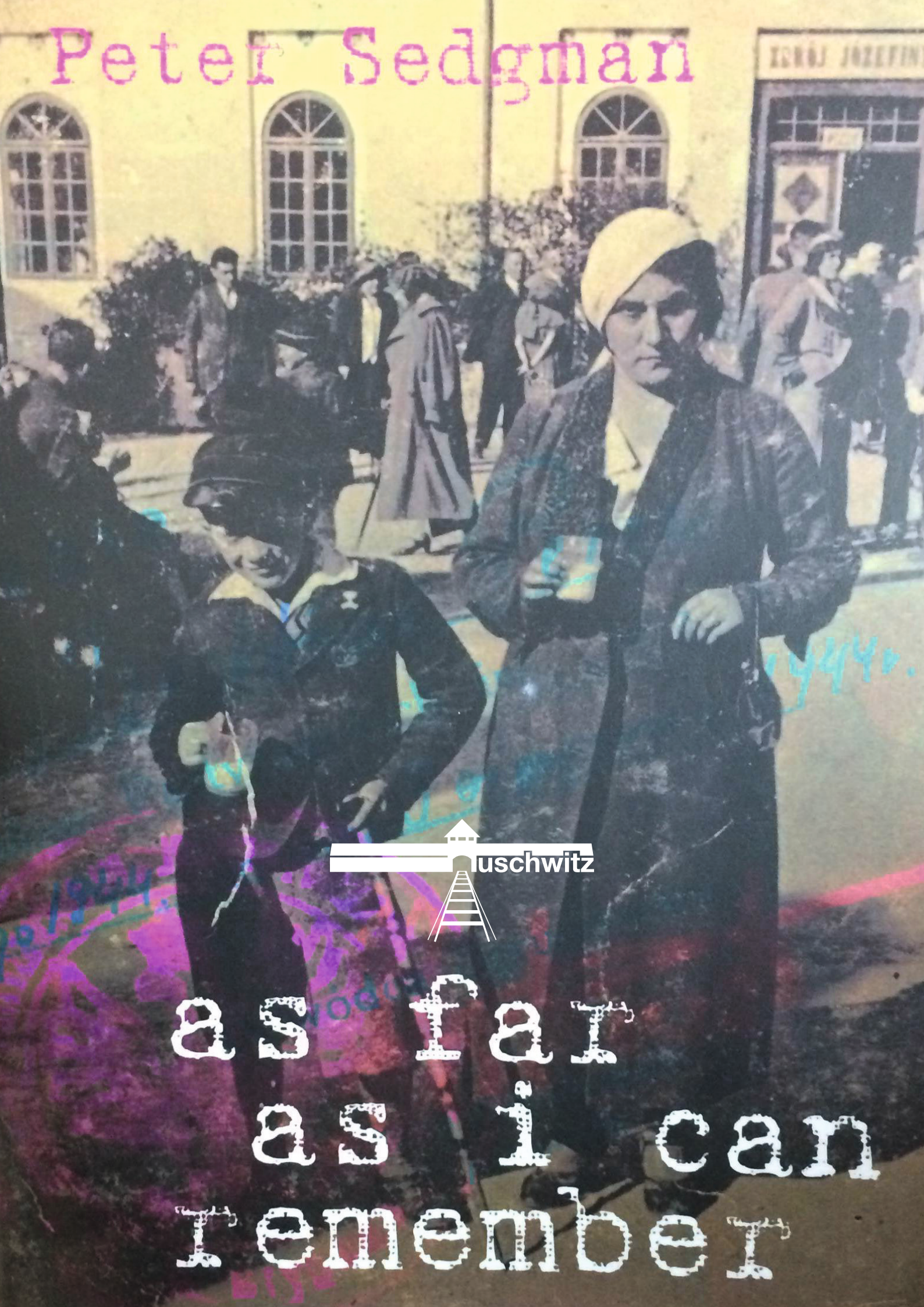
Peter Sedgman



Auschwitz

as far as i can remember

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FOREWORD

I am very grateful to Mrs Lucy Chipkin for her enthusiasm and patience, as I told her about my sleepless nights while recollecting the horrors of the war years under the Nazis, and writing about my family being deported and murdered. Lucy's continual encouragement, in helping me to express in my own words the story of my survival, gave me the strength to carry on.

Chris my daughter, while typing my story shed many tears. My grandsons Michael and Rodney always encouraged me to continue and were full of support, and recognize the importance of documenting the history of our family for future generations.

CHAPTER 1

As far as I can remember.
Let's start with my family –

I was born in Lublin Jezvicka 3. We lived in a very big block of apartments, and our flat consisted of two rooms: a bedroom and a kitchen. By then I was the third sibling.

Twins – Cadok and Masza – had been born in 1913, and I was born on 10th November 1917. After me came Gidal in 1925. We all lived in the little apartment.

In addition, in the only bedroom, there was a stand with a press to produce leather buttons. There must have been some demand for leather buttons. As far as I can remember this was the only way of my family earning a living. A partner to this enterprise was my mother's brother Moshe.

My mother was always the one who had the business sense; supplementing and enlarging the business by getting involved in haberdashery and calling on tailors and supplying them with what they needed. Eventually as the business progressed, we looked for a suitable shop. A shop was opened on Kozia 3. It was from the beginning a very big success, a goldmine. People flocked from everywhere. We were the envy of many – "such a success!" They never called the shop the "Szechtmans'" only the "Lichtens'" – my mother's family name.

My mother's younger sister Hana (Andzia) and the twins worked in the shop. My father usually opened up the shop and then vanished for the rest of the day. Mostly to the business club – he was a very good chess player.

About my father – a few words. He was a very good and generous man, and all his friends knew if they need a loan, or a favour, they could find him in the shop early in the morning and they never left empty handed. God forbid if my mother knew of his generosity. The business kept progressing. It was a long shop, enough room for customers to stand there three deep. It was a paradise for pickpockets in the beginning. Eventually we flushed them out – we got to know them.

I am talking about was the early 1930s, and the business was booming. By then I was enrolled in the only Jewish Gymnasium – Humanstyczne (College). My father's dream was for me to be a doctor at any cost. I think I was his favourite son. He used to give me more pocket money (without my mother's knowledge) than my younger brother Gidal.

Even then the antisemitism was enormous with slogans to support only Christian businesses. Our clientele was mostly Christian and they were mostly very friendly. My older brother Cadok was a very likeable picture of honesty. Sometimes he used to crack jokes about his honesty, saying he would finish up a "capcan" – a fellow with holes in his pockets – in other words, broke.

We all were Zionists and raised money as well as buying land in Palestine through the Jewish organization, keren kajemet. their main purpose was to cultivate the land in Israel. eventually my father and my uncle Leiser Licht went to warsaw and finalized the purchase of 40 Dunam each to be converted in orchards in Palestine. They named the land Kfar Grinbaum,

near Kfar Witkin, not far from Haifa, right on the Mediterranean. Of course my father's dream was to go to Palestine as a entrepreneur.

Only people with means were able to get an entry permit from the British. So began our vision and goal to settle in Palestine. The departure of my father in 1936 looked like the beginning of a new life for our family.

In spite of antisemitic incidents, everything was normal at home in Lublin. By now we lived in a big apartment Sw-Duszka 12 and had a full-time live-in housekeeper. This was necessary as my mother was the brain of the business, and went every fortnight to Warsaw to purchase goods and novelties for tailoring.

Letters in 1936 from my father in Palestine were not optimic. Every letter portrayed the hard life we could expect if we finally decided to sell everything and leave Poland. He told us that the "Land of Milk and Honey" was wrongly named – it was a "Land of Hard Labour." But he stayed on there and invested in a brick factory. He had two partners who were actually producing bricks and blocks for sanitary systems (i.e. toilets). My father's job was to make the "sidur" – put the bricks together in hundreds. It was very hard work for my father who was not used to physical work. No wonder his letters were full of disappointments. The brick factory was very profitable, though, as the building industry was thriving and demand for bricks and blocks was enormous. But the physical work wore him down to a skeleton.

My college year was coming to an end and to further my studies, my father was making plans for me to study in Palestine. I left Poland in 1937 to see the world and, from the letters, to rescue my father. As it turned out I was one hundred percent right. When I arrived in Palestine, and saw my father I was heartbroken. It was difficult to respond normally. He was impossible to recognize – just a bundle of bones. No wonder after seeing his brick factory and the backbreaking work he did, bending down thousands of times, picking up the bricks under the scorching sun. He was no longer the man I knew.

■

CHAPTER 2

When I go back to my childhood, I see myself carried and cuddled by almost everyone. Who they were, God knows. All the nips and squeezing my cheek or seat, my '*tuches',* was perhaps some expression of affection, maybe for them but not for me. They in fact inflicted pain on me. All one heard was 'What a beautiful *yingele*! What a *naches* for the parents.' Most of these comments came from clients, while purchasing their requirements from our leather button factory.

One specific memory stays with me. A similar accident happened to my brother, sister, younger brother and me respectively. We lived on the ground floor, and beneath us was a basement apartment. This apartment had a window that was always a trap for all the kids playing there – it opened into the yard. Of course it didn't miss us. We all went through the agony and fell through the window and finished with broken noses. We all carried the mark like a family symbol.

Before I started public school, it was customary to be sent to a *cheder* where a *Melamed* (bible teacher) had full control over you. Not only by teaching, but by sadistic non-stop slapping with a stick. The teacher might have thought it was encouragement to study more keenly. To me it looked like he enjoyed the slapping part much better. I remember one time, before I finished with the *cheder*, I grabbed the stick from his hand and threw it out of the window.

The retribution wasn't much as it happened just before a Saturday when he was invited by my parents for Shabbas dinner, to show him how knowledgeable their son was in religious matters. I wonder whether my parents thought the money was well spent. For the *Melamed,* it was the culmination of his achievements: The *gefilte fish* and the *sholent* with the stuffed neck, a Jewish delight.

When I was seven years old, I started public school. It wasn't very pleasant. On the way to school we had to pass a Catholic Church, and I was really frightened. Not that I could be lured in and forced to kiss the cross, but still, passing that Church would give me the shivers. At school, we started each day with a Christian prayer. Of course we weren't forced to repeat the prayers, but still had to participate and once a week there was a one hour religious studies lesson specially for the Jewish students from all grades. Well, my memories over the years of public school always reminded me of my Jewishness and guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus. I really didn't realize what it was all about.

I was about to finish school, and it was nearly my Barmitzvah, when I was sent to Pulawy on the Vistula to my grandparents of my father's side. I think it was the first time I met them. My grandfather was a *shochet*, but the boss of the house was my grandmother.

They had two daughters. Pearl was the oldest, (I have the feeling that her husband deserted her and left her with a daughter) and she lived with her parents. The younger daughter, Masza, was single. She was about to go to Palestine at the same time my father was planning to go. They were very proud of me and they tried to make my stay enjoyable. Even taking me out for a swim in the river Vistula. The only unpleasant memories of this stay were when all the hundreds of chooks and ducks were butchered by my grandfather, and they hung on a rail, with the blood dripping like water from a tap, and the flies of all description were buzzing around. I couldn't stomach the chicken on Saturday.

Back home, I had my Barmitzvah. By then we lived in a much bigger apartment. It was a real feast, not only at home, but in the *Schule*. At that time, my father did not belong to such a strict orthodox *Schule* like he had before. I think he had to move from the old *Schule* when he started trimming his beard, and was practically thrown out from there – such a crime – but his nickname "the Chassid" remained with him forever.

My parents by then were very successful, and my father's dream was to give me every opportunity to continue to study. I think my mother had other ideas – to join her and work in the shop. By then there were about seven people working in the shop. Only two were outsiders of the family. But father prevailed, and the years in College were the best years of my life. Gymnasium Humanistyczne "College of Humanities" consisted of two buildings; one for boys and one for girls. We had a lot of functions together with dances, sport and during breaks in school we communicated with the girls and dated them whenever we had a chance. I wasn't brilliant, but never had to repeat the year.

The year I finished College, my father was already in Palestine. I worked a little in the shop, but I was always looking for excuses. My older brother was the one who forced me to work on Sundays. Sunday trading was against the law, therefore, we had to keep watch for the police in order not to get fined. We kept the doors locked all the time, and then when customers arrived, we unlocked the back door to let them in and out. That gave me a chance to get extra pocket money.

The letters from Palestine from my father weren't really encouraging. It looked like he was having a hard time, but not openly admitting it. By then knowing he was preparing my permit to Palestine to continue my studies, I had to give in to my brother's demands as far as work was concerned, as I had very little money. To get extra cash, Sunday work was the only way. To go away and see the world looked like an adventure to me, I was still very optimistic about the journey to Palestine.

One mischievious incident will always remain in my memory. There was some sort of confrontation with one of my classmates and one of the teachers. My classmate's name was Piniek Zylber, and had a big influence on us. Whatever he said was like a command. He fell out with the teacher, and he easily persuaded us to boycott by staying away from school, in other words to side with him. That particular day I left for school as normal, but instead we all met in a pre-arranged place. From there we left for Piniek Zylber's home. They lived outside town practically in a large house. His father was one of the richest Jews in Lublin. They owned a brewery and were the only people in Poland to produce Kosher vodka, "Peisachuwka". We spent all day in the brewery, drinking. The hangover lasted for days. The teacher called the parents and informed them that the boys would be punished for their indiscretion. The parents agreed. The punishment was really harsh; we were given a lot of physical work and had to stay back at school for hours.

Piniek Zylber incidentally, I found out after the war, lived on Aryan papers in Warsaw. He was one of twenty Poles caught by the Germans for shooting a German soldier. The Poles were all shot in a reprisal, including Piniek.

My College years were absolutely fantastic, all fun and not a worry in the whole world. Suddenly my popularity was sought by all my classmates. The reason was the beautiful young girl my mother naively employed as a housekeeper. On the pretext of talking about school activities, my school friends all came to my place. The young lady didn't mind being the centre of attention of many well-behaved college boys. I must admit she was the first young lady to let me know about intimate relations. She was a good teacher. For me it was like discovering a new world.

Suddenly this all came to an end. One night the police invaded our place and took the housekeeper with them. It turned out she had been lured into a Communist cell. The Communist party at those times was outlawed. At the court case, my mother appeared as a character witness, giving evidence on her behalf, stating the young girl did not know she was engaged in activities contrary to the law. She got away with a two year jail sentence, while the others got much heavier penalties. The next housekeeper wasn't as beautiful – my mother had learnt a lesson, and she was far too smart to make the same mistake again.

In the letters from my father from Eretz Israel, we could see that he was far from being happy. He wrote it would be very useful for me to learn to drive a car. I was hoping to get the permit as a student to continue my studies. In the meanwhile I enrolled in the car driving school "Zambelli". The lessons in the beginning were more theoretical – twice a week in the evening, with one day in the garage. One day, while attending the day in the garage, the Polish mechanics played a dirty trick on me. They connected the end of the exhaust pipe with the motor running. When I woke up I was in the hospital bed I had been poisoned by the fumes. When they saw they overplayed the trick, they had called an ambulance. It was the end of the driving school.

So with school over, I filled in part time in our shop while preparing myself for the journey to Palestine. One thing that makes me laugh if I think of it now, is the pair of white woollen trousers – tailor made that I took with me. We had no idea how hot they would be to wear there – I never used them even once.

