

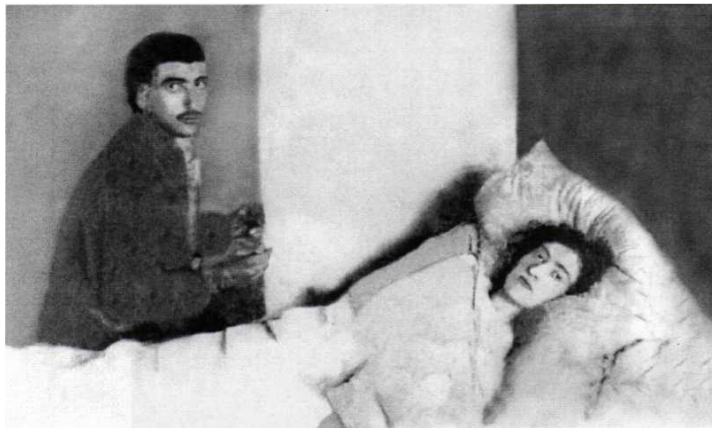
Ada Ofir<sup>1</sup>

## My Next Life Began Thus

In 1905, revolution broke out in Russia. It was the culmination of poverty, regression and the long-term repression of people under the Tsarist authorities. Russia's defeat in the war with Japan also played a significant role here. Within the countries annexed by Russia, such as Poland, the revolution greatly raised hope.

Within the Jewish community, at that time, many political parties were active, among others, the Bund, a social democratic party established in 1897. Translated into Polish, its full name was the General Jewish Labour Bund of Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

Its members were organised into small, illegal groups. Apart from its educational-campaigning work amongst Jewish workers and craftsmen, they practised using weapons – in the event of pogroms, as well as with the aim of joining with Polish liberation organisations in the fight against Tsarism. Rywka Rubel and Hersz Frajman – both eighteen years old – were members of a group which trained with weapons around the limekilns in the outskirts of Częstochowa.



1905: My father nurses my mother who was wounded in a gun accident.

Once, during a spare moment, one of her companions began playing with a gun, pointing it at Hersz to scare him. Rywka, who always had a sense of duty and responsibility, attempted to take the gun away. During the struggle, the revolver went off and shot her through her left lung. After three days, she awoke in a strange room in a small garret. A

moustachioed young man was sitting next to her – he moistened her lips with water and thanked her for saving his life.

Hersz nursed Rywka for three months, under clandestine circumstances, until she returned to health. And that is how their love began which endured for the rest of their lives, until January 1943. This was a love which brightened up our lives and our entire surroundings. This was a love which impelled my father to sneak up to where my mother was imprisoned and be caught in a round-up, in order to run off with her or to be with her until the end – even at the price of his own life. This was a love which did not allow my mother to go on living after his death.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ada Ofir – currently lives in Israel.



I am eighteen months old - dressed according to the contemporary fashion. An artfully tied bow was my mother's specialty. In high school, I had such a bow at the back of the head. My mother liked a pupil-like image of positivism.

My parents married at the outbreak of war in 1914. Szmulek, my brother was born in January 1918. I was born seven years later.

When I was five years old, I was sent to the *Kinder Hajm* kindergarten at 23 Krótka Street. The *Kinder Hajm*, the Children's Home, belonged to the network of social-educational institutions conducted by the Bund, catering for the poorer sections of the Jewish community. The alternative was an exclusive, private Jewish kindergarten, but my parents hated snobbery. They considered that a child should begin its upbringing with his/her poorer peers, even if the family was in good financial circumstances. This attitude was the reason behind my later visits, with my father, to Polish orphanages and to Jewish religious schools. My father would repair their roofs and coat them with tar-paper.

At the Children's Home, apart from the normal activities which took place at every kindergarten, the details of which I don't really remember, what I do remember very well was the custom of sharing lunch. Eight or nine children would sit at round tables and each child would receive a slice of bread with butter or marmalade and, the nightmare of my childhood, a mug of cocoa made with water and whitened with milk.

At home, before going to sleep, my mother forced me to drink "half a glassful" of hot milk. It was only after I started learning about fractions did I realise that I had been hoodwinked for years, and that what had been foisted upon me as "half a glassful" was, in fact, three-quarters of a glassful.

I persevered drinking that cocoa made with water from an enamel, sometimes damaged, mug and, even through the hunger of the camps, I never missed the taste of it.

At the Children's Home, there was also the custom of allowing children to bring a packed lunch with them from home. But it could only be eaten after the shared meal with the other children and, only then, at a separate table. It was a very democratic move: it's what is known as hedging one's bets.

In this manner, the need for a harmonious coexistence amongst all classes was respected, as was the Jewish mother's concern that her child would die of starvation if it did not eat, at least, a bread roll with, butter, cheese or smoked meat. Once, I sat at the same table as my cousin who had come to the socialist kindergarten for one day.

The next step in the education cycle was the almost automatic passage into Grade 1 of the Perec Jewish School which was located on the same street at number 19. After a year there, I became acquainted with the Jewish alphabet which helped me to learn Hebrew in Israel, 25 years later. By the time I was five years old, I could read Polish with the help of a

children's game my brother taught me. In the following year, I easily passed the examination to Grade 2 of the Wilson Street Public School.

I remember the frequent visits of comrades (of various ranks) from the Bund who tried to convince my parents that they were acting against the party's constitution and against its demands for cultural autonomy for the Jews. I didn't listen intently to my parents' arguments, but I felt proud that they stood their ground, and I was flattered that so many people were concerned about me.

In Grade 3, my ability to recite was uncovered and, from that time on, I took part in all the school presentations. In the final year of junior high school, I recited Norwid before we had even learned about him in class. At the end of the following year, we presented *Antigone*. I was chosen to play the role of Ismen, together with Zosia Opatowska.

In Grade 6 of primary school, important decisions were taken on the future lives of the students. It had to be decided as to whether the child would finish public school by going through to the seventh grade and thereby receive a school completion certificate, or would go on to junior high school in order to continue his/her education. For many families, it was not an easy decision. High tuition fees, expensive educational supplies, quite frequently, for families with many children, meant the necessity for financial assistance for their children. More than anything else, the growing anti-Semitism within the colleges, put the aim of further education under a question mark.

In our family, there was not much doubt. My brother graduated from Dr Axer's junior high school ahead of me. My future fate depended on the opinion of the class home-room teacher, the charming Miss Lusja Ajzykiewicz. My parents returned from their meeting with her quite pleased. Miss Ajzykiewicz did not speak in superlatives about my punctuality, behaviour and application to my studies, but stated that it would be a great pity to squander my abilities and intelligence. So, the dice were cast – I was enrolled, passed the examination and was accepted into Grade 1 of Dr Filip Axer's private junior high school at 24 Foch Street.

I'd like to write more about the unusual figure of this former member of Piłsudski's legions, wounded in 1920 and mobile thanks to the aid of a prosthesis. He ran his own school, promoting the principle of humanism and universality. He warned us against the great danger which was looming from the east. In the choir, which he conducted himself, we sang the works of Beethoven and the *Marseillaise*.

It was bad luck that the authorities uncovered a communist cell in our high school which encompassed the whole pre-matriculation class. In total, it was all of seven people because, in private high schools, the number in the matriculation class was very few. The court cases were swift and they were sentenced to prison, despite the fact that they were minors.

Any political activity in our school was strictly forbidden. From the way our Director spoke, we knew his attitude to Bolshevism. For us, the youngest class, it was a shock. We felt that something threatening was creeping into our somewhat destabilised lives. Dr Axer

summoned the entire school to one of the biggest classrooms and spoke about humanitariansim and liberalism, of democratic governments in England and then he spoke these prophetic words on the danger continuing to threaten us from the east and added one more sentence, "My children, watch how, by 1940, there will be no trace of that great democracy which people call the French Republic". It was 1938. Dr Filip Axer perished, together with his wife, Klara as she liked to be called. They were shot together with the Częstochowa intelligencia in 1941.

\*\*\*

We spent every summer holiday in Chrzastów, a charming little hamlet among extensive pine forests, 45 kilometres from Częstochowa. We also spent the last summer there before the War. My parents first came across this village twenty seven years earlier, when

they were still engaged to be married – when they were visiting my father's family in Koniecpol, two kilometres away.



1929 - Chrzastów village vacation, at the home of Marcjan, who exported river crayfish to France.



1936 - with Mom at Chrzastów village, at home of Sobala.





1929 - Chrzastów village holiday. Standing (L-R): me, Grandma Frajman, her cousins, Hannah and Romek Czystochowski, my brother Szmulek. Sitting: my cousin, Edzia Frajman.

The summer of 1939 was beautiful and hot. All the holidaymakers had already left by the end of August and, together with our mother, we were supposed to stay until 2nd September so that my father could still spend one weekend in the country. We had planned to return with him in time for the start of my school-year on 3rd September. While my mother prepared for us to leave, I roamed around, as I did every year, saying "goodbye" to my favourite places.



1938 or 1939 – the last happy holidays with my parents in village of Chrzastów.

In the morning, we went to Mr Kempe's garden to order fruit to preserve for the winter. After that, I strolled across the extensive moors, along the wide paths among the birch trees behind which the forests were growing dark and, with the end of August, now lay covered in a dense, purple carpet. Past the heather, there were large mushrooms (*cossak hats*) which I eagerly gathered to dry. I lay about in the tall grass, breathing in the intoxicating smell of fresh mint.

In the evenings, we would sit with my mother in front of the house, flicking away the mosquitoes and bats, intoxicated by the smell of the night. It was as though I somehow sensed that this would be the last happy holiday of my life.

We had a battery-operated radio. Together with our hosts, we listened to Hitler's threats and slogans. Our response was "Strong, cohesive and ready" and "We won't give an inch!". During one of those days, I decided that I wanted to become a medical orderly should war break out. My mother didn't try to dissuade me from this decision and we went to Koniecpol so that I could enrol in a course. There, the Council told us they had still received no directives from the District administration.

At that time, the non-aggression pact was signed between Poland's old enemies, Russia and Germany. This heightened our anxieties.

On Wednesday, 30th August, after barely a few days in the city, aunt Ewa appeared from the forest, with her two children and a little luggage. Her husband, together with my father, his brother, had decided that we should stay in the country until the situation had been clarified.

Aunt Ewa had already left where she had been staying, so we all lived together. My aunt said that everywhere in the city there was a very tense atmosphere. There were mobilisation announcements from speakers which had been installed in the streets, songs extolling Marshall Rydz-Śmigły were being played, buildings had been hung with patriotic slogans, among which was said that Hitler must withdraw his territorial demands and that Poland should be given overseas colonies.

When they saw the waves of people fleeing "Kristallnacht" from Germany, the Jews were not overly optimistic.

The next day, Thursday, we went with my mother and aunt, who remembered the First World War, to the shop of Mrs Lasota. In case of war, we wanted to get sugar, flour, oil, salt, matches and candles. It was the day of the weekly market. From the nearby villages, women came to Koniecpol loaded with butter, cheese, chickens, cream and eggs. They came to town barefoot to sell their goods. It was five kilometres one way.

Friday, 1st September, was quiet. The inhabitants of Chrzastów rose at dawn to go to about their daily work. On vacation and cut off from the world, we didn't leave the house – after all, we had a battery-powered radio and a battery-charger. But after a week, the battery was already dead. My father had taken the battery-charger with him, as we were supposed to return to the city anyway.

Around noon, we heard the sound of shots in the distance. They said that that was the Polish army training. Towards the evening, news already started to reach us that war had begun, but who knew for sure? We didn't know that the War had already begun over ten hours ago, that wherever a German soldier stood was already captured territory, that the Polish government had fled to Rumania, leaving officers and soldiers to their own devices and the inhabitants of Poland - to the mercy of the Wehrmacht. There were already wounded, dead, prisoners, bombed cities, while we continued to live in yesterday, a day before the outbreak of war.

At dawn on Saturday, a strange noise awoke us. It was still dim. A fog lay low on the ground. We peered out of the window in order to see what had happened. Out of the fog appeared herds of purebred horse led by stablehands. The horses went in ranks as though on parade. Behind the horses came hundreds of cows. At that moment, we understood that it was now war. The owners of the estate were shifting their livestock, anywhere further away from the front. After a certain time, the peasants began to run away - on wagons, on foot, with cows, chickens and children, and with bundles of their belongings. They didn't run far. They hid for the moment in the nearby forests and, towards the evening, the Germans had already arrived in the village and there was nowhere to run to.

On Sunday, at around 6:00 am, out of the forest, a group of people with bundles on their backs loomed into view. It was our family – my father, my brother Szmulek with his girlfriend Hanka (later my sister-in-law), her younger sister Róża, my uncle Izydor, the husband of Aunt Ewa and the Rychter family – Felicja and her two children, Heniek and Hanka.

\*\*\*

The Rychter family were our friends and had been under the care of our parents for many years. Dawid Rychter, a writer, but also a member of the Polish Communist Party, had hidden himself outside of Częstochową for most of the years of free Poland. He didn't leave for Moscow when the Communist Party had been dissolved, but after the outbreak of war, he fled to Russia. As we found out from a post-War publication, he'd been arrested in Białystok, taken before the court, sentenced to death (by whom?) and hung by the legs.

Felicja supported her family as a manicurist. She occupied a one-room apartment in the same building where we also lived. Their window, on the ground floor, looked out onto the street and it had sometimes been subjected to anti-Semitic attacks. In 1936, during the time of the ten-day pogrom, the Rychter family moved in with us. I remember that their little apartment was always clean and prepared to receive clients, full of aesthetic little baubles. In particular, two original Stryjeński's remain engraved in my memory – my eyes were always drawn to them.

In the winter of 1939, the Rychter family received news of David – that he was in Soviet-occupied Polish territory and was asking that his son come to him. Heniek came to us

with his mother to say goodbye. Everyone wished him good luck and, especially "that he should become a commissar". But for my father, to whom bolshevism was the personification of the greatest evil and immorality, he wished "that he remain a decent human being". I still remember Felicja's full approval and smile of satisfaction.

Heniek left, but returned after a few months when he became convinced that the son of a Polish communist had little chance of survival in the Soviet Union. Following the deportation operation in 1942, he left the ghetto with a group of six boys in order to link up with a partisan group. That same day, probably as the result of being denounced, he was arrested and shot.

\*\*\*

However, getting back to the group that emerged from the forest on that Sunday morning. They left Częstochowa on the 1st September along with thousands of other residents under heavy fire from German bombers. They walked by night, hiding by day in roadside ditches or amongst thickets, fired upon by diving German planes.

The Germans were already in Chrzastów, but we were together. "Together" – that word strengthened us throughout the War. In order to be "together", I remained in the bunker during the time of the relocation and didn't want to go to the "Moebel Lager", where there were those who had survived the *akcje*. In order to be together, I went voluntarily to the transport with my brother and sister-in-law – already after the death of our parents. In order to be together, my father tried to sneak into the transport when they had caught my mother. When the transport was released, he said, "...to be together with her and to die together, if we can't manage to escape". When I was still a small child, I often heard my parents say, kind of joking, that they would each like to be the first to die, or to die together. And those were the last words my mother said to me, "... I have to be true to your father".

So, we were together. The sound of cannons firing comes closer and closer. After some time, rifle shots could also be heard. We lay on the ground, on blankets or bunks, so as to avoid being in the line of fire. Our hosts joined us – the Sobal family – the mother and three daughters. The father and older son, Stefan, remained in the attic. For a few hours, everything went quiet. Nothing was happening. Suddenly, military vehicles appeared on the road carrying German soldiers with rifles aimed in the direction of the homesteads.

Reality hit us. The Germans were in Poland. We'd lost the War and it had barely even begun. We sat hunched over, depressed. No one said anything. My life, as it was then, lay in ruins. The Germans were in Poland. My fourteen-year, contented childhood was now over. The Germans were in Poland. I stood at the threshold of a new grown-up life, unknown and terrifying. The first armed packs rolled north towards the village of Michałów. Other divisions followed them. By nightfall, they'd made camp in our neighbourhood forest. They ate, they drank, they laughed. From a distance of a dozen or so metres, we could hear their incomprehensible, hateful talking. The Germans were in Poland. All our ethnic troubles – the



ghetto benches, the picketting, the attacks on Jewish shops, the 1936 pogrom, the attacks by young National Democrat youth, the "Don't buy from Jews" slogans, the fear of going to cinemas such as the "Świt" or the "Atlantyk" (the National Democrats regarded these cinemas as their domain and sat behind Jews, using the darkness to cut the Jews' coats or girls' hair with razor blades) – all these things suddenly no longer mattered, they became distant, unimportant against the fact that THE GERMANS WERE IN POLAND.

During the brief hours of quiet, farmers fed and milked their cows and took care of the rest of their flock and poultry. Just living involves its own needs, none the least of which is feeding people. Ultimately, there is the need to use the toilet. In the country, it's a privy, a small outhouse made from simple wooden boards, situated a certain distance from the cottage. It was late evening with darkness all around and in the forest opposite the cottage, are German soldiers eating, drinking and laughing. Of course, under those circumstances, my parents wouldn't allow me to go alone. Dad went with me. He waited outside. Through the gaps in the boards, I could see how an older soldier came up to him, perhaps someone with a higher rank because he was completely sober, and began a calm conversation with him in German. When I came out, he moved away, but waited some distance away until we returned home.

Yet another image from that previous night which particularly remains etched into my memory: Late at night, a young man walked along a path already well-trodden down by the peasants running away from the Germans. He was alone. Over his shoulder were his shoes tied together with shoelaces. This was the way the women from the local villages went to mass on Sundays – a few kilometres along sandy roads and through a forest, and then they would put on their shoes, just in front of the entrance to the church. The man had a bundle tied to a stick on his other shoulder and led a dairy cow on a rope with his free hand.

A fire broke out in Chrzastów. We didn't notice exactly where it started. At the exit of the road where the village's older buildings stood, we suddenly saw gigantic clouds of black smoke. It was some distance away from us, but the fire was spreading quickly in our direction. Wooden cottages, built close together, most often with thatched roofs, a dry and hot August, all helped the fire to spread. The Germans were no longer nearby, but we continue to sit in the cottage, together with our hosts, and watched, terrified, as the fire grew and closed in on us.

Every year, we would spend our holidays at Chrzastów. We knew all the farmers and they all knew us. As a child, I would go with the children, from the farm where we stayed, to take the cows to the pasture in the afternoons. Amazed, I watched as the kids patted themselves on their stomachs, drinking coffee made from chicory, whitened with milk, and saying, "it's good and sweetened with saccharin". It was with them, that I stole potatoes to be baked and gathered *skrzyp* with which to bribe the geese who always sensed that I was a stranger and would pinch my bare calves. They taught me how to gather blueberries so that

they wouldn't lose their fresh taste and not get squashed and how to gather mushrooms and tell the difference between them.

My first memory of Chrzastów goes back to when I was four years old, when I said that "the chicken was looking at me". I also remember the time when Grandfather Frajman took me and my cousin, Romek, fishing. I remember him – a tall well-built man, like all the Frajman's, rolled-up trouser legs, in one hand a fishing-rod, in the other he led Romek, a year older than me, who in turn carried a small bucket for the fish. I meandered along behind them. Something would always stop me along the way – I always found something which I needed to pick up and examine more closely. That habit stayed with me until that last pre-War summer, when we went on long walks to the local forests. Something would always hold me up and, when everyone had gone way ahead of me, I yelled, "Wait for me!" and quickly ran to catch up. When I was still small, I would yell out, "*Poczekajta na mnie!*". That yell would always make my parents laugh, but they would never correct me.

I was never afraid of anything in Chrzastów – neither the vast forests around which I would wander for hours, nor the walks along the narrow borders around the crops. Once, when I was maybe six years old and spent the whole summer barefoot and in short swimming shorts, two adolescents suddenly attacked me, whipping me with stinging nettles and then ran away. I didn't cry. I ran to my mother who began putting sour milk on me, while I fantasized as to how I would exact revenge if ever I would catch them. In the meantime, I walked around in a singlet.

And yet some more "fun" – strange how a city child, from a working-class family, would help with the harvest alongside the country children. The children gathered the cereal crop left behind by the sickle. We tied them into sheaves and placed them into stacks. There was only one thing that I could never learn how to do – to walk barefoot over the field of stubble. Over the winter months, I promised myself that, when I grew up, I would go to Chrzastów one winter to see what the village looked like covered in snow. But those plans, just like many others, were destroyed by the Germans. They exterminated 6,000,000 members of my people.

Meanwhile, we sat rivetted together in a cramped room and stared in terror at the growing glow. In its light, we could see our host, Mrs. Sobal, and heard her loud lament. The village burned for many hours. At one point, at the crossroads, behind the Kurpios home and in front of the Wójcik home, where there was an area of clear space, the fire stopped for a certain time, as if it had suddenly run out of energy. Those who had remained in the village fled the encroaching fire, taking with them whatever they could. The unmilked cows mooed, the chickens ran off into the forest.



1939: With my cousin in front of an old building at 19 Wolności Avenue, wearing Star of David armbands. I am on the right.

I watched as fourteen years of my beautiful, summer holidays burned. For many hours, the remains of one hundred and twenty cottages glowed in the night, even though the fire had already gone out. After that, a column of armed German soldiers rolled through the village and our hosts, the Sobal family, returned to their daily lives, as well as taking in the Novaks under their roof.

