

# **GONE TO PITCHIPOÏ**

**A BOY'S DESPERATE FIGHT FOR  
SURVIVAL IN WARTIME**

## **Jews of Poland**

Series Editor – Antony Polonsky (Brandeis University)





# GONE TO PITCHIPOÏ

A BOY'S DESPERATE FIGHT FOR  
SURVIVAL IN WARTIME

Rubin KATZ

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*To the memory of my loving parents and brothers  
whose total commitment to our family  
made survival possible  
and my sister Fela, to whom I owe my life.*

## **I Shall Not Submit**

A child sojourns in solitude.  
His eyes at the zenith,  
Of not misery, not fear.  
Raking and combing the bleak sky,  
With a glaring countenance.  
A countenance that speaks to the heavens themselves:  
“I shall not submit.”

A shadow upon the edge of the fog,  
A memory – a forbidden childhood.  
Never resting, never sleeping,  
A ghostly wanderer,  
With a penchant for Cain.  
With those who housed him saying:  
“He shall not submit.”

Beneath the love that alters not,  
A love not of softness, but of harsh spite.  
A caress not of kindness,  
But of hatred unending,  
With a hunger to swallow the world,  
A regime that despises those not of its children  
“Who shall not submit.”

So why does this child sojourn in solitude?  
Why does this ghost wander resolutely?  
Why does this love despise those not of its children?  
Because of the voice.  
The voice inside that shouts,  
Not a shout, but a whisper:  
“We shall not submit.”

For my grandfather:  
A man of courage like I have never known.  
*Alexander Nico-Katz – Age 14*





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## PREFACE

I have endeavoured to recount my wartime experiences through the eyes and emotions of the young boy I was at the time of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jewish people—*my* people.

The only way I could do this was to present it in the form of a chronicle of events and recollections, not necessarily in strict chronological order, augmented here and there with background information. When I first began to commit my memories to paper, I found the process laboriously slow, but gradually my observations, experiences and incidents, all of them factual, came flooding back.

The resulting narrative may at times read like a diary, but in fact I did not keep one. As I was forced by circumstances to be frequently on the move, this would have been impossible, as well as potentially incriminating.

The memories of the traumatic events described here have hardly diminished over the years. So vivid do they remain that even with the passage of decades I did not have to delve too deeply to retrieve them: they are always there, and I was able to recall virtually everything.

Apart from fond recollections of an idyllic early childhood, any reference to my birthplace only evokes sadness. Thus for a long time I saw no reason to go back and thereby rekindle unhappy memories. Indeed, it took me forty-six years to return to Poland and my birthplace in 1992. I did so at the behest of my children, who wanted me to retrace my steps and recount my story lest, with the passage of time, my memory of those harrowing years would fade.

Yet, despite my initial hesitation, there was an element of curiosity involved in returning to the scene one last time. Moreover, in doing so, it enabled me to acquire additional material, as well as photographs of some of the places featured in the narrative.

Though I always intended to record my eyewitness account, I kept putting it off, considering the story, spanning a number of years, too involved, and the task all too daunting. But now I am beholden to my children for having urged me to do so. I had been carrying these

memories inside me for all of those years, and committing them to paper unburdened me and gave me a sense of achievement.

First and foremost, I remain deeply indebted to my late mother Gila, for relating the anecdotes and fables of a vanished world she recounted to me, which I attempt to describe in the Prologue. I would also like to thank my dedicated children, David, Simon and Juliette, for going over the original typescript.

Special thanks to Lillian Boraks-Nemetz of Vancouver BC for all her expert advice and invaluable suggestions. My gratitude also goes to Margaret Body for her opinion and constructive comments. I am also grateful to my friend, Dr. Stephen Smith, OBE, Executive Director, USC Shoah Foundation Institute. Formerly of Beth Shalom Holocaust Educational Centre, Laxton, UK for all his help and guidance.

I am deeply indebted to Professor Antony Polonsky of Brandeis University for writing the Introduction to this work, and for introducing me to Sharona Vedol of Academic Studies Press, who was instrumental in bringing this work to fruition. It was a pleasure working with her and Kira Nemirovsky.

Finally, I owe a huge debt to Michèle, my devoted wife of forty-seven years. My deep love and gratitude goes to her for all her encouragement, patience, and countless hours spent typing and retyping the drafts, which began life in handwritten form many years ago. Without her tireless devotion, this project would not have become a reality.

—Rubin Katz

*London 2011*

## FOREWORD

When the Nazis embarked upon their ferocious attempt to murder every Jewish man, woman, and child within their territory, they left no stone unturned. They were persistent in their efforts to make sure no one escaped their clutches. They had a tightly guarded system of ghettos and camps, supported by an eager network of collaborators and informants, making it virtually impossible to be Jewish and to live outside of the system without being denounced, caught, or handed in.

To live alone and to survive against these huge odds required courage, skill, ingenuity, quick thinking and some luck. Constantly assessing who could be trusted and who could not meant moving from place to place, assuming a new identity or a new story to fit the new circumstances. Few, if any, could be trusted—and yet from time to time the only way to survive was to rely on the goodwill of others. Lack of food, lack of clothing, no access to shelter or accommodation, the ever present pang of hunger, adverse weather, and the constant fear of being caught meant that day-to-day living was living life right on the edge of existence. Surviving the enemy was one thing; surviving the elements another. It was never safe. Death was only one wrong move away.

Rubin Katz was just eight years old when the Nazis invaded his home town of Ostrowiec. As a mere child, he managed to slip through the net of destruction and evade the system of camps and ghettos, and survived almost the entire period of the Nazi occupation of Poland living alone. It sounds impossible, and yet this young boy demonstrated that it was in fact possible to outlive the Nazis. He tells his story through the lens of a child, describing his survival as an “adventure.” His story is compelling, drawing you into each twist of fate and ingenuity as he defies detection and death time and time again. Beautifully and insightfully told, his story takes us behind the scenes. We see the normality of life for those who were not under threat and simultaneously the hostility and treachery that threatened those who were marked for death.

