

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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- **My Life in Poland (1922-1949)** *by Yechiel Eisenberg*
(as told to Norton Taichman)

Yechiel Eisenberg recalls his boyhood in Ivansk before WWII. His world was destroyed forever when the Germans invaded and occupied Poland in 1939. In 1941 Yechiel and his older brother Meilech were deported to slave labor camps; the family they left behind was murdered in Treblinka. The brothers endured constant danger and adversity but remained together and supported each other. The arrival of the Russians in the summer of 1944 ended their ordeal. Yechiel's memoir is a compelling account of that very sad and harrowing time.

- **Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Progress Report**

Great News!

Thanks to the support of many Ivanskers as well as other generous donors we are now in the process of obtaining bids to construct the wall and gate of our cemetery. PJCRP representatives in Poland tell us that the work can begin in the early spring. If all goes according to plan, we should be able to hold the dedication ceremony in late summer; we'll get back to you with the date as soon as possible. We will also look into arrangements for travel, hotels, tours, etc. The dedication will be a special event for Ivanskers and their families to come together to honor our ancestors and celebrate our heritage.

Meanwhile, you can still take part in supporting the cemetery restoration. There are several additional expenses that were not anticipated in our original plans. For instance, we would like to prepare a souvenir booklet to mark the occasion; plant decorative trees to beautify the setting and place a park bench in a quiet corner of the cemetery. Your help in making this happen would be very much appreciated.

Instructions on how to make your tax-deductible gift are given at the end of the e-Newsletter.

My Life in Poland (1922-1949)

by Yechiel Eisenberg

Lakewood, New Jersey, USA

as told to Norton Taichman

Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA



Early Spring, 2003
Yechiel stands at the
entrance to his home

[This is an account of Yechiel (Henry) Eisenberg's life in Poland, from the time he was born in Ivansk until he immigrated to America. He describes the character of the shtetl before and during the war and tells us what happened when he and his brother, Meilech were torn from their family and taken as slaves by the Nazis. It is a tale filled with danger, hardship, courage, luck and endurance.

I interviewed Yechiel in his home outside Lakewood, New Jersey on 3 occasions in 2003 and once again in 2005. Our recording sessions usually lasted about 3-4 hours; each time we met I was emotionally drained by what he told me. But I could hardly wait to return for our next meeting.

Yechiel was very forthcoming in remembering the past. His mind raced ahead of his tongue. I soon understood that he had to tell his story in his own way and that it would be counter productive to try to force him to describe events in chronological order. When I returned home I transcribed the testimony and sent the audiotapes to Arthur Zimmerman in

Toronto who transferred them onto CD. In preparing Yechiel's story for the e-Newsletter I organized his recollections sequentially and took the liberty of altering his distinctive grammar and syntax to make it easier for the reader to follow the narrative [quotations from Yechiel's testimony are presented in italics]. I hope these alterations have not veiled or diluted Yechiel's personality. Because of the amount of material that was collected, it became necessary to omit many interesting parts of Yechiel's account to conform to the format of the e-Newsletter. When we publish a "Yiskor Book of Ivansk", it may be possible to include these missing details.

I am grateful to Yechiel's son, Shelly and his nieces (three of Meilech's daughters: Evy Eisenberg, Susie Kaplan and Niomi Herblum) for reviewing the document and for providing several photos that were used to illustrate the story. Unfortunately, there are no photos of Yechiel and Meilech's parents, 4 brothers and 2 sisters, all of whom were slain by the Nazis.

Yechiel and I have become good friends, and most of my family has met him and his wife, Ruth. We are indeed fortunate to know these very special people!]

My World Before World War II

My name is Yechiel (Henry) Eisenberg. I was born in Ivansk in 1922 suffering from the “pox”. I was so ill that no one expected that I would survive. There was no physician or hospital in Ivansk, only a *feltsher* (barber-surgeon):

I tell you he was like a barber. A barber who knew how to hold a thermometer or put bankes [leeches; blood-letting cups] on your back or give you a kanah [enema].

It is easy to imagine the panic felt by my parents as they carried me to the hospital in Apt (Opatow). After examining me, the doctor said he could do little and that they would just have to wait and see what happened.

My mother would not accept the wait and see prescription and decided to seek help from the *Rouf* (rabbi) in Schidlow, a neighboring town. The Rouf was a respected and learned Chassid and my father was one of his followers. He made a blessing over me and then gave me my middle name, “Alter”, which means “old one”. And that’s how I became “*Yechiel Alter Eisenberg*”.

The Rouf assured my mother that the name “Alter” would guarantee that I would live a long life. He was right: gradually my condition improved. And when I was 8 months old I was strong enough to have my *bris* [ritual circumcision], which my family celebrated with a big party.

I have indeed lived a long life. But it hasn’t been easy. A lot of *tzuris* [suffering; trouble] has been heaped on me, and there were times when my life was in great danger. But I also have had my share of *nachas* [good fortune]. Here is my story.

.. . . .

Many generations of Eisenbergs (spelt “*Aisenberg*” in Poland) and Bornsteins (my mother’s family) were born and lived in Ivansk, but I have no knowledge of the families’ histories. I don’t know, for instance, when my parents were married but they must have known each other all their lives. Nuteh and Feygah had 8 children: Meilech (born 1912), Shloma (1917), Debra (1920), Yechiel (me, 1922), Chana (1924), Burach (1926), Shieye (1927), and Scruel Myer (1932?). Only my oldest brother, Meilech and I survived the war.

I was very devoted to my parents, my sisters and my brothers. We never had any fights together. We were living like a real family, together. We were very close because everybody knew what’s doing by somebody else in the house; how poor they are and how much help they need one from the other.

By any standard my family lived on the edge of a cliff. Every zloty counted. Food was never plentiful, and “*many times we didn’t have a piece of bread*”.

My father traded in horses while my mother tended to the family. We lived in a semi-detached house on the *Stasheveh Weg* [Staszow Road] at the southern fringe of the town, across the road from one of the communal wells. Next to us lived a smithy named Mendle [Mendele Kovel; *kovel* means blacksmith] who was also a wheelwright. The well can still be seen but is no longer in use. And all the houses that I knew as a boy are gone. Back in the 1920s-1930s there was relatively little traffic on the road to Stashev, mostly farm wagons drawn by horses. Very few cars ever came to our town although a bus line connected Ivansk with Apt [Opatow] and several other neighboring shtetls. We had family in Apt, Lagov (*Lagiv*) and Klimintow (*Klimintov*), and my parents would often take us by horse and wagon to visit them.



