PART I

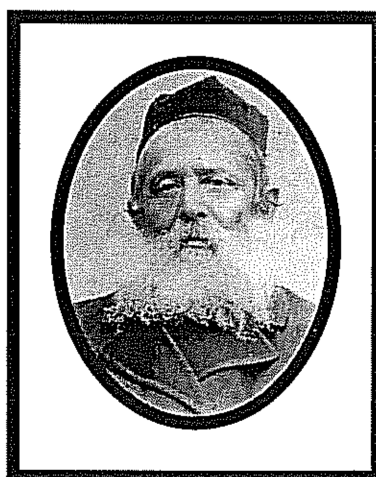
THE EARLY YEARS

Chapter 1
In Sunshine

Saul Israel Nitzberg was born on January 16, 1923 in Pruzhany, a small town in eastern Poland. He was given the name "Israel," but his family and friends always addressed him by an affectionate nickname – either Sola, Solya, or Solinka. When he came to America, he shortened his nickname to "Sol." Because people persisted in thinking his given name was Solomon, when he became a citizen he legally changed his name to Saul.

Poland had been incorporated into Russia when it was partitioned in 1795. It remained under Russian rule until 1919, when it regained its independence following the First World War. Like many of the small towns in Poland, Pruzhany had a large Jewish population that had immigrated there during the Crusades in order to escape persecution.

Saul's maternal family traces its roots back several centuries to the time when Russia was under czarist rule. His great grandparents, Yosl and Itka Applebaum, lived in Rovno, a Byelrussian village, for many years. It was located about eighteen miles from Pruzhany. The family owned a huge farming estate, with thousands of acres of arable land that was filled with forests, meadows, lakes, and wild life.



Itka and Yosl Applebaum
Saul's maternal great grandparents

The good years ended for the Applebaum family in the mid 1800's, when the Russian czar issued a decree forbidding the Jews to own large estates. Leaving their village, the family moved a short distance to a small farming settlement named Sosnoovakah, about fourteen miles from Pruzhany. Itka and Yosl had six children, one of whom was Esther, Saul's grandmother.

Esther Applebaum married Moshe Meschengisser and the couple settled in Pruzhany. Moshe went into business with his family, who ran a brass foundry. Esther and Moshe had five children: Tulia, Tanya, Sonya, Schmeryl, and Lisa, Saul's mother.

In the early 1900's, Lisa's sisters, Tanya and Sonya, immigrated to Russia. Schmeryl joined them somewhat later in order to avoid being drafted into the Polish army. In Russia Tanya became an accountant and Sonya became a physician. After the Soviet revolution, Schmeryl was in charge of all the over-ground transportation in Moscow. Tulia married Itsche Nomberg in Pruzhany. They immigrated to the United States in the early 1900's with their three-year-old daughter, Rose. Lisa was educated in Russian schools and universities and became a dentist. This was unusual, because under czarist rule Jews were seldom admitted to the universities.

The Meschengissers were a liberal family, concerned with the plight of the poor and oppressed. On July 12, 1905, Lisa, Saul's mother, and her sister Tulia were arrested and spent a day or two in jail because they had marched with the Bund. The Bund was the clandestine Jewish political party that espoused a socialist ideology. It advocated the promotion of Jewish culture and the support of human rights. The Bund was opposed to Zionism. Instead, it was dedicated to the strengthening of "Yiddishkeit" (Jewish culture and tradition) in Poland. (Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, RGASPI)

Meschengisser family:

Top Row:	***Bottom Row:***
Tulia-1st from right	*Moshe–3rd from right*
Itsche–2nd from right	*Esther–2nd from right*
Lisa–4th from right	*Rose–1st from right*

Schmeryl–Bottom Center

Like the Applebaums, the Nitzberg branch of the family traces its roots back to czarist Russia. Saul's paternal great grandparents, Moshe and Mindel Polonovski, had seven children. Their daughter, Rachel, married Noah Nitzberg. Rachel and Noah had five children: Clara, Velia, Charles, Elias and Veve, Saul's father. Veve was born in Poland in the late 1800's, during which time it was still part of czarist Russia. The family was settled in Pruzhany. Charles later moved to Geneva, Switzerland. Veve attended a Russian university and graduated as a civil engineer.

Noah Nitzberg

Saul's paternal grandfather

Veve and Elias

Charlottenburg, Germany - 1922

Lisa met Veve Nitzberg in the early 1900's. Veve liked to tell his sons how he had met his wife. Lisa's family made wines, and early one evening Lisa delivered some wine to Veve's home. As he related the encounter, Veve opened the door, saw this beautiful girl standing in the doorway, and fell in love with her. In 1915, soon after they had met, Lisa and Veve were married.

The young couple moved into an apartment on Seltser Street in Pruzhany, about a block away from Lisa's parents. Three years later, in 1918, Lisa gave birth to Lova. In the early 1920's, just after Saul was born, the Nitzbergs purchased a larger home in Pruzhany that would house their family as well as their dental office.

Veve served in militia after

World War I–1919

Lisa as a young girl

In an interview taped for the Holocaust center in Miami and conducted by his wife, Millie, Saul shared his recollections of the Pruzhany he knew as a child.

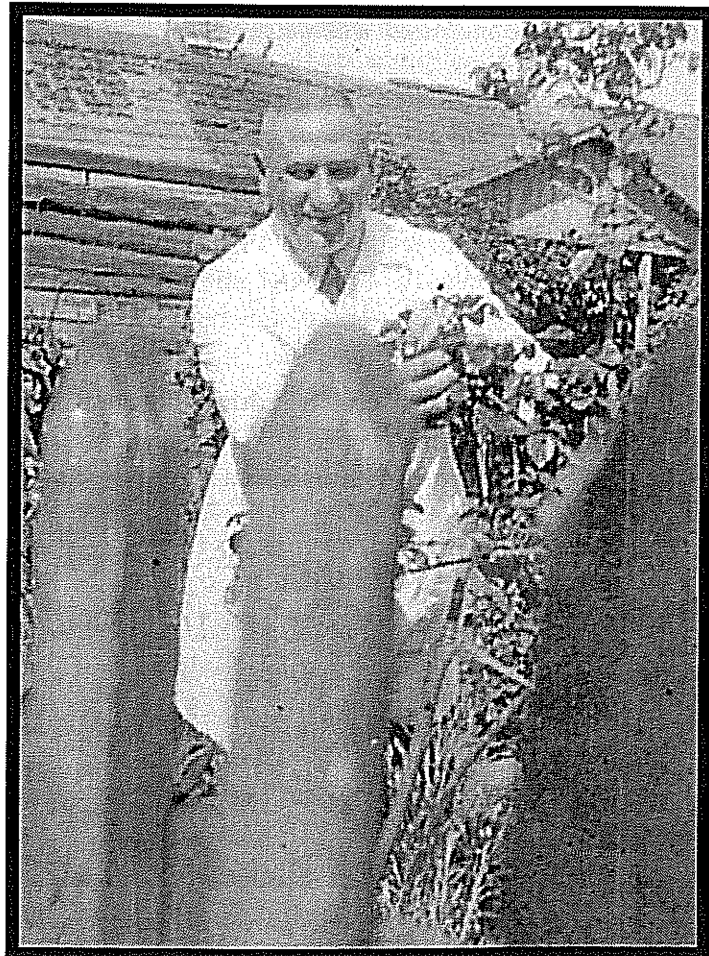
> *It was a very pleasant town, a small community in comparison to what you see in the United States these days. But it was my home and I always think of it with very pleasant memories. The street we lived on, called Dombrowska St. (our number was 13), was primarily composed of wooden houses, one-story houses, and sometimes two-story houses.*
>
> *There were several streets that were prettier than ours, especially on what we called the main street. The main street contained a number of brick buildings. There were dry goods stores, electric equipment stores, jewelry shops, watchmakers, bakeries, and a few barbershops. Once or twice a week vendors would come to town and set up their wares at the outdoor market in the town square. There the townspeople would come to buy many of the things they needed for the week, including fresh food. But, nonetheless, the street where I was raised was my street, and I remember practically every single house on that street.*

At a later date Saul embellished his description of the town.

> *We had a very big public square. It was used for marketplace and parades. The peasants came twice a week to display their wares. There were hundreds and hundreds of wagons, horse-drawn. There was a military station nearby, and the cavalry and artillery came to town. The soldiers came, the band played. We had no streetlights. We didn't need them because there were only two taxicabs and two private cars, so we didn't need traffic lights. We used bicycles or horse-drawn wagons or we walked. We walked miles, and it was very cold. Sometimes, if it was very, very bad we would rent a horse and sled to get us to school. That was very rare.*
>
> *The town was about 70% non-Jewish and 30% Jewish. Most Jewish families, including my own, lived in a three-block area in the Jewish section of town. The Jewish community had a flair for culture. They brought in traveling theatrical groups, poets who gave recitations, all types of things that would enrich the Jewish community.*

Saul and his brother spent their childhood in the house on 13 Dombrowska Street. The family home doubled as a dental office. The front door of the house led to a hall. On the left there was a door that led to Lisa's dental suite. The family lived in the other half of the house. Saul's father spent a good deal of time tending their flower garden which surrounded the house.

Site of Nitzberg home
Dombrowski Street



Veve tending his flower garden

Saul described their "modern conveniences."

> *Half of my house was long, a duplex, with an attic on top that was converted into a compartment. It was a very large house, with very large rooms... We had all the modern conveniences, but let me just assure you, they weren't modern in the American sense of the word because we never had a telephone, we didn't have a radio and we didn't have indoor plumbing or a shower, but nonetheless, we were considered the aristocracy in town.*
>
> *We were very practical people. We had chamber pots under the beds that we used and emptied in the morning. For some things we had to go to an outside outhouse... in the winter it was very cold. We had to go outside in the snow, carrying a candle. There was no light in the outhouse... that was a problem... Let's say you went to sleep, it was nice and cold. You woke up and it was snowing and cold, but you had to go outside. Everyone had to do it. It was part of living.*
>
> *To take a bath was also a problem. There was a small house next to our house and this was the bathhouse. There was a big kettle we would heat from underneath with many, many gallons of water. It was used to wash and bleach laundry, but we also heated water for the bath and carried the large kettles to the bathtub that was next to the large kettles... In the winter we bathed only once or twice a week. If you wanted to take the trouble to heat up water you could bathe every day, but it was a chore. So you washed yourself in the sink in the house.*
>
> *We hooked up to the outside well that the community used with special pipes, so we had cold running water. But we had to pump the water to get it into the house. It is so easy now to turn on a shower and take a bath.*

Saul remembered his house as "a comfortable home with large rooms, delicious food, and a wonderful dining room table."

Dining room table: Saul peers out from behind his mother

The dining room table held a store of precious memories. Saul's parents and their friends, the intelligentsia of the Jewish community, would sit at the table for hours discussing the events of the day. Saul listened intently as the adults talked, and he became increasingly knowledgeable about

current events. Some of his warmest memories were associated with those gatherings, which his brother, Lova, described in a letter many years later.

> *My dearest Solinka,*
> *As I write this letter our entire life passes in front of my eyes as if I was watching a documentary film on our past. I recall the unforgettable moments of our childhood. I see Mama, Papa, and our dear grandmother, our close friends, contemporary playmates of ours and various relatives. I envision our beautiful home, always open to friends and strangers alike, our dinner table, which was hardly ever set for just the immediate family. I see the people who were attracted by the love and warmth of our mother, by the wisdom, intelligence, and political know-how of our father, and by the hospitality and delicious foods our grandmother prepared. We learned of true friendships when we were little, and it carried over in our relations to others over the years to come.*

Saul's immediate family included his father, Veve, his mother, Lisa, and his brother, Lova, who was five years his senior. The family was small and close-knit. His maternal grandparents lived a block away, but after her husband's death in 1935 his grandmother, Esther, spent most of her time in her daughter's home. She cooked all the meals, did the shopping, and took care of her grandchildren. Saul remembered going to the marketplace with his grandmother to help her to carry the groceries.

Saul adored his mother. She was an extraordinary woman, gentle, loving, and beautiful. She was a competent and talented dentist as well. Lisa was one of only three dentists in Pruzhany (all three were Jewish). These three dentists served the 10,000 people who lived in the town and the surrounding villages. Saul would often watch his mother as she treated a patient. Years later, Saul met people from his home town who fondly recounted their memories of Lisa. They recalled her gentleness and kindness, as well as her professional skill.

Saul liked to reminisce about the special evenings he spent with his mother. Lisa's eyes often tired from the close work that her dentistry required. Many a night she would lie down in her room and Saul would bring cold compresses for her eyes. Then he would sit at her bedside and read to her from the books they both loved. He always spoke of his mother as kind, beautiful, and a real "softie."

Saul also spoke of his father, Veve, in fond and loving terms. He described him as wise, well informed, ethical, and concerned with his community. In 1919, at the end of World War I, Germany retreated from what was then Russia, and Poland was granted independence. For Pruzhany and the surrounding towns, this was a time of turmoil. In the absence of civil authority, Jews were robbed of their cattle, horses, and other personal property. In order to protect themselves, young Jews organized a militia which operated until the new government could restore order. Veve was put in charge of the local militia for a short while.

When Poland became an independent state, finding jobs in civil engineering became impossible for Jews. Veve recognized that he could not get a job, so he left his family and went to Berlin for two years and was retrained as a dental mechanic. He then returned to Pruzhany

and practiced alongside his wife doing dental prosthetics. Saul's father was not a man who would accept defeat easily.

The Nitzberg family was known for its charitable ways. Lisa always practiced tzedakah (charity). She would provide a meal for any hungry person who came to their back door. Morris Sorid, a cousin of Lisa's, recalls her generosity. Morris writes:

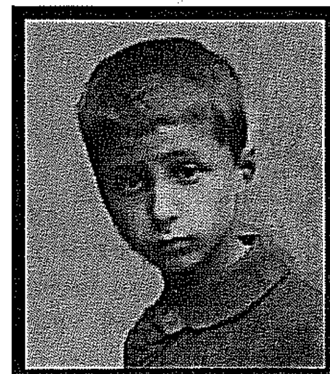
> *Lisa Meshengisser, the dentistke (Yiddish), the charming lady, whose glance I visualize even now, seventy years later. Lisa was tall, slim, with a pleasant smile. I remember because I would come to her to fill in a cavity when I needed one. Lisa was loved by everybody, even by those who did not meet her but only heard about her. Lisa threw light on the family. We were proud of her.*
>
> *Lisa, like her sisters, was a person with a liberal attitude, on the side of the needy and poor. Not with words only, but with action... She would take care of the teeth of poor children from the Yiddish school, without charging and also of elderly people, poor people, not charging or giving a very reduced price. Lisa was very busy. She worked long hours. Her patients were Jews, non-Jews, members of the Polish army, their wives...later, in 1939, Russians, and later even Germans...in 1941.*

Like Lisa, Veve practiced tzedakah. He supervised a public kitchen that the Jewish community had established in order to provide food to the needy on a daily basis. He served on the Ring Board, which worked to support poor children, and the board of the cooperative commercial bank.

Veve was also a member of TOZ, a Jewish welfare organization which was committed to safeguarding the health of the Jewish population. Saul and Lova learned by example to give care to those who needed their help.

Saul adored and revered his older brother. He described him as "handsome, polished, brilliant, and a talented writer." In his teens, Lova would engage in polemics. Every other week he would write an article for the Yiddish newspaper, propounding his political views. Another young man would respond on alternate weeks, presenting an opposing viewpoint. The entire family took pride in Lova's ability to write.

Despite their five year age difference, Saul and Lova were close. It gave Saul great pleasure to reminisce about his brother with Millie. In one of his favorite anecdotes he described an interaction between Lova and his father. One night Lova went out and was supposed to be home at 10:00 PM. He did not come in until 1:00 AM. The next morning Veve reprimanded his son for coming in so late. "I was awake and I heard the clock strike one," his father informed him. Lova replied, "Did you expect it to strike the zero as well?"



The boys loved to tease and play pranks on each other. One day the family was sitting around the dining room table, and Veve asked Saul to go to the local store and buy him cigarettes. Saul protested. His favorite dessert, sweet cherries, had just been brought to the

table. He was afraid that if he left, Lova would eat his cherries. His father continued to insist that he leave, and Saul had to obey. First, however, he spat into his bowl of cherries so that Lova would not eat them. When Saul returned from the store he found that Lova, undaunted, had eaten every cherry.

When Lova left home to study in Vilna he was fifteen years old, and Saul was ten. The house seemed empty to Saul after his brother left. All through his life he felt that he had not had enough time with Lova, and he cherished every memory of the time that they had spent together.

Two young men, Schloime Szebrynski and Itsche Janowitz, became an integral part of the family circle. Both worked as dental mechanics with Saul's parents. Schloime lived in the house with Saul. Itsche went to his own home to sleep after work, but he spent a great deal of time with the Nitzberg family. Saul had warm memories of the many times that Itsche joined them at the dining room table. He and Itsche harmonized as they sang Yiddish and Russian songs, entertaining the family and friends.

The eight temples in Pruzhany were all orthodox. Modern Judaism had not reached their town. The family attended temple only on the High Holy Days. Saul became a bar mitzvah out of respect for his grandmother, whose father had been a rabbi. Although Saul's parents were not strict observers of orthodox rituals, they were proud of being Jewish and were strongly identified with their Jewish heritage. They believed in preserving their Jewish culture and traditions.

While some of the Jews in Poland called themselves Zionists and were dedicated to the return of the Jewish people to Israel, Veve was concerned with establishing his Jewish identity and strengthening his cultural heritage in Poland. He committed himself to serving on the boards of a number of organizations whose primary function was to promote cultural activities in the Jewish community. In 1925, as a member of the Board of Directors of the I. L. Peretz Yiddish elementary school, he worked to assure that the children had a library, choir, mandolin orchestra, and billboard newspaper. He was also active on the Board of the Yiddish Library. Both of Saul's parents were pleased when Lova elected to study in a Yiddish gymnasium in Vilna rather than attend the Polish gymnasium in Pruzhany.

Education was important to the Jews, and especially important to the Nitzbergs. Veve repeatedly told his sons that worldly goods could be taken away, but that an education was the one thing that nobody could take from them. This message was reinforced by Saul's own life experience, and it became a strong message that Saul passed on to his own children.

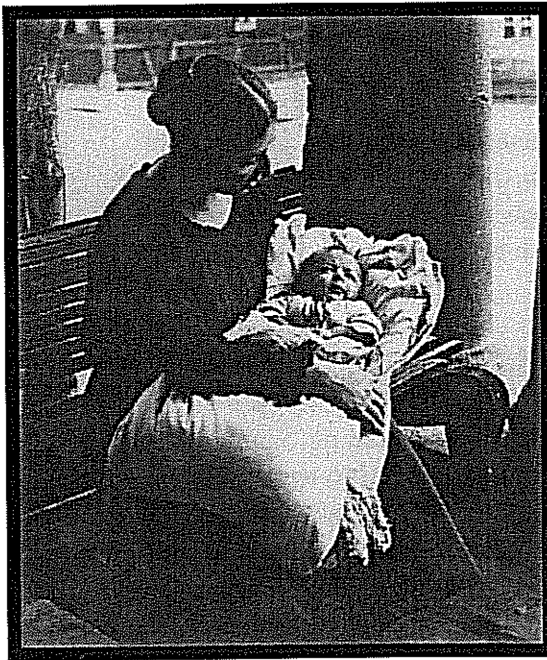
Besides wanting their children to do well in their studies, Veve and Lisa wanted them to develop a love of culture and an appreciation of the arts. They provided their children with a collection of books and were delighted with their joy in reading. Saul read *Les Misérables*, his favorite book, numerous times and in three different languages. When he was supposed to be asleep he would hide the book under his bedcovers, and with a flashlight he would continue to read until well past his bedtime. When Saul showed an interest in music, they arranged for him to take violin lessons. Veve and Lisa were delighted that Lova enjoyed writing poetry, and they encouraged his endeavors. Often, when friends came over to their home for dinner, the children joined them as they sat around the dining room table engaging in intellectual discussions.

There were two Jewish primary schools in the town. In one of the schools the primary language was Hebrew, and it catered primarily to orthodox Jews. In the other school, the primary language was Yiddish, and it catered to non-orthodox Jews. Both Saul and Lova attended I. L. Peretz, the Yiddish Folkshul.

