

displayed multiple shades of color, giving the impression of an enchanting quilt stretching out as far as the eye could see. Some contained green colored oats that grew two to four feet high. Others were wheat fields with plants five to six feet tall that ranged from light brown to golden. There was lush red and white clover, and many other dark green leafy crops that filled out the rest of the panoramic view. Thousands of deep blue cornflowers, red poppies, and a colorful variety of wildflowers grew intertwined like an artist's design throughout the fields.

Sometimes I would stand on top of the rolling hill overlooking this breathtaking landscape and, with the wind blowing softly, I would pretend to be a maestro conducting a waltz to one of the melodies of Johann Strauss, or perhaps a frolicsome dance by Antonin Dvorak. The colorful crops and flowers would sway in gentle unison to the rhythm of the music. After a while the wind would change in intensity and direction, creating the illusion of ballerinas entering the stage for their dance. They would perform jumps and splits, ending with graceful pirouettes. Sometimes a sudden calm and silence would prevail for a short moment, only to be gently broken by the sound of a trickling brook meandering through the fields nearby. This was the cue for the chorale to join in. The frogs were first with their croaking voices, followed by cooing doves and chirping crickets. Sometimes bumblebees would come to join in for the orchestra's rousing finale! It truly was a beautiful place to be, to relax, and to dream. Life could not have been any better. Everything looked so very promising for the future.

On the horizon, however, dark clouds began to form. A storm was brewing. The flicker of lightning and the rolling sound of thunder echoed in the distance, announcing the tumultuous violence of the tempest that would bring upheaval and anxiety to this serene and peaceful life.

## Chapter 4

Summer vacation of 1938 was over. In three months I'd turn 13, and on that day, according to Jewish tradition, I would enter the elite club of "manhood." Preparations for my Bar Mitzvah had to be made. We had to decide where it was going to be held, who was going to be invited, and we had to make sure that I was ready for my Torah reading. The latter was our most immediate concern. Every Friday evening and Saturday morning, I went with my dad and brother to attend services in a semi-Orthodox Temple. The print in the Torah is written in the language of the ancient Israelites, which was spoken by the Jews long before the time of Christ. Rabbis and Cantors are well versed in Hebrew language and learning. A Cantor is considered a Rabbi's helper. He performs prayer songs and readings from the Torah during services.

One such Cantor, a man with a bushy gray beard, long side curls, a huge black silk hat, and a long black satin coat that was tied with a sash around his waist became my Hebrew tutor for the next three months. He lived across town in one of the oldest sections of Kraków, called "Kazimierz" after the Polish King who established this ghetto back in the 1600s. Many ultra-Orthodox Jews remained in the old ghetto, where they had developed a close religious community.

The age of this old part of the city was visible everywhere. It was a drab looking place. Everything was gray, and the walls of many of the worn-out buildings leaned to one side. Even the cobblestone streets were worn out from age. The scarcity of greenery or any bright color gave an outsider the impression of destitution, and yet everything was extremely clean. The very religious local gentry, young and old, wore black outer attire with white shirts. All males from a very young age had side locks and wore head coverings at all times.

I traveled there every Saturday morning to see my tutor. Since it was all the way across town, I rode my bike to the outskirts of Kazimierz, locked

my bike to a lamppost, and walked the rest of the way. Each time that I entered this ghetto, it seemed as if I entered a different world and a different time. I felt like a foreigner invading territory that I had no right to be in. People looked at me in a strange way, and I returned curious looks at them.

Upon arriving at my tutor's house and entering the kitchen, the Cantor would sit at the table dressed in his ceremonial garb, waving me on to take a seat at the table. In a deep melodic voice he began the traditional opening prayer. So began my grueling two-hour sessions. I have mentioned earlier the strict observance of the Sabbath, but I would like to add that with the very religious, the ritual becomes even stricter! In his kitchen, there was nothing visible other than the cabinets, the table and chairs, the sink, and the stove. Everything was bare with the exception of the sink, stove, and kitchen table—their surfaces were covered with newspaper. The heavy wooden floor planks, worn badly from age, were clean and smelled good from the soap scrubbing they received the day before, leaving them sparkling and bleached like a butcher block.

It is very difficult to learn something one does not understand. Hebrew, like any other language, has to be learned from the basic alphabet all the way up to speech and grammar, but that was not to be in my case. All that mattered was to learn my "shtick" for the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Somehow, the two-hour sessions I spent to learn my "script" during those three months was not just about my Bar Mitzvah or how well I would recite my reading on that important day. It was much more. I felt a reverence that lingers to this day in the presence of this deeply, sincerely religious man. He had a certain aura of mystique about him. Sitting in this spartan environment, I listened to his deep, spiritual prayers that were punctuated now and then by total silence. One could argue that not all knowledge is obtained from studying and reading books. Silence and meditation can also be a powerful source of learning.

When the day was finally at hand, I remember standing there in front

of my family members, relatives, and strangers, with my stomach in dozens of knots and my throat as dry as the Sahara Desert. I hesitated and looked at the Cantor who stood beside me. With fire in his eyes he whispered, "If you don't start right now and perform how I've taught you, then may the Lord have mercy on you!" The reading was endless. Being under pressure and dealing with the difficulty of deciphering the Hebrew print, I lost my cues several times, but the Cantor, anticipating the possibility of me breaking down, guided me with a yad safely through the rest of the reading. This golden pointer, literally translated to mean "hand," is used for the reading of the Torah.

My reception afterward included many well-wishers, gifts, and, of course, food. I do recall my disappointment when I realized that my preconceived idea about getting a watch didn't materialize. I wanted a watch so badly! Instead, I received a prayer book, new clothing, and a pen and pencil set. I believe that my parents and well-wishers thought that writing and reading was more important than looking at a watch. I didn't get my first watch until eight years later after the war when I was 21 years old.

In the spring of 1939, strong rumors of a possible war with Germany started to spread throughout Poland. Germany had already annexed Austria and part of western Czechoslovakia. Many Austrian people were known to be of German descent and welcomed the annexation. German nationals called *Sudetendeutsche* also inhabited Western Czechoslovakia. By a remarkable coincidence, two men from that region emerged who left permanent legacies that impacted the lives of many Jews. One, of course, was Oskar Schindler and the other one was a Gestapo man, Hans Fritsche.

