

Tuesday May 2nd, 2019

Holocaust Memorial Day

Dear Simone our granddaughter,

Dear Ben our grandson,

who are far away, but always close to our hearts.

This time in the year, when I look up your pictures describing your activities on Facebook, such as you Simone skating so well on the ice and even swirling, dancing and playing music on your Cello, celebrating and having fun with your friends, playing and sometimes fighting with your little brother Ben.

And you Ben playing the piano and having fun with your friends.

I can see how you two were sliding on your sled last winter and more.

My thoughts are wondering back many years ago, when I was about your age.

So, what has really happened to me? Where have I been?

So, here is my story and what I do remember from my childhood:

Let start from the beginning. I was born on May 11, 1935. Well I don't really remember it, but that what my parents told me and kept celebrating my birthdays until I was six.

Where was I born? In a town called Chernovitz, which was at that time in Romania but is now in the Ukraine. My parents called me Willy.

Now that is already a lot of information. Being so good in Math, you can now calculate how old am I now? You can ask your Mother or Father to show you on an European map where is this town Chernovitz and flag it with a little star.

It was a pretty town and the weather was really nice, snow in the winter, warm in the summer, not as hot and muggy as it is in Toronto.

I remember the pretty public park with the tall trees, the river Prout passing nearby in which I tried to swim. I remember with joy the summer I spent with my grandparents at their farm. There were chickens and ducks roaming free in the yard. My grandfather Arie had two horses and a buggy. He used to drive the horses into the shallow river to create splashes which I cheered and the horses got a good bath. I was very proud when he let me drive the horses and the buggy back home. I assume to day the horses knew their way back to their stable and trough and did not need my guidance. I was five and life was good.

In the year 1940 our life changed for the worse. It may be complicated for you now to understand what happened. One day you will learn at school in your history lessons about how the second world war started and I can tell you more about it. What I remember is: There was a parade, the Russian army entered our town with their tanks and German Nazi officers saluted them.

How was our life changed? The Russians nationalized (confiscated) my fathers shop. The currency was changed from Romanian Lei to Russian Roobel. Suddenly our family had no income and no money. My parents were very resourceful, so my father sold some jewelry and clothes on the market place and bought some provisions and a cow. He built a shed in the yard for the cow. My mother baked bread. She milked the cow and from the milk she made butter and cheese.

There was food on the table and we were happy.

I was five and a few month, my task was to gather left over greens from the market place and feed the cow. I was very proud when they let me take out the cow to graze on nearby fields.

On June 22nd, 1941 hell broke out, Nazi Germany invaded Russia. Our town was captured by Nazi German soldiers and their Romanian partners.

I was six years old and our life was changed gravely.

The Nazi Germans and Romanians established a fenced Ghetto in Chernowitz and cramped all the Jews into it.

I remember it was very crowded, masses of people lived even in stair cases.

Soon there was hunger and illnesses. The Nazis started do deport Jews into forced labor camps.

You may learn later at school in your history lessons, that Nazi Germany and Romania have agreed to deport 420,000 Jews from Chernowitz Bukovina, Bassarabia and northern Romania into forced labor camps in an area called Transnistria in the Ukraine, which is located between the Nistru river and the river Boog. Ukraine with its large fields was the bread basket for the German advancing army and the Jews were forced to work on the fields and harvest the crops. In return the Romanians confiscated all the Jewish homes and properties and were promised that after the war all this Ukraine area would be annexed to Romania.

So, what happened to us?

One night some Nazi and Romanian police came in the middle of the night brutally arrested my mother and me. She was allowed to take a bag she packed before. All our belongings including a fiddle my parents bought me, which I have never played, were lost forever. My father Simon was not at home at that time and the policemen must have had his name on their list but could not find him. They kept asking my mother and me where he was hiding, when I told them that he was in the hospital, they thought I am lying and slapped my face. This was the truth. My father was hospitalized the day before, he broke a leg when he fell, while climbing into a wooden ice storage cellar to rip off some wood for fire. My father was caught later and was sent to a forced labor camp. We have not seen him for almost three years until 1944. We learned later that he worked on building a railway bridge on the river Boog for the German army, in a place called Trihatti near Odessa in the Ukraine.

