

# War & Ice Cream

FELA DOGADKO

Memories are fallible  
and some are tweaked  
to make them better.



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TO MY MOTHER—

A woman who struggled to make sense of the world  
and tried to explain the world to me.

## One: Leaving Warsaw

My upcoming fourth birthday was my family's reason to plan a big celebration. I was the third child born to my parents and the first to have lived beyond the age of two. My great-grandma, my two grandmas, my grandpa, numerous aunts and uncles and assorted family friends had all committed to come to the party and to rejoice. Then September 1, 1939 happened, and by the time October 23rd rolled in, I was already far from Zelazna Str. 63, Warsaw. There would be no birthday party.

September 1, 1939.

War came to Warsaw with all of its ferocity. The massive German Messerschmitts effaced the blue sky over the entire city. Their shadows were intersecting with each other on the sidewalks and on the buildings and on park benches. The bombs, released from their bellies, were ripping everything apart on the ground and setting off volcanoes of fire and debris.

Warsaw was the city in which all of my family was born, as far back as anyone could remember or know. Now, a few 'peklach' and 'zeklach', and seven of us were leaving everything familiar. The family's exodus included my Aunt Chajcie with her two-year-old daughter, Estush, my Aunt Sara-Rywka, my parents, and me. My grandpa came with us also. My grandma did not join us in our exodus. "I'll stay and take care of everything here for when you come back," she said. She told my grandfather, "You go with them, they'll need your help with the two babies. How long can the war possibly last? It will blow over in no time."

Before we left, Grandpa Baruch made sure I had a warm coat. The mention of Siberia must have frightened everyone. My grandpa was a designer of leather shoe uppers. The leather cutters were considered the aristocracy of the shoe-making process. He was proud of his skills and made sure that people knew the dif-

ference between being a cobbler and a design-cutter. When cutting to his design, he had to visualize how to position the pattern in order to get the most out of the leather. He had to be efficient and precise. In the instructions to the cobbler, he always included the size of my mom's shoes, so that the sample would be made in my mom's size. My mom got the sample to wear after it was shown and modeled. Sometimes she got to model the samples herself. She had beautiful legs.

My grandpa knew many people in the leather business, so he was able to locate craftsmen, who on very short notice, agreed to make a coat for a four-year-old girl. No one in the entire world, certainly not a four-year-old, had a coat like mine. I loved it from the minute that my grandpa presented it to me. It was just so very soft. It hugged me. The shearling coat was made of the finest sheepskin with the fur inside. Exposed fur trimmed the cuffs, the hem and the entire length of the front where leather loops closed on the buttons. Two large pockets were colorfully hand-embroidered on the leather. A matching hat with earflaps and a muff completed the outfit. A wide belt provided additional warmth, and someone in the family bought me a pair of felt boots (perfect for frost, not for water). I was ready for Siberia.

I said farewell to all that I had known. Farewell to Zelazna 63 where my cradle stood and was now to be forever empty. Farewell to the beach on the banks of the Vistula, to the beautiful Lazienki Park, to Jerozolimski Avenue promenade, to my Aunt Dora (my mom's sister) and to my Uncle Max (my mom's youngest sibling) who stayed behind, in Warsaw. Farewell to the best people on earth, who had surrounded me from the moment I was born. Life would never be normal from that point forward. Fall season was known for its beauty in Poland, but there was nothing beautiful about it in the year 1939.

Our small group joined others who were fleeing from the only homeland they had known. We ran toward the Polish-Russian border. We had no known destination, just a geographical direction. Eastward.

Masses of people walked; bearing heavy loads of belongings and children in their arms. A few, who could afford to pay the hefty

price demanded by farmers, would secure a ride in a mule cart only to be dropped off at a short distance away. There was nothing one could do about being cheated. Everyone was at the mercy of somebody else. Some people considered themselves extremely lucky when they could hitch a ride and sit on top of their salvaged possessions, and at least rest their feet for a while. Most walked until their feet bled.

Many trains were already stopped dead on the bombed out tracks. Rails became piles of mangled metal. Miles of railroad ties were shredded into splinters and dust.

I also walked. Mostly though, I was carried by my mom, my dad, or my grandpa. The chill in the air and the night dampness did not penetrate my coat. Still, when I was particularly fearful, or scared, or hungry, I shivered even inside this coat. No coat could insulate me from the sounds of the air raid sirens, or the booms of exploding bombs, or the sight of people whose legs buckled underneath them and unable to take one more step, were left in the places where they fell.

Traumatic occurrences readily commit events to memory. I believe that from the time of my escape, I remember everything. But then again, I do not know what I do not remember, and so it goes that all recording of my memories is a collection of fragments.

Exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and filthy, the sorrowful group of hundreds made it to the Neutral Zone; a muddy strip of wasteland in the middle of nowhere. There were no sanitary facilities, nothing at all, just a place where thousands of refugees put down their belongings and waited for the Soviet Union to open its borders. The constant drizzle made the field muddier and muddier, and the soaked clothes never had a chance to dry.

Horrible news trickled in from Warsaw by way of newly arriving refugees. Warsaw was burning to ashes. Jews were being forced to abandon their homes and surrender their valuables. More and more of them were being crowded into smaller and smaller spaces. Grandpa Baruch felt guilty for leaving his wife behind, and he missed her terribly. He was unhappy and was getting extremely restless. He made a decision to go back to Warsaw and

share the dismal fate together with my grandma. There was nothing any one of us could do or say that would change his mind. A man in his early fifties, tall, slim, vigorous and alert, practically overnight turned into a hunched, ancient man. I watched him move away from me. He carried a bundle on his back. I cried and I waved and I called out to him, "Zayde, Zayde!" I know that he heard me. I watched him stop for a moment. I knew that if he'd just turn around he would come back. He didn't turn around. Not even once. I stood there and I watched until I couldn't see him anymore.

I never saw him again.

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We stayed in the Neutral Zone for many more days, maybe even weeks. The rain soaked through every piece of the clothing we wore, and the already muddy field became a swamp. The mud stunk. The clothes stunk. There was not a single spot where we could hide from the elements. We were on a piece of land packed with waiting refugees.

Pesa Bernstein and her mother, hearing of our predicament, came to help us. They introduced themselves to us as being from Bialystok, which was not too far from the refugee camp. They were among a number of other volunteers who shared food and blankets with the displaced people. It must have been on the second or third visit when Pesa told us that every time she looked at her daughter, Cywia, she saw me and couldn't get me out of her head. Eventually Pesa asked my mom to pack our clothes and come with them to their house in Bialystok, at the same time apologizing to my father, to my Aunt Chajcie with Estush, and to my Aunt Sara-Rywka for not being able to extend the offer to them also.

When I saw Cywia I could have been looking into a mirror. She was my age, exactly. She was chubby, like me. She had long, very dark brown hair, that she wore braided, just like me.

There were truly wall-to-wall people in Pesa's small apartment. People were spread out on floors and sitting on every piece of

furniture. Cywia guided me through the maze to her crib and told me that I could sleep in it. She herself likes to sleep with her mama and bubbe in their big bed anyway, she said. Her mama had told her that I had no home, and that everything had been taken away from me. This was why she wanted me to have her crib.

Pesa found a burlap potato sack, and, together with my mom, sewed a cover for my coat. According to Pesa, the coat in its original beauty would be too much of a temptation for anyone not to rip it off my back.

Within days, news came to the Bernstein family that the Soviet Union had finally opened its borders to the refugees stretched out in the field. Mom and I rejoined the others of our family and waited for a place in an open-bed truck to be taken into the Soviet Union. It was mayhem. No one asked where the trucks were heading. People just hoped that they were being taken away from Poland. There was a lot of pushing and shoving, crying, and calling out of names. Would more trucks be provided? Would the border be closed again? No one was sure of anything. Parents were separated from their children, husbands from their wives, sisters from their brothers, and baggage from its owners. My parents and I were unusually lucky to be herded into the same truck, but Aunt Sarah was pushed into another, and Aunt Chajcie with Estush into yet another.

We were now inside the borders of the Soviet Union. In August 1939, Foreign Ministers Ribbentrop and Molotov signed a nonaggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, so Russia was placated. But I remember my mom saying that she knew that Hitler wouldn't stop at the border of Russia, and she was hoping that we could move as far as possible from the Polish-Russian border.

At least, for now, the Soviet Union was at peace with Germany. The railroad tracks were still intact, and trucks were running on the roads. Despite being in very bad shape, the roads were for the most part passable. Horse-drawn carts shared the roads with trucks, especially around smaller cities or farming communities.

We survived. My father was a tailor and his skills were portable. All he needed was a needle and thread and he was in business. Everyone everywhere had something that needed to be repaired, or let out, or a hole patched, mended, or darned. Actually, the major part of his work consisted of letting out hems. On a new garment the hems were intentionally made very wide. They were meant to be let out and let out again as a child grew. It was not at all unusual to see two or three permanent creases around the bottom or on the cuffs of a garment. In any village or city neighborhood, someone always appeared to own a sewing machine. An iron, in which one put glowing pieces of coal, was also available here and there. My father bartered his services for a place to stay and for food to eat, and he could do it all without knowing a word of Russian.

We were afraid to stay too close to Poland, so we kept inching our way deeper and deeper into the Soviet Union. The names of two cities stand out clearly in my mind. Cherepovets and Vologda, but they were way up north and a little bit East from the Bialystok area. These cities seemed to be on the way to Siberia and that might have been where we were being sent. That is where everybody else was being sent, including my Aunt Sara-Rywka, which we found out after the war. By sheer luck or coincidence, we made a U-turn and started heading south.

Moscow was one of the cities we stayed in for maybe a few days. Of Moscow itself, I remember only the subway. The underground was so huge. It was clean, well lit, had many marble statues, and walls covered with pretty paintings. There was no housing available in Moscow, and there was no one to turn to for help in this large city. We were very soon on the road again. Many months had passed since we left Poland, and we were as yet to stay in one place for more than a few days or weeks.

But, whenever we established a new address, my mom would write to her parents and to her sister and brother in occupied Warsaw. I recall seeing a few letters from Warsaw that made it through to us. The envelopes were all marked up with numerous stamps of different sizes and colors, each with the madman's face on them. "Deutschland" was prominently displayed on the envelope. The letters looked like jigsaw puzzles, words and entire sen-

tences erased or cut out by censors. By the end of 1941 the letters stopped coming. This didn't keep my mom from writing and mailing to family. Throughout the war-years, I sat tight by my mom's side and followed her letter writing. This is how I learned my numbers and the names of the months. I wondered why the first number on the date kept changing all the time, the second number not as fast, and the third – never. Today, after more than forty years in the States, the month before the day does not come naturally to me.

## Two: Kharkov

After zigzagging through many cities large and small, we unloaded in Kharkov. In the summer of 1940, this large city was at peace. My father easily found work tailoring and we were able to afford rent for a room in a Russian family's apartment. We also had enough money for food.

On the sidewalks of the city's wide, tree-lined boulevards, children played hopscotch and jumped ropes or just promenaded up and down the streets holding their parents' hands.

The parks were teeming with people and with vendors. The vendors sold suckers that they carried attached to a long stick. Roosters were the only shape in which the suckers came in and red was their only color. Balloons were carried in the same fashion as the suckers, but, unlike the suckers, they came in every color of a rainbow. Flowers were also sold on the beautiful streets of Kharkov. On each corner, a vendor would display bunches of flowers kept in buckets filled with water. In the spring, buckets were filled with lilacs. Their intoxicating fragrance carried for blocks. Later in the season came the lilies-of-the-valley, which were sold in small bunches tied with a ribbon, like corsages. The most popular perfume fragrance was lily-of-the-valley. Then came seasonal violets, carnations, and daisies; all were so fresh and so very beautiful.

Flowers, balloons, suckers, and ice cream. I always associate these things with peace and with smiles, and with fun, and with a major city. Especially ice cream and especially the kind in a cone that you buy from an outdoor vendor and eat outside. Ice cream became, to me, a symbol of luxury and a sign that everything is ok with the world.

Ice cream. I can handle a regular size cone, now, because I am a big girl. I am already five years old. A regular cone is not like the mini cones of my memory of long ago and of far away when I was a little girl in Warsaw before war came and incinerated the city of my birth.

Kharkov was such a pretty city. So colorful and busy in the day and at dusk. The entire city was illuminated by the many streetlights and by the glow of light coming from every open and unshaded window.

On the outskirts of Kharkov was a Kiddyland. The sprawling amusement park was run by “Pioneers.” They wore the required uniforms of white shirts, red ties and dark skirts or pants. The “Pioneers” were the junior branch of the Communist Party. The Kiddyland was a busy, noisy and happy place. There were many different rides and games and there was a long alley with distorting mirrors on both sides. People held their bellies, laughing at the twisted shapes of themselves. The reflections were funny to most people but to me the images were quite scary.

I loved the rides on the train and on the carousel best of all. I never got sick of them or on them. The loud clank of the train’s bells urged everybody to clear its tracks, which wound around and around and through the enormous park. The carousel’s elaborately painted wooden horses moved slowly up and down and in big circles. The calliope carnival music that came from the inside of the carousel was very beautiful.

We hoped to stay in Kharkov until the war “blew over.” It didn’t happen. One beautiful summer day everything changed. On June 22, 1941, Kiev, the capital city of the Ukraine, a Republic of the Soviet Union, was attacked by Germany. Kharkov, which was fewer than two hundred miles from Kiev, was put on alert. Loudspeakers were installed on major street corners. Newly composed patriotic songs were broadcast along with the calls for mobilization. Every able-bodied man was to report to one of the draft stations to enlist. “It is every man’s patriotic duty to fight the enemy!” In no time and out of nowhere, truckloads of young uniformed men were zooming out of the city. They were carried to the war front.

My father was thirty-six years old in 1941 and he wasn’t registered anywhere. Not a single person knew who he was or where he was. He could have very easily left Kharkov and dissolved into obscurity in the vast country of the Soviet Union. He did not have to enlist, but he did. He was going to fight the Great Patriotic War against Hitler.

After registering for active duty, my father, who changed into the military uniform right there at the registration site, came to say good-bye to my mom and me. He handed over his civilian clothes to my mom and told us that we should sell them and use the money to buy whatever we needed. Then he left. The two of us stayed to fend for ourselves.

When we were in Poland, everyone around me spoke Yiddish so I must not have known much Polish. My mom knew Polish. She was able to pick up a lot of Russian since there are many similarities in the two languages. I learned some Russian from the kids in the apartment building when we all played in the courtyard. The street corner loudspeakers were continuously blaring propaganda. Parents were being alerted and strongly advised to take their children to a safe place on the outskirts of the city and to leave them there. “The Communist Party will take good care of the children, and they will have priority in evacuation in case such a need should arise.”

“Think of your children first, they are our future and our hope. Mothers, do your duty and save your children!” a loud strong voice commanded through the loudspeaker. “We will defeat the enemy! Long live Stalin and his Red Army! Stalin, our father, will lead us to victory!” This information was being blasted day and night, but nobody knew what to expect or how close the front was.

The lines in front of the grocery stores were getting longer. Milk and bread were scarce now. Children no longer played in the streets, and the Kiddyland was shut down. The vendors disappeared from the city’s streets. No more flowers. No more balloons or suckers. No more ice cream. It was as though none of these things had ever existed. The lines in front of the stores disappeared when the stores were empty. The streetlights were no longer on at night, and every window was masked so that not a flicker of light would betray the city to German bombers.

Eventually it was no longer voluntary to send children away to the government compounds. My mom had no choice. With a muffled voice she kept repeating: “It will be better for you. You will be with all the other children. You will have food to eat. There

is no more food here. You will be safe.” My mom held my five-and-a-half-year-old hand in hers, clutching it so hard that it hurt.

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I was left on the grounds of a luxurious compound of villas that belonged to the Communist Party elite for their vacations. I never entered the building to which I was assigned. All night long, crying, I held on to the tall, black iron bars of the fence that surrounded the compound. At dawn I saw my mom approaching the gate. Her eyes were also red and swollen. “Mama, I don’t want to be safe, I only want to be with you. I don’t care if I starve as long as we do it together.”

Both of us, weeping, hitched a ride on a truck-bed back to Kharkov. My mom started to plan our escape from the city. “Are others leaving? Where are they going? Who can we ask? If we leave, will my father know where to find us?” Suddenly there was no longer time to question or to plan. It was Warsaw all over again. A long wailing of air-raid sirens ripped through the air. It was too late to hide even if we knew where to hide. The bombers were already over our heads. Some people stood in the streets in stupor as the bombs rearranged the city.

Rain fell in sheets that day. My mom hurriedly packed all that we had (not much), and we planted ourselves outside the apartment building, getting soaked and waiting for a miracle. Would anyone show pity and maybe give us a ride to the train station so we could escape? A horse-drawn carriage came to a halt in front of us. “Where to?” the man asked.

“Away.”

He unloaded us at the train station. He did not accept any money for the ride and wished us good luck. We waited for a train on an open platform. Crowds of people were already there before us.

We waited for days.

A couple of trains zoomed by without as much as slowing down. The one that stopped was already filled to capacity. Some people

attempted to squeeze in, but those already inside were pushing back. Even the open caboose was taken. Mobs of soldiers and civilians alike were clamoring for space on the roofs of the train cars. My mom ran back and forth alongside the cars. Bundles were dangling from her shoulders and arms. Crying and trembling I was holding on to her, terrified to loosen my grip. Practically carried by the crowd, my mom and I finally got inside a boxcar of a very long train. People who were already inside were using their bodies to block any available nook where we could possibly place ourselves. We sat squeezed in between a mass of bodies and on top of some bags and suitcases belonging to others. My mom clutched a string-bag with two challas; our only provisions. The teakettle was empty. The water had spilled in the rush for a place in a boxcar.

The two of us were among strangers. My father was in the army on the front-lines fighting Hitler. My grandpa was back in occupied Warsaw with Grandma, Aunt Dora, and Uncle Max. Aunt Sara-Rywka was somewhere in the Soviet Union, possibly in Siberia, and Aunt Chajcie was with Estush. We would never know what happened to them.

There were many women with children on the train, and there were some old people who miraculously made it this far. There were also a few young men who were army deserters and some who were running from the draft. My mom saw one of the young men sneak up in the middle of the night and steal our bread. She may have looked like she was asleep, but she never allowed herself to fully fall asleep, for she needed to watch over me. My mom was so angry. The chutzpah! But she was afraid to confront the bully, for no one knew what some people in some situations might do. It was hefker velt. The world was up for grabs.

The train rattled along making unpredictable stops and detours. It stopped many times in the middle of nowhere. Every time the train stopped, people would jump out to stretch a little bit and to relieve themselves, if they had not already done so while the train was in motion. Not a single person moved further than arm’s length from the train, because one never knew when the train would start moving again. It would usually start without a warning. One had to be able to jump back into the car in a split

second. There were rumors of people left behind at such stops and separated from their families forever. Whenever the train would veer or swerve off its straight course, a wave of panic would spread: “Are we being taken back? Why did they change direction? What’s going on?”

Rumors spread fast and easily. We had no food or water to drink.

We must not have gone too far from the front-line when we heard a chilling whistle, a wild howl, a shudder, and then – boom! A bomb had hit the last two cars of the train and tore them from the rest. Leaving the two graveyard cars behind, the motorman kept going.

One dark night, through the spaces between the boards of the boxcar’s walls, someone spotted lights twinkling in the distance. A settlement that we had just passed did not need to black out their windows. This was a good sign; synonymous with peace. Of course, the people in the village could not have known that only a few short hours from their homes our train had been bombed and that the war was coming close.

I did not ask for food or drink. I knew that my mom did not have any to give. What was the use of asking or crying? Another unscheduled stop was made. We saw smoke rising from chimneys. It was a sign of a populated settlement. The settlement seemed so close even though the houses looked awfully small. Without saying a word, my mom grabbed the empty kettle and sprung toward the village. I saw her run and run. A long while passed and I wished that my mom was already back.

A jerk, a huff, a pss... and a burst of white steam enveloped the entire train. With another jerk and a squeak of the wheels the train began to move. Partially burned-out coal produced cinders that flew all around and got into the wagons through every opening. The train picked up speed. I cried for my mama. No one, not a single person, looked at me. Sitting on top of all our worldly possessions in the hot, foul-smelling place with wall-to-wall people, I did not care about water or food. How would I know when to get off the train or where to go? Who would help me find my mom, and how would my mama ever find me?

The village into which my mom disappeared had been gone from sight a long, long time ago. I didn’t know the name of the village. It may not even have had a name. I wouldn’t even know which direction the train was going since it was consistently changing tracks; once going east, then going south, then a little bit north, and then south again, deeper into the Soviet Union.

Finally the train stopped. It made no difference to me. I wasn’t making any decisions. I couldn’t think of anything that I could do. I didn’t even have to go to relieve myself since I had no food or drink for days. Someone slid the door open to let some fresh air in and let some of the stench out. I didn’t pay attention to anything until I noticed a bloody and disheveled body clutching a familiar looking teakettle. She crawled into the wagon. Without a sound, my mom hugged me. The kettle, which she was unable to release from her grip, was hurting my back. I didn’t mind.

My mom had found a well in the small isolated farming town, and she filled the kettle with water to bring back to the train. On her way back she saw that the train was chugging away. She began to run to catch up with it and she finally managed to jump onto a jagged fragment of the coupling, which was sticking out after the bomb shore off the two last cars of the train.

As bad as the conditions on the train were, they began to get even worse. People were becoming meaner and louder and more vulgar. The stench was unbearable. Everyone had lice. Not a soul had water or food. The only consolation was that, with every hour, we were further and further away from the war zone.

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Another horrible day on the train. Then, after dark, came an unexplained stop, one of many. My mom woke me from a restless sleep. She showed me, through a gap in the windowless boxcar, the many flickering lights in the distance. Lights were always a reason for elation and for hope. Noiselessly, my mom eased the bundles of all our worldly possessions out the door. Then, she jumped out and motioned to me to jump into her outstretched arms.

I was so happy to be on the ground, which was moist and soft and stable, all at the same time. The air smelled so good. I could take a deep breath again. I could stand up straight and stretch my legs that were numb from sitting in the same curled up position for many days. I could take off my shoes and socks, and actually feel the grass with my bare feet. I even could wiggle my toes.

I could see some lights inside the houses with unshaded windows. From the train the lights of the settlement seemed so near, but the closer we got the further the lights seemed to be moving away. We walked and walked.

Meanwhile, one by one, the lights in the settlement were going out and we were soon in total darkness. We “camped” out in a field and waited for daybreak. It was early fall and not at all cold outside. I wore my warm shearling coat, and yet, I shivered. Then, I recalled a saying my mom often used “Things will look better in the morning.” They always do.

At first morning light we were able to make out human voices, which came from the direction of the village. A kind Russian family took us in and gave us a place to sleep. There was plenty of water from a nearby well. The Russian woman gave us a bar of homemade brown soap. It was good to wash my hair again and to start the delousing process. After a couple of rinses my mom rubbed kerosene into my hair. Then, with a fine-toothed comb, out came the lice and their eggs. It was repeated daily and little by little my thick head of hair was lice free, but I smelled like the wick of a kerosene lamp for a very long time.

This village was a Soviet Collective Farm. All the men of the village, as was the case everywhere in the Soviet Union, were mobilized. All the women, young and old, had to fill in for the men and double up. The women had to do their own assigned jobs as well as the jobs that the men did before they left to fight for their country. It seemed that all the people worked in their communal grain elevator on some stage of grain processing after the harvest. My mom was also assigned a function there. She raked and I played on top of the warm stacks of grain. I would never want to be more than a few steps away from her.

