

Arye Edelist¹

Memories

CHILDHOOD

My first memories go back to the time when I was a boy of 3-4 years old. My brother, two years older than me, began studies at the *cheder* (an extremely religious school for young boys), at which religious studies were taught exclusively. It was a great honour for me that, at the age of three, my parents agreed for me to go to the *cheder* with my older brother. Every day, winter or summer, from eight in the morning until two in the afternoon, I was in the *cheder* and, in the afternoon, I returned to repeat the morning's learning.

I remember walking with my brother from Krakowski Street along the New Market Square (Daszyński Square) to our home at number 14 (at the exit the Avenue 1 N.M.P.). Along the way home from the *cheder*, we always met an old lady who sold warm bagels. It was a great joy when my brother would buy a bagel, break it into two halves and give one half to me. By the time we arrived home, the bagel had been eaten. And so, over two years, I attended the *cheder* which belonged to the elderly, grey-haired Benjamin Litwak.

After two years of *cheder*, I could read and write Hebrew. I was able to translate and discuss passages from the Torah (the Pentateuch). I continued studying in a more advanced *cheder* where secular subjects were also taught – for one hour per day. That school, under the name of "Agudat Israel", was located in Berka Joselewicza Street. In the afternoons, a teacher would come to the *cheder* to teach us secular subjects.

In 1935-36, a law was passed forbidding the issuing of permits, for the running of a business or for the establishment of a company, to people who had not completed elementary school. That was a blow for religious schools (*cheders*), which did not have the right to issue school reports and which did not agree to implement secular education. There were two well-known schools in Poland - in Będzin and Łódź – belonging to the strictly orthodox "Agudat Israel" network, which had the rights of public schools. My parents decided to send me to Będzin, specifically so that I could obtain a certificate that I had completed elementary school.

It is hard to imagine my sadness and tears at every half-yearly departure from my home to Będzin. For me, my time in Będzin was very difficult and grey. I lived with a family, an elderly couple, in a small apartment opposite the railway station. I was occupied at school from eight in the morning until seven in the evening. Tired out from all-day religious and secular studies, in the evenings I still had to do my homework alone and

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without help. Due to the fact that I had not earlier attended a normal school, in the beginning, I had huge difficulties with the humanities subjects, above all, because, in accordance with my age, I joined Grade 6 (the second last class before the end of public school).

Despite the difficulties, I obtained my certificate in 1937 and returned home. My parents considered that Częstochowa did not have an appropriate educational institution and sent me to an academy of higher religious learning, ("Yeshivat Keter Torah"), first in Częstochowa and then later in Mstów, near Częstochowa. The school was run by a well-known Talmud scholar, Rabbi Einhorn, and boys came here from around the country. I studied here for almost two years until 1939.

The Mstów yeshivah had no classes or other divisions based upon age. Students, aged 14-20, studied according to a uniform program. I was the youngest student. I was around thirteen years old. Rabbi Einhorn was the only teacher. Lessons were once a day and lasted around three hours. In general, they comprised texts from the Talmud, written in the 5th Century, with interpretations from the Middle Ages, as well as more contemporary interpretations, and from Rabbi Einhorn's clarifications, thoughts and interpretations.

The time, outside of Rabbi Einhorn's lessons, was at our own disposal, i.e. study was completely independent, without any controls apart from general guidelines regarding fields of study, the condition being that they were religiously scholastic. There were no other classes or education. Each student had a partner, another student, with whom, on one's own accord, to study other volumes of the Talmud. In the remaining time, students worked independently.

All classes took place in a large hall, in a building which also housed the only synagogue in Mstów.

Students lived in a two-storey building. Each room was shared by 3-4 students. You got up at 6:30am and, at 9:00am, after prayers and breakfast, you sat and studied until 10:00pm-11:00pm, with a one-hour meal break, and breaks for prayer. On Thursdays, after dinner (at 8:00pm-9:00pm, depending upon the time of year), we returned to our studies until the early morning. On Fridays, tired-out from sleepless nights, we went to bed straight after dinner. We slept until midnight and then returned to our studies until Saturday morning.

Nighttime studies were "extra-curricular". The Rabbi, formally, was not involved in them and even criticised this way of life.

