ACROSS THREE CONTINENTS

By Lou Davis

My youth is connected with a typical working, medium size, mixed ethnically town in southern Poland. The name of the town was Drohobycz. I was one of four children in the family. There was an older brother, an older sister and a younger brother. Our financial situation was rather good. Our wealth consisted of a two story brick building. On the first floor there was a small rental apartment and our grocery store. On the second floor was another small rental apartment and our larger 3 bedroom apartment. In the back, about 150 yards away was a wooden, 2 bedroom rental cottage. The lot was large, about 50 yards wide and 200 yards long, with its front facing the street and ending at a creek that ran in the back of the lot. So being the owners of two homes and a prospering grocery store we were considered rather wealthy.

My parents worked hard to educate us. My older brother and sister, after finishing high school, enrolled in a school for accountant and bookkeepers for two years. The city had 45,000 inhabitants, what at this time was a good size city. It was industrialized because it was surrounded by rich oil fields. There were three oil refineries. The oil from the wells, via pipelines, was processed in the refineries and then stored in large tanks and then transported by railroad. The new Polish government, after defeating the Austro-German coalition in World War One, nationalized the oil industry. These refineries were the main source of employment of the city’s labor force. Polmin (English: State Factory of Mineral Oils, Polish: Panstwowa Fabryka Olejow Mineralnych) was the Polish state-owned enterprise, which controlled excavation, transport and distribution of [natural gas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_gas). Founded in 1909[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polmin#cite_note-0), it was nationalized in 1927, with headquarters in [Lwów](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lw%C3%B3w). Polmin operated the large oil refinery in [Drohobycz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drohobycz), which in late 1930s employed around 3000 people. The refinery purified oil extracted from rich fields of southern part of the [Second Polish Republic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Polish_Republic) ([Gorlice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorlice" \o "Gorlice" \t "_blank), [Boryslaw](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boryslaw" \o "Boryslaw" \t "_blank), [Jasło](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jas%C5%82o" \o "Jasło" \t "_blank), and Drohobycz). Some Polish-language sources claim that the Polmin refinery in Drohobycz was in late 1930s the biggest in Europe.

The city’s population consisted of several ethnic groups. The largest of these were Poles. They held the most important positions at the top and down the ladder. They were in the administration, the technical and other skilled staff. The next largest ethnic group was the Ukrainians, and they did mainly small farming. Only a small number of Ukrainians were employed by the oil industry. There was also a small group of skilled workers of German origin. The Jews were mainly traders and store-keepers. Several years later, after Polish independence in 1919, two smaller refineries were turned into joint Polish-French-German ventures, and only the biggest refinery remained nationalized.

Our property was on the main street, connecting the city’s main square and the City Hall with the railroad station and the large refinery. This thoroughfare was several miles long. Because of the good location, our grocery store was prospering. There were also other smaller grocery stores. On the north and south side of the street, there were thousands and thousands of acres of fertile farm land. There were many farm houses and villages where the Ukrainians lived and farmed. A typical Ukrainian farm consisted of twenty or thirty acres of land. There were no farm machines to work the land. Those poor farmers owned a plough and one or two horses, an tilled manually the fields. Sometimes a richer neighbor would lend them his equipment , and after harvest they had to share their grain with the lender, or pay in cash, or work it out in other ways. They harvested wheat and vegetables; and then sold it in the open market or to the stores, and with the money bought boots, heavy clothing and coal for the winter.

A typical farmers’ building was an adobe hut made out of clay. The roof was covered with straw or tree branches and a barn for the breed. Usually they had one or two horses, two or three cows and some fowl. We were buying their milk, eggs and cheese for the store. But our main supplier of farm products was a rich Jewish farmer from a village about thirty miles away. Twice a week, he would deliver butter, cheeses, milk and fish from his pond. Other products like flour, bread and pastries, delicatessen, coal an firewood were brought from wholesalers. Most of our customers were employees of the refineries. They lived along our streets and in the vicinity.

The railroad workers and the Ukrainian farmers were also our debtors. They had established accounts with us, and they paid their bills once or twice a month, usually on their paydays. And the farmers usually paid cash for their purchases. The traffic in the street was heavy. In the morning hours, the workers were rushing to the refineries and to the railroad on foot or on bicycles. In the opposite direction, children were rushing to schools. And horses driven coaches were running back and forth taking passengers to and from the trains. The coaches were mostly old and poor equipped, and the horses were skinny and undernourished. The coaches and the horses were owned mostly Jews. The streets were paved with cobble stones. In late 1920s the stones were replaced by asphalt.

The school in our vicinity was an elementary school with a seven year program. In 1930 the school system was reorganized, the principles of which I will describe later.

The weather was mild, usually warm with some rain and thunderstorms in the summer. Autumn was mostly rainy, and frost and snow in winter, and the streets were frozen and slippery. Spring was mostly beautiful. There were trees and flowers in the streets and in the outskirts were fields with vegetables and grain. Altogether it was magnificent blend of colors. I was five years old when my parents enrolled me in the elementary school. We were required to wear blue uniforms and felt paddings on shoes. In later years this was abandoned. As I mentioned before in 1930 there was reorganization in the school system. Instead of seven years’ of elementary education, the new requirement was only six years. The continuation of education (for those who could afford it) consisted of eight years of high school known as Gymnasium. This was also changed later. The new reorganization was six years of Gymnasium and two years of Liceum, a total of eight years of high school education. There were four Gymnasiums in the city, the largest of them was run by the state, and only boys were admitted. The other three schools were private and expensive. Of those three, one was for Jewish boys and girls, one for Ukrainian boys and girls, and one was for girls only. I entered the state Gymnasium in 1930, where the majority were Polish students, with some German, Jewish, and Ukrainian students in the mix. Beside the basic subjects (Polish language, mathematics, history, geography), there were mandatory studies in religion (separate for Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Jewish), studies of Latin language, and one of foreign language (German, Greek, French or English). I studied German.

So, in 1936 I finished my high school education with six years of Gymnasium. There had been no public transportation. I had to walk several miles to and from school, although some students reached school by bicycle. The teachers were mainly Poles. Besides the academic subjects, I reveled in the sports activities, mainly soccer, basketball, volleyball, track and field, and ice hockey in winter. The school also maintained a marching band and a choir. The many ethnic groups present brought racial abuses and fights were very common. Anti-Semitism was very noticeable.