We knew the Nowaks as landless tenants who lived in the corner of some farm on which they found seasonal work. Shortly before the War, they managed to put up a cottage, obtained a cow and some poultry, but probably no land because they continued to work on the richer farms and estates. Finding herself with our hosts, Mrs Nowak, bemoaned, "Our cottage burned down, the Germans killed my cow and Hanka was burnt ..." (Hanka was one of twins born to the Nowaks three years before the War).

Around the 10th September, we decided to return home. My father and uncle went to a neighbouring village and hired a peasant with a horse and cart. We loaded our belongings and, at first light, set off on foot 45 kilometres to Częstochowa. The entire village consisted of the protruding chimneys of burnt-out cottages. For us, every chimney bore the name of a farmer. The heavy smell of burning hung in the air. We tried not to look at the bloated, putrefying horse and cow carcasses lying along the sides of the road. The curfew hour began at 6:00pm and so we ran the last several hundred metres from the cathedral on Narutowicza Street, via the Aleja NMP, to our home at 19 Aleja Wolności. The farmer spent the night with us, while the horse, tied up in the backyard by the rubbish tip, neighed woefully the whole night.

The city looked totally different. Always animated and full of pedestrians, it was now empty. No one went out unless they had to. Shops and schools were closed. At dusk, windows had to be shut and covered in black paper. There was a shortage of basic foodstuffs throughout the whole city.

One could buy bread at only one bakery in our area on Sobieski Street. We would get up at 4:30am and waited until 5:00am, when the caretaker would open the gate. Youth from the whole block took on this responsibility, as adults would draw too much attention to themselves from Germans and hooligans. Central Częstochowa was inhabited by a Polish-Jewish mixture, but the local National Democrats (*Endeks*) could recognise Jews even though they dressed and behaved no differently from the Poles. As soon as the gates opened, a wild race for the bakery began. Young people poured out of all the houses. Everyone ran as fast as

they could. Those who lived closest to the bakery were already standing in the queue. At 8:00am, the sale of bread began. If there was enough supply and if we weren't thrown out of the queue because we were recognised as Jews, everyone would return at around 10:00am, happy and proud, with a loaf of bread in a bag.

Over time, the Germans began issuing ration, but the rations granted were minimal. War had broken out just after the harvests and had destroyed most of the provisions and also that which was yet to be gathered. So that, even if someone had money, there was nothing one could buy with it. In the first months of the War, our food consisted of rationed bread with margarine or marmalade made from beet, and *ersatz* tea without sugar. One could only buy meat from the peasants in the local villages. In the city, all the provisions had already been eaten.

After much deliberation, asking around and from information she'd received, my mother decided that she would go to the country, together with her cousin, in order to buy a little food for the winter. For that type of undertaking, only women had any chance of overcoming the vigilance of the Germans. Due to the curfew, the expedition would need to take a few days. She got hold of a passing wagon and spent the nights at homes of Jews, whom we didn't know previously, who still lived in the nearby small towns and who willingly extended their hospitality. Together with her cousin, my mother returned with a supply of food. At the German checkpoints, the peasant claimed that he was carrying, to hospital, two women ill with typhus. The Germans were terrified of this illness, so that they didn't bother to check the cargo or the people.

And so began a strict regime of survival, but without hunger - three basic meals per day, nourishing and filling. Morning and afternoon snacks disappeared. Salads and fruit, previously frequent in our home, were replaced by carrots, beets, cabbage and swedes. These were all available illicitly. Saturday's cakes were baked with carrots or potatoes, with powdered egg and sweetened with saccharin.

Gradually, life under occupation normalised. The curfew was in effect during the entire War. The schools were opened, but not for the Jews. The cinemas began screening films, of course only German ones, but admission for Jews was forbidden. The Germans issued an order that all radio receivers had to be turned in to the authorities. To be found in possession of a radio could mean the death penalty. We had two at home. My father turned one in to the authorities. He removed the wooden casing of the other and hid it in the attic. At night, he would listen closely to the news from other countries.

In December 1939, an order was issued regarding the wearing of Star of David armbands. The armband was supposed to be white, ten centimetres wide, with a blue Star of David. It was to be worn on the left arm. Not wearing the armband could mean the death penalty.

At the beginning of 1941, the Germans issued another order – regarding the establishment of a ghetto for the Jews. We had to move into it by the end of April that year.

The ghetto borders were strictly delineated. The Chorzewski family, my sister-in-law's parents, lived at 24 Stary Rynek (Old Market Square), within the future ghetto. In their building, a leather warehouse belonging to a Pole had become vacant. Poles were required to leave the future ghetto area. The premises, situated on the ground floor in the backyard, were quite spacious and livable, but already not enough for our family. Admittedly, my brother and sister-in-law lived separately. But, in December 1939, my uncle died and my parents felt obliged to care for aunt Ewa and her two children – 13 year old Edzia and 6 year old Wovek. We lived in the same building, one floor above them, and it was unthinkable that, in the ghetto, they would not remain with us.

The area of the proposed ghetto had always been inhabited by the poorer Jewish population, so that for the Jews who had to move into the ghetto, few apartments remained. But the financial situation was very difficult and those, who could otherwise not have got by, rented out the one or two rooms which they had. In this way, we were able to take possession of an additional room. It was, admittedly, in the same building, but was not connected to the room which had earlier served as a warehouse. That room, although very small, served as a bedroom for my parents, aunt Ewa and Wovek. Edzia and I slept in the old warehouse. Apart from that, it served as a kitchen, dining room, a washing room and a "salon", as the family would spend the evenings there after curfew.

Apart from the apartments at the front, the building had no electricity. We burned a carbide lamp in the "family room" by which we could read. To be able to see each other, we used kerosene lamps. The common toilet was in the backyard, but we, children, used the Chorzewski apartment toilet.

Before coming into the ghetto, my father hid all items of value in the attic. Paintings, which had been insured for a significant amount, he stored with Mr Seifert – a Pole of German origin (or maybe with just a German surname). Into the ghetto, we took a two-metre portrait of my mother, presented to her by artist Paweł (Perec) Willenberg, in recognition of her activity against Tsarism, and a portrait of my parents' idol, Leo Tolstoy. Both paintings, removed from their frames and rolled up, were put into the attic.

After the War, Mr Seifert (at 9 or 11 Wolności Avenue) returned, to me and my brother, two paintings by that artist in their original frames. He showed us the receipt that he had demanded from the Germans for the rest of the artworks taken, so that we could file a complaint. We hadn't even thought about that. We were happy that each of us had, at least, one memento from home.

\*\*\*

Summer was a time of work for my father. Irrespective of the War, owners of homes had to fix leaking roofs. Before the War, not all apartments had internal bathrooms and, at that time in his workshop, my father produced bathtubs and bassinets for babies. The bathtubs were heated with specially-built, coal-burning stoves, connected to the chimney outlet in the

kitchen. My father would leave the ghetto, via sidestreets, for work in the Polish district. In his workclothes, with his toolbox over his shoulder, a roll of tar-paper under his arm and a peaked cap drawn over his eyes, he avoided the attention of the Germans and of the *szmalcownicy*.

At a time when my father had more work, the number of people at the dinner-table also rose. We ran a common household with aunt Ewa, who was financially independent, but, every Saturday, the number at the dinner-table grew to 16 or 20 people. More distant family members, especially the children and the elderly, were regular lunch guests.

Inhabitants of nearby small towns were also moved into the ghetto in Częstochowa. As in all ghettos, shortages prevailed and also hunger. Not many were able to hand out charity. The black market, high prices and a lack of work made a normal existence impossible for many families, especially for those who had arrived from outside Częstochowa.

Gradually, my parents formulated a plan for charity – the serving of Saturday lunches, for free, of course. Meat was purchased from Mr Pudła, the owner of a meat-processing plant and an old client and friend of my father. Admittedly, it was not kosher, but it was affordable. On Thursday, in the pot used for boiling underwear, cabbage and jacket potatoes were cooked which, on Friday, were peeled by the whole family, including the children. Everything would be put together on Saturday morning.

The announcement, that free hot meals would be provided at 24 Stary Rynek, spread around the ghetto and that first attempt at 50 lunches quickly became inadequate. The number soon rose to 150. Everyone, including us, the young ones, took part in preparing and serving the meals.

A conversation between my father and the head of the yeshivah made a great impression on me. He came to thank us and to ask for a few portions for some sick students who could not come themselves. My father replied, of course, but felt obliged to inform the rabbi that the meal was prepared using non-kosher meat. To that, we heard the reply, “ ... if the Most High is agreeable to the fact that my students must come to you asking for a hot Saturday meal, then He must also be agreeable to the fact that the meal is not kosher”. This custom of Saturday meals lasted until Yom Kippur 1942.

## **23 DAYS ...**

At the end of Yom Kippur, 22nd September 1942, a short while before curfew, my father returned from the city and said that the ghetto was surrounded by German military police and Ukrainians.

We knew that this was the precursor to a deportation operation. We went to sleep almost completely dressed so as not to lose time when the Jewish police would come to inform us of the need to turn up at an assembly point with our hand luggage. Our family was



ready not to go to the place of selection. We planned to go down to a bunker which my father had prepared.

Older people (over the age of 35), children and anyone who didn't want to present themselves for selection were to go down to the bunker. That bunker was like a long, natural tunnel carved out of the stone. It ended under the centre of the *Stary Rynek*. Little siderooms served the occupants of the building as storage of coal, potatoes, and the like. The real shelter was comprised of the last three rooms which resembled grottoes. These rooms were not used as basements by the residents because of the prevailing damp. It was possible to camouflage the bunker well thanks to the small, low rooms which my father covered with various boards and bits of furniture. It was behind a wooden door, padlocked from the outside in such a way that there was no possibility of getting out from the inside.

For himself, my father prepared a hiding-place in the attic. From there, he could observe what was going on outside and, of course, watch over us who were locked in the basement. That evening, before going to sleep, we took bundles of bedding, clothes and food down to the bunker. We slept, keeping a small bundle of personal things close at hand.

On that short night, there was literally a plague of bedbugs, which generally nested in the old buildings of the small ghetto and against which we stubbornly fought with the help of boiling water and liquid paraffin. That night, they bit mercilessly, as if they sensed that, shortly, they would no longer be able to feed on human blood.

At around 4:00am, we heard a light tapping at the door. We sprang up quickly, but it was my cousin, Hanka Cześćchowska with her two year old son, Łucek, and her husband, Adam Rotaub who, before the War, had worked in Gnaszyn. The *akcja* had started where they lived, on Targowa Street.

We descended into the bunker without our shoes, so that our shuffling would not draw the attention of the Germans. My father woke the Chorzewski family, so that they wouldn't be shocked when the Jewish police and Germans came. And so we all descended into our hiding-place. My father and Szmulik covered up the entrance with wood and pieces of junk and padlocked the door. They hid themselves in the attic of the outhouse, from where they could observe Garncarska and Spadek Streets.

Altogether, there were forty of us, aged from 2 to 70, crammed between bundles, in absolute darkness. After two hours, the little children began to cry and it was not possible to calm them down. We lit two candles. That calmed the children, but only for a short while. Łucek had an attack of hysteria and, after a while, fell asleep exhausted. Shortly, the candles began to go out and we understood that our air supply was dwindling. The atmosphere was bordering on panic. The children cried, but now quietly. The older ones prayed aloud, while others just sighed. My closest family, my aunt and cousins, had long been prepared for this, that during an *akcja* we'd go down to the hiding-place, and were able to remain quite calm. We tried not to move around needlessly and not to breathe too deeply in order to conserve the air supply and our own strength.

My father let us out at around midday. The streets, upon which the *akcja* took place now remained deserted. Guards stood at their exits.

It was already known that the Germans were conducting operations on a few streets and that we wouldn't have to go down to the bunker until the *Stary Rynek* was among those streets included in an *akcja*. The *akcje* were conducted with several days' break in between so that the Germans could solve a problem with the trains. But the ghetto remained surrounded all the while. One could still move around the remaining streets. My father took advantage of the breaks in order to improve the air supply. He also put in buckets with lids to serve as toilets. In the corner of the last room was a tap with running water – a part of the pipeline which provided water to the whole building. Next to it was a container of lysol.

During the second *akcja* (a few days later), we remained in the apartment. We knew that it was not yet our turn. My brother, Szmulek (at the time, he was working in the *Moebel Lager*, which was considered important to the Germans), came with the news that the Jewish police, for a steep payment, were taking young people to the *Moebel Lager*, from streets where *akcje* had as yet not occurred. There were barracks there also, for the Germans remaining after the *akcje*. Of the whole family, only I and my cousin Edzia met the requirements – we were 17-18 years old.

It was a very hard decision and we didn't know who should actually take it. Those who got through the *akcje* still couldn't be sure of their fate, as transports were still being despatched from the *Moebel Lager*. But the bunker also didn't provide a 100% guarantee of survival. They could discover us by chance, while searching for goods. They could blow up the deserted ghetto. We could be left without air or die from hunger if something happened to my father. We sat together, torn between what to do. No one knew what to decide. It was Thursday. After two *akcje*, we knew that our turn would come the next day. My brother waited for our decision, so that he could inform a connection who would lead me and my cousin out of the ghetto.

My father took his head in his hands, deep in thought. My mother and aunt Ewa were numb with despair. My parents - who were our carers and our anchors, who for many others provided support and help, who in 1905 were active in the Bund, who took part in the strikes organised by the PPS, who distributed anti-Tsarist leaflets – now didn't know which road to choose for their child. I couldn't look at them in that state and it was me who made the decision for myself and for Edzia. I was staying. What happened to everyone would also happen to me. Everyone felt relieved. We were to remain together and what will be, will be.

We had hardly slept since Saturday. We lived in expectation of the banging on the door and screams of "RAUS!". During the day, we would do anything, just to keep occupied and be together. Between the first and third *akcje*, which was to encompass the *Stary Rynek*, many of the forty people, who'd been with us since the first day, decided to present themselves during that *akcja* and to put their trust in fate. The odds between Degenhart (the ghetto commandant) and remaining in the bunker were equal. Only the children and those

older than 35 years had no chance with him. But within the bunker, an incredible tension prevailed that we could be discovered at any moment. In principle, the Germans gave no one any chance.

Among those who didn't want to go down to the bunker was my cousin, Hanka. My parents couldn't come to terms with that. They had brought her here from starving Warsaw, had rented an apartment on Targowa Street and had paid the rent for her and her husband. They ate with us and, Lucek, their two year old son, had actually been brought up with us. My mother had looked after him all day because everyone around us considered that 22 year old Hanka was not mature enough to independently raise a child during wartime. My father claimed that he was taking the place of her mother who lived in Paris and that Hanka should stay with the family. Hanka claimed that Lucek would not withstand being locked up, that he was too small to understand that he was not allowed to cry even if he was scared, and that this could give all of us away. My father tried to convince her saying, "In case of danger, you can cover him with a pillow". Hanka replied that she knew that my father wanted to convince her at all costs, but she was not prepared to kill her own child for that reason. And so she went with him and her husband to the *akcja*. She proved her maturity.

In the afternoon hours, everyone prepared themselves – those who were to go down to the bunker and those who had to go to the *akcja*. These were the final preparations made in a home to which none of us was to return.

Lucek fell asleep in my bed and my father sat by him for a long time. He told us later that he had cried for Hanka's son, as he would have for his own child – on his own behalf for and for his absent sister.

We were supposed to go down to the bunker before the Jewish police turned up to notify us of the appointed hour at which we were to report for the *akcja*. We were worried that the absence of certain people at the square would arouse police suspicions and that they would come to look for those in hiding. The Jewish police did such things in order to protect themselves and those closest to them.

Only those, who were to go to the *akcja*, remained in the apartment. Of Hanka Chorzewska's family, those who went were her father, Emanuel, her aunt, Róża and her younger sister Różyczka. All perished. Her mother, Matylda, due to a disabled leg, remained with us in the bunker. Hanka also remained.

The goodbyes began. I went up to my father as if for the last time. We embraced each other and burst into tears. My father said, "Be happy". For a moment, I thought that this was a farewell and I flinched. But he finished with, " ... that you have somewhere to hide". Perhaps he thought that I was scared. But I wasn't scared for myself. I was scared for him, for my mother and for all those around us.

I went down to the bunker absentmindedly. I don't remember anything. Tiredness and depression had taken their toll. I only knew that everything that could be done, had been done – camouflaging the entrance with bits of furniture and padlocking the door.

I awoke on Saturday morning. All around was silence and complete darkness. We no longer heard footsteps above our heads. Within 24 hours of the *akcja*, our section of the ghetto was deserted. Everyone remained silent, either dozing or pretending to doze. The only voice in the darkness was that of my sister-in-law's grandfather saying his Saturday prayers.

We lit one candle. The small flame lit a bit of hope within us. We began to daydream about how we would be rescued. This was the way that day passed – two meals and water, and then again night. We worked out when it was night by our need for sleep. We couldn't light a candle unnecessarily in order to see what time it was.

We sleep well with no noises or voices to disturb us. From time to time, we hear a car drive past above and the regular footsteps of patrols. The Germans enter abandoned homes and search for anyone in hiding. Later, from a second hiding-place, we see how the Germans pull Jews out of some apartments and kill them on the spot.

At around midnight, rustling and shuffling woke us up. Through the gaps, we saw a faint light moving along the wet wall and we heard that someone was moving the bits of furniture and wood. In the faint light, I could see my mother's eyes, fixed painfully on me. The sight of her face tore at my heart. Had they found us? Was this the end? Come on, think! The Germans and Ukrainians didn't do that with such care and caution. It had to be daddy.

I squeezed my way through those who were lying down and through the bundles towards the external door and saw him through the slits. In one hand, he held a lit candle. With the other hand, he was moving aside the bits of furniture, trying to place them behind him with as little noise as possible. In a short while, he was with us, covered in dust and sand from the attic in which he was hiding. He tried to give us encouragement. He said that we had to be prepared to remain in the bunker for at least twelve days. At the end, he displayed his usual sense of humour asking if we had an appetite. He returned to his hiding-place in the attic of the outhouse, where he sat or lay the whole day (it was just high enough for someone to sit).

At night, he would cross the roofs to the apartments where there was still electricity and cook food for himself and for us. Not all the apartments on the *Stary Rynek* were supplied with electricity. The apartment where we had stayed was lit with a kerosene lamp and a carbide lamp. Cooking on a burner could betray his presence, so he searched for apartments where there were electric hotplates. The whole effort of cooking was done by moonlight and by light coming in from the street.

By order of the Germans, the Jewish police told those who were going out to the *akcja* not to lock their apartments. This was aimed at making their pillaging easier.

We listened intently as the days and nights passed. At any moment, would we hear the bashing of heads against the wall beside the empty basement? And maybe not, maybe they'll be the cries of joy and freedom.

Over the course of a day, we lit one candle for both rooms. We drove away the darkness in order to see the faces of those dearest to us and to see the stone walls on which

the damp flowed in droplets. On the fourth day of our imprisonment, on the Thursday, we suddenly heard the footsteps of soldiers above our heads. They passed through the entrance gate and then silence. After a few minutes, there were more footsteps, but now more of them. Then suddenly shots and, again, silence. We feared the worst. Was my father not careful enough? Perhaps he hadn't been able to hide in time.

Apparently, I fainted because I regained consciousness from the touch of a wet towel on my chest and drops of water on my face. My mother rubbed my stiffened hands, embraced me and cried. I was embarrassed by my old weakness – fainting at moments of great tension. Instead of supporting my mother's spirits, I'm breaking them and taking away from the others any remnants of hope. After all, each of us was afraid of exactly the same thing.

To the following night, we sat in silence. Finally, we heard the longed-for, three knocks on the door. This was the agreed-upon sign that my father was coming. With difficulty, we suppressed our tears of joy. As it turned out, some people had been hiding on the top floor. The Germans found them and shot them in the street.

Again, the days and nights pass. The supply of candles is running out. Light is as essential to us as is food. We can talk by the light of the candle. Silence falls when the candle goes out. Silence, like absolute darkness, rings in one's ears. We can hear only breathing and the beating of hearts, not only our own.

The walls are slowly drying. It is us who are drying them with our breath and with the warmth of our bodies. But the damp enters our lungs, clothing and food. Our clothes give off the smell of mildew, of bread covered in mould.

From one hour to the next, the suppression of coughing increases. The bones in our legs swell. Our bones experience sharp pain. The candles burn ever more weakly. For the time being, there is air to breathe, but it is becoming increasingly stuffy, filled with our breathing and with the odour of the excrement of seventeen people – despite the fact that, with each visit, my father exchanges the bucket for a clean one. We tried to refresh the air with dampened sheets and towels.

Our portions of food become smaller and smaller. Now, we eat once a day. Our daily portion consists of one slice of mouldy bread spread with rancid butter, a teaspoonful of plum jam and a sugar cube. Fortunately, we have running water. We can drink without any limitation. We wash our faces and hands. We make cold compresses for our foreheads and chests. We no longer have the strength to wash ourselves. Apart from that, it was possible for the sound of the running water to be heard from above. Every movement triggered a dizziness and a "darkness before one's eyes".

At night, in my sleep, I could clearly see shelves full of bread – fresh golden loaves. Once, I dreamt of a plateful of cooked cabbage. I could clearly see pieces of tomatoes and steam rising from the plate. I tried to smell it, but it was only a dream.

The only living things doing well were the fleas. During those first days, they were small, quick and active. They would bite and escape immediately. Now, they were heavy,

having overindulged in our blood. It was easier to catch them, but there were more of them and they were more annoying.

We'd already exhausted all topics of conversation. Several cookbooks could have been written from our discussions.