It should be noted that the students belonged to the Chassidic movement (the majority of the students belonged to the "Góra Kalwaria" faction). They were extremely religious and did not even surrender to the will of the Rabbi in these matters.

THE FAMILY HOME

From childhood, our family - father Noach, mother Mindla, sister Lola, brother Menachem and I – lived on Daszyński Square, at number 14, in a two-room apartment on the first floor.

My father was an industrialist. Until 1933, he owned a cartridge-case factory at 21 Warszawska Street and, from 1933, a company for the production of metal fittings for furniture under the name "POLMETAL", at 21/23 Jaskrowska Street. In 1938, he established "BE-YOT", a bicycle parts factory.

My father was socially and politically active within the Orthodox party, Agudat Israel. He was also its representative in many Jewish and general municipal organisations.

Jewish, *Yiddish*, was the mother tongue and generally spoken at home, although everyone in the family also knew and spoke Polish.

Apart from my father, who maintained business contacts with the non-Jewish community, the rest of the family maintained relationships solely within the Jewish community.

Our apartment was located in the city-centre, which was also the shopping centre. Shops, at that time, generally belonged to the Jews. Daszyński Square was also used for various events and demonstrations. From our balcony, I could observe National Democrat members' picketlines in front of Jewish shops. They chanted anti-Semitic slogans such as "Don't buy from Jews – it is good advice. Whoever buys from a Jew, betrays Poland". From time to time, young people would come and disrupt the chanting of those slogans by calling out for people to buy their newspaper, "Robotnik ("The Worker") – organ of the Polish Socialist Party".

From the balcony, I could also watch pilgrims, from all over Poland, pass through Daszyński Square. To my eyes, they were a huge mass of people, ill-disposed to Jews and, therefore, I was afraid to go out.

That sentiment was especially reinforced when, in July 1937, a Jewish porter shot a Polish porter in self-defence. That day, and for the next 2-3 days, with *Endek* thugs at the head, a mob, which had arrived from nearby small towns and villages, carried out a pogrom. The thugs walked about the city with clubs and attacked Jews. They smashed windows and looted Jewish shops. I didn't leave home and, scared, I peered through the window from time to time, but in such a way so that no one would notice me from the street, because I was afraid that they would throw stones at our windows.

THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD WAR II

From the beginning of 1939, the general atmosphere of approaching war, which pervaded the city, was also apparent at home. The family would often gather around the radio to listen to the words of politicians from home and abroad, but especially from Germany. We felt the coming storm and a fear of the unknown.

On the day that the War broke out, Friday 1st September 1939, a bus stopped outside our home in the evening. Its driver offered, to those who wished it, a trip to Piotrków, i.e. to those who wished to flee the city ahead of the approaching German army. The whole family left for Piotrków in that crowded bus and from there, by wagon, in the direction of Warsaw. The roads were packed with people fleeing, either on foot or in wagons, from the approaching German army, being attacked by machine-guns from German planes.

Finally, on the fourth day of the War, tired and hungry, we reached Warsaw. We managed to get a room with a family at 10 Twarda Street and, even then, the battle with hunger began. The residents of Warsaw had supplies of food, but we, fugitives, already could not buy articles of food. Food shops were empty or would only sell to regular customers. The situation became more dire when, after a few days, Germany bombing caused a lack of running water. Also, for this reason, sanitary conditions were horrible and a lack of drinking water nagged at us more than did hunger. I will never forget that joyous moment when we managed to buy five herrings and began to eat them without bread.

My mother, more sensible, pleaded with us, "Children, have you forgotten that there is no water? The herrings will burn you up!" But, apparently, hunger was stronger than sense and, despite the lack of bread, we ate the herrings without anything else. When thirst became too much, we went to the bank of the Wisła, but gunfire on the riverbank forced us to flee.

This was the way we survived for around four weeks in the besieged capital of Warsaw. During the day, there was heavy German artillery fire and, at night, Germans planes bombed house after house, street after street.

After the fighting ended, the seige and the fall of Warsaw, we returned to occupied Częstochowa.

GERMAN OCCUPATION

From the very beginning of German occupation, they managed to intimidate us through severe anti-Jewish activity. Round-ups for forced labour in Germany, the compulsory wearing of armbands with the Star of David, the burning and demolition of synagogues, the expropriation of Jewish property and the appointment of German commissars in Jewish businesses, the beating of Jewish passers-by and the sporadic shooting of Jews for no reason, were all the order of the day.

