

Fragments of my Life

Esther's Remembrances

By Esther Ton

Holon 2002

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Introduction

Esther Ton was born in Lithuania on July 6th, 1919.

Her childhood was spent in the town of Kurshan, on the banks of the Venta River in Shavli Province, among broad fields and dense forests.

She came to Rassein in 1933, studied in the Hebrew Gymnasium there and in 1939 married Yehezkel Ziv of that city. A year later their daughter Haviva was born.

With the Nazi invasion of Lithuania in 1941, she lost her husband and was imprisoned in Shavli ghetto with her daughter. In 1943 she managed to smuggle her daughter out of the ghetto and to hide her with a Lithuanian family. In 1944 she fled the ghetto and survived until the liberation of Lithuania by the Soviet Red Army and its Lithuanian Division in the autumn of that year.

In 1945 she married Ya'acov Ton. Their son Reuven was born in 1946 and their daughter Bella in 1953. In 1971 the family made Aliyah (immigrated) to Israel.

Esther's eightieth birthday is behind her - her mind is clear and her memory excellent. She began writing her memoirs in 1989.

In this book Esther tells the story of her life, the lives of her family and those dear to her, and the wonderful story of the rescue of the children, Haviva, Yitzhak and Ben-Tzion.

This is the story of a brave and determined woman. It is a story of survival in impossible conditions and against all odds, a story of love, fidelity to human values and the will to live. Let this book be a memorial to the names, the souls and the memory of those who shared her difficult, painful and noble fate, family, friends and righteous gentiles.

1. My Village Kurshan

Vita was a simple woman, short and plump. She managed a kiosk in the basement of Uncle **Yosse Rol**'s house. What didn't this shop have? There were candies of every sort, each wrapped in shiny paper in all the colors of the rainbow - this was very important to us, the village children. We saved the papers, straightened them, sorted them and traded them amongst ourselves. There was also "marozna" - ice cream. Vita put the pink, yellow and white ice cream between two little round cream colored wafers. This ice cream tasted so wonderful, that even frozen yogurt can't match it. You could even find oranges - only in Vita's shop.

Above this basement was my Uncle Yosse Rol's big store. I loved to wander around there among my cousins, who were always busy and didn't notice a little girl who was curious about what was going on around her. My aunt and the girls baked big tasty loaves of rye bread in the huge stove that stood in the kitchen. On Fridays, the neighborhood women would bring their "cholent" (that delicious stew of potatoes, prunes, meat and eggs) to this stove. There it would slowly cook to be ready for the Shabbat dinner.

By way of a narrow corridor in the same house one could visit Uncle **Shlomo Rol**. This uncle fell in love with a girl, **Trishik**, who lived in a village that was even smaller than ours. They married, but because they were closely related their two sons did not grow and died when they were three months old. Two girls who were born later were healthy but weak. Uncle Shlomo had a drapery shop. I remember

him, always serious and pensive, and tall like my father. Uncle Yosse, on the other hand, was a short man.

On Saturday night Mother and Father would go to visit Uncle Yosse and take me with them. After the *Havdalah* (the blessing marking the transition from Shabbat to the weekday) we always had a traditional supper: potatoes in their skins and herring, sour cream and sauerkraut. I really loved this lively house. I especially loved to watch the daughters, **Elka and Feigale**, dressed in pretty dresses, painted and powdered, preening in the mirror and going out to have a good time. I still remember the style and color of the dresses.

I often dreamed of this house, of the kitchen and the yard around it. In my dreams it was as if I had come back to the village and wanted to go into my uncle's house, I walk around and around in the street, but I can't get into the house. Everything looks shut and black.

Most of the Jewish shops were centered around the marketplace. On Mondays and Thursdays the farmers came from the surrounding areas and brought their goods: milk products, eggs, vegetables and fruit, large sweet black cherries, big and small apples of every color and sort, which grow in Lithuania and neighboring Latvia, also fowl, cattle, sheep and goats and horses. Everything was noisy and confused.

I loved to see the noisy and colorful market and I was overjoyed when Mother agreed to take me there. Especially because of the stalls: there were stalls with shining toys and brilliant colorful beads, lollipops in all sorts of shapes and colors, stalls with fresh and smoked fish that were brought from Latvia, which was famous for its preserved fish. I also liked to watch the gypsy women

who came from the forest that surrounded the village. They were young, tall and beautiful. Their shining black hair and their colorful dresses with many gathers floated with their special, proud walk. They walked about with cards in their hands and promised to tell the future.

In the good days, before the second world war, the Jews in the villages and cities of Lithuania had a full life, both economically and culturally. They had a sort of autonomy. In the primary schools and the high schools all subjects were taught in Hebrew; there were Newspapers in Yiddish like “*Yiddishe Shtieme*” (The Jewish Voice), “*Folks Shtieme*” (People’s Voice); libraries where one could take out books of all the great poets and authors of the Jewish people in Yiddish and Hebrew as well as those of other writers in translation; Yeshivot, like the famous *Ponivez Yeshiva*.

Kurshan, my village was small but beautiful. Before the war there were just about 900 Jews, but it was known for its handsome, lively, serious and interesting youth. Even the family names were interesting: **Rozengarten** - rose garden, **Melamed** - teacher, **Rol** (our family name) role, **Ton** -sound, **Heselson**- sun, **Mandelshtamm** -almond-tree trunk, **Eizrahshtamm** trunk of Israel. There were also many **Lifschitzes** in our town. My mother belonged to the Lipschitz tribe. The young people in our village Kurshan were also active. There were dens of all the Zionist parties and also some Communists underground. There was a “Maccabi” soccer team, players from the Jewish youth who marched through the village in formation and in uniform, proud of themselves and reaching the playing field at the further end of the town. There was also a Jewish amateur theatre group whose lead actress was Bathsheva Ton, my husband Ya’acov’s cousin. I still have

enlarged snapshots of events in the theatre and the soccer games.

There were two distinguished families who lived at the end of the village: the **Kushman** family- a man from Mnashek and the **Tamim** family - **Yossef and Herman Tamim**.

One of them was a piano teacher and she had the only piano in Kurshan, and I was dying to play the piano, but Father could not afford to buy a piano, which cost a fortune in those days. He indeed had many expenses. He bought a certificate for my brother Ya'acov who immigrated to Palestine in 1933 as a pioneer, two daughters studied in the gymnasium (high school), there were debts on the house that he built and besides he was known and loved by all and he liked to help out. Anyone who had a problem came to **Reuven Rol**, and he helped. As the owner of a serious business, he opened a business account in a bank in the city of Shavli. He had "*wekseles*" - like checks. When someone was in trouble, Father would give such a check and the man would be saved, but when he couldn't redeem the check Father would pay. Mother would also help women who had hardships and such were not rare in our village. So how could we buy a piano or new clothes? For the first time since he got married himself, Father had a good suit made for our weddings (mine and my beloved sister **Batya'le**) and Mother bought herself the first coat she had since her own wedding.

There were no pianos, but the young people loved art and they played the guitar, mandolin and violin. **Meir Ton**, the cousin of **Ya'acov Ton**, later my husband, studied violin with a good teacher in Shavli. He had the soul of an artist, painted large and artistic pictures and he could make a saw produce heavenly sounds. The young people who loved art would gather in the **Ton's** little house. **Batsheva**, Meir's

sister, who sang beautifully, was the star of the local amateur theatre. **Rivka**, the younger sister, played the guitar. Everyone adored Rivka, my dearly beloved friend. She was a talented and beautiful blond with dreamy blue eyes. **Abrasha Tamim**, the most popular boy in the village, fell in love with her. He was intelligent, handsome and clever and besides a sharpshooter. He used to carry a pistol and could shoot a bird on the wing. A girl who was neither young nor pretty, called **Bella Shnaider**, fell in love with Abrasha. She decided that he should be her sweetheart, and when he remained indifferent, she bought a gun, practiced and one clear summer day, when he was on the riverbank with his admirers, she leapt from among the trees and shot him (love is strong as death). But our sharpshooter, lying on the ground wounded, managed to draw his gun, shoot and hit her behind her ear as she ran away. She died on the way to the hospital and he was bedridden for a long time with Rivka and his mother nursing him. The bullet lodged in his spine and left him with a limp. **Rivka and Abrasha** were married before the war and fled to the Soviet Union. He fought the Nazis in the ranks of the Red Army. He received a medal for bravery and was a colonel. They came to Israel in 1973 with their two sons, **Moshe and Eitamar** and settled in Kfar Saba. They are no longer alive and are buried in Kfar Saba. May their memory be blessed!

As I mentioned, most of the youth was Zionist. Everyone belonged to his "den". There was a den of **Betar**, of **Ha'Shomer Ha'Tzair** and of "**Grossmanists**" - the General Zionists. I belonged to the Grossmanists because I did not like extremists. There were some families who identified with the Communists, but after the war they all

came to Israel. Who can foresee the twists and turns of time and the tangled web of life?

This is the short story of Kurshan, my little village in Northern Lithuania, the village that I loved and that is forever embedded in my memory.

2. My Childhood Home

The bus that brought us, me and my sister Batya, from the Hebrew Gymnasium in the town of **Rassein**, to the village of **Kurshan**, stopped opposite the hill that led to my parents' house. The house was on the banks of the Venta River. In the winter a thick layer of ice covered the river and children and teenagers skated on it, some with skates and other just in their shoes. In the summer it was pleasant to splash in the warm clear waters of the river.

I was a year and a half younger than my sister Batya'le, who was athletic and agile. I raced to window of the kitchen, where Mother toiled over holiday preparations. First I would tap on the window and then burst inside. We would hug and kiss and I would turn to the pot in which the holiday delicacies were cooking. With two finger I would pick up a chicken wing and enjoy a taste of heaven. Mother would say: "The young deer are the first to come from the field" and enjoy watching her child gobble up the tidbit. Next would come my quiet and serious sister who would enter unhurriedly, hug and kiss Mother and ask wise questions.

There was a special charm to the holidays in my parents' home. Everything was wrapped in warmth and love. Pesach was especially beautiful and delightful. Mother would prepare a "*Aheseh Baat*" as it was called. She would set two chairs together and put a large pillow in a snowy case on them and above it another pillow. On this comfortable platform Father would lounge and conduct the Seder with a glowing face. The Seder lasted long into the night and I would fall into a sweet slumber. When I grew

up and was about to graduate from high school in 1938, the last Seder was held at my parents' home. During this holiday my future father-in-law, **Yehezkel Ziv** came to our house to speak with my parents about the wedding. I found a picture from the holiday at my brother, Ya'acov Rol's house. He had immigrated in 1933 as a pioneer. Yehzkial took the picture and it shows the room and the festive table. The family is seated around it, **Uncle Aharon Lifschitz**, my cousins **Rachel Gordimer** and her sister **Batya'le**. It also shows my cousin **Zima'le** who grew up in our house because his mother died in childbirth - Zima'le fought against the Nazis and died in battle.

This picture is a memento of happy days that are gone forever and is more precious to me than gold or jewels. In it one can also see the door to the porch where we celebrated Succoth, because in a corner of the ceiling there was an opening where Father placed fir branches making the porch into a *Succah*. The door that led to the kitchen, the chandelier and the flowers on the table are also shown. All these are so close to my aching heart.

Our house was attached to Father's ceramics factory. The factory opened after World War I as a small workshop for kitchen utensils such as pots and pitchers, bowls and cups. **Ethel Lifschitz**, a rich widow, founded it. Being acquainted with the family and knowing Father as an honest and energetic man she suggested that they set up the workshop together. My parents already had a son, born in 1914, and they went through the First World War with great difficulty. Father accepted the offer and received 40% as a partner in the factory. He worked with great diligence and expanded all the time. He set up a tiles department, built kilns and was the first in Lithuania to produce white tiles to cover large stoves, the only system

then in use to heat houses. The white glaze was imported from Germany. Mother corresponded with them because she knew German well.

My mother, **Henia Zisse** was born in Kurshan in 1899 to **Akiva Lifschitz**, who had a workshop for producing chains. She was the second of nine children. There was no place to study or develop in the village. Mother was eager to study, so she found a job as nursemaid in a rich and cultured family living on the border between Lithuania and Germany. There she learned the language. She was quickly put in charge of the cash in their store and that afforded her the opportunity to speak German with the shoppers. She learned Russian during the war, when the Russians ruled Lithuania, and she read novels in Russian.

Mother loved flowers. There were always flowers on the festive table and near the window in the dining room there were ficuses. She tended that garden in the rear of the house and she had a vegetable garden from which she picked the vegetables for the luncheon salad. At one time the Hebrew primary school was opposite our house. In the early '30s the school was transferred to the center of the village. The building was rotting away so it was put up for sale. Father bought the building and renovated it, turning it into a nice house with five rooms. Mother surrounded it with various flowers. She planted roses and dahlias. She kept the bulbs all winter and in the spring replanted them. They had red and white flowers of various hues and their heads were large with many petals. Behind the house there was a large field and Father planted fruit trees and raspberry and blueberry bushes.

But my parents, my sister **Batya** and her husband **David** who lived with them, never moved into this house. It was

rented to cover expenses. The Soviets came in 1940 and confiscated all property and in 1941 the Germans and Lithuanians looted, plundered and destroyed not only property, but also life itself.

When I was in the ghetto, I heard one day that they were sending men from the “*Poletzai*” of the ghetto to Kurshan to bring rotten vegetables to the confined Jews. I was very homesick and wanted, at least once, to see the house where I grew up and passed my happy childhood. Despite the danger, I asked the men to let me join the group. They agreed and set me down opposite the very hill where Batya and I used to come to when we returned for the holidays.

In fear and trembling I entered the house - empty and desolate! I went into the kitchen, opened cupboards, passed through the bedrooms of the parents and the children. I looked through the windows to the little house opposite where Lithuanians lived, at the shortcut that led to the river, at the green fields all around, at the ancient tree that stood behind the neighbors old fence. I went into my mother's beloved garden, so carefully tended and it was a ruin - no vegetables, no roses, no dahlias, everything dead and wasted.

Meanwhile the women who once worked for Father learned of my arrival. They gathered around me, and didn't know what to do or how to act. The silence was oppressive. The enormity of the tragedy stood before me in all its ferocity and the pain burst from me without check. Brunia, a worker who helped Mother with the housework, knelt before me, kissed my hand and wept bitterly with me. I went to the neighbor who had taught me guitar when I was little. She asked me cynically if I had come to sell the property.... I saw the fruit trees that Father had planted

behind the new house. The branches were full of large pears and apples. The flowers that Mother planted were neglected. But none of that was of any interest to me. The men picked me up after a while and I returned to the ghetto with a sack of food that each of the workers brought for poor Esther'el, who was in the ghetto with her little girl and with her world in ruins.

3. Rassein

In the town of **Kurshan**, where I was born in 1919, only primary school was taught in Hebrew. When I finished this school my parents sent me to study in the Hebrew Gymnasium (High School) in Rassein with my sister Batya, who was a year and a half older than me.

After Hitler came to power, the nationalistic Lithuanians began to feel their oats. Placards telling people not to buy in Jewish stores were spread over the cities. Universities were closed to Jewish Students and those who were already studying could not continue and returned home. Those who came back to Rassein were unemployed because there were no jobs. These new jobless were educated and it was interesting to be in their company. They got to know the High School students and in the evening would gather, tell anecdotes and stories and sing songs from the Land of Israel.