When his journey of survival started, only instinct could have told him what to do: he was living day-by-day in an animal existence. By the time the war ended, survival had become a finely honed skill. The

13-year-old Rubin Katz had been in hiding in the open air for almost half of his life, so on the day he rode into Warsaw atop a Russian tank feeling as if he personally were liberating the city, his sense of victory was entirely well deserved. He had outsmarted the Nazis, he had outwitted their collaborators, and he had outlived his death sentence again and again. He survived, but he was more than a survivor—he had won his battle with the system of death, and was the *victor* in his own war against the Nazis.

—Dr. Stephen D. Smith, OBE

*Executive Director, USC Shoah Foundation Institute*  
*February 2011*

## INTRODUCTION

This vivid and moving memoir, like a number of other accounts which have appeared in recent years,<sup>1</sup> describes the survival of a Jewish child in the hell of Nazi-occupied Poland. Its author, Rubin Katz, was born in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski in 1931. This town, located in the picturesque countryside of central Poland 42 miles south of Radom, had in 1931 a population of nearly 30,000 people, of whom more than a third were Jews. In the nineteenth century a local Jewish entrepreneur, Leopold Frankel, had established a metallurgical works making use of the iron ore in the surrounding hills, and by the end of the century this factory had become the second largest in Congress Poland, the area whose autonomy, granted at the Congress of Vienna, was almost entirely done away with after the unsuccessful 1863 revolt against tsarist Russia. Modern politics had penetrated the town, and during the revolution of 1905-07 it was the scene of considerable unrest and strikes.

Nevertheless, Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski retained many of the characteristics of the traditional Polish market town—the Jewish *shtetl*—that was still a major focus of Jewish life in the interwar period. In these towns, the social hierarchy was very different from that in the big towns, or in the country as a whole. Here the Jews constituted a significant part of the social and economic elite, and the non-Jewish inhabitants were, to a considerable degree, their clients or employees. Most Jews lived in the centre of the town, around the market-place, often in quite poor conditions, while non-Jews lived in the outskirts. These towns were also linked with the surrounding countryside. The two populations lived in what has been described as a “pattern of ‘distant proximity’ based on continued economic exchange and mutual disdain. Most Jews were economic middlemen—‘pariah capitalists’ filling a necessary but unpopular position between what had been the two major *strata* in the Polish lands, the peasantry and the landowners.”<sup>2</sup> Jews and peasants mostly interacted in the economic sphere. On market days in the *shtetlakh*, and during the week as travellers in the countryside, Jews purchased agricultural produce from peasants and sold them goods produced in the towns. The weekly market in Ostrowiec is vividly described

in the following pages. There were also closer contacts, with country people working as servants in Jewish homes and consulting Jews on medical matters. The folk music of the two groups also reflected their mutual interaction.

At the same time, the views which the two groups held of each other were marked by deeply entrenched prejudices. The peasants and the Gentile populations of these smaller towns despised the Jews for their lack of connection to the land, and distrusted them as cunning and untrustworthy trading partners, although their business skills were sometimes admired. The attitude of the Jews toward their Christian neighbours was equally contemptuous. In their eyes, the peasants were uncivilized and uncultured. This contempt was mitigated by a feeling of pity resulting from their awareness that the peasants were even poorer than they were themselves.

The religious divide reinforced the wide gap between the two groups. The peasants saw the Jews as adherents of a religion which was not only false but deicidal, and found Jewish religious practices bizarre and incomprehensible. To the Jews, Christianity was both idolatrous and hypocritical, since in their eyes it combined a call to “turn the other cheek” with encouragement of violent antisemitism. The relationship between the two groups was also at odds with the larger political environment, in which the Jews were at best second-class citizens. The two groups had very few close social relations: as Rubin points out, he had virtually no non-Jewish friends.

Although it remained a stronghold of tradition, the Jewish small town was not unaffected by developments in the country as a whole, and this was certainly the case in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski. The traditional communal institutions—the town rabbinate, the burial society, the *bes medresh* (prayer hall) and the *mikve*—remained the focus of communal life. The persistence of traditional ways of life and the importance of the local hasidic rebbe in Ostrowiec, Yechiel-Meier (Halevi) Halsztok, as well as the introduction of such modernities as bubble gum, are effectively described in this memoir. So too are the deep political divisions between the Orthodox Jews, the Zionists, and the socialist Bund members. Ostrowiec seems to have been less affected by anti-Jewish violence after 1935 than some other towns of the Kielce province, such as Przytyk and Odrzywół. Rubin describes his childhood as “idyllic.” His family was traditional—his father was



a supporter of the religious Zionist grouping Mizrachi—and prosperous. His mother's family had long been confectioners, and in the 1930s their sweet factory, located on the outskirts of the town, was the third-largest in Poland. Rubin's family lived on the fringe of the city, where he developed a strong feeling for nature and a solitary temperament. His main companion was his beloved dog Dynguś. The youngest of six children, he grew up in a loving and protected environment. Like his siblings, he began to adopt the Polish language and not only attended a heder but also completed the first year of Polish primary school, which he describes in somewhat equivocal terms. Although Jewish children felt their isolation, they were able to defend themselves and, in Rubin's view, were viewed with some sympathy by their female fellow students.

This secure and happy childhood was brutally interrupted by the Nazi occupation of western and central Poland.<sup>3</sup> The Germans entered Ostrowiec on September 7, 1939, and almost immediately began to persecute the local Jewish population, demanding a "contribution" of 200,000 zloty and killing ten Jews. Forced labour was imposed on the Jewish male population, at the end of September a Judenrat was established to facilitate German control, and by the end of the year Jews were required to wear an armband with a Star of David. Jewish property, including the Katz family's factory, was confiscated, and the factory was placed under two *Treuhänder*, *Volksdeutsche* from Poznań. In April 1941, a ghetto was established. Its population, swelled by refugees from nearby towns, numbered nearly 16,000. It was unfenced, and although the penalty for leaving it was death, a number of Jews were able to find shelter outside. Many of those confined in the ghetto worked in nearby labour camps or armament factories. The first deportation of Jews from the ghetto began on October 10, 1942, and resulted in ten to twelve thousand Jews being sent to their deaths in Treblinka. Some of those who had found hiding places were induced to come into the open with the promise of work in the armaments factory of Starachowice, but these were also then murdered. A second deportation began on January 10, 1943, following which only about 1,000 Jews were left in Ostrowiec. Some of them were able to join the local Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) detachment, but others were murdered by their supposed colleagues when they tried to enter this force. Among those who died in this way was Rubin's cousin Meier Berman, along with a number of his friends.

