Chapter Four

The Łódź Ghetto
Thus began another chapter in my young life. I had no inkling of how much everything would change.

As we disembarked from the train, we were directed into the terminal building and told to stay together in one area and wait for instructions. Three long days and nights of being locked up in the pestilence of a cattle car had transformed most of us into an obedient and submissive group. We had survived without food and with only a few swallows of water. And, after those days and nights without a toilet, any sense of modesty was a thing of the past. We had slept sitting up almost on top of each other. We were hungry, thirsty, exhausted, and apprehensive, having no idea what was to come next.

After what felt like an eternity, a man who was in charge of the "transport and resettlement committee" took center stage and gave us a very long spiel about life in the ghetto and how things operated there. One of the big problems was overcrowding. The Łódź ghetto, which was less than two square miles in size, was bursting at the seams, filled with a teeming mass of humanity, and the situation was getting steadily worse as hundreds of Jews from surrounding towns and villages were shipped into the ghetto every day.

Near the end, he addressed himself to families with children. The committee could not find housing for new arrivals. Two and three families were already jammed into one-room living quarters. They had nowhere to lodge us. At the orphanage they could provide a temporary
I was very ill for probably a week to ten days. One day, after the fever broke, I had a secret visitor. A teenage boy, Chaim, managed to sneak into my room without being caught. He was a few years older than most of us, and I had not been aware that he had been keeping an eye on me before I got sick. When he didn’t see me in the dining room for a few days he became concerned, made some inquiries, and found me in the sick bay. He stayed with me for several hours, and we talked about our families, the orphanage, my not eating, and the need for me to get better. Chaim visited me on a daily basis. At last I had a friend, and now I didn’t feel so helplessly alone. He convinced me that, if I didn’t eat the food we were served, I would not recover and would probably die of starvation. It worked. I promised to eat, and actually started to feel better. Later on, I was allowed to go to the dining hall for all my meals. Chaim sat next to me, supervising, and to my surprise I became very fond of porridge and split-pea soup. Ironically, during the next four years I would have killed to have a bowl of rich soup or porridge. Though I had no way of knowing it, the orphanage was the equivalent of a luxury hotel compared to regular life in the Łódź ghetto.

With Chaim’s help I continued to get better. One rainy day I was informed that my mother had arrived at the orphanage and was waiting to take me “home.” I saw Chaim a few times after leaving the orphanage, but then lost touch. I have often wondered how he fared in the ghetto, and whether he survived the Holocaust.

I was thrilled to be reunited with my mother. Blabbing non-stop, asking one question after another, I could barely contain myself. “Where are Grandma and Grandpa? Where do we live? What does it look like? Did you know I was sick? Chaim helped me. Do you know Chaim?” Mother hugged me, took my hand, and led me out of the orphanage. My world was good again—I was loved. I was safe with my mother and would soon be with Grandma and Grandpa.
We walked hand-in-hand down some of the ugliest streets I had ever seen. No trees, no grass, no flowers—just concrete sidewalks lined with drab tenement buildings. Each building was connected to the next, and each had a small archway opening onto a courtyard of rock and dirt. They all looked alike, and, when Mother said to me, a little way along, “This is our building,” I was amazed that she could distinguish it from the rest of them. Entering through a tunnel-like arch, we emerged into a dreary, muddy, rocky courtyard. Not even a blade of grass dared to grow in such an environment. Gingerly we picked our way over the slippery rocks and pockets of deep mud to the building on our right. At last we were inside a hallway. Instantly I was overwhelmed by its darkness; a terrible reeking stench assailed my senses. Mother pointed to the first door on our left and said, in a matter-of-fact manner, “We live here.”

Before I could adjust my eyes from dark to light I heard a din of voices. Mother whispered in my ear, “We all live in this one room. These people were very kind to squeeze together and make room for four more strangers. They let us move in with them until we find a place for just the four of us. We are very lucky. Many families are still homeless.” The medium-sized room was occupied by five families. Numerous beds took up every inch of space against the four walls, leaving just enough room between the entry door and our bed for a two-burner, wood-burning stove and a very narrow cupboard with one door. A few makeshift shelves hung above the stove, and in the center of the room stood a small wooden table with four or five chairs. The cupboard held a couple of cooking pots, a few plates and glasses, and no more than half a dozen forks, spoons, and knives. The shelves were reserved for food, with each family having their own shelf space. At all times at least one member of a family would stay in the room to guard the family food rations. We were all starving, and everyone feared that the other families would steal their food.

The room was bulging at the seams. There were too many people, and not enough beds to accommodate the occupants. A minimum of three to four people slept in each three-quarter bed; these beds, three-quarters the width of a double bed, were standard. My excitement at being back with Mother, Grandma, and Grandpa overshadowed all the stench and horror of the place. The four of us slept in one bed, with Grandma’s and Grandpa’s heads at one end, and Mother’s and mine at the other. Our feet almost touched each others’ faces.

