

IN HIDING

by Alexander Kimel

We were sitting at dinner on day, when the dogs started to bark viciously. Somebody tried to get into the house. Matusiak got up and motioned us to hide. "Please go to the barn. A stranger is coming." Without thinking much we ran out through the back door.

We heard raised voice. Matusiak yelling: "It is not true! You are crazy, with those stories. How can you do this to me? You are my neighbor."

Fifteen minutes later Matusiak came to the barn. He was shaken. "I think that you have to leave. The neighbors suspect that I am harboring Jews."

"Mr. Matusiak I am sure that nobody saw us here. We are very careful. Let us stay." Father pleaded.

"It is dangerous for you and me. A neighbor of mine, came to warn me. Other neighbors saw the new dress and new clothing for the children, my wife bought and this made them suspicious. - You are throwing money around. You must be hiding Jews."

Matusiak was a poor farmer, and my father paid him fifty gold dollars monthly, an astronomical amount of money. He spent part of the money and this was enough to arouse suspicion. Our vacation was over. Within one minute our whole world collapsed.

"Let's join the Jewish group in the forest." I suggested.

"No," said my father. "Sooner or later the Germans will pick them up. They have no chances to survive undetected in the forest. In the winter, each footstep will be imprinted in the snow. Either the Germans or the Ukrainians will kill them. We have to find another peasant to hide."

Next day Matusiak came to see us. "You can stay a few days more, but stay inside. Don't run around in the forest. Tomorrow I am going to see Koeniksberg. He knows lots of people and he might be able to help you."

This lifted our spirit. Koeniksberg was our liaison men with Matusiak. I don't know how my father found him. I guess that Archimedes was looking for a man with a lamp, my father was looking for a peasant with his walking cane. Always on the look out. And as the Bible says "Look and you will find" My father found Koeniksberg.

Despite his German name, Koeniksberg was Polish patriot, and a real gentleman. He was the richest man in his village named Lopuszna. He owned 25 acres of fertile land, horses and cows, but his main wealth and income was derived from an oil press. He owned a press where the linseed was pressed into precious oil.

A week later arrangements were made for our transfer to the Koeniksberg's. The Koeniksberg's lived in a large house situated at the main road in the center of the village. The farm was slopping downward, toward the river. On the right hand side there the stables for the cows and horses. On the left there was the little shack with the oil press and beneath it the big barn, packed with straw to the underside of the rafters.

This barn or rather the hole in straw of the barn became our hiding place. Our "dwelling" was a hole about 6' by 8 ft. We were all surrounded with straw, breathed the air filled with straw, ate food mixed with straw. Straw was everywhere. The only connections with the outside world were the slots in the old dried up gray wood planks. Through those slots the sun was shining in morning, lifting our spirits. Sometimes it was raining and I could catch some of the rain drops and feel the wetness on my skin. It made me feel alive, not a corps buried in a straw catacomb.

My sister Luba, stayed in the main house, helping out Mrs. Koenisberg with her chores and teaching their three daughters: Janina, Urshula and Cesia.

The adaptation of the humans to any conditions is amazing. Soon we settled into a routine. In the morning we washed with a wash cloth wetted from bottle with water and then took turns in the morning walk in our straw palace.. Only one person at a time could walk. Later after one of the Koeniksberg daughters delivered our meal we played chess.

The delivery of food was a complicated operation. Usually the girl, Cesia was her name, took a metal pail with filled with chicken feed and started to call the chickens to feed: Tu! Tu! Tu! The chickens were following her when she was throwing the grain to them walking toward the masked pass-thru hole. Making sure that nobody sees her she tapped on the door and passed us a pot with soup. Whenever I heard the Tu! Tu! Tu! Calling my saliva used to fill my mouth.

Cesia was the youngest daughter and after a while I fell in love with her and her Tu Tu! Tu.! . The human adaptation is amazing. I never thought that one can fell in love even in a straw filled cubby hole.

Once a week Koenisberg briefed us on what is going on in the world, brought us some newspapers to read, and lifted our spirits. According to him it is only a matter of months before the war will be finished. I don't know if he believed himself in those stories, but he was a gentleman.

We read carefully each word of the newspapers, published by the Germans for the local population. The language was atrocious and the propaganda amazing. Goebbels had a way to interpret each

defeat as a victory. The Germans were never defeated they always retreated to better positions, inflicting heavy casualties to the enemy, advancing to the rear.

We were delighted to see that the better positions were closer and closer to us. We became masters of reading in between the lines. The places of German victories engraved in our minds: Tobruk, El Alamein, Orel, Witebsk, Kursk we lived by those names, dreaming that one day we will be able to see all those places.

Soon we developed an additional competitive game - de-licing. Despite our efforts to keep cleanliness lice started to plague us. So every morning after washing we killed the parasites. We developed a competitive game: who will kill more parasites in the allotted time.

