

THE IVANSK PROJECT e-NEWSLETTER

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- **Never Give In To Despair** *by Lazer Naiman*

"Lazer, you have to escape! From Ivansk you must escape!"

These chilling words were spoken by Rivka Naiman, Lazer Naiman's older sister. Poland 1940, under the German occupation. No one in Ivansk had any doubts about what was going to happen to them. Even though Lazer resisted the thought of abandoning his parents, brother and sisters, he was forced to flee bearing the heavy burden of saving himself so that the family name would be preserved. He escaped the Nazis but lived under the repressive political system of the Soviet Union for 51 years. Nevertheless, Lazer never gave up hope of "returning" to Israel and living a full Jewish life.

- **Ivanskiers Seeking Ivanskiers: A Photo From Fred Apel**

Fred asks our help in identifying family members in an old photograph taken in Ivansk.

Please Help Fund the Translation of the Ivansk Kehilla Documents

A recent e-mail was sent to all readers announcing acquisition of a 34-page file from the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research containing records of the Ivansk Kehilla. No doubt the archive will yield significant insights into the religious, economic, social and political life of the Ivansk Jewish community on the eve of World War II.

The material must be translated from Yiddish to English, and we have commissioned a professional translator to do the job.

It will cost \$850.00 (\$25.00 per page).

We need your help to fund this project, which will be published in a future e-Newsletter.

Please consider donating the cost of one or more pages (smaller donations will also be most welcome).

Make out your check or money order in *US funds* to, "Norton Taichman (Ivansk Project)" and mail it to:

Norton Taichman, 51 Wynnedale Road, Narberth, PA 19072, USA.

Thanks very much for your anticipated support!

Need more information? e-mail Norton Taichman: nstaichman@comcast.net

Never Give In To Despair

by **Lazer Naiman (Jerusalem, Israel)**

[Editor's Comments: In 1940, when Lazer Naiman was twenty years old, he fled Ivansk before the Germans and their collaborators annihilated the town's Jews. The next 51 years of his life reads like an epic novel. After his escape he was imprisoned in the Russian Gulag, and then he was forced to work in Ukrainian coal mines. During all this time he yearned to go home to Israel. In 1991 he finally made *aliyah* and was joined by his daughters and his grandson. Throughout his travails Lazer remained hopeful about the future, never permitting despondency to gain the upper hand. Thanks to the efforts of numerous Ivanskers, Lazer's story can now be told.

In 1997 Lazer's niece, **Esther Bensimon** and her son, **Moshe Bensimon** filmed Lazer's testimony in Jerusalem. Lazer spoke in Yiddish and Esther concurrently translated his words into Hebrew. The film was made available to **Jacob (Cobi) Silberstein** (Israel) who sent copies to **Lisa Newman** (Canada) and **Norton Taichman** (USA); it then made its way to **Henriette Kretz** (Belgium). Henriette volunteered to translate the Hebrew into English; her translation serves as the primary source of information for Lazer's story.

In 2006 **David Blumenfeld** (Israel) filmed Lazer's story for his documentary, **Within These Walls: The Death and Life of Ivansk** (see: The Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, No.10, January-February, 2005). The English translation was sent to Norton who incorporated segments into 1997 narrative within shaded text boxes. You can view David's trailer for the documentary, including portions of Lazer's testimony on the web: <http://www.blumenfeld.com/withinthesewalls/>

And in 2003 **Gittie (Naiman) Gollish** (Canada) met Lazer in Israel and wrote a letter to her family describing what he told her. A copy of Gittie's letter is given at the end of the formal testimony. Sadly, Gittie passed away in 2007.

Before publication numerous gaps and matters requiring clarification became apparent. Several Ivanskers stepped forward to resolve these issues. **Cobi Silberstein** and **Aharon Naiman** (Israel) continually consulted Lazer and his family seeking new information. In September 2008 **Laurie Naiman** (USA) and his son **Matt Naiman** (USA & Japan) visited Lazer filling several voids. And in October 2008 **Era Dishon** (Israel), **Louise Taichman** and **Norton Taichman** met with Lazer, Esther and Moshe, as well as Lazer's daughter, **Liebe Naiman**. Close cooperation by so many Ivanskers made everything come together. Not to be forgotten, we thank Esther, Laurie and Moshe for providing several photographs to illustrate Lazer's story.

Today, Lazer is eighty-eight years old. Although his eyesight is not good and he suffers from diabetes and has arthritis in his legs, his zest for life is not diminished. He enjoys the company of his family and warmly greets visitors, especially other Ivanskers. His mind is sharp and even though he suffered many hardships under the communists, he harbors no resentment against the Soviet Union.

During our meeting with Lazer in October, his grandnephew, Moshe asked him to talk about what he considered the most important lessons from the past. First and foremost, Lazer responded that we can't stop working to promote peace throughout the world. And then he reflected on the history of our people: "We have suffered under the authority of others, and after all these years we finally have our own country and can defend ourselves. But we paid a heavy price and must never forget what happened. We have got to educate our children about our history; they need to know about the circumstances that lead to The Shoah. That's the only way to prevent it from happening again."

It was a pleasure and an honor to be in the company of such a man.]

Never Give In To Despair

Before The War

*[Ed: Lazer's testimony is based primarily on the interview conducted in February 1997 by his niece, **Esther Bensimon** and her son, **Moshe Bensimon** in Esther's apartment in Pisgat Ze'ev, a suburb of Jerusalem. Lazer spoke in Yiddish and Esther concurrently translated the testimony into Hebrew. Moshe filmed the conversation.]*

The film opens with Lazer and Esther sitting at the breakfast table studying family photographs.]

This is my daughter **Liebe** and Liebe's son, **Sinai**. They live in Kherson, a town in the Ukraine near the Black Sea. It is Sinai's Bar Mitzvah, and he is putting on his tefillin for the first time in his life. It is a great moment to see my grandson putting on his tefillin; I never dreamt this could happen.

During the communist era there were no Jews in the town, only *Goyim* (Gentiles). In such surroundings how could my daughters find Jewish husbands? Sometimes I would have liked to converse with a Jew, but until *perestroika*¹ Jews didn't want to disclose themselves. They were afraid for their jobs, their careers. With Mikhail Gorbachev [*former president of the Soviet Union*] Jews began to appear, and their numbers grew like mushrooms after rain. And now there are quite many of them in this town.

