

# I Choose Life

Two Linked Stories of Holocaust  
Survival and Rebirth

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AND GOLDIE AND SOL FINKELSTEIN,  
WITH JOSEPH S. FINKELSTEIN

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## A Good Life

I was born in Poland on September 16, 1925, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. For a religious family like mine, it was a blessing to be born on such a holy day. It is said that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all born on Rosh Hashanah. Not that I'm in their league, but maybe this was God's way of saying that He had something special planned for me. I believe so. If He had not saved me so many times, I would not be here to tell my story now.

My name is Sol Finkelstein. It is a tradition among Jews to name a child after a deceased loved one. My older brothers Abraham, Aaron and Joseph had already taken the names of our only dead relatives, so my parents picked a Biblical name for me, "Absalom." In Hebrew, it's Avshalom. He was the oldest son of King David, the one who betrayed his father and was defeated when his beautiful, long hair became entangled in a tree. "Sol" comes from Absalom. "Sol" is what everyone has always called me.

My first years were spent in Pulawy, a town on Poland's largest river, the Vistula, about 60 miles south of Warsaw. My mother, Chaya Golda Perel Warszenbrot, grew up in Pulawy, and my father, Jacob Noah Finkelstein, was born in a neighboring town called Konskowola and grew up in nearby town known as Wawolnica.

My parents had an arranged marriage as was common practice for Jewish families in those days. They first met at a family wedding when they were young children, just seven or eight years old. My mother was the kid sister of the groom, Simcha Warszenbrot, and my father was the kid brother of the bride, Tovah Finkelstein. And when the *machatunim* saw this, they decided right then and there, "These two will be a couple." It was fated. I don't know if my parents ever saw each other again before they married, but the *shidekh*, the match, was

made at the wedding that very day. Of course, when one brother and sister marry each others' brother and sister, it leads to confusion, so there were many family jokes about our double relations. For instance, it meant that my Uncle Simcha was my mother's brother and my aunt's husband. And my aunt Tovah was my father's sister and my uncle's wife. You get the picture.

When my parents married, my mother was already a successful young businesswoman. Smart and capable, she owned and operated her own grocery store in Pulawy. My father, on the other hand, had been a poor *yeshive bucher*, a student in the famous Jewish religious academy in Lublin. He wanted to be a Talmudic scholar, but my mother insisted that this was no way to support a family. "You have to make a living for me and the children." She knew it would hurt business with the Poles if Father looked too Orthodox so she cut off his long Jewish beard and ear-locks. Father went to work with Mother in her grocery business, but he remained very observant and continued to *daven*, pray, every day.

Years later, as I came along and the Finkelstein family grew to five children, my parents looked beyond Pulawy for better economic opportunities. When I was about three years old, they sold the little grocery and moved to Radom about 35 miles to the west. Compared to Pulawy, Radom was a large commercial city of 150,000 people with a thriving Jewish community of 35,000. There my father was a *voyageur*, a traveling salesman, selling goods as the exclusive agent in Poland for a chocolate manufacturer in Lvov.<sup>1</sup> My father traveled all over Poland by rail, which was the main method of transportation in those days, to sell chocolates to various wholesalers and stores. My mother's domain was the house and the children. It was a demanding job for her because Father was on the road every week. He gave my mother the money, and she took care of everything.

I don't recall a single argument between my mother and father. Everybody in our family got along, even the kids. In those days, if there was a problem that the family couldn't handle, you would go see the *Rebbe*, the Rabbi. For a religious Jewish family like ours, the Bible had an answer for every question and whatever the *Rebbe* advised, it was always the right advice.

My first memories begin in Radom where *Yiddishkeit*, Jewishness, touched every aspect of my life. My earliest recollections are of an affectionate Jewish home, full of joy and Hebrew songs, with pictures of Jewish leaders on the walls, and chatter about Zionism and Israel around the table. Both of my parents had very religious fathers, and though our home was not as observant as theirs, we

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<sup>1</sup> Lvov is also translated as Lviv and Lwow. It was then part of Poland, today it is located in the Ukraine.

were thoroughly Jewish. In those days in Poland, there was not much variation in Jewish observance like there is today. You ate kosher food, you got up in the morning and put on *tallis* and *tefillin* to pray, you went to synagogue faithfully. And the Sabbath was absolutely sacred—no driving, no working whatsoever. That was our life. There was no thought of why or what you did. Your father put on *tefillin*, your brothers put on *tefillin*, you put on *tefillin*. As a Jew, it was all you knew. There were very few Jews in Poland in those days that were not kosher and they were frowned upon for it.

Clothing was the most visible difference between regular observant Jews, like my family, and the extremely observant Orthodox Jews. An Orthodox Jew always wore a black *yarmulke* (skull cap), a long beard, *peyes* (earlocks), long black clothes, and a *tallis katan* with the *tzitzit* (fringes) dangling in sight. We never wore the Orthodox clothing—except when we visited my grandfather Moshe back in Pulawy.

Grandpa Warszenbrot was short and thin, maybe five feet tall and ninety pounds, but he was strong like an ox. I'll always remember his weak beard. When he was young, he was attacked by the Chmielnitskis. These were marauding bands of Ukrainian soldiers who invaded Poland at the end of World War I to spread Bolshevism. They took their name from General Chmielnitski, whose Cossacks fought against the Poles in 1648 and massacred tens of thousands of Jews. The Chmielnitskis hated Jews and they grabbed my poor grandfather. They set fire to his proud Jewish beard and laughed. Grandfather bore the burn scars on his face and could only grow a meager beard in its place. But this never bothered him. He said, "It could not have been any different. If God meant it any different, He would have never sent the Chmielnitskis to Pulawy." Grandfather had unquestioning faith in God. He believed that whatever happens, even a terrible event, happens because God wants it to happen. For Grandfather, great troubles were a test of your true belief—like God tested Job to see if he would stay faithful, or tested Daniel in the lion's den or Jonah in the belly of the whale.

