I am a

WITNESS

Mina Rosner

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by Mina Rosner

In memory of Michael

Foreword

In the space of three years, every member of my immediate family was wiped out by the forces of Adolf Hitler and his collaborators. My aunts and uncles,

brothers and sisters, even my parents, were dragged from their homes and hiding places, bludgeoned, shot, or gassed, then dumped into unmarked graves. No headstones mark the spots where they rest. All that remains of their lives are some crumbling photos and the memories that survived along with me.

More than a generation has passed since the end of the Second World War. Today young people must rely on books and films if they hope to understand that period. To many, the war is only an historical event that came and went. The media are even fond of publicizing debates between historians and those who deny that the holocaust ever took place. For me, however, the events of that terrible time are indelibly burned into my memory and consciousness.

Recently I returned to my home village of Buczacz with my youngest son. The mayor welcomed me and escorted me on a tour of the town. As we walked up the slope to where my parents had lived, the curious town residents peered out of their windows. The younger ones must have been perplexed by it all, but I think the older ones knew well what I was feeling. The home my parents lived in is gone, so is the store that Michael, my husband, and I ran for so short a time.

One of our stops on the return visit was Fedor Hill, the town's main Christian cemetery, where so many of my people had been taken and shot. Even today, it's not uncommon for grave diggers to uncover unidentified human remains whenever they prepare a new burial spot. It is a constant reminder of the atrocities of the war.

In sharp contrast to the neatly arranged rows of graves on Fedor Hill are the abandoned tombstones in the derelict Jewish cemetery across town. It was difficult for me to control my emotions as I walked alongside the graves of my friends and relatives after an absence of so many years. Some parts of the cemetery are now converted to a garbage dump, while others are completely covered over by trees and weeds. I noticed evidence of human remains everywhere. Human bones were strewn about above ground. Some graves were actually open. This is where my parents met their fate, but there are no markers signifying the spot. A marker erected in memory of the victims of the war was destroyed long ago by anti-Semites.

We found the tombstone of my grandmother, Golde Schwebel, who died in 1926. Two graves over we had buried Uncle Karl, and right next to him was the unmarked grave of my son, Isaac. I stood there for a long time. Nearly fifty years after burying my first son here, I was in the same place again, with my youngest son. Hitler did not succeed in killing me, but his handiwork still causes pain for me and millions of others.

As we walked on I saw a group of elderly women tending a field, and I couldn't help wondering, was it one of those women who handed my family over to the Nazis? This thought had been in the back of my mind since I had returned to Buczacz. The people who watched us on the streets, the ones who looked at us through their window shutters, what did they do during the Nazi occupation? Were some of the collaborators who helped to kill my family still walking the streets of Buczacz? Every town and village had collaborators. I felt sure some of them were there still.

There were some special places I wanted to visit. One was the monument in honour of the Warsaw Ghetto heroes. Michael and I had visited the huge granite structure before we came to Canada, and now I wanted to go there one last time with my son.

It was overcast and raining lightly when we arrived at Anielewicz and Zamenhof Streets in Warsaw, the site of the monument. This is where the first fusillade was fired on April 19, 1943, signalling the start of forty-two days of heroic resistance against the Nazis by the ghetto fighters. Hitler had imported tons of black granite from Sweden to erect a victory monument amidst the rubble of Warsaw. But the Nazis never got the chance to celebrate such a victory. Instead, the granite was used to build the imposing monument which paid tribute to the men and women who took up arms against their oppressors.

As I placed a bouquet of flowers at the foot of the monument, an elderly man passed by and spoke to us in Yiddish. His name was Rubin Moscovitch, one of the few surviving Jews in Warsaw. Originally from Lodz, he told us he had lived in Warsaw when the Nazis invaded. His entire family had been wiped out, but he survived by hiding in the woods. He told us the story of the ghetto, and pointed out the spot where resistance leader Mordechai Anielewicz

committed suicide in his bunker headquarters rather than surrender to the Nazis. He warned of the dangerous political situation that was now developing in Poland and Eastern Europe, where scapegoats were being sought for the difficult conditions people were having to endure. Poland, he said, was beginning to see a new phenomenon — anti-Semitism without Jews.

As I looked at his pale and gaunt figure, with the towering granite structure serving as a backdrop, I thought about the variety of heroes the war had produced. There were the visionary men and women who foresaw the danger of fascism and fought against it relentlessly, not just during the war but before and afterwards as well. There were the brave individuals in every region who emerged as the leaders of the resistance, struggling to make life as difficult as possible for the Nazis at every turn. There were the ordinary people who had no desire other than to live normal lives, and who picked up arms to defend their families. And there were those who had no guns, but whose hatred of Nazism and spirit of defiance were no less real. They struck a blow against fascism by surviving. They continue that struggle now by speaking out against oppression.

Another name for those heroes is "witness," people who speak the truth. As I looked at Rubin Moscovitch's face I saw just such a witness. Perhaps he looked back at mine and saw another,

Although the events I recount in this book took place half a century ago, I feel compelled to speak about them now because of some recent occurrences. Increasingly, acts of intolerance and prejudice are brought to my attention. These have stirred an urgent desire in me to try to make people understand the consequences of hate. I have no desire to see the events I experienced in the past be repeated to destroy the lives of my children and grandchildren,

If we aren't prepared to learn the lessons of history — to combat racism, fascism, and all forms of discrimination — there is no guarantee that another holocaust will not occur. For Nazism was not the product of a handful of madmen who came to power accidentally. It was a conscious and deliberate policy instituted by those who sought to manipulate and control. As long as we live in a world where the exploitation of others is allowed to happen, people

will be persecuted because of religious beliefs, skin colour, or race. Examples of this kind of persecution exist today, and I am saddened by them.

The Nazi holocaust touched me directly. I know that such inhuman atrocities can happen. Somehow I lived through that time. But it must never happen again, If my story encourages people to speak out against injustice wherever it occurs, I will be content. This is my small contribution to life — and liberty.

1

I was 25 years old and getting married. Michael and I had met the previous summer through the customary matchmaker. He was so tall and handsome and elegantly dressed. We went for walks and talked in the cool summer evenings. He told me how he had lost his father at the age of nine and how he had worked since then to help support his family. We laughed when he told me about one of his very first "jobs" as a youth — he was paid by the management of Viennese opera houses to stamp his feet and shout "bravo" at the conclusion of performances. Like all young lovers we talked about our dreams for the future. We became engaged and set the wedding date for January 8, 1939.

We couldn’t take the time for a honeymoon in those days, but it didn’t matter. The future looked bright. As a wedding gift, my father had given us the small retail store he had built up on Rynek, our town’s main street. We sold candies and confectionery, carbonated drinks, snacks, and other small items. We had work to do and our life to build. The life I planned for my family was not unlike my own childhood.

My father, Abraham Pohorille, owned a wholesale distribution company. He imported chocolate, candies, cheeses, sardines, and herring. Shipments of fresh fish and conserves arrived from Gdansk, in the north of Poland. There were delicious chocolate and lemon wafers that came from Lvov. Every child in Buczacz knew that my family was the source of the wide variety of candies available in town.

The soft drink factory was really my father's pride and joy. He had started it before the First World War. The workers hauled water from the town well to my father's building where it was carbonated. It was stored in big fifty-litre copper cylinders. Most storekeepers sold the drinks by the glass, and my father made sure they had ice to go along with the refreshments. Every winter, he would hire men to crack the ice on the Strypa River and haul the blocks on wagons into a warehouse. They packed straw between each layer of ice to keep the blocks cool enough to last all summer.

Our family ran a retail store as well, right in the centre of town across from the Ratush — the main monument in Buczacz. My two brothers, three sisters, and I spent many hours helping out behind the counter. Elementary school lasted just half a day, and we were all expected to work when we got home. It hardly seemed like work when we were surrounded by candies, drinks, and all manner of treats.

The store was a gathering place for students and young people in Buczacz. Pupils from the nearby Gymnasium would constantly congregate there. One of the teachers often came by to collar the students and herd them back into school. When someone shouted that Professor Rook was coming, it was the signal for all the students to dive for cover behind the counter.

Ours was a close-knit family. Even after my brothers and sisters married, they stayed in town to work in the family business. My father was a workaholic, and he imbued everyone with the same spirit. His soft and delicate features belied a strict working ethic. He and my mother tended the business from morning until late at night. We children had the utmost respect for them.

My parents discouraged us from continuing our education past high school. I finished seven years of elementary school for girls; I went to the Gymnasium for two years and earned my certificate. I had an opportunity to train as a teacher in Tarnopol, but my parents considered the needs of the family business to be more important. Yet our education continued at home. My father subscribed to newspapers and journals that we passed eagerly from hand to hand. We read books, newspapers, and magazines in the library. We had a special German tutor, Herr Landau; and Mr. Koffler taught us to read and

write in Yiddish. We also attended a Hebrew school in a basement on Gymnasialna Street. Our home was filled with the works of Wolf Pohorille, my father's uncle, who had written and translated many books about religion, medicine, and mysticism.

Buczacz itself had a rich cultural life. Troupes would come from Vilna, and most people seemed to have money for the performances. There was theatre at the Sokol and the latest movies at the one Kino in town. On weekends we organized outings in the countryside. Sometimes we rented boats and rowed down the river singing.

On Friday nights my family gathered in our home on Zeblickevice Street, just off Rynek. My mother, Cyla, and any children still at home prepared the Sabbath meal. All my brothers and sisters, together with the grandchildren, gathered around the huge table. Since the business was closed the next day we would talk and sing songs long into the evening.

We were Polish Jews and Buczacz was very much a Jewish community. Jews had lived in Buczacz as early as the sixteenth century. We had kept our ancient customs and traditions through the centuries. In the 1930s there were ten thousand Jews in a town of eighteen thousand. There were printers, tailors, tinsmiths, shoemakers, and store owners. Some bred pigs. Others worked in the candle factory, or grew sugar for the region. A large printing press was established in Buczacz in the early part of the twentieth century, and a Yiddish language weekly began to be published. We were proud of the many men of learning and distinction that Buczacz had produced. The Nobel Prize winning author Shmuel Agnon was born there, as was Emanuel Ringelblum, the historian and chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto. My own family had been active in many aspects of community life, and one of the Pohorilles even served as a civic official in the late nineteenth century.

We Jews kept to ourselves. In a way we were isolated. Scandals and gossip could be rampant in one community while remaining unknown in the other. There was a policeman in Buczacz who would get drunk while on duty and then ask my father if he could go upstairs in the soda water factory to sleep it off. Somehow he thought his secret would be safer with a Jewish store

owner than with anyone else. I suppose he was right since my father never denied his requests nor told anyone about them.

The First World War disrupted life in Buczacz and the rhythm of the Jewish community in particular, but it didn't destroy it. Soon after the war broke out my father closed his business and took his entire family to Germany. My family made its living mending cotton sacks while waiting to see how the battle between the big powers would turn out. So during the First World War, my family fled west and found shelter in Germany. In fact, both my father and my husband's father served in the Austro-Hungarian army which was allied with the Germans.

After the First World War Jews in Poland and the Ukraine were still at risk. The Russian Revolution had put a stop to the czarist pogroms, but in Poland the Jews were being blamed for the impoverishment and destitution that followed the war. Pogroms in Poland began on the very same day the Polish independent state was proclaimed, and they continued throughout 1918 and 1919. The pretext for these killings was often that the Jews had opposed Polish troops or were sympathetic to the Soviets. Somehow our town was spared the worst effects of the killings, and my parents set about the task of rebuilding their lives.

I was six years old then and knew nothing of these events. Even as a teenager when Hitler began his rise to power in Germany, events always seemed very far away. If Europe was rushing headlong into war, I didn't realize it.

As a young married woman, I was full of my own life, the love of my new husband, and the baby now growing inside me. Nothing mattered more than the present that would give way to a bright future.

2

Michael and I opened the store at seven in the morning and closed about nine at night. Summer was the liveliest time for us. On hot days we would have line-ups for our refreshing soda which packed a punch unlike any other carbonated soft drink. During the summer my mother would make syrup from roses and raspberries, offering an alternative to people who didn't care for the unflavoured soda water. But now news from beyond our borders interrupted our busy days, and I had to start to think about events beyond my town.

We had no radio at that time, but we knew from the newspapers and from travellers about the rise of the Nazis. It seemed to us that, just as in the First. World War, we would be the pawns in the big power manoeuvring that was taking place. Hitler blamed all of Germany's ills on the Jews and the Bolsheviks, and this blossomed into a deliberate campaign to drive a wedge between the different peoples of Europe.

The newspapers that came into our home would often reprint editorials and commentaries from the European press. Sometimes my father would read them to us and curse the politicians who were supporting or conciliating Hitler.

"Look at this," I remember my father shouting one day as he leafed through the papers. "Listen to what these madmen are saying: 'The sturdy young Nazis of Germany are Europe's guardians against the Communist danger ... Germany must have elbow room.' This is what the press barons are saying."

We knew even then about the Nazi campaign against the Jews, but we had no real conception of how extensive and well organized it was. We had no way of knowing how quickly Hitler had moved since his ascent to power. I couldn't believe that his policy against the Jews was a deliberate and premeditated move. I couldn't know that by attacking Jews he planned to divert

people from the real fascist danger.

Following the ancient tactics of divide and conquer, the Nazis revived every medieval slander and allegation against the Jews to inflame the situation. Chamberlain, who was championing the policy of appeasement and encouraging the Nazis to aim their sights at the Soviet Union, typified the British and Western reaction to the situation in Germany. “No doubt Jews aren’t a lovable people;” he wrote in 1939, “I don’t care about them myself; but that is not sufficient to explain the pogrom.” [1]

Perhaps other countries didn’t know about the killings. Even so, most Jews found all doors closed to them in their effort to escape from Nazi Germany before the war. At the special conference in July, 1938, in Evian, France, a number of countries – including Britain and the United States – responded to the increased Jewish need for emigration by tightening their regulations.

In 1938 we had heard from Uncle Karl, my mother’s brother. He had moved to Germany many years earlier with his wife Regina, and established a sock factory. Uncle Karl led a comfortable life in Chemnitz and had no intention of returning to his native Poland, even though the Nazi policy encouraged many Jews to emigrate. But in October, 1938, Hitler ordered the expulsion of all the Jews living in Germany who had been born in the Polish portions of the old Russian empire. This affected some eighteen thousand Jews.

Uncle Karl made arrangements for his two daughters to emigrate to Palestine. He and his wife intended to follow them, but they were told there would be some slight delay while the paperwork was completed. They wrote to my father asking if they could come to Buczacz and stay with us “for the time being.” He never did reach Palestine, but died in Buczacz.

It was difficult for my uncle to adjust to conditions in Buczacz after so many years in Germany. He lived with my sister Anna on Podhajetska Street, and he never learned to cope with the outdoor toilets, the small living quarters.

and general lack of amenities. I once heard him say, “I would go back to Germany on my knees if I had the chance.”

I was amazed to hear this comment from a man who had directly experienced Nazi cruelty. Uncle Karl knew what had happened in Germany following his expulsion. Hirsch Grynszpan, the son of a Polish Jew who had been deported from Germany at the time my uncle and aunt were forced to leave, exacted revenge by shooting Ernst von Rath, a functionary at the German Embassy in Paris, on November 6, 1938. Although von Rath was a minor official, his death three days later provided the Nazis with an ideal pretext to step up their campaign against the Jews and solidify their position in their quest for world domination.

Storm troopers were sent across Germany smashing Jewish homes and businesses, burning down synagogues, beating and terrorizing people, and packing Jews off to the concentration camps. Scores of Jews were killed on that day, and an estimated thirty thousand — about ten percent of the entire Jewish population that remained in Germany — were sent to camps. The Nazis called the night Kristallnacht, and with typical fascist logic they passed laws fining the Jews for all the damage done. The fine was a billion marks, which was collected by confiscating twenty percent of the property of every Jew.

As September 1939 approached, an air of uncertainty hung over our town. Our store was a good listening post for local news and gossip, but we had no way of knowing for sure what was happening elsewhere. Travellers who stopped for a drink or people who were in the city on business brought news from the outside, but nothing was definite. The general impression was that the Nazis would be moving into Poland soon. Many Jews in Buczacz, particularly younger people, began sewing knapsacks and preparing to flee. This time, the plan was to flee east, to Russia, as far from the Nazis as possible.

Although I felt the tension I also believed at first that this was a temporary situation. This was a problem that would go away. I was waiting for a child to be born. How could my family begin in war? But finally I was frightened, and determined; I swore to myself that I would do everything in my

power to shelter this child.

On September 1, early in the day, German forces invaded Poland.

3

September 1 was a day just like any other in Buczacz. Religious Jews prepared for the Sabbath, and our family had its traditional Friday evening dinner. The following day my father went to synagogue, offering his prayers to God in the same way he had done every week for years before. On September 3, there was still no evidence that anything was amiss. We opened our store as usual, and the flow of traffic was as brisk as on any summer day. By then, news of the invasion had reached us by newspaper, but we wondered if it would affect us at all.

The first sign of danger appeared on Monday. Cars began to roll through town in significant numbers. Since very few people had cars in our town, the sight of more than a few at a time was rare. The vehicles were camouflaged with tree branches. Later, we realized that these were Polish politicians and army leaders from Warsaw, Krakow, and other centres who had obsequiously appeased Germany and emulated its anti-Semitic policies to curry favour with Hitler. These men were now fleeing to Romania and leaving the Polish people to fend for themselves. In the same week we saw the spectacle of the millionaire merchants and manufacturers running as well. A manufacturer of wafers from Krakow who was passing through Buczacz on his way to Romania stopped at my father's business and demanded to be paid for some previous orders. My father paid him, and he was quickly off.

Although Poland as we knew it had ceased to exist, life carried on without incident for the next few days. Suddenly an unsettling silence descended on the town. The government had fled, and no visible authority had come to replace it. We had no idea what would happen next. For those of us

who were preparing to flee, it didn't seem sensible to leave until we knew what the future had to offer. Already hoodlums were looting homes and beating people. We sat silently in our homes and prayed that we would be spared from this lawlessness.

Luckily, this period of general anarchy did not last long. On September 17, convoys of trucks and tanks began rolling through town. The Soviet army had arrived. We felt a tremendous sense of relief. We didn't know what life would be like under Soviet administration, but at least the lawlessness would stop, and the Soviet army was our protection from the Nazis. The Jews in the western portion of Poland who fell under immediate German rule were not so fortunate. The Nazis wasted no time in carrying out their mass killings, and by the end of October, more than five thousand Jews had died.

Although we didn't know it, even as we were celebrating our good fortune, the Nazis were making plans for the fate of Poland's three million Jews. Reinhard Heydrich, the chief of the Reich Central Security Office, addressed a conference in Berlin at which he stressed that the "planned overall measures" in relation to the Jews were to be kept strictly secret. Vast areas of western Poland were to be cleared entirely of Jews. The idea was to concentrate Jews in large cities, and in centres at railway junctions or along a rail line "so that future measures may be accomplished more easily."[2] Heydrich suggested that councils of Jewish elders be established in each city to facilitate tile Nazi plans. The Jews who constituted the councils were to be threatened with the "severest measures" if they refused to comply. In attendance at the conference were commanders of various SS operational groups in Poland.

I was overwhelmed by the situation. At a single stroke my carefree youth was over, and my principal concern came down to the most basic of all human instincts — survival. Into this world my son was born. Isaac — or Izzienko as we called him — became the focus of our lives for the next few days. All of our friends and relatives trooped in to tickle him and leave us small gifts. My brother David insisted that the baby looked just like him, and he couldn't take his eyes off him. My mother and father were old hands at being grandparents,

but this baby seemed special to them too. Somehow it was comforting to everyone that a new person had arrived on the scene. It was an affirmation that life could and would go on, no matter what the circumstances.

Our happiness did not last long. Wartime conditions meant hardships and privation. In the first few weeks after arriving in Buczacz, the Soviets had been on a buying spree all over town. Stores and shops were literally emptied of all their stock as the soldiers snapped up whatever they could find. Since the war had interrupted the normal system of supply and wholesale trade it became impossible for many shops to restock their shelves. Our store was no exception. By the beginning of November we had no choice but to close. My father's wholesale business and soft drink factory were quickly nationalized.

My father soon adapted to the new conditions. Suddenly he became a shoemaker and a tailor, and did all manner of odd jobs. At sixty-three he could have retired, but the thought of remaining idle was foreign to him. David, my twin, continued to work in the drink factory. I said good-bye to Zygmunt and Pepa, my older brother and sister; they had decided to take their families to Lvov where they hoped to find work. Since Michael's family lived in Kolomyja, he went there to look for work I took my baby and moved in with my parents who were now living with neighbours on Podhajetska Street.

It didn't take long for Michael to find a job in the sweater factory in Kolomyja, and I joined him there in the spring of 1940. We rented a room at 55 Fredry Street on the outskirts of town. I felt secure there. Michael's family was close by and my mother-in-law, Sara, treated me as if I were her own daughter.

Life under the Soviet administration proceeded as normally as could be expected. Schools were open, cultural and community activities carried on, even the weekly market was not disrupted. We were allowed to live our lives without being ridiculed or attacked merely for being Jewish. When wood for furnaces and stoves was in short supply, I would pick up branches and sticks whenever I went walking in the park. Somehow our landlord had managed to hoard a huge stock of wood, but he insisted on exacting a substantial price for every piece he gave us. Sometimes the price was a sweater or a coat. often it was cash. With each exchange we made, our landlord grew greedier. We had

no choice but to pay; we needed the fuel. The war brought out the worst in some people.

One day came home to find a clothes closet in our room slightly out of place. Clothes were missing from the closet. My mother-in-law had given us some pieces of material to hold in safekeeping for her, in the expectation that she could sell them later to earn some money. These were gone as well. It was obvious that our landlord had entered the room and stolen the clothes. I felt angry and betrayed, but there was nothing I could do. It was extremely difficult to find any place to live in Kolomyja, and if we raised a fuss we would surely have been evicted. We had to pretend that nothing had happened.

While our own life seemed difficult we had no idea what was happening in other places. The Nazis were clever to cover up the extent of their activities. They cast doubts about any ill treatment by their propaganda methods. They distributed photographs of Jews from the occupied territories seated at a fancy dinner table which was well stocked with food. We didn't know what to think about these pictures. On the one hand, we knew that the Nazis were virulent anti-Semites who persecuted and attacked Jews. But the pictures caused lingering uncertainties about what was really going on in the Nazi-occupied territories. The Germans themselves often expressed surprise at how ill-informed people were about the treatment Jews were receiving in Germany and occupied Poland.

However, all of this seemed temporary to me. I was waiting for the war to end, when I hoped life would return to normal. I didn't know then that between the outbreak of the war and June 1941, close to half a million Jews would be murdered throughout Nazi-occupied Poland. And only in retrospect did I fully realize that the period from September 1939 to June 1941 was a time of respite for us. On June 22, 1941, the nature of the war changed dramatically.

