

# RETURN FROM THE DEPTHS

Part 1

## Remembrances of World War II

As Related by Chune Zechariah Folger

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# In the Shadow of War

## *The Shabbos in Oshpitzin*

י"ד תמוז תרצ"ט, שבת פרשת בלק, July 1, 1939

The doors slammed shut as the train left the Krakow station to Oshpitzin. I was inside with my brother Ben Tzion. We were in an inspired and elevated mood because we were on our way to spend שבת with the Bobover Ruv. The Ruv was in Oshpitzin to celebrate a new ספר תורה that one of our חסידים had donated to the shul. (The דרשה the Ruv gave that day is printed in פרשת וילך, קדושת ציון.)

About 1,000 guests had gathered to Oshpitzin from neighboring towns and villages. The local Oshpitzin homeowners were more than happy to put the guests up in their cramped homes. My brother and I stayed in the house of his father in law R' Shlomo Leib Mandlebaum. The davening was warm and intense. The best בעלי תפלה went up to the עמוד: R' Chaim Dovid Blum of Kshanov davened קבלת שבת. R' Yossel Mandlebaum from Krakow followed him for מעריב. R' Reuven Peretz Kaufman davened שחרית. A שבת air pervaded the בית מדרש.

But to our dismay the simcha was not complete. There was no sense of calm or security. Nerves jangled and spirits were frayed. Nobody could even for a moment lose sight of how critical the situation was for Jews in Poland.

The strained atmosphere was obvious throughout שבת. Many things were different from what we usually did when the Ruv visited a town for שבת. No large temporary shack was set up for the gathering. On מוצאי שבת we didn't accompany the Ruv from shul with torches – in fact, we didn't accompany him at all. The Ruv didn't want any pomp or tumult that the Poles could see. Their hatred to the Jews was more glaring every day. It was fanned by the verbal attacks of the Germans that continued non-stop day and night.

The president of the Oshpitzin קהילה asked the Ruv what he thought about the situation. The Ruv said ס'איז שווער צו זאגן א מיינונג אין א זאך וואס דער שכל דיקטירט אנדערש ווי דאס הארץ וויל (What can I say, when my heart disagrees with my mind?)

By then Germany had already annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia, while all other nations stood aside and didn't interfere. Now Germany was preparing to stretch its dirty hands out towards Poland. Germany's propaganda broadcasts were incessant, and its threats and ultimata towards Poland grew louder and more furious from day to day.

The Poles didn't prepare for war. Instead they spent their energy on legislation and decrees and actions to hurt the Jewish population. They passed a decree against שחיטה, against Jewish businesses. They incited riots and pogroms. The hatred of the Poles towards the Jews, always there but hidden, was now out in the open.

We took leave of the Ruv after שבת. We never saw him again. The war began two months later, and he then fled to Lemberg. In Tammuz 5701 the Germans captured the city from the Russians. He was murdered a month later, on 4 Av of that year.

## ***My Father's Family***

My father R' Dovid was born in Shiniva 1876. His father was R' Yosef Zev Folger, who was a renowned חסיד. Everybody called him R' Yossel'e. R' Yossele's father was R' Avraham Shmiel whose family hailed from Brod. Brod was famous for its קלויז, in which תורה giants sat and learned, including R' Chaim Sanzer, R' Yitzchok Hamburger, the גודע ביהודה, and other giants. My father mentioned to me that R' Avrohom Shmiel's זיידעס were from the חכמי הקלויז and that R' Avrohom Shmiel, or his father, was one of the חב"א round the חוזה of Lublin. I think he also mentioned to me that our family ultimately stemmed from the illustrious Rapaport family.

My father told me all of this at various times. I am sorry that I didn't ask him for more details. I'm sure he knew much more. But who imagined that our normal life, and the detailed history of our family, would all be so suddenly incinerated in Belzec?

R' Yossel'e was born in 1837 more or less. In 1857 he married Ratze, the daughter of R' Efraim Leistner. They had four sons and three daughters. The boys were Chune, Shloime, Alter and Dovid (my father). (Shloime died as a בחור on the first שבת on which he wore a kolpek – in those days a בחור started wearing a kolpek when he was ready for shiddichim.) The girls were Chana (who married R' Shloime Leistner), Hinda (whose married name was Kramer), and Chaya Leah (who married R' Itzik England). R' Yossele's wife died when he was 40 years old. He remarried (his second wife's name was Etel), and had one more son (Yakov, "Uncle Yakov") and my aunt Rivka.

R' Yossel'e had a small business that he ran with the help of his sons. He spent his free time in תורה, מצוות and חסד. He was also an expert מוהל.

He had an extraordinarily sweet voice and was a constant בעל תפלה in the בית מדרש of the Shiniver Ruv, where he davened שחרית every year on ראש השנה and יום כפור. The Shiniver Ruv was told one year that R' Yossel'e was ill and bed-bound. The Ruv sent a special messenger to R' Yossel'e to give R' Yossel'e his

*mitzel* (a white yarmulke) – the Ruv's messenger assured R' Yossel'e that the yarmulke plus the Ruv's warm-hearted ברכות would bring R' Yossel'e out of his weakness and give him the strength to daven. And so it was, he davened that year and every year afterward until his death.

In 1911, as he was dying and the חברה קדישא were arrayed around his bed, one of them said "Yossel'e, do you remember the sweet nigun you used to sing for הזכרונות החיים והמות? R' Yossel nodded, and with the last ounce of his strength sang that תפלה as his life ebbed away.

After the Shiniver R' died, R' Yossel'e often visited R' Shloimo of Bobov. The current Bobover Ruv, R' Shloimo [who was נפטר in 2000] tells me that his father R' Ben Tzion knew R' Yossel'e well and had great respect for him.

They honored him greatly on his death. The entire city attended the לוויה. He was buried within אמות ד' of the Shiniver Ruv's אהל. During the ten years that had passed after the Shiniver Ruv's petirah, nobody had been buried there.

His gravestone says that he died on י' טבת תרע"א, that he learned תורה day and night, that he was a celebrated מוהל, that he sought to do חסד near and far, often at risk to his life, that he honored הקב"ה with his davening, and that when he davened it was as if he valued each word as gold and pearls.

When my father R' Dovid moved to Krakow after World War I, he decided to daven in the בית מדרש of R' Yeshaye'le Tch'choiver, who was the youngest son of the Sanzer Ruv, the דברי חיים. R' Yeshayal'e had known R' Yossel'e and assumed that his son R' Dovid would also be a בעל תפלה. When the Ruv invited him to daven on first שבת there, my father told him that a talent for singing was an asset he had not inherited from R' Yossel'e.

A respectable number of well regarded people davened in R' Yeshayale's בית מדרש. On the first night of ראש השנה, thousands came to the בית מדרש to get the Ruv's ברכה for the new year – this was the son of the דברי חיים! But the יונגעלייט who grew up in the בית מדרש mostly left and joined שטיבלך of Bobov, Belz or other חסידים. Mainly this was because the boys were drawn to שטיבלך where there was a

yeshiva. Just before World War II, the Ruv's son R' Yakov, helped by several others close to the Ruv, finally set up a yeshiva in the Ruv's בית מדרש.



## **Krakow**

I lived in Krakow from my earliest childhood. Earlier generations call Krakow – in a play on words -- כרך דכולא בה , the metropolis that had everything. It was an important and influential city for Jews over many hundreds of years. Among the Jewish luminaries who lived there were the רמ"א, the ב"ח, the תוספת יום טוב, the מגלה עמוקות, the Gaon R' Heschel, the מגיני שלמה and many, many more. Thousands visited the graves of these צדיקים every year.

About 70,000 Jews lived in Krakow before WWII. Even at this late stage, the city teemed with תלמידי חכמים, and extraordinary חסידים. Its דיינים were well regarded and its ראשי ישיבה and distinguished בעלי בתים were of the highest caliber. There were many רב'ס, and there were also Ashkenazim who followed German-Jewish מנהגים. To the regret of the frum Jews, there was also a reform temple that used an organ.

Some of the more formal shuls in Krakow were as much as 800 years old, and their architecture was beautiful and inspiring. There were also hundreds of newer shuls and tens of חסידיש'ע שטיבלך.

Listen to this eerie history of the rabbonim in Krakow before World War II.

R' Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer was invited from Salesh in Hungary to be installed as Ruv of Krakow in 1925. His father R' Akiva had also earlier served as Ruv of the city. He was a gaon and an extraordinary speaker, handsome and imposing. To the distress of the city, his tenure was short. In תשס"ג 1933 he suffered serious heart problems and died shortly afterwards, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Iyar, at the age of 52.

No successor candidate could please all the many factions in the city, so no one was appointed Ruv. Instead, the city appointed R' Nissan Shenirer (formerly of Sekelshtein) to be chief of the בית דין. R' Nissan was a grandson of the Ropshitzer Ruv, and a devoted talmid in a yeshiva that the first Bobover Ruv, R' Shloimo, had set up in Vishnitza (Wisniecz). He was very devoted to the then Bobover Ruv, R' Ben Tzion, and he towered above the city in his scholarship and

his sincere עבודת השם. But he too did not serve in his post for long. He died less than a year later, during פסח 1934.

His successor as chief of the בית דין was R' Moishe Shmiel Bleicher, an expert דיין, who could decide the most difficult issues without referring to a ספר. He was confident in his rulings, and fearlessly issued היתרים where appropriate. He suffered a heart attack a year later and died in 1935 at the age of 63 on י"א ניסן.

The city was stunned. The בית דין continued to function, but no one was appointed to be chief of the בית דין.

But who would deliver the שבת שובה דרשה in 1935 in the Alter Shul? – this was an ancient tradition! They decided to appoint the דיין R' Yehuda Meir Levin (known as R' Yeed'l Ostrovitzer). The קהילה took care to announce only that the דיין would speak at the Alter Shul, they carefully did not refer to him as chief of the בית דין.

R' Yeed'l died that winter. Several months later another דיין died: R' Avrom Moishe Rapaport. The city was distraught.

Recently, my good friend from Krakow R' Avrom Obstfeld discussed this terrifying series of events with me. He reported to me word for word what he had heard from the brothers R' Moshe and R' Yisroel Sharmat (who recently died in New York). The brothers had in turn reported what they had heard from R' Yosef Hillel (son of R' Zalman) Goldshtof of Krakow, who was killed by the Nazis.

This is precisely what happened:

R' Tovia of Shendishev lived in Krakow in the mid-1920. He was a תלמיד חכם, a מקובל and a grandson of the Ropshitzer Ruv. R' Yosef Hillel and the Sharmat brothers both davened in his בית מדרש. They related that on several occasions when there were only nine persons present, R' Tovia would light candles and every time a tenth person promptly arrived.

One winter day in 1933 R' Tovia asked R' Yosef Hillel to urgently visit the Krokover Ruv, R' Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer. R' Tovia gave R' Yosef Hillel a ספר in which the corner of one page was bent over. R' Yosef Hillel was to deliver the

ספר only directly to the Ruv, and not to any of his assistants. R' Tovia also insisted that R' Yosef Hillel promise not to look into the ספר.

R' Yosef Hillel arrived in the Ruv's home and was greeted by the Ruv's son in law, R' Hershel Eisenstat. R' Yosef Hillel insisted that he needed to talk directly with the Ruv. R' Hershel asked him to wait several minutes to see if the Ruv could receive R' Yosef Hillel. Several minutes later R' Yosef Hillel was ushered into the Ruv's private room. R' Yosef Hillel opened the ספר to the marked page and said that the Shendishever Ruv requested that the Ruv carefully read it.

R' Yosef Nechemia carefully read the page, became deathly pale, stood up, and paced back and forth in deep thought. Finally he said "Tell the Shendishever Ruv that it's too late to change, we've already set a date, and I already invited the mayor and other dignitaries. Had I known earlier I would have made it on a different day." He returned the ספר to R' Yosef Hillel.

When R' Yosef Hillel left the room, he could no longer restrain himself. R' Yosef Nechemia's words were so strange! He walked into a lobby of a house on the way home, and read the marked page. "No cemetery shall be inaugurated on a certain day (the Sharmat brothers didn't remember the specific day) in שבט. If they do, the chiefs of the city are likely to be physically endangered."

R' Yosef Hillel then understood the words of the Krokover Ruv. Krakow then had two cemeteries. The ancient cemetery stood behind the רמ"א'ס שול. In that cemetery were the graves of the רמ"א, the תוספות יום טוב, the Rebbe R' Heschel, the מגיני שלמה, the מגלה עמוקות, the author of מעשי השם and other well-known צדיקים. After this cemetery was had become full, about 200 years ago, a new cemetery was opened. The second cemetery held the graves of the מאור ושמש, his son R, Aron, R' Shloimo Kalman of Vielapoli and other צדיקים who had lived in Krakow more recently.

When the second cemetery became full in the early 1930's, the קהילה bought a plot of land on Yerusalemska (Jerusalem) Street, and they were preparing to inaugurate it right then in the middle of שבט. That's what the Shendishever Ruv

meant in his urgent message to the R' Yosef Nechemia, that there was great danger in inaugurating the cemetery that day.

On that day in שבת, the Shendishever Ruv firmly shut all of the windows and doors of his house, left the city early in the morning, and returned only late at night.

Perhaps these events have some connection with the unfortunate events I've told you about the רבני העיר. Know also, that when the Germans conquered Krakow in 1939, they decided to build the notorious concentration camp of Plashov – in which thousands of our brother Jews were murdered -- precisely in the cemetery on Yerusalemska Street.

## ***Our Family in Krakow***

After World War I my father found that he could not make a living in Vishnitsa, and he moved to Krakow in 1920. I was then only a year old. He opened a grocery where he worked hard from early morning to late at night, and still barely made a living.

Until 1926 we lived on the top floor on Gaziva Street, near the Vistula River. I remember very clearly how, when it rained, we had to move the beds and set up pots and pans to catch the torrents flowing through holes in the roof. Our landlords were the wealthy Klein family, who were from the more important חסידים of R' Chune Halberstam of Koloshitz. The Koloshitzer Ruv used their apartment when he visited Krakow. One time, when the Ruv visited Krakow for שבת he came up to our apartment to visit my father who was also one of his חסידים. Several members of the Klein family then moved to America where they established the famous Barton's candy business.

My father also occasionally traveled to Belz to visit the Belzer Ruv, R' Yisochor Dov. My father liked to tell the story of a train ride he took to Belz on one מוצאי שבת. Next to him sat a Jew who was dressed in the modern fashion, a *Datchsl*. My father sang the מלווה מלכה nigunim to himself very quietly not to disturb his neighbor. But the other suddenly said שלום עליכם and א. גיטער וואך. Very soon it became clear the Datchsl was also visiting the Belzer Rebbe to get his advice on a complicated problem and to ask for his ברכה.

In 1926 we moved to a somewhat more spacious apartment on Yozefzia Street. But we still didn't have enough money to heat the apartment in the very cold winter months. The cold penetrated into our bones and our teeth chattered.

My parents had 11 children, of which three (Avrom Shmiel, Tzvi Hersh and Efraim) died young. The surviving children were Yeheeda Leib, Ratze, Blima, Ben Tzion, Yecheskel Shraga, Yosef Ze'ev, Chaim Simche and the youngest – me.

When I was a little child, my brother Leib'tchi married Ruchel, the daughter of R' Zelig Fertig from Landzit. R' Zelig was an outstanding חסיד of the דברי יחזקאל from Shiniva (R' Zelig and his wife were childless for many years before they were given a ברכה by the Shiniver Ruv). In those days, only the most highly regarded בעלי בתים were made גבאים of R' Meir Ba'l Haness; R' Zelig was a גבאי. Leib'tchi lived near his father in law in Landzit. Like my father, he was a Koloshitzer חסיד.

My father suffered much to marry off his daughters –my sisters Ratze and Blima. They reached marriageable age, but he could not give them the נדון they needed to get married. This was a common problem in those days in Poland. Unmarried girls sat and waited until their parents somehow collected a נדון by loans or otherwise, and this with the greatest difficulty.

After much heartbreak, my father succeeded in 1927 to marry off my sister Ratze to my dear brother in law, a בעלזער חסיד and תלמיד חכם, R' Avrom'tchi Beck.

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My brother Ben Tzion in 1930 successfully opened a marmalade factory (I'll discuss this at length later), and was engaged to marry the daughter of R' Shloimo Leib Mandlebaum of Oshpitzin. But he refused to have the wedding so long as Blima was not engaged, and he committed to pay the נדון. He kept his word; before his own wedding, he saw to it that Blima first got engaged to R' Avrome'le Engelstein, a Radomsker חסיד.

At about this time my father started to suffer from heart angina, and he would travel to Zabnitz, a health spa, for several weeks every summer. We have a picture of him and several others in Zabnitz that was taken in about 1928.

My brother Ben Tzion was drawn to the Bobover Ruv by his friends in the old Bobover שטיבל on Krakovske Street.

My brother Yosef also learned in the Bobover שטיבל, and in fact spent an entire year in the yeshiva Eitz Chaim in the town of Bobov. He left to live temporarily in Yavarzna to help my aunt Blima (my mother's sister) run her

business when her husband R' Shmiel Loifer died. R' Shmiel was a תלמיד חכם, a wonderful בעל תפלה, and an expert בעל קורא. R' Shmiel and Blima had no surviving children.

Chaskel left the בית מדרש. He was sensitive to my father's superhuman efforts to make a living, and volunteered to go to work when he was still very young. He worked for the Walhandler family. He gave my father every penny that he earned. But since he was not in a תורה atmosphere, his working friends successfully introduced him to the Mizrachi, as was common in those days. He was frum and learned regular שיעורים in the בית מדרש.

Chaim was influenced by my brother in law R' Avrom'tchi Beck and learned in the Belzer שטיבל. He was a תלמיד חכם, sensitive, noble and one of the very top בחורים in the שטיבל. Members of the שטיבל would ask him to check on the progress that their young sons were making in learning.

And I as a child learned in the city's תלמוד תורה.

## ***My Mother's Death***

Any pleasure I had in my young childhood was shattered forever by my mother's sudden death.

I went to cheder as usual on כ"ה ניסן תרצ"א, the Sanzer Rebbe's Yohrtzeit. In middle of the day, there was an alarm for me to rush home. When I arrived, a black terror enveloped me. My mother was in bed, she had suffered a stroke after having long suffered from high blood pressure. She had lost consciousness and no longer recognized me. She passed away several hours later. They buried her in the second cemetery – the one where the מאור ושמש is buried – and inscribed on her tombstone that the חכם צבי was an ancestor. צדיקים accept that this inscription on the gravestone of a descendant of the חכם צבי is a סגולה to ward off outside interferers.

It was like a lightning bolt on a clear day! I was orphaned from my mother who was most dear to me. I was only 11 years old.

Very difficult times followed. I often didn't see my father for many days at a time. My father left to daven at dawn and from there he went straight to the grocery and stayed until long after I went to sleep. Ratze was already married. Blima was still in the house, and it was she who looked after me.

But I was still desolate. Who could compare to my mother? Blima did the best she could, but she had the responsibility for the whole household, and also helped my father with back breaking labor in the store, throughout the cold, the heat, the summers, the winters, day and night.

It's not surprising that many times there was no supper for me when I came home, and I had to eat in a restaurant. I was thoroughly ashamed to eat alone in the restaurant, and felt shattered to bits when I thought that not one of a thousand children was in my predicament. I would go to the back and draw the curtains around me to hide and to lessen my embarrassment. Many, many such unpleasant things hurt me, and all this because of my mother's death. My heart was broken and my spirit was always depressed.





## ***The שטיבל***

My pain, grief and shame were constant, but G-d didn't forsake me. Even before my mother's death I had been introduced into a world that would ease my loss.

Two months before my mother's death, in Adar I of 1931, Ben Tzion took me with him to the Bobover שטיבל on Krakovsa Street. There I saw a world of calm, happiness and joy.

At that very time the בחורים and young married men were especially joyous. First, it was Adar, and משנכנס אדר מרבין בשמחה. But more than that: there were only several weeks left before the wedding of the Bobover Ruv's daughter, on the כ"א אדר ב', and the חתן was one of their own: Moishe'le Stemple, a mispallel in the שטיבל.

Every שבת until the wedding, after davening, the בחורים and the יונגעלייט would walk Moishe'le home to the house of his father, the renowned magnate R' Faivish Stemple, on Krakovsa Street. The חתן was dressed royally in a peltz and wore an expensive and beautiful kolpek on his head. Every שבת, מוצאי שבת, at the מלווה, מלכה, the בחור Yosef Hillel Goldshtof enlivened us with witty and startlingly complex grammen that he made up and sang on the spot.

That was my introduction to the שטיבל. Later, when I was stunned by my new orphanhood, I felt some slight consolation when I was in the שטיבל, and my spirit lightened somewhat. From then on I was tightly bound to the house of Bobov.

Oh, if I could only feel again the pleasantness of the cold winter nights in the שטיבל! Hours long we'd stay and delve in תורה and חסידות, with longing for the living G-d. Moishe'le Stemple would sing ancient melodies, and we would with fervor sing תנו שבת קודש היא until the final stanza ושירה. We would dance for hours. Even as we returned home long after midnight, when the streets were quiet and peaceful and covered with thick layers of snow, we still danced quietly and announced to all of creation תנו שבת ושירה.

Starting with the שבת after R' Moishe'le Stemple's אויפרופן, our group no longer davened in the שטיבל on Krakovske Street. It was too dangerous and could collapse at any moment. Some said the building was more than 1,000 years old. Instead, we davened for a while in the Sanzer שטיבל, and then we moved over to our own new שטיבל on the Hoicher Gass, near the רמ"א'ס שול.

who lived at some distance from the Hoicher Gass and בחרים opened up a second Bobover שטיבל on Agisgeinski Street. A third שטיבל was in Podgurz on the other side of the Vistula River, where there were many באבאווער חסידים. In each שטיבל there was a yeshiva עץ חיים where בחרים learned day and night. There were several hundred בחרים in these שטיבלך, some of whom were outstanding תלמידי חכמים, and giants in תורה, יראת שמים, חסידות and חסידות. Most of them were later exterminated by the Nazis, הי"ד.

I ought to stop for a moment to describe briefly exactly what a חסידיש'ע meant in the years before WWII. In most Polish cities boys would learn in the town's communal תלמוד תורה until they were about 13 or 14. They would then move over to the שטיבל where adult בחרים would teach גמרא, תוספות, and שלחן ערוך.

Why were there so many adult בחרים? They couldn't marry, because at the age of 20 they became subject to be drafted by the Polish army. So they remained single in the שטיבלך until they could get a medical exemption from a military doctor. Some were as much as 25 years old, and many had already become תלמידי חכמים and were able to influence and teach the young boys. Each older בחר was put in charge of several younger boys to whom he dedicated all of his time. He would teach them גמרא, תוספות, שלחן ערוך, and he would also discuss with them material from מוסר and ספרים חסידיש'ע and stories of צדיקים, to each young boy in accordance with his level of understanding.