With each month, the reality of war grew stronger. The Polish felt that Germany could turn their military might against them next. To play it safe, the Polish army was mobilized and put on full alert. Poland's chances to withstand an invasion of superior German forces were very slim. In 1937, Germany had a population of 49 million. After the annexation of Austria

and the Sudetenland, their new head count had reached over 60 million people. Germany had a formidable air force and their land forces were all motorized with an emphasis on tanks. Poland, on the other hand, had a population of about 27 million people at the outbreak of war. The military was, to say it bluntly, a joke! Most of their air force consisted of World War I biplanes, and their ground forces consisted of a stately cavalry armed with long shiny swords and an infantry that was not motorized, with the exception of a few outdated World War I tanks. They simply were outmanned and out-gunned. England and France promised to come and help Poland if war broke out. This was reassuring news for everyone—but it was not to be. Political deals hammered out behind closed doors between Western European countries had used Poland as a sacrificial lamb to satisfy Germany's thirst for territorial expansions.

Meanwhile, the civil defense department issued an order to build bomb shelters in every basement. They were to be reinforced with heavy boards and beams to absorb the shocks of exploding bombs. Cots, blankets, extra food and water, first aid kits, and tools such as picks and shovels had to be stored in the shelters. Specially designed shelters were also built in backyards and city parks. They were designed to be six feet in depth and three feet wide. The sides were supported with boards and wooden beams. Each so-called tunnel was 20 feet long, built in a zigzag design with an entrance on each end. The whole shelter then was covered with heavy planks and two feet of dirt on top of that, and finally grass and shrubbery were planted on top for camouflage. As it turned out, those shelters were effective in saving a lot of lives. However, in some instances, when bombs exploded very close by, those tunnels became instant coffins!

As the war drew closer, the civil defense also issued a total blackout order throughout the country. People put blankets against windows and doors to make sure that if they had lights on in their homes, none of the

glow would be seen outside. Special blackout units were formed to patrol the streets, enforcing the strict ordinance. If violators were found, they were charged as traitors to the country and executed on the spot!

A question often asked of me by inquisitive or concerned people is, "Why didn't you people just leave Germany, Poland, or Europe for that matter and start a new life somewhere else?" Good question!

Immigrating to another country was easy, as long as a person was able to comply with the already strict conditions imposed by the free countries. It was easier said than done. Visas were based on tight admission quotas that were based upon nationality and religion. President Roosevelt indeed had strong words for Hitler's behavior, and so did the rest of the world leaders. But, President Roosevelt and members of his cabinet didn't relax the strict restrictions on immigration to America, nor did any other country. It almost seemed like a world conspiracy—nobody allowed the Jews to escape the Nazi's clutches and atrocities. Strong words and concern regarding the mistreatment of Jews did not relax the tight quotas and it did not help preserve lives. There simply was no one to turn to and nowhere to go! We faced the probability of becoming an extinct race.

We all are familiar with the best-known victim of the Holocaust—Anne Frank. Her diary depicts two years of hiding and her betrayal. It tells about the horrible time in Auschwitz and then the final destination, the most notorious death camp in northern Germany—Bergen-Belsen.\*

In 2007, 62 years later, the Institute for Jewish Studies in New York City released some 80 newly discovered documents. They contained a detailed correspondence between Anne's father, Otto Frank, and the United States government as he sought to gain permission to bring his family to the U.S.‡ In 1939, Congress had enacted restrictive immigration quotas. The

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\* Waxman, Laura "Anne Frank". August 2009

‡ Mendoff, Rafael. "America Turned a Blind Eye." *The Jewish Exponent*. 2007.

quota system was structured to reduce “undesirable” immigrants, especially Jews. The original version of the immigration bill had been introduced in Congress with a report by the chief of the U.S. Consular Service, Wilbur Carr, characterizing Jewish immigrants as “filthy, un-American, and often dangerous in their habits . . . lacking any conception of patriotism or national spirit.”

The new annual quota for Germany and Austria was set at 27,370 immigrants—far fewer than the hundreds of thousands of German and Austrian Jews attempting to escape the Nazis. In 1941, Otto Frank began to write to his American friends and U.S. officials. Otto was not heard. Instead, while the Franks were seeking shelter in America, State Department officials were seeking new ways to keep out as many Jewish refugees as possible.

With President Franklin D. Roosevelt's backing, Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long implemented in the summer of 1941 new procedures to further reduce the number of immigrants. When refugee advocate James G. Donald appealed to Roosevelt against Long's policies, the President dismissed his plea as “sob stuff.”\*

American consular officials abroad were directed by the Assistant Secretary of State to “postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas” to refugees. They created a bureaucratic maze—a “paper wall” to keep refugees far from America's shores. From late 1941 until early 1945, only 10 percent of the quotas from Nazi-controlled European countries would actually be used. Almost 190,000 quota places remained unused.

So what is wrong with this picture? The Franks were turned away by the United States, not because the quotas were full, nor because this successful middle-class couple and their two young daughters would have been a burden to American society, but because so many Americans considered Jewish refugees undesirable, and because too many politicians feared losing votes if more Jews were admitted.

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\* "Truth about FDR and the Jews" brandiscenter.com

In early summer of 1939, just before World War II, a German ship called the St. Louis sailed from Hamburg, Germany to Havana, Cuba under the command of Captain Gustav Schroeder and his crew. On board were 937 German Jews—men, women, and children. Those passengers paid for their voyage and their legal Cuban visas. Many of those people had U.S. immigration papers, to be used after the Cuban landing.\*

After the 11-day voyage they arrived in Havana, but they were not allowed to disembark. Some of the passengers were within shouting range of members of their family living in Havana. After three days of intense negotiations with the authorities, insisting that they had legal visas for entry to Cuba issued by the Cuban government, they were refused entrance.

With food and fuel depleting rapidly, the situation became critical. The captain had no choice. He navigated toward the southern tip of the U.S. and tried to enter the Miami harbor, but was refused by the Coast Guard. Next, Captain Schroeder and some of the passengers agreed to send an urgent cable to President Roosevelt asking for permission for passengers to enter with temporary visas. The cable was not answered, nor was there an answer from Mrs. Roosevelt, to whom they sent a separate cable asking to allow in only the children.

Steaming north in view of the U.S. coastline, hoping to get attention, the ship passed New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty. The statue, conceived as a grand and lasting gesture of international amity, has become a world symbol of the United States and of democratic traditions. The spirit for which it stands is well expressed in a poem by the Jewish-American writer Emma Lazarus, written on the tablet in the main entrance to the pedestal. The poem reads in part:

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,*

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\* Holocaust Encyclopedia “Voyage of the St. Louis” www.ushmm.org

*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

Those eloquent words didn't apply to the passengers of the St. Louis! The golden door didn't open for those 937 marooned Jewish men, women, and children who were "yearning to breathe free."

