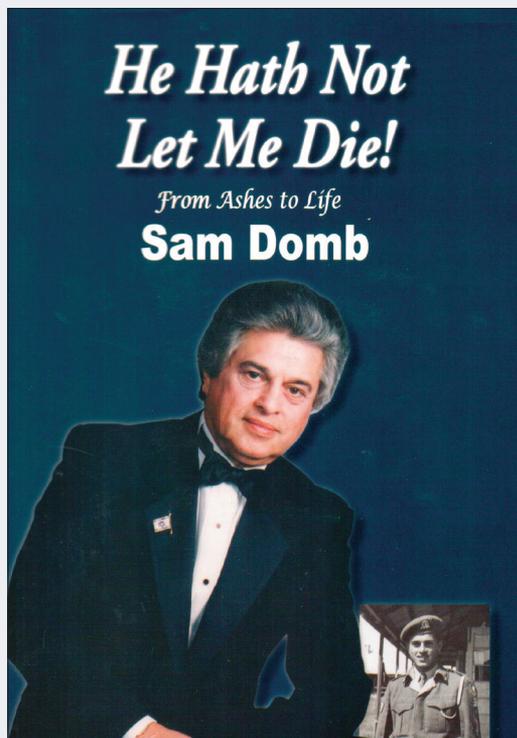


# He Hath Not Let Me Die

*From Ashes to Life*

Now You Can Read Excerpts From This Riveting Book  
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## He Hath Not Let Me Die



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### Chapter 7

## Bialystok

*"Arise and go now to the city of slaughter, into its courtyard wind thy way; and with the eyes of thine head, behold."*

*"Be'ir ha-Haregah" (City of Slaughter) by H.N. Bialik*

Bialystok was a huge city. I had never visited such a large city before. Here, too, the heavy hand of the Nazis was clearly in evidence. At the outbreak of the war, the Germans had attacked the city and several buildings had collapsed during the bombings. The Nazis entered the city on September 15th and retreated a week later. Under the

terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the city came under control of the Soviet forces.

The city resembled a battlefield. Hundreds of Red Army tanks and military vehicles were scattered everywhere and battalions of soldiers roamed the city. Worst of all were the enormous numbers of

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*Signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*

refugees who flooded the city. Most, if not all, were Jews who had run for their lives from the claws of the Nazi predator, or had been expelled from their homes in the cities and villages and savagely crushed. The stream of refugees into the city was endless, like the powerful current of an overflowing river.

At first, Father thought we could manage here; but it quickly became apparent that even the Russian conqueror was unable to restore order and cope with such a large population crying out for food and housing. Every synagogue, school and *beit midrash* (study hall) was filled with Jewish families who had arrived empty-handed. All public auditoriums housed refugees; families wallowed in hallways and public areas, under appalling sanitary conditions. Bialystok Jews opened their homes to relatives and acquaintances. Social service institutions and philanthropic organizations did their best to help their Jewish brethren. Although the large community of 50,000 Jews was well-organized, the burden was much too heavy for its institutions to bear.

Our wagon made its way through the masses and Father looked for a convenient place to park. He was very familiar with Bialystok. He thought he would contact his acquaintances in the city, but first wanted to locate a good spot for the wagon and convert it into a home during the coming days. All its problems notwithstanding, the city was safe and protected by Red Army forces and there was no fear of cruelty towards Jews. Although

the Russians also ruled with a heavy hand, they tried, in contrast to the Germans, to cope in their own fashion with the suffering that had been created.

Father set up our temporary living quarters on a street corner not far from the synagogue; we stayed there for several days. We met many Pultusk residents who had fled for their lives. They scoured the city as we did, looking for solutions to the grim situation. Most difficult and painful was the sight of prominent community members, depressed, broken and humiliated, standing on an endless line for a bowl of soup and a portion of food.

How moving it was when Father encountered some of his brothers. But the joy quickly disappeared and dissolved into bitterness when we heard of relatives who had not survived. I closed my ears when they recounted the brutal methods used by the Nazis to murder our family members. But it was necessary to continue and survive, come what may.

Father succeeded in obtaining a little food, but searched for work to ensure our continued existence. Between the food distributed by the Jewish community and that trickling in from the Soviet army, we managed to survive our first weeks in Bialystok.