One evening, in December 1939, through the window, we noticed flames which were growing and spreading along one side of Garibaldi Street. As it turned out, the Germans had set fire to the New Synagogue. The whole district was surrounded by police, without any possibility of getting any closer to the site of the fire. I stood at the window for a long time, stunned by the huge flames. No one could manage to get close enough to put them out.

The atmosphere at home was heavy and fearful. The expropriation of our business had left our family with no livelihood.

In order to facilitate repression against the Jews, the German occupation authorities organised a “Council of Elders” (*Rady Starszych*) as representatives of the Jews of Częstochowa. To this Council, they appointed community activists and, in particular, political party leaders. The Council was to carry out the instructions of the German authorities. In particular, it was to ensure the supply of Jewish workers for various sites in the city, the surrounding district and to be sent to Germany and to pass on to the Germans forced contributions of money imposed upon the Jewish population. Over time, the Council of Elders turned into a miniature Jewish Community Council, with a broader administrative apparatus, providing various social services to the Jewish population.

After our return from Warsaw, they summoned my father and informed him that he was to be a member of the Council of Elders.

One evening, a short time after, my father was summoned to a meeting from which he returned at 3:00am. Alarmed, the family eagerly awaited his return.

When he returned, he announced that he would no longer return to the Council of Elders because, at that meeting, they had debated the issue of providing Jews for forced labour in Germany. My father considered that Jews must not help the Germans by handing over the fate of other Jews into their hands. Despite his grave reservations, my father did not return to the Council of Elders.

Following the appropriation of our business, in order to get some sort of job, my brother and I registered as volunteers with the Labour Department of the Council of Elders. They assigned us to a work group. A German officer took us to a huge warehouse, in front of which a group of SS men awaited us. They opened the warehouse and the officer announced they we were to transfer all the crates to another warehouse which was located on the same street. Germans stood in two rows between both warehouses and each crate was to be carried by hand by two of us. My brother and I worked together. While explaining what we were to do, the officer held a revolver in his hand and warned us that should any crate fall onto the ground, we would end up with a bullet in the head. Each crate weighed about 40 kg and contained bottles of champagne.

At first, it seemed to me that I could handle the task but, after the first few crates, my hands could no longer hold them. They became totally paralysed and had lost all strength. My brother, two years older and stronger than me, suggested that he would carry them on his own and only asked that I hold the edge of the crates. Unfortunately, we could not continue like that. We had to think quickly because another pair of workers stood behind us and we could not hold them up.

We decided that one of us would carry the crates on our shoulders and the other would steady it with his hands. While my brother carried the crates on his shoulders and I steadied them, I could cope, but when my brother could no longer manage to carry them on

his own, I swapped with him. It was easier for me to carry the crates on my shoulders than in my hands but, after a certain time, I felt a sharp pain in the bones of my neck. It turned out that the crates were rubbing against my neck and had drawn blood. My handkerchief and that of my brother did not help, so that I returned home bloodstained. My mother applied cold compresses as she cried bitterly.

All Jewish schools, apart from trade schools, were closed at the start of the occupation. A few Jewish students and high school graduates organised illegal courses. It was well-known that courses were conducted by Loniek Goldstein and by sisters, Rybka and Madza Horowicz.

The Trade School was considered a "workplace". I went there and completed a locksmith course and, in the evenings, together with my brother, I took lessons with Rybka Horowicz.

THE BIG GHETTO

In April 1941, the Big Ghetto was established and all Jews living outside it had to leave their homes and move into it. As a result, our conditions were extremely cramped. After the creation of the Big Ghetto, my uncle, Yakow Eli Edelist and his daughter Dorka who had fled from Wieluń, and two little girls, my father's nieces, Henia and Klara Prusinowska from Łódź, moved into our apartment.

One day, my uncle asked my mother and father to join him in another room without the presence of the children. After a certain time, my mother returned shaken, amazed and lost in thought. "Something has happened to uncle", she said, pointing to her head. "He's talking about unheard of things". My mother told us that uncle was talking about how, in the Wieluń district and in the small town of Krzepice, the Germans were transporting Jews in trucks, from which could be heard horrendous screams and prayers of "Shema Yisrael" ... (the Jewish prayer recited before death).

