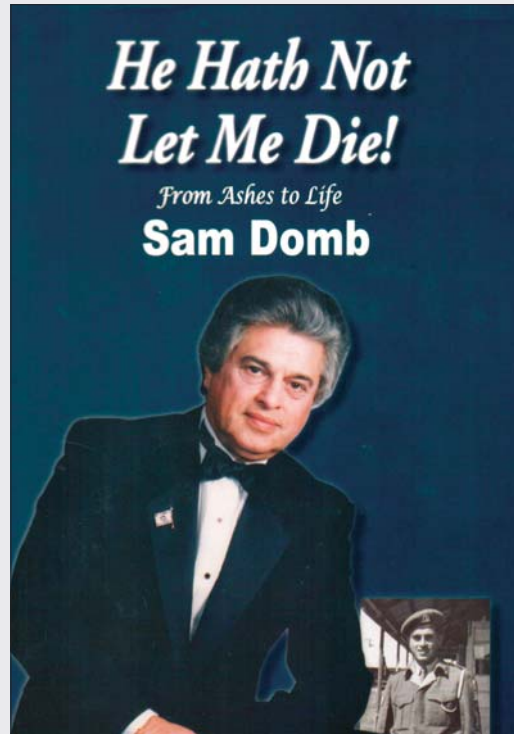


He Hath Not Let Me Die

From Ashes to Life

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He Hath Not Let Me Die



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Researched and Written By:
Gershon Stav

Hebrew Language/Text Editor:
Yehudit Shwartz

Translated Into English By:
Nachama Kanner

English Editor:
Yael Unterman

Chapter 8

Minsk — Parting from Father

"Take me under your wing and be unto me mother and sister."

H.N. Bialik

None of us knew that the attack on June 22, 1941 was the result of a plan meticulously prepared by the Germans in utmost secrecy and the start of the Nazis' Operation Barbarossa. The German attack took the Red Army and the Soviet authorities by surprise, almost totally obliterating the Russian air force in a lightning strike. Many planes

were destroyed on the ground. Entire corps of the Red Army were surrounded and wiped out, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers fell into German captivity. Many Jews who had managed to escape eastward at the beginning of the war, and had found haven under the protection of the Red Army, were

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trapped in the line of German tanks rolling toward the east. As a result, they found themselves under German occupation again.

About three million Wehrmacht (German armed forces from 1935-1945) soldiers and their allies took part in this battle. They were grouped into 190 divisions and opened attack along a 2,900 kilometer (1,800 mile) border. Among them were SS forces whose fanatical devotion to Nazi ideology was manifested in the mass slaughter of captives and civilians, particularly Jews.

We walked a very long way eastward, as quickly as possible and left Bialystok just in time. German forces entered and occupied the city on June 27th, which gave us a chance to flee deep into Russian territory. At some point, we succeeded in getting a ride in a Russian military vehicle. As Father had hoped, a driver he knew from his work in the military gas station in Bialystok stopped his vehicle and that night drove us to Minsk.

Despite being heavily hit by the German air force, Minsk was bustling with people. Many refugees gathered on its streets and Russian soldiers could be seen stopping civilians and drafting them into the army. As early as April, government authorities had announced a mandatory draft of men into the Red Army. Father had so far managed to escape it somehow, but now, at the height of war, with the enemy on the doorstep, it did not seem possible to avoid the call-up. And indeed, eventually the Russian soldiers stopped us too.

Father was taken from us with his brother, my uncle Shalom Domb, and both were immediately drafted into the Russian army. All Father's attempts to explain to the military that his children would be abandoned if he went into the army proved useless. He had no choice but to ask a female acquaintance from Pultusk whom he had met in Minsk to look after us. Father also succeeded in extracting a promise from the Russian officer who had inducted him that a military vehicle would take us to the east, far from the battle zone.

We got into the vehicle and, tears streaming, parted from Father while he waved goodbye until he disappeared from sight. Father was drafted and we children were placed in the trustworthy hands of my 15 year old sister,

Ita. The vehicle traveled eastward, but we had no idea of its destination. Fear gripped us. We did not know where Father had been taken, but we noticed that all the new recruits were driven out of the city on military vehicles, also eastward.

Later we realized that Father's determination to leave Bialystok immediately saved our lives the first time, while his insistence upon our traveling east, far from Minsk, in an army vehicle saved our lives a second time, both in the same week.

