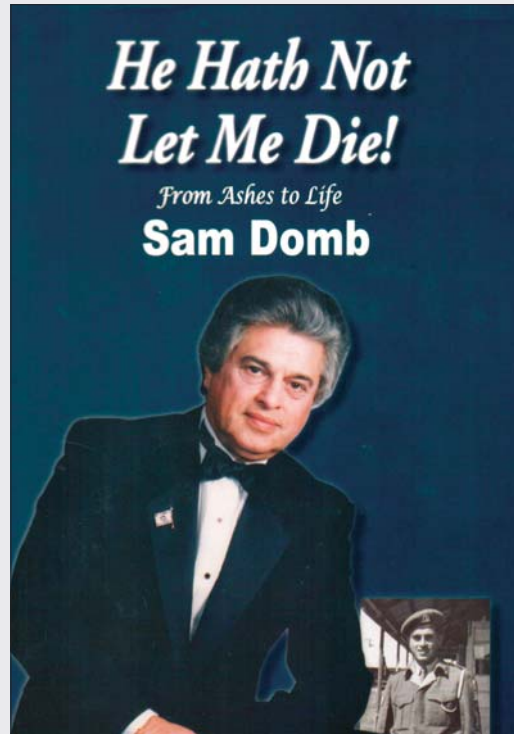


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He Hath Not Let Me Die

He Hath Not Let Me Die From Ashes to Life



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Chapter 6 Part 1

For Brethren to Dwell Together

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."

Psalms 133:1

The town we had reached had been conquered by Soviet forces immediately upon the Russian invasion of eastern Poland. Thousands of Jewish refugees had headed here after the Nazis expelled them from their homes, as did other refugees who fled, or were deported from, German-occupied territories. They arrived in the cities and towns of eastern Poland in waves. The first such

wave occurred immediately after the outbreak of war on September 1, 1939, and we witnessed a part of it in Pultusk before the latter's occupation on September 7, 1939.

A second wave of refugees accompanied the Red Army's invasion of eastern Poland from September 17, 1939 until December 1939, when the new German-Russian border

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was closed. It became obvious that our Polish friend had known exactly where to send us. Wartime rumors spread more quickly than anticipated.

The area to where he had directed us was, indeed, a haven for refugees, amongst them many Jews. Luckily, the Soviet-occupied area was near the Pole's town and the border between the Germans and Russians was still officially open. In December 1939, it was closed at Russian initiative, thus preventing the Germans from deporting residents and refugees across the border from the areas under their control.

It was thus that, on a particularly cold morning in October 1939, accompanied by my friend "the angel," I was able to walk on the streets of the town controlled by Red Army forces and filled with masses of Jews. They all assembled at the entrance to the town's central synagogue, as if hoping to go "home."

ease. The person standing there, apparently the gatekeeper or community clerk, asked what our business was. My friend answered unhesitatingly: "We arrived here this morning, alone, from the other side of the border. We're looking for our parents. We are not brothers."

The surprised gatekeeper let us into the synagogue, crowded with worshippers, and presented us to the community's rabbi. Michael related to him what had happened to us. The rabbi checked the list of names in his hand, asked us to come closer and embraced us warmly, tears falling onto his beard. He calmed us down and signaled to one of the worshippers to give us a portion of food. At the same time, the rabbi asked that word be spread among the worshippers and refugees of the arrival of two unaccompanied children from Pultusk, in the hopes that someone would identify us.

The news of our arrival spread quickly in the town. In the meantime, we made a place

"The rabbi checked the list of names in his hand, asked us to come closer and embraced us warmly, tears falling onto his beard."

With deep sadness and unmitigated amazement, I pondered: How did we—two boys who had undergone such terrifying experiences—survive the constant threat of death under conditions of cold and starvation? How were we able to escape the cruel enemy in wartime and join thousands of our people's refugees in search of relatives? Like us, these refugees had withstood the horror, leaving behind, in towns and forests, in fields and on roads, silent testimony to a community that was eradicated, to a culture that was obliterated and to the cries of Jews murdered in cold blood by beasts in human guise, ever since Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939.

The crowd grew denser as we got closer to the synagogue. It seems we had encountered a line of worshippers who awaited the local community's food distribution. Our small size allowed us to slip to the head of the line, and reach the synagogue gates with relative

for ourselves in the synagogue under the watchful eye of the rabbi. My friend sat next to me the whole time, still not letting go of me even though we had found shelter. The rabbi requested blankets for us and assigned us a corner in the synagogue to rest until our relatives could be located.

The stream of refugees coming to ask the rabbi for food and lodging did not cease throughout the day. It was an awful sight. People begged for assistance, their faces conveying fear and desperation. Each one recounted his history and gave the names of his missing family members. The rabbi and his assistant listened, wrote down every detail and promised to help as best they could.

