

## World War II

As father departed to the U.S.A. the world edged closer to a terrible catastrophe. In 1938, Franco won the Civil War in Spain. On March 14, Hitler returned to Vienna and announced the “Anschluss” (union of Austria with Germany). On September 30, in Munich, England and France consented to the partition of Czechoslovakia. In October, the German army entered Sudetenland and Poland annexed Silesia, taken from the Czechs. In November, the famous Crystal Night horror occurred. Germans went on a rampage killing Jews at random while the free world stood by.

In March of 1939, the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia. In June, 907 Jews who left Germany as refugees aboard the Hamburg-American liner *St. Louis* were denied permission to enter Cuba. Among them were 400 women and children. No country would accept them and they were returned to Germany. In August the Germans and the Soviets signed a non-aggression treaty. On September 1 Germany invaded Poland and World War II began.

Our roomer had been right. Prior to the outbreak of the War, mother had taken in a Polish woman to help with the expenses of running the house. I could never forget her remark “Zaczyna sie z Zydami anskonczy sie znamy.” (It starts with the Jews and it will end with us.)

### The Russians Occupy Lida

I am writing this so that you, my children and grandchildren, will understand and remember what happened while I was growing up. On Friday morning September 1, 1939, German planes attacked my city. The railroad station and the airport were the targets. The city itself did not suffer damage. As I look back, I realize that the agreement signed between the Germans and the Soviet Union saved Lida from destruction.

I was fortunate to escape the mobilization of the Polish armed forces. The fact that I was a Jew made this possible. In Poland every male high school graduate was supposed to have the right to enter officer's candidate school. I applied but, being Jewish, was told that the quota was full. God was with me. To the best of my knowledge, my non-Jewish friends who were in the service were mobilized and did not come back.

A few days after Germany attacked Poland, the civil government in Lida disappeared. Those of us who had received military or paramilitary training got hold of rifles and guns and patrolled the city to prevent attacks on Jews by the Poles. Perhaps as a consequence, the Jewish community was not troubled by the Poles. I was among the people with rifles who patrolled the streets. My officer training in high school and my experience as a leader in the Zionist Youth movement paid off handsomely.

As the Germans advanced deeper into Poland, I and others prepared to move eastward toward the Russian border. During those days, waiting for the Nazis and not knowing what lay ahead, we studied the Bible to find consolation; I remember it very vividly. On September 16 the Russians invaded Poland. A few days later they were in Lida. The fact that Lida was occupied by the Russians rather than by the Germans saved my life. The Russians arrived during the Jewish holidays, if I remember correctly.

One day, while we were waiting for the Russians to occupy Lida, I went into the City Hall. To my surprise, I found a friend occupying the mayor's chair. I asked him how this came to be. He explained that, while a member of the left wing Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzier, he had also been a member of the Communist party. The Communist party was illegal in Poland. My friend had used the Hashomer as a cover. He asked if I would like to join the militia, and I did.

People in the militia were given special privileges. Never did I have to wait in line for anything. This by itself made joining the militia worthwhile. People looked up to you; it was a good feeling.

One time I was assigned to watch a brewery at night. The brewery was located near a cemetery. In those days, I was a young, fearful man and the thought of the cemetery made me very uncomfortable, especially at night. But I knew my duty and I did it. The first few minutes were the worst. The high grass bending with the wind created shadows. Needless to say, my imagination worked overtime. After a while I began to think rationally and the chore became bearable. That assignment at the brewery made me grow up and think more clearly.

A few days later a friend and I were assigned to patrol the railroad station. In the morning, we saw a Russian tank approach the station. A soldier jumped off the tank, saluted us, and told us that we were relieved from patrol duty. The soldier ordered us to leave, holding our rifles with the barrels facing down, and to return to our quarters at the police station. We obeyed the order and went on our way.

When the Soviet forces entered Lida, I felt that a new life had begun for us. I was sure that the Polish anti-Jewish feelings would be replaced by a new freedom. That freedom turned out to be short-lived. Zionism was designated as counter-revolutionary and forbidden. I would wake up in the morning and find that someone had been arrested in the middle of the night and taken to jail. The crime may have been ownership of land or of a manufacturing plant. This happened almost daily.

