(Excerpts from Hela Chaja Wajs Trachtenberg's unpublished wartime memoir,
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Lublin, My Hometown

My brother Leyzer and I left Lublin on December 1st, 1939. It was the day Jews of all ages had been ordered to start identifying themselves as Jews by attaching a yellow Star of David to the front of the garment they wore. Jews would have had to wear a Star of David on their backs, as well, had it not been for a very large bribe paid by the Jewish Community Council to the occupying Nazi authorities.

I left Lublin with a very heavy heart. Before daybreak, my parents and my young, 14-year-old brother Mordechai walked us to the place where we met the rest of the group with whom we would travel—eight of us in all—and the van that would transport us out of the city. I'll never forget those last minutes saying good-bye to my dear parents and to sweet, darling Mordechai who so much wanted to come with us. We couldn't imagine, in those moments, that we were seeing each other for the last time. Our parents assured us they'll be safe. They said they remembered World War I when the civilian population had been left unharmed. Had I known then the fate that awaited them, I would never have agreed to leave them behind.

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I was born in Lublin on April 20, 1920. Before the war, the city had a population of approximately 122,000, of whom approximately 40,000 were Jews. Larger cities did exist in Poland, but Lublin held historical importance for both Jewish and non-Jewish Poles.

I had three older siblings: My sister Czarna, named after our paternal grandmother; my brother Abraham, named after our maternal grandfather and whom we called Abram; and my brother Eliezer, named after an uncle and whom we called Leyzer. When I was born, I was named after our maternal grandmother Chaja. A few years later, our little brother Mordechal was born.

My paternal grandfather, Szymon Jakub Wajs, was alive before the war and lived in Izbica, as did one of my father's brothers with his family. The rest of my father's siblings—one brother and three sisters—had emigrated earlier in the 20th century and were living in the United States.

When I was very young, my father worked as a baker. We were far from rich. We had no running water in the house. A man working as a water carrier used to fill a huge water barrel at a pump and bring it to our house every day. You can imagine what kind of a living someone like that could have made from such a "profession"—and there were many like him. We had no luxuries, only the essentials, but we were fed, shod, and clad decently. With my mother's help, I made myself a rag doll, gave her a name, and I was happy. My brothers made for themselves a winter sled, and they had fun, too. We didn't feel we lacked anything and we saw our childhood as a happy one. Sometime during my childhood, my father changed his work, becoming a merchant. We moved apartments and our family became more comfortable.

My mother, Estera Huberman, originated from Piaski where she had several brothers and sisters, some of whom were half-siblings from her father's previous marriages. We used to visit Piaski in the summertime, and I always had a very good time there. I had numerous cousins in Piaski and we all used to play together and swim in the river that flowed behind one uncle's house. I have very nice memories from those visits.

My mother was a very good homemaker. She tried to keep a kosher home. My father was not observant, but, in order to please my mother, would accompany her to synagogue services on the high holidays. My mother insisted that all my brothers attend a Cheder and that Cazrna and I have daily lessons from a female Hebrew teacher, even though we would rather have spent this time playing. When it came to education, my mother was strict with us. In all other ways, she was very sweet. I adored my mother.

At age seven, as was the custom, I started to attend school. I loved my school and my teachers, and they, in turn, liked me. From the first grade on, I distinguished myself in reading and recitations. I performed in many school plays, and, later in high-school, received flowers and chocolates on stage after some performances.

During my high-school years, I joined a Zionist organization, the Shomer, where I met Icek. We started going out together when I was 16 and he was 17. We would often plan to meet in front of Brama Krakowska, one of the old city gates. From there, we used to go to our beautiful city park, the Ogrod Saski. The park was huge, with fountains and wide paths, and with comfortable benches. There were trees and flowers everywhere. In summer, sometimes an orchestra or band played. In the Fall, the leaves and chestnuts that fell from trees gave off a wonderful scent. And in winter, we walked there with snow flakes falling on us. We always had so much to talk about. We were young, in love, and dreaming of a happy future. And we loved our city.

One of Icek's uncles ran a theatre in Lublin and used to bring well-respected Yiddish and other performing groups to the city. Thanks to him, Icek and I saw many excellent

plays. I was also a big reader of literary books. In addition to the Polish authors, I read literature by Tolstoy, Balzac, Dickens, and others.

When I was still in high-school, Czarna, the eldest, was already working as a secretary in a trade-union office, and Abram trained and began to work as a tailor. Czarna had graduated from the Jewish People's School. I am sure she yearned to continue to study, but formal education was expensive for many families. I was able to graduate from high-school by receiving scholarships and with a little extra financial help from Czarna. My dream was to continue with post-secondary education and to become a French teacher.

