

*Grand  
Illusion*

JACOB EGIT





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Lugus Publications

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I dedicate this book to the memory of my beloved parents—Shaindel and Moishe Egit; my sisters—Rachel, Genia, and Rose; my brothers—Jonas and Marcus; and their families who perished in the Holocaust.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is an expression in Hebrew, *Eshet Hayil*, which comes from Proverbs describing the self-sacrificing, loving mother and wife. I also dedicate this book in love and gratitude to my wife Clara. In the 45 years of our marriage, she has exemplified that "woman of valor."

Her sensitivity to the English language and uncanny sense of style helped much in shaping my book. Her patience, devotion and skills were indispensable.

I would like to express appreciation to my friend Sam Lipshitz for his assistance in preparing the book for publication.

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## INTRODUCTION

This remarkable autobiographical work by Jacob Egit recounts the extraordinary story of a semi-autonomous Jewish state which came into existence in Poland in 1945.

The *Yishuv* which was founded in that year with the blessing of the Polish government helped the war battered survivors of the Holocaust regain some of the equilibrium which they had lost during the terrible years of the war.

The genesis, growth and development of the Jewish Yishuv in Lower Silesia is now told for the first time in English by the man who was the spearhead behind the project and its successful implementation.

Jacob Egit documents this important chapter of modern Jewish history. Combining autobiography and astute analysis, he recounts the travail of Polish Jewry during the Holocaust and the aftermath.

From his childhood in Boryslaw, Poland, a town famous for its petroleum products, Jacob Egit was imbued with two major interests—the plight of the common working man and the warmth and vitality of Jewish culture.

At the end of the Second World War, when he returned to his native land after spending most of the war years in the Soviet Union, he sought to rebuild the shattered Jewish community he found there.

For four years, as Chairman of the Central Committee of the Jews of Lower Silesia, Egit directed the resuscitation of organized Jewish life in Poland. His involvement in educational institutions, orphanages, work exchanges, cultural facilities, and social institutions breathed new life into a Polish Jewry.

Some 50,000 people eventually settled in Lower Silesia. Under his tutelage, Jews who had had little experience in jobs that required physical work became coal miners, textile producers and farmers.

The Jewish Yishuv in Lower Silesia began its decline in 1949 when Jacob Egit was fired from his position as Chairman of the Central Committee. Accusations were made that he had tried to turn his Yishuv into another Israel. His move from Wroclaw to Warsaw, his subsequent

employment in a publishing house, his arrest and imprisonment under the Polish communist regime, are chronicled with skill.

The Egit memoir does not end with the Polish experience. It continues with a description of the author's settling in Canada in the late 1950s and his entry into the life of the Canadian Jewish community. It was not long before the talents he had demonstrated in Poland were deployed in his new homeland. Egit's comments on the work he had been involved in the Histadrut, the Canadian Jewish Congress and other community organizations show that he is a man of strong opinion and even stronger belief where the security of Israel and the Jewish people are concerned. He has remained a servant of his people.

• Jacob Egit's book makes for absorbing reading.

*Prof. Arnold Ages*

## CHAPTER ONE: MY ROOTS

I was born in Boryslaw, a small town in Galicia, in the shadow of the Carpathian Mountains. From 1860 to 1914, Galicia was part of Austria, and from the end of the First World War until the Second World War, it belonged to Poland; it is now in the Ukrainian U.S.S.R.

Galicia had been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Under the long reign of Emperor Franz Josef (whom the Jews called *Froim Yosel* in Yiddish) who sat on the throne from 1848 until 1916, the Jews in Galicia were patriotic citizens of the empire. Despite the fact that they lived in material poverty, the Galician Jews enjoyed civil rights such as the Jews of the neighbouring Czarist empire could only dream of. Further, Austria did not permit the development of major industries in Galicia, in order to preserve this territory as an export market.

With the establishment of the Polish Republic after the First World War in 1918, and the inclusion of Galicia, Galician Jews then faced the same future as their Jewish brothers in the rest of the Polish territory.

After the Nazi invasion of Poland, Galicia was divided. With the defeat of the Germans in Poland by the Russian forces, Galicia was again partitioned between Poland and the Soviet Union; Eastern Galicia became part of the Soviet West Ukraine.

Today, Galicia no longer exists; the name remains a remnant of history. Before the war, half a million Jews lived there. More than 90% perished in the Holocaust.

In 1860, the Jewish population of the town of Boryslaw numbered about 1,000; in 1887, the first Society of Chovevei Zion, the religious Zionist organization, was established. By 1939, the Jewish population was over 15,000.

Boryslaw, like other settlements in the Carpathians, was a cluster of squat houses, without paved roads, with a sizeable Jewish population. Each spring, snows melting on the mountains flooded the city and it felt as if the world were ending. This impression was heightened because the railway line, blocked by the Carpathian mountains, ended in Boryslaw.

What distinguished the town was an odour which permeated it and the miles of open fields which surrounded it. The soil in these fields was dark brown, sticky and inclined to form clumps. Whatever did take root ripened in late autumn; by then the cobs of corn and sheaves of grain were scant and withered. Vegetables which reached the table had an unpalatable flavour, as did the water from the wells, where scum always floated on the surface. The deeper the well was dug, the more scum formed. Life was hard for the peasants and the townspeople. The reason for Boryslaw's peculiarity was *petroleum*.

In the mid-19th century, the Jewish families in Boryslaw eked out a meager livelihood. However, while working the soil, they stumbled on the discovery that the earth, when dried and sifted, could be made to burn and yield a wax-like substance. Young Abraham Schreiner's father hit upon the idea of melting down the wax and moulding it to make Sabbath candles. Of course, they were inferior to the ones made from bees' wax. They filled the room with soot and snapped like firecrackers as they burned. But they had an overwhelming virtue—they cost no money! Soon Schreiner devoted his time to moulding and selling candles to the populace. Abraham had an enquiring mind and found a way to purify the wax. His father was astounded—the candle he made from the purified wax burned with a clear, bright flame, with no soot or crackling noises. Abraham himself started to peddle the wax throughout the region and did very well. Soon every Jew who had a bit of land began to supplement his income by digging for the magical, wax-producing soil. The earth from which the wax had been extracted was brought to a disposal site which formed slag heaps that can be seen in Boryslaw today.<sup>1</sup>

Rise in prosperity coincided with cholera which struck Boryslaw, Jew and Gentile alike. Throughout a whole summer the epidemic raged, with people dying like flies. One day they got sick, the next day they died. In the synagogues and churches, prayers were said around the clock. A custom which persisted at that time was the attempt to ward off sickness and death by marrying couples under canopies set up in the cemetery.

Abraham Schreiner, who travelled much of the time away from home selling his wax, remained untouched by the pestilence. He continued his experiments and without scientific training and access to books, reached the conclusion, in 1853, that the mud of Boryslaw was rich in oil. This discovery resulted in an invitation from the owner of a chemical factory

and from a young Polish engineer, Lukasiwicz, to visit them in Lvov. With their cooperation, Schreiner drilled the first oil well. Soon oil from Boryslaw lit lamps throughout Galicia. The oil industry was founded.

Boryslaw became rich overnight. Some people became entrepreneurs; by about 1880, wells provided employment for more than 3,000 Jewish workers from Boryslaw and vicinity. In 1920, Boryslaw supplied 75% of the oil in Poland. But by this time large foreign banks, subsidizing modern techniques, began to squeeze out smaller enterprises—and Jewish labour. This occurred despite the fact that a number of the firms were Jewish-owned, mainly by oil magnates living in Vienna.

The Jewish worker once more toiled from morning till night to make a living. There was no protection whatsoever. A man who had a job was so happy to be working he would not dream of asking for a raise or any other benefit. He could be fired any time.

Since oil from the wells was conveyed to the refineries through a rather primitive network of pipes, leaks would often occur and before repairs could be made, oil would seep into the ground and form pools on the surface. Some of the unemployed found a way of earning a few pennies by becoming *lebaks*—by skimming a living off the oil industry! *Lebaks* would fashion long grass into streamers that looked like horses' tails, and drawing them through the pools would thus skim the oil off the surface. In my youth, *lebaks* on the streets sold oil which they carried in two pails suspended on either side from a yoke across their shoulders. Some of the *lebaks* would squeeze out the oil, mix it with sawdust into clumps that were good for starting fires. In the early morning, you could hear their cries—"three coals for five *groshen*, start your morning fires the easy way."

In 1944 when I arrived with the Soviet Army to liberate Boryslaw, I found several Jews who survived the Holocaust because they had worked in the oil refinery in Drohobycz. They told me that, during the war, a German technical publication had carried an article describing the discovery of oil by a *Volksdeutch* called Schreiner, as it was the *Volksdeutschen*, Poles of German origin, who had collaborated with the Nazis during the war.

I was the youngest of six children. I never knew my grandparents; not too many people lived to a ripe old age in those days. My father, Moishe Ben Itzhak, had worked on the roads at the Hungarian-Galician border as a young man. He later settled in Boryslaw where he became the manager

of a transport company, owned by a wealthy man, Chaim Kornhaber, who lived in a house equipped with stables and horses.

At the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, this same Kornhaber wisely persuaded my father to pack up his family and possessions and flee to a faraway village called Husay to escape from the Cossacks. Kornhaber and his family, however, went to Vienna. On the way to Husay, my father learned that the Cossacks had arrived there before us and he turned back, to face tough years. We went through all the hardships of war—fear, hunger, pogroms. I recall my oldest brother Jonas, mobilized into the Austrian army, wounded in battle.

With the end of World War I, Poland gained independence and Galicia became a part of that country once again. My father opened a store where he sold cigarettes and tobacco. The Jews laboured under anti-Semitism, oppression, heavy taxation and rank discrimination. The combination of these factors and my father's religious habits (he went to *shul* everyday, morning and night) forced him out of his shop. In 1941, the German occupation put an end to his struggles. He was deported to *Belzec* and never returned.

My mother, Shaindel, suffered the same fate. So did other members of my family. My mother, a pretty, blond woman, had worked hard all of her life taking care of the family. I don't remember there ever being quite enough to eat when I was at home, except on the Sabbath. My mother's concern for the welfare and future of her children was the motivating force in her life. Little did she know the fate which awaited them.

My oldest sister, Rachel, married a dry goods merchant, Chaim Mendelsohn. She was a mother of four daughters. She perished in the crematorium at *Belzec* with her husband and youngest daughter. The other three daughters survived Auschwitz and I found them in Krakow in 1945. They emigrated to Israel, where the oldest niece, Leah died.

My two surviving nieces, at time of writing, Adela and Rose, are still living in Israel, both of them grandmothers. My oldest brother, Jonas, who had the largest news agency for magazines and periodicals in Boryslaw, also perished in *Belzec* as did two of his three children, the older son Ben and daughter Celia. The youngest son, Itzhak, escaped from the transport on the way to Auschwitz, joined the partisans, survived the war and is now living in New Jersey. The gas chambers also consumed my youngest sister, Rose, my sister Genia, and her two children. Genia's husband escaped to Russia with a 14 year old son, Arthur. He died there. Arthur joined

## My Roots

the army and, at time of writing, is living in Poland. My middle brother, Marcus, with whom I had been the closest, was a technician and worked in the oil fields. When the German-Russian war broke out, he paid a Polish family to hide his three year old daughter. After the liberation, I started a search for the child but never found her; subsequently I learned that she had been handed over to the Gestapo by the people who had agreed to shelter her. Marcus's wife, Sally, survived a concentration camp and lives today in America. Marcus was sent from one concentration camp to another. In the end, he went from *Plaszov* to *Matthausen* where, weakened by starvation and hard labour, he died days before the liberation. In 1982, I went to Matthausen with my older son, Richard, and my grandson, Alexander. We spent a day there, retreading the paths on which my brother Marcus went to his death.

## CHAPTER TWO: EARLY YEARS

I was brought up in a religious home. Every Friday evening and Saturday morning, I went to the synagogue with my father. I was very observant until my *Bar Mitzvah*. It was a very modest affair celebrated with *Kiddush* after the Saturday service.

On the whole, I did not have an easy childhood. I was sickly and my eyes bothered me. I remember the momentous occasion when at great financial sacrifice, my father took me to Lvov to see a Dr. Zion, an eye specialist. Subsequently, I attended school with great difficulty. Somehow my reports at the end of the school years were excellent in all subjects and in the upper grades, I did well in mathematics. Adult members of my family used to come to see me for help in their calculations. But because of my ill health, I was forced to leave school after a few years. My Jewish education was taken care of by a teacher who used to come to our house. I also attended a Hebrew school for a short time.

Reading had become my outlet. I became proficient in Yiddish and Polish. At the age of ten, I was borrowing books from the library in our town on every subject. Reading compensated for the curtailment of my formal education. Books mitigated the monotony of my days, brightened the grayness of my environment and expanded my horizons. I read everything—world classics in translation, Marxist ideology, Polish and Yiddish literature, history and poetry. I walked around with my head in the clouds, my mind full of dreams and ideas I gathered from books. As I grew older, I also read the Yiddish newspapers from Lvov—the *Tugblatt* and *Hajnt* published in Warsaw. I liked the *Literarische Bletter* from Warsaw and the *History of the Jews* by Heinrich Graetz which I read and studied in Yiddish translation.

At sixteen, I discovered the outside world and became involved in community activities. I took the initiative in organizing the first evening courses in Boryslaw, which were sponsored by the Central Committee of the Left Poale Zion Party in Warsaw. Conducted for free in Poland,

## Early Years

these evening courses gave Jewish workers, and particularly Jewish youth, the opportunity to study the Yiddish language and literature, and various other subjects to which they otherwise had no access. Shimon Rosenberg of Stryj, a leading Poale Zionist in Galicia, was one of our frequent visiting lecturers. He was an intelligent, articulate man and due to his influence I became an activist in the Poale Zion Party and organized a Left Poale Zion group in Boryslaw.

I came into conflict with our Jewish establishment. My first confrontation was at a meeting of the *Kehilla* in 1925. That year, a flood had devastated many of the streets in the poor Jewish district and, with financial assistance received from American charities, blocks of wooden barracks had been built on dry ground to temporarily house the residents driven from their homes. At that meeting, I stood up and asked for permission to say a few words. I was considered too young to express an opinion and I was refused. I insisted on my right to speak and finally was given the opportunity to say what was on my mind. This was the first speech in my life. I used the occasion to demand an accounting of the funds received from America and of the expenditures involved in erecting the shelters:

"Why shouldn't we know how much it cost to build the shelters? Was all the money spent or is some of it left? I am not accusing anyone of wrongdoing, but these are public funds and we, the people of Boryslaw, have the right to know just what happened to the money."

My speech made an impression, particularly because of my youth. The next morning, my father upbraided me:

"You should be ashamed of yourself for impertinence in taking to task the much older, and respected leaders of our community."

Yet, when I went out on the streets, I was stopped by many Jews from the poor quarter who praised me for my stand. This was the first time, they kept saying, that anyone had demanded public accounting from our *Kehilla*. Thus began my lifelong involvement in community affairs and organizational work.

I used to travel occasionally to the neighbouring town of Przemisl where my brother was stationed with the Polish army. We had relatives by the name of Mayzel who lived there and they had two daughters, Sala and Anna. Sala became my sister-in-law; Anna perished at the hands of the Nazis. In Przemisl also lived Rachel Kom, the well-known Yiddish poetess. She became a good friend of mine. She died a few years ago in Montreal.

Through her, I met the two Schwebel brothers, bookbinders and known throughout Galicia as anarchists. I used to discuss economics and politics with them but they never succeeded in converting me. Hitler put an end to their discussions. Both brothers perished.

The young Left Poale Zionists made quite an impact on our community. Among the lecturers who came to us were Moshe Erem from Israel, Yaacov Zerubavel,<sup>2</sup> Melach Ravitch, S. L. Shneiderman and other prominent speakers. The success of our program provoked attacks by both Jewish Communists and General Zionists. Often, I attended conferences of the Left Poale Zion (L.P.Z.) in Lvov, Warsaw and in Stryj, where I met a leader of the movement, Chaskel Laufer. We became friends. Later he went to Israel.

Two of my closest friends at the time were Motel Schleselfeld, who also went to Israel, and Leib Kerker, a very intelligent young man several years my senior. Leib was killed in the war, fighting with the Polish army against the Nazis.

I gained a reputation as a speaker who did not hesitate to express his radical views—views which were often at variance with the policy of the Left Poale Zion Party hierarchy and the Jewish establishment.

In November 1918, the Poles and the Ukrainians fought for control of Eastern Galicia. In the struggle between the Poles and the Ukrainians, each side accused the Jews of supporting the other. Pogroms broke out in Lvov; 70 Jews lost their lives; many were wounded. The severe economic situation was reflected in every sphere of Jewish life as was the rise of anti-Semitism.

Towards the end of the 1920s, the world-wide economic depression began to be felt most seriously in Poland. There was general exploitation of workers, pervasive poverty and much suffering. Jews suffered doubly as workers and as Jews. They were exploited in the labour force, degraded by the government, attacked by the anti-Semites. The Polish military powers incarcerated Jewish officers and soldiers, men who had actually served in the Polish army, in the large detention camp in Yablona. In Pinsk, Polish officers shot 43 Jews without a trial. In Plotsk, Rabbi Shapiro was sentenced to death by the military authorities. The charge was that he was a spy and through his prayers gave signals to the enemy.

The plight of the Jews and the ineffectiveness of official bodies, Jewish and non-Jewish, to combat this situation affected me greatly.

I never forgot two incidents which I witnessed as a young boy in

Boryslaw: Poland had regained its independence. General Joseph Haller, a well-known anti-Semite, had let loose his soldiers and given them a free hand with regard to the Jews. In the middle of one night, I heard a cry—*Shma Isroel*—from a house across the street. Hooligans had broken in and attacked its inhabitants. Nor have I forgotten the picture of an old man called Kaiser, harnessed between two horses and driven along the street, his long gray beard flying while the anti-Semites jeered.

In Lvov, I had a distant relative, a Dr. Szmorack, and a leading Zionist. I approached him for help in obtaining a permit to emigrate to Palestine. Under his sponsorship, I applied to the Special Committee in charge of *Aliyah*, but I was rejected. I tried a second time and was told openly that very few permits were being issued at the time and especially for people from the Left Poale Zion. Those responsible for choosing prospective immigrants to Palestine were not interested in promoting socialist ideology. They preferred moderate Zionists who had not been active politically. This was a devastating blow to me.

Aaron Wahl was a native of Boryslaw who years before had been the leader of the Left Poale Zion group in our city. He had gone to Warsaw where he became a member of the Central Committee of the Left Poale Zion Party. The suffering of the Jews prompted him to leave the Poale Zion. A tall, impressive man, intelligent, a good journalist and a brilliant speaker, he made every effort to convince me that the position of the Jewish masses in Poland was desperate. The gates of Palestine were closed for the majority and, in Poland, anti-Semitism and pogroms were rampant. I fell under his influence.

He could see one solution—the revolutionary movement, with its creed of justice and equality for all. The Soviet model seemed to provide an attractive option to the grim situation in Poland. At the time, the first plans had already been made by the Soviet government to establish a Jewish autonomous region in Birobidzhan. This was in the 1930s, when the murderous politics of Hitler were already clear. References were common to Stalin's interview with an American correspondent for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on January 12, 1931, in which he stated: "National chauvinism and racial politics is a holdover from cannibalism. Anti-Semitism—a result of racism and chauvinism—is the greatest legacy of cannibalism and a convenient lightning-rod put up by capitalism to divert the revolt of the workers against capitalism. Anti-Semitism is a false concept which turns the working man away from the right path.

Therefore the communists, as internationalists, are the greatest enemy of anti-Semitism. In the U.S.S.R., anti-Semitism is fought like a strange, unnatural idea and according to the laws of the U.S.S.R., active anti-Semites receive death sentences." After making this statement, Stalin never again used the word anti-Semite. In his campaign against the Jews, he used the word *cosmopolitan*. Wahl informed me that already in a number of Polish cities, the Poale Zion groups had been abandoned and that their members had joined the Leftist movement.

Discussions with Aaron Wahl resulted in many sleepless nights. I was convinced that for myself and my group in Boryslaw, joining the revolutionary movement would be the way in which we could effectively help the Jewish masses. I was still committed to Zionism but favoured a more revolutionary policy.

Many of the Jewish youth of pre-war Poland did not believe that England would ever give up its mandate in Palestine so that a Jewish homeland could be established as promised in the Balfour Declaration.

In 1930, a conference of all the "Evening Courses" in Poland took place in Warsaw and I arrived there with a delegation from Boryslaw. I was determined that at this conference we would air all our doubts and declare our opposition to some of the existing policies. We were critical of the lack of radical movement in the party. In the meanwhile, Dr. Deutchmeister, an old Poale Zionist physician in our city, sent a telegram to the Central Committee in Warsaw, warning them to be wary of me and my delegation. When I got to my hotel in Warsaw, I received a message requesting that I visit Yaacov Zerubavel, a leader of the Left Poale Zion. I took with me two of my friends. Zerubavel asked me if it was true that I wanted to take a stand at the conference in opposition to the ideology of the Left Poale Zion Party. After an hour spent in political discussion, I refused to change my mind. Zerubavel pulled out his pocket watch, looked at the time and said: "It is now half-past three, and as of this time and day, I expel you from the Left Poale Zion Party."

When our delegation, along with others, arrived at the conference hall, we were not allowed inside. I remember the demonstration which took place in front of the building. Lifted on the shoulders of my friends, I made a speech protesting our exclusion. Two days later we printed a "one-time" newspaper—*Forward*. Over the signature of the leaders of the opposition groups, including that of Warsaw leader, M. Bojmkoler, we declared our protest at being excluded.

A new chapter in my life began. While in Warsaw I met Hersh Mendel, a leftist activist. He made a great impression upon me. I roamed the streets of Warsaw with him for a few days. I saw the poverty in which the Jewish workers lived and I became more convinced that only radical change could alleviate their situation.

On October 24, 1931, at a conference in Lvov attended by twenty delegates representing opposition groups that had broken away from their former parties, *Bund* and *Poale Zion*, the *Algemaine Yiddishe Arbets Partei—General Jewish Workers Party* (AJAP), was founded. A Central Committee of ten was elected that would remain in Lvov with an executive of three (Hersh Brajer, M. Mohr, J. Egit). I was elected General Secretary. Another of the decisions made was to publish our own weekly periodical, to be called *Unser Veg—Our Road*.

Towards the end of November 1931, the newly formed party was registered with the Polish government. The Central Committee of the AJAP then published a manifesto addressed to all Jewish workers, small shopkeepers, artisans, etc., which outlined reasons for the establishing of the Party. The manifesto read in part:

1) The present economic situation in the country, which has pushed the working masses into poverty and deprivation, is particularly hard on the Jewish worker.

The policy of the government in support of big business and cartels has made it impossible for small business, small manufacturers and artisans to compete in the marketplace, with the result that most of these small enterprises have been liquidated. But, because of the anti-Semitic policy of this government, Jews are not employed in the large government supported institutions and factories, with the result that the liquidation of small individual enterprises has deprived a vast number of Jews of their livelihood. Their plight is made still more desperate by the fact that since they are not employed at any of the government supported institutions, they are not eligible for unemployment insurance. Furthermore, the new laws withhold licenses for the opening of new individual enterprises, and new heavy taxes levied by the government upon the businesses that still operate will force them to fold.

2) The newly formed AJAP proclaims, therefore, as its goal a fight for the betterment of the Jewish workers and of the Jewish poverty stricken masses; for equal status of Jewish workers with that of the non-Jewish workers; for the abolishment of discrimination in employment; and opposition to anti-Semitism and the boycott of Jewish enterprises, and for the establishment of government supported Jewish schools for Jewish children.

In the manifesto, it was stressed that AJAP was a Jewish organization for all workers, artisans, small businessmen, the working intelligentsia and for all who wish to join in the struggle for economic, cultural, social and political justice and freedom.

The party grew quickly. In the first four months of its existence, groups were established in thirty cities. At the beginning of 1933, we had a membership of 2,000. By the beginning of 1934, we had 5,000 members, with adherents in 100 cities. The majority of our new members came from the *Bund*, *Poale Zion* and *Shomer Hatzair*. We published in *Unser Weg* names of members that left their parties to join us.

In many towns, the AJAP mobilized poverty-stricken Jews in defiant opposition to the eviction laws which threw them out in the street when they had no money to pay rent. The party also organized many strikes of Jewish workers who were exploited, particularly those who worked at the looms in Kosov and in the fur industry in cities in the vicinity of Lvov. Even though the party was legal, its activities were monitored by the government.

In 1932, when the situation between Russia and Poland was very strained, I remember a Peace Conference in Lvov organized by the Writers' Union, whose membership was Jewish, Polish and Ukrainian. I spoke in Yiddish at this conference in the name of the Jewish writers. That same night, all of us were arrested and incarcerated in the notorious Brigidkis Prison in Lvov. Only Leon Schiller, the famous director of the Lvov Theatre, who had also participated in the conference, was not arrested. After a few days, we were released. I was arrested many times again. I was to sit in the Brigidkis Prison more than once.

We became the object of police surveillance. Pages from *Unser Weg* were confiscated. On July 16, 1934 the government outlawed the AJAP. This did not inhibit our anti-Nazi work. After the liquidation of AJAP and of our publication, I went underground to avoid being arrested.

## Early Years The Soviet Phase

In 1935, I returned to Lvov and headed a campaign to free political prisoners, a large percentage of whom were Jews. We forged a united front of all parties on the left. This included the PPS (Polish Socialist Party) representing the Polish and Ukrainian intellectuals, writers and artisans. I became close to Frederick and Paula Topolski. (Frederick was a student at Lvov University, who after the war, was Deputy Minister of Building. In 1968, during the anti-Semitic campaign, he was dismissed from his post. He eventually left Poland and settled in 1988 in Canada, where he died in 1989).

In 1935 the campaign for amnesty was intensive, with publicity and meetings. That the campaign was possible, was due to a more liberal government in Poland at that time. In 1936, amnesty was granted and thousands of political prisoners were released. A special committee was formed to provide clothing and other help for the released prisoners.

I returned to Boryslaw. But in the Spring of 1937, I was arrested and spent several months in the *Górka* prison in Drohobycz on charges of subversion. I was tried in Sambor, where I was accused of anti-government activities through my work in AJAP (even though the organization had been legal at the time, and outlawed later.) I put up a strong defense, stating that my work had been anti-Hitler and anti-Fascist, and on behalf of Jewish workers and against general poverty. My defense of being anti-Nazi, at the time when Hitler marched into Czechoslovakia, made an impression upon the last twelve man jury in Poland. They decided to acquit me.

I was engaged to a young teacher at the time, Wita Brajer. In order to get married and support a family, I returned to Boryslaw to work in my brother's news agency. In 1937, my oldest son, Richard, was born. Richard and his future wife, Elizabeth, were to have two children, a son, Alexander and a daughter, Daniela.

## CHAPTER THREE

### WAR ERUPTS: THE SOVIET PHASE

On September 1, 1939, war broke out between Poland and Germany and the first bombs fell on Boryslaw. A few days later, the Germans overran the town. I stood on the street and watched the Germans passing by. Even though I was not yet aware of the full implication of the German anti-Jewish policies, I felt a shudder of dread pass me. After a few days of war, Poland fell and the Russians made a pact with Germany to divide the country between them. Eastern Poland, including Lvov and Boryslaw were given to Russia. The Germans were with us for three days and then the Soviet Army marched in. A different way of life was now before us.

At first, the Jewish population was happy with the coming of the Soviet army. In the short time that the Germans were in power, they had terrorized the Jews and conscripted them in forced labour. Jewish people, especially in Lvov, received the Russian army enthusiastically. But their enthusiasm was short lived. First of all, all private businesses were liquidated, depriving hundreds of small Jewish merchants of a livelihood. Large businesses were nationalized. Rationing was instituted and it became hard to get food. The Jews lived in constant fear. I saw groups of people being led to the station on the way to Siberia. All Jewish organizations were outlawed and the Jewish press was muzzled. Friendship between the Russians and Germans was strong. Almost every Russian officer could be seen carrying a German history book or language manual.

Little is known as to how great was the economic help which Stalin gave to Hitler before Germany attacked the U.S.S.R. It is doubtful if Hitler could have continued the fight for so long without the colossal help received from Russia after the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Stalin had a great desire to cosy up to Hitler. He dismissed the Jew, Litvinoff, as Foreign Minister and replaced him with Molotov. Stalin was interested in grabbing a part of Poland—in burying the Poles so that they could never again become a factor in Eastern Europe. And he knew that the only way he could repay Hitler was to provide the millions of tons of food, oil and

## War Erupts: The Soviet Phase

other materials which enabled the Germans to conduct total war. Not long ago, an article appeared in a German quarterly publication on economic affairs by a well-known German economist Ferdinand Friedenberg. It was entitled *The Soviet Contributions to Hitler's Reich*. Friedenberg found figures in Russian and German documents which attested to the enormous extent of the help given to Hitler by Stalin. Trains and boat-loads of material came from Russia. Ukrainian grain magazines were emptied; food, taken from the Russians, who were starving themselves, was given to the Germans; cattle-trains came from Uzbekistan and oil tanks came from Baku. Stalin even sent Hitler material not available in Russia, which he purchased elsewhere; he never gave the world an accounting.

On June 22, 1941, the day Hitler attacked Russia, Stalin's ships were still sailing in and out of German harbours.

Boryslaw was at the end of the east-west railroad line. It was virtually isolated. Before the war, 80% of the bread required by the town came from Drohobycz, ten kilometres from Boryslaw. After the Soviets came into power, these shipments stopped. Boryslaw did not have facilities for baking bread to feed a population of 30,000. I was invited to a City Hall meeting where it was proposed that I remedy the situation. I pointed out that nothing could be done until the ovens in the few existing bakeries were modernized. I was sent to Sum, near Kharkov, to buy electric ovens. Thus it was that I visited the U.S.S.R. for the first time and had the opportunity of meeting many Jews in Kharkov and Kiev. Even then in 1941, they told me that the schools and Yiddish culture were being liquidated. When I observed Jewish life in Kharkov and Kiev, I was seeing what our life would be in the future under the Russians.

Within a few weeks, ovens arrived and were installed in the bakeries in Boryslaw, but now that we had the ovens, there was no flour. So I went to Tarnopol, the centre of the wheat-growing district; there I traded Boryslaw oil for Tarnopol flour.

I became director of bread production for Boryslaw and vicinity. I was reluctant to assume so great a responsibility. Thousands of people relied upon me to provide daily bread. The difficulties and uncertainties were enormous. There was the difficult task of obtaining the flour with which to bake the bread and then the danger of sabotage by anti-Soviet elements in the population. The responsibility of my position gave me many a sleepless night.

The outbreak of war put an end to these concerns. In the early morning of June 22, 1941, I heard the radio broadcast of Hitler's speech: Russia and Germany were at war. The impending German invasion cast the shadow of doom upon the Jewish population. Everyone felt that there would be bitter days ahead. I was immediately mobilized into a labour brigade that would be sent into the interior of Russia. Evacuation began.

The Russians had provided some trains for people to make their way into Russia and many Jews, had they taken advantage of this could have saved themselves. There were two reasons why they did not do so. One was that their experience during the time they lived under the Soviets was a bad one. The other reason, most regrettably, was that they could not comprehend what awaited them at the hands of the Nazis. An isolated community, the Jews of Boryslaw had no clear understanding of what the Nazi policy with regard to the Jews really was. They remembered the good relationship with the Germans at the time of the First World War. The final solution was made policy in 1942. There was no organization that could convey to the Jews of a small eastern town like Boryslaw the seriousness of the situation. Jews hoped that with their history of survival throughout the centuries, they would once again survive. This time, their hopes were not fulfilled. Jewish communities were wiped off the map.

Trains were waiting at the station in Drohobycz. I urged my brothers and sisters to come with me. They would not leave. My parents were too old to undertake such a journey. So, with only my wife and four-year-old son Richard, I boarded a train that would take us to Russia.

Even before we pulled out of the station, the Russians had begun implementing their scorched earth policy. We saw a mountain of flame and smoke over Boryslaw as the Russians set fire to oil installations, factories and whatever else could have been utilized by the Nazis.

We travelled in box cars. At every stop, more and more people boarded the train. The crowding became unbearable. When I looked through the open doors, I could see hordes of other refugees; a terrible, pathetic picture; people on wagons, on horseback, on foot; all desperate to make their way to safety in the Soviet Union. It is hard to believe that some Jews who had escaped from Germany and German occupied Poland to Soviet dominated territory, were to become disillusioned with the Russians and registered to return to Hitler's Germany. The Russians registered them, but instead of putting them on trains to Germany, shipped them to

## War Erupts: The Soviet Phase

Siberia. It is ironic that many of those whom the Russians intended to punish in this manner, survived the war.

Our train was bombed by Germans. Whenever an airplane was heard overhead, everyone piled out of the cars in panic and ran into the fields. I ran with Richard and burrowed into the ground, covering his body with mine.

Finally, we arrived at a Kolkhoz collective farm, called *Karl Marx*, in the Ukrainian province of Dnepropetrovsk. We set to work harvesting the crop of early wheat before the Germans arrived. In the short time I was in the district, it seemed to me as if the war was between the Jews and Germans. Ukrainians were eagerly anticipating the German advance. When the order came to dismantle all the factories and send machinery to Asiatic Russia so that it would not fall into German hands, the Ukrainians refused to help.

Russian Jews, engineers, technicians and mechanics worked swiftly and efficiently for up to twenty hours a day getting machinery ready for transportation. What could not be sent was destroyed. If it was not for the Jews, valuable material would have been left for the Nazis.

The Nazis approached. We were loaded once again into box cars and sent to Kazachstan. On our way, our train stopped for a short time at the main Dnepropetrovsk station, a transfer point for Russian militia-men who were milling around the platform. Many were Jewish soldiers and officers. When I went out to stretch my legs, they bombarded me with questions. What did I think the fate of the Jews would be in the territories overrun by the Nazis? I told them I was worried, that the Jews left there were in great danger. "We will have our revenge," one of the officers vowed, and those were not just empty words. Later we would know the role played by Jewish soldiers in the Russian army.

World War II historians estimate that approximately 500,000 Jewish soldiers served in the Soviet Army, many were volunteers. Considerable numbers attained high officer rank. There were at least 200 lieutenant-generals and generals, especially in the engineers, artillery and armored corps. Of the Jewish soldiers and officers who served in the infantry, air force, navy and cavalry, 167,700 were decorated. Colonel David Dragunsky<sup>3</sup> from Moscow was twice awarded the highest Red Army order, that of Hero of the Soviet Union; Israel Fesanovich, a submarine commander was responsible for sinking thousands of tons of German shipping in the Baltic Sea; Mischa Spivak and Leo Levitan were heroes

of Stalingrad and Y. J. Dolyszinski distinguished himself at the Dnieper crossing. There was the airman, Captain Mikhail Plotkin, the first to bomb Berlin. Joseph Bumagin, a soldier smothered with his body a German machine-gun post. General Jacob Kreiser and Artillery Captain Kottler won commendations for their heroic deeds at Moscow. An eighteen year old enlisted man, Chaim Byskin, blew up three German tanks and an ammunition magazine on November 18, 1941 and delayed the attack on Moscow. An ordinary trooper, Yosef Antalovich was awarded highest honours for bravery: Hero of the Soviet Union, Order of Lenin and a Gold Star. His picture was published on the front page of *Pravda* April 13, 1942 and the next day on the front page of *Izvestia*. One of the commanders of the Russian Army at Stalingrad was Colonel Leonid Vinocur who took Field Marshall von Paulus prisoner, personally relieved him of his sword and stripped the epaulettes from his uniform.

Outstanding among the Jewish heroes and heroines in the Red Army were Jewish women-pilots. The fighter-pilot Lieutenant Lily Litvak of Moscow had destroyed six German planes by the middle of 1943. In an air battle over Rostov, in which she was wounded, she did not withdraw until she had succeeded in shooting down her opponent. On August 19, 1943 after Lily Litvak had been killed in battle, the Political Guidance Command of the Southern Front issued a proclamation bearing her photograph which stated: "In the battles at Stalingrad, she distinguished herself as a courageous fighter pilot. Lily died a heroine's death in an unequal battle."

Among the 133 Heroes of the Soviet Union of Jewish extraction was Paula Gelman of Homel. After completing high school, she was accepted as a student in the faculty of history at Moscow University. After war broke out, she did a half-year's pilot course, qualifying as a navigator of an "O-2" aircraft. She fought in the Caucasus, the Crimea and on other fronts, participating in no fewer than 860 bombing missions on German front line targets. She was also awarded fourteen decorations in addition to the order Hero of the Soviet Union. After the war, she returned to her studies at Moscow University in the department of foreign languages.

There are over one hundred diverse nationalities and ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. In the number of decorations received for heroism in the war, Jews took fifth place. The highest order of the Red Army, Hero of the Soviet Union, was bestowed upon 133 Jewish soldiers in addition

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to thousands of other commendations and decorations awarded to gallant Jewish fighters. And, in total, 200,000 Russian Jewish soldiers died on the battlefield.

Another facet of Jewish resistance against the enemy was the Jewish participation in all divisions of the Polish army formed in the Soviet Union in 1943. The many Jews in the military, particularly in the officers' corps, played a remarkable role in forming and developing this army and also in reaching their objectives. In 1984, the University of Tel Aviv published a book in Hebrew about the role of Polish Jews in the last World War, written by Kalmen Nusbaum, himself a Colonel in the Polish army. He cites facts and figures about Jewish participation in the battles of the Polish army from Moscow to Berlin in the years 1943 to 1945. The author shows the important role of the Jews in organizing the Tadeusz Kosciuszko Division. Of the overall number of 635 officers in this division, 124 were Jews, almost twenty percent. Jewish officers were in the first battles and displayed heroism and sacrifice. Of the total number of 489 high ranking officers who were awarded Polish and Russian citations for heroism in battle, 108 were Jewish, twenty-two percent. Of the overall number of women officers in the Polish army, a third were Jewish who fulfilled many important functions. The author shows that over 20,000 Polish Jews served in the Polish army during the war and of this number 1,300 were Jewish officers, of whom 1,261 were killed in battle. It was not the first time in the history of Poland that Jews took part in the fight for Polish freedom. Jews took part in all Polish uprisings against the Czarist occupation including the Kosciuszko uprising in 1794 and in the later uprisings of 1831 and 1863. Now for the first time in the war against the Nazis, Jews were fighting in battles which were in their own interest as well as in the general interest. They were fighting against their personal enemy. Thousands of Polish Jews who joined the Polish army never dreamed of military careers. They wanted to fight against the bloodiest, bitterest enemy of the Jewish people. Present day Polish history does not mention the part of the Jews in the struggle against Nazism. In *The Polish People's Army in 1943/1945* published by the Military Historical Institute in Poland, a book of 900 pages, one Jew is mentioned and photographs are so selected that not one Jewish soldier is found.

After the short stop at the Dniepropetrovsk station, we travelled for several days and nights to our final destination: Koskuduk, a working man's town on the railroad line between Dzambul and Alma Ata, the capital

city of Kazakhstan. The population had been chiefly employed in wresting from the ground a substance called saxsaul, a stunted, leafless growth of a coal-like, dry consistency which made an excellent source of fuel. With the outbreak of war, all workers were mobilized into the army and our labour brigade was brought in to fill the gap. It was backbreaking work, carried on under horrible conditions. We lived like animals in caves dug out of the ground. Days were blistering hot, nights bitterly cold. We suffered from malnutrition. The food brought in every day was not enough. People began to collapse and die. I became weaker and weaker each day.

One night I was awakened by the sound of a motor. I heard my name called several times: Yaacov Moseyewicz Egit! I hurried out of my shelter, bewildered and apprehensive. One of the drivers ordered me to gather whatever possessions I had and to get in a jeep. They drove for about one hundred miles to Koskoduk in the dead of night, where they told me that the director-general of the district wished to see me. It was almost midnight when we got there. Evidently the top brass worked late. As soon as we arrived, I was taken to the director's office. I must indeed have been a sorry sight—gaunt, filthy, my clothes in shreds. After one look, he gave me a requisition for a change of clothing and ordered me to come back the following morning.

The next day he told me that he had heard of me. I was considered to be an energetic, resourceful organizer. He needed my services. There were 10,000 workers scattered throughout his district and not enough food for them. Not far away there was water teeming with fish. There was no one to catch them; wild boar and other game roamed the woods—there was no one to hunt them.

"I'll give you an opportunity to organize a brigade that will provide food for my workers," he said. I replied that neither my father nor I had ever hunted or fished, that I knew nothing about such pastimes, but at a time of war whatever had to be done would be done. I would do my best.

Before long, I organized a brigade of hunters and fishermen that proved successful beyond my expectations in obtaining and distributing fresh meat and fish to the workers. In the summer of 1941, there was such a great heat wave in Kazakhstan that fish were actually left floundering on dry river banks. I hurriedly ordered every available man and woman to gather the fish in baskets and, after gutting and salting them right on the spot, to bury the fish in the cool ground until the catch was distributed.

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On my search for foodstuff deep in Kazakhstan, one of my first stops was a small settlement where three or four families had made their home. When they learned that I was looking for fish, they told me where we could catch them easily. I immediately shipped the fish sixty kilometres to Koskoduk. My reputation was considerably enhanced.

Wild pigs roamed in the forests where some armed deserters from the army made their homes. After receiving the approval of the authorities, I persuaded them to become part of my hunting brigade by offering prizes to the ones who shot the greatest number of pigs, and to avoid arguments we kept track by first marking the bullets so that the hunters who killed the pigs could be identified and rewarded. Transporting the product was a great problem. In the summer, trucks were impeded by deep shifting sand and in the winter by mud. I enlisted the help of the peasants who lived at points on the way to the railroad by offering twenty percent of the shipment to anyone who could provide transportation.

Life in that remote part of Kazakhstan was still very hard. The diet consisted mainly of fish. An occasional piece of bread was a rare treat. By the time I left there, I had lost about twenty pounds.

While I hunted in Kazakhstan, my wife Vita worked in a children's home in Koskoduk, where our son Richard went to kindergarten. Whenever I had a chance, I went to see them and took some food.

The authorities were pleased and I continued my work for about two years. In the meantime I applied several times to the military command for a transfer to active duty. When I was in Alma Ata, I had heard of the Nazi mass murder of Jews in Poland. I could not remain in Kazakhstan in comparative safety while my people were being killed. But it was not until 1944, when Kiev was liberated, that my request was granted and I was taken into a division of the Russian army known as the Second Ukrainian Front. Before I left, a special meeting was held in Koskoduk by the union to bid me farewell and I was presented with an official document attesting to my efforts in providing food for workers in time of war.

## CHAPTER FOUR: BACK HOME

I left Kazakhstan with an army contingent bound for Kiev. My first brush with death occurred as our train passed over the Damitzer Bridge before Kiev. Sporadic fighting was still going on and one minute after we crossed the bridge, the Nazis blew it up.

