



TORCHYN BECOMES RUSSIAN AGAIN

On September 1, 1939 Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The German air force destroyed the Polish air force on the ground. Tank units sliced through the heavily defended Polish lines, and masses of infantry followed.

Mischa: Before the Germans attacked Poland there was a political pact between Russia and Germany, between Molotov and Von Ribbentrop; they made their famous **Bug line** that divided Poland. That was the Bug River: **Torchin was on the Russian side of the river.**

This was done before they started hostilities. And then our part they claimed. Since the Ukrainians were in the slight majority. They claimed it for themselves, the Russians. So when the Poles withdrew the Russian tanks came in to cover this town. And the first thing they did was to call an election. In the election you had to vote for a committee. Who do you want to govern this region? And they gave you a ballot. But on the ballot there was just 5 names. They still do it in Russia. You have no choice. You don't have 2 parties or 3 parties. It's just one party.

And the famous song that the Russians sing is: "Smarty party of the Bolsheviks; which they cannot make mistakes; they do everything for the people, by the people;" and the whole story. And you cannot write-in because you walk in the booth and there is no curtain. And if you make any move it is noted. There is always eyes looking. So they called an election. They elected, of course, a committee. The committee made up a list of undesirables. And I happened to be on the list. Everybody had to go and vote. If you didn't go you were on the black list. If you are not with me, you are against me. So you usually hear about elections 99.6%--just like that. They always have the greatest turnout. Here in the United States, along with 2 parties fighting, we have 45% of the electors.



Misha: They were after me because I was a Zionist and a leader of the organization. I was a "counter-revolutionary." That's what they would call it. When I found out I was on the list, I took off.

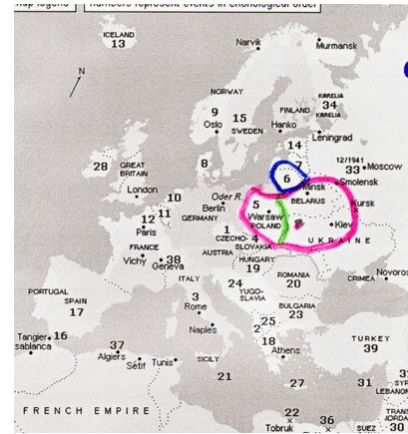
I had friends, gentiles, and the other way around. I had friends among the Ukrainians. As a matter of fact, I was forewarned about the fact that I'll be arrested by the Red Army by a Ukrainian who was, himself, a dedicated Communist. At one time he spent several years in a Polish jail for it. We were school buddies. He was under quarantine, a dedicated communist. He had been caught (by the Poles and sentenced to 4 years for activity. So he went to a camp. They used to break their fingers ...to gather information.. to find out who else. After his sentence he came back. It was a couple of years before the war broke out. But he was still my good personal friend. We didn't talk politics. We were just school buddies. And he was on the committee, the communist committee. This was the committee that was running the city. The Polish government was defunct. It was a town council, a city council.



So I told him, " I want to know when my time comes, when they will come after me." (2 weeks before he left Torchin Misha had been arrested for interrogation. They scared him. Then they let him go with a warning: "Watch your step: "

Misha: So one day my (communist) friend came over and stood near Favish's store. (I inherited Favish's store. Favish left a year before. The store was still open.)

So he came in and says, "I need a pair of shoe strings."



So I gave him the shoe strings.

So he bends down and puts on the shoe strings and says: " In two days" And he smiles.

So I went to the post office to make a telephone call. There was no public telephone except at the post office. And I knew there was a man in town sitting and waiting for me when I will be ready to cross the border. We had our organization set up already in Lithuania.

So I called him and he gave me a code word (like Masada, or Eilat) . (Misha's lookout motioned. Someone was listening in.)

He says, "Why don't you meet me in Lutsk tomorrow evening?"

So I told the people I didn't get out everybody, but there was one I wanted to get out, and take with us.

Q: What did you tell your mother?

Misha : I told her "Come with me. There's a war coming one"

I told them "Come with me. I want you to come with me. I'm going to try to get to Israel.

