Chapter One
The Innocent Life

"Stop, Stop! Go back! I'm sure that was it."

My companions don't know why I'm so excited, but obligingly turn the car around at the first opportunity.

"Stop! Pull over here. Yes, I'm sure that's it. That *is* the house. See those steps in front—and over there on the left, there's the garden. And look! Across the street—see the tall smoke stack. That's the factory that belonged to the Nazi who owned the house. Too bad Moishe didn't come with us. I know he'd recognize it, for sure. This is amazing! This is really a miracle! We were just driving by and out of the corner of my eye, I see this house. This is where we all came together after the War-- all seven of us, even Issa, who came back all the way from Siberia. Oh, I wish Rae could be here. She won't believe that I found it, after what—almost 60 years? Isn't it something? If we hadn't just happened to come down this street to buy gas we'd never have found it."

This house is in Nowa Ruda, Poland, just a few short miles from the remnants of the Ludwigsdorf Concentration Camp, where I spent nearly three years as the unwilling guest of Hitler and his murdering henchmen. But this is a long story, so I'd better start at the beginning:

In 1915, a young Jewish couple, Abraham Szpringer and his new wife Baila, my parents, were married and started their family in Bendzin, Poland, approximately 20 miles north of Oswiencim, the ordinary little Polish town not yet known to all the world as Auschwitz.

My father was born in the small shtetl of Zharki (with about 3500 Jews), about 20 miles, as the crow flies, northeast of Bendzin. His father, Chameljoel, eked out a living as a hard-working shoemaker. It seemed that in those days, just about every other Jewish man was either a shoemaker or a tailor, and all of them were barely making ends meet. I never knew my grandmother Gitel, as she died before I was born. Grandfather remarried (at the age of 93), and died at the age of 102. Fortunately, he died shortly before the Nazis devoured Poland, so he was spared the horror that followed.

The exact year of my father's birth has always been a matter of some debate, but was somewhere around 1886. Following the custom of the time, my father spent his boyhood and teen years learning his father's trade, but, before he could go into business for himself he was hauled off into the Russian army as soon as he became of draft age, since this part of Poland was under Russian control. Although he never looked back upon his time in military service with much fondness, he often spoke with pride of the time that he paraded before the Czar. Several years after this stint in the army, he was again drafted. By this time he had married and had absolutely no interest in soldiering, so he took "French leave", and went back home. Probably because there were so many men who fled the army, and with communication not being then what is today, he simply kept a low profile, and was never caught.

Baila Golenzer's family was slightly better off, having a small, but thriving business selling shoes in Bendzin. But Mother's family suffered a tragic loss when she was only a young teen. Her mother died giving birth to her seventh child, and my grandfather died not long afterward. Mother, little more than a child herself, but being the eldest child, took on the unenviable task of raising six young siblings, one being a mere infant. Her relatives realized that this unfortunate situation could best be resolved by finding a husband for young Baila. This was easier said than done, for although she was an attractive young girl, not every young man would want to start out in life by taking on the "baggage" she would bring with her? Into this picture stepped young Abraham. Here was a poor, but healthy, young man, properly religious, but with very few career prospects, in a country where making a living was anything but easy.

Their marriage was primarily one of convenience, not the result of romance, but both were content with the arrangement. Sympathetic relatives took in the other five orphaned children, while Mother and Father raised the baby, Shloimo, as their own. In accordance with traditional Jewish custom, at her marriage, Mother shaved her head and wore a wig and scarf for the rest of her days.

Mother gave birth to eight children of her own, but sadly, three of them died in infancy. The death of each baby brought sorrow that only a mother can understand, but losing three of eight children was not unusual in those days when good medical and proper prenatal care were a distant dream. Of the surviving children, my brother Isaac (called Issa) arrived first, born in 1916, followed by Moishe in 1918, Josef (called Yossel) in 1922, me in 1926, and then in1929 they gave *me* a wonderful present, my little sister Laya, who is still my dearest friend. Uncle Shloimo was another member of the family, and I always thought of him as an older brother.

Only patches of grass cover the bumpy ground where our house once stood, where I spent my early carefree childhood. Even the charred ruins have been cleared away. But I can still picture this home, where I drew my first breath of life, as did my sister and my brothers. Our home was a small apartment on the ground floor of a large three story building, shared by maybe twenty other Jewish families living in their own small apartments. Only a few rich families in Bendzin could afford their own houses.

Our apartment was both our home and our place of business. The building fronted on the Alte Marek—the old market—which made it a great location to do business. During the weekdays Father supported his family by selling shoes, which were stored in the back room. It was a common practice for people to have their businesses in their homes in those days. He sold mostly higher quality shoes which he bought mostly from his special connections in Germany. The secret to beating his competition was to buy right. He followed the principle, "If you buy right the selling will take care of itself".

Our lifestyle was quite simple. We had no carpet, no refrigeration, not even an icebox, and no running water. Our toilet was a row of privies outside, which were shared by the entire apartment building. In place of a carpet, Mother spread burlap potato sacks on the floor for warmth and to keep dirt off the wooden floor. When the sacks got dirty, we took them outside and gave them a good shaking. In spite of the sacks, Mother spent many hours on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor with a brush, soap, and water. For her, cleanliness was, indeed, next to godliness.

Since we lived in a coal mining district, coal was cheap, so we used it for both heating and cooking. Every day Mother had to start the fire in the big cast iron cook stove with some kindling and paper, and wait until the coal was burning well before starting her cooking. The rest of our home was kept warm by a ceramic tiled heating stove. In the winter one kid or another would quite often be sent out for more coal to keep the fire hot, and a well-beaten path was trod in the snow between the back door and our coal shed outside next to the building. In those days, the idea that somebody would steal coal never entered our minds, so everyone's coal sheds were left unlocked all the time.