Over time several שטיבלך appointed young married men who were exceptional תלמידי חכמים to be in charge of the older boys, those up to 15 or 16 years old. Each שטיבל also had a chief מחנך, who made sure that every boy moved in the right paths of תורה and יראת שמים, and who encouraged the boys to travel to the Ruv from time to time, who explained to the boys how important it was to

develop ties with צדיקים, and who taught them how to behave when traveling to the Ruv and when in the Ruv's presence.

The בחורים spent lots of time in the שטיבלך, throughout the week and on שבת and יום טוב. They learned there diligently, and also ate together in one big group on each יום טוב and significant Yohrtzeit. On each night of חנוכה there was a small סעודה at which one boy would say a פ'שעטיל on חנוכה; when it was my turn I said a פ'שעטיל from R' Yoinasan Eibeshutz that my brother Chaim had taught me. A בחור's permanent place was in the שטיבל, his home was only his temporary place. These שטיבלך protected the boys against the evil winds of reform, השכלה and political parties of every stripe. The top גדולים of Galicia and Poland were graduates of the שטיבלך as were legions of exceptional and learned בחורים and יונגעלייט.

## ***Teachers and Friends***

I'm going to relate some of the memories I have about my teachers and friends. Most were killed by the Nazis.

When I was bar mitzvah age I still learned in the communal תלמוד תורה, together with my friend Berish Landerer who now lives in Flatbush [was since niftar]. My rebbe there was R' Chaim Goldklang, a highly respected באבאוווער חסיד who still knew the prior Bobover Ruv, R' Shloimo, and may have been a talmid of R' Shloimo in R' Shloimo's yeshiva in Vishnitzer. He was an exceptional תלמיד חכם and a ירא שמים, who served הקב"ה humbly and quietly. Surviving באבאוווער חסידים who lived in Podguzh, where R' Chaim lived, still speak highly of him. He was a very serious man who was never known to smile. On the other hand, he spoke softly and never raised his voice at the talmidim.

Had I remained at the תלמוד תורה my next rebbe would have been R' Mendel Wechsler, a respected גערער חסיד. Instead, I left to the שטיבל where my rebbe was R' Shlomo Bochner from Dobro, the grandson of the outstanding tzaddik R' Abbe'le Sucher, who in turn was the grandson of R' Shloimo of Kshanov. R' Abbe'le would fast all day and daven hours long in R' Aaron's בית מדרש with his head between his knees. I personally saw him rolling under the benches in fervor. If you last saw him in one corner of the בית מדרש, when you looked again he was in the other corner.

R' Shloimo was a respected young man and a good educator. Just a stare from him was enough – we stopped wasting time and learned solidly.

When I was 15 I moved into R' Boruch'l Konengieser's class. We learned both in מוסכת חולין and in שלחן ערוך. He was a straightforward, earnest, noble and unassuming young man but he was nobody's fool. One steamy שבת summer afternoon I left him in the שטיבל at one o'clock where he was learning intensely. I came back at 4, and there he still was, and so he continued until מנחה at about 8 o'clock, without paying the slightest attention to what was happening around him. Many times I and my friends went up to the small apartment where he lived with

his wife and six children. We sat as equals learning חסידות and הלכה, תוספות, גמרא. He was certainly one of the most respected חסידים באבאוווער at the time.

I spent the next year in R' Mendel'e Rottenberg's class. We studied כל הבשר and הלכות מליחה. His learning style was to proceed very carefully and analytically, and very, very slowly. Besides being a major חכם, תלמיד חכם, he was wise and shrewd, a first class conversationalist, a true and humble servant of הקב"ה, and a חסיד in the full meaning of the word. Every step was steeped in fear of הקב"ה, and we derived lessons and learning from his every movement. He lived in awesome poverty and need, but his face always shone with joy and happiness.

There were no rebbes after that point. We studied in groups of three: an older בחור or יונגערמאן with two young בחורים. My partner as a young בחור was Noson Dovid Zilberstein, who survived the Nazis and today lives in Williamsburg in New York City.

Very early in the morning I studied with my friend Usher Meir Vagner, a young, noble and non-showy בחור. I continued this שיעור even after I began working.

I had yet another שיעור with Eliezer Yitzchok Vaksberg, the son of R' Menachem Nochum Vaksberg. R' Menachem Nochum would have become Ruv of Krakow were it not for the unfortunate series of deaths I mentioned earlier; he was the son-in-law of R' Shmiel Fierer, the Ruv of Kross. Laizer Yitzchok was a close friend. We often traveled together to Bobov to visit the Ruv.

Afternoons I would have a שיעור with Avrom Meir Rottenberg, R' Mendele's son. He had a clear and sharp mind, and was a noted ירא שמים. His mother's father – R' Mendele's wife – was R' Kalma'le Klasner, a veteran talmid of R' Shloimo of Bobov, and one of Krakow's venerable חסידים. When R' Kalma'le died, the Bobover Ruv R' Ben Tzion said "If R' Kalma'le is gone, Mendel'e must become Kalma'le, and Avrom Meir must become Mendel'e."

During the war Avrom Meir lived with his father in Bobov until the deportations began in Elul 1942. Avrom Meir was sent to the Plashov

concentration camp. He was weak and delicate and couldn't tolerate the work and the physical conditions in the camp. He quickly died of sheer weakness in the arms of R' Nissen Leser.

Of all the many wonderful persons in our שטיבל, young and old, very few survived the war. The survivors include R' Naftoli Ehrenberg, R' Nochum Zaltz, R' Moshe Kalfus, R' Noson Dovid Zilberstein, R' Avrome'le Mandlebaum and his son R' Leibel, R' Leibish Braunfeld, R' Elimeilech Birnbaum and R' Yosef Mendel Bochner. R' Mendel Reichberg, who lived in Brigel but spent several years in the שטיבל, also survived.

## ***Trips to Bobov***

I just mentioned my trips to Bobov with my friend Laizer Ytizchok Vaksberg. That brings to mind my sweet memories of the days that we spent in the presence of the Bobover Ruv.

The Ruv was a natural educator for young בחורים. He had an inborn ability to impress a boy he was meeting for the first time with the tremendous love and respect that the Ruv felt for the boy. The boy retained the joyful impression for the rest of his life. The Ruv himself once said “When an innocent young boy comes to me, I connect with him so powerfully that he can no longer ever leave us.”

I traveled to Bobov for the first time with my brother Ben Tzion when I was 11 years old. This was סוכות 1931. (The Ruv moved from Bobov to Tschebin immediately afterwards. He lived in Tschebin for five years before returning to Bobov in 1936.)

We arrived in the afternoon on הושענא רבא and went right into the בית מדרש. In front I saw a handsome and impressive man with a distinguished face walking this way and that, all immersed in thought. With fear and respect I approached him to say שלום. Just then my brother Ben Tzion interrupted me: “Nu, let’s go say hello to the Ruv,” and he took me by the hand into the Ruv’s small סוכה. I was totally confused because I was sure that I had just seen the Ruv. It was only afterwards that I realized that the impressive person I had seen was R’ Ezriel Mandlebaum.

When we entered the סוכה we stood in a line of other חסידים who had just arrived and who wanted to hear שלום from the Ruv. Ben Tzion presented me to the Ruv when my turn came. The Ruv greeted me graciously and said “No need for you tell me your name, I see from your face that you’re R’ Dovid’ son. Let me tell you something else about your יחוס, you’re a grandson of the Tall Feige!” And he mentioned some event from 1880 when he met my mother’s mother in Vishnitza during the reign there as rebbe of his father R’ Shloimo. I don’t



remember the details of the story he told me because this is what happened next in the סוכה.

While I was talking to the Ruv a group of children had gathered near the top of the סוכה. Someone by accident poured a full box of bricks right on top of the סכך. The bricks were very heavy, and the סכך and all the decorations came crashing down on everybody's heads, together with the bricks. Several people were seriously injured, including R' Shulem Yitzchok Friedman from Sanz and the בחור Dovid Mayer from Krakow. The סוכה was enveloped in dust and dirt -- it was impossible to breathe. There was a huge commotion. Many shouted that the Ruv should leave the סוכה immediately. His clothes were covered with stones, pieces of brick and dust. The dust made his face white as snow

The Ruv ordered everyone to raise his hands to protect his head from the bricks and stones that continued to fall. "Quiet," he demanded, "we've got to plan how to get the last person's out, otherwise those who remain may end up with the full weight of the bricks that are still falling! Let's move slowly and carefully."

In the meantime, persons outside the סוכה climbed a ladder and removed the remaining bricks and stones, and the danger passed. The Ruv later visited those who were hurt.

I learned a moral from this that served me all my life. You've got to control yourself whatever the circumstances. You can't lose your head and panic in the face of danger or unpleasantness.

From that first time I met the Ruv I developed a bond with him that has never weakened.

I traveled often to Bobov in the following years, especially for ימים טובים but sometimes also for פורים and a special שבת like שבת החודש. I never managed to be there on חנוכה, because I had already spent my extra pennies for the ימים טובים that had just passed and I was already hoarding new pennies for the coming פורים and פסח.

Often I was in Bobov from the first day of סליחות until after שמחת תורה. My father let me go for so long because he felt sorry for me as an orphan and also because he too was hardly ever home, and was desperately busy trying to make a living. He did insist that I write him a post card every week. I also promised him that I and my friends would spend time in the fresh mountain air on the Carpathian hills near Bobov.

I was present at a טיש on סוכות when the Ruv composed his renowned nigun for אתה בחרתנו. He sat at the table deeply immersed in his thoughts. He started humming a melody. When the gabbai R' Chaskel'e Rottenberg and other good singers recognized that the melody was new, they stationed themselves behind the Ruv's chair to absorb the tune and to repeat it many times louder and louder until all present sang the first stanza until "ורצית בנו." Everyone then fell silent while the Ruv composed a melody for וקדשתנו במצוותיך. This was promptly picked up first by R' Chaskel'e and the singing experts and then by everyone else. The Ruv then completed his sparkling composition with the melody for וקרבתנו till the end. After the טיש the חסידים already danced to the new nigun with happiness and great joy. I was also present when the Ruv composed a nigun on the yoitzer for the second day of סוכות on the words "חדש חדש." To this day this nigun is sung in Bobov on סוכות חול המועד.

I was proud to receive a special mark of affection from the Ruv every year on the second day of סוכות. The Ruv honored me with a glass of wine because he said the night was my אושפיזין. His reason? The הושענות for that day included "הושענה חנה דוד," and my name was Chune and my father's name was Dovid.

Where is the writer who can adequately describe the sweetness that we sensed at the טיש of our Ruv—his pleasant nigunim, the delicacy, purity and cleanliness, and the magnificent conduct that befit a king of Israel! I also got to know well the renowned veteran חסידים of the prior generation who served הקב"ה with their entire heart and soul, for example R' Mechel'e Kalvarier and R' Kalma'le Klasner (whom I had already met in Krakow), and also the rising stars of the new generation—R' Chaskel'e Rottenberg and R' Ezriel Mandlebaum from

Bobov, R' Naftoli Mehr and R' Shimon Lipshitz from Tarnow, R' Shloimo Epstein and R' Volf Shteinfeld from Oshpitzin, and the Tzisner brothers from Kshanov who knew ש"ס thoroughly. My friends would point out to me a tall בחור from Mishlenitz with prominent round eyeglasses: "he's a big תלמיד חכם and a man of common sense, his name is Mendel Brachfeld." They also showed me a distinguished יונגערמאן from Kross whose name was Yehoshia Volf Zafren. These are only a very few of the names that come to mind as I write this.

The sedorim on פסח were especially majestic. The rebbe sat as a monarch attended by maybe 1,000 בחורים. The בחורים sat on bleachers that rose to the ceiling, and each held his own הגדה. On ערב יום טוב Moishe Dovid Mandlebaum (Ezriel's son) would sell paper matzo bags for several groshen. We would hang these on our neck and we'd keep a bottle of wine, covered with a cup, in our bekeshe's breast pocket. So we sat in awe and respect as if we were in the presence of the שכינה!

פסח was the only יום טוב when we didn't starve. The בחורים could not rely on the hospitality of town residents because of the חומרא'ס of the יום טוב, so organizers, led by Shloimo Vadovitzer, set up an exceptionally well organized פסח kitchen. He and his subordinates distributed food and tea to everyone. We would stand in line and wait for our turn for a cup of tea. In the meantime we would discuss תורה, חסידות or rebbe's historical events. Sometimes we would sing inspiring melodies, including one that R' Yossel'e Mandlebaum composed for איזהו מקומן, except that we set it to the words "Shloimo Vadovitzer, tea, Shloimo Vadovitzer, tea. Oy, oy, oy."

The love and brotherhood, the inspiring atmosphere, the songs and melodies, instilled in us a sense of יראת שמים and חסידות, and filled our hearts with joy and happiness. Anybody who was there is fortunate.

## ***The Marmalade Factory***

My brother Ben Tzion opened his marmalade factory in 1930. First he called it Vitamin, but the government forced him to change it to Vitalin, because they said customers would think he was selling vitamins. The business was profitable from the start, and Ben Tzion quickly became wealthy and respected.

There was a serious problem in making marmalade from apples. There were worms in almost half of the apples, and it was quite impossible to check every apple and remove the worms. R' Moishe Shmiel Bleicher, Ruv of the city, gave Ben Tzion a היתר to proceed. The היתר was based on the fact that the apples were so thoroughly mashed that no single worm could survive as a complete creature, and the worm parts were then בטל בששים because they were no more than 1/60<sup>th</sup> of the marmalade. But what about איסור לכתחילה? He relied on the (99:7) יורה דעה in ט"ז that this rule doesn't apply where the purpose of mashing the apples was not to be מבטל but to make jelly. The ט"ז applied this היתר only when there was no other way to remove the worms, but the פרי מגדים said the היתר applied even if this condition wasn't met – the only necessary condition was that it had to be difficult to remove the worms.

Ben Tzion was generous with his money. He helped many unfortunate people both in the open and quietly. He was also an energetic activist, and was soon appointed to be the gabbai of the שטיבל on Hoiche Street.

Here's a small example of his extensive activities. Ben Tzion spent שבועות 1935 in Tschebin with the Bobover Ruv. The Ruv then owed large sums to lenders who threatened to take him to court and imprison him if he didn't pay significant amounts by a given day. He had accumulated these debts to support the yeshiva in Bobov, both to pay salaries to the m'lamdim and to pay for food for the boys. He also spent a lot to pay the expenses of other mosdos under his wing in West Galicia. And all this was besides money he gave to desperately poor people, to marry off orphans, and the like.

So that שבועות the Ruv called an urgent meeting of the more successful חסידים. These rich folk were pressured to contribute large amounts to relieve the immediate emergency. Large amounts were raised. Among those participating from Krakow were the magnate R' Moishe Yechezkel Timberg and my brother Ben Tzion. Ben Tzion gave 1,000 zlotys, which was an unbelievably large sum, worth maybe \$10,000 – enough for a respectable נדון.

My brother Chaim's involvement was very important for the success of the business. Ben Tzion was the outside man: his job was to make connections with new customers and to buy all the necessary ingredients. Chaim was the inside man. Customers respected him for his uprightness and decency. When a customer bought a liter of marmalade, Chaim would always add a little to be certain that he was not defrauding the customer. He was certainly מקיים the mitzvah to use honest weights and measures. Sugar was expensive in Poland and competitors always used less than they promised. Not so, my brother Chaim. He would not cheat the customers. Customers knew this, and would deal only with him. Shortly before the war Ben Tzion gave Chaim a 25% partnership interest in profits.

יד חריצים תעשיר שלמה המלך said, you enrich the industrious. From my brother Chaim I learned that industriousness doesn't mean cleverness, shrewdness and trickery. The opposite is true. Honest, effective and intelligent dealing is the true industriousness.

In 1932, a year after my mother's death, my father closed his grocery and accepted a position in the factory. He received a good salary and no longer had to worry about making a living. Every night he participated in a daf yomi שיעור that R' Mechel Gintzig gave in the Bnei Emunah shul in the center of the Jewish area. R' Mechel was a first class תלמיד חכם, ירא שמים and a spell-binding speaker. His שיעור was famous—more than 100 people attended every day.

## **Yossel**

My brother Yossel also worked for the factory when he came back from Yavarzna. But he wasn't carefree for long. In very short order he passed his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday and had to present himself to the army.

The very thought of a 20-year old boy facing the army was enough to terrify any family. There was of course the physical risk of army service and the real possibility of having to fight on the front in wartime. But even more concerning was the stress that army service presented from the standpoint of religion—as regards שבת, eating טריפות, and more and more. Besides, the Polish army was anti-Semitic to the core, from the highest officers down to the lowliest private, and every Jewish soldier caught up among them suffered torturous mistreatment.

It's not surprising that everybody went to great lengths to do whatever it took to get an exemption. Those who had the money -- sometimes this needed quite a lot of money -- bribed the military doctors for a statement that they could not serve because of physical problems. Those who couldn't afford to bribe the doctors often physically maimed themselves to avoid service.

But most potential draftees relied on starvation diets, and sleep deprivation, to lose weight and appear in ill health. These unfortunate יונגעלייט would try to lose even more weight by running miles every night. On the appointed day, the young man would present himself to the doctor. If the boy was fortunate he would get an exemption. Often, the doctor wouldn't exempt, but would defer induction for one year. So the boy would have to show up again next year, and maybe a second year. It was only on a boy's third presentation that a doctor had to either induct or exempt for good.

Yossel did his best when his time came. But his problem was that he was tall, big and obviously healthy, and no course of self punishment could make him look skinny and weak. He was promptly drafted for 18 months.

Yossel corresponded with the family throughout his service, and he worked mightily to overcome the huge difficulties that came his way. Still the army service affected him, and he could never really come home again. He moved to Warsaw where he was involved in some sort of business. He also wrote to us regularly from Warsaw.

I became 20 years old in 1939, and also received a summons to visit an army doctor several months later. I never did present myself because the war broke out before the appointed time. You might say that I gained one thing from the war – that I didn't have to torture myself to avoid service in the Polish army.

## ***My קוויטל to the Ruv***

My father wanted me to join Ben Tzion's factory when I passed my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. His purpose was good – he wanted me to earn enough so that I could do an appropriate shidduch at the right time. But for me it was very difficult to leave the warm atmosphere of the שטיבל and to go into the cold air of the streets. My father agreed with me that I would discuss this with the Ruv and would do whatever he said.

I traveled to Bobov for יום כפור of 1936. Right after שחרית on the day after יום כפור, I asked R' Chaskel'e Rottenberg (the younger brother of R' Mendel'e) to write a קוויטל for me.

R' Yechezkel'e was a story unto himself. A multi-talented person, an exceptional תלמיד חכם with a vast repository of knowledge, sharp and full of wit and creativity, clever and wise, g-d fearing, a gifted writer, a delicate and humble soul, who spent many hours helping others at the same time that he himself was burdened with caring for the many expenses of his large family, and all quietly and without publicity. Besides, he was gifted with a sweet and pleasing voice, and he composed many precious and lovely nigunim that are still sung today in all chassidic houses. (Best known are the songs he composed during the war years on the פיוטים of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> day of פסח, which express our longing for הקב"ה and our plea for his help.) At the weddings of the Ruv's children, R' Chaskel'e would entertain with comedy and verse, and everything he said was 100% on point. Perhaps his most outstanding trait – unusual among typical Rabbinic staff—was the love and devotion he inspired in all חסידים.

I walked into the Ruv's private room with the קוויטל – the only קוויטל I ever gave to him. He read the קוויטל and then turned to look at me. I felt his look penetrating into me, as if he could read my every thought and the essence of my being. In that moment there welled up within me all the boiling emotions that I had bottled up in me since young childhood. I cried as I remembered all the heartbreak that tortured me from the time my mother died.



The Ruv said "I know your father well. (The Ruv had joined my father in learning in the Shiniver Ruv's בית מדרש when the Ruv had spent some time with his uncle the Shiniver Ruv.) I know that he means only your own good. It's very hard to make a living these days. You are fortunate to have the opportunity to make a clean and respectable living with your brother Ben Tzion. Work there several hours a day, but take care to set aside hours to learn תורה mornings and evenings in the שטיבל." He shook my hand and wished me success.

From that point on I would spend several hours every day in the factory. I developed my own clientele to whom I sold merchandise, and I would deposit my income in the bank on a regular basis. I dedicated my early mornings and evenings to הקב"ה, with regular שיעורים, and I would also visit the שטיבל whenever I had a free moment.

### **איגרת הקודש**

The tension in the air was palpable in the summer of 1939. Dreadful danger hovered over us. People discussed nothing else but the impending war between Poland and Germany. There were intense arguments on whether Germany would conquer Poland or whether the Polish army could stop the Germans from passing onto Polish land. Exactly what a German victory would mean, we did not know, but we knew that the results would not be pleasant.

Fresh in our minds were the events of only six months earlier, when Germany suddenly ordered all Polish Jews who lived in Germany to leave immediately, day or night, by train to the Polish-Hungarian border. They were Polish citizens but the wicked Polish government would not allow them to enter. Thousands of families, parents and children, were forced to live out in the open under the sky in Zbanshin without food or shelter, until the situation was regularized and they were finally let in.

Then, on Tuesday פרשת ויחי (January 3, 1939), the Ruv discussed the situation in a letter that our חסידים later called the איגרת הקודש. The Ruv pleaded that Jews have pity on the unfortunate Jews who had been expelled from

Germany and to support them in any way possible. In his letter, which also serves as a final will and testament to his חסידים, the Ruv also apparently referred to events that hadn't even happened yet. Later, after the war, the current Ruv [Rav Shloimo, זצ"ל] said "We see clearly that my father the Ruv referred to events that happened only later, and that רוח הקודש appeared in his בית מדרש."

Here are some lines from the Holy Letter:

We certainly believe with total faith that הקב"ה himself and alone is responsible for all that happened, is happening and will happen. But, apart from that, the very events that occur before our eyes are obviously not naturally occurring, for who would have believed that in this late generation, in this period of the enlightenment that took wing in all the nations and that purified the sensibilities of all people to conduct themselves with mercy and justice towards each other, to the point that they are concerned even with the feelings of animals, how suddenly could they have become cruel as wild ostriches in the desert, directly to slaughter fathers and children and innocent babies who never sinned! This alone opens man's eyes to see that this is not a natural event. And this very realization is our balm and medicine, for just as our enemies have been given permission to wreak destruction in הקב"ה's vineyard, just so will הקב"ה's deliverance come suddenly from on high, as it says "Wait, less than a moment, until the anger passes, and the pride of Israel rises."

We didn't know then how true his words were, but we soon learned only too well.

# War

## ***Attack***

Relations between Germany and Poland deteriorated rapidly after the שבת in Oshpitzin that I spent with my brother and the Ruv. On August 24, 1939 the newspapers announced that German Foreign Minister Ribbentropp was meeting in Moscow with Soviet Prime Minister Molotov. The papers were silent about what the two had discussed, but everyone knew that the subject was the fate of Poland. It was only after the War that we learned that at the meeting Germany and Russia had divided Poland between them: Germany would attack from the west and retain the territory until the San River, and Russia would attack from the east and take the rest.