In the darkness, I could hear two girls talking. The older one said, "I so much want to get out of here - to see the sky and the birds". The younger one said, "Don't be silly. I'd prefer a thick slice of bread".

Every day, the six year old boy would ask, "When will Mr Frajman come again?". He was asking about my father, who brought food every time he visited.

My mother noticed that another family hadn't received enough food and began sharing out the food in equal amounts to everyone. When she gave food to my sister-in-law Hanka's grandfather, he didn't accept it, saying that he wasn't sure if the butter or cheese were kosher.

It was now the seventh day of hunger. The supply of bread had dwindled. When that ran out, then it would be beans which already had a rancid smell. For two days, we'd already been eating mouldy bread. I could see how, while giving out the portions, my mother gave herself the smallest. Everyone ate hungrily, but I couldn't swallow mine. I gave it to my mother saying that I couldn't eat mouldy bread and rancid butter because it made me feel sick. My mother looked at me unconvinced. She looked at me as if to see if I was lying but, after a moment, took back the bread. She didn't eat it – she passed it on to my sister-in-law who, at that time, was seven months' pregnant.

Gradually, we got used to the danger. The footsteps of patrols above our heads or the clatter of cars no longer terrified us. Less and less, we talked about whether we would be discovered. More and more, we thought about how we would move on our swollen legs and whether we would manage to get dressed in time (we sat on beds in our underwear due to the stuffiness).

We, the younger ones, argued with each other about how we would be liberated. Would they first go to my father in order to get the key to the basement, or would they first come to us to open the door with the duplicate key that my brother had? In the end, we agreed that, there would be shouts of joy, already at the gate, telling us that we were free and that the lock would simply be broken. Our mood in the bunker improved after these talks and we were as happy as a child before getting a pleasant surprise.

Ten days passed in this way. At around 8:00pm, as usual, we prepared for sleep. Suddenly, above our heads, we heard quick, heavy footsteps. They disappeared through the gate, but we could hear them right through the wall. Without much thought, I began to get dressed in the joyous, impatient anticipation of hearing the shouts of "Come out! You're free!". I knew that, in a moment, we would indeed hear the three usual knocks. One, two, three, and then four, five, six - louder and more threatening. Then strong blows with something heavy, made of iron - first on the door and then on the padlock. We could already hear voices speaking German. We cringed in the corner, terrified. I could feel my mother



putting stockings on me and squeezing money into my hands, whispering, "Maybe you can save yourself with this" and, as if in prayer, she kept repeating "Save us and our children".

A few minutes passed and, suddenly, everything went quiet. We could still hear receding footsteps and then silence fell. But our fear still remained with us. Did they go off to get axes or dynamite? Hours passed, but no one came. Gradually, we calmed down. I couldn't stop thinking about what would have happened had they found us. I tormented myself with the thought that my father would certainly have come out of hiding had he seen that they were taking us. I wasn't afraid for myself. Young people had a 25% chance of saving themselves, but my parents were fifty seven years old and would have no chance - and what about my sister-in-law who was seven months' pregnant?

For the moment, the danger had passed, but we knew that it might return at any moment. That night and the next day passed in fearful anticipation. On the Sunday night, at the agreed time, we heard the familiar knocking. My father entered to find us tense and frightened. He told us that the Germans had broken the door and the padlock, but when they saw the room filled to the ceiling with bits of furniture and boards, etc., they didn't think that, behind all that, there could be a passage to another room where someone could hide – where 17 Jews were hiding.

Since the bunker could no longer be considered safe, my father decided to take us with him to the attic where he was hiding. Right next to it was a second bunker, where part of the Chorzewski family, displaced from nearby small towns, was hiding. We took with us only the most essential items and went in pairs, barefoot, so that any nearby patrols wouldn't hear our footsteps. We went through a long, narrow backyard. We climbed a creaking, external staircase to the first floor, where the Działowski family had once lived. Then again a wooden landing, a type of balcony, more stairs and then we reached the attic. Now, we had to wriggle around a wooden beam and move, on all-fours, towards an opening which had been camouflaged with stones. We then had to slide through the opening down into the attic of the neighbouring building which was on Garncarska Street.

That undertaking took us the entire night. Every movement was fraught with danger. It could attract the attention of patrolling soldiers. Hanka's grandfather suddenly had a strong desire to light a cigarette. Relishing the clean air, after 11 days of stuffiness, could have unwittingly triggered a cough which, in the desolate ghetto, could have been heard from a long way off.

The new place wasn't comfortable. We could just sit or lie down. We could only move around on our knees. But we had air to breathe, we could see each other and we were with my father.

Throughout the night, a German military policeman patrolled in front of the houses on Garncarska Street. We could hear his footsteps and whistling.

Our day began at 8:00am with a sugar cube. At 10:00am, a teaspoonful of marmalade or half a pickled cucumber. At 1:00pm - our main meal: cooked, cold pasta with sugar or porridge. At 4:00pm - potatoes cooked in their jackets with a little lard.

The fleas multiplied. We also had to limit our water consumption. Our arms and legs were heavy and motionless. Our skin hung off us. Brushing our hair became a huge effort. During the course of the day, we observed the streets through slits in the wood lining the attic.

At around 3:00pm, my father would go outside, camouflaging the bunker entrance behind him. Until dusk, he would lie on the wooden beam and listen for voices in order to work out what was happening outside and where the Germans would be. At about 6:00pm, he went down into the apartment below us - one of the few with electricity. Using the electric hotplates there, he would cook for us and for the ten people who were hiding in the other building. Our supplies had already run out, so he obtained food from apartments on the upper floors of other buildings, sneaking there across the roofs. He would return to us at around 1:00am. Of course, no one slept a wink until he came.

We knew that, if the Germans didn't discover us, we could survive in the bunker as long as water and electricity was not cut off to the ghetto.

Through the slits in the building, we could see transports heading off to somewhere from which they didn't return. We knew that when the Germans found people in hiding, they would shoot them on the spot, amid cursing and joking. We knew how the Germans plundered homes and took away with them the most valuable "discoveries". They used the books to light fires.

One day, they also searched our building. We heard their voices clearly below. We understood the words – German, Polish and Yiddish. We heard the rapid footsteps of one person on the wooden stairs. A moment of silence, and then suddenly there was a voice, from an unknown direction, saying in Yiddish, "People, come out. Nothing will happen to you".

Another time, someone came close to the hatch and, seeing nothing, shouted into it, "Mr Frajman, your son sent me. Come out". We didn't take any notice.

After a few days, again they searched and banged on the walls to convince themselves that there was no hiding-place behind them. This time, we were now convinced that this was the end. With torches, they lit up the camouflaged entrance to the shelter. Through the gaps between the stones of the opposite wall, we could see the moving reflections of the torchlight. But the entrance was well camouflaged – my father checked it every day.

Similar events happened another six times. In the meantime, our longed-for freedom didn't come. A second week passed after the *akcja*, then a third... We began to have doubts and to lose hope. We had expectations every day and every hour. We didn't understand what was happening. Our imprisonment had now dragged on to the twentieth day. That day, we woke up cheerful and in a good mood. At around 3:00pm, we heard quiet and careful footsteps on the stairs and a tearful-sounding voice saying, "Mum, dad". We sprang up out of

our beds, crying and laughing, hugging each other. Within seconds, we were at the opening. It was my brother, Szmulik. Through the hole, he pushed a few loaves of bread and potatoes cooked in their jackets. He was certain that we had died of hunger.

It turned out that Szmulik had bribed the Jewish police to take us to the Small Ghetto which had been established following the *akcje*. When the police officers returned and told him that there was no one home when they called around, and that they had also not found any bunkers which had been uncovered by the Germans, my brother decided to get to us himself. He told one German that he knew where my father stored his reserves of English tin-solder, pitch and tar-paper which he used in his workshop. These were materials, especially the tin-solder, which were much sought after by the Germans. The German couldn't resist temptation. In addition, my brother tried to get a few bottles of alcohol and, when the drunken German took "his treasure" from its hiding-place, my brother had run to the attic to let us know that he was alive and to tell us what was happening. He told us that they were cutting off water and electricity in nearby streets and that we must leave our location and come to what was called the "Small Ghetto", which the Germans had established, across a few streets, for the 3,500 people who were still alive.

We had to cross the abandoned ghetto, past the Germans who hunted incessantly. My father stated that we have to do it immediately, but 27 people couldn't cross at the same time without drawing attention to themselves.

Half of us would go on Friday night and the other half would go on Saturday night. We went out in three's. The first trio was my aunt and her children. They were to find an apartment for us in the Small Ghetto. According to my father's plan, the whole operation was supposed to happen from the time the street lights went out and dawn.

We packed the most essential items in backpacks and bundles, and waited in readiness. The following night, the first trio was my mother, my sister-in-law Hanka and her mother. My father went ahead of all the trio's. He lay on the ground, with his ear to the pavement, listening for any approaching patrols. The next trio which was due to leave, would, in the meantime, stop at the doorway at the bend of the stairs into the basement – which was our first hiding-place. It was about 50-60 metres between our building and the gate on Mostowa Street. When, according to my father's calculations, a trio had reached the entrance to the Small Ghetto, he would lead the next trio down the stairs. It was the same procedure the following night. My father would be the last one to go and I was to go with him.

On the night of 17<sup>th</sup> October, after twenty three days, we left the hiding-place for the last time. Everything went according to plan. Our shoes were covered in rags in order that our footsteps could not be heard. The trio ahead of us had already left. While waiting, I hadn't calculated the time properly, and so I loosened the straps a little of my backpack which was too heavy for me, and I didn't go down to the gate. In the meantime, my father waited for me impatiently. In the end, he came back up to the apartment to urge me on. And then, as if on purpose, I couldn't put the backpack back on. It was getting light and, in a little while, we

would not be able to leave. Everyone, who was waiting for us in the ghetto, wouldn't know why we hadn't got there. Irritated, my father took me by the hand and we left. As we stepped onto the street, my father suddenly pushed me back and whispered, "Hide!". We hid under the stairs. For the moment, I didn't understand what was happening but, after a few seconds, I also heard the rhythmical footsteps of a patrol. Fear and relief were mixed with the image of what would have happened if we'd left one minute earlier. The problem with the backpack had saved our lives.

We waited a while longer, until the footsteps of the patrol had died away, and then we left. My father went first. I followed him. We moved silently through the empty Market Square. Death lurked behind every step and every corner. We could already be seen from the entire Square. The distance we had to cross was less than 60 metres but, after only a dozen or so steps, my legs were ready to give way under me, no longer accustomed to walking after 23 days in hiding. My back ached under the weight of the backpack and the weight of my own body. My lungs reacted badly to the clean air. I need to cough. My eyes and nose were running. I couldn't see the road ahead of me. Only my father's silhouette pointed me in the right direction.

In the shadow of the gate, we met up with my mother and the others who were waiting for us.. The Jewish Police, who patrolled the gate, moved us on quickly. An acquaintance told us that Aunt Ewa had found an apartment for us and gave us the address.

On the 17th October, we found ourselves in a one-room apartment at 59 Garncarska Street. We were together – our closest family – my parents, my brother with his wife and her mother, Aunt Ewa with her two children and me. Nine people were in a one-room apartment, which also served as a kitchen. But when I found out what had happened to the Jewish community of Częstochowa, I understood that we had been incredibly lucky. Of 40,000 people, only 3,500 remained – but the *akcje* and transports continued. In a short time, we realised that we had lost our entire extended family.

Every day, we discovered a new human tragedy. Whole families had been exterminated. All our closer and more distant relatives had perished - my mother's younger sister, Lea Frajerman, with her six children aged between 6 and 20 years old, my sister-in-law's father, sister and extended family, the Biber family – the parents and both children aged 18 and 20, the Monet family – the parents and 12 year old daughter, the Secem family, the Braun family – the parents and their 18 year old daughter, Fela, the Izraelewicz family – the parents and three children aged between 8 and 19, my mother's oldest sister, Hana Szwarc, her husband and 20 year old daughter, neighbours, the Hauptman family – the parents and their 20 year old son, Dawid, the Brzeziński family - the parents and their 19 year old daughter, Gienia, the Szwarcbard family and their many children. Of my class from Dr Axer's high school, only four people remained.



24 Stary Rynek (Old Market Square) in Częstochowa. The hiding-place in this building was where my family hid during an *akcja* in 1942. The hiding-place reached the centre of the Square. In front of the building are my family, children and grandchildren, as well as a passing group of Israelis to whom I told the story of our 23 days in hiding.

The first days, after leaving our hiding-place, were still filled with uncertainty. The Germans searched the ghetto for those who had not reported for some type of work and who were in hiding. Our appearance betrayed us – eyes unaccustomed to the light, pale and thin faces, unsteady gait, creased clothing, with paraffin stains. Everyone, who was in hiding during an *akcja* looked like that. We devoted the first days to improving our appearance. We cleaned ourselves and ironed our clothes. We tried not to go out during the day so as to avoid questions from acquaintances whom we might meet by chance. We didn't know if there was an informer in the vicinity.

The first thing my father did was to prepare a bunker for my mother, the mother of my sister-in-law and for my cousin, Wowek. All were either under or over the age “permitted” by the Germans.

After a short time, we reported for work. My father began working in the common kitchen which provided dinner for whoever wanted it. Aunt Ewa swept streets in order to be close to the bunker. My brother worked in one of the factories established by the Germans.

I, my cousin Edzia and my sister-in-law Hanka (despite being seven months pregnant) were attached to a group which went out everyday to clean up the abandoned Big Ghetto. We removed and sorted items left behind in their homes by the Jews. The Germans collected these items in special warehouses and later sent them to the Reich. Our group carried the name of “Garibaldi”, because that's where the warehouses were. It was the largest group which would leave the Small Ghetto for work, so that the Germans didn't pay much attention to the exact numbers leaving and entering. Every few days, a couple of people would be missing, who had either crossed to the Aryan side or who had escaped to the forest.

After a certain time, the foreman had an obligation to report on how many people reported for work and how many returned to the ghetto. Our group was divided into sub-groups. Each sub-group dealt exclusively with one function. We reported to the sub-group

that dealt with emptying out apartments, as we wanted to stay together and it was easier to get into this group because of its heavy, physical work.

All the buildings on Garibaldi Street were divided into designated warehouses. Number 28 held bedcovers and bedding, number 19 held glass, china and kitchenware, number 14 held toys, somewhere else held towels, pots and pans, etc..

During the course of our work, we would sometimes come across hiding-places, some more successful than others. We had no idea of the fate of their occupants. Some served as storage for various goods. What went on here was the source of economic activity in the ghetto and guarded people from hunger. Our group was called “Garibaldi 28” and was comprised of 28 people – men and women. In cleaning up the ghetto, we would often come across storehouses, magazines and supplies. We would take everything to the appropriate collection area, where it was sorted and sent to the Reich. But everybody tried to pluck out something for themselves. The most sought-after items were bedlinen, quilts and towels. Shortly before the final parade before returning to the Small Ghetto, we would put on individual items of clothing, take off our belts and put on our outer clothing over the top – in order to look as normal as possible.

People, who worked in places in the “Polish districts”, bought it and then sold it and, from the money they obtained, they bought food which we would buy from them. This trade took place in Deutschmarks and was a prohibited and dangerous practice. Sometimes, the Germans would conduct a surprise body search and then that would cause a stir. Those who had something tried to move imperceptibly to the end of the columns so that they could, under cover of the approaching dusk, dispose of the hidden items and leave them onsite. Sometimes, it was such a tightened corset, that this wasn’t possible. My sister-in-law was pregnant so, in general, she avoided scrutiny. The Germans saw her belly every day and, in their stupidity, suspected nothing. Once, I didn’t manage to rid myself of two pillowcases, so I went to the search with an unbuttoned overcoat, holding a portion of bread in my hand, and with the other drawing the coat aside with a self-confident expression. Certainly, one could pay for such crimes with your life and, not just once, we saw someone being brutally shot on the spot. They were brave, those who, at night, went on outings, meaning “jumping” over the ghetto borders. This also often ended in death.

\*\*\*

Hanka’s labour pains began on the 15th December. For two days, she suffered in that one-room apartment in which nine people lived. In the end, she went to the ghetto “hospital” where, after much effort, she gave birth to a male child. She returned home that same day, because the hospital was a dangerous place. The child came with the scissors still around the umbilical cord as the doctor stated that he should not be allowed to live. Hanka began to despair and decided to leave the child behind. Today, I know that I lost my mother in order for my brother to have a wife. It was clear that the baby had no chance of survival and would



endanger the lives of others. Today, I know that the doctor should not have left anyone with that decision, but should have given the infant a morphine injection and told Hanka that the child had died as a result of post-natal complications.

As usual, on the 4th January 1943, we prepared for work, each at his/her own workplace. My mother asked me not to bring anything back to the ghetto, as she'd had a bad dream. She had dreamt that the Germans had caught me with "issued" bedding. They began to beat me until I bled and passed out. My mother then began to pour water on my face to revive me. Grandma Frajman then appeared (she had died in 1937) and said, "Don't pour water on that child like that, She could catch cold".

More or less around noon, news reached us that there would be an *akcja* in the ghetto. We looked around the ghetto with concern as the snow fell, as though we could make out something. At around 2:00pm, we heard a series of shots coming from the ghetto. I calmed myself, my cousin and my sister-in-law saying that, after all, my father had organised a hiding-place in our home immediately after we'd come from the Big Ghetto.

In the evening, we returned to the ghetto in the usual manner. After passing the guards, we raced home. I grabbed hold of the doorknob. Opening the door, I couldn't see anyone. I could only hear crying and wailing. I couldn't go in. I slammed the door shut and began to run away, not knowing to where. I don't know how I found my way back home. My mother and brother ran after me and then I learned that my father had been killed. My mother kept repeating incessantly, "He's been sent away". But Aunt Ewa, who had been in the Market Square on Warszawska Street during the *akcja*, repeated "He's been killed, he's been killed".

### **THE FACTS:**

In the morning, there had been an announcement that everyone in the ghetto must report to the Market Square. My mother, with her 17 day old, unnamed grandson and Wowek, my 12 year old cousin, immediately went into the bunker. Matylda, my sister-in-law's mother, dawdled for a while and didn't manage to leave. She was taken from the apartment to the assembly point. Aunt Ewa and my father went to the Market Square. The *akcja* commenced. Twice, my father had been designated for transport and, both times, he'd been wangled out of it by Kopiński, President of the Jewish Community Council, as being indispensable for the maintenance of various pieces of equipment. The *akcja* was reaching its conclusion, when a ŻOB member fired his revolver at a German. The revolver malfunctioned and the German was only wounded (Marek Edelman mentions these revolvers and other weapons in Hanna Kral's documentary, "Shielding the Flame"). This time, the Germans selected every tenth person and my father found himself among those condemned to be shot.

Here, in Israel, Mietek Lejzerowicz told me how brave my father had been. In a loud voice, he yelled, "The death of us, innocent people, will be on your heads. You'll die like crushed cockroaches, avenged by those who will come after us".

The night passed, full of phantoms and illusory dreams. We got up in order to go to work. My mother got up first. She sat on a short stool, as though performing the traditional mourning rites for the dead. She was mending my brother's workclothes. Some food for the baby was cooking on the stove and for us for when we returned from work. Saying goodbye with kisses as usual, I begged her to go down to the bunker.

In the evening, only Aunt Ewa and Wovek were in the empty apartment. Aunt Ewa, who had to be on the streets because she worked at sweeping aside the snow, told us that my mother had voluntarily left the apartment with the child, and had not gone down to the bunker.

She had already sent a letter, in Yiddish, from the assembly point:

*Dear Edzia, be strong. I had to be faithful to your father. I couldn't meet Mrs Chorzewska anywhere. Tell Hanka that I will look after the child as though it was my own. Be happy and be a decent human being.*

*Mama*

My mother had left me a heavy legacy. I try to follow her instruction to the end.

## **BLIŻYN**

At the beginning of March 1943, my brother, Szmulek, received a summons from the *Judenrat*. Such a summons never augured anything good. We despaired. We didn't know what to do, to whom to turn. Without my father, we had no contacts within the world that ruled our lives. The person, from whom we rented the apartment, advised us to go personally to the *Judenrat* and try to see its president, Kopiński, who, during the *akcja* in the Market Square on Warszawska Street on the 4th January, had twice extracted my father from the group designed for deportation. Unfortunately, he couldn't save him from death and I relished the extent of our misfortune. Our family was disintegrating, dying. All my father's efforts had been for nothing.

At the *Judenrat*, Hanka and I were assured that Szmulek would certainly be freed, that he had been detained by mistake. We went to work, to our workplace on Garibaldi Street, with somewhat raised spirits. At around 10:00am, someone entered the hall where we worked sorting toys taken from homes in the former ghetto and said that Group 18 of Jews from the Small Ghetto had been taken to the baths. In their pedantry, the Germans took to the bathes and for clothing disinfection, all those who were to be sent to other camps. With Hanka, I ran quickly to the bathes where they had been taken. Among those there, we saw Szmulek. We approached in order to find out what was happening. There were no Germans there. Jewish police escorted the group of 28 people. Szmulek told us that they were sending him to a work camp, where he didn't know. The group contained a doctor and a nurse. Within seconds, Hanka had exchanged places with the nurse who, happily, ran off to the toy warehouse in

order to return to the ghetto with the work group. We had no names. We had no faces. The Germans let back into the ghetto the same number of people they had let out in the morning.

