Not All Was Lost

A Young Woman's Memoir

1939-1946

Irena Bakowska

FROM BACK COVER

Not All Was Lost: A Young Woman's Memoir, 1939-1946, is the story of how Irena Bakowska, a fifteen-year-old Jewish girl, lived, matured and became a woman through the tragic years of World War II and the Nazi Occupation.

Millions of people perished, millions were wounded, and countless property was destroyed. Yet the author affirms that not all was lost. How was it possible? To answer this question, the reader is taken on a journey through that time to Warsaw, bombed mercilessly for twenty-six days. After the Occupation began, the reader observes the daily life of the Jewish people under Nazi rule. How did they behave? How would the reader behave under such circumstances? Was it possible to remain sane while imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto? Was it possible to escape?

Readers will meet some Christian Poles who did help, and will be touched by the hardship of those slaving on German farms in Lorraine where Irena and her sister hid and labored.

It was a cruel time, a time of agony, a time of tears, a time of pain.

It was a time of heroic courage, a time of enormous endurance, a time of faith.

And life continues.

Not all was lost.

IRENA BAKOWSKA, educated as a lawyer in France, and as a librarian and lawyer in the United States, was born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1924. She was admitted to the New York State Bar in 1966, to practice before the United States Supreme Court in 1970, and to the Law Society of Upper Canada (Ontario Bar) in 1985. She spent the last two decades of her professional career as a Professor of Law and Law Librarian at Queen's University, Faculty of Law, in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

Not All Was Lost; a Young Woman's Memoir, 1939-1946 offers the historical and psychological background for the deeper understanding of God's presence and human responsibility during the Nazi regime.

God, Faith and the Holocaust; Personal Reflections, published by the author in 1977, provides additional insight for the interested reader. It postulates that the Holocaust of the European Jews should not be denied or forgotten, yet it should not weaken our faith in God. Not by our tears, not by out anger, not by our guilt – but by our constructive deeds will we redeem ourselves and honor the victims.

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Note: The author wishes to thank her relatives in France and Russia who preserved and sent her the photos dating before 1939. While she would have liked to include additional pictures, she could choose only from those miraculously saved by others, as nothing remained from her parents' home in Warsaw.

PREFACE

I have often been asked how people could live under bombardment and through the terror of an occupation. There seems to be abundant information about the inhumanity and unspeakable events under the Nazi regime, but perhaps not enough has been said about the endurance of the ordinary people during the tragic years 1939-1946.

How did people react? Did they ever smile? Did they fall in love? Could they work? Study? How did they endure each day with death so close, so real? And, finally, how did they tolerate the harsh and unsettled conditions right after the war?

In my memoir I have tried to answer these questions. For I was one of the millions who, caught in hellish circumstances, struggled to survive while trying to give some sense and dignity to their lives.

I lived through the bombing of Warsaw, the persecution and murder of Warsaw Jews before their imprisonment in the Ghetto and thereafter. I shared the misery of the Polish Christians enslaved to work for the Germans, and witnessed their confusion and hardship when liberated on French soil. And I lived in recently liberated France that had to rebuild itself. Against this historic panorama, I grew from the adolescence into womanhood.

I survived the war, but could not stay in Poland. For when I returned there in 1946, I realized that Jews were not welcome. It was my personal tragedy; I loved my country but could not stand its hostility. Disappointed and hurt, I left Poland and lost my birthplace of Warsaw for the last time. The first time was when I was imprisoned in the Ghetto, the second when I was deported for a slave work on a German farm. I lost Warsaw then because of the occupiers' cruelty.

But the final loss that occurred in liberated Poland was the most painful and most unwarranted.

In time Warsaw was rebuilt. My life too has been rebuilt, but not in Poland. Looking back many years later, I wonder about the ethnic and religious intolerance and political unrest that force people to leave their country. That loss may inflict as much pain as the onslaught of war or enemy occupation.

The present memoir, written from my new country where I have been happy and successful, is a testimony to the struggle to survive war and alienation from one's own nation without losing self-esteem, faith in humankind, and hope.

ONE
THE LAST VACATION

I was 15 years old in 1939, the year of our last vacation. That summer we went to a resort called Brok, a few hours by train east of Warsaw. The little town was on the river Bug in the middle of a forest of old pines.

We spent most of our time by the river. I did not know how to swim, so I stayed near the bank, watching the children laughing, shouting and splashing in the water. Women in brightly colored bathing suits swam out into the middle of the river, or played volleyball with men on the beach. My pretty sister Karolina, two years older than I, swam with her friends. I observed them wistfully for they did not ask me to join them.

My mother stayed with me in the shallow water, for she could not swim either. I loved being close to her -- normally she was busy with her patients or other duties. My father had not come with us, for he and my mother shared a dental practice and took their holidays in turn. He planned to start his vacation in early September, when we returned.

Our hotel had once been a large private house. Now elegant and expensive, it retained some rustic aspect: the guests used outhouses and washed in large basins in their rooms. In spite of its simplicity, it was always full of visitors, mostly from Warsaw. On that last vacation, four of us shared a large, sunny room: my mother, my sister and I, and our guest, my classmate Rena Dworecka.

Rena was such a pretty girl that I felt dull and colorless by comparison. She had shining black eyes, long black hair, cheeks as fresh and rosy as peaches, and full, red lips. An only child, she lived with her parents in a Jewish neighborhood of Warsaw. I was intimidated by her pious, bearded, yarmulke-wearing father, sensing that he looked down on me, for though we were Jewish, we were not a religious family. That did not stop Rena and me from being friends.

Although we were the same age, Rena was much more grown up. I remember that one day she fell ill and my mother kept her in bed and called a doctor. Sick as she was, Rena washed her face, arranged her hair, and put on her most beautiful nightgown. Over my mother's strong objections she also insisted on wearing lipstick, and when the doctor arrived, she looked like a beautiful oriental princess.

I was amazed by Rena's nerve. I was unable to stand up to my mother. I always obeyed her, for I respected her as much as I loved her. I was very attached to my mother and liked going for long walks with her in the forest, talking together. I found the forest at once inviting and intimidating; it excited me, made me feel slightly apprehensive, and somehow nostalgic. I felt an overwhelming power surrounding us. My mother and I were so small among the giant, centuries-old-trees, and yet we too were healthy and strong, children of the same Creator.

We had come to Brok planning to stay for two months, and the peaceful summer days flew by. But all the while strange rumors were circulating. One evening the sun was like a ball of fire and the sky was the color of blood, and the farmers predicted war was coming. There was a chill in the air; people became anxious and uncertain. We cut our vacation short and hurried back to Warsaw.

My father's big leather valises were already packed with a new wardrobe of expensive shirts, suits and shoes. He was convinced, as were many others, that the forecasts of the coming war were nothing but talk. Shortly after our return he sent his bags on ahead.

But at the last moment he decided to stay at home. His luggage was gone, never to be found. The rumors had begun to lead to chaos. No one knew when trains were coming or going, nobody was in charge. Law and order were disintegrating.

TWO
THE BOMBING OF WARSAW

Friday, September 1, 1939, was a normal working day. On the radio we heard that the Germans had crossed our western frontier. We were told not to worry; we had an army to defend us. There would be a general mobilization, and we would quickly defeat the Germans. People in Warsaw were calm.

At one o'clock in the afternoon my best friend, Bela Eisenstein, came to visit and we sat together, talking and laughing as usual. Suddenly we heard the noise of planes above us and strange, crackling sounds coming from far away. At first we thought that the noise was the sound of our pilots practising their military maneuvers. But the dry crackling became louder and louder, and more frequent.

Abruptly, the radio fell silent, the music stopped. The speaker announced in a strangled voice that the Germans were bombing Warsaw.

It was a glorious sunny day, the air fresh and crisp, the sky blue and cloudless. It meant excellent visibility for the bombers. My parents, their patients (the dental offices adjoined our apartment), Bela and I ran into our small inner hall, believing we were safer there because we were further from the windows. No one spoke. Bela and I held hands. We knew the truth but could not believe it. Warsaw, the open city, was being bombed on the first day of the war.

When the planes went away, we looked at each other in dismay and confusion. What should we do next? Some patients had rushed home; some stayed, trying to joke about the war. We reassured ourselves: "We are not alone, the French and the English are our allies. They will come to our rescue and the Germans will soon be defeated." We were certain that the Allies would counterattack and that Poland would survive.

We were all in a state of shock. In spite of all the rumors in August, the war had caught us by surprise. The bombing came

upon us without warning. We believed that Hitler would not dare to attack Poland. The martial music playing on the radio to keep everyone's spirits up was often interrupted by appeals to England and France for help and by the sirens warning of the German air raids. In fact, the warning had already come with the German planes flying over Warsaw. They began to bomb the city, one neighborhood after another. While one part of Warsaw was turned into hell, another was still leading something of a normal life.

In the stores there was a sudden run on candles, and soon there was a run on food as well. Storekeepers hid their merchandise, anticipating that supplies would be cut off and prices would rise. Anything that was not perishable was hoarded away. As people began stocking up and storing, prices skyrocketed in a day.

This situation led to a good deal of distress for my grandmother, Grunia Achlomov Dobrejcer, who had a philanthropic nature, and had made a habit of lending money without interest to several neighborhood merchants. They lived from one week to the next, returning money only to borrow it again. My grandmother's modest, short-term loans had helped them to survive. But on September 2, when my grandmother went to buy her daily bread rolls, the storekeeper -- a poor woman who had borrowed money from her for years -- now seemed to barely recognize her, and refused to sell her anything. Perhaps the storekeeper was ashamed to charge her the new, inflationary price, for she sent my grandmother away with no bread.

I was furious, but my mother smiled, and told me that I was young and still had a great deal to learn. Then she went to the store herself, put a large sum of money on the counter, and returned home with the fresh rolls for my grandmother.

Bombs now dropped in the city from morning until evening. The beautiful weather favored the Germans; for the whole month of September, the sky was blue and cloudless, and the nights were clear, lit by millions of shining stars. There was no anti-aircraft defense to chase the bombers away; the unprotected

city was laid open for the German pilots to bomb as much as they desired. We suffered countless casualties.

Many people volunteered to defend their neighborhoods. Tadek Luka, the son of our neighbors, stayed on the roof during bombing raids to protect it in case of fire. Tadek was soon joined by Samuel Rotein. They were handsome, one with blond hair, the other chestnut. Tadek was Christian, Samuel was Jewish. On the roof they had only a shovel, a hatchet, and their bare hands to fight any fire. And despite the fact that they were in clear view, they stayed up there day after day, the German planes roaring furiously over their heads -- so low that the pilots could see them and laugh. But I admired the two young men. Their heroic example helped me to endure the continuous bombardment.

Every day the city's defenses became more disorganized. Toward the end of the first week of war, the government fled into exile abroad. A rumor spread that the fall of Warsaw was imminent, and that all able-bodied men should leave the city, because the Germans would kill them first.

That created even greater chaos and panic. Thousands and thousands of men decided to run away toward Eastern Poland. Since the Germans were our neighbors to the west and to the north, and had occupied Czechoslovakia to the south, only the eastern part of Poland seemed beyond their reach.

We hoped that our defenses could be reorganized in the East, or at least that the Germans would not advance that far. But the massive exodus was not an organized regrouping of able-bodied men, preparing to fight for their country: this was a desperate flight of a panic-stricken population. Every man ran for himself, trying to keep it a secret from his neighbor. The sad irony was that they would escape the Germans only to be trapped by the Russians -- for on September 17, Russia invaded Eastern Poland.