For Jewish students, prospects of a post-secondary education at Polish universities did not look good at this time. A new law, the Numerus Clausus, came into effect, strongly limiting the number of Jewish students admitted entrance to the universities. On top of this, from those who were already enrolled, we heard stories of discrimination against Jewish students. These told of Jewish students being harassed and segregated from others by unfair lecture-hall seating arrangements. Jewish students often protested these new measures by standing on their feet during entire lectures. In solidarity, some non-Jewish students stood with them. Still, despite this, my dream was to continue my education. And this has, sadly, remained a dream as our world was shattered by the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1st, 1939.

The Nazi armies could not be stopped as they moved east across Poland, and, on September 17th, 1939, they marched into Lublin. From the start of their occupation of the city, Jews were afraid and tried to keep a low profile. It did not take long, however, for the Nazi authorities to close all Jewish schools, businesses, and other institutions, and to take away our rights. On Rosh Hashana, some synagogues were stormed and religious Jews were subjected to abuse. No one knew what to expect next.

Early in the occupation of Poland, Hitler and Stalin signed a pact that divided the country between them. The Soviet Union laid claim to Polish western Ukraine which, they said, had belonged to them earlier in history. The greater part of Poland, however, one that included Lublin, fell under Nazi control. The new border between these two occupiers was now represented by the river Bug.

As conditions under the Nazis became worse, and as all other borders were closed, many people began to flee Lublin (and Poland) for the Soviet Union. At first, this border was not yet well guarded and refugees had little difficulty crossing. During this period, both Czarna and Abram, along with some of their friends, left for the Soviet Union.

Czarna and Abram said they would be gone a short time, but things didn't turn out that way. After many days wandering on foot, they came to a Ukrainian town called Lutsk where they found shelter in a building once housing the town's judicial courts. There, they stayed, along with many other refugees, until they rented rooms for themselves. Abram started to work and, somehow, they were able to manage.

Shortly after Czarna and Abram left Lublin, Icek also left. He was accompanied by his older sister Edzia and Yudel Szainman. Edzia and Judel had been sweethearts for years, and they hastily got married the day before they left. For Icek, as for so many others, going away at that time was seen as an adventure. I didn't dare ask my parents for permission to go. Only three of us children were left at home, and I knew my parents worried enough about the older two who had gone.

During this period, many of those who had left earlier, returned to Lublin. Some came to pick up their wives and children. Others returned because they could not adapt to the harsh conditions in the Soviet Union. Most of those who permanently returned later perished.

Pesa Fogel (nee Sloma), a close friend of Czarna, and now a very close friend of mine, too, was one of those who returned to Lublin from Lutsk, the town where Czarna and Abram were now residing. She returned to pick up some belongings and to take her sister back to Lutsk with her. While in Lublin, Pesa visited our home and asked my parents to allow me and my brother Leyzer to return to Lutsk with her, too. She told my parents that Czarna had made this special request. It was only with great reluctance that my parents allowed us to go. Although I was 19 years old, I was the second youngest in the family and still considered to be a child.

Destination: Lutsk

And so we were on our way to Lutsk. We spent our first long day of travel gripped by fear of being stopped by a Nazi patrol, as Jews were restricted from traveling. In the evening, we arrived in a town called Slovatich where we had to find someone trustworthy enough to smuggle us by boat to the Soviet side of the river Bug. This took our group six days to arrange.

In Slovatich, the only accommodation we could find was at an inn owned by a Jewish family but where German soldiers came to eat and drink. After just one night at the inn, someone saw us and reported us to the Nazi patrol. Nazi soldiers came in the middle of the second night and searched us all. They asked us many questions that we answered with many lies, having been drilled to give such answers by the inn owners. It took many hours before these soldiers left, and, needless to say, we were all terrified.

When the Nazi soldiers came to the inn to question us, most of us woke up immediately. One man in our group, however, was still sound asleep so a soldier poked him with the butt of his revolver and asked him what he was doing in this place. The drowsy man, in his confused state, blurted out that he wanted to escape to the Soviet side of the border. So, when the soldiers were through questioning the rest of us, they took this man with them back to their headquarters. For the rest of the night, we couldn't sleep. We were out of our minds with worry, wondering what might befall him.

The next morning, at around 10:00 o'clock, the man taken by the soldiers suddenly appeared. Unlike the rest of the group, he looked very well-rested and cheerful. He told us that, at the soldiers' headquarters, when asked why he wanted to go to the Soviet Union, he pulled out a photograph of his old, grey-bearded father and made up a story that his aging parents lived in Soviet Russia and that he was their only source of support. The soldiers were sympathetic. They put the man in a nice clean room with a comfortable bed where he slept like a baby until morning. When he woke up, they fed him a good breakfast and drew him a map showing exactly how to escape across the border without risk of being caught.

Meanwhile, the owners of the inn were ordered to turn us out. As we did not yet have anyone to ferry us across the river, we spent a few nights sleeping with rats in the rear of a bakery we found.