We left the bathes. For the time being, the policemen allowed me to stay with the group, but I was feeling that the rest of my life was being torn into shreds. At that moment, I decided, and announced out loud, that I was going with them. Szmulek and Hanka began imploring me not to do this, that they didn't know to where they were being sent, that here I had a roof over my head and four walls around me - and that I should stay with my aunt and cousin. I looked in the direction of the ghetto which, for me, symbolised the death of my parents. Now, I was supposed to stay all alone – with nothing and no one.

The policemen agreed that I could go with the group up to the ghetto border on Wilson Street. Along the way, everyone encouraged me to change my mind. At the ghetto border, where the Polish police were supposed to collect us, seeing that I was not about to change my intention, they tried to stop me by force. I began to struggle with them. In the end, Szmulek understood that nothing would convince me. He asked everyone to leave me alone and to let me go with them.

The Jewish escort returned to the ghetto. The Polish escort took over to take us along Wilson Street to the railway station on Piłsudski Street. Hanka and I stood there in the clothes we were wearing when we raced to the warehouse. After having decided to join the transport, we were afraid to return for any clothing or to get some food.

We walk through the centre of the city escorted by eight policemen, our appearance clearing the streets. Passers-by, not knowing what was happening, are afraid of *ad hoc* round-ups, so often organised by the Germans. Kept to one side at the station, we wait for a few hours. Towards evening, we are led to the platform, and later along the railway track in the direction of Stradom where, in a siding, a goods train waits, intended for the transportation of goods, cattle and Jews.

Four months earlier, I'd turned 17 years old, but my whole life now lay behind me. Did it really matter where I would die? We sit on the floor of the railway wagon, amid the dust and dirt. The policemen lock us in with a bar on the outside and then leave. Two of them remain on guard.

We wait silently. There's nothing to talk about. Everyone is immersed in his own thoughts and memories. Late evening, we are coupled to the locomotive and we move. We travel slowly. We wait for a few hours and we move again. Again, we stop and, again, we move.

We eat that which those, who had been prepared to be sent away, had brought from home and what the girls from the workplace had managed to sell Hanka and me before we'd crossed the ghetto borders. We travel the whole night and all the next day. Once, at night, they allow us to leave the wagon to answer the call of nature. During one of the stops, the doctor manages to escape. Earlier, over a few hours, he had instructed my brother on how to deal with the sick and what to prescribe for various complaints. In any case, medical

treatment didn't exist in the camps. He left Szmulik his doctor's bag and armband with the red Star of David.

The train stopped in the middle of the night in an uninhabited area. They ordered us to get out, and a few Polish policemen together with German soldiers in SS uniforms – armed with rifles and with German shepherds on leashes – counted us repeatedly. Again, our group comprised 28 people. They told us to walk in a particular direction. We walked through the darkness in the middle of nowhere. The sharp wind made us aware that we were moving through an uninhabited area.

After a long march, we spot a few buildings surrounded with barbed wire. We enter, we are again counted, we go further, we cross a small bridge under which we can hear a river running and, in the end, we notice rows of barracks. All around is total darkness. They order us to enter one of the barracks and, by the light of an SS-man's torch; we can see two rows of wooden bunks.

We are allowed to lie down and sleep. And so, standing in darkness, after almost two days of travelling by train, we lie down fully clothed onto the bare boards without any blankets. Arms are bent under our heads, coats are used to cover ourselves. Our heads are empty, with no thoughts. There is no yesterday, there is no tomorrow. Just close your eyes and fall into the nothingness.

In the morning, the murmur of conversations and the severe cold woke me. I was numb to the point where all my muscles ached. It was still dark. In the middle of the barracks, a small fire burned. People stood around it warming themselves. I joined them. They were people who'd been transported, that same night, from the ghettos in Radom and Tomaszów Mazowiecki. In the Tomaszów group, there were two women who had also come voluntarily in order to be with their husbands. Five Jewish policemen had come with the Radom group. There were 102 of us altogether. We learned that we had been taken to Blizyn near Skarżysko. We weren't sure if it was a small town or a village.

Early in the morning, we were stood on parade near the barracks. Jewish policemen stood at the front wearing semi-military officer's boots. Their caps had red bands and they carried leather whips, similar to that of the Germans. After a time, a group of high-ranking SS-men appeared with an *Obersturmbannführer* at the front. That officer was called Nell. He was not so young, misshapen and had a German shepherd by his side. His appearance and behaviour already aroused fear. His dog never attacked anyone wearing officer's boots, as worn by the Jewish policemen, but always anyone who moved in the ranks. Later, we would come across similarly trained dogs in Birkenau.

At that first parade, the group of guards, Ukrainians and Latvians, who later filled the role of executioners, did not appear. The Jewish policemen counted us repeatedly and their commander, Szlomo Minc from Radom, made his report to Nell in a military fashion.

Nell gave a speech, translated into Polish by Minc. "You are in a labour camp in order to work. If you don't shirk from your work, if you maintain order and cleanliness, as well as comply with the orders of the authorities, then nothing bad will happen to you".

The camp had the task of providing non-military services to the front such as repairing underwear and uniforms, woollen socks and gloves, and producing warm bedroom slippers.

We stood – 102 people – in front of the rows of barracks, each of which could hold 800 to 1,000 people. They were not built especially for us. They were old. We wondered who had occupied them earlier and what had been the fate of their previous occupants. As we found out from the local inhabitants, who came under the wire in order to sell us food, before us, there had been 11,000 Soviets prisoners of war in these barracks. Looking at the large, dark stains on the walls and the floor of the barracks, we could guess their fate.

Let me return to Nell. In as much as the lower-ranking SS-men didn't needlessly enter into conflicts with the prisoners and often turned a blind eye to minor offences, Nell was a rabid, fanatical sadist. He ran the camp with an iron fist. His very appearance aroused fear. He often set his German shepherd on us. If someone moved too slowly or too quickly, or raised his hand in what could be interpreted as aggression, the dog would attack on its own initiative. Even if everything was done according to the Germans' regulations, Nell would set the dog off for his own amusement or would hit, with his whip, anyone who was unlucky enough to cross his path or who stood within range of his whip. Parades lasting many hours and whippings became Nell's favoured penalties, even for minor offences - 25, 50, 75 lashes were imposed on the bare back, depending upon the scale of the offence or the state of Nell's mood.

At first, the penalties were imposed next to a post, but the Germans quickly reached the conclusion that that system of beatings was less effective and too onerous on those wielding the whip. So they began laying the prisoner, face down, on a bed. In this way, the strokes fell at right angles, from a greater height and were less tiring for the SS-man carrying out the beating. All this would occur during parades, and we had to watch as our friends would put their shirts onto their lacerated backs. The shirt would immediately become soaked in blood.

There were two ways of imposing penalties. When Nell was present, SS-men would carry them out. When he was not present, the task would be entrusted to the Jewish policemen. The policemen beat us quickly, from a lower height and would often get it wrong to the benefit of the prisoner. The SS-men whipped from a great height, pulling the whip across the skin, waiting a few seconds between one stroke and the next. It was a matter of honour for anyone being beaten not to scream or ask for a reduction in the penalty and, at the end, to nonchalantly, and with a smile, put on his shirt and return calmly back to the ranks.

In Bliżyn, we had two desires – to leave the camp alive and for our torturers to be appropriately punished. Word got to us, after the War, that Nell had been captured. Many

former Bliżyn prisoners went to the court hearing. He was not punished because psychiatrists claimed that he was not in full possession of his mental faculties.

\*\*\*

The men were put into the barracks and the women were placed into one of the farm buildings. The buildings, occupied by the SS-men, were located quite far from the surrounding barbed wire of the camp. They were past the Kamienna River, behind other wires.

At this time, the women worked in the kitchen and cleaned the administration offices. The men worked outside the camp, adapting existing buildings for their future purpose – they were to serve as workshops.

There were actually no guards with us. Every SS-man was responsible for his group of people. Each day began and ended identically – parade at dawn, a ration of bread and work until lunch which was served at the kitchen, again work until the evening parade, a portion of bread at 9:00pm, lights out in the administration rooms and then the Germans would leave for their own area. The Jewish police maintained the peace and order. No one was permitted to leave his room during the night-time "*Nachtschpeer*" (Nightshade). The rest of the barracks were locked from the outside. The lights in the barracks burned all through the night.

After a certain time, word spread amongst the men that a group of partisans was active in the local forests and, thanks to the low level of security, it was possible to get out of the camp and, after making contact with them, it would be possible to get back into the ghetto.

After two weeks, we had our first disaster. One person was missing from the morning parade. Someone from our Częstochowa group had escaped. After a brief meeting, the Germans ordered a "*blokschpeer*", namely a lockdown and another parade at 12 noon. Unfortunately, we knew what that meant. At every possible opportunity, the Germans threatened that, if anyone dared to escape, someone else would be sentenced to death.

At 11:45am, we were driven out for the parade. We stood in three rows. At the beginning of the first row there were five Jewish policemen, then, us, the women. The policemen's faces were gloomy. Did they know what fate held for us?

Punctually at 12 noon, the entire SS staff appeared with Nell at the head. A certain distance behind them were three soldiers from the Własow corps (unity of purpose, certainly, but, thank God, for the hierarchy between master and servant). They were grinning at the corners of their mouths. We knew what would be played out here in a moment. But, who would it be?

Nell, with his retinue, walks in front of us, without even giving us a glance. On parades we, women, had our usual places at the beginning of the row. My brother always stood next to us.



He passed us by and we had neither the strength nor the courage to look in his direction in order to see ..... who? After a few seconds, we see, pulled out of a row, an 18 year old boy from Częstchowa. His name or nickname was Bulwik. We hear struggling, probably crying simultaneously with the sound of three rifle shots – and then silence. Only the smell of burnt gunpowder hangs in the air. We are dismissed. We walk away, but each of us casts a final, parting look at Bulwik's body lying by the wall. We actually knew nothing about him except that he was a happy, obstreperous boy, afraid of nothing and no one. So why him, exactly? Had he fallen into disfavour with one of the Germans? Had he spoken rudely to a policeman or had they perceived his desire to escape?

Much later, when the camp held a few hundred people (new transports kept arriving), seven people escaped one day. And, again, seven others paid for it with their lives, among them a policeman from Kielce called Cukier, who had been responsible for that group.

Yet another execution was carried out. True, it was outside the wires, but still in front of our eyes. It was a man by the name of Szac, from Radom or Tomaszów, responsible for camp supplies. He'd abused his position. During the course of the day, the Germans had carried out a search. It wasn't known what they found, but suddenly they had called a parade of everyone in the camp. We stood on parade as usual, not knowing for what purpose. Suddenly, we saw Szac being escorted by six armed soldiers outside the wires. They walked away from the camp, but along the wires so that we could all see. Szac carried a shovel with which he was to dig his own grave. We were still standing on parade when we heard the shots. Only then were we dismissed to go back to work.

Let me return to the beginning. For six weeks, Hanka and I walked around in the same clothes that we wore when we left. All the others had prepared to leave their homes. After numerous requests, aunt Ewa was allowed to send us a parcel of underwear, clothes and a little food. That was the only parcel to reach us in Bliżyn.

In the meantime, new transports arrived and the camp now numbered three hundred people. As in all camps, there was not enough food. In the morning, one loaf of army bread for eight people. In the afternoon, there was soup which contained a little potato and swede. The small amount of meat that was supposed to be in it had somehow disappeared along the way. In the evening, again there was a loaf of bread for eight people. We were supposed to divide it up amongst ourselves. But how? That dubious honour fell to me and it was a difficult duty to divide up the bread. At that time, we lived in the administration building – the only eight women in the camp. There were not enough of us to warrant a barracks. How did I divide up the bread? In front of everyone, I marked out seven lines on the oblong loaf, taking into account its width. When all my roommates agreed with this division, I held two slices behind my back and asked each of the girls to choose a hand. Neither I nor any of them could see my hands. Was that fair?

We, women, only worked in the kitchen. A not-so-young SS-man, from before Hitler's time, was responsible for the kitchen. He allowed the cook to give each of us a

portion of soup to be eaten on the spot. The portion, which we got later from the general pot, we then shared with someone close. Our work in the kitchen consisted of peeling potatoes, which was the basic and main element of our food. Peeling thinly was a matter of honour. Thanks to that, we could stretch this good work out for as long as possible. One day, we saw through the window of the kitchen, how the men were digging around in the waste containers which, moments before, had been taken out of the kitchen. They were eating the raw, dirty peelings. From that time on, we smuggled pieces of potato in amongst the peelings and we peeled them thickly, being careful so that this wouldn't be considered sabotage for wasting German property. We remembered well Szac and the supplies.

As the months passed, new transports kept coming. Ghettos in the larger cities were being systematically liquidated and those, who avoided Majdanek and Treblinka, were sent to labour camps like Bliżyn, or to production centres like Wronki and Skarżysko. The largest transport arrived after the liquidation of the ghetto in Białystok. The camp now had three thousand people. However, there was no additional room or additional sanitary facilities provided. Then there was a typhus epidemic – which usually occurs in situations of hunger, bad sanitation and cramped accommodation. Shortly after the establishment of the camp, the Germans vaccinated the kitchen workers, the sanitary personnel and the Jewish policemen against typhus. Janik, who left the camp every day to clean the Germans' quarters, was also vaccinated. Despite that, typhus had already broken out in April or May 1943. A few people became ill, among them my sister-in-law.

The sick were placed in a "clinic", which was located in the administration building. The whole "clinic" was comprised of six beds, a thermometer and aspirin. At that time, I volunteered to work with the sick, but all that could really be done was to give them water to drink, feed them, put cold compresses on their foreheads, disinfect the rooms, take their clothes to be disinfected and to just wait until the ninth day of sickness which was the crisis point. Fortunately, all our sick recovered.

Unfortunately, it was quite a different matter at the beginning of 1944. Admittedly, soon after our arrival, came Dr Wajngarten from Radom, with his wife Sabina, a nurse. As it was, there was no medication against typhus anyway. Either you survived it, or you didn't. This time, I also fell ill. The level of my illness was relatively light, as the vaccination from the previous year took effect. Typhus attacked at full strength. A thousand people fell victim to it – one-third of the entire camp. The rest were affected by hunger, emaciation and by post-typhus complications. People died standing on parade. Those who fell were removed from the ranks and the count continued. They died sitting on a bench in the bathhouse, while waiting for clean underwear which was supposed to come from the camp laundry. They dropped while waiting in line for soup.

Dante-esque scenes were played out near the soup pot. People fought over an extra ladleful of the thin soup, because their lives depended on it. We women, who worked in the small workshops, were saved from this. One of us was sent out to bring it back for the rest.

After the War, I chanced to meet, in the street, one of the policemen who were on permanent duty in the kitchen. We exchanged personal information. He told me that he had just been released from prison where he had spent five years. Maybe he expected sympathy, but I remained silent because, before my eyes, I could still see his shoulders, with his whip falling ferociously onto the heads and backs of my companions. I won't mention his name, because he's already served out his sentence. This is a fact that deserves unlining – that the Polish judiciary imposed a penalty on a Jewish policeman for cruelty to Jewish prisoners.

As the camp grew, we, who had been living until then in the administration building, were moved to newly-created women's barracks. The men's barracks were separate but, after working hours until 9:00pm when the barracks were locked, families could visit each other (for a short while).

The two-level bunks were not divided, and everyone had a width of around 70 centimetres at their disposal. All your possessions were kept behind the headboard.

Let me return to the hunger. Men suffered the camp conditions worse than the women, but those who suffered the worst were those who had been transported from other camps. They simply had nothing which could be exchanged for food. After normal working hours, I would go to the hospital barracks (I'd already been immunised against illness), to help the few staff there. For the first time in my life, I saw people swollen from hunger. Their eyes could barely be seen in their faces and their legs could not carry the weight of their bodies. The hardest thing was to look at people who I knew as cheerful, despite the harsh conditions, optimistic and talkative, now lying on bunks with glassy eyes and indifferent to everything. Sometimes, only an intense look gave me to understand that they recognised me and were grateful. Two of them, Runia Plockier and Mordek Krakauer, helped me years later, during a difficult period in my life.

Those who survived the illness, suffered later from various post-typhus complaints – weakness, hair loss, scurvy, and rashes. The only medicine that Dr Wajngarten could prescribe was an additional portion of soup and a portion of raw pickled cabbage. Both prescriptions were filled by the kitchen. Apart from that, the number of prisoners was reduced by one-third as a result of typhus. The chief doctor could, for a time, benefit from this fact and increase our food ration – but only in soup, as the Germans scrupulously accounted for the bread.

As well as hunger, typhus and lice, we were also plagued by rats. The camp was situated in a field, a few kilometres away from any centres of population. The Germans systematically took the greater part of the harvest away from the peasants, as quotas, to fill the needs of the army and the civilian population in Germany. There were storehouses of food in the camp, which were unguarded by cats, traps or poisons. Under the bunks placed on the bare ground of the barracks, as well as the laundry and drying area which were always warm, made ideal conditions for the rats to multiply to incomprehensible numbers. At night, hundreds would come out from under the bunks – whole generations of rats of different sizes.

They ate away at everything that was edible, including what we'd saved from the day's food portion and what we had managed to buy in exchange for articles of clothing. They even bit through clothes which were hung on the barracks beams, if they sensed that bread was hidden there.

What was worse was that the barracks were locked from the outside, but lit from the inside. After 9:00pm, you couldn't leave to go to the common toilets outside the barracks. Some people were forced to use dishes which were secretly produced and sold by the tinsmiths. Herds of rats threw themselves squealing at these dishes and would eat away their contents.

Over time, the rats became audacious, even appearing during the day. They would run across the made-up bunks in search of food and would bite those lying on the bunks following the night-shift. Most often, they would bite the nose or bare fingers. Those bitten would receive vaccinations against strychnine at the clinic. The Germans were not interested in dealing with this plague which troubled us until the liquidation of the camp.

### **THE CHILDREN'S "AKCJA"**

A few families from Radom and Białystok managed to smuggle one child each into Bliżyn, probably miraculously saved from an *akcja* and deportation. Children were not required to stand on parade, despite the fact that the Germans knew of their existence. They remained hidden in the barracks all day, until their mother returned from work. After the evening parade, they would leave the barracks with their mother to get some fresh air. There were perhaps five children, all around five years of age. One day, the police commander, Minc from Radom, came to the barracks and announced that families with children would be transferred to another camp, with better conditions for children.

There was a commotion and confusion, with people rushing around. Whoever could, ran to tell the parents. Someone calmed down the children. The children had to be dressed (it was winter), packing. Everything had to be ready within fifteen minutes. Quick farewells and the children, with their parents, climbed onto a lorry near the entrance to the camp.

We stood around for a little while and then dispersed to our places of work. At that time, I worked in the bathhouse, for which Szajek Landau from Częstochowa was responsible. We, Częstochowanin, stuck together and helped each other. After a few minutes, before we'd even had the time to come to terms with what had just happened, we heard the repeated sounds of shots. Now we knew. We wondered if the parents knew also. The answer came quickly – shattered parents returned to the camp, holding in their hands the small bundles which they had packed half an hour earlier. I saw them. Lipszyc and Cukierman from Tomaszów, Dr Sawczyc and Dr Cytron from Białystok are a few of the names I remember, names of people who lost their children on that day.

\*\*\*

Over the course of a year and a half, connections and friendships developed amongst us. After parade, we'd sit between the bunks and talk about our "former" lives, about school, books, films which we'd managed to see, how we spent our vacations, what we liked to eat, and the like. We rarely talked about the past in terms of "yesterday" and "the day before yesterday". It was too painful and still too hard to comprehend. Mentioning parents and homes still depressed us and would bring people to tears. We were and would be eternal orphans. But what dominated everything was a hatred for the Germans and a reluctance to show any weakness and pain. We lived only for the day. We didn't think about what would happen to us tomorrow, because we didn't know. We also didn't know how the War was going but, around July 1944, we heard explosions in the distance and understood that something was probably about to happen.

The first news flowed in with the arrival of a group of prisoners from Majdanek. A detachment of SS-men in black uniforms accompanied them. Rumours spread that this was a *Sonderkommando*, a unit which, until then, had not existed in our camp. We knew that our stay in Bliżyn was coming to an end. How did we know? On the 20th or 21st July, we were ordered to take our personal possessions with us on morning parade. All our belongings could fit into a small bundle. The more provident tried to get linen bags made for themselves in the camp sewing rooms.

After being counted, we were ordered to move towards the camp gates. We moved as we had stood - men and women separately, in lines of five. The small number of escort personnel and the absence of Ukrainians gave us a little hope. They pointed us in the direction of the train station, where goods wagons were already waiting. With all our strength, we try to keep eye contact with my brother, to see which wagon he gets into. He also tries to keep us in sight. We had already agreed amongst ourselves that, should we survive the War, we would seek each other out in Częstochowa.

The train moves, we don't know to where. The wagons were intended for transport. On the walls is a sign: 8 horses – 40 people. There were maybe eighty of us. High up, below the ceiling, are two small windows on opposite sides of the wagon. Wood chips and dry weeds have been scattered on the floor. At the nearest stop, a thousand people are already waiting. They are stuffed into the wagons, into our's also. These are people from numerous labour camps in the Radom district, mainly from Wronki where an arms factory was located. Among them, are people who are relatively old – apparently, in Wronki, there was a demand for workers. This makes it even more crowded. Whoever managed to grab a spot next to the wall, or opposite a window, was lucky.

