlier in order to prepare something to eat, and my little son helped me, for example by bringing water and the like. He also went to work, pretending to be older. Intellectually he was very developed. Even before our move to the Bugaj he had read about Greek mythology and other subjects, and if anyone had a question he usually had the answer, to everyone’s astonishment. My clever wife, though in her mind a *halutzah* who as a girl had intended to go on *hakhsharah*, had never done any physical work, and now had to work hard in the factory from dawn to dusk.

I don’t know in what connection, but there came a change in our living arrangement, and we had to move to another little room, this time without roommates.

Once, when I was going to work, I ran into Warszawski, and I said good morning or good afternoon to him, causing him great joy and making him say that he had never before heard it from me.

Our new little room also served as a meeting place for acquaintances, among them Isaac Goldberg *z.l.*, a giant of a man who was the carrier of provisions, an intelligent, generous and honorable man. Even a giant such as he did not survive the war!

It was 1944, and we had heard indirectly about the victories of the Allies, which strengthened my optimism, something that always helped us withstand all the trials, feeling that we would live to see the great defeat of our greatest enemies.

I admit and confess today that my optimism had many elements of naïveté. First of all, I could not have imagined that uniformed Germans, representing a great country and a great people in Western Europe, could be more savage than the most savage cannibals of the jungle, though I had seen enough of their cruelty with my own eyes. Second, I was sure that the world powers that waged war against them had warned the German leaders that if they harmed defenseless civilian then retribution would be taken against Germans living abroad. As I have mentioned, I also had a premonition that we would survive! Sometimes there is a feeling that one cannot comprehend with the senses, as is said in the Gemara (*Megillah*, page 3): though they see not, their *mazal* (lucky star) sees for them. Because with ordinary sense it was difficult to conceive that after the systematic and methodical decimation of Jews in the ghetto they would leave the little surviving remnant in peace. Especially after seeing what they had done with

young children, why would the children of the Bugaj be an exception? Fortunately I had not known about the unimaginably barbaric killing of the Jews who had been sent to Blizyn, where uniforms for the German army had been produced. When workers were assigned to that camp, the Nazi leaders had underlined the special importance of the work, assuring that not only the workers but also their wives would be treated well, and their children would have the best conditions. But a mere five months after their arrival a special “action” was carried out against the children, who were all brutally murdered. Mordechai Kaminski, a fine, intelligent young man, who had worked in the sanitary police in the ghetto, committed suicide in Blizyn when his children were taken away.

6. Separation and Reunion

In the last days of November the mood in the camp was depressed, despite the good news from the military fronts. There were rumors that the camp and glassworks would be liquidated. On November 27 the camp inhabitants were ordered to pack up and bring warm clothes. The following dawn we were awakened by an order to gather in the factory yard. It was the 28th, an important day to remember in our little family. Soon we saw ourselves surrounded by messengers of evil: police, gendarmes, SS men and Ukrainians, who led us out of the factory yard in the direction of the city.

As we passed Garnczarska Street, by Grosberg's house, where only Jews had lived, Poles – looking through the windows and seeing how we were driven and hunted, many of us receiving bloody beatings – laughed wildly and made hostile and derogatory remarks at the expense of the dirty Jews, whom they were finally getting rid of... I will never forget that!

We were taken to the freight station. Once there, we were immediately pushed by SS men into enclosed cattle cars. I was walking with a group of people and holding my nine-year-old son by the hand, and my wife was beside him. Suddenly an SS man began to beat me on the head with his rifle butt and tore me away from my wife. Confused and in pain, I was thrown into a cattle car, where we were squeezed together. My son was also with me, thoughtful and silent.

When the cars were closed we began to suffocate. We stood there for countless hours. All we heard was the savage voices of our "escorts" and sighing and groaning from the people pressed together in the cars. Women and girls were in separate cars. It tore my heart when my little son asked me to give him something to eat, because he was hungry, and I had nothing. We also heard shots, not knowing where they came from. We did not think about them. What we thought about was: when are we going to get out of those dark, closed iron cages, and where are we going to be unloaded?

In the late hours of the night we heard the creaking of wheels, a sign that the freight train with its live merchandise was beginning to move. That was soon confirmed by the heavy banging of the locomotive, which mixed with the quiet sighing of the human shadows lying and standing in the cars. We felt that we were moving and we were impatient for the moment when the train would stop, if only for a short while, in order to fill our physiological needs. In our car, the men and boys held themselves in check with all their might.

We began to breathe easier when the train slowed down until it stopped at a dimly lit station. Soon the bestial voices and shouts of the SS men were heard again. The heavy iron doors of the freight cars were opened, and we began to be counted. Somehow the numbers did not add up! At last we were led, under heavy guard, to a latrine. We were soon led back.

We spent many hours at that station as well. I had an encouraging experience there.

As I have said, they kept us for a headcount. Suddenly I heard an SS man calling me by my name. According to every ghetto and camp experience this was not a good sign. But I felt so broken and exhausted, physically and emotionally, that I did not care very much. The officer pushed through the crowd to hand me something, wrapped in a pair of socks, that my wife had given him for me. We looked for and found a piece of paper and a pencil, and I wrote her a note that I had received it.

My son and I were also allowed to get off the train and to wave good-bye, from a distance, to my wife, who was in one of the women's cars.

In one of socks was wrapped a diamond, the last piece of my wife's jewelry, all of which we had sold or given away in order to save our family, though we did not succeed.

