Heritage Project:

Biography of Ralph Israel Charak

Sarah Charak, December 2010

I've always been fascinated by my Saba's story. As a small child, I remember being told stories of his survival. I would sit on his lap, imagining my Saba as a hero; my Saba creeping through the forests; my Saba fooling the Nazis…

As I grew up, my mental image of Saba changed. I was amazed less by his heroism and more by his intelligence and resourcefulness.

When I started to interview Saba earlier this year, my understanding of his story changed again. Discovering the details – the dates and the names and the places, and the countless stories of lucky chances – forced me to think about the miracle that was his survival. I questioned, wondered, and tried to understand. How? WHY?

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Childhood

November 1926 – September 1939

My Saba was born on 18th November 1926, in a district town called Sokal, in Galicia, in the part of town on the eastern bank of the River Bug. Sokal was then in Poland; borders have changed since and it is now part of the Ukraine. Saba was named Israel Charak (in Hebrew, Yisrael Charag); he was called Srulik at home. Saba added Ralph to his name when he was naturalised as an American citizen in 1960.

*The **Jewish community of Sokal** was established in the late 16th century. By 1931 there were around 5 500 Jews, out of a total population of roughly 9000. As the war broke out and Germany and Russia divided Poland, Sokal was part of the Russian section. Many Jewish refugees fled to Sokal as it was not under German occupation. By the time the Germans attacked the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941, there were almost 10 000 Jews in Sokal.*
- Encylopaedia Judaica

Saba's father, Yaakov, was born in 1883; probably in the nearby town of Dembowice. Yaakov was part of a very mainstream, average sort of Orthodoxy in the town. He was more religious than his 'modern' wife and children. He went to shul every morning and evening for tefila, wore a kippa and not a streimel (there were some Chassidim in the town who did), and lived in what Saba describes as a 'Yiddish world'. He was ambivalent about his children's Zionism, and didn't read newspapers. Saba remembers his father learning Gemara in a sort of study circle every Shabbat, and teaching his brother Heshu Tanach at home. He worked extremely hard as an employee in the administration of a brick factory, and only just made a living. Saba remembers that he also did 'a little bit of trading'; he would buy grain, which he kept at the back of the house until it was sold. Mina helped with this, and Rena said that she had more of a business brain than Yaakov.

*'**Galicia**… stretches from the outer edge of core Poland, north of the regional capital Lvov and southward, to where the Prut flows into the… province of Bukovina. It extends from the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains in the west… to the Zbruch River in the east. As a consequence of its geographic location, Galicia was imbued with Polish and German-Austrian culture and exposed to influences from Russia… Galicia was the birthplace or breeding ground of numerous intellectual, spiritual, and political movements... Shabbateanism, Frankism, Hasidism, and Haskalah flourished among Jews… Roman Catholic Poles produced Romantic literature… For Greek Orthodox Ukrainians, Galicia was the homeland of Ukrainian literary and political nationalism… For Jews, Galicia conjured up mixed images. To be called a* galitsiyaner *was… not much of a compliment… The galitsiyaner came under the influence of Zionism… Galicia was also the land of great rabbis and yeshivot, miraculous tales and vibrant community life…'*
- Omer Bartov, *The Shoah in the Ukraine*

Saba's mother, Mina Safier, was born in 1887, in another nearby town called Sielec. Like most Jewish women at the time, Mina received a good secular education and an average Jewish education. She was very clever and could speak Polish, Ukrainian, Yiddish, and German (her best language). Perhaps because of her exposure to secular culture, Mina was a bit more 'worldly' than her husband. She was discontented in Sokal, and wanted to live in a big city. Apparently very beautiful when she was a young woman, Mina had been evacuated to Vienna, during World War I, where she caused quite a stir. Saba remembers seeing an unused corset of hers in the wardrobe at home – a remnant from the Vienna period. Mina was less religious than her husband, and didn't wear any head covering – although this wasn't uncommon for the women of the town at the time. She didn't go to shul, but apparently 'Jewish women didn't go to shul, except for the chaggim'. She did 'everything' around the house. She had very infrequent help with the housework, except occasionally before the chagim; otherwise only some of the washing and cleaning the floors was done by a woman from the town. Saba remembers his mother baking her own challot – and that they were very good.

*'**Gender hierarchies** in the shtetl ascribed the mundane affairs of the world to women and lofty spiritual and religious pursuits to men.'*
- Encyclopaedia Judaica

Saba describes the children's relationship with their parents as very different from today. He said that today, children are much more demanding – in terms of the attention, time, and things they are given. Then, children were very much left to their own devices. Mina and Yaakov were only strict about 'things which had to be done'. As long as the chores (bringing water from the well, chopping wood) were done and they went to school and stayed out of trouble, Mina and Yaakov were happy.

*'**Hashomer Hatzair** was a movement which had emerged in Galicia during the war years… They had decided that they would find cultural and spiritual fulfilment both as individuals and as a group only by joining in the building of a new society in Eretz Yisrael. The shomrim believed… that only young people… could be revolutionaries… Their intellectual mentors were Marx and Freud, Neitzsche and Buber, Gustav Landauer and Wyneken.'*
- Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*

The eldest of the four siblings, Azriel, was born in either 1909 or 1910. Like all the Charak boys, he first went to a cheder, then the big government primary school – with cheder in the afternoon. A lot of Jewish kids went to that school; primary schooling was compulsory. Chassidim wouldn't let their children attend and sometimes tried to only educate them at home, but they didn't always get away with that. Azriel matriculated from high school ('gymnasium') at 19, and then studied law at the university in Lvov. While studying, he would sometimes come home for short periods. Saba doesn't remember him at home except on Pesach. Azriel was one of the founders of the Sokal branch of Hashomer Hatzair (a secular Zionist youth movement), and worked for a Zionist organisation in Lvov, giving speeches. Azriel ran away from Poland in 1939. He first went to Lithuania, then Japan, then America.

Next came Rivka, who was mostly called Rena – her Polanised name. Rena was born on 10th October 1912. She went to primary school at the nunnery – the only option for girls – and couldn't go to secondary school, again because she was a girl. Instead, she studied at home and did the matriculation exams externally. At the university in Lvov, Rena studied liberal arts – Latin and philosophy. Going to university was a remarkable and unusual thing for girls in Sokal, let alone Jewish girls. She was studious, and close to her professor, with whom she maintained a regular correspondence, even when she was in Israel. While she was living in Lvov, Rena had to support herself; she tutored to earn money. Her parents sometimes sent food parcels by bus. In 1931, Chaim Nachman Bialik came to Lvov and gave lectures on Zionism. Rena, who studied in Lvov in 1934-

1936, heard about his visit, and also that he had been offering a chance for students to go to Palestine. Although she was involved in Hashomer Hatzair, Rena was not as passionately Zionist as Azriel; but she took the opportunity anyway, and left in November 1936. Mina and Yaakov were supportive of her decision to leave, because 'anybody that could get out of Poland, it was considered the right thing to do.' She had also been 'keeping bad company' – she was staying with communist friends, which was illegal and extremely risky. To get her away from danger, her parents provided most of the money. Mina even sold a big gold chain to help pay for the ticket.

