

SURVIVING IN THE FOREST¹

By Max Mermelstein (Weidenfeld)

*With generous hand a pair of twins
Had G-d bestowed upon us: a slaughter and a spring;
The garden was in bloom, the sun was shining
And the slaughterer was slaying...
“The City of Slaughter”*

–By Chaim Nahman Bialik



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That's how I remember the spring of 1943. It was the morning of the second day of Passover (April 16), when I emerged from the dark and state bunker² after the “action”³ in the ghetto of Borshchov. The bright sunshine hurt my eyes. I walked over to the

¹This chronicle translated from the original Yiddish by the author is dedicated to the blessed memory of his cousin N Nechemia Stock.

² Every hiding place in the ghetto or later in the forest was called a bunker.

window of our crowded ghetto apartment, cautiously pushed aside a corner of the shade and saw a fanner's wagon drawn down the street by two horses. Piled upon the wagon helter-skelter were blood covered human corpses with stiff limbs sticking out on all sides, terribly distorted faces and extinguished eyes. The horses were slowly pulling the wagon and its macabre cargo, leaving behind a trail of blood.

The streets of the ghetto were nearly deserted. Only from time to time, groups of Ukrainians with beaming faces were seen carrying away bundles' of Jewish owned goods and furnishings. With aching heart I opened the window a crack and a mild breeze brought to my nostrils the fresh smell of spring and of awakening nature. This was the beginning of the end in the ghetto of Borshchov. The only thing I could not understand was why the sky was so blue and the sun so bright; why a flood of darkness and fire did not engulf this ugly, disgusting world.

After the Passover "action" in the ghetto of Borshchov⁴ all our hopes and illusions about our possible liberation by the victorious Red Army were shattered. Notwithstanding the devastating defeats of the Germans at Stalingrad, the front lines were still very far away from us. In the meantime the beastly enemy was systematically destroying us. Every one of us who was still alive knew that he was condemned to death, and that it was only a matter of days, weeks, or perhaps months, before he would face the moment of execution. Only our animal instincts drove us to desperately seek a way to survive, to hide and to avoid the brutal end.

It became obvious to us at the time, that it was no longer possible to hide and survive in the ghetto, where almost everyone had some sort of bunker or hiding place that eventually proved, to be worthless. As the Passover massacre confirmed, bunkers and other hiding places had been discovered and compromised en

³ A euphemism used by the Germans for the mass roundups and executions of Jewish men, women and children in Nazi occupied Europe

⁴ During this massacre close to 800 Jewish men and women were rounded up by the Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators and brazenly, in broad daylight, machine gunned and buried in a mass grave on the local Jewish cemetery

masse. Some of the Skala survivors in the ghetto of Borshchov, especially the young, started to look for ways to escape. Although it was forbidden under the threat of death to leave the ghetto, Skala Jews, singly and in small family units, began to sneak out. Where did they go? Back to Skala of course, where some had hopes of finding shelter with friendly gentiles. At the beginning of this clandestine exodus, once they reached Skala, they surreptitiously moved back into their own empty and abandoned homes to temporarily hide in their familiar attics and basements.

On the eve of the Shavuot holiday, at the end of May, 1943, almost six weeks after the Passover massacre, I too decided to sneak out of the Borshchov ghetto and return to Skala. My main purpose at the time was to find a friendly peasant in Skala, dispatch him to Borshchov with his wagon and horses in order to smuggle out of the ghetto my ailing father and bring him back to Skala. One day I spotted in the market place of Borshchov a peasant from the nearby village of Gushtyn, who agreed for a sum of money, to smuggle me out of the ghetto in his wagon and take me to Skala.

My father accompanied me to the marketplace where the peasant was waiting for me. We nervously walked through the ghetto streets in silence. I saw tears and desperation in my father's eyes. The combination of my mother's passing, barely four months earlier, at the end of February 1943, and his subsequent illness during the typhus epidemic in the ghetto, had left him physically and emotionally devastated. We had no news from my brother Joshua, who was then in a German POW camp, and now my father was about to part with me too, his only remaining son. I was beginning to have a change of heart about my decision to leave and said to him: "What do you say, Dad, should I go?" He looked at me with his sad blue eyes and said: "My child, do what your heart tells you to do." I knew that the only hope to save my father and myself was outside of the ghetto. After we hugged and kissed I got into the peasant's wagon. The horses pulled away and the wagon rolled ahead. Seconds later, when I turned my head, I still saw my father in the distance following me with his eyes. That was the last time I

saw my father. I was then only 17 years old.