Nobody had foreseen such a calamity.

The exodus began toward the end of the first week of September and continued uninterrupted all night. The men ran totally unprotected, often without money and only with the shirts on their backs. My father refused to leave us, for he knew that for us, Jews, the situation was equally dangerous for men,

women and children. I was happy that he stayed with us. But many men did leave their families, and their wives stayed behind with the children -- although they were afraid to be left alone, often without financial resources. Other women decided to take their children and go with their husbands, entire families fleeing. The roads were crowded with people and their meager possessions, completely exposed under cloudless skies. And the German planes pursued them relentlessly. They dropped bombs on the crowds and chased the defenseless men, women, and children with machine-guns. The roads were covered in blood and the corpses of people and horses.

Among those who escaped was my father's younger brother, my uncle Henryk. A bachelor, he left with the others, and miraculously, he survived the war.

On September 9 the German army began to encircle the unfortified city of Warsaw. During the siege, when the fall of Poland seemed imminent, prison guards feared that the invaders would shoot all prisoners, and so they let them escape. This was only one of the many humane acts of solidarity that prevailed among us at that time. The policemen became more friendly too, and once they even distributed bread freely in our neighborhood. But sadly, the good feelings did not last. The crushing defeat of our country confused and stifled us.

At first our neighborhood was not badly damaged. During lulls in the bombing we were able to walk in the streets. I saw Polish soldiers and their horses stationed near Krasinski Gardens, out in the open, a perfect target for the bombs. I shuddered when I saw all those young faces and helpless animals. Our government had already left and so had most of the generals and other officers. The soldiers stayed behind, waiting for orders which were never to come. A few days later these men and their horses were turned into a bloody mass of corpses.

Despite the confusion and destruction, people showed great courage in many ways. Under the siege, the hospitals stopped functioning. Emergency operations were done without anesthetic in the less-exposed rooms of the ruined buildings. In

basements, in washrooms or storage rooms, or in any place that was thought safe from machine-gunning or shelling, brave doctors and nurses worked to help people wounded by shrapnel and bombs. And, in spite of the relentless bombardments, people continued to carry their injured friends or relatives to these ruins that only recently had been well-run hospitals.

Other were brave in more private ways. My sister's classmate, Inka Szekman, who was studying English, read Shakespeare in the original during the catastrophic days of September, seldom leaving her apartment for shelter. She was not afraid; she simply said that she had no time to waste. Inka had great courage and the power of concentration of a scholar. But she never became one, for she was murdered during the occupation.

Yet, in the midst of the great bravery and the despair of people running from street to street among the burning houses seeking shelter, others robbed the empty apartments, stealing money and jewelry. In their lust for looting, they blessed the opportunity given to them by the war and the bombing. It was as if the social system had been turned upside down. The banks were closed, never to reopen. People carried money in their pockets. Many lost homes and fortunes in a day and became completely destitute. An elderly woman, once a famous actress, carried her whole fortune -- all her jewels -- with her, hidden in a pillow, when she fled from her burning home. When she finally found a shelter, she sat down in a corner, exhausted, and fell asleep. But when she woke up, her pillow and her fortune were gone. Somebody got rich; she became a beggar.

We did not have real bomb shelters so we had to improvise with the cellars of our buildings. They had floors of beaten earth, and were damp, unheated, and without electricity. In the evenings the planes went away, and we could leave and get some fresh air. The streets were full of couples embracing, whispering softly, holding hands. They seemed to ignore the world around them, living only in the present. Before the war, such public behavior had been unthinkable. I realized then that danger and the nearness of death were powerful catalysts of love. I, too, felt a new strange urge inside; I longed for a boyfriend, as I never had before.

Toward the end of the third week of bombing, we lost hope of saving Poland. Yet Warsaw still continued its resistance, and people obeyed the confused orders coming from the mayor of the city, the civil defense militia, and some military authorities.

One day, for instance, an order was given for long trenches to be dug down the middle of the streets. These trenches prevented what little traffic there was from moving, for by this time the fire engines, the ambulances, the taxis, and tramways had ceased operating. And now the pedestrians too would be stopped. Still, men dug arduously for a few days until common sense or fatigue prevailed.

So life continued, while so many were burned alive or suffocated under the debris of their houses. Sometimes the survivors tried to dig out those who were trapped, but there was no equipment and no help. Slowly, painfully, people died under tons of rubble.

The bombing of our city terrified my eighty-two-year old grandmother. She kept repeating to reassure herself, "I have survived many wars and upheavals, thus I will survive this catastrophe as well."

I was touched by her courage and will to live. I knew how many tragedies and tumults she had witnessed, how often her own life was disturbed. She was a very courageous lady. Orphaned at an early age, she got married at sixteen to Aaron Dobrejcer, a teacher of Russian language and literature. Helen, my mother was their eighth and last child.

My grandmother told me how, during the Russo-Turkish wars (1854-56 and 1877-78) there were outbreaks of cholera in the city of Mogilev, where she was born. She saw people dying like flies, an ugly death caused by continuous diarrhea and dehydration. Her memory of this calamity was so vivid that she shivered any time she heard the word "cholera" -- a common swearword in Poland.

Millions of Russians suffered because of the troubled political and economic situation in their country, but my grandparents had to endure as well the severe anti-Semitism. Finally, around 1900, the family was forced to leave Mogilev.

They moved to Warsaw, then under Russian occupation. Five older children returned to Russia to continue their studies. Then the Russian Revolution of 1917-1922 closed the frontier between Russia and Poland. My grandmother would never see again her five children, who lived thereafter in the Soviet Union.

My grandparents, and later my parents, resided on Pawia Street, in the middle of Warsaw's Jewish section. My grandmother, a widow since 1917, lived with us and led a quiet, orderly life until the war began. The most upsetting thing for her became the regular exodus to the cellar. She had arthritis and a weak heart, but she still had to follow us down the stairs at the sound of an alarm or planes roaring overhead.

We were fortunate because our apartment building was still intact, and so was our cellar, but it quickly became crowded. Whole areas of Warsaw were destroyed. Frightened and homeless people left their devastated neighborhoods, seeking shelter wherever they could find it, while others, not yet homeless, ran out of their own homes believing they would be safer elsewhere. Our cellar, like many others, became so crowded that it was hard to find a place to sit. Some sat on the floor or even stood up all day. It was difficult to breathe.

Many refugees tried to bring some of their belongings with them, but space was precious and there was simply no room for luggage. A kind of militia of voluntary watchmen formed to forbid the entry of big bundles to make sure that there was room for as many people as possible. People who had already lost everything were forced to leave behind the few things they carried with them, before they were permitted to enter.

My grandmother's health was deteriorating. My parents placed a narrow camp bed in the cellar to let her rest a little. She sat there most of the time, sad and resigned, and no one dared to push her out even though her bed took up precious space. When the bombing raids ended, she returned with us to our apartment on the first floor. But later, once the sirens began sounding all day long, it became impossible for her to run back and forth, and my parents accepted the kind invitation of our neighbors on the ground floor, Mr. and Mrs. Luka (the parents of the brave Tadek), to stay with them. We believed, as everyone did then,

that being one floor down would keep us away from the bombs, and safer.

In 1939 the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, fell on September 14. Our neighborhood was subjected to intense and vicious bombing until Yom Kippur -- the Day of Atonement -- on September 23. On September 15, the house next to ours was hit by a powerful one-ton bomb. Our house shook like a leaf for several seconds, and everyone ran away from the windows. The air was filled with smoke and dust, and the thunder of the falling building mingled with human cries. Nothing was left but rubble and an enormous hole in the ground.

By the time this happened, my grandmother had become so weak that she was permanently installed in a bed in the Lukas' home, and my mother, assisted by Karolina or me, stayed near her day and night. When the house next door was crumbling, she was lying in bed, feverish, delirious and unable to run; but she sensed danger and was afraid. She thought the warm, bright sunlight coming into the room through the window near her bed was fire, which would burn our house down. She was very frightened. I sat on the bed with her, my arms around her shoulders, trying to explain and telling her not to be afraid. I held her tightly, repeating softly, "Don't be afraid, Grandmother, this is only sunshine."

She didn't understand me but took my hand and asked me not to abandon her in the fire. Everyone else was hiding in the corridor, and we were alone. I had no desire to leave my grandmother to run for shelter. I felt as if I were nailed to her bed, my arms around her. I accepted the thought of dying with her. It was my first close experience with death. And in the presence of imminent danger I became calm and resigned, accepting the inevitable end. I would not run away to save my life. That was it. It was my fate to die with my grandmother -- yet under normal circumstances, when the danger of death was far away, the mere thought of dying would have terrified me. I did not want to die.

A few minutes later we heard the planes flying away, and the room was filled with people returning from the corridor. My mother cried and kissed me, regretting that she had left her mother. She proclaimed me a heroine, though I did not at all feel

heroic. I simply loved my grandmother very much and could not abandon her when she was so frightened and helpless.

As time went on, the uninterrupted raids forced us to stay in our cellar all day. At night the bombing stopped, but we were afraid to leave. My parents carried my ailing grandmother from the Lukas' apartment to her narrow camp bed in the basement. The four people who had been occupying it in the meantime did not want to leave. It is true, they were exhausted, but my 82-year-old grandmother could barely stand. They finally moved just enough to give her space to sit down. She sat still, said nothing and did not complain. After a few minutes, these neighbors, who had pretended not to recognize my grandmother, changed their minds and silently moved off. She lay down, and was never able to stand up again. We stood near her and tried to comfort her.

After a few days in the damp, dark, overcrowded cellar, my grandmother developed pneumonia and rapidly went into a coma. A woman doctor gave her some injections, but they did not help. I remember my grandmother's hands moving feverishly, touching the edge of her cover as if she wanted to stand up and leave the bed. But only her hands could move, and her eyes remained closed. The air was oppressive, the light from the candles feeble. Grunia Dobrejcer, whose long life -- filled with love -- had been devoted to her duties, lay on her camp bed among strangers, more and more of whom were constantly arriving.

But although she was in a public place, she was surrounded by her family: my parents, her son Monos, my sister and I. We were always near her and never left her alone. She lingered in her coma for four days, during which the bombing increased. We could hear the German planes roaring above our heads, and shrapnel hitting houses and people. Warsaw had been encircled and the city was under artillery fire.

My grandmother died on September 24, 1939. My mother's grief overcame her fears about the bombs and our safety. Although Mr. and Mrs. Luka invited us to return to their home, my mother wanted to give her mother the last rites and brought the body to our own apartment. The news of Grunia Dobrejcer's

death spread quickly. Amidst incessant bombing, no electricity and no running water, two Jewish women offered to wash, clean, and prepare the corpse for burial.

Our kitchen was occupied by men hammering together the coffin from unpainted wood. Jewish law forbids an elaborate casket, and burial is always in a plain, wooden box, with the body wrapped in a shroud. I was in tears because there was no name on the coffin. I was given a piece of wood and, with my friend Bela's help, I found my school paintbox, painted my grandmother's name, and made sure that the wood was well fastened to the coffin.