The ghetto was fully liquidated at the end of March 1943, with most of its remaining inhabitants murdered, while around a thousand were sent to a forced labour camp in town. The labour camp, to which people were also sent from Piotrków Trybunalski, Starachowice, and Płaszów, was liquidated in August 1944.

Initially the impact of the war on the Katz family was relatively limited, but soon it was forced to move to the ghetto, and as conditions worsened Rubin's father, a very enterprising and dynamic individual, was able to obtain false papers for his wife, for Rubin's sister Fela, who used them to flee to Warsaw, where she would pass for a Gentile, and for Rubin. During the October 1942 deportation, five members of the family, including Rubin, hid in a bunker that had been prepared earlier. Rubin's two eldest brothers, Moniek and Izak, who had earlier decided to stay with the family rather than flee to the Soviet Union, remained in the ghetto to provide them with food. The hiding place was discovered by German troops, but miraculously the fugitives were not executed. Eventually, they were returned to the small ghetto which was created after the deportation. Moniek, however, now contracted a blood disorder and died. As the situation declined further, and Rubin, as a young child, was in increasing danger, his brother Leizer arranged for him to shelter with a Polish acquaintance, an engine driver named Radzik. When Rubin arrived, however, Radzik's wife would not take the risk. Willing though she was to risk herself in assisting the Katz family through its ordeal—as she would continue to do later—she could not endanger the safety of her own child, and Rubin was forced to return to the ghetto.

Through Izak's initiative, the family was able to find a new hiding place during the second major deportation, in January of 1943. When the ghetto was liquidated, Rubin escaped, and hid in the brick factory where two of his brothers worked and where he had several close brushes with death. He then hid in the Labour Camp where his brothers and the rest of his family were housed and finally, in December 1943, found shelter with his sister in Warsaw. Here he again had a number of close brushes with death, several of which he survived because he was able cleverly to conceal his circumcision. He and Fela witnessed the devastation of the Warsaw Uprising and were finally liberated by Soviet troops in mid-January 1945. The return to Ostrowiec, of whose Jews nearly none survived, was to prove a great disappointment. On the night that Fela returned to the town looking for her parents in mid-March 1945,

the house in which the few surviving Jews were living was attacked, and four of the survivors were killed. Fortunately Fela had decided to stay elsewhere. She subsequently returned to the town with Rubin, as did their mother, who had been sent to Auschwitz and Ravensbrück after the liquidation of the labour camp in Ostrowiec and who had finally been liberated by the Russians at Neustadt-Glöwen. Rubin's father and three remaining brothers, unable to find shelter in Ostrowiec with their non-Jewish acquaintances, had been sent to Auschwitz and then Mauthausen, and only two brothers, Leizer and Abram, survived. These two moved immediately to Palestine. The combination of a desire to participate in the development of the emerging Jewish state, the persistent anti-Jewish violence in Poland, and the difficulty of living in a town where so many of their relatives and friends had died led Rubin's mother and sister, who had married Benjamin Majerczak, an officer in the Polish army created by the new authorities, to leave Poland for Israel. Rubin himself moved to England, where he had an uncle, under the sponsorship of Rabbi Solomon Shonfeld. The memoir concludes with an account of Rubin's adaptation to life in England in spite of his desire to participate in the Israeli War of Independence.

Although completed more than sixty years after the events it describes, the memoir is remarkable for the ability of its author to recall so many events in detail and for the way he is able to be fair to all those caught up in the tragic dilemmas of those years. It is a major contribution to our understanding of the fate of Jews in smaller Polish towns during the Second World War and the conditions which made it possible for some of them, like Rubin, his sister Fela, two of his brothers, and his mother to survive, though they led to the deaths of his father and his remaining two brothers. It also explains why most of those who survived, including Rubin and his remaining family, fled Poland in the immediate post-war period.

—Antony Polonsky

*Brandeis University,  
Albert Abramson Professor of Holocaust Studies*

## Endnotes

- 1 Henryk Grynberg, *Żydowska wojna* (second ed., Warsaw, 1989); *Zwycięstwo* (Paris, 1989); English translation, *The Jewish War and The Victory* (translated by Richard Lourie, Evanston, IL, 2001); Bogdan Wojdowski, *Chleb rzucony umarłym* (seventh ed., Warsaw, 1990); English translation *Bread for the Departed* (translated by Madeline Levine, Evanston, IL, 1997); Michał Głowiński, *Czarny sezon* (3rd ed., Kraków, 2002); English translation, *The Black Seasons*, (translated by Marci Shore, Evanston, IL, 2005); Wilhelm Dichter, *Kon Pana Boga* (Kraków, 1996); *Szkoła bezbożników* (Kraków, 1999); English translation *God's horse and The atheists' school* (translated by Madeline Levine, Evanston, IL, 2012).
- 2 Ewa Morawska, "Polish Jewish Relations in America, 1880-1940: Old Elements, New Configurations," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 19, 72-5.
- 3 On the fate of the Jews in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski during the Second World War, see the article by Caterina Crisci in Geoffrey Megargee, and Martin Dean, eds., *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, Volume II: *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 2012); Abraham Wein, Bracha Freundlich, and Wila Orbach, eds., *Pinkas hakehilot: Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities in Poland*, vol. 7, *Lublin and Kielce* (Jerusalem, 1999) 55-8; J. Rosenberg, *Nazywam się Józef Nowak* (Warsaw, 2004); M. Geshuri, ed., *Sefer Ostrovtse: lezikaron uleadut* (Tel Aviv, 1971), and M. Jacobs, *Holocaust Survivor: Mike Jacobs' Triumph over Tragedy, a Memoir* (ed. G. Jacobs, Austin, TX, 2001).