I came to Rassein in 1934. I was fifteen and felt out of place. **Yehezkel Ziv**, the son of a respected family in the city was one of the students. He began to notice me and to joke with me. He asked about my studies and began to invite me on walks. I refused because I thought he was too old for me. Besides my sister's friend was interested in him because he was a handsome and fascinating boy. He was 7 years older than I was, a student, and I was just starting High School. He was a talented mathematician. I didn't like that subject, so he helped me with my homework. He fell in love with me, but I still wasn't ready for love. But his courting was delicate and sincere and I slowly got used to it.

When I was 18 Yehezkel invited me to meet his family. I remember that my heart beat fast as I climbed the steps to the second floor where he lived with his mother and his sister **Peralle-Pnina Ziv-Krom** and her husband **Mordecai**. Peralle was hugely pregnant with Yitzhak who was born in January 1938. It was winter and the streets and sidewalks were covered with ice. Yehezkel asked me to accompany his sister who was afraid to slip and fall. We enjoyed the walks around trees and houses covered with sparkling white snow. When Yitzhak was born I was like a member of the family.

I married Yehezkel Ziv on September 26th, 1939. I was 20 years old. I will never forget the wedding. But I don't remember what came before. I don't remember how we arrived there. I don't remember how my parents looked, nor my beloved sister Batya and her husband David **Tarutz**, whom she married just three weeks before on the 5th of September.

What remains etched in my memory is that Mother, loving, devoted, caring Mother, was by my side as I put on the bridal gown and the veil. When we left the house to go to the ceremony which was held in the large yard of the Navetski family, Mother whispered to me: "Estherel, right foot first because that brings good luck." I obeyed and stepped out with my right foot forward. I remember the walk to the ceremony: some little girls held up the edge of my long, delicate white dress. There were many guests with lighted candles in their hands standing around. Under the canopy when the bridegroom said "With this ring I thee bless" my veil caught fire, lit by the flame from a candle held by a guest who came too close. They say this is an evil omen and indeed our happiness did not last long...

The conflagration started on September 1st 1939, when the Germans violated the agreement with Poland and invaded

her. Life in Lithuania, however, continued calmly on its course, despite the fact that the influence of neighboring Germany could be felt.

After the wedding ceremony we went to the home of my parents in Kushan, to a reception for the young couple. Friends and family came and there was dancing and joy. We were happy. Our picture was taken near the porch, which on Succoth became a succah. There was an opening in the left-hand side of the ceiling. All year long it was closed, but before the holiday Father opened it and the factory workers brought fir branches from the forest and put them on the roof. From the branches a smell of forest spread throughout the house. Mother would bring out the holiday delicacies, Father would bless the wine and everyone delighted in the holiday and the unique *Succah*.

Our house stood near the Venta river at the edge of the forest. We enjoyed swimming in the river in the summer, and in the winter we skated on its icy surface. I remember the beautiful, cold winter evenings. A thick white covering of snow that reached the knees hid everything. In the winter evenings, when my parents went to visit relatives in the village I was happy to join them. When I was little, Father would carry me and I would put my head on his shoulder and sink into a sweet sleep, while the snow under Father's boots crunched with every step. I'll never forget that crunching sound. When the leaves dry out in the fierce sun here in our hot country, I love to walk on them and remember the sound from the happy days on Father's shoulder. My father, **Rueven Rol**, was tall, energetic and agile and was loved by everyone including the Lithuanian workers in our factory. He never hesitated to help a family in trouble. Mother was the same and our home was always warm and loving.

After staying for a few days in my parents' home, Yehezkel and I returned to Rassein to begin life as a family. We lived with his mother, **Sheina-Zenia Ziv**, and his sister **Pnina-Peralle Krom**. Each family had a large and attractive room and there was a big common dining room. There was a maid and we lived together in harmony with love and respect.

I had a strange unconscious feeling about the maid. I was afraid to let her go by herself into our room where our baby Havivala lay in her warm little bed. I used to feed the wood stove by myself.

Indeed when the dark days of the Nazis came, one day I took a chance and took Peralle's son Yitzhaka'le with me to find food for the family. Suddenly I saw our little maid with her strange eyes coming towards us. Yitzhak was very attached to her, because his mother, Peralle, worked in the village pharmacy. Yitzhaka'le began to run towards her calling "Elsa! Elsa!" She looked at us, one eye turned left and the other right and quickly turned and went away.

My dark suspicions of the woman who lived with us in the same house were thus justified. This was the first letdown for me and for little Yitzhaka'le. The tragic days for us and for all the Jews of Rassein had arrived.

4. The Last Visit

Those were the last days of August 1940. Warm clear days of sunshine, which are called "*bobu vasara*" (the summer of the women) in Lithuanian. On such days, when it did not rain and the sun shone, one could do housework outside: wash and dry laundry, work in the garden or the fields and so on.

I was seven months pregnant with my Havivala. I was very homesick for my old home. I missed Mother, Father and my beloved sister Batya'le who lived with her husband David Tarutz in a room which had been added to my parents' house. I decided to surprise my loved ones.

I came from the city of Rassein. I had studied in the Hebrew Gymnasium there and married Yehezkel Ziv, who was among the handsome and successful students in the city. We lived with my mother-in-law Zenia Ziv and her daughter Pnina-Peralle with her husband Mordecai Krom in a roomy apartment on the second floor above their flourishing shop.

I strolled along in a cheerful mood, proud of my first pregnancy, in a new blue dress embroidered in red and yellow, that a seamstress had made for me especially for my pregnancy. In the short distance to my parents' home I imagined the meeting, the joy and love with which they would greet me. Estherel, their little girl, is coming. Not only that, but pregnant with a round stomach, in which new life was growing, that stuck out from the robust young body.

I enjoyed my daydreaming and did not hurry. I opened the door - Mother stands before me, surprised and confused,

and her eyes do not reflect the delight I expected. It is as if she were frightened to see me. She hugged and kissed me and I saw tears in her eyes. “Mama, my dear, what’s the matter? Aren’t you glad that I came?”

“Glad indeed, my child, but things are not good here...” I heard Father speaking with strange men in the next room and high unknown voices were heard in the house. I couldn’t understand. I didn’t imagine and didn’t know what my parents were going through in those days. I hadn’t the faintest idea that there were troubles at home, because Mother protected me from any worry.

What can I say? The home that I knew wasn’t the same. The happiness and warmth that always filled it were completely missing. A heavy cloud of inescapable anxiety lay over everything.

All this happened at the time of the Sovietization of Lithuania, in the summer of 1940 after the Soviets took over the Baltic states to “save them from the bourgeoisie”. They nationalized all property in private hands. Father had a ceramics factory, he had credit from the bank and constantly rebuilt and enlarged the factory. It was no problem to get money, because the whole village trusted Reuven Rol and gladly loaned to him. But after the Soviets nationalized everything, there was no source of money. People who had lent their money wanted it back and the suffering was unbearable.

The next summer, on June 22nd, 1941, the Nazis came and imposed a “new order” on the Jews. No one needed money any more, neither did they need property or anything at all, because this was the end of life. One didn’t even need to worry about a grave, either a mass grave was prepared for all or they were forced to dig their own graves.

There are mass graves everywhere in Lithuania - in the deep forests, in the shady groves, in hills and in valleys. Relatives who survived visit some, and some are neglected. The earth of Lithuania is soaked with Jewish blood, the blood of my loved ones, who are etched into my memory forever.

5. War and Life in Shavli Ghetto

The Red Army soldiers of the Soviet Union entered Lithuania in July of 1940 claiming that the Lithuanian government had invited them. The soldiers looked miserable and they had a peculiar odor that I still remember. On October 30th 1940 our daughter Haviva was born and on June 22nd 1941 the invasion by Nazi Germany turned our pleasant lives into a hell.

From June 1941 and until 1944 the Nazis and their Lithuanian helpers ran wild in the cities and towns of Lithuania in the area on the Baltic Sea, north of Poland. The fascist Ukrainians joined them and helped in the job of exterminating the Jews.

Peralle and her son Yitzhak, Yehezkel and I with our little daughter and my mother-in-law, Sheina Genia, fled to the countryside (Peralle's husband was moved to the Soviet Union together with the office in which he worked). That night the Germans bombed the city. Our house collapsed and in the morning, the Lithuanians chased us out of the village even before they Germans ordered them to do so. The Nationalists rounded up the Jewish men and began to abuse them: they cursed and beat them and forced them to dig pits in the ground for no reason at all. We returned on foot to Rassein. We no longer had a house, clothes or money. Yehezkel gave all our savings to his brother and his family, who one fine day, without warning, were exiled by the Communists to Siberia. They were considered wealthy because they had a wholesale store that supported three families.

But the worst was still to come. Notices appeared in the town, new rules and orders which said that the Jews are not allowed to walk on the sidewalks, to enter institutions or shops or schools etc. etc. In short, Jews had no right to live. Lithuanians were forbidden to talk to a Jew, to sell him food, to help. Anyone who disobeyed these orders, it was said, would be executed! They began to round up Jewish men for hard labor. Finally, they told them to dig themselves pits and they shot them. My husband, Yehezkel, the father of my child, was among these poor souls.

In the meantime, they assembled the women with children, and the old people who could not work into a sort of ghetto. Two days later they ordered us all to gather at a farm, outside the town. As we sat in the wagon that brought us to the farm, we felt that we were sinking into an abyss from which there is no return. When we arrived, they put us into a barn, without water or even a place to sit. In those conditions, it was clear that we were not meant to live. Yehezkel and Pnina's niece who was in the hospital when her parents were sent to Siberia was with us. She was a neighbor of the mass murderer Klimas, who was the camp commander. She went up to him and asked him to give us permission to leave, because it was difficult to be there with small children. He gave her a pass to get to Shavli ghetto.

We had many hardships before we got to Shavli. My cousin **Yitzhak Gordimer** lived in Shavli and helped us to enter the ghetto. The ghetto was meant only for residents of Shavli and one needed a sort of yellow document as well as a yellow patch. The Jews were sent to the poor quarter of the city, in tiny crowded apartments, in which the poorest Lithuanians had lived. The latter were sent to

the houses of the Jews who had been expelled. Pnina, Yitzhak her son and her mother got a place in the little kitchen of the home of my cousin Yitzhak Gordimer who lived with his wife, two small sons and his sister Rachel and her husband in one room. Haviva and I got a place in another apartment.

I was once asked how I took care of my baby in the ghetto. When we entered the ghetto, Haviva was ten months old. I had to change her diapers, wash and feed her. There was great crowding and no suitable facilities. So, really how? The truth is that I never thought about it and I don't remember how I did the little everyday things in unbearable conditions.

What conditions is one able to talk about when all my property is an old mattress that the neighbors found in the attic. They put it for me near the door through which the tenants passed. The house had three rooms and into each room two families were crowded. On this mattress there was a crib, also found in the attic, which stood on four legs at the edge of the mattress. I slept with my feet under the crib.

I had one set of underclothing to change and my daughter had three or four cloth diapers and one bottle. After all, I came to Shavli from Raisen, where everything was burnt and I left home with one small suitcase and a baby carriage. So how indeed did I manage.

Once a month we would get a tiny bit of soap. We used to wash the bedclothes in rain water or snow in winter. When you put wood-ash, which was left in the stove after the wood burned, into the water you get a very strong solution. I was very strict about cleanliness, because in the crowded conditions in which we lived this was essential.

Tenants who were residents of Shavli helped me. My Havivala was a very quiet child and all loved her. Mrs. Rabinovitz, who lived in the rear room with her husband and two daughters, especially took care of her.

I would bring Havivala to my mother-in-law early in the morning before we were sent to forced labor under the SS. When she was a little older, after I left in the morning, Havivala would wake up and ask the tenants who passed her bed "Maybe you'll dress me?"

Afterwards my sister-in-law Peralle would take her to Grandma Zenia, where she lived with my cousin Itzhak, until the evening when I returned from the hard labor.

In the evening I would put the child to sleep and sing her a Yiddish song about a nest that was destroyed and the tears would fall by themselves. I translated this song to Hebrew and here it is:

Once there was a tiny nest	And in this pretty little nest
As pretty as a jewel	There rested tiny eggs
Snowy as a little bed	Eggs within a tiny box
Soft as downy plumes.	As white as driven snow.

I added to this song:

And when the days of horror came
They smashed the tiny nest
But my darling little bird
Had flown and was safe-kept.

For a certain time we worked in a factory for drying bricks. They used to take groups of women from the ghetto to hard labor in the brick factory. Lithuanian men and women also

worked there. There I met Lyoda, a pretty Lithuanian girl with a heart of gold. We became friendly and she would bring sandwiches for both of us, which we ate together. There were relatively good conditions in this factory, because the owner used to give the Jews who worked there a glass of milk and a quarter kilo of bread for lunch because of the hard conditions. I kept the bread to bring to the children in the ghetto.

In the ghetto life was hard and sad. Every day men would be taken as if to work. None of them returned to the ghetto and the families were left without a father. They were shot in the forests around the city.

Most of the people in the ghetto were starved. We would receive a small piece of bread every day. We would put water in a pot with a little black flour and some pieces of rotten potatoes. One had to stand in line for this "soup". The children suffered the most. But even in those terrible days, there were teachers who collected the abandoned children and in secret taught them to read and write and thus made things easier for them.

6. The Ghetto Runs with Blood

On the 5th of November, 1943, later called “Black Friday” blood ran in Shavli ghetto. In the narrow crowded alleys of the ghetto, the workers of Frankel shoe factory began to gather. Long rows of barbed wire led from the factory to the ghetto. These were guarded day and night by the SS and their Lithuanian helpers. People were brought to work in groups under guard. Those who lived in the ghetto could see the outside world only through those barbed wire fences.

Early in the gray morning of that day, the workers gathered near the gate to the ghetto. They stood and waited for the gate to open as it did every day. But it did not and no one knew why. Some said that today we are not going to work.

After a certain delay the gates opened and people began to stream into the factory. Two hours after work began it became clear that something was happening in the ghetto. We crowded to the windows of room where we worked. From there we could see the alleys of the ghetto. Fear and panic seized us. Each of us had left small children and elderly parents in the ghetto. We saw children and old people leaving the little houses. We saw a short elderly woman leading a small child by the hand. I thought I saw my mother-in-law.

Every evening when we returned from work, my mother-in-law, **Zenia Ziv**, would be waiting for us with some thin soup that she had prepared and a little piece of bread. During the day she took care of my little daughter Haviva and her grandson Yitzhak. The children know that they

must not ask for food, because there was none. You had to make do with what grandma gives you.

At the end of the workday in the factory, a day of terrible thoughts and uncertainty, we returned worried and broken to the ghetto. It was dusk when I approached the little window and peeked at the corner in which my child's bed stood. The bed was made, and stood empty. The room, which was always noisy with children's play, was empty and quiet. Trembling, I opened the door of our room and heard the neighbor's voice "Shah... Shah... The children are in the basement."

