

IN SEPTEMBER 1939 THE RED ARMY ROLLED INTO THE UKRAINIAN HALF OF POLAND, AND THE 1600 JEWS LIVING IN TORCHIN BECAME RUSSIAN CITIZENS.

On August 23, 1939, Molotov the Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union had signed a pact with the Nazi leader, von Ribbentrop. The countries agreed to divide Poland at the Bug River. The Germans could conquer and occupy lands west of the river and the Soviets were given the territory east of the river-- the Ukraine. A week later, on September 1,



1939, Germany invaded Poland, and the Nazis completed their conquest within a month.

The Germans honored the treaty for 2 years. Then, on June 22, 1941 Germany crossed the Bug River as they launched a massive attack on Russia (the yellow is the Bug River).



When the Germans invaded Russia, they promised the Ukrainians, the major Christian group of Torchin, that there would be a Ukrainian National state. A number of newly empowered Ukrainian nationalists allied themselves with the Germans and placed their guns at the disposal of the German secret state police, the Gestapo.

Some of Torchin's Jews, those who were politically active, retreated with the Communists and the Russian army. But most of the Jews of Torchin were trapped by the Germans and were systematically murdered.

One summer day 15 years ago my father Manuel Fredman and I drove from South Haven Michigan to Peoria Illinois to meet with a kind remarkable man. He was my father's landsman, a man born and raised in the same town, Torcyn.

His was a remarkable story and he had, on many occasions, told his tale to my father and others. It was an account of the destruction of the deaths of the Jews of Torcyn, the deaths of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. It was a story of despair of survival. (This was pre "Spielberg".) I remember the trip, the hot summer sun and the quiet empty country roads lined by fields of ripening corn stalks. The journey took hours.

The Landsman and his wife were gracious. He was a humble man, tall, a bit bent (from his time underground). As he told the stories he was often nearly in tears. The recitation of his story was painful for him and for us. He had witnessed and had suffered. We spent the afternoon talking, sipping tea. With his permission the tape recorder was running the entire time. He clearly wanted his story recorded and available to others.

On the way back to South Haven the tapes were in the back of the car. One was near the window and it melted. The others were saved. When I got home I transcribed his words and thoughts and shared them within the family and with interested friends.

Years later he was unwell and I was editing the website. I communicated with him through a family member, and he said he didn't want his story "out there."

His meaning was unclear but I decided in writing his story to NOT use his name. In my rewriting I called him "O".



THE TALE: My father was in the United States from 1914 to 1921. He loved the United States, but he came back to Torcyn because he didn't want to work on Shabbos. He was so kosher. So religious. We were 7 children. I was born in 1922. I had three older sisters. I was the first child born after my father came back to Torchin. My father was a worker. He always tried to treat everyone right. My mother was born in Ausditich.

1928 Sister Freyda --Father Mordechai



Our landsman was 17 years old in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland and the Russians occupied Torczyn. He was a yeshiva bochur. His family was very close and very religious. Under the Russians he attended the gymnasium.

Then, in June 1941 Germany invaded Russia, occupied the Ukraine. They promised the Ukrainians a state of their own and began to systematically gather and confine the Jews in preparation for the slaughter.

The Germans crowded all the Jews into the Ghetto in one section of town. They circled it with barbed wire. If anyone died a natural death they said “he’s privileged.”



There was a mochlokes (dispute) between the Haskala Shochet and the younger rabbi. At the time of the ghetto they all made peace. They all got together.

The Talmud says: a person makes peace at the last moment with his fellow man. There was no intermarriage in Torchin. There were problems of Naden and Yichas.

Before the Russian invasion I was a Yeshiva Bochur. During the Russian occupation I studied at the Russian gymnasium. I studied with Jack Holnick, Yuska Rosenfeld. We weren’t affiliated with any organization. That’s probably why we were left. Yet the storm took so many people.

The first time they had to fill a certain quota they (spared) the people who worked with the Russians during the Russian occupation. The others, the Jews, were taken to Boyan to fill the Gestapo’s quota of so many people

For 2 weeks before Tisha B’Av 1942, the Germans made a list. There were less than a handful of Communists in our town. But in the eyes of the Ukrainian bandits, anyone who had worked for the Russians were considered “workers of the Russian government,” and they were on the list.

