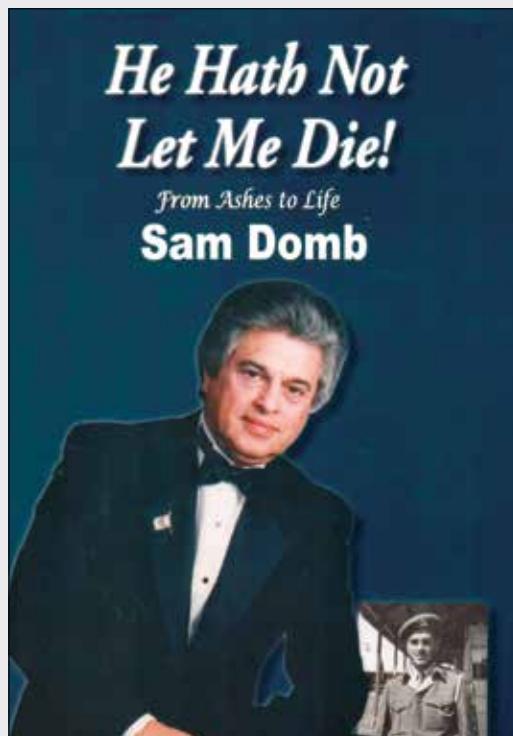


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He Hath Not Let Me Die

From Ashes to Life

He Hath Not Let Me Die



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Chapter 10
Part 2

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

After a nerve-wracking two days, they told us to re-board the train, where we sat for a long time before it began its journey. It moved very slowly, crawling along like a snail. The Frenchman looked at me and explained: "The train's speed has been limited in order to make sure that the newly repaired track can bear the weight."

After several long minutes of traveling at a snail's pace, the engine began to belch

steam, gathered momentum and proceeded to move faster. We all breathed a sigh of relief. This leg of the trip lasted a long time, taking all night. Toward morning, the train stopped at a station, where we saw soldiers and some civilians. Around the station were a few houses with smoking chimneys, another small enclave of civilization in a godforsaken place. Several travelers got

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off to fill their vessels with water, as did the Frenchman. We knew that besides water, he would gather updated information about the place, about the direction in which we were going and—most importantly—about the situation on the war front.

The Frenchman returned, this time with hot water in a kettle Ita had given him. Each of us sipped from the improvised tea she prepared. Wherever we went, Ita would gather bunches of weeds from which she made a tea-like drink. In any case, this tea warmed our hearts in the freezing air. Our friend also drank the tea and left to walk around the platform again. We finally heard the boarding call, and the sound of the whistle pierced the air. The Frenchman returned and sat down next to us, mentioning the name of the place we had reached, a strange name that escapes my memory.

The noise of the train wheels became louder. The second cup of tea Ita had poured for the Frenchman grew cold because he preferred to tell us the good news he had heard about the front: "Everything we heard in Arkhangelsk was true. It seems that there was a turning point in the war and the German forces and their allies have suffered harsh defeats. The Russian forces have succeeded in overpowering the German army in a bloody battle in the Stalingrad area. Using heavy forces, the Germans besieged the city and tried to conquer it, but failed. Both sides incurred hundreds of thousands of casualties and injuries in this battle."

Later, we learned that more than two million soldiers and civilians were killed and wounded in the battle. The Russian counter-attack destroyed the German Sixth Army and a large part of the auxiliary forces attached to it by the Wehrmacht. In February 1943, the Germans in this area surrendered.

When the refugees in the car heard the Frenchman's lecture, they gathered around us and began showering him with questions, as if he were the Red Army spokesman. He was an interesting man, this Frenchman, young, learned and intelligent. He knew how to obtain information and construct an overall



The Russians won the Battle of Stalingrad, a turning point in the war

picture that served to disperse the fog of ignorance in which we lived.

"Who is fighting on the German side?" asked one of our neighbors in the car.

"Hitler won the Axis states over to his side: Fascist Italy under Mussolini, distant Japan and from what I understood, Finland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and others," responded the Frenchman expertly, just as if he had a war map in front of him.

"Who is on the Russian side?" asked another, who had also listened attentively.

