CHILDREN OF DOLHINOV:
OUR ANCESTORS AND OURSELVES

BY

BARRY RUBIN

Dedicated to the memory of Haya Doba, Aharon, Haim, and Jacob Perlmutter; Samuel, Rikva, Leah, and Lev Grosbein; and Rachel, Yirimayahu, and Moshe Dimenshtein; to all the people of Dolghinov; and to a woman whose name I don't know that once had a stall in the Paris flea market.

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PROLOGUE
PARIS

"The proper time to influence the character of a child is 100 years before he is born In each of us lives our childhood and the values of past generations." –Robert ten Bensel, pediatric psychiatrist, Mayo Clinic

Paris, Summer 1963. In what is supposed to be the most glorious of cities, in a beautiful month. "I love Paris in the springtime," my mother used to sing in her overdramatic 1940s' style around the house. And it's the mythical pre-Kennedy assassination Eden of American innocence. The United States is flush with cash. The exchange rates are great and Americans are flooding Europe.

As a present for my bar mitzvah, my mother took me on a trip through Europe, mostly with one of those If It's Tuesday It Must be Belgium tours. But on that day, I cannot say why, we are by ourselves. My mother's main goal during the trip was to accumulate large numbers of long gloves and ingeniously designed perfume bottles.

But my father chose not to come. It wasn't a problem of excessive work or inadequate money. He was his own boss and only employee in a development company organizing and producing apartment buildings. It wasn't money because they changed their Thunderbirds every year or so and at some point, a few years later, would move into Mercedes.

Like so much of what happens in families, especially mine, there was little communication. I understood vaguely that he had no wish to ever revisit Europe for he had been there in the late 1930s, obviously at a time when fascism was on the rise, and had some bad feelings. Inescplicably to myself, I never asked any questions about the trip or his motives. in the garage was an old photo framed of himself and a friend, not identified, riding bicycles in Holland.

Somewhere I got the vague notion that he had been there on the eve of war and had to get out fast to avoid the fighting. Or he had seen the Nazi regime first-hand. The second might be true but not the first. When I find the record on Internet of his return voyage—who could have imagined such things would be possible when I was growing up—I found that he came into New York on the Britannic on August 15, 1937.

He was a tall and strong man ("Strength is Happiness--Napoleon" it said in his high school yearbook), but he was born in 1913 and thus was 28 by Pearl Harbor day. And despite his look of invulnerability, he had more than one Achilles heel, to mix the metaphor, a bad back and a hernia to be specific. Thus, being 4-F he didn't get a second trip a few years after courtesy of Uncle Sam. So he wasn't there with us that day.

The flea market was supposed to be one of the fun places where you could find anything and everything. I still have a weak spot for flea markets. Somehow, even though I never buy anything for myself, I have the sense that if I look hard enough I will find something so amazing, unexpected, and unique that it would change my life.

And in a sense that already happened. It was a bright, clear day. The sky was cloudless; the crowds were thick but not so much as to inhibit enjoying the colors and variety of goods on display. I lingered at a table looking at old medals, mirrors, the junk of history after the people are worn away. Like my son today, I needed some diversion whenever my mother looked at the jewelry which always seems to predominate in such places. Then, I turned to the left and walked across the little lane to join her as she sorted through earrings or necklaces.

A woman was standing behind the counter of the stall. She was no older than my mother. Far younger than I am now. Brown hair, average height, her slightly curling hair resting on her shoulders. Wearing the kind of dress people make fun of today, full and flowery, little style for someone in Paris where the cliché about everyone having a flair for fashion really seems true.

She looked at me and gasped. Her face showing something between panic and terror. My mother was still looking at the objects on display but for her I was the object on display. I was confused and looked over my shoulder but there was nothing there, and when I looked back she seemed frozen to the spot. Even my mother sensed something was going on.

Finally she managed to speak, in highly accented English, either assuming that was our language or perhaps she had already exchanged a word with my mother, probably encouraging her to look at something particular, offering a price, doing business. I must have moved toward my mother for protection in the unfamiliar situation.

“Your son,” she said with a cracked voice. “Your son.”

“Yes,” said my mother in her pseudo-charming tone. “He is.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head too quickly for it to be a normal gesture. She was crying. Passersby were staring, though mostly indifferent. She probably couldn’t express herself well in English any way but given her emotional distress she could not speak at all. “He…my…I…He looks like my son.”

I must have been a cynical 13-year-old because my first thought was that it was some sales’ pitch to soften my mother up to buy something. She turned and ran and picked up her purse, shaking, frantically reached into the large bag, pulled out several objects and let them fall to the ground in her hurry. Then she grabbed something from deep within and turned back. In both hands, as if she didn’t trust herself to continue at all.

She held it up with a note of triumph. It was a black and white photograph. Of a boy. My age. If he didn’t look like my double he could easily have passed for me.

“He died in Dachau, the concentration camp,” she added quietly.

The rest is a blur. I simply cannot remember what was said, though I suppose not a lot. Today, of course, I would have spent an hour talking with her, taken her name and address, asked the story of her life. I seem to remember and I’d like to believe that we spent a decent time talking to her. But I did not know then and I do not know now if my being there was something of great comfort or terrible torture for her. I’d give a lot to go back to that moment, but then I’ll bet there were moments she’d give a lot more to be able to return to, and perhaps to change.

I never spoke about that experience with my mother, who soon returned to the hunt for perfume and gloves. In fact I have never repeated this story to anyone before this moment.

PREFACE

It is a titanic story though one rather slow-moving by contemporary standards. In 79, the Temple destroyed, the Jewish rebellion crushed, the Romans enslaved thousands and deported them to Italy or southern France in order to extinguish the Jewish people forever. Yet they did not give up their religion or civilization. The Empire fell and the lights of civilization went out. Over almost one thousand years, their descendants moved ever northward and eastward, through the French-speaking lands into the German-speaking lands.

And after almost another five hundred years of prosperity alternating with persecution, they went on again, northward and eastward into the Polish and Lithuanian-speaking lands. There they sojourned another five hundred years, often of grinding poverty and sporadically of serious oppression. Then, again they were on the move but faster and farther than ever. Some to lands unknown for most of that time, North America and even to Australia and South Africa; more still back to the Land of Israel, full circle two millennia after they were supposed to cease existing, back to almost the precise spot from which they had set out.

“Do not despise the lore that has come down from distant years; for oft it may chance that old wives keep in memory word of things that once were needful for the wise to know.”
--J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring.

“One can write much more about our town, and if it does not have historical value, it is of interest to the descendants of our town, wherever they are, to see how life in our town evolved from generation to generation, and were it not for the fact that the Archevil One put an end to that life, who knows where this life would have reached.”
--Ivenets memoir

“To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.”
--William Blake, “To see a world”

CHAPTER ONE
THE SILENCE OF A NOISY PAST

”Do not despise the lore that has come down from distant years; for oft it may chance that old wives keep in memory word of things that once were needful for the wise to know.”

--J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring.

The very first building on the west side of Connecticut Avenue north of Chevy Chase Circle, the serene, grassy border between Washington DC and Maryland, once housed Mrs. Libby's school. An unusual low white stucco structure, today it is a post office, but a half-century ago it was where I attended kindergarten and first grade. There I learned to read and write. We rode stick horses around the small yard during recess and when Queen Elizabeth came to America we all wrote her letters.

That's literally everything I remember except for one other thing, a project assigned to my first-grade class in 1957. Everyone was asked where his family came from and when they'd arrived in America. Even before the contemporary mania about diversity and multiculturalism took hold that was a pretty standard exercise in American schools. We were to ask our parents, then make small paper cutouts of that country's shape with the date when they came to the United States. Then, they were all pinned into a world map hanging on the classroom wall.

My family lived in Northwest Washington, DC. Across the street was the home of Senator Lyndon Johnson, and on January 20, 1961, I watched him head off to his inauguration as vice-president. Around the corner was the modest house of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover who, in turn, was across the street from the Peruvian Embassy. That was a long way from being a recent immigrant to America.

I asked my mother in the den of the house—strange to remember that scene so vividly among so much forgotten--and she said “Poland, 1909,” just those two words, no more extended story or invitation to find out more. So somehow, I made a remarkably accurate cut-out from yellow construction paper and turned it in. My curiosity ended there.

And yet, inexplicably, holding that small piece of colored paper in the palm of my hand somehow remained one of my strongest memories when virtually every other such assignment during a dozen years of schooling evaporated. Remarkably, my mother got the date right, though in fact none of my direct ancestors had actually ever lived in an independent Poland and that was not the country they had left behind. Moreover, none of her ancestors had lived in that country or arrived to America in 1909 but had come from Austria-Hungary two decades earlier. Still, what she told me was still basically accurate.

As I write these words, it is almost to the day 100 years after Chaya Grosbein and Yaakov Yeramayahu (Jacob Jeremiah) Rubin stepped off boats in Philadelphia, and precisely 50 years since I did that homework assignment. But for 95 percent of my existence, everything I could have told you about my life long before I was born—to coin a phrase--was contained in those two words, “Poland 1909.”

If I had not embarked on this journey that statement would be still true today. I knew not a word, not one word more—not even the actual names of my grandparents--and every word that follows here is what I have learned through painstaking research and extensive travels. All the more remarkable was that it was possible to discover such things so many long years afterward. But the stories wait patiently for us to find them. They have all the time in the world, even if we don't.

The second seed that would lead to my walking amidst the orchards of a town I'd never heard of before, was planted by my step-grandfather, equally ironic since he was in no way related to me in genealogical terms and had nothing to do with that place either. He carried out the most brilliant scheme to preserve himself in memory I've ever heard, though I wonder how consciously he did so. In honor of that gambit, I here record his name, Hyman Eckhaus. He married my grandmother some years after my grandfather had died in 1933.

And just as the ancestral school project is the only such young academic endeavor I recall, this is the sole thing I remember him ever having said to me. One day when I was visiting—which my mother encouraged by small payment rather than a lecture about the importance of family, something all too typically and destructively modern—he was looking at a Yiddish newspaper. I asked him what he was reading.

Hymie fanned the newspaper forward into his lap and said in his moderate accent, "It's a story." He paused, like a good storyteller waiting for his prompt.

"What is it about?"

"A man dies and comes back as a ghost to find his wife and family and everyone he knew fhad forgotten about him. It is as if he'd never existed."

Even as a nine-year-old, that story struck me hard as the saddest thing I'd ever heard. To see first-hand that all those you'd cared for had no regard for you, that your life weighted naught, to have the message shoved in your face: You are a nothing. You do not and never have mattered. Your existence has been erased. What could be more possibly painful than that?

Somehow the fearfulness of such a fate struck me with full force. And if the suffering was on one side, the shame was on the other, of those who were such ingrates, so brutally blind and selfish as to forget. How could I ever behave like that?

Yet for decades, while sporadically feeling guilty about it, that is precisely what I did. And with some little remove, this is the overwhelming, taken-for-granted normal behavior of the modern society in which I grew up and in which we all live. It glories at cutting itself off. Still further went the contemporary, post-modern version which ridicules continuity, lambasts tradition; reclassifies our ancestors as fools at best, criminals at worst.

It is, in a more metaphysical way, like the witty exchange in the film "Casablanca":

Yvonne: "Where were you last night?"

Rick: "That's so long ago, I don't remember."

Yvonne: "Will I see you tonight?"

Rick: "I never make plans that far ahead."

But I didn't forget the story Hymie had told me, the second experience that would set me on my course.

And the third was what had happened to me in Paris.

When I attended one-day-a-week religious school at Washington's premiere Reform synagogue, we were told that Jewish history began with the discovery of the New World. Hebrew was taught without any reference to the existence of the state of Israel. The textbooks

featured a group of children taking a journey to the center of the earth. It was an apt analogy for driving memory and identity underground but without ever getting to the core of things.

Such attitudes were common to most Jews and many others. And, of course, there are always individual circumstances. In my family's case, the fact that one of my grandfathers had been a ne'er-do-well, possibly a drunk and minor con-man, provoked shame and hence concealment to a near-total extent. I can't remember a single word ever being volunteered about family history, not a single anecdote. There was a vast vacuum.

When my mother died in an auto accident and I had to clear her house and examine every object accumulated, there was hardly a single letter which predated my birth and perhaps a mere half-dozen photographs—none of which I'd ever glimpsed before--from either side of my family's background before my parent's marriage.

The same silence applied on the most obvious absence, the almost total lack of relatives. Except for a sister and her children on my father's side and a sister of my grandmother and her descendents on my mother's side, I had not a single relative in the world. Told that we had no relatives who died in the Holocaust, I could only attribute this to low birth rates rather than mass murders in Europe.

This misleading information was due partly to ignorance and partly to what can only kindly be called amnesia. Since then, however, I have identified two dozen closer relatives and 150 more distant ones who'd suffered that fatal fate, along with another dozen reasonably proximate kin who'd immigrated to America beforehand and another half-dozen who survived and went to Israel.

Before this long investigation, however, so felt was this lack of family, that on one birthday my wife assembled a host of old photographs purchased in the Tel Aviv flea market into two framed faux-family montages. I was very touched with that gift which continues to hang in a prominent place. None of those shown in the pictures were actual relatives but they do look much as those people must have appeared.

This situation, though like so much in life taken for granted, was still most peculiar. It was an absurd contradiction yet one that many people, especially intellectuals, live with. In my case, it meant having a PhD and teaching history, researching the lives of others in archives, having read thousands of books on history, and yet not having the slightest inkling of my own history or how it fit into that broader narrative.

How much more dramatic, though, could the story have possibly been, albeit a rather slow-moving by contemporary standards. In 70, the Temple destroyed, the Jewish rebellion crushed, the Romans enslaved thousands and deported them to Italy or southern France in order to extinguish the Jewish people forever. Yet they did not give up their religion or civilization. The Empire fell and the lights of civilization went out. Over almost one thousand years, their descendants moved ever northward and eastward, through the French-speaking lands into the German-speaking lands.

And after almost another five hundred years of prosperity alternating with persecution, they went on again, northward and eastward into the Polish and Lithuanian-speaking lands. There they sojourned another five hundred years, often of grinding poverty and sporadically of serious oppression. Then, again they were on the move but faster and farther than ever. Some to lands unknown for most of that time, North America and even to Australia and South Africa;

more still back to the Land of Israel, full circle two millennia after they were supposed to cease existing, back to almost the precise spot from which they had set out.

However long I'd waited to learn my own prehistory, I'd promised myself to do so some day. At last, almost the age of my grandparents when I knew them and buoyed by the amazing resources provided by the Internet, I set off on the journey. To decide to write any particular book is not a choice lightly made. It will determine how one is going to spend several years of one's life, places to travel, the people one will meet.

If the journey is to succeed, one requires a guide, and I was lucky enough to find the proper one. Before his retirement, Leon Rubin was a physics teacher in Givatayim, literally "Two Hills," Israel, a suburb just east of Tel Aviv, a place well-off but certainly not rich. If Tel Aviv is Israel's New York, Givatayim is northern New Jersey. A physics teacher is a man of precision. He knows how things work; no mystery, no nonsense; no mystique, just time and space, objects in motion, the history of the universe made as clear and plain as state-of-the-art science can do.

Leon's life changed during a lecture given at his school on Holocaust Memorial Day, April 2000. He has a free hour; no classes to teach; all papers corrected. So why not, Leon thought as he passed the auditorium, go hear the speaker. Inside, it was completely quiet, The kids filling the room were attentive, not exactly the norm for Israeli high school students. The man on the small stage, slender, white-haired, vigorous in his 70s, is named Koppel Kolpanitzky**,** a retired army major.

Leon settled into a chair. Kolpanitzky, his voice breaking with emotion, recounted that he was sole survivor of the once-800-member Jewish community in Lahva, Poland. Escaping to Israel, he had fought in the War of Independence and stayed on in the army until retirement. He had never returned to Poland, which was for him only a land of ghosts and bitterness. Even if he'd wanted to do so, Israeli officers were discouraged from travelling to the Soviet bloc, hostile states that were the main diplomatic and military backers of Arab armies trying their inadequate best, with Moscow's help, to wipe Israel off the map.

Then, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. Kolpanitzky, now in his 60s, decided that he must return. That it was his duty, because there was no one else to remember the dead; to take care of the cemetery; and mark the place where his family, neighbors, and playmates, everyone he'd known and seen every day of his life growing up, had been murdered.

There's a cherished piece of wisdom in Judaism, from that remarkable philosophical-behavioral collection of sayings called Pirkey Avot. Rabbi Hillel, most respected of sages, said, "*Uvimekom she'ein anashim hishtadel liheyot ish*," which is usually translated as meaning: If no one else is going to stand up, take leadership, and do what's right, you must do it.

Here is the situation of this Kolpanitzky, that of the man on whom the choice of *uvimekom she'ein anaashim* is laid because there literally is no one else. Lahva was a place for whom there was no one left. No one else on the world, of a half-dozen billion people, could take up the task he faced. And so he accepted that yoke. Returning to Lahva on visits, he, tended and repaired the cemetery, did everything he could to keep the memory alive, lectured, and wrote a book about his experiences.

Leon was stunned because Kolpanitzky's experience related so much to his own life. "I thought that if he could do it for a community of 800 Jews in Lahva, I can and must do it for the massacred 3000 Jews of Dolhinov." He never saw or spoke with Kolpanitzky again. But he did

see the faces in his mind of those whom fate had assigned responsibility to him for respect and remembrance.

He was equally aware of having been the most fortunate of his people. At age six, he'd marched with his family for weeks on end through Nazi-occupied territory, escorted by armed Soviet partisans, to safety in the eastern USSR. His parents, two brothers, and sister—the whole immediate family—survived the Holocaust, though his mother had died in Siberia during the war.

After the war, they were all, except for one brother who had already made his way to Israel, stuck in the Soviet Union, prisoners of the Communist regime there though as Polish citizens they should have been able to leave. They even returned to Dolhinov, now part of the USSR, where he grew up among the last Jews there. From where he lived, from where he attended school, it was only ten minutes' walk to the cemetery where his ancestors, including his grandparents, were buried, to the killing field where his playmates had been massacred. The thought of going to those places never occurred to him.

Was it too painful? Yes, that was part of it. But it was more as if everything that happened before was behind a closed door, ancient history, another planet. In the USSR, history was only what the government said; just as in American society the word history for so many students is a subject they consider irrelevant, boring, and of no connection to themselves.

In Dolhinov, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, and in the USSR generally, no one ever spoke of those things airbrushed from memory. While schools, newspapers, and the speeches of leaders talked incessantly of the Great Patriotic War, they never mentioned the Holocaust, the specific suffering or any element in the history of the Jews, or the USSR's own role—both positive and negative--in the tragedy.

For me, all those events had never happened; for him, they'd happened and been taken away, brainwashed out of his memory.

Leon became the leader of the Young Communist unit in his class at school. But within the family, the desire to get out of the Soviet Union, which had basically kidnapped them—like all the other Dolhinov Jews stuck there--despite their being Polish citizens, never dimmed. In 1952, the antisemitic upsurge triggered by the Soviet leadership threatened to escalate into mass deportations. And when well-dressed KGB officers began to arrive in Dolhinov to survey the handful of remaining Jews there, it was too reminiscent of how SS officers had done the same thing just before massacres had been carried out precisely ten years earlier.

Stalin's death may alone have prevented a new officially sponsored pogrom. Leon graduated from university in 1958, at about the time when a Soviet-Poland deal finally allowed the ethnic Poles and Jews with Polish citizenship to get out. Leon finally arrived in Israel in January 1960, first worked at Israel Aircraft Industries, then in 1988 taught physics, until 2001 when he retired.

But retirement is only a relative term for someone who is a white-haired "bulldozer," a Hebrew slang word for someone who lets nothing stand in the way of achieving his goal. His deeply lined forehead has five furrows across it, and his large ears are a common Dolhinov Rubin trait. As a teacher, he speaks authoritatively, forcefully, and fluently, in Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish, English, along with some Polish, too. An incredible linguistic ability, out of necessity in living in cultural borderlands and ultimately in many lands, is one of the things we've usually lost from our ancestors.

What particularly startled me, when we began speaking consciously as relatives with a common interest in my ancestral and his actual home, is that we'd met before. He had caught my eye as being in the audience of several lectures I'd given on the Middle East over the years. Why had I remembered him among so many people? Perhaps there was some subconscious recognition of certain traits as being from the same genetic make-up?

That inspires one to think, how many people we pass by walking down the street or engage in brief conversation, or encounter on chores or business, without realizing that they are relatives or friends or neighbors of a hundred or thousand years ago? There is nothing mystical in that reflection, on the contrary, that's what makes it remarkable: because such things actually did happen.

Which makes this an appropriate place to recount one of many remarkable encounters and experiences along the journey of research, a path that can be as colorful as any safari, as exciting as a boat trip down a river's rapids, and as challenging as scaling Mount Everest.

One day, my Russian-language researcher, Katya Minakova, called me from Jerusalem. She had been listening to the radio routinely on a call-in show when a woman telephoned. Her name, she said, was Galina Rubin. For 20 years after emigrating from the USSR, the caller explained, she had been looking for family in Israel but had never found any. And where was her family from, asked the program's host? Oh, she continued, a place no one had ever heard of, Dolhinov.

As fast as possible, I arranged a meeting. She, a retired math teacher, and her husband, a surgeon, were living in a high-rise in a Tel Aviv suburb. In her 60s, Galina was exceptionally kind and very excited to be making this connection. We talked, her in Russian-accented and me in English-accented Hebrew. She pulled out old family photos, a 1911 identity card from Dolhinov signed by the Czarist police chief there, and we drew charts on paper using my detailed databank of all the Rubins in Dolhinov, accurate at least from 1765 to 1857, after which Russian bureaucracy was less effective.

What we were able to establish, with a high degree of certainty, was this: that 150 years earlier, my orphaned great-great grandfather and his sister were taken in by her ancestor—his uncle--and raised. That was a debt of gratitude that my double-great grandfather no doubt felt all his life, and now it was given to me to reconstruct it and to say thank you once again.

At the end, I pointed out to her that Gabriel was the most important first name in our family's history. Remarkably, not knowing that at the time, I had named my daughter, Gabriella. She had never known that either, Galina said, but her parents—perhaps equally unaware—had wanted to name her Gabriella, too. That name, however, was not on the Soviet-approved list, so they had to settle for Galina.

Every day I learned new things. My net of acquaintances widened from people born there and their children; to the biographies of rabbis, Polish refugees, ancient Lithuanian and Swedish chronicles; the passenger lists of ships leaving Hamburg and docking in America. History unfolded, details I never thought would be possible to recover.

If you work hard enough, apparent coincidences will happen. I'm sitting in the back of a car driving through Moscow on my first visit to that city. Next to me sits a colleague at the university, Tsvi Magen, former Israeli ambassador to Russia and Ukraine, now a researcher at my university. Born himself in the USSR of Polish Jewish refugee parents, he explains Russian politics to me and the wonders of Moscow.

At some point, when the conversation lags, I recount my genealogical research to him and ask about his family. On his mother's side, they, too, come from eastern Poland. "My grandmother even had a brother who went to America, to Washington, but we have no idea what happened to him."

"What's his name?"

"Jacob Minkoff."

Amazed, I replied, "Oh, I know him! I have news for you. Your grandmother's brother married my grandmother's sister, and our families of that generation remained close friends all their lives."

Once a year, the children of Dolginov and their descendants gather to remember. It is the sixty-sixth anniversary of the 1942 massacre by the Germans and their helpers. There were 3000 Jews living in Dolginov when World War Two began in September 1939, 75 percent of the population. In March 1942 there were still about that number; though many had fled, refugees had arrived from further west. Two months later, there were none left alive in the town.

Then how is it that the long, low-ceilinged hall in Tel Aviv's Vilna House is full to capacity, with about 150 people, survivors and descendants of those who had perished or fled? Why had this particular shtetl been kept alive with a special kind of communal spirit? "There are more people here," said Arie Rubin, one of them, "then at the Vilna memorial meetings," even though Vilna had many times more Jewish residents.

Virtually every single survivor made his way to Israel though for some that took more than 15 years. It has been rightly said that for a long time after its founding, Israelis did not want to talk about these events, partly for ideological factors (the focus on the new Jew and on the building up of the land; partly for psychological reasons (it was just too painful).

This era is long past. Or is it? I was guest at the home of my distant cousin Victor Rubin, hearing the story of his families' half-horrifying, half-inspiring survival during World War Two. As German soldiers searched for the family, they hid in a hole they'd dug. An uncle had sacrificed his life to seal the hideout from the outside with a pile of camouflaging potatoes. They'd listened as Germans hunted for them, urged on and guided by Polish neighbors. They watched through breathing holes as the Germans were showed the hiding place next door and threw in a hand grenade to kill everyone. After the massacre ended, the Rubins emerged to find that their neighbors' six-year-old son, Haim Grosbein, also a cousin of mine, was still alive among the bodies. They took him in and saved him.

Listening to all this, I was seated at their simple table with Leon and Victor Rubin; Victor's wife, who came from a near-by town, their daughter and son-in-law. The lunch includes noodles and potato pancakes, bread (Israeli traditional meals are heavy on starches, perhaps another inheritance from the old country), sauerkraut, and pickles.

When he came to story's end, Victor's daughter, in her late 30s, said casually to her father, "'"Oh, I always knew you were close to Haim Grosbein and his family but I never knew why." I was floored: she'd never hear the story before.

Some in the younger generation now want to know more. At the memorial meeting, it was there for all present to see. A Russian film was shown about Dolhinov, made by a Soviet Jewish filmmaker named Yaakov Kaller who had met the daughter at school in Moscow of one of the Soviet partisan officers who'd help save the remaining Dolhinov Jews. It was a shock to see Haim Grosbein, a rather jovial and very well-preserved man I'd met before, describing on the

screen how he had survived three years in the forest as a wild child, living on snakes and live fish he caught by hand.

Watching all this, my elderly aunt, who had seen the bodies of her parents and older brother, able only to snatch three photographs from their house before fleeing, dissolved into tears to be comforted by my teenage daughter. In Dolginov, some of my relatives had been in Hashomer Hatzair, the left-wing youth group, and in Israel had worked at the Histadrut, the trade union federation. Others had been in Betar, the right-wing youth group, and Menahem Begin had attended their weddings. That wasn't so important after all.

These people sitting in the hall were the people who make up Israel, along with the Sephardic Jews who have their own stories of dispossession and flight. Almost 90 percent of the Jews of continental Europe were murdered; well over 90 percent of the Jews of the Middle East were turned into refugees.

And these are the people daily demonized around the world as monsters, told by well-paid academics, intellectuals, and journalists, that Israel had no right to exist or was some kind of mistake.

The meeting ended with Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem. When we sang the words, "As long as the heart of a Jew beats and his eye is turned to the east," I thought of these people who had marched—unarmed, impoverished, pursued, close to friendless—750 miles eastward. They had rebuilt their lives and brought up their families, not wasting time on bitterness or seeking revenge but acting constructively.

When we sang the lines, "Our ancient hope is not lost, the hope of two thousand years," I thought of what these people had hoped as they trudged through the forest, with horrors in their thoughts and trying to believe there was some hope at the end of the journey.

Professor Yehuda Bauer, the great historian who practically founded the field of Holocaust studies, once told me about a conversation he had with one of Israel's founding leaders, a man frequently in government cabinets during the country's early years. He explained to Bauer that he could simply not believe in his heart that six million Jews had been murdered in Europe, that somehow they were still out there and some day ship after ship would appear off the coast carrying them home.

It is important to understand that Israel is not merely a product of the Shoah, a consolation prize handed to the Jews by a guilty world but rather the result of its people's desires and labor. Whatever sympathy the Shoah mobilized for Israel was far exceeded by the damage that it did to that cause. For what marvels we could have achieved, as Bauer's interlocutor continued, if we had the energy, strength, and either direct presence or support of those murdered millions?

Similarly, for the Dolginov Jews, stuck in the corner of the corner of a forgotten back alley of Europe, Zionism and the land of Israel was not something they dreamed up merely as a result of the Shoah. They thought of their lives as good before the war but knew where their future lay, and they had already sent about 50 of their children there. Others were to follow in order to, in the words of Israel's national anthem, "Be a free people in our land."

Standing there in the hall of Vilna House--amidst photos of vanished places in Europe; next to those who had survived, rebuilt, and fought with all their varied lifestyles, religious beliefs, and characters—never had the words of "Hatikvah" seemed more meaningful, nor living up to that heritage more essential.

