



In those turbulent days, during the beautiful Polish autumn at the end of August 1939, Josef went about immersed in thought, unable to decide what would be with him in the end. What was he to do with his little bit of life on God's earth? He felt a closeness to Rywka - the closeness of the profound sorrow after their child, which united them for eternity - but, at the same time, also a [sense of] alienation, as their being together had brought neither of them any joy. Since their marriage, neither she nor he had had one minute of true serenity.

Just then, it happened that Josef needed to be a representative at a convention of the Polish typographical workers. This convention was held in the city of Katowice, next to the German border<sup>1</sup>. It was only there, at the convention, that it first became clear to him that war was unavoidable. The German army was standing at the ready, awaiting a command from Hitler - may his name be obliterated. Very soon, any day now, the German war machine would embark on its awful work. The Nazi destroyers would set out on a hunt across Poland, and the earth under everyone's feet would become barren.

Josef felt that there was only one woman - one close friend - a friend whom he could sit next to and talk, and pour out his heart, bitter with grief and pain, about his failed life and the fear that was now enveloping him. This was Miriam. She was now in the mountains. Perhaps he could have at least one peaceful hour there, in the mountains, where he would be able to repose from the wild fear and the sadness tormenting him.

For Miriam, Josef's arrival in Zakopane was unexpected. She saw how tired, troubled and sorrowful he looked. In Josef's gaze, as he looked at her, which was as if pleading her to help him - she already knew that Rywka was no longer in Warsaw and that he was, once more, on his own. Neither of them spoke. The mountain air in Zakopane soothed Josef to some extent.

At Miriam's side, that peace, which he had always hoped to once enjoy, came over him. But something was wrong here. The peril of war was great. Yet they were both having moments of tranquillity. Who was playing here with the destiny of both of them? Was he perhaps destined to this bit of joy in life precisely at her side, with Miriam? And what would happen there [in Paris] with his legal wife, with Rywka? Miriam's quiet words lulled him to sleep and strengthened him.

After the couple of peaceful days and nights in Zakopane next to Miriam, Josef returned to Warsaw. One day later, Miriam also returned to Warsaw. Miriam decided to be by Josef's side and not leave him on his own. On the way, she stopped in Warta, saw her elderly mother, and immediately departed for Warsaw.

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Although Katowice is actually nearer to the border with the former Czechoslovakia than the German one, Czechoslovakia had, at the time, already been invaded by Nazi Germany.]

Upon [her] arrival in Warsaw, in the early morning hours, the two of them entered a restaurant. This was on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939. As they were eating their appetiser, they suddenly heard a terrible explosion, accompanied by gunfire, which then continued incessantly for hours on end.

The unavoidable had happened. Nazi aircraft were already hailing down from all directions at the edges of town, flying low and raining down fire and death. Once the destroyers had done their bloody work and it became quiet for a while, the two of them went to Miriam's dwelling. Miriam lived not far from that restaurant. The trams had stopped - the electricity had been cut off. The city was in a state of upheaval. [There were] victims. People dug trenches, barricaded themselves and prepared to put up a resistance. The fear of death by the bombs, which the Nazi aeroplanes hailed down upon the city every couple of hours, continued for several days. During these days, Miriam and Josef were together. The fate of that bloody game of war held them together.

The events of the War proceeded with lightning speed - bombs over Warsaw, thousands of wounded and casualties, trails of marching military and refugees from all the towns and shtetls. With giant strides, the War was nearing the gates of Warsaw. By the fourth and fifth days of the War, it was already clear that Warsaw would fall into the hands of the Germans. By orders of the party's authorities, all the important documents and the union's membership books were destroyed, so that they should not fall into the hands of Hitler's men.

The party's leadership decided that anyone, among the party members, who wished to do so, should leave Warsaw and cross to the other bank of the Wisła [River], where it was hoped that a resistance would yet be mounted. The party leaders settled that they would leave on 6<sup>th</sup> September at ten o'clock in the morning, and everyone was to meet at the [Warsaw-]Wilno [Vilnius] railway terminal.

This moment was painful. It was difficult for Josef to leave Warsaw.

Comrade Mydler was also to leave Warsaw along with Josef but, upon saying goodbye to his wife and children, he broke down and could go no further. Josef was at Comrade Mydler's house just then. It became even heavier on Josef's heart. At the last minute, he went to his own house and gathered the few necessary things. He looked at his home's four walls with profound sorrow. The hardest thing for him was to part with the little valise, which held his deceased little daughter Sure'le's belongings. Among other little things in the valise lay her doll -Josef soaked the little doll with his tears.