Unbeknownst to me, a day or two prior to my surreptitious departure from the Borshchov ghetto, two of my first cousins, Malcia and Nechemia Stock, also sneaked out of the ghetto and made their way back to Skala. We met there in the depressing emptiness of the house our two families shared, since it was built in the 1920's, up to our expulsion from Skala 7 months ago. Meeting and joining up with these two cousins I grew up with and felt very close to, slightly lifted my very depressed and miserable mood. My first and most important task upon arrival in Skala was to contact a local peasant and arrange for him to drive to Borshchov next morning and bring my father back to Skala, which is what I did. Unfortunately, next morning when the peasant arrived in Borshchov, the ghetto was already surrounded by German and Ukrainian murder squads, and the so-called "Shavuot action" was already in progress. It started on June 5, 1943, the second day of the month of Sivan on the Jewish calendar. Over the course of that week, several thousand ghetto residents—men, women and children from Borshchov, Skala, Mielnitsa, Korolovka, Jezierzany and surrounding villages—who had been crowded into the ghetto in the Fall of 1942, were systematically rounded up, marched under guard to the Jewish cemetery, machine-gunned in broad daylight and buried there in mass graves.

That week—during one of the periodic pauses in that massacre—my cousin Nechemia and I decided to go back to Borshchov, sneak back into the ghetto and find out what happened to our dear ones, my father Solomon, his mother Eta and sisters Sarah and Rysia. Somehow we could not believe that our loved ones were no longer alive. The open, empty bunker in which all four were hidden and the plundered rooms covered with feathers up to our ankles confirmed our worst fears and our tragedy. Heartbroken and resigned from life, we returned to Skala. Miraculously we were not apprehended and shot on the way to or from Borshchov.

For a week or two, deeply depressed and despondent, we roamed Skala at night seeking a roof over our heads and a place to hide in

the empty basements and attics of our former homes. What we found there were only other single survivors like ourselves. Fear and hunger drove us from one abandoned house to another and from one attic to another. On the hard, cold floor we slept one night, we were afraid to spend another night. We were afraid to go back to the same peasant who had given us a piece of bread the night before, as a neighbor or even he himself might turn us over to the murderers. Our lives were cheap and worthless. Often, looking out through the cracks of our hiding places we were envious of the domestic pets and animals and of the birds, which unlike us were un-perturbed and free to move around in the light of day.

However, our bloodthirsty enemies did not rest. As soon as they found out that surviving Jews were hiding in basements and attics, they started to pursue and kill us. The heavy boot steps of Ukrainian policemen hunting for Jews echoed day and night through the empty, lifeless streets of Skala, heralding the nearing end. Every crack of a rifle shot signaled another extinguished Jewish life and that the same fate awaited us, a minute, an hour or a day later. Driven by the raw instinct of self-preservation and fear, we decided in the middle of a star-studded summer night at the end of June, to abandon the basements and attics we were hiding in and escape to the forest near Skala. We had no idea what to expect in the forest, where and how to hide there and how to survive, but our instincts told us that the wide expanse of forest trees and underbrush would shield us from the human beasts that pursued us.

We were a handful of just-orphaned and depressed young men and women, all survivors of massacred families. At 17, I was the youngest in the group. My cousins Malcia and Nechemia were respectively 18 and 20 years old. Then there were the Schwartzbach brothers, Meir 19 and Zunie 20. Dora Feuerstein at 28 was the oldest. We were standing in the open doorway of our house and looked out in silence into the clear and starry night. The deadly quiet of the empty Jewish streets and houses with open doors and smashed windows, cast their frightening shadows. From the nearby orchards and fields came the scent of trees in bloom and the sweet

smell of honeysuckle. With parched mouths and subdued breaths we listened to the heavy steps of the German and Ukrainian night patrols and to the pounding of our own hearts. When the steps of the night patrols faded in the darkness and the moon hid behind a passing cloud, we tiptoed single file, passed the synagogue building and empty houses, down narrow streets and through orchards, making our way to a steep ravine where a narrow stream, called “potik” in Yiddish, snaked its way to the river Zbrucz below.