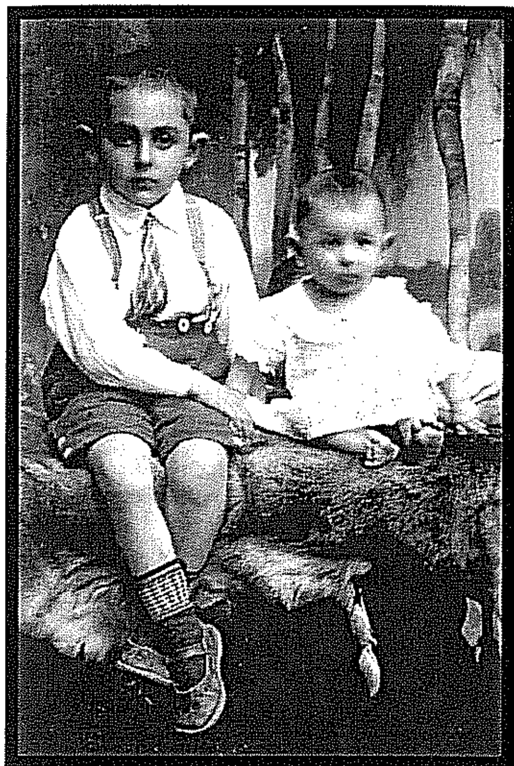
In 1934, during his last year of primary school, Saul contracted scarlet fever, complicated by glomerular nephritis. He was confined to his bed for nine months. In order to make sure that he kept up with his studies, his parents hired a tutor who would prepare him for the entrance exam to Adam Mickiewicz, the local Polish gymnasium. Saul and ten other Jewish children were admitted to the class of 390 students. He started school full of confidence, determined to succeed. He completed his studies in the gymnasium in 1938. Saul's parents wanted him to study dentistry. He wanted to be a physician. Even as a young boy he enjoyed reading his mother's medical books. When Saul was fifteen years old, his friend, Feivel Breidtbort, had a boil on his buttock. Saul searched for the treatment of boils in his mother's medical books. He sterilized a needle in her dental office and injected Feivel's boil with buttermilk. Miraculously, the boil healed, and Saul's decision to become a physician was reinforced.

The next few years were relatively peaceful for the family. They entertained themselves in many ways: playing cards, going to theater and to movies, listening to music, and attending poetry recitations. They would go walking in the evenings with groups of friends. Saul often recalled one of his most special pleasures, going on horse-drawn sleigh rides in the winter. In the summer he would go to summer camp or travel with his mother. His parents could not travel together, because one of them had to keep the office open at all times. Life was tranquil in those days. .

The family had no premonition that their whole world would soon be shattered, no fear of impending doom, no thoughts of attempting to escape. Although they were fully aware of the anti-Semitic climate in Poland, they accepted anti-Semitism as "the way things are." They did not feel threatened. They felt safe in their insulated Jewish community.

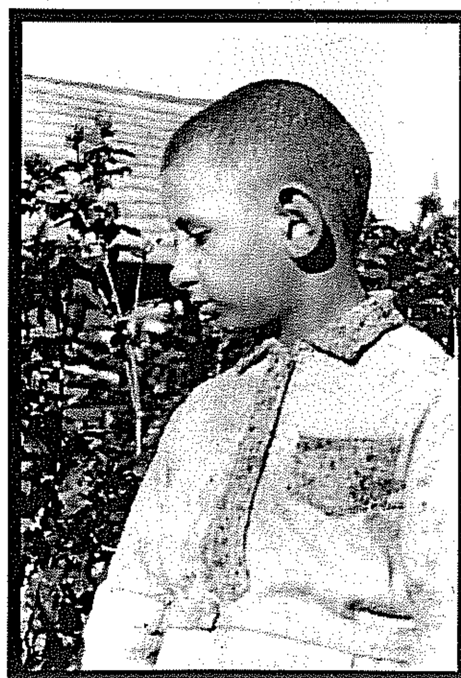


Lisa and Lova



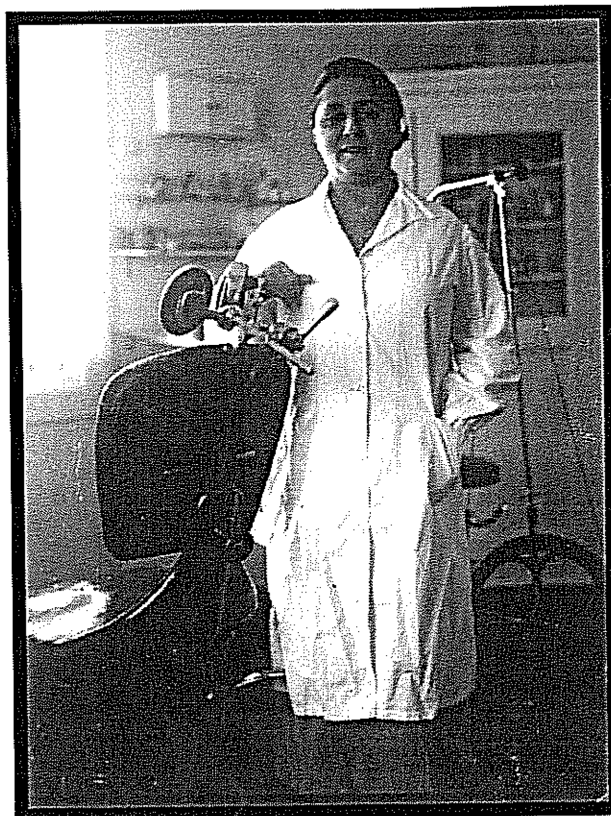
Lova and Saul

Saul and his beloved cat



Saul

Lova



Lisa in her Dental Office

Lisa–2n from left

Saul–5th from left

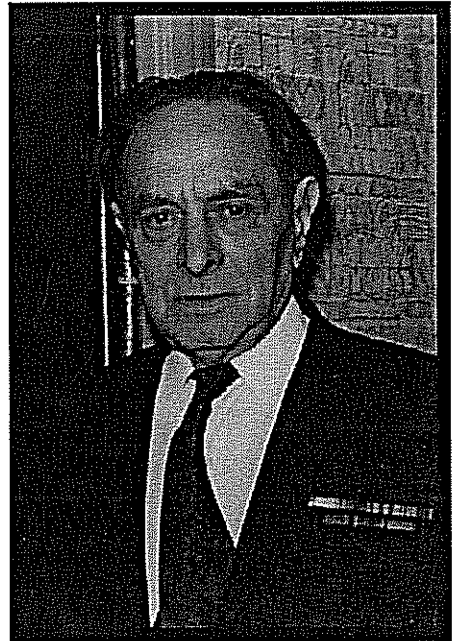
Veve–6th from left

Top Row:	*Middle Row:*	*Bottom Row:*
Tulia–3rd from left	*Esther–2nd from left*	*Saul and child*
Lisa–4th from left		
Veve–5th from left		
Manya–6th from left		

Board of TOZ

Bottom Row:
Veve–1st on right
Photo: Pinkas Pruzhany

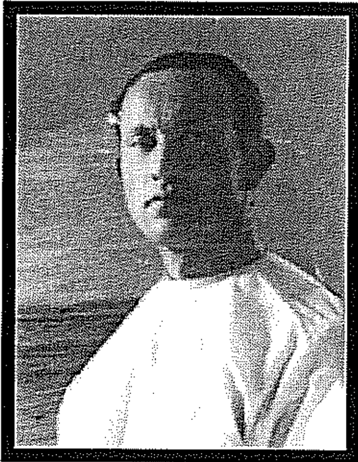
Lisa and her sisters



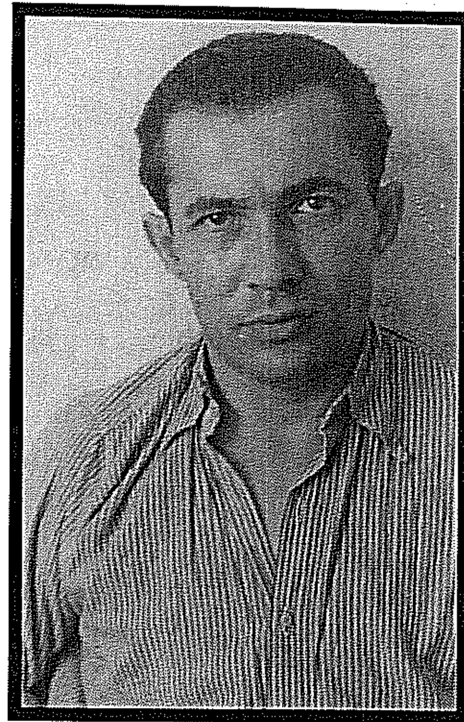
Schmeryl

Saul circled his own face in photo of

class at I.L. Peretz elementary school
Photo: Pinkas Pruzhany



Schloime Szebrynski



Itsche Janowitz

Saul and his parents

Chapter 2
And in Shadow

In 1933, dark clouds began to gather over the European continent. On January 30, 1933 Adolph Hitler, author of *Mein Kampf*, became chancellor of Germany. The Weimar Constitution gave him dictatorial powers to protect the "democratic order." As he proceeded to sabotage the German democracy, he acted upon his belief that the Germans were the "master race." Jews, Roma (Gypsies), as well as the handicapped were a threat to the purity of the German people. Predicated on his racial ideology, Hitler initiated boycotts against the German Jews. On March 10, 1933, the first concentration camp was established in the city of Dachau. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, stripping the German Jews of their citizenship and civil rights. Jews could no longer marry or cohabitate with non-Jews. They lost their jobs in the universities and in their professions. The rule of law soon gave way to the rule of terror.

Where did it begin–and how? anti-Semitism did not begin with Adolph Hitler. Raul Hilberg, in exploring the antecedents of the Holocaust, traced the history of anti-Semitism through three historical eras, each marked by one of three anti-Jewish policies: conversion, expulsion, and annihilation. The first era of anti-Semitism dates back to the 4th century after Christ, when the Christian Church gained power in Rome and Christianity became the state religion. It continued for the next twelve centuries, during which time the church insisted that all Jews must abandon their faith and convert to Christianity. Because of their stubborn resistance to conversion, harsh laws were imposed to "protect" the Christians from the Jews. In essence, they were declaring, "You cannot live among us as Jews."

Despite the harsh laws levied against them, the Jews continued to practice their religion. The church responded to this resistance by expelling Jews from the Christian countries where they were living. The choice was conversion or expulsion. The second era of anti-Semitism was marked by the Spanish Inquisition. This time the church was declaring, "You cannot live among us." (Hilberg, p. 5-8)

The third and most virulent era of anti-Semitism was ushered in by the rise of Adolph Hitler as he assumed power in the 1930's. In *Mein Kampf*, he promulgated his master race philosophy: "Men do not perish as the result of lost wars, but by the loss of that force of resistance which is continued only in pure blood. All who are not of good race in this world are chaff." (Hitler, p. 43) From this philosophical underpinning, the third era of anti-Semitism was launched: annihilation.

In the earlier years of Hitler's rule, the Jews were allowed to emigrate from Germany. By 1941 the Nazis were in the midst of total war. They had ghettoized several million Jews, and their solution was the death of European Jewry. Their message to the Jews was, "You cannot live." (Hilberg, p.5-8)

In January 1942, a group of high level Nazis gathered in what became known as the Wannsee Conference. There they sought out systematic ways to get rid of the Jewish population. This goal was defined as "The Final Solution." The process leading from the era of expulsion of Jews to annihilation was insidious.

In March 1938, Hitler invaded Austria, claiming that there was general unrest in Austria and that he needed to restore order. He marched triumphantly through the streets of Vienna. As his rise

to power continued, the leaders of the European nations became increasingly alarmed. In September of 1938, with the hope of maintaining peace, Neville Chamberlain, Britain's Prime Minister, met with Hitler in Munich where they signed the notorious Munich Pact. This Pact gave Hitler license to annex the Sudetenland, where Germans were in the majority. He in turn promised that he would not invade the rest of Czechoslovakia.

Chamberlain returned to England declaring triumphantly "This is the second time there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honor. I believe it is peace in our time." (Shirer, p. 420) History tells us a different story. Hitler soon overtook all of Czechoslovakia, and Chamberlain's signing of the Munich Pact was repudiated as a cowardly act. Czechoslovakia, a democratic country, was prepared to fight Germany. Instead, they were sold out as a peace offering to Hitler. In a debate in the House of Commons Winston Churchill described the Munich Pact as "a total, sustained, and unmitigated defeat." (Shirer, p.420)

Emboldened by the outcome of the Munich Pact, Hitler intensified his efforts to destroy the Jews and to continue on his ruthless quest for power. His anti-Semitic doctrines found fertile ground in Germany and acts of terror against the Jews were encouraged rather than punished. November 9-10, 1938 was dubbed *Kristallnacht*, the *Night of Broken Glass*. On that night, crowds rampaged through Austria and Germany, attacking Jews and Jewish institutions, vandalizing and looting their synagogues and businesses.

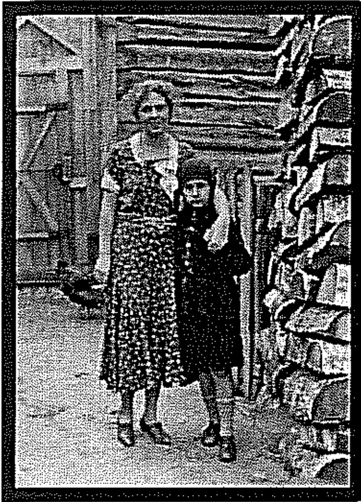
By 1938 the dark clouds that had gathered over Europe began to cast their shadow on the town of Pruzhany. Sketchy reports of the happenings in Germany had filtered into the town. Radios were hard to come by, and the people knew only what they read in the local press. They read about the annexation of the Sudetenland. There were rumors that there had been a pogrom in Germany, later known as the infamous *Kristallnacht*. They heard that a camp called Dachau was created, and this was an enigma to them. There were rumors of a pogrom in the town of Brest Litovsk, which was about seventy miles from Pruzhany. They also heard about an uprising that took place in November in which Jews were taken out of their homes, beaten, and sent off to labor camps. There was news that there were outbursts of anti-Semitism in Cracow and Warsaw, particularly in the universities.

The Nitzbergs were worried that this wave of anti-Semitism might spill over into Pruzhany. Saul admitted that they were "scared stiff." Nonetheless, conditions in their own town did not change very much, and they continued to live their lives just as they always had. Summing up the situation, Saul declared:

> *We knew our neighbors, they knew us. They did not like us, and we were afraid of them, but there was no increase in anti-Semitic activity under our conditions.*

The people in Pruzhany could not envision the inferno that was about to beset them. Nonetheless, the atmosphere was growing heavy with increasing fear and anxiety. Dining room conversations in the Nitzberg home became more intense and more political. What should the Jews be doing and where should they plan to go? As the news from other areas became more ominous, Lisa and Veve began to consider some changes. Although they were optimistic, they were also realistic. They began to consider their options. They wanted their boys to leave Poland and go to a place where they would be safe. They both decided that they themselves would not leave. They felt that they were too old to adapt to a new culture and to learn a new language, and they feared that they would not be able to practice their professions. Under no circumstances did they want to be a burden to anyone. After much soul-searching and deliberation, they decided to split their family.

In the winter of 1938, Veve contacted his cousins in America, Minna and Jake Field and Manya Kagan. Minna had visited the family in Pruzhany in 1936. The cousins agreed to send



affidavits so that the boys could emigrate to the United States. In July of 1939 Saul and Lova were called to the U.S. consulate. At the consulate they were told that the quota for Polish immigrants was already filled, but if they came back in December, six months later, they would be on the top of the list. Because they had mixed feelings about going to America and leaving their parents behind, Saul and Lova were pleased with the outcome of their interview.

In the years between 1933 and 1940, the boys were immersed in their studies. They knew from the talk around town and the occasional articles that appeared in the papers that trouble was brewing in Europe, but they were not overly concerned about their own safety. Lova completed his studies at the Yiddish gymnasium in 1936 and immediately applied to Warsaw University to study chemistry. Because of the Jewish quota he was not admitted. Instead, he attended the University in Nancy, France for the next two years. Then, in 1938, Lova reapplied to Warsaw University and was admitted.

When Lova entered the University, he was shocked by the degree of anti-Semitism he encountered. He had grown up knowing that anti-Semitism had been pervasive in Poland for many centuries, but he never realized how dramatically it would impact his own life. Years later, Saul recounted his brother's experiences in the University.

> *The general atmosphere in Poland was poisoned by the Nazi propaganda from across the border. Though they did not need the extra poison to be anti-Semitic, it had its impact. Students who were finally allowed into the University were treated in a different way than the regular students. They could not sit along with the others at lecture time, but had to stand in the left side in the corner of the back of the room. They were always afraid to walk outside at intermission time, between sessions, to be alone and mingle with the other students. They never knew who was going to attack them either with their razor blades or brass knuckles, or just abuse them verbally. They always stood in groups together, trying to escape abuses of the students...the student organizations in Poland were in the avant-garde of the anti-Semitic movements.*

While Saul, too, was aware of anti-Semitism it did not intrude upon his daily life. He knew that his father could not get a job as a civil engineer because he was Jewish. He also knew that the non-Jews who came to his house for dental care would neither socialize with his family nor invite them to their homes. But as a youngster he was not really affected by the anti-Semitism.

Saul entered the Polish gymnasium in 1936. Then, like his brother, he became more acutely aware of the meaning of anti-Semitism. He was one of the very few Jewish students admitted. These students knew that they had to perform or they would be expelled. Saul was an excellent student and was particularly strong in science and mathematics. The non-Jewish students would often come to him for help with their studies. In an interview, he described the social isolation of the Jewish students:

> *The Jewish students were there on probation, hanging on a thread. Therefore our motivation was so great that we worked very hard. I was always #2. My friend, a girl, was #1, and my other friend was #3.*

> *The top Jewish students were always admired for their knowledge, and the non-Jewish students used us over and again for tutoring,, especially around exam time. There might be three, four, or five students at our home every evening being tutored, but when there was a social function at school, Jewish students felt like outcasts. They immediately ignored us, and if I would have had the audacity to come close to a girl that I knew very well, who was at my house and ate my food and studied with me, when I asked her for a dance, she always had a reason to refuse. Even though they came to our homes for tutoring, they worried that the non-Jews would look at them with a jaundiced eye if they danced with a Jew. After a while the Jewish students stopped going to social functions. We were pariahs. We were isolated.*

These young Jews studied diligently despite the unfriendly environment in which they lived. They socialized only with their Jewish friends.

Saul's family continued to feel that the incoming reports of acts against the Jews were exaggerated. They clung to the belief that if the Germans invaded Poland, the Poles would put up a fight. They admired the Polish cavalry when they saw them on parade and were convinced that they would stand up against the German tanks. Saul realized, in hindsight, how naïve they were. They lived with the belief, or perhaps the hope, that their lives would not change. That was simply not to be. The events that followed crushed those hopes.

In the summer of 1939, the threat of war became a reality. Saul was sixteen and Lova was twenty-one. In September Saul was about to enter his last year in the Polish gymnasium in Pruzhany. Lova was home on vacation from the university in Warsaw. Then, on August 30th, before summer vacation had officially ended, Polish citizens were ordered to mobilize and Saul was called back to school. He describes those last few days before the Germans attacked Poland as fraught with tension.

> *It was September 1, 1939...it was vacation. We were called back a few days before and given rifles and told to man the various outposts, like the post office, the court building, the police station, and other public areas...to keep an eye out for saboteurs and spies... We would be doing it (standing guard) in shifts. Eight hours we would have to stand duty with the rifle. Imagine what we could do. We did not know how to shoot, we did not know how to handle a rifle, but it was just a question of going through the paces and watching out for saboteurs...because this was the pattern, the way Germany would occupy a country. They were beginning to become very bellicose against the Polish government, and we knew that a provocation was imminent... Then, at four or five o-clock in the morning, we heard that the Germans actually crossed over into Danzig and the war was on...I was very frightened, because what sounded bad before, became imminent.*

Although the Polish people were unaware of it, on August 23, 1939 Germany signed a secret non-aggression pact with Russia. According to this pact Eastern Poland, which had once belonged to Russia, would be returned to them. With this secret act, Germany turned Russia into an ally and saved itself from having to wage war simultaneously on two fronts. Two days after Poland mobilized, at 8:00 AM on September 1, 1939, the Germans crossed the Polish border with planes and tanks, and World War II began. Two days later, on September 3rd, England and France declared war on Germany.

Saul and Lova were scheduled to re-appear at the U.S. consulate in December to complete the process for emigration to the United States. Now it was too late. They were trapped in Poland with no way to escape.

The Polish army was forced to surrender to the Germans on September 17, 1939. They were no match for the German juggernaut. Two days later, at 6:00 AM on September 19th, Saul and Lova watched the German tanks roll into Pruzhany.

> *There was a place near Danzig, called Westphalia and Warsaw, where they put up strong resistance, but little pockets of resistance, just pockets They destroyed them very rapidly, and they moved in, and on September 19th, at 6:00 AM, the first German tanks rolled through our town...I saw them...We were actually frightened to death. There was no escape. The people in Pruzhany were terrified. They felt that this was the end, that this was it, that there was no place to go, no place to hide. At that time we still expected that Poland has a gallant and strong army, they would fight the Germans, and it would take months before the Germans could move into Poland. The destruction was tremendous.*

On September 19th, just three hours after their tanks had entered the town, the Germans turned around and moved out. In compliance with the non-aggression pact, the Russians were given the go-ahead to occupy the Polish territory that lay east of the Bug River, and their tanks rolled in. The town of Pruzhany was now under Russian rule. The Jews felt that they had been rescued. They looked upon the Russians as their saviors. Saul clearly remembered their joy.