Our coal shed was never empty, thanks to the reliable coal-seller, who drove through the snow from house to house with his horse and wagon, and lugged heavy gunny sacks full of coal to each coal shed. In spite of having all the work he could handle in the winter, the coal-seller was rewarded with very modest payment for his hard, dirty labor, and was among the poorest of the town's citizens.

With all the factories also burning coal, it's small wonder that throughout Poland the air we breathed was full of soot and sulphur fumes, and the buildings were almost black. Undoubtedly, those who lived far from the cities were blessed with a longer life-span.

We had no water in our apartment building. There was a pump outside in the market place, from which every family had to draw its water and carry it home in buckets. We emptied the buckets into a large wooden tub on a table in the kitchen. Come washing day this meant a lot of trips to the pump, but we were lucky to live on the first floor; those living on the third floor got a lot more exercise. Every week Mother scrubbed the family's clothes on a wash board, using a scrub brush on the tough stains, thoroughly rinsed them, and then hung them on the line outside to dry, except in winter or rainy weather, when she had to haul them up to the attic to hang them. as soon as we were old enough, Laya and I were recruited to help her with this chore. Mother scrupulously ironed everything by heating the heavy cast-iron iron on the cook stove. This was a very hot job in the summer, so she tried to start as early in the morning as possible.

As a child, before the war, I never saw an automobile, anywhere. Horses, streetcars, and trains were our only means of getting around, other than walking, which we did a lot of; which helps to explain why shoemaking was such a common trade. There were some bicycles, but I never rode one; in fact I never saw a girl or woman riding one. I'm sure it was not considered proper. We had no air pollution from internal combustion engines, but by the process of internal digestion the horses created another form of pollution, and with as many horses as went up and down the street, the odor could be pretty potent. When the winter snow piled up there was a shift from horse-drawn wheeled vehicles to horse-drawn sleighs and sledges. Since the roads were never cleared, but just constantly packed, any thawing revealed an especially nasty mess.

Looking back, our life may have seemed hard, but we didn't think of it that way, it was just the way it was, and better than our grandparents who didn't even have electricity. Since we didn't have television to isolate us from each other, we were never lonely.

The best thing in those carefree years as a little girl was playing with my best friend Rutka. We loved to skip rope, toss balls, and play hop-scotch, and of course, we did a lot of giggling together. Rutka and I had more in common than just the love of playing. We were born on the exact same day: December 25, 1926. Sometimes we would just wander around the neighborhood, stopping in at Rutka's father's shoe repair shop, or visiting some of the other small shops that lined the streets of our neighborhood. I remember Baum's green grocery, Szyjowicz's bakery, Stawski's bakery, Nunberg's knockwurst and salami, Regire's pharmacy, and Gipsman's fruit and ice cream shop.

Once in a while, Mother would buy chocolate powder from Gipsman's shop, so beautiful in its small brown cans. Then came one of the great pleasures of my childhood: carefully measuring one heaping teaspoon full of powder, stirring it into a glass of cool milk, and savoring the taste as it flowed over my tongue.

Regire's pharmacy was another magical place; full of row upon row of jars full of strange looking herbs and powders, their vapors mingling to give the whole shop an exotic aroma. Inside, the patrons showed great respect, speaking in lower than normal voices, and taking very much to heart Mr. Regire's advice—Regire said this, or Regire said that. The mystique of this wonderful shop so impressed my little sister Laya that she used to dream of being a pharmacist when she grew up; but sadly, her ambitions would be just a dream.

Next door, Gayleh Rifkeleh, owned another of my favorite places, a bakery and pastry shop. Her cheese cake was legendary, and in the Summer she dispensed the greatest treasure of all--her marvelous ice cream. Gayleh (meaning redhead) was noted for her kindness and generosity, and was much beloved in the community. As her grandson Cvi Cukierman tells us:

"…My Grandmother Gayleh Rifkeleh liked to help all of the people. Every Friday, when we came to her house for Sabbath, Gayleh Rifkeleh asked us to deliver bundles of food she had prepared for people who didn't have enough to eat. She told us to leave the chicken, challah, cakes and other food by the door, not to say who it was from, just to go away, so they would not be embarrassed. This was her practice every week. And it was my job, together with the other grandchildren, to bring these packages to the houses of the needy. Before we had our own meal, my grandmother wanted the others to have their food. She gave to all who needed…"**

Also competing for my affections was Londner's candy store, which was another great place to peer through the panes of the counters and wish, although my cravings to taste his treasures were rarely satisfied.

For seafood we didn't need to leave our house. Rosenblat the fish seller always delivered his fresh fish right to our doorstep. No matter what the time of day or the season, the streets and sidewalks of our neighborhood were always bustling with Jewish people, rich, poor, and in between, hurrying about their business or engaged in endless animated talk. Of course, on the Sabbath there was absolutely no business transacted or even discussed.

I should point out that almost everyone in our neighborhood (as in all neighborhoods) sooner or later acquired a nickname. Once you were labeled, that was how you were referred to from then on. In our family the nicknames went like this (in English translation): Issa was "Chaser of gentile girls"; Moishe, the only one to wear

glasses, was “Blind man”; Yossel, who thought a while before he spoke, was “Slow thinker”; Laya, the smallest, was “Shrimp”; and my name was so degrading that I don’t want to reveal it.

As a child I very seldom strayed far from my home. The town of Dombrowa Gornicza was little more than a stone throw from Bendzin, but I never went there, not even once. Only on rare occasions, did I tag along with my elders on the streetcar to nearby Sosnowiec, to visit my aunt and uncle and my cousins.

We didn’t have a whole lot of entertainment in Bendzin, but we did have a movie theater, so if I begged hard enough, I was allowed to go to a movie. Shirley Temple was definitely my favorite. I convinced myself that we looked very much alike, even though she had curly blond hair and I had straight dark hair, and I just assumed that the two of us shared the same kind of family life and the same Jewish faith.