> *'**Chaim Nachman Bialik** (1873-1934)… was one of the most outstanding figures in modern Hebrew literature… in 1931 he toured London, Poland, Lithuania and Austria, giving lectures on Hebrew culture and Zionism. His poetry expresses… the conflict between traditional Judaism and the modern secular world…*
> *Bialik was buried in Tel Aviv in 1934.'*
> - Joan Comay, *Who's Who in Jewish History*

Hersh Zvi – nicknamed 'Heshu' by his friends – was born in 1921. When the war broke out he was doing a compulsory part of the gymnasium matriculation program: Polish army training. Hersh didn't get to go to university; he took a job as a bookkeeper in Sokal under the Soviets.

My Saba, the second of the post war boys, had a relatively typical childhood. He received the same education as his brothers – cheder, then primary school, then gymnasium. From age three to ten, Saba learnt Chumash and Gemara at cheder. They learnt in Yiddish.

In the big government primary school, classes were in Polish with some Ukrainian taught as a second language. The students learnt Behaviour, Polish, Polish History, World Geography, Arithmetic, Ukrainian, Singing, Drawing and Practical Skills – which was usually woodwork. Saba's favourites were history, geography, and arithmetic; he hated drawing because he wasn't any good at it. School hours were eight until two, and they went five days a week.

Did he like school? Saba says 'There was no liking school or not liking. It was something you had to do – it didn't matter whether you liked it or not, you had to go.' Despite this, Saba says that he loved learning – he was always hungry for things to read, and Rena used to bring him Jewish publications for children in Polish back from Lvov. He read everything; from children's adventure novels (authors such as Jules Verne and Carol May) to political pamphlets and newspapers (which he started reading from the age of 7 or 8). He remembers reading about the Spanish Civil War (1935-39). In his early childhood, there were no radios.

The newspaper which Saba and his siblings mostly read was a Zionist publication in Polish, which was delivered daily from Lvov. There were Yiddish papers in the town, which they weren't interested in; and Yaakov didn't read newspapers. And of course there were other Polish, often anti-semitic, papers in town.

Saba says that anti-Semitism was accepted as part of life – 'a Jew is a Jew, a Goy is a Goy…' At school, it came from the Polish and Ukrainian children, who would call the Jewish children derogatory names. 'Anti-semitism was present in primary school, but at an acceptable level. We stuck together… we were seldom physically abused.'

Despite the anti-semitism, Saba's closest friend in primary school was non-Jewish. There were many Polish and Ukrainian neighbours who were friendly and 'didn't mind' that they were Jewish. All his siblings also had non-Jewish friends; but his parents didn't. Saba remembers a funny scene: his

father reading the parsha one Friday night, while his brother, at the same time, entertained non-Jewish friends, one of whom was the son of the Polish police commissar. It was later rumoured that he was high up under the Germans, but not in Sokal.

In 1938, Saba started at the gymnasium, but he jumped straight into 2nd year, 'for financial reasons'. There was an entrance exam – and, although not official, there was a 10% Jewish quota ('numerus clausus'). Saba not only got in, but won a part scholarship. There were 40 kids in his grade. It was co-ed when Saba went to school, but had been only for boys when his brothers went there, years earlier. He went to school on Shabbat, like everyone else. Uniforms had to be worn whenever the students were away from home – there were caps and numbers on the shirtsleeves. There were no electives – everyone in the entire country did the same subjects. These were the same as in primary, with the addition of Polish literature, German and Latin. Saba used to go to school in the morning, and in the afternoon, he had two hours of private lessons in Talmud. Twice a week, he studied Hebrew at the Tarbut school.

'The idea of a **numerous clausus** *for Jewish students was first raised in 1881… In July 1887 the Minister of Education published a circular restricting the number of Jewish pupils in secondary schools and higher institutions… The* numerous clausus *had become official policy… In most countries of the region the authorities introduced restrictions on the number of Jewish students in institutions of higher learning. The pretext was the 'destructive influence' of Jews in institutions of higher learning… The discriminatory policy in itself severely affected the economic status of the Jews…'*
- H.H Ben-Sasson, *A History of the Jews*

Both Poles and Ukrainians lived in Sokal, like the rest of Galica. The Poles were all Roman Catholic, the Ukrainians were Greek Orthodox – so they were easily identified. Jewishly, Sokal was generally a very religious town. There was the beginning of a strong Zionist movement, and also a small Bund organisation, but even the Bundists and Zionists lived a Jewish life. They were just drawn to new ideas. But the Chassidim considered any Jew who didn't live the way they did as a 'goy'.

Saba's family was fairly 'modern' and open to the world. They were definitely not Chassidim. Saba says that their lack of payes ('none of us had payes, even as children') was a defining element. The children were a step more modern and open than their father, but he didn't mind, much. The siblings were allowed to do what they wanted, but never openly did anything 'wrong' – they wouldn't have eaten non Kosher food, or walked around without their heads uncovered. Someone would have noticed. The family spoke Yiddish at home, but the siblings spoke Polish to each other and to their friends.

There was a Beit Midrash in the town, which was constantly open and had its own tefila. Guests and beggars alike used to come in and sleep by the oven, which was always on. The Chassidim always came to the Beit Midrash, and not to the big Shul, which wasn't frum enough for them.

The big Shul was completely full every Shabbat. Saba's family went there every Shabbat. The Rabbi, Sholem Rokeach, was a relative of the Belzer Rebbe. There were also many different shtiblech (small rooms with prayer groups) and kloyzn (a bigger version of a shtibl) – Belz, the shnayder (tailor's) shtibl (this included other trades as well), Strelisker, the Bundists' shtibl, the Husiatin-Czorkow kloyz.

The vast majority of the Jews in the town were poor – 'poverty' meaning not having enough to eat. Saba's family had enough to eat and Saba didn't feel poor. They lived in a three storey house

(including the cellar and the attic), which was considered quite a comfortable lifestyle. That the boys all went to the gymnasium, where they had to pay for tuition, was significant. Saba did not feel short of anything. But money was tight. He had one pair of shoes; and when they got torn, they were repaired, not replaced. In summer, he went barefoot to avoid getting in trouble for ruining his shoes. Bedrooms were often shared. At one point, a Jewish girl who was a student at the high school, Ruschke (Rozia) Szulbaum, boarded with the family. She slept in Yaakov and Mina's bedroom.

Saba remembers going to the public baths with his father on Friday afternoons. The rest of the time, washing meant buckets of water. In the baths, there was a mikva which was somehow connected to the river, called a 'Bod'. There was a big hole with steps of concrete in the centre like an opening of an oven, with hot rocks inside. When you poured water over the rocks, steam would rise; so the higher up on the steps you went, the hotter it was. On the lower level, there was a public shower.

Saba remembers that his older siblings weren't interested in him, and his parents didn't have time to spend time with him, but he had his own group of friends. During summer, they played games not unlike soccer and cricket. The cricket equivalent was called 'Palestra', and they used a rubber ball with a piece of timber as a bat. With his friends, Saba would play hide and seek near the river, and ball games in the pastures nearby. One of Saba's friends owned a timber yard, which had lots of space to play.