In the small basement eight small fearful children lay on a pile of threadbare clothes and a few potatoes. Parallel a true heroine, who decided not to give in to the Nazi despot, was with them. After they were ordered to bring all the children of the ghetto to the gate, she hid her son Yitzhak and my daughter Haviva, and another six of the neighbor's children. The children sensed the danger and were quiet. My worthy mother-in-law was no longer with them. She refused to go to the basement and together with 800 children and some adults went on the way to death. On the journey the Germans filled the vehicles with gas and they all choked to death. The children were snatched by the Ukrainians who helped in the "holy" mission. They were drunk and bloodthirsty and searched everywhere. Luckily they did not discover our basement, because the neighbor hid the opening very well.

On faltering legs I raced through the ghetto to my friend, **Teibale Berman**, to tell her that the children had survived. A strong wind blew sand into my eyes. The terrible silence was rent by the pathetic cries of broken-hearted mothers

and fathers who had been robbed of what was most dear to them.

It was clear after the “Children’s Action” that we had to take the children out of the ghetto and give them into the keeping of gentiles. To give them up no matter what, if only someone would take them, because to leave them in the ghetto meant to set them on the way to the concentration camps and to the death furnaces together with their mothers.

7. Refuge for the Children -

Haviva

I set out on my “Via Dolorosa” with hope and with the passionate desire to save my child. After that terrible day, November 5th, 1943, I had to find a refuge for the frightened children who had been miraculously saved by my sister-in-law, Peralle, when the ghetto police came to assemble all the children of the ghetto. But I was a stranger in Shavli, because I was a survivor of the murder of the residents of Rassein.

My friend, **Salik Ches** lived in Shavli and had worked for many years in the leather factory in which the ghetto people worked. With his help I managed to send my little daughter, Haviva, out of the ghetto.

Early in the morning, on a chilly day, Salik hid her under his coat as though she were a parcel. Surrounded by fellow workers, he took Haviva out of the ghetto. My faithful friend gave her to a Lithuanian woman who agreed to take the Jewish child and watch over her.

It is hard to imagine. A living and breathing three year old girl, who doesn't make a sound and lets herself be given, without her mother, to people whom she doesn't know and who speak a language that she doesn't understand. With her healthy little senses she felt the danger and understood that she must not make trouble.

The good will of the Lithuanian woman was of no avail. The neighbors noticed the strange black-haired child with the beautiful dark eyes and knew that she was a Jewish

girl. A girl who has no right to live in a world that belongs to them alone, to the Gentiles whose God is Jesus, the Jew from Nazareth. They suspected that the Lithuanian woman received gold in order to watch over the child. There was danger that they would inform the SS and the child would be sent to her death.

I had no gold, nor did I have silver. My only help came from my optimism, my faith in God, and my belief in human beings. I used to say to my little daughter "God will help us and God will keep us". And little Haviva'le would repeat in Yiddish, in her childish speech "*Got vault uns helfin, on Gpt vaultt uns heitan*".

I had to find her a different place. The kind Lithuanian woman gave me the address of a friend of hers. When I got there I saw that there was no place for a little girl. I returned to the Lithuanian woman and asked her to keep the child for another two days. Then on Sunday, the day of rest for the Lithuanians, I dressed in such a way that my Jewishness was not apparent, took Haviva by the hand and went from house to house following the recommendations of people. It was a beautiful autumn day without a cloud in the clear sky. The sun shone and all around there were people in holiday clothes, happy families with happy children, chatter and laughter - as if there were no war, as if people did not long for a scrap of bread, as if they were not shooting little children. Confident well-fed Germans were also seen in the streets. In my heart was one wish: to save my child. Where would I find salvation?

The doors on which I knocked opened, but no one could help. These were poor people who lived in tiny apartments with one room and a kitchenette. There were small children in some of them. I remembered the foreman to

whom some women from the ghetto were sent to work. He was a decent man and even brought some bread for us, which we ate with the onions that we sorted. Sometimes we found a tomato. I saw that I had no where else to turn. I decided to go to him. It was autumn, after the rain the mud soaked my shoes. I hugged my little girl so that she would not be cold and walked with faint hope in my heart. When I found the house, he was very surprised. He was sorry but he could not help.

When I went back it was dusk. The streets were empty and the sun was setting. My child fell asleep in my arms. I was very tired, desperate and exhausted. I decided that there was no way out. I must go back to the Lithuanian woman who lived opposite the ghetto and ask her to let us stay the night with her, and early in the morning when the Lithuanian workers came to work to steal into the factory and from there into the ghetto. Of course that was very dangerous.

I was a stranger in the city of Shavli and did not know it well. In one of the streets that I knew there was a Lithuanian tailor called **Dapkus**. He helped the people of the ghetto in all sorts of ways. His 19 year-old nephew, **Vladas Drupas**, who came from the country to study in the gymnasium, lived with him. Though I had been in this house several times looking for a shelter for Haviva, it didn't occur to me to go to them. I did not think that they could help in any way and I didn't want to bother these decent people on their day of rest.

As we passed the house, Haviva woke up and demanded "pee-pee". I went into the yard, and when she finished straightened her clothes and took her into my arms again. I was already near the gate ready to leave when I suddenly

saw Vladas leave the house. When he saw me he froze as if hit by lightning: "Madam, where are you going with the child at such an hour?" I answered that I did not know. Then that wonderful boy said "Please, don't leave this spot, we have guests in the house, and I must apologize to them. I'll be right back." Drained of will and feeling I stood and waited - as if none of it was my concern. But Vladas was determined to help. A sort of holy energy filled him and he took me to a nun from his village, a poor elderly woman. Vladas coaxed her for nearly an hour. I didn't listen to what he said, I was in a submissive, fatalistic mood. Finally the nun agreed to take the child for a few days. She asked what she would do with the child when she went to work. Vladas volunteered to be with her when the nun was absent. Indeed, Vladas sat in the poor little house with Haviva for three days. He still tells how Haviva called him "*Ankal'le*" (Uncle).

After three days I got a note from Vladas that I must take Haviva away because the nun is frightened and she will give her to the Germans, no less.

During my search for a refuge for Haviva, a neighbor once took me from the ghetto to a young Lithuanian woman who agreed to take the child to her native village. She would leave her work and watch over her. Because she said that she would leave her work I understood that she expected a generous payment from the Jewess who was in trouble. "Look" I told her "it's nice that you want to do a good deed and to help me, but I cannot give you anything now, because I have nothing. I can give you the addresses of my brother in Palestine and my Uncle in America. If I don't stay alive, they will take the child from you and you will get generous payment from them." When she heard this, the young woman took back her offer and would not

even let me stay the night. When I was already by the door, I turned my head and asked: "Maybe you can help me anyway?" She did not hesitate for a moment and said "On Wednesday, market day, a farmer called **Antanss Matuzevicius** from the town of **Pashvetin** will come here. He's a good person, maybe he'll take the child." She added: "But I'm afraid my neighbor may inform on me." I didn't know her neighbor and thought it best not to return. Still, when I got a note from Vladas that the child must be taken, I decided to take the risk one more time, come what may. I knew that the return to the ghetto was suicide for both of us.

Fearlessly, determined, I climbed the stairs and thought that this might be my last act. The woman opened the door. I asked if the farmer had come and she answered that he had. Before me appeared a tall man, no longer young, with white hair and watery blue eyes. I sat at a small table opposite him. The stranger asked me a few short questions about where I came from, what my parents, who were no longer alive because they were murdered, had done. When he received answers to his questions he said "Fine, Madam, I will take the child from you." I sat and looked at him. I wanted to get inside his head, to understand what made a stranger do such a humane act. He didn't ask anymore and didn't demand anything. When I didn't move he said: "Why are you sitting, Madam?... Go and bring the child, I will return from the market at two and take her with me." Slowly I rose and left.

The nun told me where she would leave the key. While I opened the door to her room, I heard the high little voice of Haviva ask in Yiddish "*Whar is dart?*" (Who's there?) I found her on the rough wooden couch. Near the couch was a bowl of water with some pieces of bread floating in it.

Near the stove that heated the room Haviva's clothes were hanging - clean. She was a quiet child and accepted everything with resignation. I bathed her, dressed her, combed her shining black hair and put in it a red ribbon that I kept in the house from the good days. When we came to the house, I laid her down, neat and clean and she fell asleep. When the young woman came back from work, she was amazed at her beauty. I did not know what was in her anti-Semitic mind, but I later found out that she really planned to inform on me. Only the landlady who was a kind woman, kept her from this infamous act.

I sat and waited. The clock showed two o'clock and three and only at four did Mr. **Matuzevicius** come with two friends whom he had met at the market. As usual with the Lithuanians, friends must drink a glass or two or three until they are drunk. The three were as drunk as lords and I put my child's life in their hands. I had no choice. Antanus took my Havivala in his arms, she was quiet and did not cry. I hugged and kissed her and told her that the Uncle will take care of her and that he is a good Uncle. I did not ask any questions and left. I went into the tailor's house, opposite the gate from which they left. Vladas was at home. We stood near the window that overlooked the street and saw the wagon, hitched to two horses go away from us. For some reason my heart foresaw only good.

Three months passed and I heard nothing. But one day I got a message through my friend Salik that I was to come to the house where I had left Haviva. Mr. **Matuzevicius** was waiting for me and with a glowing face began to tell me about my child: how she talks, how she acts, how clever she is. His sister in the village to which he took her loves her and takes care of her. Then I knew that she was

in good hands, with wonderful people. God sent me two angels, in the guise of men, who saved our lives.

Vladas Drufas received the award of “The Righteous Gentile” and he is an honored resident of Israel. Antanus Matuzevicius died two years after we left Lithuania. I am in close contact with his daughter Antamina. My daughter Haviva immigrated to Israel in 1990 with her husband and children.

8. Yitzhak - Itza'le

The language of the Jews in the villages of Lithuania, before the Second World War, was Yiddish. The children were called by pet names: Yankal'le, Moshe'le, Slema'le, and so on. I knew Yitzhak - Itza'le, the son of Peral'le and her husband **Mordecai Krom**, even before he was born, when I was the companion of his pregnant mother.

After I gave my daughter to Mr. **Matuzevicius** I knew that Itza'le had to be taken out of the ghetto as well. This was an even more difficult task, because he was a six-year-old Jewish boy, circumcised, and the danger to any Lithuanians who might help him was great. **Noaik**, my neighbor from the ghetto had connections with Lithuanians from before the war. I asked him for help. He found a poor family, the father an engine driver, who agreed to take Itza'le. They lived in a little house not far from the ghetto and had two children, seven and eight years old. The children used to hit Itza'le and his head was covered with scars. I found all sorts of ways to visit the boy. When I came in he would look at me, bow his head, and not say a word. But when I had to leave, he would hug me fiercely and not let me leave. It was so hard for me to see his suffering, the suffering of a child that should have grown up with his parents and been happy.

One day the family got tired of taking care of him, or they were afraid, and they brought Itza'le to the place where my friend **Salik**, who also took Itza'le out of the ghetto under his coat, worked. I was in the leather factory where we worked and my thoughts raced around and around. What to do? He could not be returned to the ghetto.

When the siren sounded for the lunch break, I joined the Lithuanian workers who would leave of the factory at this time. I found Itza'le in the room where Salik worked, with a bit of bread in his hand. I asked Salik to take care of him and went to look for **Lyoda**, the good-hearted young Lithuanian girl with whom I had become friendly at work in the brick factory.

I didn't find Lyoda at home, but I met her on the way back. She was very glad to see me. I told her about Itza'le and asked for her help. She hesitated because he was a boy and not my son, but I convinced her. When her mother agreed, I brought Yitzhak. We walked half the way, not far from the factory, but he stubbornly refused to move further. I told him "If I take you to the ghetto the Germans will shoot you." "Let them shoot" said the six-year-old. Can anyone imagine what a child like that goes through? How true is the saying "The revenge of a small child is beyond Satan's imagining". We saw that we had no choice. Lyoda took him from me by force.

For a short time all was well with Yitzhak. He could play outside, no one bothered him and Lyoda took care of him well. But then the same devil's dance of the saving of Haviva began. One day I got a message from Lyoda that there is no alternative, I must take the child.

The heads of Shavli ghetto, the "*Judenrat*" included all the important people of the city and tried in all sorts of ways to ease the suffering of the Jews and to help as much as possible. The heads of the "*Judenrat*" were **Leibowitz, Heller, Abramovitz, Karton** and **Aharon Katz**, who was called **Ketza'le**. This honorable man asked the murderers at the time of the children's action "Where are you taking them?". The Germans said to him "If you want to know,

come along”. Thus he died together with the beautiful and hungry children of Ghetto Shavli. The fate of these distinguished people was bitter. The Germans would often call them to give them terrible harsh commands. The people of the ghetto knew from their expressions that something very bad was about to happen.

There was also a police force in the ghetto, the “*Politzai*”. The Germans also used them for unpleasant tasks. Among other things they sent them to villages and towns in the area to bring rotten vegetables for the Jews. These were young men who were willing to help those who were in trouble. They found a place for Yitzhak with a nun in the town of Kelmi. After I took Yitzhak from Lyoda, I found a Lithuanian woman who lived not far from the factory near the ghetto. I knew that I could not leave him there so I turned to the “Judenrat” and they sent me to the police.

I spoke with the men who went to the town of Kelmi to bring rotten potatoes. When they left the ghetto, Peral'le gave them a package with some clothes for the child. The kind Lithuanian woman walked with Yitzhak. She said to me: “You go first Madam and I’ll follow with the child. If they take you we won’t be in danger.” We came to the appointed place. I turned my head to look at Itza'le, poor child. His shoes were too small, his socks were torn, he feet bled and he limped in pain. Even now, after 56 years, tears fall from my eyes when I remember that terrible sight.

After a wait that seemed to me eternity, the truck arrived. As we had planned, the men asked the SS soldier for permission to buy cigarettes and he agreed. Then I approached the truck, speaking Lithuanian, and asked to be taken to Kelmi, where ostensibly my mother lived and I

wanted to leave the boy with her. The Jewish soldiers translated my request. The German looked at us and agreed. When we arrived, the men put me down near a small house, and told me that a woman who would take the boy lived here. To my consternation the woman had changed her mind. When I came into the house I saw a dark Jewish girl with lovely eyes sitting by a manual spinning wheel spinning thread.

The pretty 14 year-old girl, **Yonina**, was a local girl whose parents had been killed. She and her brother, now the writer **Yitzhak Mar (Meras)**, were hidden by the local people. She was the granddaughter of the Rabbi of Kurshan, **Rabbi Litvin**, who died in the Holocaust with all the men, while the women and children were taken to Jager, a town in northern Lithuania. In a horrible slaughter that began on Yom Kippur, 1941, and ended the following day, all were killed. Only one boy, **Zelig Gelinski**, who was then 14, managed to crawl away from the corpses, after the murderers left. He witnessed the terrible thing that was done there. Lithuanians also told about it: 4000-4500 Jews were brought there from all the surrounding areas. They were gathered in the marketplace and from every side Lithuanians burst forth and shot at them. The market and the surrounding houses were so covered with blood that they had to bring fire hoses to wash it away. From there the dead and the living were loaded on wagons and thrown into pits that had been prepared beforehand in a beautiful park outside the town. The Rabbi's daughter **Rivka** and my sister **Batya** were both in the last month of pregnancy. According to testimony that we heard, one of them gave birth. One of the killers, rifle in hand, let the woman give birth. Then in cold blood and with pleasure he shot the newborn and the mother and threw them into the pit. Can

one imagine such a terrible thing? What sort of twisted mind must a man have in order to commit such a horrible crime?

