KDRG YVA-023

Testimony of Malka Molly (Burstein) Friedman, born in Shumsk, Poland, 1920, regarding her experiences in the Shumsk Ghetto, in hiding and in Wolkowce

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Translated from Yiddish by Theodore Steinberg

Edited by Ellen Garshick, January 2025

[page i, Yad Vashem cover page]

Country: Poland **Language:** Yiddish
Witness: Malke Fridman (Burshteyn) **Education and profession:** Elementary, housewife
Address: Molly Friedman, 3305 W. Ainslie, Chicago, IL
Date, place, and time of birth: Shumsk / Volhynia

German occupation; attitude toward the Jews; establishment of the Shumsk Ghetto, March 1942; Shumsk Ghetto life including rumors concerning the liquidation of Jews in the surrounding area; Aktion, Elul (August) 1942; life in hiding in the ghetto with her mother, brother and a group of Jews, for eight days; murder of her father in the Aktion; joined to a group of Jews, to collect the clothing and belongings of the murdered people; concentration of approximately 250 Jews from Shumsk in a synagogue, by the Germans; shelling of the synagogue; murder of her mother with 150 Shumsk Jews, near [killing] pits; escape from the ghetto with brother and a young woman named Chaya Gitelman; life in hiding while hidden by a Ukrainian family in Wolkowce [Volkovtse] named Kitkowski; liberation, March 1944; attempts to release Kitkowski from being drafted into the military.

Repatriation to Poland, 1945; move to Germany; emigration to the United States, 1950; help to the Kitkowski family.

Included in the testimony: Testimony, review
Pages: 32
Place: Tel Aviv **Date:** July 1971 **Interviewer's name and signature:** Yitschak Alperovits

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Testimony of Malke Fridman (Burshteyn)

Names mentioned in the testimony:

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- Miryam Burshteyn (mother) 2
- Yosel Sefarim 2
- Yankel Burshteyn (brother) 14

- Chaye Gitelman 17
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- Chaim Tsisin 28
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- Shumsk 2
- Wolkowce (village) 16
- Gliwice 30
- Pocking 30
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Review of Malke Fridman (Burshteyn)'s Testimony

The visit of Mrs. Fridman—a tourist from America—to Yad Vashem was in connection with learning how Yad Vashem perpetuates the memory of the Righteous among the Gentiles, those noble people who in the difficult and tragic circumstances of the Jewish people extended a brotherly hand to the persecuted and plagued Jews when they found themselves on the verge of destruction.

The story that she revealed to us is connected to the time when the town of Shumsk, her birthplace, found itself in its last and most bitter struggle for existence. This was the last stage of the Shumsk community.

Her escape from death was accidental, or as Mrs. Fridman says, miraculous. She holds that the whole circumstance of her troubles, from the German-Soviet War until liberation, was a whole series of miracles that can only be explained by a hidden power that rescued her from danger and watched over her.

Her familiarity with a simple peasant woman who, at the height of the liquidation of the last remaining Jews of Shumsk, proposed that she, her brother, and another young woman come to her in the village, where she promised to conceal them until the liberation, was a coincidence. They were certainly a poor peasant family with their own children and their own problems. They could barely feed themselves, let alone three growing young people.

Their stay in hiding for two years without the basic provisions for human existence certainly left its stamp on her psychological well-being and still affects her. Her recalling and recounting the facts of her survival evinced tragic associations, and she had trouble mastering herself. Offering her testimony was accompanied by deep sighs and weeping, especially when she recounted how she was torn from her mother during a "selection" and she saw how the Germans beat Jews who were lying on the ground just waiting to die.

Mrs. Fridman simply cannot understand what persuaded the peasant Kitkowski and his wife to save three Jews whom they didn't know, putting their own lives in danger. And they did so for no material gain. And it is a greater wonder that the peasant was Ukrainian, from the

nation that wrote a sad chapter at the time of the Nazis, whom so many of them assisted in the killing of Jews.

The peasant Kitkowski is no longer alive, but the whole time that Mrs. Fridman has lived in America, she has offered monthly assistance to the family to the best of her ability. Her hope is that the memory of Kitkowski and his wife will be appropriately reflected in the documentation of Yad Vashem.

Y. Alperovits

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Testimony

Date and place of birth: Shumsk, 1920

Address: Molly Fridman
3305 Ainslee Street
Chicago, IL 60625

From a family killed in World War II

- Father—Mikhael Burshteyn, killed in Elul 1942, in the Shumsk ghetto
- Mother—Miryam Burshteyn, killed in Elul 1942, in the Shumsk ghetto
- Brother—Shimon Burshteyn, fell at the front in the siege of Berlin, date unknown

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Testimony of Mrs. Malke Fridman (Burshteyn) about her life in the ghetto at Shumsk until the liquidation in Elul 1942, and her rescue by the Ukrainian Volodya Kitkowski in the village of Volkovtse, Ukraine (Wolkowce), for two years until the liberation in March 1944.