Bendzin has one very important historic structure which is its castle*, or the Zamek, as we called it, which crowns a rocky summit above a bend in the Czarna (Black) Przemsza River. By the time we inherited it, it was largely in ruins. But even in its degraded state, we could still sense its former grandeur as it stood guard over the wide countryside that lay at its feet.

The city itself was dusty and pretty barren of vegetation, so the Zamek and the area around it were favorite spots for city-weary Bendziners to stroll, picnic, gather chestnuts, and just relax in the soothing greenery. When Rutka and I were old enough to have a little freedom, we would run up the nearby hill to where the ruins of the Zamek stood. We loved to romp and play in the fresh air of the pleasant, green woods that surrounded it. We would kick off our shoes so we could feel the cool grass between our toes, and roll on the ground and let our fantasies run wild. The area immediately around the Zamek had been fenced in as a park, and entrance to the park cost 10 groszen, which was a lot of money for a little girl, so it was a rare treat for us to go into the park and actually play around in the ruins of the Zamek.

Throughout the time I was growing up, ominous storm clouds were gathering around me, but being a small child, I was unaware of such things as Hitler’s rise to power in nearby Germany in 1933, and of Germany’s growing overt hostility toward my people. In the 1920s and 30s in Poland, the Jewish communities flourished as they never had before. This was a rich, colorful, varied, and unique way of life that had developed in Poland for more than 500 years, and might well be expected to live on for another 500 years and more. No one could imagine that in less than 20 years from the time of my birth, less than 15% of the three and a half million Polish Jews would be alive, and that only a small handful of the survivors would be living in Poland. Today, not one Jew is living in what once was my beloved Bendzin.

The anti-Semitism that pervaded Poland, as well as the rest of Eastern Europe, didn’t allow Jews to become fully integrated into the larger society. Our culture was distinct, and we generally lived in our own communities. We spoke our own language (Yiddish), and associated mostly with other Jews. The little contact my parents had with Poles was mostly limited to business transactions. Therefore, I never really thought of myself as Polish, but as Jewish, and despite all that has happened, despite the pain and trauma, despite sometimes feeling abandoned by God, despite it all, I will always be Jewish. As a child I did go to public school, and was taught in the Polish

language—for as long as I was able to go to school, which was only until the German invasion.

The school week was followed by my favorite day, the Sabbath, which is called "Shabbat" in Hebrew, but we used the Yiddish form "Shabbes". Shabbes began Friday evening at sunset (officially when three stars were visible in the sky). A few minutes before sunset my mother would conduct the candle lighting ceremony. Covering her head with a scarf, she set two white candles on the table and lit them, then slowly waved her hands over the flames palms down, covered her eyes with her hands and recited the blessing: "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, sovereign of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the lights of Shabbat. (Amen)". Some seventy years later, every time either Laya or I perform this little ceremony we picture our mother and remember what a good person she was, and how much we loved her. After the candle lighting, my father and brothers then left for services at the Shul (the synagogue). The evening service began at sundown, and the morning service started at 8 or 9 a.m., beginning with the readings from the Psalms. These prayers were conveniently timed to give stragglers time to get to Shul, for the service proper couldn't start without a minyan present (a quorum of ten adult males). The service usually lasted at least two hours, ending around 9 p.m. Friday night, or about noon on Saturday.

Our Synagogue was strictly Orthodox, as were the vast majority of Polish synagogues which meant that the seating for men and women was separated; therefore, when we went to the synagogue, Mother, Laya, and I simply sat together and prayed, or talked to the other women nearby, but didn't take any active role in the service. We very seldom went except on the High Holidays. Nonetheless, I loved the sense of community that I always felt being in the synagogue, and in the presence of the Holy Ark. As the Ark was opened, the Torah taken out, unwrapped, and carried to the front, I always felt a warm sense of belonging and pride in being a Jew.

On Fridays, extra food had to be prepared, as no work of any kind was allowed to be done from sundown Friday evening until sundown Saturday. We couldn't so much as flip a light switch or tear a piece of paper on Shabbes. For some essential tasks, this taboo was skirted by employing a Gentile to perform the job. For example, when the weather was cold we paid a Polish gentile woman to come in to light a fire in the heating stove.

Of course, Father and my brothers wanted a warm meal when they came home from Shul after morning services, so the Polish woman again came in to warm up the food, which was already cooked the day before. When the men returned, the whole family gathered around the table to enjoy the food.

First Father would wash his hands and recite the Kiddush, the formal sanctification of the day, over a cup of wine. He would then recite the Hamotzi, the blessing of the challah, a loaf of rich white bread leavened with yeast, containing eggs, and braided before baking. From the moment of the ritual washing until after the blessing of the bread, silence reigned in the house. The bread was covered with a cloth challah cover, which was actually a double cover, symbolizing and reminding the household that according to scripture, every Friday while the Israelites were wandering in the desert, a double portion of the miraculous life sustaining food, manna, was given them so they didn't have to gather food on the Sabbath. First,

Father held the two challah loaves together with one hand and with his other hand he drew the knife across the loaves in a symbolic cutting gesture, while at the same time reciting the blessing: "Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth." In unison, the family broke the silence by answering "Amen." Each of us then broke off and ate a small piece of the challah to start the meal.

The Shabbes restrictions did allow for Mother and her daughters to serve the meal. The Shabbes noontime meal always followed the same order of courses: first fish (usually carp), followed by chopped chicken liver, soup (usually chicken noodle), and finally meat (beef, lamb, or chicken) served with carrots. My favorite dish was tshulnt: potatoes with seasoning, onions and some chicken fat, cooked in a covered pot. Our tshulnt was baked in the oven at the bakery, along with the rest of the community's tshulnts, on Friday. Some people made tshulnt with meat, barley other ingredients, and it was the total Shabbes meal. There was a common joke that a good tshulnt gave you enough heart-burn to last until the next Shabbes. The meal ended always with the singing of the Zemirot; sung aloud by the whole family. If a male guest had joined the family for dinner, Father would give him the honor to lead the family in the singing of the Zemirot.