I was six years and three month old and what I remember is: We were brought to a square near the rail way station. We were surrounded by Nazi soldiers with machine guns and frightening dogs. Nobody could have escaped. We were packed into transport wagons. The doors were locked from the outside. I managed to growl between the feet of the standing people to a corner of the wagon, where there was above a little steel bared opening. The train started to move and I could feel the breeze from above and I could catch my breathe. I must have fallen asleep in the corner. My mother woke me up with a piece of bread in her hand.

It was dark and the train was still moving, it went on during the night and the following day. I must have lost the time when I was snoozing in my corner.

There was no food and no water, some people fainted.

Suddenly the train stopped, the doors were opened and guards yelled “get out”.

We learned later that we have arrived in a place called Carriera de Piatra a stone quarry. I remember my mother brought some water from a creek near us in a pot she must have had brought with her. Gathered some flowers and wild herbs, placed the pot on two stones, lit a fire underneath with some branches she collected and was cooking a sup our first meal. As I ate, I suddenly remembered the cow we have left and wondered who might have fed her.

We were marched by Ukraine cooperators into a fenced camp surrounded by watch towers. The people were taken to work on the fields, harvesting potatoes, sugar beets and corn. They worked the whole day from sun rise till dusk and then were marched back to the camp by the guards. The Jews were merchants, shop keepers, doctors and lawyers. They had no clue how to work on the field. There was a lot of beating. No food and soon many people became ill. It was dangerous for me to stay at the camp alone during the day, so my Mother took me to work with her. My Mother was brought up on a farm, so she knew a lot about agriculture work. She and her two brothers and three sisters were managing the work on the farm, where many Ukraine workers were employed and she also spoke their language. My Mother managed to exchange some of her clothes for bread and hide some eatable crops and herbs she found in the fields.

That is the first time I saw an old steam locomotive fired with wood which was standing idle on its tracks. The boiler was used to create steam to cook the sugar beets in order to extract sugar. It was delicious sweet to taste a piece of the left over cooked sugar beet I was able to find without the guards seeing me.

I think it was the first time I have pondered what would I be when I am grown up? A farmer which can grow precious food or a locomotive Engineer.

Winter came with heavy snow fall. Work in the fields stopped, we were locked in the camp. I remember it was very cold, there was no heating. Food was very scarce, many people became ill and died from lack of medication. My Mother managed to exchange some of her last garments for bread or corn with farmer girls through the fence. I have learned that bread in Russian was called "Khlebb" and was the most important commodity.

One day a farmer came to the camp, he was asking for people who had worked before in raising pigs. My Mother was one of the first to volunteer.

We were taken by a sled coupled to two horses to a pig farm in village called Sharapanovka. I remember the trip was cold and windy but also I had fun.

A pig farm in Russian is called "swenarnia". At the farm they were raising pigs. I believe it was for the German Nazi army. The Jews were forced to work on the farm, feed the pigs and clean the stables, work on the fields and grow potatoes, sugar beets, carrots and corn feedings for the pigs. I remember the pigs were large and had many piglets. I thought the piglets were cute but I was warned not to enter the pig fenced area as their mothers can be very dangerous. My mother managed to hide some of the pigs food and that what we ate in hiding.

It became obvious to me why my Mother volunteered to work on the pig farm, she anticipated there would be food and shelter for our survival.

The boss of the farm was an Ukraine big fellow, his name was Mr. Boddian.

He always carried a big stick and did not hesitate to beat up anyone who could not meet his demands. He was humble and nice only when German Nazi officers showed up for inspection. There were tall nut trees growing in the farms yard.

I have always tried to be out of Mr. Boddian's way. When I saw him I used to climb up the nearest nut tree and remained there until it was dark. He must have noticed me climbing the trees and gave me a new task. I had to beat down the nuts with a stick, gather them and smash them with a stone and separate the shells. He warned me not to eat or hide any nuts and said he would be watching me. I was told it was for the pigs. It is how I learned that the pigs were more important than a Jewish hungry boy.