Grandfather's unquestioning faith was not unique to him. It is a typically Orthodox Jewish perspective. It shows the intensity of his piety and why he was determined to correct our ways when we stayed with him in Pulawy in the summertime. Grandpa would quiz me about the Torah and scold me if I did not get up in the morning to *daven*. He insisted that I wear a *yarmulke* and *tallis katan* at all times. The *tallis katan* is basically a prayer shawl in the form of a sleeveless garment that goes over your head and is worn under your shirt. It displays the knotted tassels called *tzitzit* at your waist, which show your obedience to God's commandments.

At Grandfather's house, I had to *daven* every morning. I knew the prayers well, but it is not so easy to pray in the morning when you're young and your stomach is growling. You're not supposed to eat before you *daven* so Grandma

(Chava Korman Warszenbrot) would sneak me a little bit of breakfast before Grandpa saw me. That's a grandmother for you—a smile, a pinch on the cheek, a piece of candy. Grandma was round and chubby, always smiling, and she always wore a *sheitel*, a wig. I still remember her soft round face with cute cheeks and sparkling eyes. Her house and her heart were big enough for all of her many grandchildren.

My grandfather made his living as a *jobber*. That is Yiddish for a middle man who purchases goods from one vendor and then resells the goods to another vendor. Grandpa's business was buying produce from farmers. He would buy a crop of strawberries or apples or pears, then harvest them, package them, and send them to Warsaw for sale.

My family would also go to visit my mother's oldest brother, Uncle Simcha. He was a big man with a chest like a bear and a beard that reached his knees. He was so strong that I thought he would kill me when he hugged me, which was often. Uncle Simcha was so bright and learned in Torah that he was an advisor to Rabbis. He had many children and they all lived on a sort of farm in a tiny *shtetl* called Wawolnica. If you yawned, you missed it. We were related by blood to almost half of the town of Wawolnica.

For a city boy from Radom, the *shtetl* was an exciting place to visit. It was so primitive. There were no cars. The peasants rode horses bareback and drove horse-drawn wagons. There were cows and livestock making noises. The houses were small wooden buildings with thatched roofs. In the center of the *shtetl*, there was a tiny market square with maybe ten buildings and a Jewish store in each one. You pumped your water from a well and used an outhouse because there was no plumbing. There was no electricity in the *shtetl* either. I remember one of my cousins once came to visit us in the city. We had a radio playing and he ran from our apartment, screaming, "A *dybbuk!* A *dybbuk!*" He had never seen a radio before. He thought our home was possessed by evil spirits and that Satan was talking to him out of the box! That's how different our city life was from peasant life in the *shtetl*.

My mother had two brothers, Simcha and Josef, and one sister, Paula. My father was the youngest of seven children, four boys and three girls: Aaron, Arieh, Tovah, Yehuda, Sara, Frida-Shlomit and finally my father—Jacob. So I had aunts and uncles here and aunts and uncles there. And, of course, cousins and more cousins. The only relative who lived nearby was my mother's youngest brother, Josef Warszenbrot. Uncle Josef would come over on the Sabbath and play chess for hours. He especially liked to play with me because he had no sons of his own, just two daughters. The rest of our extended family was spread all over Poland with a few living in Israel. Like the diversity of Polish Jewry itself, we had relatives living in big cities like Warsaw, which had hundreds of thousands of Jews, to smaller cities like Radom where I grew up, to small towns

and tiny *shtetls* like Wawolmca where Uncle Simcha lived. In the years before the war, there were thousands of Jewish communities in Poland, big, medium and small. Today, there's nothing.

My immediate family was four boys and a girl. I was the *miznik*. That is Yiddish for the youngest child. My oldest brother Abraham was about 8 years older than me. Then there was my brother Aaron, my sister Ann (Chana), my brother Joseph, and me. When I was five, my father predicted careers for all of us. He said Abraham would be a doctor or a scientist because he was so brilliant. Aaron would be an accountant because he was a genius in mathematics. Ann would be a dancer because she was very good in ballet. And he told me that I was destined to be a lawyer. I forget what he predicted for Joseph. Unfortunately, the war destroyed all of his predictions, but maybe his wishes came true because my own son Jacob became a doctor, and my son Joseph became a lawyer.

In Radom, we lived in a spacious apartment on the third floor of a large apartment building with four stories. The address was 26 Pierackiego Street, which was named after a former Polish premier.<sup>2</sup> We had a small balcony that overlooked busy Pierackiego Street. Like many places in Poland, our apartment building was connected to other buildings in a continuous perimeter that formed a square and nearly covered a full city block. Inside the square was a nice courtyard where we could play. There were about a hundred tenants in our building, nearly all Jewish, because Jews tended to congregate with other Jews in Poland. We would enter from Pierackiego Street through a gateway into the courtyard. A public school named after a Polish Jewish hero, Joselowicz, was on the left side and our apartment was on the right.

My typical day would begin with a long walk to school, which was a little over a mile. There were no buses or trolleys, so we walked summer and winter. School started at 8 a.m. and finished at 2 p.m. The school usually provided lunch, but sometimes we brought food from home. When we returned home in the afternoon, our family would have its main meal for the day. In Poland, people would eat their supper during the day. Then it was time to do homework. In our home, homework was as important as religion. You never did anything until your homework was done.