Finally the permit papers arrived, the simcha was hard to describe. It looked as if our family's dreams of setting in Eretz Israel were nearing fulfillment. I had a huge family and they all came to bid me goodbye and made me promise not to forget them. By then both my grandfathers had passed away. My grandmother from father's side lived with one of my father's brothers, while her daughter Pearl lived with us. Masza, my father's younger sister, was by then in Palestine and married a Sabra, (someone who is born in Israel).

■

CHAPTER 3

I remember having one suitcase and a little handy bag, as I stood on the Lublin railway station before departing. Everybody was crying. It was more or less an expression of joy. Hugs, kisses, finally the train arrived and I was off to Lwów, the first stop of the journey. I travelled all night and hardly slept from excitement. I stopped all day in Lwów as the international train to Romania didn't leave until that evening. So off to Romania, almost non-stop except at the border in Sniatyn. Our documents were checked by the border police. As soon we crossed the border, the same procedure was enacted by the Romanian authorities. The train's destination was the port on the Black Sea, Constanza.

The boat we boarded made a few stops. I remember mostly Beirut in Lebanon, where we disembarked for sightseeing. It was the first time I saw belly dancing and tasted a lot of oriental dishes. Life looked good. After two days the boat departed for Haifa, the final destination.

Father informed a cousin of mine, Haddasa, who lived in Kiriat Haim, not far from Haifa, to expect my arrival and accommodate me for the night. After going through customs, there was no one to meet me, and I felt terribly lost. Suddenly Haddasa emerged. After kisses, we got on the bus to Kiriat Haim, where she lived. By then, I was really worn out. All I wanted was to sleep, but she wanted to know all about the old "heim", about Lublin, her birthplace, bombarding me with non-stop questions. Finally she must have got tired herself, and we went to bed.

In the morning, she introduced me to her husband, who was a policeman. He was on night duty, he spoke only Hebrew – I hardly understood a word he said. My cousin escorted me back from Haifa. From there by train to Tel Aviv.

Then came the shock of seeing my father – the way he looked, I could hardly recognize him. We fell into each other's arms and cried like babies. Standing on the platform at Tel Aviv station, we were crying and crying and people enquired if they could be some sort of help to us. It took a while before my father called a taxi to get to his place. He lived in a rented room, a *makolet,* behind a shop which sold provisions.

So now I was in Eretz Israel, the land I had been dreaming of for such along time. Seeing the way my father looked and lived was an enormous shock to me. After a few days, I was introduced to his partners. They had some sort of brick and sanitary block factory on a big rented piece of land, *Migras.* Seeing my father actually work in the factory shattered all my dreams; my father the businessman, man of leisure, was working under the scorching sun, stacking up the bricks – it was heartbreaking. As it turned out my father had already planned, even before my arrival, to return to Poland. I was helpless. He had invested a fortune by purchasing land through Keren Kayemet, and now with his change of heart, it looked a total loss. But his decision to return to Poland was very firm. He hated everything about Palestine.

All my plans had to be changed. I was enrolled in Haifa technicon to further my studies. Father said "Son, leave the studies, you will have to concentrate on collecting the money I am leaving here". The two partners bought him out, giving him promissory notes, payable monthly for the next six months. Surprisingly, all were paid on time and I stayed to collect the money. My father returned to Poland and wrote letters to me asking if the payments were

made on time. I guess he was worried about me being on my own with all the bad news coming about the fighting between Jews and Arabs, "Hamorot". True, the times were bad. After my father left, I never thought I would follow the steps of my father, I was there to stay. I had a lot of money. Really I thought my father left everything for me.

I was twenty, nearly twenty-one. I lived not far from my Auntie Masza and many Saturdays I spent with them. Her husband was talking me into buying a taxi or joining the Mavir (the city transport company). I decided to give it a try. After a few days getting driving lessons on the buses, I gave up. I worked in a factory producing locks for ice boxes. They wanted me as a partner. I gave that up also. The work was too hard!

Certainly I enjoyed Sfat Ayam – the beach in Tel-Aviv. I had a lot of young friends, and even some from my old school days. His name was Ginzburg. Unfortunately, it didn't last long. He fell in love with a girl, but it was a one sided affair. She openly told him she didn't like him. He took it so hard, he commited suicide by hanging himself. Two old school mates who were then studying in Haifa, Levinstein and Korn, came to the funeral. It was a very sad reunion. We talked about the old school days. They tried to convince me to return to Haifa and continue the studies. I told about my problems, my family in Poland and the constant pressure from the letters trying to convince me to return to Poland and be with the family. And the most important thing, what to do with the money? By then all the money was paid up – nearly thirty (30) thousand pounds sterling. – A small fortune. My friends really were at a loss and were not able to give me advice in my family matters. The only person who persistently objected of my returning was my Auntie Masza. She reasoned with me – you have the money, you are young, your future is here.

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CHAPTER 4

The most important thing was coming up: my sister Masza's wedding to Moniek. It wouldn't be fair not to mention my relationship with my sister. She was my favourite. She always called me "Perecku", an affectionate version of Perec. She was always interested in my school activities and my advances towards our housekeeper. So I wouldn't miss my sister's wedding for anything in the world and my parents knew about my soft spot for my sister. My sister wasn't beautiful, but what she lacked in beauty, she made up with a heart of gold. She was refined and very likeable. My parents and matchmakers *(Shadchunim*) had many sessions trying to find a suitable partner (*Chusin).* They bought photos of candidates and my sister had the last say.

When I returned home from Eretz I had only a few days to spare before the wedding. I really was very happy for my sister. She was radiant – even now while writing, my eyes are full of tears. I remember when they left for their honeymoon, we still were celebrating with family and friends. For a few Saturdays my father supplied his congregation a keg of beer and some tasty snacks. When the couple returned from the honeymoon, I could see from the way my sister looked that she was very happy. My brother-in-law, Moniek, worked with his uncles. They were wheat exporters, in a big way. My brother in law put his money (the dowry) into their business to become a partner.

It was time now for me to report for military service. This was the beginning of 1939. We woke up on the morning on Friday 1st September, 1939 to hear distant explosions and non-stop bombardment. We discovered that the Germans had declared war on Poland.

The German justification was that Poland provoked them by saying they wanted to occupy the free port of Danzig (Gdansk). From the first minute of the war, we were on the retreat. We knew by then the Germans were bombing all the cities of Poland.

The next day on Saturday I was the next casualty in our army company. We were overloaded and worn out by walking as well as carrying the personal equipment. Giving us a few minutes rest I allowed myself to catch my breath, and I took the equipment off. Suddenly I realized the pin was missing out of the grenade. Automatically I threw it away from me. Even today I can't understand how the grenade didn't explode on me.

Perhaps the belt was my life saver. As I threw the grenade away, some pieces from the detonation caught my thumb on the right hand. The army medics were spot on and bandaged my thumb to stop the bleeding. My company leader, the Sergeant, reported my mischief. I was unable to use my rifle, a problem in case I had to use it against the Germans.

On the Sunday morning, we were led into some trenches. We saw some advancing Germans. We were completely exhausted. After a few shots were fired, we surrendered. It turned out that I was the only one from our platoon of about twenty to be able to communicate with the Germans. I was treated by one of the German army medics who bandaged my thumb properly. He probably saved my thumb from infection, by removing metal pieces and also gave me medication and told me to see the doctors when I got to a proper camp. We were led on foot. By then we were about fifty prisoners. Eventually we were loaded onto goods trains and sent off to Germany. It was a very short trip, about three hours, and we were unloaded in a town called Hammerstein. There was a prisoner-of-war camp there, numbered Stalag 17. Unfortunately I have to mention the behaviour of certain Poles towards their Jewish brothers-in-arms. A lot

of Poles discarded their uniforms when they were taken prisoner; in a sense they just became civilians as they thought they would get better treatment that way. But when they saw that was not so, they started to strip the Jewish prisoners of their uniforms. They were in the thousands and very quickly learned the word "Jude". Fortunately I got away unharmed because of my bandaged arm which was in a sling.

With the war going on, we settled down in Stalag 17. Every day more prisoners arrived. By the end of September, the war against Poland was over. At that time we were about fifty Jewish prisoners. We were segregated from the Poles and put into separate barracks and in no way treated differently from the Poles.

I was receiving treatment to my thumb and luckily the bone was not damaged. It was winter by then, we were given different jobs. We were all keen to go to the German army barracks, for cleaning detail, as there was the opportunity of finding stale bread in the barracks. I'm sure the German soldiers left the bread purposely for the prisoners. By about February 1940, my thumb was completely healed. Then one day I felt sick, and was checked by the Jewish camp doctor, who diagnosed typhus. I was put into isolation hospital outside the camp. I was treated by German staff, who were not able perform active duty on the front. I had my first taste of what to expect in the future about a day before being discharged from hospital. A young German medic, on night duty, ordered me out of bed, screaming "Verflughde Jude". On his orders I had to perform a lot of exercises. Mostly he enjoyed my "kopfstehen" – standing on my head. It was agonizing. I was very weak, having had high temperatures all week. It was my first experience with a real Nazi. Back in camp I was declared fit to go back to work. Luckily I got a good job, probably because my injury and the sickness.

I worked as an assistant to a German soldier in the showers and "entlausing" the disinfecting. So day after day I was taken by a German soldier to my job and left there. My boss at the "entlausing" was an old Wehrmacht man. He was a very nice man and he treated me well. He supplied me with an extra sandwich and an odd piece of fruit occasionally. I must admit we were well treated as prisoners of war. Of course the meals, generally, were not sufficient. The biggest problem were the Poles. They couldn't stand the fact that we were treated the same as them when they felt so much superior to us. Luckily we lived in different areas.

I was writing letters home, and never got a reply. I wanted to let them know that I was alive. The first news that I was still alive and in Stalag 17 reached my family in late September, 1940 via the Red Cross. My family had never received any of my letters.

They then posted me a parcel which I received about a month before being repatriated. For me it was the sign that they knew of my existence. The parcel which contained a small cake, by now was all crumbs. Nevertheless I had a feast with my friends.

Suddenly a rumour started that all Jewish Polish prisoners would be freed. We were confused: why should they free the Jews and not the Poles? When I mentioned the news to my boss at work, he was very quiet and gave me a sort of fatherly look. After work, returning to camp, he said, "Take my advice, don't register to return". So far I hadn't registered to return. It was getting very close to making a final decision. While at working at the showers, my boss took me aside and very simply told me not to register. "Stay here, you have a chance to survive the war, unless a bomb kills you. By returning home as a Jew and a civilian, the Nazis will kill you," he said. I looked at him with surprise. I thought he was fond of me as I was a good worker. I told a few people of my conversation and what to expect on our return. They had a good laugh.

Many of the Jewish prisoners were from the part of Poland occupied by the Russians. They couldn't wait to get home.

I was about one of the last to register. They packed us in wagons and then we left. Next stop was another prisoner -of -war camp, Stargard. This was the camp where all Jewish prisoners were brought before being deported home. We were classified in groups according to where we lived in Poland. Only those who belonged to the territories occupied by Russia were kept together and they were the last to be sent home.

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CHAPTER 5

When I arrived in Lublin, the whole group was taken to Lipova 7, a soccer stadium. As a youngster, I went to many soccer matches there. There were quite a few prisoners-of-war already there, mostly from different parts of Poland occupied by Russia.

Unfortunately the Russians didn't want to take them back into their territory and they had to stay in Lipova 7. The camp was run by the Judenrat and it was their duty to feed and relocate them. It didn't take long before they informed my family of my arrival. It was a cold winter's day. My mother was standing in front of the gates at the camp, looking at me and she hardly recognized me. We fell into each others arms. She was crying with joy. Also for all the misfortunes I had been through.

Walking home, my mother realized I was not wearing the white armband with the Magen David symbol. She pulled hers off and gave it to me. I refused to wear it. I was very foolish, not realizing the times we lived in. I then put the armband on. She also instructed me to greet any approaching German soldier by taking off my hat. I was too worn out to think too much about it. My old boss's warnings never really registered with me. Despite wearing the armband with the Star of David, a sign of being a second grade citizen The armband was the only clean item on my military uniform, which I had been wearing for nearly eighteen months now.

Finally we got home, and all the family were waiting for me. It was like coming back from death. It was a shock to me to find out that they had no clue as to what had happened to me. They never received a single letter, and I had written quite a few. It was only with the help of the Red Cross were they able to find out about me. So here I was in front of my family, everybody crying with happy faces. My father was beaming with joy, although he looked very sick, and he could hardly walk. They gave me a scrub and the wash of a lifetime. They got rid of every item I was wearing. I was exhausted, and all I wanted was a good feed and sleep. When I woke up I was sick and feverish.

The doctor ordered me to stay in bed for a few days, and I received the care only a Jewish mother can give. After being home a few days, I realized things had changed; it was not the same place as before. I noticed the absence of my brother-in-law Moniek. I felt something was not right and was afraid to find out the truth, thinking of my sister, Masza. She lived at our place with her son. My mother and older brother Cadok were still running the shop. They knew it was only a matter of time before being forced to leave it.

One morning, while I was playing with my sister's little boy, Masza told me of the tragic death of her husband. It was about two weeks before the war broke out. As usual they were eating at our place. Suddenly her husband left the table, went into the other room and started to smash things. He smashed the mirror, the furniture and everything possible thing that came within his grasp. They couldn't restrain him. Finally with the help of some people, he was tied up and the doctor called to sedate him. He was taken to hospital, suffering from a nervous breakdown. He was then transferred to a sanitarium in Otwock near Warsaw. The tragic end came after the Germans occupied Poland. All the inmates were shot. Hearing from my sister her personal tragedy, I was heartbroken. I really loved my sister and remembering her wedding and her happy days made me feel very very sad.

The day came when my parents were forced to hand the shop over to some Poles. They had wanted the shop for a long time. We took out all the goods and, for the time being,

carried out the business from home until we found some suitable premises in the Jewish part of town, in the ghetto. It was summer, 1941 and transport of Jews from Holland, Germany and Czechoslovakia were all dumped in Lublin. The Jewish population swelled to about two hundred thousand. It was supposed to be a temporary state, they were to be resettled in the Occupied Territories, i.e. the eastern part of Poland occupied then by the Germans. Finding a suitable place for the newcomers was impossible, people lived in cramped quarters, sometimes ten in a room.

There were rumours of us being dumped in a smaller ghetto. By then we still lived quite comfortably in our old apartment. My father's health was not good, he coughed constantly and was bedridden. Then the orders came to move out. We moved to the country, a village not far from Lublin where my sister's in-laws lived. We rented a peasant's house and settled down, hoping for the best. My father's health kept deteriorating we were forced to take him back to the Jewish hospital. My sister was left with her in-laws. After a few days in hospital, my father passed away on the 8th August, 1941. He was the only one of my family to have a decent Jewish burial. Also buried in tragic circumstances was my sister's son, I will come to this tragic incident later.

When I returned from Germany at the beginning of 1941, I had regained my health and I was my old self, telling my family and friends about my military service and the time I had spent as prisoner-of-war. Our family had a very good relationship with a neighbouring family in our block of flats and as it was curfew time, we spent long winter nights together. There were three daughters whom my brothers and I all fancied. I fell in love with the youngest one, Sarah. She felt the same about me. She was a beautiful brunette and was very smart and until to this day I still have some delightful memories of our relationship. We always tried to be together. Come spring, we used to sneak out of town and enjoy the open spaces.