They also spent lots of time down at the river in summer. There was a superstition that every year, three people would drown. When Saba was around eleven, he was saved from drowning by a man called Yitzchak Hor. Later on, Hor was a Jewish policeman in the ghetto, and asked Saba 'are you still glad that I saved you?' In winter, they used to make snow igloos in the backyard.

Saba only knew one of his four grandparents – his paternal grandmother, Rikl. She lived with her daughter Mindl Gelber (Yaakov's sister), and her husband. Saba visited them in Lvov once – during the summer holidays, children under the age of fourteen could travel on the trains for free, so he went to Lvov, 'for adventure'. He remembers seeing his grandmother in bed; she was very sick. She died before the war and his father and all his uncles and aunts went to sit shiva in Lvov. Otherwise, there was little contact with aunts, uncles, and cousins. Communication was difficult, and life was complicated enough.

There was music in his childhood, too. He used to sing Polish patriotic songs at school – about legions, soldiers and kings. He remembers his mother singing Yiddish lullabies to the children.

Looking back, Saba says that his family's diet was quite healthy. They could also afford a few luxuries that others couldn't. They ate dark, homemade rye bread, with bought white rolls only very infrequently. Fresh fruits (like wild blueberries) and cream cheese products were staple foods in summer. Butter and sour milk were stored in the cellar. They also ate fresh tomatoes, but these were not popular. They used cabbage a lot in cooking, and also calves foot jelly. They stored apples and pears in the cellar in autumn. In preparation for winter, they would chop heaps of wood, and store up big sacks of flour, and – in the cellar – onions, garlic and dried mushrooms hung from the rafters; there were pickled cucumbers in barrels, cabbages, carrots and potatoes – which were kept in sand. They ate a lot of potatoes; but Saba says they didn't get bored, because there were countless

ways to prepare them. All winter, they ate goose fat on bread – or sometimes chicken fat, if the chicken was fat enough.

They used to go to the markets to buy fresh things – fruit, vegetables and eggs – from the peasants (things like apples, pears, cherries, berries and carrots). They bought milk, cheese, and butter from a Jew; there was also some kosher cheese in special shops. There were shops with kosher meat – which they bought in large quantities for the chagim. They bought fish live, and kept them in tubs at home until they were ready to eat it. Grain was bought at the market, then taken to the mill to be ground. Mina kept the flour in the attic in a big copper to keep the mice out. The copper was heavy enough to kill a person, so they always had to be careful around it.

Saba remembers that he hated eating breakfast.

*'The **cooking traditions** adopted in the different provinces of Poland and Russia were not all that different from each other, because most of the regions shared the same ingredients and predilections; notably a taste for carp and salt herring, sausages and sauerkraut. They all had heavy dark and rye bread, made cucumber pickles, chicken soup, thick bean and lentil soups, pancakes and dumplings, and also sweet noodle puddings. The severe winter climate had enforced a reliance on grains… and cabbage… Potatoes from the New World became the best beloved staple in the late 18th century, and in the 19th century, many impoverished communities survived on bread, onions, and potatoes.'*
- Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food*

On Shabbat or Yom Tov, the family would have gefilte fish or chopped liver (geese/chicken/duck), chicken or goose soup with noodles (Saba doesn't remember kreplach, but Rena did), potato kugel as an accompaniment for the meat and lockshen keichel (pudding) for dessert. The chickens came from their own coop, and Saba sometimes had to take them to the shochet. They used to leave the cholent in pots with the baker – whose name was Fink – on Friday afternoon, to cook overnight in his ovens.

Saba always looked forward to the foods on Yom Tov, but especially at Pesach. There was a lot of meat and more eggs than usual – dozens of eggs were stored in the attic three or four weeks in advance – and kremslech (a type of pancake made out of matza meal and eggs). Mina made rose hip syrup, and prepared borscht in large preserving jars; Yaakov made special wine from raisins, and pickled sour cherries. There were several types of cherries in Poland: chareshny, vishny and morella. There was a taller, sweeter one. The trees were bigger. The sour one was from smaller trees, but with bigger cherries. The third – Morella – were yellow, not red.

He remembers waiting to hear the sound of the horses pulling the 'droshke', the coach, bringing Azriel or Rena from the railway station when they came home from Lvov. He went to shul, which wasn't far from home, either with his father or by himself. He used to get new clothes for Pesach, which made it even more exciting. Saba doesn't remember having many visitors on Yom Tov, but sometimes they would visit their parents' relatives who lived on the other side of the Bug.

As a child, Saba hadn't really thought about the future. He wasn't involved in Hashomer, or any youth movement. You weren't allowed to belong to any political organisation when you went to the high school, but some Jewish students did anyway; not Saba.

Saba could have lived his whole life in Sokal without knowing anything else. But he always wanted more. In a theoretical way, he thought about making aliyah like Rena had; in order to get away to a 'gan eden', a utopia. Somewhere else.

War, under the Russians

September 1939 – June 1941

In August 1939, the Soviets and Germans signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. War was inevitable.

> *The **Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact** was a non-aggression pact between Germany and Russia, which included a plan to divide Northern and Eastern Europe (including Poland) between the Soviet Union and Germany. Western Poland was to be under the Germans, and Eastern Poland under the Soviets, with the River Bug providing the border. It was signed on 23rd August, 1939.*
> *- Richard J. Evans*, The Third Reich in Power

In early September, Saba was on holiday with his aunt Cyla – his mother's sister – in a little town called Olesko near Lvov. When it became obvious that war was approaching, he was sent back home to Sokal.

Saba said that, being young, he was excited about the war – and the 'adventure' and 'glory' that would come with it. 'In a childish way, I thought it would solve some problems – Jews would be better off afterwards.' At the beginning of the war, he ran to the station and found a piece of shrapnel, which he was very excited about, and kept as a souvenir.

His parents had too many immediate problems to worry or think about the big things, like the war – and anyway, Yaakov thought that it would all blow over very quickly. This attitude was held quite widely by people of their generation. Despite the worrying things they read in the paper, the general perception was that things would settle down. The people in the town had lived through pogroms; but life had gone on for hundreds of years like that.

On 1st September 1939, the German army invaded Poland from the west, marking the official beginning of WWII. It only took until the 16th for the German troop patrols to arrive in Sokal. They handed out chocolates and lollies to the children, including Saba.

On 17th September, the Soviets attacked Poland from the east. They also got to Sokal very quickly. The Soviets and Germans then divided Poland between them, with the River Bug as the border. The west was controlled by Germany, and the east by Russia.

Immediately, a curfew was enforced, from 9pm every night.

During this period, the Belzer Rebbe passed through Sokal. He stayed for a short time, but the Russians issued an order that all 'refugees' had to move 100 km away from the border, so he left, with all the Chassidim who had come with him.