Some time after the war, when my wife and I talked about that incident with the SS man – a rare occurrence – she told me the following details: when the freight train stopped at the station, several women pushed themselves out of the suffocating mass in the car and stood in the open entrance in order to breathe some air. One of them asked the German guard why they didn't just shoot them once and for all instead of making such a spectacle. To their surprise, the German made an effort, in a friendly tone, to calm them by assuring them that they were being taken to the labor camp of Ravensbrück, where no one would be shot. He told them frankly that they would have to work hard and not have a lot to eat, but that they could live on the food that would be given them. He also told them that the war would soon be over, and he advised them to have courage and endurance. He was from the port city of Hamburg, where he used to frequent the Café Vaterland, which had once belonged to a Jew. Since many Jewish businessmen came into that coffeehouse, it was also known as Café Judenland. He suggested to the women that if they survived the war – and he believed that they would – and if they happened to be in Hamburg, they should not forget to visit that café, with its nice and pleasant atmosphere...

He somehow made an impression of a decent human being and my wife told him that she had a husband and a son on the same freight train. He then told my wife that she should have her son with her, because with the women in Ravensbrück the conditions for the children were better. When he came to take our son to his mother it was too late, because he had already been counted as being in the same car as I was. My wife then asked him to give me a pair of warm socks, into which she put the last of her possessions, in case I might be able to use it to make our only son's conditions better. That is how a devoted mother acts, and almost all Jewish mothers were devoted – giving up not only the last of what they had but even their own lives, not letting themselves be torn away from their children by the murderous Nazis who forcefully wanted to separate them.

When we were taken back to "our" car and squeezed back in, we thought about the desperate last glances among the newly divided family. My imagination painted contradictory images, and as usual with me, the optimistic colors were more prominent.

The train now began to move and gradually increased its speed, and my thoughts were racing as well, weaving in and out, one tied up with another, and I was in no condition to sort them out. We traveled for several days. When we stopped it was in the middle of the night, at small, dimly lit stations. I thought at one point, at some late hour of the night, that we had stopped in Berlin, but we were not allowed to leave the train there. They probably did not want us to see the ruins of their capital, which by then had already been bombed by the Americans and the British, destroying entire parts of the city.

When the train slowed down its tempo and shouts were heard all around, we understood that this was not just any station. This was the Buchenwald concentration camp, not far from the city of Weimar, the heart of German literature and art.

There we were "unloaded" and quickly chased into a large wooden shed. Immediately everything we had was taken away from us. Then we were ordered to undress. After being shaved from head to toe we were led into a shower. When we were still wet, we were thrown some torn and patched rags, together with old, warped shoes, and ordered to put them on. The only outstanding marks on our clothes were the yellow star of David and the yellow armband.

We were arranged in rows and counted again. Then we were each given a piece of black bread and some dark liquid that was called soup.

Seeing how I looked and looking at others, I began to grasp the tragic truth; I already doubted by then whether I would ever again see my “deported” family, about whom I had been dreaming. When once comes face to face with such a gruesome reality, the most beautiful illusions begin to fade.

Buchenwald teemed with people of various nations and various “crimes” against Nazi laws. Of course, no one was as debased and mistreated as much as the Jews.

We were brought to the so-called small camp, Block 64, which consisted of a large wooden shed, which bare bunks that were to be our beds. Aside from the SS *Lagerführer* the block was managed by the *Lagerältester*, himself an internee, a communist named Max. Though he was an invalid, lame, those who received his heavy beatings barely escaped with their lives. His assistant, Karl, also a communist and a specialist in beating the “disobedient” ones, gave speeches warning us of the consequences of not obeying orders strictly. Every so often, in addressing us he would use the word *khaveyrim*.

When one time I happened by the *Lagerältester*'s room and noticed that his radio was playing the “Light Cavalry” overture, I mentioned the fact to someone, and Max heard me and voiced his agreement.

In that block there were no steady workers. Every so often a “selection” would take place, in which men would be sent from there to various camps for deadly work, or to death without work. I did not find this out until later. One time we were all subjected to a medical examination. When it was my turn, I tried, as Jews usually do, to complain about my health. I was approached by one of the medics, apparently a decent human being, who gently took my hand and emphatically told me, “You are a perfectly healthy man!” He was one of the political prisoners bearing a red triangle, and he literally saved my life, because all those who reported sick were no longer to be seen a few hours later.

Aside from the *Lagerältester* and his assistant there were also *Stubendienste*, men who helped them. The worst among them was a Pole who sadistically attacked every Jew and gave him a brutal beating. The Frenchman, who used to call out “*Allez, aufstehen*” or “*Allez, schlafen gehen*,” helped out only occasionally with the beatings.

No hardship in the camp broke us down as much as the “roll-calls.” Hunger, cold, hard beatings on the head, lack of sleep and the like – none of them sucked the remaining marrow out of our bones like those brutal and completely unexpected assemblies. At the beginning of the night, in the middle of the night, in the morning or even right after coming back from work, whistles are heard, accompanied by thundering voices: *Appell!* The *Stubendienst* people, big sticks in their hands, drive us down from our bunks and within minutes we have to stand lined up, straight and stiff. And woe unto the one whose walk or posture is not to the liking of the diabolic SS inspectors. Soon deadly blows come down on him, he falls down but the blows do not stop until he stands up again, and he who cannot stand up straight does not escape alive.

For hours and hours we stand like this in the cold, frosty night. As usual they have difficulties in counting the Jews, even in that camp that is surrounded by electric wires and where at each corner there is a tower occupied by SS men with machine guns aimed at anyone making a suspicious movement.

Our forefathers already received that promise it would be difficult to count “the nation that would come out of them”... What is certain is that the counting by those murderers had nothing to do with that promise!