They said, "Listen, we survived the Russian-Hungarian war; we survived The Serge Pinsa, the Cossacks; we survived this war and that war. We are not going to move. We are here, sitting right here. Where are you going? What are your chances?

I couldn't tell them. I didn't know. Mother was in her early 40s;

and I had a step brother. He was about 12. He was too young. And my mother's husband. I wanted to take the whole family with me. But it was an adventurous step.

Q: Did she try to talk you out of going?

2ND HUSBAND RAFUEL

Misha: No. She knew that I would go. She knew that I was determined. She knew that I was involved in the work; in the organization, I mean, not the underground. She was resigned. She figured: Maybe he'll save himself. Maybe he'll better himself. And there was always in her mind that I may get to America. Because this was the idea. They knew that I was in the organization. I used to get lost every day, there. I didn't come back till 1-2 O' clock in the morning. We had all kinds of activities.

Q: Was there a girl you left behind?

Misha: Yes. I asked her to come with me. She didn't want to come.

Q: Was she in the organization?

Misha : No. Yakov I didn't have to ask. "Get ready, get ready. You're coming." He didn't know. They didn't know until the last minute when they were told to go. They were trained as soldiers. Yakov was in Torchin with me. He was in one of my cells. And he was the only one that I took with me because I liked him so much. And I didn't want to have too many people, because the smaller the group, the better the chance to cross. When I crossed; after I crossed, they closed the border. (During the fight for independence against the British, Yakov went more extreme than he was trained for. Instead of going into the Irgun Zvai Leumi, which was bad enough, he joined the Stern gang. And he was in counter intelligence. He is a very gentle man. And he had to trace down a traitor for the British. He tried, several times to tell me the story; and I kept pushing him off.

Misha: What I carried with me was an empty notebook, a tube of toothpaste, and a toothbrush. And a spoon and a fork. I still have the spoon, a stainless steel compote spoon. It is 40 some years old. I had some incriminating papers with me, lists of names and things of that kind. I was prepared. I had riding boots, which was the style in that time. So I went to a fellow I could trust. He cut ...you know there's a lining in the riding boot. He opened the lining and put the papers in. Then you sew the tops over it. I also had a razor as part of my standard equipment.

I called, I went, he gave me the passport, the man met me. I had my boot slashed, my papers were there, and the top was sewn over. When we got together, when we came to the village which was 4 miles from the border, to cross the border, Yakov was with me. And there were 2 more boys that were sent by a different cell. They were from Poland, from Poland that the Germans took. You see, I was from the Russian part. They were from the part the Germans occupied. I told them at that time, "Fellows, make yourself up a story. Just prepare yourself that you will be caught. We hope we won't be caught. But prepare yourself to be caught. And you should have a false name; and you should have a good story.

Those guys had papers because they were from the German side. They had papers which were kosher. I went running away from



the Russians. Yakov didn't have any papers. I had my papers in my boot, sewed in the boot. You couldn't find them. And I had a list written in Yiddish, in code, which were names. But it looked like a letter. I had it in my pocket.

There were two guide groups that were taking across the people. We paid them. We paid them so many per capita to take us across. And those two groups were fighting with each other. We found out later through our intelligence, after we got to them, that the other group was jealous that this group got more business from us. So they told the Russians that there would be a crossing at such-and-such a time and such-and-such a place. So, sure enough, as soon as we crossed the border, "Stoll!!" (stop). They had guns. It was about 60 degrees below. It was December 31st. They made us lie down in the snow. (No, we didn't say shma yisrael. We weren't that religious.) "Stretch out your hands, and lie down in the snow!!" The snow was about 4 feet deep. We were not on a path. We went through the woods. They had guards all over. They heard when you walk in the snow.

So we laid in the snow. The first thing I did was take this letter that was coded and stick it in the snow. This was before they searched us. This was in my pocket. I had a rucksack with belongings, toothpaste and all that sort of thing.