Tisha B’Av 1942 was a postponed “Tisha B’Av, because the holiday came on a Saturday. It was celebrated on a Sunday. That day the Germans made an announcement that everyone should come to a little church. The area was surrounded by the Germans. They came over. They sat down with typewriters. They pretended they were taking people to work.” *Belzec-Jewish work Kommando*



I was there. I was very slim. I was tall, the tallest of the boys of Torchin. It was on Shabbos. The rabbi was there. Eliezar Shantuch was his name. He was a Talmud of the Chupas Chia Yeshiva. I stood next to Yona Roma.

I says “Yona. Why are they taking us?”

He says, “What are you worrying about? You are strong. You are tall. Stay with me. I’ll take care of you. I’ll handle you. You’ll be alright.”

I said “Yona. Az brent a fire.”

He says “Oh shut up. Don’t make any issues. Because if they want to kill us, why do they have to type our names with the typewriter?”

Then I see that Shlomo Bik came over. He was limping a little bit. He had a store before Yonkel Katoshka. He had a spade in his hands. I looked at that spade and it made me cold right there. I figured a SPADE. It’s not for recreation.

So I said to Yona “I’m going to run.”

He said “You’re going to get a bullet in your head. Don’t run.”

I said “Yona. If I get a bullet in my head I’m not going to see it, but I’m not going to lie down in that grave.”

When the Germans surrounded that place on Tisha B’Av, there were about 480 Jews from Torchin. I realized right away... I don’t know if it was my intuition or God’s will ... whatever it was.

I was standing there. I happened to know the German language. I came over to the German officer before he had to call me.

I said “I want to get something for my father. I’ll be right back.”

He said “where’s your father?”

I said “right there. Abba so fort must ich zurick commen. (Dad I’ll be right back).”

He said “If not you’ll be killed like a dog.”

I said “Ya Wohl Herr Laupmann.”

So I came over to the other side. I saw two taxis came over from Lutsk to Torchin. They made a lot of wind. And I had a yellow insignia that said Juden on my back. And I had a yellow insignia here, on my front. But I managed to have both

insignias on a rope. It was not sewn in. So if I went out of town I could take it off. So I took off the 2 insignias.

I had long legs. I jumped over the fence. I started to walk forward. And the German Gestapo people were still standing with carbines and watching so no one could escape.

One of the Germans came forward, toward me.

So I didn't know what to do. It occurred to me that I should bend down. And being that I didn't have the sign in the back or the front I just tied my shoes. He passed me by. He couldn't figure out how I could get out of that place. I was going straight forward, like you are going to Moshe Kante's. I made a left turn at the road going to the Klabanya section of town. I went all the way around and down to my grandmother's place. I hid in the grass until the day was over.

That day they took 480 some Jews and several, so called Russian sympathizers. And all young and old, guilty or not guilty, were marched to the forest of Bouyan 3 to 4 miles outside Torchin. And they were buried the same day.

Nobody knew that they were killed. The communication was so bad.

Only one Jew survived. Baruch Shapira. He ran away. And he went to Ludmir. And he told the whole story.

A lot of people hoped. They kept on writing letters. And they kept on bribing the Ukrainian Nationalists. Please tell me. While you are talking to the Germans. Maybe you can get some word. Are they alive? Where are they working? Where can I send them some money or clothes or something like that?

They kept on milking the Jews. Give me more money. I'll try to get in touch with somebody to try to help you out, to try to get you more information. The Ukrainians knew. They were the biggest collaborators. There were only 3 Germans in town. There was Wallenshuss. And Gustaf. And one other whose name I forgot. The Germans promised them a free Ukraine. The Ukrainians did all the dirty work. They killed the Jews.

I used to go to school with the Ukrainians: Zachal Tsuk. And Kersky. He was two lines in front of me. He gave me questions. I helped him. And he passed his test because of me. And during the occupation this same Ukrainian said to me "I would kill you. I'm a Ukrainian Nationalist. I would kill you if I wouldn't remember what you did for me in school. Get out of here. Go to the ghetto. Don't stay here. I don't want to see you in front of my eyes. If I do I'll have to kill you."