4

It was Sunday. A steady drizzle had fallen overnight, and the sky was dark grey. Michael had gone to work early. I was feeding Izzienko when I heard what sounded like bombs and gunfire in the distance. I rushed out of the house, but I couldn't see a thing. The noise stopped after a few minutes, and I put it out of my mind. It could have been a training exercise.

The next morning Michael got up early again, kissed me on the cheek, and set off for the sweater factory. It was another normal day. But that evening, my mother-in-law pounded frantically at my door.

"We are at war," Sara cried. "They took Michael and all the other young people from the factory straight to the barracks. They're being mobilized into the Soviet army."

Was she mad? There was no war in Kolomyja. And how can workers in a sweater factory suddenly be drafted into the army with no notice or warning?

"Sara, please sit down. Tell me what happened."

"We are at war, at war," she screamed. Sara was close to hysteria and I tried to calm her. She rested while I made some tea. An hour passed, then two. Michael was still not home. By ten o'clock I knew it was true. Suddenly the gunfire I had heard on Sunday made sense. The Nazis were abrogating the non-aggression pact they had signed with the Soviets in 1939 and were attacking.

Early the next morning Sara and I went to the army barracks in Kolomyja to find Michael. A huge fence surrounded the barracks, and we peered through. We saw civilians and soldiers walking about, but there was no sign of my husband. There was no one to talk to, no authorities to approach. This was

war, and notifying a wife that her husband had been pressed into military service was low on the list of priorities. We left the yards despondently, but still harbouring the hope that Michael would be in contact with us.

The next day aircraft buzzed overhead. The Soviets broadcast air raid warnings on the loudspeakers they had installed. We had no bomb or air raid shelters in town; the most we could do was to run for cover indoors.

A week later, as suddenly as the Soviets had moved into our region twenty-one months earlier, they moved out. Trucks rolled out of the army post early one morning, and Michael and all the men were gone before we knew what had happened. Before the Soviet withdrawal was complete, many Jewish men volunteered to join those who had been conscripted, rather than have their future decided for them in Kolomyja.

Our period of reprieve was at an end. We knew from bitter experience what lay ahead. The Nazis had carefully groomed a fifth column throughout Europe and beyond. In our region, they had loyal supporters in certain Ukrainian elements who were encouraged by the vague promises of an independent Ukraine within the Third Reich. They had silently bided their time under the Soviet occupation but now greeted the Nazi invaders as conquering heroes. They became eager collaborators.

As soon as the Soviets withdrew, a wild spree of looting and beating began. I stood with Sara in her kitchen; we had bolted the door and shut the wooden shutters protecting the windows. We prayed that no one would break in and kill us.

A few of the men from Kolomyja who had been mobilized into the Soviet army from Kolomyja escaped from the convoy of trucks heading east and tried to make their way back home. It turned out to be a fatal move for most. Bands of Ukrainian Nazi-supporters murdered the men as they walked down the road to Kolomyja.

A few days later, Sara came to me with some startling news. A man had come by her house asking for Michael. He said he had fled the Soviet army and

had walked back part of the way with Michael. But where was Michael? We asked anyone and everyone to help us. We couldn't find him. Sara believed that Michael had been murdered on the road. I tried to comfort her, but it was difficult since I, too, believed that Michael was dead.

5

My older brother and sister, Zygmunt and Pepa, who had moved with their families to Lvov in 1939, had found work there and were raising their families. At that time there was no way of knowing that moving to Lvov was tantamount to a death sentence.

At the beginning of the war there were one hundred and ten thousand Jews in Lvov, a third of the city's population. Jews had lived in the city and contributed to all aspects of its life for centuries, and by 1939 Lvov's Jewish community was the third largest in all of Poland. Zygmunt and Pepa were not the only Jews to move there in 1939. The occupation of Western Poland by the Nazis had driven many Jews east, and some fifty thousand are believed to have sought safety in Lvov.

The Russian army left Lvov on June 28, 1941, and on the same day the first Nazi detachments began to arrive. The Nazis were quick to spread anti-Jewish propaganda and recruit Ukrainian collaborators who took positions in the civil and municipal administrations and formed detachments of the militia and auxiliary police. Historians have uncovered a telegram sent to Hitler by a Ukrainian group in Lvov on July 10. It pledged "most faithful attachment (to the Führer) in the building of a Europe liberated from the bloody Judeo-Bolshevist rule and plutocratic oppression." [3]

On July 3 and 4, collaborators carried out a murderous pogrom in which an estimated five thousand Jews were slaughtered. While many of the killings

were random, Lvov's Jewish community also lost some of its leading figures. These included the chief rabbi of the City, a leading professor of theology at Lvov University, and Alter Kacyzne, a Yiddish writer who had been appointed literary director of the Yiddish language broadcast on Radio Lvov during the Soviet administration.

In the days following the Nazi invasion, an order was promulgated requiring residents to surrender all radios to the authorities. News was a dangerous commodity to the new authorities. Debates raged in many households about whether the radio should be turned in. The dilemma was clear — give up a link with the outside world or risk execution for disobeying a Nazi edict. Most families chose to comply. My brother Zygmunt and his wife Genia were no exception. However, even the process of handing in the radio carried risks. Any contact with the Nazis was dangerous.

Genia finally decided it was she who would hand in the radio. It might be safer for her than for Zygmunt. But the lineups were long, and Genia was gone for several hours. With the passing of hours Zygmunt grew more and more worried; he left the house to look for his wife. He never came back, and his body was never found. Genia was left to look after her eight-year-old son Mozio alone.

After the slaughter of early July, the killing temporarily stopped. The Jews in Lvov were terrified and bewildered. Some believed that the early killing was an isolated and spontaneous action on the part of a conquering army and their local collaborators. After all, what profit or military advantage could there be in the continued murder of innocent civilians? Others, who feared a resumption of the carnage, had no choice but to wait for events to unfold. The idea of organizing a planned resistance was only beginning to germinate. For the most part, those who had fled to Lvov from Western Poland and other regions were now trapped. People had little time to do anything except wonder what would happen next.

The answer came swiftly. On July 25, local Ukrainian collaborators, with the full support and encouragement of the Nazis, launched the "Petlura action." This three-day killing spree was supposedly the revenge for the

assassination, fifteen years earlier, of Simon Petlura by Shalom Schwarzbard, a Jew. More than two thousand people perished over the course of those three days.

The next month, the Nazis announced that all males in Lvov between the ages of sixteen and fifty must register with the authorities. Gustav, my sister Pepa's husband, was thirty-nine; Junek, their only son, had just turned sixteen. It is amazing to me that after the events of July, the Jews of Lvov could still harbour the belief that their lives would be spared. Gustav and Pepa were convinced that the registration was merely for the purpose of being assigned work. Why else would it involve only the able-bodied men? But the registration was a cruel hoax. Waiting for the men were *Einsatzkommando*units, special Nazi formations which were assigned the task of murdering civilians. Although some were allowed to live, others were condemned to die. Gustav and Junek were shot.

The loss of her husband and child hit Pepa hard. Junek had excelled in mathematics and physics in high school and had come to the attention of the Soviet authorities following 1939.They were interested in sending him to Moscow for higher education, but Pepa was overly protective of her son. She had refused to let him go.

In 1942, having lost a brother and now both husband and son, Pepa wanted to leave Lvov and go back to her home in Buczacz. She begged her sister-in-law Genia to come with her, but Genia refused. In the end, Pepa decided not to abandon Genia. I do not know whether she would have survived in Buczacz, but the decision to remain in Lvov was fatal On August 10, the Nazis began a massive action that was to wipe out fifty thousand people over the next two weeks. In addition to the Gestapo, the German police, and the Ukrainian militia, the special extermination brigade of the SS participated in the slaughter. Whole districts were emptied of Jews in brutal house-to-house raids. The victims were sent to the Janowski concentration camp and from there to the Belzec extermination centre. Stormtroopers burst into hospitals, seizing doctors, staff, and patients. Those who were too sick to be moved from their beds were immediately shot.

Pepa was one of the victims of this mass murder. At Belzec, she was one of the more than six hundred thousand people gassed to death. She was thirty-nine. After Pepa died, Genia returned to Buczacz.

The vast majority of Jews who remained in Lvov were exterminated over the next two years. The same is true of the Russian prisoners of war who were eliminated in identical fashion. After the city was liberated in June 1944, a census showed roughly three thousand four hundred Jewish survivors. Tens of thousands of people who were Jewish by extraction or conviction, who had survived for centuries in the city, were annihilated within the space of thirty-six months.

At the time I had no idea of the slaughter taking place in Lvov. But my own education in the ways of the Gestapo was not delayed for long. As summer ended and September arrived, the Nazis moved in. The campaign of terror in Kolomyja was about to begin.

6

My closest friend and companion in Kolomyja was Klara Wald. Originally from Lvov, she had come to Kolomyja after war broke out, and her husband had also been drafted into the Soviet army. Klara lived close by and would constantly visit. We still knew very little about the events outside Kolomyja, but we speculated on how the war was progressing and how much longer our lives would be disrupted. The German presence in town gave us added cause for apprehension and worry.

One Sunday morning in October, on the Jewish holiday of Hoshana Rabba, Klara came over as usual. It was an unusually cold and rainy day, and instead of going to my mother-in-law's we decided to stay in my room.

I can't honestly say that I had any premonition of trouble on that day. And it certainly wasn't out of fear that we stayed put. Nothing had happened yet in the city to make us hesitant about wandering from our homes or walking on the streets.

My landlord had gone to church that morning, and when he returned he brought some troubling news.

"Something is going on today," he began. "The Germans have closed down all the streets in the Jewish district. They're taking people out for work."

He spoke nervously and in a whisper, as if he was afraid someone would overhear. It was hard to tell whether he was fearful of the Nazi occupiers or if he was suddenly concerned about the repercussions of renting a room to a Jewish family.

"What kind of work did they take them to do?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "We didn't see anything more."

Klara and I looked at each other silently. I picked up Izzienko and held him to me closely. We stayed in the house, not knowing what to think. My mind was full of questions. Were the Germans collecting the men and sending them for forced labour? If so, why did they pick today, a Sunday and a Jewish holiday? And if the objective was just to choose men for labour, why were they concentrating on the Jewish district?

Late in the afternoon my mother-in-law arrived at the door. She swept Izzienko into her arms and began to sob. "The Gestapo have carried out an *aktion*," she cried.

It was the first time I had heard the word, but I knew immediately what it meant. It was a pogrom, an organized and bloodthirsty assault, and it was directed at anyone whom the Nazis called a threat to the so-called Aryan race.

"They took out Zaida from the synagogue, and Uncle Leib. And they took Lea too."

Sara lived on Walowa Street in the heart of the Jewish quarter in Kolomyja. There were big and small synagogues all around, and because of the holiday they were all full that morning. The Gestapo, with local collaborators, cordoned off the streets and surrounded the synagogues. Jews in their ceremonial shawls clutching their prayer books were thrown into the streets and herded onto trucks. Those who didn't move fast enough were shot on the spot. Sara's father, eighty-four-year-old Nuta Salpeter, was hauled out of the synagogue along with her brother, Uncle Leib.

In their sweep of the houses in the Jewish district, the Nazis and their local Ukrainian and Polish militia helpers barged into Sara's home. They seized Mariam Elke, Uncle Leib's wife, their son Mechel and daughter Sara. They also took Michael's younger sister Lea. The Nazis grabbed my mother-in-law as well and threw her outside, but for some reason they left Lea's eight-year-old son Izio. Uncle Leib's daughter Chana was at work in a garment factory at the time and escaped arrest. Michael's only other relative, his

brother Shalom, had left for Palestine in 1938 and thereby escaped persecution.

As my mother-in-law was being shoved out the back door of her house and into the yard, she saw some Polish students who were nervously taking part in the operation. She recognized two of them and begged them to let her go. How could they be taking part in this, she wanted to know. She told them that her eight-year-old grandchild could not survive on his own and would require her care. They let her go back into her home as the sweep of houses continued down the street.

Since we lived on the outskirts of the town, Izzienko and I were spared. Gradually I pieced together the story of what had happened to others on that day. Close to three thousand people were rounded up in the Jewish quarter. The men, women, and children were taken to the prison yard in Kolomyja and kept there for about twenty-four hours. Then they were marched to the Szeparowce forest nearby. The more able-bodied prisoners were handed shovels and ordered to dig long trenches. After the pits were ready, the prisoners were forced to strip off their clothes and line up. We could hear the bursts of gunfire in Kolomyja as the Nazis executed our families and our friends. Some were killed immediately, falling neatly into the graves they had dug for themselves. Others were wounded and bled to death, either slowly or quickly, depending on the nature of the injury. Still others sustained only minor wounds or none at all. They suffered the awful fate of being buried alive. As one row of prisoners was shot and dispatched to the pit, the next row would be summoned to stand in place. The killing process took hours to complete. It was conducted with a morbid efficiency, as if there was some logic and sense to this exercise in genocide.

I knew it made no sense. This has nothing to do with war, I screamed silently. This is nothing but brutal slaughter of civilians, of defenceless men, women, and children, of old men in their eighties and nineties, and babies still nursing at their mothers' breasts. Some people in town refused to believe what had happened. They said the prisoners had merely been taken away to jail or work camps somewhere. I couldn't understand these people. The evidence was there for anyone who wanted to see. For days afterwards we could see clothes

strewn about. Anyone who ventured into the forest could observe the freshly dug pits where the dead were buried.

From that day on I lived in constant fear. But I carried on. The next morning I walked Sara home. The streets seemed eerie after the *aktion*. The previous day now seemed a long time ago. As we passed people on the street I wondered if any of these people had been one of the collaborators. Yesterday he might have been a murderer; today he is going about his business normally as if nothing had happened. Tomorrow will he be at my door, shouting for all the Jews to get out and herding us onto a truck?

7

There was nothing spontaneous about the slaughter organized in Kolomyja over the next two years. It was done systematically and with cold-blooded premeditation. A key element in the Nazi extermination plan was the establishment in each town of a Jewish Council or *Judenrat.* This strategy had been originally formulated by Heydrich in 1939, shortly after the German invasion of Poland. After the invasion of the Soviet Union and the German annexation of Galicia in 1941, the decree establishing such councils was extended to the new territories.

The Nazis were proficient at recruiting collaborators at every stage of their campaign. They used a variety of means — flattery, bribery, fear, and terror. In some cases the collaborators were eager — they shared the same fascist aims and were anxious to enrich themselves with booty. In other instances, the collaborators were reluctant. They went along with the Nazis to a certain degree because they feared for their own lives or the lives of their families, or because they thought co-operation could save some people by sacrificing others. Sometimes the reluctant collaborators became thoroughly corrupted by power and authority. In any event, those who agreed to work with the Nazis were the tools of Hitler's policy of mass destruction.

In Kolomyja, the German chief of the civil administration, or *Kreishauptmann,* asked the local Ukrainian city administration to draw up a list of names for the local *Judenrat.* The Gestapo examined the list and nominated the members, along with the chairman. The Germans favoured Jews who had been active in pre-war community life because they would carry more authority with the local population.

The Nazis chose Chaim Ringelblum, a former civic councillor, as head of the Kolomyja Jewish Council. The day after his nomination he approached

the Gestapo chief and told him he could not take the post. The same thing had happened in various other towns, with a variety of reactions from the Gestapo. In some cities the authorities merely nominated replacement candidates. In certain towns they threatened immediate execution on refusal of a nomination, and in other cities they carried out this policy without enunciating it. In Kolomyja, the Nazis simply took note of Ringelblum's statement and appointed another Jew, Marcus Horowitz, to the position instead. But at the next *aktion* organized in the city, Ringelblum and his family were arrested and shot.

The *Judenrat* immediately became an indispensable organ for the Nazi occupation forces. One of the first orders from the Germans was the requirement that Jews hand over their money, with the Jewish Council acting as the collection agency. Next came the decree that anything containing gold or silver be forfeited. Before long, the *Judenrat* functionaries came to the doors of all the Jewish homes demanding fur coats and any other garments containing fur. Even house slippers which had a small fur fringe, common in Poland at the time, had to be given up. As conditions became harsher and supplies were in short supply, the Council was ordered to confiscate all wool and woollen clothing from the Jews as well.

The Gestapo ordered the Jewish Council to find the best apartments and houses for Nazi use. What followed was a search of many homes by the council officials, who often seized articles of value and turned them over to the Gestapo. Those whose living quarters were chosen for the Gestapo were summarily evicted.

The Kolomyja *Judenrat* was in charge of both the town and outlying regions. This included the town of Kuty. At one point, the chairman of the local council at Kuty, Menashe Mandl, refused the demand that the Jews in Kuty turn over money to satisfy a forced contribution imposed on Kolomyja. Horowitz responded by firing Mandl and appointing someone else who would carry out the order. It was not the only time that Horowitz was challenged for unquestioningly complying with the Nazi decrees.[4]

In Kolomyja. as in other centres, the Council was responsible for

conducting a census and keeping a continuous register of the Jewish population. These reports were submitted to the Gestapo, and they provided accurate records of the ultimate fate of Poland's three and a third million Jews. The Nazis made use of these reports to plan the *aktions*. Under the pretext of organizing a "housing department", the Council also kept tabs on who inhabited each home and where every Jew in town could be found at any particular moment.

The Jewish Councils also formed part of the Nazi disinformation campaign to portray the councils to the rest of the world as a form of Jewish self-government. Traitors within the Jewish community lauded this self-government. In the United States and other countries, some organizations collected money and food to be sent to the ghettos. The shipments generally went to the Red Cross in Geneva, and from there they were passed on to the German authorities in occupied Poland. The naïveté of such measures may seem strange today, but the Nazi disregard for any form of civilized behaviour was not widely understood then. The Germans would immediately confiscate such shipments and use them for their own purposes. They would then instruct *Judenrat* officials to write letters thanking the organizations for the generosity and asking for more help. Sometimes specific goods were requested, and lists of other areas were submitted which would also appreciate similar assistance.

I do not know what was going through the minds of the *Judenrat* functionaries at the time they were enforcing Nazi orders. Did they believe they were helping their people? Did they think that such cooperation would delay or prevent the Nazis from carrying out their ultimate solution? I did know that it upset me to see the passion with which some of the officials carried out their dirty work.

In March 1942, following a number of smaller *aktions* over the previous five months, a decree was issued establishing a ghetto in Kolomyja. Jews from every corner of the city were ordered to squeeze into a defined area in the Jewish district. The ghetto was enclosed with barbed wire and carefully controlled. I was living outside the area, so within a short period I had to bundle up all my belongings and leave. It was impossible to take everything along, so I left some furniture and articles of clothing with my landlord. In the

back of my mind was the distant hope that life would someday return to normal, and I would be able to recover these possessions.

I took Izzienko and moved into my mother-in-law's home, which was located inside the ghetto. Klara came along as well. Also living at Sara's home was Mr. Abel, a photographer who earned his living by taking pictures for the Germans, Sara's grandchild, Izio, and her niece, Chana. Four adults and two children crowded into one room.

All the Jews were issued white armbands with a blue Star of David stitched on. We had to wear the armbands on our left arms at all times. Failure to do so could mean immediate execution. It was our identifying mark, an easy way for an otherwise unsuspecting policeman or Gestapo official to distinguish Jew from non-Jew. And it facilitated control over the ghetto.

In reality, three separate ghettos were established in Kolomyja. This was a common feature in different areas where the Nazis had already determined the scope and timing of the extermination plan. One of the Kolomyja ghettos was for the exclusive use of the *Judenrat* members, their families, and various functionaries. This was the privileged ghetto, if one can use such a word for an enclosure of barbed wire that is designed to encircle a particular religious group and isolate them from the rest of the population. It was the last of the ghettos to be liquidated. The second ghetto was composed of those people — the elderly, the infirm, and others — who were deemed most immediately expendable. The third ghetto housed everyone else.

A feature of ghetto life was the ever-present *Jüdische Ordnungsdienst,* or Jewish police. An adjunct of the *Judenrat,* they could be as dangerous and brutal as the Nazis and their local collaborators. They wore hats resembling those of the Polish police, along with a badge and armband identifying them as Jews. The Germans did not trust them sufficiently to arm them with pistols, but they carried billy clubs. The ghetto police stood guard at the gates to make sure their brethren didn't escape to the "Aryan" side. When forced contributions or taxes were imposed on the people, it was the ghetto police who enforced the measures. They would arrest Jews or seal off their homes for not paying their taxes or contributions on time. If a Jew was found to have a fur coat following

a random house search, it could mean jail or worse.

The job of being a ghetto policeman attracted some of the most unsavoury characters. They were not above resorting to blackmail and extortion to increase their own possessions. Because of the shortages that hit the ghetto as soon as it was set up, people began risking their lives by sneaking to the Aryan side for food and clothing. Sometimes a ghetto policeman would turn a blind eye to this activity in return for a share of the proceeds. There were other cases when whole families were threatened with denunciation to the Gestapo if they didn't comply with the policemen's orders.

The ghetto police also played a role in identifying and selecting people to be delivered to the Nazis. The Germans would give the *Judenrat* periodic orders to round up a specific number of Jews. Sometimes it was for forced labour, other times it was for elimination. In some areas, the police actually participated in *aktions* along with the Gestapo. Occasionally they were given quotas to fill in searching for Jews, and then they betrayed many people in bunkers and hiding places that the Nazis would otherwise not have uncovered.

Also among the *Judenrat* and Jewish police forces were some who worked against the Nazis clandestinely. At great personal risk, they would try to subvert the German plans and provide help to the partisans and the resistance. But it seemed to me these elements were in the minority. In the end, the vast majority of *Judenrat* officials lost their lives. Those members of the Jewish Councils who thought they would save their skins by co-operating with the Nazis were the most naive of all.

Towards the end of 1942, when more than eighty percent of Kolomyja's Jews had been shot, gassed, or beaten to death, the chairman of the *Judenrat* saw the end at hand. Marcus Horowitz tried to kill himself in November. The Gestapo, which he had served so well, succeeded in reviving him so that he could perform a few more months of valuable service. A month later, right in the *Judenrat* headquarters, Horowitz swallowed poison once more. This time his attempt was successful. He is said to have left a letter suggesting that he had hoped to be able to save at least part of the ghetto community, but seeing that this was not possible, he decided to die an "honourable death" and be

given a Jewish burial. He was indeed given a customary burial — a burial which was denied to the thousands of neighbours, friends, and relatives who were executed during his brief and ignoble reign.[5]

8

The Nazis utilized a variety of methods to exterminate people. At Auschwitz, victims were gassed with the commercial pesticide Zyklon B. At Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibor, carbon monoxide poisoning was used. In the *aktion*s throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, people were shot, hanged, and beaten to death. But in the ghetto, the preferred method was the simplest of all – starvation.

