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BALAAAM'S  
PROPHECY

EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY: 1939–1989

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## Chapter 1

# Prologue: Forty Days in Auschwitz

Witnesses to a historic turning point often misread its significance, even when it affects them directly and can ultimately seal their fate. Certainly I, as a boy of fifteen, did not read the political upheavals in Europe as portents of a looming cataclysm. But on Friday morning, June 27, 1941, five days after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, the reality of World War II exploded around me, changing my life forever.

The forces of the *Wehrmacht* had already smashed through the Russian fortifications to the east of the Bug River, which runs from north to south and divides Poland in two. (According to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact signed in 1939 by the foreign ministers of Germany and Russia, eastern Poland was annexed by Russia, and the area west of the Bug River was annexed by Germany.) The German invasion into Russian territory considerably expanded the scope and nature of the war. The front line was now about two hundred miles east of my home town of Piotrkow, a third of the way between Warsaw and Cracow. It was in Piotrkow that the Nazis established the first ghetto in occupied Poland, and it was in that ghetto that we were now enclosed. Some people were sure that Hitler would be defeated in the wide Russian Steppes, as Napoleon had been. Others, stunned by the speed of Germany's lightning advance into Russia, were deeply worried. Germany's supremacy had been established on the eastern front as well.

*Prologue: Forty Days in Auschwitz*

That morning, we had seen Red Army prisoners being marched through our streets, beaten and humiliated. It was a bright summer day.

I walked through the ghetto, carrying my notebooks, on my way home from a lesson with a private tutor. As I passed the city prison on our street, I noticed an unusually large number of police cars marked with the letters POL, short for "Polizei." The cars drove into the prison yard to unload their captives and drove out empty.

About an hour later, when I was alone at home, there was a pounding on the door. Before I could open it, two SS officers burst in, dressed in black uniforms with red ribbons and swastikas on their sleeves. "Where's the rabbi?" they shouted. Without waiting for an answer, they raced from room to room, slamming doors. One of our rooms had been given over to an elderly, white-bearded man, Moshe Warshaver, who walked with crutches. Assuming that he was the rabbi, one of the officers shouted, "On your feet, old pig. Quickly!" Moshe tried to stutter a reply. The officer grabbed a crutch and slammed it down on Moshe's back. "He's not the rabbi," said the other Nazi.

The first officer grabbed me by the ear, dragged me down the stairway, and forced me into the back seat of a gray Volkswagen. He got in next to me, shoving me against the window with his elbow to create some distance between us. The other sat next to the driver, who was also wearing a black SS uniform. Not a word was exchanged between the three, and I did not dare open my mouth. The car stopped at a gray building on 14 Bankowa Street, named Legionow Street before the war. "Out!" cried one of my captors, kicking me in the buttocks. They marched me into the lobby of a public building, city headquarters of the Gestapo and the SS. I stood in the middle of the lobby, paralyzed with fear, while the two talked in whispers. One of them grabbed me by my collar, marched me to a closed door, opened it, and kicked me down a flight of stairs. I got up in a daze and looked around me. I was in a cellar. Light filtered dimly through small latticed windows. About thirty men, evidently respectable upper-class Poles, were sitting against the walls. I did not know any of them. They looked at me with astonishment.

"How did you get here, child?" one of them asked.

I had no reply.

"They just grabbed you off the street and brought you here?" asked another.

They seemed somewhat offended that a Jewish boy should be thrust into a group of Polish Christians. Later, I found out that they were local

dignitaries who had been arrested by the Nazis upon the outbreak of the war on the Russian front, in order to prevent disturbances in the city.

I found a space against the wall and sat down, next to a well-dressed man in his sixties. He asked me where I was from, and I told him what had happened. "They were looking for your father," he said. "When they find him, they'll let you go." Suddenly, light flooded the cellar and we heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Four SS men with drawn pistols stationed themselves in the middle of the room, each facing a different wall. Without being ordered to, the prisoners all raised their hands above their heads. I copied them. The Germans bade three of the prisoners to follow them. They came back a few minutes later, carrying a container of water and two baskets of bread – one loaf of bread for every four prisoners. The man who had been sitting next to me offered me a quarter of a loaf, but I was too anxious to eat. I drank some water from a tin cup.

The man told me that he was a manager at the town brewery and that he knew my father. He was sure that I would soon be released. Toward evening, he suggested that I try to get some sleep. I lay down on the filthy floor and shut my eyes, but I could not sleep. My head was filled with frightening scenarios. I thought about my family, now sitting around the Shabbat table, worrying about me. The following day in synagogue, I was due to have been called up to the Torah to mark the second anniversary of my bar mitzvah, and my parents had prepared a *Kiddush* at home after the services. I was sure that my parents were doing everything they could to get me out of there and was convinced that by the following Friday night I would be home with them. I told myself that I was with a distinguished group of people and that it was only a matter of time until we would all be released.

At 5:00 AM, the cellar was again bathed in light. Six SS men came in and ordered us to stand against the wall, our hands crossed behind us. The commandant and one of his deputies passed down the line, looking us up and down. He then ordered us to clean up the cellar and to line up in single file. He inspected every cranny of the cell to be sure that we had cleaned up properly. We went up the stairs, carrying our slop buckets, and went out of the cellar.

On the street, we were told to get on a waiting truck and were taken to the courtyard of the town prison, not five minutes away. Screaming and kicking us, the German soldiers marched us into a fenced compound that already held some twenty prisoners.

The prison was only a few minutes' walk from my house. I prayed that my family would find out where I was and would get me released.

I was also greatly bothered that I had been forced to desecrate the Sabbath, for the first time in my life. I was sitting on the ground with my head in my hands, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was my neighbor from the cellar. "Don't worry," he said. "They'll get you out of here."

In the evening, we were ordered to get up. A truck drove into the empty yard, which was intermittently lit by the beam of a revolving searchlight in the guard tower. We got on the truck and sat on the floor against the sides. I stayed close to my friend from the cellar. He was also terrified. "Don't tell them that you're Jewish," he advised me. I realized that being Jewish made me different from the other prisoners, and knew that I would have to be very careful. An ss sentry sat behind a guardrail on the roof of the driver's cabin, a loaded machine gun aimed at us. The prison gate opened and the truck drove out, flanked by three German escort cars in front and three behind, into Pilsudski Street, where I lived.

Some of the prisoners tried to guess where we were headed. Some thought we were being taken to the Rakow forest, where the Germans had recently executed a group of Poles suspected of underground activities. Actually they were mostly Jews caught outside the ghetto for violating the curfew.

After about an hour, the convoy stopped. The guards got out, had a drink, and relieved themselves. They got back into their cars and resumed the journey. The sentry on the cabin roof cursed us. "Polish pigs," he said. "We'll finish you off one by one!" The prisoners ignored him. Fortunately, the German did not know that besides being a "Polish pig," I was also Jewish.

Sometime after midnight, the convoy stopped outside a large building. We got off the truck and were herded into the courtyard. The building was heavily guarded by Germans in green uniforms. At first I thought that we were being handed over to a regular army unit, but it soon became clear that the soldiers were part of an ss field unit, which wore *Wehrmacht* uniforms with ss emblems on their helmets and lapels.

We were lined up for inspection and counted again and again. The commander of the convoy reported that he was delivering forty-six prisoners from Piotrkow and the surrounding areas, had accomplished his mission, and was transferring us to another commandant. None of us had any idea where we were. The following morning we found out that we were in Radom, the district capital.

We were forced to relieve ourselves in the compound. By afternoon we had had nothing to drink for almost twenty-four hours, and one of our

group approached the sentry at the gate and asked for some water. He got no response. A few minutes later, German soldiers burst into the compound and began beating us with their clubs. After that, no one complained again.

At sunset, about twenty Germans came into the courtyard and ordered us to line up in single file. They tied our hands behind our backs, arranged us in rows of five, and marched us out of the compound. We walked for about an hour, guarded by soldiers with machine guns, until we reached a railway depot where a train consisting of an engine and four cattle wagons was waiting. From the train, people peered out through the barred slits. The Germans made us line up next to the fourth wagon, untied our hands, and ordered us to get on. About ten people were already inside. As the last of us got on, the sliding door was slammed shut and bolted.

