

# Sam's Odyssey - A TRUE STORY as told to Steve Paulsson by Sam Pacht

## DEDICATION

TO SAM PACT'S PARENTS, BEREL AND BELLA; TO HIS BROTHER ZELIG;  
AND TO HIS SISTER TSIPORAH; ALL OF WHOM PERISHED IN THE  
HOLOCAUST הנצחתי לזיכרון

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## Foreword



Sam Pacht asked me to write this book so that his family and his descendants might know his story. But Sam's story is more than the story of one man, and more than a story for one family. It is a priceless historical document. The Shoah is the greatest of the many tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people. We are a people of books and of memory; our books are many, and our memory is long. We remember our slavery in Egypt, 3,000 years ago, and we celebrate our miraculous escape in the Haggadah. Every year on Shabat Zakhor, the Sabbath of Remembrance, we recite the Parashat Zaklior: "Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt!" And now, every year on Yom Hashoah, we remember what Hitler did to us and to our people in Europe. As the Nazis were taking him away into the unknown, the great Jewish historian Shimon Dubnov called out to his people: "S'ira/b un farshreib!" - write and record. And many Jews did write - not only historians, artists, rabbis and philosophers, but also

ordinary men and women, some who lived through it, some who did not. Every record of that time is precious, and as time passes it will become more and more precious. An ever-dwindling number of Jews remember the Shoah as something that happened to them, to their families, and to their communities. For a larger number, it happened to their parents, or to their grandparents, or to their families in Europe. It is still preserved in living memory and is passed on from generation to generation; it is still a familiar story. But as time goes on, the living memory will fade away, as memory does, or else it will become transformed into myth and legend - for that is the way of memory, as it passes from mouth to mouth, and changes in the telling.

The Shoah, above all events, must not be allowed to drift away into myth and legend. As long as there are Jews, there will also be enemies of the Jews, who are always busily building their own myths and legends, creating deliberate falsifications: that the Shoah never happened; that it was greatly exaggerated; that the Jews suffered no more than anyone else; that the Jews invented the Shoah as a way of squeezing money out of honest people. Many of those who say such things mean to keep the Nazi idea alive, to rehabilitate Hitler, and perhaps someday to finish what he started.

That must not be allowed to happen. But memory, as it passes into myth and legend, is not enough to hold it back. There will be a time when it is just our myth against their myth, and people will say: who knows where the truth lies? In 1913, a Russian Jew, Mendel Beilis, was accused, as Jews have often been accused, of killing a child to use its blood in Jewish rituals. A pernicious story, just like the one the Holocaust deniers now try to create. The British historian Rafael Sabatini, well respected in his day, had this to say about the allegation against Beilis:

Stories of this sort have cropped up so often, and in so many places, that it would be presumptuous to dismiss them as being without foundation. If we let the Shoah pass into myth and into legend, then two hundred years or five hundred years from now, intelligent and well-educated people will say similar things. Were there really gas chambers at Auschwitz? Well, who is to say. It sounds far-fetched. Maybe the whole Holocaust was a hoax. People have said it so often that it would be presumptuous to dismiss it as being without foundation. It is so hard to believe that the most civilized nation in the world would exterminate a whole people, just like that: it can't be true. Or if it was true, then there must have been a reason for it. The Jews, people say, were Bolsheviks, and the Bolsheviks were just as bad as the Nazis. Maybe worse. So it was reasonable - reasonable - for Germany to defend itself. The respectable German historian Ernst Nolte has already written things like that, and as time goes by there will be more and more like him.

Paradoxically, when we remember Amalek, we hope that his name will be erased for ever. At first, it seems to make no sense: if we want to erase his name, shouldn't we forget about him? And there are many people now who say the same thing about the Shoah: we've heard too much about it, isn't it time to forget and move on? Even many Jews say that kind of thing, and I have even heard it from survivors. I can understand that survivors don't want to poison their lives by reliving terrible memories: those of us who didn't go through it have no moral right to tell them what they should and should not remember.

But if we collectively forget and move on, then Amalek wins. Stop remembering what he did to us, and he will come back and do it again. So the Shoah unlocks the mystery of the Parasha: Zakhor: To make sure Hitler stays dead, we have to keep remembering what he did to us and to our people.

That is why every direct testimony is precious. Every survivor who can summon up the courage to remember, and who obeys Dubnow's call to write and record, does a mitvah. The survivors who write perform a service to the future by making sure that their story is set down just as it happened, and not as it has been passed on from mouth to mouth, and changed in the telling.

The Shoah is a vast story, with many unknown and untold corners. Especially untold is the whole story of the Polish Jews, 90% of whom perished in the flames. Poland holds a special place in the history of the Jews: at one time, two-thirds or more of the Jews in the world lived there. It was for centuries the homeland of the Ashkenazi Jews, and in Yiddish, it was called der Haym - the Home. It was not

only six million individual Jews who perished in the Shoah: der Haym perished as well, and with it Yiddishkeit, the unique culture of the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Poland.

Of those Polish Jews who survived, and who have the most to tell us about that vanished world, by far the largest group were those who escaped from the clutches of the Nazis and went east, spending the war years not in Poland, but in the Soviet Union. Few of them have told their stories, and they are usually not even counted as victims of the Shoah. After all, they survived. They did not experience Nazi ghettos or camps. They had it easy.

Or did they? The Soviet Union during the war was no paradise: it was fighting for its life against the Nazis. Many Jews died in that fight, and others - like Sam Pacht - were wounded. Some endured grim conditions in the Gulag, or near-starvation in a country that was chaotic and disorganized even in peacetime. And then they came back home, knowing nothing about what had happened, to total devastation. Their families, homes and communities were gone. How is someone who has lost everything, not only those who were dear to him but also the entire world he grew up in, not a victim?

Three hundred thousand Polish Jews survived by going east, and their stories are almost unknown. Yet they are the ones who can tell us the most about the the lost world of Yiddishkeit, the world of the Polish Jews. Their own stories are often full of drama and high adventure: unlike most survivor stories, Sam's reads more like a thriller than a depressing tale of death and destruction. And yet, there is the sting in the tail.

Sam tells us about his childhood and his adolescence in Poland, and about the small but typical town of Lanovits. Sam's Lanovits was a shtetl, and yet not the shtetl of Jewish folk-memory. Since so few are left who can tell us directly about their lives in Poland between the wars, what we think we know about the shtetl is made up of half-truths. The fiddler on the roof. Poverty. Pogroms. Tradition.

That is the memory of the shtetl that has been preserved for all time by the great Jewish writers of that time and place: Mendel Mosher Sforim, Sholem Aleikhem, Yitzhak Leib Peretz, Isaac Bashevis Singer. But paradoxically, those writers were living in a world that was rapidly changing, and they wrote to preserve the memory of what was being lost - not to Hitler, because they had no idea he was on the horizon, but to modernity. The traditional world of the Polish Jews was being threatened not by genocide, but by social change.

Sam was part of that social change. There was no fiddler on the roof in Lanovits. Pogroms fortunately did not visit the town between the wars. As to tradition, Sam's generation was the generation of the Jazz Age, full of modern and secular ideas: they were rebels against the very tradition whose memory Jewish writers were trying to preserve. The shtetl of those brief twenty years was not a sleepy place with muddy streets, the shtetl of legend: it was pregnant with Zionism and secular modern ideas; It was the mother of Eretz Israel and the father of the post-war diaspora. The Jews of interwar Poland were not the medieval remnant imagined by their assimilated western they were rapidly coming to terms with the twentieth century. The Jewish community of inter-war Poland had its own theatre and film industry, its own publishing houses and newspapers, its own schools, secular as well as religious. It supported a research institute, YLVO, which studied the problems of the modern world. It had its own political parties, youth clubs, and very definitely its own ideas. It was a beautiful and vibrant world, filled with ideals of democracy, freedom and equality. Sam's generation turned the traditional shtetl upside down, and was in the process of laying the foundation for what would eventually blossom in Israel: a modern and distinctively Jewish civilization. Had it survived, it would have been very different from Israel, in ways that we can only speculate about; but it would also have been very Jewish.

There are very few left who, like Sam, can tell us about that exciting time with all its hopes and ideals. Sam was not there to witness its loss, but he can tell posterity a great deal about what it was that was lost.

This is the value of Sam's story, then, for the Jews of the fiftieth century who will still be reading about their ancestors, as Jews have always done. It is a record of what once was, what might have been, and will never be again. It rescues the memory of what it was that Hitler destroyed. And it tells us something about the many extraordinary ways that Jews found to survive the Shoah and ultimately to defeat Hitler.

The head of the Kovno ghetto, Dr. Elkhanan Ekes - one of the few leaders of the Jewish Councils who had the authority and courage to stand up to Nazi bullying - once told an arrogant SS-man: "We are an ancient people. We have outlived many oppressors, and we will outlive you."

Sam Pacht's inspiring story proves Dr. Elkes right: his survival is the survival of the Jewish people. Sam was an ardent Zionist in his youth, and it is not surprising that in later years he remained a strong supporter of the Jewish state. He was born a poor lad, a tailor's son. He ended up being a wealthy philanthropist in the New World, who not only outlived Hitler but helped defeat Hitler's plan by contributing to the renewed growth and strength of the Jewish people.

Am Israel Kiwi.  
Steve Paulsson

## I. Lanovits

Sam's home town, Lanovits, was a place where you could live in eight different countries without ever leaving home. It lay in a turbulent little elbow of land, in the province of Volhynia (also called Red Ruthenia), which has belonged to many kingdoms in its long and colourful past. When the town was founded, around 1450, it was called Lanowce, and it was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In 1569, it changed hands without a drop of blood being shed, when the Union of Lublin created the Most Serene Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania. In the process, Lanovits was transferred to the Polish part.

Though Jews had lived in Polish lands since 1100 or so, the first Jews did not settle in Lanovits until early in the 17th century: that was when the town was first listed in the registers of the Council of Four Lands - the Va 'ad Arba Arazot, which was the government of the Polish Jews. And it seems that Lanovits was indeed Most Serene, since the Va 'ad records show no legal disputes between Lanovitsers.

It was scenic as well as serene: seven nearby springs, in a picturesque forest setting, made it into something of a spa town. The spa and the economic opportunities it offered drew settlers, and since the neighbouring Poles and Ukrainians were either landowners or serfs, tied to the land, most of the settlers were Jews.

Soon after the first Jews came to Lanovits, the Most Serene Commonwealth was disturbed by a great upheaval known in Polish history as The Deluge. For eleven years, from 1648 to 1659, the Commonwealth fought off one enemy after another, lost land to the emerging power of Muscovy - the future Russian Empire - and had to submit to a Swedish king. But in Jewish memory, The Deluge is mainly known for its opening act, a revolt of Ukrainian peasants under the Cossack leader Bohdan Khmel'nitsky, which killed hundreds of thousands of Jews. It was the greatest massacre of Jews in a thousand years, and the greatest until the Shoah.

Miraculously, all these upheavals passed serene little Lanovits by. The town was lucky enough to lie in the lands of the Ukrainian Yalovitsky family,\*1 so Khmel'nitsky's Ukrainians left it alone. It seems that Lanovits was a charmed as well as a charming little town.

The Most Serene Commonwealth was torn apart by its neighbours in the 18th century. In its heyday the largest country in Europe, by 1795 it had vanished from the map. It was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria, and this time luck ran out for Lanovits. If it had lain a few miles farther to the west, it would have found itself in the Congress Kingdom of Poland, ruled by the Russian Tsar but with laws of its own that were milder for the Jews. A few miles farther South, and it would have been in Austrian Galicia, a happier place still. But instead of Polish Lanowce or Austrian Lanowitz, it became Russian Lanovtse, part of the Russian Pale of Settlement and living under Russian laws.