To our ears, this story was totally improbable. After that, we never returned to the subject until Jews were sent to the death camp at Treblinka. Despite the improbability of this story, I could not stop thinking about it. I was seized by anxiety and I constantly thought about the story, especially when German oppression against the Jews escalated.

As a graduate of the trade school, I was often sent, by the Labour Department of the Council of Elders, to various "locksmith" jobs, but particularly to fix the locks on the apartments of the Germans. For each day's work, I received a few złoty which were needed for our family budget.

I carried out the work under great stress. Despite the fact that I had completed the locksmith course at the Trade School, I had no practice experience and I could not cope with fixing locks. We carried out the work together with a friend, Nirenberg, who completed that school course together with me. When we had to work in the homes of SS

officers, the apartment's owner would watch us, with revolver in hand. This caused us even greater stress and we were not able to complete the work on time.

The round-ups for work in Germany also did not pass me by. When rumours increased that there was to be a round-up for work in Germany, our family decided that my brother-in-law, my brother and I would go to our factory and hide there. We left home in the evening, after curfew, and sneaked our way to the factory on Jaskrowska Street, which lay in an area outside the ghetto. After 2-3 hours, we heard a heavy knocking at the door and yelling in German, "Polizei". Four armed police officers ("Shupo") barged into the empty entrance hall. They stood us in three corners of the hall. One of them remained with us, while the rest began to search the factory. When they found no one else, they returned, screaming for us to give up the seven other Jews hiding in the factory. No amount of translation helped convince them that, apart from the three of us, there was no one else in the factory.

They began to beat us in such a way that, after every hit, each of us "flew" from one corner of the hall to the other, where another officer stood and did the same. They played with us like that for a long time and, screaming, demanded that we give up the other seven.

We understood that it was the denunciation of our long-serving security guard which had probably led to information that ten Jews were hiding in the factory.

Beaten and bloodied, they took us to the police and, the following morning, they took us to the assembly point for deportation to Germany. As it turned out, on that day, they already had enough candidates for transport and, with the help of Bernard Kurland, head of the Labour Department of the Council of Elders, we were released.

"AKCJIE"

On the "Day of Judgment" (*Yom Kippur*), a Jewish holy day and day of fasting, the 21st of September 1942, the Jews of Częstochowa had a special reason for fasting and prayer. A great unrest and fear seized the Jewish population of the city. In the evening, on the eve of the fast, all the prayerhouses in the city were overcrowded. SS Captain Degenhart, responsible for carrying out the operations (*Akcjie*) – the shipment of the Jews – spread rumours that, with the help of the Council of Elders, nothing bad would happen to the Jews of Częstochowa - that Częstochowa would not go along the same path as other cities and that there would be no deportations.

But, by the evening of the following day, after the ending of the fast, we heard that detachments of Lithuanians and Ukrainians had arrived in the city and, by the next morning, they had surrounded the Big Ghetto. And the ghetto had been tightly closed off. Going out into the street was forbidden under penalty of death. In general, with regard to the Jews, the Germans ignored any other penalty. Every breach of their laws carried the death penalty, namely, being shot on the spot.

After two days, through our window, I saw masses of Jews driven and pushed by the Germans, from Berka Joselewicza Street and from other streets, to Daszyński Square. From that place, with every day's *akcja*, around 6,000 Jews were led along Dreszer Street to the P.K.P. (Polish Public Railway) goods train station, at Strażacki Street.

Over 45 years later, during a visit to Częstochowa, I visited that place. There were still railway tracks there and a long wooden barracks with doors on either side. The Germans pushed the Jews, with their bundles, into the barracks and, from there, they pulled them out from the other side, without their bundles, straight onto the goods wagons which stood at the railway station.

I was told about this by an older man who lived near the station and, from there, he watched as the Jews were sent from this station to the death camp at Treblinka.

The following day, after that first *akcja*, trucks arrived at the corner of Daszyński Square and the Avenue N.M.P., with bread and marmalade, which the Germans handed out to people on the street.

We were completely disorientated and did not know what would happen next. Again, rumours circulated that there would be no more deportations but, by then, no one believed them.