My name is Malke Burshteyn, born in Shumsk in 1920. My father was Mikhael Burshteyn and my mother, Miryam Burshteyn. I studied with Yosel Sefarim, a private tutor. I graduated from a public school. After that I studied in a private school.

Question: What was your father's occupation?

—My father dealt in grains.

I loved nature. I planted flowers in a garden by our house, and they gave me life.

Question: Did you belong to a youth organization?

—To Hashomer Hatsair [Youth Guard].

Question: Please describe the time of the Soviets.

—Understand that when the Soviets came, they liquidated and seized everything. My two brothers worked for them in their administrative offices. I did not work.

Question: How many Jews were in the town?

—That I don't remember.

In the town there were the large synagogue, a study hall, and a small synagogue.

Question: When did the Germans arrive?

—The Germans came to Shumsk on July 5, 1941. The war had begun. The Russians left the town, and the Germans arrived. People were naïve and didn't understand—the human mind could not grasp that such an order could exist.

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Everyone ran out to see the German army. After they marched in, they issued an order: "Accursed Jews!" When people heard "accursed Jews," they ran. When the Germans encountered a Jew, they immediately beat him up.

People quickly saw what the German army was about. That evening, you understand, people sat in the dark. Everyone was afraid to go out. On the next day, an order came out. Every old man with a beard, they shaved it off; they cut off the women's hair.

People were driven to forced labor. The men worked very hard. Anyone who could not work was beaten bloody. Women also went to forced labor. The lucky ones got easy work; the unlucky ones worked extremely hard.

I worked on road repair and in the fields with the peasants.

A couple of days later, they issued an order that every Jew had to wear a badge so that people could see that he was a Jew, a yellow patch. People had to be careful about going out into the street.

My brother and my father worked for a landholder. There was a card showing that whoever worked there wouldn't be killed. Whoever had a profession that was useful could live. People had to pay for this card. People went to work, and in the night some food was brought. Thus did people live. Everyone went to work, but some had better work, and some worse. Those who could pay had better work.

Question: Was it possible for you to have contact with Christians? Could you receive food from the outside?

—My father worked outside, and he bought food from Christians.

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For money, one could buy a hen and other food from the Christians and bring them in. It was possible to barter things for food with the Christians.

Question: Did you have a Ukrainian police force formed by the Germans?

—Yes. There was a Judenrat and a Ukrainian police force. In the town there were a total of two Germans. Their helpers were Ukrainian and Polish police.

One cannot report what went on until the liquidation of the Jews. They extracted the last bit of blood. Every day they issued orders through the Judenrat and the *prezes* [head of the Judenrat] and announced that people had to bring in a certain amount of gold rings.

Whether people had them or not, they had to come up with a certain sum. The next day they said that people had to bring a certain number of watches, so everyone had to turn in their watches. On the third day, a certain sum of money. Whether people had it or not, a certain sum had to be raised. Thus they tortured us every month. Soon there was nothing left for them to take.

They required various things that were impossible to show. They always said that if people did not comply, the next day all the Jews would be liquidated. They scared us this way. People did whatever was possible in order to be saved.

There were various difficulties at forced labor. People were beaten and roughed up.

An order came from the Gestapo for the Judenrat to send young women for domestic work, so the Judenrat was forced to send them. Each day they sent 10-15 young women. When the women arrived, they said they wanted others, not them. So they sent others.

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No matter how many were sent, they always said that they wanted others.

One day the Judenrat sent a Jewish policeman to me because they wanted me at the Judenrat. I didn't know that every day young women were sent to work and sent back. The head of the police clapped me on the back and said with a smile on his face, "This one will be Queen Esther." I didn't know what he meant, and I went. There were 10-15 of us. They put us in a row. A German killer came in. Everyone was ordered out. He found fault with each one. Out of all of them, he chose me and one other. I thought we were going to stay and work. But no, he didn't want us then. We could go home, but we should return in the evening. When I heard that we had to return in the evening, I understood why he wanted the young women.

I came home and decided that I wouldn't return, even if it meant my death. I would do everything possible not to return. From this experience, I came down with a fever.

I looked and saw two Ukrainian policemen with rifles. They were seeking Malke Burshteyn. They were ordered to bring me. When I saw this, my temperature rose. I was sure that I was ill and they wouldn't take me from the house. But they told me that that wouldn't help. They had their orders. If I wouldn't go, they would carry me. They had to bring me. I had no choice, so I put on a shawl and went, as though to the binding of Isaac.

When I arrived, the other girl was already there, though I didn't see her. The German came to me and asked where I had been, why I had not come on time.

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I said that I was ill. I brought the thermometer to show that I had a fever. But I did not need proof, for I had changed so much from the morning until the evening. My face looked totally different. When the policeman brought me in, the German asked who I was. I was not Malke Burshteyn [he said].

"Good. If you're sick, go home," he said.