"The Russians are with a good, strong group. They are fighting alongside Great Britain, the United States, and my own country, free France, as well as Canada and others," answered the Frenchman, adding: "While we froze in Arkhangelsk, the Germans began to retreat after suffering a crushing blow in Stalingrad. In the central region, the Red Army had pushed the Germans back to the Polish border by the end of 1943."

"In other words, the war has ended?" asked a young woman in our car naively.

"The war is at its height. I do not know the situation at the moment, but from what I understood when speaking with people, the Germans are continuing to fight despite their heavy losses. The Russians succeeded in breaking the three-year German siege around Leningrad."

They had managed to hold out all that time, thanks to the line of fortifications hundreds of miles long that they built to protect the city.

There was a severe shortage of food and fuel in the city, and hundreds of thousands

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died in the bombings and from cold and hunger, but the Russians' determination and their counterattacks led to the breaking of the siege; and the city was able to again breathe a 'sigh of relief.' I believe that the German supply lines for food and military equipment have been heavily damaged."

"And what's happening in Poland?" asked Ita.

"The situation there is terrible. A Russian officer told me that the Germans are destroying everything. They have established camps and facilities for mass murder and are systematically killing Jews, Gypsies and Communists. A German named Himmler has been placed in charge of the annihilation program and operating under him are SS units called Einsatzgruppen. The officer recounted hair-raising testimony regarding the terrifying atrocities carried out by these groups."

Silence reigned in the car after the Frenchman spoke, as everyone returned to his or her place and thoughts. My mind was once again flooded with visions of those German acts of murder and cruelty that I myself had experienced. I resisted the drowsiness brought on by the monotonous motions of the train's wheels. I did not want to fall asleep with my thoughts full of the horrible images I had recalled; these usually gave me terrible nightmares. In the end, I did fall asleep.

Time passed as our train continued on its way. In one of the remote villages, we were transferred to another military train, with no change in our routine or in the passing scenery. Apparently, someone forgot to mention the forests in the Book of Genesis's Creation story.

Here was a divine creation of its own, whose description defied words: an enormous, mind-boggling number of virgin forests, filled with endless trees. The train devoured mile after mile and the forests just went on and on.

We stopped at a station where we were once again asked to get off and wait for another, southbound, train. In his usual way, the Frenchman again went to fish for information, after first setting us up in a comfortable spot together with our belongings. He knew no rest.

In every station, he could be seen circulating among the officers and local civilians to pump them for news, which he would cross-check what he already knew.

This time, the soldiers gave us larger portions of food, as well as horse meat. We all looked gaunt, and some of us had stomachs bloated from malnutrition. The wait for the train lasted many hours.

An interesting fact came to our attention: we had not heard the thunder of artillery and the sounds of shells the entire time.

"I did not want to fall asleep with my thoughts full of the horrible images I had recalled; these usually gave me terrible nightmares."

Apparently the war was far away from us now.

The long-awaited train finally arrived in the station, looking exactly like the one before it: an old freight train, blackened with soot, pulled by an ancient engine. Before it even stopped at the platform, the Frenchman rushed to help us get organized and find a good spot in the car, assisting us, as usual, in bringing our belongings aboard.

My sister Sara complained that her whole body ached. Checking her forehead, the Frenchman realized that she had a very high fever. "We have to lower her temperature immediately or she won't last the long journey," he whispered to Ita, and hurried off to the soldiers before the train started out again.

Our friend returned to the car with a little alcohol which the medic had agreed to give him. The Russians had no medicines or proper medical equipment. Throughout the trip, the Frenchman never left Sara's side and, applying a technique he had learned involving water and alcohol, he succeeded in bringing down her temperature. We worried the whole time. Ita's face said it all—she had always tried to protect us from various illnesses and now this ailment had gone and befallen us.

Among the masses of refugees we were with during our wanderings, including in Arkhangelsk, disease outbreaks occurred as

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a result of poisoning or contamination, often fatally. Ita was very careful, and tried to maintain the highest standard of hygiene possible, even under the poor conditions in which we lived. She took particular care that we not catch the "third plague" of Egypt (lice), from which many of the refugees suffered.

After tending to Sara for hours, our friend reassured Ita: "I used cold compresses to lower the fever and I'm happy to say that it worked wonders. She's a strong girl and is now totally out of danger. She must rest, eat and regain her strength." Ita thanked our doctor and quickly gave Sara water and a slice of bread.