The members of the farm had to do communal work for the “good of all.” They were supposed to share in the product of their labor, but with the country being at war, all of the “goods” went to the front by order of the communist party. The community was left with nothing to share.

Our host family grew a few pumpkins, inconspicuously, on a miniscule plot under their window. They baked the pumpkins in their large Russian ovens until the pumpkins browned and became so very fragrant and as sweet as honey. In the beginning, this unfamiliar food didn’t taste good to me, but in time, I even began to like it.

As in Kharkov, it seemed that we could have waited out the war here. It wasn’t to be. The air started to smell of sulfur again. The not too distant memory of the sounds and smells of war came back in an instant.

The people of the village became uneasy with strangers among them. Especially uneasy with Jews. My mom and I had to leave.

Woronez, Engels, Volgograd, Astrakhan...Astrakhan is a large city which lies on the delta of the Volga River where it meets the Caspian Sea. The sandy shore of the Caspian Sea was covered with globs of salt. When our train made a stop in Astrakhan, the passengers made a run to and stormed the beach to gather all that they could carry of the salt. They knew that only a few kilometers from here even this impure salt would be worth its weight in gold. I don’t know by what design or if just by sheer luck, but we kept inching our way toward the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan and away from Siberia.

Going south we saw many beautiful and exotic places in the Fergana Valley. The valley was surrounded by mountains, which were covered with gorgeous blood-red poppies in bloom. The grass was green, and the sheep grazed peacefully. The sun felt so warm, and it was so quiet. We left the train in one such place. I don’t know how my mom made the decision to leave the train in the middle of a mysterious piece of land. The reason could have been simply because it was just that, it was just too beautiful to pass and never ever have a chance to see such beauty again.

Knowing my mom, this could have been the only reason.

We stayed with the Uzbeki Nomads. Nomadic animal herding was still the prevalent way of life. The land is semi-arid. There is only about 10 inches of rainfall per year, so the Uzbeks had to move their herds from place to place in order to provide sufficient food for the animals. The shepherds rode on beautiful wild horses and wore long sheepskin coats and tall Karakul (curly lamb) hats.

They looked very rich.

One night, the earth shook so violently that we thought that the war followed us and that we would be buried alive or burned and turned into a pile of ashes. It was an earthquake! What a relief! The earthquake sounded like derailed trains folding like accordions. Wide cracks appeared in the walls of our one-room mud hut. The still agitated earth continued to rock and shake. A long, deep crevice split the settlement into two parts. Some of the Yurtas remained on one side of the freshly formed ravine while the other skin-tents ended up on the other side.

Trying to jump across the crevice, many of the sheep and goats fell to their deaths into the earth's opening. The nomads' wild horses easily negotiated the divide. Eventually, the people of the area laid timber across the ravine to make bridges. On the day following the earthquake, a horseman delivered an offering of food which my mom graciously accepted. Then, a second offering was delivered and a third. The third was a generous package of dried fruits and almonds, lamb with rice pilaf and an unexpected offer from the emissary. The offer was from his young master; a very wealthy land and herd owner. The offer was for my mom to become his wife number two. My mom must have pretended not to understand him. A third "delegate" came with a revised offer. My mom, being older (she was 30) than his first wife would assume the honors of being considered wife number 1. He also added that my mom could of course bring her "Kazymka" (me) with her. My mom frantically packed our belongings and again we escaped. This time we didn't escape the bombs or the earthquake. Instead, we escaped from a life in the luxury of the harem of a young, wealthy Uzbek.

## Three: Tashkent

Tashkent is the capital of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is located in Central Asia. It became one of sixteen Soviet Republics after the Russian Revolution of 1917 and was as such until it regained its independence in 1991. Tashkent is an oasis amidst the desert that covers 80% of the land and the snow capped mountains covering 15% of the Uzbeki landscape.

The Tashkent area is an oasis thanks to the water that trickles down from the mountains. The long, hot summers and cold winters are ideal for the walnut groves and apricot orchards.

A typical house there is made of sun-dried clay bricks and is built around a central courtyard. Of Tashkent, I remember the beautiful courtyards lush with shade trees. I remember the sunshiny tiled domes of mosques and minarets. The mosaic tile was produced locally by craftsmen who learned the ancient art from their ancestors.

Most of all, I remember the bazaar. The bazaar was in the open air. Everything was laid out right there on the ground in full sun. Some of the merchants had an enormous number of silk rugs to sell. Others had only a few dried apricots or raisins. Some sold freshly baked lepyoshkas. Some put up portable fire pits on which they prepared shashlik of mutton meat. The smell was their advertisement. There were freely roaming chickens for sale. There were samovars and utensils made of copper and tin. Silversmiths and furriers had set up their workshops there. In the hands of a silversmith the samovars became like sculptures. The furriers sewed hats and leather jackets and sheepskin coats. Silk and cotton textiles were displayed next to all kinds of exotic aromatic spices. Donkeys, weighted down by rugs or furs, vocalized loudly their rebellion while some others were actively kicking up the clay-dirt of the parched earth. The roosters crowed, the hens clucked, the sheep baa-ed, the donkeys brayed...

The merchants of the tin-ware, and brassware, and silverware were competing for attention with the sounds of the animals. The sellers of “edibles” were competing with everybody. Their voices didn’t carry them far. They got my attention though. Only their product was of importance to me. I couldn’t think of anything else but food. Hunger does have that effect on people.

“Kazymka, Kazymka, come and sample my apricots.”

I did. I was shy, yes. But I was also hungry.

“My apricots are the sweetest of all, here, take one.” I did. They were delicious. I also tasted some walnuts, and some almonds, and some prunes and some dried apple-slices. They were all perfect. I even put some raisins and almonds in my pocket for my mom.

All along I clutched in my hand a single kopek (kopeika), which probably wasn’t enough to pay for a single raisin. But, a coin in my hand may have suggested that I was a serious prospective customer. There was no sampling of the freshly out of the fire-pit, lepyoshkas. The fragrant pieces of grilled marinated meats were not offered for sampling either. Neither were the grilled vegetables or cooked big kettles of pilaf. I had to do with the whiff of the precious aromas. The bazaar with its food and many “flying” carpets of silk and cotton in every color was like a fairy-tale. I forgot about the war there.

I was six years old and I was already wandering for two years. Tashkent wasn’t a place in which we would stay for any length of time, either. We were told that since we were refugees we needed to go to a collective or state-owned farm. There was such a collective farm just 15 kilometers outside Tashkent. With our peklach and zeklach on a donkey’s back, my mom and I were on our way to Keebray, Kolchoz #15, Uzbekistan. This would be our home till the end of the war.

I was very far from home. I was a stranger in the exotic and ancient land of the Uzbeks. Uzbekistan was somewhere at the end of the world and I was grateful for the peace and quiet there. Could the airplanes of Hitler follow us here? From this end of the world place, there would be nowhere else to run.

My father as well as the husbands and the fathers of our neighbors were either on the front fighting Hitler or they were already dead. The women here, all refugees, worked in the fields or in the Orchard of the Collective Farm. All of the children attended the communist party controlled daycare or school. In essence, private property was abolished. The communist party leaders completely controlled the economy and the labor force of the entire Soviet Union.

Uzbeks were very resourceful. For one reason or another they got to keep some real property for their private use. They owned livestock, family dwellings, fruit trees, and land.

My mom and I were assigned one room in a row of “ground level” rooms. They were built of mud and straw with a thatched roof. Two small berths filled the entire space of the room. The dirt floor smelled of dung. There was no window. The only light trickled in through a poorly fitted door. When my mom would tie a piece of rope through the hook in the wall and through the hook in the door on the outside, I would always ask her “Why bother? Can’t just anybody untie it and get in?” She, in turn, always answered “No, not the honest people.”

No more than 600 square feet of parched dirt separated the barracks from a cemetery. My mom and I, along with our neighbors, planted corn outside of the barracks. The cemetery was in full view until the corn grew to a certain height. In the daylight, the shadows of the crooked and rotten wooden boards of the cemetery fence wandered around in a tipsy mode. At night the boards resembled skeletons.

Some sugar beets and potatoes were squeezed in along with the corn. When I thought that the field was overcrowded I would find a few bluest of blue cornflowers, elbowing their way to the sun. I stared and stared at these beauties. I hoped to never forget what they look like. I never yanked one out of its home.

Rains were rare but the sunshine was generous and the corn grew tall and the crop was plentiful. The crop, which the small patch of land produced, was shared equally among the residents of the barracks.

My mom would dry the kernels of corn and then she would grind them, between two stones, into a fine meal. The pancakes, made by mixing the cornmeal with water, were bitter; but they were food. A whiff of the cornmeal pancakes burning on an open fire always reminded me of...

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Before we settled in Keebray my mom and I “wintered” in a town which lies somewhere on the way between Kharkov and Keebray. The small town was in a cold part of Russia. The arctic winds snuck into our living quarters through the most miniscule openings in the window or in the door or through the walls’ loose boards. We wore our warmest outdoor clothes, inside. We went to sleep by taking only our shoes off. Next door lived a boy, my age. Both of our mothers had to go to work, but he was lucky, he had a grandma.

In the early fall, his babushka would start to prepare their room for the arctic blasts of winter. She would use up entire wads of cotton-wool to seal the windows. She would test her work with a lit candle. She moved the lit candle along the sealed places. In places near which the flame fluttered she pushed in additional cotton. She was satisfied with her work only then when the flame of the lit candle held upright and still. Unlike the windows, which were sealed and “tucked in” for the winter, the door required unceasing repetition of its sealing. Every time the door was opened, the fluffs of the cotton wool came flying out. I was the biggest culprit of opening and closing of my neighbors’ door, often.

I was six years old. I was alone, cold, and hungry.

My mom didn’t get back from work many hours after my coming from daycare. She would bring, in a canteen, her daily portion of soup to share with me. Sometimes there was also a piece of bread. My neighbor’s family didn’t have much food either, but there was a grandma who was home all day long. Their room, unlike mine, was warm and cozy. I felt welcome there. I knew that Grandma liked me. I knew it because not even once did she get annoyed with me for opening and closing the door, so very often. She knew that I wasn’t doing it to make more work for her. She

understood that I didn’t want to miss the moment in which my mom would arrive from work.

The growing season is short here. The sun isn’t so warm. The puny patch of dirt under Grandma’s window isn’t fertile, but she manages to squeeze out a few stalks of corn from the earth. She air-dries every little speck of the plant. The kernels are food and the rest is fuel for the big Russian oven. The dried leaves, the dried stalks and cobs are a good started for the fire but not enough to keep the fire going.

Grandma, her grandson and I go for a “walk” and when we spot a coal-delivery wagon we follow it and collect the pieces of coal falling into the street. The more decayed the boards of the wagon were, the better it was for us.

A few pieces of coal and the fire in the oven is making welcome and cheerful crackling sounds. It is so cozy and so warm in my neighbors’ room. They don’t have any food to cook either. Grandma puts a pot of water on the otherwise empty stovetop. Soon the water starts boiling making bubbling sounds. The clouds of steam escaping into the air provide the visuals and my imagination provides the smell and taste. Once in a while, Grandma throws a handful of the dried kernels of corn on the red-hot stovetop and the kernels start dancing and then taking off into the air, almost to the ceiling.

Her grandson and I compete in who can catch more of the kernels. We jump, and we eat, and we laugh and the grandma stands with her arms folded on her chest and laughs, too.

I bet that this Babushka invented popcorn.

## Four: Klara

My immediate next-door neighbor in the barracks was Klara. She was a few months older than I. She also lived there with her mother. Her father, like mine, was fighting in the war.

Very often I would hear Klara cry. I knew that her mother beat her. Sometimes Klara muffled her cry-outs and sometimes she just bawled. Her mother was a tall woman and always seemed to be angry. Her hands were huge. They didn't look like hands of a woman. They didn't even look like hands of a human. She would chase Klara outside with a broomstick or with a branch broken off a nearby tree.

I felt so sorry for Klara.

"Run, Klara, run!" I would scream at the top of my lungs. Klara could run like a cheetah. She could outrun her mother by a mile, but Klara didn't always run away. She would just stand there with her feet planted; teeth clenched and take her mother's strikes, whips and slaps. "If you are so heartless and have the nerve to beat up your own hungry, skinny little girl, then just go ahead and do it," her angry expression seemed to be saying with defiance.

My friend Klara likes my mom and wished that we were sisters, because if we were sisters my mom would have been her mom too. When Klara brought an award certificate from school for collecting the most scrap metal for the war effort, her mother threw a fit and whipped her hard, screaming at her, "You stupid girl, Fela is bringing a certificate for good grades and you are bringing me one for collecting garbage." When they received a telegram from the military agency that Klara's father was missing in action, again her mother took it out on her and slapped her very hard. When Klara ran to my mother sobbing and for a hug, her mother got angry at her for that, too.

We also received a telegram. A yellow strip of paper. One sentence: "Selik Hershfang missing in action and declared dead." My mom cried but she didn't take it out on me. How could it be my fault?

Klara always came up with exciting and with different things to do. Once, a kid came toward a group of us screaming and scared out of his wits. He spotted a dead dog in the middle of the road. "Let's go and bury it!" he yelled. "No!" said Klara. "We will take the dog to the Korean family."

Klara knew everything, we were in awe of her and we followed her, our general, with the dead dog in tow, to the periphery of the village where the Korean family lived. When the Korean couple came to the door, I, for the first time in my life, saw people with slanted eyes. When they spotted the dead dog, they became very angry, and, with threatening gestures they chased us away. Klara was so sure of herself and she still thought that "donating" the dog was a good idea (she always thought that her ideas were good), and she was sure that Koreans eat dogs. She explained the unexpected reaction that there were too many of us kids, and this embarrassed the family, or maybe they just were so particular that they wouldn't eat a dog that was a road kill. But Klara redeemed herself, in my eyes, for the dog incident.

Klara shared with me a secret. She told me of a place where she was getting some food. I was not sure whether to believe her or not, but there was nothing to lose. She led me, after dark, to a barn that looked better to me than the place we lived in and the cows looked better fed than we were. Their bellies were full. I didn't remember seeing cows in Uzbekistan before. The Uzbeks raised sheep and goats, but not cows. Does Klara intend to get me involved in a plot to steal a cow? What's the punishment for stealing a cow? Siberia!

She was shushing me, even though I was as quiet as a mouse. It turned out that Klara didn't intend to steal a cow after all, but she intended to steal the makucha from the cows. Makucha was a cow feed made of everything that was discarded after the oils from sunflower seeds were pressed and then hay and some other stuff that I didn't care to hear about, was added. The makucha

was pressed into hard, dense cubes. It was impossible to bite into it but sucking it satisfied the hunger. It tasted greasy and it smelled like toasted sunflower seeds. One piece lasted a long time. I was grateful to Klara for that.

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I didn't know much about what was happening with the war except that my family disappeared, I was alone with my mom, Yiddish was not spoken anywhere, I was always hungry, I was very sick with malaria, I was among strangers with many different customs, I was always in fear that my mom would disappear just like everyone else did, I ducked every time I heard a sound which in any way resembled the sound of an airplane flying low or the sound of an air raid siren, and my mom was always sad and worried. In spite of all of that, I played.

The kids of the refugees and the Uzbek kids often played together. The Korean kids never joined us in play. Russian kids, Jewish kids, kids from places we never heard of, kids with rickets, with black, brown, hazel and blue eyes, redheads, brunettes, blondes, nobody cared what anyone looked like. We played.

We "manufactured" our own games and toys. The jump rope we made was from found small scraps of clothes. It was a rope of knots but who cared? We won and lost contests, jumping. We jumped solo and collectively, forward and backward, we did crossovers and double crossovers.

Any ball became an "everything ball". We played volleyball, the net being a string stretched between two trees. We played soccer a lot. We came up with so many ways to bounce the ball. We dribbled it to a count of...thousands. We threw the ball up into the air and counted the number of handclaps before catching the ball. We bounced the ball against a wall and completed a body turn before catching it.

The huge cemetery with its ancient grave markers, its dilapidated fence and the abandoned wooden wagon without wheels were all wonderful places to play hide-and-go-seek.

We made yo-yos out of empty thread spools. The spools also became “heels” for dress-up. Empty spools were plentiful. Everyone repaired and mended. The mendings were mended.

The game most favored by the boys was “langa.” The prop for this game was a section of heavyweight fabric to which (for weight) a piece of lead alloy was attached. The lead was heavy, but malleable and not too difficult to fasten to one side of the fabric. It was played by bouncing that piece with the instep of the foot. A good player was the one who displayed the most complex and showy acrobatics of leg and foot. The boys could go on for hours, tirelessly. The prop itself (langa) was a matter of pride and joy and the most elaborate ones had the biggest brag value. The most precious ones were made from fur pieces with the lead attached to the leather side.

One of the most beautiful pieces belonged to a boy in my class and it came out of my magnificent coat. One day, after coming home from a school field trip my mom noticed a hole smack in the middle of the back of my coat. The boy must have had a blade with him and when lined up behind me he cut out a perfect circle of fur. I never even felt it.

We would usually play well into the dark and it always seemed to us that at the precise moment when a game was at its peak of interest, our mothers would call us in for bedtime. We grudgingly obliged. It was good to play and to get tired before bedtime. Sleep came instantly. This way I was spared the agony of lying awake and feeling sorry for myself while listening to my stomach’s growling from hunger. I was always hungry. I could not believe my mom’s tales of me refusing to eat a banana when I was a little girl in Warsaw. What does a banana taste like? What does it smell like? I wouldn’t refuse one now. Only two years have gone by and I couldn’t remember what it felt like not to be going to bed hungry.

## Five: Apple Orchard

My mom’s first work assignment in the Collective Farm of Keebray was in the apple orchard. The apple orchard was across the road from our barracks. The road was tar covered and it stretched all the way to Tashkent, some 15 kilometers away. Since most of the country’s trucks, cars, and horses were confiscated by the military, there was hardly any traffic on the road. An occasional donkey “express” or a person making it on foot to Tashkent was the main traffic.

My mom walked to Tashkent sometimes. She would start out very early in the morning to avoid the heat. But even so early in the morning the air would still be hot from the day before and the black top road would still be soft. Footprints left on the tar were deep and they would stay there for a very long time.

The apple orchard was surrounded by a tall and sturdy wooden fence. Daily, a group of old Uzbeki men from the village of Keebray would congregate by the wayside. They would lean against the orchard’s tall wooden fence and smoke their water pipes. The pipes made quiet gurgling noises whenever the men puffed. These complaisant men must have said to each other everything that they had to say a long, long time ago and now, strung out like crows on a wire, they seemed content in just being. They were clad in quilted jackets; it was explained to me that the jackets insulate them from the stifling heat and from mosquito bites. The only place through which one could enter the orchard was through a single gate. The gate was locked and the key was in the hands of a guard.

The orchard’s guard had his own “sentry box”. The man himself looked like a sentry. When angry, he looked like a guard dog. To perform his job he needed to appear threatening. His job was to make sure that no one carried out of the orchard, a single apple, ever. If the “smuggler” was caught, the punishment was immediate. No soup for the following day. The guard actually searched the workers when they were leaving the orchard after the day’s work.

The orchard itself was a quiet wonderland. Never a sound of an airplane flying over. Never a whistle or a shriek of a siren. The only sounds were the sounds of birds peacefully chirping, and the sounds of leaves touching each other when moved by balmy breezes. The sound of a ripe apple falling to the soft ground under the tree could startle anyone. The workers in the orchard rarely talked to each other. Not even in whispers. It was better that way. It was too dangerous to say anything that might be misconstrued and reported to “authorities.” There was danger in it. I could climb a tree like a monkey. I could pick the last apple still left at the top of a tall tree.

I was an eyewitness to so many happenings in the orchard. In four years, I was privileged to observe in awe the transformation of the orchard from winter to spring, to summer and then to fall, four times over. The group of old Uzbeki men, sitting cross-legged and leaning against the fence outside the Orchard’s gate, were a permanent fixture in any season. They wore the same quilted jackets all year round. I saw them everyday and I couldn’t tell them apart. They never came inside the orchard.

The surly guard was at this post even in the season when there was nothing edible to be taken out of the orchard. It was then, in the off-season, that he taught me how to tell time. His was the only clock in the village. It hung inside his sentry box and it was prominently displayed on a wall.

I watched the guard taking down the huge clock to wind. It reminded me of a windup toy I once had. The three hands on the clock moved. One, the longest and the thinnest, moved so very fast. The shorter didn’t move nearly as fast. The shortest didn’t seem to move at all. This was just like the dates my mom put on the letters she wrote to her dad and mom and sister and brother in Warsaw. The day was the first number and it was changing so fast. The month, the second number, was not so fast. The year, the third number, didn’t seem to change at all.

The orchard was constantly evolving. It wasn’t dead even after the apples were picked and after the leaves have fallen. The short winter was just a brake for fruit trees. After three consecutive seasons of hard work, they were gathering strength for the up-

coming spring. Spring came and the orchard turned green. Then, it was like someone threw a switch and every tree covered itself in flowers. I was tempted to break off a couple of twigs to put inside my dull and dark barrack room. I didn’t. I knew that each flower is a potential apple.

It seemed that each tree was of a different variety of apple. Every tree was displaying a somewhat different color of blooms. There were pure white flowers. There were red flowers. The pinks came in every shade. It was all magic. The bees were buzzing. The birds were chirping. The ants, in an orderly line-up, were searching for food. The mosquitoes felt at home over the decaying last year’s leaves and rotting apples.

I liked to be with my mom in the orchard. I’d rather be here than in daycare where I was supposed to be with all the other kids my age. I hated daycare because they forced us to take a nap. We actually had to sleep in the middle of the day. Everyday. I tried. No matter how much I tried, sleep wouldn’t come. My eyes just wouldn’t close. I had to pretend, which was very hard. When I saw the teacher coming close to my mat on the floor I would squeeze my eyes shut.

With my eyes open I was less scared. In the middle of the day, the sun was so warm and bright and optimistic. It was always dark inside closed eyes. In the darkness, bombs were coming down, sometimes. Sometimes I would see people covered in blood, running. I’d rather have my eyes wide open and look at the apricot tree that stood in front of my preschool room. This apricot tree was much larger than any apple tree in the entire orchard. At naptime I always chose a place for my mat closest to the open side of the room. That way I had the full view of the tree and of the sky above it. I waited for the apricots. Last season there were so many of them. The entire tree was covered with them. They were so sweet and juicy. And the fragrance! Nothing compares with the aroma of a ripe apricot from this tree. Not even a ripe apple picked after it was warmed by the sun while still on the tree. Not even a lepyoshka freshly out of the oven.

I am sure that everyone but me was asleep stretched out on the floor, including the teachers. I entertained myself by counting the

branches and recounting them the following day. Did any new ones grow? Was the shadow of the tree trunk in the same spot at the start of the nap? By the position of the shadow I could tell exactly when the teachers would announce, in their sleepy voices, when it's time for everybody else to wake up.

Normally, the sky was uniformly the same. Blue. Beautiful, but the same. Except that one day. The tree was already covered with delicate white flowers. Top to bottom. Every little twig had dozens of "apricot birth announcements" on them.