My mother had another problem. The cemeteries on the outskirts of town (Okopowa Street), Jewish and Christian, side by side though separate, were under direct shelling. The Germans were stationed right behind them. As it was impossible to go near, people were being buried in the middle of the city, anywhere the ground was not covered with asphalt: under trees, in a square, in a garden. But my mother was determined to bury her mother in the Jewish cemetery at any price. She found two cemetery workers and made them swear they would bury the casket at the Jewish cemetery and nowhere else. The men agreed, and took the money and the casket. My mother felt she could be at peace about her mother's burial.

The day my grandmother died, yet another tragedy occurred. My parents' friend, Janka Elterman, who stayed with us during the bombing, lost her sister, Olga, and her sixteen-year-old niece Nelly when a bomb fell on their building. Their mutilated bodies were buried beneath the rubble. Janka's father, Mr. Tran, was seriously injured. Only her eighty-three-year-old mother, Mrs. Tran, remained unhurt. Although she had just lost her daughter and granddaughter in one blow, her first thought was still to save her husband's life. Even in these tragic circumstances, money helped. The Trans were very wealthy, and Mrs. Tran had money in her handbag. She hired a strong, muscular man to help get her injured husband to our apartment. It was a long walk under heavy bombardment, but at last they arrived safely at our home.

While her husband was being cared for by my father, Mrs. Tran sat in our cellar on my grandmother's camp bed, clutching

her handbag. My parents asked me to watch over her. Exhausted, she fell asleep. When her handbag fell to the floor, I bent to pick it up. She opened her eyes, did not recognize me, and grabbed her handbag, looking at me with terror and anger. I tried to introduce myself, but she was afraid and backed away. I was shocked. I had never experienced such fear and hostility directed at me. There seemed to be nothing I could do for her.

Mr. Tran succumbed to his wounds and died three months later, in December 1939.

On September 26, the bombing became sporadic. Then it stopped. We heard that the Germans would use poison gas if Warsaw did not surrender. We had no gas masks.

Warsaw surrendered officially on September 28, 1939, and on September 30, German soldiers entered the city. The surrender had at least ended the bombing, so people were free to leave their shelters in search of water and news of their friends and relatives. The news was nearly always bad.

In our own building, a young mother and her baby had moved in with the janitor's family, the Trojanowskis, on the ground floor. The baby, Ada, was pretty and healthy with blue eyes and soft white skin. Although the mother was weak and hungry, somehow she could still nurse the baby. Then the milk stopped. Ada cried. She was given sweetened water, but she needed milk and there was none. The stores were closed and food had disappeared. She cried more quietly. Then her crying ended. Little Ada died one day before the bombing stopped.

Tragedy also struck the family of my father's friend, Dr. Jerzy êliwa. His brother-in-law, Andrew Mrozik, after a week of bombing, had complained of a strange noise vibrating in his head. His two girls, one seven years old, another three, were hungry and crying. They had no milk for days. His wife, Ewa, tried to comfort him. But on the sixteenth day of the bombing, while Ewa was asleep in a corner of the cellar, Andrew took the children upstairs and shot them dead, then shot himself. Ewa survived the bombing and the war. It was she who told us what had happened to Andrew.

Two weeks after the bombing ended, my mother found the men she had hired to bury my grandmother. When she asked them to show her the grave, they looked uneasy and embarrassed. They took my mother to the Jewish cemetery, pointed at a spot, and said, "This is your mother's grave." They were lying, and Mother knew it. They hadn't carried the casket to the cemetery, but had buried it in an anonymous grave that would never be found. But my mother, being an atheist, comforted herself that no matter where her mother was buried, she had returned back to the earth and to nature. She felt she had honored her mother by trying to bury her properly.

My mother put up a monument in the place that was supposed to be Grunia Dobrejcer's grave, and for a year wore a black veil attached to her hat, as was the custom. Although not herself a religious woman, she tried to do what her mother would have wanted her to do -- simply because she loved her. She respected her wishes and beliefs. I admired my mother for that.

So began our life under German occupation, while we were still crying for people lost during the bombing.

THREE

THE BEGINNING OF THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

October 1939. The sky was clear and bright, but the weather was cold. The streets little by little became crowded again as the bewildered, frightened and hungry people left their cellars, looking in disbelief at the ruin and destruction all around them.

I walked along Pawia Street with my mother. She wore a black coat as well as a black hat with a veil, to show that she was in mourning. Pale, she looked sad and dignified. Friends greeted us warmly, waiting for her to explain for whom she was in mourning. They regretted the death of my grandmother, "that good and generous lady," but they were glad that my father, my sister and I survived. They marveled that our home remained intact. We were very fortunate indeed, because not only was our building not destroyed but my parents' dental establishment remained untouched. Of course, they had lost all their savings since our banks ceased to exist along with our government and all its institutions. But my parents would be able to continue to practise their profession, which meant we would have some food, and coal to heat our apartment.

Warsaw was still without water or electricity. People went to the outskirts of the city to fetch water in buckets, and we lit our homes first with candles, then with improvised carbide lamps that filled the air with an offensive smell. Water was restored eventually, then electricity; but only for a short time -- it was cut off again periodically for weeks or months. The streets remained unlit at night, except for the carbide lamps attached to the street vendors' pushcarts.

The Gestapo visited our building early in October, less than a week after the Germans' entry into Warsaw. We were still in shock from the bombing; the streets were full of rubble and smelled of burning and decay. Our apartment remained dark and unheated.

The Germans appeared in our courtyard screaming for Mr. Lewin, the Jewish owner of the building. Finding him in his apartment on the third floor, they punched and shoved him and ordered him to follow them to their waiting car in the courtyard. But while still in his apartment, he struggled free, ran to a window and jumped out into the courtyard, three floors down. He lay there, bleeding heavily and moaning from pain, while the Germans stood by, uncertain what to do with the dying man. My father, in his white dentist's coat, took advantage of their momentary confusion and ran quickly to our neighbor to inject an analgesic. But it was too late to help him. The Germans went away, leaving the body behind.

That was my first encounter with the Germans close up. But I had seen them before, at a distance, when they entered Warsaw. Our friend Mrs. Luka had asked me to go with her to see the aftermath of the bombing. We could hardly believe our eyes: Warsaw lay in ruins. On both sides of the streets were tons of rubble and debris from demolished houses, still warm from the smoldering fires. The air stank of smoke and decay. And the Germans marched endlessly in columns of four or five down the middle of the streets, heads high and triumphant. We did not know what was more painful, to see this victorious march or to look at our destroyed, bleeding city. We held hands, trying to hold back our tears and comfort each other. But Mrs. Luka was a Christian, and did not feel that her life was endangered right now. I, on the other hand, felt deep anguish and a sense of impending doom.

Other people who had ventured out told us that in some parts of Warsaw, the Germans would throw bread into the hungry crowds and watch the people fight for it like dogs. The Germans laughed and took pictures.

Our own apartment had lost its former warmth and security. Grandmother was no longer with us, and the rooms felt empty without her. My parents decided to reduce our living quarters to only one room; we could not afford to heat the whole apartment, and we had to save our candles. We were cramped -- my parents, my sister and I -- but we felt reassured by each other's presence. However, my parents kept mostly to their dental

office, even though they had only a few patients. They closed their second office, and later moved the dental laboratory into the kitchen, which was at least slightly heated.

The sky was safe again, but the streets had become dangerous: the Germans were everywhere. From the beginning, they openly and systematically robbed our neighborhood. Not only were businesses emptied but private apartments as well. Big trucks arrived every day on Pawia Street, and men were rounded up and forced to load them with furniture, until they were filled to capacity. There was no escape from these raids, for the Germans were methodical in emptying one apartment after another. They took furniture, rugs, and paintings; they demanded money, jewelry, and gold. Those trying to hide their valuables did so at the risk of their lives; if discovered, they would either be shot on the spot or taken away, never to return.

One family from our street, the Rosens, hid their gold coins inside the hollow bars of their child's crib, certain the Germans would not disturb the baby. But they ordered the child taken out and carried off the crib, and the Rosens lost all their savings. Their business had already been confiscated, all their furniture was gone, and there was no work to be found. The family was doomed and died later of starvation.

Although the Germans were well organized in emptying the apartments, who got robbed was still a matter of luck. It was like an epidemic: your neighbor might get sick and die, and you might live. My mother feared her new dining-room furniture would be taken any day. If we had known what was to come, we would not have let ourselves worry about mere furniture. But we did not know, and so my mother looked sadly at her new possessions. When she was newly married in 1921, she and my father were poor, and had to use my grandmother's massive and unfashionable furniture. My mother wanted a new suite, and could have afforded one many years earlier, yet she did not know how to go about it without hurting her mother's feelings. But one day, in the early spring of 1939, she made up her mind, hired a reputable cabinetmaker, and ordered a round table, eight comfortable chairs and a sideboard, all in expensive wood. The suite was delivered in June. My mother was overjoyed at finally having the fine furniture she had dreamt of. But now it was

October 1939, and the Germans could come and take it all at any moment. My parents tried to damage the sideboard by pouring boiling water on it to make it look less attractive, but the finish was unharmed. Then, my parents' friend Janina Zenkowska, a Christian Pole, visited us and offered to take the furniture, and keep it until the end of the war.

Later, much later, Warsaw went through the bloody uprising of 1944, when from August 1 until October 3 almost all the city was burned and destroyed. But Janina and her husband had moved out of the city before the uprising, taking with them all their belongings, including our furniture. When my parents, exhausted and impoverished, met Janina after the war, she was delighted to tell them that our dining-room suite had escaped the destruction and was waiting to be returned.

In the same month of October 1939 radios were confiscated. First, the Germans ordered the registration of all radios; next day they demanded their delivery to the police stations. We had two radios, but my father had registered only one. Yet he was afraid to keep the second one for fear of being shot if it was discovered. He took his better, second radio into the kitchen, put it on the floor and chopped it to pieces with an axe. Hardly believing my eyes, I watched my father, my peaceful orderly father, committing a deliberate act of vandalism. Whack, whack, and the beautiful frame of good quality wood was disintegrating. Whack, whack, and the expensive radio was gone.

Still we were not entirely cut off from world news; some heroic men and women listened to clandestine radios, and edited, printed, and distributed underground bulletins and circulars.

Most people spent October looking for shelter, food or jobs, or searching for relatives and friends. My father too went out to find out how his friends had fared. He met his colleague Mr. Szmit, whose apartment and dental office were destroyed and who was looking desperately for a place to live for himself and his wife. Their only daughter and her husband had gone to the East with the early September exodus. My father invited the Szmits to share our apartment. They were about fifteen years

older than my parents, who respected them socially and professionally as their seniors.

When our dining room furniture had been sent to safety, the waiting room furniture was moved into the dining room; and so the former waiting room was now standing empty. It had two windows and a balcony overlooking Pawia Street -- before the war it had served as a salon to receive our guests on holidays. My parents offered this large, sunny room to Mr. and Mrs. Szmit because it was the nicest in the apartment, and also for another good reason: a porcelain stove was built into the wall between this room and ours, which made it possible to heat both rooms at once, saving precious coal and wood. We shared the kitchen and the bathroom. Of course, everybody considered it a temporary arrangement, for we hoped that the war would end soon.

Except for that illusion, my parents were very realistic about our situation. They understood that we had to reduce our living standard to the minimum necessary in order to survive and get by. They did not expect to live a decent pre-war life. The Szmits also tried to be brave about their new situation. Mrs. Szmit kept to her room, but Mr. Szmit was more outgoing. He became my friend, and we talked often during the long winter months.

