DIARY OF BONIA SHUR

1941-1945

LIFE LESSONS FROM BEHIND THE EASTERN FRONT

SAMPLE CHAPTER

DIARY OF BONIA SHUR
1941-1945\ LIFE LESSONS FROM BEHIND THE EASTERN FRONT

As a child my father provided most of my entertainment. He was an amazing story teller, improviser, musician, performer, poet, illustrator. For a kid he was really quite fun to be around. His love was composing music and he spent most of his days in his own head, but when I was a child and during my adolescent years he enriched my life with his gifts.

He did not sit us down and teach us life lessons or structures. He didn't help us with homework or concern himself with our friends or school. But what he did do that was so unique, was try to share what gifts he had with us, every moment he could. He would make us toys with his own hands. He would write, illustrate and bind original storybooks for us. He would sit at night and tell elaborate stories that would go on for months. Chapter after chapter he would make up with an incredible recall of everything he had made up the nights and weeks before. Sometimes he would weave songs into the stories and improvise lyrics that felt completely related. He was a modern day Pixar or Disney.

As we got older, the stories became less fantastic and more tales of his life. More and more he would tell us stories from his experience during World War Two. He told his best stories at Sabbath dinner each Friday night when all of us would sit around the table after dinner. Our conversations would go something like this: "Pick a year between 1942 and 1946", he would say. So one of the kids would randomly pick a year, say 1944. He would respond "well, Today (October 6th) in 1944 I was in ..... "

He would then go on to tell us in the most intimate detail what happened that day, that week and the weeks around that day. It was incredible. His memory recall from his past was phenomenal. He remembered conversations, peoples' names, strangers' stories, ancestry, geography, everything. Amazing!

We would be captivated for hours at a time as he told us this very intimate, naive, personal journey that he went through as a teenager and young adult. These were not tales of death and destruction, sorrow and loss. No, these were real adventures and humorous stories. Stories of mischief, stupidity, passion and bumbling. Literally the story of a gifted young Latvian in his late teens, gifted with musical and creative talents of great proportions, thrown into the Russian army. His tales of keeping in touch with his family and eventually his escape to Israel where he was reunited with his brother and what was left of his Latvian family.

For years we heard his stories, and they never got boring. Never. One day I asked him how he remembered his stories in such great detail. He told me how he kept diaries but knew he would never escape Russia with them, so he memorized his entries with incredible detail. Two years after the war ended he forced himself to rewrite his lost diaries from memory. When I was sixteen years old I asked him if he would translate his diary into English so I could have it. He agreed and that summer he offered my older brother Itaal a job. He would give Itaal a stereo if he typed up my fathers diary as he translated it into English.

After a long frustrating summer for my brother the diary was translated into English. My father was very happy. Mostly because I had asked him to do it for me, but also because he had something from his life other than his art that he could leave behind. Some twenty years later I decided to take his diary and turn it into what sits in your hands right now. Minimally edited and formatted, I wanted to present his words in a simple and graphic visual format that would allow you as the reader to feel his story the way he remembered. To hear his story as a guest at our dinner table. To hear what I heard that opened my mind and taught me all the life lessons he never sat me down to teach.

I dedicate this book to my family.

DISSONANCE

dis-*uh-nuhns*
sounds of unrest

RIGA, LATVIA


ESTONIA
BALTIC SEA
VOLGA
LATVIA
LITHUANIA
RUSSIA
BELARUS
POLAND
45
FOUR THREE
UKRAINE
SLOVAKIA
MOLDOVA
HUNGARY
ROMANIA
SEA OF AZOV
DANUBE
BLACK SEA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA

The Soviets entered the war in league with Germany, September 1939, attacking Poland a few days after Germany, taking a big slice of the eastern part of the nation for themselves. Then they attacked or invaded Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland. They threatened Rumania with invasion and thus extorted territory from that nation. They rapidly built bases all along their new western border, where they massed troops and equipment for an invasion of Germany as soon as the opportune time arrived. Germany beat them to the punch with a June 21, 1941 attack which quickly wiped out the Soviet standing army.

1941\06\21

My brother Yekutiel got out of bed today after being sick for two weeks. He was forcibly hospitalized in the University Hospital where our mother had died a month earlier from asthma and heart complications. Yekutiel had been held there in quarantine under suspicion of having scarlet fever. He was weak and feeble after having declared a hunger strike in the hospital in protest against the administration's decision to prevent a medical team of experts from reexamining his suspected illness. I went to the theater. I saw a play by Honore de Balzac in Russian. In the theater, I heard rumors about the upcoming war.

1941\06\22

Morning brought the first news of the nighttime outbreak of war between Russia and Germany. At the first air-alarm, we went down to the basement. We met our neighbors. Everyone was wondering what will happen now.

1941\06\23

I was totally oblivious to the actual situation, feeling secure surrounded by thousands of Soviet tanks, planes and soldiers. Yekutiel made a different assessment of the situation. After we heard that Kaunas, the capital of Lithuania, had been captured by the Germans, he said to me: The Russians have millions of soldiers, thousands of tanks and planes, but they have no organization. They will be smashed by the German forces.

It became clear that we had to flee from Latvia. I began exploring ways to return home, to Dvinsk, about 220 kilometers from Riga. Yekutiel unfolded his plan for our escape. I should go home and convince our father to be ready for evacuation. He, Yekutiel, will stay a few days longer in Riga to gain strength and then join us in Dvinsk. Later in the evening, a huge German air-formation of hundreds of planes showed up over the skies of Riga. They flew undisturbed over the city without encountering any Russian anti-aircraft barrage. It was obvious to all the city residents that the Germans ruled the skies and all the thousands of Russian airplanes were either destroyed or too scared to confront them. I could hear sounds of heavy bombardment and see fires breaking out here and there.

1941\06\24

At midday I caught the last regular train from Riga to Dvinsk. The train is packed with Soviet families, primarily women and children of the occupying military forces, trying to escape the war by fleeing to Mother Russia. I walked out from the railway station in Dvinsk and felt around me an ominous dead silence. The city's pulse had been paralyzed. My father, my grandmother Raise-Mere, my uncle Moishe-Aaron and his son Chatzka, all were staying in the basement of Tzemel, the house across the street. Also, I met Liak (whose daughter I secretly liked), our next door neighbor, Kliatzkin, Hanoch Mayer and his parents, and others. The night passed by peacefully.

1941\06\25

It is prohibited to walk in the streets. To my surprise, Yekutiel arrived home late that afternoon. As it turned out, he left Riga right after my departure having realized that the German army was advancing toward the only railroad connecting Riga with Dvinsk. He was lucky to catch the last train. He arrived in Dvinsk last night but because of the imposed curfew the police would not let him leave the train station until the next day. While Yekutiel was detained at the station some six blocks from our house, my father and I began preparing for our escape on bikes. According to Yekutiel's plan, each one of us should carry on his back a knapsack which should contain the most essential items for immediate survival in case we will have to drop our suitcases, coats and bikes. While we were packing, Yekutiel suggested that we take family and personal photos with us. I wondered why I didn't think about that.

Around 5:00 a.m. an elderly Jew walked into the basement where we spent the night, and said in a nonchalant manner that the Germans are already across the River Dvina, near the town of Alexandrovka, some 15 km south-west of our city. His announcement made us all jump up. My uncle Moishe-Aaron and his son Chatzka, without saying a word to anybody, even to Raise-Mere, his mother, were going to leave on their own. Yekutiel stopped our uncle and asked him if we can use his bike since he is planning to go in a truck. He consented, and after a minute or two he and his son were gone. Yekutiel pleaded with Hanoch Mayer to flee with us. He refused. He claimed that the Germans in World War I were very kind to the Jews and maybe they will treat us well again. Yekutiel tried to convince Hanoch that these Germans are not the same Germans from World War I. They are of another breed. They are Nazis whose only goal is the total extermination of every Jew. They will kill you, said Yekutiel. Hanoch would not budge. He claimed that his father was sick and he had to take care of him.