Things started to change in the sky. The sky became more interesting. On the blue background a little woolly cloud appeared. Others followed. Some floated away like sheep. Some looked like snow-covered mountains. Then there were enough of them to block the sun. The clouds turned black and it became dark in the middle of the day. The birds' friendly chirping turned into a croak as the flock took off in a frantic and disorganized flight. A cold breeze blew in; very unusual for it to happen on a spring day in the desert of Uzbekistan.

Hail, like rifle fire, started to pound on the roof and on the tree. The ice balls knocked all the flowers off the apricot tree. I knew enough to realize that there would be no apricots that season.

In the height of the hailstorm I spotted my mom running towards me. Barefoot. Her shoes in her hands. Her worn-out dress was dripping wet. Her hair was soaked. Her skin was covered in red welts that would soon turn black and blue. "Mama, why did you come? Now everybody will call me a baby."

The clouds left as soon as they came. The sun warmed the ground. The ice-balls melted and the soil quickly absorbed the water. The birds flew back, chirping. I'll remain forever regretful for making my mom sad. The welts healed slowly and there would not be any apricots to pick that season.

The apples took their time to ripen. They didn't rush just because we were hungry and impatient. Some people took chances and ate the apples when they were small, green and a very long time away from getting ripe. The lucky ones who had salt used it to get the

bitterness out of them. The luckiest were the ones who ate them and didn't get sick with dysentery.

The war is dragging on; already into its fourth year. No news from home. My mom does not give up. She writes. She mails the letters. I am sure that she knows that the letters are not reaching them. She keeps writing. Sometimes I'll ask "Why?" "Dear child, I have to" she would say. "While I write it feels like I'm talking to them and that they are alive. I am afraid to think otherwise as not to will the worst." She would walk the 15 km each way to Tashkent when she'd run out of paper, or envelopes, or stamps.

She would bring with her a few pieces of the silverware to sell at the bazaar in Tashkent. When we unpacked in Kharkov, for the first time since leaving Warsaw, my mom found a set of silver flatware inside a knapsack. It was wrapped in a tablecloth. Neither my mom nor dad put it there. It was one of their wedding gifts, but they didn't intend or even thought about bringing it along when escaping. My mom suspected that her mom packed it.

The Uzbeks would sometimes buy one fork or one spoon or a knife. My mom would use the money to buy writing materials and stamps and always a newspaper. For other things, she traded. It was a more common way of doing business. Every time my mom would go to Tashkent I wanted to come along. The post office in the big city was always our first stop. Even before the bazaar. We didn't get a letter from home in at least two years. Although my mom knew the answer, she would still interrogate the clerk "Are you sure?" "You know there is no 'H' sound in Russian like in Hershfang." "Maybe it's under 'G' (like in ghost)" or "Maybe it's under 'X' (like in Khachaturian)." "Please look under Kellerwajs, maybe they are writing now under my maiden name."

"Let's go, mama."

My mom buys a newspaper. Tired, hot and thirsty we sit on a bench in the full sun and my mom reads the paper. I fan myself with a folded page of the newspaper. I am not in school yet. I don't know how to read. I am waiting for my mom's update on the war. "The news is good, very good. Stalin proclaims that victory is near."

“Why isn’t it over, yet?”

“Shush, child.”

“Why mama? Is it because walls have ears?” My mom used to read the entire paper. All of it. Every word in it. Not anymore. Lately, she reads only Ilya Ehrenburg’s account of the war. He is a known war correspondent. My mom isn’t fooled. She knows that he can’t write the truth, either. The censorship is heavy and nobody wants to be exiled to Siberia or go to jail. She reads Ehrenburg because he is Jewish and she trusts him more than she trusts the others. In essence, she trusts no one. She can read between the lines. If everything is so rosy why then is the war dragging on? Why are more and more families receiving telegrams that their fathers, brothers, husbands are “missing in action and declared dead.”

My mom tries to keep a hopeful outlook. For my sake. She tries too hard. I figure that our entire family in Warsaw is wiped out. Even my father who is fighting in the Red Army may be dead too, although she didn’t believe in the telegrams pronouncing him as missing in action.

I am by my mom’s side when she writes. I can read her every mood. It shows on her face. I see her tears drip, drip, drip. They smudge the ink. Does she think that if she is not making the motion of wiping her tears or not uttering a whimper, I will not see that she is crying? I see that she is much slower in sealing the envelope. She takes her time to whisper something into the envelope. Possibly a wish? A prayer?

I am frightened when she asks me to send a vocal message into the mailbox when she throws in a letter. Doesn’t she know that it’s just a big metal box not connected to anything? I am frightened enough to oblige. I look around to see whether there is anyone else in the vicinity. If the coast is clear I’ll say into the box: “let the letter reach you in good health.” Or something like that.

All of my insides are quivering like in the chills of a malaria attack. I can’t understand why my mom makes me talk into a stupid mailbox. I feel like crying.

I know how very smart my mom is. She translates letters and all kinds of government forms for almost everyone in the village. She goes back and forth between the languages, with ease. She is fluent in Yiddish, Polish, and German. She learned Russian in no time. She picked up enough of the Uzbeki language to be able to communicate with them. They appreciate my mom’s efforts. The older Uzbekes don’t know the Russian language which is the official language of all the Soviet Republics.

On a particularly hungry day, my mom and I go for a walk through the village. I can tell when my mom is merely shy or when she is also nervous. She squeezes my hand harder and hangs on to me tighter when she is nervous. And she is the most nervous when we are the hungriest. When my mom times it right there would be one or more of the Uzbeki families sitting down to an evening meal. “Salam, Salam,” we would say with a slight nod of the head. “Salam, Salam,” would come back from everyone inside the house.

Their houses have thick mud walls, but at least one side, the side facing the courtyard, is open. The entire inside of their living space can be seen from the dirt path winding through the village. I remember a house with grapevines and many fruit trees all around it. There was a, reaching to the sky and sprawling, walnut tree. There was a mulberry tree, also. The only surviving mulberry tree was a reminder of the times when silk was a major industry and mulberry tree-leaves were food for the silkworms.

Inside, the dirt floor was covered with rugs. The rugs felt silky under bare feet. The thick mud walls had built-in alcoves. The alcoves were stacked high with neatly folded quilts and blankets. Small kilims and large pillows encircled a deep fire pit. The pit was excavated in the middle of the room. The fuel for the fire pit was primarily keezyak. A keezyak looks like a hockey-puck and it’s made of dung collected from farm animals, mixed with some hay and then dried outside in the sun. It burned easily and it didn’t stink. The keezyaks were burned down in the bottom of the pit. The fire heated the tiles that lined the pit. The woman baked their daily bread in it. They would knead soft elastic balls of dough, pat them flat, stick them to the wall of the oven and peel them away when the breads were ready. The lepyoshkas tasted

unbelievably good. A low table was placed over the fire pit when the fuel burned down to ashes. The Uzbek women used their finest kilims to cover such a table. A samovar to brew tea went on top of the table. After dinner everyone would gather on the floor around the fire-pit, their feet dangling inside the hole for warmth on a cool evening. Tea would be passed around in one pyalushka, each taking a sip from it.

We would always take our shoes off before entering their house. Everybody else did. It was a custom. The dinner was rice pilaf with raisins, almonds and dried apricots. Sometimes it was also made with mutton meat. Meat pilaf was a special treat. The family grew tomatoes and cucumbers. In season, they would also serve a very spicy tomato-cucumber salad. And bread! Although very hungry, my mom and I ate very little. I suppose that I would have eaten more if I had food at home and if I wasn't so hungry. I am only guessing that my mom wanted to appear that we are there to socialize only. "Rahmat, rahmat," we would humbly thank our hosts for their warm hospitality. I could have lived among them. They always have family around. The grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles and cousins share in chores and in teatimes. I like that a lot. Even the sun seems brighter and more optimistic around them.

I miss my grandpa. I miss all of my family, but I think that I miss them because my mom misses them. I really don't remember any of them anymore. Except my grandpa. I can't get him out of my mind.

Early summer and the apples are growing bigger. We eat them way before they are ripe. We are hungry, always. 100g of bread a day sometimes comes and sometimes it doesn't. The few pieces of dried apples don't last long. Neither does the handful of raisins. We are not starving, but I never go to sleep not hungry.

I have malaria. My mom does too. Mosquitoes are the middlemen of malaria. They swarm over the polluted water of a nearby canal. People wash their dishes and baby diapers upstream. Our drinking water comes from there. The malaria attacks come with clockwork regularity. Every forty-eight hours. They start with chills. The chills may last an hour or more. Nothing helps. I could

be wrapped like a mummy in the featherbed we had from home. While the temperature outside is 105°F, I still can't stop my teeth from chattering. When the chills subsided, the fever would come. The fever lasted for hours, then the stage of sweats would follow. I am dripping wet and feel very thirsty. I am also very exhausted, and I have only 48 hours to recover before the next attack. I take Quinine, when available. The whites of my eyes are yellow and my skin has a yellowish tinge.

I am photogenic. I photograph well. The signs of malaria don't show in pictures and I am not emaciated. A photographer came once from Tashkent to take pictures of all the refugee children. He would send the photos to some Jewish Agency in the U.S. Some families there would choose a child (a photo) to adopt and would send them care packages. Every kid received, now and then, a package. Everyone, but me. I was not adoptable!

I was eight years old when I started first grade. I could have started when I was seven but my mom kept me in preschool because of the kisiel. Next to napping I hated kisiel the most. The gelatin jiggled when the teacher put it in my tin cup I carried with me. It looked like slime. I could tell that it was sweetened with saccharin because of its bitter aftertaste. But "it is food," my mom used to say. In school, I wouldn't get even that.

There were some things that I liked about being in preschool. When I had a malaria attack, I could lie down and the teachers would bring me a sip of water. But the very best thing was that from preschool I could go to the apple orchard to be with my mom anytime that I wanted to.

I sure loved the orchard a whole lot. I liked everything about it. I liked being close to my mom. The rotten apples left on the ground from the previous season's crop smelled like a busy kitchen in which everybody was baking. I liked the greening of the trees. The leaves came in every possible shade of green. Then the blooming came. Each tree looked like a gigantic bouquet of flowers inside a tree-stump pot. When the petals were flying off they would cover the ground with a white and pink carpet. Then the most exciting time would start; watching the apples getting bigger and bigger. At first there was just a hint of an apple. A green spot the size of

a cherry pit. The green spots will become the juiciest, sweetest, most fragrant apples, the likes of which I never tasted since.

It seemed that each of the hundreds of the apple trees gave birth to a different variety. First came the early ripeners. They were small, yellow, falling apart crisp, sweet, juicy, fragrant and oh so much welcomed. The Kandil variety ripened sometime in the mid-season. So did the Reinette. The Russets came last. One had to exercise great patience not to be tempted by an under-ripe apple. Very few people could resist. Dysentery was rampant.

On the edges of the apple orchard, a couple of rows of grapevines grew. The sun was generous. The Ladyfingers were like crystals. In the sunlight I could count the number of seeds in each grape. They were two bites, each. All sugar and juice and crunch. A treat!

The Orchard was surrounded by a tall impenetrable fence. In the confines of the orchard everybody ate the fruit. Everybody ate without making it obvious to others. We buried the evidence (the apple cores). There was an order to the workers not to eat the apples, but there was no identifiably official enforcer among us. It didn't make it easier. Because everybody was a suspect. Each could be an informer. Anybody could be a snitch. Snitching was rewarded by the "Higher Authorities." The "Higher Authorities" were Stalin, KGB, and the Communist Party.

"Carry-outs Strictly Prohibited." The feared guard by the gate was in charge of that.

The period in which the apples were ready for picking was short. No more than two months. Two months out of twelve. What about the other ten months? If anybody had a way of smuggling out some apples past the guard – they didn't reveal. Even my mom used to say: "If more than one person knows something, it's not a secret anymore." I thought and I thought and I decided to give smuggling a chance. On the day of the planned event I put on my dress, the only one I had. It was red, when new. It was pinkish now. Faded by the sun. It was shorter now. I grew. But it was still ample on me. It flared out from the bustline to the hem. I hoped that it would be a very good camouflage. Inside the orchard, be-

hind a tree, out of everybody's sight, I rolled the elastic waistband of my panties over a few apples. They stayed in place around my waist. The dress camouflaged it and I escaped the penetrating eyes of the guard. Success! I repeated it many times. Could I have come up with the perfect scheme? Or, could the guard have been so impressed with my ploy and let me be? I'll never know.

Even my mom didn't know how I came to carry out the apples past the watchful eyes of the sentry. I didn't tell and she didn't ask! I didn't tell because I didn't want her to become an accomplice to my crime. And I didn't tell her because it made me proud of myself to be able to keep a secret. And I didn't tell her because I wanted her to know that I remember things she tells me. Things like: "If more than one person knows something, it's not a secret anymore."

My mom sliced the apples into thin rings. She cored them and threaded them through a string to hang to dry. The sun in the sky over the land of the Uzbeks was very powerful. The apple rings dried outside in no time. Dried, they were well preserved and were a great treat when the pickings were poor. Klara continued to snatch away the makucha from the cows. She shared it with me, sometimes. I shared my apples with her.

My busy-body friend, Klara arranged for me to meet somebody. "Bring some apples." The meeting was in the cemetery. The woman we met came from Tashkent to buy apples. I gave her the few apples I had in exchange for a promise to pay me for them after she sells them in the bazaar. She never came back.

The apple orchard belonged to a collective farm. Theoretically, the product of the orchard was supposed to be shared among the workers. But, typically under communism, when it belongs to everyone, it belongs to no one. And also, when everyone is responsible, no one is. Who gave the orders to not share the apples?

The orders must have come from Papa Stalin himself, from Moscow, thousands of miles away.

What will be the fate of the thousands and thousands of pounds of the wonderful apples? The country is in the midst of the war.

The slogan “everything for the war effort” was pounded into everyone’s mind. We hear that more Russians are dying from hunger than from bullets. News comes around in whispers. The apples could have saved many lives. But they were going nowhere. They remained in the orchard to rot.

Most of the motor vehicles were confiscated in the name of “for the war effort.” There was no transportation to take the apples anywhere. Donkeys wouldn’t make it far. For a while, the heaps smelled like baked apples. Then, flies began to swarm over the stockpiles. An order came: “Bury the apples!”

The grapes ripened slower than the apples. When ready, the bunches were so very heavy. They had to be cut off the vine with scissors and gently put into crates. Overnight, full crates of grapes were disappearing. Everyone was afraid of being a suspect. I couldn’t come up with an idea as to how to carry out even a single bunch of grapes. When I was given a chance to clear a section of a vine an idea came to me. I cut off all the clusters at eye-level. The few clusters on the bottom I left on the vine. I concealed them with additional adjacent large leaves. In the very late fall, when the orchard was empty and quiet, I came in to pick my grapes. I drooled in anticipation of biting into a sweet, juicy, and cool fruit. But, what I found instead was a couple of clusters of shriveled, small, dried pieces that looked nothing like the crystal clear full of juice fruits. I was so disappointed, but in third grade back in Poland I was the only one in class who knew what raisins were.

At this point in my life, everything that happened before the war became just a lovely bedtime story; the shared ice cream cones, the bananas, the beach on the Wisla River’s bank, the family. Only the memory of my grandpa remained real.

I can’t get the picture of my grandpa leaving us at the neutral zone out of my mind. It doesn’t help that I see his likeness almost everywhere. My grandpa had a goatee and his hairline was very similar to that of Lenin. Lenin’s likeness was everywhere and on everything in the entire Soviet Union. It was on display on pedestals as sculptures. It was on murals, on plaques, on paintings. It was everywhere in one form or another. Everywhere I turned I saw my grandpa’s likeness.

My grandpa took a special delight in kissing my every individual finger. Before he kissed my fingers for the last time he took me aside and, pointing to a little freckle on my pinky, said to me, “Just between the two of us, the little freckle on your pinky is not a freckle at all. It’s really a speck of a hair from my beard that, after millions of kisses got stuck in there forever and ever. Now, whenever you’ll look at your pinky, and what everyone else thinks is a freckle, you will be the only one to know that it’s not. You’ll know that it is a part of me given to you with my love. It will be something for you to remember me by.” Wiping my wet cheeks, I believed him. When I was a little girl and looked at the freckle on my pinky, I giggled. Now, when I look at my pinky I shed a tear.

My mom didn’t always take me with her when she went to Tashkent. It was very far. The entire stretch of the road was unshaded. The black tar surface was hot to the touch. Bare feet or shoes would leave deep imprints in the tar which was softened by the heat.

“See you in four hours. Be sure to eat your kisiel.”

I gagged just at the thought of the kisiel. I didn’t even go to preschool on the days when my mom didn’t take me to Tashkent with her. As soon as I saw her silhouette move away into the distance I planted myself in the middle of the road and waited for her return. How long is four hours? It felt like forever. She took with her a couple of pieces of flatware to sell in the souk. I hoped that somebody would buy them as soon as she gets to the market. I remember how sad and uncomfortable she felt doing it. If she sells, she would buy her letter-writing supplies. Fewer envelopes and stamps now. She still writes but less. She is noticeably losing hope for any survivors.

She would buy a newspaper, for sure. We both make great use of the few pages. I practice my writing between the lines (literally) and on the margins (literally). I have no other paper. We use the newspaper to wrap things. We spread it on the dirt floor when it becomes too muddy. It’s a great fire starter. It fuels the flame before the twigs catch on fire. We have this two-brick contraption outside by our door. It’s our place to cook food when there is food to be cooked.

More often than not my mom brings a clove of garlic from the souk. My mom rubs the garlic into my gums. It saves my teeth. Many around me, have scurvy and they lose their teeth, even kids.

I got a red silk ribbon for my hair from one of those expeditions to the bazaar. Sometimes it's a lepyoshka or a ball of brinza. Brinza is a cheese of goat's milk dried to the hardness of a rock. You can't bite into it. It's very, very salty. You suck on it. It lasts a long time and it satisfies the craving for salt. I hoped for the goodies, but when I stood alone on the road under the sizzling sun, I only wished for my mom to be already back.

I left my post on the road only to run into the sentry box to ask the guard for the time. "The short hand on the clock didn't even move a bit since the last time you asked me for the time." But he did tell me the time, over and over, and again and again.

"You must be waiting for your mama, yes?"

"Do you want to learn how to tell time all by yourself?"

"I know all the numbers," I volunteered.

- 1) "Ignore the longest hand which moves so very fast."
- 2) "When the other two hands line up together they will always point to a number. This number will tell you what time it is."
- 3) "For example, when they both point to number 2 its two o'clock. When they point to 10 its ten o'clock, and so on."

Wow, this was so easy.

Now I'll know that when my mom tells me that she will be back in 4 hours I'll be able to tell to which number the hands should point.

When my mom sends me to find out what time it is I would sometimes not come back from across the street for like 59 minutes.

When I started school I was very disappointed with my teacher who tried to confuse me by making telling time so complicated.

## Six: Bread-line

At the first appearance of hazy-bluish light before daybreak when children were still in their deep sleep, stirring would begin in the village. Mothers, who the night before tucked in their children with stories to distract them from their cramping empty stomachs, lined up in front of a grated window from which the daily ration of one-hundred grams (about a quarter of a pound)/per person of bread was to be distributed. Miracles were rare in those times and no one really expected at this ung-dly hour for the bread to be there. At this hour of the morning, even the donkeys were still asleep, and the bread, which was baked in a Tashkent bakery, was probably just going into the ovens after rising of the loaves was rushed. This day the bread did not arrive at all. It was really nothing unusual for the bread not to come regularly, but today was already the third day without a delivery. People lined up their usual markers to identify their place in line. A pan, a kettle, a kerosene container, or a pail, were the usual place savers. People couldn't wait hours or days in lines. They had to go to work and the timing of the bread's delivery was something no one could ever predict. There was always someone who stood in the middle of the road as a donkey spotter. No donkey "express" with the precious cargo spotted today either.

In the late afternoon an open-faced truck spewing fumes rolled in noisily into the village on its way to Tashkent. The driver stopped and asked the women for a drink of water and a place in the shade to rest for a little while for he was driving for many hours in the tremendous heat without food or water and without a stop. The truck was loaded with sacks of flour he collected in the mills of distant communal farms and was transporting them to the bread bakers in Tashkent. It meant that the Tashkent bread bakers were out of flour and they were waiting for this delivery. It also meant that we might not have any bread the following day either. The women gathered whatever they could and shared it with the stranger and he in return expressed his sorrow that he couldn't help them. "Just a little bit of flour would be a big help to tidy us

over until the bread comes,” someone suggested. “It’s not mine to give and if ‘they’ notice that some is missing I’ll surely be arrested.”

The young man with the sacks of flour started the huffing and puffing engine. His truck made a whole lot of noise as it shambled away. It wasn’t out of sight yet when it halted, backed up and stopped in front of the stunned women. The young man crawled into the back, and slipped one full sack of flour to the ground. “If I remove some flour from a sack it will be noticeable, but a whole missing sack no one may pay attention to,” he said and drove away. A couple of days later he was seen driving through the village on his way back from Tashkent. With a broad smile he held up his thumb in a gesture meaning that everything was just fine.

On the fifth day finally there was a spotting of a donkey with bulging sides coming in our direction. “It’s coming. It’s coming.” The lined up utensils like toy soldiers in a parade seemed to have come alive. People lifted their “things” off the ground and lined up and the waiting continued.

I could spot the donkey when its bobbing head was still the size of a pea. The donkey’s gait, burdened with two burlap sacks of bread and the stick figure, moving along the donkey, was so familiar. The sky was blue and cloudless, the air was clean and clear, the land was flat, and the horizon was endless. With every slow minute the silhouettes of the two figures on the horizon grew larger and larger. It could still take a couple of hours before the bread would be within reach. Depending on the donkey’s whim, it may have even taken longer because a donkey does what a donkey wants. If a donkey wants to lie down in the middle of the road between here and there then that is exactly what it will do. To prompt or to whip a donkey only berates it and more often than not it will get more stubborn. So, it would take sometimes well into the evening before the bread would be distributed.

A ration five days worth of a hundred grams of bread per person, per day, was expected to be a big chunk. That night will be the first night in many nights that I would not go to sleep hungry. Perhaps I would even have some bread leftover for the next day just because I had enough tonight.

The people who were in front of me in line and had already gotten their ration of bread already were complaining that the bread was slack-baked, soggy and gooey inside and therefore very heavy. When my turn came I pleaded for an end piece of the loaf because it was dryer. “How many end pieces does a loaf have! Everybody wants an end piece!” the mean woman mocked me. The five days worth of bread didn’t look at all like a whole kilogram. The end piece, had I gotten it, would have been larger because it would have been better baked, not raw and heavy like the middle part of the very large loaf. Had I gotten the end piece I could have been able to lay the slices crust to crust and imagined it being a “filled” sandwich. I spotted the person, who was weighing the bread, press down her finger on the side of the bread on the scale.

In spite of all the disappointments I hugged the bread and rushed home to wait for my mom to come home from work. A woman I never saw before grabbed me by my arm and begged me for a piece of bread. I was going to break off a piece for her but I had a hard time with the gooey bread. The woman happily offered to help me. She broke off a small piece, handed it to me and then instantly disappeared with most of my bread.

Klara called me stupid. “Don’t you know that everyone gets the same amount of bread?” she said.

When my mom came home from work she had already heard the story from Klara.

My mom: “How many people did you share the bread with?”

Me: “One.”

Mom: “How many are we?”

Me: “Two.”

Mom: “Then you should have given her one-third.”