> *I can't tell you the jubilation and the happiness that went through our community. We looked at the Russian soldiers as our liberators. We knew what the Germans would do to the Jews. We had no fear of the Russians, and having seen the tanks in the morning, and only a few hours later having had the Russian army as our protectors, was the greatest joy in the world. People were dancing in the streets, they were screaming, they were kissing Russian soldiers.*
>
> *We felt that we were saved from death, sure destruction. We were saved from the guillotine. We felt the jubilation as Jews, not as Poles who hated communism...For the Jews it was the hand of God. We were given a reprieve.*

Despite the feelings of jubilation that Saul and his family shared when the Germans withdrew from Pruzhany, life under the Russians changed for the worse. Month by month the dark clouds that settled over Pruzhany became denser and more ominous. The happy, secure, and untroubled years of Saul's childhood were over, leaving a legacy of beautiful memories and unshakable values and convictions.

Saul and Lova's parents, through precept and example, had given their boys a code of ethics and a set of values that they would hold sacred throughout their lives. They had taught them the value of education, and the importance of tzedakah. They had taught them that they must always maintain a good name. They had taught them to love books, music, and poetry. They had taught them, by the way they lived their own lives, how to be a spouse, a parent, a friend, and a "mensch."

Correspondence between American Consulate General and Jacob Field in the attempt to bring Lova and Saul to the U.S.

American Consulate General
Warsaw, Poland, March 7, 1939.
811.11-Nicberg, Israel, Leon
MWB/wm

Mr. Isidore Rubin
29 West 34th Street
New York, New York

Sir:

The Consulate General has received your communication regarding the above-named aliens who, however, have not applied as yet to this office for registration as prospective immigrants into the United States.

It may be stated in this connection that a resident of Poland desiring to emigrate to the United States should make a written request to the Consulate General for registration as an intending immigrant. A registration form will then be furnished and, upon its completion and return, the alien's name will be placed upon the Consulate General's waiting list of persons whose cases will be given consideration in the turn of their registration dates. It is anticipated that several years will elapse before quota numbers will become available to meet the demand of Polish aliens of the nonpreference category registering at the present time.

The aliens will be given ample advance notice concerning the completion of the personal documentary requirements of Section 7 (c) of the Immigration Act of 1924, and regarding the submission of corroboratory evidence which wi l then be currently applicable with respect to the basis of assurances of support in the United States.

Very truly yours,
For the Consul General:

G. J. Haering
American Consul

RUBIN BROS. FOOTWEAR

Factories:
ZANESVILLE OHIO
WAYCROSS, GA.

OFFICES AND SHOWROOMS:
29 WEST 34th STREET
NEW YORK CITY
Cable Address: RUBROWEAIL N. Y

March 28, 1939

Mr. Jacob Field
172 West 79th Street
New York City

Dear Sir:

We have received a letter from the American Consulate General as per copy enclosed.

We suggest you communicate with Mr. Nicberg in Poland and advise him to apply for registration as a prospective immigrant into the United States with his son at once.

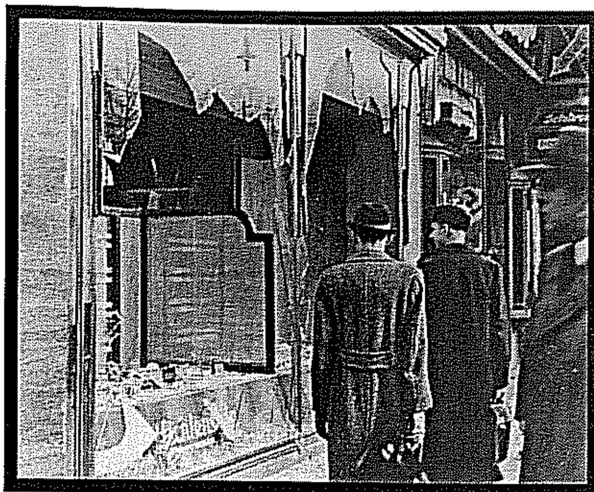
Yours very truly,
I. RUBIN

EB:

KRISTALLNACHT – November 9th-10th, 1938

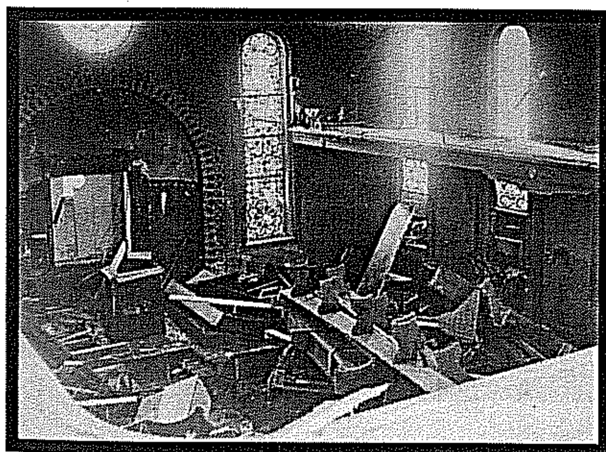
Torah Scrolls desecrated

Photographer: Edward Owen
Courtesy: USHMM



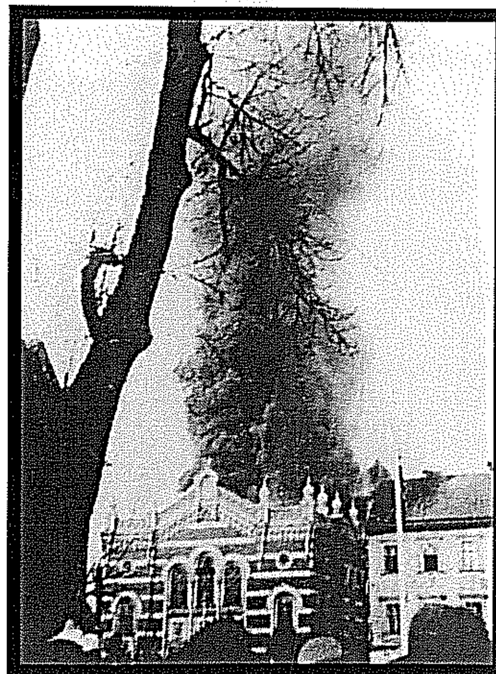
Jewish-owned business destroyed

Courtesy: USHMM
National Archives and Records



Desecrated Hechingen Synagogue

Courtesy: Dr. Adolf Vees
USHMM



Destroyed Opava Synagogue

Courtesy: Leo Goldberger
USHMM

Last Family Picture

Last Family Picture

PART II

THE DIFFICULT YEARS

CHAPTER 3
PRUZHANY UNDER THE RUSSIANS

While most people in Pruzhany were convinced that the Russians had come there to save them from the Germans, nothing could have been further from the truth. The dramatic change of events was the consequence of the non-aggression pact that Hitler and Stalin's foreign secretaries had signed just days before the Polish invasion. This sudden collaboration stunned the British and French, who had assumed that communism and fascism were ideological opposites and that the Germans and Russians were mortal foes. From Stalin's point of view, it was worth ignoring ideological differences in order to avoid engaging, at least temporarily, in a major war. Contained in the pact was the proviso that gave Russia a large swathe of territory in eastern Poland that Russia had lost after the First World War. In Hitler's devious thinking, this pact would allow him to invade Poland without going to war with Russia.

When the Russians entered Pruzhany they took immediate control of the government. At first, however, there were no drastic changes for the Polish population. They allowed the Polish communists, who had been persecuted and imprisoned by the Polish government, to assume the important civic positions. When there were no more communists to recruit, they enlisted those non-communists whom the townsmen respected.

The Russian soldiers bought out many items from the stores that were difficult to obtain in Russia. They closed the Polish schools and set up schools in which the instructional language was Russian, They maintained the schools that were bilingual, both Russian and Yiddish.

The atmosphere soon changed. The underground communists emerged with red bands on their arms and flaunted their new station. Alleged friends, tasting their power, turned on their own people. The bourgeois middle class became increasingly frightened. Capitalism, they felt, was a thing of the past. Many of the landowners were denounced by local communists and ended up in Siberia. While there was free education, the students could not choose their own field of study. They were forced to train for professions that the authorities considered to be important to the country. Corruption was rampant. People stood in long lines for hours to get food and supplies and often had to resort to the black market.

The Nitzberg family was affected by the new Russian regime in several ways. Lisa was ordered to work in a free clinic and was forced to give up private practice. After a while the Russians relented and she was allowed to see a few private patients. Over the years Veve had earned a reputation for being an outstanding citizen. Because he was known for his honesty and integrity, he was placed in a civic position. Despite being a bourgeois and a capitalist, and despite the fact that he had never been a communist, he was made commissioner of education, responsible for the local schools. Six months later, when the communists found a recruit who was ideologically more suited to them, Veve was replaced.

Saul was sent to a gymnasium where all the teaching was conducted in the Russian language. He explained that "It was a difficult transition, because even though I understood a bit of Russian, I didn't know how to read. It was a different alphabet. I didn't know how to write, but I passed all my exams and did very well." Saul remained in the gymnasium from 1939 to 1940, when he graduated. Lova could not return to school in Warsaw because it was under German occupation.

He was also denied admission to a school in Russia. Instead, he was assigned to teach chemistry and history to high school students in Pruzhany.

The first serious disruption for the Nitzberg family occurred in October of 1940 when Lova received a draft notice and was conscripted into the Russian army. No one understood why he was drafted. They wondered if Lova had been betrayed. Then, in 1941, after the Russians had left Pruzhany, some people searched through papers in the town office. They discovered that a so-called friend had reported to the Russian authorities that Lova was openly critical of the communist regime. He was the only one in the town who had been drafted, confirming their suspicion that he had been betrayed. Lova was sent to Archangelsk, a brutally cold city on the North Sea. Because he had some college education, he was admitted to officer's training school and graduated as a lieutenant in the artillery. Lova fought the war in Russia.

In October of 1940, the day after Lova left home for the Russian army, Veve stayed awake all night composing a twenty page letter to his son. His letter issued a clear warning to Lova that the occupying Russians could not be trusted. Unfortunately, concerned that it contained statements which might be incriminating both to himself and to his father, Lova destroyed the letter.. This act reflected the fear that the people in Pruzhany experienced while living under the totalitarian Russian regime. Years later Lova wrote down the portion of the letter that he recalled. He never forgot his father's words.

> *You are going out into a different world. Be careful! You were raised in an atmosphere of love, kindness, and trust. We have spent many hours in long conversations to instill in you the meaning of goodness, decency, and above all, honesty. The world you find yourself in at the present is very much different from that. You may find few friends you will be able to trust. There will be people around you ready to inform on you and to turn you in for nothing. You must be careful in what you say, selective in your confidants.*

Their world was becoming more precarious, and Veve and Lisa were trying to prepare their children for the uncertainties that faced them.

Saul graduated from the gymnasium in Pruzhany and was denied admission to medical school despite his outstanding grades. Instead, he was sent to a Teachers Institute in Bialystok, a city in northeastern Poland. In that year he took challenging courses in the sciences and became more fluent in Russian. While he encountered the usual anti-Semitism from the non-Jewish students, Saul was able to ignore their taunts. The few Jewish students who were there stayed in their own close-knit groups and supported each other.

With both boys away, life in Pruzhany became increasingly difficult for Veve and Lisa under the Russian regime. As Saul describes it, life in Pruzhany had changed.

> *It was such corruption that money didn't mean anything. The shipment of goods was always delayed. Whenever you see a queue, you line up. If you are lucky enough, you get something. If you don't, then you don't. Most people would get it on the side. You call it black market. You had to smear, or exchange, or barter, so to say.*
>
> *I lived under Russian occupation for two years. I went to Russian schools. I learned the Russian language...you never know what life has in store, but life under the Russians was bearable. Now, we didn't have the freedom that we were used to. Mind you, now, I am talking about the Poland that I didn't like, but we had freedom. We had Jewish newspapers, we had Jewish theater. I could go to a Jewish school. We used to celebrate Jewish holidays. We used to walk through the streets*

and parade. We couldn't do that under the Russians...In Russia it was different. You were immediately indoctrinated into the political life. You had to sort of give back, like a parrot, whatever they told you to. There was no such thing as newspapers, no free assembly. So we were very disappointed in the life we had under the Russians even though we had the freedom of survival.

But for Veve and Lisa the hardest part was having their sons away. On their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, as war clouds thickened on the horizon, Veve and Lisa spent the day quietly at home. Many years after the war, Lova would share with Saul the letter his father had written to him to mark that occasion. He had carried that letter with him through all those years.

Pruzhany, 12/13/40

My dearest,

Have mailed you a letter yesterday. Since then, no news. Have not heard from you or from Sola lately–and it is quite lonely here. Yesterday we celebrated our twenty-fifth anniversary. Only one year ago, when we were vacationing in Domachevo, Mother and I had planned the celebration of this important event. We hoped to go to Warsaw and take Sola with us–to meet you there and spend a few days, all four of us, commemorating this important milestone in our life. We anticipated a great time since we planned for you to show us the high spots–which, I am sure, you have visited many times before.

Life, however, is not that simple, and providence didn't shine upon us as we hoped it would. We spent the day alone, together, and the topic of our conversation was as usual–our children. We told none of our friends about our big moment, since in our days everyone is so preoccupied with oneself, with their own problems, sorrow or happiness, that it would be foolish to burden them with ours. The only bright moment of the day–Grandma cooked a better meal than usual. We ate in quiet and choked on our tears, at all times thinking of you two and how different it would have been if you were here with us. I am sure you both could have enjoyed a good meal for a change.

I find it difficult to summarize twenty-five years together in a few short sentences. It was a long and difficult road, and I am sure, being human, we made mistakes and met many obstacles on the way to success. On the other hand, those difficulties have brought us closer together than ever, and our love for each other has strengthened. Now we can face the future with more strength, but at the same time with great trepidation in view of the uncertainties of what life has in store for us. I wish I could have you both with me now. Mother and I would have told you many episodes of our life. However, at least for the time being, let's hope the time will still come when we are all united together, and I promise what I cannot do on paper I will do in person. Be well, my dear. I love you and kiss you.

Papa

As is apparent from the tone of the letter, Veve's heart was heavy with sadness and loneliness, and a sense of impending doom. Yet, despite their foreboding, neither he nor Lisa could envision what would befall them.

His friends and Saul bid Lova farewell as he departs for the Russian army

Chapter 4
Germany Attacks Its Russian Ally

On June 21, 1941 Saul completed his last exam in the Teachers Institute in Bialystok, and the students held a party to celebrate the end of the year. They planned to leave for home in the morning. During the festivities the music was halted and a voice came over the loudspeakers.

> *Attention, attention! We want all to know that there will be maneuvers early in the morning of our glorious air force. Please don't get alarmed. We are conducting maneuvers, and if you hear sirens or shots or bombs, this is just a simulated maneuver. Continue with what you are doing.*

The students were completely unaware that they were being betrayed by the Russian authorities. They continued to party until 4:00 AM. Shortly after he had gone to bed, Saul heard the roar of planes. It was dark outside. He and his fellow students went out on the balcony to see what was happening. All that they could see were planes overhead. Convinced that they were simply maneuvers, the boys waved. Next, they heard sounds of explosions in the distance and assumed they were simulated bombs. One of the students who lived in town had gone home. About 6:30 AM he returned to the dormitories. Greatly agitated, he told his fellow students that the bombs were real and that the planes were German planes. As he spoke, bombs exploded. They heard the windows shatter.

At 3:30 in the morning on June 22, 1941, without any warning, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. The honeymoon between the Russians and the Germans was over. The German attack was enabled by an act of treason. General Pavlov, a Polish official in the Russian command, betrayed his country and collaborated with the Germans. The plan for the attack was ingenious. Pavlov announced that the Russian army was going to carry out maneuvers. Several weeks before those so-called maneuvers were scheduled to begin, Pavlov ordered the dismantling of important fighter planes so that the parts could be sent back to Russia to be rechecked or repaired. This meant that the dismantled planes were unable to leave the ground. At the same time, there were trains running between Germany, which controlled western Poland, and the eastern sector of Poland, which was occupied by the Russians. These trains carried various items from the Ukraine into Germany. The trains were standing on the tracks in Brest Litovsk, a city in the Russian zone, adjacent to the border separating the German and Russian sectors. The Russian border patrols or officers apparently had a party that night and were not on duty. The Germans sneaked across the border and cut the telephone wires.

The German train had been standing in the railroad station for several hours, but it had not aroused suspicion. Suddenly, the doors opened and thousands of German soldiers, armed with machine guns, poured out into the Russian zone and occupied the city. It was a "Trojan horse" maneuver. The Russians fled in disarray, confusion, and panic. The Russian Foreign Secretary,

Molotov, made an impassioned speech, calling the attack a treacherous act. The Germans were now a mere seventy miles from Saul's hometown.

That night the Russian officers and teachers who lived with the students in the school told the young people that there was no need for worry. They instructed them to pack so that they would be ready to move out the next morning. They told them that the entire school population would be sent to Russia because they would be needed for the defense of the country. At the same time, they promised the students that they could continue their studies in the Soviet Union and pursue their chosen professions. Accordingly, the young people made plans to evacuate the next morning. When they awakened they were shocked to discover that the officers and teachers had vanished. Apparently, during the night the Russian professors had appropriated the three trucks that belonged to the school and returned to Russia. The students were left stranded.

On June 23rd the German army entered Pruzhany. Veve, Lisa, and Grandmother Esther were trapped in Pruzhany. Lova was in the Soviet Union, serving as an officer in the artillery. Saul was in school in Bialystok. The reprieve had ended, and so had life as they knew it.

Chapter 5
The Journey Home

Saul planned to travel home with two friends who also lived in Pruzhany. The three boys left the dormitories together. Saul suddenly realized that he had left his coat behind. He asked his friends to walk slowly so that he could rush back to the dorm, retrieve his coat, and rejoin them. When he returned to the street to catch up with his friends, he encountered panic and confusion. People were clogging the roads, running in all directions to escape the approaching Germans. Saul could not find his friends among the teeming mass of refugees and soldiers. He found himself carried along in the wave of humanity.

After walking aimlessly for a while, Saul boarded a military truck and then a Russian ambulance. Finally, he jumped on top of a Russian tank. After a while he realized he was headed towards the Russian border. He was walking alongside another man when German planes began to strafe the masses of fleeing civilians. Both men fell to the ground, attempting to escape the bullets. When the shooting stopped, Saul discovered that the man who had dropped to the ground beside him was dead. Thinking back to that moment, he mused, "I did not realize how close I came to being killed at that time." This was the first of many close encounters with death that he experienced over the next tumultuous years.

Moving along with the mass of people seeking escape, Saul found himself walking towards the Russian border. His heart told him to go back home, but his head told him not to enter the lion's den. He knew that he had his brother, two aunts, and an uncle in Russia. He knew that Pruzhany had to be under the German yoke, because it was a mere seventy miles from Brest Litovsk. Therefore, he continued to trudge along with the crowd of refugees headed towards the Russian border. However, when he reached the border, he was turned back. The Russian border patrols had orders to turn back anyone who was not a Russian citizen. They were deathly afraid of an infiltration of spies or saboteurs.

Saul went back to the highway and headed towards his home. After walking a number of miles he ended up in Novogrodnuk, a town near the Russian border where his mother had interned as a dentist. Saul had gone to camp there one summer and had made a friend who lived in the community. He found the house where his friend lived, and was invited to stay with them. Unfortunately, the Germans were approaching rapidly and soon entered Novogrodnuk. Saul spent three weeks with the family, because it was too dangerous to venture onto the highway. German troops were rolling by all the time, and they were suspicious of all civilians.

Once the Germans passed through the town and headed deeper into Russia, it became somewhat less dangerous to be on the road. Saul decided to head for home. He left Novogrodnuk after bidding his friends goodbye. He walked by night and slept by day, hiding in farmlands where he could garner food from the ground or from stables where he hid. He was afraid of encountering either Poles or White Russians. He knew how hostile they were towards Jews, and he was sure that if he were found they would turn him over to the Germans. He traveled alone for days, tired, hungry, unshaven, and always afraid. With torn shoes, sores on his legs, and an infected foot, every step was torture. Saul remembers how he felt.