(After the war, in 1946, we heard from my surviving teacher Lena Rosenberg what happened to Hanoch. Three days after the German army occupied Dvinsk, Hanoch was one of the first Jews to be executed at the market place.)

We went over to our apartment to take our own bikes and belongings, load a suitcase on each vehicle's baggage rack, a bag of sugar and some food on the front wheel and on top a winter coat. Our grandmother, Raise-Mere, walked up with us to the apartment on the second floor. She was 76. After our mother's death, she took over the role of a mother. She picked up an empty bucket and stood ready to embark with us on our journey. We said to her: Bobe (grandmother), we are young and strong. We will overcome any hardships on the road. It is not for you to walk tens of kilometers with us. You simply will not make it. Why don't you stay here with all your friends. Whatever happens to all the Jews will also be your fate. We gave her money and the keys to the house. She looked at us and began to cry. Her voice was trembling when she said with determination: Kinderlech (children), may you be blessed on your journey and may God be with you. But my own son, Moishe-Aaron, may he be cursed for he didn't care even to say good-bye to me, his own mother.

(36 years later, we met my uncle's wife, Anna Weksler, who immigrated to Israel. She told us what happened to her son and her husband, Moishe-Aaron, who considered himself to be a romantic sympathizer of the communists. Naturally, he wished to escape on one of the evacuating trucks of the communist party's headquarters. He tried in a hurry to climb on a truck. He slipped and injured his knee. Six weeks later, he died from blood-poisoning in a hospital in the city of Bologoe.)

Yekutiel took his violin with him. Father left his. I walked into my bedroom and said good-bye to my mandolin-banjo which was hanging on the wall. My heart was aching seeing my faithful sister-friend on the wall to be abandoned and left alone. But I didn't feel like taking it with me, for I knew then that I had never had a deep respect for my instrument although I spent eight years playing it. It was always in my eyes a second rate citizen after a violin. But I made sure to put in my knapsack the latest pocket-size edition of the Hebrew dictionary from Jerusalem, edited by Prof. Klauzner.

We lived in the central section of the city, separated from the northern part by railway tracks. There were two direct passages between the two sections for both vehicles and pedestrians - one in the east side of town, over a bridge, and the second in the west, directly over the tracks.

Around 8:00 a.m. we crossed the railway tracks on our way to Beba Etingof's home, Yekutiel's girlfriend who lived in the northern part of the city. We didn't know at that time that the passage over the bridge was already in the hands of the German advancing forces.

Beba lived with her mother, Rivka and brother, Liolka. He worked as an electrician in a plant nationalized by the Soviets after they occupied Latvia on June 15, 1940. Liolka was ready to go to work and refused at first to escape with us. It took a while to persuade him to change his mind in view of the immediate and alarming danger we all were facing. Finally, he consented to join us. Beba's father, who had died a few years earlier, had been a well-to-do businessman. He left the family some money. Before we left, Beba's mother gave each of us 1,000 rubles - a lot of money at that time. They had two bikes. We started our journey without having the slightest idea what was awaiting us. We walked toward Wishki, a little town some 30 km north of Dvinsk. Along the main highway connecting Warsaw with Leningrad.

At noon, we arrived at a little pine-grove where we found camouflaged Russian units. Suddenly we heard the sound of airplanes over our heads. I asked one soldier whose planes were they. They are ours, he assured me. He didn't finish his sentence when we heard explosions near us and we ran for cover.

My father asked me to explore the area on my bike and determine if there was an alternate route to Wishki other than the main highway. This was an adventurous assignment for me. I was 18 years old and I felt very special about this mission which my father entrusted me to carry out. I gingerly jumped on my loaded bike, left the pine grove and rode away. I was alone in the field scouting for a safe road. It was a beautiful summer day. The sun was shining on me, blue sky and open fields. Not a soul. Suddenly, from nowhere, emerged from out of the sky a German Stuka dive bomber. Apparently, the pilot noticed me for he aimed the plane towards me. I jumped from the bike and ran for cover in a nearby ditch. The plane zoomed onto me and I was dead sure that I would be cut down by hundreds of bullets from his machine guns. He was so close I could see the German swastika on his wings. Surprisingly, at that moment I was not scared, panicky or hysterical. I think I was more intrigued by the confrontation with a German plane, rather than frightened. Perhaps it was my total inexperience with the reality of war that helped me to overcome my fear. He didn't shoot. Seemingly, the pilot decided that I was not a worthwhile target.

I returned to my family in the pine-grove and told them about my confrontation, which clearly intensified everyone's awareness that death was lurking around every corner. Beba's mother could not walk any longer. Beba paid a Jew who owned a wagon to allow her mother to travel with him while we, my father, Liolka, Beba and my brother, continued on our bikes. We had to take the main highway, for it was the only road to travel north. Every 10-20 minutes a German plane would show up in the sky and everyone would run for cover in the ditches. In a minute, the refugee-congested road would be deserted by the Jews, who in panic threw down their suitcases and the rest of their belongings and ran away. I watched the planes emerging from the horizon and come down along the road. But strangely, they never shot at us. My father was very passive and sometimes indifferent to this whole epic, allowing his older son to command. At that time, I could not understand why my father had no desire

to flee from the Germans or enthusiastically participate in operational decisions. Now I know why. Just one month earlier, his wife, my mother, died. She was his spiritual and emotional backbone. With her gone, nothing could generate in him a thirst for seeking a new life. He was 49 years old. Strong. Very healthy. He never shared his inner pain of loss with us, his only two sons. He kept it to himself. He became a loner. On that memorable day, my father pedaled ahead of us on his bike towards the town of Wishki.

We arrived in Wishki around 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. and assembled in the train station square. There, we found my father in a state of hysteria, fuming with rage at us for being late. I wanted to jump and drown in that well, he said, pointing to a nearby well. There was a special train for refugees. All my friends were on that train. We could have now been far away from here. We all listened to his bitter disappointment. My brother, very calmly, said to my father: It is true that the train would have taken us quickly far away from this place. However, as long as we can move on our bikes, we are the masters of our fate.

Yekutiel's words were very prophetic. Almost 40 years later, in 1992, I was visited by Janet Kagan, who lives now in Sydney, Australia. She was a classmate of mine at the Hebrew High School. She,her sister and mother were on that train that my father was so eager to board. That very train had been bombed 20 minutes after its departure from Wishki. Her mother's arm had been hit by a bomb fragment. Janet herself witnessed a woman being beheaded by shrapnel, and told me even more horror stories that took place on the train my father wanted to be on.

A Jewish family let us sleep in their home on the floor. Through the windows I could see Dvinsk in flames towering to the sky. At that moment I felt that the umbilical cord that tied me to Dvinsk, the cord that connected me to our apartment where I was born and grew up, to the streets I knew so well, to the people I loved, was now cut forever. Now all this was gone with the flames that night. I was thrown out from a cozy cradle and catapulted into the arms of the War Gods. Yekutiel decided that we will move from Wishki northeast toward Dagda, a little Jewish town some 20 km from the Russian-Latvian border.