The longer we lived in those crowded quarters, the worse it got. Distrust was rampant. People were constantly fighting about the most insignificant things. A crying child could send someone into a rage, exclaiming, “Shut your kid up! If you don’t, I will!” Angry voices were always yelling. “ Shut up, shut up!” “I want the stove next! Get out of my way!” “Stop pushing!” “Move over!” “Get away from the table! We want to use it now!” “Hey, what are you doing on my shelf?” This went on around the clock. Combined with gut-wrenching hunger, the constant bickering made our lives even more miserable.

In this place of indescribable filth, sewer rats were the only happy inhabitants, traveling freely, spreading diseases throughout the ghetto. Big, bold, and fat, they fed on human excrement. Scurrying around the courtyard, and particularly in and around the outhouse, they were bold enough to attack a child. We had to make a lot of noise to keep them away whenever we had to go.

Despite all the miserable conditions, I quickly adapted to my new life. Mother and Grandpa spent hours hunting for jobs and housing. Grandma got up at dawn to stand in food lines; in fact most of her days were spent in search of food for her family. She usually managed to get a few potatoes or dry beans, which she would combine with whatever else she could scrounge up to make a pot of soup. The soup was our mainstay. A bowl of hot soup, thin though it might be, went a long way; filling our stomachs with liquid somewhat assuaged the ever-present hunger.

Grandpa was the first to get a job. This gave us a little bit of money to buy food on our ration cards, on those rare occasions that it was avail-
able. A few weeks later we moved from the crowded first-floor room to an attic in the same building. An old, grotesque-looking woman who lived there by herself invited us to share her space. It was a large, open, roughly finished area with a sloping ceiling and one window. Located above the one-room apartments on the third floor, it could be accessed only by climbing a steep, narrow staircase. But it was light, quiet, and, by ghetto standards, very spacious. No more screaming kids! Mother and Grandpa hung a couple of sheets to separate our two living areas, and we had plenty of room for two three-quarter beds plus a table and chairs. The stove was shared with the old lady. Grandma could cook whenever she wanted to, as long as we had fuel for the stove and food for the pot. Such luxury! The attic felt safe. It became our private refuge.

I was afraid of the old lady, though. Her looks frightened me. Dressed in a black cloak, her distorted, obese body was swollen beyond belief—at the time I thought it was fat—and she had a goiter like a turkey wattle hanging down from below her chin all the way to her chest. I was too young to understand her terrible illness. All I knew was that she scared me to death. She was all alone, probably close to the age of my grandparents, and they were of great comfort to her. As her health continued to decline, Grandma always managed to make a little more soup—if nothing else by adding more water—to take to her bedside.

My grandparents were amazing. Grandpa would make me giggle; he never lost his sense of humor and always made it seem as if life was fine. I was their only grandchild, and together they and I had a mutual-admiration society. They gave me unconditional love, and that love has stayed with me throughout my life. The Nazis could not take that away.

One could not survive in the ghetto without work. Those who worked were compensated with ghetto money, which we needed to purchase whatever bit of food our ration cards allowed. One step removed from complete starvation, we needed work to eke out a bare minimum sur-

vival. Grandma Helenka couldn't work, and I was not yet old enough to work in a factory; although Mother and Grandpa Zigmund got jobs, they were insufficient to sustain the four of us. Our situation was very precarious. A temporary solution presented itself when I joined a children's work force, picking weeds in a vegetable field. Each morning our little troop was marched to a field that I believe was outside the ghetto, where we pulled weeds from early morning until late afternoon. Alternating between kneeling and squatting to ease the pain in my knees and back, I moved quietly from one row to the next. There was no camaraderie, no conversation. The guards were quick with their horsewhips if they caught us eating even one vegetable. The slightest imagined misbehavior brought on a lashing. This job lasted until the end of the harvest season. It was my first experience as a slave laborer. I was eleven years old.

By the time I turned twelve—on the 21st of October, 1941—I had become a tough veteran of the ghetto. Grandpa and Mother were working in factories and trying to find me a job. Unfortunately, before they got very far in their search, I erupted with another case of the itch, this time much worse than before. Huge boils covered most of my body, and the pain was excruciating. I ran a very high fever. There was no medical help. Mother and Grandma took turns sponging my body with cold water and cleaning the pus-filled boils, hoping that I would be able to fight off the infection. All I remember is hearing awful screams, until one day I realized that the screams were coming from me. That was the beginning of my recovery.

As I regained awareness of my surroundings, I noticed that the sheets that separated our room into two areas was gone. The old lady had died during my illness. I had no reaction. Death had become our constant companion, and I was pleased that the attic was ours.