The journey commences and lasts three nights and two days. At one stop, when we were allowed to leave the wagons for a short time, I noticed a large sign on the wagon: AUSCHWITZ. The distance from Bliżyn works out at around three hundred kilometres.

I don't remember much about that terrible journey apart from the stink of excrement and the shouts of those nearby who could no longer stand it. In the middle of the night, we

arrive at some station. We hear the removal of the bars that locked down the wagon doors. The infamous *kapo*'s are waiting for us near the wagons with screams of "*Raus, raus, verfluchte Jude!*". They beat us on the head and back with whips. Gathered into an enormous group, under constant blows and with the accompaniment of screams, we look around. But the darkness of the night spares us the sight of the tracks, the famous ramp and the barbed wire, so well-known around the world from later reports. We also can't see the crematorium chimneys, which the world also didn't see because these were the first things that the Germans destroyed as they were retreating. But also, what is happening, is nevertheless terrible - screams and beatings, beatings and screams, bitter cold, hunger and thirst.

They order us to leave our belongings and to strip naked except for our shoes. They take away our things and beat us as they move us along. They throw us a shirt and some sort of ragged dress from a pile of clothes, paying no attention to our height or the size of the rags which they throw at us. No underpants or bras - only a shirt which served both as a towel and a dress. At this time, in Birkenau and in the FKL (*Frauenkonzentrationslager*), striped clothes were a luxury and designated a certain status. Those with striped clothes and the *kapos* dissociated themselves from ordinary prisoners. We went around in rags which were retrieved from the transports headed for the crematoria, and which were not good enough to be sent back to the German population of the Reich. We are driven into barracks. Gradually, the barracks start to fill up with women from other camps who had arrived that night. The cramped conditions were terrible – it was only possible to sit on the bunks. For many of us, there was no room on the bunks, so we just sat on the floor.

In the morning, we were divided up into individual blocks. Block 22 fell to us. By "us", I mean Hanka, Dziunia and me. Dziunia, born in Łódź, arrived from Tomaszów Mazowiecki. She arrived, just as Hanka and I had arrived, voluntarily with her husband, Izak Fajnsilber, in the first transport to Bliżyn. We'd already become friends in Bliżyn and tried to stay together in every situation.

We paraded in front of the block, for many hours as usual, with repeated counting of the rows of five-abreast. One by one, we come to the post where the prison-officer is seated. He orders us to hold out our left arm and, in the blink of an eye, it has tattooed on it the number A-15352. And that's how I remain, written as a number in B-II-B, which means field B in the Birkenau camp.

Twelve of us slept on each of the multi-tiered bunks - six in one direction and six in the other. Each group of six had the use of two army blankets. One served to cover the boards on which we slept and the other covered us. While sleeping, we all had to change position at the same time. We slept in whatever clothes we were wearing. We were in quarantine at that time and weren't forced to work. The day began with a morning parade, to which we were driven out amid screams and beatings. The parade lasted for hours, sometimes even as long as five hours. We shivered with the cold, standing in rows of five, waiting for the SS-men who were supposed to count us. We were counted repeatedly. When there were no SS-men,

and when the block-leader wasn't looking, we warmed ourselves based upon where we were standing. Every few minutes, we changed positions so that everyone could stand in the middle for a few minutes. In accordance with unwritten regulations, a parade was supposed to take place in the morning and in the evening, but they were often also held repeatedly during the night, only more briefly.

The "regulations" gave rise to sadism and various ways to torment us. During the day, the barracks were closed and we had no right to enter them. So, we sat on the ground outside. We would sneak into the barracks where the toilets were located. We couldn't go along the centre of the road which was designated for the Germans, *kapos* and block-leaders. The barracks with the toilets served the inhabitants of thirty blocks, so you couldn't stay in there for too long. Others wanted to go in there also.

Along the walls of the barracks, opposite the concrete lavatories, were cold-water taps. We washed there, using sand instead of soap. We wiped ourselves only with the shirt which we were given at the beginning and which we dried in the air. It was a foothills climate, characterised by cold nights and hot days. The latrine-barracks served as protection against the morning cold until the parade, and against the sun beating down without shade. But the *kapo* and block-leader, every now and then, would force us out. This depended upon how many people were still in there. They, too, were once in our position and knew that, in order to survive Oświęcim, a certain amount of sadism, evil and ability to abuse others was needed.

On parade, we had to stand at attention, an arm's length apart. During the count, they look searchingly at every face. What were they looking for? What sort of facial expression could justify any penalty?

The worst SS-man was called Perszel, a former boxer. He could beat a prisoner unconscious without leaving any mark. He had the habit of getting behind the rows to check whether any of us were sitting on the ground, unable to stand during the long hours on parade. Pity her, on whose dress he found any trace of dirt.

We were not permitted to disperse after parade. We waited for the meal. A few prisoners, under guard, brought a container of soup and cut-up portions of bread from the camp kitchen. An 800 gram loaf of bread cut up into five portions, one container of soup for five people and a small portion of margarine for each person. We got coffee after that. You could wash your hands in it. You couldn't drink it because, just like the soup, it contained chemicals intended to stop menstruation. We drank the soup, each in turn, sip by sip. Over time, with our nails, we scraped off pieces of wood from the barracks walls and, with that "spoon", we fished out the few pieces of cabbage and swede – again, each in turn. The soup had to be eaten immediately, because the dish had to be returned to the kitchen. You could eat your bread whenever you wished. The three of us settled for the soup, first of all. We ate one portion of bread at lunch and one with the soup at dinner. We hid and collected the third portions with margarine in order to obtain some warmer clothing and a piece of soap from the boys in the *Sonderkommando*. But we couldn't enjoy our "acquisitions" for too long. Every

now and then, we would be taken to the bathhouse and, again, left in only our shoes. Then the whole process of collecting bread had to start again.

The entire barracks went into the bathhouse, a few hundred people. Before entering the shower room, we took everything off, except for our shoes. A *kapo* gave each of us a piece of soap and we entered the area with the showers. A short stream of cold water, soap yourself, and again a little water to rinse. Urged along with shouts, we leave, wet and naked, through another exit. Here, we give back the piece of soap, we receive a shirt and some sort of dress from a stack brought from the ramp by the *Sonderkommando*. We wore things left behind by the previous transports.

Maintaining cleanliness was a necessity if one wanted to survive the camp. Hunger, sleeping together, eating from the same pot, all facilitated the spread of disease. Reporting to the camp hospital was equal to a death sentence. Every now and then, the Germans carried out a health parade – a “*Gesundheitapel*”. The whole barracks passed, naked, in front of a group of SS-men. The smallest rash, cough or appearance of illness meant being removed from the ranks and a certain end. The *kapo* and block-leader assisted at these ceremonies. So that a piece of soap, bought for the price of a dinner, was worth a “piece” of life. Every day, we washed in cold water in common washbasins which were opposite the concrete lavatories. We used the valuable soap on our faces and bodies. We scrubbed our legs with sand.

Our field, II-B, was located between Field A, to which Poles were transported and a little of which was allocated for the gypsies, and Fields C and D which contained the men.

The gypsies were transported together with the numerous members of their families. Every now and then, their barracks were emptied and, after a short while, smoke would come from the crematorium chimneys. We hadn't the slightest illusions that this would be our fate also. It was just a matter of time.

Transports continued to arrive at the ramp during the course of August and the beginning of September. Sometimes, word reached us from where they had come. A few transports never reached the barracks at all. That was the situation with numerous transports which arrived in the second half of August. For many days, black smoke and the smell of burnt meat hung over the camp. That was the end of the Łódź ghetto.

At the beginning of September, the number of prisoners in Field A increased. From short snatches of information passed through the wires, we found out about the uprising in Warsaw and its fate. Only two transports arrived in our Field during that time – Jewish women from Hungary and Italy. We tried to give moral support to the Hungarians with whom we had the Yiddish language in common. But the Italians, in their high heels, polished nails and shaven heads, were completely lost. Unused to hunger, they attacked the pots of food and, with whatever they could, took a little to eat immediately. The block-leader looked the other way but, if an SS-man noticed, he would not let them get away with it.

We were standing on parade when a German noticed one of the “Happkommando”, as we called them. He held her by one hand and, with the other, beat her mercilessly with a



stick. The poor thing whirled around him, trying to avoid the blows, but it didn't help and, when she fell, she didn't get up again. For the same offence, a second one knelt on the parade ground for a few hours, on which gravel had been poured especially for this purpose. We never saw her again in the barracks.

At that time, the Germans were totally brutal. We sensed that they were somewhat losing their composure. We were punished for the most minor of offences.

We also started hearing distant rifle shots at night and, after a few days, the sound of cannon shots closer to us. We figured out that the War had reached Kraków. So, it was almost here.

During the course of the day, an alert was declared and we were shut up in the barracks for long hours. Parades, and also meals, became irregular. We were locked inside large, hot barracks, hungry and thirsty. We waited with a newly awakened hope. Let them come. Let them destroy, Let me bomb us together with them.

By the end of October 1944, it was felt that something unusual was happening in the camp. The neighbouring fields were gradually becoming empty. Rows of prisoners, in five-abreast, were leaving the camp. No one knew where they were going, but at least smoke was not coming from the crematorium chimneys.

At the beginning of November 1944, at the morning parade, it was announced that we were being moved to another camp immediately after being counted. We were already not permitted to return to the barracks where we had left portions of bread and a piece of soap. As we had stood, five-abreast, we moved towards the main gate. With us, we had one portion of bread and margarine for breakfast. Between the empty barracks, past the ramp and, there we were, at the new camp comprised of gloomy, low, concrete buildings which we could see through the wires – the F.K.L. (*Frauenkonzentrationslager*).

We were divided up into blocks with the aid of clubs, fists and insults. The bunks were made of concrete, two-level, but so low that you couldn't even sit straight on them. One could only lie on them. Here, we became convinced that, until now, we hadn't even the slightest idea of what a concentration camp was. The bestiality and sadism of the block-leaders and *kapos* were unequalled. They treated us as badly as they could in order to show the Germans that, at least in this area, they could be relied upon. In B-II-B, they subjected us to quarantine. In the FKL, we had to work.

Immediately after parade, we were led, hundreds of women five-abreast, a few kilometres to work. Our work consisted of getting stones from a river bank, with our bare hands, and moving them to a distant place. We pushed wheelbarrows loaded with heavy, wet, river sand from one place to another, so that the next day, we could do the same work, only in the opposite direction.

The November rains commenced and the whole camp, like the local roads, turned into a sticky bog. Shoes softened and split so that we walked around the camp barefoot in order to keep our shoes dry for the long marches. We went to work and returned, escorted by armed

SS-men and dogs, which would attack anyone who moved out of line or who slowed down. If any of us slipped on the uneven, slippery road, we were whipped, a dog was set on us and we had to remain in our drenched clothes until the evening. If this happened near the river, you would be thrown into the water to rinse yourself off.

Coming back to camp in the evenings, the stronger girls supported the weaker ones. Stumbling and falling in the dark equated to death. In the camp, between the barracks in an illuminated square, a two-hour parade, a slice of bread and a thin soup. In the block, cleaned and closed up all day, a fight starts over spots near the stove to warm oneself up and to dry items of clothing, above all, socks.

Here, in the FKL, we lost the strength to struggle for survival. Worn out to the limit, hungry, constantly humiliated, beaten, insulted and ill, we watched from the back rows to see if the front rows ahead of us had, maybe finally, turned towards the crematorium, instead of leading us to “work”.

The evening return to the camp was the worst. Ahead of us was the night, cold, dampness, on concrete bunks in the same clothes we had worn the whole day. The day passed without any change or hope for change, and an equally bad night approached.

At night, barrels were placed at the front of the blocks which were to serve as toilets. When the barrels were full, two, and sometimes three, girls would carry them to the basin. Do I need to describe what happened when, starved and weakened, they couldn't carry that weight and fell over on the wet road?

I remember one particular evening parade. On the road returning home, between us, we supported Andzia Ajzenberg from Tomaszów, who had come to Bliżyn with her husband, on the first transport with us. She was bleeding from a broken nose. A *kapo* had beaten her because her abundant, fair hair had slipped out from under the scarf which had tightly covered it.

We stood on parade in the drizzling rain. Our toes, poking out of rotting shoes, touched the wet, cold, ground. For a time now, we hadn't heard those distant cannon shots which had given us such encouragement. Under a small roof, sheltered from the rain and wind, stood the masters of this world - SS-men, *kapos* and block-leaders – warmly dressed and comfortable, and casting insults in our direction. We waited for the higher-ranking officers to count us again and to dismiss the parade. But their arrival was somehow delayed.

Suddenly, one of the girls started crying loudly. At that moment, we felt that we didn't have the strength to carry on any more. In the end, we were a group of girls, aged in our twenties, who had encountered the worst that any human being can encounter. The crying engulfed everyone, like a fire in a dry forest. We cried quietly in front of the eyes of our executioners, feeling that they had taken away from us what remained of our pride and any sense of humanity. We didn't think of what the punishment would be for this breach of discipline. Looking at us, the Germans and the *kapo* laughed but, by some marvel, there was no physical punishment. And for the first time, we stood in front of them, unafraid of the

consequences of our action, not concerned with our wounded pride and not afraid of THEM, our masters. We were fortified and our spirits were raised with the awareness that we had done something which had to be done, unafraid of any consequences.

And so the weeks passed. At dawn a parade, a slice of bread and coffee and a march out to work, regardless of the weather. Return in the evening, soup which we again ate without spoons, but in a separate dish which we then had to wash. Into the dark and cold barracks, an attempt to get close to the fire and, on the whistle signal, sit on the bunks and lights out.

Even though we couldn't hear the approaching front, something changed in the camp. The parades became shorter. Suddenly, we received more soup, and we could ask for more from what remained in the pot.

At that time, something strange happened to me. In the short hours between the parade and entering the barracks, someone called out to me by name. I turned around and looked surprisingly at a strange face. After a short conversation, it turned out that she was the sister of a girl who worked as a seamstress for Hanka Hauptman, our neighbour opposite. She would come sometimes to visit her sister. She noticed me then and remembered me.

From an entire, large family, she also remained alone. In Oświęcim, she worked in the block kitchen. We began to exchange memories, but by now our tears had run dry. Zosia returned to the kitchen and brought back a pot of thick, delicious soup which even contained pieces of meat. We hadn't seen meat for over a year. She told us to come back tomorrow at the same time. Even though the prisoners now had more food, Zosia put herself at risk bringing us food which we were not meant to have. At the same time, she acquainted us with the situation. Large transports of prisoners were leaving every day for Germany and Oświęcim was to be liquidated. She advised us to try to get onto any transport, because the front was approaching and it wasn't known what the Germans would do at the last minute.

The following evening, after parade, I went with Hanka and Dziunia to the agreed place and, again, we received three portions of nourishing, hot soup, with spoons as well. Zosia gave each of us an article of warm clothing and, for me, there was also a pair of casual shoes with rubber soles. The sight of my toes, poking out from worn out, dirty shoes, had not escaped her. Another evening, we again took advantage of the privileged splendour of the kitchen. I even managed to thank Zosia sincerely for everything that she'd done for us.

There was no dinner in the camp that evening due to some transport complications, so that late evening we were given cold, unboiled milk. Who could refuse to drink a mug of milk, even if not very hungry? Until then, we could only dreamt of the taste.

That night, I fell ill. I had a fever and diarrhoea and I knew that I wouldn't be able to endure a march of a few kilometres and then ten hours of hard work. I told Hanka that I was going to report to the camp hospital. Hanka and Dziunia pleaded with me not to do that. They assured me that they would help me on the march and at work. But I felt that I couldn't even withstand a march of one hundred metres, with the screams of the SS-men and the furious

baying of the dogs. I told them that I didn't care how I died – in the gas chambers to which "patients" were sent every few days or, which I preferred, to be shot in front of their eyes.

I said goodbye to them and stood with the group of those who were sick (every parting could have been the last one). The check-in into the hospital and formation of the work groups dragged on, because new sick people kept on coming from each of the blocks. Our group was surrounded by SS-men. Indifferently, I listened to their voices, when suddenly I heard the response, "*zweihundert und funfzig*" (two hundred and fifty). I had no doubt that they were talking about two hundred and fifty groups of five-abreast. But, going to where? I squeezed up to Hanka and Dziunia and asked them to move closer to the group of sick people, because they were probably talking about transports. I returned to my place in line and anxiously looked behind me. I could see that they were trying to move to the front, which was not an easy matter.

We get our marching orders, the group of those sick at the front. A few SS-men at the gate are counting the rows of five-abreast. In the final row, there were only three girls. Impatiently, an SS\_man grabbed two girls from the side from the next "five", and attached them to us. It was Hanka and Rykla from Blizyn, whom we barely knew. Dziunia remained behind.

We reached the transports, but unfortunately, there were only two. We were locked into some sort of barracks and then the preparations for transportation began. From that time, we were not without an escort, even for a moment. We were given some more respectable clothes and thick overcoats which had, on their backs, a cross painted along the entire length and width of the back in red oil paint and, between the arms of the cross, the equally large letters "KL".

We were delighted, but also sad. We knew that, finally, we were leaving this hell. True, we didn't know to where. But we were leaving death's waiting-room. Unfortunately, we were leaving people who were close to us with whom we'd shared a single dry, slice of bread, every sip of soup and one blanket for six people – all on those concrete bunks.

All stood by the barracks windows. We said goodbye with looks and smiles through the tears. After the parade, they still gave us advice and, through the guards, tried to smuggle trinkets to us which they knew that we would need en route and at our destination. There was a girl from Piotrków, Pola, with whom I had a close friendship on account of the fact that my mother and grandmother were born in Piotrków. Also, it was because her parents, like mine, belonged to the "Bund" before the War. Over the wires, she threw me a beautiful, cornflower-blue sweater - my favourite colour. By the way, this sweater later made a "little history".

I never saw Zosia again. I don't know what happened to her. Dziunia ended up in Ravensbrück. After liberation, she found herself there together with her husband. My sister-in-law received news that Szmulek was in Germany and she went to him. They passed each other en route, as he'd come to Częstochowa in order to find us. I remained in Częstochowa.

Until 1948, we maintained frequent, active mail-contact with them and with Dziunia. My brother, his wife and two-year-old daughter left for Israel in 1950. From that time, mail-contact with Dziunia broke off completely – with me and with them. I couldn't understand how, already after the War, two friendly families, living in the same country, could completely lose contact. I often reproached them for that reason,.

It was only in the 1970's that we learned about each other through a school-friend of mine, who lived in the United States. Our active correspondence began again, and she and her husband visited me in Israel. The meeting was very cordial but, the tyranny of distance and the problems of life with which we all have to contend, again interfered again.

Two days after that parade, we were loaded onto cattle-wagons along with tens of thousands of other people. The system was the same as every day – beatings, screaming, pushing and, of course, at night with no lights. And there is yet another counting in the wagons, the door slides across, it's sealed from the outside and the wheels roll forward. We look at each other through the light illuminating the railway lines and can't believe our luck – we are leaving Oświęcim alive.

## **AFTER OŚWIĘCIM**

In the middle of November 1944, we were loaded onto wagons that took us out of Oświęcim. Each of us was supplied with two portions of bread, stockings which we couldn't fasten so that they constantly slipped down, scarves which we tied tightly around our heads (the heads of our transport were not shaved in Oświęcim, as we'd been brought from a work camp where there was regular delousing). We also had long, black overcoats with a cross painted on the back and the letters "KL", so that we could be recognised if someone wanted to escape.

We set off in the afternoon. Night falls early in November. We travelled the entire night and the whole of the next day. We didn't know to where. In the light of day, through the small window under the ceiling, we could read the names of the passing stations - REICHENBUCH, WALDENBERG (as many as three railway stations). And so, we're in the Reich. Late evening, we pass the strongly lit SCHARFENSTEIN station and, after a time, the train stops at the small station of WILISCHTHAL. Under heavy escort, we get off the wagons. They lead us along a poorly-lit road. We lose any sense of place and time. In the end, there is the command, "HALT".

By the light of the moon, we see that we are in a large square, surrounded by mountains. In front of us is a row of buildings resembling huge barracks. To the right, not far away, are factory buildings with the characteristic brick chimney. We enter the building which, inside, is divided into three big rooms, two "bathrooms" (lavatories and taps, a few tin bowls and no doors). In the living quarters, there are three-level, single bunks, a small straw-filled pillow and two army blankets – one to be used as a sheet and the other as a cover.

There is the normal battle for places to be near close friends and family. Everyone wants to sleep. We take off our shoes and outer clothing. Will wonders never cease! We sleep well until 5:00am, when they wake us for a parade. We are 300 women, from various European countries.

At around 5:00am came the usual screams of the SS-women - *aufstehen, heraus!* Get up and get out! We quickly get dressed and go out into the square. We are in a valley surrounded by hills. You could see traces of snow on some of them. There were individual, residential houses on the slopes and a large, factory building deep within. Despite the early hour, work began apace. Each of us is allocated to a machine and has explained to us how to operate it, what to do and how to measure parts removed from it. It's mechanical work. It requires a lot of attention, concentration and care. We become skilled quickly enough. They were metal-cutters, lathes and milling machines, used to make rifle parts. Before we got acquainted with the factory, of course, there was a parade with multiple countings and a speech about how we were working for the Reich and any attempt at sabotage would be punishable by death. Laziness and not keeping up with the work-flow was also considered to be sabotage.

Breakfast, which was brought to us from the nearby kitchen, comprised twenty grams of bread, a piece of margarine and unsweetened coffee. We were supposed to get dinner in the residential buildings at the end of the twelve-hour shift. We spread the margarine on the bread with our fingers and ate the whole portion straight away.

