



My Story

Berta Klipstein



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These are Berta's words. This is her story.

‘My Story’ is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).
More information at www.ajr.org.uk

Berta Klipstein was visited by AJR volunteer Albert King to share her story.
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“When the train became the target of the bombs we knew we had to leave it. We ran into a field; we lay flat on the ground with our faces in the grass, with our hands outstretched and our mouths open so that our ear membranes did not burst.”

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Part 1

Early days



Sitting in Bielsko Park with Grandmother Zofia in 1935

Early Memories

I WAS BORN Berta Bienenstock in Bielsko, Silesia, Poland on 12 March 1927. I was the only child of Ida and Samuel. Many people did not have families at all because they knew that war was coming. There was uncertainty, and so I remained an only child. I had no siblings or cousins on my mother's side of the family.

My first memory was the night of 12 November 1928. We were at Berthold Simahovicz's house, which overlooked the river. I remember my father taking me out of my cot and walking to an open window to show me an eclipse of the moon. I was just a baby, about eighteen months old, but I remember this quite distinctly. I also remember suffering with chickenpox at the age of three.

My parents eventually saved enough money to take out a mortgage. When we moved into our house we first chose to live in a flat on the second floor, which was very modern with a bathroom. We then moved downstairs into an older flat. We had sixteen tenants. The house was divided into many tiny flats with people literally living in one room. We also had a concierge who was always very respectful to my parents.

There was a German family on the first floor whose son, Georg Hahn, was a medical student, and a Jewish family called Urbach on the second floor. We had a shoemaker in one flat and there was also a widower, Mr Singer, whose only living was from *Tahara* (the religious ritual purification of dead people). A couple who rented a very small flat were getting married and we went to watch the wedding at the big synagogue in the neighbouring town, Biała. It was the first time I ever saw a very religious wedding and my only recollection is of the bride circling the groom seven times.



My grandparents



With my parents

Aunt Elsa and Uncle Adolf lived in one room in my grandmother's house, next to the grocery shop she owned. They never had any children. They both worked terribly hard and eventually moved into a beautiful new flat about three or four years before the war. My grandmother slept in a very dark room next to the shop.

Aunt Hansi (Johanna) lived in Germany and came to see her mother (my grandmother) every year. She happened to be in Bielsko in 1933 and went skating, broke her wrist and never went back home. That saved her life. She went to Great Britain as a domestic servant before the outbreak of war.

Most of my relatives spoke only German but my mother eventually learned to speak Polish, although not very well, which she needed for business. I, however, was always bilingual.

We were very lucky. Our town had a viable Jewish community with a big synagogue, along with the new community centre, *Bialikhaus*, built early in the 1930s, which had a stage and a gym.

We had many Jewish organisations including *Hakoah* and *Maccabi*, which were sports and youth movements. There were also many Zionist organisations: *Hanoar Hazioni*, *Hanoar Hadati*, *Bnei Akivah*, and *Betar*. We had a *Chevra Kadisha* (Jewish burial society) and an *ORT* (technical school). I attended the *Talmud Torah* (Jewish studies school). We were very well endowed with Jewish life. ■



Aunt Elsa and Uncle Adolf

School days

JEWISH CHILDREN in Bielsko-Biała were very conscious of the importance of a good education. We had an excellent Polish speaking Jewish school in the town along with a kindergarten. It had seven year classes with well-established teachers. One of the teachers, Miss Mechner, had taught my mother when she was a little girl. There were two classes for each year, except for my year which had only one class.

The male teachers had more varied career options than the women, who were not allowed to marry and continue to have a teaching career. Teaching was highly competitive and it was difficult to find a job, so the teachers were very qualified. There were graduate teachers in many of the classes. After the sixth class, you either went to a *gymnasium* (middle school) or stayed on for another year. I was to go on to the *gymnasium*, for which my parents had to pay.

I used to take English lessons, but when I eventually came to England, due to my accent nobody could understand a word I was saying! Mostly, girls of my age took French lessons. I learned to play the piano and performed in the concert that our teacher held every year. ■

“I used to take English lessons, but when I eventually came to England, due to my accent nobody could understand a word I was saying!”



Class of 1934. I am on the back row, second to the right and Alek Weiss is second row from bottom, 4th from right (referred to on page 103)

Grandmother

MY GRANDMOTHER, Zofia Danziger, was born in 1866 or 1868. She was uncertain due to the lack of a birth certificate. She lived in Gliwice (known as Gleiwitz in German) in Silesia. It was a small village, located in Germany, not far from Bielsko.

When she was a young girl she moved to Bielsko where her elder sister owned a very elegant confectionery shop. Grandmother also opened a shop and worked as a tobacconist, receiving many compliments from the customers who came to buy the cigarettes and cigars.

After my grandmother met her husband, Ludwig Wasserberger, they settled in a village outside Bielsko called Węgierska Górka. I believe that my grandfather was a very good-looking man but I never met him. After he died my grandmother kept a suitcase full of worthless Weimar Republic money under her bed for use in emergencies. ■



My maternal grandmother, Zofia

My mother

MY MOTHER, Ida, was the youngest of seven children, including two sets of twins. She learned millinery in Vienna and owned a millinery shop in town before she was married. My mother's first love was a poor pharmacist, but he did not have many prospects for earning a good living so she married my father when he moved from Kolbuszowa to Bielsko. He, like the rest of his family, was an optician.

He was fifteen years older than my mother and it was never a very happy union. After they married they could only afford a tiny flat. It was on the second floor of a pleasant house at number 25 Piłsudskiego Street where I was born. The house was owned by Berthold Simahovicz who was the editor of the Jewish Silesian newspaper, *Schlesischezeitung*.



With Mother, Bielsko, August 1939

I called Berthold Simahovicz and his wife 'Aunt Anna' and 'Uncle Berthold'. They lived downstairs with a maid. They played bridge with my parents. I remember my mother used to bake little biscuits decorated with pieces of almond and cherries. Uncle Berthold always picked the cherries off the biscuits. The things I remember!

On the first floor lived the Werber family who had a stationery shop. On another floor was the Grossman family who eventually escaped to their native Hungary, thinking they might be safe.

When I was three years old Teresia arrived as our maid. Right up to the time we left it was Teresia who brought me up. Whenever she needed a new dress she took me along to the shop to advise her what sort of material to buy. There was a period when she left us for a little while to have a baby, but my mother took her back. ■

My family

WHEN I WAS BORN my grandmother only had five surviving children. The five included my mother, Uncle Max who was married and lived in Berlin, Aunt Elsa married to Uncle Adolf, Aunt Hansi who was married to Pan Weidner (who had been gassed in the First World War and died very young), and finally Aunt Rosa who was Uncle Max's twin. She had a *pukel* (a hunchback). She was unmarried when I was born.

My grandmother lived in Bielsko, next to the very small, old-fashioned grocery shop she then ran with Aunt Rosa. This was not far away from a very large, Jewish-owned factory. Most of the factory workforce came from the small villages beyond Bielsko. There was a little railway station called Lipnik (Lipschitz in German). The workers went past our house on the way to work and again at lunchtime, stopping by at my Aunt Rosa's shop to buy food, but, more importantly, to buy little bottles of schnapps.

I often went with Aunt Rosa to buy schnapps for the shop from a government concession. The strength of schnapps was shown by the colour of the seal. The least concentrated bottles had a blue cap and the others had a red cap. They ranged from 45% to 75% or even 95% in strength.

I also remember a very large barrel of sauerkraut in the shop. There were no paper bags in those days. Instead, brown paper was folded into cones and bent at the end so that it could be filled with sugar or whatever else was on sale.

There were two knitting wool shops nearby which, even when I was a little girl, were of particular interest to me. One was called '*Trójkąt w Kole*' ('Triangle in a Circle') and the other one was called 'KRB.' I invariably stopped to look at them. When I was eight I had scarlet fever and my grandmother taught me to knit, and I still knit to this day. Everything I wear I make myself. I never go to a shop to buy anything, except wool and knitting needles.

Uncle Max and his wife eventually immigrated to São Paulo in Brazil. My Aunt Elsa worked in an office and my Uncle Adolf, who had textile experience, eventually opened a commission textile business.

When Aunt Elsa and Uncle Adolf moved out of their room in my grandmother's house my Aunt Rosa moved into it. Before that she had lived in a big old-fashioned house where she had to walk along two cold corridors to her bedroom. She very much wanted to get married. She would meet a good-looking man who had escaped from Germany; he was completely penniless and had nowhere to live. He and Aunt Rosa married and we never saw either of them again. They both perished in a concentration camp.

In my family there were seven girls named Berta. My grandmother from Kolbuszowa was called Berta. Three of the Bertas had the surname Bienenstock, just like me. Three of the others were called Katz, and one was Berta Blasenstein from Cieszyn (Teschen in German), a town on the Czech and Polish border.

Whenever we visited my cousin on the paternal side of my family, Berta Blasenstein in Cieszyn, we loved to go across the bridge into the Czech part of the town; oranges and bananas there were cheap. Berta Blasenstein was the same age as me and also an only child. During the summer holidays my mother invited my father's sister, Aunt Erna and Berta to spend the summer holidays with us. We were like sisters. My mother had little sailor dresses made for us.

“Whenever we visited my cousin Berta Blasenstein in Cieszyn, we loved to go across the bridge into the Czech part of the town; oranges and bananas there were cheap”

My parents had a season ticket to the beautiful theatre that was directly opposite the Post Office in Bielsko. At night the fountain in front of the theatre lit up in blue, red and white. When I was little I saw Lehar operettas there as well as *Gräfin Mariza* by Kàlmàn. There were also two cinemas in town, the Apollo and the Rialto, which showed films in German. I was fortunate because the Apollo cinema belonged to two Czech brothers called Brudek. They had an agreement with my father: he would supply all their spectacles free of charge in exchange for tickets whenever we wanted to go to the cinema. I remember seeing King Kong, which was so oversubscribed that extra chairs had to be brought into the cinema to accommodate everyone.

There was a delicatessen shop next to my family's opticians and a magnificent flower shop. They would take the flowers outside when it rained, to water them. Every year photographs of graduates from boys' grammar schools were shown in their windows.

On Sunday mornings church bells would ring all over town. Most Sundays I went to Uncle Adolf and Aunt Elsa's flat to see if they wanted to go out on an excursion. The town's central long street extended into the Gypsy Forest (Cygański Las, or Zigeunerwald in German). By the time I was six years old I knew the mountains like the back of my hand. Today I remember mainly the German names for them: Emmenthal, Rodelhitte and Klimczok.

Sometimes instead of going to Cygański Las we would take a 45-minute bus ride to a little village called Szczyrk. It would be dark when we returned home to the gas-lit streets of Bielsko. ■

My father

MY FATHER'S NAME was Samuel. He was small and rather dark in complexion. People sometimes thought he might have been an Ethiopian.

He was an optician in partnership with his brother Joseph. Their practice was positioned on Ulica Jagiellońska, which was the main street of Bielsko. There were only two opticians in town. The other (which is still open today), called Kulka, was owned by a Jewish family who came from Czechoslovakia. People from the surrounding villages came into Bielsko to buy their glasses. My father's family came from a town called Kolbuszowa in central Poland and were either all opticians or engravers by trade.

My father always wore a bowler hat and every time someone greeted him in the street he took it off and said: "*Habe die Ehre.*" At the time I did not know what it meant. It is German for 'It's my honour.' That is what they used to say in those days. When I accompanied my father in town everybody knew him. My father was very active in the Jewish community in many ways, particularly in *ORT* and in the *Chevrá Kadisha*.

My father had a disagreement with his brother and opened a shop on his own, but when he was just 34 years old his health began deteriorating and when he became more seriously ill my mother took charge of the shop.

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My mother took my father to Vienna to visit a clinic in Purkersdorf. She then found a professor from Belgrade with a new wonder treatment for cancer who sent them to a monastery in Brno, Czechoslovakia, for treatment.

My father died there of stomach cancer in 1936. He was 46 and I was nine years old. When they brought his body back through the border town of Cieszyn, the Czech cortege went to the middle of the bridge but then he had to be transferred onto a Polish cortege to be taken home for burial. He was buried on the main thoroughfare of the cemetery. A headstone was placed there which the Germans later removed, although when I found the grave again after the war we had the headstone reinstated.

After my father died, my mother initially looked after the shop. She did not want to lose it so she offered it to one of my father's nephews, Philip Katz, who was also an optician and a committed communist. At that time many young people had communist sympathies because life was hopeless. They saw the wonderful propaganda coming out of Russia and looked towards it as a way out. Philip survived the war and later returned to Poland.

The year my father died we did not go on holiday and I spent the summer vacation at the town's beautiful new swimming pool. The old lido had become very run down and was infested with frogs. This new, magnificent lido was not just a pool; it had a rose garden, and a restaurant where there was dancing in the evening. It was really lovely, but the nicest thing for me was that I could see the mountains that we used to visit on Sundays.

While I was swimming in the pool I would look up and hear melodies. Nearby was a little airfield and sometimes light aircraft would fly overhead and drop letters for people onto the water. That is one way of delivering the mail! We had a swimming coach from Vienna and we enjoyed training to improve our skills. I am not sporty, but the one thing I could do was swim. There was an ordinary swimming pool for the public and an Olympic-sized pool, which hosted tournaments.

My mother took the death of my father very badly and went to a spa to recuperate. Whilst there she met a very nice divorced gentleman called Ignac. Two years later, in March 1938, they married. Their wedding took place on the Sunday of the *Anschluss* (the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany). Ignac was a pleasant man. He lived in Sosnowiec and I think he was a representative for an oil firm which meant he travelled for long periods of time. He had a daughter from his previous marriage called Miriam. She later perished with her mother during the war.

Ignac bought me a book about scientific innovations which maybe started my interest in science. After my mother's marriage we had the entire house renovated, with all new furniture; everything was refurbished. Ignac even bought something we had never had before, a radio! ■

“While I was swimming in the pool I would look up and hear melodies. Nearby was a little airfield and sometimes light aircraft would fly overhead and drop letters for people onto the water. That is one way of delivering the mail!”

