

Henry L. Gitelman

**Drenched in the Dew
of Childhood**

a

Memoir



Drenched in the Dew
of Childhood
a
M e m o i r

By

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Montreal, Canada

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Abstract

Author was born in 1933 in small Polish shtetl called Sławatycze. Chapters 1- 8 give a vivid, detailed account of shtetl life. Drawing upon personal memory and some secondary historical sources, provides an informed ethnographic study of the economic and social life of the Jews in small-town Poland, including aspects of trade and commerce, folklore, religious practices, family structure, holiday celebrations, and the interaction between Jews and Poles. At the outbreak of war, the Red Army occupies the shtetl, then withdraws to the eastern side of the Bug River which marked the border between the German-occupied and the Russian-occupied segments of Poland. Father crosses to Russian side to escape Germans and arranges for family to join him. In January 1940, Russians round up the Polish citizens who had come from the western side of the Bug, placed them in boxcars for transport to Siberia or the arctic regions of Russia. Travel eastward through Omsk and Novosibirsk, then transferred to barges and voyage north to a Siberian prison camp called Asino. Description of conditions in prison camp and surroundings. After three months family is sent to low-security camp in Asbest near Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains. Father imprisoned for misdemeanour. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 21, 1941, the captive Polish citizens are released and families are allowed to settle in the region. Travel to Alma-Ata, capital of Kazakhstan, then proceed to the town of Dzhambul, are located in a small village called Dzhunganovka inhabited by a small ethnic group of Muslim people called Dzhungan or Dungan. Detailed description of local conditions of the way of life of the native peoples -- customs, social rituals, dietary practices, economy, etc. In 1942 Father is arrested for dealing on the black market. In 1943 make contact with family members who had reached Canada and Palestine. In 1946 family is permitted to return to Poland. Authorities dictate that they settle in the former German city of Stettin, displacing local Germans who were shipped to Germany. Learn of the Shoah—its extent and scale. Author and brother join Hashomer Hatzair Zionist youth movement where they get Hebrew lessons and military training. Family escapes from Poland through the Bricha underground. Describes the smuggling operation which leads Jews from Poland to the American Occupation Zone in Germany. Lives in displaced-persons (DP) camp, Schlachtensee. Description of camp and living conditions. Transfer to DP camp at Bamberg near Nürnberg. In 1948 get permission to emigrate to Canada, arriving in Halifax in September, 1948. Describes the conditions facing new immigrants, and the resumption of his fragmented education. He enrolls in elementary grades, then proceeds to Baron Byng High School, and enters McGill University's faculty of Mechanical Engineering from which he graduates in 1957.

Part 2: Written by his wife, Judy, gives an account of their trip to Poland in October of 1998.

20 pages plus 8 pages of photos of Sławatycze, Warsaw and Prague.

Prof. Mervin Butovsky
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, June 1999

**This Memoir is Dedicated to the
Memory of my Parents;
Chaja-Blima Repkowska-Gitelman
and
David-Zvi “Hershel” Gitelman,**

**And to the Blessed Memory of
My *Elter Bubbe* Chana,
My Grandparents,
My Aunts, Uncles and Cousins
Who perished in the Shoah.**

This “Memoir” was published by the author for circulation among his family and friends.
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The “Memoir” is offered to Holocaust Libraries and University Judaic Studies Departments.

Henry L Gitelman

אבי כל באי עולם *FATHER OF ALL LIFE*

רק קו אחד מאורך	But one ray of your light
והייתי חדור אורה.	and I abound in light;
רק דבר אחד מדברך	but one word from you
וקמתי לתחייה.	and I am reborn,
רק תנועה אחת מחיי נצחך	but one tremor of your eternal life
והייתי רווי טל-ילדות:	and I am drenched in the dew of childhood.

הלא אתה בורא הכל מחדש	O you who create all anew,
ברא נא אבי אותי ילדך מחדש.	O Father, create me, your child, anew.
נשם בי מנשמת אפך	Breathe in me the breath of your nostrils
וחייתי חיים חדשים	and I will live a new life,
חיי ילדות חדשה.	even a new life of childhood.

Hillel Zeitlin
trans., *Hillel Halkin*

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Notes on Polish and Yiddish Pronunciation

Generally, Hebrew/Yiddish words and names such as Cheder, Challeh, Zeydeh, Goy are spelled as in Leo Rosten's "The Joys of Yiddish". Polish words and names are written with Polish orthography. Yiddish/Hebrew names such as Chaja, Chajm, Chana are written with the Polish letter "**Ch**", a double consonant combination that has a guttural sound as in "Loch Ness" and are often rendered in English as Kheder, Hallah, Haya, Haim, Hannah, etc. The sound of the Polish double consonant "**sz**", as in Szepesl and *szabbes*, and letters with diacritical marks such as "**ś**" are pronounced as "**sh**" is in English. The diacritical letter "**ó**" as in Jakób is pronounced as "oo", like in book. The double consonants like "**cz**" is sounded as "**tch**" would be in English. Similarly, diacritical "**æ**" is sounded as "**tch**" would be in English, but softer.

In Polish all the letters are sounded. The letter "**w**" is pronounced as the letter "**v**" is in English and the letter "**j**" is always pronounced as a "**y**" is in English, like in "yield". **Chaja** is pronounced "Haya". The "**Bug**" River, which is often mentioned in this Memoir, or "**Bud**" [the communal bath] is pronounced with a long "**u**", as in "**bull**" and not as in "**bug**", an insect.

The crossed letter "**Ł** or **ł**" is sounded midway between as the letters "**W**" and "**L**" are sounded in English, but, pronouncing them as the "**L**" is pronounced in English would be quite comprehensible in Polish. My maternal grandmother's maiden name, **Światłość**, is pronounced as "Shwyat'lwoshtch". **Ślawatycze** is pronounced "Slwava'tytch'eh".

Yiddish, Russian, Polish and some Yiddish versions of Polish words that are transliterated into phonetic English are written in *italics*.

The familiar Yiddish forms and diminutives of the Hebrew names are most often used, such as, Szepesl, or Shepsel for Shabbtai, Nute [pronounced *Nooteh*] for Nathan, Awrejml for Abraham, etc. Sometimes the Polish name and its diminutive are used interchangeably; such as Andzia, the diminutive of Anna. Similarly, the Polish name Jadzia [the diminutive of Jadwiga] is used for the Hebrew name Yachad.

Shtetl, from the German *Stadt*, is Yiddish for a little town. *Machuten* and *Machataynesteh*, which have no equivalent in English, are defined as "my son's [or daughter's] father-in-law and mother-in-law".

Often, the spelling of names is varied with the locale. For example, when in Poland Shepsel is spelled "Szepesl" and when in Germany or in Canada the name is spelled as Shepsel, similarly, for Dawid / David and Herszel / Hershel.

The spelling of most place names is in accordance with the 1980 "New York Times Atlas of the World".

H.L.G.

Preface

The other day I turned 64, but I feel that my life has spanned two centuries.

In nine short years, from the age of six to the age of almost fifteen, my life's journey took me from a small *shtetl* in Poland, where life was as if frozen in a time capsule, to Siberian slave labour camps, travels through Central Asia, five years in a tiny Muslim village in Soviet Kazakhstan, back to war-ravaged Poland in 1946, escape from Poland to the US Zone of post war Germany, two years in Displaced Persons [DP] camps in Germany, and then, as if out of some time warp, I was plunged into the 20th century when we arrived in Canada on September 23rd, 1948.

Until the day of his death in 1991 at the age of 89, my father David-Zvi "Hershel" Gitelman had this special gift of memory. With his effusive nature he loved to regale his audiences with, what his grandchildren called "Zeydie's Hero Stories", tales of heroic escapades and escapes, adventures and achievements in which he was, most often, the protagonist.

In her quiet yet determined way, my mother complemented my father's energetic spirit. She was his wise and loyal partner. With her keen sense of family connectivity she had preserved the family photographs and the invaluable documents which form part of this "Memoir".

This "Memoir" is an act of memory. It is a recollection of my childhood coloured by the advantage of hindsight, my father's stories, shared memories with my older brother Shepsel and my aunts Jadzia Gitelman-Miller and Chaja Paluch-Rapkowski, and my passion for the history of the Jews of Poland and Soviet Russia and of the Holocaust. It is also based, in part, on the transcript of a videotape recording that I made in October of 1994 at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre as part of the "Witness to History" project.

Much of the historical information on Ślawatycze was gleaned from articles written by the Ślawatyczer native, the historian Dr. Michał Grynberg. These articles, written in Yiddish, appeared in the Polish-Yiddish weekly newspaper published in Warsaw from 1975 to 1985 :-

פֿאָלקס = שטימע – "Folks-Sztyme" [Voice of the People].

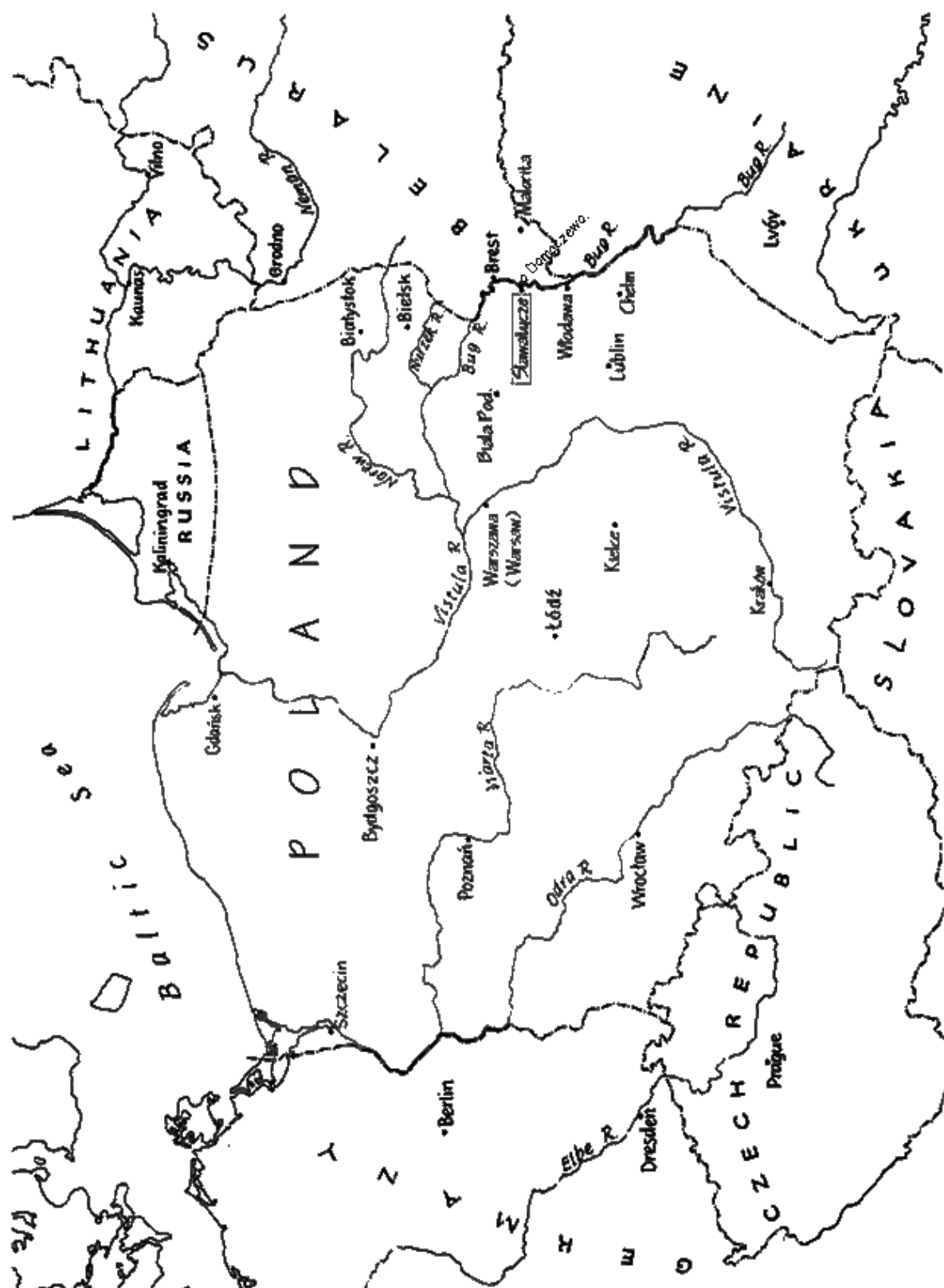
The title of this Memoir is based on a line in the Hebrew poem "Father of All Life" by Hillel Zeitlin, which is quoted in part, on page 4. The poem appears in the new *Siddur*, "Renew our Days", by Rabbi Ronald Aigen of Congregation Dorshei Emet of Montreal.

The picture on the title page was taken in the Berlin DP camp in 1946 when I was thirteen years old.

I wish to thank my good friends Immanuel Braverman, Eddy Entus and Larry Gamulka for their invaluable help in realising this Memoir.

Henry L. [Chaim-Leyb] Gitelman
Montreal, October, 1997

Rev. Aug / 09

*Map of Post World War II Poland*

Chapter 1



A Shtetl Called Sławatycze

I was born in a small *shtetl* called Sławatycze [“Slavatytsch” in Yiddish] on the sixth day of Sukkot, in “the year that they were putting in the telegraph poles”. That is how my mother remembered the event. It turns out to have been in the year 1933.

Sławatycze is located on the left bank of the Bug River, about 250km east of Warsaw and about 50km south east of Biała Podlaska. The former Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia, which is now the Independent State of Belarus, is on the opposite bank of the Bug River.

The Bug River is part of a navigable waterway of close to 1,000 kilometres. It has its origins in the northern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains near the Ukrainian city of Lviv [formerly the Polish city of Lwów], from there, the river runs north-west, then it turns north, runs past Sławatycze, and at Brest-Litovsk it turns west. Near Warsaw it falls into the Wisła [Vistula] River. The Wisła then runs north-west then north and empties into the Baltic Sea at the port city of Gdansk [Danzig].

This strategic location on a major water route to the major European trading centres and with an outlet to the Baltic Sea made Sławatycze an economically vibrant town where tanning of furs and hard leather, fur coat manufacturing, hat making, weaving, tailoring and carpentry predominated.

The town was incorporated in the late 1400s and Jews had lived there for many generations. The earliest known written record of the Jewish community of Sławatycze dates from the year 1656 when there were listed 1,089 Jewish residents out of a total population of 2,011 people, or over 50% of the total. As of the last census before World War II, the Jewish population of Sławatycze was 902. The present population is 1,100 people, but no more Jews.

According to a 1931 census 1/3 of the total population of Poland was non-Polish. The important minorities were Ukrainians, Jews, Byelorussians and Germans. Jews comprised over 10% of the total population. 1/3 of the Jews lived in shtetlach [shtetls] or market towns, mostly in the eastern part of Poland, the others lived in the large urban centres. Jews comprised over 30% of the population of Warsaw, 44% of Brest-Litovsk and 64% of the population of Pinsk.

[Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica]

It is recorded that during the 1648 revolt of the Ukrainian peasants and Cossacks led by Bogdan Chmielnicki against their Polish overlords, the Cossacks massacred the Jews of nearby Włodawa, as well as others who had taken refuge there, and set fire to their houses. However, the Jewish community was reconstituted soon afterwards.

In 1700 Count Karol Radziwiłł, the magnate, or owner of the entire region, granted Sławatycze a charter as a miasteczko [private town] and it became the administrative centre of the surrounding villages. The boom years lasted until the

late 1800s when railway lines were built bypassing Sławatycze and the Bug River lost its pre-eminence as a shipping and trade route. This started the decline of the economy of the *Shtetl*. Around that time Sławatycze even lost its charter as a town and the *gemina*, the county administration seat, was moved to the much smaller town of Hanna, some 8 km from Sławatycze.

From the end of the First World War when Poland became independent of Tsarist Russia, Prussia and Austria in 1919 until the outbreak of World War II on September 1st 1939, the border between Poland and the Soviet Union was about 300 kilometres east of Sławatycze.

In September 1939, after Germany and the Soviet Union partitioned Poland among themselves, the Bug River became the border for over half of its length. It is now still the border between Poland and with what was until recently, the Soviet Union and now independent Belarus [formerly Belorussia] and independent Ukraine.

I was six when we left Sławatycze; yet, I distinctly remember the layout of the town. My older brother Szepsel [*Shab'btai*], who is five years older than I, is amazed that I can draw a map of Sławatycze and pinpoint where things were situated in the *shtetl*.

Sławatycze was a typical Jewish/Polish *shtetl*. In the centre of the town was the market-square, the *rynek*, referred in Yiddish as *der mark*. The market-square was really in the shape of an oval, with streets and alleys radiating out from it. The *plimp*, the communal water pump, was located in the square. The market-square was covered with cobblestones and was the only area in Sławatycze that was paved. All other streets and alleys in the *shtetl* and all the roads linking the surrounding villages were rutted dirt roads which turned muddy after a rainfall.

There was no electricity in Sławatycze and everyone used kerosene or naphtha lamps or went to bed early.

In the back yard of each house in Sławatycze there was an outdoor latrine and in the winter we had to get dressed to go to this outdoor toilet. At night, especially in the winter, both children and adults used a *nacht topf*, a chamber pot that was kept under the bed and emptied in the morning. This was the extent of the “indoor” plumbing. Once a week we went with my father or my *Zeyde* [grandfather] to the communal *bud* and *schwitz* [steam bath] that was run by the Jewish community. The ladies had a separate day of the week set aside for their use. Children were usually bathed in a large zinc tub placed on the kitchen table. In the summer the people went down to the Bug River to bathe.

Every Monday was market day in Sławatycze. Peasants came from the surrounding villages and hamlets on foot or in their horse drawn wagons to sell or trade their produce and livestock with the Jewish merchants and tradesmen for basic manufactured goods. The merchants and tradesmen travelled to other nearby towns to attend the markets that were held on other days of the week. Except for Monday's market, Sławatycze went back to its quiet patterns of activity.

On market day the peasants brought eggs, live chickens and geese, horses and cows. Young colts and calves trailed behind the horse driven wagons. In season they brought vegetables and potatoes from their fields to sell at the market or to their private customers. Haggling was part of any purchase.

Observant Jews would not buy milk or milk products directly from non-Jews, as they could not be sure whether the milk container was not also used for non-kosher foods. Jewish middlemen went to the nearby farms to supervise the milking of the cows or goats into the containers provided by these Jewish dairymen who then sold the milk door to door by the glass or by the quart. Strong tasting goat's milk was considered to be a cure for digestive and many other ailments. A peasant

woman led a nanny goat with huge udders through the streets of Sławatycze and sold fresh goat's milk by the glass. Women who had ailing children ran out to the street to have the goat-woman milk some of the goat's curative milk directly into their own dairy jugs. My grandparents, like many other Jews in Sławatycze, kept their own cows. I can still recall the pleasant taste and the white moustache I got after drinking the just-milked, warm, foamy cow's milk.

The peasant women were dressed in long colourful homespun linen skirts and blouses and embroidered aprons. In the winter they wore mid-length sheepskin coats, leather side out. The coats were embroidered with folkloric designs in red wool. The decorations were distinctive and by the colour and the patterns of the decorations one could tell the area, even from which parish, the peasants came from.

The men wore long sheepskin coats and high sheepskin *kutchmas*, [Belorussian/Ukrainian style, high sheepskin or goat skin hats with the fur on the outside] called *hittels* in Yiddish, which the "Hitelmans" [later Gitelman] made and sold to the peasants on market days.

In the summer, women and children walked around barefoot. Male peasants wore a primitive form of footwear called *postoly*, which consisted of wide bandages of linen cloth or woven reeds wrapped around the legs, reaching from the toes to below the knees. The 'shoe' part of the *postoly* was made of birch bark or of a piece of rawhide, fur side out, laced to the foot with leather thongs.

We children also went barefoot in the summer and I remember wearing Cossack type knee high boots only during the winter months.

The population of the *shtetl* and the surrounding area was comprised of Jews, Catholic Poles, *Pravo-Slavny* [True Believers, i.e., Russian-Orthodox] Byelorussians [literally White Russians or White Ruthenians] and Ukrainians. People identified themselves by their religion and not by their nationality. Polish was the official language spoken in the cities and towns but in the countryside the peasants spoke a dialect based on Slavonic, which they referred to as *po prostemu*, which literally means; plain, not fancy talk. Jews referred to it as *po chlopsku*. A *chlop* being an adult male peasant who was generally illiterate and was also considered not to be too worldly nor overly bright.

The Synagogue, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Polish Catholic Church were all located in the same corner of the marketplace. The government school was in the south part of town on the road to Włodawa. The *bud* and the *mikveh* [the Jewish communal bathhouse and the ritual immersion pool] were located behind the Synagogue, not far from the river.

I remember where the police station was located and that across the street from the station lived the Jewish doctor. I remember where the Rabbi lived and where the richest man of the town lived. This rich man was called Mojsze *fun dem hoyf* [Moishe of the Manor] and he owned the grits mill. The mill was located at the river's edge, at the end of *ulica* [street] Włodawska. At one time it was a water mill but in 1939 a steam driven engine turned the millstones. A wood-burning boiler generated the steam that also drove an electric generator. The rich miller's house had the distinction of being the only one in Sławatycze that was illuminated by electricity, the only one built of brick, and the only one, besides the police station, to have a telephone.

Jewish shops lined the perimeter of the marketplace. These shops sold ironware, herring from barrels, bicycles, hard leather, ready-made clothing, manufactured goods and ice cream [home-made, of course]. For their goods, the shopkeepers often took in-trade from the peasants produce; such as potatoes, cabbages, turnips, chickens, eggs, or whatever else the peasants had to trade. To the peasants whom they knew, the Jewish merchants extended credit [with interest] or they lent them money that was to be paid back, with the accrued interest, after the crops were brought in.

Around the market-square there were a number of *shenk* [taverns or inns] that were operated by Jews and often by Jews with Christian partners.

Aside from the weekly market in the main square there was also a more regular *targowica* [trading place] a sort of bazaar that was comprised of semi-permanent stands and shacks. This *targowica* was located on the way to my *Cheder* [Hebrew school]. There, shopkeepers sold produce that they bought from the farmers or from the “*dorfs geyers*” [literally “village goers”, that is, peddlers] who travelled to the outlying farms and traded with the peasants. The *dorfs geyer* sold to the farmers ironware and other prefabricated goods and he took in trade their surplus produce, chickens, a goose, or a calf in order to save the peasant a time consuming trip into town on market day. The *dorfs geyers*, in reality, a middleman, then resold this produce to the local *targowica* retailers or sold it door to door to his established customers in the *shtetl*.

Around Christmas time, *kolędowncy* [Carollers] from the surrounding villages marched through the main street of our town singing Christmas carols. They were dressed in scarecrow type costumes made of straw that was tied around their bodies, on their arms and legs, and on their head they wore conical hats also made of straw. Frightful masks covered their faces. Many of the *kolędowncy* carried big wooden clubs decorated with whittled designs. These Christmas Carollers were continuing a ritual that dated back to their pagan past. To us they looked bizarre and very scary. Also, they were invariably drunk and no Jew dared to be out on the street when the carollers swaggered through town.

On Sundays and on Christian holidays, throngs of peasants from the surrounding villages paraded through the main street of Sławatycze, carrying icons and singing hymns, on their way to attend services at the Catholic or at the Russian Orthodox Church.

Sometimes in such a church parade there was a wedding party with the bridal couple, bedecked in their finery, riding in a horse drawn buggy that was decorated with multicoloured ribbons and with wild flowers.

I remember a large parade of pilgrims walking through Sławatycze singing hymns and carrying the “*Matka Boska*”, the miraculous Catholic icon of the nearby town of Kodeń.

When a high church personage came through Sławatycze, the Rabbi, accompanied by a group of prominent Jews of the town, went out to greet the churchman’s entourage with the traditional bread and salt carried on a silver platter before them.

The town Rabbi prayed in his own *shtybl* and attended the town *shul* only on *Shabbes* and on holidays. He seldom delivered any sermons, this was the function of the itinerant *maggids*. The Rabbi’s primary function was to *pasken shailes*, that is, to settle questions of *kashrut* or to render judgement on disputes among Jews and to also supervise the flour for the Passover *matzohs*.

Many itinerant Jews passed through Sławatycze, some came to collect money for various Jewish causes, others were *maggids*, the popular begging preachers who travelled from *shtetl* to *shtetl*—delivering firebrand sermons, often on contemporary topics.

Sztybl / Shtybl – Yiddish for a small house of study and prayer.

Szul / Shul – Yiddish for synagogue.

Szabbes / Shabbes – the Jewish Sabbath.

Pasken szayles – to respond to questions of a religious nature and of *kashrut* [kosher-ness].

Matzoh – the unleavened “bread of affliction” that is eaten during the eight days of Passover.

The Encyclopaedia Judaica defines a *Maggid* as “...a courageous itinerant preacher, attuned to the mood and the spiritual needs of his public but fearless in criticising them... they continued a tradition of preaching expressly intended for the masses, their sermons contained much social criticism but also provided social guidance. Their preaching was also characterised by the mournful sing-song intonation of their delivery... The Rabbis were suspicious of *Maggids* as they were suspected of stirring up heretical and critical ideas.”

Whole families of *beytlars*, Jewish beggars and vagabonds, often passed through town. It was not that our *shtetl* lacked their own supply of beggars. Being poor was not a great shame as they were in good company. Some families were beggars for generations. The Jewish community fed these itinerants and gave them some money and sometimes they were lodged for a day or two in the *hekdesch* [the poor house] located in the back of the Synagogue.

Some of the *ballebatym* [heads of the households] took home an *oyrach oyf Shabbes* [a houseguest for the Sabbath]. People passing through Sławatycze often stayed over *Shabbes* in my grandparents' house where they were put up in a small room located in the back of the house.

On Friday afternoons my grandmother handed me a coin, picked me up and had me drop the coin into a blue and white charity box that stood on the mantelpiece. Certain ones of the town poor regularly came to my grandparents' house on Friday's and stood silently at the door. My grandmother gave my older brother and me some coins to hand over to the beggars so that my brother and I would partake in the *mitzvah* [divine commandment] of giving charity to the poor. Many of the beggars returned on *Shabbes* and were given a thick slice of *challeh* [a braided loaf of white bread, glazed with egg white and sometimes topped with poppy seeds, baked primarily for the Sabbath.]

On *Shabbes* and *Yom Tovim* when work is forbidden to Jews, a *Shabbes Goy* would come in to Jewish homes during the winter months to stoke the fires and add wood to the stoves and to the heating ovens. Our *Shabbes Goy* was actually a *Goyeh*, or more accurately a *Shiksaleh*, which is a young female *Goyeh*, [Gentile woman]. The young girl was modestly dressed in a long skirt and shawl but she generally went barefoot in the summer months. In the winter she would come back a few times during the Sabbath day and Jewish Holidays to add more wood to the stove and to the *kalakh oiven* [a large, ceramic heating oven]. She'd return during the week to be paid by my grandmother with a few *groshen* [pennies, coins] and some bread for her stoker services.

Even though almost everyone in Sławatycze baked their own *challeh* and bread, there was also a commercial bakery in town. It was located right across the street from our new house. Many people brought their crocks of *tchulent* on Friday afternoons to be placed into the large oven of the commercial bakery and they picked it up the next day, after the prayers, to be eaten for *Shabbes* lunch. For those who wanted it, during the week, the commercial bakery delivered fresh rolls door to door, in time for breakfast.

Sławatycze had a communal *matzoh* bakery that was located in a closed-off room at the back of the *mikvah*, the communal ritual bath. It was used for the sole purpose of baking *matzohs* for *Pesach* [Passover]. Just before the holiday, young adults staged a “*Matzoh Baking Bee*”.

There was a large wood burning oven, a long zinc-covered table, sacks of flour, water barrels and also straw baskets for the baked *matzohs*. Baking *matzohs* was a busy and frenetic assembly-line affair. Everyone had his or her assigned duty. “Water-boys” scurried around bringing pitchers of water from the water barrel to those who yelled “*Wasser!*” Water was poured into the mounds of flour shaped like a small volcano sitting on the zinc table. Young women mixed the water into the flour with their bare hands and quickly kneaded it into balls of dough. The dough was then quickly passed on to their neighbours who quickly rolled it out into round *matzohs*. Another person on this *matzoh* assembly line quickly perforated the rolled out dough with forks that were tied

together into a bundle. A timekeeper, with watch in hand, shouted out the minutes left of the eighteen minutes that is allotted for each batch of *matzohs*.

The Shulchan Aruch [The Code of Jewish Law] stipulates many rules for the matzoh making process, such as:- The water has to “rest” overnight. No direct sunlight must hit the dough. No matzoh must fold over or touch another matzoh in the oven. From the time when the water is first added to the flour, the kneading of the dough, to the time when the matzohs are taken out of the oven must not exceed eighteen minutes. This “18 Minute Matzoh Rule” maintains that, if flour remains wet for more than 18 minutes the natural yeast in the flour would start to ferment thereby rendering the matzohs not to qualify as the “unleavened bread of the Exodus”. That is, it is not “Kosher le Pesach”, not fit for consumption on the Passover.

After a proper cleanup of all residue of any leftover dough from the previous batch, the 18 minute frenetic process was started all over again. The communal *matzoh*-bake was a social event where young people met and flirted with each other and a lot of giggles and laughter filled the room. My father’s job was always as *der shibber*, the *matzoh mavin* in charge of the oven.

Occasionally, bands of Gypsies passed through our town and they would encamp for a week or two in a nearby wooded area. They travelled in their colourful horse drawn caravans, veritable homes on wheels that housed their large families. The gypsies marched into town playing pipes and drums.

The Gypsy men had big black moustaches, wore baggy pants with embroidered vests over bare chests and gold earrings. The Gypsy women were clad in long skirts, embroidered blouses, colourful shawls over their shoulders and wore large golden earrings and many strands of jewellery around their necks and pendants of gold and silver coins hung from their jet-black hair. The Gypsies were mainly makers of jewellery, horse traders, entertainers and menders of pots and pans. They were also fortune-tellers, musicians and suspected thieves.

The Gypsies brought excitement and entertainment to Sławatycze. The townspeople felt nervous and uneasy about their presence among them. Many looked at the spectacle of these outlandish swarthy people in their colourful costumes from behind their slightly ajar doors or windows. Some more daring individuals could not resist following the Gypsy parade into the marketplace to hear their exotic music and to watch their trained bears and monkeys perform tricks. Some people would drop a few *groszen* [Polish penny] coins into the tambourines that were passed around the watching crowd by the pretty Gypsy girls. Mothers held on tightly to their children’s hands and we were always admonished not to go near the Gypsies as they could steal us and we would never, ever, see our parents again.

In the summer, the people of Sławatycze went down to the Bug River to swim, to do their laundry and to entertain themselves. The river shore on the Sławatycze side was sandy and had a gentle slope, an ideal beach for swimming and for recreation. There were many ox-bows and shallow and warm “pools” that were leftover from the spring floods, an ideal place for kids to splash in and pretend to swim.

In the winter young people skated on the many frozen ponds at the river’s edge. Skates were home made and consisted of a half-round piece of wood tapered at each end. A thick metal wire was imbedded in a groove at the bottom of this wooden skate to act as ice runners and two lateral holes were burned through the sides through which passed leather thongs that attached the wooden skate to the boot of the skater. A wooden pole was imbedded in the ice and it became frozen in place overnight. A wagon wheel was put over this vertical shaft and ropes were tied to the rim of the wagon wheel. Holding onto to the other end of the knotted ropes, the young men and women

skated round and round the rotating wheel in ever faster and faster circles. When the skaters let go of the rope the centrifugal force propelled them at great speed far over the river ice.

The opposite shore of the Bug River had steep, perpendicular cliffs. Sparrows burrowed their nests in these high sand cliffs. The river curved sharply at Sławatycze and the water was deep and treacherous at the opposite shore. There were many whirlpools and undertows there. A grave hazard to unwary swimmers and kayakers were the large submerged trees that were trapped under the surface of the water.

Curiously, not too many people in Sławatycze knew how to swim well, and invariably, every summer people drowned in the Bug River. Peasants floated lit candles on the river set onto loaves of bread in the hope that the candles would stop at the place where the drowned person was trapped under the surface of the water.

Large log booms, huge rafts of logs lashed together and steered by long oar-like rudders, were floated down the Bug River. A hut was located on top of the log raft to shelter the *draveurs* on their journey down the river. Smoke came out of the chimney of the hut and their dogs barked at us as we watched them from the shore.

Every spring the river was in flood. Sometimes we could see uprooted trees or even houses and barns with squawking chickens perched on the roofs floating downstream.

In the summer, when the water receded, fish were trapped in the many shallow ponds that formed on the river's flood plain. It was great fun trying to catch a fish with our bare hands. The town's people used pillowcases as nets to catch the trapped fish.

Peasants put out sheaves of flax to ret in the shallow pools that formed at the riverbank. After the flax was sufficiently retted it was beaten with wooden paddles to soften the stalks and separate the useful linen fibres from the woody pulp. During the "idle" winter months the peasant women carded, spun and wove on handlooms the flax fibres into coarse, homespun linen cloth.

In the summer, a Jewish family of rope makers plied their trade on the beach. At one end of the rope the master rope maker paid out controlled amounts of hemp from a large bundle that he carried in a sack tied around his waist. At the other end of the rope, his apprentice, most often his wife or child, while walking backwards, turned a wooden crank to twist the long strands of the hemp into the first strand of a finished rope. Two or three of these twisted rope strands were then intertwined to form the finished product. It was only in the summer, on the beach, that the rope makers had the unobstructed room to make the long ropes that were prized by the local peasants.

Lower down from the town, towards the river, a curious phenomenon existed. There, poor Jews and also non-Jews lived in *ziemianki* [houses built of sod]. There, I saw many kids with perennial runny noses and *parakhs*, large, infected fungus scabs on their scalps, very much like "cradle cap" on newborn babies, but they were not babies, these were adolescents.

I have seen photographs of similar sod houses that the early Canadian settlers built as their first, temporary shelters when they came out west to Manitoba or Saskatchewan in the 1880's. A square pit was dug; short walls of squares of sod were put up around this pit. To form the roof, the pit was covered with a lattice of interwoven wooden poles, which was then covered with large squares of sod. This was Canada in the 1880's. In 1939 Sławatycze people still lived in these damp sod houses like their ancestors had lived for generations before them.

The oldest man in Sławatycze, perhaps in Poland at that time, was "*Awrejmele der Melamed*". Awrejmele Sznajderman [or Sznajder] was a spry old man and whenever he was asked his age he replied "I had my Bar-Mitzvah just three years ago"; which meant that he was now 13+3 years old [and + 100 yrs]. When Awrejmele died in 1937, or it may have been in 1938, at the patriarchal age of 116 years, many government dignitaries attended his funeral.

To obtain water, people went to the well near my Zeyde's brother Szaja's house, down a steep sandy alley across from the blacksmith's shop. Around the well there was an open wooden structure with a thatch roof. A large cast iron wheel with a handle was cranked in order to wind the rope around the horizontal wooden shaft that raised the big wooden bucket full of water from the bottom of the well. Or one could go to fetch water from the *plimp*, the hand operated communal water pump that was located in the *rynek*, the marketplace. Often people hired a *wassertreiger* [a water carrier] to bring water to their house, especially on Thursdays, which was washday. The favoured *wassertreiger* in Sławatycze was *der meshugener* Duwedl [Crazy David].

Mesugener Duwedl was a short, stocky, muscular man. He carried water in two large wooden buckets slung from *chromosly* [a wooden yoke] that he carried across his broad shoulders. All summer long, and way into the early snows, Duwedl went barefoot, trudging through the *blotes*, the deep mud of the Sławatycze main street and alleys. *Meshugener* Duwedl may have been the town idiot, but he was also a gentleman, the town gossip, and a savant. Pretty women he charged less for his labours. By going into many homes he was in the ideal position to be the propagator of the town gossip. Duwedl knew which young lady kissed which young man behind which fence and he eagerly shared this information in exchange for other such similar juicy titbits of gossip. Duwedl had a beautiful voice and sang cantorial chants and also the latest modern ballads while he worked or at any time when requested to sing a particular song or Hebrew prayer. *Meshugener* Duwedl's unmatched skill lay in his ability to make complicated calculations to determine on what day of the week anyone's birthday or a particular *Yom Tov* [holiday] would fall years from now on the Hebrew calendar and also on the *goyisze* calendar.

Meshugener Duwedl was one of the best swimmers in Sławatycze. He could tread water indefinitely and he knew where the treacherous undertows in the river were, and at which point the Bug River could be forded by wagons or crossed on foot from Sławatycze to the Domaczów side. Only one other person in Sławatycze had such skills. Mojsze *fun die bud* was an old man and, as his nickname implied, he was the attendant at the communal bathhouse, the *bud*. During the First World War the Germans used him to guide their horse-drawn artillery and their foot soldiers across the Bug River.

In the summer of 1940 the Germans asked for their former Bug River guide by name and politely asked him to again show them the location of the safe wagon fords from Sławatycze to the other, now Russian, side of the river. *Meshugener* Duwedl volunteered to come along too, as he also had these special skills.

Duwedl and the old man both waded across the river indicating where the safe wagon fords were located and, as requested by the Germans, they easily swam out to indicate where the deepest parts of the river were located. On their return swim, back to the Sławatycze shore, the German soldiers amused themselves by using the two bobbing heads for target practice. Both *der Meshugener* Duwedl and the old *bud* attendant, Mojsze *fun die bud*, died in the river that they knew so well and loved so much.

Water was kept in the kitchen in wooden barrels and was scooped out with large wooden dippers or ladles. A barrel was kept under the downspout from the roof gutters to collect rainwater, which was softer than the water from the well or from the pump and was therefore favoured for doing the laundry. As part of the weekly washday process, the underwear and bed linens were boiled in large zinc basins that were set on top of the kitchen stove. After being rinsed in a barrel, the linens were hung outside to dry. In the winter, when the frozen wash was taken off the line, the 'long johns' looked like cardboard cut-outs of headless people.

In the summer, weather permitting, the laundry was taken to the river to be washed. After wetting the laundry in the river it was laid on a smooth rock and rubbed with large, chunky, yellow soap and the wash was then twisted into a thick 'rope' and repeatedly beaten with a flat wooden paddle so that the soap penetrated deep into the fabric. After rinsing in the river, the wash was

wrung out by twisting the linens by hand. Sometimes two women would help each other twist their lines; the “Ślawatycze spin cycle”. The wash was then spread on the grass or on the bushes at the river’s edge to dry and to be bleached by the sun.

Shirts were ironed by hand with an iron that was heated, not with electricity, as there wasn’t any, but by a charcoal fire located in a compartment above the base plate of the iron. Bed sheets and pillowcases were taken to a commercial hand mangle that was operated by a family from their house. The mangle consisted of a long wooden frame with many rotating wooden rollers. Two young women fed the customers’ sheets through the intake rollers while two husky women turned a cast iron crank that rotated in unison the interconnected rollers of the mangle. At the far end of the mangle other girls received the laundry from the rollers and neatly folded them into neat packets. The owner of the mangle attended to the customers and collected the money.