My parents tried to hide their fears from Karolina and me, for they wanted to encourage us to keep busy and to lead as normal lives as possible. So as soon as the bombing stopped, I ran to see my school on 12 Rymarska Street, about 25 minutes walk from our home. The school was gone, only a mountain of rubble. I walked around it and saw that the adjoining building, which housed the elementary school, was sound. It was possible that we would have our classes there when the schools reopened, and I returned several times to the ruins, hoping to find a notice telling us when and where classes would commence. But the Germans ordered all the schools closed in occupied Poland, even the elementary schools. Later, elementary schools for Polish Christian children were reopened, but not ours. The Jews were considered to be filthy people, who should not be allowed to congregate anywhere at all, because they would spread disease. I felt I had been robbed of my school as other people had been robbed of their homes and property.

Our new situation affected Karolina as well, for my seventeen-year-old sister wanted to continue her studies at the university. Only the previous spring she had passed her final exams and graduated from the lyceum. She was granted her Certificate of Maturity, or Matura, an important step in every student's life. The certificate was an official recognition of intellectual maturity and fitness for a higher academic career. Those who had Matura could, as of right, enter the university. Those who had failed were devastated -- every year the newspapers reported cases of suicides by students who were unsuccessful in passing the difficult exams.

In September, Karolina would have enrolled in medical school. She had wanted to become a medical doctor ever since her childhood. However, all her efforts to be admitted to a Polish university had proved fruitless because she was Jewish. Father had promised to send her to Paris in the fall of 1939, but now her dreams for the future came to an abrupt end.

My education was very important to me as well. I had just been granted the newly introduced Junior or Small Matura, which marked the end of the four-year-secondary gymnasium education. I planned to attend the lyceum for two more years to obtain the regular Matura and the entrance to the university.

The memories of my school days in pre-war Warsaw are vivid, especially the daily walks to and from Rymarska Street. We did not have school buses to take us, so we always walked, in fair weather or foul, even in the long, cold Polish winters. In particular, I remember those fine, spring days when I was thirteen or fourteen, walking home from school in the afternoon. I left Rymarska Street for the wide and elegant Leszno Street, where well-dressed ladies filled the sidewalks, and horse-driven droshkies competed with trams on the street. On the right, a garden surrounded a majestic church.

I was daydreaming, thinking about Deanna Durbin, the star of my favorite American films. She was sixteen, a radiant girl who sang and danced, and was never seen at school. Nothing could be further from my rigid schedule of classes, home, homework. But that was supposed to change when I grew up. So I could not wait, I dreamed to be sixteen.

But then I turned right down Karmelicka Street and the bustle and noise of commerce interrupted my dreams. After a while I reached Wièzienna Street, paved with cobblestones like our own Pawia Street. The large metal-rimmed wheels of the horse-drawn country wagons resounded against the cobblestones. Children played and shouted all around. The horses, waiting for their masters, neighed and stamped their hooves. It was chaotic and smelly, full of life. On one side of the street was the tall brick wall of the infamous Pawiak prison; on the other was a row of rental buildings. I liked to look in the stores along the street: a cheap jewelry and watch-repair store, and a restaurant displaying food in the window. The smell of garlic drew me toward the restaurant, but I was too young to go in. I had to be home when our dinner was served at 3 p.m.

Quite often, one poor merchant, a tall Jew with a beard and wearing a czapka, a black, peaked cap, displayed Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew books on an old blanket spread on the sidewalk. I liked to look at them, and if I was with my mother or father, he would be respectful and let me look. When I was alone, he chased me away as if I were a dog.

But in the first days of October 1939, those streets were quite deserted. The traffic lights were dead, there were no droshkies, no taxis, private cars, trams or buses in view. All my life I had taken the street lights, the traffic, the noise, and the people for granted; now I felt as if the city had become a vast countryside where people could walk across the roads in any direction they pleased.

I was so happy to see my best friend, Bela Eisenstein, again. She, her parents and two sisters had survived the bombing, but their third-floor apartment on 34 Pawia Street had been destroyed. A corner apartment, it had been cut in half by a bomb and lay open to the street. The family went to live with another tenant, where they were lucky enough to have two rooms for the five of them. A small, primitive iron stove was installed in the middle of one room. No one complained: they were together, except for the oldest sister's husband, who had joined the march eastward early in September, never to be seen again.

At fifteen, Bela was the youngest child. Her father, now old and tired, had been an accountant with an English firm, the Ceylon Tea Company. But in August 1939, its director had left Poland and the company had been dissolved. Mr. Eisenstein and Bela's two sisters, Ala and Pola, who had also worked there, were out of a job. Fortunately, before the director left, he distributed the company's stock of tea as compensation to the senior employees. Bela's father's share remained intact in the remaining part of their apartment. The price rose astronomically during the Occupation, and the family was able to survive, thanks to their stock of tea. It was considered more precious than gold, and they sold it by the gram.

Bela and I missed the daily routine of going to school. Life seemed empty. Before the war, my parents required me only to be a good student, read and study. I was not interested in sports or music, and I had never had a date. All my life it had been drilled into me that I had to get the Matura and attend university.

It was Bela who, toward the end of November, told me about the underground courses. Small groups of students were being formed to study in private homes, each group limited to four or five students, so as not to attract attention. If the group was that small, it was easier to pretend to be celebrating a birthday or just having a social visit if the Germans noticed us.

My parents were willing to support me in joining such a group. They wanted me to continue my education, and insisted that I should ignore the danger and uncertainty, which we could neither resist nor escape. "Irene, try to be brave and optimistic," my mother said. "There is a chance that we will survive. You understand that it is only a matter of time, because the Germans will certainly lose the war at the end." And my father affirmed, "Remember, my daughters, that we cannot give up. We must carry on our passive resistance, no matter what the outcome."

In fact, I was very privileged to be able to think about my education. Masses of people were already hungry and destitute, deprived of everything, uncertain even of surviving the day. There were others, though, who lived in their pre-war apartments, who were still able to work, or who had some treasure hidden away -- gold, diamonds, tea, coffee, sugar, or

other goods which could be successfully concealed. The children of such relatively well-off people were looking for useful occupations, and many of my friends wanted to learn hairdressing, dressmaking, or corset-making. We had always appreciated manual skills in Poland, and craft work was popular.

People who had relatives overseas dreamed of joining them after the war. English-speaking countries were most favored, and knowledge of the English language most sought after. Thus, the starving teachers had an opportunity to earn some money while their students dreamed of one day leaving our doomed country.

I joined a study group in late 1939 together with Bela and two other enthusiastic girls, Mirka Nusbaum and Ania Mïczacka. We met in Mirka's two-room apartment, while her parents went out during our lessons to leave more room for us. We sat around a table on which we put cards or domino pieces -- our masquerade as a social gathering should the Germans knock at the door. Luckily, they never did, for it was entirely possible that once in the apartment, the Germans would have arrested us without even asking what we were gathered for. We were playing with fire, but somehow nothing happened to us.

I loved our classes and our teachers, all distinguished scholars with doctoral degrees. We developed a close relationship, very different from what we had known at our pre-war school, where the teachers stood at a distant podium.

Our biology teacher was Dr. Cygowa, a dignified woman of high scholarly standing. Her husband, Dr. Cygie, taught us mathematics and physics. They had earned their doctorates in Montpellier, France, where they had first met and fallen in love. Now they were in their late fifties, both with gray hair, blue eyes, and a gentle, innocent look like two big trusting children. They were devoted to each other, laughed easily, and treated us, their students, as friends and equals. Dr. Cygowa liked to talk about France, which she idealized, perhaps because she spent the best years of her life there. In those days it was very unusual for a woman to obtain a doctoral degree, and Dr. Cygowa was quite rightly very proud of hers. We met sometimes at the Cygies' apartment in a fine old Polish neighborhood not far from

Jerozolimskie Avenue. There was no elevator, and we had to walk up four flights of stairs to arrive at a sunny, pleasant apartment of two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. Green plants were everywhere, and the apartment seemed big enough for the husband and wife who had no children. Both the Cygies were pale and had black shadows around their eyes from malnutrition. One day, Dr. Cygowa opened a pre-war box of delicious milk chocolate candies called "Krówki" and offered them to us. The four of us each took one candy; we could not resist. She looked sadly at us, and said that we were young and needed more calories than we were getting. She assured us that she was not hungry.

Gustawa Jarecka, who taught us Polish and French literature, was not from our old school. She was a young woman writer who had published a number of novels before the war. Her beautiful blonde hair was arranged in two braids on the top of her head, and her blue eyes shone with intelligence and integrity. She had heard no news from her husband since he had run off toward the East, and she and her two young children lived with her mother. They supported themselves by selling their belongings, one item after another. She was the first writer I had ever met, and I was very impressed by her.

French was taught by the enthusiastic Franka Magidson, while chemistry was taught by her less vivacious but competent sister, Ida Magidson.

My favorite subject was history, taught by our excellent Dr. Brams. It was a new experience for me to sit at the same table with him, listening to him talk in a calm and composed voice about other times and other wars. He gave the impression of being in control, of understanding everything, and for an hour we could forget the hell surrounding us. When we asked him to explain our situation, and what the future would be, he assured us that the Germans would lose the war, and he did not believe the rumors that Hitler would attack Russia. He considered that too stupid even for the insane dictator. For once, I dared to disagree with my teacher, although I said nothing to him. Young as I was, I knew that Hitler was irresponsible and incapable of any logic. The war he had started was cruel and senseless, and one could expect anything from people who let their predatory

and demonic instincts loose with such brute force. But our professor was too sophisticated, too civilized, to accept this. He predicted that after the war, Europe would unite and Germany, France and the other European countries would become friends and partners. There would be a United Federation of European States. I thought that he was dreaming.

One day I asked him timidly whether he had considered how to survive the Occupation, before the Germans became peaceful and worthy European citizens. He was not used to being asked direct questions by his students, and his answer was vague and condescending. I was disappointed. I felt the grip of death close by me and did not care about the future of Europe. I wanted to survive but did not know how. However, this topic was not in our curriculum; we were supposed to follow a regular one and to continue "normal" studies in the hope that the Germans would not have time to kill us all.

Much later, in 1942, Professor Brams, his wife and their young son left the Ghetto and found a place to live in the Polish or Aryan part of Warsaw. He and his wife each assumed a different name, which many people believed was safer in case one partner was caught or recognized as a Jew. The other partner could then get away without being traced. However, the woman superintendent of the building where the Brams lived found it most suspicious that such high-class people would live together unmarried, and even have a child out of wedlock, as at that time common-law marriage was considered a sin. The superintendent suspected the Brams of being Jewish and denounced them, and Dr. Brams, his wife, and their young son were murdered.

I learned about this tragedy after the war. I suspect that Dr. Brams believed, till the last moment of his life, that Germany would one day become an honorable European partner.

Refugees began to arrive in Warsaw in October 1939, right after the Occupation began. Either they were victims of the first resettlements or, having lost all their possessions during the hostilities, they hoped to find more opportunities in Warsaw. The Jews believed they would be safer there with so many others around.

Thus, one day in December, Mrs. Laufer, a dentist from a small town, arrived in our building. She rented one room in a pre-war tenant's apartment for herself, her unemployed husband and their son, Abram, a 30-year-old army veteran. Destitute, she hoped to earn some money by practising dentistry in their single room.