Starving, thirsty, exhausted, and miserable, we lay on the floor of the wagon, waiting for the train to move. One of the prisoners tried to reassure the rest of us: "If they didn't shoot us in Rakow forest or finish us off along the way, there's a good chance that we'll eventually get out." He could never have imagined where the train was headed. I cried quietly, for myself and for what my parents must have been going through. I knew that it would now be almost impossible for them to find me.

Next to me lay a Polish Christian boy who had been on the train when we got on. He looked about two years older than I, the only other person on the train of about my age. He told me that his name was Bronislaw Kaczmarek, Bronek for short, and that he was a high school student from Radom. My full Hebrew name was complicated, so I introduced myself as Tulek, my family nickname. He told me that he had been arrested in the street during a German search for underground activists, and although his parents could not have known what had happened to him, he hoped that they would get him out. A kind of comradeship developed between us, two young prisoners on their way to the unknown. Crying silently, I tried to pray. "Pray for me too," said Bronek, crossing himself.

Toward evening, the train began to move. We looked through the barred slits to try and see where we were going; one of the prisoners deduced that we were traveling south. A few hours later, the train stopped at its final destination – Auschwitz, or Oswiecim in Polish. The prisoners were aghast. I realized that the place must be notorious, although I knew little about it.

The train had barely come to a stop when I saw the gates of hell open in front of me. ss guards with hunting dogs dragged us from the wagon, shouting, beating us, and making us lie on the ground. When the



wagons were empty, the guards stood us up to be counted. Two hundred and fifty-seven people. Barefoot (many of us had lost our shoes while being dragged from the train), bleeding, and exhausted, we marched half a mile to the camp. (The track was later extended to connect the station directly to the camp.) I could not believe what was happening to me and convinced myself that this was a passing nightmare. Ferocious dogs, barking wildly, raced around us frighteningly close. Bringing up the rear were SS sentries. I could not fathom their faces. To me they appeared like faceless robots. Only their black jackboots and gray-green uniforms convinced me that they were real.

We were made to sit on the ground in an empty lot at the edge of the camp with our hands on our shoulders. We sat for a long time, in the dark of the night. To ensure compliance, we were awakened from time to time by the bright glare of searchlights installed on all the guard towers along the fence. Shortly before dawn, we were made to run to the inspection ground, where we advanced in four columns toward a row of clerks, veteran prisoners, who recorded our personal details. One clerk wrote down "Lauer" instead of "Lau"; another wrote "Blau." I did not correct them.

We were marched to the barbers, who shaved our heads. We were told to throw all our clothes and personal possessions onto a pile in the middle of the yard. A few veteran prisoners who served as *kapos* took us to the showers. We came back to the inspection ground naked, and were given prison uniforms and wooden clogs.

We were assembled for another inspection in front of Block 11. The commander gave a short speech on camp regulations. From then on, we were told, we were to identify ourselves only by the numbers we would receive. On June 30, 1941, my name was eradicated. Pointing to the electrified fence, the commander warned us what would happen if we attempted to escape. "The only way out is through there," he said, pointing to the crematorium chimney.

I stood next to Bronek, hoping that we would be kept together. An officer passed between the columns, indicating where each of us was to go. A large group of prisoners was detached and was taken to Block 11. Bronek was among them, much to my regret. The remaining fifty prisoners, myself included, were taken toward Block 23. It was already almost light.

Block 23 was a rectangular two-story building. We were met at the entrance by two Austrian *kapos* whom we came to know as Bruno and Ernst. Bruno was tall and lean, with a fierce scar across his right cheek, from ear to mouth. Ernst was short, with a flat nose and hairline mustache. They



The author in front of block 23 in Auschwitz, where he was detained in 1941

were both veteran criminal prisoners, and rumor had it that they had been brought to Auschwitz to maintain discipline. They led us into a long, narrow hall on one side of the building, in which around three hundred and fifty prisoners were asleep on the floor. There were no beds. A few moldy sacks scattered on the bare wooden floor served as mattresses. We were allowed to lie down for what remained of the night, but I doubt that anyone slept. The area was so cramped that there was hardly room to change position during the night.

I thought about a story I had learned the previous week, in which Abraham is thrown into a furnace by Nimrod, ruler of Ur Casdim, for having smashed his idols. The Talmud relates that the angel Gabriel offered to save Abraham by descending to earth and cooling the furnace. God replied that He would save Abraham Himself: "I am unique in my world," He said, "and Abraham is unique in his. It is fitting that the unique should save the unique." I was hoping for a similar miracle and prayed that someone, not necessarily the Almighty Himself, would rescue me from this furnace. I lay there half-awake, until the *kapos* burst into the room shouting *Raus! Raus!* ("Out! Out!"). We staggered to our feet and stumbled out of the block.

Veteran prisoners from the other side of the block were already lining up against the wall of the block. They looked at us with compassion. The last prisoners to come out of the building dragged four bodies behind them, prisoners who had died during the night, and laid them alongside

the group of prisoners. The dead bodies distressed me greatly, even though I had seen corpses before, when Piotrkow had been bombed in September 1939. But this time I could actually see their faces. One was lying near me, his eyes staring at me, his fist clenched threateningly.

I was still reeling from the shock of my arrest and imprisonment in the Gestapo cellar, and the journey to Radom and then to Auschwitz, here in hell itself. I could picture my father, running from place to place, trying to get me out, and I was sure that any minute my name would be called and I would be released. Only last week I had turned fifteen, and here I was, in a group of political and other prisoners, most of whom were at least ten years older than I. What was I doing in this hell, I asked myself, and how could I get out?

After roll call, the *kapos* assigned us to *kommandos* (work groups). Bruno looked at me with his blue eyes and signaled for me to remain. I hoped he would take pity on me and make my life easier. He sent me to work as an assistant to the block clerk, a young and kindly Pole named Heniek.

That day I swept and cleaned the rooms of the block staff – the *Blockaeltester* (block chief), the *kapos*, and the clerk. I was also sent to help the two prisoners who were assigned to clean the latrines. This was a horrible job, considering the total absence of sanitation. When I had finished, the cleaners gave me two slices of bread from the extra ration they received. I lay down on the floor and slept. In the evening, the work groups returned. They waited outside for evening roll call and for their daily food ration before being allowed to enter the block.

My presence as “houseboy” in a block at which I had arrived only the previous night aroused the suspicion of some of the veterans. “Who is that child?” I overheard one of them ask. A Pole called Mietek, who had arrived in the same transport as I, told him who I was and where I was from. “You’d better not leave him alone with the *kapos*,” the veteran cautioned Mietek. “There aren’t any women here and they look for boys like him.” I had no idea what they were talking about.

After roll call we were allowed to stay outside for about an hour. Mietek took me aside and suggested that I stay close to him during the night and at morning roll call. He advised me to join a *kommando* in the morning and not stay in the block under the *kapos*’ “protection.”

“They’re animals. They use boys like you for their own gratification,” he said. “If you have any trouble, tell Krist, the block elder, or Heniek, the clerk. He’s a decent man.” I learned that Heniek was trusted by the political prisoners as well as by the ss and was responsible for recording the roll. I was relieved to know that he was around should I need his help.

That night I was too scared to close my eyes. Mietek, lying beside me, reassured me. "We've warned them not to come near you," he said. After the morning count, I stayed with Mietek and went out with his work group to the *Baustelle* (construction site).

While we were walking to our workplace, a group of Poles gathered around Mietek. They turned out to be the leaders of the group of political prisoners, which had united against the criminal elements. In some blocks the political prisoners had already driven out the criminal elements and gained control. In my block this showdown was still to come, although the political prisoners had already gained the upper hand. There seemed to be great solidarity among the political inmates; I was envious. They belonged to a group and looked out for one another, while I was the only Jew. At least I had gained the protection of Mietek.

We arrived at our worksite, a muddy field a few hundred yards from a miserable-looking village called Brzezinka, or Birkenau in German, consisting mostly of thatch-roofed farmhouses and huts. Cattle, chickens, and geese roamed in the yards.