I was always fascinated by the activity at the blacksmith’s forge. The forge was located not far from our house, down a steep sandy alley, across from my great-uncle Szaja’s house and the old communal well. I often accompanied my *Zeyde* to Awrejmele *dem Kowal*’s [Abraham the Smith’s, indicating that his father had also been a blacksmith] when one of my *Zeyde*’s horses needed to be shod. The two master blacksmiths, brothers, were tall, muscular Jews with long black beards. They wore large leather aprons, no shirts, and the sides of their *tallis kattans* [small prayer shawls worn by men and boys under their shirts] were peppered with irregular brown holes, burned out by flying sparks.

To keep the horse calm while it was being shod, my *Zeyde* put a sack over the horse’s head and he gently stroked the animal’s neck, all the while murmuring soothing words to the animal in *goyish*. One never spoke or gave commands to a horse, a dog or to any other such animal in Yiddish, except, perhaps when speaking to a kitten. [*Mein sheines ketzele*, my beautiful kitten, was also used as an endearment to a favourite grandchild.]

Facing away from the horse head, the blacksmith took one of the horse’s legs between his own legs and with a large rasp file he filed smooth the bottom of the horse’s hoofs. The smith then placed a rough shaped horseshoe on the hoof to try it on for size and returned it to the fire until it turned red-hot. The master blacksmith then picked up the red-hot horseshoe with long tongs and placed it on a large anvil. In his other hand the master held a small hammer with a long wooden handle with which he tapped the spot on the horseshoe that needed hammering. The apprentice swung a heavy hammer and hit the very same spot indicated by the master blacksmith. This was repeated until the horseshoe was hammered out to fit the animal’s hoof. Large, square nails were driven through the horseshoe into the horse’s hoofs. The ends of the protruding nails were cut close to the hoof with large pliers and then filed smooth with the rasp file.

To fan the flames of the glowing coals in the open hearth of the forge, another apprentice, his bare chest glistening by the light of the fire, pulled down on a long wooden handle that operated large leather bellows, thus pumping air into the hearth to feed the coal fire. When the apprentice released the handle, the bellows opened, pulled up by a rope looped over an overhead pulley and counterweighted by a small anvil and the pumping cycle was then repeated.

I once accompanied my father to the *kowal* [blacksmith] to have holes drilled in the handles of our new, all-metal, set of cutlery that he brought back from Warsaw. The holes were to identify them as being for *milchig* [dairy] use only. The muscular blacksmith’s apprentice turned the large flywheel of the drill press while the master smith pulled down on the handle of the rotating drill. Aside from shoeing horses the blacksmith also made ploughshares, sickles and scythes, steel rims for wagons wheels and wrought-iron hinges and bolts.

Time and again I returned to watch with fascination the ongoing activity at the smithy. My father often said that since an early age I took an interest in how things worked and that I always would take things apart to see what made them tick. [*Perhaps these early experiences influenced me to eventually becoming a Mechanical Engineer. Our grandson Dustin shows a similar curiosity in things mechanical.*]

Potential buyers of horses used the sandy hill in front of the smithy as a testing ground to determine the strength of the horses they intended to buy. Wooden poles were put through the front and rear wheels of a wagon to prevent them from turning. Sacks filled with sand were added to the wagon as ballast to simulate an actual freight load. The speed with which the horse pulled the jammed and loaded wagon up the sandy hill was an indication of its strength and therefore, its market value. Also, potential buyers always looked inside the horse's mouth. I am not quite sure why they did this; perhaps it was to tell age or the health of the animal.

In the mid 1920's there occurred an unfortunate incident in the Sławatycze marketplace during a busy market day. While trying to break up a fight between a rowdy, drunken group of peasants, the town policeman fired his pistol "in the air" and accidentally killed Symche *der Kowal* [Awrejmele *der Kowal*'s partner and brother-in-law] who was working nearby repairing a peasant's wagon wheel. Symche left a wife and five young orphaned daughters.

Across the Bug River from Sławatycze was the larger town of Domaczów [sometimes referred to as Domaczewa]. It was part of Poland between the two world wars and now it is known as the city of Domaczewa and is located in the Independent State of "Belarus", which until recently was the "Belorussian Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union".

Domaczów was a resort town. Pungent pines grew there in the sandy soil. The pines trees oozed sticky sap that smelled of turpentine. In Domaczów there were many "*pensjonats*", [boarding houses or B&Bs]. Movies were shown there on weekends. My mother's youngest uncle, red haired Herszel Repkowski, who was perhaps a year or two older than my mother, owned such a *pensjonat* and our family visited there often. It was a vacation place and many city folk came out by train to spend the weekend in the curative, pungent pine groves of Domaczów.

The shore on the Domaczów side of the Bug River consisted of steep sandy cliffs. To go from Sławatycze to Domaczów, which was right across the Bug River, one had to go north for about four or five kilometres, across the river over a wooden bridge, and then go back south for another four kilometres.

A further seven kilometres north of the bridge there was a *prom* [ferryboat]. Before the bridge was built in the mid 1930s the ferryboat was the only way for wagons to safely cross the Bug River in order to travel to Domaczów or to go to the small hamlet of Dubica where the nearest train station was located. This manual ferryboat was still in use in 1939.

The *prom* consisted of a large floating platform that was made of logs lashed together with thick rope. The ferryboat was long enough to hold a wagon with its horse still in the span. It had high side rails and on one side there was a long bench for passengers to sit. A thick rope cable was strung between the two shores, high enough to let the log-booms and boats pass underneath it. Two short anchor ropes were attached to each end of the ferryboat and the other end of these anchor ropes was looped over the overhead cable to prevent the ferryboat from drifting downstream.

Opposite the passengers' bench there was a high catwalk that consisted of a couple of split logs with rough steps hewn into them. The ferryman used a large wooden club, very much like an

oversized baseball bat, to propel the ferry across the river. The club had a slot at its thick end and by placing the slot onto the overhead cable and then pulling hard on the club the ferryman tightened his grip onto the overhead cable and by walking backwards, with his heels dug into the grooves of the catwalk, his body leaning backwards and straining under the heavy burden, the ferryman pulled the *prom* across the river with his sheer, brute force.

The Oka Ferry that traverses the Ottawa River west of Montreal is used in the summer as a shortcut to the beaches and parks located on the north shore of the river. The Oka Ferry has no motor, it cleverly utilises the force of the current to propel itself across the river. A large rudder is located in the centre of the ferry. The ferryman angles the rudder to take advantage of the forward thrust component of the swift current on the rudder and thereby the power of the water propels the ferry across the river. No cables are strung between shores or slotted clubs or sheer brute force has to be used to manually shlep the ferry and its load to the other side of the river. "Only in America" as they may have said in Sławatycze, in wonderment of Yankee innovations.

Not far from my *Cheder*, [Hebrew school] right across the street from the Rabbi's house, there lived a family whose particular tragic story I heard retold many times. It seems that in the late 1920s one of their four daughters, a Jewish beauty by the name of Tajbele Mojsze-Bereche's, fell in love with a young gentile policeman. Tajbele decided to convert to the Catholic faith so that she may marry her Polish beau. On the Sunday of her *shmad* [conversion] and marriage, Catholics from Sławatycze and from the surrounding areas paraded in a long procession down the main street of Sławatycze to the Catholic Church carrying icons before them and singing hymns. The young bride, dressed in the best of Polish peasant woman's finery, was driven in an open carriage that was pulled by a white horse handsomely caparisoned with bright ribbons. The young girl sat erect, and with a defiant smirk waved from her carriage to the townspeople. Her poor, distraught parents followed the carriage, crying and screaming and beating their heads to a bloody pulp on the sides of the wagon pleading with their daughter not to go through with this woeful deed. They could not dissuade their daughter from her defiant intentions of conversion and marriage to the young Polish policeman.

After this shameful tragedy, the girl's family secluded themselves and never went out of their house. Her three sisters never married, neither did their cousins in the nearby town; no one would marry them. I remember my friends and I peered through the cracks in their very high plank fence to try to catch a glimpse of this recluse family.

The *Shtetl* Rabbi, Reb'Szyja Karpel, and his wife did not have any children. The Torah counsels us to "be fruitful and multiply" and after ten years of childless marriage it is obligatory of all good Jews to divorce their barren wives and to remarry. The Rabbi and the *rebbetzin* [the Rabbi's wife] amicably drove together in the same wagon to the nearby town of Kodeń for an audience with the saintly *Kodner Rebbe*. As it is prescribed, in front of the Rebbe's *Beth Din*, [a Rabbinical court of three rabbis] the Sławatyczer Rabbi handed his wife a *get*, a Bill of Divorcement.

Soon after the divorce the Rabbi married his former wife's younger sister. After another eight, or so, years into his second marriage, the second *rebbetzin* was also not conceiving. The Rabbi had become fond of his young second wife and not wanting to have to "set her aside" too, he decided that they adopt a child. So, they adopted the youngest of the three daughters of the Rabbi's second wife's older sister.

A story was often told of a poor Ślawatyczer, a tailor, who had a wife and many children. One evening he went out to close the window shutters of his house, as was his usual habit, *und er is nelem geworn* [he mysteriously disappeared]. It was thought that he might have been killed by the *Endekes* [a Polish Nationalist party] and thrown into the river. Two years later the poor woman received a letter from *Amerikeh*. Inside the envelope was her *get* sent to her from New York by her missing husband. This woman was lucky. Had her missing husband not sent her a *get*, [a Bill of Divorcement], which is the unilateral prerogative of the Jewish husband, the poor woman would have remained an *agunah* and not be able to remarry for the rest of her life.

Agunah; a married woman who is separated from her husband and who cannot remarry either because she cannot obtain a divorce from her husband due to his wilful refusal to deliver a get, or because it is unknown whether the husband is still alive.

[Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica]

In the early 1930s the Ślawatyczer Jewish community decided that the town should have a Jewish doctor. At that time, the only doctor in Ślawatycze was an elderly Pole. So they advertised in a Jewish newspaper in Warsaw for a young, [Jewish] doctor to open a practice in Ślawatycze. A young, single Jewish doctor did respond and he set up his medical practice in Ślawatycze. To the great disappointment of many of the local belles, the young doctor married a girl from Warsaw and brought her to Ślawatycze. The doctor's house became the focus of a new circle of Ślawatyczer *inteligencja* and many literary soirées were held at his house. Soon afterwards a lending library-for-pay was established as more and more people were now able to read and had become more and more secularised.

There was no dentist in Ślawatycze. The two barbers, including anyone with a pair of pliers, pulled teeth. Those who could afford the expense travelled to Warsaw for dentures.

One of my second cousins, my mother's uncle Welwel's son, also named Szepsel, was a mute. The members of our family were able to understand his gibberish talk. Unfortunately people did not speak to him in a normal manner but mimicked back his own peculiar speech. He was probably not retarded, perhaps a bit socially backward, neither was he deaf as he understood quite well all what was said to him and about him. He could have been normal were it not for this speech handicap. He was a crafty boy and was pampered by all. *Sztumer* [mute] Szepsel begged for pennies from his older cousins and uncles or asked them to buy him candy and ice cream. He did not go to *cheder* or to school and very little was expected of him as far as religious or social obligations were concerned or, for that matter, as far as proper behaviour was concerned. He spent his time like a free spirit doing things that other kids his age were not permitted to do.

I remember the day when he died. He must have been not more than twelve years old. *Sztumer* Szepsel had hitched a ride on a wagon carrying long logs by laying himself across one of the protruding logs. The wagon must have gone over a bump, the logs whipped up and down and he was crushed to death.

The Ślawatycze policeman, Stanisław Funk was a friendly giant of a man, well over six feet [190cm] tall. To us kids he spoke in Yiddish. He patrolled Ślawatycze on a bicycle that looked rather puny compared to his physical size. On the weekly market days Constable Funk was in his glory; he was the "cock of the walk." Should a peasant have one drink too many or get rowdy, Funk used, what was known locally as Funk's *sposób*, that is, 'Funk's method'. 'The Method' consisted of Constable Funk grabbing the rowdy peasant by the back of the neck and with the other hand he grabbed the poor fellow by the back of his pants and squeezed tight. Whatever the peasant had in the front of his pants hurt like hell. Practically lifting the rowdy's feet off the ground, Funk marched him off to the Ślawatycze *koza*, the "goat", as the local "lock-up" was called.

Stanisław Funk was very friendly to the Jewish population and the Jewish merchants generously reciprocated his kindness, especially when he caught them selling on Sundays through the back door of the store. The imposed ‘Sunday closing laws’ were a great hardship to Jewish merchants as their stores were closed for two days of the week; on *Shabbat* and on Sundays, whereas Polish merchants kept closed on Sundays only.

Prior to my father building his own house we lived across the street from my maternal grandparents in part of a house that we rented from Szmuel-Zawel, *der kamaszenmacher*, whose family lived in another part of his large house. [A *kamaszenmacher* cut and sewed up the soft leather uppers for shoes and for the Cossack type boots to which cobblers completed the boots and shoes by attaching the stiff leather soles and heels].

Szmuel-Zawel was commonly referred to as *die Kille* [the Hernia] as he reputedly had the largest protruding *kille* in Sławatycze. I remember when the poor man died, probably from a ruptured hernia. I saw him laid out on the floor of his house. The *Chewra Kaddisza*, the volunteer Jewish Burial Society, prepared the body according to the Jewish Rite of *Tarrah* by washing the body and wrapping it in a linen shroud. The body was then carried to the cemetery on a *tarrah breit*, an open wooden stretcher. [In accordance with Jewish tradition no casket is used for burial unless it be the law of the land.] My father was an active member of the *Chewra Kaddisza* and I remember witnessing this event as I may have followed my father into Szmuel Zawel’s house where he was laid out on the floor.

Also, in accordance with Jewish tradition, the burial of the dead is to be done before sundown, generally on the same day of death. My father told the story of an ailing elderly woman in Sławatycze who died on a Friday, so the *Chewra Kaddisza* rushed to have her buried before the onset of the Sabbath. As they carried her body to the cemetery, laying on the open *tarrah breit* and wrapped in *tacherrichim* [the linen burial shroud], she suddenly sat up and demanded to know what in the “heck” they thought they were doing with her. It seems that she had fainted while she was on her sick bed, was assumed to have died, and was rushed to be buried before the start of *Szabbes*. She lived, only to perish later in the Shoah.

Next door to my maternal grandparents’ house lived *der shuster* [the cobbler] Srul Kapitańczyk and his large family. Srul was always referred to by his nickname of *Bortnik*. He had spent a couple of years in the U.S.A. and came back to Sławatycze with enough money to marry off his daughters and to lend out some of it *oyf protsent* [on percentage, i.e. he was a moneylender]. Srul Bortnik would amuse his few customers with his ‘magic’ matches that he brought back from *Amerikeh*. He could light these magic matches by just waving his thumb over them or by wiping his hand on the back of his *Amerikaner* pants that he always wore, the blue ones, the ones with the copper rivets.

Srul Bortnik was a skilled cobbler but his real talent was that he could give any person or animal “*a gut oyg*” with his large, popping eyes. [It literally means ‘a good eye’ in Yiddish, but actually the opposite is meant, that is, ‘the evil eye’, a curse or a hex] Pregnant women and mothers with pretty children avoided going past his house lest he gives them *a gut oyg*.

Even the *goyim* knew and feared his powers. When a peasant bought a calf or a colt in the Sławatycze market he would go roundabout to get out of town in order to avoid passing in front of Srul Bortnik’s house. Sometimes the peasant threw a blanket over the calf or the horse’s head so that Srul Bortnik could not make direct eye contact with the animal and jinx it.

For an antidote for *a gut oyg* one went to the *machaszeyfa* [the witch], an old woman who, for a fee, would remove the effects of *a gut oyg* or place her own hex or curse on a client’s rival. She

also sold magic charms and amulets to be worn around the neck for long lasting effects of warding off the evil eye. Such were their magic powers.

I was permitted to watch Srul Bortnik work. I guess, as neighbours, we were immune to his *evil eye*. I loved watching him cobble boots and shoes and to listen to his stories of his sojourn in *Amerikeh*. The customer would place his stockinged foot on an old piece of newspaper and the cobbler then chalked out the outline of his customer's foot on the paper. Srul then took the vital measurements of the feet; such as the width at the toes and the height of the arch with a strip of folded newspaper and marked off the dimensions by making notches in the ribbon. The cobbler padded-out wooden shoe-forms with felt and with pieces of leather and then rasped the shoe forms down to the measurements of his client's feet.

Szusters [cobbler] like Srul Bortnik would sub-contract the fabrication of the 'boot uppers' to a *kamaszenmacher*, such as Szmuel-Zawel. After the uppers were sewn up, the cobbler would then attach the inner soles and the stiff outer soles and then the heels to the soft boot uppers. To stitch the leather soles to the leather uppers, the cobbler cut a shallow, slanted groove around the perimeter of the sole in which he would hide the stitches to prevent wear. With a curved awl he made holes along the groove in the sole through which he then threaded the two sewing twine in opposing directions. No metallic needle was used; instead, the cobbler used a stiff, but flexible, hog's bristle [a thick pig's hair taken from its mane]. The Jewish cobbler was careful not to take the *chazer ur* [pig's bristle] needle into his mouth so he moistened it in a puddle of spittle that he spat onto his leather apron. With his open palm he twisted the two flayed ends of the hog's bristle on his knee and then intertwined the tapered end of the sewing twine with the two twisted ends of the hog's bristle. The heavy twine was then rubbed with a chunk of *smolleh* [hard tar] in order to lubricate the thread and to waterproof the stitches. Two threads, each running in opposite directions, were used to sew on the soles. To conceal and protect the stitches from wear, the slanted groove in the sole was glued down with glue made from boiled cowhide.

The soles of the boots were then further anchored by punching holes in them with an awl and square wooden pegs were then hammered into these holes with the cobbler's curved hammer. The cobbler always kept a mouthful of wooden pegs and doled them out with his tongue, one moistened peg at a time. The excess wood of the protruding wooden pegs on the bottom of the soles and on the inside of the boots was then filed down with a rasp. Bees' wax was rubbed onto the edges of the soles in order to make them waterproof. Shoes and boots never wore out; they were always resoled, repaired and passed on.

The Lublin province, in which Sławatycze was located, was one of the most economically backward areas in Poland. Life was rather harsh and many people were destitute. There was little work in Sławatycze and many of the young people left for the big cities, especially Warsaw, to seek work or they emigrated to other countries such as *Amerikeh*, *Kanadeh*, *Argentineh* or they went to the "Promised Land" of Biro-Bidzhan, the "*Yevreyskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast*" [*The Jewish Autonomous Region* of the Soviet Union] located in the eastern extremity of the Soviet Union, near Mongolia. Of those who stayed behind, most lived in penury with no prospect to improve their lives.

In 1935, after the death of the benevolent dictator Marshal Józef Piłsudski, Poland was turning more and more into a semi-fascist state. Anti-Semitism had an official stamp of approval from the Polish Catholic Church, whose head, Cardinal Hlond, once pronounced that "We have three and a half million Jews in Poland, three million too many." The Minister of the Interior and subsequent Prime Minister of Poland, General Składkowski stated: "I will not allow people to beat-up or kill Jews, but economic boycott; Owszem [Certainly, why not?] Jews who had assumed Polish first

names, that is, Polish “Christian” names had to revert to their official “Jewish” names.

The Communist Party, to which many Jews belonged, was declared illegal in Poland and their political activities were severely restricted and offenders punished with torture and long prison terms. The Narodowa Demokracja [NDK] ultra nationalist party of Poland, known as Endecja or the Endeques, mimicked the activities of the other National Socialist party, the Nazi party of Germany, and marched through the streets of our town with their walking sticks that they often used to club Jews while shouting “Żydy do Palestyny”. [“Kikes to Palestine”, equivalent to “Jüden Raus” or “Jews Get Out”.]

Polish Peasant organizations set up buying co-operatives to squeeze out the Jewish middleman. Demonstrations and street fights became common. Jewish militant rightist organizations, such as the Betar, of which the late Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin was one of its leaders, often marched through the streets of Sławatycze in their brown shirts and their ‘Sam Brown’ leather belts with cross-shoulder straps, looking to avenge the beating of their members by the Endeques.

The Numerus Clausus [closed numbers], originally instituted under the Tsars, was reinstated by the Polish Universities as a quasi-legal means of limiting the number of Jewish students in the institutions of higher learning. In the late 1930s separate benches were set aside for Jewish students in the back of the classrooms. This policy drastically reduced the number of Jewish students in the secondary schools and universities from 24.6% of the population in 1922 to 13.2% in 1936. Technically, the Jews in Poland were equal citizens but they were not employed in the civil service, few Jews were teachers in the state schools except in the Galicia area of Poland. They were not employed in state owned banks, or in the state monopolies such as tobacco manufacturing and salt distribution. [Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica]

The dramatic increase in the Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement since the late 1700s, due to a lower infantile mortality rate than that of their rural Christian neighbours, was primarily because of better sanitation among Jews and easier access to medical help. From 1800 to 1900, the Jewish population in the Pale of Settlement increased six-fold. This overcrowding and lack of work was the driving force for the emigration out of the Pale in the late 1880s and early 1900s. The displacement of the Jewish population during World War I, the depression years, the infamous “Numerus Clausus” and the boycott of Jewish shops further devastated the economy of the Jews of Poland. Large families, poverty and economic marginalisation of the Jews was the major impetus for their emigration out of Poland in the 1920s and 1930s. Many Polish Jews went to Palestine, the USA, Canada, Australia and Argentina and then a substantial number of these Polish Jews went from there to Biro-Bidzhan [in Soviet Russia].

Biro-Bidzhan, which was officially known as the “Yevreyskaya Avtonomnaya Oblast” [The Jewish Autonomous Region] of the Soviet Union, is located in the Soviet Far East, near the city of Khabarovsk and borders the Amur River and Manchuria. It was the furthest that Stalin could get the Jewish “Cosmopolitans” away from the major cities of the Soviet Union. For those Jews active in the “Yevseksiya”, the Jewish Section of the Communist Party, Biro-Bidzhan seemed to be an ideological alternative to Zionism. There, Yiddish was spoken and was taught in the schools

alongside with Russian and where the street signs and railway signs were in Yiddish. Jewish immigration to this Yiddish “Promised Land” began in the late 1920s, not only from within the Soviet Union but also from other countries.

As a *farbrente Komunistke* [a firebrand Communist], my father’s sister Breindl, went to Biro-Bidzhan in 1932 to join her beau, Isak Lerer, known as *Itshe der Kämpfer* [Isaac the Fighter], who had previously emigrated from Poland to Argentina and from there he went to Biro-Bidzhan. The writer and poet, the Sławatyczer native, Luba Wasserman, went to Palestine in the late 1920s and then in 1934 she emigrated from the “Ancient Promised Land” to the “New Promised Land” of Biro-Bidzhan. The harsh climate, swamps, insects and insufficient housing plus the purges of 1936-38 drastically reduced the Jewish population of Biro-Bidzhan.

For health reasons, my aunt Breindl and her husband Itshe had to leave Biro-Bidzhan in 1934 and they went to live in the city of Krym Yevpatoriya on the Crimean Peninsula. During the 1936-38 purges, *Itshe der Kämpfer* was sentenced to 10 years at hard labour as an “enemy of the State”. On the day that his full ten year prison term ended Itshe was released from the Siberian *lager* and was then permanently exiled to a remote Siberian village called Ozernoye. Eventually Breindl and their daughter Ghitta joined Itshe in his exile. During the Stalin purges of the 1950s Itshe *Kämpfer’s* previous conviction of ten years at hard labour was reviewed and it was deemed that his original ten-year sentence was inadequate punishment for his “original sin” of writing letters back home to Poland hinting that life in the “Promised Land” was not what was promised. Itshe was then given a *nabavka* [a raise, or seconds] of five more years in prison. After Stalin’s death in 1952, Itshe was pardoned and released from prison but he was to live in exile [across the road from the prison] for the rest of his life.

In 1957, due to the heroic efforts of my aunt Jadzia, who was still in Poland at that time, Itshe *Kämpfer* and my aunt Breindl, but not their daughter Ghitta, were able to return to Poland as “conquering heroes” at the “request” of the Polish Communist Party.

Chapter 2



Our Family Life in Sławatycze

Our life in Sławatycze revolved around my maternal grandparents. My paternal grandfather, Abram-Yitzchok [Icke Hitelman] Gitelman whose wife died at the time of World War I, had married a widow and lived with his second family and their five children in a *shtetl* called Malorita, across the Bug River in Belorussia. They were not part of my early childhood.

We lived near my mother's parents and sometimes we lived with them in their house. When my father was away working in Warsaw, or working in the countryside, my mother moved us over to her parents; Jankiel-Mejer Repkowski and his wife, Sura-Toba [Światłość]. My great-grandmother, *die Elter-Bubbe* Chana-Pesia [Bluszejn], the widow of Szepsel Repkowski, lived with her son Jankiel-Mejer and his family. In that house we were four generations under one roof. My *Elter-Bubbe* would take me into her bed and we cuddled under her large *perinne* [a feather bed or duvet] made with fluffy goose down. She would tell me Bible stories in which her son Abraham was always the hero of the story. My grandfather's brother, Abraham Ribkovsky, made *alliah* to Palestine in the mid 1920s. In Palestine he practiced the family trade of carting sand and gravel on road and railway construction sites. Great-grandmother had a picture of her son in Palestine standing in front of his wagon that was drawn by an ass instead of a horse.

My maternal grandfather [*Zeyde*] Jankiel-Mejer Repkowski was a religious, observant Jew and belonged to a *shtybl* [a small prayer and study house]. Certain tradesmen, such as the *szusters*, the *sznaiders*, the *ba'al agules* [cobblers, tailors, draymen], each had their own *Sztybl*. When my father was at home, he went to the main synagogue on *Szabbes* and for the *Yom Toyvim*. [Hebrew: Yamim Tovim = Jewish holidays]

There was not much work for my father, or for anyone else, in Sławatycze, so my father, his brother Akiwa [Kiwa], his sisters, my mother's brothers and many other young people left Sławatycze to find work in the larger cities, especially in the capital city of Warsaw. My father used to tell us that people from the provinces were not allowed to live in Warsaw without residence permits, but many did live and work there illegally. They would rent a room from a *Warszawer* family and worked, ate and slept in the same room on a pile of furs as their bed. My father often related that lodging space in Warsaw was so scarce that some people from the provinces rented a kitchen table as a place to sleep. The table was available to them only after evening tea was finished to until just before breakfast. I am not certain if he told it as an apocryphal story or if he personally knew such poor wretches.

During the fur season, that is, during winter months, when my father went off to Warsaw to work in the fur trade with his brother and sisters, my mother and we kids would move across the street to live with her parents and her grandmother.

During the summer months, *fun nuch Peisach biz far di Yom Toiwim* [from after Passover until before the High Holidays] my father returned home from Warsaw and we moved back to our rented house. During the summer months my father worked in the surrounding villages as a “*cieśla*” and “*plotnik*”, [construction carpenter] together with his brother Akiwa, or with his close friends, the three Epelbaum brothers; Mordche, Lejzer and Hershel, who were my mothers second cousins. They put up barns and log houses for the farmers who were too busy during the summer eking out a meagre hand-to-mouth existence on their small farm plots. The farmers lived close to the annual harvest both for food and for next year’s seed. Father and his co-workers slept in the haylofts and sometimes they ate non-kosher food.

The Epelbaum/Applebaum brothers, their mother, their two orphaned nieces and their sister Chaja Bakalinsky and her family emigrated in the late 1920s to Winnipeg, Manitoba.

I shall always remember the baking of bread and *challeh* in my *Bubbe*’s house. On Thursday afternoons, that is, after the weekly wash was done that morning, my mother, my grandmother and my great-grandmother started to prepare big basins of dough for the dark rye bread and white egg *challeh*. These big basins with the various kinds of dough were put underneath the *pierzyna*, [*perrinne* in Yiddish, a featherbed or duvet] at the foot of my bed and the dough was left there overnight to “rise”.

Early on Friday mornings the women stoked up the wood oven, kneaded the dough some more, shaped the dough into loaves of rye bread, white rolls and egg *challeh*. I will never forget the ecstasy of waking up Friday mornings to the smell of fresh baked *challeh* and of fresh rye bread. To this very day I find the aroma of fresh *challeh* overpowering and it always evokes in me the pleasant and comforting smells of my childhood, invariably making me hungry.

Before baking the bread or *challeh* a tiny piece of dough was taken from each batch, the prayer for observing the rule of “Separation of the First Portion of Dough” was said and then it was tossed onto the fire. The various breads were then placed into the hot oven. White *challeh* was for consumption on *Szabbes* [shabbes, Sabbath] or on *Yom Tow* only; the dark rye bread was for the rest of the week. Since the old bread had to be eaten first and bread was baked only once a week, the new batch was already stale by the time we would get to eat it.

When the baking of the bread and *challeh* was finished, the women put the *tchullent* into the oven to be ready for the next day, for *Shabbes* dinner. [It is thought that the word *tchullent* comes from the French “*chaud et lent*” [hot and slow] and is basically a slow cooked stew of lima beans, barley, potatoes, marrowbones and *kishka* [stuffed derma]. Cocks of whole milk were put into the oven. Of course, the milk was placed on the opposite side of the oven, away from the *fleishige* [meat, not dairy] *tchullent* so as not to ritually “contaminate” one another. This hot milk was eaten with chunks of *challeh* for breakfast on Saturday mornings. A thick film of brown cream formed on top of the milk and we kids loved the burned taste of this creamy, custard like delicacy.

To maximise the overnight thermal efficiency of the oven, the gaps around the oven door were sealed with strips of old newspaper that were glued with a paste made from scraps of dough thinned with hot water.

It was very hard and intense work for the women; peeling, chopping, grating, carrying-in of the water from the well or from the water barrel, the splitting of the wood, carrying the wood into the kitchen, stoking the fires in the stove and in the bake oven.... the *lockshen kugel* [noodle pudding], the potato *kugel*, the carrot *tsimes*, the gefilte fish, the *tchullent* ... and then the women would rush off to the *mikvah* for their regular Friday afternoon immersion and cleansing in the ritual bath.

By now it was already late Friday afternoon. The *shammes*, like a town crier, went from house to house and knocked on the shutters with a small hammer to announce the approach of *Shabbes* and that it soon time to light the *Shabbes licht* [Sabbath candles].

The women rushed to get dressed in their *Shabbes* finery, light the *Shabbes licht* and greet the men-folk returning home from the synagogue, serve the family the traditional Friday night *Shabbes* meal and then again serve a large *Shabbes* meal at midday after the menfolk returned from *Shull* [Synagogue] on Saturday.

On *Shabbes* nights [the Sabbath starts at sundown on Friday] and on *Shabbes* day my brother and I went with our *Zeyde* to the main synagogue. I remember snuggling up to my *Zeyde* under his large *tallith* [prayer shawl] to receive his benediction.

I will always remember the warmth and glow on everyone's faces when *Zeyde* led in the singing of *Z'miroth*, the traditional Sabbath songs. Whenever I hear *Lecha Dodi*, the beautiful Song of Songs that is traditionally sung on Friday nights, I am overcome with emotion and I get teary.

During *Shabbes* the men went off to the main synagogue for prayers. The women stayed behind and read from the *Teitch-Chumash*, the *Chumash* [Bible] translated into Yiddish. Women did not go to *Cheder* [Hebrew school] and were not generally taught to read Hebrew. Mothers often taught their young daughters at home how to read Yiddish and the prayers.

When her family lived in Berditchev during the First World War, my mother attended a few grades at a Yiddish/Russian school run by the *Bund*. Aside from being fluent in Yiddish, she could read some Russian and also Polish. [In her later life, in Montreal, my mother taught herself to read Basic English by studying the illustrated advertising brochures distributed to the homes by the chain stores.] Mother was also a prodigious letter writer in Yiddish and her handwriting was in beautiful cursive Hebrew letters that were interlinked. Many people asked my mother to write their letters for them, especially those written to relatives in *Amerikeh* asking for favours.

In the winter our staple diet was bread, potatoes, turnips, sour pickles, sauerkraut, more potatoes, chicken or goose *schmaltz* [rendered fat], and potatoes again. Lest I forget to mention here, there were prodigious quantities of salted and pickled herring consumed summer and winter. During the growing season we ate red and black radishes, green onions, young cucumbers, small new potatoes, apples, pears, cherries, string beans, peas, rhubarb, borscht made from red beets and *shtchav* [a cold soup made of sour tasting sorrel leaves]. When we ate apples, before swallowing the first bite, we always checked the part of the apple in our hand for the other half of the wiggly worm. If yes, we would then spit out the part of the apple in our mouth, remove the bitten off part of the worm and then continue to enjoy our "organic" apple. In the summer our family went out to the fields and to the nearby forest to pick sorrel leaves, wild blueberries, a kind of sour tasting bright red berry called *vaimpelech* and also wild mushrooms. The aromatic wild mushrooms were strung with loops of cord and hung outside to dry for later use in the delicious, thick, bean and barley soups. Jam was made from the wild berries. Jews seldom ate tomatoes, I guess because it reminded them of blood, which is forbidden food to Jews. Lettuce and such other green stuff was for city folk to eat. In the winter months the only green vegetables we had to eat were sour pickles. We were fortunate as my grandparents kept a cow, so we had milk, sweet and sour cream, sour-milk [a form of yogurt] and butter year round. Once, I actually saw a sickly child in Slawatycze being fed an overripe banana that was spooned out of the practically black banana skin.

One of the unique delicacies I remember eating was baked herring. A whole herring was wrapped in newspaper and put over the hot coals in the stove. The paper caught fire, the melting fat of the herring saturated the paper and turned it into a parchment-like cocoon in which the herring was baked to perfection.

Most people in the *shtetl* led a hand-to-mouth existence. Spring was the cruellest time of all. The food that they may have laid-in in their cellars during the autumn, such as potatoes, cabbages, sour pickles and turnips, was getting scarce or was rotten by now and nothing had as yet come out

of the fields or the backyard gardens. The next potato crop would not be harvested until the middle of August. Whatever spare food he had, my *Zeyde* sent over to our poor relatives.

Our life in Sławatycze was defined by the *Yom Toivim*. [*Yomim Tovim*, the Jewish Holidays]

Purim was a fun holiday, celebrated in February or March as a festival and carnival.

Purim commemorates the rescue of the Jews of Persia from Haman's plot to exterminate them. The beautiful Queen Esther, who was Jewish, and her uncle Mordechai miraculously saved their co-religionists and the wicked Haman and his sons were hanged from the gallows that Haman had erected to dispatch Mordechai and the other Jews.

One of the customs of *Purim* is the exchanging of gifts of food, referred to as *Shallach Ha'Manot*, with relatives and friends. The gifts are usually *Haman Tashen* [Haman's pockets] the three-cornered sweet pastry filled with prunes or poppy seeds. My brother and I were dispatched to deliver our family's gifts that were wrapped in linen napkins or in small straw baskets. The recipients of these gifts rewarded us with candies or some *groszen* [Polish pennies].

On the eve and on the day of *Purim*, the *Megillah*, [the scroll of The Book Esther] is read in the synagogues. During the reading whenever the name of Haman was uttered, the people would boo and the children would spin ratchety noisemakers called *gregars*.

There was always a *Purim* masquerade and a *Purim shpiel* [allegorical play] put on by the Jewish amateur theatre group. During the *Purim* carnival adults and children dressed up in colourful costumes representing characters from the story of *Purim* such as Esther, Mordechai, King Ahasuerus, and of course Haman with his three-cornered pockets. The Jewish members of the volunteer fire brigade actively participated in this festival and marched down the main street in colourful costumes. My father and many of his friends dressed up to represent various biblical and also contemporary characters.

I remember my father's *Purim* outfit. He was invariably dressed as a cavalryman and rode on a rather unique horse. Father's "horse" was made of woven wicker straw, very much like a hollow basket, but in the shape of a horse. On the topside of this "horse" there was an open cockpit through which the "rider" stepped into the body of the "horse". The rider's own legs, covered in furry chaps, protruded from holes in the "belly" thereby forming the horse's hind legs. The horse's tail, the mane and the two small front legs that were attached to the body of the pretend horse were parts taken from real horses. Father wore a four-cornered Polish Cavalry cap and a long cape that draped over the horse's flanks. Father "wore" his "horse" by means of wide suspenders slung across his shoulders. With one hand father held the reins and with the other hand he waved a play sword over his head, all the while urging on his frisky horse into battle with realistic Polish Cavalry war yells alternated with horsy neighs and snorts.

Purim is the only time when an observant Jew can get drunk without any recriminations from his peers or his Rabbi. As a matter of fact, *Hasidim* consider it an obligation to drink on *Purim* "until one cannot tell Mordecai from Haman". So my father and his buddies happily indulged in this old *Purim* custom and they all got high on *schnapps*.

Peisach [Passover] followed *Purim*. *Peisach*, which is celebrated for eight days, was always the happiest time for us kids. It was spring, the end of the fur season, and my father would come home from Warsaw to be with the family *oif Peisach*. He always brought us new toys, chocolates, and new clothes from the big city. Generally, I wore my older brother's hand-me-downs and any new clothes that may have been bought for me were invariably a couple of sizes too big, so as "to grow into them." Father would stay home over the summer months and return to Warsaw only in the fall, after *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, in time for the new fur season.

We always spent the *Seders* at my grandparents' table. [A *Seder* commemorating the exodus from Egypt is a combination of a banquet with symbolic foods and religious services.] My mother's brothers generally returned home for Passover. I remember standing by the side of my *Zeyde's* large, throne-like chair and asking the *fir kashes*, the traditional 'Four Questions'. The day before, I accompanied my *Zeyde* on his rounds searching for *chumetz* in the house. [*Chumetz* is food that is not fit for consumption on the Passover.] Earlier, my *Bubbe* had planted throughout the house a certain number of morsels of *chumetz*, [bread] that my *Zeyde* was now seeking to 'find'. Holding a lit candle in one hand and a whiskbroom made of a goose wing in the other hand, he thoroughly searched the house. I helped my *Zeyde* on his search by holding the large wooden spoon into which he swept up the planted morsels of *chumetz*. The following day the wooden spoon with the *chumetz* was wrapped in a rag and tossed onto a pyre in our back yard and we recited the appropriate prayers for performing this *mitzvah*.

Not only must Jews not eat *chumetz* during the eight days of Passover, neither must they have in their possession during these eight days any foodstuff that is fermented, such as bread and beer, or that may ferment in storage, such as beans and rye. Foods that are forbidden on the Passover but too valuable to be burned on the ceremonial pyre, was ceremoniously 'sold' to a non-Jew. My *Zeyde* sold his *chumetz* to his *Goy* [Gentile]. I remember seeing the two of them ardently 'bargaining' over the price and then shake hands when they 'reached a mutually agreed-upon sum' at which time the Christian was now the official owner of all the *chumetz*, real and imaginary, in my *Zeyde's* possession. After Passover, my *Zeyde* 'bought back' his *chumetz* from his *Goy* and gave him a gift for his wife and his children.

Tisha B'Av [the ninth day of the month of Av] is celebrated in the middle of the summer. It is a solemn holiday commemorating the siege and the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 b.c.e. and also the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 c.e. [The expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 and from Spain in 1492 and many other calamities that befell the Jewish People is said to have occurred on *Tisha B'Av*.] *Tisha B'Av* follows nine days of mourning during which we ate no meat, only dairy, and we wore old clothes and my *Zeyde* sat on a low mourner's wooden box and not on a regular chair.