The last hope of sanctuary in North America was Canada. Prime Minister Mackenzie King led the Canadian government. In his diary he explained his worry, as he said that too many Jews were moving into his Ottawa neighborhood. He referred the St. Louis request to land at a Canadian port to the hard-line minister of immigration, Frederick Blair. In rejecting the St. Louis' request, he said that no country can open its door wide enough to accommodate the Jews leaving Europe and that the line had to be drawn somewhere.

The German captain of the St. Louis reluctantly set course back to Germany. Everyone knew that the reception upon arrival would be devastating, to say the least! As the ship entered European waters, Morris Stroker, a member of the Joint Distribution Committee in Paris, undertook urgent negotiations with various European governments. He decided on an elaborate bluff, convincing each reluctant government to accept a small number of refugees, under the understanding that others had already accepted larger numbers. The ruse worked! Finally, on June 14, 1939, asylum was granted to the anxious passengers. The countries that allowed those people in were England, France, Holland, and Belgium. Out of 937 passengers, 254 lost their lives in the Holocaust.

The 1938-39 school year came to an end in late June. I had completed seven years of school, which is the equivalent of grade school and junior college combined. Whether or not war would come, my parents wanted all of us to further our education. Choices were limited. Only those very rich

Jews were able to pay the large amount of money required for admission to universities. The rest of the young people, if they desired to further their education, had to find it in other European countries, and that was very costly as well! Our parents were by no means in the money, and I planned to enroll in an industrial-academic trade school as an apprentice.

As the situation grew worse, the debate of whether or not we should stay in Poland began. After a few weeks, Uncle Szymon and my dad came to a decision. The day war broke out, we would leave Kraków and head east toward the Soviet Union. Our relatives in Katowice were informed of our plan and were invited to join us if they desired to do so. They accepted and agreed to meet us at the proper time. The situation in Kraków and the country was getting desperate and frantic. People were afraid, and most of the young males were in uniforms. Army units moved through the city. The word was out that the Polish army would defend Kraków until their last drop of blood was shed. The radio blasted military music interspersed with news bulletins assuring the population that England and France would come to aid Poland in their fight against the Germans. People bought food items of every description, leaving empty shelves in stores and warehouses, stockpiling everything they could because of the unknown duration of the impending war.

Another day passed. Uncle Adolph arrived in Kraków. He was forcefully deported, as a Polish citizen, from Leipzig. He told us that he saw massive German troop concentrations at the border and he believed that war was imminent. Uncle Adolph left the next morning for Warsaw, Poland's capital, to join up with his old army comrades. Uncle Adolph was determined once again to fight for freedom and for Poland. Some of his World War I buddies were currently serving as Generals in the Polish High Command. By the time he got there, Polish army headquarters had moved east to the Soviet border for safety reasons. Uncle Adolph did not give up. He was resolved to join up with them, no matter what. Polish army head-

quarters eluded Uncle Adolph all the way through the interior of the Soviet Union, until finally he caught up with them in Vladivostok, a port city located at the far eastern edge of the Soviet Union. From there, he and several hundred officers and their families crossed the Pacific Ocean and traveled to Canada, where he settled in Stratford, Ontario. Uncle Adolph and all the others were very fortunate to have made their getaway!

The packing was done. We kids helped, but it hadn't been an easy job. We were not going on a vacation trip—we were fleeing to the Soviet Union and did not expect to return! We were not able to take all our possessions with us; we had to be very selective as to what we packed. Mom and Dad went over the contents several times, excluding some items and reselecting others. I remember that we ended up with three large suitcases, a few blankets, and some food. All we had to do now was wait.

Mom was in tears when she realized that all the worldly possessions that they had accumulated over a period of 20 years had been reduced to three suitcases. Dad took Mom gently in his arms, kissed her on her forehead, and in a reassuring voice said, "God willing, Ruzia, when we settle in the Soviet Union, we will start all over again! As long as we are together as a family, that's all that matters!"

Witnessing this tender moment, I realized that what I valued the most of my private memorable things would also have to be left behind, such as my stamp collection that my dad and brother had helped me start back in Leipzig. I also had to leave my collection of wooden airplane models that I carved on rainy days. Those models were painted and marked with symbols for identification, had working propellers, and had moving wheels and flaps. Yes, I was sad to leave that collection behind, but I also realized that this was one of the least important things at the time! As Dad said, we were going to start over again.

For the last week in August, we went to bed early every evening, not

only because of the blackout, but because we anticipated a strenuous journey in the days ahead. We knew that it would take a lot of energy, and involve great hardship for an unforeseeable duration.

How well I remember the night of August 31, 1939! I woke up in the middle of the night. In the darkness I made my way to the window and opened it gently. It was a pitch-dark night out there. Heavy clouds obscured the visibility of the stars, and I couldn't see the familiar fence or trees across the street. Something else was odd. I was listening to the sound of silence—it was scary. There was no sound or movement, human or animal. It felt as if the whole earth had disappeared and created a vacuum of nothing! It turned out to be the calm before the storm.

That early September morning at 6 a.m., Kraków awoke to the roar of German bombers. The first wave came flying very low, right over the rooftops, followed immediately by a second squadron of planes that released bombs on the railroad station. The first exploding bombs sent shock waves of fear and destruction throughout the city. The citizens of Kraków and the rest of Poland had to face the sudden reality of war. The peace was abruptly shattered on that September morning and nothing would be the same from that moment on. A brutal war whose effects would be felt throughout the whole world for many decades to come had begun.

Logistically, Kraków is located in the southwest some 120 miles from the German border—too close for comfort in anyone's opinion! Haste and speed to leave the city was an urgent matter. By mid-morning everyone had arrived, and without much chatter we loaded the wagon with everyone's personal belongings and started our journey. There were 16 of us and since our suitcases, boxes, and blankets filled up the wagon, we all had to walk. At first we advanced at a steady pace. After three hours we covered more than six miles and came to a road leading east. That road was heavily congested with fleeing people. Hundreds of them pushed carts and baby

carriages, rode bicycles packed with their belongings, or rode in horse-drawn wagons overloaded with household items. Amid the endless shell-shocked hordes of civilians were hundreds of Polish soldiers shuffling right alongside us, heading east in an effort to stay ahead of the rapidly advancing German army.

German airplanes dove out of the clear blue sky, frequently strafing the defenseless human masses with machine gun fire, attacking our ever-so-slowly advancing columns. We had to take cover in ditches, under trees, and in houses if there were any along the road. Casualties in humans and animals mounted with every attack. We lost our dog during one of those raids.