My older brother, Leo, and my sister, Tonia, graduated from the school for accountants and bookkeepers in 1930. At that time, my brother was unable to find a job, as there were none available, although he was very talented. He painted beautiful watercolors and oil paintings, he was a gifted musician on guitar and mandolin, and he sculpted and carved wood. He repaired bicycles and door locks. Leo also enrolled in soccer referee courses, and officiated on Sundays. After he had learned carpentry, he repaired chairs and tables, and upholstered when required. Everyone in the family looked up to Leo.

Most of the time, Leo helped in the store, as my father’s asthma became more severe. On advice of his doctors, my father had to take time off work for asthma treatment and rest in special “resorts” far from home. Most of the time, my younger brother accompanied him.

In 1936, my parents decided that instead of me continuing to Liceum education, they arranged for me an apprenticeship with a well-known Jewish dentist. But I did not like dentistry as my future, so before I even started the apprenticeship, and without my parents’ knowledge, I passed an exam and enrolled in the Technicum, which prepared students for professions in engineering. This was a four-year program, studying mechanics, electricity, drafting, thermodynamics, static, engineering and laboratory, together with Polish and German languages. The teachers were mostly engineers and doctorate degrees. The student requirement was six years of elementary school and several years of apprenticeship, or completion of Gymnasium.

It was an expensive private school. The purpose was to prepare students for universities in the industry. There were many students with high school background, similar to mine, as this gave us better basic knowledge. Several of us were also recommended by teachers for tutoring to less advanced students. So I was tutoring – four of my costudents – and this way I was able to finance partially my tuition and buying books. In the third year (1938-1939), as the technical subjects became more complicated and demanded more time to study, I stopped tutoring, and I had to depend totally on financial support form my parents.

We had some relatives. There were two uncles from my father’s side, and two from my mother. Our favorite one was uncle Morris, my mother’s brother. He lived with his wife and two sons in a city some thirty miles away. He was educated and he was an administrator to a rich Polish land owner, a member of the Radziwilli royal family. Uncle Morris was of an aristocratic appearance and spoke in our house German. Our family respected him very much. Later, his wife died of cancer, and afterwards he remarried. Morris, his boys, and the new wife moved to the large city of Lvov, about one hundred miles away. His sons entered university, to study medicine and law, and uncle Morris visited us frequently after his sons started university.

The two brothers of my father lived with their families in the southern part of our city. They were poor and unable to feed their large families. Sometimes on Saturday afternoons, they would come over, and my mother fed them, and sent food home with them. She made an effort to ease their plight. But we did not associate with them very much, because the children were Communist-oriented, and occasionally were jailed for their political orientation.

When I was a teenager, I joined a soccer club. Playing soccer was my major afterschool activity. There were many soccer clubs in Drohobycz, mainly ethnic oriented. The Communist sport organization was later disbanded by the local government. But I belonged to the Zionist organization, which, in addition to sponsoring soccer and other sports, held lectures and dances.

In 1937, my sister met and eventually married her future husband, who lived in a nearby town. At this time, he was studying medicine at the University of Krakow in Poland. After the wedding, which was totally financed by our Uncle Morris, my sister and her husband, with encouragement and financial help of Uncle Morris, moved to Bologna, Italy, so he could continue medical studies to become a doctor. In 1938, however, Benito Mussolini (Il Duce), in power already at this time in fascist Italy, joined Hitler’s Germany in military and political axis against the rest of Europe. On of his decrees was to get rid of Jewish population in Italy, especially of non-Italian Jews. There were many Jewish merchants and students in Italy from other countries. He demanded all foreign Jews to leave Italy immediately, and those who remained by the end of 1938 would be deported to Ethiopia (Abbissinia), which was an Italian colony in Africa. So my sister and her husband came back to Poland at the end of 1938. Back in Poland, her husband, and unfinished doctor student, joined the masses of Jewish intelligentsia, with no work. From time to time, he aided some sick people in the neighborhood for small fees.

On August 23, 1939, Poland was partitioned through a Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression pact, signed by German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop and Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov. The Germans initially marched into Boryslaw and Drohobycz.

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On September 1, 1939, the Second World War actually broke out, when the German armies crossed the Polish border. Despite all the signs in August, the invasion took the Polish government by surprise. The well prepared German army with its tanks, motorized vehicles and modern air force moved fast on Polish territory with little resistance, and the little that existed was quickly defeated. German Luftwaffe (Air Force) was constantly bombing strategic sites, especially railroads, highways and industry. The refineries in our city were engulfed in flames for many days and nights. It was a sunny September Sunday. I was on a working shift at the laboratory at the refinery. This was a summer vacation job from school to get some experience. Suddenly, Germany planes flew low over the refinery and dropped bombs. From the impact of a dropped nearby bomb, I was thrown against a wall. As a result the cord in my right ear was severed and that caused further deterioration of my hearing.

The bombings of the refineries and railroads continued for many days. The big oil-storing tanks were on fire and oil was flowing all over. There was chaos and looting everywhere. The firemen and volunteers tried to douse the fires, but the smoldering and dark clouds over the city lasted for a long time. Meanwhile, there was a general mobilization to the Polish Army. Neither my brothers nor I were drafted at this time. We heard of heroic fights on the border lines. The Polish newspapers carried episodes of the opposition on the western front and along the Vistula river. In the north, there was fighting in the Gdanks region along the Baltic sea.

Meanwhile, our city was in a total chaos. Hordes of Ukrainian gangs dominated the streets. They looted stores and houses, and they endangered and threatened the lives of inhabitants. The Ukrainians were sympathetic to the Germans, in hope that their collaboration would lead to an independent Ukraininan state, as Hitler had promised in his speeches. People barricaded themselves in their homes with hope that the situation was temporary, and that it would end soon. Especially the city’s Jewish population was in immediate danger. There was more fear from the anti-Semitic Ukrainian bands than from Germans. The Elders and officials of the city’s Jewish communities and the religious leaders did not believe the Nazi extermination plans. In the second week of September, the German armies already paraded in our city, we could see the Ukrainian gangs with the Germans in their army vehicles. They wore blue and yellow bands on their arms (blue and yellow were Ukrainian national colors). There was intensive fear in the air. People were staying off the streets in the barricaded homes with dimmed or no lights at night.