## PROLOGUE

### *A Carefree Childhood*

I was born into a traditional Jewish family in 1931, in a small town in the Kielce province of south-central Poland with a long, unpronounceable name: Ostrowiec-Świętokrzyski, to give it its full due. The second part of the name is to differentiate it from one or two other, similar-sounding places. Świętokrzyski stands for Holy Cross, after the range of low-lying hills in the province. The town had also been referred to as Ostrowiec-on-Kamienna, the river that runs through the town, which makes more sense. However, during the Occupation, the Germans did away with the Holy Cross designation altogether and referred to it as Ostrowitz (Radom District). Perhaps the original name was too long and too difficult for any German to pronounce! After the war, the place reverted back to its original double-barrelled name, the name it had when I spent an idyllic early childhood there, in lovely pastoral surroundings.

I was the youngest of six siblings, and my family owned a substantial chocolate factory—surely every child’s dream! Once, as an inquiring young boy, I realized I simply had to know how my birthplace came to acquire its unusually long name. If anyone should know, I reasoned, it would be my mother Gila, as she and her parents before her were natives of Ostrowiec-Świętokrzyski. My mother came up with an amusing tale, involving the *szlachta*, or gentry, no less. This type of storytelling was characteristic of her; she was well-versed in folklore and loved telling tales, and had quite a repertoire. Mama went on to explain that way back in time, before roads were paved, the deep swamps in our area were legendary. One day, the local *hrabia* (count) is said to have toured the estates within his domain, which included the marshlands where Ostrowiec-Świętokrzyski stands today. As the vast bog-lands of the Kamienna valley were not easy to traverse, the nobleman’s carriage-and-pair got stuck and began to sink ever deeper into the mud. The horses

reared up and began to neigh wildly, refusing to go any further. Consequently, the count got ruffled and charged his coachman to urge the horses on, yelling at him sternly: “*Ostro-wić!*,” to press on sharply and extricate the carriage forthwith. Thereafter, this stretch of bog-land came to be known as Ostrowiec, to mark the very spot where our noble count had almost met his demise. Presumably the town had to later adopt the Holy Cross designation to avoid any confusion with other places bearing the same name. One may safely deduce from this that the other lordships must have undergone much the same ordeal in the deep mire!

During my childhood, Ostrowiec-Świątokrzyski was a small industrial town and yet an important metallurgical centre in Poland. While the place itself may have been rather drab and polluted by heavy industry, the surrounding area was wooded and pastoral, like most of Poland. It is situated in the valley of the Kamienna River, which flows into the nearby Wisła, or Vistula, the main river in Poland. This in turn empties into the Baltic Sea, way up to the north. The local Zakłady smelting plant employed several thousand people from the surrounding area, producing pig-iron as well as rolling stock. From where we lived, we could look down on the town and beyond, toward an array of tall chimney-stacks that dominated the skyline, with a mix of black and white smoke billowing out of them. A separate pall of smoke always hung in the sky over the northern edge of town, where the steel furnace was first established in the nineteenth century by the Jewish banker and industrialist Baron Leopold Frankel. The existence of this heavy industry would prove to be a godsend, if you can call it that; it provided a lifeline for its Jewish inhabitants during the war. As a result of the Nazi policy of exploitation of Jewish labour, they maintained a slave labour camp for 2,000 inmates, mostly employed at the steelworks. This resulted in staving off, at least for a time, their total destruction, unlike the inhabitants of many other communities that were wiped out without trace.

Ostrowiec-Św. had a Jewish population of about ten thousand before the war, forming roughly one-third of the town’s inhabitants. This really qualified it as a *shtoht*, or town in Yiddish, as opposed to a *shtetl*, which is the diminutive of the former, but the dwellers felt more comfortable with the latter designation, as it signified communal warmth and cohesion in times of both happiness and sorrow. The Polish *shtetl* was typically a small market town where the Jewish inhabitants led

a traditional lifestyle, usually in grinding poverty but nevertheless happy in their quaint way of life, or so I'm led to believe. The tightly-knit community dated back to the middle of the seventeenth century when the place was first founded, and the main synagogue in the centre of town was built in that period. In fact, the old wooden synagogue was the most historically interesting structure in town, though sadly it was burnt to the ground by the Nazis during the war. There was also an ancient Jewish cemetery situated right in the middle of town, in use since 1657. That site dated back to the time of Jan Sobieski, the legendary Polish king who led the allied army that stopped the Ottoman Turks at the gates of Vienna, thereby saving European Christendom from the infidels.

Reverence for the dead plays an important part in Jewish tradition. And wherever Jews set down roots, contrary to what one would think, the first thing they do is not build a synagogue, but purchase a piece of land for a burial ground, so they can lay their dead to rest. It's not obligatory to pray in a synagogue; a modest room in a private house will suffice. Over the years, most Jews tended to gravitate towards the Rynek or market square and the streets and alleyways leading off it, as well as in the proximity of the synagogue on Starakunowska. This street was referred to within the community as *Schwamegass*, for the story that an entire Jewish family who lived there had died as a result of having eaten poisonous *schwammen*, mushrooms, that they had gathered in a nearby wood. This heavily-Jewish neighborhood was the oldest and poorest part of town, where everyone knew everyone else, and people led a lowly existence, toiling hard to eke out a bare living.

Though small, our town boasted an acclaimed *rebbe*; communities vied with each other for the honour of hosting such a great scholar. A *rebbe*, as opposed to a *rabbi*, is a Hasidic spiritual leader and guide. Our crowning glory was Rabbi Yechiel-Meier (Halevi) Halsztok, who fasted for no less than forty years—or at least was never seen eating in public. This was in an effort to hasten *geulah*, the redemption, when the Messiah would come. People said he was more a *tzaddik*, a saintly man, than a mere *rabbi*. Although there is no cult of saints in Judaism, some of these mystic holy men were reputedly endowed with the authority to act as intermediaries between Man and God, like the legendary Levi-Yitzhok of Berdichev, who with utmost respect and humility boldly dared to question his Maker for allowing so much suffering to afflict His people. The much-loved figure passed on during the early



nineteenth century, but during my time there was an intense song dedicated to the revered rabbi, “*Und der Rebbe fun Berdichev zohgt*,” “The Rabbi of Berdichev says.” The song was immortalised in the 1930s by the acclaimed black American singer Paul Robeson, who sang it in faultless Yiddish. It was in the form of a remonstrance with the Almighty by Rabbi Levi-Yitzhok of Berdichev.

