A Conversation with Yehuda Elberg

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Yehuda Elberg was a Yiddish novelist, essayist, community organizer, and businessman. Born in Zgierz, Poland in 1912 to a rabbinic family, he was active in the Polish resistance in World War II. He established the Writers' Union and Dos Naye Lebn, *the first Jewish newspaper in Poland after the war, and was the author of numerous novels, Hasidic tales, short stories, and dramas in Yiddish and Hebrew. His novel* Oifn Shpitz fun a Mast (On the Tip of a Mast, *translated in English as* Ship of the Hunted) *won the Manger Prize for literature, as did* The Empire of Kalman the Cripple. *He won the Prime Minister's Award in Israel for Yiddish Literature in 1985. I was privileged to know Elberg — my Uncle Yehuda — all my life. I interviewed him at length in 1999-2000, three years before his death in 2003. May his memory be a blessing.*

From your background, one would have expected you to become a rabbi, no?

I do come from a rabbinic family, and I grew up with rabbinics all around me. My great-grandmother Genendel was a learned woman who spoke Hebrew and often quoted from the Bible. They called her "Reb Genendel" out of respect. She used to say that she liked rabbis, and she swore she would marry off both her daughters to rabbis. One of her daughters married my grandfather, Rabbi Zvi Yehezkel Mikelson, who became the chief rabbi of Warsaw and published 56 books, or at least that's as many as I've found. That was my mother's side. My father, Avraham Nathan Elberg, was also a rabbi and the son of a rabbi, and his two older stepbrothers were both rabbis. As a child I always expected that I would become a rabbi. And certainly that expectation grew as I got older. Until I was about 14 or 15 I intended to be a rabbi. I could make up a sermon, I knew how to research the halakhah. It's not that I was so gifted, I saw it around me — my father, my uncles, my grandfathers.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up mostly in Zgierz, not that far from Warsaw. It was considered a big town, although it only had about 1000 Jewish families. Still, that was big, Jewishly-speaking. It was an industrial city, with an industry based on textile wovens, mostly handled by Jews and Germans. Later I became a textile engineer too.

Not a rabbi?

I *was* ordained a rabbi, when I was about seventeen. Even then I had my doubts, and by nineteen I knew that I wouldn't be able to carry through as a rabbi. It would have been dishonest. I would have had to be ultra Orthodox with a beard — there weren't any other kinds of rabbis then and there weren't any other choices available. What might have been forgiven in a Conservative rabbi would never be forgiven in an Orthodox rabbi, especially there.

How did you come to stray from the path?

I started to read modern literature. The first books I read in *haskalah* [modern or "Enlightenment"] literature I found in my father's desk. He was a deeply religious man but intellectually curious. I stole his books, one book at a time, and I read them in the toilet. Once he caught me. He said, "What are you doing with this?" I said "I'm reading it." He said, "It's not for you, you have time for this." I said, "Papa, you know where I got it." He said, "There will come a time. Right now it may have a wrong influence."

And he was right. I felt curious to explore, and one thing led to another. I started going to a library in Zgierz, I read at night especially, or I got up at 4 in the morning in the summertime to read. I read whatever I could get hold of — commentaries on religion, on the Bible, Talmud, Jewish history books, Darwin. I started reading the Yiddish novels of Sholom Asch, then moved on to Polish literature which is quite good. I was fascinated with the novel, and I think the greatest influence on me was Dostoyevsky. I liked his characters. If he mentioned a person's name, he gave a picture like you would take an x-ray of a person — he showed you everything inside.

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Then why did you get ordained a rabbi?

It was almost by accident. I had been studying with my father's

father instead of at the yeshiva, but I rejoined my yeshiva class for the final exams. My father was one of the examiners, and my other grandfather was the rabbi of Warsaw, so failure was out of the question!

There were 50 or 60 students at the exam. Many of the questions had to do with the laws of kashrut which can be quite intricate. The examining rabbi, who had shrewd eyes that ran from one student to another, wanted to catch someone. So he posed the following question: For a wedding feast, 30 calves' feet were cooked and cooled so that they became a gel. Later it was discovered that one of the calves' feet came from a treif animal. What is the status of the rest of the calves' feet — kosher or treif?

Now the law is that if something treif mixes in with kosher food, the kosher food must be 60 times the treif item for the entire food to be considered kosher. If the ratio is less than 60 to 1, the entire food is considered treif and cannot be eaten. I was sitting in the back and I watched what happened. The rabbi pointed and a student said, "Treif." He asked another student and the student said, "Treif." By the time he asked a third student, I was wondering, Is he a fool? He heard the answer, so why is he still asking? But how is it possible that the calves' feet could be kosher? You need a 60 to 1 ratio, and here he said there were only 30 calves feet.

But when he kept asking the same question and getting the same response, I knew there was something we were missing. I started thinking so intensely that I felt the wheels of my brain turning. I was trying to see from the way he posed the question what he was trying to get at. First I thought about the principle: *davar she-b'minyan lo bateil*, for things that can be counted (such as calves' feet), if one of them is treif, they all are considered treif. But that principle didn't fit here because the rabbi clearly wasn't accepting an answer of treif. Then I recalled that the law says, *atzamot ha-issur mitztarfim le-heter k'shehen mino*. The bones of the forbidden are added to the permitted if they are of the same type. And it hit me — why was he using calves' feet in the question? Because calves' feet are mostly bone. The bones of the treif foot could be added to the others to make the whole thing kosher. Only the little bit of blemished skin would be counted as treif, while the rest of the calf's foot would be considered kosher.

