Meir Rotholtz
A photographic life account

Introduction

This is a life account of Meir (also known as Majer / Mayer) Rotholtz (also known as Rotholc), a survivor of the holocaust whose traumatic experiences echo down the generations. The document might shine some light on the worst and best of humanity. It also It illustrates the importance of resourcefulness, mutual and organised help in times of genuine need.
A native to Poland, Meir later resided in Israel until his death.

The account is based on a tape recording which was then written down in Hebrew by his daughter Michaela in December 1999.

This English edition (2020), by A (temporarily withheld)), Meir's grandson and Michaela's nephew living in the UK, involved assembling and chronologically ordering the somewhat disjointed documented narrative. The spelling of some people's names and certain place names are the best approximations to be found from the original verbal and written accounts.
The editor's own notes or clarifications appear in square brackets […].

Growing Up

I was born in Szcitekuscin 10th September 1915.
[Szczecin is a city on the Oder, north-west Poland. This might be the origin of the entire Rotholtz family that Michaela had hitherto managed to trace. It includes the family link to another Meir Rotholtz whose grandson - Howard Roth - currently lives in the USA].

When I was three years old, in the middle of the night, I was taken away from Mom's bed into another bed. The following day I had a new brother, Michael.
I can still recall Grandma who arrived a few days later in her apron for the ceremony.

Father was working in Częstochowa [southern Poland]. Three years later my sister, Hadassa, was born.
The family relocated to Częstochowa in 1921 when I was six years old. Dad, David of Maszerky (Szoryk), was a shoemaker and Mother, Hava Binko, was a seamstress. [She had lived with her sister Breidl] and they had two more sisters elsewhere, one named Dwora and the other unknown]. We lived on 32 Gariniszarisika (pot-makers) Street (previously 36).
I studied in a Kheyder [an informal, small-scale, Jewish learning institution] taught by grandpa Binjamin Binko and other tutors from the age of three. When I turned seven I was not sent to school due to neglect at home.

At the age of nine, and with the new compulsory education legislation, I was sent into the first year at a school where only the principal was not a Jew. Schooling was taken in two daily shifts. Following my working day I would attend 3-4 hours of evening school. Later on I moved to a-day-a-week school and was taught by teacher Tabensky (a Lithuanian or east-Polish Jew, and an extreme communist) who was tough on all disciplines in Yiddish. I also took Geography, Polish and Polish history.

Although Dad was professionally employed, living was tight and Mum helped along with occasional jobs. I contributed to the family's income by working as shoemaker operating the machine, which entailed long days on our feet, attaching the upper shoe to the sole then passing it on to be finished off.

At the age of twelve I joined the junior movement Poaley Zion left-wing, (my cousin Meir Poliwoda [hereafter Meir P.] was in Poaley Zion right-wing). We then joined the respective youth movements 3-4 years later.
Częstochowa In the early 1990's.

Sister Hadassa and mother Hava in front of Meir, possibly in Olsztyn, north-east Poland 1939.

War Breaks Out

At the age of eighteen we enrolled with the Labour left party who were less Zionism-orientated
than the Labour Right party. In 1939 the party had a global conference in
Geneva where it was decided that we shall be trained [I assume here he means training for the eventual Aliya - immigration into the then Palestine, learning to become pioneers and how to become self-sufficient]. Taking place so close to the breakout of World War Two - some delegates were unable to return to their homes.

When I was 24 the war broke out 01/09/1939. Two days later Jews in Poland would avoid being seen on the streets from fear of being rounded up and forced into labour. Polish gentiles were able to pick out Polish Jews from the rest and they referred to them as Jude [not Jeed?] in a derogative manner.

At the party club which was 3-4 minutes away from home, we had red flags as well as blue-and-white flags. We met up there (with Mordehkai Bermazig, Yehushua Gelbard and Shlomo Shimonovic). We've excavated a cavity in the club's wall into which we stashed away the flags and sealed it up with cement. We all knew about the hidden flags during the war and the German occupation, but I was the only one able to locate the precise location after the war.

Under German Occupation

We heard that Germans enter Jewish homes to take people away.

When they indeed let themselves into our home, I sat down and pretended I was preparing slippers; they refrained from taking me away.

In November 1939 we heard that it was possible to move out of the German territory into the Soviet controlled area [The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had partitioned Poland between the two powers]. My brother, myself and a few others travelled south to Krakow on our way eastwards. We've arrived at night, the city was under curfew. We've been told that the Germans had sealed the eastern border where Jews were caught up and beaten up whilst attempting to flee. We stayed the night at a Jewish place then returned to Częstochowa the next day.
Meir P.'s mother, Dwora [Haya?[from Bedin, who is also the sister of my mother (Hava), wished for him to honour her by getting married sooner rather than later. He had known my sister Hadassa earlier on and a love affair had blossomed between the two cousins. The wedding took place in a carpenter's workshop that was part of the apartment of sister Breidel's in Częstochowa. We walked tight along the walls [presumingly keeping a low profile]; only the closest family had arrived. The ceremony was conducted by a "Rabbi" who knew how to conduct such an event.