The Eisenberg Home used to stand on the slope seen in the center of the photo. Mendele Kovel's blacksmith shop was next door (where the current house with the brown-colored façade is situated). The Road to Staszow runs across from left (heading south to Staszow) to right (to the market square in Ivansk). The communal well has been preserved and a portion is visible in the lower right of the photo.

Photo taken November 2004.

Our home had two rooms: a kitchen and a combined living-sleeping room:

Many of us slept on a "schluffbunk" [akin to a trundle bed]. In the daytime it was a long bench. In the nighttime you pulled out the bottom and slept on like straw [straw mattress].

In addition, we had an attic and a "cold cellar". The cellar was used for short-term food storage. We rented the attic to a Jewish man. He grew apples on land that he leased from a Polish farmer and stored the fruit in our attic. Every week he sorted and removed the ripe apples from the pile and sold them in the market. He also discarded overripe and rotten fruit so that the crop lasted longer and fetched a better price out of season. Many other Jewish people leased orchards and grew apples, peaches and plums. Before the fruit ripened they would erect small shacks among the trees and live in them day and night guarding their crops against thieves.

In our house there was no indoor plumbing [water was drawn from the communal well], no icebox, telephone or radio. The floor was the bare earth covered with a layer of straw or sawdust. An outhouse was located behind the house. Electricity arrived in the early 1930s.

In winter a wood-burning stove heated our home:

There was one oven in the house [in the kitchen] and we were packing in a lot of the sawdust and was good for a whole day and night. We used wood for cooking. When we went out to buy wood, you bought at the last minute what you needed. You couldn't save up to buy to prepare yourself for the winter. The Gentiles used to bring the wood by horse and wagon into town, and they sold it to the Jewish people. But the wood was very "rough" [not aged] and you have a hard thing to bring the fire up. I remember my mother (she was always sick on asthma and died young) was standing by the oven blowing into the flame. She didn't have breath to bring this up.

We had a "farm", really a large garden in back of our home. Here, there was a stable and a hayloft for the horses. We collected the manure and traded with Polish farmers for potatoes, corn and flour. We also had cats and a dog that lived outside in the garden.

My father and my two older brothers, Meilech and Shloma, worked together as horse traders. They traveled to nearby towns and villages (such as Apt [Opatow], Lagiv [Lagow], Stashev [Staszow], Keltze [Kielce]), trading young horses for older animals that were then sold as workhorses in the market. "Sometime they made a nice living; sometime it was a poor living".

I remember one summer my father came home with 4 horses and took them to the creek to drink. It was very hot and the horses were sweating because they had been pulling a heavily loaded wagon. During the night the horses came down with pneumonia. The next morning my father found

all four lying dead in the stable. No one knew how to bring them back to life; this was a heavy blow for my family.

As with the majority of Jewish families in Ivansk my parents were very religious. My father had a thick beard, and like most other married women in town, my mother wore a *sheytel* [wig]. On Erev Shabbos my mother lit the candles and my father and his six sons walked to the *Beis Medrish* [religious study hall] that was next to the shul on the Road to Rakow. We did not *daven* [pray] in the shul because my father thought it was too modern and not orthodox enough.

On Friday afternoon my father took us to the *mikveh* [bath house] to make ready for Shabbos. On the way we passed the tannery where horse and cattle hides were cured in “wells” and came out as leather. The smell was terrible, but the people who owned the tannery were wealthy; they were good businessmen. An old couple looked after the mikveh and there were separate rooms for men and women. We washed and took the steam, which was made by pouring water on hot stones, and whipped ourselves with willow branches.

Ivansk was a rundown, little town. Most of the houses were made of whitewashed plaster. The roads were made of dirt and pebbles. There were no sidewalks or sewers. When the snow thawed in the spring or when it rained in the fall, the roads became impassable:

I remember many times when the horses and the wagons got stuck. Even the horses couldn't pull the wagons out.

Most people in Ivansk barely made a living:

There was a lot of people who had to go begging from one house to another in different towns to bring home to support their families.

There was no community organization to help poor people: you had to rely on your own family. Some families received a few dollars from relatives who had immigrated to Canada, the United States or South America, especially on holidays like Pesach, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Bank drafts or money orders were cashed in the bank that was in the shtetl. In some instances men found work in the cities, such as Lodz, Krakow or Warsaw, where they made a better living than in Ivansk. They also sent money home.

Beggars and homeless people came to Ivansk from other towns in search of handouts. They went from house to house and were given shelter overnight in a rundown building, but I do not know who paid for the shelter.

*People gave them with a good heart as much as they could. I remember my mother was very poor. She couldn't afford it. But she had a heart if somebody comes and stretches out his hand for *tzedakeh* [giving charity]. So she gave them sugar or a penny or two or something like this. She never let poor people go empty from our house. And this was in every house the same thing.*

Many families also kept *pushkes* [alms box] in their homes for donations to the “*Agudah*” [Agudath Yisrael - A clericalist political party of ultra-Orthodox Jews, founded in Poland in 1912]. But most people could afford to give very little.

A few Jewish businessmen made a good living in the town: most of them owned little shops. They had things to sell and worked for themselves. Some peddlers also made a good living. My mother's brother raised geese, ducks and chickens and sold the feathers for mattresses and pillows; he

made a nice living. My mother used to help him collect the feathers, and she was given parts from the birds as food for our family.

Mottle (Koppel) Tepperman, the tailor, was well off and had a few people working in his shop. He was a nice man and I worked for him when I was a teenager. He even gave me a suit and pair of shoes for Pesach. On market days we went to sell ready-made clothes in Ivansk, Bogoria, Lagiv, Stashev and *Klimintov* [Klimontow]. If the war had not broken out, I probably would have become a tailor.