I saw my father looking at me, so I put my hand up. The rabbi asked me, and I recited the principle and gave my reasoning. I could see how proud my father was, and I noticed that even some of the examiners were surprised at

the answer. But a few minutes later I realized what I had done and said to myself: Idiot, you were supposed to fail! Because I didn't think I wanted to be a rabbi. So I told myself, the next question that comes to me, I'll spoil it and fail. But they didn't ask me again. They must have thought that if I could remember such an obscure thing, there's no use asking me any more questions.

I imagine it was hard to pull away from the religious world you grew up in.

It was difficult. With time I became — not exactly secular but more worldly. I had a different outlook on life. I wasn't that observant, although to this day, I have kosher dishes and a kosher home, the Torah is dear to me, and I still enjoy studying a piece of Talmud — these are the traditions of my people. I never had a strong urge to violate the Shabbos, because I never smoked. That was always the greatest temptation! There was a writer, I remember, Grossman was his name, who would puff cigarette after cigarette on Friday afternoon and blow the smoke into a bottle. Then he would seal the bottle and on Shabbos he'd unseal it and inhale.

So instead of the rabbinate, you started writing. What did you work on?

I wrote two novels before the war, both of which were lost. One was a novel about a rabbinical controversy between two rabbis in the 17th century, Yonatan Eibeschutz and Yakov Emden. The second book was about Herod the Great. I've dreamed of writing it again but I've never had the time. To this day, I mourn those novels almost as much as close kin.

Were they published?

No. But on my twentieth birthday, in 1932, I published my first story, "Ber Lep," in the *Forward*. I didn't read the *Forward* — who could afford it? But I knew the name of the editor, Abe Kahn, and I knew where to send the story in New York. I wrote him that I would like to have it published on my birthday. It took a very long time, however, until I actually got a copy of the paper and saw it published. But it was the publication in the *Forward* that helped save my skin when I was in the army.

Which army?

When I was twenty-one, I joined the Polish army. My older brother David had made aliyah some years earlier because he didn't want to be drafted. He said, "If I go into the army, I'll go into a Jewish army!" But then from Palestine he wrote to me saying, "We need soldiers. Go and learn in the Polish army and then come to Palestine."

There was terrible anti-Semitism in the Polish army even though there weren't many Jews there. Some Jews starved themselves to get out, some paid to get out. When I reported to the induction office, they asked me, Do you want to serve in the army? I said yes. They were flabbergasted, they had never seen a Jew who voluntarily joined the army.

But it turned out to be worse than I could have imagined. It was a place of torture. The sergeant who drilled us made it like a concentration camp. We had to do the impossible, and on top of it, insults and discrimination. I only stayed there six or eight weeks. What saved me was that I received a payment from the *Forward* for some pieces I had written. They found out and maybe they were afraid that I would write about their anti-Semitism in America. So when I complained, they were happy to send me home.

Your novels and short stories have two major themes to them: pre-war life in Poland and the Holocaust. I imagine these are the two big influences in your life. Where did you spend the war years?

First in the Warsaw ghetto, and then in hiding and in the underground. I had gotten married in 1939, about two months before the war started. I was an optimist, I didn't believe there would be a war. I went to Warsaw in November or December 1939; the Germans had already occupied Poland. We went to Warsaw because my grandfather, the head of the Jewish community, was there. Everyone knew him. We thought it would be easier to live there. My parents went there, and two of my sisters. The ghetto was created about a year later, I think.

My wife Rayzel unexpectedly got pregnant. I managed to find a place of our own, one room with a kitchen — this was a great thing! — at 57 Novolipye Street. I worked as the director of three welfare kitchens in the ghetto. I saw to it that the food should be brought, and checked the budget and the employees. And right from the beginning I was involved with brokering textiles. You know, there were no textiles to be had – it was war time, and all textiles were required to be given away to the Germans. But some wholesalers still had textiles hidden away and they wanted to sell them for cash, gold, something you could carry with you. So they would cut slivers from the edge of the cloth and give them to agents who found buyers. That's how I made a living. They trusted me because they had bought from me before the war when I was a textile manufacturer in Lodz. So it was easy for me to get the slivers.

The whole business was in the wallet. I would show the slivers to the prospective buyers who were either Poles who came into the ghetto to buy or Jews who knew the Poles. Once I went to Lodz with a Polish woman, a neighbor of Rayzel's parents. I took off the Jewish armband at risk of my life and brought some textiles. She and I wrapped them around our bodies.

Did you understand what was happening?

I didn't believe they would liquidate the ghetto. How was it possible? It defied reason. There was a world watching. But Hitler defied the world, and the world didn't react. At the beginning, a brother-in-law of mine got a postcard from a provincial city that said, "They are taking us out of this town on this and this day. Consider this my yahrtzeit." I said it was crazy, that's a crazy idea, it's an unreasonable fear, panic.