When we were caught, after 2 hours keeping us in the snow, Yakov walked like this. He got a burn here, and he got a fungal infection that it took him several years. And he still has a spot. And I had my trouble because I chilled my bladder. It was part of my trouble that I still have. I had a heavy coat. There was like a steam coming from our bodies because we had been running fast when we crossed. The guides were taking us real fast. And with all this heavy stuff, I had a heavy coat and a ski cap and gloves.

Misha: I had a couple of coats and a fur coat on top of it. And I had riding boots and galoshes over them. And in one of the galoshes I had a gold coin, a ten American dollar gold coin. A shoemaker took down the lining of my heel, and dug a hole, and put it inside. Then I covered the hole. You couldn't tell. This coin kept me alive. It was a Ludaeer, a French gold coin from Ludwig the 14th. It was very valuable. I got it for nothing years before.

Q: How did that coin save your life? Misha: I held on to it. In the bad days when I thought that there is hunger waiting I could spend it. The thought that if I got into trouble... I didn't sell it until I got my visa to go to the United States. I sold it in China. Neil wrote me he will send me money (to come to the U.S.) I didn't want him to send any money anymore. He tried to send me money a couple of times. He sent it via South America, via transfer, which is another story, a very complicated story.



Misha: When we crossed the Lithuanians started shooting at us. The Russians caught us. They took us back into a barn. We stayed in the barn for 2 days and we were interrogated.



It was terribly cold in the barn. My shoes were burned and my nose was frozen.

It was an open barn; you know, they had this stove in the center. A wood stove. We had some food. They didn't feed us, I had some apples and bread. I was prepared. I had some-not crackers, it was like army biscuits, but real hard. And then they interrogated us several times. Always in the middle of the night. But the first interrogation was right after they brought us in. When they caught us and they said "let's go", Yakov started crying. He said he cannot go. He has pains in his side. They had a sled so they let him ride in the sled.

They took us right into the interrogation room.

They asked me "What is your name?"

"Moshe Lichtenberg."

"Where are you from?"

"Lublin."

Now as I told the fellows, "Make yourself up a good story." So I had a story. I'm Moshe Lichtenberg. I'm from Lublin, which was under the German occupation. I am a yeshiva bocher, a religious student. So they wouldn't have use for me. And I said "Fellows, make yourself up stories where you would be worthless."

"Why you were going?"

"I have an aunt someplace in Lithuania."

Yakov made up a story that he has a wife and a child, and he is a miller with a windmill. A good story. They had no use for something like this. And for a religious student they definitely didn't have any use. But those two guys which I told them to make up a good story, and I didn't rehearse it: One says he is a metal worker. The other says something else.

So: Oh! We have good use for you in Russia!!

This was during the interrogation.

They took us back. And they asked me--it was 4 o'clock in the morning--in front of a KGB officer, and I think he was Jewish. We spoke Ukrainian. And he says "Where are you going?"

And I told him. I say, "I am going to study for the rabbinate. There is a school in Vilna where I want to study."

Misha: "What's your name?"

"Moishe Lichtenberg."

"Where are your papers?"

"I ran from home. I ran and I didn't take my papers."

I had a notebook, but I had no entries in the notebook.

He asked me "How come you have nothing written in this book?"

I said, "I don't know anybody."

They took the toothpaste and cut it in 2 to make sure there was nothing hidden. Then he says "Take off your boots. I want to see if there is something in them."

So I started taking off the boot that contained the list.

So he says, "Not this one, the other one!"

I did it on purpose:

So I took off this one;

He looked it over and he gave it back. I put it back on. He just checked one boot. You see they spot check.

(Yakov doesn't like it when I tell this story in front of him)

They asked Yakov "What's your name?"

He forgot. He said "Moshe Yuchtenberg." And he started crying.

He says "What are you crying for?"

"I have a wife and a child, in Vilna. (He was 20 year's old and he had a wife and child.)

"What is your occupation?"

He is a miller. He is a miller with a windmill.

So this captain, he looked Jewish, he says "Don't cry... "Nee Plach Chatzyiyon" (Chatzyiyon is like "Boss", Like a gentleman farmer. We still call Yakov "Chatzyiyon.")