On September 16th, the German army withdrew from our city. And on September 17th, the Russian army rolled in. Battalions of soldiers on foot and on horses marched through the city. There was mainly infantry and cavalry, and not too many mechanized units. The German army withdrew from all Easter part of Poland to the River San that divides Poland in half. According to the Hitler-Stalin agreements of 1939, and apparently with the consent of Chamberlain of Great Britain and Daradier of France, Poland was to be wiped out as a sovereign state, and the territory divided between Germany an Soviet Russia. The land west of rivers San and Vistula was to be occupied by Germany. The east was to be annexed by the Soviet Union as part of Soviet Ukrainian Socialist Republic.

Many German families (farmers, workers, traders, professionals), who were born an worked here, packed their belongings an left with the retreating German army. During the next two years, 1939-1941, we were under Russian rulers. The city’s administrators and top positions were in the hands of especially flown-in Russians, and some local members of the formerly outlawed Communist Party. The city remained in total chaos. Stores were empty. People were put to work, many of them given jobs for which they were not prepared. Meanwhile, more Russian families settled in the city, so that the population swelled from forty thousand to one hundred thousand. To make room for this influx, the Russian authorities started deporting local city inhabitants to labor camps in Siberia and other under populated Russian Asian places, although the provisional local authorities tried to bring the city back to normal functions.

My father was put to work in a nearby bakery, where under the eye of the Russian supervisor, he put the bakery back in operation. As there was constant shortage of bread, my father’s job was a blessing for us. People from early morning hours stayed in lines in front of stores to buy bread. My father worked long hours and many night shifts. Unfortunately, this further undermined his deteriorating asthmatic health condition.

My brother worked as bookkeeper for a construction company. All enterprises were nationalized. There was no unemployment under the Soviets. My sister with her husband moved to a large city of Lvov, where he was in charge of a hospital. Our house was taken over by the city administration. There was constant fear of deportation, as more and more of these came into light. My younger brother, Eddy, and I returned to school. The Ukrainian language became now the mother language in schools and in the streets. Also, Russian was now mandatory in school. We had noticed that some of my schoolmates did not return to school. Also some of our professors had disappeared. There were strong possibilities of their deportation to Russia. Many of the new professors were not qualified to teach.

In 1940, I graduated from Technikum, and soon started to work as time keeper for a construction company. We graduates were offered evening correspondence courses with the Engineering Oil Institute in Baku (Azerbaidzhan). I signed up for these courses.

In the Fall of 1940, there was a general mobilization to the Russian army. Many of my friends and schoolmates were called up in this draft. For days we saw them march to the railroad station, to be sent away to Russia, where, it was proven later, they ended up in labor camps. I was drafted at the end of April, 1941. Barely given a chance to pack and say goodbye, I reported to the draft board and then marched to the railroad station. My older brother escorted me, and at the station waved goodbye to me. At the station we were crammed into cattle wagons. There were two locomotives and an enormous long row of these wagons. After a long delay (all armies are the same!) the train took off for Lvov. There we joined another train, and the combined train headed East. For three days and three nights, the train took us to an unknown destination. We slept as best we could on the wooden seats. From time to time we were given a piece of bread, warm soup and a cube of sugar. On the third night of this travel, at midnight, we were unloaded in Russia in the industrial city, Kursk, some one thousand miles south of Moscow. From the station, we walked most of the night in dense fog to abandoned army barracks located on the opposite side of the city. The barracks were three stories brick buildings. The next day we were given military uniforms. We remained in those barracks for several weeks doing light drills without arms, although we played sports.

On June 22, 1941, under the codename Barbarossa, German armies crossed the boarders on the San and Vistula rivers in Poland, and Germany declared war on Russia. It was a Sunday morning, and we swam in the river, washing horses. Suddenly over the loudspeakers we heard the announcement about the outbreak of the war. We were summoned back to the barracks. There were political speeches and pledges to conquer the agressors. The next day we pulled the horses to the woods and were assigned to watch them. Military units had formed up, but the Russians did not trust Poles, Ukrainians, or other westerners, as they suspected collaboration with Germany. So besides feeding and cleaning the horses, we were assigned to dig trenches around Kursk for defensive military use. Of course, we were always escorted by Russian soldiers.

As an industrial center of war material, Kursk and similar cities were targeted by German bombing. Meanwhile, Moscow, Leningrad and Stalingrad were also under bomb attack. I recall a soldier from one of the autonomous republics in the Caucasus was handed a rifle and ordered to join a unit headed to the front. When he refused, he was taken away and disappeared. There were rumors he had been executed the same day. At the barracks and trenches patriotic music was constantly blasting from the loudspeakers, interrupted only by communiqués from the front. As the battlefield was nearing Kursk, were formed in groups and sent back with the horses another three hundred miles to the East, to Tambov, and again assigned digging trenches, with the city’s volunteers. Every few weeks, we were again sent East, to Voroniesh, then Sartov. In Voroniesh, I met people from Poland, who had been officials in the Polish army, industrialists and landlords. They had been deported from Eastern Poland, and were now living with families in the cottages of Voroniesh.

The winter of 1941 was very cold. There was no firewood, no warm clothing, no water due to frozen pipes. The snow was very deep. And there was no food. Due to the scorched earth policy, Russian armies removed or destroyed all food which could sustain Germans once they head reached that point. This left the local population with no food. The safest, warmest place to remain was in the barracks, and report to work at the forest or at the trenches, where we were entitled to some bread and hot water. The news from the front was not encouraging, with Russian cities falling to the Germans every day. The choices appeared to be Russian slave labor with retreating Russians, or German slave labor with advancing Germans.