One day while I was still up on a nut tree I saw a Jew came out into the yard and sat down on the ground, leaning with his back on the trunk of the tree, looking toward the beautiful sun set. Suddenly Mr. Boddian with his stick appeared from behind and caught the Jew unprepared and started yelling "you lazy Jewish swine why are you not at work". He started to beat him with his stick and then he yelled " you have a moustache like Stalin, you are a red communist" and kept beating him up. I was frozen with fear in my hiding on the tree and came down only late in the night. The Jew lay motionless on the ground covered in blood. For a long time I felt sorrow for the Jew and that I had not warned him in time. I have never seen this Jew again.

In the fall the trees shed their leaves and my task was to sweep clean the yard and gather the leaves. It was a tedious job, the wind was blowing and more leaves came down until winter came and the snow covered the yard.

The pigs were sent to the slaughter house.

My Mother and me and the rest of the Jewish people were sent back to the camp.

In the camp we met my uncle Leon and Yetty his wife. Leon was my Mothers younger brother. They could not reveal what happened to our other family members.

I was seven years and seven month old and I learned a little bit more about life in the camp.

Winter of 1943 came and the blowing snow. Life in the camp was harsh and despairing. No food, no heating, many people were ill and some perished.

Roomers were they would let us die and in the spring they would bring a new transport of detainees to work on the fields.

On Christmas day 1942, while the guards were celebrating, singing and drinking

A group of Jewish people dug a tunnel under the fence and the snow. My uncle Leon was among the diggers. My Mother woke me up in the night. We joined the group and escaped from the camp to the nearest forest. We walked as far we could during the night and then we went in hiding during the day. We had no maps and there were no signs. We were afraid to use any roads and being close to any dwelling and their barking dogs.

I remember the snow was deep and the waking was hard, I wished I had my sled with us, at least we could drag our belongings with it.

My Mother spotted an isolated farm house in the fields, smoke was rising from its chimney. We left the group. My Mother and my Uncle Leon approached the house, while my aunt Yetty and I and our belongings remained in hiding.

They knocked on the door and presented themselves to the farmer. My Mother who spoke Ukraine said to him “we were brought up on a farm and we are looking for work, we can milk your cows and clean your stable and work on the fields and I can clean your house and wash your clothes”. The farmer looked cautiously left and to the right and then let them in. The way we were dressed, the farmer must have known that we were Jews and did not say a word when my aunt and I joined in too. He must have been a righteous man.

We were let to accommodate a room which had an oven for baking bread. On top of the oven there was a bunk and a recess which was used to dry pumpkin seeds. My Mother and I used to sleep there, it was warm there. I thought the Messiah came but I was mistaken. My Mother, my uncle Leon and my aunt Yetty became all ill, I was the only one which stood on his feet. We were illegal, there was no medical help and no medication. They could not eat and they were vomiting a lot. I think they had typhus. Soon there was no food. Somehow I became aware of some heaps in the fields. I was curious so I dug into one of those heaps under the snow and found a sugar beet. In another I dug out some potatoes. I learned that the farmers used to leave some of the crops in the fields, covered them with straw and the falling snow created an isolated heaps of crops protected from the

freeze.

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It was done because the lack of storage space especially in a good harvest year. Every day in the afternoon I went to a different location in the fields. Dug under the snow of a heap, dug out a few potatoes some corn or even a sugar beet, hide them in a bag under my heavy coat. By twilight ran back home. At night new falling snow covered my footsteps and the dugout under the snow of the heap. Disaster came when the gentile boys spotted me as new to the area and dressed different. They were after me with snow balls, I ran as fast as I could. For them it was a game, but for me it was survival. It became even worse when they brought their dogs. I had to change my tactics, so I went late at night or very early in the morning when it was still dark. I tried to cook or bake in the oven my loot. My efforts were all in vain because they could not swallow anything. One thing I learned in my endeavor, if I could not beat them I had to join them. I needed to make some friends among the gentile boys from another neighborhood. Easy said, but it was hard to accomplish. It would be easier in the summer. I had to think about it and form a plan. Spring came and the days were warmer, there was still snow on the ground. My aunt Yetty was the first to recover, she said she would go to the market place and exchange a dress she had for food. She was caught by a local policeman. I was playing in the yard when I saw them coming toward the house in which we were hiding. Instinctively I rushed into the house and announced the threatening news. I jumped up our sleeping place on the oven and pushed my Mother into the recess and covered her and myself with hay. The policeman caught my uncle Leon ad arrested him. My uncle was speaking in Yiddish and asked my Mother