> *I was frightened. I was lonely; it was agonizing. I wondered if I would successfully complete my trip. Every moment of my way, there was a danger of being discovered and shot, because I had no papers. I did not belong on the road. Everybody was supposed to be in his or her own little hometown and the security of either the ghetto, that was already formed, or generally nobody was allowed to leave, and here was a Jew walking the countryside. There were other people that were doing it, but I was afraid to hook up with anybody. I did not know who they were. I did not want to take a chance of becoming noticed, so I was traveling all by myself. It was a very difficult trip, a very hard trip. I was no hero. I was simply scared to death.*

As Saul finally approached his hometown he began to walk by day. Three miles from his home he was stopped by a German patrol. There were three gendarmes, and they began to interrogate him. He told them that he was a student returning to his home in Pruzhany, and that his parents lived there. He soon realized that he was getting nowhere. All they wanted to know was whether he had travel papers. Anyone traveling the road without papers was either shot or imprisoned. He thought, "The jig is up. This is it, finished, after such a long journey." Just then, a farmer approached with a wagonload of hay. The Germans, suspicious that he was smuggling food into the area, stopped the farmer to interrogate him. Saul decided that this was the moment to escape. He bolted away before the Germans realized he was gone. Knowing his town well, he wound through the little side streets and finally arrived home.

It had taken Saul approximately six weeks to journey home. His two friends had left school with Saul, but they had arrived in Pruzhany soon after the school had closed. When Saul did not appear with his friends, his parents were certain that he had experienced some terrible mishap. Lisa was so desperate that one day, when she was treating a German SS officer, she summoned the courage to tell him that her son was lost. Although he promised to look for Saul, Lisa never heard from the officer again. When Saul reached his home he entered through the back door and approached his grandmother in the kitchen. Seeing the filthy, barefooted young man with his scrubby beard and torn clothes, Saul's grandmother assumed he was a beggar and offered him food. When she suddenly realized who it was, she screamed, and everybody came running. Lisa fainted when she saw that her son had arrived, safe and sound.

Chapter 6
The Ghetto Under the Germans

When the Germans first arrived in Pruzhany they looted the town They beat and shot people without provocation or reason. The Poles knew how the Germans felt about Jews. They cheerfully collaborated with the German authorities in carrying out the atrocities committed on their Jewish neighbors.

The Einsatzgruppen was a paramilitary killing squad whose special function was to enter a town and to murder its chosen citizens. As soon as the Einsatzgruppen entered Pruzhany, they chose eighteen people and executed them. No one knew why these people were selected. Perhaps the Germans thought they had collaborated with the old communist regime. Perhaps they believed they had belonged to the Polish police. Perhaps they were simply intellectuals, which made them suspect. Perhaps they were simply selected at random. In some communities people were locked in synagogues. The buildings were set on fire, burning the victims alive. In other communities the Einsatzgruppen killed thousands of Jews. The people were compelled to dig their own graves, and then the Einsatzgruppen would machine-gun them down so that they fell into the mass graves. In Pruzhany these acts were committed on a smaller scale. Saul speculated that possibly this was because Pruzhany was in an area that was incorporated into East Prussia, or the Third Reich. In the protectorate they made their own laws by edict or proclamation. In the Third Reich they were a little more careful, following German rules.

In a matter of days, the Germans established order in Pruzhany. They evacuated the Poles and Byelrussians who lived on the outskirts of Pruzhany. On September 22, 1941, they created the ghetto. They put barbed wire fences around two or three streets. They stationed Polish and Jewish police and German SS men along the fence. The only way to get in or out of the ghetto was to pass through guarded gates. All non-Jews had to move out of the area that was ascribed to the ghetto. All the Jews who lived outside the ghetto had to leave their homes, leave most of their belongings behind, and move into the small confines of the ghetto.

As ghettos from other areas were liquidated, many more people were sent to the Pruzhany ghetto. The population swelled from 3500 to approximately 10,000 people. Conditions worsened as the ghetto became more and more crowded. Those who were evacuated and brought in from other ghettos told of the atrocities that they had witnessed.

One day the Germans ordered the Jews in the ghetto to choose twelve men to form the Judenrat. The Judenrat would serve as the liaison between the German officials and the Jewish population. They would be responsible for maintaining order in the ghetto, making sure that the Jews met the demands of the Germans and obeyed their orders. The Germans made it clear that the people must choose men who had earned the respect of the community and whose honesty and integrity would not be challenged. The men who were selected came from different walks of life. They were intellectuals, workers, tradesmen, professionals, and businessmen. The people chose men whom they felt would be concerned with the welfare of the community. Veve, because of his sterling reputation, was one of those chosen. The Germans soon increased the Judenrat to twenty-four.

The members of the Pruzhany Judenrat were extremely dedicated to the often overwhelming task of protecting the ghetto community. They were often placed in an untenable position. If they did not meet the impossible demands of the Germans, the authorities would inflict some horrendous communal punishment upon their people. The Judenrat worked tirelessly, using every means within their power to cajole or bribe the authorities to keep them from carrying out their endless threats. Often they resorted to bribery in order to save a life. One of the most sadistic of the Germans, a sergeant named Lehman, forced the hand of the Judenrat by tormenting their beloved Rabbi, David Faygenbaum. Saul witnessed the scene.

> *There was one German sergeant who lived outside the ghetto. His name was William Lehman. This man was a Nazi, a sadist, just a sadist...He would walk with three or four of his co-workers, and every time he walked down the street you were not safe, because you never knew what the guy would do, just to beat you up. One day he picked on our very dignified leader of our community, our rabbi, Rabbi David Faygenbaum...He lived on the same street that I did. He was a very impressive type of individual, very educated, gentle, 6'2", 270 pounds, and an enormous man. One day those Germans, Lehman and his group, broke into the house of the rabbi, and while he was praying with his shawl and phylacteries, with several other people, they dragged him out of the house and into the street, beat him and told him to run through the street and continue to pray and to sing. They kicked him every moment of the way and then made him crawl on all fours the entire length of the street, and kicked him in the ribs and in his back, just to humiliate him. It was such a horrifying picture to the rest of the community who were watching behind closed doors and windows, seeing their spiritual leader humiliated and punished for nothing. It was a horrible thing.*

The people were left with an overwhelming hatred and fear of the Germans. They felt completely humiliated and helpless. The Germans were free to do with them as they wished. The attempt to dehumanize the Jewish population was evidenced in the confines of the ghettos.

After the incident, Lehman was paid off by the Judenrat in order to protect their Rabbi from further harm. Lehman inflicted other tortures on the people when he realized that the Judenrat would bribe him to avoid further atrocities. The Jewish Partisans who were hiding in the woods ultimately returned to Pruzhany and killed Lehman and his group.

In other ghettos the Judenrat was ordered to shoulder the dreaded responsibility of selecting people for transport to Auschwitz, Treblinka, or other death camps. Therefore, they were often less successful than the Pruzhany Judenrat in their efforts to protect their people. In Pruzhany the people were evacuated en masse, within a four day period, sparing the Judenrat the onerous job of selecting the deportees. Saul explains:

> *I can just tell you that in our community this did not happen. Maybe it was because we didn't have transports to be sent to Treblinka and other places until the complete destruction of the ghetto... The Judenrat was very respected and they did a lot of good for the community because they were able, on many occasions, to bargain or bribe the important officials to let certain edicts pass without being implemented. Every day there was a new chapter, a new decree. If someone was found outside the ghetto and thrown in jail, the*

> *representatives had to go and bargain with the Gestapo, because every man had to be accounted for and every man was very important to all of us, so they put themselves on the line with their personal safety and their personal freedom many, many times.*

Saul described how the people in his ghetto felt about the Judenrat:

> *I felt very good about the Judenrat...they were trying to do a terrible job under the circumstances, because they were in the first line of responsibility. If anything went wrong they took the Judenrat and shot them all. The Judenrat en masse was responsible for everything that was going wrong. Yet those people were willing to take the responsibility. There was nothing to gain; they could not get any more bread or food, just rations like anybody else. They worked long hours. They were full of anxiety...You may think I am saying it because my father was in the Judenrat, that I am trying to paint a different image. I don't know, in other communities maybe it was a different experience. The Judenrat was the most respected and loved group of people, because they were always protecting us and they were the people that used to talk to the Germans, bribe the Germans...try to cut down on the atrocities and soften the various edicts to protect the people.*

The first order issued by the Germans was that all radios, bicycles, pets, cows, and horses were to be turned in. All Jews had to wear the yellow Star of David. Jews were not allowed to walk on the sidewalks. They were forced to walk in the gutters or in the middle of the road. They had to remove their hats in the presence of Germans. They could neither enter public buildings nor take public transportation. Failure to comply was punishable by any means, including death. Every decree was an attempt to dehumanize them.

Saul's family felt that they were more fortunate than others. They were able to remain in their own home because it was located within the ghetto confines. The house was large, and they had to take in other Jews who had been evacuated from other ghettos that had been liquidated. Ultimately there were not just three, but fourteen people living in their home. Still, the family was sleeping in their own beds and had Lisa's office accessible to them. Lisa was still allowed to practice dentistry. There were no non-Jewish dentists available because the German dentists and doctors were mobilized to work in the front lines. When the local Germans needed dental care, they went to Lisa. The non-Jewish population who lived outside the ghetto also used Lisa's services. In lieu of money, the peasants would smuggle in produce, salami, eggs, potatoes, and staples. Money meant nothing in the ghetto because there was nothing to buy. They were cut off from the outside world and the rations they were allowed were quite limited. The family now fed fourteen people at their dinner table, as well as their elderly aunt and uncle. Therefore, the added food, limited though it was, served as a blessing.

The Germans issued a new decree each day, and life in the Pruzhany ghetto became more and more constricted. Veve and two other men were put in charge of the Liquidation Department, the section of the Judenrat responsible for ensuring that the ghetto inhabitants met the unreasonable demands of the Germans. It was a nearly impossible job, but they had no choice. The Jewish population was threatened with death and mass reprisal if their orders were not fulfilled.

One day the Department was told to procure 1000 fur coats and 300 pairs of boots from the people. Most of these articles would be sent to the German front for their soldiers. Very few of the members of the local Jewish population were affluent enough to have furs, and the people

brought in from other ghettos had been forced to leave their belongings behind. The three men of the Liquidation Department gathered up as many coats as they could.

As a member of the Judenrat, Veve felt that his family must be among the first to comply with the orders. Saul explains his father's stance.

> *Every time a new order came he (Veve) would appear at home and say, 'Whatever we have, we have to produce it first. I have to set the example. I can't demand that everybody give a fur coat if I don't give my fur coat.' My mother had two–one was old and one was a new one, which my mother wore. There was no question about giving them away.*

When there were no more coats available the men of the Judenrat collected money and jewels, and with permission from the Germans went outside the ghetto to purchase the rest of the coats.

Before long the Germans issued an order calling for young men to work outside the ghetto. The men selected for the work brigade never knew what work they would be forced to do. They might unload ammunition, dig trenches, work in cement factories, or work in construction. They were most often in danger. One particularly sadistic SS man took pleasure in torturing and beating the men. He would arbitrarily release the vicious dogs so they could attack his prisoners. The men never knew when they would be injured, mutilated, or beaten to death.

Saul explained that although he feared for his son's safety, Veve was not about to use his position to protect him.

> *I could have gotten a soft job in the Judenrat, but my father was very much against it. My mother, being a mother, wanted to protect me from the hardship of working, and she said maybe I could get a job in the Judenrat, you know, without really realizing the implications. But my father was very vehemently opposed to that, and he said, 'Whatever happens to others happens to him. I could never have anybody point a finger at me to say I was pulling strings to have my son privileged and working at a soft job when everyone else is exposed to the rigors of outside work.'*

Despite the desperation and fear, the people tried hard to maintain a semblance of normalcy. Even though Jews were forbidden to gather in groups, the ghetto population carried out clandestine educational, cultural, and religious activities.

> *The Jews realized that and they would always find ways and means to secure volunteers at the risk sometimes of their lives to congregate in some area and mold the young mind and teach them about their heritage...and this thing was going on in the ghetto. They would not allow the young people just to roam through the streets and be useless. They occupied them, they organized them in schools...There were hidden schools that were not allowed so that we could teach our youngsters so they would not vegetate.*

Regardless of the curfew and their confinement, the people tried hard to keep up their spirits.

> *There was a curfew of 8:00 or 9:00 PM, because you had to be in the confines of your own environment. But people find ways of occupying their time. We played chess and dominos, sang songs, and played*

> *the gramophone, just to occupy ourselves in our own environment to make every day pass, and there was an optimism. There was a feeling that another day has passed, who knows what the next day will bring, let's live today.*

Asked how they dealt with the emotional stress they endured, Saul replied:

> *We were a people of hope. We always thought, all right...a new restriction, a new trouble, but we shall overcome. Maybe tomorrow will be a better day. We will adjust–we did adjust. We made adjustments, but nonetheless we tried to organize the life in the ghetto to some extent. We had gatherings among the young people, getting together, to play chess or to sing, or just to sit there and discuss the political situation, until curfew hour...we tried to live with hope, and we worked...When you are a Jew who is used to hardships and persecutions, you take it in stride.*

No one living in the ghetto was allowed to practice Judaism. All synagogues were shut down and there were strict decrees against celebrating Jewish holidays. Expectedly, the Jews found ways of countermanding these decrees:

> *There were secret services held during the High Holy days, and people would get together and pray in a minyan if somebody died, to say Kaddish. We would get together, but there was always somebody on the lookout. At the time of the High Holy days the Jews were very conscious of the fact that Jews may try to congregate and celebrate. They put out special strict rules that no services are allowed. The Jews did it anyhow. I remember being myself on a lookout in a situation like this. They were singing Kol Nidre in very dimmed lights, with candles, and there were people along the streets, like a chain to let them know if a Polish or German policeman was approaching.*

The memory of Yom Kippur in the ghetto affected Saul's High Holy Day observance for the rest of his life. On the night of Kol Nidre he was always worried about getting to Temple on time. He did not want to miss a single note of the beginning strains of the Kol Nidre prayer. In an interview in 1981 he reflected on the impact of that ghetto experience:

> *I am not a very religious individual, but since I have been in this country I never missed going to Kol Nidre services. This evening means something to me. Probably the fact that we had to hide our emotions, we had to hide our desire to celebrate the High Holy days, the religious Jews. Even though I was not a religious Jew, I became involved and part of the conspiracy. It meant a lot to me and it has remained a very symbolic evening for me. Whenever I hear the melody of Kol Nidre, I have goose pimples. I don't know if I recall the moment that we celebrated in the ghetto or what not, but it stirs me very deeply and probably this is part of the reason it happens... It was something like complete defiance of the German rule, that we are trying to show our determination that we are still Jews, still observing our traditions in spite of the threat of death.*

Month by month the situation worsened, and the people became more desperate.

> *The overall situation in the ghetto was terrible, because it was the path to complete starvation. It was poverty, it was disease, it was demoralization. It was fear and hopelessness... there was humiliation, there was the need to wear a yellow band... there were no hospital facilities, no medicines... the misery under which we lived is a chapter in itself... We had no way of looking into the future. At the same time we already began to hear more and more about what was going on in other ghettos.*

As the conditions in the ghetto deteriorated, the people began to lose hope. Many felt that suicide was their only option. Saul's family thought about their own future. Should they wait for the Germans to end their lives, or should they take charge of their own destiny and die together at home, in their own beds? A family friend, a chemist, prepared a cyanide powder for them to take should they choose the latter option. They tried the cyanide out on a cat, but the cat survived. They realized that the powder was not effective.

A group of about forty people, the intellectuals of the Jewish community, were so convinced that the end was near that they decided to commit mass suicide. Several doctors supplied them with pills, narcotics, and sedatives, which they stowed away. The group gathered in one room, closed all the windows, and turned on the gas, hoping to suffocate from carbon monoxide poisoning. Lisa had wanted to join them, but after careful soul searching, she allowed Veve to dissuade her. He was committed to the Judenrat. He felt that his job required that he remain with his people, and he wanted his wife to stay with him. The suicide attempt turned out to be a fiasco. A small infant was apparently not well sedated. The baby awakened and started to cry. His mother could not bear it. She flung open the windows and let the fresh air flow in, aborting the suicide attempt. Saul and his father helped with the efforts to revive the people, giving them injections of respiratory stimulants, hot tea, and coffee. They were able to revive all but four. Saul described the suicide attempt as "a sign of resignation and hopelessness."

A number of young people escaped to join the resistance, but the anti-Semitic Polish and Russian partisans made it nearly impossible for Jews to join their brigades. Recognizing that it was almost impossible for Jews to get guns, the partisans insisted that anyone who wanted to join their brigades must bring weapons. While most Jews had no way of acquiring them, there were some who worked in areas where weapons were abundant. At great risk, some of the men managed to smuggle parts of guns into the ghetto and to reassemble them later. Escape to the partisans carried the additional risk of mass reprisal. The Germans threatened that if they ever caught a prisoner who had escaped from the ghetto, hundreds of people, young and old, would die. Knowing that the Jews felt responsible for their people, the Germans used a powerful weapon, collective responsibility. The Jews had no doubt that the Germans would carry out their threats. They knew that if they dared to perform acts of resistance their fellow Jews would suffer the consequences.

Yet, in spite of the danger, there was resistance. Saul sums it up in a few brief words, "There was resistance, first of all, in survival, that we wanted to survive each day and find means and ways to fool the Germans."

With the imminent threat of liquidation of the ghetto, elaborate plans were made for escape. Saul, Schloime Szebrynski, and two other friends conceived the idea of building an underground shelter where they could hide out if the ghetto was liquidated. When things quieted down they would be able to sneak out of the shelter, escape to the woods, and join the partisans. Building the shelter was a huge task. It took a year to complete the work. They labored through the nights, with perhaps two hours of sleep each night. Saul had no special talents, but he was strong and

could carry sand, dig the soil, and generally do the heavy work. His friends were skilled in electronics and carpentry, and they were dexterous. The shelter they built was replete with water, canned goods, electricity, air vents, and medical supplies. As they dug, they carried the soil outside and surreptitiously distributed it around the flowerbeds in the garden. The entrance to the shelter was inside the house. It was camouflaged by a brass plate in front of the fireplace. The plate could be removed by loosening two screws. An underground ladder led to the shelter. The boys fully intended to hide there until the liquidation of the ghetto was completed.

People had no way of knowing for sure what was going on in the outside world. There were rumors about gas chambers, but they simply could not believe those rumors were true. Despite what they were told by the people who had escaped from the camps, and despite what they heard on the hidden radio, they could not envision that there would be mass destruction. The Jews in Pruzhany accepted the fact that some of them would be killed if the ghetto were liquidated, but they did not believe that the Germans could kill 10,000 people. They could not possibly know that out of the 10,000 people in the Pruzhany ghetto, less than 100 would survive.

On November 1, 1942 there was a rumor that the ghetto was soon to be liquidated. Some of the people attempted an escape. One evening Saul and a group of young people brought shears and cut an opening in the barbed wires surrounding the ghetto. They tried to crawl through the opening, intending to join the partisans. Outside the barbed wire fence were Germans armed with machine guns, bright lights, and dogs. The intended escapees were detected almost immediately. Several of them were killed and the rest, Saul included, turned around and ran home.

Misery, poverty, and disease ravaged the ghetto. Medicines were not available; supplies of all kinds were meager. Saul contracted a serious case of hepatitis, and it took him a long time to recover. Conditions got worse and worse. People were dying in the streets. Commando groups were formed to remove the bodies and carry them to burial sites.

Saul attributed his own ability to tolerate the stress to the force of his father's strength.

> *In my personal family it was the calmness, the coolness of my father. He was a very intelligent, very well educated, very bright man. He was very well aware of history as well as of recent events. My mother was always the pessimist. She saw everything in dark colors, and he was always the optimist. He was forceful and he was able to convince her, and us, too. And people are always optimistic by nature...You know, the Jewish people always suffered through the ages. They were killed...and yet they survived. The thought that everybody would be killed, they couldn't imagine. We didn't know anything about the Final Solution. We just lived from day to day, and the same attitude carried me through the concentration camps later on. If you lived one day, that was all you wanted to do.*

Whether he believed in his own optimism or not, Veve continued to bolster the spirits of his family and friends. He would leave the Judenrat office and return home for lunch. Sometimes the German patients would leave newspapers in their dental office. He would read and analyze the news, and share it with his co-workers when he returned from lunch. He would encourage the people around him to believe that there would be a better tomorrow. Morris Sorid, Lisa's cousin, also worked in the Judenrat. He recalled Veve's words:

> *Listen, people. You will soon see. Lova will come staying on top of a Russian tank, in front of the house, and yell, 'Bubbe, (Grandmother) bring taiglechs' (Jewish sweets).*

Ultimately, it would end. Frequently the partisans would sneak into the ghetto at night to contact the Judenrat for help. On the night of January 27, 1943, about 7:00 PM, three partisans came to the Judenrat offices to meet with the chairman. They were armed and were demanding money, clothing, and medicine. Although they knew that it could endanger the entire ghetto, the Judenrat felt obligated to help these brave young people. Unfortunately, at that very time a car with German officers drove up to the Judenrat office and entered unannounced. They saw the partisans with guns in their hands. There was a shootout. One German was injured and one of the partisans was shot. The Gestapo chief called an emergency meeting with the Judenrat and announced that the liquidation of the entire ghetto would begin the next morning. The Jews were told to spread the word. The evacuation would take four days. Everyone was allowed one small suitcase. In order to seal off all possible means of escape, the Germans, armed with machine guns and leading vicious dogs, surrounded the ghetto.