In order to ease the hardship, the Soviet authorities offered all Polish refugees in the city free travel for whoever wished, to the Ukraine and Belarus. Masses of people stood in line for entire days to register for the program. As stated, the situation in Bialystok was very difficult and many wanted to try their luck elsewhere. The army placed hundreds of trucks at the disposal of those interested, to transport them and their families to the designated destinations.

Many of the refugees from Pultusk went to Lithuania. Lithuania had been occupied by the Russians along with Eastern Poland, and in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, annexed to the Soviet Union in 1940. The rumor spread that it was possible to travel from Lithuania to *Eretz Israel*. We also heard that Rabbi Lowenthal, the rabbi of Pultusk, had moved to Vilna with his family

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and other community members. With a population of 200,000, half of whom were Jews, Vilna was considered a large city. Not for naught was it referred to as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania.” It was a modern, bustling city, although we heard first-hand from people who wandered from city to city that anti-Semitism existed there, too. Father decided to remain in Bialystok. In retrospect, this proved to be a wise gamble.



*Burned synagogue, Bialystok 1941*

Although the evacuation of many refugees led to some measure of relief, the situation remained dire. Many people were still without employment and signs of the approaching winter forced us to find a roof over our heads. Father returned one day and reported that he had found a hiding place with other refugees on an unused truck at the edge of the city. Its canvas cover could protect us from the cold of winter.

This truck was an ideal housing solution for us, even if we had to share it with other refugees. We received appropriate compensation for the horse and wagon that Father sold, but from now on we had to pack our “belongings” in bundles and carry them from place to place ourselves, like the other refugees.

“I must find a job if we do not want to end up dependent on the charity of others—perhaps one of the local farmers has something for me. While I work, Ita will watch over you,” said Father, adding: “I’ll try to reach one of the villages I visited before the war; maybe I’ll have a chance there. Don’t worry if I’m

delayed in returning. I will be back, no matter what, even if it’s late at night.”

Ita looked at Father and reassured him: “Don’t worry about us, Father, I’ll watch over everyone. Go safely and I hope you are successful. We’ll stay here and wait for you.”

Father left us and set out on his way. The stress and tension he was under was evident in his body language and the way he spoke. His determination to do everything to survive knew no bounds. He had run around for entire days to obtain a bit of food for us and to arrange a place to sleep. Not for one moment had he ceased to search for work within the city. But his efforts were unsuccessful.

“What kind of work is Father looking for?” I asked Ita worriedly.

“These days, one can’t be too picky, one takes whatever work is available. Father said he would look in one of the villages. Perhaps he’ll get a job cutting wood or on one of the farms. I hope he finds something, because our money is running out,” answered Ita, looking concerned.

All of Father’s attempts to obtain employment in Bialystok and its environs proved useless. The Russians had liquidated many businesses and nationalized factories. Anyone considered “bourgeois” was arrested and exiled to Siberia. The Polish “zloty” had collapsed, becoming almost worthless; all liquid assets disappeared and a barter system developed. Long lines of people waited outside stores that had merchandise.

One day, Father returned from his regular search for work with good news: “Children, I’m delighted to report that I found a job! Tomorrow I’ll begin to work at a military gas station. One of my tasks will be to use a hand pump to provide gas for army vehicles passing through Bialystok.”

We were very happy to hear this. In the course of his work, Father developed connections with military personnel and many of the drivers who knew him gave him some food from time to time. In those crazy days, this was also something.

We endured a harsh winter. Ultimately, we were at the mercy of the Jewish com-

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From Ashes to Life*

munity and its institutions, which provided us with minimum essentials—a small amount of food and some basic clothing.

The Russians made life even harder with their new laws and procedures. They forbade all activity of a national or religious nature. In line with their system of socialism, they nationalized all factories privately owned by Jews and others. Furthermore, Russian soldiers also stole many Jewish possessions, including Father’s watch.

The Nazi monster sat on the border, several kilometers from Bialystok, and continued to hunt for more and more prey. Its appetite knew no bounds. We were extremely disturbed by reports from Russian soldiers detailing Hitler’s successes as he occupied Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. The rumors circulating about the Jews from those countries described an accelerated process of concentrating them in ghettos, confiscation of their property, merciless slaughter and deportation to labor and death camps.