whether she would reveal us from our hiding and join them. I guessed he was concerned about leaving us alone. My aunt Yetty argued in Yiddish that my Mother was very weak from her illness and would not survive the arrest and the trip back to the camp. It would be better to leave us where we were.

The policeman which, did not understand Yiddish, thought they were arguing between them. The policeman pushed them around and hastened them, so they packed some of their belongings and he took them away. They survived and I saw them after the war.

In May 1943 was my birthday and I was eight years old. My Mother recovered from her illness and was working on the farmer's fields. The sun and the fresh air have done some miraculous to her face, she appeared healthy and beautiful.

My Mother went to the market and bought me a present half a bag of sun flower seeds. I was thrilled but my Mother said she bought only half a bag because she did not have enough money for a full bag. Since then I liked sun flower seeds.

My Mother mentioned that she met two women which were Jewish and learned that there were a few more Jewish families with children living illegally in the village of Obodovka.

My Mother said she was concerned that I could not go to school and I had no friends. I would grow up and would be illiterate. I could not and would not be able to read even the prayer book.

My Mother found out that there was a Rabi which was teaching 8 boys Torah in a Hebrew language class and decided to enroll me there.

I went there a couple of days. The kids were already advanced reading the second

chapter of Genesis, where I had no clue what had happened in the first chapter. The Rabi had also a willow branch which he used to wake up the boys that fell asleep, draw their attention and enforce his teachings.

I did not like it, so I decided to skip it. Where could I go? Well the market place was initially the most intriguing place. Always something was happening there. In the evening I used to come home, my Mother was asking me how it was and my reply was OK, I was happy. Later I found out that there was a river in the village. The gentile kids were swimming, some were fishing and everybody had fun. I was watching them from the distance and wanted to join them and make some friends. I needed a plan, first of all I was dressed differently and I needed some clothing as they had. That was easy to obtain from one of the washed clothing hanging in the neighborhood far from the river. A little boy's Russian shirt (roobashca) was sufficient. I had to improve my language skills and work on my accent. I decided to listen first and refrain from speaking. I had to be prepared if someone would ask me for my name, I chose to be called Wolodia close to Willy which was too German. Armed with these decisions I approached cautiously the gang. I was lucky nobody paid any attention to me as they were busy in their activities. Except one boy by the name of Stashik which became my friend.

I have never learned to swim before so I observed the other kids swimming and tried to imitate them. To learn how to fish took me longer. First I needed a rod, a string and a hook . The rod was simply to obtain from a willow tree which grew along the river bank. I traded with Stashik a string and a hook for the supply of fruits I picked up on my way. It was Stashik who taught me how to dig out worms

from the river bank and string them onto the hook.

I tried to fish but somehow the other boys caught all the fish and I had nothing.

Stashik was laughing at me and I was persistent until I caught my first little fish.

I was so happy I have unhooked it and let go. Later I have caught more other fish.

Well I could not bring the fish back home. I had to go to the market and sell them.

Exchange my clothing and hide them and then I went back home. My Mother asked how was the day and my answer was it was good and I was happy.

Disaster came when my Mother went one day to the Rabi to find out how I was doing. I was not there. The other students told me later that the Rabi said to my Mother, "lady please show me who is your son and I would tell you how advanced he is". The students broke out in a big laughter and my poor Mother ashamed stormed out from the class room.

When I came home in the evening, hell broke out. My Mother was crying and complaining that in addition to her hard life I was cheating and would grow up without knowing an Hebrew letter. I tried to console her and promised I would go back to the class room and study all my life. I can testify now that I know Hebrew, the Torah and the whole Bible quite well and I have enjoyed studying it.