One day, on one of those escapades out of town, what seemed like disaster struck.

While comfortably resting, we were spotted by a German policeman on a horse. We jumped to our feet, and I made the customary greeting and took my hat off. He asked our names and addresses and left. The following day, the same fellow came to my place and asked for me. He left an address where I should report for work. To safeguard my family, I had no option, I had to report. It turned out to be the stables of the German Mounted Police. He left me with the two Poles who worked there and told me to report every day. Those two Poles were now my bosses, giving me the hardest work, and I had to handle the most highly strung horses. Gosh was I sweating! One day the German officer asked me if I liked my job. I told him I was delighted to work in the stables. I mentioned how well I had been treated as a prisoner of war in Germany, and even mentioned my former boss' advice not to return to Poland. I took this opportunity to ask for working papers showing that I was now employed by the Mounted Police, and to my surprise he gave them to me.. This piece of paper helped me to save my family until Lublin was officially declared "Juden free", no Jews left in Lublin.

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CHAPTER 6

When we returned for my father's funeral, and the shiva, (the customary seven days of mourning,) we decided to remain in Lublin. We were all crowded into my mother's sister's place. Eight of us were all cramped in one room. The main thing we were all together, considering by then, the daily transportations were about eight hundred to one thousand Jews.

We heard very bad rumours about the deportations, about people being taken to camps and being gassed. It was hardly believable. But we heard from Polish railway workers about the transports taking people to Bełżec or Sobibór to be gassed and cremated. The population of the ghetto became smaller and smaller. Only the most useful Jews were left. I'm sure my papers saved me and my family from many selections. I found an empty shop that used to be a bookshop and we moved in.

My girlfriend's family was reduced to only the mother and one sister, and Sarah. They moved into the shop with us. By then my sister with her son had also returned from the country. Her in-laws had been deported and the farm handed over to Poles. The Germans were advancing on the Russian front and things were getting desperate.

Evacuations took place daily with about seven to eight hundred people being deported. The Judenrat advised us to be prepared for resettlement to one of the outskirt suburbs of Lublin called Majdanek Tatarsky. We had orders to register. Majdanek Tatarsky was about one kilometer from Majdanek concentration camp, on the opposite side of the road and on the same side was another camp, Plajlaskiewicz, which, before the war had been an airport. Our family by then comprised of my mother, sister, older and younger brothers and with thanks to my working papers, my girlfriend, her sister and mother were also with us.

Before the final move there were non-stop selections. Every day permits were reviewed and, surprisingly, my papers were respected. This all happened around Easter, 1942. It is very hard for me to describe the pain and horror imprinted on my mother's face. She was devastated, knowing how little was left, and uncertain of things to come. We were perfectly aware what was happening to all the transported Jews from Lublin. There was no such thing as resettlement. It was clear that the destination was death camps.

The Germans resettled the Poles into the vacated Jewish homes and we were sent to Majdanek Tatarsky. We were only allowed to take the minimum of our possessions. It was a typical suburban village that reminded me of many summer holidays we used to enjoy during my childhood. The transfer, "Ubersiedlung" as they called it, began and there was a limit of two days to empty the ghetto of Jews. The only place for Jews to stay was Majdanek Tatarsky. The house allocated to us was very simple but comfortable. It had two bedrooms, kitchen and an attic. I think we were about a dozen people, maybe more, as some friends attached themselves to us. We planned the sleeping arrangements. The attic was very handy, and about a dozen people slept up there. Majdanek Tatarsky was separated off by barbed wire and was controlled by the Judenrat and the Jewish police. They had full control and terrorized us, and their treatment was harsher than the Germans. They would often come during the night and take people away to be deported.

My brother Cadok's best friend's brother whose name was Gidal, was a policeman and kept us informed of what to expect. We knew to expect at any time that about half of the population

could be deported. In my heart I was sure I could save my family with my precious papers, but we decided to hide in the attic if the time came.

It didn't take long. It was a beautiful spring day and everyone had to come out to be issued with new papers and registered with new ration cards. My older brother, Cadok, one of his friends who was very sick, and my girlfriend's mother and my sister's little boy, went up into the attic. I had a bad feeling. This particular action was carried out by the Jewish police, without German interference. It really appeared to be only a formality. What we didn't know was that there was a strong contingent of Gestapo waiting outside the gates. As we gathered in the centre of the village, papers were checked by the commandant of the Jewish police. I knew him from prewar years and felt confident I would be safe and could protect my family and my girlfriend. I was astonished when he looked at my neatly folded certificates of employment and papers, and without saying a word tore them to pieces. His only words were, "You have been here long enough". We were pushed towards the other preselected ones. My mother, sister Masza, younger brother Gidal, and I, along with about a thousand others were escorted by the Jewish police to the gates and handed over to the SS soldier in charge. Meanwhile, my older brother Cadok remained hidden in the attic of the house. I was trapped, it looked so innocent; there were no Germans present, it looked like a simple registration for ration cards, and now I was part of the group walking the one kilometer in the direction of the concentration camp Maidanek. How foolish I was to be caught by such simple orders.

While walking, I said to my girlfriend, "Let's run", but she remained with the group. I ran off the road towards the open field expecting to be chased or shot at. Nothing happened. I lay in the field watching the group march away. I was sure that they would be taken to the concentration camp Majdanek, but to my astonishment, they went past it, giving me some hope. As darkness approached I got up and walked back towards the barbed wire of the ghetto. There in our little house, I found those who had hidden in the attic earlier that day. My brother's friend was in very bad shape, he was dying. We called a doctor, but he died the same day. Meanwhile the group of people, including my mother, sister, younger brother and my girlfriend, had been taken to the nearest forest, and were all machine-gunned to death.

That particular event had a terrific impact on my older brother Cadok. He was determined to end his life, he had no will to live. It took a lot of persuasion to convince him to carry on for the sake of my sister's boy. I cannot remember the little boy's name. After about three weeks, this little boy died in tragic circumstances. Before this happened, I had discussed with a gentile lady, Mrs Hotynska, the possibility of placing the little boy in a Christian orphanage. She was sure that it would not be a problem.

With his fair complexion, he didn't look at all Jewish. The day the tragedy happened, he was asleep in his baby cot, next to the stove. On top of the stove was a Primus and a kettle of boiling water. Screams from the kitchen grabbed my attention. To my horror we found the boy and the overturned kettle in the baby cot. I presume he got up and pulled it down. I carried the screaming boy to hospital, where he died. We hired a four-wheeled wagon in order to give him a traditional Jewish burial. On the way to the cemetery we passed the old Jewish ghetto, which looked like a ghost town.

I felt that it was now necessary to search for a new hiding place, and I left the ghetto more often to do so, but never through the main gate. I got papers stating that I was still employed by the German mounted police, as before. I had to be very careful not to be seen by the Jewish police chief, for as far as he was concerned, I didn't exist in the ghetto.

I went to visit some of our old Polish customers, in hope that they might hide and shelter us. I met the old caretaker of my uncle's house. She had moved into my uncle's apartment with her daughter, Marysia who was about my age. I became very involved with her and showered her with gifts hoping that she would give us refuge in the apartment. In this apartment was a concealed room under the floor. Many times in the old ghetto, we ran to my uncle's place to hide in this room to avoid being caught by the Germans. I spoke of this to my brother, but he was still very depressed and had no will to live. Through a friend, my brother had secured some papers to work. Every day he joined a group of about fifty people and went to work for the Germans. They were clearing land for a sports field (*Sportplatz*).

My relationship with Marysia continued and I saw her every week, staying overnight at her place. I was confident that there would be no problem for my brother and me to move in at the end. I sold some valuables to help raise as much money as possible in preparation for the time we would be in hiding.

In the summer of 1942, I was awoken by hammering at the doors. I thought this to be another selection. At the door, was the Jewish chief of police who said to me, "You thought I didn't know of your whereabouts, sneaking in and out of the ghetto". The police let me dress and took me away and locked me up for the night, with the words, "We will see where your best place will be". I feared that they would send me to Majdanek concentration camp. The policeman on duty, who I knew, reassured me that I would not be sent to Majdanek, but probably to *Arbeitslager* Lipova 7, a work camp.

This was confirmed when my brother's policeman friend, who in the meantime had learned from my brother that I was being held in the cell, arrived and assured me that I would be taken to Lipova 7. I was very much relieved. Lipova 7 was run by ex-Prisoners-of-War, who had been refused repatriation by the Soviets. I knew many of them from Stalag 17, and from their many visits while we were still in the ghetto.

Lipova 7 was an *Arbeitslager* and the conditions weren't bad. Supervised by the Germans, the administration in camp was run by the Jewish ex-prisoners of war. Here I was in camp now, taken out every day to work and to my surprise taken to the *Sportplatz*, the same location where my brother worked. I told him it was only a matter of time before I would escape. My big hope was Marysia.

By September 1942 I decided it was time to get out. I knew the locality very well. I went to the side of the camp adjoining the cemetery, and went over the wall into the streets of Lublin. My destination was Marysia. I spent the night there and had a serious talk about staying permanently, using the hiding room. In the morning Marysia left without giving me an answer. After talking with her mother, I felt that she would let my brother and I stay. The big question mark was Marysia. Before I left to return to the ghetto, I asked her mother to talk to Marysia about our future plans.

I returned to the Little Ghetto, Majdanek Tatarski, and was very careful not to be seen by the Jewish police chief. My brother and I decided to convert the few assets we had into money, knowing that the Little Ghetto wouldn't last long. While staying one night in Marysia's place I told her of my conversation with her mother and how much we would pay her for allowing my brother and I to move in. I never got a clear answer. "We will see", was all that she said. I kept trying to persuade her that it was a small risk, while we had that secret room. I had a slim hope of success. Actually this was our only hope, there was no other alternative if the ghetto was to be liquidated.

It was November 1942 and the first snow fell when I heard a knock at the door. I ran for cover. My brother Cadok opened the door. It was a Jewish police man. To my brother's relief

it was his friend's brother. He entered and my brother called to me there was no danger. I was still wondering what this visit meant. It didn't take long to find out. He told us that the ghetto would be liquidated the next day. No more Jews in Lublin. We should make a move, as time was running out. The Germans numbers would double or treble by midnight. We took a few small things and left. Marysia was our only hope.

My expectation was for the worst. At about seven pm we knocked at Marysia's house. Upon seeing us, she shut the door in our faces. We knocked again. This time she very simply declared, "I am not going to risk my life by hiding Jews". All of our persuasions and promises of financial gain fell onto deaf ears. Her mother then came out. She was helpless and heartbroken. It was nearly curfew time, and we found ourselves trapped in the city.

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CHAPTER 7

My brother Cadok's first reaction was to return to the Little Ghetto. He was depressed, with no will to live. On the same street, I knew a tailoring shop and I knew the tailoress, Mrs Marcinczak. She was one of our old customers. The only thing I didn't know was whether she was running the shop in partnership with another tailor, or alone. As I went into the workshop, she told me to wait outside for a little while until they closed the shop. Her son, Geniek, about 15 years old, came and told us to follow them home at a discreet distance. I remembered where she lived, but surprisingly, we went in a different direction. She had moved and her new place didn't seem very safe.

It was a country style house with a square courtyard. In the centre of the square was a water pump – the only water supply. All the houses situated around the courtyard were the same size as Mrs Marcinczak's. There was only one bedroom with two beds and a small kitchen with a stove. Only room for one person to do the cooking. Mrs Marcinczak really wanted to help us. She told my brother and me to sleep in one bed for the time being, and she slept with her son in the other.

The night turned into weeks, and never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that we could stay for very long in those circumstances, as the place was so small to accommodate the four of us. Weeks passed. Mrs Marcinczak and her son left in the mornings, she to her workshop and Geniek to school. My brother and I stayed in the room, peeping out through the curtain into the neighbourhood. We got to know the movements of all the neighbours very well as well as their individual activities. We still felt unsafe and wanted to find somewhere else more secure, either through Mrs Marcinczak, or hoping that Marysia (my girlfriend) might change her mind.

Unfortunately, Mrs Marcinczak's business partner lived close by with his family. According to her, he was a very suspicious type, and we had to be very careful of him. Mrs Marcinczak suggested that it would be a mistake for her to be seen to look for other accommodation now, as the neighbours kept saying "pani sie zamyka jakby zydow przechovala", – "You keep always your door shut, as if you are hiding Jews".

One evening I decided to visit Marysia. It was about four or five weeks after the liquidation of the ghetto, on a cold winter night, with my face was hidden behind a woollen scarf. Nobody noticed me on the cold deserted streets. I knocked and was greeted by Marysia's mother. She recognized me and and let me in immediately. I told her how desperate we were to find somewhere safe to hide. She was very sympathetic and really willing to help, but it all depended on her daughter Marysia. She was due to arrive home soon. When she arrived and saw me, she abused her mother for letting me in. My begging and persuasion once again fell on deaf ears. I left and returned to Mrs Marcinczak's room. My brother was so heartbroken by the news. I had to convince him that we had nothing to lose by staying where we were for the time being. He had to calm down and accept this situation, and not to endanger us any more. I feared that he had lost his mind. After that he was so quiet, barely opening his mouth to say a word. He seemed to be unaware of anything around him. Mrs Marcinzak and Geniek encouraged us to be positive and were sure that we would find somewhere safe.

On Sundays Mrs Marcinczak and Geniek dressed up to go to church. This was to create a good impression with the neighbours, but they usually ended up at the black market to buy

their weekly provisions. Every Sunday we gave Mrs Marcinczak some money to contribute to our upkeep. She always politely accepted whatever we could give her and never demanded one cent more. Our money was running low, but we still had some valuables such as gold and jewellery which we hoped to be able to sell.

On one particular Sunday, I asked her to visit one of our old customers, Mrs Hotynska, to let her know to expect a visit from me one night soon during the week. This lady was the person who had once already tried to help us put my sister's little boy into a Christian orphanage after my sister was deported. (The little boy died) Shortly after this, I went to see Mrs Hotynska. She was expecting me and I left her a few pieces of jewellery to sell. I knew I could trust her and told her of my brother's condition and the enormous risks Mrs. Marcinczak was taking by hiding us. Mrs Hotynska said to come back in a few days and that, without making any promises, she would see what she could do.

One freezing night shortly after, I returned to see her. She offered me a cup of tea and and a packet full of money. She explained that she had tried to get top prices for the jewellery, and I asked if she had taken her commission. She refused to do so and insisted that we would need it more than she. With tears in her eyes she said this was in gratitude for everything my mother did for her. She was unsuccessful in finding any new safe hiding place for us. She had even spoken to some priests, without any luck. She said to keep in touch with her in case something came up in the future.

When I left her place, it was very close to curfew, and I crossed to the quieter side of the road, heading home. I then noticed two men who crossed as well. After walking a short distance, I saw that they were not too far behind. Suddenly a few more steps, and they were in front of me blocking my path. Peering into my face, the one said to the other, "You see it is a zyd (jew)". I asked them to leave me alone, and put I my hand into my pocket and hoped that the knuckleduster which I now gripped firmly looked like a gun. I had hidden the money very carefully under my heavy winter clothing. I left a few hundred zlotys, about the value of a packet of cigarettes, in my front pocket. Keeping my hand firmly in my pocket and pointing it like a gun, I said, "I will shoot you like two dogs". My dutch courage made them retreat, and I gave them the zlotys and told them to buy themselves a drink, and forget the whole thing. They took the money and vanished across the road. I kept turning my head to check if I was still being followed, but there was no one in sight. I never told my brother about this incident. I told him only that the jewellery had been sold, but we were unsuccessful with finding a new hiding place. I did not want him to lose hope.