My parents had a lease guaranteeing them the exclusive right to practise their profession in our apartment building, and the arrival of this woman dentist provoked an angry outburst from some of our neighbors. They were concerned that my parents would lose patients to her, and advised my parents to exercise their rights and force her to leave. My mother smiled sadly and answered, "Don't you understand that we are all doomed? This is no time to worry about money and fight for patients. All I want is to buy bread for my family and survive, as does my refugee colleague. May she live in peace, here among us." My mother realized, though others did not, what was happening. Pre-war mentality and aspirations did not change rapidly, and many people continued to believe that we could maintain a style of life similar to what we had before the Occupation. My mother sensed the danger over our heads; she had a foreboding of the coming catastrophe.

Mrs. Laufer was a distinguished and cultured woman with gentle manners and a soft voice. Probably in her fifties, she looked tired and much older, her once-beautiful face wrinkled and her hair gone gray. Somehow, she did not establish much of a practice. She had very few patients, and she and her family often went hungry.

My mother sent her food from time to time -- not enough, unfortunately. We ourselves had little food, and my parents shared it with family and friends. None of us ate enough to completely satisfy our hunger, but at least we were not starving.

I often carried food across our courtyard to Mrs. Laufer. One day when I went there I found her sitting wrapped in sweaters in her clean but barely heated room, visibly uneasy at accepting the food. I tried to tell her with my eyes that it was all right. Her warm, brown eyes answered me that she was grateful. She smiled and asked me to thank my mother. We talked little; she was aware that I felt embarrassed. She told me, "Remember,

Irene, your parents are good people. Be proud of them. Should you ever in your life experience hardship, may the thought of your parents' kind hearts sustain you."

Her son had been mobilized on the first day of September 1939 and had tried in vain to reach his regiment. The Germans were advancing fast and the Polish soldiers could not stop them, though they fought desperately and with enormous courage. The lack of communication between units soon degenerated into complete chaos. Abram was wandering around the countryside looking for his unit when he met some soldiers whose regiment had been destroyed. They were trying to reorganize, and they gave Abram a uniform and ordered him to join them. The group was hiding in the forest trying to contact the Polish army when they fell into combat with some Germans. The Poles were heroic, but the Germans were stronger. Abram was hit and fell, and two dead soldiers fell on top of him. The Germans left the corpses behind, and Abram's life was saved when he was discovered by Polish farmers. The local doctor cut off his injured leg without anesthetic and Abram was hidden in the village until he could walk with a stick and rejoin his parents. Only then was a primitive wooden leg fastened to his knee. Shortly afterwards, Abram and his parents were expelled with the other Jews from their town, and came to Warsaw.

I met Abram when he was talking with our Polish janitor at the entrance to the building. He liked to stand there during the safer moments when the Germans were not around. I knew that he was only 30 years old, but he looked like an old man. Abram was very gallant to me -- maybe I reminded him of a girl with whom he had danced, talked and laughed in his younger years, when he had his two legs, a home and a future. And all I could say was, "Hello, how are you? Nice to meet you." I was shy, as he was, and we did not talk much.

Karolina and I had outgrown our winter coats, and my mother decided to have new ones made for us. An unemployed tailor was eager to do the job, and found nice material for us, but we needed fur for our collars because Polish winters were rigorous. There was a chance to find some fur pieces on Franciszkaîska Street, a commercial artery full of Jewish

businesses which somehow had not been destroyed during the bombing. My mother asked me to come with her.

We had been told that the Germans were regularly robbing the Jewish stores on this street. What happened was this: the German trucks arrived daily, early in the morning and the stores were meticulously emptied, one by one. The Jews were rounded up and, with whips, forced to load the trucks. The screaming Germans, in a real or simulated frenzy, kicked and whipped the men, forcing them to empty the seized stores faster. They could not stop to rest for a moment, and their faces sweating, their eyes downcast, the Jews held back screams of pain and continued loading the trucks.

But the district housed such an enormous wealth of merchandise that the Germans could not steal it all at once, so they worked on a few blocks at a time, concentrating on their immediate prey and leaving the rest of the street alone. The owners of the robbed stores stood by, looking helplessly at their misfortune, while the other merchants tried desperately to sell their goods before the trucks reached them. It was no use keeping a store closed, because the Germans would smash and destroy it completely. That was why the stores were open: the merchants hoped to at least save their premises from damage, and perhaps sell some goods before they were looted.

We were afraid to go there, but we had no choice and when we did go, we saw huge German trucks parked in front of the Jewish businesses. Some occupied the whole building, housing textile, fur, or other merchandise on the upper floors, while their main floor stores were transacting wholesale and retail business. But even these main floor stores looked like warehouses overflowing with the merchandise and displaying it in bulk in their windows. They attracted the out-of-town as well as the Warsaw clients because of the quality and quantity of the merchandise and "no frill" prices.

Before the war, the district was bustling with life, the buyers anticipating good buys, the merchants good sales. People were hopeful and excited -- money was changing hands. Now the atmosphere was full of terror, grief, and chaos. The street was swarming with Poles from Warsaw and the countryside, often hostile and arrogant, trying to buy goods for next to nothing.

The honest people transacted business quietly, politely and often thanked the merchants for the bargain. But the situation attracted masses of profiteers who taunted the merchants ready to sell their possessions for a piece of bread.

We were careful to stay away from the Germans and their trucks, and my mother and I were greeted warmly by many merchants standing in front of their as-yet-unlooted stores. They were her pre-war patients. We easily found two fur pieces and my mother asked the price. The merchant looked sadly at his former dentist and said: "Please pay me ten złotys [Polish currency, roughly the equivalent of two dollars]. That is less than one third of its value. I know that the Germans will be here soon, but I cannot give it to you for nothing, I have a family to feed."

Just then two Polish men entered the store, grabbed as many large fur pieces as they could hold, shouting, "Jew, give it to us for one złoty! If you don't 'sell' to us now, you'll give it to the Germans for nothing tomorrow."

The merchant pleaded, "How can you do that to me? Please..." But the men continued gleefully, "Jew, give it to us, give it, your time is up!"

My mother paid the merchant requested price and shook hands with him. For a long moment they looked at each other, the merchant's face flushed and his eyes shining from tears, anger, or fever.

In this lawless, chaotic, hopeless time, the American Joint Distribution Committee (known as Joint or AJDC), stood by the Jews and helped us in many ways. The Joint is a Jewish non-profit organization, akin to the Christian Caritas and dedicated to helping needy Jews around the world. In this connection, I will mention only what happened to our relative, Józef Lautenberg. Before the war he was a prosperous manufacturer of men's shirts. My father's sister, Rosa, married Józef's son, Ignacy, who was chief cutter and associate manager of his family business. Józef Lautenberg rightly feared that his merchandise would be stolen by the Germans, so he delivered it to the Joint representative and received a voucher for its value to be redeemed after the war. We had no idea what the Joint did with the merchandise, and giving away goods in exchange for a piece

of paper seemed even more chancy that keeping them. But as it turned out Mr. Lautenberg was wise. After the war we met in Paris, where the Joint had its headquarters. Mr. Lautenberg, an old man then, asked me to assist him, and we went together to the Joint office, where he actually did receive money for his voucher.

The apartment buildings in our neighborhood were at that time very different from the ones we see today in North America. Each block was only three or four floors high, built around a rectangular courtyard. In the wealthier areas, these courtyards had trees and grass, but in our neighborhood they were simply covered with asphalt, cobblestones, or plain beaten earth. A large, tunnel-like entrance, opened by a high, ornamental iron gate, led from the courtyard out into the street. This entrance was used by trucks and pedestrians alike.

Every apartment building had a superintendent, who was respected by everybody, especially the children. He was in charge of the courtyard, responsible for keeping it clean and secure. He also closed the big iron gate at eleven o'clock every night, and any tenant who came in later had to ring for him to open it and tip him for his trouble.

When I was a child there had been grass and some beautiful, old trees in the center of our courtyard, surrounded by an iron fence. Although children could not play inside the garden, which was kept locked, they were always playing around it. But I was forbidden to join them, and used to watch wistfully from our apartment windows.

A few years before the war, the green square had been replaced by a huge garage for the trucks of the factory which occupied the whole left wing of our residential section, together with an adjoining smaller courtyard. A wooden gate led from one courtyard to the other. The factory was called Opus, a company that must have employed more than 100 people, working in dry cleaning and the manufacture of men's shirts.

Almost all the windows in our large front apartment overlooked the treeless expanse of Pawia Street and the bare brick wall of the Pawiak prison. Although our view was only of the prison guards' dining room, it was considered more

fashionable to have an apartment with windows looking out on to the street, and so these apartments were more expensive. But on the other side of our apartment, the dining room and laboratory windows looked on to the courtyard, which was often even noisier than the street. Air conditioning was then unheard of, and the windows were kept open almost constantly, unless the bitter cold made it impossible. We lived among active, energetic people; the familiar sounds of meat and onions being chopped for dinner, or the laughter and voices of the children playing, still echo in my ears.

But after September 1939, all that had changed. For one thing, a curfew was imposed. Instead of the superintendent closing the gate at eleven p.m., the Germans ordered it closed at nine and sometimes even as early as seven or eight o'clock. At one time, as a special punishment, the curfew was at five o'clock.

In addition, the Opus factory lost its Jewish owners. It was Mr. Lewin, the head of the family business, who had committed suicide by jumping out of the window while he was being arrested by the Germans. The whole property was expropriated shortly thereafter, and a German administrator was put in charge. Fortunately, he was a decent, friendly person. He became my father's patient, and proved himself to be a good and honest man.

In fact, he made it possible for my father to render a great service to Dr. Blumstein, the director of the Gymnasium and Lyceum that Karolina and I had attended. Dr. Blumstein and his wife were refined people -- they both held doctoral degrees, he in mathematics, she in biology. But now they felt helpless, for they had lost their apartment during the bombing, and, like many others, had difficulty finding a new one, since so much of Warsaw had been destroyed. But in October there was an apartment vacant in our building, and my father used his influence with the German administrator to let the Blumsteins move into it. The administrator could easily have demanded a huge amount of money for this favor, but he did not ask for a single zíoty. And my father was glad to be able to help Dr. Blumstein -- who proved later unworthy of his kindness.

At this time, Mr. Luka, our friend and neighbor from the ground floor, was arrested for being a Christian foreman in a

Jewish business. Terror gripped us. Our building was no more a safe place, and different noises came from our courtyard. Every day now, trucks would arrive to load and remove the merchandise and machinery which the Germans were systematically stealing from the Opus factory. They arrived every morning between eight and nine o'clock and stayed until noon. We were usually warned of their approach by the Germans' yelling and the clamor of their heavy trucks. Everyone ran inside, kept away from windows, and was careful not to attract the Germans' attention. But often the trucks arrived so abruptly that they took us by surprise, and some tenants would be caught outside and rounded up, together with any unlucky Jewish men who were nearby. The men were forced to carry heavy bundles or even machines to the awaiting trucks. Many of these men were elderly, some were sick or handicapped, and all were unaccustomed to this kind of work. They were insulted, pushed and mercilessly beaten. We could hear people screaming with pain, whips lashing, the Germans shouting, their dogs barking. The blood left on the ground spoke of the daily horrors in our courtyard.