Finally, at dawn, on our sixth day in Slovatich, we were ready to leave. For safety reasons, we divided ourselves into two groups of four. My group walked on foot to the riverbank carrying our belongings. The other group travelled in the van, more than once getting stuck in heavy mud. They told us they became extremely frightened when a group of German soldiers approached the van while it was stuck. Fortunately, though, these soldiers only wanted to help free the van's wheels and help them on their way.

The Ukrainian boatman, whom we hired to smuggle us across the river, took our money and ferried us across. He deposited us, however, with our luggage, right in front of a Soviet soldiers' outpost on the Soviet side. The soldiers immediately hurried us into a building and, through an interpreter, started to interrogate us, one by one, each behind a closed door. We knew we should not let them know we had just arrived from Nazi-occupied territory in case they sent us back. Fortunately, prior to Pesa's return from Lutsk, Czarna and Abram had received their Lutsk resident papers and they asked Pesa to give these to Leyzer and me as "proof" of our Lutsk residency status. We showed these to the Soviet soldiers, telling them we were only in the area to look for work. These papers saved us from being deported.

During these interrogations, however, we were frightened of what the soldiers might do to us. After questioning us, they ordered us outdoors and forced us to march, for much of the night and for many kilometers, along the muddy riverbank. They finally let us into a schoolhouse, gave us each a slice of bread and a large mug of water, and locked us in from the outside. The large room we found ourselves in was empty of furniture. But, as the floor was very clean, we all went to sleep on that bare floor. After all those hours of marching, I think I slept more soundly that night than I had ever slept before or have since.

The next day, the soldiers took us to the nearest railway station in Brest, in present-day Belarus. They told us we were now free and left us. We found ourselves in a train station packed with hundreds of people. Some were sitting, some lying, on the platform. Many said they had been waiting for a train for days, not knowing when the next one will arrive. Although this was December, many had no shirts on their backs, and many were

scratching themselves. I was so affected by what I was seeing that I began to cry and wished I could return to Lublin. But, after countless hours of waiting, a train finally did arrive. Somehow, we managed to get ourselves onto this train and, some time later, to arrive in Lutsk. Czarna, Abram, and Icek were all eagerly awaiting our arrival. Icek said that, had I not arrived in Lutsk on that very same day, he would have tried to return to Lublin to fetch me.

And so, for the time being, we all settled in Lutsk. Czarna and I both slept on a very narrow couch while our landlady, an 88-year-old woman, slept in the same room. Abram, Leyzer, and Icek lodged at a neighbour's house. The men all found work and, after a while, even though I had had no real experience sewing, I found work as a dressmaker's helper.

I was glad to leave for work each day. Although Czarna and I paid rent, our landlady did not treat us well. She used us as her errand girls, and we were constantly at her beck and call. She demanded that we clean her room, scrub the floors of her house, and do her dirtiest work. And we were to have absolutely no visitors. But it was difficult to find accommodation in Lutsk. The town was bursting with thousands of refugees all needing housing. Moreover, we, the refugees, were viewed as less than human by the regular townspeople.

While we were in Lutsk, many fellow refugees were volunteering to relocate further east as they were being promised work in their chosen fields. In fact, they were being sent for hard labour to mines and quarries. In their few letters to us during this time, our parents begged us not to travel any further east, but to remain as close to them as possible. We chose to remain in Lutsk.

During Spring of 1940, we were highly hopeful that England and France would help free Poland from the Nazis. Also during this time, Polish refugees, we among them, were being offered permanent citizenship by the Soviet authorities. Most of us did not accept this offer, hoping instead to return home soon. So, when the Soviet authorities began to collect lists of names of those who might wish to return to their places of origin, we, along with most of the refugees, signed up. Of course, in May of that year, our hopes of returning were painfully dashed as news came that France now, too, was under Nazi occupation.

Then, one night in June, we had a visit from the Soviet authorities. Armed with the names and addresses we had all provided when we signed up for a return journey home, they collected us and said they were sending us back. Instead, they shipped us, in cattle cars, east to Siberia.

Siberia

We travelled by train for many weeks. The heat inside the cattle cars was unbearable. We were locked in from the outside so that we would not escape. At the end of the rail

line, at Asino, we were driven by trucks to a large field near the bank of the river Chulym. There, we spent a couple of nights until a boat transported us up the river. When we disembarked, we were again driven by trucks to Taiga, an area of Siberia. Our destination was a prison labour camp. And our new address, as we learned later, was going to be:

Province Novosibirsk
District Ziriansk
County Malinowska
Taiga Village
PO 243-5

On our arrival at the camp, we were greeted by swarms of mosquitos and a variety of other insects. The camp area was huge and surrounded on all sides by forest. In the centre of the camp stood barracks, a hospital, a pharmacy, the camp offices, the police headquarters, and a large building housing a kitchen. Away from the centre, there were small houses for the commandant of the camp as well as for other officials. All these officials were KGB members.