When Yonina heard the story and saw my distress, she understood that the woman who saved her would not take Yitzhak. She stood up, told me to wait and ran to look for a place for the boy from the ghetto. Despite the restrictions and despite the danger, Yonina went to look for a place for Yitzhak. An hour later she returned with good news: "I found a kind woman who is willing to take the child." She found **Urbiliene** a Lithuanian woman who was married to a man whose Jewish grandmother had converted to Christianity. This wonderful woman sent her daughter **Helia** to the village to keep the boy and there his father Mordecai Krom found him when he returned from the front in his army uniform. When Yitzak saw him he asked "What does this soldier want with me?".

Yitzak was tired and afraid that I would leave him alone. He clung to me and did not want to stay. Again there was no alternative. With a heavy heart I left him.

I returned to the ghetto, to Peral'le. Only we two were left. My mother-in-law was taken in the "Children's Action". We continued our life in the ghetto anxious about our children, with a prayerful heart and no idea of what the future held for us.

9. Ben - Bena'le

Our house in Kurshan stood at the edge of the town near the Venta river. Not far from us there was a thick forest with pines, to which we used to walk to gather forest berries: blueberries, raspberries and little pink wild strawberries, whose smell is unforgettable. On the Sabbath, the young people would go to the forest for all sorts of activities. At the other end of the Stedtala - the village - was the roomy house of the **Ton** family. A beautiful lane of birch and chestnut trees led to the house. The family had two daughters, **Leah** and **Rivkah** and three sons, **Lev**, **Avraham** and the eldest **Ya'acov**.

My sister Batya and Leah were good friends. We were then 8 and 9 years old. When Batya went to her friend, I would wheedle and beg her to take me. She didn't want to until Mother convinced her. She was angry with me and on the way she would shove me a little. I was a spoiled child, the youngest in the family, thin and delicate and every little thing offended me. I would get there crying. But what to do when you want to tag along with your big sister and not stay at home alone? Besides, there was a swing in the garden near their house. I still remember it. It was set up between fruit trees not far from the entrance to the house. In 1929 the Ton family sold their house and the fruit garden and moved to Shavli, where the Hebrew Gymnasium was. We didn't meet again until I arrived in ghetto Shavli in 1941.

In the ghetto my year-old daughter Haviva and I were lodged with a mentally disturbed woman who shouted and cursed. The woman's room was small and untidy and

insects crawled on the walls. When Ya'acov Ton saw the conditions in which we lived he went and talked with his mother, **Beyle**, a kind-hearted woman who had been fond of me since my childhood. They decided that I would come to live with them. They had a three-room apartment. A family lived in each of the rooms. Ya'acov's mother persuaded me to come and live in the kitchen which was quite large. My Haviva had her carriage, which I had clung to in all the hardships that I underwent, and I slept on a camp bed. Ya'acov did not waste time and one day he came and told me to hold on to one side of the carriage and he held the other and brought me into the house where they lived with his sister **Rivka** and her husband **Zevulon (Zava) Gotz**. The fascist Lithuanians, collaborating with the Germans, buried his sister Leah with her husband and year-old son in a special pit. Her husband **Isaak Zaks** had been a highly respected lawyer in the city of Yenishuk, not far from the city of Jager, where my mother and sister and all the families on my father's and mother's side perished. Ya'acov's brothers **Leyba'le** and **Avrema'le** died on the field of battle fighting against the Nazis.

On the fourth of June, 1943, a son was born to Rivka and Zevulon Gotz. This was against the German rules that ordered that no Jewish child be born, and that if born the child be killed! He was born in the attic, in a tiny room, which was prepared especially for the birth. Ya'acov and Zava lined the walls so that no sound from the mother or the newborn would be heard - so that no one would hear what was going on behind the soundproofed walls, and nothing would be revealed to our cruel enemies. We, the residents of the house, crowded into the kitchen and waited until the announcement came that a son was born. His

name in Israel was **Ben-Tzion**, after Rivka's father who died in the city of Shavli before the Holocaust.

When the child was three months old there was grave danger that the "terrible" secret would become known and it was necessary to get him out of the ghetto. The parents agreed with the difficult decision. They were resigned to Ya'acov's plan, to give the child to a Lithuanian woman he had found who was willing to take the tender child.

On a rainy autumn night, the child was given a narcotic, placed in a pillow and the pillow was placed in a suitcase. The parents themselves rolled the precious package over the tall wall of the cemetery that was within the boundary of the ghetto. On the other side of the wall Uncle Ya'acov waited and took the valuable package into his hands. In this way the child was torn from his birth mother and given another mother, the Lithuanian woman.

In 1944 when the Germans saw that they were losing the war, they hurried to destroy the ghettos and the surviving Jews. One day we learned that they planned to destroy the ghetto and to send everyone to concentration camps. I still worked in the factory then. I sat and waited. When the siren for the Lithuanian's lunch break sounded, I stood up and literally flew to the ghetto. I took Peral'le my sister-in-law, who was as close to me as a sister, and miraculously we managed to get into the factory again. We left the factory with the Lithuanian workers and got to the outside world.

In July 1944 the Russians shelled the city of Shavli and a bomb fell on the ghetto. Some people were killed, among them the head of the "Judenrat" **Mendel Leibowitz**. The rest were loaded on the freight trains used for carrying cattle. Crowded together with barely room to breathe, they

were taken to the Stuthof Concentration Camp in Germany. Ya'acov's mother Beylle and Rivka with her husband Zava, the parents of Ben-Tzion were among the evacuated. Ya'acov was already outside the ghetto. He did not want to leave his mother, but she persuaded him, saying "It is too late for Rivka to leave the ghetto. Esther has already left, you leave too and raise Benele with her."

After the war when Ya'acov returned and found me and we were together, Peral'le left to look for her husband. She found him in Kovna. **Mordecai** worked in the Ministry of the Interior and had an apartment with three rooms. He brought his son Yitzhak from the country and they were a happy family once again.

Peral'le sent a messenger to bring us to Kovna as well. I brought Haviva and for a short time we lived together. But Ya'acov found work in Shavli his city, in the same factory in which we worked during the German occupation and which was now owned by the Russians. He was badly wounded in the hand and was in the hospital. After I visited him a few times and he did recover, we decided that I would stay with him, because we both felt very lonely. We found a small room with acquaintances and took Haviva. Later the Lithuanian woman also gave us Ben-Tzion, whom she had previously agreed to give only to his parents.

One evening she appeared with the child, said, "You wanted him, take him" and left. The two and a half-year-old stood near the entryway and struck the door with his little fists and cried, "I want to be in that house." His sky-blue eyes were full of tears. We adults stood helplessly by, not knowing how to calm him.

From that evening we were a family with two children. Ya'acov became a father to Haviva and I Ben-Tzion's third mother. Haviva became a big sister to Ben. In time the two became good friends.

Life after the war was very harsh. We got coupons for bread and had to stand in a long queue. There were almost no basic necessities. I went and studied cutting and sewing. I used to get an old garment and make it into clothes for the children. Ya'acov began to work and somehow we managed. Once some Russian soldiers brought a cow to sell. We didn't have enough money but the cow was a real bargain, purebred. Her teats were full to bursting with milk. We, the residents of the old house in the outskirts of Shavli, were half-starved after the hard life in the ghetto and we had two children for whom milk was a dream. It was as if the cow was asking us to take her from the drunken soldiers. We discussed it among ourselves and decided use the little money we had to buy the cow in partnership with our neighbors. I had learned to milk a cow when I was in the country, so I did the milking and the house was filled with milk products. We learned how to make butter and cream cheese and began to live. We sold some of the products. The cow did not like children, but the children were eager to be near her and did not understand that this was forbidden. One fine day when I was busy with the housework, I couldn't find Ben. I ran here and there and looked in every possible corner. Suddenly I thought that maybe the child went to the cow who was grazing across the way.

I raced and arrived at the last moment because the cow had already lifted up the child. He was hanging on her horn, her head was turned to the side, and she was ready to toss the little boy away onto the nearby tree. I was a bit afraid

of the cow, but I made a quick leap, caught hold of her other horn and brought the frightened child down. Thus his life was saved for the third time and he was only three years old.

In 1946 our son Reuven was born and we were a family with three children, mine, yours, ours... When Ben was six years old he caught meningitis and was at death's door. He was saved by American penicillin, which we managed to get at the last second, when there was no hope for his recovery.

His parents, Rivka and Zevulon Gotz managed to survive the camps and immigrated to America. The Americans liberated them from the camp. Through my brother who lived in Israel they managed to make contact with us, and we began to receive letters from them and packages of clothes for the children. The children studied in a Russian school because there were no Jewish schools. I finished a course for kindergarten teachers and worked in a Jewish kindergarten in Kovna with Jewish children who returned from Russia and with Holocaust survivors.

In 1953 our daughter was born and named Bella in memory of Ya'acov's mother. In 1957, when the Soviet Union began to open up a little to the free world, Ben's parents managed to get an exit permit for him. He was 14. He did not want to leave us. Although it was very difficult for us, and especially for me, I tried to convince him that these were his real parents and it will be better for him there. Life in Lithuania was still hard. He was a good student and excelled in mathematics. He helped the other students in his class and his teacher was sorry when he left.

The whole business was very hard for him and for all of us because he didn't know his parents and he was attached to

us and loved us with all the fibers of his gentle soul. We used to get sad letters from him when he was a student. He was not yet attached enough to his parents and missed us very much.

In 1971 when we arrived in Israel, we spoke on the telephone for the first time since he left us. In the days of the Soviet Union it was impossible to call long distance from Lithuania. We were so excited that we could not speak. In 1972 he, his wife Bernice and their two-year-old daughter, Deborah came to visit us. Today Deborah is married and works as a pediatrician in one of the hospitals in New York. Ben and Bernice's son Joshua, who is 29, is a business management graduate, and their second son is a computer genius of 25 and has finished his studies. Ben himself has a Ph.D. in mathematics and physics and works for a big company. His wife Bernice, also a mathematician works there too.

Today we have eight grandchildren and Ben's three as well, who also call us **Saba** and **Savta**. Ben calls us **Imma** and **Abba** and to this day has a lot of love and respect for us.

10. Stuthof

In 1942 and 1943 the Germans organized groups of young men from the ghetto to work at digging in the peat farms. Ya'acov Ton worked in the Atchionai work camp, as mechanic in the machinery shop of the camp. When he finished his job as a mechanic, Ya'acov would go down into the pit to help the young boys who were tired and worn-out to finish their part of the digging.

In order not to leave his mother **Beile** in the ghetto, Ya'acov took her with him to the camp to serve the workers.

When the word spread that the Germans are about to destroy Ghetto Shavli and that the men from the camp were to be sent back there, Ya'acov asked the manager, with whom he was on good terms, to find a hiding place for his mother.

A relative of the manager indeed agreed to accept her in his village on condition that she not speak Lithuanian, and that she act as though she were dumb. Beile knew deaf and dumb language. But after a short time she asked Ya'acov to come to her. When he came she said, "Son, I have a favor to ask of you. Take me back to the ghetto. I don't want to a lone Jew in the world. I want to die with all the Jews." Ya'acov tried to change her mind, but she refused. With a heavy heart he returned her to the ghetto with the help of the manager, who claimed that Ya'acov was wasting time and he needed him for work. No one was allowed into the ghetto any more. No one entered and no one left. That same night Ya'acov left the ghetto to save Ben-Tzion - Bena'le.

A few days later the Jews of Ghetto Shavli were sent to the Stuthof. Ben's parents tried to hide in the leather factory but did not succeed. They were sent back to the ghetto and from there together with Mother Beile to Stuthof. Mather Beile died and burnt with all the women in the camp. May their memory be blessed.

After they sent her mother to the furnaces, Rivka decided not to return to the camp. After an exhausting day's work which the women of the camp did in the Germans' fields, the workers were returned to the camp. Rivka hid in one of the roadside ditches. It was evening and when they did not see her she began to crawl in the direction of a weak light that glimmered from one of the few houses in the area. She knocked on the door and a German woman opened it. When she saw that it was a prisoner from the camp she let her wash and change to clean clothes. She implored her "Know that my husband is in the SS. When he comes home from work, say that you are a relative of mine from Poland and that you came to visit me." Rivka had blue eyes and a snub nose and spoke good German and so she stayed there.

One day when the front grew close to Germany, the place was bombed and a bomb fell into the basement where the two women hid, the Jewess and the German. As fate would have it, the German was killed and Rivka remained alive. Because of the bombings the women and children were evacuated to Denmark and Rivka lived with them as a German.

When the war ended Rivka tried to convince the authorities in the camp that she was a Jewess who had escaped from Shtuthof. They didn't believe her, so Rivka asked to speak with someone from the Jewish community. They sent her a

Rabbi, and when she saw the Rabbi she ran towards him and embraced him and cried. The Rabbi asked her questions and she began to quote passages from the Bible and from Bialek's poems, which she knew by heart. The Rabbi understood that this is a Jewess who was miraculously saved from the Hell. But at this moment something snapped and she could not remember who she was, neither her name nor where she came from. The Rabbi put her into the care of the community. Bit by bit she came to herself and remembered that she had a child in the ghetto. This was the boy Ben-Tzion, and later she remembered her identity.

Zava, the father of the boy remained alive. Weak exhausted and sick with typhus he survived until the soldiers of the United States liberated the death camp. The two were reunited in Italy. That was the meeting place for Holocaust survivors who received support from the UJA.

In time they had a son, **Amos**, and immigrated to America to build their home. In 1957 they received their son Ben-Tzion who is also our beloved son.

11. Rochal'le - Grazina

When I met 7 year-old Rochal'le in ghetto Shavli in Lithuania, no one could guess that one day the name Rochal'le would change to Grazina.

In the happy days before World War II, the Ton's house in Kurshan was a center of artistic activity. This was a very talented family. The oldest son, Ya'acov played the guitar and the mandolin. The second son, **Meyer**, had varied talents - he was a born musician and playing on a saw could produce heavenly sounds, he studied violin in Shavli with Professor **Kravitz** and was an excellent violinist as well as a painter. Rivka, the youngest, who was my dear friend, played the guitar. **Bat-Sheva Ton** was the leading lady in the amateur theater of the city and my cousin **Ya'acov Rol**, the son of Uncle **Yosse Rol**, fell in love with her. She married a different local man from the **Reznick** family and my cousin left town in disappointment. In the '20s the young people would leave the villages and towns and go to look for work and fortune in the wide world. Usually they went to Africa (especially South Africa), many went as pioneers to Palestine, others to North America and a few also immigrated to South America. My cousin Ya'acov went to Brazil.

A few years later my cousin, then in his thirties, came back to the town. A respected and well-to-do family, the **Navootzkis**, lived in Shavli. They had an unmarried oldest daughter, **Hinda**, who was about Ya'acov's age. Someone arranged a "schiduch" between them and they married. I was then about 11 and my parents took me and my sister Batya to the wedding. It was a magnificent wedding in the

large salon of the Navootzkis. For the first time in my life someone asked me to dance and I was very excited. My own wedding took place in the same salon, when I was twenty and married Yehezkel Ziv from Rasien.