It was now about February 1943, and we continued to watch the daily life outside through the crack in the curtains. On one occasion we saw a man approach our front door and after knocking, and getting no answer, he left a piece of paper under the door. That evening Mrs Marcinczak read the paper, which stated that he would come back on the following Sunday to make a census of the inhabitants in the household. Now we were faced with a new problem. What would we do on Sunday, when he came? We would have to go away and come back only after the census was completed. The room was small: two beds, a wardrobe between them against the wall, and a little table opposite, there was no room for any other furniture. We decided that the only thing we could do was to hide behind the wardrobe. We practiced a few times, and felt we could get away with it. We also decided that Geniek should stay in bed to give the impression that he had the flu, and cough as much as possible to cover any sounds which might come from behind the wardrobe.

The census man arrived the next day. My brother and I were now behind the wardrobe and Geniek in bed, coughing constantly. The census man left very quickly. In these tragic

circumstances, we were able to still have a good laugh! I now felt even more the urgency of somehow securing emergency hiding. We decided to lift a few planks of timber from the floor and to dig a hole in the ground underneath it. The soil was very soft because we were very close to a river. With bare hands we scooped out the soil and put it into little paper bags, which Geniek took away at night. After about two weeks of very hard work we had dug a space big enough for my brother and I to stand in up to our waist. The trouble began, when water started to seep into the hole. Because we couldn't dig deeper, we decided to make the hole wider to be able to sit in it. We kept an eye on the level of water draining into the hole every day.

One evening Mrs Marcinczak told us we were going to have a visitor. Her business partner had asked if she would accommodate one of his relatives for the night. Mrs Marcinczak agreed so that for once and for all she could dispel any suspicions that others may have had that she was hiding someone. The following night, before we went into the hole we put some blankets on the soil. We took a thermos flask and settled down for the night.

Mrs Marcinczak felt as if we were being buried alive. She never closed an eye all night. She was a devout Catholic and prayed to all the saints for our survival. She was sure that she would find two suffocated bodies the next morning. The following day when the visitor left, and we climbed out of the hole, Mrs Marcinczak cried for joy, seeing us alive and what a relief it was for my brother and me to stretch out our bodies on the floor!

Days and weeks passed and we knew with spring approaching, we would have to leave soon. We had no new hiding place in sight. I made another visit to Mrs Hotynska in hope that she might find something for us, but nothing eventuated. Easter arrived and it was now time to leave. I will never forget the faces of Mrs Marcincak and Geniek. They were so sad and helpless because they could not give us more shelter. She assured us that we could always rely on her help, but circumstances made it impossible for the time being. We then left. It was Easter, 1943.

Our only hope now was to join the partisans. Rumours were that groups of partisans were active in the forest on the other side of the River Bug and we walked in that direction, mostly at night, to avoid people. One morning, after a few days of walking, we were in an isolated shed, and my brother broke down. He felt that he had no strength left to continue. He wanted to turn himself over to the Germans and felt that he was only a burden to me. I couldn't convince him that the only way to survive was for us to continue on. He refused to go any further, and in despair, took out his knife from the provision bag and wanted to cut his veins. After a tussle, I took the knife away and left him lying on the ground. He howled like a dog, and I couldn't persuade him to stop. The last thing I wanted to do was leave him, and to calm him down I then agreed to take him back to Lublin, to try to get back into the Lipova 7 Camp, where conditions were relatively good compared with the other camps. I assured him of the many friends I had there. They were the ex-prisoners of war from Stalag 17, who remained there after being repatriated. They were virtually running the camp. My brother was now calm and we started our walk back to Lublin. He walked behind me, and I felt sure that he had lost his mind.

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CHAPTER 8

Our one chance to get into the camp was to be there on a Friday, when the groups were taken to the showers outside the camp. We got into the building by forcing a door on the Thursday night, and we lay down under some benches, until the first groups started arriving. It was now exactly two weeks since we left Mrs Marcincak on Good Friday.

The first of the groups arrived, and we joined them and had a good shower; it was the first good wash in a fortnight. We approached the *Gruppenführer* and explained our plight, hoping he would help us after we mentioned the names of a few of our friends from Stalag 17. He agreed to try to help us when we got back to camp, but feared that there might be trouble with the German guards. The group lined up to return to the camp, and it was at this time that, after the headcount, that we were discovered. When we returned to camp, we were separated and locked up at about midday. The Germans then started our interrogation.

This was this time that there was the uprising and subsequent liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto. During our interrogation, the Germans insisted that we were escapees from the Ghetto and had taken part in the uprising. I told my brother that we must agree to tell the same story – that we had been in the Warsaw Ghetto and walked all the way to Lublin to join Lipova 7 camp, where conditions were believed to be better. We were to insist that we had left Warsaw about three weeks before the uprising. During these interrogations, my brother and I were separated. We were beaten severely by the guards, mostly lituanian SS. I could hardly move after these beatings, but was surprised to find that my brother was in pretty good shape, they didn't give him half the treatment. He stuck to our story that we had returned willingly to Lublin. We were still in the cell expecting the worst, but deep in my heart I was hoping that news of our situation would reach people who could get us out, including the tailors, who had been our customers in pre-war years, and who were working for high ranking Germans in the camp. My brother seeing me beaten up and covered in blood, started crying and said, "I was a burden to you," and kept repeating, "It's my fault, it's my fault".

My brother Cadok was always the darling in my mother's heart. I always felt my mother's love was not equally shared between the siblings. My brother was sent away for holidays on his own to special resorts. His appearance was very lean and pale and not very robust, perhaps because he spent a lot of time in the shop and worked very hard, but he was also good looking and didn't look Jewish at all. Cadok and my younger brother, Gidal, looked alike.

I mention my brother's behaviour specifically at the time we were locked up because I had the feeling that he wasn't very happy with himself. I knew he felt guilty for his behaviour towards me in the prewar years. My brother had harassed me and made life difficult for me by always criticizing my behaviour. I had spent a lot of time socializing and having fun and my brother resented this because he had to work so hard.

Late in the afternoon, the cell doors opened up and to my delight, I saw a familiar face. It was a friend, one of the ex-inmates of Stalag 17, in Germany and many times he had visited our home in the ghetto. The guard handed us over to him, and while walking back to the barracks, he told us it was only a miracle that they let us stay in the camp. He also told us that the tailors had also put in a good word for us. Now once again in Lipova 7, we lived in barracks mostly

occupied by civilians. Other barracks were inhabited by ex-prisoners, who were now the elite. The whole administration of the camp was now run by these people.

On the second day back in Lipova, my brother was sent out to work. On his return, he told me that he was once again working on the *Sportplatz*, the same place where he had worked when he went from the ghetto. I was in no condition to work. The beating I had received had left me in a very bad condition, and I was exempted from work. When my health improved, I was allocated to the same group as my brother. About 50 of us worked on the *Sportplatz*, grading and improving the field. Occasionally we were sent to the old ghetto to demolish old buildings and do sanitary work. The Poles inhabited only the better homes.

While we were in the camp, we heard news of the many setbacks the German army had on the Russian front, it seemed only a matter of time before they would be completely defeated. It was late summer of 1943. We still had contact with Mrs. Marcinczak and knew we could rely on her. My plan was to escape from camp about October or November. I planned to take the same route as a year before, at Lipova 7, over the wall adjoining cemetery. I knew many of the ex-prisoners in camp had connections with the Polish underground, and it was their plan to destroy the camp and escape. Our camp wasn't really heavily guarded and it was only a matter of time before making this escape. I thought that then time my brother and I would be reunited with Mrs. Marcinczak. This wasn't to be. One morning in early November, we were woken by sirens in the camp.

German and Lithuanian SS were in the barracks, and they ordered us to get dressed and get out for an inspection. It was still dark. We stood in rows until daybreak, while they counted our numbers. They searched us and the barracks, in what seemed like a security check for hidden weapons and didn't seem at all suspicious. On this occasion we were very heavily guarded, and this was unusual.

Columns of people in front of us were being marched out of the camp, then it was our turn. Once out of the gate, I realized we were being marched towards KZ Majdanek. All of my plans of escaping came to an end. It would have been so easy to go over the wall a few days before. I turned to my brother and said "Let's run, I got away once from a marching column, it's worth a try again." He said, "You do what is right for you, I can't be a burden to you any more". We continued to march towards Majdanek, and while passing the fields, we saw men, women and children dressed in striped suits and matching caps.

When we reached the Fifth Field, near the crematorium, there were thousands of people, gathered from all different working places in town, marching in a slow procession towards the end of the field, where there were prepared trenches. We could hear sounds of music.

At this point we were stopped. I took out some gold coins and gave them to my brother. Nearby a car pulled up, and some high ranking SS officers got out and started to make their selection. They called out different trades, e.g. Welders, Tailors, and Shoemakers. We all wanted to be selected, but only the physically strong men were. I was chosen, but my brother Cadok was not so lucky and shared the same fate as most of the others who were gathered on the Fifth Field.

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CHAPTER 9

About sixty of us were put into a barrack in Majdanek. We were given some provisions, and to our surprise, even some bottles of alcohol. We were told horrible news that the remainder of the people, including my brother Cadok, were machine-gunned in the fields and were already being cremated by the inmates. We, meanwhile were well fed and anxiously awaited to see the reason for our selection. On the third day we were ordered out of the barrack. Three army trucks waited outside. And twenty of us were loaded in each truck. Under heavy guard, we left Majdanek. We didn't know where they were taking us, but many thoughts came to mind, including perhaps being used for medical experiments. It was probably only a matter of time before we would share the same fate as the rest on the Fifth Field of Majdanek.

We drove for about two hours and arrived in a forest and stopped in front of a campsite surrounded by barbed wire. There was only one barrack inside the wire fence and another outside to accommodate the guards. We lined up inside the new camp and were lectured by the Commander in charge, a high ranking SS Officer, who appeared to have a sympathetic face. He asked if there were any high ranking officers from the Polish Army and selected one of them to be in command. He gave him instructions as to how our duties were to be carried out.

The orders were that half of us were to leave the camp to work outside and the rest were to stay behind and work inside the camp.

The first meal in the camp was very good. It was midday and we had cheese, salami and even some bottles of brandy. All of this good food didn't convince us that it would stay like this.

Our first surprise came next morning, when we were ordered out of the barrack for the routine check. The chief SS officer's assistant, whose name was Rudi, took the order to select six men to follow him. I was one of them. We walked out to the army truck, thinking that they were going to take us somewhere, but were ordered to get into the truck to remove the contents. There were provisions, tools, shovels, picks, trays that looked like stretchers, wheelbarrows and what seemed to be a cement mixer. Also about twenty cannisters filled with petrol, and bundles of shackles. A few more men joined us to help unload. The shackles were taken inside the camp. By this time we already suspected what work we had to do. The next day we started to work outside the camp.

Our work was to exhume and cremate bodies. One group exhumed the bodies. Another group carried the bodies on the metal trays to be cremated. Most of the bodies were recognizable and not yet decomposed, still in their Russian Army uniforms. They had been shot with their hands tied behind their backs. Our group cremated them. We were called "Heizer", "the men who burn things." The method we used for cremation was as follows: we built a pyramid out of rows of logs and rows of bodies, and splashed them with petrol. The pyramid of about fifty bodies was set ablaze. If I shut my eyes I can still see the fires burning. The delight of the SS Officers and the praise for our work was evident when we reported the number of corpses burned, but to our amazement we were told not to refer to them as corpses, but simply "Figuren". After cremating the bodies, we sprayed the ashes with water and removed the remains to the "cement mixer". This was actually a grinding machine. The piles of bones and

remains from the ashes were ground up and put into bags and taken away. We continued our work, but surprisingly, a few days later the guards shackled our legs. We were chained together and ordered to keep the chains clean. Four more men were allocated to our chain gang in order to speed up the work. Now two pyramids with "Figuren" were burning simultaneously. We knew how long the work would take according to the number of graves left.

Until now our work had gone smoothly, with no beatings or harassment – we had performed our jobs perfectly. The SS officers in charge never failed to mention, during our morning inspection, the wonderful jobs awaiting us when our work here was finished.

We continued to build the pyramids of bodies. Every now and then a big truck, like a furniture removal van, arrived. We wondered what it was for, until the driver stepped aside after opening the back. The smell of carbon gas made us realize the contents of the load were heaps of dead bodies, which we were now ordered to remove and add them to the pyres for cremation. The trucks came often.

The guards were mostly older men, all in their sixties. One incident which I will never forget, was when one of these guards, a German, ordered me to remove a nice pair of shoes from one of the bodies from the truck. I did so and gave them to him. Two days later, he rewarded me with two packets of cigarettes. Another day, a four-wheel wagon, the kind used by peasants, but driven by a German guard, arrived at our compound. On the wagon, he had the body of a Jewish man, with a noose still around his neck. The German guard had been friendly towards me in the past, and we had had conversations. When we spoke about the atrocities being committed, his only answer was, "Look what they are doing to our cities. The Allies are killing thousands of people and destroying our cities." I told him "How can you compare murder with war?" He seemed ashamed, and not able to reply. I felt that he was a good man, just an ordinary man caught up in the war.

The barrack where we lived was erected on uneven ground with wooden supports at the back of the building to keep it level. We made plans to try and dig a tunnel underneath the barrack in the shortest direction towards the barbed wire to get outside the compound. By lifting the square floor boards, we found there to be enough room to dig underneath and dispose of the soil. By day, the Germans were happy with our work. We were treated well, rewarded every few days with bottles of brandy, and promises that when our work was finished, we would be send to work on farms in Germany. By night after we returned to our barrack, our work would continue with the digging of the tunnel which was to be our path to freedom. Usually six or seven of us, would dig out the soil under the floor, forming a chain as we passed the soil, one to the other, to be put into the right place, while others kept watch for unexpected visits by the Germans in charge. One night, the men on watch signaled us to stop work, because they saw the Germans come into the compound. In our haste to cover up our work, the floor wasn't replaced properly. Thankfully, as it was on the side of the barracks, and went unnoticed by the Germans during the inspection that followed.

A few days later, around Christmas time, we were given a big party with lots of food and alcohol. However, another surprise awaited us. We were ordered to dig a big bunker, big enough to accommodate us. When it was ready, we were told that this would be where we would sleep from then on. We were terribly depressed, all of our hard work digging the tunnel, which up until this point had progressed so well, would come to an end. I suspect that the Germans knew that we were planning something and were one step ahead of us. Two of our fellow inmates, whose job was to care for the Germans' barracks, had been promised good things in exchange for information as to what went on in our compound.

Our first night in the bunker left us feeling very depressed. It seemed like the end for us and we were all resigned to end our lives by committing a mass suicide. We planned to smuggle in a petrol can and blow ourselves up. On the third or fourth day after moving into that bunker, a new plan came to life. Parallel to our bunker, but outside the barbed wire fence, was mass grave which we had been clearing. After the graves were cleared, they were left open for a few days. We calculated that if we could dig through to that grave, a distance of approximately ten metres, it might take us about ten nights and we might be able to get free. As soon as we returned to our sleeping bunker at nightfall, work started. We knew that we only had a few days before the outside open grave would be filled in and had to work very quickly to reach it.