## Russian Lanovtse

The Russians, who had never allowed Jews to settle in their lands, had now inherited the largest part of the largest Jewish community in the world. They saw it as a major problem. The Jews were still not allowed to move into Russia proper, so they could not take advantage of the economic opportunities that the Russian Empire offered, but were trapped in a narrow strip of land, one of the poorest and most backward parts of the Empire. Another way of putting it is that though sheer prejudice, the Russians blocked the Jews from contributing their skills and talents to the Empire: this blindness to what the Jews had to offer was always part of the insanity of antisemitism.

The Jews had always been an important part of the countryside in that part of the world - they were the estate-managers, the tradesmen and the innkeepers of the Most Serene Commonwealth, and they had lived well enough through their skills; but the Russians now accused them of corrupting the peasants. The Jews were driven out of the villages and the rural areas, and forced to move into small towns like Lanovits, which became overpopulated and poor. With this forcible shift, Lanovits, like most of the shtetlekh in the Russian Pale, became a mainly Jewish town. It turned into the shtetl of Jewish memory, full of shnorrers (beggars) and luflmenshn ("air people", who, it seemed, could survive on nothing but air); of poor rebbes and poorer congregations. Since everyday life was a dreary struggle for survival, the Jews of the shtetl turned to God. The Hasidic movement was born, which offered the tonic of religious ecstasy. Preaching that everything, however grim, was the will of God and the fulfilment of His divine and ineffable plan, the Hasidim brought hope to the hopeless and comfort to the oppressed.

Russian laws discriminated harshly against the Jews. In the times of Sam's great-grandfather, Tsar Nicholas I forced every Jewish community supply a quota of boys to do 25 years of military service. They were drafted as

young as six, and sent to Christian schools to be indoctrinated before they started their service, so in practice they were lost to their families for life. The effect on the morale of the shtetlekh was disastrous. Naturally, families did everything they could to make sure that their sons weren't drafted, so bribing officials became a matter of routine; and on the other hand, a nasty new profession arose: the Ichapper, who kidnapped children to turn them over to the Tsar.

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\*1 In the Lanovits Yizkor Buch, the historian Ch. Rabin attributes the Jews' survival to the "Russian Lord Yalovitzky" who supposedly protected the Jews because of his liberal tendencies. But in 1648, there was no "Russia". The core of today's Russia was called Muscovy, and no Muscovites were settled in Poland. But Ukraine was once the medieval state of Kiev Rus', and its people called themselves "Rusini". So Yalovitzky was probably not Russian but "Rusin", or in other words, Ukrainian. The peasants who rallied around Khmel'nitsky's banner were rebelling against Polish rule, and attacked Jews living on Polish estates and in Polish towns, but they would have bypassed an estate owned by a fellow-Ukrainian.

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Things got better when Nicholas died and his son Alexander II became Tsar. Alexander was a great reformer: under his rule, the long military service was abolished, the peasants were freed from serfdom, and anti-Jewish laws were relaxed. Wealthier Jews were allowed to settle in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Alexander even allowed a measure of democracy, though only at the municipal level. But that time of liberalism and hope was cut short in 1881, when a revolutionary group assassinated Alexander. Because a few of the revolutionaries were Jews, the Jews were naturally blamed for the assassination, and the greatest wave of pogroms since Khmel'nitsky broke out throughout the lands of the Pale. But Lanovits was once again charmed. By then, Lanovits was mainly Jewish: the Jews had the paromchiki outnumbered, so Lanovits was left in peace.

The 1881 pogroms were a great watershed in Jewish history, the start of a great exodus of Jews from Russia. By then, steamships had made transatlantic travel relatively cheap, and over the next 33 years more than a million Jews emigrated to America, to Canada, and to many other countries. The earliest migrations to Palestine began then as well, organized by movements called Hovevei Ti'on (Friends of Zion) and Hibbat Tsion (Love of Zion). That was how the Zionist movement started.

Many Jews escaped from Russian oppression by fleeing to Austria, and Lanovits, being only a few miles from the border, was a natural jumping-off point. Some of the fugitives, either because they had failed to get across the border, or because they simply liked the town and felt safe there, stayed in Lanovits for good. The town's Jewish population swelled.

By the turn of the century, America had replaced the lands of the old Commonwealth as the world's largest Jewish centre, ending an era that had lasted 400 years; and when limits on residence were eased in 1905, many shtetl Jews migrated to big cities such as Warsaw or Lvov. The shtetlekh became less overcrowded, but remained overwhelmingly Jewish. Lanovits had turned into an almost entirely Jewish town by then: about 1200 Jews lived there, with only a few hundred Ukrainians and a handful of Poles.

## **War and chaos**

Russian rule lasted until the First World War. Because of its location, Lanovits was in the thick of the fighting: it was captured by the Austrians, recaptured by the Russians, and changed hands a few times more. But these military manoeuvres were only a prelude to the chaos that followed.

In February 1917, the Tsar was overthrown, and an independent Ukrainian government called the Rada was declared. It laid claim to the town, which it called Lanivtsy. But the Rada never had effective control. The new Soviet Russia pulled out of the war in March 1918, and it was the Germans' turn to move in. They set up a puppet Ukrainian government under a Hetman Skoropadsky, but Skoropadsky also had trouble keeping control. For the next few years, Lanovits was fought over by Skoropadsky, the Rada under Semyon Petlyura, a Republic of the Western Ukraine, the Communist Red Army, the Tsarist White Army, the Black Army of the anarchist Nestor Makhno, and the Red-and-White army of the Poles, who seized the chance to get their independence back. The only people who weren't fighting were the Jews.

## **II. Enter the hero of our tale**

On January 4<sup>th</sup> 1918, in the midst of this seven-way lunacy, Sam Pacht was born. Sam - his parents named him Shloyme - was the son of Bella Kandziur, a native Lanovits'er, and the tailor Betel Pacht, an immigrant from the distant town of Tchon, nearly 30 kilometers away. Berel and Bella were married in 1916, when Lanovits was still Russian, and Berel had to go and fight in the Tsar's army. Not for long, fortunately: a few months later the Tsar was overthrown, and Berel came home in one piece.

Sam had his first brush with death when he was just six months old. His father was carrying him in his arms to see his Zaide Loser (Bella's father). As they were passing by the railway station, the Petliurists launched an attack. There was a gunfight, and some bombs went off - one of them just 20 feet from Berel and Sam, showering them both with debris. It could easily have killed them. Whom were the Petliurists fighting: the Germans? Makhno? The Reds? The Whites? To the Jews, who just wanted to be left alone, they were all simply "bandits" of one kind or another.

The chaos continued for a few more years. The rest of the world commemorates November 11 1918 as Armistice Day, when the First World War ended, but for Poland, it was and still is Independence Day. After 123 years of being divided between Russia, Austria and Germany, a new Polish state was born, but it was nothing like the old Commonwealth. Poland before 1795 had been an easygoing place, where Jews had been virtually allies of the ruling aristocracy, protected and even privileged. But the Polish aristocracy had lost all its power by 1918, and a new and narrow-minded nationalism had developed. As far as the new Polish nationalists were concerned, a Pole was a Polish-speaking Catholic, while the Jews - who had lived there for 800 years or more - were aliens and enemies of the state. The new breed of Polish nationalists wanted to get back all the land they had lost in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but not to let the other people who lived there, especially the Jews, have much say in how the new state would be run.

But the question of which country Lanovits would belong to was far from settled. Ukraine, including Lanovits, became a no-man's land in 1918: the new Soviet government had abandoned it to the Germans, and the Germans left when they lost the war. Petliura, allied with the Poles, moved in. In 1920, Soviet Russia launched an offensive against the new Polish state, and Lanovits changed hands once more; but the offensive was beaten off practically at the gates of Warsaw. When the retreat of the Soviet Red Army became a rout, the Poles more or less got their wish: the Treaty of Riga in 1921 conceded most of the Pale to the Poles, and the fighting in that part of the world finally stopped.

And so it was that Lanovits once more became the Polish town of Lanowce, and the Pachts discovered, to their surprise, that they were now, like their distant ancestors, once again citizens of Poland.

### **III. Lanovits between the wars**

What kind of town was the Lanovits in which Sam Pacht grew up? In tinny ways, it was still a typical shtetl of the kind that has its place in Jewish folk memory: a muddy little backwater, ruled by tradition and religion, and mostly very poor. There were tailors, cobblers, and small merchants, who eked out a living selling their goods in open-air markets. Then there was the elite: the wealthy, established Yiches and the learned rabbis. It had for centuries been the fondest ambition of the wealthy Jews, the Gvirim, for their sons to grow up to be rabbis, and for their daughters to marry a rabbi, so the local rabbi was underpaid but revered. Besides the rabbis, there were other men who served the community's religious needs: cantors, melameds, shoychets, inoyles. In some towns a Hassidic rebbe would hold court, surrounded by his admirers.

By 1918, this sentimental picture was already out of date. In places like Lanovits, a unique Jewish culture had grown up, vibrant and many-faceted. As a Jewish comedian once quipped: "In my shtetl, there was a man who spoke only two languages. He was the village idiot." Lanovitsers spoke Yiddish at home, Hebrew and Aramaic in Mu!, Russian and later Polish in school, and Polish and Ukrainian with their neighbours. They could read several versions of the Roman, Cyrillic and Hebrew alphabets. Yiddish was theft mame loshn - literally their mother-tongue - and it was not just a colourful dialect or "jargon", as others called it. There was a rich literature in Yiddish, including novels, short stories, poetry, books on history, politics and philosophy. Eventually Issac Bashevis Singer, who wrote entirely in Yiddish, won the Nobel Prize for literature. What is the difference between a dialect and a language? Uriel Weinreich, who compiled the authoritative Yiddish dictionary and was good at definitions, said: "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy." Or perhaps with a Nobel prize to its credit.

The reality of Yiddishkeit, the Yiddish-speaking world of the East European Jews, was far from what the assimilated Western Jews imagined it to be: it was a modern, or at least a rapidly modernizing society. The shtetl produced Klezmer music, the wonderful folk-music of the Eastern Jews, but it also gave the world some of its finest classical musicians. The great 19<sup>th</sup>-century pianist and composer Anton Rubinstein was born in the shtetl of

Oflintsy, and one of the world's finest violinists, Mischa Elman, came from Talnoye, Ukraine. Singer, got his start in a shied called Leoncin. Sholem Aleichem was a native of Pereyaslav, in Ukraine; the great painter Marc Chagall, of Liozno in Belarus. Many modern Jewish political leaders emerged from shtetlekh: Chaim Weizmann was born in Motol, Belarus, and David Ben-Gurion, in Plońsk, Poland. Lanovits too, produced a great man, though not quite so well known: the multitalented Talmudic scholar Itzhak Shrulis, who became the Chief Rabbi of Bessarabia. Poland between the wars had a well-developed Yiddish theatre and the beginnings of a movie industry (which, transplanted to America, contributed many leading figures to vaudeville, Hollywood and Broadway). The Jewish community of inter-war Poland sprouted hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers in Yiddish, Polish and Hebrew, as well as a bewildering variety of political parties, youth clubs and sports clubs; several secular school systems; libraries; and YIVO, a research centre in Vilna, whose New York branch still exists. And even has its own vebzaytl (the Yiddish word for "website").

Besides the traditional cast of characters, the shtetl had its professionals: doctors, teachers, lawyers; and it lived from business. The wealthier Jews were wholesalers and traders, the poorer ones were cobblers and tailors, but all of them made a living through their skills at making and buying and selling things. Many notable business leaders who made their way to the West first learned their trades in the shtetl.

The thoughts of that community had largely turned away from piety, and towards finding secular solutions to the dilemmas of the modern world. Yiddish/ce it modernized on its own terms, in its own language, and in its own way.

To look at, a shied like Lanovits might have been the muddy little backwater of the Fiddler on the Roof. But in reality, it was lively, cosmopolitan little city, where music was made, ideas discussed, traditions preserved and challenged, many trades and professions taught and practiced. It was the incubator of Zionism, and of many of the trends that would make the modern world.