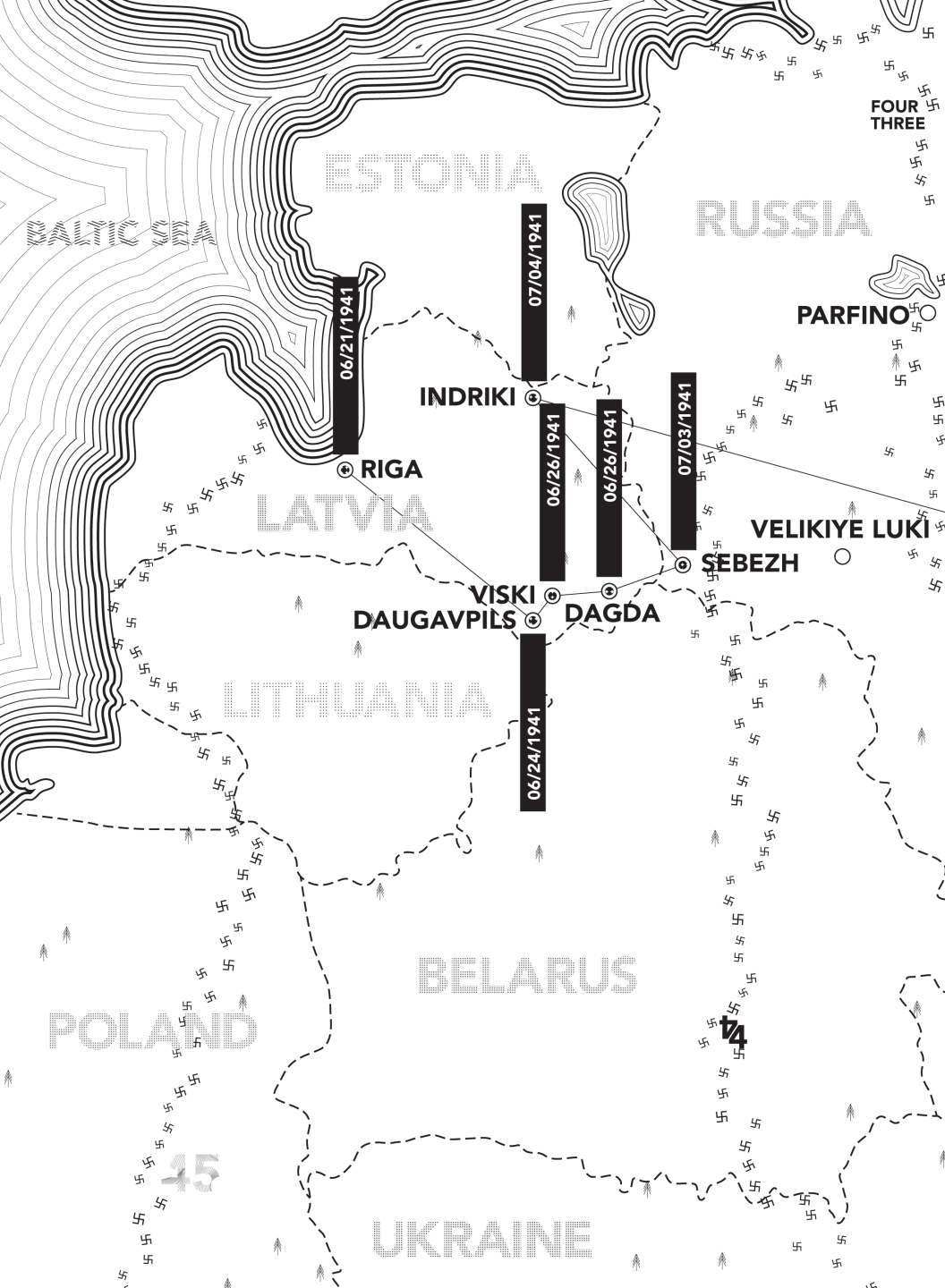
We were up before dawn and started riding on our bikes toward Dagda. We covered 56 km in one day. The sky had no traces of German planes. It was just blue and peaceful. There was no traffic on the road to Dagda, except for us. Beba's mother followed at a slow pace on a wagon belonging to a good-hearted Jew. I think Beba was with her Mom. We arrived in Dagda in the evening. There were no traces of war in this little town located in the northeastern corner of Latvia. There were no bombing sounds. No police. No soldiers. We found an empty house and moved in. We heard from the local folks that many Jewish refugees were stranded at the border, for the Soviets guards would not allow any refugees to cross into Russia for fear that they might be right-wing Latvian insurgents who were attacking the Red Army units. Yekutiel suggested that we stay in this town and wait till the Soviet army begins its retreat. Then, and only then, we will advance to the border. It was a wise decision, based on the fact that we had no idea what was going on at the front line. There were rumors that the Germans were repelled with heavy casualties. There were also rumors that severe battles were raging around Dvinsk. There were no radio broadcasts, no newspapers, no source of any information about what was really going on. But for myself, I was at peace. For me, age 18, the whole war was a great fascinating adventure. I was relying totally on the strategical skills of my big brother, who would find a solution to all our problems. I was not afraid. We stayed in Dagda for almost a week.

Late in the afternoon we heard noises from far away. It began to rain lightly. The rain became a drizzle. We began to see tanks and armored vehicles of the Red Army in retreat, crossing the town. At Yekutiel's instructions, we were the first to join the retreating soldiers. When the rest of the refugees saw us leaving town, they too began their exodus. We walked all night, a slow, difficult march for we had to walk all the way in mud, pushing our bikes. At dawn we approached an intersection of two roads. We didn't know where to go, since the soldiers now stayed behind to build a defense line against the Germans. At the intersection stood a Russian woman. We asked her where was the border, and she showed us which road to take. We advanced in the direction we were told. The longer we walked, the louder the sound of explosions became. It was obvious that we were heading towards the Germans rather than away from them. This Russian woman had misled us by sending us towards the German lines. Yekutiel quickly made up his mind and commanded us to turn around and go back. All the other Jewish refugees who followed our small group began screaming at Yekutiel accusing him of treason and in misguiding them. Yekutiel calmly faced this crowd of Jews and replied that he didn't ask anybody to follow us. It was their choice to continue to move towards the German lines or turn around. We, he said, are going back.

PIZZICATO GLISSANDI

pitsi-**ka**-*to gli*-**sahn**-*de*
plucking a string and sliding from
one pitch to another

WESTERN RUSSIA


FOUR
THREE
ESTONIA
RUSSIA
BALTIC SEA
07/04/1941
06/21/1941
PARFINO
INDRIKI
06/26/1941
06/26/1941
07/03/1941
RIGA
LATVIA
VELIKIYE LUKI
SEBEZH
VISKI
DAUGAVPILS
DAGDA
LITHUANIA
06/24/1941
BELARUS
POLAND
UKRAINE