In Kiev, I found the chairman of my union, the secretary of the party and the mayor of Boryslaw, all of whom I had worked with before the war in 1941. It was the policy of the Russians, when taking over a newly liberated city, to form brigades headed by natives of the town who would resume their former positions and help organize civilian life. These brigades were part of the Second Ukrainian Front and I knew that now I was going home.

From Kiev, we began the long, difficult journey back, with each mile bringing me closer to my birthplace. Although not on the front lines, the roads along which we travelled were often shelled. On my way back to Lvov, I saw what the Germans did to the Jewish population in the towns and cities through which we passed and I lost all hope of finding anyone of my own family.

The first stop was Lvov. Despite periodic outbreaks of anti-Semitism, a vibrant Jewish community had flourished for centuries in Lvov, the third largest city in Poland. When the Germans captured the city in July 1941, the Jewish population was 150,000, including thousands of refugees who fled there from the Nazi-occupied western part of Poland. The Ukrainian nationalists welcomed the German troops and joined the invaders in the torture and murder of Jews. A mob attacked the Jews for three days; thousands were tortured and murdered.

Jews were shot in the "Petlura Action" and in August 1941, desecration and destruction of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries were carried out. In the vicinity of the city, labour camps were set up and few survived the inhuman conditions. One of the most infamous was the Janowska Road Camp, where a German armament works was established. This camp became, in effect, a death camp and transfer point for deportees to Belzec and other extermination camps.

The conditions prevailing in Lvov, namely a hostile Ukrainian population, a lack of forests for shelter and the absence of a local partisan movement, made organized Jewish resistance an impossibility, although there were isolated instances of resistance and individual heroism. Of the 150,000 Jews, only 3,500 remained when the Russians liberated the city in July 1944. Of these, only 820 were original residents. By the time I arrived in Lvov in 1944 with the army unit to which I was attached, a Jewish Committee had been established to help the survivors. I heard many horror stories. One of them was that prior to the German occupation of Galicia, the Ukrainian volunteers within the German army had appealed in propaganda broadcasts to Ukrainians in Galicia, to welcome the approaching soldiers—"not with flowers but with severed Jew heads." Later it was revealed that Metropolitan Sheptytsky saved the lives of more than 100 Jewish children by placing them into the care of nuns. There are in existence two major testimonies of Sheptytsky's attempts to rescue Jews: one by Rabbi David Kahana (now in Israel) who was himself saved by Sheptytsky and the other by Kurt Lewin, the son of Rabbi Ezekiel Lewin. As a result of Sheptytsky's efforts, some 150 Jews were sheltered and saved. Their rescue, initiated by Sheptytsky, was carried out by trusted priests and monks of the Ukrainian United Church, including Sheptytsky's brother, Ihumen Klementy, head of the Studite Order.

Sheptytsky's warm relations with Jewish religious and communal leaders were greatly appreciated in Jewish circles over the years. On his 70th birthday, the Lvov Jewish community published a greeting to him in its daily paper, *Chwila*. Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky, Archbishop of Lvov and head of the Ukrainian United Church for over half a century, died in November 1944 at the age of 79.

In the short time I was in Lvov, I made an effort to learn what had become of my personal friends. One of them, the talented and popular Yiddish poet and writer, Yaacov Szudrich, perished in a partisan action. The organizer of the partisans in Lvov and vicinity had been Dr. Mundek Horwitz, a longtime communist. Through intermediaries, pistols, grenades and ammunition were bought from the Germans and a group of thirty, among them Szudrich and students such as Yanka Gangel set out in two wagons to join the Horwitz partisans in the Broder Forest. This was the last road they travelled. The driver of the wagons, who was paid a great deal of money for guiding them, betrayed them. He led them to the Gestapo. In the official reports of the Nuremberg Trials concerning this

incident, no mention was made of the heroic defense put up by the betrayed group. Many of them died on the spot, among them my friend, Yaacov Szudrich.

Another friend of mine, Alter Kacyzne from Warsaw, a writer and dramatist, had also been in Lvov during the Russian regime. After the war broke out between Germany and the USSR, he was in a group driven by the Ukrainians to Tarnopol, and there, not far from the Jewish cemetery, he was beaten and stoned to death along with the others.

I was very fond of the Yiddish actress Esther Gruber. I remember her from the early 1930s when she was a member of the Yiddish Masque Theatre Group directed by Hoenig Luft in Lvov. She had all the attributes of a great actress—tall, slim, a beautiful face with huge expressive eyes, an upturned little nose, perfect teeth, reddish blond hair, a charming personality and a sweet voice with wonderful diction. The last time I met her was in 1940, when the Soviets were still in Lvov, where Esther was with the Ida Kaminska Theatre. She told me then how much she worried about her family and of her fears for the Jews in general. When the Russian-German war began, Esther would not leave her parents and remained in Lvov.

At the beginning of 1943, many Jews had been taken to the well-known Lvov Piaski Sands and shot. Esther was one of the group of women brought there from the Yanover camp in open trucks. They were ordered to strip naked to prevent any attempts to make a break and line up beside the long ditch that had been dug to receive their dead bodies. Before the command to fire was given, Esther broke out of the line and in a daring move, ran up to the Gestapo officer in command and asked him for a cigarette. The officer was taken aback at this unprecedented action and overwhelmed by the beauty of the woman standing naked before him. He fell in love on the spot, put her aside, gave her clothes and took her back with him to the Yanover Camp where he was stationed. Esther was the only one saved that day. When they reached the camp, he arranged for her to live in the Gestapo quarters with him. The Gestapo officer was so much in love with her that he gave in to all her requests and almost every day Esther begged him to release some Jewish person. She succeeded in saving the lives of many Jews in Lvov. She herself did not escape death. A day before the Soviet Army occupied Lvov, the Germans beat a hasty retreat. Esther's saviour, unable to take the Jewish girl with him, shot her with his own gun. She was twenty-seven years old.

We spent a few days in Lvov, then proceeded to Drohobycz. On my way from Lvov to Drohobycz, with a division of the Soviet Army, we passed through a forest where a band of retreating Germans started shooting at us. The Russians soon captured them and since I knew both German and Russian, I acted as the translator. As I was going through the papers of a German soldier, he pointed to a picture of a woman he was carrying and said, "That's my mother. Do you think I'll ever see her again?" I was enraged. "You Germans killed my mother," I shouted, "but you want to see your own mothers!" But I doubt that they ever did; the Russians made short work of them.

Drohobycz was only ten kilometers away from my final destination, Boryslaw. As I have outlined, it was the main centre and capital city of my district, where Jewish workers, merchants and famous artists, such as the painters Mauritz and Leopold Gottlieb, the bible illustrator Ephraim Moshe Lilien and the modern writer and artist Bruno Schulz had lived. The Jews of Drohobycz had suffered the same fate as those in other centres, pogroms and German massacres. The few survivors were mostly those who had worked in the oil refinery or had been hiding. I went to the house where my sister Genia used to live, but when I got there, there was no sign of the house. She had been taken to the Belzec crematorium with her two young children, where they perished.

I also made enquiries as to what happened to Bruno Schulz. Between 1939 until the war in 1941, Bruno Schulz taught art in Drohobycz high school. My wife's sister Paula Ingber, who survived the Holocaust and moved to Toronto with her family, was his student. I learned that a Gestapo officer, by the name Landau, who admired his art, had set Schulz to work in his house painting murals. For this he gave Schulz food and protection. Schulz was sick and frail, but worked with all his strength, hoping that his art would be his salvation and that he would live to see the liberation. It was not to be. Landau had had a Jewish dentist killed, whose patient had been another Gestapo man. Annoyed at Landau for the lost of his dentist, the Gestapo officer vowed to get even. "You killed my Jew, I'll kill yours," he said. One day in 1941, known as Black Thursday in the Drohobycz ghetto, Schulz was walking home with a loaf of bread under his arm and met the Gestapo officer. The German recognized him and without further ado shot him twice in the head.

Friends buried Schulz in the Jewish cemetery near the tombstones he had put up for his mother and father. The cemetery no longer exists.

Schulz's house still stands, but there is no plaque to say that a great artist and writer had once lived there. Bruno Schulz wrote in Polish but perished as a Jew, the same way as thousands of Jews in Drohobycz and vicinity did.

On the 7th of August, 1944, after one day in Drohobycz, I set out for Boryslaw, with a heavy heart, not knowing what I would find or whether any of my family would be alive. It was evening when I arrived. There had been recent fighting in Boryslaw and the bridge in the centre of the city was blown up, with the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other. The first thing I did was go to the house where I was born and which I had left only three years before. But the house was gone—the whole street had been completely destroyed.

After the Nazis took Boryslaw between June 30 and July 3, 1941, they gave a free hand to the Ukrainians in the Boryslaw-Drohobycz district. For a full three days the Ukrainians came from the villages and farms with axes, pitchforks, whatever came to hand, and attacked the Jewish population while the Germans observed the vicious pogrom. There was heavy rain during these three gruesome days, as if the heavens wept for Jewish blood that flowed. In three days in Drohobycz and Boryslaw, 900 Jews, men, women and children were brutally murdered and 360 badly wounded. There are witnesses to this pogrom—Koppel Holzman,<sup>4</sup> author of *Ziemia Bez Boga* (The Land Without God), Dr. S. Margolis, Dr. M. Dorenstrauch, the *Safer Hazikaron* of Boryslaw-Drohobycz, published in Israel, as well as the deposition in Yad Vashem, and the documents by eye-witnesses Zlata Baum, Blima Hamerman and Gina Wieser. Also my sister-in-law, Mrs. Paula Ingber, miraculously survived this pogrom. Bloodied and beaten, she lay among the dead bodies until she recovered and made her escape. The same things which happened in my town happened in hundreds of other towns and villages in Galicia. Many of the survivors hid in the forests, but even after the liberation, they were afraid to leave the bunkers as the Ukrainian *Bandera* bands<sup>5</sup> were still active in the region. With the help of Russian soldiers, I went into the forest and brought out some of the Jews hiding there, shouting loudly all the time in Yiddish, "Don't be afraid to come out. I am Jacob Egit. I came back with the Soviet Army to free you." Gradually, one by one, they began to come out of their hiding places.

The murder of the Boryslaw Jews had been carried out with cruel precision. In March 1942, the first transport of 1,000 Jews had left for

Belzec; in August 1942, 6,000 were sent to the same place. In February, 1943, the movie house was packed to the suffocation point with Jews and from there, all 600 were taken to the Jewish slaughterhouse, where a huge pit awaited them. They were shot, thrown into the pit and covered with earth. For several hours after, the earth kept heaving, since some of those shot did not die immediately.

The man responsible for the liquidation campaign of all the Jews in Galicia was Fritz Katzmann, who, under the name of Bruno Albrecht, lived in Germany until he died in 1957 of natural causes. In a Warsaw archive, a microfilm was found of a 90-page leather-bound document, which contained a report by Fritz Katzmann in which he wrote: "In June 30, 1943, Galicia was *Judenrein* (free of Jews). Of the 500,200 Galician Jews, 434,329 have been liquidated. There are still Jews left in 29 camps but these will soon be exterminated." Katzmann's report also listed all the belongings of value taken from the Jews.

The only person from my family I found was my nephew, Itzhak Egit, a shadow of the robust youth I remembered. He said that although his mother Esther survived as far as he knew, all the other members of my family had perished, my mother, father, three sisters, two brothers and all the children, most of them in the Belzec crematorium in 1942. Itzhak had escaped from a box car of a moving train on the way to Auschwitz and joined the partisans. In all of Boryslaw, 200 Jews were left from a population of 16,000.

The first of my conflicts with the Soviet authorities began right then in 1944 while I was still in Boryslaw. Among the survivors were a few youths whom the Russians immediately mobilized for active service in the Carpathian Mountains, a front where heavy fighting was still going on. I said that it was cruel to send them there. They had just emerged from the bunkers and were so weak they could scarcely walk. But the Soviets disregarded all my arguments with the spurious excuse that since these young Jews managed to survive the German occupation, they must have been collaborators.

At the first meeting of the city council, when the Russian authorities began the organization of normal civilian life, I was made responsible for organizing the food distribution for the region. But I felt that I could not remain in Boryslaw. For me, the city was a cemetery. Wherever I walked and wherever I looked, there was only heartbreak and the ghosts of the past. I was appalled to learn what happened to people whom I had known

intimately. One of these was Leon Hoffman, who was the leader of the group of Jewish partisans in the forest of Boryslaw. A Polish woodsman who roamed through the forests stumbled upon the place where the Jews were hiding and informed the Gestapo. The group moved to another location and Hoffman crept to the Pole's house one night and shot him through the head. For days, the Germans hunted Hoffman and finally captured him. They dragged him to the grounds of the Fanto Oil Company, summoned all the Jews from the ghetto to assemble there and in front of them, tried by torture to extract from him the new location where the Jews were hiding. They cut his fingers off one by one, cut off his toes, and gouged out his eyes before his comrades. His last words were of defiance. "Murderers, you will pay for this!" One of my last acts before leaving Boryslaw was to place a wooden marker in his memory on the spot where he died.

I knew that I could not work effectively in Boryslaw and requested a transfer to Drohobycz, which the authorities granted me a short time later. But while still in Boryslaw, I called meetings of survivors, urging them now that the war was over to start rebuilding their lives. On many occasions, when I saw their gaunt, tragic faces, I broke down. It was at one of these meetings that I was overjoyed to see a family friend, the late Leib Schwarcbard from Drohobycz, who told me that his daughter Clara and her baby girl Marysia, three sisters and her parents escaped from the ghetto and were hidden by a Polish family in the vicinity of Boryslaw. But because of the close confinement and malnutrition, Clara was in such poor physical condition that she could not stand on her swollen feet and was not able to come to the meeting.

I had known the Schwarcbard family for many years and had always been attracted to Clara, one of the most beautiful girls in Drohobycz. I believed that she shared my sentiments. Unfortunately my work always took me from one place to another and although I often thought of her, the years intervened and we went our separate ways. Clara had married, but her husband had disappeared with the army. I too had married, but the war which caused havoc throughout the world was also responsible for many personal upheavals and my marriage ended in divorce. Now, when Clara and I met again, we knew that we would spend the rest of our lives together. Vita, my first wife, who remarried, went to Israel after the war, where she had given birth to a son, Zev Koch. He was mortally wounded in the Six-Day War.

When I got to Drohobycz, I was assigned the duty of organizing cooperatives in the newly liberated region that would provide the various supplies required by the Army.

One day, I had to go to Mikolaev which was one hundred kilometers from Lvov. We had to stop several times on the way because bands of Ukrainians were sniping at any Russian soldiers and Jews they found along the road. I finally arrived late at night and went directly to the home of the man I was to work with. Since I was dreadfully tired, he suggested that I spend the night at his house and we would conduct our business in the morning. I gratefully accepted some refreshments and his offer of a bed and went to sleep.

In the middle of the night, there was a banging on the door and three members of a Ukrainian group, carrying guns and flashlights broke into the house and demanded that I go with them. I knew very well what the consequence would be and hanging on for dear life to the bench on which I was sitting, refused to budge. I spoke to them in Polish so they would not think I was Russian and told them that if they intended to kill me, they should do so right here. The owner of the house and his wife begged them to spare my life and after taking my money and clothes, they left me. It turned out that their daughter who was a member of the Ukrainian underground, had informed them that I was staying the night with her parents. The owner of the house pleaded with me not to report to the Russians what had happened and offered to give me money and clothes. I refused.

In the morning, when I arrived at Russian headquarters, I was promptly arrested for breaking regulations by not reporting to the authorities immediately upon arrival in the city. However, they telephoned to Drohobycz and after confirming that I was in Mikolaev on official army business released me the same day. That evening, I learned that four Jews had been killed by the Ukrainians the previous night. I would have been the fifth. It was the night that the first streak of white appeared in my hair.

Before its return to Warsaw, the seat of the new Polish Government at this time was in Lublin, which was also the centre of Jewish life. When friends there learned that I had survived and was in Drohobycz, they sent a car for me. Then, when I had obtained all the necessary papers, I joined them towards the middle of April. At the Peretz Club in Lublin, I found Jews from many cities in Poland, survivors from the

ghettos, the bunkers and the forests and among them, some old friends.

Not long after, the Polish government and the Central Committee of Polish Jews moved to Warsaw. In May, 1945, I arrived in Warsaw, to find a city that was mustering its energies and resources to go on with the business of living, except for that enclave of dead—the ghetto to which I made my way on a sunny spring afternoon. Even now, forty years later, I can feel the impact of the despair that overwhelmed me as I surveyed the devastation.

A deathly silence prevailed—the quiet of a cemetery, of a charnel house. Not a human being was to be seen, no sound of a human voice heard in that desolate waste. Not even the skeletons of houses remained standing and no sign of the 143 streets in the ghetto which had once teemed with life. Nothing but mounds of rubble, stone and dust met my eyes from horizon to horizon, with a rusted pot here and there, or a burnt toy lying in the debris—pathetic remnants of lives brutally curtailed. Only the Gensher Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street, although overgrown with weeds and abandoned to the elements, remained more or less intact, as if by a miracle. The Nazis had wanted to mine it but the swift advance of the Soviet Army left them no time to complete this last bit of destruction.

I walked amidst the ruins all afternoon, so numbed by horror I could not even shed a tear for the heroes who, on this blood-steeped earth had defied the Nazi beasts until the bitter end. "What is the meaning of life," I thought, "in such a world, where murder and satanic evil can flourish? Where was the rest of the world? Why was it silent and passive when the Jews of Europe were being systematically murdered?"

For hundreds of years, the Jews of Poland had gathered the money with which to build synagogues and yeshivas through the land. They supported their rabbis, teachers, writers and scholars. They published holy books and provided funds for the scribes who wrote hundreds of Torahs. Even some with strong religious beliefs could not help crying out, "How could this happen?" How could this great outpouring of Jewish thought, culture and religious faith be consumed in the flames of the Nazi holocaust."

It became late. The blue sky which looked down indifferently upon this scene of desolation gradually darkened. The sun began to set as I slowly returned to my quarters to spend a sleepless night.

Early next morning, I set out for the offices of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, recently relocated from Lublin to Warsaw, which after

the liberation once again became the capital of Poland.

The Committee was formed after the establishment of the new Polish Democratic Government on July 22, 1944. Composed of representatives of all political factions, the new government had issued a manifesto proclaiming freedom for all. It made special mention of the Jews, stating that:

"The Jews, who were so brutally oppressed by the occupation, will now be assured of the right to rebuild their lives in full equality and justice."

Good relations with other countries was important for the new government. Poland desperately needed foreign aid to rebuild the devastated country and strove to make a favourable impression upon the outside world. What better means could be used to promulgate the benevolent, democratic nature of the new government than to let the strong voice of Jews, now free and equal Polish citizens, be heard throughout the land and abroad, particularly since the Poles were convinced that Jews exerted great influence in the West. In an attempt to obtain as much foreign capital as possible, the new benign status of Polish Jews was constantly stressed in the national press and to all outside agencies.

The Central Committee represented Polish Jews who had survived in the bunkers of the ghetto, in the forests and the 200,000 who had found refuge in the Soviet Union. It was comprised of members from all Jewish political parties whose representatives were still alive—General Zionists, Bundists, Poale Zionists (leftists and rightists), Shomer Hatzair and so on. Most influential members of the Committee, playing the main role in formulating policy, were representatives of the Polish Workers Party (PPR). Eventually the same nucleus formed the Regional Committees of Polish Jews in other centres where there were still Jewish populations.

The purpose of the Central Committee of Polish Jews was to rebuild Jewish life in Poland and to normalize it. It was incumbent upon its members to express the feelings of the surviving Jews, to care for their interest, to represent and defend them. It was to be the spokesman for the Jewish population in dealings with the Polish government and outside agencies. For this purpose, the Central Committee established many separate departments to deal with every need and contingency of Jewish life—social help, health care, child care, education, housing, culture, repatriation and finance. Specific departments were responsible for the material needs of the Jewish population—food, shelter and financial

assistance. The Youth Department concerned itself with welfare and productive lives for young people, while the Child Welfare Department established institutes for young children left without homes or family after the war. A Jewish Historical Institute, a Central Jewish Library, even academic and vocational trade schools were established by the Department of Education.

There was a department that worked to complete the registration of survivors and help them contact relatives throughout the world, and special committees to gather and document statistical evidence of Nazi crimes against Jews and to publicize in Polish and foreign press the existing situation of Jews in Poland. Other departments dealt with the return to productive work of the Jewish population in the factories, trades and cooperative ventures, and helping repatriates establish themselves.

Jewish members of the Polish Workers Party, who occupied the influential positions in the Committee (and who set the tone for Jewish life) had three differing views on how to proceed with reconstruction. The first view, that of a group of assimilated Jews who were also on the top rungs of the new Polish government, maintained that there was no place for Jewish national life in the new Poland. Jews should assimilate completely or leave the country. The second view was that although the Jewish masses must, indeed, be integrated into the common structure of a democratic Polish society, they must for a time be allowed to maintain their Jewish culture until eventually the need for it would disappear. The third group, which even before the war had fought and suffered for the right of Jews to preserve Jewish culture and language, maintained that surely now Jews could find a permanent place in the progressive new Poland without denying their Jewish identity and that they could live freely without persecution and discrimination alongside their fellow countrymen as Jews and loyal Polish citizens.

Upon my arrival at the Central Committee, I met Michal Mirsky, a former captain in the Polish army and now a member of the Central Committee. I knew Mirsky from before the war and he remembered me from the time when I was secretary of the *Algemeine Yiddishe Arbets Partei*. He was a well known journalist. He introduced me to the other members of the Committee. At the next meeting they decided that I too should be co-opted into membership of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland. There I had the pleasure of meeting the chairman of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, Dr. Emil Sommerstein, a well known Zionist. It was for

me personally an emotional experience. I remembered Dr. Sommerstein from my days in Lvov, when he had been the foremost member of the Jewish community, a leading Zionist. He was as well respected by the Poles. From 1922 until the outbreak of World War II, he was considered by his colleagues as one of the greatest legal minds and parliamentarians of his time. I used to come into contact with him at conferences that dealt with manifestations against the anti-Semitism prevalent among students in Lvov, at which he spoke out boldly and brilliantly in defense of Jewish rights. While in Warsaw, I learned of his experiences during the war.

The road along which Emil Sommerstein had travelled to our meeting in 1945 had been a thorny one and the painful years had greatly affected his health. He was now an old man with a long, white beard, and so frail he needed the support of a cane. When the Germans bombed Lvov at the outbreak of war, his friends urged him to save himself and his family by fleeing to Roumania. He refused to leave.

"I was never a deserter," he said, "and will remain at my post with my people." When the Russian military entered Lvov, he felt he had nothing to fear. He was a liberal and knew he was innocent of any crimes. On the contrary, as a lawyer he had often defended political prisoners in the Polish courts. But one day towards the end of September 1939, NKVD (KGB) officers came to his home and summarily whisked him away, without even allowing him time to put on his coat and hat, despite the pleas of his wife. It was a month before his wife and daughter learned that he had been taken to Brygidkis, the worst prison in Lvov, where he was kept for thirteen months. From there, he was moved from jail to jail. While in the notorious Butirka Prison in Moscow, his sentence was pronounced—eight years imprisonment as a counter-revolutionary.

The trial was conducted in his absence; he could not defend himself. The interrogations he endured were frightful. Although not physically tortured, he was subjected to the psychological methods so effectively employed by the NKVD that prisoners would confess to crimes never committed just to gain a little sleep. Always at night, night after night, Dr. Sommerstein was brought before the interrogators and questioned until he reached the point of collapse. Taken back to his cell, he would fall exhausted onto the cot, but no sooner were his eyes closed in sleep, he was awakened and dragged off for another session. This process was repeated time and again night after night.

Even before the Butirka Prison in Moscow, Dr. Sommerstein was physically broken. He had already spent time in nine different jails, where he had sat with hardened criminals in indescribable filth, covered with lice and bedbugs. The cold and dampness in the cells affected his feet so that they swelled and became infected to such an extent that he could barely stand. The system of total isolation and silence, except during interrogations, was employed. A prisoner was not allowed to open his mouth to speak. The isolation, the sense of being forsaken by the outside world, the graveyard quiet worked upon his nerves to such a degree that he felt he was going insane. By the time he was transferred to a prison in the Urals, from where he was finally freed, he was on the verge of complete physical and emotional collapse.

On July 30th, 1941, an agreement between the then Prime Minister of Poland's Government in exile, General Sikorsky and the Soviet ambassador to England, Y. J. Majski, was signed in London. Known as the Pact of July 30, it resulted in the special decree issued by the Soviets on August 12th, 1941, granting amnesty to the 800,000 Poles who were in Russia, including the Polish Jews. But Dr. Sommerstein did not leave the Urals until 1944. There he was in the Urals, alone and in ill health. The crippled state of his feet prevented him from travelling, beside which, where and to whom could he go? While in prison, he had learned of the tragedy that befell the Jewish people in Poland and, believing that his family had also perished, he broke down completely and no longer wished to live. As a sign of mourning, he did not shave or cut his hair, and kept his long beard until the end of his life.

Immediately after his release, the NKVD repeatedly called on him to apply for a Soviet passport. He refused to do so despite their threats that without a passport, he would never be able to leave Russia. Eventually events took an unexpected turn in his favour. One day a telegram was delivered to him from Wanda Wasilevska, a famous Polish writer, who was chairman of the Organization of Polish Patriots in the USSR during the war, summoning him to Moscow without delay. The authorities realized he was too weak to travel alone, an envoy was dispatched a few days later to escort him on the trip. From him, Dr. Sommerstein learned that a Committee of Polish Patriots in Russia (ZPP) had been established in Moscow in November 1941, that a Polish government was being formed in the U.S.S.R. and that he had been named as a member of the future cabinet. This news struck him like a thunderbolt. He felt he could

not undertake such an office; he was ill, sick at heart and could not contribute much, he argued, to a land where there were no longer any Jews. But despite his protests, he was prevailed upon to accept the post.

Upon his arrival in Moscow, he found that the NKVD had already prepared his passport. He was accommodated in a first-class hotel, and introduced to his new colleagues in the future Polish government. The Russians decreed that the first seat of the new Polish government would be in Chelm and, as his personal gift, Stalin ordered that new, identical blue suits be made for all its members.

Two days before the Polish ministers left for Chelm, a banquet was given for them at the Kremlin, with Stalin presiding. Stalin proposed toast after toast to the success of the new Polish government and the health of its ministers. Dr. Sommerstein was next to Lazar Kaganovich, a high-ranking Jewish member of the Politburo, who, in their conversation avoided the subject of the Jewish problem throughout the entire evening, and ignored Dr. Sommerstein's questions regarding the Kremlin's policy towards the Jews. When Sommerstein asked him to introduce him to Stalin, Kaganovich pretended not to hear. Finally Stalin rose from the table and everyone followed suit. Dr. Sommerstein, leaning on his cane, limped over to him and engaged him in a short conversation. To Dr. Sommerstein's question as to how he felt about the murder of the millions of Jews, Stalin replied, "Revenge." When asked about his attitude to Eretz Israel, Stalin answered that he was very sympathetic to the concept of Palestine as a Jewish state.

On July 27, 1944, the newly elected members of the Polish government were flown to Chelm. Among the first to deplane was the Minister of Security, Radkewitch. A beautiful young woman approached him and enquired whether he knew about the fate of Dr. Emil Sommerstein. It was Sommerstein's daughter, who had survived and was now living in Chelm. A heart rending scene ensued when she saw her father alight from the plane. He was not only alive but returning to Poland as a minister in the new government. Everyone was moved by the emotional scene as father and daughter embraced in a flood of tears. From then on, father and daughter were never apart. From his daughter, Dr. Sommerstein learned what had happened to her and his wife after his arrest in Lvov. They were thrown out of their home, deprived of all their citizenship rights and hounded from place to place. When they eventually heard that he had died in a Soviet prison, Mrs. Sommerstein died of grief.

From Chelm, the Polish government moved to Lublin and then to its permanent seat in Warsaw, where Dr. Sommerstein became Minister for War Reparations and Chairman of the Central Committee of Polish Jews. Reports issued by his office, based upon meticulously researched documents and all available material, revealed that the Nazis had murdered thirty percent of world Jewry, seventy percent of European Jews and ninety-eight percent of Jews living in Poland during the German occupation. The losses were calculated at \$4 billion in gold.

Dr. Sommerstein played a great role in the new Poland and helped write the new constitution and laws which promised freedom and justice for all. The Polish government made full use of his expertise, his many years of parliamentary experience and knowledge. But at the same time, he never forgot his duties towards the Jews. Just as before the war, despite many difficulties and opposition, he had fought for the rights of the Jews and attacked Polish anti-Semites, he now just as vehemently spoke out against all manifestations of anti-Semitism and demanded the new constitution contain all the rights of citizenship for the Jewish people.

In 1945, a delegation of the Central Committee of Polish Jews was selected to visit the United States and Canada on a mission to acquaint the Americans with the situation of Polish Jews and obtain financial assistance for them. Dr. Sommerstein was its leading member, and addressed thousands of Americans and Canadian Jews at numerous meetings. He came back for another tour about a year later, but just as he was to leave New York for Poland, he became seriously ill and never made the return journey. His daughter, Mira, joined him and remained at his side throughout the years of his illness, until his death in May 24, 1957. Years later, I learned that Dr. Sommerstein's condition was further aggravated by what he perceived as the indifference of the American Jewish community towards him. So died one of Poland's most noble Jewish personalities.

## CHAPTER FIVE: AN INVENTORY OF THE DESTRUCTION

At the Central Committee of Polish Jews in Warsaw, I learned that in May 1945, of the three million Jews in Poland, only 42,662 were now registered with all the Jewish Committees in Poland. The destruction had been appalling.

For instance, in a city like Radom, where 30,000 Jews lived until the war, only 263 were left after the Holocaust. In Boryslaw only 200 of the pre-war population of 16,000 survived, by hiding; over 200 had come back from Russia. In Kielce, where the pre-war Jewish population was 20,942, only 201 survived. In the whole Kielce region, of a pre-war population of 311,000, only 6,000 remained. Of the total number of Jewish survivors in Poland, almost half, 20,000, were sick, physically and emotionally debilitated and needed regular medical care.

The Central Committee gave me the opportunity to tour some of the towns of central Poland where I could observe the conditions under which the *She'arit Hapleita*—the remnants of Polish Jewry—were living. After a disheartening journey of ten days, I returned to Warsaw, distressed by what I saw, and pessimistic about the possibility of rebuilding Jewish life in the country. Many I had interviewed wished to emigrate, to leave behind the soil that was saturated with Jewish blood, to escape a country over which anti-Semitism hovered.

For me, such a decision was hard to make. Before the war, I had been involved with the movement that dreamt of a new Poland, where the Jews would benefit from the concept of justice and equality for all, with no nationalistic or social oppression because of race or religion. I had fought and suffered for this new Poland and could not easily relinquish it.

The opinion held by the Jews in the ghettos was that anti-Semitism had increased during the war. This belief was strengthened by various manifestations of Polish opinion. In conversation, some Poles would affirm that after the liberation of the country, there would arise a serious problem of expropriated Jewish property.

The sharpest accusation against the Poles for their attitude towards the Jews came from Mordechai Tennenbaum, one of those who created the Jewish underground movement in occupied Poland. He edited the clandestine papers *News* and *Der Ruf* (The Call) and he was the commander of the Jewish combat organization in the Bialystok ghetto. He saw on the Polish side "an attitude of hostility, anti-Semitism and extortion" and expressed his astonishment that there were still people "naive enough to believe in the humanity of this nation which rejoices that Hitler has cleared Poland of the Jews for them." He expressed the belief that if it had not been for the aid of the Poles, whether active or passive, the Germans would never have dared to do what they did.

Jews were not the only ones who expressed such views. Some Polish authors were also of this opinion. Aurelia Wylenzynska,<sup>6</sup> who was active in the underground, aided persecuted Jews and gave shelter in her flat to Jewish officers of the Polish army, recorded in her daily notes: "A wave of anti-Semitism has engulfed the Polish people" and "we are surrounded by a nest of vipers, characters from the underworld of crime."

What was the reaction of western Europe, especially in Denmark? There, the Danish population had hidden Jews on a mass scale, considering this not only humanitarian but also the duty of citizens who opposed the German invaders. The same thing happened in Holland. Dutch Jews were able to hide in homes of the local population.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Polish Jews who went into hiding during the war. Historians estimate twenty-five or thirty thousand. In Warsaw, approximately fifteen thousand Jews were sheltered by about two to three thousand Polish families. If we take into account that these two or three thousand families, acting with the knowledge and approval of their nearest relatives, we reach the conclusion that at least ten to fifteen thousand Polish families in Warsaw were helping to hide Jews.

My wife Clara, our daughter Mary and her family of thirteen were hidden by Polish friends and survived. The bravery and humanity of these good Polish people must be lauded. It is written in the Talmud, "He who saves one life saves the whole world."

While in Warsaw, I learned that a foreign delegation, together with representatives from the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, in which I was included, would visit Belzec, site of a German extermination camp.

A small Polish town in Lvov district, Belzec became part of German occupied territory after the partition of Poland between Germany and the

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Soviet Union. In 1940 Himmler decided to set up a labour camp there utilizing Jewish conscripts from Lublin, Warsaw, Radom and Galicia. The labourers worked under abominable conditions, with thousands dying from overwork, hunger, disease and brutality. When Belzec was converted into an extermination camp in 1942, with its crematorium belching smoke, it was done under a veil of secrecy. The horror was not realized by the Jews in the ghettos until rumours began to filter in from the outside world.

Initially, the Nazis had said that the Jews were being sent away for resettlement, but none were ever heard from again. The first mention of Belzec as an extermination camp occurred in Nazi documents dated March 17th, 1942. At that time, deportations began from Lublin and vicinity, east Galicia and subsequently thousands of Jews began arriving from Germany, Czechoslovakia and Roumania. More than 600,000 people died in Belzec, including some 2,000 non-Jews.

Frightful facts began to reach the ghettos, of packed trains arriving at the Belzec station and returning empty; of the stench from mounds of corpses reported by peasants in the area. Some tried to escape from the trains by jumping through holes gouged out of the walls of a car or a broken window, but were mowed down by SS guards. Most of those who did manage to survive were found by Ukrainians, who either killed them, or escorted them to the Ukrainian police. Death brigades of 500 Jews were maintained in the camp at all times and forced by the Nazis to perform the grisly task of pulling out the gold teeth from the mouths of the corpses, evaluate everything taken from the prisoners and dispose of the bodies. When their work was completed, they were shot, their bodies burned in the crematorium. When in 1944 it became evident to the Germans that the Soviet armies were advancing, the camp was dismantled and evidence of its gruesome activities destroyed.

Early one morning, our group left on the pilgrimage to Belzec. All the roads were infested with bands of Ukrainian and Polish anti-Semites. We travelled in a convoy with an armed escort in front and another at the rear. When we arrived, we found that although everything had been destroyed by the Nazis before they left, some Poles were scavenging on the site like hyenas, poking around in the earth hoping to find a piece of jewellery, a gold tooth, anything inadvertently left behind by the Nazis. When they saw us approaching, they ran away. We were appalled by the sight and before going back to Warsaw, went to the mayor of the city

and demanded that a fence be erected around the area and the entrance to the site prohibited so that such desecration could no longer occur. He promised to comply with our demand.

We spent somber hours on the grounds, gathering some stones for a temporary marker which we put up and said the Kadish. The return to Warsaw was passed in silence. We were all so emotionally drained that speech was impossible and, exhausted, we drove back without stopping.

On May 10, 1945, the Central Committee received a telegram with the news that there were about 10,000 Jewish young men and women in the newly recovered territories of Silesia, survivors who had been freed by the Russian army from the Nazi concentration camps in Lower Silesia. Excited by the news, I applied for permission to go to Lower Silesia to meet with the survivors. The decision was made to send me and the late Itzhak (Antek) Zukerman, deputy-leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and a member of the Jewish Central Committee, by special airplane to the region. Our arrival there was a great event for the *Katsetlers*, former camp inmates, and moving for us. I will never forget our first night in Reichenbach (Dzierzonow) which was the headquarters of the *Katsetlers* at the time.

After World War II, Lower Silesia was returned to the Poles. A Slavic region from the earliest days of recorded history, Silesia had also a vibrant Jewish community. As far back as the 10th century, there were Jewish settlers in Silesia and between the 12th and 14th centuries, their settlements expanded considerably. In 1157, the German Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, invaded the province and by the 13th century, the Germanization of Silesia was consolidated. The German colonists brought in their wake, economic prosperity, German laws, the German language and ultimately, after many invasions, Silesia came definitely under the yoke of Germany by the Peace Settlement of 1763. But the Polish influence, nourished by the Church, remained a potent factor culturally and linguistically. Now, in 1945, after centuries of German occupation, as a result of the liberation, this rich, productive land became once again, an integral part of the Polish Republic.

Lower Silesia encompasses 27,000 square kilometers. In 1939, the population had numbered 3,237,000. It is bordered by East Germany on the West, Czechoslovakia on the south. Its temperate climate is ideal for agriculture and the forests cover thirty-five percent of the area. The larger cities were Wroclaw (Breslau), Walbrzych (Waldenburg), Lignice, Jelenia

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Gora, but all centres, large and small, enjoyed the amenities of urban architecture, electricity and gas heating. The whole region was cultivated and industrialized. Before the war, a significant percentage of the male population was engaged in coal mining. In addition to coal, there were other rich mineral deposits in Lower Silesia, such as nickel, magnesium, potash, copper, silver and gold. Rich in natural resources, Lower Silesia had developed variegated industries which made it a major economic centre—textile mills, foundries, breweries, and lumberyards. Most of this territory was untouched by the war, except for the city of Wroclaw (Breslau).

Thousands of Jews lived in Lower Silesia before the Second World War. Thirty thousand Jews lived in Breslau alone—one of the largest communities in Germany, with many Jewish institutions. In medieval times, the Jewish population of Breslau was large enough to support three synagogues. The famous Rabbinical Seminary was located in Breslau and it was there that the great Jewish historian, Heinrich Graetz, lived, worked and died. After the war, some signs of former Jewish life still remained in Breslau—the large Storch synagogue, a community building and the Jewish cemeteries. There were Jews in a number of other Lower Silesian cities, such as Waldenburg, Reichenbach (Dzierzonow), Swidnitz and Lignice. Most Lower Silesian Jews were merchants but some owned factories and operated various businesses. There were also many Jewish doctors, lawyers and professors. The Jewish intelligentsia was German speaking and assimilated, but they still had a strong interest in and understanding of Judaism.

With the coming of Hitler, repressive actions began. A few saved themselves by emigrating, the remainder suffered. A small number of Jews and *mishlinge* (half-Jews) lived through the war by hiding as non-Jews, particularly in the larger cities; the majority perished.

The liquidation of the Jewish population began in 1941. The Nazis began to ship the Jews to Maidanek, Belzec and Auschwitz in transports of 1,000 at one time. Each Jew, before being sent to the death camps, was forced to sign a declaration that he was an enemy of Germany.

In Breslau, a small number of Jews remained. When the Nazis became aware that the city could fall to the Soviet army, they jailed those Jews who were left. Russian advance was swift; several hundred survived.

As soon as war between Germany and Poland broke out, the Nazis began the construction of concentration camps and crematoria for Jews

of Poland. All of Lower Silesia was covered by a network of death camps. The largest extermination camp and crematorium was in Gross-Rosen. The torture, the forced labour and suffering was the same as in Auschwitz and Maidanek. Inmates worked under horrendous conditions breaking up stones for a new highway. As soon as they were too weak to work, they became food for the crematoria. There were camps near Rychbach, Waldenburg, Klempendorf, Strigoff and Grayditz for Jewish prisoners. In Bielava, in the textile factory, Flechtner, there was a camp for Jewish girls and in Grossmoslovitz and near Breslau another.

Thousands died of typhus and other diseases. Particularly frightful was the dreadful women's camp in Ludwigsdorf, where the Germans built a large munitions factory. The young Jewish women and girls worked there with picric acid, phosphoric acids and the death gas cyclon without masks or protective garments. They became impregnated with chemicals. Their skins turned all colours, red, green, blue and yellow. Stomachs ulcerated, lacerated with festering wounds, they were unable to eat or drink and they died within a few weeks. The Nazis had no difficulty in finding replacements. In the beautiful countryside of Ludwigsdorf, there is a mass grave where more than 500 Jewish girls are buried.

There is an equally lovely highway, shaded with elm trees, running from Wroclaw through Lignice to Berlin. It was built in the years 1940 to 1942 and every inch of it is steeped in the blood of thousands of Jewish prisoners who were mobilized in a special work unit. Travellers now enjoying the highway give no thought to the manner in which it was built by the slave labour of Jews who perished along the way. The highway from the Czech border at Gershtapusta (Vista Gisdorf) to Bielawa was also constructed by Jews who perished while building it.

Approximately 20,000 Jews found their last resting place in the mass graves of Gershtapusta. In the concentration camps of Lower Silesia were mostly Jews from Katowitz, Dombrowa, Sosnovitz and other centres, the majority of them young people—more than 50,000 inmates. There were also Jews who were transported from Holland, France, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Most of them perished. The earth of Lower Silesia was fertilized with the blood of tens of thousands of Jewish men, women and children.

In early May 1945, there were still about 10,000 Jews in the camps. The battle was coming closer and their hearts leaped with hope as they listened to the sound of artillery on the fronts. Breslau was surrounded

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by the Soviet Army, the fighting could be sensed in the camps and the prisoners felt that freedom was near. But although the Nazis knew a humiliating defeat awaited them, they still did not release the inmates and continued torturing and working them to death. The SS had received an order from Himmler to kill every single Jew remaining in the camps, but the lightning speed of the Russian and Polish armies advance prevented them from completing this diabolical task. The Nazis knew the day of judgement had arrived. Fear of retribution frightened them and the SS men, the camp commanders, the guards and even German civilians fled in panic, leaving behind their booty. The SS and camp personnel who did not manage to escape received the punishment they deserved.

After the liberation, the Jewish survivors in Reichenbach (now Dzierzonow) formed a committee headed by Shimon Balicki, a former union activist from Dombrowa, who, at time of writing, lives in Israel. They sent a telegram to Warsaw, informing the Central Committee of Jews in Poland that there they were, alive and free. Among members of the committee were I. Eisenberg Shanya Scheinberg and Dr. Rosenberg.

The former victims of the Nazis extracted their vengeance on the spot. The homes, clothes and food left behind by the Nazis were distributed to the survivors. Factories, farms and businesses that were intact became their property. Yesterday's victims who were only "numbers" now dressed in clothes left by the Germans and became masters not only of their own lives but also of the material possessions of those who had wished to exterminate them. Though emerging from the camps three-quarters dead, starved, frightened and exhausted, the survivors were consumed by one overwhelming desire for vengeance, vengeance for what they had suffered, vengeance for the murder of their mothers, fathers and brothers, for the deaths of their violated sisters. The Nazis had good reason to fear their former victims.