We laid out narrow metal tracks across the large field, over which we pushed carts of gravel to marked areas. We poured the gravel onto the swampiest areas of the field and spread it around with a spade. Others dug drainage ditches across the field. Albert, the French-speaking *kapo* attached to our group, said that a large camp was being built for Russian POWs. Albert never raised a hand against anyone, except when SS soldiers were near and he had to demonstrate his ruthlessness.

None of us could have imagined that we were laying the foundations for a factory of death.

Pushing the carts was relatively easy work, easier than unloading and spreading the gravel. We all took turns at both. When my turn came to spread the gravel, my feet sank deep into the mud. With every step I took, my clogs sank deeper. I worked barefoot until I got used to the stiff clogs.

It was July, and the days were hot. At the end of the day I was sweaty, filthy, and exhausted. Albert told us to line up according to the foreman's instructions. The foremen, mostly veteran prisoners as well as a few foreign workers, were all *Volksdeutsche*, Poles of German origin. The foremen were authorized to set the pace of our work and could make our lives either easier or harder, according to their whim. They treated most of us cruelly, especially those they identified as Jews.

There were eight groups in our *kommando*. My group led the way on the march back to camp; Albert marched with us, club in hand. Walking up

to me, he thrust two squares of chocolate into my hand, and resumed his position. From a few rows back, I heard Mietek's voice: "Careful of him. He's also a son of a bitch." A mile from the camp. I could not walk any further in my mud-caked clogs and continued barefoot, carrying my clogs. Others followed suit. At least this problem was not mine alone.

It was dark by the time we got back to the block and lined up for evening roll call. We then waited until nine o'clock until our evening rations of soup and bread were delivered. I was starving. The prisoner who was serving the soup fished around for scraps of vegetables or potatoes. We all clamored around him, mouths watering, hoping to be the recipients of his largesse. Most of us were left with our stomachs rumbling.

Terrified of coming face to face with Bruno or Ernst, I sneaked back to my "bedroom." The floor was already covered with sleeping prisoners. I looked for Mietek, my protector of the previous night, but could not find him. One of the other prisoners told me that he was outside in the fenced-off area between the two blocks. I went outside, and there he was, whispering in Polish in the midst of a group of prisoners. They seemed to be speaking in a sort of code. I stood to the side, sensing that it would be unwise to get too close. Mietek saw me and called me over. Standing next to him, I heard that the leaders of the Polish Workers' Party had arrived in the camp that afternoon. "By evening," reported one of the prisoners, "all that was left of them was ashes." They had apparently been the first victims of the experimental gas chamber that had been built next to the crematorium.

We went back into the block. I lay down next to Mietek, who told me that he had been the public prosecutor in one of the cities in Silesia, northern Poland, where he had been active in the Polish Socialist Party. He never told me his surname. (I once heard someone call him "Czorny"; when I asked him if that was his name, he just smiled.) Mietek was a natural leader and was treated with respect by all the other prisoners, including the camp veterans. The *kapos* must have seen that I was under his protection, and kept their distance.

On the way to work the following morning, Mietek sneaked into the ranks of a work group from another block. When he returned to our group, he reported that the Germans had advanced on Moscow. This exchange of information between groups took place under the watchful eyes of the Germans, and by the time we reached our workplaces, everyone knew about the German successes on the Russian front. The mood became even grimmer, as the prospect of the Germans being quickly defeated grew slim. Only one person remained hopeful, Nudelman, a middle-aged man who

had been in the transport from Radom with me. He cursed the Germans frequently, in Yiddish spiced with Hebrew. He was in a parallel work group, and until that morning I did not know that he was Jewish.

A sadistic German foreman named Kunz bragged about the tremendous victories of the *Wehrmacht*, which had captured city after city during its advance through the Steppes of Russia. He assured us that the course of Germany's victory would proceed at the same pace. Nudelman displayed amazement at these victories and asked Kunz in all seriousness whether the Germans had captured "Misa Meshuna ("death in agony," a Yiddish curse). Kunz wanted to hear all about that important city. Nudelman answered, that it was deep in the eastern Ukraine. "If it's on the map," said Kunz, "we'll get to it." Nudelman almost choked with laughter; this was the one and only time in Auschwitz that I ever had the urge to laugh.

Nudelman was the only other Jew I had met in the camp. We talked about whether anyone outside the camp knew where we were. "Don't expect anyone except your family to help," said Nudelman. "The Jews in the ghettos, and certainly the ones in the world at large, will not do anything. They're all too worried about their own skins."

One Friday, we finished work unusually early. Some prisoners guessed that there would be a "selection" in the camp, by which some of us would be sent to work in factories or coal mines. Others thought that the weakest prisoners would be taken away and eliminated. I was still sure that my parents were trying to find me and that I would be released any moment. In order to help them, I wanted to play my part. The only way I could pray was by heart; I had no prayer book or *tefillin*. That Friday, on my way back to the block, I recited Psalm 130, which I knew by heart. Over and over, I said to myself, "From out of the depths, I called upon you, O Lord..." I was sure that my prayers would reach heaven. Tears ran down my cheeks, and one of the older Polish prisoners tried to comfort me.

At about four o'clock, we were ordered to run to the *Appelplatz* near the commander's office. We were lined up according to blocks, unlike morning and evening roll call. Dozens of ss soldiers faced us, their rifles aimed. The *kapos* were told to watch their groups. Word got around that prisoners who had been caught trying to run away or who had been involved in activities would be summarily executed.

In front of us stood a gallows, which had been made of a long iron bar attached to two poles. Underneath the bar, on wooden boxes, stood five prisoners, their hands tied behind their backs. Their eyes begged for mercy. Overcome with terror, I wet my pants. My whole body shook. Five

## *Prologue: Forty Days in Auschwitz*

SS officers stood next to the victims, awaiting the command of the head executioner. I did not hear the actual command. I saw each hangman place a noose around the neck of his victim and kick away the box, leaving the victim dangling in agony until he died.

The *Sonderkommandos*, the units for removing the dead, took down the bodies, placed them on a cart, and wheeled them to the crematorium. No one knew, and no one asked, why these prisoners had been executed. We were all terrified that we might be next.

That evening, after roll call, I did not bother to take my rations. I had lost the will to live. I could neither eat nor drink. During the two weeks I had been at Auschwitz, I had seen death all around me. That very morning we had brought eighteen bodies out to roll call. Men died from hunger, from disease, and from beatings. In spite of the constant fear, I was slowly getting used to living like that. But the hangings of that afternoon were a new horror.

In the days that followed I walked around in a daze. I stopped counting the days and lost all hope that I would ever leave that hell. I worked like a robot. One evening on the way back to camp, Mietek encouraged me to keep my spirits up. "You never know where help might come from," he said. I doubt that he knew he was quoting Psalm 121, one of my favorites. The words sparked new hope. I recalled the first line of the psalm: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence will come my help." As Mietek talked on, I recited the rest of the verse to myself. "Do not allow your feet to falter, your Guardian will not slumber." That was all I could do.

I had discovered that it was best to remain part of a group, both in the block and at work; loners were more vulnerable to the whims of the *kapos*, foremen, and SS sentries. For several days I looked unsuccessfully for Nudelman, as I was still uncomfortable about being the only Jew among non-Jews. My sole remaining hope was the protection of Mietek.

One day I received orders to clean the wagon tracks. Scraping off the upper layer of gravel from the rails, I inadvertently dislodged a wooden tie under the track. Luckily, there were no wagons nearby that might have caused an accident. Stefan, one of the cruelest of the *kapos*, saw me trying to put the tie back in place. He pounced on me, with his tongue hanging out like a hunting dog falling on its prey. The first blow landed on my back before I could manage to straighten up. He continued to beat me with his wooden club right and left. I tried to protect my head with my hands, but he did not let up until he saw me lying on the ground

writhing in pain. All this time, I did not utter a sound, just bit my tongue and my lips. My daily prayer “From whence will come my help?” was still unanswered. My face was untouched by the flogging, but I could barely drag myself back to camp.