We also played chess, endlessly fighting over each move. "You can't take this move with the tower. I am at the end of the game. I am able to check you. It is unfair." Sometimes Father got excited and screaming out loudly. I usually gave in. I did not want to lose my life because of the chess.

All this time Luba was living as a domestic help or governess-tutor in the main house. I think that Mrs. Koenisberg was a sickly woman that needed help. Luba was staying all the time in the house, in order not to arouse suspicion. During the whole time we never saw her.

The Koenisberg place was always full of people, wagons and horses. I think that the oil press saved our lives. Nobody would suspect that in place as busy as the 42nd Street, Jews could be hiding.

As the summer was passing, the days were shorter. We made ourselves a straw curtain to mask the slots in the barn's planks, and we started to use an archaic lamp. It was a small bottle filled with oil with a wick immersed in it. The main problem was safety. A small move and the whole barn could be set on fire. I always had to hold the lamp in my hand, until our host gave us an old metal pail with holes punched in walls. A home made lantern.

We lived in our cubby hole, detached from the world, until one day a tragedy occurred within an earshot. In an early morning we were awakened by shots in German: "Stop! Stop! I am going to shoot!" Soon two shots pierced the air..

Our first reaction was someone denounced us and that Luba escaped and was shot by the Germans. "My God! We are all going to die. It must be Luba that tried to alert us. I looked around. Here we are helpless. No place to escape, no place to hide. No possibility to camouflage. "

I was shaken. For the first time in my life I felt that I am going to die. I will not survive. Did it pay to go through this hardship, the confinement, the hiding to live for a few more days? Then a surprising answer came to my mind. "Yes it paid. To be able to live and witness the beginning of the disintegration of the German Army. It paid to see at least the beginning of the end." The remainder of the day passed quietly and at night after the oil press closed Koenisberg told a sad story. A story of another quest for Jewish survival.

About six months ago the family Wisniewski settled in Lopuszna. They were devoted Catholics, attending Church services each Sunday. Mr. Wisniewski was looking for a teacher's position, she gave music lessons. They had a ten-year old daughter, Cesia.

They desperately tried to blend into the surrounding, but arouse suspicion. Lopuszna wasn't a megapolis where your neighbors don't know you. "Whoever heard about a music teacher In Lopuszna? "

One day two Germans showed up to check the papers of the family. Their papers were in order. The Birth Certificate, the Kennkarte were in order. They were ready to leave when one German took Mr. Wisniewski and bashed him to drop his pants. He did not pass the test, he was circumcised.

Mrs. Wisniewski fainted while the ten-year-old girl took off, running away. The other German took down the weapon and shot the girl. The child did not have a chance. The German shot many escaping Jews. He was a sharpshooter.

It turned out that Mr. Wisniewski was Polish, and could have survived, but she refused help. For her, a life without her child and her husband was not worth living.

We Jews have a long history of sufferings, and we easily adapt to new calamities. Is it the psychological training or is the Darwinian adaptation through genes selection? I don't know, but in a matter of days our lives returned to "normalcy": Washing with a wash cloth, taking turns in "walks", entering de-licing competition and waiting for the meals.

By coincidence or design we discovered a new fascinating pastime - story telling. My father started to tell me stories from his life. They fascinated me and I listened rapturously to their repeat, almost memorizing them. They evoked in me a feeling of peacefulness. It was a vision of a remote world where life was secure and slow moving. I especially liked the stories from World War I.

My father was drafted into the Austrian Army and served as an artillery scout on the front in Italy, on the River Isonca. It was a stationery war, fought for years in the mountains of Tyrol, where the Austrians tried to push the Italian army. My father took part in the XII Isonca Offensive.

Twelve Offensives on one spot. It sounded idyllic, human madness at a slow moving pace. My father serving as an artillery scout was directing the fire of an artillery battery.

"I used to jump out of the trenches with my binoculars and the hand cranked telephone, pulling the telephone wires with me. Then, I crawled to the end of the ridge, hid under a tree or under a bush and observed the movement behind the enemy lines."

"One day I spotted a caravan of mules, negotiating a winding mountain path. The mules were loaded with wooden cases of artillery shells. The mulls are carrying shells that the Italians will use against us. I said to myself. I picked up the telephone set and cranking the handle called in the coordinate for

the firing."

"After a few shots I was able to correct the fire to zero in on the caravan. The hit animals started to fall off the cliff, limbs, heads in a free fall. Next day the Italian zeroed in on our battery and opened a barrage of fire. I was out at my post at the ridge, but when I crawled back I found half of my comrades killed. I found my best friend Simeon Sharp seriously wounded and profusely bleeding. He died on my hands."

