

## D. The Chronicles of One Bunker

In those days, the days of fear and terror, there were very few miracles, but they still existed. Arje Edelist tells about one of these:<sup>1</sup>

“Our family unit consisted of father Nojech, mother Mindla, sister Łaja-Klara (Lola) and her husband Majer Isz-Horowicz (Ha’Levi), my brother Menachem and the undersigned, Arje Edelist. We were a Chasidic family. In the city, father was one of the leaders of the Gur Chasidim and Agudas Yisroel. We had a factory for metal products and, in 1936, father established a bicycle parts factory.

“...There was immense fear in our house. The feeling was as if a great disaster was approaching. This stemmed from the following story:

“Back in 1941, my uncle, Jakow-Elia Edelist, came to us with his daughter Dwojre. Immediately upon their arrival, my uncle locked himself in with my father and mother for a long hour. Mother came out in the middle and told us that uncle was telling nightmare stories...

“Uncle said that, in one of the towns, the Germans came with closed trucks, upon which they loaded all the Jews. They say, uncle said, that the Germans inserted gas into the closed trucks. For many months, no one in the house returned to that terrible story...

“After the first *akcja* in the ghetto, the family gathered for a consultation. Father and mother said that each of us, individually, would try to find a way to be saved. Not to do it all together. The meaning was - each to his own. If one of us had the opportunity to escape, he would do so, even if the others did not, and she added, ‘No one looks at the other.’ Mother said in tears, ‘We have already gone through most of our lives, but you are young and you must look for a way to be saved.’

“Meanwhile, as the *akcje* continued, especially during the breaks between them (it should be understood that, at that time, we did not know how long the *akcje* would last), the idea was raised to build a bunker in part of the basement of the building, where we lived at Nowy Rynek 14. We (my brother and I) managed to obtain bricks and cement and built a wall, which closed off one end of the basement wing. Above it was a hardware store, from which there was a descent to the bunker under the counter.

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Arje Edelist, YVA, 0-33/7237.

“When the neighbours saw that we were building a bunker, they came to us and said, ‘We will not agree to the construction of the bunker unless it will be used by any neighbour who wants to hide in it.’ It was clear to us that such a large bunker would be discovered quickly. After all, it would be necessary to seal off the entire basement to accommodate all the neighbours, and it is impossible for the basement to ‘disappear’.

“As a result of the argument, we decided to build another bunker in the attic. The bunker in the basement was intended for our family and the Zimmerman (owners of the building materials store) and Stopnicki families, while the attic was intended for the other neighbours.

“The *akcje* continued and things changed rapidly from day to day. Bernard Kurland, a family relative, came to our house during a break between the *akcje* and informed us that he was willing to smuggle two men from our family, and that they would not take any packages with them. In accordance with the decision made in the family consultation, my father and brother went with him.

“According to Kurland, he would smuggle them to a place where the Germans had gathered those who had already been through the *akcja* and were left alive. I therefore stayed at home with my mother, sister, uncle, aunt and their children, and the Zimmerman and Stopnicki families (our neighbours and relatives) and a small number of other neighbours. I continued to work on improvements to camouflage the bunker and, most importantly, preparing a stock of food and other essentials for a long stay.

“As time passed, we asked ourselves what the situation would be in the bunker, how long we could stay there and how we would ever be able to get out of it. It was already clear that the entire Jewish population would be deported, leaving only a small portion for the labour of collecting the contents of the houses, and that there would be no access to our house when the deportation and evacuation were complete.

“At that time, we had no information about my father and brother or what had happened to them. Did they manage to get to a place of safety as he had promised, or were they caught on the way when they had to cross the city that resembled a ghost town?

“Two questions troubled us (apart from fear)

- How could we (the occupants of the bunker) contact the outside world?
- How could we ensure food for its occupants?

“After difficult deliberations and consultations among all the occupants of the bunker, I decided that I, alone, would go to the *akcja* and if I managed to survive, I could be the liaison between the occupants of the bunker and the outside world. As for the problem of ensuring food, the lack of which had already begun to bother, especially my mother, who was a sickly woman, we found a solution. There was a sweets factory in the yard of our house. At the opinion of all the neighbours, we broke down its doors and took cocoa and sugar out of the warehouse, and all the occupants of the bunker (or both bunkers – I do not remember) received a decent ration. We also took care of stocking up on candles and water.

“On the day the *akcja* took place in our quarter (the fourth *akcja*), we all entered the bunker and I, alone, stood in the Nowy Rynek, where thousands of Jews were brought from all the surrounding streets. Until I came face to face with a group of officers, led by Degenhardt...

“He pointed with his stick that I should turn right. Together with the other survivors, I was sent to the ‘Metros’ factory, one of the concentration places for those who remained alive. There, I learned that the smuggling of my father and brother by Kurland had been successful. I met my father and my brother alive, but he was sent to work and was not with us in ‘Metros’. Despite the troubles in ‘Metros’, where the frequent *akcje* were particularly distressing, I was encouraged by the situation of the family and by the feeling that for now everyone was alive.

“True, we were scattered, mother and my sister in the bunker, father and I in the ‘Metros’ and the brother in the Raków foundry. In the ‘Metros’, I followed the family’s decision, continuing to hide and to flee during the *akcje*.

“The occupants of the bunker stayed there for about three weeks. Through Jewish workers, who worked on the collection of Jewish property in the ‘Big Ghetto’, we ensured that food was brought into the bunker. At the end, a Gestapo man discovered the bunker. All the women gave him their jewellery and begged for their lives. The jewellery helped and all the occupants of the bunker were brought to the ‘Small Ghetto’.”