School and street in Torczyn post World War 2

The Judenrat (the Jewish Council) had to work together with the Germans. If not they would kill them, and everyone. They called me into the Judenrat to work. And I said "No. I'm not going to work for the Judenrat. If I have any Jew on my conscience, on my soul, if I have to sacrifice somebody according to the German quota, to Wallenshuss' orders, I wouldn't live with myself. I couldn't do that."



So the leader of the Judenrat, Lazer Pust, called me up and said: "Listen to me. You were selected. You are going to be working for us. We need you. I talked to the German commander about you."

My luck was that before that, I had started to teach algebra and geometry and German and Ukrainian to a fellow by the name of Tomish Krishkovsky who lived on the road to Bialastok. He wasn't Jewish. He was building roads. And he worked with the Germans.

And my sister Frieda called him up. And she said, "Mr. Krishkovsky, my brother is working for you. Please help us out. You have a lot to say. I don't want him to work in the Judenrat. He is teaching your children. He'll be happy to teach them as long as he is alive. He'll do anything he can."

So he came to the Judenrat, and he said to Laser Pusk, "either you are going to leave 'O' alone, or I'm going to destroy you and your family. Don't you touch him! You are starting with me. You know who I am."

All the rest of my family slept in the ghetto. In the summertime I slept in the hay, in his attic. He went to the German commander and he got me a certificate.

A bescheinigung: This is to certify that "O" works for the organization that builds roads. No other organization is to touch him.

Krishkovsky used to give me some bread that I could bring into the ghetto. I came home. It was Friday. I brought some bread and other things. I saw my mother and father. I said "I heard rumors about Lutsk. They are killing so many Jews in Lutsk."

My father said "how do you know? Don't believe all the rumors. It's impossible. God wouldn't let this happen." My father was fanatically religious.

I used to sit with them and give them quotations from the Tanach.

On the 8th of Elul my mother said to me: "Kindt. Go away." She knew what was happening.

There was a Russian prisoner. His name was Vashisikov. He ran away from the Russians. The Germans used him as an engineer. He worked with Krishkovsky. And he liked me so much. He said to me, "are you Jewish?"

I said "Yes."

He said, "Oh my God. What are you doing here? I just came back from Lutsk. They killed so many Jews. 30,000."

I said "Impossible."

He said, “I want you to survive. I’m 60 some years old. I could care less about my life. But you are a young man. Run. Run away. Don’t stay here a minute. All the Jews in Lutsk were killed. Torchin is next to Lutsk. You know that.”

I couldn’t believe it. So I came to my mother. I told her what the guy said.

And she said “I hope you remain alive and remember your parents and say Kaddish.” She kissed me. She embraced me.

I don’t know why I didn’t go together with them. If I had been in the house that night I would never have left my parents. I don’t think my mother or father would have been happier if I had gone with them.

I went to Krishkovsky’s that night, because the Ukrainian Nationalists were always looking for me. They wanted to eradicate any sign, any hope, any witness. If anything should happen. Some of them went to school with me. I did their homework. They played volleyball, basketball with me. Some of them said “O”, hide out. I don’t want to see you in the street. If I do I’ll kill you. “

One of them said the Bible said the Jews have to suffer. I told him Koleduk, they gave you a gun. Be grateful.

The Ukrainians were worse in terms of searching out individual Jews.

That Friday night I went back to the road builder’s house and slept in the hay. In the morning he woke me up and said “Hide.”

He put some hay above me. And he made an opening in the side, in the stables, so I could catch my breath. He said all the Jews are getting killed. He was a Ukrainian Nationalist.

In the morning when I woke up, lying in the hay, I heard all the shooting there, but I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t believe it.



The Cemetery Chagall 1917



soldiers said “Gott Mit Uns.”

“O”: After they killed the Jews the Polish church on the hill rang its bells and they started chanting.

When people try to convert me, I don’t have to go back to ancient times, I just have to go back to Hitler. The belts of the German

There was no anti Semitism from the Germans who lived around Torchin, from Friedrich or Wooshka.

Naum Krutt, he had a big belly, he had a son. He used to beat the hell out of his son. So my mother tried to help the son. She went to the school and complained.; They said, don’t worry. He’ll survive. And after the war we found evidence that he was a German spy.

