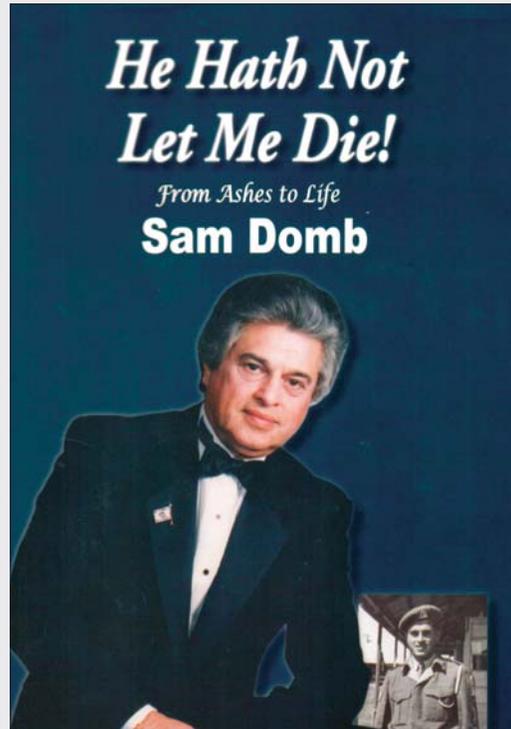


He Hath Not Let Me Die

From Ashes to Life

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He Hath Not Let Me Die



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Chapter 10
Part 1

From Arkhangelsk to Kutaisi

"Who knows the tears that have yet to be shed, the storms that have yet to strike?"
"Mishut ba-Merhakim" (Back from the Distance)

H.N. Bialik

Our stay in Arkhangelsk was, as mentioned, not easy. I varied the daily routine by means of all sorts of activities with my sisters and other boys whom I met. I have already described Ita's role, but I must reiterate and emphasize that in our long stay in this god-forsaken location, she truly outdid herself and inspired admiration. She continued to be both mother and sister to us, and none of us questioned her position. She took us under

her wing and, in this freezing cold, showered us with her love and warmth.

Throughout the time we lived here, the trains never ceased arriving, bringing with them a stream of refugees, with news and updates. From them we heard about the concentration camps and the mass murders carried out by the Nazis. We had known about the atrocities and had even witnessed

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some ourselves, but not one of us could have guessed the extent of the slaughter in these camps. Later we learned that in Treblinka itself, the Nazis had cremated 900,000 Jews!

The human mind cannot fathom such numbers. Despite the change on the battlefield in winter 1942, which signaled the end of Germany's victories and rapid advance, the Nazi extermination machinery continued to operate at full steam in the occupied areas, as we later heard.

At a certain stage of the war, the Germans were fighting against three great powers that had consolidated their civilian and military resources—Russia, Great Britain and the United States. Field Marshal Montgomery's forces eventually crushed Rommel and his army in the Battle of El Alamein. The Russians revived and initiated counterattacks that eroded the strength of the German military. Having heard nothing from Father, we did not know where he was stationed and on which front he was fighting. All we knew was that he had been conscripted in Minsk. We were very worried about him.

Whenever I asked about him, Ita would reassure me, saying that we would certainly meet him after the war was over. Here in the intolerable cold, however, no end to the war was in sight, as evidenced by the ceaseless arrival of refugees and the horrifying news they brought.

It is not clear to me exactly how long the duration of our stay in Arkhangelsk was, but I am positive that it spanned many months—more than a year, perhaps even two. It was an unforgettable period.

I remember many events and details, but not their exact dates. My account here is based on my best attempt at recollection and on stories I heard, primarily from my sister Ita, of blessed memory.

Once it became impossible for the camp to take in additional refugees, it was decided to release groups and individuals who were only marginally productive, such as families with children, the elderly and others. One day, the officer in charge came into our barracks and informed us that we were leaving. He turned to Ita and said: "You must report with



your belongings tomorrow morning. You will be transferred to a safe area in east Russia. There is nothing to fear, as your destination is far from the battle zones and you will be out of danger there."