Childhood friends and childhood days

I HAD MANY FRIENDS of my own age in school including Erika Freier, who sometimes came to play. Her parents had a haberdashery shop in the market. She said how lucky I was to have Teresia, our maid, looking after me, because she was just left on her own. I had another friend called Lisa Meizels who lived nearby and we would often improvise plays for hours. Despite having friends and Teresia, I was often on my own and felt myself to be a very lonely child.

There was a large German community in town and the German language was widely spoken. We had German schools, German *gymnasias* and Lutheran churches. My grandmother and my aunt read the German newspaper, *Morgenzeitung*, which was published in Czechoslovakia.

Practically every day my grandmother would come and take me out, and she would tell me what life had been like in Bielsko during the First World War. She now lived mostly in her kitchen. It had no electric lights, just an oil lamp. I remember my grandmother going out and getting coal for the fire. She would bring live geese into her kitchen and forcibly feed them to fatten them up. It was all very old-fashioned and it must have been very difficult for her to live under those circumstances.

About three years before the outbreak of the war the Polish authorities prohibited German being spoken on the streets because it was deemed too provocative. People in the many German businesses, however, hung pictures of Hitler on their walls. It was long before the war began but there was already support for the Nazis.

We were situated close to the border and many refugees arrived in Poland. There was a growing amount of antisemitism. Pickets stood outside our shop saying: “Don't buy from Jews.”

One night, we had a real pogrom. People were wandering through the streets. Some picked up stones and threw them at our windows. Many people painted white crosses on their houses to make it clear they were not Jewish. It was a very difficult and frightening situation.

During the pogrom I had been alone in the flat with only Teresia, but my aunt arrived and took me to her house until my mother returned.

At home we used to collect 'Green Shield Stamps.' My mother would stick them into books that were full of German propaganda saying: *Gott strafe England* (God punish England).

By August 1939 my mother and Ignac had been married for one and a half years. They were not planning anything other than that they were going to live happily ever after. But when I came home from school I would hear Hitler ranting on the radio and, unfortunately, as we could speak German we understood what he was raving about. It seemed that war was inevitable. ■



With my doll

Part 2

We head East

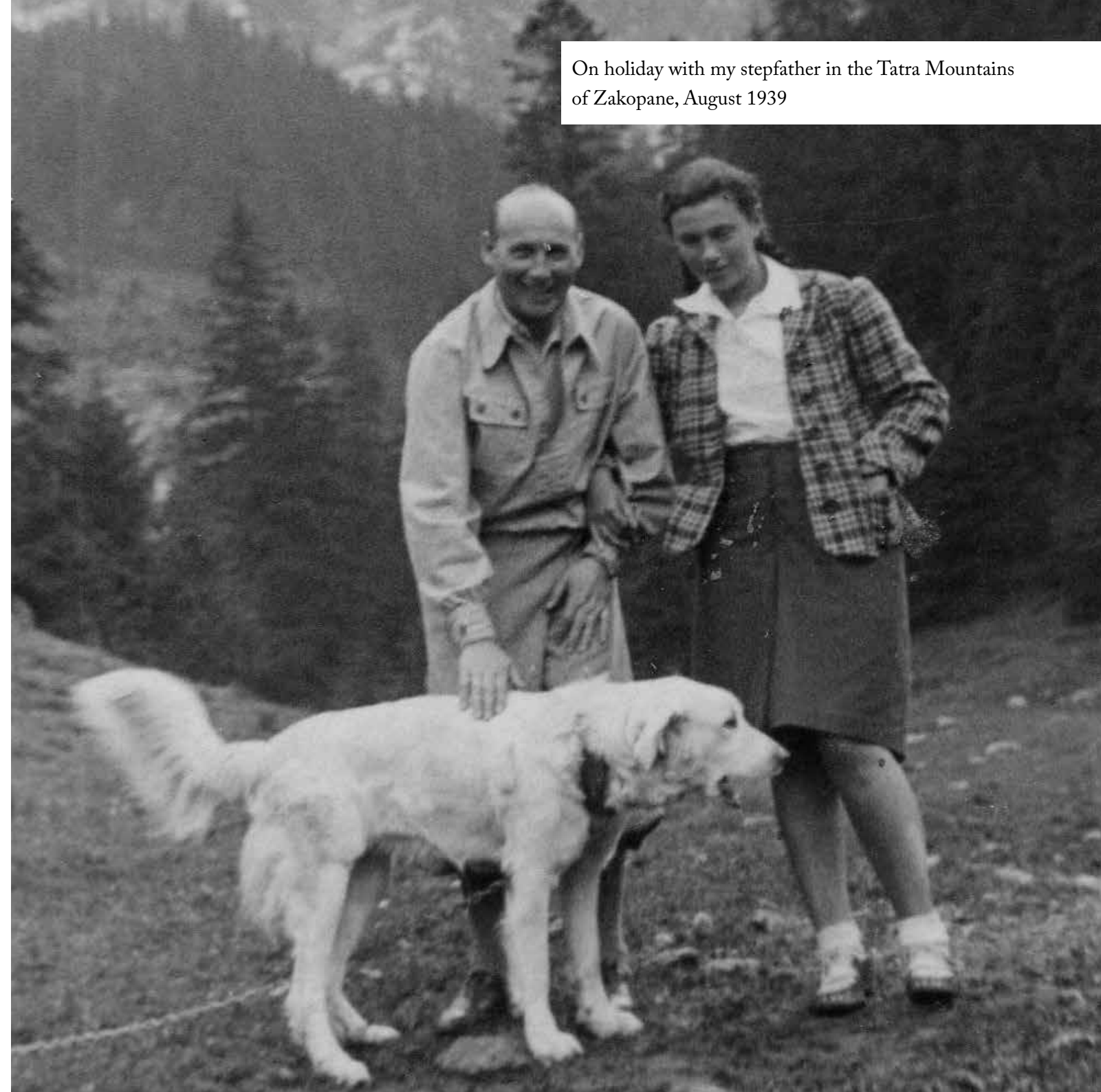
War

IN AUGUST 1939, I had been ill with pleurisy and we had taken a holiday in Zakopane, in the Tatra Mountains. Whilst we were there the Molotov and Ribbentrop treaty of collaboration (a neutrality pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union) had been under discussion. As soon as it was concluded, war was inevitable and everyone knew it. We left our holiday and returned home. About a week before the war began we sent a large trunk, packed up with all our valuables, away by train to relatives. Of course, we never saw those things again; they just disappeared.

On Thursday 31 August 1939 I was sitting in a park in Bielsko with a friend. We were both twelve years old. We were watching soldiers digging trenches as anti-tank defences. That night was to be the first time we would try a blackout. The next day, on 1 September, at a quarter to six in the morning, we were woken by bombs from Germany. Our war had started.

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On holiday with my stepfather in the Tatra Mountains of Zakopane, August 1939



Along with the other residents we spent all day in the cellar of our big house, sheltering from the bombs. Occasionally someone went upstairs to listen to the radio. We heard reports about so many bandits here and so many bandits there - 'bandits' being the name for enemy aircraft. We sat there all day not knowing what to expect.

Eventually night fell and we went upstairs to eat our Friday evening meal. While we ate, we discussed, 'What do we do now; do we stay or do we go?' It was decided that, whatever happened, my mother, my stepfather and I were going to go together with my grandmother, Aunt Elsa and Uncle Adolf. We finished the meal, and after Teresia had done the washing up, at about ten o'clock, we left the house, locking it with a big key. The whole town was dark with the blackout.

Where do you go? We wanted to get away, so we went to the railway station.

We did not know it at the time, because we had no access to news or communications, but two days after we escaped, on Sunday 3 September 1939, the same day that England joined the war, our town surrendered to the Germans, and without a shot being fired. ■

Flight from Bielsko

AT THE RAILWAY STATION we found a train, half-full, and climbed aboard. The train was stationary but other people boarded and eventually, towards morning, it began moving eastwards, away from Bielsko and the Germans. We arrived in Kraków.

On the train Red Cross ladies were distributing tea to the passengers. From the windows I could see the first air battles overhead. We were desperate to get further away, away from the border and away from the Germans, who were advancing all the time. After leaving Kraków we did not progress far due to heavy bombardment.

When the train became the target of the bombs we knew we had to leave it. We ran into a field; we lay flat on the ground with our faces in the grass, with our hands outstretched and our mouths open, so that our ear membranes did not burst. There was heavy bombardment from the aeroplanes. All our worldly belongings were on that train and if anyone wanted to take them and run away they were welcome to it. After the strafing finally stopped the planes flew away, but we were too afraid to get up and see who among us was still alive.

Eventually we managed to re-board the train, but the same thing happened again three or four more times during the course of the day. The aim of the bombardments was to destroy all the bridges on the line. We were sitting ducks. At one point during that long day we caught a glimpse of our cousins on another train, on another line, in the middle of nowhere. That was the last time we ever saw them.

As the trains were clearly targets it became impossible to remain on board. Finally, on Monday 4 September in the afternoon, we disembarked and let the train leave without us. We found ourselves somewhere in the middle of Poland. It was a lovely summer's day, the sun was shining, and we spent the day sleeping in an orchard. We managed to hire a horse and cart with a driver and moved from one village to another. We travelled at night by the illumination from incendiary bombs. We passed by several large towns, which the Germans had targeted with their bombs.

As we moved even further away from Bielsko, we reached Eastern Poland. There were no proper roads. One night we travelled through an area with just boards underneath us and our cart toppled over. We all ended up on the ground, even my grandmother.

We were making our way to Kolbuszowa, the town my father came from. We arrived there on the sixth day of the war. For the first time we stayed overnight, otherwise we kept on the move constantly. We awoke very early the next morning, about five o'clock, to the panicked cries of 'They are gassing us!' We gathered our things and ran away, but fortunately it was not true; it was a false alarm.

During this time of flight we never unpacked; we just kept moving. We had virtually nothing in any case. When we had left Bielsko we had just taken the big key, locked the door, collected my aunt, uncle and grandmother, and run. Although we had very little to eat we had brought with us our enamelled little grey plates decorated with red flowers. That is what we ate off; I remember them clearly, as if it were today. We bought things to eat when we could. Very often we might buy a chicken in a village and pluck it on the cart. At the next village we would use somebody's stove to cook it.

As the days of war went on it became more difficult to hire people to drive us because they did not want to leave their families. Finally, we had to buy our own horse and cart, even though we had no idea how to look after them as we had never done it before.

The roads were full of refugees and villagers; everyone was on the move. We had to travel on the side because the main roads were full with military vehicles. Before the war we had been indoctrinated with stories praising the Polish Army. As it turned out many were still fighting on horses as they had during the First World War. We had been shown pictures of our wonderful air force but any little flying club in England probably had more efficient planes.

We were moving as you see depicted in films, in Florida or in Houston when there has been a hurricane, people moving in masses with their belongings on their backs. We continued moving away from the German border until, one day, we came up against people moving in

the other direction, towards us, and we could not understand what was happening. Things were confused further by a sudden explosion. It turned out to be nothing more than Polish soldiers trying to extract fish from the river by firing into the water with bullets!

By this time we were over half way through Poland and had arrived at a little eastern town called Kolki. When we arrived in town it was beautifully decorated with Polish flags. They thought the Polish Army had come to rescue them, but in fact it was the Russians who would later arrive. We found a family willing to take us into their home. They had a little house with a big barn, full of straw and a large bus, full of petrol.

It was a night of high drama. The shooting and firing was very close to the house and I could see the explosions of the shots. We spent the whole night under the table. We did not know if we were being attacked by the Polish Army or the advancing Russians.

Morning came and we were still alive, but there were several houses either side of us burning. The family who owned the bus threatened to set it alight because they did not want the petrol to fall into enemy hands. I never found out what happened to it.

We ran away. In our haste we left behind the chicken we had begun cooking the night before. It was very tense but we kept moving. We ran maybe a mile or so through the fields with all our belongings. That night we came across a barn in which to hide, but we found ourselves really in the thick of it. Ukrainian nationalists with rifles were also inside the barn with us!

Early in the morning, at first light, we were moving along when a man with a cart passed by. It happened to be my uncle called Blasenstein, who used to live in Cieszyn. Of course, we could not stop then because everyone was moving. We arranged to meet in Łuck, the next town, but we never saw him again. We kept moving east, and on the twenty-third day since leaving our home we arrived in the large town of Łuck, where we would spend the next nine months. ■

The town of Łuck

ŁUCK IS PRONOUNCED ‘Wootsk’. The German name for this town is Lutsck, the Yiddish name is לִטְסַק, and in Ukranian (it is now in Ukraine) it is known as Луцьк.

We arrived late at night, maybe around eleven o’clock, with nowhere to stay. There were many refugees and we were given permission to sleep on the floor in the Town Hall. It was *Erev Yom Kippur*, the eve of The Day of Atonement.

The next day was *Shabbat* and *Yom Kippur*. This was the first time that I fasted because I was now twelve years old. There was a Jewish community in Łuck and we attended a service in the lovely old-fashioned synagogue.

On Sunday, we began hunting for somewhere to stay. A Jewish dentist who had a little room in his house took us in for maybe a short time. He had a disabled daughter who lived in the same town, a middle-aged lady who was a dressmaker. She had a special sewing machine which she could operate with her hand.

Only three of us stayed with the dentist. My uncle, aunt and grandmother found alternative lodgings, two or three streets away. We had arrived in Łuck on 23 September. By 1 November it was snowing and the dentist had had enough and asked us to leave; we needed to find some other accommodation. We eventually found one room in a Jewish family home. It had a separate entrance but was extremely basic and primitive. That is where we stayed for the remainder of our time in Łuck.

Life in Łuck was very difficult. We were not well off. My father’s illness had used up much of our savings and resources. The antisemitism we had experienced in Bielsko had also taken its toll. People were boycotting Jewish businesses and did not come into their shops. I really do not know how we managed or where the money came from.

At night, memories of the nights we had spent on the road, came back. Often I could still hear crossfire – sometimes very close, sometimes a long way away. We never knew if the next people coming around the corner were going to be the Polish Army or the German Army. All we wanted to do was to run away.

By that time the ‘Polish War’ was over and I was able to attend school. There was a *gymnasium* in Łuck and I had a really fantastic teacher. I remember him teaching us The Odyssey and The Iliad.