After crossing the stream we started to climb up the hill on the other side of the ravine, where standing on the edge, one next to the other, were farmers’ dwellings and barns. Suddenly the dogs of the neighborhood picked up our scent and started to bark from all sides. Lights appeared in some windows and sleepy, angry peasant voices were heard in the darkness. A cold sweat covered my body from head to toe. I was out of breath, exhausted from days of hunger, anxiety and depression. My weak legs refused to budge and I got stuck in the middle of the hill, unable to move. Then I heard someone calling my name in a hushed voice and felt a friendly hand on my shoulder. It was my cousin Nechemia, who picked me up and pulled me up the hill. We swiftly moved together in the darkness, away from the peasants’ houses and barking dogs. As we got further away, walking through the open fields, the black contours of the forest grew sharper and larger before our eyes. At night, from a distance, the forest looked very threatening, filling our hearts with apprehension and fear. But the fears that drove us into the forest were much stronger and more tangible than the visual impressions. As soon as we reached the forest and got used to its inner darkness, exhausted, we collapsed on the hard, wet forest floor, and huddled together, dozed off between the trees and the underbrush.

It took several weeks before we got acquainted with the forest and adjusted to our new environment. Our scarred souls and terrible experiences that we brought with us from the Borshchov ghetto massacres and the street executions in Skala were so fresh in our minds that the first few weeks we lay in the forest underbrush

and hardly dared to move. Every rustle of the trees, or whistle of the wind or call of a bird, made us freeze up, hold our breath, and strain our eyes and ears like hunted animals. But the thirst and hunger on the one hand and the cold, rainy nights on the other, forced us out of the forest at night in search of some shelter, food and water. The strong and courageous among us ventured out at night to the edge of the forest, and from there sneaked across the open fields to a friendly peasant in the nearby settlement of “Mazury”⁵ or even beyond into the farming area of old Skala in order to buy or beg for some bread, cooked beans or a bundle of corn flour. At night we also began to meet other survivors who like ourselves, managed to get out of the Borshchov ghetto, came back to Skala and eventually, also made their way to the forest. That is how our forest colony grew from a few dozen people in June 1943 to about 150 men, women and children by mid-August, 1943, who spread out over various sections and ravines of the forest and held on for a while to this last refuge.

Various scenes and moments from those first days in the forest are etched in my memory. I still feel in my bones the long, cold and rainy nights when we lay huddled on the forest floor, our drenched clothes stuck to our bodies, praying quietly for the rain to stop. It was wet and cold inside and out and the feeling of desperation and hopelessness was overwhelming. The pangs of hunger hurt and our parched mouths demanded relief. We could not fall asleep in the mud so we sought shelter every few hours in an abandoned shepherd’s hut at the edge of the forest. As soon as dawn began to break we abandoned the hut and went back into the wet density of the forest. Finally, one morning after almost ten days of uninterrupted rain, an embarrassed sun peeked through the tree branches. We then removed our clothes, wrung them out and left them hanging on the trees to dry slowly in the sun. Meanwhile, our empty stomachs persistently kept demanding their due, but the fear of the unknown forest paralyzed our minds and bodies.

⁵ A settlement of Polish colonists from Western Poland encouraged by the government to settle in our predominantly Ukrainian region, in order to “Polonize” it.

We looked at each other in desperation and silence not knowing what to do. The answer was provided by my cousin Nechemia. He picked himself up from the wet forest floor, threw a drenched jacket over his shoulders and disappeared among the trees. Where he went we did not know. For hours we waited anxiously, not knowing what happened to him. Finally, we heard the rustle of trees and Nechemia reappeared. Without a word, he pulled-out from his bosom a bundle wrapped in a coarse peasant cloth. When he opened it, we saw it was a round cornmeal pudding. With hungry eyes we looked at it in disbelief. Someone gave him a pocket knife and Nechemia cut the cold pudding into small, even, triangular pieces, the way one cuts a birthday cake. With trembling hands each of us picked up a piece of the pudding and swallowed it in a second. This was our first “meal” in the forest.

From ghetto dwellers we quickly turned into forest people. Nature, which at the beginning was very harsh to us, turned out to be kinder than the human beasts that pursued us. Slowly we got to know the forest and with time every path and ravine became familiar. The forest birds and wildlife also got used to us and accepted us as harmless cohabitants. We learned to emulate the various sounds and cries of the birds and used them to signal each other in the thickness of the forest when we called or sought each other.