I liked school. Like most Jewish boys, I started *Cheder* when I was five. The *Cheder* was a Jewish secular school, but the emphasis was on Jewish learning and Hebrew. Everybody but the janitor was Jewish. Boys and girls attended together and I had a lot of friends. A Jewish religious school teacher is called the *Melamed*. If you didn't pay attention, or you didn't know the answer quickly enough, the *Melamed* would smack you on the knuckles! That was how we

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<sup>2</sup> In modern day Poland, the street has been renamed Niedzialkowskiego Street.

learned. We were taught to read and speak Hebrew. We studied the traditional Jewish prayers, *Chumash*, *Rashi*, and a little bit of *Gemorah*. But we also studied secular subjects like science, Latin, German, mathematics, and history. As much as we wanted to learn all about the world, we could never forget that we were Jewish.

I think I was nine years old when I graduated from the *Cheder*. The secondary school had an odd name, "Friends of Knowledge" (*Przyjaciół Wiedzy*). It was also a Jewish secular school and parents had to pay tuition to send their children there. Our education mixed secular subjects with more advanced Hebrew, *Tanach*, *Mishneh*, and *Gemorah*. We had separate teachers for each Jewish subject and for each secular subject. Most of the teachers were old maids and they often had their favorites. I was the favorite of the German teacher. She was maybe four feet tall. I was a small boy but I was still taller than her.

My older brothers were such brilliant students that the teachers expected a lot from me. I always lived in the glory of how well Abraham and Aaron did. A teacher once said to me, "Sol, you have big shoes to fill, because Abraham was in my class, and Aaron was in my class." I was expecting her to make the usual comparison, but she surprised me. "Ah, but you're doing well, Sol, you're filling those shoes." So I guess I was pretty smart too. I read a lot. In fact, I was an assistant librarian in the school, which exposed me to every kind of book. I didn't understand many of the books I read, but I read them nonetheless, and reread them. Some of it stuck. Some of it didn't.

After homework was done, we were free to play. Sometimes I played outside with friends, but mostly I would follow my older brothers and sister to the Zionist youth clubs. There were several to choose from in Radom. *HaShomer Ha'tzair* was politically left, *Beitar* was right and there was *Mizrachi* for the very religious. The politics of each did not matter so much to me. Personally, I liked *HaShomer Ha'tzair* because the girls were prettier. They all offered the same kind of camaraderie and fun, and each one taught the same passionate love of Israel and Zionism. We would sing Hebrew songs and dance *horas* and march about. Then, at about 6:30, everyone would go home, eat a sandwich and go to sleep. Life was simple and sedate.

You see, for Jews in Poland, the dream of a Jewish homeland was supremely important. From the earliest I could remember, there was talk of Israel and the belief that Zionism would revitalize the Jewish people. We all dreamed that someday we would see a land of Israel. That was the thing we always talked about at our table. We sang Zionist songs and read Zionist literature. We all wanted to go to Jerusalem. *Yerushalayim shel zahav*. Jerusalem of gold. As we learned from Psalm 137, a Jew must never forget his connection to Jerusalem or he will be lost.



The love of Jerusalem and Israel permeated our traditional prayers. Even the daily morning prayer says, "*Tolichenu kommiyut l'artzenu.*" It means we should return upright, in dignity, to our homeland. I felt Zionism strongly because it was all around me. My father was a passionate Zionist. So, too, were my older brothers and sister, and my mother. We all believed in Zionism. My grandfather's absolute greatest wish was to go to Israel and be buried in Jerusalem.

As Jews, I think we always dreamed about Israel because we never felt safe in Poland. There were millions of Jews living in Poland. Some were well off, but a great many more were very poor. And we were always hated by the Poles. Poland never felt like our home country. No matter how successful you were in Poland, no matter how many generations your family lived there, if you were a Jew, you were still an outsider. That's why we always talked about an independent land of Israel. The modern Zionist movement first started in the 1870s and grew popular because the Jews in Poland never felt that they belonged there—even after living there for 900 years.

In Poland, there was no hiding that you were a Jew, especially if you wore the clothes and beard of an Orthodox Jew. The Poles were blond and fair-skinned and we Jews were mostly dark. Anti-Semitism was an everyday occurrence. For children, it took the form of taunts and racist slurs. When we walked to and from school, the Polish boys would often yell, "dirty Jew" or "filthy Jew" or throw stones at us. Sometimes they would threaten to beat us up and chase us. But that is as far as it went. Later, as Hitler and the Nazis became more powerful in the late 1930's, the Polish anti-Semites also became louder and bolder. A few started to break windows in Jewish stores and bully Jews on the street. But, for the most part, anti-Semitism was an irritation that we were accustomed to, like a stone in your shoe.

Like most Jews, of course, our weekends were centered on *Shabbat*, the Sabbath, which started at sundown on Friday evening and ended at sundown on Saturday. Father would return home from his business trips each Thursday afternoon so that he would never have to travel on the Sabbath. He wanted to be ready for Friday night like everyone else. Thursday was also the day when the *schnorrers* would come to our house. They were Jewish beggars and it was traditional to treat them with charity and kindness. The *schnorrers* would make the rounds in the neighborhood, visiting certain houses at certain times. Our day was Thursdays. My mother would always give the *schnorrers* a prepared meal and a few coins of *tzedakah*, charity. The *schnorrers* knew who would give and who wouldn't. My mother always had an open door and always gave. She honestly believed that the more she gave, the more God gave to her. I think it's true, too.