The Ukrainians used to copy their homework from me. You remember Zacher Chuk. He had a handlebar mustache. His son, Alexai, came into the ghetto. He saw me standing there.

He killed Avram Yovitz.

I was passing by. I said Alexai have mercy.”

He said “O”, run away, or else I’ll kill you too. I have orders.”

They were wild. They were indoctrinated by an idea that goes back to Chiemelnitzki that goes back to Petluria that goes back to Ukrainian Nationalism. They were fed up with the Polish government and with Communism.

O: My father and 2 brothers and a few other Jews were the last Jews wiped out on Chof Tes Kislev. Shmeel Kossava at the time was at our house. We had a house we used to rent to the Polish government. They used it as a school. It’s one of the biggest houses in Torchin. It had 9 or 10 rooms. My father bought it when he came back from America. He brought it from his brother Mayer. We were in the house.

We got up that morning and put on our tallis and Tphellin.

Someone knocked on the door. They said “Mordachai, open the door.”

My father was laying tephillin. My father said to me, “O”, with me they’ll just take me to work. At night maybe I’ll come back. With you.. They’ll kill you. They don’t want any witnesses. Get upstairs.”

There was a room in back with a ladder to go upstairs. I don’t know if it was an intuition or what. I climbed the ladder into the attic, and I pulled the ladder up with me.

They couldn’t climb there.

So they took my father and my 2 brothers and Shmeel Moshe Yankas and all the others. They were the last Jews.

That was Chuf Tes Kislev.

They killed them all.

The night before that my mother came to me in a dream. She said, "My child. Go upstairs. Cover yourself with a piece of wood."

I don't know how to explain it. I climbed into the attic with the ladder without thinking, without analyzing it, because if I knew they were going to kill my father and brothers, I would have stayed with them. I would not have run away.

My father told me: I work on tractors, on combines. They'll keep me until the last minute.

Anyway, the night before my father was killed my mother came to me in a dream, and she said, "my child run up and cover yourself with a piece of plywood."

A dream is a dream.



I ran upstairs when the Ukrainians took my father, brothers, and the others. The Ukrainians couldn't get me. On the other side there was a small window called a Poujalik. I put my legs through that window. I jumped into a neighbor's yard. And I ran into a cellar where they keep potatoes. I covered myself and I was lying there.

I heard voices. One Ukrainian said: "That Jew. If not today, tomorrow. He has no other way out."

I slept there that night. The next day I walked out, and I saw

Anatole. I asked him if my father and brothers were still alive.

He said he didn't know. They kept him alive so he would write a letter telling me to give myself up. He wouldn't do that.

I went to school with Anatole. He used to be a Szhlob.

I said: "Anatole, can you tell me what happened to my father and brothers?"

He said, "Where will you be?"

I said "I'll be at my father's house." I went to the adjacent house; where we used to live.

It was December. I saw Anatole going with his collar turned up. I saw him going to the police and telling them something .. This is where he is at.

I climbed back into the attic. I climbed on a nail and managed to get upstairs. I looked through the window. I didn't see a living soul. I remember sitting in the attic and hearing a Ukrainian song going through my head.

I saw Anatole going with the police to our other house. They knocked. They went to the other house. They couldn't find anyone.

Zerinski's son told them that I was upstairs.

One guy heaved the second guy into the attic. The man they threw into the attic hit his head. He started to bleed. He cursed "that Jew. If we don't get him today we'll get him tomorrow."

I covered myself with a piece of plywood, and I lay there as he looked around. It was getting dark. I thought I was a gonner.

He didn't see me. He left. I slept in the attic that night. When I awoke the next day life was so miserable I didn't know if I was going to live or die.

(One of the tapes melted in the back of the car as we drove away from the interview. But I remembered...)

At this point all the Jews in Torchin, the landsmann's entire family, were dead. Life ceased to have meaning. He took a knife and started towards the cemetery. He walked down the middle of the street. He wasn't afraid anymore because he had decided to kill himself. So there was nothing that the Germans or Ukrainian Partisans could do to him. As he walked through the middle of the street alone, no one was around. No one saw him but the town thief, Shanka Krutt. Shanka saw him, came up to him, and tried to stop him.