We were shown to newly-built barracks. Each structure had a long passageway running down the middle. On each side of this passageway were cubicles meant to house families of four to six people. Stacked outside the barracks were unused wooden boards. We were directed to these and told to make from them the beds we would sleep on.

Czarna and I immediately got busy cleaning our assigned cubicle while the men—Abram, Leyzer, and Icek—went out to explore the camp and to see whether they could scavenge items that might be useful to us. Until our arrival, the camp had housed Russian convicts. When they were transferred out of the camp, they left various things behind.

Abram managed to return to the barracks with a table for us. Leyzer returned with a stool and a lamp. Icek, meanwhile, returned carrying a piece of paper that stated he was now the new manager of the camp's store. The store was the only one in the camp. It distributed to everyone daily rations of bread and monthly rations of things like flour, oats, and sugar.

It was only by chance that Icek was appointed manager of the store. He spotted the store while walking around the camp and went inside to see whether he could purchase some cigarettes. While inside, he heard an officer ask whether anyone present happened to be an experienced salesperson. Icek, who had never had any work experience of this sort, lied and said he had been a salesman. And so that is how he secured his new position.

My brothers, Abram and Leyzer, as almost everyone else, worked in the forest cutting down trees, cutting off tree branches, and loading trees onto tractors. In the summertime, they had to cover their faces to protect themselves from insect bites. In winter, many of those working in the forest suffered frost-bitten fingers and toes. Czarna and I would also have ended up working in the forest. But, when the commandant came to the barracks to look for young women who could be sent out to work there, we, as well as a few others, hid.

As Stalin was constantly building new labour camps, there was always a risk that young, single men would be sent as labour to more remote areas where conditions were worse than at our camp. Icek and I feared he would be sent away and we would be separated. The commandant, who was also my Russian teacher at the camp, said he had the authority to marry people. He offered to issue us a formal marriage certificate, and we accepted. We assumed, at the time, that we would properly celebrate with a true, formal wedding once we returned home to our parents.

From the moment we arrived at the camp, a great number of our fellow exiles openly expressed their unhappiness about being there. As time went on, many naively started to voice their demands that the authorities send them back to their places of origin. As, not surprisingly, these demands were not met, a formal work strike was organized by some of the inmates. Needless to say, the officers in charge did not tolerate such protests. They handed Icek, the store manager, a list of the strikers' names with strict orders to suspend their daily bread rations. Icek took the list, but ignored their orders. Risking his own safety, he delivered bread to the strikers in the middle of the night. After a period of time, as the strike brought no benefits, the strikers returned to work.

Although we heard every day from the camp authorities that we will never be released, we did not take their words to heart. We were young and full of hope. Summer daylight hours in Siberia were very long, and we used to sit outside laughing and singing, often until after midnight. I was healthy and strong. I could split a log with an axe, carry two pails of water from a pump a long distance from the barracks, and even carry a heavy bag of potatoes on my back.

Then the Siberian winter arrived when the temperatures dipped below minus 35 degrees Celsius. And yet those who worked in the forest were not exempt from their duties. One had to be quite ill in order to qualify for an exemption from work. But, as harsh and long as our first Siberian winter was, it did finally end and we saw Spring arrive.

Icek continued to manage the store. All seemed well until he was suddenly fired one day and someone else was put in his position. Until we had arrived, the camp had housed many convicted men serving life sentences. Just before our arrival, some of these men were appointed to jobs of running the camp. The man who served as the camp accountant, as well as the man in charge of the large warehouse where all food provisions were kept, were two such men.

The system was such that all provisions allocated for the store were transferred from the warehouse to the store. Icek would then be in charge of distributing these among the camp inmates. The accountant and the warehouse manager, partners in crime, had been stealing provisions from the warehouse, but, needing to find a scapegoat, they decided to place the blame on Icek. Icek was only 21 at the time, relatively naive, trusting, and a foreigner who did not speak Russian. He was no match for these hardened criminals.

The camp authorities decided to try Icek for theft and, shortly, a judge, a prosecutor, and a lawyer for the defense arrived from the capital city. Before the trial started, a messenger was sent to all the barracks. He invited everyone to be present at the public trial and to witness how the Soviet Union dealt with those who attempted to defraud the government.

Icek, by this time, had made many friends at the camp and was strongly liked by all. As a few of the inmates had been electrical engineers and familiar with electrical work, they tampered with the camp's electrical system and caused a wide-spread black-out. In this way, they disrupted the plans for the trial. Angry, the authorities postponed the trial to the following morning and said it would take place behind closed doors.

The next day, the trial lasted seven hours. As not even I was allowed to be present, I had my ear to the door the entire time. Even though I understood little Russian at the time, I understood enough to know that the lawyer appointed to defend Icek was not defending him at all, and that, for the first few hours of the trial, things were not going well for Icek.