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We knew about concentration camps, but we didn't know. We knew they arrested some people for smuggling and other things and took them to concentration camps. But to take everyone? I didn't think they would dare. Later we received information from the underground, that they took the Jews from Warsaw by train to Treblinka, in cattle cars. Even in the underground at the beginning they didn't believe it. But very soon in every underground newspaper in Warsaw there was a warning: Don't let yourself be taken. Do everything to avoid it. But then the Germans went systematically, taking people street by street. Very few managed to hide. What could they do after hiding? There was no food, it was a locked up area.

What happened to your child?

My son Emmanuel was born in January 1940. But when they started to liquidate, there was hunger, very little food. He got dysentery and we didn't have anything — not the proper food, not medication. I brought him to the doctor, who wanted to make some tests, and he took him to the hospital. I tried to stay with him in the hospital, but they wouldn't let me. They said it was an epidemic. So I left and came back later, but I could not get in. The hospital was surrounded and the Germans took all the patients on the train, including the children and people who couldn't talk, people half dead. My

son disappeared. I never saw him again. Imagine a child suddenly left without his parents. I tried to bribe a nurse who worked at the Umshlagplatz, where they loaded the train. She too tried but she couldn't do anything. He wasn't sent away immediately, he was sick; but just when I thought I was about to get him back, nothing came of it.

You must have been frantic.

You can imagine. I seldom talk about it because the pain is still raw. At the time I wanted to commit suicide.

What happened to the rest of your family?

My mother died of typhus in the ghetto, in 1940 or 1941. My sisters and their families were deported and died at the hands of the Germans. My father and my youngest sister Genendl survived one big Aktion. I kept hiding them and bringing them food. We knew that the Germans would come again. The next Aktion I put Rayzel in a hiding place and ran over to my father and sister to bring them to the same place. But it seems that someone had advised them that the Germans would take the Warsaw rabbinate separately — and it was hoped that the rabbis would be saved from deportation. Perhaps they thought that through my grandfather's prestige, my father and younger sister would be allowed to stand with the rabbinate.

But they were all taken — my grandfather and my father and sister, and all the rabbinate. One Jewish policeman who knew our family told me that he saw an old man who had been beaten and had a bloody face, and his beard was cut off roughly, with a knife. He recognized my grandfather and took him to a little shack and told him, Don't move from here, I'll see what I can do to get you out of here. But my grandfather refused his help. He said: They take all the people, for whom should I survive? The policeman went off to arrange things — he was going to bring him out in the wagon where they brought out corpses — but when he came back, my grandfather wasn't there. That was the last of my family – a couple hundred people.

What happened to you?

After the big deportation, there was left a small ghetto. Now everyone realized they had better listen to the underground because there was nothing to lose. The underground group that I was active in wanted to organize a safe house so that if some of our people went out to the forest to organize a group of partisans, they would have a place to stop for the night. It was dangerous to

be out at night because there was a curfew and all the streets were patrolled. I was sent out to find such a place.

At that time I was attached to a group of 30 or 40 Jews who worked on the railroads loading and unloading trains. We went out of the ghetto every day, led by a German or Ukrainian. I always took the night shift which gave me a chance to disappear, and I knew every corner of the railyard. Rayzel knew a Jew who had contacts with Polish peasant families, and one of the families agreed to hide us for money in a basement under their building. Some peasants took money and informed. But I felt that these people could be trusted. The woman was very religious, and I felt that she wouldn't inform and wouldn't let her husband inform either.

So when the final liquidation came in April 1942, Rayzel was at the hideout in Shvider. I was on my way back to the ghetto to notify the group that they could start sending people to the hideout.

But I couldn't get into the ghetto. I went back to the railroad yard and rejoined the night shift group at the building where we would go to rest for an hour and have hot soup. The morning shift arrived, and we were standing outside the building waiting for the guide to take us back to the ghetto. Then I realized that there were too many of the SS. They had surrounded us.

I didn't know exactly what it meant, but I felt that the liquidation had started, and I had fallen into a trap. So I tried to hide in a toilet and they found me, but they didn't shoot me, they threw me back into the group. Then as I was standing there, I decided: no matter what, I'm running, I'm escaping. I saw on one side there was an officer standing with a heavy machine gun on his chest. On the other side was an SS with a dog. Those were the two roads out.

I decided that a dog is more dangerous than a bullet. A dog will notice you, but a bullet might miss. So I went over to the SS with the machine gun and told him I had to relieve myself, and could I go over to the pole that carried the electric and telephone wires. He nodded okay. I was standing there making believe I was doing things behind the pole, and I was watching him. This was in the open field. I saw that he was trying to light a cigarette, but the wind kept blowing and he couldn't light it. He crooked both hands around his mouth to

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light the flame. As he bent his hand to light the cigarette, I jumped behind the building. I didn't run straight because he had an open view of the road for about a mile.