Mother was the leader of the family, and two weeks after the wedding she realised we were wrong not to have left town along with the others who fled, because we didn't want to leave the family behind. Her conscience bothered her. She had found out about a group planning an escape and hitched us (Meir P., brother Michael, myself and others) on to them; ten in total. She paid a sum of money to a pair of individuals: a Jew from Częstochowa and a gentile from the Ukraine. After the war these two became watch smugglers from Poland to Russia by wearing multiple watches on their arms. They were to smuggle us out to the east.

On 02/12/1939 I said my goodbyes to my parents; it was the first time that I had seen dad crying. Mum and sister Hadassa walked us from afar to the station entrance (avoiding proximity). On the platform we each waited separately, away from one another (I met the party's city representative there, he whispered signalling that I ought to keep the distance). [This was the last time Meir was to his parents].

Some Jews held counterfeit documents. I was told of a Jew pretending to be a gentile onboard a train who had sighed in Yiddish, betrayed himself, and got caught.

The gentiles couldn't have spotted us entering the train under darkness. We needed to change for the east at a Warsaw station by crossing the Viswa [Wisla] river's long bridge heading eastwards. Pedestrians were disallowed during the night curfew. We found a gentile waggon driver who we paid to get us across.

At the near end of the bridge we were stopped by Germans who made us disembark and asked where we were going to. To the eastern station, we replied. We weren't carrying any suitcases or rucksacks; but we were wearing multiple sets of clothing. In my package they found a good piece of fabric that Mum have given me for making some trousers.

The Germans then said: "You lot, run on the bridge, the last one of you will be getting a bullet to the head!" We ran like hell, Germans were stood at either end of the bridge. I remember Meir P. arrived first, immediately followed by myself, brother Michael arrived last. The Germans asked "Who arrived last?" we all kept stum, somehow we all got out of this alive.

Our pair of people smugglers led us to a building site. I thought at the time that they must have lost the plot. They demanded that we pay towards onward transportation by some locals smugglers. As one walked into the site, the other stayed outside of the entrance. We paid him. As soon as his partner outside the entrance saw that, he shouted "Germans!". A shot was heard and they both fled with the money. We each scattered in different directions.
Once the dust had settled down, we started looking for one another. I found Meir P. Out of eleven, we have reassembled 6-7 people, including the smugglers, but excluding brother Michael, whom I was never to see again.

The Way to Vilna

[Vilnius, now in Lithuania, was north east from Warsaw, and at the time was disputed over with Poland also claiming it as their own]

The ground was burning under our feet, we had to march on. We aspired to make Alyia, to [the then] Palestina. Lithuania was neutral at the time, from where we could travel anywhere in the world.

We asked for directions at a home of a local who had come out a short distance to point us in our direction, he was paid for that. We walked on, not knowing whether or not we had arrived into the Russian territory. At two in the morning we saw light in a house. The

Ukrainian “guide” asked us to wait outside; we waited for a long time. The Jewish “guide” proceeded into the house. He too stayed inside for a long while. We kept tight to the fence of the house. We suddenly saw somebody coming out from the house; we hid amongst the shrubs planted along the fence. Alas we were found.

That man turned out to be a Soviet soldier, and the house belonged to a Soviet HQ. We were so happy that we had crossed into Soviet territory, however we were now arrested.

Entering the house, we met various smugglers: salt, watch and people smugglers with their “cargo”. We relayed our story to a Jew in there. He advised us that in the morning there would be a military police inquiry and that we are best to claim that we were heading from Soviet territories west to Poland to help our parents, the opposite from our actual direction.

As expected, in the morning the military investigator responded to our (fabricated) claims and told us we could not go back to Poland. He said that in order to go back to Poland we must first be granted with a license from the Soviet foreign ministry in Bialykstok [then under Soviet control? now in Poland]. We were “forced” to go to Bialykstok (our true destination). As we left the house we wanted to soar in the air, jump for joy, but we held back and acted disappointed.

The next destination on the way to Vilna was an address in Bialykstok, where we delivered a letter from a fellow we met on the way. When Meir P. and I handed the letter to his parents they were full of happiness.

In Bialystok we walked the streets during Hanukkah, the Huanukia's [a type of a Jewish festive candlabrum] shone from inside the windows.
We were hunting for information that might help us find brother Michael. Instead, we were told about a kibbutz in Bialykstok where one, Tzvia Lubetkin stayed, she knew Meir P. She said sarcastically “Well, are we liberated?” to which Meir P. replied “Tzvia, don't you know me, speaking to me this way?”. And so he gained her trust, I followed him as he would find an acquaintance at each stop on the way.
We were accepted onto the kibbutz, but only stayed for under a week on our way to Lithuania. Tzvia had put us in touch with a person who would take us to Vilna. On our way we arrived at a small south Lithuanian town [Eišiškės, they probably travelled across Belarus] on the Friday. We were allocated different Jewish homes,15-16 year old youth escorted us to the synagogue where I met Meir P. and we had chulnt [special home-cooked Jewish food] on the Saturday.

On the Saturday evening our group from Bialykstok had just left Eišiškės when somebody shouted “Army!”. We retreated back to Eišiškės (Meir P. continued on). The day after (Christmas eve) our guides got us to join the parishioners walking to church which was on our direction [towards Vilna]. Outside the church we veered back on to our Vilna route, those of us who weren't fit enough were carried on a horse-drawn wagon; we walked.