Our trip to the Caucasus lasted many days, even weeks, although exactly how long I cannot say. Often, our trains were forced to stop because of tracks damaged by German bombings. In such cases, we walked for a few days until we reached tracks that were safe, where we boarded another military train traveling toward our destination.

The scenery began to change somewhat. We saw more and more populated areas, although there were still very large expanses of unsettled territory. The long journey weakened many people who had trouble withstanding the conditions. Russian soldiers accompanied us the whole time. During the last few days, we heard the noise of German military planes overhead and we feared that they would attack the train. Fortunately, this did not occur.

After extensive traveling, one of the officers informed us that we were approaching our destination and would probably arrive in a day or two. Great joy followed this announcement. We hoped to reach a safe place, far from the areas of fighting. However, about an hour after the train set out, it suddenly stopped. No one inquired as to the cause, as we were used to such stops; but this time, we were left in the cars for a long time, with no explanation. According to the learned Frenchman's calculations, our destination was still far away. Officers and soldiers could be seen through the cracks, conversing as if in consultation.

"Strange. Something must have happened," our friend mused aloud. The doors opened abruptly and we were asked to exit the cars.

The Russian officer stood in front of us, pointing in the direction of the trip, and said: "I'm sorry to report that we have reached the end of the road. The tracks ahead have been bombed out in various places, as you will see, and the repairs will last a long time. As far as we have been able to learn, even the preparatory work has not yet begun, which means that repairs could take weeks, if not months. It has been decided, therefore, to

"After extensive traveling, one of the officers informed us that we were approaching our destination and would probably arrive in a day or two."

continue the rest of the way by foot, together with the food and equipment. Luckily, we are near our destination—Kutaisi, Georgia.

I request your cooperation so that we can arrive together as soon as possible. We are stopping here to rest and get organized, and I will inform you of our plans later."

We were all in shock. The refugees included children and older people. Despair overtook many of them. Would they survive the difficulties along the way? Had they not endured enough till now? Our small group had gained much experience from our years of wanderings, but what would become of them? The officer calmed everyone down and told us that this time we were truly at the end of the trip. He promised that we would find relief at our destination, since it was very far from the fighting.

Here I must give credit to the Soviet rail system. Throughout the war, as we also learned afterwards, the trains continued to operate ceaselessly and unobstructedly. The Russians had enough coal to fuel thousands of engines, which pulled tens of thousands of

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cars loaded with soldiers and refugees fleeing for their lives from the war zone, in addition to transporting war materials, arms and food to the fronts.

Damaged tracks were repaired and trains that had been attacked and were no longer serviceable were replaced with others. It must be said that these trains stood the test of the horrors of war.

More than anything else, however, I was thinking that our years of suffering and wandering would never end. Every time it seemed as if my sisters and I had reached a place where we could settle and begin to rebuild our lives anew, something transpired that forced us to continue our journey, our course of endless suffering. And now, who knew how long it would take to reach Kutaisi, and what else awaited us along the way? Nevertheless, it was somewhat comforting that we were under the protection of the Russian army, and that the soldiers accompanying us took care of us. We assumed that they would continue to do so along the way.

"Kutaisi? Where is this city? I've never heard of it, nor of the country in which it is located!" cried one of the women desperately.

Our wise French friend quickly jumped in:

"If my memory serves and from what I learned in geography classes in school, Georgia lies east of the Black Sea, at an interesting juncture of the peaks of the Caucasian Mountains and the warm waters of the Black Sea, amidst green slopes and fertile valleys. The scenery we see around us is a sign that we are very close to our destination. Kutaisi is a large city, considered the second largest in Georgia, whose capital is Tbilisi."

The Frenchman's knowledge and expertise knew no bounds; he was like a walking encyclopedia. As he spoke of his school days, it suddenly occurred to me that I, in the first decade of my life, had still not seen the inside of a school building. I consoled myself with the fact that I was learning in the "school of life," an open school with no walls...

We walked for days. The soldiers led us along the tracks, where we discovered that the officer had, indeed, been correct, for we saw the results of the German bombings along the full length of the tracks, which had

been damaged in various places. We often came across duds and unexploded shells. The soldiers would alert us to these early enough and we would be forced to take a detour. The weather cooperated and was consistently pleasant.

