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By his own contrivances and strong willpower, Josef saved three souls from the Soviet-Nazi hell. Josef took advantage of the opportunity, when the Polish consulate was still active in Lithuania. Josef went and had a foreign pass [viz. passport] issued, and showed the Consul a bogus marriage certificate from a rabbi in Wilno, to the effect that he had been married here sometime earlier. Naturally, [the person] he added to his pass as his wife [was] Comrade¹ Miriam.

To that same pass, Josef added the young Comrade Stefa from the *Zukunft*² organisation in Łódź and the young activist Wiktor, a leader of that same *Zukunft* organisation in Wilno, who was being sought, by the Bolshevik agents, to be arrested. Soviet agents had even already been in Comrade Wiktor's room in the middle of the night, but Comrade Wiktor had fortunately snuck out through a side door and had disappeared. Wiktor hid with comrades, each night in a different house. Josef declared the two youths, Stefa and Wiktor, as his children. The pass with the names of the three souls - his "wife" Miriam and the two "offspring" Stefa and Wiktor - was stamped, and Josef was provided with the required departure visas.

It was during those days that Josef received a letter from his female friend Mirl in New York, to the effect that the Jewish Labour Committee in New York was making attempts to affect a wartime rescue of the well-known Jewish labour activists from Poland, who were in Lithuania. The letter, with this news, no longer seemed like a fantasy at all - it could actually become a reality! Mirl wrote that she would do everything possible to bring Josef to America.

Meanwhile, the War situation was worsening. The Germans went from victory to victory. The embassies of the countries, to which one could still escape, gradually began to close. And when Josef entered the American consulate once, and the Consul declared he was willing to grant him the visa to America, Josef could not believe his own ears. The Consul asked Josef if he knew William Green in America. Josef replied that he knew very well who William Green was - he was the President of the American Federation of Labour [AFL]. Josef told the American consul that he had met William Green at a convention of professional unions in Poland. "That will do!", the Consul answered, "I'll make [every] effort to secure your visa as quickly as possible, because the consulate is about to be closed."

It was only after obtaining the American visa for himself and the three additional people inscribed [in his passport] - Miriam, Wiktor and Stefa - that a frantic rush ensued to secure the transit visas through Soviet Russia and Japan - the only route to reach America at the time.

Josef was one of the counted lucky refugees in Wilno to receive the transit visa from the Soviet consul. Regretfully, the Soviet transit visas for Wiktor and Stefa were withheld. They only

¹ [TN: The Yiddish term "chaverte", which is used in the original, can mean either female friend, girlfriend or female comrade/member in the same party/organisation - all of which are correct in this case.]

² [TN: Ger., Yid., "Future"; the Bundist youth organisation.]

received these visas later, sometime afterwards, in Moscow. In the meantime, Josef and Miriam travelled off without them.

The transit visa which Josef had obtained, after many difficulties, enabled him and Miriam to journey to America through Soviet Russia and later Japan.

People of different classes stood, day in and day out, in long queues in front of the Soviet consulate building, most of them Jews. Josef's turn came. He entered a room. Josef looked about and perceived the Consul and several assistants sitting at a table. The Consul regarded Josef, looked at him in silence and, without saying a word, took the papers and certificates from him. He gave Josef another pressing look and, in a stern tone, uttered the following scanty words, "Yes, yes – [all] is in order. Josef Szalit, you will come again in two days' time, at nine o'clock in the evening. Do not come to me, but to the floor above, room № 17".

Coming in the evening did not promise Josef anything good. Josef already knew what it meant when Soviet people, who were the *de facto* rulers of the supposedly Lithuanian republic, told one to come in the evening and not during the official daytime hours. Josef went about during those two days in grief. Wiktor, Miriam and Stefa, whose entire hope of escaping to America depended on Josef, were also uneasy. Josef already knew that many of his comrades, who had been asked to come to the consulate building in the evening, disappeared from those evening visits, and what became of them is unknown to this day.

Two days later, Josef arrived at the Soviet consulate building at the appointed hour, nine o'clock in the evening, as he had been instructed. He had no other choice. Were he not to come, they would have immediately searched for him in town - which would certainly have meant an arrest. Upon entering room №17 on the third floor, Josef saw before him three officials in civilian clothes. On the table lay black revolvers, with their muzzles pointing in Josef's direction. One of the officials, who was sitting in the middle between the two others, obviously already knew who Josef was. He glanced at the papers and immediately started asking Josef one question after another:

"Do you read Russian?"

"Yes", Josef replied.

"What kind of books have you read?"

"The works of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky", Josef quietly responded.

"Which of the Soviet writers have you read?"

Josef remained silent for a while, but immediately realising that saying nothing for too long would be suspicious, he declared, "You are fully aware, sir, that the pre-war Polish government did not let in any Soviet books. How would I have been able to read the Soviet writers?"

During this questioning about reading [material], the investigator stared at Josef with his cold, unrevealing eyes and numb features. He stared and said nothing. He finally went on to ask

Josef about his political affiliation. Josef naturally denied being a member of the Bund or any other socialist organisation. The interrogator remained unsatisfied.