In all those hardships, pain, sufferings and degradations, our only son, Coby, also took part. How did he react to them? He hardly ever spoke; the way he looked at me with his wet, sad eyes was enough for me. Fortunately for me, there were other children in Block 64, also from Piotrków. Near our bunk was that of Moshe Aaron Rosenblatt, a townsman whom I knew well. He had two sons, around Coby’s age. In the small ghetto they had hated him, because he knew too much, and called him “philosopher.” Now, when there were no books to read, they held no grudge against him.

On one of those gray and gloomy days, when we had stepped out of the block for a little while, our attention was caught by a marching group of tall, elegantly uniformed men, accompanied by SS men. When they saw our children, they threw little packages with bread and sugar in their direction. Not only did the hungry children delight in these gifts but they shared them with their fathers. I remember that some time later, when I had been transferred to the large camp (Block 23, I think), I met Gomberg, who had been the *Lagerältester* of the Piotrków glassworks. He was lying on his bunk, sick and weakened, a mere bundle of bones, like most of us; I found a piece of sugar to give him and he was overjoyed.

Who were those good men who had disregarded their German guards’ warnings and threw food to Jewish children? I don’t know who told us, but we soon found out that they were Danish policemen who had disobeyed the orders of the German occupation power and proclaimed passive resistance. The same had also happened with the police in Norway, also tall blond men. They had all been interned and brought to Buchenwald as political prisoners. They would receive food packages, with they shared with their fellow prisoners.

I was deeply moved when I once saw one of these Danish policemen taking off his boots and giving them to a camp inmate who was walking almost barefoot. He himself remained in his stocking feet. Such human kindness, in a place and at a time when cruelty and brutality filled all of space, was a bit of comfort and a ray of hope in that darkness!

Those policemen were housed in a special block.

Aside from Jews, Block 64 also housed Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs and also Germans (communists, socialists, and common criminals who wore green triangles). The Ukrainians and Russians, mostly Jew-haters, would more than once settle scores with their fellow-believers whom they suspected as collaborators with the Germans, beating them to death.

In the first few days I suddenly saw Warszawski, standing on a table in the block and helping to distribute something. He was soon denounced about his previous activity and he was set aside.

A depressing experience was seeing A. Samelson committing suicide in the block by taking poison. He had been a tailor in the ghetto and was one of the “useful Jews.”

In the middle of one night Heniek Milsztajn was taken away. An able man, an accountant, he had been in the so-called *Ordnungsdienst* and a very close acquaintance of Warszawski’s. Afterwards he was no longer seen.

This was a common occurrence in the *Kazetts*. Informers and policemen who had caused Jews trouble in the ghettos or the labor camps were swept away soon after coming to Buchenwald, Auschwitz and other such camps. Their merits in helping the Germans no longer did them any good.

Not far from our bunk was also that of Dr. L. Weinzieher, a well-known surgeon and medical director of the Jewish hospital in Piotrków. I had known him for many years, but at the Bugaj we became closer. He told me about translating a poem by Bialik into Polish, and I showed him what I had written – in Polish – to honor a day of remembrance in my family, and he liked it. In the block he once complained of having a cold; he went to the “clinic,” where he was given a shot, and I never saw him again.

As I have mentioned, new transports kept arriving in Buchenwald. One time I noticed that the newcomers did not look like typical *Kazett* inmates; they looked better, were dressed quite differently, and so on. It turned out that they had just come from Budapest, where only a few weeks before they had lived and worked like normal human beings. But after a few days they could not be recognized. The radical change happened too fast for them and they literally collapsed. I met one of them, a chemist named Dr. Wahl. He had hardly ever had anything to do with the Jewish community, and the sudden uprooting from his rich, comfortable home broke him physically and mentally. Before my own eyes he died in a matter of hours.

A day of bitter disappointment was the one when a new transport of Piotrków people arrived from a labor camp, and my brother’s son Srulek (Israel) was not among them.

At the end of December, around Christmas time, we saw that some of our fellow inmates, especially the Czechs, received food packages. People would stand beside them, like dogs in front of a butcher shop, hoping that someone would throw them a bone. They had probably also received news about the situation at the front, because they seemed in a good mood.

One early morning I was shaken up by the unexpected news about a children’s action in our block. All children, without exception, would be taken away from our block! I felt my blood curdle. Had we really guarded and protected all that was left for us, and now, when the war was about to end, would we not achieve survival together? I even felt a double responsibility, because he was alone with me! I thought that his mother would do everything in her power to save him, and here I stood, helpless and not knowing what can be done! Can anyone imagine how I felt when my little son asked me, in a weepy voice: Does this mean we won’t see each other again? It’s amazing to me that my heart did not burst then.

When they had been led outside, some Germans approached me and told me that all they could do was weep with me. But I had become so hardened that I could not even weep.

When I saw that my acquaintance Rosenblatt, whose two boys were also taken away, was having a bite to eat, I could not understand it. He noticed my puzzlement and explained to me that whenever he felt distressed his hunger grew, and he had to eat something. He was also more optimistic than I was, assuring me that we would see them all alive. He was even ready to bet on it. I did not take that consolation seriously. My feelings were in turmoil, and my thought processes did not work at all.

Day and night, at roll-call or amid the pushing for soup, Coby’s helpless look was before my eyes, and now I saw the complaint in that look: why had I done nothing, besides choking back tears, to keep him there?

But even that constant reflection about Coby’s being taken away was, after a while, interrupted by the screech of *Aufstehen!* We had to jump down from our bunks in a hurry and go out for the roll-call, where we heard the order to leave Block 64 and move to the large camp.