On the night we were supposed to die in the grave, we drew numbers to see in what order to crawl out. I drew number fourteen. The man who had worked on the bone crusher had some tools to cut the chains on our legs. He cut the shackle on my left leg, but couldn't remove the ring on my right leg. As time was precious, I left with the ring still attached. Crawling towards freedom, our plan was to crawl towards the open grave and wait until we were all there. The next obstacle was to crawl towards the barbed wire, which the first men to reach would cut. So now it was my turn to crawl, I had to take off the heavy winter jacket so I could crawl swiftly. As I reached the opening, I was surprised to see those who had gone ahead of me and a wall of soil. We realized the opening was not in the empty grave, so we jumped quickly over the wall of soil into the grave, where some of the others had gone before us. The opening was exactly on the path where the German guards made their rounds. It was only a matter of seconds before the opening hole would be discovered. We abandoned our plans and crawled towards the barbed wire. As I reached the wire the alarm sirens went off and the shooting started. I got to my feet and started to run. Two more joined me and so we ran together, not having any specific sense of direction. Suddenly the shooting stopped and an air raid siren started, all the lights went out and Russian planes flew overhead.

By daybreak, three of us found ourselves in a forest. We decided to take refuge in some straw huts in an orchard nearby. We were exhausted and lay down and fell asleep. It was snowing very heavily and we felt secure that our footprints in the snow would soon be covered.

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CHAPTER 10

Of my two fellow escapees, one called Reznik, was an ex-prisoner-of-war, the other was Sterdiner, who was the toolmaker and made the cutting tools for the shackles. That evening we decided to find out exactly where we were and get some directions to find out way back to Lublin. We knew we were in the district of Chełm, not far from the River Bug. We knew that we were not too far from Lublin and I told the others, "If we get to Lublin, I would have a safe place at least until the summer". Reznik's plan was to get to the other side of the River Bug which was much closer to the Eastern Front. For the next two days, mostly hidden during the day and walking at night, we looked to find the right direction for either one of our plans. We were unsuccessful and always found ourselves back in the same area.

Finally, we decided to walk by day. It was a Sunday and about four days since our escape, and as we continued to walk along the highway we saw a horse-drawn typical Polish peasant style carriage approaching us. We could see German soldiers sitting on it. We ran as fast as we could into the deep snow covered paddocks. As the wagon came into parallel line with us, we saw German police get down off the wagon and started shooting in our direction, but without chasing us. We lost Sterdiner who fell, he must have been hit by a bullet, and Reznik and I ran without stopping or looking back until we came to the edge of a village. Once again we found a deserted barn where we crawled in, covered ourselves with straw, and totally exhausted, fell asleep.

When I awoke later, night was approaching. I woke Reznik and we left the barn. Not far away we saw a man walking towards the water well. He was carrying two buckets to fetch some water. We approached him to ask directions and find out where we were. He told us the name of this village was Danbek, and also told us that some German soldiers had been asking the villagers if they had seen any Russian prisoners-of-war, but left after being told that not too many strangers were seen in these parts. We told him that we were Polish prisoners-of-war and had escaped and probably we were the ones they were looking for. The man noticed the shackle on my leg and asked us if we were hungry. Of course we were. He brought us some bread and hot soup from his house. He watched us all the time and I had no doubt that he wanted to help us. He told us that we were not too far from the River Bug and our chances of crossing it were good as the river was still frozen solid. He also told us not to go into the village of Danbek, after crossing the river but to stay to the left which would lead to the highway. He warned us to stay away from the village because the German army stationed there, with the help of local villagers were preparing defences and digging trenches against the Russians.

After thanking him we left and went in the direction we were told. It was now pitch dark. The river was frozen solid and we crossed without any problem. On the other side, we saw the typical village houses and tried to get to the highway, bypassing the village of Danbek, as we had been advised. Unfortunately, it was past curfew time and we were noticed by soldiers on duty, who started shooting at us. We ran into one of the abandoned houses. We climbed up to the attic and the shooting stopped. It seemed safe enough and we decided to stay here for the night and have a decent night's sleep.

The following morning we only left the house when we saw people coming into the village to work. We saw the Germans, the Wehrmacht, giving orders to the villagers to dig

trenches. We found some tools and joined the work force without being noticed by the German soldiers. A short distance away, we could see the highway and without any effort, headed off in this direction. Once on the highway, we kept going as we had been told, by always keeping to the left. The people who lived in these parts were White Russians. We walked for about ten kilometers, hardly seeing a soul, until we saw some houses in the distance to the left side of the road. As we approached one of these houses, to our surprise, a man came out to greet us.

He must have seen us approaching. My companion Reznik, spoke Russian fluently and he explained to the man in Russian, that we were escaped prisoners-of-war and asked if there were any partisans there. We were invited inside and were overwhelmed by the hospitality. We were well fed and given information we needed. We found out that the area was full of partisans and we would not have any trouble finding them. Before we left, the man cut the remaining shackle from my right ankle. We left, well fed and full of hope and walked towards the next village hoping to find the partisans. The people in the next village were also friendly, they were White Russians, and according to them it would be only a matter of time before we would make contact with some partisans, who came often to the village for provisions.

It didn't take long before some partisans came into the village on horseback. They questioned us and we told them of our escape and the work we had been doing in the labour camp of exhuming and cremating of the bodies of the Russian prisoners of war. This conversation was held entirely in Russian with Resnik. He told me that they suspected us of being German spies. I told Resnik to point out to them my swollen ankle from the shackle which had only been removed hours earlier. They didn't believe us, and suggested that if we turn back towards the River Bug and bring some information about German activities around the Bug, they would consider us joining them. The partisans then left with a warning to us that if we were found in this area again, we would be shot. We couldn't possibly return to the River, especially me with my Semitic appearance and my friend, Reznik with his bad Polish language. We knew there were other partisans who were Polish, but how to find them?

We went from house to house looking for the Polish partisans. We were anxious to find them and felt the threat of the Russian partisan was serious. Most people were helpful and reassured us that the partisans were around and it was only a matter of time to find them. That evening, a peasant arrived on his horse-drawn carriage. He told us to get on to the wagon. Resnik asked him in Russian, "Where are you taking us?" He replied, "To the right place, not to worry". I felt confident that he had good intentions. We traveled a few kilometers to an isolated house, where we were greeted by a man with a rifle. He questioned us as to who we were and we then followed him into the house. In the corner of the room, a man lay on a stretcher. He looked very sick, and was suffering from typhus.

We later found out that our driver had earlier come here to get permission from the partisans to bring Reznik and I to join them. There were two partisans there caring for, and keeping guard over, the sick officer. It would be his decision if we could stay or not. We felt very relieved; we were with the Polish partisans at last and felt safer and had a good night's sleep. The following day we tried to communicate with the sick officer. He had a very high temperature and was not capable of talking. Later in the day two other partisans arrived with medication and provisions. They were suspicious of us and once again asked questions as to who we were and were we were from. I felt afraid that they may not let us stay, but thankfully they agreed. That evening they asked me to be on night duty. I was very happy and felt that we had now been accepted, and I was given a gun and hand grenade and asked to keep watch. Holding that gun and taking guard on night duty was my happiest moment since escaping from the Germans.

We stayed there for about six days and got on very well with the others. The sick officer's health was improving and he had only to regain his strength. He assured us that we had nothing to fear and he would gladly have us in his platoon. This officer was very friendly and full of admiration for us when he heard about our escape. He explained that his platoon was one of the group of partisans with the name Jeszcze Polska Niezginela, meaning "Poland is Never Lost".

My friend Reznik, and I remained with the platoon. We were impressed by how well the camp was organized. The officer continued to treat us very well and we were always willing and ready to do things for him without being asked. Now and again the Officer sneaked out of the camp for his personal pleasure! I always accompanied him on these little excursions. We always avoided the Wehrmacht, the German Army, but from time to time we let them know that we were around.

One morning, while lining up for the daily inspection, a volunteer was called for to carry the two-way radio. As usual, I was first to volunteer and that night, with the radio pack on my back, we went out on a mission to a pre-arranged place. The "Radzista", the radio controller, made contact with some aircraft. We were expecting them to drop some arms for us. We lit fires to mark the area, and shortly after the planes approached, bundle after bundle dropped from the sky. As the mission was completed, it was important for us to move quickly and leave with our drop of arms, before the German Army were on to us.

Knowing that they would be looking for us for the next few days, we remained on high alert.

The German Army continued to pursue us for several days. One morning, on the second day after the drop, with the German Army very close on our heels, and after a barrage of gunfire, we suffered two casualties. One of them was my friend Resnik. He was shot dead and from accounts I heard later on, he was the first to fall. A witness, one of our partisan group, went to help him but found him already dead. Although we didn't have a close friendship, we shared the bond of escape and survival up to that moment, and now I felt very sad. The other casualty was a partisan.

For the next few weeks I continued to accompany the "Radzista". He became very unfriendly and abusive. He drank a lot and when he was drunk, he was at his worst. He abused me and called me different names in Russian, which I hardly understood, and it was the first time I heard the name "Ivrey". By the Poles I was called "Zyd", By the Germans, "Jude", and now my Russian comrade showed the same antisemitic tendencies.

By now I had had enough of this treatment and spoke to my officer. I explained to him how I had been continually abused by the radio-controller and now I wanted to go back to the platoon. My officer arranged for me to rejoin them and I was very relieved to be back.

Back with platoon, I was given an anti-tank gun, Pretiv Tankum Ruze, (PTR). I carried out daily exercises, assembling and dissembling this gun, to become fully acquainted with it in case we needed to use it in action. The gun consisted of three parts and when fully assembled was about two metres long. It was impossible to carry it alone and therefore we were a team of three people: a marksman and two ammunition carriers to handle the gun and the ammunition boxes that went with it.

One night we were involved in a local action against the Germans combined with a local partisan group with the name Armia Ludowa. The Germans were occupying a large estate and

our goal was to just shake them up a bit. We assembled on a highway overlooking the estate. We took our positions and waited for the order to start shooting. At that point we heard a whisper that the Germans were on the main highway and everyone started retreating back into the forest, including my ammunition carriers. I was now left alone with the gun. I could follow the others but had to carry the two-metre gun on my own. This was extremely difficult and I had no choice but to leave the gun right there because by now I was also completely alone in the forest. Finally I joined the group again. The commanding officer of that particular partisan group started to abuse me for abandoning the gun and I was promptly arrested. I explained to him that it was my intention to go back in the early morning with my carriers and retrieve the gun. This explanation wasn't satisfactory, but the following morning, he agreed to let me go back with a wagon and another man to look for the gun. We arrived at the point where I thought I had left the gun and to my amazement it was exactly where we had left it. We took the gun back to the local partisan group, under the scrutiny of the Germans, and waited for my patrol to pick me up from the main group, to return to our quarters. I was escorted back and put under arrest, and told that the penalty for dropping a weapon in the war years, was a Court-Martial and possibly a death sentence.

During the Court-Martial that followed, my officer and my two ammunition carriers were all called as character witnesses, to explain the circumstances leading up to the retreat and abandonment of the gun. It was never my intention to abandon the gun and I had always intended to go back and retrieve the following with help. It was impossible for me to run with the gun into the forest without any assistance.

After a short interval, the Court announced the verdict that, "Perec Szechtman is sentenced to death for abandoning the gun, but, by retrieving the gun he showed his intention of putting it down for safe-keeping". Therefore, my punishment was now only to be stripped of my rank of Sergeant to the lowest possible rank and the death sentence was rescinded.

After this ordeal, I was afraid that I would be humiliated by my fellow partisans. To my surprise I was greeted by the commanding officer, who assured me that my behaviour was not cowardly, but on the contrary, it was the only way to ensure the safety of the PTR gun in these extraordinary circumstances. I felt very relieved to hear his words spoken in front of the whole platoon. My two fellow ammunition carriers came to me, embraced me and showed how relieved and guilty they felt, for deserting me.

The daily news bulletins were good. The Germans were in full retreat on all fronts and our platoon was always ahead of them, hampering their moves. The Germans were already pushed back from all the Russian territories. Occasionally we captured one of their soldiers. One morning, while positioned on the edge of a forest with my PTR gun, awaiting the retreating soldiers, we heard a motorized column approaching. I positioned myself to fire the first shot, but my commanding officer pushed me away saying, "Let me do the honours". He fired the bullet and killed the German instantly. We took the motor cycle, and some of his personal belongings. I found a leather folder (passport). We left the scene immediately but no more German soldiers passed this way again. Today, this leather folder and a certificate of serving with the partisans, are my only relics of the war.

It didn't take long for the Russian Army to push the Germans to the other side of the River Wisła, and occupy Praga, a suburb of Warsaw. All fighting by now had stopped.

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CHAPTER 11

My hometown, Lublin, was liberated, and it was my strong desire to return there. I wanted to appear before the Russian Prosecutor, who was investigating German atrocities on Russian prisoners-of-war and civilians as well. My commanding officer promised me that he would contact the headquarters of the partisan group, Jeszcze Polska Niezginela, to help me to testisfy. A day later, I had a pass to go to Lublin to testify before the Commission. Lublin was only about two hours away from our camp. Wearing Polish army uniforms supplied by the partisans, it was very easy to hitch-hike a ride, and in no time, an army lorry got me back to Lublin.

As I walked through the centre of Lublin, I couldn't believe my luck to be there. I was alive, healthy and a free man. I was overjoyed, not fully comprehending that I was alone: no parents, brothers, sister, not even a distant relative had survived.

I found my old friend Mrs Marcincak and Geniek, her son. She was very happy to see me, and said I could stay as long as I liked. She asked about my brother Cadok, and I could only tell her about the way he was killed in Majdanek, and my miraculous escape and survival, during the eighteen months since I had seen her last.

After a sleepless night, I reported the next day to the headquarters of the partisan group, where I awaited further instructions, as well as official papers. After reporting to General Satanowsky, the head of our partisan group, I made a full report of my imprisonment, and the duties I carried out while imprisoned. Before I left he gave me a certificate stating that I had served with the partisans at that time, and to consider myself free unless I had a recall. Having this letter I decided to see the Prosecutor for German Crimes the next day.

After looking around the city, I hoped to find somebody that I knew. I hoped perhaps by some miracle, other Jews had also survived. I visited the Jewish quarter, now mostly inhabited by Poles. I felt like a stranger. I met someone with a Jewish appearance. We conversed in Polish, but then switched to *mamalushen*, Yiddish. He told me that a Jewish Committee existed and if I didn't have anywhere to stay, I could stay at Perec Home, a home which offered temporary accommodation for Jewish people.

I found the Jewish Committee, who were located in my old soccer club, Hakoah. The person in charge, Leon Aronson, was well known to me. We embraced each other, and he offered me a room in his apartment, where I spent that night, in the building owned by my parents. The Committee also offered me some financial assistance.

The following day I went to the Russian Prosecutor for German Crimes. I gave him the letter from my General and explained that I only spoke Polish or German. To my surprise he asked if I spoke Yiddish. I nearly fell off the chair, and I assured him that I did.

I explained to him exactly what had happened to me between November, l943 to the end of February, 1944. I don't think I left out many details. I was sitting next to him, he didn't look Jewish at all, but his Yiddish was music to my ears. He never turned his face towards me, and while I was talking, he kept turning the pages of the files on his desk, and listened.