The Germans always succeeded in rounding up people, for the streets were crowded. People had to attend to their daily occupations: going to work, selling their meager merchandise on the streets, transacting business there, or simply moving from one place to another. They could not afford the luxury of staying locked in their apartments all the time.

One day Adam Birman was caught by the Germans in our courtyard. He was a dental mechanic who did freelance work for several dentists, and visited my father's laboratory regularly to use his equipment. But this time he was grabbed by the soldiers as he was approaching the building. He was pushed and punched in the face, but when the Germans turned away to beat up someone else, Adam, who knew the building well, ran up the back stairway and rang at the kitchen entrance of our apartment. Our maid, Stefa, opened the door. She saw his face covered with blood and his whole body shaking while he wiped his shoes on the doormat. Yet she shut the door in his face, saying, "Wipe your dirty shoes before you enter my clean kitchen." Adam, in

terror of being discovered by the Germans at any moment, rang and rang. We came to see what the commotion was about, and my mother opened the door and brought him quickly into the apartment, where he was able to take some tea in our room and rest until the Germans had gone. My father dressed his bloody face, while Stefa looked on and said nothing.

Later, my mother asked her gently, "Stefa, why were you so cruel to Adam? It is not like you to be nasty and hurt people." Stefa repeated, "I worked hard to wash the kitchen floor, and Adam's shoes were dirty, dirty." Angry and miserable, she added, "Adam should have shown more respect for my work and more consideration for me." She never apologized to Adam nor showed any remorse for her cruel behavior, but she never repeated it either.

Stefa's own story was a sad one. Her father owned a very small piece of land but in order to support his family he had to work for a rich neighbor for long hours every day. And still the family lived in abject poverty. Her mother contracted tuberculosis and died when Stefa, her oldest child, was only nine years old. Her father soon remarried. Stefa's stepmother was supposed to work their piece of land, do the housework, and take care of the children. She always seemed ill-natured, abused Stefa verbally and physically, and expected her to do work beyond her age. Stefa went to school from time to time, and though she could recognize the alphabet, she could not read. She learned to sign her name, but that was all the education she received.

When her brothers and sisters grew up, Stefa's help was no longer needed, and she was forced to leave her father's house and her village. Unmarried and humiliated, called a good-for-nothing old maid at 22, she came to Warsaw in search of work, and found a job as a maid. Her successive employers had been harsh and demanding and paid her very little.

Stefa Redke came to live with us in 1935. She seemed contented in our home. And in 1940, she was a single woman of 33, pretty, graceful and vivacious. (She was also very healthy, and the monastic life of a maid must have been hard on her.)

I liked Stefa and tried to understand why she had so badly mistreated Adam. I asked myself, did Stefa resent the fact that he was a bachelor who didn't seem to be interested in courting her?

When Adam lost his father at the age of four, his heavy-set mother had to support herself, her daughter and her son by selling bagels from a basket on Smocza Street. She sent Adam, her younger child, to the Orphans Home for Jewish Children, known as Korczak's Orphanage. It was a modern, secular orphanage directed by its founder, Dr. Janusz Korczak, who understood the plight of all mistreated children and was totally devoted to his orphans. They found warmth and security in the care they received from the "good doctor" and his assistant Stefania WilczyÆska, who were always available to comfort, listen to and advise their pupils.

The children were taught that they had a right to be understood and respected, and that no one had a right to abuse them. They were also taught that they should be just and honest, forgiving toward themselves and toward others. The democratic rule was applied by the institution of the children's self-government and their court of peers. Children pronounced verdicts -- some acted as prosecutors, others as judges or advocates. Physical punishment was never applied in the orphanage. This innovative and advanced approach to the children's education was introduced by Dr. Korczak himself, who was a medical doctor, as well as an exceptional pedagogue and defender of children's rights through his lectures and writings. "Janusz Korczak" was at first only a pen name of Hersh/Henryk Goldszmit, born on July 22, 1878, into a Jewish middle-class family. But when his writing and his ideas became known, people referred to him exclusively under his pen name. Even though he no longer used his father's name, Dr. Korczak never denied his origin nor renounced being a Jew. And later, much later, he accepted deportation from the Warsaw Ghetto to die with his children.

Adam was happy at the orphanage and would have liked to stay there as long as possible. But when the youngsters reached 15 or 16, Dr. Korczak tried to help them to learn a trade and become independent. My father agreed to take on Adam as an apprentice, and he and Adam became friends. Once he was

trained as a dental mechanic, Adam devoted his life to supporting his mother and older sister, who was slightly retarded. The three of them lived in a small apartment on Pawia Street, not far from us. Adam never married.

Since the beginning of the war, everyone's main preoccupation had been to buy and stock up on anything that could be preserved. People were acquiring as many non-perishable goods as they could afford, and so merchandise was disappearing rapidly from the stores and prices were skyrocketing. There was a panic run on most staples: flour, sugar, salt, lard, soap, candles and matches. Of course, Stefa had free access to our store of fresh and stocked food: she was one of us, we trusted her, and she was in charge of the kitchen. Yet, one day, we discovered that she was stealing our food. She was not hungry, and did not have any family in the city to give it to; she simply gave away our food, offering it to casual acquaintances.

Why? My mother never confronted her. It was too dangerous to antagonize a Christian girl. She could easily bring disaster to a Jewish family. She could report us to the Gestapo for any real or imaginary non-compliance with the hundreds of orders issued by the Germans. Non-compliance always brought the most brutal punishment: instant death or deportation.

The Germans continued their plundering of Jewish homes, and one day somebody ran in to warn us that two Germans were on the way to check our apartment, looking for the gold which they believed all dentists had. The most incriminating things in our possession at that time were two long bars of ordinary soap; the Germans could use it as pretext to accuse us, the Jews, of the crime of hoarding and speculating. It was too late to leave the apartment and dispose of the soap. What could we do? My parents looked helplessly at each other. Stefa spoke up. "Let me pretend to be sick and to sit on my bed and conceal the soap. The Germans will not touch me because I am not Jewish." My mother objected, "Stefa, you cannot do it. You will be punished if the soap is discovered." "No, I will not, I will say that it is mine and I am a Christian," said Stefa.

We heard heavy footsteps and shouting on the stairway, and the Germans entered the apartment. My father had just the time

to leave by the back door. My mother confronted the "visitors." They were big, heavy and loud, and demanded gold. My mother, who spoke German fluently, explained that my father made teeth with porcelain rather than gold. She showed them the "Made in Germany" oven for baking porcelain teeth. Her blonde hair, her professional white coat, and the medical character of the establishment must have impressed the brutes. They didn't touch anything but went from room to room looking around. In the kitchen, they saw Stefa sitting on her bed and loudly asked, "What are you, a pretty Aryan girl, doing in a Jewish home?" Stefa said nothing. They shook their heads with disapproval but did not touch her or her bed. After a few minutes, which seemed longer than eternity to us all, they finally left. Stefa sat on her bed a while longer before she took the soap and gave it back to my mother. She looked like a child proudly presenting her parents with a good school report.

A year later, just before the Ghetto was sealed, the Christians were ordered to leave our area. Stefa cried and refused to leave us. She had no place to go, she said. "You see, once back in my village, without a job, I would be deported for slave work in Germany."

My mother explained, "Please, Stefa, try to understand. You must leave because we are doomed, but you have a chance to survive."

Stefa became angry, "You don't like me, you want get rid of me, you are rejecting me after all these years of faithful service!" My mother took Stefa's hands into her own, dried her tears, and tried to calm her. Finally, she persuaded Stefa that she must leave us, and gave her some food to take with her. Stefa was crying as I embraced her. I never saw her again, though my mother sent her a message after the war. We heard that she was still living in her village, but she never came to see us.

Adam and his family did not survive. They were murdered by the Germans in 1942.

At the beginning of the Occupation, word spread among the Jewish population that we should go into mourning. Women should wear their hair naturally and not go to hairdressers. We should not wear hats, but cover our heads with modest scarves.

Movie houses and theaters were closed, while private dances, musical recitals, and artistic performances were all considered improper. We were to lead very subdued lives, and everyone should stay at home as much as possible. We were a nation grieving.

But the consequences of this were very serious. The craftsmen and artists had no jobs and no bread. Business premises stayed empty. Meanwhile our population swelled daily with masses of Jewish refugees desperately looking for jobs. So for the sake of economic survival, the directives were changed. People were instead encouraged to spend money, for today we were alive, and tomorrow we might be dead. It was selfish to keep money; we should share it with others by consuming. It became proper and laudable to use the services of hairdressers, dressmakers, tailors, dentists, doctors, teachers, and artisans or craftsmen.

My mother, now forty-three, returned to her pre-war hairdresser and once again became a steady client. The owner of the salon allowed two refugees to work there, even though there were not enough clients for the three of them. My mother noticed one of them looking at her with imploring eyes. He wanted her to let him take care of her hair. So on her next visit, when the owner was busy with another client, my mother let the refugee cut her hair.

She came home quite upset, unhappy with the result. I reproached her for pitying the man so, for thinking more of the hairdresser's needs than of her own. "Please promise me you'll never let this man touch your hair again," I said. But the next time she went to the salon and the same refugee hairdresser jumped up to meet her, his sad eyes pleading. She let him set her hair again; and although he was not as good as her pre-war hairdresser, she remained his client for as long as he stayed there. She told me, "Try to understand, Irene, the owner of the salon has enough clients to survive, while the refugee, Mr. Paul, has not. He has a family to support and they are hungry."

The days were gloomy during our first winter under the Occupation, but the evenings were worse. The apartment was cold. The electricity had been cut again, and we could afford

only one small candle to light the room we lived in. After the curfew, neighbors from our building dropped in to exchange news and talk over the horrors of the day. The passing of a car on the street made everyone shiver, for it could only be the Germans bringing brutal beatings or death. Conversation would stop abruptly. We would listen. When the car did not stop at our building, we were safe for the moment. And so we lived in constant terror, every day bringing more disastrous news.

People grasped at every possible shred of hope, and many thought again of escaping to the eastern part of Poland, now occupied by the Russians. But since September we had no news about the people who had left Warsaw. Many were certainly killed, either by German bombs and machine-guns, or by bandits who would murder them for no more than a watch or a few zíotys. And the women and children who had stayed behind, hungry and without resources, were still waiting for their husbands and fathers to return and protect them. Yet these men, a short while ago responsible heads of families, had become -- if they were still alive -- only powerless Jews.

Some of the refugees to the East decided to return home because they were starving. Things got worse when the Russians began deportations to Siberia. The refugees coming back thought of their pre-war life: they had no idea of the horrors perpetrated by the Germans, much less of the atrocities that still awaited us. Some could have survived in the East or escaped across the borders to Lithuania or Romania, yet they returned. They did so out of a sense of duty, believing that they would be able to protect their families. Some young people were unable to endure the separation, and chose to live or die with their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters.

But not many returned, and the clandestine exodus toward the East continued. It was a perilous journey; for one thing, the road became increasingly difficult as the Germans and their collaborators got better organized and watched every possible route. They were looking for fugitives, and those they caught were often murdered after a cruel beating. Men and women were subjected to brutal anal searches for money, diamonds, jewelry, and gold. Women's genitals were searched as well. Some people were caught, beaten and robbed, but left alive and

forced to retrace their steps back to occupied territory. Still people ran for the East, and not all were caught.