You can't comprehend my mother's experiences. I was her one and only. She thought she would never see me again. When I got away from that German bandit, we said that there is a God over the world.

The Germans let me go and never called me back. I just had to go to forced labor.

What came upon us in the Jewish community cannot be described. People fought with each other. People took vengeance on each other. Some gave more money and some less. When the decree came that we had to give, those who had more did not want to give. They wanted to take from those who did not.

Question: Were there times when the Germans shot Jews in the ghetto?

—Yes. There were times. I was lucky that after my experience, I came face to face with a German. My mother protected me when the Germans came to take something from our house. We sat in the dark, not going out. The German soldiers came to take food, drink, bread. People immediately complied and gave them everything, just so they wouldn't see me.

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Question: Do you remember what kinds of things happened in the ghetto? Was there hunger?

—Children were ill, and there was hunger. Eight families lived in one room. People slept on the floor. This was all before the ghetto was created. We lived this way for eight months, until March 1942.

We were so naïve and didn't want to believe that such a thing could be. In March, people said that a ghetto was being created and that all Jews would have to live in a single place. We still didn't want to believe it, and we said it was impossible. People said that the gentiles would pile up stones around the Jews and other such nonsense.

One fine day, we saw that it was true. They had chosen a few solitary streets, the worst, you understand, which included the bathhouse and nearby streets. Then came the decree. Jews, some who lived better and some who lived worse, had to leave behind their belongings, taking only necessities, and go into the ghetto.

Some were lucky, having made accommodations with friends and being more comfortable. The Judenrat had to assign dwellings. Those who were unlucky had to live in more crowded conditions. The difficulty cannot be described. People simply had to bear all this in silence. People would go to work, be beaten and abused, and return home, where there was nothing to eat.

Question: Who guarded the ghetto?

—The Ukrainian "police."

Question: Were there cases when the Germans selected Jews from the ghetto and shot them?

—There were. Gentile enemies would say that someone was a communist or other slander, so people would take him from the ghetto and shoot him.

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Even association with the Communist Party served as an excuse.

The Jews regretted having to leave everything behind, some more and some less, things that they had worked for over the years. But they didn't understand that this was all. Possessions one can regain, but they didn't understand at all that they would have to give up their lives as well!

Every day there was news. When people went out to work, they met local gentiles who told them that in Kremenets, the Jews were liquidated; in Rovno, a grave had been dug and Jews laid in it. Our Jews from Shumsk didn't want to believe. There was no other connection, no newspaper, no radio. We only knew what the gentiles told us.

The Jews didn't grasp that there was such a wolf, such an unspeakable force, that could rule the world. The Jews thought that their gentile enemies had made their hearts stony and invented such tales. And they lived in fear.

Hearing such news, people created hiding places in attics. They offered no security, but they were better than nothing.

Only a day before the German bandits arrived in the ghetto, people had baked bread. The oven was hot, and it was hot in the street. One nice afternoon, people heard motorcycles. Everyone was in their homes. Soon the Germans arrived like killers with masks. They surrounded the ghetto, forced people into the street, and made them kneel near the synagogue.

The Judenrat said that the men who had certificates to work wouldn't be bothered or harmed. They shouldn't be afraid.

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I saw how my father had his certificate in his hand and that other Jews who worked had certificates. They were the first to be taken and led away. The Judenrat had fooled them. If they had not done so, perhaps many of the Jews would have tried to escape, but perhaps that wouldn't have helped.

My brother also had a certificate, and he thought that perhaps he would stay back and not go. But as I said, they took everyone and led them away. People said that they were being taken to another camp. But they were wrong. Three graves had been dug. They were led there and killed. I don't remember how many there were. I didn't count them.

As they were led away, we were forced into the square near the synagogue. We were on our knees, watched over by Germans. Other Germans went through our dwellings, forcing people out so they would have a larger number, and they led us away.

My mother got ready to go. I thought to myself, “Where is she going? The Germans are there with their revolvers. If you take a step, will you get a bullet?” But she was gone. I asked where she was going.

“I’m going to see where Yankel is,” she answered.

Yankel was my brother. After she left, I tried to go after her so I wouldn’t be separated from her. This was a miracle. The Germans saw us go, but their eyes were blinded and didn’t shoot us.

My mother went into the ghetto, into the house, up to where we had made a hiding place. As we went up, there was my brother. There was also a family of 10-12 people. Altogether there were 15 of us in a tiny place. We were suffocating. We could neither hear nor see that the Germans were in the house, hitting the walls with their rifles:

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“Out, damned Jews!”

They banged on the walls as they searched for Jews. They took the furniture out of the house. As we sat in our hiding place, we heard as they led away the Jews. We didn’t know where they were taking them. We thought they were being transferred to another ghetto. Another group was taken every day.