Unexpectedly, he then asked me whether I knew the name Sterdiner. "Sure", I answered, "he was with me in the same camp before my escape. In fact, he was the third person on the run with me, whilst escaping from the Germans." I was curious to know why the Prosecutor had mentioned this name. I then learned that Sterdiner had survived and had not been shot dead after all. The Prosecutor told me that my information was word for word consistent with Sterdiner's story. He told me where I could reach him, and I could hardly wait to see him again. The next morning I went to find him. He was living in a room in the girls section of what had been my old high school. This was now converted into accommodation for Jewish refugees who were continually returning to liberated Lublin. I found his room and knocked on the door. Sterdiner appeared and was astounded to see me. The look of disbelief on his face when he realized who I was! We exchanged stories of how we had survived. I particularly wanted to know how he had survived, because we had been convinced that he had been shot. Sterdiner then told me that he had fallen from exhaustion and not bullet wounds. Some time after he revived, and he hid in the fields in a storage cellar which was normally used for storing potatoes. Each day he would forage for food and that was how he survived until springtime, when some peasants from the nearest village found him while searching for a lost cow. Luckily they took him in and because of his mechanical and engineering skills, they allowed him to stay in the village and work. One morning, when he heard that Lublin had been liberated, he left and found his way back there. We had the same plan and that was to settle in Palestine and we continued to see each other from time to time.

Before the war, my family rented the shop, which was run by my mother, and our apartment where we lived. However, we owned a large block of flats. It was my aim to reclaim my family's property, and it only took a very short while before I had the title deeds and started collecting rent from the tenants, although I really wanted to sell the property now. After getting a few offers, I decided not to sell as the offers were only a fraction of its real value.

For the first few weeks after my return to Lublin, I couldn't make up my mind what to do with myself – everything I did had no purpose, I was at a loss. My only thought then was to return to my partisan group, although by then they had been recruited back into the Polish army.

One evening while visiting Leo Aronson, I was introduced to a young lady who was staying with him. Her name was Stella Kohen, a daughter of Herc Kohen, Editor of the only Jewish newspaper in Lublin before the war years, *Yidisher Lubliner Tugblat*. I was so enchanted by her looks, I couldn't take my eyes off her, she looked like a real *shikse,* meaning not a trace of "Jewishness" in her face. We spent the evening telling each other our survival stories. She survived because of her non-Jewish appearance and also the fact that she had somehow obtained false papers, declaring the fact that she was not Jewish. She had worked as a nanny for the children of a well-to-do Polish family at Saska Kepa, a suburb of Warsaw, on the side of River Wisła, already occupied by the Russians.

Knowing that Lublin was now liberated, she was anxious to return in the hope to find some of her family, specifically her older sister. She confronted her employers, telling them that she wanted to leave and also telling them that she was a Jew. As she explained this to them, their reaction was not of surprise, as they knew all along that she was Jewish and they had wanted to help her. To my amazement, Stella also told me that she knew my younger brother Gidal, from school. They were the same age. That night I didn't go back to my apartment, but stayed at Aronson's place, as our conversation took hours telling the unbelievable stories to each other. After that meeting, Stella was my only interest. We met almost every day and dined together often.

I felt that there were certain obstacles in my relationship with Stella. Leon, her cousin was making advances as well as trying to protect her. She had a room in his apartment, and I felt very threatened by this. I had been telling Stella my plans to settle in Palestine on my father's orchards, purchased before the war, and now I was hoping that she might come with me. I explained to her that we could get help from the Schlichim, people from the Jewish Agency in Palestine. This group helped the survivors get to Palestine and assisted them as much as possible.

By now, a few hundred Jews lived in Lublin, mostly Jews who returned from Russia, as well as some who were hidden by Christians. Comments by certain Poles "that they reappear like mushrooms after the rain" were heard and shocked me. Jews were also being murdered while claiming their properties in some of the smaller townships. All of these events gave me more and more motivation to want to leave Poland and I wanted Stella to come with me. I was now determined to leave either way. The plan was to get us to Romania, to the port of Constanza and from there by ship, to Palestine.

By now I was financially more secure, and I decided to propose to Stella. I felt that she liked me but she was young and undecided. She also wanted to remain in Lublin for a while in the hope of finding her sister. Leon Aronson was really a big obstacle, as he proposed to her as well.

The winter was nearly over and I was really anxious to get out of Lublin. Many Jews had already left for Romania, and I was now ready to leave as well. I packed my few belongings in a rucksack and went to say goodbye to Stella. She started to cry and begged me to stay a little longer. Then in front of Aronson, she said, "I will go with you". We set a date to leave in two weeks from then. The next day Aronson came to congratulate me and suggested we have a proper Jewish wedding. On May 3,1945, I married Stella according to the Jewish law, and she became my wife.

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CHAPTER 12

Before we left, I gave Aronson authority to look after my property in Lublin until further notice. The next day, with our two rucksacks, we were on the train to Romania. The trip was very well organized by the Jewish Agency. I was overjoyed – firstly, I had Stella with me; secondly, I was out of Poland for good. I really thought it was very simple – just get to Constanza and from there by boat to Palestine. Exactly like the trip I made before the war. After arriving in Bucharest, our plans came to a halt. It wasn't quite that simple – the trip to Palestine was not legal, and everything had to be organized with top security and secrecy. At the station in Bucharest, we were met by people from the Jewish Agency and from the Joint (Jewish American Relief Organization), to assist us. We were part of a group of about thirty people, all with the same plans. We were all given separate accommodation so as not to raise any suspicion. Stella and I were taken to stay with a Romanian family, who had a room waiting for us, and there were given a letter with further instructions. Finally, that night, after a two day journey by train, we had a decent sleep, and Stella and I were together as husband and wife.

The following morning, following instructions, we set out by tram to meet the group of fellow travelers. We arrived at our destination only to discover large numbers of people with the same plans as us, all waiting to get to Palestine. Many of them had already been there for several weeks, waiting unsuccessfully for their turn. First we had to travel to Constanza, a port on the Black Sea and from there by ship to Palestine. This part of the journey was often hampered by the English blockade, which prevented ships from making the final crossing, ordering them to turn back. This news did not upset Stella and me, after all, this was our first day in Bucharest. Later that day, we started to understand what the situation really was. We weren't too worried because we knew we would have financial assistance.

So it began a long wait of nearly two months. By then the war had ended and the Germans had capitulated on all fronts. There were celebrations and joy, but for us, all we had were our memories; our families were never to be seen again.

The time we spent in Bucharest was for us, unforgettable. It was a real honeymoon. We explored the city's beautiful spots. The most memorable thing was when we saw the Jewish business district, Vacharesti. Shop after shop displaying goods were owned by Jews with all the signs were written in Yiddish.

I wondered at that time how come the Germans made Poland "Juden frei" and here, things looked as if nothing had happened to the Jewish population. Of course here were some deportations of Jews, but the majority of Jews survived. The Romanian Government was an ally of Hitler, but it opposed the deportations. Now with the war over, the English Blockade of the Black Sea was even stronger. Our only hope was to get to Italy and try to get to Palestine from one of the many ports there. We were ready for our immediate departure.

Our journey to Italy took us through Transylvania, Slovakia, then Budapest. While in Transylvania, an unusual thing happened as the train stopped at one of the many stations on the way. We were approached by a very religious Jewish man. He was wearing clothing in the typical Chassidic style. He asked me if we still had some Romanian currency. He wanted to exchange this for Hungarian Pengos. He offered us a very generous exchange rate, much more than the true worth. I was overjoyed with the transaction as the Romanian currency outside

of Romania was worthless. We continued our journey, and by the time we arrived to Kosice, Stella was ill.

We did everything possible to comfort her. Her knees were very swollen, making it impossible to walk. We finally arrived in Budapest where Stella consulted some doctors. She was advised to rest and apply cold compresses on her knees and not to walk until the swelling had gone down. During this compulsory stay in Budapest, I went out shopping to try and buy some clothes for Stella, to please her and cheer her up. I took out my precious Pengos to pay the saleslady. She took the money and spread it on the counter with a questioning look to say if I was making a joke. I asked if there was enough money to cover the purchases. She said, "Not at all, these notes were withdrawn from circulation a long time ago!". They were worthless. Nevertheless, I managed to buy a few garments for Stella, paying with the Dollars I had. I will never forget this experience with the pious Jew, and to this day whenever I see one, it brings a smile to my face, and I never trust them.

Stella's knees were improving and we were now part of a group of forty people, heading towards Graz, in Austria. We were accommodated in a luxury hotel with instructions not to leave the room, and wait for further instructions. With everything Stella had gone through with her knees, the rest was very beneficial. It was surprising to see that we were a group of about one hundred people staying at the hotel – I had no idea that there would be that many. Finally it was time to leave and when we were loaded into lorries to be taken to the Austro-Italian border. The Russian guards at the border turned a blind eye, perhaps they had been bribed, and from this point, we continued our journey on foot, through the mountain pass towards Italy. It wasn't really hard for me, but after about half an hour's walking, Stella's knees gave in again. It appeared that all the blood vessels in her knees had burst and she was now unable to walk. For the next few hours, until we reached Italian soil, she was carried in turn by different people in the group. I carried the two rucksacks, which were our only possessions.

Once we were on Italian soil, military trucks waited to take us to temporary camps near Modena. The trucks were driven by soldiers from the Jewish Brigade in the British Army. In Modena, Stella received more medical attention to her knees. Many soldiers from the Jewish Brigade came to the camp and showered us with gifts. Many of these soldiers were originally from Poland, or had settled in Palestine before the war, and constantly questioned us, hoping to find news of someone they knew, or of some family. Their assistance was magnificent while we were waiting to be transferred to one of the many refugee camps in Italy.

From the distance while watching the soldiers, I thought I recognized a face. I moved closer and with the word "Koska!" (his real name was Iser Korn), he looked at me, and with tears in his eyes, only to say "Peci, Peci" – our nicknames from school. From that day until our departure from the camp, he was constantly with us. He tried to be unendingly helpful. I told him what a terrible mistake I had made to leave Palestine and return to Poland. We both were studying at Haifa Technicum.

The camp was now under the supervision of UNRRA[1], and overcrowded with people all nationalities. We were refugees and known as Displaced Persons. Before our departure to one of the many camps in the south of Italy, I developed a rash on my face, some kind of eczema due to the hot weather conditions and received medical treatment. Stella's knees improved and the doctors were satisfied with both of our medical conditions to agree to our departure. Now,

1 United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

as part of a group of Jewish refugees we left for southern Italy, Santa Maria di Bagno, under the protection of the Jewish Agency, whose aim was to get us to Palestine.

After arriving in Santa Maria, we were told our stay would not be too long. At the first opportunity, we would be transported illegally to Palestine. We stayed at the camp waiting for the unknown. The camp was part of a small Mediterranean seaside resort and there were many little holiday houses. The rent for these was paid for by the UNRRA.

I spoke a little English which I had learned in Palestine before the war, and this proved to be very helpful. I became very involved in the camp's activities. My personal contact with the UNRRA officials enabled me to get Stella a paid job. She distributed food and clothing parcels to other refugees in the camp.

Groups of people, mostly couples, were being illegally transported to Palestine, all in utmost secrecy, as the English blockade was very strong. Couples given top priority were those with women in advanced stages of pregnancy. In order to help speed up our departure, we decided to try and get pregnant and by the end of 1945, Stella was pregnant and we were on the list to be selected. While our life in camp was very good and comfortable, it was still our ultimate goal to get to Palestine.

In February 1946 we were included in a group selected for departure. We transferred to Barletta, not far from the port of Bari, where our temporary accommodation was in corrugated, iron ex-army barracks. Stella was very unhappy with these changes and she started to cry. I reassured her that it was only for a short time until we could board the boat to achieve our goal.

We waited for about three months. Three times we boarded ships, but were taken off each time. The English blockade was very hard to penetrate. Many ships were intercepted and *Olim*, the people wanting to settle in Palestine, were taken off and taken to Cyprus and put behind barbed wire. All of this news had a very bad effect on Stella. By now she decided that all she wanted was to go back to our camp and have the baby in Italy. After all that we had been through the past three months, I agreed with her. We returned back to Santa Maria al Bagno, not to the same accommodation that we had before, but luxurious in comparison with the barracks in Barletta. I continued back in my position as interpreter, not only in English but by now Italian as well. Stella was happy and now looked forward to the birth of our child.

From the moment I arrived in Italy, I tried to locate my uncle Moshe Licht in Argentina, through the Joint. He was the younger brother of my mother. Finally I found out his address in Buenos Aires. We corresponded and in his letters to us, he indicated that he could never understand why we left Poland with its new Communist regime. He was a Communist before the war, and had to leave. I explained to him that our only goal now was to get to Palestine.

On several occasions, the *Schlichim,* the people who worked for the Jewish Agency, tried to include us in the next transport. Stella was determined not to go anywhere and stay until after the baby was born. The next few months passed leisurely and finally in mid-September, 1946, I accompanied her to Santa Maria di Leuca, about one hour away, to the hospital to await the arrival of our baby. Every day I travelled back and forth to the hospital and finally on Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New Year, September 25, 1946, I was delighted to become the father of a healthy beautiful baby girl. Stella was relieved and all I could hear from the nurses, Sisters of the Catholic faith, "Che bella bambola", "What a beautiful doll". The nuns took great care of Stella for the eight days of her stay in hospital after the birth. I made sure of that by bringing in large food parcels for the nuns to distribute every day to the other patients. I

celebrated with a few friends with plenty to vino. Some of them insisting to come with me to visit Stella.

Through my connections in Santa Maria al Bagno, I managed to improve our accommodation and organized everything for Stella and the baby's return. Stella had chosen to call the baby "Jochevet", after her mother's Hebrew name. We registered this name in the Municipality of Santa Maria di Leuca. We always used this name on special permits, (soggiorno), to be able to leave the camp, but we called her Christine informally. Of course I notified my uncle in Argentina. He was so thrilled, he sent one thousand dollars as a present and suggested we come to live in Buenos Aires.

Immigration restrictions also applied there, but he would get us papers to Paraguay and from there the entry to Argentina was only a formality. Of course we thanked him for the very generous gift and said we would give it some thought.

At this time we were also corresponding with Leo Aronson in Lublin. We were hoping that by some chance, someone from our families would turn up and he could tell them of our whereabouts. By the end of 1946, we made a decision not to leave Italy until our baby was at least three years old. We also decided not to go to Palestine illegally. By then thousands of illegal Jewish immigrants had been taken off the boats and placed on Cyprus. We would not want to find ourselves in that situation, with our small child.

Life was good. Stella was happy and the environment was beautiful. We really enjoyed our life in Santa Maria. We had made some special friends, including a couple, Albert and Monica. They both worked in Lecce, the headquarters of UNRRA. Because of their positions, they were a great help to us. They often stayed with us on weekends. We had a lot of fun. They were so enchanted by our daughter, Stella decided to honour them to be her godparents. Not only did they accept, but their visits became more frequent.

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CHAPTER 13

One day we received a telegram from Lublin, from Leon Aronson. "Stella, Perec, Herc Kohen arrived to Lublin from Russia, Letter follows". Stella was overcome with emotion to hear that her father was alive. She wanted to talk to him by telephone immediately. The only way to do this, was to go to Lecce, where out friends arranged to make a telephone call. I stood next to Stella while she spoke to her father for the first time. Tears of joy streamed from her eyes. The conversation ended with the words that he should pack his things and come and join us. Before hanging up the phone, her father told Stella that he had some news for me. He told me that a cousin of mine had returned from Russia. He was my first cousin, Gidal Szechtman. Our fathers were brothers. He was in Lublin with his wife and baby daughter. I corresponded with my cousin, and shortly after that he agreed to help Stella's father get to Italy to join us.