Our own beloved *rebbe* was a pious and humble man, but unlike other famous sages he didn’t encourage or foster a cult following. He preferred to be remembered as the author of essays and commentaries on the Halakha (Jewish Law). A man of ascetic habits, he lived an austere life of utmost piety. After fathering a son and daughter early in his married life, he distanced himself from the physical world and led the life of a celibate. It was even rumoured that his wife, the *rebbeztin*, had summoned him before the town’s rabbinical court to account for his neglectful connubial conduct. Thereafter the *rebbe* withdrew into intense study for the rest of his life. After his death in 1928, his more temporal son, Yehezkel, known affectionately as “Hezkele,” succeeded him, to become the spiritual head of the community during my own childhood. As a young boy, I wasn’t so much impressed by his father’s scholarly accomplishments as by his ability to get by without eating! As I got older, I became rather disillusioned when I discovered that our esteemed *rebbe* did not in fact subsist entirely without sustenance, and apparently survived on a diet of figs and milk at night, before retiring.

The hasidic movement which galvanized Eastern-European Jewry began in the eighteenth century. Its founder was a legendary “wonder-rabbi” known as the Baal Shem-Tov. Hasidism was a pietistic spiritual movement that attracted a large following within the Jewish masses of Poland and Eastern Europe. The quaint Hasidim dressed in distinctive garb, particularly on the Sabbath. This comprised a silky black caftan, which was tied round the waist with a plaited cord when immersed in prayer. The cord symbolically separated the upper from the lower, unchaste, part of the body. The headgear consisted of a *shtreimel*—a large fur hat trimmed with sable tails—and knee-high white or black socks, depending on the sect, completed the outfit. As the majority of shtetl dwellers were humble folk who had to struggle to make a bare living, the idea of hasidism appealed to them. It came to be known as the religion of the poor, and advocated that the destitute and



downtrodden could serve God by whatever means with joy in their hearts in their humdrum everyday lives.

The hasidim had their fierce opponents in the misnagdim, who were opposed to, amongst other things, the hasidic practice they called *Rebbe*-worship. The misnagdim were mainly centred round Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, which was once part of the Polish commonwealth. The better-educated Litvaks, i.e., Lithuanian Jews, as personified by their spiritual leader and mentor, the eighteenth-century Gaon of Vilna, who preached that the true way to God is through intensive Torah study and scholarship, believed in learning for the sake of learning. A Gaon, in the Ashkenazi tradition, is a Talmudic genius; the title is rarely awarded, and is conferred only on a rabbi of exceptional learning. It was said that the Gaon of Vilna had mastered the Torah at the age of eight, and the hidden complexities of the Talmud by the time he was nine. The Hasidim, on the other hand, maintained that this was not the only way to God, as the impoverished Jewish masses in Poland had no means for all-day study. Unlike their Litvak opponents, the spirited Hasidim exalted in singing and dancing ecstatically, as if under a spell, to soulful Klezmer music played by fiddlers as an essential element in the worship of The Almighty. During these enraptured festivities, moderate imbibing of *schnapps* was, if not encouraged, certainly not frowned upon! Hence, the more animated Hasidim, who believed it was a *mitzvah* (divine command) to be constantly happy, earned the reputation of being joyful and fun-loving, and the traditionalist Misnagdim were thought of as scholarly but dour. The followers of these competing forms of Judaism were generally contemptuous of each other—it even went as far as the Vilna Gaon invoking a ban on the Polish Hasidim!

Apart from the animosity between Polish and Lithuanian Jewry, they were both also at odds with the Galitzianer, and of course vice versa. The last group hailed from the province of Galitzia, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that ruled over a chunk of Poland. Both the Galitzianers and the Litvaks spoke Yiddish with a different accent from that of the Poles. Otherwise there was little outward distinction between them; there was only geography and of course the accent, which only became apparent when they opened their mouth. For instance, Polacks thought it funny that Litvaks could not pronounce the “sh” as in *shlemiel*—this came out as

*slemiel*, and would have everyone in stitches. Nevertheless, the Litvak version of Yiddish is far more pleasant to the ear than the Polish rendering, in my opinion and that of many others.

These divisions were mainly societal, but they were enough to set the groups apart, and they rarely intermarried in those days. These communities are no more, but interestingly there still exists in the West until today a symbolic division among their Orthodox descendants, though this only manifests itself in the type of prayer-house their adherents belong to.

A Hasidic following was named after the place where its *rebbe* resided and from which he headed the community; for instance, there are Hasidic groups known as Belz, Gur, Kotzk, and so on. In our town there were several prayer and study-houses, each one called a *shtiebl*, literally a small room, with each *shtiebl* representing a different Hasidic sect. Every adherent would try to journey at least once a year to wherever their *rebbe* held court, and they would hardly leave his side over an entire weekend, starting with Friday afternoon. They would participate at the *rebbe's tisch* (table), over which he would preside, surrounded by his devoted disciples. This was especially at the last of the three festive Sabbath meals, when it was customary for the *rebbe* to deliver a *vort*, literally word, but in fact an in-depth Talmudic hair-splitting discourse that the adherents looked forward to the entire weekend. Such an experience was a most joyous occasion and a major event in the life of a Hasid. During the same weekend, the visitor would seek a blessing from his spiritual mentor, or advice on a matrimonial or family matter. Another possibility was to pass a *kvittle*, a missive, to the *Rebbe*, with a request for the Almighty to heal a sick relative, or asking that some other wish be fulfilled. Some of these Hasidic Masters were even said to possess mystic powers that could work miracles, and some had such a wide following that the places they held court at were well-known to the wider community because of all the disciples heading for it. This was so much the case that it's said Polish day labourers and peasants, when booking a fare, would ask for a ticket *do Rabina*—to the rabbi—without mentioning the name of the place he resided!