This peace between the evil brigands, Germany and Poland, lasted less than two years, from September 1, 1939 until June 12, 1941. On that day, the Germans crossed the San River in a surprise attack against the Russians. They trampled the Russian army and seized all of east Poland, and province after province in Russia itself, until they were stopped at Stalingrad. The Ruv was wise and prophetic in 1939 when he said “Now they’re hugging each other, but soon they’ll tear at each other like beasts.”

In the last week of August the Polish government mobilized its army and hurriedly sent thousands of soldiers to the German border. Poland realized that the German threats were not idle and that war would come soon. But the government didn’t know that the Russians were prepared to attack from the east, and the government left the eastern border unguarded.

The two camps laid out their war materiel along both sides of the border. The Germans on their side had a powerful and huge army, tanks, artillery and the best weaponry. On the other side stood thousands of Polish farmers with rusted weapons left over from World War I, and several horse-drawn cannons.

## **Friday, September 1, 1939**

I got up early to go to the שטיבל for my שיעור with my good friend Usher Meir Vagner, and I suddenly heard far-off explosions. I told my father and Chaim, and we closed all the shutters to protect our windows and doors. Groups of people gathered in the street, all looking upwards at airplanes overhead. Everybody thought “theirs or ours?” We wanted to believe that this was the Polish air force protecting its territory. The Poles standing next to us agreed: “They’re ours.”

The explosions grew louder moment by moment. From far away we could see pillars of smoke rising from fires caused by the bombardment. Then we all realized that these flights weren’t Polish maneuvers, they were the German Luftwaffe attacking us! After שחרית we all went home. The streets were empty, for fear of injury from exploding munitions. The only sounds came from the German Messerschmitts and from a few defending Polish aircraft.

## **שבת, September 2**

Throughout the day nobody knew whether the Poles had succeeded in stopping the onslaught. The תוכחה we read that שבת כי תבא didn’t do much to relax our raw nerves. None of us imagined that this was the last שבת we would daven in the שטיבל. After הבדלה we heard that the Germans had easily smashed through the Polish defensive lines and were moving rapidly towards the east. The routed Polish army was retreating in panic, on the theory that at some point it would reassemble to set up a new front. We trembled when we contemplated the consequences of a German conquest.

## **Sunday September 3**

England and France declared war against Germany, carrying out their treaty responsibility to defend Poland against attack. This news gave us a sliver of hope, maybe foreign assistance would arrive in time.

By the way, my friend Usher Scharf related an interesting observation of the Ruv at the seder he held in Lemberg in 1940. In תרדפם באף שפוך חמתך we say תרדפם באף, which is spelled with an א' and a פ'. The א' stands for Anglia (England) and the פ' strands for Frankreich (France).

But we lost all hope when we learned the tactics that the German military was using. Their attack was spearheaded by bombers, followed by heavy cannons and artillery, followed by powerful tanks that broke through all resistance. Only then did the infantry attack. The battle plan was solid and powerfully organized. There was no way the Polish army could put up any resistance against this “blitzkrieg.” We knew in advance that it was all over for Poland.

### **Mass refugee flight to the east**

Word spread that the Germans were murdering all men, especially Jews. These rumors were by and large false at the time, but they caused turmoil among the Jewish population. Thousands, mainly men, ran for their lives towards the east, away from the Germans. My brothers Chaskel and Yossel also left Krakow together with my uncle Chune's sons (Yakov and Efraim Folger, proprietors of a chocolate factory).

I stayed in Krakow with my father and my brothers Ben Tzion and Chaim. We weren't ready to abandon the factory in which we had made such huge investments. We decided instead to wait to see how events unfolded.

Much toil and trouble awaited the thousands who ran. All the roads were dangerous. They were clogged with retreating Polish soldiers, overloaded wagons, and people who were walking on foot laden with packages. Movement was slow. Besides, the refugees had to scamper to the side of the road when attack airplanes flew overhead and rained artillery right unto their heads. The Polish army didn't make things easier. They seized horses and packages, and pitilessly beat up anybody with the courage to resist.

The heat this late in the summer was suffocating. When their canteens ran dry the refugees desperately approached Polish farmers for water. Many Poles showed their true colors and shooed the Jews off. Many times the farmer would take a jug of water and spill it over the Jew's head.

Chaskel finally arrived in Shiniva where he was put up by relatives, while Yossel reached Kolbosuv.

Sadly, Kolbosuv is where our family endured its first casualty. My cousin Efraim suffered fierce hunger pangs when his wagon arrived in Kolbosuv. Those with him had no choice but to move the wagon off the road while they sought to put something together for him to eat and revive him. But once they finished eating, they couldn't make their way back unto the packed road. Suddenly, German airplanes appeared and laid down a withering line of machine gun fire. All the refugees laid themselves down at the side of the road to avoid injury. Yakov suddenly remembered that he had left his wallet in the wagon, and he rose and ran to get it. That very moment he was struck by a machine gun bullet. He died on the road. Yakov was an intense גערער חסיד, who never missed spending פסח with the אמרי אמת.

After several days, the Germans had conquered all of Western Poland until the San River. The refugees realized it made no difference where they were, it all belonged to Germany anyway. Most refugees returned to their homes, including Chaskel and Yossel.

## ***Leib'tchi and Yossel are exiled to Siberia***

Leib'tchi and his family fled from their home in Landzit to Lemberg. Lemberg was soon captured by the Russian army. The Russians forced Leib'tchi and his oldest son Yossel to work in a concentration camp for the army. This was in fact a good thing, because those who had no job were in danger of being exiled to Siberia. We were in constant touch with them because the Germans and the Russians were then at peace and allowed mail to pass between them.

Leib'tchi's aged mother in law had been left alone in Landzit, under German control, and she required constant help. Leib'tchi and his wife Rochel'e decided that somehow or other they had to get back to Landzit so that Rochel'e could tend to her mother. Rochel'e managed to smuggle her way in one night with the assistance of a band of smugglers. Leib'tchi planned to do the same later with his four children.

Most people thought then that it was better to be under German control than under the Russians. The Germans hadn't yet confined Jews into concentration camps, and they paid Jews for the work they did. The Russians, on the other hand, set up concentration camps immediately and forced people into hard labor. Older persons also remembered that in World War I the Germans treated the Jews better than did the Russians. That's why Leib'tchi didn't hesitate about trying to return to German controlled territory.

But Leib'tchi's plan didn't succeed. The Russians distributed forms in which everyone was supposed to say whether he wanted Russian citizenship. Nobody knew what the wise move was—to accept or to reject citizenship. Leib'tchi decided to reject. One night in June 1941 Russian policemen stormed into the homes of thousands of Jews who had rejected citizenship and forced them on trains to Siberia. Also exiled to Siberia were his children Chaya'le, Yossel, Meir and Efraim, and my brother Yossel who had arrived in Lemberg in the meantime. This was a tough situation: Rochel'e was alone in Landzit with her mother while her husband and children were off to Siberia.



Leib'tchi became seriously ill in 1943 and died on 9 Kislev. People who knew him there told me that in the worst times he refused to eat טריפה. Nothing impure ever passed his lips.

Yossel didn't survive in Siberia either. I was never able to find out exactly what happened. But I later heard this account from my cousin in Haifa, Yosef Artzi-Folger. The Russians selected a group of prisoners, Yosef Artzi included, to be shipped to Poland for service in the war against Germany. This transport went by way of Israel, which was then under the control of England, an ally of Russia. Yosef Artzi managed to escape into one of the kibbutzim. Yossel wasn't selected because he suffered from a *ro'iz* – erysipelas – on his foot. I assume that the infection later spread through his body and killed him.

How terribly disappointed I was when the war ended and I learned that neither Leib'tchi nor Yossel survived! Throughout the long war years, when one by one the lives of my family were extinguished, there always burned in me a spark of hope that I would not be the only survivor of our large and illustrious family. See what happened to me in the end: Leib'tchi didn't return and there was no Yossel. How broken-hearted I was after the war when masses of people returned from Siberia, and my brothers were not one of them. I was left bereft and alone, a single branch from the entire tree of our family. This was my only consolation: four of Leib'tchi's children survived and established respectable families of תלמידי חכמים and doers of good.

# The Germans Enter Krakow

German troops marched into our city Krakow on September 10. Not one of us risked his life by appearing on the street while the enemy entered. We stood at our windows and watched silently and sadly as the parade continued without end. We were overtaken by fear and terror when we realized the fate that awaited us. We had heard too much about Hitler's speeches to tens of thousands of Germans, full of poisonous hate and promising to destroy and murder all Jews, young and old, men and women. And now we were under his protection.

It took several days to transfer control of government offices from Poles to Germans. They needed many laborers to clean out the offices and to prepare barracks for their soldiers, and used mainly Jewish labor brigades. Consistent with their practice in most of their newly conquered territories, they at first dealt with these workers professionally and politely, like true Prussians. But we soon heard reports that the Germans were seizing Jews for work against their will, and that they were imposing varying forms of torture.

Once they were organized they plunged into their real program with enthusiasm – to first rob the Jews of their wealth and property, and then to slowly strangle the population. During the week of פרשת האזינו, they pasted placards all over the city that demanded that everyone had to register his name with the Gestapo. In general, announcements to Jews were printed on yellow cardboard.

that year fell on the first שבת after the conquest. No one even thought about davening in the שטיבל. The Germans had shut all shuls. Besides, to walk in the street was to take your life in your hands. So all residents of our house, Number 9 Yozalevitza Street, davened in Sender Peltz's apartment. Sender was the son of R' Mordechai Peltz of Lemberg, a prominent בעלזער חסיד.

R' Sender and his wife never had any children. They graciously made their spacious apartment available for davening, and arranged it with an ארון קודש, tables, benches and ספרים. We davened there more than a year until we were forced to leave to Vishnitsa in חנוכה of 1940.

Right after ראש השנה the Nazis decreed that all Jews more than 12 years old had to wear a yellow patch on their left arm, and on it a blue Magen David at least 15 centimeters large, so that it could be readily seen even at night. Violators would be shot on sight. This decree had serious consequences in daily life. From that point on a Jew could not consider himself a free and independent citizen, for wherever he went he was stigmatized as a pariah.

On יום כפור morning, while we were davening at R' Sender's, armed Nazis stormed into the apartment and seized whomever they could, me included. They forced us down into the street, trundled us into trucks, together with men they had seized from many other davening places. The trucks rumbled out of the city until we reached a large building complex, the Polish Casern, that was used to quarter Polish soldiers before the invasion. We were ordered to clean the building and to remove burned wood and other debris. While we worked we tried to complete the תפלות that we had started at R' Sender's. The Germans returned us to the Jewish neighborhood that night.

On the same morning the Nazis had lined up several hundred Jews near the Hoicher Shul on Yozefa Street. Among those forcibly present was R' Yehuda Leib Orlean, a prominent educator in the Bais Yakov Seminary that Sara Shenirer had founded. He had been beaten viciously on the way to the shul.

We heard from one who was there that once many Jews had gathered, the Nazis seized brooms and rags and other cleaning implements from nearby homes, and distributed them among the Jews present. It happened that they honored R' Yehuda Leib with a rag while they honored his friend with a broom. R' Yehuda Leib groaned. When his friend asked why, he said "When I have to wash the floor with the rag, I'll have to be עובר the סחיטה, which is one of the 39 מלאכות. You to your good fortune will at most maybe straighten

out holes in the floor with your broom. His friend tried to console him that where there is *נפש תורה* the *תורה* orders us to work on *יום כפור*, but R' Yehuda Leib could not stop groaning from the deepest parts of his heart -- Oy vei, oy vei.

*יום כפור* and *סוכות* passed in an atmosphere of fear. The situation was tense, but we tried as hard as we could not to concentrate on our dismal situation. Everybody tried to continue with his business and other activities as far as he could. But one thing we were very careful about and could not forget: never to come face to face with a German soldier. Woe to anyone who fell into the hands of these vicious beasts! They jumped unto the unfortunate Jew and beat him viciously until his blood flowed. When they seized a Jew with a beard and peyos, they would pull him to a corner and cut them off with scissors, with beastly joy and laughter. If they didn't have scissors they would pull the beard and peyos out with their hands, just as one plucks chicken feathers.

They had a garage not too far from our house, near the train station. They would pull Jews over there and force them to wash the officers' cars, while they laughed and guffawed. They would add to the humiliation by forcing the unfortunate victim to wear *טלית* and *תפילין*, or they would cut off half of his beard, while they took pictures to send back home to prove their high-minded victory in the war against the Jews.

## ***The Judenrat and the Ordnungsdienst***

At about this time the Nazis set up two organizations in all Polish cities. Each city had its Jewish Council or Judenrat, and each Judenrat had attached to it Jewish police or Ordnungsdienst (OD). Both these organs should be remembered in everlasting shame, because they served only the interests of the Nazis -- the main job of the Judenrat was to implement orders of the Gestapo. To our misfortune, the Judenrats and OD's dedicated themselves to their jobs with total devotion. Their membership was almost universally repulsive, because any person with a shred of humanity withdrew from any service. How could they not refuse the low and degrading task of turning their brethren over to death by the Germans?

Why would anyone volunteer to serve on the Judenrat and the OD? There were several reasons. Most important was that they believed the Germans' promise that they would spare the lives of volunteers and their families. In the early days, volunteers in fact lived pretty much as free men, and they expected that this would continue to the war's end. But that wasn't what the Germans had in mind. The Germans intended to erase and uproot every vestige of Jewish life, plain and simple, and that included Jewish officials and policemen who were dragged into the extermination camps without any distinction or special treatment. Quite the opposite: the Germans took extra care to exterminate these officials lest they later testify about the miserable behaviors of their Nazi bosses.

The Germans could never have eliminated so many Jews so quickly without the help of the Judenrat. The Judenrat disclosed bunkers where Jews were hidden. They seized Jews to work. They identified the wealthy Jews, the rabbonim, the דיינים, the community leaders in every province and city. Alone, the Germans could never have amassed this detailed information, and many, many of us would have been saved. They were our enemies. Most of the persons in our family who died in this nightmare were brought down by the Judenrat, as I'll tell you in more detail later.

Many officials of the Judenrat conducted themselves as arrogant noblemen, and became full-fledged sadists. The same goes for the OD. True, they were stigmatized with yellow patches on their arms just like the rest of us, and even had a yellow cord on their caps, to mark them as Jews. They nevertheless considered themselves distinguished because they wore police-like uniforms with tall black jack-boots, and carried hard-rubber batons. They humiliated their fellow Jews no less than the Germans did, and often with even more meanness. Jewish blood had no value to them. Even the Germans would stand by, astounded, while they watched the OD's cruel enthusiasm to harm us. Most of them were low level scum, empty-headed, miserable and gross, totally and thoroughly corrupt and perverted.

I remember the bitter end of one Judenrat member. Shmiel Brodman was a חסידיש'ע young man before the war – on the surface. He wore a shtreimel and long white socks on שבת. Even then, we suspected that he was a hypocrite to the core. People said that he informed on his friends to the Polish tax authorities. What he really was became clear during the mean days of the war, when his confidence blossomed and he turned many souls over to the tender hands of the Gestapo. His own end was not good either. When the ghetto in Krakow was liquidated on ז' אדר תש"ג, he tried to escape with his family to the border with Hungary, secure that his German connections would protect him from any misfortune. But the Germans seized him nevertheless, and set him ablaze. I myself saw fire tear through his body.

I've got to admit that there were some on the Judenrat who were good and kind. These were few in number, but they did exploit their positions to serve their Jewish brothers, and were a small bright light in the bleak captivity. When the Germans planned a general liquidation, or when they proposed to seize Jews for labor camps, these good souls quietly let the word out so that at least some could take protective steps while there was still time. Also, when the Germans directed the Judenrat to declare that amnesty would be given to all Jews who left their hiding places in bunkers and basements, these honorable people did not comply because they knew the bitter lot that would befall those who emerged

from hiding. These precious people existed, but they were very few. Of the Judenrat in general it can be appropriately said, as did ישעיהו הנביא, "Your destroyers will emerge from your own."

## ***December to January 1939-1940***

Winter arrived. The Germans grabbed Jews off the street to shovel snow off the roads and build new highways. Frequently, they beat the workers for the slightest infraction. Sometimes workers didn't return home at all, and only later, when we found their bodies on the sides of the roads, did we discover that they had died from the thrashings. To heighten our terror and subservience, the Germans sometimes would not give us permission to bury the dead.

The noose was around our neck, and over time they made it tighter and tighter. Nowadays, many articles and books are written to explain why the Jews did not resist the Nazis. The truth is, we couldn't do anything! The roads were guarded day and night, and there was no way to escape. We couldn't organize any opposition because the country swarmed with armed soldiers and police who were prepared to brutally squash the slightest insurrection.

Nor did the Poles give us help or support. To the contrary, they rejoiced at our bitter lot. They suffered under the enemy occupation but the afflictions of the Jews were even more dear to them.

With all this, none of us had any concept on the German's ultimate plan to kill all of us. We resorted to the weapon that we and our forefathers used over the centuries: to plead for assistance to הקב"ה in the midst of oppression, to bend our heads against the pressure of each new wave as it came, and to accommodate each new situation as best we could. At each stage, the aggressive and honest activists amongst us energetically bribed Gestapo and other officers to lighten our burden as far as possible.



## ***The Search***

German soldiers blocked our exit out of the house one winter morning in 1940. We were forced back into our apartment. Through our windows we saw troops parked outside all of the other houses, too. No Jews were in the street, only armed and steel helmeted soldiers and several heavy-duty trucks. The Germans were conducting a general search to seize all Jewish valuables and to load all of the loot into the trucks. The seized valuables were worth many millions.

The entire Jewish quarter was locked and sealed shut that day and the next. The deathly quiet was punctuated now and then with rifle and pistol shots. They also tramped into our apartment and grabbed whatever money or moneys' worth we couldn't hide.

We later heard that about 100 Jews died during the search. In some houses there were episodes of exceptional cruelty. In one apartment they found a sharp knife and claimed that the household planned an insurrection. They beat and killed those in the apartment with cruel abandon.

One episode of קידוש השם that happened then will always be deeply ingrained in my mind. The Germans broke into the house of the Glazman family. This family was crude and simple -- at the bottom level of our society. Their business was to rob and steal, and they didn't hesitate to eliminate anybody who got in their way. People said that on the tombstone of the deceased head of the family was engraved בחכמה פותח שערים on account of their expertise in picking locks and cracking safes.

Anyway, during the search the Germans dragged the head of the family to the train station. They unrolled a ספר תורה and, השם ישמרנו, laid it on the ground, and ordered Mr. Glazman to dance on top of it. He steadfastly refused and they shot him right there.

This fearful event is to me a symbol of the heroic essence of the Jew, and of the powerful forces that lurk in his deepest heart. Even the most inferior and

gross Jew abandons his life to be מקדש השם when his Jewish inner spark is touched.

## ***Deportation from Oshpitzin and Kshanov***

Poland was divided into several sectors shortly after the invasion and conquest. The province of Oshpetzin-Kshanove was annexed to the German Reich. That's why the Germans promptly deported the Jews who lived there – all men and women who were capable of working were sent to labor camps in Germany itself. At the time people thought that this was a cruel fate: to have their families broken apart and do forced labor while Jews in the rest of Poland still lived with their families and didn't work in labor camps. But after several years, in the midst of the flames of the war, it turned out that the Oshpitzin -Kshanov deportation saved the lives of many of the deportees. The Jews deported to Germany were treated better than those that remained in conquered areas that were not annexed to Germany.

The early deportation also had another side benefit. The deportees were permitted to take along personal belongings to Germany, including ספרים and תפילין. In 1944, when we ourselves were sent to concentration camps in Germany, and our ספרים and תפילין were stripped from us, we used ספרים and תפילין that had been brought to Germany years earlier by Jews from Oshpitzin and Kshanov.

Once all Jews had been removed from Oshpitzin the Germans set to work there to build the extermination camp that will forever be known in infamy as Auschwitz. More than a million people were murdered in that camp in 1943-44.

The Krakow area wasn't annexed to the German Reich. It was in a sector the Germans called "General Government," under the control of the evil General Governor Frank, may his name be obliterated. This wicked man was given the task of solving the "Jewish problem" for roughly a million Jews under his control. The Jews were a thorn in his side, and he set out to develop plans on how to rid himself of them at the earliest opportunity.

## ***Our Factory is Seized***

Our factory continued to operate at lower volume during the several months following the conquest. We sold whatever we could on the black market, and made enough money to support our family.

But in תש"ד 1940 the Germans announced a decree that ruined the livelihoods of a great many Jews in the city. All major factories and other businesses owned by Jews had to be transferred to the control of a German agent. The decree was later modified to permit transfers to be made to Polish as well as German agents. As you might expect, the Germans approved only Polish agents who were well connected with the Germans.

The former Jewish owner was permitted to work in the business, but only as a simple employee who received a salary that was set by the new German or Polish owner. The former Jewish owner had no say at all on anything involving the finances of the business. The front door of each seized business was required to post a sign that said "This Enterprise is Under the Control of the German Commissariat."

Ben Tzion lost his factory as a result. As you might assume, this was a disaster to him and the whole family. In one moment, without any cause, the family lost an enterprise in which it had invested so much effort and money over many years.

Ben Tzion didn't sit by with his hands folded. He analyzed every possible avenue to salvage what he could. He ultimately developed a plan to transfer formal ownership to a gentile woman in Italy with whom he had done business. In actuality, he would continue to run it.

This plan was almost completed when the Ruv's son, R' Yechezkel Dovid Halberstam, proposed another approach. He suggested that he could act as a broker between Ben Tzion and three Jewish businessmen (one of whom was a Mr. Unger, a relative of the Scharf family) who claimed that they had excellent connection with the Germans, and that if they were made equal partners with

Ben Tzion, the Germans would permit the factory to continue to be run by Ben Tzion.

Ben Tzion accepted the second approach and took in the three new partners. Indeed, the business continued successfully for several months, without interference from the Germans. But in the end it became clear that Ben Tzion had made the wrong decision – there was no way that a Jew could continue to run a successful business for an extended time without inciting the envy of the Germans. In June or July of 1940, an ethnic German filed a complaint with the authorities that Ben Tzion's business had not been transferred to German control as required, and that under the rules of the Gestapo, this ethnic German was the proper person to whom the business should have been transferred. Ben Tzion's partners tried to accomplish what they could with the Gestapo by using connections and bribery, but the Gestapo decided in favor of the ethnic German. As soon as the ethnic German obtained possession, he evicted Ben Tzion and the whole family. Ben Tzion's losses were in the tens of thousands: our estate was transferred to foreigners, our houses to strangers.

After this failure, the three partners moved to Tarnow and opened a new marmalade factory under the name "Gomorsky." They could think of no person more appropriate to run the business than my brother Chaim, whom they knew as an honest and decent person from the short period when they worked in the factory in Krakow. Chaim moved to Tarnow in August 1940, rented a local apartment and ran the business.

Despite the major loss that Ben Tzion suffered when the factory was seized, he was still left with large bank deposits and substantial gold and other jewelry. He started to do business by buying and selling jewelry.