Two years later the terrible dark days of World War II and the Nazi occupation arrived. I met my cousin Ya'acov Rol and his wife Hinda only in 1943, in Ghetto Shavli. They had a 7 year-old daughter, Rochal'le.

Ghetto Shavli was in two of the poorest sections of the town - Kavkaz and Tarko. I was with my daughter Haviva'le in Ghetto Kavkaz and my cousin Ya'acov in Tarko. We were not allowed to move from one ghetto to the other. In 1943 the ghettos were united and the crowding became unbearable. At that time I was already a widow with a two and a half year-old daughter. I used to visit my cousin and his family. They gave me some of Rochal'le's clothes for Haviva.

We were not able to meet for long, because that same year on the 5th of November the worst happened - the "Children's Action". The children were crowded onto trucks, along the way a hose was inserted into the trucks and they choked to death. We were lucky. Our children, Perela's, and mine, remained in their hiding place, and I managed to get them out of the ghetto. What Rochal'le's fate was I did not know.

Before they moved all the residents of the ghetto to the death camp at Stuthof, I fled from the ghetto with my sister-in-law. Ya'acov Ton who escaped from the ghetto with his three-month-old nephew, also fled and the child's parents were sent to Stuthof with the others. When Ya'acov and I met again after the liberation, after the bombings and the changing fronts, we decided to live

together and raise the two children, my Haviva'le and his sister's Bena'le.

One day I learned that Rochal'le, the daughter of my cousin Ya'acov Rol, was with a gentile neighbor of the Noovitzkis, the owner of a pharmacy who lived opposite them. I looked for an opportunity to meet him. When we met, we spoke of the Navootzkis family and of their daughter Rochal'le. I said that I had two children and we were a family and I wanted Rochal'le to grow up with us as her family had been sent to a death camp. The gentleman was not pleased with my request. He said in an unequivocal tone that he would not give the child to anyone except her parents. When I still tried to convince him he said, "Madam, even if you go to court, you won't get the girl."

For two years, while we lived in Shavli, I could not see the girl. When I went to them they would hide her. I tried in every way but did not succeed. I always asked after her, and knew that she was a good student, played piano and grew up with their two sons.

When she was a student, studying in the city of Kovna, I discovered her address. The city of Kovna is divided into the lower city and the upper city called "The Green Hill". We lived very near each other - we near the hill and Rochal'le on the hill.

I arrived at a one-story house and knocked on the door. When she stood before me, I saw my cousin **Feiga'le** - really an exact copy. Even in her height there was an amazing resemblance. I introduced myself and explained the relationship between us. She listened and was silent, calm and wrapped in her own thoughts. It seemed that the story reminded her of her parents and of the ghetto. I

invited her to visit us and she arrived. I gave her a present - material for a dress, which my brother Ya'acov Rol, who had immigrated before the war and lived in Ramat Gan, had sent. I also gave her the clothes that her mother Hinda had given me for my Haviva'le in the ghetto. I had kept them as a remembrance. The atmosphere was tense, I did not touch on painful subjects.

The second time that I visited her, I gathered up my courage and asked her if she would marry a Jewish boy. The answer was negative. Her name was Grazina. In Lithuanian the name means beautiful. She made it clear to me that she belongs to the family in which she grew up with two brothers. This meant that she was no longer Jewish...

The meetings with her were devastating for me. It took me two painful weeks to recover. I was in great distress. Actually I don't understand the terrible anguish that would attack me. It seems that that was the Jewish feeling, buried within us, that was deeply hurt by the terrible things done to us by our foes.

Grazina finished her studies and became a dentist. We have not been in contact since then, but I heard that she is a dentist in Vilna. When we were preparing for *Aliyah* to Israel, I searched and found her address and again went to see her. Again I suffered the same disappointment and the same distress. Grazina lives alone, unmarried. She has her own small, well organized apartment. I told her that we were planning to move to Israel, but it did not seem to touch a chord in her soul. Since then contact between us has been broken.

I still think of her and her fate, the eternal Jewish fate.

12. In a Remote Lithuanian

Village

There was a young woman named Chayet in Ghetto Shavli. She was the poet of the ghetto and wrote poems about the sad life there. When I told the story about the sad faith of the children that were handed to Lithuanians hands her image was surfaced in my memory and I remembered her sad poem.

In a Remote Lithuanian Village

In one of the houses of a remote village
Faces of small children
Are glimpsed trough the window.
Tow-heads of boys,
Plaited braids of girls.
Between them peep
a pair of sad and bewildered dark eyes,
A tiny nose, a graceful mouth and a boy's curly hair.
He is sad and silent,
Nodding his head as if he asking:
"And me, who will protect me?"
His mother carried him through the night,
Wrapped in blankets she covered his face
with kisses and tears
and softly whispered in his ear

"The Angel of Death is seeking your soul,
Listen well to your mother's words:
Play nicely with your friends
and not a word in your mother's tongue.
Be careful!
You do not know the language of the Jews!
Always speak only Lithuanian.
"From now on, my child, you are not a Jew".
"Mom, mom, do not abandon me,
I am your only child,
I'll go with you wherever you go
I am yours, yours!!!"
The boy trembled and cried
Clutching her neck.
The mother pressed her child to her heart,
Calming him with a sad lullaby.
The child sleeps in her arms,
Tears stream from her eyes.
With trembling hands
She delivers her boy to a strange woman.
Outside all is darkness.
A storm rages.
A lament rises above the storm - a cry.
"Oh my son, my son, what will become of you?
Strange hands will care for you,

Strange hands will raise you,
And I will be far away,
But maybe thus I will save you?"
The knees buckle,
tears are falling
And the heart is filled with grief and prayers:
"Dear Lord, hear my cry
and bring my only child safely back".
In the house, among strangers,
The child walks around with a frozen face,
He doesn't speak or sing,
Doesn't ask for anything,
His Lithuanian name sounds strange to him.
All around so strange and alien...
Oh Lord, why is your world so cruel?

Lily Raz, the manager of the pensioner's project in Kiryat Sharet high school, in which I participated, is also a teacher of literature. She translated the poem into Hebrew from the original Yiddish. My daughter Bella, who is a violin teacher, transcribed the melody as she heard it from me. When the project had been running for six years a booklet was prepared to which we were asked to contribute. It was then that I began to write my story, thanks to Lily and the high school principal, Mr. Yisroel Katz.

13. The Flight from the Ghetto

One morning in July, 1944, when I got to the leather factory where I worked, there were rumors that the ghetto would be destroyed. Before the war, the factory belonged to a rich Jew named **Frenkel**, so the factory was called "***Frenkel's Fabrique***". During the war the Germans controlled it and Jews from the ghetto worked there under strict supervision and without pay.

We learned that the following day we would not leave the ghetto. There was a lot of confusion, people did not know what to do, where to turn. However, we did not have many choices. When the signal for lunch sounded, I got up and ran with all my strength in the direction of the ghetto. Peral'le was in the room. I said "Hurry, come with me". We snatched up the coats we still had from home, a slice of bread and hurried to the gates of the factory, the only hope for salvation. A young German stood there pushing everyone back into the ghetto. I would recognize him today! I watched him and the second that he turned his back, I pulled Peral'le after me and we found ourselves in the factory yard. There we met my friend **Salik Ches**.

One day Salik come and told me he found a hide place for two with Lithuanians we can trust. He said "Ester, I'm ready to escape but only if you joins me, are ready?". I was surprised and said I can not leave Peral'le behind. We were really good friends. Salik was a devoted friend who helped me get my kids out the ghetto and was ready to help me in every thing I may ask in spite of the inhuman conditions of our life in the ghetto. We were young full of energy but my hurt was not for him. He was a tall handsome man, very

gentle and bright. He was a violin player. He would bring his violin, stand stare at me and play my favorite tune. It is still plays in my head to this very days. Such pleasant moments brought a string of light to our sad life. The first time I meet him I was young girl. Together with my mom and sister we would spend the summer in Palanga a resort town on the Baltic Sea. There we would gather, a group of young friend we had a good time and enjoy the white dunes. I was in my sixteen's nothing really bothered me I was happy laughing singing and dancing. From that period I remember Salik, and then the second time in the ghetto.

Back to my escape from the ghetto story. Salik helped us to remove the yellow patch from our backs, wished us luck and with his help we left the ghetto in time. He himself returned to the ghetto to his family. Later they were sent with everyone else to the Shtuthof concentration camp. Salik was saved when the American army liberated the camp and immigrated to America. We met him there in 1980 when we visited our Ben-Tzion.

The dream. Few day prior to my escape from the ghetto I had a dream. In my dream I'm standing in front a tunnel. Black darkness inside. At the far end my mom is sitting on a tall chair surrounded by light and she is glowing like a sun. She shows me the way out. Suddenly I find myself on a top of a hill. Someone hands me a key and my mama gives me her farewell blessing.

That night, before the Jews of the ghetto were exiled to Germany, a bomb fell in the ghetto. **Mr. Mendel Leibowitz** who was the head of the Judenrat - a council of Jews which was called in Shavli "the representative" - was killed. The "*Judenrat*" was responsible for the residents of

the ghetto. The Germans imposed the terrible orders on the “*Judenrat*”. When they were ordered to the Gestapo we knew that orders would be given out and many Jews would not return to their miserable homes. It was hard to see the dark and despondent faces of those respected Jews.

I asked Mr. Leibowitz for help after the “Children’s *action*” in November 1943, when the brutish Ukrainians, the Nazi helpers, miraculously did not find the basement in which Peral’le and the children were hiding.

They had to be taken out of the ghetto, but what to do with them after the disaster of the ghetto? Mr. Leibowitz sent me to the chief priest of the Shavli area, the Priest Lapis. He helped several Jewish women to hide in nunneries in the area. I came to him in Mr. Leibowitz’ name. The priest received me nicely but said that first he must find out with whom he has the honor to speak. He agreed to meet me the following week. When I came at the selected date he received me graciously, seated me opposite his writing desk and asked what I had come to him about. When he heard that the subject was saving children, he said that to his sorrow he could not help us to find a hiding place, but he could give me birth certificates of children who had died. I got two documents - one for Haviva and the other for me, just in case. The Priest Lapis was a man with wide knowledge and love to speak with me about varied subjects. Among other things, he spoke about himself and made it clear to me that he helped people who were in trouble and not in order to influence Jews to convert.

When I managed to slip through the gates I turned towards the miserable house where Yitzhak stayed for a time that was short, but painful and meaningful for a Jewish child. The children beat him up, he could not go outdoors, he was

neglected. From time to time, when I could, I would steal a visit to him and bring the family that kept him a little money that Peral'le and I earned washing floors. Itza'le was very sad. He would look at me, bend his head and say nothing. When I was ready to go, he would hug me tight so that I wouldn't leave him. My heart was sick with the pain of a child of six on whose weak shoulders the tragedy of the Jewish people pressed.

In any case these poor people had a conscience and they did not betray him to the Germans. But one clear day they brought him back to the factory where my friend Salik worked. When I got the message from him, I decided not to return him to the ghetto. Salik took care of him to the best of his ability and meanwhile I again went to search for a refuge for Itzal'e.

The men of the ghetto police, the "*Politz'i*" were Jews who were willing to help in time of need. Despite their limited ability, they helped me to take Yitzhak to the city of Kelmi. They used to go, escorted by SS men in a truck to bring to the ghetto frozen potatoes or rotten vegetables from the nearby city to the hungry Jews of the ghetto. The men found a nun who agreed to take the boy, but when they came to her she changed her mind and said that she could not hide him. It was Yonina, a Jewish girl of 13 or 14, the granddaughter of Rabbi Letvin, the Rabbi of Kurshan, who found a refuge for Yitzhak with another woman called **Urbeliene**.

The miserable house in which I hid Yitzhak at first was the only place near the factory that I could enter. The people were not in, and when they arrived they were surprised to see us. They knew Yitzhak but had never seen Peral'le. I explained that we had escaped from the ghetto. They were

frightened, because the Germans were searching that area looking for Jews who had escaped. Luckily they did not get there but the people were fearful and did not want us to stay in their house. Near the house there were fields of corn. This was autumn and the stalks were high enough so that one could hide between them. The night was lovely, with many stars. At dawn we left the city hoping to find someone who would take us to the village where I had hidden my Haviva. And we did indeed find a ride. We climbed on a peasant wagon and arrived there. Haviva was no longer there, because Mr. **Matuzevicius** moved her to his sister's village when he was warned that people were saying that a Jewish girl was staying with him.

When we got to the village, Mrs. Kilishauskinie did not know us and did not want to take in refugees. When I told her that I was Haviva's mother, she was overjoyed and suddenly there was place and food too. She received us as if we were family and for Peral'le she even kept kosher. Pnina stayed with her and the **Matuzevicius** family received me. In their house there were six children and workers who helped with the farm. They had 40 hectares of land and there was much work. I helped Mrs. **Matuzevicius** at home and in the fields. I learned to milk a cow, which later helped me to care for the cow that we bought with the **Fleishman** family.

I wanted to go back and tell this story in order to preserve the names and memory of all the honorable and humane people who saved four souls: two children, I myself and my sister-in-law Peral'le. I am sorry that I do not know the names of the brave men of Ghetto Shavli police. May their memory be blessed.

14. The Liberation

The sounds of the Russian bombardment began to be heard in the town of Pashvetin where I was hiding. It was clear that as the front neared, the Germans would flee for their lives. I awaited the day of liberation. The Lithuanians were fearful, they were afraid of the Russians, because they well knew what they had done to them in the war and what they did to the Jews and they were afraid of revenge. One day there was a lot of confusion and people rushed about in a panic not knowing where to go. There were rumors that the Russians were killing and slaughtering. But suddenly the victorious Russian army appeared on the Russian tanks from which boys and girls threw candies. Among them were soldiers of Jewish descent, who recognized me as a Jewess and asked about my fate and the fate of the Jews of Lithuania.

I went to the end of town and found a garden full of flowers. The terror-stricken residents had apparently fled. I stood in the garden and picked armloads of flowers that I threw at the tanks that neared the town. Later I ran home, shut myself up alone and burst into those bitter tears that had piled up during all those years that I fought for the lives of the children and our lives. Suddenly I was no longer brave, I lost my energy and a great emptiness filled me. I thought I remained a lone Jewess in a sea of gentiles. Alone in the world! Where would I go? Where could I turn? All, all were killed.

But **Pnina, Peral'le**, who all those years was apparently apathetic and passive, depending only on God and then on me, who prayed and fasted twice weekly (although she was

hungry the rest of the time), suddenly became brave and energetic, perhaps because we succeeded in staying alive. One day she sent me a note saying that she had been in Shavli and there she met some Jews who were saved, and were crowded into a house that stayed whole after the bombings. She told me to come to her and together we would go to Shavli. I asked Mr. **Matuzevicius** to take me to her and we immediately set out. There was no transportation and we had to walk and hope that we would get a lift. We walked with a few Lithuanian women from the village and stopped to rest in a forest near the road. Suddenly we saw an army truck coming near. It stopped, but the soldiers ordered us to hurry and I left my wooden clogs in the forest.

When we got to Shavli the city was full of slivers of glass from the bombings and I was barefoot and could not walk without shoes. I said to Pnina who did not know where the house was, "Go and look for the house and I'll wait for you here. When you find the place, I'll come somehow".