At school a constant stream of refugees arrived all the time. One of those refugees was a girl called Janina Gelernter, who had traveled from Warsaw with her mother. The mother was a lawyer, and Janina became my best friend.

I did very well at the *gymnasium*. At school they discontinued Latin and replaced it with Russian. To this day I am very sorry that we had to learn to speak Russian. The school was under a new director named Rasbitsky, who was a communist. He was a Ukrainian, but spoke Polish. We always laughed at him because he wore a dark suit and white socks.

Most of the children at the school were Polish. Like all schools we had an in-house newspaper and I vividly remember reading about what happened in Spain and, in particular, the bombardment of Guernica. I was joint editor for another newspaper for which students wrote little stories. Every newspaper has to have a name and we called ours ‘Primus’, meaning ‘First’ in Latin. One day we were summoned by Director Rasbitsky who made us stand in front of him and said, ‘What do you think you are doing by calling your newspaper ‘Primus’?’ We looked at each other puzzled; we did not know what he was talking about. Apparently ‘Primus’ in Ukrainian means ‘under duress’ and he thought we were being subversive and trying to get one over on him!

During that period of eight or nine months it was all relatively quiet. The war was over for the Poles but we were unaware that there was a larger war going on. The Polish Army had not endured for very long. The Russians had acquired their slice of Poland and the Germans

had similarly taken what they wanted. However, people were still endlessly on the move - men would run away at night leaving their wives and children behind. There were barns full of people who were being taken through the 'green border' at night, illegally crossing into Romania and Hungary. You had to pay to get to the other side. People were very happy to return home. Łuck was a town controlled by the Russians located on the Russian side and nobody we knew wanted to be there.

The NKVD (*Narodny Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del*) were communist authorities of The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the Russian Secret Police. They wanted us to become Russian citizens as we were now officially on Russian territory. Our previous homes were across the border and we were never going back. Their argument was: "You are in our territory; you've got to be with us, or against us. If you do not accept our invitation to become Russian citizens, then you are our enemies." This harassment went on for many months. Everywhere refugees gathered in groups they would discuss this dilemma.

Our family decided we would never be separated wherever they might send us but we would never take Russian citizenship. We knew exactly what had gone on in the Soviet Union, including the show trials of 1937 and 1938. If we resisted Russian citizenship, we would have a small chance of retaining a separate identity. Had we accepted Russian citizenship, they could do what they liked with us. Very few chose to become Russian.

Russian military personnel and their wives flooded the town. They had never had it so good. They bought everything! In the street you could see Russian soldiers with many watches asking: "Would you like to buy a watch?"

When she suspected that war had been coming my mother felt strongly that she should learn a trade. She learned to become a dressmaker. Some people made the wrong choice, like one lady, I remember, who learned to make corsets.

The Russians continually wanted to show how good life was in the Soviet Union. They screened free performances in the local cinema or theatre. I saw the propaganda film called *Цирк*, showing a Soviet circus; everybody was saying how happy they were to be in the Soviet Union. The wives of military personnel attended these performances showing off all their fancy things and newly bought dresses.

Meanwhile people were summoned time and again by the NKVD and the interrogations lasted for hours - we were being pressed hard. Eventually the authorities said: "If you refuse to be Soviet citizens, you will have to go back home."

Time was passing and on 1 May the great proletarian holiday was approaching. Of course, the school planned to celebrate it. For three weeks beforehand, we had to march in the playground, in front of Director Razbicki. He stood on a platform, and we had to cheer as we passed him. Our practice was repeated again and again so that on the day we would give a creditable performance.

One day the town of Łuck was particularly full of the NKVD. They were swarming everywhere, and we knew something was brewing. It happened on the following Friday night. Somebody knocked on our door and two secret policemen barged in. "Pack your things, you are being sent home. If you've got any valuables, give them to us and we'll give you a receipt."

We packed our things and took our suitcases to the main road where lorries were waiting to take people to the station. My grandmother, uncle and aunt made their own way there. It was very early on Saturday morning at the end of June 1940, and a very hot day, when we arrived at the station. On the platform were long trains of cattle wagons. They loaded around 44 people into each cattle truck. Then the doors shut. Sometimes you see films of people getting out of those wagons, but very few people know what it feels like when you find yourself inside and the doors are closed. At the end of our particular wagon was a little platform, where a soldier with a bayonet stood guard while the train was moving. 44 people, with all their belongings, crowded into in a small space with absolutely nowhere to sit and nowhere to lie. It was dreadful.

There was no food, no water, no toilet, nothing, absolutely nothing. With the door of the truck closed it was very hot. Among the passengers was a two-year-old child, and many old people. The atmosphere was one of desperation; we did not know what was going to happen next. There were wooden planks along both sides of the wagon. We removed some planks so people could sit and changed places after a while. There were two levels. We were on the top. The long day wore on.

My friend from school, Janina Gelernter, and her mother came to the station to see if they could help but we did not even see them. We only found out later that they had been looking for us.

Sunday arrived. The hot weather continued. At some time two buckets of slop were put into the wagon - our ration for the day. The train stood still. It was almost dark when we finally moved west and thought, "They are indeed taking us home." Not so. After 15 kilometres we arrived at a big junction and changed direction. For the next two weeks we moved further and further east. ■

“The atmosphere was one of desperation; we did not know what was going to happen next.”

Part 3

Survival in Siberia

Into the snow forest

WE ONLY TRAVELLED as far as the old Polish border. The train could go no further because the Russian railway gauge was wider than the Polish. We stopped in the middle of nowhere, guarded by Mongolian-looking Soviet soldiers. Unusually the wagons were level with the platform. In desperation some deportees hid below the wheels and escaped on the other side, out of the sight of guards. "Good for them," we thought. But most were killed later after the outbreak of the Russo-German war.

Perhaps we, who were deported, were the lucky ones. Most of the next day was taken up with moving from the Polish to the Russian train. The inside of the cattle trucks was the same as in the last train and we removed a few planks for sitting on. Once the train was in motion we used an umbrella to open two little windows to give us some air.

We had no idea where we were going. Could it be the Ukrainian coalmines? No, they were left behind. By Friday we crossed a wide river, the Wolga, and on Saturday night the Urals near the town of Ufa. We continued to move east and were now on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

Whenever the train stopped locals came to sell milk, bread and onions. At most stations there was hot water so that was how we survived. The journey was very monotonous - there was nothing to see and the train would stand motionless in the middle of fields for hours. And when we could we rushed out to relieve ourselves in the bushes.

Two weeks after we left Łuck we were told to get off the train. It was still light but it was late evening. The light Siberian nights! It then occurred to us that while moving east we had passed seven time zones.

The next morning 3000 people were moved by lorries to the River Chulym and ordered onto a barge. Some managed to climb onto the roof. The water level was low down as the river bed had been eroded by melting snow. The six members of our family crouched under the stairs

inside the barge. There were no toilet facilities, you had to hold on at the end of the barge and try not to fall into the water.

During the day there was no drinking water but at night we could get some water contaminated with oil from the tug that was pulling us. We were only given salted herrings that made us thirsty and mouldy green bread. With us under the stairs were two Polish boys who spoke Yiddish; they had learnt it while playing with Jewish children in Warsaw.

After a few days we were ordered to disembark in the middle of nowhere. Some people were taken further up the river. There were two small villages nearby. Beregajevo, where some deportees had already settled. The other was called Tayga, for which we were heading.

The barge disappeared up river and we were left standing on the bank with our few belongings. Soon we were ordered by soldiers onto a little narrow gauge train, usually used to move logs to the river. For the next few hours we moved on, often having to push the train which kept breaking down.

It was two weeks and three days since we had been deported from Łuck when, in the late evening, we finally arrived in a clearing in the forest having passed the watch towers some four kilometres back. Except for stagnant water, there were a few wooden, vermin infested huts built by earlier prisoners now moved to make room for us. My family were ordered to a hut some way up the hill. It would be difficult to move downhill in winter snow drifts.

Our wooden hut was full of mosquitos so every evening we had to burn spruce to get rid of them. We built a shelf to serve as a bed for the six of us. Once you went outside the hut, all sense of direction was lost in fog. Some deportees went to look for berries and could not find their way back. When they finally returned their faces were so bitten by mosquitoes that they were unrecognisable.

Down in the village was a cook house. Deportees were put in charge and we were told to address all complaints to them. Our diet consisted of *schi* - a thin cabbage soup - and of berries and mushrooms collected in the forest. We were also given a small ration of heavy black bread.

We were soon put to work as slave labourers; men and women were marched off into the forest to fell trees, something none of us had ever done before. But first we were injected with an unknown substance; we would never find out what it was. Our thumbs were marked with indelible ink and no rations given to those without a mark.

By the middle of August we had been working in the gulag for eight weeks. There were no cows to milk for the children, no medicines and we only had the dispensed slop and stale bread to eat. Many were ill, exhausted and suffering from dysentery and typhoid.

We only had the few clothes we brought with us. Winter was coming, the river would freeze up and no supplies would reach us until spring. We were surrounded by the forest from all sides, there was nowhere to run and the chances of survival were slim.

We, the 3000 deportees dumped in the gulag, had to fight back. It was decided at a meeting that one morning, instead of going to work, we would hijack the little train, go back to the River Chulym and demand to be sent elsewhere where we might get a chance of survival. Some deportees disagreed, stayed behind and moved into better huts which were now vacant.

There was not enough room for everyone on the train which kept breaking down and had to be pushed. Some way down the line a heavy log was placed on the rails and had to be lifted. It was after dark when the train was pushed back to collect the remaining people. Our family was among them.

All that night was spent on the train; some walked alongside it to lighten the load. Autumn was approaching and no one could tell whether it was day or night.

As we moved towards the Chulym River the moon reflected in the bogs in the forest and sometimes large trees just fell over for no reason.

Finally we arrived on the river bank and camped in the open. It was getting colder but the days were still warm. Deportees in Beregayevo smuggled some bread to sustain us. But on the fourth day the rains came and we were soon lying on the grass covered in mud.

That day notices appeared at the corners of the field saying that we had left our place of work and would be shot. The authorities agreed to talk to our representatives assuring us that no harm would come to them. The talks went on all day. In the evening they returned to say that we had to return to our camp in Tayga.

And so we loaded our scant belongings onto the train and pushed it back. Our plan had not worked. We had to resume cutting trees. But the representatives who negotiated with the authorities were removed and were never heard of or seen again. They were probably sent to another camp. Some two weeks later, late one Friday night as usual, there was a knock on the door and we were ordered to pack up and move. So we boarded the little train and pushed it back to the river. But first the train stopped at the watchtowers for a roll call. If you did not hear your name you were separated from your family and sent back to Tayga.

Once again we camped on the river bank, this time until a barge arrived from up river and we were herded onto it. More people were picked up later from little camps without names. Soon the barge was overloaded with only room left to stand.

Of all our experiences this proved to be the worst. This barge was worse than the previous one. There were cases of cholera, typhoid, malaria, dysentery and vicious insect bites. There were no toilets. The diet was the same as before: salt herring, stale bread and polluted water from the tug. People tried to get onto the roof for extra space but it collapsed and they fell onto those below. Every day many died from their illnesses. Once a day the barge stopped on one river bank or the other and buried the dead in the middle of nowhere. Some gravely ill were taken

to hospitals somewhere. The most prized possession was salt. And so the journey continued for two weeks.

The Chulym River is a tributary of the much larger Ob River. Another barge was just due to leave and who should be on it but Uncle Berthold Simachovich! By himself. Aunt Anna was left behind. Except for a brief hello we went our separate ways.

A few days later we found ourselves in Tomsk and were ordered onto a passenger train. What luxury! It soon took off towards the Trans-Siberian Railway leaving carriages and occupants in villages along the route. This was bad for us as we no longer had the advantage of numbers. Finally only 78 people disembarked in a small village called Pichtach near a town also called Tayga. Our commandant waited to receive us. He marched us into the *banya* (bathhouse) where water was poured over hot stones and birch branches used as sponges. Then he marched us to the barracks which were to house us for the next year.

Pichtach was completely quiet - no sound, no noise, just silence. It was now late summer and there were berries, mushrooms and a weed called lebioda which tasted a bit like spinach. Otherwise we only got a starvation ration.

There were some Russians in the village who had been deported in the thirties by Stalin. They had planted potatoes, had a few cows and pigs but refused to sell anything to us as money had no value. However they sometimes exchanged food for clothing. They had hoped that they would be returned home but now knew this would not happen and assured us that we, too, were there for the rest of our lives.

I attended form four at the village primary school for a while (I should have been in form six but could not speak Russian). One day on the way home I fainted. There was a sort of paramedic whose only remedy for all ills was castor oil. I was sick with jaundice. I was very yellow including my eyes, and I was very weak. Then I developed bad toothache. The commandant allowed me to go to Tayga, some 17 kilometres away, to see a dentist.

The Trans-Siberian railway trains went past the village once a day in each direction but the porters did their best to keep you off. Tayga was a strange town with only five streets named One, Two, Three, Four and Five. The railway station was on Street One, the hospital on Street Three, and so on. There were only women in town. They had been deported from the Caucasus and their men taken to other unknown gulags.

I was examined by a wonderful woman called Olga Filipowna. Seeing how ill I was she sent me straight into hospital and kept me there for a week. Every morning at 6.30 everyone was woken up by a song about Stalin telling us how lucky we were to be living in the Soviet Union. After a week she had to discharge me and gave me a litre vodka bottle filled with pinkish potassium bromide. I was stopped several times by Russians on the way to the station asking how much I wanted for the vodka. The train to Pichtach was not due to leave until 2.30 the next morning and now it was not yet noon. I had no money, no food, and no one to speak to. Had it not been for the village shopkeeper who was also travelling I would never have found the right train in the maze of railway lines.

It started to snow in September. We were allowed to go into the forest, choose three trees and chop them down for fuel. A horse pulled them to the barracks. The trees then had to be cut into smaller chunks and the wood stored.