BUNKER

During that three-day break following the first deportation, my mother called us all into the kitchen where my father was waiting for us. My mother cried and said that "we had already lived our lives (she was around 45 years old at the time). You, my children, are still young and have not even begun to live. Save yourselves in any way that you can." My father took some banknotes from his pocket, divided them into equal amounts. He gave everyone a prayerbook and added that each of us must save ourselves in any way possible. We should not stay together and one should not look after the other.

After that family meeting, we began preparing a "bunker" in our basement as a hiding-place for the family and for some neighbours. The entrance to the basement was under our apartment and we were going to build a wall, at the end of the annexe, to create the impression that this was the full extent of the basement.

In our building, there was a shop with building materials and metal products which belonged to the Cymerman family. In the shop, there was a trapdoor in the floor which one could open and, using movable stairs, go down to the basement. The trapdoor was hidden by a solid counter above it.

Unwaveringly and enthusiastically, my brother and I set to work. We took tools and cement from the Cymerman's shop and we brought bricks from some building in the ghetto. After a short time, the single-layer brick wall was ready and the bunker could accommodate about 25 people. It was enough for our family, some of the Cymerman and Stopnicki families and the rest we left for neighbours who were interested. There were

such neighbours who considered that such a bunker was laughable and dangerous and could not save anyone.

On the third day, a new *akcja* began (in other districts of the city) and all activity regarding the bunker had to stop. On the day following the *akcji*, there was another break and we returned to the matter of the bunker. The bunker was ready, but new problems emerged.

The bunker needed to be stocked with food. We had no idea just how long we would need to remain there. No one dared to think about what would happen after the *akcje*. Where would we go if we managed to remain alive?

There was a sweets factory in our building and its owner, Dresler, did not show himself during the whole period of the *akcje*. All the neighbours were of the view that, in our situation, we should break down the door in order to ensure enough food for the people in the bunker.

It turned out that there was a huge amount of sugar and cocoa there. I will never forget the moment when I brought a bowl of cocoa and sugar and put it on my sick mother's bed.

This was after the second *akcja*. My father and brother were already not at home. Bernard Kurland, head of the Labour Department of the Council of Elders, came to our home and informed us that he could manage to sneak two men into the *Metalurgia* factory, the gathering point for those who had survived the previous *akcje*, on the condition that they go with him dressed as workers and without any baggage. The decision was taken at once. My father and my older brother were to go with Kurland and I was to stay with my mother and sister in order to go down with them to the bunker.

On 4th October 1942, the fourth *akcja* took place (it was the worst of all the *akcje*) and, early in the morning, the dark blue (Polish) and Jewish police came to the backyard of our home and called upon all residents to go out to Daszyński Square. I gathered my mother, sister, cousin and uncle and, together, we began to go down to the bunker. At that last moment, someone asked, "What will happen if we are all in the bunker and no one can contact us (we had no news about the fate of my father and brother)?" One solution was that I should go to the *akcja* and, if I should not be deported, then I could maintain contact with the bunker.

I left home, running in the direction of the *akcja* on Daszyński Square between Dreszer and Berek Joselewicz Streets. Degenhart was already there with a group of German officers and German police and, in front of them, Jews were standing in rows of five in the direction from I Avenue N.M.P. to the site of the *akcja*. One by one, they stepped out of the rows and stood before Degenhart.

It was a terrible sight. It was a sunny day but, due to fear, I didn't notice and had no idea what I was doing. Because I was late, I did not know where to stand. Was it better at the end – at the corner of I Avenue or at the head of the row? I didn't know which was

better, as if the position would somehow influence my fate. I lifted my head and looked around the huge square. It was surrounded by Germans in various uniforms (Gestapo, army, police), Ukrainians and Lithuanians and the dark-blue Polish police. From time to time, shots would disrupt the quiet pervading the square which meant that there was a dead body of a Jew who had hidden himself or had been ill or, through carelessness, went out into the street. One cannot imagine the horrible quiet that pervaded the square despite the presence of a crowd of several thousand. Parents even managed to calm their children and infants. That absolute silence enhanced the anxiety and fear of the unknown.

Each of us, who stopped in front of Degenhart, the lord of life and death of us all, waited as that murderer indicated with his horsewhip to the left or to the right; to the left meant deportation to the unknown, to the right – you remained in the city. Despite our lack awareness, we were all terribly scared lest the horsewhip should indicate to the left.