Then things suddenly turned in Icek's favor. The accountant and the warehouse manager were asked to present invoices for the missing provisions as evidence against Icek. They were sent to look for these but came back empty-handed, saying that rats must have eaten the evidence. Of course, there had never been any invoices, so Icek was declared not guilty and was set free.

As we walked back to our barracks, people were waiting along the way, and, as the news of the verdict spread, they hugged and kissed Icek in joy. A huge crowd gathered at our barracks that evening. People brought vodka and whatever else they could scrounge, and we celebrated the trial's outcome. Pious Jews later told us they lit candles during the trial and recited special prayers. An elderly Roman Catholic couple we had befriended, of former Polish nobility, said they had prayed on their knees for Icek's freedom. For the remainder of the time we were at the camp, Icek worked in the forest.

As a result of the findings of corruption at the camp, a delegation from Moscow visited to inspect it. On the eve of their arrival, we heard that the head of the local KGB committed suicide.

We sometimes received parcels of garlic and onions from Icek's sister Edzia in Kiev. She was concerned as people were suffering from scurvy from lack of certain nutrients. We had virtually no vitamins or protein in our food. Many people contracted "chicken blindness" and were blind from dusk until sunrise. Others developed sores and other skin problems. We considered ourselves lucky not to be ill with any of these.

We received a couple of letters from our parents and from Mordechai. They did not want to worry us, so they told us they were fine. How I missed them. I was even happy when I saw my mother in a dream. I was very attached to her, and I did not like living so far away from my parents and from Mordechai.

Then, in the summer of 1941, we lost all contact with our families. Despite their non-aggression pact, the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union and were advancing with such rapidity that they soon occupied about half of the Soviet territory. The Soviets were not prepared for this and were now at war. And while, at the camp, life went on as usual, we were now hearing very little news of the war. The Soviets did not want it known just how poorly they were doing and how one city and town after another were being lost to the Nazis.

Sometime in the Fall of that year, the authorities suddenly announced that we were free to leave the camp, but said they would like us to remain. Afterwards, we found out that Great Britain and the United States had set some conditions in exchange for agreeing to fight as Soviet allies. One condition was that all Polish citizens would be freed from Soviet labour camps. The Polish government, at the time in exile in London, had insisted on this. As the Soviets badly needed arms and goods, they had no choice but to agree.

We were now considered to be free. We started to store some provisions we would need when we left the camp. We dried and toasted bread, farfel, and whatever little else we could find. We were going to be travelling as a fairly large group, having made lasting friendships at the camp. When all of us were ready, we left, taking our meagre belongings with us. No one looked back.

South to Central Asia

After leaving the camp. we came to a little river we had to cross. But there were no boats there. It was cold and snowing, so we covered our few possessions and sat by the river all night until a barge happened to pass. It took us to the town of Ziriansk where we found lodging with a Siberian woman.

As we had to leave Siberia the way we had come, we first had to follow the huge river Chulym south. It was too late in the season to travel by boat, but the river was not yet completely frozen. We had to wait several weeks before the ice was thick enough to allow us to travel on the river by horse and sleigh.

It was minus 60 degrees Celsius the day we left to travel on the river. The Siberian woman with whom we had lodged cried and said we would freeze to death. But we got ready anyway. A horse was harnessed to each sleigh. Each sleigh could carry three people, two in the back and one in front. Our party consisted of eight people, so we needed three sleighs. Czarna and I rode in the back while Icek was in front holding the reins. On the other two sleighs were my brothers, Leyzer and Abram; Mr. Leib Lerer, a well-known Bundist from Lublin; and Ida and Wladek Skurnik, a couple originally from Warsaw who had become our very dear friends. We were all bundled up, with our legs and feet wrapped in straw. Whenever we stopped, we had to warm ourselves with some vodka we carried. This river adventure lasted three days. At night, along the way, we rented space in people's huts.

With the river travel finally behind us, we then had to travel by train. And, as there were no passenger trains running, we considered ourselves lucky to get on a freight train with 30 people packed into a single freight car. A tiny cooking stove stood in the middle of the car, but the temperature was so cold that the walls of the car, made of wooden boards and against which we rested our heads, were covered with frost.

We never knew when the train would stop or go or how long it would remain in a station. One day, during a stop, Icek, Abram, and Wladek left the train to find some fresh water for us. Suddenly, the train started to move and we found ourselves traveling without them. We were terribly anxious and certain we would never find them, but, miraculously, we did. The engineer of another train in the station took them onto his train, placed them next to the engine so they would be warm, and, traveling in the same direction as we were, managed to overtake our train over the span of two days. They were thus able to rejoin our train at a station further down the line.