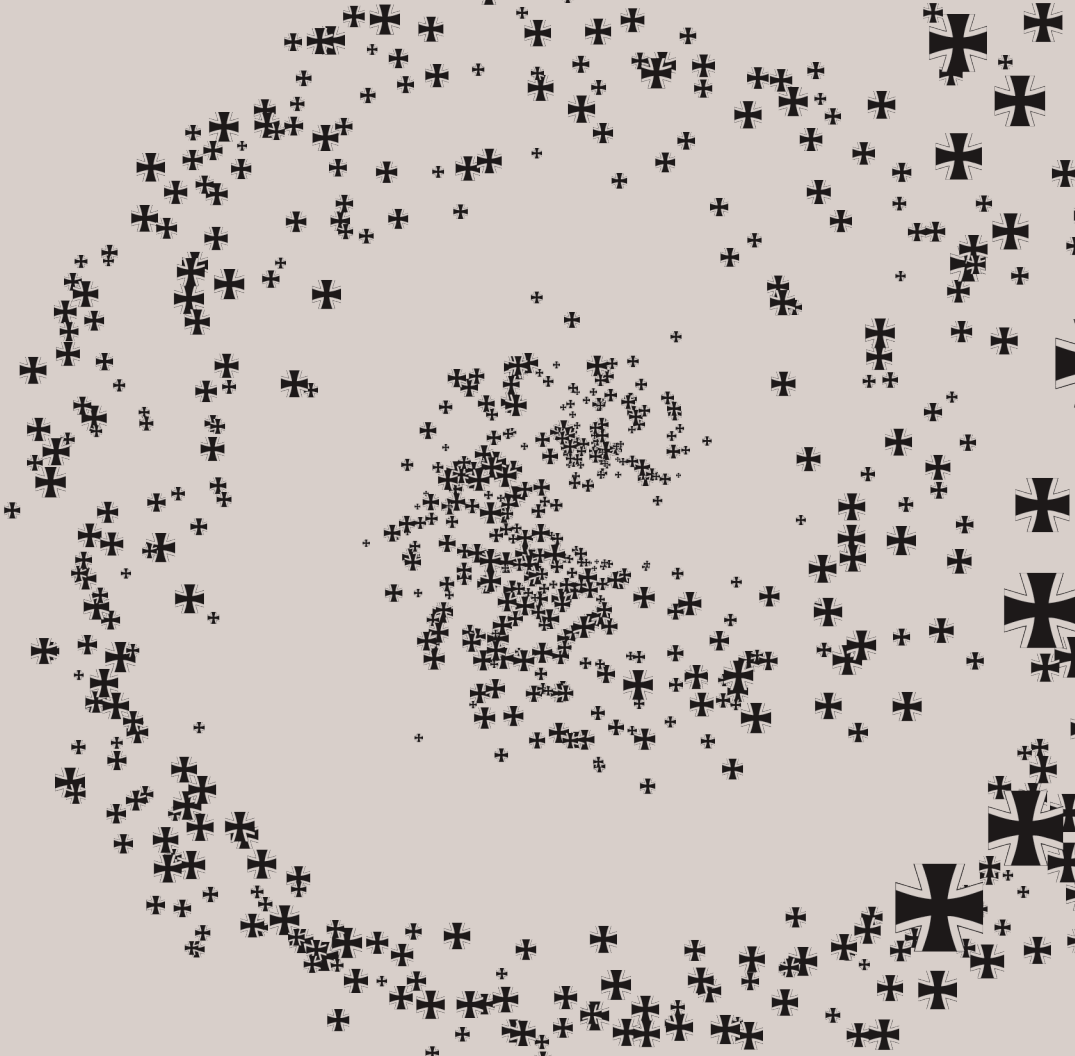
We covered some 50 km during the night and arrived at the border around noon. The Soviet guards permitted us to cross the line and enter the communistic "paradise." Our extended small family sat down for a short rest and a light meal. Yekutiel said: From now on forget butter, candy, meat and other goody-goodies. Welcome to the Soviet Union.

Our next destination was Siebiezh, a small city situated on a narrow strip of land between two small lakes some 20 km from the border. We entered the city around 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. and were met with angry faces of the local residents, who looked at us with scorn, hatred and disgust. They would not give us even a glass of water. Their rejection was very understandable. All their men were drafted into the army. The teenagers were mobilized to dig trenches. And here we were, young men and women in very nice clothes with expensive bikes, suitcases, in good health and exempt from military duties. I accepted the resentment of the citizens of Siebiezh as a part of life and didn't feel guilty at all for not fighting the Germans.

We crossed the town without any further confrontation and reached an open field adjacent to the train station. The area was crowded with hundreds of refugees who arrived here from various checkpoints on the Latvian-Russian border. Suddenly I bumped into my cousin Chatzka who last week left Dvinsk with his father. I asked him: where was his father, Moishe-Aaron, but he didn't know. He lost him somewhere on the road. We invited Chatzka to join us.

There were rumors circulating that with nightfall there would be a train that would take all the refugees east. Late in the evening we approached a passenger train and were allowed to board it. In the excitement we dropped our faithful bikes on the ground and settled in the cars.

We felt both secure and insecure. We were now sitting ducks waiting for the departure of the train. We no longer had the freedom to move on our own. (Later, my father regretted having left the bikes at the train station for it turned out that there was a special car reserved for bikes.) We waited for a couple of hours. Suddenly, there were bombs falling near the train, but nobody got hurt and the train was not damaged.



I FELT NO FEAR DURING THE BOMBING. I SAW MYSELF AS AN OBSERVER OF AN EVENT THAT TOOK PLACE AROUND ME BUT, SOMEHOW, I WAS NOT DIRECTLY INVOLVED.

This feeling of being an observer, of a person outside the real action, recurred many times during the war.

After midnight, the train finally moved off. We were relieved. We knew that the engine was pulling the train eastward, away from the frontline, away from the reach of the German planes.

1941\07\04

Approaching the town of Indritzy, a German plane appeared from nowhere and began bombing our moving train. There was no time to stop and run for cover. We all were electrified by a sense of fear and helplessness. We all had one prayer in our hearts, that the bombs miss our train. They did. It seemed to be either an inexperienced pilot, or Providence that took care of us. In the meantime, Beba's mother, Rivka, got sick. She had a temperature. Her leg had become infected after the long march from Dagda to the border. It became clear that she would need medical attention. As we passed the city of Velikie Luki, I was shocked by its destruction – it had been heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe.

We were now heading directly to Moscow. Everyone around us felt relieved that we were now far away from the Germans. We arrived in the evening in Rizhev, a small city 237 km west of Moscow. We were told that this is it. No refugee trains were allowed to enter Moscow.

We disembarked and settled at the train station. We organized a family war conference. On the agenda was Beba's mother. She had to be hospitalized immediately, for she had a red swelling on her leg. (I was familiar with this swelling As my mother had it several times. She used to invite a folk healer who would put some salt on the wound and whisper magic words over it and lo and behold - next day the swelling was gone. Somebody had to stay with her in the hospital. Her son, Liolka, refused so it was decided that Beba and Yekutiel will stay in Rizhev for a couple of days until her mother was able to travel and then join us. But where shall we meet?

At the train station there was a big colorful map of Russia. I knew that map from my high school. I loved it, for I adored maps, not only to look at but also to draw them myself. We found the city of Penza on the map, some 700 km southeast from Moscow. We had no information about that city. It was just a geographical point on the map. We decided that the rest of us would catch a train going in the direction of Penza and after we arrived there, we would wait for Beba, her mother, and Yekutiel.

That evening we all assumed that there was order in Russia - the railroads were functioning in a normal fashion, refugees were allowed to settle in any city they desired, there was mail service and a post office. Had we known what was awaiting us, we would have reached a different conclusion. In order to reach Penza, we had to cross Moscow, but all refugee trains were barred from going through Moscow. We had to find a refugee train that went east and circumvented the capital.

1941\07\06

Father, Liolka, Chatzka and I boarded a train that went east. It was not a passenger train but a freight train with box cars packed with thousands of refugees.