Mealtime was leisurely, as the family talked about many things, such as events of the past week, and events planned for the coming weeks, or months. The only taboo subject was anything financial. For me, the Shabbes meal filled my heart and soul as well as my stomach, and was the best part of being Jewish.

During Pesach (Passover), special dishes were retrieved from the cupboard, which could not be used at any other time of the year. No unleavened bread could be eaten during Pesach, only matzo. One of the delightful side benefits was eating matzo brei, which Mother made by stirring matzo and beaten eggs together and frying them. Mother would scrub the house from top to bottom to assure that not one crumb of bread was left. It is easy to see that our religion was very ritual-centered, and directed every aspect of our lives. This acted as a cement that helped to bond our family together, as it did with the entire Jewish community. Repression by the outside world also created a strong common bond.

*The castle was first built of wood in the mid 13th century, but torn down and rebuilt of stone by Kazimierz the Great around 1358. A few years later, he also built a stone wall around the city for better defense. The castle was partly destroyed and rebuilt several time before its final reconstruction in 1855.

** Ann Weiss, The Last Album—Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau; The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia

Chapter Two
The Semi-Good Life

The pleasant life I enjoyed with my family continued without interruption through the mid-1930s. I was too young to be concerned about what was happening in Germany, whose border was only a few kilometers away. However, life was not so simple and beautiful for the older members of my family. The newspapers constantly reported on the escalating anti-Semitism happening just across the border. My oldest brother Issa read the paper, and sometimes I overheard him and Father having animated discussions. Politics was a major topic of conversation for my elders, but I had more important concerns, such as how to keep my fingers from freezing when I played in the snow, and how to avoid being smacked by my teacher. Sadly, my childish naïveté would not shield me from the nightmare that was looming in the West.

Around 1935 a big change for the better came to our household. My father bought a real store for selling our shoes, on Kołłantaja Street. No more did we have to operate out of the small back room in our own home, which required the customers to tramp through our living quarters in order to examine the merchandise. The new store had two rooms: a large one where all the shoes could be displayed and examined by many customers at once, and a smaller workroom in the back where my two older brothers, Moishe and Issa, now slept, making so much more room for everybody else at home. In the front of the shop were two large glass display cases facing the street. We filled one case with men's shoes and the other with women's shoes. Since the new store was located in a row of more modern looking one storey shops even the random passerby might discover the shoe store and be tempted to come in and have a look. On one side was Londner's candy store and on the other side a women's undergarment store. Quickly, we began selling more shoes. Since more money was coming in, we were able to move to a larger apartment at #14 Kołłantaja.

Our new apartment building, which housed many more families than the old building, was right across the street from the new store, which made it quite convenient to go back and forth. Our new home, on the second floor, had one less room than the old one, but the rooms were bigger, and we also had an enclosed porch. Entrance to the apartment was up a private stairwell, with its own security door at the top. The whole building shared a common attic as in the previous building, but entrance to the attic was through a different and unconnected stairwell.

The first room we entered at the top of the stairs was the unheated porch, where Yossel slept on a folding bed in the summer months. Behind the porch was the kitchen, which contained a cooking stove, a bed, several large hampers and storage cabinets, and a table. On top of one of the cabinets stood the familiar large water tub, moved over from our old apartment. This kitchen was the main gathering place in the house, where meals were prepared and eaten, books were read, songs were sung, and much of the housework was accomplished. In other words, most of our family life took place in the kitchen.

The door at the back of the kitchen led into the bedroom, the largest room of the apartment. The bedroom was divided by two large wardrobes, with Mother and Father sleeping on one side and Laya and I on the other side. Our new home was heated by a tall, ceramic tiled stove, which stood in the bedroom, and by the cooking stove in the kitchen. When we moved in we didn't have running water in the house, but carried it, bucket by bucket, from a common tap downstairs, and carried out the waste water, bucket by bucket, to the cesspool in the courtyard, just as we had in the old apartment. But before long, my always handy brother Yossel got busy and ran a pipe from the common tap to our apartment. He installed a sink and a toilet in the porch. The toilet was of the type that has the tank near the ceiling and a pull chain. No other family in whole complex had either running water or an indoor toilet in their home. Another huge improvement in our new home, for Mother, was a two-burner kerosene cook stove. Much easier to control than the old coal stove, and no more having to kindle a fire before starting her meals.

We may have had running water and a private toilet, but we, like all of our neighbors and friends, were definitely not rich. In the winter, the food supply was limited and variety was even more limited. We would buy a large sack of potatoes, which were kept frozen solid; an easy thing to do in the Polish winters. The frozen potatoes were peeled and grated, and then combined with egg, hot water, and flour, then molded into a small ball. These balls were boiled in water, and were a major staple of our winter diet, sometimes eaten just boiled, but sometimes fried with a bit of onion. This was our standard meal, which is one more reason why we cherished the Shabbes dinner.

Frugality was a way of life. I don't remember ever seeing a store that sold ready-made clothes. For dresses, Mother would buy material by the yard and take it to a dressmaker. The men had their clothes made by a tailor. There were a great many tailors in Bendzin, and they all worked very hard, but very few could be called prosperous. Unless you were the eldest son or daughter, you seldom got new clothes; you had to be happy with hand-me-downs, somewhat refurbished as necessary. My poor little sister Laya complains to this day about never having a new dress. She says, "Everything was Dora, Dora, Dora—Laya was nothing; she didn't even exist."