The Soviet train stations were so large one could not see from end to the other. There were countless rail lines and trains in each station we went through. Often, when our train stopped in one of these stations, I would leave our car to look for a washroom. I would jump over the heavy car links or crawl under them while, at times, a train would begin to move. I seemed to be the only one who was shy enough to search for a proper washroom, and the other family members were very angry with me over this.

Kyrgyzstan

We finally arrived in Frunze, the capital city of the Central-Asian Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan. It is now known as Bishkek, the capital of independent Kyrgyzstan. Frunze had once been a stop on the Silk Road. After the Bolshevik revolution, the city was named after Mikhail Frunze, a military leader and close associate of Lenin.

When our train reached the Frunze station, our car, for reasons unknown to us, was disconnected from the rest of the train and left abandoned in a corner of the station, away from any hustle and bustle. As we had no other place to stay, we decided to continue to live in the car while we looked for other accommodations.

Soon, though, we found ourselves caught in a vicious circle. We found out that the local population had been ordered not to rent lodgings to anyone without work, and, when we looked for work, we were told we had to have a proper address and be registered as residents. As we soon exhausted the provisions we had brought with us, we had no choice but to join a collective farm.

There were 21 of us traveling to the collective farm. We were taken by truck along a serpentine road. On one side of the road, large rocks fell from a steep mountain while, on the other side, we could see a deep canyon with rapids below. The road was only wide enough to accommodate one truck and the ride was frightening. The scenery, however, was breathtaking, and so I soon forgot my fears.

At the collective farm, we were assigned a little hut. It had to house the eight of us who had travelled together from Siberia. It had a bare earth floor and no windows, but we were given cots to sleep on. We were also given some pitas to eat, and so were soon congratulating ourselves on the smart choice we had made in coming to this place.

The next morning, when I looked outside and saw our beautiful surroundings, I thought we had arrived in paradise. We were high up in the mountains. Higher yet, were peaks permanently covered in snow. Even at our altitude, there was snow on the ground, with tiny streams of water running between patches of snow. And the trees around us looked very exotic. Soon, we were to find out that these trees were of great importance to the local people as they were the food source for the silk worms cultivated in the area.

On our second day, instead of pitas, we were given a ration of damp corn flour. We had nothing like fats, milk, salt, or sugar to cook with. As we also had no fuel for making a fire, we began to cut down the exotic trees around us, not realizing we were guilty of committing what the local people considered sabotage. And, as was our luck, the wood turned out to be very poor firewood, being too damp and causing a lot of smoke. Adding to this, even after we managed to cook the corn flour, we all ended up with stomach aches.

We were constantly hungry. We went from one official to another asking for help, but no one seemed able to help us. It was wintertime. There was no work on the collective farm. The local people around us appeared to have food, but we went hungry.

Then, to add to our difficulties, Abram became ill with typhus. We felt helpless. There were no doctors, no hospitals, and we had no medication. All eight of us were living in a crowded hut, with Czarna and I trying to nurse Abram and help him to sit up in bed. All we had to give him was a little bit of tea and honey that we had brought from Siberia and managed to save.

On the tenth day of Abram's illness, things looked critical and we were afraid he would die. We then heard that a nurse, the only one in the area, lived in a far-off dale. Icek and I decided to go and find her. We set off in the middle of a dark night with only the white

snow illuminating our way. We carried long sticks so that we could feel our way in the snow and not end up in a stream. Also, there were loose dogs roaming the area. During the day, they were tied up by their owners. At night, they were allowed to roam freely. Under ordinary circumstances we would have been frightened, but we became courageous when faced with this emergency.

When we arrived at the nurse's door and knocked, she did not respond. I knocked harder and harder, using my fists and my body, shouting that she must come to help a dying patient. At first she refused, calling out to us that she had just returned home and was going to bed. But, as I continued to bang on her door and to plead, she finally relented and returned with us to give Abram some sort of injection that immediately seemed to revive him.

From that night on, Abram seemed to get better, but, at first, he was so weak he could not walk without help. We had nothing to feed him. Icek and Leyzer would at times find work sawing wood in exchange for a pita. And Czarna and I would trade our best dresses from home for a pita, too.

Some time later, a typhoid epidemic struck our area. By this time, a little hospital, with one doctor and a couple of nurses, had been set up. It seemed to us that whoever was admitted to that hospital did not come out alive. Our friend Ida developed a fever caused by pneumonia, and the doctor refused to treat her outside the hospital. Her husband had no choice but to admit her, where, surrounded by all the patients infected with typhoid, she soon became infected herself and died.

Ida had become my close friend. She was an attractive, intelligent woman, and she was my age. I offered to wash my friend's body and prepare her for burial. It was my first contact with death and I grieved for weeks. Of the 21 of us who had arrived at the collective farm on the same truck, eight had passed away in less than three months.