Eventually, it was my turn. I stood in front of Degenhart, who moved his hand to the left. At that same moment, I said two words in German: "I'm a locksmith". Bernard Kurland, from the Council of Elders, standing at the front with Degenhart, confirmed what I had said and indicated that he knew me personally. That was enough for me to stay alive.

THE SMALL GHETTO

Those who remained after the *akcje*, around four thousand people from the forty thousand Jews of Częstochowa and surrounding district, were crammed into the Small Ghetto which was located near the Warta River. The ghetto was cut off with barbed wire and took into parts of Jaskrowska, Mostowa, Nadrzeczna, Garncarska, Kozia and Senatorska Streets. At the Garncarska Street exit, there was one gate. Through there, residents went to and returned from work. Only women lived on Kozia Street.

Our family was gathered in one room with a small kitchenette which was converted into a bedroom, because it was forbidden to use private kitchens. The ghetto was actually a work camp with the difference that we lived in buildings rather than in tents or barracks. We went to work outside the ghetto. There was a communal kitchen and laundry. Some of the residents worked in servicing the ghetto but, apart from them, the presence of residents in the ghetto during working hours was forbidden.

Often, there were round-ups in the ghetto – to Treblinka, to be shot at the Jewish cemetery and to a labour camp in Skarżysko-Kamienna.

There was no normal life in the ghetto. Its residents vegetated. In the morning, they went to work and returned in the evening, after a twelve-hour working-day, worn out and dispirited. I went to work at the "Vulcan" foundry and, after a certain time, I worked at the Hasag-Pelcery munitions factory until the liquidation of the Small Ghetto.

My father worked in a warehouse from where clothing was distributed. My mother worked in the laundry, my sister and brother-in-law at "Rawo" and my brother in the Raków steelmill.

On the 25th June 1943, after work had ended for the day, we did not return to the ghetto. All of the Jewish workers were assembled in a huge hall which had a straw-covered floor. No one was allowed to leave the hall until the following morning.

I lay in a corner on the ground in great fear, not knowing what would be our fate. There were various rumours. Generally, it was considered that we would be deported to who knows where. No one knew what was happening in the ghetto. I had no idea what had happened to my father and mother who had remained in the ghetto.

The following day, the Germans led the majority of the ghetto residents to Hasag, among them my parents. From them, I learned of the liquidation of the ghetto and of the murder of the sick and of the children. My sister and brother-in-law were also brought to Hasag from their place of work. My brother was not with us. He remained penned up in the Raków steelmill but, after a certain time, he was transferred to our camp.

In the first months, it was very hard. I worked in the transport department, in a unit called "Heavy Transport". In pairs, we carried long, steel pipes from wagons to the factory, we carried heavy equipment to the productions halls and I unloaded coal from the wagons (one worker per wagon).

I could barely stand on my feet after a day's work. I was starving. The ration of black bread which tasted like clay and beet soup was not enough to satisfy my hunger. When winter came, I was still wearing the sandals which I wore in those first days of being barracked up, and which were unsuitable for the rainy days.

After a few months, I managed to move to the building department. I thought that it would be easier for me there, but I was disappointed. I was assigned to carrying, on my back, tin cans of concrete for building scaffolding. Each can weighed around 60 kg. However, I managed to swap that work and was assigned to fencing the area of the barracks with barbed wire. Here, I was able to work near the edge of the camp which looked out onto a field which surrounded the camp. And I worked alone, not in a group.

It was very hard to get up in the morning for the roll-call, which took place daily before leaving for work. We slept on three-level bunks, covered in straw which was never changed. After a short time, fleas would hatch which we could not get rid of and which "ate us alive".

SMUGGLING BREAD INTO THE CAMP

During my time working on the barbed wire surrounding the camp, I noticed a shepherd boy and motioned for him to come over to me. But the boy was afraid and was scared to approach the camp. However, I managed to convince him with the promise of earning money and proposed that he buy loaves of bread and leave them near the barbed wire. The boy demanded 50 złoty for a (2 kg.) loaf of white bread. I promised that I would

leave a 50-złoty banknote outside the wire. He would leave me the bread only after he already had the money in his hands.