From this position I looked and saw two lines of wooden hoops or rails piled up. I jumped behind them. Then I decided that was far enough. It was already noon, and the Polish workers were going for soup. I pulled off my Jewish armband, pushed it under a pole, and walked out on the road where the SS officer could see me, but I doubted he would remember my looks from the back. Instead of running, I walked leisurely toward the gate. Then I realized I shouldn't go to the gate because every gate was probably guarded. I knew a place where there was a brick wall and a private yard on the other side. The wall wasn't very high — standing on tiptoes one could touch the top. I thought, if I could get there, I could climb the wall and jump over. I made my way over to the place, but standing right near it was a wagon with horses and two Germans with rifles guarding the horses. I waited for them to go, but I realized they would only go when replacements would come.

So I looked around — a Polish worker had left a wheelbarrow with mortar next to the wall. There were a few bricks lying on the ground. I put a little mortar on my jacket and I took the wheelbarrow with the bricks, wheeled it over to the wall, and started trying to repair the mortar. I put a few bricks on the top of the wall, and put on mortar with a wide knife, and the German policemen laughed — Polish workers! I waited for an occasion for them to turn away, but they were amazed at how I was working, because it was silly what I was doing, so they kept watching.

How was I going to get over with them watching? It took a while before it came to me. Idiot! I said to myself. Why do you have to jump over the wall? Why can't you fall down? And that's what I did. I took a misstep, and fell down the other side, and they laughed. I can still hear them laugh, and I thought: *yekke*, I laugh at your expense. I wasn't really laughing because I hurt my knee, I could hardly get up. But I told myself, Reb Yidl, GET UP. And I got up. And after a few steps the pain was easier. From there I made my way to the train station and back to the hideout.

From then on did you stay in the hideout?

Believe it or not, I took the train back the next day. I had to get into the ghetto to tell them about the safe house. I still didn't know that it

was surrounded, that the uprising had started and this would be the end. We had many ways of getting into the ghetto — over the walls, through the sewers. We would pull up the sewer's iron cover and let ourselves down. In some places you could walk, in some places we had to crawl. That day I tried a few different entrances and I realized that all the walls and the sewers were being watched.

I tried going through the Polish cemetery, which bordered on the Jewish cemetery, but I couldn't get in. Then I tried a factory building near the cemetery. This factory was a tannery and its back yard ended in a wall that abutted the ghetto. I was going to climb this wall to get in, but there were lights in all the windows of the factory and light in the yard, and so I knew that the Germans and the Polish police had found out about this passage. I needed darkness. I hid inside the deep hole in the back yard where the raw leathers were soaking in the chemicals. I waited until some lights went out in the windows, and then crawled on all fours to the wall.

When I got to the wall, I heard noises coming from the other side. I realized that while I was trying to get in, some Jews were trying to get out of the ghetto the same way. I didn't want to scare them, and I didn't want them to shoot me either, so I moved back into hiding and they began to jump over the wall. But in the middle, the Polish police came along; it seems they were watching from the factory building. There was shooting, a commotion, and more police and Germans came, until daybreak. Where I was, hiding in the hole, I went down up to my nose. I grabbed some dirt and put it on my face, it shouldn't reflect light.

At daybreak the action stopped and I came out of the hole, half alive. I went to one of the outhouses in the back of the factory to clean myself up a bit. It had been two or three nights already that I hadn't slept. I locked myself from the inside and while I was sitting there, I fell asleep. I was awakened by a man whispering to me in Polish, "I know what's going on. Don't worry. I'll help you." He took me out of the outhouse and into the factory, and gave me a chance to wash up. I still stank from the hides, I couldn't wash myself clean. He gave me some clothes and a drink — the thirst was terrible — and a piece of bread, and said: You'll have to wait until we finish work and then we'll go out. I waited and I walked in the middle of a group of six or eight Polish workers until we reached a street where I had a Polish friend. From there I went to the train and to the hideout.

After one more try to get back in the ghetto — I know it was silly, but it was my conscience — I realized that it was impossible to get in and I would only get myself killed. And I went back to the hideout.

Did you stay there the rest of the war?

Off and on for the next 18 months. At the beginning we picked up people who jumped from the trains and brought them back to the hideout. We were patrolling and watching the trains at night. A few people jumped from the trains from Warsaw to Treblinka — they knew already what was going to happen. If they jumped, we knew it was a train for Treblinka.

But I was in the hideout only a short time before I started feeling like a coward. The whole purpose of finding a hideout had been to save my family and save others from the ghetto. But when the ghetto was liquidated, all I wanted to do was fight, to take revenge on the Germans, at least to do some harm to them as they had done to us.

So with a few other people, I went to a big, dense forest in Eastern Poland — called the Parczewer Velder (the forests of Parczew) where we knew there were Jewish partisans. We were hoping to find them, but we never did. We did find other young Jews who were also looking for the partisans, and together we became a group of our own. At different times, our group was made up of 10 to 30 people, I'd say. We wanted the Polish underground or the Russian partisans to give us guns, but they said: Get them from dead Germans — meaning, you have to kill a German and get his gun. Early on, I remember two people from our group snuck into the house of a policeman and grabbed his gun and ran away with it while he was sleeping. Later, I got my gun from a pool — we were fighting and the Germans left dead soldiers and we collected the guns.

I believe each survivor needed about a thousand miracles to survive.