In Vilna

By the time we reached Vilna the evening curfew was in-force. We stayed the night at a Jewish blacksmith's and before we left in the morning someone walked in, telling us they know where Meir P. can be found.

Two tall disused buildings stood in the suburbs. They were now used by the Jewish community which comprised a whole range of non-local Zionist political movements. That is where I found Meir P.
Amongst the movements, there was a large group of Jewish youth who'd escaped from Germany and were now not allowed back nor permitted into Poland. As such *persona non grata* they were given priority to Israel by the Halutz organization.

Many refugees found themselves in Vilna, 2,000 Jews and 5,000 Anglo-Jewish Poles. There were many squalid rental vacancies. We were given food but we had no beds or covers.
January 1940 was cold one and I contracted pneumonia.

Shabyli

I had a high temperature and the examining doctor referred me to the hospital in a [unrecognisable name/word] place called Shabyli / Shabli. Meir P. sent my cousin (the son of Mother's older Sister) to meet me at the hospital. I didn't know him and we do not know what happened to him since. After the hospital I was sent to a recovery place from where I was exchanging letters with Meir P. A nurse from the Halutz brought me extra sustenance. I checked out of that place fatter than I had ever been before! I headed to Shabyli on a train via Kovna [Kovno was a ghetto in Kaunas, Lithuania].

Whilst I was hospitalized, a hundred of the Halutz members were sent from the community in Vilna to Shabyli, where a kibbutz named Shakharyiah had been established by the organization. Upon arrival at Shabyli I can recall the 1st of May Labour Day. The demonstrations in Poland had not reached Shabyli.

The training kibbutzim in Poland owned property, cattle etc. On the kibbutz, aspirations of a new life in Israel were being fleshed out. We were waiting for the HQ to arrange for the necessary certification. It was a long wait. I was sharing a top bunk with Meir P. until I took "ill" and slept in a bed of the kibbutz infirmary. I was initially allocated to do the afternoon dishwashing. Later I was doing guard duties at an outpost of the kibbutz. Meir P. was the treasurer. Others were in groups of three on lumber duty, two sawing off branches and one piling them up for drying.

In 1940 (June?) the Soviets moved in following the Levintrok Pact [Indecipherable. A Soviet–Lithuanian Mutual Assistance Treaty between the Soviets and the Lithuanians was signed in October 1939]. I can recall the tanks. We had to dismantle the kibbutz and split into groups or as individuals. Eight of us have found a rental flat in central Shabyli and worked at a Jewish shoe factory (one found a job in town at a blacksmith's). Below us lived Haviva and the couple (?) Brum (Mottek). We earned enough to afford sending weekly parcels home to Częstochowa and Badin

[probably a place between Warsaw and Gdansk called Bądzyn]. Letters were exchange with the parents and sister Hadasa.

Hadasa's letters were written in Polish and we reckoned were conveying secret messages to get past the censorship. She had written about the visitation from the non-existing "Uncle Freilichman" [Uncle Freedom], which we interpreted as Mr. Weszrowsky from the Polish espionage coming after us.

This made us speculate that since we had left Częstochowa, ghetto features like the attire and the yellow badges have been introduced; similar to what we had come to know about the Lodz ghetto.

Brother Michael too had been exchanging letters with home. Back when we were searching for him in Bialykstok, he was there. Being a communist he was sent coal mining to Mariopol, a large industrial city on the Azov Sea [Ukraine's south east]. Our parents had passed his address on to me. He signed on for a year which entitled him to a choice of place of abode; he had chosen Mariopol. We tried to coax him over to Lithuania but there was a catch: No work permit without a home address and no home address registered to those not registered as working locally...
Living was bearable under the Soviet rule. We had income and conditions were liveable.

The Nazis arrive in Shabyli

In June 22nd 1941 the Nazis invaded.

As war broke out, a stay-put order was issued by the Government. By the following day the Government had dispersed. A transitional period of neither Nazi nor Soviet governent had become established.

Once we recognised the implications of the new situation, we took two days to decide that we are to flee towards Leningrad [St Petersburg]. Only a small sector of the population joined in with the flow, having walked for seventy kilometres over the night. I was wearing uncomfortable boots that were pressing on my feet.

On our flight, passing gentile Lithuanian villages, a local had caught hold of my arm trying to pull me away. I had the impression that he was looking for a Jew to dispatch. I managed to wrangle free from him by force and ran away.

Entering Latvia, we asked a local farmer permission to sleep in the barn. Although the hay was plentiful (as were the rats), sleeping next to the road was impossible due to the hurtling Nazi military traffic. A few hours later the farmer entered and asked us to leave for fear of his own safety as a shelter provider. We managed to persuade him to allow us to stay until dawn.

We have realised resistance would be futile as the fast going Nazi traffic would outpace us to our destination. We thus decided to return to Shabyli. Evading the gentile, we had met earlier in the morning.

We had to cross a river not knowing how deep it was. The scout used a dipstick to indicate

that crossing would be possible on foot. And so we crossed the river, not knowing where to go to. We arrived on a field, a gang of anti-Semitic gentiles prevented us from crossing the field. Under gun threat, they have forced us onto the road used by the Nazi traffic. Fortunately for us, and unlike the locals, the Nazis knew not how to distinguish us Jews from local folk. German traffic was motoring past us on the road.