Miriam encouraged him to leave. Had it not been for her, who knows if Josef would have been able to move from the spot? At the last minute, Miriam also decided to go together with everybody. Upon parting company, Comrade Mydler, with tears in his eyes, pressed fifty zloty into Josef's hand and said to him, "You are going away. I am aware of your financial situation. Take this - you will need it for the road. We shall somehow manage here".

When Josef and Miriam arrived, at the appointed time, at the [Warsaw-]Wilno railway station, they already found groups of fellow members. They were supposed to take a train, but a hail of bombs from incoming German aeroplanes separated everyone. They ran in all directions.

There was no more talk of travelling on a train. They decided to march on foot. The route [after crossing to the eastern bank of the Wisła] was via Mińsk Mazowiecki, Kałuszyn, Siedlce, Międzyrzec [Podlaski], Biała Podlaska, Janów [Podlaski], Wysokie Litewskie [Vysokaje, Belarus], Kamieniec [Kamyenyets], Prużana [Pruzhany], Kartuz-Bereza, Drohiczyn, [and finally] Pinsk. Wherever the group arrived, they were chased by German aeroplanes. On foot, they went through burning cities and marched past piles of dead and wounded.

The roads were filled with cars and people. From Siedlce, they had the opportunity to walk in the group with Henryk Erlich, the renowned Bundist leader, who later perished at the hands of the Soviet "justice". This group also included the late Szlojme Mendelson, Emanuel Szerer and his wife, the late Chaim Wasser, Abram Stolar with his wife and son, and others.

Thus, they reached Pinsk. Who knows if this group would ever have made it there, were it not for the loyalty of the Bund members, whom the refugees met along the way? Josef drew much of the strength to complete this route from Comrade Erlich. More than once, they had to fall to the ground due to the incoming Nazi aircraft. Comrade Erlich, with his dignified figure and self-control, his firm steps and intelligent smile, encouraged everyone to walk on and on.

Josef heard the last explosions of the German bombs when he arrived in the city of Pinsk on 17<sup>th</sup> September. In Pinsk, too, there were many victims. In Pinsk, Josef also found out that they would not need to continue walking onwards, as the Red Army was approaching from the other direction.

On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1939, the Red Army marched into the city of Pinsk. Josef remained in Pinsk until 13<sup>th</sup> October. Other Bundist comrades later arrived, such as Nojech [?], Sura Szweber and others.

Pinsk was taken by the Red Army without any resistance. On the third day of the Soviet occupation, it was announced that on 23<sup>rd</sup> September, during the whole day, no one in the city was to show himself in the streets surrounding the large Polish church, for this church would be blown up with dynamite. Why – nobody knew. People told each other different stories.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon, a terrible explosion was heard, accompanied by gunfire. The blast and gunfire lasted a few minutes, and then it became quiet. From afar, a fire was still seen blazing where the church had stood, and later [just] clouds of smoke. The ruin smouldered until [all that] remained of the church was a mountain of ash.

On the following day, it was told that Polish priests, who had refused to submit to the Red Army, had been hiding in that church. It was also whispered, very secretly, in the little Jewish streets, that the general who had taken Pinsk, and was now in the city, was a Jew - the son of one Reb Pinches, who years earlier had been shot, along with other Jews, by Polish legionnaires in the war between Poland and Russia. At the time, in 1919, Polish soldiers had

led innocent Jews up to the tall wall of the church and had shot them all for no particular reason. The Soviet Jewish general had now taken revenge and destroyed the church.

At the time, Josef's situation was bitter. He reported to the newly-organised Commercial Employees Professional Union in Pinsk, and asked for work<sup>2</sup>. At the union, they demanded his entire pedigree - personal and political. Josef told them he belonged to the Bund. He did not receive any work. Meanwhile, news came that members of Josef's party were being arrested in an entire array of cities. Among the detainees was the leader of the Bund, Wiktor Alter. Josef saw Wiktor Alter for the last time in Międzyrzec [Podlaski], during a consultation [they held]. Comrade Alter was then appointed to set out with a group to Lublin, to carry on there, in any way possible, with his work against Hitler's invasion. There, in Międzyrzec, Josef said goodbye to Comrade Alter for the last time.