Food became scarce soon after we moved into the Kolomyja ghetto. There was no meat at all, and if we ever found potatoes it was a treasure. The only item that was rationed was bread, and people had to wait in endless lineups to receive the daily family allotment — a quarter of a kilogram. Though the bread was fresh, it was heavy and wet, and didn't taste like bread at all. But it served as the main staple for people who grew quickly unaccustomed to seeing meat, vegetables, and fruit.

Food shipments soon stopped altogether. Food was always on everyone's mind — how to get it, where to get it, how to share our measly portions. We timed our meagre meals so as to dull the hunger and make maximum use of our sleep.

"The war cannot last forever," we would say. "It must end someday. Then we will have a loaf of bread on the table." This was our greatest dream and hope.

It didn't take long for the effects of the starvation policy to be felt. People became desperate. Cats and dogs soon disappeared from the streets as people killed them for food. Frail and sick people could not last long under such conditions, and many died. We could see people with swollen and distended bellies literally dropping on the streets. Soon disease became

widespread in the ghetto.

Much of my portion of food went to Izzienko. He was not getting enough milk and needed all the nourishment I could provide. Still it was not sufficient, and his requests for food and drink where there was none were like daggers in my heart. But it was Izzienko who remained a tower of strength even when others around him were wavering. He was two-and-a-half years old, but the war had hardened him. On one occasion when the Gestapo entered the ghetto, we all went to hide in the attic of Sara's house. An elderly woman who was very nervous began to get hysterical. Izzienko put a tiny finger to his lips and said:

"Shh, please be quiet. If you make noise the bad man will come and take us away."

It might have been comical if the situation wasn't so dangerous. Izzienko sounded like an adult speaking to a child.

Throughout our ordeal in the ghetto, the *aktion*s continued. Sometimes the Nazis had an excuse for carrying one out, but usually they came without explanation. The Nazi euphemism for the round-ups was "resettlement actions". But the only place people were resettled was in the Belzec camp or the freshly-dug pits in nearby forests.

The largest-scale *aktion* after the ghetto was established came in April 1942, when more than one thousand people were rounded up and shipped to Belzec. We were spared that time, but it was becoming increasingly clear that we were doomed unless something drastic took place. Even if we were to survive the effects of hunger and disease, the Nazis and their helpers were still waiting to finish off the survivors.

The situation seemed hopeless and the idea of escaping from the ghetto seemed far-fetched and impractical. We would be easily recognized on the Aryan side of Kolomyja, and I didn't have the wherewithal to arrange for a more elaborate escape outside the city. In any event, I didn't know whether conditions were better or worse elsewhere.

I thought often of my family in Buczacz. My parents had written to me regularly while I was in Kolomyja. With the establishment of the ghetto, the letters stopped. I had no idea whether this was because of the Nazi interference in Kolomyja or because there was some problem with my family. I began to wonder whether they were still alive.

One of the people I knew in the ghetto was Chana Frankel. She was originally from Buczacz as well. One day in May, she came over to visit. She took me outside the house and in whispers asked me if I had any way of contacting my family.

"I can write to them, but who knows if the letter will get through?" I explained. "You know what has happened with parcels and letters since they put up the ghetto."

The last word I had heard from home was a letter from my sister Anna. She blamed fate for my predicament in Kolomyja and my separation from the family. She wasn't suggesting that this was God's will, only that it was somehow meant to be. Most Jews, especially those who had been very religious before the war, shied away from thinking about what God's will was in those days.

Mrs. Frankel pulled me a little bit farther from the house. "I have heard that beer trucks travel from Kolomyja to Buczacz all the time, and some people are escaping back to Buczacz that way. But you have to have money, and it's very dangerous. Still, people are doing it; people are getting out."

I could feel my heart start to pound. The prospect of returning to Buczacz and escaping the hell we were going through was intoxicating. But Mrs. Frankel's last statement puzzled me. The Frankels were probably the wealthiest people I knew in Buczacz. If anybody had money, they did. Why then had she not gone back to Buczacz herself? Or was her wealth now a thing of the past, exhausted by the forced contributions, bribes, and thefts of the past two years?

Suddenly Mrs. Frankel announced she had to go. She never clearly said

why she had given me this information. I got the impression that she was just trying to help me, out of affection for me and my family. She had no intention of attempting any dangerous escape herself, but wanted to help out a younger person.

I took the chance. The same day I wrote a letter to my parents, telling them about what Mrs. Frankel had said. I didn't have any idea if the letter would ever reach them, and for the next few days I was gripped by the fear that the Nazis were opening letters and reading them.

A few days later, a gentile girl entered the ghetto and asked to speak to me. I had never seen her in my life, but she knew my name and exactly where to find me. Before she said a word, she handed me a note. It was from my parents:

"Please read this carefully and destroy it immediately afterwards. We have made arrangements for you to come back to Buczacz with Izzienko. Maria will give you a necklace with a cross which you must wear around your neck. A truck will pick you up at 2 p.m. tomorrow and take you to Buczacz. Maria will tell you where to meet it. Please listen exactly to what she says. and everything will be all right."

As I finished reading the note, Maria handed me the necklace. She told me where the truck would be the next day. It was about a fifteen minute walk from the ghetto fence near Sara's house. But at two in the afternoon! That meant escaping from the ghetto in broad daylight and walking down the streets of the Aryan side without the protection of darkness.

That night was the longest of my life. Escaping from Kolomyja was my only hope for survival, but it also meant risking my life and the life of my child. I begged Sara to come with me, but she refused. She did not want to leave, holding out the hope that the situation would miraculously change or that she would be able to survive the war. Kolomyja was her home, and despite the starvation and slaughter that had transformed the town, she believed she would continue to be safe there. Klara refused to come as well. She did not know anyone in Buczacz, and seemed to be convinced that the situation there would

be no different. That left me to undertake the escape myself.

The next morning I packed a few things in a tiny bag and got Izzienko ready. Sara and Klara wished me luck, but I could tell from their expressions that they were worried about my chances. I hugged them both. I walked through Sara's backyard and into another yard where a Polish family lived. It was adjacent to a part of the ghetto fence that had a small opening in it. We had known about this opening for some time, but we had always considered it to be too dangerous to go over to the Aryan side. I looked around to make sure no one was watching, and with Izzienko in my arms, I squeezed through the opening and calmly walked onto the other side. I was wearing the necklace with a cross, and just before leaving the ghetto I removed my Star of David armband. But there was a nagging feeling even in my own mind that something would go wrong. Instead of discarding the armband before I set out on the journey, I slipped it on my knee under my dress. It was the height of idiocy; if I had been stopped and searched, it would have meant death. Yet it gave me some extra comfort. It reminded me of who I was, and allowed for an escape valve in the event I would have to run back to the ghetto. Moments after I had gone through the fence and began walking I heard voices calling: "Zydowka, zydowka! (Jewess, Jewess!)."

My blood ran cold. Someone had seen me and now I would be arrested. How stupid it was to attempt such an escape in the middle of the day, I thought! In that split second I began cursing my family for organizing such an adventure, and berating myself for agreeing to it. But after that period of despair I composed myself. I had steeled myself for this moment, and my strategy was simply to argue that I was a Polish woman who was going about her normal business. I just kept walking, smiling, and talking to my child as if nothing had happened.

Two boys approached me. They couldn't have been more than eleven or twelve years old. "Hey Zydowka, where are you going?" asked one, laughing. They were about fifteen feet away. I gave them a puzzled look and kept on walking, still maintaining my confident air. I picked up my pace and they followed me for a few moments. Then they seemed to get bored and turned in another direction. I felt my pulse racing, but I tried not to let my fear show.

After another minute I turned around and they were gone. There were very few people on the streets at that time, and I quickly made my way to the appointed place. I sat down on the grass with Izzienko and we waited.

We were there for what seemed like hours. According to the note I was to be picked up at two. But it was already past three and there was no truck. I began to panic. Perhaps it was all a trick, and there would be no truck after all, I thought. It was clear that I couldn't wait here all day. There was hardly anyone around, but eventually people would notice that a woman was just sitting on the grass and would wonder what she was doing. I waited another five minutes, another ten minutes — but no truck arrived. Finally I decided I had no choice but to return to the ghetto. I got up and started retracing my steps. About halfway back to the ghetto fence, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"What are you doing, Mina. Where are you going?" It was Maria, the girl who had brought me the necklace and the note.

I almost fainted when I saw her. "The truck didn't arrive, so I am going back," I said.

"Don't be foolish. The truck is there now. Please go quickly."

We raced back to the corner and there was the "truck." It was a horse-drawn carriage carrying barrels of beer and driven by a man from Buczacz whom I vaguely recognized. It turned out he was a Ukrainian policeman in the town. My parents had bribed him to act as the chauffeur in bringing me home. I put a babushka on my head and put one on my child as well. Izzienko looked like a little girl with the kerchief on. The driver put both of us on top of the beer barrels, and we set out for Buczacz. I felt an indescribable sense of relief as we left Kolomyja. At the same time, I couldn't help but think of Sara and Klara and my other relatives whom I was leaving behind.

When we came to Monysterzyska, not far from Buczacz, the truck had to stop for inspection. There were German and Ukrainian guards all around.

"Who is the woman and the child?" one of the guards barked.

“It’s my wife, and my daughter,” the driver replied. I don’t think the driver was aware that Izzienko was a boy. It could have been a fatal mistake if the guards had looked into the situation any further. But they didn’t. It was a routine stop, and we were allowed to carry on without further questions.

When the driver was near Count Potocki bridge, about a kilometre from Buczacz, he stopped. “This is as far as I can go with you,” he said. “You will have to get out now.”

It was dark. I took Izzienko in my arms and started walking. There was no enclosed ghetto in Buczacz, but Jews were still not allowed to be on the streets in the evening. And Jews were not permitted to have their house lights on at night.

Yet I was in familiar territory and my fear seemed to dissipate. It gave me tremendous strength to know that I would be back with my family. I entered the town and turned down Kolejowa Street, still wearing my crucifix and the white armband snugly around my knee. Soon I was at the centre of town on Rynek, and I turned to Podhajetska. Buczacz has a hilly terrain, and one is constantly walking up and down. Though I had been carrying Izzienko for a long time, I didn’t feel at all tired. I knew the journey was about to end.

As I approached my parents’ house, I could see that the lights were out. But it was a beautiful May night and all the windows were open; the moon provided plenty of light. I walked to the main floor window and looked in. There were my mother and father, sitting on a couch with my twin brother David and my youngest sister Sala. For a split second I imagined I was looking at a picture of my family in a photo album, a picture from the past. But it was not a moment from the past — it was real. I had escaped from the hell that had enveloped Kolomyja. I called out to my parents and they rushed to the window. We embraced and we cried for a long time.

On September 7, 1942 — less than four months after I escaped from Kolomyja — the Nazis and their collaborators carried out a major “resettlement action” In which an estimated eighty-seven hundred Jews were exterminated. On October 3 of the same year, an additional five thousand Jews

were carted off to Belzec to be gassed to death. The survivors were then amalgamated into a single ghetto. In February 1943, the Nazis decided to liquidate the Kolomyja ghetto completely. All the remaining Jews were taken to Szeparowce forest and shot. The Nazis issued a proclamation: Kolomyja is now officially Judenrein, free of all Jews. When the Soviets finally liberated Kolomyja the next year, only a handful of the fifteen thousand Jews who had lived in the town in 1939 were found alive. My mother-in-law was not among them. A few months after I escaped from Kolomyja she died of starvation. I never learned the fate of Klara Wald.

9

Although my parents knew that conditions had been difficult in Kolomyja, they could not know what it had been like to live there. Even when I described the starvation, the *aktion*s, the brutality of the Nazis and their collaborators they could not fully believe what I was telling them. My family tried to understand and to comfort me. Other people in Buczacz actually thought I had gone mad! Since the Nazis had not yet started their extermination campaign in Buczacz the people there could not believe my story. I might not have believed such a story myself had I not experienced it.

So far the only *aktion* in Buczacz had come immediately after the Nazi invasion. As soon as the town was occupied in early July, all the men from sixteen to fifty years of age had to report for registration. Once again, people thought that this would be a registration for work. My brother David, along with Abraham Zuhler, my brother-in-law, were still working in the carbonated drink factory at the time. This gave them an advantage, as the Nazis didn't want to exterminate the working Jews. To be exempted from the registration, however, David and Abraham needed a note from their employer confirming that they worked there. As the time approached for the registration, they still had not received the note. Finally David pressed the employer and warned that the factory would lose two workers, as the Gestapo would never believe that they worked there without a written note. "Ach, the Gestapo! Yes, they are murderers," replied the German who had been brought into town to run the factory. He immediately wrote the note they needed. The men were gathered in a place where pigs were normally brought for sale at the market every Thursday. From this location, some were selected and the rest were told to leave. The men who were selected were taken to Fedor Hill and shot. Just as I had seen in Kolomyja, some people in Buczacz maintained that they had merely been shipped to another region for forced labour.

When I returned to Buczacz a ghetto had been established, but it was an open ghetto with no barbed wire. The Ukrainian militia patrolled the city and were quick to punish Jews found violating the curfews or wandering into establishments from which they had been barred. A *Judenrat* had been set up as well, but its members had not yet been asked to carry out orders that involved sacrificing the lives of their relatives and neighbours. Jews were still required to wear their white armbands with the blue Star of David, and I continued to wear the one I had removed when escaping from the Kolomyja ghetto. By this time it was accepted as normal that Jews would be rounded up periodically and sent for forced labour. Although everyone felt the cruelty of the occupying forces at one time or another, there was still enough to eat. Many people believed that they could go through the war under such conditions and survive. The random killings, the brutality, and the starvation that Kolomyja was undergoing were largely unknown.

I started to see how pervasive the Nazis' propaganda campaign was, even among its destined victims. My father, who knew well what anti-Semitism was, seemed to be infected with the illusion that things would turn around of their own accord. He had shaved off his beard to look younger, believing that the Nazis would not harm anyone who could still provide some useful labour for them.

Yet even as the Nazis succeeded in fooling their own victims of their intentions, they continued to plan the final solution. In January 1942, Heydrich again assembled the senior Nazi officials to discuss the extermination plans. The conference, held in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee, was a follow-up to his initial meeting in 1939 which set out the broad outlines of the campaign. This time Heydrich was speaking with even greater authority; he was the newly appointed "Plenipotentiary for the Preparation of the Final Solution of the European Jewish Question". Detailed statistics were provided of the numbers of Jews in all the conquered lands, and transportation logistics took up a major portion of the conference agenda. When the strategy of extermination was finally adopted, much of the necessary infrastructure to carry out the plan was already in place. With Jews concentrated in ghettos throughout the occupied territories, close to railway lines, the only problem that remained was one of deciding the best means of killing and the most efficient way to dispose of the

bodies.[6]

The Nazis did not restrict their ambitions to European territory under their occupation. Heydrich outlined plans for the Jews of Britain, Ireland, Sweden, Switzerland, and all other countries of Europe. He told the conference:

"In the course of the practical implementation of the final solution, Europe will be combed from West to East... For the moment, the evacuated Jews will be brought bit by bit to so-called transit ghettos from where they will be transported farther to the east."[7]

The final solution itself, of course, was never discussed openly and directly at the conference. But ten days after the Wannsee Conference, Adolf Hitler didn't mince words when he spoke at the Sports Palace in Berlin on the ninth anniversary of his accession to power:

"...the war will not end as the Jews imagine it will, namely with the uprooting of the Aryans, but the result of this war will be the complete annihilation of the Jews."[8]

These mass extermination plans necessitated the construction of appropriate facilities. The Nazis already had the Auschwitz and Chelmno camps on the Vistula River to serve Western Poland, but to accommodate the final solution they needed more. Early in 1942 preparations were made to install death camps in Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. All were placed at major railway centres or on spur lines, to facilitate the transportation and delivery of victims at the fastest possible speed. Belzec, less than a hundred kilometres northwest of Lvov, served as the final transit point for most of the Jews of Galicia. It also gathered Jews from the Lublin, Krakow, Radom, and Warsaw districts. The eastern centres were death camps pure and simple. There were no Nazi officials present to select who would live and who would die, who would go to the gas chamber and who would be spared for use in forced labour factories. Everyone died. Of the six hundred thousand who were

shipped to Belzec, for instance, historians are aware of just two survivors.[9]

The Nazis already had experience in gassing people to death. In 1939, Hitler personally gave the order to use poison gas to provide a "mercy death" for the incurably ill. Euthanasia killings began to multiply. Christian Wirth, a police chief in Stuttgart, was the Nazi-appointed expert in this field, and he began constructing gas chambers for this purpose. More than seventy thousand Germans were gassed to death over the next two years. Victims included the mentally ill and people who had chronic physical ailments. It didn't take long before the Nazis extended this murder to everyone considered to be a lower form of humanity, including some of the two hundred and fifty thousand gypsies they slaughtered during the war. The Nazis had a euphemism for this state-organized murder — *Sonderbehandlung*, or special treatment.[10]

As soon as Hitler invaded the Soviet Union and began taking prisoners of war, the gassing victims increased. Soviet prisoners became the guinea pigs for many of the experiments. This was the beginning of the wholesale slaughter of Soviet prisoners of war by the Nazis — an estimated two and a half million perished in all.

When Wirth was appointed commander of the new Belzec extermination camp, he decided against using the bottles of carbon monoxide gas that had been employed in the euthanasia institutions. The extent of the slaughter being planned was so vast that the demand for the bottles, which were produced in private factories, would far exceed the supply. Instead, Wirth designed a gas chamber which would use exhaust from vehicle engines to do the job.[11]

It took several months to build Belzec, and some of the work was done by Jews from nearby ghettos. Once they finished their tasks, they became the first experimental victims of the gas chambers. As many as eighty Ukrainian guards served at Belzec at any one time, manning the watchtowers and assisting in the extermination process. In the initial stages they hauled the bodies from the gas chambers and buried them, but this task was soon given to Jews themselves. In order to minimize resistance at the camp, the Nazis never told the victims of their fate until the final moment. Wirth himself would often

address the victims and convince them that they would merely have to bathe themselves and disinfect their clothes before being sent off to do work. Once the job was done, there was no need for further deception. The women's hair and gold fillings were extracted from the corpses before they were dumped into pits.

By the time I returned to Buczacz in May 1942, Belzec was already in full operation. A month earlier it had gassed to death thousands of Jews from Kolomyja. Before its liquidation in the spring of 1943, it would be the site of hundreds of thousands of murders.[12] The townspeople of Buczacz did not escape.

10

Abraham Zuhler, my sister Anna's husband, brought us news. He always seemed to know what was happening, what the Nazis were planning, and what we had to do to stay alive. Abraham was on friendly terms with some of the local *Judenrat* members, and although he had the utmost contempt for the leadership of the *Judenrat* he would often wander into their offices to sniff out information. This information was vital to those of us living in the ghetto.

Abraham's contact with the *Judenrat* and his knowledge of what was happening in Buczacz were responsible for saving many lives. The *Judenrat* itself kept the Jewish community in the dark. The only time it communicated with people in the ghetto was to issue Nazi-dictated proclamations and orders. These orders meant the confiscation of food, clothing, money, and ultimately lives. I often wonder how many more lives could have been spared if the *Judenrat* had co-operated with the resistance movement and the partisans, and if it had used its contacts with the Nazis to frustrate and defeat fascism instead of facilitating it.

In August, Abraham brought us the news that the Nazis were going on a killing spree throughout the region. Deportations were organized in more than twenty towns and cities. The streets of Lvov ran red with blood as the Nazis carried out their *aktion*, giving free rein to the local collaborators who saw an opportunity to enrich themselves from the misery of others. More than fifty thousand Jews were deported to Belzec from Lvov alone in August, with big deportations from Drohobycz, Boryslaw, Sambor, Stary Sambor, Turka, Tarnopol, Zborob, Mikulince, and many other areas.

The nightmare I had experienced in Kolomyja had finally caught up to me in Buczacz. We were virtually trapped inside the ghetto, waiting like doomed prisoners for the day of execution. The betrayal of Jews by our leaders sapped

our energy, but there was resistance. Many young men escaped to the forests and organized partisan detachments. Others, like Anna and Abraham, worked quietly to assist people and interfere in the Nazi plans as much as possible. For most people, however, it seemed that the world had abandoned them to a barbaric end.

As for me I asked questions. Where are the United States and Britain? Why are they not fighting Hitler in Europe? Why are they not bombing the roads and railways leading to the extermination camps? Why are they giving the Nazis free rein on the European continent to do as they will, when every norm of civilization and humanity is being blatantly violated?

I thought about my own death. At least I had had the opportunity to be re-united with my parents, my sisters, and my brother. Then I began thinking about Michael. I had no real proof that he had been killed, and I began to believe that he was still alive. I wondered where he was at that very moment, and how he would cope when he returned home — if he ever returned home — to find his wife and child dead.

Late in the month Abraham came to our door. “There is some trouble in Czortkow, and it looks like it might spread here.”

Abraham was gone before we could ask for details; there were many families to warn. But we all understood. Czortkow was fifty kilometres east of Buczacz. The Gestapo post for the entire region was headquartered there. If the Nazis were carrying out an action there it was reasonable to assume they would soon do the same in Buczacz.

“There is a bunker across the street at Mathilda Schwartzbach’s house,” my father said slowly. “It is in their basement. The entrance is camouflaged by boards and a false wall. Mina, they won’t let you into that bunker, because of the child,” he said, his voice breaking.

I felt a shiver come over me. I hadn’t thought about such a possibility up to now, but it made sense. To have a child hidden in a bunker posed a danger to everyone. The utmost silence is required under such conditions, and a child’s

cough or cry can mean death for two dozen people. The bunker across the street was a large one, holding twenty people or more, and they had decided that children would not be allowed.

"Mina, you must go to Uncle Favish." And so I did. In the back of his house was a hill, and not far from there — close to the town's outskirts — was a Polish family's home. This is where Uncle Favish took me and Izzienko.

"How long will I have to stay here?" I asked Uncle Favish. "Just until the *aktion* is over," he said. "We will come and tell you when it is safe to come out."

Although the Polish family was willing to shelter me from the Nazis, they were also afraid to have me stay right in their home with my child. I took Izzienko outside to the corn fields near the family's house. I sat for a long time with Izzienko in my lap, listening to every noise and trying to imagine what was going on in the town. This would be the first of many nights I would spend with my child outside in a field, exposed to the elements and fearful of falling asleep.

That very first night, Izzienko turned to me and asked, "Mum, why do we have to sleep outside?" The innocence of his question and the way he asked it made me cry. I could think of no answer at the time.

At first I was angry at being singled out and separated from my family because of Izzienko. This anger didn't last. I had witnessed the cruelty of the Nazis and their henchmen to children in particular. The discovery of a child in a bunker often meant a tortuous end for the infant. The Nazis would have no qualms about swinging babies and young children by their feet and smashing their heads against poles. Sometimes they would use the terrified children for target practice, and they would delight in murdering them right before their parents' eyes. I also knew the danger a child posed to others in a bunker.