## CHAPTER SIX:

### A NEW LIFE FOR JEWS IN SILESIA

It was in the first days of June, 1945 that my friend, the late Itzhak Zukerman and I came to Lower Silesia. My plan was to build a new life upon the soil where Hitler had wished to eradicate the last trace of Polish Jewry. I was haunted by the thought that here, in this land which the Germans had cultivated for so many years, the Jews could exact their retribution and justice and could repudiate Hitler's "final solution" by making this former German territory a Jewish settlement. Here they could begin a new life, since their former homes in the towns and villages were destroyed and there was no going back. Once again, a vibrant chapter of Jewish history could be written on Polish soil. Here especially, where the countryside and urban centres were undamaged by war, was the ideal site for Jewish resettlement. A thousand years ago, Jews were pioneers in this province of the Polish empire. The Jewish tradesmen, artisans, farmers and merchants had formed a link between the East and West. They lit the way for other Jews who found refuge there after being dispersed by the crusaders. The Polish noblemen who had travelled west compelled the Poles to travel with them and this move also brought the Jewish masses from the east who survived the pogroms. Now I felt this liberated Polish land, where Jews had ancient ties, would be the ideal place for a great centre of Jewish life in a new postwar Poland—for the rebirth of a Jewish settlement.

I recall my discussions with Antek Zukerman the day after we arrived in Rychbach. My plan was to establish a Yiddish *Yishuv* in Lower Silesia. I told him that in my travels through Poland and in my talks with many survivors, I found many of them discouraged and demoralized. They wanted not only to leave the country but to leave their Jewishness behind them, to escape from themselves and the horrors they had endured. For those Jews and many others who would return from Siberia and other parts of Russia, Lower Silesia could be the first stop on the road to rehabilitation, here Jews could regain their strength and self-respect by reasserting their identity.

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Zukerman did not support my idea. As an active Zionist, he could conceive of a Jewish homeland only in Palestine, where he was convinced a Jewish State would eventually be established. Although he listened to me carefully, nothing could induce him to help build a new Jewish life in Poland, in the same land where millions of Jews perished.

I contended that we, the survivors, as a collective, an organized entity, had a historic duty to nullify Hitler's plan of a *Judenrein* Europe. The Yiddish Yishuv in Poland had been the strongest, most colourful and most fruitful in the world. Without a Jewish population in Poland, the existence of a Jewish population in the rest of Europe would not be possible. Together with the repatriated Jews from Russia and the survivors, we would have a quarter of a million Jews in Poland and could play a great role in cementing European Jewry. Hitler's plans for a Europe without Jews would not be realized.

The problem of physical health was of paramount urgency. Camp inmates suffered from lung diseases—tuberculosis, asthma, and were fortunate that in Lower Silesia there were many famous sanatoria where we could treat these patients. These included the Reinhartz Sanatorium, Duszyniki, Solel, Kudowa and others.

Filled with hope and enthusiasm, assured that the Polish government would support the rehabilitation of surviving Polish Jews, I threw myself into the work of helping to establish the Jewish settlement. I worked for sixteen hours a day and spent the nights writing notes on all that had been seen, heard and discussed. It was these notes that later helped me write my presentation to the Polish government and formed the basis of my book, in Yiddish, *Tzu A Nai Leben* (To A New Life), published in 1947 in Wroclaw.

My ideas began to develop in flesh and blood. I went to Warsaw with the first delegation of survivors from Lower Silesia to present my plan to the Central Committee of Polish Jews. We were gratified at the warmth and enthusiasm with which our delegation and proposals were received. The President of the Jewish Central Committee, Dr. Emil Sommerstein, said to us: "In Lower Silesia, a new chapter in Jewish history can be written by the survivors of the death camps. Through the newly open window in Lower Silesia, Jews can look out on the world and breathe freely."

Five weeks after the liberation, on June 17, 1945, the first conference of Lower Silesia survivors was convened at Rychbach. Fifty delegates attended from the cities where committees had already been established.

Before proceeding with the problems of building a Jewish settlement, the memory of those who did not live to see the day was honoured at a march organized by the delegates to the nearest Jewish mass grave in Rychbach, upon which flowers were placed.

The conference took place in one of the largest building in Rychbach, which later became the headquarters of the Central Jewish Committee for Lower Silesia. The occasion was festive, the rooms decorated with flowers and Yiddish slogans. The words of the Russian hero, Captain Borosov, who attended as the representative of the Red Army and addressed the delegates, were relevant. "You are an unusual people, you Jews," he said. "I just freed a great many of you from concentration camps. A short while ago you were sick, starved, three-quarters dead, yet here you sit at your conference with eyes aglow, full of life, transformed, and already you speak of culture, schools, child care and theatre. An unusual people indeed—such a nation will never perish."

A resolution was unanimously adopted at the conference to form the first Central Committee of Polish Jews in Lower Silesia, with myself as chairman, Moishe Linkowsky, secretary (he later went to Argentina); and executive members, the late Dr. Yaacov Rosenberg, Shimon Balicki, Hanka Levine, Israel Eisenberg and Shanya Scheinberg (almost all of whom are, at the time of writing, in Israel).

We were full of confidence and hope. There was such potential for this development of a flourishing Jewish settlement in this region where the economy was both agrarian and highly industrial. German management and skilled workers in the industries and the factories would all be replaced by Jews and we believed that in a short time, 20,000 Jewish survivors from all of Poland, as well as repatriates from Russia, could be settled in Lower Silesia.

At the conference, I presented a paper outlining the program upon which the future of the Jewish settlement could be built. After a day's discussion, a memorandum to the Polish government requesting its cooperation in our endeavours was unanimously approved.

Shortly after I led a delegation to Warsaw to present the memorandum to the Ministry of Public Administration, where we were received by the Minister of the Interior, Edward Ochab. Our memorandum stated:

**"Lower Silesia has become the liberated camp prisoners' home. Here they suffered, here they shed their blood. At this moment of**

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the German defeat, the former prisoners undertook to guard the factories and workshops, proclaiming their Polish citizenship. They bought the right of citizenship in Lower Silesia with their own blood and sweat." The memorandum requested the Polish government:

- 1) To include the urban and rural settlement of the Jews in Lower Silesia in the general repatriation plan and grant them privileges reserved for repatriates.
- 2) Reserve for the Jewish Committee the right to designate the place of settlement and to offer facilities for transportation and to supply food, clothing and tools for Jewish repatriates.
- 3) Make available for the Jewish Committee quick communication services.
- 4) Instruct major and minor administrators of the first and second order not to interfere with the carrying out of the repatriation plans.
- 5) To make available food sufficient for the maintenance of the repatriates.
- 6) To make it possible for Jewish repatriates to take over German workshops and facilitate the opening of consumers' and production cooperatives.
- 7) To supply raw materials for the factories which are already in operation or those that will be opened in the future, and to make available ample markets and sales opportunities for their products.
- 8) To make it possible for qualified Jews to fill communal and government administrative posts.
- 9) Facilitate agricultural settlements by granting them adjoining tracts of land (whole village settlements) and adequate inventories.
- 10) Facilitate the rehabilitation and productivization efforts of the Jews by establishing appropriate trade schools.

11) To delegate a representative of the Ministry of Public Administration to study conditions on the spot and give appropriate instructions to the local authorities.

12) To enhance Jewish life through developing cultural and educational activities by opening Jewish schools, publishing Yiddish press, sponsoring Yiddish theatre, etc.

The memorandum continued: "The Jews who have lost their dearest and nearest in such a bestial manner, desire to begin a creative life anew in the midst of compatriots, amongst whom the need for amity and understanding which normally exists in a family can not be realized except in a homogeneous social milieu. The opportunity for creative, productive life, the fruits produced by their meaningful work and endeavours in all facets of the economy will benefit not only the Jews of Lower Silesia but the whole land."

Rychbach, June 23, 1945.

For the Regional Central Committee in Lower Silesia:

(Signed) J. Egit, J. Eisenberg, J. Rosenberg, Sh. Scheinberg

Edward Ochab, Minister of the Interior, reading the memorandum, exclaimed, "Whether it pleases anyone or not, you go to it, and build a new life on that new soil. We shall support you in all your endeavours and with all the forces at our disposal."

The Central Committee of Jews in Poland wholeheartedly endorsed the memorandum and dispatched a communique that same day to Mr. Ochab requesting the Polish government, national and regional, to give every assistance to the Jewish Committee of Lower Silesia in its momentous undertaking. The letter was signed: Warsaw, June 23, 1945, Dr. E. Sommerstein, President, Central Committee of Polish Jews. P. Zelitski, General-Secretary.

The results with which the delegation returned to Rychbach elicited great enthusiasm from the survivors. The first cornerstone was laid for a new Jewish settlement!

There had been some speculation as to why the Polish government of that period acceded readily to the request for a Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia. Aside from the humanitarian aspect of the gesture, consideration also should be given to political factors. The presence of a

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Jewish settlement under Polish auspices on a territory whose ownership had been contested frequently between Germany and Poland would, it was thought, strengthen the Polish claim to the land.

When the Soviet Army liberated Lower Silesia, there were few Poles in the district. Of the original 10,000 Jewish survivors, some were from other European countries—France, Holland, etc., who returned to their homelands. The young Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust and remained in the region, and the Jews who returned from the demobilized Polish and Russian armies, became the pioneers of the land.

Not long after the Jewish Administration Committee was formed, we were faced with a series of unique occurrences. Time after time, Jews came to us with the complaint that whenever they had an occasion to visit an official building, the guards, when asking for identification, spoke Ukrainian and made anti-Semitic remarks. We investigated and found that it was the case, for the following reasons:

When the Russians liberated the Ukraine, many of its inhabitants were German collaborators who fled with the Germans to Lower Silesia and remained there, since there was nowhere else to go. After the liberation of Silesia, the Russians needed guards for factories, warehouses and official institutions and unwilling to trust German civilians, used the Ukrainians.

Since there were hundreds of Jews available who fought in the Polish and Russian armies, the first Jewish military division of several hundred men mobilized under the leadership of Abraham Goldbloom, Rinder and other former high-ranking officers. They immediately took charge and began guarding the factories and all the other official institutions.

Thus, under the command of our Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia, the first official Jewish militia was organized, an act which in those days contributed much to our sense of strength and security. The commander of this Jewish militia was the son of Arthur Zigelbaum, Joseph. Arthur Zigelbaum was a member of the Polish Government in exile in London. In 1943, he committed suicide to protest the world's seeming indifference to the murder of Polish Jewry.

Immediately after the war, Lignica served as capital of Lower Silesia; Breslau (Wroclaw) was in ruins. The first governor was Piaskowski, a Social Democrat from pre-war Poland. His deputy was Jewish: Stefan E. Wengerow. His father had been a prominent lawyer in Lublin.

One evening, I received a telephone call from Wengerow indicating that he

would very much like to visit me. I invited him to my house for supper. There wasn't much to eat in those days but lots to drink.

Wengerow couldn't get over his joy at finding an organized Jewish population in Lower Silesia, something he never dreamed could happen again. But his joy was tempered with grief. His whole family had perished in Lublin, his wounds were fresh and deep as mine. Throughout the whole night, we talked and cried. By morning, we worked out suggestions for retribution.

We got into Wengerow's car and drove to Lignica, to the office of Governor Piaskovski. The Governor, who came from Radom, had always been a good friend of the Jews. We unburdened our hearts to him. We spoke of the harrowing emotions of the previous night evoked by our bitter memories. Piaskovski was sympathetic and understanding.

"I was a witness," he told us, "to the manner in which the Nazis had dealt with the Jews of Poland, the barbaric torture and death inflicted upon innocent people simply because they were Jewish." He concurred that we were entitled to some form of redress and we must have impressed him with the justice of our demands, for Piaskovski issued the following edicts:

- 1) German houses in Lower Silesia must be designated by white flags.
- 2) Germans must wear white armbands on their left arms.
- 3) A German meeting a Jew on the sidewalk must step aside.
- 4) Those Germans who were being repatriated to Germany can take with them only sixteen kilograms of personal belongings, all other possessions are to be left intact in their homes which will be occupied by Jews from the concentration camps and repatriates from Russia, so that the contents shall not fall into the hands of marauding bands.

These orders were immediately put into effect, to the great delight of the Jews, especially survivors of the concentration camps. I found out later that Wengerow had been appointed Ambassador to Czechoslovakia and later recalled to Poland where he worked in minor positions. He survived the anti-Semitic purges and died in Poland.

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About six weeks later, I was summoned to Warsaw, to the office of the Minister of the Interior, Edward Ochab, for a distressing interview. He told me that a group of journalists from abroad who had visited Lower Silesia were creating a furor in the foreign press by their reports of the anti-German edicts, which were being criticized and condemned as unduly harsh, now that the war was over. I explained to Ochab why Wengerow and I had felt justified in proposing these measures, how the burning need for retribution in our hearts, and in the hearts of all Jews, had to be assuaged to some degree. We asked how he would feel in our place. However, the first three orders were rescinded, but the fourth, dealing with the property restrictions, remained in force.

The work of settling Jews in Lower Silesia made progress from day to day as more repatriated Jews returned from Russia. But at the same time, the Poles also came, many of them anti-Semites. Although in Silesia Jews were not easily intimidated, as the authorities displayed greater energy and effectiveness in eradicating anti-Semitism there than in the rest of Poland, hatred of Jews and bigotry amongst many Poles remained.

One day in the summer of 1945, I returned from a conference in Warsaw to find that Ostrovski, the regional Governor, had ordered the confiscation of the apartment which had been assigned to me, as well as the car at my disposal. My wife Clara and little daughter Mary were still living with me at the Committee headquarters as I had been too busy to move. But what I really found intolerable was his order to take away from the Jews the ration cards for bread which had been issued to them. When I heard this, the blood rushed to my head.

I asked the Secretary of the Jewish Committee, Igor Kuchinsky, at time of writing the proprietor of an art gallery in Toronto, to come with me and we rushed to Ostrovski's office. I did not wait to be admitted. Brushing aside all attempts to stop me, I forced my way into his office, brandished the revolver which I carried with me day and night and said, "If you take away my apartment, I'll soon get another. I'll also get another car. But, you contemptible anti-Semite, I won't let you deprive the Jews of bread—Jews who survived Hitler and were the first to resettle this land. I demand that you immediately reissue the Jewish ration cards, otherwise I will shoot you." He couldn't open his mouth from shock. I was still in my army uniform and he realized that I knew how to use the gun, and was incensed enough to pull the trigger. The ration cards were returned.

The next day, I was again summoned to the office of the Minister of the

Interior in Warsaw to account for my action. Edward Ochab was an old communist and I remember his appearance after the war at the first conference of Jewish activists held in Warsaw in 1945, at which he declared: "The positive attitude of the new Polish government towards our Jewish population will be an indication whether we are on the way towards true democracy and socialism." His sincerity was never in doubt, as proven in 1968 when he was President of the Republic of Poland. That was the year of the major anti-Semitic campaign and when Ochab was shown a list of several hundred Jews holding high positions who would be dismissed from their jobs, he wrote his own name at the top of the list and resigned as President. In his written declaration, he stated: "As a Pole and a communist, I am deeply disturbed by the anti-Semitic hatred which is being instigated in Poland by various dark forces, such as yesterday's 'ONR' (National Radicals, anti-Semitic and Fascist parties) and their present day powerful protectors. And because such policies of hatred and racism have penetrated our party, I express my protest by giving up my membership in the Politburo of the Polish United Workers Party, and am handing in my written resignation as Chairman of the Government Council and President of the Republic of Poland." In the history of the Communist movement, Ochab's voluntary resignation from such high offices and his openly-expressed reason for it was indeed a unique occurrence.

When I appeared before him, he was angry. Did I know, he said, that my duties in Lower Silesia were to stabilize the region and not to behave so irresponsibly; that drawing a gun on the Polish governor was a reprehensible act? I told him that I realized the seriousness of my action, but asked him to understand what had brought me to this act. We Jews were the first to resettle the land. Thousands of us had perished in concentration camps because of the Nazis. When we came to Lower Silesia, we first fought the Germans, then the Ukrainians, and now it seemed that some of the Polish repatriates were our worst enemies. If an anti-Semite like Ostrovski continued to rule our lives, I saw no hope for the future. I reminded Ochab of his words to our first delegation. "If you were sincere," I said, "and if it is true that we are now living in a new Poland, then it is inconceivable that Rychbach, with a 90 percent Jewish population, should have a Polish anti-Semite as governor." I proposed that a Jew be appointed to the post.

"Can you give me a candidate?" Ochab asked. I said I could. A week later a Jewish engineer, Eugene Wasserman, at time of writing at the

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*Technion* in Haifa, became the new Governor. The Jewish population was elated, but the anti-Semitic underground in the region of Rychbach did not want to accept such a change. They decided to get rid of me.

One evening when I was entertaining friends at a reception in my home, a Russian officer broke into the house, drew a gun with the intention of killing me. Before he could pull the trigger, my wife Clara grabbed his arm and bit him. The gun clattered to the floor. He was immediately arrested and at the trial, it was revealed that some Poles got him drunk and incited him into assassinating me. He was sentenced to ten years in prison. Jonas Turkow, the Yiddish artist, who died in Israel in 1988, was at my house that night and wrote about the incident in his book, *Nuch der Bafrayung* (After the Liberation).

The Polish anti-Semitic Mafia did not rest. Days later, I heard that eighteen Jews had been arrested in Rychbach on charges of vandalizing German homes. I telephoned the Rychbach police and asked for their release. They became abusive and a shouting match ensued in which I kept repeating my demand and they kept on refusing. Finally, I gave him an ultimatum. If they did not free the Jews within two hours I would send in my Jewish militia. They were freed immediately. (Many of those who were arrested are in Israel today, among them a friend, Pinchas Poremba.)

Not all the survivors were angels. Some of them felt justified, in view of what they had suffered at the hands of the Nazis, to exact their own justice by vandalizing German homes and exacting physical violence. From time to time, they were arrested by the Soviets. I arranged with the Russian commander that these apprehended Jews be turned over to our committee. As soon as the police left, I would call them into my office and sternly reprimand them. The war was over, I told them. We are building a new, stable society and I warned them not to take the law into their own hands. But my exhortations did not always work.

The attitude of the Soviet military authorities towards Jews in Lower Silesia was on the whole very good. Within the Soviet division stationed in Lower Silesia were many Jewish officers and soldiers and the head of the army in the district was a Jew, General Silver. I was invited many times to join them in their holiday celebrations, and often General Silver would ask me to greet the Soviet soldiers on behalf of the Jewish community in Yiddish, even though I could speak Russian.

"Let them know that the Jews speak Yiddish," he used to say. Russian Jewish officers who had come from Odessa, Leningrad and other Soviet

cities visited me on many evenings. They enjoyed hearing a Yiddish word and Yiddish songs.

The first contingent of Jewish artists in Lower Silesia also came to my home, among them Zalman Koleshnikov, Chayale Rosental, and Jonas Turkow. Igor Kuchinsky used to play the piano and sing ghetto songs. I brought Kuchinsky back with me from Warsaw when I met him there one day standing before the headquarters of the Central Jewish Committee shortly after his return from Mathausen. I drove him to Rychbach, where he became secretary of the Jewish Central Committee of Lower Silesia and contributed much to our cultural life. One of the Jewish Soviet officers who came to my home was a former cantor from Odessa, whose wife and two sons had been killed by the Nazis. He used to drink and cry a lot, and on the way to his quarters late at night would shout curses at the Germans.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: HIGH HOPES FOR POLISH JEWS

When Lower Silesia, now southern Poland, was first resettled, there were no children. Those Jews who had survived the camps were mostly young and childless, and most of the girls had been sterilized by the Nazis. Our daughter, Mary, who was then seven years old, was the centre of attention and the recipient of many gifts. Our people longed for the presence of Jewish children. Later we brought to Lower Silesia Jewish orphans from Lublin and established for them a Children's Home in Piotrolesie, not far from Rychbach.

The Jewish population of Lower Silesia became famous. The Jewish press throughout the world wrote accounts about the development of the viable Jewish settlement on Polish soil. Prominent personalities travelled from abroad to see for themselves the remarkable rebirth of Jewish life. In 1945, Rabbi Phil Bernstein, a chaplain in the American armed forces, came to visit us from Rochester, New York, together with Col. Dr. Joseph Schwartz and Col. Herbert Freedman. Dr. Schwartz, who later became head of the Joint Distribution Committee in Europe, returned to Lower Silesia on more than one occasion, often together with the vice-chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee, M.A. Levitt, and always remarked that when with us, he felt as if he was in Israel. After one of his visits, M.A. Levitt sent me the following telegram from Prague: "Please accept our appreciation and heartfelt thanks for the courteous reception which Dr. Schwartz and I were given and for the opportunity of witnessing the remarkable development of Jews in Lower Silesia. We were enthused and spiritually strengthened. We convey our blessings and personal greetings."

Among the delegates to Rychbach from America were Pesach Novick and the late Rueben Saltzman of the International Worker's Order, the painter William Groper, and writer Uri Sul; the columnist, Ben Zion Goldberg and the President of the Organization of Polish Jews in America, Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, who wrote about us in his book, *In Search of a Lost People*; S.L. Shneiderman, the famous journalist, who

also devoted several chapters in his book, *Between Fear and Hope*, to Lower Silesia.

From New York, we were visited by Gedalia Sandler, representative of the Jewish Fraternal Organization; then the late Louis Segal, general secretary of Farband Labour Zionists, and many others. The Canadian Jewish Congress sent a delegation which included the late Chananya Kaiserman and Sam Lipshitz. Later came J.B. Salsberg and the Yiddish writer Sholem Shtern. The Communist Party in Israel sent its general secretaries, the late Mikunis and Gozhanski; and from Paris came poet Moische Shulstein, Benjamin Shlevin and others. These were a few of the individuals who marvelled at the progress made by our community and wrote about the new *Yishuv*.

Highlights in those years, events which were received by the settlers with appreciative, enthusiastic response, were the performances by such artists as Molly Picon and her husband, the late Yaacov Kalich; Shimon Dzigan; Israel Schumacher; Hellen Shiffer<sup>9</sup> and many others who came and brought the gift of laughter, drama and song to Lower Silesia. Among other distinguished visitors were Dr. Slovis from Paris; Zigmund, Jonas and Itzhak Turkov, Ida Kaminska, her husband Melman; Sheftl Zak and Chayale Rosental.

At the end of 1945, the capital of Lower Silesia was moved from Lignice to Wroclaw (formerly Breslau), as were the offices of the Jewish Central Committee, which had been in Rychbach. Our new headquarters in Wroclaw at 18 Wlodkowicza took up almost the whole street. The building had not been destroyed in the war, although much of Wroclaw was left like a skeleton of its former self by the battles that raged there for 85 days. Even as the Soviet Army pushed into Berlin, fighting was still going on in Wroclaw. Before the war, this had been the main Jewish centre, housing the famous Breslau synagogue, a mikvah and the Jüdisch-Theologischer Seminar founded in 1854, the hub of Jewish culture and learning as well as a training school for rabbis. Renowned Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz had studied and worked there until his death in 1891.

Even since my boyhood, the writings of Heinrich Graetz, one of the greatest nineteenth century historians, had exerted a profound influence upon my concept of Jewish history and thought. The son of a butcher in a small Polish town, Zvi Hersh, as he was then called, rebelled against the wishes of his parents who wanted him to become a rabbi, and broke out



also devoted several chapters in his book, *Between Fear and Hope*, to Lower Silesia.

From New York, we were visited by Ben Segal, representative of the Jewish Fraternal Organization; Sam Segal, general secretary of Farmland; Sam Kagan, general secretary of the Canadian Jewish Congress; Sam Kaiserman and Sam Unger, Yiddish writers; Sholem Shtern, general secretary, the late Moishe Shtrikman, general secretary of the individuals who had written about the new

Highlights in those days were the artists as Moishe Pilsner, Dzigal, Israel Segal, and brought Among other things, Jonas and Zak and C. O. K.

At the end of 1945, Lignac, in Wrocław (former Central in Wrocław) was founded for the Jews of Poland, culture and Jewish had deadly 18

Even since the greatest mis upon my small Po wishes o

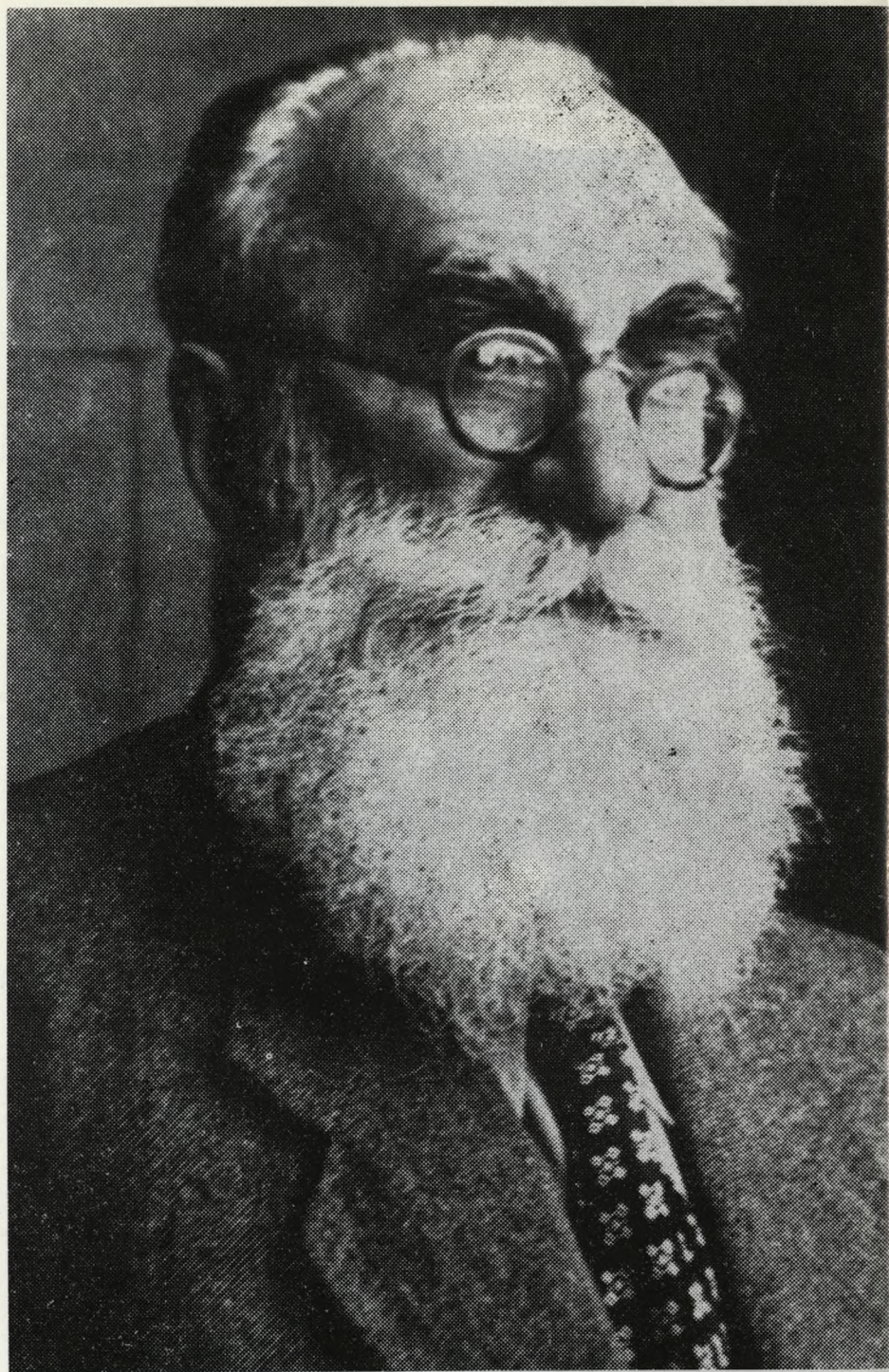


My oldest brother, Jonas Egit, who perished in the Belzec Crematorium.



Prof. Dr. Heinrich Graetz.

<http://icim.org.pl>



My oldest brother, **Dr. Emil Somerstein**, in the Belzec Crematorium.

<http://rcin.org.pl>



A group of teachers and students at a teacher's seminar, Wrocław, 1947.



An officer in the Soviet Army with a group of Jewish orphans in Rychbach, Lower Silesia, in February 1947.



The late Prof. Berl Mark with his wife Esther and Jacob Egit in front of the grave of Prof. Dr. H. Graetz, in Wroclaw, 1947.

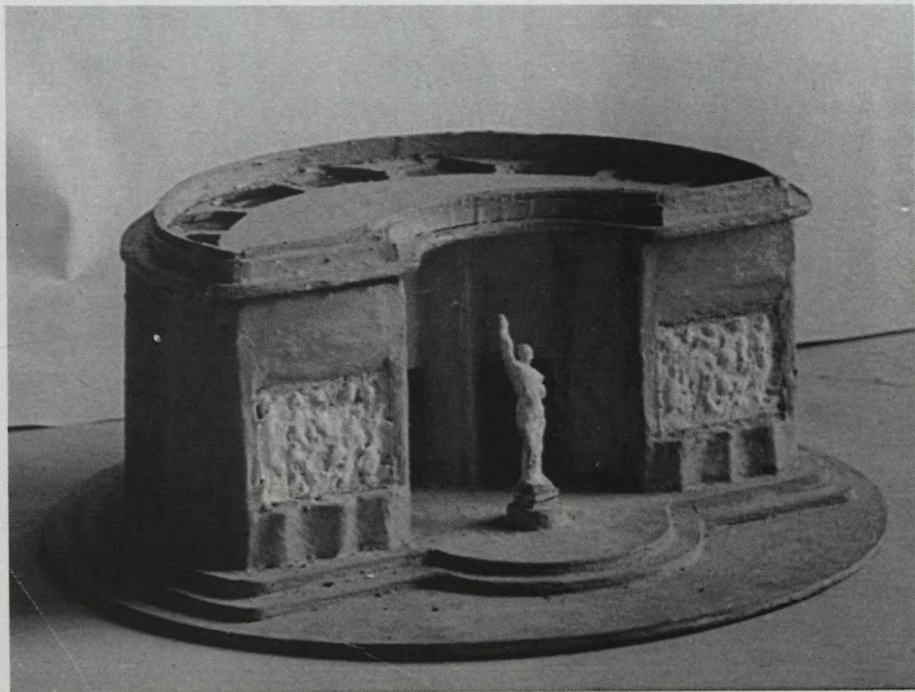


In Rychbach, a group of Jewish soldiers in the Soviet Army mark the end of the Second World War. Seated third from the left, Jacob Egit.



Clara Egit in Wrocław, 1947.

<http://cjh.org.pl>



<http://rcin.org.pl>

Jewish Pavilion built on the exhibition ground in Wrocław, 1949.



Jacob Egit, Moshe Szulzstein and Ichhak Grudberg-Turkov at the grave of Ferdinand Lassall, in Wrocław, 1947.

On June 17, 1945, all those assembled at the first conference of survivors in Rychbach, placed wreaths on the graves of those who perished in the concentration camps of lower Silesia.



Centre front, the Russian Officer who liberated the survivors.



Delegation of Jewish coalminers from Walbrzych Wroclaw 1948.



Jorge Amado, a writer from Argentina on a visit to Lower Silesia with Jacob Egit, Szimon Intrator and Itzhak Grudberg Turkov, editor of the weekly paper "Niederszlezie".



Jacob Egit at the opening of the Yiddish theatre in Wroclaw named after the late actress Esther Rachel Kaminska, 1947.



Distinguished guests at the Oneg Shabat during the Peace Conference in Wroclaw in 1948. Left to right: Ilya Ehrenburg, Mr. and Mrs. Julian Tuvim and Jacob Egit.



Prof. Otto Nathan, who brought greetings from Prof. Albert Einstein, at the Oneg Shabat during the peace conference in Wroclaw, 1948. Right, Jacob Egit.

## High Hopes For Polish Jews

of the confines of *shetl* life and thought. His life was spent in the city  
of a new beginning. One of the first Jewish  
of the Wroclaw century.



Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich, visiting an orphanage in Lower Silesia, 1945. Sitting left to right: Lilian Warn, Molly Picon, Jacob Kalich, Jacob Egit.

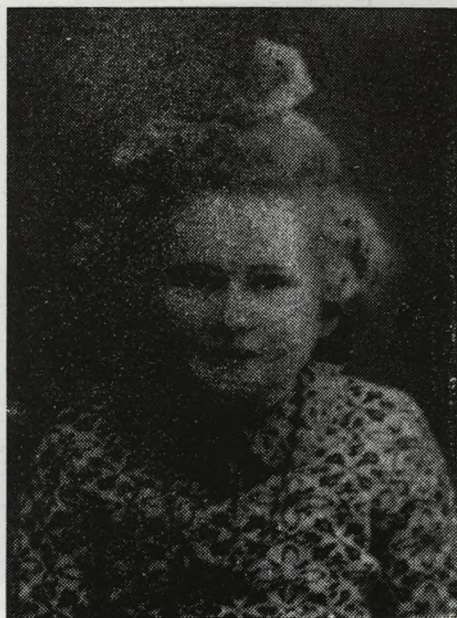


Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia, 1947. From left to right, seated: B. Levi, Leszcz, J. Egit, S. Staszewski, A. Schaffer. Standing: J. Slutzki, J. Rosenfeld, J. Plotsker, A. Cebula, B. Hellman, J. Wasserstrum, S. Hirshfeld, J. Hurstein.

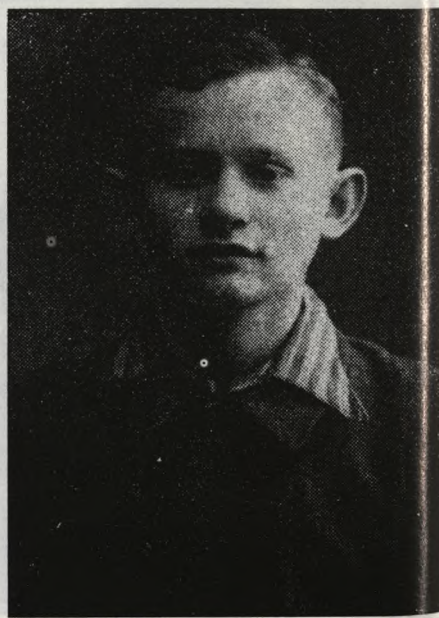
Three youngsters from Childrens' Home in Piotrollesie in 1946:



Ala Openheim.



Fela Sherman.



Mendel Zenek.

## High Hopes For Polish Jews

of the confines of *shtetl* life and thought. His life was spent in the city where we were now launching a new beginning. One of the first things I did was to visit his grave in the Wroclaw cemetery.

Some time later I again visited the cemetery in the company of the late Professor Berl Mark, Chairman of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and his wife Esther (who today lives in Israel). After this visit, Professor Mark wrote about Heinrich Graetz in Yiddish in a publication which was issued by the *Verlag Niederszleizje*, our publishing house in Wroclaw. The description of our visit to the cemetery and the life of Graetz as quoted below are in the words of Professor Mark, in his book *At the Grave of Zvi Hersh Graetz*: "The cemetery was a wilderness of weeds, fallen branches, overturned bushes, full of potholes filled with muddy water. Here and there wilted flowers that still survived on some of the graves showed traces of the care which the once thriving Jewish population in the then German city of Breslau had bestowed upon the site in the years before the Holocaust. But now vandals had smashed many of the marble monuments and the Germans had dug bunkers in the ground to hide when they knew the end was coming. The cemetery is huge, and as I walked along the pathways of this city of the dead, the profound silence seemed pregnant with the spirit of all those, the great and the small, who lay buried beneath my feet. In a corner near a fence I came upon a large, plain tombstone that marked the grave of the socialist thinker, Ferdinand Lasalle. There were vaults for important, wealthy members of the community, many of which have been defaced and broken into. Further on, gravestones, some of them toppled, marked the final resting places of merchants, doctors, lawyers; still further, beneath tombstones whose tops are emblazoned with replicas of military helmets, lay Jewish officers who had fought in the German army during the First World War.

"Far off I saw a beautiful monument that seemed miraculously intact, made of marble carved into a replica of the Ark, and as I approached I could make out an inscription in Hebrew—'The wisdom of the Bible is the basis of all good.' I had found the last resting place of Dr. Heinrich Graetz, born October 31, 1817, died September 7, 1891. His wife was buried with him. The Graetz plot was surrounded by the graves of scholars and rabbis, the nearest being the grave of Zaharias Frankel, head of the famous Breslau Theological Seminary where Graetz had been a professor. It was with reverence that I stood before the monument

of Zvi Hersh Graetz, whom the *Yehudim* (German Jews) called Heinrich—a Polish born Jew, who writing in German, had fulfilled his ambition of writing a history that cast brilliant light upon his people.

"Graetz can be called the father of modern Jewish history. He was a researcher, steeped in Jewish scholarship and knowledge. His intellectual gifts were enhanced by his talent as a writer. A fighter by nature, who dared to take a stand against established thought, he was a figure of controversy who attracted criticism from many sources. Some considered him a liberal, some a conservative, but he was a revolutionary who rebelled against the old, entrenched representatives of *chochmat Yehudit*, (Jewish wisdom), as exemplified by Yost, Ganz, Zunz and Geiger. He was critical of the unyielding Orthodox on the one hand and on the other hand repudiated the assimilation of the Reformed Jew. Graetz defied those who represented Jewish history as a chronicle of suffering.

"Graetz especially attacked the historical writings of Leopold Zunz, who categorized Jews into two groups—those whom he called Israelites and those he labelled the 'New Jews.' Graetz also criticized the work of the widely recognized historian, Itzhak Yost, accusing him of falsifying Jewish history when he wrote that only a handful of zealots fought the Romans while all other Jews were peaceful, law-abiding citizens. Graetz unmasked Itzhak Yost as a writer who toadied to the Germans, who deliberately slanted Jewish history to show that just as Jews were never fighters in the past, now too the Prussian rulers could be pleased with their peace-loving, patriotic Jewish subjects. With the courage of his convictions, Graetz also opposed the views of rabbis such as Shimshon Rafael Hirsh, and broke from the narrow restraints of authoritarian Orthodoxy whenever he felt that truth must be served. Graetz was the first Jew to openly praise talented converts to Christianity, such as Heine and Ludwig. Without condoning their apostasy, Graetz felt that these great writers in the German language merited recognition and praise for the courageous defense of the Jewish people and the condemnation of anti-Semitism which they often expressed in their works. It is clear that on the one hand Graetz was attacked by the chauvinistic, reactionary, anti-Semitic elements in Germany where he worked, and on the other hand by his own Orthodox colleagues and assimilated Jews."

As I left the cemetery, I was inspired by the thought that once again the hub of Jewish life in Wroclaw was within the same walls where Heinrich Graetz and other great Jewish scholars and teachers had spent their days.

## High Hopes For Polish Jews

Now, once again, the building became the centre of Jewish life and activities were taking place within the very walls where our forebears had lived and worked. The Centre was so large we could accommodate all our offices under one roof—the Departments of Education, Culture, Productivization, Social Activities and a Health Clinic (TOZ), a Child and Youth Department and Welfare.

Having received the full support of the Polish government, the Jewish Central Committee of Lower Silesia began systematically to plan the implementation of its ultimate goals. The problem was the preparation which had to be made for the reception of the Polish Jews repatriated from the Soviet Union. We had to provide houses, jobs and the material assistance they would initially require. At once our Central Committee contacted the Organization of Polish Jews in Moscow to inform it of the rebirth of a *Yishuv* and the reconstruction of Jewish life in Lower Silesia. In our letter we invited them to join us.

Our appeal struck a chord which echoed and re-echoed in the hearts of Polish Jews throughout Russia. The Committee of Polish Jews in Russia replied with the following letter, which was circulated among the Jews of Lower Silesia and created a favourable atmosphere for the reception of the repatriates:

"To the Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia: we read your letter with great joy, with the same joy that was felt by all Polish Jews in Russia who read it. Your letter is passed from hand to hand and deeply touches all our hearts, not only because 8,000 of our rescued brothers are speaking to us, but also because of the strong, and manly spirit which emanates with every word—the faith and vitality which, demonstrated by your *Yishuv*, attests to the inextinguishable will to live. As we read your letter, we saw before our eyes not only the shattered, tragic picture of the martyrdom and pain of our people, but also your faces, your eyes burning with creative fire, the resolve to build a destroyed life anew. Of all the news which reaches us from our resurrected people—good and bad, light and shadow—your message was the brightest, most optimistic and strongest.

"With our whole hearts we greet your settlement in Lower Silesia. We were deeply convinced that you have sparked the incentive for a great historic development which will rebound to your credit not only from the revitalization of Jews rescued from the death camps, but also for the pride engendered in the whole Jewish nation. We are convinced that

Jewish communities throughout the whole world, with no thought of political or partisan creed, will extend to you their immediate, fullest support to help you realize the boldest, and as of this day, the most essential plan.

"Your message, your plans and objectives are for us Polish Jews in the Soviet Union, of vital importance. We number here approximately 200,000. The Russian nation rescued us from annihilation. At the time when you faced daily degradation, torture and brutal death, we had the opportunity of participating with the Russian people in their victory over the Nazis, of sending our youth to the battlefield to fight in this war which also won your freedom.

"Now we are on the verge of achieving repatriation to our liberated homeland. During our five years in Russia, we Polish Jews learned many useful, productive trades, attained qualifications and skills inaccessible to pre-war Jewry. We have in our ranks the best metal workers, electricians, steelworkers and coal miners. Thousands of our people are helping to rebuild Stalingrad; they are working on the canals, the hydro generators, power stations, and new coal mines and oil wells throughout Russia. And these people are enthused by the prospect of going to Lower Silesia, to unite with you in common, zealous endeavours on behalf of our Jewish nation. With them will come families from the farms and villages of the Soviet Union, who have learned to work the land.

"We can also send you many productive intellectuals. A segment of our cultural heritage was saved by these writers, scholars and artists who found asylum in the land of the Soviets. In your letter we read with deep emotion, words that show your serious concern for the preservation of our national culture. It is our belief now that a portion of our cultural element should be settled among the thickly populated Yiddish masses in Lower Silesia to develop, in your midst, their creative activities.

"Your aim of establishing a cohesive, concentrated *Yishuv* of 50,000 Jews in Lower Silesia must be fully supported. We believe the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, the Polish democratic government, as well as Jewish organizations from all over, will support wholeheartedly with all their available resources to this great, initial demonstration by our Jewish people of strength and purpose. We await your further letter and say farewell with the words of the Yiddish blessing, *Tichzaknu Yadeichem* (May your hands be strengthened)."

## High Hopes For Polish Jews

(Signed) Committee of Polish Jews in Soviet Russia.  
Berl Mark (Historian, editor),  
Leo Finkelstein (Essayist and critic),  
Dr. David Sfar (Philosopher, poet, critic and editor),  
Shimon Zachariasz (Communist leader in Poland),  
Ida Kaminska (Actress and director),  
Rabbi Elchanan Sarotchkin (Spiritual leader),  
Abraham Kagan (Activist),  
Moshe Broderzon (Poet),  
Ephraim Kaganowski (Writer),  
Leib Olitzky (Poet and fabulist),  
Binem Heller (Poet),  
J. Yanosowicz (Poet, journalist and editor)  
S.L. Goldstein; A. Brum; M. Burko."