An elderly man walking next to me tried to help me. He was a Czech by the name of Bendarcek, a high school teacher by profession, who had been in Auschwitz for six months. “We won’t be freed for a long time,” he said. “But we mustn’t lose hope. You’re young and you mustn’t give up.”

Overcome with pain, I turned and twisted that night on my bit of floor in the block, trying to fall asleep, in order to face another day of hell. The words of Bendarcek heartened me. I told Mietek about him, and he too added words of support.

The following day I stayed as far away as possible from Stefan. I joined a team pushing the wagons and kept my nose to the grindstone all day. This was my thirty-seventh day in Auschwitz.

After evening roll call, Mietek called me aside. We walked to the area between the blocks and he whispered that contact had been made with my family. “Tomorrow morning,” he said, “don’t join a work group. Stay behind to help Heniek, who will take you to the clinic and hand you over to a Polish doctor called Kazik. He’ll look after you. Do whatever he tells you. If all goes well, we’ll meet again on the outside.”

I was very excited. In the middle of the night, Mietek tapped me on the back and whispered, “Be brave and you’ll be all right.” I could not believe that this might be my last night in the block.

The next morning, Heniek took me to the clinic and handed me over to Kazik. Several SS doctors were walking around, but Kazik ignored them. My stomach was churning from anxiety. Kazik put me on a camp cot and pretended to give me an injection in my backside. He called an orderly to help me wash and put on a patient’s gown. Dressed as a patient, I followed Kazik outside, ostensibly toward another building for an “examination.” We passed the inspection grounds where the gallows awaited their next victims. Kazik pointed to a brown van parked next to the camp kitchen, about two hundred yards away. “Take a good look at that car,” he said. “Pay attention and remember every detail.” We slowed down and watched the driver of the van open the door of the van and take out racks of baked goods. We passed close by and I got a good look at the driver’s face. He was the owner of a nearby bakery who came to the camp twice a week to deliver bread and cakes for the Germans. He had become a familiar face, and his van was only rarely checked.



We returned to the clinic and Kazik told me to get onto one of the bunks in the quarantine area. Twice I heard him report to the German doctors, who seemed satisfied with his explanations. For two days I enjoyed being “sick,” and the rest did me a world of good. On the third day, my fortieth in Auschwitz, Kazik gave me a pair of pants, a vest, and a jacket which had a personal number sewn above the pocket. Kazik had taken the jacket from a corpse which was being wheeled to the crematorium, putting my jacket in its place. He gave me a pill to swallow, probably a tranquilizer, and sent me on my way. I was carrying a cardboard box full of lab bottles, that I was to take to the building in which I had supposedly been examined two days earlier.

I was shaking, and Kazik tried to reassure me. “When the driver opens both back doors, go over to him, put the box in the car, and help him with the empty racks. When he taps you on the back, jump in and he’ll close the door. Lie down inside until he tells you to come out.”

Trembling, I walked toward the van. I could see the driver putting the racks into the van. One of the back doors was still closed. When I was about twenty yards from the van, the driver opened the other door. Quick as a flash, I ran to the van and placed my box inside. I felt a tap on my back and jumped in. The door closed behind me.

The van began to move. I lay down on the floor and breathed in the aroma of freshly baked goods. My heart was still pounding, even though the car was already traveling at a good speed. Encased in the moving cage which, with luck, would bring me to freedom, I had no idea where I was. After about an hour, we turned into a bumpy, rocky road and the van came to a halt. The door opened and the driver called me to come out.

I found myself in the yard of a small country farm. Several pigs and chickens were running free, and I followed the driver into a wooden hut. The single large room served as kitchen, dining room, and bedroom. A fat white cat stared at me, and an old woman handed me a mug of warm milk and a slice of black peasant bread, which I devoured. To this day I can vividly recall the taste of that bread. She smiled at me with friendliness, and I wondered if she knew who I was. The driver, whom she called Bolek, was apparently her son. Seeing how hungry I was, she offered me another slice of bread, this time spread with butter. “Eat, eat,” she said, smiling from under the brightly colored kerchief that covered her head and half her face.

Bolek ran a bakery in the nearby town of Sosnowiec. He was about fifty, and had a stern face, a thin mustache, and light blue eyes. He said very little to me. He removed the prison numbers from my jacket, and gave me

a pair of boots and a peaked cap which concealed most of my bald head. Bolek told me that I was to travel with him to the nearby railway station at Zawiercie, and gave me a train ticket to Koluszki, a station between Warsaw, Lodz, and Piotrkow. He told me to change trains at Czestochowa. At Piotrkow, I was to cross the main road in the direction of the fields and walk from there to my house, bypassing the ghetto boundary.

Fortunately, there were no uniformed Germans at the station. On the train, I huddled in my seat, afraid that any Pole who recognized me might turn me in. A middle-aged Pole wearing a felt hat and carrying a raincoat was sitting opposite me and looked up at me from time to time. I was terrified that he had been following me. I pretended to be asleep but could not relax. When I got off the train at Czestochowa, he followed me. On the platform, he came up to me and whispered, "Don't be frightened. I'm with you." I got on the train to Piotrkow. I looked around for him and smiled when I caught his eye. He positioned himself in the corridor by the door of my compartment. When the train arrived in Piotrkow, he told me to stay close to him. He took off his hat and draped his coat over his arm. We walked together like old friends until we got to the fields behind the houses on Pilsudski Street where a young Pole was waiting for us. We carried on walking. The young Pole walked ahead, serving as a guide until we neared the ghetto.

"This is the most dangerous stretch," said my companion from the train. "They could recognize you here." His presence was very reassuring, even though I knew the area well. I just wanted to get home as quickly as possible. We walked for about half an hour on a footpath through the fields, parallel to the road that led to the town's Christian cemetery. The young guide left us. We continued on our way until we reached the "Jewish Ghetto."

I led the way to the back entrance to the courtyard of our house. The gate had been blocked by order of the authorities, and I would have to climb the wall of the courtyard to get in. I thanked my companion for taking care of me. We shook hands and he wished me luck. He helped me over the wall, tipped his hat, and was gone. I jumped down into the cobblestone courtyard. Crossing the courtyard toward the stairwell of our house, I encountered Regina, the fourteen-year-old daughter of our neighbors. Her parents, the Gomolinskis, lived in the apartment opposite ours. She asked me where I had been for the last few weeks. "In Cracow," I answered, "visiting family." I decided that this hastily fabricated lie might be useful in the coming days.

*Prologue: Forty Days in Auschwitz*

I walked up the stairs to our apartment and gently opened the door. My father's study, which had become the most important room in the house, was empty. I walked toward the kitchen. Mother was standing at the table, her back to me.

She turned. The knife she was holding fell from her hand and dropped to the floor. She froze. I forced myself to smile and ran into her arms. She held me close, her tears wetting her face and mine.

Holding me by the hand, she led me into the dining room, where my two brothers and I would sleep. Father was sitting at the table with my twelve-year-old brother Milek, studying the weekly Torah portion. Lulek was sitting on the floor, building a tower out of wooden blocks. Milek saw me and nudged Father. Father's face lit up and I ran to him. He pressed me tightly to him and I leaned on his shoulder. I felt his empty right sleeve; since the accident in which he had lost his right arm, he usually wore an artificial limb, using his left hand to write. He stroked the back of my neck. How many times, in the darkness of Auschwitz, had I imagined this reunion.

Despite the emotion with which my parents welcomed me, I realized that my sudden entrance had not surprised them. They had never given up hope that I would come back. Lulek abandoned his game and jumped on me, squealing with joy. Milek begged me to tell him where I had been. Mother quietly raised a finger to her lips, signaling me not to speak.

I stuck with the lie invented for Regina, and told them that I had been with our relatives in Cracow. Milek knew these cousins and wanted to hear all about them, so I made up the answers as I went along. Father asked when I had last eaten. Mother had already prepared tea and cake, offering me my favorite cup. Sitting with my brothers on either side of me, I heard all that had happened in the ghetto in recent weeks, including the death of Regina's mother from a typhus epidemic that had raged through the ghetto. Father glanced at his watch, remembering that a dozen or so men would be waiting for him for afternoon prayers in his study. My brothers and I got up to go with him, but he told me to stay with Mother.