I was haunted for a long time by one incident that was repeated across Buczacz and Europe. During one of the *aktion*s, a father hid with his son and several other adults in a bunker. They were in the basement of a house, sitting

nervously and waiting for the shooting outside to stop. Suddenly the boy started to cry. The father put his hand over his son's mouth, but the crying could still be heard. The others in the bunker warned him that if he didn't do something about the crying, they would. With one hand over his son's mouth, the man started choking the boy with his other. In a matter of seconds the crying had stopped. The boy was dead.

That first time, Izzienko and I slept in the corn fields for three nights. Then Uncle Favish came to the Polish family's house to take me back, There had been no *aktion* in Buczacz after all, he said. The Gestapo and the *Einsatzkommando*units had struck all around, but for some reason had left our town untouched. We learned later that two thousand people were sent from Czortkow to the Belzec extermination camp. Two days later, another four thousand were rounded up in Tarnopol and sent to be gassed.

I returned to my parents' home and we resumed our life in the ghetto. Yet after the events of August, nothing was the same. It could only be a matter of time before the Nazis entered Buczacz. Jews from all over Poland were being slaughtered that summer under the general framework of Operation Reinhard. From the huge Jewish ghetto in Warsaw to the smallest communities across the Nazi-occupied "General Government" of Poland, *aktion*s were carried out to evacuate the Jews and send them off to Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibor. In Warsaw alone nearly two hundred thousand people were deported to Treblinka that summer, with another fifty thousand going to the gas chamber in September.[13] It was a season of annihilation, and in the end, no community remained untouched.

On October 17 just before dawn Abraham was again at our door. The Gestapo were planning to move into the ghetto later in the day. We must hide immediately. The urgency in Abraham's voice was frightening.

This time Izzienko and I went with family friends to Medwedowce, a small town six or seven kilometres west of Buczacz. We set out before daybreak, and as we left Buczacz we heard noises and the sound of dogs barking.

At Medwedowce we went to the home of a Polish family who had agreed to hide us. Izzienko and I were put in the grain shed, where we spent the next two days and nights. The family brought us food and came out periodically to make sure we were all right. At night, we covered ourselves with straw and tried to sleep. Since the nights were cool we huddled together to keep warm. I thought about my parents hiding in the bunker across the street from their house. My brother David, my youngest sister Sala, and my sister-in-law Genia were with Abraham and Anna in another bunker.

After two days we judged that it was safe to return home. The fastest way home would have been to walk down the Chechego Maya, one of the main streets in town. But I was afraid to use that route. I didn't know what the conditions would be nor whether it was safe to be seen on the streets. Instead, I carried Izzienko down a different path which took us through the Jewish cemetery in Buczacz.

At the cemetery, bodies lay everywhere, some in heaps and others neatly lined up, like logs. It was the first time I had seen so many corpses, and the sight and smell made me sick to my stomach. Men, women, and children of every age lay dead. Some of the children's bodies were still in their mothers' arms. I could see the signs of beatings and torture. Everything was soaked in blood. At first I was afraid, and I thought of returning to the grain shed. Then I thought of my parents, of my brother and sisters. I had to know if they were alive. I looked at the faces of the bodies as I passed to see if I could recognize them. Was it possible that my family had been slaughtered? Dumped here without a burial? I found the task of looking at the faces too gruesome to continue. Some were beaten and bloodied beyond recognition. I picked up my pace and walked past the bodies as quickly as possible.

When I reached home my family was safe. My father told me that the *aktion* had begun soon after dawn, just as Abraham had warned. The Gestapo, with the assistance of their Ukrainian militia and some Polish collaborators, cordoned off a section of the ghetto and began a house to house round-up of Jews. Some were shot on the spot, while others were taken to the cemetery and executed, with the vengeful local collaborators administering beatings along the way. Usually it was the Gestapo officer who would bang on each door and

issue the order for Jews to get out. However, he would not dare set foot inside the home for fear of encountering resistance or a trap. This job was left to the Ukrainian or Polish collaborators, who rampaged through the homes with the zeal of dog catchers, checking every corner for hiding places. In some of the ghettos the Jewish police were also used for this purpose.

By the end of the day, some five hundred people had been killed and another fifteen hundred put on sealed freight cars en route to Belzec. This appeared to fulfil the quota for the day, and the killing suddenly stopped. The Gestapo disappeared and the collaborators went home with their blood-soaked clothes and their captured booty. It was over. Only the stench of the corpses in the cemetery served as a reminder.

The Nazis had not attacked the street where my parents were hiding. Nor was David and Sala's bunker endangered. Yet over the next few days we began to notice that some of our neighbours and friends, the people I had grown up with and known all my life, were no longer there.

It is impossible to describe the feelings we experienced in the days following the *aktion*. Walking down the streets in the central part of the city, we saw some of the people who had taken part in the mass killings and round-ups. They were our neighbours in Buczacz, but they had turned into killers without the slightest provocation.

From then on, at most Jewish homes in the ghetto, one or two people stood guard during the night, listening to every noise and movement outside. If there was any unusual commotion or barking of dogs, it was a sign that trouble was imminent. Bunkers were everywhere, but the majority were relatively easy for the Nazis and local police to find. It didn't take much effort to search the attics and basements of the houses, and unless there was some ingenuity in masking the hiding place, the victims were forced out.

A little more than a month later on November 27, the second *aktion* took place. The pattern was the same as before. Abraham gave us advance warning. Once again I took Izzienko and travelled to Medwedowce and the grain shed. Even as we were walking to the farmhouse we could hear the shooting

beginning behind us. I ran as fast as I could carrying my child in my arms.

The weather had turned cold, and we shivered through the night. I sang lullabies and told stories to put Izzienko to sleep. They all had the same theme; be quiet and still, don't make noise, because we don't want the bad man to come and take us away. That night I told him that his father was very far away helping to defeat the Nazis but that one day he would come home.

After one night and part of the next day, we decided to return to Buczacz. All the evidence showed that the *aktion* had lasted just one day. As many people as possible had been rounded up in the specified time period, and it was merely a matter of chance as to whether one or another street had been attacked.

Once again I avoided the main roads and took the path through the cemetery. The scene was similar to that of the previous month, but this time the bodies were frozen, still and inanimate. I could hardly believe that just yesterday they had been living, breathing human beings.

My family was again unharmed. The Nazis had stopped one street short of Podhajetska. Sala and David described the shooting and the screams they heard as they waited silently in their bunkers. My mother was especially shaken by the experience. Her arms trembling, she picked up Izzienko and hugged him tightly, then burst into tears. Her face was white, and I knew she could not take much more of these conditions. She had been spared in both *aktion*s, but I had the feeling that she wanted the terror to end, one way or another.

The Nazis seemed satisfied with their success. In addition to the hundreds of Jews murdered in the round-up, they transported twenty-five hundred people to the gas chambers in Belzec. In two days of concentrated killing and arrests, the Nazis had succeeded in exterminating roughly half of Buczacz's Jews.

Suddenly, almost collectively, the community realized that this was not just a bad dream that would go away if it was ignored. Some of the younger

people collected weapons and escaped to the forests. From there they could launch guerrilla attacks against the Nazis. At the same time we couldn't abandon the families, the children, and the aged. For the very young and the old, and those who cared for them, there was no escaping from the ghetto. Only the hope that the Soviets would soon roll back the Nazi advance and liberate us.

11

As winter arrived in 1942, our only thoughts were of survival. The cold weather meant that a few sticks of firewood could be the difference between life and death. The freezing temperatures quickly made us realize the desperation of our situation. How could Izzienko and I continue to sleep in the fields or live in barns? No one would allow me into a bunker with my child. Where would I go?

The woman who had sheltered me in Medwedowce offered a solution. She suggested that we leave Izzienko in her care for the foreseeable future. She had a large family, mostly girls, and she thought that Izzienko dressed as a girl would not arouse suspicion.

Placing Jewish children in the care of gentile families was not uncommon in those days. But it had its risks. Our family was more aware of those risks than most others, since we had experienced a tragedy some months earlier.

When my brother Zygmunt's wife Genia returned to Buczacz from Lvov, she brought her eight-year-old son Mozio with her. Our family was on friendly terms with some Ukrainian neighbours, and they agreed to take Mozio for the duration of the war so that he would be sheltered from the Nazis. We had complete faith in our neighbours and there was not the slightest hesitation in allowing them to care for Mozio. Subsequently, the boy was taken to Stanislawow, where he was placed in the care of another family who were friends of our neighbours. We never saw Mozio again. Our neighbours told Genia that the Nazis had found Mozio and taken him away. Eventually they admitted that their friends had informed the Nazis about the boy. Genia managed to survive the war, but she never learned the fate of her son.

These were the thoughts swirling around in my mind as the woman was making her proposal. I knew that Izzienko's best chance of surviving the war would be with a gentile family. This woman, who had taken risks to shelter us during the *aktion*s, appeared to be trustworthy. However, she was not making the proposal as a humanitarian gesture. She intimated strongly that she expected to be paid for this service. My parents had given her clothes and other goods in the past, but now she wanted money. If we could buy this woman's help, perhaps the Nazis could buy it, too. In the end, we decided that Izzienko should go with this woman. We asked that Izzienko be kept in Medwedowce and not moved anywhere else without our knowledge. We also gave the woman the address of Aunt Anna, my mother's sister, who had married and moved to New York before the war. If anything should happen to us during the war, we said, she was to get in touch with Anna and make arrangements to send the child to the United States.

On a Saturday evening, a couple of weeks before Christmas, the woman came to pick up Izzienko. When the knock on the door finally came I was filled with apprehension and fear. Since his birth, Izzienko had not been away from me for a single night. Now I was sending him off with this virtual stranger for months, or years.

Izzienko was asleep on the chesterfield. I had told him beforehand what we were planning, and tried to prepare him as best I could. I said it would be fun and an adventure for him. There would be other children to play with, and he would have plenty of food to eat. Best of all, he wouldn't have to sleep outside or in barns any more. He seemed to accept the idea, but it was hard to tell what was going through the mind of a three-year-old boy. When I woke him he turned to me and said, "Mum, I'm so tired right now, I don't want to go."

The words he used and the way he spoke them burned an indelible impression in my memory. I can still hear him saying it today. Suddenly I began to waver. I thought of calling it all off, sending the woman away, and keeping Izzienko with me. But everything had been arranged, and there was no turning back.

"Come on Izzienko, we have to go. Get dressed quickly," I said sternly.

Originally I had decided to kiss him goodbye right there, but now I thought it would be better to accompany him to the woman's house. We travelled the same road I had used to escape from Buczacz with Izzienko in my arms when the Nazis were running wild in the streets of the Jewish ghetto.

"Why don't you take off your coat?" Izzienko asked, when we arrived.

I told him that I was not going to stay, but that he would be living here from now on. It would be just as I had explained to him, and we would see each other soon. He looked at me with sad eyes, but he didn't cry. I held him close to me and kissed him, and I managed to hold back my tears as well. But as soon as I walked out the door, I lost control and broke down.

The next two weeks were days of agony for me. It is impossible for any mother to know what kind of hell I was going through unless she has experienced a similar situation. Yet how can any situation be similar to this? I had given my child away to someone I didn't really know for an indefinite period. The tragedy that befell Mozio was uppermost in my mind, and I could see how it continued to torment Genia. I stayed awake at night for hours wondering what was happening to Izzienko, whether he would be safe.

I had made a pledge not to visit Izzienko, and I stuck to it. We thought it would be best if he didn't see me for some time. That way he would get accustomed to his new surroundings and start to view them as his home. My parents could see that this decision was taking its toll on me, but we all recognized that it was important to abide by it. They didn't say a word to me about it, and we carried on.

The woman herself came by my parents' house every second or third day. We gave her pastries, baked goods, food, clothes, and anything else she requested. She brought encouraging reports on how Izzienko was doing. He was adapting well to his new home and playing with all the other children, she said.

I had no words to express what I was feeling. The thought occurred to me that it is easier for a mother to lose a child than to be kept wondering and

worrying twenty-four hours a day.

My troubles were just beginning. On Christmas eve, we heard a knock at the door. The woman came to tell us that Izzienko had developed a very bad cough. I grabbed my coat and Genia came with me. When we arrived at the house, Izzienko was burning with fever, his face and body were flushed and red. With every breath he took you could hear the fluid in his lungs. It was frightening to hear his coughs — they were incessant and unlike anything I had heard from a child before.

"How long has he been like this?" I demanded.

"He was sick yesterday, but we didn't think it was serious. We thought it would quickly go away. Today the coughing got much worse."

"Are you crazy? Why didn't you call a doctor immediately?" I shouted. I felt the fever transferring from Izzienko to me as I spoke. It was hard to keep control, but after a few moments I regained my composure. This was a peasant farmhouse on the outskirts of a small village. The nearest doctor — if there was a doctor at all — was probably many miles away.

For months afterwards I couldn't stop thinking about that house. It was essentially one big room, with a smaller, unfinished room to the side. The unfinished room had no heat in it, and it had a clay floor which was perpetually cold and damp. Yet the children walked into the room and played there in their bare feet all the time.

Despite his fever and bad state, Izzienko was overjoyed to see me. He tried bravely to smile, but the coughing wouldn't stop. With his flushed cheeks and light brown, curly hair, he looked to me like a beautiful angel. I got Izzienko dressed and immediately took him back to Buczacz. We made him as comfortable as possible while we waited for the doctor to arrive. His diagnosis was swift. Izzienko had diphtheria.

The doctor said there was not much that he could do. We just had to wait and see if the fever would break. The doctor lived beside the Charny Most (the

Black Bridge) at the western entrance to the city. It was about a kilometre from my parents' house. He told us to call him immediately if the situation turned for the worse. If Izzienko's breathing became very difficult, he said he would install a small tube in his throat.

Christmas Day arrived. The weather had turned colder, and the sky was overcast and black. I spent the whole night at Izzienko's bedside; he coughed throughout the night and into the morning. His fever was still raging.

The streets of Buczacz were exceptionally quiet that day. Nothing and no one was moving. People stayed in their homes in the ghetto district, as if they were waiting for something to happen. At about noon, my brother-in-law Abraham came to the door with his now-familiar warning, He had just been at the *Judenrat* office, and from the way the officials were talking, it looked like an *aktion* was in the offing. I listened to him talking to my family, but my mind was somewhere else. For the first time I felt no tension or fear at the prospect of Nazis storming through the streets and barging into houses to drag people to their death. From the pattern of their attacks during the first two operations, it seemed likely they would come to our district and street this time. I didn't care any more. I made up my mind what to do.

"There is nowhere for me to run this time," I told my father. "You go and hide, and don't worry about me. I will stay right here with Izzienko."

Late in the evening, Abraham returned. It appeared to be a false alarm, he said. There was no evidence of any impending action. Usually one could observe the gathering of equipment and marshaling of forces in preparation for the killings. But the streets remained totally quiet, so it was unlikely anything was in the offing. Abraham intended to stay up all night to monitor the situation, and he would inform us before dawn if there was any change.

I too stayed up that night, watching Izzienko and trying to comfort him. Dawn arrived, and Abraham had not returned. There was to be no *aktion* that day.

By the middle of the morning, Izzienko's condition rapidly deteriorated.

He had lost a lot of weight by now and was very weak. All of a sudden his coughing became extremely intense, and he seemed to have trouble breathing. I ran to the other room and asked my sister to fetch the doctor. No sooner had she gone out the door than Izzienko began to choke. I held his cheeks in my hands and talked to him. His choking abated, but he couldn't breathe properly. After a moment he began to choke again. I took him in my arms and rocked him, sweeping the curls out of his eyes. I kept talking to him, but he couldn't hear me now. His eyes were closing, and I knew the doctor would never make it in time. Shortly before noon, Izzienko died in my arms.

A few minutes later the doctor arrived. I was still holding Izzienko in my arms, rocking him back and forth. My mother had been in the other room the whole time, unable to watch. My father was in tears. The doctor took my baby from my arms, examined him, and pronounced him dead.

Between my grandmother Golde's grave and Uncle Karl's, a small space had been left. We didn't know why at the time, nor did it concern us. Perhaps it was a mistake on the part of the grave diggers, or maybe they had their reasons. We could never have believed that the space there would be reserved for my child. We took Izzienko to the cemetery ourselves, dug a grave between the other two, and buried him there. I placed a smaller marker beside the grave with his name on it, and the dates 1939-1942. I'm sure the marker didn't last long. It may have blown over with the next strong gust of wind. Or 1t could have been crushed by the bodies the Nazis stacked all over the cemetery in their subsequent campaign to make Buczacz an area free of all Jews. Yet I was happy to have marked the spot. My son would not be one of the hundreds of thousands of children dumped into mass, anonymous pits across Nazi-occupied Europe.

In a strange and horrible way, I considered myself to be a lucky mother. The two weeks I had endured without my child, after I had given him away, were the most agonizing of my life. Somehow the certainty of his death relieved the tension. A part of me had died, and I could feel no emotion any longer in that part.

I had been with my child to the end, and I buried him myself. Yes, I

thought to myself, I was the lucky one indeed.

12

Abraham was beside himself with joy. “The Nazis have been defeated at Stalingrad,” he said. “The Soviets captured their whole army. They even took von Paulus, the Field-Marshall himself!”

It was the beginning of February 1943 and he had just heard the news on the radio. We didn’t know the full meaning or significance of the news, or what effect it would have on shortening the war. Yet it gave us tremendous satisfaction to know that the Nazis could be stopped.

Of course Jews didn’t have radios. The one that Abraham listened to had a history, Shortly before the war began, my father had acquired this radio. It was a novelty in his home, and he used it mostly to listen to music when he relaxed in the evenings. In the years following the outbreak of war in 1939, he had so much else on his mind that the radio was stored away and left unused. It never occurred to my parents that the radio was a valuable means of keeping abreast of the course of the war.

With the Nazi occupation, the radio suddenly became a liability. One of the first orders issued in every city and village was that all radios in Jewish homes be confiscated. Radios were also seized from the homes of anyone else who could pose a threat, or who might potentially use the information gleaned from broadcasts to assist the resistance.

When the order came to hand over all the radios, my father hesitated. He refused to give up something that might prove useful in the future. At the same time, to be caught with a radio in the home after such an order would surely bring a death sentence. He came upon the solution of giving the radio to one of his Ukrainian customers who hated the Nazis with a passion and was more than happy to help us out. It was in this man’s home that Abraham would often listen

to the news broadcasts, picking up reports about the growing resistance to the Nazis and the development of the anti-fascist coalition.

Abraham reported on every major development on the Russian front that led to the defeat at Stalingrad. We followed the reports of the slow strangulation of Hitler's Sixth Army, which was isolated and then surrounded by the Soviets. A German attempt in December to break through the encirclement failed. Early in the new year the Soviets delivered an ultimatum to the Nazis, calling on them to capitulate, but Hitler refused to let his generals and field-marshals accept the proposal. The refusal cost the lives of tens of thousands of German soldiers. The Soviets proceeded to annihilate the army, killing close to one hundred and fifty thousand German soldiers and capturing another ninety thousand — including twenty-four generals and Field-Marshall Friedrich von Paulus. [14]

After Stalingrad, the war took on a new complexion. The Nazis had suffered defeat on a major scale, and now they were on the defensive all along the front. The Soviets were staging a winter offensive, taking advantage of their superior preparation and experience in cold weather warfare. The German line was pushed back seven hundred kilometres during the offensive, and by the end of the cold weather the Nazi losses numbered about one and a half million men.

I remember Abraham coming to our home one day and announcing, "On all the roads there are signs that say: *Halt*. But now the road signs are changing. On many of them you can see the word *Postoi*. (Russian, for Stop)."

Even within the occupied territories there was encouraging news. Resistance groups, national anti-fascist fronts, and guerrilla fighters were opposing the Nazis. Partisan fighters blew up bridges and ambushed German convoys at every opportunity. The radio reports Abraham was listening to were Allied propaganda, designed to give people confidence that the Nazis could be opposed and defeated. In this respect, they were successful.

A few days after the Nazis had marched into the Ukraine in 1941, a

speech by Joseph Stalin was broadcast on the radio calling for widespread and organized resistance. Abraham heard that speech and copied parts of it down. It was clear that it inspired him and influenced much of his later activity. I didn't know how involved he was in resistance activities, but I knew that he was a thorn in the side of the Nazis and all their collaborators — whether Ukrainian, Polish, or Jewish. We all realized that we would have perished in the early stages of the Nazi occupation without his assistance.

With the setbacks the Nazis were now suffering, we began to think that they would turn their attention away from exterminating Jews and concentrate on re-organizing their war effort. How could a country that was being defeated expend so much energy, manpower, and material on killing innocent civilians? The fact of the matter was that the Nazis had embarked on their strategy of the final solution and were determined to carry it out regardless of cost. As time wore on, the policy assumed a momentum of its own. The Nazis had inculcated their own soldiers and citizenry with such vile racist propaganda that for Nazi functionaries in a variety of positions the genocidal slaughter of Jews became an end in itself. As a result, the train transports continued to ferry Jews to the extermination centres even when the same cars could have been used to carry supplies to German troops. While the gigantic bureaucracy involved in the extermination process — the guards, the special *Einsatzkommando* units, the concentration camp staff, the railway support workers — were busy murdering Europe's Jewry, Nazi troops were beating a hasty retreat to their inevitable defeat.

Abraham's tale of the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad was still ringing in our ears when he appeared on our doorstep again. This time he was unshaven, and even his dark complexion could not hide the fact that he hadn't slept in a long time. The news was another *aktion*.

"This is not a false alarm," he added. "The Gestapo have moved extra men into town, and the Ukrainian militia is getting ready. This time they are going to use the excuse that they must quarantine Jews who have contracted typhus. Everyone will be shot or sent to Belzec, just as they were in the first two *aktion*s."

“False alarm or not, it doesn’t matter,” I blurted out. “If they don’t kill us today it will be tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after. We are just sitting here and waiting for it to happen.”

Abraham suddenly grabbed my hand and pulled me outside the door. “Mina, you have to be brave,” he said. “I know what you went through with Izzienko. But that gives you no right to speak so foolishly now. You have a duty to survive. You owe it to yourself and your family.”

Abraham spoke sharply, but he held my hand gently throughout. I was looking at the ground as he spoke, until he took my head and turned it toward him.

“We are not just sitting here and waiting,” he said. “We are defying Hitler’s dictum that the Jews are to be annihilated. Some of us are in the forests fighting, some are using rifles and grenades. Some of us are resisting through our very survival. I have no intention of dying, and neither should you. We will be here long after Hitler and the Nazis are gone.”