Then it was Friday. Friday was very traditional. The women went to the *mikvah* on Friday morning to cleanse themselves, the men washed up in the late

afternoon, and everybody dressed in fine clothes to walk together to synagogue in the evening. After services, we all walked home and the family would gather around the table to eat and sing *z'mirahs*, Hebrew songs. Then, after the meal, we all *bentsched* (recited prayer blessings) and talked about Israel and Zionism.

Saturdays were always the same. In the morning we all walked to synagogue to *daven* again. Then the afternoon would be lazy and relaxed, a true day of rest as God intended. The children went out to play and the adults went to visit friends and relatives who lived within walking distance.

Then Sunday would come and Father would pack his suitcase to start another week of traveling sales.

As the youngest in the family, I felt that we had the perfect life in Radom. I had a loving family with lots of hugging and kissing. We were well-educated and comfortably middle-class. I had many good friends. We lived in a Jewish neighborhood, spoke Jewish, went to Jewish school, *davened* every day, and dreamed of a Jewish homeland. We enjoyed a passionate and satisfying Jewish life. The Torah was the basis of our life as it had been for Jews for 3,000 years. Simple truths like, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." "Thou shall not kill; thou shall not steal; thou shall not covet." "Honor your parents." It is all in the Bible. To have a good life, all you have to do is be a good person and respect others.

I have only happy recollections from my young childhood—memories of how we marched and sang, how we played, how I went to school, how my oldest brother taught me to ride a bike during our summer family vacation. There was only one time that was upsetting. My oldest brother Abraham struck my brother Aaron because he said something disrespectful to a teacher. Then my father struck Aaron too. "How dare you be disrespectful to a teacher!" Aaron wasn't beaten or hurt, but it was frightening to me. I loved my brothers very much. My oldest brother Abraham was always very thoughtful and protective of his younger brothers. I remember the event precisely because it was so unusual. It had never happened before and never happened again.

Honestly, other than the tension that we felt from Polish anti-Semitism, our life in Radom was idyllic. I wish I had photographs to show how lovely life had been. But only two family photographs have survived the war. The first is a picture of my oldest brother, Abraham. He is wearing a hat that would be readily recognized in Poland as that of a university student. The picture was taken while he was attending the university in Krakow, probably in 1938. It was unusual for Jewish boys to go to university in Poland, but Abraham was unbelievably talented. He was absolutely brilliant, fluent in Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, French, and English. At the age of eighteen, he was a freelance correspondent to *The New York Times* and *The London Times*, writing dispatches in perfect English.

Since my oldest brother was eight years my senior, I remember Abraham in the most idealistic way—tall, handsome, with blond hair and blue eyes, and the confidence of a natural leader. He was prominent in the Zionist youth groups. After graduating from the university, Abraham decided that he wanted to be a *chalutz*, which is a pioneer in Israel. At that time, Israel needed skilled laborers and craftsmen more than scholars and scientists. They needed people who could build a modern nation from an ancient desert. So, to be more useful, Abraham started training to become a locksmith or a mechanic just before the war broke out.



My oldest brother, Abraham, in his university clothes, about 1938.

The only other family picture that survived the war is of my second oldest brother, Aaron. The photograph was taken about 1938 when he was still in high school in Radom. Aaron was a year and a half younger than Abraham, and five years older than me. He was skinny and dark. He was the best math student in the whole school, and a genius in chemistry and physics. In the summer of 1939, Aaron had graduated from high school and was looking forward to attending the university in Warsaw.

Both of my oldest brothers were brilliant young men. Both were ardent Zionists, who loved to discuss Zionism and Jewish thinkers like Jabotinsky, Grossman and Greenblum. Wherever there was a debate about Jewish politics or philosophy, they were right in the middle of it. The pride I felt in watching my older brothers played a huge part in my own Jewish pride and identity, which I carry to this day.



My second oldest brother, Aaron, in high school, about 1938.

My sister Ann was three and a half years older than me. Her Jewish name was “Chana,” but they called her “Andzia” in Polish. As the only girl, Ann was the darling of the family, cute, cuddly, and smart. She spent so much time with her two best friends, Marysia Tenenbaum and Hanka Leslau, that they called themselves “the Holy Trio.”<sup>3</sup>

The youngest siblings were my brother Joseph and me. We were closest in age, about a year and a half apart, so we tended to play together the most.

As for my father, he was just great. He was a very loving parent and husband. With his sharp mind and inventiveness, my father could have achieved whatever he aspired to. As I said, he was a *voyageur* for many years, but in the years just before the war he invented a new kind of glue. Though he had no formal education in chemistry, he created a formula for glue using lime and casein, which is a protein in cheese. Father’s glue was similar to what we know today as Elmer’s Glue, which was originally a casein-based glue. At that time, my father’s glue was a new idea in Europe that offered a better alternative. In fact, it became so successful that my father quit his traveling sales job and started a little factory. The factory was in the rear of the courtyard, right across from our apartment at Pierackiego 26. Later, after the Germans imprisoned the Jews in the Radom ghetto in early 1940, there was a short time when we were given a special permit to leave the ghetto each day to continue working in Father’s glue factory.