But the history of Eastern Europe and of Dolhinov goes far beyond that of the Jews alone. If it were larger, Dolhinov's story would be a tale of three cities, including the Poles and Byelorussians. The idea that Jews were "outsiders" in Dolhinov or purely a religious group would have been an absurdity. In this multinational, multicultural town: The Russians spoke Russian and were Russian Orthodox in religion. The Poles spoke Polish and were Catholic in religion. The Jews spoke Yiddish (literally "Jewish") and were Jewish in religion. The Jews were every bit as much of a nationality as were the other two, and indeed if Israel did not exist in the nineteenth century as a country, neither did Poland.

Unlike in places further West, the Jews had not yet explicitly made their ultimate choice of national identity. If Jews had become Russian, they would have been hated by the Poles, and after 1918 to be a Communist would be to choose Russia, no matter what the blah-blah. Yet relations were complex, there were friendships and respect and business relationships and also dislikes in a balance necessary to preserve the town, unless power relationships altered or outside forces intervened. Each group was a community unto itself and each put its own people first.

Yet there was nonetheless a close connection among these neighbors, as I learned in meeting the descendants of ethnic Polish Dolhinov. Through a group of Polish refugees and deportees from eastern Poland, I met Alexandra Weldon, whose mother had been born in Dolhinov, deported by the Soviets, and watched two of her sisters die of illness in Siberian exile before making it long after the war to Buffalo, New York.

Alexandra was also researching her family history and there was much for her, too, to discover. When I was in Dolhinov, I met an elderly Polish woman and gave her name to Alexandra, who contacted her only to discover:

"She went to school with my mother and even remembered her nickname, as well as many other family details. She is living today in one of the houses my family was taken from by the Soviets in 1941. To think that after almost 70 years, in a town which was almost depopulated from the deportations, extermination of Jews, and Polish resettlements to the west, that someone could still [recall] my grandfather. My mother was laughing today when she told me how peasant women would insist on paying my grandfather with eggs or chickens when he helped them with paperwork."

By contacting the priest in a nearby village, Bella Rubin, secretary of the Belarus Jewish community, found a woman in her 80s named Anastasia Sinitska. Bella asked Alexandra, "Do these names seem familiar to your mom?"

Familiar? Absolutely, as Anastasia Sinitska's husband was a cousin whom the family had not heard from for almost seven decades. Long-lost doesn't mean forever lost.

But that was only the beginning of our crossed history. Alexandra's uncle, Henry, a leader of the Polish underground in Dolhinov, had been arrested and thrown into jail by the Soviet secret police. One of his cellmates was also from Dolhinov, a Jew and a pharmacist. Unfortunately, the man had died during the forced march where Soviet agents had shot hundreds of Poles. On visiting one of my cousins on my mother's side, Asia, I suddenly realized from her description that the pharmacist was her father, and he actually had escaped, gone back to Dolhinov and helped rescue my grandfather's sister and her two little boys, at least temporarily.

The pieces fit together, far better than I'd ever dreamed possible. And this was despite the fact that I was very tough on myself, re-examining each piece of information to make sure that it was true, not just a good story.

When I had to condense everything I have written here into a single sentence to explain it to the modern-day children of Dolhinov, standing in the town's Jewish graveyard, it came out like this: If we don't respect those who came before how can we expect anyone to respect us?

CHAPTER TWO:
THE LONG ROAD TO SOMEWHERE

"One can write much more about our town, and if it does not have historical value, it is of interest to the descendants of our town, wherever they are, to see how life in our town evolved from generation to generation, and were it not for the fact that the Archevil One put an end to that life, who knows where this life would have reached." Memoir of Ivenets resident

"Military and Historical tourism," advertises the brochure for Belarus in somewhat fractured English. "The boring pages of textbooks come alive in this land, abundantly poured with blood of both the invaders and the defenders." That's perfectly true. It is amazing how much red blood has been absorbed by a country whose name means White Russia, though "innocent" or "pure" might be a better translation.

What else does Belarus have to offer nowadays to the foreign visitor? The pamphlet continues, "The history was settled so that practically entire Belarusian territory can be considered a thematic military and historical park. One cannot find a place in the country not affected by wars. Since time immemorial Belarus has been the arena of military actions; armades from different states used to cross the country in all directions."

That's for sure, too. This is about the westernmost end of the Tatar and Mongol invasions. The Vikings showed up to loot and pillage. And from then on it was Lithuanians and Russians, Swedes and Russians, Napoleon's French and Russians, Germans and Russians, Poles and Russians. And did I mention 1595 at Buinichy, where revolting peasants fought Cossacks?

As for today, Belarus doesn't have a great reputation. It is considered Europe's worst dictatorship, a backward country, a sort of fossil left over from Communism. In September 2009, the government even celebrated the Soviet invasion of Poland which led to the western half of Belarus being annexed by Stalin, though he was allied with Hitler at the time. When a European diplomat friend was assigned to work in a Belarus town, the expression on his face couldn't have been more stricken than if it had been central Congo or Sudan.

And the tales told about Belarus are enough to drive away a casual visitor, too. You are forced to buy costly and unnecessary medical insurance, ripped off for an expensive visa, and terrified with anecdotes that if you mistakenly take out too much currency, a concentration camp might be awaiting you.

When I explained my plan to the Belarussian ambassador to Israel, much of whose diplomatic career had been spent in Soviet service, even he'd never heard of Dolhinov, though his assistant knew where it was. The visas for a family of four cost about $275, the highest fee I've ever paid in decades of world travel.

Actually, I found the country to be fascinating though, of course, I don't live there But I used to, in a way, which is precisely why I'm going there now. The Russian tide had receded and left Belarus as an independent country for the first time in history. Still, an expert explained, "If Vladimir Putin," the real ruler of Russia, former president, and current prime minister, "decided to take over Belarus in the morning, it would be incorporated back into Russia by that evening."

The Belarus ambassador, who'd spent most of his career in Soviet service, had never even heard of Dolhinov, though his assistant had. Like a half-dozen other Central European countries—especially Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Austria, the Czech

Republic and Slovakia, Moldova and Ukraine—a Jewish minority played an important part of their country's history and is now just a ghost. In all these places, except perhaps the Czech Republic, the entire local nation had been victimized by both Germans and Russians, while much of it also played a large part in wiping out the Jews.

This creates a complex psychological mix of amnesia, apology, and defensiveness whose exact proportions depend on the country and the political views of the individual. Sometimes there is sincere sympathy, sometimes an attitude colored more by attentiveness to one's image and the possibility of profiting from genealogical tourism.

In Belarus, there are few assets other than the past to be exploited. At the same time, no place suffered more from World War Two in Europe than did the lands which now constitute that country. Belarus was the road by which the Germans entered the USSR and the route on which they were expelled. The war museum in Minsk is probably the biggest in proportion to the city of anywhere in the world.

The situation is further complicated by the amorphous nature of any Byelorussian identity. Originally a group of tribes a thousand years ago, the Byelorussians absorbed a blend of Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian culture. Their language was a dialect of Russian—more different than people think but still a sort of sub-language--and has been largely wiped out in favor of the more powerful tongue. There was never much of a nationalist movement, though what there was eagerly collaborated with the Nazis.

There is, then, little or nothing distinctive about Byelorussian people or culture. Ironically, one of its main unique factors was the exceptionally high proportion of Jews among the overall population before World War Two. Another was that the lack of a strong local nationalism, at least before the Germans came in 1941, also reduced the level of antisemitism.

A third factor is the relative popularity of both Communism and the Russians there. Byelorussian citizens of Poland, in the western half of what is now Belarus, were at worst indifferent and at most enthusiastic about the three Soviet invasions, in 1922, 1939 and 1944. Thus, while Jews might be hated for religious and economic reasons, two additional elements of antagonism—national conflicts and the hatred of Jews as Communists—was not a factor there. Ironically, it was under the post-war Soviet regime, when Byelorussians could finally take the best jobs, formerly held by Poles or Jews, or newly created by the development process, did antisemitism reach its peak.

I'm prepared for the worst type of dictatorship—like the ones I've seen, for example, in Cuba, East Germany, China in the old days, Syria, and Algeria. Once while experiencing a particularly bad bit of bureaucracy in Algeria, I remarked quietly to a fellow journalist—but hopefully not fellow traveler—standing next to me, "It's one thing to model yourself on a Communist country but why did they pick Albania?"

Actually, though, Minsk is a beautiful city, at least the downtown area, shining with white marble buildings that looked as if they'd been there for well over a century. In fact, the city was leveled during the war and all of these are reconstructions. True, the place has a bit of the look of a stage setting, the streets and sidewalks fuller with cars or people but rather empty, too, as they must have been in Soviet times. There are few stores—downtown Moscow looks like Manhattan in comparison—but also less disfiguring advertising.

The building that makes the most lasting impact on me is a large white structure on the north side of a square. Now a school, it was once the Soviet secret police headquarters, then the SS headquarters, and then again the Soviet one. It was a building said to have the best view in

the city because from it--there was a time when telling this joke required tremendous courage: "You could see all the way to Siberia."

In a place like Vilnius, Lithuania, or Riga, Latvia, where the horrendous sufferings of the people at Soviet hands are highlighted, such a building would be a museum of Soviet atrocities. In the Vilnius building, which is a museum of the Lithuanian Holocaust, you can go to the basement and see, looking down through the clear plastic floor, the bones of Stalin's victims executed there and the bullets used to kill them. In Belarus, though, an unkind word is never spoken of the Communist period, a sharp contrast to other ex-Soviet republics.

Daŭhinava, as it was written in Latin, also known as Dolhinów, Daŭhinaŭ, Daŭhinava, Даўгінаў, Даўгінава, Даўгінова, Даўгынава, Долгиново, Dauhinava, Dolginovo, Dalhinev, Dolguinovo, Dolhinev, Dolginowo, Dolhinow, Dahlinav, Dauhinau, and Dolhinowo was for 500 years a small town but is today a small village, 50 miles north of Minsk and about 80 miles east of Vilnius.

It's a simple two-lane road like that you'd find going up and down amidst American farmland. What's different are the trees, smaller, standing apart a bit more, with lots of white birches. There are glimpses of lakes and marshy ground. There isn't much other traffic. What's important about this road is not its breadth but its route, threading between the water-logged lands that make this area one of Europe's most inaccessible. Dolhinov was a place you had to go through. But now with many other roads and railroads and air routes it is even more of a backwater among the swamp waters.

Yet while Dolhinov has become much further from civilization, it is actually much faster to get there, forty-five or fifty minutes by vehicle, even if only an old red Volkswagen van. This is no longer the way to Minsk or to Moscow but merely to a string of sick, if not actually dying, small agricultural towns and peasant villages. It has gone from being the breadbasket of Russia or Poland to being the Appalachia of a country already poor and less developed. This is Europe's Third World.

We stop along the way at a rundown store where the smell of animal manure even stronger than it should be in a place like this, a sign of poor sanitation more than the presence of cows. Then, as we enter town, we ask directions of the first man we see. He wears baggy grey pants, no jacket against the cold, and is pulling on a spindly cigarette. His face is pockmarked and covered with cuts and bruises, a classical alcoholic, a casualty of the long war between East European peasant and vodka.

When I had met a 92-year-old Dolhinov man who'd lived there all his life, he remarked to me, "You look good. You must have lived in more fortunate circumstances." I should add that I encountered him vigorously chopping wood behind his house and life had preserved him well enough that he seemed capable of running rings around someone half his age. Still, the point was made.

But the houses, they are simply charming, brightly painted in green, purple, or light blue, as if the rustic characters of fairy tales had moved up in the world of their magic villages. Locals and city people may think it a disgrace that people still live in old one-story wooden cottages rather than more modern (and admittedly better insulated) but incredibly ugly two-story brick or concrete buildings. Yet while the interiors are like old two-room apartments, outside each home is immaculate, lovingly maintained and painted in pastel colors, with contrasting window shutters. This is the other side of the peasant life for those not completely demoralized, devotion to the few things one does own.

The roads are now a single lane, and no cars are parked along it because few of the local people own one. We pull up in front of the mayor's office, a shanty across a narrow lane from the gold-gilt-laden Russian Orthodox church. An old home-made cart, possibly old enough to have been made by one of my ancestors, creaks by pulled by a horse, probably the descendant of one sold by my great-uncle. Two worn-looking old men set on the bench. And the cargo is, of course, potatoes.

As traditional as that crop is the smell in the air, wood smoke, thick and stifling but also comforting. Potatoes and wood, two things—along with apples—the area has in abundance. Next to the building is parked the first—and the last—local car I see. It's an old Volkswagen bug painted in elaborate military camouflage, which turns out to be the official town vehicle.

Inside, it is rundown with a tiny waiting room and small offices for the mayor and his assistant straight back from the entrance. On the left though is a closed door and in a quick tour the mayor opens it to display the unexpected: a huge and opulent wedding hall, a leftover from the Soviet days when people were discouraged from church weddings by the Communist regime. The podium, not altar of course, is pink like a wedding cake. On it is a fancy quill pen, for signing the marriage documents, and behind it is the emblem of Belarus. The walls are lined with plastic flowers.

Anatoly Krasnevich, the 43-year-old mayor is clad informally in a sweater, a bearlike, genial, seemingly energetic man. At first, he'd insisted that he was too busy to meet me, working on some road improvement plan mandated by the central government, but he relented. It would require a strong effort to dislike him. His assistant is a kind, buxom woman perhaps in her 30s who is obviously an ethnic Pole, a sign that there is no discrimination in modern Belarus along those lines.

He is an electrician by profession, an ethnic Russian whose family came after the war, and not even from Dolhinov. He makes a joke about the country's dictator, whose face stares out over his shoulder in a photo behind his desk. Belarus's government today seems more intent on keeping power and making profits rather than ideological conformity through intimidation.

"You are my guest, in spite of the fact that you lived here," he says in Russian. I find the translation, which might be a little off, intriguing. I, of course, never lived there directly but the welcome applies in more metaphysical terms, doesn't it?

"The destruction of the Jews," he tells me, "was the destruction of the town." And that's true. From a lively place of more than 4000 people in 1939, it has gone to around 1200 today, a village. Those who can leave do, usually as construction workers in other countries or Minsk.

We go into the small reception room where a table is set simply for lunch, which we hadn't expected. Galina Tupitzina, principal of the high school joins us, leaning heavily on a cane. She's an ethnic Russian whose family came to Dolhinov after the war, her father was a teacher sent to Russianize the Byelorussians, a continuation in Communist form of the old Czarist policy.

It's an ironic situation, since the USSR had seized the land from Poland, illegally annexed it, massacred Polish war prisoners, deported Polish civilians and sent them to concentration camps, and then brought in ethnic Russian settlers. This is far more than Israel ever did in the territories captured in 1967, and it was responding to threats against its very existence.

The surviving Polish refugees couldn't even get anyone interested in hearing their story. Yet Soviet aggression had been accepted by the world, another reminder—if one were to be

needed—that supposed law and morality is merely a convenience indulged in by most when power is not a consideration.

Tupitzina wears a blue and red flannel coat against the cold. She'd gone to school with Leon in the 1950s there, lived across the street in fact, and he regards her as a special, reliable friend, which is why he sent her money to care for the graveyard. She's the only one in town who knows any English, and probably any foreign language at all except for the ethnic Poles.

Sitting down, we then look at the lunch laid out. In the center of the table sits a plate piled high with ham sandwiches. It's been too long since the Jews left. In their good intentions to be hospitable, they just don't remember that pork is the main culinary boundary between the communities. The situation makes me sad, showing just how far the ghostly presence has faded.

Tupitzina reads the shock, horror, and perhaps trace of amusement on our faces and waves her hand as if magically to make the food disappear. Of course, their intentions were good and

Without further ado, Tupitzina echoes the mayor, "Dolginov is dying," she says. Civic boosterism has not yet come to this place.

This decline is most visible in what might be called downtown Dolhinov is a small square with buildings on two sides—the other two must have been burned down during a partisan raid during the war and never rebuilt. There is a small post office; a grocery with a little bread; and a bigger general store with work boots, cheap carpets, plastic plants, and a disproportionate amount of funeral supplies, a symbol of the town's moribund state. There's an abacus instead of a cash register,

In the store, I find the perfect hat, having always wanted one of those cadet-type caps so often seen in pictures of Russia a century ago. But the storekeeper, horrified when I try it on, rushes over: "That's for dead people," she says in Russian. It did seem to have a relatively flimsy construction but I'd attributed that to local quality control. To make her happy I take it off but regret not buying it as a souvenir.

It was on this spot, as photos from the 1930s show, that crowded Jewish shops with large signs proclaimed their wares in Yiddish, along with some Polish. How often my ancestors must have walked up this sidewalk, though now even the second side of the square has ramshackle houses, replacing the vanished stores, with a goat tethered in the back. In some ways, the neighborhood could provide a set for a B-movie about life after a nuclear holocaust. Indeed, there was a Holocaust here, albeit of a different kind with far more conventional weapons.

A few minutes by car is the eastern end of town, which is precisely where it was a half-century earlier, not only because of the place's stagnation but also due to the stagnant swamps that block the way. At the foot of the conical hill is a memorial marking the place where the hundreds of victims were buried in a mass grave, buried by survivors some of whom I know. I stare down at the soil beneath which lies perhaps 2500 people, many of them related to me. Do they sense my presence? What does it mean to stand on this spot, any sense of mystical bond or special knowledge? It is too overwhelming for such a signal to get through.

In that dreaded year 1942, about 85 percent of everyone related to me in the world was murdered, in Dolhinov and in Slovakia. I passed most of my time on earth without knowing even one of their names or the names of even one of these places. William Shakespeare had written, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!" Doesn't that apply in equal measure to great-grandchildren, nieces, or nephews, to those charged by their happier fate to be guardians of memory and respect?

Above it is a steep conical hill where the post-1920 Jewish cemetery is located. The previous one is gone, buried underneath a street, Leon says. People build graveyards for eternity but they generally don't seem to last more than a century, such is the limit of human memory or concern about the past.

.Like most people, I have an avoidance sense toward cemeteries: too many sad memories of the past; too many realistic expectations about the future. But when I get to the top of the hill and push through the gate with the Star of David on it, a terrible shock comes from something else. The place is completely overgrown and neglected. Despite the money paid through the school principal it is clear that there's been no clean-up for a long time. New trees are growing in, the scrub grass is very high; markers have been edited by the fingers of lichen, pushed over, or completely covered by vegetation. There's a profusion of mushrooms and wild onions.

The issue isn't just one of the place's even more mournful aspect, of disrespect shown to those I'd come to respect and forgetfulness of those I'd come to remember. No, it was also an act of bad faith. The relations among national groups in this part of the world had been complex. Jews, Poles, and Byelorussians had co-existed—often with Russian rulers—in peace most of the time. But there had been more than enough wars. Antisemitism was one side of the coin but there had been plenty of positive relationships as well.

It is possible to focus on the antagonisms, but that is not wholly accurate. Some neighbors helped Jews escape being murdered, others gleefully turned them in. In pre-war Poland, antisemitism was not so much a universal but an issue over which there was a struggle among Poles themselves. Yet it is also easy, especially for Jews among whom assimilation has become a skill set so inbuilt as to be unconscious, to sentimentalize.

No other group so passionately wants to believe in the brotherhood of man, the dissolution of difference. An American sociologist once told me that when he does surveys on personal identity, if a college student answers, "What does it matter" or something along the lines of, "I'm a citizen of the world," that person is invariably Jewish.

This kind of thinking is the Jewish political disease, a key element in their political tilt—often disastrously—to the left, like those Jews of Dolhinov who became Communists only to discover that the Polish masses hated them for doing so and the Soviet rulers wanted to destroy their people, and often themselves personally and physically. Far from a brave new world of universalism, the regime had the same goal as its Czarist predecessor: to transform them into Russians.

Yet the breaking of faith represented by this overgrown cemetery reminds us of the truth that so much of modern officially approved culture tries to deny: You can ultimately, only depend—at best--on those with whom you have something profound in common: family, co-religionists, nation, country, in ever-larger concentric circles, like gravity the forces that bind becoming weaker over distance.

We press through across the width of the cemetery, about 12 rows of graves, in lines of perhaps 50, stretching until hidden by trees and undergrowth. There is a skill to walking in cemeteries, especially older ones, where the ground is so undermined by digging and decay that it threatens to cave in, with horrible results.

But Tupitzina had promised to send the students to help in the clean-up, which was either a courtesy or an attempt to salvage her subsidy. Slowly dots appeared on the horizon. The first students come, cutting across a field toward the back gate, several on bicycles. The older boys

looked, or tried to look, tough in black jackets and stocking-hats. Girls gossiped and giggled, ponytails swinging.

About nine to fifteen years old, they are wearing thin jackets and sweaters, though many have international brand names and sport shoes, close to being indistinguishable from American kids of that age. Very Slavic in appearance, they have light hair, high cheekbones; altogether a good-looking and healthy group of children. They might not have luxuries but fresh food and outdoor exercise are more conducive to well-being.

It's a complex moment. I'm going to have to make a speech to explain what I'm doing here to these kids, to make a lasting impression on them. But realistically, of course, they are just viewing this field trip to clean the cemetery as a lark, a chance to get out from under the teachers' feet and the classrooms' walls. Also, anything I say will be translated into Russian so the meaning on arrival in their ears would predictably quite different from the meaning on departure from my lips.

Then, too, among them there are the grandchildren of Byelorussians who were Nazi collaborators and of anti-Nazi partisans alike—and none of them knows anything about that personal past of their own—as well as post-war ethnic Russian arrivals.

So here's what I remember saying, with some conscious sugar-coating: "For 500 years our families lived together and saw each other every day. The relations among our people were good. Wherever we go we remember that we came from Dolginov. We hope that you remember us as part of our town. We represent hundreds of Jews who lived here or whose families lived here. We ask you to remember people who were part of the town. We feel very close to you as friends."

Then we set off to clear the cemetery, to clean the headstones and to read them if possible. The children grab shovels, drag out brush, they pass like a whirlwind of enthusiastic effort. They are kids used to working. For them, it becomes a game, a challenge, as my children instinctively understand. The teachers scream at the students to work harder, while doing nothing themselves. Our guide says to my daughter not to dirty her hands, "Let them do it," with that strong sense of social snobbery, class privilege, and disdain for manual labor that seems to thrive so strongly under Communist regimes .

My son, Daniel, nine years old and wearing his prized Sherlock Holmes deerstalker hat, purchased on Baker Street in London, was surrounded by peers speaking to him in Russian, despite his incomprehension. One bolder lad decided to try out his English: "Do you want to eat a table?" he asked seriously.

Here's how my then 14-year-old daughter, Gabriella, described the experience:

The tombstones protruded from the ground like jagged teeth, barely differentiated from rocks. Some were broken into two cold pieces, others slowly deteriorating, ivy growing thickly over them. You could almost hear them cracking. Spindly trees towered overhead with large wigs of leaves, soon to spiral down, showing splices of sky from between the branches.

"Found one!" Called Daniel. He waved his arms so fast they looked like multiple arms, a Hindu goddess. "One, two, three," the headstone was heaved up and turned over. What remained was an empty, rectangular, frowning, hole, and a dirty hunk of rock. We rubbed the soot off the rock and I scrutinized the engraved letters.

"The pious woman, Debra, daughter of…..Shlomo? Died on the fifteenth of the Hebrew month, Av,'' I ran my fingers across the carved Menorah at the top.

The kids pulled out clumps of weeds, yanking nature's wild hair from the ground, gathering armfuls of leaves and dropping them in a pile outside the gate. I scrubbed with dry fingernails at moss creeping over a forgotten name.

Some of the children began clawing wildly at the naked dirt. I bent my knees, digging along with them. One of the boys nudged me, pointing to a sliver of rock jutting from the ground. I dug my fingers under the stone to lift it with all my might. Others joined in the effort, grinning and grunting. They were looking at me patiently, as if asking me to lead them. I felt a fluttering feeling in my tummy, the wind scraped against my skin, and slowly, together, panting; we heaved up the gravestone and turned it over.

Surprisingly the dirt had sunken into the Hebrew letters, making them readable. More kids began to clean the tombstone together, caressing the old letters and wiping away years of dirt and abandonment with a single sweep.

Silently, the youngsters gazed at me, expectantly. *They want to know who this is as much as I do*, I thought. I read the person's name: Josef son of Tzvi who passed away in 1900. The words curled out of my mouth in swirls. Bella translated and the children stared wide-eyed at the pile of earth which was once a living and breathing human being. Joseph was Jewish and from an era that these children couldn't comprehend. He lived before them in the same town as they now lived. Maybe one of these children's great-grandfathers had known him.

It was as if they had discovered him, like a child discovers a new and mysterious plant in the garden, one that he has never noticed before. It was as if this person had been reborn. We sat in a circle, Jews and non-Jews, happy and laughing, feeling deeply attached, in a graveyard of forgotten people, now remembered.

And, of course, just as I expected and with full melodrama—life is like that much more than we expect—the last grave of all we find that day is that of my great-grandfather. It's surprisingly elegant compared to the others and in a position of honor, near the front gate. So around it, we gathered together again and I made a closing speech, trying to put everything I felt and wanted to say into the fewest and clearest words:

"If we want other people to respect us then we need to respect those who came before. You've done a good deed before God and before man and I thank you from my heart."

Against my advice, more money is turned over to the school and more promises are made. A year later when another descendant visits Dolhinov, he angrily reports that the graveyard looks untouched, even more overgrown than when I was there.

After an overnight old-style European train ride in a sleeper, we arrive in Vilnius, the destination for centuries of the Jewish merchants of Dolhinov on their wagons. I also came to like the city and its people but wondered when glimpsing those of an appropriate age whether they had once been in Dolhinov in German uniform.

In the hotel lobby is a guide entitled "Exploring Vilna." In the historical section there are three paragraphs or so on the very real crimes of the Soviets and KGB against during the war against the (Christian) Lithuanians. The Nazis are not mentioned at all. This indicates a certain problem of historical narrative. There is no doubt that the Soviets treated the country terribly, executing hundreds and deporting tens of thousands. The Germans were there for only three the

Soviets for well over forty years. The Lithuanians are entitled to turn the old KGB headquarters building into the Museum of the Lithuanian Holocaust.

But that was not the only Holocaust in Lithuania. Many Lithuanians are trying to cope honestly with this complex history; others aren't. One of the main reasons that Jews were hated in Lithuania was that they were—and this was a major theme of Nazi propaganda, too—identified as Communists. In fact, though, most Jews had tried to prove they were Lithuanian patriots. Seven were in the first independent Lithuanian parliament, several dozen died fighting for the country's freedom during World War One, and so on.

During a tour of Vilna, full of the genuinely inspiring stories of the resistance to Communist rule, we're standing in front of a brick wall with a huge antisemitic graffiti. It was in Lithuanian but I could easily read it. And during the time we spent standing, the Lithuanian Jewish guide talked about various things and pointed at buildings but never acknowledged its presence.

It would be silly to use such things to condemn an entire country for its antisemites just as to point to individual Jewish Communists doesn't prove Jews are treacherous or disloyal. Nor does it make the idea of nationalism invalid.

But the reality of this history, the typicality of these conflicts, should be understood.

My grandparents on my father's side came from Dolhinov, in an area where the Russians and Poles fought endlessly. The Russians oppressed the Poles until 1918. Then the Poles oppressed the Russians until 1939. Then the Russians oppressed the Poles until 1941. Then the Germans oppressed both until 1944. then the Soviets chased out the Poles in 1944 in a population exchange or ethnic cleansing take your pick. And who knows what's going on today.

On my mother's side, her grandfather came from South Prussia where the Germans oppressed the Poles from 1780 through 1918. Then the Poles oppressed the Germans until 1939. Then the Germans murdered the Poles until 1945. Then the Poles threw out all the Germans.

And my mother's grandmother came from Austria-Hungary where German-speakers ruled over Slovaks, Czechs, Hungarians, and others. In 1918, Czechoslovakia was formed. The Slovaks, ethnic Germans, and many of the Hungarian minority supported the Nazis. After 1945, all the Germans and most of the Hungarians were deported. The town of Magyar (Hungary) Brod became Uhersky Brod. Finally, dissatisfied at playing second fiddle, the Slovaks split off from what became the Czech Republic.

Europe's history has shown—and many doubt that the future will be different—the real difficulty of maintaining multiculturalism.

Amidst this complex of other people's battles, the Jews historically had difficult decisions to make. Should they:

Stay traditional and mind their own business but then face traditional antisemitism in turn?

Become Zionists and leave?

Emigrate anywhere possible, which usually meant North America?

Be Bundists and seek their own share of the power, thus potentially antagonizing the local majority group?

Assimilate? But then the problem was: assimilate to whom?