13

This time I went with my parents across the street to the bunker they used. I had been in this house before, but I would never have guessed where the bunker was hidden. Just off the kitchen was a room that was full of odds and ends. There was a stack of wooden boxes in one corner that hid a set of stairs that led to a small basement. It was an unusual place for a staircase, and it was ingeniously hidden. Some of the houses in the district had basements, while others did not. The Nazis and their local helpers had to determine in each house whether there was a basement and attic; if these weren't immediately obvious, they would move on to the next house rather than waste precious minutes on a search. The murderers had their quota for each *aktion,* and they didn't really care how it was satisfied.

In many of the ghettos throughout Poland, the *Judenrat*s played a treacherous role when it came to identifying houses and the number of people within each. Under the guise of a "housing department," the *Judenrat* would survey all the Jewish homes and determine how many rooms were in each. This information was ostensibly used for determining the number of people who could be placed within the ghetto and how many Jews from the countryside could be absorbed into the cities and towns. In reality, it gave the Gestapo detailed Information on who lived where, and the potential hiding places in every house. Abraham had made sure that the *Judenrat* had no information on the houses where many of the bunkers were located. This was no guarantee that the bunker would be safe, but it prevented arrests as a result of the collaboration of the supposed leaders of the community.

Within an hour of our arrival, about twenty people had gathered in the bunker. Incredibly, we all managed to squeeze into the basement bunker, which wasn't more than fifteen feet long and seven or eight feet wide. The first part of the basement was very small and narrow. Then there was a small opening

leading to a slightly wider section. It had a low ceiling and was dark and extremely dank. We all had to lie next to each other with no space between, like sardines in a can. The extent of the movement available to us was to sit up or lie down, and for most people there was not enough room to extend their bodies fully. In the very front of the basement, at the foot of the stairs, was a pail that served as our toilet. The bunker opening had a hatch on top, with clothes and other debris secured to it. It was virtually impossible to detect.

When everyone was in place, we waited silently. My mind raced from thought to thought. I visualized myself in the corn field with Izzienko on my lap, listening for noises. I remembered how we would talk to each other like friends and equals, and how he would look at me with his innocent eyes and tell me how beautiful I was. The sound of shooting and barking dogs in the distance brought my mind back to the present. It was clear evidence that the *aktion* had begun, and we all braced ourselves. The commotion was incessant; there was noise all around us. I asked myself why we, twenty human beings, were hiding like animals from other human beings.

Suddenly we heard loud banging and shouting immediately overhead. The Nazis were at the house.

"*Juden raus. Raus!*" came the shouts.

We heard the door slamming so hard that it must have come off the hinges. There was running and screaming throughout the house, as if some lunatics were on the loose. They knew where to look, and they used their dogs to assist. We could hear boxes scattering and crashing to the floor. I steeled myself for what was coming.

I looked across the room and saw my mother. Her face was completely flushed, and she had a frozen and terrified look. She was a heavy woman with high blood pressure. I couldn't imagine what was going through her mind at this moment, or how she was coping with the stress. I didn't feel pity for her, I was angry at those who had destroyed so many lives and brought decent people to such a state. My father, who was right beside her, slowly closed his eyes when the noise began and lay absolutely motionless.

The commotion must have lasted only one or two minutes, but at the time it seemed endless. The sound of the jackboots pounding across the floor overhead has stayed with me ever since. As suddenly as it began, the noise was over. The Nazis, frustrated at finding no one in the house and unable to locate any obvious hiding places, stormed out Everyone in the bunker remained still. It was difficult to believe they had actually gone. A minute passed, then two. Nobody moved for at least an hour. When it appeared that no one would return to the house, some of us sat up to stretch the tension out of our muscles. The two sisters from next door began whispering to each other, but they were instantly hushed up.

Although the immediate danger appeared to have passed, there was no lessening of tension in the bunker. We could hear continuous shooting and noises coming from the distance. The Jewish cemetery was not far from the house, and we surmised that the gunfire was coming from there. Those who had not been as fortunate as we, were led to the cemetery for their execution. Some of them may have been caught sitting in their homes, unaware that an *aktion* was going on. Others may have been flushed from their bunkers, sniffed out by dogs, or caught by neighbours who knew the layout of their homes. Still others may have been betrayed — perhaps by a local collaborator seeking a favour or a small bribe, perhaps by a Jewish official or policeman hoping to save his own family. The very old and the sick had nowhere to run anyway. They ended their lives in the town they grew up in, or on a train transport to Belzec.

Several more hours passed. By evening, we could still hear noises in the distance. We couldn't understand what was going on. The *aktions* normally lasted one day. They would begin at dawn and be over by nightfall. This time the shooting carried on without let-up. As long as the noise continued, we didn't dare venture outside. It meant spending the night in the most uncomfortable conditions, yet we felt we had no choice.

I couldn't sleep at all that night, and it was the same for most of the others. At about midnight the shooting died down, but shortly after five in the morning it began anew. It was a two-day *aktion* this time. The prospect of a lengthy stay in the bunker was frightening. We hadn't brought any food with us. I wondered if the Nazis had chosen this occasion to liquidate the ghetto

entirely. Wouldn't Abraham have learned about it beforehand? And even if the Gestapo didn't find our bunker and flush us out, how long would we be able to survive without succumbing to starvation?

By mid-morning the shooting seemed to be over. We waited half an hour or so, and then Chaya and I went upstairs. The tables, chairs, and other furniture had been tossed aside in yesterday's rampage. All of the windows to the house were covered, but from a transom on top of a window facing Podhajetska Street we peered out at the narrow street below. It was empty, but directly in front of the house a woman was lying on the road.

The two of us went to the door and into the street. Everything was silent. We approached the woman on the road. I saw that she was pregnant, perhaps in her ninth month. The baby was visibly moving inside of her, but the woman didn't seem to be alive. Still, we couldn't see any blood or signs of injury. I tried to turn her head towards me and talk to her, but she didn't respond.

Suddenly we heard the march of footsteps coming down the street. We ran back into the house and down into the bunker. A few minutes later the shooting began again.

As we sat and waited, I couldn't help looking at my mother. It tore my heart out to see how she was suffering. For the entire first day she hadn't used the pail at the foot of the stairs. But on the second day, she couldn't hold back any longer. She was at the very end of the room, so she had to climb over everyone to get to the pail. Every movement seemed to be painful and laboured for her. I couldn't imagine how she would endure this ordeal much longer.

My mother and father had witnessed two world wars, countless pogroms, and anti-Semitic outrages. In spite of it all they raised and nurtured their family, and gave us all their love and devotion. I was determined to see that they would be among the ranks of the survivors when the war finally came to an end.

By the middle of the afternoon the shooting subsided once more. After a short wait, Chaya and I again went up to determine whether it was safe to come

out. Looking out we could no longer see the pregnant woman in the street. Chaya went into the kitchen to find some food for the people downstairs, while I continued to look outside. Suddenly I saw about a dozen Ukrainian policemen walking up the street, heading towards the house. Just as I was about to run to the kitchen and get Chaya, I saw them turn off in a different direction. They were headed towards the town well to wash up after a day's hard work. Their high black leather boots were totally covered with blood.

Chaya and I went back to the bunker and told everyone what we had seen. It remained quiet after that, and it was likely that the *aktion* was now over. I couldn't erase the sight of those policemen and their bloody boots from my mind. I was afraid to go back outside. Then I heard Abraham shouting to us that it was safe to come out. There was no rejoicing or celebration, no pats on the back or congratulations. We had survived this time, but it would only take one neighbour or false friend to give the secret of our bunker to the Nazis. It was a slow death the Nazis were dealing out to us, sapping us of our energy and vitality and keeping us in a state of perpetual anxiety and fear. I helped my mother and father get to their feet. My mother could barely walk up the stairs and collapsed to the ground as soon as she emerged from the bunker. My father and I carried her home.

When we ventured onto the streets the next morning, we saw blood spattered on the streets and sidewalks. The houses where our friends and neighbours once lived were empty. Two thousand Jews were murdered in that *aktion,* leaving fewer than one-third of Buczacz's original Jewish population still alive. My family was still miraculously alive. Pepa and Zygmunt were gone, and I had lost Izzienko. But I still had my parents, my twin brother, and my two other sisters. We counted ourselves lucky.

14

It was a week before Passover. Automatically, as if it were a programmed response, we began to get ready for the holiday. No one considered it strange that we should do so. It was a tradition, and such traditions had survived the centuries through all manner of strife and torment. We clung to those forms and customs that bound us together as a family and as a people. Besides, baking the matzoh and making the special Passover dishes helped us turn our attention away from the horrors that had become our daily routine.

To say that my faith in God was shaken by the events of the last two years would not begin to convey the disaffection I felt. I can't pretend to speak for all or even the majority of Jews, but there were not a few of us who questioned how God could allow such unprecedented atrocities to take place. Could this all be a preordained punishment that God was enforcing? Some believed that it was. Yet how did this explain the nature and extent of the atrocities? How did it explain the torture and murder of babies, of innocent children, of women, old men, the sick, and the infirm? If people were to survive this war, how could they teach their children compassion, when the source of this virtue had allowed such monstrous crimes to occur?

On any day and at any time the Gestapo would appear at someone's door, taking away people on the flimsiest of pretexts or on no pretext at all. There was no longer anything strange in discovering that someone you had known for years had disappeared without a trace. Nor was it a surprise to learn that someone you trusted and considered a friend — a neighbour or personal acquaintance — would betray you for no apparent reason.

Those Jews who placed more trust in God than in man for their deliverance were effectively condemning themselves to death. I knew that our own strength and ingenuity, our will to resist the Nazis, were key factors in our survival. For me survival became the watchword. Every day that I lived was a

victory against the Nazis.

It was now obvious that anyone in Buczacz who did not flee to the forests or find a secure place to hide would be exterminated. In the beginning, the Nazis were anxious to fill their quota of arrests without worrying about which houses the victims came from. Now that the objective was to rid the entire city of Jews, however, more attention was paid to ferreting out every person. Building a bunker or finding room in an existing one became a necessity for every Jew in Buczacz.

Then we learned that the Schwartzbach house, where my parents and I had hidden during the last a*ktion,* had been looted. Clothes, small pieces of furniture and the like were taken and the thieves left the house in a great mess. For a Jew to have articles stolen from his home was not an exceptional occurrence. This is why most people in the ghetto rarely, if ever, left their homes empty. This time, however, there was a difference. Amidst the debris it was clear that the opening to the bunker had been disturbed. Whoever had been in the house had become aware of the existence of a bunker.

We decided to build a small bunker underneath the bed in the house where my parents lived. It would be used in the event of an emergency, when my parents didn't have time to rush out to another location. It might also come in handy if the Gestapo one day came looking for someone in the house. We lifted the floor boards under the bed and began digging. There was no concrete or basement underneath, only earth. We designed it so that two people could fit in, move the bed back into place, and then cover the opening with the floor boards. In the end, it was an impractical project. My parents dreaded the idea of going into the hole, and they refused to use it.

In the midst of our Passover preparations, the terror began again. It was April 13, at dawn. Abraham came to the door and told us to clear out of the house as quickly as possible. An *aktion* was about to begin and we had no time to lose. He left immediately to inform others. This was the shortest notice we had ever had. I considered putting my parents in the home-made bunker under their bed, but I knew they would refuse to stay there. Besides, how could I leave them, possibly for days, in a hole in the ground with no light or food? As

soon as we were dressed and heading out the door, Abraham returned to see why we were taking so long. The old people could not move quickly, and as we crossed the street to the bunker, we heard the yelping of dogs in the distance. At the Schwartzbach home, close to thirty people stood arguing at the entrance to the bunker.

Neighbours who had found shelter In their own homes up to now decided to opt for the safety of a bigger bunker, and they had been there hours before we arrived. It was a desperate situation, and a potentially explosive one. Who would remain in the bunker, and who would be forced out? Where would the others go?

I could see Abraham speaking excitedly to some of the other people in the house, then throwing his hands up in despair. He took me aside.

"It's no use," he said. '"There are just too many people here. You and your parents can come with me. We'll make room for you in our bunker."

Suddenly I knew why Abraham kept the family spread out in two or more hiding places. In one bunker the whole family could be wiped out with one stroke. Someone in the family had to survive, to mourn, and to tell the story to future generations.

"Let's go quickly Mum. We'll go to Abraham's bunker just down the street," I said to my mother.

My mother's face was still flushed from the walk across the street, and I knew her blood pressure was at a peak. She answered immediately.

"No. I am not moving anywhere. If they don't take me into this bunker, I will stay upstairs in the house."

My father said nothing. I could see from my mother's eyes that she was adamant, and we had no time to argue. It was quickly decided that the elderly people would all be allowed to stay in the bunker. Six of us had to leave, and I was among that group. I embraced my parents and said goodbye. None of us

knew what would happen that day, but I sensed that my mother would not be able to survive the war much longer. If the Nazis didn't murder her, she would surely fall victim to a stroke or other ailment. Her spirit had been broken.

Abraham led us to his bunker. It was in a corner of a cellar, behind a partition that was made to look exactly like a wall. Abraham had designed the bunker, and it was cleverly concealed. Only someone familiar with the house and the basement would have any inkling there was a hiding place there.

We sat and waited. Within minutes the shouting and screaming began, and the shooting. I looked at the anxious faces all around me and wondered what the people were thinking. They should have confidence in the security of the bunker, I thought. They should be calm. As for myself, I had no fear of being arrested this time. I spent most of the time thinking about my parents, and especially my mother. I pictured her sitting at the far end of that bunker, staring at the floor, the blood pounding through her bulging veins. Then came the familiar call we had all heard many times. "*Juden heraus, schnell schnell!"*

We heard screaming and the vilest obscenities being shouted. They were rampaging through the house. Sala, my 23-year-old sister, suddenly began to sob. Everybody in the bunker froze. David put his arm around her and tried to console her. He put his hand over her mouth to muffle the noise, and in a matter of seconds she stopped. Just then we heard boots thumping on the floor overhead and coming down the steps into the basement. They were right beside us now, kicking and prodding everything they came across to uncover any hiding places. We all sat rigid, holding our breath. Did they have dogs, I wondered. If they had dogs, we were finished.

Judging by the noise and commotion, there must have been five or six of them in the basement, all of them shouting and cursing in Ukrainian. It was the usual pattern. The Gestapo men waited outside the door, while the Ukrainian collaborators searched in every nook and cranny. In less than a minute, we heard the boots heading back up the stairs. They had found nothing, and weren't about to waste any more time.

It was still early in the morning, and we knew we had a long wait before

we could move. But the worst was over. By the afternoon, the noises had grown more distant and we ventured to speak to each other. How many did the Nazis have in their quota this time, we wondered. Our main concern was that the *aktion* would last only one day, and that we would not have a repeat of the events of February.

In the evening I heard steps coming down the basement once more. It was a friend of Abraham's who also had connections with the *Judenrat*. He knocked on the partition wall and then said that it was safe to come out. The *aktion* was over.

The five of us, my brother and two sisters and Abraham, ran down the street to check on my parents' bunker. As we approached the house I saw that the door had been flung open, which meant that the Gestapo again had been inside. I was out of breath as I ran through the kitchen and into the side room. The first thing I saw was the hatch of the bunker lying on its end at the other side of the floor.

The bunker had been discovered.

I lowered myself into the basement and desperately looked around. There was no one there. As I was climbing back out, I saw the dark grey suit jacket my father had been wearing. It was lying rumpled on the floor, folded up as if it had been a pillow.

"They've taken Mum and Dad. How could we have left them here?" I couldn't contain myself any longer and began to cry. Sala also began to weep, and we clung to each other.

"The *aktion* has been over for some time. Maybe everyone has left for home," Abraham said. He was trying to calm us down, holding out the hope that everyone was still safe. However, I knew from the appearance of the house and the bunker that this was a slim possibility.

We walked across the street to my parents' house. There was no one there. No other explanations could be offered. My parents had been arrested,

along with everyone else in the bunker. I would never see them again.

I too would have been arrested if it hadn't been for the events of that morning, when an overcrowded bunker forced some of us to leave. It was a narrow escape again, just as it had been in Kolomyja when Klara Wald and I decided to stay home one day rather than walk to my mother-in-law's in the rain. I asked myself why I was still alive.

The more agonizing question which haunted me in the coming days and weeks, and which troubles me still, is why we allowed anyone at all to hide in that bunker. We knew that the bunker was compromised, which was reason enough to abandon it. In the heat of the moment on that morning of April 13, none of us spoke up and warned of the dangers involved. We knew the risk; all of us knew. But no one spoke.

The three thousand Jews rounded up that day, including Abraham's parents, were in the jail yard, past the bridge on Gymnasialna Street, This was the former location of all the civic administration buildings, the police station, and the court house. Law and order? No justice was meted out now, only Nazi vengeance.

15

By the next morning, the reality of the previous day's events began to sink in. It was impossible for us to venture anywhere near the jail yard to see what was going on. We had to rely on Abraham to bring home some news.

"The *Judenrat* has been asked to go to the jail yard and pick out some able-bodied men who are still capable of doing labour for the Nazis. Those men will be spared."

"What does it mean, Abraham. What about my parents?"

"None of the women and children will be picked," he said. "Only a handful of the stronger men will survive. I don't think anyone over forty will be chosen."

I couldn't believe the matter-of-fact tone he was using to tell me this. In effect, he was saying that our own people — the supposed leaders of the Jewish community in Buczacz — would decide who among the three thousand Jews would live or die. My parents, along with his father and mother, would be condemned to death.

"This is insane. You must go there and speak to the *Judenrat* and have them save everyone. They can't sit in judgement over innocent lives. Who gives them the right to do this?"

"Mina, this is how fascism works," Abraham said. "The Nazis want to conquer the world and to do it they have their sympathizers and collaborators. Those Jews who are collaborators are every bit as guilty as the Pole or Ukrainian or Frenchman or Norwegian who co-operates with Hitler." I knew Abraham was right, and we just had to keep on.

After the *Judenrat* had completed its work, the Nazis followed their set pattern. The victims themselves were taken to dig pits at Fedor Hill; others were merely lined up in the open areas around the Jewish cemetery. Then they were all shot.

Early the next morning I went to the cemetery to see if I could find my parents. 1don't know how I could have accomplished it, but I was intent on giving them a proper burial. I wanted to see them one last time.

I must have spent an hour at the horrible task of searching through the bodies. There were hundreds of corpses this time, all waiting for a mass burial which likely wouldn't come for a few days. I saw many of our neighbours and friends among those corpses. There were Jews I had known, customers who had come into the store to buy candies or chocolate before the war began. I couldn't see any trace of my parents, nor did I see the body of anyone else who was in their bunker. I began to think that they had been taken to Fedor Hill for their execution, and were already buried in a mass, unmarked pit.

There were a few other people in the cemetery going through the same exercise. One of them, a young man with a shock of red hair, saw me from a distance and came running over.

"Mina Pohorille! Is that you?"

"Yes, Mr. Miller, how are you?" I responded.

"How am I? I'm alive, that's how I am." Miller paused for a moment, then made a sweeping motion with his hands. "It's a slaughter this time. They showed no mercy. I'm terribly sorry about your parents."

I suddenly realized that I hadn't come to the cemetery in the hope of finding my parents' bodies. It was just the opposite. I was hoping that by not finding my mother and father, I could cling to the belief that they had been miraculously saved. It was an irrational thought, completely out of tune with the reality of the *aktions* and the murders I had seen over the last year.

"What do you mean? Do you know about my parents?"

The man told me the story of how my parents had faced their final hours. He had been flushed out of a bunker himself along with many others, and taken to the jail. The prisoners were placed in large holding cells inside, and all those who couldn't fit were herded into the fenced jail yard. He knew a number of people in the cell, including my parents.

My mother was a broken woman at the end, Some people experience a strange kind of relief at being captured after hiding for so long, but she could not cope with the situation. She wept constantly, and she was heartbroken at not being able to find out the fate of her children.

My father, on the other hand, accepted his fate calmly. "The Jewish people are being punished," he said. He said he hoped that with his death, the lives of his children and others would be spared.

I understood my father's attitude at the time, but as the years passed his statement has become more and more troubling. If he were alive today I would challenge his fatalistic posture. This was not a war about punishment and divine intervention; it was dictated by men who desired to exploit and enslave other men.

As for my parents and all the others who were rounded up on April 13, 1943 in Buczacz, they were executed by the Gestapo and the local collaborators. Their bodies were dumped into unmarked pits.

A week after the *aktion,* Passover arrived. Anna and Abraham organized a traditional *seder* at their house. Abraham caught a rabbit for the meal; it was the first time in months that we had eaten meat.

In Jewish tradition, it is customary on Passover for the youngest in the family to ask the "Four Questions." They all centre on why the Passover night differs from all other nights of the year. Then it falls to an elder, often the father in the family, to answer the questions by explaining how God delivered the Jews from enslavement in Egypt.

We didn't ask any questions that night. Somehow it didn't seem appropriate. There were far more than four questions that had to be answered.

16

The idea of waging armed resistance against the Nazis had occurred to Abraham long before the dark days of April 1943. It would have meant leaving permanently for the forest, which served as a base for the bands of partisans throughout the region. He knew it was the right thing to do, but he felt an obligation to his family and friends in the town as well. People depended on him to warn of impending *aktions*. The events of April, however, caused a distinct and noticeable change in Abraham's consciousness. He realized that time was not on the side of the Jews in Buczacz. Even though the Nazis were on the defensive in their battle with the Soviets, they remained intent on continuing the slaughter of Jews to the last woman and child. A passive approach might salvage a few lives, but the majority would be condemned to death.

Abraham now spoke openly about joining the partisan groups in the forest. The most well-known of these was in the Koropiec forest and led by David Dalek These partisans had dug a huge tunnel in the forest with many exits, to facilitate quick escapes. From here they carried out forays against the Nazis and the local militia. In one instance they attacked a Ukrainian police station, killing several officers and making off with weapons and ammunition.

A few days after the April *aktion*, Abraham gathered everyone together and outlined his plans.

"The Nazis have every intention of making Buczacz *Judenrein,*" he began. "All the older people are going to be resettled to Kopyczyniec — but we know very well what the Nazi resettlement actions are all about. As for everyone else who stays here, their end will be the same as for our families

and friends who have already perished."

He spoke calmly and slowly. In a sense, he was telling us that our fate was sealed. Yet there was not even the slightest hint of resignation in his tone. We waited for him to explain.

"I have discussed the situation with David and my brother. The three of us are planning to go to the forest and join the partisans. The Nazis are not going to be defeated unless everyone plays his part. We may die, but we will die fighting."

The announcement came as no surprise. I felt proud to hear Abraham's words, but at the same time I knew the anguish that Anna must be experiencing. In one instant her husband and brother would be leaving for an uncertain future, and the possibility was strong that they would never see each other again. I thought of Michael, and I wondered whether he had time to think about me or if he was completely preoccupied with fighting and survival. I turned my thoughts back to the situation at hand. With the men going off to the forest, how would the rest of us survive? Before I could speak, Abraham continued.