In Ivansk there was no orphanage, and kids without parents were taken care of by their family. The same was true for old and sick people:

See, over there when somebody was sick or old, he always found a place by their children in the house. Was no hospital to go in and die. Always they were saying they want to die in their own bed. And that's what happened – either they died by the daughter or by the son. They weren't taken away to throw them into a "home" like here.

I started cheder in the Beis Medrish when I was 5 years old. Only boys went to cheder. Beginning when I was 6 or 7 years old I went to secular school in the morning together with Polish children. I stayed in the Polish school until I was 12 or 13 years old and finished the 5th grade. I didn't have any Polish friends: we were two separate people. I grew up not trusting Polish people. I wasn't raised to dislike them but I was told that some Christians were against Jewish people and even murdered them. So I kept my distance.

As a youngster I wasn't allowed to go into the church because if you went in, you had to take off your hat. It was a real strict Catholic church. The nuns...they had their homes over there in the back of the church. There was a big field by the church with nice grass and lots of beautiful trees.

I had Jewish boy friends and we usually got together on Shabbos. We would play soccer and volleyball in the field near the stream out of sight of our parents. There were no movies, and only two families owned radios. When I was about 10-12 years old I got a second-hand bicycle and it was my treasure. I was always crazy about riding my bike and would go to Apt and Klimintov quite often.



Yechiel sports the type of cap that he wore as a boy. Although his family was very observant, this was not the style worn by orthodox boys.

In Apt I joined *Hashomer Hatzair* [*The Young Guard*: Zionist youth movement, emphasizing socialism and commitment to Israel] and attended meetings with both boys and girls. We also had a Hashomer chapter and a small library in Ivansk. I read and thought a lot about making *aliyah* [immigration to Israel] and being in the *Chalutz* [Pioneer] movement. My parents knew nothing of this because they would not have allowed me to be alone with girls before marriage or to be a member of a non-religious, Zionist organization.

I didn't go the way of my parent's to be orthodox. I used to go out on the side with girls and boys. We went out on dates. My father would never like this. Also, I didn't dress like an orthodox Jewish boy, and I didn't wear peyes [sidelocks]. But I was expected to put on tefillin [phylacteries] and daven [pray] in the morning before eating breakfast.

I remember one morning I left the house very early to go to work but did not daven. I returned home about 9:00 o'clock for breakfast. My mother asked me where I had davened. I said, "By Kopple" [Tepperman]. She gave me breakfast, and she didn't wait long before she went to the Tepperman house and asked whether I had davened there. Mrs Tepperman responded, "Not in my house!" My mother smacked me in the face, and the blood came from the nose right away. "I'm not hitting you because you were eating before davening but because you lied to me", she said.

And I'll remember this for the rest of my life.

My brother Meilech was 10 years older than me. He was very tall and worked with my father trading horses. He became a good businessman as well as a good horseman. I was still a youngster when he was drafted into the Polish calvary and I think he was supposed to be in the army for 2 years. But "*Jewish people did not like to go to the Polish army*", so he looked for ways to get out of it. He went for advice to the rabbi and to a doctor (I don't remember who the doctor was). The doctor told Meilech to go into the army and be a good soldier and then come back in four weeks. Four weeks later the doctor showed Meilech how to injure his knee in such a way to make him unfit to be a soldier. Meilech's knee became inflamed and swollen. He reported to his superiors; they discharged him and told him to go home. I don't remember how Meilech wounded himself but that is how he got out of being in the army.

Meilech married Elkeh when he was 20 years old. Elkeh was also from Ivansk. The marriage was arranged by both parents and took place in my parent's home. All of us got new clothes for the celebration. The rabbi conducted the ceremony under the *chupah*. A *badchin* [the master of ceremonies; the wedding jester] from Apt was hired and two Jewish musicians from Ivansk played the violin and the accordion. There was lots of food. I don't remember if Elkeh and Meilech went on a honeymoon but they rented a house just in back of ours. They had two children, a girl and a boy. Elkeh and the children vanished in the Shoah.

Before the war many Jews were leaving Ivansk because of the bad economy. I knew of one man who went to Toronto leaving his wife and four children behind. He was never heard from again and there was a great deal of gossip about this. I had a cousin in Apt who was engaged to a young man. He wanted to go to South America and she gave him money for the journey. But he never came back for her. There were many other stories of abandoned women and families.

Ivansk had a police station, which also served as the jail and courthouse. The chief of police and his few helpers wore uniforms but did not carry guns. Robbery and stealing were the most common crimes but sometimes someone was murdered. People who were arrested were put in the jail and their trial was held in a room inside the police station. A justice of the peace was in charge. We did not sense that the police were against Jewish people. However, we did not seek help from the police or the court to "*straighten out things that happened between families.*" Instead, the rabbi mediated most of the arguments within the Jewish community and "*he was helping them to solve the problems*".

Most of the Jewish businesses in town were conducted from small shops that surrounded the market square. The family usually lived upstairs or in the back of the store. Tailors were the most common trade but only few made a good living. Clothes were custom tailored or made for the mass market. When you wanted something better for yourself you picked out the material and had a made-to-measure garment.

The key person in the tailor shop was the cutter. My boss, Mottle Tepperman was a good cutter and made his own patterns. He also knew how to press clothes but could not sew on a machine. Everyone in the shop had to know more than one job; there was no section work.

There were several cobblers. Most of their work was repairing shoes. Only once can I remember going to a cobbler to have a pair of new shoes made.

There were a few bakeries in town. All sold bread but there was little baking of cakes. There was a store that sold ice cream and one where you could buy peanuts and chocolates.

All the Jewish stores closed on Shabbos and Jewish holidays. But in some cases you could still get something even when the store was not open. You walked in through the back door and picked up something without paying for it. So money did not change hands. Right after the holiday you paid the bill.

There were a few Jewish carpenters who worked out of their homes. Most of their business came from Gentile customers. For example, some carpenters made coffins, which were not used in Jewish burials. They also made furniture to order, like beds, couches and chairs. There were carpenters who built houses but I can't say whether they were Jews or Gentiles. At that time you didn't need a permit to build a house, although you still had to pay taxes to the town.

People who made cheese and butter had their own cows or bought big cans of milk from farmers.