Over the years since then I've thought about these events many times. If only Ben Tzion had decided to go with this first plan – to transfer the business to formal control of the Italian gentile woman. If he had done so, maybe the ethnic German would not have been envious, and maybe the business would have remained under Ben Tzion's control. I continue with the following thoughts: And

maybe Ben Tzion would have been permitted to move his factory into the ghetto, the same as happened to other businesses, for example, R' Nochum Zaltz's brush factory. And maybe Ben Tzion's name would not have appeared on the list of the those who were shot and killed on the bitter and accursed day of כ"ב חשוון as I'll tell you later. And maybe then the entire family could have survived, as happened with several other enterprises.

But as soon as I start thinking this way, I chase these thoughts forcefully out of my mind. These thoughts serve only to distress me and break my spirit. I tell myself, "Why am I interfering and delving into הקב"ה's secrets? Maybe! If!" The best and most-thought-out human plans didn't save anyone's life during the war. All those who survived will testify that the only survivors were those who were meant to live -- those whose names were written and sealed in the ספר החיים.

## **סעודת יאהרצייט**

During the course of the year, a minyan with a ספר תורה was established in the apartment of my rebbe R' Boruch'l Konengieser. We also had a סעודת מלווה there every מוצאי שבת. מוצאי שבת באבוב. joined in the סעודת מלווה מלכא and absorbed chassidic anecdotes that R' Boruch'l had heard from the Bobover Ruv R' Ben Tzion. (R' Boruch'l lost his parents at an early age and he was brought up by the Bobover Ruv; heard hundreds of shmiessen from the Ruv).

My friend R' Yechiel Weingarten recently reminded me of one event at R' Boruch'l's house at about this time. A group of us went up to his apartment one morning when he was about to eat a roll for breakfast. R' Boruch'l cut it in half, not by separating the left side of the roll from the right, but by laying it on its side and cutting it into two hemispheres from the top down through its thin dimension. He explained this by mentioning that the Bobover Ruv had told him, in a deeply chassidic way, "We must never separate the bottom from the top." Stories of this kind exhorted all those who listened to keep in mind the rule "Know Him in all of your ways" – in every step that you take.

Our discussions with R' Boruch'l infused us with בטחון and אמונה, and gave us strength and courage to confront the daily trials we all faced. They also left a mark on us in the bitter years that followed.

The second day of ראש חודש תמוז – the Yohrtzeit of the prior Bobover Ruv R' Shloimo זצ"ל—was approaching. A number of us, including my friend R' Moishe Yehoshia Tsanger, who was R' Boruch'l's wife's brother – decided to hold a סעודה for the Yohrtzeit in R' Boruch'l apartment. R' Boruch'l agreed, but on condition that the סעודה was only for בחורים and not for חסידים generally. As our rebbe and mashgiach for many years, he wanted to spend the סעודה in discussions that would encourage and guide us.

But in the end he couldn't limit attendance. At that time R' Yecheskel Dovid, the Bobover Ruv's son (the only son who hadn't fled to Bochnia at the

outbreak of the war) arrived in Krakow and he wanted to attend the סעודה. Many חסידים arrived in his honor.

R' Boruchl's rebbetzin prepared the סעודה on the night before the Yohrtzeit, with the help of her brother R' Moishe Yehoshia, R' Naftoli Ehrenberg and several בחורים. A large group of חסידים was already present at שחרית. As difficult as it is to believe this today, more than 200 persons attended the סעודה, at a time when any gathering at all was absolutely forbidden and all who showed up were in great danger. Some of the cream of Bobov was present, for example, R' Mendel'e Rottenberg, who made a special trip from Bobov on a horse-drawn buggy with his face swathed in clothing to hide his beard. It was an elevating experience; almost a full year had passed since we last had the privilege of traveling to Bobov for יום טוב and to attend the Ruv's טיש. It reinforced our connection with our holy root.

Our enemies, the Nazis, thought they understood the inherent qualities of the Jews. They certainly had no conception of the internal qualities of the חסידים.

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In June 1940, we heard alarming news from Lemberg. The Russians one night seized thousands of Jews, loaded them onto trains, and shipped them off to the far vastness of Siberia. My brother Leib'tchi and his four children, Chaya, Yossel, Meir and Efraim were part of the transport. My brother Yossel, who in the meantime had crossed again from Krakow to the Russian side, was also included.

We heard not a thing from them for several months. All of us were in anguish, but my father was pained most of all. Unceasing worry turned his hair completely white. He couldn't understand why he received not even a post-card or some other sign of life.



# The Deportation Order – July 1940

More than 10 months had passed since the German conquest. We had gotten used to the frequent decrees that were directed at us on a regular basis. We tried to organize our lives around the new situation, while we offered prayers and pleas to soon witness the end of the war and the downfall of our enemies -- the German soldiers and their helpers included. We hadn't yet heard of massacres. We hoped that the situation would remain stable and grow no worse.

That's what we hoped for, but it was all in vain.

How very much were we stunned one morning that summer when we saw big posters plastered throughout the city that announced that Jews must leave the city altogether. The posters advised that a Jewish ghetto was being formed in the Podgurz section, and that ten thousand Jews would be permitted to live there with permits from the Gestapo.

70,000 Jews then lived in Krakow. So what the announcement meant was that 60,000 Jews had to move somewhere outside of Krakow while 10,000 would be permitted to squeeze into the small Podgurz section on the outskirts of the city.

I don't have to tell you the pain, the fear, the alarm and the shock that residents of the city felt. To leave the city?! To abandon homes, factories, stores and big and small businesses like offal in the open field?! Besides, we were talking about a glorious city, renowned wherever Jews lived, on whose avenues and streets had trod geonim and holy men, מקובלים, חסידים of the highest caliber. The city was permeated with תורה and יראת שמים, and about whom the world spoke only with great respect. Now this city was to be left bereft of its residents?!

Alas! רבנו של עולם! Where were the tens of thousands of men, women and children to go? Other cities across Galicia were suffering their own pain, captivity and concentrations. This was truly a fearful and far-reaching decree. It was the beginning of the end to Jewish life in Krakow.

We had a small consolation that the posters did not set a specific date when we had to leave the city. Our activists used this respite to try to rescind the decree. Those who had connection with high officials of the Gestapo tried to use their prestige and wealth to persuade General Governor Frank to cancel the order. But nothing worked. No amount of effort could persuade the enemy not to move towards its goal: to make the General Government judenrein or free-of-Jews. Nothing could stand in the way of this goal.

A black mood (שחורה אני in the full sense of the word) descended on us. Our mouths were bitter and we were demoralized. You could see on everyone's forehead the questions that tormented him: Where will I go? To where will I escape? Where will I find a roof for myself and my family. But there was no stopping the decree; it had been issued in urgent haste by the Nazi administration, the rule applied to our streets and homes, and the city despaired.

Many people didn't leave the city that summer because no deadline had been imposed. The theory was to live in the meantime, and that maybe, somehow, the decree would not be implemented.

## ***September 1940***

The ימים נוראים approached. And they were in fact fearful. As the first year of the German Conquest drew to a close, the Gestapo turned to their faithful servants, the Judenrat, and assigned to them the task of evacuating Jews (“auszidlung”) from Krakow. Judenrat members resolved to carry out this order with full force, and to take whatever actions were necessary. They prepared detailed listings of all Jewish residents of the city, arranged according to financial means. They then sent letters to thousands of Jews demanding that they leave the city by a designated day. At the end of the letters they threatened to take serious actions against anyone who failed to carry out the order.

As you would expect, the poor and downtrodden were the first group to receive these eviction orders. Next came the middle class, and finally the wealthy. In the meantime, Judenrat members, who were themselves also included in the evacuation order, took care to amass for themselves many of the Gestapo permits to move to Podgurzh. There began a struggle among the rest to receive the same permits. The resulting black market in “ken-korten” did nothing to impoverish the Judenrat. Those Jews who had the money bribed the Judenrat with huge payments to obtain the permits that would include them in the 10,000 Jews who could remain in Podgurzh.

The Judenrat also sent one of these letters to our family. My brother Ben Tzion tried to get special permission to remain in Krakow, at least temporarily. My father hinted at these efforts in his letter to Leib’tchi that I’ll mention soon. But because of the pressure from the Judenrat, my brother in law Avrome’le Engelstein and his wife, my sister Blima, moved to Vishnitza where they settled in the house that my father had bought yet before the First World War.

## ***Contact with Leib'tchi in Siberia***

In addition to these alarming and unsettling events, my father was disconsolate and heartbroken about the fate of my brother Leib'tchi and his children, and my brother Yossel. We hadn't heard a thing from them since that night when the Russians seized them in Lemberg and sent them to Siberia. Leib'tchi's wife Rochel'e, who then lived in Landzit with her aged mother, hadn't received any word either.

Rochel'e finally received a letter from Leib'tchi, after three long months, in September 1940. Leib'tchi wrote that he and the children were all right and that they had arrived in Siberia after a long journey, and he also gave her his address. Rochel'e immediately conveyed the good news to my father. My father rejoiced, and wrote back to his son with emphatic good wishes for the impending New Year. My father also took care to send warm clothing to Siberia in preparation for the frigid cold of the Siberian winter. My sisters Blima and Ratze added several words at the end of the letter. Because of the German censors, much of this correspondence was in German or Polish. •

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• Krakow, D. Folger, Midowa 29, Sept. 13, 1940

Dear Children עמור'ש:

After worrying about you for three months, I only now learned from Rochel'e where you are now. My heart bled all this time till I heard from you. Unfortunately there is nothing to do here until our merciful Hashem takes pity on us. I have nothing here to send you, but have written to Premisl and Shiniva to send you necessities from there and expect that this will in fact be sent. [illegible]. We're waiting to get the necessary paperwork to remain here. Your ever-loyal father who hopes soon to learn good news. I also wish you a *כתיבה וחתימה טובה*. Heartfelt greetings and kisses to your beloved children.

Dovid Folger

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I also greet you warmly and pray for a prompt deliverance when we can all see each other in happiness. I beg you to write to me because I miss you very much. The address is Blima Anisfeld at New Vishnitza. Separately, please say hello to your Chaya. G-d should help us to be delivered of this, *אמן*.

I and Avrom'tchi and our beloved children heartily greet you dear brother [and wish you] deliverance soon.

Ratze

Premisl-Shiniva was near the Russian-German border, and packages could be sent from there to Siberia but not from Krakow.

My father hoped to hear more from Leib'tchi every day, to get any kind of letter or any information at all. He waited every day with bated breath, but no more word arrived.

## ***Exiting the City***

After יום כפור of 1940 the Judenrat progressively increased the pressure on those without permits to leave the city. The Ordnungsdienst began to show its strength and power. The OD would swoop down on people without permits -- young and old, fathers, mothers and their children -- and eject them from the city by force. Many of these forced exiles were delivered to Pustkov, a working and extermination camp in the forest near Dembitz. The camp held thousands of Jewish prisoners, all exiles from cities that had been ordered to be free-of-Jews by German command. The unfortunates in the camps were not given food. They did back-breaking labor while famished and desperately thirsty, and while they receive a full measure of severe and cruel beatings. The camp emptied quickly. Masses died from hunger, thirst and disease, while others were shot and murdered.

We realized how dangerous it was to remain in the city when we heard that Jews were being seized and sent to Pustkov. Chaskel and Ben Tzion decided to move to Tarnow, where they had previously lived for some time. Ben Tzion rented an apartment that had been vacated by someone who fled to the Russian side. But they left a very short time later when they managed to get permits to live in Krakow and even to enter the ghetto that was to be built once the Germans decided to close Krakow completely.

At the end of Tishri, I moved to Vishnitsa, where I stayed for about a week in our house together with Blima, her husband Avrome'le and their young son. From there I moved to Tarnow, where I set myself up in the apartment Ben Tzion left when he moved back to Krakow. I slept there alone.

## ***November 1940***

I lived in peace and quiet in Tarnow for six weeks until the middle of Kislev when the Germans began “actions” there too. They broke into houses at random and transported the occupants to Pustkov.

One time, the Nazi criminals broke into houses on my street and dragged out all who lived there. In great haste I ran up to the roof and hid there. I was terrified and trembling because danger lurked on all sides of me. The roof was slanted and I had to lay on it in order not to be seen by the Nazis from the street. On the other hand, I had to take great care not to fall off the slanted roof. I barely avoided sliding down, and managed to hold on until danger passed. But what I saw of the action from my vantage point on the roof was enough to make me decide to return to Krakow. There were widespread rumors that the Judenrat was no longer pressuring city residents in Krakow to leave. It was more dangerous to be in Tarnow—which hadn’t been declared officially free-of-Jews --than it was to be in Krakow, from where Jews were officially banished.

At that time, Jews were still permitted to take public transportation, and I prepared myself for the two-hour bus ride to Krakow. I took with me a sack full of family pictures and letters that I valued more than money. I put the sack on the floor for a moment while the bus arrived. In the tumult a thief stole my package because he undoubtedly thought it was laden with money and valuables. In its place he substituted a bag full of old and torn rags. I have no doubt that as soon as he looked into my sack full of old pictures he took the sack and dropped it into the first dump that he came across.

Alas, so much family history was lost... But as much as my mood was down because of this disaster, I was revived when I arrived in Krakow and I met my father and my brothers alive and well. I thanked הקב"ה for having returned whole to my father’s house and added a prayer for the future.

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I still have two letters from my father to Leib'tchi from November 1940.\*

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In mid-December 1940 the Judenrat announced that it was only a matter of several months before those with permits would be evicted out of the city into the ghetto, and the rest would be forced out of the city entirely. Masses of people

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ב"ה\* Krakow November 13, 1940

Dear Children, עמו'ש

It's two months now since Rachel'e sent me your new address, to which I wrote right away. Since you haven't answered, I assume that you never got my letter. As you can imagine this situation gives me no great joy. So I plead with you to write everything frequently. Especially how you've been doing until now. Are there any people we know with you over there? How do you and your dear children spend your time? Is the work not too hard for you? Most important do you have enough food and clothing? Did you receive anything from Premisl or Shiniva? Because as soon as I learned your new address, I gathered food and clothing and sent it to you, because I think they allow these items to be sent.

Even if you're too busy, the dear children can write me.

I don't have to tell you that I wait here for salvation, that we should have successfully davened for all that's good, and for salvation immediately.

Your brothers and sister want to write to you, but not [erased] wish [erased]

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ב"ה Krakow November 15, 1940

Dear Son and Dear Grandchildren, עמו'ש

I just found out about your new address from Rachel'e. I was very happy that you and the children are thank G-d in good health. But how it sickens me to be separated from you. Besides, you write nothing, and I don't know why. I am mainly concerned that you have enough food and clothing, especially clothing for the cold weather over there. Please write to me often and don't make me worry. Several weeks ago a letter from my brother Yakov came through to A. S. Folger. He also pleads for a package of clothing for the winter. It looks like he and you aren't together. I hope to see all of you soon.

Your father, Dovid Folger

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ב"ה

My loved ones!

I really wonder why you don't write. My husband and I and our dear child live in Vishnitz. What good news can you tell me. Solomon Bier is in the hospital here and has a weak appetite. How is Chai'tche? And Yoss'in, Meir'l and Efram'che? I greet you all and wait impatiently for good news  
Blima

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My dear ones!

I let my post card to you lie around the house for two months, thinking that you'd be coming back, and in the meantime you changed your address. Just got your new address, and I finally mailed you that old post card last week. So how are you doing? I think of you every day. Dear Chai'tche how are you? Take courage and don't worry, all will be OK with Hashem's help. Take care of the children. Just now I received a postcard from your mother. My husband, I and our dear child live in Vishnitz. Write more often, at least once a week. That would comfort us a lot. I greet you and kiss you.

Your Blima

Say hello to your father, Yossel, Meir and Efraim'che.



began leaving the city. My father also decided to leave because he saw that no good result would follow from remaining.

On the 19<sup>th</sup>, he, my brother in law Avrom'tchi Beck and four of his six children and I all left Krakow for Vishnitsa. Ratze and her two other children stayed behind in Krakow with Ben Tzion and Chaskel, who had the permits they needed to stay.

Right after we left, Governor Frank ordered a more organized and hasty exodus from the city. He no longer had the patience to wait for the Judenrat to implement the departure. The Poles rejoiced at this new order as if they had hit the jackpot. With cruel laughter they tortured and beat anyone without a permit and then deported them to the deportation camps. Not one Jew without a permit was left in the city. Those with permits began to move into the ghetto.

The Germans had decreed that the ghetto was to hold 10,000 people, but more than 20,000 crowded in because the Judenrat had awarded additional places to those who offered them attractive bribes, while others succeed in smuggling their way in without any cards at all. The crowding was extreme. Several families lived in each apartment, with one family living in each room.

The Germans built fences around the ghetto. Guards were stationed at the gates to limit entrances and exits, but these rules weren't strictly enforced at first.

The expulsion from the Jewish quarter "Kazmirz" was finished in March 1941. The quarter that had been a home for Jews for hundreds of years no longer had any Jewish residents.

# Vishnitza

## ***The Town's Early History***

We moved to Vishnitza hoping that we would wait out the Nazis in this small town.

Vishnitza was a much prouder town in earlier years. Its residents then included תלמידי חכמים and prominent people. The רבנות of Vishnitza included more than 200 smaller districts that stretched all the way to the border with Podgurzh. Many תשובה ספרים of that era referred to "Podgurzh which is in the vicinity of Vishnitza." Vishnitza had the good fortune to become the home of many notable geonim, including R' Yakov the Ruv of Kotlberg (the grandson of the Rebbe Rab Shmelke of Nikolsburg), the אריה דבי עלאי, the ברוך טעם, and R' Shloimo of Bobov who established his well known yeshiva there.

Over the course of time the town was destroyed by successive fires. Many residents moved elsewhere and there was a steep decline in population. The decline was accelerated when a train station was built in neighboring Bochnia but not in Vishnitza. To take the train one had to hire a special horse and wagon to get to the Bochnia station. Before World War II the population was at most 180 families.

My father settled in Vishnitza when he married in 1897 because that was where his mother in law Feige then lived. Her husband R' Yehuda Leib Gerstner had died many years earlier at the age of 39. My grandmother Feige supported the entire family with a successful liquor operation that she ran out of her house. After his marriage, my father ran the enterprise himself until World War I.

Roots of the Gerstner family extend long into the past. There was a family tradition that the family emigrated from Russia during the Cossack riots in 1648 and 1649, when tens of thousands of Jews were killed in Russia, Ukraine and in eastern Galicia. Many Jews, including the Gerstner family, escaped to Western Galicia. A large portion of the family settled in Krakow and its environs, while others settled in Yavarzna and Kshanov.

My grandfather R' Yehuda Leib was born in Kshanov, but settled in Vishnitsa after he married my grandmother Feige. All knew her as Tall Feige. I've already told you about my first visit to Bobov to see R' Ben Tzion in תשע"א in 1931. When I approached to greet him in his small סוכה, he told me with a friendly face "You don't have to tell me who you are, I can see that you're R' Dovid's son and the grandson of Tall Feige." He then started to talk about my grandmother, whom he remembered from his stay in Vishnitsa in 1880 when he was six years old. I don't remember the details of the story he told me – you remember how the סוכה was almost destroyed at that very moment-- but I do know that it meant a lot to me that the Ruv was familiar with my grandmother.

R' Yehuda Leib and Feige had four children: two sons and two daughters. The sons were Tzvi Hersh and Yitzchok. My uncle Hershel, a baker, was hanged by the Nazis on the pretext that he was a spy. My uncle Yitzchok lived in Tarnow – one of his sons in law was Shmiel Folebaum, a young man who was an ardent חסיד באבאווער and an effective community activist. The daughters were Blima, who married R' Shmiel Loifer of Yavarzna, and my mother Raizel Chana.

My father did exceptionally well in his liquor business. All of the hotels and bars in the surrounding area were customers of his, and he was considered one of the more established and prosperous men in town. This abundance gave my soft-hearted mother many opportunities to do חסדים and to give food and other support to downtrodden poor people. Every Friday afternoon they would line up at her house door, and she would give each a bottle of liquor in honor of שבת. Often she would notice that a supplicant's shirt was torn and she would offer him one of my father's shirts. In a short time my father had no shirts left from his wedding.

## ***My Father's Stay in Germany***

Shortly after his wedding my father had to interrupt his business when he reached the age when he could be drafted into the Austrian army. He did everything he could to avoid the draft, but all was to no avail, so he was forced to leave Galicia for Germany during 1897 to 1898. We have a rare picture of him from this period that he had sent home to Vishnitsa.

While in Germany, my father had the opportunity to move his family to America. He declined out of concern that in America he would not be able to give his children a torah-true upbringing. In those days they said that in America even the stones were טריפה. It was hard to be שומר שבת. I am quite certain that had he moved to America he would have been strong as a rock and would not have moved one inch off the derech. I sometimes think to myself that it was a pity that he didn't make the move, for if he had, my brothers and sisters would have survived. But then again I dismiss these thoughts, for they result only in pain and heartache.

## ***The שאלה to R' Shmiel Engel***

My mother gave birth to two boys in 1905 and 1906, Avrom Shmiel and Tzvi Hersh. Both died several days after their ברית for reasons not related to the ברית. Efraim was born in 1908. My parents postponed the ברית for five months, out of concern that his brothers had died because of their ברית. The ברית didn't affect Efraim, but he died in 1911 at the age of three when he contracted diphtheria. When my brother Ben Tzion was born in 1910 my father asked the Vishnitzer Ruv, R' Naftoli Rubin (a son in law of the Shiniva Ruv the "דברי יחזקאל," he was made Ruv of Vishnitzer when R' Shloimo of Bobov left the town in 1893) whether the ברית for Ben Tzion should be done on time, or whether to wait several months as with Efraim. R' Naftoli Rubin forwarded the שאלה to R' S Engel, Ruv of Radamishle. His ruling is included in R' Engel's תשובות.

This was the issue for R' Shmiel. The rule is that once two brothers die because of their ברית, we don't make a ברית for the third. Does this rule apply where the two brothers died shortly after the ברית, but for extraneous reasons not connected with the ברית? If yes, then the risk remains even though Efraim survived: first, Efraim's ברית occurred several months later, and two, to remove the risk, *three* brothers (not only one) would have had to survive after the two that had died. After analyzing numerous precedents, R' Engel directed that the ברית be postponed for several months and that a doctor be consulted before proceeding.

My father did so. He waited five months and then named the baby Ben Tzion, on account of what the חיד"א says in שם הגדולים per the Yerushalmi: the name Ben Tzion is a סגולה for one whose children die early. R' Shloimo of Bobov named his son Ben Tzion for the same reason. (R' Shloimo's grandfather, the Sanzer Ruv, had added a prayer that Tzion should be rebuilt in Ben Tzion's lifetime.)

Chaskel was born in 1911, Yossel in 1912, Chaim in 1914 shortly before World War I. I, the youngest, was born after World War II in 1919.