To go to the toilet, one had to report to the SS-woman who wrote down the time spent in the toilet and the number of times each of us went. Just like in Oświęcim, we had numbers pinned on us.

For dinner, it was always soup with buckwheat or potato and scraps of meat floating around. It was great if you received a ladleful from the bottom of the pot, but that depended on the humour of the *kapo* and her preferential treatment. In the evening, there was a portion of bread just like for breakfast and then we were free inside the locked barracks until lights out at 10:00pm.

That first evening, after parade, we each received a piece of soap and something which could pass for a towel. We understood that we'd been raised to the level of forced labourers, admittedly unpaid, but still of benefit to Germany's armaments.

Time passed monotonously. Work continued seven days a week, two 12-hour shifts per day. The guards' relationship to us was indifferent. They didn't beat us. Apart from them screaming orders at us, we meant nothing to them. There were trivial, malicious remarks when we came to get our soup or humiliations when extra portions of swede were brought to us in the factory. A guard, seeing that our queue for soup was a little untidy, would walk away from the queue carrying the pot, scattering swede over the floor so that we would have to chase after her for the "tidbits". In that situation, despite the hunger, many of us refused to

pick up the swede to simply retain for oneself one's last shred of dignity and to deny the Germans any satisfaction.

The behaviour of the *meisters* and foremen was completely different. Above all, they were professional. They patiently explained how to operate individual machines and quickly worked out who was suitable to which task. There was no hatred in their eyes. With half-smiles, they spoke a few words quietly. That was all they could allow themselves under the constant observation of the *aufseher* (the German supervisor). One of the *meisters*, a lot older than the others, placed a piece of bread furtively into the pocket of a girl who regularly worked with him. I was working not far away and, surprised and at the same time amused, I watched as he manoeuvred himself like a pickpocket, with eyes gazing into space and an indifferent expression on his face. The girl, whose hunger he had helped overcome, was the youngest of all of us. She was not in the vicinity, but her sweater hung on her chair.

As I mentioned previously, when we left for Oświęcim, we were supplied with stockings, but without garters. We tied them off into a small knot above the knee. When I was pushed into the train with everyone, I fell down and my stockings were completely torn away. It was already cold in the mountainous area of Wilischthal and so a spare sweater, smuggled in by Pola, saved me. By the first night, Hanka and I had already unstitched the sleeves and, on the first morning's parade, I was wearing beautiful, cornflower-blue, woollen stockings on my legs. The *aufseher*s looked at me suspiciously, but could only think that this is what I was supplied with in Oświęcim. I had to be particularly careful not to fall into their bad books, because I was more visible in any situation. As it was, I did. Hanka, my sister-in-law, was chosen, along with two others, to work in the kitchen. From time to time, she could smuggle two or three potatoes in their jackets into the barracks. But in the camp, no one ate such God's gifts alone.

I considered how to share these potatoes with my two friends. In the factory scrap heap, I found a narrow bit of metal, about ten centimetres long and one centimetre wide and began sharpening one of its edges on the grinder. Hilda, an *aufseher*, caught me. (She was the most malicious one, who had scattered the pieces of swede on the factory floor and who sent pots, with leftover soup, back to the kitchen, so that we couldn't have an extra helping.) In the evening, after parade, I was sent to a court of the *Lageralteste* (senior camp inmates) where I was charged with preparing a weapon. My head was shaved as punishment. I still had the audacity to quip that as long as they leave me my head, my hair will re-grow. Hanka and my friends were far more affected by this than was I.

At the end of February 1945, air raids began in this part of Germany. In the beginning, the air raids and bombings took place at night. If we happened to be working on the night-shift at the time, the Germans would lock us in the barracks from the outside and go on their own to the shelters. The barracks windows were barred and we had no way of saving ourselves in the case of an explosion or fire. The daily routine of twelve hours' work didn't stop due the bombings. Sleepless nights and gruelling work during the day almost brought us

to the point of collapse. We would involuntarily drop off to sleep at every opportunity – at the machines, waiting to be counted on parade, resting your head on the shoulder or back of friends for a few seconds.

One night, taking a machined part to the *meister*, I suddenly woke up in another part of the factory. I'd walked a dozen or so steps without being conscious that I was actually walking. In order not to fall asleep in front of a functioning machine, I sat in such a way so as the handle of the machine, which turned during the processing cycle, touched my back. Apparently, however, I did fall asleep, because I found myself without the scarf which had been tied tightly around my head and the crankhandle of the machine was already wound around my dress. Someone quickly stopped the machine. All I could think of was what would have happened if I hadn't had a shaved head.

One day, after a sleepless night, I was so terribly tired, that I thought to myself how good it would be if something happened to me which would break the murderous cycle of work and sleeplessness. My thought was interrupted when half my thumb found itself under the blade of the lathe. It was bandaged and I was given the rest of the day off. But I have the scar to this day.

The air-raids were almost continuous, with the mountain echoes heightening the sound of the exploding bombs. In the factory, the Germans were already clearly stating that the American front was here and there, and one could sense their anxiety.

One day, after morning parade, they announced to us that we were being moved to another camp. We didn't return to the barracks. As it was, we had no possessions to take with us. The storehouse's entire supply of bread was brought into the parade square – whole loaves of bread. As usual, the grabbing for bread began – whoever was fastest or strongest took two or three loaves. The *aufseher*s ignored it all – would wonders never cease! When things had calmed down and we stood five-abreast waiting for the convoy to take us to the train, we divided the bread up fairly amongst ourselves. No one went without while other had a few loaves. What was interesting was that this unity only existed amongst women coming from the same country.

We were loaded onto cattle-wagons. They were locked from the outside and the train began moving immediately. Again, we didn't know where they were taking us, how long the trip would take and what was its final purpose. We moved along slowly, with long stoppages. Once a day, we were allowed to leave the wagons to answer the call of nature and we were given water to drink. The bread we received in the camp served as our food. We stood for hours on railway sidings in order to give priority to other trains. All the time, we were accompanied with the sound of bombs exploding - some closer, some further away. Gradually, we lost our sense of time. We'd already stopped counting the days since we'd left Wilischthal. We lived for one thought only – that the longed-for and improbable end of Germany was getting closer.



Gradually, the bread ran out. The Germans gave us each a few teaspoonfuls of sugar to last us each day and a slice of swede or kohlrabi.

One day, the Germans, being certain that many hours of stoppages lay ahead, allowed us to leave the wagons. We were ordered to remain in the one place and to stay together. It was a beautiful spring day. We were in the middle of nowhere. After a few days of being locked up in the wagons, we could breathe the fresh air. I looked around. Ahead of us, there was a river in the distance. On the horizon, behind us, was a huge city upon which bombs from planes rained down incessantly. We could see the flight of the bombs' trajectory. We heard the thud of the explosion and, within seconds, there was a column of smoke and fire. I sat on the edge of the group and, from time to time, I could pick out a few words in German. The Germans were no longer concerned about us and it was possible to pick up on what they were talking about. Within rapid sentences, one word was repeated incessantly - Dresden. And it was, too – it was Dresden. My God! I was being given the opportunity to see some army raze Dresden to the ground!

After ten days of travelling and stoppages, we pulled up at a large railway station. The station's big clock indicated that it was April 24th. Assembled, as usual five-abreast, we passed through some large gate, but the narrow streets forced us to procede dispersed, but of course, under the watchful eyes of the SS-men. People, standing on the footpaths, looked at us and cried. I was sure that we were being taken to be gassed, because what else could have illicited such crying and signs of sympathy from these strangers? At a certain moment, when the Germans were not concentrated on us, one of the women shouted out that we were in the Terezin ghetto in Czechoslovakia.

We were led into a huge building and told to settle into the rooms. We found out later that they used to be army barracks. The rooms were large, with several beds, a table and a few chairs. The bathrooms and toilets were located at the end of a long corridor. We decided to remain together – all of us who'd already become close friends from the first camp in Bliżyn. We settled into two adjoining rooms – 29 in one room and 31 in the other.

Apparently Terezin (Theresienstadt) was under the care of the Red Cross, which still didn't stop the Germans sending people from there to Oświęcim and to other camps. We were locked up, but we didn't know what we were allowed to do and what we were not. We sat in the room, looking out into the corridor from time to time to see what was happening.

We divided up, amongst ourselves, places to sleep and the duties involved in keeping the place in order. In the evening, we received our first cooked meal in ten days – full pots of thick soup with buckwheat, to which was added a portion of bread, margarine, jam and .... a can of tinned meat. And here, the problems began. Not everyone was able to eat sensibly after years of hunger and ten days of fasting. In reality, it was hard to remain indifferent to such an amount of food. Soon afterwards, many women suffered from diarrhoea, stomach aches and cramps. Jewish paramedic teams were kept busy helping those in need throughout the night. We saw no SS-men or *kapos* in Terezin. All administrative activities were

performed by civilians, probably Czechs. Like in other camps (except for the concentration camps), there were only the Jewish police, in their red-bordered caps, to maintain uniformed order.

Had the Terezin staff known about the conditions in concentrations camps and the story of our journey when we travelled ten days on just a small loaf of bread and a few teaspoonfuls of sugar, they would have fed us more sensibly.

After two days, we discovered that, between the hours of curfew, we could move freely around the ghetto. The streets were full of prisoners from all the camps which the Germans had managed to evacuate in time. They were in a terrible state - in ripped clothes or prisoner stripes, in worn-out shoes or barefoot. They sat or lay on the footpaths or roads, waiting for the ghetto authorities to deal with them. There were also hundreds of people there from Buchenwald, among whom I recognised a friend from the first Bliżyn group, Jerzyk Blajwajs, a friend from high school. In a faint voice, he told me that they had walked for three weeks, eating only leaves from the trees.

Red Cross teams moved around those lying, gathering up the weakest onto stretchers. Out of simple curiosity and due to a lack of anything better to do, I followed behind them. As it turned out, there was an improvised hospital on the edge of the city – a dozen or so camp barracks with multi-level single bunks, and a medical team and auxiliary staff. I asked one of the staff if they needed help and, the following day, together with two other volunteers, I turned up for work at the hospital. Through the six years of the War, I hadn't seen anything like it. Men weighed 34 kilograms, swollen from hunger or skeletons that didn't have enough strength, on their own, to roll over in bed. These were the ones we would have to feed and turn every now and then to prevent bedsores. They died before our eyes from emaciation and from heart attacks.

Together with the professional teams, we worked from morning until evening. We simply didn't have the heart to leave before curfew. The hospital emptied out naturally, patients leaving for the local cemetery. Only a few left of their own accord. We, the women in the Dresden barracks, regularly received food, towels and soap.

On Saturday, it was probably 6th May, news suddenly spread, repeated from mouth to mouth, that the War had ended. Joy was mixed with tears. My God, it was just two years too late. The thought that I would celebrate the end of the War alone, without parents, relatives, those closest to me or friends, that their almost daily repetition of, "May we all talk about this in peaceful times" was never fulfilled, brought about in me an attack of hysterical crying which lasted long hours. Hanka didn't know what to do with me, or how to calm me down. And I couldn't stop crying, as though floods of tears, held back for years, were now spilling out. Towards evening, exhaustion caused me to calm down. When Hanka made me some tea, my throat was so swollen and shrunken, I couldn't swallow anything.

Over the following days, life rolled on normally but, through the windows, we saw rows of Germans in military vehicles, with their weapons aimed at our windows. We were

still not sure as to what they would do with us. Rumours spread that, at the last moment, they would blow up the whole of Terezin.

Throughout the whole of Tuesday, the 9th May, military vehicles filled with Germans passed along the road. For two hours, there was silence. Suddenly, we heard a terrible roar in the air and the rattling of rolling metal brought us again to the windows. The first Soviet tank slowly rolled by. We were stunned by what we saw. Some time later, more tanks appeared, together with military vehicles filled with soldiers, their guns at the ready. Seeing the drawn faces and, here and there the shaved heads, of the girls in the windows, they shouted joyfully in our direction.

A few days earlier, a state of quarantine was announced in the camp, due to the danger of an outbreak of a typhus epidemic. We were not allowed to leave the buildings in which we lived. Jewish police stood guard all around.

On all fronts, liberation armies were greeted with joy, flowers and hugs. All that was absent in Terezin. The soldiers probably understood our indifference because, suddenly, one of the tanks stopped. A young soldier jumped down, grabbed an iron pole and, shouting Russian curses in the direction of the police, began breaking down the wall which surrounded us. That, more than the sight of fleeing Germans and Soviet tanks rolling along that same road, made us aware that we were actually free.

Oh, really? Free? Why hadn't any of us run out into the street? We waved to the soldiers and smiled. The following day, we learned that, on 8<sup>th</sup> May, the Germans had signed an unconditional surrender.

The first night of freedom turned out to be a nightmare. In the early night hours, we heard the stamping of soldiers boots and the shouts of girls who, by chance, were outside the barracks. A girl from our room returned shaking. With difficulty, she'd managed to run away from a soldier who was chasing her. Even at home, three principles were instilled in us: don't wander around the streets at night, if you see a soldier then cross to the other side of the street and do the same if you see a drunk in the distance.

All our girls were now in the room. Quickly, we locked the door and pulled as many tables as would fit up against it. During the night, we took turns at an improvised guard. Throughout the night, drunken soldiers roamed the corridors and only the shouting caused us to guess what was happening to those girls who hadn't managed to hide.

My husband had fought with the Kościuszko Division. Many years later, I heard from him that, before entering Polish territory, the command had issued an order forbidding soldiers to rape and to steal food from the peasants. Even picking fruit from orchards could land you in front of a military tribunal.

The following morning, everything went quiet. The soldiers had to return to their units. Their command entered the city and established order. From that day, we didn't see any soldiers wandering around, except for the patrols.

After a certain time, when everything had calmed down, we returned to our voluntary work in the barracks containing the sick men, but we found great changes. All of the sick who were Russian nationals, as well as nationals from countries within the Soviet Union, were placed into one of the buildings, the best furnished one. The three of us were moved to this barracks. The sanitary conditions there were far better – less congestion, trained paramedic personnel and, of course, better food. However we, the volunteers, were treated horribly. Despite the fact that we worked long hours, carrying out everything we were instructed to do, cleaning the barracks and gathering up the dirty underwear, in the eyes of the head nurse (a Ukrainian), we were “parasites, who only came to devour (food)”. It was also not difficult to hear anti-Semitic statements spoken in Russian, a language related to our own.

After three days, we stopped coming to work. In the meantime, we had met a couple of boys, friends from Częstochowa, brought to Terezin towards the end of the War. Just like us, they’d come from various German camps and had managed to find out how to get out of there. Among other things, we found out that, in all the cities of Poland, Jewish Committees had been appointed to provide aid, on behalf of the state, to Jewish Holocaust survivors.

With Hanka, we decided to set off the moment the boys had organised papers for us with the Czech authorities. Sala Birenbaum, from Radom, joined us when she learned that her uncle, Pinkas Zeligowski, was chairman of such a committee in Warsaw.

We were provided with documents. We had the right to move around Czechoslovakia, the right to use public transport and, at the beginning of June, we set off. We walked the few kilometres to the Terzin railway station and, from there, went by train to Prague. Along the entire route to the station, Czechs farewelled us with smiles, waving and shouting “*na zdar*” (good luck).

At the Prague station, we were directed to the Polish military mission where, in turn, we were supplied with documents authorising us to cross the Polish border. We were given provisions for the trip and told to wait in some repatriation centre. A crowd of Jews already teemed there, awaiting contact from members of their families who had survived.

We travelled on the next train, stopping out of necessity in Ostrawa Morawska, and crossed the border into Poland at Zebrzydowice. From there, Sala travelled to Warsaw, while Hanka and I went, through Katowice, to Częstochowa.

We arrived at the station in Częstochowa on the morning of 7th June 1945. At that time, hundreds of people, Poles and Jews, besieged the railway station, expecting, with the arrival of every train, some family member or close friend or, at least, an acquaintance. We met someone who, after hearing our names, told us that Pola Chorzewska, Hanka’s aunt, was living at 11 Wolności Avenue. We went there immediately – I knew the way – from the primary school on Przemysłowa Street, to our home at 19 Wolności Avenue.

Like before, the smell of freshly fried doughnuts and fresh cakes spread from the Błaszczyński cake shop at the corner of Piłsudski Street and the Avenue NMP. Behind the bridge, by the hospital of the Sisters of Charity, an oil lamp burned, as before, at the altar to

the Holy Mother. In front of the Paris Café on II Avenue NMP stood, as before the War, the same young assistant, only six years older. Everything was the same, only we weren't there and would no longer be there...

*Instead of an Epilogue:*

... "My Satan went through the garden mortally sad  
And changed it into a terribly, horrible hideaway...  
Gloomily, he went with head hung down  
And sprinkled the blooming flowers with ash.  
Onto the lawns he threw lumps of stone  
And sowed a frenzy of fear and terrible death..."

Leopold Staff: "Autumn Rain"

## THE POST-WAR YEARS

With our arrival in Częstochowa, in June 1945, an adaptation began to a "quasi-life" – registration with the Jewish Committee, ration cards and, above all else, seeking out family and friends within the decimated Jewish community.

The fact that no one from my family had survived, I already knew in the Small Ghetto. Now I learned that aunt Ewa, who was together us in the bunker and had remained in Częstochowa, had been sent to Germany together with her daughter on 15th January, on the eve of the liberation of Częstochowa. Her 12 year old son, Wovek, perished during the liquidation of the Small Ghetto in 1943. Apart from that, family in France and in America were looking for us. I had to inform them of the tragic consequences of the Holocaust.

In France, also, not everyone had managed to survive. My father's youngest brother, Jakub, perished in the French Resistance Movement; 16-year-old Max, caught in a round-up, perished in Oświęcim; Romek volunteered to the Legion in order to gain French citizenship after the War – he died in northern Africa defending French colonies. It was my sad responsibility to tell his mother, my beloved aunt Balbina, that her daughter, Hanka, had left the bunker to an *akcja* despite my father's protestations, and had also perished in Treblinka, together with her three-year-old son, Łucek. I met Hanka's father, Molek Częstochowski, by chance in Israel. In 1939, with the outbreak of war, following the occupation of Warsaw by the Germans, he had wisely fled to Russia, leaving 19-year-old Hanka alone in Warsaw to look after the apartment.

In various ways, through the waves of refugees coming and going, survivors searched for the remnants of their families in Jewish centres in Germany and in camps liberated by the Allies. And that's how Hanka and I discovered that Szmulek, my brother, had been found in Feldafing together with aunt Ewa, and that they were looking for us in Częstochowa. Hanka travelled immediately to Feldafing. However, she failed to meet him along the way and, after a few days, Szmulek suddenly appeared at the apartment where we were living. He came together with Izak, Dziunia's husband, who had gone through all the trevails of the camps with Hanka and me, right up to our unfortunate separation during the evacuation of Oświęcim

in November 1944. When I speak of the camp trevails, I have in mind the divisions of every slice of bread, some of which had to be set aside to buy warmer articles of clothing from the boys in the *Sonderkommando*, sharing the scrap of a blanket on the bunk or the imitation spoon, i.e. a small piece of board chipped away from the barracks wall. Dziunia had found herself together with Izak, in one of the German camps liberated by the Allies.

Szmulek and Izak stayed for another few days. My brother took two pictures which had been hidden by Mr Seifert. He also visited the hiding-places in the attics where our father had hidden expensive editions of world classics translated into Yiddish, furs belonging to my mother and to aunt Ewa, the remains of the radio which he used in the attic before the ghetto, as well as oil portraits of my mother and Leo Tolstoy which would have been suspicious had they been left with Mr Seifert. As he told me, he found none of these items.

Now, a new problem arose. What was I to do? I refused to leave because I wanted to study. After graduating from junior high school, I planned to enrol in an academic senior high school. That's what my parents would have decided for me. Throughout their lives, they believed in connecting Jews with the life of the country in which they'd been born and in which their ancestors had settled almost a thousand years earlier. The struggle was supposed to be for equal rights for Jews, based upon the principle of democracy and against anti-Semitism.

It was only a few weeks until the beginning of the school year. In the meantime, Jadzia Brener, head of the Children's Home at 23 Jasnogórska Street and co-ordinator of youth matters at the Jewish Committee, asked me to lead a group of children who, in September, were supposed to continue their normal elementary school education. However, their previous teacher, Hela Szczupak (a Jew and graduate of the Jagiellonian University) had decided to leave the country. They were Jewish children hidden with peasant families, in bunkers or monasteries, who had not been able to go to school with children their own age – even there where schools existed. I accepted her proposition joyfully, even more so as it coincided with my plans for the future. Classes were conducted in the pre-War Perec Jewish School at 23 Krótka Street (?).

The 1945/46 school year began. I wasn't obliged to take part in the opening ceremony. The next day, I went to school and went to my allocated class. Outside the door, I could already hear an amazed voice utter the question-statement, "A Jew???" I didn't react and, looking for a place to sit down, I asked a seated girl if the place next to her was free. Receiving a positive reply, I sat down, not paying any attention to what was going on behind me. A normal hubbub pervaded the class. I started an indifferent conversation with my neighbour which continued until the teacher came in.

I studied willingly, but went to school unwillingly. I didn't integrate into the class, with the exception of the girl next to whom I sat. In all fairness, I need to point out that the age difference between us was 4-5 years.