Turn revolutionary as Communists and thus intensify antisemitic persecution if they lost and both destroy their own community and intensify antisemitism if they won?

These were not easy choices.

In South Prussia they tried to speak German and be good Germans so the Poles hated them and the Germans didn't accept them.

In Austria-Hungary they tried to be German-speakers (loyal subjects of the monarchy) and the Czechs (who have just about the best record of all these groups though) and the Slovaks hated them. Some tried to be good Hungarians but that didn't make the Hungarians love them.

In Russia they tried to be good Russians (which made the Poles and Ukranians hate them) or to change Russia (which made a lot of the Russians hate them).

Ultimately, it was a no-win situation. Zionism or emigration or both made the most sense. And because of my ancestors' decisions in this regard, they lived, they prospered, I exist.

As for their attitude to the "Old Country" it ranged from nostalgia, through deliberate amnesia, to resentment. Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak Ruderman, himself born in Dolhinov and who came to head the yeshiva of Cleveland in the land of Ohio, suggested the proper Jewish attitude on this matter. In analyzing one section of the Bible, he recalled how the deity told Moses that Aaron, and not himself, should strike the Nile River with his staff.

Why? Ruderman explains,

"Because the Nile protected Moses when he was cast into the river; it was not to be smitten by his hand. In this manner, the Torah teaches us how deeply we must feel gratitude, not only to human beings who help us but even to inanimate objects such as water and sand. Moshe is commanded to take vengeance on the nation of Midyan but cannot participate himself because he lived there for many years and felt gratitude for his former homeland."

If one believes, than that type of argument is called religious. If one doesn't, it is still equally valid in the real of logical, moral, and philosophical. Thus, too, it is true with the transformation of past into present. One should feel gratitude toward one's former temporal homeland and those who inhabited it.

Taking this journey to understand those people and decisions has allowed me to meet several hundred people, living and dead, I'd otherwise never have known; and to be to a dozen places I'd otherwise never have seen.

How could one possibly imagine how my ancestors and the other people of a little isolated town like Dolhinov lived? At first, this appears a hopeless task, a great unknown and a few vague shreds based only on a tiny number surviving witnesses whose memories extend back to the 1930s. Yet it is amazing how much evidence remains, in some ways organized on the Internet though much of it in the most obscure references and in dusty archives.

Life is basically pretty simple. People wake up, eat breakfast, pray, do some sort of labor, eat lunch, labor more, pray more, eat dinner, deal with family or friends, and go to sleep, finding time for some reading and study whenever possible. Babies are born, children are educated, marriages made, children parented, life comes to an end. We make a great deal of the details and are fascinated not only by variations in them as well as to the overall pattern. That's what makes for travel, anthropology, dining out. When that pursuit relates to that far-off country from which traveler never returns—the land of the dead—we call it history.

There's more around of it than you may think. Documents signed by my ancestors in the 1880s patiently have waited for me to come and visit them, as empires rose and fell, as dust drifted downward like miniscule snow drifts. The scattered evidence extends to the ends of the

world, over thousands of miles in extent about a place one could walk across in twenty minutes. Often, today, this bureaucratic data which is now gold to be mined is brought together by electronic magic, unimaginable to those living in a time when few travelled further away from their homes than an automobile can now take you in a half hour and the most advanced technology was the well bucket and kerosene lamp. The number of languages required to bring home all of these scattered bits is awesome. The list eventually includes Byelorussian, English, French, German, Hebrew, Latin, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, Swedish, and Yiddish.

And yet, like pieces of a puzzle—a puzzle ultimately as large as the earth itself—to be fit together by a combination of ingenuity and what the ancestors called sitzfleisch, the ability to sit and work patiently to the point of exhaustion and beyond.

Too much has been lost but far more has been preserved than we dare dream. So within two years of having never heard the word Dolhinov, I know more about it than anyone on earth. And while the smallest details might appear only to a tiny number of people, with a few changes for other people of east central Europe—and somewhat larger adjustments for others—it is a story that applies to just about everyone, since even the most sophisticated resident of New York, London, Tokyo, or Cairo with very few exceptions, arises from a village or tiny town dweller not so long ago.

On page 416 of the memorial book to Dolhinov, Yitzhak Levi Koton stares out with a guileless expression that belies what he'd experienced by 1945. He is in Red Army uniform, having been transferred from the partisans to a regular unit after the Soviets captured Belarus. I glance between the 20-year-old boy in the book on my lap and the 85-year-old man sitting next to me, knowing they are one and the same body carried through two-thirds of a century. His left ear stands out at an angle just as in the photo. The distinct and quizzical eyebrows, which strangely only go halfway across above his eyes, are precisely the same.

Born on May 15, 1924 as Leib "Lova" Koton, he's the grandson of a famous rabbi. His father had gone to America for a while, didn't like it, and returned to Dolhinov. Koton became a member of the left-wing Zionist group Hashomer Hatzair. Clearly a powerful man, he is bearlike even at his advanced age, leaning most of the time on his cane,. He lives in a beautiful old-age home of marble and yellow awnings over balconies, built around some very well-kept gardens, a few steps from the Mediterranean Sea, about as far from Dolhinov in feel and geography as one can get.

On one wall of his small apartment are his fifteen wartime medals framed in an unobtrusive small case. The furniture is of light-colored wood and plenty of it, so favored by older Israelis from Eastern Europe. He shows me the interview he did for the Spielberg archives on just about the most modern flatscreen television I've ever seen. The young Israeli woman interviewing him is charmingly naïve about places like Dolhinov. She simly cannot believe that in Dolhinov all the members of Hashomer Hatzair, famed for its hardline secular stance, are religiously observant. nishment that Hashomer Hatzair members were religious.

As always in the homes of survivors who have lost so much of their families, family photos are prominently displayed. A small round clock ticks, proof that time isn't finished with us yet. I sit on a couch in a red flower pattern, eating the mandatory cheesecake, hearing stories of long ago about people I feel I've already met though they are long dead and never encountered by me in person.

And the eddies of history--your history--swirl around you whether you know it or not. Eilat Gordon Levitan, born in Israel but who had relatives in Dolhinov, has done more than

practically anyone to keep alive the memory of that town and other shtetls by creating Internet sites about them. Her mother has lived in Rehovot, Israel, in the same house for fifty years. One day, she proudly showed her neighbor, Chanik Golan (originally Goltz) the sites her daughter had created. Golan turned to her in astonishment and said, "My husband Yehezkel is from Dolhinov." He and his sister, Miriam Goltz-Deutsch survived the Holocaust and came to Israel.

Or perhaps there really is something to genetics. My great-grandmother's brother, named Nathan Hefetz, born in 1859, he had a son and a daughter. The daughter, Sarah, went to South Africa in 1936 while her brother, Mendel Hefetz, stayed in Dolhinov and perished in the Shoah. One of Sarah's grandsons became a professor in Tel Aviv University's Geophysics Department; one of Mendel's grandsons became a professor at Tel Aviv University's Geophysics Department. Neither Eyal Hefetz nor Dan Price knew each other until they met in the hallway, since their offices are only four doors apart.

Now I'm in the small but neat apartment of my fifth cousin, Asia Hefetz, the aunt of Eyal Hefetz, who I hadn't known existed even a few months earlier even though she has been around since 1930. She lives in a beautiful new high-rise retirement building. As she talks about tragedies, I am practically sobbing about people who died eight years before I was born. I'm embarrassed since after all, it is her father who was murdered. Yet she is the only one I've met who knows my great aunt, Chaya Doba Rubin, and what became of her.

We go through at the memorial book. On page 74 is a picture of her first-grade class at a Chanukah party in the late 1930s. One of her fellow students is Chaya Doba's son, my great uncle who was murdered in 1942, but she isn't sure which one and so I will never know what he looks like. So close, yet so far.

In the photo's center is the teacher, Ringa. I know Ringa already from the memoir of Esther Dokszycky, who was a young girl then. It's a day in May 1942, Esther's mother and sister have just been murdered and she sees a cousin, even younger than her, shot down before her eyes. Barely surviving herself, she is taken to one of the two remaining houses into which the last remaining Jews of Dolhinov, no more than 200 out of 4000, are being kept for a few last weeks of life.

She stumbles into a room where, to her astonishment, she is face to face with her former first-grade teacher from the Jewish school. The young woman is clutching her own four-year-old son, the last two survivors of their family. The teacher is equally astonished to see one of her students still in the land of the living. She hugs and kisses Esther, and with tears in her eyes, says to her: "Remember how I taught you about Israel. But we didn't have the opportunity to go there." A few days later, she and her little boy were murdered, too.

Yes, I've already met Ringa.

On this time machine journey, I'm travelling light but with an entire town inside my head.

CHAPTER THREE
IMAGINED LIVES

"To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour."
--William Blake, "To see a world"

Cold. Cold. Cold. But that's hardly surprising since it's the Ice Age. From Scandinavia, too far north for any human eye to see then, ice sheets move ever south and east, cutting down everything in their path, flattening hills, overturning trees. They rock and roll boulders, making them smoother and rounder as they journey onward. Ice carves lakes and swamps on its march, scoops up earth in one place and lays it down many miles later as a carpet of rich soil.

Flat. Flat. Flat. Up to a point, topography is destiny. That was, literally, the foundation on which Dolginov would stand: lakes, swamps, dense forests, rich farmland, but also a path--a long, narrow corridor of dry, firm land-- among ice-dug valleys filled with water. A natural crossroads.

Oh, and one more thing. The glaciers left behind a very impressive boulder, tall as a woman and a yard wide. Two hundred thousand years later, a Lithuanian tribesman drifting into that harsh but promising land looks at this rock and notes the resemblance. To a pagan eye, it seems magical. A vague figure is carved into it at some time between 1100 and 1300: mortal woman or female goddess.

The rock sculpture is a prayer to promote the fertility of people, animals, and crops. After the people become Christian, around 1400, the carved stone is reinterpreted as a cross, ensuring God's favor on that place. Fertility, protection, prosperity, that holy trinity works for a long time. But in the end, the magic wears away. In the supposed Age of Reason, the boulder is carted off to the Academy of Science's Institute of Geology in Minsk. Life is frozen into history; passionate belief becomes museum exhibit.

It was a good location for a town, convenient to Minsk to the south, Vilna in the northwest, and Moscow to the northeast. The main road of the kingdom runs through it for merchants and armies, the way going dry and easy between swamps, across the bridge over the thirty-foot-wide Sarchista river on the town's eastern edge. Clean, sweet drinking water can be heaved up from wells. Dolhinov was in the middle of nowhere but on the route to many somewheres. In 1495, when Princess Helena, daughter of Ivan III, grand duke of Moscow, travels to Vilna to marry Prince Alexander Jagiellon of Lithuania and seal the peace between their two domains, both battling Muslim invaders, what other way would she possibly want to go?

The forest was plentiful, pines, spruce, and birch closer together yet thinner in girth than in North American woods. Gleaming silvery-white bark of the birches make the woods themselves seem magical, providing that beauty so beloved by Russian poets. For more earthly needs, the forests provided plentiful firewood and cheap construction material. Wheat grew well in spring, snow grew deep in winter. Not the most hospitable of places by any means, but before the industrial age it supplied anything one could need.

From far-off Asia, the very frontier of China come Mongol horsemen to slice and dice the Slavic and Baltic tribes in the twelfth and thirteen centuries. Out of the debris rose Lithuania and Poland, two kingdoms which joined fortunes in 1386 when fifteen-year-old Queen Jadwiga of the former married Grand Duke Jagiello of the latter. Their child was the Catholic kingdom of Lithuania-Poland, second only to France in the size of its population. The kingdom's high point came in the early 1600s when its armies briefly seized Moscow after Czar Ivan was so terrible as to murder his only son and heir.

Soon, however, the path was ever downward due to invasions by Muslim Tatars, Ukrainian revolts, endless wars, indefensible frontiers, and incredible internal conflict as spoiled-brat nobles pursued personal interests at the country's expense. The Lithuanian-Poles created a parliament whose unique and fatal feature was that even a single aristocratic member could veto any decision. Not surprisingly, paralysis ensued, and their Russian neighbors to the east used these self-inflicted wounds to grind them down, eventually, to nothing.

What of Dolhinov in all this? A continent, civilization, country, history is not all heroic men and powerful suprahuman forces. It's made of small people and places. Crossroads get walked on as well as walked through. That's its blessing and curse. And that's what first drew then doomed my ancestors.

In the 1100s the Russian principality of Polotsk arises to the east and brings the Russian Orthodox church to the area. But by the 1250s, the Lithuanians are pushing back from the west and control the crossroads. They bring many Polish and a few Tatar prisoners, after a victory over them in 1397, to the area as slaves. Seven hundred years later, there's still a street in Dolhinov named for the Tatars and rumors of them living in the town as leather workers persist. The strange thing, though, is that no name is ever recorded and no one has ever seen them. Probably--along with some of the other Poles, Russians, and Lithuanians--they were already absorbed into the mass of Christian serfs whose blending together became the Byelorussian people.

By 1440, the border between Lithuanian-Polish Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy is established in this area, which will remain a borderland ever after. Dolhinov is ruled by the Catholics and now has a name, derived from the Lithuanian word for many people, which later becomes the Byelorussian word for "long village" as it is compressed by the surrounding swamps and forests. The glacier-sculpted lakes are long and thin; so is the road; so is the town. Dolginov may have been a crossroads' grouping of small buildings earlier but it only became a town with the arrival of the Jews, including my ancestors.

It makes sense since the oldest communities of Jews in the Lithuanian-Polish kingdom was established in 1388. The Black Plague hit Germany in the 1340s. Jews, accused of spreading the disease, were expelled from city after city. An economic crash also ensued. Waves of persecution in the following decades included burnings at the stake for those refusing to convert to Christianity. The sole direct clue about where and why Jews around Dolhinov came to be there was a mural in a nearby Jewish house of worship portraying the synagogue at Worms, Germany, seized in a dragon's jaws.

Despite the flames and catastrophe pursuing them, those Jews of seemingly otherwise civilized Germany needed courage to move to an eastern frontier ravaged not long before by horsemen from the Asian steppes who raised pyramids of severed heads and razed cities to the ground. But Lithuanian nobles promised protection against their own peasants, other aristocrats, and not least important from persecution by the church.

And so my ancestors loaded up their wagons and headed east, excited at getting in on the ground floor of a promising new country, not realizing this decision would shape their descendants' fates for 500 years, until another cataclysm intervened.

Who issued that invite? Very likely it was Dolhinov's first owner, Jan Dovgird, Lithuanian noble and royal army commander. If Dovgird had used the later art of advertising, he might have issued posters proclaiming: "Uncle Jan wants Jews."

Dovgird was clearly a man of great abilities. He had been the one who arranged the murder of the previous Polish king, then the royal marriage which created the Lithuanian-Polish kingdom. As Shakespeare described similar circumstances in his fictional Denmark, "The funeral baked meats/Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." Dolhinov was part of his reward, a peaceful place for a bloody deed.

During 1453, the year mighty Byzantium fell to the Turks and the Roman Empire's last vestige vanished, Dolhinov passed to Duke Ivashka Monividovich, another favorite of the throne; then, in 1486 to his successor Duke Bogdan Andreyevich Sakowicz, a successful ambassador; and by 1525 to Bogdan's daughter, Alzhbet Bogdanona Sakowicz. In 1567, Dolhinov went to Yuri Aleksandrovich Hodkevich, whose brother was deputy army commander, and, when he died just two years later, to his wife, Yurieva.

In those days, the nobles owned towns and countryside alike. They received their estates from the king, who could give them to someone else in future, as payment for services rendered. They took the peasants' crops as rent and their unpaid labor to build manor houses and repair roads. In exchange, the aristocrats protected the serfs from other nobles. That is, unless the other nobles won and then became the new masters. The Middle Ages lasted long in this part of the world.

There were logical reasons why nobles in this region might have been indifferent to economic development or material progress. With so many holdings in different places, they had less personal interest or time to devote to any one of them. Since ownership was temporary, they had no stake in raising productivity. They simply took as much as they wanted—ignoring whether the countryside became impoverished--and ruled.

Even if they had been interested in improving their estates, who could they find to help them do so? The locals were peasants, priests, or warriors, knowing nothing about management, making things, or commerce.

There was, however, a solution: to hire the commercial and financial consultants of the day, the Jews. Having your own Jews was a guarantee for prosperity. They were among the few who could read and write. With connections and relatives throughout Europe, uninvolved in local disputes, they could trade far and wide. Being outside of the political system, barred from owning land or being aristocrats, and having no military power, they couldn't challenge you for power.

Today, the empire of Lithuania and Poland is long forgotten. But with a lucky break or two it might be a major player in today's world while Russia and Germany would be names known only to antiquarians. After all, that state once ruled a broad swath across the east end of Europe all the way from Lithuania on the Baltic to the Black Sea. In retrospect, one can find many reasons for that area's impoverishment to seem inevitable. Yet history is inevitable only after it happens. In those days the Lithuania-Polish kingdom was a contender to be Europe's leading power.

Alas, however, the economic boom of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries soon gave way to the cannon's boom. At the very moment when Eastern Europe looked like the place where Jews should boldly go where no Jews had been before, the area fell further and further behind. A cold climate and short growing season meant less of a food surplus to support more non-peasants. Competition among so many bickering nobles and quarreling kingdoms brought conflicts which flattened, burned down, and used up any wealth accumulated. War followed by rebellion, invasion succeeded by plague.

The first of these wars, as wars often do, created conditions for a relatively long peace. It was a war I'd never heard of, despite being a history professor, yet one my ancestors had seen first-hand. The Livonian War of 1558 to 1582 pitted Czar Ivan the Terrible's rising Russian state against Denmark, Sweden, Lithuania and Poland. These seemed uneven odds but Ivan was as tough as he was terrible. He demanded his own Baltic seaports and to be supreme in the north. What Ivan wanted, he usually got. Each time, these armies marched too and fro, they stirred up the dust in Dolhinov's streets.

Ivan himself swept through town during his initially successful 1563 campaign when he captured his enemy's capital, Vilna. So well was the war going that Ivan rejected peace proposals. Big mistake. His victories brought all his enemies together into an alliance against him.

Then everything went wrong for Russia in a virtually Biblical series of plagues: Tatars invaded and burned down Moscow, rains failed, deadly diseases spread. Ivan also now faced Stephen Batory, a rival as strategically brilliant and tactically ruthless as himself. Through Dolhinov, Batory, Poland's national hero, marched three times between 1579 and 1581 on his way to smash Russia.

Fortunately for Dolhinov, it was friendly territory, so he neither looted nor pillaged there. Not so the lands of Russia just up the road. When Batory's army took a city it massacred everyone. His cavalry looted and burned. In the end, Russia lost but the blood enmity endured between Russian and Pole. Dolhinov was on the border between them. When they were at peace, trade was good; when they were in conflict, it was first to suffer.

By 1622, Dolhinov passed to 22-year-old Janusz Kiszka, brand-new duke of Polotsk. He sold it a dozen years later, perhaps to raise money for a career that would end with his being the country's most powerful noble before his heirless death in 1653. The buyer was Iosif Rutskoy, who got it as a consolation prize. The 61-year-old priest had been leader in a royal experiment, the Uniate church, by which the Lithuania-Poland Catholics hoped to subvert Russian rule by pulling peasants out of the czar's Russian Orthodox Church.

The town's Trinity Uniate church is the place of worship for the elite. Wealthy local families bequest it no less than three bells, in 1667, 1669, and 1679. People speak in a mixture of Byelorussian and Polish. Yet the strategy failed. Rutskoy's patron, King Sigizmund III, died and his royal successor gave it up. Rutskoy had retired on his income from Dolhinov and himself passed on four years later. The distinction between Catholic and Orthodox would remain the boundary between the two Christian communities in Dolhinov and everywhere along the Russian-Polish borderland

Back in town was the previous ruler, the Kiszka family, through the former owner's nephew, Count Michael Drucki-Sokolinski of Vyalyachsk. Things were still tense along the border. Another Russo-Polish war took place between 1654 and 1657 during which Dolhinov was burned to the ground.

Dolhinov, the last Lithuanian-Polish outpost before Russia, became a trading center closely linked to the capital in Vilna. It was so important that the king assigned a noble, Sir D. Kostrovackis, to watch over the two cities' trade in the 1660s and 1670s. When he died, his brothers and widow took over.[1]

By this time, the Jewish community in Dolhinov included 485 people. Many worked for aristocratic landlords. Others were merchants dealing in potatoes, hops, flax, and oats from the fields, fruit from the orchards; hemp for fabricating rope and leather to Vilna and through the port of Danzig to places far away. During the wars with Russia, the Polish-Lithuanians had left the Jews alone, but the Russian Cossacks had persecuted them. And so a number of Jews converted temporarily to Christianity, 90 percent returning to their own religion after the danger was passed.

And so when the roads were passable, merchants set off in their swaying horse-drawn wagons on long journeys, stopping at nightfall in Jewish inns or on the road itself if they couldn't arrive before Sabbath began. Perhaps a lucky son would go along in preparation for the day when he took the reins.

Arriving in Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania it was called, is a magical experience. Fine buildings of stone lined the streets, gold lined the pockets and fur the coat linings of the city's rich merchants. Still, Vilna was not revered for wealth alone but for the brilliance of its rabbinical scholars, too.

Those from a dusty town of cramped wooden houses that could be crossed on foot in a few minutes must have felt timid, or perhaps they walked proud at being able to straddle these two worlds. What presents did they bring home for families, what tales did they tell when finally back at each journey's end, a trip whose survival could never be taken for granted due to weather, bandits, disease, and breakdowns along the way?

Back in Dolhinov, individuals walked the cycle of brit millah, bar mitzvah, marriage, and the birth of children. Communal life travelled from sunrise to sunset in the cycle of the holy year, from Sabbath to Sabbath, to and from the synagogue for prayer and study, to and from the mikvah for renewal. This was a life so similar to that lived by Jews elsewhere that they could step into another such community thousands of miles away or even in a different century with ease. After all, their bodies were in the cold northeast Europe of the Middle Ages, but their minds were in their homeland in ancient times, and their souls exalted in the world to come and future return to their homeland.

Few of the town's inhabitants ever went more than a day's travel in their lives, at least except for weddings. Many or most Jewish daughters of Dolhinov would wed men from nearby towns, marriages arranged through already existing family connections with those places.

The boys studied until they were around 13, a task parents thought the most important in their lives. The less studious or poorer would then be apprenticed to craftsmen or work with their fathers. Those with an aptitude for learning continued, perhaps going to a better yeshiva elsewhere. But sooner or later, except for the very few who became rabbis, they will work as merchants or storekeepers, continuing to learn part-time.

Education for the girls was far less developed though far higher than what existed elsewhere. They were to learn literacy in Yiddish and the laws they would have to fulfill as wives, mothers, and household managers. In storekeeper families, though, Jewish women were more likely to work than any other non-farming people in the world at that time. And they, too, would imbibe a great respect for learning, to be lavished on a yeshiva student who had dinner

with the family, sacrificing so their own sons could study, and urging their children to marry those of education.

It was true, no doubt, that Dolhinov was in many ways an isolated backwater. Yet it also had a front-row seat to history. When powerful states and rulers contended, the route to victory lay on Dolhinov's road. First had come terrible Ivan and his rival Batory in the 1670s and 1680s, then the Swedes in 1708, followed by Napoleon in 1812, Germans in 1916, battling Poles and Russians in 1920 and 1921, Soviets conquering Poland in 1939, Nazis invading Russia in 1941, and finally Soviets throwing out the Germans—and Poles, too, as it turned out--in 1944.

The second round between Russia's ambitious czars and their neighbors was fought by Czar Peter the Great, and Sweden's King Charles XII. If Ivan largely created Russia, Peter built it into a great European power. But Charles, an intellectual as well as a warrior, was no slouch either. These two monarchs were such modernizing giants that the French philosopher Voltaire rhapsodized about them as, "The most remarkable men to have appeared in over 2,000 years." Young Charles eschewed luxury and lived for war, glorying in taking on and defeating bigger armies, running to the hottest part of a battlefield to gamble his life. It isn't surprising he died at 36.

In 1697 he climbed onto Sweden's throne as a mere 15-year-old boy. Thinking this young man no match for their guile and experience, Denmark, Poland, Saxony, and Russia combined and came at him. He defeated them all while still a teenager.

But Czar Peter the Great was also a formidable character. In 1703 he founded Russia's new capital, St. Petersburg, and named it after himself. The twenty-six year-old Charles, however, was not easily impressed. He bragged that he'd capture Moscow then tell Russia his surrender terms. On New Year's Day 1708 he set forth with 45,000 men and 30,000 horses.

Just south of Dolhinov, he defeated the Russians. Peter ordered a retreat and a scorched-earth policy: all crops were destroyed; any peasant who sold food to the enemy would be hanged, the village where he lived burned to the ground. It was a strategy his successors would imitate when Napoleon and Hitler invaded Russia. Dolhinov was lucky that it was already behind Swedish lines, shielded from the czar's pyromania.

Onward went the Swedes until, by the end of July, they halted, out of food, to await their supply train and its accompanying army of reinforcements. Why was it taking so long to arrive? The 49-year-old General Adam Ludvig Lewenhaupt, old enough to be the king's father, was his best officer. But it wasn't easy to keep moving forward over truly terrible roads with so many unruly men, stubborn oxen, and crude carts.

The desperate king sent a trusted officer on a fast horse with a simple but urgent order for his general: Advance faster! The lieutenant rode 20 miles west to Belynichi, then the same distance southwest to the road junction at Berezino. He turned north through Borisov, Zembin, Pleschenitsi, another 40 miles. At every moment he peered down the road looking for a column of dust. Nothing! Weary, hot, nursing along his horse, his sky blue and sunflower yellow uniform stained with dust, for 20 miles more he turned north, and then, dodging the swamps followed the road west.

It was August 29, 1708. From the western end of Dolhinov, with its new wooden Catholic church and 150 houses, could be seen a dust column rising high into the air. The Jews must have compared it to the pillar of fire that guided their ancestors in Sinai. Did they flee in fear or did they watch in awe as 11,000 Swedes marched through the tiny town, 20 times more people than they'd ever seen assembled in their lives?

The Jews watched the line infantry in tricornered hats, dressed in the colors of the evening sky, carrying long guns such as they had never seen. Grenadiers in tall hats, Swedes already towering above the short townspeople; pikemen dwarfed by their spear-capped poles. The proud cavalry on fine mounts—did the horse-dealers appraise them favorably? Such finery of clothing and so many coats of many colors! Such masses of cattle and wagons! Such piles of supplies, like the migration across Sinai or the march of Pharoah's army! What Bible references did they use in talking about it, for years afterward no doubt, to fit it into their world?

But one thing they knew: this was a battle of king against king that had nothing to do with them. This was not a time of national patriotism on anyone's part, least of all Jews enjoined by God to stay out of such pointless quarrels. Fortunately, the Swedes are disciplined, even friendly, already loaded with all the food they need, no time for looting, and grateful to find sweet, clean water.

Suddenly, into the town from the east dashes in the lone rider on a lathered horse! Still more wonders to dazzle watching villagers. He talks to an officer, is conducted to the general, whose uniform is dazzling. The whispers expand outward among the troops in ripples until it perhaps reaches the Jewish onlookers watching along the road. A message from the king!

Lewenhaupt reads it. The order is clear. What does he think? I am doing the best that I can? Is he annoyed, fearful? What can he say? The general promises to be quick.

After a night's rest, the messenger leaps onto a fresh horse. With a hurried look back and a wave; he sinks in his spurs and gallops back in the opposite direction.

Charles was right to worriy. Two days later, just as the messenger is arriving back to report, the Russians attack in full force. Taking advantage of morning fog, they hit the Swedes hard for two hours. While Russian casualties are much higher, the skirmish shows they're learning how to fight better.

Yet Charles, still confident, continues to advance. Every day, the supply train must go further to catch up with him. Two weeks later it still hasn't found the king's troops. His army starves; winter is nigh. Tempted by a Ukrainian offer of alliance against the Russians, he turns south.

Every day, Lewenhaupt is left even further behind. On the morning of September 28, his luck runs out. As his column crosses a river at the village of Lesnaia, not far beyond where the king's messenger set out a month earlier, Peter's army finds the supply train. The Russians charge. Both sides are bloodied in the all-day battle, losing one-third of their men. As the sun sets, though, Lewenhaupt's men have had enough. They run for their lives, abandoning cannon, cattle, wagons, and food, but not the liquor. Lewnehaupt's army turns into a drunken mob as Russian soldiers seize the supplies and many prisoners. It's the first time Russians defeat Swedes, a historic turning point.