We decided we would leave this “paradise” as soon as possible. The silkworm growing season was fast approaching, and, had we stayed, the authorities would soon have noticed that, thanks to us, many of their legally-protected trees were missing. Cutting down these trees was considered a political crime, punishable by a long prison sentence under Soviet law. As we were close to the border with Uzbekistan, we decided to travel to one of its cities, Fergana.

Uzbekistan

The cities and towns of Central Asia were crowded and overpopulated by the time we arrived in Fergana in the Spring of 1942. Many people who had been liberated from Siberian labour camps, like us, had made their way south. And, as the Nazis were now occupying many western parts of the Soviet Union, large numbers of Russian people from those parts also fled, or were evacuated, to Central Asia. It was not unusual to see

people in the streets in terrible condition, some whose bodies were swollen from hunger and disease or some who looked like walking corpses.

Thirteen of us had arrived together in Fergana. We found it impossible to rent places where we could live. Somehow, we managed to find a one-room abandoned house in the middle of a field and situated on the outskirts of the city. All the windows were broken, and anyone could have entered to rob or injure us as the area was known to be full of bandits. These poor living conditions, as well as the fact that we needed a proper address to obtain our bread-ration cards, meant that we needed to find lodging quickly.

There was not a lot to choose from. We managed to find a little hut to rent, made entirely of mud, across the city. I then went to the mayor's office to request bread-ration cards for us all. The mayor himself took me, literally, by the collar and threw me out of his office. I did not give up. I went to see him a second, and then a third, time. Each time he threw me out. We realized then that we would have to offer a bribe to obtain our ration cards. We sold a nice suit of Abram's which he had brought from home. We then found a "middleman", and, for the price of 800 rubles, we obtained our cards.

Icek then went to work at a hospital where his job consisted of keeping the boiler fed with fuel. Abram and Leyzer found jobs at a jam-producing plant, and Czarna and I went to work for a crochet and knitting factory. At the factory, we were supplied with wool or cotton that we would take home with us to knit socks for the Soviet soldiers on the warfront. When the supply of material was used up, we would deliver the socks and pick up another supply of wool or cotton.

After a short period of time, the hospital gave Icek a so-called promotion. He was now to deliver supplies to the hospital by a cart pulled by a donkey. On many occasions, the donkey would stop and refuse to go further, and Icek had to resort to pulling both the cart and the donkey. Then, he received another promotion and worked indoors at an easier job.

Being promoted in the Soviet Union did not signify earning better wages. For a whole month's wages, some people could only buy half a kilogram of bread on the black market. And the bread was nothing like the bread we eat now. Workers at bakeries were constantly in the habit of stealing flour and substituting it with substances that were rough on our throats. And, as for our bread rations, often we would go for days before receiving these. We would stand and wait in long queues only to walk away empty-handed.

Abram was still recuperating from the typhus and was weak, so the jam-producing plant fired him. He soon, however, found work as a tailor where he was able to use his skill. Then, suddenly, Icek was sent to work in a peat mine quite far away, in Kokand. While there, he was conscripted into the Soviet army despite the Soviet Union having no right to conscript Polish citizens. He was sent north for army training, but, luckily, was released after a two-month period. He was then returned to the mine where he was

promoted and made to perform the work of a mining engineer. He came to see me whenever he could, but he could not come often.

The summer of 1942 brought with it terrible heat. I was sent to work at another factory for the summer season. To this factory, raw cotton from collective farms was delivered in huge 100 kilogram sacks. I and another young woman had to carry these sacks up an incline and empty them of their contents onto a pile of cotton below. There was loose cotton everywhere. Our feet sank in it with each step we took. The work we were being asked to do was far beyond our strength. And often I went without food for days.

My job at this factory did not last long as I became ill with malaria. I suffered daily seizures of terrible chills and convulsions. My teeth chattered so badly that Czarna could not tolerate the sound and would go outside. I also suffered from vomiting and diarrhea. After a few hours of this, I would break out in very high fevers. I was so debilitated by this illness that I was excused from working at the factory.

At about the same time, Leyzer became very ill and had to be hospitalized. He was diagnosed with pellagra resulting from a lack of proper nutrition, mainly a lack of niacin. Leyzer had always been so strong and healthy, but, since we had come to the Soviet Union, he was often sad and indifferent to his surroundings. He missed our home terribly, and he missed his girlfriend who had remained behind.

We sold whatever possessions we still had in order to buy nutritious food for Leyzer. But, even when we had the money to buy food, we could not easily find nutritious products. And Leyzer was not able to keep any food down. His condition grew worse and worse. His thighs became as thin as sticks and, from his knees down, his legs were swollen. Finally, he could not get out of bed. We were helpless and could do nothing for him, and, bit by bit, we watched him die. He passed away on the afternoon of November 25th, 1942 at the age of 24. Grief-stricken, we buried Leyzer in the Jewish cemetery in Fergana and erected a monument to mark his grave. The cemetery was located in what seemed like the middle of a wilderness.