While I was alone with Mother, she gave me strict instructions: "Forget all about the last few weeks. You were not in Auschwitz. You have never heard of such a place." Seeing my surprise, she said that everything would be explained in due course. Meanwhile, and only when asked, I should say that I had been with relatives in Cracow, exactly as I had told Regina.

Much later, after Father and Milek had been taken to Treblinka, and I remained with Mother and Lulek, she told me of the efforts she and Father

had made to find me and bring me home. She described the despair and frustration of the first days after I had disappeared, and how they spoke to every person of influence in the town who might be able to help. My parents learned that the operation in which I had been taken to the Gestapo cellar had been carried out by a special unit from district headquarters in Radom. In Piotrkow, neither the Gestapo nor the ss knew of my arrest. Through a family friend, Rabbi Yehiel Kestenberg, rabbi of Radom, they succeeded in locating the group from Radom to which our transport from Piotrkow had been added and then taken to Auschwitz. Following up on this information, Mother's younger brother, Rabbi Mordechai Frankel-Teomim, rabbi of Jaworzno, contacted Polish acquaintances in his town; many Auschwitz inmates worked in the Jaworzno coal mines, supervised by local miners. Through these contacts, my parents learned that I was alive in Auschwitz. My uncle then arranged for my escape in exchange for a very considerable sum of money. My uncle's contacts even managed to have the card with my personal name removed from the Auschwitz files. This card was handed over to my parents as proof of the faultless execution of the operation.

Late that night, after my brothers had gone to sleep, I told my parents everything that had happened to me. They were horrified. Every so often Mother interrupted, "Are you sure you're not exaggerating?" They especially wanted to know if mass executions were taking place in Auschwitz, having apparently heard rumors about what was happening. They were relieved to hear that, aside from a few hangings and killings in the experimental gas chamber, there were no mass killings. They were surprised to learn that most of my fellow inmates were Poles and other gentiles, that Jews were only a small minority. This encouraged them to believe that the Nazis were not targeting Jews exclusively. They were convinced that as long as Jews were not the only group singled out by the Nazis, our situation was less desperate.

When I was alone with Father, I hesitantly mentioned that for six weeks I had had no opportunity to pray or observe any commandments. He was not surprised, and asked me whether my faith had remained strong. I could not assure him that it had. Sensing my discomfort, he dropped the subject.

My parents kept me under "house arrest" for ten days, making sure that I ate well and slept a lot. They were also worried that I would be snatched again, since the Germans had already begun seizing people from the ghetto for forced labor. I stayed off the streets in consideration of my

parents' wishes, as well as to avoid bumping into friends and having to answer questions. My experiences at Auschwitz were indelibly engraved in my consciousness. I had terrible nightmares every night.

Three weeks after I got home, the Germans "celebrated" September 1, the second anniversary of the outbreak of war. Several SS units burst into the ghetto and fanned out over several streets and alleys. I was on my way home from the house of a friend with whom I had studied before the war. A short distance away, I saw a group of people being rounded up and loaded onto a truck. I backed into an alley and walked straight into a patrol of four Germans leading a group of Jews to the truck. Within a minute, I had been forced into the truck. Salek Greenstein, a friend and classmate from before the war, was already inside. Seeing my terror, he tried to reassure me. "It'll only be for a few hours," he said. "With a bit of luck, we'll be home soon." We were taken to an empty lot near the Phoenix glass factory, then used as an improvised gas station for army vehicles, and were ordered to shift a pile of gasoline barrels. We set to work. When we had finished, three or four hours later, we reassembled for the trip back to the ghetto, but there was no truck in sight. I thought that we would be allowed to walk home, but the German soldiers guarding us ordered us to stay where we were. Suddenly, twenty more Germans appeared out of nowhere and began clubbing some of us with their rifle butts. Our screams only encouraged them. Eventually they ordered us to line up and march back to the ghetto. Luck was with me that day and I was not hurt.

My parents were deeply troubled by such events. They knew that they could not keep me at home forever. They considered some of the invitations they had received from friends and former students of my father in Slovakia. From there it would be possible to continue through Hungary, Romania, Turkey, and eventually to Palestine.

Mother was now in favor of this plan, but Father was against. "A captain may not abandon a sinking ship," he would say. Even though he was powerless to help his people, he felt that, as a leader of the community, he had a responsibility to stay with them. The evening after I had been snatched off the streets of the ghetto, he suggested smuggling Milek and me into Slovakia, so that we at least would be able to reach Eretz Yisrael. I overheard my father say to my mother, "With all that he's been through, he'll be able to take care of Milek." Milek and I never left, for Slovakia was soon in the same situation as Poland, and the route through Hungary, and Romania was blocked.

The jaws of the trap snapped shut around the ghetto, leaving us no way out. We heard nothing from friends and Jewish organizations in

Britain and the United States. Cut off from the outside world and at the mercy of the Nazis, we could only hope for help from Heaven, which was not forthcoming.

Father retreated into silence. Although he had many Jewish friends in the West, whom he often met at conferences and with whom he corresponded regularly, he did not think that they could be able to help us. The only people who showed interest in our plight were former students of Father in Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania who were now also under Nazi rule, especially Rabbi Yosef Zvi Carlebach of Hamburg-Altona. They sent *etrogim* for Succoth and matzoth for Passover, as well as frequent letters of encouragement. That was all that they could do. Occasionally I overheard my parents regretting that they had not been sufficiently aware of the danger we were in. The writing on the wall had been clear for over three years, and no one had bothered to read the words. Now it was too late.

Before Auschwitz I had been a boy who had never tasted the personal struggle for existence. But those forty days had changed me totally. I returned steeped in horrendous experiences and was consumed with suspicion, fear, caution, and determination. Father tried to reassure me: "God's salvation can come in the blink of an eye." To me that indicated his despair of salvation by the hand of man. I was seized with worry about the future and doubt that anyone in the free world was concerned about our fate. Why, I asked him, had the Jews always been singled out for such cruelty, and why were the Jews always, victims of war between other nations?

He fixed his gaze on me, tears in his beautiful blue eyes. Then he pulled me to him, hugged me, and kissed me on my forehead. "There are Jews who live in anxiety," he said, "and others who live in tranquillity." I did not understand what he was trying to tell me. I could not imagine that there were Jews living in security who would be indifferent to the fate of less fortunate Jews. "Aren't we one nation?" I asked. "Don't the Poles in London worry about their compatriots here?" My wise and knowledgeable father had no answer. He was as helpless as I.

Momentarily, I forgot about the present. Perhaps it was no more than a prolonged nightmare from which we would shortly wake. Thinking back, I saw myself as I had been two years ago, in our peaceful home, before the flood had engulfed us.

## Chapter 2

# Home

**B**y the time I was ten years old, I had already lived in three different countries: Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. In 1926 my parents were living in Suceava, Romania, where Father was serving as chief rabbi. In anticipation of my birth, Mother returned to her parents' home in Cracow, Poland, where we remained until I was two months old. My grandparents lived in a spacious house with a large communal courtyard, which was used by all the other families.

My grandparents, Rabbi Simcha and Miriam Frankel-Teomim, were well known all over Poland. Grandmother Miriam traced her ancestry back to the eleventh century. Her illustrious ancestors included Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, 1040-1105), one of the greatest commentators of the Bible and the Talmud; the Maharam of Padua (Rabbi Meir Katznellenbogen, 1482-1565), who lived in Italy in the sixteenth century; Rabbi Shaul Wahl-Katznellenbogen, whose grandson is said to have been king of Poland for one night in 1587; Hacham Zvi (Rabbi Zvi Ashkenazi, 1658-1718), well-known rabbi of Istanbul, Sarajevo, Lwow, Hamburg-Altona, and Amsterdam; and his son, the Ya'avetz (Rabbi Yaacov Emden, 1697-1776), who served as rabbi of Hamburg and Emden. Rabbi Baruch Frankel-Teomim (1760-1828), author of *Baruch Ta'am*, and Rabbi Haim Halberstam of Sanz (1793-1876), author of *Divrei Haim*, were Mother's paternal and maternal grandfathers.