On we went, day after day. At night we slept in barns with cows or other farm animals, and when other people already occupied barns, we slept in open fields. Food had become a cardinal issue. Farms were literally picked clean of any available food by the multitude of fleeing people. Personal hygiene was a big problem for all concerned; however, the paramount issue was to distance ourselves from the advancing German army! Tired and worried, we kept going on overcrowded roads and sometimes through fields, trampling one field of crops after another, wandering on toward an unknown fate.

On the fourth day, hobbling down the endless dusty road now scarred with bomb craters, our column came to an abrupt stop. Rumors were spreading that the German army had surrounded a large area and people were ordered by the German military to go back to their cities and villages. No one knew for certain if this was true or not, but the column didn't advance any further. Some people who carried only small suitcases kept on going through the fields heading toward the east. After a lengthy heated discussion by the elders, all the relatives from Katowice decided to continue their escape on their own. They joined the many hundreds of people fleeing through the fields hoping to outrun the Germans. In retrospect, I believe it would have been wiser if we too had joined the other family members in

their escape, but that would have meant leaving the horse and wagon behind, and that was not acceptable to Uncle Szymon or to the other elders.

Our trip back home was not a happy one. We were stopped numerous times by the German military and asked to identify ourselves. When they realized that we were Jews, the soldiers did not spare their hostility toward us. After dropping us off at our apartment, which fortunately was still intact, Rose and her family drove back to Modlnica. Our ill-fated getaway had come to an abrupt end.

Upon our return, Kraków was already under strict military control. The Germans wasted no time in establishing rules and regulations concerning the general public. Those new orders were posted all over the city with a reminder of the dire consequence that awaited those who did not comply. The Germans applied harsh policies to break and suppress the national spirit of the conquered Polish people. One of the more stringent orders was the surrender of all firearms and radios. Anyone caught with either after the deadline was shot! A firearm of any sort was considered contraband. Radios were confiscated so that people would be deprived of any news from friendly sources.

While under military rule, Jews were not treated too harshly. After the military relinquished their power to the civilian authorities, things began to change rapidly. The German governor of occupied Poland, a personal friend of Hitler named Hans Frank, began to initiate anti-Jewish restrictions. First he gave benign orders such as forbidding Kosher food preparations. Then, in late November, he came out with a decree requiring all Jews to wear armbands emblazoned with the Star of David. In January of 1940, he forced registration of all Jewish-owned property and registration of each individual Jew in order to receive an identification card (*kennkarte*). That, of course, gave the Gestapo an exact account as to how many of us there were and where we were located.

A war brings out the best and the worst in people. Before the war, Anti-Semitism in Poland was widespread among its mostly Christian citizens, but was somewhat suppressed by the government. Now suddenly they found themselves in a free-for-all, “hate a Jew” fest, and a majority of those people took advantage of it! We, that is, the Jews, had been exposed to economic and political sanctions throughout world history. For the Polish it was not so. They did not blame Germany for their plight and their misery, even though the Germans had attacked and occupied Poland. No, it was blamed

on the Jews! In time, however, the noose was tightening around their Polish necks as well.

The political and economic clampdown by the German occupiers was carried out efficiently and ruthlessly. All food production centers and warehouses were put under German control. Food rationing cards were issued, but even with all the rationing there was a painful shortage of food. To make purchases with our cards, we had to join long lines of people and wait for many hours. Sometimes after waiting in line, which seemed to take forever, the merchant would close the shop just as we would get to the door, only to put up a sign that read, “Sorry! Out of food!” And so we had to try the next day and hope to have better luck. We kids used to take turns waiting in line at our neighborhood bakery to buy bread. We would line up at four in the morning only to find at least a hundred people already waiting in line at the bakery. The doors were opened at seven, and by the time we got to the door, all the bread was sold out. Waiting in line for bread became a nightly routine.

Once I was almost in the bakery when some Jew hater jerked me by the arm and pulled me out of line, shouting, “You G-damn Jew, you don’t have to eat!” Meanwhile, the other “God loving” people behind me who stood and waited with me practically all night did not intervene on my behalf. I had to go home without bread that day. After being pulled out of the line on other occasions, I decided to outsmart those hoodlums. I would line up at midnight, take the Star of David off my arm (it was nothing but a nuisance) and I put my school cap on. Schools in Kraków issued caps to their students that differed in color and had insignias on them, to exhibit the pride of that particular school. The school I attended was located in a predominantly Christian area. Our school cap was dark blue adorned with a wide band that exposed the national colors of white and red. In the center front of the cap was a silver letter “S” that indicated the name of the school, Sniadeskiego. Because of the school’s location, most people didn’t expect

Jews to attend that facility. From that night on, I didn't have any trouble waiting in lines for food. It worked just fine; I really pulled one over on those clowns. Still, most of the fresh foods such as eggs, milk, butter, meats, and fresh produce were very hard to get.

Wearing the Star of David made us visible targets. We could be put to work without compensation, be pushed off of the sidewalks while being called degrading names, or be spit upon or beaten up without provocation. We were thrown off moving streetcars (Jews were only allowed in the last half of the tram). Before the war, my friend Zbigniew and I used to jump on and off moving streetcars as a game, just to see if we could do it without falling or getting hurt. Well, I had a lot of experience in this field, so on occasions when I was being approached and anticipated a push I would jump off voluntarily, but the person who was going to push me would lose his footing and fall out onto the pavement, hurting himself badly. That's how I got back at the hooligans without lifting a finger.

While serving as an apprentice at a dental practice located across town, I had to use the streetcar a lot. To avoid being a marked person and the hardship that came with it, I decided one day not to wear my white armband with the blue Star of David, and I put the armband in my pocket. Two blocks from our apartment was a Polish police precinct, run by German sympathizers, which I had to pass by on the way to the tram station. Approaching the precinct, I noticed a policeman standing in front of the entrance. As I passed him, I heard one or two footsteps behind me and then I felt a tap on my shoulder. "HALT!" said a commanding voice. I turned around and looked at him. He looked at me with a grin on his face, and asked me for my identification. I gave it to him; of course my card identified me as a Jew. Without any hesitation he pulled me forcibly into the station and triumphantly announced to his comrades, "Look here, I caught a Jew kid without his 'King' on his arm. I am going to report him to the Gestapo

and they are going to come here and lock him up at Montelupich prison!" (It was a notoriously bad prison).