One of the rapacious eagles that has torn the modern world has been ethnic nationalism, an artificial ideology born in W'-century Europe, and the Jews have been caught in its claws. The nationalists of all the countries where Jews lived on the one hand regarded the Jews as not members of their own ethnic group, and therefore as threatening aliens, but on the other hand demanded their loyalty. Well, nobody ever accused anti-semites of being rational. Jewish tradition had indeed always called for "loyalty to the Crown"; but who deserved that loyalty? Go back as far as you like, and the basic belief of antisemites has always been the same: whatever goes wrong, the Jews are to blame. When the Commonwealth was at war with Sweden in the 17th century, the Polish army massacred Jews for supposedly supporting the Swedes, and then Khmelnicky's Ukrainians did the same to them, for supporting the Poles. In the year Sam was born, and in Lvov, the big city nearest to Lanovits, the Polish Cavalry - fighting Ukrainian insurgents - killed hundreds of Jews because, having armed themselves for protection from looters, they were clearly supporting the Ukrainians. In newly-independent Poland, few were prepared to tolerate the Yiddish-speaking Jews. Progressive Poles and Jewish assimilationists wanted to turn them into Poles; reactionary Poles wanted to push them into ghettos, or get rid of them altogether.

After all that, most of the Polish Jews had decided that the Crown, meaning the government of the thy, didn't deserve their support. The Lanovitsers' citizenship had been decided for them, but as far as they were concerned, it didn't matter whose state they lived in. They lived in a Jewish town, and they were Jews: Jews by religion, Jews by language, Jews by custom, by tradition and by history. And Jews, finally, by nationality. If everyone had to belong to something called a nation, and if all the nations rejected the Jews, then the Jews had to become a nation of their own. The famous historian Simon Dubnow, the founder of the Folkist party, had one way of seeing it: "The Jews are a nation", he wrote, "and the Talmud is its constitution." The newly-born Zionist movement had a different idea: if the Jews were to be a nation, then, like all other nations, they had to have a land of their own.

Because its population was so overwhelmingly Jewish, the Jews of Lanovits in a way already did have a land of their own: their town was simply a Jewish town, which happened for the time being to be in Poland. In Poland generally, the Jews were considered a national minority, but in Lanovits the national minorities were the Ukrainians and the Poles. Deep down, the Ukrainian and Polish neighbours were probably just as antisemitic as anywhere else, but living in a town where the Jews had them outnumbered four to one, they minded their manners. Anyway, just as cats and dogs can live peacefully in the same house, so Jews, Ukrainians and Poles got along all right: Lanovits was still a serene little commonwealth.

While the Jews got along well enough with the other groups, being Jews, they could never agree about anything amongst themselves. There were Hassidic Jews and traditional Jews, modernizers called Maskilim,



socialist Bundists, Dubnow's middle-of-the-road Folkists and five kinds of Zionists (the Left and Right Labour Zionists, the right-wing Revisionist Zionists, the centrist General Zionists and the religious Mizrahim.) There was an Orthodox political party, Agudas Yisroel, and then some Jews went with non-Jewish parties, particularly the one sponsored by Marshal Józef Pilsudski, the dominant political figure of inter-war Poland, which was relatively tolerant and recognized the Jews as a separate nation with minority rights. The Polish Socialist Party, the Democratic Party and the Communists also had some Jewish supporters. There were many Zionist youth groups: A/ciba, Dror, Hashomer Hatzair; Hehalutz, (affiliated with the Left Labour Zionists), Betar (with the Revisionist Zionists); a more radical version of Hashomer called Hanoar Hatsioni, the Watchmen of Zion; and Tseirei Mizrach which lined up with the Mizrahim. The Bund had its own youth movements - S/of for younger children and Tsu/cunfl for teenagers. Freiheit and Yugnt were independent, but generally left-wing. Nor does that exhaust the list of Jewish movements. The old saying goes that where you have two Jews, you have three political parties, and it was pretty much true.

But differences weren't just political. There were rich Jews and poor Jews, who didn't move in the same circles, and even the rich Jews were divided into the old-money Yiches and the nouveau-riche. It was a complex society: Lanovits was the whole world, squeezed into one small town.



*The Pacht family, c. 1926.  
clockwise from top left:  
Srulik, Sam, Berel, Itzhak, Michael, Zelig, Bella*

## Sam's Family and Friends

Sam's mother Bella, hard-working and long-suffering like all Yiddishe inamelech, gave birth to nine children, six of whom survived. There were twins before Sam, but they died at birth, leaving Sam as the eldest. His brother Yisroel - they called him Srulik - was a year younger. Yitzhak - Itzi - was born in 1921, followed by Mekhel - Michael - two years later. In 1925, mamele brought forth another pair of twins: Zelig survived, but his brother Shiel died of cholera. Finally a girl: little Tsiporah joined the family in 1930. After that, her labours finished, mother Bella retired from the baby business.

Sam was a poor boy, the son and grandson of tailors. His father Berel, although he didn't have much money, was a respectable member of the community, and served for a while as the Trustee of the Sick People's Fund. Berel was a devout Jew: every thy, he put on his tefihlim and talles to pray, and of course there was a mezuzah on every lintel in the house. The Pachts lived a few steps from both shul and school. Berel and all his sons would go to shul every Shabbes, but at school all the children got a Polish secular education.

As Sam grew older, he joined one of the Zionist youth groups, Hechalutz, and later, Hanoar. To Sam's generation, class and other differences didn't matter: unlike the Christian Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, the Jewish youth movements were all unisex, and had modern ideas about democracy, equality, freedom, and a world that could find a little room for a Jewish state, where Jews would not have to salute the Polish or Russian or German flag, or fight each other for the sake of foreign rulers; where they could name the streets and schools after their own heroes, and not have to live a few miles from a city called Khamelnitsky. They wore modern clothes, rejected arbitrary rules, and affirmed the right to like and love and marry whom they pleased.

Sam had two girlfriends, both from the rich end of town, but their parents were still of the old school, and that meant trouble. He tells the story in his own words:

I met both girls at the local "Hechalutz" clubhouse. Their names were Havaziah (Chava) and Reisele. Ifell in love with both the moment I saw them. I was stunned by the realization that I got know two of the best choices among the girls of our town. Reisele was beautiful and sensual, while Chava was smart and pleasant But my father, who knew how the town's class-lines worked, was skeptical: "When hair grows on the palm of your hand, you'll marry one of those girls ", he told me.



One day Reisele came to my house carrying a bag of cherries. I felt hot, blushing as red as the cherries. I thanked her. We exchanged a few words, and then she left. My father came over to me after she departed and said, "What is Reisele doing in our house? Remember you are a son of a tailor. Find your friends within your class. Do not push yourself into the elite circles. They will ridicule you and destroy you. Be careful when dealing with members of the elite." His admonition drove us underground. Our meetings were secretive and glowing; our love bloomed. Sometimes I would meet each of them separately, other times I met both together. Both girls wanted to run away from their parents' homes, to escape to a world that had no lineage rules nor strong parental will. In the "Hechalutz" clubhouse our meetings were quasi-legal. There we were not alone. However, in our feelings we were detached from the other youths of the club. One evening Asher Brilliant [Reisele's father] came to the club, pulled Reisele by her hair, beat her, called her disgraceful names and dragged her home. Ziporah [Chava's mother] reacted in a similar manner.

A year passed, and we continued to take walks in secret locations. We read a little and dreamed a lot; we tried to mature and find our freedom. The pressure from our parents did not deter us; going underground increased our resolve to continue to develop our relationship until we were reeemed

On a glorious Sabbath morning, Chava and I sat alone near the seven springs, far from town. Life felt full of content, and we were at its epicentre. Suddenly an image appeared on the horizon. My heart raced, though I did not know who it was. Chava recognized the image, left me and ran toward her mother. Ziporah pulled her daughter's hair, beat her and shouted, "Better to fall into the arms of a Gentile boy than into the arms of a tailor." The next day Chava told me that she received additional beatings at home. This episode was the talk of the town the next day. My father reminded me again that a tailor needs to socialize within his class. I replied that I had started to lease land parcels and to trade, as my friend Shmuel Bachtel had done successfully. In this enterprise I was going back to our old family roots, since our surname, Pacht, means land-agent. But my father was not impressed. He went to Shmuel Nuskiss, Chava's grandfather, and asked him to admonish me for my desire to betray my class. Shmuel responded to my father's request in a manner of an objective person dealing with an issue unfamiliar to him, for which he only had a general opinion, "Remain a cobbler and stick to your last." He said "You are not the type to be a rich trader. Do not strive high, and be happy with your lot"

The above advice did not help me. I felt comfortable among my good friends Zuniah Rabin and Motil Buchstein. They respected me. While I socialized outside my class, I respected and loved those of my class, especially my hardworking and honest father

The two girls decided to escape from their homes. Reisele told me that in a wardrobe of their home were three jars full of gold, paper-money and jewels. She wanted to steal them and run away. I did not let her do this. Instead I advised her to take along only a sum of money needed for her initial expenses.

The two girls left by train for Lvov on the first day of the month of Av [August]. In the letters they left for their parents they stated, "We have no ill feelings towards you. We want to learn a trade. Leave us be and think well of us." The next day both parents came to my father's house in search of the bandit [me]. They asked my father, "What does he want from our daughters?" My father distanced himself from the affair, claiming that he had no interest in seeing his son marry above his station; he begged them to leave him alone.

The girls studied in a girls' school located on Olovek Street 14, Lvov. I used to visit them every Sabbath. The school happened to be located next to the large house of Asher Scheinberg, a doctor from our town. This doctor was a specialist for kidney diseases, who later died in the house next to the sanatorium of Chanah Kesselman, to whom he referred his patients.

Ziporah appeared one Sabbath at her daughter's room for the first time. I have no idea how Ziporah discovered her daughter's address. Both girls and I froze in our place when we saw her. There was a moment of silence, and I left the room. Ziporah attacked her daughter in the presence of her friend, shouting, "My father knows his grandfather, a tailor the son of tailors. How shameful. I prefer to see you marry a convert, but not him." Reisele returned to her home and married someone else, but Chava and I continued our relationship for another two years. At the end of that period, as Chava was about to finish her trade-school studies, we decided to reveal all to her mother. There was plenty to reveal.

Yoske Guberman, our good friend, provided cover for our correspondence. Chava addressed all her letters to me "Dear Yosele." All her needs were arranged by Yoske. Chava's mother relented and started to send her money and the items she needed. Finally, Chava and I decided it was time to come out into the open. Together, we wrote her mother a letter, in which we informed her that we intended to get married. We further stated that if she did not

approve of our decision, we intended to travel to Warsaw, join Hachsharah [the Zionist pioneer training movement] and emigrate to Palestine. In the letter we explained that Chava's letters to Yoske were meant for me. It was Yosice's task to wait for the postman to deliver this letter to Ziporah and slowly explain to her the entire complication. Ziporah reconsidered the situation. She suddenly remembered that she herself had married a man against the wishes of her parents; that she was against dividing society into more and less fortunate classes. She agreed to our match. And so Sam and Chava became engaged. The year was 1939.

## **IV. Krasnoarmeyets**

Fortunately, Hitler's armies never got as far as Lanovits. Hitler had secretly handed Eastern Poland over to Stalin, in return for a free hand elsewhere, and when the Red Army marched into Lanovits, the whole town rejoiced. It had just been rescued from the evil Nazis, and was in the hands of a government that promised brotherhood, equality, and all the other things the youngsters had been dreaming about as they grew up. Stories about Jews greeting the Red Army with joy circulated all over Poland, and reinforced the antisemitic stereotype of the "Commie Jew", but most Jews weren't really fond of the Communists and few voted for them, they just seemed better than the alternative.