Every morning at first light brigades were marched into the forest to work - everyone except my grandmother who was then in her seventies. Every moment of daylight had to be used as there was total darkness after sunset. Every morning at daybreak the commandant barged in and ordered us to wash floors. We went to bed at dusk. It was very cold but even so we had to work unless the temperature was below -45 degrees centigrade. The Russians cunningly wrapped the thermometer bulb in cotton wool and, as there was only one thermometer in the gulag, we had to go to work regardless. We had no suitable clothing and our footwear were felt *valenki*.

We only received meagre rations in the gulag shop. Once or twice, on public holidays, we got a small chunk of margarine. I could not imagine why people needed to eat butter when margarine was wonderful. Water was supplied by a horse drawn tank. In town milk was sold as frozen cakes – a two litre cake, a one litre cake and a smaller, half-litre cake. Nowadays people are surprised to learn that milk can be frozen.

I had to go back to Tayga to have a tooth extracted. This was very painful as no anaesthetics were available. My face swelled up and I was readmitted to hospital. By now I had outgrown the village school but was anxious to continue my education. While in hospital Olga Filipowna, the doctor, lent me a book and I worked hard at Russian.

My mother obtained permission to work in an 'artel' (cooperative association of craftsmen) in Tayga as a seamstress sewing clothes for privileged members of the Communist Party. I was allowed to stay with her and Olga Filipowna found some lodgings for us. However my mother soon decided we should return to Pichtach.

The weather was terrible and in the middle of winter one walked on a narrow path between two walls of snow. In the mornings we had to dig ourselves out and removed snow from the windows to let in light. Morale was low. On New Year's Eve in 1941 someone played their mouth organ to cheer us up.

Each family had their own room in the barracks, the greater part of which was taken up by a self-made stove for cooking. We slept on a bed made of boxes. Our clothes hung on the wall and were frequently nibbled by mice. Water in the bucket turned to ice. In winter we melted snow for water.

Villagers came to the barracks to have their teeth pulled for payment. Although there were two dentists they were most often pulled by Dr Rosenberg. The cries of the patients were blood-chilling. In Tayga was a shop called 'Beryozka' where almost anything was available for gold. Some deportees had gold coins, others had gold teeth and these were extracted and sold for food. Shops like this were all over Russia. Soon after New Year Dr Rosenberg walked



Me (left) and Galia in Tayga

with some gold to the railway station but somehow lost his treasure on the way. He was devastated. He kept looking for it and, unbelievably, found it. A lucky day.

The commandant gave me permission to go to class six in Tayga. I walked in in the middle of an algebra lesson. Once the lesson was over the kids surrounded me – all they wanted to know was how to swear in Polish! And I did not know. None of them had seen a foreigner before and I was a curiosity. I was good at school and my history teacher asked if I came from the aristocracy.

Our class teacher was Anastasia Afanasievna. She was a not very good looking spinster. She said I could stay in her house, in which she lived with her uncle, aunt and two nephews. I was offered two wooden planks in a very cold corridor to sleep on. In gratitude my mother gave her her last black flowered silk blouse. I was expected to help with the housework and cooking. The food was eaten off a big common plate with fingers – there was no cutlery. The warmest place to sleep on was on top of the stove. Once they tried to butcher a pig and chased it all over the house.

School was in the afternoon. When I returned supper was over and I was left only a few leftovers. I was always hungry. Once I was almost poisoned by carbon monoxide. Life was very hard.

There was also a 19 year-old illiterate youth in the house who was Anastasia Afanasievna's fiancé. The day they decided to get married one nephew had to stay home to lend his coat to the bridegroom so he could go to the town hall for his marriage ceremony. In the evenings he was taught by his new wife to read and write.

After three weeks I was told I had to leave as there was not enough room for me. At school I made friends with two sisters, Galia and Zhenia Karastilieva, whose parents agreed to take me in until the end of the school year. The house was kept by the *babushka* (grandmother) while their mother and father worked. While staying with them we went to the cinema to see “The Three Musketeers”. But time went on and all too soon I had to return to the gulag in Pichtach.

In the gulag we were desperate for food but the few belongings we had left could be sold at the market in the nearby mining town of Andzhero-Sudzhensk. It was not on the railway line and one day Dr Rosenberg's elder son Erik and a Polish girl took with them items to sell for commission. They had to walk along the railway tracks to avoid deep snow drifts. Somehow they did not hear the approaching train and jumped off the tracks at the last moment. When the train passed, the girl was nowhere to be seen. She had been dragged by the train and killed.

Our prospects were miserable. We considered ourselves lucky if we got a bucket of potatoes. And we were still infested with lice.

Eventually spring arrived and the melting snow left much mud which took weeks to dry out. Soon it was 1 May - the great proletarian holiday. Everyone was given buckets of slaked lime to whitewash the barracks and an extra ration of margarine. The women also received three metres of a printed cotton material to make a new dress for the holiday. They all ended up with identical dresses.

The earth in Siberia is very fertile and one bucket of potatoes produces ten. For the coming winter the commandant gave us some ground a long way from the village. We hoped for a good crop. My mother asked a Russian woman to plant for us in exchange for shocking pink dress from the material she brought. The day for planting was 22 June 1941. A very significant date for the world.

The day we planted the potatoes Germany invaded Russia.

No news about the war, our families or anything else penetrated into the gulag. There were no radios, newspapers or anything else anywhere in sight. In the mornings we were woken by loud, martial music emanating from loudspeakers on the wall. In summer evenings we walked the few miles to the station at the time the Trans-Siberian train was due. If we were lucky a passenger might throw out a newspaper, magazine or something to eat and we greedily looked for news trying to find out what went on in the rest of the world.

Summer wore on and like young people everywhere we tried to get together for walks and to sing. While out one evening I began to tremble uncontrollably and then my temperature went very high. This happened a few days in succession. It was malaria. I had been bitten by mosquitoes. Eventually it settled only to return many years later.

To get medical help in town we had first to get a pass from our commandant, which he was reluctant to issue, and then report and get it stamped by the town militia. Some evenings when the commandant was about to sit down to a meal a deportee would rush into his hut to report that someone had run away. He would have to go out to check. In any case, there was nowhere to run. ■

Part 4

Our escape from Siberia

We are no longer the enemy!

WE HAD NOW been in Siberia for over a year and locals and the commandant never missed an opportunity to remind us that we were there for the rest of our lives.

One Saturday in August 1941, everyone was summoned to a meeting in the barn. This was very unusual and we had no idea what to expect. Sheepishly the commandant told us that Soviet Russia and Germany were now at war. We, the deportees, could now be trusted to fight the war on Russia's side. We would be allowed to move away with the exception of some towns prohibited to even the Soviets. However he urged us to stay in Siberia as, with the war on, transport would be difficult and there would be no food on the way. Perhaps he thought that they would have to deport us back sooner or later.

After the horrors of the winter in Siberia all everyone wanted was to move to a warmer place. Dr Rosenberg had been to Uzbekistan during World War One and told us of a lovely town called Kokand. So we unanimously decided to go to Kokand. But how to get there? After much discussion it was decided to send two representatives to Novosibirsk and try to hire two railway wagons which could then be hitched to any train bound for Uzbekistan. While we waited for the scouts to come back from Novosibirsk someone, while walking along the railway line, picked up an apple thrown from a train. We cut it into 78 portions to give everyone a taste of better things to come.

The scouts returned from Novosibirsk with the news that the carriages had been hired. Seventy-six people from our billet left.

Each person had saved every morsel of their bread ration, which had been made into little rusks for the journey. That year, the year we planted our potatoes, there had been a blight and instead of the large potatoes we had hoped for, we only grew tiny shrivelled ones. We ate them anyway, morning, noon and night, so that we could keep the bread for the journey.

Lo and behold, at the beginning of September 1941, the carriages arrived at a little siding in Pichtach. We packed all our belongings into the two cattle wagons, one of which had a platform, everybody paying fairly according to the amount of luggage they travelled with. As we left our hut for the final time I took a last look at our room and as a parting gesture, I kicked over the little oven which we had built out of bricks. Hundreds of beetles wriggled out - they had been living inside the warm stove.

We were now no longer prisoners, so nobody had the responsibility for our welfare or for feeding us. We were on our own.

On Monday 8 September 1941, our two carriages were hitched to a train and departed for Tayga, where we were delayed until Saturday. I took advantage of this to go and say goodbye to the Caristilliov family, my school friends who had taken me into their home. I remember that Zhenia, who had been in my class, was not at home, but Galia was there.

No one knew exactly how long it was going to take to get to Kokand, but it was a very long journey. There was still Kazakhstan to travel through before we reached Uzbekistan. Somewhere along the way we all contributed towards the purchase of a mandolin. Right the way through Kazakhstan, we played the mandolin, sometimes spending time on the little platform at the end of one of those carriages. We could feel the cold, but as we travelled down to southern Siberia, it became a little warmer.

During the time we were heading south, trains of prisoners, similar to the one we travelled in on our way to Siberia, were moving northwards to take our place to cut down trees. The unfortunates on these trains were none other than the Volga Germans who had lived in Russia for centuries. They were actually Russian citizens, but they could no longer be trusted with Germany on the offensive.

In Siberia, I had been anxious to continue my education but had not been allowed back to school after class six. I had persuaded my parents to scrape together some money to buy some books from a shop in Novosibirsk, for a correspondence course, allowing me to continue

to study by myself. As we were travelling south we passed through Novosibirsk, where the train stopped in a siding for two or three days. My mother and I left the train and found the place to return my books and recoup our money. When we came back to the sidings however, the train was not there! Luckily the train had only moved to a different platform and we eventually found it.

Another night, we took a risk, a real *chutzpah*! We sent a telegram to the town of Barnaul, which was quite a large town in southern Siberia. The telegram said that a group of seventy-six people would be arriving by train at six o'clock, and it asked if there could be a meal ready for them on arrival. We thought the telegram could do no harm, although we did not expect it to produce any result. The train was three hours late arriving, but when it did, the meal was waiting for us.

We moved through Kazakhstan, eating mostly red watermelons. There were so many watermelons! At night we could see buzzards settling on the rail posts and grass fires in the distance and many abandoned agricultural buildings. Our wagons were sometimes hitched to a train carrying cattle, and at other times, logs; it could have been anything. As we had left in September, we spent *Rosh Hashanah* in a railway siding somewhere. We knew it was the Jewish New Year, but we had no means of checking the exact date. The boys from Warsaw who could speak Yiddish were amongst our numbers, and there were others who were also not Jewish.

We kept moving on and the days went by. After around ten days, we found ourselves passing close to the town of Alma Ata, which is now called Almaty. There I saw something that I had never seen before, or since: thousands of birds swooping in an enormous flock over the town. Afterwards, we passed through the town of Shymkent. Early one morning, two weeks after leaving Pichtach, we arrived in Kokand. We had survived the journey on those homemade rusks! ■

Arriving in Uzbekistan

THE WEATHER WAS WARM and sunny. We did not know where to go, so we put our belongings down in front of the town hall and started to explore our new surroundings. It was an interesting town built around the railway. There was the new town and an old town, which was some distance away. The streets were lined with caravans of camels. The Uzbek men wore *tibiteika*, skullcaps (тюбете́йка) or the Central Asian little hats, and women were dressed in *purdah* (Muslim robe covering). It was all completely new to us. That night we slept on the ground in the open, but there was a sandstorm and by morning we were all completely covered in sand.

In the morning we went to the bazaar where there was plenty of food at reasonable prices. We were surrounded by the Pamir Mountains, a mountain range north of the Himalayas. The sun was out and it was very hot. Our first priority was to find somewhere to live. The houses were Uzbek style mud huts. There were no windows looking out into the street, only facing out into a courtyard.

It took some time, but we finally managed to rent a room for six at reasonable rates opposite the railway station. We had no money whatsoever so my mother and my aunt began to take in sewing.

By this time I was fourteen and attended class seven at the local school. Most lessons were in Russian and Uzbek. When my father was alive, he had given me some earrings as traditionally all little girls when they were born had their ears pierced. My earrings were forget-me-nots and little gold hoops, with gold studs, but I had lost one of these and I only wore one earring. One of the boys in school always called me 'The girl with one earring' (Девушка с одной сережкой).

Everything was fine for a while. On leaving Siberia, we had been given identification documents, valid for three months. Consequently, one night in December, we were rounded

up. We were firstly provided with a wonderful meal in a hall and then led onto a train. For the next two weeks, we were shunted up and down the railway line in the middle of nowhere. Thankfully, it was a passenger train, but it was terribly frustrating not knowing where you were going or what was happening. I later understood why they gave us a good meal beforehand, as there was no food on the train. During this period we tried to send telegrams to the nearest town, or to well-known Russian writers, Boris Pasternak and Ilya Ehrenburg, saying: "Look, we're here, we are who we are, please will you do something." But nothing happened, it did not help. I do not know if the telegrams ever arrived, but we had to try to do something to help ourselves.

After two weeks of this shunting backwards and forwards, operatives arrived and ordered us off the train. We took our few belongings and got out. They needed people to pick cotton and they planned to move us out of the town to a *kolkhoz* (a collective farm). We would have been even more isolated than we were in the town.

Somehow my mother, stepfather, grandmother, aunt and uncle and I managed to get away in a *grazin*, a hand pump trolley. It is one of those contraptions you find on a railway line that can be moved along the track. Using this we made our way back to Kokand, which was a great achievement.

On our return we had nowhere to live because somebody else had taken up residence in our room. In summer it is very hot, but in winter it is really very cold. The Pamir Mountains were covered in snow, even in summer. We had to begin our search for accommodation from scratch, which was very difficult, because in the December of 1941 even more people were arriving from Russia along with evacuees, all looking for somewhere to stay. Luckily, we found a room at Number One, Rosa Luxembourg Street. It was a pleasant U-shaped building situated behind a stone wall.

There were four dwellings and ours was right at the end. It had two rooms, belonging to an illiterate washerwoman who we called Teiotia Dunya. She gave us the first room. She lived

with her daughter Marusia in the second room. Her daughter, whose husband was in the Russian army fighting at the front, had just given birth to a new baby.

About six o'clock every morning Teiotia Dunya and her daughter had to pass through our room on their way to work and again in the evening when they came home, but we never saw them during the day. Teiotia Dunya was a wonderful old woman, salt of the earth, and a wonderful interpreter of dreams. Every morning when they passed through our room, we told her what we had dreamed and asked her: "What do you think it means?" We lived with them for over three and a half years.