Then, in 1941-1942, a Polish army was formed under the command of General Anders, with headquarters in London, under General Wladyslaw Sikorski. In 1942, the eventual winner was in doubt, and the Russians were willing to accept any allies it could get. This London-based Polish army recruited Poles in Russian territory, to fight as Russian allies. As a Polish citizen, I volunteered, hoping to find contact with the outside world, and maybe to find an avenue of escape. We were trucked back to Voroniesh, but the officer in charge told me there were enough Jews in the army, and that no more were needed. I was returned to the Sartov barracks. In actuality, Anders’ Polish army eventually numbered 25,000 soldiers including 1000 officers. When Stalin agreed to use this new Polish army on the middle eastern front, and the army was moved to the Persian corridor. There the Polish army passed from Russian to British control. The army effectively deserted from Russia. From Persia the army made its way to Egypt, where they fought as Free Poles, with the British army, against Rommel’s Afrika Corps. But back in the barracks, I kept my army uniform, as there was a black market for clothing in the city. In the city, I made contact with a Jewish family, composed of an older man of sixty, who was a shoe repairman, his wife, and two daughters. Another son and daughter were in the Russian army, but there had been no word from them. On Sundays, he sold shoes at the market, and evenings he worked as a nightguard in a factory. I joined this family often, sharing my own food. The house was dirty and a shamble, but it was warm. On Friday nights we lit candles and enjoyed a holiday atmosphere.

I also spent time around the black market. I was told that people were buying bread on the black market beyond their ration books, taking it to Tashkent near the Chinese and Mongolian border, and exchanged the bread for tobacco and vodka, then sold it in Sartov for big profits. I decided to try a black market venture. The train was overloaded with injured soldiers and with destroyed tanks and other mechanized vehicles, all returning from the front toward Asian Russia. But my uniform got me on the train without trouble. The train took me all the way to Bukhara, a center of Jewish population in Uzbekistan. In Bakhara, I saw synagogues and orthodox Jews in the streets. They wore long beards, long black coats and hats with fur, as later seen in orthodox places in New York and Israel. The trips to Tashkent were long, with many stops along the way. There were snowstorms, and the rails were covered with deep snow. There was insufficient coal for the locomotives, as the war effort used all the coal, those trains running in the opposite direction. So our trains to Tashkent were often stranded at stations, sometimes for days. The coaches were without heat, so passengers left the trains for depots at the stops. But there was little heat in the depot buildings. We slept as we could on the concrete floors, while my backpack with bread in it served as pillow, and my coat served as blanket. Hundreds of people waited in the depots, which were dirty and had little sanitation. Usually at midnight, the loudspeakers announced that all passengers must leave the buildings so that the floors could be washed and sanitized. Often they were not, but when they were, the floor remained wet for the rest of the night, while we stayed in the cold and freezing wind.

On my thirds trip to Tashkent, I became very ill, as I had developed typhoid. My toes and fingertips were frostbitten. I was taken unconscious off the train and put in a hospital somewhere in Voroniesh. In the hospital some doctors and nurses were Polish, as they had been deported, and now lived near the hospital. I remained in the hospital for four weeks, the first two confined to a bed, as I could not walk. My doctor was a retired Major from the Polish army, but at this point neither the doctor nor the nurses knew I was Jewish. Due to my education background and my good Polish accent, I kept the conversations on matters of their interests. One of the nurses liked me, and brought me additional rations of food, especially scraps of meat. She put extra effort toward my recuperation. At the third week, by holding onto walls, and with her help, I gradually regained enough strength to start walking. At the fourth week, I was discharged from the hospital to make room for others.

My Polish doctor suggested that I join a Collective farm in the vicinity, where I could more easily obtain food, vegetables and animal fats, which were essential to my full recovery. He promised to help me find a farm, and I agreed to his suggestion. Some days later, together with another man, who had been deported from Romania or Moldova, who was also convalescing at the hospital from typhoid, we were sent by horsecart to a collective farm in the Aktiubinsk region in Khazakhstan. That was in the beginning of 1943. We were attached to a family for our convalescence, but in actually to work the farm. The farmers were older people, husband and wife only, as their only son was in the Russian army, and they never heard from him. The husband was a carpenter for the collective. They were Kulakhs, previous farmers of their own land, who had been deported from Ukraine after the Bolshevik revolution. We two recent arrivals lived with them in their clay hut. We slept on the clay floor, covered with rugs and blankets. Sometimes we slept on top of the clay oven, where they baked bread, and which was therefore always warm.

Our Kulakh hosts were very warm towards us. They said that we struggled as their son might be struggling now. They fed us, we started to gain strength, and we began to work around the collective. We sawed and chopped firewood, helped milk their cow, shoveled snow and made repairs around the house to keep the wind out. When the weather began to warm, my Romanian friend left. With the warmth and my new strength, I started working with my host, the carpenter, and with the blacksmith, as well as in the field. One day while working in the field I spotted a man walking on the farm road, who was a schoolmate of mine from my Drohobycz youth. Having recognized each other, I asked him what he intended doing. He was just walking away from his own farm, hoping to find a ride somewhere far away where he might find food. He was clearly starving, and I gave him the bread in my own backpack, and sent him on his way as he wanted.

During my free time on the collective, and at nights, I cut grass in the fields for my farmer hosts to feed their farm animals. In return they gave me bread, vegetables, fats and warm clothing, all essential for my recuperation. Sometimes I was so tired at night that I preferred to sleep on the haystacks, amid the roaring of wolves. In the mornings, I walked straight to work in the fields or to the shops, where I was provided soup. In Summer 1943, I hitchhiked to another farm about one hundred miles away, where I had been told lived more Poles. On this farm, I became ill again: during the day I worked in the field, but at night I collapsed and had to be guided by coworkers back to where I lived. I could not see, and my teeth fell of from my swollen gums. I was told this was from a lack of vitamins, a form of Beriberi. After a week, I regained my vision, and more green vegetables in my diet restored enough strength to return to work.

During these periods of working on farms, I had explained that I had petroleum engineering and oil industry experience before the war, and that I would like to continue working in the oil producing sector. Since they periodically sent horses to a far-away farm on the Caspian Sea, heart of the Asian Russian oil production, they suggested I join the next transport. After a long journey with the horses, I arrived near the Caspian, a fishing farm, where the farmers smoked and canned fish, sending them West to cities. I stayed at the fish farm only a few days, then caught a ride on one of their own fish transports. I reached the big oil industrial city of Guriev. Guriev was situated at the delta of Ural river, where it joined the Caspian sea.

Guriev was the headquarters of the oil industry in Kazakhstan republic. When I arrived there, I had an interview with the assistant director in charge of personnel. I told him about my background, my education, and I told him of my desire to return to work in the oil industry. The next day I was put on a truck that carried pipes for oil well drilling to a place about three hundred miles northeast of Guriev.