We stayed there for eight days. It was very hot, both from the outside and from the oven. We had no food. One boy went out in the evening (or in the daytime) to get water in a bottle. A policeman saw him. The boy tossed away the bottle and ran back to us. This was the second miracle. We were shot at from all sides through the night and no bullet hit us.

I don’t know whether it just seemed to me or I actually saw someone. I heard a Ukrainian policeman yell in Ukrainian, “Crawl out!”

“We’ll come out, but don’t shoot,” I called. I saw no one. Someone called to me, “Who are you talking to?”

“A policeman called for us to come out!”

“There’s no policeman. Be quiet! Don’t talk! There’s no one there!”

I thought I had seen a policeman and begged not to be shot.

After a week, we looked out through a small hole. We saw some men going into the synagogue. After the liquidation, things were so quiet. We saw no one in the street. We had no idea where the Jews had gone.

After several days, we saw some people entering the synagogue. Some carried containers of water; some carried pillows; some had other things.

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When we saw that people had pots of water, one of us ran out, took a pot of water, and mixed in with them so that people didn't know who he was, and he asked, "Where have you been?"

"What are you saying? They killed everyone in the town. We were left. We were brought to the graves when an order came out that a hundred people would be spared to work."

A hundred were chosen—that was their fate—and they were sent to the synagogue. We saw that we had no alternative. How could we continue to stay in that heat? How could we exist without food? We decided to leave. We were not far from the synagogue, just across the way.

When we came out, a German saw us. We said that we would join in the work. The German came right up to me, put his revolver by my mouth, and asked where I had been. I told him the truth: I had been hiding. I thought this was my last moment. But he was only scaring me. He registered us, and we worked for a week.

Can you grasp this? We had to go into houses and with our hands remove the possessions of our near and dear ones who had been killed. We saw dishes, furs, household items that people had only owned, you understand, outside the ghetto. In the ghetto, one could have nothing. Everything was for outside the ghetto. We saw how bedclothes were ripped apart and feathers flew through the street. We had to sort the things. This was our forced labor.

Question: How many of you were there?

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—There were 300, and every day more people came from hiding places. Altogether there were 280 of us. Every day we went to work.

In the synagogue there was a kitchen, and they gave us food after work. The synagogue was crowded and dirty. We lay down in the dirt. I don't know if anyone told them something or they just thought it up, but several times they shot at the synagogue all night. The bullets flew over our heads. We lay head-to-head. We did our bodily functions where we lay. We were like this for eight days.

After eight days, we were told to go out to the square to be counted. We were afraid, because if they were counting us, something was about to happen. Some hid. Some refused to leave the synagogue, thinking it would be better to be absent if something were to happen.

People went out. The German counted the hundred who had been spared to work and the 150 who had joined them. He called each one by name and told them to get to work. But this was a trick. In the morning he said again that he would make a count, so everyone came out.

As soon as everyone was out, the ghetto was surrounded by rows of German and Ukrainian police. Earlier some boards had been broken, so people could sneak out. Now the ghetto was sealed with boards.

Then he said that he wanted a list of the hundred whom the German regime had spared for work. Those and the 150 others would be separated. My mother and I were standing there. I had made my mother look nice. I put her in a blue dress and made her look younger.

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The German, the murderous soldier, was so friendly that one could not believe he was such a criminal. I was young then and knew that nothing would happen to me right away, but I worried about my mother. When I asked him, he said that she was still a healthy woman, fit for work. When I heard that healthy people could work, I tried to make her look even younger.

The next morning when we were called out, I made her look nice. She looked like a flower. She stood next to me when he counted out the 150 and 100 separately, as if something was forthcoming. When he had counted them, the police encircled the 150. He took me out of the column and replaced me with a man, putting me with the 100. I didn't know what this meant. Others who saw that he had put me with the 100 tried to run across. He shot some them. The victims fell before our eyes.

After a short time, they beat the 150 over their heads. They bent over and went away like sheep. We were left on our knees. I was petrified, unable to speak. After a couple of minutes, I understood and began to run to the head of the police with the murderer who ordered the slaughter. He asked where I was going.

"I won't stay here. I'm going to my mother!"

"You're lucky I don't have my gun. You see how these others have fallen. I'd do the same to you."

I retreated. I didn't want to hear. I wanted to go to the grave with all the others. He had me confined in the ghetto gateway. A policeman came, and he ordered me to be taken back. That's how I stayed alive.

They left. It was dark. A few hours later, someone came to me and said that my brother was alive as well.

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When we were standing in line and being counted, my brother had tried to run away and was then in a dark cellar. The Germans searched the cellar but didn't see him. He stayed in the cellar until it was dark. He was afraid to leave, since he didn't know what had happened. Later I was told that my brother was here. It happened that we met. I had no ability to weep. I had to suppress my tears.

Question: Which brother was this?

—Yankel, who now lives in California.

I saw how my mother was taken away. I was petrified. Even now my thoughts are disordered. I forget many things. I don't remember what I'm doing.

Question: Where did they take the hundred?