In September, 1938, I turned thirteen years old and it was time to become a bar mitzvah. I remember my mother hired a bar mitzvah tutor. He was skinny as straw and wore shabby clothes like a beggar. He seemed very old to me, though he was probably in his twenties. Twice a week, the tutor would come to our house to give me bar mitzvah lessons and my mother would feed him. He gulped the tea and devoured the meal as if it was the only food he ever ate. The truth was that I did not need tutoring, but the poor man needed to make a living. It was another way that my mother gave *tzedekah*, charity.

When the day of my bar mitzvah came, I recited a special prayer that my father had said at his own bar mitzvah. After the Torah scrolls were returned to the Holy Ark and just before the doors are closed, I recited the words from Psalm 137, which is not part of the traditional service: *Im eshkachech Yerushalayim tishkach yehmeenee*. “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth. If I remember you not; if I set not Jerusalem above my highest joy.” It is a belief that has always stayed with me.

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<sup>3</sup> Marysia described my sister and mother in her own Holocaust memoir titled *Looking Back* (by Mania Salinger, Ferne Press, 2006).

## CHAPTER TWO

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### The Blood Red Moon

In the summer of 1939, my family rented a cottage in the country. One evening, I was lounging outdoors and I fell asleep in the lazy summer heat. When I woke up, the moon was shining on me, full and red. A blood red moon. It scared me. It was a superstition in Poland that a red moon means that something bloody is going to happen. People said it meant that war was coming.

The threat of war was nothing new by then. My family followed current events closely, reading the newspapers and listening to the radio. We knew all about the rise of Hitler and the Nazis. We watched as Germany swallowed up Austria in the *Anschluss* of March, 1938. We watched as Hitler's army seized the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia in October, 1938, and we grew more nervous as the Nazis launched the brutal violence of *Kristallnacht* against German Jews in November, 1938. A month later, the Germans started howling for territory in Poland. They demanded the city of Danzig and all of the land of the so-called Polish Corridor. The Poles were outraged and worried, of course. Locally, they organized a big public demonstration in Radom. My family and I went to the city plaza to show our national spirit. But the Poles rejected our support. "Go home Jews," they sneered, "this is not your problem." Even in their patriotism, the Poles hated Jews.

But nothing would satisfy Hitler's lust for an empire. In March, 1939, the German army marched into the Czechoslovakian areas of Bohemia and Moravia. After that, it seemed to most people that war was inevitable. My parents were worried. Like most Europeans, they remembered how terrible World War I had been. All through the summer of 1939, there were rumors that war was coming, along with new rumors that the Germans and the Russians were plotting to split Poland between them. But people still hoped that war would not happen.

“Hitler won’t be fool enough to invade Poland,” they said, “because France and England will come to protect us.” Though I was just a boy of fourteen, I was well aware of the growing anxiety. I had heard the news about this or that German invasion, but it was hard to conceive of it happening to us in Poland. I remember listening to Hitler screaming on the radio and it scared me.

This is what was happening in the summer of 1939 when my family was on vacation in the country and I woke to the sight of the blood red moon. On the first day of September, the Germans launched their *blitzkrieg* against Poland. My family hurried home as quickly as we could. The Polish Army was stunned by the Germans’ Messerschmitts and tanks. Radom itself was bombed from the very beginning because there were several factories that made military equipment for the Polish army. By September 6th, the Polish army retreated from Radom and there was panic in the city. “The Germans are coming! The Germans are coming!”

Like many other citizens of Radom, my family tried to escape the danger. We thought we would be safe if we fled east to Pulawy, the town where my grandparents lived. They lived above a grocery store in a two story building. It was located across the street from a Polish army base, at a major intersection where the road south from Warsaw intersected with the road from Radom to Lublin. Pulawy was on the eastern side of the Vistula River, and we figured the German invasion would have to stop there and the Polish army would be right across the street. So, my father hired a horse and wagon, we loaded whatever we could and fled in the middle of the night. We rode through the night and the next day, often shaken by the thump and crunch of bombs. It didn’t take long to realize that there was no place to run. The German army marched into Radom on September 8th and soon overtook us on the road to Pulawy. Polish and Jewish refugees were chased from the road as the German army roared past in their trucks and tanks. We didn’t need a radio to know that the Germans were crushing the Polish army. It was the same everywhere, as the final remnants of the Polish army retreated and surrendered.

The Germans crossed the River Vistula and captured Pulawy around September 14th so the German soldiers were already there before we arrived. On September 17, 1939, the Soviet Red Army launched their own invasion from the east and occupied the eastern half of Poland. Just like they had planned, Germany and Russia divided Poland between them. Poland disappeared from the map.

We stayed for a week with Grandma and Grandpa in Pulawy. But now that the Germans had conquered everything and the bombings had ceased, there was no reason to remain. So we loaded up the horse and cart and traveled back to our home in Radom. We expected to resume a somewhat normal life, but the Germans immediately began to persecute the Jews. They closed the schools for Jewish children. Every Jewish adult had to carry a work permit. At

any moment, the Germans could yank anyone from the street for forced labor. Almost as soon as we had returned, some German soldiers pulled me off the street to push trucks and cars that had stalled. The Germans would force Jews to scrub and clean the streets. The Orthodox Jews were the easiest targets for abuse by the Germans. If they saw a Jew in traditional garb, they would spit on him, or tear his clothes, or cut off his beard. The Germans loved to mock the Jews and take photographs of their abuse.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, fell on September 23rd that year. Random beatings of Jews were already so common in Radom that we were apprehensive about going to synagogue. We feared that the synagogue would be a target, but it was unthinkable not to go to *shul* on the holiest of Jewish holidays. So we went. Sure enough, when the Jewish men stepped outside after services, the Germans grabbed us and forced us to clean the filthy streets while still wearing our best clothes.