We sat down in the corner allotted to us. Someone brought us food and relieved our anxieties. He said it would take time until our relatives were located, as there were thou-

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sands of refugees in the town and its surroundings. After we ate our first hot, cooked meal (unbelievable!), we stretched out in our corner. Michael took the trouble to cover me with a blanket and I fell asleep.

I was awakened by the voice of a tall young man, filtering through to me as if from a dream: “Domb? Sholom Domb? From Pultusk? Your family is here. Your father is on his way to the synagogue!”

This might sound trite, but there are no words to describe the joy that gripped me! It was as if Shulem Domb had been reborn. Without a doubt, these were among the happiest moments of my life, moments that will never be forgotten. Everyone around me was

arms in full view of the amazed worshippers. The rabbi blessed us and my father thanked him. Father grasped my hand and we walked out together to the synagogue gate. As we exited, I glanced back at my friend. Our gazes held until I was outside the synagogue walls.

That was the last time I saw him. To this day, I do not know his name or that of his family. Not for naught did I call him an “angel.” Only an angel could perform such miracles and deliver me safe and sound to my family. I have no idea what happened to him or his family. I hope that they survived and are leading happy lives. To this day, I believe with all my heart that he was sent to save me. It is a story beyond belief, which I have now

“My father’s strong embrace enveloped me in the familiar warmth I had missed so much. His whole body trembled. The tears streaming uncontrollably from his eyes onto my arm seared it deeply.”

caught up in the elation. My friend hugged me tightly and exclaimed emotionally: “I told you we’d been saved. Finally, there is someone to look after you. You behaved like a hero. I’m proud of you!”

Approximately an hour later, I noticed my father making his way through the massive crowd in the synagogue. I got up and leaped towards him. For the first time, Michael let go of my hand.

“Father! Father!” I screamed in a broken voice.

“Shulem!”

My father’s strong embrace enveloped me in the familiar warmth I had missed so much. His whole body trembled. The tears streaming uncontrollably from his eyes onto my arm seared it deeply.

I can still feel their impression to this day, many years after we were reunited. I, however, did not cry. I introduced “my angel” to Father, who shook his hand and hugged him. Father was still in complete ignorance of our experiences.

At this point, someone announced that my friend’s family had also been found and they were on their way. I stared into Michael’s face, which failed to disguise his emotions. I sneaked a smile at him and ran into his

retrieved from the depths of my memory for the first time. Although I recounted it in the past, this is the first time I am putting it into writing. Unfortunately, I cannot recall exact names and dates from this period, but there is no doubt that these events occurred in the early months of the war, a war worse than any other—World War II.

Father took me to where our family was staying. When my sisters saw us approaching, they ran towards us and immediately enveloped me in their warm arms. The tears of joy shed that day would not put to shame the many streams I crossed in my wanderings.

Everyone gathered around me and asked about my experiences. I shared everything. Every detail. The tears did not cease falling from the family’s astonished eyes. I don’t know where so many tears could have come from. The questions were endless.

“Where did you meet your young friend?” asked my sister Ita, who did not stop hugging me.

“In the cellar of Father’s Polish friend’s shed, the friend who handed us over to the Germans,” I answered.

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Upon hearing my tale, a forceful Polish expletive escaped Father's lips, and he said that one day that Pole would receive his divine retribution. He sat down next to us and declared that from now on we must worry about our future. He related that the rumors among those in the know portended evil. The war was still ongoing, and the Germans were scheming to take control over additional territories. To this end, Hitler had marshaled all of Germany's resources and placed its industry entirely at the army's disposal, for the unceasing production of planes, tanks and other military equipment.

Father explained further that after the Polish army had surrendered in Warsaw on September 27th, Hitler had annexed western Poland to the Third Reich. Other areas of Poland, including the districts of Warsaw, Lublin, Radom and Krakow, were designated as the General Government for the Occupied Polish Territories (Generalgouvernement in German). Such administrations were established in places conquered by the Germans but not annexed to Germany. It later became clear that these areas housed most of the extermination camps—the “machines” for the annihilation of the Jews during the Holocaust.

My father and sisters set themselves up outdoors, on a street corner at the edge of the town. My father, who had been a grain merchant in Pultusk, knew many merchants in villages throughout eastern Poland. With their assistance, he managed to obtain a horse and wagon, upon which he loaded all the “belongings” he had accumulated since the deportation: several blankets, a few articles of clothing, eating utensils and a small amount of food.