It was a lovely autumn day washed in sunlight. I waited a rather long time until I finally saw her at the end of the road accompanied by a soldier. I thought that they had arrested her because we had no documents. When they came closer I recognized her cousin **Bubik Ziv** (Pnina was from the Ziv family) from Rassein. Pnina looked at me and with a closed face said "Esther, Mordecai is alive, he came back." It turned out that he returned with the Lithuanian Division, which was a unit in the great army of the Soviet Union. A great number of the soldiers in this unit were Jews who managed to flee the Germans at the beginning of the war.

Our men the “Litvaks” (so the Jews of Lithuania were called) fought like lions against the Nazis. They went to battle with the slogan “Revenge for our dear ones, for the spilt blood, for brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers”. Many of our soldiers fell in battle. Among them were two classmates of mine, **Moshe'le Bloch** and **Heneck Krom** who were killed in the big battle near Oreyol.

There were many soldiers, both men and women, who distinguished themselves, but the Soviets tried to change their names to non-Jewish names as in the case of **Sheina'le Deynin**, a nurse from Shavli, who served as a volunteer and fell in battle. After her death she was awarded the medal “Hero of the Soviet Union” but they changed her name to **Ladeninayta Zosia** (ayta is a Lithuanian ending for a woman's name). **Major Volenski** was also a Hero of the Soviet Union and survived.

The Soviet army liberated Lithuania after hard and bitter battles and the soldiers of the Lithuanian Division returned to their homeland. Unlike the Lithuanian soldiers, our brave soldiers did not find their loved ones. There was no sign of their families. The houses were in ruins and the property looted. When they saw how few Jews were left alive they wept and rejoiced in the few survivors and surrounded them with warmth and love. They crowded into the Jewish house that miraculously was not destroyed. The Jewish soldiers brought us food and heard for the first time of the atrocities committed on the Jews by the Lithuanians.

Among the discharged soldiers were **Boria Ziv** from Rasien and **Zalman Halperin** from Kelmi, both cousins of Peral'le, **Mosha'le Ger** and **Rueven Luria** from Rassein, with whom we studied in the gymnasium and **Michael Dvoretzki** from Kurshan.

It was impossible to write to foreign countries from the Soviet Union, but the army had internal, censored mail, through which the soldiers could send postcards abroad. So through Zalman Halperin I wrote my first letter since 1940 to my brother Ya'acov Rol, who came as a pioneer to Palestine in 1933 with a certificate. I told him the horrifying news in a few words - of all our family only my daughter Haviva and I remained alive. This was the first letter to reach Palestine from a Holocaust survivor. Its contents were published in a newspaper in Palestine.

Thus we were liberated. I began to urge Peral'le to leave me and go and look for Mordecai her husband. He had been discharged from the Division and worked in some office somewhere. Peral'le refused stubbornly "If you won't go with me, I won't leave you".

The Germans did not want to surrender and they fought the Russians. In a few days we heard that the Germans were counterattacking and were already only three kilometers from Shavli. The few Jews who were left, fled in the direction of Vilna. We did not move. Peral'le asked me "What are you waiting for Esther? Everyone has left already." I said "I am waiting for Ya'acov, but you don't have to stay." And again she told me that without me she wouldn't go. Then at the last moment, when there was nobody left there, the wind blew, the sand whirled around as in a storm, Ya'acov stood before me and with him was **Vladas**. Ya'acov told me that his mother told him before he fled from the ghetto, "Go, escape. Estherel (so she called me because she had known me as a small child in Kushan) has already left. Go as well and both of you will raise Bena'le".

Ya'acov was lucky. The ghetto guards did not find him when he hid in the latrine that stood on the border between the ghetto and the German's garage. But, when, after all was silent, he tried to leave through the hole in the latrine he nearly drowned in filth (shit to be accurate).

Nevertheless he managed to leave the ghetto, with his lower half stinking. He climbed on a truck which was just leaving the garage and jumped out on the road.

From there he went to the Lituanian woman, with whom he had hidden Bena'le who was born in the ghetto in spite of the Nazis. With Ben-Tzion and with the woman and her son Vladas, they fled the bombarded city for the country. During the first bombardment they lay in a pit near the railroad tracks. He lay on the child so that he would not be hurt. When the raid was over, there were corpses near them and even a dead horse. Tell me, are there not miracles in the world?

Ya'acov asked me what to do. I told him to do as he wished. Vladas returned to the village. At that time the trains were already running. We were in time to climb on the last platform (an open train) that left the city. Peral'le, Ya'acov and I went in the direction of Vilna. We came to a village in the vicinity of Vilna - Aignalna. There we found some Jewish survivors, who crowded together in the home of a Jewish family who gave shelter to any one who had survived the Hell. Only then did Peral'le go to search for her husband.

Meanwhile Ya'acov met a Jewish engineer from the Soviet army. Ya'acov got work as a mechanic. There was a field hospital of the Soviet army there. Among the staff were Jewish doctors. They were interested in us, invited us, gave us some clothes and helped me to get work in the operating

room of the hospital. Day and night severely wounded soldiers were brought from the battlefield, suffering unimaginable agony. Their screams broke the heart. I couldn't bear the dreadful sights and asked to be released and moved to another place. They moved me to the kitchen of the soldiers' mess. There I washed dishes and I used to get food and could bring some to Ya'acov as well. This was a big help.

When Peral'le arrived in Vilna she found out that her husband was in Kovna. One day a messenger came with a letter from her. She had found her husband, they had a roomy apartment and they invited us to come and live with them. We decided to accept Peral'le's invitation and to go to Kovna. "To go" meant "to walk", because there was no transportation, the roads were filled with army trucks and we did not have documents. We went 70 kilometers on foot, through villages and on bare tracks. We would sleep on a threshing floor for a few hours and, hungry and exhausted, keep walking. We would pull a few carrots or radishes from the ground, go into a hut and ask for water. In this way we reached Peral'le, who was waiting for us and received us gladly and lovingly.

15. Return to Life

The cannons were silenced, the killing stopped, people began to return to their places - from the army, from hiding places, from the forests where they fought the Nazi oppressor. The cities and most of the villages where there had been Jews before the war were in ruins from the Nazi shelling and later the Russian shelling. If there were a few houses left standing, the Lithuanians took them over. The Lithuanians looted and stole Jewish property. The villages were "*Judenrein*" - cleansed of Jews.

Few remained alive, the remnants of large families, which included Uncles, Aunts and Cousins all now wiped off the face of the earth. We did not wish to return to the killing ground where the earth was soaked with the blood of our loved ones. The lucky families who managed to flee to the Soviet Union before the Nazis came, were saved and settled in the large cities. It was necessary to build a new life from scratch... We were tired, depressed, hungry and feeling the pain of our loss, the great destruction that the Germans and the Lithuanians together had wrought. There was no one to lend a helping hand. We felt neglected and it was a strange feeling to be free. A long time passed before I felt really free. One could walk on the sidewalk and not in the middle of the road, one could enter a store and buy. There is after all a world outside the ghetto from which we had not emerged for four straight years. Everything was strange and confused. Where to begin?

When it was clear that the Germans would not return, Mr. Matuzevtzius agreed to give Haviva back. We rode in an army truck with **Nina Ziv**, Haviva's cousin, who was

saved from death by Peter, the person in charge of guarding the Jews in the death camp. He also drove us to the village. Haviva hadn't seen me for ten months and nearly didn't recognize me. She said that her mother was dead, for so she had been taught. But she very quickly clung to me and began to speak in Lithuanian. I brought her to Aunt Peral'le.

Ya'acov couldn't find work in Kovna, and decided to try his luck in Shavli, his native town. There he indeed found work in the Interior Ministry's garage as a mechanic. One day he injured his hand, which had already been wounded during his service in the Lithuanian army. I worked in Kovna in the laboratory of a factory for alcoholic drinks. Once a month we would receive a half-liter of liqueur. They said that this drink helped to heal wounds. I had no transport, still I managed to come and bring him the medicine.

I don't know if the drink helped, or my visits, but the wound began to heal. His spirits were very low. It's not hard to guess in what mood we were. I decided to stay near him. When he left the hospital, we decided to remain together. There was no Rabbi, so we had a "wedding" with two witnesses. We went to the local authority and took out identity cards as Tonas and Toneina (In Lithuanian).

Of course, we did not have a house. Ya'acov found a small room with the **Fleischmans**, who were from Shavli. Although they were not so happy with our presence we moved in. We had to go through their room where the entrance was to the kitchen. At first the atmosphere was not pleasant, but later we became friends. Mrs. Fleischman was an unusual woman. She was wise and full of humor despite the great tragedy that struck them. Two children

were taken from her in the “Children’s Action”. She used to write poems about this, about the ghetto and about the troubles that we had had. May her memory be blessed.

I brought Haviva, who was four and a half, to the little room. The Lithuanian woman who kept Ben-Tzion did not want to return him to us, because she was waiting for his parents. But one evening she appeared, with the two and a half year-old boy, opened the door said, “You wanted him. Here he is. Take him.” We were stunned. The little boy didn’t understand what was going on and burst into bitter tears. It was hard to calm him down until he fell asleep. So we had two beautiful and lovable children who played together. Together with Ya’acov we began to face the very hard new life with its erratic fate and uncertain future. We were young and inexperienced and we had to take care of two children, my Haviva and Ben-Tzion, his sister’s son.

The economic situation was difficult. When Ya’acov got work conditions improved. I took care of the children and the poor household. One summer day towards evening some Russian soldiers arrived with a cow. They were drunk and offered the cow for sale. She was a beautiful animal. Her pelt was shining brown and white and her teats were full of milk. We consulted with Mrs. Fleishman and decided to buy the cow together. And so we had a wonderful cow and the situation changed for the better. We worked together and made sour cream and butter. There was a lot of milk and we could even sell some milk products.

The cow did not like children, but the children did not realize this and liked to go near her. One day three year-old Ben-Tzion disappeared. I searched for him everywhere and didn’t find him. Suddenly I thought that he might have

crossed the street and gone to the cow who was grazing in the park there. What did I see? The thin little boy was dangling from the cow's horn. Her head was turned to the side preparing to toss him into the tree opposite. In one great leap I managed to catch the other horn and to release the frightened child. Bena'le was saved from certain death for the second time in his short life.

The first time was when at three months he was weaned from his mother's milk and given to the Lithuanian woman. He began to have diarrhea. A doctor was consulted and he ordered a strict diet and soon the baby didn't have the strength to lift his head. Then another doctor came and ordered them to feed him and he was saved.

Something similar happened to Haviva'le eight months before war broke out. We lived with Pnina (Peral'le), her husband Mordecai and her mother Sheina (Zenia Ziv), who was taken from the ghetto in the "children's *action*" (children deportation and elimination). After the birth I began to nurse and had a lot of milk. But the milk soon disappeared, the baby was always hungry and all my efforts did not help. It turned out that I should have massaged the breast in order to remove the excess milk, but I did not know this and no one advised me. My mother came to visit us to see her first granddaughter. She immediately understood the situation and said "Give the baby food, she may die of hunger God forbid." What a miracle! We began to cook cereal and the baby recovered. However only at five months of age she had the strength to sit up. This was the only time that my mother saw Haviva, before she died in the terrible slaughter in the town of Jagar. With her died my beloved sister Batya (Bessa'le) who was eight months pregnant.

Again and again I return to the days of the disaster and the ruin that our foes brought upon us. It is impossible to continue to the later days without remembering the past that is deeply embedded in the soul of everyone who suffered those terrible days and was saved.

Still, the theme of my story is "The Return to Life". And truly we live! We started families, we have children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. There is joy, we are happy, we dance, we laugh, we prepare parties, we help our children to start families, we work, we study, we join in events, we see movies and plays - as if we remained regular, sane people and you can almost not see any difference between us and other people. But the pain that is buried deep within us is alive and breathing and it disturbs... Sometimes when I am alone in the house and the radio is playing dance music, I begin to dance because that was the love of my life. But after a few steps the pictures begin to appear: here I am, young, pretty and full of life, dancing with my life partner to the notes of the tango or the fox-trot and we are the best-looking couple on the floor. Where are my dear loved ones? What hardships did they go through? Then the tears pour down, but this is between me and myself and no one needs to know about it. When the family comes I must set the table, serve the food, smile, talk and be happy with everyone, for this is indeed happiness, that we won through.!

We lived in town of Shavli for a whole year. We slowly began to recover, we were not hungry thanks to the cow who gave a lot of milk, the children grew and became brother and sister, Ya'acov became a father to the children and I a mother, and it was as if life were moving in the right path.

We were in constant contact with Peral'le. They lived their lives with Yitzhak, their son, in Kovna. Mordecai worked in the Ministry of the Interior in the NKVD. They had a nice roomy apartment. Apparently this apartment was a thorn in the side of his fellow workers. Almost all of them were Russians who fought with the Lithuanian Division and settled in Lithuania.

The Russians were experts in faking cases. An apartment was a dream for them, because in Moscow, for example, there were five or six families in a four-room apartment sharing one kitchen. One day they came and took Mordecai and accused him of something he had not done and sent him to jail for five years. Peral'le with her nine-year-old child was ordered to leave the apartment. She was given a basement apartment without a ray of sun. The walls were covered with ice because the central heating didn't work. Rats raced through the house and there were holes in the floor. Peral'le was miserable.

We decided to leave Shavli in order to help her. On New Year's Eve of 1946 we arrived with our children in Kovna. We were given a five-room apartment, but another Russian family of four was added very soon. Their daughter worked in the Ministry of the Interior...to say that life with them was not sweet is an understatement.

Ya'acov got a job in the Ministry of Construction, in a garage as manager and mechanic. Peral'le worked in her profession as a pharmacist. I managed the common household, and we again began a new life. On July 15, 1946 our son was born and we called him Reuven after my father who died in the Holocaust. He was shot in the woods near Kurshan together with all the men of the town. Life was hard with three children without enough food,

without a washing machine, without a refrigerator and without “Pampers”. I took a course in sewing and made Haviva a pretty dress with white collar and cuffs, Reuven a suit and Ben-Tzion a coat. Everything of course was from old clothes which we got from the people of Kovna, because there were no stores and if there were they were empty. We had to stand in line several hours for bread and there was not always enough for everyone.

It was Peral'le who arranged to have Reuven circumcised. We learned that there was one “*mohal*” (one who does the “brit” or circumcision) left in Lithuania, who went from place to place to circumcise the Jewish children who were beginning to be born as the Jewish world rose from its ashes. We brought him from Vilna, the capital of Lithuania, which the Soviets had returned to Lithuania after the war.

A new era began. We existed on “*telons*”, coupons on which were written how many people there were in a family and according to this we could buy bread and sugar. At rare intervals we got some beans or peas. The economic situation was terrible. In our home there were four children, Haviva and Benela, Peral'le's Yitzhak and the newborn Reuven. It was very difficult, even though we were young and strong.