A German approached me. Using a hand gesture, he asked me for “a light”. I happened to have a match box with me. He took the box away from me; inside it was a note with the name of the place we were heading for.

Our journey had been treacherous. There were cows, dogs and other animals on our way. We envied them. They were not as fearful as we were. The ground was burning under our feet, whilst the sun was shining as usual…

The Nazis made telecommunication illegal for Jews. Jews were becoming disconnected from their surroundings and the wider world. Some Jews were keeping secret diaries. Throughout the journey, I kept in my hands a book of Yiddish poetry [/songs?] by Menachem Kipnis. Some of the poems came with musical notes. I sometimes read out songs to the guys. [Meir also kept a miniature war diary which was subsequently translated into English, currently held by Michaela]

Ghetto Shabyli

We headed back to Shabyli. The possessions we had left behind were still at the apartment. A month later a ghetto was established in Shabyli's roughest zone by relocating the locals out of there and into Jewish properties elsewhere. We dubbed the place the “Kawkas” [Caucasus] as living conditions were squalid. Work in the ghetto was allocated by the Judenrat who were responsible for “good” order. The other part of the ghetto was called Tiraku across the road via a bridge.

We lived in a relatively large room [apartment?]. Eight in total, including a woman who came to look after her sick son, who had since died, but by which time it was too late for her to go back. We referred to her as the “Aunt”. We used to screen her off behind taller people during inspections so that she was not uncovered and expelled. Two couples (Rivkale & Brum and Srulik Wolk with Rivkale Scheindale) were each sharing a bed. I shared with Meir P. The “Aunt” shared the kitchen with a single guy. In another room, a couple named Oschpatzin have started a pregnancy out of which no child was produced. The eight-strong band was later disbanded, couples and compatriots split up, sent off to different work allocations.

Obviously, childbirth in the ghetto was forbidden, any births that did take place took place in secret. New mothers would be killed if caught. Anecdotally, once during an Aktzia [raid], a child was hidden inside a barrel with water in the top section – the child's life was saved.
At another ghetto incident, some gentiles arrived towing trailers [or wagons]. Aboard one waggon was a Jewish family destined for extermination from which a five year old boy escaped. He roamed the ghetto and was saved. He survived the Aktzia. It is unclear how he had looked after himself, but this is a well-known story.
There were a few thousand people in the ghetto.

Out of town was a small airport which was to be expanded using Jewish workforce. Those working would receive a note for a Ratzia [ration voucher]: 150 grams of bread and rotten potatoes. The food was redistributed by the “Aunt”.

Forced to walk the four kilometres to the airport on a road worn out by hurtling military traffic, we were banned from using the pavement. Meir P. managed to jump clear from a speeding vehicle, but I was hit and thrown into a ditch. When I got up, in pain, I was so disorientated I simply followed everyone else.

Whilst working in Shabyli town, a group of captive soviet soldiers were ushered [presumably by Germans] down the street, ever growing in number. I had some food reserved for myself which I placed on the road “Have it!” I pointed at the package. I was left without food, but shared some of Meir's. I did that because I realised that their situation was worse than ours. Like us, captives were put to work expanding the airport, but they were so weak and often not up for the job. Many of them contracted spotted fever [or typhus]. The Germans treated them cruelly: when a fellow captives supported another on a march the Germans would beat them up.

In the evenings we used to have food as a group. The “Aunt” placed the bowl in the middle. Each was trying to help themselves as fast as they could. As a slow eater, they showed consideration and left some for me.

At bedtime we would reminisce about home and talk about the war and the rumours that went around. Good rumours were dubbed I.W.U., a Yiddish acronym for 'so willed the Jews'. This was also the name of the culture house [club] in Lithuania. When I was sceptical about a certain I.W.U., I was encouraged: “Have some faith, why won't you?!”

Another work allocation was at the H.E.M. (food & ammunition supply base).
We were ordered to manufacture small crates to be parachuted off as supply for the German army who were at the time besieged [or cut-off outside of] Leningrad. I was reluctant to be of any assistance, I worked as slow as I could. I was unaware of the supervisor observing me; he hit me on the head with a stick that snapped on me. I was left with painful concussion, and I would not return and encounter that German again.

The day after I was working privately through a friend who was a servant at a German officer's household. I worked along my friend which had given me some respite from doing jobs like shoe-shining. The officer lived with the wife of a Lithuanian, who had been a policeman before the war. This woman had taken out abortions every few weeks, and died as a consequence.

Meir P. was occupied in a peat mine at the time.

Our Judenrat were Lithuanian Jews appointed by the local Lithuanian authorities. The local Jews had gained favouritism because they had more money which was earned through selling their items to gentiles. The rest of us, refugees, had no money and we were forced to take on the hardest work.

The Jewish police demanded that all furs were to be collected and handed over to the Nazis.

During an Aktzia aimed at under 12's, the Jewish police collaborated with the Nazis hunting-down the children. We hated the Jewish police.

Later in summer 1941 an order arrived instructing that the ghetto is to be fenced in. Both Nazi guards and the Jewish police were positioned at the gates.

