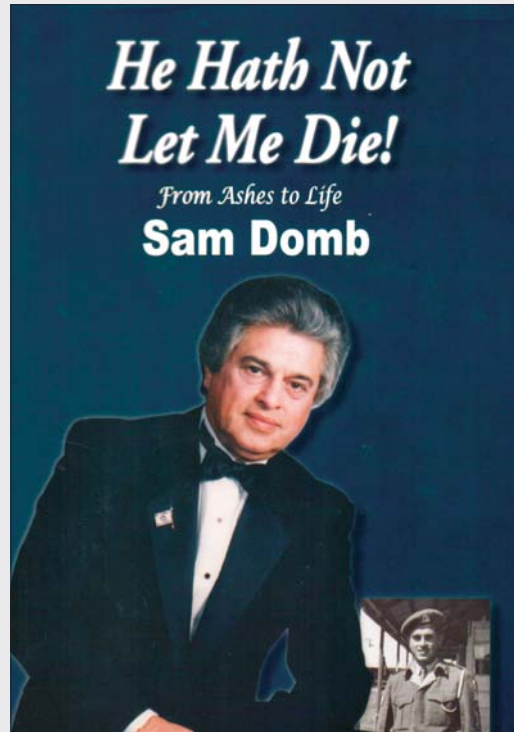


# He Hath Not Let Me Die

From Ashes to Life

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## He Hath Not Let Me Die



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### Chapter 9

## In the Forest and Hallows of the Earth

*"And they shall come into the caves of the rocks and into the hallows of the earth."*

*Isaiah 2:19*

As we wandered, many thoughts raced through our heads during the endless walking. One thought that never left us was where to sleep at night.

We felt lonely and exposed in the open air, walking for an entire day with short breaks to rest and stretch our limbs. Apparently we were in a hostile area under German control, deep in unfamiliar Russian territory and far

from population centers. Ita said we were going towards the forests, where, according to rumor, many Jews were hiding.

Evening descended and darkness began to reign. The forest, our destination for that day, seemed very far away, literally on the horizon.

As usual, we walked on side paths rather than on the main road. Whenever a vehicle

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appeared on the road, we were careful to hide in order to avoid being discovered. Now, under the cover of darkness it was easier to make progress.

“We should rest a bit and then continue walking. We’ve avoided being detected by the Germans until now, and we must not be caught by them. If we continue we can still get to the forest tonight,” said Ita, spreading a blanket on the ground. We all fell on it, exhausted and drained. I fell asleep instantly.

We reached the forest that night. It would become our home fortress for several months. We had come across many forests by then, but had never seen one like this. This forest held an entire colony of Jews. There was a family in every corner. Some people gathered in groups. Our common denominator was that we were homeless refugees, hiding from the ceaseless German pursuit of Jews. Ita said it was best to go deep into the forest, where it would be safer. Many of the refugees dug pits to hide in and protect themselves from the cold of the approaching winter.

“It seems we will have to stay here for a long time, until the situation clears up. As long as the Germans control the area, it is very dangerous to be on the roads, especially for Jews. The Nazis are searching high and low for us, and killing every Jew they find,” said Ita while walking into the depths of the forest. We passed families and individuals who had already staked out their territory.

“It looks like these people have been here for a long time,” commented Sara, asking: “How long will we be here?”

“I don’t know. We’ll act just as the others do. First, let’s organize a comfortable and suitable place for ourselves. Afterwards, I’ll inquire among the forest veterans and see if they have information that will help us understand the situation,” answered Ita, urging us on.

This was a huge virgin forest, many kilometers in length and breadth. There were tall conifers and leafy trees whose branches extended both horizontally and upwards. It was obvious that no human had trod in the depths of this forest. One could see enormous tree trunks from storm-toppled trees lying on the ground, blocking all passage to the forest center. This was a world unto

itself—dark, frightening and uncivilized, a habitat for animals such as foxes, wolves, snakes and wild boars.

Ita drew us deep, very deep, into the forest, where we set up our home amidst trees and thick vegetation. Judging by the arrangements strictly orchestrated by Ita, it looked as if we would remain here for a long time. We removed any obstacle preventing us from spreading out the blanket, then lay down on it and fell asleep for a very long time.

I cannot estimate the size of the forest, but, as stated, it was huge, truly endless and far from civilization. Even from its edges, it was impossible to observe any kind of populated area. Only on the very distant horizon were vehicles visible, traveling on a road. We maintained a fixed daily routine here. Each day, we gathered blueberries, raspberries, blackberries and mushrooms. Ita strictly demanded that we not stray too far from our “home;” and under no circumstances did she

**“In the real life in which we ‘starred,’ we were willing to do everything to obtain a piece of bread or a rotten potato.”**

let me to go by myself. We became experts in all types of mushrooms. Ita would cook soup from some of the harvest, which warmed us up on cold days.