—We were in the synagogue for a week. Then we went to work. A Ukrainian who worked for the regime came and asked why we were there. He knew that we would all be liquidated.

"What can we do?" we asked. "We have no alternative. If we leave the ghetto, we'll be shot immediately."

"That I don't know. My job is to talk to you."

The Ukrainian, who worked for the Germans, came in the middle of a bright day and took our things. When we entered the ghetto, we brought with us tin containers that the Ukrainians took. (They worked for them and didn't know they were ruining our things.) There was money left from before the war, for we had bought a few things: material, cloth, a fur for my father, a fur for myself.

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We sewed them into old things so they wouldn't be noticed and thus got them into the ghetto. After that, when they went to liquidate the last people, he went in and took them out. This was during the day. No one was in charge of him. He was a Ukrainian and worked for them! He asked us where to put things.

"With us in the room."

When we entered the ghetto, a Ukrainian took over our room. Our few things he gave to the Ukrainian. What chance did we have to escape? We worked every day. One day, we heard people banging with hammers all around the ghetto. Then we knew that these were our final moments. But there was no alternative. I didn't know where they had taken all the people. When they took the whole group of people, human thought could not have conceived what they were doing with them. The graves had been dug outside the town. They led the mass of people. The people were ordered to undress, and they were shot 10 at a time with a machine gun and then fell into the graves.

At first, they ordered the children to be given away. Imagine the grief when a mother had to give up her child! There was one grave for women, one for men, and one for children. The graves were so full, there was no place to lie down.

Question: Did you hear the shooting?

—We heard nothing. The graves were outside the town.

Before this happened, a gentile came and said that people were digging graves. The Jews didn't believe this. How could anyone believe they would take living people and throw them into a grave?

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When the Jews had been killed, the gentiles came to loot the ghetto. They took Jewish property, from both those who were poor and those were not. It was a good deed to take Jewish goods.

One time my brother saw a Ukrainian woman, who really didn't need anything, taking items. Seeing my brother, she threw them down. She was embarrassed. She was even shocked, because she thought we were dead.

"What are you doing there?" she asked my brother. "Who else is there from your family?"

"My sister and I. The others have been killed."

"What are you going to do?" she went on.

"I don't know what to do. They want to kill us all," he answered.

"You know what? Come to me. You'll stay with me."

He didn't want to believe her.

"Go talk to your husband. If your husband says we should come, we'll come."

The next day, she came and said that her husband said we should come to them.

Seeing that they [the Germans] were going after the ghetto and these could be our final moments, I thought—what do we have to lose? I saw what the end of the other Jews had been. I saw how all the Ukrainians were taking things, so I took a bag of things, dressed like a Ukrainian gentile woman, barefoot with a kerchief on my head, and I left the ghetto through a window. Like a mole when he comes up from under the ground and sees the light, so was I when I saw the light. It twinkled in my eyes,

Along the way, gentiles were standing and showing the police that a Jewish woman was there. I went into an old, damaged house.

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The windows had been removed, as had the locks on the doors, by the thieving gentiles. The place was empty. I went behind a door and covered myself with a stone. The police ran around and around looking for me. Soon my brother arrived at the same house and went into the barn behind the house. He stayed there in the dark. After us came a young woman, Chayeke Gitelman.

We saw how the police searched and searched. The door was not closed, and at any minute people could have entered and shot us. But a miracle happened, and their eyes were blinded. They didn't get that we were there. The police went by and didn't see that we were there.

After us, two or three young women tried to get out, but they were shot on the spot.

We stayed there until it was a little dark. Then we went to the attic in the house, to the chimney. We hid in the chimney and heard how the Germans were running around and shouting, "Jews! Damned Jews."

They shot and searched, but they never knew that we were there.

The next day, we left that house and went to another. But how long can one go in the dark, at night, in attics? We decided to go to another house, where a gentile lived. On the way, we encountered several miracles. Three of us went: I, my brother, and the young woman. The moon was shining, and we had to go from street to street. Suddenly a policeman with a rifle appeared and shouted, "Stop!"

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I thought this was the end of us. But the One Above provided another miracle. Just as he yelled "Stop!" a gentile came from the ghetto, where she had been looting. He arrested her, because the government didn't allow private individuals to loot. He took her to the police station. That was a miracle, and we got away.

We went into the house where we had lived and up into the attic. The gentile brought us food in the attic. No one could know about us. We were there for three days. I heard how the door squeaked as people opened it. I knew everything in that room, where I had been born. We were in the attic, and Germans were in the room. It was very dangerous. In the house where I was born, one had to be afraid of speaking a word.

From there we went from one attic to another because we were afraid of staying in one spot. We spent three nights in attics, in chimneys, in ashes and dirt.

Finally, after three days, we came to the village of Volkovtse, where the gentile woman had told us to come. We had to go past the guard. We went in the dark. It was cold, and the water was frozen. We went barefoot. In this way we crossed the water and the bridge, on which there was light. The watchman said, "Halt. Where are you going?