It transpired that, the day after Bialystok was occupied by the Germans, 3,000 Jews were herded into the central synagogue. The Nazis set fire to this holy site, and all inside were burned alive. Minsk was conquered on June 28th and German soldiers who had been parachuted east of the city succeeded

"Father was taken from us with his brother, my uncle Shalom Domb, and both were immediately drafted into the Russian army."

in intercepting thousands of Jewish refugees, forcing them to retrace their steps westward. To our relief, by then we were very far from Minsk, deep in Russian territory. Four children with no mother and no father, on their own, weak and starving, at the height of a world war. After hours of travel, we reached a town with a heavy concentration of armed forces. It was early morning. The driver stopped and told us to get off, as we had arrived at our destination.

Jewish refugees had gathered in the center of town. Noticing us, four unaccompanied children, getting out of the military vehicle, a Russian officer took pity on us, and handed us half a loaf of bread. We wandered around town, weighed down by our bundles and with only a little food in our possession.

Many military vehicles drove by on the main street. This town had also been bombed from the air, and the further into the city we walked, the more overpowering the unbearable odor became. Even the winds were unable to erase the stench of death, the hor-

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rible smell of both explosives and burned human flesh. Ita spotted a line of refugees making its way out of town and, with her excellent instincts, decided to join them. She went to speak with them and returned after a few minutes.

"Where are we going?" Sara asked Ita.

"I wish I knew. Like us, they also came here after escaping the German bombings. They say the Germans are advancing quickly and suggested continuing eastward in the direction of the retreating Russian army. Father would also do the same. He said we should follow the Russian soldiers because they are the only ones who can protect us. Please stay near me so that we can be together the whole time. No one should get lost and we must not waste time," said Ita firmly, taking charge.

So much responsibility was placed on this 15 year old girl's shoulders! At those moments, she showed her true greatness. Ita was both mother and father to us, and our sister-leader. Like a seasoned soldier, she displayed courage, organizational skills, responsible thinking, adaptability and the survivor's instinct. We obeyed her every instruction. She distributed the bundles among us and we joined the line of refugees leaving town.

Here begins a journey of wandering and survival that is difficult to describe. This was a journey that stretched for four years over thousands of long kilometers. If not for Ita's leadership, wisdom and sense of responsibility, it is doubtful that we would have survived. Time had no meaning for us. We were fated to wander, but we did not know to where. All we knew was that the direction had to be eastward, because the predators waited in ambush in the west. They were advancing toward us like a hurricane, destroying all that stood in their way, leaving destruction, ruin and mountains of dead in their wake. Whoever escaped early enough and found any sort of hiding place was saved; whoever did not, found their death.

As we were walking, German warplanes flew overhead in our direction. The sounds of explosions reverberated from all sides and wherever we looked, we saw billowing smoke. Along the route were the remains of burnt military vehicles and Russian tanks in

flames. Corpses and body parts were scattered around. During one segment of our walk, we passed a genuine battlefield—a field full of dismembered bodies spread over a large area. A cloud of black crows swooped down on the corpses, covering everything.

We walked many kilometers. Those whose strength gave way were abandoned to their fate. We did not know where we were, only that we were in Russian territory. Toward evening we reached a small village near a forest, tired, starving and weak.

"I think this place looks safe for resting and sleeping. I see that people are preparing to stop here," said Ita in her soothing voice, turning onto a side road that led to the nearby forest.

**"Ita was both mother and father to us,
and our sister-leader."**

Somewhere in the forest, together with a few other Jews, Ita spread out a blanket, thus marking the territory of the Domb refugees for the night. We placed our belongings near us and in her usual manner, Ita gave each of us a portion of bread. She repeated Father's famous sentence: "Chew slowly and swallow."

After we stretched out on the blanket, Ita covered us and we fell asleep. The exhaustion, starvation, the hardships of the road and the difficult experiences of the last few days took their toll. We slept many hours, and it was already daylight when we opened our eyes. I lay on my back, staring at the treetops above, frightened and agitated from my nightmares. When I calmed down a bit, the terrors of the recent days began to penetrate my consciousness. Reality mingled with dream, and became almost as one.

Ita re-packed our belongings for easier carrying. She sat down next to us, a pitcher of water and cup of milk in hand, and gave us each a portion, saying: "While you were sleeping, I dropped by one of the farmers in the village, who was kind enough to give me a cup of milk, a potato and a bit of bread. We will leave after we've eaten. The farmer told me that the Red Army forces are fighting very

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heroically, and in some places are succeeding in stopping the Germans and causing them great losses. I hope this is the case; perhaps it will bring the war closer to its end.”

I do not know how long we wandered, but I can certainly say that it was many months. I cannot name all the places we passed through, but I can safely say that we traversed dozens of towns, villages and cities. We also passed through countless forests and crossed rivers and streams. At times we would spend only one night in one location, while at others we would remain for several weeks. The roads were dangerous and we tried to stay close to the Red Army forces. Frequently we spotted German military vehicles traveling on the roads. At such times, we were careful to hide until they passed, and tried to choose a different walking route.

