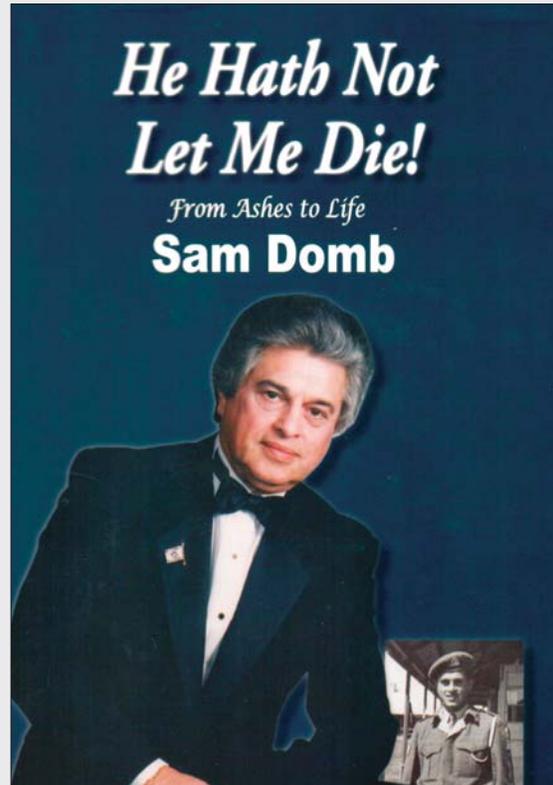


He Hath Not Let Me Die

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 5

Stealing Across the Border

“For your own sake, therefore, be most careful.”

Deuteronomy 4:15

A small motion in the region of my arm awakened me. I opened my eyes and saw my friend, his face again radiating like that of an angel.

Having woken up before me, he sat by my side, holding my hand. He seemed to have an alarm clock hidden inside him. Perhaps he really was an angel.

“You should get up; it’s beginning to get dark and we have to set out,” he whispered in my ear.

“Okay,” I said, sitting up next to him. I was dead tired. “When did you wake up?”

“A long time ago,” he answered, continuing: “You slept very deeply. Apparently you needed it, but it’s important that you stay awake now, because we’re going to cross the border and reach the town that the Pole mentioned. Perhaps we really will find our families there.”

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I rose to my feet and stretched. The pains in my body had disappeared. The hope that I would soon be able to meet my father and sisters revived me, and I was ready to start out.

"We'd better wait another half hour so that we can leave when it's completely dark," suggested my friend. We left our hiding place and walked toward the edge of the forest where we had parted from our Polish friend. Total darkness fell upon the entire area. Distant lights flickered in the town that was our destination.

Michael pointed the way. "We'll walk in this direction until we reach the stream." Our nighttime trek began with our passage

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"No, I can go on," I answered.

"Very well, we'll continue walking straight, until we reach the stream."

While we were talking, we saw the lights of two approaching vehicles and could also hear the sound of their engines.

"I don't know if the vehicles are traveling on this side of the stream or the other," said Michael, "so we can't tell if they're German or Russian. Let's climb down the hill and hide in the thick bushes nearby. We can also rest until the danger passes."

Like seasoned survivors, we proceeded downhill straight into a large thicket of bushes.

"My survivor's instinct sized up the situation accurately and I was unbelievably calm. This time I relied on both my friend and myself, having apparently begun to think and act like an adult."

through the break in the fence the Pole had mentioned. I had trouble walking. The shoes his wife had given me were a little too big, though certainly more comfortable than going barefoot. We passed by thick bushes, struggled with impenetrable vegetation and evaded obstacles. Mindful of the darkness enveloping us, Michael proceeded cautiously, out of concern for hidden pits and unanticipated traps.

Somehow, the lights of the town seemed farther away the closer we got. My friend was determined, however, and pressed on, unflagging. Despair was alien to him. The main thing was that we were advancing carefully and avoiding German eyes. There were no paths on our route. He was cautious to avoid them, claiming that using them in this area was a recipe for disaster. The moment we hit a paved road or path, the lad was quick to distance us from it as much as possible, like an experienced scout.