New refugees who had succeeded against all odds in crossing the roadblocks and borders appeared daily and arrived in Bialystok on their last legs. They were an important source of information for us about the Nazis’ actions in occupied Poland. From them we learned of the “labor camp” set up in April 1940, which became the concentration and extermination camp, Auschwitz. Later, we heard of the Warsaw Ghetto, established in November 1940.

This period we spent wandering around Bialystok as refugees was terrible. We all prayed for an end to the war, but there was no indication of this then, in early 1941. Radio reports told of additional German conquests, this time in Greece and Yugoslavia. One by one, countries fell into German hands; and everywhere, the stories repeated themselves—unrestrained murder of Jews, confiscation of their property and concentration of Jewish populations in ghettos.

April 1941 was marked by increased Soviet military activity in Bialystok. Numerous tanks and military vehicles loaded with sol-



diers filled the streets and stationed themselves around the city. Positions changed every few days.

“I have a bad feeling,” I heard Father musing aloud.

“What do you mean,” asked Ita.

“The intensive military movement in the area indicates that something is about to happen. I hope there won’t be another flare-up. I tried to see if anyone at the synagogue understands the meaning of all this military deployment, but no one could explain it.”

“Maybe the Russians know what is about to transpire, but want to keep it from the civilian population?” asked Ita.

“Perhaps,” Father responded. “The news of many European countries falling to the Nazis one after another is surely worrying to the Russians. In any case, my instinct tells me that things do not bode well for the future.”

The conditions under which we lived in the city, along with our helplessness, left no alternative but to maintain our desperate attempts to survive and to hope for an end to this hell. But the shocking reports from the other side of the border stole from us all peace of mind and left us unable to sleep a wink.

The morning of June 22nd is forever etched in my memory. We were awakened in the pre-dawn hours by the deafening wail of sirens. Minutes later, the familiar noise of planes filled the air. German Messerschmitt aircraft conquered the city’s skies and powerful explosions were heard all over.

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In a dramatic radio report, Russian foreign minister Molotov announced that the Germans had opened attack on Russia and were bombing its cities. The agreement he had signed with the German foreign minister over a year ago was not worth the paper it was printed on.

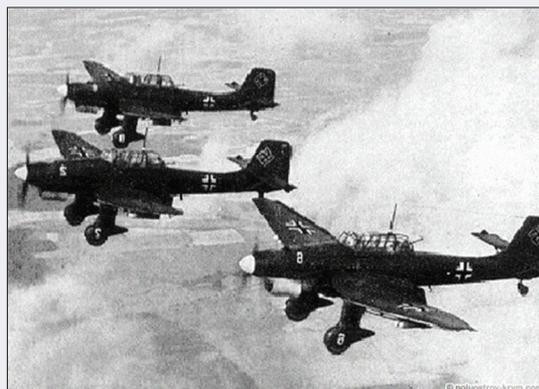
“Germany is invading Russia! Germany declared war on Russia,” was heard from all sides as people scurried, panic-stricken, in search of a hiding place.

Father gathered us together as soon as the bombings began and at his instructions, we immediately packed our belongings and awaited his word. As another wave of planes pounded the city endlessly with heavy bombs, Father declared agitatedly: “We will stay here until the bombing ends, then flee the city eastward, because the Germans will arrive afterwards. I have no idea if the Russian army will succeed in stopping them. We must leave immediately!”

The explosions destroyed buildings, which collapsed on their residents. Hundreds of bodies were scattered throughout the city. Burning tanks blocked roads and wrecked military vehicles were abandoned with their wounded and dead soldiers inside. Heart wrenching cries and wails were heard all over. Flames engulfed many buildings, smoke spiraling towards the sky. Father waited for a lull and when it came he rushed to get us out of the city.

We barely managed to make our way through the rubble. The images were horrifying. Dismembered corpses were scattered everywhere. The wounded, bleeding heavily, cried out in pain and called for help. Military vehicles undamaged by the bombing were seen escaping from Bialystok. Pandemonium reigned and the city lay in ruins, its streets in bedlam. Father asked us not to look around and instead to focus on following him quickly. Sounds of explosions and machine gun fire were heard clearly from the western side of the city.

Father said we must distance ourselves from the main road and military vehicles as these were targets for enemy planes. We walked eastward under the cover of darkness



*German planes over Russia*

towards the retreating Soviet forces. Bursts of shells and rounds of machine gun fire were still blasting in the background. We veered off the main road onto a side path, near a grove. From there we witnessed lines of Red Army tanks and vehicles retreating to the east on the main road.