Most Jews did not fare well under the new régime. Owners of businesses, even small ones, were classified as bourgeois and lost their property. The practice of the Jewish religion was discouraged. All Jewish political parties and youth movements were dissolved, many of their leaders were arrested, and all the young people had to join the Komsomol - the Communist Union of Youth. The younger and more left-wing Jews had naïve and idealistic notions about Communism, and some joined the Communists voluntarily, but most became quickly disenchanted. Hundreds of thousands of Jews fled from the Nazi-occupied part of Poland in 1939: most of them ended up being deported to Siberia. Quite a few Jews even fled to the German occupation zone: they remembered Russia as a place of pogroms and persecutions, whereas the German occupation in the First World War had been relatively humane and civilized. Most Jews had no love for the Polish government, which after Pilsudski's death in 1935 had become more and more antisemitic. Divided between Germany and the Soviet

Union, Poland disappeared from the map again. Before the war, antisemites had taunted the Jews with the slogan *precz do Palestyny* (clear out and go to Palestine); now Jews could return the insult: "You wanted Poland without Jews: now you have Jews without Poland." Even though Poles and Jews were deported to Siberia in roughly equal measure, there was little love lost between them.

But Sam never got to experience much of the Soviet occupation. As far as the Soviets were concerned, they hadn't invaded Poland at all, merely reclaimed land that they had lost in 1921. So Lanovitsers automatically became citizens of the Soviet Union; once again, nobody had asked them for their opinion.

By then Sam had turned 21, and as a Soviet citizen he was immediately called up for military service. The joy of being saved from the Nazis was still in the air, and the whole community thought it was a great honour for Sam to be the first Red Army recruit from Lanovits. When Sam went off to report for duty, all of Lanovits - complete with orchestra - paraded to the train station to see him off. Chava and her mother were there, and of course the whole Pacht clan. Tsiporah Zeltsman cried, kissed Sam like a mother, and apologized for her behaviour. She said to Sam: "I like you, I wanted to test you. Don't forget Chava. She won't be able to live unless she knows you remember her." Chava cried too, and Sam and his fiancée kissed each other goodbye.

As the train hauled Sam off to strange new places, he watched wistfully through the window as all the people he knew and loved grew smaller and smaller in the distance. In the crowd, he could still make out his *mameleb*, his *tate*, his little sister, his not-quite-mother-in-law, and all his friends. Chava was waving and wiping away tears. Then the train rounded a curve, and they all disappeared from view. Sam would never see them again.

## **Boot Camp**

The train spat Sam out in Vozhdeshensk, a military town 120 kilometres from Odessa, together with all his fellow recruits. They were a motley bunch, mostly Ukrainians and quite a few Jews. The Ukrainian farm lads might have been something like soldiers already; the rest of the conscripts, the townies, were a sadistic drill-sergeant's dream come true. Short or tall, skinny or fat, fit or flabby, educated or illiterate, underneath they were all kids far from home: a little bit scared, a little bit homesick - but with a young man's sense of adventure, and a little bit excited, too. They were herded into the camp, made to strip, given military haircuts and fitted with uniforms. They still didn't look very uniform, but at least they looked a bit like soldiers. Sam admired himself in his crisp new

clothes: he was now a Krasnoarmeyets - a Red Army man.

The clothes didn't stay crisp very long. The Red Army wasn't big on parade-ground drill: what they wanted to drill into their soldiers was not how to march around looking pretty, but how to master the ancient Russian art of suffering. The recruits had to crawl on their bellies through mud and thorns and nettles, over rocks that cut their knees, carrying their rifles in the crooks of their elbows, ready to use in an instant. There was endless target practice, sometimes in weather so cold that they couldn't bend their fingers. The worst thing was the long, exhausting marches, where they often had to wade through lengthy stretches of chest-deep, freezing water. It was torture - but Sam reckons it helped save his life.

Sam was a pretty good soldier: just six months after he was drafted, he was promoted to Sergeant and assigned to the 522nd Artillery Division. It was March 1940, and the 522nd had just come back from the Winter War against Finland. The Red Army won that war, but the men of the 522nd that Sam met didn't look like the soldiers of a winning army: their equipment was battered, and they were battle-weary and depressed. Tiny Finland had put up one hell of a fight, holding the Soviet colossus off for four months, and in the end Stalin had to settle for minor territorial gains. The Red Army lost about 300,000 men in Finland, and the Finns only 22,000. One Soviet commander said: "We gained just enough ground to bury our dead".

Many historians think that it was the weakness that the Red Army showed in Finland, the result of Stalin's purges of senior officers in the 1930s, which persuaded Hitler to invade the Soviet Union later on. Having signed a peace treaty with the Finns, the Soviet Union was at peace, and nobody expected more war in the East. The Nazis remained aggressive, but their push was to the West and the South, not against the Soviets. After taking over Denmark, Norway, Holland and Belgium in the spring of 1940, he stunned the whole world by conquering mighty France in a matter of weeks. With the right-wing dictatorships in Spain and Portugal as friendly neutrals and Mussolini's Italy as an ally, the Nazis were the masters of Western Europe. Only Britain still held out. The Balkans were next on the agenda: Hitler and Mussolini both started meddling in the affairs of this troubled region. Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, all afraid of the Soviet Union, were natural German allies, but Hungary and Bulgaria both had territorial claims against Romania. The two dictators generously offered to broker a settlement. Unbeknownst to Romania, however, the same treaty that let the Soviets have the eastern half of Poland gave them territory in Romania as well, so the Romanians had been double-crossed before the negotiations began. In September, they were forced to give up nearly everything they had gained in the First World War to Hungary and Bulgaria.

But Stalin did not wait until September. Anxious to score a propaganda success after his humiliation in Finland, he asserted his claim - in other words, invaded Romania - in June 1940. And that was when Sam first saw active duty. Not knowing that Hitler and Stalin had a secret deal, a Soviet invasion was the last thing the Romanians had expected. They offered almost no resistance, and by the time Sam's unit arrived, the operation was already complete.

Sam found himself part of the occupation force in Soviet Moldavia, which today has become the independent country of Moldova. But its traditional name was Bessarabia - where, you may remember, Rabbi Ithzak Shtrulis of Lanovits was once the Chief Rabbi.

Our own Lanovits, Sam Pacht, was stationed near the Moldavian capital of Kishinev, notorious in Jewish history as the site of two great pogroms, in 1903 and 1905. Sam's duty was to help guard the new border, or in other words, to protect the Romanian-speaking Moldavians from their own people. You might see it as taking revenge on the pogromists, many of whom were still alive.

To get the most propaganda value out of his coup in Romania, Stalin staged a great victory parade, reviewed by the man who would go on to become the most renowned Soviet General of the Second World War, Georgi Zhukov. Zhukov was the man of the hour in Moscow, because he had gained victory in the little-known Manchurian War of 1938-1939 against the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. He had defeated a superior Japanese force in August 1939 through a brilliant two-pronged armoured manoeuvre - the very same tactic that the Germans were about to use so successfully in Poland and France, and which is nowadays known by its German name, Blitzkrieg. But it was Zhukov, not the Germans, who was the first to use it.

Zhukov's later successes were also mainly as one of the war's greatest tank commanders, but at the time of the Moldavian occupation he was in charge of artillery. So as part of the victory ceremonies, he reviewed the ranks of the 522nd, and Sam got a close-up look at the great man himself.

Sam's Moldavian posting did not last long. Always paranoid, Stalin did not trust "Westerners" - recruits from Poland - and had them moved away from the front lines. The 522<sup>nd</sup> went back to Vozhdeshensk, where Sam spent a few idle months. On May Day in 1941, Sam's unit was sent off to the bush in Ukraine, somewhere near the Dnepr river, to play war games. For the first time, the new recruits experienced real artillery barrages - thankfully behind the big guns, not at the receiving end. But the noise was so deafening that the crews had to dig foxholes to hunker down in, while their steel lions roared.

## V. Sam's War

The 522<sup>nd</sup> played at war for almost two months, when suddenly, on June 22<sup>nd</sup> the real thing struck. Sam woke up that morning to the sound of sirens: the Germans had attacked, taking Stalin completely by surprise. Chaos broke out on the Soviet side. Sam's unit was dispatched to Zhitomir, about 200 kilometres East of Lanovits - but with guns to follow, so Sam found himself on his way to the front as an artilleryman with no artillery. Overall troop movements were hasty and badly planned: hundreds of military trains converged on Zhitomir simultaneously, causing a massive traffic jam. Sam's train got stuck on a bridge eight miles outside of the city, and then three German planes began to strafe it. Between them, they kept up a constant stream of fire. The men were sitting ducks on the bridge, so they ran to the end of the train and tried to hide in the wheat-fields nearby. There was no room to spread out, and the best they could do was to huddle in small groups, hoping that the German pilots wouldn't spot them. Sam hid with seven of his buddies. But the Germans did spot them, and one of Sam's friends, Yuzef Matla, was shot. He died holding Sam's hand. Another shot grazed Sam's helmet: a millimetre of steel had saved his life. When night fell, the strafing stopped. The men got back on the train, which finally moved. Someone, somewhere had finally done some organizing: the train retreated to Kiev, 150 kilometres to the East, where General Budyonny was organizing a front to defend the city.

Budyonny had made a great name for himself as a cavalry commander in the Russian Civil War. He remained an avid horse-lover, creating a breed that is still named after him. His legendary exploits in 1919-1920 were told and re-told, and commemorated in a popular song, so he was, quite literally, a hero of song and story. Twenty-one years later, Budyonny was probably still a great cavalry commander, but he had no concept of modern warfare. He had suffered disastrous defeats in the Winter War, yet he remained one of Stalin's favourites. While other losing generals were shot on Stalin's orders, Budyonny's display of incompetence resulted in his promotion to Marshal. Stalin was a sentimental man.

Unbeknownst to Sam, the Kiev force that Budyonny was in the process of organizing would suffer the Red Army's worst defeat of the Second World War: the whole force of 1.5 million men would be surrounded and annihilated. But that lay in the future, and fortunately not in Sam's future.



*Soviet Model B-4 203mm "Gauvitsa"*

Sam was, at last, reunited with his gun. It was a big Model BA 203mm Howitzer (the Russians, who don't have the letter "h" in their alphabet and use "g" instead, called it a "Gauvitsa"). The BA was the best and most modern gun in the Soviet armoury, self-propelled, pulling a trailer that carried shells and accessories and accompanied by a truck for the crew. Soon after the happy reunion, Sam's unit got its orders and the "Gauvitsa" took to the road. Where it was going, and why, the ordinary soldier was as usual not privileged to know. The big gun trundled along the road, at night and without lights, with Sam and his mates riding following behind in the truck. Despite the blackout, a German pilot somehow found them, and they suddenly came under attack from the air again. Speeding up to escape the strafing, the driver tried to negotiate a tight curve with a deep ditch on one side, but he didn't quite make it: the truck went over the edge and overturned. Sam broke his leg, and in that somewhat less than glorious way he joined the ranks of wounded war heroes.

The Invalid Sam was taken to a field hospital that had been hastily set up in a school, in the town of Borodyanka, on the river Tefarov. The doctors set Sam's leg and put it in a cast from hip to toe, and there he lay, completely helpless. The Germans had mastered Zhukhov's tank tactics all too well: the Blitzkrieg moved forward so quickly that it was hard to outrun the advancing forces, particularly with a leg in a cast. Since the front was clearly not going to wait for Sam's leg to heal, his fate seemed to be at a crossroads: either someone, somewhere, was thinking of the field hospital in the school in Borodyanka, on the river Tefarov, and was organizing its evacuation, or, more likely, not. If not, then Sam was about to fall into the hands of the Germans, which would have

meant almost certain death. Besides six million Jews, the Nazis also killed 3.5 million Soviet PoWs, so one way or another, Sam would not have stood much of a chance. Sam couldn't know that at the time, but he did know what rabid antisemites and anti-Communists the Nazis were - and here he was, a Jew in a Communist uniform. So it seemed, on the whole, preferable to avoid capture somehow. Still, all he could do was wait.

He didn't have to wait long. By morning, the front had already caught up with Sam: he could hear machine-gun fire drawing closer and closer. Very quickly, the hospital was evacuated - meaning that everyone ran away. The only people left were Sam, a badly-wounded general, and an orderly named Katya. And, barring a miracle, all of them were about to be killed or taken prisoner. And then came the miracle.