"I was in a shock. I looked at myself. My tunic was all stained with the blood of my friend. I suddenly realized that this is a war. It not the only the mules that fell off the cliff. I decided to quit."

"How can you quit a war? Did you desert the Army?" I basked.

"No, I quit legally."

'I applied for a furlough. Our battery was put out of operation, and we were withdrawn from the front line to a small Hungarian town near the Lake Ballaton. I went to the rabbi and he directed me to a Jewish girl that was taking care of soldiers. She gave a small bottle with acid. I think it was sulphuric acid. 'Smear it on you leg for a few days and you will develop symptoms of a wound.'"

"Our battery was reorganized, we received new horses and additional soldiers. "Cannonen Futter" Cannon food as the Germans called it. We returned to another position on the Isonca. I waited for an opportunity. When our position was marginally hit, I smeared my leg with the acid and screamed in pain. The acid was burning a real hole in my body. I screamed with pain until a Red Cross Orderly put me on a wagon and took me to the field hospital."

"Before I was examined by a doctor, I smeared my wound with a few drops of acid. I stayed in the hospital for months and the wound would not heal. Until my doctor became suspicious and diagnosed me a simulant. He put leg in a cast. 'I assure you Kimel', he said. 'Your leg will heal in one week. I will take care of you.' And really my leg started to heal."

"I was desperate and ready to give up. The cast was tight and I could not reach my wound with magic bottle. One night I had a dream. I saw my friend Sharp dressed in a Talit a Prayer shawl. 'Leon I am praying for you. Don't give up. Find a way.'

"I woke up and in confusion jumped out the bed. The jerking of my encased leg sent a wave of piercing pain through my body, and I was that my cast slipped a little bit. That was all that I needed. My friend saved my life."

"I took the magic bottle and went to the toilet there, in the middle of the night I worked feverishly to reach the wound. I dipped a piece of toilet paper in the magic fluid . . . and I was happy when I felt

the burning, piercing pain. I was back in business."

"Three months later I was discharged from the hospital and declared an invalid, not fit to serve in Austrian Imperial Army."

Soon the autumn arrived. Autumn of 1943, was unusually cold, frost covered the crops. One night I woke up shivering from cold. I tried, to dig into the straw but it did not help me too much. I had to get up and start moving around to warm up.

My father also woke up and immediately started to worry. "We can't stay here, We will freeze to death. I think that Koeniksberg is trying to get rid of us. What does he need this aggravation for?"

Next day we spoke with Koeniksberg. "Mr. Kimel I am aware of the problem. We have to build an underground bunker, but I don't know where to dispose the excavated dirt. With people waiting for the press, milling around the digging is dangerous, and who is going to do the digging? But don't worry Mr. Kimel will find a solution."

When my father heard the "Don't worry," he immediately prepared a whole list of things that could go wrong, and started to worry one item at the time:

Soon Koeniksberg came to inform that he started the digging. He found a nice Ukrainian man Stepan that will do the digging at night.

My father immediately revised his "Worry List" introducing more specific items. First the Ukrainian might denounce us to the Germans and get the price. Secondly his wife might blubber the secret out. Thirdly the Ukrainian partisans might try to get our money. Fourthly, Stepan might kill us himself.

After two weeks of intensive worries we were transferred to the new underground bunker. The bunker in many ways resembled the old bunker at home. An area of about 12 X 10 ft was excavated to a depth of about seven feet and a false ceiling was built. Inside our main furniture was a homemade platform bed filled with straw and covered with a blanket. The new place was warm, but we lost the wooden slots connecting us with the outside world and letting the sunshine through. We had to use the oil lamp for illuminations and the only connection with the outside worlds were the two vent lines.

In the autumn of 1943 the German Army was retreating on all fronts. Even the newspapers became more open and required less and less reading in between the lines. Imperceptible Goebbels changed the propaganda line. After discovery of the Katyn Massacre, Germany became the defender of culture against the onslaught of Asiatic hordes of Stalin. Reading, the newspapers became a feast. New names were engraved into our consciousness. The Russians started to conduct summer offensive. New Russian names we learned: Zukow, Rokossovksy, Konew. We started to believe that we will survive.

In winter of 1943 Russian forces entered the old Polish territories, the front line drew closer. The incessant roaring of German tanks and planes became constant. We learned to distinguish the noise of Panzer tanks from a Tiger tank. Most of all, we learned how to determine the direction of the machines. When they were retreating, we celebrated, when going in the going eastward we wished them an easy death.

Soon the front drew nearer and nearer. In March of 1944 Tarnopol was liberated by the Russian forces. We started to count the hours of our liberation. When my father abandoned his proverbial pessimism, I became suspicious. It is a Ukrainian proverb "Ne Kaze Hop..." meaning Don't count your chicken . . .