As solemn as this holiday may have been, boys found merriment by throwing thorny thistles, called *bern* [burs], at the girls or onto the beards of older men on their way to the synagogue for prayers. The thorns were difficult to remove from the hair and at times whole locks of hair had to be cut off.

Rosh Hashanah and ***Yom Kippur*** are the most solemn holidays on the Jewish calendar. This is the only time I remember my mother, my grandmother and my great-grandmother going to *shul*.

On the eve of *Yom Kippur*, the 'Day of Atonement', young people came to their parents' house to *beiten mechilla* [to ask for forgiveness] for real or imagined transgressions that they may have committed against their parents or their elders during the past year. Friends who had quarrelled reconciled so as not to carry their *broigez* [quarrel] into the New-Year. All outstanding loans were repaid before each *Yom Kippur*.

A more extreme and bizarre form of repentance was carried out when a repentant prostrated himself at the entrance to the *shul* [synagogue] and people stepped on him 'in punishment' as they entered the *shul* for the *Kol Nidre* prayers.

Sukkot, also known as the Festival of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths, is a thanksgiving holiday that comes less than a week after *Yom Kippur*. During the entire week of *Sukkot* we ate our meals in my *Zeyde's sukkah* [a primitive, temporary structure or booth roofed with branches].

My *Zeyde's sukkah* was constructed in an enclosed porch at the back of his house. A roof-hatch was opened with rope and pulleys so as 'to let in the stars'. Wooden slats and *s'chach*

[greenery] was placed over the skylight opening making it into a proper *sukkah*.

Simchat Torah, the festival celebrating the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai comes right after *Sukkot*. At the synagogue adults carried Torah scrolls in a procession around the central *Bimah* [stage] while children carried their home made Torah flags that had an apple stuck on top of the flagstick and a lit candle was stuck in a hole on top of the apple. My brother Szepsel and I carried fancily decorated *Simchat Torah* flags that our father had brought back for us from Warsaw. I remember my *Zeyde* letting me help him carry the real Torah around the *Bimah*.

Chanukah, the eight-day festival of lights that usually falls in December, commemorates the victory in 167 b.c.e. of the Maccabees over King Antiochus, the Seleucid ruler of Syria and of Israel, and the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Chanukah, a happy holiday, is observed with games and gifts to the children. It is customary for parents and grandparents to give the children Chanukah *gelt*, small gifts of cash in the form of new shiny coins. For eight days we lit the Chanukah candles and played spin-the-*dreydl* [a four sided spindle-top] and gambled for pennies or for buttons. We ate delicious, potato *latkes* [potato pancakes fried in oil] and *hillnikhes* [the same as potato pancakes, but thicker and the size of the entire frying pan] that were permeated with oil. The eating of oily foods on Chanukah is in commemoration of the one-day's supply of holy oil that was found in the cleansed Temple and which burned for eight days.

Before *die Yomim Noruim*, that is, before *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, my grandparents started fattening geese for *Chanukah* by force-feeding them *kliskelach*, dumplings made from a thick, coarse gruel of a mixture of hand-milled rye, potato peels and other available food scraps. This thick porridge was shaped into thin, cigar shaped dumplings by rolling spoonfuls of it between wetted palms. I liked to help shape the *kliskelech* and to force-feed the geese. The geese were held between our legs, their beaks were pried open wide and a dumpling was put into their mouths. Their beaks were then held shut so that the geese were forced to swallow the *kliskele*. If the geese were sated and would not swallow, the outside of their long necks was massaged to guide the dumpling down their throats, thus forcing them to swallow.

The soft, fluffy down was plucked from the underbelly of the live geese. The down re-grew within a month or two and it was plucked for a second time after the geese were slaughtered.

The geese soon got so fat that they could hardly walk. The *shohet* [ritual slaughterer] came to my grandfather's yard and slaughtered the geese. The goose fat was removed and rendered with onions into delicious *genzene schmaltz* and *grivennes* [rendered goose fat and cracklings]. Large crocks of this much prized goose schmaltz and also chicken schmaltz were kept in the cellar for year-round use. A piece of rye bread *schmiered* with rendered *schmaltz* was a snack that was handed to us kids and we were then sent outside to play. The enlarged livers from these forcefed geese made delicious chopped liver.

Sixty years after eating my *Bubbe's* *genzene grivennes* with shredded black radish, it is still a vivid taste memory of mine.

I have very warm memories of my great-grandmother, *die elter Bubbe Chana*. All winter long she sat in front of the *kallach oyven* [a large oven covered with ceramic tiles to better radiate the heat] with large zinc basins filled with goose feathers placed before her. She plucked the soft fluffy down from the base of the feathers which she placed in a large basin and discarded the tough pen into a smaller pan. The goose down was used to stuff pillows, and of course, to stuff those large, comfortable *pierzyny* or *perrinnes* [feather beds, duvets]. *Die elter Bubbe Chana* must have been close to ninety years old then and she did not need to wear any glasses.

My mother and her mother sewed their own clothes and the shirts for the entire family, including shirts for my uncles. These shirts were pulled over the head and buttoned with two buttons at the neck. There was a “Singer” sewing machine in the house [operated by a foot pedal, of course], bolts of linen and tins full of ivory or bone buttons. The mattresses on our beds consisted of flour or sugar bags stuffed with straw, never with down. The straw was usually changed once a year *oif Peisach*, more often for the beds in which *pishers*, bed wetters like me, slept in.

My mother’s mother, Sura-Toba, suffered from frequent headaches. My older brother and I were often sent to a nearby creek to gather *piafkes* [leeches]. My *Bubbe* put a *piafke* on each of her temples and, after having gorged themselves full of her blood, the leeches dropped off her temples under their own bloated weight. It was a form of ‘blood-letting’. It commonly used as a relief for headaches and to counter the effects of high blood pressure.

During the winter months we kids often suffered from loss of appetite and anaemia caused by tapeworms. To drive out the tapeworm from our guts my mother fed us cubes of sugar soaked in awful tasting turpentine. I remember sitting on a *nacht top* [chamber pot] and feeling the long flat tape-like worm come out of my *tush*. The worm must have been getting out of me to escape that foul smelling turpentine. We were not allowed to touch the worm as it was coming out of us lest we tear it. Should the tapeworm’s head be left inside, it would re-grow its body inside our gut and we would have to start all over again with the unpleasant remedy.

A sure cure for a sore throat or a hacking cough was to drink a *gogel-mogel*, a thick, overly sweet concoction of raw egg yolks, sugar, honey and hot milk.

The cure for a cold or an achy back was *bankes* [cupping]. This consisted of six or eight small ‘cupping’ glasses in the shape of tiny chamber pots that were applied to the achy back. Before applying the *bankes*, the back was first lightly greased with chicken schmaltz. A twig with a bit of cotton wrapped on one end was dipped in vodka and lit. For a brief second or two the flame was put inside of the cupping glass which was held upside down in the other hand. The *banke* was then quickly applied to the patient’s back and its beneficial effects became evident immediately. The skin of the back puckered up into the vacuum of the *banke* and formed a round, purple hickey. After ten or fifteen minutes the *bankes* were removed and the patient felt infinitely better. *Bankes* was a common remedy that my mother often applied on us kids.

A few years ago I applied ‘bankes’ to cure a friend’s achy back. Not having real ‘bankes’, I improvised by using whiskey shot-glasses for the task. After I removed the bankes, my patient and I both drank a ‘le chaim’ to our health with Polish Vodka and he declared himself miraculously cured.

Jewish weddings in Sławatycze, which were generally held outdoors under the *chuppah* [the wedding canopy], were a community affair; everyone could attend the wedding ceremony. Cake and wine and also herring was provided for the town ‘guests’. There were beggars and *shnorrers* [bums and freeloaders] galore, from our own town and also from the surrounding area. How they knew about the upcoming weddings is a mystery, as the *shtetl* weddings were not announced in the social columns; there weren’t any social columns.

The bride’s parents sent out the *Shammes* [the synagogue beadle and caretaker] to invite *die khusheve gest* [the worthy guests] to attend the wedding feast that was generally held inside the house. In the last few years, before the outbreak of the war, some *moderneh* people in Sławatycze

had the *Shammes* deliver to the worthy guests fancy wedding invitations that were printed in the big city, generally Warsaw.

I remember witnessing one or two weddings and seeing a horse drawn wagon full of *klezmer* coming into town all the while playing popular wedding tunes in order to announce their arrival. The whole town ran out into the street to hear them.

A *badchan*, sometimes part of the *klezmer* group, was engaged to enliven the festivity and entertain the wedding guests. The *badchan* must have been the progenitor of our modern day stand-up comics. With funny verse and in comic singsong he would lampoon everybody and heap ‘praise’ on the bride and the *machuteynim*, [in-laws], recite their many ‘attributes’ and bemoan the bride’s upcoming loss of her youth and her innocence, that is, her virginity. He also listed the wedding gifts, lampooning the donors, stopping just short of insult.

Shortly after my father’s completion of his two-year conscription service in the Polish Cavalry, my parents were married in Sławatycze on Feb 17, 1927. [Actually, my father served two and half years in total. Six months in the artillery and then two more years when he decided to switch to the cavalry.] In accordance with my parents’ *T’naim*, their prenuptial contract which my mother preserved, the bride’s father undertook to provide one year’s *kest*, that is, one year free room and board for the newlyweds. The bride’s father also promised a dowry for the groom of 250 *Dollars* [US Dollars]. I have a photograph of my father’s brother Kiwa in Polish Army uniform sitting with a group of his friends around a covered table. A sign placed on the table reads “17/II/1927”. By the snow on my uncle’s military boots it is evident that the picture was taken outdoors for proper lighting purposes.

When people left to go to America or to other remote parts of the world, like when my uncle Awrejml [Abe Reback] left for Canada in December of 1938 to join his sister Dobe [Dora], the people had themselves photographed together with their friends. The photographer came from the next town of Włodawa to Sławatycze especially for such assignments.

Friends presented their pictures to each other and inscribed on the back of the photographs with flowery messages in Yiddish or in Polish, such as;

*I bestow this picture of myself to
my dear friend
Awrejml as a memento of our
eternal friendship.
From your friend forever, Chana.
Sławatycze, September 1938*

I have copies of many photographs from my aunt Dora’s and my uncle Abe’s albums, which have such fascinating inscriptions on the back of the postcard size photos.

From the old pictures one can see that both my grandmother and my great-grandmother wore a *shaytel*, the traditional wig that is worn by married, orthodox women. Young married women like my mother and her contemporaries wore no wigs, they wore their hair long or in the then fashionable “page-boy” style. The young men posed with bare heads, wore shirts and ties and had no *payes* [side curls] or beards.

Chapter 3



Gitelman, a.k.a. Hitelman

I was named ‘Chajm-Leyb’ after my father’s grandfather, Chajm-Leyb Hitelman. My father was named “Dawid-Zwi”. On my birth certificate my father is listed as ‘Hersz-Dawid Gitelman’ and my mother as Chaja-Blima Gitelman, *rodowe* [née] Repkowska. My father was always called “Hershel” in Yiddish and ‘Herszko’ by non-Jews. [The name Zwi or Zvi means “deer” or “stag” in Hebrew which is a “Hirsch” or “Hersz” in Yiddish. Herszel is the diminutive of Hersz. My father’s father was Abraham-Yitzchok, commonly called “Icke” [Yitzke]. We were all born in “Ślawatycze nad Bugiem” [Ślawatycze on the Bug River].

In some documents, such as in my parents T’naim [the pre-nuptial contract] and Ketubbah [marriage contract] my great-grandfather, Chajm-Leyb, is referred to as “Chajm-Yehuda”. “Leyb” means “lion” in Yiddish and a lion is the symbol of the Biblical tribe of Judah or Yehuda.

My older brother Szepsel [Szab’btaj] was named after my mother’s paternal grandfather and my younger brother Mojsze was named after my mother’s maternal grandfather.

My father, his parents, his grandparents and his full siblings were all born in Ślawatycze. My father was born in 1902, his brother Akiwa [Kiwa/Kiva] was born in 1904, sisters Breindl and Chana-Marjam were born in 1910 and 1914 respectively.

With his second wife, the widow Szeindl Gutmacher, my paternal Zeyde Awrum-Yitzchok and their five children lived in Malorita, about 40 kilometres east of the Bug River in what is now independent Belarus, formerly part of the Soviet Union. Between the two world wars Malorita was part of Poland. The second family, all born in Malorita, consisted of the widow’s daughter Chana-Zelda and their four common children; the eldest daughter Yachad, [Jawdiga/Jadzia in Polish] was born in 1920, Chaja was born in 1922 and twin sons, Chajm-Leyb and Szulem-Wolf, were born in 1924.

I never visited Malorita neither do I remember ever seeing my paternal grandfather or my twin uncles or their sisters, they were not part of my childhood. I have a photograph that was taken in Malorita in the summer of 1938 during my father and my older brother’s visit to Malorita. The photo shows my father and my older brother together with my Zeyde Abraham-Yitzchok, his second wife and their children. That same year my uncle Kiwa married his long time girlfriend, Pesha Ratnowska from Pinsk, and they lived there during the off-season.

In my father’s family all were *kirzhners* [furriers]. The making of *kutchmas* [fur hats], fur coats and *blamen* was the primary family trade. [*Blamen* are rectangular platens of fur that are made by tediously sewing together small scraps of fur or ‘trimmings’ left over in the manufacture of fur coats. *Blamen* were used as linings for winter cloth coats or used as blankets.] Before World War I, my Zeyde Abraham-Yitzchok and his brother Aaron had special permission from the Tsarist authorities to travel to trade fairs beyond the restricted “Pale of Settlement” to sell their manufactured furs.

In the off-season, that is, during the summer months, my father and his brother Kiwa worked as *cieślars* [s], construction carpenters [*plotnick* in Russian, *Zimmermann* in Yiddish or German].

The name “Gitelman” was originally “Hitelman”, derived from the word “*hittel*”, Yiddish for “hat”. The Hitelmans also made fur-hats, such as *kutchmas*, the high fur hats worn with the fur side out. The word *kutchma* is Belorussian / Ukrainian, like the name of the recent president of the Belarus Republic, Leonid Kutchma.

In the summer of 1960, when I was returning home by train from a business trip to Quebec City, I encountered the Rev. Dr. Clifford Knowles, the Presbyterian Chaplain of my Alma Mater, McGill University. Rev. Knowles was an amateur anthropologist whose hobby was the study of the origin and meaning of family surnames. When I introduced myself to him, he immediately asked me if I knew the origin of my family name “Gitelman”. When I answered in the negative he questioned me as to where my grandparents came from, what was the family trade, etc. He then told me that my original name must have been “Hitelman”, based on the area in Poland we came from and on our family trade of fur-working and the making of fur hats.

*I have found that many, older generation and unrelated “Gitelmans” were furriers by trade. There are Gitelmans in Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and in Winnipeg who are also furriers but, as far as I know, are not directly related to our family. The University of Michigan political scientist and author, Zvi Y. Gitelman, recently informed me that his father and grandfather, who come from Pinsk, were *kirzhners* [furriers] and that his great-grandfather Matityahu Hitelman, was known as “*Mates der Kirzhner*”. Zvi and I could not trace a definite link between our families even though many members of both our paternal families carry the same first names.*

After the failed 1863 Polish uprising against Russian domination, the Russians decreed that henceforth all official records in the part of Poland under their domination were to be kept in Russian. Since the Cyrillic alphabet, used by the Russians, has no aspirating “H”, “Hitelman” was therefore rendered as “Gitelman”, with a “G”, but pronounced “Hitelman”. The name of the Russian astronaut, or the Calgary Flames hockey player, German Titov, whose first name would be pronounced as Herman in Belarus, the Ukraine and in Eastern Russia.

*In 1919, after Poland became independent, the Latin alphabet was reinstated and our name was then transliterated from the Cyrillic into Latin letters as “Gitelman”, but still pronounced as “Hitelman” in Eastern Poland. I have a family photograph taken in 1927 that my mother had sent to her uncles in Canada on the back of which she signed her new family name in Yiddish with a ‘**H**ay’ as **H**itelman. On the back of some other photographs from the same era she wrote the family name with a ‘**G**immel’ as **G**itelman.*

Through the Montreal branch of the L.D.S. [Mormon] Family Research Centre I recently found a microfilm of the original birth record of 1848 of my great-grandfather Chajm-Leyb Hitelman. It was written in Polish with a cursive Latin script in the narrative form as prescribed by the Napoleonic Code.

The following is a translation of the old Polish document that appears on the preceding page which records my great-grandfather **Chajm-Leyb Hitelman**'s birth on the 28th of December 1848 / 20th of January 1849. The dates given are in accordance with both the old Julian Calendar, the official calendar of Russia at that time and still used by the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches, and also the Gregorian Calendar, which was already followed by most Catholic and Protestant countries.

Act 2

*It happened in the town of Slawatycze on the Twenty Eight day of December in the year One Thousand Eight Hundred forty Eight / Twentieth of January in the year One Thousand Eight Hundred Forty Nine at the hour of two in the afternoon presented himself the Starozakonny Herszko Hitelman twenty four years of age living here in Slawatycze who in the presence of the witnesses Herszko Feldman seventy three years of age and Abram Ruzy, Szkulnik, thirty nine years of age living here in Slawatycze showed us a child of the male sex born in Slawatycze on the Twenty Second day of December of last year / the Third day of January of the current year in the hour of two in the morning of his spouse **CHANA** twenty five years of age whom were given the names **CHAJM - LEYB**.*

This document was read to the petitioner and to the witnesses and to which the father and the witnesses together did affix their signatures.

Father Herszko Hitelman

Witness Herszko Feldman

Witness Abram Ruza

The Keeper of the Civil Status Records [Signature in Latin letters]

“Starozakonny”, which translates as “Old Believer”, was the formal and the legal way of referring to someone as “the Jew”. My great-great-grandfather Herszko [Herszel /Zvi] Hitelman signed his son’s birth certificate with a flourish of three linked circles O-O-O [three kike’ls].

According to the author Leo Rosten, in his book “The Joys of Yiddish”, the American derogatory word “Kike” when referring to a Jew, was coined in New York in the 1880s by the assimilated German Jews in order to differentiate themselves [“Our Crowd”] from their brethren, the “Ost-Jüden” [the Jews from Eastern Europe], illiterate Jewish immigrants from the Russian Pale who were coming through Ellis Island and who signed their names with O-O-O, three “kikels”, the German-Yiddish word for “circles”, whereas an illiterate Christian would sign with three crosses; + + +

Chapter 4



My Grandfather Jankiel-Meir Repkowski

My maternal grandfather, Jankiel-Meir ben Szab'taj Ha'Kohen, was a tall man with a black beard, an observant Jew and a *Kohen* [a Jewish priest of yore]. Some documented variations of the family name are Repkowski, Rypkowski, Ribkowsky, Rybkowski and also Rapkowski and Reback in Canada. On my birth certificate my mother's maiden name is listed as Chaja-Blima Rybkowska. My mother, the eldest of her siblings, was born in 1903 in the small village of Hanna, about eight kilometres south of Sławatycze. Her only sister, Dora [Dobe-Riwka] was born in 1905 and her five brothers; Szaja-Lejb was born in 1906, Awrejml [Abram-Wolf, Abe Reback] b.1908, Nute-Hersz [Nathan Rapkowski] b.1911, Riwen [Rubin Rapkowski] b.1914 and Mojsze [Morris Reback] b.1918.

During the First World War the retreating Cossacks burned most of Sławatycze, including my grandfather's house, and the old synagogue that dated from the 1600s, and drove the Jews out of the *Shtetl*. My grandfather and his family went to stay with relatives in Berditchev, a predominantly Jewish city near Kiev, in the Ukraine. After spending close to three years in Berditchev they returned home to Sławatycze in 1918 or 1919.

It is incomprehensible how a large family with seven young children and babies were able to traverse 500 km under adverse war time conditions to reach Berditchev and then, three or four years later, safely return home to Sławatycze. This 1,000-km. trek was accomplished at a time when utter chaos reigned. The First World War was still raging and the "Eastern Front" was fought in that area. The Russian Revolution was in full swing. The Tsarist regime in Russia collapsed in 1917, the Bolsheviks took Kiev in February 1918, the Germans retook Kiev from the Bolsheviks two weeks later, and Pogroms against Jews were carried out by the Ukrainian nationalist military and also by the Bolshevik armies.

In his book, "Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics", the political scientist and author, Zvi Y. Gitelman, states that "...in the years 1917-1921 more than 2,000 pogroms took place, and half a million Jews were left homeless as a result of the burning of twenty eight percent of Jewish homes and the abandonment of others. The direct loss of Jewish life easily exceeded 30,000, and together with those who died from wounds or as a result of illnesses contracted during pogroms, the number of Jewish dead probably reached 150,000, or ten per cent of the Jewish population [of the Ukraine]."

The Armistice that officially ended the First World War did not end hostilities in Poland or in Russia. Poland declared its independence on November 11, 1918, the Bolsheviks, having crushed all counter-revolutionary forces inside Russia, turned their attention on Poland. By early August 1920 the Red Army, led by Leon Trotsky, was at the gates of Warsaw. On August 15th the Polish Army under Marshal Józef Piłsudski and generals Haller and Sikorski fought the "Battle of Warsaw" which is known in Poland as the "Miracle on the Wisła". There, the Polish forces routed the Red Army and pushed them back to a line some 300km east of the Bug River. It was not until March 1921 that Poland's borders with Russia were finalised by a peace treaty.

My *Zeyde* [grandfather] Jankiel-Meier made his living as a *ba'al aguleh*, a carter of sand and gravel on road and railroad construction and also by farming. He hired young *chlopes*, [peasants] to work with pick and shovel carting sand and gravel on far away road construction sites. They drove out of Sławatycze in three or four large covered wagons with high sideboards pulled by a span of two big, strong horses. The men slept in tents and were paid a daily stipend plus food. My grandfather was paid by the wagonload of sand or gravel that his crew carted on the construction site. If it rained, the work slowed down or it had to be stopped for days on end. The men still had to be fed and be paid their daily stipend, so, for my grandfather "it was not such a good season as it was the year before".

Zeyde also had an important government contract to carry once a week the post office strong box from the train station in Dubice, which was on the other side of the Bug River, back to Sławatycze. The strong box contained the weekly mail and also money for the postman's, the policemen's and the teachers' payroll or other cash transfers that relatives sent from *Amerikeh* to their poor kin in Sławatycze.

A condition of this lucrative contract was that, when carrying the official government strongbox, my grandfather had to wear the revolver that was issued to him under the contract. Being an observant Jew and generally a very peaceful man, my *Zeyde* did not feel comfortable wearing a revolver and he often left it behind in the house.

One day, when he drove off the ferry from Dubice, two men who had been waiting in ambush in the nearby bushes, confronted him. They came at him wielding long staves as weapons. Shied by the two would-be *holdupnicks*, the horse reared its forelegs high in the air and the two highwaymen jumped out of the way of the threatening beast. *Zeyde* whipped his frisky horse and galloped off in his light wagon and swift horse with the strongbox still in place, but not before my *Zeyde* was hit by one of the long staves that broke his forearm.

At the threat of losing this lucrative contract, *Zeyde* had to wear the revolver whenever he carried the strongbox. For a while, after this incident, his youngest son Mojsze, who was about eighteen or nineteen at the time, "rode shot gun" for his father on these special weekly assignments.

I remember watching my *Bubbe* helping my *Zeyde* put on his long *peltz* [sheepskin greatcoat] in the winter for the trip to Dubice to fetch the strongbox. On his head he wore a *kutchma*, a high fur hat that was made for him by my father. My grandfather then strapped on a wide leather belt that was supported by two leather straps that were crossed over his chest and his back, "Sam Brown" style. On this wide belt hung a leather holster in which there was a very large revolver. My *Bubbe* shooed me away as she did not want her grandson to think of his *Zeyde* as a man of war.

My maternal grandmother's family, whose name was Światłość, owned land in the hamlet of Kuzawka, about five kilometres south of Sławatycze near the village of Hanna. As a matter of fact, on her Polish passport my mother's birthplace is listed as Hanna and her cousins, the Paluch and Światłość families lived there. [Światłość, pronounced "*Shviat'lwoshtch*" means "enlightenment" or "luminescence" in Polish]. On the land my grandfather grew potatoes and rye. I do not know if the farm was originally leased under the "*Arenda*" system under which Jews could lease farms, mills and taverns from the local *Puritz*, the Polish Magnates who owned large tracts of land, villages and also towns.

A caretaker and his family lived on the farm. The caretaker could speak Yiddish. This was not such an unusual phenomenon in that part of Poland as many Poles and Belorussians who lived in close proximity to the Jews, or worked for Jews, could speak Yiddish. Every *shtetl* Jew had his "*Goy*" and every *Goy* had his "Jew" with whom he traded, from whom he could buy on credit and with whom he had a relationship that was based on mutual respect and trust. Many Jews, like my grandfather, had close and friendly dealings with certain Christians of whom they referred to as

“*unzer goy*” [our gentile], but the relationships were always at “arm’s length”. “*Unzer goy*” was never invited to a Jewish wedding or to a Bar Mitzvah.

One of the two barbers in Ślawatycze, a Pole by the name of Franciszek, had many Jewish customers and he spoke Yiddish rather well. Also, the policeman Stanisław Funk spoke Yiddish. Few older *shtetl* Jews in Poland could speak Polish well. Many Jews, who dealt with the peasants or, like my father who worked in the countryside as a carpenter, could speak the various local Polish, Belorussian and Ukrainian dialects.

During the Holocaust, the Germans looked for a hooked nose and a beard and *peyes* [earlocks] to identify a Jew, *unzere goyim*, our Christian compatriots, could generally tell a Jew by his sing-song speech.

Jews and Christians were distinct communities in Poland and did not mix socially. The Jew was the eternal stranger. As much as the Jews tried to isolate themselves, dress differently and be distinct from their Christian neighbours, the nearness in space between them resulted in a certain amount of cross-cultural influences, but intermarriage was almost unheard of. What conversions there were, they were by Jews converting to Christianity either by force or voluntarily such as by the Frankists, the Jewish Messianic Shabbateans in Poland that converted to Catholicism in 1760, or it was done by assimilated Jews to advance their business or professional careers. But how then can we account for Jews who come from the Pale of Settlement, that is, Eastern Poland, the Ukraine and Belorussia which was under the domination of the Russian Empire, having wide faces, high cheekbones very much like their Christian neighbours. Between the years 1200 and 1400 the Russian lands were invaded by the Mongol and Tartar hordes. Many members of my father’s family have round faces and high cheekbones.

In my mother’s family there are many redheads. Two of my great uncles, my first cousins Steven Waterman, Andrew Reback, Barry Rapkowski and his son Adam, my own son Lewis, his little daughter Mira-Eve and to some extent his son Dustin, have red hair.

The prevalence of red or “ginger” hair among the Jews originating from the “land of the Rus”, coinciding with the Russian “Pale of Settlement”, is at a much higher incidence than among their Slavonic neighbours. One hardly ever finds a red headed Jew from outside the Pale, such as among Jews whose ancestors are from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, such as Galicia, Austria, Hungary and the Carpathian Mountains. There are practically no redheads among the Sephardi Jews who come from Southern Europe and from North Africa or among Middle Eastern Jews, these Jews look Semitic, very much like their Arab, Turk and Persian neighbours.

*During the 8th and 9th centuries when the Sea Vikings, such as Eric the Red and his son Lief Ericson, raided Northern Scotland and Ireland and as a result many Scots and Irish have flaming red hair. Eric the Red’s kinsmen, the Land Vikings, known as Varengians, penetrated Eastern Europe from Scandinavia via the Baltic Sea and the inland waterways, such as the Wisła and the two Bug Rivers, the Pripiet and Dnieper and reached the Black and the Caspian Seas. Eric the Red’s “cousin”, Rurik the Varengian Land Viking, founded the Kingdom of the “Kievan Rus” in the 800s. Along their route, the redheaded Norse Land Vikings, or Varengian Russes [from the Latin “*russus*” meaning red or auburn haired], enslaved the indigenous population who became known as Slavs and as Russians. At this same time the Semitic Jews and the Khazars, their Turkic co-religionists from the Caucasus, began to migrate North along this same river routes into the area that will later become the Pale of Settlement.*

Rape is the most probable reason for the high cheekbones and the prevalence of red hair among the Jews of the Pale of Settlement. The Jews were constantly robbed and raped by the Land Vikings and their Slav progeny, by the Tartar hordes, by

Chmielnicki's and all of the other Slavonic pogromists. Rapine was their vocation and raping Jews their avocation. The Swedish invasion of the Polish lands in 1650 must have added a few more red genes to the Jewish population of that area.

Long ago the Rabbis decreed that a child born of a Jewish mother is Jewish, no matter who the father may have been.

During the planting season our entire family would go out to my grandparents' farm to help with the planting and reaping. The fields were ploughed with horse-drawn ploughs that had steel ploughshares attached to the otherwise all wooden plough. I loved to scamper over the freshly ploughed furrows and to pick out wiggly worms from the fresh, pungent earth. I remember once helping my *Zeyde* plough the fields. He had me walk in front of him behind the plough and I stretched out my hands and placed them over his hands which held the high wooden handles of the plough with the glistening steel ploughshare. My mother and other women followed behind and planted quartered potatoes, each piece with a "seed-eye" in it, into the fresh furrows that were then covered over by the next passing of the plough.

In the rye field hired farm hands, carrying seed bags under one shoulder, walked side by side over the ploughed and raked soil and with sweeping motions in unison of their right hand cast the rye seeds over the field.

At harvest time, four or five hired reapers would cut down the ripened stalks of rye by walking in a staggered tandem line and swinging their scythes in rhythmic harmony. After each swing of the scythe the reapers advanced in unison to the next swath of rye. Rabbits and grouse scattered away from the human intruders. Every now and then the reapers stopped to sharpen their scythes with a sharpening stone and then again proceed to swing their scythes in unison. The standing rye came up to my chin and watching the golden tops of rye shimmer in the breeze tended to make me seasick.

Women carrying large, curved sickles followed the reapers and gathered the stalks of rye and bundled them into sheaves with twisted straw. The sheaves of rye were left standing upright for a few days to dry in the sun. When dry, the sheaves of rye were loaded onto a hay wagon and carted into the farmyard. On the threshing floor the peasants beat the rye stalks with long flails made of two wooden poles, one long and one short that were attached to each other with a leather hinge. By holding the long pole with both hands the peasant beat the rye with the short end of the stick. The women then raked the straw away from the grain and bundled the stalks of straw to be used as bedding for the horses and cows and also for stuffing our mattresses. After threshing, the women winnowed the rye by scooping up the mixture of chaff and grain with large wooden shovels and wafted it into the air. The lighter chaff was blown away by the wind and the heavier grains of rye fell around their feet.

My *Zeyde* observed the Biblical injunction of leaving the corners of his fields uncut and of not gleaning his fields; it was to be set-aside for the widows, orphans and for the poor.

"And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest. And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of the vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and the stranger; I am the Lord your God." Leviticus 19 v.9, 10

After the sheaves of rye were removed from the fields by my *Zeyde's* hired field hands, peasant women and children with sickles and sacks then came out to cut the grain stalks that were purposely left for them in the corners of the fields for their own use. They also gleaned the fields for stray ears of rye. It was a pastoral scene as depicted in the famous 1850s painting, "The Gleaners", by Jean François Millet.

Haying was done in May and then again in August. Wagons full with unbundled hay were delivered to my *Zeyde*'s cow barn and horse stalls. Strong, young peasants, their bare, sweaty chests glistening in the hot sun, pitched the hay up into the hayloft located above the barns. Pitching hay overhead is very hard work, especially in hot weather.

Behind my grandparents' house there were horse stalls, a cow barn, a vegetable garden, a large woodpile with a chopping block and an outhouse. My *Zeyde* kept a number of horses, as carting was his primary occupation. He also kept a cow or two and a lot of chickens were running around the stables and in the fenced-off yard. If one wanted fresh milk in Sławatycze one had to keep a cow. In order to have fresh eggs we kept our own chickens. "Why should we have to buy eggs in the marketplace that were certainly at least a day or two old when we can keep chickens and have our own fresh eggs daily?" my *Elter-Bubbe* [great-grandmother] explained to me.

I loved hunting for freshly laid eggs with my *Elter-Bubbe*. Our chickens were "free range", that is, they were not kept in a chicken coop but roamed freely in the backyard and in the barns among the horses and cows. On Thursdays I helped my *Bubbe* [grandmother] catch a chicken or two that we took to the *shohet* for ritual kosher slaughtering. Before a chicken was picked for slaughter it was given a rectal examination with the forefinger to determine if it was about to lay an egg and be spared until next time. It was also the method used to measure the chicken's *schmaltz* content. The distance between the inserted forefinger and the thumb was a gauge of the fat content of the chicken. [The Sławatycze "Fat-O-Meter"] If a chicken was judged to be too scrawny it was put into a coop and fed grain to let it fatten up some more.

An unusual occupant of my *Zeyde*'s backyard was *Wilk*, a large German shepherd that was always kept on a chain. He was friendly with us kids and angry with all others. *Wilk*, [Polish for Wolf], was my father's dog. Jews generally did not keep dogs, they ordinarily kept cats to control mice and rats, but my father was not in any way ordinary, or for that matter, conventional. [A Jew would refer to a favoured child as *mein klein ketzele*, [my little kitten], and an angry person was referred to as a *beyzer hunt* [a vicious dog].

In the backyard, in front of the cow barn and horse stalls, there was a huge, smelly manure pile. In the spring a peasant carted away the manure, which was then spread over my grandfather's fields. At the same time the peasant would also empty our latrine. A trail of stinking liquid dripped from the manure wagon all the way to the farm.

Like the Gitelmans, my maternal uncles were also *kirzhners* [furriers] and some were tailors. They also worked in Warsaw. Many Jews from the small *shtetlach* went to Warsaw to seek work. During the great Depression years of the late 1920s and the 1930s it was illegal for provincials to come to live in Warsaw, or for that matter, to live in any other large city in Poland without a special residency permit. This rule was promulgated so as to avoid an influx of people from the provinces and overcrowd the limited living spaces available in the large cities.

In 1929, my mother's sister Dobe emigrated to Canada, she was sponsored by her mother's two brothers, Meir and Aaron Światłość. [In Canada the two brothers became "Sweet".] In Montreal my aunt Dobe Repkowska became "Dora Reback" and she married Joe Waterman, formerly Yosl Waserman, her Sławatyczer *landsman*. In December of 1938 my Uncle Awrejml [Abram Repkowski], the *kirzhner*, followed his sister to Canada and became Abe Reback, the furrier.



The Repkowski / Rybkowski family, probably in 1918. L-R:-Awrejmel, Szaja, *Bubbe* Sura-Toba is holding Mojsze, [born in March 1918], my mother Chaja-Blima, *Zeyde* Jankiel-Meir, Riwen and Nute. For some unknown reason Dobe is not in the picture. On the back of the photograph my mother wrote in Russian: "26 January 1916 [?] year"

26 January 1916 1916



The Repkowski / Rybkowski family in 1927 or 1928 and my father Herszel is now in the picture. Front row sitting, L-R:- cousin Chajm, uncle Welwel [the cellar digger ?], mute Cousin Szepsel, *Zeyde's* sister Bunja holding the baby, Grandmother Sura-Toba, Cousin Chajele, Grandfather Jankiel-Meir, *die Elter Bubbe* Chane, and Mojsze [standing]. Back row standing, L-R:- Riwen, Dobe, Szaja, my mother Chaja-Blima is standing next to my father Dawid-Zwi [Hersz / Herszel] and Nute. Mother's brother Awrejmel is not in the picture, he was away studying at a *Yeshiwa*.

Note the modern hairdos and dresses of my mother and her sister Dobe and the absence of head coverings, beards and *peyes* [side curls] of the younger generation of men. Also note that my father and the young men are all wearing modern suits, white shirts and cravats.



My father served in the Polish Cavalry 1924-1926

My mother and father's wedding picture, February, 1927

על פי הצליל
 ופניו הן פתחו
 ופניו הן פתחו
 1916/27
 פתחו הן פתחו

On the back of their wedding photograph mother inscribed in Yiddish:-
 "As an expression of our sentiments of friendship we bestow this picture to our
 sister Dobe Ribkowski, Slawatycz 19 16 /27 Chaja and Herszel Hitelman."



My earliest photograph. I am in my mother's lap and my older brother Szepsel is beside us. Winter, 1934



Father and Szepsel wearing cavalry boots. Winter, 1935



Father and my brother Szepsel during their visit to Zeyde Yitzke in Malorita, summer of 1938.
Standing L-R:- Father's step-sister Chana-Zelda, father's sisters Chana-Marjam, Jadzia and Surele.
Sitting L-R:- my father, my older brother Szepsel, Zeyde Abram-Yitzchok [Icke] and Bubbe Szejndl.
In front are father's twin brothers, Szulem-Wolf and Chajm-Leyb

Chapter 5



I Start Cheder

I was about three years old when I started *cheder* [Hebrew school]. On the first day of *cheder* my father wrapped me in his *tallis* [prayer shawl] and he carried me in his arms all the way to Mendele Kolker's *cheder*. My mother was there too and she fed me honey and candies to make *cheder* a sweet experience. The *melamed*, [Hebrew teacher] Mendele Kolker, was a poor man, as were most of the *melamdin*. The *cheder* was in his house and his wife and his younger children were always about. We kids sat on benches on both sides of a large table. The top of the table was level with my chin. There must have been about two dozen kids in this *cheder* studying in unison the Hebrew prayers and the *Aleph Beis* [Hebrew A,B,C's] The *melamed* sat in the middle, not at one end of the table as one would expect, as from this position he could reach any kid and slap those that he thought had misbehaved or who mispronounced the *Aleph Beis*.

This *melamed* was not known for his scholarship but was always remembered by his former students for the unique way in which he punished the rowdies and the slow learners. He would make the unfortunate boy sit next to him, sitting right on the *melamed's* strong right hand. Whenever the child could not identify a Hebrew letter or misread a word, the *melamed* closed his fingers underneath the dullard's *tush* and the child cried out in pain.

In the summer we were allowed to play in the backyard of the *cheder*. There was no playground equipped with swings or slides. We improvised our own play. In one game we threw a penknife into a marked out circle on the ground, bisected the circle and claimed the largest section as our own domain. The winner was the one who acquired the largest area of the inscribed circle. Another game that we played was with two sticks and a shallow pit. We would lean one stick on the side of the pit and with the other stick we would hit it so as to propel it high into the air. The winner was the one whose stick flew the furthest. At the end of the game we invariably peed into the pit. Only close friends were allowed to pee together into the same play pit. [My father, when recalling an old childhood friend, would say "*mir hobn gepisht in dem zelbn grieble*", we peed into the same pit, indicating their old childhood bond.]

The neighbour next to our *cheder* kept bees. The older boys summoned the younger, uninitiated ones, to come close to the fence and watch the bees swarming around the hives. We invariably got stung by the bees and cried out in pain, to the great amusement of the older boys.