Sure enough, I heard him on the phone trying to explain to whomever he was talking to, "*Jude, Jude.*" This means Jew in German. At this point I got somewhat apprehensive and wished I had worn my armband. I sat there a long time biting my fingernails and trying to come up with a story that could explain why I didn't wear this stupid thing on my arm. When the waiting was over, a Gestapo man in uniform entered, greeted the Polish policemen with a loud "Heil Hitler" and asked to know what crime the Jew had committed. All this was said in German. Well, this is where the fun began!

It seems that the men could not communicate with each other. The policemen were pointing at me and kept repeating "Jude, Jude." This had been going on for several minutes. The German was losing his temper. Addressing the Polish men, he yelled, "You dumb idiots; you Polish pigs," and more. I was just about to burst out laughing but restrained myself for my own good. Finally, I turned to the Gestapo man and with my best German dialect explained to him that I was a Jew, and I pulled my ripped armband from my pocket (I ripped it while I was waiting for the officer to arrive). I told him that two men had chased me earlier that morning, and while trying to get away from them, I climbed over a fence and ripped the armband. I told him that I had been continuing on my way to work when this policeman arrested me. At this point I could tell that the officer was not happy. He looked with dismay at the Polish man and then at me and asked me how old I was and if I had parents, but most of all he wanted to know why I spoke fluent German. I answered his questions one by one, and it seemed that he was pleased to be able to communicate with someone, even if it was a Jew. All in all, we had a good talk for quite some time, while all the Polish policemen stood there with their mouths wide open, looking at us.

The Gestapo man looked at his watch and with a stern voice said, "Tell those Polish puppets that they are the dumbest people I have encountered and if they bother my department with such trivial problems again, they themselves will end up at Montelupich!" I asked him if I should translate it word by word, to which he said, "Of course!"

I was not about to let a good opportunity go to waste. I translated what I was told and I added: "If you here at the station give me any trouble, I am to report it to the Gestapo man, and he will deal with you." It was a good feeling to be able to put them down! Thinking back, it was a scary but gratifying situation. I saw those policemen many times after the incident, but they never bothered me again.

Very often while on my way to the dental lab, I and other Jews were forced to carry out all sorts of work projects, such as loading or unloading trucks, sweeping streets, or just washing sidewalks. It was insane! Once I had to pull grass (roots and all) from a long dirt driveway with an older man. The house was on the outskirts of the city and had been commandeered by a Gestapo officer. The ground in the driveway was hard as a rock. When I asked him for some tools, his answer was, "No, your fingers are your tools!" Then he added, "When I return, this driveway has to be grass free, or else!" and he drove off. After a couple of hours of pulling the stubborn grass, we were cursing while the sweat dripped down our noses on this blistering hot day. We realized that it would be impossible to weed the whole driveway with our bare hands. Since the Gestapo man didn't retain our identification cards and there was no one watching us, we simply raised our sails and ran like the wind, so to speak.

The Nazis inflicted hardship and suffering on the Jewish population to gradually break and degrade our spirits as human beings. The constant harassment on the streets and in the country in occupied Poland increased in intensity with every passing week. The Germans, however, were not the

only perpetrators. Many Polish people used their power to take advantage of the Jews' misfortune.

It would be impossible to describe all the work details I was assigned to; however, the next account will show how willing some people were to inflict unnecessary punishment. As I recall, six of us were forced by two SS men into a vehicle and driven to the west side of Kraków. We were handed over to three Polish men, and the two SS men left. We found ourselves on a long boulevard, maybe two miles long, lined on both sides with trees. Each of us was given a large, empty bushel basket, and we were told to climb the first six trees. Among the rich foliage there grew pods that contained seeds. Our job was to harvest the pods. When the bushel baskets were full, we had to empty them into huge burlap bags. A pharmaceutical company used the seeds to manufacture medical remedies. At first it appeared to be an easy job, but as it turned out I had a difficult time with it. The other five fellows were grown men and I was 14 years old. While on the tree I had to hold the basket in one hand and pick the pods with the other, leaving me with no hand to use to hold onto the tree. Naturally it took me a long time to fill the enormous burlap bag. The other fellows finished one hour ahead of me, though one Polish man stayed to help me finish. All of us worked a whole day without food or water. I picked 19 trees to fill that stupid bag. At last the Pole said to pick the bag up and start walking. The bag had to weigh at least 40 pounds. That was not unreasonably heavy for me, but because of its unwieldy size it was difficult to handle. We had to walk a long way. The clumsy bag kept slipping off my back, so I had to stop and lift it up again, and that was not easy.

As I walked down the sidewalk, passersby pushed me off into the oncoming traffic. The oncoming traffic did not agree with me obstructing their right of way, so I had to quickly get that cursed bag on my back again, only to go through the same ordeal again and again. It was very frustrating

to me, but to that illiterate collective mass of people it was fun and games, and they were getting satisfaction out of tormenting a 14-year-old Jewish kid! I felt rage, I felt disgust, and I despised those shadowy figures slithering by me! The ugly laughter, echoing in my eardrums, and the insulting and obscene remarks hurled at me were very hard to endure. Obnoxious remarks such as, "Suffer, Jew!" and "We spit on your Jewishness!"

"Perish, you Jew!"

"You finally have it coming to you!" "Die Jew, die Jew!"

"Where is your God now, Jew? The God who has picked the Jews as his chosen people?" rang out as I trudged along with the load I had been forced to carry.

I felt anger build up within me. I felt like shouting at the top of my lungs, but no, I wouldn't do that! I felt the urge to fight back; and fight I must, but how? I was one young boy against the whole world! I refused to show that I was afraid, intimidated, and mad at the situation I was in. I might bend like the branch of a willow tree, but I would not break! I wanted to cry, but I did not let the tears run down my cheeks. I knew I had to persevere and win this battle.

Finally, with sweat dripping down my forehead and tip of my nose, I reached the pharmaceutical plant, dragged the antagonistic bag through the open gate, and dropped it in the middle of the courtyard. "Can I have a drink of water please, as I've had none since this morning?" I asked my adversary.

"Go home! There you can drink all the water you want. Besides," he added, "I wouldn't want to contaminate my drinking cup."

As I slammed the gate shut behind me, I stopped just outside in the doorway. I put my right arm behind my back and leaned against it, so that my armband with the Star of David was not visible to any passersby. Relaxed, I stood there watching all the people go by. I saw tall and short, thin and fat, old and young. Some were in a big rush, and others were not. Men,

women, and children—both Polish citizens and German soldiers—passed by in the crowd. Most people smiled at me. Some even asked me how I was feeling. I smiled too, but not at them. I smiled because I was fooling them. Rest assured, those good intelligent citizens would not have smiled at me nor asked me anything if they had known that I was a Jew. I felt sorry for their ignorance and stupidity.