Sam heard the sound of a car pulling into the courtyard. "Katya, what's that?" he asked the orderly. Katya went to investigate, and reported back.

"They've sent a jeep for the general".

"Katya", said Sam, "you've got to get me onto that jeep".

Katya wrapped Sam up in his coat - because apart from his cast, he was stark naked - slung him over her shoulder, and carried him out to the courtyard. A strong girl, Katya.

The jeep had two seats: the driver was sitting in one, a nurse in the other. In the back there was just enough room for the general's stretcher.

The driver wasn't pleased to see Sam. He pulled out his pistol, pointed it, and said:

"I'm not taking you. There's no room."

"Well then, you'd better kill me," Sam told him, "because I'm not staying here".

The nurse begged him not to do it. She was a Jewish girl, from Galicia.

"I'll carry him in my lap", she offered.

The driver still wasn't convinced, but he lowered his gun while Katya and the nurse went to get the general. Once they had strapped him into his stretcher, the nurse took her place in the passenger seat while Katya manoeuvred Sam into an awkward position, his leg sticking out and the rest of him splayed out diagonally across the nurse's lap. Katya stayed behind. Sam doesn't know what became of her, but as a gentle and civilian, she had the best chance of surviving.

The driver tried to go back up the road he had come in on, but he saw Germans and had to turn back. Roads were no good: he checked his map and compass, and headed cross-country. The jeep bounced like a basketball over the hillocks and dips. It was the most uncomfortable ride of Sam's life, and he wondered how the general could survive it. The poor nurse, sandwiched between Sam and the Spartan metal seat of the jeep, must have had a worse time than he did, but she didn't complain.

Finally, after an endless eight kilometres of cross-country jouncing, the driver found the road from Belotserkvi to Nezhin. He said that the whole army had retreated to Nezhin, and headed that way. In Nezhin, there was a proper hospital, and the driver delivered his load there. Sam thanked him profusely, forgave him for threatening to shoot him, and even more profusely thanked the nurse from Galicia who had saved his life. And who must have been covered in bruises for her trouble.

At the hospital, Sam was washed and given new clothes, and that evening he was put on a Red Cross train, headed headed who knew where? Headed as far away from the front as you could get, Sam hoped. For the moment, it was headed nowhere. It was supposed to leave at eight that evening, but what did timetables mean in times like these? Sam was afraid they'd be stuck in Nezhin for days, long enough for the front to catch up with them again. But to his great relief, the train lurched into motion at ten. Two hours late - in the circumstances, not too bad.

But it turned out that it was too bad. Again with the planes, this time not three, but eight or ten. It was a puzzle that the Luftwaffe was able to keep up with the rapidly-moving front: these were fighter planes, not bombers with a range of hundreds of miles, and they needed airstrips nearby to operate from. Could they build them so fast, or did they just take over Soviet ones? Was the retreat so chaotic that nobody had bothered to blow up the runways? However they managed it, their constant harassment of the retreating forces was threatening Sam's life once again. Sam perhaps remembered his father, Berel, telling him how he was almost killed by a bomb when he was a baby. Maybe it would happen again - maybe he would almost be hit by a bomb. He had almost been killed by a bullet, back in the wheatfield. He had almost been crushed by his truck: he was lucky that he just broke his leg. He had almost been caught by the Nazis in Borodyanka, on the river Tefarov. And now eight or ten planes were

systematically strafing and bombing his Red Cross train. He hoped he would die quickly: he dared not hope for another almost.

And yet morning came, and the planes went away. Everything was a bloody mess. The train couldn't move. But if the Red Army had not yet learned how to stop the Germans, it had at least learned how to retreat more efficiently. Cleanup and repair crews got to work right away. Horses were found somewhere, and some survivors were evacuated that way. And then the train moved. The steam engine chugged faster and faster, with an exhilarating spew of steam and ashes and the syncopated clicking of wheels over the rail-joints. They were under way! To where, he had no idea, but away. And against all odds, it had been yet another almost.

## **VI. Samarkand**

It wasn't the most comfortable of rides. The train bounced and jolted over the uneven tracks. As a hospital train it had shelves instead of seats, the men thrown about like so much loose cargo. Sam has little recollection of that long, monotonous, uncomfortable trip, but he remembers that when the train stopped at stations to pick up coal and water, the walking wounded would get off, looking for vodka. The desire to stay permanently drunk, Sam had noticed, consumed the minds of most of the soldiers. Sam didn't drink, and couldn't move anyway. Perhaps he dreamt that he was back in Lanovits, that his lather was tying on tefillim, that his mother was baking bread. Perhaps the steam-train smells and sounds made him remember his trips to Lvov to see Chava. He was itchy under his cast, and the constant lurching of the train was not helping his leg to heal. It was not as bad as Katya's jeep - but would it never end?

It ended. After two days, the train arrived at their destination: the fabled city of Samarkand. V. Samarkand Ulugbek Madrassah, Samarkand, Uzbekistan It was now August, 1941, the hottest part of the summer. The train, despite its discomforts, had been ventilated and shaded, but stepping out into the streets of Samarkand was like walking into an oven Sam could hardly breathe. He was taken to the hospital in the Old City. Sam spent six months there, hobbling on crutches once he could move at all. When he was well enough to become an outpatient, he started walking to a clinic in the New City a few days a week for electrical stimulation therapy, so his muscles wouldn't atrophy.

At some other, more normal time, Samarkand would have been a fascinating city to explore. Once the main stop along the Silk Road, it would have bustled with caravans coming and going, the bazaar filled with exotic goods and the babble of many languages, as well as the clink of the one language that everyone understood. It was hard to imagine. The modern bazaar in Samarkand, Sam says, was just a bazaar, full of impoverished tradesmen trying to eke a living out of trading in cheap and shoddy goods: second-hand clothes, wooden toys, tins of mahorka - the vilest grade of tobacco - and of course the ubiquitous vodka. In a more elegant time, tradesmen from East and West would have traded silk, gold, jewels - luxury goods worth hauling for months between China and the Middle East. In its heyday, Samarkand was one of the world's wealthiest cities, and a great centre of Islamic learning. Its wealth is reflected even today in its wonderfully ornate buildings, dating back to the golden age of Islam, when Islamic culture was the most advanced in the world. That was an age of poets, physicians and philosophers, astronomers and mathematicians, when Damascus steel was literally the cutting edge of technology, and rulers were enlightened and tolerant.

In those days, the greatest Jewish community in the world had lived in Islamic Spain: it was the age of Maimonides and the poet Ben Ezra, of the Yeshivah in Safed, in Turkish-ruled Palestine, where both the Kabbalah and the Shulkhan Arukh had been written. When the Jews were expelled from Christian Spain in the 15th century, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent had welcomed them to settle in his lands, including Palestine. The Communists had little use for ancient religious institutions and had allowed the ancient buildings of Samarkand to fall into disrepair, so that the city in which Sam recuperated was as drab and neglected as its bazaar. But though the bazaar will never again be what it was, the Old City, now restored, is once more a beautiful place. One can only hope that the tolerance of Suleyman the Magnificent will someday prevail as well.

Sam made a friend in the hospital, Seryozha Karasiov, who came from Kaluga, near Moscow. Seryozha had served in a tank brigade, and been shot through the hand. He was a skinny young man, of average height and always full of jokes. And, like most Soviet soldiers, also full of drink; he stole hospital housecoats to trade for vodka. But he was good company, and he'd often come with Sam on his walks to the physiotherapy clinic.

## **The Coat**



Before the war, Sam's father had made him a coat. It was a special coat, black, with a distinctive cut and a Karakul lamb collar. Sam had to leave it behind when he was drafted.

One day, as Sam and Seryozha were making their way down the narrow lane that connected the Old City to the New, they saw two men and a woman having an animated conversation in the lane. As they drew closer, Sam could see that one of the men, with his back to them, was wearing what looked like Sam's coat. Sam couldn't believe his eyes! He hobbled up to the group and tapped the man on the shoulder. The man turned around, and Sam beheld his brother Michael.

## Michael's Story

Michael caught Sam up on the news. Srulik had been drafted a week after Sam, so he was somewhere in the Red Army too. Then, when the Nazis invaded in June 1941 - just as Sam was being sent westward to fight - Michael and Itzi headed East. Their youngest brother, Zelig, tried to go with them, but he was just 15, so Michael and Itzi talked him into going back. They told him he was needed to look after their parents and their little sister Tsiporah. Itzi and Michael made their way as deep into Soviet territory as they could. They ended up in the small city of Kargan, about 200 miles south of Samarkand, near the Afghan border. Itzi got a job as an irrigation worker there. Michael worked in a coal mine for a while, but the work was dangerous and badly paid. He found a better way to make a living by travelling back and forth to the big cities nearby, Samarkand and Tashkent, buying clothes and selling them in Kargan. It was all in the best tradition of the old Silk Road: Samarkand had prospered by trading, and trading gave brother Michael a way to get by.

## On the Road

It was the spring of 1942, and the Red Army's catastrophic defeats in the previous year had turned into a stiff and effective resistance. Although the Germans were still advancing, the Soviets were winning many battles that the official propaganda could trumpet. Most significantly, the Germans had failed to take Moscow, suffering major losses and recalling Napoleon's similar defeat in 1812. The official press did not fail to note the parallel, and predicted that Hitler, like Napoleon before him, would soon be routed. Indeed, in Samarkand, far from the front lines, it was rumoured that the war was nearly over. Sam, for one, believed that the fighting would end before he was fit to return to active service, and wanted to spend as much time as he could with his brothers. As a wounded soldier, Sam got a lot of respect, so it wasn't hard for him to wangle six months' leave, as well as a travel pass, or komandirovka.

In the hospital, Sam had met a pair of brothers from the Caucasus mountain region - Georgia or Armenia - and they told him about the letters they'd received from their families, saying how prosperous it was down there and how good life was. So Sam, as the eldest, decided that was where they should all go. Michael readily agreed, and went back to Kargan to get Itzi. But Michael and Itzi couldn't get komandirovkas for the Caucasus: the best they could do was to get a labour assignment in Astrakhan. That was more or less on the way to the Caucasus, at least a good start, so off they went.



*Part of the Kremlin In Astrakhan*

Astrakhan, located where the Volga river flowed into the Caspian Sea, was another storied city. Though it is mainly known today as the source of the world's best caviar, in its day it was also the fortress town from which Tsar Peter the Great organized the conquest of the Caucasus and central Asia, and was still an important administrative centre. It is graced with many fine buildings, including a military fortress or Kremlin, and an imposing statue of Peter himself. But caviar wasn't in the boys' budget, and they didn't have much time for sightseeing. Itzi and Michael's work assignment turned out to be in a lumber mill, untying rafts of logs sent down the Volga by the loggers upstream. It was hard and dangerous work. Sam meanwhile tried to get them all komandirovkas for the Caucasus, but when he couldn't go back to Kargan and try

again.

In Kargan, Sam went to the military office - still limping and with a cane - and told them that he wanted to visit his parents in the Caucasus. They asked him where. His friends in the hospital were from Annavir (in Russia, but near the Caucasus mountains) and Ordzhonikidze (now Vahan, in the mountain-republic of Armenia); so that's what Sam said: we all want to go to Ordzhonikidze via Armavir. The authorities were happy to give a soldier a pass to visit his parents, but balked at giving them out to his brothers. Sam managed to wear down their resistance: if a soldier is going to visit his family, shouldn't the rest of his family be able to come along? It worked: he got passes for all of them, and they set off together.