During the summer months we erected in different sections of the forest primitive shacks that provided us with some shelter in cold and rainy weather. At the same time, we constructed several underground bunkers in which to hide in time of need. In this respect we had already acquired some expertise, first in Skala and then in the ghetto of Borshchov. This experience was quickly adapted to the conditions of the forest and each bunker we built was large enough to accommodate from six to ten people. By mid-summer our group had grown to 15 people. Some members of our original group had left and new ones replaced them.

All built under the forest floor, the bunkers contained concealed ventilation channels and small fireplaces in their forest walls that

enabled us to kindle small fires and cook at night. Most importantly, they were so camouflaged by trees, bushes and leaves that it was quite difficult to spot them. Building hiding places and underground bunkers in different sections of the forest for different seasons of the year was our ongoing preoccupation during the summer and early fall. This was undertaken thanks to the wisdom and guidance of the leaders of our group, Nechemia Stock and Chaim Gottesfeld, who understood that it was too risky to dwell in the same place for extended periods of time. We therefore moved every few weeks from one section of the forest to another, and from one hiding place to another. We were also very careful not to kindle fires in the same section of the forest in which we were hiding, because rising smoke could be seen from afar and would compromise our location. Often, when we managed to gather mushrooms from the forest floor or received some corn flour from a generous peasant, I was charged with the task of going deep into the forest to start a fire and cook there a meal in a World War I trench. In the winter, when the forest was blanketed with snow and it was difficult and dangerous to move around the forest, we cooked only at night. That is, when there was something to cook!

In spite of our desperate situation, hopelessness, hunger and exposure to the elements, life in the forest also had a positive side to it. After our confinement to the stale and choking ghetto bunkers, the wet and cold basements and hot attics, first in Skala and then in Borshchov, the forest provided us with some physical relief and a temporary release from constant fear and tension. The shimmering trees under blue skies, the refreshingly scented forest air and the chirping birds were like a soothing balsam to our aching hearts. The warm sun, the mild summer breezes and the illusion of freedom in nature, especially during the summer months, strengthened us physically and emotionally.

The appearance of Soviet partisans in the forest had also enhanced this feeling and provided us with some rays of hope. Small partisan units of four or five men were passing through our forest on their eastward moves to Russia. We watched them with

admiration and eyed their automatic weapons with envy. Generally the Russian partisans tried to avoid us and refused to accept any of our young men into their ranks. Only two of our men, Moshe Salzman and my friend and classmate Samuel Augenblick, succeeded in joining one of the passing units. Augenblick distinguished himself fighting the Germans on many fronts and returned to Skala at the end of the war. Salzman also survived the war, settled in Israel and died there. In the armed Soviet partisans we saw the first swallows of freedom. They filled our hearts with new hope, while at the same time spreading fear among the Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators, who initially stayed away from the forest.

One summer day, in addition to the Soviet partisans, we also met in the forest a group of our own Jewish partisans, members of the so-called “Ashendorf Band”⁶, which was formed in the ghetto of Borshchov and was active in a forest near the village of Cygany⁷. The “Ashendorf Band” also included two young men from Skala, Joseph Schwarzbach and Shmeryl Yavetz. The others were young Jews from Borshchov, Mielnica and other communities in the area. Some of them wore captured German army uniforms and all carried rifles and pistols. The courageous and determined faces of our boys carrying weapons raised our spirits and ignited fresh sparks of hope in our hearts. We spent a long time with our Jewish partisans, listening to their battle stories, admiringly touching their weapons, and dreaming of freedom and vengeance.

In the summer of 1943 after the great German debacle at Stalingrad, the Soviet armies along the entire eastern front and the partisans behind the front lines had inflicted heavy losses on the German forces. The appearance of partisans in our area and the intelligence the Nazis must have had about Jews freely roaming the forests apparently alarmed them and prompted them into action. Late in August a small German reconnaissance plane appeared over

⁶ Named after its founder, Ing, Wolf Ashendorf, from Borshchov.

⁷ The story of their resistance and heroic end is told in the Hebrew volumes: “Sefer Milchamot Hage'taot”, pp.666-67, and “Milchamot Hapartizanim Hayehudim Bemizrach Europa”, pp. 240-242.

our section of the forest. Circling low above the tree tops, the Germans threw a few grenades that exploded with a big bang, but caused no harm. A few days later a stranger in peasant attire carrying an ax appeared in the forest. He pretended to be a woodcutter and started up conversations with Jews he met. But it was obvious that he was a German agent and his appearance, along with all kinds of rumors that reached us, created an atmosphere of anxiety and tension in our ranks.