Within the first weeks of occupation, the Germans also began to ration bread. Everyone had to stand in line at the bakery to receive their portion. This became a big problem because the anti-Semitic Poles would curse the Jews and drive them out of the bread lines. If German soldiers were nearby, the Poles would yell, "This is a Jew, this is a Jew." And if a Jew succeeded in reaching the front of the line, the bread was already gone. In the beginning, my oldest brother Abraham would stand in the line for our family because he could pass for Polish with his blond hair, blue eyes and university cap.

The persecution of the Jews in Radom became a little worse each day. No Jewish male of working age was safe from being beaten or suddenly kidnapped from the street and forced to do work. I remember a day when I stepped outside onto our tiny balcony over Pierackiego Street and my mother yelled at me. "Come inside, Sol, before the Germans see you!"

Given the situation, my family had a long discussion. Although it would break up our family, it was decided that my two older brothers, Abraham and Aaron, would escape to Lvov in the Russian-occupied section of Poland. They picked Lvov because my father had some friends there from his days as a traveling salesman. Many of their peers from the Zionist group *HaShomer Ha'tzair* also fled from Radom to the Russian-occupied zone at that time.

I remember the day my two brothers were packed to go. "Goodbye boys, we hope to see you soon," my parents said. "Don't worry. England and France will beat the Germans in a month or two, and Poland will be free again."

They believed it. Everyone believed it. France and England were considered the strongest countries in the world. We expected the Germans to retreat back to Germany with their tails between their legs. We never imagined that the Germans could defeat the whole world, and we never imagined that this would be the last time we saw Abraham and Aaron alive.



My older brothers made it safely to the large city of Lvov about 200 miles to the southeast. Then, they moved to a small village outside of the city, where my brothers took jobs teaching Hebrew to Jewish children. They were safe, for the time being.

Meanwhile, the rest of us tried to make the best of things in Radom. Although I was only 14 years old, my youth was no protection from forced labor. When the first snow fell in October, some German soldiers grabbed me from the sidewalk and forced me to shovel snow from the streets. Another time I was forced to clean horse stables. Another time my brother Joseph and I were forcibly taken all the way to Lublin to chop wood for a day. There were many such instances. The Germans would grab Jews for forced labor anytime they wanted—to sweep the street, or push vehicles, or shovel snow, whatever they wanted. “For the Fuehrer, for the Fuehrer,” the German soldiers would bellow. When the cars and trucks would not start in the winter cold, they would shout, “*Juden, Juden, Auto schieben!*” (“Jews, Jews, push the car!”), beating anyone within arm’s length. You could not walk on the sidewalk, but had to walk in the gutter, and if you saw a German coming, you had to tip your hat in respect—or else.

I think it was November, 1939, when the Germans ordered every Jew in Radom to wear a yellow arm band with the Star of David and the word *Jude*—Jew. The yellow star was meant to be a mark of shame. The Germans considered the Jews to be nothing but cockroaches. Each day seemed to bring new restrictions. Jews couldn’t do this, Jews couldn’t do that. Jews were forbidden to walk on the main streets. Jews could not ride on public transportation. The Germans seized Jewish properties and businesses, including my father’s little glue factory, which they gave to some German or Pole. We could do nothing to stop it.

One day we were forced to make space in our apartment for a German. He moved into one of the three bedrooms and the rest of us squeezed into the remaining two rooms. We tried to reassure ourselves that, “Well, the Germans won’t be here forever.”

For the first year of the German occupation, we continued to live in our apartment on Pierackiego Street. Life was hard, but not terrible yet. The biggest problem was that my father, being an able-bodied Jewish man, was in constant danger of being kidnapped by the Germans for forced labor. He might even be sent away to a work camp. Eventually, it was decided that my father should also escape to Lvov and join my brothers in the Russian zone. We knew from letters that Abraham and Aaron were safe, and life was definitely better for Jews there.

Of course, my mother was afraid to be left alone with three children in an uncertain world, but it seemed like a wise move. Our family was not unique. There were thousands of other Jewish families who packed up and fled east to the Russian zone of Poland. Unfortunately, Stalin did not like having the Jews there either. So, in 1940, he deported about 200,000 Polish Jews to labor

settlements in Siberia and the former Soviet states of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia. Although cruel at the time, Staliu's deportations ultimately saved the largest group of Polish Jews from death in the Holocaust. Naturally, we knew nothing of this at the time. We only knew how much we missed Abraham, Aaron and Father.

In the winter of 1940, the Germans ordered the creation of the Radom ghetto as a prison for the Jews. They actually built two Radom ghettos. The "Big Ghetto" was created in the old quarter of the city and held about 27,000 Jews. The small ghetto was built in the suburb of Glinice and held about 5,000 Jews. By March, 1941, the ghetto prisons were ready. Every Jew in Radom was ordered into the ghetto. We said goodbye to our apartment and comfortable furniture. We saved a few personal belongings and crowded into a single room in the Big Ghetto, where we lived together for the next year. Once we had been comfortably middle class. The ghetto was the great equalizer. Now everybody was dirt poor.

The ghetto was locked on April 7, 1941. To keep our hopes up, we organized a Zionist youth club. Even in the ghetto, we dreamed of Israel and Zionism. It was absolutely forbidden for Jews to congregate or break curfew, but we were willing to risk getting shot for the chance to sing our Hebrew songs and dance. In fact, our secret meeting place had a little patch of green—a sort of garden in the ghetto. So we called our group "*Gan*", the Hebrew word for garden. There were twenty or thirty of us, boys and girls, who gathered around the fire to sing the same Zionist songs over and over. We sang the ancient oath from the Babylonian exile—*Im eshkech Yerushalayim*—never forget Jerusalem.