A few hours later we were already in the large camp and not all in the same block. I was assigned to Block 21 or 23, I don’t remember exactly, but what I do remember that one of the *Stubendienste* there was a Jew from Radom named Werbe. When I poured my heart out to him

about the children's action, he immediately told me that as a Buchenwald camp employee he was well informed and knew that those children had been sent to Bergen-Belsen, a name that I then heard for the first time and that sounded a little strange, and I therefore thought that he had made it up in order to make me feel better. Not one of my acquaintances had ever heard of such a place.

A few days later I happened to be outside the block and in the distance I saw Max's assistant in Block 64, the aforementioned Karl. He too wanted to encourage me, telling me that those alive in 1945 would not die (*die Alle, die in 1945 leben, sterben nicht mehr*).

Somehow those calming words could not calm me. At the same time word came from people who had remained in Block 64, reporting that the children's "clothing" had come back...

The snow was beginning to melt, here and there a little sun would peek out and speed the end of winter, but it was still far from spring.

A frost, shivery cold penetrates the weak, exhausted body, and even the dried-out bones feel it.

The new block was cleaner and less crowded, but I felt worse there.

Finally we were remembered and ordered to get ready for being sent to a labor camp. We were told to take everything we had with us. Before leaving I put on a sweater, the only thing I had managed to save when everything else was taken away. It is interesting that I had not been able to save the diamond that my devoted wife had sent me, only the silly sweater, which gave me no pleasure. The *Stubendienst* Otto liked it and tore it off me amid bloody blows with a board over my head and face, so that I fell on the floor unconscious and was stepped on with heavy feet. How I managed to get up is still an enigma to me.

It is interesting that, beaten and hurting as I was, I didn't think much about that murderous beating. At first I was confused. But Coby did not leave my thoughts, and everything else was unimportant in comparison.

Once again we were in cattle cars, which we were already accustomed to and which did not bother us so much this time, especially since we were not squeezed together – there were far fewer of us this time – and the trip did not last as long.

When we arrived at our destination I saw the sign at the railway station: Berga an der Elster, a small town in a picturesque setting. When we were led off to work, looking at the beautiful surroundings, with the sun still shining, as if to spite us, there came to my mind the words of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi *z.l.*, the great, unforgettable poet and philosopher: "How sweet in my eyes the daylight will be!" And also Bialik's: "The sun shone, the acacia bloomed, and the butcher slaughtered..."

Already in the first hours after our arrival we noticed that this was truly a death camp. The living and hygienic conditions were atrocious. We got almost nothing to eat. Buchenwald, in comparison, had been paradise! At least there had been water for washing up.

Once we were taken to work, we noticed that captured American soldiers were employed in forced labor. From the way they were spoken to, amid pushing and shoving, we could see that they had not been spared either.

Our *Lagerältester* in Berga was a common criminal from Hamburg, with a green triangle, named Harry Kopp. Once, when in the middle of the night I had to come down from my bunk in order to go to the latrine and, broken down and exhausted, I barely managed to get back, he began to beat me over the head with a whip like a born killer. For many years I felt the effects of this beating, unable to hear with my right ear. I remained unconscious for hours on my bunk.

Fortunately for me, a townsman from Piotrków was also there, Zajdman, a tailor by trade, a kind and intelligent man. We had something in common: his child, Teddy, was among those sent away from Buchenwald. As a result of that we became closer. In that accursed Berga he made an effort to help me, at least for the first few days after our arrival. Later he too began to ail, while I was feeling that I was losing my strength, becoming thinner and weaker day by day. And I was forced to work hard in installing cables, which were so heavy that more than once I fell when trying to lift one. Our foreman was a Jew from Częstochowa named Ringel. Through his wife he was related to Warszawski, but he did not have his smarts; what he did have in common with his relative was the attitude that all orders had to be carried out and that we had to work hard, otherwise things would get much worse. So we carried the cables until we were as dead when we came home in the evening.

At work I became acquainted with a certain Złoty-Kamień, from Warsaw, active in the *Folkspartey*; with Israel Rolnik, a cousin of Rabbi Simkha Trajstman *z.l.*; and with Mr. Podolski from Antwerp, who promised me that if he survived he would give my regards to my relatives the Finkelsztajns, observant and wealthy Jews.

In the barrack, on the bunk, I was virtually isolated. Not only did I not see anyone, but I did not think about anyone. I no longer even thought about Coby. In the days after he was sent away I knew that I would have to defend myself against my wise wife, whom I constantly hoped to meet again after the war, for having given him up without resistance. But I no longer even thought about that. What did I think about? About a potato or a piece of bread – that was my dream... This was how the Nazi murders succeeded in carrying out their plan of annihilation; they had killed most of the Jews of Europe, and they gradually degraded the remainder to the level of animals.

The ways and means of Providence are hidden from us. Only in the results can the hand of Providence be seen. Had I remained in that camp for a few days more I would certainly not have made it; my strength was leaving me from hour to hour. I was not the only one; men were falling like flies.

In sharp contrast to Buchenwald, where there was communication among the several blocks, and some of the prisoners even had contact with people outside the camp and from them they quietly received news about the situation on the fronts, in Berga we were completely cut off from the world.

One morning we were roused and hurriedly driven from the barrack to a roll-call. As we were coming out, we noticed that we were surrounded on all sides by SS men and other guards, armed with machine guns. Not much time was spent in counting. The order was: *Marschieren!*

This is how we left the most horrible of all of my camps, physically and emotionally broken, dead-tired and dead-hungry. Our escorts screeched “*Schnell laufen*” and whoever fell even slightly behind was immediately shot dead, as the Yiddish poet Abraham Reyzen says in his poem “Blow ye evil winds”: “Those who cannot fly far are killed on the spot.”