Approximately a week before the Jewish New Year at the end of September 1943, on a mild sunny morning, large German army units surrounded the Skala forest. With drawn bayonets, lines of German troops systematically combed every section of the forest. Minutes after we managed to get into our bunkers, we heard their heavy steps and rifle shots above ground. Those from our group, who managed to get into one of our two bunkers in time, were saved. Others who did not and ran ahead of the advancing troops were killed on the spot.

The slaughter in the forest continued until dusk. When darkness fell and silence enveloped the forest, we ventured out of our two bunkers. With me in the first bunker were my cousin, Malcia Stock, Joseph Blutstein with his wife Sarah and their four year old daughter as well as Chaim Gottesfeld with his wife Blima and their infant daughter Beile. The children, as if perceiving the great danger, kept quiet and slept through the ordeal. In the second bunker were Abraham and Sarah Frenkel, Frieda Frenkel and her daughters Mira and Rita, Moses Dunajer, Yehudit Schrantzel and her daughter Nusia and my cousin Nechemia Stock. Aside from those inside the two bunkers, other members of our group who miraculously survived were Finio Frenkel and Ryva Schwartzbach with her two teenage children David and Suzy and an infant. All others who did not manage to get into one of the two bunkers were killed.

It took us several days after the slaughter to find the bodies of the victims and to bury them among the evergreen trees not far from where we were hiding. First we found the bodies of Solomon

Blutstein and Munio Schrentzel. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, following the odor of decomposing bodies, we found behind an evergreen tree, the bodies of Julyk Frankel and the orphaned, 11 year old girl, Fancia Tannenbaum. The bodies of Hersch Schwartzbach and his son, my dear friend Max, were found at the edge of the forest where German bullets hit them and where they were buried by peasants. Many of our people had been camping in the other sections of the forest. Most of them were either captured by the Germans or killed, as they had no bunkers to hide in.

After the bloody forest massacre all our hopes to survive the Nazi nightmare were dashed again. The rains and the deteriorating fall weather that set in added to our desperation and hopelessness. As the trees were shedding their leaves heralding the approaching winter, we were driven underground for shelter from the inclement weather and the murderous Nazis.

In mid-October 1943, in the middle of a forest clearing shielded by the thickness of young evergreen trees, we started to build our underground winter quarters. To accomplish this task, we borrowed the necessary tools from friendly peasants in the nearby, Polish "Mazury" colony. For many days, starving, cold and depressed, we labored, first removing trees and then digging three large openings in the ground, 5 to 6 feet deep by 14 to 16 square feet wide. At night, in another section of the forest, we cut down and brought over young birch trees to provide roofing for the three bunkers. On top of these "roofs" we spread thick layers of earth and replanted the young evergreen trees we had temporarily removed. Then we covered the ground between the replanted trees with layers of brown dead evergreen foliage, matching the rest of the forest floor. A small window-size opening through which a human being could squeeze was installed and served as the bunker door and only source of light. Inside we covered the damp ground with dry leaves and pieces of old cloth and burlap. As our new winter quarters were quite crowded, each person was allocated 9 to 12 inches of space to

lie on. Inside the bunkers one could only sit or lie down. It was impossible to stand up or to move around, but it was warm.

At the end of October 1943 we moved into our winter quarters. In the weeks that followed, our underground colony expanded as we were joined by other survivors who were forced to abandon their hiding places in town or with peasants and escape into the forest. Thus in the winter of 1943-44 our underground colony numbered 28 souls. Among them, in addition to the author of this chronicle were the following men and women and a 2-year-old child.