End of conversation.

I may have been stupid according to Klara, but I was luckier than anyone I knew. Klara knew it too and she told me so. She liked my mom.

My mom, many times over, shared her last few coins with a beggar. When reproached by a friend who told her that the beggar had more money than my mom, my mom responded: "It's not my place to judge the needs of the beggar. I am doing it because I see an outstretched hand."

## Seven: 1945

May 9, 1945. The war is over. In the summer of this year we receive a letter from my father. He was released from active duty, lives in Saratov now and has a very good job there and a beautiful apartment. His only desire now is to have us with him. My mom rereads and rereads the letter. Her eyes are tearing and the paper is fluttering in her trembling hands. In the four years while he was on the front fighting Hitler in the Russian Army, twice we received telegrams declaring him dead. He unexpectedly left us along in Kharkov when I was six years old. I was almost ten now and I wasn't curious about what he wrote in his letter. When my mom read the letter to me I was disappointed that he didn't ask how we were, how we survived. He wrote that he was flying missions that he had to parachute down when the plane was hit and that he had a couple of burn scars on his body to show for it. He wrote that he received a medal for bravery and was honorably discharged from active duty when the war was over.

To travel within Russia one needed a pass, which was an official document that would state in specific terms the name of the destination city, the date of departure and also the date of return. My father applied for such a pass and was now impatiently waiting for it, he wrote.

Only a few days after the first letter, a second one arrives. My father received a two-week pass allowing him to go to Tashkent from Saratov and to return. He asked us to get ready to follow him back to Saratov. He wrote that there was a small obstacle he faced in making the trip; it was something that he would certainly ignore and actually defy. Again, he boasted of his good fortune, his accommodations, his job, and how much he was valued and needed. It was only toward the very end of the letter when he mentioned what the "insignificant obstacle" was. The "to get ready" part was no big problem for my mom and me. What was there to get ready? All of our clothes would fit into a backpack. My lambskin coat was a vest now. The sleeves were cut off. They were already elbow length and tight. The only dress I owned I

would wear for the journey to Saratov. The dress was still nice, although not red as it had been originally. After three years of washings and drying in the bright sun, it was all bleached out to a crispy white. I had grown so much in the last year. I could tell by my clothes. The dress still fit me but it was so much shorter and there was no more hem to let out. My underwear showed when I bent. My black patent leather sandals were too small now but since they had an open back it was only a matter of how much of my heel would stick out beyond the back of the shoe.

My beautiful red silk hair ribbon was still red. It was not washed as often as the dress and it was never dried in the sun. Instead, my mom smoothed out the ribbon when wet and spread it neatly on the bunk bed board under the mattress. In the morning the ribbon was dry and well “pressed.”

I got this ribbon in a Tashkent bazaar on a lucky day when my mom was able to sell a piece of silverware from her set. The ribbon looked very nice in my shiny black hair and I would probably have to wear it for the trip, not that I wanted to. We also had the featherbed, but it would just have to be rolled up and tied up with some strings. The very few letters and photos of my grandparents, aunts, and uncle, from the times that no longer were, my mom would protect and guard with her life. The pictures now represent a fond memory of the people who perished. The very few remaining pieces of the silverware place settings were also to be packed. These were to become invaluable again in the very near future.

The packing was probably no more than one hour’s work. It was no problem. The problem was the “insignificant obstacle” that got my mom so very worried and when my mom worried I worried about her worrying.

I was really alarmed when, after reading the second letter from my father, my mom started pacing the room back and forth, back and forth (there must have been room for only four or five steps from one end to the other) in a dizzying pace. Then, with resolve she pulled out all of her “writing equipment” and started to write, with great speed, a response to his letter while mumbling something to the effect: “What is he thinking?” “How naïve can he be?” I trembled.

My mom mailed the letter in which she wrote for my father not to come to pick us up and that we could make the trip to Saratov by ourselves and that “as we didn’t see each other for such a long time, a few extra days wouldn’t make a difference.”

She hoped for this letter to reach my father still in Saratov in time for him to possibly change his mind about leaving his unfinished work. No such luck.

Days after the letter went out, my father showed up in Keebray. I certainly recognized him, but he felt like a stranger to me. Who needs a stranger around me? I offered to get my mom at the drugstore where she worked at the time. I ran so I won’t have to be with a stranger. I did not look forward to their meeting.

“Will you cry when he shows up?” I once asked.

“But these will be tears of happiness.”

For the life of me I couldn’t understand why anyone would cry from happiness. Tears mean sadness to me. There are no happy tears!

When my mom cried for her family she would say, “I have no more tears left” or “All of my tears dried up, I can’t cry anymore.” That I understood.

Since my father did not receive the letter before he left Saratov to pick us up in Uzbekistan my mother explained to him why she didn’t want him to leave at that particular time. He had written in his letter to us that he had a confrontation with a highly placed KGB agent about unfinished garments. My father was a master tailor and he was given the responsibility of overseeing a shop located on the campus of the prestigious Saratov University.

This tailor shop, as all other workshops on campus, were the property of the government. The University was also a governmental institution. The tailor shop was supposed to serve the professors and other faculty members, but my father’s clients were KGB agents, secret agents, informants, whose singular job was to spy on lecturers in order to keep them in fear and under

suspicion so that nothing would ever be said that might be anti-communist, anti-Stalin, or anti-government. One such agent's daughter was getting married and he committed my father to "outfit" everybody in his family for the upcoming wedding, but my father stood up to him saying that he will finish the sewing when he comes back with his wife and daughter from Tashkent.

Now that he was here, my mom tried to convince him not to go back to Saratov but stay in Uzbekistan until such time comes when we would be allowed to go back to Poland. Not that my mother looked forward to seeing the devastated place of her birth, Warsaw, which was as all of Poland, a "Jewish cemetery without graveside markers," but staying in the Soviet Union was not an option either. My father couldn't be persuaded that he had greatly underestimated the threats of "authority" and how vindictive and powerful those people could be. He would say, "What could they possibly do to me?" Did he hear of all those innocent people sent to Siberia or locked up in jails or shot on the spot without provocation? He continued to brag about the beautiful apartment with running hot and cold water, with electricity, with indoor plumbing, with central heating and about the great job he had tailoring for all those "important" people, but all my mom could do was worry about the threats made to my father. I wasn't permitted any input in the matter as to whether to follow my father to Saratov or not. He would say to me using a Polish cliché, "Children and fish don't have a voice."

My mom eventually capitulated and we set out to yet another temporary place.

My father – with a perception of victory.

My mom – with great trepidation and a heavy heart.

I – an unhappy tag along.

## Eight: Saratov 1945

We were lucky to come to Saratov when the weather was still warm. Winters in Saratov are brutal as we soon found out. Volga, one among the Principal Rivers of the World, snakes its waters, all 2300 miles of it, through the European part of the Soviet Union and along its way it touches Saratov. Saratov was heavily bombed during the war, but, surprisingly, the entire sprawling campus of the Saratov University and the immense teaching hospital were untouched by the ravages of the war.

My father's apartment was assigned to him by the University "bosses." It was everything the way he described it, and more. It had a full, real, separate kitchen. It had a private washroom and a shower. There was running cold and hot water. It had electricity. It had central heating. When cool days arrived the steam hissed happily in the radiators. The windows opened and closed and the door had a normal lock on it. It was pure luxury.

My mom couldn't forget about the threats my father got before he left Saratov to pick us up before he finished sewing the KGB agent's wedding outfits. She wasn't happy and couldn't enjoy the seemingly good fortune.

There was even a milkman who, at the crack of dawn, left dairy products and sometimes a loaf of freshly home baked bread, at the door. There was milk in liter glass bottles. Sour cream in jars. A hunk of butter, sometimes, wrapped in a leaf and then in newspaper. The loaf of bread lie on top of the milk bottles. My father took care of the ordering and of the bill. My mom still couldn't shake the dreadful sense of foreboding.

Weeks after picking up the goodies from outside the door I got curious to see what the "magician" looks like. One very early morning when I looked out the window, I caught a glimpse of the man. He walked with a pronounced limp and he must have been in pain when he was loading and unloading the heavy milk cans and bottles into his dilapidated wooden wagon. His old shkape was

standing, bridled to the wagon, motionless and patiently waiting for its master's orders. The master walked beside the horse on their way to the next delivery. The man didn't even hold the horse's reins. It was obvious that the animal faithfully served its kind, considerate, and gentle boss and that the two of them were unmistakably the best of friends.

The streets around the campus were clean and the trees on both sides of wide boulevards were spreading their welcome shade. Ice cream was sold from small three-wheel pushcarts in the streets. The ice cream vendors came out as soon as the war was over. Ice cream is a peacetime treat. The only flavor of ice cream sold was vanilla and it was packaged like Philadelphia cream cheese. I like ice cream and I liked to lick it while strolling outside in the neighborhood, but sometimes I would take an ice cream bar home, put it whole between two slices of fresh bread and...I should have claimed a patent on ice cream sandwiches.

My mom wasn't eating much, she had no appetite. Generally there was tension and unease in the air. People were afraid to mingle and talk to each other. They were afraid of each other. There was this uncomfortable hush because: "Walls have ears."

As nice as our neighborhood was, things looked quite different just blocks away. Signs of war were everywhere. Toppled and burned out buildings and so many invalids. We came face-to-face with a young man who was wearing an army jacket and this jacket's empty sleeves were folded over and pinned to the jacket's shoulder pads. Medals covered this young soldier's entire chest. Along the same stretch of street we saw two legless soldiers. They were seated on top of homemade wooden platforms. The platforms' mismatched small wheels were unbalanced and they made for a very bumpy ride on cracked and rough sidewalks. The squeaky boards and wheels made noise that was as ear piercing as were the sounds of air-raid sirens in the midst of the war. The men on these wooden boards locomoted themselves along the sidewalks with their palms, which bled through all the rags in which they were wrapped for protection.

Occasionally an invalid would be spotted here or there abandoned on a street corner, to beg. It was illegal to beg because begging

was considered a slap in the face to the communist regime. I saw a very well used baby carriage pushed by a stooped, old looking woman with a pained grin on her face. A huge black scarf with oversized red flowers was tied under her chin. A few unruly wisps of hair kept slipping out from under the scarf and the woman kept nervously tucking her long blond strands back under the scarf. There was no baby in the buggy but surrounded by pillows and by raggedy blankets "sat" a torso. His soldier's cap shaded a young handsome face and his sleeveless jacket displayed a bunch of medals and stripes awarded to him for one thing or another. I had all those questions I never asked. How is he using the washroom? How does he scratch an itch? How does he turn pages in a book? I was afraid to ask. I didn't want to see anymore of this. I clutched my mom's hand very hard and I was ready to run back "home."

## Nine: Arrest

I knew that my parents wanted to go back to their homeland. They always whispered to each other when any news came about the possibility that the refugees may be able to eventually leave Russia. They kept everything secret from me and others, or at least they tried to. But, when my father applied for repatriation papers for the three of us, everyone at his work immediately found out about it. My mom was nervous and agitated and she wanted to leave Russia right away, but we had to wait for “papers.” The “incident” or “insignificant obstacle” of the recent past, as my father called it, was always on her mind and her premonition of something sinister to happen never left her. She even threw up a few times.

In the winter of 1945, months after we came to Saratov, and in the darkness of the night there was an abrupt loud pounding of heavy boots on our door. The sound was magnified by its surprise and by the stark contrast to the stillness of the night. Agents tore the door open and kicking my mom out of their way as they dragged my father out.

My mom miscarried the very same night. She was in pain and she was bleeding to death. I knocked on every door in our long hallway of the apartment building. Not a single door opened. The neighbors must have heard my cries for help. My mom and I huddled in despair. The radiator stopped hissing that same very chilly night. As if on cue, everything was turned off: the electricity, the water, and the heat. Overnight we became lepers.

My mom was bewildered, but not at all surprised by my father’s arrest. She always felt that it was only a matter of time. The KGB agent, whose orders my father disobeyed when he left Saratov before completing all of the sewing for his family, retaliated. By having my father arrested he was in fact saying, “Now you will go nowhere, you shall stay right here and do all the tailoring for all of us at our will.” The revenge was total.

My father was locked up.

One of the jail guards, peeling my mother's fingers off the cell bars, told her, "Go, and forget about him. You are a young woman, find yourself another man."

In the jail's corridor, someone clad in a suit, adlibbed the accusation. My father was arrested on charges of "inciting state subversion." The evidence was a photo of the three of us taken before the war in Poland. The proof of his guilt was that when he was showing the photo to his coworkers he was bragging about how good we looked, how well we lived, and how happy we were. This crime warranted a ten-year sentence.

There was a story circulating about a ten year-long imposed imprisonment. The story was pretending to be a joke. One man was convicted of a crime and was given a twenty-year jail-time. He bitterly complained to his friend about such a lengthy term. The friend asked, "What did you do to deserve twenty years?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing," the man replied.

The friend in turn said, "You must have done something because for nothing they would have given you only ten years."

A day after my father's arrest we found an eviction notice glued to the door of the apartment. It said that the apartment should be vacated immediately. We both sat on our packed up bundles by the door in the long corridor. The milkman came by to make a delivery. I am guessing that he was familiar with scenes like this one. He told us that he would come back after he is done with the last of his customers. As promised, he came back, grabbed our belongings and told us to follow him. We climbed into his wagon. He himself walked beside his horse holding its reins. When we got to his farmhouse, his mother, his wife and his two children came out to greet us as if though we were expected.

## Ten: The Milkman

It was a private farm and it belonged to the milkman and his family. That the farm remained in private possession, after the Communist Revolution in 1917 when all private everything was confiscated and the concept of private property, in time, became unknown, was in itself remarkable. No one volunteered any information about the milkman's personal ownership and we didn't ask. We were overwhelmed by the generosity and kindness of the man and his family. We knew that the house and the land, was in the family for many generations. We also knew that the milkman delivered the products of his labor to the party members of high standing in and around the University and University Hospital. The farm was on the outskirts of Saratov, but it seemed to be isolated. Its nearest neighbor was at least 20 minutes by horse and buggy.

The family's farmhouse was generations old, but it was in very good repair. It was meticulously scrubbed inside. White hand-made lace curtains were washed often, starched and hung on every single window in the house. The white-washed walls were decorated with hand-painted plates and with samples of complicated design embroidery. The table in the room with the stove was covered with a spotless white tablecloth and "Grandma" made sure that a loaf of freshly baked bread was always on the table. Besides doing other chores, she appeared to be perpetually kneading. She used a starter piece of dough saved from the prior days of bread making and she never forgot to pinch a piece of dough, after it had risen, for the next day. She did not remember when and where the first starter piece of yeast dough originated.

My father was in the city's jail for a short few days. From the jail he was transferred to a labor camp within a short distance from Saratov. It made it very convenient for all the people who used his services before the arrest. In the camp "they" settled him into a well-equipped and furnished tailor workshop. He had a private room with a bed in the back of the shop where he slept and he didn't have to mingle with other "criminals." He

had enough work coming in which he had to do as requested and for free. He was bribed with food by the people who wanted their work to be done before someone else's. Sometimes he even shared some of the food with my mom and me when we came to visit him in the labor camp.

In the farmhouse, one entire wall of the "great room" was taken up by the large built-in Russian oven. A niche in the wall above the baking and cooking part of the oven was where my mom and I slept. We used a milking stool to climb into the nook. Even when sitting there we had to bend our heads. The most difficult part was when we had to crawl out of that space. I didn't know that such a thing as claustrophobia existed, so I was spared the suffering. The niche was not the most comfortable place, but it was the warmest place in the entire drafty old house and it was cozy, felt safe and it was wonderful to have.

There was no running water in the house. All of the water for the household, and for the animals and for the small field was carried, by bucketfuls, from a nearby well.

All of us were required to wash our hands before we entered the house. "Grandma" strictly enforced the rule. She was watching us like a hawk. There was not a chance in the world that anyone could ever even try to sneak into the house without first washing their hands. If that wasn't enough she also made us take off our shoes at the door. Her son, the milkman, improvised a contraption that he hung next to the entrance for the sole purpose of hand washing. The contraption resembled an old-fashioned metal mailbox that can still be found hanging on doors of some old houses. This one though, had a small circular opening cut on the underside of it and a home-made spigot. When I wanted (had to) wash my hands, I pushed the spigot and the water trickled out, and when I released the spigot, the water stopped.

The "Grandma" was the milkman's mother. He had children—a boy who was one year older than I and a girl a year younger than I. Their mother, I don't remember at all. I know that the kids' mother was alive and lived with them, but for some reason I can't recall a single thing about her. The grandma though was all over. She cared for the farm animals, milked the cows, collected eggs,

mended clothes, darned socks, made soap, scrubbed and even polished wooden floors and baked bread. And baked and baked. She also made sour cream and butter for distribution to the customers that her son took care of.

By the sheer fact of being a grandma, she looked ancient to me. Her face had deep wrinkles, her hands were calloused, and she walked visibly bent-over. She was always covered with a scarf that she tied under her chin. I so envied the two kids that had her for a grandma. I had no more hope of ever seeing my grandma again.

Although no one could confirm anything, I knew that if we ever get to go back to Poland, there wouldn't be anyone of my family there alive. My mom never took out the few photos from "hiding," and the memory of my grandma faded away except for one incident that came back to me when I watched this grandma bake bread. My own grandma back in Warsaw would always, when she baked challa, cover my nose with flour and laugh and laugh.

My mom and I visited my father at least twice every week. On foot. Winter was coming. The wind was fierce and it cut into our faces and the bitter cold penetrated to the bone. The two-hour walk (each way) felt endless. There wasn't a chance in the world for us to hitch a ride. Not a single vehicle would ever stop for us. This road was the only road leading to that forsaken place. Everyone knew our destination and they wouldn't risk giving a ride to people who have a "criminal" in the family. Some of the people going in a car that way were, most likely, my father's clients. Our visits were always so depressing. I was always ignored, and my father always concentrated on 1) did my mom talk to anyone who can get him out of there or 2) what about getting in touch with a Polish or Jewish agency and ask them for help. There was no one to talk to and no one would touch this case.

The return from the visitation was even worse than going there. The dark comes early in the winter and the head wind, in spite, always changed directions so it blew straight into our faces. The desolate landscape felt more frightening in the dark and no one traveled this road after dark. Tears would have frozen on our cheeks so neither dared to cry.

Quite a few months into the school year in the winter of 1945, I was in third grade. The two kids of the milkman's family attended the same school. We always walked together to and from school. Their grandma treated me the same way she treated them. She made sure that also I had something to eat before I went to school. Before anyone else would even start waking up the grandma would quietly leave the house to go to the barn to milk a cow and bring in a huge pitcher of still-warm and foaming milk. Just the sight and smell of it made me want to throw up. For a while I got away with not drinking the milk and I was just ok with a piece of that wonderful bread for breakfast until the kids snitched on me. The grandma "investigated" and found out that I will drink milk only when it's "burned," so she boiled the milk until the bottom of the pan was coated with a brown crust. This changed the smell of the milk and I could drink it then. She went through all that trouble just for me. The school wasn't too far from the house, but still we found a short cut. It was along the railroad tracks. We would skip from one rail tie to the next and we were not supposed to touch the gravel in between. Sometimes we would balance on the rails. When we heard a train coming close we rolled down the embankment and waited for the train to pass and would climb up onto the tracks again. This route to and from the school was kept secret from Grandma.

I didn't look anything like the brother and the sister, but no one asked any questions. Maybe not knowing was easier on everybody. The girl was a typical blond with braided hair. Blue eyes. The boy was somewhat darker than his sister but had that typical "Russian look." I, in major contrast, had that typical Semitic look. Black hair, brown eyes, olive complexion and a touch of my nose-bridge curvature. The difference stood out.

Every Sunday, Grandma would try to persuade someone in the family to accompany her to church. No one wanted to go, but the kids would sometimes oblige for the love of Grandma. Once, even I, after many tries, was maneuvered into coming with them to church. I was scared. It felt as if though the entire world was staring at me. And maybe it was. Everybody knelt at some point. I stood. The boy pulled my hand: "kneel, kneel." On that perfectly cloudless day I saw lightening and heard thunder as I knelt.

I knew that someone above is probably angry with me. Then I thought, "I am a good girl and if it was not for the war I wouldn't be here. There are plenty of bad people on this earth, let Him punish them."

In the beginning of 1946, the Polish refugees were grudgingly and discriminately given permission to return to Poland. Jews who wanted to go back to their homeland didn't intend to waste time and they were frantic and in a rush to get papers, for no one could predict whether or when the government would renege on the offer.

There were only a few pieces of the silver flatware left. They were part of the set that my grandma, in secret from my mom, wrapped up and slid into one of our bundles before we left Warsaw. Just as in Uzbekistan, my mom would go to the bazaar here to sell what remained. When she succeeded in selling a piece or two she would buy some salt, some sugar, a razor blade for the Milkman, some matches and contribute them to the household. Eventually we were down to the very last couple of knives. When these will be sold, what then?

Late one night when everyone was tucked into their beds and the house was still and dark and it was pitch black on top of the oven "shelf" where we slept, my mom handed me an unfamiliar fruit that had the most wonderful fragrance. I held it in my hand and was falling asleep again. My mom nudged me and whispered in my ear, "It's for you, peel it and eat it. I sold the last knife today and bought a small treat for you. I don't know when, if ever, I'll be able to buy anything else at all." I didn't want to eat that mandarin orange in the middle of the night in hiding. "I'll share it with the kids in the morning," I said. "It is such a puny fruit that when divided three ways none of you will even know what it tastes like," my mom replied. I had a hard time swallowing the miniscule sections of the mandarin. The juice spritzed into my throat and that made me cough. I did not enjoy it. The fragrance perfumed the entire house. In the morning, no one uttered a single word about it or asked any questions but I couldn't look anyone straight in their eyes.

By now, my father must have come to the conclusion that there was absolutely nothing that my mom could do for him by staying put in Saratov. It seems more likely, he realized, that there was something that could be done, on his behalf, from Poland. So it was. My mom and I, just the two of us, were going back to Poland after the war. Another journey into the unknown.

Throughout the years I often thought about the milkman's family and particularly about the mandarin orange episode. I dreamt of reciprocating for their many kindnesses and for their compassion and humanity in an otherwise world of evil. But I remembered that when we bade our tearful farewells, the milkman emphatically requested that we do not keep in touch. "Please," he said, "forget our names and address. Forget that we ever met. It's best that way for us."

## Eleven: Returning Home

Going Home! Poland was the homeland to generations of families on both of my parents' sides. Now, with no one waiting for us at the end of the road and with no one to greet us, or welcome us, or hug us, or to be happy to see us, could it still be Home?

The train filled to capacity with repatriates chugged along the tracks from Russia to Poland. There wasn't a single intact family in the entire echelon. There weren't many children. There weren't many old people. There weren't many men. There wasn't much talking. There were wall to wall people in our car. Some sat on the bare floor and some sat on top of their belongings. Most sat in silence. We didn't know anyone's names and no one asked ours. We didn't know where anybody was from.

The war is over, people! We are going back Home!

Why is everybody so gloomy? We're not going to a funeral! Or are we? There was no one my age to talk to or to play with in this, made for cattle, car. Another train, but the same feeling of going into the unknown. Frightening. Sad.

I am as yet to take a train ride for fun and pleasure.