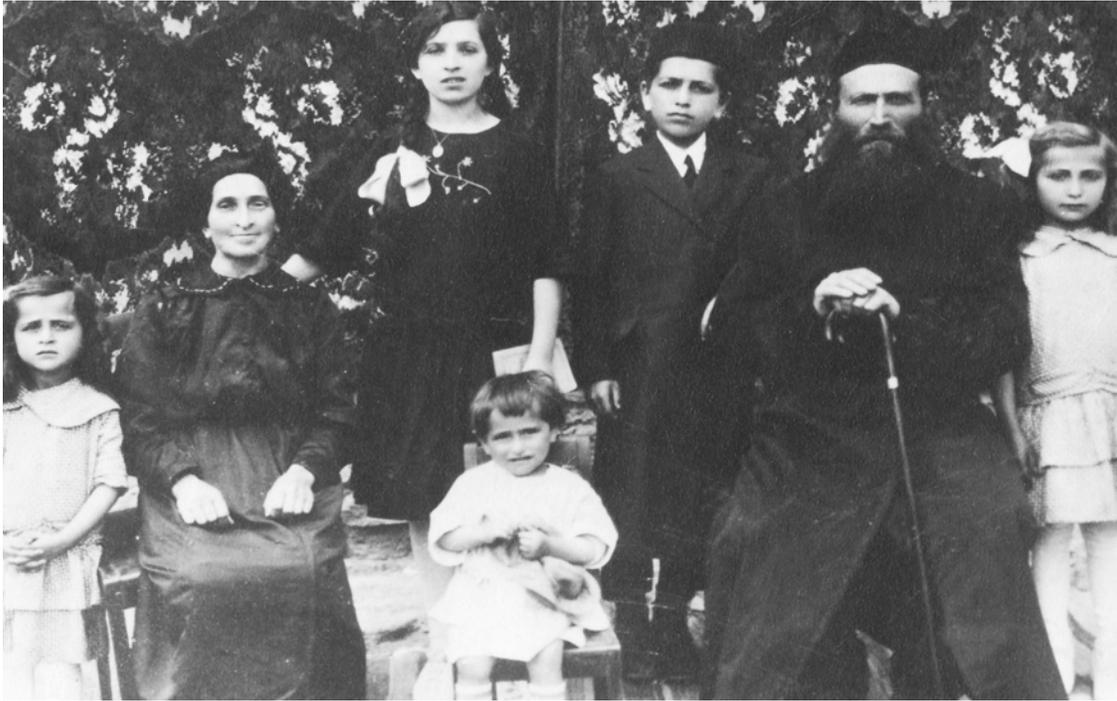
I have two daughters; **Lilly** is the eldest [*Lilly emigrated from the Ukraine to Israel with Lazer in 1991 and is married to **Marrek Gershman***]. **Liebe** is the youngest and was named after my father, Leibisch (Leib) Naiman. In the Ukraine Liebe had married and later was divorced from her husband; I kept reminding her, "Don't forget you are a Jew." Now she and her son live a full Jewish life. They go to the synagogue on Saturday and my grandson learns in an institution led by the *Chabad*. His biggest wish is to come to Israel. But first he has to finish his studies and learn more about his being a Jew. Afterwards, he will join the rest of the family in Israel. [*In 2002 both Liebe and Sinai made aliyah to Israel.*]

[Lazer consults a map of Poland pointing to various features.] Here is Ivansk. I was born there in 1920, but my parents came to Ivansk from Kabrze [*Yiddish; Kabza, Polish*] a little village in the neighborhood. Ivansk was a small town; it had a population of around 2,000 Jews; about 1600 were killed by the Germans and 400 survived by fleeing like me to USSR [*Soviet Union*].² After the war the survivors immigrated to different countries in the world, such as Canada, USA and Israel, including the **Rotenbergs** and **Pinczewskis** from our family. **Grandmother Kasten** immigrated to Canada in 1925 long before the war. [*The Naimans were not related to the Kastens; the word "grandmother" is used to signify an elderly woman.*]

On the next page there is a photo of almost the whole family dating from 1921. My father, Leibish and my mother, Mindel had 5 children. My father was twice married. First to **Bracha Pinczewski**; they had two children: **Moishe Tzvi** and **Leah (Leitsche)**. Following the death of Bracha, my father married Bracha's sister, **Mindel Pinczewski** and they had five children (in chronological order): **Tsirel, Yechiel, Malka, Rivka (Riva)**, and **Lazer**. I was the youngest.

¹ **Perestroika**: Mikhail Gorbachev's program of economic, political, and social reform which led to the collapse of the Soviet communist state in the late 1980s.

² There are no firm data on the number of Ivanskans who escaped annihilation by fleeing to the USSR. Yitz'chak Goldstein's testimony (Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, No.3, March-April, 2004) suggests that only a small number actually survived the war.



Ivansk 1921: Leibish and Mindel Naiman and their Children. Left to Right: Rivka, Mindel, Tsirel, Yechiel, Leibish and Malka. Lazer, the youngest, is seated on the chair. He was one year old.

My stepbrother, Moishe immigrated to Toronto, Canada and my stepsister Leitsche went to the USA. Leitsche wanted to have "*parnussy*". [*Yiddish, to make a living.*] Sadly, both are already dead. Moishe went alone to Toronto in 1927 hoping to earn enough money to have his family join him. He lived with Uncle Max (my father's brother) and his family until he got settled. He put every penny he earned into the bank to show the authorities that he had the means to keep them. Meanwhile, his wife lived with their children in our home. So our family in Ivansk needed not only to support ourselves but also to support Moishe's family as well. These were difficult times.

My older sister, Tsirel also left Poland before the war, immigrating to Argentina in 1935 [*Tsirel is the mother of Esther Bensimon, the woman who interviewed Lazer in 1997*] where she married her first husband by proxy through a "*schadchen*" [*Yiddish; matchmaker*]. But Tsirel wanted to see the larger world. (In 1966 she found me in Russia. We corresponded with each other for several years; she asked me not to speak about her life with her first husband.)

My parents, Yechiel, and Malka were destroyed in Treblinka. Rivka also suffered a terrible death; she was taken to *The Planta*, a local estate taken over by the Germans, where she and other young women were raped and then murdered.

The photo on the next page is from 1936. We see my father, my mother and my sisters, Malka Tsirel and Rivka and me (my brother, Yechiel was not present). I was sixteen years old at the time and I was proudly wearing my khaki-colored "*Hashomer Hatzair*" uniform. I am told that I resembled Rivka. Yes, but now I have a different "*poneem*" [*face*].

My mother, **Mindel Pinczewski** was a very pious person; she fasted twice a week. You can imagine what kind of person she was because she was willing to marry my father despite the fact that he had already two small children. She herself gave birth to three pairs of twins; I was one of

them. But soon after birth, three of the twins died, including my double. My mother also took care of Moishe's 5 children after he went to Canada.



Ivansk 1936: My Parents and My Sisters
Seated: Mindel and Leibish
Standing (L-R): Malka, Lazer, Rivka & Tsirel

Our house was not big but it was always full of people. Nevertheless, everybody was well taken care of and had enough to eat. The house stood opposite the market square on the Road to *Stashev* [Yiddish; *Staszow*, Polish]. See the K-B map on our website. The Naiman house is Number 49 on the east side on the market square.]

My father had a store and a warehouse at the back of our house. He sold iron products to blacksmiths, farmers and other inhabitants of Ivansk. He distributed iron products for a German manufacturer and sold other goods as well. In fact, it was the sort of store where you could find almost everything people needed. The shop was near the railway station, which was convenient for my father's business. My father often went to *Ostrov* [Yiddish; *Ostrowiec*, Polish], a bigger town about 40 km from Ivansk, where he knew a Jewish wholesale merchant who gave him a little reduction on the goods he bought. It was my father's little gain. He also conducted business in *Apt* [Yiddish; *Opatow*, Polish] and *Keltz* [Yiddish; *Kielce*, Polish].

My father had a horse and a wagon in which he traveled to surrounding towns, villages and farms delivering merchandise people needed. When I became sixteen or seventeen I was given the reins and made these rounds.

Everybody had to help in my father's store, especially Tsirel; as the eldest she had the most responsibilities of all. She was authoritarian, had a strong will and was not easy to get on with. Later my father bought her a bicycle to make her work easier.

It was a custom to send boys as well as girls beginning at the age of three to the cheder [Lazer laughing]. Sometimes the children were so young that they had holes made in their pants in order not to wet them. Our first teacher was "Reb Yankel". He beat us often, but we learned our "alef-beit" [Hebrew alphabet]. I stayed with him half a year and then went to another rabbi and learned *Gemora* [That part of the Talmud which contains rabbinical commentaries and analysis of the Mishnah.]

In Poland compulsory secular education began when we were seven; we went to the government primary school until we finished seven classes. In the afternoons we achieved our Jewish education with the rabbi.

A young boy named Yitz'chak Goldstein³ organized the "Hashomer Hatzair" [a Socialist-Zionist youth movement] chapter in Iwaniska. There were other youth organizations but most of us joined Hashomer Hatzair, which offered the most possibilities to learn new things and amuse ourselves dancing and going on outings.