I arrived in Kostchagil, situated in the deserts of Kazakhstan. There was no vegetation, just endless sand dunes and camels. The natives lived in scattered tents surrounded by herds of sheep, their source of milk and meat. The camels were used as sources of milk and for transportation. These natives worked in the oil fields. They arrived and departed by horse or camel. There were numerous oils wells everywhere, some already abandoned. Kostchagil was an older place, with many Ukrainians, Poles and other nationals, most of them deported from their native lands. The Russians living there were more recent arrivals, evacuees from cities overrun and occupied by German armies. The buildings were mostly of clay, and several families lived in each building. Everyone was employed in the oil industry. I was given a room to share with other boys my age. All of us in this room were Poles. The crude oil was used for heating and cooking, and therefore there was smoke and dirt all over the place. I was assigned a job as pipe fitter at the oil wells. Toward the end of Summer 1943, I as transferred to another oil center about one hundred miles to the North, named Kulsary. This was a newer settlement, as oil was discovered there much later. As elsewhere, the buildings were all clay. But these were better built, more spacious, in a square of blocks consisting mostly of eight buildings with a separate kitchen building in the center of the block.

Most inhabitants of these block houses were deportees or refugees. I shared one block with a Russian and two Poles. As more Russians were taken to the front lines, the next inhabitants took over the jobs. I was now assigned to work as a time keeper in the oil drilling department. The weather was very rough: hot desert dry summer, and very cold wind in winter. While snow was nearly nonexistent, the deep frost was very intensive. One could see thick white frost on telephone lines leading into buildings. Our clothing supplied by the administration consisted of warm cotton-filled jackets, similar pants, warm hats and high felt boots. The work day started in the dark, very early in the mornings. A motorcoach pulling one large open platform on a narrow rail took us to the oil wells, located about five miles away from our housing. In winter, the engine would not always turn over, due to frozen oil, and those days we walked those five miles. From six in the morning until six in the evening, we worked in the cold or heat, while given a half-pound of bread and a cup of boiled water at noon. After the workday, we were returned to our houses to wash up, and we went to the kitchen area for our dinner. Upon presenting our ration card, we received a bowl of hot soup, mostly fish with local cereals like barley, spelt or corn, and a piece of melon which grew locally. Meat and potatoes were rare. Modern Kulsary was on the Emba river, which was a tributary to the Ural river. The river provided irrigation to grow vegetables and melons. In the center of the city was a wooden office building for the Director General, the Secretary of the local Communist party, the General Engineer, the General geologist, an all the administrative offices. In the oil field there were offices for all other departments, such as drilling, exploration, machine repair, industrial safety, and the refinery maintenance. Each department had a director, a chief engineer, and all technical and administrative staff.

On top of the whole enterprise was a Director General, who had been transferred from the Baku oil fields in the Caucassus mountains of Azerbaidzan. He had three assistants, the General Engineer who was imported with the Director General, and two native Kazakhs, Secretary of the Communist Party and the Union Leader. Twice each week we had to attend Union meetings. There were appeals for more and better production, for more hours of work without additional pay, for more sacrifices, because the country needed more oil and more gas, to defeat the German armies. At these meetings, they mentioned the names of workers who peformed especially well, and also the names of the ones who lagged in work. These were pointed out and criticized. After the meetings, the lists were displayed on boards in visible places.

In Kulsary, I met many deportees and refugees from Poland and other Easter European countries, and also displaced Russians. There were families and single people. On Sundays, the only free day from work, we had social activities in the social room at the Firehouse building. There were movies, most of which had war themes about Russian victories and German atrocities toward civilians. Other movies were about the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1918, the victories over White Russians and other Counterrevolutionaries. There was constant propaganda. Usually, after the movies and propaganda, there were discussions and comments. And later there was dancing. My Russian roommate played guitar, and I played mandolin, so when the few records had been played, we played dance music.

At one of these dances, I met my future wife, Helen. Helen had been in Kulsary since early 1942. I learned from her that when the war first broke out in 1941, she was working in Lvov. She had been born in a small town, Turka, which was in the Karpathian mountains, south of Lvov. She had lived with her parents and relatives in Turka. During the German advance and Russian retreat, she found herself deep in Russia near Stalingrad, on the Volga river. During the big battles over Stalingrad, many girls and some boys were put on barges and sent north on the Volga to safer places. Eventually, she was transported over the Ural River and then to the oil fields on the Caspian. When we met, Helen worked at the oil exploration division, but later she was transferred to the industrial buildings division. She shared her room with three other girls, one form Lithuania and two from Russia, displaced from Moscow. In late Summer of 1943, I fell ill with malaria. I was confined to bed for more than one week. Each day after work, Helen brought me bread and hot soup, tea and vegetables, and melons. After I had recuperated, I was sent back to work.

My immediate supervisor was about forty years old. He lived with his wife and three children in a house for the executive staff. He was from the Tartar Autonomic Republic in Asia, and spoke fluent Kazakh. He was an alcoholic and his hobby was hunting birds and large game. He was often away from work on hunting trips, and he began to burden me with more and more of his work. In late Summer of 1943, a tremendous dust storm passed over Kulsary. There was great damage from the storm, the severest of which was a collapse and explosion of one drilling site. The anchors holding this drilling tower had ripped off. The foreman at the site, trying to stop the motors, had been killed. He was a native Kazakh, a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist Party, and a very influential person. An investigation into the cause of the tragedy revealed that the drilling tower had not been properly anchored. The blame was put on inadequate industrial safety.

The position of the Engineer of Industrial Safety was vacant, but the duties had been laid on an engineer displaced from Baku. In the ensuing result of the investigation, he was released from his position, and relegated to a minor task. Several days after the conclusion of the investigation, I was called to the office of the Director General, and was told that I was to take over responsibility for Industrial Safety inspections. He pointed out that others had paid their lives for defense of the country against Germany. Despite my lack of experience and background for the job, I found myself forced into it. The lesson from the last tragedy warned me that I would take blame for any future accidents of this kind. I could predict danger of being arrested and even prosecuted, but I had no one to advise me, and I had no choice but to accept. I studied intensively all material I could find in the library, and in the offices. Fortunately, before any future accidents, my former boss, the alcoholic, influenced the Director General to return me to his staff. He enjoyed the easy life, with me doing most of his work. So after only two months, I returned to timekeeping.