With the Soviets in control of Sokal, school continued, but the systems changed: Ukrainian became the main language and Russian was also taught. The Shul, Beit Midrash and shtiblech were left open; religious life continued uninterrupted. But Zionist and Bundist activities and organisations were immediately banned and some of the leaders were imprisoned. There was pressure to join the Comsomol (communist youth) but Saba never did. Somehow, this didn't become a problem for

Saba. Some people (Jews, Poles and Ukrainians) were arrested and sent to Siberia. It became very important to be careful what you said, to always be politically correct.

During this time, there were Soviet newspapers, so people knew what was happening, but from the Soviet perspective. Radios were illegal, but some people had them anyway. Saba's family just got the newspapers.

There were no rations when the Russians were in control. Food supplies were still good, and people could buy whatever they wanted, provided they had the money.

In the middle of 1940, the Russians began building fortifications about one kilometre behind Sokal – walls of concrete, bunkers and anti-tank ditches – to protect the town against the Germans. But when the Germans attacked on 22nd June, only some were functional. The attack wasn't a surprise; German planes had already been flying over the Soviet side of town for a couple of weeks.

War, under the Germans

June 1940 – May1943

The Germans came into Sokal at 3 or 4am on 22nd June, which was a Sunday. They got in by stabbing the Russian guards on the one bridge which went over the Bug into the town; they were in town after 15 minutes.

At around 8am, German soldiers came to the Charaks' house, asking for hot water to shave with. Saba brought it out to the soldiers while his father stayed inside. Yaakov had a beard, and they would have realised that they were Jewish.

The Ukrainians greeted the Germans as liberators, very happily. The Ukrainian police immediately began to arrest anyone against whom they had a personal grudge.

*'… All Jews aged six or over had to wear a **Star of David**, black with a yellow background, as large as the palm of the hand, with the word Jude in the middle. This was an identification system which made it easier to detect Jews breaking the regulations… it turned the people of the town into law enforcers and demoralised the Jews themselves.'*
- Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews*

Later that day, Saba saw – from the safety of the house of a non-Jewish friend – people breaking into stores, and Germans randomly taking out Jews and shooting them. The Germans immediately imposed restrictions on the Jews of the town. No more than three or four could be seen together in a group at once, and they had to wear yellow stars. Germans began randomly catching Jews to clean the streets, and taking Jewish boys to bury Russian soldiers.

Ration cards were introduced around this time; you had to use the ration card to stand in line for the one shop where Jews could buy bread.

On Monday, Saba was caught in the streets with his friend, Chaim Bard, and they were both taken, along with about 15 others, into the forest to help bury Russian soldiers. The next day they were told they had to fill up holes in the road. Chaim ran away, and the soldiers threatened to kill the whole group if they didn't expose him. None of the people said anything, but the soldiers just brought the group back to town without harming them.

On 29th of June, the Germans ordered that all men between 14 and 60 had to come to the marketplace; if they didn't, the punishment was death. Saba's father went because it would have been noticed if he wasn't there, but he told Saba to stay home. The Ukrainians and Germans selected a few hundred Jews – anyone who was better educated, or looked better dressed. They were taken about three kilometres out of the town, and shot in the pits at the brick factory. Yaakov wasn't selected, and he came home.

A Judenrat was set up within one or two weeks of the German occupation. All the members were recommended by the Jews and had previously been community leaders, but the ultimate selection was made by the Germans. The Judenrat was an instrument of the German rule. Hersh Zvi was approached to work for them; he said no, as he already had a job. Saba used to do errands for the Judenrat and the Nazis, indirectly. The Judenrat would assign a number of people to work for the Nazis in whatever work they required. The Jews' regular jobs from before the war had by now completely disappeared.

'Upon entering Poland, the German invaders ordered Jewish communal leaders to establish Jewish Councils, ***Judenrat****… From the beginning, the Judenrat had two roles – to meet German demands, and to serve Jewish needs… Those who suffered during the war blamed not only the Germans but also the Judenrat officials and the Jewish police... The Judenrat was seen as a mere tool of the Nazis… '*
- Lucy S. Davidowicz, *Hitler's War Aginst the Jews*

Saba's family were driven out of their house in October 1941, and given a room with another family called Lieber. They took with them some furniture, a table and some timber for winter, and their clothing. Mr Lieber had been killed in the first mass killings; his wife and their child were left. The building had a shop in the front which had been taken over by Ukrainians, and a dwelling behind, in which they lived.

'The Judenrat has lost much of its former credibility… The Jews are calling the Judenrat by a new name: Judenverrat, Jew traitors.'
- Moshe Maltz, *Years of Horror, Glimpse of Hope*

During the winter of 1941, the Germans demanded 500 fur coats from the Jews. The Judenrat managed to collect the right amount, but everyone was left freezing cold that winter.

'The leaders of ghetto Jewry confronted insurmountable problems, but most struggles valiantly to keep spirits up and heads clear. Which tactic would prove most effective, or at least would do the least harm? The community was so adrift from normal, predictable life that few officials could act confidently in the face of constant fear and uncertainty. Many people are complaining because I arrange plays for children, festive openings of nurseries with orchestras playing, etc. I am reminded of a movie; a sinking ship – the captain orders the jazz band to play to lift the passengers' spirits. I have decided to imitate this captain. '
- Judenrat leader's diary entry, July 8th 1942

It was during that winter that the problem of food began. People would exchange any belongings they still had for food. People went scavenging for food. Once, Saba and his brother Heshu went to dig potatoes, and the peasant whose field it was saw them and gave them a whole bag.

Religious life at this point was almost non existent. As Jews had been forbidden to be seen in groups of more than four, people stopped going to shul. On one occasion a group of Jews were discovered praying at the Rabbi's house and were shot on the spot. Shechita was forbidden and even Ukrainian and Polish peasants were only allowed to kill animals for the use of the Wehrmacht.

In February 1942, 200 boys were taken by the Judenrat to the 'quarry' to work – it was a pretext to kill them. Saba was brought to the hall where they gathered – he slept there a few nights on the straw, but then wasn't taken – he thinks that Hersh must have bribed the Ukrainians to save him.

'At 5am this morning we hear gunfire from the streets and from the direction of the fields behind us. Mrs Halamajowa brings us our breakfast and informs us that the Aktion has begun. The Germans, accompanied by members of the Jewish Police, are all over town, picking up Jews… At one o'clock… the Aktion appears to be over. At four o'clock, she informs us that Jews – including children, old people, and invalids – are being marched to the railroad station in one long column… Hela [Mrs Halamajowa's daughter] *reports having seen members of the Judenrat staff and the Jewish police escorting the Germans through the streets of the city and helping them round up Jews. That night we are unable to sleep.'*
- Moshe Maltz, *Years of Horror Glimpse of Hope*

On 17th September 1942, 6th of Tishri, the first Aktion took place. Mina and Yaakov were taken away with that transport, to Belzec. Belzec was a death camp; you went straight from the train to the gas chamber; nobody survived. Mina was 55 when she died; Yaakov was 59. Hersh was working around the main square at the time, and saw them being rounded up.