Among the first repatriates from Russia who arrived in Rychbach were the late Itzhak Turkow-Grudberg, who became editor of *Niderszlezie*, our publication in Wroclaw; the journalist and historian, the late Israel Biderman, who became the editor of our weekly *Nowe Zycie*; the artists Shefil Zak and his wife Raya; the actor Kurlander and among many others the late Nachman Rapp, another well-known poet; the young talented journalist Simeon Baker; and the poet S. Simchovitch, who, at time of writing, lives in Toronto.

The task of resettling repatriates and dealing with the innumerable problems was overwhelming. Every day, as I left my home just across the street from the Committee office, I could see a crowd already waiting outside for the doors to open at 8 o'clock. There were so many tragedies, so many problems, so many requests for help, not all of which were in our power to fulfill. One case particularly stands out in my mind: it was that of one Simma Bagisz, whom I first noticed as she stood patiently waiting outside, singing a Yiddish folk song to herself in a clear, plaintive voice. She had been separated from her husband and begged us to help her find him. Still young, frail and very pale, with liquid brown eyes almost always full of unshed tears, she was distraught to the point of breakdown, and so pathetically vulnerable that my wife Clara and I took her under our wing. She would come to our home almost every day. As she sat through the evening smoking, sometimes singing Slavic, Yiddish and Hebrew songs, she would finally dissolve

into uncontrollable bouts of crying as she thought of her husband. Once when Clara was sadly observing her, Simma looked at her and said, "You think I am a bit crazy. It's not so; but believe me, the world will always gain more from someone a bit crazy than from a normal nothing."

Simma's husband was a young poet from Lodz, Boris Weissman, who later changed his name to Zisha Bagisz. He came from an intellectual, artistic family in Bialystok, and one of his singular pursuits was the translation of Chinese poetry into Yiddish. Married young and intensely in love, Zisha and Simma were full of idealism and ambitions which were not realized. Writing poetry was not a lucrative profession and more often than not, they were on the verge of destitution. They left Poland for Rumania, but returned before the outbreak of the war. A son was born and Simma had him with her in Lower Silesia when we knew her. The son is in Israel at time of writing.

Simma's consuming desire was to find her husband. She was certain he was somewhere in Lower Silesia. We sent circulars to departments of our Central Committee and tried to locate him through the government channels and the police with no result. Then somewhere Simma heard a rumour that he was seen in France. She went to Paris to search for him. Undernourished and anemic, she collapsed in Paris and was taken to the Rothschild Hospital, where despite treatment and blood transfusions, she died. It was 1948.

Zisha's father, mother, brother and sisters also survived and were in Rychbach, Lower Silesia. It is interesting to note that all members of the family made their way to Canada, where they successfully rebuilt their lives. The father died in Toronto. His older brother settled there and in a short time became a successful accountant, but unfortunately was in a car accident which left him incapacitated for many years and unable to work. He died in 1983. The mother, Miriam Weissman, lived in Toronto at the Baycrest Home for the aged. Active till her last days, she died in 1983, a few months before her hundredth birthday. One of the sisters, Sally Weissman, whom I had placed in a student's home in Wroclaw after the war, also emigrated to Canada and later established a successful ladies' wear manufacturing firm in Montreal.

There is an epilogue to the story of Zisha Bagisz. After Simma's death we learned that he had been picked up in Bialystok when the Nazis occupied the town and shipped to Auschwitz. In 1949, I happened to be reading the *Yiddisher Kemfer*, a weekly New York Yiddish journal and

## High Hopes For Polish Jews

suddenly a headline, "The Sainly Zisha Bagisz," leaped out from the page. It was the title of an article by the Yiddish writer in New York, the late Yaacov Glatstein, recounting the last hours of Zisha Bagisz in Auschwitz, as told to Glatstein by a survivor: "Another inmate, a very young man from Bialystock, Sokolovitch by name, learned that he was among those selected for the gas chambers the next day. Crazed with fear, he ran up and down the barrack all night like a wild, caged animal. Seeing him in such a pitiful state, Zisha Bagisz called him over and, with tears in his eyes said: 'You are younger and stronger than I am. I am weak and know that I cannot live much longer. Tomorrow I will take your place and when I die, it will not be in vain, for at least through my death, a Jew will have a chance for survival.' Next morning, before the victims were taken to the gas chamber, Bagisz went up to Sokolovitch, embraced him and said that his last wish was that the young man should live until the liberation. His wish was fulfilled. Sokolovitch was among the survivors." Glatstein wrote: "Of the hundreds of thousands of Jews whose souls went up in smoke, the soul of poet Zisha Bagisz was among those that soared to the very highest reaches of heaven."

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONFRONTING ANTI-SEMITISM

On August 11, 1945, in Cracow, one in a series of Czarist-type pogroms broke out, with Poles robbing and murdering Jews. The situation for the Jews was becoming more and more dangerous, for the Polish authorities lost control. A Jewish army officer, Edward Koninski, who saved the lives of many Jews in Cracow, sent soldiers out to patrol the streets and put a stop to the pogrom there. Koninski came from Zdunska Wola and from 1943 on, had been an officer in the Polish army that had been formed in Russia during the war. In 1968, at the height of the anti-Semitic outbreak in Poland, he was relieved of his command; he had reached the rank of colonel.

In the town of Nowy Targ, in 1945, five Jews who had survived the Hitler death camps were pulled out of a car by a gang of Poles and brutally murdered. In Szczecin, seven Jewish repatriates from Russia were killed. In Lodz, Fishke Naiman, the leader of the Bund was murdered. Similar acts took place in many other cities.

The pogrom in Kielce was an especially devastating blow to the Jews. On July 4, 1946, a mob, incited by a rumour that a Christian child had been murdered by Jews, gathered at Plantagasse 7 and initiated a massacre of Jewish inhabitants. The violence lasted a whole day and, fed once again by the same old blood libel of Jewish ritual murders which had been nurtured for centuries, spread throughout the region. Polish police took part. In the vicinity of Kielce, Jewish passengers were pulled out of trains and trampled to death on station platforms. Forty-two Jews were killed that day and hundreds wounded and maimed. Forty years after the pogrom in Kielce, a book was published in Poland alleging that the Jews themselves organized the pogrom. In this book, *Polish-Jewish Relations in the Years 1914-1949*, by Josef Orlicki, (1983), it is alleged that Zionists instigated the pogrom so that the remaining Jews would leave Poland.

After the pogroms, leaflets began appearing in many other centres, spreading the ritual murder myth. In Wroclaw, a leaflet was distributed

## Confronting Anti-Semitism

stating that the bodies of Christian children were hidden in the basement of the Jewish Central Committee headquarters. With the horror of Kielce before me as an example of what could happen, I went to the Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR) in Wroclaw, and demanded that they equip Jews with arms. I wanted no one except the Jewish militia to defend us. We were provided with everything we needed. In a few hours the Jewish soldiers who had fought in the Russian and Polish armies were mobilized in Lower Silesia. They were given guns and ammunition in order to protect the Jews. A contingent surrounded the Jewish headquarters building day and night, marching and singing songs. Guards were also posted inside. I took up the command. The militia was instructed to shoot at the first indication of trouble, without hesitation.

For seven days and nights, we maintained a grim vigil and during this time we never left the building. After the Kielce pogrom, there was great panic among the Jews, particularly in central Poland, and around 100,000 left the country at that time. There was no such panic in Lower Silesia, notwithstanding the fact that thousands crossed our territory on the way to the Czech border at Kudowa. The Jews of Lower Silesia felt safer and more at home than they ever had in their former homes in the Polish towns and villages where they were born.

Soon after the Kielce pogrom, the Central Committee of Jews in Poland convened an emergency conference in Warsaw of delegates from several Jewish committees in Poland, where the reports given were pessimistic. The well-known journalist from New York, S.L. Shneiderman was present at the conference and in his book, *Between Fear and Hope*, he was to write: "The only note of hope, the only report that spoke of developing Jewish settlements and productive achievements, came from Jacob Egit, head of the committee in Wroclaw."

Why did the Polish government open the borders to allow thousands of Jews, without documents, to leave the country? In my opinion, the reason was the visit to Lower Silesia of a delegation from America headed by Rabbi Phil Bernstein and Dr. Joseph Schwartz. They were received by the President of Poland, Boleslaw Bierut. It was after the reception, and the conversation between the delegates and the President, that the decision of the government came—to open the borders for Jews.

This was not the only reason why Jews were allowed to leave Poland en masse. Years later, on one of my frequent visits, while in Israel, to Kibbutz *Lochamei Hagetaot*, the late Yitzhak Zukerman, leader of the

Kibbutz, gave me what he considered to be the real reason. After the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, he joined the Polish underground army, *Armia Ludowa* (The People's Army), and took part in the general uprising in Warsaw in 1944, under the leadership of General Spichalski. At the time of the Kielce pogrom, General Spichalski was the Deputy Minister of Defense and a member of the Politburo of the Party. When Zukerman returned to Warsaw after attending the funeral in Kielce, he approached Spichalski, spoke to him about the serious situation of the Jews in Poland and demanded that they be allowed to emigrate. It was not long after that the border between Czechoslovakia and Poland was opened and the Jews were allowed to leave. When I was told that a great number of Jews, including children, were stranded at the border suffering from lack of amenities and a shortage of food, I immediately went to Kudowa and saw to it that the kitchens were opened there so that they would at least have hot meals. But regardless of this exodus, 50,000 Jews remained in Lower Silesia and they continued to lead productive, normal lives.

After the tragedy at Kielce and other anti-Semitic outbreaks throughout Poland, I could not sleep at night. Doubts as to the future awaiting us, the surviving Jews, disturbed my rest. Was it possible, I kept asking myself, that a change in the political system could affect a change of heart in a whole people? Could the hatred of Jews, ingrained in the Polish psyche for generation upon generation, be eradicated by political decree? I wanted to believe that an enlightened, human era had now begun, which would destroy the cancer of anti-Semitism. It was this hope that sustained me, despite the memories that flooded back each night. I remembered Polish kids throwing stones at me, yelling that I had killed Jesus. I remembered the tragic days following World War I when Polish soldiers under the command of General Haller amused themselves by cutting off Jewish beards. And in later years, there were pogroms against Jewish students in Lvov, the segregation of Jewish students in the universities. Three of them, Zelmayer, Proiveler and Lansberg were killed. There was an accusation that the Jew Steiger wanted to toss a bomb at the Polish President; there was another pogrom in Przytyk.

Was it feasible to call on the Jews to build here a stable settlement, I asked myself at night? But during the day, which was full of constructive effort, I forgot my doubts. I rationalized that even if some Jews would want to emigrate later, especially the many who filled the sanatoria for

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tuberculosis, right now they needed a place to live and work in dignity, rather than in a DP camp. We kept hearing disturbing stories about various diseases that had struck displaced persons camps in Germany. The attitude of the German population towards the Jews was openly unfriendly. However, the emigration still continued and in 1946, over 100,000 were in German DP camps in the American and British occupied zones.

One of the pressing problems which faced our Jewish Committee in Lower Silesia from the very beginning was channelling the Jewish population, survivors of the death camps, into productive work. This was not an easy task. Many of the survivors who had laboured so long in indescribable conditions under the whips of their Nazi masters found it difficult to return to normal work, particularly at a time when an easy life could be lived on what the Nazis had left behind. Nevertheless, concern for communal welfare on the one hand and the conscience of Katsetzlers themselves that they must play a pioneering role if they were to prove worthy of resettling the land they now claimed as their own, prompted a number of them into productive activity. Soon the first skilled craftsmen appeared who took over German workshops and the first Jewish peasants began to till the fields.

It was harvest time in 1945. The fields were golden with uncut wheat that was begging to be harvested. The Germans who had planted them had left and it would have been criminal to let it rot. Our committee met the challenge by organizing Jewish harvest brigades. On July 17, 1945, we summoned representatives of all the Jewish committees in Lower Silesia to a special conference in Rychbach, and there the following resolution was adopted with enthusiasm: "We, the survivors of Nazi camps in Lower Silesia, cognizant of the pioneering role which we must play on this soil, declare that we will expend our utmost effort to harvest the grain from the fields. Beginning tomorrow, we take upon ourselves the task of organizing special harvest brigades to save the crops and call upon all able-bodied Jews to participate in this endeavour." Leaflets were posted on all the streets of Lower Silesia with the slogan: "Jews, have you enlisted in the harvest brigade?" This strategy worked. Hundreds of young Jewish men and women, former camp inmates, went out into the fields in organized brigades and soon the storehouses were filled with the treasure of golden grain. In the fields, the survivors met up with Jewish soldiers from the Russian and Polish armies and as they worked together, singing Polish, Yiddish and Russian songs, the reality of a new pioneering

life of friendship and cooperation flourished on the previously poisoned earth.

Most Jews in pre-war Poland rarely had the opportunity to engage in anything other than their traditional occupations—tailors, shoemakers, or to operate small hole-in-the-wall businesses. Jobs in heavy industry were denied them since large factories were almost *Judenrein*. Some Jews had no steady work at all and did not know what tomorrow would bring. Our aim was to change the social structure of the Jews and bring them into the mainstream. To make them feel they had the right and the necessary skill to work at any job that was required. Special Jewish committees were formed to register the workers and the industries where workers were needed and to organize trade schools for Jewish youth.

The first Jewish tram drivers soon appeared on city streets as did Jewish coal miners in the coal mining centre of Waldenburg. Jews started operating the textile factories in Bielawa. This was just a bare beginning. The problem of productivizing the Jewish masses confronted us in full force when the repatriated Jews began to arrive from the Soviet Union. Meaningful employment had to be found for them, so that all Jews would be part of the rebuilding process taking place in the reborn domain. It was unthinkable that in the new life on this new soil, there should appear again the stereotype *Menachem Mendel, The Luftmensch* with his little business, who had lived in Poland before the war. The development of the productive Jews in Lower Silesia was characterized by an entirely different image. By December 1, 1945, we already had about 3,000 Jews employed in the coal mines, metal works, textile factories, in agriculture, crafts and produce cooperatives. By the beginning of April, 1946, the number of productive Jewish workers was 6,000.

The problem of placing all Jews in productive employment became more complicated with the arrival of ever larger transports of Jews from Russia, for whom immediate means of livelihood had to be found. This was an element which had become requalified in the Soviet Union, where the Jews learned skills they never dreamed of acquiring before the war. Of every 1,000 repatriates, at least 450 were qualified for skilled work. I remember the heated discussions on how to place repatriates from the Soviet Union. Some of our committee members insisted on the establishment of exclusively Jewish cooperatives, I believed otherwise and suggested the slogan: "Jews to the state factories!" Of course, we did not deny the importance and necessity of the Jewish cooperatives, but

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it was my contention that the Jews should become full partners in the industrialization of the new Polish state. The industries that had been owned by the Germans before the liberation were still dependent for their operation upon the Germans who had been allowed to remain in order to run the factories. For Jews now placed in the factories, it was necessary to work with them until they mastered the required skills and till then, of course, these Jews needed a great deal of assistance from our committee. The result was that hundreds of Jews eventually replaced the Germans in the work place. Our program had three stages: 1) Through bringing Jews into all phases of both heavy and light industry, 2) through establishing cooperatives, and 3) through supporting private crafts.

In August of 1946, there were already 16,000 Jewish workers in Lower Silesia. With their families, 50,000 people were employed at productive labour. Before the war, no Jew had ever worked in a coal mine. On January 1st, 1946, we counted fifty-five Jewish coal miners, by July of that year, there were 480 and by the first of September 1946, 850 Jews were employed in collieries. We were particularly proud of our Jewish miners. While quite a few were experienced, having worked in the coal mines in the U.S.S.R., many of them were former tailors, shoemakers or people without any trade whatsoever. At first, the Jewish workers were ridiculed by the Poles: this did not deter them. Our committee helped by creating an atmosphere of encouragement and praise which motivated the Jewish coal miners to such an extent that before long, they were the best workers, producing two or three times more tonnage than the norm.

They were commended by the State for their extraordinary efforts and received many awards. Not least of the achievements of the 850 Jewish coal miners was the respect they earned from the non-Jewish miners, a respect which strengthened friendship between Jewish and Polish workers.

Jewish textile workers distinguished themselves on the industrial scene. On January 1st, 1946, there were 300 workers in the textile factories, by the first of June, 1,400 and on December 1st, 1946, close to 3,000. In August of 1946, 150 Jewish textile workers received awards for their excellent work. By 1947, 5,000 Jews worked in heavy industry, some in Wroclaw, where railroad cars were manufactured. One top engineer there was our friend Mark Brandes, who eventually moved to Toronto.

In April 1948, the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was commemorated throughout Poland, and particularly by an impressive

ceremony in Warsaw. Right after the commemoration, for the first time in the history of Polish Jewry, and indeed an unprecedented event in the history of Poland, a unique assembly was held in Wroclaw in honour of 300 outstanding Jewish workers who, through their truly heroic efforts had surpassed and in many cases, more than doubled normal production in the coal mines of Walbrzych and Nova Ruda regions and in the textile mills of Bielava. These workers demonstrated that in a democratic Poland, there had arisen a new Jewish element. How proud we were when Miriam Honigvogel, a female Jewish coal miner from Nova Ruda became the first woman to receive an award from the President of Poland for outstanding work.

Characteristic of the acceptance and respect which our Jewish workers had earned was the sentiment expressed by a Polish coal mine manager in a letter of greeting and congratulation to the assembly, in which he wrote: "As manager of the coal mine in 'Boleslaw Chrobry', I met many Jewish miners and day by day observe how they work. I want to stress that in my many years in the industry before the war, I never found a Jew working the mines. Like many Poles, I thought they could never do such work, would be afraid to risk their lives underground. But when I came to the mines in Lower Silesia and saw so many Jews down in the pits, I watched them with interest and now, after two years of working together with them, I can say that the Jewish miners work not only as well as their Polish colleagues, but very often better and harder. Workers like Fischel Munk and the brothers Yidel and Hersch Greenbaum produced 186% more than the normal tonnage per man and can be an example to our best Polish miners.

"The Jewish coal miners are outstanding in their work, discipline and responsibility. With this letter, I convey to your gathering my best wishes and the miners' greeting: *Help Gott*." The letter was signed, Stanislaw Wiezik, Manager, *Boleslaw Chrobry* Coal Mine, Walbrzych, April, 1948.

The gathering in honour of our outstanding Jewish workers was also addressed by the Chief Rabbi of Lower Silesia, Rabbi Shlome Trajstman, a clever, spiritual and realistic man whom I had often met on various occasions. Often I addressed the Jewish population together with Rabbi Shlome Trajstman who later emigrated to Israel. To our people, he would state "Today's gathering in the heart of Lower Silesia is an impressive manifestation of the strength and courage of our people here, in one of

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the most vibrant Yiddish settlements in the world. This conference is a demonstration of what can be achieved by concerted effort and goal-oriented work in rebuilding and creating our new life. As a representative of the remnant of religious Jews in Poland, I appeal from this spot to all the rabbis of the Western world to look eastward, here, to see the results of what peace can bring. I call upon the religious world to stand united against all warmongers, to fight for holy world peace.

"The great achievements of such a small settlement in so short a time will go down in history for all future generations. World Jewry will learn and benefit from our efforts. The rebirth of our tragic, suffering people here, is a death blow to anti-Semites. We are an example of what can be accomplished by ordinary people who have the opportunity of living in freedom and peace. The liberated Jew on this spot is no longer a silent victim. You, the workers, exemplify strength and courage and goodwill. You are building a new life and contributing to understanding and peace which we pray may spread throughout the whole world, all nations and our beloved land of Israel."

At a time when so many others swooped down upon Lower Silesia from all parts of Poland, to line their pockets by carting off either for their own use or for sale goods left behind by the evacuated Germans—tools, machinery, farm produce—Jews applied themselves to reviving the economy of the region. They gathered raw materials, tools and parts to recondition damaged machines, found suitable locations and organized cooperatives in a variety of trades. The first cooperatives were formed mainly by Jewish workers and artisans. By 1949, seventy percent of all cooperatives in Lower Silesia were Jewish establishments and played a major role in producing items that fulfilled the basic, primary needs of the population. At the head of this cooperative movement was the late Yidel Plac and Moshe Szafranek, who eventually went to Israel. In all these efforts, assistance from the American Joint Distribution Committee was essential.

In November of 1946, the first conference of Jewish cooperatives in Lower Silesia took place in Wroclaw and clearly attested to their growth and strength. An exhibition at the conference of products manufactured by the cooperatives demonstrated the high quality of all the items displayed. Gone was the former tailor or shoemaker who before the war had worked in a dark, damp basement or hole in the wall from morning to late at night without ever earning enough to feed his family. In Lower

Silesia, the Jewish craftsmen worked under entirely different conditions in well lit, roomy surroundings, with modern machinery and made a good living. In 1949, there were approximately 100 Jewish cooperatives in Lower Silesia with over 2,000 workers.

An important part of the productivization of the Jewish population of Lower Silesia was channelling Jews into agricultural pursuits—a move which made clear the type of society we wished to build. An agronomist and I toured the region to find farms where it would be easiest for Jews to settle. At the beginning of Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia, survivors from the German camps took to the farms, particularly in the Rychbach region. With the return of Jews from the Soviet Union, their numbers increased. In 1948-49, there were 150 Jewish farms on approximately 1,500 hectares, of which 1,000 hectares were fertile land. Two hundred and fifty families—500 people—were settled on the farms. They had 180 horses, 250 cows and flocks of poultry numbering in the thousands.

The Rychbach region was well-known for its Jewish farmers: Arbesman, my father-in-law, Leib Schwacbard, Tepper, Gelman and many others. Arbesman, a former mechanic, had been incarcerated during the war in a camp near Rychbach. When he was liberated by the Russians, he found for himself one of the best farms and went to work. Everyone in the district knew that he had the nicest cows and horses, to whom he gave diminutive names like little children. My father-in-law had been an oil-refinery worker. He took an agricultural course organized by the Jewish Committee and, with his wife, Henya, in a short time became a farmer in Bielawa. Everyone agreed that the sweetest, biggest sugar beets grew on Schwarcbard's soil and that his calves were the nicest. Instead of selling the milk from his cows, Schwarcbard kept feeding it to his calves, insisting that was a better investment than money.

In October of 1945, we convened a conference of Jewish agricultural workers. It was attended by ninety-seven farmers representing thirty-two farms. At this gathering the progress of the agricultural development to that date was reviewed and plans made for the future, to which the farmers contributed the knowledge and experience they had gained in their work.

As a result of the conference, the first Jewish Agricultural Association was established in postwar Poland. The Jewish farmers felt an obligation to the community as a whole. They were particularly helpful when the Committee's budget was so low there was actually not

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enough money to purchase food for the Children's Homes. The farmers sent produce to the Homes so that the children should not go hungry.

Not enough can be said of the contribution made by the agronomist, A. Rosenman—a member of the Central Committee and a General Zionist—to the development of Jewish agriculture in Lower Silesia. He was appointed head of the new Jewish Agricultural Association and it was his expertise and organizational ability that played a major role in the success of our undertaking. It is always a pleasure for me to meet him on my trips to Israel where he now resides. "ORT" began its operation in Lower Silesia in the fall of 1946. In contrast to the prewar trade schools operated in Poland by "ORT", where students received vocational training only, the schools in Lower Silesia were programmed so that youngsters, learning to become mechanics, electricians, technicians, agronomists and so on in four hours of practical study, also received four hours a day of academic education. Within a year, the first students graduated as certified electricians and found employment. There was also a course specifically for women which taught them how to work on women's and children's wear. Altogether, 500 students were enrolled in "ORT" schools in the first year.

One of the important tasks, and, at the same time, the most difficult tasks confronting the Jewish Committee in coping with the growing Yiddish *Yishuv* in lower Silesia, was the integration of the youth. It was not merely a question of taking care of their immediate material needs—food, shelter, clothing—but of giving them an opportunity for a healthy physical and spiritual development, of educating them and teaching them trades and skills that would make them self-respecting, productive citizens. The difficulties were further complicated by the fact that these were children of the Holocaust—twenty-five per cent full orphans, twenty-five per cent half orphans. To cope with these problems, the Central Committee set up a special youth department which immediately went into operation.

Full assistance was extended to these youngsters; 720 were taken into factories; 580 into cooperatives; 300 were apprenticed in trades and 500 enrolled in the ORT courses. For youngsters without parents, twelve Children's Homes were established through the region and a large Youth Centre was set up in Bielawa. A separate concern was the welfare of 250 Jewish students who came to study in the Wroclaw University. For them, the Youth Department set up their own residence, a three-storey building

with large, wide windows. Assistance was given to most of the students by the Central Committee, with many others receiving partial subsidies.

The Youth Department organized a wide range of activities, such as drama groups, orchestras and sports clubs. The fourteen Jewish sport clubs in Lower Silesia had a membership of 1,000 and was exceptionally successful. Soccer was one of the outstanding sports and the players became popular, not only within the Jewish community but with the public in general. A few Jewish soccer teams participated in a series of games and there was great excitement when the Walbrzych team came out on top and received a trophy as the best team in all of Lower Silesia.

To finance all these undertakings, a Jewish bank was opened in Wroclaw with the help of the American Joint Distribution Committee in March 1946, to provide long-term, low interest loans to the farmers cooperatives and craftsmen, and Jewish institutions. In one year, 30 million Zlotys had been advanced for this purpose.

Despite the fact that Jewish life in Lower Silesia was overshadowed by an atmosphere of fear, especially after the Kielce pogrom, with a certain number crossing the borders every day, thousands of Jewish workers remained in the cooperatives and factories.

An historic event of world-wide interest took place in Wroclaw from August 25th to August 30th, 1948. Four hundred of the world's most prestigious intellectuals from forty-five countries, assembled in the Hall of the Wroclaw Polytechnic Institute for the First International Peace Conference after the war to demonstrate against war and to declare the need for the preservation of peace in the world, so that the culture of nations and individual life might be saved from catastrophe.

Delegates included such prominent personalities as Ilya Ehrenburg, Fadyev, Korneichuk, Szolochov, Leonid and others from the Soviet Union; Professor Joliot Currie, Pablo Picasso, Professor Koton from France; Aldous Huxley, Bishop Johnson, Professor Levy and many more from England; Professor Otto Natan Roggi, Norman Corwin and his wife, Katharine Lacky, Dr. Albert Kahn, the painter William Groper and the well-known Jewish writer, the late Uri Sul from the United States; Jorge Amado from Brazil; Julian Tuvim, Sofia Nalkowska, Leon Schiller, Berl Mark, Nachman Blumental from Poland; Dov Chomsky from Israel and many others.

When I learned that the conference would be held in Wroclaw, I got in touch with the great Polish poet of our time, Julian Tuvim, who was

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Jewish and whom I knew personally. He used to come to Wroclaw to buy antiques and rare books which were to be found there and I often went along with him. I proposed to him the idea that, with so many distinguished personalities assembled in Wroclaw at one time, we should avail ourselves of the opportunity to organize an Oneg Shabbat for the Jewish delegates and Jewish representatives from Lower Silesia, to demonstrate our solidarity with the aims of the conference, in the fight for international peace. Enthused by my idea, before the conference sessions started, he helped me organize the gathering by visiting many of the delegates to inform them of the time and place. All the Jewish delegates—scholars, writers, artists—accepted our invitation.

The gathering took place Friday evening, August 27th, 1948, the third day of the conference, at the Klubova Hotel in the heart of the city. The beautiful hall was decorated with banners in Yiddish, English, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, French. I opened the evening on behalf of the Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia and greeted the guests by saying: "We are living through momentous days—days in which anti-fascist writers, scholars and artists from the world have come to Wroclaw for the refutation of all warmongers. The results of this conference are of vital interest to us Jews. No other people suffered as much during the last war and no other people would be more threatened by a new war. We are fortunate to welcome you, dear guests, as messengers of peace and heartily greet you in the name of the young Yiddish *Yishuv* of Lower Silesia with the old Jewish greeting, *Bruchim Habaim*—Welcome. Shimon Intrator, in Israel at time of writing, was then secretary of the Central Committee in Lower Silesia. He stepped forward and spoke about the pioneering achievements of our settlement.

After the greetings, a delegation of Jewish Girl Scouts presented bouquets of flowers to Ilya Ehrenburg and Julian Tuvim. In a touching, simple speech their leader, a ten year old girl said: "In the new Poland, we are rebuilding our national life which was completely destroyed by German fascism. In the three years we have learned to love our settlement, to be proud of our national Jewish culture and to value peace. We knew well whom we must thank for the victory over Nazism."

The guests were deeply moved by this greeting. The poet, Julian Tuvim, stood up and in a voice quivering with emotion delivered a short, congenial speech. "I feel," he said, "not as a guest among you, but as one of you. The gathering today is tragic and yet joyous. Tragic because this

is but a splinter of what was a great life force and joyous because we all believe in the rebirth of Jewish life. If I find myself among you here this evening, it is not because there are ties of blood between us, but because we are bound together by the spirit, and in the name of all men of good will who abhor war, who are striving for world peace so that all nations can live and prosper in a free, just and democratic society. I propose the first toast to our guests from the Soviet Union."

Ilya Ehrenburg, the world-famous Russian Jewish writer, though hoarse and exhausted by the long conference sessions, responded. After expressing regret that he could not reply in Polish or Yiddish, he said, "I won't talk too much, because my throat is strained. And not because I shouted at the sessions, but because I had to voice, time after time, the fact that there are still people who do not remember what fascism is, and who are already thinking of war and not peace. They will not succeed. I kept thinking of this as I listened to the little girl who greeted us and to Julian Tuvim. They said everything—I will not repeat the words. This Yiddish child, just like the adults, knows clearly whom we have to thank for our existence, whom we must thank for being able to sit here in the liberated old city, in such a nice hall, with a glass of whiskey before us, Yiddish *challah* and fish, and together with Yiddish people of culture from many other lands speak of our determination to safeguard this hard won freedom and culture from the new fascism which would destroy it. But speeches alone will not do it. If a Jewish homeland has been founded, if Jews live in European countries, it is because there exists in this world the great strength of the Soviet Union. As a Jew and a citizen of Soviet Russia, I am happy to see in Poland Jews who live and work in a land where the spirit of progress and democracy prevails. The existence of the Jewish nation depends upon progress—war is regression, the death of culture. War is a weapon in the hands of that element which cannot by itself create a worthwhile culture, which wants to destroy both truth and civilized human values. But this evening, the lovely little Jewish girl who greeted us is proof that Hitler did not succeed in exterminating the Jewish people, and that no one will ever succeed."

Professor Otto Natan spoke next. From 1920 to 1933, Professor Natan had been an economic advisor to the German government and a lecturer in the faculty of Political Science at Berlin University. During the war, he was an economic advisor to the American government, a professor of Economics at New York City University and the author of many

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books on economics. He was a personal friend of Professor Albert Einstein and, at the Peace Conference, read a statement by Einstein which he had brought with him. Professor Natan said, "As I greet the Jewish *she'erit hapleita* on Polish soil, I feel a particular pride. Progressive American Jews have not for one minute forgotten the heroic battle which the Jews in ghettos fought against the Nazi enemy. In our eyes, every Polish Jew became a legendary hero—a symbol of resistance against the forces of evil and darkness. When I was in Warsaw, I was heartbroken. In America, we could not even imagine that the barbarians could create such chaos. But here I feel joy that people are again living in this land and that the will to live conquered all. This evening makes me happy," ended Professor Natan, "because I am sitting with you Polish Jews at one table and I say to you from the bottom of my heart the traditional *Gut Shabbos*."

The English mathematician and political activist, Professor Hyman Levy, addressed the gathering in English. "I don't consider myself a guest among you. My roots with Wroclaw are deep. My grandfather was a rabbi here many years ago and my father was born here, when the city was still called Breslau. Together with you and all progressive people, I am happy that the city today is called Wroclaw and that there are Polish Jews living here who will carry on the legacy left them by the heroic defenders of the Warsaw Ghetto."

A member of the English delegation, Louis Golding delivered a brilliant speech. He was a progressive English writer, and author of many best selling novels and stories. His book, *Magnolia Street*, was translated into many languages. Born in Manchester, England, into a partially assimilated family, he took every opportunity to declare his Jewishness and wrote on many Jewish themes such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Louis Golding commenced by saying, "I don't really know Yiddish, but allow me to greet you in as many words as I do know and remember. For me it will always be a great satisfaction that I spoke to you Polish Jews in the language of the heroic ghetto fighters. The uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto awoke many English Jews from their sleep, to the realities of what transpired here. I myself have long wanted to meet Polish Jews and I am proud and happy to see here such a well established Jewish community with such a strong will to live. That which I saw here will give me much to relate to the Jews of England and I ask your permission to greet, in your name, the Jews of Israel, where I will be going shortly."

The audience responded enthusiastically to the performance of a musical program by Rosa Raiska, who sang in English, Yiddish, Polish and Russian. Olbrey Pankay, an American Negro singer, was given an ovation when he rose to speak and sing two Negro spirituals. This portion of the program was followed by several more greetings. Dr. Albert Kahn, who had made a great impression at the conference sessions with his address, spoke next. From 1938 to 1943, Dr. Kahn was the editor of two American journals and author of a number of books. He had come to Poland now to acquaint himself with Jewish life. "I am a writer", he said, "speaking is not my profession. Everything which I say now can only express that which I feel—I love you all."

An outstanding figure among the guests was the tallest man in the hall, John A. Roger, the American Associate Chief Justice. A lawyer, he gained prominence through his investigation of the subversive activities of American Nazis and was one of the leaders of the progressive Wallace movement in the States. "I know that the Jewish people have given many geniuses to the world—Einstein, Freud, geniuses of our century. The Uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto has given a most inspiring event to our century. At a time of ethical death, moral nihilism, the Uprising has given us a vision which can lead to a better world. Here in Wroclaw, I feel again the strength of the Jews as a nation, with an inborn, dynamic creativity, with a healthy, national instinct."

Julian Tuvim next introduced the famous radio commentator from America, Norman Corwin, who was there with his wife, the celebrated actress, Katherine Lackey. Corwin spoke with typical American humour which did not hide his deep emotion. "Tonight, I envied Louis Golding for the few words that he spoke in Yiddish, but I am happy that I at least know a few more Yiddish words than John Roger, Albert Kahn and William Groper." He concluded his greeting by wishing the new *Yishuv* in Lower Silesia health, peace and a fruitful life.

The hall was galvanized when the representative from the newly established State of Israel, the Hebrew writer Dov Chomsky, spoke. He said, "The Jewish people, the people of Israel, know that their true friends are the Soviets. We must all together do battle against the rise of imperialism which endangers the independence of Israel and that of the Yiddish *Yishuv* in Poland. It is Jews like you, like the Polish Jews who manned the barricades in the Warsaw Ghetto, who will be the rear guards and a reservoir of strength for the fighters for Israel's Independence."

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Dov Chomsky received a standing ovation. Mrs. Jadwiga Klajnerman

I remember how I closed the evening. My heart was full of joy. I thanked everyone and said how much this gathering meant to our new Yishuv and called upon all assembled to acquaint themselves with the achievements and goals of the Jewish settlers in Lower Silesia. As we left the hall, we felt that August 27th, 1948, was a great day in the history of our settlement, a unique occasion that brought men and women from the whole world to spend an evening with us—the builders of a new life. A great contribution to the success of this historic event was made by the well-known Jewish writer from the U.S.A., the late Uri Sul, by his brilliant, simultaneous translations of all the speeches from English to Yiddish, and Yiddish to English.

## CHAPTER NINE: SOME SURVIVORS' STORIES

From the very beginning, the growing *Yishuv* in Lower Silesia manifested the utmost concern for its Jewish children—children who somehow survived years of nightmarish terror and hardship in the bunkers, the forests, within ghetto walls and on the Aryan side. These children, witnesses to the unspeakable tragedies that had befallen their fathers and mothers, who had experienced the evil and horror unleashed by the Nazi murderers, were in special need of tenderness and love such as a mother might provide. Also, the children who had returned from the Soviet Union had to be received with warmth and care.

Soon after the war, we were confronted with the great problem of Jewish children found in Polish homes, whose parents had often paid huge sums to hide their children with Christian families. There were many cases where, after taking the money, the Poles still turned the children over to the Gestapo. That is what happened to my brother's three-year old daughter. Then there were cases of Polish families, who had grown attached to the children in their care, refused to give them up when relatives came to claim them. There were particularly painful cases when children, removed from their Polish families, suffered severe trauma upon learning they were Jewish. I had a little boy pointed out to me, a child from a fine family in Warsaw, who could not accept the fact that he was Jewish and threw stones at other Jews, calling them dirty names. How easy it is to instill hate and prejudice in young minds! Then there were older children who knew that by denying their origin, they stood a better chance of making their way in the world. But still, in many cases, it was possible to get back Jewish children from Polish families.

I got to know a wonderful Jewish lady from Warsaw, Jadwiga Klajnerman, who lived through the occupation as a Pole and worked the whole time with the underground, hiding and saving the lives of as many Jewish children as she could. After the war, with the help of the Joint Distribution Committee and the director Guzik, who contributed the funds, she devoted her efforts to finding and reclaiming Jewish children and sending many of them out of the country. David Guzik died in 1949, in a

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plane crash between Prague and Warsaw. Mrs. Jadwiga Klajnerman remained in postwar Poland for a short time, because her husband Isadore was chief legal advisor to the President of the Polish Republic, Boleslaw Bierut. They then left for Israel with their son, Daniel, a civil engineer. In 1976, the family settled in Toronto. But after surviving the hell of the Nazi occupation, the son died two years later leaving a wife and two sons. Jadwiga Klajnerman, who had snatched from death so many Jewish children, was heartbroken at the loss of her only son and died shortly after.

The rehabilitation of all these children who had survived the Holocaust was, indeed, a very serious problem, which required much thought and great sensitivity, and absorbed much of my time and effort and that of other members of our committee in Lower Silesia.

Before coming to Lower Silesia, I had been in Lublin and visited the home for rescued Jewish children, some of whom had been found in the forests. I could never forget this experience. The tragic eyes of these children haunted me, eyes which mirrored not only past suffering, but also apprehension, insecurity and awareness of their present life surrounded by anti-Semitic elements.

Consequently, at the first conference on June 17, 1945, at which the Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia was officially established, I proposed that the Children's Home in Lublin be relocated in Piotrolesie, a town near Rychbach. My proposal was unanimously approved and the new home, named after Janusz Korczak, the famous educator who marched with the children under his care from the Warsaw Ghetto to the gas chambers, became the largest and best in all of Lower Silesia. In charge of this home was the well-known child educator, Mrs. Natanblit.

Eventually seventy-four institutions, comprising orphanages for children without parents, day care centres for pre-school children and youth centres for youngsters whose parents worked during the day were established throughout Lower Silesia. And always, the welfare of these children was a prime concern for the Yishuv. At times when there was a scarcity of certain commodities, the children were all well fed and clothed.

In the early days of our settlement, when we first established the Children's Homes, it was difficult to find competent people to take care of the youngsters. It was then that we realized how fortunate we were to have my dear friend Zlata Baum on our staff. I had been brought up with

Zlata in the same Boryslaw neighbourhood and when I returned there with the Soviet Army, I found her and her daughter June, the sole survivors of their family, staggering out of a bunker.

I learned from other survivors that Zlata was called the mother of the Boryslaw Ghetto—it was the strength and courage of this remarkable woman that sustained them throughout their ordeal. When she joined us in Lower Silesia, she became mother of all our orphaned children, many of whom remember her care and compassion to this very day. Eventually she and her daughter June left for America. She lived with her daughter and son-in-law, Ira Katz, in Miami, where she died in 1985.

The orphanages and centres were staffed by competent individuals—teachers, nurses—completely dedicated to their work. They realized that the normal psychological development of children who had undergone at an early age frightful, traumatic experiences was as important as physical development. To instill confidence, cooperation and a sense of communal spirit, the youngsters were allowed to run the centres themselves. They elected committees and, under the supervision of the teachers, programmed activities, which were many and varied. There were vocational training classes, physical training and cultural activities which developed many potential artistic talents. For example, the concerts at which orchestras from all the centres played in competitions against each other were very popular. These concerts were widely attended and the talent of the young musicians made a deep impression on Jews and non-Jews alike.

I often visited the Children's Homes and Youth Centres, and seeing the youngsters engrossed in their studies and play, hearing them sing and watching them dance, I could almost forget their harrowing pasts. From time to time, the teachers recorded the history of the children before they came to us and the facts revealed were beyond belief. For example, Fella Sherman was born in 1935 in Somowitz. Her father Jacob was murdered by the SS while lying in the hospital. Her mother, Sarah was shipped to the concentration camp at Sobtow. Fella and her sister somehow escaped being picked up and hid in the forest, but the sister froze to death. Fella ran into some Jewish partisans who took her into their group. The child became part of all that was done, participating in the fight against the Nazis. During an attack, she was shot in the hand and still suffered from the wound when she came to our home. The partisans brought her to the hut of a friendly peasant who consented to hide her. Fella became a shepherdess and a cowherd and was out in the fields every

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day tending to the livestock. Finally, after what must have seemed a lifetime to the little girl, the Russians liberated the countryside and she came out of hiding. In the Children's Home at Piotrolesie, she recovered from her wound, learned Hebrew and Yiddish and became a bright, energetic child participating in all the activities.

Ella Oppenheim was born in the vicinity of Lublin in 1934. During an "action" in 1942, the Nazis set dogs on her and she was only saved from being torn to pieces by a skilled Jew whose services the Nazis needed. With tears in his eyes, he begged them to call off the dogs. Both her parents disappeared in Maidanek and little Ella also fell into the hands of the Gestapo several times. Once, with another child, she broke through a wall and escaped. Picked up a second time, she was taken with a group of Jewish children to be shot. On the way to where a common grave awaited them, Ella carried a small, sick child in her arms. When the Nazis fired, Ella, still clutching the child, fell into the ditch. The child was dead but Ella was unharmed. For the whole night, Ella remained in the ditch, covered with the blood of the dead children's bodies piled around her. In the morning she crawled out and ran away. She found shelter in the attic of a school and, possibly because she looked Aryan, managed to survive there for a year, but eventually contracted typhus and dysentery. As a result of her suffering, her legs became paralyzed and she was taken to a hospital, where a successful operation was performed. But when the Nazis learned she was Jewish, they took her to Auschwitz. On the way, the transport passed through Ella's birthplace, Krasnik. Ella escaped and managed to run to the home of a friendly Polish family who hid her until the liberation.