At the time, I was staying with a Jewish family, all my friends said their goodbyes and scattered in all directions. It was in the summer of 1942 when an announcement was made in Shabyli Ghetto: The Nazis required a hundred Jews to work at a military camp. Those with any preferential treatment avoided entering the list – a Jewish camp inside a Nazi camp definitely was not a lucrative proposition. When I turned up at the Judenrat, the mobiliser tried to encourage me saying that I was a wise man and that the military camp will have good food which Jews would enjoy too. I volunteered out of desperation. There were days I hadn't gone out to work and thus was not entitled to the food.

As part of the camp work, we arrived at an unmapped place called Linkeitch. There was a secret ammunition factory in the forest with multiple rail-tracks each leading to rows of storehouses. The Nazi invaders in Lithuania took a shine to Linkeitch, not so much for the factory and machinery but for the storage capacity. The Nazis needed a depot for supplies from all over Europe.

The logistics and distribution were handled by one company, the other Nazi company operating in Linkeitch were Dombrowsky from eastern Prussia. Dombrowsky were trading as property renovators, and I was working there as an assistant labourer to a retired old German builder. He was a kind man, and I was treated pretty well working alongside him. We stayed and dined at the camp.

Communications and Speculations

We saw German soldiers returning back to the camp from the Soviet front, fatigued and exhausted. At the time the Germans had suffered a harsh blow from the Russians in Stalingrad. We figured that the end of the war was imminent.

During our time we had developed a canny ability to decode articles in German newspapers. The newspapers were brought back by a Jew who was employed by a German forestry man. At the time we were working in the lumber yard in groups of three, two of us working with the saw and a third one with an axe. Once the branches were sawn off, the trunk was transported to the sawmill on a cart. We browsed the newspaper during lunch, as if it were our dessert.

We relished the news of the German defeats, but we realised what was in store for us. The German had returned from his Christmas leave and told us he had heard of a Polish city where there were four million Jews; it was called Auschwitz.

Finding out that Germans are exterminating Jews

Returning from work one day we saw outside the ghetto two lorries loaded up with crying Jews. Each lorry corner was manned by a Lithuanian holding a gun. To my naivety I thought they were simply being transferred to another workplace. I said to them: Does it matter – we work here and you work elsewhere? They wouldn't answer. Later, I realised that on the same night they were exterminated in the forest near the sugar factory. About two years later we were taken tree felling

not far from the sugar factory. The area was covered with strange mounds with lime powder sprinkled between them; we realised we were trampling on graves.

When the ghetto was enclosed, Jews were made to move their belongings in. Some took their time, thinking “the ghetto won't run away” - they were rounded up and sent for extermination elsewhere in Europe.
At each Aktzia hundreds were exterminated. At one of the children Aktzia’s, old women who were unable to work were also taken.
We lived like doomed; walking-dead in Linkeitch. I can recall the sleep-yelling person.
Once, there was an attempt to poison the bread in the captive camp, but the poison was not powerful enough.

I was allocated to work on the roof of a hut in Linkeitch, hammering nails. Suddenly the entire hut had collapsed, I was injured. I showed my injured leg to the Nazi guard who said I was unfit for work; later I received a doctor's leave for a few days.

The lonely guy who stayed with the “Aunt” was authorised by the Judenrat to work for a gentile blacksmith in town; we used that address for exchanging letters with home. I found out that brother Michael whom we failed to find after we lost him whilst escaping in Bialystok, had indeed disappeared. Sister Hadassa wrote in vague Polish; we could not write in Yiddish as all letters were censored. She wrote in a style meant to dupe the interceptors into assuming she was a gentile.

One hot Sunday we had gone out to work with the Germans, and we were suddenly approached by a number of young ladies bringing drinking water. They told us of rumours about the closure of Linkeitch as part of an overall process of closure and extermination. Later a group of armed Germans arrived who lead us to our camp. We were not taken out to work for a week. There were no explanations and no need for any – we understood it all, all too well.

Security tightened up; time to flee

Guards were placed on the camp’s four corners as security had tightened up.
Though cheered with the Germans’ defeats, we feared for our very lives. We assumed we were going to be transported to our death, and so we were going to take the initiative and escape the scene.

Following that week off work, an order was issued saying we must all pack ourselves up and board a
truck. We stayed put atop our “mattresses” (straw-filled bags). We knew that from Shabyli ghetto Jews were going to be transported to Germany; we were going to return to Shabyli the following day. As evening fell, my friend Zvi Meirowitzs whispered to me that there was an opportunity, and that it was the time to flee.
Three of the German guards had gathered for some talking with our young lady friends near the fence, and there was a security blind spot. At the corner of the camp was the toilet block about half a meter from the fence.
We split the bread between us, I collected my shaving and sewing kits – I was ready.

One had held the fence up whilst the other crawled out underneath. We had escaped the Jewish camp but were still within the general camp precinct that was covered by woodland and shrubs.

Scrambling through the bushes, my friend had located the German guard on the outer fence and given me the all-clear sign. The tried and tested method had now gotten us out of the outer fence.