As I write these words today, thoughts come to my mind about the lifestyle, culture, good manners and norms accepted by our society. The encounter with the reality of life—that which exists beneath the veneer of culture—lent a wholly different significance to everything.

Time meant something else, behavior was different. In the real life in which we “starred,” we were willing to do everything to obtain a piece of bread or a rotten potato. Even if it meant stealing, lying or removing articles of clothing from dead or dying people. Real life meant survival and nothing else, exactly as it did for the beasts of the forest which we now called home.

Since we left Bialystok, I had heard many stories about partisans and their acts of brav-

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ery and revenge, and I very much admired their courage. With my active imagination, I pictured the partisans as tall and thick-bearded, with muscular bodies that instilled fear in the enemy. I envisioned them holding weapons, living in the forest and helping the weak. I wondered if there were partisans in our forest as well.

I received my answer when a rumor spread that a group of partisans was coming to our area. When I spied on them from behind a tree, they looked different from what I had imagined. They were young bearded men in their twenties and thirties, carrying

**"The more I think of it today, many years after those terrifying times, the more my admiration for my eldest sister Ita grows."**

bundles on their backs and holding weapons. They stopped near us, distributed potatoes and bread, and melted away again into the thick forest bushes.

It seems that every so often, the partisans would raid one of the distant villages and, after their fashion, would obtain food for themselves and the refugees in the forest. They knew that we had no possibility of leaving the forest, in this hostile area under Nazi control. The death sentence imposed on the Jews by the Germans and their collaborators, and the cruel, highly efficient mechanism they had established for its implementation, left us no choice but to hide here. We knew that any Jew caught faced death.

At times, the partisans were accompanied by youngsters aged thirteen to fifteen, also carrying bundles and arms. I very much wanted to join them. Someone in the forest claimed that the weapons these boys carried were real. Someone else argued that the rifles they had were of carved wood and only resembled real ones. Everything to do with the partisans was mysterious. No one knew where they came from and to where they disappeared. Every conversation about them was held in a quiet, almost whispered, voice. When I tried asking Ita something about them, she immediately hushed me, saying there are things that are not discussed, and changed the topic.

The partisans also provided us with information. They communicated with the outside world via a wireless transmitter and were able to report on events and on the latest news, including the war in Stalingrad. They warned us of German raids on the forests and suggested that we change our hiding places frequently.

Ita borrowed shovels from our neighbor and, together, we dug a pit. We covered it with trees and branches for camouflage, but also, of course, to conserve our body heat during the cold weather.

The more I think of it today, many years after those terrifying times, the more my admiration for my eldest sister Ita grows. From where did she derive the wisdom to accumulate enough suitable clothing during our wanderings to prevent us from freezing in wintertime? As I pen these lines, unfathomable images come to mind, such as Ita rummaging among the corpses of bombing victims, removing clothing and various articles that would be useful to us. To her everything had value—sweaters, coats, socks, blankets, pants, shirts and what not.

I recall one incident when, while on our way to a forest, we found ourselves in a town that was under aerial attack. We hid in one of the destroyed buildings. During a bombing, a woman wrapped in a blanket who was crossing the street near us was hit and killed, and her whole body began hemorrhaging. This time, I mustered up the courage to run up to her and peel the blood-stained blanket off her. To this day, I remember the angry look on Ita's face due to my "irresponsible" actions; yet this blanket served us well later during the cold nights.

One of the items Father "bequeathed" to us when he was drafted into the Russian army was a sack. Made of a strong weave, it was reminiscent of the army "kitbag" familiar to every soldier. Ita made sure to carry this bag throughout our years of wandering. It served as our clothes closet as well as our kitchen cabinet. In it were a vessel for water, cups, plates, a small pot and other items. It was also our pantry, where we hid a few potatoes and, sometimes, when our situation improved, bread that we had received.

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We were extremely worried about informers throughout our stay in the forest, fearing that some farmer would hear about us and turn us over to the Germans. There was no shortage of hostile elements who collaborated with the Germans. But luckily, the Germans did not fare well in this region, as the Russians managed to recover and launch a counterattack.