Our goal was to sabotage the rails that were taking food and ammu-nition to the Eastern Front. Night after night freight trains passed. If we could take apart the rails, or take apart the screws, there would be an accident and the munitions or food wouldn't be delivered. We did manage to derail several trains, and one of them blew up because it was loaded with ammunition.

I can understand how you would have felt despair. I'm having a harder time understanding how you managed to keep your spirits up most of the time.

When we were fighting against the Germans, we thought only about the dangers. Then when we lay down to rest, instead of sleeping, all that we went through would come back. The interesting thing is that I always had a feeling — call it a premonition — that I would survive. It seems that this belief gave me courage and confidence to escape when it was dangerous, to do things that were possible only with that courage. It wasn't just luck. First, I knew if I wouldn't escape — like when I was surrounded by the SS — I knew that if I stayed I wouldn't live, for sure, so what risk did I take if I escaped and he shot me? And with the other escapes it was the same thing. But still, I believe each survivor needed about a thousand miracles to survive. Every day was a miracle.

But you had led such a sheltered life before the war. How did it equip you to survive — in the ghetto, in the forest?

When a person is in crisis, in danger, reserves of hidden strength are accumulated in the body and come out. A person doesn't know what he's able to do until he comes to a crisis.

Your book, Ship of the Hunted, *starts off in the Warsaw ghetto and is the story of a young boy, Yurek, who finds a hideout during the war and has one harrowing escape after another. It sounds like it was based on your own experiences.*

There is a part of me in *Ship of the Hunted.* Not only the Warsaw ghetto and the experience of hiding out with a Polish family, but the illegal ship Moledet that sails from Marseille to Palestine. After the war I was active in the organization Bricha [which facilitated illegal immigration from Eastern Europe to Israel], and helped organize refugees in Marseille onto a ship. More generally, I write from my experiences. I'm not a professional psychologist but I examine myself — my actions and reactions to events, my feelings, as much as I remember, and I remember because I watch myself as if from a distance. This has been true my whole life.

There were many escapes, it's true. I made a number of trips to Warsaw after the liquidation, but on two occasions I was caught. I would go to Warsaw to have contact with the underground and also to get money from them for food. This particular time I went to my contact on Freta Street in Warsaw, and I was nearly there when someone grabbed my arm and said, "I *knew* you'd fall into my hands."

Now this fellow was a Pole whom I had stood up to some months before when he wouldn't pay a fellow Jew for a precious pair of leather boots that he took from him on consignment. It wasn't what I said to him that mattered, but I appealed to the other Polish workers standing around us. I said: We have a mutual enemy, shouldn't we be united? This is a poor man, this is all he has, if you take away his boots, he'll die. And they forced the fellow to give back the boots. I never knew his name, but he lifted a threatening finger at me and said: You'll fall into my hands, I'll find a way to get you.

So here we were, face to face again. So I told him, "Okay, your dream has come true." And I didn't show any panic. We walked and he talked in a loud voice, so I said, "Why are you shouting?" He said, "I'm taking you to the Gestapo." I said, "Am I running away? I'm going with you." I wanted to keep him quiet because I knew if he would holler down the street that he caught a *zhid*, he'd find people who would run over and help him.

As we were walking, he said something again about my end being near. So I burst out laughing. He stopped short, suspicious: "Why are you laughing?" I said, "I know what I'm laughing about." And I walked ahead a few paces. He ran to catch up with me, and said again: "What are you laughing at?" I said: "You think that I'll soon be dead and you'll walk away free and wash your hands of it. I know it will be the opposite."

You should have seen the face of this man. In the second that I said this he changed completely. He was so jittery, I can't describe it. He said, "But I am leading you to Gestapo." I said, "If you want to know, I'll tell you a secret, and I'm not afraid to tell you because you won't be able to carry a secret much longer. I'm connected with the underground and there are two people behind us watching us, and they'll soon take care of the situation."

As I said it, he abruptly turned around and of course the street was empty. I myself turned around and saw the empty street. I couldn't believe I had said "two people" — maybe only one person would be there, that was more than I could hope for. But what do you know, at that moment two people emerged from one of the buildings. I started to breathe again. I turned around to tell him, "Those are the people," but I couldn't find him anymore — it was like the earth had swallowed him up.

How were you liberated?

We knew through the underground bulletin that the Russians were coming closer. I left the hideout and walked the 30 or so kilometers to Lublin where we heard that the provisional government of Poland would be established. I finished up my last pair of shoes on the road. That first night we slept in a destroyed flour mill; there I got together with a few people and we organized a Jewish committee.

At this point, the war was still going on. Warsaw was still not liberated, and Lodz neither. I heard that there were still 18,000 Jews in the Lodz ghetto. I went begging to the Polish army that they should drop me near Lodz, so I should be able to contact the Jews and tell them not to let themselves be taken out of there — to hide, whatever. The Polish army started to investigate me because I asked to be taken to enemy territory. I'm lucky they didn't put me in jail! But events moved faster than the investigation. When the front started to move, I got some help from an officer in the Polish army and from the propaganda/information minister Stefan Matusiefwski — who was a priest and a socialist. I told him, for your propaganda against the Germans, you could use information about the annihilation of the Jews. So I got an official paper saying that I was collecting information about the annihilation of Jews for the minister of information. The same officer that helped me get this paper gave me a military hat, a leather shoulder holster that only officers wore, and a gun.