Veve returned home late that night with the devastating news. It seemed their whole world had caved in on them, and there was no way out. There was no further reprieve. No one slept that night. The next morning a former patient of Lisa's, a Gestapo officer, came to their home. He told Lisa that she should take all her dental equipment and supplies with her, that they were going to a labor camp and that she would be able to practice dentistry there. Although this sounded plausible, it was simply a clever ruse. Lisa packed her electric drill, her extraction tools, and some cement and gold, items that she would need for her practice.

The time had come to hide in the shelter and escape to the woods. Because they felt they were too old to withstand the rigors of living in the woods, Veve and Lisa decided not to go. Nevertheless, they urged the boys to hide in the shelter and escape to the partisans. Saul and Schloime refused. They would not leave Saul's parents alone to face the unknown.

> *My parents insisted that Schloime and I go into the shelter anyway... They could not go into the partisans themselves. They felt they were too old and they insisted that we do...I just didn't feel I wanted to leave them alone. They were older people, 54 and 52, and I couldn't see myself leaving them alone. So I decided against it and Schloime did...My two friends who built the shelter with me and one of their girlfriends and a few other people–all of them survived and escaped into the partisans. Feivel Breidtbort and his girlfriend survived, but his brothers who went were killed...I just didn't feel like it. I felt a very strong need to be with my parents. I couldn't see myself surviving, not knowing what would happen to them, and my brother wasn't there either. It was a very traumatic moment.*

Saul's memories of leaving his home were vivid and poignant.

> *Well, I remember the moment we walked outside the house, my mother feeling the same way, cried aloud, and my father tried to console her in a very realistic, calm way, telling her, 'Don't think about it, those are just material things. The important thing is that we have ourselves, that our son Solinka is with us. We will go and we will be together and we will work again, and we will survive. We will show those Germans that they can't wipe out a good family or a good nation, and we will survive. I can guarantee you that.'*
>
> *He didn't believe a word that he said. He knew too well what to expect because he was a very smart man. This calm that he tried to convey to us helped us generally to put our lives together and to go on.*

How does one turn away from a home, a life, a world you had known and loved to face a frightening unknown? It is a deeply wrenching and bitter experience. Saul recalled what it meant to him to walk out of his home for the last time.

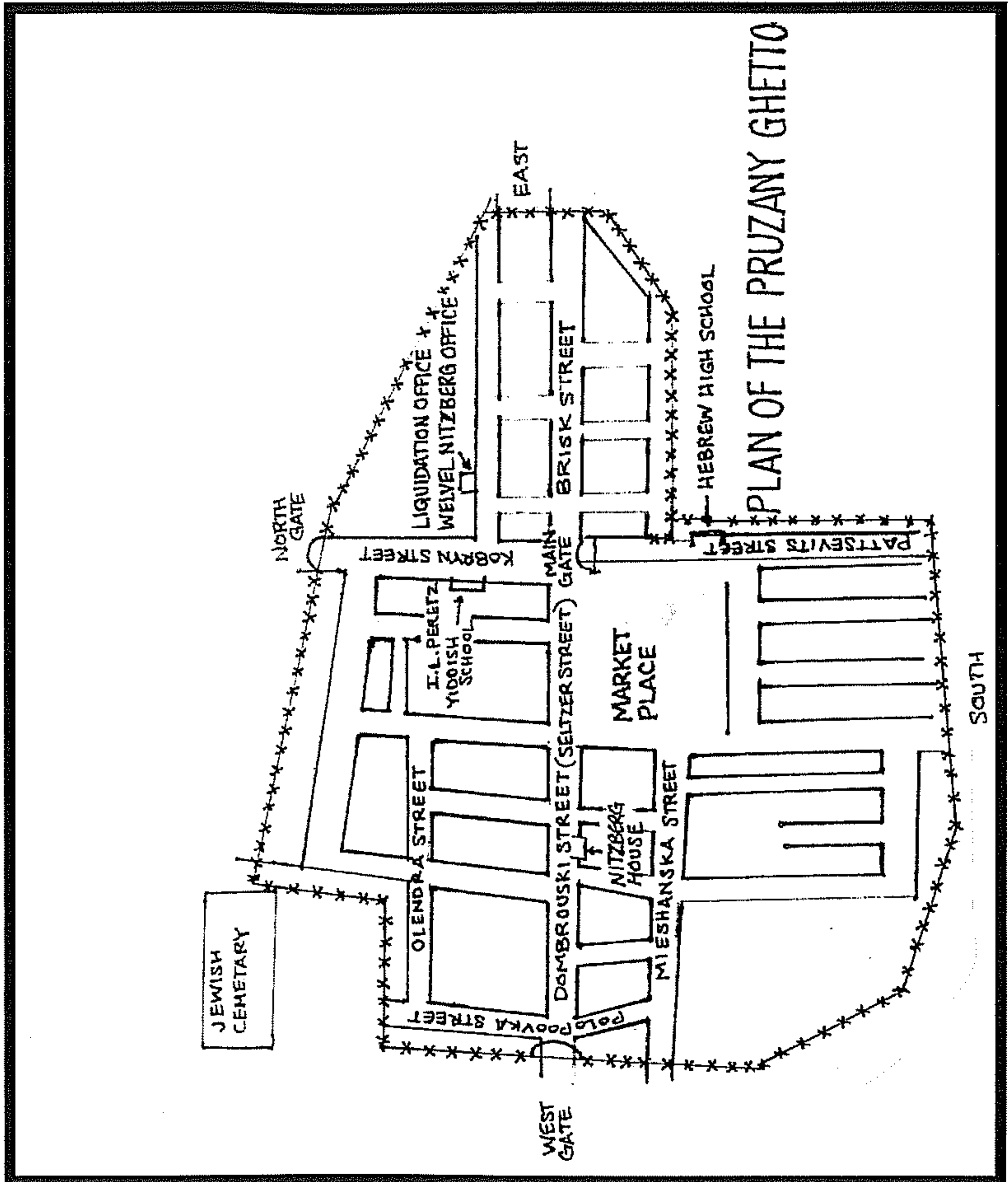
> *Leaving my home was probably the most devastating, difficult moment of my life. There was an aching, there was a pain, there was an emptiness. My mother wanted to clean up and make the beds and we absolutely prohibited her from doing that.*
>
> *You see, it wasn't a question of leaving worldly goods, because we didn't care. We were so concerned about life that we didn't care about what was left behind – but to leave the rooms, my little cat, my favorite dog, my bureau, my pictures on the wall, everything that reminds me of my youth, my adolescence, my growing up, and knowing that you will never see them again, never. My heart was tearing apart. I cried. My mother cried. My father tried to calm us. He said, 'Don't look back. It's just another move, another station in our lives.' You know, the beds were unmade, the food was on the table, Mother's office was full of medicine, things thrown on the floor. It was a terrible sight, and to leave it all behind – this was the end – twenty years cut off. It was a surgical knife, right there, a closed chapter.*

Saul and his parents took one last look as they left their home.

> *I turned back and each time I took another few steps, I turned back and looked. I had a certain pain, a squeezing around my heart. I looked around, saw my precious belongings, which were with me as a child; my stamp collections, my books, which were so precious to me, furniture, my bed, the grandfather clock. All this, which was never to be again. The place that I was raised from an infant to maturity was never to be seen again...it was a certain feeling of finality, that it will never be again...I cried internally. I did not want to show my tears, but I couldn't control them.*

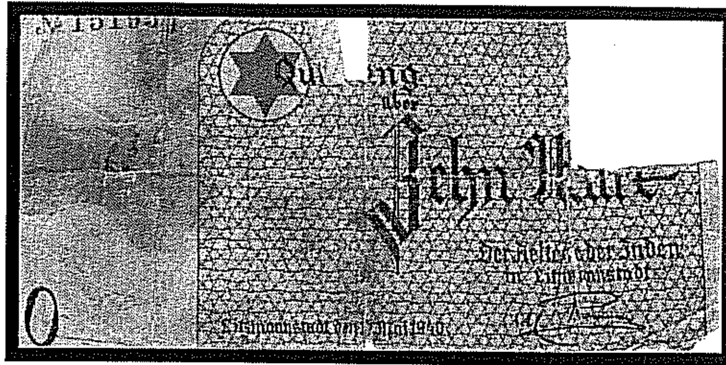
The liquidation of the ghetto took place on four consecutive days. Twenty-five hundred people were evacuated each day. Saul and his family were on the last transport. Early in the morning the town was filled with hundreds of peasants who were driving their own horse-drawn sleds. The sleds were lined up in front of the houses. Between four and eight people climbed into each sled, carrying their belongings. The sleds formed a caravan and were headed towards the railroad station in Lineve, a town that was twelve miles from their home. Lisa, still hopeful that she would be able to work, took her dental equipment with her. This was one more difficult chapter in their lives, but they felt that somehow they would survive.

Saul, his parents, his grandmother, and his friend, Schloime, were all in the same sled. One of Saul's acquaintances attempted to escape, but he was shot. When they arrived at the railroad station they were clubbed by the Germans and herded into cattle cars. There was screaming, shouting, and pushing. Then, in one traumatic moment, the doors of the cattle cars were slammed shut and sealed. They were on their way to an unknown destination.



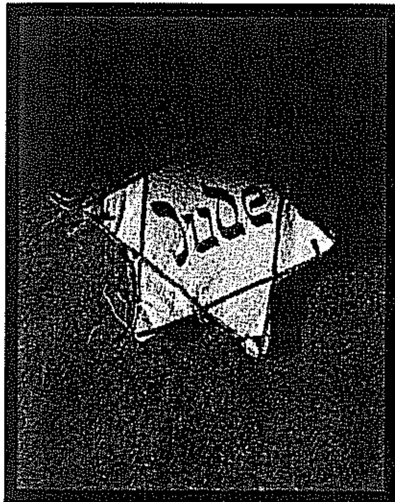
Map of the Pruzhany Ghetto – Note site of the Nitzberg house

Map: Pinkas Pruzhany
English rendition: Richard B. Sabra



Ghetto Money

Personal Collection:
Saul Nitzberg



Yellow star of David badge bearing the German word 'Jude' (Jew)

Charles and Hana Brumi
Courtesy of USHMM

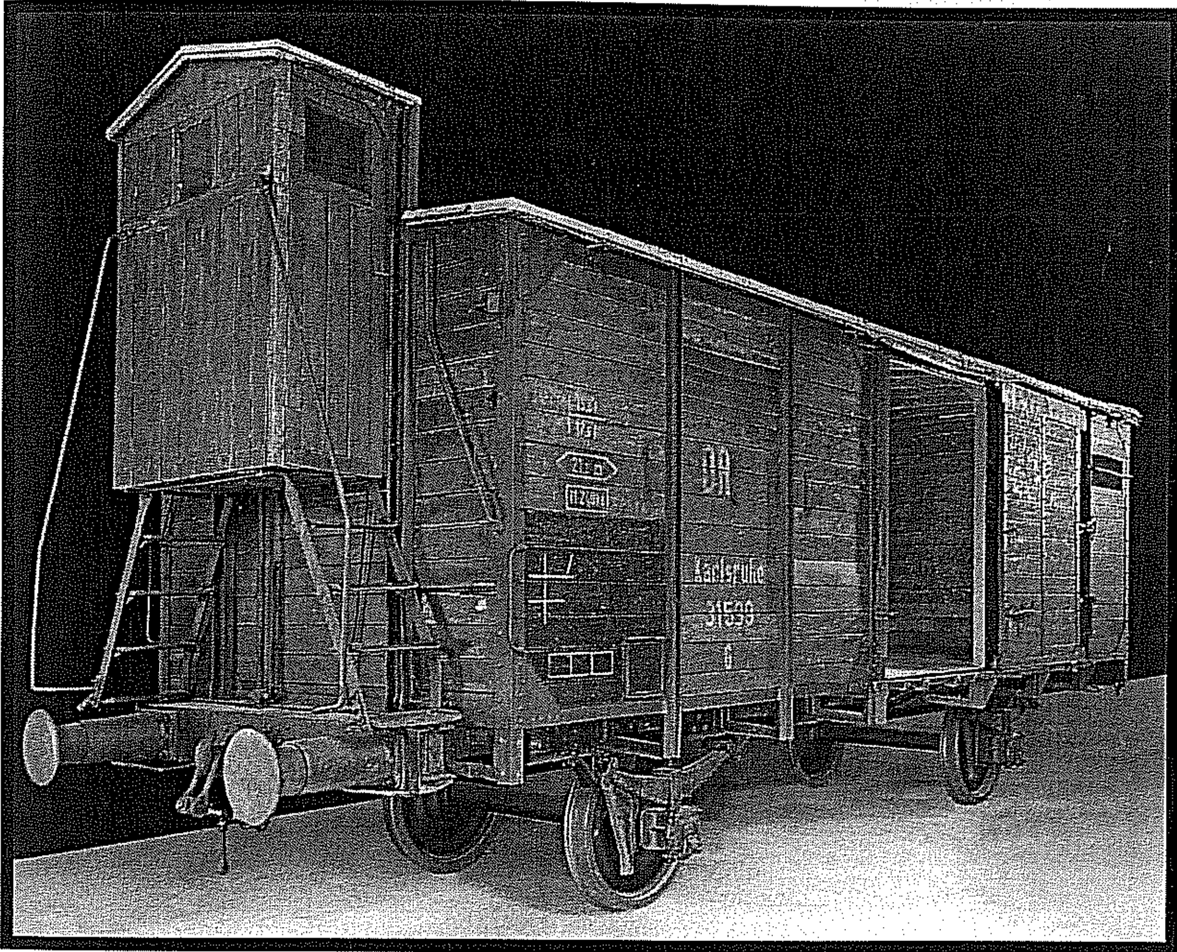
Piles of furniture and household belongings of Jews who are being transferred to the ghetto cover the pavement of a street in Kutno.

Main Commission for the prosecution of crimes against the Polish Nation
Courtesy of USHMM

Jews from the Lodz ghetto board deportation trains for the Chelmo Extermination camp. Lodz, Poland, between 1942-1943

National Museum of American Jewish History

Courtesy of USHMM



View of railcar on display in permanent exhibition

Courtesy of Polskie Koieje Panstwow S.A.

Photo: USHMM

Chapter 7
The Concentration Camps Under the Germans

There was so much mayhem and confusion that Saul never could fully recall all the details of that nightmarish trip in the cattle cars. What bothered him the most was that he could not remember whether or not he had said goodbye to his mother.

> *In the railroad station they separated the men from the women, and I remember saying goodbye to my grandmother because she was in a separate car. I don't recall. I cannot bring myself to recall exactly, whether they really separated the men from the women, that my mother was not with me, or whether my mother was with me in the cattle cars. I just can't recall, and it bothers me, because it is a nightmare picture.*
>
> *They threw us in the cattle cars, about 100 people. There was no room for us. Everybody had to stand up; there was no place to sit down. They gave us a piece of bread and a quart of water. There was a big container in the corner, where we had to relieve ourselves for our physical needs. So you can imagine the stench that was created in a very short order. It was not a question of any embarrassment. I think my mother was with me, because I remember thinking that there was no question of shyness or embarrassment. It was a need to relieve yourself, and everybody had to do it, and did.*
>
> *I tried many times to recollect the interrelationship with my father and my mother at the time of this terrible journey and I can't recall a thing. I only know that early there was a lot of yelling and screaming and talking about what is going to happen to us. Everybody had different opinions. I even remember that I personally was emphasizing the point, 'We are going to be alive. We are going to a working camp, because otherwise, why should they have insisted that my mother take her cumbersome dental drill and all the equipment?' Nobody could really envision what was ahead of us.*

The people were packed together so tightly in the cars that no one could sit or move about. Some of the older people died in an upright position and never fell to the ground. No one realized they were dead. It was only when the doors were opened at their destination and those who could do so climbed out of the cars that they recognized there were dead people among them

There was only one small window in their cattle car, and it was too high and too small to allow anyone to see outside. It was dark inside. For three days and three nights they traveled with almost no food or water. It was late January. The temperature outside was sub-zero, but inside the car it was hot from the heat of so many bodies. They relieved themselves in buckets. The stench of the large containers filled with excrement was nauseating and penetrating. On one occasion the Germans allowed a few men out of the train to empty the buckets. On the way back into the

car, the men grabbed handfuls of snow and they used it to quench their thirst. In a short time the prisoners had eaten the little food they had brought with them. The hunger was fierce, but the thirst was devastating. The men who had managed to get the snow were not allowed to share it with their families. Some people drank their urine just to stay alive. Everyone lost a sense of time. Finally, on February 2, 1943, after three days and three nights, the train came to a stop. They had arrived at their destination. One nightmare had ended and more dreadful nightmares were about to begin.

The heavy doors of the cattle cars were opened, and the passengers heard shouts and screams. It was 3:00 or 4:00 AM. As they disembarked onto the ramp, they were blinded by bright floodlights that lit up the night. At first all they could see were soldiers who were pointing machine guns at them as they disembarked. People were screaming at them, shoving them. Vicious dogs were lunging at them. Saul's memories of that moment were haunting.

> *It is amazing what fear crawls into people's hearts when they see a vicious dog, even on the leash, lunging at you and barking. You do anything right away.*

The Germans were screaming orders at them:

> *'Raus, raus, verfluchte Juden, schnell, schnell, schnell, macht es schnell.' It means, 'Out, out, you cursed Jews, fast, fast, fast!'*

How could they have envisioned the scene that met their eyes?

> *Immediately, when we descended, that was when I saw my mother. They separated the men from the women... We were blinded by the lights on the ramp where the train stopped. We saw nothing but well-dressed German SS officers and many soldiers with machine guns and vicious German dogs. The officers were running, screaming, yelling, hitting... There were hundreds and hundreds of emaciated creatures with striped clothes and striped caps, running around and helping us get off the train... The yelling, the screaming, the beating, the stampede of the bodies and people falling on top of each other was a sight to behold... We said to ourselves, 'Okay, people are alive. They didn't lie to us. It's a labor camp.'*

Saul recalls "the first equalizer:"

> *The first thing they did to us, with the screaming and the beating, was an order...they were so clever...the first order was 'Leave everything behind.' It was a clever ploy, because everybody took with them what was most precious...we were left just with what you had on you, so that was the first equalizer. We were like naked. Everybody, rich or poor, were equal immediately. Within two minutes, we were all poor. We had nothing, except what we had on ourselves.*

Saul was often asked, "Why didn't they try to escape?" His answer was clear:

> *Theoretically, yes, you could run, except, where to? You are demoralized, hungry, cold, beaten down to the ground emotionally and physically... When we were taken to the train one of my friends tried to run, and he was mowed down with a machine gun instantly...*

> *There could be no heroes. If you would escape into the woods, you faced the hostile environment of the Polish population...We were disembarking from the train like a herd of cattle, with people armed with machine guns and dogs, and you are asking a question, 'Could we run?' We could run nowhere. Sure we could run, but that would be the end of us. The idea was to resist in a form of survival, not of being a hero. I would go ten feet and I would be dead. What would that do? Anybody could commit suicide.*

They could see electric wires and sentry posts that were placed every couple of feet along the barbed wire fences. They realized that they were imprisoned in a camp. In the distance they saw billows of smoke reaching into the sky, and there was a putrid stench in the air.

When the prisoners were standing on the ramp, the Germans ordered their beloved Rabbi Faygenbaum to step forward.

> *This rabbi was a towering figure. They realized he was something special because he looked the part. They beat him up in front of everybody and they let the dogs at him, and they just tore him into pieces. The man died right there in the snow, I suppose as an example to us what can happen to all of us if we don't obey. He didn't put up any resistance. I guess he felt this was his moment of piety. He prayed, he continued to pray. He prayed all the time while the dogs were attacking him. It was very, very terrible to see. It was something that – everybody was crying. We couldn't control ourselves.*

The prisoners were paralyzed with fear as they watched this dastardly act. Order was restored.

As they walked off the ramp, the men and women were separated and lined up into rows of eight. Saul was desperate, yearning to say good-bye to his mother, but there was no way that he could do so. Standing at the head of the men's group of prisoners was a German officer. He was tall, handsome, and dressed in an officer's uniform. He directed the prisoners to go either left or right. Once they were separated into two groups, he informed the men that they were at a work camp, but that there was still a long, four mile journey ahead of them. Since there were not enough trucks for everyone, only the older people and the children would be allowed to ride. The others had to walk.

Saul was sent to the right and his father to the left. He waved to his father, assuming that they would join each other later. The German officer noticed that Veve was well dressed. He asked him what his profession was. Veve told him that he was a dentist, and he was re-directed to the right. Saul was relieved when his father joined him, but he was suspicious. What was the real reason for separating the old men and young children from the group? Not until later did they realize that the Germans had told them a lie. The young and old people who were put on the trucks were on their way to the gas chamber. The Germans deceived the people in order to allay their fears so that there would be no rioting.