My father, Moshe Chaim Lau, was born in 1892 in Lwow, capital of East Galicia, then part of Ukraine in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



The author's father, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lau, who died in Treblinka, 1942

He too came from an eminent family of scholars and intellectuals. His mother's ancestors included famous *poskim* (halachic authorities) such as Bach (Rabbi Yoel Sirkis, 1561-1640), rabbi of Brest and Cracow, as well as a number of other cities, and author of Bayit Hadash and many other commentaries; Taz (Rabbi David Halevy Segal, 1584-1662), author of *Turei Zahav*, one of the most important commentaries on the *Shulhan Aruch*; and Rabbi Effaim Zalman Shorr, author of *Tevuot Shorr*.

Father was a known scholar, author, and orator. I remember him as an imposing figure, with his tall, athletic physique and trim, light-brown beard. He had been ordained at the age of eighteen by some of the greatest rabbis of his generation. During World War I, when Ukrainian gangs led by Petlura staged pogroms against the Jews of Lwow, his parents' house was burned down and the family fled to Vienna. The Austrian capital presented Father with many cultural and academic opportunities. In Vienna he made the acquaintance of rabbis, philosophers, and intellectuals, including Dr. Natan Birenbaum, the Jewish philosopher whose ideas on modern Zionism preceded those of Theodor Herzl. Father became his close friend, guiding him through his first steps in Jewish practice.



A charismatic leader, Father was much in demand throughout the communities of eastern and central Europe. He gave his closest allegiance to Agudat Yisrael, a party that came into being in order to counter the Zionist Organization and the Socialist Bund, secular movements established after the Emancipation. In the early 1930s he was among the founders of Bais Ya'acov, a network of religious schools for girls, which went on to revolutionize ultra-Orthodox education for girls.

His political activities gravitated toward the religious labor wing, Poalei Agudat Yisrael, which was involved in settling and repopulating Eretz Yisrael, then under British rule and called Palestine. Father became the spokesman for Poalei Agudat Yisrael in its confrontation with the more conservative Agudat Yisrael which, because of the antireligious stance of many of the early pioneers, wanted no part in settling Eretz Yisrael. Father spoke fervently in favor of religious pioneers, emigrating and building new Jewish settlements in Eretz Yisrael. I was sure that one day we would find our place in the Holy Land, even though practical plans were never discussed.

In 1928, at one of the world conferences of Agudat Yisrael in Vienna, the leaders of the Jewish community in Presov, Czechoslovakia, invited Father to become their rabbi and he accepted. At the age of two, when I had just begun to mouth my first words in Romanian, I was forced to switch to another language. However, the transition to Slovakian was facilitated by German which, in time, became a very useful tongue. During the four years that I studied at the Jewish school, German enjoyed equal status with Slovakian as the language of instruction for secular topics. Jewish studies were taught in German and occupied a half day. At home we spoke a mixture of Yiddish and Polish.

My childhood in Presov was happy and carefree. I had many friends with whom I played for hours in the big fruit orchards that surrounded our house. One of my most vivid memories is of the *brith milah* of my brother, Shmuel Yitzhak, born in September 1929, when I was three. Many of Mother's relatives came from Poland to join the celebration. The pathway through the orchard to the gate of the synagogue next door was decorated with flowers, and the main entrance to the synagogue was carpeted in blue. I sneaked in between the adults and found a vantage point near my mother's empty seat in the ladies' gallery. Looking down, I could see the podium in the center of the synagogue on which all the distinguished guests stood around Father, who was draped in a striped *tallit* with an elaborate silver border. Grandfather sat in the chair of Elijah, an ornate chair used only at circumcisions, the baby in his lap.

## Home

When the ceremony was over, I ran outside to wait for the nurse, who was supposed to take my new brother home. I stood at the foot of the stairs that led to the ladies' gallery, when Elsa, our Jewish maid, caught sight of me. "We've been looking everywhere for you," she said. "Your mother is worried. Where have you been all this time?" She burst out laughing when I told her. She took my hand and led me home. My mother could also not help laughing when she heard where I had been.

I went in to see the baby, whom I had seen only once since his birth, eight days earlier. He returned from the ceremony bearing the name Shmuel Yitzhak, in memory of Father's grandfather, Rabbi Shmuel Yitzhak Shorr, a prominent rabbi in eastern Galicia, author of *Minchat Shai*. His name was far too much of a mouthful for me. I decided to call him Milek, which went well with my own nickname, Tulek. No one voiced any objections, and he remained Milek until his dying day.

My mother, Chaya, or Helena as her Polish friends called her, was a wise, well-educated woman. She had learned Polish and German in school, and had also been given extra tutoring by private teachers. Although her family's rabbinic, hassidic traditions had precluded her going to university, she was



The author's mother, Chaya Lau, who died in Ravensbrueck, 1944

extremely knowledgeable and well read. Her beauty, regality, and elegant attire, which was fully in keeping with the laws of modesty prescribed by Orthodox Judaism, attracted many an eye. Her charm and friendliness gave her a special status in the community.

She was a warm and caring mother, instilling in us children a love of people and a zest for life. She was rarely angry, and when she was, her anger was usually tinged with humor. Mother was the dominant influence on my education and the molding of my personality throughout my early childhood.

In addition to being a devoted and loving wife, mother, and housewife, she was also active in community affairs. She devoted a great deal of time to looking after the needy and to counseling and comforting the many who turned to her for help. I remember her as someone who quietly influenced everyone about her.

My mother taught me the Hebrew and the Latin alphabets by the time I was four. When I entered preschool at the age of five, I could already read the Hebrew morning prayers fluently, as well as the opening



Age two with Mother

verses of Leviticus. On my fifth birthday, in recognition of my scholastic achievements, my parents held a festive meal to which they invited many community leaders. Extra chairs and tables were brought into the library, which also served as Father's study and was filled with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. I was placed on a chair next to Father at the head of the table, from which I gave a short speech, which Father had written for me. He presented me with a set of the Five Books of Moses and put the gold chain from his pocket watch around my neck. I was very proud. The guests, I suspect, enjoyed Mother's pastries more than my sermon.

Even the rigors of school did not mar the happiness of my childhood. Jewish studies were taught to my class of over fifty six-year-olds by Mr. Guttman, a short, elderly man with a small, pointed beard. Prayers, Bible, and Jewish laws were taught by rote, in German. We memorized the passages verse by verse, repeating them in a sing-song fashion. I already knew most of the material, but since my parents did not want me to skip a grade, I stayed in grades one and two for the two full years. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught in Slovakian by Mr. Brill, a thickset man who walked with a limp. He also taught us physical education, and was more like an older friend than a teacher.

Although my parents were satisfied with my grades, they arranged for additional tutoring in Bible and Mishnah. My tutor was a student in a yeshiva that had been established by Father. The extra lessons did not affect my boyish high spirits nor did they prevent me from playing with my friends.

Reward for my many hours of study came in the long summer vacations, which we spent in the Tatra Mountains or at Bardejov, near Presov. We spent two summer holidays at Zakopane, on one of the Tatra peaks, together with relatives from Cracow.

On these vacations I discovered a different facet of Father's personality. He loved walking in the mountains; discarding his long, black coat, he hiked with us in his shirtsleeves, cane in hand. Occasionally he would borrow a horse-drawn cart from one of the farmers and we would go on outings to far-off places. Sometimes he disappeared at daybreak to go swimming in the river outside the village. Vacations allowed him to escape from his responsibilities and to spend time with his family.

Mother enjoyed not having to worry about household chores, exchanging the dark silk scarves that covered her fashionably combed wig for brighter colors. She always wore a wig in the presence of others, since, according to Orthodox Jewish tradition, a married woman may not show her hair to any man except her husband.

In August 1933, my older brother, Yehoshua, known as Shiko, from Father's first marriage, left for Wizhnitz to study in the yeshiva of his uncles, the Wizhnitz rabbis. He stayed with them until he left for Palestine in 1944.