The next day, I tossed the paper-covered banknote outside the wire and, shortly after, the boy brought the loaf of white bread and left it outside the wire. I dragged in the bread with a wire and, with great joy, I smelt the aroma of fresh bread which I had not experienced for a long time.

The smuggling in of bread did not end there. In order to bring the bread to our barracks, you had to cross the factory area and, here, there was the danger of being caught by the camp workshop guards (the "Werkschutz"). I got an old raincoat which I draped around my shoulders and I put the loaf of bread into my trousers against my stomach. The large dimensions of the raincoat completely covered the loaf of bread.

Encouraged by the success of this smuggling, I increased the number of loaves which I moved with my brother who helped me smuggle in bread several times per day. Selling a large portion of the bread allowed me give my whole family several slices.

Despite the acquired ability to smuggle, and the care exercised, Szyglic, head of the factory guard, caught us and, as well as confiscating the bread, they took my brother to the "wacha" (the factory guard building) and there they used whips to beat him.

When a guard caught us for a second time, he "invited" my brother to come to the "wacha" on the following day. With the agreement of my family, I volunteered and went in his place. I received double the whipping after which I was unable to sit down. In addition, they threatened that, in the event of further smuggling, I would not escape with my life. So, ended my occupation as a smuggler.

WORK ON THE CHIMNEY AND UREA

The German building foreman selected me to assist him in the building of a chimney. The foreman's work consisted of laying bricks on the inside walls of the chimney. My assisting work was hard, but the work conditions were much better. Firstly, apart from the foreman, there was no supervision. As my supervisor, I had an older man who was not a Nazi. From time to time, before the start of work, he took a slice of bread out of his pocket and said, "I know that it is not possible to sleep on the flea-infested straw bunks. Go to sleep on the bricks and I'll manage. But don't tell anyone because they'll kill me".

This "paradise" did not last long. A short time later, I contracted nephritis (probably due to lying on the cold bricks) which developed into urea. My blood pressure rose and I could barely breathe. They took me to the "hospital" where I was treated by Dr Przyrowski, a friend of my parents'. The treatment consisted of him drawing about half a cup of blood from my body whenever I had an attack of breathlessness. With black humour, he told me, "As long as you have blood in your veins, you can still be saved".

After leaving hospital, I returned to work. My foreman, it seemed, did not call upon his assistant and I did not appear on any list of workers. I decided not to return to work. I didn't go out for roll-call. I didn't leave the barracks area and helped my father clean the barracks.

LIBERATION

On the 15th January 1945, we heard artillery shots. The Soviet army had reached the city's suburbs. I left the barracks and went to the factory area. The factory hall was empty and, through the window, I observed the management of Hasag-Pelcery as they fled. Cars stood in front of the residential building of the German personnel and the Germans were quickly loading them with suitcases and bundles.

I returned to the barracks area with the good news. No one went outside to work. The occupants of the barracks, disorientated, gathered in front of the barracks, weighing up the situation and thinking of what they should do.

In the afternoon, a goods train drew up and stopped at the gate to the barracks area. Szyglic entered the barracks area, stopped at the square by the gate and turned to the gathered crowd in front of the barracks. He announced that the Soviet army was in the suburbs and he had come to save us from the hands of the Soviets. To that aim, he tried to get the train in order to take all the Jews to the West. He warned that anyone who remained would perish at the hands of the Soviets.

The opinion of the crowd was divided. Rumours had spread that, before leaving other camps, the Germans had pushed all the Jews into barracks and then set them on fire. For that reason, a section of those gathered went into the wagons in order to avoid this similar fate. I stood, not far from the gate, with my father and brother and, together with the mob, approached the train. But, after a moment, as we stood by the train, we returned to the barracks area. An interesting situation had arisen: those in the square near the gate approached the train - some entered the wagons, while others turned back in front of the wagons and returned to the barracks area and again stood in front of the train. Actually, no one forced us to do anything

In the end, we came to the conclusion that the time had come to save ourselves and that we should flee rather than get into the wagons. Together with my brother, I ran to the factory area and hid amongst the machines. My mother and sister hid in the camp kitchen storehouse, in my brother-in-law's workplace. That same evening, the whole family hid together in the kitchen storehouse.