He believed us. I told you at that time, he told us to take off the boots. Somehow it passed. He

interrogated so many people and probably was darned tired. And he didn't care. We didn't sound as dangerous elements or elements that Russia can have any use for. Because in the same line-up are these 2 guys that one says he is a metal worker and the other one gave him another occupation.

He says "Oh, we have good jobs for you in Russia. Here you won't have to work as a slave under the Poles. You'll be all right.

And I never see these boys anymore. They sent them back to Russia.

The following morning, the first thing in the morning, I told them I had to go to the toilet. It was an outside toilet and it was cold. And I said "Yakov, you watch." Because they kept the door open. And they were standing there with a gun. And while they were standing with a gun, I took a razor blade, and I cut open the boot. Then I took out those papers and dropped them into the toilet. Because this was the list of a number of cells in



my district. And he was standing there and smoking a cigarette.

I sit there. And he didn't suspect. I was scared.

Listen, we had training.

After the interrogations, they took some and sent them back to Russia. And they ended up in Siberia. Then they took all those that were worthless, like Yakov and myself. And these that didn't have any value for the Soviet republic. They called out our names. at 2 o'clock in the morning. And they said "get dressed!!"

They lined us up, and they took us to the border. And they said "The border is this way." But be careful that the Lithuanians won't shoot us because they are trigger-happy. The Russians told us that. And they let us go.

Misha And we get lost. We keep on going and running for about an hour and a half; And then I say "This tree looks familiar." There was a smart aleck. He says "I know the road."

"So, OK, lead us." So after an hour and a half I say "This tree with a broken limb; we were there before." We were going around in circles. I say "Now, you want to go yourself, you go. I want my boys to go with me." I went over and found the tree, and, after all, I had some Boy Scout training. I found the moss on the north side of the tree. So I knew where north is. And we started going north. And sure enough we crossed a river. We walked in up to here, and I got wet. And the water got between my galoshes. and my boots. And I was walking like on stilts. And it was after 4 hours we finally came to a village. We were so exhausted I didn't know what happened. And I lost Yakov. I had 6 people with me. And where do you go? You get to a village. You may go into the police station, right? Then you're in trouble.

I saw a big building. I said "Let's go and look at this building. "And next to the building was a small building with a mezuzah on it. I say "This is the place."

I knocked on the door. A fellow opened it. "We are Yiddim."

So they took us in, and I fell down, and I slept for about 24 hours.

The next morning Yakov showed up. He got lost. He found the same place. Somehow everybody went for the shul. The big building was the shul. Next to the building was the fellow; and he was by the joint distribution committee advised to save everybody he could that would cross the border.



JEWISH COMMUNITY VILNA LITHUANIA BEFORE WW2

When Misha arrived in Lithuania he found that the whole active core of his Zionist organization was there, and they were all trapped. They were in Vilna, a city that Poland had taken away from Lithuania. When the Russians occupied the city they held a plebiscite and 99.6% of the population voted to be annexed by Lithuania. In 1940 Vilna voted to become part of Russia. There were several thousand refugees from the Germans and the Russians in town when Misha arrived. Begin was there. As soon as Russia took over in 1940 he was arrested and sent to Siberia. The people in Misha's group tried to get out. They sent a couple of boys to Estonia, which was on the Baltic Sea and was also controlled by Russia. They wanted to see if it was possible to get boats and to sail to Finland. The boys were caught.

The group went to the Belgian consulate. A Jew was a secretary to the attaché, The secretary made a stamp that said that the bearer of the visa could enter Curacao. (One of 3 Belgian colonies in the S.E. Asian waters.) The secretary neglected to mention that permission of the local Curacao government was also needed. Using the Visa, Misha's group went to the Japanese consulate and asked for a transit visa... that would allow them to come to Japan as a stop over on their way to the islands. The Japanese granted permission for propaganda reasons. They wanted to show how oppressive the Russians were. There were daily pictures in the paper showing Misha's group lined up in front of the Japanese embassy.