Our room was very small. A third of it was taken up by a cooking range, which we did not use as it would have needed far too much wood which we could not afford. We cooked food in a special cooking bucket that we made ourselves, called a *mangalka*. There was a hole cut at the bottom to empty the ashes and we placed a piece of tin at the top. We kept a few bricks inside the bucket to keep it warm. Two orange boxes were used as our beds, with our few possessions underneath. My stepfather, my mother and I slept on the left side; and my uncle, aunt and grandmother slept on the other side.

By now everything was expensive. The man who sold little bundles of wood at the market and carried it home for me always used to say: "*Kursakpustoi*." *Kursak* is an Uzbek word for stomach, and *pustoi* means empty. He was just begging for food.

Kokand was quite a large city. I do not know how many inhabitants it had, but in the old town the market was typical of those in the Middle East. The main road was wide with two little channels filled with water on either side of it. There was always a man up to his knees in water in the channel, throwing water onto the road to keep it moist. I cannot remember ever seeing an automobile as dromedaries or camels mostly used the roads, loaded with goods.

We were on our own and no longer anybody's responsibility. We had to make enough money to keep ourselves fed. Therefore every minute of every day was devoted to earning a living. All of us had a function: grandmother did most of the cooking, uncle mainly stood in queues to

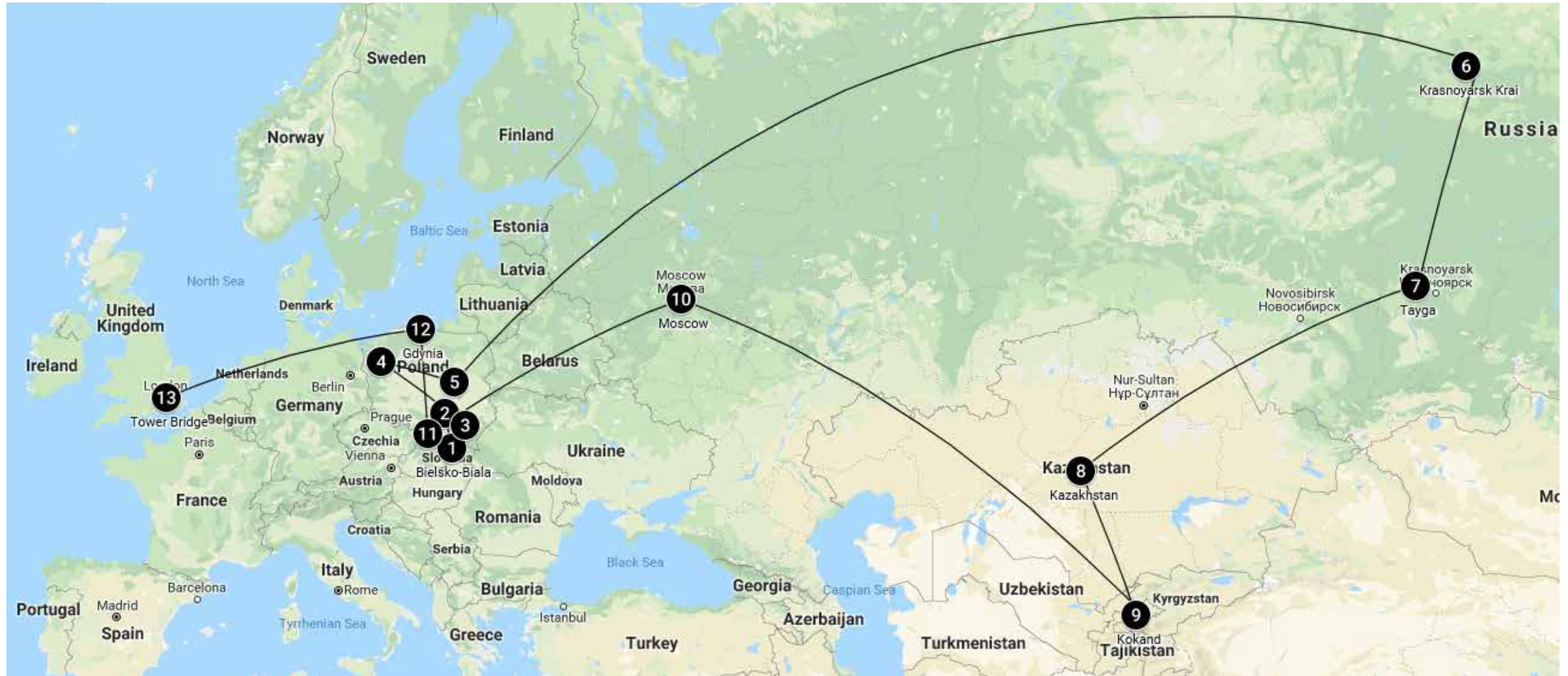
purchase bread, my mother and my aunt took in sewing for people, my stepfather also had a job, some sort of bookkeeping for which he earned a small salary, and I did the shopping in the market and earned money from my knitting. A girl student evacuee from the very well-known Mendeleev Institute of Chemistry in Moscow University had brought her knitted cardigan to me to finish. It was a very intricate pattern and it took me a very long time to work it out. Ultimately I finished it, and that was the start of earning money from knitting.

One of my duties was to go into the old town on Sundays to buy provisions. We bought something called *katyk* (sour milk yogurt) which was like Devon clotted cream. We purchased it and put it into a glass jar and then carried it home. I always carried two jars in my basket, but one day somebody knocked into me and when I picked myself up the jars had been stolen!

Outside our room in the courtyard was a very tall old mulberry tree and I think I am right in saying that this tree saved our lives. The mulberries fell off the tree and we ate them - they had very high sugar content. Otherwise sugar beet was very good for us. Everything else was extremely difficult to come by. Women from a *kolkhoz* brought milk to the market. Before they were allowed to sell it, however, they had to prove, with hydrometers they carried, that the milk had not been watered down.

You always had to haggle with the Uzbeks. If you haggled long enough, they often said: "*Prijdi Ertaga*" which meant: "Come back tomorrow and you will get a better price!" We ate anything we could get our hands on, anything and everything that was edible. One such thing, sold outside the doors of the bazaar, was the blood drained from slaughtered sheep. It congealed and people ate it just like black pudding.

My stepfather had lost his Omega watch the day we left our first gulag in Siberia and for years we did not know exactly what time it was. Somehow we managed to buy a pocket watch which we hung on the wall. Being a volcanic district it behaved oddly, like a pendulum. One day the watch was not there anymore. Customers came regularly to our little room to try on the dresses which my mother made. One of these customers must have stolen it. We never found out who it was.



On the run from Friday 1 September 1939 – Friday 29 March 1946

It was very hot in the summer. We acquired water from an artesian well situated in a brick building. I had to carry the water for about three or four kilometres from the well back home. We used most of the water for cooking and very little for washing. Therefore keeping clean was not easy. There was always a queue of people waiting their turn to collect water and while they waited, they talked about the progress of the war, although we did not know much about what was happening. The only newspapers available were those pasted to the wall of a building in the centre of town. The news seemed primarily to be about the great success of one *kolkhoz* or another. We did not have very much time to walk into the centre to read these articles.

Periodically we listened to talks by some visiting General or other who spoke about the wonderful victories of the Red Army. It was probably propaganda. People sometimes received letters so we had some news. However, generally speaking we did not really know what was going on.

During the summer it was almost completely impossible to breathe. Any water that could be spared was used to soak sheets, which we hung across the windows for the evaporation to reduce the heat. I used to sleep on the table with my head next to the only window in the room, while the others slept outside on the steps. One night, somebody stepped over our sleeping bodies, and cleared out our room. Everything we owned hung on the walls. Dresses hanging there for my mother's customers were stolen, but the customers were thankfully very understanding.

Another night when I was sleeping with my head next to the window, there was a sudden commotion outside, and my uncle said: "There's somebody outside." Teiotia Dunya also heard it, and she started shouting: "*Wstawaj Nikolaj*" to give the person who was outside the impression there was a man inside. Anyway, it turned out it was not a thief, but Mariz, Marusia's brother, who had deserted the army and had come to see his mother.

The first year in Kokand was a very bad year for the original seventy-six who had left Siberia. Back there, only the girl who was struck by the train had died, but half of the people who

came with us to Kokand died during the first year. Some were old people who had no-one to help them.

There were many scorpions in the area. Once I found a scorpion on me whilst walking along, but I managed to shake it off. They liked to hide in your pockets, and to be sure that none were there you had to be very careful to shake your pockets out. Unfortunately, one day my grandmother was bitten. She was in terrible pain lasting for twenty-four hours, but she eventually recovered. They were particularly vicious in the month of May. In spite of everything we tried we could not get rid of them; it was awful.

We had no electricity. In the evening, when I had homework and my mother did her sewing, we had only a lighted wick dipped into a little oil. There was a little water closet, called an *aryk*, on the main streets where people would empty their dirty water. Otherwise, you had to walk a long way to an open toilet. That was very difficult, especially at night, if you were suffering from dysentery, which most of us were, all the time. My grandmother was in her seventies and her health was failing. There was a clinic with doctors not far from where we lived and a Russian doctor came to visit us. We had no money, but he gave us a prescription and the money to pay for it. I was the only one fit enough to undertake the lengthy journey to the pharmacist. I spent all Sunday afternoon waiting for the prescription to be dispensed. I received a piece of newspaper, cut into a square, filled with nothing else but the grated rind of a pomegranate. It was supposed to be a good remedy for dysentery, but of course, it did not help any of us.

We had been weakened by our time in Siberia. Illness was rife, especially in the first year. Along with amoebic dysentery we had a terrible skin disease. Some bacteria or parasite burrowed beneath your skin, causing you to scratch all the time. There was typhus, there was typhoid, and there was malaria. I had caught malaria in Siberia, but it was not the deadly strain. Malaria in Uzbekistan was tropical malaria which could be lethal. I slept through every volcanic eruption, but sometimes I woke up in the morning to find very large cracks in the road.

My uncle used to stand in the bread queue for hours, together with Uzbek men and Muslim women dressed in *purdah*. Sometimes the queue for bread began at five in the morning and lasted for many hours because the bread failed to arrive. When it came, the bread was very dark and terribly heavy because they added a large amount of water to the dough. Everyone received a daily ration of allotted weight of a type of rye bread. There were occasions when, despite having queued for hours, the bread ran out before your turn.

Everything was becoming increasingly difficult. When we first came to Kokand there had at least been plenty of fruit and other food supplies. However, as the Germans made further progress occupying Russian territory more people were arriving, particularly from Leningrad. As the number of evacuees increased the food supplies seemed to disappear. Prices were exorbitant. It was terrible to see young people without teeth and with scurvy. In the morning when we went out to stand in food queues we had to step over the many bodies of those who had died during the night. Times were bad, we were infested with lice, and there was also a lack of fresh clean water.

Before the war I had been learning to play the piano. I was never particularly good, but suddenly in Kokand I wanted to learn again - but of course, we did not have a piano. I enrolled in a music school which was at the other end of town. At five o'clock in the morning I would walk three to four kilometres to practise before the school day began. Very often all pianos were taken when I first arrived. Nevertheless, it was worth it to be able to play.

My mother helped to keep us alive with her dressmaking skills. She hired herself out, visiting customers' homes and making them a dress that same day. Sometimes they offered her a meal, and whatever they gave her she would put into little jars and bring home for us to eat. One client she sewed for was a very rich Armenian family who had many jewels. They had a Russian woman servant and their own cow for milk. They had children who wanted to learn to play the piano and they asked me to teach them. Occasionally they asked me to eat with them. They cooked cabbage leaves filled with meat which was so highly spiced it made my eyes water.

Unfortunately they came under suspicion by the NKVD and that was the end of them. The husband was arrested and the family was taken away along with the servant and the cow.

I began to attend a mixed school, boys and girls together. I loved learning and I was a good student. The first year in Kokand ended and I finished class seven. I wanted desperately to go to university, for which you needed a matriculation certificate proving you had completed ten years of schooling, but I could not afford to stay in school any longer. In Kokand, however, there was a Technical Institute which trained students for petroleum extraction. It was potentially risky, because after three years you graduated and could then be posted wherever they wished to send you. Scholarship students received a very small stipend for studying, which was a bonus because we had absolutely nothing. I gave up my idea of going to university and enrolled in technical college. I do not remember having any difficulty getting in. The women in our class learnt how to look after and install manometers and thermometers, and about places where petroleum was being extracted. We had a derrick (soil cutting device) in the college amongst the equipment and I obtained a very good education there. The college was in a pleasant modern European building, which we shared with the Mendeleev Institute of chemistry, and it had an Uzbekian Director. We not only shared the building, we also shared the excellent teachers. We had a wonderful Russian teacher who, on Saturday afternoons, told us stories of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace,' which I still remember. I attended six days a week in the afternoons and in the evenings. Maybe that is where my desire to study chemistry began.

Henrik, Dr Rosenberg's son, was two years older than me. He was also intent on learning but could not go to school because he had to work to earn a living. Whenever we could we used to sit under the mulberry tree in the courtyard and I would teach him all that I knew about the wonders of chemistry and physics.

Every moment of my waking life was taken up with some activity. I had to go to the market, to school, to evening classes, and fit in knitting! Nevertheless, I finished the second year of college knowing that I could then be sent anywhere at the end of the third year.

I had begun attending evening classes with the aim of obtaining my matriculation certificate for entry to university. There were about thirty in my class, all women except for one man who did not quite make the grade. I received very good marks - in fact my Russian was probably better than most of the native Russian speakers. Once we were asked to write an essay and, in my naivety, I wrote about our experiences in Siberia. The teacher called me back and said: "Don't write about that unless you want to go back there."

The college authorities thought we would benefit from some industrial experience. They sent us to an industrial compound outside Tashkent. It was a nightmare town, polluted with many smoking chimneys and built down in the bottom of the valley, with all the living accommodation up at the top. All the smoke and effluent rose up to reach the population. When we arrived, all the girls, except for me, were assigned work in the factory. As a foreigner I was apparently untrustworthy and had to go back home accompanied by a teacher.