This time they could take the direct route, the ferry straight across the Caspian from Krasnovodsk to Balm. It summer by now; the weather was beautiful, the sea was beautiful (Krasnovodsk means "beautiful water"), and it seemed as if the world must be at peace. Little did they know that the Balm oilfields were Hitler's main military objective, and that they were heading straight into the path of the German Army. One army group was heading for Stalingrad - just 400 kilometres from Astrakhan - and another was pushing south into the Caucasus. Fortunately, Zhukov's winter counterattack had temporarily pushed the Germans back, so for the time being they were safe. But Armavir, when they got there, was full of bezhintsy ("runners") - refugees from Moscow and Leningrad, reminders of the grim reality heading their way. The siege of Leningrad, which would cost the lives of 650,000 citizens, was in its hardest stages, so despite their wretched appearance and air of desperation, the few who had managed to make their way south were the lucky ones.

The brothers didn't stay in Armavir long: they were sent to work in a kolkhoz (collective farm) in the countryside nearby. The men were away fighting, so the farm was run by the women alone. The Pacht brothers were exotic curiosities, not to mention young and good-looking, so they were treated very well. The women would tap on their windows and give them white bread. (The more nutritious black rye bread that Russians usually ate was considered common and looked down on, while white bread was considered a luxury). Then the kolkhoznits found out that the brothers were Jews, and the atmosphere changed. They didn't want to know them any more, and started calling them kukuruzhniki - corn-eaters - which for some strange reason had become the common derogatory word for Jews in those parts.

One day a man from Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, came to the kolkhoz to buy hard straw for brooms. The boys told him they were Jews, and about the troubles they were having with their neighbours. He was sympathetic, and invited them to go back with him to Tbilisi, a few hundred kilometres to the south. And so they did. Since Armavir fell to the Nazis in August 1942, the Pacht brothers had paradoxically been saved by antisemitism. There was a complication. They couldn't board the train without valid documents, and theft komandirovkas didn't allow them to travel to Tbilisi. So Sam forged theft passes. Michael's and Itzi's worked out pretty well, Sam's wasn't so good. The passes got them onto the train, but NKVD men were on the train, too, and they started checking everyone's papers. (The NKVD later turned into the KGB. One way or another, they were the secret police.) The NKVD men didn't bother Sam's brothers because they weren't in the army, but they were suspicious of Sam because he was an invalid (maybe he was pretending?), and they were looking for deserters. So they took Sam off the train in a little town two hours short of Tbilisi. The two younger brothers stayed on the train, but Sam ended up in a police lockup - a little one- storey house not far from the train station. There were a few other prisoners there already. The other prisoners told Sam that the express train from Moscow to Tbilisi made a stop in the town at midnight every night. Fortunately for Sam, because of the war the NKVD was very far from the efficient machine it had been in the 1930s, and nobody had bothered to lock the window. So Sam waited, and when he heard the train pull in, he jumped out and hid underneath the train, hanging on to the rods. It was a very long two hours, but it was summertime. In the winter Sam might have frozen to death.

Finally the train pulled into Tbilisi. Sam, confident in his ability to talk his way out of his predicament, had told his brothers to wait for him at the train station. It was a proper, covered station, what the Russians call a vogzal, not a mere stantsiya so Michael and Itzi had been bored but fairly comfortable, and late that night the brothers were reunited. When morning broke, they left the station and headed for the market square, the traditional meeting place for Eastern Jews, to see what they could learn.

At the market, a stranger came up to them, told them he had recognized them as Jews, and introduced himself: Velvl Katz, from a town near Tarnopol - practically next door to Lanovits. To find a fellow-Jew from their own parts, so far from home - well, how could they not become friends? Velvl told the boys he was living in a town about 100 kilometres away named Sandari, and invited them to come and stay with him. Velvl lived in a bungalow with his mother, his daughter and her boyfriend. He said his wife had died, but he didn't volunteer any details. With all the men off fighting, space was not a problem in those days, and Velvl rented the

house next door at a low price. Velvi gave the Pacht brothers a room to themselves, so they had a home; they just had the usual problem of making a living.

## **Sam and the NKVD officer**

Sam still had his cane, his army ration coupons, and some of his 6 months' leave left. Michael met a Jewish barber called Kurt; from Rzeszow in Poland, who was willing to teach him his trade for a small fee. And one day Sam was sitting around in Mr Kurtz's barbershop, watching Michael doing his work, when an officer of the NKVD walked in.

She wanted a haircut. The fashion for women in the NKVD was to cut their hair in men's styles, so she had gone to Mr Kurtz, and apprentice Michael got the job of shearing her. She got to chatting as her hair was being chopped. As in many areas of Soviet life during the war, women were drafted into roles normally filled by men, and she was not a professional member of the secret police: in fact, she seemed like a nice girl. She told the boys that she worked as the Nachalnik Pasponovno Stola - the head of the passport desk in the local NKVD office - and that her name was

Katya Sachkova. In turn, Sam told her their story, edited to leave out anything that might actually interest the NKVD: he was wounded and on leave, and wanted to stay with his brothers, who were exempt from military service because they were Polish citizens - but having fled from the Nazis in a hurry, couldn't prove it. So Sam asked Katya if she could make passports for them, and Katya readily agreed. Pushing his luck, Sam asked her if she would also make him a fake passport that would get him out of the army. Katya must have fallen for Sam, because she agreed to that as well, even though it was clearly illegal. So with the help of another Katya, Sam Pacht turned into Shloime Zaltsman, born in Warsaw, and a Polish citizen.

The matter of citizenship was, like many things in the Soviet Union, complicated, arbitrary and a matter of politics. The Soviets had lost western Ukraine to Poland in the 1920 war, but had never given up their claim to it. When they captured those lands in 1939, they regarded everyone in Soviet occupied Poland - or Western Ukraine, however you wanted to call it - automatically as Soviet citizens. So once again Lanovitsers found themselves in a new country without moving an inch. But many Jews had fled to those parts to from the western part of Poland - from what is still Poland today - to get away from the Nazis, or just from the fighting, and the Soviet authorities made them declare their citizenship: Polish or Soviet? Most of them opted for Polish citizenship, hoping that once the fighting was over they could go back to their families. But Stalin decided that those who declared themselves Polish were disloyal and not to be trusted, so instead of letting them go home, he sent them east, to Siberia. They were kept there, in prison camps, until the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Then, all of a sudden, the Poles and the Soviets became allies and the best of friends. The gates of the prison camps were opened, and Polish citizens were free to leave. Shloime Zaltsman, Sam's alter ego, being from Warsaw, looked on paper like one of those 1939 refugees from western Poland, who had been in Siberia, in a place called Komi. But the most important thing was that he was a Polish citizen, so he couldn't be drafted.

Sam played up to Katya (Katyusha, he started calling her). He bought her perfume, they had a little romance. She made him the passports for free - it must have been true love - and even agreed to make free passports for other people that Sam found. So Sam started going to the marketplace, meeting other Jews, and selling them passports for 3-4,000 rubles, a small fortune in those days. It was all pure profit, because darling Katyusha didn't charge a kopeck.

To expand his little business, Sam needed a bigger market. He got Katyusha to make Icomandirovkas for all three boys, allowing them to travel to Yerevan, the biggest city in neighbouring Armenia. And so they went back and forth between Yerevan and Sandari, rounding up more business in the Yerevan bazaar. They also made a side-trip to Ararat - just 8 km from Mount Ararat - where he found more Jewish boys, invalids on leave from the army, just like Sam. In Ararat, Sam got assigned to another kolkhoz by a Ukrainian, who took him for one of his own (Sam still travelled under his own papers, saving Mr. Zaltsman for an emergency).

## **Dr. Sam**

Sam became something of a hero on the kolkhoz. On the train to Ararat, he had picked up a bag by mistake that looked just like his, but turned out to be a doctor's bag, full of instruments and medicines. The peasants took him to be a doctor and came to him for help. Sam was in a fix: if he admitted the truth, they would be angry and disappointed; so he became Doctor Sam. He listened to their chests with a stethoscope, looked in their ears and

down their throats, took their temperatures, and gave them the pills that he found in the bag. In wartime, serious medicine was reserved for soldiers and hospitals, so the pills in his bag were mainly aspirin, laxatives and the like: they seemed to make the kolhozniks happy, and Sam kept up the charade. The people were Muslim, and the women even trusted Sam enough to lift their veils for him. Most likely, just believing that a real doctor was looking after them really did help them to get better. Having no money, they expressed their gratitude by paying him in eggs and live chickens, even going hungry themselves, since in wartime food was scarce.

Sam kept up his passport business as well, going into Ararat and finding customers in the marketplace. They would supply him with photos and money; then he would go back to Sandari now and then for a tryst with Katyusha, and she would do up the documents.

One day, Sam had a scare. He was in Tovarisch Katya's office when a male NKVD officer walked in, an ominous-looking man. Sam had escaped from an NKVD jail, after all, and he assumed they were still looking for him. But Katya told him not to worry. It seems they had a little love-triangle going. The NKVD man had a crush on Katyusha, and turned a blind eye to the goings-on. Still, Sam decided it would be safest to leave. Katyusha begged him not to forget her, and he promised to write. In the meantime, he introduced her to Velvl Katz, who took over the passport business, while Sam went back to Ararat and his brothers.

## Fugitives

Back in Ararat, the boys were now assigned a house across the river from the town itself, which they shared with a Ukrainian. They were told it had belonged to a priest who got arrested. But Sam didn't think they were destined for an idyllic life there. Their adventures in the Caucasus had occupied a year and a half: it was the fall of 1943 now, his army leave had long ago expired, and he was a fugitive from the NKVD. So he had an idea. They were very close to the border with Iran, a neutral country: why not go there, and maybe they could head for Palestine?

You couldn't get across at Ararat, because of the mountainous terrain, but according to the grapevine, you could at Nakhichevan, ninety kilometres to the southeast. So off they went.

Nakhichevan stretched out along a narrow valley by a lake; the border lay at the end of the lake, with a little Kurdish village on the other side. There were people in Nakhichevan who would smuggle people across for a few dollars. But the NKVD had caught on to this game, and the town was swarming with agents who were checking people's documents. Sam could have become Mr Zaltsman, but what about his brothers? They were of military age by then: if they were caught, and Katya's papers didn't stand up, they might be drafted, or arrested. So they decided not to risk it, and went back to Sandari.

Sam went looking for Katya, but she was gone. Velvl Katz told him the story. One day, he got Katya to make a passport for a Jew from Bessarabia - business as usual. But the Bessarabian jilted his girlfriend, who got mad and blew the whistle on the whole operation. Senior NKVD people came in to investigate. They arrested poor Katya and sent her to jail for three years, and they started scouring the town, looking for people with fake passports. The whole business had been shut down. And the boys had to get out of town, fast.

## VII. Going Home

By this time, the German army was in MI retreat, and most of Ukraine was back in Soviet hands. The boys decided that it was time to head home: after tee years away, to see Berel and Bella again, and sister Tsiporah, and brother Zelig. Sam also wanted above all to be reunited with his Chava. But, as usual, they needed to have the right travel documents.

That did not pose a great problem: Sam, as usual, had connections. He knew an Armenian who was the commander of the army post in Sandari, and word had reached him that an old friend from Lanovits, Mendel Brimmer, was in the Ukrainian city of Zhitomir. So he hatched a scheme. Sam tells the story:

As with all matters in the USSR, I paid a bribe to arrange military travel papers that requested my presence to appear at the Polish army camp in Zhitomir. Neither the officer that issued the paper, nor I, knew where the Polish division was presently located. We relied on the Soviet trust in military paperwork hence put down Zhitomir. On the way to Zhitomir, I came to realize that there is no such camp, and never was.

Mendel Brimmer 'fixed' my travel papers by changing the destination to Lvov. With the corrected travel papers, my two brothers and I traveled in the direction of Lanowitz. We reached Yampol (=Yampil in the Ukraine), 12 km from Lanowitz. The rail line beyond Yampol was damaged. The train remained standing at Iskowitz (=fuskowcy). We de trained It was a clear night We carried our luggage and walked We got to Grybovo at 6 am. The women were already in their fields, working separately from the menfolks. My father Berel, who did tailoring for the peasants of the villages, was well known and liked by these villagers. The peasant women recognized us. When they saw us they shouted, "Berel's sons have returned, " and cried at the same time.