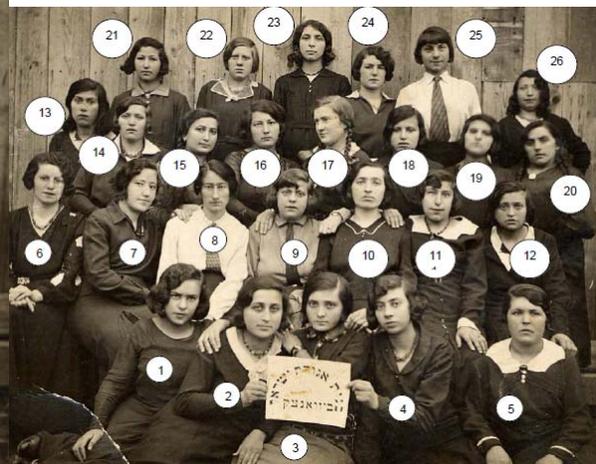
³ See Ivansk Project e-Newsletter, No 3, March-April, 2004 for Yitz'chak Goldstein's testimony

There came to our region an envoy from Palestine to organize Zionist youth. He was a very good speaker and visited Iwaniska and the neighboring towns. He explained why we should learn Hebrew, know the history of our people and immigrate to Palestine, even though malaria and other difficulties would be encountered there. There were about fifty youngsters in the group. He was given money to rent a house, which was used as the *ken* [Hebrew; meeting place] for *Hashomer Hatzair*. The *ken* was located on the *Rakover Weg* [Yiddish; Road to Rakow], near the *Shul* and *Beit Medrash*. In the library we were able to read books about Jews and Palestine, hear speeches and undertake all kinds of activities. The walls were decorated with a Jewish flag and pictures of famous Jewish activists. Our goal was to immigrate to *Eretz Yisroel*.

My parents did not object to my joining a leftist organization instead of an orthodox one. Our family was traditional but not ultra orthodox. My parents were sympathetic to some of the leftist ideas. Anyhow, they thought I was big enough to know what I wanted. I had finished my formal Jewish education; so why not? I shared some of my earnings with Hashomer Hatzair. I was too proud to ask for money from my parents.



Ivansk 1930s
Young Women Belonging to
Local Chapter of Agudas Yisroel



- 2. Rivka Naiman (Lazer's sister)
- 6. Malka Staiman (Immigrated to Colombia)
- 10. Tsirel Naiman (Lazer's sister)
- 15. Malka Naiman (Lazer's sister)

IF YOU CAN IDENTIFY ANY OF THE OTHER WOMEN OR PROVIDE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THEM, PLEASE CONTACT NORTON TAICHMAN



Ivansk 1936: Seven Friends

Front Row (L-R):

- Chayah Greenbaum
- Unkown (Lazer remembers her beautiful voice)
- Malka Naiman (Lazer's sister)

Back Row:

- Malka (Rotenberg) Kahan (see Newsletter, #18, 2006)
- Shifra Rotenberg
- Rivka Naiman (Lazer's sister)
- Etel Shtulberg

If you can identify the unknown person or have information on any of these women, please let me know.

1939: War Comes to Ivansk

[Lazer begins drawing a map of Poland positioning key points in his story]

We must make a map. Otherwise we don't know what and when. Let's say this is Poland. Here is the border. Here is the border. This is Russia. This is the border with Poland. That is not the real Polish border but the border between German and Russian-Occupied Poland.

This is the *Tayich Buch* (River Bug). This is the Buch, which formed the border between the German and the Russian zones.

This is the border with Romania.
This is the border with Czechoslovakia.
Here is the border, the old border. This is Germany.

Here is Ivansk. This is Ivansk.
Here is the Vistula River [*Wisla in Polish*].
It starts down here and flows into the Baltic.
Here is the San River. It flows into the Vistula.
Here is Apt. Here is Sandomierz. This is Ivansk.

Here, the whole area up to the Bug was occupied by the Germans, including the Baltic. The Germans came in from here, from all sides to Ivansk.

In 1939 the Germans came in. On the 3rd day they came. War broke out on the 1st of September, a Friday, and on Monday they were already in Ivansk. They came right away to Ivansk.



September 1939: Germany & USSR Invade & Occupy Poland
The Nazis and Soviets conquered Poland and divided the country into German and Russian zones. Ivansk was in the German zone.

All I've told you so far happened between 1936 and 1939. When hostilities began in 1939 I brought all the books from the ken's library to my home. There were many good books about *Eretz Yisroel*, communism, as well as a complete collection of the best Jewish writers like *Shalom Aleichem*, *Shalom Ash*, *Mendele Mocher Sfarim*, *I.L. Peretz*, etc. I also took the radio home; we used to listen to programs from Palestine warning us to flee before the danger coming from the Nazis.

[Lazer, reproachfully] Yes, flee, but to where? And how? To immigrate we had to have somebody abroad who would claim us and show that he would support us. I wanted to immigrate to *Eretz Yisroel* and then bring my family, but we ran out of time.

We were already aware of the possible danger. In about 1937 the warnings became real when German and later

Austrian refugees began arriving in Poland. In the early 1930s we also read "*Mein Kampf*" [*My Struggle/My Battle, first published in 1925*] in which Hitler exposed his plans for the Jews and which pro-Nazis sympathizers began to spread in Poland.

So, even in 1933 when Hitler came to power in Germany we knew that he was bent on destroying the Jewish people.

My family urged me to escape. I was the youngest and had the best chance to succeed. My sisters refused to go because they didn't want to leave our parents alone. Within days after the war began the Germans occupied Ivansk. The soldiers who stayed in Ivansk were older; younger men went to the front. I remember one of the elderly Germans who stayed behind. He told us specifically to escape because we were in danger. But not all the Jews knew or wanted to believe the rumors.

In 1940 the SS came in and took people for slave labor. We were taken to the small town, *Rakov* [*In Polish, Rakow*], where there was a stone quarry where they dug up *Kalch* [*chalk*]. That's where we were working.

It was coming close to the time of the high holidays [*1940*]. And we all knew that we had to survive the SS and all the other tribulations. So when we came home, Rivka, Rivka Naiman, my sister said, "Lazer, you have to escape. You have to escape!"

During the occupation people who were twenty-one or older were taken away to work in distant labor camps. Many began to disappear and never returned. We began to realize that they were going to be killed. At this time my parents foresaw the danger and told me to run away.

But I was only nineteen, almost twenty; and although I was made to work by the Germans, I was not taken away from my family. Every morning I was driven by truck to the lime quarry outside *Rakov* and returned home at night. I worked hard mining chalk that was used to white wash houses. I still bear a "gift" from the Germans. [*Lazer inclines his head; there is a deep scar on his skull.*] The Germans were beating us the whole time. It was like a second nature; like a sadistic

strain. You see a Jew and you must hit him. It was indoctrination from early childhood. Like with the Arabs. You kill a Jew and you go to paradise.

From Ivansk You Have to Escape!

[Lazer looking very grave] My cousin **Sasha Pinczewski** came to us and told us that many of my mother's family (the Pinczewski's) had run away from the Germans by crossing the border to USSR. Sasha said she also intended go as well. That was the day that three of my Pinczewski cousins and I started to plan our escape. We kept our plan to ourselves; few people outside our families knew what we intended to do. In truth, every family was on its own.

Where do we escape to?

So Riva took a map and said, "This is Apt. This is Ivansk. This is *The San*.⁴ This is *The Buch* (Bug River). And this is Rakov. So from Ivansk you have to escape!"