We were very fortunate. Mother found some old family friends. Before the war they had been the owners of a large mercantile factory
in Łódź. Now their son held an important position as manager of the
ghetto’s furniture factory, and he gave my mother a job. In due time he
also hired me, despite the fact that I was only twelve and the rules said
that you needed to be older. I don't remember what the age restrictions
were for working in a factory, but I do remember that under the rules I
wouldn’t have been old enough for that job, which gave us our much-
needed third ration card.

We fell into a daily routine. In the morning, if we were lucky
enough to have some fuel for the stove, we would have a cup of ersatz
coffee and a slice of bread; if we had no way to cook coffee, we ate just a
slice of bread and headed out for work. Grandpa went in one direction,
Mother and I in another.

We had a long and often dangerous walk, dangerous because it en-
tailed crossing one of the thoroughfares used by German and Polish traffic for traversing the ghetto. The ghetto sidewalks were separated from the thoroughfares by very high barbed-wire fences, and the crossing points had gates with German guards on both sides of the road. The guards had the power to decide when to stop the traffic and let us cross over to the other side. Often, usually in the hottest days of summer or coldest days of winter, they would hold us back for a long time, until there was a large group waiting to cross. The worse the weather — ice, snow, downpour, or blistering heat — the more the German guards enjoyed watching our suffering. They were sheltered inside their little checkpoint huts, while we were battered by the elements. When they did finally open the gates, the safest way to cross over was in the middle of the group. People on the edges were often beaten just for entertainment. Once we got to the other side we were safe, although of course this procedure would have to occur in reverse on the way home.

When we arrived at the factory, Mother remained on the first floor. She had a desk job, keeping track of production and inventory in the middle of bandsaws and flying sawdust; every person who worked on

that floor was covered with a fine film of dust. My job was on the third
floor, in the staining and polishing department. The work was physically
demanding. All day long a group of us stained bedroom and dining-
room furniture. The deep-red mahogany stain, applied by hand, had to
be perfectly even, with no perceptible color gradation. Required to meet
a daily quota, we stained one piece of furniture after another without a
break in the routine. When the stain was completely dry, usually after a
couple of days, we then oiled each piece. This process took hours of rub-
ing, using an oil-soaked chunk of cotton wrapped in cheesecloth, until
the surface shone like a mirror and the wood could not absorb another
derop of oil. The oil then had to set for a day or two before we applied the
final seal and polish; after that each piece was inspected and either passed
or rejected by the supervisor. I quickly learned to work at great speed and
to produce perfectly finished pieces. "Uneven stain!" “Can you see your
face in it?” “It must shine like a mirror!” These were words I did not want
to hear, because they were usually accompanied by kicks or other forms
of physical abuse. When a piece passed inspection I went back to staining
more pieces of furniture, oiling them, and sealing them. This was my life.

Our working conditions were abominable. On the first floor a
group of workers made all the wooden parts; on the second floor the parts were assembled; and the finishing process took place on the third
floor. The three-story building had no heat during the sub-zero Polish
winters, and our hands could barely hold the frozen staining rags. But
the third floor was also absolutely the worst place to be during the sti-
fling summer heat; then we could hardly breathe and sweat poured from
every pore in our bodies. Winter or summer, one could not see out of the
windows, nor open them. They were permanently sealed shut by layers of
dirt and grime.

I have a vague memory of a factory whistle announcing lunchtime.
This half hour was our only break during the work day. Every laborer
grabbed his or her lunch bowl and proceeded to the courtyard. There we
formed a line that led to an open window, where a woman stood with a huge cauldron of soup. She poured one ladle of soup into each outstretched bowl. Depending on the availability of food supplies in the ghetto we either had soup with some substance to it, like beans and barley, or a bowl of mostly liquid with a few pieces of vegetables. Potatoes were our most prized staple, and to get a bowl of soup with some potatoes in it was the goal of every worker. Depending on the woman’s mood and whether she liked you, she would either give you mostly liquid from the top, or dip way down into the cauldron and fill your bowl with something more substantial. Either way, this one bowl of soup per day was our life-line to survival.

Despite all the misery and hard work, I still managed to have friends, though we didn’t play games like normal kids. Instead we stood in lines with our ration cards, hoping to maybe get lucky and be one of the fortunate ones who got some meat before the butcher ran out, since he rarely had enough for everyone. The quota was just a quarter kilogram of horse meat or sometimes pork per person per month, but one could wait in line for hours and go home empty-handed. We got a small loaf of bread per week, and there were rations of potatoes, flour, sugar, ersatz coffee, and at times barley, beans, turnips, or kohlrabi. Never did we have all of these foods at the same time. Sometimes flour, at other times barley or potatoes, but in any case never enough to satisfy our hunger. Occasionally we received a quarter kilogram of fat, which would have to last for weeks. Basically that was all the food we ate in the ghetto. There were no vegetables other than those mentioned above, with the exception of an occasional head of cabbage or some beets. From the time when I first entered the Lodz ghetto in September 1941, until April 15, 1945, I never saw or ate fresh fruit, milk, an egg, or any kind of snack.