When the Ghetto was sealed on December 16, 1940, escape to the East became practically impossible. Nonetheless, people continued to try. All hope was lost on June 22, 1941, when the Germans attacked Russia and closed the border completely.

The somber months under the Occupation dragged on. Our family continued to sleep, eat and live in one room. So far we had succeeded in heating it, albeit slightly, along with the adjoining Szmits' room, as well as one dental office and the kitchen we shared with the Szmits. Although many pre-war patients, Jewish and non-Jewish, remained faithful to my parents, our waiting room was now often empty. People had no money; they rarely visited dentists. Wearing their coats and boots, our patients waited in the chilly room, once the bright dining room where we'd had so many joyous meals and gatherings.

Sunday was usually a day off. Thus, I was very surprised when, one Sunday, my father announced somewhat mysteriously that he was expecting two patients. He asked me to stay out of the waiting room. Such an unexpected and bizarre order aroused my curiosity and I kept watch. My father let a woman in and left the room, leaving her alone, waiting. But for whom, or what? I opened the door slightly. She saw me, said my name, and asked me to come in. I barely recognized her as Mrs. Szwedowa, pale, thin, and wearing a widow's black veil. Once a wealthy lady, she was now impoverished, and looked very tired, her hands shaking.

Before the war, she had been an elegant and gracious woman with a beautiful apartment and many friends. But when she lost her husband, her only son, Józio, rebelled. He rejected middle-class values and became politically active. Shortly after the Germans entered Warsaw, he and his friend, Zosia Zatorska, a Jewish girl also from a well-to-do family, decided to convert the German soldiers into peaceful human beings. They distributed anti-war pamphlets appealing to the soldiers' reason and humanity. The two young Jewish idealists, about twenty years old at the time, believed they could convince Germans to

change their allegiance -- simply by explaining to them the truth about Hitler and the Nazis.

Józio and Zosia were arrested, held in Pawiak prison, and tortured. They tried to commit suicide by swallowing pieces of glass, but to no avail. They were saved, and tortured again.

Like many other mothers, Mrs. Szwedowa spent long hours in cold, windy or rainy weather in front of the entrance to the Pawiak prison. They all brought parcels for their loved ones, even though there was no assurance that the prisoners would ever receive them.

Mrs. Szwedowa had been a patient of my parents for a long time, and knew that a number of Polish prison guards were also among their patients. She asked my father to help her meet a prison guard, a good and honest Polish patriot, who could give her news about her only son and maybe take a parcel to him. Certainly many pre-war Polish guards hated the Nazis and were sympathetic to the Polish prisoners, regardless of their religion. But the guards wanted to keep their jobs and, like everybody else, they were afraid of the Germans. In addition, any one of them might have chosen to became a spy for the Germans. It was very risky to approach a guard.

Nevertheless, my father decided to help Mrs. Szwedowa. He asked a guard, whom he believed to be trustworthy, to come for his dental appointment on Sunday. Mrs. Szwedowa waited for the man alone in our cold waiting room. He came, they talked. He was very understanding. Did she pay him? It is possible, but I truly don't know. Mrs. Szwedowa saw him again, but that was the last time she came to our home. Shortly afterwards, her son and Zosia Zatorska were murdered.

On December 1, 1939, the order was issued that all Jews must wear armbands on their right arm, a blue Star of David on white material. It was a strange feeling to be singled out this way. Many people said that they were proud to wear the star because they were proud of being Jews; yet I felt ambivalent about this "distinction." My parents, who were not religious, had brought me up simply as a Pole and we had many Polish friends. But because of the morbid, virulent anti-Semitism that prevailed in Poland at that time, I could not feel entirely Polish.

In one sense the distinctive armband freed me from any hesitation as to my identity; the problem of who I was had been solved for me. But on the other hand, I felt humiliated and deprived of my right to be treated equally with other Poles. I felt that by wearing the armband I was officially classified as different and inferior. We Jews were branded as animals for slaughter, banished from society, targeted for persecution. We were hated. We were not sure how people would treat us on the street, even though we could still walk freely anywhere in Warsaw. The armbands showed clearly that we were Jews, and that gave free license to anyone to mistreat us.

One day Karolina and I were walking on Marszaíkowska Street, a main commercial artery. It was a bright, sunny April day. The air, though still cold, was fresh and invigorating, and it was a pleasure to walk, with the worst of the winter months behind us.

Suddenly we heard an uproar and saw a crowd in front of us. For a moment we did not understand what was going on. Then we heard people saying that the commotion was being caused by "the sick woman." She was already well known in Warsaw, a big strong woman who was insane, or pretended to be. She was fulfilling her "divine" mission of destroying and mutilating Jewish faces. She wore special gloves with sharp iron nails, and acting in a kind of frenzy, aimed her hands at her victim's face.

Karolina and I were now in the center of an hysterical crowd that was shouting and encouraging the woman, enjoying the anticipation of a bloody spectacle. Surrounded by this hostile crowd, we could not run back without drawing attention to ourselves. We could be caught by the friends of the "sick" woman. Then we saw an empty droshky passing near us. It stopped and the coachman gestured to us, saying, "Young ladies, climb up quickly and cover your armbands." We covered ourselves with our scarves and got into the droshky. It moved forward, slowly, because of the crowd. As we passed the woman, she turned in our direction and I saw for a moment her distorted, feverish face.

I felt faint, and for a moment my heart stopped beating. Then somebody shouted: "Look — here is a Jew!" She turned in

the direction of a man wearing the armband with the Star of David and grabbed him. As our droshky moved on, I heard the victim's screams and people shouting and laughing.

On another occasion, a lovely, sunny day in June 1940, I took my nine-year-old cousin, Jadwiga, to Saxony Gardens for a walk. I longed to get away from our crowded, smelly neighborhood and see again trees and green grass -- I'd almost forgotten how they looked. And Jadwiga, my Uncle Monos' only child, would also enjoy some fresh air and tranquility and a view of the flowers and trees. Her family lived on Pawia Street, only a few blocks away from us, and though my Aunt Freda was very protective of her young daughter, she gave me permission to take her for a walk. Jadwiga did not wear an armband because children up to 10 or 12 years old were exempted. I covered mine by holding a coat over my right arm. I felt so proud to be taking care of Jadwiga.

We strolled in the park. When we sat down on a bench to rest, we caught the attention of a group of teenagers. The boys said, "Hey, what are two nice ladies doing here alone? You are so pretty, we are in love with you and would like to marry the older one. We will wait for the younger until she grows up." They were merry, joking and laughing.

I was relieved that they were only talking, and didn't come too close. But Jadwiga became frightened. "Irene" she whispered, "I want to go home."

I pretended that we considered the boys' talk innocent fun. "We like you young men very much," I said "and we will certainly return here tomorrow to meet you again. Good-bye for now." As we stood up to go, my overcoat fell from my arm.

The boys saw my armband, and their behavior immediately became hostile. "Jewesses! Oh, blessed Jesus! We wanted to marry a Jewess," they shouted and crossed themselves as if they had met two witches. We hurried away, frightened, before they could attack us.

My mother heard about a bakery in the Polish section of the city that sold fresh bread. It was a long time since we had tasted such a delicacy, and since it was only a 40 minute walk from our

home, she and Mrs. Szmit asked me to go buy bread, and possibly a few rolls. I did not like to venture into the Polish section wearing my armband, but I went. It was early in the morning, the day was cold but sunny, and after a long walk I arrived at the bakery.

It was full of people, and I was the only person there with a Jewish armband. The talk stopped as I entered, and the crowded store became very quiet. I felt all eyes fixed on me. People moved away. I tried to look self-assured as I approached the counter, walking slowly and looking straight into people's eyes. I placed my order, speaking clearly and evenly in my educated Polish. I expected to be insulted and thrown out, but that did not happen. Some people returned my gaze with a look of sadness and sympathy; a few smiled at me, slightly, imperceptibly. But no one said a word.

In my own country, in my own city, I had become a leper. Yet this time I was allowed to return safely home, with a bag full of fresh bread and rolls.

By January 1940 large numbers of Jewish refugees were arriving daily in Warsaw, as they were deported from other parts of Poland in the middle of that cold winter. They were freezing, they were hungry, and they had little hope to survive. We knew that the Germans would lose the war, but we didn't know if we would live long enough to see it happen.

My studies were my salvation. I was now studying intensively the two-year lyceum curriculum in preparation for the Matura, and this helped me to go on living in spite of the Germans. My life was at their mercy -- but not my mind. I tried to preserve my inner self, to keep it untouched by the daily horrors.

One evening I was sitting at my desk in our room, doing my homework. Our room was chilly and dark, for blackout had been imposed and the only window was covered by a blanket and a heavy cotton shade and tightly closed drapes. The slightest ray of escaping light could attract the attention of the Germans, and so could be the cause of death. Outside, I knew, Pawia Street was dark and cold but still full of hurrying pedestrians, people peddling all kinds of merchandise, beggars imploring passers-by for a piece of bread. The street lamps were turned off, and the

only light came from the smelly carbide lamps on the merchants' carts or baskets. Even this meager light would disappear at the curfew. People tried to take advantage of the safer early evenings, for the Germans usually finished their business before dark and the terror of their possible reappearance at night was still remote.

Mr. Szmit walked into our room. Though he wore a heavy sweater under his woolen jacket, his first act was to station himself by the tiles of the stove, everybody's favorite place. We filled it with wood and a little of our precious stock of coal every other day. The first day, the porcelain tiles were deliciously warm; the second day, they became lukewarm.

Mr. Szmit warmed first his hands and then his back. Then he turned toward me. Wrapped in two woolen sweaters and a heavy skirt, wearing winter shoes, I still felt cold. But Mr. Szmit's big, brown eyes looked at me with a solicitude that warmed my heart. I liked the gentle smile at the corners of his lips. I liked his presence, and felt safer with him there. I enjoyed our long conversations. In the middle of the growing terror of 1940, he was calm and thoughtful. His stories made the past half-century come alive before my eyes.

He had come to Warsaw from a small town in Lithuania a long time ago, growing up in the years before the First World War. He had been brought up in the Jewish tradition, knew the Hebrew Bible well, and quoted from it often. Although he was not a practising Jew, he was a wise man who found in Judaism answers to many life problems. He treated me as an adult; yet, he constantly reminded me that I had a whole life ahead of me. "You will survive, Irene," he reassured me. "Your future will be bright and meaningful."

But I was scared; I felt that my future was as dark as the night behind the window. I feared the coming spring of 1940, the spring I had once so eagerly awaited, the spring of my sixteenth year. Before 1939, I had been impatient to be sixteen, the age of my idol Deanna Durbin. Like her, I had wanted to laugh, dance and have lots of admirers. Now I was frightened of reaching that age. I feared the cruelty of the Germans, who were running our streets. Their sadistic appetite was not abated by the cold,

overcast days, nor was their furious energy. How would they behave during the sunny spring? Would any woman be safe?

Mr. Szmit did not share my anxieties. "The Germans do not have women in mind. They yearn for blood and destruction. Murder appeals to them, not women," he said. I was not convinced, and we changed the subject.

We talked about school and education. Mr. Szmit agreed with my parents, who wanted my sister and me to have professional careers. But I doubted my abilities and felt a strange longing for something other than my studies — although I could not describe what it was. I knew the spring would make this inner anxiety, this nostalgic feeling, even stronger.