We walked and walked without rest, hunted, driven and beaten by our escorts. I was marching in a row with my townsman M. A. Rosenblatt, whom I have already mentioned. Suddenly I noticed that he was falling down on the road. I don’t know where I found the strength to get him up so that none of the guards would notice. Also walking with us was David Mintz *z.l.*, a Jew from Walborz who had been in the camps in Piotrków. I saw that he was chewing on something and from time to time putting a spoon into his mouth; this did not seem natural at the

time, and he also gave me a spoonful of food, something I always remembered, and I expressed my gratitude to him many years later, when he lived in Los Angeles.

I think I have already quoted the words of the Gemara (Megilla 3) to the effect that when one is suddenly beset by a fright, though he may not see consciously what is going on around him, his fortune, his instinct does see; his intuition tells him.

I somehow had a strong premonition that if I were to continue on the death march, I would certainly not make it!

And, thinking about it, I heard – and this was not the first time during the war years – an inner or “higher” voice saying to me: run away, now, don’t wait! I quickly stole away, not looking at the countless armed guards, and I even managed to pull Rosenblatt with me.

We entered a large, dense forest. As people told us later, shots were fired in our direction. These same people also reported this to my wife, who was searching for me after surviving the war in Bergen-Belsen, and she did not want to hear it... We also heard shots, but we heard them during the entire time of the march.

The question is, how did I dare to risk my life, not being by nature a great risk-taker? The answer is precisely that before the escape my brain started functioning... I managed to do a quick reckoning to the effect that the only hope of staying alive lay in escaping, because if I were to go on marching like that I would simply collapse, and they would not need to shoot me.

When we got into the forest I stopped being afraid. As soon as we had gotten far enough away from the highway we lay down, or rather we fell down from fatigue. When we thought that we heard someone talking we kept going farther away until it became altogether quiet. We then felt more secure. The poet’s words come to mind: The world is lovely where man is not.

In the woods we looked for something to fortify us, berries or mushrooms. But there was not a trace of any of that; it was not the season yet. We did, however, find a little stream and we refreshed ourselves with some water, chewing some grass with it.

We walked for hours and hours, resting for a bit and walking on, not knowing where we were going and not seeing any way out.

Our hearts began to feel lighter when we saw railroad tracks. We followed the tracks until, at a distance, we saw signs of a settlement. We then began to walk more slowly; up to now we were driven by our nerves.

Looking closer at the settlement, which consisted of small houses, but clean and well cared for, we did not know whether we had arrived at a large German village or a small town. We were “dressed” in torn *Kazett* clothes with the conspicuous yellow marks, truly in tatters, but somehow we were not ashamed, just as we were not afraid for our lives; what was paramount to us was getting something to eat!

I believe that we entered a very small house. (Times were different, people were not afraid to let people in who seemed suspicious according to their clothing.) Though we had not arranged it, we somehow assumed roles: I was the talker and my partner was the “collector,” and he played his part very well, he even had a large bag ready... I politely asked for some food and we were given boiled potatoes in their peels, which truly delighted us, but they were but a drop in the ocean; we were just beginning to feel our hunger. From there we went to another house, where we were given pieces of bread that we gobbled up. From there we went to houses that seemed finer, and by this time my partner was gathering “provisions” into his bag, which was filling up. Some of the people whom we told of our wanderings had compassion with us and even invited us to eat from plates, something we were no longer used to. We kept eating and

somehow could not get full. It reminds me of the Gemara Megilla (page 7), which tells of a well-known scholar who ate tens of bowlfuls of food, and even wanted to eat the bowls... For, as the Gemara explains, people do not know how hungry a poor man can be!

In some of the houses we noticed the owners looking out the window, in case someone was looking for their guests.

As we were walking, almost in a leisurely way, along the little streets, we noticed a large, very beautiful house, a villa. We rang the bell and introduced ourselves as workers who had lost their work party on the march. I spoke to them in fairly good German, telling them that I had studied at the university in Berlin. There too we were well received and treated to food. They had us sit down in a room where swastikas stared at us from every corner.

It did not take very long before the police came and took us, with no yelling or pushing, to the local jail, in a basement that was relatively clean. There, too, upon arrival we were served some cabbage soup that we gobbled up immediately. A few hours later the mayor of the town came to visit us. I introduced us and he was very friendly. I found out that we were in the little town of Schmiedeberg [Kovařská], in the Sudetenland. In the evening his wife came and brought us some tasty homemade cookies, something we had not eaten in years. At the time I did not understand why they made so much fuss about two ragged Jewish beggars. Only later did we read in the newspapers that in the last few months of the war the Nazis already knew about their eventual defeat and tried to mask themselves as normal human beings. This does not mean that all those who treated us humanly at the time were Nazis in disguise; some of them were good people who had themselves suffered under the Nazi regime. In any case, the Schmiedeberg jail was not the worst place compared with all of our camps.

Gradually we were joined by other “prisoners” (no Jews among them). This was one of the very few nights in the camps when I could sleep for a few hours. I would probably have slept longer but early in the morning we were awakened by the police, who led us to a larger group of *Kazett* prisoners. There we had to wait until smaller and larger groups arrived until hundreds and hundreds, perhaps thousands, were gathered, once again guarded on all sides by police, SS and others. And once again the order was given to march quickly.