In autumn 1943 the neighborhood gentile boys became more aggressive and were chasing me this time throwing stones at me when I was trying to get home. It might have been sparked by the news from the front. The German army was in retreat. I became bolder and in one incident threw stones back and hit one attacker in his foot, who was yelling and limping back home. His father came after me with a stick and I had to hide in a swamp for a couple of days.

I felt sorry about the injury I caused but thought I was right. The throwing of stones stopped.

In the winter of 1944 we were hearing heavy guns shelling specially at night. In the spring the German army was in retreat. I remember me and other boys watching from the top of a hill overlooking a junction in the village upon the German army retreat. There was a lot of confusion and chaos. I was pleased when I saw it.

The Russian army arrived. For 3 days we have seen Russian tanks, armed cars dragging heavy cannons and many officers and armed soldiers. They were very nice in particular to the children, offering us candies and sugar cubs. To me they were very impressive and I was sure they would win the war. The Russian army mobilized all the men over 16 in the village. I was not even 9 years old.

After a couple of days we could not hear any more the cannons shelling from the front. My Mother said lets go home and packed two bags for us to carry.

We should look for my Father we have not seen for more than two and half years. Our home town was far away so we walked many days. Sometimes we could join other Jews going in the same direction. Occasionally we were able to stop a single army truck driven by a lonely soldier driver who gave us a lift for a bottle of Vodka we bought on the way. We could still hear the bombardment from the front at night and had to stop and wait being too close to the front.

There was a roomer saying that the German army was coming back, wishful thinking of some Ukraine. We rested a little time and then went on.

Our goal was to reach the river Nistru and cross it. It was the prewar border between the Ukraine and Bassarabia (Romania) now it is called Moldavia.

There was a rumor the Russian would close the border for civilian movement and we had to hurry. There were no maps and we did not know how far the river was.

Finally we reached the river at a place called Yampol. I remember a wide muddy river. There was a wooden makeshift crossing bridge. A lot of refugees were in waiting to cross the bridge. There were Russian officers and soldiers on guard not letting anybody to cross the bridge.

Suddenly two German Shtooka fighter planes appeared, there was an alarm, they bombed the bridge and it was gone.

I noticed they were bombing another crossing down the river and there they were met by heavy anti-aircraft fire. The planes left, the traffic resumed down the river. I saw many tanks and armed cars passing the river like they were floating. I could not believe my eyes. I was told the Russian had built a submerged steel bridge for army purpose and no civilians were allowed the crossing. During the night the wooden bridge was repaired. Again the German fighter planes appeared and bombed the bridge. More refugees arrived and the bank of the river became very crowded. One day the bombardment missed the bridge and the order came to cross it in a haste. We were running on the bridge while workers were still repairing it. Suddenly I saw Mr. Boddian among the workers. I cried out " Mom here is Mr. Boddian from the pig farm". My Mother dragged me over the bridge and argued that I was mistaken and it was someone else who resembled him. She had enough from Boddian and his pig farm. If you still would like to see your Father we should go on and look for your Father and forget about Mr. Boddian.

We crossed the bridge and went on away from the river fearful from another bombardment. All the way I thought about Mr. Boddian and his deeds and that it would be unjust to let him go without reporting him to the Russian authority. I nagged my Mother about it and my Mother promised to ponder on it.

We reached the first town in Bassarabia – Moldavia called Soroka and we found a place to sleep. My Mother said to me I could sleep well and in the morning we would go to the police and report the case. The following day we went there.

My Mother filed a report and I added that I actually saw Mr. Boddian beating up a Jew claiming he looked like Stalin the Russian leader. A policeman told us that they had to invite a special NKVD interrogator and locked us up in a room.

They were nice to us and offered us tea and sugar cubes, but did not let us go.