1. Blutstein Joseph
2. Blutstein Sarah
3. Blutstein Mayer
4. Blutstein Shayndl
5. Dunajer Moses
6. Fisch Fishel
7. Frenkel Pinio
8. Frenkel Frieda
9. Frenkel Mira
10. Frenkel Rita
11. Frenkel Sarah
12. Fleischman Israel
13. Gottesfeld Chaim
14. Gottesfeld Blema
15. Gottesfeld Beile (child)
16. Greenberg Shulem
17. Kleinman Benzion
18. Reinisch Edzia (from Borshchov)
19. Staehel Leon
20. Staehel Etta
21. Stachel Munio
22. Staehel Samuel
23. Stachel Gezia
24. Shapiro Lena
25. Stock Malcia

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26. Stock Nechemia

27. Sehrenzel Yehudit



Three who survived the holocaust in the forest near Skala. Seen from left to right in this 1946 photo are: the author (Max Mermelstein) and his cousins Malcia and Nechemia Stock

Living underground on small rations of bread, beans and water and without sanitary facilities or water to wash with, we were inundated with lice. Part of our daily routine in the bunkers was to de-lice ourselves and the rags on our backs. Another vital task was the weekly or bi-weekly expedition to fetch bread-and-water. At night, four or five men, one from each family, ventured out of the forest to the “Mazury” settlement or to the forester Radchuk to fetch provisions. Each expedition was fraught with danger and life threatening risks—first and foremost to those who went, but also to those who remained behind in the bunkers, because the Germans and their Ukrainian collaborators were always on the lookout for Jews. Every step and every move on the way out of the forest and each nightly visit to the house of a peasant or forester, had to be made with the greatest caution. Exiting the section of the forest in which our bunkers were located had to be done in a way so that no visible marks or footsteps were left behind. When approaching the “Mazury” settlement at night it was necessary to wait and listen in the darkness to make sure the peasants’ dogs were not barking more than usual; otherwise it was an indication that strangers were present there, often murderous ones.

When the expedition went to Radchuk the forester, extreme caution had to be exercised before entering his house, since he often had dangerous visitors like Ukrainian policemen or henchmen of the infamous Bandera bands. When such visitors were in his house, he warned us not come in by placing a flour sieve in his window, a signal agreed upon in advance. This kind and poor forester and his wife sustained us during the most difficult winter months by supplying us with bread and water, while shielding us from the murderers.

These night expeditions were especially difficult and dangerous during the winter months when the forest was blanketed with snow and every step in the snow left our human imprints. To solve this problem we had to be inventive. In order not to leave behind our imprints in the snow when exiting our bunkers and returning to them, we stuffed small burlap bags with straw, spread them on the snow in front of our path, and with the help of primitive wooden crutches we walked over the stuffed burlap bags. Step by step, standing on one bag we pushed another bag ahead of us, and leaning on our crutches we carefully walked from the top of one bag to the other. That's how we exited our bunkers from the depth of the forest and made our way onto publicly used, well trodden paths, leaving the stuffed burlap bags behind in the underbrush until our return.

The bread and water we were able to secure were carefully rationed, so that our meager supplies would last for up to two or three weeks. During the long winter months our daily diet consisted of small slices of black bread, which were often either half baked or moldy. Water was also rationed, because we had neither the necessary containers nor the ability to bring enough drinking water into the bunkers. Along with these meager supplies each expedition often returned with good news. Slowly and gradually we realized that our deadly enemy was losing the war. Whether we would live to see him defeated was questionable, as it was very difficult if not impossible in our situation to hope and dream about deliverance and freedom. Sometimes we asked ourselves, why would

destiny select us to be the chosen ones? In what way were we better or more deserving to survive than our parents, brothers and sisters, who were mercilessly murdered? Questions like these always troubled and depressed us.

However, even people condemned to death cannot always remain in a depressed state of mind. Even in the depths of our affliction, when our lives hung in the balance, we often tried to forget our troubles for a while and to overcome our depression. We talked a lot; we joked and even sang old, melancholy folk songs. One of the popular bunker dialogs went like this: “What would you like to eat for dinner tonight—fried eggs with fresh buttered rolls, or crispy grilled duck on a hot plate of mashed potatoes?” Everyone who participated in this popular sport tried to outdo his partner with vivid descriptions of Jewish dishes we had not seen in years. Just mentioning them brought back fond memories of better days and tantalized our starving taste buds.