I believe it was sometime in 1938 that a very unpleasant, and I assume, unexpected affair shook the family. Mother's brother Shloimo who had been raised by my parents as their own child, and whom I had always thought of as my oldest brother, left the family shoe store, and opened a shoe store of his own. The galling thing about this was that he opened the store just a couple of doors down from ours, and with money which he had apparently been "borrowing" from the family business for some time. We were sure of this, as we knew he had no large supply of funds of his own. After that we all avoided Shloimo like the plague, even to the point of crossing the street to avoid walking past his store. Mother was especially hurt and embittered by his lack of loyalty; after all, she had raised him as her own child from a baby. Why he pulled this dirty trick, I don't know; perhaps he never felt that Father treated him the same as his own sons; who knows?

In 1933, I started public school in the Podlinska School. Even though Piłsudski was still alive, the Polish government had eliminated school subsidies for Jewish schools, with the result that all but the richest Jewish children throughout Poland

attended public schools, with the classes taught in Polish, rather than in Yiddish which was spoken at home. Perhaps the government hoped that the Jews would either assimilate or emigrate. In addition to reading and writing (in Polish) and arithmetic, we had PE, and singing.

All Jewish boys received extensive training in Judaism and the Hebrew language from a very young age at what was called the Kheyder. Most families, like mine, also felt that girls should also have some education in these matters; so in the afternoon, after I had been to public school, I was sent to the Bais Yaakov School in Bendzin.* Although I liked the teacher and enjoyed my time there, downstairs from the school was a big dog that barked ferociously at me every time I went up the stairs to the school; this terrified me so much that I dreaded going to school, but my parents insisted that I must go. In fact my education was so important to my parents that they hired a private tutor for me when I was too sick to go to school.

Every school day, I was up at 7 a.m. for a breakfast of milk or hot chocolate with bread and butter, and usually an egg as well. Public school lasted from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., with a break for lunch. I always took a sack lunch from home, which was usually just a bread and butter sandwich, but occasionally I was lucky enough to get my very favorite treat—salami. I walked to school every day, about 15 minutes, passing by a small city park, which boasted a few trees and a few benches. There were about 20 students in my class, almost all of them Jewish. All the kids had to wear a uniform to school--a black dress with a white collar for the girls. It seemed that I could never get my collar white enough to please my fastidious teacher, who often sent me home with strict instructions to get the collar whiter. No matter how much I scrubbed and scrubbed, and bleached and starched that collar, I never really succeeded in getting it white enough to satisfy this teacher.

Mostly the teacher conducted the class like a bunch of automatons, repeating our lessons in unison. In other words, learning was, except for math, largely a matter of rote memorization. Discipline was very, very strict. Most of the teachers were like no-nonsense drill sergeants. Since I had one bad eye, I always had to sit up front so I could see the blackboard better, and sitting on the front row made me more vulnerable. If you got caught not paying attention, or giggling, or whispering to a friend, you could expect a smart slap on the palm with a ruler. If that didn't straighten you out, the teacher embarrassed you by sitting you in the corner facing the wall for the rest of the class period. Finally, if you hadn't learned to behave yourself, they would make you sit outside the schoolhouse. The outside punishment was especially effective in winter; sitting out in the snow and wind usually persuaded the most unruly student to change his or her behavior. Whether or not it made them feel that they were in the wrong and the teacher was right is another question. Our schoolhouse was not insulated, but nonetheless, it was a lot colder outside than inside, making discipline easier to maintain in winter than in spring. Generally speaking, the warmer it got, the harder it was for the teacher to keep order in the classroom.

In my class I was one of the difficult cases, often being caught talking and, or giggling in class. One time the teacher sent me home with a letter to my parents detailing my supposed high crimes. On receiving this report, in spite of my pleadings of innocence, Father took his belt to me. I didn't even get to call my lawyer. Corporal punishment at home, and at school, was quite acceptable in those days. It was also the

norm for the father of the family to be the “King of his castle,” and my father didn’t hesitate to assert his authority. Sometimes he was quite abusive, not only to me, but to Mother and Issa, as well. That is, until one day a nearly grown-up Issa firmly told Father that he had better not lay a finger again on himself or Mother. When he whipped me this time he explained to me that the reason he punished me, was that it was part of Jewish tradition to set a good example for the rest of the world, and I should never forget that. It soon became apparent, however, that the rest of the world had no appreciation for any good behavior by me or any other Jew.

One day, part way into the second grade at school, I began to feel really sick as the day ground on. Struggling to stay upright in my chair, and hoping that I wouldn’t be called on, I barely managed to last out the day. I walked home bent over double from a pain that kept getting worse. Sometimes it was in my stomach, but sometimes it seemed to come from my back, or my legs, or from just all over my entire body.

As soon as I got home, I fell in a groaning heap on the floor beneath Mother’s horrified gaze. What followed went like this:

“Dora! What’s wrong?” Mother screamed.

“I don’t know,” I answered weakly. “I don’t feel good.”

“Where does it hurt?”

“My stomach, my back, I don’t know, everywhere.”

After tenderly putting me to bed, Mother ran out, saying, “I’m going to get Dr. Szer.”

Dr. Szer wasn’t really a doctor with a medical degree, but a “house doctor,” or “Felcher”, who visited sick people in their homes rather than having an office. He had no diploma, but was well versed in dispensing home remedies and folk wisdom. Sometimes his patients got better; sometimes they didn’t. Not really much different from the results obtained by the more expensive doctors who had offices in town. As far as I know, the town had only one real Doctor, Dr. Weinziher, and only the well-to-do could afford to see him.

Herman Szer was a man of average build, in his late thirties, sporting a narrow black mustache –of the type favored by many men of the times, including Charlie Chaplin and one Adolf Hitler. He took himself very seriously, and always dressed very neatly in a black suit and black derby, and carried a black medicine bag. Herman always charged three złotys per visit, no matter what he did. Of course, he charged whether the patient got better or not, and he was very persistent in collecting his fee.