By the time the surviving, demoralized and starving, half of Lewenhaupt's force finally find their king on October 8 it's too late. Instead of being resupplied, the king has even more men to feed on what he has left. Meanwhile, the Russians crush the Ukrainian rebellion with great brutality, so there's no hope of help from there. Charles camps for the winter. His army whittled down by fighting and hunger he has only one-third of his soldiers left. Their powder is wet; morale is low. In the spring, he desperately besieges the rich city of Poltava, south of Moscow, where there's plenty of food and gunpowder. It's a case of conquer or die.

But the city doesn't fall. Instead, in June, Peter arrives with an army double the size of Charles's. Lewenhaupt wisely counsels retreat. Instead, typically, Charles, though wounded,

outnumbered, and lacking both artillery and gunpower decides, Viking style, to attack on July 8, 1709. The Swedes charge with fixed bayonets. Charles has to be carried into battle by his men. Just on the point of victory, confusion among the Swedes gives Peter a second chance. Charles's army is soundly defeated, thousands are taken prisoner.

It is the beginning of the end for Sweden's ambitions and the start of Russia's. The Swedes won't return to Dolhinov; the Russians will. For another 75 years, Dolhinov will remain in Lithuania-Poland but the Russian influence there grows stedily.

The town's basic pattern of life was set and would endure until the coming of the Nazis almost two and a half centuries later. Dolhinov would be a virtual sociological laboratory of three different nations' coexistence in independent interdependence, until outside forces would destroy them simultaneously during World War Two.

Most of residents are Jews. In the manor houses live Polish nobles. In the villages, Byelorussian peasants from Slavic tribes shaped by Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian influences, living barely above subsistence and almost entirely illiterate;. Each had their own religion, respectively Judaism, Catholicism, and Russian Orthodoxy. Each group had its own language, respectively Yiddish, Polish, and Byelorussian. There was little intermixing; no intermarriage. Yet there was, by and large—perhaps precisely because of that separation and the clear rules governing their lives--reasonably amiable coexistence.

No one would suggest that Byelorussians were merely a religious group who followed the Eastern Orthodox faith, or that Poles were just Catholics and not a national and ethnic community. The concept of Jews as merely members of a religion would arise from nineteenth-century assimilationist thought. In historic terms, no matter how widely accepted it is today, the idea is completely absurd.

Prosperity and peace was enhanced largely due to the relative enlightenment of the last noble owners of Dolhinov, the Kaminsky family. Their association with the town, began in the 1720s, would endure 200 years, and their estate remained intact another half-century more. The dynasty had good relations with Jews—my ancestors worked for them—and promoted the town's economic development.

The Jews would celebrate their good fortune in a special way. In the 1740s, an artist named Chaim ben Isaac Segal from nearby Slutzk is gaining a reputation after painting amazing murals for a synagogue in Mohilev. It's often claimed that Jews didn't develop painting because the commandment not to worship idols barred any representation of the human form. But Jewish use of decorative arts was common, albeit only for religious purposes (which was also largely true for Christians) and without picturing people.

Some citizens of Dolhinov heard about Segal's reputation and perhaps saw his work on visits elsewhere. Thinking their town also deserved the best, wealthy men hired him. He came to Dolhinov, stayed some weeks, and created a masterpiece for its oak-walled building.[2] There is a probably apocryphal story that his career was ended by a fatal fall off the ladder just as he was finishing. That was probably a way of claiming he could never equal the masterpiece he created there.

So respected was Segal that150 years later he would be the inspiration for the greatest of all Jewish painters. The young Marc Segal, a local boy but probably no relative. Marc was fascinated by Chaim's work that he made up the story that he was the old painter's grandson. And when he started painting adults gave him the compliment of telling him that he was just as

good. The fact that they had the same last name, however, can be easily overlooked since the young man spelled his name a bit differently, Chagall, Mark Chagall.

We can see a bit of the original Segal's work today due to what must be called a miracle in its own right. A Russian Jewish artist visiting Mohilev just before World War One, made a careful copy of some of those murals, a German Jewish magazine reproduced them in 1923, and the illustrations were discovered decades later by accident. Yet by such remarkably fortuitous windows on the pact we can vividly experience what the Jews of Dolhinov and other towns saw.

Remember, they had nothing else that visually took them beyond their immediate environment. There was no television, radio, periodicals, photography, other illustrations in books or on walls. That's why it is so very hard for us today to comprehend the incredible impact of paintings on even the most sophisticated circles of pre-modern people. All you had was your imagination, the most immediate reality around you, and the few sights offered on walls, canvas, or sculptures of a completely different world, from someone else's vision.

Even a first glance at the surviving copies of Segal's work cries out the name of Chagall and of magic realism. Painted in red and pearl, olive green and brown, they are primitive, or to use the more polite word, naïve, representations, yet of enormous power. And they have nothing in common with contemporary European painting.

The tablets of the Ten Commandments stand on a pedestal; lions hold shields, one of which carries the artist's name; zodiac signs circle up above. Jerusalem is imagined as a swirl of palaces and towers, centering on the Temple crowned by its roof. No people are depicted but the sky is alive with birds, whose flight seems to symbolize freedom and might have reminded viewers of the wings of eagles on which they would one day ride back to the Land of Israel.

There are two particularly interesting symbolic touches. One is a painting of Worms, Germany along with a dragon. The dragon is the symbol of Worms and the source of its name, being the place where Siegfried killed a dragon. The Mogilev Jews had been driven out of the city or decided they must leave. The Dolhinov Jews probably had a similar story.

The other is a three-headed eagle, a hybrid of the symbols for the Poles and Russians, a wonderful embodiment of the traditional Jewish management of politics, committing to none of the contending nations as either ally or enemy. It's also a prophetic theme, prefiguring the two great peoples and powers which would fight over Dolhinov, demanding the Jew's allegiance and punishing them for not extinguishing themselves in satisfying their nationalist appetites.

Eli Lisitsky, the artist who made the copies, was stunned to see these paintings, recalling, "It was equal to astonishment which I felt when I first visited Roman basilica, Gothic chapel, baroque church in Germany, France and Italy. It is like the children's bed with stitched bedspread, butterflies and birds where prince suddenly wakes up surrounded by splashes of sun. That's how we felt inside the synagogue."[3]

The way Lisitsky was so enraptured at Segal's work went beyond a detached critic's judgment. As a culturally assimilated Jew who'd accepted the notion that his people produced nothing of cultural or intellectual value, he was flabbergasted to find out differently. Having lost the sense of being an insider in his own culture, such people worked to elevate Jews by bringing them into the European (Christian) mainstream. This was the situation of Jews who were indeed outsiders, because they'd dwelt in their own house and were not fully able to live in someone else's.

Lisitsky was discovering that he did indeed have a house of his own and one well worth inhabiting. The Dolhinov Jews had never thought otherwise. They had lived in homes of their

own which provided all they needed, without obsessively staring out the windows, or trying to break or talk their way into their neighbors' dwellings.

The Jews of Dolhinov, of course, saw their murals daily. They knew nothing about great art, had nothing to which they could compare these pictures. But what was important for them was not the aesthetic but the spiritual-psychological aspect. They were living in a land of snow and birches, at the very edge of Europe, but their minds still dwelt in the land of Israel. Segal allowed their eyes to do so as well. There was no sharp break between their current existence and that of their ancestors many centuries before. No outsiders they. Their spirits flew through time and space as easily—perhaps more so given they were not so jaded and overwhelmed—than those living in the era of jet planes and Internet.

What later happened to Segal's work, however, sums up the destruction of that independent world and the tragedy of Europe's east generally. The Mohilev synagogue was closed down by the Soviet Communist authorities in a campaign to destroy religion. In 1938, they dismantled it and used the wood for building farm sheds, which they thought a more useful employment for the timber than as a house of prayer or cultural monument. Three years later, the Nazis burned the Dolhinov synagogue. Those were the hammer and anvil—Germany and Russia, fascism and Communism—that extinguished this world and almost all of its people.

But about the time Segal was happily, we hope, standing safely on his ladder and creating works that would indeed have an heir, the individual people of Dolhinov emerge for us by name. In 1765, a census was taken that shows 265 people, all Jews, living there. No one even knew such a document existed, but the conscientious archivist of modern Lithuania's state archives, Russian section, found it for me and meticulously translated it. Quietly, for 350 years, it had waited for someone to care enough to come and recall that such people once lived, prayed, loved, hoped, and cried on the face of this earth.

Appropriately, the list begins with the family of the rabbi, Norech son of Aron, his wife Feiga, and their daughters Nachanka and Ester. At first, these names sound strange to me. Only months' later do I realize why: while all are Yiddish, these are Polish not the Russian forms we are used to and which people adopted only after the Czars came to Dolhinov.

None of those in the list have family names, which came into use later, but by patronyms, their father's first names. Some are listed by occupations, which will soon become last names, whose variations you might even bear yourself: cyrulnik (Srolnik, barber), szklerz (Glazier, worker with windows), rzeznik (Resnick, cutter, of wood), szkolnik (Skolnik, rabbi's helper).[4]

By 1800, all the Dolhinov Jews gained last names. Perhaps this came with Russian rule, the new regime's demand for its new subjects to be easily identifiable. Ancestors on my father's side—and thus the name I bear--took Rubin, meaning ruby or red and also referring to Rubin, son of Jacob and Leah, father himself to an Israelite tribe.

There is, however, a simpler more likely origin of the name. Many Jewish men in the eighteenth century carried the first name Reuven, or Rubin in the vernacular. Their sons were ben Rubins; their daughters, bat Rubins. It would have been obvious for the offspring to shorten this to Rubin alone, and to keep it ever after.

Yet since all these children of men named Rubin throughout Jewish communities all over Europe were not related, that name itself does not signify a single family. In Dolhinov, though, all the Rubins—a point proven by DNA tests—are related, meaning they are descendants of a single couple in that town.

This family's founding patriarch was Gabriel, probably Gabriel ben Rubin, though he was never called Gabriel Rubin in his lifetime. He, my eight times great-grandfather, was born in the late 1600s and was dead by 1765, but his son Leib, born in 1735 just three years after George Washington, would call himself Leib ben Gabriel Rubin and, along with his wife Roda, they named their first son Gabriel. In 1765, Leib and Roda, Gabriel and his wife Basia, and two other married sons—Nosen and Rysia, Zelig and Bluma—all lived together in a small wooden house.

They would produce the largest extended family in Dolhinov. So valued was Gabriel's legacy that during the 18th century, about 40 percent of Rubin men were either named Gabriel or carried the patronym ben Gabriel--meaning they were his children or children of those named after him. On his successes the Rubin family flourished and thus I was born at all.

On my copy of the original census, the only one in existence, you can see my thumb prints from riffling back and forth, back and forth comparing those ancestors I know—because their lives or deaths were recorded in 1811 or after--to find the right combination of father and son, mother and father, to identify people. It is tedious and obsessive but the only way back to what my genes were doing at the moment the British General Edward Braddock and a militia officer named George Washington are marching off to a catastrophic ambush in the French and Indian war, past the spot where I would be growing up two centuries late.[5]

You might ask: How did I find them? The answer is a little genealogical detective work. In the beginning, all I knew about my great grandfather was that he was Haim Shimon Rubin, his name from the headstone of my grandfather's grave. According to the 1885 Russian tax records, dug out of the Minsk archives for me by a researcher who used to be in the KGB (and thus knew how to get things out of archives), Haim Shimon's father was Yankel. And according to the 1850 census of Dolhinov, preserved in Vilna and transcribed by the volunteers of the Jewish Gen organization, the only Yankel Rubin of that age was the son of Zalman Rubin who, the same census told me, was the son of Moshe Rubin who was the son of Zelig Rubin.

Thus, I knew Zelig Rubin had a son, Moshe, who lived from 1793 to 1845 and would be my four times great-grandfather. That meant by 1793 Zelig was at least 19 years old (18 plus about a year for pregnancy to result in a baby's birth). So Zelig was born no later than 1774 but, of course, could have been much older, especially since Moshe might not have been his first child. Could he be in the 1765 census?

There are only two Zeligs in town at that time. One is already adult, born before 1747. But I know that Zelig is still alive in 1818, and perhaps much later, which means this man would have been in his mid-70s, a life span uncommon in those days. It is not impossible he is my ancestor but it is unlikely.

But the other one was listed as a child and, what clinched him as the forebear is his name: Zelig ben Moshe, Zelig son of Moshe. That is extremely important because my Zelig named his son Moshe, and in those days naming a son after your grandfather (or a daughter after a grandmother) was very common. The odds are as close to 100 percent as possible that this is my ancestor.

The tale of the census is thus: my great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather was Josiel (Joseph) ben-Rubin, born around 1720. His sons, my six-times-great grandfather Mowsza (Moshe) and my six-times-great grandmother Merja (Maria, a name more common among Jews of that period than you'd expect) are living with his older brother, my six-times-great uncle Abram (Abraham), and his wife, my six-times-great aunt Chasia. Abram and Chasia have a son, Favish and a daughter Breyna.

The last member of the household in the list is Moshe's and Merja's son, my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, Zelig Rubin. Before I discovered that fact, Zelig was a funny-sounding Yiddish name--its Hebrew equivalent is Asher--made famous by Woody Allen in his film, "Zelig."

This reference is just right. Woody Allen's Zelig is an enigmatic figure who shows up at a remarkable number of historic events. He has no personal identity and that's just what Woody Allen—and huge numbers of people today, including Jews--thinks of as an archetypal Jew, someone who takes on other peoples' appearance, mannerisms, and speech in a chameleon-like way as a means of, at least, surviving and, at most, assimilating.

So set is this image that many people, even Jews, believe that this has always been so. But it hasn't. Just like the concept of the Jew as outsider it is a latter-day transference to the past. People like my grandfather to the seventh Josiel, and pretty much the eight following generations, did not adapt very much at all. They learned languages, altered trades, but always remained authentically themselves.

They had their own identity as individuals and as a people, were insiders of their own society. These Jews were not merely guests at other people's multicultural picnic. Despite pressure, oppression, and temptation, they had the courage of continuity. If there's anything that is the opposite of a chameleon, that's what they were.

What does this matter, you can ask? Well, there's no reason you should care about my ancestors but you should care about your own. First, they should be honored out of decency and duty. Most human beings seek at least that minimal form of immortality: to be remembered, to have someone care about them, to have their lives matter. If I owe this person, these people, a debt for everything I have, shouldn't I keep his memory alive?

A second motive is a reasonable self-interest. If I would like to have some value and to be remembered, if I would want my children and children's children to act as if my life mattered, should not I do that unto others as a role model for how people should behave?

Finally, there is self-knowledge. If this man was part of the process that produced me, if I carry some of his physical characteristics and even aspects of his personality—both biologically and through the collectivity of experience that shaped those who shaped me--shouldn't I know as much as possible about him and ponder the implications for me and myself?

Obviously, there are no portraits or photos, no memoirs or details. But the most minimal historic record can tell us a lot about people. Moshe and his family lived in the house of his brother, Abram. Probably, Abram was older and more successful. One can imagine both gratitude and deference, perhaps some resentment at this state of affairs.

But why is Abram the head of the household and was the family well-off or poor? An additional clue answers those questions. To discover such things we are at the mercy of some ancient census-taker being energetic and conscientious rather than lazy. If he took one minute more to record an additional fact, if his hand-writing was clear, such are the things that determine our knowledge or ignorance. Fortunately, the minor official that day took the trouble to write after their names the words, Karolina of Kaminsky. This is the name of the noble family for whom he—along with at least two other heads of Dolhinov Jewish households--worked, Duke (Karol) Kaminsky, from one of the greatest Polish noble families, whose his local estate was in the village of Kamin only three miles from Dolhinov.

And so now we can easily imagine what Gabriel, and Leib, and Gabriel did over several generations. They managed the estate of a great Polish nobleman, visiting his manor house to get

instructions, looking over accounts, buying everything needed, selling everything grown. This would have given them job security and a relatively high income. They could live well enough to ensure the survival of more children in better living conditions. Perhaps that was the secret of success for the founder of the Dolhinov Rubin family. Thanks then to the noble Kaminsky, as well as a thousand other instances of good and bad luck, coincidence and tragedy, I exist to write these words.

The ancestors of my grandmother's family were also starting up at the same time, living probably less than 200 yards of the Rubins for 200 years, passing them in the street, talking together, and sitting next to each other in synagogue. They probably knew every detail of each other's lives and personalities. My grandmother's side took a quite distinctive name, Grosbein. All Grosbeins in the world come originally from Dolhinov and from a single couple who lived at the time of the 1765 census there.

Grosbein means big boned, long-legged, and hence "tall." The requirements for being tall among the Jews of Dolhinov in 1765 were not challenging by today's standards. Five feet six inches, perhaps a bit less, would probably do very nicely. Exercise they certainly didn't lack but medicine was non-existent and good nutrition scanty. The tall ones in question were probably Yitzhak Grosbein and his wife Lipsha, whose children included Shmerko, married to Pesia, and Shmuel, married to Chaya. They worked for a nobleman named Bubma of Wolk and thus had the same relative privileges as the Rubins.

There is a great deal I do not and will not know, certainly not this side of the great mystery of the world to come, which might or might not exist. But the number of possibilities is limited and his life plays out like a film in my mind. And maybe, some day, I will get a chance to ask Zelig himself. Who knows?

The entries in the 1765 census were written in Polish, the Kingdom of Lithuania and Poland's last gasp at grasping life. Still, the impression of having once lived in its borders was strong enough that forever after those Jews called themselves Litvaks—a term used by Lithuanians exclusively to indicate Jews--even after living two hundred years under Russian and Polish rule. Litvaks have a reputation as bright and scholarly, partly self-styled but also arising from a huge conflict within Jewish society at that time.

While Poles, Russians, and Swedes fought with pikes and swords, Jews struggled exclusively in the realm of spiritual ideas. Their war was between Hasidism and traditional Jewish ways, and Dolhinov was one of the battlefields. At the beginning the town had just one synagogue and one rabbi. There was consensus over the entire range of Jewish law that determined virtually every detail of life.

Yet a new Jewish movement was to shake up the life of Dolhinov Jews more than anything else before the twentieth century's wars. A bloody, antisemitic uprising in Ukraine and the Lithuanian-Polish kingdom's decline made Jews poorer, insecure, and inclined toward a mystical hope that Messiah would soon come to end their misery. Beginning in the 1740s, the Hassidic movement preached a combination of faith in wonder-working, charismatic holy men and infusion of joyous zeal as an antidote to what they saw as the status quo's arid legalism.

Many Rabbis were horrified, fearing the Hassids were deviating too far and might cross forbidden borders. This opposition is led by Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, known far batter as the genius, Gaon, of Vilna. The Vilna Gaon's great rival was his contemporary, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, who was enough of a Litvak to develop a hybrid Hassidism--the Chabad or Lubavitch

movement—which included enough intellectual elements to appeal to those self-consciously studious northern Jews. Living not to far from Dolhinov, Zalman attracted many followers there.

For a time, the town must have been torn by dispute, contending rabbis, and the formation of a second synagogue. My direct ancestors stayed with the Vilna Gaon but some cousins went with Zalman. When the dust cleared, the Dolhinov Jews were divided into two groups, yet this was to have no effect on personal relationships and communal solidarity which was quickly reestablished.

After all, since both sides were completely observant, the differences between them were not so wide. And in a little town, ideological distinctions were less finely stressed than in big cities. The spirit of communal pragmatism and solidarity prevailed.

Not so with the outside world's political battles. Life continued to get worse as the Lithuanian-Polish empire became weaker, died altogether, and was carved up by its neighbors, thrice in Zelig's lifetime—1772, 1793, and 1795—until nothing was left. The middle of those partitions came on January 23, 1793, as President George Washington was sitting down to breakfast in Philadelphia. Dolhinov was part of the territory annexed by Russia, in whose hands it would remain precisely 125 years. The czar of the Russians proclaimed himself king of Poland.

Ironically, Poland's downfall had been brought about by conservative Polish nobles so fearful of a constitutional regime being instituted at home that they preferred Russian autocratic rule to Polish democracy. Here is history at its most ironic. While the Communist USSR would later use this partition as a rationale for again seizing these lands, Russia got them in the first place for the most reactionary of reasons.

For Poles, partition brought heartbreak; for Jews, terrible fragmentation. One Jewish town became Russian, another German, and still another Austrian. Jews, however, had neither really lost a country nor found another one in Russia. The Jews in Dolhinov, and in thousands of other shtetls throughout the east of Europe, remained for all practical purposes, a separate nation.

This was due not only to their own preferences but to Russian policy, which strove to keep the Jews apart. Within the Russian elite there was a debate over whether to try to integrate the Jews into Russia but those opposed always won. In the 1770s, the Russian governor of the district called the Jews "parasites and useless members of society." A local merchant replied that the Jews were merely backward, held back by "recalcitrance, superstition and licentiousness," but could be turned into good subjects of the czar. The governor's view won out.

Germany and Austria, which ruled the other two parts of what had been Poland, ultimately took a different course. They would eventually give Jews citizens' rights. Jews seized the opportunity, abandoning Yiddish for German, heders for modern secular education, and community loyalty for patriotism. This improved their material lot but did not diminish antisemitism. On the contrary, the traditional warning about avoiding intervention in the world of the goyim was to prove true with terrifying results.

But most of those on the Russian side of the border had no such options and were far more likely to keep to their traditions. The kind of life and culture existing in Dolhinov in 1793 would still be recognizable—though this doesn't mean there was no change at all—on the day the Nazis arrived in 1941.

In general terms, Jews on the Russian side were also poorer than their counterparts across the frontier. As I overheard an archivist in New York explain, albeit with some exaggeration, to a newbie researcher, "On the German side of the border they wore leather shoes; on the Russian side they wore rags." Up to the 1917 revolution, Jews were kept in the areas where Russia had

found them in the 1780s, making it first impossible for Jews to move elsewhere in the kingdom. In the mid-nineteenth century, some wealthier Jews were given special rights but in Dolhinov there were only to be two such families.

Those environments made the Jews, at the time identical, divided by these borders into completely, though certainly not totally, different people. My paternal great grandparents grew up in Dolhinov, spoke Yiddish, and were strictly observant. In contrast, my maternal great-grandparents came, respectively, from the German- and Austrian-ruled lands and spoke German. Neither was religious. They gave their children no education in these matters, and thought themselves superior to "eastern" Jews.

By the time these distinctions—created by the eighteenth-century partition of Poland--were transferred to my grandparents, they had a huge effect on my make-up, character, and life story. Therefore, remote as it seems, I was very much shaped by the eighteenth-century partition of Poland, and perhaps you were, too.

Further west, the last remnants of the medieval world were being wiped out by dramatic changes. The French revolution, new ideas of democracy, and a widening struggle to rule Europe first brought Napoleon Bonaparte to power in France and then to Dolhinov itself.

By 1812 Napoleon had been endlessly victorious, defeating every army that engaged him with such ease as to seem blessed by Heaven or in league with Hell. But now he made a fatal mistake by invading Russia. One rationale for the attack was to mobilize support among Poles, was a promise to liberate Poland and undo the partitions. But of course it was his own mastery of Europe that concerned the emperor.

Napoleon planned his campaign carefully but fell far short of taking Russian conditions into account, something any resident of Dolhinov might have explained to him. His army had always won by moving fast and living off the land. But, as the Swedes found a century earlier, the land of Russia was too poor and bad roads too impassable to feed a host of men and horses. And that's not even mentioning diseases like typhus or dysentery and frigid weather beyond anything a Frenchman might imagine.

On June 24, Napoleon's great army of about 600,000 men, the largest military force ever assembled in Europe, advanced into Russia, intent on capturing Moscow. Almost none of them ever returned. Rather than fight decisive battles, the Russian army retreated and let nature take its toll on the enemy.

As they marched, the Polish soldiers in Napoleon's army sang the new national anthem, "Mazurek Dąbrowskiego," written in their honor:

"Poland has not perished yet
So long as we still live
That which alien force has seized
We at swordpoint shall retrieve….
We've been shown by Bonaparte
The way to victory!"

The "way to victory" over Russia lay down two roads. The main body of Napoleon's army took the northern one, passing 100 miles north of Dolhinov but its right flank came straight up the Dolhinov route. During July, cavalry units, foraging parties, and on the seventeenth of that month an entire brigade marched down the main street. One French officer wrote that Dolhinov

seemed like a safe haven after the tedious passage through swamp country, where decent food and fresh water wasn't available.

He described Dolhinov as a, "Small town with wooden houses and three churches that were black because of their old age." Having probably never seen one before, he didn't know that the third "church" was a synagogue, where—as his eyes peered at the outside—my ancestor Zelig and his nineteen-year-old son Moshe, with the rest of the family, may have been huddled inside waiting for the soldiers to pass. Possibly, like other town residents, they had fled for the duration of the war. Or perhaps they opened the 1812 equivalent of a lemonade stand for the thirsty soldiers. It sure wasn't Paris or Moscow, even Vilna or Minsk. But to the 305 residents living in just 88 houses, it was the whole world--except perhaps for Jerusalem--that mattered to them.

There is also a mystery here. For Moshe's second son, Gabriel, died aged 15 years old in 1812. Was he killed by the French soldiers or was he done in by flight and famine? However it happened it must have been an enormous family tragedy amidst hundreds of thousands of deaths. Still, when the deeds of Napoleon are weighed in the balance, perhaps the life of Gabriel ben Moshe Rubin can be added to the costs of one man's ambition.

Like Peter the Great did against Charles, the Russians again used scorched-earth tactics. Dolhinov was too quickly captured by the French to be affected by the utter destruction of fields and crops that happened further east. Only when Napoleon approached Moscow itself, at Borodino on September 7, did the Russians stand and fight. They lost but inflicted even more casualties on the dwindling French. Napoleon entered Moscow one week later to find the city a ghost-town, most of its population having fled, and a fire soon to break out which destroyed what remained. In vain, emperor waited for czar to surrender. Finally, realizing he had dawdled too long, cut off from supply or reinforcements, Napoleon marched out again on October 19

In its two-month-long retreat out of Russia, the French army again crossed the same depleted ground they had already picked clean on their march into the country. Russian cavalry galloped in pursuit to kill stragglers; the plunging thermometer—intense cold from mid-November; snow after December 5--added to the woes of the already exhausted French. Russian peasants murdered, often in the most gruesome manner, any of the enemy within reach.

After much suffering, their numbers in steady decline, the once-mighty army came to the last station of its torment, the Berezina river near Borisov, on the road just 50 miles east of Dolhinov. It was already getting dark, four o'clock in the afternoon, November 24, 1812. To their horror, they discovered that the Russians had burned the bridge so recently that the remains were still smoking. One Russian army was staring at them from across the ice-choked river, another was approaching their rear. Napoleon, trapped, faced his career's most perilous moment.

But the French leader didn't lose his head. He dispatched, with much noise, a pretend detachment of bridge-builders to the south while quietly sending his best 400 engineers to build a real one to the north. The Russians fell for the trick and raced south. Quickly, the engineers took apart every building in four villages to make two makeshift wooden bridges. The walkway's boards weren't nailed down; the pillars stood on mud. They knew the bridges wouldn't stand long, but it didn't matter. Napoleon's army would either cross fast or be captured.[6]

And so for two days, in a temperature of fifty degrees below freezing, thousands of desperate men turned into a crazed mob to get across by any means necessary, in their haste pushing comrades to their deaths in the ice-choked river. Men and horses who stumbled were trampled in the rush. Twice, a bridge partly collapsed and engineers waded into the icy water to

make repairs. Finally realizing they'd been fooled, the Russians raced up the western bank. Those who'd already crossed had to fight to hold them off.

By the morning of November 28, the last organized units had gone over. Tens of thousands of soldiers and camp followers, including women and children, remained on the eastern bank as the second Russian army bore down on them. Crazed with fear, they surged onto the bridges, one of which collapsed in the middle. Those in front fell into the frozen river; those behind pushed forward and plunged in to drown. Out-of-control wagons crashed into people crushing them.

For some hours more, people fought their way across the remaining bridge, but the second Russian army was within sight of the eastern bank. If they captured the span and used it, all that remained of the French army would be surrounded and destroyed. Despite the fact that the bridge was still packed with their own people, French troops set it on fire. Hundreds of people burned to death. Those trapped on the eastern shore added to the 100,000 prisoners taken by the unmerciful Russians. Few of them survived. About 30,000 corpses were left floating in the river. The crossing of the Berezina became one of the main symbols for European culture for the ultimate horror of war, until surpassed by World War One a century later.