The monotonous clickety-clack of the wheels along the railroad tracks, the unscheduled sudden stops with a thrust forward and then a jerk back, the loud metal-on-metal screeching of the locomotive being disengaged, the shudder when it hit a snag on the tracks in disrepair, the hissing sound of steam being released... all was so familiar to me. The only difference was that there weren't any bombs zooming down on us from the sky. In order to look outside I had to stand on top of some suitcases to reach the window. The train was moving slowly through the Russian countryside.

I can still hear the rumble of wheels over rails and the thudding rail ties. The million good-byes I said to every little flower and ev-

ery animal I saw out the window left me forever with the gnawing realization that I always had to leave somebody behind; never to see them again. Farewell to the beautiful field of daisies. Farewell to the huge boulder, standing all alone in the middle of nowhere.

I managed to open the window a crack. There was a lot of smoke and soot, and cinders flying in my face, but I didn't mind it at all. It still smelled better than the air inside. Along the way, a few emaciated cows grazed in the scarce grass along the railroad tracks. Their sunken sides suggested empty bellies and their protruding ribs – prolonged starvation. There were also small flocks of sheep scattered in search of patches of grass. Most of them were sheared to the bare skin. The wool was badly needed to make clothes for the harsh winters. Silos in the nearby farms stood still empty so many months after the war.

The spot by the window was all mine. Even when we passed the border and entered Poland no one but me showed any interest in the outside. For days there really wasn't that much to see. There were some scattered farmhouses with sagging roofs and windows bordered up. There were a number of hogs rolling in the mud next to the houses. There were farmers with hoes and sickles in hand trying to break up the hard dirt. There was a horse barely pulling a plow and a barely moving farmer following the plow. Kids, many kids, on school vacation were pretending to be helping with chores.

I waved to everyone through the partially open window. Not a single creature waved back or lifted a head to look at the whistling and screeching train passing through their front yards. Many more days went by before we entered much more populated territories of larger cities. Only then did the visible and palpable reality appear in full view. How do people find shelter and work in those piles of rubble?

On the first stop in a larger city in Poland we were greeted by a group of Jewish representatives of UNRA (United Nations Relief Administration). They were loading cartons upon cartons of food for all of us on the train. Everybody was so happy. A small group of self-appointed "insiders" took charge of distributing the donated provision.

The food for the trip that my mom packed in Saratov for the two of us was long gone and we had nothing to eat for days now. We were eagerly but patiently waiting for our share and for our turn. Many hours passed from the food delivery. I could smell the food. A whiff of wonderful fragrances came in from the neighboring car. Then, in our car, there was a family of three adults who were acquaintances of the self-crowned distribution kings and they were handed a most extravagant and a most generous package of food. In that package were two cans of Pillar Rock Salmon, a number of small cans of deviled ham, packages of crackers, cans of Carnation milk, candy bars and gum. Oh the smell of the deviled ham! I was drooling. They should have waited to open the cans! We must be next. Maybe the "distributors" went the other way through the train? So many boxes of food loaded into our echelon. Surely there would be enough for everybody. The family of three adults in our car who had received the generous goodies were already full and happy. We were still waiting for our share. Oh, the deviled ham! Its aroma ingrained itself in my "olfactory memory."

Not until 1961 did I get a chance to taste the spread. On my first trip to the grocery store in Chicago, I recognized the graphics on a small can and the memory of the smell took me back to that train ride from Russia to Poland of 1946.

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It was already late in the evening when one of the machers (big shots) made his way into our train car with a few cans of Del Monte peaches and fruit cocktail which the fifteen or twenty or twenty-five of us were to share. The peaches were good but not on an empty stomach. Some canned salmon, or tuna, or deviled ham would surely have been wonderful. We remained hungry and sad. The unfairness and favoritism coming from our own was very hard to take. There was enough food delivered by UNRA for everyone to share!

The train rolled along without a schedule. Along the way the train made many unpredictable stops and detours. Sometimes it had to back up for many kilometers. There were many obstacles and emergencies and it wasn't uncommon to encounter a bomb-torn stretch of tracks or an immobilized train blocking the rails. In

spite of all the predicaments, with each day we were getting closer and closer to our destination.

Going home! Where is home? What is home?

People, in general, did not really know where they would want to put their new roots down. My mom knew that it would not be Warsaw for us. She said it's not her city anymore it's a graveyard. The train was stopping in or near major cities and letting people off at will.

Before the stop at the city of Kielce very few people were seen leaving the train.

In Kielce though there was an unusual commotion. There were Polish representatives of this city who came on board and recruited Jews with promises of free housing and many good jobs if they would settle in Kielce. Many Jews succumbed to the temptation and exited the train to settle in Kielce. Only two days by train from Kielce, on July 4, 1946, we heard of a pogrom. Forty-two Jews were slaughtered and among them were all the ones who left the train on that fateful day with hopes of making a new life for themselves after the horrific war.

It didn't feel like the war was over. Will it ever be?

Unexpectedly good news trickled "out of thin air." There were unbelievable tales of a Jewish community flourishing in Wroclaw – a city in Lower Silesia, a territory which was reclaimed by Poland from Germany after World War II.

Herszfang FELA  
Boleslaw Chrobrego Street #35  
Wroclaw, Poland

That was my address from 1946 to 1957. In 1946 the same address was temporarily shared by many other families – recent repatriates.

The three-story walk-up had four apartments on each floor. On the second floor, two adjacent apartments were connected by

a large windowless space. On one side of this space were three separate small rooms and on the opposite side of this space two doors opened to two rooms. There was a family occupying each of the five rooms and the large space in-between was a welcome gathering place for everyone. Each and everyone was born elsewhere. Wroclaw was never home to anyone in the group. People were talking about returning to the cities of their birth, but not now, not yet.

The windowless room was lit by one lowly bulb suspended from the ceiling. It wasn't a pretty room but it became a place in which everyone looked forward to congregating. People longed for the companionship to appease their loneliness and isolation. There was a certain comfort in being among Jews in spite of the fact that each was into himself and I don't know whether there were any permanent friendships cemented at this point. And though having had tragic experiences, people remained strangers to each other.

The pogrom in Kielce greatly disturbed us all and Jews became once again more vigilant and separated themselves even more obviously from the Poles.

Putting aside all of the serious business of life, we had good times in the dark, ugly corridor. Ideas were flowing freely on every conceivable subject and where there were two Jews, one could be assured of three different points-of-view. There were multitudes of opinions on how to reward the righteous. People became practically physical when the devil himself was mentioned.

"Hitler got off too easy."

"Suicide? No way. He is surely hiding in Argentina."

"Was Eva Brown Jewish?"

The consensus finally was that Hitler should have been put on public display in a cage. Every Jew should then be given a chance to rip a piece of flesh off of him and sprinkle a generous dollop of salt into each wound.

Sometimes melancholy and nostalgia took a hold of those gathered and then young and old would harmonize in some romantic, mushy, sentimental songs in Yiddish or Russian and wail away well into the night. Often someone would bring out a harmonica, or an accordion, or a balalajka and it wasn't uncommon for someone to break into a dance to show off some fancy footwork to everyone's delight, with laughter and applause for the brave soul. After an evening like that people would reluctantly retreat into their cubicles for a few hours of sleep.

Days were spent on looking for employment, on joining organizations, on searching for family members, on registering for school, on finding apartments, or on finding ways to exploit American aid.

My mom and I were at the tail-end of the arriving Jews who had stayed in this second floor apartment. Many who came before us had already moved out. It was meant to be a transitory place. Wroclaw was bombed toward the end of the war, but not destroyed as much as Warsaw was. Housing, vacated by extradited Germans, was made available to Jews. My mom was given a set of keys with an address to a vacated by Germans furnished apartment. She did not make a dash for it.

In this one room on Boleslawa Chrobrego 35, my mom must have felt secure. There were always people around. My mom finds a job only days after we arrive from Saratov. She is not the one to ask for help. Others ask for help and are doing well. Some women even have fur coats and fancy boots. Their husbands either work for or just mingle with the people who work for the distribution centers of American Aid.

I can't even go away to a free winter camp because I have no boots. Khaver Pinie, who was an organizer in the Jewish Bund, bought me a pretty and warm sweater, but I still couldn't go. Pay for work is handed out once a month. Meanwhile we live on a bowl of soup from the workmen's soup-kitchen and a bag of dried bread crusts donated to us by a couple who moved out of the communal apartment.

It doesn't feel the way peace time should feel. I haven't had ice cream, yet.

In Saratov I had an ice cream almost everyday. But that was before my father was arrested. In Uzbekistan I never had ice cream. Not once. There was the war. I had wonderful ice cream cones in Kharkov, but that was before Hitler invaded the Soviet Union.

By memory or by tale, I have warm and fuzzy reminiscence of ice cream when I was a little girl and surrounded by a close extended family and family friends before September 1 of 1939. I always finished everybody's cone. They ate down their cones to my size and then gave it to me. Sometimes I would have four or five or even more ice creams. Nobody cared when I made a mess of my beautiful clothes. Everybody was happy. There was peace.

Two years after the war ended we heard merely rumors of people finding family members still alive. There were rumors of a father finding his child. A brother finding a sister. A woman finding three members of her family who were still hiding not being aware that the war was over.

Rumors became reality when my mom became aware that Sara-Rywka, my father's sister, lived only blocks away from us. She was Mrs. Kogan now. My father was still in a labor camp near Saratov. My aunt was not happy that she couldn't be reunited with her brother. She survived the war in Siberia. She was all alone in exile. People looked, searched, inquired. Even a rumor of a survivor was a flicker of hope for many. An actual locating of a survivor was quite a miracle. The majority of survivors came out of the Soviet Union. A miniscule number of Jews survived in Poland.

In two years many families and many single survivors passed through the rooms of the two apartments of the tenement house on Boleslawa Chrobrego 35. My mom and I remained. We took over two more cubby-holes, knocked down a wall which was provisory put up and ended up with one double-cubby with two windows. All three windows faced the street. We had electricity. We had one faucet over a funnel-shaped sink. Running cold water only. We had one tile oven for heating with coal for fuel and one stove, also for coal.

A special treat for the two of us was a trip to the city's public bathhouse. It was a real fancy place. The lobby was carpeted. A

crystal chandelier hung low over a circular sofa which was upholstered in red velvet. The velvet gave me goosebumps to the touch but it was very elegant and rich looking. There were many plants and many fresh-flower arrangements. It was service for a fee. The bathtub and the shower stall was supposed to be cleaned after each use but my mom always brought along a rag with washing soda to scour the tub anyway. We must have removed layers of skin scrubbing ourselves and each other's backs. The clean needed to last until the next time in three or four weeks.

I knew of some people in Wroclaw who had showers in their apartments. Some even had toilets. "Our" toilet was located in a corner of the mid-point landing of the stairs between the second and third floor. My knees would be in the way of the door when I sat on the toilet in a normal fashion. When I wanted the door closed I had to climb on top of the toilet and do my business that way. There was a water tank on the wall. A pull of the string flushed the toilet, when the water in the tank wasn't frozen.

Looking to the right out of my window, I could see the massive building of the Railway Station, Dworzec Nadodrze. When the water in the tank was frozen and the toilet was clogged and overflowing I would bring a couple of strips of newspaper and run to the station to use the toilets there. Considering that it was a busy public space the washrooms were clean and roomy. I could close the door and not have to worry about my knees getting in the way. We used every little bit of the daily newspaper. All of its four to six pages. I no longer needed it to write between the lines or on its margins, like I did in Uzbekistan. I had notebooks now. But we used the newspaper for toilet tissue, for wrapping food, for spreading it on a freshly scrubbed floor and to kindle a fire. Our neighbor used the paper to cover up their dirty dishes in the sink. They had a sink and it was always full of dirty dishes.

Boleslawa Chrobrego was a busy street. Or at least the part of the street closest to Staszica Square where the Nadodrze Train Station stood. The square must have been the largest streetcar depot in the city with its intricate configuration of a multitude of intersecting tracks and overhead wires. From 1946 to 1957 it was the place from where I took the tram to school and to every other place. There was a kiosk, the size of a telephone booth, standing

in the middle of the heavy traffic. I used to buy my "Swierszczyk" magazine there when I was young and later "Przekroj." My mom bought her daily paper there. Next to the kiosk stood a large cylindrical form which was part gallery and part poster board of sorts. Workers used to come around with bucketfuls of diluted glue. They would dunk their long-handled brooms into the bucket and paste new posters and all kinds of announcements on top of the old ones. The circus posters were the most colorful and the most beautiful and there was almost always a circus in town. Mostly ones from the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union exported more than circuses to Poland. In 1948 the Communism's takeover of Poland became apparent. Every political organization was outlawed. The Russian troops' presence was obvious. The borders were closed to emigration. Even travel abroad was not permitted. It became illegal to own dollars. Letters were censored. Private initiative was driven into the underground which gave way to a black market. The "Iron Curtain" was no fiction. We were made to believe that the Soviet Union was our only friend in the world. The markings on sacks and boxes of food and clothing were altered. UNRA (United Nations Relief Administration), CARE, Made in the USA, were crossed over and substituted with "a gift for the Polish People from the Soviet Union." Something like "From Russia with Love." Paul Robson was Russian's Ambassador of Communism's triumph over American Capitalism. For all I knew Coca-Cola was an explosive.

Chewing gum was said to be a habit of decadents. I didn't believe that. Decadents-shmekadents. How could I have been a decadent when I chewed gum in Uzbekistan? First of all I didn't even know the word. My friends and I were between the ages of 6 to 9. The gum was a black tar like substance. The white gum was probably sap from a tree and we couldn't afford it. We were barefoot. Half naked. Mostly hungry. Some kids said that chewing makes them feel less hungry. It didn't make me feel less hungry. How could it make me feel less hungry when all that I've swallowed was my own saliva? Decadents?!

As soon as we came to Wroclaw my mom started a letter campaign on behalf of my father. She wrote to every organization in Poland, in the Soviet Union, in the United States, in Sweden, pleading the

case for my father's release. For almost two years all we had gotten in response were a few postcards with a standard: "Unfamiliar with the issue" or "Not under our jurisdiction to help."

My mom wasn't giving up.

We could've gone to Buenos-Aires, Argentina.

Uncle Szmil Rosenbojm was a familiar and a loving presence in my life until he left for Argentina only months before the war.

He wasn't really my uncle. Out of respect, children would call a close family friend, "Uncle" or "Aunt" followed by their first name.

My mom, my dad, and Uncle Szmil were an inseparable trio before and after my mom married my dad. After I was born, my Uncle Szmil, my dad and I became the inseparable trio. To give my mom some rest time the two men would take me to parks, to the beach, to the zoo and always buy me ice cream. I loved it. Especially the ice cream.

Not long after my mom's and my return to Poland, Uncle Szmil found out our address. Even before a letter, a package came from him. My mom always used to say about him that he was a practical man. But when I saw, among other things, the most exquisite pair of shoes, I thought that this man was very sentimental. He knew for a fact that my mom always had the best and prettiest shoes, since her father was a designer of leather shoe uppers. The shoes in the package were for me and if he thought that I liked shoes as much as my mom did, he was right. The shoes probably had some emotional significance for him, also.

The shoes were already too small when they arrived. But I kept them for years. Now and then I would bring them out of the armoire drawer, try them on, polish them and put them back, gently and lovingly. "Dear child," my mom would say, "your feet will not get any smaller and the shoes will not get any bigger. It's time to give them to someone who can use them."

"Not yet, mamele."

I still have a fragment of the precious woolen blanket from the package. I framed it!

A few yentes, who knew my family from before the war, came sometimes to Wroclaw to visit. They always gossiped and that is how I found out that Szmil was always very much in love with my mom. He became a very prominent business man in Buenos-Aires. He owned furniture factories. He was a respected member of the Jewish Community. He didn't marry until two years after my father was freed from jail and came back to live with us in 1948. I thought that my mom should have accepted Uncle Szmil's invitation to come to Argentina.

## Twelve: The Yiddish School

July, 1946. I am ten and a half years old. This is a fact. What is not a fact, is whether I am only ten and a half or already ten and a half. Today my mom thinks that I am already ten and a half and that I'm quite capable of going to register for school all by myself. School is very important. A Jewish school for Jewish kids is momentous. It is still summer vacation. Seven more weeks before the start of the new school year. We are given the name and the address of the school.

Sholem Alejchem P.S. (Public School)  
Itzchak Lejbish Peretz str.  
Wroclaw, Poland

My mom is in awe. Not only that the school is named after a beloved Jewish writer, but also the street on which the school stands. We are only days in the city. I don't even know my immediate neighborhood. Everybody in the temporary housing apartment is a displaced Jew returning from the East. They don't know much of what is going on either.

My mom is at work already, but the pay is being handed out once a month. Meanwhile, we have no money. Not even for a train fare for me to go to school to register. My mom is eager. She borrows the money for my fare. I think that what makes her so eager is that she isn't entirely convinced that the Jewish school exists. Until I am officially registered and until I see the building and until I talk to someone in the office she'll probably be thinking that the school is a figment of someone's imagination. She gives me the borrowed money. It's enough for two legs of a ride. The directions to the school are: "Take the train to Grabishynska str. and look for Peretz str. which is a side street to the left off of Grabishynska."

My mom has to go to work and she leaves very early in the morning. She has to make it on foot. It's many miles away. Today she

wakes me up before she leaves. She seems nervous. I am too sleepy to know whether I am nervous or not. She asks me to stop by her work after my registration, so we can go to the workmen's soup kitchen to have something to eat.

I am only ten and a half years old today.

I am all alone.

I try to be brave, but I can't.

I feel sorry for myself.

I speak only Russian.

What if I get lost? Poles don't speak Russian.

I board the train on Staszica square only steps from my house. The sign says "Grabiszynska," but when it gets to that street it veers off to the left, away from the street. I panic and jump off the fast-moving car. I return to the place where I lost Grabishynska and start to walk along the longest street in the entire world. I walk and I walk. No Peretza str. in sight. The quiet is so spooky. The results of the bombings are clearly apparent. Both sides along my way are in ruins. Heaps of bricks, which were once buildings, are lying there without aim or purpose. The glass shards of broken window panes are reflecting the sunrays with blinding intensity. The skeletal walls that are still standing are pockmarked by bullets. Their gaping window holes look like hollowed out eye sockets. I cringe when I get the feeling that the empty eye sockets are staring at me with that dreadful blind gaze.

How could I be absolutely sure that all of the people in these eerie places in the rubble are dead? Can some Nazi be still alive hiding in this horrible place and at any moment jump out to kill me?

They are so fresh, the ruins are. The ashes are not completely settled yet. The burned out buildings still smolder and the air is hotter near them. Real or imagined footsteps behind me send me running. My shoes are at least a size too small and I am hurting.

I am finally standing in front of a street sign, which reads Peretza str. I am profoundly aware of anti-Semitism. The Kielce pogrom of July 4, 1946 happened before my very eyes.

Zyd (Jew) is always said with rancor and hatred. There is always a perplexed look in the eyes of a Pole when he comes face to face with a Jew.

"Didn't Hitler finish you all? Too bad. You are like vermin."

The Polish language has a long list of slurs for Jews. Young people, who never saw a Jew in their lives, will use them as curses.

And here, in contradiction, in front of me is a street sign with the name of a renowned Jewish-Yiddish writer on it.

The school building is easy to spot since it's the only intact structure among ruins.

I enter through a massive wrought-iron gate into a yard with patches of trampled grass and of mossy dirt shaded by an immense chestnut tree. Ivy creeps up to the roof of the building. I hesitate as I take the four wide concrete steps to the front door. It is deadly quiet in the hallway. School will not be in session before September 1 and it's mid-July. I can hear human voices coming from a room behind closed doors. I pace the empty hallway back and forth, back and forth. I hope that someone would come out of the office and say to me: "Hi, little girl are you here to register? How nice. Please come in."

It didn't happen and I head back home.

My mom expects me at her work. She likes it when I come so she can take me to the cafeteria there. I go there only because I don't want to hurt my mom, but I hate that place. Today I feel even more down because of my failure to register for school. The workmen's soup kitchen is in the basement of the clothing factory. It is damp and cold even on a sunny summer day. The bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling don't provide much light. The soup is thick and ok tasting and it's served with bread, unlike the watered down soup without bread which my mom shared with me in

Uzbekistan. But the sun, the optimistic sun of Uzbekistan compensated for it. The basement feels so desolate. Some people wear coats. Each is hunched over a bowl of soup slurping it loudly and greedily. My stomach is in knots but I eat the soup. There isn't any food at home. My mom carries an empty canteen to work with her. When I don't come to join her she brings me the soup in it. She says that the cook gives her the extra soup for me. I don't believe her. I think that it is her own serving of soup. I think so because I see how grudgingly the kitchen help gives the soup to me when I am there. I think so also because I can't imagine my mom asking for an additional serving. My mom is a proud woman. She works hard. Life should be easier. The war is over.

My mom takes a day off work and together we go to register me for school. Today she probably thinks that I am only ten-a-half years old. I have my report card from the Saratov School with me showing successful completing of 3rd grade. I am proud of the fact that all my grades are "A's" and I am sure that the registrar will be extremely impressed with me.

Instead, she tells me that I will be repeating third grade.

"Why?" my mom asked, stunned.

The woman in the office interrogates me. "Do you know Yiddish?"

"No", I say.

My mom is more hurt than surprised by my answer. She knows that Russian is my language now. I speak it like a native, I read fluently and write effortlessly. But, still, Yiddish is my mamé-loshen and throughout the war, every single night she sang a lullaby to me – in Yiddish. Sometimes she sang one to me in the daytime – to muffle out the sounds of the whistling bombs exploding around us and the sounds of the whining airplanes flying low overhead, and the sounds of the air-raid sirens. The words of the lullabies weren't important for me to understand. It was my mom's voice and her presence which gave me comfort.

מאק 13 13 אויגעסעק  
 אלע קומען בייעסעק  
 און קרוינען זיי אדום  
 צוקאלפן אויף ציין בעס

מויב זענען אלע צא  
 אין שלעכט, שלעכט שער  
 און צווייטע נויט אריין  
 ס'גייט 13 אדעס

מויב זענען נאקעט, בעלי  
 בארייגען פון אלע זעען הויב

My mom reasons with the registrar: "It is a Jewish school, yes? With Jewish teachers and Yiddishe Kinderlech, yes? You will teach her Yiddish then, yes? The Yiddish school is the only reason for our coming to Wroclaw." The school clerk throws another loop at me. "Do you know Polish?" Everyone knows the answer to that question. I can tell that my mom knows, at this point, that it's senseless to continue.

I leave my name and my birth date and at two months short of my eleventh birthday I'll be entering third grade, again. I bet that the registrar didn't know that raisins are dried grapes.

The summer passes slowly. There is nothing for me to do. My mom works. It's still almost six weeks to September 1st when school starts. Always September 1st unless it's a Sunday. If you ask me, it's a terrible date for it to be the first day of a school year. I love school and I always look forward for a start of a new year, but September 1st always brings with it fresh memories of Warsaw being decimated in 1939.

When my mom gets her first paycheck, we go for ice cream. My mood improves. But yet, she buys only one cone, for me. She doesn't want to take as much as a single lick from it. This reminds me of the mandarin orange in the milkman's house near Saratov. "If you split this puny mandarin into three none of you will experience the taste." I couldn't wish this memory away and I wanted to.