The officer then turned to a number of others in our barracks with the same information. Ita asked: "Where exactly are they taking us?"

The officer hesitated. After a short pause, he responded: "To be honest, I'm not really sure. But it was decided to send you to a safe place, with more suitable conditions. The train leaves tomorrow morning, and you are to report to the platform at 8 am."

He left. The other families who were told to leave gathered around us, and one frightened-looking woman grumbled: "The Russians are sick of us. They're going to abandon us far from the camp, where we'll freeze to death!"

"Nonsense," said a French prisoner to put her at ease. "The Russians are tough, but they aren't cruel like the Germans. I think they just want to make things easier for themselves and for us."

We had long been acquainted with this Frenchman, ever since the initial days of our arrival in Arkhangelsk, when he was already living in our barracks. Noticing that we were alone and unaccompanied by adults, he had offered his help to Ita. Every day, upon returning from work, he asked how we were; and on days when not required to work, he was available for conversation and assistance. Topics

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of discussion included our life in the camp, the war and our future. Many people enjoyed conversing with him and a circle of listeners formed wherever he stopped to talk. A pleasant, wise and learned man, knowledgeable in many fields, he spoke gently and never argued with others. He always had the upper hand in the occasional disagreements that transpired; but he never insulted or harmed his listeners.

On this occasion, however, his words failed to placate the frightened woman and she burst out crying.

I was unable to sleep that whole night. Thoughts raced through my head and the woman's words echoed in my ears: "They're going to abandon us—we'll freeze to death."

I recalled the night we had gotten lost in the forest, the freezing cold and the terrifying bear attack. I preferred to dwell on the Frenchman's calming voice: "Nonsense—they just want to make things easier for themselves and for us."

Reading my thoughts, Ita approached my bed and said: "It's important that you try to sleep. I agree with the Frenchman, I also think they have good intentions. We're of no use here, and who knows, perhaps they'll take us to a place near Father."

Many families could be seen packing their belongings in the early morning. The Frenchman, also released by the Russians, offered to help us pack. Ita was delighted and, together, they folded the blankets and packed our things. Experienced by now and knowing that the trip could take days, Ita made sure that we dressed appropriately.

The platform was bustling with people by the time we arrived. The Frenchman carried some of the bundles and tried to stay near us at all times. Soldiers maintained order and organized us in groups. The Frenchman insisted upon being in with us.

The train arrived, a freight train with no seats. Ita grabbed a corner near the door where we placed our possessions and sat down with the Frenchman, who had boarded with us. Behind the passengers' blank expressions lay the unanswered question weighing on all of our minds: "Where are they taking us?" Here we heard from one of the Russian soldiers that military headquarters had decided to evacuate the camp to make

room for German prisoners-of-war, captured in battle.

The train began to move and left the camp gates. The freight cars proved very uncomfortable, with dozens of people crowded inside each one. The Frenchman calmed us and told Ita not to worry; from now on, he would watch over us and help as much as he could.



After several hours' journey, the train stopped in the center of a town that looked populated, where we received a little food. At the station where we had stopped, we saw the Frenchman talking with one of the officers and with someone in civilian garb. After a short break, the train proceeded.

"Indeed, we are going south. I spoke with the officer, who told me that they plan to bring us to the Caucasus," said the Frenchman, offering Ita some of the food he had received.

Ita thanked him and asked: "Where is the Caucasus? What country is it in?"

"It's a mountain chain in southeast Russia, in an area famous for its oil wells. Most of the mountain chain is in a state called Georgia, east of the Black Sea," answered the Frenchman, impressing his listeners with his expertise.

"I hope the Germans haven't reached there," said Ita.