At the end of 1943, a new political event was taking place. A new Polish Government-in-Exile was formed in Russia. The Union of Polish Patriots, a communist organization, was in opposition to the “London Poles,” as they expected to control a post-war Poland. The war outcome was no longer in doubt, and the new army, known as Berling Army, was clearly under the control of Russian NKVD. As a result, former Polish citizens of draft age and beyond were called for duty in the new Polish Army, to fight alongside Russia to liberate Poland from Germany occupation. In February of 1944, Helen and I married. Our marriage took place in the office of the county clerk on a workday morning. That evening after work, we celebrated with friends. We had bought at the store a bottle of vodka, smoked dry fish, candies and tea. In the days that followed, we were assigned a one-room apartment just to ourselves.

Two weeks later I was served with notice to report to the drafting point, in the Polish Army, in Guriev. Back in my old barracks for several days, we again had drills and lectures, but now in Polish. After some days, I was called to the office and informed that I would return to Kolsary, as requested by the oil administration. I returned by next truck. I later learned that Helen had influenced my alcoholic boss to keep me. With the Union of Polish Patriots now an official Communist organization, we were able to form cells of thirty or forty members in Kulsary. At the first meeting, which took place in a private apartment, we elected Lubartowski as president. He had been deported from Warsaw, and lived with his wife and two young sons, and worked as a bookkeeper. We soon published a biweekly paper in Polish, and the paper was read at our meetings. It carried information from the battlefront, it glorified heroic actions of Russian and Polish soldiers, and it condemned the leaders of the “London Poles,” and General Anders and his Polish army which had defected via Iran to Africa. Our meetings were conducted once or twice a month, at the apartment of the president.

We continued our meetings throughout the rough winter, but our ranks began to diminish. Fewer people attended. Some did not consider themselves Polish any longer. Others believed the cell was a set-up by the Russian authorities to spy on people for loyalty to Russia. There was fear that the Russians were looking for targets for arrests and prosecution. We slowed activities for several weeks. But one day, I was told by my boss to go to the county clerk’s office. There a man in an NKVD secret police uniform, with the rank of Major, greeted me. He informed me I would be accompanying him to Kostchagil, the next settlement. A truck was waiting for us. The major sat in the cabin with the driver, while I settled in the back with the pipes and equipment. Once in Kostchagil, he questioned me: Why I did not report the absence of two workers. I explained that the foreman had not marked absences on his time sheet. But he got angry and threatened me with arrest, blaming me as it was my sole responsibility. He claimed I had purposely not reported the absences to slow production. And I insisted that I had no knowledge, and no desire to slow production. After a short break, during which I was given water and dry fish, the Major continued the interrogation with another topic. I had been observed continuously attending the meetings of our Polish group cells, and he wanted to know from me what we were talking and doing at the meetings. I tried to explain that we only read the biweekly newspaper and talked about the subjects, and discussed how the postwar Polish government might look like. He did not believe me. He accused me of reactionary and anti-Russian activities within the cell. He accompanied his interrogations with blows to the stomach, and stomps of his boots when I was down. He further threatened me with never seeing Helen, that we would neither be allowed to return to Poland, and would stay in Kulsary forever. After a night on a damp cold floor, I was back before the Major. Had I thought it over? Did I have any information for him? I did not. I was thrown down the stairs and then into a truck headed back to Kulsary. I first visited Helen at her work, and she had worried when she could not find me, but was unable to get help or answers. That night, I told her my experiences with the NKVD. We agreed that we should no longer attend meetings of the Polish group.

In May 1945, Nazi Germany surrendered, and the war ended. People celebrated by drinking in the streets and dancing in the open. The war had ended, but the deportees were still in Kazakhstan with no way to return. First, native Kazakhi soldiers returned by rail from the German front. Many did not return, even those who had written letters after surrender. Rumors abounded about Asiatic Russian soldiers being executed if found with any valuables taken from Germany.

In July 1945, the General Director that a new rich oil field had been discovered in Koshkar, about three hundred miles away, and that he received orders from Guriev that I would be sent there to organize the operation of this new place. Because we were expecting a baby, I was advised to leave Helen in Kulsary, as there were no living accommodations, no housing, no canteens for food, no office buildings, and that everything had to be organized from scratch. I was to be responsible for organizing the work shifts, setting up time tables, for supplies, machinery, equipment, clothing and food for the shifts. When I arrived, some construction crews were busy digging large square holes, as if for house foundations. Over the holes they put roofs covered with straw and dirt. One of these served as offices and another as restaurant or canteen. We slept on additional straw on the floor, and used blankets which had been a gift from UNRRA.

Most of the shifts I organized were formed from native Kazakhs. They lived in the surroundings in their own tents. After nearly two months, I was again transferred, to Sagiz, about two hundred miles away. Sagiz was an older big field, and, since there was housing, Helen could join me. My responsibilities were much the same, but I also distributed packages arriving as UNRRA gifts. Whenever packages arrived at the warehouse in Sagiz, the first in line to accept them were the officials, among them the Director and the Secretary of the Communist Party. They plundered the packages, taking what they wanted. Their wives also arrived, and took whatever clothing they wanted, and canned food. The working masses for whom the packages were sent, had little left. I was helpless to prevent this, despite union meetings and protests. And I was under threat of arrest from both sides, the union leaders and the officials.

In October of 1945 our first child, a girl we named Anna, was born in Sagiz. After feeling stronger, Helen returned to work the next week. We hired an elderly woman to take care of our new baby. She was a Tartar, East of the Volga river. She was addicted to very strong tea, and we paid her by obtaining additional tea on the black market.

At this point, in late 1945, the city of Drohobycz, my hometown, had already been liberated by Russian forces. I first heard of this liberation from Russian engineers returning from the front, back to Moscow or Baku or Leningrad. So I decided to write a letter to the mayor’s office in Drohobycz, and inquired if any members of my family, relatives, or close friends had survived, and their addresses. In this way I got in contact with a close pre-war friend, who (as I found out later) had sent to Russia an affidavit that I was needed in the Drohobycz refinery, which he had obtained by bribing refinery officials. I hoped to return, but my hopes faded, as the Sagiz officials explained that I was more needed in Sagiz than in Drohobycz. Fortunately, at this time, with Poland tilting towards Communism while still under Russian command, a massive campaign had begun to register former Polish citizens to return to Poland. Taking advantage of this, I entered our names on the returnees’ list. When my Director learned of this, he tried to persuade me to reconsider. He tried to convince me that I was better off in Sagiz. He used false political accusations against the new Polish regime. He claimed that the new Polish government was weak and unstable, that the political orientation of the new Pressident, Borislaw Bierut, was not clear. As we learned, however, Bierut was a product of Russian political machine, a dedicated Communist, trained in Russia.