My cousins **Simcha Pinczewski** and **Gimpel Pinczewski** from Ivansk and another **Simcha Pinczewski** (from Apt) and I ran from Ivansk.

Riva made the plan. How to escape: we were working there in the quarry [in Rakov] and to get water we had to walk one-half kilometer.

So Rivka asked, "Who is guarding you when you go for water to drink, the Germans or Poles?" (The guards were Sudeten Germans.)

"And is anybody guarding you when you go into the forest for water? (No)

"So you should make it as though you are going for water. You are going for water. All four of you guys as though you are going for water."

Each day my cousins and I were taken to the quarry. We stayed together and worked as a team, waiting for our chance to steal away. We did not know when the opportunity would occur; we had to be prepared to run at a moment's notice. Every morning we said goodbye to our families as if it was the last time we would see them. We dressed in clothing that would be suitable for the life of a fugitive. In my case the tailor, **Chaim Tajchman** made a warm, long coat for me. I took documents showing that I had family in Canada and Argentina, as well as a map, a compass and a few Russian gold coins. My mother made food for the journey: *ai'er kichlach* [egg cookies] and hard dry bread. Every morning I kissed my parents and siblings goodbye and went away to work. [Lazer becomes agitated] In the deepest of our hearts we knew we probably would never see one another again, but on the surface hope persisted.

We were dressed in uniforms of Polish students and had false documents which Riva got for us from the former mayor of Ivansk who she had befriended. In those times few Jews went to college; so we hoped to be mistaken for Catholic students returning home.

Each day the Sudeten German guards would select a different group of workers to bring water from the stream, which was several meters from the quarry. The day came when it was our turn. When we were out of sight we fled into the forest. The Germans had declared that if anyone

⁴ **The San River:** a tributary of the **Wisła (Vistula) River**. The San joins the Vistula near Sandomierz. *The River Bug* forms the boundary between Poland and the Ukraine. In 1939 The Bug demarcated the German and Russian zones in occupied Poland.



1940: Lazer Escapes from German-Occupied Poland. After Yom Kippur, Lazer and his 3 cousins fled to Lwów, which was in the Russian zone. The map shows Poland's current borders and some of the towns and cities that figured in their escape.

escaped, collective punishment would be meted out to those left behind. But they needed our labor; so, we felt that it was unlikely that anyone would be penalized when it was discovered that we were missing.

My cousins and I hired a peasant with his horse and carriage to take us to Sandomierz [a town to the southeast of Iwansk]. He asked no questions. We traveled via Opatow (Apt), and when we reached Sandomierz our driver left us. We had to cross over the San River which was wide and patrolled by the Germans. Our final destination was the River Bug which formed a natural boundary between Russian and German-occupied Poland. However, the Bug was also heavily guarded and most people who tried to cross did not make it. And that is why that river became known as "The Red Bug".

We marched along the river bank looking for a bridge or another means to cross. Then we spotted a young boy on a barge. He proposed to take us to the other side for a small sum of money; each of us paid him approximately 2 zlotys. [Lazer smiling and with admiration] To this day I remember the skill he showed, guiding his boat in the strong current to the other side.

After crossing we went through woods, woods, woods. We could only go at night. But we didn't see any Germans anymore. We went through villages, villages, villages. The Germans were afraid to go into these little villages. Fields, fields, fields. Then we came to the San River, which we crossed and then we went to the town of Biłgoraj.

We got to on the other side of the San but were still in German-occupied territory. We decided to go to the town of Janow lubelski and then on to Biłgoraj. From there it was straight to the Bug. Simcha who was the eldest was our leader.

We found the town of Biłgoraj in ruins. Large numbers of Jews lived in the towns in this eastern part of Poland. We went into a house where we saw an elderly couple together with some young girls. [Lazer's voice changes; he is almost crying.] They awaited death. They said to us: "You are not the first Jewish refugees we have seen. You must go. You must flee!"

We proposed that the girls come with us but they refused saying, "We cannot leave our old parents alone. Besides why should somebody harm us? We didn't do anything. We are neither soldiers nor partisans. We are children. We are innocent. We will be safe." [Lazer wipes his tears]

I then remembered a similar scene happening not long before in my parent's house in Iwansk.

We stayed the night, and in the morning we went our way taking care to avoid the towns and roads traveling mostly through the woods. We decided to head further south to get at the beginning of the river Bug where it was narrower and easier to cross.

It took us about 3 days and nights of almost continuous walking to reach the forests surrounding the town of Lwów,⁵ which is now in the Ukraine. There, in the middle of the forest, we found a deserted Polish military post. The soldiers had fled leaving behind everything, including uniforms (especially those of officers), sabers, guns and ammunition. The most valuable finding proved to be detailed military maps of the region. We took what we needed, and now everyone had a gun and was feeling much better

From Bilgoraj we come to the Yanov Forest. Hey, milling around are horses, cavalry horses. The Polish cavalry went home and they left their horses. In the backpacks we found bread, military maps, and in the military maps every tree is marked. Compasses, and hats, wurst, bread, and dried milk. Everything was hanging on the horses. It was a *mechaya* [Yiddish, wonderful]. We ate. What happened in the end? We went. We left our things and took the items from the military.

We continued our journey until we reached the end of the woods and in the distance we saw a few houses. We decided that one of us would see if anyone lived in the nearest house while the rest of us stayed outside to help in case of necessity. We had luck. The house was inhabited by an old woman; as soon as she heard our questions about the direction to the border, she told us that she understood everything. She said that her son, who lived on the other side of the frontier, would soon come to bring her food and would show us where to go. "He is a good man", she added. "He will help you."

Indeed, when the man showed up he agreed to take us with him but on condition that we did exactly as he said. He explained that this part of the border was not so strongly guarded but even so guards patrolled the area every half hour.

We gave the woman and her son some money, and after dark we were taken to the border.

Into Russian-Occupied Poland

The border was marked by three rows of deep trenches [*ditches*] that were filled with water. We crossed over this "no man's land", holding our belongings above our heads.

We crawled to the border. Through one trench. The second trench. The third trench. God helped.
Simcha said we should thank God and say *Shema Yisroel*.
So we said *Shema Yisroel* and we went forward.
We were wet. And afraid.

⁵ *Lwów*: a city in western Ukraine. The town is known by different names, depending on the nation that controlled the territory; *Lwów* (Poland), *Lemberg* (Austria), *Lviv* (Ukraine), *L'vov* (Russia). In 1939 the town was part of Poland and in this account we will refer to it by its Polish name, *Lwów*.

After reaching the other side, we saw a German patrol approaching from where we had just come from. We panicked. But our guide told us not to be afraid because we were already into Soviet territory. He said that if the Germans fired at us it would be contrary to the pact that had been signed between Russia and Germany just before the outbreak of the war. He was right; the frustrated Germans contented themselves by shooting into the air. Our guide took leave from us, and we took off in the direction of a forester's lodge which was marked on the military map.

I don't know exactly how long it took us to reach this point, but we had left home after Yom Kippur and came to Russian-occupied territory around the end of October [1940]. I wanted to contact my parents to tell them that we had safely crossed the border, but it was not possible.

After parting with our guide, we were alone in the woods.

Suddenly, we heard barking of dogs and then a Russian patrol came out from the trees. The men seemed to be of Asian extraction [*so-called "Kalmuks"*]. We were not afraid knowing that we had nothing to fear from them. The commanding officer of the patrol asked us if we had guns. Seeing we didn't understand Russian he mimicked the sound of firing guns: Bang! Bang!

We surrendered our armaments and then he shot his gun into the air as a signal to other nearby soldiers. Very soon came a detachment of men accompanied by an officer on horseback; the officer sent the border patrol on its way.