## ***Escape during World War I***

When World War I erupted the forces of Czar Alexander of Russia attacked Galicia, which was then an Austrian province, and murdered and robbed residents at their whim. Tens of thousands ran for their lives from Galicia to Austria. My father and his entire family fled to Prague. He spent a full night at the train station with his little children until they squeezed into a crowded train car. Many Jews, including prominent rabbonim, traveled to Vienna.

My father was drafted by the Austrian army. To avoid being sent as an ordinary soldier to the front he damaged one ear slightly. His hearing in that ear was permanently weak. He was appointed to be an assistant to an officer. He wore an army uniform, but never touched his beard and peyos. We had a picture of my father in his army uniform with his *יידישע צורה*.

He would often repeat to us the story of the *טוכות* he spent in Sombathelli. He walked the streets in his uniform *ערב יום טוב* and tried to find a place to stay. But all were busy preparing for *יום טוב*, and no one took notice (or wanted to take notice) of this "soldier." After *מעריב* on the first night of *יום טוב*, someone finally invited him to eat and sleep in his house.

Leib'tchi turned 16 in 1917 and he too became liable for the draft. He went into hiding in a *בית מדרש* in Hungary, and secretly ate in a different house every day of the week, as was customary for *yeshiva בחורים*, until the war ended. My brother in law Avrom'tchi Beck also fled from Vienna to Hungary for the duration of the war.

My mother and six younger children returned to Vishnitza after the war. My father joined her after he was freed from army service, and Leib'tchi also came back. The house and hidden stocks of liquor were totally destroyed. All that was left was the house itself. My father was under great pressure to make a living, but could find no means. He tried to reopen the liquor business, but didn't succeed. So when I was born in 1919, the family decided to move to the big city of Krakow with the hope that they could sustain themselves there more easily.



My father opened a grocery store, and struggled there for several years, as I've already told you.

## ***Vishnitza during World War II***

### **Tranquility at First**

The dispossessed Jews from Krakow wandered to wherever they had relatives or other connections. Hundreds joined us then in trekking to Vishnitza. The number of families in the town increased to more than 600 families—approximately 3,000 persons. The Ruv of the town was R' Chaim Boruch Rubin who had succeeded his father R' Naftoli, whom I mentioned earlier. R' Chaim Boruch was closer than a brother to my father from their earliest childhood. My father and he kept in touch even after my father had moved to Krakow. When R' Chaim Boruch visited Krakow every year he would spend the שבת in our apartment. His father R' Naftoli would also stay in our house when he visited Krakow. I still remember how as a child I would watch as R' Naftoli hardly slept. Instead he would pace back and forth for hours caught up in his learning and his thoughts.

A large contingent of באבאווער חסידים lived in Vishnitza, and they had their own שטיבל. (The town also had a city shul and a בית מדרש for חסידים.) But when we and the other exiles from Krakow arrived, we were told that the שטיבל was locked, that it had been dangerously damaged by bombs during the German conquest, and that until the שטיבל was repaired the Judenrat would not release the key.

The persons in charge of the שטיבל were R' Yakov Zehwirth, who was the ראש הקהל, and Yidel Shabsi Blitz. They didn't think it was appropriate to press the new arrivals for repair funds. So my friend Moshe Yehoshia Tsanger and his friend Shimon Shantzer committed themselves to raise the money. They went from house to house and collected what was necessary, penny by penny. They also reserved some of the money for a handsome gift to the head of the Judenrat. They made the repairs, and reopened the שטיבל for davening and learning. There were more than 10 minyanim on the first שבת.

From then on, for close to two years while shuls throughout Galicia were by and large desolate, until the final deportation in Elul 1942, there were minyanim in our שטיבל morning and night, right in the shadow of our persecutors.

Life in Vishnitza was generally calm and peaceful. Jews wore their regular clothing with beard and peyos, and a shtreimel on שבת, but with the addition of a yellow patch inscribed with a Magen David. There was no other open sign of the troubled times. Except for an ethnic German who was in charge of the town's jail, there were no Germans at all in the town.

As time passed, this became more and more surprising. In the other towns, Jews were persecuted with a fury, action after action, until their final deportation, while in Vishnitza there was no sign of trouble. The town was like a small island in a huge sea of turmoil. We imagined that maybe the Germans had forgotten about us. To this day I don't know why Vishnitza was spared the whip hand of the Nazis for so long. But in the end, Vishnitza too drank the cup of poison when it was declared Judenrein on the bitter ח' אלול תש"ב.

### **The 60 Giborim**

I promptly joined a שיעור in the שטיבל. To my great joy my rebbe R' Boruch'l Konengieser had arrived from Krakow at roughly the same time – 5701 חנוכה -- and moved into the house between ours and the שטיבל. That house belonged to the Lapanover Ruv, R' Aron Lipshitz (a brother of R' Itzil'e of Vielapoli) and had been the old בית מדרש of R' Aaron's עזרת נשים.

R' Boruch'l began a regular series of שיעורים as soon as he arrived in Vishnitza. More than 60 בחורים participated with the same enthusiasm as in years past. A group of us joined him in his apartment every שבת, to sing זמירות, discuss chassidic anecdotes and to dance שבעה. My eyes well with tears when I remember these dear souls, exceptional לומדים, חסידים chock full of love of תורה and faith in צדיקים, who absorbed our rebbe's learning for almost two years. For these I cry.

The reputation of this “yeshiva” spread far and wide. They called Vishnitza the Yerushalayim of Galicia. It’s interesting that the first yeshiva in Galicia (which produced rabbonim and דיין who lived throughout West Galicia) was instituted by R’ Shloimo of Bobov in Vishnitza. Vishnitza was also זוכה to be the home of one of the last – maybe the last—yeshiva in Galicia.

### **We Reestablish a Connection with Leib’tchi**

We received Leib’tchi’s first letter from Siberia two weeks after we had arrived in Vishnitza. Leib’tchi had sent the letter to Ben Tzion in Krakow, and Ben Tzion forwarded it to us. Leib’tchi wrote that things were relatively peaceful and the work wasn’t too difficult, and he added other encouraging things. The family breathed a sigh of relief, because we had been oppressed with worry about Leib’tchi and his children, especially our father, who concerned us with his heart pains and general fatigue. My father wrote back that he had received Leib’tchi’s letter with great joy that made him forget for a moment all the tension we lived under and the pressure of our expulsion from Krakow\*.

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\* ב”ה Vishnitza, January 21, 1941

Dear Son and beloved grandchildren

It’s 15 days that I’m here with Avrom’tchi [Beck] and his children, and [Blima and] Blima’s husband and child. Ratze, Ben Tzion and Chaskel are still in Krakow. This morning I received your letter from Ben Tzion, and it revived me with new life. I thank G-d that I’ve received an encouraging letter from you. This is the first letter I’ve received from you since you left Lemberg. I’ve written to you several times.

Thank G-d that there’s nothing special for me to write about us. I often receive letters from Rochel’e. Just received a letter from her this week. Thank G-d everything is in the best of shape, certainly nothing we ought to complain about. I’ll send your letter to Rochel’e right away. Stay in good health, greet the children, and may G-d permit us to meet and enjoy each other in person soon.

Your always loyal father, David

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My dears, Your letter made us very happy because we were very worried about you. We worried about you whenever we ate and whenever we slept, whether you’re freezing in the cold and whether you have what to eat, the same for the children. We so much want to see you, but alas... We hope to see you in joy and happiness, greetings and kisses and all the best.

Blima

Dear loyal brother in law and dear children, I too give you a hearty greeting and thank you for your letter which made us all very happy that you’re all healthy. May G-d permit that we meet soon in happiness.

Your loyal Avrohom Beck

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ב”ה Vishnitza, January 8, 1941

Dear Children [to Leib’tchi]:

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My brother Leib'tchi's children have the only surviving letter from Ben Tzion. It's dated January 16, 1941, and reflects the generally tense environment of those days. Ben Tzion makes a hidden reference to his expropriated factory when he writes "I have less work, because this is not our season. He means that because of the German conquest it is no longer the season of the Jews. Ratze added a post-script in pencil marks that are almost illegibly light and smudged\*.

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Just yesterday I received my first letter from my brother Yakov since he left Lemberg. He writes about no news, except about his silence till now. He is concerned about your situation, wants to know your address, and asks for winter clothing.

Unfortunately, we here can best be described as "refugees." But we thank G-d for the situation as it is, and pray for salvation soon.

By the way, I'm writing you his [Yakov's] address. Get in touch with him, he writes that he's not far from you. Write to him under the name Yekl Zeidman.

I'd very much want some letters from the dear children.

Your father, Dovid

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I join in hearty greetings and kisses, and await a prompt deliverance.

Blima

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I, too, your loyal brother in law, join the hearty greetings, wish you all the best, and pray that the All-Mighty soon permits us to meet in happiness and all that's good.

Avrohom Beck

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Dear Bother, I join in warmly greeting you and your children

Your loyal brother, Chune

• ה"ב Dear brother Leib'tchi, Krakow, January 16, 1941

Received your letter on Friday. Our father, Avrom'tchi [Beck] and Avrome'le [Engelstein] and Chune have been in Vishnitza since late December. I sent your letter there, and I'm sure you'll also get responses from them. I've also written your wife Rochel'e – you needn't worry about her, she has all she needs. In a few days she'll send Chaya'le a package with clothing that will also contain a coat and various winter items that I had sent to her. It's possible that she has already has sent it, but although I've written you several times I've never received an answer.

Looks like Chaskel and I will be able to live in Krakow for the time being. (We suffered plenty in trying to make a go of it in our apartment in Tarnow.) Ratze and her two children are also here, and we pray that they will be able to stay.

Why don't you know our Yossel's address?

Chaim has been in Tarnow the last several months, where he worked in a marmalade factory and makes enough to cover his expenses. I have less work, because this is not our season, but we hope to earn more when our season returns again.

All of us were elated that you don't work at hard labor, especially our father. It pains him that you write so rarely.

Be healthy -- the same goes for your children.

Your loyal brother Ben Tzion

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I, Ratze, join your brother in greeting you warmly. May we see you soon in happiness. I also greet the whole family, especially dear Chaya'le. Let's all hold on tight ... and happy breezes should come soon, Amen.

## ***Late February 1941***

Ratze and her husband Avrom'tchi Beck and their six children moved into an apartment in Tarnow. The children's names were Yosef (named after my grandfather), Efraim, Raizel (after my mother), Yissocher Dov "Ber'l" (after the Belzer Rebbe), Eliezer Yitzchok, and Feige Beileh (after my mother's mother).

Yossel'e was then 12 years old. He had an unusually sharp mind and was widely considered a genius. He engaged in constant correspondence with my father. His letters were replete with his own חידושי תורה. My father enjoyed him very much.

Avrom'tchi developed a strong friendship in Tarnow with R' Moishe'le, the Boyaner Rebbe. My nephew Yossel'e also participated in this relationship.

## **Chaim Becomes a חתן**

My brother Chaim became a חתן that February in Tarnow. The כלה was a granddaughter of the prominent חסיד R' Moishe ("Moshel") Veksler, who was in turn the grandson of the ברך טעם. R' Moshel was one of the town's top scholars and a respected חסיד of the דברי חיים. On their part, the Veksler family was proud to have achieved a חתן like Chaim, who was known to be a scholar, a ירא שמים, with a refined character who managed to support himself in the worst of times. My father spent seven days in Tarnow then (from February 18 to February 26) until the match was completed. He announced the good news to Leib'tchi by letter\*.

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The wedding took place in Tarnow on April 3, 1941. My father and my sister Blima managed to get travel documents and they alone attended from our family.

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\* Vishnitza February 12, 1941

Dear Children עמר"ש

Received from Rochel'e your letter in which you asked me to give you Yakov Folger's address. You should already have received the address from me long ago ... but I'm enclosing his address again to make sure that you establish clear contact with him. I think that you're located not too far from him.

Although I know it's difficult for you to write me [more often], it does pain me ... greatly [not to receive more letters from you].

I hope soon to write you a mazel tov: that Chaim has become a חתן in Tarnow.

Warm greetings to your dear children.

Your always loyal father, David Folger

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B' H Vishnitza February 26, 1941

Just today received and read with joy and pleasure your rich [complete?] and very-pleasant-to-me letter of January 28<sup>th</sup>. I praise Hashem that that you and the children are in good health. May he help us soon enjoy each other's company in person.

And now Leib'tchi and dear grandchildren, mazel tov and mazel tov. I've just arrived from Tarnow, to where I traveled over 8 days ago, and ב"ה on Sunday wrote תנאים with my son Chaim. The כלה is a granddaughter of R' Mohsel Veksler, her father is R' Fivel.... With the help of Hashem I'll [also] attend [weddings] of your dear children.

Avrom'tchi yesterday moved his apartment to Tarnow, and Ratze and the children will travel there today. Refugees can't earn any money here; the same goes for me. Chaim has his own apartment in Tarnow and thank G-d that he still earns something. Avrom'tchi unfortunately has no income at all. The same goes for Ben Tzion who hasn't had any income since they took his factory away six months ago. Hashem should save us soon....



I have a letter from my father from April 2, a day before the wedding, to which I added a note in which I expressed my hope to meet again soon and to be happy together. I also have a letter about the wedding from my dear brother Chaim himself.\*

Chaim's letter of May 24 was the last that the family wrote to Leib'tchi and his children in Siberia. About then the situation worsened considerably – the Germans were preparing a strong attack against the Russians, and all

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\* ב'ה"א April 2, 1941 Vishnitsa

Dear Children [addressed to Leib'tchi]:

Don't be surprised that you haven't heard from me this long. It's because they accept absolutely no mail from here to out of the country. That's why I haven't written for several weeks. I just had the idea to send you this letter through Rochel'e.

Now dear son, I wish you mazel tov before Chaim's wedding. Let G-d give that the wedding should be to all with mazel and joy, and that you and Rochel'e shall soon achieve the same for Chaya'le, and that I also live to participate at [the weddings] of all the grandchildren. Blima and I will go the wedding.

I'm sure you know that Avrom'tchi lives in Tarnow the last several months. His address is A. Beck, Tarnow.

As far as sustenance, all is in order. Ben Tzion still lives in the Jewish Quarter in Krakow. His address is B. Folger, Krakow, XX11 Vegerske 8/10. Chaskel, on the other hand, lives in New Krakow (?), but I don't know if he can remain there.

By now you should know something about your brother Yossel.

Please write me ....

I hope that we will soon end our separation. Warm greetings to all.

Your always loyal father, David Folger

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Dear Brother Leib'tchi

I too wish you a hearty mazel tov on Chaim's wedding. Let Hashem see to it that this should be fortunate for the whole family, and that [you should have the same happiness with] your children in great joy. Warm greetings to your dear children

Your always loyal

Brother Chune

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ב'ה"א Tarnow May 24

Dear Brother עמר'ש

First I want to tell you that we're all healthy here, and I hope to hear the same from you. I also want to give a good report about my wedding on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. Let God give us as much mazel as we wish ourselves, and that we meet soon in happiness.

I've been here in Tarnow for about 10 months where I have a job in a marmalade factory. I'm happy with my job considering today's situation.

You must really forgive me for having written you so little, I didn't have your exact address here.

Write if you urgently need clothing, I might be able to send you what you need.

Regards ... and warm regards to the dear children Chaya'le, Yossel, Meir and Efraim, and a wish to Hashem for an immediate deliverance.

Your loyal brother and uncle Chaim Folger

communications between the two sides were ruptured. It wasn't until the end of the war that I got any news from the family on the Russian side.

## ***The Bobover Ruv is Murdered***

On June 22, 1941 the Germans launched an intense attack against the Russians over the San River. In short order the Germans conquered all of eastern Poland and large swaths of Russian territory. Thousand and thousands of Jews became subject to German authority because of this conquest. They too suffered the decrees and the liquidations; they were also part of the Nazi master plan to destroy all the Jews.

The metropolis of Lemberg, where the Bobover Ruv then lived, also fell under Nazi control on June 30. The Ruv's residence was in the home of R' Eliah Avigdor's Brinner, who was one of his חסידים. For about a month the Rebbe hid in a room whose door was secretly blocked by a large bookcase. But a friend convinced him to come out of hiding, on the theory that the Germans were more harsh to people who were found in hiding. The friend also argued that the Germans would honor the Ruv's official papers that declared he was a foreign resident. The Ruv didn't accept these arguments at first, but ultimately acquiesced on Friday, ראש חודש אב, פרשת מטות מסעי. He left his hiding place and established himself openly in a separate room in the apartment.

At about 6 pm that very day, while the Ruv was removing his רבינו תם תפילין, the door opened suddenly and a Ukrainian youth entered together with the building's gentile superintendent. The youth carried a red whip with the insignia of the Pertilura gang. The two were conducting a search of R' Brinner's house.

That day happened to be the anniversary of the day Pertilura was shot during World War I. He was a Ukrainian leader, an organizer of pogroms and a notorious anti-Semite. The Germans had authorized the Ukrainians to celebrate his anniversary with a murderous rampage against the Jews. The Ukrainian mobs decided that they would concentrate on Jews who were prestigious, wealthy and distinguished. R' Eliah Avigdor's name was on this list because of his wealth and status.

The youth took one look at the Ruv and immediately realized that this was a distinguished personage. He ordered the Ruv to accompany him. The Ruv's youngest son, Moishe Aaron, saw his father being led away, and pleaded to come along to help his father. At first the Ukrainian youth objected, but afterwards he acceded and took along Moishe Aaron.

They were joined at the street corner by other distinguished prisoners from other areas in the city. Soldiers stood guard to prevent escape. When the number of captives reached 100, the guards arranged them in a row, three abreast, and ordered them to march. The Ruv was too weak to keep up with the rapid pace and moved to the back. The guards beat him with their batons and demanded that he hurry up. R' Eliah Avigdor's held one of his hands and his son Moishe Aaron held the other until they reached Gestapo headquarters at Polczinski 4.

On שבת there was another action. The captives this time included R' Itchi Leser, who was a באבאווער חסיד, and three sons in law of the Ruv who had been hiding in R' Leser's house: R' Yecheskel Halberstam (the son of R' Yeshayal'e Tch'choiver), R' Moishe'le Stemple and R' Shloimo Rubin. All four were brought to the Gestapo building.

The entire household, led by the Ruv's son R' Shloimo, moved heaven and earth to secure release of the prisoners, and offered huge bribes. But the גזירה had been issued, and the efforts were to no avail.

After three days, on Monday פרשת דברים, ד' אב, which then fell on July 28, four weeks after the German entered Lemberg, the Jewish captives were shot in the Yanover forest behind the city. 20,000 Jews were shot that day, the Ruv, his son and this three sons in law included.

We heard this from one of our friends who was in Yerushalayim during the war: On ה' אב of that year, Tuesday morning, R' Chaim Shaul Dwick, a renowned מקובל, dreamed that the western light of Galicia had been extinguished. Later, when word came from the fields of slaughter that the Ruv had been murdered the pervious day, it became clear that the western light did indeed go out. Because

throughout western Galicia, the Ruv had kindled the holy flame of Torah, יראת  
חסידות and שמים.

# Deportations Begin

By and large there weren't many transports in the summer of 1941. It wasn't until the winter that transports began, first in East Galicia and then in central Galicia. Starting in December 1941 thousands and thousands of men, women and children in 65 cities in eastern and central Galicia were transported to the extermination camp Belzec in eastern Galicia to be gassed to death and cremated. Auschwitz was not yet ready to absorb these transports, but this "failing" was soon corrected.

But even though the turn of western Galicia hadn't yet arrived, cities there were pelted with evil decrees that were issued and made more severe every day.

In Bochnia, near Vishnitza, the German set up a ghetto that they divided into two camps separated by barbed wire. The first was for artisans and factory workers who worked for the German military. No children or elderly people were permitted in this camp. The second camp held children and people who were too old or too infirm to work, pending their ultimate transport on a day that no one knew.

There was no ghetto in Vishnitza.

## ***The Belzer Rebbe Arrives – February 1942***

The Belzer Rebbe and his brother R' Mordechai from Bilgorai fled Premisl because of local riots and pogroms. They escaped to Vishnitza through the strenuous efforts of their חסידים. They selected Vishnitza because of its modest size and the peace and quiet that prevailed then. The Belzer Rebbe was a guest of R' Zelig Schechter, בעלזער חסיד. His brother was the guest of R' Yekl Stein, a באבאווער חסיד.

R' Mordechai developed a close personal friendship with R' Boruch'l Konengieser. They treated one another with enormous respect. R' Mordechai would visit R' Boruch'l once or twice a week. He would typically arrive at about midnight and they would discuss תורה and חסידות until dawn.

I also developed a personal relationship with the Ruv from Bilgorai. We would discuss the war's progress, and I would bring him newspapers with articles on the current status.

The Belzer Rebbe and his brother spent seven months in Vishnitza, from אלוול תש"ב to שבט. When rumors flew that the Germans were about to liquidate the city, חסידים brought him to the Krakow ghetto by way of Bochnia. They remained in the ghetto until it was liquidated in אדר תש"ג, when they returned to Bochnia. In the summer of 1943, just before the final liquidation of Bochnia, they crossed the border into Hungary, and from there they arrived in Eretz Yisroel in 1944.

In the beginning of אדר תש"ב the actions approached further and further into central Galicia. My sister-in-law Rochel'e, who had been living in Landzit with her aged mother, left the city and came to Vishnitza after the Germans murdered her mother. German soldiers tossed her mother out the window.

## פורים תש"ב

On שבת פרשת זכור the Germans descended onto Reische, a long-time important city for Jews. They robbed, pillaged and murdered. Those who survived were transported to Belzec, where they sacrificed themselves to ה'קב"ה's name. After the Germans were done they burned the city.

R' Berish Shteinberg, the head of Reische's בית דין and the son of R' Avrohom Shteinberg (who was the Ruv of Brodi and the author of מחזה אברהם), escaped with his two young sons. He arrived in Vishnitza in the middle of the day on שבת חן.

That שטיבל the בחורים and יונגעלייט gathered in the שטיבל, the same as in the old times, and we celebrated שמחת פורים together. R' Boruch'l Konengieser served as פורים Ruv. The very talented בחור Moishe Katz hoisted himself on the table and delivered warm grammen that encouraged all of us. Moishe Katz was a powerful תלמיד חכם and a delicate soul, and had been a major influence at the second שטיבל in Krakow, the one on Agoskinski Street. We then danced a joyful rikud, almost forgetting the fearful situation in which we found ourselves.

After we davened on שושן פורים, the group returned to the בית מדרש. R' Boruch'l stood on the table and danced the "Mitzvah Tencil." It was traditional for the Ruv to summon one of the bystanders to join him in the Tencil on the table. R' Berish Shteinberg just happened to walk by the שטיבל at that moment. He looked in to see where all the noise was coming from. R' Boruch'l noticed him and directed the "gabboim" to carry R' Berish unto the table. R' Berish shouted "Meshigoim, at a time when Jewish blood flows without stopping, is it a time to sing and dance? Let me go!"