The *Gan* also published a secret record of our activities. Sometimes we had visitors from the Zionist underground movement, mostly the *HaShomer Ha'tzair*. One speaker was an elderly man who had been on vacation from Israel when the war started. He was caught by the Germans and not allowed to return home. We listened with wide eyes as he told us about life in the Promised Land.

In the beginning of the Radom ghetto, there was no organized work to speak of. Most people lived on whatever savings they had and bought food and items on the black market. The Germans would frequently round up Jews from the ghetto for forced labor assignments. No one could refuse to work. The Germans would give the laborers a little soup for a day of labor. That was how the Jews survived in the ghetto from day to day. My brother and I were different. We had work permits that allowed us to leave the ghetto to go to work in my father's glue factory. A Jewish policeman escorted us to and from work because we were not allowed to walk alone in the Gentile section.

After our family was locked in the Radom ghetto, my mother started trying to get my father back from the city of Lvov and my brothers back from the little village outside Lvov. She decided that whatever will happen, it should happen to all of us together. But the Germans put an end to that hope. On June 22, 1941,

the German Army suddenly launched their *blitzkrieg* against the Soviet Union. Just like every country before, the German Army crushed the Russians and they raced across Poland and on through Russia itself. By July 2nd, the German Army had captured the city of Lvov. Almost immediately, the German SS and their new anti-Semitic allies, the Ukrainian nationalists, began slaughtering the Jews living in the region. By July 3rd, they had already murdered 4,000 Jews in and around Lvov. Then, on July 25th, the Ukrainians unleashed a three day pogrom that massacred another 2,000 Jews in the Lvov area.

At the time, we knew nothing of these events. We never heard from my brothers again, and we never learned what happened to Abraham and Aaron until many years later. About ten years after the war, I met a man who was in the same village outside of Lvov at the time of these pogroms. He remembered the two Finkelstein brothers from Radom who were working as teachers in the village. The man heard that my poor brothers were beaten to death with clubs and shovels by a Ukrainian mob. My dear brothers Abraham and Aaron were murdered for no reason except for being Jewish. Two beautiful souls were lost. It is a pain I feel even today, almost 70 years later.

Having no information about my brothers and my father from the war zone was worrisome, but we did our best to go on living in our tiny ghetto room. We knew that my grandparents from Pulawy had been deported to Treblinka, but we could not accept they had been murdered along with tens of thousands of other innocent Jews.

We also heard very discouraging news of overwhelming German victories in Russia. We could see the proof of German power with our own eyes as they marched thousands and thousands of Russian prisoners through the city. They trudged past us, dressed in rags, looking more like animals than human beings, begging for water. But if we offered any help, the Germans beat us. The sight of those wretched Russian soldiers destroyed our hopes that Hitler could be defeated. The Germans seemed invincible.

As the winter of 1941-1942 passed, my brother and I continued to be escorted each day to work in Father's former glue factory. But then the Germans revoked our permits to leave the ghetto and we had no work. In the spring of 1942, the Germans began to deport the leaders of the Jewish community in Radom ghetto. This started persistent rumors that the Nazis were going to liquidate the entire ghetto. People became desperate to get jobs that could help protect them and their families from deportation. The best jobs were in the munitions factories and the automotive workshops.

My brother and I were first in our family to get work permits. By claiming to be mechanics, we obtained jobs working for the German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*, which had a garage just outside and against the wall of the ghetto. The closest I ever came to being a mechanic was I knew which end of the screwdriver to

hold. Without knowing it, my brother and I were already doing two things that increased one's chances of survival during the war. First, seize any opportunity that can improve your condition, and second, stay close to someone you can trust so that you can protect and help each other.

My mother and sister Ann were next to get work permits. They did housecleaning work for a shop run by the German army, the *Wehrmacht*. Working directly for the Germans was considered the best way to keep safe. Ann later persuaded the Germans to give jobs to her two best friends, too. The "Holy Trio" of Ann, Marysia and Hanka worked together doing various jobs outside the ghetto, like washing windows, making beds and cleaning offices. Ultimately, they gained desk jobs in the *Wehrmacht* office because they could all speak German quite well. Their boss was a kind middle-aged German officer named Baker.

On August 5, 1942, the Nazis suddenly struck. In a single day, they liquidated the entire Glinice ghetto. The SS surrounded the smaller of the two Radom ghettos and, at midnight, the Jewish policemen drove all the people from their apartments. Those who tried to hide were shot on the spot. The SS assembled the Jews and picked out the ones with work permits, about 800, who were sent to the big Radom ghetto. Then the SS shot about 600 old people and children and deported everyone else, about 6,000 Jews, including 2,000 from the large ghetto, to be gassed at their new extermination camp at Treblinka. We were in the big ghetto, but I remember that horrible night because we were locked in and warned to not go out. There were shouts, gunshots, screams and barking dogs. My poor uncle Josef, his wife and their two lovely children were deported that night, as well as my sister Ann's dear friend Hanka and her mother.

After the Germans liquidated the smaller Glinice ghetto, everyone was afraid—for good reason—because the Germans soon came back to wipe out the big ghetto. Between midnight August 16 and August 18, 1942, the SS forced 20,000 more Jewish men, women and children into cattle cars to be gassed at Treblinka.