The situation in the ghetto was getting worse, as day after day new transports arrived—not only from various Polish towns but also from Germany and other countries—increasing the population density. Crammed into a small area that had been the Lodz slums before the war, surrounded by tall barbed-wire fencing constantly patrolled by German police, we were essentially in a top-security prison, from which only a few managed to escape. At one time there were almost a quarter of a million of us, all suffering from malnutrition and disease. The death toll was staggering. My nightmares are full of dead bodies being carted off by subhuman-looking men, usually two of them, pulling a wagon full of the deceased. The bodies would be piled high, and sometimes one would fall off as the men pulled the wagon forward. My brain can’t erase the pictures of dead eyes staring open, rigid arms and legs, human corpses piled on top of each other. Death didn’t discern between the young and old. They all had the same look, with sunken eyes, protruding bones, and skeletal bodies.

Suddenly there was a change. In the summer of 1942, instead of more people being transported into the ghetto, there began to be transports out of the ghetto. The transports started by taking children from the orphanage, proceeded with the liquidation of the hospital, and then moved on to the elderly. No one felt safe. Rumors were flying. At the beginning we had no idea where those who were deported were being taken, and as we learned more we still did not want to believe that even the Germans were capable of such mass murder. Shipments of clothing were coming into the ghetto, which workers had to sort for distribution. A mother recognized her little girl’s dress; soon other workers were identifying familiar clothing. “Why are they sending back our children’s clothing?” “Oh this was my mother’s coat, my grandma’s dress…” We knew!

Chaim Rumkowski, the chairman of the Lodz ghetto government, made speeches. “The Germans are demanding quotas from us. We have to select who will be on the next transport, but I am doing this to save you, the workers… As long as we work and produce, the Germans will not liquidate the whole Lodz ghetto. All the workers are safe.”
Dear Mauritz and Hanita,

I haven't written to you for quite some time. Since June 25 of this year, I find myself in Posen. I am here as a medical orderly in a work camp. I am not doing too badly. I am in good health and work with enthusiasm.

Ruta, Miriam, and the two parents find themselves in Litzmannstadt (Lodz) since September 27. I have received some letters from them. Thank god they are all healthy. I hope that you will write to them immediately; also a little money would be helpful.

Other than that, how are you, my good friends? I hope to receive an answer from you. I greet and kiss you wholeheartedly.

Your Zalmen

Heartfelt greetings to the whole family.

A postcard from my father to Uncle Moniek and Aunt Hanita. He would have composed his message to survive censorship by the Germans.
Despite Runkowski's assurances, the deportations continued to escalate. Our own Jewish ghetto police were performing random searches, block by block, for children and the elderly. The process was simple: policemen surrounded an entire block at a time, went into the complex of buildings, and with a loudspeaker ordered every inhabitant to report to the courtyard. After the selection, the police followed up with a room-by-room search, looking for those who might be in hiding.

On September 12, 1942, the police cordoned off our block. Mother, Grandma, Grandpa, and I were all in the attic when we heard a commotion in the courtyard below our window. Someone was yelling, "There's a selection going on, right now on our block! They're two buildings from us! Hide the children!" There must have been a coordinated plan of action among everyone who lived in our apartment compound, because within a couple of minutes men were carrying a ladder up the stairs to the landing outside our attic home. As soon as they had it set up, a man climbed up the ladder and opened an almost invisible trap door in the ceiling of the landing, leading to a crawl space directly above our room. I became aware that a few children I didn't know had followed the men up the stairs. These kids and I were ordered to climb up the ladder into the rafters, crawl in as flat as we could, and lay down flat on our bellies. We were not to make a sound. If we weren't discovered by the police someone would come back with the ladder and get us. "Lay as flat as possible and spread out. Do not be close to each other. If you hear footsteps or someone opening the trap door don't move or make a single sound. It might be the police. If it's one of us we'll let you know. Now scoot fast." With that, the trap door shut behind us and we were in total darkness.

The crawl space had maybe two feet of head room, and we couldn't have stood or sat up even if we had wanted to. I crawled on my belly, feeling invisible in the black space. The other kids must have done the same. We maintained total silence. I could feel my heart pounding as spiders and vermin crawled all over me. Cold sweat covered my face. I could see nothing in the blackness, though I could taste the dust and smell the rat droppings. I never made a sound or moved my body; all my attention was focused on listening for sounds below us. All was quiet. We waited and waited for what seemed like eternity when suddenly I heard something. It sounded like the ladder was being set up to the trap door. They're searching the building and they've discovered the trap door. Oh, my, they are going to find us. Hold your breath, hold your breath, don't move. If they call out, don't answer. This litany was running through my head as I lay there waiting for the unknown. If I was invisible, maybe somehow I would not get caught. Time had no meaning; it stood still, waiting with me to discover my fate.