When it was our turn to study, the *melamed's* wife came to the yard to fetch us. *Cheder* was from early in the morning to late in the afternoon or evening. I remember that it was already dark when I walked home from *Cheder* and that I carried a lantern made from a pumpkin with a lit candle inside, the precursor of the Halloween lantern. It wasn't until about a year after I started *Cheder* that I got a real kerosene lantern as my reward for having learned the *Aleph Beis*. My father had brought the lantern from Warsaw when he came home for *Peisach*. One year father brought us battery operated lanterns. My brother and I were the first kids in Slawatycze with these newfangled flashlights.

After having learned the *Aleph Beis* we then started the study of *Chumash*, [the Old Testament]. Starting to learn *Chumash* was a celebrated event. My parents came to my *cheder* to witness my initiation to *Chumash*. To my utter amazement God dropped coins and candy from up above onto my *Chumash*, “so as to make study a rewarding experience for you” my father said. My parents then distributed candy to all the other kids in the *cheder*.

My older brother Szepsel, who is five years older than I, was already attending Polish elementary school. Elementary school was then compulsory for all children in Poland. Under the threat of being fined, observant Jews reluctantly sent their children to the state schools. Once a week a Catholic and a Russian Orthodox priest came to school to teach religion to the Christian children and a Jew was assigned to teach Jewish religion to the Jewish children. In the afternoons, after Polish school, my older brother attended a more advanced *cheder* where he studied *Rashi* and the *Gemara* [commentaries on the *Talmud*, i.e., commentaries on the commentaries on the Old Testament]. The *melamed* of my brother’s *cheder* was considered a Talmudic scholar and his fees were therefore higher than what my *melamed* could charge.

Chapter 6



Father Builds His Own House

In 1938 my father, with the help of his friends, built his own house in Sławatycze. Our new house was across the street from my grandparent's house on *ulica* Włodawska, the main road to Włodawa. It was on the left-hand side of the street when leaving the market place and after crossing the small bridge that spanned the ravine. The back of our new house faced the Bug River.

Unlike many of the houses in the *shtetl*, which were made of round logs and with roofs made of thatched straw or wooden shingles, my father's house was made of hand sawn squared-off logs and the roof was of grey slate.

Wrought iron hinges and door handles made by the local smith were too old fashioned for our new house, so my father brought back the latest available brass plated hardware from Warsaw.

To build his house, my father cut the square logs and planks from large logs that were obtained in trade from a peasant for having built his barn the previous summer.

The logs to be sawn were put onto two tall sawhorses of about five or six feet above ground. My father stood on top of the sawhorse on two planks straddling the log. His assistant stood on the ground below the log. With his back to the saw and with his hands high above his head, the assistant leaned forward and pulled down on the handles of the big saw cutting the log. My father, standing on top of the sawhorse, carefully guided the saw on its down-stroke, thus controlling the thickness of the cut. My father then drew up the long saw and the cutting procedure was repeated. The assistant wore a folded-in burlap sack on his head, like a monk's cowl, to protect his neck from the sawdust. It was hard, tedious work. This was what a Sławatycze sawmill looked like in 1938; driven by muscle power.

I helped my father build our new house by gathering small stones into a wooden box that I pulled with a strong cord, like a horse in harness. The mortar for the stones for the foundation and for the plaster and whitewash for the oven was made from active lime that was slaked in an open pit in our backyard. My father admonished us not to get near the pit, as the lime was extremely corrosive and very dangerous. A dog did fall in and I later saw its skeleton fished out of the lime pit.

My grandfather's brother-in-law Welwel dug out a large cellar under our house. Cellars served as coolers where sacks of potatoes, onions, turnips, beans and cabbages were kept throughout the year. The cellar also served as the "refrigerator" where earthen jugs of milk and buttermilk and slabs of butter were kept cool. Slabs of ice were cut from the river in the winter and kept in the barn covered in sawdust for later use during the summer months.

My great-uncle Welwel also dug the pit in the back of the house that was to serve as our latrine. Welwel was a poor man without skills and with many children to feed. He had been bedridden for seven years when both of his legs become completely paralysed. His youngest daughter Chawele was his constant attendant. Then, one day a miracle happened. Welwel's dead mother came to him in a dream and told him to get out of bed and start walking; so he got out of bed and walked.

Building one's own house is not an easy task for anyone and my father's house was not built without hardships and setbacks. The foundation and the walls went up fairly quickly and the framework was ready to receive the roof joists. Then, a building inspector from the county office shows up and claims that "in accordance with the recently enacted building regulations the wall facing the common lane has to be of fire rated construction" and that "no windows are allowed in such walls". My father adamantly refused to comply with these new building regulations because one of the bedrooms in his new house would not have a window. The inspector ordered a halt to any further construction and he put an official "Stop Work" seal on the top of the unfinished walls. The seal was to be removed only by the inspector if, and when, my father complies with these new regulations.

It was in the autumn, the rainy season was about to start, my mother was expecting another child and the fur season had already started in Warsaw. My father had no time to waste, so he organized a few of his buddies and in his father-in-law's back yard, across the street from the new house, they prefabricated the roof trusses and pre-assembled the roof into a few manageable sections. Saturday evening, after *Shabbes*, many other friends joined in to help carry these large pre-assembled sections across the street and raise them up with ropes on top of the new house. By Monday morning the roof was complete and the slate roof shingles wired in place.

A few days later the inspector showed up and fined my father a certain sum of *Zlotys* [Polish currency] or thirty days in jail for flaunting the law. Being short of cash, in need of a rest, or in a show of defiant bravado, father chose the alternative; the thirty-day jail term. The next day the local policeman, Stanisław Funk, came to our house and arrested my father and escorted him to the county jail, always referred to as the *Koza*, the Goat, which was located in the nearby village of Hanna, about six kilometres away.

I remember that my older brother Szepsel and I were taken by wagon to Hanna to visit my father in jail and to bring him food. The jail was an old primitive round mud-house with a steep thatched roof that had a large opening at its top which served as a smoke vent. It was dingy and smoky inside and it had an open hearth in the center of the hut.

My mother was born in this same village and her uncles and cousins, the Światłość and the Paluch families lived there. Every day the cousins brought food to my father as the *Koza* did not feed its "guests". On Friday evenings and on Saturdays a jailer escorted my father to his cousins' house for the *Shabbes* meals. Not one to be confined in any one place for too long at a time, at night, my father would climb out of this primitive jail through the smoky opening in the roof and go to visit some of his cavalry buddies who lived in the vicinity. Years later, when my father retold this story, the thirty days in the *Koza*, the Hanna "lockup" was to him just a lark, an adventure, he had endured much worse hardships when he served in the Polish Cavalry, he would add. My mother always countered to my father's heroic tales of bravado that to her this was just one of the many embarrassments that were constantly heaped upon her by her *meshugener* husband.



Myself with my oldest son and oldest grandson,
In front of my parents' house in Sławatycze, May 2008

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Chapter 7



Life with Father

My father was a bit of a disappointment to his father-in-law, primarily because father was a free spirit and because his lifestyle was not what was expected of a son-in-law of an observant Jew like my *Zeyde*. My father and his buddies rode on *rower[s]* [bicycles], something no observant Jew would do. Riding bicycles was for *goyim* and for teenage boys. [*Bicycles were called "Rower" in Poland, after the British bicycle manufacturer "The Rover Bicycle Co."*] It was rumoured that my father had been seen to occasionally smoke a cigarette on *Shabbes* and to have gone around without a hat when in Warsaw. It was also said that on *Shabbes* afternoons he and his buddies would sneak into Luzer's Barber Shop by the back door to meet with their Socialist friends when they should have been taking a *Shabbes* afternoon nap like all the other proper *balebatim* [heads of households].

In 1915 or so, when my father was about thirteen years old, his mother died shortly after giving birth to her fourth child. Father had to stop going to *Cheder* and go to work to help support the family. Father had no secular education whatsoever, yet he was not fully illiterate. He was able to read the prayers in Hebrew and to read the Yiddish newspapers but he never learned to read or write in any other language. Even though he was not a very observant Jew, he knew most of the Hebrew prayers by heart.

Throughout his life, my father was an energetic spirit and an inveterate joiner. He was a furrier, a carpenter, a tanner, a union activist, a socialist, a member of the *Arbeiter Farband* [a Jewish workers' organization], a volunteer fireman, an amateur actor, a *Purim shpieller*, a raconteur, an ardent fisherman, a *Matzoh* baker, and the greatest Polish pickle maker that ever was.

I remember my father taking me to visit the fire station in Sławatycze. The fire station was located at the end of the market place, beside the Catholic Church. At the firehouse there was a huge wagon with a huge red steel drum on top of it to hold the water and the wagon was pulled by four horses. Ten volunteer firemen would stand on the long sideboards on either side of the firewagon to operate the pumper. By pulling down and pushing up on the overhead wooden bars they provided the manpower required to pump the water from the large drum through the fire hoses to the brass nozzles that were held by the senior firemen. To fill the tank, the firewagon was taken to the Bug River and the drum was then filled by a bucket brigade. On the walls of the fire-hall hung piked firemen's hooks with long wooden handles.

At home, in our attic, my father kept a shiny brass fireman's helmet that had a mane of horsehair running down its crown and also a fireman's jacket with a large leather belt from which hung a huge fireman's axe. I loved to show off my father's shiny helmet and the fireman's axe to my friends.

Fires were common occurrences in Sławatycze. I remember the big fire that occurred in early 1939. My *Zeyde* packed up the family and moved us all to his farm in nearby Kuzawka. The fire started in an attic storage room of the bicycle shop in the center of the market place and it rapidly spread to the other shops. The Sławatycze fire brigade could not cope with the spreading fire and they called in the fire brigade from the bigger nearby town of Włodawa. They came with their more modern equipment that consisted of a wood burning, steam-operated pumper mounted on a wagon that was drawn by four horses. The fire was contained, but not before half of the shops on one side of the market place had burned down.

Even though the fire chief and most of the firemen were Poles, there was also a number of Jewish members in the Sławatycze Volunteer Fire Brigade. To raise money for the fire brigade, the Jewish volunteer firemen and their friends put on plays in Yiddish. I remember seeing my father on stage acting in a Biblical dress-up play called *Die Josef Shpiel*. [The Joseph Play]. It was a play based on the biblical story of Joseph who was sold into slavery by his eleven brothers and taken to Egypt. The actor portraying Joseph wore “a coat of many colors” that may have been his wife’s bathrobe. The other eleven brothers each wore a long black “shepherd’s” coat with black sashes tied around their midriiffs that looked rather similar to the garb worn by Chasidim. All the twelve brothers wore Polish style visored caps with the name of the brother that each actor portrayed inscribed in Hebrew letters on the hatband.

Many of the other plays that they performed had a strong social content, such as; *Die Zibben Gehonghenne* [The Seven that Were Hanged], *Mirele Efros* and other plays by Jacob Gordin such as *Die Shvue* [The Oath]. My father claimed that they staged many plays that had been banned by the Polish Government. In the Poland of that time all books and plays had to have the government censor’s stamp of approval, otherwise one chanced being fined or given prison terms for possessing banned books or staging unapproved plays. These regulations were often defied by using two different scripts, one expurgated script to show the government inspectors in order to get their stamp of approval and another, the original unapproved script that was used by the actors.

An interesting anecdote was often told and retold in our family pertaining to my father’s passion for acting. Whenever my mother quarrelled with my father she always brought up the same complaint to him: - “You never really cared for me. When I was giving birth to your first-born you had to run off with *deine bande aktoren*” [with your gang of actors]. It seems that, when my mother was in labour and about to give birth to my older brother Szepsel, my father supposedly “abandoned” his young wife at a time when she was in utmost danger to her life and took off with his troupe of actors, Bohemians all, to put on a play in the nearby town of Włodawa. In those days giving birth, especially to her first born and at home [of course], was a most dangerous time of a woman’s life.

In his defence to these very serious accusations, my father stated that: -

The very same evening when his wife decides to give birth to their first child the Sławatycze Volunteer Firemen’s Acting Troupe was putting on a fund-raising play in which he had a leading role. They had been rehearsing for weeks. The troupe already left by droszky [horse-drawn taxi] for nearby Włodawa where the performance was to take place. Seeing that her mother, her grandmother and the midwife were all there with her and that he had already provided them with “all the sheets and all the hot water that they would require” he felt that his presence at this birthing scene was rather superfluous and that his fellow thespians desperately needed him that evening in Włodawa.

As they say on Broadway, “The Show Must Go On! ”. After my mother gave birth to my older brother and my father reassured himself that everything seemed to be all right with my mother and the newborn baby, father sneaked out of the house through an open window, got onto

his “*Rower*” and frantically pedalled the 24 kilometres to Włodawa. He arrived just in the nick of time to put on his make-up and go on stage and to give one of his stellar performances. The play was a smashing success.

My father’s big problems really began when his mother-in-law caught him sneaking back into the house through a window at four in the morning. My mother never, but never, forgave my father for this escapade. She always brought it up to him in arguments and whenever she wanted to get even with him. She always contradicted him in his telling of this tale claiming that he sneaked out before she gave birth to their firstborn and not after she gave birth. And, besides this abandonment, she is now not so sure whether he was there with her when she gave birth to their other three sons.

I remember when my younger brother Mojsze was born. It was at the end of 1938 and we already lived in our new house across the street from my grandparents. When my mother went into labour and was about to give birth, she moved over to her parents’ house. There, she was with her mother and her grandmother. The midwife was there as well. The town doctor would be called in only in a dire emergency. My father was at home, for a change, looking after my older brother and me. No theatre performances for him, this time. The next morning my brother Szepsel and I were taken across the street to see our new baby brother. The new baby was all wrapped up in swaddling clothes. [Swaddling clothes consisted of long strips of linen wound around the infant’s body, immobilising its legs and hands and were intended to keep the spine from curving and the legs from becoming bowed. Babies looked like tiny mummies or Indian papooses. In Sławatycze all babies were kept wrapped in swaddling clothes from birth until they started to crawl.]

Every day for the entire week preceding my brother’s *briss*, [circumcision] my *melamed* and the kids from my *cheder* came to our house to *laynen krishma* [to recite the *kriat sh’mah*], prayers that invoked the holy name so as to ward off any evil that may befall the new-born before his induction into the “Tribe” by means of the rite of circumcision and naming. The children from the *cheder* were rewarded with candies and the traditional cooked chickpeas. Of course, my mother also rewarded the *melamed* for his thoughtful courtesy.

It was told that when he was a baby, my older brother Szepsel was colicky and he had to be constantly rocked in order to be pacified. During the regular card games held at my parents’ house his wicker bassinet was suspended from the rafters over the table in the kitchen/dining/living room and after every time a player put down a card he would give the bassinet a shove to keep it swinging to-and-fro. [This must explain why my older brother Szepsel/Sam is a “compulsive card player”, which must be distinguished from being a “compulsive gambler”, which he is not.]

Shortly after Szepsel was born mother’s milk started drying up, so in order to lactate she conceived again and gave birth to another boy. The second child died of pneumonia when he was only about six months old. When I was born about four years later I was named “Chajm”, which means “life” in Hebrew.

All his life my father was very proud of having served in the Polish Cavalry. He was twenty-one years old when he was conscripted into the Polish Army. After serving six months in the artillery, father decided to volunteer to serve in the cavalry instead. My father maintained that not every Jewish boy wanted to or could serve in the Polish cavalry. Whereas the length of service for conscripts serving in the artillery or infantry was only 18 months, to serve in the cavalry one had to volunteer for 24 months and be able to ride on horseback. My father often retold stories about the life in the Polish armed forces and how harsh it was and that many Jewish boys avoided conscription by self-mutilation. They would cut off their trigger finger, pierce their eardrums or they would arrange to make a *kille* [a hernia].

Father served in the “*Pierwszy Pułk Marszałka Piłsudskiego*” [Marshal Piłsudski’s First Regiment], an elite mountain cavalry unit stationed in the North Carpathian Mountains. In May of 1926 my father’s cavalry regiment was transported by train to the suburbs of Warsaw where they took up positions on the side of Marshal Józef Piłsudski’s forces when he made a military “coup” against the government. My father related that the only casualty his regiment suffered on this military campaign was the loss of his captain who rode up to the top of a small hillock, stood up in his stirrups in order to see better with his binoculars and got a bullet in the middle of his forehead. That was the extent of the military action of their regiment. *Marszałek* Józef Piłsudski ruled Poland as a benevolent dictator until his death in 1935.

I have a picture of my father, decked out in his formfitting Polish Cavalry uniform and with the four-cornered Polish hat cocked at a rakish angle over one eye, his drawn sabre held to his chest. Bravado personified. It is a picture that he was very proud of and one that I will always treasure.

The week before each new batch of conscripts had to present themselves for induction into the army, the conscripts would celebrate their last days of freedom with all sorts of shenanigans and drunken orgies. A favourite amusement of theirs was to drop a nicely wrapped package that contained feces in the middle of the road and howl with laughter when a passing peasant picked it up and hid it under his sheepskin coat for later discovery of “his good fortune and someone else’s loss”. The young recruits also “raided” townspeople’s homes for drink and for food to fuel their reverie. For the swearing-in ceremony the Jewish conscripts went to the Synagogue and were blessed by the Rabbi. Christian conscripts went to Catholic or Russian Orthodox churches to receive their blessings. One would often see Jewish soldiers on leave strutting down the main street of Sławatycze in their natty uniforms with the Polish four-cornered military caps worn at a cocky angle. They were the centre of attention in *Szul* [*Shul*, synagogue] and received *alliahs* and other honours. I have pictures of my uncles Akiwa, uncle Szaja, and my uncle Nute together with a group of his buddies in Polish Army uniforms with the distinctive four-cornered hat, always worn at that rakish angle.

On May 3rd, Polish Independence Day and November 11th, Armistice Day, every house in Poland was obliged to display the red and white flag of the Republic of Poland.

Chapter 8



My Visit to the Big City

In the fall of 1938, when I was about five years old, my dad took me to Warsaw to attend his sister Chana-Marjam's wedding. As the first born, my older brother Szepsel would have been the one to go to the big city before me, but he had to attend school and I got to visit Warsaw before him.

There were so many new things that I discovered and experienced on my first trip to the big city. It was the first time I was on a real train. There was electricity in the houses and with the flick of a switch a "lantern" shone overhead. Water flowed from a tap and not from a barrel. I saw cars, trolleys, illuminated streetlights and houses that were much higher than those in Sławatycze. I am told that I had inquired as to why it was necessary to pile three, four, five and even six houses one on top of the other.

To go up to one's apartment one had to enter through a gate, pass the scrutiny of the *stróż* [the concierge], enter the courtyard and from there go to one's apartment block. To go to the apartment where we were staying we had to enter into a steel cage, a gate then closed us in, and we were then pulled up by a steel rope to the sixth floor. The front gate was locked at night and one had to tip the concierge to be let in after hours.

It was the first time that I flushed a toilet. It wasn't until eight years later, when I was about thirteen years old, that I had the opportunity to flush a toilet again.

About six years ago, during a bitter cold evening in January, we were at the Shiva for our daughter-in-law Debbie's grandmother. Debbie's uncle, Felix Kohn, and I were talking to a group of the guys of the rather primitive conditions in which we lived during our youth in Poland. [Felix had spent the war years in Nazi concentration camps and also hiding in the forests of Poland] Suddenly, a frosted fellow rushed into the house and ran directly to the bathroom without saying hello. When he came out of the bathroom he apologetically explained that he had to pee badly and that he was afraid to pee outside lest he would get a frigid digit. Felix then told the gang that "when Henry and I were kids we had to get dressed up in the winter to go to the outhouse. And as the name implies, an outhouse is located outside." I then added that it was not before I was almost thirteen years old when I began flushing toilets. I was just about to tell the guys my "can you top this" story of the fact that I do not remember wearing any underwear before I was thirteen years old, that is, not before our arrival to the DP camps in Germany in September of 1946. Our grandson Julian, who was about three and a half years old then and who had been quietly listening to our conversation, tugged at my sleeve and whispered to me, "Poppy, Poppy, I could flush a toilet when I was two years old." Am I ever glad that I did not get to tell my

“sans-culottes” story, I can only imagine what my grandson Julian would have thought of his “Poppy” then.

During my visit to Warsaw I recall looking down from the upper floor into the courtyard and seeing a young woman with a wicker basket on her arm and a large shawl wrapped around her face singing in a maudlin voice “... *kupitche, koifitche pappirosen, trikene fun reggen nisht fargossen. rattevet a yuseml fun hunger un fun toit*”. [Herman Yablokoff’s song ‘*Pappirosen*’ “.... *buy, please buy my cigarettes, they are dry, not wet from the rain, buy and save this orphan from hunger and from death*”.] People threw coins to her from the windows or they threw down cubes of sugar wrapped in pieces of newspaper. I remember that I cried bitterly because she was telling me that she is a *yuseml*, an orphan, and she begs me to save her from hunger and from death. I did not realise that she was a street singer and that she may not have been the starving orphan that she sang about. To this very day, when I hear this song I invariably get teary eyed. This was one of my earliest memory of places other than Sławatycze.

My father and I returned to Sławatycze by train to the nearby town of Dubice and from there we went by bus to Sławatycze. When we arrived home, we stepped off the bus into total darkness and into knee high mud. It was for good reason that everyone there wore those high Cossack boots.

Throughout 1938, Jewish refugees from Germany began streaming through Sławatycze. They were mostly German Jews of remote Polish origin who were thrown out of Nazi Germany.

Chapter 9



September 1st, 1939 - The Start of World War II

During the summer of 1939 there seemed to be a lot of nervous activity in Sławatycze. Groups of people were milling about in the market place and in the streets exchanging rumors about the unreasonable ultimatums that Nazi Germany was issuing to Poland and of the imminence of war. People gathered around the only radio in Sławatycze. The owner of the radio listened on his earphones [there were no loudspeakers on the battery-operated radio] to foreign news broadcasts and repeated out loud the essence of the broadcast to the crowd around him. For the past year there had been a number of Jewish refugees from Germany that passed through our town. Of course, few could comprehend what was happening to Jews in Nazi Germany or what was about to happen to us too.

On September 1st, 1939 the Germans launched their “*Blitz Krieg*” [Lightning Attack] on Poland without any declaration of war. World War II had broken out.

On September 3rd Britain and France declared war on Germany in response to the attack on Poland. The Polish Army was outnumbered, outgunned and outmanoeuvred. The Polish Air Force, no match for the Luftwaffe, ordered its planes flown out of the country to England, France and to Hungary in order to save the planes from certain destruction and to be able to fight another day. There was little resistance to the German attack except around the capital city Warsaw. The bloodiest battles were in the triangle of Łowicz-Kutno-Rawicz and in the Westerka (Westerplatte) naval base of Gdansk (Danzig). Legend has it that in north of Poland, the vaunted Polish Cavalry counterattacked the German Panzers with drawn sabres. Within one week the Germans took most of western Poland.

On September 17th the Soviets attacked Poland from the east. The Polish army did not put up any opposition to the Soviet invasion. By the end of the month the Polish capital, Warsaw, fell to the German invaders.

On September 28th, in accordance with their secret “Non-Aggression Pact”, also known as the “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact”, Germany and Soviet Russia partitioned Poland between them. Under this Pact, the Germans occupied the western part of Poland and Soviets annexed the eastern part of Poland, that which primarily lies east of the Bug River. To this day it still forms part of Russia, or what is now the independent republics of the Ukraine and Belarus [formerly Byelorussia].

By October 5th, 1939 sovereign Poland was, once again, no more.

At the outbreak of the war, my grandparents, my great-grandmother, my mother and we children went to stay at my grandparents' farm, some 6 or 7 km from Sławatycze. My father had been drafted into the Polish Armed Forces and was initially not with us. A week or so later he suddenly appeared at the farm. It seems that his military unit in which he was serving had dispersed and he hid in the countryside near Malorita where his father lived. My uncles had also scattered, I do not know where.

I clearly remember the farmhouse and the peasant family that was looking after my grandfather's farm. There was a spinning wheel and a handloom on which the farmer's wife and his daughters wove coarse linen cloth. The peasant family ate all their meals from a common wooden bowl, each one dipping into the large bowl with their own long, wooden spoon. The smell of soured milk and rancid butter was pervasive throughout the farmhouse. The house was full of houseflies and all the walls were heavily flecked with millions of dots as if the walls were covered with some fancy wallpaper, but it was really layer upon layer of fly excrement.

On top of the thatched roof of the farmhouse there was a huge nest of twigs that was lined with soft hay and feathers. Beautiful sleek storks with long necks took turns feeding their fledglings. The peasant's wife once asked me to help her catch one of the chickens that were roaming the farmyard. She then held the chicken by its legs, placed its head on the wood chopping block and with one swing of the axe she cut off its head. To amuse me, the farm woman dropped the decapitated chicken to the ground and I was stunned to see the chicken blindly running around the yard, like the proverbial "chicken without a head".

One day, a redheaded young man was spotted walking forlornly on the sandy road not far from the farm. He was barefoot and his boots were tied and slung over his shoulder. A half-eaten loaf of bread was tucked under his arm. He turned out to be Michał [Michael] Fleising,¹ from nearby Radzyń and my uncle Awrejml's former partner in a fur shop in Warsaw. Michael was trying to get across the Bug River in order to reach the Soviet lines. My grandmother fed him and early in the morning he continued on his way.

German Stukka dive-bombers bombed and strafed straggling Polish soldiers and columns of refugees. Some of the refugees were killed. My grandfather and the farmer went out to help the wounded. That was the only fighting and killing, per se, that I remember witnessing.

After less than a week on the farm we returned to Sławatycze. My father too had clandestinely returned home to Sławatycze.

The Germans had not yet come into Sławatycze and there was no one in authority for a few days. A "Workers' Militia" was formed, my father was one of them. Wearing red and white armbands and carrying rifles that they had commandeered from the local police station, they patrolled Sławatycze. They arrested a few of the minor Polish officials in town and buried some of the weapons for later use.

Chaos reigned. In their attack on Poland, the Soviet Red Army had overrun their agreed-upon borders, crossed the Bug River and came into Sławatycze.

But before the Red Army would enter our town, the Russian commander demanded that a delegation of prominent citizens, carrying red flags, come out to greet them and "invite" them into our town. The town Rabbi, together with the Catholic and the Russian Orthodox priests, went out to greet the invaders in the traditional way that dignitaries and conquerors were greeted in this part of the world; by the ceremonial offer of bread and salt carried on a platter.

¹ Michael Fleising and his family live in Canada.

The Red Army then entered Sławatycze and bivouacked in the town marketplace. The locals could easily converse with the Russian soldiers in their own dialect and they were very friendly to the population. The huge, steaming, field kitchen set on a horse drawn wagon fascinated me. It was not much different from the Sławatycze fire pumper. Everything was horse drawn, the cavalry, the artillery guns and supply wagons. There were no tanks or trucks to be seen.

One day, the population was gathered in the market place where a Soviet *politruk* [political instructor] stood on the back of a wagon expounding on the merits of international Communism to the crowd. About a week later the Red Army pulled back east across the Bug River and the Germans came into Sławatycze riding on motorcycles with sidecars, motorised cannon, trucks and a couple of tanks.

A week or so later my father went off to Warsaw, driving my grandfather's horse and wagon. Dressed in a sheepskin coat, a hat with a lacquered visor [Observant Jews wore hats with cloth visors] and with his high cheekbones and the fact that he could speak the many local dialects, my father could easily pass as a Polish or *Belorussian* [White-Russian] peasant. Also, the registration permit for my grandfather's wagon was in the name of "Jankiel Repkowski", a very Polish sounding name to the German patrols.

Father made a couple of round trips to Warsaw and brought back bundles of furs and fur coats that he had in his Warsaw shop and he also converted whatever money he had into goods for trade, such as leather. On the return trips to Sławatycze he brought back family friends who wanted to get out of Warsaw and cross the Bug River to the Soviet Russian side.

Since Sławatycze was now right on the German-Russian dividing line, it had become a good jumping-off point to cross over from German occupied Poland into the part of Poland that was now annexed by Russia. Many people wanted to get out of German-occupied Poland as they heard rumors that the Germans were extremely brutal with Jewish soldiers whom took prisoner.

My father was afraid that the Germans would arrest him as a Polish prisoner-of-war so he crossed over to the Russian side of the Bug River. His own father and stepmother and their four children lived on that side of the Bug in a small town called Malorita. There too, he had to hide so as to avoid being arrested by the Russians and taken as a Polish prisoner-of-war.

The most curious part about this situation was that my father had my older brother Szepsel sent over to him on the other side of the Bug River. This very fact may have been the most fateful coincidence of the many propitious coincidences that saved the lives of my immediate family.

In Sławatycze, the Germans had commandeered my parent's new house to serve as their headquarters. It was the newest house in town; my father built it himself less than a year earlier. We moved across the street to live with my mother's parents. Once, a German sergeant came to ask my mother's permission to drive nails into the wall of our new house so that they could hang up their helmets and their clothes.

I went to visit our new house where the German soldiers were now staying. They slept on bundles of straw spread on the floor and spoke in what seemed to me as "big city Yiddish". The soldiers were very friendly to me and offered me lemonade and candies. I was warned by my mother not to accept any treats from them as it was rumored that the Germans poisoned Jewish children.

I distinctly remember the last time I visited the German soldiers in my former home. I looked up, and there before me I saw this tall man staring at me. He was dressed all in black and wore a red and black armband and a high hat with a black visor and on top of his hat there were badges of

an eagle and a skull and crossed bones below it. I did not know then who he really was but he seemed very frightening to me. He must have been an officer of the “SD Einsatzkommando”, the security division of Nazi extermination teams, who came into our town to size up the Jewish population. The next day it was decreed that all Jewish shops had to display a yellow Star of David.

Soon afterwards, my father appeared at the river’s edge on the Russian side of the Bug River, and, in between passes of the Soviet and German border patrols, he yelled across the river for someone to:-

“GO GET CHAJA YANKEF SZEPSSEL’S, I HAVE TO TALK TO HER !”

[Chaja, daughter of Jankiel son of Szepsel].

My mother, like every one else in Sławatycze, was always referred to by her father’s and grandfather’s names. Some were referred to by their matronymics, such as Chaja Leah’s or by their nicknames, such as Szmuel Zawel die Kille, Szmuel Kasztan’s, Mojsze Kalte Weczeres, [Mojsze-Cold-Supper] die Poliszukes the nickname of a large extended family in Sławatycze. One was never called by their surnames. The imposed surnames these were for official use only.

Neighbors quickly summoned my mother. My father shouted across the river telling her that he is not coming back to Sławatycze and that she and the children should cross over to join him on his side of the Bug River. To her regret, about a month or so earlier my mother had sent my older brother Szepsel across to the other side of the border to be with our father.

My mother refused to join her *meszugener* husband on one more of his adventurous escapades. She did not want to leave her parents and her elderly grandmother by themselves and she in turn demanded that her husband send their eldest child back to her. Szepsel was by then eleven years old and he too was adamant about not wanting to go back to Sławatycze. He was having a grand time in Domaczów; adults were paying a lot of attention to him and there was a cinema there. My father, my brother Szepsel and three of my mother’s brothers were staying at the *pensjonat* [resort hotel] that my grandfather’s youngest brother Herszel owned in Domaczów, now on the Soviet side of the Bug River. Our family often visited Domaczów and my redheaded great-uncle Herszel and his chubby wife Henja and their two chubby sons, Szepsel and Bunja.

A week later, my father again appeared at the river’s edge and again tried to persuade my mother to cross the river with the children and to join him. Shortly after this second cross-border communication, my mother’s older brother Szaja with his wife Dobe and their little girl came from the nearby town of Włodawa to be with his parents in Sławatycze. Now that her eldest brother was here to look after her parents and her grandmother, my mother felt that she should join her crazy husband in Domaczów as he is obviously not coming back to Sławatycze any time soon and he insists on keeping her eldest child hostage.

One of my earliest childhood memories is of travelling by wagon to Włodawa for the wedding of my uncle Szaja. His bride Dobe was from Włodawa. It must have been in the spring, as we were tucked in under feather beds and I remember seeing the flooded shores of the Bug River running next to the road. I also remember playing with other children under a table at the wedding feast. Recently, I found a Rosh Hashanah greeting card on which there is a picture of my uncle Szaja and his wife Dobe with the date “1936” on it. The wedding must have taken place in the spring of that year. I was then 2 ½ years old.

People were not aware of the actual situation or what was happening in other parts of Poland. Perhaps my father had an instinctive inkling of the true meaning of things that were about to happen. His keen instincts for survival served us well during the war years.

My *Zeyde* hired a fisherman whom he knew in order to smuggle his daughter and her two children across the Bug River in his rowboat. Together with us in the smuggler's rowboat was the sister of my uncle Akiwa's partner in Warsaw, Michał Fleising. She and her husband had come to Sławatycze, to their friends the Gitelmans, to be smuggled across the Bug to the Soviet occupied side of Poland.

In the middle of one cold, dark night at the end of November or early in December, before the river froze over, we were rowed across to the other side of the Bug River. In case my baby brother should cry out and alert the border guards, mother doped him by having him suck on a piece of cloth that had been soaked in kirsch liqueur.

After we landed on the other side, we were directed to a farmhouse that belonged to a relative of the fisherman and now a smuggler. A lamp placed in the window of the house acted as our beacon. The peasant woman, who knew my mother's family, was expecting our arrival. After we settled in, the woman told my mother that early every morning the Russian border patrols come to the farmhouse looking for deserters, smugglers and refugees that had crossed the river the night before. The peasant woman explained to us that she could shelter my mother and her two children by telling the Russian border patrols that we are her relatives who are visiting, but our friends would have to leave the house and hide somewhere else. She could easily explain my mother's presence she said, as my mother spoke the local dialect, but our friends spoke with a big city accent and she dared not hide total strangers in her house. My mother then told her "if you won't hide my friends then don't hide us either".

Early the next morning soldiers of the Russian border patrol came to the farm and arrested a number of people who had crossed the border the night before. They found people in the barn and in the bushes, they stuck their bayonets into the haystacks in case someone was hiding there too. Then the Russians came into the house and arrested us.

The bundles of luggage and the women with young children were put on a horse drawn hay wagon and the rest of the adults were marched behind the wagon. We were guarded by Russian soldiers with their long rifles and fixed bayonets held "at-the-ready." Shortly afterwards we arrived in the nearby town of Domaczów and were ushered into a fenced-off schoolyard.

In Domaczów many people lined the route of the daily parade to see if they recognized anyone they might know among the detainees.

I was riding on top of the wagon when suddenly I spotted my father in the crowd of onlookers. I jumped off the wagon and ran to my father. The Russian guards shouted at me: "*Stoy!, Malchik, Stoy!*" [Halt! Boy, Halt!], but I did not pay any heed and they did not shoot at me, the Germans surely would have. My father had my older brother Szepsel whisk me away to uncle Herszel's *pensjonat*. The wagon with my mother and my baby brother and the other detainees was brought into the fenced-off schoolyard for processing.

The Russians detained deserters, "spies", smugglers and other undesirables and "threw" the rest back across the Bug River to the German occupied side of Poland.

Through the schoolyard fence my father whispered instructions to my mother:- *“When they take you and the others out of the schoolyard to be sent back across the river to the German side, you should take only the baby with you and leave your peklach [bundles] behind and when you and the others are marched out into the street, you should stay on the outside of the line-up, that is, on the side facing the curb”*. My mother protested that she needs all the clothes that she brought with her for the baby. Somehow my father was able to convince my mother to listen to him and to do what he insisted that she do.

Before leaving the schoolyard, my mother extracted a small package from her bundle and secreted it in the large shawl that she wrapped around the baby. The contents of this little package that my mother carried with her throughout the war years consisted of a rather unique treasure that was always a great solace to her for the rest of her life.

*My mother carried this little packet with her throughout the war years and it was not until after we arrived in Canada in September of 1948 that she revealed what was this treasured possession of hers. The packet contained many family pictures, my father’s and her own “Dowód Osobisty” dated 1934 [the Polish internal passports], my father’s Army Mobilisation Call-up Card, his “Karta Rzemieslnicza” [trade card], dated 1928 and other such valuable documents. There was also a small piece of blue paper that seems to be an official receipt from notary Stefan Rudziński of the city of Włodawa for the registration of “Akt No.864” dated November 9th 1937. It is possible that it is the receipt for the notarial deed of the lot on which my father built their new house in 1938. I have yet to find out for certain what this receipt is about.*²

My mother’s most unique treasures in that small packet that she took with her were her T’naim, the Jewish prenuptial marriage agreement, and her K’tubbah, the Jewish marriage contract written in Aramaic that was standardised over 2000 years ago. The T’naim spelled out the amount of the Nad’n, [dowry] and listed the property that the wife brought to her husband at marriage. My parent’s T’naim also stipulated that the father of the bride undertakes to provide one year’s kest [free room and board] for the newlyweds and to pay a dowry of \$250.00 in US dollars, \$50.00 payable upon signing the T’naim and the rest “sometime later”. [My father always claimed that the “sometime later” never came.] Both of these marriage documents were written on plain lined sheets of paper that were probably taken from a school scribbler, with no fancy lettering and without any of the ornate or fancy decorations that one expects to see on a modern K’tubbah. Not too many survivors who had gone through the war in Europe, Siberia and Kazakhstan can boast of possessing such treasured mementoes.

My mother reluctantly left her *peklach* behind in the schoolyard and with the baby in her arms she joined the group of the other detainees. They were lined up in rows of five, and under heavy guard, were marched out from the schoolyard into the middle of the street that led to the bridge across the Bug River. As instructed by my father, my mother positioned herself on the outside row of the parade of refugees.

When the refugees were marched down the street, there was a sudden commotion among them. As previously arranged, my mother’s youngest brother Mojsze kicked a soccer ball into the parade

² Note for this Update. During my second return trip to Poland in October of 2001 I was able to obtain a copy of the deed of sale of the land based on my mother’s little notarial receipt marked:

“Akt. No.864 notariusz Stefan Rudziński, Włodawa, 9.11.1937”

of detainees, right near where my mother with the baby in her arms was located. People pushed each other and tried to step out of each other's way. In this ensuing confusion, my father quickly plucked my mother out from the parade and stood her right behind him on the sidewalk. A friend took the baby and others closed around my mother so that she could not be seen and be recognised by the Russian guards. The lines of detainees reformed and were marched to the bridge to be sent across the Bug River to the German occupied side of Poland.

That is how my father saved my mother and my younger brother from certain death. God knows what would have happened to us all if she and the baby were sent back to Sławatycze.

Is it fate, luck, or the presence of mind when the right decisions are made that saves our lives? It seems that as various critical situations arose, my father always made the right choices, as if made by some instinctive sense for survival.

My parents' friends, Shprintze Fleising and her husband who had crossed the Bug River with us in the same rowboat were in the group of detainees that was sent back to the German side. Shprintze, but not her husband, survived the war. Shprintze and two of her brothers, red-haired Michał [Micheal] and black-haired Lipa also came to live in Montreal. For the rest of their lives my parents were very close friends with the Fleisings.

One day in February 1940, German soldiers came to my grandparents' house asking for Jankiel Rebkowski. They had a list of forty names of the most prominent people in Sławatycze and asked my grandfather to come with them, claiming that he was needed for a work brigade. His older son Szaja, who was in the house with them at the time, asked if he could go instead of his father, so they said "you too, you come with us." They took the forty-one Jews to a small wooded area behind town, had them dig a shallow ditch, and then executed them. At that time the Germans still needed falsified documents to cover up their bloody deeds so they forced the Rabbi of the *shtetl* to sign a prepared document certifying that forty Jews froze to death while on a work assignment. Then they shot the Rabbi.