Hunger and cold were our worst enemies. Among those hiding in the forest were older people who died after their strength gave out, while the young managed to survive. We were all very gaunt. Some of the adults required medicines; but since these, of course, were unattainable, their bodies weakened. Thus passed many months. We had become shadows of our former selves. What awaited us? All gates were closed before us—both the gates of mercy and the gates of vengeance.

We were like broken vessels. Our strength was totally depleted from the many wanderings decreed upon us, and from the entire situation.

We clearly heard the echoes of battles in the area, and the thunderous explosions of shells grew more frequent. At night, in addition to the sounds of explosions, we also saw flashes of fire. Frequently, we heard the noise of planes pouring out their wrath upon the surroundings via massive bombings. From our hiding place we were unable to discern whose planes these were, but it was obvious that heavy fighting was going on somewhere, outside of the forest.

A rumor spread one morning that the Russians had conquered the area. The forest refugees began to congregate immediately to clarify the source of the rumor, which held great significance for us—it meant that we could finally leave the forest! A sneaking suspicion crept into our hearts that this might be a trick designed to turn us over to the Germans.

Not one of us dared leave the place until we heard confirmation of the rumor from the partisans themselves. The partisans related that the Russians had recovered from the initial blow and had begun to repel the Germans in various spots. They

had regained control of the region, and the Germans suffered defeat and heavy losses. No words can describe the joy that gripped us. A spark of hope appeared. We are leaving the forest! Perhaps the war has even ended. We rejoiced. However, the truth was that although the Russians had beaten back the Germans in that area, the war was far from over. Apparently the Germans had attacked Leningrad and Moscow, but had not succeeded in penetrating the strongholds.

We resumed our wanderings, but this time under the protection of the Russian army. An indelible memory comes to mind here. We were being taken somewhere in a Russian military vehicle and along the way

**"We were told that we were being taken to a safe place, far from the battle zones."**

saw a long line of posts bearing the hanging bodies of German officers, captured in battle. It was a frightening sight. Ita, sensing that I was upset, covered my eyes with her hands, and said, "These are German officers. They deserve to die after sowing death throughout Europe!"

The tremendous number of refugees roaming the area posed a problem for the Russian forces and interfered with their maneuvers. The military directed the stream of refugees to a huge compound near one of the cities. To maintain order, thousands of soldiers were stationed in the compound, which stretched over a wide territory. We numbered among the tens of thousands of refugees, mostly Jews who had hidden in the area, who were assembled there.

During this period, the Russian soldiers tried to give us food and to demonstrate that matters were under control. We were in the first of many groups transported here by hundreds of trucks. We were told that we were being taken to a safe place, far from the battle zones.

After traveling a considerable distance, the convoy of trucks stopped in an open field near railroad tracks. A large number of

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soldiers stood around the field's perimeter to maintain order. After we alighted from the trucks, they organized us into groups. Ita made sure that we stayed together and did not get separated. A freight train approached from afar and stopped in the open field. We were ordered to board the cars, in the groups that had been formed.

We all wanted to know where we were being taken. The train started to move and we set out. It was a long trip and it was hot and stuffy in the freight car, which reeked of the sour stench of human sweat. We traveled for hours. A person who recognized the route said we were heading northward towards Siberia. On the one hand, we were happy to be heading so far from the fighting; on the other, the name Siberia brought up unpleasant associations of exile. It was linked in our minds to hard labor and freezing cold, and we knew it as a place for prisoners, criminals and opponents of the regime. We felt unsettled and extremely worried.

Each time the train stopped, we left the car for a short break, to stretch our legs and to relieve ourselves, after which we were called to re-board. The engine would start up slowly, laboring heavily, and then gather speed and accelerate. I looked out through the cracks and saw forests and more forests, countless forests. Here and there a few houses could be seen, their smoking chimneys indicating some sign of life in this godforsaken region. Sometimes, the engine's steam penetrated the cars, resulting in an intolerable odor and feeling of suffocation. As the trip wore on, temperatures dropped further. Someone mentioned that the train routes in Russia were among the longest in the world.

After days of travel interrupted only by short breaks, we reached our destination—a place called Arkhangelsk. This was not a mistake: we were completely surrounded by snow and ice. We inhaled the cold, trembled from the cold.

"Arkhangelsk?" Ita asked one of the travelers.

"Yes, we've arrived in Arkhangelsk. We're not alone, this is a labor camp. I heard one of the soldiers say that conditions are not so terrible," answered the traveler. He took his belongings and approached the soldier orga-

nizing the group. We stood outside, in the cold, awaiting instructions.