"We're going home to the village," we answered.

He didn't recognize me, thinking that I was a gentile, and so we got past. Another miracle! We went at night, in the dark and cold. Our feet were pierced by the sharp remnants of the grains that had been cut, and the dogs barked. We went through the fields and woods so that no one could see us, until we came to the gentile Kitkowski.

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The gentile was afraid to talk to us. He thought we were dead. He raised his eyes to the heavens and asked us to go into the barn. He covered us with sheaves and grain. My brother and I stayed there for a week.

After a week, the woman said that the Germans were looking for Jewish goods. They were going to conduct an inspection, so we had to leave. After the inspection we could return. We pleaded with her that we had nowhere to go, that if we left, they would kill us. She had a son, and we begged her to send for him so we could speak to him.

When the son came, we said that we would go with him until after the inspection. The woman was his stepmother. He took us by back roads and led us to a barn, where there were horses, pigs, and cattle. It was crowded. We sat on the hay. The barn was old and broken down. Light shone in; and when it rained, it rained in; when it snowed, it snowed in. We were there for two years.

What we experienced during those two years is beyond description. One can't tell. Only a beast could have survived, but a person—never.

One day we got food. The German bandits had taken our food, fat, milk, and bread. One night, my brother and I went to help the gentile grind a little corn by hand (using a stone) to make bread.

When it was dark so no one could see, we left the barn, went into the gentile's house, and ground several pounds of corn by hand to make a couple of loaves.

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I saw how difficult it was. The next day, the gentile baked the bread and brought some to us. We said that seeing the difficulty, we wouldn't eat the bread. He had three children and should give it to them.

Every day we had a little bit of potato, only once a day when no one saw. Kitkowski's wife would put the potato in a pot, cover it with a hand towel, and then put potato peelings on top as if for the pigs. When the children asked where she was going, she would say she was taking food to the pigs.

Every day the gentile would take the ladder and see if we were still breathing. There were times when it was so cold that our water was frozen. The gentile told his wife that he believed we would freeze. He would bring us a flask of hot water in the morning.

But all we could do was sit there. We had no choice, because if we went out, every minute brought the threat of death.

One day the German bandits came to the village. When they came, the Ukrainian partisans shot at them. In the whole town they had only two officers. They wanted to fortify it, so one day they descended on the town, encircled it, called everyone out, and went from house to house. When people saw them going into the houses, they seized whatever they could in their hands and fled from the town. We had to remain as martyrs. We sat there and awaited death.

In Yiddish, people say that a gentile is a Jew's enemy, but one could not deny that a gentile did so much for a Jew.

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He risked his life. If the Germans had found us, they would have burned the family and all his property. But he remained firm.

It happened that one day, when they had surrounded the village and were going from house to house, taking people out, the gentile stayed in his house. I saw that everyone was going out, but the gentile stayed in his house. I was afraid. I didn't know what was going on with him. I saw that they would soon come to us and discover our barn: two Germans with rifles and spears.

When I saw them heading toward our barn, my brother and I dug down into the hay and said our final confession. We knew that these were our last moments. They poked in the hay with their spears, stabbing around and around, but never hitting us.

Finally I saw people coming back. We thought they had killed them all. The gentile came and told us what had happened: the Germans had wanted to scare them. If anyone had shot at the German bandits, then all the gentiles would have been shot.

I hardly expected to see the gentile alive. I thought they had killed him. He told me that he refused to leave the house because if they had gone into the house and not found him, they might have gone searching and found us. It was better that he was in the house, so they searched no further. He had risked his life. It was good that they only wanted to threaten people.

We sat in the dark, seeing nothing. We couldn't even stand up, let alone discuss leaving. We were like this for two years, summer and winter. I could look out through a little hole. I saw the sky and the stars, heard how the wind blew. I didn't know whether any Jews besides us were alive.

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I thought that this was the end of the world for Judaism.

Every day the gentile came and told us the news, where the Germans were, where the front was. We thought there was no way out, because they were making progress.

Finally one day, the gentile came with good news, that the Germans had received their first blow. That was Stalingrad. That brought our first hope. After this blow, they began to retreat, but we lived with the same fear, in the same situation.

I'll tell you of an event, a miracle that cannot be comprehended: once, when we were in the dark attic, the gentile's little son, five years old, came looking for eggs. He uncovered us when he moved the sheaf that covered us. He saw that there were two people. He was scared and ran away. He went to the barn where his father and a neighbor from next door were standing. No one could know about us. We were sure that the boy had talked about us. But the boy avoided his father, went into the house, and said to his mother in Ukrainian, "Momma, I saw two people up there. They must be Jews."

The mother was frightened and nearly fainted.

"My son," she asked, "have you told anyone?"

“No, Momma. I haven’t told anyone, not even our friend.”

Go trust a five-year-old not to tell the friend. You must know that we were so petrified that we could not even eat our potato. We thought our last moment had come.