The boy, Zenek Mandel was born in 1936 in Wolin. His father had been shot by the Nazis in a cemetery where he was forced to bury Jewish victims. His mother was taken away and was never seen again. Zenek lived like a small hunted animal, hiding in holes, scavenging for food and always in danger. Twice he barely escaped being picked up by the Gestapo. After the liberation he found an uncle, with whom he lived for a while in Wilno. But in June of 1945, bandits attacked the house where the last surviving Jews lived and murdered them all. Zenek escaped and eventually was brought to the home in Piotrolesie.

Fella Medzner, born in Zbarasz, was six years old when war broke out. As often as I spoke to her in Piotrolesie, she could never forget the marauding German and Ukrainian bands. At first she, her younger sister

and parents hid in a bunker, but when the food gave out, there was no alternative but to leave the shelter. The children became separated from their parents and wandered through Polish forests and villages and it was only because they had learned to cross themselves that they were taken for Polish children. Fella told me of one incident. They had found a new bunker in which to hide, but the Nazis saw them, pulled them out by the hair and were going to shoot them when they spotted two Jewish women. When the Nazis chased the women, the children got away and lived to see the Russian liberators.

Jack Kuper was born in 1932 in Pulawy, Poland. His father Zelig left for Russia. His mother Eta-Lieba and younger brother Josel were taken to a concentration camp in Sobibor where they both perished. Nine year old Yankel, as he was called, was tending to cows at local farms. He was alone and on his own. With a cross around his neck, a bible in his pocket and attending church every Sunday, he managed to survive the next three years running from village to village performing a gamut of chores, whatever was asked of him, and generally depending on the help of local peasants and his own wits. He came to Piotrolesie with the first transport of orphans from Lublin in the fall of 1945. While there, he learned Yiddish, performed in a drama group that travelled to other cities and towns. One day, he discovered that the entire dormitory was leaving to join a kibbutz with plans to go to Palestine. He did not know what Zionism or Palestine was about. Nevertheless, he packed his few belongings and left with them. Jack Kuper later moved to Toronto. He wrote a book *Child of the Holocaust*, in which he describes his experiences during the war. He became a filmmaker. He married, became a father of four and a grandfather.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, children from Piotrolesie were taken to the Jewish homeland. As many times as I have been to Israel, I have tried to trace the whereabouts of these children but never succeeded in finding them. Of course, now they are adults, married, perhaps have assumed different names, but I hope that if any of them read these pages I will hear from them.

A separate case was that of the children from Russia, who because of the war had been far from Jewish life. They spoke many languages, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, but knew little Yiddish. In the Children's Homes in Lower Silesia, they lived in a warm, Yiddish environment; they rediscovered their Jewish heritage and were brought up as Jews.

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It can be well understood that when these Jewish children came to us, they were in poor physical condition, suffering from rickets, anemia, lung and skin diseases. In our institutions, they recovered, physically and emotionally, as a result of the care, understanding and love they received. Even in the hardest times, when the Jews in Lower Silesia were in great difficulties, everything was done so that the children should not suffer from any shortages. Today, writing about this after so many years, I come to the conclusion that the redemption of the Jewish children was the greatest achievement of the Jewish committee and its leadership in Lower Silesia.

Until the repatriation of the Polish Jews from Russia, there was only one Jewish school in Wroclaw, as almost all child survivors of the Nazi occupation were full orphans and were placed in Children's Homes. With the return of the Jews from Russia came very many Jewish children and it became imperative to establish schools for them. Our committee called a conference of all available teachers and academics and a Jewish Board of Education was formed. By December 1946, twenty-three Jewish schools had been established, with 1,700 students and 116 teachers.

What was taught in these schools? All general subjects such as reading, writing and arithmetic, but with special emphasis upon Yiddish, Hebrew and Jewish history. Our most difficult problem was a scarcity of Jewish teachers, since so many of our academics had been murdered by the Nazis, and the fact that there were almost no textbooks. Despite these difficulties, our efforts to educate the Jewish children were unabated and when the first seminar of Jewish teachers took place in 1945, with the participation of the late well-known Jewish historian Rafael Mahler, plans were formulated to establish a Jewish high school and the first Jewish Conservatory of Music. An important role in establishing the Yiddish school system was played by the teacher Leib Tenzer, who today lives in Montreal, and by Slucka Kestin, who died in Israel.

As soon as the first assistance was received from America, through funds distributed by the Joint Distribution Committee in Lower Silesia, we expanded our services to every needy segment of our population—housing for repatriates, homes for the aged and destitute, convalescent homes, children's homes and trade schools for the older children, communal homes for mothers and children, and the number of soup kitchens which we had operated previously grew to twenty-eight.

But the quality of help our committee gave the Jews was not merely

philanthropic. We did not want our people to be recipients of charity. It was constructive help, enabling them to eventually help themselves so that they could lead independent, productive lives, with dignity and in a spirit of mutual help and in cooperation. As we gradually succeeded in normalizing life in Lower Silesia, we found many instances where this spirit of community flourished, as exemplified by miners in Walbrzych, who voluntarily worked a longer shift each day and donated the surplus of 500,000 kilograms of coal to Children's Homes and other institutions. Their example was followed by workers in factories and cooperatives and by Jewish farmers. Thus, our Yiddish Yishuv followed the precepts of brotherly cooperation while developing a viable economic situation in a society based on democracy and freedom.

Needless to say, the physical condition of the Jews who had survived the concentration camps was appalling and medical care was a prime concern for our committee. We proceeded to set up Departments of Health in all the Jewish settlements and by 1946, the Jewish health organization, TOZ was active throughout Lower Silesia. Lung diseases were so prevalent that to reactivate the sanatoria became one of the first duties of the Health Departments. Clinics, mobile medical units, staffed by competent doctors served thirty-six cities and their environs, so that health care was accessible to all. A sanatorium with 150 beds was established by TOZ (acronym for Organization for Health Rehabilitation) in Jar, near Walbrzych. Lower Silesia was noted for many famous sanatoria in the region—Reinhartz, Duszniki, Salzburg, Solel, Kudowa—which we could now utilize to heal our sick.

Many survivors from concentration camps and ghettos were tubercular. There was also a preventive unit for children in danger of developing tuberculosis. TOZ also maintained sixteen homes for nursing children whose mothers were either working or sick. Along with all the other diseases, TOZ had to combat the spread of malaria which somehow obtained a foothold in our region. One of the important and laudable achievements of TOZ was the medical care extended to our children in the orphanages, the schools, the day and youth centres by the 100 doctors and 120 other medical personnel affiliated with TOZ in Lower Silesia. Heading TOZ in those days were Drs. I. Harmelin and Ichel Deutschmeister. A special role in healing the Katzetters as they emerged from the camps was played by Dr. Tuvia Citron. The Soviet Army, which liberated Lower Silesia, played a vital role in providing medical services for survivors.

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When the late Antek Zukerman and I visited Lower Silesia soon after the liberation, the survivors, just emerged from the horrors of the camps, wept with tears of joy when we told them that despite the great disaster which had befallen our people, Polish Jews were again organized and rebuilding Jewish life and Jewish culture. This strength of the human spirit, this assertion of Jewish identity and nationhood through its culture, was forcefully demonstrated at the concert held the evening of the day when the committee of Jews in Lower Silesia was established. There were no professional artists, writers, actors, or musicians. Almost all had disappeared in the maw of the Nazi juggernaut. The revitalization of Yiddish culture had come from the people, and come it did, with an unsuspected display of talent that amazed and delighted the audience.

Our *Yishuv's* aspiration, striving for national rebirth was a reaction against those forces that had aimed to wipe Jews off the face of the earth. It was the seed which nurtured their determination to combat fascism and intolerance through development of Yiddish culture and preservation of its rich spiritual heritage. The result was amazing. In a short time, through the cooperative efforts of our Yishuv, there was a proliferation of Jewish cultural groups and institutions throughout Lower Silesia—ten Jewish Cultural Centres with auditoriums, thirty-five smaller buildings that accommodated sixty-four drama groups and choirs, thirty-two libraries and a large central library in Wroclaw; a mobile university that offered thirty lectures a month in different cities and towns; schools of journalism and literature; a publishing house with its own printing press. Two weekly newspapers, one in Yiddish and the other in Polish, were issued—*Nidershlesie* (Lower Silesia) in Yiddish, and *Nove Zycie* (New Life) in Polish. The interest of the masses, the *folksmentschen*, in cultural life, in communal and political undertakings was intense. For example, it was characteristic that over a three month period, over 500 events were organized in Lower Silesia, with the participation of over one quarter of the population.

Yiddish theatre was a particularly important feature of cultural life in the region and extremely popular. The first group that pioneered the development of Yiddish theatre included two actors who had come straight from the camps, Zalman Kolesznikow and Chayale Rosental. Soon, a permanent Yiddish theatre came into being in Wroclaw, under the joint directorship of Itzhak Grudberg-Turkow, Szeftel Zak and Yaacov Kurlander. In 1948, a special committee was formed in support of our

Yiddish theatre and we were visited by the foremost Yiddish theatrical groups in the world, including such artists as Molly Picon, Jacov Kalich, Zigmund and Yonas Turkow, Dzigán and Shumacher. For a long time, our directors were Jacob Rotbaum and Ida Kaminska. In 1947-48, we started amongst ourselves a fund-raising campaign to build a new Yiddish theatre in the centre of Wrocław. The campaign was a huge success and in 1948, the theatre was officially opened with representatives of the Polish government in attendance. The theatre was named after Esther Rachel Kaminska, the mother of Ida Kaminska.

The crowning achievement of our cultural revival was the first Yiddish Cultural Conference in Wrocław, which took place in December 1946. The concept for such an undertaking originated soon after the rebirth of the Yiddish Yishuv in Lower Silesia. The planning and preparations of this historic event took six months. Days before the conference opened, banners and posters on the main streets of Wrocław publicized the coming event. Streams of people from early morning on made their way to the largest hall in Wrocław, which was filled daily with an overflow audience of more than 2,000 who listened with interest, and enthusiasm to the reports and discussions.

Pictures, banners and slogans in Yiddish and Polish decorated the hall. Behind the head table hung three portraits of Sholom Aleichem, Peretz and Mendele, three classic writers of Jewish literature. Illustrations of Jewish life in Lower Silesia and exhibits set up on the balcony attested to the achievements of our people—the children's handicraft, the accomplishment of our youth in the Youth Centres and ORT schools, illustrations of Toz at work, products from the kibbutzim found in Lower Silesia—all displayed the strength and vibrancy of Jewish life. Jewish men and women who but a few years ago had experienced the ultimate in pain, sorrow and degradation in the Nazi death camps, as they gazed at the exhibits, as they looked at the sturdy, uniformed Jewish youngsters maintaining order in the crowded hall, asked themselves, "Is this a dream? Is it possible this has been accomplished in such a short time?"

For the first time since the Holocaust, the 400 delegates from all the cities and towns of Lower Silesia met with guests from Warsaw, Lodz, Cracow, Katowitz and other Polish cities. It had been a long time since so many Jews gathered in one place. After many years of separation, friends met, embraced, and cried from joy—an affirmation of life and identity.

Before proceeding with the first day's business, everyone was asked to

rise and a solemn atmosphere enveloped the throng as we stood in silent tribute to the memory of the millions who did not live to see this day. But the mournful mood was dispelled by the warm greetings from our Polish guests—the Mayor of the city of Wroclaw, representatives from the Polish Workers Party and other dignitaries. The audience was particularly aroused by the greeting from Piaskowski, the Governor of Lower Silesia who, as I previously mentioned, was a true friend of the Jews. He said: "I rejoice to see so many of you in this hall today. I remember when you first came from the camps, when we began to build with you a new life in Poland. And I promise you, our friendship and our help as in full partnership, we shall continue to build a free, democratic future for you and for all the people of Poland." Greetings were received from Moscow, Johannesburg, and New York .

That same evening was the premiere performance by the Lower Silesia Theatre Company of *Der Blutiger Shpas* (The Bloody Joke) by Sholom Aleichem. The second evening there were presentations by other dramatic groups, choirs, adults, children and youth. In all, fifteen dramatic groups and other artistic presentations regaled the delighted and enthusiastic audience for a full seven hours. Among them was the performance by the children from the Jewish Ballet School, under the direction of teachers Judith Berg and Felix Fibich (in New York at time of writing) and Tanya Kuchinski (now in Toronto).

There were many discussions and reports from all segments of the population, with representatives from the cooperatives, the factories, the coal mines and political parties. As a result, to assist our people in the development of Yiddish culture, the Yiddish *Kultur Gesellschaft* (Jewish Cultural Association) was established. The conference in Lower Silesia was the first Jewish cultural manifestation after the war in Poland and its impact overflowed the borders of Lower Silesia with important results for Yiddish culture in the country. Accordingly, its scope and intentions were expressed in the manifesto proclaimed by the conference.

## CHAPTER TEN: REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

By 1948, the Yiddish *Yishuv* of Lower Silesia had already achieved a great measure of stability and acceptance and on January 9th of that year, the first conference of Jewish members of all city councils in the region took place in Wroclaw. The fact that Jews were included in the city councils showed that in those days, Jews still had the same civil rights as all other Polish citizens in all aspects of economic and political life. At meetings of the city councils, the Jewish members had the opportunity to demonstrate the achievements in Lower Silesia and to demand the help needed in maintaining the various Jewish institutions. Jewish membership in these city councils was very important, since there was not one facet of life on Lower Silesian soil in which we were not active participants. Eighty-five Jewish city councillors attended the first conference. As the representative of the National Council, I delivered the main address and outlined the goals for which our councillors should strive. This was a new experience for all present. In many cities, it was through the agency of the city councils that we received help and budgetary allotments for our Jewish schools, children's homes, etc.

We delineated the most important problems with which the councillors must deal. They included support of the sick, financial aid, the training of skilled workers, procurement of appropriate documents, legalization of Jewish land claims and the organizing of advisory committees.

The conference in Wroclaw stimulated the Jewish councillors to further intensify productive efforts on behalf of the Jewish population. In those days, we believed that we were establishing a truly democratic society within which we would develop a flourishing Jewish life.

With the establishment of the new Polish Democratic Republic, there was, at the beginning, every opportunity for the development of all facets of political and cultural Jewish life. While the Central Jewish Committee, with its representatives from diverse parties and institutions was the authoritative umbrella organization, each of its component bodies was

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autonomous and conducted its own individual affairs and activities. Prominent among the population were the Jewish members of the Polish Workers Party. Many other organizations, such as the Bund, flourished. And all the Zionist democratic organizations that existed in Poland before the war were again functioning, such as *Ichud* with its youth organization; the women's organization *Wizo* which operated its own *Hachshara* (training farms). The Labour Zionist Party *Dror* was also very active, as were the *Young Bor*, the Stern Clubs, *Hashomer Hatzair* with its flourishing kibbutzim and hachshara. There was also an active Zionist Socialist Party (*Histadrut*) and the young organization *Gordonia*.

An entirely different movement was the *Mizrachi*, which maintained a religious congregation and its own kibbutzim, and was particularly concerned with serving the religious needs of the population, through the operation of kosher kitchens, restaurants, etc. There was also a rabbinate in Wroclaw, headed by the religious scholar Rabbi Dr. Sholom Treistman. There were synagogues in every city in Lower Silesia where there were Jews. There were large ones in Wroclaw, Rychbach and Lignice. In Wroclaw, there was also a big *mikvah* (ritual bath). Jews went to services every Saturday and on holidays. In the city, there were *shochtim* (ritual slaughterers) and *kosher* meat was available. Passover *matzos* were baked; during the High Holidays, the synagogues were full.

The Jewish population of Lower Silesia was fully aware of and sensitive to all political events throughout the world which concerned the Jewish nation. There were protests against the small number of Nazis tried at Nuremberg and the light sentences meted out to the war criminals at the tribunals. There were also protests against the terrorist tactics of the British against the Jews of Palestine. One of the largest pro-Israel demonstrations ever organized was when the State of Israel was proclaimed.

The Jewish soldiers who had fought in the Allied armies and partisans from the forests came to Lower Silesia immediately after the war and formed organizations in many centres. On March 10th, 1947, these front line fighters and partisans gathered at a conference in Wroclaw to proclaim their role in the region. I remember the words of an officer in the Polish army, Major Schitzer, who said: "When our soldiers returned from the front lines and the partisans from the forests, there was no one to meet us. Other soldiers and partisans—the Poles, the Ukrainians—went back to their homes. Jewish fighters had no homes to go back to, no

friends or family to greet them with a friendly word. When we emerged like hunted animals from the forests and came to the cities, we were met with hatred and the black pall of the Kielce pogrom." Hersh Smolar, the leader of the partisans of White Russia also addressed the gathering. A longtime activist, he was chairman of the Jewish Cultural Association in Poland and editor of *Folkshtimme* which was published in Warsaw. In 1968, at the time of the anti-Semitic campaign, he was expelled from the Party and dismissed from all his positions. He left for Israel, where he wrote four books on his life. He is now over eighty years old.

In my address, I reminded them that the function for which they were organizing had already been demonstrated two years ago, in 1945, when the former Jewish camp inmates seized arms from the Nazis and at gun-point defended themselves and protected the establishments and factories where thousands of Jews were now gainfully employed. The conference concluded with the resolution to establish a central leadership for the 1,500 former soldiers and partisans living in Lower Silesia.

Life for me was hectic, but also very rewarding. In February 1947, our son Mark was born. At time of writing, Mark has a Ph.D. in sociology and teaches at the University of Toronto. He also has a private practice in psychotherapy. He and his wife Susan are the proud parents of three children, a boy Patrick, and two girls, Shaindel and Rubi. Also in 1947, my book, *To A New Life*, was published in Yiddish by our own publishing house, *Niderszlezje*, with the financial help of the Joint Distribution Committee of America.

That same year, I went to Paris as a delegate to the international conference of the American Joint Distribution Committee. My report dealt with the aims and achievements in Lower Silesia. I was invited to various functions and was interviewed by the press. This was my first trip to Western Europe and my Paris experience was a revelation as to the extent of the interest and popularity which the *Yishuv* in Lower Silesia had aroused in the outside world.

Five years after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, on April 19th, 1948, a magnificent monument which would stand as an everlasting testimonial to the sacrifice, martyrdom and heroism of Jewish people, was unveiled on the spot where the uprising took place. The monument is the work of the great Jewish sculptor Nathan Rapoport, who died in June 1987 and was buried in Israel. At the time of the Ghetto Uprising, Nathan Rapoport was also a refugee in Russia, sharing the fate of thousands

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of other Jews from Poland. When news of the revolt reached him, he began to draft a design for the construction of a monument to immortalize this event which would express his feeling of sorrow, pain, anger and heroism. In 1943, he presented a small plaster model of what was to be the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters' Monument to the Art Council of Moscow, and although the work was acknowledged by the Russians as a great artistic creation, the project was rejected as being too nationalistic.

Toward the end of 1945, it was possible to return to Warsaw and when Rapoport arrived there with the first group of repatriates, he presented his plan to the Central Committee of Polish Jews, who approved it. The project was also approved by the Polish government. As soon as the decision was made to erect the monument, the Polish Jews began the task of raising funds for the project. The campaign for funds was intensified in Poland and contributions obtained from every segment of the Jewish population and all Jewish institutions.

It was agreed that the location of the monument should be the very spot where the first shots were fired against the Nazi invaders. This was not far from Mila 18, the site of the last bunker that was destroyed, to be called the Ghetto Heroes Square, where the leader of the revolt, Mordecai Anielewicz, died in the last days of the fighting. There was no appropriate stone in Warsaw, so Nathan Rapoport went to Sweden and there found it. It was a splendid granite, ordered originally by Arno Breker, the German sculptor, to be used in Berlin for a monument dedicated to the victory of Hitler. These stones became the monument of the martyrs and heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto. Measuring thirty-three feet high, the sculpture is divided into two sections. The front section, cast in bronze, portrays a group of fighters escaping from the burning ghetto—men, women and young people. The expression on their faces symbolizes the fighting spirit of the ghetto as do their weapons held aloft—homemade grenades and stones torn out of the pavement. The figures convey boundless courage, unalterable determination to resist at any price; the entire group seems to emerge from its stone framework as the embodiment of a people fighting for its freedom. The reverse side of the monument, cast in stone, represents the last march of Jews, condemned to the concentration camps and death chambers. Here we see the tragic fate of helpless old men, women and children, their expressions showing fear and resignation. The row of figures with the lowered heads has a rhythm all of its own—a pathetic procession of passive persons who had been deprived of

any means to resist. Here we see the tragedy of an ancient people

As the date for the unveiling approached, we were notified day by day of delegations from all over the world who were planning to attend the unveiling ceremony. In Lower Silesia, we organized a delegation of more than 500, including 50 Jewish coal miners dressed in their special uniforms. On the fifth anniversary of the Uprising, April 19th, 1948, the memorial was unveiled. Representatives from twenty-five countries, including Israel, the United States and Canada, assembled for the event, but with one notable exception—the U.S.S.R. refused to send a delegation of Russian Jews. The official reason given was that the Russians considered it not fitting, when so many other nations lost their people in the war that the first monument should be for the Jews. This attitude on their part pained us deeply.

Thousands of Jews and many Poles converged upon the site, opposite the one time military prison on Zammenhof Street. Thousands clambered upon the walls of the surrounding ruins for a better view. I will never forget the solemnity, the impressiveness of the occasion—the menoroth burning, people crying in silence and praying. I was one of the twenty-five thousand participants. Along with me were my wife Clara and nine year old daughter, Mary. After trudging along for several miles, our little girl, tired and foot sore, began to cry. Clara attempted to sooth her, explaining that all of us were marching in memory of the thousands of Jews who had been led to their death along this very same road. "But it wasn't my fault," Mary sobbed. "Must I die too?" Itzhak Grudberg Turkov, who was walking beside me and had with him a small suitcase, placed it on the ground so that Mary could sit down and rest for a while. After several such stops, we completed the march.

Not only the Polish Jewish survivors, but delegates from all over the world staged a march along the very streets through which the Nazis had led Jews to destruction—a procession that stretched for many miles. Nor can I ever forget the emotional impact upon me and upon the whole multitude when Jews, covered in *tallaisim* and chanted *Ail Moley Rakhmim* (Lord Full of Compassion).

One of the moving experiences was to have with us the delegation from Israel, representatives of all political parties in the Jewish State, many of whom were well known to us from pre-war days. Among them were Itzhak Greenbaum, J. Zerubavel, M. Kleinbaum (Sneh), the famous poet Itzik Manger and the many others, most of whom later visited

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the *Yishuv* in Lower Silesia about which they had heard so much. Telegrams were received from all over the world, from such people as Albert Einstein, Leon Feuchtwanger, Sholom Asch, H. Leivick, J. Opatoshu. The only thing which to some extent marred the occasion was the absence of Jews from Russia, with whom we had fought side by side in the war against the Nazis.

In those exciting days, I became acquainted with Moshe Sneh, who had made a great impression upon me, as a young man. I used to read his weekly column in the Zionist organ, *Hajnt*, which was published in Warsaw. Moshe Sneh was born in a Yiddish *shtetl* by the Vistula River to a Hassidic family, but when a radical wing of the Zionist movement was established, Sneh, then known as Moshe Kleinbaum, joined that faction. The upheaval of the Second World War drove him to Vilna, which was part of Poland at the time, but after the Red Army occupied Vilna, following the division of Poland between Germany and Russia, Sneh fled from the Soviets and in 1940 managed to get a British visa which enabled him to move with his family to Palestine.

A man of great political and polemical talent, he soon obtained work with the Jewish Agency and, although only thirty-two years of age, became the commander-in-chief of the *Haganah* and a very popular figure in Palestine. The *Haganah* had the official sanction of the Jewish Agency, but it was not the only force in the battle against England, since the *Irgun*, with its terrorist tactics, was also engaged in the struggle. Sneh wanted to coordinate the *Haganah* and *Irgun* activities under one central command, to increase their effectiveness in the struggle against the British. When David Ben-Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency of Jerusalem, learned what Sneh was planning, he became incensed and, not able to forgive Sneh's desire to cooperate with the *Irgun*, immediately fired him from the *Haganah*. At the time of the mass arrests in Palestine, Sneh, with a price on his head, managed to escape capture by the British security police and illegally entered Paris. Devastated by the blow to his plans and by the break with Ben-Gurion, Sneh sank into a lengthy period of depression while in France. There he began to ponder the trend of world political developments and became convinced that the U.S.S.R. would prevail and that communism would become dominant. Also, he felt that Russia would favour the establishment of a Jewish State and it would be necessary, therefore, to prepare a leadership in Eretz Israel that would be pro-Soviet, since the leaders in Palestine were aligned with America.

With the departure of the British from Palestine and the establishment of the Jewish State, Sneh returned to Israel and resumed his political activities. He was still imbued with the ideas of international communism and was an advocate of the U.S.S.R. When the left Zionist Mapam (formed before the establishment of the State and of which Sneh had been the leader) split, Moshe Sneh became a Communist. He became the leader of the Communists Party and it was said at the time that he had considerable influence in the Kremlin. But as a Jew when he saw what Stalin was doing to the Jews, he became disillusioned. He broke with the Arab-Jewish Communist Party and founded *Makki* (Jewish Communist Party). He became increasingly more nationalistic and after the Six-Day war, he even became more Zionist-conscious. By the time he died of cancer in early March 1972, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that Sneh's allegiance was solely to the State of Israel and the welfare of the Jewish people. It is of interest to know that his only son Rafael, who was a leader of the young communist movement in Israel, became a general in the Israeli army.

I happened to be in Galilee with the delegation from Toronto when the news of Sneh's death was announced. I left my group and travelled half the night to attend the funeral held at the headquarters of *Histadrut* in Tel Aviv. Many dignitaries, including Golda Meir, Moshe Dyan, and others assembled to pay their last respects. I learned that in his will, Sneh stipulated that *Kaddish* should be said by his son, Psalms read at the graveside and that he should be buried according to traditional rites. As I walked in the funeral procession, I reflected upon the turbulent life Moshe Sneh had lived, and how the hard and twisting road he had travelled led him in the end to his beginnings.

In April 1948, I was summoned to Warsaw by Shimon Zachariasz whose function, as a representative of the Polish Workers Party, was to deal with problems of the Jewish Central Committee. He told me in strictest confidence that all the socialist states that supported the United Nations resolution in favour of a Jewish State felt that it was incumbent upon them to render concrete aid for its establishment by conducting a campaign for funds, sending grain to Jews in Palestine, most importantly, by organizing a military school for young Jews who, upon completing their training, could go to Palestine to help the *Haganah* in its fight against the British. He assigned to me the job of finding a place in Lower Silesia where military training centre could be established. The socialist

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states saw the Zionist struggle as a battle against British Imperialism. We

I chose a location in the vicinity of the small town of Bolkow, three kilometres from Jelenia Gora which had a population of only 130 and was surrounded by open fields and forests where military manoeuvres could be carried on without arousing much attention. The location was approved and representatives from the Haganah in Israel came to train the Jewish youths. The recruiting was not haphazard. Each trainee had to have been recommended and had to disclose from which organization he came. The recruits were from twenty-two to twenty-five years of age and each group trained twelve hours a day for ten days. One group could be from 130 to 150 people. Each signed a pledge that after coming to Israel, he would join the Haganah. Besides the physical drills, there were also lectures on the history of Haganah. An active part in organizing and carrying through these courses was played by a member of the Central Jewish Committee, Stefan Grayek, one of the surviving leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising who is, at time of writing, chairman of the World Federation of Partisans and Fighters in Israel. One of the first Haganah instructors was Itzhak Plagi from Ein Shomer, one of the first kibbutzim, and Yaacov Natel, a representative from Palmach. Later they were joined by other instructors.

Several thousand young Jews were trained. Some difficulties were encountered in getting them into Palestine, but we overcame them and our boys became fighters in the War for Independence. Hersh Smolar, in his book *Oif der Letzter Pozitzie-Mit der Letzter Hofenung*, (On the Last Position—With The Last Hope), writes that 7,000 were sent to fight in Palestine. We heard that they fought bravely. Many were wounded and killed. Our efforts in Poland to help the embattled Jewish country also resulted in 150 carloads of grain shipped and 115,000,000 Zlotys in financial aid.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: PORTENTS OF DANGER

In 1948, the Polish government began planning a large exhibition to take place in 1949 in Wroclaw, which would demonstrate the achievements in the reclaimed new territory of Lower Silesia. This event was a source of great excitement for our Yishuv. We felt proud of our accomplishments, of the major contributions we had made to the overall development of the region while maintaining at the same time Jewish identity and culture. A committee was organized to plan a Jewish pavilion for the exhibition and after months of intensive work including the participation of artists, craftsmen and many willing hands to erect and decorate the structure, the beautiful Jewish pavilion was finally ready. At its entrance were two statues of Jewish workers by the well known sculptor Chaim Hanft. Inside were impressive displays that illustrated the pioneering role of the Jews in the region—in industry, agriculture, education, health care, social welfare and the arts.

Two weeks before the opening, I received a telephone call at home late at night, an ominous event, advising me that in the morning, I would be visited by a government delegation headed by Mr. Bida (later the Polish ambassador to Israel). They wished to inspect the Jewish pavilion. For the first time in the years that I was chairman of the Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia and responsible for all the activities of our Yishuv, I felt uneasy.

In the morning, when I met the delegation I was surprised to see them with the chief of the Wroclaw security police and the Soviet advisor. For an hour, I showed them around the pavilion, explaining the theme and purpose of each display. Even as they looked and listened attentively, I felt they had come with some sort of preconceived decision. Finally, one of them said to me, "Comrade Egit, you must think that you're in Israel. This would be a very appropriate pavilion for Tel Aviv, but this is Poland. We order you to dismantle your pavilion and to include some of the displays in the general exhibition in the other building." When I

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heard these words, the blood rushed to my head. I began to protest. We were justly proud, I said, of what the Jews, as loyal citizens of Poland, had contributed to the general welfare and development of the region, and that the maintenance of our Jewish identity and culture did not, in any way, diminish our achievements on the soil of Lower Silesia. My protestations were in vain. I had with me the invitation to sit on the platform at the ceremony officially opening the exhibition. I took the invitation out of my pocket, tore it to pieces before their eyes and declared that I would in no way participate in the ceremony.

It was during that same period that disturbing news began to reach us from the Soviet Union, news that Jewish writers and artists were being arrested. I had two guests from America at my home at the time, writer Uri Suhl, and the late painter William Groper, who confirmed all the rumours. Groper, who had been in the U.S.S.R. many times, told me that he was going again to see if he could contact his close friend, the Jewish writer Itzik Feffer. Some weeks later, he returned so depressed he couldn't speak. He eventually told me that when he asked for Feffer, he was sent from one office to another, from one court to another, all to no avail. Finally he left without seeing him or obtaining any knowledge of his whereabouts. I urged him to send a statement to the press about his experiences but he refused, saying that he still could not believe that the situation of the Jewish writers in Russia was hopeless and that he was afraid to provoke the Soviets.

An open demonstration against the anti-Semitic policy of the U.S.S.R. came from one of the leaders of Jewish communists in Canada, J.B. Salsberg. His repudiation of communism made a great impression upon the world, but by this time, Stalin was dead and it was after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party in Russia. Had the western world expressed its protest sooner, it is possible that many of the murdered Jewish writers would be alive today.

Now we have definite corroboration of these facts in a statement by Jacob Berman, the former Vice Premier of Poland and a member of the Politburo of the Polish Workers Party. The statement was printed in a book of interviews by Teresa Toranska, called "*Oni*" (They) published in Great Britain in 1985. Berman stated to her, that after a trial by a military court, 238 Jewish writers, 106 actors, 19 musicians and 87 painters and sculptors were either shot or murdered in Russian camps.

An ominous portent of things to come! After many sleepless nights, I

decided to contact various leaders of the Zionist organizations and, in individual interviews with them, make each one realize that he, and the members of the organization, should be prepared to leave Poland now. I succeeded in convincing them that no bright future awaited them in the country. Among those leaders who eventually went to Israel were Yaacov Mendelsohn, a member of Poale Zion; Samuel Hirshfeld of Ichud; the engineer Roseman and many others. My foresight proved correct. A half year later, the government outlawed Zionist organizations in Poland.

In the fall of 1949, I was summoned to the office of the First Secretary of the Polish Workers Party in Lower Silesia (PZPR), Kazimierz Witaszewski, a known anti-Semite, who was a general in the Polish army formed in Russia during the war, and who was instrumental, it was said, in getting rid of Jewish officers in the Polish army. This was the man who later in 1955 and 1956, made himself very popular in Poland by his statements, wherein he declared that the Polish intelligentsia must be beaten down with iron rods. He kept me for three hours, delving in great detail into the seriousness of Poland's present situation. "We are now living in circumstances," he said, "as if we are in a wagon going downhill that is being pulled by a pair of runaway horses and must hold on for dear life if we don't want to fall out." You," he declared, "are one of those who cannot hold on." He accused me of building and organizing a Jewish nationalistic settlement and that I operated if I were in Israel. The Party, he said, could no longer tolerate me as chairman of the Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia and asked for my resignation.

I came home a broken man, my feet could scarcely carry me. This was a blow, I knew, not only against me personally, but against the whole concept of Jewish identity. It meant that my dream of a new life, for a resurrected, flourishing Jewish community upon the soil of a democratic Poland, was dead. Dismissing me as a chairman of the Jewish Committee was a clear indication of the government's opposition to our aims. My hopes were shattered.

I went to Warsaw. There I met Shimon Zachariasz, who admired my activities in Lower Silesia. Now that I had been ordered to resign as Chairman of the Jewish Committee, perhaps, I would be allowed to go to Israel. I asked him to intervene on my behalf. He went to Jacob Berman, a member of the Politburo and a colleague of the Polish President. Permission was refused, the reason being that it would create a bad impression. When I returned to Wroclaw, I became very sick and spent two weeks in the hospital.

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Shortly thereafter, I presided at a conference of Jews in Lower Silesia, at which I said goodbye to delegates from all cities in the region. All of them were very disturbed, for they understood that a new era was coming to Poland. Not one member of the Central Committee in Warsaw had wanted to attend this conference at which they knew I would be divested of my position, with the exception of Joel Lazebnik, the secretary of the Central Jewish Committee. I learned later that my dismissal from office had not been the decision of the Central Committee of Polish Jews, but had been decided and engineered by the UB or Polish Police. They accused me of being a Jewish nationalist, and were suspicious of my contacts with foreign delegations, particularly Zionists, and they were not sure of my absolute political reliability. These were the same reasons for my arrest, later on.

Despondent, I knew my dismissal would not be the end. I understood the workings of the regime and suspected that my name was somewhere on its blacklist as "a traitor to the Polish people." The uncertainty as to my future was resolved by an old friend, the writer and poet Dr. David Sfar, who recently died in Israel. He was the editor of a Yiddish publishing house in Warsaw. He proposed that I be appointed its director on the recommendation of Shimon Zachariasz. I gladly accepted the position. In Lower Silesia, we had established our own publishing house and even before the war, I had had some experience in that field. Since the publishing house was part of the Central Committee of Polish Jews in Warsaw, my appointment was an official transfer from Wroclaw to Warsaw.

In 1950, we moved from Wroclaw to Warsaw. Although it was a small enterprise, it was the only Yiddish publishing house at the time, not only in Poland but in all of Europe. I put all my energies into that work and, within a year, organized a subscription list of 5,000 for our publications, which reached readers not only in Poland but abroad, as well. I spent several peaceful and productive years in Warsaw with my family during which, in addition to my duties at the publishing house, I also travelled to various cities lecturing on Yiddish literature.

I remember as if it were today, the date of Sunday, January 14th, 1953. I was on my way to a speaking engagement in Lublin and at the railway station I bought the daily paper. On the first page was a reprint of an editorial that had appeared in Moscow's *Pravda* about the so-called conspiracy of Jewish doctors (instigated and abetted by the Jewish Welfare

Organization known as the Joint Distribution Committee in America) to assassinate the leaders of the U.S.S.R. The blood ran cold in my veins and I started to shake. This was, I realized, a new Stalinist provocation against the Jews, the bitter repercussions of which would also be felt by us in Poland.

The reprinted editorial quoted a communique from *Tass*, the Soviet News Agency, which read: "Some time ago the State Security Police uncovered a terrorist group comprised of Jewish doctors whose avowed goal was to shorten lives of Soviet leaders by using spurious medicines." The article named members of this alleged criminal organization—M. Wofsi, B. Winogradov, B. Kogan, F. Yagorov, J. Feldman, A. Greenstein, G. Mairov, and Dr. L. Stern—all famous professors of medicine in Moscow. The communique went on to say that documents found by the police, the testimony of medical experts who helped in the investigation and the confessions of the arrested criminals proved that the Jewish doctors were enemies of the people who planned to undermine the health and stability of the nation. The criminals confessed that in the case of A.A. Zhdanov, a false diagnosis concealing his serious heart condition resulted in his death and further interrogations revealed that the Jewish doctors were also planning to shorten the life of comrade A.S. Scherbakov. "The first objective of the conspiracy now is to destroy the leaders of the Russian army and thus weaken the defense of the country. The conspirators intended to incapacitate Marshal Vasilevsky, Marshal Konev and others, but their arrest nipped in the bud this nefarious plot."

The communique further stated: "Most members of this terrorist group are affiliated with the Jewish nationalist bourgeois organization (Joint) which is aided by American espionage. During the interrogation, the arrested Mr. Wofsi revealed that he had received directives to liquidate leading Soviet personalities from this American organization through Dr. Shimonilovich and the well-known Jewish nationalist Michoels.<sup>7</sup> Other members of the terrorist groups are agents of the British spy network."

The *Pravda* editorial pointed out that discovery of this "murderous band" proved the validity of Stalin's theory about the class conflict becoming sharper. It was an excuse for anti-Semitism, as made clear by labelling Michoels a Jewish nationalist. The editorial revealed the alleged criminal activities of Jewish doctors in the past, such as that of the prominent Dr. Levine, who, with another Jewish colleague, poisoned the famous Russian writer, Maxim Gorki, party leader Kubishev and others.

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The anti-Semitic provocation of the "Doctors Plot" surfaced five months after the execution of the greatest Jewish writers and artists in the Soviet Union. The "Doctors Trial," had Stalin had his way, would have been the beginning of the last chapter in the history of Russian Jews. We later learned that plans had been made to eliminate the Jews by sending them to die in Siberia. The mass arrests had begun in 1948 and, by the beginning of 1953, the anti-Semitic actions were greatly intensified.

The slanderous allegations against the Jewish doctors in Moscow, labelled "murderers in white coats," began with a letter sent to Stalin by a woman, Dr. Timoshuk, confessing that while working as an assistant to a certain Jewish professor in Moscow, she participated in attempts to poison leading figures in the U.S.S.R. When the first statement about the "Doctors' Plot" was issued, her patriotism in revealing the plot was acclaimed and she was awarded the Lenin Order as a Heroine of the Soviet Union.

Needless to say, the situation for the Jews of Poland at this time was precarious. The policies of the U.S.S.R., widely publicized preparations for the "Doctors' Trial," resulted in strong, anti-Semitic reactions. From every city came rumours of anti-Semitic incidents, of slogans written on walls and of the distribution of anti-Jewish leaflets. Although the Poles never liked the Russians, they very quickly adopted any anti-Semitic policy which came from Moscow.

The tenth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was coming up and in this period of hostility and anti-Jewish feeling, we all were anxious to stress the heroism of the Ghetto defenders, who courageously fought until death, for the honour of the Jewish people. A committee was organized in Warsaw to plan the memorial ceremonies and I was elected chairman.

February 23rd, 1953, was a hard day for me. There had been a constant stream of people going in and out of my office, meeting to plan the Ghetto Uprising Commemoration. When I got home late at night, the first sight that greeted me was "Death to the Jews" painted in red on the wall of the building where I lived. I said nothing of this to my wife when I came in, just asked for a bite to eat before going to bed as I was tired and had promised my six year old son, Mark, who wasn't feeling well, that I would sleep with him. I no sooner sat down at the table when there was a loud knock at the door. We weren't expecting any visitors and I called out in alarm, "Who's there?" The answer came—"The police. We just

want to ask a few questions." I opened the door and six security police in plain clothes trooped in. When I asked the reason for this intrusion, they showed me an official document authorizing them to question me and to search the house. For two hours, they rifled through all our belongings, looking through all my books and papers, before requesting me to accompany them to the police headquarters for a 'brief hearing.' I said goodbye to my wife, who was trembling with fear, to my frightened son and daughter and assured all of them that I would come home soon since I wasn't guilty of any crime. That is what I told them, but deep inside I thought otherwise, for I knew from past experience that no one who had been arrested in this system ever came back.

My worst fears were realized when I saw an ambulance waiting outside. This was not going to be a routine visit to a hospital. Everyone in Warsaw knew that when an ambulance speeded down the street with sirens blasting, it was not taking a sick person to the hospital, but was transporting some unfortunate to prison. Two armed guards shoved me onto the floor of the ambulance, climbed in after me and tied a blindfold around my eyes. I lay there sick with apprehension, dazed with my thoughts in a turmoil as I tried to figure out what was happening to me.

It was a long ride. After the first 15 minutes I realized that they were taking me out of the city. About an hour later, the ambulance ground to a halt. Still blindfolded, I was led down three flights of stairs and into a room where the blindfold was removed. A man was seated at a plain wooden table with several others standing around. Without addressing me directly or giving me a chance to speak, they forced me to leave all my belongings and to remove the belt from my trousers. They led me down another flight of narrow stairs and through an iron door into a cell.

It was cold, damp, windowless. The limestone walls were dripping with moisture and the only light a single dim bulb hanging from the ceiling which flickered off and on.

The guard made me take off my suit and shoes and after I handed them to him, he went out without a word, clanging the iron door shut behind him. I was shivering with cold and apprehension. An iron cot stood against a wall, with a straw pallet and a thin rough blanket. I lay down, took off the sweater I had been wearing under my suit and used it for a pillow. My wife had knit it for me and its touch against my cheek was comforting—a link with my family and the outside world.

For hours I lay there and though I was shivering with cold, my face



While with a delegation in Ottawa, Jacob Egit is introduced by the late Saul Hayes, O.C., Q.C., National Executive Director of the Canadian Jewish Congress, to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.



Harry Mandelbaum, Rabbi David Monson, Jacob and Clara Egit, Dr. Sidney Wax, Julius Ciechanowsky at the Tribute Banquet for Jacob Egit, Toronto, 1978.

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Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel, receiving the Toronto Delegation, March, 1972. Left to right: Irving Paisley, Jacob Egit, David Rotenberg, Mrs. and Mayor William Dennison and the Prime Minister.



Executive Committee of the United Organizations for Histadrut in Toronto, 1963. Honorary President Rabbi Dr. David Monson seated centre.



Around the table from left to right; Luba Kleinstejn, Nathan Rapoport, Anne Mirvish, Igor Kuchinski, Helen Karney, Susan Karoc, Mr & Mrs Maurice Boyman; Guests at the Tribute Banquet for Jacob Egit, Toronto 1978.



The late Anne Glass, president of the Women's Council, UOFH, greeting Jacob Egit, at the banquet in his honour, September 1978. At the head table, Senator David Croll



Isreal Kessar (centre) Secretary-General of the Histadrut in Israel, makes presentation to Jacob Egit. Looking on David Geist of Toronto. Tel Aviv, 1977.