My destination was home, and as I walked the very same streets that I walked so many times before in comfort and safety with my friend Zbigniew, I had the sensation that I was being watched and hated, but that day it didn't bother me. I had just passed a test of strength, endurance, and determination. This day, I thought to myself, I did not allow anyone to break my spirit or self-respect! This day was my victory! Tomorrow would be another day, another work detail, and hopefully a good day.

September months in Poland are as a rule very chilly. With the ushering in of the fall season, with strong winds and low temperatures, folks begin to bring their overcoats out of their closets and get them ready to wear for the cold weather. In those times it was fashionable to have a wide fur collar on one's overcoat. They looked good, and were warm and comfortable. However, with age and the chemical reaction caused by exposure to the environment, the pelts would fade and look old. Using a combination of chemicals, my dad was able to restore those furs to their original state. This procedure was by far cheaper than replacing the fur with a new collar or full-length coat. The Germans soon realized that the Polish fall and winter seasons were very cold. They had furriers make "snap on" collars and linings for their army coats. Since my dad was the only one in Kraków who could refurbish fur collars and coats, the Gestapo allowed him to have a workshop in their basement. They issued him a special ID exempting him from unnecessary harassment while riding his bicycle to work and home.

Dad was also busy with work from the Polish segment, and, of course,

the Jewish population as well. The latter two were paying customers. The Gestapo didn't pay anything. His income was enough to pay for all our needs, and he had a little more to put away for a "rainy day."

We were still under military rule, and while the Gestapo began to arrive in Kraków, the army had negotiated with the SS Chief Reinhard Heydrich, who specialized in Jewish affairs, a stay of operations until Poland passed from military to civil rule. It seemed that the German military did not want to be associated with or take any responsibility for campaigns against the Jewish population.

Heydrich set up his office, the Gestapo headquarters, on Pomorska Street—the same place where Zbigniew and I had built model airplanes. He brought with him specially recruited Special Duty Groups, or *Einsatzgruppen*. All too soon, the passage of authority took place. The Einsatzgruppen and SS did not waste any time unleashing racial hatred into the old Jewish ghettos. At that time, travel throughout occupied Poland was still possible. Travelers spread eyewitness reports of Jews being persecuted and murdered by the Einsatzgruppen.

At first, everyone dismissed this news as impossible and untrue. However, more and more horrible details circulated about Jews being evicted from their homes and shipped to camps established by the Germans. Soon, though, the crimes began in Kraków and we learned that the reports that reached our ears were true.

The Einsatzgruppen moved against our own 14th century Synagogue in Kraków. As expected, when the Germans arrived they found there a congregation of traditional Jews attending their prayer service. They harassed and beat the worshippers. They destroyed prayer books and the Torah. Then they brutally shot everyone in the Temple and set it on fire, making a tomb out of the oldest Synagogue in Poland.

The Einsatzgruppen continued to hang and shoot Jews in synagogues,

raid Jewish homes on Sabbath evenings and feast days, cut off prayer locks and beards, burn prayer shawls, and beat people, sometimes to death. The SS, meanwhile, took what they wanted from Jewish apartment buildings, calling it "economic warfare." Stealing is the right terminology! They broke into apartments and dragged out the contents of closets. They smashed locks on desks and dressers. They took silverware, religious items, and valuables off of the fingers and necks of their victims. Anyone who opposed was shot on the spot. Those who took part in this gruesome exhibition of terror didn't keep this slaughter a secret; they wanted every Jew to know that this was only the beginning and a small example of what was to come. The verdict was in; Europe's Jews were granted only a temporary stay of execution!

The Germans, who were masters of instilling fear into their conquered populations all over Europe, used terror to ensure that there was no escape route for the Jews. Among the many orders and proclamations the Germans issued to the Polish people, one declared that any Polish citizen that gave assistance to a Jew by harboring or providing an escape route would be jailed with his or her family and then executed. Even with such a firm proclamation, a small number of Polish people dared the Gestapo by helping Jews. It was no secret, though, that the Gestapo had spies all over. Most of the people who helped the Jews were caught and publicly hanged beneath a sign that read, "We helped the Jews!"

As time went on, and the reality of the Einsatzgruppen killings became known to all of us, the tension in our household became very strained—one can say it was almost explosive! This anger was not directed at any one of our family members. Rather, it was directed at the German Nazis and the dire situation we were trapped in. We were trapped with no money, no weapons, and nowhere else to go. Our frustrations reached unimaginable proportions!

In hindsight, it may have been different if we had been heavily armed

to protect ourselves from unforeseen enemies. We did not have the proliferation of privately owned weapons that are in our society today. Guns were virtually nonexistent and not allowed to those in my generation, with the exception of gun and rifle club members. Perhaps if we had the opportunity to possess enormous quantities of weapons, the Nazis' job to eliminate Europe's Jews would have been a disastrous task for them. My father, a decorated war hero, had been trained to fight his enemies with a weapon in his hand. Now he was defenseless to protect his wife and children.

Luckily, we always were a very close family. Our motto was, "Family first!" Whatever we did, from going on vacations, taking bike rides, or taking Sunday strolls in the parks or forest, we always did it together. For as long as I could remember, all of us, including Uncle Adolph when he had been with us, sat down at the dinner table every evening together. Now, during this horrible time more than ever, our parents insisted that we all share our burdens or happiness, if we could find any, together.

## Chapter 6

The Germans established closed "Jewish quarters," claiming that it was a necessary step to reduce the tension between the Polish and Jewish populations (What an excuse!). The ghetto was established in Podgorze, just across the river Vistula. This part of Kraków was old and in bad need of repair. Some of the buildings were crumbling, and the plumbing was primitive and hardly sufficient to serve all of the people living there. It encompassed several small city blocks, composed mainly of old three-story apartment buildings. This small area eventually housed over 25,000 people. The main entrance was on the public square, Zgody. There, new citizens of the ghetto were greeted by a white fancy wooden gate with a sentry box on one side and two wide arches spanning the street. A nine-foot-high barbed wire fence had been strung along the front of the entrance. The Germans had blocked off any open spaces between streets or houses that would lead out of the ghetto with round-topped, nine-foot-tall cement slabs that resembled cemetery headstones. Above the two arches towering over the main entrance was a Star of David with a sign in Hebrew proclaiming the ghetto to be a Jewish town.