Of the 600,000 soldiers who had invaded Russia, no more than 60,000 crossed the bridges of death and survived to stumble on toward Dolhinov. Cannons dragged across the Berezina with so much effort were abandoned. Westward fled Napoleon and his men, up the road to Zembin, on the 29th, and then to Pleschenitsi by the 30th. It took them four days to cover the remaining 50 miles. Almost half of them died as temperatures plunged further.

Even the always buoyant Napoleon began to despair. "We need," he wrote on the November 29, "Two weeks to reform the men into regiments, and where can we get two weeks? Cold and privation have broken up the army….Food! food! food!" His army, not long before the world's greatest, the conquerors of Europe, was now just an "undisciplined mob."[7]

Still, even now, Napoleon employed the brilliant propaganda that had played so large a part in his self-made legend. From Selitche, just south of Dolhinov, on December 2, he sent a messenger to Paris to announcing his great victory on the Berezina and capture of thousands of Russian prisoners. As a further assurance, Napoleon told his people, "His Majesty's health has never been better."[8]

Within earshot of his imperial majesty, at that moment the right flank of his army arrived at Dolhinov. If villagers dared to peer at them at all, they saw men totally transformed from the proud, beautifully uniformed soldiers who had come proudly through five months earlier. Now they were ragged, shivering, and sick, at the very edge of human endurance. They were far more dangerous, too, frantic to grab any food possible and kill anyone who got in their way.

Fortunately, they had little time to linger in Dolhinov. Three thousand Russian cavalrymen charged into town, smashing into the French rearguard. No one recorded how many died on each side but the battle of Dolhinov was the campaign's last.[9] Napoleon's fleeing men needed no Russians to kill them as weather and disease battled to claim credit for their deaths.

On December 3, at Molodechno, 20 miles down the road from Dolhinov, Napoleon received news that, despite his message, he was presumed dead in Paris, where an emboldened general seized power. Determined to reach the capital with all speed, he set off on a sleigh, accompanied only by a driver, bodyguard, and one aide, abandoning his army to its fate. He did get home safely and took back his throne. But while Napoleon raised another army and fought on for almost another year, Russia had broken him for good.

Undeterred by Poland's partition and Napoleon invasion, Zelig lived on with his wife, her first name unknown but a member of the neighboring Ruderman family. Moshe Rubin grew up; Gabriel didn't. Zelig and his wife died, their departures unrecorded by history, their tombs disappeared forever.

At some time between Napoleon's fleeing Russia and his defeat at Waterloo, Moshe Rubin married Sarah, born in 1794 and a year younger than himself. They, too, had two sons: Zalman, born in 1816, and Leib, who entered the world in 1822. And Zalman grew up and married and had two children, the daughter Reyza, in 1835, and Yankel, in 1838. And it came to pass that his first wife died, probably in giving birth to Yankel, my great-great grandfather. Zalman remarried around 1841 to Chaya bat Gershon, born in 1823 and hence 29 years younger than himself, to be a mother for his children.

Tragedy didn't require a war to happen. Zalman, age 29, and Moshe, age 48, died in 1845; Sarah had already passed, short of reaching 50. Little Reyza and Yankel had lost all their parents and grandparents by the time she was ten and he seven. It must have been terribly hard on them.

The survivors behaved as people in Dolhinov always did in such circumstances. In 1845, Reyza and Yankel, along with their 22-year-old stepmother, moved in with the children's great-uncle, Zalman Ruderman, his 29-year-old son Kaplan, Kaplan's 25-year-old wife Tauba, and their 8-year-old daughter Zelda. Seven people lived in a tiny house of at most two rooms. When Zalman Ruderman died in 1848, still another numbing tragedy though he had at least reached the respectable old age of 55, Kaplan became head of household

How did they survive since by then the family had probably long lost their position as estate managers? Chaya and Tauba took care of the children; Kaplan earned money, somehow enough to support a half-dozen people. Reyza, Yankel, and Zelda played together, though any toys must have been of their own devising. How Reyza must have cared for her little brother, the two of them so alone in the world, and he must have looked up to her. For love and dependence were the only antidotes to the suffering they had experienced. Did Yankel know that his life had caused his mother's death? That would have been still another burden on him. All of these things shaped my great-great grandfather's character, though precisely how I cannot say.

On the other side of my ancestry similar things were happening. In 1850, Yizhak ben Menahem Grosbein, born in 1818, was living at the home of his two-years'-younger brother Shlomo. Yitzhak married Feiga bat Yakov, born in 1820. Yitzhak and Feiga had two daughters: Chaya, six, and Khana, nine. These nine people lived together in a cramped tiny cottage. In 1857, Yitzhak and Feiga had another son, Pinkus Leib Grosbein, who was my great-grandfather. Without this baby born late in their lives, these words would not be written.

And so they lived and labored, probably never projecting their thoughts as to what would be in 150 years save to hope that the Messiah would have come by then. Given what was to happen in Dolhinov, it was better for them not to know what would be. Long before the Messiah came to Dolhinov, Haman and the Amalekites arrived. But that was still a long way off. Many good days would be lived in the meantime, many smaller tragedies suffered and endured.

True, it was the fashion for rabbis to cultivate an air of unworldly innocence, though many were by no means bereft of sophistication. One shouldn't think that these people lived in some isolated backwater totally out of touch with events elsewhere. For the nature of Jewish life was awareness of time and space's permeability. Nor did they ever lose sight of a homeland

daily visible thanks to Segal's paintings, their studies in the sacred writ, and their seasonal cycle timed to that in the land of Israel.

It is told that Rabbi Moshe Shlomo Khary, rabbi of Ilya, was once on his way to a rabbinical meeting in Dolhinov. The 20-mile journey by horse-pulled wagon took four hours. When they'd travelled about half the distance, he turned to the driver and asked, "Is this still Russia?

"Yes," affirmed the driver.

The rabbi muttered in wonder, "It is indeed, then, a huge country."[10]

Yet, at that same time, the son of the Dolhinov rabbi was simultaneously a great scholar of Jewish law and a man of wider culture as well, an excellent violin player, and local representative of Count Jozel Ginszberg, the richest Jew in the Czarist empire, responsible for collecting the liquor tax.[11]

In 1849, a cholera epidemic broke out in the land of Israel. At that time, there was in Jerusalem only a Christian missionary hospital which tried to convert its Jewish patients. Rabbi Shmuel of Dolhinov was one of those rabbis writing Sir Moses Montefiore, the great philanthropist, in England, urging him to finance the building of a Jewish hospital in Jerusalem. Shmuel warned that many Jews would go "to the conversionist hospital, and, alas in several instances follow the inducements held out, and forsake the religion of our fathers."[12] It took Montefiore years of effort but he finally succeeded in fulfilling the task the Dolhinov rabbi and others had urged on him.

Small towns in Eastern Europe like Dolhinov were not so isolated as to lose contact with the rest of the Jewish world. Rabbis were part of a far-flung intellectual network in which books and ideas passed from country to country, even continent to continent. Rabbi Shmuel's own guide to Jewish laws, Minhat Shmuel, was praised by some of the most respected rabbis of his day. He also wrote prayers to say on visiting the Land of Israel, including the Temple's Western Wall, Rachel's tomb, and the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Men like Shmuel were part of the eternal link between hundreds of places like Dolhinov and the millions of Jews who lived in them, with the land of Israel, a lifeline that would eventually lead the town's survivors back to their ancestral home.

In this story, 1850 is a particularly important year, the only one in history where we have a full picture of the Dolhinov people, drawn up for us by the Russian census takers. In 158 houses live 1469 inhabitants, about 1187 of them Jews, with the names and relationships of them all; a list of who lived and who died, who left town and who stayed. They counted only 16 Grosbeins but more than 100 Rubins, the latter being Dolhinov's most common name.

Among them was the orphaned Yankel Rubin who grew up, married Chaya bat Yitzhak Grosbein, a year older than himself, and at last was able to create a family of his own. They had three sons whose respective fates signaled that the world wasn't just breaking into Dolhinov for one day each century but on a permanent basis, even though the pace of change continued to be slow. One of them would go unimaginably far away and never return; another would suffer a fate worse than death and never return. The third, my great-grandfather, made my life possible by reacting against this turmoil and just staying put.

Yankel's family of five lived in a wooden cottage and paid for that privilege 2 rubles and 25 kopecks tax a year. So totally distinct were the town's communities in the town, so disparate their lives that even the homes reflected those distinctions. A Jewish house had its entrance to the front, facing the street because many of them were also small shops. In contrast, Christian homes

were entered from the side because they were agriculturally inclined, oriented to reach the gardens, animal pens, and storage sheds behind them.

The huge kitchen oven of the Rubin cottage was at the back of the house; the privy in the yard behind. Straight back from the street stretched a line of attached sheds for animals and firewood, with the cottage like a locomotive pulling the outbuildings. The wood, thrown into the oven, powered the buildings through the harsh winters. Today, with insulation, double-glazed windows, efficient heating systems, and closets full of winter clothes—not to mention cold remedies, indoor bathrooms, and other amenities—it's hard to imagine how people could survive such terrible winters.

Those seasons of snow and ice were romanticized by the Dolhinov Jewish poet, Samuil Plaunik, in "A Winter's Tale":

"A snowy night hangs, a savage night hangs,
A grey pelt above forests' wild tresses.
In white plumage of snow, in a white silk of snow,
Valleys, hills under rich snowy dresses….
Like a horse without rein, like a grey-and-white flame,
The blind snowstorm will rush, rearing, whirling."

There's a simple answer, of course as to how Dolhinov Jews survived: they were used to it. The body somehow adapts to the worst climate and they'd had centuries to make the transition from their tropical origins to their sub-arctic fates. Yet there were fates for which they could not have been prepared.

Such was what befell their first son. Zalman Ber Rubin, named after his grandfather, came into this world in 1862, as America fought its Civil War. Ironically, he'd be the first in his line for two millennia or more to be a soldier himself. On April 15, 1879, he was dragged off to the Russian army and assigned to an artillery unit in Kaluga, near Moscow. His family would never see him, and probably never heard from him, again.

Forcing Jews into the army was a policy begun by the Czarist regime in the 1820s. Jews considered that fate a living death, and they were right. Faced with 25 years of brutal treatment intensified by antisemitism, pressed to become Christian, and moved hundreds of miles eastward, those so shanghaied were lucky to survive at all and rarely ever returned home. The burden inevitably fell on the poorest and least influential. To avoid the draft was a major incentive for Jews in Dolhinov and elsewhere to migrate to America or other countries.

Traumatized at Zalman Ber's fate, one brother would cross the Atlantic; the other would quickly marry to ensure deferment. The former, Yankel's second son, was Leib, born in 1865. Leib was named after his uncle, with whom Yankel had lived as a child, making him like so many children then a living memorial to someone who'd been a link in the chain of their existence. A few days before, thousands of miles away, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Probably no one in Dolhinov heard about it, nor could they have imagined that Leib would one day be living a few yards from where Lincoln died, near the Capitol in Washington DC.

The third son, Haim Shimon Rubin born in 1867, was my great-grandfather. Haim Shimon had his own brush with the Czar's army. At age 21 he was still unmarried, a very dangerous situation. According to Article 16/1 of an 1872 law, any Jew under 25 could be

drafted unless he was the family's only son, student in a non-Jewish school, seriously ill, had a parent who died that year, or if he was wed.

By 1888, Haim Shimon was the only son left living at home but that didn't count. His parents were living and he was well, thank God. No Jew in Dolhinov attended a non-Jewish school. Somehow, probably through bribery, he secured a one-year postponement on October 26. Shortly after that, he stood under the huppa next to Faiga Rivka Heifetz, daughter of a fine Dolhinov family. It seems that as the Jewish population increased, there was less incentive to exchange daughters in marriage with other towns. Haim Shimon might have been happy at last, having avoided a far worse fate. Yearning for a quiet life, he never left town and died peacefully in his own bed.

My other great-grandfather, Pinkus (Pini) Leib Grosbein, underwent worse travails before settling into the role of patriarch. In 1879, at age 22, he married Sima Mandel, 18. At first, things went well and they had a son named Hershel in 1880. The next year, they moved from Dolhinov to the nearby village of Rechki to open a store.

If Dolhinov was a backwater, Rechki was a pond, a place where a tiny Jewish community lived surrounded by illiterate peasants. Russia being essentially a dictatorial state, they had to obtain a permit to do so on May 6, 1881. Three years later, a second son, Itzko (Isaac), named after his grandfather, was born. The midwife did all she could but Sima died in terrible pain, at the age of only 23.

What was Pinkus to do, having no family in Rechki but a baby and four-year-old boy? He returned to Dolhinov, receiving a police permit to do so on February 1, 1885. His family helped him find a young bride named Lea Rivka. By 1889 they were a family of five—Pini Leib, Lea Rivka, Hershel, Itzko, and their new baby Shmuel--living in a wood one-story house even smaller than that of their Rubin neighbors. Over the next five years they would have three more children: Sarah; Chaya, my grandmother, and Rahel.

Pini Leib returned to a hometown really starting to develop. In 1823, Count S.L. Kaminsky, heir to the estate where my ancestors worked a century earlier, had founded a cloth factory at his manor with two looms. In 20 years, he had expanded using steam power to 28 machines. It was a sophisticated enterprise. Wool and dye was bought in far-off Riga. The high-quality cloth was sold all over the Russian empire. By 1866, there were 162 workers. Not resting on their laurels, the Kaminskys established a brick factory in 1898 which grew to employ 71 workers.

Change was finally thawing even this frozen land. But history was not to be so kind. In the 1880s, Dolhinov boasted five taverns, three inns, a medical clinic, a post and telegraph office, a bank, and a drugstore. Wooden board sidewalks connected sixty small Jewish shops around the central square from which five streets branched out. The town set out sixty benches for those who wanted to relax and contemplate the passing scene. A Russian-language government school, established in 1862, had 64 boys and 10 girls enrolled by 1890, all Christians, albeit with only two teachers. By 1902, the number of pupils had doubled. If history had allowed, Dolhinov would have become a prosperous center of commerce and industry.

The wooden Russian Orthodox church, which Napoleon's soldiers forty years earlier had thought decrepit, was replaced with a new, stone St. Stanislav's in 1853 right off the central market square. Overseen by Father Jozef Lvovich, it served 4623 people in his large parish. In 1870, the Catholic Poles also got a new stone Trinity church for 1500 people in the district. Both churches had high domes or steeples and an ample use of gold leaf. The Jews, too, built a new

synagogue but, always mindful of keeping a low profile, used only red brick and kept it decidedly modest.

Politically, Russia's hold was firm and Polish nationalism finally seemed permanently defeated. When Poland finally did regain independence from Russia after World War I, the declaration referred to this period as a "state of constant slavery" and the country's situation during these years as a land that seemed "forgotten" by God.

It wasn't that the Poles hadn't tried hard to revive their country. In 1794, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, fresh from fighting for America's freedom from Britain, had come home to lead a revolt. The czar crushed the revolt. Poles then put their faith in Napoleon to defeat the czar and father a new Poland, and lost again. In November 1830, they rose once more and this time Dolhinov joined the revolution. Local Poles seized the town, led by their Catholic priest and vicar. All were arrested by the Russians. Still more failed uprisings came in 1846 and 1863. Enough, said the czar, and began a Russification program to ensure Poland would never rise again. Jews stood aside through all these events, only watching, as their religion instructed them, not taking sides in the struggle among the nations.

But this very same tightening of control and Russian nationalist assertion intensified antisemitism. The Russians saw Jews as a threat, too alien to absorb and insufficiently loyal to the czar. Traditional religious antisemitism merged with the new nationalist version. During the 1870s and 1880s, Russian laws restricting Jews were tightened, forbidding their moving out of the far western provinces, excluding them from higher education, barring them from government jobs.

Of course, antisemitism had long been endemic to these parts. For Christian peasants, who knew little about Judaism—and nothing at all about the Jewish roots of their own religion, its founder, or their Bible—Jews were linked to witchcraft. According to a local peasant proverb, "Jew, Germans and the Devil are sons of one mother." Thus, for example, in the late 1700s, serfs in the area dug up a grave of a Jewish child and cut off his hand believing it to be a magical object that could make one strong.

Observing the Purim celebration in a nearby town in 1827, local residents concluded that Jews were making fun of Christian practices, ridiculing priests, writing satires on Christian prayers, and profaning the cross. In 1836, the Russian Orthodox church investigated a Jew, Mordukh Velvelevich of Narev, for sacrilege because he used an icon left behind by previous tenants as a hatstand.[13] In 1861, peasants and townspeople in the Sokolski district staged a pogrom after one of them incited a crowd by telling them that Jews were allies of the devil but Judgment Day, when they would all be killed, was at hand.[14]

> Now violence came to Dolhinov, too. It's a beautiful spring day for a fair, May 8, 1886, the festival of Saint Stanislav Dolhinov's Russian Orthodox patron saint and the local church's namesake. Among those walking around in the crowd and enjoying the food and festivities is the Krasovsky family of Gabytatsya village. Somehow, their 12-year-old son, Stanislav, whose holy name day it is, wanders off or perhaps his parents—dazzled by the splendors around them, relaxed by drink or tending their other children—lose track of him.[15]
>
> He's never seen alive again. Naturally, the parents launch a frantic search but he's nowhere to be found in Dolhinov's streets. Five days later, his body is discovered deep in the forest and many miles away, covered with tree branches. It is rumored that he had been stabbed in a dozen places. His funeral is held in Budslav, with lots of police to

ensure no disturbances break out. You can still see his grave there, marked with a large pine cross.

Ritual murder is an old antisemitic accusation. It is one of the Canterbury Tales, that fourteenth-century classic of early English literature. In the Dolhinov area there is an account of such a story from 1603. The slander popped up as far away as Damascus, Syria, in 1840, and the long-time, Syrian defense minister Mustafa Tlass published a book in 1983 claiming Jews really do murder little children to turn their blood into matzoh. In Saudi Arabia it's still claimed as true in newspapers, and the slander appears transmuted into modern political form through propaganda stories claiming deliberate Israeli murders of Palestinian children.

But I never thought one of my own ancestors was the accused in such a case, much less a famous case, of this sort.

For so the story ran, the rumor spread, though no evidence seemed to exist. The peasants whispered that one Leiba Katsovich from the village Matyki, found little Stanislav wandering alone in the crowd and promised to lead him back to his parents. Instead, he took him to a Dolhinov Jew named Rubin, described as a red-haired, florid man.

And so it was that on Easter Thursday, June 12, many Byelorussians arrived in town well-fortified with copious amounts of home-made vodka. The police, tipped off that a riot was imminent, arrived in force but then stood by and did nothing. Led by people from the villages of Pogost and Bitavsty set off to find the evil Rubin and put him to death. Armed with poles, stones, and even sheep-shears, they ran across the central square, just outside their church, and charged into the tailor, hairdresser, and other shops. Windows were smashed, shops looted, the contents of the synagogue were dragged outside or taken home by peasants.

Four Jews were covered with tar. Some accounts say none were killed, others that several were left dead. It is not reported whether one of them was the Rubin they sought. The police didn't investigate, no one was charged or jailed. Jews could not expect the Russian authorities to protect them.

And none of the peasants saw anything wrong in the assault on defenseless people since, after all, they believed the Jews deserved it. They even wrote a proud song about it, still being sung, with accompaniment by accordion and cymbals, a half-century later in surrounding villages:

> "In 1886 all the people revolted,
> Even Poles in Dolhinov revolted,
> They were eating bread, drinking vodka and beating and strangling Jews
> When they drank more they started beating Jews harder….
> The Jews were suffering for the boy, Stanislav.
> The Jews caught the boy; they didn't give him anything to eat for 3 days,
> They put him in a barrel and were rocking him,
> They pulled him from the barrel as from a bog; all his body was pricked….
> And nailed to the wall, and thrust through the ears with wire....
> Let's beat Jews in revenge for Christian blood!"

No doubt, the nailing was suggested by the Christian story of crucifixion, which was much discussed at Easter time when these events took place. The barrel, which sounds like that medieval torture machine, the Iron Maiden, was a legendary device supposed to be used by Jews to remove the blood efficiently. The child was dropped into the barrel, which was then rolled, so the nails sticking out within it pierced him in many places and drained out the blood.

The word used for Jews in the song is the derogatory word "Zhid" and the song evinces some surprise that even the more sophisticated Polish town residents, the ones who lived near the Jews as neighbors, had joined in with the peasants. The police never investigated the murder nor the pogrom afterward. No one was ever charged or tried for the assaults and attempted or actual murders. There is another version of the song which is identical except that it begins, "In the year 1891" which seems to refer to a second, similar pogrom that year.

While violence like this rarely visited Dolhinov it was never far off. On June 14, 1886, just two days after the Dolhinov pogrom in a village named Tatarka not far away, five peasants were passing the house of Jacob Katz at 4 pm. Being already drunk, they broke into his house, grabbed him by his beard, and demanded, "Give us vodka, otherwise you'll die and here will be your grave." His wife and son tried to rescue him but the peasants attacked them with an iron rod and a wooden board, broke windows, tore up pillows, destroyed furniture, and stole what they could.

Captured by the police, they were tried five months later before a jury. Witnesses confirmed the above account but in the end the jury convicted only one of the men and urged that he be pardoned. The judge sentenced the convicted man to six months in jail and a 180 ruble payment to Katz, and a second suspect to five days in jail.[16]

The murder and pogrom in Dolhinov lived on in memory and played a part in the most famous ritual murder case in history. In 1911, a 13-year-old boy was found murdered with his hands tied. A Jewish worker named Mendel Beilis was accused. That case is the best-known of all ritual murder stories today due to Bernard Malamud's novel, The Fixer, and a film of the same name. The killers were apparently criminals who robbed the boy, then killed him in a way they thought would make it look like ritual murder. According to court testimony, the Dolhinov killing, or at least stories passed down about it, was their role model.

As late as the 1930s, parents in the Dolhinov were warning children that if they strayed far, Jews would tear them up in order to make matzah. So when the Germans arrived for the biggest pogrom of all, hatreds were already deeply planted and ready for their cultivation.

But to return to the 1880s, the Russian empire was changing rapidly. The serfs in Belarus had been freed in 1861 though there was no dramatic change in the social relations. Now, however, following in the path of Western Europe, Russia was starting down the path of industrialization, urbanization, and all the other developments associated with modernization. Dolhinov and the surrounding area were relatively slow to participate in these trends, yet events elsewhere dragged them along. Such developments combined with rising food prices, increasing unemployment, and growing nationalism among Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Poles, to fuel unrest. One of the results was intensified anti-Semitism and violent attacks against Jews.

Ironically, or perhaps not so ironically, the hatred was intensified, unintentionally but inevitably, by the efforts of a small minority of young Jews to bridge the gap to the Russian people through revolutionary activity. Their goal was to build a socialist Russia which would transcend all ethnic, religious, and class distinctions. Noble as this Jewish revolutionary tradition

has been made to seem today it was in fact a road to catastrophe for both Jews and Russians, intensifying antisemitism and ultimately producing a murderous dictatorship.

After all, it was easy for the Russian masses, and European Christians in other countries to read leftist revolutionary activities by individual Jews as a malevolent, collective Jewish attempt to destroy Christianity, their country, and their culture. Following the involvement of a few such Jews in assassinating Czar Alexander II on March 1, 1881, there were rumors that the government wanted Christians to retaliate by attacking Jews as traitors. Alexander was himself a reformer who, if he lived, probably would have led the country in a more democratic direction including fairer treatment of the Jews.

The Russian and later Polish antagonism to the Jews as perceived political enemies merged with traditional religious hostility; nationalist views of Jews as aliens; and economic conflict over the Jews' disproportionate share of mercantile, commercial, and sometimes professional or intellectual positions.

The Rubins, Grosbeins, and others in Dolhinov might have hovered on the edge of subsistence, but the Russian government classified them as "bourgeois" in its documents. They might be living six-people-to-a-room, with few possessions, and no economic security at all, but since they were neither peasantry nor aristocratic that was the only category left.

The modernization starting to transform the empire was also making their economic slots to politically important and economically profitable to leave in Jewish hands. With the number of people multiplying far faster than the bounty of the earth, the money and power was no longer in agriculture, either as a cultivator or as a landlord. The kingdoms reigned over by warriors who received land in exchange for service to the monarch and their ennoble descendants were on their way to extinction. Manufacturing and distribution, as well as jobs requiring a high degree of education—where Jews also had an advantage--were going to be the new sources of wealth and social influence.

Jews, impoverished as they were, sat at these crossroads of everything new and important. Everyone else wanted in. Open a store, transport with a wagon, make clothes, sell food. If one didn't want to be a peasant, a tiller and toiler of the soil, what was the next step upward? Even better were jobs requiring advanced education—managers, lawyers, doctors. And if the Jews, who had a head start on education, already held or were flocking into those jobs or professions, where was the room for Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians to advance? The Jews must be eliminated in one way or another: expulsion or emigration; conversion or assimilation; dispossession or murder.

It was easy, then, to see Jews as threats to the spiritual and material survival of one's own civilization—because liberals and radicals among them championed change, secularism, and other movements challenging the status quo—or to the interests of one's nation—whose identity they diluted—or individuals—with whom they competed for money and status. On one hand, the Jews were hated as exploiters of the masses; on the other hand, they were hated as would-be agitators of the masses. The Jews who kept to their own society were alien; those who tried to assimilate into yours were subversive.

As against that, there were those who favored assimilating the Jews and those Jews who favored assimilating. Some Russian officials favored this scenario. Yet in a sense that solution was the problem. For how could the Jews enter society without changing it; and how could the Jews be accepted as equals and full participants if by doing so it doomed so many others from the majority to having less?

In this era, at least, the Jews of Dolhinov were lucky. Where Dolhinov was located, in Vilna province, things were relatively quieter than elsewhere in the empire, in part because its governor-general worked hard to keep the peace. Russian officials trying to stop pogroms were motivated by sentiments ranging from a sense of justice, to fear that disorders would threaten the empire's stability, or belief that Jews were far less dangerous than the local Christian nationalisms challenging the empire. Many Russian bureaucrats, especially at lower levels, were hostile to Jews, blaming them for the violence that broke out against them. But they were held in line by their superiors.[17]

In Belarus and throughout the Vilna province, fights between Christians and Jews often broke out over small incidents involving the former's drunkenness and disagreements in business transactions. Whether a glass of vodka at an inn had been paid for or an apple had been tasted and not bought by a peasant could lead to fistfights. But in this area, in sharp contrast to places further south, pogroms remained small, battles short. The unrest was a warning to Jews in Dolhinov, but it was a warning that could be disregarded.

There were thus three main messages for the Jews of Dolhinov from their experience over the centuries at the onset of the twentieth century. First, they were a coherent community, not merely a religious group but a national one as distinctive as Russians, Poles, or Lithuanians. Not only were they the majority in town but the highest concentration of Jews in the region. There were almost twice as many Jews living in Dolhinov than in any nearby town. Jews were 10 percent of the population in the Vileika district but close to 75 percent in Dolhinov.

No wonder, then, that the Zionist movement would become the most powerful political force in Dolhinov with the Bund in second place.

In the early twentieth century, before World War One and the Russian Revolution, 15 percent of the people in Belarus were Jews, four times as much as in Russia generally; double the proportion in the Ukraine. But even this understates the intensity of Jewish society. In the cities and towns, 54 percent of the population was Jewish. They owned half the factories, were half the intellectuals, and comprised 84.5 percent of the merchants.[18]

Second, basically relations between Jews and Byelorussian were generally good. Peasants saw Jews as "rich" and "successful," sometimes dishonest and exploitative, but also good allies to have. One peasant petition argued, "We believe that the time is not yet ripe to give equal rights to Jews because we are not educated enough as to coexist peacefully with Jews who are mentally developed and well educated in all spheres." Indeed, even when peasants complained to the czar and government—sometimes about individual Jews—half the scribes writing their petitions were Jewish.[19]

The level of antisemitism in Belarus was much lower than in other places precisely because the large peasantry wasn't in competition for the social roles held by Jews and since the Byelorussians had no strong nationalism of their own. In addition, the presence of four groups deflected a lot of the conflict that took place in areas where there were only Jews and a majority group. Polish nationalism was directed against Russians; Russian concern over subversion focused on Poles; the Poles feared Byelorussians; and Byelorussian anger centered on Polish landlords and Russian officials. When peasants wanted to send petitions to the Czar complaining about their situations, they often used Jewish scribes to write them. Relationships were just too complex and mutually beneficial to be embattled.