There was a *schoichet* [ritual slaughterer] living in Ivansk. He was paid a few zlotys and given parts of the lungs, liver or the legs for his work. Every Passover we used to eat goat meat during the seders. We kept the goats in the backyard and went to the *schoichet* when it was time to kill them.

There was a Jewish person who engraved matzevot. You had to bring a sketch of the type of stone you wanted, and "*the rabbi gave the prescription on it*" in Hebrew. I never saw any double stones for husbands and wives in the cemetery, only single stones.

I can't remember any inns in the town but there were a few taverns owned by Jews. Gentiles, not Jews, used them. Also, there was a watermill on the side of the stream where people brought corn to be ground into flour.

Most of the Polish farmers owned small plots of land. But there was a rich gentleman farmer who had a big property on the Road to Klimintov. The ruins of an old castle were on his land [Kryztopor Castle]. Many people worked for him raising horses and cows. My father sold horses to him.

About politics I knew very little. Marshall Jozef Pilsudski was in power for many years in the 1920s and 1930s; he had a good name because he held back a lot of the anti-Semites. When he died [1935], the anti-Semites became more powerful. They were always criticizing Jewish people and yelling, "*Go back to Palestine! You don't belong here in Poland!*" There were some anti-Semites in Ivansk but there were no riots or pogroms against us. However, incidents happened: some Jewish people were killed on the roads.

Poland is at War and is Occupied by the Germans; My Mother Dies on the Night the Germans Enter Ivansk

The war came when I was only 17 years old. I don't remember very much about what was happening in Europe before the Germans invaded Poland [on 1 September 1939]. At that time we got our news mostly from Yiddish newspapers that peddlers brought to Ivansk once a week. Sometimes, we listened to the radios owned by two neighboring families. I was aware that the

Nazis were persecuting Jews in Germany because beginning in 1937 or 1938 Jews were being chased out of Germany and many came to Poland. Then, I also heard about *Kristallnacht* [9 November 1938].

The day fighting broke out many planes flew over our town. The Polish army was being mobilized and in combat with the Germans. My brother Shloma, who was 22 years old, was ready to go and fight, but things happened so fast that there was not enough time for him to be taken into the army. And within a couple of days the Germans marched into Ivansk. I knew then that the Polish army had lost and that the Germans were the new rulers.



But we didn't know that they would come with a politic to clean out all the Jewish people.

Right away the Germans attacked the Jews. They killed them in the streets; they shot those who broke the curfew; they made young people work in road gangs, clearing snow and digging trenches. Many Jews were chased out of their homes and shops and could no longer make a living. If they were caught stealing, the police shot them. In general I thought most Polish people did not care about what was happening to us.

The Polish people were freer. They were allowed to go anyplace, to travel all over. Jewish people were not allowed to go out from town to town and if they did, they took a chance with their life.

I knew a few Ivanskers who fled to Russia in 1939. My boyfriend, Wolf Gutmann and his brother survived the war in Russia and then immigrated to the United States.

My mother was a sick woman, and she died the same night that the Germans marched into Ivansk.

My mother suffered from asthma and we could not afford to get proper care for her. That night she was coughing and having trouble breathing. But the curfew was already in place and we could not take her to the hospital. Before she died she said that she was happy that her family was together.

The *Chevra Kadishe* [Burial Society] prepared my mother's body in our house. In the morning she was placed on one of the Chevra's horse-drawn wagons. We followed behind the wagon and took her to the cemetery. My mother's *kaiver* [grave] was in the lower part of the cemetery. I stood beside the open grave and saw that it contained a lot of water. I asked the rabbi if we could bury her somewhere else, but he said that once the grave was opened the body had to be put there. So, my mother's shrouded body was lowered into the water and "*always this picture was staying in my mind*".

My oldest sister Debra took over the house and cared for the family. Without my mother we had a very difficult time, and with the Nazi occupation none of us had the luxury of being children any more. My father was still a young man: maybe he would have remarried, but Hitler came.

Under the Germans it became harder for Jews to make a living. The soldiers closed many Jewish shops and told the Poles not to do business with us. But the Germans still needed horses for their army; so my father was able to do some trading even during the occupation. However, he had to hide the fact that a Jew owned the business. So, he took in a Polish man as his partner. This man

was the “front man” who dealt with the people in the open markets; Shlomah, who did not look or dress like a Jew, went along with him to carry on the business.

Even though the Germans allowed us to go to shul, they constantly humiliated us. I remember when they cut off my father’s beard. He was very religious and was so ashamed for the town to see him without his beard. He covered his face with a handkerchief to hide his embarrassment.

The Germans brought in Ukrainians to help them watch over the town and drafted Jews to work in the *Judenrat*. These Jews were forced to carry out orders against their own people. Most of them were “*wise guys*”, not from religious families or from better homes. They thought they would save themselves and their families if they served the Germans. They collected clothing and money for the Germans and kept order. They selected people for work parties. The Germans even forced them to provide hostages, mostly sick people or invalids, many of whom were murdered by the Nazis. A few of the *Judenrat* were helpful and considerate, but most were sadists and seemed to enjoy torturing us.

I remember two massacres. One happened when several Jews were accused of setting a fire that destroyed some houses in the town [Yechiel is referring to a fire that was ignited accidentally by Jews who were making candles. Making candles was forbidden by the Germans.]

The second massacre took place when a Jewish prisoner escaped from the jail. He was accused of being a pickpocket who robbed people in the market place:

He [the thief] had connections with the president of the Judenrat, and this got him out from the jail. The Germans searched but couldn’t find him and went to the Judenrat saying that they wanted 75 people to be taken in. What did they [the Judenrat] do? They went around house to house and they knew already which people were sick, which people were crippled, which people were out of their mind, and they presented this kind of people to the Germans. The Germans took these people out to the cemetery the same day, and they were shot. [The Germans forced Poles to bury the victims in a common grave in the cemetery.]

The president of the *Judenrat* was not harmed because the Germans didn’t know that he was suspected of managing the escape.

It was probably 1940 or 1941 when the Nazis transported a group of Viennese Jews to our town. These unfortunate people received little help from our community because we had nothing to give them. It was very hard for them.