Every *shtetl* had to have its own Sabbath *klapper*, a sort of “town crier,” for want of a better term. The *klapper's* duty was to hurry from door to door in the Jewish neighbourhood on Friday before sunset and *klap*, or tap, several times with a wooden mallet on the doors and shutters of Jewish shops to remind the shopkeepers of the imminent start of the Sabbath and summon them for evening prayers.

The *klapper* would rap harder on the shutters of shops whose keepers were prone to be lax with their time-keeping, urging them to conclude their business. The latter were tempted to take advantage of the last-minute trade prior to the onset of the Sabbath at sundown, when all manual work must cease, when trading and the handling of money is not permitted.

My father, Moshe-Aron, was referred to as *Reb* Moshke by his friends. The respectful title *Reb* was merited only by a learned man or a well-to-do householder. Father was an observant Jew, respected for his talmudic learning, wisdom, and modesty. As a young man, he had attended a yeshiva, a talmudic academy. Although not a Hasid himself, he was an admirer of the Gerer *Rebbe* of Góra Kalwaria, who headed a moderate branch of hasidism known as Gur. Father dressed in a modern manner and was clean-shaven, but as a traditional Jew he always kept his head covered outdoors, with a grey trilby during the week and a navy one reserved for the Sabbath. His political affiliation lay with the Mizrachi, religious-Zionist, movement. Unlike many people of the shtetl, my father was not ultra-, but rather modern-Orthodox. And our way of life was more rooted in Jewish traditions, imbued with a love of Zion, than focused on strict religious observance. Father embraced modernity, was a supporter of Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, and was a firm believer in Jewish ethics and values, combined with a worldly outlook.

My mother Gila, on the other hand, came from a traditional but not Orthodox background. She was mainly preoccupied with taking care of us children and running a substantial and welcoming kosher household. We were six siblings: my eldest brother was Moniek, then there was Izak, followed by my only sister Fela, Leizer, Abram, and finally me. Moniek and Leizer stood out as the most studious among us. Being the youngest in a large family, I was of course the centre of attraction and thoroughly spoiled. My registered Polish name was Rubin, with no middle name, and I was often called by the diminutive Rubinek. But my grandparents and older Yiddish-speaking relatives preferred to call me Rievele; this was after my paternal grandmother Rieva, after whom I was named. It was the custom to name children after their departed close relatives, to perpetuate their memory. And as I was the last to be born, I had to be named after my granny! As I got older I gained yet another affectionate name, *ketzele* (kitten), based on the family name, but this one I really disliked;

I felt I merited a more grown-up name. Actually, pet names and nicknames were part of shtetl lore, and I shall talk about them later.

We kept the Jewish traditions and celebrated all the festivals, which were always joyous occasions in our home. Father observed the Sabbath customs and liked to don a festive satin robe on Friday evening in honour of the Sabbath. As it was too far to walk to the Synagogue, and observant Jews don't ride on the Sabbath, evening prayers were said at home. As Jews have done for centuries, on Sabbath eve Father welcomed in the figurative Shabbat bride with joy and the song "Come, My Love, to Meet the Bride." Before dinner, Mama lit candles in the silver candlesticks and said the blessing over them, and the family sat around the dinner-table set with best china and white linen, laden with food, while the delicious fragrance of traditional dishes filled the house. Next, Father recited *Kiddush*, the benediction, over a large silver goblet filled to the brim with sweet wine. After this came *Moitzi*, the breaking of two loaves of bread, symbolising the double helping of heavenly manna that the Israelites received for Shabbat in the wilderness. This came in the shape of plaited *challah* loaves, with round ones for festivals. Next, Father blessed his younger children with the priestly blessing. Laying his hands on my head, he recited "God make you like Ephraim and Menasse," the two mighty sons of the biblical Joseph, born to him in Egypt. Then he broke into the traditional Shabbat Eve hymns in his melodious voice, starting with "Welcome, greetings, O' ministering angels, angels of the Most High." Then, turning to Mama, he recited from the Proverbs: "A woman of valour, who can find? Her worth is far beyond pearls..." The sumptuous dinner, accompanied by traditional songs, was followed by the Grace after Meals. All this added to the magical aura of Shabbat in the home. The next morning we strolled in a leisurely way, as a family, to the synagogue for morning services, except for my mother and sister, who stayed behind to prepare the table for the festive lunch. In the evening, at the conclusion of Shabbat, it was Mama's turn to offer a blessing for the family for the forthcoming week. It was a touching little prayer in Yiddish, unlike most prayers, which are in Hebrew. It is recited by the mother of the household, and begins with "*Gott fun Avrum*"—God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, protect my family and guard the entire House of Israel in the coming week...



Family snapshot taken outside our home in the summer of 1937.

I was the youngest, aged six at the time

My mother Gila, *née* Berman, was easy-going, but Father expected a measure of discipline from his sons, which we didn't really object to. Although devout himself, Father was not judgmental, and was tolerant of others. He didn't try to impose the burden of strict religious observance on us children, but his overriding desire was that we acquire a good religious grounding, and he strove to instil in us a positive Jewish identity. My older brothers were more interested in secular subjects, of which he also approved, but he never tired of saying that religious education would hold one in good stead. He maintained that it was important to be able to mix at every level of society, be it religious or secular, and he himself could interact with the high and low. He was fond of repeating the maxim, "Be a Jew in the home and a *Mentsch* (upright being) in the street." Father was blessed with a good baritone voice, and led the service in the synagogue on special occasions. He also read the weekly Torah portion from the *Bimah*, the raised podium in the synagogue auditorium. This requires a prodigious memory, as the Torah scroll is hand-written by a scribe, without vowels or cantillation notes. No pronunciation or grammatical mistakes are permitted, as this could alter the meaning of the Word of God; as the precept says,

“Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it.” Father was an articulate person who spoke Biblical Hebrew fluently, and to prove a point with a learned friend he was fond of quoting scriptural verses in Hebrew or Aramaic from the sacred texts and commentaries. As he was a prominent member of the community, many came to seek his counsel. He was also a founding member of the Social Welfare Institution and Loan Fund for the needy of our town.