The soldiers carried on a conversation amongst themselves in Russian. We understood a few words, including "*shpion*" (spy). Then, the officer signaled us to follow him. We obeyed, but soon we realized that he was leading us back to the border...back to the German side!

Speaking in Yiddish Simcha said, "It is better to be killed like dogs than to return to the Germans. Sit down and don't move".

We sat down.

And in about 15 minutes an officer arrived on a horse followed by two soldiers. Awww.

"We caught you." We understood what he said.

He said, "Stand Up". So we stood up. "Turn around." So we turned around.

And the two soldiers go behind us. The officer goes in front of us.

And he is taking us back to the German border! Wayyyyy.

We escaped and he is taking us back!

So Simcha said, "We're not going anywhere. We are staying put."

And we sat down.

"Let them shoot us now. Rather than be murdered by the Germans it is better for us to be killed by the Russians."

And he, the officer is yelling at us to stand up. "Stand up!"

You know what I'll tell you? I said to Simcha in Yiddish, "You know I think that the officer is a Jew. The officer, I think that he is a Jew." (His face showed me that he was Jewish.)

So the officer said to us, "Yes. Yes. I'm a Jew." *Vayyy!*

We said to him, "We don't know Russian, we only know Yiddish, German, Czechoslovak, and Polish. And Russian we don't understand what or when.

"Boys, Don't worry. I wanted to test you to see if you would go back", he said. "Don't be afraid. Now that you've come we will let you live. And you will be in Russia and we will not send you away. And you will work. And you will know that you are still alive. You are not the first. You are not the last. There are a lot of refugees who crept through the border, and you will live."

We turned around again and he took us through the forest.

So we took one another by the hands and he took us to the forester's house.

The soldiers lead us to the forester's lodge. There we found quite a large group of other Jewish refugees who told us not to be afraid as we were in the hands of civilized people who would give us food and shelter.

A little later we were sent to the town of Sinjawi where we were given a document certifying that we were Polish refugees. It was *Shabbos [Shabbat]* and the town's Jews invited us to their homes. *[We have not been able to locate this town on the map.]*

The documents we received allowed us to travel to neighboring towns. I proposed to go to Lwów to visit a friend from Iwanski, the town's physician Dr. Kretz.⁶ We then took the train from Sinjawi to Lwów.

Dr. Kretz was a Jewish doctor who had been sent by Polish authorities to serve as Iwaniska's physician. We knew him well as did the other Jews in town. He was our family doctor and we were friends. He often visited us on Saturdays and we had coffee together. I wanted to get in touch with him. Before fleeing from Iwaniska to escape the Germans, he gave us his address in Lwów and told us that if we were in need we could come to him. Till this day I remember his address in Lwów: Sobieskiego 36.

When we entered his house the family was already packing. We were given food and tea *[Lazer laughing]* but instead of sugar we got candies. When we asked him if there was any sugar, Dr. Kretz laughed, "You are dreaming. You want sugar in the land of Bolsheviks?"

We stayed the night and talked and talked. Dr. Kretz told us that he wanted to go to Romania and from there perhaps to Israel. He said, "In Romania you can get everything for money."⁷

⁶ **Henriette Kretz**, the daughter of Dr. Maurycy (Maurice) and Elsa Kretz, told her story, "A Child of the Holocaust" in The Iwanski Project e-Newsletter, Number 31, July - August, 2008. When Henriette translated Lazer's 1997 testimony into English, she was surprised and delighted to encounter her father's name in Lazer's account. Since then she has been in contact with Lazer.

⁷ Dr. Kretz planned to flee to Romania with his family but for some reason decided to remain in the Ukraine. Had they succeeded in reaching Romania it is possible that Henriette's parents may have survived the war. In 2008 I asked Lazer if he knew why Dr. Kretz had changed his mind about fleeing from the Ukraine; Lazer did not have an answer.

He tried to convince me to stay with him: "Simcha [*Lazer's cousin*] is going to his family but to whom are you going?" It was a crucial moment in my life, but I decided to go with my cousins to Białystok, where the rest of my Pinczewski family was staying.

We left Lwów by train and arrived in Białystok. Refugees were not put up in the town itself but were housed in the suburbs on a big property, which probably belonged to a very rich person before being confiscated by the Bolsheviks. The place was packed with refugees and about 10 families had to stay in one room.

We met our family. [*Lazer looks at another photo*] Here are their photos: Uncle Shlomo, his daughter Reisaleh and Simcha and the others; after the war they all came to Israel.

It was a very cold that winter in 1940. Young and old had to work hard to survive. We went into the town and took any kind of work that was offered to us. Simcha and I had utensils and an ax; so, we chopped wood.

When Hitler attacked Poland in 1939, the Russians quickly occupied this region of the country. Consequently, the Jewish populations in Białystok and Lwów and in neighboring towns were still practically intact and were relatively safe for the time being.

In our daily life there came some relief when the Joint [*American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee(?)*] began to distribute food to Jewish refugees.

At this time I had little idea about what was happening to the Jews in German-occupied Poland because the Russians censored all news from the other side. The Soviets were not willing to jeopardize the agreement they had with the Germans. They even went so far as to write in the press that Stalin, Molotow and Kaganowich [*Lazer Kaganowich: a Jew who was a member of politburo under Stalin*] were pleased that the German people had become such good friends of the Russians.

But the Jews in Russia were more suspicious. They had read "*Mein Kampf*" and knew about the Hitler's desire to conquer the east (*drang nach osten*). But Stalin believed in Hitler's good will. He didn't want to heed the warnings of his councilors who advised him to beware of Hitler's promises pointing to German rearmament.

The Land of the White Bear

One day an order was issued to all refugees to apply for papers that would allow them to become Soviet citizens. Most of those who were already reunited with their families were willing to accept the offer but most of those whose families were left behind in Poland refused and chose to remain Polish citizens. This was especially true for the younger refugees.

One night trucks came in large numbers and all those who didn't sign up for Soviet citizenship were taken away and put on a freight train, destination unknown. I was one of them.

In a way this development came as no surprise. Already in the 1930s we heard by radio about the massacre in Moscow and how bloody the Soviet regime was. About what was happening in Russia before the war we knew more than the Russians. We knew how brutal the Soviet government was and how people were arrested without knowing even why and that many people disappeared forever. But in fleeing the Nazis I had no other choice but to try to reach the Soviet Union. Where

else could I go? France and half Europe were now in German hands. Besides, Stalin promised to accept everybody without distinction of race or religion, and in fact that is what he really did.

Before we embarked on the train I said goodbye to Uncle Shlomo and Reisaleh in Białystok. Also I said farewell to my cousins who had fled with me from Ivansk. They decided to take the offer of Soviet citizenship; they survived the war and eventually went to live in Israel.

It was in the middle of the Russo-Finnish War⁸ when the train set out to the east. It was dreadfully cold. We slept on planks. We were traveling endlessly. How long I don't remember. Perhaps weeks, months or more? We didn't know where we were going.

In our wagon we were about thirty people (the children were transported in separate wagons). Most were Polish refugees but some were Russians. We were fed salted fish but didn't get water. It was terrible. We complained to the armed guards who accompanied the train that, "It is worse than Hitler. At least Hitler is killing us quickly." Some tried to suck ice that formed on the iron joints in the doors, but because of the deep cold their tongues stuck to the metal. So what we could do? A lot of people became swollen from starvation and lack of water.

On the journey we passed through the railway station in a former Polish town, Baranowicze.⁹ Through the openings between the planks of the wagon's walls we saw people and heard them asking the guards, "Who are you transporting?" The answer was, "Spies!"

Then one day we heard the name of a town, Molotow [*Molotov*].¹⁰ One of us who knew well the geography of Russia said to us fearfully, "We are lost. They are sending us way to the north where the white bears are!"