They stayed in houses or they stayed in shacks. They didn’t go into fancy hotels, let me tell you. A lot of them died out because they were used to being washed and clean. You know, they were used to taking showers and being shaved. They started getting lice and then the sickness [typhus].

Under the occupation we lived in a state of denial. We couldn’t accept what was happening and failed to grasp what was in store for us. Yes, we knew the conqueror’s brutality and heard what he did to other Jewish communities. But we always hoped that the worst was behind and that the Almighty would help us. Even if we had fully understood that the Germans were bent on killing us, what could we do against such an evil, ruthless, powerful enemy? We were totally isolated; completely on our own. There was no umbrella underground movement to organize resistance: each city, town, family, and person stood alone. The chances of remaining undetected in the shtetl were almost nil. Our only chance was to flee to the forests. But we could not survive without help

from our Polish neighbors. Those who dared to help us risked their very lives as well as those of their families. Most looked the other way. And a few even turned us in to the Germans. The odds against our survival were very small.

Meilech and I are taken from Ivansk to Starachowice Labor Camp



In 1941 the Germans began shipping Jews to distant labor camps. It was the job of the Judenrat to fill the quotas with young, healthy men and women. My two older brothers and I were compelled to have a physical examination to see if we were fit for work. To escape selection, Shlomah placed *bankes* [blood-letting cups] on his back the night before the examination. The Germans saw the bruises on his back and rejected him. But Meilech and I, together with 40-50 male Ivaskers, were driven away in two open dump trucks. We never saw our families again.

We were taken to *Starachowice-Wierzbnik*, a town near Kielce. The Germans needed workers to man the armament factories and an iron ore mine located outside the town. They established an “open ghetto “ in Wierzbnik [this was a ghetto without walls that was still guarded by Germans and their collaborators]. Meilech and I became slaves in the mine. The work was hard and we were given very little food.

In the autumn of 1942 a notice was posted in the camp. Those of us who were sick or had an injury that hindered our ability to work were told to sign up for a medical examination. If the illness or injury were confirmed, we would be sent home to rest and recover. Naturally, Meilech and I placed our names on the list, but to qualify for this unexpected “vacation”, we had to think of a way to wound ourselves.

Meilech came up with an idea: *he inserted a piece of wire and put himself in with his hand. And the hand swelled up and got infected.* I scraped the skin between some of my fingers causing infected blisters to appear. Now we waited for the examination. Little did we know that the Nazis had set a trap.

As this was going on a new group of laborers were brought from Apt to the camp. They told us that Ivansk had been liquidated a few days before [15 October 1942] and that all of its Jews had been sent to Treblinka. Our parents, brothers and sisters and Meilech’s wife and children were gone. The devastating news caused deep despair. But at the same time we realized that the Nazis had tricked us into signing our own death warrants and that we had to get rid of any signs of our self-inflicted wounds.

Meilech right away took out the piece of wire from his hand, and he started using hot water and the pus went out and the swelling went down. But I couldn’t do nothing with myself. My blisters stayed with me.

Came on a Friday. I remember like now. They called out all the people what they signed up about going home. They called my brother first and he showed his hand. They told him to go back to the barracks. When it came to me, they saw that my blisters are still there. They put me in a corner and I didn’t know what to do.”

Meilech was sent back into the camp while about 15 other prisoners and I were marched under guard to the ghetto in Wierzbnik. I was apparently no longer of any use to the Germans and I sensed that they were going to finish me off.

It was Erev Shabbos when we arrived to the ghetto. My grandmother's brother, Shmiel Iser, lived in Wierzbnik, and I found his house anticipating that I would receive a warm welcome. My uncle was about to leave for shul and was all dressed up. By contrast, my clothes were torn and dirty and my toes were sticking out of my shoes. The table was set for Shabbos and I was offered a piece of bread. I was tired and asked if I could have a place to sleep. My uncle told me to go to the shelter for homeless people. It felt as if he had slapped me in the face, and I left without taking the piece of bread.

It was already dark outside and Shabbos candles were burning in the windows of most of the Jewish homes. I knocked on the door of one of the houses; a woman answered and I told her that I had been transported from one of the camps and was very hungry. She invited me inside and gave me bread and a pair of shoes. Feeling a little better, I went out and started looking for the shelter.

I found the homeless place. They didn't have no lights in the room. Fathers and mothers and children crying; the noise and everything in there; I thought I'm going out of my mind. I had no other choice. I'm a stranger in town. So I stayed over there the night.

The next morning I got up and went to the Jewish *Gemeinde* [community] office to find out what was happening. Groups of people were standing around wondering when the Germans were going to liquidate the town. There was a rail link in Wierzbnik and this made the town a staging center for deportation. Hundreds of people from neighboring shtetls were being brought to the town, and everyone believed that we would be taken away within a few days.

I wandered around to no purpose and eventually went back to "my apartment". I tried to sleep but it was no good; I prayed to God that morning would come.

At daybreak I went out on the street and started towards the *Gemeinde*:

While I'm walking I see my brother walking! My brother walking?! Then I start getting mad. I say, "Meilech, why did you come over here? You know today, tomorrow we are going to be taken away. You had a chance to live through!!"

His answer was to me, "Whatever is going to happen with you is going to happen with me!"

[Meilech had escaped from the camp in Starachowice and knew where Yechiel had been taken.]

The next day (Monday) we went to some Jewish homes where we were given bread and clothing. That night, as we slept in "my apartment", a tumult erupted outside in the street. The Germans, Ukrainians and members of the Jewish police were shouting "Raus!! Raus!!" People were running and screaming. The Germans were shooting those who resisted leaving their homes or who did not move fast enough. The expulsion had begun.

We were herded to the market square beside the railroad tracks where a train with cattle cars was waiting. When it was light the Germans began to select younger men to work in neighboring labor camps; these people were marched away. The rest, mainly women, children, the elderly, the sick and the infirm were to be loaded onto the train and taken to Treblinka. [On that day, 27 October 1942, about 4,000 Jews were taken away to their deaths].

Meilech and I were in the group destined for Treblinka. We were not selected for work because the Germans had filled their quota before they came to us. While waiting in the square to board the train we were recognized by two Jewish policemen who had been involved in taking us from Ivansk

to Starachowice. They walked over and asked whether we would like to be chosen for “town work”. We had no idea what “town work” meant, but anything was better than being put on the train. Approximately 60-70 men and women were selected for “town work”.