His favorite cure, which was a popular one for that time, was to find the apparent location of the problem and then heat bainkas (small glass cups) with his little alcohol burner. When hot, he would place these heated bainkas on the afflicted area, where they would stick from suction, later leaving a red ring on the skin when they fell off. This treatment, however popular, was only rarely effective. When someone was asked if some action was helpful, the reply was often, “Helfen vi a toyten bainkas”, (“As helpful as bainkas on a dead man.”)

I was still lying miserably on my bed three hours later when the house doctor arrived. He had no instruments, but conducted his examination by looking, listening, and feeling.

"She has a very high fever. Have you used the bathroom today?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I can't."

"Give her some parsley soup without salt, and I'll check back in the morning."

After the doctor left, Mother made up the parsley soup and also some chicken soup, carefully leaving out the salt. I refused to eat either soup, but Mother forced a little bit of the chicken soup down my throat. Mother was so concerned that I might not live, that she went to the cemetery, as was the Jewish custom, and prayed at the stones of her family that they should help me survive.

The next day, by the time the doctor came around in the morning, as promised, I couldn't even talk.

"How is she?"

"She's even worse than yesterday."

"Did she eat any soup?"

"I was only able to force a couple of spoons of chicken soup down her throat."

"What would you like to eat?" the doctor asked me.

I just lay there, too weak to answer him.

"Can you talk?"

I couldn't answer him, of course.

"Well, even if you can't talk, can you shake your head yes or no?"

I shook my head, yes.

"OK," the Felcher said in triumph. "Would you like some bread?"

I shook my head no.

"How about some chicken soup?" I shook my head no again.

The doctor turned to Mother and asked. "What will she eat?"

Mother's thoughtful reply was, "If she will eat anything it would be salami, but you know, it has a lot of salt.

"Well, we have nothing to lose. We've got to get her to eat something."

Smiling, he leaned over close to me and asked, "Would you like some salami?"

This time I nodded my head, yes. Mother and the Felcher exchanged a grateful smile. It was the first time my mother had smiled since I came home from school the day before. She cut me a thin slice of salami, which I had no trouble in eating, and with the outlook much better, Dr. Szer collected his three złotys, put on his derby, and took his leave. Slowly, I began to get better, and for the rest of my life I've often said, "Salami saved my life."

It took five months for me to get well enough to go back to school. The principal told my parents that I had missed too much of the year, and they would have to hold me back and have me repeat the second grade. I couldn't bear the thought of this, and I threatened suicide, not out of any concern over my academic career, but because being held back would separate me from my best friend Rutka. Of course, I lost the battle, and from then on I was a year older than my classmates. But each day after school I continued to play with my beloved Rutka who remained loyal, despite my lower status in school.

A year or so later, my poor constitution led to another bout with sickness. This time, for some unknown reason, I was unable to walk. Dr. Szer resorted to one of his most drastic home remedies –the pigskin treatment. This involved wrapping my feet in pigskin. For Jews to resort to using anything to do with pigs, it must have had good results for many people, but for me this disgusting, sticky, and smelly treatment had no beneficial effect at all, so the family decided that their only hope was to take me on the long bus journey to the health spa town of Busko Zdroj—about fifty miles northeast of Krakow. People from all over Europe came (and still do) to Busko Zdroj to "take the waters," and parboil in the various mineral-water baths and mud baths. The hot springs waters contain sulfides, bromides, iodides, and selenium in various combinations, which are drunk, gargled, or soaked in, depending upon the affliction being treated. The doctors at the spa didn't give you free rein to just jump into the baths. You were thoroughly examined, and given a specific regimen, with exact time to be spent in each bath spelled out. I would say that the whole works were applied to me. After two weeks of this regimen, the treatments worked--I could walk again. Mother joyfully wrote back to the rest of the family about my marvelous recovery, and of our plans to return home. When I got back home, I was given a big hug and kiss from everybody in the family.

Once my health returned, Mother took me to my grandfather Szpringer's house in Zharki, only about 25 miles away as the crow flies, but a two hour bumpy ride as the bus goes. Zharki was one of a myriad of shtetls -- primarily Jewish villages—scattered

across Eastern Europe. These shtetls gave the world a unique, vibrant, colorful culture. There were also many gentiles living in these towns, and they, more or less, lived in peaceful co-existence with the Jews, until the war came.

I saw my Grandfather only a few times, and being a small child, I don't remember very much about him, except that he was very old, rail-thin, had a long white beard, and dressed in the garb of a religious Jew. When they were raising their family, Grandfather and Grandmother Gitel shared a very small, crude one-room house with their six children, including my father. Grandfather's workshop was also crowded into this room. This one room contained a bed, a table and a small cooking stove, which doubled as a room heater. This sort of cramped living condition was normal for all but the rich. By the time I visited them the children were grown, and had moved out, but Grandfather and his new wife still lived in the old house.

There was no running water in the house and of course no toilet. Water had to be pumped and carried from the well in the middle of the village, which supplied all the homes. Scattered around were various small family shops--one for bread, one for meat, and so on.

When we visited, we didn't want to crowd into Grandfather's little home, so we rented a room in another house in the forest, about a quarter of a mile away. In Zharki I loved to walk in the huge surrounding quiet, green forest and to go swimming and splashing in the wonderful pond not far from Grandfather's house. The pond was fed by a delightful spring with clean, cold drinking water. Several of my aunts and uncles lived nearby, so I always had plenty of cousins to play with. It seemed like every time I went there, I met new ones I had never seen before.