1941\07\07

We entered Bologoe, an enormous railway junction. It lies halfway between Moscow and Leningrad. There must have been 30-40 railway tracks. There were countless trains with what seemed like millions of people fleeing from the Germans. We heard that somewhere at the station candies and sweet rolls were sold. I volunteered to run over and buy some. I had to hop over many tracks and bend my head under countless stationary trains. Finally I found the kiosk, where I bought some candies and sweet rolls. I ran back with a sense of accomplishment. It took me some time to find our train. Happily, I handed over the bag of goodies to my family. Suddenly, I felt that my jacket was too light. I looked into my inner pocket and, to my dismay, discovered that I had lost my brand new Soviet passport and the thousand rubles that have been entrusted to me by Beba's family. I almost became hysterical. I ran back retracing my steps but there was no sign of either my passport or the money. I felt as though the whole world had collapsed around me. I had no identification document and I lost 1000 rubles, which in my eyes was a fortune. I was almost on the verge of losing my mind.

My father calmly said to me: Don't worry. At the next station you will notify the police that you lost your passport and they will give you some document. When you go to the police tell them that you were born not in 1923 but 1924. But that is a lie, I retorted. Yes, it is a lie but you will be drafted into the army a year later. It was hard for me to understand his logic for I had no desire to be dishonest. But I accepted his advice. Only years later I realized how much my father was right in changing the date of my birth. Were I drafted into the army in 1941, I would have had much less chance of surviving the war.

Traveling with us in the same box-car were two famous Jewish artists, the well-known tenor Zachodnic and the choreographer and dancer Moiseef.

1941\07\12

We stopped for a day in Ivanova, an old Russian city with lots of churches. We went through Yaroslavl, as well as the huge railway junction Ruza'ifka and many little towns. Nobody knew where the train was taking us. For me, this was an adventure, which elated me. I had finally left Dvinsk, the town I wished to run away from. As much as I felt at home in our apartment, on the street where we lived, and with the people who lived around, I wanted an external force to change my life. Since I could not do it by myself, I dreamed about revolutions or wars that would catapult me to another world. Now, here I was, sitting with my legs dangling from the open door of the box car and talking with a couple of strange teenagers my own age about the possible outcome of the war, our future, Russia, food, but not a word about dating girls or having sex - these topics were not on our agenda.

It was already night when the train came to a halt. We had arrived at our destination - a small town in the Mordov Autonomous Republic. The entire transport was unloaded. There were wagons with working horses waiting to take us to several collective farms or kolkhozes. We sat down with our suitcases on a crude peasant wagon. We were tired. A young boy held the reins. The kolkhoz was 50 km from the station. Slowly, we all fell asleep. Sometime after midnight, the whole world collapsed around our ears. The young driver fell asleep and let the horses go their way. They drove the wagon into a ditch. The wagon overturned, our suitcases flew and hit our heads. It caught us by surprise for we were all asleep.

1941\07\14

In the morning we had to register at the provincial town before being sent to the kolkhoz. In the meantime my father went hunting for a job as a mechanic at the local tractor repair shop. They jumped on his offer to work for them after they realized what a skillful mechanic he was. He was ready to stay in this place. I rebelled against my father's decision to settle down in this hole. I claimed that Yekutiel, Beba and her mother are due to arrive in Penza where we decided to meet and he has no right to change this arrangement. After screaming and howling at my Dad, he gave in and we managed to smuggle ourselves out of this stinky little provincial town.

1941\07\16

We boarded a train going to Ruza'ifka where we planned to catch a train to Penza. We arrived in Penza hoping to find the rest of the family. We were allowed to leave the train but not enter the city. We were confined to the station, sleeping on the hard stones of the platform. Our only food consisted of buns and bread which were sold by enterprising Russian citizens. We searched with our eyes every incoming train for Beba, her mother and Yekutiel.

1941\07\18

Father became impatient. He said that he is not going to wait any more. I felt his despair and anxiety. I could not resist him any more for he was right. We all agreed that we will take any train going towards the Russian hinterland in the east. We boarded a train that was heading for the Bashkir Autonomous Republic near the Ural mountains. After finding an almost empty box-car, we climbed in with our luggage. It was night. After 3 or 4 four hours we arrived at a gigantic railway junction. To our surprise, the place was familiar to us. It was again Ruza'ifka, the station we passed several times. The train stopped. I decided to run over to the station to get a bucket of boiling water, the only commodity that was free and available on every station. Sometimes it was a lifesaver. After I marked in my memory the exact location of our train in this jungle of many trains, I ran with a small bucket to the station.

While I was standing in line for the boiling water, I looked aside for a moment and whom do I see walking on the platform but Leibke Sturkowtich with his wife Zina. I was both shocked and overwhelmed with joy. Leibke lived with us for 5 or 6 years. He slept with me in our tiny children's bedroom. My good-hearted mother took him into our family after his mother had been murdered by a robber. To me, he was like a uncle. Leibke had just gotten married to Zina who, like him, was in her thirties, quite an old age to get married according to the custom in Dvinsk.

The first thing he said to me was that Yekutiel and Beba are behind him on another train. He should arrive here in a couple of hours! What wonderful news! Had I not bumped into Leibke, we would probably not have met up with Yekutiel again during the war.

I ran to our train and told the good news. We all disembarked from the boxcar and settled to wait for Yekutiel's and Beba's arrival. We had a wonderful reunion. As it turned out, they had to leave Beba's mother in the hospital for she had to be there for a longer time then they thought earlier. The mother agreed to stay alone and join us in Penza. How naive and inexperienced we all were, including my wise brother, regarding the gigantic chaos and confusion that reigned in Russia. Had Beba and Yekutiel known what we already knew from our attempt to settle in Penza, they would have never left their mother alone in Rizhev. Tragically, after she became well, she arrived in Penza searching for her family. Of course, she could not find us. Apparently, she decided to stay and wait for us but, a year later, she died. Beba found out about her mother's fate only after the war was over.

MEANWHILE, I FELT RELIEVED AND PEACEFUL WITH MYSELF. YEKUTIEL WAS BACK AND I DIDN'T HAVE TO FIGHT MY FATHER ANYMORE.

1941\07\27 \07\21

Since Penza was off limits for refugees, it was decided that we head for the city of Saratov, on the Volga river.

After being stranded at another railway junction for almost a week, we were finally allowed to enter Saratov. The city was old and neglected. Noisy, screeching old streetcars. Wide streets planted with trees here and there. We were told that we could not settle here either, and must move on. We ended up at the riverfront on the Volga river. We were given no choices where to go: only to travel by a riverboat up the river to the city of Volsk, some 160 km north.

For me this trip was an exciting experience. It was a real ship, unlike the little paddle-wheeled steamboat on the Dvina River in Dvinsk. There were many people on the boat, but it was not overcrowded, which made the trip more of a vacation than an escape from the war.

Volsk was peaceful. No traces of war. We attempted to get permission to settle in Volsk, but the Russian authorities told us that this city is also off limits for refugees. We were sent to a collective farm called Sofchoz 59 where, we were told, they needed working hands. We loaded our belongings on a wagon pulled by an old horse and began strolling to a village a few kilometers away from the town. We were temporarily housed in a school building. The members of this Sofchoz 59 were really poor. The place looked neglected and in total disarray. I was indifferent to what had been happening and had no opinion about what should be our next step. Father immediately expressed his readiness to stay here and work in the metal workshop. Yekutiel disagreed. He was determined to find for us something better in the vicinity. Next day he traveled around and discovered a beautiful village called Sielo Tcherkaskoe.

INTERMEZZO

*in-ter-***met***-soh*
short composition inserted
between other pieces

WHERE EUROPE MEETS ASIA


07/07/1941
BOLOGOE
07/04/1941
RZHEV
07/12/1941
IVANOVO
07/12/1941
07/14/1941
07/18/1941
RUZAYEVKA
RUSSIA
BASHKORTOSTA
MORDOVIA
PENZA
07/27/1941
07/16/1941
07/27/1941
VOLSK
SARATOV
10/31/1941
URALSK
FOUR
THREE
UKRAINE
VOLGA
KASAKHSTAN
SEA OF
AZOV
BLACK SEA
GEORGIA
CASPIAN SEA

We were allowed to move to Tcherkaskoe. We found a nice family who agreed to rent us one room in their house. The room had an oven which, after being used, gave out heat for a long time. In the freezing winter nights, the Russian people loved to sleep on top of such an oven and many fairy tales ascribed to these ovens magical powers. We liked our neighbors. They were warm human beings and treated us with compassion and care.