The next day we found out what we were in for:

Der Burgermeister [the mayor] from the town gave us horses and wagons to go around from house to house and street to street and pick up the dead people. We picked up a lot of people on the wagons like they would be a piece of wood. We carried them over to the cemetery and over there was already a bulldozer and a big grave. We pushed the dead bodies into the grave and we covered them up.

The next morning we began boarding up the empty Jewish houses many of which had already been looted by Polish people. The Germans posted a bulletin that they were going to auction off the furniture. We went around from house to house taking out the furniture, which Polish people bought. This work lasted about 2 months and during this time the Germans assigned us to live in 3 big houses along the railroad track. There were about 20 women in our group and they slept in separate quarters. We had plenty of food, clothing and even money that we had found in the abandoned houses.

When our “town work” was completed another bulletin appeared: the Germans announced that they were going to make a Jewish ghetto in a town near Kielce. They said it would be a “nice place” and that Jews who were in hiding or members of the underground should come out and live a good life in the new ghetto. The next morning the Germans told our group that we were going to be taken to the new ghetto. Two dump trucks were ready to take us there.

At the last minute the Germans announced that they needed a few carpenters and tailors to remain behind in Starachowice. I was suspicious about German promises of a “nice ghetto”. So, I put up my hand to volunteer and was selected to be one of the carpenters. What did I know about being a carpenter? “I knew how to hold a hammer... and I could drive in a nail and I could take out a nail!”

Meanwhile, Meilech was about to board one of the trucks, and I had to think of a way to stop him. During the past two months one of the Germans who was guarding us became familiar with me and knew that I was a very hard worker. I went up to him and asked if I could have a helper. He replied, “Go, pick one up.” That’s how Meilech was chosen to stay behind with me, together with about 15 of our original group including a few women.

We were put to work tearing down old horse stables and building new ones. We remained in the 3 houses that I mentioned before. Conditions were pretty good; we had plenty of food and clothing and we were left pretty much on our own. But after 6 weeks, there was no more work and we were taken to a munitions factory outside Starachowice [the so-called *Herman Goring Werke*]. From 1942 to 1944 we worked smelting scrap metal into iron forms and were housed in barracks in a camp close to the factory.

My job was to go outside into this big field [yard] and load up a wagon with coal. The wagon was on tracks, and I had to push it into the factory and unload the coal by the furnace and then go back outside and load up again. There would be snow, rain, sleet and cold but you had to go out. You were freezing and you could hardly push the wagon. I worked there during the night; mine was a night job. In the daytime I was taken back to the barracks.

Maybe 10,000 men and women prisoners lived in the barracks in separate sections. Once we were brought back to the barracks we were free to go around anywhere we wanted. We

had ovens in the barracks and everybody was trying to cook something for himself to live through.

We worked with Polish people who were hired as laborers and went home to their families at night. Those of us who had a few zlotys or items of trade (like shoes) would give them to the Poles who smuggled extra bread, potatoes and carrots into the camp. This helped us to survive.

In 1943 the Germans were very short of laborers and needed us to supply their army with weapons. So, they treated us a little better than before. In the past sick Jews were routinely murdered; now many were allowed to recuperate and then sent back to work. Nevertheless, our life was very hard in this place. We were given hardly any food, only some bread and soup made from potatoes or potato peels.

By July 1944 the Russians had advanced deep into Poland, and the Germans decided to abandon the factories and the camps in Starachowice. One day all work was stopped and we were told that we were going to be sent away. We knew this meant that they would take us to Auschwitz or Buchenwald or some other extermination camp.

So, what happened? Us young, healthy boys knew we had no other choice. We were not going to go in like sheep to be killed. We had to try to run away. If the bullets are going to catch you, they're going to catch you.

On a Monday night a bunch of the prisoners, including Meilech and me, started ripping and cutting out the barbed wire fence. The searchlights came on and Ukrainian guards in the towers started yelling and shooting. Bullets came right and left. Meilech and I ran for cover. Many prisoners were killed but some escaped into the forest, which was about 200 feet from the fence. Meilech and I were left behind in the camp.



The next morning the Gestapo assembled us in the camp yard. Dead and injured prisoners were lying in the barbed wire. The Germans warned us that if any of us would try to escape again, we would look like those trapped in the barbed wire.

They ordered us to return to the barracks. But we knew that our only chance was to get out of here now:

The barbed wire was already cut from the night before and parts of the fence were broken. So we went straight into the fence [in broad daylight!], me with my brother and other Jewish people. The Ukrainians in the towers started shooting right away at us again. A lot of our group fell from the bullets but we got into the woods. Took maybe 2 hours and then it quieted down.

[Only about 100 prisoners managed to reach the woods. The Germans chased after them and many were captured and killed. ¹]

After we escaped we found out from Polish people that prisoners still in the camp were shipped to Auschwitz. Some of them survived Auschwitz. I have a friend who survived and now lives right here in Lakewood. We slept in the same bunk in Starachowice: I slept on the top and he slept on the bottom.

¹ For a detailed account of the Starachowice complex and the treatment of prisoners see: Christopher A. Browning. *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK. 2000.

Meilech and I Return to Ivansk

Meilech, another man (whose name I can't remember) and I threaded our way through the forests walking in a southeasterly direction. We wanted to get back to Ivansk. We had a few zlotys in our pockets and we bought food from Polish people. The Germans still occupied this part of Poland but they were in disarray retreating before the Russians. We were wearing civilian clothes; so when they saw us they left us alone. Nevertheless, most of the time we kept out of sight in the woods. Meilech was the leader; he knew the countryside because he had traveled throughout this area as a horse trader. I cannot explain why we wanted to go back to our shtetl. We knew that all our people had been murdered, but there was always a chance that someone lived through. Ivansk had once been our home and I guess we had to see it just one more time in case someone was alive.

After hiking for several days, we came to a village (I can't remember its name) about 2 km from the Ivansk cemetery. Like Ivansk this village was on the Road to Rakow but on the other side of the cemetery. Meilech knew some of the people in the village who used to trade horses with our father. We went to an old lady's farmhouse just outside the village. Meilech told her who we were and asked for shelter. She kept us in the stable with the horses and cows and gave us food. She told us that the Russians had crossed the Vistula River and were now in Klimintov. But the Germans still occupied Ivansk, Apt and Staszow.