We had begun to eat out of our provisions bag while in jail and there was hardly anything left in it, but this time hunger did not gnaw at us. Though outwardly the situation was like that of the previous death march, there were some differences. First of all, people tried to throw paper-wrapped pieces of bread to the marchers. Only after shouting by the guards and shots in the air did that stop. Second, one of the guards took a sandwich out of his pocket and, looking around to make sure no one saw him, divided it among us. From him we also found out that there was a retreat from “some” of the fronts, but he had no doubt that this was all brilliantly planned by the Führer, who was in no hurry – he had enough time! And we had the feeling that this servant of the Reich believed what he was saying.

Meanwhile we also heard marchers whispering to one another that the front was getting closer and that they were therefore escaping together with the prisoners. But the approach of the Allied armies did not prevent the Nazi murderers from continuing their murders. Along the march, as well as in the woods where we had stopped for a while, executions by shooting did not cease.

We passed through villages and towns and saw people leading normal lives. For the most part we saw women and children. They took a quick look at us and promptly turned their heads away.

According to the calendar it was already spring, but the nights were ice-cold and the frost penetrated our thin bones.

One of those nights was etched into my memory. First of all we were held at roll-call for many hours in the darkness and frost, each one of us a piece of ice. A Jew from Łask (he had known the old rabbi as well as his successor, and admired them both greatly), who was standing beside me, literally collapsed from the cold and wept like a baby, saying that he could not take it. Later we were squeezed into a barn, one of top of another as in a barrel of herring.

As I was lying there in my distress I heard a quiet sobbing accompanied by a faint voice: Help me, I'm going... It came from a young man who was lying at our feet. I turned to Mr. Złoty-Kamień, whom I have already mentioned, and suggested that we should try to do something for the agonizing young man; he answered, "I'm dying too"; he obviously was not feeling well. Our exchange was overheard by a certain Grynberg from Radomsk, an observant Jew who was not regarded as a good person, since he did not help anybody in the Berga camp, though his two sons had worked in the kitchen and he had lacked for nothing, or so people said; but he soon got up from his place and said, "Here, I have this bagful of sugar, take it and save the young man!" We soon gave the weakened young man some sugar and brought him back to life. I don't know what happened to him eventually. Not many came out of the barn alive.

I learned once again that one must never believe in accusations against someone, even if they seem justified. A *mensch* is recognized at a time of distress! The thought occurred to me – one that not everyone will accept – that the observant Jew Grynberg's impulsive reaction was the result of what was left of the fear of God that he still carried in him, something that sometimes can be trusted more than kindness, as modern humanism would dictate – when the mind gets involved, and the human mind is always objective! As the famous Rabbi Bunim of Pszyscha explained the scriptural verse "Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him" (Deuteronomy 15:10): Give to the poor man because you must, that is the categorical imperative, and not because you feel bad when you see his need...

After that night in the barn we kept on marching, and with each day our group got smaller. Some were shot, as I have mentioned, and others simply collapsed on the road; their strength had given out.

One morning we stopped at a place called Kaaden (in Czech), Komitau in German, a very pretty, clean and picturesque town or city. [Actually Kaaden is the German name (Kadaň in Czech), and Komitau (Chomutov) is the district seat.] As we were going through the streets I noticed a sign pointing to Karlsbad, the famous spa which brought back familiar memories: not only had my grandmother Brokhe, may peace be upon her, gone there for the cure, but many Hasidic rabbis would spend their summer vacations there together with hundreds of their followers. Conventions of Jewish organizations had also taken place there, as well as the 12th and 13th Zionist Congress.

Finally we were led into barracks, which were not as dark as the ones in the previous camps; they were also cleaner. We also heard less shouting and saw fewer beatings. What had happened? People were whispering that the war was about to end. To a certain degree we also felt more "comfortable" there, for a simple and sad reason: the marching mass had in the course of the long march become decimated, and only a small group remained.

I have no recollection of what we were given to eat. I remember only that we were led to work every day.

Walking to work one day I had a glimpse of a very beautiful villa and I said to my landsman Rosenblatt that we would soon be liberated in that town, and then we would move into that villa.

On a certain morning we noticed that there was more light than usual in the barrack. On stepping outside we were greeted by a laughing sun moving across a clear, bright sky. Since our camp guards had begun to disappear, we took the chance of walking somewhat further along the streets. And my eyes were suddenly struck by banner headlines in the newspapers: *Der Führer ist tot!* We soon spread this unbelievable announcement among one another and returned to the barracks, which were beginning to empty out. This was May 9, 1945 – we had seen the date on the newspapers. It did not take long before Soviet tanks showed up in the town, with soldiers and officers whom we approached and whom we greeted as our liberators.

Did we then take account and appreciate the significance of the historic moment of liberation? Did we thank Providence for having left us among the living, when the best and finest of us were taken away? I will be honest: I did not think at all! The psalmist tells us, in the Song of Degrees: “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream” (Psalms 126:1). Did any of us really believe that we would be liberated? And even now the reality was hard to grasp. The human heart, when it fills with joy or despair, often cannot allow anything else, and our thinking, since Berga, did not “function” normally.

One thing I did not forget was to go back to the splendid house I had “chosen” when I was still the Nazis’ slave.

The house, surely one of the finest in town, was not hard to find. When we got there and rang the doorbell, there came out an elegantly dressed man who looked at with hostility. I explained to him that we needed rooms to live in. He tried to refuse us, but I told him firmly that we had to have rooms and there was to be no argument.

We then went out on the town to get some food, about which we human beasts had not stopped dreaming over the last few months. As we left the house I felt as if my feet could not carry me; but I paid no attention and first of all went into the stores. Everything was open for us. We filled paper bags and barely managed to carry them to “our” house, put them in front of the door and went back for more provisions; we ate only with our eyes.