After what seemed like a lifetime, I heard footsteps on the ladder and someone opening the trap door. Before I had a chance to form a thought, a familiar male voice was calling to us, "OK kids, come out. You're safe. They're gone. Come to the ladder. It's safe." Slithering on my belly towards the light, I reached the ladder, scamppered down, and walked into our room, expecting to be back with my family. Instead of my mother or grandparents I saw a very old woman, cowering in a corner of the room. I recognized her as someone who lived with her daughter one floor below us. She had been bedridden for as long as we had lived in the attic, but now had managed somehow to crawl up the steep flight of stairs to our room. She looked at me and said, childishly, "I am hiding." I told her to go back to her own place and ran downstairs. The courtyard was full of people, and it took me a couple of minutes to spot my mother, standing forlornly by herself amidst our neighbors.

Grandma had been chosen for the selection, and Grandpa had immediately followed her to the truck. On that particular day my grandparents were the only casualties in our complex. Had they remained in the attic they would have survived for a little bit longer. Grandma, though, had refused to stay in the attic, afraid that if the building was searched and she was found, it would lead to a closer inspection of the
area that in all probability would endanger the hidden children. Staunchly she went to the selection, knowing that she would most likely be put on the transport. Short and stout, and looking old and worn, she was the perfect candidate for deportation from the ghetto. Grandpa, on the other hand—tall, dapper, and fit—was not selected, but Mother told me that he voluntarily, and without hesitation, accompanied his wife to the truck and to what he knew was certain death for both of them.

Mother and I had one slight hope: to find where they were being detained and then to quickly reach our friend the director of the furniture factory and beg for his intervention. We found the detention area, but by the time we got there my grandparents had already been transferred into bigger trucks and transported out of the ghetto. Rumors abounded as to their destination. We knew that Jews were being murdered by the thousands, but not how and where. It would not be until many years later that I would learn their fate.

With the loss of my grandparents, I went through an immediate transformation. I was still only twelve years old, and even though I had been working for months under terrible conditions at the furniture factory, Grandma and Grandpa took care of me when I returned to our attic. Now the sheltered little girl was gone. Within hours I lost the last vestige of childhood, assuming the role of Mother's protector. She really fell apart, and now I had to take care of her. Grieving together, we went back to work and returned to our attic, but our home was devoid of life.

In the middle of the following winter, we found a tiny room in another enclave, directly across the street from our factory. I organized the move, and friends helped me. We dragged the three-quarter bed down the three flights of stairs, turned it upside down to create a sled, piled our few belongings onto the cross-boards, tied it all up with rope, and pulled the whole kit and caboodle along the snowy, ice-covered streets across the ghetto and past the crossing points to our new home.

We were alone, but determined to survive. Our relationship, though, had changed dramatically. We functioned no longer as mother and little girl, but much more as partners in survival. She was still my mother and I her daughter, of course, but I now took the leadership role and with it responsibility for procuring our rations. Mother's physical condition had deteriorated, and it was up to me to stand in the ration lines and fight with the best and worst of the others for our share of food.

The move was very good for us. The tiny, cramped space—at the most the room was no more than eight feet wide by ten feet long—barely held our bed, a small chest of drawers, and a little round table with three chairs. A two-burner wood stove occupied a corner spot between the foot of our bed and the wall at the end of the room, and a few shelves above the stove held our cooking utensils and groceries. The latter were quite meager: a little container of flour, another with maybe half a cup of sugar, a small loaf of bread that had to last for a week, salt, some ersatz coffee, and once in a while a quarter cup of oil. Those were our staples, supplemented by the other rationed goods described earlier.

Our new life had a few advantages. The room was so small that in the winter, as soon as we would start the stove to cook something, the space would warm up to above freezing temperature and be almost bearable. Since our factory was located directly across the street, there were no more dangerous crossing points. It took only two minutes to get to work, which gave us another hour of sleep in the morning and more time at home after work.

We made new friends, and my mother met and befriended an elderly German Jewish professor who had arrived on a transport from Germany. He became a frequent visitor. The professor had no family or friends, did not speak Polish, and was very isolated, but he reminded me of Grandpa. He and Mother conversed in German, and she treated him with great deference. In the meantime I was busy reading books from the ghetto library, which was located fairly close to our home. There weren't
very many kids’ books, so I discovered some of the great Russian writers. I became enthralled with communism, and couldn’t get enough of this utopian philosophy. I was also very busy knitting skirts and sweaters. As soon as I outgrew one piece of clothing I would unravel the yarn and knit something else that would fit. It was the ghetto form of recycling!