But the "gabboim" had received the order from the "Ruv," and in the blink of an eye R' Berish was on the table dancing with R' Boruch'l. Throughout the dance we saw R' Boruch'l whisper to R' Berish, but none of us could hear what was said. But this we do know: after R' Berish came down from the table, he approached two יונגעלייט and asked "Who is this angel who gave me a new נשמה?"



We baked matzos when פסח approached, and sent extra packages to the ghetto in Krakow and to Leib'tchi in Siberia. On ערב פסח, I had the honor to bake matzos with the Belzer Rebbe and his brother, the Ruv from Bilgorai. R' Itzik'l Lipshitz, the Vielipoli Rebbe, also put his life in danger by leaving his home in Brigel to joins us. All knew R' Itzik'l to be a sainted person with a pleasant character. He was murdered later in the Bochnia Ghetto in אלול תש"ג. I'll tell more about that later.

## ***In Yulog #1***

### **50 Young Men are Seized**

A truck carrying several armed German soldiers lumbered into town several days after פסח תש"ב (April 11, 1942). The soldier in command approached the head of the Judenrat and demanded that he provide 50 יונגעלייט to work on a job the Germans needed done.

The Jewish police had been lazing idly for month after month. They now swung into action with energy. They had a list of all the יונגעלייט who were between 20 and 25 years old and went house to house to demand that they all gather in the city's בית מדרש. I was then 21 years old and was also summoned. They required me to shave my beard and peyos; my beard had just begun to sprout. I had no choice.

The Germans charged into the בית מדרש to confirm that the required 50 יונגעלייט had been gathered. They were furious when they counted only 49. The ordnungs diensten rushed out into the city to find the missing young man – Reuven Vulcan, a בעלזער חסיד. They couldn't find him and had to grab another young man in his place. After the Germans left, Vulcan left his hiding place, the ארון קודש! In the midst of all the hullabaloo when the boys were dragged into the בית מדרש, he managed to enter the ארון קודש as a refuge in a time of trouble. He ultimately survived the war and lived afterwards in Bnei Brak in Israel.

When we got on the truck on Bochnia Street (so called because it was the road to Bochnia), the entire population of the city, young and old, surrounded us on both sides of the street. The image is fresh in my mind: the populace milling around, with handkerchiefs in their hands to wipe the tears off their cheeks. To them it was a troubling thing. To our dismay we later saw that this one of the more minor of many dismal events.

## **In the Yulog**

The truck took us towards Krakow and stopped where the Germans were erecting the Plashov concentration camp, on a hill on Yerusalemska Street in Podgurzh. I already told you that this was the site of the new Jewish cemetery. Our precise location was Yulog (Yuden lager) #1. It was past midnight when we arrived, and the Germans marked off an area for us in which to sleep. We fell asleep hoping that tomorrow we'd somehow leave here and return home.

We got up early the next morning and davened. At 8 am we started on our job to build new barracks. Trucks arrived with prefabricated walls. The walls were thick and broad – each weighed several hundred pounds. Each group of four men was required to carry each wall from the truck to the place where workers were building the barracks.

I had never carried this much weight before! The Germans didn't let us stop or even pause. They tracked us step by step, shouting "faster, faster." I was collapsing under the weight, literally prepared to expire. I understood what Rashi meant when he said עבודת פרך means "difficult work that crushes the body and breaks it." As soon as we deposited the first load, they turned us around to bring the second, and so time after time. I sensed that my strength was about to leave me, and I was almost at the point of critical danger.

Throughout I whispered prayers and pleadings to הקב"ה to please have רחמנות on me. In my prayer I mentioned my mother's name Reizel Chana bas R' Yehuda Leib. I begged her to plead for me up above in the world on high.

I spent four hours working like this. Every second was like a long hour to me. To this day I don't know how I survived.

The Germans called a recess early in the afternoon, when they gave us food for lunch. I knew there was no way I could continue with this work, and I sought some plan or scheme to be relieved. I noticed a group of workers who were mowing grass and cutting straw. I didn't hesitate for a moment. I jumped in and started working without asking permission from the person in charge. I had

the help of הקב"ה that no one noticed what I had done. I heaved a sigh of relief when nobody asked me "who are you and what are you doing here."

I am confident that the זכות of my holy ancestors and my mother the tsedeikes achieved רחמנות for me up above, and that my cry reached הקב"ה. I did no more hard work at the Yulog. Not only this, but from then on throughout the war הקב"ה's kindness to me was such that I never had to do labor that was beyond my strength.

The Germans paid us six zlotys a day.

Several בחורים in our group were put to work laying railroad tracks (שינעס in Yiddish). This was very hard work. While dragging tracks on שבת, they sang bitterly שינעס בשבת תענוג.

### **Leaving the Yulog**

My father by post card asked Ben Tzion to do whatever he could to help me. Ben Tzion had already heard that 50 בחורים had been seized in Vishnitza to work in the Yulog near Krakow, and he was concerned that some of his family might have been included. When the post card confirmed his worry, he hurried to the Yulog's gate, and that night passed me a small satchel with warm soup and other food that revived me. He did this every night for the full six weeks that I was in the Yulog.

In the meantime my father told me by post card that my sister Blima had given birth to a little boy.

Ben Tzion worked hard for my release. A Jewish doctor had been retained by the Germans to provide medical services to Yulog laborers every Sunday. Ben Tzion bribed the doctor to add my name to a 30-person list of בחורים whom he considered not medically fit for labor. Of the 30, six were from Vishnitza. They included my friend Moishe Yehoshia Tsanger, Yosef Hirsch (the son of R' Shimon Hirsch, who lived in our house in Vishnitza), Avrom Velvel Drenger (one of the older בחורים from our שטיבל in Krakow, a תלמיד חכם who had a היתר הוראה – his father was R' Chaim'l St'm who was the brother in law of R' Chaskel'e

Rottenberg; a half-year earlier Avrom Velvel had become (by mail) a חתן with his cousin the daughter of R' Chaskel'e)), and another חסידיש'ע בחור, Gavriel Hollander.

Shortly afterwards, on a שבת morning that fell on the second day of שבועות (May 23), the Germans ordered our group to leave Plashov by foot to the ghetto in Krakow, with a special permit to enter the ghetto and to go from there by train to Bochnia.

The walk from Plashov to the ghetto in Krakow took me two hours. I davened in the Bobover שטיבל where I was happy to see Ben Tzion. I ate the יום טוב סעודה in Ben Tzion's apartment. I left Ben Tzion מוצאי יום טוב to take the train to Bochnia.

While in Bochnia I visited the Bobover Ruv's son R' Shloime in his house outside the ghetto. He was studying a difficult סוגיא with his brother in law R' Yecheskel Limonever. I recounted the history of the last several weeks. We parted with warm and friendly good byes. I also went to visit the Tch'choiver Rebbe R' Yeshaya'e. I can't describe my heartache when I saw this tzaddik and זקן, the son of the Sanzer Rebbe, had been forced to shave his beard.

I told my father about my release by post card on 8 Sivan. He met me as I walked the seven kilometers from Bochnia to Vishnitza. He greeted me with great joy, and gave thanks to הקב"ה that I had survived without harm.

We heard painful news a week later. The first liquidation of the ghetto in Krakow had occurred right after שבועות, and several thousand Jews were sent to the Belzec extermination camp. I was also told that on the day after שבועות, another group of 30 בחורים had bribed the doctor at the Yulog to be released from work. But instead of being freed—as I had been—these בחורים were added to the transport to Belzec. Among them was one of my friends from our שטיבל, Yecheskel Viederman, the son of R' Yeshaya Dovid.

There were rumors that the Germans were searching for the first group of 30 בחורים that the doctor had released the prior week. I feared that the Gestapo would search me out. Thank G-d there was no substance to this rumor.

Vishnitza was quiet and peaceful that summer of 1942, but there was palpable danger in the air. The actions had reached West Galicia, city by city, until the turn of Bochnia-Vishnitza came in אלו. This was the last summer I spent with my father and my family.

## ***The Liquidation of Tarnow***

The Germans destroyed West Galicia under a precise plan. They set a specific date for each city, and they carried out their schedule with astonishing precision. Step by carefully planned step they made Poland *Judenrein*.

More than 30,000 Jews lived in Tarnow then. After Krakow it was the second largest city in all of West Galicia. Ratze and her husband Avrom'tchi Beck lived there after they were forced out of Krakow, as did Chaim and his wife.

The principal liquidation of Tarnow occurred on ראש חודש אלול תש"ב. Before that liquidation there were smaller actions. In each of the earlier transports the Germans selected one segment of the population. In one of these, in mid-Av, the cruel oppressors selected only children who were 12 and 13 years old. Yossel'e, the precocious son of Ratze and Avrom'tchi, was forced into this transport and was sent to Belzec.

Early אלו, hundreds of SS officers, Gestapo and general army soldiers surrounded the city. With them there was a large group of Polish policemen who reveled in actions by the Germans. The liquidation took three days, and was one of the cruelest in the whole country. They murdered Jews in ways that had never been imagined before. They grabbed children and babies, threw them in the air and shot them dead before they returned to earth. They tore children from their parents and tossed them out of windows. Others ordered mothers to hold their children in their hands, and they then shot them together, so that their blood joined as one. In these ways and other ways the criminals tortured them, and also in ways which cannot be written down. More than 10,000 Jews died in this blood bath.

20,000 survivors of this slaughter were transported to Belzec. Among them were my sister Ratze and her five remaining children. An eyewitness told me that he saw her carry her babies on the truck to Belzec. In all this turmoil she was separated from her husband Avrom'tchi, who managed to hide in a bunker

with the Boyaner Rebbe R' Moishe'le. Chaim and his wife also managed to saved themselves from this action.

The few survivors were compressed into a small and narrow ghetto, where they lived until the final liquidation in חשוון תש"ג.



## ***The End of Bobov***

Bobov's turn came on ראש חודש אלול.

Before the final liquidation, R' Chaskel'e Rottenberg hid in a bunker with his older brother R' Mendel'e and a small group of distinguished married יונגעלייט. Among them were the חסידים R' Ezriel Mandlebaum, R' Naftoli Mehr and R' Eilish Soifer.

Chaskel'e composed three precious, emotional and courageous nigunim while he was in the bunker. He set them to the words of piyutim [\_\_\_\_\_] for שביעי אחרון של פסח. A בחור who learned the nigunim in the bunker survived and taught them to באבאווער חסידים. The nigunim are sung in Bobov on פסח every year.

From the day the Germans invaded Poland R' Chaskel'e considered it his personal obligation to strengthen and encourage באבאווער חסידים wherever they were, especially after the Ruv was murdered. Survivors report that after R' Chaskel'e learned that the Ruv had been killed in Lemberg, while all others were distraught and their minds useless, R' Chaskel'e recovered immediately and said "When the general falls, the soldiers must still continue with their campaign."

who maintained a correspondence with him would somehow, though indirect and various means, receive encouraging and heartening post cards from R' Chaskel'e in the bleakest times.

In one of these letters R' Chaskel'e maintained that the possuk in תהילים 139: רוקמתי בתחתיות ארץ teaches that a person should never despair but should instead always seek to be בשמחה. The word ורוקם means woven (געוועבט), but in a sort of pun (probably based on a mistake by a schoolchild), was also somewhat humorously translated as געלעבט. רוקמתי, we should live, even בתחתיות ארץ, in the depths of the earth, in the worst of times. Even when secreted in a bunker underground, where outside the sword bereaves and inside there is terror – even there, serve הקב"ה with joy.

The German murderers descended onto Bobov on ראש חודש אלול. They killed 300 persons at the cemetery and brought the rest to Belzec. The renowned חסידים I mentioned earlier, heroes of Torah, prominent for their works, sacrificed their souls, and were killed and gassed in Belzec on ו' אלול, may הקב"ה take revenge for their blood.

# ***The Liquidation of Vishnitza and Bochnia***

## **Panic Builds**

On Sunday פרשת שופטים posters were plastered all over Vishnitza and the surrounding areas. The Nazis demanded that all Jews take their belongings and leave for Bochnia, where the authorities would see to it that everyone would have lodging.

The true intent of the Germans was obvious to anyone who could think clearly. There was no train station in Vishnitza. To transport the Jews to Belzec for extermination, the Germans first had to move them to Bochnia, which did have a train station. Early in the week, a long train with very many wagon cars was already parked in the Bochnia train station.

The Jews in Bochnia –Vishnitza were in a panic. Some insisted that the wagon cars were preparing to take everyone to Belzec, and that it was imperative to hide in an effort to avoid a terrible fate. Others said that the Germans intended to move the Jews to a labor camp, to assist the Germans in their war effort. Yet others argued that it was nonsense to think they were taking us to a labor camp – for if so why were they including youths and elderly persons who couldn't work? More likely, they said, the Germans were taking everyone to "family camps," for had not the Germans constantly announced that all transports were to family camps? No one had yet returned to deny this claim....

Page 64 of המאור, a book of memoirs, describes the situation then in Bochnia:

Many knew that they were to be transported to the crematoria, but others refused to submit to this troubling truth, and convinced themselves that they were being taken somewhere to work. From this, disagreements developed on whether to hide out in bunkers or to board the trains, because the Germans had issued a decree that anyone found hiding would be shot. In fact, they found 13 Jews in bunkers and shot them, and as a result many Jews came out of hiding lest they too be found.

The Judenrat announced that 1,500 persons would be given permits to remain in the city to do necessary work, while the rest would be transported out. These permits were sold for large sums to wealthy residents. R' Yehoshia Halberstam also bought a permit.

It was heart-wrenching to see the despondency and the inability to decide what to do. To listen to the Germans and go? But maybe they were sending us to our deaths! To hide in bunkers, and then maybe to be found and shot, while those going into the trains would survive?

The Bobover Ruv (Ruv Shloimo) was in Bochnia then and had no hesitation or uncertainty at all. He demanded that all must hide. He didn't even try to get a permit from the Judenrat.

The terror grew when we heard that the train had come in closer to the station, and as other preparations for the action became obvious.

Our family's main concern was for our dear father. Maybe it was uncertain where the train was headed. But one thing was sure, even if it was to a labor camp, our father couldn't work. What he had witnessed destroyed him. He had lost all contact with Leib'tchi and his children and with Yossel, and his loss and grief were as wide as the ocean. It was only days since Ratze and her six children were sent away. And here we stood at the onset of a liquidation in Vishnitza. Add to this all of his other many troubles over the years – none of this gave him an image of youth.

Ben Tzion was still in Krakow and worked hard to bring our father there, where things were then quiet. The Germans still honored Hungarian residency papers. For a huge amount of money, Ben Tzion arranged that a Jewish woman with these papers (the daughter of R' Yeshayal'e Tch'choiver and the wife of the tzaddik R' Mendel'e) would take the train to Bochnia, and travel from there to Krakow with my father as if they were husband and wife. To advance this plan and to arrange for hiding places in Krakow, we prepared to leave Vishnitza on Wednesday, August 19.

## **Tuesday Night August 18, 1942**

The night before we were to leave for Bochnia, I climbed down into the cellar of our house and dug a very deep hole into the wall. I put into the hole many silver objects that the family owned, and a huge pile of silver and gold watches – worth thousands of dollars-- that belonged to Ben Tzion. I also hid \$1,100 that a family member had given me to hold until better times arrived. The same night I also carried all of our ספרים into the attic, including a first edition of נועם אלימלך that my father had inherited from his father and that was worth a lot of money even then. My father then called one of our gentile neighbors and gave him the house and furniture, so to say, temporarily. The gentile committed to keep watch over the house and to hold it for us should we return.

## **The Journey to Bochnia**

Early on Wednesday the 19<sup>th</sup> we climbed into a buggy with our packages and traveled to Bochnia. My brother in law Avrome'le Engelstein had arranged for us to stay in the home of his uncle R' Chaim Engelstein. R' Chaim'l's house was located on a street that for some reason had not been cut off by ghetto fences. It was possible to enter and leave the ghetto through that street.

When we arrived, Avrome'le and I unloaded our packages and arranged them in a garage-like room at the back of the house. We prepared to get the formal pass that my father needed for his trip to Krakow. But it was not destined to be.

That afternoon, the local Judenrat got wind that some Jews had arrived from Vishnitzer. They decided to arrest these Jews and imprison them, so that if they needed to turn over a number of Jews to the Germans in the next several days – they knew there would be an action --- they would turn over these new arrivals in the place of long-time residents. For this purpose, a posse of police searched our street to search for new arrivals.

I was in the garage with my brother in law when we heard them barge into R' Chaim's house and order our father to go with them to a prison near the

Judenrat police station. For some unknown reason they didn't seize Blima and Rochel'e although they were there with my father, and although in other houses women were seized, too. We listened to Blima's pleas and cries, and her offer to go in the place of our father. But all was for nothing. The police took my father. Our plan to move our father to Krakow fell apart.

Blima was at the prison early Thursday morning to try to liberate him. R' Chaim Engelstein's children were also involved. Ultimately, the Judenrat agreed to free my father for \$50 that Blima paid them, but they didn't let him leave jail that Thursday or the next day.

Avrome'le and I were afraid to leave our hiding place lest they imprison us too. Our fright was so great that we began to dig a bunker without any tools at all. In the meantime Blima worked at efforts to send her two boys to Tarnow -- Alter Leibish who was five years old and her infant son who had been born only months before. She wanted them sent away from the impending action in Bochnia. Whatever was left of Tarnow was quiet then. Blima, mild of heart and manner, parted with her children in heartbreak and great haste. She succeeded by paying a gentile woman to take them to Tarnow and to hand them over to my brother Chaim's protection.

### **In the Bunker, Friday night, פרשת כי תצא, ט' אלול, August 21**

We spent the night in our bunker. We were afraid to leave because word had come that the liquidation was imminent. Oy vei, what a שבת night! I tremble when I remember that bitter night, and the terror will not leave me so long as I live. We sat crushed together and uncomfortable, suffocating from the fetid air, and davened קבלת שבת together in fear. We then sang שלום עליכם, and ached for a visit of those angels of peace. We made kiddush on black bread. It is to times like this that the מחבלי משיח יוצלו לרוחה פדותינו תצמיח וגם יגון ואנחה פייטן refers when he says. Throughout, our limbs trembled and our knees shuddered out of fear that our hiding place would be discovered and that our death sentence would be immediate. The Germans had already announced many times that they would shoot on the

spot anyone who was discovered hiding – and that was exactly what we were doing.

And so I sat with Avrome'le who had just parted from his children.

Oh, the children, the children! That was the worst of all. Blima and her children had lived in our house for more than a year, and I had grown close to her son Alter Leib'tchi. This little boy had a razor-sharp mind. He was only five years old, but already learned חומש every week to שלישי or רביעי with his rebbe R' Shloimo Kluger from Krakow. He davened with great warmth: My brother in law would say the entire תהילים every שבת afternoon, and this little boy would stand at his right side with his own little תהילים, and pleasantly recite with his father chapter after chapter. And the second child – an infant only three months old! Can anyone write down the bitterness of looking at the situation of those children and their parents? Streams of tears run from my eyes on the heartbreak of the unfortunate mother and father who had to separate from their small children without knowing if they would ever see them again. Avromele's quiet and tranquility, his simple faith even in the face of his miserable fate, strengthened me no end. He didn't complain.

E Wsat there in the darkness that continued into the day. We had covered the bunker with heavy boards to protect us from discovery. So we knew nothing of what was happening outside – whether the action had begun, or was about to begin. But we did know that people from Vishnitztza were to arrive on שבת, and we assumed that the transport wouldn't leave from Bochnia before these victims from Vishnitztza arrived.

### **To the Building Complex**

We sat in the bunker until about noon on שבת. We realized that we couldn't hide any longer. We had dug our bunker hurriedly and at the last moment, and we had not included the necessities for a long stay, nor did we have enough food even for a day.

At about 4 pm we heard Jewish police who searched for Vishnitzer refugees and who brought them to a large complex of buildings (some of these had held Polish barracks before the war) near the train station. We surrendered to the police, figuring that they would find us anyway, and that we ought to avoid certain death against the possibility of lighter punishment for having hid before we turned ourselves in.

As they brought us towards the building complex, I was stunned to see two policemen bringing my father back in the direction of R' Chaim Engelstein's house, in merit of the \$50 that Blima had paid them. On the one hand, we were concerned about our own situation – we faced an action that would begin any moment, and we also didn't know what awaited us for having hid until we emerged. On the other hand, we were elated that they were returning our father, and we thought that maybe now we could succeed with our plan to move him to Krakow, away from the danger that was enveloping Bochnia.

Polish police encountered us while we were being moved by Jewish policemen. When told that we had tried to hide, their poisonous anger exploded and they beat us murderously with their rubber truncheons. I tried to protect my face with my hands, but they managed to smash my eyeglasses anyway and my arm swelled up from the welts. So they continued until their anger abated.

Then I didn't realize that the *הקב"ה*'s grace was intertwined with this beating. I realized differently more than a year later when I was in the Plashov camp, and the vicious commander Goeth ordered a selection. On a crazed whim he decided to exterminate all those who wore glasses. Then I recognized that the beating in Bochnia was a torture of total pity – a preparation to live and survive the next year. For this I thank *הקב"ה, הטוב והמטיב*.

Soon after we arrived at the building complex we were amazed again to see my father, Blima and Rochel'e among another group of Jews who had just arrived. It turned out that right after the Jewish policemen had returned my father to R' Chaim's house, Polish police noticed them and ordered the entire



household to go the complex. We were united again after several days' separation.

That שבת afternoon when we had arrived at the complex we met a transport of Jews who had arrived there that day from Vishnitza. The Germans had arranged special transportation for them: a long caravan of large wagons on which more than 2,000 Jews were trundled with their packages of valuables and necessities.

I heard afterwards that when the Vishnitza Jews were forced out of their homes to leave for Bochnia, R' Moishe Yehoshia Eisenberg arranged a minyan on the street. ( He was the son of R' Mechel'e Eisenberg from Kalvaria --a prominent באבאווער חסיד -- and the son in law of the elderly חסיד R' Nochum Zaltz.) Many people stood there to daven שחרית out in the open on the street. After davening R' Moishe Yehoshia and others danced ברוך הוא אלקינו שבראנו לכבודו, knowing full well the end that awaited them. The dance grew in ardor and warmth until it split the very skies, and until the evil Germans stopped it and ordered all to board the wagons.

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A small group of exiles who, like us, had left Vishnitza before שבת succeeded in remaining hidden in bunkers in Bochnia. This group included the head of the Reische בית דין R' Berish Shteinberg and his sons, and R' Chaim Boruch Rabin from Vishnitza. (They ultimately died the next year, on ג' אלול תש"ג, in the final liquidation of the Bochnia ghetto, together with R' Yeshayal'e Tch'choiver and the Rebbe from Vielapoli.) But R' Shmiel, the son of the Vishnitza Ruv, was with us in the complex.

We arranged ourselves in our new "apartment." We didn't know how long we had to be there, but we knew that it wasn't for too long, because the wagon cars were all ready.

They gave us no food, but we had brought bread with us, and we all shared. There was a well with cold-water in the courtyard that we used to drink

and for נטילת ידים. We slept that night on the cold floor, while many others slept outside in the yard. The nights were cold, it was already Elul, and winter was on its way. Children begged for covers and quilts from their mothers. Bodies shook and trembled from the cold. So sat a company of several thousand Jews until Wednesday, August 26.