Overall, our life in Bendzin was a good life mainly because of the love and solidarity within our family, and also the sense of belonging we got from our Jewish Faith and community. Our life of frugality in rough living conditions was just something that we accepted as normal and necessary. One thing we could not accept as necessary was the anti-Semitism that had existed in Poland and throughout Eastern Europe for centuries, and which we faced on an almost daily basis. Occasionally, some Jew would be hit or even beaten up in the street for no reason, other than his being a Jew. Occasionally we were subjected to pogroms, usually minor in Bendzin, with thugs rampaging through the Jewish district, smashing store windows, looting, and beating up any Jew unfortunate enough to be caught outside. We usually had sufficient warning in time to board up the store and keep low until the storm passed. As the 1930s went on, even killings of Jews became more common. In such cases, there was less and less recourse to the law. The situation grew worse after 1935, when Jozeph Piłsudski died, and with his death, feelings of anti-Semitism that had been only barely restrained before, quickly came to the surface throughout Poland. In practicality, the Jews had no particular rights.

However, the Jews were not always passive. On one occasion in 1936 or 1937, our community got word that a large group of Poles planned to loot our stores, and would be entering Bendzin by crossing the bridge over the Czarna Przemsza River. When this group of anti-Semitic thugs arrived at the bridge, carrying big sacks in anticipation of hauling home a sizable quantity of ill-gotten booty, they were quite surprised to be confronted by a determined contingent of burly Jewish workmen. In

the ensuing scrap the Jews sent the Poles running home with their tails between their legs, many of them being knocked out and thrown off the bridge into the river.

As a child, I didn't understand all of this discrimination, but I soon learned that it was part of being a Jew. As the '30's moved toward the '40's, while changes in the laws and actions in Germany against Jews were dramatic, changes in Polish laws and practices, which steadily diminished our rights, seemed comparatively slight. They seemed to be just minor cycles in a larger eternal pattern, like a harsh or a mild winter. We had no choice but to go about our lives and hope for better times ahead.

But not all Jews were willing to sit passively, and wait for things to get better, particularly the young people. Issa had joined a Zionist organization dedicated to moving Jews to Palestine. His was just one of many activist groups in Bendzin. In fact, Bendzin was loaded with brash, brave young Jewish men and women. The state of Israel didn't exist yet--but the gathering of the Jewish people in our ancient homeland was already underway. Issa even went to a training camp in a nearby town to make preparations for the planned journey to Palestine. Unfortunately, the German invasion quashed these plans.

Like Issa, Moishe also wanted to find a new life abroad. He filled out the proper application forms and after some considerable delay, he was informed that he had permission to emigrate to Venezuela. Permission gained was a big hurdle, but that still left many problems. Who would pay for the move? What would he do when he got there? What would happen to the rest of the family who stayed behind in Poland? The net result was that the practical and logistical problems associated with a trans-Atlantic move were simply too much, and Moishe's plan to leave Poland fell through for lack of motivation and money. As events proved, of course, moving anywhere outside of Poland would have been a wise move for any Jew, at any price and effort.

*Prior to 1917 it was not common for young Jewish girls to get much schooling in Judaism. Recognizing this need, Sarah Schenirer, a seamstress in Krakow, founded the Bais Yaakov movement, which spread throughout Poland and eventually the rest of the world.

Chapter Three
Invasion

Anyone who thought about it at all, realized that the eastern part of Upper Silesia, which had been hungrily coveted by both Germany and Czechoslovakia for years, was potentially a prime target for German expansion. German influence was already well established in this region, and unless the glorious Polish army could match the Germans' tanks with their horse cavalry, there was nothing to stop the Germans from quickly adding the balance of Upper Silesia, with its riches in natural resources, to the expanding Reich. This was of course exactly what would happen, but no one, except maybe the Germans, would have believed how extremely quickly the Germans would gobble up all of Poland. The whole world was to learn a lesson in modern warfare and what "blitzkrieg" meant.

Because I wasn't politically savvy as a young girl, the war sort of sneaked up on me, but as I mentioned before, the older members of my family had kept themselves well informed about all the events that might impact our lives, so they weren't taken too much by surprise when the German invasion did come. However, nobody could comprehend, or would have believed, what diabolical plans the Nazis had for the Polish Jews. So, while the Germans were busily preparing for their invasion, Moishe, Issa, and Father were busy in Bendzin running the shoe store and trying to convince themselves that whatever was going on in Germany would stay in Germany. Mother had her hands full taking care of her family, and managing the books and paperwork of the store, because Father could neither read nor write Polish. Since the store was a small operation, Yossel was working outside the family business, in a building supply and hardware store. Laya and I were still children of 10 and 12 years of age.

Having no way of knowing when, where, or even if, the war would start, in late August Mother packed a few things, and with her daughters in hand, headed for Busko Zdroj, as she had done every year since my earlier illnesses. This was indeed a well earned vacation, where she could relax by just resting, or by strolling among the splendid flower beds and shady trees. What a relief this was from the toil of housework in the heat, noise, and dust of Bendzin. But this year our pleasant vacation was cut short by a surprise visit from Yossel. He had rushed from Bendzin to warn us that war might break out at any time, and we should come back home at once. In Busko we had no telephone, or any other news source, so we had been blissfully ignorant of events taking place in the world outside. We immediately packed and caught the next bus home, arriving there only a day or so before the Blitzkrieg struck.

As soon as the war began, Father and Mother agreed that it would be wise for the females in the family to hide out in a rural area before the war reached Bendzin. It was decided that Yossel should escort his mother and sisters to Szczekociny, a small city some 40 to 50 miles northeast of Bendzin on the banks of the Pilica River, where about half of its 5600 citizens were Jews. Mother's cousin Szmul lived there and we hoped we could stay with him until things settled down. So the four of us packed a few necessities, and climbed aboard a bus headed for, we hoped, a safer place. Issa also, along with many of his youth group, had taken off for parts unknown to the east. These young men had no desire to be drafted into the Polish army. Therefore, Moishe and Father were the only family members who stayed in Bendzin to keep an eye on

our house and the store, and to face the Germans when they showed up. So, for the first time, our family was split up, a pattern that was to be repeated many times, with the result that we soon wouldn't even know if any of the others were even alive.