The many policemen and armed soldiers were charged with guarding and maintaining order in the camp, which was home to a large refugee population. The person responsible for our car took us to a huge wooden barracks housing about two hundred refugees in crowded conditions. Ita located a spot for us, where we placed our possessions.

At long last we were settled in proper quarters, with wooden beds, an enclosed space that was heated, and with our own corner. There was, however, no electricity, and light was provided by lamps which burned a special oil made from fish.

We were soon made aware of the camp's rules. The men were taken out to work every

**"At long last we were settled in proper quarters, with wooden beds, an enclosed space that was heated, and with our own corner."**

day, primarily to chop down trees. Some worked in camp services such as cleaning, maintenance, etc. Young boys also had jobs. They had to gather the short branches and scraps of wood that piled up after the hewing and sawing, and bring them to the heating stoves in the barracks. These were wood-burning stoves with chimneys that connected to other barracks, and thus the heat was retained—fortunate for us, as the cold here was intolerable. Ita made sure that we dressed properly in the harsh winter, and watched over me especially. Whenever she saw me about to leave the barracks, she insisted that I wear appropriate clothing.

We slowly adjusted to conditions. We discovered that a not insignificant percentage of the camp population included exiled political prisoners, many of whom were Ukrainian. Trains arrived very frequently and the stream of refugees and prisoners was unending. The train station was inside the camp. However, these were no ordinary passenger trains. Rather, they were freight trains, discharging refugees and prisoners, unloading equipment

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for the camp and then returning to the front with military supplies on board.

The camp was an army base that spread over several kilometers and was surrounded by high wooden walls. Permission was required to leave the camp grounds, and it was granted only for work purposes.

There were some advantages to being here. The first was the personal security: we were no longer pursued, nor were we concerned for our lives, so far from the Germans and the fighting. The second was having a roof over our heads, and no longer having to worry about finding a place to sleep, as we did previously when we slept in the open air, in fields or forests. Another benefit was the food, distributed weekly—bread, dried mushrooms, corn flour. True, it was insufficient for our needs; but at least we did not have to go hunting for food. We considered our stay, temporary as it was, a tolerable one until the war should end.

To our great surprise and sorrow, we learned after some time that our paternal grandfather, Yaakov Domb, along with our grandmother, had been exiled here, to Arkhangelsk. Suffering from cold and hunger, they met their death inside the camp, both dying on the same day. This story touched us deeply and caused us great pain.

One day, my sister Sara and I went out to the forest with a group of adults and an accompanying guide, to pick cherries and mushrooms. As usual, Ita made sure we were dressed warmly from head to toe. The forest, one of the virgin forests typical to the area, was filled with tall conifers. Focused on our task, we all entered the thick forest.

It was early wintertime, and we were struck by the bitter cold. When we completed our assignment at the designated time, the guide collected us and we began marching back to the camp. After we had walked for hours without reaching our destination, the guide understood that he had lost his way. Several of the youngsters in the group began to display signs of distress and burst into tears. We saw bears in the area trying to approach us, but the older members of the group, together with the guide, cut some long branches in order to chase them away. We all shook with fear. The guide decided that we should light a fire, both for warmth and so

that the smoke would signal our location to those looking for us. We sat in a tight circle around a tree, near the fire. My sister Sara did not leave me throughout this time and we sat huddled with the group to preserve our body heat and—purportedly—to protect ourselves from the bears. A full twenty-four hours passed, with no food, in the freezing cold of the forest. Seeing that we did not return, our families alerted the police and soldiers, who went to search for us. It took them twenty-four hours to find us, hours of unmitigated fear and tension for all. The soldiers who reached us immediately wrapped us in blankets, gave us hot drinks and calmed us down.

**"The local winter was cruel and merciless, with blinding, five foot-high snow covering vast spaces."**

Here in the camp we were also introduced for the first time to a unique phenomenon of nature, called "white nights." Arkhangelsk is located on a plateau, a land of brown bears and gray wolves. The area was infamous for being a place of exile for millions of people out of favor with various ruling governments, transported here to meet their deaths.

The local winter was cruel and merciless, with blinding, five foot-high snow covering vast spaces. Temperatures dropped to about negative fifty-eight degrees Fahrenheit and fierce winds gusted; their howling was terrifying.

To someone who was not used to living here, it seemed as if the world was on the verge of destruction. It was hard to breathe and the frost burned our faces. No living creature could be outside and anyone without shelter would freeze to death in a very short time. Fortunately, we spent this period in heated barracks, awaiting the end of G-d's wrath.

For many months, we lived with the hope that the Americans and their allies would prove victorious in the war. We yearned for an end to the ongoing nightmare. □

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