Father immediately found work at a tractor repair shop. I went to work in Kolkhoz Budionniy. It was for me my first working experience in my life. Until my arrival here I had never worked a whole day for pay. Luckily, for me, the kolchozniks (the members of this collective farm) were not "workaholics." They related to me quite nicely. Most of the men had been drafted into the army. The majority of the workers were mature women or young girls. After a week in this new environment, I began feeling settled and relaxed. I started noticing pretty faces belonging to some of the Russian girls, but there my interest in girls stopped. I could not go further. How could I? Until now the only girls I knew, as friends, were my classmates at the Hebrew gymnasia or members of my Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatza'ir. I had two girls in Dvinsk whom I dated once or twice but they were all Jewish. Russian girls? What kind of specimens were they?

Father, Yekutiel and myself performed a short program in honor of the Soviet Airforce Day. It was a humble celebration at the town's high school. Yekutiel played the violin and I accompanied him either on the guitar or piano. We put on our best clothes that we carried from Dvinsk and for a moment the world was in peace again. It was a pleasant feeling to have regained my own human dignity, even for one evening, and not be regarded as a homeless starving refugee.

I had to change workplaces. I now worked in Kolkhoz Barricada. I became close to a Jewish fellow from the Ukraine. He was tall, strong, and a good worker, a year older than I. At work he shared with me his romantic experiences with many girls at this kolkhoz. He pointed out to me who of them was good in bed. He boasted that he had no trouble in having sex here with any girl. He asked me if I would be interested in going to bed with somebody he already knew was easily available. At first, I was scared to even to think about it. Then the urge to experiment, to do the real thing with a real girl who was willing to go to bed with me, took the upper hand. One evening I made a date with a beautiful Russian girl. I knew from my friend that she was interested in having sex with me, but I didn't know how to be with her. I felt frozen and afraid even to start a pleasant chat. None of my peers had ever told me that first comes the foreplay and only later the intercourse. I was hesitant to kiss her, I didn't know how to caress her, how to move my hands over her body.....even worse, I didn't know that an arousal stage even existed, let alone was required. I could sense that she wished I would start my engine running, but how?

BUT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN EVEN MORE SCARY FOR ME, HAD SHE UNDRESSED HERSELF AND SAID: LET US START.....

This was my first true encounter with a mature, sexually experienced young woman. In her presence, I felt so boyish, virginal, naive and unmanly. Ironically, at that date, I was eighteen years of age, a stage when supposedly a man's sex-drive is in the highest gear in his life.

1941\09\

Disturbing news began to reach us from the battlefield. The Germans were advancing towards Moscow and to Charkov in the Ukraine. It became obvious that the war would sooner or later reach this quiet, as yet undisturbed region. We also heard that the Soviet authorities had begun drafting into the Red Army Latvian men, whom until now they refrained from mobilizing out of mistrust in the loyalty of its new, forcibly acquired citizens. Yekutiel was 22 and he was concerned about his immediate future. He decided to leave us and travel to Central Asia, both to explore the region for our next resettlement, and also to avoid being drafted into the army.

1941\10\

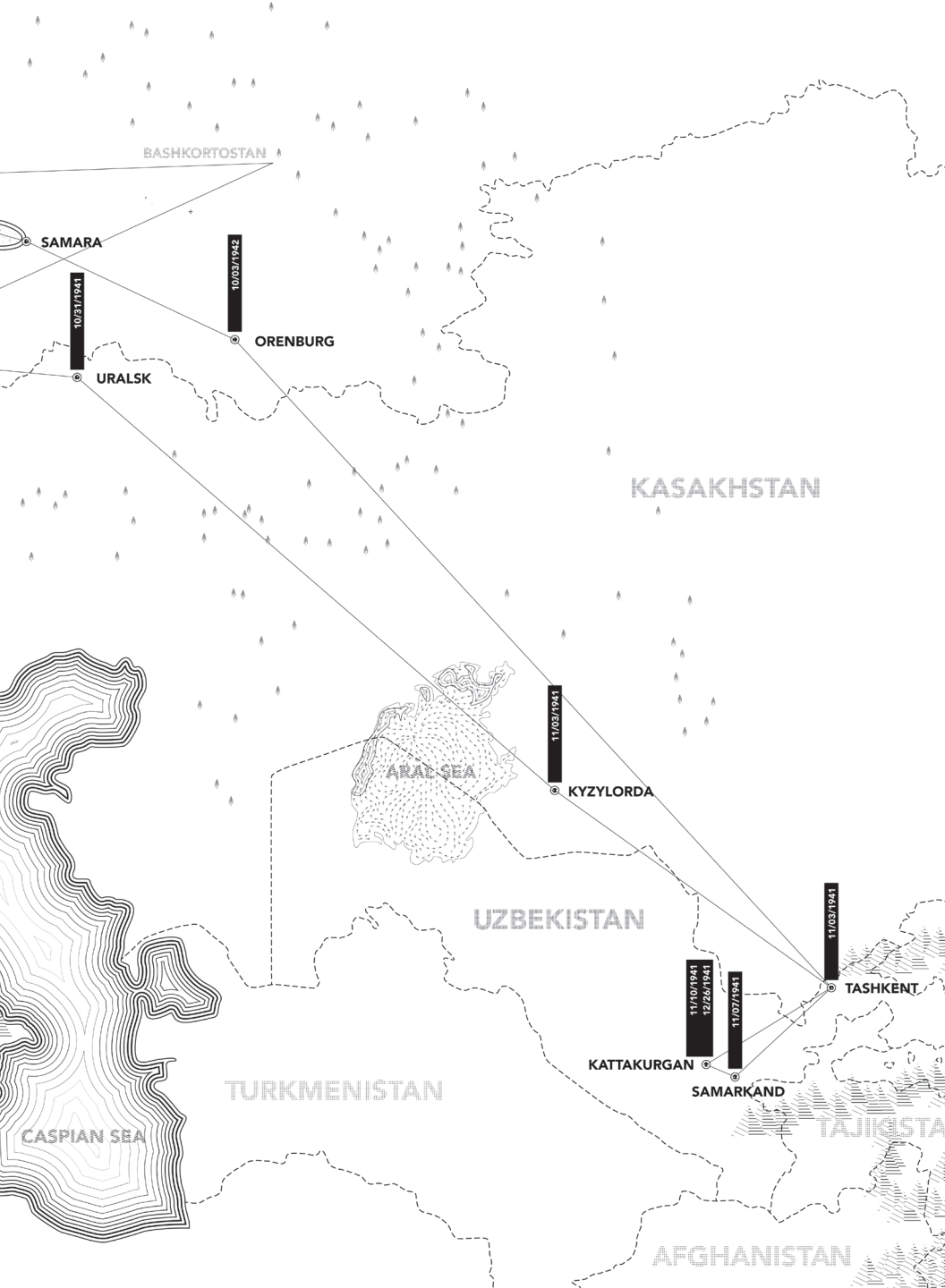
Before Yekutiel left, it was agreed between us that he will send a cable from Central Asia notifying us where we should go. The weather became colder. Father again began resisting any plan of moving from this town. He felt comfortable and secure at work. He became close with some of the workers and he wanted to stay. We all waited for a cable from Yekutiel.