A prisoner who had been an inmate for a while noted Saul's handsome, custom-made boots. He asked Saul to give them to him. He provided Saul with a rude awakening with the following information:

> *You are in a death camp...They are going to undress you, take everything away. I will take them and hide them for you and return*

> *them later. They will undress you naked... You see that smoke coming up in the air? Well, that is where your older people are going. They are going to be gassed; they are going to be burned.*

How could Saul possibly believe those ominous words? It was simply too outrageous. He thought the man was making this up so that he would give him his boots, but Saul still refused to turn them over. Nonetheless, those incredulous words quickly led him to a heightened awareness of what might lie ahead.

It was bitter cold, and there was snow on the ground. The prisoners began their march. They were hungry, exhausted, frightened, and barely able to walk. What would come next?

The men were marched to a set of barracks that had been dubbed the "sauna." The processing of prisoners was about to begin. This was the second stage of equalization. They were ordered to remove all their clothing, but to keep their belts and their shoes. Saul suddenly realized the importance of keeping his boots. He thought quickly. He borrowed a razor blade from another prisoner and cut the tops of his boots into strips. When he was asked by an angry guard what he had done, Saul told him that someone in the back had cut the boots in search of money. Later on he managed to get a needle and thread and sewed the strips together. Instead of the wooden clogs that were issued to the prisoners he had his sturdy boots to wear. Saul learned that he had made a very important move. Because the clogs never fit properly, the inmates developed blisters walking in the cold, the mud, and the snow. All too often their feet became infected. For prisoners who were already debilitated, these infections were life-threatening. Saul felt that this impulsive act had spared his life as well as his boots.

Next, the prisoners were shaved from head to toe and a number was tattooed on their left forearm. As he looked at the tattoo, 98048, Saul had the overwhelming feeling that he had been reduced to a number.

> *We rapidly lost our identity, our names... We were all equal, naked, homeless, hopeless, scared, humiliated, beaten, hungry, shaking from the cold in poorly fitting clothes, rich and poor, weak and strong, educated and illiterate. We were all the same, equalized in one short hour, without anything to call our own. We were at once prisoners of the infamous camp of Auschwitz.*

Saul realized all too soon that his grandmother was sent to the gas chamber. Later he learned that his mother went into the camp, but that she did not live long. Saul was grateful that her suffering was brief.

> *Thank God she didn't live very long. My mother was a very soft, very gentle woman. She couldn't have survived the rugged life, the humiliation, the beating, the torture and the hunger. I really can't tell you how long she lived. I know she went psychotic, she lost her mind. She was killed by a bullet in the head...I found that out after the war, and believe me, I am grateful that she didn't have to go through this terrible torture and die anyway, like my father did. She couldn't take it, she just couldn't take it. It was like sent from heaven.*

After an ice cold shower, the prisoners dressed quickly in ill-fitting striped uniforms, with a thin striped coat and a hat. Each uniform had a colored triangle sewn on it. The colors identified the categories of prisoners. The yellow triangle was worn by the Jews. Next, Saul and his father were marched to their barrack, No.18, which was about a mile away. The barracks

were quarantined for six weeks so that if anyone was carrying disease it would incubate. Anyone who became ill was sent to the gas chamber so that they would not infect others. In this way, the new arrivals would neither spread disease to the Germans nor contaminate the camp. It was the beginning of the process of selection. The weak were eliminated, and only those who were strong enough to work were allowed to survive.

> *I mean merely to give you an account of one person in this living hell where I spent the next several years, and where many of my friends perished, my parents, and all the rest of my relatives perished. It is difficult to talk about my family and life because it appears like a nightmare that really didn't happen. Nobody that went through it can ever understand and no words can bring it alive... it is difficult to imagine that a human being who never prepared for such hardships and such tragedy can make it through life. Naturally many did not, and the ones that did, did not make it through heroics or because of strength or because of wisdom or education. They made it because of minor miracles that happened to them, like events that made a difference in living or dying, and because of an outstretched hand of a dear friend or relative that cared to share with them whatever they had, what little they had at a very crucial moment.*

The barracks were originally built to house horses. They were made of wood, with no insulation. There was a long, narrow brick oven running the length of the barracks that divided them into two sides. There were brick chimneys at each end plus a fireplace for wood and coal on each side. These provided limited heat. The prisoners slept on wooden planks in three-tiered bunks. The top bunk was the best. When people had diarrhea, it would drip down to the lower bunks. There was not enough room between the upper and lower bunks to allow the prisoners to sit up.

Saul climbed to the upper bunk and pulled his father up with him. It was freezing cold, but they were forced to sleep wearing just their underwear. Eight people slept on a bunk that was large enough for three. Everyone had to sleep on their sides, facing in the same direction. When one turned, all had to turn. There were no mattresses and no straw to sleep on. There was one thin blanket for all eight of them. Their clothes were rolled up at night so they could sleep on them for some bit of comfort. Because they did not do heavy work during those six weeks of quarantine, the prisoners received reduced rations. They had descended into a vale of misery.

The first three weeks were a nightmare during which Saul watched his father deteriorate before his eyes. At night the barracks were locked and the men had to relieve themselves in buckets. There was a man from Saul's hometown who volunteered to be the "scheissmeister." His job was to supervise the emptying of the excreta that had accumulated during the night. He harbored a special anger for Saul's father.

> *My father went in with me but he didn't last very long. He was with me for approximately three weeks. First of all, he couldn't stand the humiliation and the degradation that was pushed upon him. We had a man in our barracks who had lived about a block away from us, in our hometown. He was a horse thief by profession, everybody knew that...He volunteered in the barrack to become the sheissmeister, to supervise taking out the buckets of excreta. For some reason he tried to humiliate and take it out on my father. We were from the*

> *upper strata, well-to-do, the intelligentsia. He was the scum of the earth, even before the war. Given the power of feeling important – he arrived with us in the same transport –he would take my father, out of turn, to take out the bucket.*

Veve, fifty-four years old, lacked the physical strength to endure the trials he had to face. Saul and his friends tried desperately to protect him, to carry the heavy buckets for him.

> *I tried, my friend Schloime tried, Itsche tried to take the bucket out for him, but he wouldn't let us do it...He had full control, and would report to the stubenaeltester (the man in charge of the entire barrack), 'This man won't take out the bucket,' and that man got a beating.*

Saul thought he might have some influence with the stubenaeltester. He approached him, hoping to convince him to protect his father from the scheissmeister.

> *The one in charge of the barracks was a French Jew who was brought to Auschwitz much before us, and he ascended the ladder to become the stubenaeltester. He was a brute, a criminal from way back...He was a tyrant and a sadistic brute. For some reason he liked our singing and commanded me and Itsche to stand on the brick ovens and sing for the barracks. He liked the Yiddish and Russian songs. For that he gave us extra bread and an extra plate of soup. So I thought, he's a friend, he makes me sing, gives me extra bread, so I came to him and asked him, 'Let me carry out the buckets for my father, because my father is old and he isn't strong enough to do so.' He said, 'When this man tells your father to do it, he will do it,' and he hit me across the face with a stick and flung me across the barracks. So on the one hand he was a benefactor, and on the other hand he beat the hell out of me...so there was no way we could protect my father.*

Saul's efforts to help Veve to survive were of no avail. There was nothing he could do. His memories of the rapid deterioration of his beloved father were painful.

> *With the bad food and the dirt he developed dysentery. He couldn't control it. It was a terrible picture...He fell several times carrying those buckets, soiling himself and feeling completely dehumanized from the experience...For me to see my father in this condition...He was soiled, smelly, parched, begging me for a drink of water, sunken eyes. It was just a terrible, terrible moment.*

As the days passed, it became more evident that Veve could not survive the tortures and the rigors of Auschwitz.

> *The end was getting close. He couldn't carry on, and I knew that he would be taken away from me. A fear of sick prisoners was known... once they got very sick they were taken out to the hospital. There were selections twice a week, usually Tuesday and Friday, and the destination was the crematorium.*
>
> *I loved my father very much. We had many lengthy discussions when I was growing up. I was never punished for anything. I was just spoken to, sometimes late in the night. I respected his wisdom,*

> *his intelligence, his culture, and his knowledge of so many things. I looked up to him, and here he was, a withered old man. Imagine, he was only fifty-four, but to me he already looked so terribly old, but he had to go on with his last efforts for a few more days of his life.*

On February 22nd the Germans took Saul's father to the gas chamber. Saul expressed his anguish with a few simple words, "They took him away that night, and they cut my life in half."

> *In the evening, just before they took him away to the hospital, he asked me to sit next to him. He spoke to me with great emotions and great depth. He said 'Now you realize what the Germans have done to us, and to the whole world of Jews. I am not for this world, but I am old. You are still young. You have the energies and the capacity to survive. Don't let them break you, don't give in! You cannot fight, but endure. Try to figure out a way to live an extra day, an extra day. I have great confidence that our allies will eventually win and maybe you will survive and tell the world what went on in the bowels of this hell, in the camp of Auschwitz...you must live to tell the story, to tell so that people will know what they did to us, to the Jewish people, to your mother, to your family, to me, to other people'...and you know, those were the words of a dying man, and I listened, and I said, 'Yes, Papa.' I promised...my brother was taken away to the service. I thought that my mother and grandmother by that time must have been gassed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and here my only remaining vestige of my family was being taken away.*

Saul's pain was palpable. Many years later he could still recount those parting moments.

> *I kissed his parched lips. I held his hand, and I promised. I promised to do my utmost to survive, but no sooner had they taken him away, desperation and fear and depression overwhelmed me. I was all alone. I felt I couldn't go on. Something was pushing me to the wires... When he was finally taken away to the hospital, and what did that mean? The hospital was just the vestibule to the crematorium; it was just a question of a day and he was gassed. I was desperate, because I saw nothing but death and destruction, deprivation, hunger, and there was no sense of living...I went close to the wires. I was ready to touch them, to finish it all in one second. They were highly charged electric wires, and death was quick and easy...Touch the wires and you would be electrocuted instantly. It was an easy way out. It was an easy death. You couldn't stand torture, but you could stand the electric shock. I wasn't afraid, because I didn't want to live.*

But Veve's parting words stayed Saul's hand.

> *I didn't do it because my father's parting words rang through my ears. 'You have to live, you have to tell the story. You are strong. You must survive.' I not only survived, but I felt that I had to propagate my race by having a large family, and here I am telling the story for future generations. I went back to the barracks to face the routine of*

> *every day in hell.*

The night his father was taken away Saul cried himself to sleep, and he cried himself to sleep every night for a long time after. But Saul knew that he had to endure the pain and horror of every day, that he must fight to survive. He had a promise to keep.

Each day the prisoners were awakened at 6:00 AM and were permitted just a few minutes to relieve themselves. For breakfast they were given a bitter black liquid that they called "tea." At lunchtime they lined up with their metal bowls, and they were allotted a quart of thin soup that contained a few vegetables and one or two rotten potatoes. They never received the full quart that was due them, so that after the distribution there was always some soup left in the cauldron. They didn't dare complain because any complaint could invite a beating. Already weak and debilitated, a beating could end your life. A beating was more dangerous than the lack of food. Sometimes the man serving the soup would allow the prisoners to come back for more. Frequently, mealtimes served as an exercise in sadism. If they didn't stand perfectly still in the line, they were beaten. Saul decided very quickly that he would rather starve than risk his life by pushing himself ahead to get the extra portion of soup. For the rest of his life, he would stand quietly and still when he had to line up for anything at all, whether it was at a restaurant, a theater, a bus stop, or an airplane.

Seemingly simple choices were actually critical choices – suffer the hunger or risk a lethal beating. Each move, each act, required a well thought out strategy. Each step toward survival required that you analyze the situation, make a choice, and act on that choice. There was no way to know which choice would be the correct one.

The main meal was served at night. It consisted of a 400 gram loaf of bread made of flour and sawdust, as well as a pat of margarine and marmalade. The bread had to be cut in half and shared by two people. The prisoners devised a system that would assure that each of them received an equal share, because every crumb was precious. They would measure the bread with a string. The person who cut the bread had to allow the person with whom he was sharing to have first choice in selecting the half that he wanted. There was always a dilemma about the best time to eat the bread. Again, survival required making the right choice. Should one eat the whole portion of bread at once or save a piece for the next day? If you saved it, another desperate, starving prisoner might steal it. If you ate the whole portion at night, the next morning all you had to sustain you through the day was bitter tea and an empty stomach. It was a serious dilemma.

The unremitting, pervasive, and gnawing hunger was torturous. Sundays brought the only relief because then the prisoners were given a piece of blutwurst, which was made from a mixture of blood and gristle from the slaughterhouse. Pea soup was also added to the fare on Sundays, and the prisoners considered this a "gourmet" meal. For the rest of his life, Saul savored pea soup.

> *The misery was so great that if you had an extra two grams of bread, you were a rich man. If you had an extra two tablespoons of soup and went into the line and got it without a beating, you were a lucky man... There is something you can do about the cold. Sometimes you can run in place, or huddle with somebody. You can make movements. Sometimes you may escape into a warm place for a few minutes But when you have finished your portion of food and you have nothing to eat for the next twenty-four hours, you keep on rehearsing in your mind, 'What would it be like if I had another piece of bread, another plate of soup,' and your pain is so bad you just die inside. Hunger is worse, although the discomfort of being cold, in wet clothes, in penetrating rain (and the weather there was not*

> *kind to us), is terrible when you have to stand still in one place for a couple of hours, because the fact is that you are not secure, and that you'll get a beating for not taking off the hat in time or not standing at attention.*
>
> *Somebody said, 'Would you like to be twenty-five or thirty years younger?' No, I couldn't go through it again. Under no circumstances, under no conditions could I ever face this type of experience, ever, in my life again. It is so much easier to die, you know, than to have this struggle. Yet, when you're faced with it, you keep on living, keep on struggling.*

In addition to the terrible pangs of hunger that the prisoners suffered day after day, there was the ever-present fear of the guards' unrelenting cruelty.

> *There were German prisoners who were criminal elements who could speak the language and communicate easily with the guards. Therefore, they were often put in charge of the Jewish prisoners. They had a lot of power and special living conditions. However, they had to prove themselves worthy of the trust of the German officers. Therefore, they gained their positions by acts of extreme brutality. If they showed they could control the discipline of a thousand people in the barrack with just a look or a loud voice they could maintain their privileged position. The solution was simple. They did it by instilling fear, by beating, kicking, all sorts of sadistic punishment. They devised a plan of calisthenics, where prisoners had to crouch on their haunches for long periods, holding a heavy chair over their heads. It was most painful. Then there was leapfrog. Again, you held a chair with both hands, crouched down, and then you must leap. If you fell, you were beaten, kicked in the stomach or spleen. These punishments were entertainment for the guards. If one person transgressed, the whole barrack might receive this dreadful, sadistic punishment.*

Besides these ingenious "calisthenics," the guards devised other creative modes of punishment. They would force the prisoners to lie down in the snow, rise, and lie down again, until they were soaked and frozen. Weakened as they were, this often led to a lethal bout of pneumonia. At times a guard would order a prisoner to run to pick something off the ground. As he ran, the guard would shoot at him and unleash the vicious dogs. The excuse, although they did not need one, was that the prisoner was attempting to escape. There was no end to the acts of cruelty that the guards could invent for their own entertainment.

The very worst part of the day was roll call, held in the morning and at night. Morning roll call began at 8:00 AM.

> *Many of the prisoners had nothing on their feet but the wooden clogs, no socks, or perhaps some rags or paper from cement bags they found and wrapped around their feet. Unfortunately, the cement bags were rough from the sand and the prisoners would get sores or infections. They had thin uniforms. In the winter there was a topcoat made from very thin striped material. They had to stand at attention for 1½ to 2 hours in the bitter cold of a Polish winter. They stood in mud, in snow, in rain. In summer they stood in the hot sun. If a*

> *prisoner had escaped, or if something unusual was afoot, everyone would have to stand at roll call for as long as ten hours or until the person was found. At one time the prisoners stood at roll call for twenty-four hours as the Germans hunted for an escaped prisoner. If you could no longer stand and fell to the ground, you were finished. The punishment for escaping was a public hanging, and the entire camp had to watch.*

At one point Saul had the good fortune to have been assigned a double job. He was both orderly and aide to Schulte, the hospital administrator. Schulte was a Polish prisoner himself, and Saul was his lackey. He cleaned Schulte's shoes, pressed his pants, and kept his wardrobe in order. Schulte considered himself an educated man. He needed someone with whom he could converse. He selected Saul as his lackey because he recognized that he was intelligent and that he spoke perfect Polish. However, although Schulte enjoyed talking with him, he never lost sight of the fact that Saul was a Polish Jew. That categorized him as non-human, and that gave Schulte license to treat him as such. He would beat him frequently, but he also fed him.

Saul recognized that despite the beatings, there were advantages to working with Schulte. As his lackey, Saul did not have to work outdoors and fight the elements. More importantly, he did not have to face the hazards of the work brigade. The work brigade was always treacherous. If you merely straightened up to wipe your face you might get a potentially fatal beating. If the guards took a hundred prisoners to the workplace in the morning, they were responsible for bringing the same number back, but it did not matter whether they were dead or alive. No one was ever taken to task for the fatalities. There was daily attrition, and no accountability for the crimes. Saul recognized that despite the sporadic beatings he suffered, working for Schulte was preferable to working outdoors. His stint as lackey lasted for approximately two months. Then he was forced to return to the work brigade.

Saul never knew when the ax would fall when he was in the work brigade. At lunchtime the prisoners were allowed to rest for a half hour. One day, Saul fell asleep and did not hear the call to lunch. When the prisoners were counted, Saul was missing. Because he was a couple of minutes late for lunch, he was brought in front of the entire group, and given twenty-five lashes on his bare buttocks. He knew he must not scream, because if he did they would start counting all over again. He was so badly beaten that he could hardly walk, but he had to return to work. At another time he found a newspaper on the ground. Hungry for news of the outside world, he committed the forbidden act. He read the newspaper. Someone saw him reading and reported him. He was beaten so severely, with a shovel, that it fractured his vertebra. His buttocks were black and blue and bloodied, and he had to sleep on his stomach. For weeks, he could neither sit nor lie on his back. It was terribly painful. Although he was barely able to walk, he forced himself, once again, to go to work. There was no other choice, and he was determined to survive.

Sunday was a day of rest. That was the day the prisoners were permitted to sit and delouse themselves. Lice were commonplace in Auschwitz. The Germans were very frightened of lice, because they carried typhus. Typhus was an ominous epidemic that could strike both prisoners and guards. In order to protect themselves, the Germans allowed time for delousing. Once it was completed, the prisoners were free to visit prisoners in other barracks.

Avoiding disease in Auschwitz was impossible. There were periodic selections to weed out the sick and replace them with healthier prisoners. The inmates dreaded these selections. The Germans would close off the camp without warning. In 1944 the camp was crowded because they were bringing in the Hungarian Jews. This meant that they would soon line up the old

prisoners outside the barracks, and a German officer, a physician, would inspect them. If they were emaciated (called a "musselman") or if they had a disease, they were no longer of use. Therefore, they were selected for the gas chamber. In the German psyche the Jews were expendable.

In 1944 Saul developed a severe case of scabies, another disease that the Nazis dreaded. He had itchy, painful sores all over his body. Aware that the trainload of Hungarian Jews was coming into the camp, Saul recognized that he was in trouble. He knew that the Germans would have to get rid of some prisoners to make room for the new arrivals, which meant that a selection was imminent. He also knew that people with scabies were selected for the gas chamber. The only medicine that could heal his scabies was sulfa, which he could not get in the camp. With his characteristic resourcefulness, Saul conceived a plan that would enable him to get the precious medication. He made contact with a prisoner who worked in the commando unit called Canada. Canada workers sorted the belongings that the prisoners were ordered to leave behind as they exited the cattle cars. This provided the workers with the opportunity to hide some of the valuables. The prisoner that Saul contacted had gathered a stash of gold and diamond jewelry that was of no value to him in the concentration camp. He could not eat gold and diamonds. Fortunately, he worked outside the camp. There he came in contact with German civilians who were anxious to acquire jewelry. Saul offered to give the man a portion of his bread for several days, as well as his Sunday ration of salami and pea soup, a tremendous sacrifice for a starving inmate. In return, this prisoner would exchange some of the jewelry for sulfa. He gladly made the trade, and Saul treated his scabies.

The sulfa cured Saul's scabies, and by the time the selection day came his skin was clear except for some minor scratch marks. The German officer who examined Saul noticed these scratch marks. He took him aside and started to write down his tattooed number. That meant that Saul would go to the hospital and then the gas chamber. For some unknown reason, the officer changed his mind, apparently deciding that Saul was not contagious, and sent him back to his group. "So close –so close," Saul mused, as he told the story.