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The gentile was so worried that he came to us and spoke from his heart. He said: “Why should you be afraid until we know something? Trust me, eat. We’ll wait a few days. If he told anyone, someone will let me know; and if no one lets me know, then he told no one.”

A week passed, then two, and no one said anything. This was a sign that the boy had told no one. The older sons, one 14 and one 12, knew nothing of us. And the mother had not hidden from the five-year-old when she had put the dish with the potatoes in the pitcher and covered it with peelings. The boy could say, ironically, that she was taking food for the chickens.

But later, for the sake of safety, they had to tell the two older boys, because the 14-year-old would bring his friends into the barn to catch birds. Thus all three boys knew, but none gave away the secret.

Every day when the gentile came up to us, he would tell us how the Germans were retreating and the Russian army was advancing.

I’ll tell you something you can’t believe: that shooting can sometimes sound like beautiful music. When my brother and I heard cannon shots, it sounded like beautiful piano music to our ears. Every time we heard such shots, my brother would say, “That’s nothing. I still don’t believe that I’ll see the defeat of the Germans and that we will be free. When I see a bomb fall near us, then I’ll believe that the Germans are being driven back.”

But I didn’t lose sleep, so pleasant was it to hear the shooting.

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This lasted several days. Each day, as the Germans were driven back, the shooting sounded closer.

Finally, one morning we heard Russian soldiers coming from all sides. They came to us in the barn.

I must say that we survived thanks first to God, thanks second to the gentile, and thanks third to our consistency, our discipline. I know that many people were in similar circumstances, but they were not so disciplined and were killed at the last minute.

Understand—we heard the Russian language near us in the barn, heard how they spoke to the horses. We were uncertain and didn’t leave the dark spot where we had been for two years.

They say that one should get on with one’s normal life. Onne should eat normal food and be healthy. But for two years we had eaten only potatoes. We had no fats, nothing that contributes to human health. And for two years we wore the same clothing, I in my

nightshirt and my brother in the same underwear. Occasionally the wife took them and washed them, then gave them back.

We had given the gentile everything, for he had saved our lives!

It was a miracle from the Master of the Universe: we were unharmed. We were filthy. Once in that whole time, when it was dark, we went out and washed. The wife washed our things and we put them back on. My skin was clean. I didn't have a single pimple, and we were not ill. One could have caught a cold in the cold weather when it was snowing and we were covered with snow; when it rained, we got wet and had to move to another spot. We didn't even cough.

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If we had coughed, someone would have heard and found us.

Question: How did liberation come?

—When the Russian army came, the gentile came to us and said, "Follow me, but don't come down until I call you."

After a few days, the German bandits drove out the Russian army. But that didn't last long. After a couple of days, the Russian army returned and drove out the Germans. Then the gentile came and said that we were fine. But he wanted to wait until the Russians had liberated other cities further on. Then we could be secure in emerging. This was in March 1944.

I'll tell about another unbelievable moment. Jewish life was then cheap. A dog was worth more. But if one wanted to purchase a life, it was expensive. One went through such hardships, and why would one want to live after that? I didn't know that there were any more Jews. I thought only I and my brother remained alive. Our desire to live was so great that we were willing to go through bad experiences if we could remain alive. We so wanted to remain alive!

I'll never forget this: when the gentile came and told us we were free and could go down, my tongue and my brother's were tied. We could not speak to each other. We knew that we had no place to go and nothing to do. We sat there like mutes.

Finally, we came down from the attic. I could hardly move after sitting for so long. I was all dried up.

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We went into the town. The gentiles were shocked to see us. They thought we were dead. Our house was still there.

Our house was occupied by gentiles, Poles. They didn't even offer a bed. I slept on the floor.

Now I'll tell about something that happened when we left the ghetto. Our property, that we had made sure of, was taken out and left in the house of our gentile. Seeing what had belonged to us with the gentile, I knew that he had risked his life for us, so why shouldn't I

give him those things? I again risked my life and went into the city at night in the dark. The gentile put us in a cart full of hay and covered us with hay.

We went past several guard posts, where he was stopped and asked where he was going. He gave some response, and we were allowed to continue. This was a risk to lie, and there were miracles. They could have searched what he was transporting, and that would have meant an end to our lives.

That night we rapped on the window of the gentile who lived in our house. He let us in and told us a lie, that the Germans had searched and taken our things. What could we do? We went back and he hid us. We gave him the little that we had with us.

After liberation in 1944, there were already other people in the house, not that gentile. As I said, I slept on the floor, and the gentiles, in the beds. That didn't bother me, although it was our house.

One day that gentile came. He had heard that we were there, so he came to see us. The Russian army was around. One could take vengeance. They asked who he was. They hit him and he fell down.