We heard about the advances of the German Army in the Ukraine, and there were rumors that the Germans were at the outskirts of Moscow. This alarming news prompted my father to change his decision to stay here. Now he became impatient and afraid of the Germans. He urged us to leave right away without waiting for Yekutiel's cable. Here again I had to fight my father and force him to live up to our agreement with his older son. We waited till the middle of the month. With no news from Yekutiel, we decided to leave town.

POLYPHONY

pa*'li-funi*
a multiplicity of sounds

CENTRAL ASIA


BASHKORTOSTAN
SAMARA
10/31/1941
URALSK
10/03/1942
ORENBURG
KASAKHSTAN
ARAL SEA
11/03/1941
KYZYLORDA
UZBEKISTAN
11/03/1941
TASHKENT
11/10/1941
12/26/1941
KATTAKURGAN
11/07/1941
SAMARKAND
TURKMENISTAN
CASPIAN SEA
TAJIKISTA
AFGHANISTAN

1941\10\18

It was already dark and raining. We traveled back to the city of Volsk on the Volga. Later in the evening we caught a train to Saratov where we were supposed to find a train going to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, one of the largest republics in Central Asia, some 5,000 km southeast from Saratov.

(Three months later we found out that on the very evening we left Volsk for Saratov, Yekutiel was returning from Central Asia to pick us up because he didn't trust father's readiness to leave his job and town. By going back to central Russia, he placed himself in jeopardy of being arrested as a draft dodger. I can imagine his shock and disappointment when he came to the house and found us gone!)

1941\10\29

We are again in Saratov. This city that had been so peaceful at the end of July was now full of war markings. Most of the windows in the houses were plastered with paper strips to protect the glass from explosions' sound waves. The railway station was packed with refugees fighting for seats in trains going to Central Asia. I saw Polish officers and soldiers from General Anders' Army dressed in brand new uniforms of the Polish army. They were freed by the Russians from prisoners of war camps in Russia following a deal with the English government, who demanded their release and permission to leave the Soviet Union and travel to Iran. People were searching for places to buy food. There was almost none available. After having spent several days at the station, Fortune smiled on us. A heavily bribed train conductor allowed us to board a special passenger car attached to a military train that goes to Tashkent. We left Saratov at night.

PG 38 NOV 1941

1941\10\31

We passed the city of Uralsk which had been built over swamps. Our train stopped. At the station, peasants were selling enormous watermelons. We continued to Iletz'kaya Zastchita, (later renamed to its old Czarist name, Orenburg). Our car was disconnected from the train and left on the tracks to wait for another engine that would take us to Tashkent. While we were waiting for a connection, the passengers, mostly Jews from all four corners of the world, began scavenging in all directions for food. It was not easy. After waiting for a whole day, our passenger car was finally attached to a train of heavily wounded soldiers headed for hospitals in Tashkent. The sight of red crosses on the passenger cars made me stand in awe before the soldiers who had the courage to face the Germans and fight them.

1941\11\01

The landscape was beautiful. Slowly we left the European steppes of southeast Russia and entered the subtropical region of Central Asia. We were lucky. We travelled in a passenger car. The people around us were very friendly. Each person had his or her story. I suddenly saw myself as a tourist traveling in foreign countries, fulfilling my childhood dreams to be in any place in the world but Dvinsk.

My passion for geography found its highest fulfillment on this trip. I cherished every place we passed on our way. I realized that I was in a different world. Instead of pine or birch trees, I saw palms growing along the road and sand-dunes covering the ground. We passed a caravan of camels moving along the tracks. It was a long ride and there was plenty of time to listen to stories of war and peace.

1941\11\03

Suddenly, somebody called out: Look, look, blue water! It is a sea with blue water. We all looked through the windows. Somebody said that it was the Aral Sea, located in the middle of the Kara Kum desert.

Later in the day we entered the train station of Kzyl Orda, the capital of Kazakhstan, the biggest republic in Central Asia. We had enough time to leave our train and buy dried fruits, melons and baked flat bread. We arrived in Tashkent late that evening. Again we were not allowed to leave the station. We found ourselves surrounded by thousands of refugees from all over Russia. At every corner there were beggars, thieves, starving people and lots of Uzbeks dressed in their traditional Tartaric clothes. We could only see the city through the windows of the station. It looked like a beautiful place to live. There were lots of vendors who were selling sweet buns and breads, which became our main staple. We had lost all hope of settling in Tashkent. We were sent off to another city, this time, Samarkand. When I heard that we were going to Samarkand, I became excited for this city had been the ancient capital of the great Mongol Khan Tamerlane. Suddenly, I saw myself more like a student of history rather than as a starving refugee from Latvia, stranded in Central Asia.

1941\11\07

We arrived at the railway station of Samarkand. The city itself was about 10 km away. There was no hope for settling here either. There was no food to purchase. We were hungry. Very, very hungry. In the evening we heard Stalin's speech from the Kremlin piped through little loudspeakers at the station. He proclaimed his determination to fight and defeat the German army. His speech gave us somehope for a possible reversal in the war.

1941\11\08

I had a tremendous urge to walk to the city and see for myself the old Samarkand and the palace of the Khans I read about, but my stomach was screaming for food. I was really starving.

At the station there were thousands of Polish citizens who were released from detention camps in Russia and were allowed now to settle in Russia in any location they wished. We were finally told that we had to go further west, to the city of Katta Kurgan.

Katta Kurgan was a small provincial city. The buildings were a mixture of European and Islamic architectures. We left the railway station and settled in a Tchaichana, a tea house. A Tchaichana is like a coffee house where instead of coffee, people drink hot boiling tea day and night, even on the hottest day of the year. Most visitors to the Tchaichanas were Uzbeks. We found a corner in one Tchaichana and settled there until we could find work. We met up again with Leibke and his wife Zina, who now had a very young baby. We had no idea where Yekutiel was. After we left the station and settled in the Tchaichana, we had no food for 24 hours. I was really, really famished. For some reason my father didn't complain about his state of hunger. (A year later I found out from Leibke that he and my father, on that very day as we were starving, went to a restaurant and had lunch. This revelation of Leibke's about my father's behavior in a time of crisis infuriated me to the core. At that moment I lost respect for my father. How could he do it?!)

After a day or two of searching for a job, my father had been hired as a mechanic at a cotton factory. Leibke found some job too. Beba, father, Leibke, and Zina stayed in town. They rented one room from an Uzbek in the upper part of the town, some two kilometers from the station. The room had no water faucet, no toilet, no light, just one long bunk, enough space for several people to sleep.

Chatzka and I went to live on a kolkhoz named Kzyl Oltin. After walking from Katta Kurgan for hours we were even more ravenous than ever. However, we didn't dare to ask for food for this would be bad manners in our eyes. We were met by the Rais, which in Uzbek language meant the head, the head of the kolkhoz. He was a well-mannered guy. He asked us to tell him about ourselves. It was hard to talk to him, for our stomachs were pinching and aching. I prayed for the moment that he would ask us if we would like something to eat. Finally he did. His wife brought for both of us two bowls of peppered soup with little pieces of meat in it. She called the bowl itself piala. This was the second word in the Uzbek language I learned. While Chatzka and I were eating, a huge man came in, dressed in Uzbek clothes with a little Asiatic skullcap on his head. He was an exiled Russian citizen who, after having served a prison-term, had been banned from returning to his hometown in Russia. He was a locksmith. Although he had just met us and we were total strangers to him, he promptly told us gruesome stories about the prison camps. The Rais

showed us our living quarters - a small hallway in an empty building. We would sleep on the stony floor. There was no water around. We will start working tomorrow in the fields picking cotton. We would receive a bowl of soup during lunch break and 100 gram of unsifted wheat as our main meal. We can do anything we wish with the unsifted wheat. We would share our living quarters with two other young refugees from Poland who were also Jewish.