The reason the details of this massacre are known is that one person did escape. When the executions began, *Mojsze der Toiber* [deaf Mojsze] started running into the forest. Being deaf or hard of hearing, he did not hear the executioners' shouts for him to stop or the shots they fired at him. He was wounded but managed to get away and give an eyewitness report of this first "Einsatzkommando Aktion" in Sławatycze. I heard my parents retell this story many times over the ensuing years.

After getting word of this tragic news, my mother and her three brothers sat *Shiva* for their father and older brother. Shortly afterwards we moved away from Domaczów in order to be far away from the new border. We wound up in a resort colony called Nowostaw near the small railway town of Klewan, some 200 km east of the Bug River. Before September 1939 this area was part of Poland, but at that time it was already annexed to Soviet Russia and to this day it remains part of Russia, or more precisely, the Ukraine.

Chapter 10



Our Family Excursion to Siberia by Boxcar

Early in 1940 the Russian authorities decreed that all those who were born in the territories of former Poland which have recently been annexed to the Soviet Union, that is, those born east of the Bug River, are all now citizens of Soviet Russia.

All those born in that part of Poland that lay west of the Bug River, in what is under German Occupation, may apply for Soviet citizenship and will be relocated further east, away from the border areas. Any Polish refugee who did not want to accept Soviet citizenship must register with the German Commission which was sitting in Soviet annexed Poland for eventual return to her or his birthplace. My father did not want to become a Soviet citizen and he did not want to move further east into Soviet Russia. His sister, “*die farbrente Komunistke*” [the firebrand Communist] Breindl and her husband Itshe “*Kämpfer*” [Itshe the Fighter], had gone to Biro-Bidzhan in the early 1930s and soon afterwards they started sending letters back to Sławatycze hinting that conditions in Soviet Russia were not as ideal as it was made out to be by the Polish Communists back home. So, like many others, my father registered to return home to Sławatycze. To return, of course, only after things quietened down a bit. The Soviets now had the names and addresses of all refugees under their jurisdiction who did not want to accept Soviets citizenship.

In the beginning of June of 1940, at about four o’clock in the morning, there was a loud banging on our door. Russian soldiers of the NKVD [the Soviet Secret Police], with rifles at the ready, came in and searched the house for weapons. They informed us that we are under arrest as *vraggy naroda* [enemies of the state] and that we are to take only what we could carry with us and we were to come with them, **NOW !!**

We were marched under guard to a railway siding on the outskirts of town, a few kilometers from the Klewan railway station, where empty boxcars were waiting for us. Armed soldiers were all around us. We were not alone there; many families with little children and single adults were already being loaded into the boxcars. We were loaded with close to fifty other people into a boxcar. Other boxcars with prisoners were brought in from the nearby towns and linked up to form a long train. Before the end of the day the sliding door on our boxcar was shut and the train started pulling out. Only then did we realize that my father was not in the wagon with us. “Did he escape and abandon the family?” “Did he not say that he wanted to sneak back to the house and get some more clothing and other stuff for the family?” people said. “He must be in another wagon,” my mother thought out aloud, but knowing her husband, she was sure that he had escaped, disappeared. It was not the first time that her husband had done things that annoyed her, she explained to the people in our wagon.

It seems that my father and a buddy of his by the name of Alter Czenker, got away from the train and went back to our house. They filled up a large wooden trunk with bolts of linen that my mother had in the house, some more essential clothing that we could not initially take with us. Father took some furs that he had in the house and he also took with him the head of his furrier’s sewing machine, leaving behind the frame and foot pedal. The two of them lugged this heavy trunk

back to the prison train. But, by then our train had departed and we were on our one-way-trip to faraway Siberia.

Our family was among the close to a million Jews and non-Jews arrested and deported east to Siberia or north to Arctic Russia. All were former citizens of the German-occupied part of Poland who had crossed over to that part of Poland that was now annexed by the Russians and who had refused to accept Soviet citizenship and to voluntarily move deep into Soviet territory. The Russians also arrested, and similarly deported to Siberia or north to the mines, all former Polish government officials, policemen and foresters on their annexed territory. Polish prisoners-of-war captured by the Soviets in September and October of 1939 were already slaving in the mines of the Arctic *lagers*, starving in the forests of Siberia or have been shot in the Katyn Forests.

In 1940 the Soviets shot over 20, 000 Polish prisoners-of-war, primarily officers, in the Katyn Forests of Belorussia and buried them in mass graves. The massacre was discovered in 1941. The Germans blamed the Soviets for this massacre and the Soviets blamed the Nazi Germans. It was only during Perestroyka in the 1980s, that the Russians admitted killing the Polish officers.

The June weather was beautiful. Our locked prison train passed through cultivated fields, grassy steppes and pine forests. We crossed the beautiful Ural Mountains and passed through many hamlets, but few cities. It took almost a month for our train to reach our destination. Armed guards in a command railcar at the front of the train accompanied us all the way to Siberia. Our train never stopped at regular railway stations, only at rail sidings outside of populated areas. The train often sat on the railway sidings for a day or two to let other trains pass us on the single track Trans-Siberian railway. Ours was not an express train in a big hurry.

The boxcars we were in had been outfitted to carry people over long distances. Graffiti carved on the inside walls told of many such earlier trips to Siberia. On each side of the wagon there were wide two levels of wooden shelves so people could bunk down on the “upper berth” or on the “lower berth”. Our few bundles were stored under the lower shelves. The four small windows at the top of the wagons were strung with barbed wire. The boxcars had two sliding doors, one on each side of the car, but only one door was operational. In the middle of the wagon there was a coal burning, cast iron stove to provide heat and a pail with drinking water and a bucket for washing. At the outside wall, behind the stove, stood a wooden bench with a hole cut in its centre that was positioned over a similar square hole in the floor of the wagon. This was our “potty”, our indoor plumbing. The shy ones in the wagon had someone shield them from view by holding a coat or blanket in front of them when they had to sit on the “potty”. But, after a few days, such modesty was mostly dispensed with.

At various stops, our food and water was brought to the command car at the head of the train. Once we were away from the station and prying eyes, our prison train stopped and the *starosta*, the elected elders or captains of the wagons were let out to fetch our rations from the command car. Our food rations consisted of heavy, soggy bread and oily *kasha* [porridge] that was carried in pails by the wagon *starosta* and their helpers. *Kypyatok*, steaming hot water, was available from the steam locomotive.

In the middle of one night, after about ten days into our four-week one-way trip to Siberia, the door to our wagon slid open and in jumped none other than my father and his buddy, Alter Czenker, *shlepping* a heavy wooden trunk. They were both unrecognizable except for their voices as they were covered from head to foot in coal dust and grime. [Alter Czenker, had the use of only one arm, he had been shot through his left biceps when he swam across the Bug River to escape German occupied Poland.]

All his life my father had this fantastic homing instinct. He had remembered the number of our prison train and also the number of the boxcar in which we were riding. On the sliding door of each wagon was chalked the number of the boxcar and the number of “passengers” that it contained. My father and his buddy had chased down our prison train by hitching rides on the locomotives of freight trains that were going in our direction, that is, east to Siberia. He managed to get rides because he could make himself understood in the various Russian dialects and he helped out the train crews by shovelling coal into the furnaces of the locomotives.

Those bolts of linen that were brought back by my father were our barter for food for the better part of the war years.

On our way east to Siberia, father observed many trains laden with grain and with live cattle all going west. The train crews told my father that this valuable freight was being exported to Germany under the Russian-German peace pact and trade agreement. The Germans were stocking up with vital provisions for later use.

One day, when our train was sitting at a railway siding just outside of the city of Kazan in the “Tatar Autonomous Republic”, many locals came to our prison train to beg for *Chleb!*, *Chleb!*, [bread, bread]. We barely had enough bread for ourselves let alone to feed the local Soviet citizens. With our daily bread rations we got a tin of *kasha* [porridge] that was made of a round, yellow grain, probably a form of millet, which was invariably flavoured with rancid sunflower seed oil. It tasted awful and it gave us the “runs”, but nevertheless, it was food.

As an act of charity, my father hailed a one-legged *Tatar* [Tartar] beggar through one of our barred windows. Speaking to him in peasant Russian, my father offered the *Tatar* some of our porridge. At the thought of food the beggar began “licking his chops”. The problem now facing my father was how to pass on some of our porridge to the Tatar since our wagon door was bolted-shut from the outside and the high windows were strung with barbed wire. It was in the middle of the summer but the *Tatars* wore their traditional high sheepskin *kutchmas*, [fur hats with the wool on the outside]. My father suggested to the one-legged beggar that he should crawl under our wagon, take off his *kutchma* and hold it upside down under the hole in the floor. The beggar did as he was told. My father then started to pour this yellow putrid *kasha* through the shit-hole of our wagon right into the poor man’s hat. The beggar did not wait for my father to stop pouring before he started lapping the *kasha* from his *kutchma*. By the time my father stopped there was yellow *kasha* all over the back of the Tatar’s head.

This pitiful scene is one that I always recall when I hear or read reports about hunger. It is also a sad commentary on the Soviet Socialist system whose citizens had to beg for food from prisoners; and all of this before the Germans attacked their Russians allies.

Sometimes during the day, when our train was stopped in the middle of nowhere, the guards would open the doors of our boxcars and let out the people, a few at a time, to get some fresh air, to stretch their legs or to relieve themselves outside of the confined wagon. After about an hour or so the locomotive would sound a series of long whistles and the guards’ cries of *Davay!*, *Davay!* [Get going!] would get us all rushing back into our wagons. Then the train started rolling, very slowly at first, to give stragglers a chance to jump onto the train and for the guards to run alongside and bolt the wagon doors. During one such stop, a widow, the mother of two young boys, decided to go under the boxcars to the other side of the train in order to defecate out of sight of the others. The locomotive whistle blew and the train started to move. She had to crawl under the moving train to get back to the side where the doors were open. The poor woman was not fast enough. She tripped on the rails and both her legs were cut off.

Chapter 11



How I Spent the Summer of 1940 in Camp Siberia

Our prison train passed through the large city of Omsk and then Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia. Near Krasnoyarsk the train stood still on a railway siding for a couple of days and then it reversed its course and travelled in the opposite direction for a few more days. At the city of Tomsk, some of the people from our transport were loaded onto river barges and shipped north on the Ob River to prison camps in the Siberian *taiga* forests. Our wagon and a couple of the others were attached to another train and we were taken to a *lager*, as the Soviets called their prison labour camps, that was located in a pine forest just outside of the small town of Asino, about 100 kilometres north-east of Tomsk.

By one of the many fortuitous coincidences that we encountered throughout the war years, my mother's three brothers were with us on the same transport and were also shipped to the Asino *lager*. They had also been hiding out near Klewan, not far from where we were, and had been arrested and taken to Siberia on the same transport train as we were. We had learned that they were on the same train after a week or two into our journey to Siberia. Each wagon had a captain who was let out to fetch the food rations and water for the wagon inmates. Of course, my father was the captain of our wagon. After his "heroic" return to his family, the people in our wagon chose my father to be their wagon *Starosta*. On one of his sorties to pick up our rations, my father discovered that my mother's three brothers were on the same prison train as we were.

When we arrived at the Asino prison camp large barbed wire gates opened and our prison train rolled right into the forced labour camp. Two concentric barbed wire fences surrounded the *lager* with guard dogs running loose in the space between the two fences. High wooden guard towers with armed guards in them were located at each corner and at intermediate points of the fences. Outside the twin fences was a wide strip of ploughed ground that was raked regularly in order to detect any footprints of escapees. The fence was not electrified - that was not the Soviet style - and besides, there was no electricity in Asino.

Inside the double fence, the prison camp consisted of a number of fenced-off compounds. The new arrivals, primary former Polish citizens, were kept in separate compounds. Each compound had log bunkhouses, a cooking house, a washhouse, and a latrine. A separate compound contained the two-story administration building in which there were an infirmary and a meeting room that doubled as a one-room school was located on the second floor. Family units and singles were housed in separate bunkhouses.

On arrival, we were herded into delousing sheds. Most of us were scruffy and some had only the clothing they wore. Towards the end of our thirty-day trip we probably could not smell each other any more. All of us were infested with lice. At the delousing shed we had to undress and string our clothes onto a long wire loop, attach a numbered metal tag and then hand over our dirty and lousy bundles to the female attendant. The attendant then placed our clothes into a hot disinfecting oven in order to kill the lice, nits and other such vermin. We were issued a wooden

bucket and a willow whisk and ushered into a wet steam room to bathe, at last. Curiously, all public bath attendants in Russia were women.

The sleeping accommodations in our “family log cabin” consisted of four double-high, twin bunks that were nailed together for stability. Each twin bunk was to sleep two people but it was only slightly wider than a standard single cot. In the middle of the aisle, separating the two rows of bunks, there was a row of plank tables and half log benches. In the aisle, at the end of the benches stood a wood-burning stove.

Our newly assigned bunks were infested with all sorts of vermin such as nits, fleas, ticks and bed bugs. By the size of the bed bugs we could tell that the camp had been in continuous operation for a rather long time before our arrival.

The term “lager” comes from the Afrikaans word “laager” meaning an encampment of wagons or a prison camp. The Russian slave labour camps, the “lagers”, were not an invention of the Soviets; they just expanded on the network of prison camps started by the Tsars over a hundred years earlier.

The Soviet system of lagers was administered by the “GULAG”, the acronym for “Glavnoye Upravleniye Ispravitel'no-trudovyykh Lagerey” or “The Chief Directorate of Corrective Labour Camps” which was an arm of the Soviet internal police and security service, at various times named the CHEKA and its many linear descendants, such as the OGPU, NKVD, MGB/MVD and KGB. The GULAG system had several million inmates, referred to as “zeks” [short for zaklutchyonye, i.e., prisoners], included murderers, thieves, and other common criminals - - along with political and religious dissenters, real and imagined.

The GULAG, whose prison camps were located mainly in remote regions of Siberia and the Far North, made significant contributions to the Soviet economy. In the period of Joseph Stalin they constructed canals, railroad lines, numerous hydroelectric stations, strategic roads and much of the country's lumbering and the mining of coal, copper, and gold. Conditions in the camps were extremely harsh. Prisoners received inadequate food rations and insufficient clothing, which made it difficult to endure the severe weather and the long working hours. As a result, the death rate from exhaustion and disease in the camps was high. After Stalin's death in 1953, the GULAG population was reduced significantly and conditions for inmates somewhat improved. Forced labour camps continued to exist, although on a smaller scale, into the 1980s. With the advance of democratization, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience all but disappeared from the camps.

After the publication in the 1970s of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's book THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO, the term “GULAG”, rather than “lager”, became the commonly used term to designate the Soviet forced labour camps.

Early each morning, all the adult men and the women who did not have small babies, were assembled into small brigades and marched out of the *lager* to their work assignments under an armed guard who held their long rifles with fixed bayonets at the ready. The primary industry of our lager was logging, lumbering, and shaping trees into telephone poles. There also was a *tartak* [sawmill] at the river's edge. The trees were felled with heavy axes and long saws and then dragged out of the forest to the river's edge to be floated down stream to the saw-mill.

Everyone; lawyers, doctors, furriers, shoemakers, men and women, all had to swing an axe or pull on the long lumberman's saw. In the egalitarian society of Soviet Russia where equality of the sexes was the law, many women worked right beside the men in the forest cutting down and trimming the trees. The work week consisted of one day off for every ten days worked.

Most of the newcomers were inexperienced and clumsy with saws and axes. Often, someone swinging an axe would miss the tree and hit his foot instead. Others did not get out of the way of a falling tree quickly enough and were maimed or killed.

There was little food in the camps. The amount of the food rations, the *payok*, which a *zek* received depended on the percentage of the “work norm” that each *desiatka* [a squad of ten] produced the day before. Lenin’s slogan, “*Those who don’t work don’t eat*”, was often cited and applied. The less one produced, the less one got to eat. The less food one got, the less one could produce the assigned work norm, and therefore, one got less to eat. This must have been the origin of the phrase “Catch 22”. Many people suffered from night blindness and from scurvy due to malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies.

My father, as a skilled *plotnik* [construction carpenter] and someone who could communicate with the guards in Russian, was soon made a *desiatnik* [a foreman of ten] and was also assigned as an instructor to teach the others the proper way to swing an axe and how to use the two-man lumberman’s saw. As a *desiatnik* father received a larger *payok*. Families cooked their own meals in the cookhouse from the food rations assigned to their children plus what the adult of the family received.

Conditions in our “family style” slave labour camp were not as severe as in the other prison camps in the more remote areas of Arctic Siberia. Many of those lagers were high security establishments for political prisoners where iron and coal was mined. I am told that in the severe Russian Arctic slave labour camps, those who produced less than a third of their “work norm” were put into an unheated solitary shed with little food or water. Their frozen bodies were retrieved a week or so later.

One day, on the way to their work station in the forest, my father’s group came alongside another column of *zeks* on their way to the sawmill. My father noticed a familiar face; it was none other than Szmuel *Kasztan’s* [Szmuel, *Chestnut’s* son], a Sławatyczer cabinetmaker and a *farbrenter Kommunist* [a firebrand Communist]. In pre-war Poland, Szmuel Grynblat had been imprisoned a number of times for his Communist activities and had been incarcerated for close to four years in the infamous *Bereza Kartuzka*, a rather harsh maximum-security concentration camp for Polish Communists and hardened criminals. Before the outbreak of the war in 1939, Szmuel escaped from Poland into Soviet Russia.

Szmuel advised my father to apply for work at the sawmill. My father and my three uncles made the request citing their skills as *plotnicks* and shortly afterwards they were transferred to Szmuel’s brigade at the sawmill. The work there was easier and the *payok* [rations] was much better.

When my father asked his *landsman*, Szmuel Grynblat, “Tell me, as a *farbrenter Kommunist*, how come you are not a *natchalnik* [a chief, or a commandant] but an ordinary *zek*, a prisoner, like me?” The former ardent Communist replied: - “Herszel, don’t ask silly questions, *die Ratten Farband* [the Yiddish term for the Soviet Union] *is a farmachter kasten* [a closed box, an enigma], we knew nothing of its reality.”

In the late 1970s, Szmuel Grynblat, now Sam Greene, the successful furniture and appliance dealer of Charleston, S.C., and his wife Regina were on a bus tour that included visits to Quebec City and Montreal. Sam Greene remembered that his childhood friend Awrejml Repkowski emigrated from Sławatycze to Montreal, Canada, in 1938. When the tour bus came to Montreal, Sam scanned the telephone directory for

his landsman's name, but by then, Awrejml Repkowsky had become Abe Reback and the other Repkowskis in Montreal were now called "Rapkowski". He called a couple of furriers listed in the yellow pages and the second furrier he called knew Awrejml Repkowski, a.k.a. Abe Reback the furrier. Sam Greene has been to Montreal many times and has attended many of our family functions.

There was a kindergarten and a Russian elementary school in the camp. I attended kindergarten and my older brother was in elementary school. We, like the other Polish deportees, did not know the language and did not understand what was expected of us in school. The Soviets always treated children exceptionally well. Easily indoctrinated; children were the future; our parents were the enemy.

Russian natives from the surrounding area would come to the gate of our camp in order to trade with us wild honey and blueberries that they had gathered, the only spare food they had. These people were former inmates of the *lagers* who, after having served their sentences of ten, fifteen or twenty years, were released to the "outside"; that is, they were exiled for the rest of their lives to live in the restricted areas in Siberia, at times just outside of their former prison camp. The released prisoners could not return to their former homes but their families could come out to join them in exile. Some, like my aunt Breindl, did join their husbands in their internal exile.

Even though it was in the middle of the short summer, the locals wore frayed *fufaykas* [quilted cotton jackets] that were covered with grime and with wads of cotton sticking out from holes in the fabric. On their feet they wore *postoly*, crude shoes made from birch bark or *valenki*, knee high boots made of moulded felt that are generally worn in the winter but here they were also worn in the summer, that is, if one had nothing else to wear on their feet. As my father could communicate with these former *zeks* in Russian, they told him that they had been warned by the authorities to stay away from us as we were "a strange people from a far away land" and that some of us were cannibals. Cannibalism was not a stranger in remote Siberia.

About three months after our arrival in the Asino *lager*, the women of the Polish section of the *lager* organized a protest march in front of the administration building. This was perhaps the first ever organized protest in a Soviet slave labour camp. The women, carrying babies in their arms, demanded to be returned to their homes. One of the women protesters borrowed my baby brother for the protest march. For some rather strange and incomprehensible reason this protest march was effective. The Soviets decided to ship out from our *lager* to a medium security *lager* those Polish citizens who had young children before the approach of winter.

Our family received an exit permit for 5 persons. This official *propusk* [lessé passé, exit permit] was handwritten with a chemical pencil on a piece of plain paper. My father easily changed the 5 into an 8. With an exit permit for eight people we were able to take with us my mother's three brothers. These strapping young men without families did not qualify to leave the Asino forced labour camp under this special "family relocation ordinance". When their presence on the train was discovered a few days out of Asino, the commander of the guards did not mind, he now had three "spares" in case anyone escaped from his train; he was answerable with his own freedom for the full count that was placed in his custody.

We were loaded into the same first class Siberian style "*wagons lits*" as before but this time we were shipped in a westerly direction. Eventually our prison train stopped at a city called *Asbest* which is located in the eastern Ural Mountains near the city of *Sverdlovsk* [now called *Ekaterinburg*, its old Tsarist name]. As its name implies, the city of *Asbest* is where asbestos, the fireproof, and also carcinogenic, fibrous mineral is mined.

In *Asbest* we were placed in a low security *lager* on the edge of town, not far from the asbestos mines. The *lager* consisted of a cluster of barracks and workshops. There were no barbed wire fences anymore, but we were confined to the barracks for a nightly headcount and a dawn-to-dusk curfew.

My mother's three brothers were located in a nearby labour camp about 15 kilometers from us. There were no families in their camp and the work there consisted of logging in the nearby forests, but conditions were much more lenient than in the previous *lager* in Asino.

In the city of *Asbest* my father worked as a carpenter in a construction yard where roof trusses and entire wall sections were prefabricated for the construction of barracks. My mother worked the night shift in the maintenance shop of one of the asbestos mines where she repaired burlap bags that were used to carry asbestos ore out of the mineshafts. Her work environment was laden with asbestos dust. In the bag repair shop, my mother, and her co-workers were made to wear strips of cloth around their faces as masks. Everyone there was given half a liter of milk to drink but they were not allowed to take home any of that milk. The entire town of *Asbest* was covered with a layer of grey asbestos dust.

My older brother and I attended a school that was set up for us in one of the barracks in our compound. Each day at school we were given half of a *bulechka* [a bread roll] and a quarter litre of milk to wash down the pervasive asbestos dust. We had to eat our bread and drink our milk at school and could not take home any leftover food or milk.

Father suffered terribly from constant heartburn. He was able to obtain some baking soda and carried with him a spoonful of the powder wrapped in a piece of newspaper. He got some relief from the heartburn by licking a bit of the powder off the paper and washing it down with a drink of water.

During the day we were allowed to leave our light security compound and go anywhere in town except that we were not allowed to go near the train station or near other sensitive areas such as railway tracks or bridges.

My parents had every second Sunday off from work and we, with some of our friends, went to the nearby pine forests to pick wild mushrooms, wild blueberries and a kind of bright red sour berry, possibly bilberry, which was made into compote and jam. Food was not plentiful. At a time when Soviet Russia was exporting grain and other foodstuff to their German allies, bread was rationed, not just for us deportees, but also for all Soviet citizens. There were many bread and pastry stores in the city of *Asbest* but their shelves were usually empty. There were constant long *otchereds* [bread lines, queues] of people standing in line waiting for the next delivery of bread. Curiously, in the show windows of the bread stores, stacks of various kinds of breads, rolls and plaited *challehs* were displayed; but all of these delicious, mouth-watering breads were actually decoys that were carved in wood or plaster and painted to look like the real thing. [The Soviet version of Russian Orthodox iconography.]

Occasionally, the bread stores received a delivery of a limited quantity of white bread that was sold without ration cards; while quantities lasted. This bread was limited to one kilo per customer but at a much higher price than that charged for regular bread sold on the ration cards. This non-rationed white bread was in great demand and long *otchereds* formed to buy this rare delicacy. Teenagers and elderly people stood in line for long hours in anticipation of buying some of the white bread that they resold at great profit on the black market.

One day, when the bread store across the street from the shop where my father worked received a delivery of non-rationed white bread, my father jumped out the window of the carpentry shop and got into the long line-up. As my father later told the story; “a *hooligan* [teenaged delinquent] tried to push into the breadline ahead of him, father tried to prevent him from getting into the bread line; the boy fell and somehow bloodied his nose.” Russian witnesses came forward and maintained that “this uppity *Yevreiski bezhenets* [Jewish refugee] pushed himself into the *otchered* ahead of where this nice young boy was already standing for a quite a while. An argument ensued, and the *Yevrei* [Jew] deliberately hit the *pionier* [pioneer, a Soviet Boy Scout or Junior *Komsomol*] in the face and bloodied his nose”.

In Soviet Russia hitting a child, even your own, was a criminal offence. Parents could be jailed when denounced by their own children for having spanked them. My father was pulled out of the breadline and arrested. After a quick trial by three women judges, he was sentenced to a one-year jail term.

My older brother and I often visited my father in jail or rather at the road gang where he and other inmates worked under heavy guard. We brought him food daily, but we could only approach him from a distance. We had to put the can with the soup on the ground, step back about twenty paces and only then would the guards let my father advance to pick up the meagre food we brought him. My father had to share this food with his *desiatnik*, his group foreman and the *urki* [juvenile delinquents] in his unit, or else!

I have never seen my father in such a sorry, bedraggled state as he was then. The prisoners slept in their clothes and with their boots on. The *urki* could steal boots off the feet of a sleeping prisoner and sell them back to him or to anyone else for a smoke of tobacco. My father, always the free spirit, felt confined and claustrophobic in jail and he often asked us to have mother plead with the authorities for his release.

Chapter 12



June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany Attacks Soviet Russia

Early in the morning of June 22, 1941, in a surprise attack they called “Operation Barbarossa”, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in violation of their Ribbentrop-Molotov Non-Aggression Pact. By the fall of 1941 the Germans had conquered much of the territory between the Bug River and Moscow, the capital of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the rest of vast “Mother Russia” was threatened.

Many of us who were in Russia at the time still remember the song we were taught in school:

*“Dvatsiat-vtorovo iunia, rovno v’ tchetireh tchasah,
Kiev bombili, nam obiavili tchto natchalsa voina.”*

Translation:

“On the 22nd of June, exactly at four in the morning,
Kiev was bombed, and we were informed that war had began”.

There was then a general amnesty in the Soviet Union for common criminals who were then drafted into the military. My father was released from jail under this amnesty and was permitted to rejoin his family.

As Polish citizens, we were now considered allies of the Soviet Union instead of the “Enemies of the State” that we had been until the day before Nazi Germany suddenly attacked their Soviet allies. We were released from detention and given *propusks*, [*laissez passés*, exit permits]. We were free to travel, but where were we to go? The war was raging in the west and the Germans were quickly advancing to the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains, not very far from where we were. Since we could not go west, back to our homes in Poland, we stayed put in our barracks in the *Asbest lager* for about a month or so.

The “Polish Government in Exile”, headquartered in London, England, received permission from the Soviet government to have their former citizens released from the Russian prisons and Siberian slave labour camps and to recruit their former soldiers into the Polish Army. This new Polish Army, commonly referred to as “General Anders’ Army”, was under British Command and was headquartered in Palestine. Train transports were sent out to the *lagers* to gather these former Polish citizens and to transport them to assembly areas in the cities of Tashkent and Bukhara in southern Uzbekistan and then take them out of Russia through Iran into British-controlled Palestine. Tashkent soon became overcrowded from the large influx of Polish refugees.

This is how Menachem Begin, the former Prime Minister of Israel, got out of Russia and into Palestine. Once in Palestine, like many other Betarists, he defected from the Polish Army and joined the Irgun, one of the fiercest anti-British Jewish underground organizations.

Not being too keen on overloading their military ranks with Jews, and with subtle pressure being applied by the British Government who did not want too many Jews entering Palestine, the Polish Government in Exile instituted the familiar “Numerus Clausus”, the unofficial quotas that Poland had used before the war to keep down the percentage of Jews in the Polish secondary schools in the universities and in the professions.

Shortly afterwards, the Soviets formed their own Polish Army Division named after the Polish revolutionary hero, Tadeusz Kościuszko, a veteran of the American War of Independence in the 1770s and who later led a failed Polish uprising in 1793 against the Tsarist-Russian occupiers of Poland. Many of the officers in this Kościuszko Division of this Polish Army were actually Russians with names of Polish origin. Later, in 1945, my mother’s youngest brother Mojsze was drafted into this Kościuszko Polish Army and was made an adjutant and translator to an officer with a Polish name but who could not speak Polish. After Stalingrad, when the Russians were advancing to the west and liberating former Polish territory, they recruited ethnic Poles from that area into this Russian/Polish army.

From *Asbest* we travelled by train to the nearby city of Sverdlovsk. After spending a few days at the train station we were then able to get onto a train that was full of war refugees running east. Our train carried us east to the city of Omsk. We did not intend to go this far to the east as we were getting uncomfortably close to our former prison camp of Asino in Siberia. On reaching the railway junction city of Novosibirsk we decided to get off the train. As was the case of many the other war refugees, the Novosibirsk rail station was our home for close to two weeks. We were trying to get onto a train going south, to Tashkent, but all the trains were overcrowded. At the railway station we slept on benches or sprawled on the floor on top of our *pecklaks* [bundles]. Our travelling luggage consisted of burlap sacks that we carried on our backs like knapsacks. A heavy cord was tied around the mouth of the sack and the two ends of the cord were tied around a small potato placed inside each corner of the sack. We held on tightly to our few possessions lest the ever-present *urki*, the roving gangs of juvenile delinquents, steal our few possessions or cut holes in our bags and remove the contents.

Food was scarce. We brought with us some *sukhari*, slices of dried bread, like “hardtack” or primitive “Melba Toast”, which could be eaten dry or when soaked in hot water would become a form of bread stew. In Russia, on the outside of every rail station there was a tap for drinking water and more importantly, a tap with free *kypyatok* [steaming hot water] that was handy for tea and to make bread stew with the *sukhari*

Every day an *ubornia* was held in the railway station, that is, it was clean-up time. “*Zaberaishmaty y ukhodite stanziy!*” [take your *shmates*, ie, take your rags and leave the station!] was an order shouted at us every single day. Everyone had to leave the station and take with them all their possessions so that the floor of the passenger hall could be mopped. After the daily cleanup, there was a big rush and push to get back inside the station. Invariably fights ensued for the benches or other choice spots.

Utter chaos reigned. The war was raging to the west. The Germans were advancing rapidly towards Moscow and the Ural Mountains, and more and more war refugees were streaming east. Finally, our family of five and my mother's three brothers were able to get onto a freight train that was heading south. [It was the usual Russian passenger boxcar. We never did get to ride in a regular passenger railcar during our six-year sojourn in the land of Communist egalitarianism.]

We were running short of food and running out of items that we could barter for food. Our "barter money" had been pieces of cloth cut off from the bolts of linen that my father and his buddy had lugged back to the prison train when we were arrested the year before.

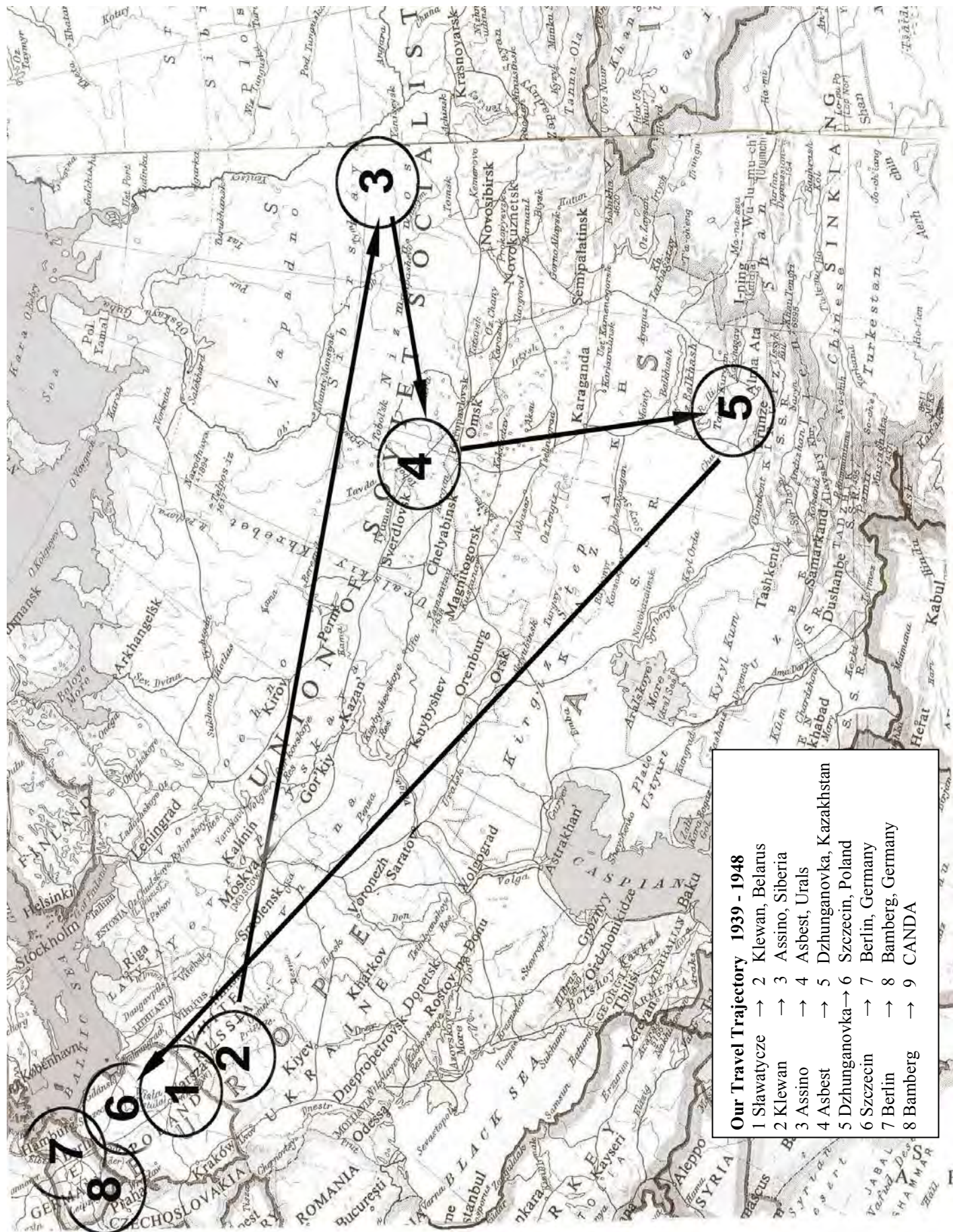
The second day out of Novosibirsk the train stopped at Barnaul. My father went beyond the station to forage for food. The train left and my father was not on it. "*Mein meshugener man*, my crazy husband has disappeared again and this time he is gone for good," my mother lamented. We had heard stories of people who got separated in crowded railway stations and never found each other again.

Two days later my father reappeared, his arms laden with food. [With his special homing instincts my father could have served as an Indian scout for the Lewis & Clark expedition.]

When we reached the city of Bukhara near the Russian-Iranian border, the Jewish quota for the Polish Army was filled. The question facing us was; "Where shall we go?" My mother had a sister, a brother and two maternal uncles living in Montreal, Canada. She also had lots of cousins who had emigrated to Canada in the late 1920s and most of them were living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. So my parents and my three uncles reasoned: "*Canada is a British colony; we heard that in China there is a city called Shanghai where there is a British colony, therefore, it would be easy for us to get into Canada from Shanghai. So let's go on to Shanghai and from there we'll go to Canada!*"

My family of five, together with my mother's three brothers and two other Jewish refugee families from Poland, again set out by cattle train going east on the Southern route, in the general direction of China and Shanghai. When we reached just past Alma-Ata, the capital of Kazakhstan, our train stopped running, our money had run out and we were stuck. The Soviet authorities placed our small group in a nearby *kolhoz* [collective farm] located near the Chu' River. The collective farm must have had the usual heroic Soviet name but the local Kazakhs called it *Imbekshi*. We were put to work with the Kazakh farmers to help them take in their cotton crop. All the able-bodied Soviet citizens had been inducted into the Soviet army and the collective farms were short of manpower.

After about two weeks, my father got impatient and anxious to get out of this "cotton picking" place. He bartered for a wagon and a pair of lumbering oxen and in the middle of one moonless night our family of five and my three uncles made a plodding, "quick" getaway from this tiny Kazakh farming hamlet. After a few days of following the shore of the Chu' River we came to a railway line. We caught a freight train laden with refugees that was heading southwest. When our train reached the fairly large Kazakh town of Dzhambul we discovered that there were a lot of Polish/Jewish refugees there. We then decided to stay in the area and not continue on our quixotic quest to reach Shanghai.



Chapter 13



Dzhunganovka

In Dzhambul the Soviet authorities assigned us to a small village some 15 kilometers south of the city of Dzhambul. The official Soviet name of this village was “*Kolhoz Immeny Stalina*” [Kolhoz Named for Stalin] but it was always referred to as Dunganovka or Dzhunganovka, depending on the ethnicity of the speaker. Dzhunganovka is located in the northern foothills of the Alatau Mountains of Soviet Kirghizia and the Tien-Shan Mountains of Northwestern China. The Talas River, a fast flowing river, passes near the village.

On an Atlas of the World one can see that in this small corner of the Central Asia, Soviet Russia, Mongolia, China, Tibet, Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran all come together and touch each other like fingers on a hand.

Our family of five was billeted in a typical single room *kibitka*, an adobe type mud hut that was located within an enclosed family compound. A high mud fence surrounded each compound. Inside the enclosure was a large yard and abutting the perimeter fence there was two or three flat-roofed mud huts and a couple of animal shelters. There were no windows facing the street. The huts and the mud fences were constructed of sun-dried mud bricks that were made with chopped straw and animal hair added in for strength. All the huts in the village consisted of only one large room of about 20 feet by 20 feet [6m x 6m], the size of a modern bedroom. As their families grew or they acquired another wife, additional huts would be built inside the family compound, one hut abutting another hut. The door and the one or two small windows of these huts always faced into the courtyard and no two adjacent huts were interconnected with doors or other openings.

A large gate for the passage of wagons and animals was located in the part of the fence facing the street. A small, narrow door near the main gate was for people-traffic. At the rear of the enclosed yard there was another small door that led to the fields and the area that was used as a latrine. There were no outhouses and no specific area was designated for this purpose; one could defecate anywhere as long as it was outside of the perimeter of the inner compound. Both human and animal manure was considered a prized natural fertilizer and it was in great demand by the locals. A smooth stone, wetted with water or spittle, served as the local toilet paper. The European sojourners among them used cut-up newspaper [which was in short supply], leaves, grass or they adopted the local method of using a smooth stone which was always within easy reach.