We were not the only ones to flee the city; from what we understand, the majority of the Bendzin Jews also left. They reasoned, as we did, that if they found some smaller town to take refuge in, they might escape the expected bombing and shelling. Thousands upon thousands of people from towns to the west, Poles and Jews alike, carrying what they could of their possessions, came trudging through Bendzin to escape the war zone. Most of them drifted back home after things quieted down.

Upon arrival in Szczekociny, we were warmly greeted by Szmul and his wife, who were as nervous as we were about the advancing Wehrmacht (the German Armed Forces). Cousin Szmul not only had a safer location in a rural area, he also had a hiding place already prepared in the basement, with a hidden trap door for an entrance. After all, these were Jews in Poland where anti-Semitism had been a reality for hundreds of years, so they were prepared for any emergency. We weren't there more than a few days, before the rumble of artillery shells exploding could clearly be heard in the distance, like an approaching thunder storm. Although we hadn't seen any Germans yet, the explosions were definitely getting louder as the hours passed. We all agreed that it would be prudent to abandon the idea of hiding in the basement, and to move on to an even smaller village to the east. A bus was out of the question, so we hurriedly procured a horse and wagon, loaded a few provisions and ourselves aboard, and headed down the road. Even after Szczekociny had receded from view, we continued to look back, and could now observe plumes of dense black smoke ascending from what we hoped, for cousin Szmul's sake, wasn't our recent refuge. Our new destination was the village of Wodzislaw, about 17 km. as the crow flies, but many jolting hours away by horse and wagon, where cousin Szmul had some friends.

In Wodzislaw, our new hosts, although surprised by this wagon load of refugees, graciously invited us to share their modest farmhouse. The first night passed uneventfully, and no shelling could be heard. All of the children slept crosswise in the one bed. Everybody else slept on the floor. The next morning the situation grew more frightening. We had no idea what to expect; no one had seen any Germans yet--but the unmistakable announcements of their impending arrival were increasingly plain for all to hear. The explosions were getting closer and closer. Everyone in the village was nervous and frightened with no certain idea of what action to take. As there was clearly no place to escape to, there really was no choice except to stay put. Beneath most houses was a windowless cellar, which would give protection from anything but a direct hit. Most of the villagers did what we did, which was to crouch in the cellar and pray. Outside we could hear artillery shells exploding and rifle shots being fired, and then suddenly all went quiet. While we were cowering in the cellar wondering what we should do next, the answer came in the form of a motorcycle with sidecar screeching into the yard, manned by two German soldiers.

The driver turned off the engine and his boots could be heard crunching across gravel of the yard. In a loud and commanding voice the German ordered all the men in the cellar to come out with their hands up. Getting no response, the German repeated his order in a louder and more demanding voice. Having no other choice, Yossel, Szmul, and the farmer went outside and were taken away, for what seemed

like an eternity. Time passes slowly when you are sitting in the dark in a damp cellar. When Yossel came back, he told us we could all come out. He had been taken to the village square along with the other men from the village, but none of them had been harmed. Standing at the water pump in the yard was another German soldier in his neat but dusty field-gray uniform, handing out candy to the children. This soldier's courteous and non-threatening manner led us to hope that perhaps our fears of the Germans were exaggerated. Mother walked over to him and asked him what we should do. He said we should remain right where we were, and after things quieted down we could all return to our homes. He didn't seem to know himself when that might be. He and his passenger soon mounted their iron horse and roared away in a cloud of dust.

We were all anxious to go home, but since the Germans were constantly passing by in their trucks, motorcycles, and tanks, we knew we would have to stay put for a few more days. It was obvious that the Polish army wasn't doing too well. In fact, none of us ever saw a single Polish soldier in the whole time we were away from Bendzin. Eventually, we went back to Szczekociny, where we found most of the houses completely destroyed. Cousin Szmul's house was only slightly damaged, but it had been thoroughly looted. All his possessions of any value were gone. So after several more days of nervous waiting, Mother, Yossel, Laya, and I rented another horse and buggy and took the slow road back to Bendzin, to face the unknown, grim reality that would confront us.

Having a long history of being run over by armies from all directions, both Polish and Jewish citizens knew that although the war would be fought by soldiers, the civilians would be caught in the middle of the conflict, and would suffer greatly. Remembering World War I, the government issued the citizens so-called "gas masks," which were actually just a white piece of cloth. In a way, these so-called gas masks symbolized the whole situation. The masks were as ineffective and outmoded as the Polish army, which was decades behind the times.

My father wasn't a man who liked to rely on hope, but after Yossel and the female members of the household left, all that he and Moishe could do was to brace themselves for the inevitable arrival of the Germans, and then take whatever actions they could to protect our home and the precious family's store.

In Bendzin, the Polish army had arrived shortly after the invasion, and set up a few machine gun emplacements pointed down the road to Czeladz, to the west, and then blew up the bridge over the Czarna Przemsza River. Unfortunately, the Polish machine guns were all pointed the wrong way, as the Germans arrived from the south. Furthermore, the river under the bridge that they blew up could be waded across. As soon as the Germans arrived, the Polish army disappeared without firing a single shot, and so, on September 4th, 1939 the mighty forces of the Master Race vanquished little Bendzin. Polish citizens lined the streets with cheers, as the arrogant conquerors paraded down the main streets of my hometown, and girls ran out to toss flowers to them and kiss the soldiers. I'm sure that a great many of the Poles were thinking, "Now maybe we can get rid of the Goddamned Jews."

On that same day these Supermen murdered 90 helpless Jews in my father's home shtetl of Zharki.