Our friend did not leave our side the entire time. He constantly looked after us, helped Ita carry our traveling sack and knew how to



provide encouragement during moments of crisis. Every day, he calculated the number of miles we had walked and told us how many remained. Not only did he instill a spirit of optimism among the wandering refugees, he was also well-liked by the military personnel.

The sub-zero blinding white scenery to which we had become accustomed in Arkhangelsk had been replaced by green surroundings; and this, at least, was reassuring. The soldiers distributed tiny portions of food whenever we would stop for the night, but we walked around starved and weak.

After many days of walking, we came upon a magnificent expanse of green fields. In the course of our journey we crossed a considerable number of bridges. One morning we came to a bridge spanning a river. With some of the refugees already on the other side, my sisters and I suddenly heard the deafening sound of German planes circling above us. We all panicked, including the Russian soldiers. We had learned from previous experience with planes that it was best to run as far as possible from the area under attack. As a result of the pandemonium and the ear-splitting noise, I fled back while Ita and my sisters ran ahead, to the other side of the bridge—we had no time to look around, for the planes had already started to drop

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their bombs on the bridge. Powerful explosions were heard from all sides and a huge hole opened in the middle of the bridge. The planes disappeared immediately and Red Army aircraft were seen flying in the skies.

Fear gripped me. I had emerged from the attack in one piece, but where were my sisters? My heart pounded and was almost torn from my chest. After recovering for several minutes, I spotted my sisters on the other side of the river, searching for me. Noticing me first, the Frenchman pacified them and pointed toward me, standing on the other side of the river. Without thinking too much, in my fierce desire to join my sisters I leapt into the hole in the bridge and, to their amazement, swam across the river. To this day, I do not know how I gathered the courage to do this and how I managed to cross the river waters.

Over the years, I learned that at certain moments in life, when one's life is at stake, one discovers unimaginable strengths and abilities. This was one such moment.

The Frenchman pulled me out of the water, and Ita and my sisters pounced on me as if I was a hero returning from battle. Luckily, none of us had been injured in the attack. Ita changed my wet clothes and restored calm. The Frenchman went to offer aid to the soldiers and some of the wounded. Fortunately, there were only a few lightly wounded people, who were treated by the accompanying soldiers. The soldiers gathered all of us at a place far from the bridge.

Many people had lost possessions. The soldiers reassured us that we were very close to the city and would already arrive that night. The officer who had led the march came over and, pointing to the bridge, said: "This German air attack indicates that the war is not over. We must all remain together. We have reached the end of the trip and just a few miles away is the main road to Kutaisi, from where Red Army vehicles will take us to the city. We will leave in about an hour."

We were still agitated from the attack, and I believe we were unable to digest the officer's words. I heard the Frenchman whisper to Ita: "That's it. We've reached the end. At long last, we'll see urban landscape, people, public squares, buildings and marketplaces."

"What does it mean that the war has not ended? How long will it last? Why did it reach here? They said they were bringing us to a safe place and yet the Germans attacked the area!?" asked Ita.

"If I understand the situation correctly, we are not in the battle zones. It's true that the Germans launched an air attack, but they're not physically here. This place is important from a strategic point of view, as it boasts oil wells and serves as a source for food supplies to the fighters on the front. The Germans have been bombing the railroad tracks and bridges in their attempt to disrupt the supply routes. This is one of the reasons for Hitler's occupa-

"Over the years, I learned that at certain moments in life, when one's life is at stake, one discovers unimaginable strengths and abilities. This was one such moment."

tion of the Ukraine and all the surroundings. He viewed them as a strategic goal, important for sustaining the war effort, because they are a source of food and military supplies for Germany, and an important base from which to continue toward the Caucasus and its oil wells. His plans were upset with his defeats at Stalingrad," analyzed the Frenchman.

We waited for many hours at the bridge. Red Army trucks arrived at the bombed area carrying iron tracks and tin planks, which they placed on the bridge so that the remaining refugees could cross safely to the other side. The refugees arranged themselves in a long line and walked over the bridge one at a time. The next evening we arrived in Kutaisi.

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