One day, when I returned home from work, there was a commotion in front of the house. I heard voices calling out, "They have arrived, they have arrived". There in front of me, I saw my cousin Gidal and with him, Stella's father. Our highly emotional reunion was a mix of tears, embraces and choked exchanges.

For Stella, the arrival of her father was very happy and joyful. Her father was fully occupied with his granddaughter, he had never seemed happier. He was full of *naches* and also proud of his new son-in-law, after hearing of my survival. He himself told us the story how he had survived, which was remarkable considering that he was not a strong man.

Meanwhile, after a few days, my cousin Gidal had to return back to the north of Italy, to one of the many camps up there, where he had left his wife and baby daughter. He promised that he would consider moving to the south to join us if it was possible.

During the next few weeks, Herc Kohen, my father in law, slowly told us the story of his survival. He left Lublin in September 1939, before the German occupation. He settled in Lwow, which at that time, was occupied by the Russians. He corresponded regularly with his wife and two daughters. They were living with his parents-in-law in Zamość, a small township near Lublin. They urged him to come back because life seemed to be reasonable and safe by then. Coincidently, the Soviet authorities in Lwow, officially proclaimed that anyone wanting to return to the German occupied Polish territories should register, in order to facilitate their return. The people who had registered, were taken away, in the middle of the night, placed in rail wagons and deported to the unknown. My father-in-law was one of these. He was taken somewhere to the far north of Russia, where there was six months night and six months day, and unbearable freezing temperatures. Because he wasn't a very strong man, quite frail in fact, he was given duties inside the barrack and this possibly saved his life. He managed to survive these few years of imprisonment, until he was released and returned to Lublin by the end of 1945.

A couple of months passed and my father in law was contacted by the management of the only Jewish newspaper in Rome. This publication "Baderech" was fully sponsored by the Joint. They heard about Herc Kohen, who had previously owned the newspaper, "Lubliner Yidisher Tugblatt", in Lublin. He had also acted as Responsible Editor, and was an accomplished tradesman, typesetting by hand the Jewish letters. Now he was urged to join the staff and come to work in Rome.

My father in law explained that his family came first and he would not come to Rome without them. Arrangements were then made for us all, to be transferred and resettled in Rome. We moved to Ostia, Lido-di-Roma, an outer suburb of Rome and my father-in-law started work at the newspaper. Not long after, I started to work with UNRRA once again. They gave me a jeep and life was very good, and the thought of leaving Italy was not so pressing any more.

I was in contact with my cousin Gidal. I constantly urged him to join us, and together we planned the future. To my surprise, the letters from him, started to come from Poland.

He had returned, convinced of golden opportunities there. Gidal's brother-in-law was a high ranking official in the Communist Party, and through him, Gidal found an excellent job, as a manager in a large bakery, which supplied bread to the entire district.

We had been corresponding with our old friends from the south of Italy, Albert and Monica, who had in the meantime settled in Australia. Their letters were full of praise for their new country and wrote of the wonderful opportunities there. They described it as being some sort of paradise. Stella was very enthusiastic about the idea of coming to Australia, and wanted us to try and get a permit to do so. However, my uncle from Argentine had already sent us necessary papers to go there. He really wanted us to go and join him and his wife there. We told him that we were still undecided, and our priority was Palestine. But by now, Stella was very determined to go to Australia.

Something jogged my memory about a conversation in around 1941 about a neighbour, who was in fact our landlord in the apartment building where I lived with my family in Lublin, and his two sons. One son was a doctor and the other became a Pharmacist, in Vienna. They left for England before the Anschluss in 1938. One brother remained in England, the other went to Australia. He married, and settled in Sydney. I thought that if I could locate his whereabouts, then he might be able to help us get a landing permit to Australia.

Stella was now more than ever determined not to go anywhere other than Australia. She didn't let up: she wrote to the Joint, UNRRA, and the Red Cross asking their help to find our friend in Australia who might help us. My daughter was two years old. It was about this time I received a letter from the Joint telling us that they had located my friend in Australia. I knew he had kept in contact by telephone with his family during the war.

Our families were close and I knew a lot of personal details about him and his family.

At this time, our way of life was comfortable and our departure was not a matter of urgency. My father-in-law was fully occupied and enjoying his work, as well as being adored by all of us. My job with the UNRRA was terminated with the promise that they would help me and my family get to our chosen destination.

The first thing I decided to do now, was to travel to Israel on my own to make enquiries about the property there. After arranging for a visa, I arrived in Israel at about Pesach time in 1949. My aunt Maszia welcomed me. She was very enthusiastic about me being there and insisted that we must settle in Israel on the orchards purchased by my father before the war. The property had been placed in the hands of an English company, acting as custodian for "enemies' properties", during the war years. As we were back in Poland at that time, our property fell into that category. I went to the Department of Land and produced papers of identity. To my disappointment, I discovered a huge debt existed which had accumulated over the property. The orchards had run at a loss, unable to sell their products, because of the war. I was confused about what to do. The Department of Lands said that if I settled in Israel with my family, then

I would get all the necessary financial help from the Government. Otherwise, it would be my problem of how to raise the money needed to pay off all the debts. They then registered my name as the only survivor of the family and now the rightful owner of the property. I returned to Italy, feeling very disappointed about the situation regarding the property, even though I knew beforehand that Israel was not part of our plan for resettlement.

With renewed enthusiasm, we pursued our goal to get papers to go to Australia. Not long after, we got the papers we needed with the help of my friend who lived in Australia.

Unfortunately, my father-in-law, who was over the age of sixty years was not included. We were informed that once we arrived in Australia, it would be only a small formality to get a landing permit for him. I went to the UNRRA and now asked them to assist us by speeding up the process for our departure. Until our departure, we continued desperately trying to get a permit for Stella's father. We visited the Australian Consulate in Rome, but every effort was rebuffed, with the same explanation – his age was the problem. We were continually assured that it would only be a formality once we arrived in Australia.

Of course, Stella's father was heartbroken, at the idea of us all being separated once more, but we had no choice. We started to prepare for our journey to Australia. I had been promised, the UNRRA financed our trip, including us in the first available transport coming from France through Genoa for September 1949. A few days before we departed, we stayed in Genoa waiting the arrival of the ship "Cyrenia". Stella's father accompanied us to Genoa, where our accommodation was all arranged by UNRRA. He was terribly sad. It seemed he had a premonition that he would not see us again. The day arrived and it was time to board the ship. The ship was already full of immigrants, mostly Jewish people, but other nationalities as well. Our departure was very emotional, especially for Stella, leaving her father behind, as we knew how much his survival depended on us.

We settled down in a cabin shared by two other couples. Stella and my daughter got a bottom bunk and I on the top, and so started our voyage to Australia. For the next month I was fully occupied with my daughter as Stella was constantly seasick, lying mostly on a deckchair outside the cabin. For me, the journey was rather pleasant, specifically after getting acquainted with an Italian man who was a resident in Australia, and returning after visiting his family in Italy. Stella's only companions were a couple lying next to her on the deck, who suffered as she did with seasickness. My daughter was probably the most admired child on the ship.

The journey was very hot and the swimming pool was in constant use. During the journey, we stopped at many ports on the way. This was a time for us to explore and shop, buying bits and pieces and really enjoying ourselves. Our first stop in Australia was Fremantle. Some people disembarked here, but our destination was Sydney. While in Fremantle, we enjoyed the first fresh meal on land. I remember we ate toast, bacon and eggs – it was so delicious and it was the first time I saw so many shops selling such varieties of fresh fruit. We felt very optimistic. I farewelled my new found Italian friend from the ship, as he disembarked here. His parting advice was it would be better to continue our journey to Melbourne by train, as we would encounter very heavy seas by boat. But against his advice we continued our journey by boat. The next few days of our journey were the roughest, to the extent that even I was seasick. The best traveller was my daughter. We finally arrived at our destination in Melbourne, the end of the journey for the ship "Cyrenia". And most of the passengers ended their travels here, but our final destination was Sydney, and we continued our journey by train.

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CHAPTER 14

When we arrived in Sydney, we were met by our sponsors, Dr Charles Perec and his wife. He was the son of our neighbours in Lublin. They were surprised by our good looks, and our beautiful child. They took an immediate liking to us, and asked me in what language we wanted him to speak to us. German was fine, as long as his wife wouldn't be embarrassed, but we learned that she spoke German too. He asked us about the rest of our luggage. I told him it would come by boat later. They took us to their home in Petersham, where we were made to feel very welcome. It was extremely comfortable and pleasant for us to be there. The Perecs had three daughters, the two younger ones similar in age to our daughter. They employed a full time nanny and it was no problem to look after our daughter as well, as the nanny took a great liking to her.

We stayed with the Perecs for about a week while they searched for suitable accommodation for us. During this time we enjoyed their company, dining with them and we even went to the cinema on a couple of occasions. Often, when we spoke I could see the tears in his eyes as he listened to the stories of what his family had been through during the Nazi occupation, and the sad end of it. Finally we found temporary accommodation in Drumoyne, where we stayed for a few weeks. Shortly after this Dr Perec bought a house in Burwood as an investment. It was a very big and we moved there and rented the bottom half from him. The upper level was given to the family of their nanny. The arrangement was very suitable and comfortable for all of us.

We spent our weekends with our friends from Italy, Alfred and Monica. They were the ones who had originally suggested to us that we should come to Australia. We settled into a comfortable lifestyle and I found some casual work around Christmas 1949. I bought a car, an old model Austin for one hundred pounds. I was now more mobile and could look for opportunities for our future.

Letters from Italy, from Stella's father, were full of despair. We assured him that we were happy, settled in a house and it would be only a matter of a very short time to get the necessary papers for him to join us. Sadly, shortly after this, we received news from Italy, that he had suffered a stroke and died. We were devastated by the news and were very grateful that our friends in Italy could arrange for his funeral. We were heartbroken and the shiva period of mourning was one of our hardest times.

Not long after Stella's father's death, she started to feel unwell. Our local doctor referred her to see a specialist for further consultation. He suggested that she go to hospital for some tests, and not long after was diagnosed as having Multiple Sclerosis. By now, she was in very early stages of pregnancy, when she was advised by the Specialists to terminate. When Stella came home from the hospital, we had to get some extra help and for about a year, we managed.

Her condition then deteriorated very quickly, and she was almost bedridden and it was becoming increasingly difficult to manage at home. I was desperate and made enquiries as to what I should do. Someone suggested that I contact the Jewish Maternity Society. Thankfully, they were able to help us extraordinarily. We met a wonderful woman, Mrs Owen, who took charge and investigated different ways of what we should do. One day she suggested I come with her to visit a particular hospital. I had already looked at several nursing homes and hospitals, but was disgusted with the general conditions in most of them. On this day, when we arrived

at "Weemala" hospital, in Ryde, I was very impressed with the beautiful Victorian building and its surrounding gardens. Inside the rooms were large and sunny. It seemed to be a good place for Stella. Soon after Stella went into this hospital with the idea that it might only be a temporary stay. My other concern now was my daughter. If Stella went into a hospital, how could I look after her? Once again Mrs Owen came to the rescue. She suggested that instead of having help at home, the Isabella Lazarus Childrens Home might be a suitable place for my daughter and it was arranged for her to go there in January 1953.

Stella went into "Weemala" Hospital in June 1952, and stayed there for almost twenty-five years until she died a week before her fiftieth birthday. During that time, she had many interests, and she formed many close friendships. One of her particularly close friends was Sofia Majewski. They met each other in Prince Alfred Hospital, while they were both patients in the same ward. Not a week went by when Sofia would not visit. She didn't drive and took many buses from the Eastern Suburbs to Ryde, always carrying jars of home made food, samples of dressmaking material, which would become a new fashion creation, and even her latest pair of Ferragamo shoes. All of this kept Stella in touch with the outside world, which she had loved so much.

Stella constantly spoke about "the ladies from the Jewish Maternity Society", Mrs. Owen, Mrs Feller and Mrs Lesnie. They were wonderful and loyal and became personal friends. They visited Stella on a regular basis for years, and made her feel a part of their personal lives.

We had no family here, and our group of friends were very few. Some of our friends had been perfect strangers who showed great generosity and were always willing to help me and my daughter. Some of them, very often, visited Stella in the hospital over the course of the next twenty three years. However, we were often hurt and disappointed by the behaviour of other close friends, particularly those who had come from my own home town. I had counted on their friendship, but they distanced themselves even further.

Particularly hurtful were our friends from Italy, Alfred and Monica, who had encouraged us to come to Australia. They said they feared Stella's sickness was contagious.

With Stella in Weemala and Chris being looked after, it looked as if I would have to start my life over again. I was alone. The only person by then was my local doctor, Dr Bonnett, who knew the whole history of our family. We had many consultations with him in respect of Stella's sickness and what to do with my life. His advice was to stay calm and occupy myself, as the rapid progression of Stella's illness was only a matter of time. I could not be much of a help to her in the future. Of course, I had a lot of time and went to see Stella every day at the hospital. To my surprise I met Mrs Majewska there who Stella had first befriended while in Prince Alfred Hospital. They became firm friends, and Mrs. Majewska became also my best friend and adviser to the last days of her life.

In chance meeting with the brother of Albert, who knew what had happened to Stella, he enquired what I was doing about work. I was at a loss, I really didn't know then what I should do with myself. He suggested that seeing my English wasn't too bad, and having a car, that I should buy some kind of merchandise and go and sell it in the country areas of New South Wales. He was sure that I would do well. That was how it started, and I said to myself I would give it a try and for the next fifteen years, I travelled thousands of miles in the country areas all over New South Wales. These years proved to be very enriching and fruitful meeting Australians and hundreds of migrant workers who worked so hard building the Snowy Mountain Scheme. Every now and then, I took along a helper, but found that the best way was when I worked alone. Most of my trips lasted about a fortnight, and then I would return to Sydney to have a short break, spend some time with Stella and restock my goods.

I was left with many good memories, I made lots of good friends, and was well-liked, and never had any disputes. I always tried to sell my merchandise, which consisted of mostly clothing and some household goods, in the most honest way. Also my relationship with my suppliers, the manufacturers, and wholesalers was first class.

Between trips, I rarely missed a day without seeing Stella. Her condition in those years was stable. Mentally she was more alert than the most ordinary people, and our conversations were about my business trips and Stella telling me of all her visitors in my absence. I was surprised when, on one of my visits to Stella, she told me about a couple who had been to see her. Their name was Mr. and Mrs. Reiss. They had told her that I was a frequent customer, buying clothing from their factory. They knew all about her and our daughter Christine, whom they had heard about from the many conversations with me when I visited their factory. I knew in my heart that they shared my sorrows as I had often shown them photos of Chris and they looked with loving eyes as they were childless. I learned much later that they had in fact lost children at birth, because of severe health problems from which Mrs Reiss had suffered, a consequence of her experiences in the concentration camps during the war years.