The deadline for all Jews to enter was set for March 20, 1941. Upon entering, everyone had to register and received a special ID card. The so-called "Judenrat"—a Jewish self-ruling administration controlled by SS headquarters—allocated housing, if one could call it that. People came from all the little towns and villages by the thousands. For two weeks, they pushed carts and wheelbarrows; they pulled wagons loaded with mattresses, bedding, and furniture. Some wagons were packed with kettles and skillets, pots and pans, dishes, boxes, and suitcases. People who had nothing to push or pull carried bags on their shoulders and backs as they all headed toward their "new Jewish town." I remember that when we pulled our wagon we were jeered at and pelted with rocks and mud by Polish people who lined the street.

Our family was assigned to one and a half rooms on the ground floor of a three-story apartment house. The half-room had no window; it served

as our kitchen. So, the one room was our living, family, and bedroom; this is what you call simple living! We three kids slept on the floor. Each of the three floors had a bathroom that had one toilet only. This bathroom was adjacent to the staircase on each floor and had to be shared by all the tenants on that particular floor. Therefore, each floor shared this one and only toilet with 25 people! There were no bathtubs or showers in the building, but we were lucky to have running water.

Leaders at the Gestapo headquarters, located on Pomorska Street, had designated the building we were in for housing all the workers and their families who provided their skilled labor for the Gestapo. My father had a very small workshop at Pomorska. As soon as we were forced into the ghetto, the income that he had been receiving from civilian business dried up completely. He told the officer who was in charge of all the workers that his tiny shop couldn't accommodate the workload he was getting and that with the officer's permission and some materials he could build a larger work area in the basement of the apartment we were assigned to. His request was granted and all materials to outfit the shop were delivered. The materials included two big vats, hoses, and lumber. My father had no intention of building a workshop. What he had in mind the whole time was to build a makeshift shower. Using half a basement and the lumber, he built a platform six feet high to hold one of the vats for water. He drilled a hole in the bottom of the vat and attached a hose with a small shower tip and a clamp to crimp the hose. Another hose was attached to the faucet and ran to the top of the vat so we could fill it. In order to shower all we had to do was fill the vat, stand in the other vat, and release the clamp for the water to flow. After a shower the water was siphoned out into the sink. It worked great and did what it was designed to do—keep us clean. This “ritzy” shower accommodation was strictly for our private use. It would have been impossible to share it with the huge group of people living in the building.

And now, more than ever, Marina turned out to be a life-saving person—a real saint! She would make the 18 mile round trip barefoot from her little farmhouse to us, sometimes twice a week, to bring fresh milk, eggs, butter, and even home-baked bread! After we were forced to move to the ghetto, while working at Pomorska my dad would meet with Marina at a predetermined time and place to receive the food. As time passed and our situation became increasingly dire, Marina worked tirelessly to help us. She just would not give up! Marina was a MENSCH! To be called a Mensch is a tribute to a person's integrity, love, and righteousness, and should be used in an aura of reverence.

On March 20, 1941, movements of Jews to the ghetto were completed. However, there were a lot of families that remained in their villages despite the great danger it caused. Rose and her family were some of those who remained in Modlnica for the time being. Meanwhile, in the ghetto the Judenrat had created its own *Ordnungsdienst* or OD, a police force to regulate and keep order in our new “Jewish city.” At SS headquarters, the OD was regarded as just another auxiliary “puppet” police force that would take orders from them. They were issued dark brown uniforms adorned with a bright yellow Star of David that was sewn onto their jackets. They had belts around their waistline and were armed with nightsticks. As they strutted down the cobblestone streets, they showed off their shiny black leather boots. What an outrageous sight they were! The police chief of those clowns was Symche Spira, a man with an Orthodox background who despised the Europeanized Jewish liberals. He recruited many of his friends who had the same beliefs as he had, or people with complexes or grudges about treatments they'd received in earlier days from respectable, middle-class Jewry. In other words, those people regarded their fellow citizens as trash! Many OD men were suspected to be collaborators, feeding information to the SS. The majority of them felt that what they did would protect their families; and

so it did, at least for a while.

The ghetto was not a place for rest. Every young man and woman was forced to report for work every day. Thousands had worked in the city at different jobs before entering the ghetto. These people had, of course, their *kennkarte* (identification card) and were allowed to leave in the morning and return to the ghetto after work. To get back “home” everybody had to cross a long bridge spanning the river Vistula. On any given day or evening, crossing that bridge meant walking a gauntlet of menacing drunk German soldiers who beat and kicked us as we were returning from work. Many times, scores of people didn't make it alive over that bridge! One of the famous Nazi Hippocratic oaths that describes the duties and obligations of their Aryan people to the “Fatherland” was to avoid intimate contact with Jews, yet some of those “pure Aryans” raped young Jewish women and girls as they tried to return home from work. The men who tried to protect those women from the soldiers were thrown over the rail of the bridge, along with many rape victims, into the rapidly flowing Vistula River.

Residents of the ghetto who had no outside jobs had to report every morning in front of the OD station to be assigned to a work detail. On one such morning, while waiting with a few dozen other men, I heard someone shouting and cursing at the top of his lungs. I couldn't see the person who was causing the ruckus. Suddenly our police chief, Symche Spira, appeared at the top of the stairs that led to the OD station. There he stood, dressed in his full uniform, with his legs spread apart and his hands resting on his hips. This defiant, 5'4” grotesque figure was pretending to be a general giving orders to his troops. He was furious because the “Luftwaffe” (Air Force) needed 30 men to work at the airfield, and no one volunteered. Rumor had it that work was very hard and Jews were badly mistreated there. I knew that, one way or another, 30 of us would have to do it, so I stepped up to the front and indicated that I was ready to go. The men from the Luftwaffe

picked the rest of the workers, and we were on our way. As I recall, we had to unload equipment and supplies and stock them neatly in a warehouse. Some of the airmen asked me a lot of questions (most Germans did), wanting to know why I spoke with a fluent Saxon dialect. My answer left some of the airmen wondering and lost for words. They fed me well that day, and allowed me to take some food home with me. That day was a good day, but unfortunately there were not too many of them!

The nature of work details I was assigned to would change from day to day. Some were routine and insignificant, and some are fixed firmly in my memory. On one summer morning, a few men and I were sent to work on a barge that was anchored close to the shore on the river Vistula. One Polish worker who was dredging sand from the river bottom manned the barge. It was rather interesting to watch him going about his work. He had a 20-foot long pole that had a tin bucket attached at one end. He then would submerge the pole and bucket into the water until it would reach the bottom. Then with one leg twisted around the pole and a quick maneuver with his hands he would pull the pole and bucket up and dump the wet sand in the middle of the barge. It didn't look easy, and it wasn't. He was a giant of a man, yet I could see the strain on his face with each bucket he pulled up.