On the other hand, my mother’s side of the family, the Bermans, though traditional in their ways, were not religiously observant. Their interest lay not in Torah study but in the chocolate and confectionery business in which they excelled. In fact, within the family, the Bermans as opposed to the Katzs had the amusing reputation of possessing powerful arms and strong, heat-resistant, hands, developed as a result of working with hot molten sugar for generations. They were accustomed to folding, kneading, and pummeling the stretchy mass, liberally sprinkled with edible talc to avoid any sticking, on steel tables as air bubbles burst with a loud pop. Their skill in the sugar business led to a rather unkind saying within the family: “The Bermans may have the brawn, but the Katzs possess the brains!”

Our German-sounding family name, Katz, predates the time when Jews were first given surnames in western-Europe in the sixteenth century and is not in fact of German origin despite its sound. The name had at some stage been Polonized by some naming official to the phonetic Polish spelling Kac, which sounds the same, as there is no “tz” letter combination in the Polish language. My pride swelled when Father explained that we were hereditary Hebrew priests by birth, belonging to the Kohanim, the priestly caste. Our name has its origin in the Temple of Solomon, no less. The name Katz is a Hebrew acronym for Kohen Tzedek, Righteous Priest, for those who officiated in the ancient temple of Jerusalem. This birthright is passed down from father to son ever since the destruction of the last temple by the Romans in 70 CE. All this made me feel rather important, having discovered that we descended from the brother of the biblical Moses, Aaron, who headed the tribe of Levi and was the first High Priest; a bloodline going back more than 3,500 years. The Kohanim were the nobility in ancient Israel. Father said that we would revert to that role with the coming of the Messiah when the temple is rebuilt.

My earliest distressing recollection is of being run over by a horse and cart as I darted across the street when I was about four years old.



Fortunately, I escaped with just a broken leg. Apparently, I hobbled along with my plaster cast and when asked what I had there would reply, pointing at my leg, “*Watte fiessele*”: a cotton wool leg! This amused my relatives no end, and the expression stuck. And thus I acquired yet another pet name; to all the doting uncles and aunts I was surrounded by, I was *watte fiessele*. But to my brothers I was simply *mazik*, a doting name for a mischievous child. I never liked these pet names, but only my lovely sister called me by my proper name.

Another of my abiding early memories is of being carried off into the woods by a *meshuggene*, a village simpleton, when I was about five years old. Fortunately, feeble-minded Mendel was placid and quite harmless. He dressed in a black caftan with peaked velvet cap, in the style of young Orthodox men. Mendel was not originally from our town; he apparently stemmed from a good background and was well-educated. People said that some tragic event in his life had in some way affected his mind. And so, one nice summer’s morning, I disappeared with him from outside our home. Word spread and within minutes almost half the community went looking for me. Mendel and I reappeared in late afternoon, happily strolling down Sienkiewicz Street from the direction of the woods, holding hands. I had an exciting time gathering wild strawberries and blueberries in the forest, and didn’t understand what all the fuss was about. When Mendel was admonished for taking me away, he replied innocently: “I saw this little boy with fair curly hair standing there and I thought he would enjoy coming *yagde* picking with me.” He was never punished for it, since he and other characters like him were not only tolerated but formed part of the local scene. They hurt no one, and people would feed and help them. There was no crime within the community and there was no need to lock doors in the predominantly Jewish neighbourhood. These unfortunate characters may have been at the bottom of the heap, but they were nevertheless part of *shtetl* life.

We lived in a somewhat isolated spot outside town, in a spacious home in idyllic rural surroundings next door to the family chocolate factory. I was free to wander and disappear for hours on end, together with my pet dog Dyngus, so long as I showed up at mealtime. I was really a country lad by environment, if not by background. We had no Jewish neighbours in our immediate vicinity—or any other neighbours, for that matter. I had no playmates and spent a lot of time on my

own, but I was used to the solitude and my own company and because of it I suppose I grew into a solitary boy. The factory building and our adjoining home were built towards the end of the nineteenth century as *koszary*, or brick-built barracks for the czarist imperial army, mortgaged by the Pfeffer banking family, financed by the Jewish community in order to placate the czarist authorities. Our province had been under Russian domination, situated on the western edge of the Russian Pale of Settlement, within the boundaries of where Jews were allowed to settle. Apart from the factory complex, our home and the nearby school building, there was just open countryside. I loved exploring the area and have fond memories of roaming freely with my pet dog *Dyngus* at my side, leaping joyfully through the fields of corn, interspersed with red poppies and blue cornflowers, chasing butterflies, while *Dyngus* went after the field mice which seemed to entrance him. I enjoyed an exhilarating and adventurous boyhood in the country. That was my own secret playground; oh, how I wished it would remain like this forever. Apart from the nearby gently-swaying wheat fields, there were also potato fields with endless furrows running far into the distance. At harvest time, after the peasants had dug up the crop and departed, I would dig deeper for any leftovers and roast them in the banked-up ashes of a dying fire that I made with the wilted potato plants; there was no other kindling to be had in the fields. These, I thought, tasted more delicious than anything my mother prepared at home, in spite of her being an excellent cook. I did this all on my own; there were no friends to share in the fun and exciting adventures. Apart from *Dyngus*, only my brother Abram joined me occasionally, as most of the time he had his head buried in books, like our other brother Leizer. All the boys lived in nearby hamlets and anyway, their parents would not have let them play with the likes of me. There seemed no outward difference between us, but to them I was different—I was considered a “townie” and Jewish to boot.

These rural surroundings and green fields stretching as far as the eye can see imbued me with a love of the countryside, the wildlife, and gardening from an early age. I had my own patch against a sunny south-facing wall of our home, where I planted seedlings and grew flowers from seed. I liked cosmos and pansies in a variety of colours, as well as night-scented stock that filled the evening air with its deliciously overpowering fragrance outside my window. I grew it especially for my golden-haired sister Fela. *Mathiola* stock was her favourite, but



mine was the sunflower, because of its rapid growth. It was exciting to discover just how wondrous nature is. I liked to watch things grow, and I ran out each morning to see by how much the sunflower had grown overnight. Every evening, after a hot day, I watered the plants with a watering can. I could observe their growth almost daily and this fascinated me; the sunflowers grew tall in the fertile black soil with large drooping seed-heads that ripened well in the short but hot Polish summer. It was these early beginnings that started me on the road to a lifelong passion for gardening. Gardening in the English sense was hardly a pastime in Poland; instead, people grew potatoes and cabbages out of necessity. Another one of my favourite hobbies was to climb the tall trees, like most boys at that time. There were majestic sycamore and chestnut trees surrounding our home and factory, and Dyngus would run circles around the base of the tree, wagging his tail, barking for me to climb down, or perhaps he wanted to come up and join me! Dyngus meant a lot to me—he was the only pal I had.