Our hearts were broken. How could we possibly return to our parents without our brother? Czarna became so depressed that she sat all day staring into our burning fireplace. It took a couple of months before she could be pulled out of this melancholy. I was still suffering from malaria attacks and pained from having lost my brother. But, somehow, we knew we had to survive as long as we possibly could.

Death was such an everyday occurrence that many became numb to it. Everyone was just struggling to survive. And the war seemed like it would never end. The Soviet army was losing battles on all its fronts.

In the summer of 1943, first Czarna, then Abram, came down with malaria, as well. And, as if this weren't enough, one of the walls of our rented hut collapsed. Luckily, Mr. Lerer was very handy and skilled, and he was able to have the wall up again in a matter of hours.

Even though we were living in abject poverty, we had many friends and visitors. Our hut was located right off the street. Behind the hut was our courtyard, and, behind it, our landlord's Uzbek family lived in their separate hut with its own courtyard. As it was often too hot to sleep inside, we used to spread blankets and various rags in our courtyard and we slept outdoors for much of the year.

During the first year we rented this hut, our landlords were suspicious of us. They had not had much contact with foreigners. Their neighbours kept advising them to evict us as we were Jews, and, according to them, thieves. But, as they came to know us, they began to trust us and confide in us, and they began to defend us to their neighbours. When their eldest daughter got married, they invited us to move into a bigger and better hut they had, one that shared a courtyard with them. Shortly after we moved into this better hut, I was stung by a scorpion.

The long, terrible battle of Stalingrad finally stopped the Nazi armies from advancing further east. It was a turning point in the war. The Russians, used to harsh, cold winters, and to other terrible conditions, were able to beat back the Nazi armies and, in 1943, to finally begin to reclaim cities that had been lost to them. A contingent of Polish soldiers, including Polish Jews, was formed in Central Asia. These soldiers fought side by side with the Russian soldiers. For us, these events allowed us to have some hope that the war will come to an end.

Sometime later, in 1944, Abram started to sew men's trousers at home after his regular work hours at the tailor shop. He purchased the material and sewed the pants. It was then my job to sell these pants at an outdoor bazaar. This practice was illegal and, on a few occasions, I was arrested. As the police were not above accepting a bribe, I always "bailed" myself out. This enterprise allowed us to improve our living conditions somewhat and we were able to afford bread and a few other necessities. Of course, we continued to hope for the end of the war and for our return home.

On July 22nd, 1944, news came that Lublin had been liberated and that a new Polish government, appointed by the Soviets, was now based there. Shortly after this exciting news, however, came horrific news. Letters received from the first Jews to have returned to Lublin told a terrible story. We learned that almost no Lublin Jews had survived the war. Except for the very few who survived by hiding or carrying Aryan papers, all had been murdered. We did not want to believe what we were hearing. We refused to believe that our parents and Mordechai were not alive. And, for the time being, this refusal to believe somehow helped us cope.

On May 8th, 1945, we heard that the Nazis finally capitulated and that Hitler committed suicide. Very gradually, transports started to be arranged to take the exiles back to Poland. We did not return until April of 1946. Once again, we were packed into cattle cars for our return trip home. Our hearts were full of grief as we were returning home without Leyzer. Icek, who was living at the time in a different geographic area, had to

register separately and travel with another transport. He arrived in Lodz a few days after we did.

Poland

In Lodz, we stayed temporarily at a Bundist hostel for war refugees. Shortly after arriving, Czarna was recognized by a dear high-school friend of mine while she was walking along the street. Basia Schwartzman and I had shared the same bench in school and we loved each other dearly. Our mutual joy at meeting again after so many years was great. Basia, her mother, and her brother had survived the war by hiding in Lublin. Basia's sister was killed only three days before Lublin was liberated. They were all living in Krakow at the time of our reunion, but soon moved to Wroclaw, as Icek and I did.

During these early days back, we were constantly searching for our parents, for Mordechai, and for Icek's family. We combed through lists and lists of survivors and of Jewish displaced persons. We approached everyone who we though might lead us to information about our families. We found no one alive.

The country was still in post-war chaos. One day, Icek ran into old acquaintances of his family who told him that Cesia Trachtenberg, his first cousin and someone he had been close to, had survived the war by passing as a non-Jew. They said Cesia was now married to Romek Fiszer and they were living in Wroclaw, a city that, until the end of the war, had been the German city Breslau.

Icek immediately took the train to Wroclaw despite not having an address for Cesia. Much of Wroclaw lay in ruin from the wartime bombardments of the city. Somehow, though, Icek found her and they were ecstatic to see each other alive. All of Cesia's family had perished, but she and Romek were now the parents of a six-month-old son. They wanted us to move to Wroclaw right away, so, when Icek returned to Lodz, we talked and decided we would move to start a new life in Wroclaw.