### **Wednesday, י"ג אלול, פרשת כי תבא, August 26, 1942**

This was the day of the action – the liquidation of Bochnia. All residents of the city were forced into the building complex. Soldiers broke into every house with a loud crash and ordered everyone onto the street and from there to the building complex. In a hail of bullets they shot anyone who tried to flee or who didn't heed their orders. In this way, they succeeded in terrifying all the unfortunate residents. The soldiers had been directly ordered not to give any special treatment to those with permits to remain in Bochnia. So when they encountered any of the 1,500 people who had these permits they killed them right there. This included R' Yehoshia Halberstam, who was the Ruv of Bochnia, and other prominent members of the קהילה.

### **Boarding the Wagon Cars to Belzec**

Once all the Jews from Bochnia and Vishnitza were in the building complex, the German commander ordered that they leave immediately to the train station, where the wagon cars stood waiting to bring them to the Belzec extermination camp. They ordered the Jews to arrange themselves in straight lines of 100 persons each. SS officers cruelly beat anyone who did not arrange himself in these lines with military precision and speed. On whims, SS men would shoot malingerers, and the bodies would fall to the ground in a pool of blood.

They descended on us like predatory wolves, barking like dogs. They whipped people with their pistol butts, and kicked left and right with their booted feet, all for no other reason than to instill panic and confusion. They pulled old men and women out of line who didn't stand straight enough and threw them on

trucks like piles of rags. They did the same to Jews in the Bochnia hospital, where many were in hiding on the hope they would be forgotten when the action occurred. Among those brought from the hospital was R' Yek'le Zenwirth, who was head of the Vishnitsa קהילה. I watched as two Germans seized him by his hands and feet and threw him forcefully into a truck. They threw others on top of him and then trampled them with their boots to make room for others. The truck left to a nearby forest. After several minutes we heard rifle shots – they were killed על קידוש השם.

They next demanded that the Jews board the wagon cars. Groups of 100 people were forced into cars meant for 40 people. It was almost impossible to breathe in the cars. Many died before they even reached Belzec.

Each group of 100 sought to rearrange their packages on their backs as they prepared to board the train. But the Germans attacked with weird cries and shouts, tore away the packages and threw them to the ground. As a result many Jews also fell to the ground, and as they tried to stand up the soldiers hit, trampled, punched and cursed them. Anyone who still had some life in him pulled himself on the train and watched the doors close behind him.

Piles of packages were strewn on the station floor. The packages held the gold, silver and other valuables that the unfortunate Jews wanted with them at their new place of labor. They didn't imagine that they were being taken like sheep to the slaughter. The prophecy of Yechezkel was realized: "They will throw their silver into the streets."

These scenes were repeated for every group, with whistles, shrieks and shouts: *Rauf! Rauf! Schneller! Schneller!* (Up! Up! Faster! Faster!)

### **The Last Moment**

Until they arrived at our group. We had stood there all the time, watching our brothers being beaten and maimed. We prepared ourselves for the same beatings and curses. We each held our packages in our hands or on our shoulders, hoping that somehow we would succeed in loading them onto the

wagon car. But my father held nothing but his טלית and תפילין. His רש"י תפילין had been written by the tzaddik R' Moishe from Przeworsk. My father had inherited them from his father.

Suddenly a military car appeared, with two trucks right behind it. The commanding officer hurried over to the director of the action, and told him that he had just arrived from the airport in Rackowitz (near Krakow), and that he had written orders to pick up 150 labor-capable men. SS men with whips ran to the 100-person groups that hadn't yet boarded the train to assemble the needed 150 persons.

All this happened in the moments when my family was preparing to board the train. I felt a whiplash on my shoulder from an SS man who ordered me to leave the line and to stand on the side. I had no desire to leave my father and Blima, even though it wasn't hard to assume that the fate of the train-boarders was bleak, and I knew that I had been given a reprieve from a death sentence. Still, because of my strong feelings for my father and Blima, I didn't want to leave them. I stood there for a moment lost between the living and the dead. But my father saw my worry and the pain on my face and said "Go! Let at least one live!"

I left the line and stood on the side with others who had been selected to work in Rackowitz. I still managed to catch a glimpse of my father, Blima and her husband Avrome'le, and Rochel'e boarding the train amid the shrieks of the Germans and their truncheons and curses. I saw the Germans tear their packages away, including the טלית and תפילין my father had carried. Everything was strewn on a tall pile in front of the wagon car.

When the military commander estimated that he had enough men for his work detail, he counted and found that he had selected 189 men, 39 too many. He counted out 39 men and ordered them to rejoin the lines boarding the train. Those 39 men were doubly unfortunate. As they approached the lines, the SS attacked them murderously for not being in their own groups. They couldn't just join any group, because no more than 100 could be in any group. So they turned

this way and that in a fog of blows, until ultimately they properly arranged themselves in the wagon cars.

The train doors closed and the train moved on to Belzec.

# Belzec

The Belzec extermination camp was constructed in early summer 1942 in a thick forest in East Galicia, near the train lines from Lublin to Lemberg and Lublin to Krakow. In 1942 and 1943 600,000 Jews from Galicia were murdered there.

Very few details have survived. With almost no exception all Jews who were sent there were murdered. SS soldiers were sworn to secrecy on the cruelties they did and witnessed. Whatever few details there are come to us from Rudolf Reder, a Jew from Dembitz who was in the camp from August 17 to November 1942. He alone escaped from this earthly גיהנום. What follows is a small portion of what he said.

New transports of Jews would arrive two or three times a day. They were greeted by Ukrainian SS troops who stood there waiting with horsewhips and bayonets. The SS ordered the Jews to leave the train quickly and to hand over anything they had of value. Men were separated from women. All elderly persons and small children were brought to a waiting open pit, where they were shot to death.

The Commandant, a Mr. Erman, made a speech to the men, advising them that they would first be showered and disinfected and would then be sent to their workplaces. This somewhat pacified the men, who thought there was a chance that they might yet survive.

The pretext worked and the men walked in orderly fashion until they reached the barracks marked "Bath-House." This barracks had six large rooms, each of which held 750 persons. Those who refused to enter were speared with bayonets. Blood spurted in all directions. Several minutes after the doors were shut those inside began to wail and scream heart-rending cries. But after 15 or 20 minutes all was quiet and the SS men opened the locked doors of the gas chamber. Jewish laborers, two to a corpse, pulled the dead bodies out with thick

leather straps into a large pit, 100 meters long, 20 meters wide and 12 meters thick. They did this work accompanied by music from the camp's orchestra.

The women knew what awaited them after they heard the wails and cries of the men. When their turn came, they had to be pushed by force and beatings, until they met their fate and were murdered and gassed על קידוש השם.

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From what we heard later, the train with my family arrived in Belzec on Sunday, י"ז אלול תש"ב, פרשת נצבים וילך, (August 30, 1942). That day, my father, his daughter Blima, his son in law Avrome'le Engelstein, and his daughter in law Rochel'e returned their souls to their creator, among 6,500 Jews from Bochnia and Vishnitza, who were suffocated in the gas chambers על קידוש השם, and whose bodies were later burned in the crematorium. This was exactly three years after the war had begun on י"ז אלול תרצ"ט. They were beloved and pleasant in their lifetimes, and in their deaths did not part from us. Let הקב"ה remember them for good with other צדיקים of this world, and let him take revenge on the spilt blood of his servants.

From the קינה composed by the Bobover Ruv (R' Shloimo) (shlita) [A'h]:

Their screams and cries, crushed and locked in their wagon cars  
Like sheep to the slaughter, burned in the fiery ovens  
Let the sound of their cries be always heard in front of he who dwells on high  
While shouting שמע ישראל they gave their lives to the lord of the lords.

# **Rackowitz and the Krakow Ghetto**

***August 30, 1942 to February 12, 1943***



## ***Rackowitz***

The truck sped along the road from Bochnia to Krakow. We sat there stunned, shocked by the events of the last few hours. We had seen our beloved relatives grabbed away from us, while we miraculously escaped at the last moment. 150 of us, quiet as stones, listlessly watched the scenery winding past us along the road, each with searing memories of the cruelties we saw. My father's final words: "Go, at least one will survive!" rattled through my mind as a burning coal. Afterwards, I realized that his order to me was prophetic: in the end, from the whole tree of my family, I alone survived as a solitary branch.

After about an hour we arrived at the gates of the Rackowitz Camp on the outskirts of Krakow. Rackowitz was a civil airport before the war that now served the Germans as a military air base. Its entire expanse was surrounded with barbed wire. All persons passing through, citizens included, were carefully searched. The camp wasn't large—it held maybe several hundred persons. It resounded with the roar of constant take-offs and landings.

The guards cleared us for entry, and the gates opened wide to admit us. It was quite late at night, so they dropped us off in front of a large cattle barn. The guards told us that this was the barracks where we inmates were to sleep.

There were no beds or bunks. We slept on the freezing floor. There were four long rows of sacks of sawdust lined up end to end across the room. There were no pillows or covers. We used our clothing as cushions and our coats as quilts. There was no illumination except for a small light in one corner. The sawdust accumulated into uneven piles and crevices that broke our backs. You can image how much we enjoyed our sleep.

The barracks itself was also surrounded by barbed wire – this was besides the barbed wire that ran around the whole camp. Near the entrance to the barracks there was a small shack for the camp police -- Poles dressed in distinctive black uniforms. They had total authority over us. They could beat us if

they wished and they could kill us for any minor infraction. They were a vicious lot. Woe to anyone who did something wrong and attracted their attention.

At five in the morning Jewish police barged into the barracks and in gruff voices demanded that everyone rise quickly. Faster! Faster! We put on our תפילין but couldn't daven long because the black-uniformed Polish police joined the fray with their truncheons.

We worked in three shifts. A German guard escorted my shift about one-half hour out of the camp to do landscaping work. We finished שחרית while we walked or worked. I and my group were fortunate to be given work that wasn't that difficult. Others were unfortunately assigned backbreaking labor.

During the first part of our shift we were served breakfast – a huge pot of black coffee that had already gone cold while it was brought from the kitchen. We paused in the middle of the day to eat a piece of black bread and filthy water that they called soup, and ate the same food again at night after we finished. We weren't hungry because we bought food from nearby Polish farmers.

There was a minyan in the barracks every Friday night. My friend Moishe Yehoshia Tsanger davened קבלת שבת before the עמוד when he arrived from the Bochnia ghetto just before סוכות. My friend Yechiel Weingarten was also with me in the camp.

## ***Chaim is no More***

My cup of grief was filled further on ראש השנה תש"ג, September 12, 1942. I heard that my brother Chaim was sent from Tarnow to Belzec at the end of Elul. Blima's two children shared his fate.

Chaim's wife had given birth to a little boy two months earlier in a difficult delivery. Chaim's wife had been hospitalized for severe exhaustion. The baby died several weeks after the ברית. Chaim was also responsible for Blima's orphaned children. The pressure was too much for Chaim -- his strength gave out by the time of his final transport.

My bother in law Avrom'tchi Beck avoided the action by hiding in a bunker together with R' Moishe'le of Boyan. The Germans discovered the bunker during the final liquidation of Tarnow in October 1942. The two of them, Avrom'tchi and R' Moishe'le, boarded the wagon cars, hand in hand, for their trip to Belzec. May הקב"ה avenge their blood.

Woe and alas! Little more than a month ago I had lost my father and Blima. Now I was struck again with the loss of Chaim, my mentor and brother. Disaster on top of disaster.

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I was intensely disturbed by Chaim's death and couldn't regain my composure. I felt an unstoppable urge to escape Rackowitz, at least temporarily, and to regain some strength from visiting my surviving brothers Ben Tzion and Chaskel. So I investigated ways to slip out of camp. One possibility was to escape into the surrounding forests while we were working outside the camp. The workers weren't carefully guarded then, and a brother of one of my friends had escaped this way with my help. The Germans soon realized that the number of workers declined here and there, but this didn't matter to them at the time, when they could easily replenish their labor pool by kidnapping Jews everywhere. (When Krakow was liquidated some time later, the gates of Rackowitz were locked to prevent escaping Jews from entering the camp.)

A second and easier way to leave the camp was to stow away on a truck that traveled to the ghetto every night to return ghetto residents who had been brought to work in the camp. The truck also traveled to the ghetto frequently with Jewish police and with camp workers who were taken there to wash up. I decided to try my luck using this route.

My first two tries didn't work.

The head of the Jewish police, a Zilberman, noticed me on my first try and reported me to an officer. Zilberman hailed from Vishnitsa, where he knew my father, and had left the town several years ago to move to Germany. But this familiarity didn't do me any good. I was punished with ten whip lashes delivered by two energetic and expert Ukrainians.

Even though I didn't succeed at first, and suffered plenty for trying, my desire to leave became overpowering as סוכות approached. I felt that I had to be in a טובה סוכה. On the Sunday before סוכות, September 20, 1942, I tried again to stow away on the truck. This time I succeeded. I left the truck in the Krakow ghetto where I rejoined Ben Tzion with great joy. We enjoyed each other's company through the טובה. Afterwards, I hid on the truck again and returned to Rackowitz.

## ***Saver of Lives***

Ben Tzion continued to deal in marmalade in the ghetto. He furnished huge amounts to the German army. Because of this and his other business interests, he had close ties with the Judenrat, and a special permit that allowed him to enter and leave the ghetto at will. He used these connections constantly to help others. Besides, his house was wide open to famished and thirsty Jews. His wife invited everyone with a smile. She helped as much as she could, and even more.

That שמיני עצרת (October 3, 1942), while I was in his house, I witnessed how he at great risk save the life of my friend R' Moishe Brachfeld.

In the weeks since ראש השנה more than 500 Jews had escaped from Yulogs 1, 2 and 3. The enraged SS leadership announced that should anyone else escape the SS would kill every tenth man in the camp. This announcement had the opposite effect: it increased the resignation of the camp inmates, and impelled more to escape since their lives would be at least as uncertain were they to remain. The number of escapees increased daily.

Moishe himself escaped from Yulog #3 that שמיני עצרת. He ran two kilometers and managed to arrive at the gates to the ghetto before noon. To his dismay, the gates were shut and locked. There wasn't time to sit down and ponder. Polish guards were patrolling for Jews outside the ghetto and he was liable to be their next victim at any moment. He climbed a large tree outside the gate that had branches that hung over the ghetto. From there he jumped into the ghetto. A considerable portion of his clothing was caught in the branches and remained on the tree.

As he sprang to his feet he confronted a Mr. Viener, a Jewish policeman who was carrying a טלית under his arm. Viener directed Moishe to walk out the ghetto doors. Moishe couldn't believe this. He had just managed to save himself from certain death, and now a Jew was telling him to leave!

He turned to Viener and pleaded: "Please, give me two huge slaps on my cheeks, but one thing, don't force me outside." The policeman answered that he hadn't yet slapped any Jew, that he wanted Moishe outside, and that he, Viener, was not about to risk his life for Moishe. Moishe responded sharply and asked why Viener assumed that Moishe was to risk his own life for Viener's! The policeman pulled him outside of the ghetto, and the world was bleak for Moishe.

At that very moment, Moishe noticed Ben Tzion stepping up to the gates to enter the ghetto. Moishe shouted "Ben Tzion, Ben Tzion, help me." Ben Tzion was several years older than Moishe and didn't know him, but he did see that Moishe was in great distress. He turned to Moishe and asked him who he was. Moishe answered that he was the son of R' Yosef Hillel Brachfeld from Mishlenitz.

Ben Tzion clapped his hands in sympathy. "The son of R' Yosef Hillel! I certainly have to do whatever it takes to save you and get you into the ghetto. Listen carefully. Wait over there at that side door. I'll walk in and try to bribe that Polish guard. If this works, I'll raise my hands upward. You then walk into the ghetto determinedly, walk straight ahead, don't ask any questions and say not a word to anyone. If the bribe doesn't work, I'll make with my hands as if I'm saying 'stop.' Then wait outside. I'll see what else I can do to bring you in."

After Moishe waited outside for a short time, in great fear and with chattering teeth, Ben Tzion raised his hand to signal that it was OK to come in. Moishe did come in and was saved from certain death with Ben Tzion's kindness.

This is only one example of many great things that this young man did in those black days that exposed and tested the real inner workings of every man. Sadly, Ben Tzion didn't survive the valley of tears. But R' Moishe's descendants, and the descendants of the many others Ben Tzion helped, are an eternal light to memorialize this very special man.

## ***Visit to Vishnitza***

In mid-October 1942 General Montgomery of England broke through the German defense lines of General Rommel near Alamein in Egypt. British troops began pressing the German army back to Tunis and Algeria. But defeat in Africa didn't deter the Germans from their mission to destroy every last Jew.

Towards the end of the month rumors abounded that the Germans were preparing an action for the ghetto in Krakow, as a follow up to the liquidations the Germans had completed in the surrounding areas over the months just passed. As we were mulling over this in Rackowitz, we were interrupted by a new development. On Sunday November 1, 1942 the Germans distributed a permit to each Rackowitz inmate that allowed him to visit family members for one day. Jewish police were to accompany each group of inmates and were to be responsible to see to it that the inmates returned on time.

I registered to visit my family in Bochnia. In truth, I had no family in Bochnia, nor in nearby Vishnitza which had been declared Judenrein after its liquidation in August. My goal was to go from Bochnia to Vishnitza to remove the fortune that I had hidden in the cellar of our house the night before we left for Bochnia.

I realized that the odds of my finding anything were close to nil. Others had found nothing when they returned to their houses. The Poles invariably got there first. Still, Ben Tzion and I agreed that I would try.

I took the train to Bochnia with a group of other workers on that Sunday, November 1. We were directed to gather at a specified place on Tuesday November 3 to return from there to Rackowitz.

After I arrived in Bochnia, I tried to decide on the safest way to travel the final seven kilometers (four miles) to Vishnitza. This was a very dangerous mission, because it was absolutely forbidden for any Jew to be in the area. After some effort, my friend Chiel Kurtz from Vishnitza, who was then only 16 years old, gave me a good idea. He told me that he and other workers traveled every

day to Vishnitza to work on the estate of a Polish aristocrat named Tvozelda who provided food to the Germans. The laborers also worked in the environs of a large prison in Vishnitza.

The workers traveled under the supervision of Pochalla, a 30-year old Polish police chief who was notorious for his cruelty. He was an ethnic German who had enlisted in the SS immediately after the conquest and wore the distinctive SS black uniform. Before the war he had done business with the Kurtz family, and they had done him numerous favors. That's why in these terrible days he was sometimes willing to do a favor for them.

The next trip to Vishnitza was set for late that afternoon. The workers were to spend that night on Tvozelda's estate. Chiel approached Pochalla and told him that a friend from Vishnitza wanted to join them to take something from his house, and that the friend was prepared to pay for expenses. Pochalla accepted the proposition for 300 zlotys. The understanding was that Pochalla would wait for me until I leave the house and he would then return me to Bochnia.

### **In the Cellar**

It was about midnight when I climbed down into the cellar. It was pitch dark. I lit a candle with some matches that I brought along. I scratched here and there and was overcome with a wave of memories of days past. But this wasn't the time to dwell on the past. Looking at the walls, I saw right away that strange hands had been at work. Our gentile neighbors had made their own investigation. They had dug like mice into the walls and the floor.

I took just one look at the wall where I had hidden our treasure and immediately despaired. There had been lots of digging right there. But I had no sooner touched the edge of the hole they had dug when I encountered two paper-bound packages that fell on the floor. My sorrow turned into happiness. The searchers had indeed dug into the depth of the wall, but they hadn't dug into the sides. I tore the hem of my jacket and placed one package in the right side and the other on the left.



The packages held gold pieces, gold watches and jewelry that belonged to Ben Tzion. They were worth a fortune. At today's [1980] value they would have been worth more than \$300,000, maybe as much as half a million dollars. There was \$1,100 in cash that belonged to a relative who had entrusted the money to my father before Vishnitza was liquidated. I also removed a small diamond that I managed to keep with me for the rest of the war.

There were other valuables that were too large to remove and hide under my jacket. For example I had to leave the לייכטער שבת that my mother used to light לייכט.

When I came out Chiel recognized success in my eyes. His sharp eye also noticed the sudden newly-formed bulges on both sides of my jacket. He asked me האסט מצליח געווען? I answered ברוך השם, כ'האב מצליח געווען. Pochalla also asked me in Polish if I found anything. I told him no.

Pochalla asked me what I wanted to do next. I told him that I had to return to Bochnia that very night, and proposed that he first take Chiel back to Tvozelda and that he then accompany me back to Bochnia. Pochalla wouldn't agree to this, because he had no wagon and would have to do all this on foot. Chiel then suggested that Pochalla accompany me to Bochnia, and that he, Chiel, would find his way back to Tvozelda by making his way through the woods and farms.

We walked the seven kilometers back to Bochnia. In order not to raise questions of what a Jew was doing in the dark of night in an area that was Judenrein, I walked in front of Pochalla. He followed me with his gun drawn as if he had captured me and was bringing me to prison. This is how we strolled the seven kilometers to Bochnia. After we arrived, Pochalla walked back to Vishnitza to catch some sleep before going to work.

My friend Chiel started walking back to the Tvozelda estate. When the realization sunk in that he would be killed if found by a German or a Pole, he broke into a full-fledged desperate run for the 45 minutes it took him to get to get back through the country pathways. Dogs barked the whole time. He nearly died

from fright that some farmer might go out to see why the dogs were barking. He arrived at the estate at about 1:30, dripping in sweat.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my friend Chiel. He was young then, less than 17 years old. He placed his life in danger for me, without asking for anything from me. Let הקב"ה remember this for him as a good man.

When I think back to the events of that night, I am astounded by the immense סייעתא דשמיא that accompanied me at every step. For the measly sum of 300 zlotys, an ethnic German, a member of the SS, agreed to help a Jew he had never known earlier, brought him to a city that was Judenrein, and walked him on foot in a direction opposite from his own home. He would have profited much more by simply turning me over to the Germans!

I gave all the gold and the jewelry to Ben Tzion's wife later when I arrived in the Krakow ghetto. I kept the \$1,100 because the owner had already perished in Belzec. Through the rest of the war I spent \$500 of this money on various occasions for my benefit and for the benefit of others, as I'll tell you later. In short, the money resulted in רוח והצלה to many Jews. As I mentioned earlier, I held on to the small diamond through the war, and I gave it to my wife as a gift when we were engaged.

When I arrived in Bochnia I had the serious problem of where to hide the treasure. Time was short because I had to return to Rackowitz in several hours. I happened to meet R' Chaim Shloimo Friedman whom I knew from Krakow (he lived in Antwerp after the war, was a respected בעלזער חסיד, and recorded his memoirs in his book "איך וועל זיי איברלעבן"). He very carefully and precisely cut a loaf of bread into two, hollowed out the bread within the crust, inserted the gold and other valuables and then covered the valuables with some bread to tamp out any jangling noise. He then closed the loaf up carefully and used a wood splinter to line up the crust good as new. My golden loaf looked whole enough to be used for לחם משנה.