As tensions were running high at the camp, we continued our escape. The rail-tracks from Lithuania to Riga in Latvia, running along it's raised track bed had to be crossed. We crossed and descended, running quickly along the other side. We ran like hell until we lost our breath then continued walking fast.
We decided that for safety, we should only walk at night and hide during daytimes. As far as the local gentiles were aware we were Polish. The bread they gave us was all that we ate.

In one instance we asked a local if he would allow us to spend the night at his place. He gave us bread and showed us a place in the woods where we could sleep in the hay pile.
We were preparing for the night there as a stranger suddenly arrived. The young Lithuanian realised he had us alarmed, he reassured us that he too was hiding from the Nazis. He was wanted as workforce. I distrusted the man and us friends decided we should move on from there.

Another Lithuanian had given us bread but would not accommodate us overnight.
At another place we found an old Lithuanian lady. She asked us to wait at the threshold for her return. I suddenly spotted the cap of a Lithuanian policeman on the wall. We swiftly scrambled from the backdoor to the garden. Then we heard a vehicle approaching and we jumped into the bushes as th vehicle drove closely pastus.

Escaping from Linkeitch we were faced with impassable boggy grounds. I spotted a body thrown in a mire and pointed it to Meirowitzs. We both got spooked out and ran away.

We were heading for the retreating German front. Navigation was aided by the night stars.
Since our escape from Linkeitch we were looking for Polish people with whom we could better communicate.

We have hound one Polish individual

As we continued our escape we found a Polish man [named Miszotowic, by cross reference with diary] from Szutowics. Presenting ourselves, he declined to have us over to sleep, but he directed us to a small wooded hill surrounded by mud. He supplied us with a spade which we used to dig up something resembling a grave pit for two. We disguised the entrance with camouflage branches and hid there until the arrival of the Russians.
Miszotowic reassured us that we should come to him each evening for food. He said that we should not be exposed during daytime as he could not rely on some of the people who were working for him. We had no choice but to trust him.

Having had some cooked food, and our pockets stuffed with bread and sausage, we used to sit for a while on his porch. One evening air crafts crossed the sky. We could see the bombs dropping out. Miszotowic claimed that the bombs were dropped by the Soviets on Shabyli ghetto. This was later verified. Some in the ghetto were killed as a result, one top Judenrat included.

On another evening he brought two young ladies. We entered into conversation. One lady boasted of her multilingualism. She said she spoke German and Lithuanian. I suspected she was Jewish and interrupted: “Yiddish too”, and she went silent.
Back in our hideaway I shared my suspicion with my friends. The next day we met both ladies again and it turned out that they were Jewish, and Miszotowic had them hidden away in his barn.

A while later in our hideaway the camouflage had dried-up, we heard voices in Lithuanian. We lost our breath, huddling tight together. We were certain we were to be uncovered – however the voices faded away and eventually died out. We were not certain whether we had been exposed or not and decided to escape to the woodland until darkness. In the evening we told Miszotowic and he agreed we ought not to return to our hiding place. He proposed a hay stack not far away and promised to meet us at dawn.
It was very cold and we could not sleep until, as promised – Miszotowic arrived in the morning. He suggested we hide in the woodland but the tree cover was too sparse. A shepherd and his flock passed by and identified us as foreigners. There was nothing-else we could do.
Still amongst the trees, a whistle was heard. We did not know to whom the whistle was intended but it was persistent. My friend asked me to stay put whilst he ventured to find out who was whistling. I suddenly heard a voice yelling: “Meir, we are freed!”
I came out of hiding, Miszotowic said a rumour arrived that the Soviets had made it to the next village. I wasn't so sure that the rumour was reliable.
Miszotowic suggested we stay hiding whilst he would send a messenger to verify the situation. At night at his place he said the news were indeed true. Yet he would not have us sleep at his place – anxious that his neighbours would find that he was sheltering Jews.

Outside we hid amongst the shrubs below the potato field when suddenly we heard searching voices. We worried the Germans have pushed the Soviets back and were on the Jew-hunt again. The situation was so tense, but we were going for it, do or die. We each pulled out a folding knife ever so slowly as we heard the searching in the potato field.

There appeared the maid of Miszotowic who had cooked our food. She identified us and shouted: “Where are you, why are you not coming to eat?” We signalled to her to whisper and asked if it was us she was looking for, we were as white as ghosts.
As it had turned out, the search voices were in fact those of diggers working on an anti-bomb ditch. We ate food that night, slept in the barn and said our goodbyes in the morning.

I left a letter for Miszotowic confirming that he had given shelter to Jews and that this must be acknowledged / rewarded.
[Michaela commented that Meir stayed for a total of only 11 days at Miszotowic's and the other ladies might have stayed there for longer and got to know Miszotowic better than Meir had, for the good or possibly for the worse. Michaela recalls as a girl in Israel, packs of provisions such as clothing were sent to the Miszotowic family, and her sister Pnina, Dewy's mother, recalls exchanges of dried wild flowers].

Decades later in Israel, one of the two ladies resided in Ramat Gan. We kept in touch for a while and I visited her. I posted a letter to Yad Vashem in order to grant him a Righteous Among the Nations award. The lady dissuaded me from the idea. She proposed that he might have been anti-Semitic after all, having used us as a cover or for preferential treatment by the Soviets. [Michaela says Yad Vashem conduct vigorous award checks. It is possible the ladies might have been

mistreated by Miszotowic who might have had a personal incentive in helping Jews. Selfless deeds only are awarded].

