

# 19



Stefa and Wiktor were living their own lives. Wiktor studied and became a teacher at a Yiddish school. Stefa worked in a clothing shop. It was not long before she opened a business of her own, and worked her way up to quite a good degree. In due course, she met a local young man, and they were soon to be wed. Josef was happy that both Wiktor and Stefa had fought their way to something. He had *naches* [Heb., contentment] from them, as if he had been their true father.

It just so happened at the time that Josef stopped working at the workshop. The labour was beyond his strength. Comrade Artur [Szmul-Mordechaj] Zygielbojm, who was then the manager of the *Zukunft* [Future] journal, offered him a trip to Boston, to lead a campaign for the paper there. Josef gladly accepted the proposal.

In those days, Josef remembered that his former betrothed Hela, with whom he had written *tnuyim*<sup>1</sup> in Warta twenty-five years earlier, was living in Boston. He thought that now he would have the opportunity to see his former bride. Why should he not see her? How would she receive him? [He was] curious. As far as he recalled, Hela had departed to America on good terms with him. She had surely forgotten the disappointment she had had when he, Josef, had relinquished the match.

Josef did not have Hela's address. All he knew was that her husband was a barber. Upon arriving in Boston, Josef proceeded to the Jewish neighbourhood and began going from one barbershop to the other, until he came upon the name "Wolf Lewit's Barbershop" in a barbershop window. He entered, sat on a chair and waited his turn. At once, he recognised Wolf. It was him - Wolf Lewit, Hela's husband. He had aged a little, but he was the same silent young man whom he had once known well in Warta. Wolf failed to recognise Josef.

With interest, Josef watched as a woman looked in through the window and, when Josef had a good look at the woman's face, he recognised her also. Yes, it was Hela. She had only become slightly fuller, but had almost not at all changed. Hela entered the shop, looked at Josef and called her husband to one side. He was just then in the middle of cutting a customer's hair. Josef heard her say, "That man sitting in your shop looks incredibly like Josef from Warta." Here, Josef was unable to contain himself any longer and cheerfully exclaimed, "Yes, it's Josef - that's who I am!".

Their surprise was great. They conversed and remembered Warta, with words of sorrow and joy being intermingled. She asked him over to dinner that evening. She would present, to him, her three fine children - two boys and a girl. Yes, they were content and thanked God for their life here in Boston - only the news from Poland, the war there and the murderous Nazis did

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<sup>1</sup> [TN: Heb., lit. "conditions" (תנאים), viz. the conditions of betrothal which are signed by the bride and groom to be upon their engagement to be wed. The term "tnuyim" in Yiddish is synonymous with "engagement" in English.]

not let them sleep at night. [They had] left the whole family behind there. Hela said good day and parted company with Josef until the evening.

It was on that evening, sitting in Hela's home surrounded by her children and friends, that the radio announced the dismal news that Hitler's Germany had attacked Soviet Russia without a declaration of war.

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Following the great victories of Hitler's armies, who set upon Europe like a wild storm, this news was, for Josef, both terrifying and gladdening. Josef thought, "Good, good! Now the Nazi beast will be stifled. Now, Hitler, may his name be obliterated, will drown in his own blood. The German murderers have been occupying themselves with the destruction of all Jews but, with Russia's help, the Germans must lose".

Josef remembered the words he had said at the 1940 May Day celebration in Wilno. At the time, Josef had thought very differently of Soviet Russia. He then believed, just as thousands like him, that it was this country, where the social revolution had taken place which would put an end to German and Italian fascism. "The world", Josef thought at the time, "will be redeemed with the help of the Red Army".

[Then] the horrendous Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour took place. America entered the War. But everyone's belief that fascism would finally be shattered was strong. The hope of defeating the mighty Nazi war machine increased.

Josef had a very strong desire to make himself useful in the fight against the barbarians. He gladly welcomed the news of the military mobilisation, which came immediately following the war declaration against Japan and Nazi Germany.

At once, he reported, wishing to become a common soldier. His youthful appearance helped him in this. However, when they inquired as to his age, they answered him that he was fit enough to be a soldier, but that due to his age, they would not take him as a soldier, for the time being, unless the times would require it. Josef left the draft station in dismay. On the way home, he stopped at a hospital and gave blood to the Red Cross, which was in such need for the critically wounded soldiers.

He envied the younger comrades among the refugees with whom he had come as one to America, who actually had the privilege of becoming American soldiers. In those first weeks of the War, ever more and more Jewish refugees joined the American army. Those young Jewish lads, who had barely had a taste of the American freedom, rushed to stand face-to-face with the Nazi murderers. As Jews and as Americans, they vigorously desired to make the Germans pay for their bloody deeds against the Jewish people.

Josef had a consolation for the disappointment of not having been accepted as a soldier, in that Wiktor, who was officially inscribed as his son, did get taken as a soldier in the American army. Josef felt uplifted. He had rescued a Jewish boy, registered him as his son - and now he was an American soldier. Stefa's groom was also taken to the army.