When, with the last of our strength, we got back with more grocery bags, we realized two things. First, that we had partners for our provisions; Russian officers, who had also taken rooms in the same house, had picked out precisely the best of what we had brought back. Second, that they had taken away the owner of the house; he had been one of the Nazi chiefs in the town, and we did not see him again. We immediately entered our respective rooms and literally collapsed onto the beds. It was the first rest since the outbreak of the war. I could not sleep, however; the experiences of the preceding hours had been altogether too strong and too dramatic.

After some rest we opened the closets and found a great array of underwear and expensive clothing. I therefore decided to wash from head to toe and dress like human being. Not far from our rooms was a splendid bathroom, where I literally washed skin and bones; I was a real skeleton. My partner bathed after me. He also found enough underwear and clothes for himself.

In the evening we heard singing and laughter. We went downstairs and met Russian soldiers partying. I became acquainted with their leader, the *politruk* of the group. From what he said and related I gathered that he was not a great friend of the Jews. I spoke Polish and he Russian, and we managed to communicate. Later I was glad that I had interrupted my end of the

conversation, because what he wanted to hear from me was comment about various political problems.

Already in the Buchenwald camp, when we met young Russian communists – *komsomoltsi* – we noticed that they oozed hatred toward the Jews, even their “own” Kaganovich. Later we heard about the communist-style arrest of the chairman of the Jewish community in Berlin, a Mizrahi activist, and of the famous humanist Raoul Wallenberg, who had achieved renown with his self-sacrificing activity in Budapest, rescuing thousands of Jews from certain death by supplying them with Swedish passports. What happened to them has remained unknown until this very day.

Sudden Transition from Slavery to Freedom

The breathtaking transition from the most degrading slavery, where life was in danger at every moment, to complete freedom seemed to have affected my health, just as one is sometimes blinded when coming out of a pitch-dark room into one that is bathed in bright, sunny light. I had lost my equilibrium and literally collapsed under myself. I was taken to the municipal hospital (I don't remember how), where I was thoroughly examined and treated with great care. No diagnosis was necessary; the doctors knew exactly what the reason for my illness was, and the atmosphere in the hospital was very friendly.

There is one incident in that hospital that I can never forget; my conscience is pained by it to this very day.

When I was beginning to feel better I was allowed to get up from my bed and walk around the hospital, in the comfortable and clean hallways. Shaking as I walked, I noticed a crib in which a blond German child was lying. My blood began to boil, because I was reminded of the 21 children who were taken out of our Block 64 in Buchenwald. I ran over to the crib and gave the child a blow. It could not have been a very hard blow, because the child did not even react. Later I felt sorry about it and thought that this was a survival of the human-beast product that had been formed in the Nazi camps.

It was only on returning from the hospital to the comfortable room and no longer feeling hunger and thirst that I felt a terrible emptiness around me. A fearful sense of despair overtook me: did I really remain the only one of my whole family? What kind of sense or purpose is there in such a life? Why, and for whose sake, was I left behind? Should I beat my head on the wall and tear my flesh? Is this kind of life worthwhile? Such questions filled my still feeble brain. And here I was in a small town, where I had not yet met a Jew to whom I could turn for advice. I therefore decided to travel to Prague, where there were still Jews and Jewish institutions with whom I might be able to consult. Arriving in Prague, I went to the Jewish community and asked for information about surviving Jews. Unfortunately they had not yet established contact with other Jewish centers and could not help me much. They did, however, advise me to return to the place where I had lived before the war. Simple common sense dictated that those who were looking for their families would first of all go to the places where they had lived with those families. In my case, this meant that I would have to travel to Łódź.

I understood that they were right and immediately went back to Kaaden. I hardly saw anything of the city of Prague, though I had always had a special feeling for that capital. Not only had Prague been famous for centuries as a European metropolis, renowned for its scientists, writers and artists, but also as one of the greatest and oldest Jewish communities, where from the

Middle Ages to modern times great scholars, rabbis and yeshiva heads had lived and worked, as well as Jewish historians, astronomers, philologists, writers and artists. The world's oldest synagogue, after all, is in Prague! Already as a child I had heard stories about the wondrous happenings in that city. But at this time I cared about none of that. I thought only about my family!

In Kaaden I managed to get the necessary documents as one liberated from a concentration camp, and went on my way. I don't remember how I traveled; I remember only that the trip was not an easy one. I had to change trains in several cities, and I had with me two large suitcases filled with clothing. Many cars were full of Russian soldiers, who let themselves be heard; passengers, especially women, ran away from them and tried to find a place where they would not be seen.

After a drawn-out journey I arrived in Łódź with a heavy heart and immediately went to Cegielniana 25. The watchman of the building (which belonged to my father-in-law), who together with his family had been our *shabbes-goy*, received me coldly. He informed me, however, that my brother-in-law Salek (Yeshaya) Weltfried, my wife's half-brother (from the same mother), was in Łódź and had a place in that very building. This was good news; at least someone in the family remained alive! I immediately went up to his place and put down my suitcases. Now I had a roof over my head. When my brother-in-law returned and after we kissed and cried, I heard a horrifying, bloodcurdling report about the tragic end of almost the entire family. On the basis of his own tragically sad experience, he advised me not to make too many illusions for myself about my wife and sister . . .