Eventually Warsaw was taken by the Russians; they burned every house in Warsaw. First they moved out every person, then they burned every house. Not one house remained as it was. When I went with the Polish army to Warsaw, we walked between fires on both sides of the street. Sometimes the flames went up like a canopy over our heads. In Warsaw there was nothing for me to do — there wasn't a house standing. There was a suburb, Raga, where I found some Jews, and I organized them to go to Lublin.

Then I arrived together with the army to Lodz. At that point, the beginning of January 1945, there was still fighting with the Germans at one end of Lodz. I must have been the first civilian Jew who arrived in Lodz. When we came into the center of the city, the first thing I saw on one of the major business streets, in a big display window, was the corpse of a German who had been shot.

I found a Jewish-looking policeman and I asked what happened to the 80,000 Jews of Lodz. He said: A month ago they were deported to

Auschwitz. I said: No one remained? Eventually he told me that there were close to a thousand Jews in hiding. I told him, you have to come with me to find the hidden Jews and tell them they can come out. This is what we did. We went along and every few paces we stopped and called in Yiddish, *kimt arois* [come out]. About 20, 30 people came out that day, and little by little more came out.

I didn't go back to Lublin. I stayed in Lodz — which was a more central city where Jews would find more to do than in Lublin. I took an apartment for myself, and I prepared apartments for our Jewish institutions — the Lodz committee, a regional committee, a historical committee — and for the people who would work there.

How did you get all these apartments? Were they vacant?

It turned out that the temporary government in Lublin had nominated a Jewish governor in Lodz — most people didn't know that because he had a Polish name. But when I told him my story, he gave me papers empowering me to visit apartments and reserve them for Jewish institutions. These were mostly Jewish apartments that had been taken over by Poles and Germans. The people in the apartments were scared — the government wasn't yet in Lodz, and they had never seen papers such as I had, on stationery of the Republic of Poland, and I had a gun and officer's hat. Luckily no one dared test my power. After we notified our people in Lublin that everything was ready for them in Lodz, Jews started coming back to Lodz.

A Jew seeing a Jewish newspaper printed after the war could start to believe it was true, that he was liberated. It was the start of going back to a Jewish life

What were you aiming to do with the remaining Jews?

At that time, the idea was that, to spite everyone, we would build Jewish life in Poland. Later there was anti-Semitism and a pogrom, and most people wanted to leave. Early on, though, I organized a Writer's Union for Yiddish and Hebrew writers, journalists, and actors. We had already a hall for an editorial office — but we wanted a Yiddish newspaper.

How could you focus on a newspaper at such a time?

This was so important that you can't imagine. A Jew seeing a Jewish newspaper printed after the war could start to believe it was true, that he was liberated. It was the start of going back to a Jewish life, and not just being a part of the new Poland.

But there was a problem: would we get Yiddish type? I started thinking, wasn't there a Yiddish printing shop in the ghetto? Before the war there were maybe a quarter of a million Jews in Lodz and two Jewish daily newspapers. Eventually I heard that the printing shop had moved to a neighboring city of Bzezin. I took a friend, Shedletsky, who had helped me organize a Yiddish radio transmission in Lublin, and we went back to Lublin. I had a car and a chauffeur, don't forget!

It was winter time and in Bzezin there was snow and a lot of empty buildings. We looked in a few of them, but we couldn't find anything that looked like printing equipment. As we were about to leave empty-handed, Shedletsky looked behind the stones on a staircase and noticed something. He picked it up and it was a letter of the Hebrew alphabet — a metal printing type!

We started to dig and sift the snow through our hands. We found some letters, and when we couldn't find anymore, we took what we had. We didn't know if it would be worth anything. Eventually a Jewish typesetter came back from the camps and he sorted it out and said it was good but not enough. For instance, he said, "You have one *ayin*, it isn't enough; you need it in every line, you need many of each letter." So I asked him, "From all that you have — big letters, small letters, headline type, etc. — can you set out a page?" At least we would be able to publish a bulletin in Yiddish. He found enough to set out a short page.

So we started to publish a newspaper. It took a week to print four pages. The title was *Dos Neie Leben (A New Life)*. Everyone wanted me to become the editor, but I knew it wouldn't work because the Communists were in power and the Jewish Communists would come back and demand the position. I gave the position to a Communist, Michal Mirsky, and I stayed on as the managing editor. I wouldn't say a bad word about him because he tried to be fair, even though he was a Communist fanatic. I explained to him, Your Communist government is interested that the world should see a Jewish community coming alive with all segments — religious, non-religious, bundists, etc. And he understood it, he grasped that.

But it was hard to make a newspaper this way, with practically no type. In April I went with 10 or 12 others to a European Jewish conference held in London. We arranged a special meeting of the Polish delegates who survived

the Shoah, and they wanted to know what they could do for us. I said: Get us Yiddish type for a Linotype — and I got it!

I was the managing editor but not for long. There was too much else to do. The Zionists wanted very much to get the Jewish orphans out of Poland. First we had to get them back from Polish families, from orphanages, from churches. Sometimes we had to use force, we went with weapons.