This is believed to be the Miszotowic family 1959

Liberated then enlisted

I left behind in Linkeitch my book of poems which I had carried with me all the way from home. On the first page I had written down my biography [contact details?] to provide details in case the book was found.

We returned to Linkeitch where an undercover group was being organised in the Jewish camp, consisting primarily of ex kibbutz members. Haim Schienberg was a member and I might have been the organiser. The men were together in one of the rooms and we set up security around the place.

It ought to be said that Linkeitch might not have been such a bad choice after all. It was the destiny of those without the preferential treatment. I had no choice. It had turned out to be a better place than the ghetto. Linkeitch was a work camp of a hundred Jews and not a ghetto, where Aktzia's would take place.

Having vowed to one another that should we ever be liberated then we ought to enrol with the Russian army, Meirowitz and I headed to Ponveitch to be enlisted. We stopped by a tall building used by the Red Army offices. Nearby were German captives and a few Lithuanian civilians were wearing red ribbons and serving as a militia. One of us walked into the house to announce our intention of enlisting.
We were suddenly surrounded by fifteen Russian soldiers pointing guns and spears towards us. We were ordered to walk along with the Germans for a few more streets. We stopped again by another house used by the military. A NKVD [presumingly forerunner of KGB] soldier appeared and asked us 'Are you Jewish?' - we confirmed. 'Then why are you with the Germans?' - we told him what had happened. He walked into the house, relaying our plight, and we were released.
We were ordered to walk to Vilnius tens of kilometres away from Ponveitch. There sat the Russian HQ where we were drafted into the Red Army. Later in Vilnius, a local Jewish militia man explained to us that we shouldn't have enrolled because any subsequent retirement from the Red Army would be seen as a defection.

There were two Polish divisions in the army: Wanda Wasilewska (Bolsheviks) and the Polish Government-in-exile. We were not given ammunition, instead we practised on sticks!

Meir in red Army uniform

Serving in the Red Army, my friend Meirowitz had squabbled with a young anti-Semitic Polish man. I was stopped from helping him. I asked to be transferred from the Polish to the Russian division hoping the Russians, as fellow sufferers in German hands, would treat us Jews more humanely. Alas, the Russians too were consumed with anti-Semitism.
Once, I entered a discussion with a Russian soldier (not knowing his religion). He asked “Would you kill a German?”. At the Brigade, vengeful groups were organised and eliminated many Germans following the war in Germany. I replied “Why are you asking, you would be well aware what the Germans have done to us.” Alas, he doubted my response. Indeed, I personally had no will to revenge.

Aftermath

Following the war in the Ukraine I got injured and hospitalized in Saratov [Saratov appears on the map in south west Russia]. There were some other casualties with me, and I could speak a little Russian. We talked about war and politics, my Left wing views were known.

A Russian officer appeared asking all casualties who can walk to go to a meeting. He announced that both the Romanians and the Finnish are joining the Red Army. I interrupted and commented that besides announcing their intention to merge, neither of the two nations have actually done anything on the subject. Officer: “Have you no trust in the Russian government?” Me: “What did I say? I said nothing untoward the government.” I thought that this was end of subject. Outside the room, I met a casualty who was known to be a loyal communist. He told me how when the hospital manager had asked about me [unclear text, presumingly asked about the political alliance], the communist had defended me saying I was not an anti-Soviet.

On dismissal from hospital I was faced with two options: either head North West via Moscow [roughly home-bound], or retrace brother Michael's movements. I opted for the latter. Contact with Michael was lost when war broke out. I had an address in Mariopol for a Ukrainian house where I was greeted by a man and a woman. “Michael!” the man exclaimed; I said I was his brother.

He told me what had happened when the Germans, with their magnificent German commando, invaded the Ukraine. The Nazis failed to recognise the Jews in the house, mistaking them for the children of the gentile. They were susequently imprisoned at the school or the synagogue having been turned-in. One of the prisoners had managed to escape and came back to the gentile asking for food. He was given a bucketful of food for everyone.

Jews were sent to work in the many hospitals of Mariopol, I suspected the couple were anti-Semitic to some extent, the wife more so. One day they [the fugitives?] all disappeared. [Michael, after whom Michaela was named, had disappeared / perished with them].

Michael 1939

Poland to Germany

I went back to Częstochowa and arrived home still in my soviet uniform. I had met the gate attendant [perhaps a gated community], to whom I had no doubt Michael would identify himself should he come home.

I had no place to stay.
There was a Jewish hospital across the Wart river, I went over to check what had changed since the outbreak of war. At the time, there were incidents where local Poles had identified and assassinated soviet soldiers; and would receive a kilogram of sugar for a Jew. They were chatting in Polish, not knowing the “Russian” understood, denouncing the Jews as Moskwal [Muscovite collaborators].

On the street a Jew revealed to me that sister Hadassa had survived and could be found either in Lodz or another town (unclear word). I placed my bet on Lodz and arrived there on a kibbutz where I was told Meir P. had taken a ship to Israel and that Hadassa, who had also visited the kibbutz, knows about Michael.