In April 1977, Egit being introduced to President of Israel, Itzhak Navon by Moshe Kol, Minister of Tourism. Looking on Alex Grossman of Toronto, Benni Sharoni, leader of the Massuah Project in Kibbutz Tel Itzhak.



Reception on the occasion of the opening of the Joseph and Esther Betel Medical Centre in Kiryat Bialik, Israel. Left to right: Murray Betel, the late Esther and Joseph Betel, Mary Betel, Sam Lipshitz and Jacob Egit.



Jacob Egit, Prime Minister Menachim Begin, Nathan Silver, Clara Egit, Anna Geist, Israel, 1978.



Ben Goldglas, Alex Grossman and Jacob Egit lighting one of six torches commemorating 6 Million Holocaust Martyrs, Tel Itzhak, Israel.

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(Antek) Yitzhak Zukerman with wife Zivia Lubetkin, Warsaw, 1945.



Jacob Egit, Gideon Hausner, Nathan Rapoport, Stefan Grayek, Israel, 1976.



Abraham Sutzkever, famous Yiddish poet in Israel, with Jacob and Clara Egit.



Szymon Kanc, an Israeli writer, greets the Toronto delegation at a reception in Tel Aviv, 1979. Seated, Israel Kessar with wife Mazel and Jacob Egit.



Jacob Egit and Rabbi Gunther Plaut speak at mass demonstration. At Toronto's Nathan Philips Square in 1971.

Robert Lawrence Egit Weisz with Clara and Jacob Egit, 1987





Members of the Jacob and Clara Egit foundation Editorial Board in Israel. Left to right; seated: Melvin Klarfeld, Dr. Goldstein, Mordechai Tzanin. Standing: Stefan Grayek, Dr. Dina Porat, Clara and Jacob Egit, and the late Y. Avrech, Chairman, Israel, 1985.

*Abraham Sutzky, Rabbiner Tzofim, Israel, with Jacob and Clara Egit.*



Executive members, Women's Council of the Toronto Histadrut with the famous Jewish singer Nehama Lifschitz at the O'Keefe Centre, 1970. From left to right: Raya Koby, Clara Egit, Ruth Gutholc, Nehama Lifschitz, Fay Gold, the late Ruth Upfal, Minni Shupac, and Minni Peters.



Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel with Clara and Jacob Egit, 1987.



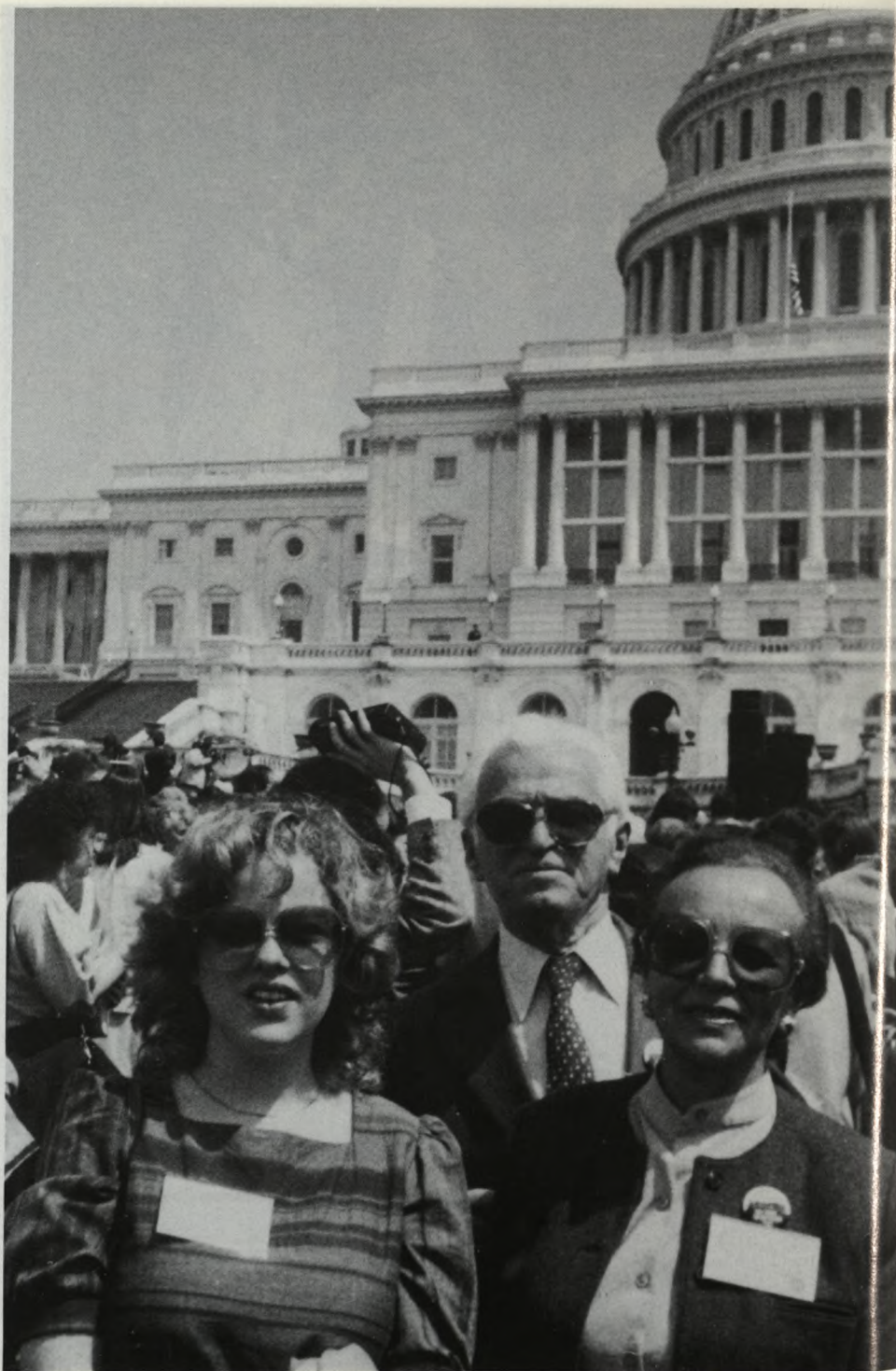
Jacob Egit with daughter Mary Betel in Jerusalem, 1979.





Clara and Jacob Egit, with their son Mark, on the campus of the University of Toronto, after Mark received his Doctorate in Sociology in 1980.

<http://rcin.org.pl>



Jacob and Clara Egit, grand-daughter Helena Betel, World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, Washington D.C. 1988.

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was burning. From exhaustion, I fell asleep and dreamt I was being attacked by a pack of large, black cats, who were biting, scratching and tearing at my flesh. Overcome with terror and excruciating pain, I screamed and opened my eyes—to see a blinking light, a closed iron door, scabrous walls and, what I hadn't noticed before, a dark shape huddled on the ground against the far wall, emitting loud snores. I was completely disoriented. Could this be another nightmare? In the unnatural silence punctuated by the snores, I could hear my heart beating. No, this was reality I realized, but the reality that was in itself a nightmare. I prayed for the night to end. I must have dozed off and dreamt again for I felt the warmth of my little boy's arms embracing me and heard him say, "Papa it's so good to be with you." Suddenly, as if a bomb had exploded beneath me, I sprang up from the cot. The iron door had opened with a loud clang, shattering the absolute silence. The banging of the door and the flickering of the bulb off and on, I learned, were deliberately designed to play upon the nerves of the cell inmates. My suit and shoes were brought in by a guard and on a frosty February morning, he led me outside to wash with cold water.

When I was taken back to my cell, still dazed by the shock of my arrest, unable to comprehend fully what was happening to me, my cellmate—the apparition of the night before—introduced himself.

He was an old Polish worker accused of anti-government activities. He was innocent but didn't believe that he would ever see his loved ones. "If you are innocent, why are you so afraid?" I asked him. He smiled and told me. "There was a Jew from Shchechin here in your place yesterday whom they tortured so horribly at the interrogations that he scraped the lime from the walls and ate it trying to kill himself." He kept on telling me the gruesome details of the prisoner's interrogations. "Does he want to frighten me?" I thought. "Why would he do that?" Perhaps he's been planted by the police to soften me up before my turn came. But why am I here? What are my sins? What wrong did I do? Where am I?" A maelstrom of confusing and despairing thoughts spun through my mind.

I remembered that just yesterday, all kinds of people had come to my office with alarming stories about the outbreak of anti-Semitic violence throughout the land, which the Polish police did nothing to stop and recalled that during the week the Jewish Committee had received an order from the Party headquarters to prepare lists of all Jewish activists. Why? I also remembered that the foreign press had carried an item about

concentration camps being built for Polish Jews on the Polish-Soviet border under the command of the Russian officer, Kozakevitch. I trembled as I thought of my family, of the uncertain future which awaited the Polish Jews, of my own hopeless situation.

On the second day, my cellmate was taken away and I was left alone. Days ran into nights without my knowing the difference. Periodically the iron door opened and shut with a nerve-shattering clang and the guard, without uttering a word, would leave a bowl of food on the floor for me as if I was a dog. At the same time, I was ordered to turn in the opposite direction so as not to see the guard's face.

Some time later my interrogations began—sessions which lasted from midnight until three or four in the morning. My suit and shoes were brought in by a guard who led me up a narrow staircase of three flights into a brightly lit room where a young officer of the security police sat at a table. The first night I was told to dictate my biography—slowly and in minutest detail. It wasn't easy. I was weak from not eating and not sleeping and it was difficult to gather my thoughts together. After an hour on my feet, my knees began to buckle, but when I tried to lean against the wall for support, I was roughly pulled away.

The interrogations continued night after night, with the same questions barked at me over and over again in an effort to incriminate me by my contradictory statements. The interrogations were conducted in such a manner as to completely confuse, disorient and break the morale of the accused. The pressure was meant to cause the psychological breakdown of the victim, so that he would often confess to crimes he did not commit. For instance, in my case, time after time I was questioned about my conversations with foreign delegations. When I answered, they often told me that my wife had contradicted my statements. My wife, however, was never interrogated. From the questions put to me, I realized that the regime was planning to start anti-Semitic prosecutions, although I didn't know at the time that on the night of my arrest, February 23rd, 1953, the secretary general of the American Joint Distribution Committee in Poland, Gittler Barsky, a Polish citizen, had also been arrested and that trials of the "Joint Zionist Counter-Revolutionaries in Poland" were being prepared.

In my later interrogations, they wrote down the names of all my contacts with the foreign Jewish delegates who had visited me in Lower Silesia—Rabbi Phil Bernstein (at time of writing in Rochester, New

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York), Dr. Joseph Schwartz; Dr. J. Tennenbaum, the representative of Polish Jews in America; Reuben Saltzman; Paul Novick and others. It was obvious that they intended to show that the visits of these American Jews to Lower Silesia were for the purpose of undermining the communist regime and that I was one of those involved in the counter-revolution. I soon realized that the police must have a list of all the Jewish leaders in Poland and were only waiting for the end of the "Doctors' Trial" in Russia before carrying out mass arrests and prosecution of Polish Jews.

At the time of my imprisonment, it was Swiatlo, a high ranking officer of the Security Police (U.B.), who together with the Deputy Minister of Security was responsible for the rounding up of suspects. After Stalin died, and Beria was sentenced to death, Swiatlo, knowing that now there would be a reversal of policy on the part of the Polish regime and afraid that he would be called to account for his actions, fled to Germany and from there to the United States. In America he issued a statement that full-scale anti-Semitic campaigns were going on in Poland, that anti-Jewish prosecutions were being prepared patterned upon the Moscow trials.

The interrogations went on for weeks. My health deteriorated. Although I was never beaten or tortured, the psychological pressure was unbearable. Several times, two guards entered my cell, handcuffed me and led me out to a courtyard where I was told I would be shot, but at the last minute, half dead from fright, I would be taken back. Once I heard a woman screaming. When I was summoned to my usual interrogation the following night, I was told that many of my statements and the dates I had given did not correspond with those of my wife. My heart seemed to stop beating and I almost fainted with shock. "Did you also arrest my wife? I have two children." "She's here for a few days only. We'll let her go soon," my interrogator assured me. I didn't know if I could believe him and the memory of those screams, which I assumed were that of my wife, tormented me day and night. This form of torture just about destroyed me. After three months, I almost stopped eating and sleeping and couldn't stand up without help. This type of interrogation was intended to destroy me as a human being—to kill my soul, my spirit, my morale and bring about my total physical collapse.

During the course of my interrogations I began to understand clearly that I was being accused of wishing to separate Lower Silesia from the

rest of Poland and that, with the help of the Joint Distribution Committee and other American Jewish organizations, I was planning to turn Lower Silesia into the hands of the newly established Israeli government and, in effect, build a Jewish nationalist state. Of course, they also charged that I formed a Jewish army in Lower Silesia to help Israel.

As ridiculous as this accusation was, the fact is that even now, 33 years after my arrest, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency published a report on October 5, 1984, which reads as follows: "The communist controlled Polish press published a frame-up about a partnership between West Germany and Israel against the interests of the Polish Republic. The West German press excerpted a series of articles from the Polish Political Journal "Perspective" which came out with a sensational article about the existence of a Bonn-Jerusalem Axis whose goal was imperialism and revenge. The magazine, which was considered an organ of Foreign Minister Olszewski—a loyal follower of the Moscow line—accused West Germany of attempting to alter the borders of Europe and Israel, and first of all to revise the borders of Poland.

"West German observers, familiar with the Polish program see in this ongoing propaganda campaign an attempt to deflect the attention of the Polish people from difficult economic problems. They fear that even in the heart of Poland, the propaganda about the German-Israeli alliance against existing Polish borders can ignite the fires of anti-Semitism, which have lately been somewhat subdued."

Jews were also attacked in the Polish press in connection with the visit to Israel of a West German Christian Democratic politician Herbert Hufka, leader of the Alliance of German Refugees, who were driven from Silesia, which now belongs to Poland. Hufka was represented in the Polish press as a fascist, who dreamt of regaining German territories which were returned to the new Poland. In the Polish press, it was told that at the time when Hufka was in Israel, he met with various Jewish refugees from Silesia who now live in the Jewish State. It was upon this event that the Polish anti-Semitic leaders based their assertion that Israel supports the West German plans.

My interrogators were convinced that I would confess to these charges, as Slansky had done in Czechoslovakia and also the doctors in Moscow and others whose forced confessions led to mass arrests and trials. I was determined from the first minute of my arrest that, although they could break my body, they would not break my spirit and I would not confess to crimes I had not committed. Fortunately, I was not put to the test.

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Three months had passed, when one day a bemedalled captain of the police came into my cell. He looked down at me for a moment as I lay on my cot, then asked, "Why were you arrested?" "I've been asking myself the same question for three months," I replied. "What's wrong with you?" I told him that the one thing I knew for sure was that I wouldn't survive in this prison much longer. He stood looking at me for another minute, then walked out without a word. The next day, with a guard holding me up, I staggered up the all too familiar stairway, but instead of turning into the interrogation room, we went outdoors where an ambulance stood with its doors open. Once again, I was blindfolded and lifted inside. The blindfold was removed as the ambulance pulled up in front of the old, notorious *Mokotov* prison, one of the toughest in Warsaw, where I was again taken to a cell. I looked around, dazed and unbelieving. Compared to what I had left, this cell was heaven. There was daylight, a window to the sky and human companions—three other prisoners who surrounded me solicitously.

They saw that I was physically debilitated and mentally disoriented. "You must have come here from a real *piekelko* (hell-hole)" one of them exclaimed. They plied me with questions as to the treatment I had received, whether I had been beaten or tortured. No, I told them, but just in case I would eventually be tortured, I did save some drawstrings from the underwear which was issued every two weeks to make a rope to hang myself rather than confess to crimes I never committed. My three cellmates were a former Deputy Minister of Agriculture, the former Mayor of the city of Gdansk and the proprietor of a printing shop in Warsaw—all Poles who had been accused of working with the fascist organizations to overthrow the government. The Deputy Minister had already been sentenced to twelve years, but he was lucky; the others at the trial received death sentences. There was a special large cell in this prison, I was told, that had held 30 prisoners condemned to death for "political" activities and each day, without knowing whose turn it would be, one of them was shot.

The next day, I was taken to the prison hospital where I was given vitamin injections and put on a special diet. Apparently the authorities didn't want me to die in prison. I sensed a change of attitude but didn't know the reason as no news or letters reached us from the outside world. Towards the end of September, the eighth month of my imprisonment, an untoward happening occurred. A guard came in one

day, actually called me by name, for the first time since I was in jail, and handed me a copy of the Party daily newspaper, the *Tribuna Ludu*. Such an unprecedented event could only portend something good, I thought. Excited, I eagerly started to read and learned Stalin was dead, Beria condemned to death and that a great upheaval was taking place in the communist world. From then on I was given a paper every day.

Soon after, each prisoner was summoned before a special commission of three who came to the jail to investigate the reason for the arrests. Then the former Mayor was released, then the owner of the printing shop, a little later the Deputy Minister. Finally the guard came for me, told me to gather all my belongings and took me to the prison barbershop before escorting me to the office. An official informed me that my investigation was finished and I would be freed on one condition: I must sign a document stating that I have never been in jail, never interrogated and that due to ill health, I had found it necessary to go away for a long vacation. I signed.

It was a beautiful, balmy autumn day. As I stood outside the prison in my heavy winter clothing, a taxi driver saw me and stopped. He wanted to know if I had just come out of jail and would like a ride home. He waved aside my answer that I had no money to pay for the ride. Prisoners were now being released all the time, he said, many people felt sorry for them and wanted to help.

Only my mother-in-law was home when I reached the house and the poor woman almost fainted with shock when she saw me. She thought I was a ghost, since I had lost fifty pounds. Soon Clara and the children came home and we celebrated our reunion with tears of joy far into the night. Later Clara told me what she had been through in the months of my imprisonment.

After my arrest the agonizing months of fear and uncertainty about my fate began for Clara. She started on a round of visits to jail after jail in an attempt to learn where I had been imprisoned. Hour after hour, she stood in queues with other women waiting to speak to jail commandants, only to be told that there was no one by the name of Egit in their prisons and that they had never heard of him. Her visits to the prisons were coupled with repeated visits to the prosecutor, where she pleaded my case, insisting that her husband was not a criminal and had never been an enemy of the State. All to no avail. "Divorce your husband immediately," the prosecutor advised her, "or you too will be implicated in his crimes."

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Clara knew that any action against her would mean the loss of her job in the state import firm where she worked, the confiscation of the apartment and utter destitution, but she continued in her assertion of my innocence and the search of my whereabouts. She was afraid that if she too were arrested, the kids would officially become orphans and wards of the state. Her sister, Rose Longert, took Mark to Lignica, a town in Lower Silesia, where she took care of him for several months.

It was then that she found how many of our friends began to avoid her for fear that association with her would bring suspicion upon themselves. But those who stood by her, like Shimon Zachariasz, Dr. David and Reva Sfar, the lawyer Jacob Wilf, who later went to Israel, did whatever they could to help and advise her, often at risk to themselves. Szymon and Freda Intrator, Tad and Hela Goretzki, now in Israel, used to visit Clara every day during that time and always encouraged her with assurances that I would be freed.

Finally, after three months Clara learned that I was at the Mokotov jail. On her visits she was never allowed to see me, but she always brought parcels of food which I did not always receive.

I learned after my release that Gitler Barsky, the director of the Joint Distribution Committee in Poland was arrested the same night I was and that Arie Lerner, the secretary at the Israel Embassy, had been previously imprisoned. Anatol Wertheim, also a member of the Jewish Central Committee in Warsaw (in Toronto at the time of writing), told me that the day after my arrest, Zachariasz said to him that it was time for Jewish activists to start packing since it was obvious that provocations similar to those in Russia were being instigated and that the fate of Jews in Poland was very precarious. Nevertheless, as Zachariasz told me, he still went to the Deputy Minister of Security and demanded my release, arguing that in his capacity as supervisor of Jewish activity, he was well aware of all my actions and knew they were legal and above reproach. Roman Rumkowski, then the chief investigator for the U.B. answered, "Shimon, don't argue with me. You and your whole Jewish Central Committee are on the list and it's only a question of time before you all stand trial." Rumkowski was himself arrested in 1956, after Gomulka came back to power. He was sentenced to 12 years in jail.

During my interrogation, I gave the names of people who had known me for many years, could vouch for my good character and could attest to the importance of the positions I had held in Poland. The manner in

which such witnesses were treated was characteristic of the police methods. Herschel Lerer, a good friend of mine, told me later that he was summoned by the Security Police without reason, that his possessions were taken from him. By the time the police got around to questioning him about me, they hoped that he would be so intimidated and confused that he would say something to incriminate me. Herschel Lerer died in 1954 in Warsaw.

In 1956, I read a speech by Nikita Khrushchev made at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. Even though I had had the opportunity to know much of what was going on in the U.S.S.R., that speech was still world-shaking. It meant that everything that had been written before, during and after the war was the truth, with the only ones refusing to believe it, the communists and their sympathizers throughout the world. Eleven million victims perished on the collective farms during the Stalinist era; twelve million killed in the prisons and camps and six hundred thousand communists from abroad disappeared while in Russia. Masses of people were liquidated—those in Kazakhstan, the Volga Germans, the Tatars, and many others. And all this was done in the name of socialism!

The Russian Communist Party chiefs would not tolerate deviation from their policies or any threat to their total control. I thought back to events before the Second World War and the tactics of the Soviets which helped Hitler's rise to power. The greatest danger for them, they felt, was the Social Democratic Party in Germany, particularly the leftists, and not the Nazi Party. Instead of supporting a united front between the social democrats and communists, which would have been the only way to stop Hitler, they attacked the social democrats as "social fascists." I recall the famous article by Itzhak Deutcher, editor of the *Literatishhe Tribune* entitled "The Twelfth Hour." He wrote that the Communist Party in Germany must immediately make a common front with the social democrats in order to prevent Hitler's rise to power and the misfortunes which he would let loose on the world. I began to understand why, in 1938, the Communist Party in Poland was dissolved, and its leadership was persecuted. This was preparatory to stifling any opposition in Poland to the Nazis. As a result of this strategy, the von Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement and Russia's partnership with Hitler came into being.

When I read Khrushchev's statement at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, I was astonished he did not mention the liquidation of the Jewish writers and of Jewish culture during the Stalin era. This gave

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me much to think about. I realized then that even under Khrushchev, we were not sure that the anti-Semitic policy of the Stalin regime, will come to an end.

In 1948, we had heard news about a conference at the Kremlin of all the general secretaries from the so-called socialist countries, at which Stalin was present. Malenkov spoke out and said: "At the time of the Second World War the Jews, naturally, were allies of the U.S.S.R. because of Hitler's anti-Jewish policy; now when Russia's biggest enemy is the United States, they are potential allies of America. Hence, our main goal is to remove Jews from all responsible positions, to increase our surveillance of the Jews and combat Jewish nationalism everywhere."

During this period, the prosecutions followed—in Hungary against Rajk; in Czechoslovakia against Slansky; Poland started to prepare for a series of trials as well.

This was only a beginning; several hundred Jewish leaders were on the list, headed by Jacob Berman, a member of the Politburo. Speculation had it that Bierut, the President of Poland, who had opposed having trials like those of the Doctors Trials in Russia, died in Moscow a few years later under mysterious circumstances. The last decision before Stalin's death was to build a string of concentration camps for Jews along the Polish-Russian border, with work on the one in the vicinity of Bialystok already started.

My position as director of the publishing house, *Yiddish Buch*, was still open and I was invited back but refused the offer. I did this because I knew that if I became involved in Jewish affairs again, it would be much more difficult for me to leave Poland when I decided to do so. My place was taken by Leib Trepper-Domb, who had just been released from a Russian prison. Later he became well-known as the author of *The Rote Kapelle* (The Red Orchestra).

Trepper spent about 10 years in the Soviet prison, after which he returned to Poland and took the position as director of the Yiddish Publishing House. Later he became Chairman of the *Yiddische Kultur Gesellschaft* (Yiddish Cultural Society) in Poland. From there he emigrated to Israel, where he died in 1984. The publishing house, *Yiddish Buch*, was liquidated in 1968 at the time of strong resurgence of anti-Semitism in Poland, with the passing of a law which required that all books, even classics, must be translated into Polish before being published in Yiddish.

Clara and I left Warsaw for a holiday so that I could regain my strength. When we returned, I was offered the position of director of the new Polish State Publishing House (WPLS) which issued technical books. I took the job and within three months, the staff under me numbered 200. After one year, the publishing house was self-supporting and no longer required government subsidies because I concentrated on technical books for the general public that were scarce—how to bake, how to sew, and for the first time in postwar Poland, published fashion magazines. In this work, I was greatly helped by my friend, S. Bengom, a director of another technical publishing house, who, today, lives in Israel. Our books sold so well that their proceeds covered the deficit of the heavy technical books. In 1954, at a festive ceremony, the Minister of Culture, Kirulak, awarded me a gold medal for my accomplishments. At the same time, Clara, who worked in an export-import firm received a silver medal for copying and putting into production an automobile oil filter not available in Poland at the time.

## CHAPTER TWELVE: PLANNING OUR DEPARTURE

The success in my work did not for one minute affect the decision I had made in prison that, if ever I was released, I would leave Poland at the first opportunity. The problem was how, since I knew that having been in prison I would not easily be allowed out of the country. In 1956, the Hungarian revolution broke out and its effect was felt in Poland. Every day, there were demonstrations and mass meetings, with people shouting anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic slogans. Many of the Jews still in Poland began a systematic exodus and they were allowed to leave. The situation in Warsaw became more perilous for Jews. Once the editor of books on engineering on my staff came to my office and said, "I know how dangerous it is here for the Jews and I want you to know that I am prepared to hide your children for as long as necessary." I thanked him but refused his offer, saying that in a free Poland, my children had the same right to live as everyone else. I was popular with my Polish staff and had a good position, but my mind was made up.

One night at the beginning of 1957, I received a telephone call from an old friend whom I hadn't seen for a long time and who had an important position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asking that I come to his office in the morning. "My good friend Egit," he said when I saw him, "I know that you want to, and indeed must, leave Poland with your family but you're afraid to apply for a passport as you know you will be refused and later persecuted. I can prepare all the documents for you. They will be ready in two days but you must leave at once because I too will be going soon." He was as good as his word. I received the papers and hastily prepared to leave, but not on the usual train for Jews leaving the country.

Two weeks later my family and I boarded the Moscow-Vienna express which stopped in Warsaw. My nephew, Artur Maryl, one of the survivors in my family, insisted on accompanying us to the Czech border as he was afraid we would be taken off the train. As we pulled out of Warsaw my daughter Mary and I started to cry, she because she left behind her

friends and her music school and I because I left behind half of my life in the land where I dreamt my dreams and cherished hopes for justice and freedom for the Jews—concepts for which I had worked so hard and suffered so much.

My wife's mother and two sisters were in Canada; Clara was determined to join her family there. We decided, therefore, to wait in Vienna for Canadian documents. The American Joint Distribution Committee in New York was aware of the situation in which my family and I found ourselves and tried to gain entry for us to the United States, France, or Canada. Although we did receive papers for France while in Vienna, we were determined to wait for the Canadian visas.

We bought our tickets with Polish Zlotys and boarded the train with exactly \$15.00 American dollars at our disposal. Clara, who had been the manager of an import office, "Motoimport," a branch of the Foreign Trade Ministry, before leaving Warsaw, phoned the representative of her department who was stationed in Vienna, asking him to meet her at the station. When he saw the family with their knapsacks, he realized at once that this was not a business trip. Nevertheless, he was very kind, took us out for lunch, treated the children to the first Coca Cola they had ever tasted and checked us into a hotel for two nights at his expense. Physically and emotionally exhausted, we slept like dead on the first night.

The next morning our worries began. We could spend another night at the hotel, then where would we go? How long would our only means of support, the fifteen American dollars last? How could we get the permit for temporary residence in Vienna while waiting for the Canadian visa, how were we to make a living? The children woke up hungry and Clara, with her usual practicality and foresight solved that immediate problem. Before leaving Warsaw, she had packed a knapsack with bread, cheese, tea and whatever other food she could take along, also an electric pot and water from the tap served us our first breakfast in Vienna.

Right after eating, I left the family in the hotel and set out first for the Joint Distribution Committee office. I did not allow our seemingly hopeless situation to overwhelm me, but clung to the belief that I could overcome all difficulties. In 1944, when I was with the Russian army that liberated my native city of Boryslaw, I found that our dear family friend, Zlata Baum, had miraculously survived. She told me that before my mother went to her death in Belzec, she kept saying to Zlata: "I feel certain

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that if any of my children survive, it will be Jacob and he will live to a good old age." All the years after, I held on to my mother's belief!

There was bedlam in the Joint office; they were inundated with a flood of Jewish refugees from Hungary after the revolution and it wasn't easy to get to see anyone, but finally I obtained access to the office of the director, a woman. I introduced myself, told her of my past history in Poland, of my involvement there with the Joint Distribution Committee, the positions I had held and of my present predicament. She seemed to listen politely but told me I would have to come again. Because of the heavy workload it would be some time before my case could be dealt with.

I left the office with a heavy heart. I knew that by the evening of the next day, we would have to leave the hotel since we couldn't afford to pay for another night's lodging.

I reminded myself that Morris Spector, a childhood friend of mine who was born on the same street in Boryslaw, was living in Vienna and that years ago he had given me his address, which I still had in my notebook. I trudged along the streets for hours until towards early evening I found the address. In those days, the gates to the courtyard of the apartment houses were locked at 7:00 p.m. I kept knocking until, finally, an Austrian opened the gate and when I inquired where Morris Spector lived, he told me where the apartment was. When I knocked at Spector's door, a woman's voice from inside asked what I wanted. I shouted through the door that I was an old friend of Morris Spector and wished to speak to him. A fat, Austrian woman opened the latch on the door and told me that her husband was not at home, he was working now in the city of Gratz and she had no idea when he'd be back. I told her of my plight, that the next night my wife and two children would have to leave the hotel with nowhere to go. Without even letting me inside, she told me very brusquely that there was nothing she could do and we certainly could not spend the night in her house.

As I was leaving, despondent and at my wit's end, I heard someone rushing after me and a man's voice called:

"Are you perhaps the Jacob Egit who was born in Boryslaw?" "Not perhaps," I replied, "I am Jacob Egit." I recognized Philip Oberlander, whom I had known. He grasped my hand and I was so happy to see a friendly face that tears almost came to my eyes. But there was more to come. "This is a miracle," he said.

"You know that I haven't seen Morris Spector for almost two years and just today I decided to give it one more try. When I heard you give your name to that woman, I was dumbfounded. Don't worry now. I want you and your family to come to my house tomorrow after we came home from work and you can live with us as long as necessary." He even pressed money on me for a taxi. Overcome with gratitude, I accepted his offer.

When I returned to the hotel, I found Clara anxiously awaiting me. I first told her of the fruitless hours I spent at the Joint Distribution Committee office and of the hostile reception I received from Morris Spector's wife. "So what is going to happen tomorrow?" she asked. "A miracle," I replied and told her of Philip Oberlander's offer.

The next evening, when we arrived at Oberlander's home, we found a supper table set with flowers, wine and a warm welcome not only from Philip but also his wife Rela, an Austrian, a wonderful person. Although they only had two small rooms and a kitchen where they lived with their son Willie, they managed to put up the four of us by sending Willie to stay with Mrs. Oberlander's parents. Philip Oberlander died in 1965, a comparatively young man. He had survived four years in concentration camps at Plashov, Auschwitz and Matthausen. By the time he was liberated by the American army, he weighed 60 pounds and ever since suffered from poor health and a lame leg. In the last four weeks before liberation, the Nazis fed the inmates nothing but beets boiled in water and forced them to perform hard and senseless labour—carting stones weighing 70 pounds each from place to place for no purpose whatsoever. Philip could hardly stand but the prisoners propped each other up—anyone who fell would be shot immediately.

Now that we had a temporary roof over our heads, other important problems had to be dealt with. First, how to obtain a permit to remain in Vienna until our papers for Canada arrived, since we knew that in a short time, the police would catch up with us and we would be deported as illegal aliens. It was difficult to obtain such a permit (Fremden pass), except through a good lawyer for a fee of \$500, which we didn't have. Secondly, how could we earn some money so that we could at least contribute toward the food and shelter we were receiving from the Oberlanders. Once again, I had a stroke of good luck. The day before we left Warsaw, I had gone to say goodbye to a prominent Pole with whom I had been imprisoned in the same jail in 1953. Ever since, we

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had maintained friendly relations. When I told him that we were going to Vienna and eventually hoped to go to Canada, he asked if I knew anybody in Vienna who could help us. When I replied in the negative, "Mr. Jacob," he said, (he had always called me Mr. Jacob in prison), "I'm giving you two letters of introduction. One is to the editor of an influential newspaper in Vienna and the other to Dr. Hildegard Mayr-Goss, who is general secretary of the "Christian Youth Organization" in Europe. I'm sure that when they learn that you're in Vienna, they will do everything they can to help you. And that is exactly what happened.

I went first to the editor who received me most cordially and without any hesitation gave me a letter to the Deputy Minister of Immigration. Within two days, I had an alien's permit for me and my family to stay in Vienna. Then Clara, who spoke German fluently, soon got a job in a department store. Our daughter Mary, who was nineteen years old at the time, had a degree from the Conservatory of Music in Warsaw and was an accomplished pianist. Clara had told her that we would have no money when we go to Vienna, so before leaving Warsaw, Mary took a course in piano tuning and very luckily got a job. Mark, who was nine, went to a camp for a whole day. I alone was a problem. What could I do?

One day I got a message from the Joint Distribution Committee to come to the office immediately. When I got there, the same director who had interviewed me the first time chided me for not telling her just who I was and the details of my past history. "My dear madam," I said, "I told you everything then but I'm afraid you were too busy to listen." It appeared that the director of Joint in New York, Moses A. Levitt, had telegraphed to Vienna and requested that I be given special consideration and all the help I required, and that he be kept informed of the situation in which I and my family found ourselves. This personal intervention on our behalf was due to the effort of Clara's sister, Dorothy Rosen, who had immigrated to Toronto, Canada, just a few years before. When she learned of our plight, she took a train to New York, managed to see Mr. Levitt in his office and informed him of our situation. I told the director of the Vienna office that I would be happy just to receive the same help as everyone else and not to make an exception in my case.

Going out of the office that same day, I met on the street a friend whom I had not seen for 25 years. Anshel Grau from the city of Kosow in Galicia. He had been attached to the new Polish embassy in Hungary, but came to Vienna at the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution with no

intention of ever returning to Poland. It was always with much joy and warmth that those of us who had survived the war and the Holocaust met again in later years and Anshel Grau was no exception. He remembered me well and recalled the time when I visited his city on a speaking engagement.

I told him of my situation and how we were living. He immediately invited me and my family to stay with him. I was anxious to relieve the Oberlanders of their burden and I accepted Grau's invitation. Philip Oberlander said goodbye to us with tears in his eyes. He and his wife had grown very fond of our children, and Rela Oberlander was at all times most gracious and kind to our family. But I felt that we could not impose upon them indefinitely.

There was always a good atmosphere at the home of Anshel Grau. He knew many people—it was lively at their house and many friends came to visit when they learned that we were staying there. Eventually Anshel Grau emigrated to New York. He now lives in Florida.

One day there was knock on the door and a young Viennese woman asked for me. This was Dr. Hildegard Mayr, one of the most remarkable women I had ever met, to whom my family and I owe a deep debt of gratitude. Hildegard learned that my family and I were in Vienna and waited for me to contact her. When time passed without my showing up, she made enquiries and learned where we were. Hildegard Mayr was the secretary of the "International Fellowship of Reconciliation" (IFOR), a transnational religious movement committed to non-violence as a principle of life. It was an offshoot of the Catholic Freedom Movement, of which Hildegard's father had been one of the founders in 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, and counted among its members such men as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Don Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, the forerunner of the struggle for social justice through non-violent means in Latin America and the Peace Nobel Laureate for 1980, Adolfo Perez Esquivel of Argentina. Mayr 's family had been persecuted under Hitler and after the experience of war and ten years of occupation in Austria, Hildegard had decided to follow in her father's footsteps and dedicate her life to promoting worldwide peace. She had studied languages and theology at the Vienna University and in the United States, and devoted all her energies and organizational ability to the furthering of peace and human rights for all, regardless of creed, colour or nationality. Unmarried at the time we first knew her, Hildegard

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later met and married Jean Goss, her counterpart in France, and at time of writing both serve as vice-presidents of IFOR. It was in that capacity that Hildegard Mayr-Goss delivered a statement of the IFOR to the Second Special Session of the United Nations on Disarmament on June 25, 1982, of which she sent me a copy.

There was immediate liking and rapport struck between my family and Hildegard Mayr, and seeing how crowded we all were at the Graus', she offered us her apartment. She was travelling much of the time, we could practically have the place to ourselves. Greatly touched by her kindness, we moved to her large apartment in the centre of the city on Schottengasse. The apartment was on the fifth floor. There were no elevators and everyday, I counted the 106 steps as I came home, but to us it was like a staircase to heaven—space and privacy. There were no bounds to Hildegard's kindness, she treated us like family. She even rented a piano so that Mary could practice. We got to know her family—her mother and father, her crippled sister Irena and her brother, who now holds a high office in the Austrian Government. Very often, Hildegard would take us with her to various conferences and receptions for foreign delegates and very often, we used to sit and discuss with her all the problems facing the post-war world. She showed great sympathy for Israel. To this day, we have maintained our friendship, have visited her in Vienna and corresponded with her regularly since we came to Canada. In 1984, we were delighted when she visited us at our home in Toronto.

In time, I became familiar with Vienna. Before the war, 180,000 Jews had lived there and maintained 59 synagogues. The anti-Jewish terror began in March, 1938 when the Nazis entered Austria. Together with the Nazi S.S. murderers, the Austrians organized a pogrom. The streets of Vienna flowed with Jewish blood. Prominent members of the community, rabbis like the 75 year old Dr. Israel Taglicht, were driven into the streets and forced to perform degrading acts—crawling like dogs on their hands and knees and cleaning the streets with their bare hands. Beards were set on fire while the onlookers jeered. Some months later, on the November *Krystalnacht*, the Austrian Nazi murderers killed thousands of Jews, destroyed houses, plundered Jewish business establishments and burned 24 synagogues. In four year's time, of the original 180,000 Viennese Jews, only 800 survived underground. By November 1942, Austria declared Vienna *Judenrein*. After the Holocaust, about 1,000 Jews returned from the camps, amongst them many not natives of Austria but born in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

By 1956, the registered Jewish population of Vienna numbered 8,000, but the city never again regained its former glory. It served as a transit point for hundreds of rescued Jews awaiting entrance to other countries. While waiting for our Canadian papers and not knowing how long it would take, I realized that I could not go on much longer without work, living as I did upon the earnings of my wife and daughter.

Since publishing was my profession, the idea occurred to me of founding an international publishing house in Vienna to translate Yiddish literature into German. I felt that it was important for the Austrians and Germans, after being exposed to Nazi propaganda, to acquaint themselves with Yiddish literature, culture and knowledge. I took my idea to several Jews who had come from Poland—Max Neustein from Drohobycz among them—and soon a committee was formed. After a few meetings, the committee decided that to establish such a publishing house, we would require approval and assistance of the Jewish Agency in Israel and I was delegated to go there and meet with the head of the cultural department of the Jewish Agency, Zalman Shazar, later President of Israel.

I left for Israel with my little boy Mark in a whirl of excitement. The journey was a four-day trip by ship from Venice, the first time for me on a ship and my first trip to Israel. In Haifa, we were met by my nephew Itzhak Egit, who had survived by hiding in the forest and who had soon emigrated to Israel. The next day I met with close friends from Poland: Prof. Joseph Godlewski Ophir and his wife Dr. Anna Ophir and Shimon Kanc, who was an associate editor of the Yiddish daily newspaper, *Letzte Neis*. It was through Shimon Kanc that I met Mordechai Tzanin, who was then the editor of the Yiddish daily. Tzanin is the author of the famous five-volume book, *Artapanus Comes Home*, and of a complete Hebrew-Yiddish Dictionary, among many others. Mordechai Tzanin has been, for many years, chairman of the Association of Yiddish writers in Israel. He and his wife Dora are among my good friends. I also met the Yiddish poet Binem Heller, and his wife Hadassah Kestin, family friend from Drohobycz Shimon Eidelsheim and his wife Henia, and writer, Nachman Rapp. I was astonished that my visit was arousing a great deal of interest in Israel and was touched by the warmth with which I was received everywhere I went, and even more surprised that the press considered my presence in Israel newsworthy enough to warrant articles and interviews with me. Everywhere I went, I found Jews from Lower Silesia who were happy to see me, thinking that I had come to settle in the Jewish homeland. This was 1957, with much emigration from Poland.

## Planning Our Departure

On my sixth day in Israel, I was invited to visit the chairman of the Absorption Department, Mr. Jani Avidor, a member of the central committee of *Mapai* (Labour Zionist Party). We talked for a long time. Avidor told me he had heard about me from the new immigrants from Poland and was convinced that I could become a useful, productive citizen of the State, particularly in helping the new *Olim* adjust to their new life. He knew my past fully, he said, what I had lived through in Poland and now urged me to remain and work in Israel. He had three propositions for me, and I could choose to work in one of the following projects: (1) There was a plan for the building of a large publishing complex in Ashdod—a plant which would include the printing presses, bookbinding, etc., and which would provide jobs for many of Polish newcomers. I would manage the whole project. (2) Many Yiddish artists had come together in Israel from Poland, Rumania, and Russia. The artists from Poland who had known me well from the halcyon days in Lower Silesia wanted me to organize a Central Yiddish Theatre in Israel, which could tour throughout the whole world. (3) There were plans in progress for the publication of a weekly periodical in several languages directed especially towards immigrants from Eastern Europe, of which I could be the managing editor.

I was overwhelmed at Avidor's friendliness and by the three positions he offered me, any one of which I would have gladly accepted. He even took me in his car and showed me a new apartment building in Ramat Aviv, near Tel Aviv, where we would be living. "I know your family is in Vienna," he told me. "Bring them here and make your home in the land of Israel." I promised to telephone my wife Clara that evening and give him my answer the next day.

I was thrilled at the prospect before me and full of enthusiasm when I spoke with her that night. But Clara told me, very calmly, to curb my excitement. While I was in Israel, her sisters in Canada had sent her the necessary documents and she, Clara, would under no circumstances come to Israel after waiting for so long to join her mother and sisters in Canada. If I wished to remain in Israel, I could do so alone. It was a bitter pill for me to swallow when the next day I had to tell Avidor I could not stay and it was hard to face my many friends who were looking forward to my settling in Israel.