## ***Ben Tzion is Gone***

**November 2, 1942**

I heard the news when I returned to Rackowitz on Tuesday, כ"ג חשוון, November 2, 1942. Ben Tzion was no more. He was one of 6,000 victims who were transported to Belzec the day before in a first liquidation of the ghetto. My heart pains me to this day, and my head pounds, for this prince of a man whose life was cut short. I had been confident that Ben Tzion, with his tremendous talents and great wealth – besides his superb connections – would somehow avoid the liquidations and the actions. But it's obvious that the heavenly decree covered him, too. Who can inquire after what the King has done?

I learned the details afterwards. When he heard that a liquidation was imminent he placed his family outside the ghetto in the home of a gentile plumber who had worked for him before the war. He expected them to remain there until better times arrived. But for some reason he didn't remain with them the night before the action, and instead spent the night in his apartment in the ghetto.

Monday morning, while I was in Bochnia, Ben Tzion was preparing to leave his apartment to go downstairs where laborers were congregating on the street. But a split second before he was about to leave, a Jewish policeman named Meller approached Ben Tzion and showed him that his name was on a list that Meller held. Meller ordered Ben Tzion to accompany him. Ben Tzion protested that he had all necessary papers. The policeman said that with these papers *האט איר זיך נישט וואס צו זארגן*, Ben Tzion had nothing to worry about, but that in the meantime Ben Tzion had to go as ordered. Ben Tzion tried but could not get out of the predicament.

Oh! If Ben Tzion had left just a moment earlier, he would not have been seized by the Ordnungs Dienst! They never would have found him among the thousands of workers milling around on the street. To my everlasting grief they sent him to Belzec that bitter day, with 6,000 others. May הקב"ה avenge his blood speedily.

Shortly afterwards, Ben Tzion's wife gave birth to a little boy whom she named Shloimo Leib after her father R' Shloimo Leib Mandlebaum from Oshpitzin. But not too many days passed before she and her children were also caught up in the ensnaring trap. They too died על קידוש השם.

Here is a קינה that Shaul Hutterer from Antwerp composed in memory of these 6,000 victims from the ghetto in Krakow, including his father R' Avrom Hutterer and his sister. It was published in the כ"ב חשוון תשל"ט issue of כרם שלמה:

6,000 from the ghetto in Krakow

Men, women and infants in the day of sorrow

With elders and youths of the ancient city

Were transported to Belzec with shrieks and screams

On כ"ב חשוון תש"ג

They fell by the sword, for this my heart roars

# In the Ghetto

With Ben Tzion torn away, and with no one left from my whole family but Chaskel in the ghetto (Leib'tchi and Yossel were in Siberia), I decided that I could no longer be in Rackowitz. I also felt pressured by my golden loaf -- I had to get into the ghetto soon, somehow.

I had to wait a full week – until November 11 or 12, 1942 -- until I could escape. The whole week I worked with my group on the outside grounds as usual. Because I couldn't leave the loaf in the barracks, I put it into my jacket lining and brought it with me, even though it looked strange for someone to walk to work every day with a big ball-like object bulging in his jacket. While we worked I put my jacket on the ground where the other workers put theirs. I hoped that nobody would touch mine.

When I arrived in the ghetto I gave Ben Tzion's widow the gold and jewelry. I kept the \$1,100 as I mentioned earlier.

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After the action of י"ב חשוון (November 2), the Germans divided the Krakow ghetto into Ghetto A and Ghetto B. Ghetto A was reserved for laborers who had a work certificate. All others – the elderly, women, children and persons who otherwise couldn't work – were assigned to Ghetto B. Chaskel's house was in Ghetto B, immediately abutting the entrance to Ghetto A.

The apartment had four rooms. Each room served as the lodging for an entire family. R' Yisroel Aryeh Werdiger (a גערער חסיד) lived in one room with his sons R' Yakov Meir (who died several years ago in New York) and R' Dovid. The Vulcan family, R' Yakov and his brother R' Reuven (who now lives in Bnei Brak) lived in the second room – I've already told you how Reuven hid in the ארון קודש in Vishnitza when the Germans grabbed us for Yulog work. My brother Chaskel and

his wife and three children lived in the third room. Ben Tzion's widow and her four children lived in the fourth room. I slept in a corner of the apartment.

The Germans imposed a curfew after a specified hour each evening; nobody could be out on the street after that time. We had no choice but to remain squeezed into our rooms all night. When it came time to go to sleep, beds were laid out throughout the rooms. In the mornings the beds were stood up against the walls, leaving a little bit of space to move in.

Life in these conditions was very difficult. Only the workers in the camps could wash. There was a fierce lice epidemic no matter how much everybody tried to keep clean. Roaches and bugs pranced about as if they were in charge. The lice carried typhus germs, and before long this disease spread like wildfire and spared neither old nor young. Many died. Dovid Werdiger also fell ill with the disease. He hovered between life and death for a week until he recovered with ה'קב"ה's help.

There was practically no medical assistance in the ghetto. The local hospital didn't have even the basics: for example, there were no bandages, cotton swabs or thermometers. A hospital that the Jews had proudly built before the war in the Jewish quarter was now used only by Polish gentiles or wounded German soldiers.

Still, with all of the woes of the ghetto, we lived a semblance of ordinary life. Families still sat around a table שבת. Davening in shuls was strictly forbidden, but secret minyanim continued on a regular basis. Food was short but work details secretly brought in whatever was necessary or important. How could we complain at all, when we heard word of the sufferings of fellow Jews in the surrounding camps where families were separated, hunger was intense, cruel blows rained down without stop – and in the end they awaited only death.

### **The Matisoftzies**

I ought to spend a couple of minutes to tell you about the Matisoftzies group in the ghetto. They were named after their leader and counselor, the

sainted בחור Matisyohu “Viener” Gellman, may הקב”ה avenge his blood. I met him personally one summer before the war when we are on vacation in Yordanav.

Matisyohu Gellman was born in Vienna to assimilated parents who totally rejected תורה and mitzvahs. When Hitler rose to power in Germany, intense anti-Semitism spilled over into nearby Austria. Matisyohu’s gentile friends humiliated and oppressed him. This distressed Matisyohu no end. He was only 15 years old and didn’t know why he was any different than they were. He found no relief until he met and spoke at length with R’ Moishe’le of Boyan who happened to visit Vienna then. The Ruv spoke to him for a long time with tenderness, and gave to Matisyohu his blessing that הקב”ה would lead Matisyohu on the right path.

Without his parents' permission, and armed with a letter of recommendation from the Boyaner Ruv, Matisyohu set out to the Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin in Poland. He sank all his energies into learning. When his father sent international police (Interpol) to search for him in Lublin, Matisyohu escaped to Ger, where he dressed the same as other בחורים in the בית מדרש. He rose there to be among the exceptional בחורים in פוסקים וחסידות ש”ס, פוסקים וחסידות.

Matisyohu moved to Krakow when the war broke out. He was among the head משפיעים in the גערער שטיבלך. I mentioned earlier that after the conquest the Judenrat announced that every Jew had to register with the Gestapo in order to be ready to join work details that would be formed later. Matisyohu directed all those under his influence not to register, in order not to subject themselves to work for the Germans.

Since the Matisoftzies didn’t work for the Germans, they didn’t have to change their חסידיש’ע clothing or to cut their beards or peyos. Nor did they wear the yellow star on their clothing. When they had to use the streets, they went only in the very early morning hours with their heads wrapped in scarves.

Matisyohu and several of his close aides, including my friend the exceptional חסיד R’ Shmelke Lipshitz, risked their lives to travel illegally from ghetto to ghetto to raise funds to feed בחורים who learned תורה in roofs, attics and other hiding places. Stories passed by word of mouth how Matisyohu and his

small group successfully completed these hazardous trips without falling into the enemy's clutches.

My friend Shmelke is the only survivor of the whole group. When the ghetto was liquidated on 6 Adar II, March 13, 1943, and others fought to attain the relative safety of the Plashov concentration camp, the group decided that no way would they enter Plashov camp under German control. Shmelke was the sole exception: his father ordered Shmelke, as a direct *גזירת כבוד* אב, to accompany his father to the concentration camp. Shmelke acquiesced and survived. Today he is the mashgiach in Yeshivas Chiddushei ha'Rim of Chassidei Ger in Tel Aviv. I spoke with him when I visited Eretz Israel in 1990.

The conduct and sacrifices of the Matisoftzies in these months was remarkable. R' Moshe Prager mentions some details in his book "*Those that Didn't Succumb.*"

### **Reuven Vulcan escapes again**

The Germans would frequently invade Ghetto B and grab non-working Jews to take them to a place we didn't know and from where they never returned. One night we heard loud banging on the door to our apartment. Jewish policemen barged in. They were filling an order by the Gestapo for 50 Jews. Apparently, some drunk Germans had on a whim decided to satisfy their blood-lust by killing 50 Jews.

Here, again, you can see the shame of the Jewish Police as they faithfully served the Germans to make the Germans' cruel job easier. Whenever the Germans decided to do evil to the Jews, the Jewish Police stood ready to carry out their orders with dispatch, accompanied with vicious and cruel beatings. It was no problem for them to drag their brothers to their deaths.

They entered the Vulcan room and seized Reuven and brought him downstairs. They then broke into other houses to fill their quota. They loaded the 50 on a truck the next morning. SS soldiers sat themselves in front and back to guard against anybody who might try to jump off and escape.



Towards nightfall word came back that the Germans had murdered everybody on the truck except for one person who had escaped. The escape was miraculous because the Germans guarded their cargo with great care. When I mentioned this to Yakov Vulcan he told me that if anybody had escaped, it had to be his brother Reuven! How surprised we were when several days later Reuven again showed up in our apartment.

He told us that during the truck ride he realized that no matter the risks, he had nothing to lose by trying to escape. Without anybody noticing, he very, very slowly inched his way to the back of the truck. When he sensed that one of the guards was looking the other way, in that split second he picked up the canvas that covered the truck, jumped and ran into the forest at the side of the road. Nobody noticed anything. From there he walked on foot until he stumbled on a group of Jewish laborers working outside the ghetto. When they returned to the ghetto at night he came with them.

## ***R' Fishel Beigel***

In late 1942 and early 1943 the Germans worked hard to complete the Plashov concentration camp. General Governor Frank intended to liquidate the Krakow ghetto as soon as the camp was finished.

The camp was located on a hill in the Jewish cemetery on Yerusalemska Street. The thousands of Jewish workers who built the camp were lodged in Yulogs 1, 2 and 3 on the other side of the highway, and were under the supervision of SS Commandant Meller, may his name and memory be erased. I mentioned earlier that I had also worked there for a time in Spring 1942 when I was seized from Vishnitza. The situation in the Yulogs got progressively worse as time passed.

Terrible was the lot of those unfortunates who were trapped in the Yulogs. They did backbreaking work under all sorts of torture, in the cold and the heat, with negligible food, and with no washing except for occasional groups of workers who were sent to the bath-house in the ghetto.

Let באבאווער חסידים הקב"ה remember for good one of the veteran Podgurzh, R' Fishel Beigel, who risked his life to offer food to hundreds of these laborers.

Fishel's father, R' Yakov, had opened a bakery in Podgurzh several years before World War I. The business succeeded. He sent baked goods to customers far and wide.

The current Bobover Ruv [ר' שלמה זצ"ל] often recounts that a gentile baker wanted to destroy R' Fishel's business and set up a competing bakery nearby. He charged unfairly low prices, on the theory that he would raise them again once R' Yakov was out of business.

There was no way R' Yakov could compete at these prices. He decided to discuss his predicament with the prior Bobover Ruv, R' Ben Tzion. When R' Yakov came into the Ruv's room, he saw that the Ruv was throwing pebbles out of the window at crows in the yard. When he noticed R' Yakov, the Ruv said to

him “Do you see what’s happening here? Doves are eating bread crumbs in the yard, so I’m throwing pebbles at the crows so that they don’t rob the doves.” The Ruv accepted R’ Yakov’s קוויטל, and gave him a ברכה that the gentile baker would fail. And so it was.

In his old age R’ Yakov left for Israel and his son R’ Fishel continued with the bakery. When the Germans set up the Krakow ghetto and surrounded it with stone walls, the bakery happened to be within the ghetto’s confines. The Germans directed the bakery to prepare food for ghetto residents and for nearby working camps. The Germans provided R’ Fishel with flour, eggs and potatoes for R’ Fishel to distribute. R’ Fishel and his family – his son R’ Israel, who survived the war, and his daughters (two of whom survived, Mrs. Stiel and Mrs. Wislicki), helped by R’ Moishe Yosef Goldfinger (who died in New York in 1970), also employed other Jewish workers with the Gestapo’s permission.

Food was scarce for everyone, even non-Jews who received limited rations. That’s why R’ Fishel could easily bribe the Polish police who stood guard in the ghetto. He arranged with them that when they accompanied workers to the bath-house, they would also make a brief stop at the bakery to give R’ Fishel a chance to give the workers food and drink.

Hundreds of broken, oppressed, afflicted and strengthless Jews passed by R’ Fishel’s house every day. R’ Fishel and his household cooked huge vats of potatoes which they offered with hot soup, and a satisfying piece of bread. R’ Fishel also make a point of cutting an extra piece of bread to put in each guest’s pocket, so that he could survive the next day, back in the Yulog.

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The (current) [former] Bobover Ruv R’ Shloimo and his family also benefited from R’ Fishel’s good heart. They left the ghetto in Bochnia in early January 1943, when there were rumors that the Gestapo was preparing to gather all remaining Jews for liquidation.

All those who could arrange for bunkers or other hiding places in Bochnia did so. R' Shloimo decided to flee to the ghetto in Krakow. He and his family didn't wear yellow stars on their train ride to Krakow because they carried forged Gestapo papers that certified that they were Hungarian citizens. In middle of the night they arrived at the train station in Prak Ziyim, a little village just one stop short of Podgurzh.

The plan had been for the guard of the village's cemetery to shelter them until dark on the next day, when they would join hundreds of laborers as they returned to the ghetto after work. But before they could meet the guard they saw a gentile moving towards them with a flashlight in hand. They were certain that this was an SS man. It was too late to escape, so in his distress the Ruv took the old weaponry in hand – his lips whispered out תפלות and pleas for salvation in זכות of his ancestors. When the policeman came close– he was dressed in the uniform of a railway worker – he said “I know you're escaping the deportation in Bochnia,” and he showed them the path to the cemetery so that they could hide there. They thanked him profusely, and he left.

The Ruv would say later that it was clear to him that this “policeman” was אליהו הנביא. Everyone knew that true Poles excelled in turning escaping Jews over to the Gestapo.

The next morning, the cemetery guard let R' Fishel knew that the Ruv and his family had arrived. R' Fishel arranged for some יונגעלייט to bribe the ghetto guards and to bring the Ruv and his family into his house.

The Ruv was astounded at the scene. In every corner of a huge room tens of Jews on ביהמדרש benches and house beds were reviving themselves with bread and hot potato soup.

The hopelessness of these Jews touched the Ruv's soul to its root. Their eyes were sunk deep into their sockets, their cheeks were sunken without a shred of flesh, their bodies shrunken from hunger, hard work and constant fear of death. Here they ate and drank, and maybe even sensed a faint hope to live. The Ruv recognized many excellent תלמידי חכמים among those eating. They included a

particularly precious Bobover young man, R' Shimon Auerbach, who knew ש"ס by heart, as well as notable and once wealthy members of the קהילה.

The Ruv told R' Fishel, "By feeding these broken Jews, you can accomplish more than by davening כל נדרי and the rest of the תפלות ימים נוראים."

## ***Parting***

The Plashov camp was finally completed in early March 1943. The Germans plastered large notices that the ghetto was about to be liquidated on the following schedule: Ghetto A would leave from Zagoda Plaza (at the entrance to the ghetto) for Plashov on *שבת, י' אדר ב*, March 12, 1943, and Ghetto B would leave from Zagoda Plaza on the next day, Sunday March 13. This was several days after the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad at the end of February, which was the beginning of their downfall.

We knew that the Germans would take to Plashov only men and women who could work. They had no need for the old, the sick and children: we had seen their fate in Bochnia. There was no question that it was safer to be in Ghetto A, where residents were presumed to be work-capable, than in Ghetto B where residents would at best have to pass a selection based on their ability to do work.

Chaskel decided to remain in Ghetto B because he didn't want to leave his wife who was nine months' pregnant and his three children. He relied on a permit that certified that he worked for the Germans. He also built a false wall in his apartment that could hide 10 persons. As for myself, I still held from my Rackowitz days a white cloth marked "C" that allowed me to enter Ghetto A with other workers.

*שבת* arrived. Trucks lined up alongside Ghetto A. Once each truck was fully loaded with laborers it pulled off to Plashov, unloaded, and came back for more.

The atmosphere was *תשעה באב*. Families separated with wails and sobs. I, too, although I had the white cloth marked "C," spent the whole day in Ghetto B with Chaskel. There were two reasons. My closest friend Meilich Birnbaum had no permit to enter Ghetto A. He begged me to wait while he maybe could find some way to get out. Besides, I was totally confused and depressed. My spirit had left me.

What could I say, and what could I speak? I couldn't separate from my dear brother. Chaskel was the only one left from my father's house. Leib'tchi and Yossel had been swallowed by the Russian bear. Who knew if they could tolerate the cold and the ice in Siberia. Ratza and her family were sent to Belzec from Tarnow. Chaim with Blima's children followed in Elul. They took Blima and her husband, and my sister-in-law Rochel'e, together with my father, from Vishnitsa. Ben Tzion left on his final journey in חשוון from Krakow. There was nobody left but Chaskel and his family, and Ben Tzion's widow and her children. How could I leave them?

Pangs of guilt flooded through me. Was it right that I leave my near ones here to an uncertain fate? On the other hand, was there really any support that I could lend by staying here in the ghetto?

Time passed and the hour was late. It was already מוצאי שבת and no more trucks were leaving for Plashov. Several hundred men who had no worker's certificates tried to arrange a transport to Plashov, and they even announced that they were arranging a truck for 300 men. This started a crushing stampede, because the whole multitude wanted to be part of this group. I also tried to join, but the Germans decided that the truck would not leave for Plashov. They shot their rifles in the air to scatter the assemblage. The mass of people walked off in different directions. I then despaired entirely from leaving Ghetto B, and returned upstairs to Chaskel's apartment.

The curfew hour arrived. My head spun and my mind was a blank from the day's events. I sat and cried. In the meantime a group of Matisoftzies walked into the apartment and read the entire ספר תהלים aloud with great warmth.

## ***The Last Moment; Again***

It was already 11 o'clock at night. Suddenly we heard through the window a youth (from Sanz) screaming "Father, the Ordnungs Diensten (Jewish Police) are already leaving the ghetto!" This was the final group of Jewish policemen and their families, and leaving for Plashov was their pay for their efforts in oppressing Jews for months and years. But in the end they suffered the same fate as other Jews.

As soon as I heard this shout, I grabbed my package, which held my תפילין and other things, and Meilich and I ran down the stairs and rushed with all our strength to the nearby ghetto gates. We didn't care that it was already past curfew.

The gate was already closed and guarded by German police. The Jewish Police had already walked a city block in the direction of Ghetto A, and here we were still in Ghetto B. We had no choice, so we approached the German police and told them that "we belonged to that group." We pointed to the Jews walking a block away.

They could have done with us whatever they wanted, especially since Meilich had no permit. They could easily have shot us simply for having violated the curfew. But with הקב"ה's help they asked us nothing and simply opened the gate to Ghetto A. We ran energetically until we joined the Jewish Police group.

The night's adventures weren't over. The police group realized immediately that we weren't one of them. There were loud noises that we didn't belong there, and that we had to return.

My head was spinning by then. We didn't know what to do but decided that the only course was to stick to our position that indeed we had permission to join them. So we went with these צדיקים until we reached Plashov in the dead of night.



## ***Murder***

In the early morning of Sunday March 14, 1943, ז' אדר תש"ג, hundreds of German soldiers stood prepared together with SS men. At their right were some Jewish Police who still remained in the Ghetto. All Jews were ordered to gather in the square near the gate, and were allowed to carry only one bundle each.

Someone barked an order that all small children had to be placed on the side. Policemen charged and grabbed children from the hands of those who didn't comply quickly enough. Who can describe the heartbreak of the unfortunate parents? The tragedy of parents who had to leave their little children like dung on the open field, standing ready for the slaughter!

The police also checked each sack to make sure no children were hidden there. Many simply couldn't leave their children, and moved to the side with them. These were pulled off cruelly, together with the old and the sick, and were shot. We learned these details from witnesses Sunday afternoon in Plashov.

When Chaskel saw that the action was in full force he hid his wife and children and Ben Tzion's widow and her children behind the false wall in his apartment. He knew that his name was on a list of 300 technicians who were to be sent to Plashov. His plan was to arrange himself in Plashov and then to bring those hiding behind the wall to Plashov by bribing an Ordnungs Dienst.

But הקב"ה decreed a different fate. When Commander Haase, who was in charge of the liquidation, was told about the 300 special permits, he waved with his hand that he had no need for them. All of them, including my brother Chaskel were shot right then and there.

My friend R' Boruch Klamke, who was in the חברה קדישא, told me that afternoon that he had seen the rifle bullet in Chaskel's neck. Chaskel was buried in a mass grave with more than 2,000 others who were murdered on that bitter day על קידוש השם.

Chaskel's wife and children, and Ben Tzion's widow and her children waited in vain behind the false wall. After several days they were found by a

commando group that ransacked homes in the ghetto for valuables. They also found hundreds of others who were secreted in various hiding places, including R' Yakov and Reuven Vulcan.

All those who were work capable were sent to Plashov, including R' Yakov Vulcan. (Reuven managed yet again to escape to Bochnia through some open part of the ghetto wall. From Bochnia he made his way across the border to Hungary.) The rest, including my two sisters-in-law and their children were ordered to dig a large pit in a woods outside the city. They were murdered in a hail of bullets and fell into the pit, with the dead falling on top of some who were still convulsing in pain. The murderers shot again and again into the pit at anyone they thought might still be alive. They then covered the pit with earth. Poles who passed by later said that for several days after the slaughter they saw the earth moving here and there, as the wounded tried with their last bit of strength to leave their graves. הקב"ה should avenge the spilt blood of his servants soon, in our presence.

Following is a קינה that my friend Shaul Hutterer from Antwerp composed in memory of those who died in the Krakow ghetto, among them his grandfather R' Yakir Singer of Oshpitzin. The קינה was published in כרם שלמה for אדר תשמ"ה:

I recite this dirge with bitter soul for a קהילה

Great with elders, youths, and men of esteem

Parents and children separated on שבת in wails and cries

The next morning 2000 קדושים killed without pity

6,000 more were gathered and transported to Plashov

while the gates of Ghetto Krakow were closed and sealed

I demand their blood, G-d of vengeance, quickly answer us

Return this to them sevenfold soon, in front of our eyes