We stopped after a few hours and climbed a nearby hill from where we could look down at our destination. This time, the lights of the town were distinctly visible. My friend decided to take a break.

We cleared a path through them and created a space in which to sit next to each other. The sound of the cars' engines grew louder and their lights bounced up, down and sideways.

"Germans," whispered my friend, adding: "They're approaching from the right, traveling the same route we took an hour ago. I think we're far from them. We'll wait here until they pass and then continue toward the stream."

No further explanation was needed. My survivor's instinct sized up the situation accurately and I was unbelievably calm. This time I relied on both my friend and myself, having apparently begun to think and act like an adult. We waited a short while and the vehicles passed.

Michael rose, took my hand and explained with satisfaction that it was evidently a German patrol that had passed and we should not delay in taking advantage of this fact.

"We must hurry and reach the stream before the patrol returns. There may be an additional route along the stream, via which the patrol is liable to come back," my friend

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said, assessing the situation and hurrying me along.

This time we walked quickly, again avoiding traps and thick bushes. Michael explained that the dense vegetation resulted from winter flooding and the stream that had overflowed. The thicker the plants, the closer we were to the stream. We walked without stopping and, just as my friend had anticipated, reached a point from which the stream was visible. We clearly heard the flowing water.



“We must hurry and get to the other side before the patrol returns,” said Michael, searching with his eagle eye for an easy crossing point.

We traversed the road, and with extreme difficulty, cleared a way among the bushes toward the stream. Our goal was to gain distance from that spot and get as close to the stream as possible. The sound of flowing water grew louder until our feet eventually touched the water itself. We stopped and my friend looked for a place to cross. The current was not strong and the water did not seem deep. We continued to walk along the stream in the direction of the town, hoping to find a suitable crossing point.

We reached a bend in the stream. In the stream’s center were large pieces of driftwood that had been swept away and gotten stuck on mounds of rocks protruding from the

water. Michael stopped walking and noted that this looked like an ideal place to cross safely.

He suggested we remove our shoes and roll up our pant cuffs. Sitting on a piece of wood, he took off his shoes, tied the laces together, put his socks inside and hung them around his neck.

“Do just as I did. We’ll put our shoes on again once we get to the other side and continue toward the town. We’ll be safer there, as our Polish friend told us. We should hurry, I don’t know when the German patrol will return,” said my friend, helping me with my shoes.

We got ready to cross the stream. Michael, who was taller than I, hung my shoes around his neck too, and we immersed our feet in the water. It was ice cold. With utmost caution, he climbed onto a piece of wood that looked stable and pulled me toward him with his right hand.

We proceeded slowly to a rock that jutted out above the water, while he continued to hold my hand and keep me steady.

“Be careful not to fall. The rock is slippery and we must walk very slowly,” he warned.

We advanced a few steps. The water froze the soles of our feet. The darkness made it harder to select the strongest piece of wood, but our survivor’s instinct helped us overcome the difficulty. My friend checked every single log before we stepped on it. Thus we straggled onward, from rock to driftwood to rock again, our feet in freezing water while the river’s spray drenched our bodies. Our clothes were wet, but it was tolerable; and we eventually reached the other side.

We continued into a thicket, looked for a dry place and sat down. I heard my friend release a long, meaningful sigh. I huddled close to him and he hugged me warmly, saying confidently: “The dangerous part is already behind us. The Russians are not as cruel as the Germans—the Pole did tell us that Jews are not persecuted on this side of the border as they are on the German side. So

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we can relax. It is important that we distance ourselves from the border, moving eastward, so that we're not detected by German eyes on the other side of the stream."

While Michael spoke, we saw the approaching lights of the German patrol on the other side of the stream, exactly as he had predicted.

"We'd best stay here until the patrol passes. This is an excellent hiding place, we're already on the eastern bank and they won't notice us from the other side. In the meantime, let's dry our feet and put on our shoes so that we're ready to get going," said my friend encouragingly.

The patrol vehicles moved slowly and much time passed before we saw them disappear from the path on the western bank from where we had just come.