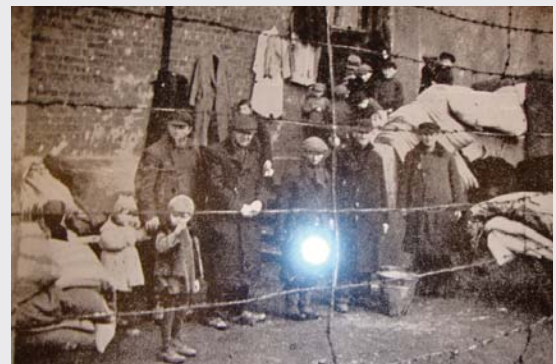
Father was radiant with joy at my return to the bosom of the family. He sat down next to the wagon and informed us of his plans. He spoke quietly and we listened attentively:

“Now that Shulem'keh is back with the family, we must plan our steps carefully. At the moment, we are living under Soviet rule. There is no point in returning to Pultusk, which is under the control of the Germans, who took all our property. The little that remained was looted by our Polish neighbors. We are left

with nothing. In my pocket is a little money from previous debts I succeeded in collecting from several merchants.”

“The Russians have taken over all of eastern Poland and all forms of private enterprise, in accordance with their socialist principles. They have confiscated property and liquidated the commerce run by many Jews. I cannot predict the final outcome of all this, but it is clear that our situation is grim in every respect. As you can see, there are thousands of refugees in this town, and the stores are empty of merchandise. The lines to purchase basic food—bread, milk, flour and rice—are very long, the black market is flourishing, prices are rising and there is no employment.”

Father took a deep breath and continued: “Only one conclusion presents itself. We must move to a large city and try to find a place to live and work so that I can support the family. The place I deem most suitable for us is Bialystok. The city is under Soviet control, but their policies are still not as cruel as the Germans. Besides, we have no other option. So I now ask you to behave responsibly, as adults. We have to preserve the little food we have and use it sparingly.”



Children waiting on bread line

Requesting us to prepare for a long trip of several days, Father said that in the meantime, he would try to obtain supplies and food for the coming days. He asked Ita to watch over me, and set out on his way. Ita needed no instructions from Father; her eyes did not leave me.

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From the moment she saw me, she felt the responsibility of a mother, did not let me budge from her sight, looked after my welfare. Her warm embrace was indeed like that of a mother. She instinctively understood what I had undergone and tried to instill stability in our abnormal situation and a warm, loving family feeling, especially towards me.

During my short existence, I had managed to experience life under German occupation. And now I was in another part of my same native country, but under Soviet rule. I sat on the harnessed wagon and gazed around me. Masses of people filled the streets, Jewish and Polish refugees mingling with the local population. Trucks with red flags, carrying Red Army soldiers, moved along the town's roads. It seemed that the color red had become dominant in those days. The flags displayed the hammer and sickle symbol.

Relations between Russia and Poland had always been strained, full of suspicion and hostility. The Russian's Sovietization of the areas under conquest forced many Poles, primarily the middle class and estate owners, to give up their property. A considerable number also fled to large cities in the Generalgouvernement under German control and had no means of existence.

The new Russian regime did not overlook the Jews, many of whom lost their property and businesses. With the completion of the nationalization of private property and capital in November 1939, economic activity was effectively paralyzed. The nationalization process and the communist socialist takeover entailed imprisonment and exile of property holders and business owners, including many Jews.

None of this affected our family in any way. The Germans had already stolen our property and business. What was left to take from us?

We remained with a few garments and the small amount of food Father obtained with the little money he had.

A few hours later, Father approached the wagon, loaded with packages. Ita and Sarah ran up and helped him carry everything.

"The lines are long and stores are empty," said Father, adding: "We're lucky—a Pole I know from my travels agreed to sell me some goods at double price. There's no point in staying here. We must hurry to Bialystok, where the situation is more reasonable. The Pole also said that we'll be able to manage better in a large city than in towns and villages packed with refugees."

After we piled the goods onto the wagon, Father helped Ita arrange it as comfortably as possible for the extended sitting that awaited us. The wagon was smaller than that of the Pole who had smuggled us to the border. There was barely enough room for us and for our few belongings. Father sat up front on a special wagon driver's stool. We set out on our way: Father, my three sisters—Ita, Sara, Zipporah—and I. On this one small, old-fashioned wagon that held all our possessions, we all squeezed in for the trip to the unknown. The wagon's wheels squeaked and it was evident from its appearance that it had traversed many miles in its time. We proceeded on a road leading out of town. Father covered me with a blanket to protect me from the cold wind that blew at us mercilessly.

Throughout the journey, I looked around carefully. When we had placed a considerable distance between ourselves and the town, I drew Ita's attention to a thicket of bushes on the left side of the road and explained:

"This is where I hid with my friend on the way to the town. And there, further on, we crossed the stream. There are Germans on the other side of the stream." As I spoke, I pointed out the spots I had passed with my friend Michael. My sisters sat up straight and Father looked leftward to see the places I showed them. With a warm hug, Ita said: "Now you no longer have to hide. You're with us and we will watch over you!" **Don't miss the second half of chapter 6 next month.** □

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