We were always thirsty. I was the youngest and I told my companions in misfortune, "Next time the guards open the doors to give us bread and herring we should throw it in their faces. We can survive a few days without food but we cannot survive without water."

(Even when we arrived at our destination and were permitted to step outside I remembered that I had learned that we should not overindulge ourselves on snow and water because drinking too much after being so long without water can also be dangerous. You see, to learn is a good thing.)

⁸ **Russo-Finnish War** ("The Winter War") The Soviet Union and Finland fought a bitter war between 1939 and 1940. The Soviets feared a possible German attack through Finnish territory and wanted Finland to cede land near Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). The Finns refused. The Russian military vastly outnumbered the Finns in manpower and material. Nevertheless, the Finns held out because of inept Russian leadership. The Finns were finally overwhelmed following a change in the Russian command and were forced to relinquish territory to the enemy. In June 1941 Germany invaded Russia; the Finns joined with the Germans hoping to regain lost territory. In 1944, when the tide had turned against the Germans, the Finns signed an armistice with the USSR.

⁹ **Baranowicze**: An important railroad hub which belonged to Poland before WWII. Today the city is in western Belarus.

¹⁰ **Molotov**: A town in northern Kazakhstan. From Molotov the train carrying Lazer presumably turned in a northerly direction parallel to the western slopes of the Ural Mountains, passing through the town of Perm and ultimately reaching The Gulag (see map on the following page).



1940: To the Land of the White Bear
We are not certain of the exact route the train followed to reach The Gulag. A possible route went from Poland via the Ukraine into Kazakhstan. Then, at Molotov the train would head in a northerly direction, running parallel to the western slopes of the Ural Mountains passing through the city of Perm. The Gulag lies beyond Perm (indicated by the orange-colored oval on the map).

At first everybody was against me because they didn't like getting lessons from me, a youngster still wet behind the ears. I said, "You do as you wish but I will do exactly what I told you." In the end I won.

When three soldiers came with food, we took the bread but we threw the herring into their faces, all this accompanied by fierce curses in German, Polish and Russian.

In my wagon no one died, but some died in other wagons and their bodies were taken away immediately.

Finally, we arrived at our destination and the train came to a halt. We were in a deep forest; nothing to see but trees and snow.

We were taken further away to a series of long, dilapidated barracks. These quarters were built in the thirties for dissidents sent into exile but the buildings weren't demolished because someone with foresight thought they could be useful later on. The first thing we did when we got off the train was to take a bath. People who were ill were immediately isolated; the Russians didn't have enough medicines and were very much afraid of an outbreak of epidemics.

We were given warm clothes appropriate to the climate (coats filled with cotton wool) and tools. They told us that if we wanted cabins we would have to build them ourselves. Meanwhile we slept in the barracks. I must say that the Russians always took care that we should be warmly clothed fearing epidemics.

The place we stayed in was called Tchubin *[The location of this town could not be determined]*. It was the most northern point before the land of the Eskimos. This was "The Gulag".

Our job was to cut trees and place them on the frozen river "Urka Isme" which drained into the Wolga (Volga) River. In the spring when the ice melted the logs floated down the river to all parts of

Russia. Later on we were joined in this wilderness by thousands of other new arrivals. The Gulag is usually thought of as being reserved for political prisoners, and because we had declined Soviet citizenship, that's what we were considered. But in this camp there were all sorts of other people: Polish soldiers, German Jews who fled from Hitler in the thirties, common criminals, etc.

Escape? Impossible! We were in "Nowhere Land".

We were already well-organized: we had a kitchen, an office and a hospital (doctors were recruited from among the prisoners). We were divided in groups. Prisoners who spoke Russian were made chiefs of the groups; usually they were Jews from eastern parts of Poland near the Russian border. Their main task was to control the number of trees cut by prisoners. Food was distributed according to the quantity of cut trees. The more we worked and delivered, the more food we got.

The cold was so intense that even birds froze in the air. (Temperatures descended in the winter to -50°C or -60°C.) Many people died. Spring and summer were even worse. We were eaten alive by flies and mosquitoes. We prayed to God for the winter to return.

We had a radio in the club but could listen only to Soviet propaganda and successes of the Red Army. Everything else was censored. Through this radio they encouraged us to work harder, saying that every effort we made was bringing victory nearer and that we would be living happily and enjoying prosperity after the war. Until the Nazis invaded Russia in 1941 we heard only "good news" from occupied Poland. But after 1941 censorship was lifted. We learned what was really happening to the Jews under the Germans.

(I will tell you something else: we heard that Hitler was preparing gas to kill all the Jews in Russia and throughout the world. We were given the names and locations of the concentration camps. When President Roosevelt heard about all this, he was asked to bomb these camps. Roosevelt said that numbers didn't count and to bomb the camps didn't fit into the military strategy. Can you imagine such a thing?)

In the camp men and women were separated. But when we returned from work we often crossed paths with groups of women; we exchanged a few words and asked about friends or relatives.

The policy of the Soviet regime was to separate the children of political prisoners from their parents and send them to children's homes. Many of them were too little to remember their Jewish roots. So now in Russia there are probably a lot of these children who have grown up never knowing that they are Jews.

Under the Bolsheviks there was no way we could outwardly practice our religion. They confiscated religious articles, such as *tallit* and *teffilin*. But some of us managed to keep "Yiddishkeit" [*Jewish traditions and customs*] while living under the Soviets. I will give you an example:

[Lazer stands up and gesticulates] In the barracks it was like this: there was a passage the whole length of the barrack. Beds, one on top of the other, stood on both sides of the corridor. My neighbor from "above" was a Georgian Jew, Moishe Schwilli. He was religious and had *pyes* [*earlocks*] and a beard. He was a Soviet citizen and I asked him why he was here. He told me that he was sentenced to 5 years because he dealt in the black market. He already completed 4 years and had only one year to go.

I told him that I had a religious upbringing and learned *Chumash* [*the Five Books of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch*] and *Rashi* [*Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (1040-1105) known by the acronym,*

Rashi the author of the first comprehensive commentaries on the Talmud, Torah and Tanach (Hebrew Bible)]. Moishe Schwilli was amazed at this because under the Soviets no such learning was permitted. I reminded him that in Poland things had been different.

Russian prisoners could get packages sent from their families; naturally I didn't get any because I had nobody. All packages were searched very carefully, but Moishe Schwilli bribed a guard and was able to get a tallis and tefillin. But he prayed like a Muslim and explained that he did so to avoid being caught. He covered himself with a blanket to conceal his tallis and tefillin, and in this attitude he prayed. I also asked him how he dealt with food not being kosher. He told me that from the beginning he was swapping his non-kosher soup for extra bread; that meant that he practically lived on bread for four years. I asked him if he would swap his food with me, but he said no because he didn't want to give non-kosher food to a Jew.

I always wondered how he kept his religion despite the brainwashing and Soviet propaganda which was streaming on us; sometimes we even believed what was being said. I want to tell you that keeping my Jewishness was not uppermost in my mind. Do not forget that Moishe Schwilli was in his own country; he had a home; he received help from his family and he did what he was used to doing all his life. We political prisoners were alone, without contact with anybody, isolated without any outside help. All we cared about was surviving the cold, the hunger and the exhausting work. (Moishe Schwilli was released from the Gulag and after my release I looked for him in Tbilisi [*a city in the Georgian Republic*], but I didn't find him in this big town.)

From the Gulag to Ukranian Coal Mines

I was kept in this camp in the Gulag from 1940 till 1943. Now, Russia was already at war with Germany. Stalin needed all the help he could get. In London there was a Polish government in exile lead by General Władysław Sikorski. He proposed forming a Polish army to fight against the Nazis on condition that Stalin agree to liberate the thousands upon thousands of Polish people and allow them to circulate freely or join the Polish army. Stalin agreed and I was liberated together with other Poles.