We knew nothing of the Holocaust that took place; hence we were puzzled why they were crying. They declined to explain. We visited Panasy Yashchuk, a Stundist (a member of a Protestant sect) known in our neighborhood as a deeply religious and moral man. It was with him that we hid some of our goods and goods of others during the Soviet regime. During the last period before the Holocaust, I used to lease land from the goyim (Gentiles). I brought the harvest to Yashchuk's threshing floor. He would thresh the wheat, and keep our harvest separate from his. He did so with almost religious fervor. Now he cried like a baby. His wife came out of the house crying and ran away. "What happened?" I asked I expected him to tell me that our goods were taken away. "All were killed," he answered "Why?" I asked (a naïve question on my pan). I had no idea why all had to be killed I could not get more details out of him. We left his house.

I entered Lanowitz at 9AM After all, I knew my town with all its alleys. This time, I did not recognize her. The town had vanished Only a few houses remained standing. Between these houses others lay in ruins. I went over to our house which was still standing. My heart was beating as I approached it. I expected to see my father, my sisters, and my mother, to see the happy past return. Instead, Adamchuk's daughter came out of the house, a young, blond Gentile woman. My father had turned the house to her because it was outside the ghetto, and told her: "We are going to be killed, guard the house in the event my sons will return so that they will have a roof over their head" She told this to us and that was the truth. Then she added, "Do not go out alone. Bandera bands [Ukrainian nationalist partisans fight-ing under the leadership of Stefan Bandera] are in the area, murdering all remnants of the previous (Soviet) administration, also former town residents."

She told us that several Jewish residents returned after the Holocaust, among them Itzik Sabaris, Yisrael Brodsky and others. The Soviets inducted them into their army. Six to seven Russians and collaborators are being murdered daily (by Bandera bands).

We entered the house. It was requisitioned by the Raispulbum (District Council). They let the young woman live in the kitchen. Her husband, a soldier, was missing. She and an infant lived in the kitchen. We, too, remained in my parents' kitchen with its inheritors.

We left our parcels in the house and went out We met the son-in-law of Paweli, the blind He informed us that Richter, the German Gebiets-kommander was crazy. He killed and hit peopleforpleasure. He once hit Paweli, when he saw him go out with nine small pigs to a meadow, claiming that he must watch the pigs because the German army needs them. He further told us about 20 pretty local girls that had to be supplied to the German army to clean their houses and do more things.....He also warned us not to wander about lest we be killed We went to visit local friends despite his warnings.

We found two trenches, covered with a thin layer of earth. Skeleton bits stuck out of these trenches. Our family and friends rest here. Gentiles stood near us and cried as they saw us. They told us that for two weeks after the liquidation, these trenches moved Blood would occasionally spurt up from them like a fountain. I fainted When I awoke, I found myself lying down in our kitchen.

## **VIII. The Shoah in Lanovits**

Sam did not learn the details of what had happened in Lanovits until later. There had been a rich Jew in Lanovits before the war named Shimon Glinik, who owned several farms. A German named Richter - probably the Kreisleiter or district commander - took over Glinik' s farms and set up a ghetto there. There was no source of water in the ghetto, but there was a well in the town, next to the synagogue fence. The Jews were allowed to go to the well only once every two weeks, and anyone caught drilling for water was killed.

One day, the Germans started digging two big holes. The Ukrainians guessed what their purpose might be, and tied notes to stones and threw them into the ghetto to try to warn the Jews. But the Jews assumed the Germans were building anti-tank ditches. The truth was so grotesque, so improbable, that no normal mind could accept it. Soon after, the blacksmith's sister, a meshugineh, went to the well to get water for her brother. It wasn't her day to

go, so she was shot by a Ukrainian policeman. When her blood contaminated the well, the Jews were allowed no water at all. Once the Jews were weakened by thirst, Richter ordered them to line up and march to the main farm house, where Richter had his headquarters. They were told to bring buckets, and they would get two weeks' supply of water. But it was a trick. When the Jews got there, they were surrounded by policemen, then loaded onto trucks in groups of 20-30 and driven to the two big holes - the men to one hole, the women to the other. There they were forced to undress, stripped of all their belongings. Richter himself, the bastard, sat in the holes, first one, then the other, and shot them all personally.

After the war, Sam met Srul Brodsky. Richter's bullet had only grazed Brodsky, but he played dead, and when the shooting was over, he climbed out of the grave. He made it to the river Horyn, and swam up it 26 kilometres to his own home village, where a Ukrainian family hid him until the end of the war. And so Richter's crimes had a living eye-witness.

Today, a memorial to the victims stands in the town. It was built on the site of the mass graves by Yosef Marder, who returned and lived in Lanovits to tend to them until his death, when the task was taken over by others. The inscription on the memorial reads, in Yiddish and Russian:

**Here lie Lanovits residents who were killed by fascists on 29th Av and ft Elul Tashav,  
13th and 14th August 1942**

In those two pits lie the remains of Berel and Bella, of Zelig and Tsiporah, of Sam's fiancée Chava; and of all but a handful of Sam's friends and family members. It is all that is left of the Jews who lived in Lanovits for 300 years.

Once he knew that his home town no longer existed, Sam had no wish to stay. He takes up his story again: When I recovered, I decided to escape from here as soon as possible. With the help of a Russo-Polish local attorney, whom I had known previously, I willed the house to its present tenant so that it would not fall into the hands of the government I took the document to the secretary of the Raispulbum, representing the Communist party. The official rose from his seat, pulled his pistol from his holster, and asked: "Abominable Jew, the Ukrainians murdered all those dear to you, and you turn your house over to them? There are unusual cases, but your case is dishonorable, and more." All this preaching was meant to frighten me, and to test whether I am indeed the true heir of the house. If not, to persuade me to change my mind and leave the house to the local authorities.

My brothers and I climbed onto the first train leaving Lanovits to escape this place. What the Germans failed to accomplish, the Russians accomplished I fought in the Red army, was wounded while serving in it (yet I decided to leave the USSR). We reached Zamott, the border town. We crossed the border at night and reached Lublin, Poland.

Lublin was liberated in September 1944. The local partisans surrounded the city. The Germans and their collaborators were caught in the ring-hold around the city. The small fly escaped, only their leaders were caught. Before I arrived in Lublin, I saw journalists and important leaders all going to Majdanelc the concentration camp located in a suburb of Lublin. One cannot imagine the sight; that such cruelty can be instituted. An oven was still functioning. Metal racks on which bodies were inserted into the oven stood in front of these ovens.

Before the 55 staff escaped from Majdanelc they wanted to obliterate signs of their crimes. They had little time, so they shot all the inmates: Jews, Ukrainian collaborators, and Russian POWs. Many of the latter were lying on the ground, wounded, groaning quietly so as not to be noticed by the remaining German staff.

We tried to save those that could be saved. In the rows of the wounded, I pulled out a tall Jewish lad dressed in a Russian-officer uniform. I recognized that he was Jewish and saved him. The gas chamber was a 12 x 12 meter room. Its flooring was still wet from the cleaning it received after the gassing. Nearby, were shacks full of children's shoes, and sorted adult clothing. It was heartbreaking to see the piles of children shoes. It brought memories of children running,

The Jews in Majdanek and nearby labour camps had actually been murdered on November 3, 1943, in an operation that the Nazis cynically called the "Harvest-Festival Action" (Erntefestaktion). Like the man whom Sam was about to save, any Jews still in the camp when it was liberated in July 1944 would likely have been there as Soviet prisoners-of-war, who were second only to Poles as the largest group of prisoners still alive. playing catch, and other games. I could imagine these children, pleading to be saved for they are so young. Yet, we could no longer save them. I am not a writer, but to this day, I remember these small children's legs that the Nazis ignored, children



who committed no sin.

Ukrainians and Poles rummaged through the men's shoes to search for gold and jewelry that some Jews hid inside their soles and heels. This is how these vultures wanted to enrich themselves. They appeared to have found items inside these shoes. I, myself found a green paper with Hebrew Letters and a serial number, a Palestine pound sterling money note. It must have belonged to a Jew who left Palestine, to avoid hardships, and return to the easy life in Poland. With the pound sterling note he hoped to save himself I also found 2 damaged greenback dollar bills. [Sam later donated these items to the Toronto YMHA (Young Mens' Hebrew Association, now the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre).]

On the second day of my arrival in Lublin, I was informed that its Nazi leaders will be hanged publicly. Politicians and journalists came to be present and photograph this revenge-act. I, who was familiar with the details of their horror acts, volunteered to translate into Polish and Russian all that surviving witnesses testified to. Unwittingly, I converted a friendly testimony to a historic event, with me the main witness. Five hanging posts were erected in a forest clearing. A Polish professional hangman, with white gloves, was at the ready for the best event of his life. A Jewish sergeant of the Polish military police managed the event. His task was a great privilege, to mastermind this act of revenge. Following his order, the five trucks, on which sat the selected "heroes" on a bench with their head covered, entered the hanging area. The Jewish sergeant signalled to the hangman. He climbed onto each truck had each criminal stand up, and draped the noose around their neck. Next the Polish priest climbed the truck and whispered whatever message he had. This process was followed on each truck. The sergeant asked each criminal if they had anything to say. Each one answered, "gar nichts" - "nothing at all". The main criminal, a man of low-stature, said nothing. He was shaking, and could not utter a word. The sergeant gave another signal. The trucks moved from the hanging posts and the men were left hanging, crumbling. Whoever had not seen this event has not experienced a tragic gratification. The bodies were left hanging for two weeks, to symbolize the revenge due Nazi criminals. It was a message for future generations.

The mob who wanted to lynch these criminals received some satisfaction seeing them hanging there. The average person was now able to experience freedom after years of daily nightmares. Sam adds that his faith in God was never the same afterwards.

To keep Itzi from getting drafted into the Polish army, Sam paid money to get him into Bricha - the Zionist organization that was smuggling Jews out of Poland. They got him to Romania and from there to Italy. From Italy, he made his way to Porto Alegre in Brazil, and he lived there for the rest of his life.

Michael and Sam stayed in Lublin for a while, living in a house for refugees at no. 3 Wyszyński Street, near the railway station. They made a living by buying clothes from Russian soldiers and selling them to Polish civilians in the city market, which was also not far away.

One day, Michael came home with a parcel of clothes that he had bought for 5,000 zlotys: a pair of pants, some shirts and shoes. The pants still had blood on them: maybe they were taken off a body on a battlefield, maybe their owner had been murdered. Many of the Russians were bandits - army deserters, desperate not to get sent back to the Soviet Union, who lived an underground life and had no qualms about robbing and killing people. Michael made the mistake of leading the Russians to the brothers' house, and two days later they came back with guns, wanting their clothes and their money back. They started breaking down the door. Sam had a gun hidden under the window-sill, and he still had his Soviet army uniform. He quickly put it on, then opened the door and pointed the gun at them. "I'm from the railway NKVD", said Sam, "and you'd better get out". To which one of the Russians replied: "We didn't come for you, we came for the Jew." But they left the brothers alone.

Remnants of the Polish Home Army - the AK - also still waged a civil war against the new Communist government. They were mostly from the worst, most extremist groupings, such as the National Radical Camp. According to their ideology, Communists and Jews were one and the same, and they murdered one or the other any time they could. These types murdered six to eight Jews a day in Lublin alone. One evening some of them came to the brothers' apartment.

"Open the door!", one of them yelled.

"I have orders from the city commandant not to open the door at night", Sam yelled back.

They were insistent:

"Open the door, or we'll kill you?"

Sam told them he wasn't going to open the door.

The men went away and came back with the building superintendent.  
"We're with the Polish police. Now open the door."

Sam refused, and they started to break the door down with rifle butts. Sam gave one shot through the door, and they ran away. His pistol was a 9mm German Parabellum - probably looted from the body of a German officer on a battlefield somewhere - that Sam and Mike had bought on the black market. It proved a wise investment.