Hearing from Stella of their visit, I told her how they had sympathized with our misfortune and always had time for lengthy conversations about my daughter and wife. They often enquired whether my daughter was really happy at the Childrens Home where she was at that time. On my next visit to the Reiss' factory, I thanked them very much for visiting Stella, and they assured me how delighted they were to meet her and spend such an enjoyable afternoon with such an intelligent lady. Before I left them that day, Mrs Reiss escorted me to the door and asked me if I would mind if they took Chris to their home for the weekend. I agreed and made arrangements with the Home to allow Chris to spend the weekend with the Reiss family.

This was the start of a very long relationship. After the first visit to their home, many more followed, and eventually Chris moved in with them. Stella was very happy with this arrangement, not only for the sake of Chris, but also because of the frequent visits and friendship she formed with the Reisses and of course they always took Chris with them.

My daughter seemed very happy and was loved and very well cared for. She adjusted well to her new life and extended family and their circle of friends. When she finished high school, Chris enrolled into a business college. She was a beautiful girl, and was popular and enjoyed going out and having fun. Soon after, she met the love of her life, Bobby Evans, who had just returned from an extended working holiday overseas after graduating from Engineering at Sydney University. Bobby was the only son of Emil and Paula Evans who had migrated to Sydney just before the outbreak of the war in 1939.

Not long after their meeting, Chris and Bobby became engaged and married in December 1966. These were the happiest moments in Stella and my life. We attended the wedding together. Stella was brought to the Central Synagogue in a wheelchair, and placed next to the *chuppah*. Her face was shining with happiness and tears flowed constantly down her cheeks. I gave Charles Reiss the honour of escorting my daughter to the *chuppah*. The Synagogue was full of the many family friends of the Evans and Reiss families and our few friends as well. A wonderful celebration followed at the Chevron Hotel, with many guests enjoying delicious food, wonderful music and dancing. It was truly like a royal wedding. The happy memories will stay with me forever.

Sadly Stella could not come to the reception, but she relished every small detail about the wedding for months to come.

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CHAPTER 15

I want to go back to the fifties and revisit what happened at that time up to the present day. My uncle and aunt, who lived in Argentine for a number of years were aware of my situation here, through correspondence, they knew of Stella's sickness and were very keen for us to come and live with them in Buenos Aires. But by now I felt very settled in Australia and had no intention of moving away. I received the last letter from them in February, l957, and never heard from them again. I enquired through the different Jewish organizations and never got a positive reply. My aunt Masza, who lived in Israel, who had been such a help to me in 1949 on my visit to Israel, died in 1952.

I also continued to correspond with Koska Korn, my friend who I knew from school days and Israel. (When I arrived in Italy in 1945 he recognized me amongst all the refugees.) We exchanged a few letters and learned that after he was discharged from the army, he married and had two children, two little girls. Through him I found out about another school friend from Lublin, Bobby Levenstein. Bobby studied with me at the Haifa Technicum in 1938. He was now a customs officer, checking Olim as they arrived by the thousands to Israel. On one occasion, Bobby wrote to me that he had recognized our History teacher from Lublin, Professor Blumenthal, and they too had had a very emotional reunion. Bobby was now married to a Turkish girl and wrote that he was hoping to be posted to Australia. He worked for the Foreign Office and he was known now as Ari Even. The last letter from him was from New York. By then he had a son and his wife was expecting another child. In this letter received in the early 60's there was news that he had found two more of our old school classmates living in New York, Tuller and Cinamon, but I was never in touch with either of these.

In August 1960, I received a letter from a friend of mine in Melbourne, Julek Fiszman.

In it he included a postcard from Israel, from my cousin, Gidal Szechtman. Gidal lived in Natanja, and was looking for my address. This was the first time I heard the whereabouts of my cousin and his family since his return from Italy to Poland in the late forties. In the few letters we exchanged, I found out that he had heart problems and his financial position was not that good. He had three children, a girl and two boys. His daughter, Esther, who is the same age as my daughter Chris, is the only one I have remained in contact with. At present she lives in New York. One of her brothers also lives in New York and the other in Israel with his family. My cousin Gidal died some years ago. I later found out that he had been involved with some shady affairs in Poland and was lucky enough to be deported to Israel.

My cousin Gidal knew about the orchards belonging to my family in Israel. He also knew that these properties had been sold by the Custodian for Enemy Properties. (They managed all properties that belonged to people not living in Israel). Knowing that the property was auctioned and the balance of money was held in custody for the rightful owner, Gidal made a claim through the courts that he was the rightful recipient of this money, and the court gave the decision in his favour. However, when he made the claim for the money to the Land Department, he was shocked to find out that he was not entitled to it because according to the documents, it was registered that I, being the son of the owner, had settled in Australia, and had already made a claim on that land in 1949.

Gidal didn't know of my visit to Israel in 1949, prior to my departure from Italy to Australia.

The exchange of many letters followed, and I obtained legal advice. In order to resolve the whole matter, keep the costs down and simplify things, I signed all the legal documents, verified by the Israeli Consul, declining all rights to the money in trust.

After my daughter's wedding, we were extremely happy. I knew in my heart she was going to have a wonderful life. The day I became a grandfather, was the highpoint of my life. A baby boy, Michael Benjamin, was the most beautiful gift life gave me. Michael Benjamin was "numero uno". The Bris was performed in hospital, with only immediate family and friends present. My daughter's mother-in-law was in hospital at the same time, but this didn't stop her from being there as well. Sadly she died one year later.

Three and a half years later a little brother for Michael, Rodney Paul, arrived. I called them both "numero uno" – "number one" in my book.

Chris and the boys visited Stella in the hospital regularly, and occasionally brought her home for the day. These occasions were very special and Stella loved seeing her grandsons. Stella died in May, 1975. It was a very sad time, even though we had always known that her illness was incurable.

As life progressed, so were many upsets. First Margit Reiss died shortly after Stella, and then some years after, Charles died too. Their deaths made me very sad, after all we were like one family. We shared joys and sorrows as well.

I was a frequent visitor at Chris and Bobby's place and probably the best babysitter. Granpa was always available. I watched the boys grow up and start school at Bellevue Hill Public School and then Cranbrook. They were both brilliant students.

The boys' Barmitzvahs, were a high point of my life. Michael's went through without a hitch. When it was Rodney's turn, he bound me to a promise to shave off "my grisley beard" as he called it. I fulfilled the promise one hundred percent. I think up to the present day we are still great pals.

My life and my interests were all centred on my daughter and her family. The traditional Friday night dinners, the Passover and all other Jewish Holidays were all observed in a very traditional way. As the years passed I watched my grandsons grow into men. They both enrolled at University, and Michael went on to study Pure Mathematics with a scholarship to Cambridge University in England.

For my 75th birthday, my daughter organized a special dinner at Doyle's Restaurant. She surprised me with the most wonderful gift, a holiday overseas to visit Michael in Cambridge. It was really the highlight of the trip, being with Michael in Cambridge and seeing all the Gothic style buildings. In many ways it reminded me of my home town of Lublin.

I was lucky enough while in Cambridge to attend the monthly dinner with the Professors and students alike. On Sunday, the leisure day, Michael took us punting on the River Cam. Michael pushed the boat along the river with the poles, and we were extremely lucky to not get wet! Our next stop was Italy. Chris, Michael and I rented a car and drove south to visit the town where Chris was born. We stayed in a little village called Santa Maria del Bagno, just a few kilometers from the hospital. It was almost forty years since we lived there and I hardly recognized the place. It was a wonderful experience, and I surprised myself that I had not forgotten how to speak Italian.

We drove across the southern part of Italy from Bari to Naples. Chris proved to be an excellent driver, particularly on the curvy Amalfi coast. The holiday came to an end and we

farewelled Michael at Heathrow airport, and continued home via Las Vegas. Being in the U.S.A. and not visiting Las Vegas would have been a big disappointment for me, as I love to have a gamble. So we went to Las Vegas for a couple of days. It is absolutely a gambling paradise. We stayed at the Mirage Hotel and I will never forget the huge buffet breakfasts in the morning, a feed that lasted 24 hours. Of course it is with gambling that the house showed its superiority. I was cleaned out of all yankee dollars. It was fun – at least I have been to Las Vegas. It was a wonderful trip and one I would never have dreamt about without Bobby and Chris.

During this trip, on our way to meet Michael, we stopped in New York. While there, I had the opportunity to meet my cousin Gidal's daughter, Esther. She was very excited to see us and went to the extreme lengths to spend time with us. Her brother, on the other hand, was a big disappointment, and we met with him only very briefly.

Before I left for my overseas holiday, I had instructed a friend of mine, to sell my car. When I returned, I was very disappointed to find that he had sold the car for far less than I had hoped to get. I felt lost without a car then, because I still worked on a casual basis and really needed the car to get me around. Chris lent me her car for a while, and assured me that Bobby was looking around to buy me another car. Soon after, he bought me a second hand car, in perfect condition with very few miles on the clock. I am still driving that same car today.

A few words about my son-in-law, Bobby. He was very charitable and kind, a real human being, a *"mensch"*. When he graduated from University, he joined his father and uncle in a family business, later known as "Evans Confectionary". When his father died, he continued to run the business very successfully and then decided to sell it and retire at a young age. This left him time to pursue his great passion in life – playing bridge. For years he played competitively and represented Australia in tournaments all over the world. He competed in Israel at several Maccabean games, and brought home gold and silver medals.

At the opening ceremony of the Maccabean Games in 1997, the Australian contingent marched over the bridge constructed over the Yarkon River, into the Ramat Gan stadium. The bridge collapsed and Bobby, along with one of his oldest and closest friends, Warren Zines and many many others fell into the poisonous, polluted water of the Yarkon River. Bobby spent only a few days in hospital and luckily escaped with minor injuries.

However his friend Warren was seriously ill and spent weeks in hospital in Israel. Bobby stayed on in Israel to be with him and Lynette, Warren's wife, to offer whatever support he could. Tragically, Warren died and Bobby returned to Australia with the family for Warren's funeral. The Chevra Kadisha was filled with people for the heartbreaking funeral and Bobby's emotional farewell ended with the words "*Shalom chaver*".

Michael, he was a very dedicated student in Cambridge. I knew in my heart that he would always succeed in obtaining his degree. He wrote me many letters of his ups and downs. While visiting him there, I was moved to tears seeing my picture in his room at the most prominent spot. During the three and a half years that Michael spent in Cambridge, he travelled extensively. Not only back to Australia during the semester breaks, but also to Israel, Turkey and parts of eastern Europe. A bad fracture to his leg, sustained during one of his early soccer matches for Emmanuel College team in Cambridge, did not prevent him from joining Bob and Chris and Rodney at the Maccabi Games in 1993, and then on to Turkey, hopping along on his crutches.

On one of Michael's trips, he visited my home town, Lublin, in Poland. He found and photographed all of the places I had told him about: the family apartment, where his great

grandparents had lived; the shop where we had carried out our business; as well as a block of flats, the family property. Everything was exactly as it had been fifty years before.

When Michael returned home to Sydney, he told me how pleased he was to have made that journey. For a while I thought Michael would settle overseas when he completed his studies, particularly with his credentials, but he always assured me that he wanted to stay in Australia. It wasn't long after his return, that he was offered a position with a large banking company. He has been very successful in his career and now holds an extremely responsible position. On one of his business trips, he was lucky enough to be in France while the Soccer World Championships were on. Being a passionate soccer "tifoso" (fan), he had a ball attending some of the matches.

Meanwhile, Rodney, after his graduation from University, went for overseas for a whole year. He travelled to the West Indies and Central America, finally working in the hospitality industry in New York for about six months. It was a wonderful experience for him, and while he was there, developed his passion for photography even further. This influenced his decision to pursue photography as a career when he came home to Sydney. Rodney started slowly at first, continuing to work in the hospitality industry, and photographing in between. His portfolio of work is very varied and impressive. He has exhibited in several group exhibitions and also worked in fashion and done some corporate work. His passion for travel took him to Cambodia, where he was very moved by the plight of the landmine victims. Subsequently he held a large exhibition and auction in Sydney, the proceeds were matched by the Government, dollar for dollar, to raise funds for these people. Rodney and I have a special relationship, we meet regularly and have lunch together and he keeps me informed about his work.

Our traditional Friday night dinners have always been very special. Even when the boys were away at different times, it was wonderful when they returned and we were all together. On one occasion, Michael surprised us, accompanied by a young lady. He wanted her to meet the family. He told me he loved her and he had serious thoughts about marrying her. "Granpa, you are the first one to know", he said to me, and asked me to accompany him one evening to meet Liza's parents, to ask them for their permission to marry their daughter. Of course, they agreed, and we then toasted "l'chaim", with champagne, and had a small celebration. Shortly after Michael and Liza had a wonderful wedding, held by a celebrant, and attended by friends and family from the Jewish and Chinese community. I felt so proud of Michael and Liza on that day. Subsequently Liza converted to Judaism, through the orthodox synagogue and we celebrated again under the *chuppah*.

Life took on a different meaning for me after the birth of my great grandson. I became great "grandpawpaw", and this is how I am referred to by my great grandson, Ollie.

Bobby was referred to as "Opa", and Chris is referred to as "Yun yun". In this way, Ollie has taken all the names from the different cultural backgrounds. Our family continues to carry out most of the traditional celebrations. We share our Shabbat dinners, sometimes at Chris and other times at Michael and Liza's house. Being greeted by my great grandson, with the words "Good Shabbas, Grandpawpaw," with hugs and kisses, gives me my greatest contentment of my life.

A fatal blow stuck our family in February 2004. Bobby became unwell, and after a very short time in hospital, he died very suddenly. Our whole family and circle of friends were shocked and devastated and while I have been through a lot of difficult experiences in my life, this was the hardest blow, and one of the most painful. Whenever Bobby's name is mentioned, I find it difficult to hold back my tears.

As I am writing these words, Ollie, my great-grandson, has celebrated his fourth birthday and is with his parents Michael and Liza, attending the 17th Maccabean Games[2] in Israel.

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2 From July 11th till 21th, 2005.

EPILOGUE

The few pages I have written are the story of my life. I am not a gifted writer but I was trying to put it into writing as clearly as possible. The sad memories of the Nazi occupation are always with me. The Nazis murdered my dear, pious, caring and hard working mother. My good natured father who had a heart of gold, never refusing help to anyone even to the extent, my mother criticized him for his naivety, died of natural causes. My two brothers and sister, my grandparents, many uncles, aunties and cousins, were all murdered in the Holocaust. They will always remain in my memory and never to be forgotten.

I am not a hero, I survived by sheer luck, and meeting the right people, whose advice and direction helped me enormously, and saved my life. I must also mention the Polish family, Marczincak, who risked their lives to keep me and my brother, Cadok, in hiding, in one room, for six months. There were a few more Polish people who also helped, but I cannot remember their names, and to whom I owe my gratitude.

■

Born in Lublin in 1917, Peter Sedgman (born as Perez Szechtman) has had a very eventful life. In his teens he had an interlude in Palestine and with disastrous timing, he returned to Poland just prior to Germany's invasion. Conscripted into the Polish army, he spent 18 months as a prisoner-of-war in Germany. He later had six months in hiding with his only surviving brother, who then tragically lost the will to live, and was killed. After an audacious escape from a German labour camp, Peter finally joined a group of Polish partisans.

After the war, he married Stella Kohen and together they had a long sojourn in Italy before going to Australia with their three year old daughter, Christine.

Life in Australia provided further challenges for the family of three, but despite these difficulties, Peter was able to rebuild his life. He passed away in Sydney in 2016.

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