We had some very good friends from Kokand who had moved to Tashkent, and I was going to take the opportunity to look them up before I left, but I did not know their address. Whilst travelling on a bus I saw one of them in the street and quickly jumped off, fell down and was completely covered in dust when I met them.

At college we learnt about the properties of materials and mechanics, as well as mathematics, physics, and Russian. I was the best speller in Russian. We had quite difficult exams but I still have the book displaying the marks I received over those years. The only subject in which I performed poorly was metalwork. We were given a big lump of iron, and told to make a hammer. It had to be made at right angles and I never could it get right. My teacher instructed me to try harder as you never knew what you might have to do to earn your living.

8 March was International Women's Day. If you were outstanding as a student you were given a present of three metres of material with which to make a dress. I won it, every year! I took it immediately to the bazaar to be sold for food. It was a question of survival. The other thing I

did for money was my knitting. People brought me some wool if they could, but mostly an old cardigan, which I had to unpick and then reknit. I needed the money.

There was no library in town but there was a reading room not far from my college. You were not allowed to take any books out at all, because the authorities knew they would be stolen and never returned. I once spent the whole summer in there reading 'Anna Karenina'.

At home, my family were becoming more wasted and ill, and my Aunt Elsa was unfortunate enough to contract typhus. We were all living in such close proximity that it was most likely that we would all catch it. When I went to town, I would often see who had suffered typhus previously because they had no hair. When you contracted typhus if you did not cut your hair off it fell out anyway. My aunt was taken to the hospital in the old city. We had to take her food when we went to visit, because the hospital did not provide any. As we walked with the food, which we carried in a three-tiered container, we had to exercise caution: often somebody might come from behind and steal it, or spill it and eat it.

As you walked the streets of Kokand, half the people had very pronounced yellow faces and a yellow tinge to the eyes. This was the jaundice epidemic. Vermin had invaded the silos of the remaining grain and rat and mouse droppings contaminated the flour and the bread. I had had jaundice in Siberia, but this was an epidemic.

One day my mother went to the market and who should she meet but my cousin, the other Berta Bienenstock! She brought her home. My cousin had been married after the outbreak of war. She wanted to be a doctor and was working in the infectious diseases hospital. There was another doctor who worked in that hospital called Manek Brechner, who came from our part of Bielsko. He had been a medical student in Prague with my future husband's sister. He lived on the other side of the railway in the new town. Sometimes, very late at night, he would visit us to see if there was anything he could do to help. It was especially valuable when my grandmother was dying.

The day came when my grandmother died from disease and old age. We had no key to our room and somebody always had to be there, so I could not attend her funeral. I spent the day reading 'Eugene Onegin' by Pushkin. She was buried in the Bukharian Jewish cemetery, out of town. Bukhara is a town on the border with Iran. There were many Bukharian Jews in Uzbekistan who were merchants, and usually very well set up. They did not welcome us because we were newcomers who were infringing on their territory. Before we left Kokand my mother paid somebody to look after my grandmother's grave. I have never seen it myself; I was unable to find it and I don't know what happened to it.

In February 1943 our outlook began to improve after we heard that the Russians had repelled the Germans from Stalingrad. Polish committees were established, and people from abroad must have heard something about our plight because charity parcels of discarded clothing and gifts arrived. Some of them were in beautiful condition and we would take them to the market and trade them for food. Time was passing and we hoped that the war might be coming to an end. The only definitive piece of information we heard was the opening of the second front on 6 June 1944. We also heard about the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945.

A communist Russian Polish writer, called Wanda Wasilewska, was appointed head of a Polish organisation called *ZPP, Związek Polskich Patriotów* (The Society of Polish Patriots). The *ZPP* formed an army on the Eastern Front to fight at the side of the Soviet Army and advance west to fight the Germans. Willingness to join this army was another route out of Russia. Two years before the war ended my stepfather volunteered to join. We would receive letters from him as he advanced with the Polish Army. Eventually he arrived at Auschwitz and from there went to Bielsko. Incredibly, with some connections in Moscow, he was granted permission to take us out of Uzbekistan. The whole family had permission to leave - me, my mother, Aunt Elsa and Uncle Adolf. Furthermore, he made another entire journey back to Kokand in Uzbekistan to get us out!

When my stepfather arrived back in Kokand in 1945 it was a sensation - nothing like that had ever happened before. He brought us the news of Auschwitz and the other concentration

camps. In fact, he had been in Majdanek camp two weeks before the furnaces had cooled down. We had not known anything about all those atrocities. We were going to travel back to Poland with him as he had all the correct papers required for us to leave Russia. What he did not have, however, was the money to finance it. He came back in a very smart military coat which he sold along with his uniform in the market to raise some money for the journey. Two or three weeks later the day arrived and we left Kokand on 2 May 1945. It appeared as though the whole town came out to wave us goodbye. ■

“When my stepfather arrived back in Kokand in 1945 it was a sensation - nothing like that had ever happened before.”

Part 5

Zyga's story

Zyga's story

BACK IN BIELSKO, a few shops further along from my father’s store was a family jeweller named Klipstein. Strangely enough, my future husband had known me back then but because I was only twelve years old and he was five years older, I did not remember him. He recalled me wearing white socks and pigtails. We were both in *Hanoar Hazioni*. I knew Zygfyrd Klipstein as Zyga. He had lost his father to leukaemia in 1936, the same year I lost my father.

After his father died, his mother, with great difficulty, carried on the family business. In 1936 to make a reasonable living she had to supplement her income by cooking lunches for representatives and travellers. Life was very difficult. His sister was a medical student but could not go to medical school in Poland because Jewish ‘quotas’ did not allow for it. She had been a student in Prague, but had to give it up when her father died. Zyga was still at school when his father died but was searching for a suitable profession. Despite the uncertain times, he attended Bielsko’s Textile College, which was famous for being the centre of the woollen and worsted industry.

My future father-in-law had been married previously and had two girls. During the First World War he had been in the Russian army, advancing as far as Baikal Lake in the Far East, close to Mongolia and China. He was shot, but he had his *tefillin* (phylacteries) in his pocket and they saved his life. They were indented with the bullet that struck them. I still have the *tefillin*. Whilst he was away in the army his wife and daughters found life very hard. His wife lost her sanity and died. There was nobody to look after the two girls, so Zyga’s mother came to look after them. One daughter was named Zelma, but everyone called her Moushka, and the other was Elisabeth. She brought up the girls and eventually she married their father and had two boys of her own, my husband and his brother.

When the war with Germany began my future husband’s family did not leave on the Friday, like my family did, they waited until Saturday morning. Like us, they walked to the railway station, but by that time there were no trains. The delay cost them.



Zyga in 1946

Zyga was later incarcerated in a synagogue by the *Wehrmacht* in a place called Łańcut. Fortunately, with his mother's intervention, he was released. Two or three years ago my grandson from Israel went to visit the concentration camps in Poland. Lo and behold, he visited Łańcut where his grandfather had once been incarcerated.

My husband-to-be and his family, like many others, ended up in Lvov, (Lviv or Lemberg, which is now in Ukraine). They were apprehended in June 1940 and deported to Siberia. He ended up in the Urals, near Yekaterinburg, which is now called Sverdlovsk, on the border of Europe and Asia. (This is where the Russian Royal Family were transported to after being taken from the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg). The village he was sent to was called Sosna.

In the summer of 1940, Zyga's group were given long scythes and sent to the fields to cut the grass. In the winter, like everybody else, they had to fell trees. The trees they cut were pulled towards the river, and let loose to float downstream. Unfortunately, they often changed direction and logjams stopped everything. On one such occasion, Zyga was ordered to walk over the trees to unjam the blockage. It was not easy and he fell in the water. By the time he pulled himself out, he was reduced to a lump of ice. In winter the Siberian temperatures do not take long to freeze you. Luckily, he was allowed to go home to change clothes. The next mishap also nearly cost him his life. A train arrived from the mill to collect wood to be cut from where it was kept on a carriage platform, held in place by chains. After the chains were loosened the logs did not fall down and Zyga was ordered to climb up and move them. If it had not been for a knot in one of the trees, they would have fallen and crushed him.



Dancing with Zyga

Apart from some details, Zyga's story was similar to mine and those of most people who had been deported. His sister Moushka was shot and carried the shrapnel in her body right until the end of her life. His other sister, Elisabeth, never escaped. She was the elder of the two sisters and married when war was declared, staying behind in Bielsko. They took the decision not to run and she perished in a concentration camp.

Zyga's younger brother, Henry, had escaped Russia via General Sikorski's officers' transport. Zyga, however, had responsibility for his mother and sister. Furthermore, at that time he was in hospital with diphtheria, kidney disease and scarlet fever. After six months in hospital he could hardly walk. He was extremely weak due to the poor food and conditions.

In 1942, after he recovered, Zyga, like my stepfather, joined the newly formed *ZPP* Polish Army. He arrived back in Poland visiting Bielsko just days after peace had been declared. ■

Part 6

Back to Bielsko

A long journey home

WE BEGAN OUR JOURNEY home and we knew it was going to be a long one. We put feather pillows in our rucksacks to prepare for it. It was a scrum to get on the train. Some Russians had knives and tore up our pillows; the feathers were flying everywhere. The train left that evening and we travelled overnight, arriving in Tashkent in the morning. The following evening we boarded a train bound for Moscow. The carriage was filled with officers and military men. We travelled on the train for about five days during which there was no definitive news. People said that the war could last another three years, or three months, or even three weeks, or that it would be over very soon. We did not know anything.

Because we had arrived in Moscow from Central Asia, we had to change stations to continue on to Kiev. It was dusk and raining and we were waiting to cross the street, carrying the few belongings we possessed. As a tram passed by, someone shouted: “Do you know that the war is over?” It was 7 May 1945. We had just been talking about how long the war would last, and there we were, trying to cross the road, in the rain, at dusk, and somebody had said: “The war is over”.

It was certainly an experience to be in Moscow the night the war ended. It was dark and it was late, and we had nowhere to go and nowhere to spend the night. Rockets of white, red and green exploded in the night sky. Eventually my parents met people willing to let us spend the night with them. We did not know if they would steal all our belongings or murder us, but everything turned out okay!

The next day it was snowing and we made our way to Red Square. There was a lorry standing at one corner with photo apparatus set up and roughly two hundred people milling around being photographed cheering because the war was over. After a short time, the lorry moved over to the Basilica and all the two hundred people followed them. It was a completely stage-managed photo shoot.

We spent the day in Moscow. We saw *Magasin Gum*, a department store, where you could buy most things, but at twice the price they cost in the market. Everywhere was closed anyway, so you could not buy anything. My stepfather, having sold his uniform, was wearing a pre-war suit, but with a smart military coat without any insignia. The quality was so fine that everybody thought he was a General and began saluting him!

Evening came and we had some coupons to be exchanged for a meal in one of the numbered dining rooms. It was extremely busy. We handed in our coupons and were given a table with one empty seat. A Russian lady asked if she could join us and we said she could. Immediately the cashier came over and said to her: "You can't sit there, they are foreigners." We were allowed to stay and eat, but could not let anyone sit with us.

My stepfather had some relatives in Moscow and we went to visit them. That was the first and only time I had seen a communal building. Residents lived in small rooms. There was a bathroom with six or seven baths, all in a row, with no partitions. There was one kitchen where everybody cooked. It was pretty unpleasant, but that is the way people lived.

To obtain seats on the Kiev train my mother did the impossible: she bribed an official by giving him some soap. This allowed us to board the train before the general public, so there was much less of a squash. Nevertheless, the train was overfull, with people who could not get seats standing in the corridors. On Friday, at midnight, we left for Kiev. Suddenly there was a terrific commotion. As the train slowed down when going up a slope, thieves jumped on board and began to throw people's belongings from the corridors out of the doors, and then jumped out after them.

We arrived in Kiev on Sunday morning, where we found people camping inside the station, trying to get onto trains. It was not until sometime on Monday that we managed to board a train heading west. This time it was not an officers' train. It was filled with ordinary drunken privates. That night as we travelled west, we crossed the old Polish border. It was uncanny, but it does not take much to recognise antisemitism. Barely five minutes after we crossed over into

Poland we knew with absolute certainty that we could not remain there. We knew we had to move on. There was no future in the 'modern' Poland. It was not for us.

At half past twelve on Tuesday lunchtime we arrived in Bielsko. It had been raining but now the sun was coming out. A lady and a little girl came up to us asking directions to the town hall. We told her, and it was as if we had never been away. We had arrived back in our home town of Bielsko but we had nowhere to go. Having suffered malaria in Siberia, I suddenly relapsed. I became delirious with a high temperature of 40 degrees. I needed to be taken somewhere. We decided to head for the flat in the house we owned, only to discover it was being occupied by army officers. When they encountered us they said: "We don't know you from Adam!" Nevertheless, they let us inside the house and they took me to the flat on the first floor.

The first floor flat was being occupied by *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans). They had been given those flats by Hitler after we moved out and were due to be evicted the next day. They laid me on a mattress on the floor. I was in a shocking condition, still delirious, and dirty after weeks of travelling with no clean clothes to wear. I had no idea where my parents were, although at the time they were actually out searching for a place for us to stay. While I was lying there a woman came in telling me that a Polish sergeant had come to the door wanting to speak to me. As people began returning to Bielsko, Jewish committees had started making lists of those who came back to the city. The sergeant had seen the name Berta Bienenstock on one such list, although he did not expect it to be me but thought it was my cousin. The sergeant was Zygfryd Klipstein. My dreadful condition did not frighten him, and he would later become my husband.

My parents ultimately went to court to contest ownership of our house. The court ruled in their favour, but warned them not to expect any rent or reimbursement. When we returned to the house, the concierge greeted us by saying: "We were hoping the Germans would have finished you off!"

Meanwhile my mother found a very pleasant flat for us to rent, opposite the station, and we moved in. My parents then began the task of looking for our furniture. They found our black

upright piano in the town's theatre. They found many of our other belongings scattered all over the place, although we did not find everything. Aunt Elsa and Uncle Adolf had locked their beautiful apartment in September 1939 and left behind all their possessions. They never saw any of them again.