Yet the third factor and real immediate motivation for the transformation of Dolhinov Jews was the spread of new ideas, the transition from religious to national expressions of

identity, whether in the form of communal consciousness, Bundism, or Zionism. In 1897, the same year that the Russian census counted Jews as 70 percent of Dolhinov residents—2,559 out of 3,552--Theodor Herzl convened the first Zionist congress in Basle, Switzerland, raising the vision of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, a place—like Dolhinov—where Jews would be a majority but where they would also have political power.

In comparison, though, Dolhinov's Jews were still limited to living in only a small part of Russia, with no chance for advanced education or state employment, and fenced in by 650 Russian laws applying only to them. That number of such restrictions exceeded in number the rules they voluntarily accepted from the holy laws.

Then, though not later, the Jews of Dolhinov could not imagine that most of their descendents would be living in the state that Herzl had seemed to conjure from a fitful imagination. "In Basle," proclaimed Herzl, "I founded the Jewish state....Maybe in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will realize it." Even more remarkable, from Dolhinov's standpoint: in fifty years its survivors were almost all living there.

There was, however, another destination that was immediately available. The outflow to America began. Leib Rubin was one of the first and what began in the 1880s intensified in the 1890s and continued to grow during the years up to World War One's commencement in 1914. Of the next generation, two of Pini Leib's and Leah Rivka's daughters, one of them my grandmother, would go there in 1908 and 1909. The following year, one of Haim Shimon's and Feiga Rivka's sons, my grandmother would go there.

But if Zalman Ber's life had not been destroyed by the czar's army, and if the czar had not been assassinated and pogroms had not broken out, then Leib might not have gone to America, one day becoming the patron of his nephew, my grandfather, to help make his migration possible, then I would not exist. And if Sima Mandel had not died in childbirth so that Pini Leib Grosbein had to remarry and had as a daughter my grandmother than I would not exist either

Even after those people left, however, Dolhinov continued to exist, but the outside world would break in with a sledgehammer. The sleepy little town would be subjected to one of the most concentrated doses of war and upheaval suffered by anywhere in the world throughout history.

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[1] Aivas Ragauskas, Vilniaus miesto valdantysis elitas: XVII a. antrojoje pusėje (1662-1702) (Vilnius, 2002.)

[2] Carole Herselle Krinsky, Synagogues of Europe: Architecture, History, and Meaning (Dover Publications, 1996), pp. 57-58.

[3] Alexander Litin, Synagogue at Shkolische. Parallels with Chagall // Lekhaim #10, 2007 Synagogue at Shkolische. Parallels with Chagall.

[4] Bakalarz the Russian online dictionary gives me "ayatollah" which seems unlikely, the Yiddish one stays silent baker?Zrawiec Russian: Wales zhusnier zlotnik zrawiec drukarz wiolista doktor

[5] For the record, Braddock's march was in 1755, ten years before the census.

[6] A good source on this and the following days is William Henry Ireland, The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte: Late Emperor of the French, King of Italy, Protector of the Confederation of the Rhine, Mediator of the Confederation of Switzerland, &c. &c (London, 1928).

[7] http://www.napoleonic-literature.com/Book_22/1812.htm

[8] Ibid.

[9] Robert Thomas Wilson, Bernadette de Castelbajac, Hubert Pichelin - Napoleonic Wars, 1800-1815 (NY, 1998), pp. 206, 263.

[10] http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/ilya/ily069.html

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[13] Olga Sobolevskaya, "Distrust as a product of the lack of knowledge: everyday (domestic) anti-Semitism in Byelorussia," in Insiders or Aliens? Jews seen by Slavs, Slavs seen by Jews." (Moscow, 2003,) pp. 376-382.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Myadel Regional studies Sergiyusha Yaminskogo "Legends of the ritual murder" in an Vilensky "Word" (1938). **http://westki.info/artykuly/3744/5-jaurejsk%D1%96-pahrom-u-1886-hodzie;** Michal Gil 11.10.2008 Seryugish Yaminsky "Legends about ritual murders" mentioned in newspaper "Slovo" (Word) Vilna (1938).
[16] Barisov, November 20, 1886.
[17] Darius Stalinas, "Anti-Jewish disturbances in the North-Western provinces in the early 1880s," East European Jewish Affairs, (Volume 34, Issue 2), Winter 2004, pp. 119-138.
[18] Z.V. Shybeka, Garady Belarusi 60 Gady (Minsk, 1997), pp. 260, 265, cited in Oleg G. Bukhovets, ""The Image of Jews in Belarus: Petitions as a Source for Popular Consciousness in the Early Twentieth Century," International Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (No. 46, 2001), p. 173.
[19] Ibid., pp. 180, 183.

CHAPTER FOUR
POLISH POWER

"The delightful Charles Haas, the most likeable and glittering socialite, the best of friends, had nothing Jewish about him except his origins and was not afflicted, as far as I know, with any of the faults of his race…."

--Gustave Schlumberger, writing of his old friend Charles Haas, the model for Marcel Proust's character, Swann,

It's May 3, 1938, in downtown Dolhinov, though the town's central square is a rather modest affair, surrounded by low, small, somewhat decrepit buildings. Down Pilsudski Street toward its intersection with, appropriately enough, May 3 Street, come the Polish townspeople in their best clothes, men in suits and ties, red-and-white flags flying, and banners held high.

Along the narrow sidewalk are few bystanders, as if all those who feel they have something to celebrate are already marching. Above their heads hang the stores' signs, each bearing the Jewish proprietors' name. Many are lettered neither in Russian Cyrillic nor Polish Roman scripts but in Hebrew letters, the language not Polish but Yiddish.

The event being celebrated is Polish National Day, marked in Dolhinov during the time of Polish rule—what the locals call the era of "Polish power"—between 1921 and 1939. The Poles are free, lucky not to know this is merely a brief respite between 150 years of servitude to Russia and the half-century more of slavery to Russia's Soviet incarnation about to begin in little over a year.

Next door, the czar is gone and it's not called Russia any more but the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Dolhinov is the closest town in the world to the Communist iron curtain. A twenty-minute walk, not even a hurried one but a sauntering polka step, would have brought the cheering parade participants a view of the Worker's Homeland itself. Indeed, from the veranda of the Niezabytowsky estate house, just outside town, one could sip a drink and watch Soviet border guards across the river patrolling

The countryside has a Byelorussian majority; the town a Jewish majority. Polish is the language taught in schools but in Dolhinov's streets and stores, when Jews weren't speaking Yiddish, they're talking the Byelorussian language, a dialect of Russian. Dolhinov was still, as it had been for a half-millennium, a front-line outpost in the endless strife of Russian against Pole. And neither Russia nor other mighty nations were yet, by a long shot, finished with Dolhinov.

A third of a century before that happy Polish Independence Day march of 1937, Dolhinov had still been part of Russia's empire. True, before World War One, the Polish nationalist movement was active underground even in Dolhinov and Józef Sawicki carried messages from the headquarters in Vilna in a hollowed-out walking stick, travelling under the pretense of being a merchant.

Still, the transformation from Czarist province to Polish power took seven years, three wars, and a series of accidents. Czarist Russian, then German, again Czarist, then again German, next Byelorussian, then Bolshevik Russian, next Polish, then Bolshevik Russian, and then again Polish armies had marched into—and all but the last had run back down—Vileika Street, Dolhinov's main, cobblestoned, road.

It all began, as did so many things, in August 1914, World War One, a worldwide competition for conquest, had nothing directly to do with daily life in Dolhinov. Yet its battles would soon run through the center of town.

Our images of World War One today are defined by the Western Front. Hundreds of miles of trenches where the machinegun's dictatorship is imposed for four years on millions of soldiers huddled in trenches. Terror and boredom was punctuated by suicidal mad-dash attacks across no-man's land ordered by generals bewitched by romantic memories of gallant charges sweeping an enemy off the battlefield. Commanders still fought by the historic rule: to be on the offensive was heroic, on the defensive unmanly. But the technology of rapid-firing, more accurate weapons had reversed the odds, making each attack disastrous. Instead of the defender being overwhelmed by a massive onrush, the attackers are mown down by the tens of thousands in desolate no-man's-land for no gain whatsoever.

Things were different in the east. Armies maneuvered, victories won, dramatic advances made by huge masses of infantry. True, merely capturing ground didn't bring victory until the other side—Russia in 1917; Germany and Austria in 1918--collapsed from within. Also, casualties there were as shocking, or more so, than in the west. But at least it looked more like history-book warfare. Napoleon would have recognized it; and so would the Duke of Wellington, Ulysses Grant, and William Sherman.

But that eastern front was less a place of brilliant generalship than a competition of incompetence between Russia and Austria-Hungary. The Germans had the good fortune of having the former as enemy and the curse of having the latter as ally. In the end, the great empires of czar, kaiser, and emperor would all end in collapse. Most significant for world history, Russia's fell to Communism's 70-year-long global detour, modern history's second-worst system which also inspired fascism, the first-place winner.

Dolhinov would be in the middle of these events, especially when armies were on the march. In 1914, the war began with huge Russian defeats at Tannenberg in August and the Masurian Lakes in September. In May 1915, the Germans advanced even further east, capturing 240,000 Russian prisoners and killing an equal number, at the cost of only 90,000 casualties for themselves. One million Russian soldiers—the numbers quickly become unimaginable—were captured that year alone. Entire divisions disintegrated.

As always, Jews tried to be optimistic in the face of turmoil. Aharon Rubin, a Dolhinov lumber dealer, returned home from a July 1915 sales' trip to Vilna just in time to see the Russian army retreating through the town. His friend, Josef Sawicki, told him that the Germans would soon arrive. Rubin smiled and replied: "The era of the Russian czar and his empire is over, now they will no longer punish and discriminate against us Jews and you Poles."[1]

His words were prophetic but the course of events was not to be so simple. The front-line was now just west of Dolhinov and the town was transformed into a military zone. Pack mules, marching men, and the occasional car or track—the first motorized vehicles ever seen in those parts—pass endlessly through its otherwise empty streets. Artillery fire boomed in the distance. Much of the town is destroyed in the fighting, houses, shops, and mills all gone; the possessions and work of many lifetimes wiped out in a few hours. For 76 Russian soldiers from General Nesviataev's 115th Viazemsky infantry brigade, Dolhinov became permanent residence and final resting place.

Those residents who could still do so, however, fled eastward. Russian officials, scared and angry, treat local Jews with hostility and sometimes violence. So bad is the situation, noted a

British observer on the scene, that "even the most extreme antisemites have been moved to complain at treatment of the Jews."[2] While the French ambassador to Russia wrote in his diary, "for the Jews of Poland…the war is one of the greatest disasters they have known."[3]

For decades in the nineteenth century, forcible induction into the Russian army, from which my great-grandfather barely escaped and his brother didn't, had been Jews' single greatest complaint against the government. Now several Dolhinov Jews were serving in the ranks to protect a regime which had always oppressed them.

One of my relatives was captured by the Germans and ever after declared that they treated him better than the Russians. Another, Aaron Grosbein, drafted in 1917, declared himself a pacifist. Hoping his mother wouldn't hear about his decision and worry about his fate, Grosbein waited until his unit was far away from Dolhinov before refusing to fight. But when he was sentenced to two months in military prison, she found out any way and suffered greatly from anxiety. Released after six weeks, he'd been unable to change his clothes all that time because a guard stole the clean underwear that a friend sent him. But Grosbein found jail to be the easier alternative. Once back at the front, he had to face the anger of his fellow soldiers who resented his behavior as making their own lives harder and more dangerous.[4]

The Russian army had dealt with hundreds of thousands of deserters, soldiers who preferred to surrender, inflict wounds on themselves to escape duty, ran away, and even openly rebel. Yet so baffled were the officers by a man who simply declared he wouldn't fight and was ready to accept punishment that they just left him alone. They didn't expect Jews to be good soldiers even if they were willing to try.

You didn't need to be a military genius, or even a soldier, to stand in the middle of Dolhinov during the war and understand why the Russians were losing. Let's lean against this closed and shuttered Jewish storefront for a moment and watch the military traffic heading up to the front. Here this great empire's weakness is revealed.

When the Swedes had marched through Dolhinov they were a small professional, even mercenary, army. Napoleon had led a massive force, product of the new patriotic nationalism that mobilized an entire country for war. Yet carts pulled by animals along muddy roads could not feed, clothe, and arm either army in the face of Russia's vast space and terrible infrastructure.

It was now the twentieth century but things had changed around Dolhinov far less than in the west of Europe. Railroads there didn't have enough track, cars, or locomotives. Roads hadn't improved that much from Napoleon's day. And while there were such things as automobiles and trucks, there weren't many on the eastern front.

Given the flat land, long distance, and lack of motorized vehicles, cavalry units were still effective, at least for getting soldiers to the fight. But fodder for the Russian army's one million cargo and cavalry horses filled twice the number of railroad cars needed for feeding the men at the front. Corruption and incompetence contributed to the mess. So did the lack of Russian officers, poor training, and low morale. Food spoiled before it could be eaten; even the sergeants' weapons were dirty.

One shouldn't exaggerate. The armies, even those of the Russians and Austrians, fought often well and bravely for three years. Still, by 1915 the Germans could move four army corps in five days the same distance that it took the Russians three weeks to shift just one corps. Due to conflicting orders, a Russian force evacuated the fortress of Libau and destroyed its telegraph lines, at the same moment as another unit was moving in to defend it. Taking advantage of the confusion, Germans attacked and took the town.

In the Russian army, trenches were badly dug, fallback positions weren't prepared, and reinforcements poorly positioned. When a general suggested building a series of strong defense lines in the face of an imminent German offensive, commanders couldn't agree where to put them, how to man them, and whether implying retreat might be necessary would so damage morale as to make it inevitable. It wasn't that the Russian army had no good generals, but there was no effective decision-making system.

The German high command was much better organized. Even more important, it had learned the lesson that Napoleon had neglected and that Hitler wouldn't remember: the way to achieve victory was to destroy Russia's army, not to strike as deep as possible into Russian territory. As a result, of all the assaults on Russia in modern history, Germany's World War One campaign was the most effective.

But Germany's victory in the east during 1917 would be mainly due to its adversary's internal collapse. In March, Russia's first revolution produced a broad democratic regime determined to stay in the war. But, in April, the Germans helped Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin, return home, hoping his priority on revolution, even at the cost of losing the war, would ensure its own victory. The plan worked. In November, Lenin's Bolshevik party staged a coup against the democratically elected parliament and seized state power.

The Communist takeover wasn't inevitable. Communism was a disease of modernization, an attack on a system weakened by the difficult transition to big cities; industrialization; the growth first of a working and then of a huge middle class; democracy; and other features that shook but didn't wreck America, Britain, or France. History could have turned out differently. The Czarist system might have survived the war and made gradual reforms, or Russia could have had a democratic republic. Eventually, progress could have exceeded what the Soviets achieved by violent repression and at such a high human cost. Without the Communist example and Soviet help, Germany might not have rebuilt itself through Nazism. The Holocaust might never have taken place. But, of course, things didn't happen that way.

In 1918, Lenin was trying to save his infant revolution from enemies at home and abroad but couldn't succeed without giving Germany whatever it demanded. German soldiers seized a wide swath of territory in Western Russia, including Dolhinov, and there was nothing between its bayonets and Lenin's office.

He ordered his delegates to sign anything and what they accepted was a March 9, 1918 agreement in which the Soviets gave up Poland, Belarus and Ukraine, as well as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—in short, the whole western slice of the Russian empire. With Russia out of the war, the Germans could concentrate all their troops on the Western front. With Russia out of the war, Lenin could focus on keeping power.

Germany expected to dictate the new international boundaries at the peace conference ending World War One. Meanwhile, though, no one knew where the USSR's borders began and those of Poland ended or even whether there would be a country called Poland. At this confused moment a wild card was thrown down. A new nationalist movement arose to declare the establishment of a Byelorussian People's Republic on behalf of that long-quiescent people. Along with left-wing and Christian Democratic parties, the Jewish Bund threw its lot in with this movement, in exchange for promises of full autonomy and in preference to Bolshevik rule. A new war began between the Byelorussian People's Volunteer Army and the Soviet Red Army.

One son of Dolhinov in particular took sides enthusiastically in this confrontation. His name was Samuil Plaunik, but he was better known under his penname as Zmitrok Biadula. Born

in 1886, Plaunik moved to Dolhinov at a young age with his family. More interested in writing poetry than learning ritual, he was expelled from his heder class. In 1910, he switched from Yiddish to Byelorussian. Plaunik was fascinated by the idea that the Jews of the region should hook their wagon to Byelorussian nationalism. Toward this end, he wrote poems, stories, and essays arguing that the Jews and Byelorussians had achieved some cultural synthesis.

What was unique about Plaunik is that while many Jews would advocate assimilation to with the Russians—both wealthy people seeking to become part of the dominant society or revolutionaries proposing to overthrow it hand in hand with the Russian proletariat—or later with the Poles, Plaunik was virtually alone in his allegiance. Yet his variation throws light on the more popular paths taken by others.

Jews were unlikely, however, to favor a movement whose prospects seemed dim and whose forces were involved in antisemitic attacks when it finally did gain some power, as happened during the short-lived Byelorussian revolt. The fact that Plaunik married a non-Jewish woman and had to function under a non-Jewish name was also evidence of where this road led. He died in 1941 while fleeing the Nazis, but if Plaunik lived a bit longer he would have seen the surviving and reviving Byelorussian nationalists become Nazi collaborators. While a curiosity of history, Plaunik, the most important literary figure Dolhinov would produce, merely represented one more betrayed and unrequited loyalty.

At any rate, the Byelorussian uprising would be short lived. On November 2, 1920, the Byelorussians launched an offensive and ten days later proclaimed an independent Belarus that included Dolhinov. But the peasants remained passive and, within three weeks, politically Red Russians defeated ethnic White Russians. Apparently, Belarus—and Dolhinov with it--would become part of Lenin's USSR.

Before the Soviet-Byelorussian war ended, however, a Polish-Soviet war began. The Poles had taken advantage of Russia's revolution to declare their own independence. Poland's new leader Józef Piłsudski wanted to recapture historic Polish territories and lead an alliance of new eastern European countries to balance off both Germany and the USSR. Lenin, whose proletarian internationalism was indistinguishable from traditional Russian imperialism, rejected his own now unnecessary territorial concessions. If Poland became his, the Soviets would have a border with Germany from which revolution could be spread throughout all of Europe. .

In February 1919, broke out what would have been border skirmishes if anyone had known where the border was located. The next month Polish units advanced steadily to capture Minsk, 50 miles from Dolhinov, on August 8, and kept going. It was the first time Polish authority had returned to Dolhinov in 130 years. But the Poles wouldn't cooperate with the counterrevolutionary Russian forces trying to bring down Lenin. From a Polish standpoint, these anti-communists were even worse, militant Russian nationalists who'd never permit an independent Poland. So the Polish forces stopped advancing after conquering all the territory they claimed and let the Bolshevik regime survive.

That turned out to be a terrible mistake. Once the Communists defeated their rivals at home in the civil war, they returned to fighting the Poles. In summer 1920, the Red Army attacked across the Berezina River just east of Dolhinov and broke through, advancing as fast as their legs or horses could carry them. Dolhinov was quickly captured by the Soviets, who slapped a high tax on its people to finance their war effort and plunged on toward Warsaw. Here was the Red Army's 27-year-old General Mikhail Tukhachevsky's order of the day to his Third Army for July 4, 1920: "In the west the fate of world revolution is being decided in the west: the

way leads over the corpse of Poland to a universal conflagration!…On to Vilna, Minsk and Warsaw—forward!"

The Poles were totally defeated, scattered, in headlong retreat. At each river they dug in, sometimes using left over German trenches from the recent world war, only to be outflanked and to flee once again. In August, the Reds were within 60 miles of Warsaw and ignoring Polish pleas for peace-at-any-price. Soviet victory seemed inevitable, to be followed perhaps by a wave of Communist revolutions throughout a Europe flattened and bankrupted by six years of wars.

Yet at the last possible moment, with the Soviet army almost in the suburbs of Warsaw, the Poles counterattacked, saved their capital, and destroyed their enemy. Now the Soviets fled; the Poles in hot pursuit.

How this military miracle happened remained a secret for more than 80 years. Now we know how it happened: Polish soldiers intercepted and decoded Tukhachevsky's orders and laid a trap. They pulled out of areas into which the Soviets were advancing and concentrated their forces for an all-out flank attack. Achieving complete surprise, they hit the Soviets on the northern and southern tips of their lines, encircling and wiping out the Soviet forces, while suffering almost no casualties of their own.

Within days the Poles advanced 300 miles eastward, surging through Dolhinov. What did all this fighting leave behind in Dolhinov? The graves of 65 Polish and 4 Red Army soldiers from 1920. It is strange to think that Karl Kursakovsky, Frank Novak, Bronislav Wozny, and Vaslav Kozak happened into Dolhinov one day by happenstance and now it is their fate to lie there for all eternity.

Onward advanced the Poles, capturing Red Army headquarters in Minsk, only moments after the over-confident Tukhachevsky scurried out the door and ran for his life. Poland had won.

Precisely as he had done two years earlier, Lenin was willing once again to pay anything for peace. As the British ambassador to Germany put it at the time, had the Poles lost, "The very existence of Western civilization would have been imperiled [under] the fanatical tyranny of the Soviet."[5] Of course, the first time, it had taken Lenin only two years to take back all the territory he'd given to the Germans. Nineteen years later, in 1939, Stalin would do the same regarding what the USSR had been forced to yield to the Poles.

The Soviet triumph, however, would have to come on the point of the Red Army's bayonets on both occasions, not from the revolt of the working masses. Among the Poles, nationalism had trumped social class. Lenin even admitted this privately, saying that the Polish "workers and peasants defended their class enemy."

But he was still wrong. The Polish people had not acted to defend a rich ruling class; they had fought to defend their own nation and religion, their primary identity and loyalty. For them, the enemy was not Polish plutocrats but the Russians, whatever they were calling themselves now, along with the Marxism, atheism, and dictatorship that the Soviet state embodied. It was a foretaste of both what Communism had become and why it would fail.

But what would happen to Dolhinov? Would it be Soviet or Polish? There were no revolutionaries in Dolhinov worth speaking about; the Jews were indifferent; the peasants had no strong political sentiment, having refused to fight on behalf of Byelorussian nationalism. Everything depended on where Poland's eastern, and the USSR's western, border would be drawn. The Versailles conference of the victors, meeting in a French palace to end World War One, favored what was called the "Curzon line." According to this, the Poles would rule where they were an ethnic majority. And that would leave Dolhinov in Soviet territory.

Pilsudski, like most statesmen, wanted as much land as he could get. But the ups and downs of war had left him out of favor and his National Democrat rivals, now in power, did something unprecedented. As militant nationalists who remembered Poland's previous downfall, they wanted no territory where Poles weren't the majority. Consequently, when the Soviets—desperate for peace—offered Poland even more land as a way to get immediate agreement, the Polish government turned them down and insisted on taking less.

One result of this decision was that more than a million Poles were left in the Soviet Union, where they would be harshly oppressed. The Soviets turned the territory they kept into the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Sixty percent of the area's Jews—numbering one million by 1939—were on the Polish side; the other forty percent were on the Soviet side. As in Poland's partition a century and a half earlier, their fates would be quite different.[6]

In the Dolhinov area, Poles were only one-third of the town itself and not more than 20 percent in the surrounding area. But when the border was set in the Riga treaty of March 18, 1921, Dolhinov landed in Poland by the skin of its teeth. The treaty stated that the border would run, "To the Vilya River up to a point east of Dolhinov…up to a highway running to the south of Dolhinov, hence further south…."

And so Dolhinov became part of Poland, Byelorussians, Jews and all. The Polish minority was ecstatic. The town's name was altered to Dolhinów and it became the county seat. On the day in 1921 when all this became official, the town's population was down to 1,747 Jews and 924 Christians. But the war refugees returned and life went back to normal. As a result, by 1929 there were 3,671 residents, a 40 percent increase over 1921. That number fell slightly to 3346 inhabitants living in 580 houses in 1931 and 3181 people in 547 houses by 1938, as people migrated to big cities or abroad.

The see-saw Soviet-Polish war had imposed tough choices on Jews. Polish nationalists varied in their attitudes—Pilsudski was tolerant, his National Democratic Party rivals openly antisemitic—but were generally hostile to Jews. Polish troops launched pogroms against Jews in several places. Pilsudski also allied with the Ukrainian nationalist leader, Symon Petlura, infamous for his murderous attacks on Jews in that area.

To make matters worse, many Soviet Communist leaders were Jews, including the architect of the Red Army itself, Leon Trotsky, born Lev Davidovitch Bronstein in a Ukrainian town very much like Dolhinov. When a Polish Communist puppet regime was formed in Soviet-occupied territory, most of its supporters were Jewish radicals. When the Soviets approached Warsaw, Soviet leader Nikolai Bukharin, whose Jewish background was known to Poles, wrote that the Red Army should march through Warsaw "right up to London and Paris."[7] While other Jews backed the Poles, even fighting in their army, many Poles were suspicious of all Jews, a prejudice already strong from a host of religious, economic, and nationalist motives.

After the war ended, and in response to press reports about antisemitic violence in Poland, a U.S. investigating commission was formed headed by the American Jewish lawyer Henry Morgenthau. Trying to show its cooperation, the new Polish government hosted and cooperated with the commission. Morgenthau's group documented the main antisemitic incident of the era. When the Polish army seized Minsk from the Soviets, on August 8, 1919, its soldiers murdered 31 Jews, looted 377 Jewish shops, broke into homes, and beat up people. But the commission concluded that most of these incidents stemmed more from anarchy than intention

and praised the new Polish government and army for trying to stop such violence, punish perpetrators, and reduce antisemitism.[8]

Following the commission's report, the Polish government promised to provide its Jewish citizens with "justice and fair play?"[9] During the republic's first 15 years, as long as Pilsudski lived and periodically acted as Poland's benevolent dictator, he largely kept this promise but when he died in 1935, extremists began to oppress the minorities. Over the next two years, an estimated 79 Jews were murdered and 500 injured in antisemitic attacks. In 1937, ethnic quotas were instituted in the universities, and Jewish students had to sit in a separate part of the classroom. Boycotts were launched against Jewish shops, even in Dolhinov.

Granted, the Jews were not part of the ethnic Polish nation and had no desire to integrate completely. Still, Polish antagonisms against Jews were far more intense and lasting than any ill-feeling toward Ukrainian, Byelorussian, and German minorities about which the same point can be made and who were in reality far more dangerous and troublesome for Poland.

On a personal basis, though, the Jews of Dolhinov had total freedom to go about their lives, think their thoughts, and practice their customs. They could create and maintain communal institutions, educate their children, and leave the country if they so chose. The Morgenthau report had concluded that Jews, while "disturbed by the anti-Jewish feeling...did not fear for their lives and liberty" and accepted their "full duty" as loyal Polish citizens and majority rule.[10] The Jews of Poland, and of Dolhinov fulfilled that pledge, except of course for a tiny minority of Communists who themselves had broken from the community and were indifferent to its interests.

For his part, Pilsudski and his social democratic allies thought antisemitism dishonored Poland and undercut its desire to be a respected country enjoying international backing. They were also aware that the country's prosperity in large part depended on the Jews who though only 10 percent of the population paid between 35 and 40 percent of the taxes.

In 1926, Pilsudski staged a coup and had full control to implement his policies. Of course there were limits. Jews were barred from civil service positions. But the government repealed the old Czarist laws against Jews, opened the universities to Jewish students, gave the community official recognition, and even subsidized its institutions. Jewish parties elected many members of parliament.

So overwhelming was his personality over Poland that he came to embody the nation. Seventy years after Polish rule forever left Dolhinov, an old Polish woman there proudly showed me the drawing of Pilsudski she had kept hidden throughout the Soviet period. On it was written a quote from the leader: "If a person lives his life very simply and not having high ideals to achieve, it's a failure."