In January of 1946, we were asked to surrender our Russian passports to the local police. In February, we were driven by truck to Guriev, where a huge transport of freight wagons was formed. We boarded this train, about twenty-five or thirty people per wagon. There we double berths along the walls for sleeping and a small iron fireplace in the center. We were provided food in the beginning and coal for the fireplace. Finally, at the end of February, we started the long journey back to Poland. The winter was bitterly cold. The situation with the food was somewhat bearable. We also took to the black market and shard the food. But after a while we had no coal or wood for heat. Whenever the train stopped and there were signs of delay, we jumped off to gather or barter for coal and wood. With the little warmth, we were able to keep our young daughter, Anna, bathed and clean. Since she was the only baby at six months, we had lots of help, and the other passengers cooperated during bathing time.

With these delays to allow other trains of greater priority pass, our journey to Poland took almost two months. Finally, in April, we arrived at the Polish border, the new border at the San river. Here we were reloaded onto another train, because the Polish railroad operated on narrower tracks. Once on Polish soil, some people jumped off the train, hoping for connections to their hometowns. But most of us remained in the train all the way to its destination. Our train eventually reached its destination, Klodzk, in lower Silesia, in the last week of April. This territory had belonged to Germany before the war. There we were transferred to the repatriation center, which was a large brick building that had housed the German military in the past.

We stayed in Klodzk for about two weeks. Afterwards, I was sent to the nearby city of Bystrzyca. There I was given a completely furnished two-bedroom flat, in a brick building. A mailman lived in the lower flat, with his family. The building had been confiscated from its German owner by the Polish administration. I soon started working in a machine factory that manufactured parts for railroad freight wagons. I had to walk to work about five miles, as the city had no public transportation. At the end of the workday we were given a loaf of rye bread, about two pounds. With my meager salary, Helen obtained somehow food and clothing on the black market, because stores were empty and food rations on the coupon books were minimal. I worked at this factory about two months. Later, through friends I had met on the transit from Russia, I got a job as a clerk in the county administration. I no longer had to walk very far to work. Through the county administration influence, I obtained a two-bedroom furnished home on the outskirts of the city. It had a beautiful front yard full of flower plants, and a garden in the backyard, where vegetables were growing. Also in the backyard I raised chickens, about a dozen of them. So we had eggs. I also kept a hog in the yard, and on Easter I hired a butcher, so we had meat, bacon and sausages, for several months.

At about this time, through help of the Red Cross, I contacted my younger brother, Ed, who had survived the Holocaust. He lived at that time in a refugee camp in Austria and in 1947 emigrated to the United States.

Later that year, I was transferred to a much larger city, Swidnica. Swidnica, Sweidnitz, had also been in the German lower Silesia territory before the war. Here I also worked in the county administration, in the Division of Land and Properties Distribution. These properties were confiscated from Germans and worked by Polish farmers. Here, by accident, I met a man who had been a tenant of ours in my hometown, before the war. From him I learned that the rest of my family, both parents, older brother and sister, were wiped out during German occupation. He told me that as soon as the German army came into our city in 1941, some Ukrainian bands grabbed my father and dragged him to the river to drown him. According to the tenant, he persuaded them to let my father go. Freedom did not last very long. Soon there was an order from the German administration that all males of Jewish origin, who were sick or unable to work, had to register with the city administration. Accordingly, my father registered, as he had the advanced asthma, and therefore could not work. According to the former tenant, a truck with German soldiers stopped at our house, picked up my father, and drove him away. From that point, no one heard from my father. My father was only fifty-three years old. All the trasports of registered people unable to work were driven to the nearby forest and machinegunned at dugout trenches. This story was later confirmed by my younger brother, once I made contact with him. In 1941, after my father had been taken away, my two brothers left the house and were hidden by friendly Polish and Ukrainian neighbors. However, the neighbors were denounced to the German authorities, and my brothers had to leave for other hiding places. As for my mother and sister (her husband was drafted to the Russian army in 1941 as a doctor, and no one heard from him again), they were taken to work in the nearby factory making clay bricks. They had to live there in the labor camp. Later in 1943, they were shot there at the clay pits by German soldiers. As for my older brother, it was unconfirmed that he went through several hiding places, then was caught and put in a concentration camp, and supposedly survived the war. And my younger brother, Ed, went through similar hiding places and concentration camps, and did survive the war. And this former tenant, who also lost his wife and adopted daughter during the occupation, was by now an older man. I helped him get a minor clerical job where I was working.

In August of 1948, our son, Roman, was born in Swidnica. We hired a German girl recommended to us by a friend of ours. She lived with us and helped us with our children and other household chores, because Helen started to work as a bookkeeper in a large department store. Here we joined the Jewish Community Center where there were some cultural and social activities. The centers were financed by Jews from abroad, and there was also subsidy from the Polish government. Soon there was a small amateur Yiddish theater, there were lectures, dances and job training courses. And on a Passover holiday, there was distribution of matzoh send rom abroad.

Slowly, the centers turned into a propaganda arm of the new Polish communist regime. All we heard from speakers was that despite ever increasing anti-Semitic pogroms in Lublin and Kielce, and other incidents in other Polish cities, we, the Jews, should remain in Poland and participate in building a new better Socialist society. We knew that the leftist oriented Jews, the communists and the socialists, were members of the underground communist party in prewar Poland. Now, with new regime, they were placed in high government posts, because they were the ones who could be politically trusted.

Despite this propaganda, many Polish Jews left for Israel and other free countries. Helen and I, having two small children, decided to stay in Poland rather than to leave for the unknown future. With help of some friends, I was sent to a government training school, which would put me in line for future executive positions. The training school was near Warsaw. The course took three months for completion. Helen and the children stayed with our German maid in Swidnica, an she continued working in the department store. Upon my return, I was elevated to the head of the city’s administration division, and later as vice-Mayor of the city.