So one day a Polish delegation led by a very famous Polish woman writer, Wanda Wassilevska [*a Polish novelist and politician who played an important role in the formation of communist government in Poland*] came to our camp. The group came to claim the Polish prisoners as provided in the accord between Stalin and Sikorski.

Before letting us go, the Soviets gathered us in the club and asked us not to speak ill of the Soviet Union and the way we were treated in the Gulag. We assured them that such was our intention and that we were thankful for the refuge that they had provided. After all, it was true, and we bore no animosity towards the Soviet Union.

We were gathered together and were told that we were free to go where we wanted. Young men and women were welcome to join the Polish army and many did so. I was very weak and didn't have any military training but wanted to join as well. The Red Army was advancing in the direction of the Middle East and there was a chance that I would eventually be able to reach Palestine. But the army didn't want me and I was rejected.

That same day a delegation from factories and enterprises throughout Russia came to the camp. Almost all Russians of military age were at the front and there was a big shortage of working hands, especially skilled workers. But I was without a profession so I didn't have much choice; I

decided to go to the Ural Mountains to work in the coal mines. So once again I was taking the train, but this time as a free man. You may ask why I did not return to Poland after my release. The answer was that in 1943 the war was still on and there was fighting in Poland. We were forbidden to go to the war zones.

So I arrived in Kaminsk and started working in the coal mines. *[Kaminsk could not be identified on current maps; perhaps the spelling is not correct. We speculate that Kaminsk may be Kharkiv, a town located in the coal mining region in the Eastern Ukraine.]* We lived in wagons, about 14 men per wagon. We worked hard and there were several Jews so we spoke Yiddish to each other.

There was with us an attorney from the Ukraine. In the past he had done something so bad that he had to work even on days of rest. He wanted to be well thought of in the eyes of the authorities, so he denounced us saying that in our group there were people who spoke against the Soviet Union. In reality he could not understand much of what we were saying as he did not speak Yiddish or Polish. He was asking us what we would do after the war. We told him that we were Polish citizens and will return to Poland but would not stay there because we were tired of the anti-Semitism and wanted our own country.

Under the circumstances this may have been a stupid thing to tell him, but *[Lazer apologetic]* you know the tongue is without bone; it is easy to wag. Anyhow, he wrote a deposition and pointed to one of the Jews as being our leader. The man was badly beaten and got 10 years for Zionist activities, and all of us were forbidden to leave the town for 5 years.

They took back our Polish citizenship papers, and we had to continue to work in the mines. You can imagine what I felt when all my Polish Jewish friends returned to Poland with the possibility to immigrate to Israel. I had to stay behind.

Out From The Mines

And then in 1947 on Rosh Hashanah I was set free, but by then the borders were closed and I was trapped in the Ukraine. I got a document saying I was released from arrest and I could go everywhere except a big city. I chose to go to the western part of Ukraine to be as near as possible to the Polish border; this part of the Ukraine was formerly Polish territory, with towns like Lwów, Rovno, Rokitno and Volynsk. I hoped to find someone who knew about my family.

When I came to the station to take a train to the Ukraine, the train was full beyond capacity. But when the chief of the militia saw my papers, he immediately ordered a ticket for me. I am certain he wanted to get rid of a person without money who was also a jailbird. When the train arrived to Volynsk *[a city in the Western part of the Ukraine]*, suddenly I got very ill. I was brought to a small, ill equipped hospital, and one day later I was operated on for a hernia. The surgeon was a military man, and he spread the news that a young Jew was staying in the hospital. Immediately some Jews came to visit me.

I stayed in the hospital for 12 days, and when I went out I was taken under the protection of the Jewish community. They didn't have enough to eat for themselves but organized to help me. One of them named Barman (he lives now in Israel in Beersheva) offered me a place to stay in his house and gave me work in a glass factory. Before the war the factory was owned by his father and afterwards it was nationalized, and Barman was named director. I told him I wanted to go to



The Ukraine (Current Borders)
The map shows some of the towns/cities that are mentioned in Lazer's story.

Palestine. He said: "Patience, one day you will go there. But first of all you have to recover." I took his advice and began to work, first as an apprentice and then as a fully qualified worker.

I didn't want to continue staying with Barmen because he had children and a family of his own. So, I went to the town authorities and asked for a place to live, which I got. In 1948 I already had a profession and was earning money.



Miriam and Lazer
(Date Uncertain)

I met and married a Jewish girl, Miriam [*Miriam Gerber who was from Olevsk, Ukraine*]. In Stalin's days she was a teacher of Yiddish in a Jewish school. When the school closed, she learned the profession of an accountant and worked as such. Our son was born in 1949 and was given my father's name, Leibish. I especially went to Kiev to bring a mohel for the Brith Mila [*Mohel: a person who performs ritual circumcision of Jewish boys 8 days after birth*].

[Lazer's face becomes very sad] Our child died a few months later. *[From Lazer's description the child probably died of pneumonia.]* After this tragedy my wife went depressive. The doctor said that perhaps with the new child it will be better. We subsequently had two daughters but it didn't help. On the surface Miriam acted like any homemaker: she cooked, cleaned, and even exercised her profession at home, but mentally she was sinking more and more. She was feeling pursued, and she heard voices. She was very unhappy and exhausted by her illness. I tried to help her but I had to make a living. She died of heart failure in 1984. *[Lazer very sadly]* We lived together 33 years.

While living in the Ukraine I wanted to contact members of my family who lived abroad. But I was warned that if I wanted to stay in Volynsk and not end up in jail, I would do better not to do it. I was afraid and waited till the regime softened a little.

When this happened [*peristoika*], I began the search for other members of my family. I wrote a letter to the Red Cross and I asked if they would publicize the names of my family in Jewish newspapers. In 1966 the **Diesenhaus** family, who were from Ivansk and now lived in Argentina, read the announcement and responded to the editor of the newspaper providing the name and address of my sister, Tsirel in Canada. Immediately I sent a telegram to her, and we began to correspond regularly. It was through Tsirel that I was informed that my stepbrother, Moishe Naiman and stepsister, Leitcha Najman were living in Toronto.

Not One Jew Left in Ivansk

I have since learned more about the fate of our people in Ivansk. By coincidence this happened when there was the catastrophe in Chernobyl [*site of Ukrainian nuclear power plant disaster in 1986*]. The lot of the Jews of Ivansk was for all the same. I had gone to visit friends in Rokitno, a border town where there are lots of tourists. By accident, I met a Polish woman who said that she was from Klimontów, a shtetl only a few kilometers from Ivansk. She described for me the last day of the Jews from Ivansk. Helena (it was her name) said that all the Jews were brought from Ivansk to Klimontów where they were gathered in a big square. The Germans then proceeded to kill every tenth Jew and then the remainder were taken to Cmielow, and loaded on the train to the concentration camp, Treblinka where they were gassed.¹¹

Before they were deported from Iwaniska the Jews knew what awaited them. They were leaving never to return. They set fire to their wooden homes so as to prevent them falling into the hands of their neighbors who they knew waited impatiently for their departure.

Ivansk was totally burnt. It's a new Ivansk.

Encircling the market square there were two-story houses that people lived in. In the last days the Jews already knew they were taking them away.

So the last Jews that were there including my father, brothers and sisters went to the assembly place. Yes. Yes. So they knew.

They set fire to one house, the house at the corner of the market square on the Rakover Way [*the Road to Rakow*]. So they lit the fire, and the fire went all around. The Jews set the fire themselves. The Jews didn't want anything to remain.