Russian officials and security personnel escaped with their families in cars, wagons or on horseback. Masses abandoned the city and fled like lost sheep. The goal was to get as far away as possible from the approaching enemy. Looking backward, Bialystok was seen going up in fire, enveloped in a cloud of smoke.

Father urged us to keep walking. We walked all night almost without stopping. He apparently knew something that he kept from us.

Just before dawn broke, a mighty wave of German planes swooped down on the retreating Russian convoy, and explosions accompanied by fire and columns of smoke were visible along the length of the main road which Father had been determined to avoid. We escaped to the nearby grove, looking at the horror transpiring before our eyes. The planes had no mercy on Bialystok. We looked behind us and saw the “bats of steel” raining heavy fire on the city over and over again. I thought how wise my father had been to urge us to escape so quickly.

Wave after wave, the planes descended on the city, as if the death and destruction we had witnessed several hours earlier were not enough.

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The planes unleashed their wrath and disappeared. Father repeated that we must continue eastward by roundabout paths. We walked along a winding road that reached a creek. We stopped to quench our thirst, wash ourselves and rest a bit. A long line of refugees trailed behind us. We were among the first to flee Bialystok.

Not one of us understood the situation; all we knew was that the Germans had declared war on the Russians, the ramifications of which act we were now witnessing with our own eyes, all around us. We did not know what our own fate would be. If the Germans occupied the area, it would be catastrophic for us to be under their control. We had already witnessed their barbaric behavior in Pultusk and on the roads.

As stated, we were terrified by the accounts of their horrific acts, which we had heard repeatedly from refugees arriving in Bialystok.

German planes conquered the skies. Squadron after squadron flew eastward over our heads. Refugees began to slowly gather around us and we again saw appalling sights. Some refugees were wounded, some bandaged. Father was determined to continue on our way without stopping, and constantly urged us on: “We should leave here as soon as possible, before the Germans arrive. They have vehicles and tanks, while we’re on foot. They are liable to catch up with us at any moment. Perhaps, in spite of everything, our best option now is to return to the main road in case we find someone willing to give us a ride eastward,” suggested Father, while carrying our bundles on his back.

I stood looking at my father and sisters. At that moment I was not fully aware of the enormity of the tragedy that had befallen me. My childhood and youth were over; the joy of childhood had ended for me before it had even begun.

Several of the refugees walking with us were convinced that everything would work out fine, exactly as the songs of that era implied: Stalin would give the order and the Red Army would clear the area of the cruel German invader. They harbored the hope in their hearts that all would be safely restored

in a short time. Their disappointment was as great as their expectations. By contrast, Father was a realist and viewed things more clearly: whenever the Germans initiated an air attack, invasion followed immediately. He therefore felt that we should leave the city quickly and resume our travel on the roads.

“Ita, you hold Shulem’keh and make sure he doesn’t trip,” instructed father. “Sarah and Zipporah, walk behind me, holding hands. This time, we will go as fast as possible. I hope you drank enough water; we are going to walk without stopping.”

“Father, you don’t think it’s dangerous to be on the main road? After all, the Germans bombed the convoy traveling on it,” Ita reminded him.

“Yes, you’re right, it’s no small gamble. But I assume that if they bombed the convoy on this road, they’ll set their sights on other places and won’t return. In any case, we’ll keep our eyes open and if we see planes approaching, we will immediately run to the side, far from the road. Our only option for a quick escape before the Germans come is in some kind of vehicle. I might be able to stop one of the drivers I met when I worked at the military gas station. We must find someone who will agree to give us a ride!” explained Father determinedly. He was knowingly taking a calculated risk.

After walking a long time, Father stopped us and said: “Unfortunately, I don’t see any Russian resistance.”

“Why did the Russians flee and not fight back?” asked Ita.

“I don’t know. Apparently, the attack surprised them and they weren’t sufficiently prepared. But who can withstand an attack as massive as that of the Germans? I didn’t see a single Russian plane in the sky. The Germans are doing as they please in the area. This is total war—they mercilessly bombed and shelled a city along with its residents. I am convinced that thousands were killed in the bombings,” sighed Father, looking behind him. Bialystok was going up in flames. **Don’t miss chapter 8 next month.**

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