We were safe for the time being. We did not own any property, the store having been sold sometime after father left for the U.S. So we were not considered capitalist. Moreover, the Russians did not know of my Zionist activities. I had earlier buried my Hanoar Hatzioni flag, hoping that the war would be short and that I would be able to recover it later. (I thought that France and England would engage Germany from the west, Poland from the east, and that Germany would be crushed. How wrong I was.) I put the flag in a tin can and buried it in the back yard of my house. This action had important consequences, which I shall describe later.

The Russians now ran Lida. As they organized the civil administration, life fell back into place. Students returned to

school, stores opened up, and new Russian movies arrived. As more Russians arrived in Lida, there was a need for lodging. A member of the N.K.V.D. was assigned to live with us. The N.K.V.D. was the forerunner of the present K.G.B. The man assigned to us was an officer in charge of the jail.

In their zeal to organize a better city, some of the lay people went overboard. For example, new pedestrian traffic regulations were enacted. The most absurd was one that decreed that each sidewalk should be one way, the sidewalk on one side of the street for foot traffic in one direction and that on the other side for the opposite direction. Naturally this regulation did not work. It was eventually rescinded.

I remained in the militia under Russian supervision. For the moment, I was happy. As a militia member, I had privileges and money, although there was little to buy. I traveled to Bialystock, a large city not far from the new German border, to buy leather boots. One day I had the pleasure of escorting a former teacher of mine, a blatant anti-semitic, to jail. Russian soldiers arrested him and I was told to accompany them. As we marched the prisoner through the streets of Lida to the jail, I walked in front with my rifle and two Russian soldiers with bayonets walked behind him. What his fate was, I don't know.

Before the outbreak of the War, while still a student, I fell in love with Fryda. She attended the Gimnazjum Panstwowe, the public high school. In my senior year of school, Fryda embroidered the hat of my uniform; this symbolized graduation. As the prom approached, she taught me to dance, a skill that had been frowned upon by Hanoar Hatzioni. At the prom, we danced as Fryda counted one-two-three, one-two-three, and so on. She was a very good teacher and I have enjoyed dancing ever since.

I spent much time in Fryda's home listening to music and talking with her. I can still see the second floor apartment. I most remember evenings in the fall and winter. The snow was falling and we were listening to a song with a beautiful melody and the words "the snow is falling, a white snow, a silver snow."

When I was in the militia, I accompanied Fryda to school each morning, my rifle on my shoulder. We saw each other until I left Lida. Before going, I asked her to come with me. She did not want to leave her parents and so remained. After the War, I learned that Fryda was alive in a refugee camp. I applied to U.N.R.O. (United Nations Relief Organization) for a job in Europe, my intention being to look for her. While waiting for an answer, I met your mother. I did see Fryda in New York some time later.

### Planning to Leave

In the house we settled into a normal routine, except for mother. She planned to get us reunited with father.

At one point a man I did not know came to the house and conversed in Russian with mother. Afterwards, I was told that the man was a Belorussian and that he had told mother not to worry, he knew father. After I prodded mother for an explanation, she told me that during the war between the Poles and the Soviets in 1919–1920, father had been helpful to the Russians. I was surprised not to have heard this before. Given the pain the Poles had inflicted on the Jewish population, my father's action seemed normal to me. But he had kept it a secret through all those years in order not to antagonize the Polish authorities.

The actions that my mother now initiated must have been with God's blessing and help; there is no other explanation for it. She implemented her desire to leave Lida. When I think about it, I still find it unbelievable.

First she went to the authorities, trying to find the proper person with whom to deal. After a long struggle she was told to go to the Attorney General. She saw him and was told "Father should come back. America is here." Mother was not satisfied with this answer and began to think about other ways of getting out. As for me, I didn't mind staying in Lida. But mother persisted. She told us that living under the Russians is no picnic. She must have known what she was saying from her own experience. I am glad we took her advice.

With legal avenues blocked, mother started to inquire about leaving Lida illegally. She planned to go to the small town of Ejszyski, which had been part of Poland before the War but now was annexed to the Republic of Lithuania. We had cousins in Ejszyski and hoped from there to go on to the States. Mother sought to find people who could smuggle us across the border. Involved were my mother, grandmother, sister, my younger brother, and myself. Mother informed her sister and my paternal grandfather. My aunt, her family, and a few other families decided on the same action.