## **IX. Flight to Freedom**

Michael and Sam had no particular desire to stay in Poland, a place that now had only unpleasant memories for them, and was dangerous for Jews to boot. Instead of turning to Bricha for help, they found their own way out of Poland. As soon as the war was over, they went to the so-called "reclaimed territories" - land in the west that Poland had been given at Germany's expense, to compensate Poland for the wide swath of territory (including Lanovits) that Poland had lost to the Soviet Union. They travelled to Wroclaw - formerly Breslau - and stayed there for six months. Then they crossed into Czechoslovakia and made their way along the German border to the little town of Selb, in the American occupation zone. From there they got to Munich, where the Americans assigned them to the Displaced Persons' camp at Fohrenwald, 30 kilometers south-west of Munich.

Michael and Sam lived at FUhrenwald for two years, along with 5,000 other homeless Jews whom the world seemed to have forgotten. The Americans had issued orders that no rations should be diverted to the camp, and thousands of people were starving. Some Jews would go to the nearby town of Wolfrathausen to buy meat, which they had to buy on the black market. One day, a German policeman came into the camp, chasing after one of the traders, and an altercation broke out. In the ruckus, a Jew got shot. Outrage spread through the camp like fire through dry straw, and a riot broke out. The Americans surrounded the camp with MPs and locked it down for a few days. Sam tried to get to Wolfrathausen himself, but an MP stopped him and jabbed him in the ribs with his nightstick.

Finally the actor Glenn Ford happened to find out about conditions at the camp, and personally drove a truckload of contraband army rations into the camp. He kept this up for seven weeks, persuading the supply-sergeants to look the other way, until the American authorities woke up and allowed the inmates to be fed. Eventually, conditions in the camp stabilized. The Jews had their own camp administration, and a chief rabbi, Amram Zwi Gruenwald from Rumania. A talented artist even designed a Haggadah for the camp and had it printed. Generally life in the camp was uneventful - a polite word for boring. The food was like institutional food everywhere, nutritious enough but also boring. The inmates were allowed to leave the camp during the day, though they were supposed to be back by curfew every day. But Michael made a business out of travelling to Vienna, trading in Czechoslovakia, and then checking into the camp as if nothing had happened.

The Americans were letting people go to the States if they had family there. The Pachts had relatives in Philadelphia, but immigrant numbers were limited by the American quota system and there was a five-year wait. Then in 1947, a Canadian delegation arrived at the camp, headed by a man named Kirchner from the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. They were looking for people to work as tailors, and they preferred people with Toronto connections. Sam was a tailor's son, but he had never picked up a needle himself, and he didn't know anybody in Toronto. But a Jew didn't survive the war without a healthy dose of chutzpah, so Sam applied anyway. He heard of an American, a Mr. Fry, who worked for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA). Mr. Fry controlled the lists of emigrants, and Sam had heard he was good for a bribe. Michael and Sam went together, and knocked on his door. Mr. Fry invited them in.

"Mr. Fry," said Sam, "I was told you were the man to see about leaving Föhrenwald."

"But I have a list", Mr. Fry told him, "and I only take families".

"We are a family", Sam said. "This is my brother."

Michael nodded and smiled; a hint of doubt crossed Mr. Fry's face. Sam suddenly felt a need to go to the washroom. He asked where it was, and Mr. Fry, taking the hint, offered to show the way. In the washroom, Sam pulled out \$200 and made his play - \$100 now, and \$100 when the Canadians had enlisted him as a tailor. Fry was still doubtful. "I can't do anything until the OSS has checked you out", he said. The OSS was the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA.

So Sam was interviewed by an OSS man. It was the beginning of the McCarthy era, and he was mainly concerned that no Communists should infiltrate the United States. Or even, apparently, Canada. Naturally, Sam couldn't admit to having fought with the Red Army, or being a Soviet citizen - they would have shipped him straight

back to Russia. But Shloyme Zaltsman and his Polish passport came to the rescue: Sam was a Polish citizen, and he told the interviewer that he and his brother had been hidden by a Ukrainian peasant in an underground bunker. Unfortunately, Michael had lost his papers. There was enough of a family resemblance that the interrogator accepted the two of them as brothers, and the OSS man bought the story.

Once the brothers had passed muster, the first \$100 changed hands. "The rest is up to you", said Mr. Fry. "Now you have to get approval from the tailors." Sam went to the ILGWU committee, and they put him to the test. They gave him cloth, needle and thread, and told him to make a lapel. He'd never done it in his life, but he had watched his father working, so he had some idea of what to do. He made a few stitches, and it was good enough for them. But then there was Michael. Sam went away, grew a beard, and came back, pretending to be Michael. He went through the same routine, and once again made it through.

There were still hurdles left. Sam had to go through one more session with the OSS people, who grilled him: where had he lived, what did his father do, where was he during the war, and so on, and so on. Luckily, four years of life under Stalin had taught the brothers how to be smooth liars, so he passed with flying colours yet again, and when Michael told them the same story, he was good to go as well.

One final hurdle: they had to pass a physical. That posed no problem for Sam, but Michael's lung X-ray showed some dark spots. He had probably been infected during the TB epidemic that had swept through the camp. But again the universal language did the trick. Sam bribed the German radiologist - it only took \$10 this time - to make a second set of plates of his lungs and pass them off as Michael's. And so they were all set to leave for Canada. Sam and Michael arrived in Toronto in 1948, with a contract to work for Darling Clothes at 96 Spadina Avenue. Thus one life ended, and a new one began: but that is a story for another time.

## Epilogue Srulik

One more of the Pacht brothers survived the war: Srulik, who was drafted into the Red Army two weeks after Sam. After the war, Sam tried to find Srulik, but without success. Finally, in the 1950s, the Red Cross informed him that Srulik had suffered serious war injuries and been sent to convalesce in the Ural region of Russia. But it was not until much later that Sam succeeded in communicating with his brother, through coded messages, and learned his story.

Srulik had married and had a daughter - named Bella, after her grandmother - , and they had all moved back to Ukraine. They were living 100 km from Chernobyl in 1986, at the time of the nuclear disaster there. Perhaps as a result, Srulik had developed cancer.

Sam managed to get permission for Srulik to leave the Soviet Union, on compassionate grounds, for a three-month visit to Canada. And so in 1989, after 50 years apart, Srulik was reunited with his brothers Sam and Michael. Although Srulik had to go back, the era of glasnost' and perestroika (openness and reform) soon arrived, and Soviet citizens no longer needed their government's permission to leave the country. Srulik and his family, which by then included a granddaughter, emigrated to the United States and settled in New York. Srulik's wife died of cancer soon after their arrival, and Srulik himself also passed away in the early 1990s. Sam flew to New York for his funeral.



As I write this, Sam Pacht is 92. He is the owner of a successful property development firm in Toronto, arcel Developers, so he found his way back (more or less) to the trade he had picked out for himself back in Lanovits, and what must have been the family business in the distant past: he became a Pacht" - a land agent. He married Rose Goldman, who was also a Holocaust survivor,, and they raised four children (Ben, Larry, Michael and Lisa). Together they have given him 10 grandchildren: if that trend continues, then in 20 generations, when Jews are still remembering Hitler as they remember Amalek today, he will have more than a million lineal descendants who will be eager to read his story.

Sam became a great benefactor of the State of Israel, Bnai B'rith and

many other philanthropic causes. He is proud of his two walls covered with awards and distinctions for his charitable works and his achievements in the business world. Sam has outlived Hitler and Stalin, as well as nearly everyone else of his generation, and obeying the mitzvah to go forth and multiply," already given the world more Pachts than Hitler managed to kill.

One Jewish world, the lovely but doomed world of Yiddishkeit, is gone for ever. Mother, not only in Eretz Israel but wherever the Polish Jews set down roots, was born and thrives. To Sam and his family, and to the Jewish people, went the final victory.



Sam, Itzi and Michael at Förstenwald, c. 1946



Michael and Sam on their way to Canada aboard the S.S. *General Heintzman*, 1948



Michael, Srulik and Sam reunited in 1989 (Photo: Toronto Sun)

## Historical Postscript

At one time, a Turkic tribe called the Khazars lived in southern Russia, with its capital somewhere near modern Armavir. In the 7 to the 9th centuries, the Khazars expanded their territory into a sizeable empire, in the process coming into contact with the Christians of Byzantium (modern Turkey), as well as with the Islamic world.

According to legend, the Khazar king was impressed by the monotheistic religions and decided that his people should adopt one of them, but he couldn't decide which one. So he talked it over with a Christian priest and an Islamic mullah. Having studied the Christian and Muslim scriptures, the king knew that both religions were rooted in Judaism, and to help him make up his mind, he asked each of the religious leaders a question. He asked the priest: "If you had to choose between Islam and Judaism, which would you prefer?" And the priest said that he would prefer Judaism. Similarly, the mullah said that he preferred Judaism to Christianity. So the vote was unanimous, and the Khazar king adopted Judaism in the name of his people.

Whatever the truth of the legend, it is an unquestionable fact that the Khazar Empire, which existed until the 10th century, became officially a Jewish state. It stretched from Uzbekistan to Ukraine, from Crimea to the Caucasus, as far north as Moscow and west to the borders of Galicia.

Without knowing it, in the course of their wartime odyssey, the Pacht brothers had toured the lands of an



ancient Jewish kingdom that had existed before Poland, Ukraine, the Soviet Union, or any of the states of Eastern Europe came into being. Although Yiddish is related to German, and the East European Jews clearly migrated to Poland from the West, starting about a century after the downfall of Khazaria, it is possible that when they reached Ukraine, they met up with some of their ancient eastern brothers, in a country that had been Jewish before it became Christian.

## Sources

Portions of this book are adapted from stories that Sam Pacht tells in the Lanovits Yizkor (memorial) book, which was originally published in Hebrew but is available in English translation at [www.iewishgen.org/Yizkor/LanovtUAanovtsy.html](http://www.iewishgen.org/Yizkor/LanovtUAanovtsy.html)

The map of Lanovits that appears at the beginning of this book, and the photograph of the mass graves that appears at the end, were taken from that website, where other photographs can also be found.

Sam told his story to Steve (Gunnar S.) Paulsson, who wrote most of the text, researched the story further, and contributed historical background. Dr Paulsson is enormously indebted to the town's historian, Ch. Lazar, for the short history of Lanovits that appears in the Yizkor book. Further information was obtained from interviews with members of Sam's family as well as with Joe Viner, a Lanovits survivor who lives in Toronto and who has also contributed to the Yizkor book.



Rose and Sam Pacht, surrounded by their children  
Michael, Lisa, Larry and Ben

## About the authors

Sam Pacht, who recounted this story, will need no introduction to readers of this book. In telling his story, at the age of 91 and about events that happened many decades before, his memory was sharp and his story-telling skills still acute, although understandably some details were beyond recall. His own words were used as far as possible in this book, supplemented by historical research.

Steve (Gunnar S.) Paulsson holds a doctoral degree in Modern History from the University of Oxford, specializing in Jewish history, particularly the Shoah in Poland. His main interest is in the attempts of Jews to survive the Holocaust.

Dr. Paulsson's major book, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw 1940-1945* (Yale University Press, 2002), has received three prizes and been translated into Polish; a German

translation is also under way. Further details, can be found at <http://www.secretcitybook.com>.

Dr. Paulsson has served as the director of the Stanley Burton Centre for Holocaust Studies at the University of Leicester in England, headed the historical team that designed the permanent Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London, England, and has taught at Leicester, Oxford, the University of Toronto and in Germany. He has authored or edited two further books on the Holocaust as well as 15 articles, two of which have been reprinted in an anthology of "the most significant articles on the Holocaust published in the past 60 years". He is the son of a Holocaust survivor.

It is hoped that this book will be the first step towards an historical study of the 300,000 Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union - often, like the Pacht brothers, one step ahead of the Nazis. Their collective story has never been told.

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