Despite the starvation, disease, and deaths, despite fearing the constant transports out of the ghetto, we somehow managed to have some culture. There was the Yiddish theater, usually a spoof on ghetto life, and full of self-deprecating humor. We had poets and song writers, and every few weeks there was another hit tune being sung by all of us. Ignore the death wagons, disease, and starvation. Live, live, live, until they either put you on a transport or cart away your stinking carcass.

The professor didn’t come around anymore. One day he visited us and the next day he had vanished into the unknown. The rats were busy scurrying around in the courtyard, and I sat by the window, knitting and watching them. Spring came. I met a pretty girl with rosy red cheeks, reclining on a folding chair in the courtyard. My age, she lived upstairs. She didn’t work and needed a lot of rest. One day, as we sat visiting, she had a terrible coughing bout, and I saw bright red foam running out of her mouth. “Oh, that,” she said. “I have tuberculosis.” Soon she no longer came out anymore. After work I would go upstairs and spend some time with her. She got worse and worse, becoming too ill even to raise her head. One day, when I made my usual trip up the stairs, her mother opened the door but did not let me in. Instead, devoid of any expression, she said, “My daughter died last night. The body squad came today and took her away.” With that she turned away from me and shut the door. The tuberculosis had invaded my friend’s entire body, attacking all her bones and organs. The red cheeks had been a sign, not of good health, but of tubercular disease. I was sad, but took the news without much emotion. We had been friends, and now she was no more. I had become totally accustomed to living with loss.

On a warm and sunny day—I don’t know what month or year—I overheard some people talking about a transport of men who were being held in the deportation depot. They were from a labor camp in Poznań, now on the way to some other place, with a temporary stop in the Łódź ghetto. This was most unusual, and why they were in the ghetto I will never know. As soon as I heard the words “from a labor camp in Poznań,” I started running to the deportation center. With my heart pounding and my pulse racing, my whole being was focused on the possibility that my father might be there. I was sure that these men were from the same labor camp, Camp Radziwill! As soon as I reached the enclosure I started yelling his name. I was on the outside, separated from the men within by a very tall wire fence. No one was near the fence. I saw little groups of men—or should I say walking skeletons—inside the enclosure and too far away from me to be recognizable. The only thing that I could do was to keep yelling my father’s name, hoping that someone would respond. Maybe, just maybe, my daddy was one of them.

At last I saw a man detach himself from the group and start walking toward me. It wasn’t really a walk, more of a shuffle; he seemed to have an injured leg that he had to drag along the ground. Slowly he reached the area across from me, on the other side of the fence. I was in shock. This man looked like he was a hundred years old. Covered with filth and grime, he had fingers that looked like claws, and sunken cheeks with black holes that once had held his teeth. In a dry and raspy voice he asked, “Who are you? Why do you ask for Zalmen Kominkowski?”

I told the man that Zalmen Kominkowski was my father. Suddenly there was a light in his blank and staring eyes. He said, “Your father is dead. I knew him in the camp. He was an angel! We had a typhus epidemic in the camp. Your father nursed all the sick and dying. He never rested. He worked day and night trying to bring comfort to them. Three days after the epidemic ended your father got sick. He died within a couple of days. What you see here are the men who survived the epidemic.
That’s all that is left out of hundreds of us. Be grateful that your father died. Look at us. We are being sent to the gas chambers because we are too weak and sick to do any more work. You had a beautiful father; be grateful that he doesn’t have to face this final indignity. We are being shipped out of here in a few hours, to a place called Auschwitz.”

With this said, the skeleton shuffled away. I went home and never told my mother about this experience. I wanted her to have hope that Daddy was still alive. Still, I have always had the feeling that she knew, and that she also kept the bad news to herself. Each of us wanted the other to have hope.

We continued to exist. Mother had heart attacks; I was diagnosed with a case of tuberculosis. Miraculously, without rest or medication, my cough waned and I was OK. I was determined to live and take care of my mother. I knew that she would die without me, and so I lived and functioned.

Skinny, small, and terribly undernourished, I fought anyone who tried to take advantage of my size and push ahead of me in the food lines. I walked on the dangerous sidewalk along the barbed-wire fence that closed off the ghetto from one of the main arteries for German and Polish traffic. Instead of a street crossing like the one in our previous location, we now had the famous Lodz ghetto bridge. This bridge, probably two stories high and extremely slippery and icy in the winter, was a connection to a different part of the ghetto, and I needed to cross it in order to get to the vegetable depot. I had to climb the bridge, descend on the opposite side, and once again traverse along the barbed-wire fence in order to get our sack of potatoes or whatever vegetables – most often turnips or kohlrabi – were available. These usually came packed in bags weighing about twenty or thirty pounds, and I would throw the heavy sack over my shoulder and retrace my walk home. This was a physically demanding task. Going up and down the slippery, ice-covered stairs was fairly easy for me, but even though I was very agile the return trip was fraught with danger. Carrying the sack of produce slung over my shoulder, I could easily slip and lose my precious cargo. It was not uncommon for someone to trip you just so they could grab your food, and there was the additional danger that you might be shot from the thoroughfare. That was done strictly for sport: kill a Jew. We were always fair game.