September 1st, 1946 is here. My first school year in the Sholem Alejchem School in Wroclaw, Poland. We are some bunch of kids in the 3rd grade. There are 35 of us and the spread in age is at least 4 years. All of us are recently out of bunkers, out of holes in the ground, out of ghettos, and forests, and monasteries, and out of every corner of the Soviet Union from Russia to Siberia, to Uzbekistan. Each of us is in disbelief that others have also survived. There is a family among us who was still in hiding many months after the war was over. Their saviors, suspecting that the family didn't give them all of their possessions yet, kept them in the dark about the war.

The Arian looking Jewish girl in my school who, even years after the war, had nightmares and in them she screamed out that her Jewish father, who reclaimed her from a convent, wasn't her real father. She insisted that this Jewish man kidnapped her for ritualistic purpose. Another student in my school saw her mother and her baby brother shot dead in front of her. Yet another was buried alive in a shallow mass grave. She crawled out and was then luckily picked up by a group of partisans in a forest. She was only three years old, then. There were so many stepmothers, stepfathers, stepbrothers, half brothers, step sisters, half sisters, single mothers, single fathers and orphans. I knew only one Jewish girl who had a grandmother.

My mom is already into the second year of letter writing on my father's behalf. No success, but she isn't giving up and she still is not considering moving to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Uncle Szmil wants us to come. He isn't married, so far. He hopes, I guess. He is forty-three years old in 1948 and my mom is 38, and I think of them as being old people. My mom gets help in the letter campaign, from a group of people from the Jewish Bund of Poland. I make no contribution. After all, it was my father who fed me the line that "children and fish don't have a voice (say)." And I was a child at ten and a half and he in effect was a stranger to me. I am thinking to myself, whatever happens, happens. I am not the only kid without a father. Actually, an original intact family is an aberration after the war.

I would have so loved to have an older brother. I had one but he died before I was born. So I never even met him. I never met my sister either. She also died before I was born. My brother died of diphtheria and my sister of polio. Both at about the age of two. Even this information I was given by someone other than my mom. After the war, back in Poland, getting older and becoming more curious about the past, I started to ask questions about everything and everybody. It didn't get me far at all. Before a single word to an answer ever came out of mom's mouth I could see her eyes well up with tears, I could feel a lump in her throat and I could hear her accelerated heartbeat. Her pain was palpable. So I don't ask.

I don't even know the names of my brother or sister.

Schoolwork is easy for me. I skip a grade to make up for the stupid registrar's decision to make me repeat 3rd grade. In Uzbekistan, I stayed in preschool beyond my first grade age, because of the daily snack given there. I made up that year also. I am caught up and school work is still easy for me. Life isn't.

Each tenant in the building has a designated locker in the basement. Its sole purpose is to store coal. At the sidewalk level is an opening to each locker, a chute. Coal, after it's ordered and paid for, is dumped from a horse-drawn wagon onto the sidewalk. Clouds of black dust rise again when my mom and I, shovelful by shovelful, try to push the coal through the narrow slit of the opening into the basement locker. When done, our nostrils are coal black. We look like miners. Coal dust sticks to the body wet with perspiration.

Both the tall tile oven for heating and the iron top stove for cooking are coal burning. Food shortages, government rationing, black market, high prices, long lines are a way of life.

At the street level of the building where I live is a Bar. It's open 24/7, and the place is busy 24/7. There is never a lack of patrons. They drink. The vapor of beer drifts out and permeates everything. The Bar doesn't have a washroom. At all times of day or night there are men and women alike lying on the stairs in their own urine, sleeping the booze off. I step over them on my way to the basement for coal. We need the coal to kindle the fire in the tile oven to keep us from freezing in the winter and we need the coal for the stove to cook and to heat water for everything where cold water won't do.

The laundry is done in the kitchen – hallway. It's a long day's worth of hard labor. We have a galvanized tub and a washboard. We use washing soda and a bar of brown soap. We heat the water in pots and pans on the top of the stove which has to be fired up with coal, brought up by bucketfulls, from the stinken basement. Sometimes the laundry has to be rewashed because the rats would decide to take a jog on top of the ropes strung out in the attic on which the laundry is hung out to dry. The rats would leave footprints on the sheets and towels and on everything else.

I felt quite lucky that the window of my room faced the street. I had a round wicker table under the window and a wicker chair and I still had access to the window for when I wanted to stick my head out to see what's going on in the street. My twin size bed was against a wall about two feet away from the table. The huge armoire took up the rest of the room. There was a drawer on the bottom of the armoire. It's where I stored my penny-loafers from Uncle Szmil from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Every time when I clean my room I start by reorganizing the things in the drawer. It gives me an excuse to look at the shoes for the thousandth time. I treat them with respect. I polish them. I stuff them with fresh crumbled newspaper. Gently, I put them back in the drawer and cover them with all of our underwear, and sheets, and socks.

I have a pretty good sense of my naiveté. I am naïve about so many things of life, but not that naïve as not to know that my feet will not get smaller or that the shoes will "grow" bigger. To me these shoes, I realized, were not another item of clothing to wear. They were not a "thing." They were a symbol.

I daydream a lot. I would sit at my round wicker table by the window, with my eyes open to the inside of my brain and heart, and I would dream. I could see my mom being in the arms of Uncle Szmil more than I could see her in the arms of my father.

I imagined him looking exotic in a white linen suit and Panama hat with bouquets of lavish tropical flowers, waiting for my mom at the Buenos Aires Airport. They would hug and kiss and then hug and kiss some more. She would have that special look of being in love. The sort of look which I saw in movies only. He would tell me about my mom as a young girl. What she liked to do. What she liked to wear. What she talked about. What she dreamed about. Why she chose my father over him. My dreams would often wander off to the wish of having an older brother. He would certainly have a bunch of very nice and very attractive friends and all of them would badger my brother to introduce them to me. I wouldn't have to ever sit out even as much as a single dance at the Friday night dances in the Jewish club.

"How is your homework coming along?"

“Fine,” I say, startled.

In front of me is a textbook open to the same page for the last hour or two. My notebook shows a blank page and the ink on the pen in my hand is bone dry. I have a memory of reading my homework assignment from an empty page. The homework bores me, but most of the time I do it. I often stare longingly out the window watching people go home after a day’s work, free to do what they please. There is never an end to my homework, if I wanted to do it all.

On occasion my mom would read one of my book reports. Her usual reaction is: “Well, now I know what half-a-dozen ‘authorities’ think about this book, but what I would really like to know is what you think about it.”

I don’t like my math teacher but I like math. I am ahead in math thanks to my shyness. When I was making up lost time I had a volunteer tutor for a few weeks to help me to catch up with an entire year’s work. I was too shy to approach a teacher to ask what I should study. I asked a couple of students instead. They, in turn, bragged about what advance math they were doing in fourth grade. I reported it to my tutor who worked with me more intensively. I was way ahead in math in my new higher grade and all throughout my schooling.

The major subject of interest to every survivor was to find others who may have also survived. There were some central committees in Warsaw where survivors could register, but these were inaccessible and ineffective. Every reunion came as a result of word-of-mouth information. My mom and I found out about my aunt, Sara-Rywka Hershfang, almost two years after the war, and all that time she had lived in the same city, a short tram ride away. She was my father’s younger sister. By the time we met, she had recently married and was now Mrs. Kogan. On May 3, 1948, a baby boy was born to them, soon to be followed by a baby girl and then twin boys. The entire family was crowded in a dark, damp basement apartment. Their father, Velvel, was not able to contribute to the wellbeing of the family.

My aunt was the one who kept the six of them fed. On Fridays, my aunt ruled the roost in the only synagogue’s courtyard. She was the master poultry feather plucker. The city’s only shokhet, ritual butcher, slaughtered the chickens in this courtyard. The chickens were sold live in the farmers’ markets. There were two or three other pluckers, but Mrs. Kogan was the first choice of every customer. She was fast and thorough, and kind to people. She was rewarded with tips, but her biggest payoff was a chicken for Shabbat, the Sabbath. She was assured of that. Six people, one chicken. Velvel was a big eater. She successfully persuaded Szmulik, her oldest, that the neck of the chicken was his favorite. Itka learned to be content with the giblets. The twins shared the wings and Sara-Rywka was left with the chicken feet (not to be confused with chicken legs).

Sara –Rywka was functionally illiterate. She spoke Yiddish, only. Four babies. Ill husband. One had to admire her for not being bitter. I remember walking down a busy street with her in Wroclaw. She said, “Hi” to almost every passerby. Impressed, I asked, her, “Do you know all these people?”

“No.”

“So why are you saying ‘Hi’ to them all?”

“Well, I don’t know them, but maybe they know me.”

By 1948, my Mom and I were the only ones who still lived in a “transition” apartment. Everyone else had taken advantage of the offers and moved into apartments vacated by ousted Germans. I remember the day when my Mom came late from work carrying a small picture in her hand. She hung the picture in my room on the wall next to the window. It was a picture of a girl in an oval frame. The girl in it looked so regal and pampered. She had long braids like mine but unlike mine, which hung loose to below my tush, hers were coiled about and over her ears. My Mom didn’t say anything about the picture at the time. I could tell that she had been crying, so I didn’t dare to ask anything.

Sometimes I’d stare at the girl in the oval frame and I’d admire the beautiful lace collar on her dress. Sometimes I’d look at her

coiffure and I couldn't find a single hair out of place. Sometimes the perfectly rosy cheeks would draw my attention. Years went by and the picture receded into the wall. I didn't pay any attention to it anymore. Then, out of nowhere, my Mom revealed the events of the day when she brought the picture home!

"Remember the keys that we were given to check out a residence vacated by exiled Germans? That day, long ago, and long after we received the keys, I decided to see what the apartment looked like. When I entered, I was blinded by the sparkle of crystal chandeliers and by the gleam of the many pieces of silverware on the buffet. The long dining room table was covered with a white tablecloth and seemed to have been set for a tea party. I had the sensation of actually seeing steam escaping from the tea cups. There were games and toys and many dolls all over the house, and there were books – by the hundreds. There were featherbeds and pillows. I should have taken at least one featherbed so I wouldn't have to put my coat on your feet to keep you warm at night. The German family, who lived there when Wroclaw was Breslau, was exiled and had to leave everything behind. My heart started racing. I ran to the door, locked it behind me. The picture was in my hand. I couldn't make myself go back to return the picture. How could I have possibly even considered living in such luxury when all of my family is dead? My Mom took a glance at the picture and with great sadness in her voice said, "There are no winners in a war."

The area around Boleslawa Chrobrego 35 was full of life. On our corner, two buildings away, was a post office. There was a telephone there. It is where we once waited for days for a telephone call from Uncle Joe in Chicago. When the call finally came, we couldn't make out a single word. The transmission was so garbled, it sounded like the Voice of Free Europe on the radio. Next to the post office was a shoemaker who shared his space with a woman who mended runs in nylon stockings. She had more work than the cobbler. Across from the shoemaker, three steps below street level was a grocery. It was no more than eight feet by ten feet. I, at my grown-up height of 5'4" had to bend down not to bump my head on the ceiling. This grocer had the freshest sour cream, butter and eggs. For nine years, two or three times a week, I bought a couple of eggs at a time, or a cup of sour cream

or 100 grams of butter from him, and it was always the best and the freshest. Every time, before my mom sent me for something, it came with a caveat, "Make sure that it's fresh."

Ever so often, in the wee hours of the morning, I would open my window to catch a whiff of the aromas coming from the bakery around the corner. They specialized in tortes and sold them by the slice. Two zlotych per slice. Their napoleons were incomparable. They also baked loaves of French bread – the kind described in novels by Victor Hugo and shown in French films. The French bread was very expensive – at least twice as much as a loaf of rye or Russian black, which was baked in a different bakery. When I did get to buy a loaf of that long, white, elegant bread, I made the most of it. I didn't go directly home. Holding the loaf under my arm, I took the roundabout way. I imagined myself walking the streets of Paris. The other bakery, two blocks away, baked the basic stuff, but they provided a service to the neighborhood people. For a fee they made their ovens available to anyone who didn't have one. Sometimes I would bring a braided challah to be baked there. Sometimes I carried an apple kuchen or in the summer, some fresh blueberry pastry which my mom always packed me for the trip to summer camp. For Passover she would prepare a sponge cake. She would beat the egg whites with two forks until stiff. It took forever. "Be careful. Hold the baking pan steady. Don't jiggle it, or it'll collapse." The warning words followed me down from the second floor through two blocks of heavy pedestrian traffic to the bakery.

Next door to the French bakery was a fancy chocolate and hard-candy store. One hundred grams of chocolate, less than a quarter of a pound, obligingly wrapped in colorful cellophane and tied with a ribbon, was an acceptable and much welcomed birthday gift for any child my age. Mostly though, I bought a book for a present. Book fairs (Kiermasz Ksiazkowy) were frequently held outdoors. I loved the commotion and the celebration around the many tables bending under the weight of the books piled high to the sky. There was music, and clowns, and balloons, and ice cream bars carried in a box with a leather strap, over the vendor's shoulders.

Wroclaw is a big city. The clanging of the tram bells reminded me of that fact. As in Moscow, Kharkov, or Saratov, the balloons,

flowers, ice cream, and the clanging of bells were to me a sign of a big city and of peace, as in “no war.”

By 1948, the hope for my father’s early release was declining. Many, who helped my mom with the writing of petitions, were disappointed with the lack of progress, and had given up.

“We wrote to everyone and to everywhere. There is no one left to write to anymore.”

“Not true. We didn’t write to Stalin yet,” someone offered in jest.

A letter went out to:

Generalissimos Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin  
Kremlin, Moscow  
USSR

It was an act of last chance. My mom and everyone else knew that it was daring and dangerous to send a letter to Father Stalin himself. Within a few weeks a letter arrives from the Kremlin, and we are afraid to open it.

“Your husband will be joining you soon.” Signed: Generalissimos Stalin.

Even after the signature had been authenticated, it didn’t seem real.

Only days after the letter, comes a familiar sequence of raps on the door in the night. I hear it first. Slowly, I walk over to my mom’s bed and pleadingly ask her.

“Mamele, Mamele, don’t open the door, it must be my father.”

The two small rooms and the windowless hallway-kitchen space became very crowded. The only radio was in my room. The only wardrobe-*armoire* was in my room. My room was a walk-through room. The wall between the rooms was paper-thin, and the door didn’t close tightly. Every whisper in one room was clearly audible in the other, and every creak in the floor of the bed was exaggeratedly loud in my room.

By the time my father came back to Poland in 1948, all of the political organizations, except the Communist Party, had become illegal. But in 1946 there was a proliferation of them. There were Zionist organizations like “Dror” and “Hashomer Hatzair.” There was the “Bund” and its youth branches “Tzrif” and “Tzukunft.” There were the proverbial three parties for every two Jews. We children were drawn to the organization with the prettiest uniforms.

The cultural institutions though thrived. The Yiddish Theater was a world class institution performing plays such as “Mirele Efros,” “The Dybbuk,” “Tevye der Milchiker,” “Glickl Hamelin Fodert Gerechtkajt.” The Theater was also a venue for Friday night variety shows. Sometimes the performers were professional comedians like Dzigal and Shumacher. Mostly though, the performers were children from the Jewish school, the Jewish ballet school, and the Jewish music school. We always had a full house, and no matter how poorly we performed, we were assured of a standing ovation.

We in-turn kitized for every notable Jew. We were glued to the radio when we heard that Vladimir Ashkenazy, a Jewish teenager from Russia, a contestant in the International Chopin Competition, had won.

Anti-Semitism had no expiration date. We always sought out places where Jews gathered. It was difficult for us to ignore provocation, so we started building walls around ourselves. Because they were teased and mocked, many children were embarrassed by their too Jewish sounding names. If your name was Mendel, or Shlomo, Moisze, Tevye, or Pinia, you wanted to be called by your last name.

We enjoyed stories in which we would outsmart the anti-Semites. It was a way of coping. In Poland, then, only Jewish boys were circumcised. A circumcised penis was a sure giveaway.

A Polish man calls out to another man on a street in Warsaw.

“Hey Jew, what time is it?”

The other man covers his wristwatch with his shirt sleeve and extends his arm for the Pole to read the time himself. Appalled, the

Pole says, “How can I tell the time when your watch is covered. The reply comes fast, “The same way you could tell that I am a Jew with my pants on.”

Laughter relieves a lot of pain. We took heed of some of Sholem Aleichem’s epigrams: “One can laugh at the world or weep” or “Laughter is healthy; doctors should prescribe laughter.”

In all the eleven years in Poland, from 1946 to 1957, I befriended only one Polish girl. I took violin lessons from a Jewish teacher. However, for subjects like theory of music, solfège and other music-related subjects, I had to go to a special school where non-Jews also attended. That is where I met this Polish girl, who lived on my street. After school we walked home together. She invited me to her house many times. Only when she told me that her grandma wanted to meet me and had baked her favorite cookies, did I accept the invitation. The word “Grandma” was always the magnet.

It was warm and nice in their apartment. This girl didn’t have to stand in long lines for groceries. She didn’t have to go to the basement for coal to light the oven. She had toys and games. She had “Tiddly Winks.” It was my favorite. She used her baby blanket to lay the green pieces of felt on top. She had her baby blanket! How could her baby blanket have survived? I bet that she still had her crib! She had a mother, a father and a grandma. How did they all survive the war with everyone and everything intact?

Every summer I went to camp. I always chose the one at the Baltic Sea. Every morning for breakfast we had a bowl of blueberries floating in milk. Not a single camper liked milk with the blueberries. We would pour out the milk and eat only the blueberries. Still, we were served them the same way for the entire month. We took turns helping in the kitchen. Our duty was to butter hundreds of slices of bread. The cook always cursed the bakers for letting the dough rise to such an extent that the slices looked like Swiss cheese. She would curse us for filling every single hole with butter. The more she cursed, the more butter we used up.

En route from the campsite to the beach, we marched through a dense forest picking wild blueberries and raspberries along the way. On a cloudy day, we played volleyball in the sand, collected

shells and amber, jumped over the foaming waves of the Baltic and waited for the sun to come out from behind the clouds. When the sun finally appeared, one could hear, “Move away! Don’t block the sun!” We were determined to go back home bronzed.

I had a beautiful swimsuit. It was Made in U.S.A. (Made I pronounced mud-è). Cywia sent it to me from Brooklyn, N.Y., U.S.A. It was very special because it came from Cywia, the girl who had let me sleep in her crib when we were refugees and homeless in 1939. I cherished my swimsuit and showed it off. It was a heavy woolen knit. When it got wet, it weighed a ton. The crotch stretched half way down my thighs. It was hot, and I itched. By the time I took it off in my cabin, my thighs were chafed and my entire body had prickly heat. By the following summer, sand was still pouring out of it.

On stormy, rainy days, we had nothing to do but sit around and talk – talk about boys when they were not within our earshot. Most of the girls claimed to be so much in love, or, at least, have a boyfriend. I didn’t. They didn’t believe me. Under pressure I had no choice but to make one up, but I resolutely refused to identify “Him.” After the month by the seashore, I was nicely tanned. For the trip back home, I wore my silky powder blue blouse. The blouse had a lapel style collar which was embroidered in a blue-on-blue eyelet.

I felt pretty and happy. On the train station platform stood the handsome boy we all knew, and in his arms he held a bouquet of flowers. Our eyes met, and he gave the flowers to me. Though I had many chances to ask him whether the flowers were actually intended for me, all I knew was that at that moment they were meant for me.

When I enrolled in the Yiddish school, in Wroclaw in 1946, there were at least 25 to 35 students in each classroom. After 1948, things started to change. The enrollment started to fall off. Practically every day we found someone gone. Leaving the country was illegal, but people found ways. Some were smuggled through to Sweden, some to France, but the majority left for Israel. Even my favorite teacher, Mr. Tentzer was in school today and gone tomorrow.

row. For the longest time we didn't know what had happened to him. He surfaced in Israel.

Only a few went to a trade school after eighth grade. Alek Szafer transferred to a full time music school, I think. Tall, skinny, bespectacled, he looked more of an academic than an accomplished pianist. When in my class, it seemed that he lived for the amusement of pulling my braids. He put on that innocent look and I was the one to be scolded by the teacher for screaming out every time he yanked my braids. When he left, I only pretended to be relieved. I missed his annoying, frolicsome ways. By the time we got to senior year, out of thirty five, there were only eleven of us left.

My mother, Anna Kellerwajs, was born on November 22, 1910. She was the eldest of three. After her came her sister Dora and then Max. My father, Selik Hershfang, was born in Nowy-Dwor on February 2, 1905. Nowy-Dwor Mazowiecki was a small shtetl only some twenty kilometers from Warsaw. His brother, Joseph Hersh, was born in 1902. They had two sisters: Sara-Rywka, and the youngest, Chajcie. Uncle Joseph Hersh emigrated to Havana, Cuba in the early 1920's. Four of my cousins were born there.

Anna married Selik when she was eighteen years old. In 1930 they had a baby boy, and in 1932, a baby girl. I met neither of them. They died before I was born on October 23, 1935. After fourteen years of being an only child, I became a sister. My brother Bajrechl was born on December 26, 1949.

He was such a luxurious baby. His skin was so soft and pink, and he had those deep folds on his wrists, and "pulkes." He had a full head of dark hair. "No wonder that for nine months I had constant heartburn," my mom would say while gently caressing the baby's soft locks. He nursed eagerly and slept well. He was circumcised by the letter of the Jewish rite. My mom cried harder than the baby. "Why does that innocent child have to suffer already?"

My father is rarely home. He travels to smaller towns throughout Lower Silesia to inspect clothing manufacturing places. It is his job, and he likes it. I am in school all day. Six days a week. My mom is home alone with the baby and with all the hard work. Just to keep the apartment warm requires her to go to the base-

ment for coal to kindle the fire in the oven and to keep it going. To warm the water for the baby's bath, she would need to start the fire in the stove. That would require more trips to the slimy, stinky, dark basement for more coal. She carries up the heavy pots and pans filled with water, and places them on the stove top. When the water warms up, she empties it into a tin tub on the floor. The after-bath water she uses for laundering the diapers. The diapers are made from cut-up white bed sheets, and the clothes from assorted fabric remnants.

It is already dark by the first half of March when I get home from school. My neighbor meets me on the staircase.

"Your mom is in the hospital with the baby. He had a hard time breathing."

I go to the hospital. My mom cannot be reassured or comforted. She spends days and nights on a narrow, hard bench in the dim corridor near the baby's hospital room. She nurses my brother at regular intervals, but he gets weaker and out of breath. The sucking becomes a struggle for him. My mom won't let him give up. She desperately flicks at his cute little nose. "Wake up. Eat. Suck. Try. Try." Each time she repeats the plea, it becomes a scream. Her breasts are sore, and the blouse is soaked. She pumps the milk, and donates it for other sick babies. The nurses gladly accept the donation, but for my mom it is no comfort.

My brother took his last breath on March 16, 1950. The white bed sheet kept for diapers became a shroud. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of Wroclaw. The rabbi said a prayer at the gravesite. He stuck a piece of sawed off lumber with the baby's name and the date of his birth and death. My mother's whimpers are only audible to me. To the outside world she was silent. In my heart I knew that we would never again take our leisurely walks for ice cream.

My mom went to the cemetery every single day. The first rain washed away the name from the temporary grave marker. My mom rewrote it. She rewrote it hundreds of times.

"Let's put up a permanent marker."

“He was only three months old,” was my father’s response.

My brother wasn’t the only Jewish boy who died within months of others under similar circumstances. It was indeed discovered that the vaccine, (TB, I think) administered solely to the Jewish boys in this particular hospital, was in fact tainted. There was a trial. A mock trial. Whether it was explicit or not, we heard, “What’s another few dead Jews?” My brother was yet one more casualty of hatred.