¹¹ [Ed: In September 2008 Laurie Naiman (USA; The Ivansk Project's Web Master) visited his cousin Lazer for the first time. Lazer told him about the last days of the Jews in Ivansk. This is what Laurie wrote to me:

"While in Europe Lazer met the daughter of a non-Jewish neighbor from Ivansk. This woman's mother had told her that in the final days before deportation, she was brought to the center of the village to witness what would happen if she did anything to help the Jews. In the town square, where all the Jews had been gathered, a group of young Jewish musicians were playing beautiful music by German composers (Wagner, Liszt, etc). To the horror of everyone the Germans shot every tenth Jew and loaded the rest onto trucks to be taken to the trains and transported to Treblinka. The sadism and extreme cruelty of the Germans greatly disturbed this Christian woman who felt she had to pass it on to her daughter."

It is likely that the woman referred to in Laurie's letter was Helena and that the village where the Jewish musicians were forced to play German music was Klimontów, not Ivansk.]

New Houses. Ivansk is all new. It was burnt down in 1942. The Jews themselves. She told me this. She gave me a lot to understand.

I asked a favor of Helena; I requested that she bring me a document to show that I was born in Iwaniska. Helena was a business woman and agreed. But in return she gave me some money and asked that I buy a television for her. Helena secured my certificate of birth together with testimony of the local priest. And I bought her the television. She also told me that in Iwaniska there is no trace of the Jewish community; it is like it never existed.

I now want to tell you about a woman who lives in Richon Le Zion [*region southeast of Tel Aviv originally known for producing wine*]. Her name is **Bela Beiltschke**; she called Iwaniska home. She was my friend from "Hashomer Hatzair". When I came to Israel we met and she told me how she survived. She was in the last group of 1600 Jews who were brought to Klimontów. (Bela's last name is now Borenstein; she may still be alive and living in a home for the aged in Israel.)

Before putting our people on the train to Treblinka, the SS chose a few girls who looked strong and fit to go to work in Germany. Bela was one of them. I asked her, "Didn't you see what was happening to your family?" And she answered, "You don't understand; we were like zombies. We went where we were told to go and did what we were told to do. I was 17, and all I know is that they all perished. "

Aliyah, Home At Last

I am the second generation from the Shoah. I have told you some of my memories from 50 years ago. Tell me, what are your feelings after hearing my experience?

You know, I am not sorry for my personal suffering. If not for the torment I went through, perhaps I might never have come to Israel.

I AM HAPPY THAT MY DREAM OF A LAND FOR JEWS HAS BEEN REALISED.

And I can achieve my wish to be a part of this wonder. Now I await my daughter and my grandson to join me in Israel and make roots and build here a home for the generations to come. I am also happy to get the gift of a large family when I thought I was alone in the world.

A letter written by Gittie (Naiman) Gollish (Toronto) in 2003 summarizing her visit to Israel where she met with Lazer Naiman.

Gittie and Lazer were first cousins.

We regret that Gittie Gollish passed away in 2007.

Dear Family

I was fortunate to be in Israel in November, 2003, and had e-mailed my cousin Aharon Naiman (Moishe Naiman's grandson who lives in Efrat) giving him my itinerary, and arranged to meet at the King David Hotel the day I was leaving. Aharon and his wife Tova then drove to Lazer Naiman's apartment and what a thrill. I didn't know of him at all, not where he fit into the family history and that he was in fact alive and quite well.

He was excited to be able to speak to me in Yiddish and that we could converse and his story was almost unbelievable.

Lazer's father was Leibish, or Leib, the brother of Fetter Shloime, Uncle Max (Mordechai), Machel (my paternal grandfather), and Boruch. Leibish married Blima Pinczewski (my mother's aunt) and they had two children - Moishe and Lena (Kalechstein). When Blima died, Leibish married her sister Mindel and they had Tsirel, Riva, Malka, Yechiel and twin sons - Lazer is one of those sons. That's his connection with the family.

This is Lazer's story: The family lived in Ivansk; when the war broke out the Jews were put into a ghetto. Not too many hardships were imposed until the S.S. came in and then some of the young men were conscripted and forced to work. Lazer was 17 and strong, and worked in a stone quarry. In the spring of 1940 refugees from France and elsewhere came into Poland because they couldn't get into other countries, and there were about 3 1/2 million Jews there at that time. Word had come back from the camps and the Jews knew what was going to happen to them, but there was no escape. The family held a meeting and decided that Lazer, Simcha and Gimpel Pinczewski and one other would have to escape and survive so that the family name wouldn't disappear. Lazer was twenty at the time. One of the managers at the stone quarry was Czech, a kind man apparently; when he sent Lazer and buddies to the forest to fetch water, they didn't come back and he didn't give chase. Lazer doesn't know how many months they were wandering trying to get to Russia - it was the only country they could escape to.

They came to a village in the forest and saw horses belonging to cavalry tied up to posts with no one watching them, so they were able to look through the saddlebags, found four guns with ammunition, took them and went back into the forest. They eventually came to a little hut and saw an old woman alone in there, so they went in with guns drawn and asked for food and also wanted to know where they were. Her hut was very near the Russian border and she told them that her son was across the border; he brought her food every night and surely he would take them across. They threatened her with death if she reneged. Soon the son came, gave them bread and water and offered to take them across the border. The border consisted of three trenches - dry, wet, dry - and they were strapped in under the cart - they arrived covered in mud head to toe. When they were freed from the cart, they were surrounded by dogs and then soldiers, who wanted to take them back to Poland. Lazer and friends sat down and refused to go. As luck would have it, one of the soldiers was a Jew. He took pity on them, hosed them down, gave them old military clothes and bread and water. They had no ID, so weren't very safe. However, they were taken to the next town where there were other Jews. The Jews housed them, gave them food, and rubles and they stayed a while before having to move on. There was a doctor who lived in Ivansk and who also had a house in Lwów, and he had told the Jews in Ivansk that if they ever got to Lwów, they would have shelter.

[Ed: Some details which Gittie provides in this paragraph are not correct.] The story gets a little vague at this point; I couldn't get it all. Lazer spent 10 years in a prison in the Gulag and was finally released in 1974. He must have gotten married before prison because he has three grown children - Lily and two sons, and he has grandchildren. They all came to Israel in 1990 when Russia allowed the Jews to leave.

While in Russia, he placed an ad in the Argentinean newspapers looking for his sister Tsirel and they were able to contact each other and keep in touch. Tsirel probably didn't know he was alive. Tsirel's daughter, Esther lives in Jerusalem but wasn't available the day I saw Aharon.

It was an unbelievable treat for me to meet Aharon, Tova and Lazer; this was the icing on the cake for my incredible and unforgettable trip to Israel. I shall never forget it.

So, my dear family, I felt it was important to share this with you, glad that miraculous things do happen sometimes and there is still some good in this world of ours.

Love you all

Gittie Gollish

LAZER TODAY: PHOTOS TAKEN IN JERUSALEM, SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER, 2008



**Below:
Cousins Meet for First Time:
Laurie and Lazer Naiman**



Right:

**Moshe Bensimon
(Esther's son)**

**Esther Bensimon
(Lazer's niece)**

Lazer

**Liebe Naiman
(Lazer's daughter)**



Right:

**Clearing Up a Point in
Lazer's Testimony**

Lazer

Esther

Norton



IVANSKERS SEEKING IVANSKERS



Fred Apel

(West Bloomfield, MI, USA)

“I was happy to receive the latest e-Newsletter for the Ivansk Project.

After looking at the photos of the past, I started digging through some old photos of my own.

I remembered that my father had a photo of his aunt and cousins, taken in Ivansk in 1936.

I have no names or other information.

I wonder if any other Ivansker has a similar photo or can help identify any of those in the picture. “

If you can help, please contact me at:

fredapel@usa.net

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