We had no map and only knew that we had to go as far eastward as possible. This was “the code.” In one of the forests in which we hid, other Jews were hiding, as usual, and they warned us of sudden inspections by Nazi units. We also had to watch out for the Gestapo who swarmed throughout the area. It seems that local informers would notify them of Jewish refugees in the forest. In such instances, the Nazis would systematically encircle the forest, cutting off any possible escape route and trapping the Jews who were hiding. Whoever tried to flee was shot and killed on the spot. It was impossible to avoid the chain of beasts in human form who surrounded those hiding in the woods.

Early one morning before dawn, after spending several days in a forest, we heard the din of a large number of cars approaching our hiding place. Still half asleep, we found ourselves blocked on all sides by SS soldiers. They commanded us to make our way out to the main forest path. Great panic ensued. The hundreds hiding out there included many children, women and elderly, as well as handicapped people who were carried on their relatives’ shoulders. It was a horrifying scene. Ita hastily gathered us together and encouraged us to blend in among the hundreds of people on the path.

Volleys of machine-gun fire in the forest were accompanied by bloodcurdling human screams. My heart pounded. Ita hugged us

all, placing me in the center. The roars of the Gestapo soldiers were terrifying. They ordered us to start walking in the direction of a road that led to a town visible in the distance. German military vehicles rode at the head of the long line of marchers, and two jeeps in the rear forced the stragglers to catch up to the group. We marched thus for several hours.

“I do not know how long we wandered, but I can certainly say that it was many months.”

Suddenly, like saviors, Russian fighter planes burst from the sky. They had apparently tracked the convoy and now rained heavy fire on the German forces at the head of the line. Great pandemonium ensued. We threw ourselves down on the ground. Some of the Germans were killed on the spot; others began to flee. We remained in the area for a while, shocked at what had transpired. The sight of the dismembered bodies of the SS soldiers scattered on the smoking vehicles was revolting. From afar we saw a line of Russian soldiers approaching. They provided us with a little food and escorted us to a place of safety.

Most of the time, we marched on foot. To the best of my recollection, we stopped once in a town where Russian soldiers sent us to the local train station, to board a train. After traveling for several hours, we were let off to continue our wanderings. They had removed us from the battle zone, but we could still clearly hear the roar of artillery fire.

Part of the time, we rode on horse-drawn wagons we encountered along the way. Once, the Russian soldiers directed us to a dirt path and instructed us to continue on it. The path led to a roaring, impassable river. Russian military vessels transported us to the other bank, from where we continued to nowhere. We always walked in the direction indicated by the soldiers, usually joining the wave of refugees marching in that same direction.

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One day, we reached a forest after having walked for almost 24 hours. Nearby was a small agricultural village. Ita always preferred sleeping in forests, near small villages. She felt that there was a greater chance of finding someone who would agree to give us shelter or a bit of food. From what I recall, she was usually correct.

Accordingly, we prepared to sleep along with other people who were with us. Suddenly, about 10 Jewish boys, aged 10 to 13, burst forth from the forest and asked to join us. We had no idea how they had gotten there or how they had survived. From afar, they had noticed Ita leading us and sensed that she was someone they could trust.

Without a word, Ita cleared a space next to us and told them to sit down. The stories we heard from them were hair-raising. They had been abandoned in various places, and fate brought them together here in the forest. As we sat and listened to them, another few boys emerged. They related that deep in the forest was a kind man who occasionally gave them potatoes and a little bread. They gathered berries, and sometimes received a little food from local farmers. Like us, they all appeared starved and emaciated.

The boys did not leave us, and Ita was now taking care of about 20 boys. During our long journey, we had encountered many refugees, but this was the first time we had joined up with such a large group of youngsters who, like us, were without parents. We stayed in the forest for a few days, and through the kindness of several local Russian families, received a little food for sustenance. The boys became dependent on Ita and refused to part from her. When we left after a few days, they came with us.

A Red Army vehicle picked us up along the way and brought us to the train station in one of the surrounding cities. The station was crowded with thousands of refugees and many soldiers, all waiting for eastward-bound trains. We were swallowed up in the crowd. Ita tirelessly and constantly made sure that we were by her side. We waited along with everyone else for the salvation that might appear from some mysterious quarter; but all in vain. Instead, we heard an ear-piercing siren informing us of an impending air attack. Once again, there was a great commotion,

with people scattering in all directions. Ita decided that it was safer to get as far away as possible from the station. We did that. Luckily, though, the planes were heading elsewhere and passed overhead with a thundering noise.