The principal of my Yiddish school offered my mother a task he knew she couldn’t refuse. He asked her to start a kitchen in the school so as to feed the children dinner before going home to their empty, cold apartments. She accepted the challenge. The idea of being around children and feeding them greatly appealed to her. There was another important reason for committing herself to a salaried job. She wanted to save up enough money for a tombstone for Bajrechl’s grave.

Rarely, extremely rarely, did I take advantage of the meals made available to all of the students. My mother was the one who prepared, and also served the meals. I didn’t want anyone to think that she might be giving me a larger or better serving. Most students went to the kitchen after classes. I went home hungry.

I didn’t understand it then, but now I do. She must have been hurt by my behavior. She may have thought that I didn’t come to the kitchen because I was embarrassed by her being a cook. I hope she didn’t think that. I was always proud of my mom.

On the corner of Boleslawa Chrobrego, where this street met the town square, was a fish market. Sometimes there were a few smoked fish on display. There weren’t that many takers in spite of the shortage of food. The fish tasted terrible, and it was very expensive. The “counter space,” and most of the space in the store, was occupied by a huge fish tank filled with water. It was always full of water in readiness for the occasional supply of live carp. In Poland, carp was an exceptionally delicious fish.

Long lines for groceries, in those days, were a fact of life. One had to be ready to join a store line as soon as it formed, whether or

not one knew what was on offer, or whether or not one needed it. I lined up when the line was already snaking around both corners of the block. By eyewitness account, carp had been delivered just minutes ago. The line had begun to form hours earlier. By the time I entered through the door from the outside line into the inside line, there were only a few carp left swimming around in the tank peacefully oblivious to their fate. “Only one carp per person.” No need for the announcement. There was always only one fish per person. I counted up the number of people still in front of me. Then I tried to count the number of stationary carp still in the tank. The count was close. I could have made an error in the count. Was I waiting for nothing? Will there be a carp left for me when my turn came?

A two hour wait paid off this time. There were still two carp. I politely asked for the considerable larger of the two. The salesman reaches for the smaller one as if in spite. He puts it on the scale and reads the weight precisely at the moment the fish landed in the scale bowl after a high jump. This must have added at least half a kilo to its weight. I had no say about it. But, in a loud and clear voice, I asked, “Is the fish fresh?” The salesman looked up and gave the kind of stare which said, “Are you nuts?” I take the fish home, at which point the many hours of laborious production of gefilte fish would ensue.

My mom made the best gefilte fish. Before the fish was even handled, one had to light the oven. Coal had to be brought from the basement, and twigs and newspaper pieces gathered. Before the coal started to smolder, there may have been three, four or more tries to light the match and attempts at blowing on the flame. There was no refrigerator. The only gadgets were a small wooden board, a knife, a cleaver in an advanced state of dullness. My mom didn’t use the meat grinder because “it drew all the juices out of the flesh.”

The carp was brought home as it was caught. Whole, unscaled, and alive. It was wiggling its way out of the sheet of newspaper it was wrapped in. The preparation for cooking began right away and continued well into the night. The fish was scaled with a knife. Scales would fly off in all directions and stick to every surface in the kitchen including the ceiling. The live fish was jump-

ing and twitching. Two small surgically precise incisions were made on the belly. One was in front of the pelvic fin, the other at the anus. This way the insides could be pulled out without damaging the gall sack. A broken gall bladder would instantly contaminate the entire fish making it bitter and inedible. At this point, the fish was still showing signs of life, its mouth opening and closing. The whole fish, with the belly skin intact, was now cut up in slices (steaks). The head went into a large pot of boiling water in which sliced carrots and onions were perfuming the entire apartment.

The two sections of flesh of each slice were cut out carefully and were chopped painstakingly with a cleaver. Onions were also chopped together with the pieces of fillet. When this was practically a mush, raw eggs, bread crumbs, salt, pepper and a pinch of sugar were incorporated. The fillers made enough to fill the three holes in each slice. The filling was patted with wet hands to make the filled slices smooth and even, and then carefully eased into the bubbling broth. Approximately one and a half hours later, the slices were slid onto a platter, and garnished with a slice of carrot. The broth was poured into a jar, and in hours, even without refrigeration, it jelled.

My father would wake up at three or four in the morning to check on the state of the fish. He would surely have a slice for breakfast and for dinner. He would also have the head. I jealously watched him devour the fish-head, leaving a very puny pile of flat bones. I would have liked, just once, to have tasted a head, but there was always only one fish, and the head always went to my father.

## Thirteen: Wroclaw 1954-1957

I graduated from high school in 1954. Eleven of us were together in the same class since after the war, but there was no fanfare or party or even picture taking. We received our diplomas in the school assembly hall.

At home though, my mom was waiting for me with a gift. It was a watch. My first watch. And it was a beauty! A Swiss-made Tissot in white gold. The gently curving dome-like crystal slightly magnified the watch face. My mom had bartered for it with a smuggler. He asked to be paid in dollars for it. Twenty-dollars. My mom had only \$16. They were hidden in the bottom drawer of the armoire under my shoes from Argentina. The sixteen single dollars had come one by one included in letters from my Uncle Joe Hershfang from Chicago. The four dollar shortfall was finally agreed to be made up by my father's tailoring for the smuggler.

With my diploma, I could have gone to medical school or any other. All I really wanted, since third grade was to become a judge. I was convinced that I could instill justice, fairness and lawfulness in the entire world. Somebody should be able to do it. Why couldn't it be me? A realistic person summed up my choice: A woman! A Jew! A judge! In Poland! I never really wanted to be anything else, so if not a judge, I didn't much care what other profession I chose. On a whim, I applied to the University of Technology of Wroclaw. The Department of Biomedical Engineering sounded really smart.

Hundreds upon hundreds of students filled the enormous auditorium for the math test. Vigilant assistants were monitoring the mass of nervous eighteen year-olds. I was calm and collected only until the first student had turned in his paper and walked out. I was nowhere near the end of the test. I lost my concentration and began to make errors. I still finished the test ahead of time.

Most of us waited for the others to come out in order to compare notes:

“How did you do?”

“What answer did you come up with for number 3?”

“What Method did you use to solve this problem?”

“No way! You couldn’t possibly have solved it without using calculus.”

The smug graduate of a technical high school shrugged his shoulders. I was close to tears. A nervous churning in my stomach sent me running down the mile-long corridor in search of a wash-room. I was accepted. The “calculus” guy wasn’t. In addition to me, seven more girls and one-hundred and thirty boys would be starting the freshman year in the fall of 1954. The boy to girl ratio looked good to me!

I was not prepared for all the labs and for all the workshops, and for technical drawing, and for classes in technology of metals which were all in my program. I didn’t even know how to ignite a Bunsen Burner in the chemistry lab, but my partner knew his way around the lab. I did all the mathematical calculations. He did all the experiments. And we were both happy.

Even before I started classes in the fall of 1954, I was selected to represent the university as a guide to the International Youth Festival in Warsaw. It was an exciting summer for me. I was assigned a dorm room near the newly erected Palace of Culture and Science. In the Office of the Festival, I was given a map of the city, a free meal card and a badge. The badge was a metal pin with GUIDE engraved on it. GUIDE I pronounced as goo-ee-dé, and nobody corrected me.

I asked about my duties and obligations.

“You be a translator.”

“Ah?”

“OK.”

I was ecstatic when I found out that there was a large Israeli delegation. I blissfully allied myself with them, and we developed an instant camaraderie. We were all Jews! Our mutual language was nonverbal. Most of the Sabras (native born Israelis) spoke Hebrew, Arabic, and English. I spoke Polish, Russian, and Yiddish. My badge opened the doors for them to every important and sought after venue. I got them in to watch the Russian Ballet perform “Swan Lake.” I got them into the indoor ice-skating rink. Anything they wanted to see or hear, they did. They asked me to march with them in the Big Parade, under the Israeli flag.

I didn’t want it to end.

## Fourteen: Mom is Sick

More than at any other time, things do not seem right at home. My father still travels to surrounding areas inspecting clothing manufacturers. I live at home but am swamped with college work. Tuition is free, but everything else is the responsibility of the students.

School supplies cost money. I need paper for technical drawings – lots of it. I need a set of compasses, T-squares, rulers and pencils. I need textbooks. These are very expensive. I do without them. Just like in high school I try to take good notes, and I ask other students to let me copy the assigned homework questions from their textbooks. Kids who live in the dorms have it somewhat easier. I feel isolated.

My mom mourns the loss of the baby. Five years after his death, and her pain doesn't seem to abate. She still goes to the cemetery often and especially after a rain when she knows that the markings on the piece of wood at his gravesite would be washed away. She always carries a pen-marker in her purse.

The migraine headaches are a nightmarish affliction, and my mom suffers. She also has very high blood pressure, and there is no medication to control it. She is aware of the consequences of uncontrolled hypertension, but there is nothing that she can do about it. She occasionally uses some home remedies but neither the slices of raw potatoes applied to the head for migraines, or the leeches to suck out some blood to relieve high blood pressure, help. My mom values and encourages higher education, so there is nothing unusual when she repeats the need for me to have a profession. "Have a profession. It will be wonderful if you will not have to work, but if you need to work, you should be prepared."

What is really odd is that she starts to collect goose down for two comforters for me. She is also making contacts with people who are in the know of how to secure a visa for me to France or

Sweden, all of which were illegal. Why the sudden urgency? It sounds ominous to me.

“Mama I don’t want you to die. I want to die before you.”

“Silly girl. It is the way of nature for a parent to die before her child. There is no worse grief in the world as for a parent to endure the loss of a child.”

My father is admitted to the hospital, where he is diagnosed with gallstones. He stays for tests. Every day my mom leaves the house before dawn in order to catch the first tram of the day to the hospital. She carries a thermos of warm milk and a snack. My father expects it. Breakfast to the patients is served at around 7:00 a.m., and he wakes up earlier and is hungry.

It is September 17, 1955. My father is still in hospital waiting scheduling for the gallbladder surgery. My mom wakes me out of a deep sleep.

“Are my eyes bloodshot?” she asks me.

“Yes.”

“I don’t feel right. I know what it is. Let me die. I don’t want to be a burden. Finish college.”

She returns to her bed, lies down, and lets go of all inhibitions.

Her breathing is laborious, and she is making a loud, snoring sound. It is night. The corner post office is closed, and I have no other access to a phone. I run over to a neighbor. I wake them and beg them to stay with my mom while I run to the nearest hospital. A schoolmate of mine, who was in medical school, happened to be on duty in the emergency room that night. He requested an ambulance, and came with me to transport my mom to a major hospital. He doesn’t give me any hope for my mom’s survival. His guess, which turned out to be correct, was that my mom had suffered from a massive brain hemorrhage.

The doctors attached a glucose drip to her arm. They put an oxygen mask over her nose and mouth, and they leave. I tug at every white tailcoat that passes.

“Do something! You left her alone! Don’t let her die!”

I hear one doctor say to another, “If we had blood plasma available, we could have tried that.”

I sprint in search for plasma. I had to do something! One pharmacist tells me that a university hospital may store some plasma, but they keep it to use to treat serious burn victims. A lab technician (a girl who once attended my Yiddish school) recognizes me. I plead with her to give me the plasma for my mom.

“It would be stealing.”

“But my mom is dying.”

“I could go to jail.”

I was standing there helpless, tears rolling down my cheeks. Then she took me by the hand, and walked me through a basement labyrinth to a storage room, unlocked the door and disappeared. It wasn’t easy to find my way through the intricate passageways of the hospital basement concealing a gallon of stolen plasma under my coat. Nobody stopped me.

The doctor was stunned when I handed him the bottle of blood plasma. I wouldn’t save my mom, but I had done something. I would have donated an organ had I been asked. My mom never regained consciousness. Three days later her heart stopped, and so did time. She will remain forty four years old, forever. I had all but forgotten my father. He was probably wondering about the pre-dawn deliveries of his pre-breakfast snacks which had stopped coming.

For the zillionth time in my life I wished that I wasn’t an only child. The benefits were few, if any. The burdens – too many. I did have the sense to know that even if my two brothers and my sister were alive, I still would have been dealing with one-hundred percent of

the pain in my losing our mother. So too would each of my siblings. It would not have been that each of us would have had to deal with only twenty five percent of the pain. It is the same with love. When you have three children, you love each a hundred percent, not at thirty three and a third percent. The grief and the sadness wouldn't have been less, but life in mourning would have been more bearable with siblings. I could have gone to visit my father only once or twice a week instead of every day. I could have been standing in line for food only once or twice a week instead of every day. I could have had a shoulder to cry on or to laugh. I wouldn't have been so terrified of going back to the apartment to face the clean-up if I weren't alone. But I was all alone.

My father left the hospital for a few hours, and we buried my mom. He went back to the hospital to wait to be scheduled for the gallbladder surgery. My father requested that Dr. Bross perform the surgery. Dr. Bross, whom my father had never met or talked to, was a visiting professor from the Department of Surgical Sciences of the Medical School of Sweden, in Stockholm. He came to the University of Wroclaw Hospital to showcase his skills in a couple of complex surgeries. He couldn't be bothered with something that any other surgeon was well qualified to do. But my father wouldn't hear of entrusting his gallbladder to just any surgeon, and I was the chosen one, hand-picked by my father, to convince the doctor to cut out my father's gallbladder.

This major teaching hospital had the most modern equipment for that time, and the best trained doctors and nurses, and engaged in the most avant-garde research. My father was a very healthy man. Truly, any surgeon in this hospital was very well qualified to take a healthy man's gallbladder out, but not according to my father.

I am into my second year of studies with an extensive and arduous curriculum, and I am falling behind. I don't take over my mom's pre-dawn delivery of warm milk in a thermos, and a nosh, but I am in the hospital every day. Every which way he can, my father lets me know that unless Dr. Bross performs the surgery, I'll be left an orphan. With my mom's death, I am an orphan already.

It is October. It's cold in the apartment. I have no money to buy coal. Some evenings I go to my friend Hela's house. She lives across the street a block or two up. We've known each other for many years. She is a smart girl, and she knows how close I was to my mom, so there isn't any need for me to explain how lonely and how sad I am. I also appreciate the times when I am invited to join them for a meal. Their potato latkes were the best.

My father does not budge. It is Dr. Bross or . . .

I am respectful of people who hold high and esteemed positions in society, but, at the same time, I am not star-struck. I may even be in awe of such people, but never intimidated by them. I have a way of talking myself out of being intimidated. Sometimes I'll even chuckle at my thoughts.

"They walk one foot in front of the other, just like me."

"They eat and they may not even have good table manners."

"Their expelled intestinal gases stink just as bad as those of any mortal."

But how do I get through to somebody who is either lecturing, doing surgery, and in between is surrounded by a crowd? One day, accompanied by many doctors and followed by a gaggle of students, Dr. Bross was making his hospital rounds. By borrowing a white coat, I made myself inconspicuous amid the crowd of eager students. When Dr. Bross solicited questions, my hand went up as did at least a dozen others. He pointed to my raised hand. It startled me. I had no question to ask. One needs to know something on the subject to be able to ask a question. I knew nothing, but I felt compelled to make contact with the doctor. My impromptu question must have been so outlandishly incoherent that he probably thought that I knew something that he didn't. Not surprisingly, he had no answer to my "question," but it got me invited to observe his "show and tell" surgeries for which he was scheduled. I was still clueless as to how this or anything at all would help me get Dr. Bross to do the surgery for my father. I asked an upperclassman, who was sitting next to me, "How could the surgeon leave the operating room in the middle of the

surgery?” “Surgeons are addicted to coffee, so they leave to have a cup in the back room,” he said. I didn’t know whether he was pulling my leg or not, but I didn’t care because I had an idea.

Once upon a time, my Uncle Joe from Chicago sent us a care package. In it was a can of Maxwell House coffee, which my mom had never opened. Coffee was practically impossible to get at that time in Poland. This coffee went to Dr. Bross. He was elated and agreed to take my father’s gallbladder out. Coffee for a gallbladder.

## Fifteen: To Israel

Pete and I got married in September of 1956. I wasn’t quite, 21, he 24. A short five months later we were on our journey to Israel. We seized an opportunity to leave Poland.

We left, with many other immigrants by train. Passing through Czechoslovakia, the train would only stop to pick up security agents who would check and recheck everyone’s passports and other bits of documentation. Mostly though, they seemed to be interested in each person’s possessions. They thoroughly searched suitcases, knapsacks, violin cases, pockets – everything. People were known to conceal their jewelry and foreign currency in violin cases. The valuables were confiscated when found. When the secret of hiding the “contraband” in violin cases came out, people started to hide their valuables in their hollowed-out shoe heels. We smuggled a salami and cigarettes. Pete was a smoker. I don’t think that a salami and a few packages of Chesterfields were considered confiscatable items, so we got to keep them.

From Czechoslovakia, we entered Austria. In Vienna, we were transported from the train to a Hotel. We stayed there a few days, got to see a little bit of the city and get a taste of a different world. I saw the new cars displayed in clean and well lit showrooms. “Do you mean that if I had money I just could have gone in and bought a car?” I asked. Every few steps there was a café. The variety of torts was unbelievable. Vanilla and chocolate flavored ice cream were only two of at least a dozen of other flavors.

From Vienna, again by train, we headed to Genoa, Italy. By the time we made it to Italy, it was Passover. It was the end of March of 1957. Neither “Zion” nor “Shalom” would be operational during Passover. We would have to wait in Italy for after the holiday.

Daily, Jewish immigrants had been arriving in Genoa from Eastern Europe. The designated hotels there in which rooms had been reserved and paid for by HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) were already filled to capacity when we arrived. A few young

couples were sent to Nervi, an hour or so outside Genoa. The road to Nervi was bumpy and I was getting sick. The Italian taxi driver stopped at a roadside bar and he bought me a whiskey and made me drink it. I never had whiskey before or any other hard liquor. The whiskey had that hospital smell of camphor and I hated it but it did settle my stomach. The rest of the ride along the Mediterranean coast was a breeze. Nervi was on the Italian Riviera. The hotel was more like a family estate than a standard structure of long corridors and 10 x 10 single rooms. Our room had a private bath and the floor to ceiling wall of windows overlooked a park. When I stuck my head out the open window I could see the waves of the sea. I could hear the waves of the sea. They lulled a displaced person to sleep.

In the group of the immigrants who stayed in the same hotel in Nervi were three other couples from Poland and one couple with a three-year-old daughter from Russia. We met at every meal in a sunny, elegant dining room of the hotel. The cute freckled carrot-top introduced herself as “Kapustka” (mini cabbage head). Her parents, she claimed, told her that they found her in a cabbage patch. They actually did tell her this. “Kapustka” was delighted with everything she saw. She was fascinated by each of the many different shapes of pasta served daily. We were all astonished by an incredible variety of macaroni in an amazing number of forms, shapes and sizes. If it wasn’t spaghetti it was vermicelli, ziti, capellini, fettuccine, manicotti, mostaccioli, lasagna, orecchiette. Although we, the adults, didn’t allow ourselves to squeal in delight as Kapustka did. There was always a bottle of S. Pellegrino natural mineral water on the table to share. It felt so luxurious. I wasn’t even disappointed when I found out that the designer bottles were actually filled with tap water. I was sure though that the Reggiano Parmigiano was real. It tasted sooo good. I used a lot of it on pasta. I even sprinkled it on pane bianco rolls.

It was early April and the chills of March gave way to balmy mornings. The beach was deserted. Too early in the season for vacationers. I rather enjoyed having the beach all to myself, but I was not disappointed when I spotted two handsome young Italian men. They were digging for clams in the rocky stretch of the shore and they responded to my inquiring look. “Frutti di mare” one of them

said, pointing to his handful of clams. “Buono, mangiare, delizioso” said the other offering me a raw clam right out of the shell.

“Grazie,” I said using up one of a single digit number of my Italian words. It didn’t take them more than a second to figure out that I didn’t know Italian, but the “conversation” went on uninterrupted. Pointing to the wedding band on my right hand the Italian said with a sad face “marito morte?” I noticed that his wedding band was on his left hand ring finger. He was too young to be a widower, but at twenty-one years-old, so was I. I gazed at the sun-illuminated blue waters of the Mediterranean when the Italian continued “Morte in Mare?” As wonderful as the company was, I felt really dumb not knowing the language. “Ciao,” I said feeling sorry for myself. In a week or two I’ll be in Israel. I didn’t know any Hebrew. I needed a dose of optimism. Where would I find it?

## Sixteen: Israel

We disembarked from the ship in the port city of Haifa, Israel on May 7 of 1957. The trip from Genoa, Italy to Haifa was a blip. I only remember the overwhelming fear that I was feeling. Pete wasn't too talkative either. Neither of us had anyone in Israel to turn to in case of need. "Things will work out somehow" wasn't a viable plan. Will I ever be anchored anywhere? I was just 21 years old and already uprooted so many times. Will Israel be it? I hoped so. The celebrations on the streets of Haifa during Israeli Independence Day on our arrival gave me a temporary lift.

There was music and people were dancing in the streets. There were groups of Jewish policeman and Jewish soldiers. Mothers, leaning out from the windows of their apartments were calling their children for the night. "Yoyné" "Moyshle" "Rywkele" "Khanele" "Yosele" "Sarele." The names sounded so sweet.

There was one other thing that made me hopeful. I saw a family of six strolling down a street. Each of their four children had been enjoying an ice cream bar. In Italy, two scoops of gelato cost us four packs of chesterfields. I was thinking that if ice cream here in Israel is just as expensive as it was in Italy, and if a couple of Israelis could afford to buy an ice cream bar for each of their children, than everything is fine with the world. Things will work out for us also.

A few days worth of bureaucratic paperwork and we were off to an Ulpan- a Hebrew language immersion program. We were assigned to Maayan Baruch Kibbutz in the Northern Galilee. We took the bus and were forewarned not to look out the window when the bus winds through the serpentine roads in the hilly terrain of the upper Galilee. The Israeli bus drivers are legendary.

One of the many stories told by a passenger on the bus:

"A famous Rabbi goes to heaven to meet his maker. He sits in the waiting room hour after hour, waiting for his sins to be weighed

against his good deeds. The line moves very slowly. All of a sudden, he sees a new fellow come in, go straight to the head of the line, get weighed and sent straight to Eden. Now, the rabbi, who has been very patient, gets up, dusts himself off and goes to complain. 'Who was that fellow that he got such treatment while I have been sitting here for hours?'

'Why, he's an Israeli bus driver.'

'What?!' the Rabbi says, 'How could it be that a man like that waltzes right in, immediately gets weighed and sent right through the Pearly Gates while I, a famous rabbi, the leader of a large congregation, am kept waiting for hours in doubt?'

'Well', the angel tells him 'It's really quite simple. When you get up to make a speech, you cause hundreds of people to fall asleep. But when an Israeli bus driver sits down to drive his bus; he causes forty people to pray!'

The busses run on a precise schedule. They have to. The roads are paved but very narrow. They are merely wide enough to accommodate one bus. People who sit on the drivers' side could have touched the rocky wall of the mountain if they could dare to open a window. People who sat across could see nothing but the sky and a way below, and far away, landscape. On either side of the bus the road under was not visible to the passengers.