*'The small town of **Belzec** was located in southeastern Poland between the cities of Zamosc and Lvov... In November 1941, SS began the construction of a killing centre next to Belzec… Belzec was the second largest German killing centre… Between March and December 1942, the Germans deported approximately 434, 500 Jews to Belzec, where they were killed.'*
- www.deathcamps.org/belzec

Saba was then working in a village called Switazow, 10 km or so away; that had been arranged by Hersh. Ukrainian police came after Saba in that village and Saba managed to escape through the backdoor and took off to another village.

After that first Aktion, the ghetto was set up.

Saba was still staying with the Liebers, in their shopfront house; which became the corner boundary of the ghetto. Another family – the Haberkorns – as well as the mother of the Charaks' former boarder, Ruschke Schulbaum, were added to the dwelling.

The families dug a hole together underneath the floor behind the shop. This was to be the place where they would hide when the Germans came to round them up. They all knew that, at some point, the Germans would come. In another spot in the dwelling they began digging a tunnel to reach the basement of the building next door, which had been destroyed by bombs. They were going to camouflage the entrance, but they ran out of time.

During this time in the ghetto, Saba used to smuggle food (mostly bread) into the ghetto from the railway station where he worked. This was illegal, but 'I wanted to be alive; that was my only goal.'

On around 25th October 1942, at the time of the second Aktion, Hersh was in the ghetto, very close to the fence, and he managed to get away and made his way to Tartakow, where Ruschke Szulbaum, by then his girlfriend, was living. At some point, he also had a job as a bookkeeper on a farm in or near Stanislawow. Hersh had organised forged Aryan papers for himself and Rushke, and told Saba that he had left Aryan papers for Saba to use too – but Saba never found them. After the war, there was no trace of Hersh or Ruschke, and Saba understood that they had not survived.

In December 1942 – January 1943, typhus spread through the ghetto. Saba was sick and became very weak; his hair was coming out in clumps. Dr Kindler helped and treated him, and Saba recovered.

In April 1943, a boy called Aaron Schiffenbauer suggested to Saba that he should go with him into the forest, where they would build a bunker to protect them both. Saba didn't show up in time to hide with him in the bunker, so he missed out. Aaron survived the war in that bunker, emerging three months after the German retreat.

In May 1943, the ghetto was liquidated. The Aktion was supposed to start on the 26th, but the Jews got wind of it and started to hide in bunkers. The Germans decided to wait until the next day, to lull them into a false sense of security, so that they'd come out.

The Aktion started on the 27th, which was a Thursday. Saba and six other people planned to hide in the the hole under the floor. The other people were: Mrs Lieber and her child; Mrs Schulbaum; Mr Haberkorn, and two family members (Saba isn't sure whether it was Mr and Mrs Haberkorn with their daughter, or whether Mrs Haberkorn had already died, and their son was there instead).

As soon as the Aktion started, they all ran to hide in the hole. Saba was the last one inside. He only just managed to close the trapdoor seconds before the Gestapo, Ukrainian police, and Jewish police broke into the dwelling, jumping and landing on top of the trapdoor. They immediately saw the half dug tunnel, and assumed that the Jews were hiding there, so they concentrated on flushing out Jews around the entrance to the tunnel by throwing hand grenades. They completely missed the hole where the group was hiding.

> *'At two o'clock, Thursday morning, May 27th, we hear a series of explosions. It sounds to me as if the Germans are lobbing hand grenades into cellars where they think Jews may be hiding… Before long, we hear shouts and screams from the direction of the ghetto… We hear shooting all day long. We feel as if every shot has gone through our own hearts. We know that each bullet will hit one of our own people in the ghetto. We hear screams… Mixed with these sounds of pain and horror we hear singing and music. Ukrainian schoolchildren are parading through the streets. They seem to be celebrating something – is it the death of the Jews in the ghetto?'*
> - Moshe Maltz, *Years of Horror, Glimpse of Hope*

Saba says that the hole itself was tiny, with hardly enough air to breathe. 'We were packed in like sardines'. They stayed in the hole till Saturday, opening the trap door for air. The police came through again on the 29th to check if there was anyone left. They did multiple rounds of the ghetto, to see if there were any Jews they had missed the first time. Saba was out of the hole and taken by surprise, and only had time to hide behind a door, but they didn't see him.

At dusk on 29th May 1943, the end of Shabbat, Saba left the ghetto – and the others in his group – behind. He put on his floor length navy blue school coat, hopped over the low fence surrounding the ghetto, and started walking. Gestapo men called out to him, but Saba pretended he couldn't hear, and just kept walking, faster. He didn't look back; he disappeared into the nearby property of a non Jew – it was the back of a coffee shop which was frequented by the Germans. After a couple of hours skulking around in the coffee shop, Saba went to the house of a Polish friend, Zbycho Mankowsky – which he had planned to do.

Of all the people in that hole in the floor, Saba was the only one who survived the war. The others were eventually caught and killed.

On the run, and liberation

May 1943 – May 1945

By the end of May 1943, the Sokal area was supposed to be 'Judenrein'.

Two days after Saba left the ghetto on 29th May, he was joined by Chaim Bard. Chaim and his three brothers had been rounded up with others from the ghetto, and were being led to the cemetery to be shot. They knew that they were going to die anyway, and many people bolted. Chaim's brothers didn't make it, but he did – and he ran to Mankowsky's house, which was around 500 metres away from the cemetery. The two boys had to leave when Mankowsky's brother, a virulent anti-semite, began making threats that he would denounce them.

Still in Sokal, Chaim and Saba hid in a barn in the backyard of a Ukrainian, called Wykarczuk. Wykarczuk was an old Ukrainian nationalist, and Saba remembers making mischief for him – throwing stones on his roof – before the war. Wykarczuk found them there, and directed them, with good intentions, to a place where his wife's sister lived in a 'new settlement' called Orzeszyn. This was a Polish settlement of some 50 people set up between the first and second World Wars, in the Volyn area. They headed there together, passing through a provisional border. On the way, they met smugglers (of salt, matches, petrol), who misdirected them on purpose to a German post. They realised in time, though – and made it to the hiding place in Orzeszyn safely.

Someone had informed the Ukrainian partisans that Jews were hiding in the area. Around 10th June, the partisans (whose leader was Stefan Bandera) invited Saba and Chaim to join their group, really intending to kill them. They said they were leading them back to their headquarters, but instead took them to a place in the forest where graves had been dug. They were told to undress. Chaim started to beg for mercy. He ran in one direction and Saba in the opposite direction. Saba was shot in the shoulder – the bullet entering from the back and exiting from the shoulder – but kept running.