> *See how life hangs by a thread, little things that may make a difference. A bottle of lousy medicine made a difference whether I survived or not...concentration camp was so unpredictable, so uncertain, so full of surprises, that any move you made could have meant meeting your death or being saved, little incidents...*

In 1944 Saul had another brush with death. He developed a rash, a very high fever, and a severe headache. He was extremely debilitated and dangerously ill. His friends held him up in line so that he would not fall as he passed by the guard. However, on the fifth day he was so ill he could no longer carry on. Although he knew that reporting sick meant certain death, he simply gave up and reported to the infirmary for sick call. The doctor looked at him and said, "To the hospital." If a non-Jewish prisoner was ill, the doctor's assistant would fill out a pink card and he was sent to the Gentile hospital. He did not receive medicine there, but if he recovered he could return to the barracks. If a Jewish prisoner was ill, he was given a yellow card and was sent to the Jewish hospital. Several days later, whether or not he had recovered, he was sent to the gas chambers. Saul recognized the man who was giving out the cards. He was the chemist from their town, the friend of his parents who had attempted to make cyanide powder and had tested it on their cat. This man did not say one word, nor did Saul. Without acknowledging Saul, but risking his own life, he wrote out a pink card. Accordingly, Saul was sent to the Gentile hospital. The chemist, in spite of the risk, held out a helping hand and saved Saul's life.

> *If the doctor had noticed he himself would have lost his life...He was very brave. He saved my life...and you know, some people ask me, 'How did you survive? Were you something special?' I wasn't something special, I wasn't that brave, I wasn't a hero...It's the help of others, like when I got the mitigal (sulfa). That man was able to take a chance and smuggle in the drug. Here is a man who had nothing to gain and everything to lose...He saved my life. I never saw him again. I was never able to thank him. He perished in Auschwitz himself, and I survived.*

Saul was always aware that his survival rested on many acts and many fateful events. Not the least of those acts was the bravery that inspired people to help each other, even though it might cost them their own lives.

With a raging fever and in coma Saul lay on the bunks in the Gentile hospital. He did not realize that in his delirium he was mumbling in Yiddish. A Jewish doctor from France was working in the Gentile hospital and he heard Saul's mumblings. When Saul was sufficiently alert to understand, the doctor cautioned him to stop speaking Yiddish. He was concerned that the non-Jewish prisoners might disclose Saul's Jewish identity. However, the other prisoners realized that Saul was too ill to eat, and that they could take his rations. Because they wanted to keep getting his rations, they did not denounce him when they realized that he was Jewish. Unfortunately, when Saul was finally able to eat, the prisoners continued to take his food. If he challenged them, he was afraid that they would turn him in. He figured it was better to chance starving than to risk exposure. Risking their own lives, Itsche Janowitz, his friend, and Avram Breskin, his parents' friend, would come to the window every day and slip him portions of bread. When he was finally ready to be returned to work, his friends contacted the stubenaeltester who had enjoyed listening to Saul and Itsche sing. They convinced him to give Saul a job in the barrack. This man assigned him to very light work for six weeks so that he would have a chance to recuperate.

Following the six-week period, the stubenaeltester arranged for Saul to work for three months as night watchman in the barracks. Saul was responsible for tending to the needs of the stubendienst (man in charge of maintenance details in the barrack). He was also required to supervise the prisoners when they used the excrement buckets. In this job, protected from exposure to the elements and from physical punishment, Saul was able to regain his strength.

At the end of the third month Saul received one more lucky break.

> *We had transports from Greece, and they didn't speak anything but Greek and French... The Germans asked who speaks certain languages, and in a situation like this, you utilize every little ounce of knowledge because you may find a better job. So my job became to be a French translator for the German guards... I had to wander around with the Germans just to translate what they had to say... I didn't have to carry the heavy cement, unload the trains, and carry the heavy rods.*

Just as his friends, Itsche and Avram, had helped him, Saul found a way to help Itsche when he was assigned to the dreaded strafkommando. This was the punishment commando, and it was far worse than anything the other prisoners experienced. Surviving this commando was extremely challenging. These prisoners suffered frequent and severe beatings. Their rations were cut in half even though they worked harder than anyone in the rest of the camp. Many perished in the strafkommando. Saul would sneak portions of his bread to Itsche. He explains what such acts meant under such bizarre circumstances:

Someone that you cared for and were close to, you would share. This was the beauty of the cohesiveness that we had among ourselves, and it kept up our morale and helped us to survive. And the multiple little incidents that I can recall at the present time were the ones that helped us to stay alive, and prevented us from being dehumanized and humiliated all the time, like you would expect would happen in a situation like this.

Despite the fact that the prisoners were mostly focused on survival, struggling to keep themselves alive, they managed to sustain that central core of humanity. Though there were obviously lapses, this core of humanity would emerge despite the evil and the cruelty that raged through the camp. It moved people to reach out and help each other when they could, without expecting personal gain. Leaning on each other, helping each other, made a difference. It kept that point of light and hope alive. Saul recounted his own concern for a man who was a complete stranger to him.

Those Jews from Holland were a different breed. They were very intelligent, very refined, very knowledgeable, gentle people and among the people from the transport were a whole bunch of musicians from the Amsterdam Symphony. And the conductor, who was also the first violinist, was among them. He was an unusual gentleman...you look at him and you feel, my God, what is he doing here. He was going to die in a few days; he was so thin and so helpless. And this man, every day when he came back from work, cried because he had sores on his feet, he had diarrhea, and then he had frostbite and he had sores on his hands. And he cried, 'Look at my hands, I'll never be able to play again'...I knew the stubenaeltester and I once took the courage to go up to him and say to him that we have a very talented musician, and I told him about the man, what a position he held as conductor, first violinist. I told him, 'If you can get a violin, this man could play for you.' A few days later he ended up with a beautiful violin, and he called the Dutch prisoner into his room, which was the same part of the barracks, but a separate room for himself, and he played for him every evening. He let him sit in the warm barracks, he gave him more food, and he healed.

Saul and this talented musician met again when they were transferred out of Auschwitz to Kaufering. Once again, pitying the musician, Saul tried to intervene.

We finally ended up in a camp called Kaufering...Suddenly, a few weeks later appeared that gentle musician from Amsterdam. Part of my job and other people's job was to carry these enormous iron bars... We would carry them on our shoulders, supported by our hands. We had no gloves. We would wrap our hands in paper from cement sacks to keep us from injuring our hands, because cold steel would stick to our hands and would pull the skin off. Well, that poor fellow just couldn't handle it. And he injured his hands so badly, that it wasn't the pain that he had; it was fear.

He was so innocent, so naïve, he thought of how he would survive the war, how he wouldn't be able to play the violin again

> *if he injured his hands... But I felt so bad for that kapellmeister, that conductor. I did the same thing that I did with the stubenaeltester. I came to the German officer in charge and told him about it. He got him a violin and took him out of the work detail, and he was spending most of his time indoors in the warm environment. He died in Kaufering... He just couldn't take the food, the starvation, and he petered out completely. But this was a very important thing to me, because I was able to help him, just like people helped me.*

Over and over again, Saul points out that despite their efforts the Germans could not destroy their intrinsic humanity.

> *If he were a little stronger and not so delicate he could have survived. Prisoners helped prisoners without any particular reason to. We didn't get anything in return. I couldn't improve my lot, but I could improve his, and I did. And people did that to me, and without that help many of us would not have survived... It was both ways. People would look out for themselves and not help, and there were others who helped others without any other motive except to be nice and kind. My personal experience was a positive one. I don't think I would have survived the various difficult moments in my life if I didn't have help from very dear friends.*

Saul would often think about the daily ordeal of survival. He had a need to examine his own behavior under the worst possible conditions. In reflection, he was grateful that he did not compromise his principles, that he never did anything at someone else's expense. He could look back at his own behavior without feeling guilt. At the same time, he understood quite well that considering the inhumane circumstances they had to endure, no prisoner could be judged. Each day that one survived required an enormous effort, and making that effort was an almost impossible challenge.

Thinking about how he had managed to survive from day to day, Saul said:

> *I just faced the day, today is another day and we have to live positively, and hopefully my friends will support me, and I will support them, and we'll make it for the day.*

Saul's concept of resistance places it within the context of a concentration camp.

> *I, as a survivor, must tell you. We were sick and cold and hungry. We were filled with lice and body sores. We were walking skeletons. We were surrounded by electrified wires with guardhouses with machine guns ready to spew at us death at any time. We were watched by guards with guns and whips and vicious dogs, ready to tear us apart at any time. To think of resistance under those conditions was simply an empty dream. And yet, there was resistance. If you think of the people who rose against the Germans and blew up the crematorium, the inmates of the sonderkommando, who fought them with their own, acquired weapons. If you think of the people who escaped the wires of the ghetto, or hid in the shelters to later join the partisans with stolen weapons and fight the Germans behind the lines. This*

> *was true resistance – and just to remain alive one more day, one more day in this living hell, where you faced the terror of agony, and not to die when they wanted you to die. This was resistance. And when you think of the anguish of the mothers as they calmed their children on the way to the showers of the crematoriums and the gas chambers, this was truly courage and resistance.*

Resistance took many forms. As Allied planes flew overhead, the prisoners raised their arms to the skies and waved to them, praying that the Allies would see them and drop the bombs on the camp. They wanted the Allies to destroy the crematoria and end the carnage. This was their passive act of resistance. If their efforts were successful and their prayers were answered, it could have meant their own death. It no longer mattered.

> *We lived with hope, and it was very difficult. Many times when the planes flew over Auschwitz we hoped they would throw bombs and destroy the chimneys of the crematoriums. We didn't care that many of us would die in the process. We just hoped that they would destroy the factory of death. Unfortunately, that did not happen...we were very disappointed and disheartened. But when the alarm would sound we wouldn't hide like the German soldiers did, in the bunkers. We would wave and hope that someone would see us and drop the bombs, but nothing happened. We actually prayed and it didn't make any difference, but we felt maybe many people would have a chance to escape, and the factories of death that were grinding out thousands of people in the gas chambers every day would be stopped. We weren't that lucky.*

One particular scene plagued Saul with nightmares for many years.

> *This was toward the end of the summer, August 1944. They were trying to liquidate the ghettos in Hungary and were bringing in transports every day. The crematoriums were working overtime. They didn't have enough facilities to kill all the people. One day we heard terrible screams behind the fence – we all did. We went to the fences and through the very narrow strips we saw a horrible picture. There were big ravines dug in the ground with flaming fires coming out of it, and lorries, automobiles, filled with cargo inside, like they do with cement. And they would drive up to those flaming fires, and one of those lorries opened up, and there were living children, infants, small children, who were thrown into the fire alive. Now, you know, when you think about a child being hit by a car, when we think about a child being in the hospital getting a liver transplant, because they couldn't survive otherwise, your heart goes out to this child. And here there were thousands of children being brutally killed, alive. This was the most horribly brutal act I have ever seen in my life that I will not forget it till I die. Night after night I would wake up with nightmares...It wasn't only me. We all suffered. When you hear about it, you can read about it, but unless you actually see it, you can't understand the depths of the degradation and the terrible inhumanity of man to man that was committed in those years. Those*

nightmares stayed with me for months on end.

There were painful thoughts that continued to plague Saul:

> *One of the most difficult things was for me to recall the moment when I had to leave my home. It wasn't that I was leaving comfort and wealth behind, it was a certain feeling of finality, that it will never be again... This moment, it kept on recurring to me all the time.*

Saul struggled to fight depression and to maintain his equilibrium. He tried to turn back to happier memories.

> *It wasn't nightmares that kept me awake all the time, it was memories, good memories, sad memories, memories of home. It was often memories of the home where I was raised, where I enjoyed the good things of life, where I enjoyed being with my parents; sitting there in the evening and reading to my mother, who was so very tired that her eyes were hurting her, and she couldn't read, and I had to read to her aloud the books that we both enjoyed. It was the conversations with my father that went on deep in the night. It was the gatherings in our house around the dining room table, the politics and the discussions about political events and the predictions, what the Germans would do, and the Russians would do, and this and that. All these things used to come back to me all the time, and this was the good moments...it was the sentimental, warm feelings that I kept on recalling all the time, because although they were hurting me, they were pleasant.*

These memories helped Saul get through each hour, each day.

> *When left alone to think, I didn't really think of the horrors of the concentration camp. You would fantasize. You didn't have the strength to think about girls. You fantasized about a clean bed, a warm bath, a table set with a tablecloth and candlelight, and abundant food and butter, strawberries...and the moments of your upbringing. I always thought of the times when I was a small boy, the games I used to play with my brother, the good things of life. That would sustain me, gave me the extra strength to face the next day. Even now my philosophy is you live for today, you plan for the future, and let's see what the next day will bring. I don't get depressed ahead of time. I would rather live in the past, the good past, than worry about the unknown and the terrible future.*

By October of 1944 the Russians had routed the Germans from their land. A group of prisoners, the sonderkommandos, felt that this was the moment to rebel. The sonderkommandos were a special outfit charged with taking the bodies from the gas chambers to "process" them. They had to pull out the gold teeth and cut the hair of the corpses. The gold and the hair were sent back to the Fatherland. Next, the sonderkommandos had to place the bodies on lorries and take them to the crematorium. There were times when the corpses were their relatives, sometimes their own parents.

The sonderkommandos were well fed so that they would be strong enough to withstand hard labor. They knew, however, that they did not have long to live. After six months the Germans

would destroy them and set up a new group. They did not want the sonderkommandos to bear witness to their crimes if Germany lost the war.

When they recognized that the Germans were near defeat, the sonderkommandos decided to take action. They killed several Germans and blew up crematorium #4. Within the camp there was wild shooting and general chaos. The Germans captured the ringleaders of the rebellion and their accomplices. Two sisters who had delivered the ammunition were hung, with all of the prisoners watching. When the shooting began, Saul, like many others, hid out. When he was found, they strapped him mercilessly, using whips with lead tips.

> *When they found me, as a punishment they tied my arms behind my back, hung me by my legs, from a ceiling hook and lashed me with lashes on my feet and my behind until I was unconscious.*

Many years later Saul was asked if he ever thought of God when he was in Auschwitz. He could only respond that facing death each day, he was too exhausted, too miserable, to reflect on God.

> *Oh, we were dying every day. We were dying every day. Here there was no such thing as God. You didn't have a guarantee at all that by the next morning you would be alive – no guarantee at all, nobody. Nobody had any guarantee that the next morning would not be a catastrophe for you, for you were at the mercy of any kapo that could beat you to death, kick you in the stomach, make your spleen bleed, develop dysentery, typhus, sores that wouldn't heal, anything. You were so vulnerable to the outside world. There was no way that you could protect yourself, no way that you could do anything about it. And you know what, you didn't have time to reflect or to think, because you were so exhausted that when you lay down you just fell asleep; dead, dirty, filthy, cold, hungry, you just fell asleep, because the next morning you had to get up and go to work again. And you had nobody to commiserate with, because everyone was in the same misery as you were. You had nobody to share with.*

When Saul described these experiences years later to his wife, he told her again and again that dying would have been easy–it was living that was a struggle.

Following the demolition of the crematorium, the prisoners were told they would be evacuated from Auschwitz and sent deep into Germany. Saul, along with other prisoners, was transported once again by cattle car, sustained with rations of marmalade and bread. The Germans moved the prisoners through Sachsenhausen, Oranienburg, and Dachau concentration camps in Germany, with a short stay in each place. Their ultimate destination was a camp known as Kaufering. This was actually a camp without barracks. It was built into the mountains, so that the underground bunkers could not be viewed from the outside. Kaufering was a work camp, not an extermination camp. The prisoners were building the Messerschmidt bomber fighter factory in Kaufering.

On April 12th the prisoners received the devastating news that Roosevelt had died.

> *I remember the 12th of April. President Roosevelt died, and for a moment there was a terrific elation among the German guards. They figured that this great man died, so they had a chance to win. There was a terrible sadness for us, because we believed that this man, along with Churchill and Stalin, the three that were allies at that time, would eventually liberate us. I knew very little about him, but the fact*

> *that he died. They showed us the newspapers. They talked about it. The Germans were so proud and happy about it, and so we knew, and everyone was terribly depressed, just like they lost their own father.*

Saul felt as if he had experienced a personal loss. This great man was to be their savior. The Germans, of course, were overjoyed, gloating over his death, confident that they would soon be victors. Like Saul, the prisoners were convinced that now they were doomed. All their hopes had been pinned on Roosevelt.

As the war was drawing to an end, the prisoners were moved out of Kaufering. They could not be transported by rail because all the railroads had been bombed. The Germans lined them up en masse, and the infamous death march began. Saul remembers walking for days and nights in dreadful weather, trudging in the rain through mud and patches of dirty snow. Many people, unable to walk another step, died from sheer exhaustion. Those who could not keep up the pace and lagged behind, and those who tried to escape were shot. It was a simple and effective process of attrition. Many perished on the death march in those last days of the war.

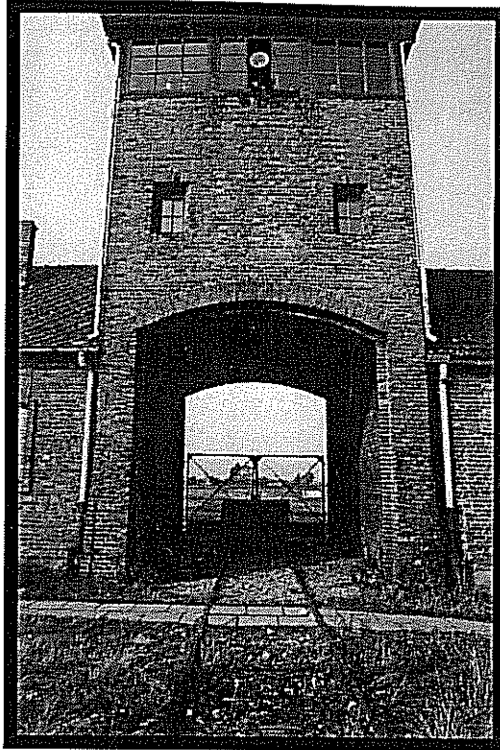
The prisoners faced their last life-threatening hurdle when they were stopped in a town called Buchberg, just outside of Munich. The march came to a halt. Several ambulances approached. The vehicles were being used to transport a group of SS men from Auschwitz. These men were attempting to escape the allies by going deep into Germany. One of the SS was known as the terror of Auschwitz. He had been in charge of the crematoria. He confronted the commanding officer and demanded that he turn the prisoners over to him. He intended to march the prisoners to the Tyrol Mountains and to destroy them. Fortunately, the commanding officer resisted. He addressed one of the prisoners who was known to be an activist. "If you promise to put in a good word for me when the Americans come, I won't turn a single prisoner over to this SS man," the officer told him. The activist made the promise and the commanding officer denied the SS their victims.

> *They drove off without us... We finally fell asleep, exhausted.*

The liberating forces were approaching, but there were people who no longer had the will to live. One elderly man from Pruzhany was near death. Saul begged him not to give up.

> *There were some people from my home town. There was an elderly person, the brother of a man who lived in the other half of our house... This man survived in Auschwitz, while his brother perished. A few more hours and we knew he would be liberated, and we knew the Americans would come. The guards were gone so that we knew that we would be taken over by the Americans very shortly, and he suddenly lost his will. He was very sick, very weak, and I begged him to stay alive, to hold on; we will give him food, we will get anything. The Americans will come and we will get him to a hospital. He didn't live. He died, maybe an hour before we were liberated. We were liberated about 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon. He passed away about 2:00 o'clock... he just didn't make it. He lost complete will. He said 'I don't care. I don't want to live. There is nothing to live for. I lost my family. I can't carry on like this. There is just nothing saved.' And many people died. Some people did survive, and the Americans came and took them to the hospital, but many didn't live anyhow.*

Many people who had struggled to survive through all the terror simply gave up in the last moments. They just could not manage to hold on to life any longer. Some no longer cared.