"Does everyone have to be a perfect, educated professional?" I asked my friend.

He smiled. "Let me tell you the following tale: Many years ago, in Warsaw, before 1914, there was a young dentist who did not like his work. He enjoyed nice clothes, amusing company, good food and interesting conversation. He spent his time socializing, talking and drinking coffee or expensive liquor. His father had to support him and worried about his future. Then, one day, someone decided to open a private school of dentistry in Warsaw. And guess what happened? The likable dentist was chosen as the first director of the school -- not, of course, for his professional achievements, but for his good looks and his know-how with people. So you see, Irene, there is a place in this world for everyone, and there will certainly be a place for you, God willing."

I laughed. It was so pleasant chatting with Mr. Szmit. He believed in God: "God will help us," he would repeat. His words took the chill from the cold room. For a brief moment, I was able to forget about the Germans.

But shortly after this conversation a terrible thing happened to my friend. He looked after his son-in-law's business daily, as his daughter and her husband were somewhere in Eastern Poland. He was always back at home at four p.m., before dark. But one day, he did not return on time. Hours passed and still Mr. Szmit had not come home. The curfew was approaching. His wife became frantic and kept watch in the cold corridor next to the entrance. It was nearly nine p.m. when I heard a commotion

at our door. Mr. Szmit staggered in, went immediately to his room, and collapsed. His wife followed him and shut the door. What had happened? My father went in to see him.

I learned the truth bit by bit. Mr. Szmit had been caught on the street by a gang of uniformed Germans and forced with other Jews to do sit-ups and other "gymnastics." He could not explain how, at his age of 56, he had been able to do it, in the middle of the street, with the Germans whipping him, pushing him and mocking him. He was terrified. He was mortified.

His life had only been saved because the gang caught some bearded Jews and found more fun in plucking their beards and mutilating their faces. The Jews previously caught for sit-ups had to stand to attention and watch the spectacle. The "fun" lasted for over an hour, while more and more men were seized and subjected to this torture. Finally, the Germans had enough and let the men go.

Mr. Szmit was so crushed he did not leave his room for weeks. My father tried to convince him not to feel humiliated by what the Germans had done to him. His wife, an educated woman and a dentist like my mother, sneaked tranquilizers into his ersatz coffee, and tried to encourage him by talking about the future when they would be reunited with their daughter.

It was his love for his daughter, and a sense of duty toward her, that brought Mr. Szmit back to life; he had promised to watch over her husband's business. But when after many weeks he returned to my room again, I saw an old man with a pale and sunken face. His left eye and lip trembled constantly.

He asked me what I was learning in my underground classes. I told him about Professor Brams hope for a united Europe. Mr. Szmit smiled, and asked me to repeat, again and again, what Professor Brams told us about the future peace and understanding among European countries.

Mr. Szmit did not live to see the future peace. He and his wife were murdered at the end of 1942. His daughter survived the war. Her husband did not.

FOUR
LIFE IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

The summer of 1940 was hot, the air oppressive. Our neighborhood became even more crowded as thousands of bewildered Jews continued to arrive in Warsaw daily. They had terrifying stories to tell of forced resettlements, brutalities and murder. All over Poland, Jewish communities were being closed, their inhabitants forced out or, even worse, deported -- destination unknown. Most people arrived destitute, with nothing more than small bundles. They became the first victims of disease and starvation.

The refugees hoped that they would stay in Warsaw till the end of the war -- that would come soon -- and the Germans would have no time to hurt them further.

We Jews were branded as an inferior race, as carriers of diseases. And the Christian Poles, called Aryans, had to be protected from contact with us. We were already segregated from them by the obligatory armbands. But as early as November 1939, rumors were spreading that we were to be confined in a quarantine zone to prevent the spread of epidemics. This was the reason given for the resettlements and the herding of the Jews into one area. Yet, in spite of persistent rumors, we did not believe in the forthcoming total imprisonment.

The summer passed, and the windy fall arrived. People worried about heating and food. Then, at the beginning of October, the order to create a closed Jewish district became official. On October 12 the street loudspeakers announced to the public that all Jews must relocate into the Ghetto, and all Aryans must move out by October 31.

Panic-stricken Jews tried to exchange their apartments on the so-called Aryan side of Warsaw for apartments in the Jewish district. The out-of-town Jews tried desperately to find a place to stay within the Ghetto. The entire Jewish population was frantic.

As the Aryan Poles could hardly move out in such a short time, the Germans extended the deadline to November 15. On November 16, 1940, the Ghetto was sealed.

I wanted to help Dr. Cygowa, my dear biology teacher, who was unable to exchange her small apartment for one in the Ghetto. There were many more Jews entering the Ghetto than Aryan Poles leaving it. Aryans could easily exchange a small basement apartment for a large one, in a fashionable neighborhood -- together with its expensive furniture. The Jews could not sell their furniture, as no one was willing to pay for it. And there was no place for much furniture in their new quarters in the Ghetto.

I ran all around our neighborhood trying to find an apartment for Dr. Cygie and her husband, but I found nothing. Resigned and sad, they left behind their precious books and plants and most of their possessions and moved into one room in somebody else's apartment. They had to share the kitchen and the toilet.

The Ghetto was surrounded by a three-metre-high brick wall. About 400,000 Jews were imprisoned within an area of 307 hectares (about 760 acres) of city blocks. The checkpoints or police stations at the entrances and exits were guarded by uniformed Germans with machine guns, assisted by Polish policemen and unarmed members of the Jewish Order Service or Ghetto police. The latter wore no uniform and were recognized by a special cap, a distinctive armband, a belt and a club or truncheon. Huge signs were posted at the entrances proclaiming that it was a typhus area, through which only vehicular traffic was allowed. No stopping was permitted. In fact, only one non-stop tramway crossed the Ghetto. Apart from this, entering and leaving without a special permit were forbidden.

For our family, the establishment of the Ghetto was less traumatic because this was already the neighborhood we lived in. Many Jews had lived in Warsaw before the war, most of them in our northern residential area. The Christians living there were mostly policemen, janitors and blue collar workers, and they were greatly outnumbered by the Jewish population.

November 16, 1940, the first day of our imprisonment in the Ghetto, fell on a Saturday. My mother asked me to go with her and look around, and we walked hand in hand. Pawia Street was noisy and very crowded. We were among Jews, with no Aryan Poles in sight, no policemen, no hostile Christian thugs. That made us feel more relaxed and at home. "It would be good to live in our own country," my mother said with a sad smile.

We walked slowly along Pawia Street. Mrs. Fromowa, the owner of the fruit and delicatessen store and an old patient of my mother's, stood in front of her store. She greeted us in a friendly manner.

Suddenly, a German truck appeared out of nowhere. We could see the green uniforms, and hear their shouts. My mother pushed me into Mrs. Fromowa's store and quickly followed me. Mrs. Fromowa immediately lowered the iron shutters and bolted the door. "Let us stay quiet, let them believe that the store is empty and permanently closed," she whispered.

We could hear the footsteps and loud yelling of the Germans, and the barking of their dogs. We listened, afraid to move, to breathe. The Germans passed our store and stopped in the middle of the street. This time they had come not to rob stores but to seize men. The men were pushed into their truck, and were never seen again.

We lived in the Ghetto day by day expecting the worst, yet hoping for a miracle to save us. My family was my refuge, its love sheltered me. I admired my sister and felt inspired by her determination. She had always wanted to be a medical doctor and was overjoyed when, in 1941, a medical school opened in the Ghetto, under cover of a "Course to Fight Against Epidemics."

When I obtained my Matura, I followed in her footsteps, enrolling at the same underground medical school. I simply could not resist my parents' urgings to follow Karolina's example. The school was located just outside the Ghetto, on the corner of ñelarna and Leszno streets, and getting to our classroom was most frightening. We had to pass the checkpoint under the watchful eyes of two German guards. We were

entirely at their mercy, but there was no other way to reach the school building.

The dark stairs leading to our third-floor classroom were also frightening. The electricity supply was sporadic, and the stairs were often pitch dark, although the classroom was always lit, either by electricity or by carbide lamps. I could feel secure only once I had passed the police station and the stairway. Being among lively young colleagues and listening to a lecture allowed me the illusion that all was well, and that I was a student at a real university. That illusion was destroyed as soon as I was back on the street. How many times did I see the imploring eyes of starving people sitting or lying on the sidewalk, and children begging for a piece of bread, with no more tears to cry. Guilt, that I was not starving, that I still had my parents and my home, overwhelmed me.

In the classroom we concentrated on our lectures, and tried not to hear the noise and occasional gunshots coming from the street. One day, however, we heard women's piercing screams and cries. Somebody entered the class to say that two girls who tried to enter our school had been taken to the guardhouse and were being raped. No one could help them. We were frozen in our seats. I felt numb, gasping for air. After a moment, which seemed like an eternity, the instructor said, "Let us continue the lecture."

Was he serious? How could we concentrate on our lecture and ignore the fate of these tortured girls? But he repeated calmly, "Let us focus on our studies." Then, I remembered reading about the First World War and the soldiers dying in the trenches. When one soldier fell, the others continued fighting. They did not stop to cry or grieve. They had to be brave. And I understood that we too were fighters -- we fought to preserve our minds and our inner self. And, like soldiers, we too had to be brave. The lecture continued.

Walking to my classes one cold winter afternoon, I saw a woman sitting on the sidewalk. Her body and legs were swollen from starvation, and she looked up at me with great intensity. I stopped and put a few groszy (a few cents) near her inert hand. During classes, I thought about her eyes, her swollen body. I wanted desperately to do something for her, at least to talk with

her, to apologize for hurrying away. After class, though the curfew was approaching, I made a detour to see the woman. She was sitting in the same place, her eyes staring. But she could see no more, she suffered no more. She had died right there on the street. There was no one even to close her eyes.

I knew that the cadaver would be piled up with dozens of others on a primitive wooden cart, pulled by one or two men. Every day we would see one pushcart after another, full of dangling corpses barely covered by paper or cloth, going through the Ghetto. The Jewish Police were in charge of collecting the bodies of those who had died on the street, and of throwing them into anonymous mass graves in the cemetery.

At home, I studied at night. Our apartment was cold and uncomfortable, but we were not freezing. The street was dark and quiet, for only Germans were allowed outside during the curfew; so the noise of an approaching automobile signaled mortal danger. I would lift my head from my studies and listen. When the car passed our building without stopping, I could return to my books. Another reprieve.

During the day, hungry people knocked at our doors asking for food. Refugee doctors came to see my parents, begging for referrals. Like other forcibly resettled refugees, they had lost everything and had no work. Later, of course, typhus epidemics broke out and doctors were in great demand. They became powerful men.

One day I opened the front door to find a well-dressed gentleman begging for food. He said that he was a refugee from Lódî, a lawyer and a cousin of our well-known poet, Juliusz Tuwim. He stood in front of me, eyes downcast. I had no money but I ran to the kitchen and gave him a piece of bread. He took it and thanked me. I was as embarrassed as he was.

My mother's brother, Monos, ate dinner with us every day. Before the war he had been a teacher and associate director of a high school. He was a man of letters, an Esperantist, who believed in the power of reason and education. But when the schools closed, he lost his job. He had to rely on his savings in Russian gold rubles, which he had accumulated before the war. But because the Germans had been robbing one Jewish home