"There's a Polish woman named Janka. She lives in a little white bungalow at the end of Gymnasialna Street, next to the Sokol and the girls' school. We have come to an arrangement. I am going to build a bunker in her house, and this is where the women will stay until the war is over and Buczacz is liberated."

Not for a moment did I think that Abraham would have left for the forest without first making plans for our safety. In retrospect, it made no sense that the task of being a partisan fighter should be the exclusive domain of the men. Except for Aunt Regina, we were all young and able-bodied women who could have made a contribution to defeating fascism. However, we had been brought up not to think in such terms, and the concept never even occurred to me then.

In silence we all agreed to Abraham's plan, but deep down I was discontent. I hated the thought of spending the rest of the war confined in a small space. It was bad enough having to hide in bunkers during *aktions,* but it

was unthinkable that we would do so for an indefinite period. As dangerous as conditions were in Buczacz, I valued my freedom of movement.

Within two weeks, the bunker was built. Janka demanded to be paid in gold pieces, and she intimated that the price would go up once the bunker was actually occupied. Abraham immediately began pressing us to occupy the bunker, but we resisted. He especially wanted Aunt Regina to go into hiding, fearing that the Nazis would soon carry out their campaign to eliminate all the elderly Jews from the town. Aunt Regina insisted she didn't want to go by herself, and asked that Sala come with her.

Just as we were procrastinating and arguing about who should be the first to go to the bunker, the Nazis introduced their so-called resettlement campaign. This was in May, and it came in typical fashion. With the full co-operation of the *Judenrat,* the local Nazi administration ordered all the elderly people to report to a central gathering place. People were told they would be taken to nearby Kopyczyniec where they would be given free housing and daily food allowances, and where they would be able to move about freely, without the confines of a ghetto. After everything that had happened, I didn't think that anyone could believe such a tale. But people did believe it, and Aunt Regina was among them. Abraham pleaded with her to head for the bunker, saying that the Nazi resettlement was a cruel joke. She refused. She gathered a few things in a bag and reported to the local authorities, along with hundreds of other old people in Buczacz. It was the last time we saw her.

A few days after the resettlement campaign another general *aktion* began in Buczacz. We hid in Anna's bunker as we had done before, and the Nazis again entered the basement of the house without discovering where we were. It was a smaller *aktion* than the others and lasted only a few hours. The reality was that the number of Jews in Buczacz was rapidly dwindling. With one further campaign, the ghetto which once contained more than ten thousand Jews would be liquidated and the Nazis could report to Berlin that another occupied town had become *Judenrein*.

All of us were still reluctant to go into permanent hiding. I had miraculously survived to this point, but I knew that such miracles couldn't

continue indefinitely. Yet the thought of voluntarily imprisoning myself in the most dreadful conditions — of being dependent on someone to bring food and carry out my waste — was too difficult to face.

The Nazi determination to cleanse Buczacz of its Jews finally caught up with us on June 26, when the sixth and final *aktion* was organized. Once again we sought shelter in Anna's bunker, and again it appeared that we would go undetected. Late in the afternoon, when we could still hear shooting in the streets, one of Abraham's friends rapped on the bunker door.

"The *aktion* is over, but it isn't safe to be on the streets," he told us. "Jews have killed a Ukrainian policeman and wounded a German officer. The ghetto has been liquidated. The only Jews left alive are in bunkers."

Officially Buczacz was free of Jews. I knew this pronouncement was coming but this news was still a shock to me even though I knew that there were hundreds still hiding in their bunkers. The official "cleaning" meant that the local collaborators had *carte blanche* to hunt down and murder Jews wherever they could find them, and confiscate whatever property they had left. The bureaucratic madness of the *aktions,* with their strict time limits and quotas, was now at an end. It was open season on the remaining Jews, and it didn't take long for the brutality to begin. We learned later that the Jew who had killed the policeman was caught, soaked in petrol, and burned alive.

The situation demanded that we act quickly. It was impossible for us to stay in Anna's bunker. We had made no preparations for an extended stay, and there were good possibilities that the house would soon be commandeered by the Poles or Ukrainians. Our only chance was to make a run for Janka's bunker. The men had to abandon their plan to flee to the forest. This meant that eight people would have to squeeze into the bunker which had been built to accommodate six.

I realized it was an impossible situation and one which couldn't work for very long. Abraham was again in charge, organizing our escape to the bunker in every detail, but I felt compelled to speak. I stopped him in mid-sentence.

"I'm not going," I declared. "The bunker is only so big and there is not room enough for us all. I've lived my life already. I have had a husband and a child, and now they're gone. Even if I survive, what will I have to look forward to? Just think of me as an eighty-year-old woman whose time has come."

I began to cry, and David took me in his arms. But I was adamant about what I had said. I wanted my brother and sisters to survive, to experience the joy of getting married and having children, as I had. Abraham took my hand in his. He understood the depth of my feelings, and I believe he knew he couldn't dissuade me even if he tried.

The Schwartzes were also staying in Anna's bunker with their eight-year-old son. The only place they could think of going was to their home town of Medwedowce. They offered to take me with them. As night fell we got ready to go.

It was a painful farewell My mind flashed back to the embraces I exchanged with Sara and Klara when I left the Kolomyja ghetto, and to the kisses of my parents when I was turned away from their bunker. Each time it seemed I was the one at risk, but each time tragedy struck the others while I was spared. There was no comfort in that thought, only the pain of once again being separated from my loved ones at a time when we needed each other most.

By the time we emerged from the bunker, the shooting had stopped altogether and we surmised that the *aktion* was officially over. Yet the circumstances forced us to take special precautions. There were five of us: Jankiel and Frieda Schwartz and their son Mundzio, Mathilda Schwartzbach, and me. We took the path that was so familiar to me, through the cemetery, and there we saw the remnants of Buczacz's Jewry. Somehow we were able to walk the seven kilometres to Medwedowce without being detected.

The Schwartzes had operated a small store in the village before the war, and they knew many of the farmers in the outlying areas. There was no question of returning to the house they used to live in, which had been boarded up and

left vacant for years. Medwedowce was also officially cleansed of Jews. If we were to survive, it. would have to be in hiding for the duration of the war. The one advantage to being in a small village was that the Nazis were not permanently stationed there. They did come into town regularly for supplies, and there was always the danger of the local militia and constabulary. We also had to be wary of former neighbours and friends, some of whom would have no hesitation in turning us over to the Gestapo for a small reward.

Mr. Schwartz led us to the home of a Polish farmer he had known before the war. His name was Mieczyslaw Wicherek, and he owned a small plot of land near the village. He lived in a simple house with his wife and teenage daughter. Mr. Schwartz exchanged a few whispered words with the farmer, and we were quickly ushered in. His wife gave us hot tea and cakes, and then we all settled down to sleep.

This was to be our home for the next ten months.

I couldn't believe our good fortune. We had immediately found a family willing to take us in, despite the risks involved in sheltering Jews. There was no bunker in this house. As soon as daybreak came, we would be easy targets for detection. Even if the Nazis were no longer making routine sweeps of houses in the villages, there was the danger of being spotted by neighbours or travellers. These thoughts raced through my head and I found it impossible to sleep. I couldn't help thinking about my family, and whether they had made it safely to their bunker.

Our hiding place was soon shown to us. Shortly after dawn, we were ushered up to the attic. We would have to stay in the attic throughout the day, and only late at night, when there was no possibility of visitors or neighbours dropping by, could we come down into the house. The attic had big beams where one could sit down and stretch out somewhat, but it was an attic nonetheless, and a small one to accommodate five people.

A few days after we arrived, the farmer returned home from one of his routine visits to Buczacz with another Jew. It was Dziunek Schechtman, whose mother had died in the same bunker as my parents. Dziunek and Mathilda

looked at each other with disbelief, then embraced. They had been in love since their teenage years, but Mathilda was certain he was dead. They wept for a long time as they held each other's hands and spoke about the horrors they had experienced over the last few days.

Dziunek had been arrested along with thousands of others in the June *aktion*. The Nazis took him to a small village outside of Buczacz, where they planned a mass killing of victims. Pits were dug, and the Jews were ordered to strip off their clothes and line up in rows along the edge of the trench. The shots rang out, and row after row of bodies fell into the pit. Dziunek was not hit. He realized instantly what had happened, and fell into the pit anyway. He lay amidst the corpses for hours, until the killing finally stopped. The Nazis did not bother burying the dead in the usual fashion. They merely sprinkled lime over the corpses to speed up the process of decomposition. When the soldiers had left the scene, Dziunek freed himself from the mass grave and made his way back to Buczacz. I don't know how he met up with the farmer, but he must have found out somehow where Mathilda was staying. They were now together again. After his brush with death, he had no complaints about joining us in the attic.

The attic was an adequate hiding place for the time being. What was needed was a camouflaged bunker which would keep us hidden in the event of real difficulties. Because the Nazi raids usually came at dawn or before, we would have to spend the night in the bunker as well. It was a situation we all dreaded, but circumstances forced us to accept it as necessary.

In the entrance to the house there was a hall that had an oven at the far end. On the right was a door that led into the big room that constituted the farmer's house. Over the next few days, Mr. Schwartz, Dziunek, and the farmer worked tirelessly to construct a bunker in the hallway. They took apart the oven and erected a partition that ran from the floor to the ceiling. Behind the partition they constructed two tiers of wooden benches, six feet long and four feet wide. Directly above the tiers in the attic, they cut a rectangular opening in the attic floor. This allowed us to lower ourselves from the attic into the bunker, where three of us could sleep on one bench and three on another. A handle on the inside of the opening allowed us to replace the piece of attic

floor. It was an ingenious bunker, and it became our bedroom thereafter. We would spend our days in the attic, and at bedtime we lowered ourselves onto the tiered benches. The Schwartzes slept on the upper bench, while Mathilda, Dziunek, and I were on the bottom. If someone turned over at night, everyone had to turn. It was cramped and uncomfortable, and if any of us had had claustrophobia, we would not have survived. Nonetheless, it gave us a feeling of security to know that no matter what happened on the outside, we were unlikely to be detected.

Our lives revolved around the task of permanent hiding. We were guilty of no crimes, but we were condemned to prison for an indefinite sentence. In Buczacz, Abraham had kept us informed of the war's progress, giving us something to hope for and dream about. Now we were isolated, stuck in a village with no knowledge of what was happening in the outside world. Our only contact with the reality of the war came every few days when the Nazis would enter the village for food.

One afternoon, as we were sitting in the attic, a Ukrainian neighbour came over to visit the farmer's family. It was two weeks after we had arrived from Buczacz., and only the third or fourth time that anyone else had been in the house. Whenever someone came into the house we had to sit absolutely still. The slightest creak would have given us away. The walls and ceilings were thin, and we could hear every word that was spoken.

The neighbour's name was Ustina, and she was prattling away on every subject under the sun to the farmer's wife while the men were out in the fields. All of a sudden the subject turned to Jews, and how the Nazis were still rooting them out of their hiding places.

"There's hundreds of Jews hiding in Buczacz, that's what I think," she said. "The Germans say all the Jews are gone, but if that's so why do they keep finding a few every day? Do you know that small house right next to the Sokol in Buczacz? They found Jews in there the other day. It's amazing really, after everything that has happened, that the Jews can find anywhere to hide. I swear to God, if I ever found out that someone was hiding Jews, I would go straight to the Gestapo."

We sat and listened as Ustina described exactly where David, Sala, Anna, and Abraham had been hiding. It was a searingly hot summer day, and the attic was like a furnace. Sweat poured off my face soaking my clothes. At first there was disbelief. Abraham was clever at constructing bunkers, and I couldn't believe it had been discovered so quickly. But Ustina's description was unmistakable. Later we learned that Janka had called in the Gestapo, betraying my family and two others she had agreed to shelter. I felt rage building up inside of me at the injustice of it all. Sala was twenty-three. David was still unmarried, while Anna had not yet started her family. Now Abraham would never join the partisans. I had lost my entire family, just two weeks after we had made the decision to go in separate directions. They had been discovered while I was still safe.

17

Could more Jews have been saved? Some historians think so. Some Polish families hated the Nazi terror and were courageous enough to offer shelter to Jews, but there were tens of thousands of Jews who needed protection. Emanuel Ringelblum, historian and chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto who was born in Buczacz in 1900, wrote this about conditions as he saw them: "Among the Polish families hiding Jews there are doubtless some anti-Semites. It is, however, the anti-Semites as a whole, infected with racism and Nazism, who created conditions so unfavourable that it has been possible to save only a small percentage of the Polish Jews from the Teuton butchers ... The blind folly of Poland's anti-Semites, who have learnt nothing, has been responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of Jews who could have been saved despite the Germans. The guilt is theirs for not having saved tens of thousands of Jewish children who could have been taken in by Polish families or institutions. The fault is entirely theirs that Poland has given asylum at the most to one percent of the Jewish victims of Hitler's persecutions." Ringelblum was executed by the Nazis in 1944.[15]

I considered that we were the lucky ones, sheltered by courageous Polish families. For these families there were no ulterior motives, no profit to be made, no recognition to be won. On the contrary, there were constant dangers and risks. A Polish family found hiding Jews was doomed to the same fate as all the other Nazi victims. More often than not, the persecuted victim and his Polish protector did not know each other; what bound them together was a hatred for Hitler and fascism.

For the next ten months, the most important person in our lives was a poor farmer who tended a small field in an out-of-the-way Galician town. We called him Dziadek — the Polish word for grandfather. He was a tall, heavy-

set man, with grey hair and a big moustache. I never knew why or how he had agreed to hide us, but he treated it as more of a duty than a burden. It was as if we were part of his family. He spared no effort to ensure that we were protected at all times.

Dziadek's six-foot frame towered over his wife, a small and delicate woman with a perpetually pale complexion. To us she was Pani — Polish for "Mrs." She worried about our safety constantly. Together they struggled to feed their adopted family of Jews.

Dziadek had one daughter. Her name was Jozia, and she couldn't have been more than eighteen when we met her. It was Jozia who volunteered to carry out the pail which served as our toilet and to bring us fresh water and food. Dziadek's wife's daughter from a previous marriage, Wisia, lived next door, and she also sheltered five Buczacz Jews from the Nazis.

Life took on a monotonous rhythm. We slept on the benches in the partitioned bunker until morning and then spent the rest of the day in the attic. There were no windows in the attic, but the flimsy construction of the roof allowed in plenty of light and air. Though it was possible to walk on the attic floor, it was safer to sit on the beams, and this is where we spent most of our time. I tried to do some writing in the attic, but I couldn't concentrate for long periods of time. Mostly I just sat and thought or counted the minutes, the hours, the days that passed.

Most days, Dziadek and his wife and daughter would leave home early in the morning to tend their field. This left us alone in the house, and we had to be careful to keep our voices low and not make any sounds, in case a passerby would hear. Locking the door to your home was an unknown concept in the village, so we had to be conscious at all times of who was passing by the house and whether they were likely to come in. We had just a few seconds to get from the attic to the bunker, and it all had to be accomplished before anyone came into the main part of the house so that the noise wouldn't give us away.

After dark we climbed down from the attic to join the family in their room. We stretched our limbs and had a chance to wash up. Visitors rarely

came by the house in the evening, but there were still a few occasions when we had to scramble up the ladder after someone knocked on the door. In extreme emergencies, two of us could hide behind a curtain on top of the oven in the big room.

Food was in short supply for everyone. Somehow Dziadek managed to keep six extra people fed without rousing suspicion In the market. Still we decided to fast one day a week — on Mondays. It didn't present a great hardship to us, as our inactivity and confined environment destroyed our appetite in any case. During the rest of the week, we ate next to nothing in the daytime. Our main meal was at supper, when Dziadek's wife cooked a big soup. There was no meat at that time. The only time I remember eating meat at Dziadek's house was at Christmas and Easter. On Sundays, Pani would often cook perogies with potato filling, and for a special treat in the summer she would fill some perogies with fruit.

Whether he was at the dinner table or joining us in the attic for conversation, Dziadek was our constant inspiration. "This war will not go on forever," he told us. "Be patient. The Germans will soon be gone, and you'll be free." Occasionally he would hear some news at the market in Buczacz, a clue about what was happening at the Russian front. We were the first to learn about it when he got home, and the report was always tinged with the optimism that the Soviets would imminently drive back the Nazis and free us all.

Dziadek and his wife treated me like a favourite daughter, exhibiting the kind of emotion that transcends compassion or pity. I told them the story of what had happened to my baby, to my parents, and my brothers and sisters. They wept when they heard about the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their agents. They were also troubled by the realization that I was now alone in the world, without a family.

Many times I sat by myself, so preoccupied with my thoughts that I couldn't hear people trying to talk to me. I hummed songs softly to myself for hours at a time. The others thought this was strange, except for Pani.

"Leave her alone," she would say, "her heart is crying."

Less than a month into our confinement, the Schwartzes began to argue incessantly. Mr. Schwartz would sit in silence or offer the occasional retort, while his wife unleashed a stream of criticism. The pressure of our predicament was clearly affecting her, and she took it out on her husband and her son.

What made the situation especially perilous was Mrs. Schwartz's voice. She had a particularly unique voice. Very loud. The Schwartzes were the only Jews in the largely Ukrainian village before the war, and all the townsfolk knew them. Dziadek was justifiably afraid that someone would walk by his house one day and hear the familiar sound of Frieda Schwartz's voice.

I tried to calm the friction between the Schwartzes whenever I could. Mr. Schwartz was a quiet and good-natured man, and he agreed with me that the problem had to be solved. Sometimes I jumped right into a fight and changed the subject, moving it away from questions that couldn't be answered. When I saw that Mundzio was bearing the brunt of the pressure, I waited for an opportune moment and took him aside. I told him all kinds of stories, make-believe tales that took his mind far from the dreadful reality. After a while he began to cling to me. He wanted to speak to me all the time, and he never tired of hearing my stories. I often thought about how exceptional a child he was, to be coping with such circumstances. Then I remembered how my own Izzienko, just a baby compared to Mundzio, had handled the wartime conditions. They were children who were born into conflict, and they adapted.

The cramped atmosphere of the attic and bunker began to take its toll on us physically too. We had gone to bed late one evening and I slept later than the others.

"Come on Mina, let's go," I heard Mathilda say as she put her hands above her head and stretched.

"She's tired. Let her sleep," Dziunek interjected. "Are you afraid she'll be late for the grand ball?" he joked, and he and Mathilda laughed.

I smiled as well, but as I tried to move my legs and swing them off the

bench, I couldn't. My arms were like lead pipes by my side. I could still speak and move my head, but I felt paralysed from the neck down.

When the others realized what had happened to me, there was panic. Dziunek wanted to leave the house immediately and try to locate Dziadek, so that he could get medical help right away. Someone said that I should be taken downstairs, and someone else shouted that it would be dangerous to move me even an inch until we knew what was wrong. Dziunek finally agreed that it would be foolhardy to venture outside and risk detection. Although I had no feeling or sensation in my limbs, I was not in pain, so the problem didn't seem to require any unduly risky emergency measures. We decided to wait until the afternoon and see if my condition improved.

The hours went by with no change. Finally Dziadek came home, and he was immediately called up to the attic. He instructed Dziunek and Mr. Schwartz to carry me out of the bunker and down the stairs with the greatest care. Once downstairs, they put me on the oven in the big room, where it was warm. There was no doctor in the village, and Dziadek said that he didn't know any doctor in Buczacz whom he could trust. After a few moments, he came up with an idea. He would go into Buczacz and explain that his wife was suffering from similar symptoms, and try to secure some medication. There was a problem, however. Medicine was expensive, and Dziadek could not afford to pay for it.

Dziadek had acquired a calf a few days previously. It was one of his most precious possessions. But Dziadek didn't hesitate for a moment to do what he knew needed to be done. As I lay on the oven staring at the ceiling, he went to the barn and slaughtered the calf. He took a huge slab of meat with him to Buczacz, which he then used to buy the medication I needed.

I spent several days on the oven, slowly recovering the use of my arms and legs. I don't know whether it was the medicine, or the loving attention Dziadek and his family showered on me, but I was nursed back to health. They refused to move me from the oven until I was fully recovered, even though this posed a danger of detection. Dziadek stayed home during the day to care for me. During the evenings, a curtain was drawn across the oven to conceal my

presence.

I don't know what had brought on the condition. It never happened again.

One day late in the summer we were sitting in the attic as usual, trying to pass the time with idle conversation. From a distance we could hear the rumbling of trucks, a sign that the Germans were coming to the village. At this point the Germans were mainly interested in food, having already plundered everything else of value.

No one was home downstairs, but suddenly we heard loud noises and the sound of German voices. Quickly we let ourselves down into the bunker and onto the benches. Just as we pulled the hatch into place, we heard the soldiers opening the door and coming into the house.

A chill washed over me as it had in the basement bunkers in Buczacz. But this time there was a difference. There were no wild shouts for Jews to clear out. There were no dogs, and no local collaborators turning over every piece of furniture in search of hiding places. The Nazis who were entering the house were looking for food.

We heard the soldiers running through Dziadek's big room. They ran down the stairs to the small basement and then back up. Then we heard the unmistakable sound of someone climbing up the wooden ladder to the attic. Why had Dziadek left the ladder in place? We could hardly believe that he had made such a blunder. Or perhaps the Nazis had found it and were intent on searching all the attics as possible storage areas for food.

We held our breath as the soldier poked his head into the attic and looked around. It sounded as if he got onto one of the beams for a moment. I imagined him crawling around the attic, stumbling across the hatch and lifting it to find us there. Fear gripped us all, but no one cried out or made a sound. Then we heard him climbing back down the ladder. In another few moments, the soldiers were out of the house.

An hour passed before we ventured out of the bunker to sit in the attic. I

was relieved that the bunker had fulfilled its purpose, but if the Nazis had come once, I knew they might come again. We had to be forever vigilant.

After that incident, Dziadek decided the attic was no longer a safe place for us to hide. We couldn't understand his logic. After all, it had just been put to the test and succeeded. He continued to worry about noises and voices being overheard, and the German intrusion into his home spurred him to devise a better way to shelter us. The very next day he began building another bunker for us, in the basement. The basement walls were made of stone, and Dziadek decided to use the same concept as he had in the hallway. He constructed a partition wall out of large stone, leaving an opening in the bottom big enough for all of us to crawl under. Once we were safely between the basement wall and the partition, we pushed the final stone back into place. Anyone who wasn't familiar with the basement would have no way of knowing there was a bunker there.

As soon as the basement bunker was complete, Dziadek insisted that we move downstairs. It wasn't a move I wanted to make. Our new bunker was smaller, darker, and perpetually damp. We had almost no ability to move about, and we spent much more time lying down and sleeping. There was no fresh air. The only redeeming factor was that we could speak and move around without fear of being heard.