After the unsettling news regarding the hunt for Bundists by the Soviet regime, it was decided that Comrade Henryk Erlich should leave Pinsk. Parting company with Comrade Erlich was hard for everyone. All the members exchanged kisses with him - with tears in their eyes - and it is certain that none at the time had an inkling that these would be their last [parting wishes of] "stay healthy" with their leader and teacher.

It was certainly a great pain to Josef's heart when, several days later, he found out that Comrade Erlich had been arrested in Brisk [Brześć].

When it became known that Wilno would be given back to Lithuania<sup>3</sup>, Josef decided to move to Wilno. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1939, Josef left Pinsk along with a group of comrades. They arrived in Wilno on 15<sup>th</sup> October. Immediately upon alighting from the train, the news reached them that dear Comrade Josef Aronowicz, who had helped so much in developing the Labour movement in Warta, had been arrested the previous night by the Soviet authorities, together with all the other members of the Bundist Committee in Wilno. Once more, the soul is torn. Why? Wherefore? There was no answer from anyone.

When Wilno was given over to Lithuania, the situation changed once again. Thousands of Jewish and Christian refugees arrived in Wilno. A refugee committee was formed. Josef and Comrade Miriam<sup>4</sup> set about organising a soup kitchen for the Jewish refugees. The local Bund members also helped, and displayed great devotion to the work in general.

The members of the refugee committee in Wilno were Josef Gutgold, Jeruchom Rudawski, Leon Oler, Mojsze Perenson, Menachem Rozenbaum and Lajbel Berkman.

Josef also participated in the newly-formed refugee committee during the whole time he was in Wilno. Postal contact was established with the outside world. As soon as the Lithuanians took over, letters began to arrive from Poland and France. The takeover of Wilno did not go by without a pogrom, which the Lithuanians and Poles perpetrated on the Jews in the city. In that respect, the two enemies - Lithuanians and Poles - made peace. They both smashed windowpanes and beat Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: The organised professional unions acted as labour exchanges, finding jobs for their unemployed members.]

<sup>3</sup> [TN: During this period, Lithuania was a neutral country.]

<sup>4</sup> [TN: Appears as Comrade Andzia Munowicz in Federman's memoirs in "Czenstochover Yidn".]

After a few months, the work of the Aid Committee in Wilno intensified and greatly widened. It set up accommodation to spend the night in and distributed clothing. Cultural activity also began to be established. Every day, at the Aid Committee's kitchen, over five hundred lunches were given out to the Jews in town suffering need.

The Lithuanian authorities, however, were not indulgent of the refugee committee's work, and they cast a bad eye upon it. Once, the police raided the premises, arrested several dozen individuals and made many of them leave Wilno, forcibly settling them in other Lithuanian towns, such as Poniewież [Panevėžys], Ukmergė [Wiłkomierz] and other small *shtetls*.

The fate that also befell Josef, who was to travel to Ukmergė. There, too, a house was set up for the refugees. Josef thought that he would already be spending the time of the War in Lithuania. From Lithuania, Josef sent food parcels to Poland, and he would receive letters to the effect that the parcels had arrived. Josef also received a letter from his sister Cirla, in which she wrote to him that he was her only hope. He also corresponded with his wife in France, and she informed him that she was making efforts to bring him to Paris. Josef would also receive letters from America during this period in Lithuania. His good friend Mirl also discovered Josef's whereabouts. Upon receiving the first fifteen dollars from her, Josef's joy and encouragement were great. This was in the beginning of 1940.

A normal life was established in Lithuania under a temporary Lithuanian government which was friendly to Soviet Russia, which had its military bases in Lithuania. Josef had, more than once, the opportunity to speak with Soviet soldiers and officers. They did not make a strong impression with their equipment. In the conversations with the Soviet soldiers, [regarding] how friendship could be possible between a socialist country like Soviet Russia and Hitler's Germany, the soldiers would reply with these words, "Our Stalin is in charge of the policies - and if this is what he does, it is good for us, and [the outcome] will be good".

During this period, ostensible elections to the Lithuanian Parliament were held in Lithuania. Josef experienced these elections while he was in Ukmergė. Only one electoral list ran. The outcome of the elections was clear to everyone - it would be a Lithuanian Soviet republic.