On the morning of 16th January 1945, we walked through Hasag to freedom.

AFTER LIBERATION

“Quo Vadis” was a very appropriate question for the surviving Jews of

Częstochowa. Choosing a life-path after the Holocaust was extremely complicated for the Jews, as a community as well as individually.

As a first step, the "Jewish Committee" was established which represented the surviving Jews. The Committee conducted cultural and social activities. The Committee was given a beautiful two-storey building on Jasnogórska Street, which turned into the "Children's Home". Accommodated within it were countless orphans and children repatriated from Russia. The Committee established a college and other cultural events, as well as education for the children and youth. The Committee also distributed articles of food and other items needed for life.

The majority of Jews, however, aspired to leave Poland, especially to travel to Palestine – the Zionist movement began to be heavily active in the cities where the Jews were gathered. Anti-Semitic excesses and especially the Kielce pogrom, during which several dozen Jews were murdered, contributed to the mass emigration of Jews and to their fleeing Poland. Despite the existence of the Committee, another Jewish organisation emerged – "The Religious Association".

The Committee was the official representative of the Jewish community with respect to the government and was supported by the Communist Party. This Committee also had funds for its own activities and to assist the Częstochowa Jews.

Chairman of the Committee was Liber Brener, leader of the Jewish socialist party (anti-Zionist), Bund, and its other members were Jadzia Brener, a member of the PPR, Director of the Youth and Culture Department, lawyer Lowa Bojtm, Abram Czarny, members of the PPR and others. Chairman of the Association was my father, Noach Edelist, and active within it were Jechiel Landau, Lipman Reicher, Itzhak Zander, Dawid Koniecpoler and others. The Association strived to maintain Jewish traditions and was communally active. Rabbi Weisler was appointed Rabbi of Częstochowa and a public kosher kitchen was established which provided free meals to the poor and lonely Jews.

Personally, I was terribly torn. Straight after the War, I joined the Zionist movement and the aim of my life was to leave for Palestine. On the other hand, after five years of war, I had neither an education nor a trade. Finally, I came to a decision – I would leave Poland, but first I would graduate from high school. As it turned out, that was a difficult decision.

Due to my religious education and upbringing, I did not have a good enough command of the Polish language, neither did I know Polish culture and literature. In addition, straight after the end of the War, the Częstochowa City Council announced the opening of a junior high school for adults, but admission to the school was conditional upon passing preliminary examinations. Despite all these difficulties, after months of preparation, I managed to pass all the examinations and entered the fourth grade of high school.

My personal situation was very difficult. During my first school year, I was the only Jewish student. Severe anti-Semitism was prevalent and I felt it in my class despite having

a few good friends who defended me. An example of this severe anti-Semitism could be the fact that, when sitting for the minor matriculation examinations, I was permitted to carry a gun, and I passed several examinations with a revolver in my pocket (let us not forget that this was the time of the Kielce pogrom). On the other hand, being known as a Zionist activist, I had difficulty obtaining help from the Committee.

I will never forget the following incident. In March 1946, in a large hall, the Jewish Committee organised a memorial event for the Czestochowa Jews. Together with a few friends, we decided that no Jewish commemoration could take place without the "Hatikvah" anthem – at that time, it was the anthem of the Zionist movement. We organised ourselves in such a way that, when given the signal, someone in a few places in the hall would begin to sing it on the assumption that everyone else would then join in. And that is what happened. After that incident, I was summoned before the manager of the Culture and Youth Department who had found out about my involvement in organising the singing of the anthem and this was the reason for me being denied a scholarship.

My family did not wait for me to leave Poland and, already by 1946, my parents left for Paris and, from there, to Israel. My brother also left (after being smuggled across the German border) through Paris for Israel. I left Poland in July 1947. The situation relating to my departing Poland for Israel was very complicated. In the first instance, after the War, the Polish government did not make it difficult for Polish Jews to leave for Palestine. At the time, it was connected with the Soviet Union political line which, at that time, saw the Zionist movement as a resistance movement against English imperialism. The difficulty arose from the fact that the English government's mandate did not give out entry visas to Palestine.

That situation led to illegal immigration into Palestine and illegal emigration out of Poland. That meant being smuggled across the Polish borders (to Germany, Czechoslovakia or Rumania) and then on to Palestine.