About a week after arriving at the lady's farm, Meilech said to me:

"Yechiel, let's go to the Mama's cemetery. It's not far from here."

We went to the cemetery. But the wooden gate was locked. So, we jumped over the fence [wall] that was made of stones. The fence was about 4 feet high.

There was a "little house" just inside the gate. It had a roof but no sides.

My mother's stone was still there.²

When we finished crying we went back to this lady.

That same night we heard soldiers on horseback speaking Russian outside the house. We went out and there were many men with artillery and horses. They told us that they had taken Ivansk. We were free!!³

The following morning we walked to Ivansk. None of our friends or relatives remained. Many Polish families lived in makeshift shelters and several had been evacuated from the town because a lot of houses had been destroyed. The shul lay in ruins [apparently caused by Russian bombing from the air] and the market square was empty.

Our house was still intact, and we met the lady and her family who were living there. She told us that she and her husband had been hiding 3 Jewish boys in the attic. The boys had been taken into the house in 1942 when the Germans deported the Jews. I think the boys probably had some

² The Jewish cemetery was still intact when Yechiel and Meilech visited their mother's grave. Against the wishes of the Priest and local authorities Poles perpetrated the destruction of the cemetery after the Germans had been driven from the area.

³ There is a Russian military cemetery on the Road to Rakow about 1 km outside of Iwaniska. This graveyard is a measure of the intensity of the fighting in this area of Poland.

money and were able to pay something for their keep. During the occupation her husband was questioned by a group of unidentified Poles who were cooperating with the Nazis; they wanted to know if he was hiding Jews. But he did not betray the boys. Later the same group of predators returned, took her husband to the forest and shot him.

All three boys lived through the war. One of them was Schulem Urman who went to Israel, served in the army and then settled in Toronto. The second used to live in the Roodhaus, but I don't remember his name; he might have immigrated to South Africa. The third boy was related to the Goldsteins; he was malnourished and died from some sort of lung sickness soon after he was freed .

Earlier I told you about the *feltsher* (barber-surgeon) who lived in the shtetl. I found out what happened to his son who was also a barber. His shop was located on the Road to Staszow, a little ways from the market square. Before the war he married a Gentile woman in the church and had been baptized. This saved his life because the Germans did not deport him. But he got into trouble because he kept on threatening to expose some anti-Semites once the war was over. And for this he was murdered in his shop.

The few hours we spent in Ivansk were very depressing. There was nothing left of the world we once knew. Besides, there were rumors that the Germans were planning to reoccupy the town. So, it was time to leave, forever.

Picking Up the Pieces

We decided to make our way to Klimintov, which was under Russian control and apparently some Jews had returned there. Also, before the war we had relatives in Klimintov and maybe someone was still alive. It turned out that Luba, my second cousin and future wife, was from Klimintov...more about Luba in a minute.

We got to Klimintov and found work in a mill where corn and wheat were ground into flour. We worked there for about 6 months. Before the war a Jewish man had owned the mill, but during the occupation Polish people ran it. The son of this man had been sheltered from the Germans by Poles, and when the Russians took over, he reclaimed the mill.

One day a Jewish woman who was married to a Gentile told us that some anti-Semitic Poles were planning to kill the Jews who lived in the town because a Jew had exposed them to the Russians. That night about 5 Jews were murdered, including a woman who was pregnant. The next morning Meilech and I fled from Klimintov to Apt, together with a few other people. [Apt was now under Russian control.]

In Apt we heard that Lodz had been liberated. Lodz was a big industrial town and we decided to move there to find work and be with more Jewish people. So, we got an apartment and registered with the Lodz Jewish community service, which posted our names in case members of our family were still alive and searching for us.

In May 1945 many Jewish refugees were pouring into Lodz; one of them was my wife to be, Luba Citronbaum. Luba had recently been freed from a labor camp:



**Luba and Yechiel
Germany circa 1945**

Everybody was looking for somebody. Luba, she should rest in peace, saw the bulletin. She saw our names there and started screaming, "That's my cousins! Meilech and Yechiel is my cousins!"

Luba came down to our room where we were living in Lodz. And what happened? Meilech was there and I wasn't there. I was going out to do a little business...to sell something in the market. When I got home I found out that Luba lived through the camps.

We started going out together, and we got married the 5th of August 1945. We called in a few friends and a rabbi who married us in our house.

*A honeymoon??
The next day I went back to work.*



**Meilech and Rifchu
Germany 1947**

Meanwhile, Meilech met, fell in love and married Rose (Rivka [Rifchu]) Schmelzman who was born in Apt; she was also a survivor.

Now my brother and I could really plan for the future and start raising our own families.

Leaving Poland Forever



Turkheim, Germany 1947

**Meilech, Rifchu and Evy
Yechiel, Luba and Larry**

In November 1945 we realized that there was no future for us in Poland. We decided to try to get to the West. Luba, Rifchu, Meilech and I boarded a train, and when we reached the frontier between Poland and Czechoslovakia we had to bribe the Polish border guards to let us cross the border. From there we reached Germany, arriving in Berlin in the American Zone and then on to Munich where the Jewish community service told us about Landsberg, a *Judenlager* [camp for Jewish refugees]. Here, thousands of Jewish DPs [displaced persons], primarily from Eastern Europe, were being housed until new homes could be found for them in Palestine, America, Canada, United Kingdom, etc. We did not want to stay in such a large, crowded facility and were able secure a private apartment in Turkheim, a nearby town. Soon after, Meilech and I became fathers: Rifchu gave birth to Evy and Luba had Larry.

In 1948 Meilech and Rifchu were able to gain entry into Canada and left for Toronto. Luba and I wanted to be with them, and we also applied to immigrate to Canada. But I was rejected because at that time I was short of breath, and it was suspected that I might have tuberculosis.

Luba had cousins living in America and she asked for their help in getting us to the U.S. They were good, kind people and made all necessary arrangements and guarantees through HIAS [Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society]: we boarded ship in Bremerhaven and landed in Boston in July 1949. The train took us to Grand Central Station in New York where Luba's cousins met us and took us to their home in the Bronx.