Prior to his leaving for Wizhnitz, Romania, we spent that summer in Krynica, a beautiful spa resort on the Polish-Czech border. The rabbis of Ger, Bobov, Wizhnitz, and Belz – the greatest rabbis of Poland, Hungary, and Romania – were also in Krynica, accompanied by hundreds of their *hassidim*. Although I was only seven, Father took me in to introduce me to these luminaries. To me, Rabbi Benzion Halberstam of Bobov seemed the most impressive. Hearing my name, he told me about the ancestors whose name I bore, reminding me that I was also descended from Rashi. He bent down and kissed my forehead, then shook my hand and pressed a Polish zloty into my palm.

As I was leaving, a boy of about my own age wearing a hassidic-style peaked cap asked me for the coin, offering me ten times its worth. I hesitated, but he persisted. I told Father about the offer, pointing out the young trader. Father told me that the boy was the son of a famous hassidic rabbi from Poland. "Do as you please," he told me, "but if it's worth so much to him, it should be to you too." The boy again asked that I sell him my coin. I could not understand how it could be so valuable to him, and eventually sold it for the ten zlotys. Neither of us got rich from the transaction. The little boy went on to become the rabbi of Ger. Years later, Rabbi Pinchas Menachem Alter became one of the most prominent rabbis in Israel. Under his influence, Israeli governments were formed and brought down.

It was in Krynica, in the summer of 1933, that I first heard the name Hitler, when the rabbis and some of their disciples were discussing developments in Germany following the Nazis' rise to power. Some were worried; others not. Overhearing a conversation between Father and Rabbi Meir Shapira, his cousin and good friend, I began to understand the possible consequences of Hitler's ascendance. Rabbi Shapira, who had just returned from a fund-raising trip to the US, told Father about his experiences in the New World. He was concerned that Jewish immigrants in America might not survive as Jews.

He also spoke about Eretz Yisrael – the first time that I heard Palestine discussed as a place in which Jews actually live. Even though he had never been to Eretz Yisrael, Rabbi Shapira described the holy places vividly. I was mesmerized by his portrayals of the Western Wall, Rachel's Tomb, and the Dead Sea. I pictured myself walking in these places, though thoughts about Eretz Yisrael as a place where one could live in the near future were remote from our reality.

On the train back to Presov, I asked Father about Hitler. "The Lord will help," he replied. He then mentioned to Mother that Rabbi Shapira had suggested that he submit his candidacy for the position of rabbi of Piotrkow, a post that Rabbi Shapira had resigned two years earlier to become rabbi of Lublin and head of the famous Hachmei Lublin Yeshiva. Mother was enthusiastic about going back, to Poland, where she would be closer to her family, thus obviating the need to cross frontiers between countries constantly at odds. My parents' decision centered solely on whether Poland or Czechoslovakia would be more suitable for setting up their permanent home.

Two months after we saw him in Krynica, Rabbi Shapira passed away suddenly at the age of forty-six. Father was deeply affected and delivered the eulogy at the funeral, which was attended by thousands of people from all over Europe.

An emergency committee that had been set up on behalf of the Hachmei Lublin Yeshiva asked Father to go on a fund-raising mission for the yeshiva. One of his stops was Piotrkow, the city in which Rabbi Shapira had been chief rabbi. Father was now offered the position. He accepted, and his installation was set for December 1934, on Hanukkah.

He continued to Cracow on his fund-raising trip. At the Cracow station he had a serious accident, as a result of which his right arm was amputated. He was in a hospital in Cracow for a month, and then went to stay with one of my uncles to recuperate. Mother made arrangements for the family to join Father in Cracow, without telling us children about the accident. Thus we left Presov, to return nine months later for a final farewell before proceeding to our next destination, Piotrkow.

We arrived in Cracow just before Hanukkah. One of my cousins told me about my father's accident. I was very upset and asked to be allowed to see him. I went into his room, where he lay in bed propped up on two pillows, a clipboard on his lap. Naturally I was horrified at the sight of his bandaged stump. Gently, my father explained what had happened. "I had just boarded the train," he said. "As I was about to go into the corridor, the train suddenly lurched forward. I lost my balance and was thrown out of the train door and under the carriage between the rails. As the train passed over me, I tried to protect my head with my right arm. My elbow got caught under one of the wheels and was crushed. After the train passed, I was pulled up onto the platform and was taken to the hospital. The doctor said that he had no choice but to amputate. I must thank the Almighty for bringing me through alive, and will just have to get used to it."

Father asked me to place his *tefillin* on his left arm, telling me that when the stump healed he would use his left hand to put his *tefillin* on the stump of his right arm. He showed me the clipboard on which he was already learning to write with his left hand. He was clearly in great pain and I began to cry. Mother comforted me, saying we must be grateful for having a “new father.”

Mother saw to it that I did not waste a single day of our stay in Cracow. The day after our arrival, she took me across the River Vistula to Yesodei Hatorah, a private Jewish school. Because I spoke Polish, I was accepted into third grade, together with pupils around my own age. I quickly got used to the new curriculum and made friends, including boys I had met on our vacations in the Tatras. I fell in love with the city of Cracow, and enjoyed playing in Grandfather’s courtyard with my many cousins. I would have been happy to stay in Cracow permanently, as would my mother. But at the end of the summer, when Father returned from Vienna, where he had been fitted with an artificial limb, we went back to Presov to wind up our affairs before moving to Piotrkow.

We spent Rosh Hashanah of 1935 in Presov. Father took leave of the congregation with an emotional sermon, which reduced some of the men to tears. Two days later, a huge crowd escorted us to the railway station. About twenty friends came with us on the train as far as the Czech border at Orlov. They waved good-bye from the platform as the train rolled slowly toward the Polish checkpoint at Muszyna.

After a ten-hour journey, we arrived in Piotrkow a few days before Yom Kippur. Hundreds of people were waiting at the station, and they greeted Father with singing and dancing. We were taken to our temporary apartment in horse-drawn carriages decorated with flowers.

Father’s first appearance as rabbi in this town of sixty thousand people – one-third of them Jews – was on *Kol Nidrei*, Yom Kippur eve. Many people who usually prayed in other synagogues came to hear the new rabbi’s sermon, and the huge synagogue, including both levels of the ladies’ galleries, was packed. Father sat on the right of the Holy Ark, in the chief rabbi’s seat, which had been vacant since the departure of Rabbi Shapira. Next to him was the podium on which the cantor and choir stood. Two chairs facing the congregation had been placed behind Father for Milek and me.

When Cantor Baruch Kaminecki and his choir had finished *Kol Nidrei*, Father rose to deliver his sermon. While he spoke, the congregation sat in absolute silence, hanging on his every word. He was a thrilling speaker. Even people who did not entirely understand the meaning of his

words were captivated by his appearance and resonant voice. From my seat I could clearly see the members of this large congregation and could sense the impact upon them.

After the High Holidays, we moved to our permanent home at 21 Pilsudski Street, the main east-west thoroughfare of the city. I made new friends in school, particularly those living nearby. Pilsudski Street was in the heart of a vibrant Jewish neighborhood. Shops were closed on the Sabbath and on Jewish holidays – except for barbershops that catered to non-Jews wanting to get their hair cut before Sunday. The communal institutions were controlled by the Socialist Bund, which had won the recent community elections, defeating the religious factions led by Agudat Yisrael. The Jews lived mostly in the area between the Great Synagogue and Plac Trybunalski (Supreme Court Plaza), known locally as Trybunalski Rynek. This square had been the focal point of Jewish communal life in Piotrkow for centuries. At the center stood a water pump, at which wagon drivers watered their horses on market days.

In 1663, a Jewish pharmacist from Cracow named Matityahu Kalhora was accused of insulting a Catholic priest. He was condemned to death and was burned at the stake in Plac Trybunalski. His ashes were returned to Cracow, where a tombstone still stands on his grave in the old cemetery, next to the ancient synagogue where the famous Rema had prayed.

Piotrkow had been an important city in Polish governmental affairs, housing the parliament and the supreme court of Poland, the tribunal, from the fifteenth until the end of the seventeenth century. Piotrkow was proud of its rich history. The Jews, for their part, were proud of the great rabbis who had served the city for four hundred of the seven hundred years in which there had been a Jewish community in Piotrkow. Gradually, I became caught up in this local patriotism, though I have always felt a greater attachment to Cracow, the place of my birth.