In 1949, I was interim mayor. As such, I had to participate in all kind of festivities, like dedication of the new administration or social building, new fire station, clubhouse, or dedication of the new church, and so forth. Practically, there was something planned for every Sunday. The most difficult for me was dedication of churches, where I tried to get along with the Catholic religious masses, their customs, and rituals. My dark hair and straight nose looked rather Ukrainian. But this charade lasted over a year. Soon I was somehow feeling more and more that the ground under me was giving in. I had the feeling that people suspected me of being Jewish. So in 1950, I decided to go back to my real profession in the oil industry. The oil fields were in the south and east of Poland, at the new Russian/Ukrainian border, known as Jaslo-Kroson-Gorlice oil fields. By this time, our German maid left for Germany, and we moved to Krosno.

We did not like Krosno, and the next year we moved to Warsaw. There I got a job in the oil department of t he ministry of mines. My duties were to travel to the oil fields and refineries, and report their needs for new or reconditioned equipment and machinery. The Five-Year Plan needed to know everything. So I spent a great deal of time traveling. Helen did not work. She had to take the children to school and take care of the house chores.

In 1953, Stalin died. In 1955 Gomulka was freed from detention in Russia for “deviationism,” believe in a Communist system not headed by Stalin. In 1956, upon the death of Bierut, Gomulka was elected President of Poland and Secretary of the Polish Communist Party.

Poland at this time was on shaky political and economic times. There was increased antisemisitm, never far from the Polish heart, although it was rumored that Gomulka’s wife was Jewish. The Jews in the Polish government were held to blame for the poor Polish economy. One day our daughter came from school crying and brought a note that someone left on her bench. The note wrote “You Jews go to Palestine.” She said that she did not know we were Jewish an that we did not tell her this. When the next day Helen went with the note to the school principal, she shrugged her off and told her to ignore it.

The growing anti-Semitism prompted our decision to leave Poland. Meanwhile, Gomulka had published a decree that Jews who wanted to immigrate to Israel could leave Poland without complications and restrictions, and that the border was open. This decree appeared in early summer, 1956. So we applied for emigration papers, and as we got them, we sold our furniture and our other possessions, and in August of 1956 we left Poland for Israel, with a stop in Vienna.

In Vienna, my brother, Ed, living at that time in Denver, Colorado, USA, flew into Vienna and greeted us there with a friend of his. They took us out of the flight to Israel, and we spent the night at the friend’s house in Vienna. The next day, with the assistance of the friend, we went to a doctor, and obtained a medical report that our son was anemic and not ready at this time for further travel. On the ground of this report, the friend got from the Police in Vienna a permit for us to stay in Vienna for three months only. And the next day, the friend rented for us an apartment from another friend of his, who had other properties. The following day, Ed flew back to the States.

In Vienna, we had it already easier than in Poland. Helen and I possessed good knowledge of German language. We enrolled our children in local Austrian schools where they learned the transition from Polish speaking to German. We lived in the center of the city and either Helen or I took the children by city transportation to school, which was located in the far northern part of Vienna, and it took almost an hour to get there. Soon our son’s anemic condition started to improve as we were able to buy for him oranges and bananas, and other fruit and vegetables, which he had lacked in Poland. Then with the help of the Vienese friend, I started to work in an oil refinery, and Helen in a sewing shop (she learned sewing from a girlfriend of hers before we left Poland). I worked the night shifts because no foreigners could get working permits from the Austrian authorities, as Austria had a big postwar unemployment problem, and many Hungarian foreign refugees. We started to earn money and support ourselves. After the initial three months, we got an extension from the Austrian police for an additional three months, and therefore remained in Vienna.

During the year we spent in Vienna, we got to know some other people from Poland, some of them Austrian citizens already, and others on their way to other countries, similar to our situation. As a specialist in oil industry, I explored some possibilities to emigrate to Australia or to Chile, since they needed experienced engineers. After conversations with my brother on the telephone, and at his advice, I abandoned these emigration ideas, and our aim became to eventually emigrate to the US, and to reunite. The problem was that the Polish quota for emigration to the States was closed for the next two years. But I was advised to apply anyway. And I filled out an application for a visa to the US and sent it to the American consulate in Hamburg, Germany. Meanwhile, Helen got in touch with relatives of hers in Canada, who had a Canadian senator as a friend. So we now had two potential avenues to reach the US, one from the American consulate and one from the Canadian senator. But we received a letter from Helen’s relatives that the Senator could or would do nothing to help, as we had just left a Communist country, and that we needed to spend some time in the West first. It was probably a way to not oblige himself. Meanwhile, I lost my job at the refinery because I was denounced to the authorities as an illegal worker, so the owner fired me.

At about this time I read an advertisement in the paper that an oil company in Celle, Germany, had an opening for a draftsman. This was an American-French-German conglomerate, “Herman von Rauthenkranz.” So I applied for this job, with my resume. I got an answer that a representative would come to Vienna to interview me. Two weeks later I was hired. So in summer of 1957, I went to Celle to work. Besides the wages, the contract called for a free paid room with a German family, and a monthly payment for separation from the family in Vienna. Most of the money I earned I sent to Helen so she could support herself and the children, while I was away. On Christmas I visited my family in Vienna. In Spring of the next year, the company wanted to send me to their office in Kaiser Lautern. I objected because I did not want to be much further away form Vienna, where my wife and children lived. So I was fired. And then I signed up for a job with plumber in Hannover. I found a small apartment in Hanover for reasonable rent. And now I was able to bring Helen and the children to Hannover, and send my children to a Germany school within walking distance.

In October I received a letter from the American consulate in Hamburg that my application for entry and visa to the United States was under consideration, and that I would be further notified for its progress. Meanwhile, I continued to work for the plumber. There was an unpleasant anti-Semitic atmosphere, especially after a few bottles of beer, but I ha no choice but to swallow it, as long as they did not know I was Jewish. They considered me a Pole and a friend. In February of 1958 a letter from the American consulate came that I was to report with my wife and children in Hamburg for a physical examination. And in June of 1958, we received our visas. We boarded and S.A.S. flight from Hannover to Amsterdam and then to New York. In New York, we changed planes for San Francisco, where my brother, Ed, lived with his family. We arrived in San Francisco on July 1, 1958.