For Pilsudski's Poland—and most of all for its Jews--the problem came when he had finished living his life. Once Pilsudski died, however, the right-wing and army dominated the regime and, starting in 1936, officially sponsored an anti-Jewish economic boycott. Jews were not even allowed to join the governing party. Signs like, "Buy only in Polish shops" and, "A Poland free from Jews is a free Poland," went up everywhere. Cardinal August Hlond, wrote, "It is a fact that Jews fight against the Catholic Church…constituting the advance guard of a godless life, of the Bolshevik movement, and of subversive action….It is a fact that the Jews are embezzlers and usurers and that they engage in the white-slave traffic."[11]

Professional associations of doctors, lawyers, and high school teachers excluded Jews, while Jewish university students were limited by quotas, forced into separate seating sections

(called "ghetto benches"), and sometimes assaulted by Polish counterparts. There were a number of pogroms in which Jews were killed by their Polish neighbors. Licenses were denied to Jewish merchants. In Dolhinov, the lucrative beer brewery was taken away from its Jewish owner and put into ethnic Polish hands by the refusal to renew his license. Kosher slaughter of animals, a necessity for Jews, was banned. In Dolhinov, it had to be performed privately since no Jewish family would think of eating non-kosher meat. As one historian has written, there was, "No other European nation where [antisemitism] "affected so many persons."[12]

Still, Jews in Dolhinov continued to enjoy the extra insulation offered by the fact that they were less of a minority there than the Poles themselves. Moreover, Dolhinov—like a thousand other shtetls—was no longer sunk in stagnation. Progress, technology, and education were gradually transforming life there. Even within the Jewish community, modernity peeked in, though full religious observance and community loyalty remained overwhelmingly intact.

Next-door, literally, in the Soviet Union was a utopian experiment where nothing remained intact and life often turned into a nightmare. On the positive side, Soviet Jews as individuals were granted total equality and unlimited opportunities to gain education and hold any job. Yet their communal and religious institutions were crushed in a program of forcible assimilation beyond any czar's dreams while personal freedoms were tightly limited.

Perhaps this paradox was best expressed by Ewald Ammende, a Baltic German businessman and minority rights' defender who travelled widely in the USSR. "Leadership and administration of the Soviet state—in trade and industry, in diplomacy, in the press, etc.—is today," he wrote in 1936, "to a considerable extent in the hands of Jews, is a fact which none can deny." Ammende, however, called such people "non-national Jewry," determined to destroy "those Jews who, unlike them, cling to their nationality, religion, and customs."[13]

Behind the veil of paradise was the leveling of everything outside the dictatorship's control and increasingly the whim of the dictator himself, Joseph Stalin. The system, however, in this case was entirely approved of by Lenin, himself—though this was among the Soviet Union's most restricted secrets--one-quarter Jewish. Synagogues were closed; the teaching of Hebrew banned; community organizations smashed; emigration barred; Zionists, Bundists, and religiously observant Jews, arrested and sent to concentration camps. Simultaneously, however, the Soviet government claimed to be protector and even promoter of Jewish rights and culture.

Ammende gave a perfect example of how this system worked, explaining, "The function of the Yiddish Institute in Kiev is to destroy Yiddish culture." The institution's apparent concern to preserve Yiddish seemed impressive to him until the director explained that the real purpose was to promote the Russian language."

But, asked Ammende, "What kind of work are you doing?"

One of the officials showed him: he was translating secret police interrogation forms into Yiddish.[14]

At that time, conditions were made worse by a famine created by the Soviet government's insistence on forcing peasants onto collective farms and murdering the most successful among them. Whatever the Jews suffered, Ukrainians and Poles suffered even more. And this would be followed by the purges, mass arrests, and more deportations to concentration camps.

Harry Lang, a Jewish visitor posing as a businessman, described a Ukrainian shtetl in the 1930s that could easily have been the fate of Dolhinov. "The people are afraid of each other. They are afraid of every superfluous word….They are even afraid of relatives and acquaintances,

and fear to tell them anything of their troubles." A Jew whispered to him to come to the cemetery at 3 pm, where he witnessed an amazing scene. People stood by their family graves and prayed, interspersing whispers to him about the real news—arrests, killings, death by starvation--as he moved from grave to grave.[15]

Deeply moved, Lang wrote a passionate plea that "the Jews of the whole world must not forget their brethren in Soviet Russia and must render them assistance in every way….[Their distress] passes all imagination."[16] But in the face of Soviet propaganda, accepted—partly even to this day--by Western intellectuals, many of them Jews themselves—this cry was ignored.

The Jews who became Communists, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, saw that choice as a way of solving simultaneously their society's problems and the Jewish question. The specific oppression of Jews would be dissolved by an egalitarian society where everyone was treated equally. The price to be paid, however, was that they would have to give up all distinctiveness: religion, ethnicity, language, all subsumed into the proletariat's dictatorship. At first, only the individual Jews choosing join the revolutionary cause voluntarily made those sacrifices but later, with the Communists in power, these same demands were imposed by force on all Jews in the country, often by the Jewish Communists themselves.

To make matters worse, while in theory Jews were to give up everything that made them Jews in order to merge into some overarching revolutionary collectivity. In practice, though, reality was much more banal: they were giving up being Jews in order to become Russians. What Communism achieved in the USSR was merely the historic objective of the czars: forcible assimilation to Russian culture and society, though not religion.

Finally, rather than make antisemitism extinct, the participation of Jews in Communism actually exacerbated it, making Jews more hated, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. For the Jews as a whole were accused, and often made to pay, for Communism's crimes of destroying other people's religions, traditions, and nationhood. This resulting image played a huge role in the rise and appeal of Nazism and fascism, as well as confirming the Jews' "treasonous" nature to east European nationalist movements hating both Communism and Russian imperialism.

In the words Morgenthau report's words: "It is...often asserted that the chiefs of the Bolshevik movement in Russia are Jews of Poland or Lithuania and there is no doubt that they played a prominent part in the Bolshevik government of such cities as Vilna, Lida, and Minsk before the capture of these cities by the Polish Army."[17] This concept of Judeo-Communism was applied in the 1930s and even more so in the post-1945 period when Jews were associated with unpopular Communist regimes in their countries.

Yet east European antisemitism is so complex precisely because it simultaneously comes from so many, even contradictory, directions. Jews were too rich and too poor, too traditional and too modernistic, threatening when they were different but equally—or even more—dangerous when they entered into mainstream society. In the end, the issue could be resolved only by murder or emigration.

As the Morgenthau report explained, the long Polish struggle to regain their freedom, "Has caused them to look with hatred upon anything which might interfere with their aims." And the existence of so many Jews did interfere with this project in the minds of many, understandably insecure, Poles who knew that their nationhood could easily vanish and that Jews were indeed a separate people.

Even paranoids have enemies, goes the saying. But no Pole had to be paranoid to perceive their country was surrounded by them: Russians to the east; Germans to the west. In Berlin and Moscow, rulers were determined to wipe Poland off the map and many throughout Europe believed the country's freedom was only temporary. Poland's strategic problem was almost unsolvable. Being flat, it had no geographical defenses except its many rivers and Poland's only option was to hope that a French and British readiness to fight for its independence would deter the two powerful foreign enemies.

Then there was the fact that almost one-third of the population wasn't Polish at all but Ukrainian, Jewish, Byelorussian, or German. The constitution guaranteed minorities' equal rights and cultural autonomy. But that didn't solve the problem, especially for Ukrainians, who were strongly nationalistic, and Germans who dreamed of a return of the fatherland's rule.

Knowing the fragility of their independence, Polish leaders were determined to be united, even at the cost of sacrificing democracy and persecuting minorities. When the Soviets invaded in 1939, they explicitly claimed they were coming to liberate the oppressed Byelorussians and Ukrainians—but not the Jews. The Germans took a similar propaganda line. Ultimately, the situation in pre-war Poland drove Jews, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians into Soviet arms and, later, many Byelorussians, and most Ukrainians and ethnic Germans to collaborate with the Nazis.

Yet Jews were highly visible throughout Poland, while the other minorities lived only on its territorial fringes. It was easy to think that persecuting them could solve Poland's other big problem, economic underdevelopment. By pushing the Jews out of business or out of the country altogether, space would be cleared for a stronger Polish middle class.

"Polish national feeling is irritated," the Morgenthau report had noted, "by what is regarded as the `alien' character of the great mass of the Jewish population. This is constantly brought home to the Poles by the fact that the majority of the Jews affect a distinctive dress, observe the Sabbath on Saturday, conduct business on Sunday, have separate dietary laws, wear long beards, and speak a language of their own."

Many Poles on the right end of the political spectrum thought that Zionists, the Bund, or traditional Jews were a threat to their state but that simply wasn't true. The first wanted to leave; the other two merely to be left alone. In the struggle for power within Poland, Jews preferred to be mere bystanders. In contrast to all the other groups, this attitude was due to their tradition, inward orientation, situation as an imperiled minority, and lack of any patron state.

And yet the Morgenthau report's conclusion is accurate: "It is no more fair to brand all Jews as Bolsheviks because some of them support the Soviets than to class all Poles as Jew-baiters because some of their military forces or of their lawless civil elements have occasionally been guilty of depredations and violence."[18]

Nevertheless, Jews were also in a no-win situation. If they were Zionists, Bundists, or traditionalists they were seen as loyal to a different nation. If assimilationist, they competed with Poles for jobs and brought distinctive perspectives to bear in the national debate. If left, secular, or assimilationist, they were seen as enemies of Poland's traditions, the Catholic Church, and established order. If they spoke Yiddish—a German-based dialect—this was used to accuse them of affinity for Poland's number-two enemy, Germany.

How did this work in Dolhinov? Many Poles there, including the local priest, rejected antisemitism. Others embraced it. The young Eliezer Koton knew that he could not ride his

bicycle down certain largely non-Jewish streets or stones would be thrown at him. Fist fights sometimes did break out between Poles and Jews.

The more positive side of coexistence was experienced by Ida Friedman. As a student in the state—which everyone called the Polish—school in Dolhinov, she was one of four Jewish girls (there were no Jewish boys) in her class. "They were very kind to us," she recalled, "there was no antisemitism." As an example she tells the following story:

"Once, we were playing hide-and-seek in the playground with the Polish girls. One of the Polish girls didn't manage to catch me and so we started to hit each other on the head. She fell over and fainted. The headmistress came out and I thought I'd be in terrible trouble. Our parents were summoned, and I was surprised when instead of getting into trouble I was told by the headmistress that I was a very good student and that this was a one-time problem and wouldn't happen again. I was always a little nervous of the Polish boys, that perhaps they would get angry at us and hit us. Every day we went to school with this fear but nothing ever happened in the end."

The last sentence above is the key: people always expected more friction than took place. A major reason for this is precisely the fact that not only were there many people who wanted coexistence to work but there were many more who knew conflict could break out due even to the smallest misstep. The greatest departure from this pattern was the Polish boycott of Jewish shops in the late 1930s. Yet balance and communal peace survived until destroyed by outsiders.

In this system, Jews were the overwhelming majority of storekeepers and artisans. Poles comprised most of the professionals; all of the government employees, including teachers, and the prosperous farmers as well as some of the peasantry. The Byelorussians were the majority of peasants.

Dolhinov, like many other traditional societies, was obsessed with the concept of the "evil eye," or what anthropologists have called the "limited good." The former idea is that showing off one's good fortune attracts demonic forces that would destroy it. But this idea has a very practical sociological aspect in Dolhinov: the tremendous danger from other people's—and communities'--envy and covetousness. This attitude would later be the major source for the collaboration of local people with the Nazis to eliminate their Jewish neighbors, steal their homes, and loot their possessions.

According to the theory of the limited good, there's only so much wealth to go around. If you have something, it's because your neighbors don't. In essentially static agricultural societies, before modern technology increased crop yields, this concept holds true. Elsewhere, one of the main factors promoting antisemitism through jealousy was that at least some Jews were relatively wealthy. In Dolhinov, they were just a bit better off than at least their peasant neighbors. But why should that bother anyone, unless Russian peasants or Polish town-dwellers believe it is at their expense?

Ethnic frictions in Eastern Europe were not mere matters of imagination but based on real economic and political clashes of interest. In the end, there was no solution to this problem and it was ultimately resolved only by mass murder, expulsion, and redrawing borders. This would be the outcome not only in Poland and large parts of Russia and Belarus but also in Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, the Ukraine, and Lithuania, among other countries.

Peasants complained when individual Jews bought up forested areas they wanted for themselves and sold the wood, sometimes back to them. Most transactions were less fraught with friction. While Jewish stores had a near-monopoly of commerce, the owners were obviously not becoming rich or even well-off. As a Byelorussian inhabitant of the time put it, the Jews were so poor that "I still wonder how they survived." Nevertheless, any time a peasant rightly or wrongly thought himself cheated there was a potential for antisemitism and a possibility of violence.

Of course, many Poles thought they should take over these businesses and make the profit themselves. After all, it was their country and how else could a Polish middle class develop? On this point, the Byelorussian peasants, lacking such ambitions, more easily developed close cooperative relations with individual Jews. When Poles boycotted Dolhinov's Jewish stores in the late 1930s, many Byelorussians ignore the campaign.

How did communal roles differ? In the Dolhinov of 1929,[19] there were two doctors, a lawyer, and a veterinarian, all Poles. On the other hand, the dentist (Aron Shimshelevitz, one of whose relatives, Yitzhak Szymszelewicz, would, as Yitzhak ben Zvi, later be Israel's second president) and pharmacist (my relative, Mendel Hefetz) were Jews. The credit union and cooperative store were Polish institutions, but the sole bank in town was the Zydowski Bank Ludowy, the Jewish People's Bank.

One of that bank's officials was the 39-year-old Wolf Sosensky, whose life reflects the path of upward mobility Dolhinov's Jews could now take. Son of a poor tailor, he left heder to go to work in that profession at age 9, in 1899, after all his family's home and everything in it had been destroyed by a fire. Thirsty for education, he continued to study on his own, collecting folktales and folksongs—which he loved to sing in his excellent voice. Drafted into the Russian army at age 20, he fought in World War One and was captured by the Germans. Returning home, he had become educated enough to get a job in the bank and became a community leader.

The relative shortage of Jews in the most skilled jobs reflected the low numbers of university graduates since higher education was closed to them in Czarist times and difficult in Poland due to discrimination. In addition, ethnic Polish institutions enjoyed state backing while Jews had to create their own community institutions.

Dolhinov's Jews responded by building their own school and credit union. The arrival in town of Dr. Leonid (Eliezer) Kotler to run the new 40-bed hospital meant Dolhinov had a Jewish doctor as well as a Polish Catholic one. Kotler's compassionate treatment of all the town's people and refusal to charge poor patients, made him quite popular, a status his war-time record would later enhance further.

One of the most important factors ensuring separate community-based facilities was the Jewish dietary laws. Of two hotels and two restaurants, one each was Jewish, the other Polish. The Jewish hotel's owners, Shayna and her brother Benjamin Ryjer,[20] were such important figures in the community that the German occupation would later make him, involuntarily, head of the Jewish council. In contrast, all five cafes were Jewish-owned. A kosher cup of tea and bread roll would have been indistinguishable from what Poles had at home, where they were eating Jewish-baked bread any way since all the bakers' dozen of bakers were Jews.

Similarly, there were four Jewish and one Polish butcher, corresponding roughly to their proportions in the population, since Polish cuisine required pork products; three Polish and two Jewish food stores, since the latter couldn't sell non-kosher products; two Polish wine stores, since Jews drank little wine except for the Sabbath dinner, but both a Polish and a Jewish beer

distiller and only a Jewish soda water vendor, since that was a Jewish delicacy. Appropriately, the main Polish grocery store is just outside the Catholic Church's gate.

The sole writer of petitions and translator was a Pole, presumably dealing with his less literate community or those needing something done in Russian, a language Jews spoke better. The town had two barbers: one Jewish, one Polish. Take your choice so you could have a nice chat in Yiddish or Polish while having your hair cut. But for some reason the two women's hairdressers were both Jews. The town's sole full-time painting company was a Jewish family business, too.

It is equally significant that every single person listed in the town directory is either a Jew or an ethnic Pole with just one exception: the sole full-time midwife was a Byelorussian, presumably peasant wisdom was valued in such matters. Not a single storeowner or any professional whatsoever has a Byelorussian name. Equally, every town employee is an ethnic Pole. The state had no wish to employ Jews.

Not all Jews who live in the town work there. Jews were prohibited from owning land under the czar's regime and it is almost impossible for them to do so now. But many rent property for harvesting the forests' lumber; the orchard's apples, pears, or cherries; or even to be farmers themselves on leased land.

Businesses that dealt with the peasants were overwhelmingly Jewish. This includes the 11 blacksmith shops, 10 owned by Jews and only 1 by a Pole. The same applied to the ironmongers and 13 grain merchants. The only miller of grains was Jewish until the local Polish nobleman opened a mill of his own. All the cattle and horse dealers are Jews. The former buy from peasants in surrounding villages, then sell the animals for beef; the latter go to towns where horses are raised, buy a horse for 150 to 200 zlotys and bring them back six to eight at a time to sell for 300 to 350 as pullers of plows and wagons.

Any peasant who needed to buy such a wagon or have one repaired went to Zalman Friedman. Even the two merchants who bought hog bristles from peasants to be used in making high-quality brushes—both quite religious, though I don't know how they avoided physical contact with these items—were Jews.

All of the town's 11 tailor shops, all but one of the clothing shops, all the cloth stores, hatmakers, shoemakers, and cobblers are Jews. Virtually all the 16 dry goods' merchants, 18 general stores, and 2 leather-goods', 2 hardware, and 2 ready-made clothing stores are also Jewish-owned.

Nevertheless, many a Jewish man in Dolhinov was a luftmensch, meaning he appeared to live from air or more realistically from anything that brought in a livelihood. The father of my Rubin cousins had a horse and wagon which carried him to the countryside where he sold cloth and soap in exchange for whatever crops or produce peasants could barter for it. When given the chance he bought animal hair for brushes, leather, or just about anything else. Not trusting banks, he kept his money hidden in the attic.

There is one final revealing detail in the official Polish national business association directory. Dolhinov is listed as having a Catholic and a Russian Orthodox church. The Polish editor did not think it worth mentioning the half-dozen synagogues in town.

What was life like during the Polish Power era? If in 1880 Dolhinov had been only one step up from a "Fiddler on the Roof" style shtetl, by the 1920s and 1930s it was on its way to being a moderately prosperous market town.

Still, Dolhinov suffered from its location. It was in the poorest part of a poor country, the neglected east, called Kresy, borderland, in Polish or, revealingly, Poland-B, the second-class region. It was such a frontier that following the Polish-Soviet war the government sent army veterans who had been particularly brave soldiers as settlers there, giving them land as a reward for their military service. Two-dozen such families were sent to the Dolhinov area. Like pioneers in the American West, these farmers built homesteads and were supposed to act as sentinels for the ethnic Polish presence. The Soviet invaders would later treat them as such, putting those families at the head of the deportation list.

Since it was right up against the dead end of the Soviet border, the historic trade between the two countries, so important in earlier centuries for the town's existence, was legally non-existent. Some did make a living by cross-border smuggling and a few paid with their lives for trying, like Haim Katzovitz in 1924, killed by Soviet border guards . Motor vehicles were still scarce; and the closest railroad station was in Budslav, 12 miles away. To get there one would have to travel by horse-drawn coach. Later, there were two buses a week: No. 11 from Vilna through Dolhinov to Budslav, total journey six and a half hours, cost nine zloty; and No. 28 from Dzisna terminating in Dolhinov, for the same price. There was also a more frequently running local route to and from Vileika.

While Dolhinov as a whole was not culturally Jewish it certainly was so for the two-thirds of the population who were. Despite diverse organizations and orientations, along with growing changes imported from the outside, the Jewish community's all-embracing role as center of life remained. All offices and stores closed for Jewish holidays which were also observed on the streets—including public Purim parades, complete with someone dressed up as Mordecai on horseback.

Esfira Dimenshtein, born in 1926, recalled:

"My favorite holiday was Pesach. We worked very hard before it to clean all the corners in our house. Then my grandfather came, checked everything, and said we were ready to celebrate Pesach. He always brought matzoh for us. There was a special bakery making it. My mother sometimes brought matzoh from Vilna where she went to buy cloth for the family's store. The Seder was in my grandparents' house for the entire family. It was always very beautiful and festive."

There was no theater of stage or film. Going to synagogue fulfilled the function of diversion, social function, filler of free time, and edification we now know as public entertainment. But at home, people danced, sang songs, acted out plays, and enjoyed the incredible warmth of well-functioning, if far from perfect, families.

As Dolhinov had weathered the Mitnagdim-Hassidic battles of the 1700s and the rise of secular learning in the late 1800s, once again ideological variety didn't produce lasting conflict. Any dispute was cushioned by many people being related by blood or marriage and close friendships among families. In regard to the Polish state or the prevailing European culture, these Jews might have been "outsiders," yet in their daily lives they were complete "insiders," within their own society, nation, and separate civilization.

On the religious level, traditional Judaism still reigned. Virtually no one was openly secular and, at most, young people would sneak off to smoke a cigarette on the Sabbath. Even

the local members of the left-wing Zionist youth group, Hashomer Hatzair, known for being ferociously anti-religious elsewhere, were religiously observant. Yet this piety was largely taken for granted. Men who went to the villages took kosher food with them and they all prayed three times a day. Along with their uniform at the Tarbut school on Pilsudski street, the boys wore talit, the fringed vest, though far fewer wore payot, the long sidecurls.

Aside from religion, the community was dominated by Zionists and Bundists. It is easy to understand why these two political philosophies had such appeal in Dolhinov. After all, the Jews there were clearly a national group—like their Byelorussian and Polish neighbors—with their own language, culture, history, customs, and society. If someone had told them that Judaism was purely a religion with no implications about national identity, they would have laughed in his face.

The Bundists favored Jewish autonomy within Poland, which is essentially what already existed in Dolhinov and other Jewish-majority towns. The Zionists--divided among the explicitly religious (Mizrahi), left-wing (Hashomer Hatzair), mainstream socialist (Habonim), centrist (General Zionists), and militant nationalists (Betar)--educated young people in Hebrew and prepared them for making aliyah to the Land of Israel. In every house was a Jewish National Fund box for donations to the Jewish community in the Land of Israel.

From the 1920s onward, young people—Abba Axelrad and Eliyahu Halperin and his sister Dvora--left regularly to make aliya to the Land of Israel. They would prepare themselves at training farms or in an urban "kibbutz" near Vilna. It would be something of a holiday to accompany those going there, who were, indeed, far luckier to be getting away than any of those present realized. There was still some immigration to other places, like Canada and South Africa—America's doors were pretty much closed-- but far less than in earlier decades/

"My entire childhood was preparation for my arrival in Israel," Dvora Halperin told me 72 years after she made that journey in 1937. In order to do so, despite the Jewish immigration quotas imposed by the British there, she underwent a fictitious marriage to a friend of her brother Eliyahu who came all the way from the land of Israel for that purpose. The rabbi knew all about it and sent the divorce paper on ahead of the "happy couple."

As for those remaining behind in Dolhinov, assimilation was not a serious or sought-after option since every Jew there accepted loyalty to the community as a powerful identity. Intermarriage was simply unthinkable. This was even true among the few young Communists. Polish nationalism similarly held little attraction.

But why would Communism appeal to many in a population comprised largely of small businessmen? Why should one become a Communist or Polish nationalist since any wish to be a socialist or a nationalist could be expressed within the Zionist or Bundist movement? Moreover, one would have to be pretty obtuse to believe that a Jewish Communist could organize pious White Russians and religious Polish nationalists, or that ethnic Poles were ready to welcome Jews into their ranks.

Of course, things were quite different across the border in the Soviet Union, where Byelorussian Jews became avid Communists since that doctrine was in power and pressed them to do so. But while less than five miles away the USSR was in many ways the other side of the moon for Dolhinov residents. A couple of young people did sneak across and present themselves as loyal disciples of Stalin but a suspicious secret police quickly bundled them off to far-flung provincial towns or even to prison.

Another reason for the continuing appeal of religious identity, Zionism, Bundism, or emigration over assimilation or Communism was that the Dolhinov Jews had long learned to keep their nose out of the goyim's business. History and religious doctrine taught them that any such intervention was dangerous not just to oneself but for the entire community. Why take up arms against Napoleon or become involved in World War One as if the French, or Czar, or Poles were going to do anything for them? Who knew when the pendulum might swing in the opposite direction? If one waited it out, the problem would go away. This had always been a successful strategy.

That view also reflected the surrounding peasantry's philosophy of life. The peasant sows, the tailor sews, and the blacksmith pounds his hammer. Everyone needs them, no matter who sits on the distant throne. As a Russian peasant proverb puts it, "God is in heaven and the Czar is far away." And the common people are like grass: he who sticks his head up has it cut off.

This idea is embodied in a folktale common to both the Jews and peasants of Dolhinov. A man rescues a snake, pinned down by a rock, from certain death. Yet instead of showing gratitude, the snake wraps around his neck and tries to strangle him. When the man asks, "I saved you and you want to repay me evil for good?" The snake answers, "There's no justice in the world."[21]

The man persuades the snake to let a third party decide what to do. They find a horse, then a dog which both recount their woes at the hands of humanity and urge the snake to strangle him. Using all his powers, the main talks the snake into trying one more judge. This time they pick a fox who cleverly has them reenact the rescue. But once the snake is pinned down, the fox tells the man: "Leave him there to die."

The fox then demands payment and the man promises to keep him well-supplied with chickens. But when the farmer runs out of chickens, he ambushes the fox and kills it with an ax. The story's last line is: "From this we see that there is indeed no truth in the world."

This kind of cynical thinking is a release from the contradiction between the Jews' religious belief that the Holy One deals out justice fairly with their observation that this rarely seems to happen in the world around them. But the story also warns: Don't get involved or you will be hurt. Good intentions don't necessarily lead to good results.

That philosophy—keep your mouth shut, work hard, don't intervene in the outside world--would be central, too, in their response to the Nazis. The Jews of Dolhinov, as in other shtetls, really thought that if they proved themselves valuable workers and didn't cause trouble they would survive a transient German occupation. This approach had worked for centuries with the Russians, Germans, Poles, Soviets—and even the French and Swedes. Indeed, if Nazism had not been such a crazed, anti-pragmatic ideology, the traditional Jewish strategy would have succeeded again.

Equally, every Jew knew, and perhaps only the few Communists among them forgot, that their every deed and word affected the entire community's survival. A tremendous sense of self-consciousness and self-discipline was instilled, characteristics that would later serve their descendants well once they left Dolhinov for other countries. Leonid Andreyovich, a Byelorussian of peasant background born in Dolhinov in 1917 and at age 91 still a remarkably accurate source about life there, understood this well: "Jews always felt oppression but never showed what they thought."

A story recounted by him is a perfect example of this whole style of existence. Down the street from Leonid lived the family of Mendel Rubin who, like many Dolhinov Jews, had relatives in America from whom he periodically received parcels. On one occasion, in 1929, non-Jewish neighbors seeing a package arrive came over to hint that they might get some of the "almost new" clothing it contained. But of course no one would ever ask for anything directly.

Leonid's father said, "Oh, Mendel, you have again received clothes from America."

Mendel scowled, "No one wants to wear it any more so they send it to me." This was no expression of resentment toward cheap relatives but a dismissal to avoid envy, a strategy to avert the evil eye. The message was: this is nothing special; I'm not better off than you and so there is no cause for hatred or jealousy.

From his "outsider" viewpoint--for it was the non-Jews, and especially Byelorussians, who were "outsiders" in Dolhinov and shtetls like it--Leonid made another important observation about the Jews there: "I can't help admiring their organization. They had their own synagogues, schools, teachers, and charity groups."

A propensity toward organization, including philanthropy and public activity, were one of three core characteristics of shtetl Jews that their descendants would carry. The other two were a priority on education and a sense of self-consciousness far in excess of their neighbors. For later generations, what happened in towns like Dolhinov was not some alien world without connection to their present psychology and behavior but rather the very foundation of their character and world view no matter how far away they lived, how many years had passed, or how ignorant they were of having such ancestors.

Precisely because their customs were directed by an explicit, studied and understood set of rules, Jews were self-aware in every aspect of their behavior. Moreover, religious practice and knowledge was not delegated to a priest but was expected to be understood by every male to a high level and by every female on a practical one regarding all life activities.

For later generations of non-Orthodox Jews, the rabbi was made religious specialist; the laypeople mere clients. They became largely passive observers in religion, as in Christian practice, rather than minute-by-minute implementers of it. Yet this traditionally engendered self-consciousness—sometimes raised excruciatingly high—remained a well-known Jewish characteristic, whose religious and social roots were often forgotten. Jews easily became intellectual or cultural figures—as well as psychiatrists and their patients--due to the kind of extreme awareness that so typified their lives in places like Dolhinov.

The same point applies to the extremely intellectually oriented society which put the highest priority not only on study and learning but also on the use of dialectic logic. It was a social structure at least 1900 years old based on voluntary study, love of learning and the laying up of merit by such deeds. The pillars were formed by analytical intelligence: the derivation of meaning from the text and also its practical application. For while the laws of sacrifice at the Temple or the proper management of agricultural lands in the Land of Israel was only thought applicable when the Messiah came, much of this learning was concerned with the proper conduct of one's life. And all of it sharpened the wits. Men who spent much of their time buying grain, hammering out tools, or selling tobacco, daily journeyed through the life of the mind, taking themselves back thousands of years and across thousands of miles.