Our years in Piotrkow were marked by periodic outbreaks of anti-Semitism in Poland. In 1934, a decree designed to prohibit, or at least restrict, the ritual slaughter of beef for Jewish consumption, was passed on the grounds of cruelty to animals. This was followed by anti-Semitic statements from several Polish politicians. Prime Minister Slawoj Skladkowski, for example, condemned a pogrom against Jews in Pshitik, but when asked about the boycott of Jews in business and the unwillingness of Polish employers to employ them, replied: “Oh, that’s all right.” The anti-Semitic sentiments of government leaders further encouraged the masses, already imbued with a hatred of the Jews. Popular anti-Semitism



was expressed in graffiti on the walls of houses and fences, and especially on Jewish public buildings and institutions. During Christian holidays we were fair game for attacks by Polish youths, and on the nights of Christmas and Easter we did not dare go out into the streets. The rest of the time, however, relations were neighborly; Jewish boys studied in the public schools alongside Christian children and played in the same public parks and sports fields.

I sensed the growing unease in the Jewish community. Young people came to consult Father about whether they should go to pioneer training farms to prepare for immigration to Eretz Yisrael as farmers. There were many who wanted his help in acquiring immigration certificates from the British mandatory authority in Eretz Yisrael. Others simply came to say good-bye before leaving. "Why don't we go to Eretz Yisrael?" I asked Mother. At first she tried to ignore the question, then she said that some go to Eretz Yisrael, some go to America, but we will stay here with our family. I got the feeling that she was not at peace with her answer.

On June 1, 1937, when I was eleven years old, my youngest brother was born. Eight days later, the Great Synagogue was festively decorated with flowers. Since early morning, horse-drawn carriages had been lined up near the house. The one decked out with an arch of flowers was to take my new brother to his *brith milah* in the synagogue. All the dignitaries of the congregation were there, along with Mother's family from Cracow and Father's from Lwow and Katowice. My younger brother Milek and I got to ride in the decorated carriage of honor, together with Mother's brother Shmuel and his fiancée Hannah, daughter of Rabbi Elimelech Perlov of Stolin-Karlin in Pinsk. To symbolize fertility, the couple was honored with carrying the baby to the ceremony, where he would be given a name. Since Shmuel and his fiancée were not yet married, they needed chaperones, an honor given to Milek and me.

The baby was to be named after at least four prominent people whom Father greatly admired. His first name, Yisrael, was the name of Rabbi Yisrael Hager, Grand Rabbi of Wizhnitz, as well as the name of Rabbi Yisrael Friedman, grand rabbi of Chortkov, revered by many, including Father. The second name, Meir, was in memory of Father's cousin, head of the Hachmei Lublin Yeshiva Rabbi Meir Shapira, whom Father now followed as rabbi of Piotrkow. The two names together, Yisrael Meir, carried on the name of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacohen of Radin, one of the greatest Torah scholars, regarded as one of the most righteous of his generation. He was the author of the *Hafetz Haim*, a major contribution to the rabbinical literature of the twentieth century.

Hundreds of guests from far and near came to the celebration. There were speeches, greetings, and songs. As the elder brothers, Milek and I were also happy to receive gifts. We chose to nickname him “Lulek.” He was a beautiful baby and we loved to rock him in his cradle and walk him in his carriage. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that a day would come when he would be entrusted to me, to be father, mother, and mentor to him.

Meanwhile I continued to enjoy the ordinary pursuits of children my age. The weekdays were long, with little opportunity for youthful mischief. Letting off steam from the tension of school days had to be deferred to the Sabbath. On Saturday afternoons when the parents in every Jewish household were enjoying a nap, we roamed the Jewish Quarter.

Like many other cities, Piotrkow had its share of homeless people, some of whom should probably have been institutionalized. They lived a sad life, shuffling between the synagogues and the doorways of Jewish homes, looking for shelter. The Jewish housewives gave them food and clothing.

One of these unfortunates was known as Yaacov *Kav veNaki* (Concise and Clear) because of his knowledge of a Bible commentary by that name. Others claimed that he acquired the nickname for his deft exploits. He was in his thirties, with a thick beard and a large potbelly. He always wore a battered cap with a visor that hid his eyes. He spoke as a man of the world, spicing his words with wise sayings from scholarly sources, spurning offers of bread or food, inventing his own method of staying well fed. Lurking in the shadows, he would wait for a householder to leave the kitchen, then slip in with the grace of a cat, extract some dish from the oven, and sneak away to eat his meal. True to his name, he always returned the pot, empty and clean, to the doorway of the house.

Yaacov knew all the homes and chose his “suppliers” by the savor of that day’s menu. On the Sabbath, he scouted around the bakeries where Jews had delivered pots of *cholent* on Friday. *Cholent* is a traditional Sabbath stew cooked overnight. Rather than have every home keep a fire going all night and morning, the bakery ovens were used for that purpose. Poor people made do with potatoes and beans in a gravy. The well-to-do included pieces of beef, chicken legs and wings. The rich even put legs of veal into the pot. Yaacov would select “his” *cholent* on the basis of aroma. On Sabbath morning all the pots of *cholent* were brought back piping hot to their owners. He would wait until the families left for morning prayers in the synagogue, then snatch the pot of his choice. One Sabbath some of us children organized a cruel trap for Yaacov. We got up earlier than usual

and went to the early services of the Ger *hassidim*. Then we fanned out over the streets, tracking Yaacov's footsteps. One of our groups spotted him near the house of Shmuel Zebrowicz on Szewska Street. We set a well-planned ambush and caught Yaacov fleeing from the doorway, hot pot in hand. He panicked and threw the contents of the pot at us. The wonderful aroma of *cholent* wafted all around us as the contents spilled out over the street. It was Yaacov's last exploit in our neighborhood. He vanished from Piotrkow and was never seen again. We looked for him for several weeks but he never returned. My conscience bothers me to this day for my participation in trapping him and banishing him from our little world.

During the next two years the shadow cast by Hitler began to approach us. The threats against Austria, and later against Czechoslovakia, aroused alarm, but in spite of everything life continued as usual. In the summer of 1937, as in 1938, we spent our vacation in the foothills of the Tatra Mountains. We children were involved with our games but it was impossible to ignore the concern on the faces of our parents and their friends.

Hitler demanded the annexation of all territories with a majority of German-speaking people. In 1938 he annexed Austria to the German Reich and received a hero's triumphal welcome in Vienna. Then he demanded the Sudetenland, the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of Britain forced Czechoslovakia to yield, and Hitler took control of the Sudetenland where Germany faces the Czech border, a mountainous region with excellent military defenses. The thirty-five-division Czech army, well trained and well armed, could have put up an excellent defense. The German occupation left the remaining part of Czechoslovakia defenseless and gave Germany one of the largest arms factories in Europe, the Skoda Works. This classic appeasement policy set the stage for the Nazi takeover of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. This was the first time Hitler violated his oft-repeated assertion that he had no interest in non-German-speaking lands. Chamberlain now realized, too late, that Hitler had deceived him.

The Poles, feeling threatened, asked for a defense treaty with Britain and France. However, neither of them had any practical way of coming to the aid of Poland, now surrounded by Germany and Czechoslovakia. The Soviets offered Britain and France a treaty to open a two-front war in case Hitler should attack Poland, with Russian troops entering Polish territory in order to fight the Germans. The paranoid Polish suspicion of Soviet motives led to rejection of such a treaty. The consequent refusal of Russia's offer by Britain and France and their shabby treatment of the Soviets in

## *Home*

subsequent talks on joint action against Hitler, the common enemy, finally convinced Russia that she could put no trust in Britain or France. In the summer of 1939, the two implacable enemies, the Nazis and the Soviets, found it expedient to sign a treaty of friendship, dividing Poland between them in case of war. This freed the Nazis from the threat of a two-front war and set the stage for their invasion of Poland in September 1939. After numerous demands that Germany return to her own borders, World War II broke out when Britain and France finally declared war on Germany.