In each hut there was a wall-to-wall raised sleeping platform about two feet off the hard packed mud floor and which occupied about three-quarters of the room. The inside of the sleeping platform was hollow and the top was made of flagstones or squares of sun-dried mud that was supported on mud stub walls that were laid out in a zigzag or maze pattern. [In northwestern China this type of heated sleeping platforms is referred to as *kahng*.] A primitive form of stove abutted one corner of the sleeping platform. The stove consisted of two short walls of the ubiquitous mud blocks topped by a sheet of metal that served as a cooking surface. The stove was used for both cooking and heating the hut during the winter months. The smoke from the stove was discharged horizontally into the hollow sleeping platform, warming it by the circulation of the hot smoke

through the maze of the internal baffles and it was discharged to the outside through a vertical chimney that was located in the kitty-corner. During the summer months all cooking was done on a similar stove located outside of the hut under a small roofed-over shelter.

Our family of five slept on the same sleeping platform in the local manner, one beside the other, like the proverbial sardines in a can. All slept on felt pads and covered themselves with the cotton quilts.

Winters are fierce and summers are rather hot in this area of Kazakhstan. The houses were comfortably warm when heated by the local fuel of preference; the slow burning, dry dung patties. Initially, the platform was quite warm, but in the morning, after the fire had been out for a while, it became rather cold inside the huts. At times it was so cold inside our hut that our pail of drinking water turned into a bucket of ice. During the winter months all wore crude sheepskin coats or quilted cotton jackets that were tied with ribbon tabs. None of the indigenous people used buttons.

Dzhunganovka looked very much like any other Kazakh or Kirghiz village consisting of a single street of low, flat roofed adobe type mud houses. The exception here was that the inhabitants of this village were part of a very small minority that referred to themselves as “Dzhungan” or as “Chinese Muslims”. The Russians called them “Dungan”.

The Dzhungans were an enigmatic people. Their physical features were different from their neighbours. They were taller, had fairer complexions, and their eyes were not as slanted as the Kazakh majority and the neighbouring Kirghiz who both have heavy-lidded eyes and round Mongol faces. The Dzhungans spoke a different language that was obviously not of Turkic origin like the other tribal languages of this part of Central Asia and it was totally incomprehensible to the others. The “lingua franca” was a mix of pidgin Russian and the local Turkic-based Kazakh and Kirghiz languages.

The Dzhungans had been in this area for as long as they could remember and they knew of two or three other Dzhungan settlements a few days ride past Alma-Ata and that most of their fellow tribesmen were on the other side of the mountains; pointing towards China. The old men said that their grandfathers told them that long ago they had come from beyond those mountains in order to escape massacres by the Chinese Han invaders. The Dzhungans knew nothing much else about their own history.

The Dzhungans were endogamous, that is, they married only within their own people. As Sunni Muslims they were polygamous and a few of the men had taken second wives from other neighbouring Muslim tribes such as the Kirghiz or the Kazakhs but their principal wives were always Dzhungan women. Dzhungan women could only marry Dzhungan men. Generally, the non-Dzhungan second wives and their families lived in their native villages and the Dzhungan husbands travelled there on their conjugal visits. Wives were bought sight unseen from the head of the girl’s family. Two wives was the maximum anyone in the village could afford to own.

Curiously, the Dzhungans in our village held Chinese and not Soviet citizenship as one would expect and therefore, they were not drafted into the Soviet Army as were the Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Uzbeks and other citizens of the Soviet Republics. Each year, one of the Dzhungan elders journeyed to Alma-Ata, the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan, to have their Chinese passports renewed by the consul of the Republic of China.

It was only in 1959 that I discovered the possible origins of the Dzhungans. It happened on the same train trip from Quebec City that I referred to earlier in this Memoir when the Rev. Dr. Clifford Knowles, the Presbyterian Chaplain of McGill University, revealed to me that our family name “Gitelman” was originally “Hitelman”.

The Rev. Dr. Knowles was an amateur anthropologist and one of his many hobbies was the study of Central Asian tribal people and their languages. After many questions about my family history he got very excited when I related to him about our sojourn among the Dzhungans. He wanted to know more about them and he asked me details about their unique customs and their unique language. By then I did not remember very much of the little I had known of the Dzhungan language though I did remember how to count from 1 to 10.

A week or so later, Rev. Knowles called to tell me that, after consulting with some of his learned colleagues, he believes the Dzhungans or Dungans are one of the many small groups of ethnic peoples in Asia and they number less than 30,000 people. They are concentrated primarily in the "Dzhungarian Depression" of China between the Tien-Shan and Altai Mountains and that there are small concentrations of Dzhungans in the nearby Soviet Republics of Kirghizstan and Kazakhstan. Some may have escaped into central Asia through the "Dzhungarian Gap" which cuts across the mountainous border between China and Russia in order to escape reprisals from the Chinese overlords after having rebelled against them in the mid 1700s and again in the late 1800s. Rev. Knowles and his colleagues think that the Dzhungan language seems to be a form of Pushtu, which is of Northern Afghani origin, and that the Dzhungans may be the descendants of nomads from Northern Afghanistan. Rev. Knowles then asked me if they played a type of polo game on horseback using a headless goat as the object to be captured. I replied in the affirmative, they called it "Buz Kashi". "This is what Afghans call this game", Dr. Knowles stated enthusiastically. The Dzhungans may have been one of the nomad tribes that migrated from the Persian Empire in an easterly direction on the northern branch of the ancient Silk Road. There is evidence, he added, that some tribes even came to that area from as far as Europe and that they all got lost in history.

The Dzhungan women were very pretty. They washed their long, raven black hair in soured milk, a sort of yoghurt, and wore it down to their ankles in one long braid weighted down with silver coins if they were married and in two braids without decorations if they were not married. The women wore colourful cotton dresses over pyjama-like trousers and soft leather slippers. In contrast to the neighbouring Kazakh and Kirghiz women who wore cotton-padded turbans, the Dzhungan women wore embroidered caps on their heads. The Dzhungan men also wore these types of caps which were distinct from those worn by the other peoples in the area.

Horses and also camels, the double humped Bactrian type, were used for ploughing the fields and for pulling wagons laden with the sugar beet crop. The Dzhungans seldom rode camels probably because they moved too slowly for them. They were expert riders and kept shaggy ponies for transportation and for their amusement. They wore baggy pants that were held up with a drawstring and the pants had no 'flies'. The Dzhungans ate at low tables while sitting cross-legged on a carpet. They used no chairs and for all other activities, such as story telling, gambling, being barbered or defecating, they squatted with feet planted flat on the ground with the body hanging from their knees.

The young Dzhungan boys played a game on which the modern "Hacki-Sack" is probably based. It consisted of a small leather sack filled with dry corn. Another version was made from a large penny through which a hole was drilled in the centre and a wad of horsehair pulled through the hole and secured with a wooden peg. The "Hacki-Sack", either the coin or bean sack version, was kept in the air by hitting it with the ankles, alternating between the right and left foot.

Another game young Dzhungans played was "*al'tchik*". This consisted of twirling between forefinger and thumb a sheep's knucklebone and tossing it into the air. The opposing player called

out whether the *al'tchik* landed heads or tails or by knocking the opponent's *al'tchiks* out of an inscribed circle on the ground. The winner collected the other players' *al'tchiks*. It was quite acceptable in this game of skill to file down or add lead to an *al'tchik* in order to give the player an unfair advantage over his opponent. A favourite *al'tchik* lost to an opponent could be redeemed for money or for treats.

The main diet of the local Kazakhs and Kirghiz was stewed lamb with rice, which they ate only with their right hand. [As Muslims, their left hand was reserved for unclean purposes, such as wiping their behinds.] The Dzhungans' main diet was stewed lamb with wheat noodles, which they ate with chopsticks, Chinese style. The Dzhungans ate from porcelain bowls and drank tea from cups of a different design. The Dzhungans baked flat bread in round, vertical outdoor ovens that were fuelled by dry cow dung. This flat bread is indistinguishable from the Mediterranean pita.

Lice, fleas and ticks were quite common among all of us there. Lice are disease carrying wingless parasites that pierce the skin and feed on blood. They also cement their nits [lice eggs] to the stem of body hair to prevent their progeny from falling out of the nest. To keep the lice at bay, the Dzhungan men shaved off all their body hair; including that of the head, face, eyebrows, underarm and also their pubic hair. Like most Orientals, Dzhungan men grew no hair on their chests, arms or legs. The Dzhungan women sat around in social groups and with their teeth they bit along the seams of their family's clothes and cotton quilts to squash the live lice and nits that infested their clothes and bedding.

My younger brother Mojsze was practically three years old then, and since we were now in a more stable place, my mother decided that the time had come to wean him from the breast. In order to assure our own supply of milk, we acquired a cow. One day, while milking the cow, the cow gored my mother. My father was away from home, so I borrowed a scrawny plough horse from a neighbour and I galloped bareback on this bony nag into Dzhambul to summon the doctor. My mother wasn't hurt badly, but I had to be attended to by the doctor for a bleeding coccyx. I could not sit for over a week.

In the early 1930s the Soviet Army, led by the legendary Bolshevik hero of the Russian civil war, Marshall Semeon Budennyi, subjugated the Central Asian Muslim tribes. In Dzhunga-novka, and elsewhere, it was considered to be a provocation if one twirled, or even pretend to twirl, a moustache in imitation of moustachioed Marshall Budennyi, the most recent of their many conquerors.

In the late 1930, the Soviets confiscated all private land in Central Asia and organized villages like Dzhunganovka into kolhozy [collective farms]. A large part of the common pastures were put under the plough and crops of corn and sugar beets were planted. Dzhunganovka was then officially named "Kolhoz Immeny Stalina" [Kolhoz named Stalin].

Sugar beets, which taste acrid when eaten raw and overly sweet when cooked, were not a traditional food staple of the Dzhungans, neither was farming their natural occupation. They were shepherds and traders; farming was forced upon them by the Soviets. The Dzhungan women did most of the heavy work in the fields and at home. The men were the supervisors, rode their horses or sat around on their haunches gambling and telling tall tales of past heroic battles.

Each household was allotted a small plot of land of about half an acre behind their compounds to serve as a private vegetable garden. Corn, melons, and onion were often grown on these small plots. Our family was allotted a plot of land not far from our house. My brother Szepsel and I turned-over the stony soil manually with spades and hoes and we planted potatoes and corn. The area was rather arid and the fields under cultivation had to be labouriously irrigated. The

communal fields of the *Kolhoz* and also the small private garden plots were planted in long, raised furrows arranged in a zigzag pattern so that they could be watered by the network of irrigation canals that were fed by diverting water from the fast flowing Talas River.

The sugar beets were carried from the communal fields by camel or horse drawn wagons and brought to the sugar refinery in Dzhambul where they were processed into sugar. Often, my friends and I, like the other boys, dodged the long whip of the wagon drivers and snatched beets from the back of the wagons.

Later on in the war, American Lend Lease Studebaker trucks were used to carry the sugar beets to the sugar refinery. A young Jewish refugee girl was once caught stealing a few sugar beets from the back of a truck that was passing through our village. She was tried by three judge tribunal in front of a large crowd and was sentenced to two years at hard labour for “interfering with the patriotic war effort” and as a warning to all would-be thieves.

Initially, besides our own family, there were only two other Jewish refugee families in Dzhunganovka. Subsequently, many war refugees or evacuees, both Jews and non-Jews, were settled in our village. The Dzhungans, always wary of outsiders, resisted any intrusion into their life. After a while, they cautiously accepted us, since we, as Jews, did not eat *tchushka* [pork] as did the Russians, the Koreans in a nearby settlement or the detested Han Chinese. Also, since we, as Jews, shared many of our first names with them, such as Ibrahim [Abraham], Isa’ak and Musa [Moshe], the Muslim Dzhungans became less apprehensive of us Jews. One of our landlord’s sons was even named *Khaim* just like my own Hebrew name *Chaim*. Eventually, close relationships were formed between our family and some of the Dzhungans. After a while we were permitted to draw water from their private wells, others had to carry water from a natural spring which was located about two kilometers from the village. Our friendship was a natural affinity of one persecuted minority for another persecuted minority.

The locals knew practically nothing of life outside of their own immediate area. They liked to hear our tales of life in far away Poland, of streetcars and elevators, of large cities where houses were piled one on top of another, and people were pulled up in cages to the upper levels. The Dzhungans thought it to be a disgusting custom for anyone to be defecating indoors, even if it was in a specially assigned room.

In the fall of 1941, shortly after our arrival in Dzhunganovka, I was enrolled in a newly formed kindergarten. I was already eight years old and should have been in grade one under the Soviet ten-year elementary and secondary school system, but, a free lunch was served daily to the kids in the kindergarten, so with some creative fudging by my parents I became “not yet seven years old” and thus eligible for kindergarten and the free lunch. My older brother Szepsel, who was thirteen years old by then, worked with my father to help support the family. The following year, approaching my ninth birthday, I finally entered into grade one.

In this chaotic time of war, our school had few books and no writing paper. Pencils and ink were hard to come by. Sometimes Communist Party newspapers such as the “*Pravda*” or “*Komsomol*” were available at the school and the newspapers were used as scribbles, that is, we literally wrote “between the lines”. Once, there was a shipment of Communist Party books that were bound in the usual Party fashion of red cloth covers with embossed white lettering. These books with titles such as “In Praise of Father Stalin” were allotted only to the upperclassmen who then wrote their own essays “In Praise of Father Stalin and his Leadership of the Glorious War Effort” between the lines of these books. We made our own ink by crushing the lead of “chemical”

indelible pencils and dissolving the purple lead in hot water. Metal pen nibs were hard to obtain and at times we used quill pens made from the tail “pen” feathers of roosters.

I have a photograph of my third grade class taken in April of 1945. I was eleven and half years old then. By that time there were many more war refugees and evacuees in Dzhunganovka than the original three Jewish refugee families. What a conglomeration of diverse faces can be seen in my class picture. I am there, with my shaven head and standing beside me is my younger brother whom I brought in to be with me in the picture. Our teacher was a Russian woman. In my class picture there are two Koreans, a Tatar, a Russian boy whose father was the police commandant, a Russian girl wearing a heavy shawl around her face to conceal her shaven head, a Polish boy in a white turtleneck sweater and three other Jewish kids. There was a Kazakh girl whose father was a local Party official and also the only one Dzhungan boy in our class. Dzhungan parents were not interested in having their children mix with non-Dzhungans and would not permit sons, and especially their daughters, to attend public school.

In class, every day we had to check each other for head lice and if too many lice were found on our head we were ordered by the teacher to wash our hair with smelly naphtha or to have our heads shaved.

In the class picture I am seen wearing golf pants and a matching tweed jacket that was passed down to me from my older brother. After our arrival in Canada in 1948 I saw a picture of my mother's cousin Freda Simon and her family that was taken in Montreal in the mid 1930s. In that picture my cousin David Simon can be seen wearing the very same suit that I was wearing in my Dzhunganovka class picture. When the suit became small for my rich cousin, it was sent to Slawatycze as a “hand me down” for my older brother Szepsel and then it was “handed down” to me; this is now called “recycling”.

There was a mosque in Dzhunganovka, but since the Soviets had banned all religious services and gatherings by groups of over 5 people, the mosque was converted into a general meeting hall which was occasionally used for showing movies. A special mobile cinema truck, outfitted with a power generator and a projector, travelled to the various outlying villages to show propaganda movies and some benign American movies such as “Sun Valley Serenade” with Sonja Henje and especially Charlie Chaplin films such as “Modern Times” and “The Little Dictator”. “Tarzan” movies with Johnny Weissmuller were the all-time favourites. The movies were projected on a large sheet hung in the courtyard of the former mosque. The movies were always well attended by the refugees and also by the Dzhungan men but not their women as they were not permitted to mix with strangers. At the movies it was always “standing room only” as no seats were provided. There were frequent pauses to change the movie reels and to restart the gasoline driven power generator.

As Muslims, the older Dzhungans prayed in private five times a day kneeling on their small prayer rugs. The younger generation mocked them for being old fashioned and even considered them degenerate. After a while, I was able to recite the Arabic prayers. The Dzhungans loved to sing and they accompanied themselves on a three stringed instrument that was held flat across the knees and plucked or played with a bow that looked like an old Chinese warrior's archery bow. They sang in a nasal monotone and their songs were generally tales of heroic battles and of fearless bravery. One of our landlord's sons was a professional singer. He lived in the Kazakhstan capital of Alma-Ata where there was another, perhaps larger, Dzhungan community nearby. He sang on the state radio and often returned to Dzhunganovka to a hero's welcome as he usually brought with him his own recordings and many other records and played them for all to hear on his wind-up gramophone.

About two years after our arrival in Dzhunganovka the village shepherd contracted lockjaw. The Dzhungan cowherd, named Khaim, was about fifteen years old and our landlord's nephew. He must have stepped on a rusty nail or on a piece of barbed wire and was infected with tetanus. Tetanus is caused by a bacterium that is found in the soil and enters the body through a deep wound and can cause gradual paralysis. After a while Khaim's face became progressively paralysed and he had difficulty in opening his jaw. He had painful convulsions and great difficulty swallowing food. I remember seeing him at his house, lying on his bedroll, his front teeth had been knocked out so that he could be fed by pouring liquid food down his throat. About two or three weeks later the poor fellow died. He must have starved to death or suffocated due to the progressive paralysis of his chest muscles.

My older brother Szepsel, who was close to seventeen years old at that time, inherited the lucrative job of being the shepherd of the village cows. The village cowherd would collect a monthly fee for each cow he pastured plus a daily lunch that was given to him, on a rotational basis, by the owners of the cows. A major perk of this job was the cowherd's right to the herd's cow dung. In this area of few trees, dried cow dung was used as "firewood" and it was a sought-after and marketable commodity.

After my brother had been the village cow herder for about six months, a cow strayed from his herd and it was found about three days later; stuck in a ravine. It is rather dangerous to the wellbeing of a lactating cow if it is not milked for more than a day or two. My brother could have been held responsible if the cow had died or was stolen. My brother Szepsel, then and there, decided that the responsibility of being a cowherd was too much for him and he quit this most ancient of professions of our forefathers, the well-known sheep-herding firm of *Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Sons*.

Few trees grow in this area and what few trees there were they were reserved for roof beams for house construction and for shafts of farm implements, such as shovels, rakes and hoes. The fuel used for cooking was a type of gummy sagebrush called *topka* that grew in abundance in the nearby fields and which burned rather quickly with a hot flame. But the fuel of choice was the slow burning, dried cow dung that was favoured for heating in the winter of the raised sleeping platforms.

Dry cow dung burns rather slowly, very much like dry peat moss that is used as fuel in Ireland. Women and children, carrying sacks, went into the pastures to collect the dry cow dung patties. In the North American prairies they are called "Buffalo Chips".

Some of the newcomer refugees tried bringing in coal from Dzhambul but there were a few near fatal accidents as burning coal gives off toxic gases. It was safer to use coke, which is degassed coal, but it was difficult to obtain and rather expensive.

Each morning the cows from the village were let out onto the main street of Dzhunganovka to be driven by the cowherd to the communal pastures and they were returned to the village at the end of the day. Women and children followed the cow parade with buckets and scooped up the warm cow dung with their bare hands.

When our buckets were filled with the fresh, steaming cow dung we would rush back to our family compounds to empty them onto the manure pile located in the middle of the yard and then rush out to catch up with the cows for more of the same crap.

We also collected some of the coarser and therefore, less prized horseshit to be mixed in with the more liquid cow dung. Horses, not being ruminants, that is, they do not chew their cud; have

coarser excrement than cows do. The piles of collected manure in the private yards were then kneaded by treading the dung thoroughly with our bare feet; it was very much like squashing wine grapes in a vat. After the dung was thoroughly mixed, it was then shaped by hand into round patties, the size of a medium “Domino’s” pizza. The wet dung patties were then plastered onto the inside of the mud fences surrounding our courtyards to let them dry in the sun. My mother and I soon became champs at this speciality. After a few days in the sun, the dung “pizzas” were dry enough to be easily removed from the wall. These handmade, and much prized, dung patties were then stacked in a shed next to the natural cow-dung patties we gleaned from the cow pastures. During the time when my brother was the cowherd we had a bumper crop of this prized “Central Asian Gold Crap” and we sold the surplus to the new war refugees in our village.

Needless to say, there was no electricity in Dzhunganovka. We studied by the light of an oil lamp that consisted of a wick stuck through a piece of wood floated in a bowl or in a can filled with oil. It had no glass globe and was rather smoky. In the morning our faces were streaked with black soot and our nostrils full of black snot.

There was a shortage of everything, including utensils. A bottle was easily converted into a drinking glass. A string soaked in kerosene was wrapped around the middle of the bottle and then set on fire. The bottle was then plunging it into cold water and it would cut off cleanly at the line of the flaming string.

Adding a handle to an empty tin can that had contained the US processed meat “Spam” converted the empty can into a drinking cup. [An early form of recycling] The locals used glazed china bowls and china teacups. Flat plates were unknown. Broken china was mended by old men plying their unique trade. Using a small bow with its string wrapped around a steel tipped arrow the repair man played it to-and-fro to drill small, precisely located, shallow holes along each side of the break-line. Small copper staples were then lightly hammered into the opposite holes to hold the broken parts together.

Matches were non-existent. To start a fire one struck together two flint stones over a pan that contained ashes of burned cotton. By blowing on the ashes the spark was propagated into a glowing ember. Smokers carried with them similar paraphernalia in small, pillbox type, containers.

When our landlord’s oldest son had saved up enough money to purchase a bride, he asked us kids to report to him what his intended looked like. He only knew her from when they were young kids. As devout Muslims, the Dzhungans kept their unmarried daughters inside the family compounds after the start of their menarche. Members of the immediate family, women, and also young boys were the only ones that could view these young, unmarried women. So, after being properly bribed by the young swain, a couple of my friends and I went to the girl’s family compound on the pretext of playing with her younger brothers, but our main task was to spy on the young intended bride of about fourteen or fifteen years of age. We reported to the bridegroom that she is a true beauty; that she is tall, she has long shiny black hair down to her ankles and she dresses in nice clothes and wears colourful paisley scarves around her neck. So our landlord’s son concluded the deal with the girl’s father and got the right to claim the young beauty as his bride.

The marriage feast lasted three days. The first day was feted at the bride’s compound. The second day was celebrated at the groom’s compound. On the third day, the groom, in the company of his friends, galloped off on their ponies to “storm” the bride’s compound and “snatch” the young bride. The groom scooped up his bedecked prize and, carrying her under one arm, galloped off throughout the village to show off his “abducted bride” before taking her to his own family compound. All the while the groom’s friends “fought-off” the bride’s relatives in mock battle to

prevent pursuit and the rescue of the “abducted bride”. [Bride snatching is an old custom that is practised by the peoples of the Caucasus and the mountainous areas around Afghanistan.]

My father, as one who could ride a horse with the best of them, enjoyed an avuncular relationship with his Dzhungan student/workers and with our landlord’s sons. They loved to hear his fascinating tales of far away Europe and of his service in the Polish Cavalry. At the wedding feast my father was treated like a favourite uncle. This honour came with certain privileges and responsibilities. One of the privileges accorded the groom’s “uncle” was a front row seat among the witnesses to his “nephew’s” consummation of the marriage. [My father always maintained that I was there and that he ushered me out of the room]. A few weeks after the marriage it was noticed that the pretty young bride had been concealing a rather large goitre under her colourful scarves.

When one of our landlord’s younger sons turned about twelve years old, the time had come for him to be circumcised. In accordance with Muslim custom, boys are circumcised before the age of thirteen, the age *Isma’il* was when he and his eight day old half-brother *Isa’ak*, the progenitor of the Jews, were circumcised by their father *Ibrahim* who also circumcised himself.

Circumcision day was a feast day in the family compound with many friends and relatives attending. The teenage “*ben brith*” [Hebrew for “Son of the Covenant”] was placed on a mat in the middle of the yard and he was held down by his older brothers and his uncles. An elder Dzhungan acted as the *mo’el* [circumciser]. The star of the show was first fed sweet confections so that it would be a sweet experience for him. He was then fed mashed-up hardboiled egg yolks so that his mouth would be mealy and he would not be able to cry out in pain and thereby embarrass his family. The women in the distance ululated, the men shouted and the painful deed was done. Wet clay was applied to stem the bleeding. Only after about a two week convalescence was the young man able to walk again.

When a co-worker, a prospective convert to Judaism, had once asked my friend Jack Leinwand if circumcision is painful. Jack replied: “I was only eight days old when I was circumcised so I do not remember if it hurts, but I can tell you one thing for certain, I was not able to walk for a year”.

My mother’s three brothers, Nute, Riwen and Mojsze were with us in Dzhunganovka. They lived in a hut in the family compound of a wealthy Dzhungan who had a second wife, a young Kazakh woman who lived in her family village about a day’s drive from Dzhunganovka. The Dzhungan was a crafty black-marketeer whose speciality was selling wagonloads of contraband wheat that he obtained through his Kazakh in-laws.

My mother’s youngest brother Mojsze, a handsome young man in his early twenties and a “go-getter”, was made a junior partner by their landlord in his black market wheat deals. This gave the Dzhungan more time to visit his second wife in the remote Kazakh village and to buy more wheat. He also taught my uncle how to speak the Dzhungan language. This was rather unusual since to the Dzhungans their language was part of their unique distinctiveness, their *Lashon Kodesh* [Hebrew for “Holy Tongue”] that was to be spoken only between Dzhungans and was not for use by others. As all non-kosher or Mafia organizations need a convenient language to secretly communicate among themselves, one that is not generally understood by outsiders, the old Dzhungan made an exception for his junior partner and taught my uncle Mojsze how to speak Dzhungan.

My uncle Mojsze, who was often in Dzhambul on business, met there a bright, educated lady named Andzia Szapira, originally from Łódź, Poland. After he got to know her a little better he thought that she would make a good mate for his older brother Nute. He introduced her to his older

brother and things got serious between Nute and Andzia. As the oldest in her family, my mother reminded her brother that as a *Kohen* he must not marry a divorcée, a widow or any blemished woman and that he must only marry an “unspoiled” virgin. In spite of his older sister’s admonitions, my uncle Nute married the young widow from Łódź and brought her to Dzhunganovka. The newly married couple lived in the same hut with the groom’s two other brothers.

The bazaars, the marketplaces of the East from ancient times, were tolerated by the Soviets as a place where the collective [*kolhoz*] farmers could sell their surplus produce grown in their back yard garden plots but in actuality it was rife with black-marketeers; big and small.

At another time, when my uncle Mojsze was on the Dzhambul bazaar, he spotted a young woman selling candy from a kiosk. She looked rather familiar to him. He could not believe his eyes! She was his second cousin Chaja Paluch from Hanna. Chaja was the only one of her family who got away from the Nazis. Cousin Chaja joined the family in Dzhunganovka and moved into the same single room hut with her three cousins and Nute’s new bride.

Often there were *oblavas* [police raids] in the bazaars. The Soviet Militia would cordon off an area of the bazaar and verify the documents of everyone caught in their net. The authorities were looking for deserters and for big time black marketeers. They also press-ganged people into the *Trud Army*, an army of forced labourers. Due to the induction of all able-bodied Soviet citizens into the armed forces there was a dire shortage of workers on the collective farms and the forced labour battalions were created to replace the inducted collective farmers. Many of the *Trud Army* slave workers were also sent to the war zones to dig trenches and tank traps. People who did not serve in the regular army for reasons of age or ill health, and especially Polish refugees who were not obliged to serve in the regular Soviet armed forces, were candidates for the *Trud Army*.

My uncle Riwen was in the wrong place at the wrong time and he was caught in one such raid and inducted into the *Trud Army*. He served for about two years as a cook on a collective fishing village on the Aral Sea. At the end of the war he was permitted to return to Dzhunganovka. Shortly afterwards my uncle Riwen married his second cousin Chaja Paluch.

The Aral Sea is really an inland lake and it has since become an ecological disaster. It is constantly shrinking due to the interception of the feed waters of its two principal tributaries, the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya. The water of these two rivers has been used for extensive irrigation of the large cotton fields in the surrounding area. The area around this shrinking lake is now a saline desert.

In the spring of 1942, a forlorn man in a torn *fufayka* [a padded cotton jacket] and broken glasses that were tied with string around his ears showed up in the Dzhambul bazaar. He had travelled all night by train from a small town called Yangi-Yul near Tashkent, some 250 km away, to buy bread on the Dzhambul black market. He intended to bring the black market bread back to Yangi-Yul and resell it at a profit. Dzhambul was considered to be a breadbasket, while in nearby Tashkent, flooded by war refugees, food was at a premium. At the bazaar a Jewish refugee from Poland recognized this man’s *Warszawer aksent* and told him that not far from here, in a small village, there lived a Polish Jew who had worked in Warsaw and his brother and two sisters had lived in Warsaw. “What’s his name?” the visitor asked. “Gitelman”, was the response. “Oh, my wife’s maiden name is also Gitelman”, said the black-market-bread-dealer from Yangi-Yul. He turned out to be my father’s brother-in-law, Henryk [Heniek] Miller. That is how we found my father’s sister Yachad [Jadzia] and her husband Heniek. They came to live with us in Dzhunganovka. After the outbreak of the war in 1939, Heniek, who is a native of Warsaw, crossed

over into Soviet annexed Poland to join his fiancée, Jadzia Gitelman, in Malorita. Jadzia and Heniek were married in 1940. They were not arrested by the Soviets in 1940 and were not taken to Siberia like we were because Jadzia was born in Malorita, which had become Soviet territory. In June 1941 they miraculously escaped the raging war-front and like many other war refugees they somehow wound up in Uzbekistan, in the small town of Yangi-Yul near Tashkent.

The Soviets did not deport to Siberia the other members of my father's family who lived in Malorita like we had been deported and they all perished in the Shoah. My father's brother Akiwa [Kiwa] who resided in Warsaw had married Pesha Ratnowska, originally from Pinsk, Byelorussia. After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, they both managed to escape across the Bug River to Pinsk, then under Soviet occupation.

The University of Michigan political scientist and author, Zvi Y. Gitelman, [no relation of mine] whose parents were from Pinsk, informed me that on a visit to Pinsk in 1993 he discovered a Soviet census of Pinsk residents dating from the end of 1939. On this list there were two listings of "Kiwa Gitelman"; one listing was for "Kiwa Gitelman the furrier, born in Slawatycze, son of Abram", the other entry was for a "Kiwa Gitelman, plotnik, [construction carpenter], born in Malorita, son of Yitzchok". It is obvious that these two entries were for the same person, my father's brother Akiwa. My uncle Akiwa was born in Slawatycze and was both a furrier and a plotnik and his father's name, my paternal grandfather, was Abram-Yitzchok who was then living with his second wife and their young family in Malorita, Byelorussia, now in the territory annexed by the Soviets.

After the war, eyewitnesses reported to my father that they had seen his brother Kiwa in the Pinsk Ghetto.

In the summer of 1942 the Nazis conducted a census of Pinsk Ghetto. The original of these documents are in the holdings of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Recently, I was able to obtain a copy of page #176 of this census on which Pescha and Kiwa Gitelman and their baby daughter Paja are listed as living at Tüpfersstr 37/18. The Ghetto was liquidated in December of 1942. Pescha, Kiwa and their baby Paja perished in the Shoah.

Had my uncle Akiwa not changed his identity to someone who was born in Malorita, that is, on the Soviet side of the new border, he and his family may have been deported to Siberia in 1940, like we were, and perhaps they may have survived the Shoah, like my immediate family did.

After living with us in the same hut for a short while, my newly found aunt Jadzia and uncle Heniek were assigned to their own accommodations in the nearby hamlet of *V'toraya Dzhunganovka* [Second- Dzhunganovka]. This small Dzhungan enclave consisted of a few mud-walled huts but without the mud fences.

In January of 1944 my aunt Jadzia gave birth to a baby boy. One cold night the cow dung fire in their stove must have gone out and it turned very cold in their hut. The baby was crying. "The baby must be cold", they thought. So, instead of taking the baby into bed between them, this young, big-city couple decided to put their baby on top of the faintly warm stove to keep him warm through the rest of the night. The baby cried non-stop. "He must be colic", they thought. Early in the morning, when they removed the baby's wet and steaming swaddling clothes, pieces of the baby's bottom came off with the cloth. The baby must have peed and there was still enough heat in

the stove to have cooked his backside. To this day, the family jokes that our cousin John Miller must have two extra dimples on his behind.

Near *V'toraya Dzhunganovka* there was a small settlement of about a dozen huts where only Koreans lived. These Koreans, originally from the Vladivostok area where many Chinese and Koreans live, had been arrested in the late thirties and exiled to our area. Our Korean neighbours' houses were different, also built of mud, but their steep thatched roofs distinguished them from the Dzhungan flat roofed houses. Their Muslim neighbours avoided the Christian Koreans like the plague for not only did they raise pigs but they also raised dogs for food. I had a Korean classmate whose Russian father, an officer in the Soviet army stationed in Vladivostok, was arrested for whatever reason, and his Korean wife, their children and her entire family were exiled to our area.

With the large influx of war refugees, employment was scarce. A factory making underwear for the army was started in the village under government auspices. My uncles Nute and Riwen and their wives worked there. For a while, my big-city uncle Heniek worked as the night shepherd and guardian of the *kolhoz* workhorses. Being a night watchman in a factory or in a warehouse was a most lucrative job because stealing was a way of life; there were shortages of everything. My aunt Jazia and uncle Heniek then opened a Government sanctioned restaurant where liquor was served. Watering down the Government issued Vodka added an extra margin of profit for them.

The making of ladies' fur coats or carpentry was not viable means of earning a living in this part of the world as most people wore sheepskin coats or padded cotton jackets in the winter and no wood was available for carpentry. The locals knew how to tan sheepskins but they did not know how to make hard leather which is used for the soles of footwear. So my father opened a government sanctioned tanning school in order to teach the locals the secret of making hard leather. When my father was asked; "How come a furrier/carpenter like you knows how to tan hides into hard leather?", he explained that when he was a young boy they lived next door to a family of tanners and that it was pretty obvious to him what was their supposedly "secret" tanning process.

Three large, round pits, each one of about three metres across and about two metres deep, were dug out in our back yard to serve as tanning vats. These vats were waterproofed by lining them with clay. One vat was filled with a solution of activated lime; a caustic chemical that removed the hair from the cowhides. The second vat was filled with fresh water to rinse off the activated lime from the hides. The third vat was filled with a solution of tamarack bark; the tanning agent. The tamarack bark was obtained from the few sparse tamarack trees that grew in the hills across the Talas River. Water for the vats was carried by the the apprentices in buckets from a nearby spring. About a year later the government sent my father to attend a course on how to tan hard leather by chemical nitrates. About four or five young Dzhungans were assigned to my father as his tanning apprentices. The central government stores in Dzhambul issued my father's tannery a certain amount of square metres of raw hides and the necessary tanning chemicals and he had to turn in to the government stores the same amount of square metres of finished product, less a small allowance for shrinkage. His pay was by the square metre of leather produced and it was rather dismal. A month's pay was just enough to buy a week's supply of food for the family. So, like everyone else, my father had to do some black marketeering. He bought illegal hides from the Dzhungans who illegally slaughtered their illegally owned extra horses or extra cows. My father mixed-in these illegal hides with his batch of government issued hides and he then sold this illegally produced leather to the Jewish shoemakers in Dzhambul who made shoes and boots illegally which were then sold illegally on the black markets.

My brother Szepsel and I carried this contraband leather to the shoemakers in Dzhambul. To avoid detection, we hiked cross-country along the shore of the Talas River carrying on our backs heavy rucksacks filled with pieces of leather topped off with cow dung patties as camouflage.

This was the way my father earned sufficient money to feed his family, to give out bonuses to his apprentices/workers and to have enough money to bribe the government storekeepers to “give” him extra chemicals or even extra raw hides. Unfortunately this ideal situation did not last for too long as my father was arrested and sentenced to a one-year jail term for *spekulacia*, that is, speculating on the black market. It was the winter of 1942, the winter of the decisive battles at Stalingrad. It was the worst of times for our family. We did not have enough to eat. My uncles helped out and neighbours, who did not have enough to eat themselves, gave us their potato peels. We also rummaged through the empty potato fields for stray potatoes. Any potatoes found in the fields at that time of year were frozen. The starch in frozen potatoes turns to sugar and when cooked, frozen potatoes smell like rotten eggs and taste acrid-sweet. About four months after he was arrested, my father was released from jail under a general amnesty.

In the spring of 1959, when Judy Fink, formerly of the Bronx, N.Y., and I were courting, she cooked a fabulous roast beef dinner for the two of us at her apartment in Montreal. With the delicious roast beef Judy served lots of delicious little roast potatoes that were browned in the fatty juice of the roast. As a side dish, Judy made her “pièce de résistance”, baked sweet-potato pie with a browned crust of marshmallows. I had never eaten sweet-potato pie before. The pie looked scrumptious. I took a big spoonful of the sweet-potato pie into my mouth and the memory of the acrid-sweet taste of the frozen potatoes of our hungry winter of 1942 flashed through my memory. Judy and I were married on Halloween Day in 1959 and she never made sweet-potato pie for me again.

A typhus epidemic swept through Dzhunganovka. My father was convinced that drinking lots of Vodka would ward off any disease, especially typhus. Everyone in our family, including my uncles and most of the people in the village, got sick. All, that is, except my father. [Throughout his life, my father had a *schnapps* before eating his lunch or supper “in order to give him an appetite” and he always proclaimed it to be the best medicine to keep away any kind of bug and to ward off diseases.] There was no hospital in our village of Dzhunganovka so the local school was converted into a makeshift isolation ward. The symptoms of typhus, a highly contagious disease, are; diarrhea, chest pains, sudden high fever, chills, and possible delirium and death. The most critical period of typhus is the first two weeks of the outbreak of the disease. Many of the elderly and the very young in our village died. For the survivors, after the initial two-week crisis, an insatiable hunger and thirst follow, which lasts for another two weeks. There was little food available and my father had to provide for us and for my three uncles and their two women and also for his sister and brother-in-law. Miraculously, all of our family recovered.

Malaria was common in this area and my mother and I contacted this dreadful parasitic disease. Malaria sufferers are racked with repetitious high fevers, hot sweats and cold shivers. We took a lot of bitter quinine powder, the locals called it “China Powder”, which was made from the bark of a tree that grows in the nearby mountains. This bitter tasting medication is perhaps still the most effective medicine to combat the trembling chills of malaria. [Although I have not felt its symptoms for close to fifty years, yet evidence of my past bouts with this parasitic disease still shows up in some of my blood tests. Also, I enjoy the slightly bitter taste of “Schweppes Tonic Water” which contains a touch of quinine in its formula.]

Medicine was primitive. The nearest doctor was in Dzhabul, some sixteen kilometres away. My mother had learned a lot of folk medicine from her mother and from her grandmother and she put it to good use. Of course *Bankes* [cupping] was a staple of her repertoire. Spider webs applied over a cut or a bleeding scrape or peeing on one's own stubbed toe was used to stem blood flow. Dandelion leaves and poultices of a mixture of flour and wild honey were used to drain pus from infected wounds and boils.