Next, the sand had to be transported from the barge up to the shore, where it was loaded onto trucks. This would have been an easy task if it weren't for the difference in height between the barge and shore, which was an estimated 15 or more feet. The wooden trestles they had installed leading up to the shore had thick planks approximately one and a half feet wide and 12 feet long, arranged in six switchbacks. The whole construction looked very intimidating.

The man took time out from his dredging and showed us how to load the sand into the wooden wheelbarrows in an efficient way. He pointed

toward the trestles and said, "Your job is to get all this sand from the barge up to the shore. Good luck!"

It didn't take me long to figure out what he meant when he wished us luck. I approached the wheelbarrow with gusto and thought there would be nothing to it; after all, it had a wheel, two handlebars, and all you had to do was push and walk up the planks and keep your balance while doing so. I watched the other grown men who didn't seem to have any problem getting up to the shore with their loads, but would I be able to make it? The first three switchbacks were going just fine, and then half way up the fourth stretch, the wheel seemed to turn more and more slowly, and just as I turned into the fifth switchback it all stopped! There I was, holding up the wheelbarrow with my hands. I couldn't set it down because the plank was too narrow, and I couldn't push it forward because of the pressure of the weight and the downward slant bearing down on me. One of the men from the top saw the predicament I was in and came to my rescue. He couldn't get around me because we were at least 10 feet from the ground, so he started to turn the wheel with his hands while I was pushing as hard as I was able to. The man on the barge had a good laugh, and I had a good scare!

He later gave me some pointers. "Here's the best way to get it up to the shore," he said. "When you start, lean your upper body over the wheelbarrow, let your hands and arms pull and push, and never relax until you reach the top." Now why couldn't he have told me that in the first place? I finally got the hang of it, but it was an arduous day! For the following week I hid in our basement. I couldn't report to work. Every muscle in my body must have expanded to twice its size, and the pain was intolerable!

My work assignments continued on a daily basis, ranging from cleaning toilets in military hospitals to moving furniture, building roads, cutting trees, and digging ditches. It continued without an end in sight.

Harsh winter came upon us. On one of those bitter cold winter days,

a small group of men and I were selected to remove snow and ice from a bridge. Pilsudskiego Bridge, spanning the frozen river Vistula, had a one-foot-thick layer of solid ice. We had to chip the ice with a pickaxe and throw the chunks of ice over the railing. The wide-open space on the bridge exposed us without mercy to violent gusts of wind. We estimated the temperature to have been at least 30 degrees below zero! My worn-out shoes and my meager clothing were no match for the piercing cold that penetrated to the very core of my body. The 20 of us had worked in this frozen state for about two hours, but it felt more like an eternity to us. Because of the wind and cold, breathing was difficult. The discharge from our noses froze solid, forming icicles resembling the tusks of an elephant. Eventually the bitter cold, and the ever-present hunger, caught up with us. Our faces showed visible signs of fatigue. Our work pace slowed. I remember my feet going numb and my hands tingling, and I began to not notice the cold as much as I had before. The prospect of getting my feet and hands frostbitten, or perhaps even freezing to death, entered my mind. The SS guards watching us certainly didn't care if any of us succumbed on this day.

"Move, move around!" some of the other men shouted at me. "If you don't, you sure are asking for trouble!" I started to stomp my feet as hard as I could. I remember it to be very painful and it didn't help, I wasn't able to get rid of the numbness. I then took off one shoe at a time and massaged my feet briskly with snow, until the circulation had returned. From this moment on, I kept moving all the time. By that time more than half a day had passed and we still had a few dozen feet of ice left on the bridge. The six SS guards assigned to watch over us were dressed in fur coats, hoods, and fur mittens to keep their trigger-happy fingers warm. They were standing in a contraption that looked like a huge boot made out of braided straw at least three inches thick that was designed to isolate them from the ice. Though I am sure they felt snug and comfortable in their attire, they showed neither

pity nor concern for our discomfort; in fact, they kept heckling us to work faster. The guards were rotated very frequently. Those who were relieved walked toward the far end of the bridge to a coffee shop, where they found warm shelter and hot food and drink. How inviting those gray puffs of chimney smoke were! They beckoned to all the cold and miserable, inviting them to take refuge in the shop's cozy warmth—but this oasis was out of reach for Jews on that miserable day. All we could do was remember the good winter days we had spent in warmth and peace with our loved ones. I wondered if those good days would ever come back again. It was early evening as we dragged our tired bodies back to the ghetto to rest for the night and then face a new day, and a new assignment.

As has happened since the dawn of time, nightfall was soon followed by daybreak, and once again I found myself with six other men on a truck heading to another assignment. Our driver wore an SS uniform, which from past experiences indicated that it was going to be a bad day. The sign at our destination read, "Hospital for the Waffen SS." Before the war, it had been a regular city hospital built on a large piece of property. We were hustled from the truck to the building over a fresh blanket of snow that was a couple of feet deep that had accumulated overnight. We were led promptly into the cellar where we were assigned to our chore.

The basement under the hospital consisted of dozens of large rooms used for storing everything and anything, including tons of potatoes! Our job that day was to pick through all those potatoes one by one and discard the rotten ones. It seemed as if half of all the potatoes had gone bad. We had to stick those rotten potatoes into bushel baskets by hand (they gave us no tools) and then take them out to the far side of the hospital to dump them on a pile. It sounded simple enough, until I discovered that the rotten potatoes were one big, gushy, slimy mess that clung to my hands and stunk like manure. I carried bushel after bushel of those putrid potatoes on my

shoulder in sub-zero weather through the snow-covered yard. It was so cold that by the time I returned back to the cellar, the slime on my hands had frozen.

I did this for a few hours. Then, as I was emptying the bushel basket, an SS soldier called out to me, "Jew, come here! Do you see those basement windows? I want you to remove all the snow with your hands from all of them!" He walked a few feet away, and then he turned and said, "If it is not done in an hour, you will end up in that building over there!" He pointed toward what looked like the morgue.

I remember it very well. There were nine windows that were recessed about four feet below the ground. They were covered with snow, and I removed it with my bare, frozen hands. Not having a watch, I didn't know how much time it took to remove the snow from the windows, but the sadistic-minded animal never came back.

I went back to the cellar but couldn't lift the bushel up. My hands were completely numb. I couldn't turn the doorknob either, so I kicked the door with my foot until a man with a white apron tied around his uniform came to the door. He didn't look too happy opening the door for me, but when I explained my outdoor adventure to him, he shook his head in disbelief. The snow could have been removed with a shovel faster and without pain, but that would have been much too easy.