Knowing Hadassa was in town, I wandered the streets and met Czesa, Hadassa's friend, who led me to their joint apartment. She had an expired pass into Germany and I was holding a note of dismissal from the army.

A week later, the four of us (including Czesa's man friend) decided to go to the American zone in Germany. The train journey was interesting, with soldiers coming onboard at some stations to check documents. I pulled out my dismissal note which proved to be useful, but Hadassa and Czesa were taken off the train. After a momentary concern, the two ladies managed to breach the guards and re-alight. These eventualities reoccurred twice on that journey.

On the train were a few soviet soldiers with suitcases; we did not know what was inside. It was raining in Berlin and the soldiers asked me if we could help carry the heavy cases. It turned out that the cases were containing cheap Polish Mark notes bound for buoyant German buyers. Fortunately thanks to the rain, we were never stopped. Czesa's friend befriended the soviet soldiers who shared their vodka with him.

We were aiming to emigrate [Aliya] to Israel [Palestine at the time] and so we headed for the American zone in Berlin. We slept at the Berlin Jewish Community, courtesy of UNRA. This is where we were first certified as Jews bound for the American zone [the family still holds this document]. On the way to the zone, Czesa and her friend diverted to the English [British] zone as an alternative route to the American zone.

At the Feldafing camp [Bavaria] I finally had some rest from the war atrocities, the ghetto and the injury.

Black arrow pointing at Meir (top row), 1946, possibly in Feldafing

In Israel

As holocaust survivors started to arrive in Israel [circa 1948] they were received by the pre-existing population [also Jewish immigrants] with disrespect and blame, questioning why would we go like sheep to the slaughter? No resistance? The attitude changed following the Eichmann Trial [1961]. Only then had the rest understood how WW2 was different from WW1 and how different was the behaviour of Germany. How resistance was hampered.

Barak [Prime Minister over the turn of the millennium] had apologised for the treatment received by Jewish immigrants from the Arab countries – no one found the political need to apologise to holocaust survivors.

In my first years in Israel I had no steady job; I would turn up at the job centre daily to be registered for work. One day the clerk said there was a job pouring concrete. I was the only Ashkenazi around to have gone out looking for work. Street demonstrations in Holon demanded “Bread! Work!” Being the only European, one demonstrator approached me asking “What business have you here?” I replied “Like you, I too am looking for a job”. He responded “What? a jobless Ashkenazi?!”.

1949 at the IDF [Israeli military] I applied for a week off in order to search for some income. As preferential treatment at the job-centre I had secured a job extracting soil samples. The contractor specified he preferred to employ an Ashkenazi.

Editor’s comments

I never knew grandfather Meir very well at all, and that's even more apparent on the completion of this piece of writing. We seldom met and he wasn't comfortable talking about his past life in Europe. In my youth he seemed foreign to me, an old man from far away. Reading his testimony I belatedly understood much more of what he said and what he kept unsaid. It seems to me his brotherly love to Michael was a major thread in his life.

Having also transcribed his wife's (my grandmother Hava Landesmann) wartime story, I can link the two together. They have met as war refugees in northern Italy, young and single, sharing the untold misery of that war and the hardships on the journey to Israel. They had little time for romance. That journey of tribulations continued in Israel. They got married there and started a young family with their two daughters: Pnina (married surname Rapid, living at Givat Hashlosha kibbutz, Israel) and Michaela (after Michael Rotholtz, married surname Rahatgoodman, living in Jerusalem). The daughters were encouraged to succeeded to excel in their academic lives.

Hava and Meir ran a modest household first in Holon, and then in Jerusalem, following Meir's work placement at the Israeli National Printers.

Meir was actively involved with people from work, social and political movements and the Yiddish culture. He persevered with his cultural and social engagement until very late in his life.

Although his childhood was very humble and opportunities were few and far between, stoically he managed to advance in his schooling. Some structured, some self-study; grandad quietly persisted with leaning languages, poetry, ideology, current affairs and more. He would not let his humble beginnings keep him down. Meir loved the written word and – to the best of his ability - he tried to compel us to read more.

Well-read, he held a moderate, secular and progressive outlook on humanity. As a survivor he could have easily turned bitter, vengeful and resentful towards people – he was a humanist. He held respectable reconciliatory views over the Germans, the Polish and other wartime adversaries. The issue of social equality was important for him and he also shared sympathetic views with both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, recognising the plight of the Palestinians in general but remaining firmly against extremists on both sides. Importantly enough, grandad respectfully tolerated grandmother's (Hava) more conservative home-life, as she did towards his secularism and his personal interests; one might say that they coexisted.

He passed away on 10th April 2007 in Jerusalem.

He left behind the two daughters, and three grandsons: Yaniv in Australia,
A (temporarily withheld) in England and Dollev in Israel.

Meir left a personal war diary covering the years 1945-1946, much of it taking place in Lithuania and Russia which was later translated into Hebrew and then in to English.

In winter 2019/2020 addition family relations made contact with Michaela. Howard Roth is in the USA and there are hitherto never seen relations in Israel (via a man named Pinko, we have a photo of him in 1946).

Meir in Jerusalem 1970's?

Meir with wife and daughters in Israel 1950's?

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