I had taken enough travel provisions that I still had enough to eat on the day of my arrival in Łódź. A living person, however worried and desperate, must still eat. I did have good-quality clothes, but not much money. I went out into the street to look for any acquaintances who might have survived. Passing over streets that once had been exclusively Jewish, I saw very few Jews. I felt depressed and downcast. Here and there I would see a familiar face, and we would greet each other heartily. Even the survivors had no joy. Each one had his list of martyrs, some longer and some shorter. I was fortunate to come across the two sisters of my dear friend Leybl Horowicz *z.l.*, about whom I have already written. (They were named, I believe, Regina and Madzia, lovely young women who already had husbands.) When I coincidentally ran into Ada Karmel, the descendant of a wealthy Hasidic family and herself highly educated and intelligent, she told me that she was employed in selling merchandise, earning a commission. I had known her, because she had given private Hebrew lessons to my wife.

I met yet another acquaintance, who advised me to go into business. He immediately suggested to me what I should buy or sell. I recognized that he meant to help me earn some money. I turned to Ada and she introduced me to a relative of hers who was a wholesaler. I then bought some merchandise and sold it, and began to make a living.

Meanwhile the news came to Łódź that the rabbi in Kraków had lists of camp survivors. If I could travel from Kaaden, in the Sudetenland, to Łódź, then I should certainly be able to go from Łódź to Kraków. No sooner said than done. Here I am in Kraków, with Rabbi Steinberg (now in New York), from a well-known rabbinical family, who received me warmly and gave me all the lists, including the one from Bergen-Belsen. I looked through them carefully and even found many names of women acquaintances who had been in the Piotrków ghetto, but not one name from my family! People who knew had told me that even after the war many thousands died there from various epidemic diseases, especially typhus.

In Kraków I also barely saw the city, especially the Jewish Kraków that I had known and that had bubbled with Jewish life in every field. Nothing interested me outside the lists.

Disappointed but not resigned, I returned to Łódź. I harbored the hope that names had been omitted from the lists, and Rabbi Steinberg had agreed.

Back in Łódź, as I was visiting an acquaintance, I accidentally met someone who had been in the Piotrków ghetto and who had known me and my family. Of course he had heard of our son, who had been known in the camp for his knowledge and his talent for languages. When he saw me, he told me that he had been in Bergen-Belsen (one of the most gruesome death camps), and that he had been told there that my wife and my son were among the survivors. I should remark that the young man who had given me this unbelievable piece of news was not of those whose word could be trusted, and I found it particularly suspect that he mentioned both my wife and my son. I had, after all, seen with my own eyes how the murdering Nazis had taken him away, along with the other children of the block; and we all knew what those ruthless murderers did with Jewish children!

But that notice, however unbelievable, did not let me rest. Though it might not be true, even some dubious news is something for someone who wanders blindly in his loneliness and looks for something that would remind him of his beloved family.

Another of those searching for family in Łódź was Jakub Berlinski, whom we had known in the large ghetto in Piotrków and who had been sent from there directly to Auschwitz for engaging in trade. We later became close friends with him and his wife Hela, for whom he was looking. He had also heard that his wife was in Bergen-Belsen, and did not know if the news was true.

When we met, and each of us told the other about the news from Belsen, we decided to make our way there.

We did not know the location of Bergen-Belsen. We only knew that it was in the British zone. But we knew that we needed permission to travel from Łódź to Berlin, which was in the Soviet zone. We went to the military commander of Łódź and explained the purpose of our trip to him. By his attitude and appearance he had to be a Jew. He asked us a few questions as a formality and gave us the necessary permits.

As I have mentioned, train travel was difficult, and it was getting worse, to the point of being life-threatening. But who minded that? We squeezed into a car, and the uncertain prospect of finding someone from the family made all hardships easier.

With luck, we arrived in Berlin safe and sound. But how were we to continue our journey? We had heard of a station (I don't remember its name) from which there was transportation to the British zone. We made our way there and noticed that a freight train was beginning to move. We managed to hop onto one of the freight cars, holding on so that we would not fall. When the train stopped, we were seen by British military police, who, rifles drawn, ordered us to get down. All we knew to say in English was "concentration camp," but it did not help. I don't remember any longer how we managed to drag ourselves to the Belsen camp, except that it took several days. We arrived there in the morning. It was summer. The sky was clear, and I was surrounded by a pleasant feeling of warmth.

No trace was left of the old Belsen camp, which had been a nest of death and disease. It was burned down right after the liberation. What was left were massive blocks of white houses, which had been the quarters of military people and Nazi vampires. After the war, survivors and other refugees lived in that camp.

As I entered the camp, I saw a woman whom I had known in the Piotrków ghetto and who had worked in the Bugaj kitchen. When I asked her if anyone from my family was there, she answered with joy: “Not only your wife and sister, but your son is also among the survivors!” This, of course, produced a joyful outburst in me. I was no longer walking but running. I still could not believe it, so I asked other people I had known when I met them. They led me right away to the block where my wife and sister were living, together with another family.

My unexpected arrival in the large room, which was still half in darkness, was more than a sensation; they had heard absolutely nothing of me. The only thing my wife had heard was, as I have mentioned, that I had been fired on; she now told me that she had refused to hear it. The boundless joy of meeting with family was mixed with sadness and tears, remembering all those of our family and friends who had so tragically perished.

Our son, who had learned English quickly, immediately ran to the camp administration and brought back a permit for me to live in that block, which was actually intended for women only.

It was June 1945. The camp already bubbled with Jewish life. A Jewish elementary school was already in place, supported by people from the Jewish brigade, folk with hearts of gold, the embodiment of true *halutz* idealism, who had completely given themselves over to the task of easing the need and improving the conditions of the surviving refugees.

I have written about them and their activity in an article in *Di Tseyt* of London.