The long, winter nights when the forest was chained in ice and covered with blankets of snow were often sleepless and melancholy. Lying in the bunker, talking in the flickering twilight of a kerosene lamp, old Yiddish melodies and folk songs burst forth from our aching hearts. I remember one song in particular, chanted by Israel Fleischman, in his deep, yearning voice that always brought tears to my eyes. Following is a free translation of the lyrics that apparently came from a Yiddish musical entitled “Motie-Meylach the Carpenter”, once staged by the Skala Amateur Theater:

*“My mother raised me with great tenderness,
Always caring, she hovered above me;
Ready to take my place,
If anything should threaten her child.*

*Nights she stayed awake,
Keeping a vigil at my bedside;
Imploring G-d not to punish her;
And to this day I feel her tender touch.*

*For it's good to have a home;
Who can better appreciate this than I,
When one is buried alive and
Everyone keeps his distance from me.*

Most befitting our mood and condition was the last stanza of this song, and it seemed to me at the time that the unknown author had written those lines expressly for us.

In addition to our underground colony, two other bunkers were constructed in different parts of the forest, in which small groups of men, women and children tried to survive. Unfortunately, the cruel arm of the Ukrainian Police reached them there and they were murdered in the most gruesome way. One of the bunkers in which 12 to 15 Jews were hiding was discovered and destroyed at the end of October 1943. The Ukrainian militiamen discovered the bunker after apprehending Max Bretschneider, from the nearby village of Cygany. They beat and tortured him until he led them to the bunker in which he once hid himself

The Ukrainian militiamen first fired some shots into the bunker in order to intimidate and force those inside into coming out. When none did, they threw bundles of burning straw into the bunker. When choking from the smoke, people started to climb out of the bunker, they were shot one by one on the spot. Among those who perished at the site were the following martyrs: Moshe Schwartzbach (son of Zeide) and a child, Aron-Shmuel Schapiro, Moshe Weingast, Israel Blutstein, Isaac Goldstein, Chaya Edelstein, her son Shaye, Berl Schwartzbach and a Mr. Segal from Borshchov. Benzion Kleinman and Menia Schapiro, who miraculously survived, later reported this tragedy.

The second bunker in the forest was discovered early in March, only three weeks before our liberation. The Jews who had almost survived the Nazi nightmare were instead gruesomely murdered. As told by Shulem Greenberg, the only survivor of that bunker, three Ukrainian policemen, Rembocha, Yakubyshyn and a third unknown to him, were led to the bunker by a young Ukrainian, a

son-in-law of the forester Chepesiuk. The bunker was located not far from the Chepesiuk residence and the young Ukrainian either spied on the hiding Jews or noticed one of them in the area. The Ukrainians brought with them bundles of straw, set them on fire and pushed them into the bunker. The choking smoke forced some of the unfortunate people to come out of the bunker and as they did, the Ukrainians shot them in cold blood. Those who remained inside were burned alive. Shulem Greenberg, who came out of the bunker, was forced by the Ukrainians to stand at the entrance and stir the smoldering straw so that the fire should not die. Among those who perished inside the bunker were Greenberg's father Abraham and sister Henia, Elka Feuerstein, Taube Weisinger, Abraham Weisinger, Yitzhak Goldstein, Moshe Wallach, Nathan Weinraub, Dena Schwartzbach, Alter Rosenzweig and Nuske Rosenzweig, the last two from the nearby village of Burdiakovtse. Shulem Greenberg survived miraculously by offering the murderers money and while leading them to its ostensible hiding place in the Jewish cemetery, he managed to slip away and escape.

It was the end of December, 1943. A white crisp snow covered the ground and hung from the evergreen trees reflecting in the sun with millions of glittering sparkles. A quiet melancholy enveloped the forest section we were hiding in. It was warm inside the bunker and to quench our perpetual thirst we were busy "producing" water from the snow. We made hard snow balls, pushed them into some glass containers, shook them, breathed into them and waited patiently until the snowballs melted into a few spoons of water to wet our parched throats. The job was slow and frustrating, but we didn't tire. From time to time one of us stuck his head out of the bunker to fetch a few handfuls of snow so that the job at hand could continue.

Suddenly, as my cousin Nechemia Stock stuck his head out of the bunker, he heard some steps in the snow and saw in the underbrush, just a few feet away, the boots of a Ukrainian policeman. He froze for a second, then slowly lowered himself into the bunker and white as a sheet stammered: "Police, let's get out of

here". He jumped out of the bunker and started to run in the opposite direction, away from the policeman, and we followed him running between the snow covered trees. Several rifle shots exploded over our heads, but a few minutes later the forest returned to its deep silence. Apparently a single Ukrainian policeman accompanied by a forester, went into the forest shortly before Christmas to get a Christmas tree and accidentally stumbled into the evergreen section where our bunker was located. When we noticed him and started to run, he became frightened, fired a few shots from his rifle and quickly withdrew. Much later we were told about this encounter by the forester, but at the time we were certain that our bunkers had been discovered and that more than one policeman had come looking for us. We therefore decided immediately to leave our bunkers and seek temporary shelter elsewhere.