Once Ya'acov met a Lithuanian woman called **Oona**, who had worked for his mother in the guesthouse they had in Shavli. Her husband had just died and she was alone. Oona asked Ya'acov to take her to live with us and help in the house. When she came I immediately felt eased. She was a kindhearted woman, she loved the children and took care of them and I could look for work to ease the economic situation. A course for kindergarten teachers opened and I

joined. I finished successfully and began to work in a kindergarten that was conducted in Yiddish. I was very successful at my work because I loved the work and the children. I worked with 3 to 4 year-olds. This is the most interesting, the most innocent and the most obedient age. The children were brought from poor families who went through the Holocaust, or the exile. We had to feed them and to see to the cleaning of their scanty clothes. There were no pedagogic materials in the kindergarten. There weren't even blocks or dolls. One had to keep them busy all the time with drawing or a little plastic clay, to tell stories, to sing, to exercise with them or to dance. The principal belonged to the Communist Party and she would take the better food home and leave the kindergarten children the scraps.

I raised the children by myself, because Ya'acov worked from morning to night. If there were eggs I would give each a half. We mostly ate cereal. There were no problems with most of the children, but Ben did not like the cereal and would sit without eating. I did not allow them to leave the table until everyone was finished, because there was no other food. He would take a big spoonful, put it in his mouth and swallow and his tears fell into the plate.

We began to get packages from my brother who had lived in Palestine since 1933. Ben's parents immigrated to America after the Americans liberated them from the death camp. They corresponded with my brother and thus learned that we were alive and that Ben was living with us. They also began to send clothes for us and for the children. People from Kurshan, our town, who had immigrated to Africa a long time before the war got together and sent packages to all the survivors of the town, and this was a great help. We received packages from the UJA. They sent

heavy work boots and white shortening in three kilo cans. This had a strange odor but one could fry potatoes for the children. The children grew and when Bella, the child of our old age, was born I was already 35 and life was much easier.

When Ben was six he fell ill with meningitis which was then epidemic in Lithuania. I left the children with Oona and sat with him in the hospital. The treatment was hard. Every day they took him to draw liquids from his spinal cord. His screams were awful. They treated him with Soviet penicillin, which was almost worthless and he was already very weak. "Daddy I don't want to die." He said to Ya'acov when he visited. Ya'acov left and couldn't see where he was going. Suddenly someone asked me "What's with you?" This was a friend from work. When he heard of the terrible situation, he said that someone got a medicine from America. They went to that person and he gave them the medicine. The chief doctor said that this was penicillin in oil and suitable for the disease. So instead of an injection every three hours, Bena'le got an injection once a day and that saved his life.

Once Ben fell from a tree and broke his arm. Reuven had attacks like epilepsy every morning. We were very frightened. It turned out that he had worms and when they were ejected the attacks stopped. Haviva got scabies on her head. She had to be treated every evening. She received x-rays and her hair fell out. Eventually black, shiny curly hair grew back. We went through all the children's diseases and overcame all the hard times. Praise be to God.

The children studied in Russian schools, because we did not want them to study with the children of Lithuanians, the murderers of our families. There was no Jewish school,

neither in Yiddish nor in Hebrew, because the tyrant Stalin closed everything that was Jewish. The language of the kindergarten in which I worked was also changed to Russian. We started to learn Russian together with the children.

In 1957, when Ben was 14 and had finished 7th grade his parents, who lived in America, got an exit permit for him. Letters and tests and tears preceded this, because Ben did not want to leave us and it was hard for us to part with him. But I tried to talk him into it and explained that these were his parents and he would have a good life there. I accompanied him to Moscow, where he received all the necessary documents and I put him on the plane on the way to his parents. We were both very tense and nervous. We could hardly communicate. Before he got on the plane, he whispered in my ear, so others would not hear "Mother, don't cry. We'll meet again." Indeed we met again in 1972 when he came to visit us here in Israel with his wife and his sweet little two-year-old daughter. We have visited them three times since then and enjoyed the love and respect that we received from them.

Ben was born on June 4th in Ghetto Shavli and on June 4th 2000 exactly he became a grandfather to his first granddaughter.

16. A Meeting with a Friend

Those were the sad days after the Second World War, after the Holocaust of European Jewry.

Ya'acov, my husband, was at work out of town. I sat alone in the tiny room, that we had gotten with great difficulty, in the city of Shavli which was destroyed by the German and Russian bombardments. Melancholy thoughts ran through my head and pain pierced my soul. Pain over the terrible loss of my dear parents, of my beloved sister Batya and her husband David and the extended family on both Mother's and Father's side. Batya did not get to enjoy motherhood because the Nazi villains killed her near the huge pit in Jagar in Lithuania. This was the mass grave of 4500 Jews from all the province of Shavli and all the towns round about. The Lithuanians, our neighbors, joined in the killing with great delight.

It was late on an autumn evening and the wind beat against the windows. Suddenly I heard someone knocking on the shutters. I asked, "Who's there?" and a voice which seemed familiar said "Estherke, open the door." I opened the door and before me appeared a tall man with wide shoulders in a white fur coat, dressed as a Russian army officer. He was a handsome and impressive man. I knew him. It was **Av'ke Leiviash**, a friend from the Hebrew gymnasium, who was once from Rassein.

We studied in the same class. He sat in the first row and I in the row behind him. He was a shy narrow-shouldered boy, who blushed every time I turned to him. I was also friendly with **Sar'ke Foormanski (Sora'le)** from our class. From the first class trip we stuck together and became good friends. Sora'le was a lively and daring girl, who like

to talk and tell stories and also to ask questions. She was the only girl who played volleyball with the boys and she never lost a ball. I was a bit older than her, because I came from a village where we had not yet studied German and in the third class of the gymnasium in Rassein they already did. Therefore they put me in the second class of the gymnasium. Besides, I lost a year, because I went to first grade in primary school twice because of frequent throat infections. I remember how I went with Mother from Kurshan to the large city of Memel, which once belonged to the Germans. A renowned expert, an ear, nose and throat doctor whose name I have forgotten, worked there.

That was the first time that I had traveled in a train and that was a big event for me. Next to us in the train an elderly Jew sat and carried on a conversation with me. Mother was very proud of her ten-year-old who knows how to answer questions. I also remember the surgeon who used to sit on the edge of the bed and talk to me. He told Mother that she had a brave girl and I really wasn't afraid of the operation and enjoyed staying in the clean and beautiful hospital for the first time in my life.

I was a happy little girl who laughed at every little thing, sang and danced without a care in the world. I enjoyed being the youngest in the family, loved by all. The world seemed so beautiful to me. It was interesting to see the first grass spring from the earth in spring, to see the first of the wild flowers that later covered broad fields, to see the river near our house begin to flow after the snow melted and the torn blocs of ice that floated on the water. In the summer there was the first butterfly, the warm river in which one could wade, the thick forest. The whole family would assemble there in the summer to gather blueberries, raspberries and small wild strawberries with their maddening smell. In the forest there were also anthills. An

entire world from which one could learn how they work, how they try to carry on their tiny backs a heavy load to drag to their nest and hoard for the winter. In short, everything was full of interest and life was so tranquil and beautiful until the great disaster that fell on us, on the heads of our wonderful people.

And here the two of us are - Av'ke and I who remained alive and met in Lithuania which was soaked with the blood of our loved ones. Each had his sad and terrible and great story. I sat with Av'ke, embracing and talking and telling our stories. Every few minutes he would look at me and cry "*Esterke! Du lebt?*" "Esterke you are alive? he asked as if he did not believe his eyes. So we sat until dawn when we parted.

We met with Avka, his wife **Ruthka** and his sister **Mirka** in Israel. They immigrated illegally, were sent to Cyprus, arrived in Israel and settled in Kibbutz Lohamey Ha'Gettaot. Later they moved to Kiryat Haim, where Av'ke worked as a teacher of mathematics, beloved of the pupils until he retired. From time to time we have a gathering of the survivors from the town of Rassein at Sarah Foormanski's home in Bat-Yam.

17. The Yawning Pit

Everyone in Rassein knew **Micha'le Dvoretzki**. He was a mischievous boy who played tricks and would get beatings from his father and sometimes from those who suffered from his activities.

A boy like Micha'le does not sit quietly in a village when war starts. Indeed he fled and succeeded in crossing the border into the Soviet Union, while his family stayed in the village. When the Lithuanian Division gathered in 1941, Michael volunteered to fight against the Nazis. The officers were Lithuanians but 30% of the soldiers were Jewish boys from all over Lithuania who managed to flee from the Nazis. The Jewish soldiers were the bravest and most daring in the Division. They fought like lions and went to battle with the motto - to revenge the spilled blood of their families. Michael received rank and a citation for excellence.

When the Lithuanian Division, together with the Soviet army, liberated Lithuania, our brave men reached Shavli. They were glad to meet us, the handful of survivors, and wrapped us with love.

But many did not reach the treacherous homeland, where Jews had lived and flourished for 300 years. Many of the Lithuanians became the cruelest killers in Europe. In the famous battle near Oreyol my classmates **Moshe'le Bloch** and **Heneck Krom** fell. Some of the sons of our village also fell in the bloody battle. May their memory be blessed.

Among those who returned were **Michael** and **Moshe Ger**, as well as **Zalman Halperin** and **Boria Ziv**, both cousins

of my late husband, **Yehezkel Ziv**. They found no trace of their families. The villainous Lithuanians murdered all of them.

When the war ended on May 9th, 1945, Michael Dvoretzki and I met again in Kovna. Since then, every year we used to go, with some other survivors, to visit the mass grave in the town of Jagar, where our dear ones were killed. There is a large monument there on the grave of 4500 Jews, not only from Lithuania but also from neighboring Latvia.

That was a terrible slaughter, on the Day of Atonement in 1941. Women, children, infants, cripples and the elders of the villages died in it. The men had been killed in the first days after the arrival of the Germans.

Then, however, we did not know exactly where the grave was. We were told that it should be 2 or 3 kilometers from the town, in the grove. Michael and I rode there and stopped more or less where we thought the grave, the mass grave of our loved ones, should be.

We looked for Lithuanians in the surroundings, who could show us the place and tell us how it happened and what they saw. But most of them slipped away. They did not want to speak or to reveal the place. Only one woman, who seemed a God-fearing soul, took pity and went with us and showed us the place and said, "Here, they killed them here."

We approached and the horror was revealed. - a deep pit, full of murky water and mud. In this filthy pit human skulls and bones were scrambled together with shoes and rags of faded soiled clothes. We could not believe that there, in that yawning pit, were the bones of our dear and beloved ones, who should have continued their calm lives.

We stood there, both of us, shaken by the horror, frozen and shivering. Michael took a shovel from the good woman and covered the pit with earth. Then, very quietly with a breaking heart and a frozen face, he recited the prayer “God Full of Mercy”.

18. Pesach Haggadah on Purim

I grew up in a traditional Jewish home and I heard stories legends and songs from Mother and prayers from Father. On Simchat Torah Father would sing with the congregation in the synagogue... “And you distinguished us from all the nations and gave us the Torah of truth”. On Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) we would go with Mother to the prayer of “Kol Nidray” (all the vows) and at the end of the final prayer the congregation would thunder “Next year in Jerusalem!”

I absorbed all of this when I was a child. In our village, as in all the Lithuanian villages in which there were many Jews, there were branches of all the Zionist parties. Pioneers would come to the Hachsharah (study farm) on the outskirts of the village to learn agricultural work in order to immigrate to Palestine and set up Kibbutzim of farm workers. We would meet with these groups in order to hear lectures about the Land of Israel and the settlers. I still remember the songs of the Land of Israel which we sang. That land seemed to my imagination to be the most beautiful and just in the world, but far away and unobtainable. It seemed so distant, that only at night did I dream that I was in Israel meeting with my brother, Ya’acov Rol who had immigrated with a certificate in 1933.

When World War Two ended some of the youth, who had survived the cruel war and the terrible Holocaust, made the dream a reality and succeeded against all odds in reaching the desired for land. Some of those who tried to cross the border were caught and spent years in Soviet prisons.

But we, Ya'acov and I, had two small children, whom we had miraculously saved from the Nazis and we could not move. We stayed put and waited for a miracle. Perhaps the Soviet authorities would give in and allow the Jews to leave legally.

Indeed the miracle took place in 1970 before the Purim holiday. A large group of young Jews from the three Baltic countries, got together to organize a demonstration before the Soviet authorities in Moscow. They demanded that the Jews be allowed to leave the Soviet Union and immigrate to Israel. We heard the news, which spread by word of mouth, and a group of about 50 people traveled by train to Moscow. We were careful not to be noticed as a group so that word of the demonstration would not reach the authorities.

In Moscow we met with the organizers and agreed that the next morning all of us would go to the Ministry of the Interior to hold a hunger strike. On the eve of Purim we sat in the dark because they would not let us switch on a light. One of the organizers stood by the window and in the weak light which filtered in from the street read of the exodus from Egypt instead of the story of Esther. It seemed that he had a Haggadah in his hands. It was funny, but we felt a bit of holiday spirit anyway. Maybe he did it on purpose because leaving the Soviet Union in those days was comparable to the exodus from Egypt.

At first the Soviet officials didn't pay us any attention, but they also did not use force against us as was customary in the days of the tyrant Stalin.

After Stalin's death the Soviets began to get closer to the outside world. Some reporters from abroad came and met with "Refusniks" - Jews who had requested exit permits

and were refused them. They were without work and without any income. They were educated Jews from the Gulags. They had been imprisoned because of their Zionism or just because they were Jews, so that their expertise could be exploited without payment.

We sat in the Ministry of the Interior for three days. At night when the offices closed we would disperse and each of us sought a place to sleep. I had friends in Moscow. I had met them at a wonderful vacation spot, Palanga near the Baltic Sea. Vacationers from all over the Soviet Union used to come there. Between the dunes that were scattered along its length fine white sand dazzled the eyes. Near the shore there was a promenade, between wonderful pines like a forest, that led to a pier that jutted 300 meters into the sea.

Every evening we walked on this pier and watched the sunset. In Lithuania the evening are usually cool, especially near the sea. We wore sweaters so as not to catch cold from the evening breeze. It was there that we first met the **Edelstein** family - **Marec, Nina** and their son **Romic** who was then six. Our Bella was about the same age. This was a warm and pleasant family and they welcomed me very gladly. They had already heard about the strike and were pleased to hear of it first hand from one of the participants who meant to immigrate to Israel.

This was a scholarly family with a very Jewish spirit. Marec had an elderly father, **Solomon Ben Moshe**, an erudite man. Books of Judaica and Torah filled the rich library in his home. He had a large bible with etchings, pictures with explanations. Solomon Ben Moshe worked for ten years and created a Hebrew dictionary of 20,000

words. Jews would come to hear him speak of Judaism and of events in Israel. They called him “our Ben Gurion”.

Marec told him about the strike and he wanted to see someone who planned to go to Israel. We visited him in the afternoon. Before me I saw a man with young eyes, warm and dark - Jewish eyes! Mr. Solomon was interested in the strike and asked wise questions. I could hardly answer them all.

Marec was a pilot in the Soviet Union. He used to fly to the North Pole and he had amazing pictures from that time. I saw them when I visited them in New Givon in Jerusalem. They immigrated to Israel in the 1980s and we are friendly with that lovely family. Romic has two sons and he works in Tel Aviv as a computer engineer. Marec changed his profession and learned bookbinding at which he works. Nina raises the grandchildren and never forgets to call us on Purim to greet us and remind us of the strike in Moscow.

After the strike had lasted three days we were given a hearing. We sat in a large room. The officials moved around irritably. It seems that they didn't know exactly what to do with those Yids. (In the Soviet Union they called us Yebrai - Hebrews.)