For the time being, there were no incidents. A month later, we began discussing “Revenge” (*Zemsta*). To better understand and empathise with the work, we were to play out a few scenes, reading lines at our desks. When it came to casting the part of Klara, a few voices from the back of the room, so that I couldn’t see who, demanded that I be given the role. The teacher looked at me inquiringly. I nodded my head in agreement and smiled. “Just wait, you peasants, I’ll show you how to read properly”. These silly little kids didn’t know that, from the age of four, I’d been placed on a stool and showed off by reciting in front of guests, and that my brother, who’d graduated from junior high school ahead of me, had left his entire compulsory literature at home. Not having much to do before the ghetto, I knew, almost by heart, all the women’s issues. Before commencing my role, I could still hear stifled giggles here and there, but when I finished with the immensely emphatic phrase, “.... give me the crocodile, dear”, you could hear a pin drop in the classroom. The teacher looked at me surprised, and said, “You read beautifully”.

A lack of a normal timetable was a great inconvenience to me. When I didn’t go to class due to it being a religion lesson, it turned out that, at the last minute, plans were changed, and a lesson in a different subject took place. Or the reverse – after the bell, a priest would come into class because, again, plans had been changed.

A feeling of alienation and being convinced that I couldn’t mentally withstand the situation, induced me to leave school.

In my defence, the situation at the end of 1945 should be explained. All my peers, from parallel or near-parallel classes, were liberated on 17<sup>th</sup> January and almost immediately attended similar classes. So that there were a few in every class and they formed a mutual-support group.

The internal situation in Poland was far from that of the peace which, officially, reigned over Europe. News reached us of anti-Jewish excesses, minor pogroms in small towns and a larger one in Kraków, of Jews being thrown from moving trains and of internal fighting in the eastern regions of Poland and in the Podkarpacki Province.

A similar situation prevailed within the Jewish community – propaganda for and against. On the one hand, the government and the Jewish Committee did everything to settle Jews and to make them productive. On the other hand, Zionist organisations promoted mass emigration, to which the government turned a blind eye. As a result, personal and political considerations were the deciding factors.

From the moment I left school, I was in vacuum. I didn’t know what to do with myself. Jadzia Brener employed me in the Children’s Home as a tutor to children who were still having difficulties at school.

The feeling of alienation and of an absolute inability to cope alone in that new and always uncertain reality more and more turned my thoughts to join the surviving members of my family. I received long, frequent letters from them. A wave of optimism and warmth wafted from these letters. Constantly, some newly-found acquaintance would write to me and



pass on regards from other acquaintances with whom I'd lost contact four years earlier. Dziunia, especially, ardently urged me to come. She described life in the displaced persons centres and added that, "people like you are needed here. Only here will you have purposeful work".

Even opponents to emigration, such as Jadzia Brener and Mrs Rychter, agreed with me that, in a situation such as mine, I should be with my brother. Mrs Rychter found a group which was to leave Poland shortly and asked her friend, Leon Sztajnkeller, who was also to leave with that group, to take care of me.

At the Children's Home, Jadzia organised an official farewell for me, with speeches of thanks, etc. and, at the beginning of 1946, we set off. We were supposed to cross the border at Zgorzelec, with the help of an appropriate guide. Our group comprised twenty people. Late one evening, I can't remember how anymore, we found ourselves near the border in some forest. The guide waited for the appropriate sign from the border guard, who had already helped many times in this semi-official emigration. Suddenly, shots rang out. The guide told us to lie flat on the ground and we waited to see what would happen next. When, after a certain time, all was quiet, he told us to go to the homes in which we'd been relocated and to wait for another suitable time. On the next day, we found out that a local Security Service (UB) employee had been killed that night and that we would have to be patient. Our waiting was prolonged.

In Zgorzelec, there were many former-German apartments which hadn't been totally looted, so we made ourselves comfortable. There was also a sizeable Jewish community there who welcomed us warmly. They had been repatriated from the Soviet Union and were, in part, inhabitants of central Poland who, probably just like our group, were looking to cross to the West. The waiting became longer and we had to support ourselves somehow. In any case, I didn't have much money so that, when I was offered a job in a local Jewish boarding-house, I accepted with enthusiasm. It was a boarding-house which, like all community institutions at that time, was run by the Jewish Committee and was state-funded.

Apart from that, the Jewish Committee concerned itself with providing cultural activities and charity to Holocaust-survivor Jews and to the wave of returnees from the former Soviet Union, and to make them productive. It was the same ideal program that I'd had instilled in me at home – the existence of a productive Jewish community in an independent Polish state.

The kindergarten children and those in the younger primary school classes predominantly only spoke Russian, but I communicated well with them. They taught me Russian, and I taught them Polish.

In January 1946, two couples within our group got married - Ewa and Borys Herszkowicz, and I with Leon Sztajnkeller, the carer given to me by Felicja Rychter. We were married on the same day at the Civil Registry Office. Ewa and Borys were related by

marriage and their surname repeated itself amongst their parents. So that there was a little confusion until the Registry Office official managed to issue two appropriate marriage certificates.

The debate still continued within all Jewish communities throughout Poland – to stay or to leave. We didn't take part in the discussion, but we decided to stay. It was a matter of personal choice and we didn't feel that we had the right to interfere or to campaign one way or the other. Some people, however, left under official emigration which enabled Jews to be reunited with family outside Poland's borders.

The boarding-house was closed and I began working with the Zgorzelec City Council, with which my husband had begun to work earlier. We established social contacts which was greatly assisted by my husband's military service in the Kościuszko Division from Lenino to Berlin, awarded the medal "In recognition of service in the war with the Germans, the victory of the Polish nation against the barbarian Fascists", his directness in communications gained from years of military service and our ease in interpersonal communications.

At the end of 1947 and beginning of 1948, we experienced the first shock to our kind of normal, small town life on the outskirts of Poland.

The Chairman of the Jewish Committee was the demobilised Polish Army Captain, Michał Rabinowicz. A pre-War communist, he fled to France when the Polish Communist Party was disbanded but, in January 1939, he returned to Poland to report for the announced general mobilisation at that time. Following the September defeat, he fled to the Soviet Union, where he was active in the Union of Polish Patriots (ZPP). He enlisted in the newly formed Polish Army and, after being demobilised with the rank of captain in 1945, he settled in Zgorzelec. During the period of forming the state at that time, Michał was indispensable – an idealist with a warm heart and clean hands, as the slogan stated. Only people such as those could build the People's Poland and Michał Rabinowicz was exactly such a man.

Zgorzelec is part of a large city divided by the Nysa River, between the Poland and Germany. The inhabitants were concentrated in small blocks so that you would meet with your neighbours daily, either as just neighbours or within matters concerning the Jewish Committee which encompassed nearby housing estates, also partly inhabited by Jews. Michał came to one session, very late and depressed. He didn't answer our questions as to where he'd been. We'd noticed his unexplained absences and also changes that had occurred in these sessions.

One evening, Aniela ran over to us with eighteen-month-old Wiktor in her arms and in an advanced stage of pregnancy. She was hysterical. Michał, who never drank, had been drinking senselessly for hours and was playing with a revolver. When her pleadings had gone unheeded, she'd run out of the home with the child. She had heard the door being locked behind her. Borys Herszkowicz ran to get Leon and, together, they ran over to the Rabinowicz apartment. Asking him to open the door, they suddenly heard the sound of a single shot. They ran off to get the militia, but before the militia and Red Cross ambulance

could arrive, the UB had broken down the door. The only thing they did was to take the letter Michał had left. A doctor certified death. The militia wrote up the incident and that's where the matter finished.

But it had not finished for us. A small group of friends attended the funeral which took place at the communal cemetery, only a few friends took part despite the fact that Michał had served in various communal and party positions. We were stunned and disoriented. What was being hidden here? It was beyond comprehension that a sensible, level-headed, family man could have committed suicide without having given any earlier indication of the reasons for his anxiety. In any case, he took his secret with him to the grave. Perhaps it has remained in the UB files.

It was the beginning of 1948. Together with the Herszkowicz family, we decided to move to Wrocław. The small Jewish community looked after Aniela and her two-year-old son, Wiktor (named in honour of the victory over the Germans, as he'd been born in May), and the new-born, Michał.

It was still a period of constant population migration. The Dolny Śląsk region was particularly convenient from the point of view of housing and employment. Every plant and every institution needed workers. Clerks at the employment offices came from all of the parties of that time, including the Jewish Committee. Among them were many acquaintances. The state put great emphasis on enabling Jews to being involved in all areas of production, counting on their loyalty in exchange for equal rights and for fighting ant-Semitism. In this respect, the state was not disappointed in us. It was the Jewish community that was shaken with a great disappointment later.

I found out about the establishment of the State of Israel while in hospital in Częstochowa where I had gone to get various ailments treated, since Zgorzelec lacked the appropriate facilities. My husband came from Zgorzelec and brought with him an issue of "*Przekrój*" ("Diameter") with a beautiful editorial by Kazimierz Koźniewski which I have kept to this day. When my small group of friends gathers on Independence Day, I read this article out loud. It always moves those present and they are surprised that I have never tried to translate it into Hebrew and to have it published.

We lived in Wrocław for a few months. Obtaining an apartment took place on the basis of paying a "compensation fee" to the previous occupant who would then declare at the City Council that he had no objection to us occupying the apartment. The Housing Department did not impose any obstacles and would allocate the apartment to the interested party.

My first job was a secretarial position at the Olgin Co-operative Production Board. I had undeniable qualifications – I could spell correctly and could write minutes from the most nonsensical of statements.

It was a shoemaking co-operative. Its management, appointed by the Party in agreement with the Jewish Committee, was generally composed of pre-War Communist and Zionist activists (in order to highlight political pluralism).

A relatively large number of Jews lived in Wrocław and, with the establishment of the State of Israel, the already mentioned discussions began about whether Jews should stay in Poland or emigrate to Israel. Poland was one of the first countries to recognise the Jewish state and it seemed logical that the state would allow legal emigration.

For the time being, the government agreed that a group of young volunteers could leave. They had earlier been trained in army camps, so that they made up modest units of the Hagana. Recruitment was mainly conducted amongst Polish and Czechoslovakian Jewish youth and was completely organised by Israeli organisations. Volunteers were recruited from all political movements – from the extremely nationalist to the communist.

One would think that such personal matters, such as deciding whether to emigrate or remain, would be a closely private matter for everyone. But for us, Jews, such matters had to be publicly discussed, wrestled with, chewed over and digested at meetings (for Jews only) and in domestic circles arranged by the numerous, still legal, organisations and political movements. It was a wonderful opportunity for orators and agitators from all sides to display their skills. But, in the end, everyone made their own decision in accordance with their conscience and world view. I left the Olgin Co-operative as the atmosphere was not to my liking.

Gradually, signs of nationalism began to sneak into the internal politics of some people's democracies. The alleged necessity of increasing the "class struggle" against growing "imperialist appetites" produced a wave of trials of party leaders in Czechoslovakia and Hungary which ended in death sentences. Whether by coincidence or not, these were people of Jewish origin. Whether by coincidence or not, a large number of Party and state leaders had Jewish roots. I'll leave that to the sociologists and historians. We felt sorrow and embarrassed that Jews, to whom the people's democracies had given equal rights, had identified with "American imperialism". We still believed in the propaganda and, since in Poland there were no such allegations and trials, we were not too concerned.

Shortly after leaving Olgin, I began work at the Municipal Transport Enterprise in Wrocław, as secretary to the Executive Director, Zygmunt Ociepki (NB: also from Częstochowa but, before the War, we lived in separate worlds) and the Technical Director, Józef Szenbach, from Lwów, probably.

I commenced work anxiously and unsure as to whether I would cope. There were 3,000 staff and dozens of divisions, branches and departments. Dozens of matters came and went through the secretariat every day and here was I, working in a totally strange department. But, as a guide, I had the most ideal of secretaries, the patient and irreplaceable Mrs (or Miss) Terenia, who would come to work daily wearing a beautifully tailored outfit and high-heeled shoes. She was to remain with me until I got used to the work-flow. But,

after having taken the minutes for the first time at a management meeting of department heads, during which all she told me were the names of the people speaking, Dyrektor Ociepka acknowledged that I was sufficiently prepared - despite that fact that I wrote the "GMS" make of car as the phonetic "James". If I hadn't understood English, I would have written "Dzems".

Rapidly and enthusiastically, I became used to my new work and my new surroundings. The plant pulsated with life, with one issue after another having to be dealt with speedily and efficiently. Staff and management were loyal. The tone was set by an old Lwów tramways team who could settle in the only city where there was a gigantic, formerly German, transport network, i.e. in Wrocław, and trams were the focus of their lives. And I quickly became integrated into this community and gained their full acceptance. I was promoted from the management secretariat to the team division and, in the middle of 1954, I was offered the position of Assistant Director for Administrative and Financial Matters. I hesitated to accept, claiming that I lacked an appropriate economic education. But to not accept the position would have meant deserting the ranks of those building the People's Poland. At the same time, I took on the role of fig leaf. I was the most obvious proof that anti-Semitism was a thing of the past and a remnant of the pre-War Sanacja government. I was proof that the Party's demand for women to be moved into management positions was coming true.

I took on the position with the full support of the people with whom I had worked to that time, and of the people with whom I would work in the future. That was my mainstay and support. I craved more work and more interests in order to distract me from the tragedy that had hit me not long before.

In December 1953, my husband died suddenly of a heart attack. The first attack took place at work while he was signing the attendance sheet. The second, this time fatal, took place half an hour later in the Admissions Room.

I was left alone, with a three and a half year old daughter and in the ninth month of pregnancy. Without any family, I had to rely on myself and on my friends who did not disappoint me. After the funeral and the seven-day Jewish period of mourning, Ewa and Borys Herszkowicz took me and Irenka into their two-room apartment, which they occupied with their four-year-old son, Kuba. I was to stay with them until after my delivery.

On 13<sup>th</sup> January, when I felt the onset of the first labour pains, Ewa took me to the University Clinic, where I'd been under observation during my entire pregnancy. The delivery was almost painless. At the appropriate moment of delivery, the doctor and midwife alternately called on me to scream and to push. After a time, the doctor joyously announced that "You have a son". At the same time, something apparently alarmed her as she quickly gave the child back to the midwife and examined me internally. She then announced that I had twins. Something then tore at me and I began sobbing. She looked at me surprised and as

if with indignation. It was only then that I told her that my husband had died only three weeks before.

She just swore. To the doctor whom she'd called to assist her, she said, "We need to do something. The foetus' pulse is bad". I don't know what they did to me. All I did was cry and plead with them to save my baby. After a quarter of an hour of treatment, a healthy girl was born weighing 2.95 kilograms, half a kilogram less than her brother. Following my maternity leave, I returned to work as normal.

My brother had been in Israel since 1948. When I wrote to tell him everything, he replied that I should immediately try to come to him. He suggested how I should do it – I should write a request to the President explaining my current situation, that we were dying from hunger, etc.. Even today, just like back then, I smile when I think about his suggestion. I replied, using reserved expressions. The essence of my reply was that, after such a letter from my brother, the President of Israel would never ever see me or my children. It was the middle of 1954 – a year of remarkable gloom.

For two years, news was spread in the press about the necessity to fight cosmopolitanism and, as a result of that, then came news about the disbanding of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Union in the Soviet Union. This news, reprinted from "Pravda", was not especially prominent in the Polish Party press. But, every day, these articles were read carefully since, it was only from them, that one could learn which way the wind was blowing and who was in danger. It was the "issue of Jewish doctors", who treated members of the party and of the Soviet Union government and who, under investigation, had admitted treachery, that disquiet was aroused within the Jewish community. These absurd accusations were reminiscent of the Soviet trials from back in 1937.

Despite these insinuations and believing in my own "impeccable" reputation, I turned to an UB (Secret Police) employee, a controller. I asked him to check whether there was any chance, if I applied to the relevant authorities, that I would be given a permit for a brief trip to France, where I could meet up with my brother on neutral territory. (Of course, my children would remain in Poland.) After a few days, I received the short reply, without any explanation, "Not now". Shortly after that, I was promoted to such a responsible position that it attested to my unblemished record – or that that controller had given me his personal opinion and had not passed my request on any further.

I'm not sure whether I'm giving the facts here in chronological order but, in the years 1953-1954, nothing good came from the news of the death of Stalin, turbulence within the party leadership in Moscow or the situation of creating a position for an UB operative, in a factory where he knew his environment well. Despite everything, and being an optimist, I still believed that things would get better. My work, and the need to look after the home, totally absorbed me. (Irenka went to kindergarten and the twins spent the week at the plant's creche. I picked them up on Saturday and brought them back on Monday morning.). Constant changes in the party leadership and within the authorities were totally disorientating.

In 1955, events occurred which topped all these changes. The Executive Committee of the UB fled abroad. Codemnatory accusations appeared in the press, together with names (changed or otherwise) - Światło (Licht), Fejgin, Różański – all with Jewish roots. Again, there was a subconscious sense of guilt and embarrassment. In the meantime, pamphlets were dropped on Poland – a dozen or so pages, printed on impregnated paper, openly presenting the history of the most recent years of Soviet rule in Poland. The talk in them was about ways of arousing anti-Semitism by putting Jews into key positions (these facts were connected with the murder of Polish partisans by units of the Home Army in some regions of Poland). The pamphlets also told of the baiting of communists (even ending in suicide), who had dedicated their lives to these matters and the inside story of how other parties, such as the PPS or the Democratic Party, were dissolved and declared illegal. To its credit, it should be said that no show-trials of “Jew-traitors” were held in Poland. My God, what was the world coming to?

In the meantime, despite everything or as a result of it, there was a feeling of ease in the air. The first swallow of the approaching “spring” was the International Youth and Student Festival which took place in Warsaw, and the ensuing theatrical fantasy of freedom in the press and in everyday life. One could then sit with work colleagues in a café, without exposing yourself to charges of an “old-boy network” or of hatching secret plots. More and more, the press commented on “the distortion of recent history”, without omitting those in government.

I can’t remember the exact chronological order, but there were two especially important facts from that period – the freeing and rehabilitation of Gomułka, previously sentenced for “right-wing, nationalist” offences, and the strike at the Cegielski factory which was put down by the authorities in a brutal and bloody manner. These were the first worker victims of a People’s Republic of Poland, which had been created by the workers and the peasants, for the workers and the peasants – oh yes, and for the working intelligentsia also.

Shortly after, Brandys’ “*Matka Królów*” (Mother of Kings) appeared which, in a beautiful, literary manner, summed up the bygone era, including the present. And then Andrzejewski’s “*Ciemności Kryją Ziemię*” (Darkness Covers the Earth) appeared – a novel in which the action takes place in Spain during the time of the Inquisition. But one could easily translate all the events described therein to the present times in Poland.

And where was I in all this? I worked with redoubled energy because I could see the results of my work. I was pleased with all the changes. Only sometimes did I become concerned that, among those openly criticised for perversion, there were more and more Jewish surnames. But, as usual, I didn’t let it get to me. I was above all that.

One day, when I picked up Irenka from kindergarten, on the way home, I heard, “Mummy, do you know that my teacher said that we would go to warmer countries and there we would eat tropical fruit”. I brushed this off with silence.

This was the period of liquidating many *Państwowe Gospodarstwo Rolne* (PGR’s – state-owned farms). I don’t remember how we found ourselves in one of them. Perhaps it was

when employees were encouraged to do agricultural work on Sundays. I looked at the emaciated cows with their protruding ribs and at the hundreds of scattered chickens. One of my co-workers said, in hushed tones, “We could do with a farm like this”. At that time, many large enterprises, with numerous employees at their disposal, adopted such rundown farms. After a few meetings with appropriate department managers, I presented the Chief Executive Officer, my immediate superior, with the general idea of adopting such a farm, presenting the benefits that the staff of our enterprise would gain from such a step. He thought for a few seconds and asked. “And who will run it when you leave the country?” I was confused but, in my mind, there was a small warning light. Who would leave? Me? With that, our discussion ended and I never returned to the subject.

We worked on normally. It was already the second half of 1956. During some work meeting, when there was just the two of us in the office, Jankowski asked me directly if I did not sometimes feel as if I was walking blindfolded on the edge of a precipice. “No, never”, I replied, firmly. Lowering his voice, he informed me that the secretary of *Podstawowa Organizacja Partyjna* (POP) had written to the Jewish Committee in Częstochowa, asking for information about me. That small warning light from the previous conversation now flared up into huge torch. My first reaction was the thought that the Chairman of the Committee is an old Party friend of my parents and that he’d known me from birth. But I restrained myself. Am I already trying to defend myself, to calm him and myself? But I kept silent, because I knew that it made no sense. The decision had already been made. They don’t want me, so they’re looking for something. Search and you’ll find something. If you don’t find anything, then you’ll invent something.

In my imagination, I could see the scenario for the coming weeks. There would be a Party meeting at which the most absurd charges would be laid against me – false and improbable. I knew myself and that I was good at my work. But I knew how they would run that kind of meeting. The only thing that I would be permitted to say would be to offer an “honest” self-criticism, apologising not for my guilt, but for that invented by someone else. I knew that I wouldn’t stoop to that level. But it wouldn’t make any difference anyway. I was marked from above. They would remove me from the Party and from my job. As a marked person, I wouldn’t easily be able to find work, if any at all. I am alone and I have three children to support. My children benefit from the crèche which is only for MPK employees. I occupy a *Zjednoczenia Energetycznego* (United Energy) apartment – my husband worked there. All these privileges, due to me as an honest employee, would be taken away. I wouldn’t even have a job. The silence continued. I said, “Thank you”, and left the office.