Dziadek was still not happy with the arrangement. Anyone familiar with his house would immediately realize that the basement was now smaller. He began to dig a pit just at the foot of the basement stairs. It was a hard and tiring job, but he worked at it with diligence. After a few days, the pit was wide enough to hold the six of us. He fashioned benches out of clay for us to sit on, and cut a board to the right size for the top of the pit. If we ever needed to go inside, he had some sticks and straw, potatoes, and other debris ready to put on top of the board to hide the pit

A week after the pit had been dug, Dziadek ran home from the field one morning with some news. The Nazis were on their way to the village, he said, and we must hide in our new bunker until they left. We crawled out of our basement hiding place and gathered around the pit as Dziadek cleared the mess

from the cover. When he opened the bunker, we saw that it had filled with at least a foot of water. We went in anyway and took our seats on the benches. The water came up almost to our knees. Dziadek put the cover onto the pit and began camouflaging it again. Inside it was pitch black, and the only sound we could hear was water dripping onto our shoulders from the wet clay.

It was like sitting in a coffin. Tens of thousands of Jews had been forced to dig their own graves in this war. I asked myself if we had just done the same thing.

We waited in the pit for a few hours. Nothing happened. Then we heard the debris being swept away and the cover being lifted. It was Dziadek, telling us to come out and go upstairs. He bundled us all in blankets and we sat by the stove to get warm. Dziadek apologized for putting us through the ordeal, but we would hear nothing of it. We knew he had our best interests at heart. It was the last time, however, that we used the pit as a hiding place.

Weeks and then months passed, and winter arrived. In those dark days, Dziadek and his family celebrated Christmas. In the entrance-way to the house, on a table, Dziadek placed a small tree. The house was made spotless for the occasion, and Dziadek, Pani, and Jozia all wore special clothes which we hadn't seen before. Christmas dinner was like a feast. Here we were, six wayward Jews who posed such a danger for this man and his family, yet he loved us and treated us like his children. He was totally free of prejudices and hatred.

As another spring drew near, my spirits were at a low ebb. We heard no news about the course of the war. I began to wonder what would happen if the Nazis won. Would we have to keep on hiding forever? I couldn't conceive of such a miserable existence continuing for very long. Sometimes I thought that my relatives and friends who had died were the lucky ones. They no longer had to put up with the perpetual fear of being caught. With nothing else to do but sit and think, I often imagined how my beloved parents and my brothers and sisters had spent the last hours of their lives.

Sometimes we convinced Dziadek to let us spend the occasional day in

the attic, to relieve the monotony. Those days were like heaven for me. What I missed the most was the sound of the wind, of people passing in the distance, and the rustling of trees. One evening, while everyone was quiet, we heard the sounds of a fiddler in the distance. I began to cry. How I envied that fiddler, who had the freedom to pick up his instrument and play. The tune was a beautiful one, like the song of a bird that returns home from a long winter sojourn. It continued for quite a long time. Then, as abruptly as it had begun, it stopped.

18

One evening, towards the end of March, we were sitting in the attic. Dziadek had gone to Buczacz to buy food, while Pani and Jozia were downstairs. All of a sudden the door flew open, and heavy footsteps bounded down the hall. We heard the creaking of boots on the ladder leading to the attic.

Dziunek and Jankiel Schwartz braced themselves ready to leap on anyone that forced the hatch open. The rest of us were frozen in place, trying to stay still but at the same time getting ready for a confrontation.

"Hey, hey," came the shouts from below. It was Dziadek's voice, and before we could figure out what was happening he pushed the hatch open and poked his head through. Dziadek was acting like a man half his age. He hauled himself up to the attic floor, surveyed the worried looks on our faces, and broke into a big smile.

"I've just come back from Buczacz," he announced triumphantly. '"The Soviets are in town, and there's no trace of the Nazis anywhere. It's just as I told you all along. You're free."

We could hardly believe what he was saying. I made him repeat it twice. The Nazis were gone, and Buczacz was liberated. After ten months we could come out of hiding. We were free!

It was less than three years since the Nazis marched into town, and in that short time my life had been turned Into a living hell. The ten-month confinement had taken a toll on my health. Now that we were free, I would have the chance to regain my energy and rebuild my life. Yet I couldn't focus on the future without reliving the past. My entire family had been wiped out, and I had no idea whether my husband was dead or alive.

The next morning I stepped outside the front door of Dziadek's house, and for the first time in ten months I actually saw the sky and breathed fresh air. With the handful of belongings we had brought along last summer on our hacks, we set out on the main road for Buczacz.

As we entered the town, we walked down the main Chechego Maya Street, the same road I had purposely avoided many times before when the Nazis controlled the town. Every now and then a truck would roll by with Soviet soldiers aboard. I had expected to see a large concentration of troops and tanks in Buczacz, but there were only a handful of trucks and two or three tanks.

There were other Jews returning to town at the same time. For the collaborators the sudden influx of Jews presented a problem since the surviving Jews could bear witness against them. I wondered if they were worried about what punishment the future might hold.

I was weary from the walk; I could barely stand on my feet. We stopped at a small apartment block right on the Chechego Maya, the same block my sister Pepa and her husband had lived in before they fled to Lvov. We chose one of the abandoned suites for the time being. It was still a time of war, and there were no housing authorities or civil administrators to consult. People simply found shelter wherever they could.

The suite was like a palace. There was a front room, a kitchen, and two bedrooms. This became our home for the next few days. The six of us continued to live together, an unlikely sort of family who had been thrown together by the war. We had all lost our families and friends. None of us really had a home any more. We were in Buczacz because we had nowhere else to go.

I was too sick to move around. I spent all day resting, while the others went out and scrounged for food. The word soon began to spread that various survivors were back, and people quickly learned through word-of-mouth where everyone was staying. On the third day after we had returned to Buczacz, Klara Fisher. my childhood friend and school mate, knocked at our

door. I hadn't seen her since 1939 or early 1940, when I moved to Kolomyja. Like me, she was the only survivor in her entire family.

I asked Klara if she intended to stay In Buczacz, or if it was safer to move somewhere else.

"Nobody knows what's safe and what isn't," she said. "We haven't been able to find out exactly what is going on. The way the Soviet soldiers are acting, though, it doesn't seem they are in a hurry to set up a government here yet."

"Does that mean they might leave again?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said with a sigh. '"The Soviets are pushing the Nazis farther and farther west, and they need all their soldiers at the front. They may not have anyone left over to keep order in towns like Buczacz."

Both of us knew what the consequences might be. The local collaborators who had assisted the Nazis and had been rewarded with Jewish homes and property would go on a killing spree if given the opportunity. Under the circumstances, it was far too early to talk about liberation.

After another two or three days, we began to notice that many of the Jews who had drifted into Buczacz were now disappearing again. Klara never came back to see me. We began to worry.

A military truck was parked on the road in front of our apartment block. We decided to confront the soldiers there and demand to know what was happening. We were stunned when we heard their response.

"Haven't you heard?" one of the soldiers asked. "The German army will be marching through this area on the way back to Germany. You will have to hide in the meantime. It will take three-and-a-half hours for them to go through, and then you can return."

We were among the last to be told about this evacuation, since most other

Jews had already left town. We could think of nothing else but to return to Dziadek's house. I was certain he would welcome us back with open arms, and this is exactly what happened.

We intended to spend the night at Dziadek's house and return to Buczacz the next day. We stayed in the attic that evening and slept in the bunker, more out of convenience than necessity – there just wasn't any other room in the house to accommodate us. The next morning, Dziadek went into Buczacz to see what was happening. He returned with bad news – the Nazis were in town, and there was no sign of the Soviets anywhere. The Nazis were back in the same positions as before, and it didn't appear they were moving anywhere. A second and a third trip to town brought the same news. The Nazis were still entrenched in their positions.

As it turned out, the three-and-a-half hours of renewed Nazi occupation turned into three-and-a-half months. The Nazis used the time to take care of unfinished business. The collaborators seized the occasion. The renewed Nazi occupation provided a perfect opportunity to wipe out the witnesses to their crimes. When Buczacz was finally liberated by the Soviet army in July of that year, fewer than one hundred Jews returned alive. Most were broken men and women, physically or psychologically damaged by the ravages of war.

19

Medwedowce turned into a war zone. The Soviets had retreated to a position about three kilometres to the east. The Nazis were in retreat all along the eastern front, but that front had now come to us. We were caught behind the lines, and we were directly in the line of fire.

Bombs began to rain down all around us. The Germans sent troop contingents into Medwedowce, but they were no match for the superior Soviet firepower. Every day and all day we heard shooting and bombing. Everyone in the village began preparing for the time when a general evacuation would be ordered. Dziadek promised to take me with him when the time came. He never extended the same offer to the others. Of course it would have been impossible to take the Schwartzes, since everyone in the village knew them. I suppose he thought Dziunek and Mathilda could look after themselves as a couple.

One day a bomb fell in Dziadek's yard, We were in the attic as usual, and we heard a deafening crash. I don't know if the bomb had partially exploded, or whether it was the sheer impact which caused such a noise. Dziadek, his wife, and daughter were all downstairs, and their immediate reaction was to run into the yard. Dziadek's daughter Wisia also came from next door to inspect the bomb.

Suddenly, with everyone hovering over the bomb, it exploded again, sending shrapnel flying in all directions. A piece of shrapnel pierced Pani's chest and lodged in her heart. She fell dead on the spot. Wisia was also hit, in the thigh. Dziadek and Jozia escaped unharmed. For the next twenty-four hours, we listened to the tormented screams of Wisia. I heard her screaming over and over again: "Get an axe and chop off my leg!" Dziadek and Jozia did everything they could to stop the bleeding, but only a doctor could have helped. After a day and a night of agony, Wisia died of her wound.

In an instant, Dziadek had lost his wife and his daughter. I never saw him cry.

The death of Pani hit the six of us very hard. It was all we could talk about and think about for weeks. Dziadek and Pani were our angels of mercy, the people who risked so much to save our lives. How was it that they deserved a fate like this?

Increasingly, we felt like a target waiting to be hit. It became impossible for Dziadek to buy food in the quantities he had before, and our supplies grew dangerously short. The Germans were now selectively ordering families out of their homes and commandeering houses for their own use. It was dangerous for Dziadek to walk down the street in broad daylight. He and Jozia became prisoners in their own house as well. All they could do – all anyone could do – was to wait.

One day Dziadek said there were rumours that all the Polish families in Medwedowce were running away to the forest. The Nazis were sowing enmity now between Ukrainians and Poles, and encouraging the extension of the pogroms to include Poles.

When Dziadek told us this news, we were certain it meant he would flee to the forest and leave us in the house alone. However, he was not so quick to abandon us.

"The others can run, but I'm staying right here," he said. "Jozia will stay with you in the bunker. If there's any trouble, I'll stand behind the door with my axe. I might get killed, but before I do I'll chop off a few heads myself."

There was no anger in Dziadek's eyes, only a fierce look of determination. He felt completely at one with us. The Poles had joined the Jews as targets for annihilation, and his instinct for survival was as strong as his loyalty to us.

Jozia joined us in the bunker, and from that day on she became one of us. We decided it would be safer if we moved back to the basement bunker.

Dziadek stayed in the house at all times, going out only when our supply of food was totally depleted. Two or three days went by without incident. The whole tense period lasted only a very short time because, as Dziadek had predicted, the Nazis ordered a general evacuation.

We had three hours to get out. The village was a war zone and no civilian could remain there under any circumstances. I was sick and asleep when Dziadek brought the news. Mindful of his promise to take me along in the event of an evacuation, Dziadek asked the others to wake me up. They refused, telling him that I was too ill and tired to move. Everyone was in a hurry to get moving and leave town, so there was no time to argue or delay. Dziadek and Jozia bade everyone farewell and left the house.

When I woke up and found out what had happened, I wasn't angry. My fate was bound up with the others, and if one of us was to survive, we all would. Three hours later, the entire village was quiet. All the civilians were gone. Neither combatants nor civilians, we remained. We had enough food to last one or two days at the most.

There was no longer anyone to supply us with food and water, and we had no reserves of strength to draw from. Without food and water we would die. We would have to move from house to house in search of subsistence, bearing in mind that German troops would be roaming around the village as well.

When our supply of food at Dziadek's place ran out, we started to plan our first move. It would have been too dangerous to go up the stairs and out the front door, since we didn't know who might now be in the house or on the street. There was an opening in the basement ceiling that had been used at one time as a potato drop. It had since been covered with mud and stones. One day, well before dawn, we began clawing away at the spot with our hands.

Soon we had an opening large enough to slide through, and Dziunek and Mathilda were the first ones out. They stood guard as the rest of us prepared to come out. Jankiel Schwartz was the next to emerge, but the hole wasn't big enough for him to squeeze through.

“Push through, hurry,” shouted his wife Frieda.

“I can’t do it,” he said. “If I push any more I’ll be stuck.”

Dziunek and Mathilda tried pulling him from above, but it didn’t work. We couldn’t afford to waste any more time in the attempt, so Jankiel slid back down into the bunker. Dziunek and Mathilda followed him in, and we tried to cover up the opening as best we could. We knew that our best chance for survival was to stay together.

We sat in the bunker for another day with no food or water. When night fell, we began digging in the same spot once more. This time, we created a much larger opening. We all climbed out easily, and started walking down the deserted streets of the village. Frieda Schwartz was at the head, directing us down the roads and paths she had known since her childhood.

We came to a house that seemed to have all its doors and windows intact. This was evidence that it hadn’t been broken into or plundered by the army. It was a solid house, bigger and better built than Dziadek’s. Frieda must have known who had lived there before the war – she was confident that we would find food there. We did find some salted meat in the kitchen and other bits of food, but there was no water. We took the food with us and headed into the basement, a very small room with no place to hide in the event of an emergency. For the moment, this house became our refuge, and we prepared to spend the night there.

The next morning we were awakened by loud noises outside. We heard the slamming of doors all around, and then there were footsteps overhead.

“This will be fine, just fine,” we heard a German voice saying above.

The German army had taken over the house, and the officer in charge was barking orders to everyone. The floor was so thin we could hear every word. We sat motionless, staring at one another.

We expected the soldiers to enter the basement at any moment. There

was nothing we could do but sit and wait for it to happen. But it didn't happen. Amazingly, the troops went about their business and didn't bother searching the house from top to bottom.

Jankiel looked at me and whispered, "You should relax, Mina. This is the Wehrmacht, not the Gestapo. Their job isn't to hunt down and kill Jews. If they haven't come down here by now, they probably won't."

Jankiel was right. The Wehrmacht might be stationed somewhere for a day or two, and then they would be off. It was routine for them, and even if they found a group of hiding Jews they would probably consider it more of a nuisance than anything else. They weren't interested in wasting time by looking through attics and cellars of every house they occupied.

Whether the Germans came downstairs or not, we were trapped. We would soon need more food, and water was an urgent necessity. Six of us were confined in a very small room, and condensation began to form on the concrete walls just from our breathing. We licked the moisture off the walls to satisfy our thirst.

From a window in the basement we could see a guard marching back and forth, keeping watch on the front door. Our only hope for escape was to crawl out the window when the guard took a break. Late that evening when everything was still, we started scraping at the window in an effort to loosen it. It was heavily caked with dried mud, but we managed to chip away everything around the frame. The window was now ready to be removed, but the guard continued to walk his rounds.

None of us slept. Every few minutes we would peek out the window and assess the situation. No other troops were in sight, only the single guard. At dawn, I looked out the window and almost shouted.

"The guard is gone. I don't see him anywhere," I said.

"Get the window off right now and let's go," Jankiel said, jumping to his feet.

“What if he’s just off to the side for a moment? What if his replacement is coming?”

Jankiel ignored my questions and took the window right off its frame. He grabbed his son and lifted him through the window, then helped his wife get out.

“We have no choice,” he said to me as he was working. “This is our only chance, so let’s take it.”

In an instant we were all out of the basement and on the street. The sun was drifting above the horizon, and we could see trucks and armoured vehicles around. There were no troops anywhere.

We started walking, again with Frieda in the lead. It was broad daylight now so we needed to find some shelter. Frieda led us directly to a barn behind an abandoned farmhouse. This was a place the Nazis were unlikely to enter, but we covered ourselves with straw just in case. As we lay there, I heard a movement in the barn’s loft. Before I had a chance to warn the others, I saw a head lift up. It was Betka Buk, my friend and former schoolmate, and her eight-year-old daughter, Cesia. I hugged them both.

I didn’t ask what had happened to her family, nor did she inquire about mine. We kept our sorrow and our tragedies to ourselves, and paid the maximum attention to the task at hand – survival.

Betka and Cesia became part of our wandering family. There were eight of us now, six adults and two children, fleeing from house to house in search of food and shelter. We heard shooting and bombing again in the distance, a reminder that we faced danger not only from the Nazis in the village but from the fire of Soviet bombardment. The odds of such a large group escaping detection for very long were slim.

After we left the barn, Frieda took us on a path that led back towards Dziadek’s house. From the outside, the house looked exactly as we had left it. The Germans had clearly felt no need to take it over, and though we knew there

was no food inside, we decided the house would be a secure place for us to stay on a more permanent basis. We could no longer wander about aimlessly. One or two of us could go out on forays for food periodically.

We entered the house and went down to the basement. No one had been there since we left. We repaired the opening that we had dug to escape, and brought some bedding downstairs to make sleeping more comfortable. Everyone was hungry and weary by this time, and the children looked haggard. Nearly half of their short lives had been spent running and hiding, and no one could provide a sensible explanation to them of why life had to be this way.

Throughout the night we had heard bombs and explosions, but they seemed too far off to pose any immediate danger. In the early morning we smelled something burning. After a few minutes, smoke began seeping into the basement. The house was on fire; an incendiary bomb had hit the roof.

Betka panicked. Before anyone could say anything, she scooped her daughter into her arms and ran up the stairs. When she threw open the door, the flames shot out. Betka plunged through the fire and headed for the street. The very next moment we heard a thud and a scream. I bolted up the stairs, with the others following close behind. Betka and Cesia had been hit by a falling beam, and both of them had been badly burned. I picked Cesia up and grabbed Betka by the arm, dragging both of them out the door. All of us ran straight to Dziadek's barn, while the house continued to burn.

Betka and Cesia both had serious burns on their arms, while Cesia was also burned on her shoulders. Both were in great pain, and there was little we could do to comfort them. Betka was still in shock; she couldn't explain why she had run directly into the flames. If we had collected our thoughts and spent a few more minutes in the basement, we could have smashed out the same opening we had used the first time we had escaped. Now our situation was even more precarious since travel would be more difficult with the two injured.

We watched through the barn window as the flames consumed most of Dziadek's house. The structure was damaged so badly that it couldn't be used

for shelter any longer. When evening arrived, we set out yet again to find another house.

This time we walked away from the village towards Buczacz. Just on the outskirts of the village we came to a cluster of houses. In one of the houses where a rich villager had lived we found meat, potatoes, and plenty of other food in the pantry. We ate voraciously that night, making up for the last few weeks of meagre supplies.

The house consisted of a large room and an attic, but no basement. Dziunek and Jankiel went up to the attic while the rest of us went to bed in the big room. It was a precaution in the event we were caught. Women and children might bluff their way through the situation by pretending to have missed the evacuation, but the presence of men in a war zone would lead to suspicions that they were spies.

The next morning, we were awakened by a loud knocking on the door. I jumped out of bed with a start. I opened the door and came face to face with a German officer. After years of hiding in bunkers, sleeping in fields, running away and cowering like a frightened animal, this moment had finally arrived. I can honestly say that I didn't feel fear. This was not a member of the Gestapo or the *Einsatzgruppe* whose specific job was to root out Jews and murder them. There were no local collaborators present to point the accusing finger at their former neighbours. It was merely a soldier, on the run from the Soviet troops and perhaps weary from a war he may have hated every bit as much as we did. Nonetheless, he was a Nazi.

Rifle in hand, the officer stepped inside the house followed by several other soldiers. He looked around the room at the other three women and two children, then turned his gaze back to me.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"We're Polish women, and we all live in the village," I answered in German. "Our house was hit by a bomb and it burned, so we ran to this house."

The officer looked skeptical. “Why didn’t you get out when the village was evacuated?” he demanded.

“Our husbands left at the time, but we couldn’t go. My sister Maria was badly burned, and so was her daughter. She was too sick to move, and we had to stay to look after her. Take a look at their burns. See for yourself.”

The officer went across the room and looked at Betka and Cesia. He didn’t say a thing.

“We need medical attention for them right away,” I said. “If you have a doctor, please send him here. We knew there would be no possibility of helping them if we joined in the evacuation.”

My pulse was racing by this point. The German words I had learned in school came easily to me, and I spoke with confidence. I realized that we would only be spared if we put on a brave and believable front and didn’t waver for a second. I told them my name was Magdalena, and for the next two months that is who I became – a Polish peasant woman.

“All right, all right,” the officer finally muttered. “We’ll be back soon. In the meantime, don’t leave this house.”

A few hours later an army medic arrived. He cleaned Betka and Cesia’s wounds and put a dressing on them. A little while later, a soldier came by with food for us.

20

A dozen German soldiers were stationed a short distance away in the same cluster of houses we had chosen as our refuge. This is where they had their *Beobachtungstelle*, an observation post and communications centre that kept close watch on the Soviets. Judging from the extent of the bombardment that originated on the other side of the front, the Germans appeared to be badly outnumbered. It was only a matter of time before they would be forced to retreat, but we had to make sure we survived in the interim.

Our next contact with the army was the following morning. A captain came to the door and demanded. “Who is Magdalena?”

“That’s me,” I said.

“You are related to the woman who is injured?” he asked.

“Yes, Maria is my sister,” I said. The story was a spontaneous concoction yesterday, but now it appeared to assume larger significance. We didn’t understand what he was getting at.

“The others, are they related to you in any way?”

“No,” I said. “They are our neighbours, but they were at our home when it was hit by the bomb.”

The captain, a short and stout fellow, paced around the room as he spoke to us, looking at our faces as if he was trying to make an assessment of our story based on our expressions. No one spoke for a long while. Finally he turned to me and said:

“You will be allowed to stay here to look after your sister and the girl. The others must be evacuated immediately.”

He turned and left. Our deception was still intact, but the order to evacuate Mathilda, Frieda, and Mundzio posed a problem. If Frieda joined the other residents of Medwedowce, she would be recognized and exposed. Luckily, the Germans had no intention of transporting them to the evacuation centre. They were expected to leave themselves. We decided that they should join Dziunek and Jankiel in the attic.

Food was not a problem. Every day, a kitchen detail would come to feed the soldiers at their post. The army ensured that the detail stopped by our house as well. We were all used to getting by on the smallest amount of food, so the meals they brought for two adults and a child easily fed the eight of us.