> ***Stefan Bandera*** *(1909 – 1959) was a Ukrainian nationalist leader. He was one of the leaders of the OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) in the western Ukraine. The organisation encouraged armed revolt for the cause of Ukrainian independence. It also happened to be anti-semitic. He was assassinated by the KGB in 1959.*
> - www.answers.com

Saba ran (for around 20 or 30 kilometres), as far as Poryck, a small village in Volyn which was controlled by Ukrainians under Wehrmacht command. There was a Jewish family there who recognised Saba's name because of Azriel, who was quite well known in the area for his Zionist activities. They gave him food and drink and sent him to Vladimir Volynski, where there were still around 500 or 600 Jews. The Jews there lived under a type of protection, kept alive because of their special skills. Saba was allowed into that 'handwerks genossenschaft', because the partner of a Jewish policeman, a woman from Sokal, recognised Saba's name. She found a place in an attic to hide him, together with other illegal refugees. A woman doctor in the clinic treated the wound and his scabies, and put his arm in a sling. Others who managed to get from Sokal to Poryck and then to Vladimir Volynski were refused entry to this ghetto; all perished.

Saba met up again with Chaim, who had illegally joined a group of Jews cutting trees in the forest for the Nazis. They were a group of boys from Vladimir Volynski who had been allocated by the Judenrat to cut timber for the Nazis in a forest ten kilometres outside the town. For some time,

Chaim and Saba stayed in the woods close to the Jewish work detail; sometimes going with the boys to chop timber, and other times scavenging in the forests.

In August or September 1943, while they were on the run, Saba and Chaim hid in a barn which had a small haystack, burying themselves inside the straw. Ukrainian police came in with pitchforks, and speared the haystack multiple times; but missed Saba and Chaim.

In December 1943, the last remnant of the Jewish ghetto of Vladimir Volynski was liquidated. The boys working in the forests were surrounded and taken to be shot. Chaim was there and managed to run away. Saba came into the forest, noticed Germans everywhere, realised that something was seriously amiss, and ran away. Afterwards, he talked to a Pole who told him that the Germans had killed everyone, including the group of boys.

Saba and another three or four boys (including Chaim and Laibl Reichstuhl) made their way to a small Polish village, near Troscianka. They managed to get a rifle from a Pole, because the village was pre-occupied with defending itself. They stayed there for a couple of months, in the forest just beside the village. They survived on potatoes from cellars. There was nothing in the forests for them to eat – no berries or mushrooms – because it was winter. They slept outside, and moved around a lot. Sometimes, if they were lucky, they found abandoned houses; otherwise they dug bunkers to sleep in. It was very cold. The group grew and shrank – boys came and went, for one reason or another.

On 12th April they were attacked and surrounded by Germans. The boys ran and escaped. Chaim took a different route to the front, and died when he stepped on a landmine. Saba met a boy from Tartakov who told Saba the story. He had heard it on the grapevine.

On 13th April 1944, there were five boys left in the group (two of them died later, in Israel, in the War of Independence). They crossed the front line together, heading east towards Russia. The group split up – but Saba and Laibl stayed together. 'From that day, I began to be alive again'.

In Lutsk, Saba and Laibl were caught by the Russians as 'spies' and taken to the frontline as cannon fodder, but they escaped. Soon after this, they parted – Laibl volunteered in the Russian army until he was wounded. Saba later met Laibl in Gdansk in 1945, after liberation. He was then in the Polish army. Later, Laibl went to Israel with Aliyah Bet. Saba met up with him in Italy as they were about to board two different boats which departed at the same time for Israel. He also saw him once or twice in Israel.

In June 1944, Saba made it to Korets in the Ukraine, where he stayed with a Polish Jewish woman. She had two grown up sons who were partisans, and had been mobilised by the Russians to fight the nationalist Ukrainian underground, the followers of Bandera who had shot Saba.

Saba secured Soviet identity papers, and a job as a trainee book-keeper. The administration of the cooperative where he worked sent him to Lvov for training. He stayed in Lvov for six

From 1945 to 1952, more than 250 000 ***Jewish displaced persons*** *(DPs) lived in camps and urban centres in Germany, Austria and Italy. These facilities were administered by Allied authorities and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).*
- Harold Werner, *Fighting Back*

months, in a room in a Polish family's living quarters. The accommodation was part of the Government study grant.

*'The **Fohrenwald** DP camp was one of the largest in post-World War II Europe, and the last to close (in 1957). It was located in the section now known as Waldram in Wolfratshausen in Bavaria, Germany. The director… fostered the rehabilitation of the camp's residents, encouraging adult education and vocational training. A school was established… with extracurricular activities arranged largely through the local chapters of the Jewish youth movements… Residents enjoyed freedom to practice religion…'*
- Harold Werner, *Fighting Back*

Saba never went back to Sokal. He was repatriated to the Polish side at the end of the war. This meant that, like all Polish citizens on Russian territory, he was given permission to return and live in Poland.

When the war officially ended on 8th and 9th May 1945, Saba travelled by train to Bratislava, with false documents (they were Greek, and said that he had come out of Auschwitz). He stayed in a little hotel on Židovskà Ulica ('Jewish Street'). He and some others just hung around waiting to get to the West. They were stuck there for four weeks. In August 1945, he came to a DP camp, called Fohrenwald, set up by the UNRRA (United Nations Refugee and Relief Agency) in Bavaria, near Munich; he remained there for six weeks. This was the route out of Europe for those who aimed to get to Palestine.

After the war: illegal immigration, Israel, and America

August 1946 – November 1962

From Fohrenwald, Saba caught the train to Italy with two Jews (one called Tepperman, the other name Saba can't remember) who had come from the South of Italy to Fohrenwald, and were returning. This trip was organised by the Breicha. He went to the place where Aliyat Hanoar was active and stayed at another DP camp there (set up by UNRRA), waiting for a suitable opportunity to get to Palestine.

When I asked Saba why he decided, at this point, to go to Palestine, he said that he had already decided while he was in Russia; his sister Rena was there and after all, he had been involved in Zionism in Sokal. It seemed liked the sensible thing to do. Also, while he was waiting in Italy, relatives whom he didn't even know had sent him papers to go to America, and an affidavit that they undertook to support him. But entrance to America was on quota, and you had to wait to get in. Saba went to Israel instead.

While in South Italy, Saba learnt Hebrew from David Katz, who was an Aliyat Hanoar volunteer. David was older than Saba, and generally admired by the refugees.

In August 1946, the breicha secured Saba a place on the Katriel Yaffe, a fishing boat heading for Palestine. It was a boat intended for 30, carrying 700 people. They boarded the boat in Pisa. Italian politicians had been bribed to ignore it; and the people going onto the boats didn't know much about what was going to happen to them. They were told to be ready for the

*'**Aliyah Bet** is the name given to the organised illegal immigration of Jews from Europe to Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s. **Breicha** was the name of an organised underground operation moving Jews out of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, the Baltic countries, and the U.S.S.R. into Central and Southern Europe between 1944 and 1948 as a step toward their – mostly "illegal" – immigration to Palestine. It is also the name of the spontaneous mass movement of Jewish Holocaust survivors from Europe toward Eretz Israel.'*
- Yehudah Bauer, *Jewish Virtual Library*

morning, and trucks took them to the port. They boarded at night time, in secrecy.

At the time, Saba possessed the clothes he wore, a spare shirt, some money which Rena had sent, and a watch. Luckily, he didn't have to pay for the ship – it was organised by Aliyah Bet.

The boat had no toilets and hardly any water. Food was spaghetti, bread, or whatever they had taken with them. They were on the boat for seven days.