At an early hour, before the break of dawn, we arose and set out on our way.

value of a piece of bread—how much pleasure a small amount can provide.

"We'll save the potato and the remaining bread since we don't know what awaits us," said my eleven-year old friend, rich in life experience.

Sated with the bread and water, we started walking on the path along the stream. The lights of the town grew nearer. The Divine Creator chose this hour to illuminate the land and all who dwelt upon it. The lighter it became, the more we discovered what we had missed in the dark: not far from the path we were on was a paved road that apparently led into the town. Visible on the approaching horizon were a few houses alongside structures that looked like grain silos, with a number of cows nearby. Several wagons were already traveling in our direction on the paved road.

"We're better off sticking with this path,



We felt safe here and took the first path we happened onto, toward the "promised" town. Michael suggested stopping at a creek that flowed parallel to the stream so that we could drink and quench our thirst. I sat near the creek and drank as my life had taught me to, scooping up a handful of water and drinking it. My friend took the remaining bread out of the bag and broke off two chunks, one for each of us. We ate heartily. These are the moments in life when one learns the true

not the paved road. I don't know who those people traveling it are; they might be hostile Poles or highway robbers. I would prefer we reach the town via our current path. I think we'll be there in about an hour and we'll be able to blend in with the many residents without arousing suspicion. Let's hope we run into some Jews like us who can help us locate our families," commented Michael—here was the life wisdom of a boy not yet thirteen years old.

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We walked for a long time, trying to conceal ourselves from the sight of the wagon drivers who rode along the road that twisted alongside our path. Vehicles also traveled on it, including military ones bearing red flags. We immediately sensed the difference, as the uniforms of these soldiers vastly differed from those of the Germans.

There was already cause to breathe easy. We reached the edge of the awakening

ments. Some lay with suitcases next to them, while others only had cloth bundles. Women held babies, trying to soothe them, and crying children in tattered clothing begged for a piece of bread.

We were shocked by what we saw. My friend, who had not let go of my hand, pulled me forward. The street we were on appeared to be one of the main streets. No one paid any attention to us; all were preoccupied with

“Hundreds of destitute Jews filled the pavements. Some lay with suitcases next to them, while others only had cloth bundles. Women held babies, trying to soothe them, and crying children in tattered clothing begged for a piece of bread.”

town. As we proceeded, we were confronted with the most terrible sights. Numerous people thronging on street corners, sleeping on the sidewalks, and in the adjacent courtyards, families, including children and elderly, had settled. Some were wrapped in blankets; others had nothing but the bare sky above them. It was not hard to guess that these were Jews like us who had been expelled from their homes, or had survived the cruel Nazi occupation. Some still dozed; others were awake. Our eyes sought familiar faces. At first glance we saw no one. My friend stopped near a group of Jews and asked about our families. One older man, with a beard and *peyot* was praying, swaying from side to side. He looked at us with astonishment and asked us where we had come from.

“From Pultusk,” we answered.

“You should go to the synagogue and ask there. Perhaps someone will be able to help you,” he suggested, pointing in the direction we needed to go. It seemed as if our Polish friend had been right. Many Jews had gathered here, refugees from the surrounding towns that had been conquered by the Nazis. The deeper we went into the town, the more distressing were the sights we saw. Hundreds of destitute Jews filled the pave-

ments. The place resembled a refugee town in every way.

The hundreds crowding the streets became thousands, and though we searched for people we knew, we identified no one. My friend stopped at a group of boys and asked where the synagogue was. One of them pointed to a nearby street and said: “Turn right at the next street. You can’t miss it; there are lots of Jews there.”

Noticing my highly emotional state, Michael grasped my hand even more tightly and continued pulling me forward, trying to be encouraging: “I’m sure the people in the synagogue will be able to help us find our families. Let’s hurry over there. It’s early morning now; perhaps we’ll find some of the community rabbis praying the morning service and they’ll advise us what to do.”

We turned right at the next street, as the boy had said, and were quickly engulfed in the mass of people around the synagogue.

Don’t miss chapter 6 next month. □

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