“You’re lying!”, the man with the cold eyes exclaimed to Josef. “You must tell the full - and only the full - truth! Go home. Come tomorrow morning at nine. You probably will not be receiving those transit visas. You’re not telling the truth. Every Jew belongs to a party - don’t tell me stories!”.

Josef left the Soviet consulate building a crushed man. His knees almost buckled under him. He barely just dragged his way through the streets. He feared going home. Every [little] while, he looked round to see if he was not being followed. “My fate”, Josef thought, “has already been sealed. I already will not get away from the bands of Soviet murderers. Once they sniff a Bundist, they will already shorten his years. Still, am I to completely abandon myself, to completely lose hope? Who knows? Maybe I actually am destined to receive the transit visa for myself and my three close ones, Miriam, Stefa and Wiktor”.

On the following morning, once again, Josef arrived punctually. He came, even though he knew he was risking his life by going to the Soviet consulate building. He had spent that night in a different dwelling, with a Wilno Jew - a cobbler by the name of Reb Jankel. [This] Reb Jankel [was] a dear Jew - he let Josef spend the night, and even gave him something tasty to eat from his scant provisions. Like most Wilno Jews, this Reb Jankel was an *ish toiv* [Heb., good man] - hospitable to an extreme. This Jew never inquired what or when. He cried out in his delightful Wilno Yiddish, “*Meyheicho teisy*³, you may spend the night here. One must always be ready to help a Jew!”.

This time, when Josef entered the consulate building and showed the note [with the name of] whom he needed to see, the man at the table sent him to a different room - №38. Josef well remembers this number, this room and the new investigator, with his sickly, unwell appearance. This was the Consul himself - obviously a Jew. Next to him sat the previous interrogator - the man with the cold, thieving eyes, who had questioned Josef two nights before.

The Consul, with the sickly appearance, looked at Josef and at the note. He then looked once more at Josef, and again at the note. Now, he began to shuffle through papers on his table. While he was doing this, he spoke silently with his neighbour, who had accused Josef of not telling the truth two days earlier.

Suddenly, the Consul asked Josef angrily, “Why are you travelling to America?”

Josef had been waiting for a question of this sort, sooner or later. Composedly, and in a confident tone, Josef replied, “I am travelling to America with my wife and children, because I have relatives there. I am tired of the war. In addition, I am a sick man”.

The Consul inquired further, “To what party do you belong to, Józef Szalit? To the Bund? Admit it!”

³ [TN: Talmudic Aramaic, lit., “from wherever you arrive” (מֵהֵיכָּא תֵיַתִּי); expression akin to the English “it is not important” or “whatever”, in common parlance.]

Josef shook his head, "No, I do not belong to the Bund."

"Perhaps you belong to the PPS?"

"I am a Jew", Josef retorted. "How could a Jew possibly belong to the PPS?"

The Consul was unimpressed with Josef's response. He coughed, and his sickly face turned crimson. In a rage, he cried out, "Don't tell me any stories - Jew or no Jew! And what is Liberman? Is he not a Jew? Liberman belongs to the PPS!"

Josef remained silent, feigning ignorance. After saying nothing awhile, Josef said naively, "Mr Consul, I do not understand your remark about Liberman. I do not know such a name, because I have never been a political man." The Consul came back at Josef, "Well, all Jews lie!"

This pierced Josef's heart. He wanted to say something – to respond to this sold-out Jewish-Soviet high official and tell him what he thought of him. But he reminded himself where he was and began speaking of how feeble his health was. Josef suddenly remembered the operation he had had years earlier, and the scar the operation had left on his body. Without thinking too much, Josef pulled up his shirt, loosened his trousers and, showing the scar on the right side of his abdomen, said with tears in his eyes, "Here, look! Dear sir, have mercy. I am a sick man after an operation - grant me the possibility of travelling to America with my wife and children".

Through his teary eyes, Josef saw how his words had softened the heart of the Soviet-Jewish consul, himself an ailing man. Maybe it was because he - the consul, who was a sick man himself - had been softened, and he had been touched upon perceiving the healed wound on Josef's body. Or perhaps the Jew in him had been revealed, and had awoken in him the eternal Jewish sense of compassion, which a Jew bears in his heart, wherever he may be. One way or the other, Josef noticed how the Consul began quietly deliberating with his neighbour - the one with the cold, thieving eyes. Josef caught these words, "Someone like him will not work in America against the Soviet Union".

The Consul turned to face Josef, "Well, all right. Remember not to say anything bad about the Soviet Union [and] the peoples of the USSR, who are the friends of all the oppressed nations, and the friends of humankind".

As if in a fog, Josef then heard a long speech from the Consul on the great merits of the Soviet State and its achievements for the benefit of humanity.

Josef paid the required sum. An indescribable joy engulfed him when the Consul held out to him the pass with the stamped transit visa. He ran out of the consulate building and speedily took the good news to his close ones.