Betka and I realized that the Germans would only tolerate our presence as long as it took her and Cesia to recover from their wounds. We needed a scheme to justify our continued stay in the village. We decided to make the Germans a proposition. We would offer to wash and iron their uniforms and other clothing. The idea was to make ourselves not only useful but indispensable. That would allow us to remain in the house and keep receiving enough food for all of us.

The Germans accepted our proposal. As we had hoped, they began to take us for granted, seeming to forget that their policy was to remove all civilians from the area. Not only did we become the official launderers for the Wehrmacht, we also acted as servers at their garden parties. The officers held get-togethers for visiting army officials and VIPs. We served hors d’oeuvres and refilled the beer and wine glasses for the guests. I didn’t stop to think about it; I just wanted to survive.

Betka and I were two young women in a deserted village with a handful of German troops. The soldiers could easily have taken advantage of us. They didn’t. There was never even so much as an off-colour comment.

Over the next few weeks, I got to know several of the soldiers who were

stationed in and around the village. Many of them were fed up with the war, and some expressed open and angry criticism of Hitler and the Nazi hierarchy. They knew Germany was being defeated, and they had no desire to leave their bones on foreign soil They had little of the anti-Semitic leanings and sentiments that we had seen in the Gestapo leaders or even the Ukrainian and Polish collaborators. I realized that they had no idea of the extent of the slaughter of Jews which had taken place over the last three years. Many of them were merely Hitler's foot soldiers, pressed into action to serve as fodder for the voracious guns.

One of the officers was a lanky lieutenant from Essen who was stationed in a nearby village. He was about my age, married, but with no children. He talked to me about his wife and how he longed to be back home. He had run a flower shop before the war, and looked forward to resuming his business – if there was anything left of his town when he returned. Betka and I picked wildflowers in the field and brought them home. When the lieutenant dropped by, he arranged them in the most beautiful displays. He hated the war, and he spoke passionately against Hitler. He had no hesitation in expressing these thoughts to us.

After a couple of weeks, Cesia seemed to be fully recovered from her wounds, and the captain told us that the child would have to leave. The same day the lieutenant came to our house with some clothes for us to wash. We asked if he could do anything to help.

"I can't reverse such an order," he said. "The *Hauptmann* (captain) is in charge. He makes the rules."

But after a few seconds he said, "I will be back here tomorrow at the same time. Have her ready then, and she will come with me. She can stay at my house."

We trusted him completely, and the next day he came for her. He lifted Cesia onto his horse and they galloped off. A few days later, the lieutenant told us that it was no longer possible for him to keep the girl. So Betka and I went to his house to pick her up. In his home a photograph of Hitler was propped

against the wall. Beside it were two burning candles. The lieutenant had constructed a mock memorial to the Fuhrer. His greatest desire was to see Hitler dead, the war ended, and a stop put to the widespread destruction and killings that the war had brought.

We took Cesia home and put her in the attic with the others. It left just two of us in the open to feed and protect the others.

The lieutenant wasn't the only German officer we got to know well. The head of his unit was a captain whom we saw regularly and with whom we developed a unique and trusting relationship. He expressed his innermost feelings about the war to us, and we were not afraid to confide in him.

The captain was a clergyman who had lost his wife in one of the early bombardments of the war. His wife's death made him bitter, and he made no effort to conceal his animosity towards the top Nazi officials.

"This is Hitler's war. It has nothing to do with us," he would say. "If the SS didn't send their men regularly to keep a watch on us, the soldiers would drop their guns and just go home." At first I found it hard to believe that a person of his rank could speak so derisively about Hitler and his own leaders. He explained that this was already a widespread feeling in the army since at the battle of Stalingrad, and on many occasions afterwards, Hitler had shown no regard for the lives of German soldiers.

Near the beginning of June, I decided that we should tell the captain that we were Jews.

"I think we can trust him. If he really believes everything he has been telling us, he will help us. I'm sure of it."

"I don't know," Betka said. "We are surviving right now. The war is bound to end soon, so why should we jeopardize ourselves and the others?"

"Don't forget that we're living in a combat zone," I said. "The Germans could order us to evacuate at anytime, and where would that leave us? We

can't think just of ourselves, you know. There are the others to consider. Even if we aren't ordered to evacuate, we could get caught in the crossfire or be killed in a bombardment."

My argument was a logical one, but it wasn't logic that motivated my desire to confide in the captain. I felt I couldn't take the pressure of keeping our secret much longer. It would help tremendously if someone else knew, especially someone who might help extricate us from the situation.

Betka was skeptical, but she didn't dismiss the idea out of hand. If the captain agreed to help us, he could arrange for our safe transportation out of the region – possibly to the sector already occupied by the Soviets. It would be a big gamble for him, but as a captain he might be in a position to arrange it. If this was too risky, perhaps he could help us get some added food provisions for the others. The worst scenario was that he would have us arrested and imprisoned. However, if what he had said about the army was true, why would they bother killing a few more Jews? Wouldn't it be more valuable for them to continue having their clothes and uniforms washed?

The next time the captain came to visit, we fell into one of our usual lengthy conversations. I began to make references to the Jews, and how it was sad that so many Jews in the region had been killed. The captain said that while he had heard rumours of mass killings and extermination of Jews, he didn't really know what had happened. The majority of Wehrmacht soldiers knew nothing about such matters, he said. He expressed distaste for the anti-Semitic campaigns that the Nazis had organized, adding that he had no respect for anyone who persecuted another human being because of his religion or background.

This was the cue I was looking for, and I saw in Betka's face that she agreed.

"We are Jews," I said. "My name is not Magdalena. It is Mina Rosner. My family was killed by the SS and the Gestapo, and by the local anti-Semites whom you have just condemned."

The captain did not say a word, nor did his expression change. Perhaps he suspected us all along. I didn't know how to interpret his reaction, so I just kept talking. I told him the whole story.

"We never knew what was happening," he finally said. "I don't know if you can believe that, but it's true. Hitler hid it from the world, and he hid it from us too."

He looked shaken and didn't know what to say. Up to this point, I had withheld a crucial piece of information – the existence of six more Jews in the attic of the house. I was waiting to gauge his reaction, to determine if he was sympathetic to our story or if we had made a fatal mistake. Betka and I were willing to risk our own lives by confiding in him, but we were more circumspect when it came to the lives of the others. When I was satisfied that we had made the right decision, I told the captain about our friends.

"I'm glad you decided to tell me this," he said. "I promise you I will do anything I can to assist."

The captain promised to get to work immediately on providing us with false identification papers which would state that we were gentiles. He took down all the information on everyone's age, physical appearance, and other data he needed for the papers.

I felt tremendous relief. My confession to this officer somehow gave me renewed hope that we wouldn't fall victim to the Nazis. Life became more bearable knowing that someone shared our secret and was working on our behalf. Our captain was eager to help but time was too short for him. After two or three more visits he was killed in battle. There had not been enough time for him to arrange the false identification papers.

21

One morning in the middle of July Betka and I were walking back home from the German command post with a load of clothes. From the road leading to Buczacz, we saw a cloud of dust rising as trucks rumbled towards us. The Germans were bringing dozens of civilians into the area to dig trenches and fortify their positions. Clearly they expected a Soviet offensive in the next few days, and they wanted to be prepared.

The people who were recruited for this trench-digging exercise were the same Poles and Ukrainians who had been evacuated from Buczacz, Medwedowce, and the surrounding area. We watched them as they climbed off the trucks and began their work.

The next morning, Cesia joined us downstairs for breakfast as she sometimes did. As we were eating, two German military police officers came right into the house without knocking. We had never seen them in the village before, and assumed they must have come from Buczacz. They demanded to see our papers.

I guessed that one or more of the people who had been brought into town to work had recognized us. Of course, we had no papers to show to the police. We were used to bluffing, so I tried again.

“Our house was hit by a bomb and it burned down,” I said. “We didn’t have time to do anything except get out of the house. We couldn’t stop and find our papers with fire all around.”

The police had no patience for this excuse. They said their orders were clear: anyone without proper identification was a suspect and must be detained.

“You will have to come with us to Buczacz,” one of the officers said.

While they didn’t tie our hands or formally arrest us, they made it clear that we had no choice but to go with them. This was all taking place at the doorway, and I didn’t know if our friends in the attic realized what was going on. I tried to stall for time while I thought of what to do.

“There are many army uniforms in this house. It can’t be left unlocked. I will lock the door from the inside and then come out the back way,” I said.

They agreed. One of the policemen took Betka and Cesia out the front door, while the other went around back to make sure I came out. After I locked the front door, I quickly went to the attic and told the others what had happened.

“I don’t know if we’ll be back, so you’re on your own from now on,” I whispered.

We walked down the same road I had travelled so many times before. I felt my muscles tense as we entered Buczacz and passed the familiar landmarks. The town had been evacuated as well, and the streets were totally deserted. For the first time I walked alongside the Jewish cemetery and not through it. As we approached the cemetery I had the feeling that the policemen would simply take us inside and shoot us there. I knew it was an irrational thought, since they would have killed us long before if that was their intention. However, I was mentally prepared for the end.

Betka was beginning to panic, just as she had when she made a dash out of Dziadek’s burning house. “Maybe we should tell them we’re Jews,” she whispered to me.

This time it was my turn to tell her she was mad. “Let’s play out the tune to the end,” I said. “If we’re going to die, we will die. There’s no reason to speed up the process. Just stick to your story.”

Our captors led us to the jail in Buczacz, the same building where my

parents had languished before they were taken out and shot. The place was teeming with people, a sharp contrast to the empty streets and buildings outside. The cells were full of Jews and non-Jews, people were overflowing into the halls. As we were being led inside, I recognized a woman who was leaning over a bucket and washing dishes. She looked up and saw me. She started to cry, and the tears ran down her face and into the bucket.

The police brought us to an interrogation room and we were ordered to sit at a table. Two uniformed German officers came in and began asking us questions.

"What are your names? Are you Jews? Where do you come from? What happened to your husbands?"

The questions came like machine-gun bursts, and they were repeated over and over. I told them my name was Lena Stabiszewska, that I was from Medwedowce, that my sister Maria had been injured. We repeated the same story again and again, but they persisted in their questions.

The interrogation lasted late into the evening. Cesia was exhausted by this time, and they let her lie down on one of the narrow iron beds in the jail. Betka and I continued to sit at the table all night.

Early Sunday morning, a medic came into the room and put a fresh bandage on Betka's burn. He was not in uniform, and it wasn't clear whether he was a German or one of the prisoners.

"Why do you bother?" Betka said. "We're going to be killed anyway."

"Oh no," he said in Polish. "You will survive."

The interrogation resumed. We were exhausted, but we stuck to our story.

At one point, I lashed out in frustration.

"What if we were Jews? What difference would it make? Some people

are Germans, some are Turks, some are Catholics, some are Jews. Don't Jews have a right to live?"

The officer laughed and assumed a scolding tone of voice, as if talking to a naive schoolgirl. "Jews are an inferior race," he said. "They have no right to exist. Europe and the world will be much better off if they are eliminated."

If nothing else, this confirmed in our minds what our fate would be if they decided that we were lying and were Jews after all. However, the officer's last reply was directed not so much at a Jew who was trying to deceive him, but at an ignorant peasant woman. Maybe our deception was working.

The questioning ended around noon, and I remember the German officers asking us if we knew a Polish song called The Last Sunday. It was a popular song at the time, a tango. I said I knew the song, and they asked me to sing it. I didn't know what else to do but comply. It was hard to know whether this was their idea of a cruel joke, or whether they really wanted to hear the song. They seemed amused by the whole affair, and they urged me to begin. After I had finished singing, Betka and I began to cry. We thought this might indeed turn out to be our last Sunday.

About thirty minutes later, one of the military policemen who had brought us to Buczacz came into the room with a message.

"*Ihr seit frei* (You are free)," he told us. "You can go."

Free to go where, I wondered, in a town that had no civilians. The policemen said they would escort us out of the town and back to our home. We retraced the same route we had taken all the way to jail, but as we passed one of the German checkpoints on a bridge close to the outskirts, a guard called down to the policemen.

"Who are these women?" the guard shouted. "They are Jews," one of the policemen replied. "We're taking them to the forest to be shot."

I was beyond caring. Yet I sensed that this was a lie. For whatever reason, the Germans did not intend to kill us, even though they suspected or knew that we were Jews.

The policemen brought us well outside Buczacz and about a kilometre from our house in Medwedowce. As we were walking with them, one of the policemen began to tell Betka of his own daughter, who was about Cesia's age. He even had a picture of her which he showed Betka. For the first time, we could detect some human emotions in these men, and it gave us hope that we would be spared.

"This is as far as we can take you," one of the policemen announced. "You'll have to walk the rest of the way yourselves." He turned to leave, then swung back around and said, "Take my advice. Sit quietly in the house, and don't start any fires in the stove so the smoke can be seen outside. In a day or two, your Soviets will be here."

Suddenly everything was clear. The Germans were planning to pull out of the region, and they couldn't be bothered with Jewish or any other prisoners. For the Nazis, Jews were synonymous with Bolsheviks, and the policeman's reference to "your Soviets" indicated that he knew we were Jews. Whether we were shot or let go made little difference to these German army remnants, who would soon be on the run themselves.

Before they walked away, the German policemen extended their hands to us and shook our hands. They shook hands with Cesia as well. Then they turned around and left, while we walked towards Medwedowce.

22

When we arrived back at our adopted house on the outskirts of Medwedowce, we saw that the front door had been ripped off its hinges. I climbed the stairs to the attic, but everyone was gone. My mind flashed back to the time we had returned to my parents' bunker and found it empty. This time there was a difference. Everything in the attic was neat and undisturbed, as if our friends had left of their own accord.

We could think of nothing else but to walk to the house where the Germans were stationed. We had nothing to fear, having been freed by the military police. Maybe the local troops would tell us what was going on. When we got there, the door was open and the house was empty. It appeared that the troops had left in haste.

The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place. The Germans had received an order to pull out of the region because of the impending Soviet advance. However, a number officers still had their uniforms and clothes at our house. They must have gone to the house, broken down the door, and recovered the outfits. Then they left town.

We found a substantial amount of food in the house that the soldiers had vacated, and we carried as much as we could back to our place. I fixed the door and closed it properly.

For two days we stayed in the house and listened. The war was clearly continuing. We heard the sound of shells and gunfire in the distance continuously. We were in no hurry to venture outside.

Early Wednesday morning we heard tapping at the door. Betka and I both went to the door and opened it slowly. There stood Dziunek, Mathilda, and the

Schwartzes, all of them grinning and in a jovial mood.

"We thought you were dead for sure," Dziunek said as he embraced me. "After you were arrested, we didn't know what to do. It would have been too dangerous to try an escape, but we couldn't just stay there either. Then all of a sudden, we heard the Germans pounding on the door. When no one answered, they broke down the door and started ransacking the house, looking for their uniforms.

"The next day we came down from the attic and went to another house where there was some food. We couldn't see any signs of the Germans anywhere. We sat in the attic of that house for a couple of days, when we heard commotion and troops moving around. I could hear them speaking Russian. We went down and told the troops we were Jews. They said It was safe for us to come out — the Nazis had been driven out of the area."

On their way back to Buczacz, they were passing by the house we had inhabited, and Dziunek noticed that the door had been fixed. Dziunek came to the window and peered in. There we were.

The eight of us were together again, and we wasted no more time in Medwedowce. Since my home town was liberated as well, we headed out on that well-travelled road once again.

This time Buczacz looked totally different to me. The uncertainty of our previous trip home was gone. Soviet soldiers were everywhere, and it didn't seem likely there would be any further retreat. For us, the war was over.

Dziunek and Mathilda set off in one direction, the Schwartzes in another. Betka and I had lost our families, so we decided to live together and continue to provide mutual support. We moved into the same block on Chechego Maya Street that we had occupied before, but we took another flat.

In the apartment building right beside ours, the government began to set up offices for the civil administration of the town. I applied for a job, and after five years of living as a fugitive in my own country, I was employed once

more. Betka and I were bookkeepers in an office that kept track of taxation and contributions that the peasantry pledged to the government. When postal service resumed, the authorities asked Betka and me to sort through all the mail that appeared to be addressed to Jewish residents. We were in a position to know who had survived and who had not. If we came across letters addressed to people who we knew had died, we were to re-direct them to the sender, or if that was not possible, to destroy them.

Months passed uneventfully. We followed the events of the war with a somewhat detached curiosity. Our region was liberated, and that's all that seemed to matter to us. When the Nazis finally capitulated in May 1945, everyone in town celebrated.

Even though the war was over, my life in Buczacz had a temporary feeling to it. I was back in my home town, but I knew that I couldn't live here anymore. There didn't seem to be any point. Where else could I go?

The answer came that summer, when Jews and Poles were given the opportunity to leave the region if they so desired. The crowding in Buczacz made it imperative for the authorities to find a solution. Under the terms of the surrender, large portions of Silesia which were under German domination before the war were ceded to Poland. Arrangements were made for train transports to go to different Silesian towns. When news of this possibility became known, Betka began preparing to leave. Yet I was hesitant.

"If we leave now, how will Michael ever find me?" I said to Betka.

"The war is over. He'll be back soon."

I saw in Betka's face that she didn't believe it was possible for Michael still to be alive. Yet she never came right out and said so. Instead, she tried to reason with me and convince me that it was pointless to stay in Buczacz any longer.

"All the Jews are making plans to leave," Betka said. "Do you want us to be the only ones left in town?"

We didn't discuss the question any more that day, but the next time Betka adopted a different method.

"Listen Mina, we will leave information with the authorities here about our new home. When Michael comes back, he'll find out where we are."

I could see that she was trying to console me. I knew she was right, and I had nothing really to keep me in Buczacz. In August, we filled out the application forms and received all the necessary approvals for our trip. The time for hesitating was now past. We gathered our few possessions and prepared for the journey. I had a strange feeling as I waited at the train station in Buczacz. It was from the same station that thousands of Jews had made the journey to the gas chambers at Belzec. Loaded into locked cattle cars, they left their home town for the last time to become victims of a worldwide game of conquest. Now I was leaving my hometown for the last time as well. I too had no idea where I would end up or what the future would bring.

The journey to Boleslawiec in Lower Silesia took six weeks. We didn't know anyone there and our luck at finding work wasn't as good as it had been in Buczacz. Somehow we managed to scrape by. A Polish officer brought us food periodically, and he was helpful in advising us on how to secure other supplies. On the second floor of our building, a German woman lived with her daughter. She often brought us wood for our stove, and Betka and I went out together in search of food. We were always hungry, and as winter approached, we bundled up on many nights to preserve our precious supply of wood. By now Betka and I were experts at survival. Before the trip to Boleslawiec, Betka and I again adopted our Polish names. As far as anyone knew, I was Lena Stabiszewska and she was Maria Wolenska. These were identities we had assumed during the war, and we thought it would do no harm to hold onto them until we decided on our final course of action.

The weather turned unexpectedly mild for a few days in January. A friend was ill, and Betka and I went to the hospital to visit him. When we returned, our German neighbour came out of her apartment and stopped me on the stairs.

“Frau Stabiszewska, your husband was here earlier,” she said.

I looked at Betka and then back at my neighbour. She was not someone who would make a joke.

“What do you mean?” I asked haltingly.

“A man came up about an hour ago,” she said. “He knocked on your door for three or four minutes. When I heard the noise, I came out of my flat and went up the stairs to see what was going on. The man asked for Mrs. Stabiszewska. He said he was your husband. I told him you weren’t home, and that he should come back later.”

I couldn’t think straight as I listened to all of this. Was it Michael who had come to find me despite the name I was using, or did someone called Stabiszewska see my name somewhere and search me out?

With a mixture of fear and expectation, I went into our flat and waited. Betka was just as nervous as I was, and she put some water on to boil for a pot of tea. Less than five minutes later, the doorbell rang. I raced down the three flights of stairs to the main entrance and opened the door. For the first time in nearly five years, I stood face to face with my husband.

I put my arms around him and we held each other for a long time. Neither of us said a word. What could be said that would convey what we had gone through for the last five years?

I had visualized this day for years, playing it in my mind over and over again and imagining what it would be like when it finally happened. I expected to see a pale and emaciated figure, broken and ravaged by war. Instead, Michael looked dashing in his long, dark green military coat and cap. He had finally found me, and his smile radiated the kind of warmth that I hadn’t seen since he had left.

Both of us found it difficult to talk in the beginning. There was too much to recount, and it was painful to start. Gradually, over the next few days, I told

Michael the whole story. He knew that both our families had been destroyed, but he wept as I described each *aktion* and murder carried out by the Nazis. I saw the anger burning in his eyes when I told him about Izzienko. He had spent the whole war deep in Russia, and didn't witness the atrocities that were part of my daily life. It was difficult for him to comprehend how such barbarism had been carried out, just as It was difficult for me to understand even as I was telling it.

Michael learned from survivors that I was alive and decided that I must have gone to Silesia with many of the region's other Jews. He first went to Bytom, a town considerably west of Boleslawiec, and learned there that I had taken the name of Stabiszewska. It took him little time to track me down.

Michael and I stayed with Betka for a few weeks after his arrival in Boleslawiec. Betka and I had come to depend on each other, but from the moment Michael arrived we both knew that we would soon go our separate ways. On a snowy evening in February, my husband and I boarded a train for Bytom with the same feelings of expectation we had had when we were first married seven years earlier.

By the fall of 1948, we had made arrangements to come to Canada. There was an echo of 1939 in the events that were unfolding. Once again I was pregnant, and once again we were facing a new and uncertain situation. Yet that is where the similarities ended. This time, nine years later, I had full confidence that a definite future awaited my child. Exactly what kind of future would be up to him and his generation to determine. We had survived the worst of times and I, witness to unspeakable atrocities, set out to make a new life.

Notes

1. Neville Chamberlain papers, letter of 30 July, 1939. Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1987, p.81.

2. Ibid., p. 89.

3. Philip Friedman, *Roads To Extinction*, New York Conference on Jewish Social Studies, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980, p. 185.

4. For a more complete account of Jewish Councils see Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat*: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation, Macmillan, New York, 1972, p. 376.

5. Ibid., p. 370.

6. *The Holocaust*, op. cit., p. 280.

7. Ibid., pp. 281-2.

8. Ibid., p. 285.

9. Ibid., p. 817.

10. Ibid., pp. 238-9, 311-12, 426, 427-28. For more Information about Belzec see Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, University of Indiana Press, 1987.

11. Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka,* University of Indiana Press, 1987, pp. 24-28.

12. *The Holocaust*, op. cit., p. 502.

13. Ibid., pp. 388-401, 405-6, 417, 455, 456-7, 458-61, 462.

14. Peter Young (ed.), *The World Almanac of World War II*, Pharos Books, New York, 1986, pp. 198-99.

15. Joseph Kermish and Shmuel Krakowski (eds.), *Emanuel Ringelblum: Polish-Jewish Relations During The Second World War*, Jerusalem 1974, p.247.