My Mother was furious with me when she said we came so far toward our home town to find my father and now we were locked up. In the morning a Russian officer and two soldiers came and took me on a jip back to the bridge. I was asked to point out Mr. Boddian, which I did. They arrested him and we drove back to the police station. The following day the Russians arranged a trial. I remember three Russian officers were sitting behind a table covered with red cloth. The accused Mr. Boddian was brought under guard. The special NKVD interrogator read the charges against Mr. Boddian and mentioned they found a lot of Jewish looted property in searching the accused home. I was asked to repeat what had happened during the incident. The Judges issued their verdict. Mr. Boddian was found guilty and was taken away. The proceeding were very formal and impressive to me. An officer knotted a red ribbon around my neck and said

I would be a good pioneer. My mother was glad when they let us continue our Journey.

We were walking on the edge of a road when an enclosed armored vehicle stopped as it passed us. A rear door opened and a high ranking Russian officer invited us in by waving his hand. I remember the walls were covered with maps, red arrow signs and little colored flags. In the middle there was a large table, which did not shift while travelling. There were a couple of armchairs and one couch, which did not move while travelling. On the rear wall there were phones hanging. We were invited to sit down, tea from a Russian Samovar and sugar cubes were offered to us, a real treat.

The officer asked My Mother where were we heading. My Mother answered to our home town Cernowitzi. The officer said he can take us to a railway station. There would be a military train leaving on a mission to repair the tracks and the exploded over passes. It would be slow, but it would take us close to our goal. He gave my Mother a stamped voucher and whispered to her in Yiddish that he was also Jewish. He let us off at a small station and indeed there was a train with open wagons packed with railway tracks and construction materials. The officer in charge let us on the train and even arranged seating places for us once he saw the voucher. To my Mother it was a miracle of Divine intervention and was praying to the Almighty, asking for a safe trip and that no German plain would appear and bombard the train. I was naive and I thought that my red ribbon had some impact on the Russian officers.

The train was moving with caution slowly.

Whenever it approached an exploded overpass it stopped. The soldiers jumped off the train and repaired the damaged overpass and the tracks. The train passed slowly with caution. I noticed the soldiers were walking before the train and checking the tracks for a while and then boarded the locomotive and were standing in the front of it. I was told that the retreating German army damaged the tracks and exploded the overpasses in order to slow down the advancing Russian army and their supply means. There could have been even mines that would derail the train. The real challenge would be to repair the railway bridge on the river Proot at the entrance of Cernovitzky. The soldiers that were off duty on the train were singing Russian songs and I thought the melodies were very nice. The train stopped before the river and we disembarked it.

I was the first to run over the road bridge to see whether it was damaged and whether there were any guarded road blocks. Well to our surprise, there were not any at all. I waved to my Mother from the top of the bridge signaling to come and join me. I was full of joy and so was my Mother.

We went with the tram to our home, it was occupied. We asked the dwellers whether my Father was looking for us. They had a message for us from my Father, that he was working at a shop, there was an address. He found another flat we could all live there, there was an address. We rushed to his working place and we met. Oh! What a meeting. We have not seen him for two years and ten months. In the following days we were together and we told each other what happened to us and how we survived. My Father was deported after us to a forced labor camp in the Ukraine. He worked on building a railway bridge on the river Boog.

In May 1944 we celebrated my birthday and this time my Mother bought me a present a full bag of sun flower seeds.

I was nine years old and they enrolled me into the third grade of a Jewish school. That was the first time I went to school.

They taught us Russian literature, Yiddish and Jewish literature, Russian History and Mathematics. It was all new to me and I liked it. I had a lot of new friends and I was happy.

My good life started again in 1944.

The war ended only a year later in 1945.

I remember my Mother said to me once she had survived the war because she wished I could live.

I believe those happenings had a great influence on my life as they shaped partly my character.

Ze'ev Willy Shore

In blessed memory of my Mother Fanny Zipora Russenberg Schorr 1911 - 1999 and her family.

In blessed memory of my Father Shim'on Yehuda Schorr 1903 – 1981 and his family.

Next Chapter: How I went to Israel in 1947. Memoir from 1944 – 1948

When I was 9 – 13 years old.

Memoir of my robbed childhood
1940 – 1944 when I was 5 – 9 years old.
By Ze'ev Willy Shore
To be read with parental discretion.