"I don't think so. From what I understand, the Russians have succeeded in repelling the German attacks on most of the fronts. Rumor has it that the German situation on the Leningrad front is terrible and supplies are not reaching the soldiers," explained the Frenchman, winking at me encouragingly.

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“How far is it to the Caucasus?” someone asked.

“If I’m not mistaken, about 1,900 miles. A great distance, even if we don’t have to detour around war obstacles on the way,” responded the learned fellow, precisely as if he had a map in front of him.

forests to starve and freeze to death. I told you! I told you!” wailed the older woman, who had scared us from the beginning.

Trying to restore calm, the Frenchman declared: “I’ll clarify the situation as soon as they let us open the doors. I suggest that we don’t rush to draw conclusions.”



The Caucasus Mountains

“What’s happening in Moscow? Have the Russians managed to push back the Germans?” inquired one of the travelers.

“The Russians are fighting heroically there and the Germans have failed to penetrate the city. The Russian at the station told me that the Germans are suffering heavy losses, but there have also been many Russian casualties in the attacks,” replied the Frenchman.

The train continued on its way. Once again, the same scenery: endless forests, boundless spaces. After hours of traveling in the middle of nowhere, the train slowed and stopped. We were shocked. What was the meaning of this? Nothing could be seen all around except forests and desolation.

“What happened?” asked a traveler.

“Why did the train stop here?” asked another.

“I told you, the Russians decided to get rid of us! They are about to abandon us in the

I believed the Frenchman. For some reason, his words made sense to me. His approach toward us and his pleasant manner instilled confidence, and we trusted him implicitly. He always spoke logically and demonstrated great knowledge about almost everything.

After long moments of fear, the doors opened and soldiers boarded to explain that the stop would be brief. The officer in charge added:

“We have reached a section where the tracks have been destroyed by German bombing. Luckily, it is a short section. Hundreds of workers who arrived before us are now repairing the track and I hope it will be fixed quickly.”

A sigh of relief was heard from everyone in the car. One traveler asked: “How long do you think it will take?”

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"I don't know, but the work has been going on for several days and is progressing rapidly. It could take a few days, perhaps less. We will let you know when we are updated. In the meantime, you can get out and freshen up a bit near the train. You must wait for an announcement from us."

The officer and soldiers moved on to the next car and we breathed a sigh of relief. We alighted from the car. The train looked completely out of place here. The Frenchman helped Ita out, and, as they set off in the direction of the engine, Ita turned to us and said: "I want you to stay here and guard our possessions. Don't go far from our car. I'm going with the Frenchman to clarify something and I'll be back very soon."

After a short while they returned with

Frenchman explained further: "We had best be ready for a wait of a day or two. The worker told me that the damage isn't that great and there remain only about 300 feet to fix. They've been working for several days."

Toward evening, Russian soldiers visited all the groups of refugees in the cars and distributed horse meat and bread. The Frenchman joined us and helped Ita prepare the "feast." He reminded us again that he had decided to help us as much as we needed during this period and asked that we not be afraid of him.

For the first time, our friend began to talk about himself. It turned out that he had been a medical student who, shortly before the end of his degree, had been arrested by the Russians on suspicion of spying and exiled



news, and people crowded around them to hear the update. Leaning on the car, the Frenchman related: "The officer spoke the truth—the Germans did, indeed, bomb the track several days ago, and we just saw workers busy repairing it.

One of them told us that the work is almost done. Within a day or two at the most, our train can resume traveling. The officer said that they'll distribute food in the evening."

The Frenchman finished speaking and everyone near him continued talking among themselves, each with his own opinion about when the repair job would be finished. The

with others to the Arkhangelsk labor camp. Ita, in turn, related all our suffering since being expelled from Pultusk: Mother's murder, Father's conscription in Minsk and all our wanderings. Her words moved him and with tears in his eyes, he reiterated his promise: "I will take care of you from now on, until we reach a safe place."

He put his hand firmly into mine. □

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