And so ended my life in Europe. Our new lives had begun in freedom and boundless hope.

But that's a story for another time.

Looking Back

Where was God? *The Nazis took so many innocent people and good people and religious people who believed in God. Where was He? Where was God when they were slaughtering people just because they were Jews? There is no answer, but you have to go on with your life and believe in something. I believe there is a God because every little thing that goes on in a person's life is steered through God in you.*

About Being Human. *This is in yourself. When we got free, believe me, we had chances to kill German people. But in yourself you felt that you can't do something like this. You can't! How could you go and kill innocent people like they were doing to us? To take revenge against people like they did to our families? You can't!*

My Reward: My Family. *I can tell you one thing now. When it comes already to the end at my age, I am very proud that I lived through the Holocaust and I brought a new family to the world and they live in the United States. They got a good education through us and they are good people, good family people. So, I can say that I did accomplish something in my life.*

After Words



Pesach, Toronto 1955

Meilech, Rifchu and the "Four Diamonds"
(L to R): Susie, Evy, Debbi (behind Evy) and
Niomi

Yeichiel and Luba and Meilech and Rifchu lived through hell in Europe, but in America and Canada they found unimaginable freedom, security and opportunity. Each couple raised 4 children (boys for Yeichiel and Luba; girls for Meilech and Rifchu) who have gone on to have Jewish families of their own. The Eisenbergs have proven that Hitler did not win!

Meilech was a successful entrepreneur in Toronto. He and Rifchu had 4 daughters, who Meilech proudly called, "My Four Diamonds" (Evy, Susie, Debbi and Niomi).

Meilech died in 1997 and Rifchu in 2000.



Luba, circa 1975

Yechiel and Luba have 4 sons: Larry, Shelly, Elliot and Philip. Always the hard worker, Yechiel initially became a dressmaker in the garment industry in New York City. In the 1950s he purchased farmland in New Jersey and began raising chickens, but disease plagued his flocks. Then Yechiel started marketing eggs. The business was doing well, but in the 1970s competition from large producers in the South cut into the profits. And coincidentally, Luba became ill during this time.

Yechiel then became a bus driver for the East Windsor New Jersey School System, where he stayed for the next 15 years. He proved to be a likeable, trustworthy and resourceful employee and was promoted to positions with greater responsibility. Unfortunately, Luba's illness progressed and she died of cancer in 1987. Soon after, Yechiel sold the farm and moved to Lakewood, New Jersey.

In 1991 Yechiel married Ruth Elenberg (also a survivor; she was born in the Ukraine) and retired from work in 1992. Ruth and Yechiel live in a bungalow in a development community outside Lakewood, New Jersey. They genuinely take pleasure in each other's company and being with both of their families. Almost every afternoon Yechiel can be found in the development's community center schmoozing and playing cards with his buddies.

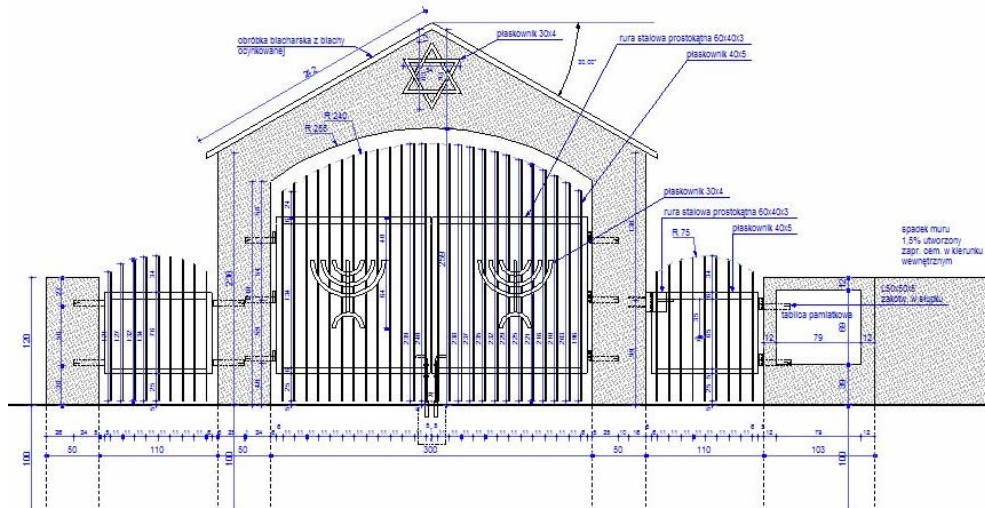


Unlike many survivors, Yechiel made sure that his sons knew about his life in Poland. Yet when the School Board asked him to share his experiences with students, Yechiel initially declined. He did not want to relive the horrors of the past. But he relented when he realized that he had an obligation to make sure that young people understood what prejudice and bigotry could lead to. I am certain that his audiences learned their lessons well and came to respect and admire Yechiel for his quiet determination and his warm, unassuming, and welcoming personality.



**Yechiel and His Four Sons
Celebrate the Wedding of Shelly's Daughter
November 2004**

(L to R): Eliot, Larry, Yechiel, Philip and Shelly



HOW TO DONATE TO THE IVANSK CEMETERY RESTORATION PROJECT

CANADIAN DONORS

Cheques should be payable to:

The United Jewish Welfare Fund of Toronto

Mail to: c/o Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto

Attention: Angela D'Aversa

4600 Bathurst Street, Toronto, Ontario M2R3V2

In the cheque's memo line, be sure to insert: "for Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project"

- Donations can also be made on VISA or MasterCard. Telephone Janice Benatar at 416-631-5847 or by sending the information in writing including your Name, Card Number, Expiry Date and the amount of your donation.
- You may designate a person you wish to honour, and a card will be sent to this person or the family to acknowledge your gift.
- The Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto will deposit all donations to a special account dedicated to the Ivansk Cemetery Restoration Project. You will receive a tax receipt from the Foundation.

US DONORS

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The Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies

PJCRP Account

787 Delaware Avenue, Buffalo, New York 14209

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 - **For agency, select Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project.**
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