The Dzhangans had a rather unique method of curing headaches and all such other aches and pains. In order to draw away all the "bad fluids in the body" the patient's scalp was massaged horizontally and then vertically so as to push the "bad fluids" towards one focal point at the centre of the forehead. A "third eye" of congealed blood formed in the front of the forehead and by concentrating on that painful spot all other aches became minor and thus the patient was cured of what had ailed him.

The only food that was available at the government food stores was bread which was rationed at 400 grams per person per day. This bread was rather coarse and heavy with filler. Some thought that the filler was really sawdust. People lined up for hours at the distribution centre to await the delivery of bread from Dzhabul. My brother Szepsel was the one who was generally delegated to pick up our family's ration of bread. The clerk weighed a large slice of bread and added one or two small pieces to make up the proper total weight of the rations. The one who stood in line for the bread got to eat one of the small pieces of bread as his reward for standing in the breadline.

One of the anecdotes told in our family at my expense is that the one time I was sent to pick up our bread ration, the clerk weighed out two almost equal pieces of bread to make up our two-kilo ration. On the way home I ate one of the pieces of bread as my reward for standing in the long breadline. Without realising it, I had eaten half of our family's bread ration. I was always insatiably hungry. My mother had said many times over that she hopes to live to the day when we would have sufficient bread so that we would not go to bed hungry. All her life my mother pushed food on us, when she had the food, no matter what time of day it was.

Like all Dzhangun households, we also had a primitive hand-mill that consisted of two round, flat stones of about 50 cm [20 inches] in diameter. The top millstone was turned by a handle with one hand while kernels of wheat or corn were slowly poured into the centre hole with the other hand. Coarsely ground flour came out of the perimeter of the millstones. To obtain finer flour, the coarse flour was sifted and the bigger kernels were re-ground for a second or third time. Before cooking any beans, rice or flour, first we picked out by hand the ever-present mice droppings.

Besides bread, potatoes, beans, rice and the occasional piece of meat, our meals most often consisted of *zatcherucha*, a sort of porridge that was made from a mixture of hand-milled wheat and corn. To make this "delicacy", the coarse stone-ground flour was placed in a pan, lightly sprinkled with water, and by rubbing both hands through the moistened flour tiny dumplings would form, similar in texture to rolled oats. While still rubbing the hands together these tiny dumplings were dropped into a pot of boiling salted water and the pot continuously stirred by the cook's helper. The *zatcherucha* was then flavoured with rendered beef fat or, when it was available, with rendered chicken *schmaltz*. With experience one got a pot of porridge, otherwise, the result could be a pot of sticky glue.

My brother Szepsel still claims that my hunger could never be sated and that I always checked to see whether he got a bigger portion than I, especially if his portion was served to him in a larger bowl.

Throughout her life my mother observed *Kashrut*. Even during our sojourn in Siberia and in Dzhunganovka she would not eat meat that was not ritually slaughtered according to Jewish Law. Mother never ate salami neither would she eat ground meat that she did not chop herself. On the other hand, my father, at times, ate non-kosher food but he would never eat *hametz* [food not fit for Passover] during *Pessach*, even in the worst of times.

Among the refugee families in Dzhunganovka there was a Jewish family by the name of Kuczer. Mr Kuczer was an observant Jew and a butcher by trade. He became our *shohet* [ritual kosher slaughterer]. Occasionally we bought a sheep or a calf on the black market and he would clandestinely slaughter it in the kosher manner. In order to make the hindquarters of a ruminant kosher it had to be “*ge-traybert*”, that is, all the sciatica veins of the hindquarters, which remain gorged with blood after slaughtering, had to be properly excised. As an experienced kosher butcher, Mr. Kuczer knew how to *traybern*, a lost art among Jews as it requires the skill of a fine surgeon.

With the exception of the hide, the hoofs and the horns, everything of the animal was eaten. Besides the meat, we ate the cow’s brains, the tongue, the udder, the heart, the lungs were made into lung stew, the spleen, the liver was broiled on an open fire and fried onions were added and made into delicious chopped liver. The stomach was cleaned out and stewed. *Kishka* was made by turning the intestines inside out, scraped clean and then stuffed with a mixture of flour, spices and onions. The *kishka* was then stewed with other meat or with offal. The fat of the animal was rendered with onions into *schmaltz* and kept for flavouring our bland *zatcherucha*. My father tanned the hide and the leather was sold on the black market. Nothing of the animal, with the exception of the *moo* and the hoofs went to waste.

Some of the animal fat, such as the suet or tallow, which is considered to be not kosher for consumption, was used to make our own soap. My mother rendered the suet and added wood ash. The soap looked like grey, lumpy porridge and it smelled rancid. We did not bother to compress the soap into bars. It was soap, but not quite the perfumed soaps of today.

Our Dzhungan neighbours kept pigeons that were trained to lure other pigeons to their home coops. Since pigeons are considered to be kosher birds, my older brother started keeping pigeons to supplement our meagre food supply. He became skilled at inviting other pigeons to his dovecote for our dinner.

My father, the *Matzoh Maven*, organized a *matzoh*-baking bee in Dzhunganovka like those held in Sławatycze. The *matzohs* were baked in a Dzhungan outdoor “pita” oven that was properly purified for Passover use.

One of my buddies in Dzhunganovka was a Tatar [Tartar] boy whose family had been evacuated from the Kazan area in the Tatar Soviet Republic which is located on the Volga River. His father was drafted into the Soviet armed forces and my friend’s family was not sure if the father was alive or dead. Like I, my Tatar friend was always hungry. He was good at climbing trees and we raided bird’s nests for newly laid eggs and for the flightless fledglings that were still in the birds’ nest. We made omelettes from the bird eggs and barbecued the plump fledglings. The life young birds were held by their little necks between our forefinger and middle finger and by sharply tapping our closed fist on our knee, the plump bodies of the little birds separated from their heads. After plucking and gutting the tiny chicks we strung them on a wire and barbecued them over a campfire. They made a delicious feast that we sometimes shared with our friends. [Whenever I see “Quail” featured on a restaurant menu I always recall the time when my Tatar

friend and I smacked our lips over our barbecued sparrows. Needless to say, as much as I enjoy experimenting with food, I could never bring myself to eat "Quail under Glass" in a restaurant.]

Towards the end of the war new American "Lend Lease" Studebaker trucks began passing through our village carrying farm workers and sugar beats from the collective farms to the sugar refinery in Dzhambul. War veterans began trickling back to rejoin their displaced families. Most of the men were wounded and many had missing limbs. One Jewish man, originally from Bessarabia, returned to his wife and his two young sons who had been evacuated to Dzhunganovka. His left hand had been amputated practically at the shoulder and his right leg was missing below the knee.

My Tatar friend's father, after having served for close to four years with the Soviet Army, found his family in Dzhunganovka and came home to them without having sustained any major wounds. This was rather unusual as most returning war veterans came back maimed. My friend's father entered our village riding on a grey mare and strapped to his saddle were two big pillowcases stuffed full with war booty that he had looted in defeated Germany. He brought home many scarce items, such as ruled school scribblers and pencils for the kids, a harmonica for his eldest son, nice dresses and night-gowns for his wife and his two daughters. He also brought home many cans of American "Spam", a form of canned meat loaf.

After the area between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, known as the Caucasus, was recaptured by the Soviet army in early 1944, many of the indigenous peoples such as the Chechen, Inguish, Karachay and Volga Tatars were deported or exiled from their homes as punishment for having collaborated with the Nazis. Their families were split up and sent to different parts of the Soviet Union.

Many ethnic Chechens were sent to our area. Even though they were Muslim, they did not get the reception that we had received by the Dzhungans some three years earlier. I remember these exiles coming to our village dressed in their impressive black felt capes that had many pockets on the front for knives or bullets. They came to our village to beg for food. Many looked fat but they were actually bloated from starvation. One tends to think that starving people are all emaciated but it seems that they tend to drink a lot of water to satiate their hunger and they become bloated. When their skin was pushed in with a finger it was like squeezing putty, the skin did not spring back. Many of their children had protruding bellies and bowed spindly legs as a result of malnutrition and rickets. No one had pity on them as times were hard for all of us and they had been Nazi collaborators, betrayers of the "Motherland".

There is great animosity between the Chechens and their Russian conquerors and to this very day there are ferocious civil wars going on in the Caucasus between the Muslim Chechens and their Slav overlords.

Early in 1943, after the victory at Stalingrad, loudspeakers were installed in Dzhunganovka and regular broadcasts were made announcing the Soviet Army's constant victories over the German armies and a daily count was made of the many *naseloniye punkty*, [inhabited settlements] that were recaptured during the past days. Only when the wounded veterans began trickling back to their families, did we begin to learn about the atrocities that were carried out by the Nazis against the civilian population of the areas that they had conquered. In early 1945 newsreels were shown of the liberation of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp by the Soviet Army. No mention was ever made in the newspapers or in the newsreels of Jews having been singled out by the Nazis for total annihilation.

Sometime in 1943, through the auspices of the International Red Cross, we were able to contact mother's sister Dora and brother Abe in Canada, and also mother's uncle Abraham Ribkovsky in Palestine. Soon afterwards, parcels with clothing and blankets arrived for us in Dzhunganovka from far away Canada and from Palestine. No regular correspondence was engaged in as all letters were heavily censored and we were satisfied to let each other know that we were alive.

Whenever itinerant Jews passed through Dzhunganovka, my father always solicited them to teach his sons the Hebrew prayers or any other school subject that they were proficient in, be it arithmetic or science, in exchange for a bowl of soup. Being practically illiterate, father always promoted the advantages of having an education.

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Chapter 14



Our Return to Poland

May 1945. The War in Europe is Over!

Towards the end of 1945 Soviet evacuees were given the choice of returning to their homelands or staying behind in Kazakhstan or in Uzbekistan. Many chose to stay where they were as there was nothing much left for them at home to go back to. Former Polish citizens who were born within the newly-defined boundaries of Poland, like our own family, were permitted to return to Poland. At the end of 1945 my three uncles and their two wives obtained permission to return to Poland. Once back on Polish soil my youngest uncle Mojsze was inducted into the First Division of the Polish Army that was under Soviet control as opposed to the Second Division which was under control of the British Army and the Polish Government in Exile based in London. The Soviets stacked the new Polish army with Soviet officers of Polish extraction. My uncle became an adjutant and translator to an officer who had a Polish name but who could only speak Russian.

It was not until the spring of 1946 that the repatriation back to Poland of families with children began. Our family of five and my aunt Jadzia and her family of three obtained “*propusks*” [permits] to return to Poland. We departed Dzhambul on May 3, 1946, a full year after the war had officially ended. [My older brother remembers the exact date as it being on May 3rd since that is the day when Polish Independence Day was celebrated in prewar Poland]. The trains used for our transport home were the same boxcars as before, but this time there was no barbed wire on the windows, no guards, and our wagon door was not locked from the outside.

In preparation for our return home, we made a lot of *sukhary*, the food that lasts forever and the food a prudent person in Russia “would not leave home without it”. *Sukhary* consist of slices of bread, preferably white, that had been dried in the sun. It can be eaten dry, like “hardtack” or “Zwieback”, or it can be softened by soaking it in the ubiquitous *kypiatok*, the boiled water that was available from the steam locomotives and at all railway stations and even in the forced labour camps, the *lagers*.

Returning refugees converted whatever assets they had into food and into old Tsarist ten *ruble* gold coins, called “*chazerlachs*”, piglets. These gold coins were the size of Canadian or American dimes and made of pure 24 carat gold. They were the favored currency of black marketeers and smugglers as they could easily be taken through police and border checkpoints by putting them into a condom and hiding the loot up one’s own anus.

Early one morning, when our train was stopped at a railway siding near the Aral Sea, we were awakened by knocks on our wagon door. The locals were offering to sell us buckets full of salt, cheap, only ten [paper] Russian *rubles*. We told them that we did not need so much salt. The local people explained that here salt is plentiful, gathered on the salt flats of the Aral Sea, but two days travel from here we would be able to sell one glass of the salt for as much as we paid for one pail of the salt here. They were right. A few days later we were awakened by similar knocks on our

wagon door, this time offering to buy our salt at great profit. This is a sad commentary on the poor Soviet distribution system, not just during the war years, but it still exists to this day. Apples grown in Alma-Ata are not available 100 km away, unless one bought them from *spekulanty*, speculators and black marketeers.

When we reached the Byelorussian city of Kowel we dismounted from the wide gauge Russian railway boxcars and we were loaded into standard gauge, European boxcars. In the mid 1800s, when railways were being built throughout the world, Russia chose a different rail gauge of about six inches wider than the standard rail width used in all other countries. This was intended to hamper the movement of invading armies. The German bombers and Panzers invading Russia in 1941 did not have a railway gauge disparity problem.

Our emotions were somber when we entered our home area and saw devastated cities and villages. The full extent of the Shoah and of its unspeakable horrors was only now becoming evident to us as we began hearing eyewitness accounts of the atrocities. I do not seem to have much recollection of our brief passage across Poland.

The Polish authorities did not let us go back to our original homes. Our transport of returning Polish refugees was taken to the former German city of Stettin. This city had been incorporated into post-war Poland and was now called "Szczecin".

This time, my father managed not to miss the train on our entire return journey to Poland.

The borders of post war Poland were shifted about 300 km. to the west. The Soviets retained that part of Poland which they had annexed in 1939 and thus making the Bug River the border between them and present day Poland. Sławatycze became a border town. As compensation, Poland was given a part of pre-war Germany up to the Oder River. The new border between post war Poland and post war Germany was moved about 150 km to the west.

As our train was entering the Szczecin railway station we saw people at the far end of the platform, mostly elderly men and women with children, sitting on their *pecklach*, and waiting. Armed Soviet guards stood over them. After we were unloaded, our train moved up to the other end of the platform and these waiting people were boarded onto our former train. We were told that they were Germans who are being deported east to Germany. The Polish government and their Soviet sponsors were doing some "ethnic cleansing" by removing all German nationals from the newly annexed former German territory and transferring these people across the Oder River into East Germany.

A few hours before a train with Polish returnees like us would arrive from Russia, the NKVD Militia surrounded a city block and give the German nationals two hours notice to pack up and take with them only what they could carry. These Germans were then marched under armed guard to the railway station for deportation to East Germany. For us it was all *déjà vu*.

At the station we were loaded onto "US Lend Lease" Studebaker trucks and taken to the apartments that had just been vacated by these deported German nationals. Two or three returnee families shared one apartment. Our family of five was assigned two rooms of a large, fully furnished apartment. By the looks of the flat we could tell that the Germans had been arrested and taken away only a few hours before. In the apartment there was furniture, bedding, dishes and pots and pans for our use.

The “American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee”, commonly referred to as the “Joint”, supplied us with free food rations. People milled around the offices of the “Joint” reading posted notices and stood around in groups exchanging gossip and seeking relatives and *landsmen*.

Only now, as we met up with Nazi death camp survivors and former Partisans, was the incredulous extent of the Shoah beginning to become evident to us.

My aunt Jadzia and her husband met a friend of theirs from before the war who had a flat in Warsaw and who worked for *dem Yiddishen Komitet* [the Jewish Committee]. He invited them to stay with him in Warsaw and to try to obtain a job with this organization. They soon left Szczecin for Warsaw.

My mother’s three brothers, who had no children we did, preceded us from Russia to Poland by about six months. We heard rumours that they were in Łódź, Nute’s wife Adzia’s native city, but we could not locate them there. Attempts to finding them through the “Joint” and the International Red Cross were to no avail. We then thought that they must have gotten out of Poland into West Germany like many of the Jewish returnees to Poland had managed to do.

My father tried to get back to our *shtetl* Sławatycze to verify if any other of our relatives had survived and to again to see his new house. Since the train junction of Dubice was now in Soviet Russia, he went by train to Piszczac, now the nearest train station and about 40km from Sławatycze. A Polish man, originally from near Sławatycze, recognized my father and whispered to him that he should follow him to his house. In the privacy of the Pole’s house he warned my father that if he dares to go back to Sławatycze the “people from the forest” will surely put him in a sack and throw him into the Bug River like they did to a couple of other *Żidy* [Jews] who dared to return and then possibly attempt to reclaim their properties. The “people from the forest” was a euphemism for the “NSZ”, the *Narodowe Siły Zbrojne* [National Armed Forces], rogue elements of the A.K. [*Armia Krajowa*, the Polish underground army during WW II] that fought both the Nazi Germans and the Communist Russians and in-between some of this group also killed many Jews. Their aim was to make Poland independent again and also “*Jüden Rein*” [free of Jews], to finish the job the Nazis had started. Poland was the only country where after the end of the war Jews were still being killed just because they were Jews.

Father’s Polish friend hid him in the orchard which was located in his back yard because he was afraid for his own life if he kept my father inside the house. Early in the morning my father climbed down from the apple tree he was hiding in and hopped a passing freight train to get out of town. He came back to us in Szczecin a shattered man.

A number of Jewish organizations were recruiting young Jews and smuggled them out of Poland into the US Occupation Zones of Germany and Austria. Eventually they were smuggled into Italy with the intention of then being smuggled into Palestine. My older brother Szepsel joined a *Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz*. This preparatory kibbutz or *hachsharah*, was located in an old customs house about 20 km north of Szczecin. One had to be over 15 years old to become a member of the *kibbutz*, but since my older brother was a member, I was able to join even though I was only twelve and a half years old at that time. I was the youngest member of the group. Most of the members of this *kibbutz* did not have any family; my brother and I were the few exceptions who had their parents nearby.

On the premises of this former customhouse there was a powerhouse that the Russians were dismantling and shipping the components of the powerhouse back to Russia as war reparations. They even dismantled the tall brick chimney after marking all the thousands of bricks for later re-

assembly in Russia. Since many of us in the *kibbutz* could speak Russian, we became quite friendly with some of the Soviet soldiers who were guarding the powerhouse. Some of them even came to our *Oneg Shabbats* [Sabbath-eve celebrations] and we all sang Russian and newly learned Hebrew songs. Our *kibbutz* bought some small weapons from the Russian soldiers. The members of the *kibbutz* were taught Hebrew and socialist philosophy and we underwent clandestine military and weapons training.

My brother and I were part of a group which was preparing to be smuggled out of Poland by the *Bricha* into the US Occupation Zone of Germany. This group would then go to Italy and from there board all kinds of vessels, from small fishing craft to the famous ship, the “Exodus”, to run the British blockade of Palestine. We later learned that most Jews trying to smuggle themselves in British occupied Palestine wound up in British prison camps on the island of Cyprus.

“Bricha” [from the Hebrew “berihah”, flight] was the name of an organized underground operation moving Jews out of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other countries under Soviet domain into Central and Southern Europe between 1944 and 1948 as a step toward their, mostly illegal, immigration to Palestine. This organization was formed in 1944 in Lublin by former Jewish partisans, Warsaw Ghetto fighters and Jews returning from Central Asia under the leadership of the legendary Jewish partisan, Abba Kowner. [Source : Encyclopaedia Judaica]

In July of 1946, after the Poles “celebrated July 4th” by staging a *Pogrom* in the Polish City of Kielce, killing 41 Jews, my father decided that the time has come for us to get out of Poland. There was no time for procrastination. There was no time to think things over. My father was in the habit of making hair trigger decisions at times when the wrong decision could have been fatal. Father made it a condition that the *Hashomer Hatzair kibbutz* must also take his entire family with them to Germany, otherwise; he would not let my older brother and me leave with the group.

Chapter 15



Displaced Persons [DP] Camps

Shortly after the Kielce pogrom, our family fled Poland; again.

One dark night our *Hashomer kibbutz* group, including my parents and my younger brother and some other Jews, gathered in small groups so as not to attract attention, inside a large empty warehouse not far from the *kibbutz*. We were then packed like the proverbial “sardines in a can” into a covered US Lend Lease Studebaker truck. Our clandestine trip to smuggle ourselves out of Poland and into the US Occupation Zone of Berlin had begun. In the truck, adults sat on benches holding teenagers in their laps who in turn held smaller children in their laps. To camouflage its real cargo, the back-end of the truck was closed off with stacked sacks of potatoes. It was unbearably stifling in the truck and people cut holes in the overhead tarpaulin to let in some air so we could breathe. Our *Bricha* escort rode in a small automobile at the head of our convoy of two or three trucks. At the numerous Russian Army checkpoints our escorts showed them false manifests for a cargo of potatoes that was supposedly being transported from starving Poland into starving East Germany. After the proper bribes were handed over; our small convoy was waved through.

Early the next morning, somewhere in East Germany, our trucks drove into a barn on a farm that was used as a “safe house”. We could get off the truck but were not allowed to go outside of the barn. Before leaving on our next leg of the journey, the *Bricha* collected and burnt all documents that people had on them so that the Russian or American authorities would not be able to identify us as having just been smuggled-in from Poland. Needless to say, my mother did not give up her secret packet that she had been carrying with her for the past seven years.

That night we resumed our trip. After travelling all through the night we arrived early in the morning to the *Schlachtensee* district in the U.S. Occupation Zone of Berlin. Our convoy rolled into a Displaced Persons Camp [DP Camp] located in a former German Cavalry barracks, the *Schlachtensee Ulanenkaserne*.

There were many Displaced Persons Camps in post-war Germany and in Austria under the United Nations Refugee Relief Administration [UNRRA] auspices; housing and feeding former inmates of the Nazi concentration and forced labour camps, former Allied POWs and other non-German displaced persons and refugees. Eventually the DP Camps were divided by ethnic origin. In our *Schlachtensee* camp there were only Jews.

At the DP Camp we were processed and given refugee identification papers and rations cards. Anyone could assume whatever identity, place of origin, concentration camp, or any reasonable age they wanted to be. On paper it seemed to be a good idea to be younger. My older brother, who was about to turn 18, was registered as being 16 years old so as to delay the possibility of him being drafted into the army [in case there should be a military draft]. My younger brother was also registered as being two years younger than he was because six-year-olds received bigger chocolate

bars than did eight-year-olds. I was approaching my thirteenth birthday, the age of *Bar Mitzvah*, the age when it would be pronounced from the pulpit that “from now on you are a man”, so I was not about to be made into an eleven-year-old kid, even if it was only pretend; that is, only on paper.

My mother claimed that I was born on the sixth day of Sukkoth, which falls on the 20th day of the Hebrew month of Tishri. In 1946, the 20th day of Tishri fell on the 15th of October, so that date became my official date of birth. Years later, when I pointed out to my parents that in 1933, the year I was born, the sixth day of Sukkoth fell on October 10th so this date should really be considered to be my birthday, my father wondered out loud why I was trying to be so precise about my birthday when my official birthday is really in January and not in October at all. He related that in Poland, Jewish boys born after the High Holidays, that is, from September to the end of the year, had their births officially registered at the beginning of the following year. This was done so as to delay by one full year conscription into the army. Two years ago I applied to the Polish Consulate in Montreal for an official copy of my birth certificate. All those years my father was right. My official, and therefore my legal birthday, had really been January 2nd, 1934, and I dared to doubt him all these years.

At the *Schlachtensee Ulanenkasserrne* DP Camp we were quartered in the horse stables, as the army personnel barracks were already full. We could not believe our eyes; horse stables with individual horse-stalls and slopping concrete floors with grooves in them so that the horse piss would run off to an underground cistern. [The stables had been cleaned out before our arrival.] Our family of five was assigned to two horse-stalls. Opaque white plastic sheets were hung around each horse-stall in order to provide some modicum of privacy for the new occupants of the stables. Down the centre of the stable was a row of wooden tables and benches where we ate our meals and gossiped with our neighbours. We slept on U.S. Army folding cots and were issued U.S. Army wool blankets that had “US” imprinted on them in large white letters. We got “US” mess kits and a knife-spoon-fork kit with the “US” monogram stamped on them. [As a treasured memento from our stay in the Berlin DP camp I still have two dark stainless steel spoons that have the “US” monogram on them which my frugal mother had saved over these many years. I use them during the Passover Seders, together with the “bitter herbs”, as a “*zecher*”, a reminder, of our personal Exodus from slavery.]

At the DP Camp we were issued some second hand clothes. With the approach of winter my parents had “golf” pants and “Ike” jackets made for my brothers and me from the khaki US Army blankets that had been dyed dark blue. Our UNRRA food rations consisted of powdered eggs, powdered milk and powdered potatoes. As an authority on potatoes I can confirm that powdered [dehydrated] potatoes taste awful.

Jewish policemen guarded the inside of our DP Camp. They wore civilian clothes, blue armbands, and US Army helmets with the word “UNRRA” stamped on them. They carried no weapons. US Army Military Policemen [MPs] in US Army Jeeps were stationed on the outside of the main gate of our DP Camp. The MPs verified the documents of anyone entering the camp. Germans, or anyone else without proper authorisation, were not allowed to enter the DP Camp.

Originally, the term “Displaced Persons” [DPs], was applied primarily to those who had been imprisoned in Nazi concentration and forced labour camps. At the end of WW II there were approximately 8 million DPs in Germany and in former Nazi occupied territories. The Allied Powers gave high priority to the rapid repatriation of

the DP's and therefore close to 6 million were returned to their home countries by the end of 1945. The remaining people who could not or would not be repatriated for political reasons, were put into special camps [primarily in former German military barracks] under the United Nations Refugee Relief Administration [UNRRA].

However, the Jewish DP's presented a problem of an entirely different nature. At the war's end, an estimated fifty thousand Jews were liberated from concentration camps in Germany and Austria. Some of these joined the mainstream of persons returning to their countries of origin, others managed in various ways to reach Italy in the hope of continuing from there to Palestine. Most of the Jewish survivors soon came to realize that they had no place to return to, as their communities had been destroyed and their families were no longer alive. A reverse trend set in, wherein Jewish survivors began making their way to the DP camps in Germany and in Austria; these were Jews who had been in hiding, had joined the Partisan units, or had succeeded in posing as Aryans. They joined into a concentrated mass of Jewish DP's in the hope of being recognized by the allies as a separate category of refugees. Their purpose was to be rehabilitated in a new homeland rather than to be included in the groups of refugees to be returned to their country of origin.

President Truman commissioned an inquiry into the conditions and needs of displaced persons in Germany who may be stateless or non-repatriable, particularly Jews.

The Commission concluded that:- "... for reasons that are obvious, most Jews want to leave Germany and Austria ... the only real solution to the problem lies in the evacuation of all non-repatriable Jews in Germany and Austria, who wish it, to Palestine...."

In consequence, the American authorities recognized Jews as a special category of refugees, who had been persecuted for being Jewish. The American policy was to create a "temporary haven" for persecuted Jews from Eastern Central Europe in the American Zone of Germany and Austria. The Jewish refugees were placed in separate camps and given autonomous internal administration. The British, on the contrary, prohibited further entry of refugees into their zone of occupation as of December 5, 1945.

After February 1946, when the repatriation of Polish citizens from the Soviet Union began, 140,000 Polish Jews, most of them who could not find their place in Poland, left [illegally, with the aid of the Bricha] for camps in Germany, especially after the Kielce pogrom on July 4, 1946. The total number of Jewish DP's in Germany, Austria and Italy trebled from less than 80,000 at the beginning of 1946 to an estimated 230,000 a year later. Whereas the "original" DP's were mostly single persons, the new arrivals comprised complete families, and an educational network had to be set up for the children.

With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 a mass emigration from the DP camps began. About two-thirds of the total number of Jewish DP's settled in Israel, a quarter emigrated to other countries, especially the US and Canada, and the rest remained where they were. The last of the Jewish DP Camps was disbanded only in 1953.

The UNRRA, the United Nations Refugee Relief Administration, was an international organization founded to give economic aid in countries that were under Nazi occupation during WW II and for the care for Displaced Persons. ORT and many Jewish Relief organizations were active within UNRRA. In 1947 UNRRA was phased out and the care for the DPs was transferred to the new International Refugee Organization [I.R.O.].

[Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica]

At that time, before the blockade of 1948 and the erection of the Berlin Wall, Germany and the city of Berlin were divided into four occupation zones, American, Russian, British and French. There were no restrictions on travel between the various zones. The streets of Berlin were patrolled by military police from the four Allied occupational forces [US, British, Soviet and French], riding together in an American Jeep driven by an American Military Policeman. [Eventually the American, British and French zones became West Germany and West Berlin and the Russian zone became East Germany and East Berlin.]

Most of post-war Berlin was a ghost town of bombed out skeletons of high-rise buildings. It was now a year and a half after the end of the war and many of the streets were still blocked by rubble. Sections of the underground train system, the “U-Bahn”, were flooded and unusable.

The winter of 1946-47 was very harsh. We had sufficient food that was provided to us by the UNRRA, but the German population was starving. Elderly Germans came to the gate of our DP Camp to trade articles of value; such as watches, silver cutlery and candlesticks, for food. Many of these expensive articles must have been war booty. Some Germans sold to the Jews grey bars of soap with “RJF” embossed on them, claiming that RJF stands for “*Rein Juden Fett*”, that is, it was made from “Pure Jew’s Fat”. They also sold scraps of parchment from *Sefer Torahs* that had been used as wrapping paper by German soldiers to send parcels home from the occupied territories. The Jewish community in the DP Camp bought the RJF soap and the scraps of the Torah and gave them a proper Jewish burial.

The people in the DP Camps took many posed pictures of themselves. They posed beside cars and trees in a park, they posed with casual acquaintances; anything that recreated a life that was interrupted.

There was a makeshift school in the DP Camp but few attended it. All thought themselves to be in a transitory state and that they may be somewhere else by tomorrow. The school curriculum was haphazard; there was a lack of qualified teachers and an absence of textbooks, paper and pencils.

Our *Hashomer Hatzair* group left Berlin with the intentions of going to Italy and from the memebtrs would smuggle themselves into Palestine. Since my parents could not come along with us, they persuaded my brother and me to leave the group and to remain with them in Berlin.

Shortly afterwards, my older brother [who was officially 16 years old] and I entered an orphanage for Jewish children. The orphanage was located just outside of the DP Camp and was run by a Jewish organization under UNRRA auspices. We were given new clothes; I got my first toothbrush and underwear. The food was better there although the potatoes were still that awful tasting dehydrated type. Also, our accommodations were much better than those in the main DP Camp. We slept on steel-frame beds with real mattresses instead of the US Army issue canvas folding cots.

Like my brother and I, many of the youngsters in the orphanage were not true orphans and some had one or both parents living somewhere back in Poland. Unlike our parents, their parents allowed the *Bricha* organization to smuggle their children out of Poland without their parents accompanying them. The Jewish organizations were anxious to make an international issue of the large number of homeless Jewish orphans and to get these young Jews into Palestine. At that time, they did not want the old people, as it was considered to be easier to build a new Jewish country with the young. The older Jews, who are difficult to move about and difficult to assimilate into a new social order, would come later. [It is reminiscent of the Jewish people wandering for forty years in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt so that the old would die off and only those who knew no slavery would enter and build the new country of Israel.]

At the orphanage we were divided into groups by age. Various Zionist organizations were active in the DP Camps and also in the orphanages. They paid particular attention to those over sixteen years of age as potential fighter for a new Jewish state. Our orphanage was often used as a safe-house for army deserters, primarily Jews, both American and Russian. After a few days with us, these newcomers mysteriously disappeared and new ones would appear overnight.

A service organization of US Army wives often came to our orphanage and handed out American chocolate bars and took us “orphans” to movie theatres that were restricted for use by the Allied Occupation Forces only. There, I saw my first Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse cartoons. They also took us on outings to the famous Brandenburg Gate, to the *Tiergarten* and to the Berlin Zoo. The zoo had few animals then as most of the animals had either starved to death or had been eaten in the latter days of the war. Most of these attractions were in the Soviet Occupation Zone of Berlin. We kids generally travelled in the back of a large 10-ton US Army truck. Our hostesses rode in khaki coloured US Army Chevrolets. American MPs in military Jeeps riding ahead and behind our convoy accompanied us on these outings.

I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah in October of 1946 in the *Schlachtensee* DP Camp. There was a makeshift synagogue in the Camp where Sabbath services were held. I was called-up to the *Torah*. My father wrapped a *tallit* around me and he made the benediction of *Baruch Sheptarani*, effectively saying “you are now responsible for your own sins”. My parents provided a *Kiddush* of herring and *schnapps* for the congregants and thus I became “a Man”.

At the orphanage I befriended an older boy of about sixteen who was registered as being only 13 years old. He and I made frequent excursions by tramway throughout the city of Berlin. There was also an extensive underground subway system in Berlin but parts of it were still flooded and inoperable. My friend and I often went to the cinemas where we saw Pathé and Movietone newsreels and American movies. Our favourite movies were the Tarzan series with Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan and beautiful Maureen O’Sullivan as Jane.

Nazi era German films were not permitted to be shown. We also went to live theatre performances and to the Berlin Opera. US Army money, known as “Script”, and American cigarettes were the blackmarket currency in post war Germany. For one American cigarette apiece my friend and I were ushered in by an old uniformed lackey to an ornate private box in the Berlin Opera House. At the posh opera house there were many be-medalled Russian officers with their blonde German girlfriends and a sprinkling of other Allied officers. But what amazed me most was that at a time when the German population was starving yet the opera was attended by many elderly Germans who were decked out in formal wear with their silk top hats and white silk

scarves and with the elderly ladies in flowing gowns. I do not remember much about that opera, but I do remember that a mixed chorus of men and women, chained one to another, marched through the stage. What struck me odd is that they all wore real and makeshift *taleitim* [Jewish prayer shawls]. It must have been the chorus of the “Hebrew Slaves” from Verdi’s opera “Nabucco”.

In late 1946 we again were able to make contact with my mother’s sister Dora and her brother Abe in Canada. Mother, the prodigious letter writer, remembered their address on Laval Street in Montreal. We received a telegram from them informing us that Nute and Riwen and their wives are in a Displaced Persons [DP] Camp in the city of Bamberg in the US Occupation Zone of Germany and that their youngest brother Mojsze was with them. [Later we learned that Mojsze had defected from the Polish Army and was smuggled into the US Zone of Germany by the *Bricha*, the Jewish escape organization.] We tried to be transferred to the Bamberg DP Camp, but to no avail. Our aim was to go to Canada to join our relatives there, but at that time Canada was not admitting Jewish refugees under their unofficial immigration policy concerning Jews of “None Is Too Many”.

At the end of 1947, before the Russians blockaded Berlin, many families with young children were moved out of West Berlin to other DP Camps in the American Occupation Zone of Germany. Together with a number of other families we were loaded into huge, open, 10-ton, U.S. Army Studebaker trucks and transported to a DP transit Camp near Frankfurt-am-Mein. We tried to get to Bamberg where my uncles and their wives were but we were told that there was no room for us in that camp. We contacted my uncles and told them where we were. A week or so later my aunt Andzia, my uncle Nute’s wife, came to the transit camp to get us out of there and to take us to Bamberg.

It was not an easy feat to accomplish this unauthorised evacuation, but my late aunt Andzia was a “with-it” lady, and moreover, she could speak German. [She must have learned German in her native Łódź where 1/3 of the pre-war population was ethnic German.] On some pretext Andzia was able to take us out of the DP Camp and then take us by taxi straight to the train station. She had no problem buying train tickets for all of us to go to Bamberg but to get into a railway car was impossible as all trains were overcrowded with people moving from one place to another. Some people squatted with their bundles on the roofs of the railway cars.

When the train to Bamberg rolled into the station, we heard a voice shouting “*Amchuh!, Amchuh!*”. *Amchuh*, the Yiddish version of the Hebrew word “*Amechah*” [your People], was the identification code-word that was used by Jews after the war as a way to identify themselves to their fellow Jews. We and a few of the others around us started running to where the call emanated from. There we saw a young man leaning out of an open window of one of the commuter train compartments shouting “*Amchuh! Amchuh!*” He had barred the doors to the compartment from the inside and opened one of the windows and let in only those who responded with the proper code word or other words in Yiddish. We helped each other climb in through the open window into the already crowded train compartment. There was not enough room inside the compartment for my older brother and some of the other Jews, so all through the night Shepsel stood on a switchman’s tiny footrest on the outside of the wagon with his hands locked around the handrail. He had fallen asleep standing up but he did not let go of the handrail and luckily he was not hurt except for cinder burns on his face and on his clothes and he was covered from head to toe with soot from the coal burning locomotive.

We had no problem of being admitted into the Bamberg *Ulanenkaserne* [Cavalry again] DP Camp. My uncle Riwen was a DP Camp policeman and he used his connections to get his sister's family admitted into the Bamberg DP camp. Riwen also obtained for us lodging in the barracks and not in the perennial horse stalls where many of the other DP's were quartered.

When we inquired as to the whereabouts of my uncle Mojsze we were sheepishly told by his brothers that he is serving time in the Landsberg Prison for black marketeering. [Adolf Hitler wrote his book "Mein Kampf" in the Landsberg Prison when he was incarcerated in the 1920s]

In the DP Camp we received our ration cards from the IRO [International Relief Organization, successor to the UNRRA] but it was not sufficient to feed hungry teenagers. Bamberg is in an agricultural zone, and therefore, food was not as scarce as it was in the beleaguered city of Berlin, but our funds to buy anything on the black market were rather meagre. To buy additional food over and above the IRO rations we had to find ways to earn money through employment, which was difficult to find, or to trade on the black market. My father started a furrier trade school under the ORT vocational school system. My uncle Riwen worked as a camp policeman. My uncle Nute was dealing on the black market and he took on my brother Shepsel as his apprentice. The black market consisted of dealing in items of short supply, such as cigarettes, liquor, or anything else. Liquor and cigarettes were bought from the American soldiers who bought these items at the "PX" supply stores inside their Army bases. The black marketeers then resold these items at a profit to the general public. US Dollars, or rather, "US Army Script" money was the black market currency. The black market always replaced a broken distribution system.

Apprentices like my older brother bought cigarettes by the carton and resold them by the pack or even by the single cigarette. The big guys on the black market, like my uncle Mojsze, bought and resold wheat and other goods by the carload, sight unseen. These black market "biggies" dealt directly with rogue officers of the US Quartermaster Corp. They even sold carloads of black market wheat to the Russian Authorities.

My younger brother Mojsze and I attended school in the DP Camp where we learned arithmetic, Hebrew, Zionist marching songs such as "*Anu, Anu Hapalmach*" and the beginning of Basic English. Most of our time in school was taken up by doing callisthenics. In the classrooms we spoke a mix of Yiddish, Russian and Polish. One boy in our class knew "none of the above" as he spoke only Hungarian and some German. Most of our teachers were amateurs and not really qualified to teach. Only our teachers had textbooks. *Siddurim* [Hebrew prayer books] served as our Hebrew textbooks. In late 1947 we received some American textbooks on Basic English that were illustrated with cartoon characters and with instructions in incomprehensible English.

During the afternoons I attended a trade school where I was learning to be a locksmith and a machinist. The trade school was sponsored by ORT, [Organization for Rehabilitation and Training, the international vocational organization originally founded by Jews in Russia in the 1880s to teach industrial skills to Jewish youth.] The man in charge of our trade school was a German Jew who was an Engineer before the war. He spoke to us in German and we found it rather odd that a Jew would speak to other Jews in despised German.

As one of the best students in our machine-shop class, I was sent to an eight-week apprenticeship course at the Bosch Company, the German manufacturer of auto electric components. Even after having been in Germany for close to two years, as a Jew I felt very awkward being in such close proximity with Germans and of being addressed in German.