In town, of course, there was nothing left of our big synagogue and the beautiful new *Bialikhaus*. We discovered that my stepfather's sister had worked as a doctor in Ravensbrück concentration camp. My mother and stepfather went to see her, whilst I was left at home to recuperate. During those initial post-war years we all suffered enormous shocks because people's families had been separated. Fathers, mothers and children did not know what had happened to the ones who were left behind. There were some really terrible things uncovered when people began looking for their relatives.

One young chap that I knew called Walter Carter had been in a concentration camp closing the doors of the furnaces. If the war had continued he might have been the next victim. The concentration camps were now liberated, and strange things were happening. There were three sisters in the Meizels family, Greta, Lisa, and Judith. Lisa and I had been friends at school, putting on plays together. Greta and Lisa had been in a concentration camp and after liberation they made their way home hoping they might find that their parents or Judith were still alive. They arrived home and sat outside their house. A woman asked them why they were crying. "We've lost our parents," they told her. The woman replied: "You haven't lost them; they are upstairs."

I was very impatient to go to university. I wanted to go to Kraków to see if I could obtain a place at the university there. Despite the continued violence and shooting on the streets and the unpredictability of the trains, I nevertheless made the journey. I was still unwell, suffering from malaria, which is a strange illness. I was perfectly all right during the day, but at night my temperature would return. I had nowhere to stay, but an orthodox Jewish family took me in and allowed me to sleep on their floor for the night. The next day I went to the university, but they turned me away. My Russian matriculation certificate was not acceptable and for entry



Walking in between my school friends, Greta and Lisa Meizels in Bielsko

I required a Polish *Matura* (certificate of education). There was nothing else for me to do in Kraków, so I had to take the train home.

I became a telephonist in a newly set up long-distance exchange. I worked on the seventh floor of a building which had an unexploded bomb in the basement. It never exploded and as far as I know, it's still there. Often we had to work overnight. We had a boss called Mr Humenny who was very nice to us. On Sunday lunchtimes, because it was a quiet time, he would put on music. One day he gave us dictation and said to me: "Don't worry about not being able to spell. I know you grew up in Russia - you can't be expected to know Polish well." Nevertheless, I was



I had just returned from Russia to Bielsko aged
18 years old

asked to compile the directory because I was actually the only one who could spell! Not only that, I was also given a role on 'information' because I had an excellent memory for numbers. Despite having this job I was also determined to obtain my *Matura* certificate. I finally received it in March 1946, in eleven subjects, including 'the history of the Bolshevik Party.'

People continued returning and that was probably the happiest period of my young life. I went dancing, I went to the theatre and to concerts. It was really a very enjoyable time - people started living. One time we met some Jewish Polish soldiers in a friend's flat and we danced all through the night. night, although late nights were very difficult for me because I was on duty the next morning. ■

Part 7

We travel to England

A meeting with Dr Solomon Schonfeld

ZYGA, MY FUTURE HUSBAND, was studying at school to obtain his diploma in textile weaving. He had also begun his own business producing material to sell. When he was not studying or working we had a lovely time going out together. We went dancing one night and I remember when we came to leave there was thick snow on the ground and I was wearing high heels!

The Jewish community opened an orphanage. There was a particular girl, an orphan of about twelve, who was an accomplished pianist and the Jewish community took care of her and others like her. Although people were returning to Poland and life seemed to be going back to normal, it was not. On one occasion, when we came home to my flat opposite the station, there was a Russian soldier standing watch. That is what it was like after the war. The German word for it was *galgenhumor*, where you pretend to be happy but it is all very precarious. We tried to make the best of our time in Poland but we knew it was only temporary. There was no future for us - at least we did not see any future. Had I not found a way out my life would have been completely different.

My stepfather had a job working in the Jewish community. One day he went to a meeting in Kraków and came back saying: "I met an English Rabbi who took countless *Kindertransport* children out of Germany, and now he has come to Poland. He wants to take children and orphans out. I asked him about you and he said yes!" The Rabbi was Dr Solomon Schonfeld.

My parents decided to let me leave and a week after my 19th birthday I went to Warsaw with the English Rabbi. He gathered us all in a temporary building, which was an annexe to a demolished synagogue. There was hardly anything left standing in Warsaw. There was one building, a hotel on the *Aleje Jerozolimskie* which had housed all the consulates and embassies, but otherwise it was a complete ruin.



Travelling to England on the ship 'Ragne'. I am on the far left

Rabbi Schonfeld left us at the annexe for a few days whilst he gathered together other children. He gave every one of us a piece of paper with the supposed names of their relatives who were sponsoring them in England. Some people had relatives who were only too glad to get them, other people did not. Nevertheless, everyone received a piece of paper.

In March 1946 he travelled with around one hundred children from Warsaw to the Polish port of Gdynia and chartered a ship to England. It was a Swedish ship called the *Ragne*. We sailed from Gdynia to Gothenburg. It was terribly rough and hardly anyone was able to stand up. We

were all dreadfully seasick. This was made worse by the rich food we were given to eat which we were not used to. After Gothenburg, we sailed through the Skagerrak and the Kattegat. We were on our way to England.

On our ship there were many children who had been in concentration camps, who were completely alone and had lost their parents. Rabbi Schonfeld did not want us to feel alone in England so during the voyage he often repeated where to find him in London. He said: “86 Amhurst Road, Hackney. That is the address of my Rabbinate, and if ever you get lost in London and don’t know where you are, you must remember that address.” He also taught us two songs: ‘Solomon had a thousand wives,’ and ‘Daisy, Daisy’. We all learned to sing them.

Ours was the first of three transports giving young people safe passage to London. Everyone has heard about Nicholas Winton, who was remarkable. But there are other people like Rabbi Schonfeld, who are not so well known but were equally remarkable. ■

“On our ship there were many children who had been in concentration camps, who were completely alone and had lost their parents. Rabbi Schonfeld did not want us to feel alone in England so during the voyage he often repeated where to find him in London.”

My journey to London

TOWER BRIDGE OPENED and we docked on the Thames on Friday 29 March 1946, at about twelve o’clock. We were taken to the far side of the Tower of London, to Pickled Herring Street. There was a reception committee waiting. They took us in taxis to Finsbury Park, to an orphanage, and gave us lunch.

I had taken English lessons in school and thought I could speak English, but nobody could understand a word. I was told if anybody spoke to me, I should just reply ‘Yes.’ That does not always work! There were English personnel waiting for us at Finsbury Park but I did not understand much of what they were saying. Those who had relatives went to stay with them and after lunch I was taken to Plaistow, to my Aunt Hansi, who had come to Britain as a domestic servant before the outbreak of war.

Aunt Hansi was an unusual person with some psychological problems. Her marriage had broken down and her husband moved back to Czechoslovakia, where he came from. Once again, I found myself in a familiar situation; I had nothing, absolutely nothing, no money and no support. Aunt Hansi did not do very much. She supported herself by making some sort of baby covers, which she sold in the market on Petticoat Lane in Aldgate. Every afternoon she went to the cinema and did very little else. In her house there was only one bedroom, one living room, a small kitchen, and a small bathroom. We slept together in a double bed. There were not many Jews in Plaistow. They mostly lived in Forest Gate, or out towards Woodford.

I still very much wanted to go to university. I had absolutely no advice from anyone about what to do. I had grown up in the wilderness, how did I know what the world was about? Nevertheless I found my way to West Ham Municipal College in Stratford. I told them my story. The teachers at The Mendeleev Institute College back in Kokand had inspired my interest in Chemistry. They listened and offered me a free place to study Chemistry.

The college was quite close by, just a number 697 bus ride away from the London Docks to Stratford. On my first day I was taken to a Chemistry lecture, in one of the very old-fashioned

lecture rooms. The lecturer's name was Mr Bromley and over the years he took a special interest in me, almost adopting me. I was the only female student, because back then which women studied Chemistry?

I learnt to speak English. I read everything I could whilst I rode on the bus; everything that was printed, I read. I told the college that I wanted to go to university but they said I did not have the right qualifications. I asked them: "What about my Russian ones?" They replied "They don't mean a thing to us." "What about my Polish ones?" "They don't mean anything." They said: "If you want to go to university, you have to pass our examinations." So I had to pass a third matriculation. I was terribly upset at first and cried my eyes out, but the next day I began studying.

I took my matriculation in November 1946. I had to take it as I needed the English qualification. The English exam included writing a precis, in the fewest possible words. I could not remember the word for 'hill', which I referred to as a little mountain, and 'integer', which is a whole number as opposed to a fraction. I do not think many English-speaking people even know what an integer is!

The only financial support I received was two pounds per week from HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). There was no money for textbooks, but Mr Bromley contacted one of his graduate students, who was on National Service duty, and persuaded him to lend me all his textbooks for the three years. I barely had a social life, because all my energy went into studying and working towards my degree. Unfortunately, at the end of the three-year course, the university decided to prolong the course by another year. Due to financial difficulties, I decided that I could not stay on any longer at college.

Mr Bromley, however, had renewed his wartime contact with Mr Powers, the chief executive of Tate & Lyle, and he agreed to hire me as a chemist for the company. I was determined to finish my degree and during the last year of my studies I worked full-time. During that period my old lecturers at West Ham College were very helpful, correcting papers and answering any

questions that I put before them. At the end of the fourth year, in 1951, I graduated with a 2.1 degree in Chemistry and Mathematics. Upon graduating Tate and Lyle bestowed on me the princely sum of £20.

I would occasionally write to my mother, although maybe not often enough - after all, I would not have survived without her. My mother was a wonderful woman, but she was very challenging emotionally. I often felt used. We had a difficult relationship.

By 1951, I had been in England for five years and I qualified for naturalisation. I applied to become a British citizen and this invariably involved several hours at Scotland Yard being grilled! 'Was I an undercover agent?' 'Had I ever been persuaded to join the Communist Party?' They even came to my place of work, and interrogated my colleagues. Eventually I received my British citizenship.

When I left Poland I had been very close to Zyga Klipstein, my boyfriend. His family returned from Russia in June 1945. Shortly afterwards Zyga, along with his mother and sister, left Poland illegally, stopping briefly at a camp in Austria. There, Zyga's sister married a man called Dr Pickman and they went to America. In early March 1946, Zyga and his mother travelled on open wagons into Italy. The *Bericha* (meaning flight) were an organised underground operation that helped Jewish Holocaust survivors from Poland and other countries through Central and Southern Europe to reach Palestine, and tried to resettle them there. It was very difficult for Zyga and his mother. They were spotted and sent back. Eventually, they ended up in Milan and later settled in Rome.

Zyga asked me to come and visit him. We had corresponded but I had not seen him for five years. After I was naturalised in 1951 I earned a good salary, and although he offered to pay my expenses I would not contemplate that at all. I went to visit him in Italy in October of that year. By that time he was living with his mother in the Alps in Merano, and we met at the Brenner Pass.



In London as a student 1948

I had wanted to make a good impression. For the trip I bought a new red coat and I had my hair permed especially. The next day, however, I could not work out how to style it, so I combed it out. By the time I arrived in the Brenner Pass, my hair looked completely 'afro'! Fortunately, I was recommended a good hairdresser, where I had it straightened. I spent about three weeks in Merano. His mother was a wonderful cook. She cooked goose which was delicious. Zyga was working for a man who owned a weaving shed and taught Italian girls to weave. They had an excellent production line of luxury woven goods.

I went with Zyga to visit some of his friends in Milan. He also took me to Udine, Venice and Murano. One night when we walked around Venice we stopped outside a little boutique, and the whole window was full of Zyga's beautiful products. We spent much of the trip trying to obtain permission for Zyga to come to England. It seemed a conundrum; the Italians would not grant any exit papers and the British refused entry without the correct exit papers. Zyga was stateless. At the end of the visit we agreed that within a hundred days we would

both emigrate somewhere that we could be together. If it was not going to be England, it would have to be somewhere else.

I returned to England on All Saints Day, 1 November 1951. Zyga stayed behind, still trying to get permission to come to England. His mother managed to obtain papers allowing her to go to his half-sister in New York, where she unfortunately died of cancer shortly afterwards. Following his mother's death, at the end of 1951, I received a telegram saying: "Arriving London 18.50." He did not say exactly where he was going to arrive. I telephoned the airports to no avail. The 18.50 could only be a train at Victoria Station and that is where we met!

We obtained a special licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury to marry quickly and Rabbi Dr Schonfeld, who had brought me to England, arranged the wedding in his Stoke Newington Synagogue. We were married on a very cold 3 January 1952. Rabbi Dr Schonfeld produced a *minyan*, the ten men needed to hold a Jewish service. The only people we actually knew at the wedding were Zyga's cousin, whom he had not met previously, and a friend of mine from university.



Zyga and I in London



Graduating in Chemistry and Mathematics, 1951

After the ceremony we went straight to the Home Office to apply for permission for Zyga to remain in England. We were 'number 76' in the queue. The official was not very hopeful. Usually, permission was only given to British women who had married foreign nationals. Zyga had stateless papers, which were only valid for six weeks.

I packed everything I had into a suitcase and we left on our honeymoon. We spent the first night of our married life in the Grand Hotel in Brighton at the exorbitant price of twenty-five shillings (£1.25) per person. That was a lot of money back then, especially because Zyga was only allowed to bring into the country the equivalent £8.50, which he had spent on our wedding rings. The next day we took a taxi and found some cheaper accommodation in a bed & breakfast along the front in Hove. We were married on the Thursday and we stayed in Hove until Monday, because we had to follow up on the formalities. We had some photographs taken, but when they sent us the proofs the pictures were not of us but of some ballerinas - they had mixed them up!

Back in London we stayed at Aunt Hansi's while we waited for news from the Home Office. I was working during the day while



Married by special licence on 3 January 1952

Zyga searched for work, but it was very difficult without documents. The Polish government in exile had an employment agency, but they charged one month's wages. Zyga found one job laying floors and had another job in textiles. I was working all day and he was working all night, so we hardly saw each other, except at weekends. Time was passing, the six weeks validity of his stateless papers passed which meant they could not send him back.