The original founder of the family business was my maternal *zeide*, grandpa, Leibish Berman. His forebears before him were also confectioners. He was a mild-mannered, loveable old gentleman who I adored and was close to. In spite of his advanced years, *zeide* Leibish was young at heart and had the reputation of being a harmless prankster, even in old age. As I got older, I frequently called on him on my way home from *cheder*, Hebrew school, in the town centre. To keep himself occupied after he had retired from manufacturing, grandpa Leibish ran a retail shop, selling confectionery rejects from the factory: misshapen chocolates, sweets, broken biscuits, wafers, and so on. Children would line up after school outside the shop eagerly holding up their *groszy*, keen to buy sweets. I can still picture my *zeide* trying to put the youngsters off by telling them that sweets were bad for their teeth, and he instead handed out the collectable picture cards. These cards of animals and acclaimed sportsmen were inserted into bars of chocolate and keenly collected by children. When I was a young boy, not yet able to read, my brothers helped me to memorise the various animals, and I would amuse my relatives by holding up a stack of these cards, calling out the correct name of each animal, reptile, or bird of prey. For instance, I could differentiate between a boa constrictor, a python, and an anaconda. As there were hundreds of these creatures, my parents typically thought they had a young genius in the making! This was hardly the case, but it was fairly

apparent from an early age that I had a retentive memory and a keen eye for detail.

Our home adjoined the factory, where we produced not only a wide range of chocolates and sweets but also pre-packed biscuits, chocolate wafers, and in fact a large variety of confectionery, from the exotic Turkish delight and Greek halva down to sugar-coated *dragées*, sesame snaps, and the humble lollipop. There is hardly anything new today in the confectionery field that we didn't produce at that time; the only thing that has changed is the decorative packaging. It was a family-run business, and apart from my father, my two eldest brothers also worked in there, as did two uncles with all of their sons. No doubt my turn would have come one day; my ambition was to follow in my father's footsteps when I grew up. We employed a large workforce, and the goods were marketed under the brand name of "Amor" with the company trading under Berman Bros. & Partners. It was probably the third-largest chocolate and confectionery concern in Poland at that time, after Wedel and Plutos. We had a rail spur laid from the mainline to transport sacks of sugar, flour, barrels of cocoa-butter and chocolate mass, as well as other supplies, by the wagonload, and to facilitate distribution all over Poland. By the mid-1930s we had installed the most up-to-date German machinery, incorporating conveyor belt mass production methods. There were machines that could wrap sweets automatically in foil and coloured cellophane, spewing them out at incredible speed. Previously this had been done by hand, with rows of women sitting against long trestle tables heaped high with sweets, speedily wrapping the toffees, caramels, and fruit-filled sweets, dropping them into boxes resting in their lap. Some of these women were incredibly fast with nimble fingers. When full, the boxes would be weighed by the supervisor and the packers paid according to their output. Had it not been for the war, our business would undoubtedly have expanded into a concern of international repute.

One of my most amusing pre-war recollections is of my German cousin Leo Katz coming for summer visits from Halberstadt with his mother Manya. Leo's favourite sport was to throw sweets and chocolates by the fistful down from the factory loft window onto the street below and get a kick out of watching the barefoot urchins pounce on each other, grappling for them in the dirt. We could not communicate properly, as Leo spoke no Polish, so we dubbed him *Waffelman* in German, after all the chocolate wafers he unloaded onto the ravenous

street kids below. We who lived there didn't indulge in this pastime, as sweets were no novelty to us, but as Leo was a privileged and spoiled visitor from abroad, he was afforded the liberty of behaving in this precocious manner.

All my uncles and aunts on my mother's side were in the confectionery business, either in production or retail, all initially trained by grandfather Leibish. After the business had expanded and moved out of town, my grandpa retained a part of the original old factory in the city centre, at the bottom of Sienkiewicz Street. There were coal-fired ovens there for the baking of a variety of pre-packed biscuits, in particular the ever-popular *herbatniki*, tea biscuits. The large bake-ovens had to be kept going round the clock. And as the factory didn't operate on weekends, housewives who wouldn't cook on the Jewish Sabbath were welcome to bring their pots of *chullent*, the traditional bean and barley stew, on Friday evening for slow baking overnight. The dishes would be collected the next day on their way home from synagogue and served for lunch. It was the customary Shabbat meal, particularly during the cold winter months. Young girls dressed in their finery, with long glossy braids reeking of paraffin, could be seen hurrying home from our factory with their hotpots. Escorting the *chullent* was the responsibility and duty of the younger daughters of the households. The twin-handled pots were covered with brown art paper and tied with string at the top. For ease of identification, the family name was written on the paper. The more affluent housewife would include choice ingredients, resulting in a rich, fatty *chullent*. Apart from the compulsory butter beans, pearl-barley and potatoes, it would contain fine cuts of meat or such delicacies as stuffed *kishke* (intestine casing) or stuffed *helz'l* (chicken neck). But the poor could only afford a lean *chullent*, containing only the basic ingredients. It so happened that on occasion the oven temperature rose too high and the paper on top got singed, making the names illegible. People tried to memorize their pots, but they were all rather similar; white or black enamel. Consequently, it was hard to distinguish between such names as: Kamaszenmacher, Katzenellenbogen and Weinwurtzel. As a consequence, the poor man's modest Shabbat table was sometimes graced with the rich man's *chullent*, and, of course, vice-versa!

The familiar aroma of baked *chullent* wafted down the narrow alleyways at lunchtime on Saturday, combined with strains of Shabbat dinner melodies streaming from the windows of Jewish households.