It was bitter cold and the snow was knee deep. Half naked, barefoot, bundled up in rags, we left our bunkers heading in the direction of our old, abandoned bunkers near the "Mazury" settlement, where we survived the great September massacre. Only after our liberation we were told, that about two months after the above incident and our abandonment of the bunkers in the section of the evergreen trees, German soldiers were hunting for wild boar in that section of the forest, stumbled on our abandoned bunkers and blew them up with hand grenades. Fortunately, we were no longer there and were thus saved by Providence from certain death.

Moving into the old bunkers near the "Mazury" settlement we realized that we could hide there only temporarily for several reasons: Firstly, because they were too small and had partially caved in; secondly, they were too close to the Polish settlement and were in a section of the forest with sparse birch trees devoid in the winter of their foliage; and thirdly, we suspected that those bunkers had already been discovered and exposed by someone. Therefore, we decided immediately to look for a suitable site on which to construct new bunkers. This task was undertaken by Nechemia Stock, Chaim Gottesfeld, Finio Frenkel, Joseph Blutstein and the

brothers Samuel and Munio Stachel. After wandering through the forest for several nights, they found a suitable site and in the middle of the winter, around the first days of January, 1944 started to work. They borrowed axes, picks and shovels from friendly peasants in the “Mazury” settlement and in the course of one week, through superhuman efforts, achieved the impossible. In pitch dark forest nights, in snowstorms and biting frost, without food or hot drink, they felled trees, dug up the frozen ground and with their last strength constructed new bunkers. It’s now impossible to comprehend and describe the efforts and perseverance of these men. Returning to our temporary quarters in the gray winter mornings covered with snow and ice and with stiff limbs, they usually collapsed from exhaustion. Observing them at the time, I believed that only The Almighty gave them the strength and perseverance to do what they did.

In mid-January, 1944 we moved into the new bunkers from which we eventually emerged into freedom at the end of March 1944. Those two and a half months seemed like eternity, and were most difficult and trying. At that time we suffered very much from starvation because we were afraid to leave any footprints or marks in the snow and our periodic expeditions to Radchuk for bread, became less frequent. During that period, whenever our people returned from those rare expeditions, they always brought back good and encouraging news of German defeats and Russian victories that filled our hearts with renewed hopes that were often dashed by terrible and devastating events. One night at the beginning of March 1944, members of our expedition returned from Radchuk with Shulem Greenberg and his tale of horror related above.

In the second half of March 1944, distant rumblings of heavy artillery and the noise of engines began to reach us at night. Every night those rumblings became louder and closer. Wide awake in our bunkers, we listened to the sounds of war and the nearing front lines, the way one listens to a fine symphony concert. We were beginning to hear the footsteps of freedom and deliverance, even

though our hearts were heavy with great apprehension and fear. We were afraid to hope and reluctant to rejoice yet. We were cautious and remained inside our bunkers, waiting to see what the day might bring.

One morning we heard an airplane flying low above the treetops. Cautiously, I and a few others stuck our heads out of the bunkers. Following the noise of the engine, we spotted on the wings of the small aircraft, the red Soviet star. I started to feel dizzy and my heart was pounding. Was it a dream or reality? We were all confused and did not know what to do or to say to each other. The rest of the day we remained inside the bunkers and only at night did our group leaders, Chaim Gottesfeld and Nechemia Stock, venture out of the forest into the “Mazury” settlement. They returned within the hour with the overwhelming news that Soviet troops were already in Skala. That night nobody closed an eye. We were up all night, talking, crying and thinking.

A new dawn descended on the forest. That morning the icy winter gave way to the approaching spring. The snow got wet and heavy and started to fall off the trees. Barefoot, bundled up in our rags, we came out of the bunkers, and slowly filed out of the forest. Only after leaving the forest and seeing the others in broad daylight—28 human skeletons walking in knee deep snow like ghosts from another planet—did I begin to comprehend the scope of our great tragedy.

(Updated December 2008)