One night we were awakened by noise above our trap door. What is it? Are we liberated? Soon the door opened and Luba appeared. "What happened? Are the Germans gone? Where are the Russians?"

"They are almost here. The Russian patrols were spotted about 10 miles from here, but the German brought in reinforcing. They are combing now the forest and killing the surviving Jews." Luba shared the news with us.

"Worst of all, Koenisberg is afraid of the Russians and decided to retreat with the Germans, to Western Poland."

"Oh my God we will be left alone."

"No? Stepan is going to take care of the farm, the cows and the horses and of us. Koenisberg is going to leave us food and water for two weeks. The Russians should be here any moment."

We had mixed feelings. We were sad seeing Koenisberg go. He was like our Saint Patron. But we were excited with the coming liberation.

Soon Koenisberg brought us dried bread and two containers of water. "I have to go. I am afraid that the Russians will send me to Siberia. They called me a Kulak before. I will settle down in Western Poland. Stepan is going to take care of you."

We thank him for saving our lives and kissed him Good Bye. Father also gave some extra money. Little did we know that our ordeal is just starting. Koenisberg left in the morning and at day's end Germans were all over the farm. Like from a loudspeakers, German guttural voices were beaming through the vent pipes.

My father glued to one of the ventilation pipes soon solved the riddle. Koenisberg's house was taken over by the German Military Police. We were their unwanted guests. Now, Father was busy with compiling a list of the probabilities, one possibility was worse than the other.

One day we overheard two Germans discussing the situation. They were upbeat. The Russian forces were thrown back, Tarnopol was retaken by the Germans, and Goebbels promised new miraculous weapons that will change the course of action.

To confirm the information we picked up the rattling of the German armor moving eastward. I think that even my father could not predict such a dire situation. Life is unpredictable, completely unpredictable. Who could predict that before the end of the war we will be hiding in a German Post witnessing the movement of the German forces eastward. "How will this end? Are we going to make it?"

A few days we witnessed a strange situation. A plane making noise like a lawn mower appeared from nowhere and started to throw incendiary hand grenades at the Germans. The Kukurudzinik is here. The Kukuridzinik is here. We were delighted. The kukuridzinik was a light bi-plane made up from aluminum frame and covered with canvas. He could fly at low speed and almost stand in one place and throw hand grenades through a window.

The Germans were defenseless against this simple plane. Bullets could make holes in the canvas and he kept flying. We were ecstatic until we realized that an incendiary grenade thrown at the barn will spell out our end. We were torn with mixed feelings. Father immediately revised his "Worry List."

Life is unpredictable. The Germans wanting camouflage the post as a farm let Stepan take care of the cattle and the horses, The chickens were already gone. We heard his voice often now, he was talking to the horses, telling them that Koenisberg is gone and he will be their owner now. Soon the German will go also. New communication lines were established.

One day Stepan wanted to open the trap door but a German, suspicious of him, followed him into the barn. It was a close call for us. came closer. Stepan quickly closed the door and this was the end of our supplies lines.

"We might have to stay here for another month," said my father. " We have to start rationing the food and the water. We had at most food for two weeks only. We decided to limit our rations to a piece of bread and half a glass of water."

We stopped wasting water on washing and this increased our de-licing entertainment. We got stuck in a difficult situation. No food, no water and the parasite eating us alive and the Germans above us. Even Father could not have created a worst scenario. "Are we going to make it?"

After one week a week of hunger I lost so much weight that only skin and bones remained. Without food one can live but without water it was impossible. The skin on my cheekbones was so thin that I

could not sleep at night. It hurt.

Soon the hunger subsided, the body adjusted to limited food intake, burning every ounce of fat available in the body. The thirst became unbearable. I started to doze off, losing consciousness for long periods of time. I started to dream, daylight dreaming. My favorite dream was that after liberation I will buy myself a bicycle and ride from one water well to the other and drink this delicious cold liquid. I could not understand that for so many years I never appreciated this gift of nature- water.

In the time when I was awake, I started to understand why the Germans starved the Jews in the ghetto. It was no food shortage. It was a way to control and disarm any resistance to the destruction. A hungry man thinks only about food. He is oblivious to any other stimulations.

In mornings, after munching the stale, dried bread, washed down with a gulp of water I felt better. The nights were more difficult to take. I could not sleep.

One day, when I was fully alert, I heard through the vent line a familiar voice. I could not believe my ears. It was the voice of Lonek Engelberg, A Jewish Policemen from Ghetto. He was talking in German that means he spoke Yiddish that sounded like German. I understood him perfectly: "I am a Jew. Please give a bowl of soup and let me take a shower and then you can shoot me. I had enough. I can't take it"

It was a tragic end of man I knew very well. I don't know if his wish was granted but he did not survive. Maybe we should do the same thing?. What is the use of the sufferings?