We met our two roommates. They were nice fellows who until last month were detained in a camp somewhere in Siberia. They were released from detention and allowed to find a place to live after England had struck a deal with Russia concerning Polish citizens arrested by the Soviets and deported to camps in Russia after the division of Poland between Germany and Russia in 1939.

Without undressing, Chatzka and I lay down on the stones for the night.

Next morning, without washing ourselves (for lack of water), we went to work in the field. It was a cool, sunny day. It was easy to pick cotton. There was only one minor problem - we were starving. We couldn't think about anything but food. Finally, came the great moment - lunch. All the workers lined up in front of a field kitchen consisting of one huge kettle of boiling soup. The smell was delicious but the soup itself was hot water with two lonely onions and one carrot. The long-anticipated lunch was a blow to me. I became even hungrier than before. At the end of our work day, we received our 100 grams of unsifted wheat. Chatzka and I asked our two Polish friends what they were doing with their portions of wheat. They told us that they would take a big pot, fill it with water, and heat it to boiling. When the water started boiling, they would throw in the wheat making a kind of a glue that in pre-war times was used to paste posters on walls.

I tried to enter an Uzbek home and ask for food but I was practically thrown out by an angry landlord for trespassing the holy boundaries of his habitat. Moreover, I had peeked in and seen his wife and children, who were off limits to strangers.

A week passed and I came to the conclusion that if we don't get more food from another source, we will all die from starvation. I realized that in the eyes of the Uzbek residents, I was a Russian, a person the Uzbek people had hated since the Revolution when Marshal Budionnyi slaughtered twenty thousand revolting Uzbeks. Maybe, I thought, if I spoke their language, they might soften and be more friendly to me.

I found a textbook for the Uzbek language for the third grade which contained some grammar. In my free time I immersed myself in mastering the language. After a week I knew the whole book by heart. I could converse in Uzbek enough to be understood by the local people. I could feel immediately the change in their attitude towards me. Some answered me with a smile, some gave me some food, and some talked to me as if I could help them with their life under the Russian regime.

~~JAN 16, 1923~~

~~NOV 23, 1922~~

DEZ 2, 1922

In 1936, when I was thirteen years of age, I had come to the conclusion that I had been born not on January 16, 1923, as was stated in my birth certificate but, rather, on November 23, 1922. My mother, of blessed memory, said one day that I was born two weeks before Hanukkah. Since in 1936 Hanukkah happened to be on December 7th, it was easy to calculate a date two weeks earlier - November 23. From that day on, I began celebrating my birthday in November.

When my nineteenth birthday came, I decided to celebrate it with a cake I would bake myself. I took three portions of my unsifted wheat, mixed it with water, kneaded it until it became some kind of dough. I made a small fire between two rocks, placed the dough on a piece of metal and baked it. When it turned brown, I served it to Chatzka and our two Polish friends. My birthday cake was a disaster. It was tasteless, hard like a stone, with unsifted weeds an integral part of the cake. After two bites I broke down and tears came into my eyes. I saw myself losing my human dignity and becoming a beast. Just half a year ago, I was a high school student with dreams and aspirations for a bright future and here, now, I was chewing a piece of dough which even a cow would refuse to eat. At that moment, I experienced a horrible sense of self-degradation and humiliation. I realized what the war was doing to me and to all the rest of us.

Life continued at a slow pace in the kolkhoz. After having slept on the stony floor for more than a month without washing, we became infected with lice which crawled all over us by the hundreds. They were imbedded in our skulls, under our arms, in our clothes, in every possible spot on our skin.

THREE TIMES A DAY, ALL FOUR OF US WOULD SIT DOWN IN THE WARM WINTER SUN OF UZBEKISTAN, TAKE OFF OUR SHIRTS AND SHOVEL OFF THE LICE WITH THE PALMS OF OUR HANDS.

Even so, we continued to find new armies of lice on our bodies. Strangely enough, we got used to them. Their bites didn't bother us. Often, we completely forgot about their existence. One afternoon, an Uzbek who liked me, invited me to join him in his home for tea, the national drink of the region. I entered a room that had in the center of the floor a kind of a niche filled with hot coals. On top of this niche was a low table. The guests were seated around the table with the legs under it almost touching the hot coals. The windows were open and cold air was streaming into the room. The fresh cold air created a feeling of being outdoors but the warm feet underneath the table made it feel as if one was lying in bed. The Rais was there, too. Everyone recalled the good old days when the main occupation had been raising sheep and wool instead of being forced by the Soviet Government to produce cotton. Although my mastery of Uzbek language was in the most primitive state, I felt honored by my hosts trust in me after they realized I was not a Soviet Russian, but a refugee from Latvia.

Somebody from Katta Kurgan who knew us met Yekutiel in another region of Uzbekistan, the Fergana Valley. As a result, Chatzka and I walked to my father's house in Katta Kurgan to celebrate the reunion with my brother. There were many stories to hear and to tell. We were again together, one family. Life in the kolkhoz dragged on. Everyday my thoughts revolved around food, food, food. There was no end to our hunger. One day I was thirsty. I saw a little stream of water. Although I noticed little crawling bugs in the water which indicated that the stream was contaminated and I should not touch it, the devil in me whispered:

DRINK IT AND YOU WILL BE RELIEVED FROM YOUR SUFFERING IN THIS HORRIBLE PLACE.
I CONSCIOUSLY DRANK THE WATER KNOWING THAT I MIGHT GET SICK.
AND I DID.

I got a fever. A high fever. In this sick state I walked 5-6 kilometers from the kolkhoz to our house in Katta Kurgan. I was very weak when I arrived at the house. Yekutiel immediately said that I must go to a hospital. We both walked to the hospital in the city. The receptionist wouldn't accept me for lack of free beds in the hospital. Yekutiel wouldn't give up. He argued with the receptionist that I had high fever and if I died, she personally would be responsible for my death. Therefore, he said, my brother will stay here until he is admitted.

After midnight I was called into the reception room. I undressed myself. My clothes were immediately removed and taken to a special disinfection facility. Before entering the shower, I was shaved and sprayed under my arms with a special chemical to kill the imbedded lice. My hair had been shaved too and disinfected with the same liquid. There were so many lice on me that one shower was not enough to remove them. I had to take several more treatments with the disinfecting liquid to kill the eggs of the lice that were lodged in my skin.

I was no longer famished. The high fever completely killed my appetite. I was given a clean bed with a white sheet and a blanket in a room with two other patients. One was a big man from Latvia and the other a Russian officer whose leg had been amputated after a severe battle.

Although I was sick and had a high fever, at that moment I was very happy. Finally, I could sleep in a bed with clean sheets and a pillow.

In the morning I was seen by a woman doctor. She diagnosed my disease as Typhus. She said that there was nothing she could do to stop the illness or stop the fever. The disease must run its course and hopefully my body will overcome it. Real food was brought in but I had no desire to touch it. Instead of returning the dish I gave it to my neighbor from Latvia. He ravenously consumed everything. I asked him what was his problem. He suffered from a kidney inflammation. The Russian officer's name was Daikovski. He was an engineer, an intelligent fellow but with lots of superstitious beliefs.

End of Sample Chapter

DIARY OF BONIA SHUR. 1941-1945
LIFE LESSONS FROM BEHIND THE EASTERN FRONT