Every early morning, Josef saw how parents and family accompanied young lads, with tears and silent weeping, to Pennsylvania Station on 34<sup>th</sup> Street in New York. He saw the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sweethearts, bidding farewell to their own flesh and blood, the young soldiers. He identified with the pain of the parents and all the relatives standing at the railway station, next to the iron railing leading to the train.

And, more than once, Josef heard a despairing Jewish mother cry out these words, "What did America need this war for?". Josef would not be able to contain himself and would exclaim, half in consolation and half in reproach, "The war is against the entire Jewish people! They are slaughtering our brothers and sisters just because they are Jews! We must take revenge for the innocent blood spilt!"

For Stefa, taking away her betrothed to the battlefield was a strong blow. She had already been through enough in her young life; at the beginning - the gruesome days in Poland, trudging the roads, pursued by the Nazi military and the aeroplanes hailing down death; later - the terror and experiences while wandering across Russia; and now, once again, the spectre of bloody war. Stefa's nerves were too weak to withstand all this. Her mood was dark - depression overtook her.

One fine, early morning, when Josef was preparing to go to work, they informed him over the telephone that Stefa had disappeared. Already, she had not been home for a couple of days. Had Josef maybe seen her? Had she perhaps come to him, as to her father? Josef did not go to work that morning.

At once, he went to Stefa's home and discovered that, lately, since they had taken her betrothed into military service, Stefa had gone about as if bewildered, without eating or drinking. They would often find her by the Hudson River, standing thoughtful and sad. They would just barely bring her home, and make attempts to console her. Josef went to the Hudson River, wandered about for long hours on the bank, between the trees, until he found her in a corner, behind a tree.

Stefa burst out in tears and fell into Josef's arms like a child - Josef received her and comforted her. He did not leave her. He went with her to a doctor - a psychiatrist. Stefa was committed to an institution. She spent a few months in hospital until she came back to herself, and regained her healthy and pretty appearance.

Now Stefa waited for her sweetheart patiently and hopefully.

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Meanwhile, the news from the Jews in Poland became worse. Day in and day out, Jews were perishing, being led away like sheep to the slaughter. Horrific news came of hunger, dearth, mass graves and indescribable massacres in the ghettos and gas chambers.

Like most survivors, inside himself, Josef carried a sense of guilt. Why did he deserve to live here in peace and safety? How was he different from those Jews there in the ghettos? His

heart was filled with sorrow. Josef would lie at night, on his bed, unable to sleep. He imagined scenes, one more horrifying than the other.

In the meantime, Comrade Artur Zygielbojm travelled to London on a mission from the Bund, as a representative in the Polish Sejm-in-exile. Comrade Zygielbojm [just] could not sit calmly! He was stirred by the tragic news from the Jews in Poland and felt that he must do something. In the newspapers, Josef read the news about Comrade Zygielbojm's appearances in the Polish government-in-exile and in the English circles of government.

Zygielbojm demanded action, acts of revenge, warnings that the Allies not to allow the destruction of a people. He demanded putting a stop to the heaven-screaming massacres before it was too late, when there would be no one left to save. But upon perceiving that his words were as *"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness"* [Isaiah 40:3], this great Jew and loyal socialist took his own life. The martyr, Artur Zygielbojm, wished to rouse the world's slumbering conscience with his hallowed demise. Perhaps, by giving up his life as a sacrifice, he would achieve something for his suffering people.

Josef held the newspaper in his hand and read the news of Zygielbojm's death. Tears ran from his eyes. Indeed, who had the strength? Who could be equal to that wonderful man, the martyr Zygielbojm?

Josef felt proud that he had had the honour of being acquainted with that chosen fighter and martyr! For himself, he found no peace. The unrest inside him increased and the feeling of guilt, that he had survived, did not abate.

[Then] began the great military wrangle - the fight between the gigantic Nazi and Russian armies in Stalingrad [later Volgograd]. It was known that Stalingrad would decide the fate of the world because there, in Stalingrad, both Hitler's armies and the Russian armies threw in their last strengths. Like colossal beasts, like monsters in human shape, the Nazis fought. But they were unable to overcome the selflessness, the heroism of the Red Army, the love of the Russian for his motherland, for which he was prepared to give up his last drop of blood. And victory came. There, in the city of Stalingrad, the downfall of the German murderer began. The Nazi beast was beaten in Stalingrad. The miracle had happened!

In those days, people were willing to forget all the sins of the Soviet state. Everyone mentioned the Red Army with a blessing on his lips. Hope was revived in Josef, too. Could it be? Might the country, whose motto is *"Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt Euch!"*<sup>2</sup>, put an end to all the suffering of the working people across the globe?

The Nazi armies began retreating. The day of complete victory over the barbarians was nearing. The redemption of humanity was approaching. Here, Josef read in the press that the Soviet regime was freeing many of those who had been arrested. He read the names. These were Bundist comrades - socialists - whom he remembered from Warsaw and other cities in Poland. Josef's heart was now filled with joy and anticipation.

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<sup>2</sup> [TN: Ger., lit. "Proletarians of all countries, unite!", but soon popularised in English as "Workers of the world, unite!"; from "The Communist Manifesto" (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.]