Memories of the Lodz ghetto have stayed with me, as vivid today as they were more than sixty years ago. The death carts were everywhere, filled beyond capacity, the stiffened corpses falling off the carts and the men stopping to throw them back on. Eventually the carts would disappear around the corner, but within a few hours more dead bodies lay on the sidewalks, waiting for the wagons. It was an ongoing daily process. Cart away one batch, turn around, and come back for more. This ritual was an integral part of the ghetto landscape, a vision I learned to ignore.

We were alive and that was all that mattered. Another day at the factory, maybe go to the Yiddish theater or read a book—somehow we were still full of hope. We had survived another day; it didn’t matter that we were skin and bones. In the fall we celebrated my thirteenth birthday. Mother was a miracle worker, making cookies for the special occasion out of grated potato skins and one teaspoon of chocolate that she somehow managed to buy on the black market. She made six cookies and invited our neighbors to the party.

That year passed quickly for us. Oh yes, there were daily roundups, and because they had already emptied the ghetto of the sick, the old, and most of the children, no one was safe. The ghetto government would be given a quota for deportation, which they had to fill. Without notice a factory would have a roundup and most of the workers in that factory would be put on a transport, never to be heard from again. Poof! They disappeared into thin air, though a few managed to escape and hide.

By the summer of 1944, our factory was one of only a few that were still functioning. The ghetto streets were devoid of life. We hugged the buildings, trying to be invisible whenever we had to venture out to the
baker for our weekly loaf of bread. I don't recall much about any other food by this time, even though I know that we must have had some.

We heard the stories of Auschwitz, and we knew that the Warsaw ghetto had been liquidated. Chairman Rumkowski kept reassuring us that as long as we worked we were safe. Speaking about the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, he said that they did not have factories, and we did. He was convinced that working in the factories would save us; after all, we were producing goods for the Fatherland. We wanted to believe. We had to delude ourselves. The ghetto was becoming a ghost town. At one point there had been more than two hundred thousand of us, and now we were down to a few thousand. Rumors had it that the Russian army was getting closer; we might be liberated within a few weeks. Hang on, hang on. We must live. . . . Forget that we were human skeletons, scarecrows dancing the danse macabre, forcing ourselves to keep alive until liberation. We were barely holding on to life, waiting, but not sure for what. Liberation - or maybe a trip to an extermination camp.

Our building was almost empty. I sat by the window staring out at the scurrying rats in the deserted courtyard. No more friends or neighbors; if they were still alive they would also be hiding in their rooms. In the middle of one late-August night in 1944 we were awakened by a gentle knocking on our door. Mother's friend, the director of the furniture factory, was softly calling her name. As soon as he was in our room, he told Mother that under no circumstances were we to go to work. He had gotten word that our factory was going to be liquidated as soon as all the workers were inside the building. He told us to get dressed and to grab whatever food we had left, as well as our blanket and pillows, and to go under the cover of darkness to the third tenement building away from ours. Under one of the rooms a couple of men had dug a cellar in which to hide their families, and we could join them. The factory director's parting words were, "My son, sister, and mother are already there, as well as a couple of other families. I'll be in touch." With that last sentence, he left.

Mother made me put on three dresses, one on top of the other. I never questioned, just did as she told me. She, also, put on multiple layers of clothing. We grabbed our pillows, our goose-feather blanket, and our almost nonexistent food, and left our very last home. This process took maybe half an hour. It was still dark outside as we carefully slunk along the building walls, trying to blend into them, hoping not to be spotted by the ghetto patrol. Within a few minutes we arrived safely at our destination. A man let us in and said, "We've been expecting you." He moved a chair and the floor rug underneath it, exposing a trap door to the cellar. He opened it and told us to go down. Within seconds the trap door closed above us, and we heard the sounds of the rug being thrown back into place, as well as the scraping sounds the chair made as it was being dragged back across the floor to its original position.

The space was lit by one candle. I could barely see all the people gathered in this small, dank, earthy space, basically just a big hole dug out under a room. Mother and I found a vacant spot of earth, which we immediately occupied. This now became our home. Daily life consisted of sometimes having a bite of food and occasionally something to drink. Most of the time I lay curled up into a little ball and slept. Sleep became my friend, making hunger and thirst more manageable. Bathroom urges were few due to the lack of food and water, and dreams were big, and bold, and beautiful. I dreamt of freedom, of being reunited with my father, but most often my subconscious turned to food, especially huge platters of scrambled eggs.