(Long ago. When Torchin was a Polish Stetl...)

Shanka Krutt was the biggest ganif in town. Everyone was afraid of him. If they saw him coming down the street they'll cross over.

(Years earlier long before the Second World War) ...

Moshe Ring bought some wheat on speculation. He figured he would sell it in the spring and make some money. He put it into the attic of Favish's store.

Shanka Krutt saw them unloading the wheat at Favish's.

He picked out a night when there was a strong wind, a Friday night when the Jews were home singing zemirot.

Shanka got in though the back door. He got into the attic, unloaded 40 sacks of wheat and took it to his barn.

The next morning Moshe Rink came to shul and said "Rabosai. Someone robbed me. Does anyone know anything about it?"

No one knew. When Shanka did a job, he did it clean. He took the wheat home. He opened a sack and stuck snow into the sack.

The next morning the police came over to look. Where else would they look? There were only 3 goniffs in town. One was cockeyed. One was gone. So who else but Shanka?

The Polish policeman, Charnetzki, checked the wheat. He said "wait a minute. When did we last have snow?"

The other policeman, said "last week."

"When was the wheat stolen?"

"Two nights ago."

"Then this is Shanka's wheat. Shanka, you're free."



Years later Shanka was still one of the town Goniffs. And on that fateful day Shanka Krutt saw “O” walking through the middle of the street alone. He saw “O”. He came up him, and tried to stop him.

I hit him with my elbow.
He fell down.

It was the seventh of December. It was cold.

He says “You are the only one that hit a giant that fell down. You hit Shanka Krutt. Do you know what you did?”

I said, “I don’t care, Shanka. You are nothing but a crook.”

He says, “I want to save your life.” He stood up. He grabbed my hand. He pulled it behind my back. He took me to his stable. He says “get upstairs there, where the hay is.” His wife, Marusha, came out. She says “God! My God! Your parents were so religious. Your sister used to teach my children in school. Why would you want to commit suicide? We want to help you. We want to save your life.”

I says, “Marusha, I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Shanka comes over and he brings over a bottle of homemade booze. He wants to give me the booze to make me drunk.

I said “Shanka, you are not going to do it to me. If I’m going to death, I want to go with my mind open. I don’t want to be drunk.”

He said, “You’re crazy. I want to save your life. You idiot. Get upstairs.”

Meanwhile the police came over. Somebody squealed that they saw me go to Shanka’s place. So Shanka went out from his house with a pitchfork. And he said “Listen to me carefully, now. You know I’m Shanka Krutt. I don’t have any Jews hiding here.

Whoever sent you to me, go look at his place. If you start with me, you and your families will not be alive. Your homes will be burned. Not only your homes, but your children and grandchildren will be finished. I promise you this faithfully. This is it. Out you go!” He kicked them out.

I was standing there, and I lost my mind. There was a barrel standing there. He kept klein (bran) in it. I stood on that barrel and I took a rope. I threw it over the beam. I wanted to hang myself. I couldn’t believe it.

His wife came out. She said “kindt, what are you doing? Your father was so religious, your mother, your sister, everybody. God wants you to live, to be a witness. Don’t do it. We want to save your life.”

That night, when it got darker, he took me into the toilet.

Where are you taking me?

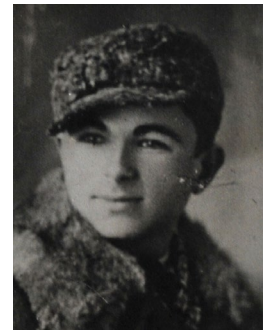
He said “go there. I’m telling you.”

He goes in there, and he began knocking on the wall, on a piece of plywood.

A false door opened.

He said “go down”

From below I heard the voice of Aaron Katz. He said “O”. Come down.”



AARON

I went down there. There were eleven Jews. I was the twelfth Jew. I put on a tallis and tephillin, and I made the luach myself.

Shanka said “I knew your father and your mother. I’m not going to give you any Hazer. I’m going to give you potatoes, milk, bread. That’s all you’re going to eat and live on.

We lived there for about 4 months underground. In the spring it started to get hot. We couldn’t stay there. We went out and joined the partisans.