I traveled through Germany to help organize life in the camps. I contacted the *Jewish Morning Journal (Morgenjournal)* in New York and I became a roving European correspondent writing about the camps and the refugee life.

How did you have the strength to do all this?

I came out of the war with a crazy energy. I can't explain it psychologically. I came out to rebuild Jewish life, and I did it, I did everything I could.

During and after the war, everyone asked himself, Is it worth it? Why not let it come to an end? And everyone had the same answer: It's not me I'm helping. I'm helping a witness survive. What we the survivors saw, no one had seen, no one would believe it could happen. This was an excuse to go on — meaning, I'm surviving in order to be a witness. It was probably a self-preservation instinct. And there was another thing that practically everyone said: All I want is to live to the day to watch the *mapalah,* the downfall of the Germans. Then whatever would happen to me could happen.

How do you feel today about Germans?

I don't forgive those who were involved. But I can't blame their children. During the war, I thought I would be able to choke any German I met. But when I came to Berlin — this was on the day Berlin was conquered by the Allies — I walked on the streets of Berlin and I looked in people's faces. I wanted to find a face that I could pin to a picture I had seen — a picture of a crib with a baby shot in the head and its brains spilled out. I wanted to connect this picture to a person: Was this man able to do it? Was this one? But there wasn't one face that I could attach to this picture.

Yet they did it.

Yet they did it. I saw it, I watched it. It was a mass psychosis — I mean among the masses of people, that they didn't react, that they didn't make an uprising against the Nazis.

Didn't you want to take revenge for what happened?

From the desire for revenge to killing a person is a far distance. And I never had the opportunity to see a person that I knew was a killer. Maybe if I bumped into such a person, I would kill him, I would be able to hate him. In the forest I shot in self-defense together with others. But face-to-face to kill a man, I don't know. I'm lucky, because it would bother me for the rest of my life. I think I would rather let myself be killed than kill someone.

In no way can a person be the witness, the judge, and the executioner.

I'll tell you a secret. A friend of mine from *cheder* came back from Russia and I met him in Lodz. I was happy to see him. He was an officer in the Russian army, and he told me that they had taken a German prisoner, and he volunteered to take the man to the prisoner-of-war camp. When they got outside the town, he shot the German. Later he said that the German tried to escape. When he gave me his hand to say goodbye, I couldn't touch him. It's true it was a German he shot, but how do you know that German was guilty? How do you know that he didn't leave a child at home, or a wife or a mother? In no way can a person be the witness, the judge, and the executioner.

I wonder, having lived so close to it, how do you think about the evil you saw? How do you think well of people ever again?

I think a lot about it, and I live with it. I would say the Holocaust is alive in me every day and every minute. It isn't something you can get away from or forget. But I don't think evil about people — I love them. I'm better at loving than hating. This is how people are. They can be corrupted — but not all of them. Even the Polish people that I trusted proved that they were all anti-Semites — but still, not everyone was going to inform, to kill a Jew.

And even a corrupted person can return to good if given the right circumstances. This was something I wrote about in a story about a Jewish informer called "837" and also with Kalman in *The Empire of Kalman the Cripple.* Kalman was complex but he had started as a good person. It was life that made him the way he was — the disappointments, the humiliation by the other children, the desertion of his parents when he was a child — and then he was given to a cold old man, who maybe loved him but didn't know how to handle him. In time he became a bitter and twisted person.

I think every person is redeemable if you take them out of their environment and put them in another one.

You published Unter Kuperne Himlen *in the 1950s, a Holocaust novel that has never been translated. And then in the 1960s you were working on two very different books,* Ship of the Hunted (Oifn Shpitz fun a Mast) *and* *The Empire of Kalman the Cripple.

I was writing stories as well as the novels. I write and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite. My wife Shaindle used to say that when I write something, she should hide it. *Oifn Shpitz fun a Mast* came first, in 1974. That and Kalman are very different novels, but they were written at the same time. When I would come to a dead end on one, I would turn to the other. I was in business most of my life — in real estate development — and writing was my relaxation. In the late 1950s you couldn't borrow a dollar and I needed $100,000. You can imagine the tension I was under. But when I sat down to write, it was like being in room, pulling down the shades, and shutting out the light — here I shut out the tension.

I know that you are an optimist by nature, but are there any grounds for being optimistic about the prospects for Yiddish literature?

It's sad. There are no Yiddish readers being born. You have to grow up in a Yiddish home, and except among the very religious, there are no parents who speak Yiddish anymore. My own dear children Eve and Nathan grew up in a Yiddish-speaking house, but if they were writers, they wouldn't write in Yiddish. There will be people who'll be able to write a Yiddish letter, but you have to know more than that to write a book. And what's the point of writing if there are no Yiddish readers?

I have four manuscripts of stories and essays that I wrote in Yiddish originally, but I'm not publishing them because there is no publisher, and no readers. Those who still read Yiddish, even their glasses don't help anymore.

I remember a friend used to say, America is Sodom and Gomorrah. I said, America is beautiful.

You got divorced and remarried after the war. Tell me about it.