I had been so busy renewing friendships and absorbing the sights and sounds of Israel that only a few days were left to accomplish the

mission for which I had come—an interview with Zalman Shazar at the Jewish Agency to discuss our plan for the international publishing house in Vienna. I went to Jerusalem with Binem Heller, a poet with whom I had been friends for many years before the war. He knew Shazar well and promised to make an appointment for me. I waited in a restaurant while Heller went off to telephone Shazar. Soon he came back with the news that Shazar was busy and could not possibly see me that day. I was dreadfully disappointed and told Heller that I couldn't postpone the visit since there was only a few days before I would have to return to Vienna. I asked him for Shazar's home address and said I would try to see him there after office hours. Heller told me I'd be wasting my time but gave me the address just the same. I found the second-floor apartment where Shazar lived and knocked on the door. A woman's voice called out in Hebrew, "Who is there?" I answered in Yiddish, "A Jew from Poland. I must speak to Shazar." I heard the woman's voice again, "Zalman, a Jew from Poland is outside and wants to see you." "So, Rachel, why don't you let him in," Shazar replied. The door opened and I was ushered in by Shazar's wife Rachel. I introduced myself and was warmly received by two of the kindest, friendliest people I have ever met.

I apologized for my intrusion and explained that since Binem Heller had been unable to obtain an appointment for me that day, I decided to try on my own. Shazar laughed. "Heller didn't tell me you were a Jew from Poland. He said you were a Jew from Vienna." I wasn't in the house more than 10 minutes before I was offered tea and jam. Shazar thought that my idea of publishing German translations of Yiddish literature in Vienna was an excellent one and on the very next day, I received from the Jewish Agency an official document of approval. Shazar also invited me to attend the Forum on the Problems of Zionism, Jewry and the State of Israel, a high level think-tank, then taking place in Jerusalem. In later years, when Zalman Shazar was President of the State of Israel, whenever I was in the country with a delegation of Jews from Toronto, it was enough for me to let Shazar know through his secretary that "the Jew from Poland" would appreciate if a reception for his delegation could be arranged. I was never refused—his door was always open to me.

I returned to Vienna after a three week stay in Israel with the approval of the Jewish Agency to go ahead with the plans for the publishing house. But despite all my urging, I could not persuade the committee to carry on without me and the project was abandoned, much to my regret. I

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had to tell my friends that I would be leaving for Canada and they were all sorry to see me go. When I said goodbye to Max Neustein, he gave me a small portable Yiddish typewriter and when I didn't want to accept it, he said I could pay him for it when we meet again. Years later, in 1978, I met him in Israel and gave him \$100 for the machine which at first he refused to take, but I told him that he could give the money to charity if he wished. At that time, he invited Clara and me to his house and introduced us to his wife whom he married in Israel. Later, in one of his letters, he told me the \$100 was donated by him to a worthy cause.

We left Vienna January 1, 1958. The night before, we took the children to Stefanplatz where each year, the Viennese celebrated on New Year's Eve. We watched the dancing, listened to the singing, but stood apart from the festivities, wondering what the New Year held in store for us. Early next morning, we left for Hamburg, where we boarded the "Seven Seas," the ship on which we had booked passage to Canada. It was an uncomfortable trip and Clara and the children were seasick practically all the time. Ninety-five percent of the passengers were Yugoslavs who were full of *slivovitz* and kept singing all the way, "Sera, Sera." I looked among the passengers for someone who was Jewish and I found an engineer from Halifax named Gordon who had been a member of a delegation to the U.S.S.R. and was returning to Canada. He was a relative of the well-known Yiddish dramatist Jacob Gordon and we struck up a real shipboard friendship. On the morning of January 14, 1958, we disembarked in Halifax and were heartened when stepping for the first time on Canadian soil to hear our names over the loudspeaker. We were met by representatives from the Jewish Aid Society, who were extremely kind and helpful. They showed us Halifax before putting us on the train for Montreal, where we arrived the next evening. As we got off the train, I was again pleasantly surprised to be met by a good old friend, Israel Hirsch, who had learned I would be arriving in Canada that day. With him was Sonia, the wife of the poet Sholem Stern.

I knew Israel Hirsch in the city of Lvov in the days before World War II. There was then a trial of four Jewish youths who were accused of anti-government activity and sentenced to death—Shmiel Yugend, Naftali Proper, Akiva Kohn and Israel Hirsch. There was a great outrage and demonstrations throughout the whole world demanding their release. After regaining his freedom, Israel Hirsch was active in the Youth Movement in Lvov. He had worked in the coal mines in Dombas, Russia.

During the war, and afterwards, came back to Poland for a short time before leaving for Canada. After my coming to Canada, Clara and I became very friendly with Israel Hirsch and his wife Basia.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: A NEW LIFE IN CANADA

When we arrived in Toronto the next day, members of the Salvation Army were waiting at Union Station to greet new immigrants to Canada. We were grateful for their welcome and offer of assistance and for the pleasure they gave Mark when they presented him with a gift of a toy car. Clara's sisters met us at the station and took us home with them. We soon rented a small flat in an Italian home in an old part of the city, on the top floor. From our windows we could only see the rooftops of small shabby old houses and the impression we received of Toronto was quite depressing. I soon received a letter from New York, from another good friend, the columnist for the "*Tug-Morgen Journal*," the late Ben-Zion Goldberg, who expressed surprise that I was planning to settle in so dull a city as Toronto instead of New York. Soon after our arrival in Toronto, Sam Lipshitz, whom we had befriended when, as a delegate from the Canadian Jewish Congress, he had visited me in Lower Silesia in 1945, arranged a reception for us at his home to which were invited many of his close friends. To this day, Manya and Sam Lipshitz are among our best friends, as are that wonderful couple, Mary and Sam Harris, who are beloved by all who know them, whom we met that evening for the first time; and Morris Biderman and his late brother David and others. J.B. Salsberg, whom I also knew from his visits in Lower Silesia, together with his wife, the late Dora Wilensky received us most warmly at a gathering at their home. Throughout the years in Canada, our friendship with Sam and Mary Harris meant a great deal to us. They always shared our joys and problems like close family.

Soon after arriving in Toronto, I visited the offices of the *Jewish Standard* and became acquainted with the publisher, Julius Hayman, who received me very warmly and despite my difficulties with the English language, we had a long conversation. After 20 years of working with him on Histadrut matters, I came to admire him more and more. With his cooperation we put out many issues of the *Jewish Standard* on

projects in Israel and to this day, I have a great regard for him. Soon after my arrival in Toronto, I also met the late David Lewis, then leader of the NDP. Despite his busy schedule, he never refused to be the guest speaker at any function our organization scheduled.

Among the people whom I met when I first came to Toronto was the late Moishe Epstein, whom I had known in Poland. He and his wife Chana received us very warmly and it was he who introduced me to Max Federman, leader of the *Achdut Avodah*. Also, one of the first people I met was the well-known Yiddish poet, Peretz Miransky. I met as well the late Lipa Green, and also Harold and Yetta Martin who are still among our best personal friends.

When Clara and I met Joseph and Esther Betel at Sam Lipshitz's reception, we did not dream that their son Murray would one day become our son-in-law. Our daughter Mary in those days gave piano lessons to 40 children while continuing her own studies at the Royal Conservatory of Music and it was a recital by her pupils that the couple met and in 1962 were married. Six hundred guests joined us in celebrating the wedding, since Joseph and Esther were a beloved, and greatly respected couple in the community with a host of good friends.

A great tragedy in their lives was the death of their younger son Bernard. As a tribute to his memory, the Betels donated a large sum towards the building of the Bernard Betel Centre for Creative Living on Steeles Avenue, one of the busiest and most popular centres of activity for senior citizens in Toronto.

The death of Joseph in November 1981 and Esther within three months was a devastating blow. I can say with a full heart how fortunate we are that our Mary, who had lived through the Hitler era and later the difficult times in Poland is married to Murray Betel—a cultured, intelligent young man who follows in his father's footsteps and is successfully carrying on the business. Twenty-eight years after the wedding, they are the happy, proud parents of three daughters, Helena, Sheri, and Anna.

My friend, Israel Hirsch, urged us to come to Montreal. I went to see what the prospects were and in the week I spent there, renewed some old acquaintances and made many new friends. Among them were Ruth and Philip Pressman who had visited with us in Poland; the late Melach Ravitch, the Yiddish writer and poet whom I knew from pre-war days; my old friend and former secretary of the Central Committee of Jews in Lower Silesia, Igor Kuchinsky, who was with the cultural department of

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the Canadian Jewish Congress; and a boyhood friend from Boryslaw, Moishe Tallenberg.

I was introduced by Sam Lipshitz to the noted journalist Israel Medres of the *Kanader Adler*, whose daughter Anne Glass and her husband, Professor Irvine Glass of Toronto eventually became good friends. Anne later became a close associate in my work. Through Igor Kuchinsky I got to know Saul Hayes, the national director of the Canadian Jewish Congress and Ruth Weiss who also worked at the Congress at that time and is now a professor at McGill University. Ruth Weiss' parents, Leib and Masha Roskies, invited me to a Friday night dinner where I met with other guests.

My friends wanted me to stay in Montreal, but I told them that it would be hard enough for me to learn one language, English, without having to cope with French also. Towards the end of my Montreal visit, I was invited to the office of the *Kanader Adler* by the editor-in-chief, Israel Rabinovitch and by the publisher, Mr. Volofsky. They proposed that I write a daily column for the "Adler" from Toronto. I did this for some time, under the pseudonym of J. Boris, but the remuneration was far from enough to support a family and Clara went to work in a grocery store in the Jewish district where her lack of English was no handicap. She could use Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, German and Yiddish—languages she knew well. Soon Clara's command of English was good enough for her to become a successful travel agent.

In the few months that I worked for the *Kanader Adler*, its editor, Israel Rabinovitch, made a lasting impression on me. In our conversations I felt that I was speaking with a scholar, a man of wisdom, sensitivity and kindness who, although I was a newcomer, treated me as if I was a good friend of many years. I always read with the greatest interest his daily column *Gut Morgen* and admired his reporting and analyses of the important happenings of the day, whether in Israel, locally or on the international scene. I regretted that as I became more active in Toronto that I lacked the opportunity to meet with him more often. His death in March 1966 was a great loss. I will never forget Israel Rabinovitch.

April 1958 was the 15th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The Canadian Jewish Congress and the Organization of Polish Jews in Toronto sponsored a commemoration at the Ostrovitzer Synagogue and I was invited there to be one of the guest speakers. After my speech, in Yiddish of course, people came up to me to express their appreciation

and congratulations. But one of the representatives from the CJC, Nachman Shemen, criticized my speech. He had taken exception to my statement that the agony suffered by the victims of the Nazi brutality in Europe was exacerbated by the silence of Jews throughout the world, particularly those in North America, and that it was their passivity which encouraged the Nazi murderers to carry on their diabolical acts until six million Jews were killed. But in later years, after I became active in the Congress, Nachman Shemen, one of the most respected members in our community, became my very good friend. Meyer Nurenberger, then the editor of the Toronto Yiddish daily newspaper, *The Daily Hebrew Journal*, was among the audience and invited me to visit him at his office.

It was Meyer Nurenberger who introduced me to Rabbi David Monson of the Beth Sholom Synagogue. Rabbi Monson invited me to his house one Saturday afternoon and I was immediately impressed by his kindness and the warmth of his personality. As I soon realized, David Monson not only preached about good deeds but actually performed them. In addition to his parochial duties, the time and energy which he put into helping all who came to him was truly phenomenal, and I personally have him to thank for my first job in Toronto. He and Meyer Nurenberger organized a committee to undertake the publication for the first time in Canada of *Who's Who in Canadian Jewry* and got me the job as manager of the project. Rabbi Monson himself went to the bank, gave his own \$5,000 Canadian Bond as collateral and opened a bank account giving me the power to sign all cheques. I well remember that when Rabbi Monson was asked why it is so important to have a *Who's Who* in Canada, he answered: "I don't know just how important it is, but I do know that Egit, who came from Poland, must make a living for his family."

We opened an office on College Street and hired a secretary, Dora Silver, a nice, intelligent woman who did not speak Yiddish. It was hoped that I would learn English from working with her. However, it turned out that after three months, my secretary picked up a smattering of Yiddish from me, but I still did not know English. I was collecting biographies and photos. The work was not easy but I was successful in attracting considerable interest in the project. Eventually, Rabbi Eli Gottesman came to Toronto from the United States with the proposition that he take over the *Who's Who* and the committee agreed to turn it over to him. Gottesman bought out the company for \$10,000. and I returned the \$5,000 to Rabbi Monson, paid all our outstanding debts and came out

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with \$1,000 clear, the first money I earned in Toronto. Rabbi Gottesman proposed that I stay on and work with him but I wasn't used to his methods and declined. Before Gottesman came to Toronto, he was very well known in America through a unique service which he provided for small towns where there were no synagogues. He had converted a van into a mobile synagogue and drove it to these small centres to officiate at weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. Eventually I was happy to see the publication of the first *Who's Who in Canadian Jewry*. When years later Rabbi Gottesman came to Toronto and wanted me to help him put out a second, revised edition, I declined his offer because of involvement in other projects.

In the meantime, through my daily columns in *The Kanader Adler* and my work in the *Who's Who*, I became better known in the community and made many new friends. Among the first was Kalman Berger, a leading member of the Labour Zionist Movement, who until his death remained one of my best friends, as well as the late J.J. Zweig. They introduced me to other members of the movement, the late Fishel Walerstein and Dr. Samuel Hurwich, both of whom died in Israel. Dr. Hurwich, who was not only a leader in the Labour Zionist Movement and Histadrut Campaign, but one of the most prominent and respected members of the Jewish community took an interest in me. In a lengthy conversation with him, I recounted my whole life story. I told him that I was a member in the Polish Workers Party (PPR). My sincerity must have been obvious, because shortly after this conversation with Dr. Hurwich, I was offered the position of director of the *Landsmanshaft* and Fraternal Division of the Israel Histadrut Campaign. At that time I met Abraham Shurem of Montreal, the national director of Histadrut. I also met two devoted Labour Zionists, Hy Kirshenbaum and Leo Moss. They died young.

Why did I go to work for the Histadrut? There were other opportunities for me to find work, but I was determined that after having spent so many years for ideals which turned out to be illusory and harmful to the Jewish people, I would devote the rest of my life working for Israel. Since my early youth, I first belonged to the Poale Zion Party. I felt an affinity for the Labour Zionist Movement and the Histadrut—the organization which represented Jewish workers who were the pioneers and builders of the Jewish State. They cleared the swamps, created the kibbutz movement and made the desert bloom. They created a great Jewish organization, *Histadrut Haovdim*, which from the earliest years provided health care and which through its network of institutions served the needs of Israel's working men, women and children.

The executive director of the Histadrut Campaign in those days was a young man, originally from Montreal who had spent some years in Israel, Dr. Saul Zabel. For me this was an entirely new type of community work and I did not always see eye to eye with Saul Zabel. But out of respect for me he gave me a desk in his office in the temporary quarters which the campaign then occupied on Bathurst Street, before moving to the Labour Zionist Centre on Viewmount Avenue. The Fraternal Director was the late Isaac Swerdlow, a Yiddish actor who had been with the Maurice Schwartz Art Theatre, and his frequent presentations at society meetings and banquets were always appreciated. I sensed that my appointment made Swerdlow uneasy, that he felt threatened and afraid I would replace him. One day, I invited him for lunch and told him that never in my whole life had I taken anyone's job away; that if I ever thought joining the staff would jeopardize his position, I would leave without hesitation. Since then we maintained a good relationship and we worked together without any friction. But Isaac Swerdlow was a sick man and he died a few years later.

One of my assignments after joining the campaign was to raise funds in the small provincial centres and my first success was in Kirkland Lake, Ontario. When I arrived there, I asked the chairman of the Jewish community to call a meeting which I would address. He smiled when I said I would be speaking in Yiddish. "I'm afraid the Jews of Kirkland Lake don't understand Yiddish," he said. I assured him that my Yiddish they would understand and that was, indeed, the case. The meeting was a huge success and the response was most gratifying. From a small community of 59 Jewish families, we raised about \$5,000 in pledges right on the spot. However, I wasn't satisfied with pledges only and the next day asked a couple of community members to go with me to collect the cash. We went from door to door and after a long day's work, I returned to Toronto with cash and cheques. Dr. Hurwich had been very dubious about my touring the province with only limited English at my command, but when I told him of my success, he smiled. "How do you do it?" he asked. "I guess the Jews of Kirkland Lake understood my Yiddish and believed me when I told them that Israel needed the money," I replied. From then on, I was confident that I could be a fund raiser. This was in 1959.

The Histadrut campaign, which was founded in Toronto in 1944, was a small one, but kept on steadily growing not only in the monies raised but

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in terms of its image in the community. My own position was that of executive director of the United Organizations for Histadrut, which was comprised of delegates from various Societies, Landsmanshaften and Fraternal Organizations in the city and functioned as an independent body affiliated with the Histadrut Campaign. My objective then was to expand the scope of the campaign and to draw new individuals and organizations into the campaign and into our ranks. Of the 40,000 survivors who came to Canada after the war, about 30,000 settled in Toronto and established new societies that were represented in the United Organizations for Histadrut (UOFH), which soon became part of the community and involved in communal and political activities through the Canadian Jewish Congress. The resurgence of neo-Nazism was a particular concern of the UOFH and our outspoken views and actions with respect to this problem often came into conflict with the Jewish establishment. The Association of Former Concentration Camp Inmates, under the leadership of Louis Zablow and Paul Goldstein, found themselves in a similar situation in Quebec. I had been elected to the executive of the Toronto Jewish Congress and at the meetings was often criticized for my militant attitude. Canada was not Poland, I was constantly reminded; free speech was the privilege of all. In 1962, at a conference in Toronto of the Former Concentration Camp Inmates of Montreal, a resolution against the neo-Nazi movement in Canada was adopted. After this resolution appeared in the press, the national executive of the Labour Zionist Movement in Montreal sent a very sharp letter to the Toronto executive, pointing out that it was not my function to busy myself with political problems. But we continued our fight against the neo-Nazis, with very significant results as I shall elaborate upon later.

When I became the fraternal director of the campaign, I concentrated on two important fields of endeavour, in which I felt the UOFH could be most effective. The first was to raise funds through sponsorship by various folk organizations and individuals of projects that would enhance the quality of life for the people of Israel, such as medical clinics, cultural centres, trade schools, etc. This concentration upon specific projects was a relatively new concept in fund-raising for the Histadrut Campaign in Toronto. The second goal was to mobilize within the UOFH the *Folkmentschen*—society members, especially survivors of the Holocaust, in the battle against neo-Nazism rampant in Toronto.

Today I can say with full certainty and satisfaction that the UOFH succeeded in both goals.

Our first large project, in commemoration of the 20th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, under the patronage of Allan Grossman, then a Minister in the provincial government, was to help build the museum in *Kibbutz Lochamei Hagettaot* (Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz), a unique project which was initiated by the last survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto who reached Israel—Itzhak (Antek) Zukerman, his wife Zivia Lubetkin and others—and brought with them relics from the ruins of the Ghetto, documents and records that told the full story of that heroic and tragic event. To raise the required funds, we published a *Sefer Hazikaron* (a memorial book) to which almost all folk organizations in the city contributed. At a large, impressive ceremony attended by an audience of over 800, leaders of 100 Landsmanshaften signed the book. Each page was dedicated to the memory of the destroyed city, whose name the society bore. The book was then presented to the leaders of Kibbutz Lochamei Hagettaot by 160 representatives from all the participating organizations. This was one of the largest delegations which I led to Israel.

To best promote the campaign for the museum in Kibbutz Lochamei Hagettaot, we invited Zivia Lubetkin, the heroine of the Warsaw Ghetto, for a week's visit to Toronto. Her presence in the city galvanized the Jewish community. This woman was a living legend, the stuff from which true heroism is made. She symbolized the moral strength which sought to preserve the dignity and honour of the Jewish people in the midst of chaos and destruction, while never relinquishing the dream of Zion which had inspired and nourished her since early girlhood.

Zivia was born in 1914 in the small town of Beten in eastern Poland, into a family where pride in Judaism and the aspirations of Zionism were instilled in the children. As a young girl, she joined *Hechalutz*, the pioneering youth movement, and soon her outstanding organizational ability, dedication and physical hard work brought her to the forefront of the movement. In 1938, Zivia was summoned to the movement headquarters in Warsaw and appointed director of the network of training farms (*Hachshara*) throughout Poland, from where groups of young *chalutzim* emigrated to Palestine. When in 1936 the British closed the country to Jewish immigration, the Hechalutz movement found a solution through illegal immigration. Zivia, in addition to her other

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duties, became actively involved in this phase of the work and travelled from place to place, from training camp to training camp, organizing the departure of young pioneers for Palestine. In August, 1939, she was chosen along with other young members of the Labor Zionist Movement, as a delegate to the World Zionist Congress in Geneva. She returned to Poland at the end of August and on September 1, the Second World War broke out.

The pioneering movement had no illusions as to the fate of the Jews under Nazi rule. Its leadership, including Zivia, operated a training camp in Warsaw where groups of young people from the movement who had fled the Nazi advance were absorbed. Knowing the dangers which faced them, Zivia and her friends loaded a few belongings into horse-drawn carts and began their trek, along roads clogged with fleeing refugees and defeated soldiers of the Polish Army, to the eastern provinces of Poland, which had been occupied by the Red Army on September 17. During the months she spend in the Soviet zone, Zivia devoted her time to the rescue of Polish pioneers who wished to reach Palestine. Because Zionist activity had been forbidden in the Soviet Union since the 1920's, the work was carried out in secrecy and at great risk. Her trips to the Rumanian border to find legal and illegal ways of smuggling refugees to the shores of the Black Sea, from where people could still leave for Palestine, were always fraught with great danger.

On December 31, 1940, the activists met secretly in an apartment in the city of Lvov, where it was decided that some would remain to lead the movement in the Soviet Zone and some would return to work in the territories annexed by the Reich. While most of the leadership of Polish Jewry left the territories seized by the Nazis, Zivia chose to go in the opposite direction, and illegally crossing the border, reached her destination—Warsaw—in January 1940.

The story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising need not be retold here. But the part which Zivia played, from the time she entered the city, until the final days when she escaped through the sewers from the burning ghetto along with the last remnant of survivors who had remained to fight until the bitter end, is legendary. She took up arms alongside the other brave defenders. She organized, she advised, she encouraged, she comforted. As one of the leaders of the Jewish Fighting Organization within the ghetto, Zivia exemplified the creed of the Zionist Youth Movement—to resist, to defend with the last breath of dignity and honour of the

Jewish people. She had wisdom, strength of character, ability to make decisions and she was consulted on all matters concerning the Jewish Fighters organization. When a rumour was spread outside Poland that Zivia fell in the Warsaw Ghetto, her initials became a password used by members of the underground.

After the escape from the Ghetto and until the liberation by the Russians in January 1945, Zivia spend about a year and a half in the forests, or hiding in "safe" apartments in Warsaw and in outlying cities. During this period, alongside her husband Itzhak Zukerman and other surviving members of the Jewish Fighting Organization and the Hechalutz movement, and through contacts with the Polish underground, she continued to battle the Nazis while, at the same time, never relinquishing the dream of eventually emigrating to Palestine.

There was tremendous excitement in the city of Toronto when it was learned that Zivia would be with us for a week—a week which turned out to be a ceaseless round of activity. The first event was a reception at the King Edward Hotel, where more than 1,000 people, many of them were survivors, came to hear her speak. It was an emotion-charged event. There were tears in the eyes of the audience. In simple, straightforward language she told her story. Now and then, an uncontrolled sob would sound from the depths of the hall. There was heartrending episode which received wide coverage by both the English and Jewish press which had assigned reporters and photographers to cover the event. As she stepped down from the platform after her speech, a young man, Irving Milchberg, now a prominent businessman in Niagara Falls, Ontario, rushed up to her, fell on his knees and covered her hands with tears and kisses. His parents had perished in the Holocaust and he had been one of the few small children who had survived in the ghetto. It was Zivia who had carried him in her arms through the sewers to safety in the outside world.

It was my privilege to introduce Zivia to the audience. In the interval after the liberation and before she emigrated to Palestine, I had met her often at meeting in Warsaw of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland of which she also had become a member. We had serious discussions. Although she understood my motives in wishing to thwart Hitler's aim of exterminating the Jews by developing the rebirth of new Jewish life upon the very soil where so many had perished, she herself would not come to Lower Silesia. She was not interested in building a Jewish settlement in Poland. She remained steadfast to the dream which had sustained her

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through the years of tragedy and devastation—of a Jewish homeland in Eretz Israel based upon the precepts of the dignity of labour, respect for the individual, democracy and justice for all. It was not long before I too came to the conclusion that, indeed, that was the only true goal for the Jewish people.

A round of activity followed the event at the King Edward, Zivia spoke at a gathering at the Labour Zionist Centre on Viewmount Avenue where the Histadrut office was located at the time, and we placed a menorah on the roof of the building in her honour. She spoke to capacity audiences at synagogues, landsmanshaften, women's organizations, and to children in the schools. She held press conferences and was received by the Mayor of Toronto at a reception at City Hall. In one of my subsequent visits to Lochamei Hagettaot, her husband, Antek Zukerman remarked that Zivia had told him that of all the cities she had visited in North America, Toronto was the warmest and most responsive to the message she carried, with the result that Toronto contributed the largest financial aid for the museum in Kibbutz Lochamei Hagettaot.

I saw Zivia and Antek whenever I visited Israel. I particularly remember attending the 25th anniversary of the Ghetto uprising in 1968 which took place at the kibbutz. It was a rainy day but 40,000 people attended the outdoor ceremony.

In 1978, Zivia Lubetkin-Zukerman died at the age of sixty-four. She had written a book before her death and I am proud to say that at my request the first work to be published by the Jacob and Clara Egit Foundation, established in Israel for the purpose of publishing books dealing with the Holocaust and Resistance, was an English translation of Zivia Lubetkin's book, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*.

When shortly after her death, the first kibbutz was established on the bare hills of Galilee, it was named *Maala Zivia* in memory of the heroine of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Since 1945, when Itzhak Zukerman and I were sent by the Central Committee of Polish Jews to Lower Silesia to investigate the situation there after the liberation and meet with the survivors in the region, I had kept in close touch with him throughout the years. Physically, Zivia and he were very different. She was a slight, attractive brunette, with thoughtful, glowing black eyes. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a curly mop of blond hair and a long, thick, moustache—characteristics which enabled him to assume an Aryan disguise under the

name of Antek. They complemented each other beautifully. She was wise and reflective, he was a man of action. They made a perfect team.

Zivia, with her typical Jewish appearance remained in the Ghetto until the end of the uprising, while Antek, with his Polish physiognomy, worked on the Aryan side, smuggling arms, contacting partisans, preparing safe hiding places. While Mordechai Anielewicz was the commander inside the Ghetto, Antek was the deputy commander outside.

After Zivia died, Zukerman was busy editing her manuscript, in compliance with her wish that it be published after her death. He also busied himself making documentary films on the Resistance and Holocaust, one of which is *The Eighty-first Blow*. On one of my last visits to Lochamel Hageettaot, Zukerman told me the unusual story upon which the name of the film was based. At the time of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, one of the witnesses for the prosecution described how a 16-year old boy in the concentration camp had been punished. He was forced to run between two rows of guards who struck him with their truncheons as he vainly tried to weave and dodge the rain of blows. In all he was struck 80 times. "Did the boy survive?" the prosecutor asked. "Yes, he is in Israel, sitting near you," and the witness pointed at a young man at the front of the courtroom, an officer in the intelligence corps that had hunted Eichmann down. Antek Zukerman was present at the trial and later asked the officer why he himself never told of his experience. "Because," the young man answered, "when I first came to Israel and told what had happened in the camp, no one believed me. That was the 81st blow."

In 1981 I attended the World Gathering of Survivors in Jerusalem. I had planned to go to Lochamel Hageettaot to see Antek Zukerman. He was scheduled to speak on the last day of the gathering, but was not well. While still in Jerusalem, we heard that he had died—at a time when thousands of survivors had come to Israel to demonstrate that they were alive. It was sad news for all of us.

After the erection of the Ghetto Memorial in Warsaw, Nathan Rapoport never ceased to hope that a replica would eventually stand in Jerusalem, at the *Yad Vashem*. This dream finally became a reality through the generous contribution of Leon Jolson of New York, a businessman and himself a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto. Rapoport had retained the model and today an exact replica enhances the entrance of *Yad Vashem*. There are the two parts of the sculpture set into a wall

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adjoining the museum, the wall itself build of red brick to resemble the actual ghetto wall. Once again it was my privilege, this time in the State of Israel, to attend the unveiling of the first panel in 1975 and again in 1976, when the second part of the sculpture was unveiled.

Thousands of Israelis and visitors gathered in the assembly square at Yad Vashem to participate in the ceremonies at which the Prime Minister and the President of Israel officiated. As I looked around, and watched delegations of Israeli school children place flowers along the base of the monument, I was moved almost to tears.

Here in Israel was the true homeland of the Jews—and how fitting it was that a great work of art, symbolizing the indestructible spirit of the Jewish people should remain at Yad Vashem as a tribute to the martyrs and heroes of the past and as an inspiration and as a warning for all generations to come.

It was in 1945 that I first became friendly with Nathan Rapoport. I had harboured thoughts of erecting a monument by this renowned artist in Lower Silesia, symbolizing the suffering and rebirth of Jewish life. But all the rapid political changes in Poland and the emerging scourge of anti-Semitism put a stop to any such plan.

I didn't hear from Rapoport for almost 20 years. Then, shortly after the Six-Day War, I was in Israel with a delegation whose mission it was to officially dedicate a number of projects that had been built with the help of the Histadrut Campaign in Toronto, and to find other projects, such as a hospital or clinic, towards which we could direct our fund raising efforts. An old friend of mine, Benni Sharoni,<sup>8</sup> a leader of Kibbutz Tel Itzhak, came to see me with a proposal that we subsidize the building of a monument in memory of a young, heroic member of his kibbutz, Gad Manela, who fought gallantly in the defence of his country and then was killed by an Arab sniper. I told him I was not concerned with monuments, there were more vital needs for our financial aid, but when he said that the sculptor would be Nathan Rapoport, I became enthused at the idea. I thought of the saying, "Man does not live by bread alone," and realized how much it would mean to the people of Tel Itzhak to have in their kibbutz a monument in memory of one of their bravest sons sculpted by an artist of Rapoport's calibre. Clara and I immediately went to Tel Aviv to meet Rapoport and were moved to see him again after 20 years. It was after this visit that I committed myself to the project.

Back in Toronto, I approached the wonderful couple, Joseph and Luba Kleinstein, who agreed to sponsor the Gad Manela Monument. In 1968, Luba and Joseph Kleinstein unveiled the statue in Kibbutz Tel Itzhak, at a ceremony attended not only by our delegation from Toronto, but by thousands of Israelis, among them members of Zahal, including Eliezer Weitzman; the chief of Zahal, General Eliezer; and 17 other Generals. The B'Nai B'rith Organization has also sponsored Rapoport's magnificent Scroll of Fire which stands in the Martyr's Forest high in the Judean Hills overlooking Jerusalem and is a major tourist attraction.

In 1980, I was also instrumental in finding sponsors—Alex and Genia Grossman and again Luba and the late Joseph Kleinstein—for Rapoport's *Jacob Wrestling With The Angel*, which enhances the front grounds of the Jewish Community Centre in Toronto. Among works in the United States is the Martyrs Memorial in Philadelphia and the bust of Arthur Rubinstein, which was executed at the pianist's special request and is displayed in Carnegie Hall. One of his's latest works, *Liberation*, depicts an American soldier holding in his arms a concentration camp survivor. It stands in Liberty State Park, New Jersey, not far from the Statue of Liberty and was sponsored by the American Government as a symbol of freedom. I am proud to have been a friend of this great artist and must say that it is the close relationship Clara and I maintained throughout the years with Nathan Rapoport which stimulated our own interest in Jewish art.

For 20 years, many Jews in Toronto listened to my Sunday morning broadcasts in Yiddish on the Jewish Radio Hour over the station CHIN. During my broadcast, I spoke not only about our campaign matters and Israel, but also on topics and news items of general interest to the Jewish community. I must say that these broadcasts in the Yiddish language were greatly appreciated by many. I had good relations with the director of the Jewish Radio Hour, the late Sam Yuchtman and his daughter, Zelda Young, who carries on the program. From time to time, my articles also appeared in the *Canadian Jewish News* and *Jewish Standard*.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: PROJECTS, PLANS AND ANTI-NAZI ACTIVITIES IN TORONTO

Another important project was in *Ashdot Yaacov*, a kibbutz on the Jordanian border. Right after the Six-Day War, I was with a delegation in Israel and one morning at the headquarters of the Histadrut in Tel Aviv we heard a radio report that Ashdot Yaacov had been shelled the previous night and sustained considerable damage, with two casualties, one a Swede who had come to work in the Kibbutz. I asked Yehoshua Levy, then the secretary-treasurer of the Histadrut, to provide me with a car and driver for a visit to Ashdot Yaacov. He thought that I was out of my mind. Tourists don't travel to danger areas, he told me. I protested that my delegation had not come to Israel merely as tourists to see the sights. We had come to find projects through which the Toronto Jews could participate in the defence and development of the Jewish State. Very reluctantly he acceded to my request and accompanied by two members of my delegation, Harry Mandelbaum and Benny Goldglas, I set out for the Beit Shean Valley where the Kibbutz was located. Harry Mandelbaum, an officer in the Polish Army during World War II, had been decorated by the Poles for outstanding performance in the fight against the Nazis and was with the Polish Army when it entered Berlin. Benny Goldglas had been a participant in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Both of them have been my good friends since I came to Canada.

As we approached our destination, the car was stopped several times by the military. We told them we had permission to go to Ashdot and despite their warning that we were travelling at our risk continued on our way. Our arrival at the kibbutz was an occasion for amazement that North Americans would voluntarily enter an area which was a frequent target for attacks by *Al Fatah* terrorists just across the Jordanian border. We told the leaders who came to meet us that we considered the borders of the Jewish homeland which they were so bravely defending our borders also; that they were not alone; their battle was our battle and

that we would help them rebuild whatever the enemy destroyed.

The damage was considerable. Several buildings were completely demolished, among them the dining hall and community centre. We were not there very long before there was a burst of shellfire and we were hustled off to an underground shelter. This was an almost daily routine for the 650 settlers, whose children spent the nights sleeping in underground shelters. Towards evening, as we prepared to leave, the kibbutz members gathered around us. We said goodbye to the leaders—Moshe Arieli, the kibbutz secretary, Tova Shimron and Rivka Riklis—and assured them they would not be forgotten. This was, indeed, the beginning of an association and friendship that lasted through the years.

It was already dark when we returned to the hotel in Tel Aviv where our group was staying. Everyone was worried, especially our wives. That same night I called a meeting of the whole delegation and related what we had seen first-hand, of everyday life in a kibbutz under fire and spoke of the heroism and courage of the settlers. Not one man, woman or child had left the settlement to seek safety elsewhere. While they were defending the Jewish homeland with their lives, the least we could do was to provide the financial means to help them rebuild the facilities so essential for their daily living. It was decided to start a campaign right there among the delegates present and the first \$15,000 was pledged on the spot. A few days later, on the EL-Al plane taking us back to Toronto I asked the captain's permission to use the microphone and when I appealed to all the passengers to help in the campaign for Ashdot Yaacov another \$20,000 was raised.

In Toronto, I approached Alex Grossman, a prominent businessman, to head a committee for the Ashdot Yaacov campaign. Our appeal touched the hearts of the whole community and the campaign was a tremendous success. The publicity was city-wide. In addition to the *Canadian Jewish News*, we received good coverage in the English press, thanks to Rabbi Slonim who was at the time an associate editor of the *Toronto Telegram*. The Toronto Jewish community adopted Ashdot Yaacov and contributions were received from individuals and organizations alike. The first organization to respond was the College Memorial Chapel (now Steeles College Memorial Chapel) with a contribution of \$40,000 in honour of the then president, the popular and well-known Sam Cohen, who before his death had the pleasure of attending the dedication of the Culture Centre which bore his name. Within two years, sufficient funds

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were raised to rebuild first the dining hall, which was dedicated in the name of Genia and Alex Grossman of Toronto, and then the Community Centre. The appreciation and warm-hearted hospitality with which the kibbutz members always received our delegations were ample reward for our efforts.

Another major project was undertaken on behalf of *Massuah* (The Torch), established in Kibbutz Tel Itzhak, near the city of Natanya. Ben Sharoni, an active Zionist from his earliest days in Poland, whom I had known well and who settled in Israel before the war, came to Toronto and appealed to the Histadrut for help to complete the project. Headed by Gideon Hausner, member of the Knesset and the renowned prosecutor at the Eichmann Trial and Moshe Kohl, then Minister of Tourism, a worldwide organization with committees in Israel and all Jewish centres throughout the world, had been established for the purpose of building a memorial center to Jewish youth who perished during the Hitler nightmare of the Second World War. But the concept of *Massuah* was unique. It was not to be just another memorial, taking its place among other famous institutions and monuments such as at Yad Vashem, Lochamei Hagettaot and Yad Mordechai. *Massuah* would be an institution of learning and research which would, as its name implies, be a torch passed on from generation to generation, casting a light upon the dark days of the Holocaust—a link between our past and our future.

The project entailed the building at Kibbutz Tel Itzhak of a complex which would include a memorial centre, a repository for archives, a library, an amphitheatre where thousands would gather each year on *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day), classrooms and dormitories to house young students from all over the world, Jewish and non-Jewish. They would live on the premises while studying in depth the history of the Holocaust at year-round seminars conducted by a staff of multilingual lecturers and teachers especially trained for the task, mainly survivors themselves.

Once again, I approached Alex Grossman. Under his leadership we succeeded in launching a community-wide campaign that raised sufficient funds to begin construction of the *Massuah* Centre in Israel. The *Massuah* Group was aided in its efforts by the visit to Toronto of Gideon Hausner. A highlight of his visit was the tremendous mass rally at the Beth Tzedec Synagogue, where an audience of nearly two thousand listened with rapt attention to his message. I also had the privilege of addressing the audience at that rally.

Thousands of young people from all over the world, speaking a variety of languages, are now participating in the year-round series of seminars conducted at Massuah. Success brought its own problems and eventually enrollment was curtailed because of lack of housing accommodation for the overflow of applicants. Again, we received an appeal for assistance from Israel to help build two vitally needed dormitories and, once again Alex Grossman, with the well known Mendel Green, Q.C., serving as co-chairman, rallied a host of Toronto's prominent Jewish citizens to serve on a committee to raise funds for the two dormitories. In 1981, our delegation attended the ceremony at Tel Itzhak where the groundstones for these buildings were laid. The leadership of Massuah in Israel honoured those who participated in the project by placing a plaque at the entrance which bears the names of the Toronto committee and that of Alex Grossman and Jacob Egit. An important contribution to the Massuah campaign was also made by D. Lou Ronson.

In the 22 years which I spent with the Histadrut Campaign, more than 50 important projects were built in Israel with the help of individual sponsors and the many societies, Landsmanshaften and all the Fraternal Organizations that made up the United Organizations for Histadrut, of which Rabbi David Monson was Honourary President and contributed much to our success. In our efforts, the executive-director of the Israel Histadrut Campaign, George Steinhouse, was most helpful. The cooperation and assistance which he extended to me contributed much to the success of our projects. Mention must be made of the Women's Council of the UOFH, which included many dedicated, hard working women.

The Dr. Samuel and Rivka Hurwich Literature Fund of the Yiddish Cultural Association in Jerusalem must be mentioned. In 1976, when my good friend Professor Gershon Winer of Jerusalem approached me about the project, I received it with enthusiasm, and with the stimulus of his personality and cooperation, we raised a significant sum of money for that purpose. To date, numerous Yiddish books have been published in Israel in memory of Dr. Samuel and Rivka Hurwich.

Gershon Winer, born in Toronto, is an ordained rabbi and intellectual who left important academic positions in America to work in pioneering community of Dimona, Israel. He now lives in Jerusalem and in recent years made a significant contribution to Israel's cultural life. At present he is the Dean of the Yiddish Department at Bar-Ilan University in Tel-Aviv.

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For many years, The Women's Council of the United Organizations for Histadrut was fortunate to have as a member the late Anne (Medres) Glass. For those of us who had known, loved and worked with her, her death in August, 1982, was a devastating blow. It was during the years when Anne was President of the Women's Council that I came to fully appreciate her remarkable gifts—her intellect and strength of purpose. It was under her leadership that the Women's Council was successful in sponsoring so many vital institutions in the State of Israel, such as Clinics, Cultural Centres and Children's Homes.

Anne Glass came from a traditional Jewish home in Montreal. Her father was the well-known Yiddish writer, Israel Medres, and it was from him that she inherited her love of the Yiddish language. Married to the eminent scientist, University Professor Irvine Glass, the couple made their home in Toronto, where Professor Glass taught at the University of Toronto while Anne, mother of three daughters, still found time and energy not only to work on behalf of the Jewish Homeland but to pass on her enthusiasm for Yiddish through many lectures and study sessions.

Before illness struck her she taught Yiddish Literature and Language as credit courses towards a B.A. at the University of Toronto. To have had Anne Glass as a member and leader in the Women's Council of the UOFH enhanced our efforts in every field of endeavour.

Members of the United Organizations for Histadrut also supported the Amal Scholarship program—a major aim of the Histadrut Campaign in Toronto and many annual and perpetual scholarships were sponsored by organizations and individuals. One of the ardent supporters of the scholarship program was Maurice Boyman, one of our intelligent and sincere workers who collected significant sums exclusively for Amal. Also active in this program were our good friends David Geist and Adam Altenberg. One of the most significant contributions was made by Manya Lipshitz who donated the proceeds from the sale of her book *Memories of Stormy Times* (1977) towards the program.

In recent years the fate of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who had been stationed in Hungary during the German occupation has engaged the concern of individuals and organizations throughout the Western World. But it was our organization, the UOFH, that first brought his name to the consciousness of the Toronto Jewish community twenty years ago after an article I wrote about him appeared in the Canadian Jewish News. At great risk and under the very noses of the Nazis,

Wallenberg, through his diplomatic status was able to obtain documents that saved the lives of 100,000 Hungarian Jews by spiriting them out of the country. After Hungary was occupied by the Soviets, Raoul Wallenberg disappeared and it is believed that he was picked up by the NKVD. There is much speculation about him and rumours persist that he had been seen alive by fellow prisoners in Russia, but to this day his fate remains a mystery.

After the publication of my article, we established in Toronto a special committee of Hungarian Jews, headed by Benni Stark and ably assisted by Lily Frank and Leslie Ungar. We raised the funds that helped build in the name of a truly "Righteous Gentile" the Raoul Wallenberg Wing in the Beersheba Hospital. A delegation consisting mostly of Hungarian Jews which I led to Israel attended the dedication of the wing. It was only after our project had aroused interest of the general public that other organizations in Toronto took up the cause of Raoul Wallenberg.