Politics, at the time, were interpreted in various ways. On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1940, Josef was in Wilno, where May Day was celebrated at laden tables, with speeches and congratulations. In his speech, Josef naively called out, with true guilelessness, "At the moment, I am unable to show, with figures, how it will happen. But I have a profound conviction that the redemption in this war will come from Soviet Russia".

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The arrests of Bundist still continued. The persecution against the members cast fear in the ranks of the masses of Bundist refugees in Lithuania. The contacts, that had been established with America, awoke the hopes of being able to travel there from Lithuania. Even though it seemed like a fantastic dream, with what fantasies did a person not go about at that time?

Together with the saved members, who were in the various towns and *shtetls* of Lithuania, Josef began to seriously contemplate saving himself to America, to free himself both from the German beast and the evil Soviet GPU<sup>5</sup>, which was also carrying out its work openly and freely here in the Lithuanian state.

In Wilno, the rescued Bundist members did not stop when faced with any difficulties to bring over their relatives and friends from the German and Soviet-occupied side. In both occupied lands, the same dark fate awaited the Bundists and other socialist groups. Also, here in Lithuania, the GPU had an eye on any former Socialist, Bundist or *Poalei Zion* member - yet there was still a hope that, from there, from Lithuania, one might be able to escape to America, if there was only the possibility of acquiring some visa from the free, democratic countries.

Hundreds of Jewish refugees stood at the frontiers, where Hitler's murderers were in control, and also in the border territories ruled by the Soviet regime. The refugees were languishing and longing to streak across the two borders. Many managed to cross over these two occupied borderlands, but more than one victim fell to the bullets of the German or Soviet border guards, whenever they caught someone at the borders. It was easier at the Lithuanian-Soviet border - the Lithuanians let Jewish refugees through for money. They, at least, allowed themselves to be bought off.

The number of visas to America, given to the refugees, was limited. It was decided to rescue first those, who were known to be sought to be arrested by the Soviet authorities - those who had a name as leaders of the Bund or *Poalei Zion*. The hunt for Bundists and just socialists was ongoing. A Bundist was in mortal peril with the Nazi murderers in Warsaw and, just the same, with the Soviet rulers in the supposedly independent Lithuania. The eye of the GPU sought victims mainly among the Bundist groups.

So, consequently, the members made efforts to save, first and foremost, those Bundists who were in jeopardy of being arrested. There were countless obstacles and complications, but who thought of that? Rescuing and sending abroad the largest possible number of members in peril of being caught today or tomorrow by the Soviet secret agents - that was the order of the day!

There was a day then, which was etched in Josef's memory. It happened in Wilno. Comrades warned Josef to show himself in the street as little as possible, until he received the [transit<sup>6</sup>] visa from the Soviet Consul. They were looking for him, just as they were looking for many of the Bundist comrades staying in Wilno. It was better for him to sit at home. This was not easy for Josef.

And then Josef received the dark news that Rywka Pat, the wife of Jakow Pat, had died suddenly. She had suffered a heart attack and collapsed. Rywka Pat had already received a visa from the American Consul to travel to America, and was awaiting the transit visa from

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<sup>5</sup> [TN: Russian abbreviation of the State Political Directorate, which was the Russian intelligence service and secret police in 1922-23. By 1940, when this part of the story is set, the agency's name had been changed to the Main Directorate of State Security (GUGB).]

<sup>6</sup> [TN: According to Federman's memoirs in "Czenstochover Yidn", at this point, he had already been granted the US visa (as described in this book in chapter 16), and was waiting for a transit visa to pass through the USSR on his way to America via Japan.]

the Soviet Consul. She had been one of the lucky ones. And now Death had stopped the close [female] comrade's heart. Josef was unable to stay sitting at home. They warned him not to attend the funeral, for he could still be arrested. The GPU agents were lurking, and they were sure to appear at the cemetery during the funeral of a well-known Bundist activist.

Nevertheless, Josef, along with other comrades who concealed themselves as he did, did come to see off Comrade Rywka Pat to her eternal repose. He knew his conscience would give him no rest were he to remain sitting at home. Josef ignored the danger of being detained, and came to the Wilno [Jewish] cemetery to shed a tear over the death of a person for whom he bore, in his heart, such great respect and affection and who had now, suddenly, on the eve of her journey to America to her husband, Comrade Jakow Pat, been so brutally taken away!