On the seventh day, British aeroplanes saw the boat and sent a warship across, which said over a loudspeaker, 'You are entering the waters of Palestine, you aren't allowed here… We're coming out to get you.' They brought the boat closer to Haifa, and a British ship called the Ocean Vigour sent soldiers from the 6th paratrooper division. Through a loudspeaker, they told the people on the Katriel Yaffe to get onto the British ship. No one did as they were told; they called the soldiers rude names, and then went below into the boat, where the fish were kept.

The British fired water cannons at the boat; the people still didn't get off. They used tear gas, which burnt their eyes. Finally, the British managed to get onto the fishing boat – and they forced the people, one by one, onto the Ocean Vigour.

The Jewish Underground managed to send frogmen with explosives to disable the engines; the intention was that the British wouldn't be able to move the boat away from Haifa. However, the explosives didn't work properly; so they took them out to sea. 'We didn't know – all this was done without being consulted.'

The British fed the people and gave out shorts and shirts. They didn't really know what to do with them – and rumours circulated among the refugees that they were being taken to Mauritius, as many people had been sent there during the war.

'Nowadays, you can pay thousands of dollars for a tour around the Mediterranean… then, we got one for free, unwanted.'

*'…It was agreed to deport to **Cyprus** all 'illegal' refuges who were caught trying to enter Palestine…From August 1946 to December 1947, the 51 700 immigrants who arrived illegally off the shores of Palestine – on 35 ships – were taken to Cyprus, surrounded by barbed wire, and guarded by armed British soldiers. Many of the soldiers disliked the task assigned to them; they were from the same army, and wearing the same British uniform, that had liberated so many of the DPs from Bergen-Belsen a year and half earlier.'*
- Martin Gilbert, *Israel*

The ship eventually landed in Cyprus, and the people were put into the detention camp at the end of August 1946. The people from the Katriel Yaffe, along with the people from another boat called the Kaf Gimmel, were the first group to be sent there – they set up the original tents. Saba stayed in Cyprus for about five months.

At the end of1946, the Jewish Agency moved Saba's group to their own camp in Kiryat Shmuel, in Palestine, for about a month. To make room for more people (other illegal immigrants) coming in, a few hundred of them – including Saba – were transferred in the beginning of 1947, this time to Atlit. They were the first European Jews to be imprisoned there. They were there to wait for their permits to be ready. In the camp, they were given barracks, and left to their own devices. At least, the British fed them.

Saba continued to learn Hebrew in the camp. He spent time with Yaakov Teichmann (who was later killed in the war, in April 1948), Jurek Bursztyn, Bronek Bursztyn, David Katz. Saba doesn't remember any particular pastimes; but he remembers the girls sewing themselves clothing from the tent materials. They stayed in Atlit for about a month.

> ***Atlit** is a coastal town located south of Haifa, Israel… The detention camp was used by the British authorities to detain 'illegal' Jewish immigrants to Palestine.*
> - Martin Gilbert, *Israel*

Rena knew he had arrived in Israel and that he was in Atlit. Saba had already made contact with her when he was in Russia. Pregnant with her second child, Rena came to Atlit from Tel Aviv, and saw her little brother through the barbed wire. In February 1947, Rena and her husband Paul organised a permit for Saba, allowing him to leave the camp. Saba went straight to Tel Aviv from Atlit, to stay with them and their small son, Dani. Their daughter, Mutal, was born in July 1947.

Paul's job was buying and selling cars. Saba started learning with a mechanic, so he could later on work with his brother-in-law. But, later in 1947, he got a job learning accounting in a firm. He worked during the day, and at night time he was preparing to do the London matriculation.

As soon as he entered Palestine, Saba had been enrolled as a reserve soldier in the Haganah. In March 1948, he went to train in an army camp in Tel Aviv – which the British had already left.

> *'… a **Haganah** (defence) organisation was set up in March 1921. The Haganah was essentially a clandestine organisation operating without the approval of the British authorities, but dedicated to maintaining the security of the settlements which the British could not do… It was to defend Jewish property and protect Jewish life in Palestine until the establishment of the State 27 years later.'*
> - Martin Gilbert, *Israel*

After training, Saba became a quartermaster – supplying the army with food from a warehouse, in Tel Hadar, Tel Aviv. While working there, Saba slept and ate at home. Some of the food was 'legal', some not. 'There was nothing. You had to create everything. Say army? It was no army.'

Later on in the war, he was sent to Jemosin – an Arab village used as a camp for the Israeli army – where he trained to put mines in the ground. While there, he still slept at home, but ate with the other soldiers.

After Jemosin, Saba went to a military camp called Tel Litvinksy. It is now a hospital called Tel Hashomer, next to Bar Ilan university. When the British left, the Jews had got in to Tel Litvinksy just before the Arabs. There were some skirmishes, but it eventually became an Israeli camp until the end of the war.

By the end of the war, Saba was in Sarafin (now צריפין), which was a British camp, next to the present (and more recently established) Kfar Chabad. It was also taken over by the Jews just before the Arabs arrived. It is still an Israeli army camp today.

Saba was demobilised in Sarafin at the end of 1949, and went back to Tel Aviv.

Saba's attitude towards his time in the army is very matter-of-fact. 'There was a job to be done, and we had to do it'.

After the war, Saba had a job in customs brokerage until the end of 1953. He spent five months in Haifa, then went back to Tel Aviv, but stayed with the same firm – which was called Atsmon.

The relatives who had obtained papers for Saba to go to America contacted him in 1953. Their letter said that he needed to come to America; if he didn't use his quota number, it would expire – they only lasted for 10 years. So, with a group of friends from Tel Aviv, Saba decided to go to America. They left in December 1953, always intending to come back.

Saba and his friends took the plane to Paris, where they were tourists for about a week; then they got a plane to London, and then caught the *Queen Elizabeth* to New York. Conditions on the seven day boat trip were very good. Saba was in a comfortable cabin – although 'of course not first class'.

Saba worked in a factory in America for a few months in 1954, packing underwear. In 1955 he got a job at Hauser, a Jewish customs brokerage firm. The non-Jewish firms didn't hire Jews or blacks, as a matter of principle; 'pure anti-semitism…'

When Saba arrived in America, he saw his brother Azriel. Azriel had changed his name to Edward when he arrived in America, and joined the US army. He spent some time fighting in Senegal. After the war he went on a GI (Government Issue) program to Palestine. He was in Jerusalem during the siege in the War of Independence, returning to New York in 1949. Saba had seen him in Israel after the siege. By the time they met again in New York, Azriel was mentally ill and didn't recognise Saba. He was shattered by his escape from Europe, and service in both the American and Israeli armies. Azriel died in America on 10th August 1968.

In 1957, Saba went to Brazil. His friends were there – and supposedly, there were good chances to set up an import business. It didn't work out, but he stayed there for a year, enjoying the beach, making friends, going to nightclubs, and learning Portuguese – his 8th language.