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I could have said that he had taken our things, but I said that I had given them to him. He had taken them, but he hadn't taken our lives. He knew that we were Jews and. He had our things. Many gentiles who had Jewish property did this. Fearful that these things would be taken away, they killed the Jews. Seeing that he had taken only our things and not our lives, I forgave everything and told the Russian soldiers that they should do him no harm.

I couldn't spend more than a few days in our house. I felt like everything was coming loose. We went to live in another house. Life there was routine. There were partisans who had thrown living people into fire and burned them. But our life was again regular. We lived close to the Russian army.

I forgot to mention that when we left our gentile and went into the city, we left him what we had worn. He didn't want it. His wife said I should take the fur coat because I was a young woman and should be dressed. I decided to give it back, because I had nothing to pay with. My brother, too, left his things and took just a pair of torn pants.

In the town, my brother knew the secretary of the Communist Party, where he had worked before the war broke out, and they gave him work. I didn't want a responsible job. I only wanted my brother to heat up the ovens so that I could have bread to eat, because for two years we had not eaten bread.

But the Russians, who knew us, wouldn't allow such a thing. They gave us good jobs.

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They told my brother to get dressed. He put on a uniform, and so did I. I worked in a canteen, and my brother worked for a shoemaker and tailor cooperative. He was in charge of machines and people. They provided the materials.

Question: Until when were you in the town? Were many Jews gathered in the town?

—In 1945, we went to Poland. When we came into the town, I knew no one there aside from my brother. Soon we encountered Shlome Shrayer and Chayim Tsisin, then Yoske Verbe (who were there).

After liberation, things were good. We worked and had food, but I couldn't go through the town. I saw various people, but no Jews, no Jewish children.

I was not happy that we were living well. I thought about going away.

One day the wife of the gentile who had hidden us came to me. She told me that her husband had been taken into the army and that the next morning he would be sent away with the soldiers. They were so naïve that they had not wanted to trouble me.

"Why did you wait so long?" I asked. "Why didn't you tell me sooner that he had been mobilized?"

What could I do? It was already too late, but I thought I would try. I went to the party secretary and told him I had a request.

"There is one Volodya Kitkowski. Tomorrow he goes into the army. Free him, I beg you. If you don't free him, I'll stay in this room and slit my throat before your eyes."

I didn't tell him why and he didn't ask. I started to cry. He looked at me.

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"It's too late. Everything is done."

I begged him to try, so he wrote a note. I don't know where I got the strength to run. It was far. I got there at the last minute, just as they were supposed to leave, and gave them the note. They let the gentile go.

He was afraid because there were partisan bandits. This was the reason they hadn't come to me. They feared for their lives lest the partisans come for them because they had hidden Jews.

On the road he met my brother. He raised his eyes to heaven and said, "Yankele, there is a God over the world."

He was afraid to say anything else, and he went home. This was the greatest joy of my life and I will never forget it. God helped me, and I was able to free the gentile.

I forgot to say that the gentile's mother had told him he should kick us out. He said he couldn't do that, because if he did, we would be killed. If he threw out innocent Jewish souls who had done no wrong, he would see God's punishment. And God did help him. He suffered no harm, and neither did we.

After liberation, he was quite scared for our welfare. He was able to meet with us. We met in secret so no one could see for the whole time until we left.

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When the ordinance came that whoever wanted to leave Russia could register, you must see that we were the first. We left for Poland.

We settled in Gliwice and had bad times there. From Gliwice we went to Germany, where we spent four years in a camp. First we were in the Pocking camp in Lower Bavaria. In Pocking there were military barracks in the woods. We lived in difficult conditions.

Then we were relocated to another camp that was a bit more human. This camp was called Heidenheim. From there we contacted our family in America. They sent an affidavit, and we traveled to America in 1950, I and my brother.

Arriving in America without knowing the language and the differences between European and American life was difficult. We had a bad time at first. Those who didn't know the language got the worst jobs. Until we became a little settled, we suffered a lot.

At first it was not possible to write from another country to Russia. Finally, one could write. I was able to contact the gentile and receive a letter from him. The gentile had died, but his wife and children were alive. I had not forgotten them, and I will never forget them. I could never repay them. I paid $120 to send them a package. The Russians didn't allow the shipment of old things. Everything had to be new. I sent material, clothing, shoes. They could sell these things for cash.

I got photos from them. The children had grown up. After we left, they had a daughter. The father was old and sick, so the daughter wrote the letter.

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She called me "Dear Tsitsi," and she asked when she could thank me for all the good things I did for them. She didn't know why I did them. They didn't want to tell her when she was young. When she got older, her father told her why "Tsitsi" sent them things.

The daughter grew up and was going to be married. They sent me her photos and I sent clothing. It wasn't easy to find American clothing that would look good there. I went to a store and asked for appropriate clothing with long sleeves. I told the saleslady the whole story. She contacted New York and they made the garments. I bought woolens.

There is no way to repay what I owe them. As long as I live and am healthy, I will be indebted to them—this is my life's responsibility. The same for my brother.