There was no chance of boarding the train. The throngs of people gathered in the station created unbearable, almost life-threatening, congestion. So we continued our endless walking. Our attempts to stop a military vehicle met with no success. Such a ride would have held many advantages for us. There was a certain chance of encountering a Russian Jewish soldier or officer who would treat us well and give us a good portion of food. We would also be able to hear updates on the battle situation, as well as warnings of places to avoid. Perhaps most importantly, such a ride would save us days of walking

"The boys did not leave us, and Ita was now taking care of about 20 boys."

exhaustively on foot. In our poor physical condition, an opportunity like this would have been extremely beneficial. In the meantime, however, these were merely "dreams" that we entertained.

On one occasion, we arrived in a smoke-filled town; a battle had obviously ended there just a few hours earlier. Vehicles damaged during the fighting were trapped in the ruins. The sounds of gunfire still reverberated on the outskirts of the town. It seems that the Russians had succeeded in repelling the German attack, causing losses to the enemy.

Ita brought us to the train station at the entrance to the city where we found a corner in which to hide. On the way, I noticed the body of a fallen German soldier lying on the ground. My eyes were drawn to his shiny, new shoes and the knapsack he carried. With my vivid imagination, I pictured the bread and other food items in the knapsack.

When things calmed down, we saw Russian tanks and red-flagged military vehicles moving through the city, and understood that the Russians had beaten back the attack and emerged from their hiding places. Encouraged by this, I approached the

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German's body, pulled off his knapsack, and started to remove his shoes. As I struggled with his right shoe, which stubbornly refused to come off his foot, he opened his eyes! I ran for dear life, leaving the knapsack and shoes behind, probably to the benefit of another refugee.

Many times, we happened upon battle zones. An incident strongly etched in my memory occurred in one of these areas, which was under German control. This was deep in Russian territory. As a result of the fighting and the major destruction sown in the surrounding cities, tens of thousands of refugees flocked toward a river in the vicinity. To our surprise, the place was filled with large German forces.

Many tens of thousands of families were present, including children, the elderly, the ailing and handicapped being transported in carts, pregnant women and babies—a mixed multitude of refugees. The Germans concentrated everyone on the river bank and surrounded the mass with tanks and machine guns. Squads of Gestapo soldiers strode among the crowds, snatching everyone who looked like a soldier. These young people were all placed to one side, and then shot to death in front of everyone. The cry that went up from the crowd at the sight of the slaughter raised goosebumps all over my body. The rest of the people were ordered to the other side of the river. We merged with the crowds and were swept up with them to the other side.

"The area is infested with Germans and is apparently controlled by them. We have to hurry and get far away from here. We absolutely must not fall into their hands. Perhaps we should hide in one of the surrounding forests until the situation clears up," Ita mused aloud, turning to consult with an older Jewish woman walking next to us, then reporting to us what she had heard.

"The woman said that many of the Jews who fled are hiding in the forests for fear of the Germans. Rumor has it that the Germans are focusing on a search for Jews. They are concentrating Jews in ghettos and sending them to forced labor and to extermination camps."

We had no radio or newspapers, and received war news primarily via rumors.

When one has no means to verify a situation, rumors are the only alternative. We gleaned the facts regarding the situation primarily via the testimony of refugees who managed to escape the inferno, and recounted what they had seen with their own eyes and the shocking experiences they had undergone. We also had information from Russian soldiers we met along the way. Village farmers were another important source. Whoever owned a radio in those days heard the news and the reports straight from the battlefield.

Our wanderings did not end. For months, we continued marching from place to place with other refugees, sleeping each night in a different location. We ran out of food and relieved our hunger with grass, berries and

"The Germans concentrated everyone on the river bank and surrounded the mass with tanks and machine guns."

stalks of wheat. The forest dwellers we met resembled shadows, as did we. The hunger, wanderings and frequent changes of hiding place exhausted our energy. Despair began to eat away at us and to deplete even further our already minimal desire to live. We faced death many times. My sister Ita stubbornly and persistently fought against this somber mood and constantly reminded us of Father's command—not to surrender under any circumstances and to do everything to survive!

Already by the end of 1941, the rumor had arrived: the Germans had activated the machinery of destruction and begun the mass slaughter of Jews in Polish concentration camps. We learned this from survivors' accounts. The rumors spoke of Hitler's outright order to begin implementing the Final Solution to the Jewish Question. This meant one thing only—the annihilation of the Jewish nation. And as for us—we continued our wanderings, through endless expanses; with no clear destination; under cloudy skies, under blue skies. On we went. **Don't miss chapter 9 next month.**

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