In the 1960s, I took the initiative of forming the Organization of Polish Jews in Toronto. Our immediate goal was dealing with the newly arrived immigrants from Poland, several hundred of whom had come to Toronto in 1969 after the anti-Semitic actions drove the Jews out of Poland.

Also, at the Second World Conference of the Polish Jews held in Tel Aviv in 1969 (which was attended by delegates from many countries) I was elected to the executive committee and the World Presidium of the Federation as a representative of Polish Jews in Canada.

In twenty-two years as executive-director of the United Organizations for Histadrut, I led twenty delegations to Israel to dedicate special projects and to investigate the areas where we could all assist in the development of the Jewish State. The delegates were welcomed with the utmost cordiality by the highest leaders in Israel—from Golda Meir to Menachim Begin. Hospitality was of course always extended to us at the various centres where our projects were dedicated, especially at Kibbutz Lochamei Haggettaot, Tel Itzhak and Ashdot Yaacov. We were also invited several times to military posts and I particularly remember the delegation in which the then mayor of Toronto, William Dennison, also participated, when we were present at a military ceremony at which girl soldiers were promoted in rank.

Twenty years of effort wholeheartedly devoted to the welfare of Israel through our contributions which helped build new projects vital for the land and its people, forged an unbreakable link between me and the

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Jewish State, with its difficulties and its needs. And for me, personally, it was a form of rehabilitation—a total repudiation of those years when I served a movement which sought to denigrate my people and its land.

After World War II, I devoted my strength and the best years of my life to building a Yiddish *Yishuv* in the new Poland—in a land where at the beginning the new government proclaimed democracy, socialism and freedom for all, especially for the Jews who had suffered so much from the German occupation. But what was the reality? The story of my life and all that I endured in subsequent years bore witness to the falseness of the proclaimed policy—brutal anti-Semitism, pogroms, mass dismissals of Jews from places of employment—that was the reality. I experienced true democracy for the first time in my life when I came to Canada, and it was in this great, free land that I was given the opportunity to work on behalf of the State of Israel.

The United Organizations was also responsible for sponsoring many cultural events and bringing to Toronto famous artists and outstanding personalities. Thousands came to our concerts featuring the famous guest artists from Russia, Nehama Lifschitz, Ethel Kovenska and her husband, Lev Kogan, Misha Raitsin and others.

In 1965, we invited to Toronto Joseph Ziemian, author of the famous book, *The Cigarette Pedlars from the Three Crosses Square*—the true, heart rending story of young boys, who after escaping one by one from the Warsaw Ghetto, banded together to form a cooperative selling cigarettes on the Square, and passing as Polish youngsters.

These were children who had lost their parents and relatives in the Ghetto and were themselves candidates for the crematorium. All their childhoods ended abruptly and tragically. Their struggle for survival on the streets of Warsaw, passing as orphaned Polish children, sleeping wherever they found shelter, often hungry and cold, is a remarkable tale of courage and endurance. The older boys looked after those younger, the stronger after the weaker.

Ziemian, who as a member of the underground in Warsaw at the time of the Ghetto Uprising, was in contact with the group, tells in his book that many boys smuggled arms into the ghetto, acted as messengers and even took part in the fighting. Most of them are now in Israel, but a few are in Canada. One of them, the leader of the group known as *Bitchek*, is Irving Milchberg, a businessman in Niagara Falls. Michael Keller (Pavel) is a resident of Toronto. Ziemian himself emigrated to

Israel where he died in 1971. His book, written in Polish, appeared in several editions and was translated into Yiddish, English and Hebrew.

In 1968, Tuviah Bielsky, famous partisan commander during World War II, was the guest of honour at a banquet held under the auspices of the UOFH. For three years Bielsky, who with other partisans escaped to the forests of Poland, dedicated his life to saving the Jews from the ghettos of Lydda and Novogrodek and sabotaging German installations and transportation facilities. Harassment of the enemy was so effective that in 1941, Bielsky had a reward of \$40,000 on his head. His presence among us was a great occasion.

We were also very active on behalf of Soviet Jewry. The Moscow "Trial of Nine" in 1968 prompted one of the great demonstrations in our city. We worked to bring 10,000 people to Nathan Phillips Square and I was one of the speakers, denouncing the trial before a cheering crowd as a manifestation of Russian inhumanity. In February of 1976, my wife Clara and I were delegates to the Second World Conference of Jewish Communities on behalf of Soviet Jewry, which took place in Brussels, Belgium.

In the 1960s, resurgent Nazism began to manifest itself in Toronto and its exponents became popular media subjects. The CBC scheduled a number of interviews with the neo-Nazis and anti-Semites, providing them with a platform from which to spout their vicious propaganda. Two self-styled Nazi sympathizers and anti-Semites from Quebec, André Belafin and Adrien Arcand appeared on television programs. But the most provocative program, blatantly exploited for its sensationalism by the CBC, was the interview with George Lincoln Rockwell, leader of the neo-Nazis in the United States. It was indeed a black day for the Jewish community, especially survivors of the Holocaust, when Rockwell and his aides appeared dressed in uniforms sporting swastika armbands and the interviewer addressed him as commander. The newly risen star of the neo-Nazi movement in Toronto, John Beattie, was given air time.

For me, these interviews were beyond all understanding. How could a democratic country like Canada, after all that had happened during World War II, give these people the opportunity to address millions of viewers? Despite protests from spokesmen for Toronto Jewry, the CBC continued to schedule anti-Semitic programs and understandably this exposure created an atmosphere favourable to the development of the neo-Nazi movement. It was not long before John Beattie announced

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that a Nazi Party headquarters had been established in a house in the east end of Toronto. Survivors amongst us, particularly in my organization—the United Organizations, where the membership consisted of about 90% survivors—were incensed and felt that some action had to be taken. We let the residents in the district know that it was not in their best interest to harbour a nest of Nazis in their midst, hate-mongers whose vicious propaganda against the Jews and Blacks could lead to trouble. Soon after the opening of the headquarters, the neighbours organized a street demonstration, broke all the windows of the house, and tore Hitler's picture down from the walls of the new Nazi headquarters. An elderly Christian woman threw herself at Beattie in outrage, shouting—"My sons died fighting the Nazis, and now you want to bring them here!" And hundreds of residents of the district presented a petition to the government calling for the outlawing of a Nazi party in Canada.

The Nazis were forced to close the headquarters. But the propaganda continued to flow. Canada was inundated with Nazi literature which came through the mail and flyers were actually dropped by plane. On Rosh Hashana 1964, many Jews received New Year cards with best wishes from Canadian Nazis, depicting a caricature of a Jew cringing under a swastika and a caption which read, "This is the End for the Jews." Soon after Kennedy's assassination, leaflets appeared in mail boxes and were thrown into doorways of many homes stating that the Jews murdered Kennedy. A separate anti-Semitic campaign was being carried on by John Ross Taylor from a farm in Haliburton, Ontario. He spoke in the name of a new anti-Jewish organization called "National Order."

There were leaders of the Toronto Jewish community who opposed visible and vocal action by Jews against the neo-Nazis, which they claimed would only give the movement more publicity. In any case, they argued, the neo-Nazis were a lunatic fringe and if ignored would fade away. But we who had experienced at first-hand that silence which resulted in the death of six million Jews and had personally witnessed what "a lunatic fringe" had accomplished in Europe, could not keep silent. I can truthfully claim that it was the pressure exerted by the United Organizations and other survivors in the city that finally compelled the Canadian Jewish Congress to take a stand against the rise of Nazism and the proliferation of hate literature which then led to the enactment of the Hate Literature Bill in 1970 by the federal government.

In 1965—on April 20, Hitler's birthday—the establishment of a Nazi

Party in Canada was proclaimed by its leader, 23 year-old John Beattie, at a press conference which he called on the occasion of the opening of the party headquarters in a house in Toronto's east end. At the interview, Beattie, flanked by three of his henchmen, all of them decked out in brown uniforms sporting swastika armbands, declared the party already had 74 members and 1,700 supporters. When questioned as to the platform of the Nazi party, the *fuehrer* answered: "We must get rid of the Zionists and the Jewish communists." To the question who the Zionists and Jewish communists were, Beattie replied:

"All the Jews in Canada."

"How will you get rid of them?" the reporters asked.

"Very simply. We will hang them."

"Where?"

"In Allan Gardens."

Allan Gardens, the place where John Beattie wanted to hang the Jews, was where he called a mass demonstration at which he proposed to expound the goals and policies of the neo-Nazi party.

At the press conference, a brochure was also distributed, "The Red Rabbi," written by a Nazi anti-Semite, David Stanley, and published by "World Service," address P.O. Box 3848, Birmingham, Alabama, U.S.A. On the last page, in heavy type, was an announcement: "Do not read it at night! Do not read it if you have a weak heart! But if you want the truth, read *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion!* A million copies have been issued."

The events that occurred Sunday, May 30, 1965 in Allan Gardens, where thousands of people came to demonstrate against a Nazi rally, had a historic significance the importance of which reached beyond the borders of Canada. What led up to the Allan Gardens demonstration?

With the financial support of foreign organizations, Toronto had become a centre of neo-Nazi activity. The smearing of swastikas on synagogues and Jewish institutions, the distribution of tens of thousands of anti-Semitic leaflets through the mails, hand to hand and even dropped by airplanes; the official opening on Hitler's birthday of the Nazi party headquarters on Rhodes Avenue; the publicity given to the Nazis by the Toronto newspapers, especially by the CBC, which had several times interviewed Nazi leaders such as Rockwell, Stanley and Taylor, finally the calling of a Nazi rally in Allan Gardens—these combined to arouse concern and outrage in a large segment of Toronto's Jewish population.

## **Anti-Nazi Activities In Toronto**

No concrete effort had been made by government officials to stop the systematic build-up of the Nazi movement in Canada. The demand by thousands of citizens throughout Canada for the enactment by the federal government of legislation banning hate literature and to stop once and for all Nazi activity, similar to legislation already enacted in more than 20 other countries, had resulted only in discussions, polemics and the setting up of a committee to study the situation.

People were skeptical when they read in the press that the Nazi party was planning a public rally at Allan Gardens where John Beattie, the leader, would announce his program. However, several days prior to the May 30th rally, thousands of leaflets were distributed in Toronto which read as follows:

**Canadians at Allan Gardens (Carlton & Sherbourne Sts.)**

**Sunday Afternoon, May 30**

**Public Speaking with National Socialist Views**

**John Beattie - 181 Rhodes Ave.**

Beattie's intentions to hold a Nazi rally were serious!

The organization that condemned this rally as an "act of provocation" was the Canadian Jewish Congress. But no one took this warning seriously. When the city Mayor at the time, Philip Givens, was asked if he had issued a permit for the Nazis to hold the rally, he declared that he had not and had no intention of doing so. All the leaders of the United Organizations urged the Canadian Jewish Congress to take stronger action and demand that the provincial government prohibit the rally and, if this failed, to organize a massive counter-demonstration. But the professors and civil libertarians in the Congress leadership maintained that we were living in a democratic land where everyone was entitled to free speech and the right to assemble. I had many a heated argument with those people. I warned them that the survivors could not tolerate the development of a neo-Nazi movement in Canada, and that their reaction should not be underestimated.

Not only was the reaction of the survivors underestimated in this instance but that of the entire Jewish community and the Congress leaders did not foresee the repercussions which followed. More than six thousand people showed up at Allan Gardens to prevent a Nazi rally. When three of the Nazi leaders—Beattie, Astle and Gobrowski—and 30

of their Nazi supporters from Toronto and vicinity, and their sympathizers, entered the Gardens in order to hold the rally, a melee ensued. The arrogance and defiance of the Nazis who arrived at the Gardens in full knowledge that thousands were there to oppose them clearly showed what a threat and danger this posed to the general community. Some of the survivors could not contain themselves and attacked the Nazis, after breaking through the police lines to reach them.

I was present at Allan Gardens that afternoon. Those who were attacked by the crowd had swastikas on their arms, Nazi literature in their pockets and acted in a derisive and provocative manner towards the Jews. The thousands of Jews who had come to Allan Gardens left wives and children at home. They had come to protest Nazism. The arrival of Nazi leaders, some with swastika armbands, resulted in a swell of angry emotions among the crowd. The event was of course widely covered by the media, but some of the statements in the press, "that had not certain groups, organized for violence been present at Allan Gardens, no incidents would have occurred" were erroneous and false. The crowd had no connection with any violent group.

It must be pointed out that the Toronto police were very efficient and thanks to their crowd control, there were no casualties or serious injuries.

The N3 Organization under Charles Wittenberg and Sam Pasternak was active in those days and a great help in the anti-Nazi campaign. The name N3 was taken from Newton's Third Law: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."

Immediately after the demonstration, civil libertarians in the Canadian Jewish Congress addressed a letter to the Jewish community condemning the activists as "irresponsible rabble rousers." The letter reached the newspapers before the Jewish community received it. The Toronto newspapers devoted a great deal of space to this letter. The *Telegram* said: "Jews Blame Jews for Nazi Park Riot." The headline in the *Globe and Mail* read: "Jewish Congress Blames Jews for Fomenting Mob Violence" and the *Toronto Star* headline read: "Jews Rap Own Rabble Rousers." The Jewish population was so aroused and indignant and the opposition voiced against the establishment in Congress on the part of a vast majority so vehement, that there was actual danger Congress would be destroyed as a forum for all Canadian Jewry. Evidently I was considered one of the "rabble rousers:" the day after the demonstration in the Allan Gardens, the executive director of the CJC, the late

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Mayer Sharzer, declared that Congress had decided my foot would no longer be allowed inside its doors. I smiled when I heard this. A few days later, the United Organizations called a mass protest meeting which was attended by several hundred delegates from most of the Jewish Folk Organizations in Toronto. In my speech, I demanded that those who had signed the harmful letter should resign from their positions. A resolution of censure of the Congress was unanimously adopted and published in the press. The crisis in the Jewish community was serious.

The late Meyer Gasner, then President of the Congress, invited me to his home, where for several hours we discussed the situation. He was very worried about the split in the community. I said to him then that he himself was a *Folksmentsch*, a sensitive individual and an upholder of justice. But, very frankly I told him: "You, Meyer Gasner, are surrounded by some lawyers and professors who do not understand the feelings of the Jewish survivors, who cannot even for a minute feel the anguish which we carry within ourselves all the days of our lives for what we have suffered. They want, above all, to be liked by non-Jews."

There followed many confrontations between our *Folksmentschen* and the Congress leadership, and many conferences at which Rabbi Plaut was the mediator. Finally, after a general mass meeting at which harsh criticism was directed against the Congress, a historic decision was made to include representatives of the *Landsmanshaften* and survivors in the executive, and various other committees of the Congress. What effect this had upon future policies was demonstrated by the campaign against the appearance of the German Nazi leader Adolph von Thadden on CBC, which was organized and carried through with the sanction of the Canadian Jewish Congress.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN: LESSONS TO BE LEARNED**

What were the lessons of the Allan Gardens incident? After World War II, over 40,000 Jewish refugees, as well as many non-Jewish survivors of Nazism, entered Canada. They had all lived through tragedies, lost loved ones, and survived the worst hell in history. The Jewish survivors were grateful citizens of Canada, happy to live in this great democratic country. However, they could not accept the laws which permitted the development of a neo-Nazi movement. Not only did the Nazi group in Toronto remind them of the murder of brothers, sisters and children, but prevented them from living a peaceful life by the continuous spreading of hate literature throughout the country that predicted a repetition of Nazi atrocities in Canada. Many of the Jewish immigrants had succeeded in creating a new life in Canada, trying to forget the past, but the Nazi hate literature revived the bitter memories of concentration camps and gas chambers.

It was impossible to convince these people that even if the Nazi party did gain in strength, there were sufficient laws in Canada that would prevent them from becoming harmful. The survivors of World War II had good reason to be skeptical of promises. When their closest relatives were killed in the gas chambers and burnt in the crematoria and the smoke was blown by the wind throughout the world, the people of the 20th century remained silent. None of the Allied powers made any effort to bomb the gas chambers and concentration camps that were built throughout Europe. This act of genocide was not an episode of merely several days. It did not occur in the middle ages or in the jungle. It took place over a period of years in the heart of civilized Europe. This is the historic truth.

The survivors of the Holocaust were opposed to the spread of Nazism in Canada. They did not wish to breathe the same air as the Nazis—and this time they were determined that their resistance would not be too late. They knew that although at the time they were not threatened

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physically by the Nazis in Canada, they could not minimize the threat of the Nazi ideology which existed in Toronto. If someone puts one drop of poison in the water system, who would dare to say that this drop of poison does not matter. When you cultivate a garden and someone plants one weed that spreads, then can you say that one weed does not matter? The demonstration on May 30th, 1965 at Allan Gardens was not merely an outburst of emotion. It was a real contribution to Canada. It awakened the conscience of the country. It was an outpouring of the democratic conscience of Canada—not merely a problem of Jews or non-Jews. It was a miracle that some witnesses to the Nazi holocaust still survived who reminded those Canadian citizens, fathers and mothers who lost tens of thousands of sons in the war against the Nazis, of the oath taken years ago never to permit Nazism to rear its ugly head again—for Nazism resulted in the death of millions of innocent people.

The survivors carry with them a legacy from the millions who died—**NEVER FORGET!** Would it have been right and is it still right for them to remain silent and say nothing about the rebirth of Nazism in their midst? Is this why millions of people gave their lives in World War II? The problem is not merely Beattie or any other Nazi leader and the Jews—it is Nazism and the future of Canada. In writing now about the events in Allan Gardens 25 years ago, I must point out that in all the years that have passed since then, no neo-Nazi group has had the audacity to again make an attempt to organize a similar rally.

We were also involved in helping the Katzetler Organization of Montreal to bring several thousand concentration camp survivors to Ottawa on May 9, 1965. On the 20th anniversary of their liberation from Nazism, they met on Parliament Hill to declare their thanks for the opportunity to rebuild their lives in the great, free and democratic land of Canada. In his speech to the assembled, then Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson stated: "It is not enough to say 'It can't happen here.' **WE MUST BE ON GUARD TO MAKE SURE IT DOESN'T HAPPEN HERE, OR THERE, OR ANYWHERE!**" Those words spoken by Lester B. Pearson must never be forgotten by any law abiding Canadian citizen, Jews and non-Jew.

Despite what had happened at Allan Gardens, CBC television once again was providing a platform for a Nazi spokesman. Towards the end of 1966, the CBC announced that it had invited Adolf von Thadden, founder of a revived neo-Nazi party in Germany (The German National

Party) to Canada for an interview. While the media may have regarded this as a sensational journalistic coup, the Folk Organizations and the survivors felt otherwise and initiated one of the greatest mass protests in Toronto, and this time with the full backing of the Canadian Jewish Congress. At one of the meetings, I remember expressing my amazement that von Thadden had the audacity to come to Toronto, a city where there were thousands of survivors who could never forget the tragedy of the Hitler era. I must say that we were supported by many sympathizers throughout Canada. The late Judy Lamarsh, then Minister of Health and Welfare, was in Toronto at the time and realized the traumatic effect which the projected interview would have upon the Jewish population. When she returned to Ottawa, the Minister recommended that the federal government revoke von Thadden's entry permit to Canada.

In the days before von Thadden's expected arrival, a protest meeting of 7,000, chaired by John Bassett, publisher of The Telegram took place in the Coliseum at the Exhibition grounds, with the participation of the late David Lewis, Jean Marchand, leaders of the Canadian Jewish Congress and members of the clergy, Jewish and non-Jewish. At the conclusion of the proceedings in the Coliseum, Meyer Gasner, President of the Canadian Jewish Congress and other dignitaries led a march to the Peace Monument on the Exhibition grounds, where Max Shecter, who was at the time Chairman of the Anti-Nazi Committee, and I addressed the huge gathering. Our protest was effective and the federal government refused permission for von Thadden's entry into the country. Thanks to the example set then by Canada, the other countries who had scheduled interviews for von Thadden, refused him entry.

To overcome this obstacle, the CBC sent two reporters, one of them Larry Zolf, to Hanover for a taped interview with von Thadden, which was scheduled to be broadcast mid-January 1967. With the cooperation and guidance of the CJC, a demonstration was organized for the night the program was televised—a disciplined, dignified and impressive event which received wide favourable press coverage. On a cold January night, more than 3,000 people marched in front of the CBC studio in total silence as a protest against von Thadden's appearance on the television screens of the nation. Among the marchers were Rabbi David Monson and Rabbi Kelman. These two rabbis had participated in many other anti-Nazi demonstrations. Knowing the difficulty our survivors were having in containing their emotions, I went up and down the long column

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admonishing everyone to maintain their silence, and when a CBC representative came out of the studio and attempted to interview the demonstrators, he was thoroughly rebuffed. No one would speak to him. The dignity and discipline of the protestors won the approbation of the entire community and the press subsequently carried many statements by prominent non-Jews saying that they understood and they shared the outrage of the Jewish community.

In those years, the United Organizations also took a prominent part in the meetings, marches and demonstrations opposing the imposition of the Statute of Limitations on war crimes, scheduled to go into effect in Germany on December 31, 1969. There were many delegations from all over Canada to German consulates and the German embassy in Ottawa, and we were proud that we were always in the forefront of this effort which succeeded in the revocation of the Statute. At this time John Geller, Q.C., was chairman of the the CJC Public Relations committee and contributed very much to the success of this campaign.

Of the delegations to Ottawa in which I participated, I remember most vividly the one to the Senate, led by the late Louis Herman, Q.C., who was at the time chairman of the Jewish Community Relations Committee (JCRC) urging the Canadian Government to enact the bill prohibiting hate literature. The brilliance of his presentation, his erudition and the force of his argument, contributed to the decision of the federal government to finally pass the Hate Literature Bill.

When the neo-Nazis in Skokie, Illinois, proclaimed that they were organizing a march, we in Toronto campaigned to demonstrate solidarity with the Jews of Skokie in protest of the planned Nazi demonstration. We held a massive rally in Earl Bales Park, at which Harry Simon and I were among the speakers, and vowed that if the Nazi demonstration took place as planned, we were prepared to send 10 buses full of people to Skokie to help the Jewish community. The Nazi march did not take place.

Long before any official action was taken against the resurgence of Nazism, the United Organizations in Toronto joined forces with the Association of former Concentration Camp Inmates of Montreal in a concerted campaign urging the Canadian Government to enact a Hate Literature Bill. I still remember the annual conference of the UOFH at which the 250 delegates from various societies and Landsmanschaften throughout the city unanimously and enthusiastically approved the following statement: "If in the near future the federal government does

not pass a law making the distribution of hate literature and the advocacy of the racist, anti-Semitic theories of the Nazis a criminal offence, we will call together Jews from every part of Canada to a demonstration in Ottawa and in the thousands we will march to the Parliament buildings. We will be heard!" And in keeping with these words, we were in the forefront of every action against the neo-Nazi movement.

In January of 1965, Rolf Hochhuth's accusatory drama, *The Deputy*, was presented at the Crest Theatre in Toronto. The contention in the play that Pope Pius XII could have defied Hitler in his massacre of the Jews but refrained from doing so for political reasons—to preserve the position of the Church in Germany—aroused controversy in some quarters and of course irked the neo-Nazis. We received information that on opening night, groups of Nazis in the city were planning a demonstration in front of the theatre to protest the showing. We were determined to organize a counter demonstration. Members of the UOFH took to the telephone and on opening night, about 20 cars full of survivors converged upon the theatre. Some of us stood on the street corners keeping an eye out for the Nazis, others sat in parked cars or circled the block to drive past the theatre. The police had been alerted as to possible trouble and scoured the neighbourhood in cruisers, motorcycles and on foot. Whether intimidated by our members or the presence of the police, the Nazis did not show up. Their planned demonstration did not materialize. In all our anti-Nazi activities, Mike Englishman of Toronto was always involved.

When the security of Israel was at stake during the Six-Day War in 1967, Jewish communities in the western world rallied in unprecedented fashion to her support and Toronto was foremost among them. Under the auspices of the United Israel Appeal, a special emergency campaign was proclaimed under the leadership of the late Ray Wolfe, whom I greatly admired for the drive and organizational ability he displayed. I became involved in the campaign and worked day and night among the folk organizations in the city to raise the required funds. The response from the members of the societies and landsmanschaften was phenomenal. I know that in many cases, the size of the contributions meant considerable personal sacrifice. In a few days, we raised a substantial sum of money. I received the coveted *Karen Hayesod*—United Israel Appeal Certificate of Merit, for outstanding effort in the 1967 Israel Emergency Campaign.

Soon after coming to Toronto in 1958, I joined the Yiddish Culture Council which is supported by the Canadian Jewish Congress and

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became a member of the executive. Each year the Society sponsors six lectures by Yiddish writers and scholars brought to Toronto from other parts of Canada, the United States and Israel. In the 36 years since, over 200 such lectures have been delivered.

It is now more than 35 years since the Culture Council has been in existence and I am the only one left of the old guard, except for Dr. Diamond, who now lives in Florida. None of the original founders like Lipa Green, Kalman Berger, Harry Topper and Boris Litman are still among us. In the last years, the chairman was the late A. Katz and the secretary A. Bainerman. In its own modest way, this organization fulfills an important function in fostering interest and love of Yiddish culture and language. Yiddish is being taught in our parochial schools and at the university level, and I hope that the membership of the Council will be augmented by young people who have learned to appreciate the rich cultural heritage left by our great Yiddish writers. I have also been all these years a member of the Labour Zionist Alliance (*Farband*). I am on the executive of the oldest Branch in the Alliance, B. Borochov Branch #124, which celebrated its 70th Jubilee, and there I am privileged to work with members of the executive, a warm, dedicated group. The late Boris Sperber, an active member of the executive who had contributed so much to our Branch, is missed by all of us. His unexpected death left a void in our midst.

When I first became active in the CJC many years ago, its activities were influenced by the so-called "Sha-Sha" policy, which advocated avoidance of direct confrontation with neo-Nazi anti-Semitic elements manifested in the country. It was as if the Jewish community was afraid of drawing attention to itself. This was a continuation of the CJC policy during World War II when the Jews of Canada did very little to protest the attitude of the openly anti-Semitic government with regard to the admittance of Jewish refugees from Europe. There were no organized demonstrations, no nation-wide protests by the Jewish population. Day to day business went on as usual.

The influx of 40,000 survivors after the war changed the image of the course of Jewish life and consequently forced the Congress to change its policies. After the anti-Nazi demonstrations in Toronto, which re-echoed throughout the whole country and reached far beyond the borders of Canada a new Jew evolved, one who would not allow himself to be influenced by a "Sha-Sha" policy but considered himself a full citizen,

demanding his rights and the protection of the federal government in banning the development of racist, hate-mongering elements which threatened the security of the Jewish people. The Canadian Jewish Congress was exceptionally active in the fight against neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism at the time when Professor Irwin Cotler was National President.

Unfortunately, anti-Semitism cannot be easily eradicated. How far the image of the Canadian Jewish Congress has changed can be illustrated by the fact that when in 1982 the neo-Nazi Zundel appeared on the scene and began to distribute his hate literature in Canada and abroad, the anti-Nazi Committee of the CJC under the chairmanship of Harry Simon organized a demonstration in front of Zundel's home, where thousands of Jews came out on a Sunday morning to protest against him. Such an act by the Canadian Jewish Congress would have been unthinkable 20 years previously. Ben Kayfetz was director of the CJC at that time and played an active role in organizing the demonstration.

In the summer of 1978, I visited Israel with a delegation to attend the dedication of new projects built with the help of our organization. When I returned I was told that, at a meeting of the United Organizations for Histadrut during my absence, it had been decided to celebrate the 35th year of its existence with a festive banquet in my honour to take place September 24, 1978 in appreciation of 20 years of service. To say that I was overwhelmed by the tribute paid me is putting it mildly. The chairman of the Jubilee Committee was my good friend, Julius Ciechanowski, one of the foremost leaders of the UOFH.

As I sat on the dais with my dear wife Clara at my side and surveyed the banquet hall of the Beth Sholom Synagogue crowded to capacity not only with people from our own movement but also with leaders from every spectrum of communal life in Toronto, my heart was filled to overflowing. David Birkan, of the Canadian Jewish News, referring to the remarks made in his speech by Judge Philip Givens sentencing me to a further 20 years of hard labour on behalf of the Jewish community, headlined his report of the occasion in the *Canadian Jewish News* "Jacob and Clara Egit Receive People's Unanimous Verdict." He wrote: "And the more than 500 people, who had come to the testimonial dinner of the UOFH's 35th anniversary at the Beth Sholom Synagogue, to honour Egit for the 20 years he had already put in, rose as one and all applauded. Chaired by Rabbi David Monson, the tribute dinner featured

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a head table of about 25 community leaders from all walks of Canadian Jewish life." In presenting a scroll of honour to Jacob Egit and his wife Clara, Senator Croll said, "Egit is for real. In what he has to do, he has to produce." The late Anne Glass, president of Histadrut's Women's Council, said in her tribute: "Jacob Egit came to Canada 20 years ago and brought vitality and colour to events and demonstrations, and raised Jewish morale and consciousness." Greetings were also extended by David Satok, of the Canadian Jewish Congress and by Dr. Sydney Wax, President of the Labour Zionist Movement. More than 50 telegrams of congratulations came from around the world. Those from Israel included a tribute from Histadrut acknowledging "Egit's devotion and support, and the role he played in building a bridge between Canada and Israel."

For me, the culminating highlight of the evening was the inauguration that night of "The Jacob and Clara Egit Endowment Fund" for the publication in Israel of books, in Hebrew, Yiddish and English, dealing with the Holocaust and Jewish Resistance. I was moved at this manifestation of esteem by the members of the United Organizations for Histadrut, with whom I had worked for so many years, and by the generous support which the project received from the Toronto community. The money raised for the Foundation has been invested in Israel and from the interest yield grants are made each year to two writers whose work has been selected by the Editorial Board in Israel. Titles already published and distributed are: Zivia Lubetkin's *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*; Misha Louvish's *The Facts about the Holocaust, Scroll of Auschwitz* by Berl Mark and *Final Journey* by Martin Gilbert, translated into Hebrew from English; Hersh Smolar's *Sovietische Yidn Hinter Getto-Tzoimen* (Soviet Jews Behind the Ghetto Fence). The sixth book we published was *An Entangled Leadership—the Yishuv and the Holocaust, 1942-1945* by Dr. Dina Porat, and many more. Much of the success of the dinner and the Foundation is due to the efforts of my good friend, Julius Ciechanowski. This project is close to my heart, for the flood of Nazi propaganda denying the massacre of six million Jews must be counteracted with the truth as it is known only by the present generation of survivors who were witnesses of the atrocities. This is one of the most tangible ways in which we can keep faith with those who died—never to forget!

The Foundation, administered in Israel by Histadrut, was officially inaugurated in Tel Aviv on February 14, 1979. In announcing the estab-

lishment of the Fund, the Chairman of the evening, Israel Kessar M.K., Secretary-General of Histadrut, paid tribute to my 20 years of effort on behalf of Israel.

For many years, I have had dealings with the man who now heads the Histadrut Labour Federation, Israel Kessar. When I first met him he was the Deputy Secretary-General and now, as the Secretary-General, he is head of an organization to which 75% of Israel's people belong. In my over 20 years with the Histadrut Campaign in Toronto, I had dealt with several of Kessar's predecessors, but it was Israel Kessar, with his ability and talents, who impressed me the most.

A true man of the people, Kessar who was born in Yemen in 1931, came to Israel as a child of two with his parents, seven brothers and sisters, was brought up in the slums of Jerusalem. His deprived background contributed to his understanding and sympathy for the ordinary working man, the underprivileged and the elderly. He graduated from the Hebrew University with a B.A. in sociology and economics and attended Tel Aviv University where he was awarded an M.A. in Labour Studies.

Universally liked and respected for his warmth and dedication, Kessar has been a member of the Histadrut's Central Committee since 1966 and rose through the ranks to become Secretary-General. My friendship with him remains till this day. I owe much to Israel Kessar for the success of the Foundation. Although he had not experienced the Holocaust, he fully understood the importance of preserving its memory through books dealing with that subject. He gave me his fullest support.

Members of the first editorial board were literary critic and author the late Yehoshua Avrech, Chairman; Professor Gershon Winer; Mordechai Tzanin, writer and editor, Melvin Klarfeld, director of the Histadrut in Israel and the late Anne Glass of Toronto.

In December 1980, I sent a letter of resignation to the head office of Israel Histadrut Campaign in Montreal. After 22 years of service as executive director, I felt that I had earned the right to some years of leisure and time in which to write my memoirs. Retirement from the campaign does not mean that I am curtailing my activities. I am grateful that the years I have lived in Canada have afforded me the opportunity of contributing to the welfare of the Jewish community in Canada and the State of Israel.

## POSTSCRIPT

Why did I write this book?

There are so many memoirs and autobiographies now in print that I hesitated adding my own story to what has already been written about the history of our times. But all my close friends, especially Professor Irvine Glass of Toronto and Professor Matitahu Minc of the Tel-Aviv University convinced me that I could shed new light upon certain events in history—events which have not been part of the public record.

Each person's life is a world in itself, though the historical framework may be common to all. I, too, like so many others, lived my life through trials and tribulations, through great upheavals, through times of wars and revolutions, through the time of the Holocaust and in a time that saw the establishment of the State of Israel. I had many successes in life and great disappointments.

The dream of colonizing and settling the survivors who were left in Lower Silesia, and of creating there a base for the repatriation of Polish Jews from the Soviet Union, was to result in the most turbulent period of my life. The experiment of creating an autonomous Jewish community in Lower Silesia, the dramatic growth of the Yiddish Yishuv there and its dramatic collapse, is an important part of my book—and a part of post-war Polish history that is not generally known.

In writing my book, I wished to point out the transformation which thousands of Jewish workers and intellectuals saw in the Soviet Union, the solution of all social, political and national problems of the Jews. With fiery zeal, they threw themselves into working for a movement which they thought would bring justice and equality for all and would eliminate the scourge of anti-Semitism. But history soon proved otherwise.

Especially brutal were actions taken against the Jews who had devoted their lives to an ideal. In the Soviet Union particularly, they were repaid by the loss of all their rights, with the stifling of the Yiddish language and literature and the murder of Jewish creative artists. Anti-Semitism in

Russia overflowed its borders, anti-Semitic campaigns were instigated in Poland and went on for many years. I myself became a victim.

I am not a historian and I cannot write the history of this period. But I hope that someday, a qualified historian will fully cover the period of the Lower Silesia experiment and its aftermath and throw a new light on those dark and stormy times.

Now 40 years later, I can see that we harboured many illusions—dreams that we could really build an autonomous Jewish centre within a new democratic Poland. The preparations for the anti-Jewish trials in the Soviet Union and in Poland; the resurgence of Polish anti-Semitism organized not by any anti-Semitic group, but by the ruling party in government itself; the lists drawn up by this government of all the Jews holding important positions in the country and their subsequent dismissal en masse from their posts—all these developments caused panic among the Jews. As early as the 1950s, Jews began leaving Lower Silesia. The height of the exodus was in 1967, when Gomulka, the Secretary of the ruling Party (People's Workers Party) accused the Jews of being a 5th column in Poland. Almost 95% of the Jews in Lower Silesia left the country, leaving most of their possessions behind them. In contrast to Jews from other regions, the Jews from Lower Silesia for the most part, emigrated to Israel. Now, as in all of Poland, only a handful of Jews can still be found in Lower Silesia. Clearly, my dream was shattered!

I have already mentioned that when I was in Israel for the first time in August, 1957, Zalman Shazar, who was then the chairman of the Jewish Agency, had organized an 8-day Forum on the Problems of Zionism, World Jewry and the State of Israel. Shazar invited me to the Forum and I was lucky enough to be present the day when the late great Yiddish writer and poet, H. Leivik, spoke. His lecture made an impression upon everyone. It is over 30 years since I heard him but his words have remained with me and I wish to end my book with the last words of his address.

Leivik relates how, at the age of seven, he ran into a husky Pole on his way to *cheder*, who jumped on him and beat him up. "I entered the schoolroom, controlled my tears and sat down to my Humash. We were just reading the chapter which tells of the sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac was on the way to Mount Moriah with his father; then he lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; I actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. When Abraham lifted the knife, my heart froze within me from fright. Suddenly, the voice of the angel was heard:

## Postscript

'Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God.' And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud." "Why are you crying?" asked the rabbi. "You know that Isaac was not killed." And I said to him weeping, "But Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?" The rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late.

"I think of Isaac as he lay on the altar looking up at the lifted knife until the voice of the angel called out that it was but a trial. And I still hear my childish question, which echoes in my ear like a song: "Rabbi, what would have happened if the angel had been a minute late?" This still sounds in my ear because I have seen, as we have all seen, how six-million Isaacs lay beneath the knife, on the rack, in gas chambers, and were slaughtered. The angel of the Lord was too late. To me, six-million slaughtered Isaacs is an incomprehensible thought. I can, however, conceive of one Isaac who waits to be slaughtered, and while waiting, experiences the horror of six-million victims as if he himself had been slaughtered six-million times.

"Now we have seen how in the new Israel the best sons and daughters, Isaacs and Rebbecca's, were sent to a new altar of Jewish emancipation, a little distance from Mount Moriah. The trial ran its course. Those tried endured to the end. We bow our heads in awe before them."

"Have we not had enough trials?" I ask. "Is it not enough?" Let us at least among ourselves, and within ourselves, not lead ourselves to altars of sacrifice. Let us all be living, luminous Abrahams, living and loving Isaacs, living and loving Jacobs. This is my prayer today, here on the soil of Jerusalem, a little distance from Mount Moriah. This today is my only prayer."

*Tor.* A Jewish organization for health care.

*Volksdeutsch.* Poles of German origin.

*WIZO.* The Womens' International Zionist Organization.

*Yishuv.* A Jewish community or settlement.

*Yom Hashoah.* Holocaust Remembrance Day.

*Yung Bor.* Members of the Borochoy youth movement.

## Notes

1. For more information about the origin of the Petroleum industry in Borslaw see I. Hirszhaut *Die Yiddische Naft Magnaten* (Jewish Oil Magnates) Buenos Aires, 1954 .
2. Jacob Zerubavel was one of the most popular Jewish leaders and orators in the period between the two wars.
3. David Dragunsky surfaced in the Soviet Union as the head of that country's Jewish and anti-Zionist Committee, a violently anti-Israel arm of the Kremlin.
4. For details of this horrendous massacre see Koppel Holzman's *Ziemia Bez Boga* (The Earth Without God) published in Wroclaw, 1946.
5. Named after Stefan Bandera the Ukrainian leader whose guerilla bands were responsible for taking many Jewish lives during the German occupation.
6. See Notes from a Diary "Z Notatek pamietnikarskich," by Aurelia Wylenzynska in Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute, No. 45-46, pp. 215, 217, 226.
7. Michoels was the chairman of the Jewish anti-Facist Committee during World War II, the director of the Jewish Theatre in Moscow and one of Stalin's early victims.
8. Benni Sharoni, has for many years been conducting various seminars and courses on the Holocaust at the Massuah Institute at Tel Itzhak. Many of those who take the courses are from the Israeli Defence Forces. Sharoni himself lectures at the institute and has received numerous awards for excellence in teaching.
9. Helen Shiffer married the community activist Julius Ciechanowsky and moved to Toronto.

## Glossary

- Alma-Ata.* The Capital of Kazakhstan.
- Bilbul.* A false accusation or frame-up.
- Bund.* Yiddish Socialist Labour Party.
- Capo.* Collaborator in a concentration camp.
- Cheder.* An elementary level religious school.
- Dror.* A youth group aligned with the Labour Zionist faction.
- Folksmenschen.* Ordinary people.
- General Zionists.* A centrist group within the Zionist family.
- Hachshara.* Zionist training farms.
- Hashomer Hatzair.* A left-wing Zionist faction.
- Hechalutz.* Zionist youth organization.
- Heflinger.* A concentration camp inmate.
- Humash.* The Pentateuch.
- Ichud.* A group aligned with General Zionists.
- Judenrein.* Cleared of Jews.
- Katzetlers.* Former inmates of concentration camps.
- Kehille.* The legally incorporated Jewish community.
- Kiddush.* The Benediction over wine.
- Landsmanschaften.* Fraternal organizations.
- Luftmenschen.* Persons, without a definite occupation.
- Mizrachi.* A religious Zionist group.
- Olim.* Immigrants to Israel.
- Oneg Shabbat.* Friday evening gathering.
- ORT.* The Organization for Rehabilitation Training.
- Paole Zion (Left).* A left-wing group in the Zionist family.
- She'erit Hapleita.* Survivors; remnants.
- Shochtim.* Ritual slaughterers.
- Shtetl.* A small town or hamlet.
- Shul.* A synagogue.
- Tallaisim.* Prayer shawls.
- Toz.* A Jewish organization for health care.
- Volksdeutsch.* Poles of German origin.
- WIZO.* The Womens' International Zionist Organization.
- Yishuv.* A Jewish community or settlement.
- Yom Hashoah.* Holocaust Remembrance Day.
- Yung Bor.* Members of the Borochoy youth movement.

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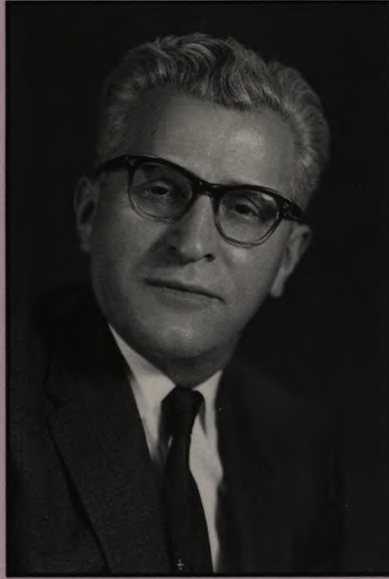
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The genesis, growth and development of the Jewish *Yishuv* in Lower Silesia is now told for the first time in English by the man who was the spearhead behind the project and its successful implementation.

At the end of the Second World War, when he returned to his native land after spending most of the war years in the Soviet Union, he sought to rebuild the shattered Jewish community he found there. For four years, as Chairman of the Central Committee of the Jews of Lower Silesia, Egit directed the resuscitation of organized Jewish life in Poland.

The Jewish *Yishuv* in Lower Silesia began its decline in 1949 when Jacob Egit was fired from his position as Chairman of the Central Committee. Accusations were made that he had tried to turn his *Yishuv* into another Israel.

The Egit memoir does not end with the Polish experience. It continues with a description of the author's settling in Canada in the late 1950s and his entry into the life of the Canadian Jewish community. It was not long before the talents he had demonstrated in Poland were deployed in his new homeland.

Egit's comments on the work he had been involved in, the *Histradrut*, the Canadian Jewish Congress and other community organizations show that he is a man of strong opinion and even stronger belief where the security of Israel and the Jewish people are concerned. He has remained a servant of his people. Jacob Egit's book makes for absorbing reading.

**Arnold Ages.**