The days passed, one after another. We waited for the Russians. A young man would come in the middle of the night, usually around two A.M., to bring us news and to let someone go up to empty our toilet bucket. Once in a while he would bring a few pieces of bread. One night, though, he didn't come at two. We were all awake, and the later it got the more fearful we became, but no one could venture out of the cellar without some assistance from the outside. At last, at about four in the morning, as
we were almost beyond hope, we heard noises above us. We were afraid to breathe, sure that it was the ghetto police searching the premises. Someone was pulling the chair across the floor. There were no voices. Are they trying to trap us by being quiet? As these thoughts were racing through my mind, I and everyone in the cellar heard the opening of the trap door. We had already extinguished the candle light and sat in total darkness.

Is this the end?

Before I could form the whole thought, I heard the familiar voice of our young man. Apologizing for being late, he told us of the latest development in the ghetto. There were no more civilians left except for some groups in hiding. The Germans had offered chairman Rumkowski a passenger train for himself, the other titular heads of the ghetto, the ghetto police, and all of their families. They promised relocation and factory work in Germany as a thank-you to all those people who had been so devoted to producing goods for German consumption. Rumkowski, of course, would continue to be the leader after the move. He and the others had agreed to take the German offer, since there was no sign of an approaching Russian army.

Our young man had come to inform us that we could join them as part of the family group. Should we opt not to go, we would be on our own. If we decided to join the group, we had to be at the train depot by six A.M. He made sure that we understood that this would be the last train out of the Lodz ghetto. Our group consisted of mostly women and children, and we knew that our survival odds were almost nil if we stayed behind without any outside help. Besides, Rumkowski was going and he was pretty sharp. We chose to join him.

Mother had been very smart to make me wear the three dresses. We were told to leave all our possessions in the cellar. The young man instructed us: "Carry nothing. Walk single file and try to blend in with the buildings. If you are spotted by the ghetto police or the SS you will be immediately shot. The ghetto is under martial law and they are killing everyone." We climbed up the ladder, without looking back. Remembering the young man’s words, we proceeded carefully to the train station.

As soon as we entered the terminal, we knew that we had chosen the wrong option. We were immediately surrounded by the SS with their vicious German shepherd police dogs. Their guns pointing directly at us, they were yelling, "Schnell! Schnell! Raus, Juden!" They pushed us out onto the train platform, where I immediately saw awaiting us, not a passenger train, but a very long cattle train. The dogs were barking. The SS were hitting people with their rifles and screaming obscenities.

For the second time in my life I climbed into a cattle car. Remembering our first cattle-car experience, I managed to pull my mother with me as I fought our way to a side wall. I knew that with no one behind us and a wall to lean against for back support, and surrounded by people on only three sides, we had slightly better odds of survival. Backs against the wall, legs stretched out in front, we were trying to establish our territory. Good idea, but it didn't work. More and more people were being shoved into the crowded space. Eventually we sat with our knees bent and almost pulled up to our chests. By the time the Germans locked us in, there were probably a hundred people in our cattle car. This time there wasn't even a pot to use as a toilet. Even if we'd had one, there was not a space inch of space for such niceties. As the train pulled away from the station, I still had hope that, even though we were in a cattle train, it didn't mean that we were not going to a work camp.
RETURN TO ŁODZ

On August 29, 1944, my mother and I had been on the very last transport that carried people out of the Łódź ghetto and brought them to Auschwitz. Decades later I had learned that when my beloved Grandma Helenka and Grandpa Zigmund were taken away they had been put on one of the transports to the Chelmno extermination camp. When they got there, they were murdered by the infamous lethal gas vans, vehicles rigged so that their exhaust could be piped directly into the interior, killing all those inside as they arrived. The bodies were then dumped into mass graves in the nearby woods.

Now our little group was going to Łódź, which for me would be returning to the site of my family's dissolution. My emotions were tumultuous and powerful. Coming here meant coming back to a place of overwhelming loss, but also I could hardly wait to show my girls where I had lived and worked. I was excited to show them my bridge, the one that I had had to cross so many times, going back and forth on the treacherous journey to and from the food lines.

Łódź was ugly, and extremely unwelcoming. It was a dirty and dreary city, mostly in shades of gray—just like my memories of the ghetto.

To my great disappointment, I could not find a single familiar landmark in Łódź. The bridge had been torn down; just this fact alone left me disoriented. Even though I had the addresses, all of the streets had been named in German by the occupying forces and then were renamed back to Polish after the liberation. We couldn't find either one of the buildings I had lived in, nor could we find the factory.

All my expectations were shattered. I had a great need to show my girls where and how I had lived for three years of my childhood. Not only could we not find our homes or any evidence of the furniture factory, there was nothing even left anywhere in Łódź to indicate that once upon a time more than two hundred thousand captive Jews had lived there, dying from disease and starvation.

We spent a few hours at the Jewish cemetery. Włocław was quite concerned and visibly uncomfortable the whole time. That particular area of Łódź was not at all safe, and we were all glad to board our bus and go back to the hotel.

I could hardly wait to depart from Łódź.