We had still received no word from the Home Office, so Zyga went to Bradford, the UK's textile centre, to see if he could find some work. He also went to Leeds, but his contacts there were unhelpful. It was 1952 and the textile industry was in recession, but despite this Zyga took out a fourteen-day subscription to the Yorkshire Post newspaper and returned to London. Zyga answered nineteen advertisements in the Yorkshire Post for openings, and eighteen came back with refusals. The nineteenth asked Zyga to attend an interview off Regent Street in London. Following that, he had to travel to Yorkshire for an interview with the head of the company. I went with him to King's Cross Station to see him onto the train. He boarded the train carriage marked Bradford, but without us knowing they changed the destination from Bradford to Leeds.

To cut a long story short, in spite of the delays and mix up on the journey, Zyga secured a job at the weaving firm, G. Garnett and Sons Ltd, which was in Valley Mills, Apperley Bridge. He received the princely salary of £500 a year and worked as the head designer for 28 years. The company received the Queen's Award for Industry thanks to his efforts. ■



Zyga working as a textile designer

Our move to Yorkshire

WE MOVED to Yorkshire and found accommodation in the Great Horton area of Bradford with a family who were connected to the factory. Our landlords helped us to decorate the place and were extremely helpful.

I discovered that I was expecting a baby. Our baby, Stevie (Stephen), was born in 1953. Unfortunately, his brain had not developed and he was mentally impaired. Discovering that was probably the worst thing that had ever happened in my life. We had nobody to help us and things were very difficult. However, when Zyga's mother died in America she left us a small bequest and we used it as a deposit to buy a house in Shipley Fields Road, Shipley.

Stevie needed a lot of attention so I could not go out to work; I had no one to leave him with. To supplement our income I taught chemistry in the evenings at the Technical College, which later became the University. At the time there was a shortage of maths teachers and I was co-opted to teach maths for three months, which turned out to be five years. Later on I would teach maths at the Boys' Grange Grammar School in Heaton, and the Girls' Grammar School in Great Horton.

The university friend of mine who had attended our wedding was a Holocaust survivor, who managed to make his way to England from the concentration camps. He had a friend, Ben Helfgott, who was a weightlifter. Ben asked me if I would translate four articles about Russian weightlifters for a magazine called 'Musclepower', which was on the bookstands.

I had translated some scientific articles whilst working at Tate and Lyle. I had an article published and decided to work as a freelance translator. This was difficult in the beginning as I had no previous reputation to rely on. I had to source my own clientele and convince them that my work was sound. I was only as good as the last paper I had worked on, and I translated papers for people who had been employed in scientific work all their lives. I had to learn quickly on my feet, and produce decent translations in subjects with which I was completely unfamiliar.



In Shipley Fields Road with Stevie aged four months



On the steps of our synagogue in 1980. I am on the left, Zyga is third from right in the back row

As time went by, I accumulated clients. My translation work lasted 43 years until I was nearly seventy when I gave up gradually, just taking on the work that I wanted. I also undertook the translations of two Russian books on higher mathematics along with a book where each chapter had an inscription by Lenin. The first book I translated, some 60 years ago, took me a year, the second took four months. I did an enormous amount of translation over the years, on all kinds of subjects.

All this time I continued to pursue my hobby of knitting and designing clothes for myself, which were often the envy of my friends. I also worked as a knitwear pattern designer for the yarn production companies Lister and Robin Wools.

Looking after Stevie was difficult and his doctors expressed different opinions on whether we should have more children. Some encouraged us to go ahead, whereas others told us that Stevie would need all our attention. It was a challenging time because our friends were having babies and I felt absolutely desolate. We finally decided that we were going to try to have more children. We had two more, Richard in 1955 and Philip in 1958.

Zyga, who was known to everyone in England as Ziggy, was naturalised five years after his arrival. By then we were all British citizens.

After the other children were born, Stevie was admitted to a little hospital to be looked after for a couple of months. He was a big child and it became impossible to look after him along with the two other children. When he was five years old, he went to stay in Westwood Park, a residential hospital in Bradford. It was difficult, but we visited him every week and when the boys were little we took them along with us and we never kept their brother's problems from them.

Stevie was happy at the hospital. He was a lovely child and the staff liked him, but he never spoke and he never really knew who we were. They taught him to walk, or at least to shuffle, but his quality of life was poor. When he was seven years old, the doctors informed us that children with Stevie's problems experience seven-year cycles. Survival of the first cycle may

indicate a longer life expectancy. When he reached fourteen, however, he began losing weight. The hospital telephoned one day, telling us that he was very ill and that we should come. By the time we arrived, he was dead. He died on 1 March 1968. It was terribly sad. Nowadays with amniotic testing conditions like Stevie's can be prevented.

Richard and Philip grew up, attending primary school in Saltaire, near Bradford. When they began to show some promise they entered and then passed the exam for Bradford Grammar Preparatory School. In those days the quarterly fee was £35, quite a substantial amount of money, not that much less than our mortgage payment! Nevertheless, I believe the only thing that is worth giving your children is a good education.

We had an enjoyable life in Bradford. We had good friends, attended many dinner parties and belonged to a thriving Jewish community. At that time Bradford had a decent sized Jewish congregation. On *Yom Kippur* they had to bring in extra chairs to accommodate the people in the Spring Gardens Synagogue. We tried our best to maintain a Jewish education for our sons, although it was very difficult to get Hebrew teachers to come to Bradford.

Time went by and our sons celebrated their *Barmitzvahs*. Sidney Levine was the President of Bradford Hebrew Congregation. He was Master of Ceremonies at Richard's *Barmitzvah* and was a very entertaining speaker. He began his speech by saying: "I always remember the time that Berta told me of falling off the bus in Tashkent!"

Richard won a scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford and then decided to study medicine. His headmaster had said he was a 'problem cruncher' and he proved to be correct. Besides being a doctor, he worked at the National Heart Hospital in London and received his Ph.D. from London University for MRI development. Philip received his degree in physics at Balliol College, Oxford and his Ph.D. at Cambridge University. Both boys were heads of the Jewish students' society and involved with the Jewish community.

After a number of years, we bought a larger house in Shipley in Glenview Grove, Nab Wood. Those were probably the best years of our lives. We very much enjoyed our involvement with



Family holiday, 1972



Richard was visited by Mrs Thatcher when working in the 1980s

the Bradford Hebrew Congregation. Over the years Zyga held virtually every position, from President, Secretary and Head of Education to Head of the *Chevra Kadisha*.

Garnett's, the firm and mill for which Zyga worked, still stands but is now divided into industrial units. During the time Zyga was first employed there it was a very successful firm with Sir George Garnett at the helm. When Zyga had joined the company there were over a thousand operatives, but by the time the firm closed in 1980 they were only fifty.

Before he retired, Zyga took a job in Huddersfield. It was successful, but it required a large amount of travelling. Salaries in the textile industry were not very high, and although Zyga was very efficient, he never received a decent pension. Two years later, Zyga discovered that he had a medical condition that led to a heart bypass operation. Luckily, by that time Richard was a qualified doctor at the National Heart Hospital. Mr Magdi Yacoub, the number one surgeon, operated on Zyga. Zyga retired following his surgery. He loved cooking and he was very good at it. For 20 years he did the cooking whilst I was in my office upstairs working on the translations.



Zyga and I with Richard and Philip

Richard decided to change career and became a Chartered Information Scientist. Part of his time was spent at Lloyds Shipping, where vessels are insured. He then moved to Lloyds Bank, and became a Programme Manager. His role was to assess the implications each time the bank introduced new software.

Philip was offered a position as a Lecturer at Imperial College London. He worked there for five years, after which he was headhunted by Oxford University. He was appointed as a don, a position that he held for nine years.

The Bradford Jewish community continued to function, but after children grew up and moved away to college they did not return. People died and the community shrank. Huddersfield and other small satellite communities ceased to exist. In 1971 the synagogue in the centre of Bradford, Spring Gardens, closed and Springhurst Road synagogue opened. This was built with the help of member subscriptions and designed by the architect who had designed the Harrogate Hebrew Congregation synagogue.

The new synagogue functioned for a number of years due to the hard work contributed by the community. We only had a part time, or visiting Rabbi, and ultimately the synagogue closed. Zyga still had responsibility for the Bradford *Chevra Kadisha*, so despite the severely declining Jewish population we would not leave Bradford. He believed that as long as there were Jews in Bradford they deserved to have a Jewish funeral with *Tahara*.

However the *Chevra Kadisha* duties were eventually handed over to an undertaker. We sold up and made the move to Leeds. ■

Leeds and onwards

WE MOVED TO LEEDS in 1988. We began our new life here and integrated fairly well, better than most ‘Bradfordians,’ many of whom had moved to Leeds before us.

Richard was married in 1981, the same year Prince Charles and Lady Diana married. He married a girl from Manchester named Freda. She was the daughter of a Holocaust survivor who had lost all her family. Richard and Freda have one son called Yishai. He is married to Perelle, and they live with their children, Shmuel and Zipporah, in Israel. Richard and his wife continue to live in London.

Philip continued to live in Oxford for a further seven years, where he was a Fellow at Pembroke and Merton College. He then took his sabbatical at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, Israel. He remained in Israel, taking up a position operating machinery developed for growing crystals that few others were qualified to hold. He still travels from Israel worldwide giving lectures on highly complex matters. In 1991, he married an American girl called Judy from New Jersey. They married in Florida, and we all attended the wedding, which was a wonderful occasion. They have four children: Amichai, Noa, Gilad and Hanit.

Regarding the rest of my extended family, this is what came to pass after I left for England in 1946. My auntie and uncle were unable to face any more upheaval, so they stayed in Bielsko. My auntie died first. Afterwards Uncle stayed with friends but he was very unhappy without my aunt. Eventually, he died.

Things were becoming increasingly difficult in Poland and in 1948 my mother and stepfather made *Aliyah* (immigration of Jews to Israel). Initially, they had a challenging time, but they eventually assimilated and made many friends. Zyga and I used to go and visit them in Israel and in time they acquired a very comfortable apartment in a large block. My mother had always been artistic and friends would model their apartments on the style of hers.



Mother and stepfather in Haifa, Israel, 1950

My stepfather would have very much liked us to join them in Israel, but we wanted to educate the children in England. Also, the relationship with my mother had become increasingly difficult. Every time we visited, things were strained between us. I could never do right. My stepfather died when he was 70 years old and after his death my mother eventually moved into a residential home. She died at the age of 89. We went over to Israel for her funeral.

Meanwhile, I discovered new members of the family living in Israel. Uncle Joseph's son, Edek, had his *Barmitzvah* in 1936 which was attended by a room full of relatives. In Israel two



Edek Bienenschtock's Barmitzvah, 1936

years ago I met one of them, my cousin Levia. She had also been a little girl in Poland like myself. I found out that Uncle Joseph's son Edek was still alive, although he now called himself Edmundo Bardi. He had married an Italian nurse who saved his life in Russia. He lived with his son and daughter-in-law on Lake Garda in Italy in the summer and in Uruguay during the winter. He did not like writing, so a couple of years ago we had a long video conference call. We could not decide on which language to speak, because he spoke Polish, German (which he hated) and Russian. He also spoke French because he had been a diplomat after the war.



With Philip and Richard in Leeds

My cousin Levia insisted that when Edmundo visited Israel with his son he should make a deposition at Yad Vashem. He intended his testimony to be recorded in French, as he spoke this most often as a diplomat. On the day of the interview, however, there was no one available who could speak French, only Russian. I spent twenty hours translating it for Yad Vashem because they had no money to pay for a translator. Edek died a little while ago aged 96.

About ten years ago I received a phone call and was asked: "Are you Berta Bienenstock and do you speak Polish? My name is Alek Weiss and I was in your class at primary school!" A



With Mother in Israel

memorial was being erected, dedicated to Jewish survivors from Bielsko. A worldwide search for these survivors had led him to me. He now lives in Israel, in the same gated community as Erika Kulka, who was also my classmate and the daughter of the other optician in Bielsko.

Time passed and we eventually grew older. Zyga's health, which had been good during his years in Leeds, eventually began to fail. We took our last holiday together in 2006, a cruise on the Queen Elizabeth, which I did not like at all. Following that, he became increasingly more housebound and infirm. I looked after him until he died in February 2014. He was 92 and we had been married for 62 years. ■

Part 8
Epilogue in Israel

Israel

THAT IS NOT quite the end of the story. Prepare yourself for a shock - four months short of my 92nd birthday I left a rain-drenched and foggy Leeds to begin a new life. I applied on 22 May 2018 to make *Aliyah* and moved in October to be closer to Philip and the rest of my family in Israel.

Indeed, I became an Israeli citizen at 22:01 on Thursday 11 October 2018.

Today is a beautiful day. It is 23 degrees centigrade and I am looking at the sea in the distance. I am still ‘drop dead’ tired and everything has yet to be unpacked, but there is no place on earth I would rather be. I am very happy to be here, a true homecoming. ■



With my granddaughter Hanit



My great grandchildren Shmuel and Tsipora



Richard and his wife Freda Yishai



Grandson Yishai and his wife Perelle



Richard with his third grandson, Zvi, Jerusalem April 2019



My grandchildren (Philip's children) at my grandson, Amichai's wedding



Amichai and Neaama's wedding in Haifa on 6 March, 2019



My grandson Amichai and his new wife Nechaama's wedding under the chuppah



Philip with children and grandchildren



After my arrival in Israel with Philip and grandchildren



About the AJR

Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees from Central Europe, The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) is the national charity representing and supporting Holocaust refugees and survivors living in Great Britain. Primarily delivering social, welfare and care services, the AJR has a nationwide network of regional groups offering members a unique opportunity to socialise in their local area. Members receive support from volunteers and can obtain advice and assistance on welfare rights as well as on Holocaust reparations.

The AJR is committed to the education of future generations about the Holocaust and is now the UK's largest benefactor of education and memorialisation programmes and projects which promote teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

About 70,000 refugees, including approximately 10,000 children on the *Kindertransport*, arrived in Great Britain from Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s. The AJR extends membership to anyone who fled a Nazi-occupied country as a Jewish refugee or who arrived in Great Britain as a Holocaust survivor. We also welcome the descendants and spouses of the refugees as members.



“When the train became the target of the bombs we knew we had to leave it. We ran into a field; we lay flat on the ground with our faces in the grass, with our hands outstretched and our mouths open so that our ear membranes did not burst.”



www.ajr.org.uk