Rayzel and I split up in Lodz. We didn't have a happy marriage, right from the start, and I had nothing but painful memories with her. I left Poland in 1946, both to end the marriage and to go to Israel. I couldn't get into Palestine, though, so I went to Paris. I lived there for two years, in an old house belonging to Rothschild where all the apartments were occupied by Yiddish writers from Poland! In Paris I organized a Jewish literary magazine, *Kiyum*. Then in October 1948 I went to New York as a delegate from the magazine to the World Congress for Jewish Culture. At that conference I met my second wife, Tehilla Finerman, who was one of the translators.

We were married in January 1949, and my daughter Eve was born nine months after the wedding. I wanted children and I didn't waste time. I was 36 and Tilly was 29 or 30 when we married. And Nathan was born not much more than a year after Eve. Then, when Nathan was still a baby, Tilly got sick. She felt a lump in her breast and went to the doctor. That's how it started. The cancer came back two years later, and she lived only a few more months. Nathan was only 4 when she died. To me it felt like a continuation of the Holocaust.

You never got to Israel, then.

Before we married Tilly promised that she would go with me to Israel, but then she got pregnant with Eve, and I got used to America. I remember a friend used to say, America is Sodom and Gomorrah. I said, America is beautiful. When I got to New York, people told me I'd never get a job, because I didn't know a word of English. Within weeks, though, I created a job organizing the incoming refugees from the camps. We found them jobs and apartments — there was a shortage of housing after the war. We had a soup kitchen for a while and we did cultural activities.

You married again shortly after Tilly's death, this time to my mother's sister, Shaindle Bloomstone.

Yes. We had moved to Miami before Tilly's recurrence so that it would be easier on Tilly to deal with the winters and the children. I was working for the Histadrut in Miami and Shaindle was vacationing there. She came to a lecture of the new director of the Histadrut, whom she knew. After the lecture, I was standing with him as people came up to him with compliments. Shaindle came over, and he told her, Let me introduce you to the Yiddish writer Yehuda Elberg. When she heard my name, she pointed to me, and called out: "837!" She had read my short story. This was the beginning.

We got married shortly after and I moved to Montreal where she lived. We were together for close to thirty years — thirty enjoyable years, for both of us. We got along beautifully, as if we were of one mind. Over the years we became part of the Yiddish writers' community in Montreal which the poet Melech Ravitch had gathered around him.

Shaindle had a great youthfulness about her, a capacity for love and for happiness. When she died in 1987, it again felt like I was back in the Holocaust. She had kept it from me that she had a heart problem, and when she had a heart attack I was in Israel working on two books that were being published. She arranged with friends that they should make a surprise 75th birthday party for me in Israel. I suspect that she didn't feel well a couple of days before the heart attack, but she didn't want to spoil my party. Because right after the party I got the telephone call that she was in the hospital. I rushed back and saw her alive, but only for a matter of hours.

One of the things I always loved when I would visit you and Shaindle in your home in Montreal was your collection of Judaica — silver, paintings, manuscripts. How did you start collecting?

Manuscripts were always my favorite. My advantage was that I knew what I was buying. I once bought a Hebrew manuscript of the five books of the Torah, handwritten on parchment, from around 1417. It was signed by the sofer, a famous scribe. There is an interesting story how I bought it. There was a man I knew, a religious person who enjoyed discussing Torah, not a great scholar, but he knew a bit. One Friday afternoon close to Shabbos he called me and said, "You have a parcel of land at such and such place, would you sell it?" I was very eager to sell it, but I said, "It depends on the price." So we bargained and came to an agreement on a price.

I went to his office and I was silly enough to say, "You know that you're getting a bargain. I wouldn't have sold it if I didn't need the money." Which was true, but once he heard that, he changed his mind, and wanted to lower the price by several thousand dollars from what we had agreed on. It was still bad times, and I really needed the money. I think it ended up that he took off $3,000, close to half of what we agreed. As I was standing in his office, though, I saw he had a shelf with a few *seforim* [holy books]. I went over to the shelf and picked out a big heavy book that caught my eye. I said, "Where did you get this?" I opened it and I knew immediately that it was valuable, so I closed it just as fast — I didn't want to look too carefully. He said, "I just picked it up in London a few days ago." I said, "Listen, you want to cut down the price we agreed on by $3,000. But if you throw in this book, you have yourself a deal." He stretched out his hand and shook my hand.

How much was it worth?

A few years later I sold it for around $250,000, to a buyer in London. So it went back to London. After many years of collecting, my name became well known among dealers, and if one of them had an important manuscript, he would call me. One day an antique dealer called me from New York and said: "I see here something that is yours."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said: "It's a kiddush cup with an inscription that was given to you by your grandfather."

I didn't believe it. In order to sell an antique for a lot of money, they have to attach it to a famous name. My grandfather was well known, so they probably took a kiddush cup and inscribed it.

He said, "Wait a minute, I'll take it in my hands and read it to you."

When he read it, I knew it was the kiddush cup that my grandfather had given me. I remembered the inscription: *Nekhdi ha-yakar* — my dear grandson — and then my name, and the year.

So I bought the kiddush cup from him. I have no idea how it was found. It was lost during the Holocaust. I look at it sometimes and think, this is what is left of my world. It is very sad, and very precious.

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