My mother and sister Ann were saved by the actions of their kind German boss, Herr Baker. When Baker learned the date of the next deportation, he ordered his workers to return to the Radom ghetto to pack their clothes and valuables and return to work immediately. But Ann's best friend Marysia failed to return to the office. Ann acted quickly. She gave her watch to one of the German guards as a bribe to go to Marysia's apartment in the ghetto and bring her back before the liquidation began. Ann, my mother, Marysia and about thirty women and girls stayed overnight in an empty warehouse, while Mr. Baker stood guard outside with a shotgun. They could hear gunshots and screams during that long terrible night. My sister Ann had saved her friend Marysia's life, but her Holy Trio was finished—Hanka was gassed at Treblinka.

At the same time, my brother and I were saved by the *Luftwaffe* soldiers who didn't want to lose their free workers. They also knew that the Nazis were about to exterminate the Radom ghetto, so they told us to stay overnight in the garage next to the ghetto and not return to our room. We tried to sleep in some cars that night, but the sounds from the other side of the ghetto wall were too horrible. In his brief unpublished memoir, my brother Joseph wrote this description of what happened that long night:

“All night there was movement of people. All night there were cries and calling of names—Camale, Shigruele, Yosale—all children's names. The parents tried not to let loose of their children. All night there was shooting and more shooting. At daybreak, a deafening silence surrounded the ghetto. No sign of life. It was horrifying. At about 7 a.m., our keepers lined us up, about eight in all and marched us before the Germans . . . They checked our papers. They were in order with the exception of the only girl in our group, who worked as a maid. They marched her away from us about ten feet. Bang—she was not amongst us any more. I still shiver at the thought. We passed many corpses. However, to this corpse, we were immediate witnesses . . .”

The SS had now reduced Radom ghetto to a tenth of its original size. Of the 2,000 Jews remaining in the ghetto, nearly everyone worked for the German Army or Air Force. After the mass deportations, people were desperate for jobs outside the ghetto because they believed it might offer better protection from future deportation. My mother and sister were fortunate in gaining jobs at a work-farm outside and north of Radom, in the small village of Wsola. There were about one hundred male and female workers who walked four miles each day from the ghetto to the Wsola work-farm. After a while, the Germans erected a barrack so the workers would not lose so much time marching back and forth from the ghetto. The Wsola farm turned out to be a decent labor camp without brutality.

At about the same time, my brother Joe and I were assigned to work at a munitions factory in Radom, which had about 500 workers. It was short-lived. Only a week later, I was suddenly seized from the ghetto street by the SS Commandant, the *Unterscharführer*, who was looking for a car mechanic. I tried to talk the Commandant out of the idea. “Yes, sir, I'm a mechanic, but I work for the *Luftwaffe*.”

“You're not working for the *Luftwaffe* anymore,” he snorted. “You're working for me. You'll be my personal mechanic.”

Just like that, I was torn from my brother, the final connection to my family. I was sixteen years old and it was my first time alone. I was terrified. Joe remained in Radom ghetto while I was taken to a nearby labor camp. There, I was given the job of caring for the personal automobile of the SS Commandant. He owned

a little Fiat and my job was to wash it and change the oil. I didn't know anything about cars, but luckily someone showed me a few things. For a few months, my position was not so bad. I worked alone in the garage. I was given adequate food. I had blankets, which I used to make myself a bed on the floor.

During the time I was working at the garage, my mother was determined to reunite our family. Using persuasion and bribes, she succeeded in getting my brother Joseph transferred from the Radom ghetto to the Wsola work-farm. Joe was safer now, but my situation soon became perilous.

A *kapo*, a Jewish prisoner who supervised other prisoners, who was a friend of my brother, suddenly ran into the garage one day. "Sol, you have to run away!" he warned me. "Listen, someone was caught stealing gasoline from the garage. He told the Germans that he bought it from the little Jew boy in the garage. Sol, you know what happens. They're going to shoot you tomorrow morning at 11. You have to escape and save yourself!"

My stomach clenched and I felt the blood run from my face. This was a death sentence. With the Germans, there would be no chance of a trial, no explanations to prove my innocence. The truth was that two Poles had been smuggling the stolen gas. But the truth did not matter. I would be executed in the morning. There was nothing I could do but send word of the bad news to my family at the work-farm. At least, they would know what happened to me. It was sad to wait alone in the garage. Not many people will ever know what it is like to be a 16 year-old boy, all alone, counting the hours to your certain death.

While I waited for my execution, my sister Ann, who had received the message that I was to be executed, went straight to the German in command of Wsola. He was a major in the regular German army, and had contempt for the Nazis and their brutality. Not all Germans were bad. Some were kind and respectful like the Major and Herr Baker. At first, the Major said he could do nothing. But Ann was a clever 19 year-old and very brave. "You have a car, sir," she persisted. "My brother is a wonderful car mechanic. He could fix your car." It worked. The Major wrote a transfer order to the SS saying that he needed me specifically to repair his car and immediately dispatched one of his lieutenants in his personal car to come get me.

It was about 10:30 in the morning and I was counting the minutes to my execution. Someone called my name. I stood and walked outside the garage, expecting to meet a firing squad. Instead, it was a bright, beautiful morning and there was only this German lieutenant. He escorted me outside the gate to the Major's car.

Minutes later, as I left the camp in safety, I heard the gunshots that were meant for me. In the cruel logic of Nazi justice, someone had to die as an example to the others. Since I was gone, the SS guards chose another Jewish prisoner at random and promptly murdered him. Through quick thinking, courage and determination, my sister Ann saved my life.