The following day, I lodged an application for a passport and for a thirty-day visa to Israel, motivated by the desire to see my brother, the only family member I had left. After a few months, I received a positive reply. Only the two people I trusted the most at work knew about my decision to leave – for the sake of equality, one Jew and one Pole. Apart from that, all my neighbours and friends from outside of work knew. On the day that I received the



permit, an acquaintance came to me in the evening and, disregarding the fact that I had friends with me, said that for a certain amount (as a matter of fact, it was quite modest), he could exchange the tourist visa for an emigration one, and he could do it immediately. Joyfully, I accepted the proposition and, on the following day, after receiving travel documents which entitled me and my children to a one-way crossing of the border, I went to the Israeli Consulate in Warsaw in order to sort out the rest of the formalities. At the Consulate, I met people who were in the same situation – either they had lost their job or were expecting to lose it. They had experienced harassment and public humiliation and preferred to leave as soon as possible.

The consular employee who received me asked about my economic situation. I said that my brother was waiting for me in Israel, that in Poland I'd been employed and that my husband had died three years earlier. He looked at his calendar, filled with writing, and asked if the 3rd January suited me as a departure date from Warsaw. This was at the end of November 1956. I replied that it did. He left the room and, after short time, he returned with pre-paid tickets for travel from Warsaw to Vienna. In Vienna, a *Sochnut* (Jewish Agency) staff member would take over our group and would deal with the next stage of our travel to Haifa.

I stayed overnight in Warsaw with friends of longstanding – H. & O. They were pleased with my decision to leave and told me of the minor harassments that O. had experienced at the plant where he worked as an engineer. H., who was a senior registrar in the premature babies ward in one of Warsaw's hospitals, had been left in peace for the time being, but both were thinking about emigration to Canada. In 1948, O. had volunteered to fight in Israel and the Israeli kibbutz was much to his liking. But H. had written to him that the Polish peasantry was closer to her than was the Israeli kibbutz, and so he returned to Poland.

I took a month's recreation leave from 1st December and began preparing for our departure. I didn't show up at the tramways anymore, not even to collect my salary. Our departure from Warsaw was to take place on 3<sup>rd</sup> January. We left Wrocław on the morning of 1st January. Apart from the normal preparation for emigration, I had to get receipts for all benefits and to obtain a permit to take the two paintings returned to us by Mr. Seifert. Here, I encountered problems, as one of the officials was against "taking works of art out of the country". But, almost crying, I got them by saying that they were the only things I had left from my parents and that they'd been hidden by a Pole during the War.

With all my documents, I went to the bank and obtained US\$20 for the trip – US\$5 for each member of the family.

Krysia, who lived with me and helped me with the children on Sundays, travelled with us to Warsaw.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> January, we left on the night train to Vienna. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that the *Sochnut*, which dealt with “aliyah” matters (immigration to Israel), had provided us with a sleeper compartment.

Kryisia, overcome with tears, dressed the children in their pyjamas and put them to bed. It was only on the sound of the whistle that I said goodbye to my friends and entered the railroad car. The train, which was an express, travelled in a south-west direction, the same direction from which we had come to Warsaw. When the train roared past Wrocław Central station and rolled along the rubble-strewn Nadodrza Street, I impulsively lifted Irenka to the window and said, “Look and remember that this is where you were born”. The only stop was on the border at Zebrzydowice. Eleven and a half years before, I had crossed this point back to Poland from the camp in Terezin. Customs officials entered the wagon and, after looking over our documents and receiving a gift of a few bottles of alcohol, they left our compartment without looking into our luggage. We were carrying nothing prohibited, but I dreaded having everything unpacked and strewn around, so that I’d have to repack everything. After some time, we heard the sound of the railroad car doors being closed, and the train began to move.

We reached Vienna in the evening. I don’t remember the time, but it was already dark. The *Sochnut* representatives were waiting for us at the station. Without any unnecessary discussion or questions, we got into the waiting bus. They told us that, before taking us to the hotel where we would wait until the next stage of our journey, we would take a little ride around the city. Our group comprised about 30 people, of different ages and varieties of family units. The ride around the streets of Vienna was a revelation to someone who had only ever gone on holiday to Cieplice or Kolumny-Las near Łódź. The feast of lights, the shops stocked to the rafters, the crowds of people moving freely along the streets surpassed any idea we might have had about western civilisation.

The following day, we were on another train. This time, we knew we were headed for Rome. It was good that the children and I had a separate compartment to ourselves. During the journey, everyone was absorbed in their own thoughts and kept to themselves. Apart from one couple who were travelling with their twelve-year-old daughter, and who had enough money to do some shopping in Vienna, and in Naples to do a side-trip to Pompei, I was the only one, travelling alone with three small children, no one asked me if I needed any help.

The *Sochnut* staff helped me to put the children and the luggage onto the train and, from time to time, came to our compartment to check if everything was alright. But, speaking with them was rather limited. They only knew a few words in Polish. They all spoke Yiddish, a language which I could barely speak and I wasn’t exactly proud of my schoolgirl English. But everything was excellently organised and worked “like a Swiss watch”. For all of us leaving Poland, the years of the People’s Democracy had taught us to remain silent. But a young woman, emigrating with three small children, aroused curiosity and questions. Sometimes with a smile, I thought that, during those difficult times at the tramways, I had better contact with people and trusted them more.

Again, this train was an express and, only after passing through the beautiful landscapes, did I work out that we were travelling through the Swiss Alps, and the huge stretches of water made me aware that this was probably Venice.

We reached Rome in the evening. Again, on the platform, *Sochnut* staff gathered us together. From our compartment, a not-so-young man, who spoke Polish well, helped me from the train. Chatting to me, he leads me to the assembly point and even takes the hand of one of the twins, literally strapped to a suitcase, so that they don't get lost. But then he drops a file with papers which then scatter along the platform. Irenka breaks free of my hand, runs over to the file with the papers and says, "I'll pick them up for you". We then reach the platform from which the train to Naples will depart. Perhaps it was her small gesture which led to us getting a separate cabin for three people on the ship, the "Fillippo Grimami" which was to take us to Haifa, while others were put into cabins holding several people below decks.

Our cabin-class came with a steward who, like all Italians, was infatuated with "bambini". He took good care of us. His assistance was very useful, especially when we all became seasick during the storm on the second day after sailing out of Naples. But after the storm, there is always the sun and, on the following day, we could already enjoy the azure blue of the sky and the sea. I went out onto the deck with the children and, there, I could see the normal passengers, swimming in the sea, escaping the English or Scandinavian cold for Cyprus or Greece.

On the evening of the 15th January, we called into some port in Cyprus and, there, a *Sochnut* official told us to get our luggage ready as we would reach Haifa early the next morning. Throughout that almost two-week journey, I felt like a dummy, moved by someone else's hand and shifted from place to place. Only now did I feel any emotion. Irenka helped me to gather and pack everything and, after an early breakfast, we were already on deck with our luggage.

It was a beautiful, sunny morning, but all around us was the sea. The horizon was still foggy. Only after a certain time did houses appear, high up on mountains, with red roofs and surrounded by greenery. Emotion seized everyone. Was this "The Promised Land"? We didn't know. For the moment, we had the superb view of Carmel in Haifa, as seen from the sea. The usual sirens blasted, the pilot-tugboat drew up and we sailed slowly into port. We could already see the tiny figures of people awaiting the ship's arrival.

We berth at last. I look around the people who are waiting, but I don't see any family members anywhere. I only noticed someone who resembled someone but, for the moment, I couldn't remember who. A few minutes passed and, suddenly, I hear Hanka's hysterical shouts, calling me by name. I looked in her direction and saw her amongst a group of people. Now, I recognised them. The man, who reminded me of someone, was my brother whom I hadn't seen in twelve years. And they hadn't recognised me straight away. Their friend, a policeman who had come with them "just in case" and who had never seen me before, had

drawn my sister-in-law's attention to a woman with three small children. But, having glanced at me, she grunted impatiently, "Don't be silly, my sister-in-law is a beautiful, young girl". She recognised me only after a few moments.

Before we came ashore, we had a visit from the then-President, Yitzchak Ben-Zvi, who greeted the captain and the *Sochnut* team. His wife, Rachel Yanait, greeted each of us and shook our hand. My brother's friend was the first to greet us. Thanks to the fact that he was in uniform, he was able to come up on deck and help us leave the ship. I won't describe our welcome. I'll only add this, It was a marked characteristic of those times in Israel, that the porter, who put our luggage into the car, would not take any money from my brother. He did, however, ask for two apples (I'd bought a few kilograms in Naples). "For the children", he said. That was how my journey in the unknown began.

I have never regretted leaving Poland and, in particular, having escaped "the gravedigger's shovel". But, throughout my life, I have been and will always be connected with that country which was the scene of "my pastoral and angelic childhood, my grandiose and cloudy youth" and where I had the foretaste of "an age of defeat".

## THE 1942 AKCJA

All around it is still dark and quiet,  
The night has barely begun to lift its darkness.  
From it can be heard stamping and heavy footsteps.  
People, horrified, awake from their sleep.  
Fear seizes them with anxiety and terror:  
They already understand that something threatens,  
They begin asking for God's help.

Eyes fearful and face quailing  
And hearts beat fearing the worst.  
What could it be? What's happening there?  
Has something terrible happened?  
Oh, their premonitions are infallible,  
Something terrible is indeed happening.  
Meanwhile, steps in the stillness of the night  
Come closer, ever closer.

And then the Jewish Police appear:  
"Get up, people, time is short".  
You must leave your home and,  
With your families, go to the square.  
So everyone holds small bundles in their hands,  
Farewelling their home and belongings with a sad face.  
Those closest to you are now your whole world,  
Will they not be separated by an evil and cruel fate?

At the square, there is uproar. In the enormous crowd  
Loud shots frequently ring out.  
And from the beaten masses, as if paralysed  
Children cry, again the plaintive cries arise.  
A husband by his wife, a sister with her brother.  
Within his soul he thinks of what he should do,  
Should he go with her, to perish, like a hero,  
Or should he save his own life?

And here near his numerous retinue  
Stand these executioners, bringing us extermination.  
Life and death depends on them,

They are the masters of our fate.  
Totally heartless, with consciences ripped out,  
Their malevolent faces devoid of feeling  
One has already been sentenced to death,  
The other is cut off from those dearest to him.

A mother presses a baby to her breast.  
She won't hand over her treasure – her sweet burden.  
And so a shot rang out, then derisive laughter  
And the dead child fell to the ground.  
And again two shots thunder into the air  
And a scream ripped from the mother's breast.  
And to that a choir responds  
The despairing shouts of all poor mothers.

The sun arose and it was already morning.  
That square looked like a battlefield,  
And the sea of people herded to the station.  
A handful of the young is all that remains.  
So went tens and hundreds of thousands  
In every settlement, city and small town.  
The old and the young, women and children  
Went without objection, without a word of protest.

It was said, "An *akcja* is happening here"  
That is what the culture called it.  
But indeed that name was false:  
What took place was simply murder, slaughter.

They then took them in locked railway wagons  
And mouths were parched from the heat.  
More than one yelped and died from thirst  
As though having strayed into the Sahara desert.  
And at the village named TREBLINKA,  
The destination and here they stopped.  
It is only here that the tragedy plays out,  
Because here they are mechanically slain.

There was no way out, even though they craved to live.  
The air was permeated with gas.

They were Jews, so they had to die, for sins not committed.  
They all went. Individuals remained.  
But if we are destined to survive,  
Then for this wiped out Jewish nation,  
Let the injustice be avenged.

Sala Sokołowska.

### **WILISCHTHAL 1945**

One day drags on monotonously after another, long and calm.  
But it's already been so long. This is the sixth year of war.  
The longing in eyes escapes through the iron grating  
And we spend our lives not as people, but as robots.

Every day, as usual, at five o'clock, a voice calls "*Aufstehen*".  
After a humble, morning meal, it's time to go to work.  
A small courtyard comes alive with people, stamping and footsteps can be heard  
And a grey, imprisoned mass crosses the darkness.  
There in the houses, people still sleep behind closed windows,  
And we must already work: after all, we are prisoners.  
At six-thirty, a whistle breaks out in the factory.  
We know this signal well, it calls us to work, summoning.

So work begins: laborious and difficult.  
The machine hums mediocrity, and hunger moves us.  
Because hunger is cruel and constantly accompanies us.  
It whispers, "You'd like to eat something..." I feel it within myself and hear it.

When they bring a meal, our faces brighten,  
And constantly there is only one thought: food.  
And so it goes on until evening. A good night and again morning.  
One day drags on after another like this, every day is the same.

And even if sometimes there is a feeling of emptiness in this life, of nothingness,  
Then soon a vision of a happy future germinates,  
So that a quiet sobbing frees itself from an aching breast.  
One question arises from tightened lips:

Will it go on for much longer? Will we live like this forever?  
Will we never again feel that beauty of freedom?

After all, our youth is being ruined, destroyed and decayed.  
And we so much want to be free, to live as others live.

Because we are witnesses, we want to shout in front of the world,  
That we saw something terrible, as brother fought against brother.  
How columns of smoke soared up into the sky,  
Those innocents who were burned alive, endured torture.

We survived summer in this hell – almost an entire winter.  
Although the battle is hard, the desire to live on endures.  
In the meantime, the hours drag on, and we dream of freedom...  
And the day is so monotonous and grey, grey, grey...

Sala Sokołowska.

### **THE GHOST TRAIN**

Heavily, it untangled itself from the jumble of tracks.  
Far off into the world it set off with a thousand wagons.  
A crimson sky, spraying its crimson sparks,  
It rushed through forests, among fields and patches.  
Steam spread like clouds in the air  
And no one knew, no one sensed,  
That it was carrying death.

It rushed, devouring the kilometres, the miles,  
Moment after moment, it picked up speed,  
Then again, like a turtle, it slowly moved on.  
It rushed through settlements, towns and villages,  
And no one knew, no one sensed,  
That its redness is the redness of blood.  
That death announces a list of white names,  
The wild wheels rumble of death,  
Death is hiding in the maze of silver maze,  
That its final movement is called "DEATH".

It rushed and it rushed. All around people looked,  
They waved their arms, but they knew nothing.  
They thought that the fire carried in the lumps of black coal,  
That dragged along hundreds, thousands of tons.  
But it carried a terrible, human jumble



And within it a wild plaything was released.

Locked within four, steel walls,  
It meandered, meandered, a quivering crowd.  
Bodies piled up into one beaten mass  
Wheezing and howling with animal whining.  
Stifling air, atrocious, which cut into the lungs,  
A terrible, heavy hand grasping at the throat.

They gasped and died in utter torment.  
And burnt hands, like birds of prey  
Stretched out for water. For one sip of water,  
They begged for a waft, for a moment of refreshment.  
They wheezed and howled like these thirsty dogs.  
Their parched lips, cracked until bleeding.  
They panted, they panted, they died.

Someone cried bitterly, someone complained quietly,  
Someone fell with a deafening clatter  
And another, constantly, as if in a delirium,  
Continuously repeated the same name.  
Someone fervently repeated words of prayer,  
Someone cursed his fate, threatened the Germans.  
They cried and they cried and they cried.

And still more strongly, until they ran out of breath,  
They pressed, they pushed, "Where are you? Come here."  
"I'm fainting", "I'm falling", "I beg you, let me through"  
"Go away for a moment", "Don't choke me, don't choke me"  
"Mummy, dear mother, why is it so dark?"  
"Mericful G-d, take pity on me!"

They crawled along slowly, looking through the grating,  
As a lost world sped past them.  
They farewelled their lives, their family and friends.  
Ahead of that terrible, final hour.

Death is already not far away when it stops,  
That train from which sobs reach to the sky.  
And turns into a curse and is pressed into God's face.  
The extermination of millions, their deaths are so near.

They raise their clenched fists like rods

And cry out, "You are cursed! You are cursed! You are cursed!"

Sala Sokółowska.

**THE CENTRAL ARCHIVE OF THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE,  
GIV'AT RAM CAMPUS, HEBREW UNIVERSITY, JERUSALEM.**

CZĘSTOCHOWA, 1911.

The chief of police began an investigation into people belonging to the "Bund" organisation. The police carried out arrests.

The grounds for beginning the investigation: correspondence, notices of meetings being held and the intention of forming anew the organisation which had broken down. Those arrested: Gnarik Tenenbaum, Icek Dawid Izraelowicz, Moszek Jarecki, Moszek Szczupak, Rywka Rubel. Icek Dawid Izraelowicz, carpenter, born 1890 in Częstochowa. Rywka Rubel, seamstress, born 1886 in the city of Piotrków, place of residence Częstochowa. Arrested in 1906, charged with belonging to the "Bund" organisation. She was jailed for three months. Gnarik Tenenbaum born 1895 in the city of Częstochowa. Profession: clerk in the Wajnberg & Co. factory in the city of Częstochowa. Graduated after four years at the "Boganski" private junior high school in Częstochowa in 1910.

Moszek Szczupak born in 1892 in the city of Wieluń, Kaliszewski district. Permanent resident of Częstochowa. Employed as a trader in his father's wholesale warehouse in Częstochowa. He finished primary school. Moszek Jarecki born 1889 in the city of Częstochowa. He worked in his father's grocery store. Finished two grades of schooling.

CZĘSTOCHOWA, 1906-1907.

The City of Częstochowa, Chief of Police. Report on Rywka Rubel, as a harmful, political campaigner.

In the city Częstochowa, on 12/01/1906, Rywka Moszkowna Rubel, resident of Piotrków, was apprehended. During a search carried out in her apartment, a certain number of copies of anti-government material, published in Yiddish by revolutionaries, was found. According to a statement made by Szaja Berliner, who was a witness in the abovementioned matter, she was exposed a political agitator, bring active in a destructive movement.

Rywka Rubel was sentenced to gaol for three months. After serving her sentence, she should be moved from the industrial area of Częstochowa to her relatives who live in Piotrków.

Rywka Moszkowna Rubel, 19 years of age, born in Piotrków. Permanent address: Częstochowa, *Stara Rynek* (Old Market Square). Occupation: seamstress, spinster, father is a turner in Piotrków. She can neither read nor write (*in Russian – my note*). During the search, the following pamphlets and magazines were found:

- 1) Pamphlets in the Yiddish language,
- 2) Issue No.40 of the "Workers' Voice" newspaper,
- 3) 2 issues of "The Bund" newspaper,
- 4) Issue No.16 of "The Warsaw Worker" newspaper,

- 5) A statement by the Central Committee of the Bund,
- 6) Handwritten poems, using jargon language,
- 7) Issue No.2 of "Jewish Social-Democrat" newspaper,
- 8) Issue No.8 of "Der Weker" Yiddish newspaper (my note: *"the alarm clock, the arouser"*).

## THE DECISION OF THE POLICE AUTHORITIES

Those arrested had decided to set up a branch of the "Bund" organisation in Częstochowa with the aim of mobilising, through agitation, possibly the biggest number of members to this organisation from amongst Jewish workers, in order to then demand an improvement in working conditions and pay for Jewish workers in carpentry shops. External investigation into the abovementioned matter brought no results. On 21st July 1911, a search was undertaken, regarding the abovementioned matter, with the following results: At the home of Icek Dawid Izraelowicz, a public notice was found, urging Częstochowa Jews to be active in the elections to the "State Duma". The notice also urged Częstochowa Jews to join the Social Democratic Party, a party fighting, within the "Duma", for equal rights for all ethnic groups in Russia, including the Jews.

At the home of brothers, Mosze and Nuhim Jarecki, a few books of tendentious content were found, as well as a copy of a Russian-language pamphlet entitled "The Jewish Proletariat", published by the Committee of the SSRP, as well as a letter from overseas from someone named Jakub Pławner who, as it turns out, is an agitator who was also a delegate to the conference in Bozan (Basle?)

During the search at the home of Rywka Rubel, an open letter was found which contained a photo of a young man named Daniel Załuski who, according to current information, belongs to the Bund organisation in Częstochowa. There was also a photo of Herszel Frajman, a member of the Board of Management of the "Bund" organisation in Częstochowa.

Further enquiries revealed that Nuhim Jarecki had been apprehended by police Częstochowa and in Noworadomsk for being a member of the Zionist-Socialist Party and he is a representative of that party in Częstochowa.

Rywka Rubel belonged to the "Bund" Party. In 1907, she served three months in gaol. According to confidential information, all the abovementioned people, together, established this fighting organisation under the direction of Rywka Rubel, who was its instructor. They trained with firearms in the forest near the village of Mstów in the vicinity of Częstochowa. Daniel Załuski and Herszel Frajman also belonged to this fighting organisation as well as a man name Mendel, a painter by trade. (Mendel Braun – my comment). Moszek Szczupak was not a member of this organisation. The chief of police will take steps to deport these

people, as harmful elements, to outside the Przywiślanski District, in accordance with administrative procedures. At present, Herszel Frajman is serving in the army in the city of Wiaźma.

(-) Director, Police Special Branch

Governor of Warsaw

22/10/1911

SECRET

To : The Governor of Piotrków:

Decision:

- 1) To forbid: Icek Dawidow Izraelowicz, Rywka Rubel, Nuchim Jarecki and Moszek Jarecki from living in the city of Warsaw and in the following regions: Warsaw, Piotrków, Lublin and Siedlce, through the entire period of heightened security in these regions.
- 2) Moszek Szczupak will be the subject of an open investigation by the police in his places of residence, on the basis of a decision taken on 30/04/1907.