In 1958, Saba returned to America and worked for customs brokers again. Still hoping to find business in Israel, Saba returned in 1960, and stayed for a year. In September 1961, he met my Savta, Danielle Gryfenberg. Danielle's family had survived in Brussels, Belgium, and emigrated to Australia after the war. She had trained as a teacher, and then left Australia as a 22 year old to see the world.

Saba was sharing an apartment in Tel Aviv with two other boys who had returned from America, Roman Seitler (a concentration camp survivor) and Sam Moszowicz (who was in Russia during the war). Sam's sister's Polish husband, Yitzchak Brat, was editor of a Yiddish newspaper, *Di Letste Nayes*. Danielle, who had grown up speaking Yiddish, surrounded by Yiddish culture, was in touch with Yitzchak through a friend of a friend in Australia. Yitzchak and the friend's friend had gone to school together in Poland. Yitzchak introduced Danielle to Sam, and they started going out.

One night, Sam asked Saba to go on a double date – with Sam, Danielle, and an American girl called Francine (Fran) Bensley, Danielle's roommate, whom she had met at Ulpan. They went to a café called Capri, but Francine didn't show up; she had left that morning for America ('she was a very impulsive girl'). So, Saba met Savta.

Later that month, an American friend of Saba's, Nechama Singer, was in Tel Aviv. She went to a concert at Heichal Hatarbut, and Saba waited outside to meet her afterwards. As it happened, Danielle was at the concert with her mother, Rywka, who was in Israel to visit her. They all went out together that night. Rywka met Saba and Sam, and she especially liked Saba.

While in Israel, Danielle worked at Kadima school, teaching English and French on Ben Yehuda in Tel Aviv. The boss was tough and not likeable; but Danielle worked hard, and he liked her and gave her more work in summer. In Tel Aviv during summer, the shops would close at twelve, and open again at four, because the middle hours of the day were too hot. So Danielle would work from eight until twelve, and four until eight. One day, as she finished work, Saba 'happened' to be walking outside her work just as she finished, and asked her to go out with him for dinner. When he told me this story, he winked and said 'Tel Aviv is not a big place!' Later on, he admitted to her that it wasn't a coincidence.

After that, Saba would very often come past after work, and pick her up to take her out to eat.

Because Francine had gone back to America, Danielle needed to move apartments – she couldn't afford the rent by herself. When she moved (from Sderot Tarsat 11, opposite Habima, to Rechov Gordon 7, closer to the beach), Saba helped – she couldn't carry everything herself.

Saba introduced Danielle to Rena, who approved of her. Mutal (who was 14 at the time) was looking for an English teacher; she was very fussy. One day, Saba brought Mutal to visit Danielle; Mutal 'sized her up' and approved of her. While they were dating, Saba was staying with Rena again. Mutal took messages for Saba – but she began to tell him only about Danielle's calls. Once, a friend asked Saba why he hadn't called back, and he said he didn't know she had called. When he checked with Mutal, she said 'I won't tell you. Unless it's Danielle...'

Saba left for America in November 1961. Danielle was still working in Tel Aviv. While they were apart, they kept in touch through letters. Rena and Mutal included Danielle in their customary Friday lunch at Assa, even after Saba had left. 'The food was good', says Savta.

Rywka went back to Australia in October 1961; and Danielle joined Saba in America in January 1962. She stayed with Francine.

Saba and Savta were married on 7th of March, 1962 under a chuppah in Francine's apartment, which was 'beautifully kept, nicely arranged; but not a flashy apartment at all.' There were about 20 people. They were married by Rabbi Herbert Friedman. Francine's mother made the food; she was a very good cook. Savta wore a short navy dress with a jacket and veil. 'Not everyone had a white wedding in those days!'

They moved into a very small apartment in Kew Gardens, Queens, staying there until the following March. Daddy (Alan Jacob Charak) was born on 10th November 1962, in Maimonides hospital in Brooklyn. Dr Daniel Clark looked after Savta.

Australia

May 1963 - Present

Savta's parents wanted her and Saba to live in Melbourne with them, so Savta's father Nachman travelled to America to convince them to come. Savta didn't need much convincing; she wanted to go home, and Saba was happy to oblige. He gave notice in March 1963 to his current employer, Trans Air – international forwarding.

The new Charak family left America in March, visiting Israel for six weeks on the way. They arrived in Melbourne on 15th May 1963 – which happened to be the same date that Savta arrived in Melbourne in 1949.

Saba originally worked in the management of his parents-in-laws' factory, which produced skirts and slacks. Savta taught in Sunday school and went back to university to study for an MA in French Literature.

Their daughters arrived quickly after my father: Annette Mina was born on 20th April 1964; and Pearl Hannah was born on 21st October 1965.

My Saba and Savta now have twelve grandchildren – 'twelve lots of naches!' Some live in Melbourne, some in Sydney. My Saba is now 84.

Nowadays, Saba spends most of his time reading, meeting with friends, following the news, spending time with the family, 'looking after the source of our income'. He says that he seldom relives his experiences in his mind; and they only come up sometimes in dreams. I asked if he thinks that he has made his parents proud. 'Yes'.

Questions along the way

What helped you to survive?

'L-U-C-K. And the instinct to survive; because people did the same as I did, and sometimes more, and they didn't survive. Everybody tried to do something to help them – sometimes very silly (like hiding under a table) and sometimes not – but they did it anyway. It was like a… like an obstacle course. If you get lost in a forest – how do you survive? Some people do, some don't.'

'I was driven by the will to live and by the conviction that this war would come to an end reasonably soon with the defeat of the Nazi regime. '

Did you expect to survive?

'Yes, I expected to survive… this went together with focusing on the goal. But there are some things, you have to do. If you don't, you don't survive for sure.'

Was God involved, for you?

'I never thought of God then, not at all. I didn't think that praying or not would make a difference. What existed wasn't praying – it was evaluation. You had to evaluate constantly, and on the spot. You know, my father probably was praying until the last day of his life – he didn't believe that this

would help, but he did, anyway. He didn't rebel – the person that he was – there was nothing he could have done. Maybe he could have taken less risks… But otherwise, what else could he do?

'There were things that maybe, indirectly helped me… I was convinced that the Germans would lose, there would be an end – I just had to get to the end – not to get killed before the end. That was a belief – like believing in God. That it was a question of time. I believed that I would be killed if they had it their way – but I was convinced that they would lose the war. The rest… And then each day, some days quieter than the others, but generally, you had to be aware, every day, what you were doing. There was a lot of luck in it – but also evaluation.

'In the time between June 1941 and April 1944 – somebody with skills could write a book on every day of those 1000 days – and it would be more interesting than the gantse mayse. A story relies on a peak, a climax – each day had something of that kind.'

*

Having finished my heritage project, I still don't have answers to my big questions. Why it happened, how it was possible – these are things which Eli Wiesel can't answer; how can I?

But what I do have is a much deeper understanding of my Saba as a person, and of his experiences. I have a heightened sense of amazement, admiration, and deep respect for a man who survived horrors, and yet created a life and family to be proud of. And I am proud to be able to claim this amazing, humble, modest, gruff man as MY Saba.

Sarah Charak, December 2010

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