Maayan Baruch was built on a frontier, as were most of the kibbutzim. This one was on the northern most tip of Israel, between Lebanon and Syria. Although it was a period of relative peace between Israel and Lebanon, we could see the Lebanese soldiers postured on their elevated terrain to snipe at us at any time.

One day a bullet from the mountaintop snuffed out the life of Eitan. Eitan was a member of the Kibbutz. He was a young single man, still a boy really. We never saw him off his tractor. He was plowing and sowing and gathering. He toiled with inexhaustible verve.

I was told tales of some of Eitan's antics. I heard that for years he would sneak out at night and he would plow under an inch or

two of arable Lebanese land and incorporate it into the Kibbutz's property. After his death, I saw no outward signs of mourning by his friends or by Kibbutz members. I struggled to understand this kind of behavior. I was also troubled when I found out that the Kibbutz had an elaborate bunker system.

Memories! They are easily triggered and they are so vivid, still.

I panic and I tremble just at the thought of having to go into a bunker again.

We the Ulpan People, work very hard and study the Hebrew Language, not so hard. After four hours of labor we are too exhausted to sit through four hours of study of a foreign language. We are all young. Pete at 24 and I at 21 are the oldest of the group, but some doze off in the classroom. Pete works in the chicken coup primarily. I work with young children. Children live separately from their parents. Some parents would, occasionally, pick up their children for dinner. Some parents would sometimes just pop –in to say hello to their kids.

Specially assigned Kibbutz members take care of member's children from the day they are born to the day they graduate from elementary school. For high school they go either to another kibbutz which has a high school or to a nearby large city. A group of three and four-year-olds was to be my responsibility. I bathed them, dressed them, and fed them. After a meal, which normally consisted of sticky pasta squares, it was absolutely necessary to hose them off. The pasta was everywhere. I actually had to use the garden hose to clear the pasta off of the toys and the table and off of the floor.

Weeks into our Kibbutz life – it happened. An alarm had sounded. There was a skirmish on the border. The children were torn from their sleep and herded into the bunker. They were all crying and asking for their mommies and daddies. I had enough room in my arms and heart for the entire group of "my kids." It was a tight hug, and I don't know who needed to huddle more, the children or I.

Pete was accepted into Technion in Haifa in order to complete his studies towards a degree in engineering. We left the Kibbutz Ulpan after three months of a six month program. September was nearing and we still didn't have a place to live anywhere near the Technion.

Eventually after much ado, we were assigned to a tzrif in Kiryat-Khaim. Close enough to Haifa. It was a very good deal for us. The tzrif felt palatial after paying rent (on a loan from Sochnut) for a twin size bed in the living room of an unrelated family that had six children. We had our own front door. We had our own washroom. There was a so – called kitchen corner consisting of a small counter and a sink. The cooking appliance was a kerosene lamp. There was an ice box - literally a box which was somewhat insulated to hold a block of ice. There were windows, real glass windows, which we could open and close at will. There was a shower. No running hot water, but we could put the kerosene lamp under the water tank to heat the water. It took a long time but it was doable.

There were two living spaces in each wooden barrack (tzrif). We shared one wall with our neighbors on the other side of the tzrif. The row of the barracks ran along railroad tracks. The tzrifim were erected as temporary dwellings to accommodate the newly arriving immigrants from Eastern Europe. Because of the limited window of opportunity there was a mass emigration from Eastern Europe. For Israel, in order to absorb the sudden influx of people, it became a task on the order of bailing out the Atlantic Ocean with a teaspoon. Jobs were especially difficult to find. It was not uncommon to see a medical doctor watering plants in parks, or college professors sweeping streets, or a classically trained violinist performing on street corners for spare change. In this environment, I ventured out to find a job.

Pete had one year in front of him to graduate from Technion with an engineering degree. For me to complete my studies it would have taken three more years. So the logic dictated that I'll be the one to support us.

My first stop was the employment agency. Nothing available.

Second stop was the same agency. They accused me of having "some chutzpah."

"We have professors that accept a menial job and you..." I was desperate.

On the third visit in that many days, the clerk wrote out a job assignment. I thought that it was to deceive me. It wasn't. It was a referral for a position in a major hospital in Haifa.

At 6:00 AM on the following morning, I reported to work. I had to get up before 4:30 AM in order to make it on time for my shift. My supervisor (drill sergeant) trainer handed me a mop, a bucket, a basket of soap powders, a stack of rags and led me to a six bed patient room on the men's ward. My assignment was very explicit. I am to pick up every piece of litter from the floor. I am to wipe down every millimeter of the entire baseboard and of the window sills. Then, on to the mopping of the floor – once with soapy water and once with clean water. "Be sure to get every spot under the beds and you have 15 minutes per room." She started the hand on her stop watch and all I could hear, above the chatter and the groaning and moaning in the room, was the ticking of that watch.

The "trainer" will be obligated to write up my performance and assess whether I qualify for the job or not. After an eight hour shift, the extreme physical exhaustion dissipated within hours, but the sound of the "drill-sergeants" voice lingered. Her utterance of the Hebrew words in a guttural German accent made my flesh crawl. In a nightmare, the supervisor came to me as a Nazi Gestapo, kicking me hard with her steel-shank shoes. As bad as the first day at work was, the second day was worse.

"Oops! My robe is untied"

"It's gotten so hot in the room"

"Oops, my blanket slipped"

The third day was unbearable. Some of the sick men (It wasn't a psychiatric ward) were prepared with dirty jokes the very minute I walked into the room to scrub the floors. That night I sobbed my humiliation into my pillow.

Early morning came. The sun won't be rising for another hour or two. I passed the central employment agency which was still

closed, but the line of people waiting for a hope for a job was growing by the minute. The closer I got to the hospital the sicker I felt. I actually threw up and I felt dizzy. My stomach was churning and I was parched. I could not make it inside!

I walked through the streets of Haifa. The sun was just coming out, but was already baking the sidewalks of the city which did not have time to cool from the day before. The cafes started to come alive. The owners were taking out the tables and chairs and opening the umbrellas to shade the customers. The aroma of the very bitter Israeli coffee and of the extremely sweet pastries was in the air over the entire city. It would have been so lovely to sit down under an umbrella with a cup of coffee and have a carefree moment. I touched the coins in my pocket. I had the exact change for a bus fare back.

Pete was already studying in Technion, in his senior year. There was no way around it but to tell him that I didn't report to work today. Pete's reaction would be his predictable "OK, I'll quit school and go to work," which I would take as being more of a threat than that of a kindness.

I had a brown dress on that day. On my feet I had a pair of open-toe sandals, which I wore over heavy roll-top socks. In a bag, I carried a babushka, which was required to wear while I was scrubbing the floors. I had no hopeful thoughts. I was alone amidst crowds of people. I wasn't even reading the names of the streets. I walked in slow motion. Everyone was bumping into me. I was in everyone's way. Everyone else had a purpose. Everyone else was scurrying to get to work on time. For the entire morning, I seemed to have been walking against the human traffic, until I let myself follow a small group of talkative friendly looking people. I followed them into a large office building and told one of them that I needed a job. The group worked in different offices, but all worked for the Board of Education, Northern District.

My Hebrew was what I could learn in three months in Kibbutz, and my "contacts" were not impressed with the fact that I was fluent in Yiddish, Russian, and in Polish languages. Every medical doctor, lawyer, accountant, and teacher from Eastern Europe knew at least those three languages. When I mentioned that I

studied in the College of Engineering and had a lot of Math, they suggested that I try the Payroll Department on the second floor.

Mr. Friedman, a distinguished looking middle aged man, sat behind a huge desk and he looked the part of the head of a department. He emigrated from Johannesburg, South Africa a long time ago. He spoke a wonderful mame-loshen and we were able to communicate. "No, there are no openings, sorry."

I had no specific skills and zero job experience, not counting the three days of washing floors in a hospital. When I was a senior in high school, I tutored a really obnoxious and dumb eighth-grader. She passed but I didn't get paid, as I was promised. The obnoxious child's mother told my Mom that they had a fire (a lie) and they didn't have the money to pay me for the many hours of hard work. Since I wasn't compensated for my work, did it count as work experience? Maybe not, but it certainly counted as life experience.

I really didn't have much to offer and I had no thought as to how to convince Mr. Friedman to hire me, but I didn't go away. Mr. Friedman and I talked. I think that he was delighted to have a chance to use his Yiddish. He missed it. He spoke Yiddish with his parents in Johannesburg, but not since he left home as a young man.

The Payroll Department, all seven of them, was leaving the office for their midday break. They surrounded their boss's desk and staged a campaign.

"We need help this month."

"Ya'akov is taking a week off."

"Calderon will be computing the annual salary increase, which is additional work this month."

"Most of the two-thousand teachers' payroll records are all over the room, unfiled," interjected Gila.

Mr. Friedman, their boss, already on the defensive, deliberated: "She doesn't know how to do the payroll. She doesn't have a refer-

ral from the employment agency. There are many educated and experienced accountants with large families to feed who applied for work here. We just don't have any openings."

"The seven" wasn't giving up.

Mr. Friedman conceded!

"I do have some petty cash. It should be enough for a couple of weeks worth of salary."

I was hired! My assignment was very specific – to file all the folders in alphabetical order. It would have been easy if only I knew the order of the Hebrew letters. After "dalet" I struggled.

Within hours of my first day at work Oved came over with a cardboard tablet on which he'd written out, in large script, the letters in alphabetical order.

I was happy.

The folders, which were scattered all over the office, were quickly clearing. Too quickly.

I never figured out who, but someone started to mess up the folders, so I could stay longer on the job. Ya'acov insisted that I learn how to do the payroll. He was a good teacher and I learned in no time. Although I saw no point in learning how to do a payroll form, I sure would never dismiss an opportunity to learn something new.

I completed my "filing" assignment and the day of "good byes" came.

Ya'acov disappeared before Mr. Friedman finished saying "If only you knew how to work the payroll and could obtain a referral from the employment agency..." Before the day was done, Ya'acov came back to the office waving a work assignment to the cheers of the entire gang. He must have procured the permit from a clerk that he once dated or promised to date. Gila, although some twenty years my senior, and I became good friends. She showed me how to grill a cheese sandwich on the "fireside" in the office.

Anulka was born on December 10, 1958. Entire Israel was celebrating. It was the first day of Chanukah and also Mother's Day. The baby was perfect and beautiful. We named the baby after my Mom. Anna. Anulka is an endearing and diminutive form of Anna. In Israel she was also required to have a Hebrew name – Chana.

Every mother and child in the maternity ward of the Rothschild Hospital in Haifa was presented with Chanukah and Mother's Day gifts. Every gift was welcomed since I had nothing ready at home. My coworkers visited and my "Guava Man" brought the hugest bouquet of flowers and a colorful toy for Anulka. Pete had two younger siblings so he was sure that he'll know what to do with a baby. The first bath proved otherwise. The worst was when I had to interrupt the breast feeding in order to get the ice block when the "ice man" rang the bell early in the morning. I was alone at night when Pete accepted a night-time position at a radio station.

I loved my work and the people I worked with. I worked until the day I left for the USA on January 6, 1961. I left without a goodbye. I was too sad and too embarrassed for farewells. How many times can a person start over?

America exerted such power over people that, once given a chance, no one was able to say no to America. Peter, Anulka, and I are emigrating to the U.S. I truly did not have the illusion of streets paved with gold or that men throw away their shirts once they got them dirty. I no longer believed that Coca Cola was an explosive, although it tasted like tar to me! How could all American women wear a size 10 or 11 in AAA width? I found that football is not the same game as soccer and that Paul Robson after a short love affair with Russian communism, returned to the U.S.

That was about the scope of my knowledge. My ten-year-old neighbor in Israel knew more about America than I. When he found out that we will be living in Chicago, he said "Oh, it is a city which is dark in the day and bright at night."

To me, the primary draw for going to America was family. I longed so much for family. I actually had a real live uncle, an aunt and four cousins. I had photos of all of them which I cherished. I had the photos of Rosita- the princess and Adolph – the prince in their wedding picture. I had Louis' Bar-Mitzvah picture. What a

handsome lad. And Charlie's photo, with his sweet mischievous grin. I was excited in anticipation to meet them all in Chicago and to claim them for my own.

The day of our departure started out with a drenching rain and it continued to be dreary and gloomy without a crack of blue in the all gray sky over Haifa. The port was full of people bidding farewell to their guests who were returning home to the U.S. after a visit or vacation in Israel. On January 6, 1961 the "SS Zion" left the port of Haifa, with Pete, Anulka, and me along with 800 tourists. The ship was to arrive in New York Harbor in two weeks. It would be two long exhausting weeks on the open seas.

The three of us settled into a claustrophobic cabin. We did not intend to spend much time inside the cabin, just to sleep for the night. There were many spaces on board in which to spend the days. The dining rooms were the best used spaces of all. The first breakfast on board filled the dining rooms to over-capacity. The Americans uniformly demanded corn-flakes, stewed prunes, and toast. Some wanted the toasts dark, some wanted them light, and everyone wanted them right away. I didn't even know what toast was. To me, it looked like bread and I couldn't understand the fuss since there was plenty of bread to go around for everyone. It was an awfully noisy breakfast crowd. People were not happy with the slow service and complained to the servers who did a tremendous job of ignoring them all.

The Mediterranean Sea was supposed to be calm, but we were not so lucky. The ship swayed and was tossed by huge, dark waves. The decks were wet and slippery and we were sliding from side to side. Anulka was the first to complain. "Brzuszek boli" (tummy hurts). She was so pale and sad.

There was a stop en-route to the U.S. in Palma. The capital city of Mallorca was beautiful. Cobblestone streets, boutique shops. Many shoe shops. I bought a pair of shoes and a small wooden box. I didn't want to go back to the ship. We were as yet to cross the Strait of Gibraltar and then enter the Atlantic Ocean; a vast open space of water. From Mallorca we were not yet half way to New York, and the Atlantic Ocean, we knew, would be much more treacherous than the Mediterranean.

Pete couldn't understand why on earth anyone would get sick just because the vessel did a little swaying and rocking. He was surprised to have the dining hall practically to himself. The waiters were asking what kind of toast the few hardy souls wanted. Merely a few days into the voyage, the ship's Rabbi was knocking on cabin doors to form a minyan. Out of 800 passengers, he had a hard time to gather 10 not nauseated men.

Pete reluctantly joined. Anulka and I were flat on our backs on the claustrophobic cabin's berths. We ate burned toasts and drank tea for almost two weeks.

A few more days left before we would reach New York. Sick or not, it started to sink in that we didn't really have a plan and we had no clear arrangements for anything at all. My father's messages were vague and inconsistent. Infrequent letters from him to us in Israel had nothing specific about reality. I didn't want to sound ungrateful for his effort to bring us to America, so I did not dare to ask him to be clearer about things like: Will anyone meet us when we get off the boat in New York? How will we get to Chicago? Who do we contact in New York and who will understand us? We knew not a word of English and we had ten dollars to our names. I had my doubts about my father's sincerity and about his motives, but I was chasing the doubts away from my thoughts. My father knew that I always suffered from motion sickness and that I would never go on a merry-go-round and that I never grew out of getting motion sickness. Boat tickets were a little cheaper than airfare. I knew that he resented paying for the tickets in the first place.

Two weeks to the day, we came to land, at last. The day had finally come. America! We really, really are here, a dream of a lifetime come true. Why then was there no happy excitement or anticipation of wonderful things to happen? Was it fear? Experience with the unknown was well known to me. I was intimately familiar with it, but this time the responsibility for uprooting the three of us was mine. It was my family who made the immigration possible and the decision to accept or not was left up to me. From now on, I would be responsible for anything which did not go well. I must have felt it in my bones the minute I saw land. The ship moored. Passengers started to disembark. I did not see the

statue of Liberty on that day. Did I even remember at this time of arrival to look for her? Or, maybe I did search for her but did not see her because of the dense fog and heavy snowfall of the most major snowstorm in the history of New York. The land of our dreams had surely extended us a very cold shoulder. A cab drivers strike was also no small event for New Yorkers.

The day of our arrival was a most memorable day in this grand country's history. No, it was not special because of the arrival of three immigrants with ten dollars between them and one extremely heavy suitcase – its weight attributed to the set of cheap plates packed carefully in some clothes and yucky tablecloths of assorted sizes (wedding gifts). It felt that not a single soul in the entire world gave a damn about us. The day was historical because it was January 20, 1961 – John F. Kennedy's inauguration. A memorable event which will be well recorded with its snow storm, cab driver's strike, Kennedy's swearing in, his not wearing a hat or warm coat. Everything about this day would be written up in detail.

The cab drivers' strike did not affect the three of us at all. The ten dollars in our possession would have not gotten us very far away. The subway could have taken us around New York, but we had no place to go. Our final destination was Chicago. The huge mass of people in the terminal was thinning out. Greeters with flowers and hugs and kisses whisked away the other arrivals to waiting cars, homes, and families. Just an hour or two after the disembarkment the terminal was emptied.

We were the only ones left behind. We were standing there in the middle of a huge terminal. My father assured us in a letter that he worked everything out. I was thinking – Do they let homeless people sleep in the terminal? What about food for Anulka? How would we explain our situation to anyone? The footsteps of a few cleaning people echoed in the vast space. The sounds of metal garbage containers, being dragged and emptied, reflected from the high ceiling and from all the windows intensifying the vastness and emptiness of that place. Hope faded when the last person off the boat was picked-up. The stinging loneliness was unbearable. At this point, the port's terminal was entirely deserted and eerie. How could any single place in New York be so abandoned?

After all, it's a world city. Nothing ever closes in New York – as we were told. As a fact, the entire world thinks that New York is the capital of the United States and life should be going on even if it was the middle of the night. I was trembling more of anxiety than the cold.

Sweetest Anulka wore a green parka with a white fuzzy trim and a hood – the warmest jacket I could find in all of Israel, but it was no match for a New York winter. I had bought a woven shawl before leaving Israel. It was wool with angora woven in a workshop for blind people under the supervision of a Betzalel school graduate. It was a beautiful shawl (I still have it). I wrapped the shawl around Anne and it helped her to keep warmer. On the night when we were already hopelessly abandoned for hours in the terminal, my father called his acquaintances in NY to ask how we were and it was only then that they found out that they were supposed to pick us up. It was already late in the evening when they received the call, they were all tired and a snow storm was raging outside. They did not own a car and the port was a great distance from where they lived. The family's teenage son was delegated to pick us up.

We must have been quite a sight that night. Three poorly dressed, exhausted, nervous immigrants dragging a heavy valise and assorted peklach and zeklakh with a teenage "patron" – a newcomer himself. Outside was a raging storm. This family was kind enough to share their limited living space with us. Some of their friends came over the next morning and wanted to know "How do you like America?" I shudder at the thought now, but on January 20, 1961, if someone had approached us in the terminal and offered us return tickets to Israel, we might have had accepted the offer. Thank G-d, no one had!

Less than three years later, when President Kennedy was assassinated, I cried my heart out, after all, I had a special bond with him.

Two of my three children were born in Chicago and they know that there is no better country in the world, and no city nicer, or prettier, than Chicago in the entire world. I know of no other place I would rather be. For better or worse, it is my home – until death do us part.



The Coat a gift from my grandfather after September 1, 1939



With my parents in 1939



In my mother's arms



Before 1939—my father, the tailor at work with his coal-fired pressing iron



My father, his sister Sara Rywka on his right, my mom, and me in a stroller in Lazienki Park in Warsaw circa 1936



Me, a beginner walker



The early signs of my "green thumb"



This photo of me was taken by foto "Dorys" in Warsaw on August 1, 1937



Me with a stroller and with my elegant mom and with my proud grandfather, Baruch Kellerwajs on a Warsaw street circa 1937



In a park, in Warsaw. Uncle Shmil—always in his favorite beret



My maternal grandma



"Uncle" Shmil in a Polish Military uniform



My father



Three friends—my father in the middle, "Uncle" Shmil on his left and "Uncle" Shmil's younger brother circa 1928



My mom in a hospital surrounded by her parents, her brother with fiancée, her sister, and me in my father's lap



My mom with my father and "Uncle" Shmil, 1935 or just before



My third grade class in Saratov, Russia in 1946



The milkman's son and daughter and me in Saratov, 1946. P.S. The length of my skirt wasn't a fashion statement. There was just no more hem to let out.



Me, age seven or eight, in Uzbekistan near Tashkent



The milkman's son and daughter and me in Saratov, 1946.



My mom and me in Saratov in 1946. My mom wearing her black woolen dress made for her in 1929 in Poland.



Everybody's favorite teacher, Mr. Tentzer, seated on the far left



Cywia and I in the white dress with our mothers in the Summer of 1947



My mom and I in Wroclaw in 1947



Me, a teenager



Me, a teenager



Me, a teenager



Me, a teenager



My "Cuban" family received in Wroclaw



My cousin Rosita with Adolph in their wedding picture



My cousin Louis's Bar Mitzvah



My cousin Charlie's Bar Mitzvah



My husband in civilian 1956



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



Summer camps (always by water)



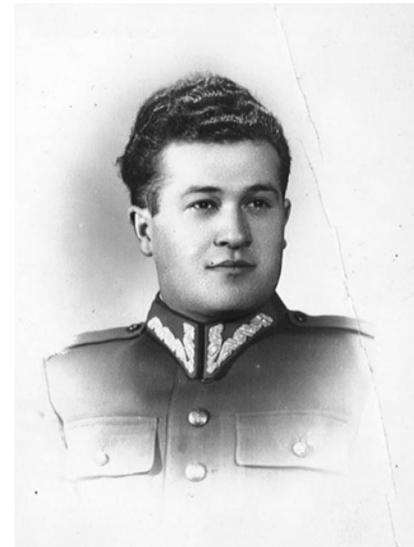
School field trip



"Uncle" Szmil in Argentina



My mom, pregnant with Bajrechl



Not yet my husband, Pinia AKA The Jewish General



My unofficial graduation picture 1954



"Beribboned" high honor students representing the school in a mayday demonstration in Wroclaw, 1952 (likely)



The girls of the class of 1954



"Uncle" Szmil in Argentina



Payroll Dept. Board of Education, Haifa 1957-1960



At the Ulpan in Kibbutz Maayan Baruch, Summer of 1957



Payroll Dept. Board of Education, Haifa 1957-1960



At the Ulpan in Kibbutz Maayan Baruch, Summer of 1957



At the Ulpan in Kibbutz Maayan Baruch, Summer of 1957



Anulka's first 2 years in Israel, Dec 1958-Jan 1961



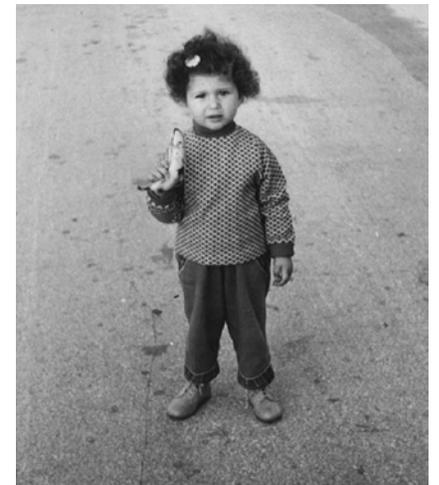
Anulka's first 2 years in Israel, Dec 1958-Jan 1961



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Anulka's first 2 years in Israel, Dec 1958-Jan 1961



Anulka's first 2 years in Israel, Dec 1958-Jan 1961



Leaving the ship for a few hours in Mallorca



Anna's green card photo



First photo in Chicago, Jan 1961