My older brother Shepsel was enrolled in my father's ORT furrier trade school where he was learning the family trade, but he still continued his activities on the black market on a part time basis.

Since our return to Poland in May of 1946 and during our two year stay in the DP Camps in Germany we had been in contact with my mother's sister Dobe [Dora] who had emigrated to Canada in 1929 and her brother Awrejml [Abe] who joined her in Montreal in December of 1938. They tried to bring us to Canada, but to no avail. Since the late 1930s Canada had an unofficial immigration policy of "*None, Is Too Many*". Under this policy, administered by anti-Semitic civil servants and under pressure from the French Canadian Fascist sympathisers, as few Jews as possible were to be allowed into Canada. Bringing in condemned French Nazis and admitting Ukrainian and Lithuanian Nazi collaborators was OK, but no Jews were to be allowed in. In early 1947 some Jewish war orphans were admitted into Canada.

In late 1947 a farmer friend of my mother's Uncle Aaron [Światłóć] Sweet who was an egg and hide dealer in the small farming community of Winchester, Ontario, arranged for a farmer friend to sponsor my uncle Mojsze for immigration to Canada "as a much needed [single] farmhand". But by that time my uncle Mojsze, who had been recently released from the Landsberg prison, had active TB [tuberculosis] and he knew that he would be rejected from entering Canada with such a highly contagious disease. So, in order to get his entry permit to Canada, my uncle Mojsze paid someone to stand-in for him for the prerequisite chest X-rays.

It was not until the middle of 1948 that Jewish war refugees and Holocaust survivors were able to join their relatives in Canada. Our turn to go to Canada came about two weeks ahead of my uncles Nute and Riwen and their families. In June 1948, the Military Government for Germany issued to our family "*Temporary Travel Document [s] in lieu of passport for stateless persons and persons of undetermined nationality*" and a "*Military Exit Visa. This permit is valid for one single journey from 16 JUN 1948 to 16 OCT 1948 for CANADA and countries in direct transit.*"

We left the Bamberg DP Camp for a staging camp located near the German port of Bremerhaven in the British Occupation Zone of Germany. There, potential immigrants to Canada were processed and documented by the British authorities on behalf of the Canadian Immigration Department. It took about two weeks for us to be processed and medically screened. Eventually we were approved for immigration to Canada. Our family of five and about 500 other immigrants was loaded onto a 14,000 ton US Navy Liberty Ship, the "U.S.A.T. General Stuart Heintzelman" for our eight-day transatlantic voyage to Halifax.

The Liberty Ships were the product of an emergency USA shipbuilding program of WW II. They were cheap and quickly built armed cargo steamers of 14,245-ton displacement, designed to carry arms, materiel, and ordinance and which could quickly be converted to serve as troop carriers.

On board ship, women with small children were assigned to small, cramped cabins. Men and teenage boys slept in the cargo holds on four tiered hammock-type canvas bunk beds supported by four floor-to-ceiling pipes. Women and teenage girls were assigned to separate cargo holds that had previously housed *non-coms* [non commissioned officers] and they slept on similar hammocks but only two tiers high rather than four high. Linens and pillows were issued to the women and young children only. The men were each issued a blue navy blanket with "US" stamped on it and a "*Mae West*" life preserver, which doubled as our pillow. We were all fed navy rations and the men and women ate in separate cafeterias. We all ate standing up at high metal tables supported on similar floor-to-ceiling pipes that supported the tiers of bunks. Everyone, including the women, had to do KP duty [Kitchen Patrol].

It was late September, the North Atlantic Sea was rough and we were seasick most of the time. There was nowhere to sit topside. The only place to sit was on the metal deck or on the canvas covers over the loading holds. Yet no one seemed to complain; we were happy to be out of the DP Camps and on our way to join our relatives in Canada.

My uncles Nute and Riwen and their families followed us to Canada about two weeks later. They travelled on the “SS Samaria”, a 45,000-ton former Cunard luxury liner that had been converted into a troop carrier. They all slept in cabins, had linens and pillows, though no deck chairs, and the food was served in the dining room by waiters wearing white gloves.

I have the letter from the Canadian Immigration Department addressed to my aunt Dora that demanded payment of \$846.00 for passage of our family of five persons. The cost per person for my uncles’ families was the same as our fare in steerage on the Liberty Ship freighter/troop carrier. Years later there was an investigation into the rip-off that was carried out by the shipping companies who had charged full passenger fares for freighter type accommodations.

We arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on September 23, 1948 and then proceeded by [passenger] train to Montreal. Before boarding the train we were given some spending money to buy food for our overnight trip to Montreal. At the train station father went to a food kiosk, stuck out his hand with some dollar bills in it, and asked for *apfel, brot*. He was given some apples and a sliced white bread in a cellophane package which to us looked and tasted like Kazakh chopped cotton rather than bread. My father then informed my mother “if this is bread in Canada you will have to resume baking our own bread.”

I still have our exit and travel documents with our pictures and the various stamps on them, such as, “Dept. of National Health and Welfare Canada”, “Immigration Canada Halifax, NS Sep.23, 1948” and “U.S.A.T. General Stuart Heintzelman”. Among the documents that my mother squirreled away in her compulsion to hang on to old family pictures and documents include our chest X-ray certificates. My X-ray certificate, dated May 12th, 1948, consists of a small yellow form to which is stapled one 35mm frame of an X-ray of my chest, it states that:-

GITELMAN, CHAIM age 13, sex M, DP No. 778263.

***Film Reader’s Remarks: IN BOTH OF THE HILI SEVERAL INTENSIVE SPOTS.
NO SIGNS OF ACTIVE TB.***

Another “Certificate”, dated 27.5.1948, was issued by the “Preparatory Commission for the International Refugee Organization, US Zone, Germany”, states:-

***This is to certify that Mr. GITELMAN HERSCH, born OCTOBER 8, 1902,
has been tested by SPECIAL SERVICES Commission and has been classified
as a FUR DRESSER FIRST CLASS.***

Chapter 16



C a n a d a

In Montreal, my aunt Dora and uncle Abe lodged us in a third floor “cold” flat at 128 Laurier West. In the post war years there was a shortage of apartments in Montreal. Rents were frozen and to obtain a cheap flat one had to pay a lot of “key money” under the table and were also obliged to purchase old, unwanted furniture.

Eleven of us, our family of five, my uncle Nathan [Nute] and his wife Andzia, my uncle Rubin [Riwen] and his wife Haya [Chaja Paluch-Rapkowski] and their two young children, all occupied the same flat that consisted of three small bedrooms, a “double parlour”, a dining room and a kitchen. The heating was by means of a gravity oil stove located in the kitchen and another oil stove located in the entrance hallway. Each stove had long, horizontal metal chimneys running through the house. Any room that had its door closed was unbearably cold in the winter. My brother Szepsel [now Sam] and I [now Hymie, but I preferred to be called Henry] both slept in one $\frac{3}{4}$ size double bed that was located in the open “double parlor”. My brother and I fought as to who would get into bed first and warm it up for the other. My younger brother Mojsze [now Morris] slept on a cot in the same room with our parents. We were all used to living in crowded quarters and to be oblivious to human noises.

My father easily found work in a fur shop. Since he, and other such skilled immigrant workers, “had no North American work experience” the union permitted the shop owners to pay the new arrivals only half of the regular union wage-rates for the first year of employment.

Our funds were meagre and we all had to make do with very little. My uncle Abe and my aunt Dora helped however they could and we did not want to depend on others or on our more distant relatives. We wore second hand clothes and second hand shoes and bought cheap food. Eventually each family moved to its own flat.

My aunt Dora, the *geyleh*, [“yellow”, meaning *old-timer* as opposed to us the *greeners*, *greenhorns*, i.e., the newcomers] decided that even though I was almost 15 years old and should be attending high school, Baron Byng High, the nearest high school, was five long blocks from our flat and she was afraid that I may lose my way, and I would not be able to ask for directions how to get back home. My aunt solved the problem by enrolling me in the Fairmount Elementary School which was only one short block away from where we lived. Aunt Dora told the principal, Mr. Webster, that I just got off the boat, I was twelve years old and that she wants to enroll me into grade seven. As I could not speak English and I was [supposedly] only twelve years old, though big for my age, the principal decided to put me in grade six. I must have been in elementary school for three months before I discovered that I was really in grade six and not in grade seven. Anyway, it really did not matter since I did not know what was going on in class. But, during the weekly spelling tests I was like an “idiot savant”. I studied the list of assigned words in advance and

during the spelling test I remembered how the words were spelled without really knowing their full meaning and I scored high marks in spelling. In class, in addition to our textbooks, we were issued English dictionaries but I did not understand the words that described the word whose meaning I was seeking. Eventually I began to absorb English like by osmosis.

In grade six I sat behind a tall, beautiful girl with auburn hair. Merle Newman could speak Yiddish and was very sympathetic towards me. Merle was thirteen years old and was repeating grade six. She was rather weak in arithmetic. Since I always had a knack for math, I readily volunteered to coach her. Merle invited me to her house where her mother and grandmother received me warmly. Merle's father had died of cancer a few years earlier. Before long, her mother and her younger twin sisters were coaching me and encouraging me to speak English. Fifteen is an awkward and difficult age for any teenager, especially one that was "just off the boat" and ignorant of the conventions of Canadian society. I owe the late Merle Newman and her mother my everlasting gratitude for accepting me into their family.

At the end of the school year I was promoted to grade seven, probably based on my age and not based on my school marks. I was 15½ years old then. I felt strongly about catching up with my education, or rather getting it going. I was to have started school in Sławatycze in September of 1939, but the war intervened. I attended school in Asino [Siberia], in Asbest [Urals], in Dzhunganovka [Kazakhstan] and again in the DP Camps of Berlin and Bamberg. My education was constantly interrupted. Father, who was functionally illiterate, always encouraged his children to acquire as much education as was available to us and he offered to support us financially so that we could continue with our education. "Education", he always claimed, "is portable wealth that cannot ever be taken away from you".

In the spring of 1949, while I was still in grade six, I got a part time job at Lionel's Drug Store located on Park Avenue and Laurier. The job consisted of delivering by bicycle the phoned-in orders to the customers' homes. The salary was 35¢ per hour, plus the occasional tip. That summer I worked at the drug store on a full time basis. The druggist, Lionel Cohen, was very patient with me and took an interest in my education. He suggested that I skip grade seven and go directly into grade eight. He obtained some grade seven textbooks for me to study on my own. During the slow time at the drug store he helped me with my studies, especially with English grammar. He also persuaded me to enroll in Prep School, a private school that specialized in remedial teaching for high school students, especially those who failed in a particular subject and had to write supplemental exams. The private school fees were 75¢ per hour. I enrolled there for evening classes in remedial English. I figured that before I could effectively use an English dictionary I first had to acquire some proficiency in that language, as I had no proper skills in any other language in which to understand unknown words.

At Prep School I met a fellow Polish immigrant of my age who, like me, was trying to catch up with his education. Jack Leinwand and his parents had come to Canada about the same time as we did. He had completed grade eight in post war Poland but missed attending grade nine in Canada due to illness. He was now planning to enter into grade ten. Jack suggested that I skip two grades; seven and eight, and that I enter into grade nine. His logic was that «English History Part I is taught in grade seven and English History Part II is taught in grade eight», so, if I skip both grades seven and eight I would avoid having to study English history altogether. And besides, Jack continued as an enticement, in grade nine they teach Canadian History, a rudimentary form of which had been taught in grade six. Jack's concept sounded interesting but I did not know any

Algebra, a subject that was introduced in grade eight and continued in grades nine and ten. Jack gave me his grade eight Algebra textbook and helped me get started with learning by my self the elements of Algebra.

At the beginning of September [1949], Jack and I marched off to Baron Byng High School; he to register for grade ten and I to register for grade nine. It was now eleven months since we arrived in Canada and I had by then acquired some of the rudiments of the English language. But at the age of almost sixteen I could not express myself well in any one language. I never learned Polish, my Russian was fading, and my German and my Hebrew were sketchy at best. Yiddish was always my *mammeh*['s] *lushen*, my mother['s] tongue, although I never had any formal education in Yiddish.

At Baron Byng High School I told the principal, Mr. Henderson, that “I just got off the boat” and that I wanted to enroll in grade nine. I did not reveal to him that I had by now been in Canada for close to one year and that I had attended grade six in a Montreal elementary school, and I didn’t mention the gaps in my schooling; that I had not completed grade four, that I never attended grade five, that only last year I was in grade six, and that I had never been in grade seven or grade eight. The principal told me that my knowledge of the English language was surprisingly good for a refugee who had just arrived from Europe and that, since I was about to turn sixteen, I should be enrolled into grade ten. I shivered at the thought of skipping three grades and at being catapulted into grade ten. I was afraid that my lack of school basics would be uncovered. I persuaded the principal to enroll me in grade nine of the eleven-year school programme of the Quebec Protestant School Board.

Grade nine did not turn out to be as difficult as I had feared it to be. I finished the year with high marks in all the math subjects. Math came easy to me as I always had good spacial perception and math really requires very little language skills. Physics and chemistry did not come to me as easily as math did. I had difficulty with English grammar and with the compulsory French subjects, nevertheless, I managed to pass grade nine and I finished grade ten with average marks.

In 1952 I graduated from Baron Byng High School. In my high school leaving exams of grade eleven I barely passed the compulsory two English and two French courses. My marks in physics and chemistry were in the mid 70s, but my average in the various math subjects was close to 92%, with a 98% mark in geometry.

I never went to summer camp. During the summer vacations and on weekends I worked as a delivery boy for Lionel’s Drugstore and then as an assistant shipper for a dry-goods wholesaler. At the end of my tenth grade I followed my friend Jack Leinwand to work as a part-time grocery wrapper, and later as a cashier, for the Steinberg’s grocery chain in Montreal.

In the fall of 1952 I was admitted to the five-year Engineering Program of McGill University from where I graduated in 1957 with a degree in Mechanical Engineering.

Eventually, I was able to assimilate into contemporary Canadian society.

I made it, but the memories of long ago persist.

Epilogue

On October 19, 1958, at my Uncle Morris's wedding, I met Judy Fink, a most charming and bright young woman from New York who came to live in Montreal the year before. We started dating the following February, we fell in love, became engaged in May and we were married in a little synagogue in the Bronx on October 1959.

We have three sons and two grandsons, and a red headed little granddaughter.

My mother, Chaja-Blima Repkowska-Gitelman, Z"l, died on March 19th, 1991, four days after her 88th birthday. My father, David-Zvi [Hershel] Gitelman, Z"l, died on October 28th, 1991, three weeks after his 89th birthday. Both were clear of mind to the last days of their lives.

On my sixty-fifth birthday, I will stand in the market place of Sławatycze, fifty-nine years after my family and I fled for our lives from our birthplace, I will recite the *Kaddish* for my ancestors and I will bewail the destruction of three and a half centuries of documented Jewish life in my *Shtetl* Sławatycze.

Then, with all my might, I will emit a long, silent, scream: -

! . . . ך ן ח כ ש א ם א

Lest I Forget ...!

Henry Lawrence [Chaim-Leyb] Gitelman
Montreal, September 1998

Chronology

- | | | |
|----|--------------------|---|
| 1 | January 12, 1849 | My great-grandfather, Chajm-Leyb Hitelman, was born in Sławatycze, son of Herszko [Zvi] Hitelman, 24 years old and Chana, 25 years old . |
| 2 | October 8, 1902 | My father, David-Zvi [Hershel] Gitelman, is born in Sławatycze. |
| 3 | March 15, 1903 | My mother, Chaja-Blima Repkowska, is born in Hanna near Sławatycze. |
| 4 | 1924 - 1926 | Father serves in the Polish Cavalry. |
| 5 | February 17, 1927 | Father and Mother marry in Sławatycze. |
| 6 | October 8, 1928 | My older brother Szepesl [Sam] is born in Sławatycze. |
| 7 | October 10, 1933 | Chaim-Leyb [Henry Lawrence] is born in Sławatycze. |
| 8 | November 3, 1938 | My younger brother Mojsze [Morris] is born in Sławatycze. |
| 9 | September 1, 1939 | Germany invades Poland. World War II starts. |
| 10 | September 17, 1939 | Soviet Russia invades Poland. |
| 11 | November, 1939 | Our family smuggles across the Bug River into Soviet annexed Poland. |
| 12 | January, 1940 | Grandfather Jankiel-Meir Repkowski and his eldest son Szaja are executed by the German "SD Einsatzkommando" in Sławatycze.. |
| 13 | June, 1940 | Our family is arrested by the Soviets and shipped to a Siberian prison camp. |
| 14 | October, 1940 | We are transferred to a light security prison camp in the city of Asbest, on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains. |
| 15 | June 22, 1941 | Germany attacks Soviet Russia. |
| 16 | July, 1941 | We are released from the Soviet prison camp and travel south-east, in the direction of China. We settle in the village of Dzhunganovka near the city of Dzhabul in the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan. |
| 17 | May, 1946 | We return to Poland. We are brought to the port city of Szczecin. |
| 18 | June, 1946 | We now learn of the full extent of the Holocaust and that all our relatives who remained in the German occupied areas of Poland & Byelorussia perished in the Shoah. |
| 19 | July 4, 1946 | Pogrom in Kielce where 41 Jews are killed. |
| 20 | August, 1946 | Our family escapes from Poland to the American Occupation Zone of Berlin. |
| 21 | April, 1947 | We move from Berlin to a DP camp in the Bavarian city of Bamberg in the US Occupation Zone of Germany to join mother's three brothers. |
| 22 | September 23, 1948 | Our family of five arrives in Canada. My mother's three brothers and their families follow shortly afterwards. |
| 23 | 1952 | I graduate from Baron Byng High School in Montreal. |
| 24 | 1957 | I graduate in Mechanical Engineering from McGill University, Montreal.. |
| 25 | October 19, 1958 | Judy and I meet at my uncle Morris' wedding. |
| 26 | October 31, 1959 | Judy and I are married in the Bronx, New York. |
| 34 | March 19, 1991 | Death of my mother, Chaja-Blima. |
| 36 | October 28, 1991 | Death of my father, David-Zvi [Hershel]. |
| 38 | October, 1998 | Judy and I visit Sławatycze on my 65 th birthday |
| 40 | May 19, 2008 | I visit Sławatycze with my eldest son, first born grandson and a group of Jewish descendants of Sławatycze for the rededication ceremony of the cleaned up Sławatycze Jewish Cemetery. |

Postscript

November, 1998

On October 10th, 1998, my 65th birthday [according to the Hebrew calendar], 59 years after our escape from Sławatycze, I returned to my birthplace. Judy was with me. My emotions were high and my feelings were strange walking through Sławatycze. I felt that I could see the missing people. I was able to orient myself by the two churches, which had a familiar look. The market place was still there, filled with trucks instead of horse drawn wagons. The main street, still *ulica Włodawska*, was now paved in asphalt, but the side streets were still bare earth. There were now

electric power poles throughout the village. The mainly wooden houses still had the same outhouses and the same chickens roaming the back yards.

Ślawatycze, now being a border town, we hesitated to go near the Bug River. From the edge of the flood plain the mighty Bug looked rather tiny compared to my childhood memory of it. The many flood pools in the river meadow that I used to splash in as a child looked familiar. A woman led home a cow from the pasture.

I think that I located the spot where our house stood, but the house there now did not look familiar. Years ago my father was told that his house survived the war but it had been moved away. I found the old well that I wrote about in my Memoir. It was opposite the former blacksmith shop, which is now a repair garage. My brother Szepsel had remembered were the Jewish cemetery was, on *ulica* Kodeńska, next to the Catholic and the Russian Orthodox cemeteries. Judy and I went there with our guide, Ryszard Lewicki. We had to ask where the Jewish Cemetery was located as it was overgrown with tall shrubbery and trees and there were no monuments visible. After two attempts I found one broken headstone, all the others had been removed by the locals to be used as flagstones to construct their walks.

I said *Kaddish* for my ancestors and for the members of my family who perished in the *Shoah*.

After about an hour and a half in Ślawatycze, I confirmed to myself that my former *Shtetl* is no more and that I had to flee from there once again.

When in Warsaw, I met for the first time my 92 year old uncle Isak “*der Kämpfer*” Lerer, the husband of father’s sister Breindl. In 1956, after some thirty years in Soviet Russia, Biro-Bidzhan, Siberian prison camps and internal exile, Isak and Breindl, but not their daughter Ghitta, received permission to return to Poland. Before her death in 1984, Breindl twice visited us in Montreal but my father refused to ever see his brother-in-law for having ruined his sister’s life with his ardent Communism of his youth.

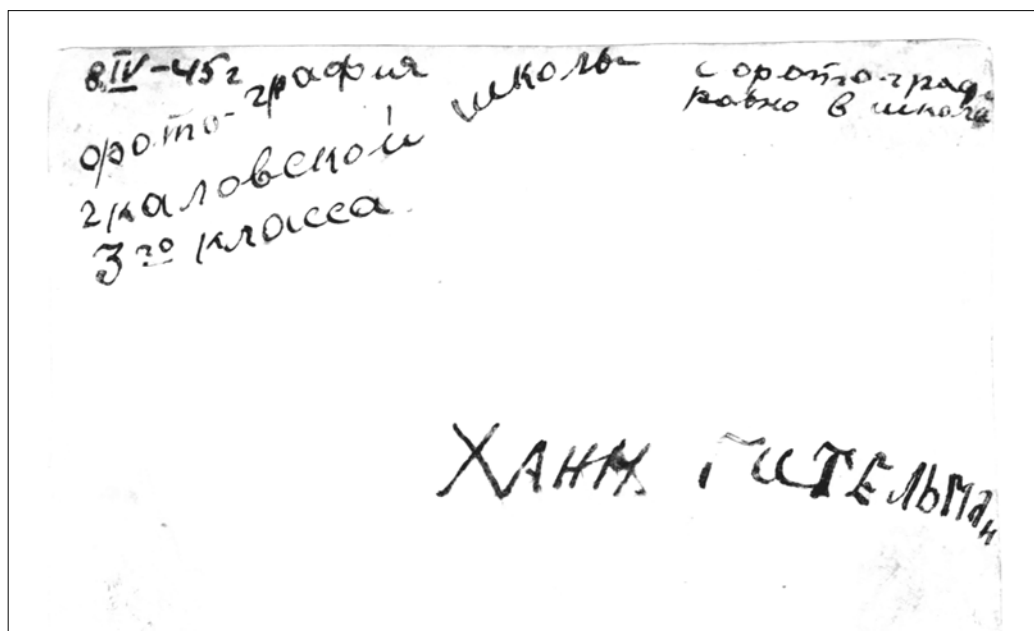
Judy kept a journal of our trip to Ślawatycze, Warsaw, Auschwitz, Krakow, Budapest, Prague and Paris in which she recorded our feelings and our impressions of the places we visited and the people we met on our three-week trip of October 8th to October 29th, 1998.



I with my uncle Isak, “*Itshe der Kämpfer*” Lerer, Warsaw, October 1998



Class picture of my 3rd grade in Dzhunganovka, April, 1945. I am sitting to the right of the teacher. I brought in my younger brother Mojsze to be photographed with me. The teacher is Russian, my classmates are Dzhungans, Kazakhs, Koreans, Jews, Tatars and one Christian Pole [back row 2nd from left]. Some of us had our heads shaved to control infestations of head lice.



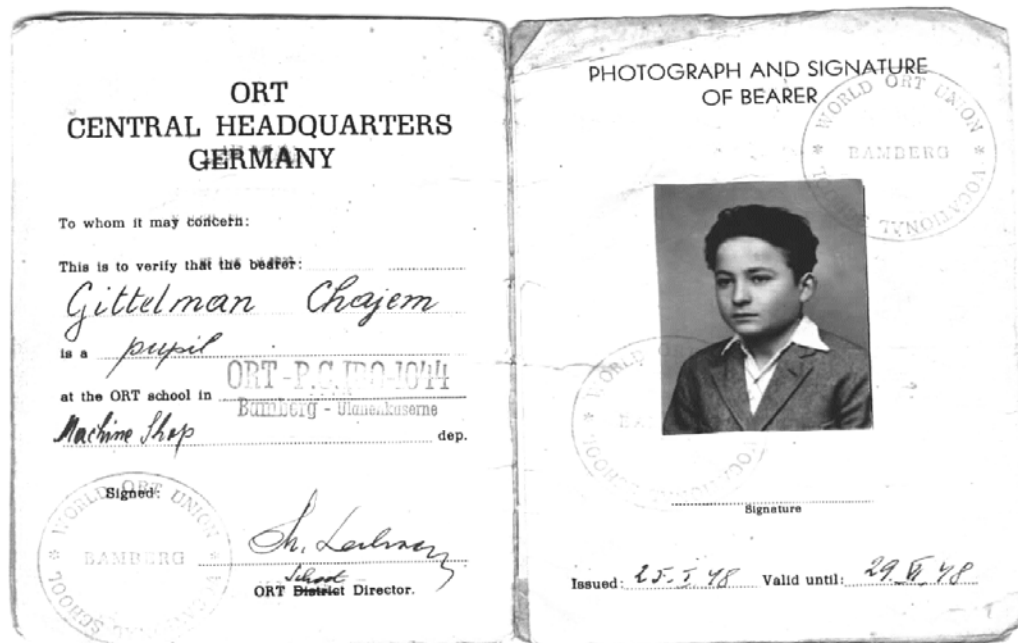
On the back of the above class picture I wrote in Russian:- "8th of April, 1945. Photograph of Tchkalovsk School, 3rd grade. Photograph taken right in the school" [Signed] Chaim Gitelman"



Our family in the Schlachtensee Displaced Persons [DP] Camp in the US Occupation Zone of Berlin, 1946.



Our family in the Ullanenkaserne DP Camp, Bamberg, the US Occupation Zone of Germany. May 1947.
Front row L-R:- Uncle Nute's wife Andzia Szapira-Rapkowski, my brother Mojsze, mother, Andzia's cousin, Riwen's wife Chaja Paluch-Rapkowski holding baby Sura-Toba.
Back row, L-R:- my brother Szepsel, mother's brother Nute, father, cousin's husband, mother's brothers Mojsze and Riwen and I [I am standing at extreme right].



My ORT Vocational School apprentice card. Bamberg Ulanenkaserne DP Camp, 1948.



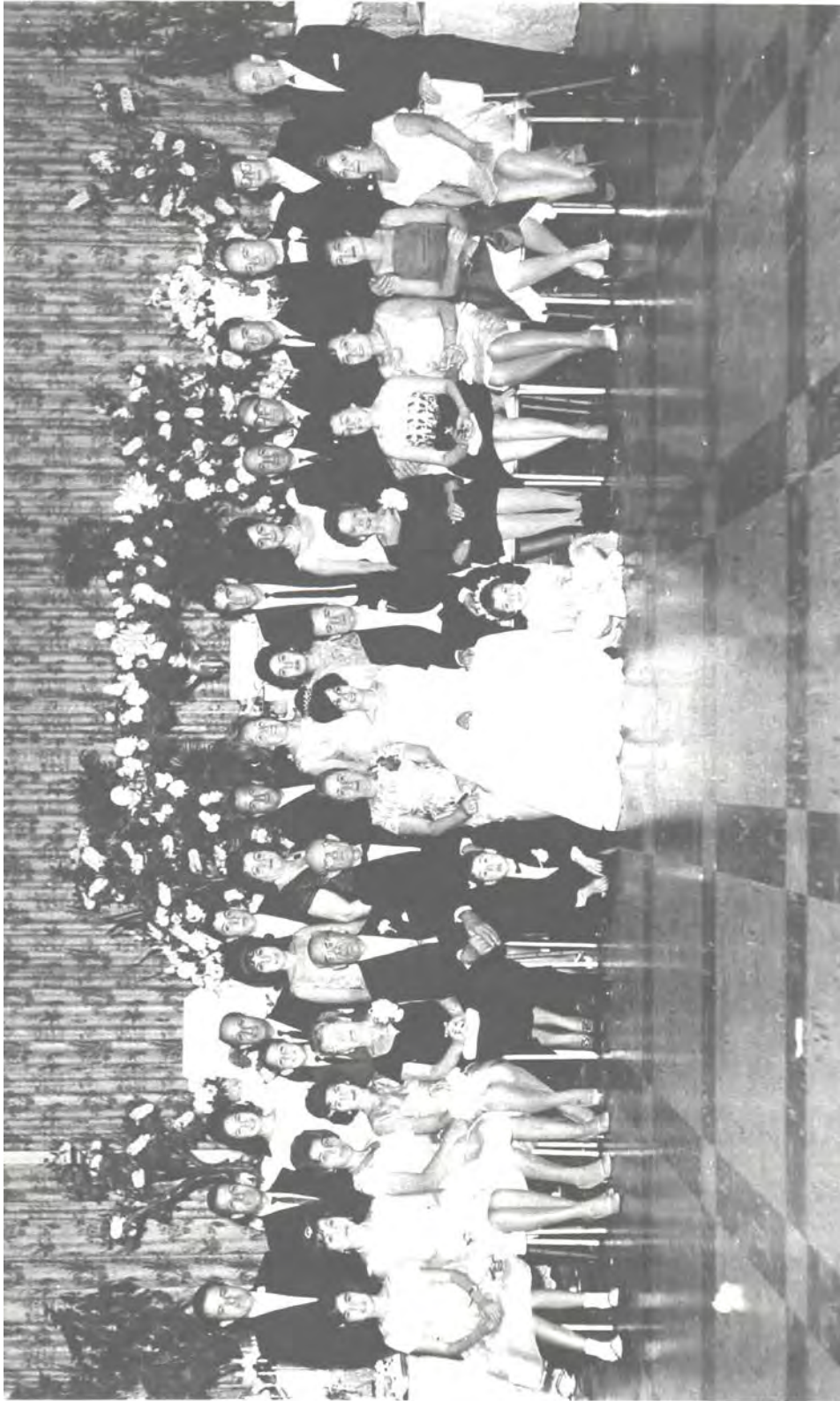
Our family one year after our arrival in Canada. 1949
We are now Sam, Harry, Morris, Chaja, and Henry



As a bearded Engineering student. Autumn, 1953



Jack Leinwand and I with my British-made 2.5L Reiley Convertible
in front of the McGill University Engineering Building. Summer, 1958



The extended family at my brother Morris' wedding,. Montreal, November, 1962



Judy and I were married in 1959 in the Bronx, N.Y.

Part II



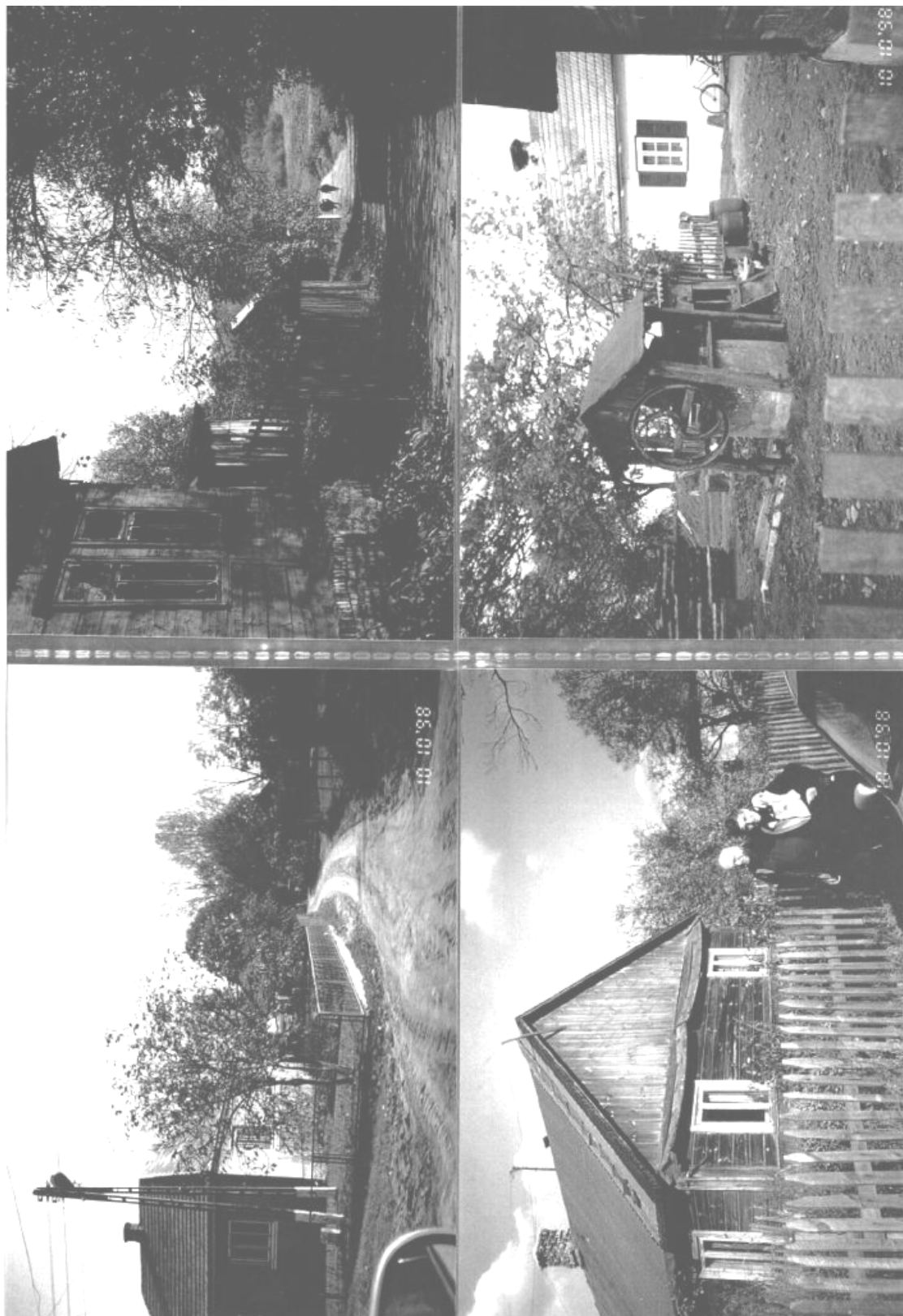
PHOTOS FROM OUR TRIP TO POLAND, OCTOBER, 1998

Henry has wanted to visit his birthplace Slawatycze, Poland, for his 65th birthday. We bought a “land and hotel only” package for Warsaw, Budapest and Prague from a US tour company, Club ABC Tours. Henry and I flew in to Warsaw one week ahead of the tour group.

We linked up with the group in Warsaw and left them two weeks later in Prague. We continued on our own to Paris where we stayed for three days and then returned home to Montreal.



Skawanki



Slawatyce
the house opposite the Smithy
mentholite in Henry's memoir 2



*The "Mighty" Bug River
the Road to Hanna 2*

*The Bug and the Flood Plain
the Road to Włodawa*



*House with thatched roof
With our Polish hosts Rydzard & Danuta*

*Typical House in Slawatyce
Site of Kitzelman House in Slawatyce*



Remnant of Warsaw Ghetto Wall
Impression of Mezuzah & Graffiti in Warsaw 5



Cemetery in Biala Podlaska empty of headstones
Impression of Mezuzah in Wakawa



6

Warsaw





MAHNMAL GEGEN KRIEG UND FASCHISMUS
VON ALFRED HRDLICKA
ERRICHTET VON DER STADT WIEN
IM BEDECKJAHRE 1988

AN DIESER STELLE STAND DER LEBEN
PHILIPPUS
DER IM 12. MÄRZ 1945 BEI EINEM BOMBEN-
ANGRIEF ZERSTÖRT WURDE HUNDERT
MENSCHEN
DIE IM DEN KELLERN DES GEBÄUDES
ZUFLUCHT
GESUCHT HATTEN KAMEN DEBEI UMS LEBEN

ALLEN OPFERN VON KRIEG UND
FASCHISMUS
IST DIESEN MAHNMAL GEWIDMET
A MEMORIAL AGAINST WAR AND FASCISM
BY ALFRED HRDLICKA
ERECTED BY THE CITY OF VIENNA
IN THE YEAR OF REMEMBRANCE 1988

ON THIS PLACE STOOD THE "PHILIPPCOURT"
WHICH ON 12 MARCH 1945 WAS DESTROYED BY AN
AERIAL BOMBARDMENT AND HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE
WHO HAD SOUGHT SHELTER IN THE CELLARS OF THIS
BUILDING HAD LOST THEIR LIVES

THIS MEMORIAL IS DEDICATED TO
ALL VICTIMS OF WAR AND FASCISM



PART III



MY TRIP TO SŁAWATYCZE, WARSAW & PARIS WITH SON & GRANDSON, MAY 2008



The English version of the speech in Polish I delivered at the ceremony at the Sławatycze Cemetery – May 19, 2008

My name is Henryk Gitelman, I was born in Sławatycze. My father was also born in Sławatycze. My mother, Chaja Rybkowska, was born in the nearby village of Hanna.

I consider myself a Pole of the Jewish persuasion. In November, 1939, with the help of a Polish Sławatycze fisherman, my family and I were fortunate to have escaped from Nazi occupied Sławatycze across the Bug River to Soviet occupied Domaczewo.

The late Dr. Michał Grynberg who was born in Sławatycze and whose daughter Jadwiga Krawczyk with her family are here today, was the author of over 10 books in Polish. In his last published book: “Sławatycze, domu moj...” Michał Grynberg wrote about the first victims executed by the Nazis in February, 1940 on the grounds of this cemetery. Among these first 21 victims was grandfather, Jakob Rybkowski & my uncle Szaja Rybkowski. I have translated this book into English and which includes the personal stories of many Sławatycze families.

In June of 1940, my family and many other Polish citizens were arrested by the Soviets as enemies of the Soviet State and were shipped by cattle train to the Siberian Gulags.

Six years later we returned to Poland. In 1948 my family was able to emigrate to Canada to join my mother's two uncles named Światłość who were originally from Hanna and my mother's sister and one of her brothers, also from Ślawatycze, who had emigrated to Canada before the war.

I always had fond memories of my life in Ślawatycze and the stories my father told of his military service in the elite Polish cavalry of the Pierwszy Pulk Piłsudskiego.

I returned to Ślawatycze twice where I obtained many copies of documents of my family.

It is with great emotion that I am standing here today, returning to the miasteczko (sztetl) of my birth and my formative years. Though the events of history have tarnished this site, the memories of my life here remain brightly etched in my mind. I will proudly repeat them to my children and my grandchildren. My oldest son and my oldest grandson are here with me today. Also, here today are my mother's cousin Shoshana Ribkowski –Afel with her son Oded from Israel and my cousin Steven. Shoshana's father and both Steven's parents were also born in Ślawatycze. Unfortunate historical events destroyed materialistic goods but the love, the pride and the attachment to the roots of my family tree were not erased.

In Canada I have made many friends of Polish origin. Among them is Father Kazimierz Kozicki who is also from Ślawatycze. It is my sincere hope that my friendship with Father Kozicki will serve as an example to promote harmonious relations among Poles of various faiths.

Thank you very much for your kind attention & please excuse my imperfect Polish.

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In front of my parents house in Ślawatycze with son and grandson, May 19, 2008



Sławatycze, May 19, 2008 The mode of transportation in Sławatycze has changed since my family left in 1939: The horse drawn carts now have rubber tyres instead of wooded wheels and most of the streets are paved.