While the plans were being formulated, the N.K.V.D. officer was still living with us, the maid Nadja left for her village, and the conditions in the city became less pleasant every day. More and more people were arrested. The hand of big brother became heavier.

Our problem was how to handle our live-in Russian officer. Mother decided to tell him that we were trying to leave Lida; she did not tell him when and how. He was very sympathetic and understanding. Would he have been a Jewish Communist, we would never have gotten out. The officer eventually told mother that she, my grandmother, and brother could try to leave but that my sister Mira and I must remain. He said that Mira and I were young and that the Soviet Union needed young people. He also warned mother: "Please be careful and don't fall into my hands." As I mentioned before, this officer was in charge of the jail.

Mother now began to sell off some of the things in the house. In order not to alert our Russian roomer, items belonging to my sister and myself were not touched. Naturally the plans for leaving still included the two of us. The crossing into Lithuania was set for the last week in December. My paternal grandfather made the arrangements. He knew trustworthy peasants who lived near the new border.

As a militiaman, I was able to contribute by determining the best time to make the crossing. I knew the guards' patrol schedule. For some time I had informed members of an or-

ganized underground Zionist movement, who spread the word to Jews seeking to flee the Nazis to the relative safety of Lithuania. I was proud to be able to help. The aim was to get the refugees to Lithuania and then to Palestine.

I myself had one problem to solve. If I were caught deserting my post, I would simply be put against the wall and shot. I decided to obtain a doctor's statement that I was sick in order to get a few days furlough. To prove I was sick, I smoked a few very strong Russian cigarettes and stood near a fireplace in the doctor's office. These actions made my head quite warm and my heart palpitate. I had no trouble getting the furlough.

### Refugees

It was now the last week in December. Mother, my sister Mira, and brother Shlomo were first to go. A few days before the New Year, dressed as peasants, they met at my paternal grandfather's house near the outskirts of the city. There they waited for darkness and for the peasants who were to take them across the border. My grandmother crossed the border herself in a sleigh.

I was not present when they left that night. I was restless and felt that morning would never come. So I decided to go to work, regardless of the furlough. Patrolling the downtown area, I thought I heard my brother calling me as some trucks went by. I was fear stricken, remembering the N.K.V.D. officer's warning that he could not help us out if caught. In the morning, grandfather assured me that everything went okay. I was relieved and began to prepare for my departure. It was decided that my cousin Mitchell, a girl named Olka, and I would cross the border on New Year's Eve, December 31, 1939.

I was ready. I wore the new leather boots I had bought in Bialystock. Inside the boots I placed straw and paper in order to keep the frost out. I was dressed and fortified for the occasion. I said goodbye to my girlfriend, my grandfather, my father's sister and her children, and waited for the peasants who

would guide us across the border. They finally showed up and I was on the way, hoping for a better and safer world.

As we left the area in a one-horse sled, my friends and the people of Lida were ushering in the New Year. We rode a few hours and reached the woods. There we left the sled and walked through the forest toward our destination. In the darkness I suddenly saw my cousin fall and a flash. I thought he had been shot, my earmuffs muffling the sound of the firing. As I bent over him, Mitchell told me he had tripped and that the flash had been made by his flashlight. Relieved, we went on.

We crossed the border very early in the morning and were told by the guide to enter a house on the outskirts of Ejszyski, near the cemetery. The people there were Jewish and expecting us. I was put in a room by myself; Mitchell and the girl were somewhere else in the house. Less than an hour passed when there was a knock at the door and a Lithuanian border patrol officer entered, looking for us. It seems that we had left tracks in the snow in the walk to the house. Or perhaps our Polish guide sold us out. I shall never know.

My cousin, the girl, and a man I did not know were awakened and told they were being taken to the police station. The border patrol officer had no idea I was there in another room. But my cousin, taken by surprise and shaken, asked the guardsmen to wait while he proceeded to get me. So I was taken to the station too.

I wore leather boots in the style of Polish officers and my father's fire department officer's belt as well. At first, the police thought they had captured a Polish officer. In time, and one hundred dollars later (twenty-five for each of us), we were released. The people in the house where we had taken refuge notified our relatives and handled the transaction. In this way, on January 1, 1940, I became a refugee.