In a neighboring room an official sat and called us in one by one. He tried to get us to talk and asked why we wanted to leave and tried to convince us to stay. We all said that we wanted to immigrate to Israel in order to join our families. Finally another official came and said, “All those who are here can go home and in a while you'll get an exit permit from the Soviet Union.” Romic, the twelve-year-old from the Edelstein family accompanied me to the railroad station. When we parted he gave me a 10 ruble

coin and said “When I come to Israel, return it to me” and so I did.

I came home and we waited for the documents. When they finally came we were ordered to leave the Soviet Union within two or three weeks. Nevertheless our joy was unbounded and we feverishly prepared for Aliyah to the Promised Land.

19. Aliyah and Absorption

Mrs. **Ella Shteinberg** was with me at the 1971 demonstration in Moscow. Her daughter **Batya** married our son Reuven and they had a daughter, **Dina**. They lived with Batya's parents and were considered one family. Thus they got permission to leave the Soviet Union together.

We all went by train through Tschop on the Ukrainian-Hungarian border. When we got off the train a representative of the UJA met us. We felt that we were safe, that we were looked after and were in good hands. From there we continued to Austria. We spent two days in Shanau Castle in the suburbs of the city. In the evening we were put on an El-Al plane. Can you imagine what a wonderful feeling we had? The entire crew was Israeli: the pilot, the captain, the elegant and courteous stewardesses. Everything was new, exciting and thrilling. When the lights of Tel Aviv twinkled in the darkness under the wings of the plane, we burst into song "We bring to you peace..."

My dear brother, Ya'acov Rol, with his whole family was waiting at the Lydda airport, to meet his little sister Estherel, whom he had left in Lithuania in 1933 when he immigrated as a pioneer. My brother had alerted townsmen from Kushan, and friends and neighbors, and family members my late husband Yehezkel Ziv and invited them all to celebrate at his home in Ramat Gan, 7 Marganit St. This was a smallish single-family house with a lovely well-cared for garden. The smell of jasmine in the month of May greeted us.

We celebrated all night. At dawn the guests left. Then we talked all day and the excitement did not lessen. We did

not feel tired or deprived of sleep. How is it possible to close the gap of a whole lifetime, when it seems as if we are dreaming.

In the evening my brother called Bena'le, who grew up with us in Kovna until the age of 14 and now lives in the United States with his family, his wife, a daughter, two sons and a granddaughter and grandson.

Ben was born in Ghetto Shavli, to Rivka and Zevulon Gotz, and when he was a three-month-old baby his uncle Ya'acov Ton (my second husband) took him out of the ghetto and gave him to a Lithuanian woman. His parents were exiled to the Stuthof death camp with all the residents of the ghetto. When they were miraculously saved and liberated by the American army they immigrated to the United States and set up a new home there. When Ben-Tzion was two years old, the Lithuanian woman gave him to us and so he grew up with my daughter Haviva, who was saved from the "Children's *Action*" in Ghetto Shavli, and with our son Reuven and our daughter Bella. When the Soviet authorities permitted Ben to leave the Soviet Union, he reached his biological family. In all the years of our separation, from 1957 until 1971 we did not hear his voice. It was forbidden to call abroad from the Soviet Union. So on our first day in Israel, we again heard the voice of our lost child. The excitement was so great that we could hardly speak. His voice trembled and our voices trembled. A year later he visited us with his wife Bernice and his two-year-old daughter Debbie. Ya'acov and I stayed in their home three times for two months each. He also came with Bernice for the Bar Mitzvah of Nimrod our grandson, the son of my daughter Bella. Few years later he also came for the Bar Mitzvah of David, our first great grandchild, the son of my daughter Haviva.

The first days in Israel we spent with my brother, his wife **Rachel** and his daughter **Naomi**, her husband **Uori** and daughter **Dana**. Family members arrived constantly to meet us and share our joy.

Afterwards the Jewish Agency sent us to Dimona, in the south of the country for intensive study of the Hebrew language. Our son Reuven and his wife were students and stopped their studies when they left Lithuania order to immigrate to Israel. Our daughter Bella also stopped her music studies.

We studied Hebrew every day with a soldier-teacher and her lessons made the adjustment pleasant. Ya'acov and I had no trouble with the language because we were graduates of Hebrew schools in Lithuania, but our son and daughter didn't even know the Hebrew letters. Reuven studied in the Ulpan and worked at building roads. He began to speak Hebrew really quickly but Bella began to speak only when she knew the rules of grammar well and had all the words needed for self-expression.

Ya'acov was hired as a mechanic by Kitan, Dimona (a textile manufacturer). They quickly recognized his expertise and offered him an apartment so that he would not leave the city. He was very happy with his work but there was a problem with our daughter Bella. She had studied violin in Lithuania from the age of six, in a school of the arts for gifted children. She wanted to continue her studies in a similar school that was in Tel Aviv. Bella was sixteen. I used to encourage her to go out and meet people her own age who used to meet in the evenings to sing and dance. She refused and didn't want to hear about anything except her playing. I tried to convince her to leave the violin and study a different profession because of

difficulties that she had - pains in her right hand. She found an excuse to refuse everything that I suggested. In short, she wanted only the violin. We decided, therefore, to leave Dimona and Ya'acov's work and settle in the Tel Aviv area.

Reuven and his young family settled in Beersheva. Many of the young immigrants lived there. Apartments were cheaper there than in the Center and it was also easier to find work. He began to work in Beersheva in the workshop of Solel Boneh (the largest building concern). He contributed to the founding of the Negev industries. He also worked in a ceramics factory in Yerucham and during that time they lived there.

During the Yom Kippur War Reuven joined the army and so underwent his first baptism of fire in war-torn Israel. At first he was very optimistic and glad to serve the old-new Motherland. But very soon the optimism became anxiety. That war was too harsh and took too many sacrifices.

After the war he worked in phosphates in the Negev and reached a high administrative level. He was sent by the industry to continue academic studies that he had not finished in Lithuania. Family circumstances made this impossible and 15 years ago the family moved to Tel Aviv.

Reuven has three wonderful daughters each a personality in her own right. **Dina**, the eldest, who came to Israel at the age of two has completed education in graphics. She married a wonderful boy, **Shlomi**, a surgeon dentist. They are a handsome couple and very much in love. They have a sweet daughter, **Shaya**.

The second daughter, **Ora**, is pretty and successful and is studying English literature. **Arina**, is also talented and studies in Wingate (a distinguished school for athletics).

All of them served in the army, work and study and are pretty and even taller than their father, who is a tall man. He is much loved by his daughters and friends. He is optimistic, thoughtful, sensitive and devoted to his family and parents.

After we left the Ulpan in Dimona, we settled in Holon, in Kiryat Sharett, which had just begun to be built especially for the new immigrants who began to throng to Israel. The whole neighborhood had a few paved roads and the rest was dunes, sand and more sand. The **Engeltchin** family, **Naomi** nee Ziv and **Yasha** who went through the horrors of the war already lived in Holon then. They recommended the city, which they loved, and thus we decided to stay there. They received us warmly, like family, invited us and helped us, as new immigrants, in any way they could.

When I completed all the Alia related arrangements and took care for the apartment, I started to nurse a very dear person, Dr. Heselzon, a family member and a man of honor. He died of Parkinson disease and I began working for Bitooch-Leoumi (Israeli social security) in Jaffa with the elderly people department until my retirement.

Last but not least is Bella. Bella was accepted at the "Talma Yelin" school (a school of music and arts) because of her musical talents. But it was not easy for her. It was difficult for her to learn all the subjects in Hebrew and to fit into the Israeli society, coming as she did to the 11th grade. In due course she overcame her difficulties like all the immigrant students.

At the same time she studied violin with the famous musician **Professor Shevelov**. He advised Bella to join a Feldenkriez group, which helped her to get over the pains in the right hand. Bella went through a difficult period.

Sometimes she would return from a violin lesson in high spirits “Mama, I had a wonderful lesson! I really enjoyed it...” and sometimes she would come home and cry. The teacher did not instruct but said that she must find solutions on her own. She played very well, but missed the technical instruction that she had had since her childhood in Lithuania.

When she graduated, she was accepted into the Academy of Music in Ramat-Gan, where she continued to study with Shevelov. She joined the workshops that he conducted in the summer in the Writer’s House in Zichron-Ya’acov. She also participated in a tour with the chamber music orchestra of the Academy in Germany, Holland and on campuses in the United States.

In her second year at the Academy Bella reached a bold decision. She left Professor Shevelov and began to study with a promising young teacher, Mr. **Yair Kless**. The new teacher saw her professional problems and understood them and within a relatively short time gave her what she needed. She used to practice for hours. She worked on scales and etudes and got impressive results, which were crowned in a most successful final exam and the appreciation of the teaching staff.

Bella is a born artist. She has perseverance and is also gifted with pedagogical talent. When she graduated from the Academy she was accepted by the Beersheva chamber orchestra, under the direction of **Mendi Rodan**. She played with them for two seasons. At one of the concerts she met her future husband, **Aharon**, who came to hear the music. Aharon is a physicist by profession. He is a graduate of the Technion in Haifa in mechanical engineering and has a Master’s degree.

When they married, they went as a young couple to Carmiel and since then Bella has been a violin teacher in the Carmiel Conservatory. She is successful at her job and is raising a new generation of successful young violinists, soloists and orchestra players. She does this through devoted work, investing unlimited hours of caring. One of her pupils is **Yishai Ratz**, who studied with her for seven years, was accepted at the Talma Yelin school and successfully graduated. He received a scholarship from the Sharett America-Israel Fund for young artists. He is a graduate of Tel-Aviv academy music and earned his second degree from the Jerusalem academy of music as a student of **Hagai Shaham**. He participated in several international workshops and toured abroad. Today he plays with the Raanana symphony orchestra.

Mika Karni studied with Bella for five years. She acquired the basis of her musical training in violin. She played in a violin trio under Bella's guidance. In the 1980s she joined a delegation from Carmiel to represent Israel in Berlin and Metz. Mika Karni is a singer and a famous Israeli musician.

Bella's youngest pupil was **Kobi Malkin**, who began to take lessons at the age of four and a half. At the age of nine Kobi studied in the international workshop of the famous violinist, Pinchas Zuckerman, and in 1991 won the competition for young violinists in Haifa. He also appeared with the orchestra as a soloist. In 2001, Kobi was chosen to represent Israel in the pianist Daniel Barenboim's international orchestra in Chicago. In September Kobi was again invited to appear as a soloist with the Haifa Symphony.

Bella and Aharon have three children. **Nimrod**, the oldest, graduated from high school in Carmiel and is serving in the army. **Anat** is seventeen, a senior in Carmiel high school and active in the Work and Study Youth Movement, and **Tamar** is twelve. Each one is a marvelous child popular, loving and well liked by their friends. Aharon's work took the family to the United States twice, each time for a year and this contributed greatly to the children's development.

We are proud of our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We love and enjoy them and pray for peace.

In 1991, after we had been in Israel for 20 years, we received a present that we had dreamed of for years. Our Holocaust survivor, **Haviva'le**, came to Israel with her family. Haviva was married in 1964. She is a certified midwife and works as a nurse. She has a son, **Raphael**, and a daughter **Einesa**. She also has four grandchildren (and I four great-grandchildren) - **David, Chen, Chai** and **Orel**, all living in Israel, thank God... The first to arrive was Einsa in 1989. A year later she married **Asher Levi** and they have two adorable children. Two years later Haviva came with her husband **Leonid (Lonia)**. After them in 1991, her son **Raphael (Rafik)** came with his wife **Esther** and their two children. The oldest David has already celebrated his Bar Mitzvah.

Real life is stranger than the imagination can conceive and if so, peace must come!

20. The Righteous Gentiles

There are terrible days when we pray to the Creator and ask for his pity. It does happen that the Lord hears and miracles happen. One of the great miracles is the fact that our people rose from the ruins, from the killing and devastation. Despite the fact that the nations of the world united against us, we again became a people and even achieved independence in our tiny nation.

We went through horrifying years in the time of the Nazis, may their name be destroyed. To each of us, who survived those years, a private miracle happened. Wonderful people, who despite the dangers they faced, came to the aid of the miserable and oppressed, in those years of suffering and due to them we survived. They are called “The Righteous Gentiles” and there are those who won the right to bear this honorable title officially.

One of them is **Vladas Drupas**, who made it possible for me to take my three-year-old daughter out of Ghetto Shavli, after the “Children’s *Action*” in which 800 children died and with them the aged of the ghetto.

Vladas was brought up by his uncle in Shavli and got to know the Jewish community through his uncle’s connections. This uncle made his house into a work place for the Jews of the local ghetto. It was a source of food and other necessities and above all a place for saving Jews. Vladas was influenced by the courageous spirit of his uncle, who took an active part in helping and saving Jews, often at the risk of his life. He arranged communication between family members who were separated, set up secret meeting between mothers and their children, got food and

clothing and other things, and prepared false documents for children and adults. With their help they found refuge and survived. All of this was done without any hope of a reward.

There were also those who helped and did not receive this title.

Among them Mr. **Matuzevicius Antanas**, who has since died, his sister **Kilishauskinie** and his daughter **Antamina Briliuvene**, who lived in Kovna, Lithuania. Because of them Haviva and I remained alive.

Because of **Urbilieni** and her daughter **Helia**, I was able to save Yitzhak Krom, the six-year-old son of my sister-in-law Pera'le Ziv-Krom from Ghetto Shavli.

Due to the head priest of the Shavli area the honorable Mr. **Lapis** some Jewish women and children were saved in monasteries. He provided me and Haviva with birth certificates. May his memory be blessed.

May all their memories be blessed.

21. Afterword

Birthdays

Even in the difficult days after the war, we would celebrate the children's birthdays.

Now we celebrate for all - the great-grandchildren, the grandchildren and their parents (my children) and for the grandfathers and grandmothers.

For my 80th birthday my children prepared a wonderful surprise. They invited the whole family from both sides and good friends. Then I danced with granddaughters, "the dancers", in great enjoyment.

Now, three years later, I have less desire to dance, but this does not lessen the happiness and joy that my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren bring me. Suddenly the house is filled with a young spirit, with happiness and love. To see the love in the innocent, somewhat shy eyes of the great-grandsons and daughters, as they give their great grandmother the bouquet of flowers and the paintings with their childish greetings and a big hug, is worth all the goods of the world.

At that moment one forgets the wrenches, the hardships and the difficulties that life brought us for so many years. Together Ya'acov and I overcame and measured up to them. We reached our great age and all that must be said is "Blessed is He who kept us alive".

Together we raised four children: Haviva, Ben-Tzion, Reuven and Bella.

Haviva and her husband Leonid have a son named Raphael, married to Esther and they have a son named David and a daughter named Chen. Their daughter Inesa is married to Asher and has two children, Chai and Orel.

Ben-Tzion and his wife Bernice have three children: Devorah and her husband Lance and their daughter Chloe; Yehoshua and his wife New and their son Natan and David.

Reuven has four daughters and his wife Anat: Dina married to Shlomi and their daughter Shaya, Ora and Arina students and the youngest Rachel.

Bella and her husband Aharon have three children: Nimrod, doing his military service, Anat who graduated from high school in a music program and Tamar.

**To all those who are dear to me and
whom I love I dedicate this book.**

With Grateful Thanks