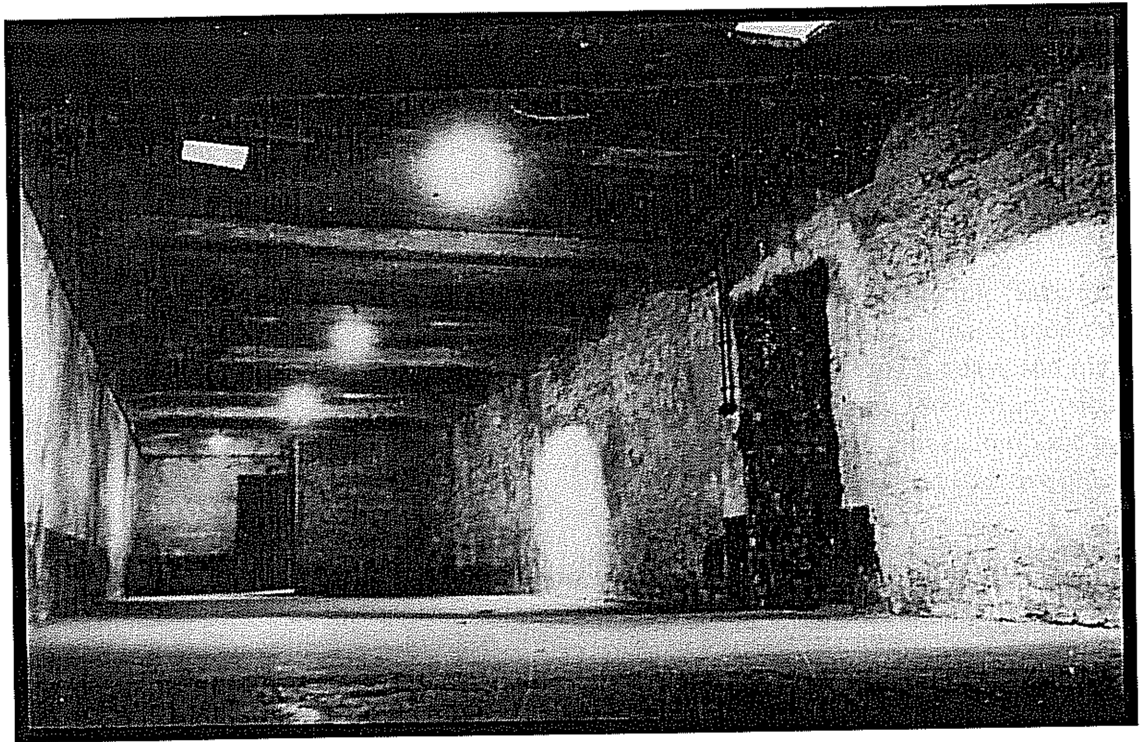


Main Gate to Auschwitz
Courtesy: Norman Morrison

Prisoners standing during a roll call

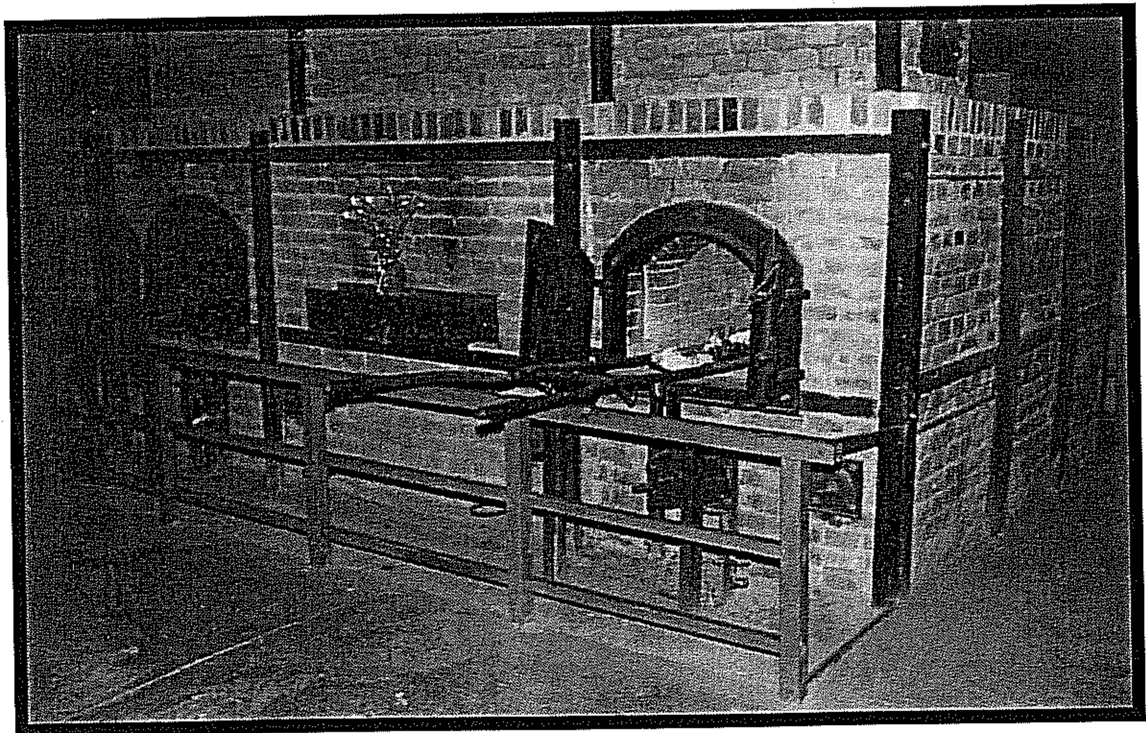
Robert A. Schmuhl

Courtesy of USHMM



Gas chamber

Courtesy: Norman Morrison

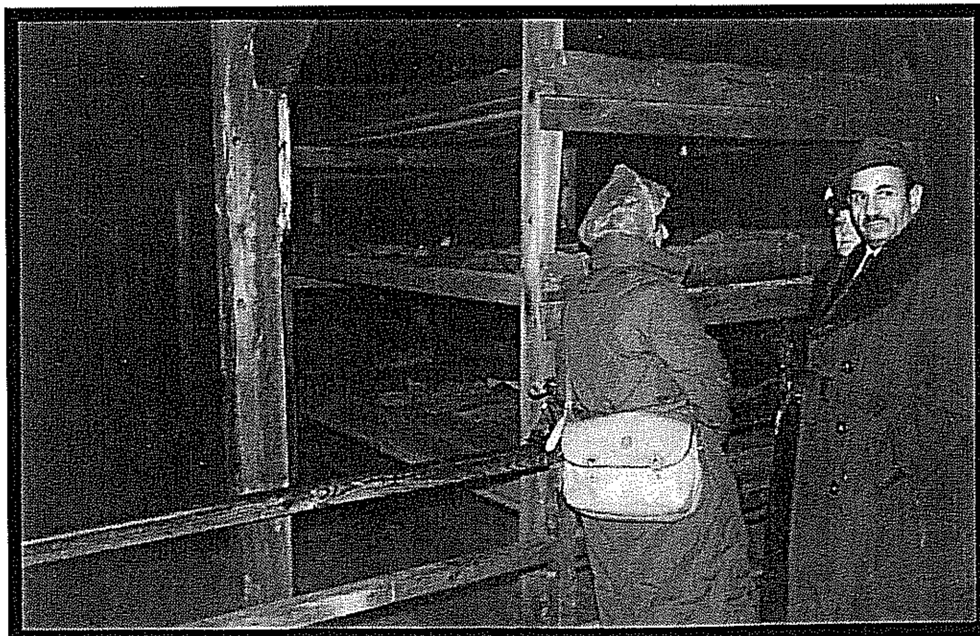


Ovens in the crematorium

Courtesy: Norman Morrison

Latrines

Courtesy: Norman Morrison



Prisoners' Bunks

Courtesy: Norman Morrison

PART III

A NEW START

Chapter 8
Liberation

At 3:00 PM on May 1, 1945 Patton's Third Army liberated the prisoners in the German town of Buchberg. Saul describes those last hours:

> *We were free. When we woke up on May 1st all of the guards were gone...We were free, but we had no place to go. Nobody went anywhere. We stayed there, but people were screaming and carrying on and dancing in the street. I wasn't doing anything...I was so damned sick and exhausted, so starved, so weak that I was laying in a house on the floor. I remember, under a table...I was too sick, too weak, too exhausted, too tired to even yell and scream and carry on like the others did. When we woke up on May 1st all of the guards were gone...The guards were gone, so we knew we would be taken over by the Americans. I was just lying there. I didn't have any enthusiasm or energy left.*

They were almost afraid to believe they were truly liberated.

> *However, when we finally saw the approaching tanks and the American soldiers that called out to us and handed out cigarettes and chocolates and gum, well, it was like someone lifted a curtain right in front of your eyes, that you were in the darkness all the time, and you could finally see again. It was suddenly the full realization, but you were afraid to talk about it...Maybe the fact that we could be liberated was really here...You could see, and you could hear, and you could touch the American soldiers and the American armaments, and know that they are our saviors, that nothing is going to harm us anymore, that we will actually live. We cried. We talked to them. We kissed them.*
>
> *In a few days they organized kitchens, food and clothing for us... they were very humane and tried to do something and do something in a hurry...the American soldiers gave me life, and they continued to give me life and all the breaks since I came to this country.*

After four years of tribulation under the German yoke, Saul faced the great unknown. He was twenty-two years old. The door to his past was closed. He was alone, a displaced person, without family, without a home, and without a country.

Betreuungsstelle
für sämtliche Ausländer

Ausweis

Name: Nitzberg, Israel geb. 16.1.1923
Geburtsort: Pruzany/Polen
Wohnort: Marburg/L., Pilgrimmstein 3a
wie lange im KZ oder Kriegsgefangener?
1942-1.5.1945 K.Z. aus rassischen Gründen
Staatsangehörigkeit: staatenlos (Jude)
Inhaber dieses Ausweises hat sich ordnungsgemäß bei mir gemeldet.

Der Eigentümer dieser roten Karte ist bevorzugt zu behandeln.

Information Office
for Foreigners

Certificate

Name: Nitzberg, Israel born 16.1.1923
Place of birth Pruzany/Poland
Dwelling-Place Marburg/L., Pilgrimmstein 3a
How long in concentration-camp or P.O.W.
1942-1.5.1945 C.C. for racial reasons
Nationality: without any nationality (Jude)
Bearer of this certificate had duly reported himself to
Der Oberbürgermeister als Ortspolizeibehörde
Im Auftrage:
Stadtkommissar

Official certificate declaring Saul Nitzberg is 'staatenlos (Jude)'

(Jew without a country)

It was time now to step back into the real world, but Saul had no anchor. Freedom, which he had craved for so long, presented a new challenge. He had to adjust to freedom.

> *I was jubilant, but at the same time I was very sad, very lonely. I didn't have any friends there. My friends had dispersed. I spent a lot of time reminiscing and planning, but I didn't know where to go...I tried to adjust to freedom, but it wasn't easy...I had a lot of sores on my body...I weighed less than 100 pounds. I was very weak, but I did not have an actual illness. I had swelling of the legs. I think I injured my kidneys.*

Again, Saul's will to survive emerged. He searched for a job. He was fortunate, or perhaps unfortunate, to get a job in an American kitchen. He cleared the tables and trays in the officers' mess hall. Starved for so long, he suddenly had access to an array of rich food. He stuffed himself with all of the wonderful leftovers – bacon, eggs, muffins, sausages, marmalade, and hot rolls. He devoured cans of evaporated milk and fruit salad, and became deathly ill with dysentery. Fortunately, he survived the experience, but he lost his job. Many other survivors died because their gastric systems could not handle the rich food that they devoured following the extreme starvation that they had suffered.

When Saul regained his strength he moved into a German house that had been requisitioned for the survivors by the allied authorities. It was communal living, with five or six survivors to a house. There, in a home that had once been German, Saul took his first bath in several years. He spent hours in the bathtub, grateful for that simple pleasure. The American Red Cross sent packages. The authorities opened mess halls, fed the survivors three meals a day, and provided them with clothing and pocket money. Despite the generosity of the allied forces, Saul knew that he could not continue to drift without purpose or direction. He also knew that he had to leave Germany. He explained, "We don't belong in Germany. We wouldn't want to be in Germany. I didn't want to interact with any of the Germans." He kept asking himself the question, "What next?"

> *Quo vadis domini? Where will I go? I was in very deep thought and I didn't know what to do. I was thinking, where could I go? There is no sense going back to Poland. There is nobody there. I was thinking of going to Palestine, but it wasn't easy and I had nobody there either, except that I would have been among Jews. And then I started to think about Russia, because I knew that I had two aunts and probably a brother. Now that's a heavy contingency of relatives. That's about the time they set up the Russian desk, as they called it, because officers with impressive uniforms had started to recruit people to go to Russia. And after some thinking, maybe a couple of weeks or less, I lined up to sign to go to Russia.*

Once again a trick of fate changed the course of Saul's life.

> *And as I was in line, a fellow from my hometown, I don't remember his name, saw me in line and motioned me to come out...He took me aside and very quietly said, 'Get out of here.' He said he went with a similar transport just a week ago. After they crossed the border, they were put in cattle cars and told they were going to a concentration camp in Siberia. The Russians felt that If they had survived, they must have collaborated with the Germans...I wasn't going to take a chance.*

He had no intention of going from the brutal German concentration camps to a Siberian labor camp. He took his friend's advice and stepped out of line.

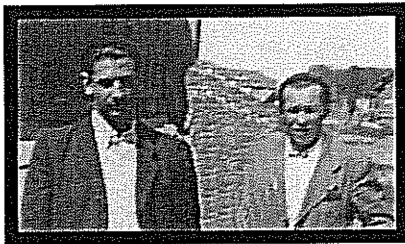
Saul was faced with a quandary. Where should he go? He knew that he did not want to return to Poland. His home had been destroyed. When the Germans left Pruzhany, they set fire to the entire ghetto. Furthermore, he did not want to live in an anti-Semitic country. There was only one option left. He must find a way to get to America, where he knew that he had relatives.

> *So my heart was set on going to America. I remembered that I had my mother's sister in America and I had my cousins on my father's side. They are not very close relatives, not like a brother or sister, but still close as can be.*

In the meantime, Displaced Persons camps were set up to house the survivors. There were two DP camps in Germany, one in Landsberg and the other in Feldafing. Saul decided to go to Landsberg. Much to his surprise and joy, he met up with his old friend, Itsche Janowitz. Saul and Itsche were told that several people from Pruzhany had gone to the DP camp in Feldafing. Since they wanted to be among people from their home, the boys rented a truck and drove to Feldafing, where they joined their friends. Saul described their reunion.

> *We had a marvelous reunion. We lived in two rooms, men and women together. The survivors had plenty to eat. They shared their clothing with us... We were one big family.*
>
> *They told us about a lot of people who were going to America. I wanted to go to the United States too, but I didn't know how to get there... To make a long story short, I was in the DP camp only for a short while. I got a job as a supervisor in a kitchen for children. It was like a day care center. I knew nothing about kitchens, but I got a job, just enough to be occupied.*

Each experience brought Saul one step closer to achieving his goals.



Saul and Itsche in Feldafing

Survivors gather in Feldafing DP camp

Saul in right forefront

Reunion of old friends after liberation - 1945

Saul – 4th from right

Itsche – 2nd from right

Chapter 9
A Door Swings Open

Although Saul was glad to have a job, he realized that there was no future in supervising a kitchen. He had dreams for himself, but he did not know how to pursue them. Then a door swung open. He learned that UNRRA, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, had offered to provide young survivors with room, board, and tuition at a university in Germany. Saul wanted to do something with his life. His dream about becoming a physician was rekindled. His father's message, the importance of learning, rang truer than ever for him.

> *The influence I had from my father made the decision for me. My father always told me that education you must have. They can take anything away from you, but they can't take away your education. He was so right, because when we got off the train and left the satchel behind us, and when we got into the sauna and undressed, we were stripped of everything – all the savings, all the worldly goods, but what we had inside nobody could take away from us.*

Saul leaped at the chance to study once again. He joined a study group of forty other survivors in the DP camp. All of these young people wanted to go to medical school. Among the students was a young man who had shared the bunk with Saul in Auschwitz, Alex Kott. They had become friends in Auschwitz, and had been evacuated from there at the same time. They roomed with each other in the DP Camp. The boys managed to get hold of some books and studied together to prepare for the university entrance exams. Although they tried hard to help each other, they found it difficult to concentrate on their studies. They had been away from school for a number of years and were not familiar with scientific German. Fortunately, they were highly motivated and they studied day and night. Fourteen of the forty succeeded in passing the exam. Saul and Alex were among them. Within a short time they were admitted to a German medical school in Marburg. Once again they were roommates.

Dictionary in hand, Saul began his medical education. He could read and write in Polish, Yiddish, French, and Russian, but his German was limited to the small vocabulary he had acquired in the concentration camps. The dictionary was essential.

The Jewish students did not mix with the German students. The professors and instructors masked their hostility and did not reveal their wartime activities. The Jewish students experienced benign neglect. They sensed the hostility in the air, but they were not deterred from focusing on their studies.

Saul in German Medical School 1945

One night Saul and some friends attended a Friday night service in a private home that had been converted to a synagogue. He met an American soldier who spoke Yiddish. The soldier told Saul that he would soon be returning to the United States. Saul mentioned that he had relatives in New York. Although he did not know their names, he asked the soldier to put a notice in the *Forward,* (the Jewish newspaper published in the United States), stating that Solya Nitzberg was looking for his relatives. The soldier took out a book of matches, wrote Saul's name on the cover, and put it in his vest pocket. When Saul saw him scribble his name on the matchbook cover, he was convinced that the young man would forget all about him. Saul was wrong. The soldier did send the message to the newspaper. Saul always regretted that he did not recall the soldier's name and could not let him know how grateful he was. That one act had changed his life.

A friend of Saul's family read the notice in the *Forward* and called them. These relatives were the very people who Veve had contacted in 1939 to initiate papers to bring Lova and Saul to America. As soon as they learned that Saul was alive, Minna and Jacob Field and Manya Kagan contacted the Red Cross. Within a few months, May 1946, Saul was called to the U.S. Consulate in Germany.

HEBREW SHELTERING AND IMMIGRANT AID SOCIETY (HIAS)
425 LAFAYETTE STREET, NEW YORK 3, N. Y.
Date July 18 1946
Dr. ... gratefully acknowledges the receipt of your contribution of $162
One Hundred Sixty-Two Dollars.
Re- Israel Nitzberg Germany
Holdeman Cashier — HARRY FISCHEL, Treasurer.
Dr. Jacob Field
155 W. 20th St.
N.Y.C.
Your generosity helps to give aid to the Jewish wanderers and to provide food and shelter to the hungry and unemployed.

Fee to HIAS for aiding immigration efforts for Saul and Lova, signed by Jacob Field - 1946

The American Consul informed Saul that he was scheduled to leave from the port of Bremerhafen in June. This posed a huge problem for Saul. He was scheduled to take his final exams in June. He asked the Consul if he could delay his departure until August so that he would

have proof when he got to America that he had completed his first year of medical school. The man was enraged. He banged his fist on the desk, and told Saul in no uncertain terms, "Thousands of people are trying to get to the U.S. They are not as lucky as you, and you have a chance. You found relatives to send you papers and you are going to tell me when you will be ready to go?. I want you to know, young man, that if you don't go now, I will see to it that you never get to the United States!" Without further discussion, Saul said "Yes, sir." He would not jeopardize his chance to emigrate.

Saul's family began to send him packages. He bartered some of the articles, and with some of the money he had a suit made for himself out of a woolen blanket. He used the rest of the bartered money to pay for English lessons. He learned to read a few words, but he found English difficult and he did not learn to speak.

Bidding his friends good-bye, Saul boarded the train that would take him to the port of Bremerhafen. With Saul on board, the U.S. Marine Flasher left Bremerhafen around June 6, 1946. He traveled in steerage. The first day of the trip he ate heartily. The following day the seas got rough, and for the next ten days Saul was violently ill, suffering from nausea and vomiting. To make matters worse, he felt uneasy about going to America. He was delighted to be out of Germany, but he was concerned about what lay ahead.

> *I was very apprehensive...I remembered my cousins, two sisters, vaguely...I wasn't sure what the reception would be. I wasn't sure. They sent papers all right, but will I be able to live with them? Where will I start? What's my future? My hopes were that I could go right into college, finish medical school, and become somebody, but I didn't know the terrain. I didn't know the language, I couldn't communicate with them. I was scared. I was shy. Yet I was full of hope and joy that I could get out of Germany. I couldn't stand Germany. I couldn't stay in Germany. Everything that reminded me of the past, spoken German, reminded me of orders that I received. But it was still a big question mark, a big unknown, how will the reception be? How warmly will they receive me?*

As the ship grew closer to American soil, Saul became more and more apprehensive. How could he adjust to a new country when he couldn't even speak the language? The only English he had learned was the one terse phrase that the American sailors shouted when the passengers were boarding the ship, "Take it easy, take it easy!" How could he make his way in a new world without a friend or even a familiar face? How could he ever feel part of a family that he knew only as "cousins living in America"? He had only seen them once, a long time ago, when he was too young to remember. How could he be sure that this family, who he barely knew, even wanted him? Would they feel he was a burden? When the ship passed by the Statue of Liberty and approached the docking area, his relatives were standing on the dock, waving. He felt better.

> *Well, I was very lucky. My relatives were on the plank. When I approached the shore and I saw the Statue of Liberty I knew what the Statue of Liberty meant. It was the gate to liberty. We went to the land of freedom, freedom that I certainly would appreciate because I didn't have it for so many years in the Nazi concentration camps.*

Saul was in tears as he saw the renowned statue. Now he was ready to enter into a new world, and into a new life.