In this manner, and incorporating the original writing of the Bible as well, Jews were every bit as much the authors of Western civilization as the Greeks. In contrast, however, Jews employed an inductive method—using reasoning on accepted first principles—rather than a

deductive approach. It was Socrates who said that the unexamined life was not worth living, but it would be Jewish communities which collectively put that concept into practice.

The companion of systematic self-consciousness was its outward expression, organization. That is why Jews who lived within the traditional lifestyle had to be geographically concentrated, due to their own needs, not external pressure. Only thus could they have all the facilities needed: synagogue, mikvah, house of study for adults and schools for children, kosher food, employment in accord with Jewish laws and holidays, burial society, and so on. When their descendants abandoned that life-style, they projected backward the excuse that this society had only persisted due to outside compulsion. But that was patently untrue.

With no government or aristocracy of their own, Jewish organization was more bottom-up than top-down. True, the rabbi and wealthiest merchants had the most power but communal participation was still widespread and equality, at least of adult males, was accepted as proper. Dolhinov Jews don't expect their social welfare to be delivered by the government. A communal council passes out food and other necessities to the most needy. If someone hadn't enough money to pay taxes or buy business licenses and police carted off one's possessions, the community would step in and provide rescue. Few are well-off but no one starves.

Now the community extended this approach further, with the Zionist movement and Bund key organizations in this modernization effort: the former concentrating on education; the latter on social welfare. Up until then, Jews had to choose between a purely religious education, and thus never being able to qualify for the more skilled jobs opening up, or going to the Polish school and being alienated from their own people.

In 1932, the Zionists established the Hebrew-language Tarbut (culture) school, a large wooden structure built by the Jews themselves. There 300 students studied in grades 1 through 9. The school was equivalent to a Jewish community day school today except that all the students came from fully observant families. This school was the most important innovation in Dolhinov Jewish life since it had begun four centuries earlier, symbolizing that the community was moving into the modern world rather than building a wall against it. To engage in the systematic study of secular subjects was a huge change especially since education was at the very core of Jewish life. Yet whatever grumbling had took place among rabbis and the pious, the revolution was accepted with little conflict. There is no record of any opposition to the school's establishment or criticism of its conduct from the town's rabbis or most pious circles.

Contrary to the traditional idea of remaining in Dolhinov until the Messiah came, Tarbut taught students that their future would be in the land of Israel. To be accredited, the school had to teach Polish one hour a day but the emphasis was on Hebrew instruction, the language needed for that purpose, and on the skills required by life there. More than 50 of these young people had indeed followed this path before 1939, and that basis in Hebrew would be very handy for the rest when--as no one foresaw--almost all the former students who survived the war did so.

Nahum Lenkin, one of them, later recalled how parents often, "Went without food so they could pay the tuition for their children. They made these sacrifices because the school provided young people their first preparation to go one day as pioneers to Eretz Israel, the land of the workers, the renewed land."

None of this meant that there was a high level of friction between Jewish and Polish students in the state school. Itka Friedman, who came from a modern Orthodox (Mizrahi) Zionist family was one of four Jewish girls in her fourth grade class in the Polish school and had good

relations with her Catholic counterparts. All Christian holidays were celebrated but the Jews did not have to participate. Still, she was happier the next year, 1938, to be sent to Tarbut.

By the time the first class was graduating, young Dolhinov Jews were also able to continue their educations outside of Dolhinov. Avi Yehmiel Yoffe obtained his teaching certificate in Vilna and in 1936 left for the land of Israel where he became a teacher. Avraham Friedman learned auto mechanics in another town, and in 1939, Buske Katzovitz travelled to far-off Grodno to attend a teacher's college. Itke Friedman was planning like many to go to high school in Vilna.

In 1935, the Bund, since it expected Jews to stay in Dolhinov forever—and to be speaking Yiddish as well—took over the G'mach Foundation, funded by the Joint Distribution Committee, an American Jewish charitable organization. The 300 members, representing a large proportion of the Jewish households, held weekly and annual meetings to help businesses get started, expand, and survive. With the Polish boycott of Jewish stores and generally poor business conditions in the late 1930s, it was an especially vital organization.

These two institutions, the school and the credit union, were intended to be the basis for a new prosperous and educated Dolhinov.

Walking around its streets in the 1920s or 1930s, we find some things that match and others that contradict stereotypes. Much about Jewish life in eastern Europe assumed by its offspring derives from the late nineteenth century, when many of their ancestors left and the classics of Yiddish literature were composed. Clothing had changed a lot from the Russian to the Polish era. While pious men still wore beards and older people dressed in traditional clothes, the younger generation looked outwardly like their neighbors, though always wearing their vests with the ritual fringes and their hats. There they are around the town's main square, a name rather too grand for the reality. Little two-story buildings line the square with shops almost smaller than the signs advertising them. Here, all the stores are Jewish: blacksmiths, tailors, shoemakers, cloth sellers, and those who vend a variety of goods. In the middle is an open, dirt-floored area where peasants set up stalls on market day.

Storekeeping families often followed the pattern of Batya Sosensky's parents in their commercial partnership. Her mother, a good businesswoman, travelled to Vilna to buy fabric. Her father minded the store but was too generous in extending credit to customers. He had a special soft spot for families scraping together money to pay for bridegrooms' suits. People would say, "Your father married many couples." Two-thirds of a century later, a Polish resident still living in Dolhinov recalled that the Sosensky's "material was so good, that a suit made from it would make even a humpback look handsome."

But despite the Yiddish humor, these were not the fragile, neurotic Jews of the Woody Allen parody, spindly tailors, or pale young men who'd never been outside a study hall, but strong country Jews used to physical labor and outside work in one of the world's most grueling climates. Indeed, they had more in common with the Israelis of today than with either the Israeli or American Jewish stereotype of the eastern European shtetl Jew.

Most live near the center of the town; others on the north side. But there is no ghetto and many Jews have Polish or Byelorussian neighbors. Almost everyone lives in small, single-floor wooden cottages. A few of the more prosperous live in uglier but no doubt better insulated brick homes, some even two stories high. There are still no town sewers or water system. All the toilets are outhouses; all water comes from wells, both located in backyards, though as far apart

as possible. And while Dolhinov is proud to be a town, not a village, most families have chickens for eggs and dinners; a cow for milk; and, if they need it in their work, a horse and cart.

In the backyard, families grow beets, carrots, cucumbers, onions, peas, carrots, cauliflower, or potatoes. A lot of people have fruit, especially apple and cherry, trees, too. Women tend the gardens, serving fresh produce or preserving them in cellars for winter use. But they did not live by bread, or pickles, alone. The core of Jewish life was never mere subsistence as such but cultural. And though that culture was expressed in religious form, it was the most intellectually oriented mass religion in world history. It is no accident that the Yiddish word used for the synagogue, shul, is equivalent to "school."

Five synagogues are scattered through the town, the core of social and intellectual life. Near the center is the sturdy red brick Big Shul with its matching mikvah next door, along with the Hassidic Shul, and two small ones for workers in the market area—the Market Shul and the humble Shoemakers Shul. On the north side is the New Market Shul. Outdoor weddings, preferable under Jewish law, are held in a space near the main square. On the appropriately named Bathing Street is another mikvah. Dolhinov is, after all, a respectably large place, not just a one-mikvah town.

Young boys still learn in tiny heders, literally rooms. As they got older, many go to the Tarbut school, where they sit in classrooms with girls. The dedicated yeshiva students go onto more senior courses, like the one conducted by the respected melamed Eidel Dokshitski, whose tenure would be fatally interrupted by the Germans. Yeshiva students, aged 18 to 22, meet in the synagogue, where they also sleep. On a less elevated plane, the synagogue is not well heated and there is a scramble for the benches closest to the stove. At least once, a fistfight broke out over the best places. They have "dining nights" with families, for whom it is an honor to host them. The students are expected to impart some Torah wisdom in exchange for the food.

The yeshiva's head was Rabbi Shmaryahu Smorgonski, a highly regarded scholar. Two of his students, became well-known leaders of Orthodoxy in America, the two cousins Yakov Kamenetsky, born in 1891, and Yakov Halevi Ruderman, born ten years later. Kamenetsky would become known as the Dolhinov *ilui*, the genius from Dolhinov. His grandfather had been a wealthy timber merchant who also owned a flour mill but lost everything when Czarist anti-Jewish laws were tightened in the 1880s. The family moved to Dolhinov when Kamenetsky was a baby. There, he found his world at Smorgonski's yeshiva which had about 100 students at the time. His mother packed an oil lamp so he could study late into the night.

After the dawn prayer at synagogue, laborers or those heading out to villages that day, rushed off while shopkeepers or merchants who had a more leisurely morning stayed to study a little Talmud, Mishnah, or Psalms, depending on personal interests and ability. Then the room was turned over to the yeshiva students, who enjoyed the luxury of spending the whole day with the holy books.

Later, those who'd finished their work participated in Talmud and Mishnah study groups taught by knowledgeable but otherwise average people. The less educated might study psalms, chanting and explicating them to each other. Then there were all the social aid groups and burial society. Now there were also Zionist and Bundist political groups which functioned as youth clubs. People worked for a living but their avocation was learning and their entertainment arguing.

Outside of listening to good preaching and study, there were life's simple pleasures. Families gathered to drink black tea in tall glasses, sweetened with homemade cherry jam, made

in a big pot boiling away on the stove. Dolhinov was good orchard country. The cherries—a prized child's job is to remove the seeds--and apples are succulent.

In the summer, barrels of salted herring, cucumbers, and anything else that could be pickled was prepared for winter and laid down in the cool basement. Cabbages, salted and sliced, made fresh sauerkraut. All the usual chores of home had to be performed, including the endless battle against the mud and dust which were always invading homes. Against this enemy, most people wore pants legs tucked into boots.

Then there's the joy of swimming in the summer; skating or sledding in the winter. Yet while the river was a playground in warm weather, in winter the ice along the banks made it dangerous to the unwary who might fall over the edge onto the frozen stream.

Family was everything, but this did not mean people were isolated in a nuclear family unit. Everyone had close relatives in many towns. For centuries, people—especially women—married and moved to places where they already had family connections. Thus, everyone knew cousins in half a dozen or more different places, while names like Rubin, Alperovitz, Kuzinitz, Freedman, and Sosensky, were found throughout the area.

Children were often sent to live with relatives elsewhere for a while. For example, worried about her poor appetite, Batia Sosensky's parents sent her to Myadel, considered the region's most naturally beautiful town, to stay with relatives in hope she'd eat more there. When Batya's mother went to buy fabric in Vilna, she stayed with cousins. The family frequently visited to relatives in different towns. Every family was part of a regional network. Relatives in America kept in touch with letters and sent money.

Within each town, relatives often lived just a few doors apart. For example, there was just one house—that of the Katzovitzs—between that of Batya's family and her mother's sister. My grandfather's sister lived next door to my grandmother's uncle. As adults, my grandmother's brother lived a few feet from his sister.

While the outside world is finding its way into Dolhinov, there is still a great deal of separation from it. There's no local newspaper, though ones from Vilna are available by subscription; few people have radios or telephones. To make a call requires an appointment at the post office. Knowing the news can't be taken for granted, including what that new leader in Germany is saying.

This being a small town, of course, everyone knows everyone, tradesmen and peasants have done business with each other all their adult lives. Everyone has their opinion on who's the best at their trade, where quality is best, and prices lowest. Ready-made clothes are still rare so most people buy cloth, then take it to the tailor of their choice to turn it into clothing. At the counter they look at sample books—to see what's fashionable in Warsaw, or do they already talk of Paris?—and make their orders.

Thursday was market day. Merchants bought wholesale; townspeople got what they needed. Carts clatter in over the rough paving stones, laden with eggs, chicken, and vegetables. Grain is taken to the mill. Peasants tie up their horses at the market square. The wives open their market stalls; the men visited Jewish shops, critically comparing prices.

What did they buy? Everything they couldn't grow or make at home but wouldn't do without: salted herring from barrels for a little variety at meals; kerosene for lamps; oil for frying food; spun flax , needles, buttons, and thread for making homespun clothes, along with cloth for the professional tailors to sew up something better; cheap tobacco, snuff, and pipes, since smoking was one of the few peasant pleasures; boots and shoes, a Dolhinov specialty.

My grandfather was a blacksmith, though he bore no resemblance to the stereotyped hulking, confident man of that trade, being rather small and mournful. He liked the challenge of making keys but horseshoes were probably one of his specialties. My two great uncles were horse traders, the auto dealers of their day. Much of their work was done on market day. They had wagons to travel the countryside, looking for horses to buy, chatting up the peasants in Byelorussian, opening equine jaws to inspect their health, perhaps taking a serious prospect for a test trot.

Every Thursday morning they woke expectantly. Did they employ a peasant to groom the horses, tie their tails nicely, or do it themselves? Had they a stock of funny tales and stories of adventure, true or fables, to warm up their customers? Did one of them mount expertly, putting the horse through its paces, galloping impressively down the street, exaggerating its virtues?

Then came the tough bargaining: two men looking in each other's eyes and calculating precisely how low to offer; how high to demand. Living by their wits, they had to act crudely at times to get along with customers. Did such behavior become part of their rough character or like a garment they put on for working hours, sealing that part of themselves off from family and worship.

Everyone knows acquired traits cannot be transmitted unless, of course, taught. Still, in later life my father—American-born as he was—suddenly acquired an otherwise unaccountable fascination for horses, perhaps derived from stories about these relatives I never heard or passages read aloud from letters long-vanished.

There's also an irony here of which we should be well aware. We're proud of our degrees, our accomplishments. Yet the loss of ability to work metal, or judge a horse, or read a page of Talmud is the disappearance of skills that also produced virtues. There should be no room for snobbishness. Given our devolution in so many respects, one should never be too proud of advances in other areas, nor feel scorn for those who do the most basic types of labor, or for those, on whose shoulders we stand, who performed those feats every day for long decades.

My ancestors on my mother's side, albeit in the Austrian-ruled part of partitioned Poland were, like a few of the Dolhinov Jews, innkeepers. Even if he didn't buy a horse as an excuse, at the end the peasant stopped off at the inn to down some, at times too much, vodka, along with some bread and herring. Life was hard, requiring an artificially induced cloud of euphoria from cheap vodka to get through the next week. Sober or drunk, as night fell they had to manage the horses all the way back home. Or perhaps the horse did the navigating to the accompaniment of somewhat unsteady voices raised loud in song.

Given all that potential for dispute, only twice in a century of Thursdays had there been serious ethnic violence in the town. Such is an astonishing record attesting to the social structure's stability.

Of course, everyone knows each other on a first-name basis, which helps keep things friendly. Yet other than business dealings and neighborhood small-talk, Jews have little contact with the minority Christian population. Lack of contact doesn't signal hostility but merely each group's desire to be apart, to follow its own customs and interests.

Dolhinov is a multicultural society—that obsessive buzzword of today—but it was not a cultural cafeteria where people who lacked any identity of their own patronized those who had one. The underlying philosophy can be summarized as: you have your culture. I have mine. Let's keep it that way, with mutual respect. Religion and ethnicity, language and nation are all one and indivisible. A Pole is a Catholic of Polish descent who speaks Polish; a Jew is a Jew of

Jewish descent who speaks Yiddish; a White Russian is Russian Orthodox and of White Russian descent who speaks Russian. There's no fourth option.

The Poles have their fine Catholic church and the Russians their elegant Russian Orthodox one. As always in life, no matter what the institution, much depends on the individual. It just so happens that the Catholic priest is friendly toward Jews, while the Russian Orthodox priest preaches inciteful, anti-Semitic sermons. Is this difference due to some profound historical reason? No it just happens to be the personality and view of the man holding that office at that time.

By the time the Russia of the czars fell, the kaiser's army had come and gone for the first time, and the Soviet Union and Poland were born, my grandparents had left. But almost all their siblings remained. Chaya Doba Rubin was my grandfather Yakov Yeremayahu's sister, younger by 16 years. Since he left Dolhinov for America in 1909 when she was just three, she had no memory of him. She married Aharon Perlmutter and they had a son, Haim, in 1930. Letters were exchanged; my grandparents, Yaakov and Chaya, sent money home regularly. But no one in my family who once crossed the wide ocean ever again saw anyone who didn't.

The letters are gone, misplaced by people who no longer valued them, the distancing of generations from tear-stained keepsakes to distant indifferences, or lost in a fire on the American side; abandoned with everything else in 1942 on a day when the recipients' dead bodies paved Dolhinov's streets. If one takes the trouble to look very hard, though, there are two clues of that emotional bond, like fossils buried deep, waiting to be painstakingly excavated.

The first clue is this: thousands of miles away from Dolhinov, in Washington DC, Yaakov, now Jacob, was rushed to the hospital in late January 1933, for an appendicitis operation, infection set in, and he died, aged only 42. In his will, he left $100 a month—a princely sum for Dolhinov in those days—to his mother and sister. When she heard of the death of the brother she'd never really met, Chaya was pregnant and immediately decided to name her child after him. And so he became Yakov, and my little great uncle carried that until his death nine years later from a Nazi bullet, probably fired by a Latvian or Lithuanian voluntary executioner.

My grandmother, Chaya Grosbein, also left behind a sister, Rachel, as well as a brother, Shmuel. The two siblings must have been close personally as they lived only four doors away from each other in the north part of town. Both Shmuel and Rahel's husband, Yirimayahu Dimenshtein, were horse dealers. Shmuel's partner was married to a Rubin and still another Rubin family lived between them. They all knew how they were related, each other's character, habits, appearance. I don't.

In the Dolhinov Jewish cemetery stands the second clue, the handsome tombstone closest to the gate, a place of honor, is that of Chaya's, Shmuel's, and Rahel's father, Pinhas Leib Grosbein, who died in 1926. It is unexpectedly elegant in comparison to all the others. That cost money and Pinhas Leib was not rich, nor were Rahel or Shmuel. Clearly, the marble was paid for by money that crossed the Atlantic. Sometimes, love and respect can be carved in stone.

The unspeaking but all-remembering earth remains where the mourners stood that day, though their footprints have long blown away. Still, who knows what molecules of them have been left behind, stray strands of DNA, from dead or mourners whose copies still travel the earth. Yet of all the members of Chaya Doba's, Shmuel's, and Rahel's immediate families who no doubt stood there that day, not one would survive what was to come.

Even without expecting such a horrible denouement, the Jews of Dolhinov had good reason to dread the outside world. There were enough experiences bringing to life their fears: tax collectors, armies seizing unwilling recruits, soldiers chasing loot, some word or gesture that set off an avalanche ending in a pogrom, dangerous engagement in politics, or losing one's faith and identity.

There were also stories of events transcending life's normal bounds. Why should that surprise those for whom heaven was so close; space and time might be leaped in a single mental bound; ghosts seemed to walk, and demons to prowl. What could be supernatural if what was natural could be defined in such different ways? There were local stories told and accepted which proved that very point.

One was of the Jewish stranger who arrived in Dolhinov pursuing a dream in which is a missing son revealed his burial place. He was invited to into a home; shared the family's dinner of homemade bread, pickled herring, boiled potatoes, and cream; and given a soft, feather bed for the night. The next day, after prayers, a group of Jews accompanied him up the road to Vilna. And sure enough, at the very place the father pointed out, they found the son's shallow grave, from which they returned as mourners and interred him in the Jewish cemetery.[22]

The lack of names and dates make one skeptical. But if you've ever had a similar experience—in my case a terrible nightmare of imminent death which, only later and with no prior warning whatsoever, coincided with the moment of my grandmother's death thousands of miles away—such an story cannot be ruled out entirely.

Unfortunately, there can be even less doubt of the horrors purveyed by humans directly. And so it was told by Miriam, then 14 years old, that one Friday as she was outside hanging up just-washed clothes to be clean for the oncoming Sabbath, she saw two srong young Polish men seize her 16-year-old brother Yankel and tie him to a horse with long ropes.

"Stop, stop! What are you doing"? She shouted in Polish.

As she tried to stop them, one pushed her and she fell. The other said, "Your miserable son stole a chicken from our backyard."

"I'll pay you anything, just let him go," she cried, begging and pleading.

"Keep quiet, you old Jew, or we will take your daughter, too. Go and ask the priest for a letter saying that he is not a Bolshevik and we will let him go." He slapped the horse and it galloped off, dragging the screaming Yankel behind it.

Miriam and her mother ran into the town to the big Catholic church, a place Jews never went. At the door she cried in terror, "Mr. Priest, Mr. Priest, I need you."

He came out wearing his long robe and skullcap, asking gently, "What is the matter?" Sobbing, she explained, and he replied, "Of course I will write the letter. I remember how your father sewed all my clothes and my father's. Whenever I came for a fitting he would give me a nice biscuit to eat."

She took the note and raced home, with sympathetic townspeople, both Jewish and Polish, following. When they arrived, both men and horse were gone. Only Yankel's corpse remained. The screaming mother, beyond consolation, was taken away by shocked neighbors.

Not all terrors were man-made or supernatural. For Batya Sosensky, her happy childhood ended when her mother died in an epidemic in 1939. "My life stopped at that moment."

Still, these were the worst conceivable disasters imaginable because they all took place on an individual level. It wasn't that the community had been coddled or was naive. The people of Dolhinov had lived through four wars in eight years, occupied by five different armies—

Russian, German, Byelorussian, Soviet, and Polish—yet the town was little damaged, few had been hurt, and nothing much had changed. Three completely distinct groups had lived together almost always at peace from a time before the Protestant religion existed, Europeans lived in North America, or William Shakespeare was born.

Who could imagine their worst nightmares multiplied by a million, a situation in which every resident of the town, Catholic or Jewish, would either be killed, exiled, or flee for their lives never to return? The Jews of Dolhinov knew they were a people, not just a religious group. Even as they might hotly debate their future, they certainly expected to have one that would be a common future.

After all, to endure had always meant to survive. That was the lesson history had taught them, Jews, Byelorussians, and Poles alike. In passivity lay safety, the Jews had understood, the best way to avoid dangerous conflict was to stay out of the world of the majority. Yet traditional society remained remarkably intact. Even when modernity intruded it was successfully reinterpreted in the context of those communities.

Today, we think ourselves so secure and society so fail-safe as to recognize no boundaries. Guidelines of ten thousand years are abandoned with indifference, tremendous risks are taken without even realizing fate has been tempted. No value is sacred, no divine or social restriction worth respecting. Yet in our security we stumble.

"Tradition," says Woody Allen, "is the illusion of permanence." And what happens if one abandons even that illusion, one can ask a man who chose to have no offspring as the ultimate rejection of continuity. If permanence is an illusion, transience is even more so.

For the Jews of Dolhinov, tradition was no illusion of permanence but the preservation of it. Only when the community ceased to be—due to outside, not internal forces—could anyone believe such things. Inside the bubble—if bubble it was, then the walls were made of spiritual steel--it seemed immortal, though its citizens were so very much all too far from being so.

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[1] Selecki, Kronika Historyczna, p. 111. Translated by Alexandra Weldon for this volume.

[2] Norman Stone, The Eastern Front, p. 184.

[3] Quoted in Konard Zielinski, The Shtetl in Poland 1914-1918, p. 104.

[4] Peter Brock, Testimonies of Conscience Sent from the Soviet Union to the War Resisters' International, 1923-1929 (1997) pp. 31-32 and 41. See also Document 31 *WR,* No. 18, November 1927, p. 6. God's Playground 400-401 Lord D'Abernon

[4] Stephen F. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik

[5] God's Playground 400-401 Lord D'Abernon

[6] A good overall view is given by Leonid Smilovitsky "A Demographic profile of the Jews in Belorussia from the pre-war time to the post-war time" Journal of Genocide Research 2003, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 117-129.

[7] Stephen F. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888–1938, (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 101.

[8] http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Mission_of_The_United_States_to_Poland,_Henry_Morgenthau,_Sr._Report.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Henry Morgenthau, Sr., Report of the American Commission to Negotiation Peace, Mission to Poland, Paris, Oct. 3, 1919, Text on http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Mission_of_The_United_States_to_Poland,_Henry_Morgenthau,_Sr._Report

[11] Richard M. Watt, Bitter Glory (NY, 1982), pp. 361-2

[12] Richard M. Watt, Bitter Glory, NY 1982, p. 352.

[13] Ewald Ammende, Human Life in Russia 142

[14] Ibid., p. 144.

[15] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

[16] Ibid., pp. 66-67

[17] Morgenthau, op. cit.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Nowogrodek Polish Business Directory, 1929. For the full text, see http://data.jewishgen.org/wconnect/wc.dll?jg~jgsearch~model1~nowo1929.

[20] The owner of the hotel was a women from the Ryer family, her first name was Zina (probably Sayne in Yiddish).

[21] Told by Wolf Sosenski to Dinah Behar. "There is No Truth in the World," in Dan Ben-Amos, Folktales of the Jews, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 288-290. I have changed the word from truth to what I believe is a more accurate translation of what is intended in the story.

[22] Mary Kropman,"Why Leave Home and Leaving Home," unpublished manuscript, was told this story by her mother, Rachel Grosbein, as an event she witnessed as a young girl in Dolhinov.

CHAPTER FIVE
STALIN COMES TO DOLHINOV

"It is important that we know where we come from, because if you do not know where you come from, then you don't know where you are, and if you don't know where you are, then you don't know where you're going. And if you don't know where you're going, you're probably going wrong."

--Terry Pratchett, I Shall Wear Midnight

At 3 AM on September 17, 1939, Count Konstantin Niezabytowski was awakened by loud noises outside his two-story estate house, just east of Dolhinov. His beautiful two-story home overlooked the river that marked Poland's border with the Soviet Union. Sometimes he took visitors and his favorite dog out onto a small island from which you could literally throw a stone into the USSR.

The house, which had been in his family for centuries, featured a conservatory where his slim wife with fashionable bobbed hair tended her prized flowers and a huge library. In an adjoining building stood their carriage and a stable of fine horses, holdovers in the age of automobiles which had not yet fully come to Dolhinov. Niezabytowsky was a handsome, distinguished-looking man in his fifties. His well-clipped goatee and moustache were white but his slightly receding hair was still a rich brown. Konstantin was a good rider, dog fancier, and a landowner who took his duties seriously.

Being a forward-looking man, he was not just a frivolous nobleman content to spend his rent income on luxuries. He also owned a flour mill, brought in new agricultural techniques and, only a couple of years earlier, had established the town's first electric generator just two years' earlier.

Niezabytowski was used to smugglers crossing the frontier. It was easy enough to get across. Both sides were thickly wooded and the banks weren't at all steep. But smugglers thrived on quiet and whatever was going outside his home was making quite a racket.

Then he heard what sounded like shooting. Putting on his dressing gown quietly, so as not to alarm his family whose sleep was also turning into waking and wondering, Konstantin went out onto his veranda to peer across the fields. He only had a second to make out the most astonishing sight of his life: hundreds of armed men were pouring across his property. Trampling the grass were soldiers beyond number, uniformed and grim, moving swiftly through the fields, an entire army.

But he had only seconds to take in this nightmarish vision. Suddenly, another shot rang out and Niezabytowsky fell to the floor, wounded and bleeding badly, the first victim of the Soviet invasion of Poland. When Soviet soldiers grabbed Konstantin and dragged him away, his wife saw that he was living but he was never seen again.

Panic-stricken, his wife and children, still in pajamas and only half-awake, ran out the back door toward town. Panting, confused, and in shock, they ran past the swamps on their left, and on the right they passed the Catholic cemetery where their own ancestors were buried.

Above them on the left was a steep hill on which the Jewish cemetery stood. They didn't need to go far before they reached the home of Piotr and Eugenia Sinetsky Bilewicz.

The Bilewicz and Sinetsky families were pillars of Dolhinov life for generations. Eugenia's father, Anthony Sinetzky, had been the town doctor for a generation. Piotr, an engineer, had inherited from his father-in-law the job as trusted manager of Konstantin's grain mill, at the end of Ulika Plutskeva street, and had then added to that the same post for his new electrical power plant when it opened in 1937. So close was the two men's association that, to be nearer his boss, Piotr had moved his family in 1936 to a new home he built, a one-story cottage, the first house between the Niezabytowski estate and town.

Piotr was kept busy between these two demanding, full-time jobs, running between the mill and power plant, then up to the Niezabytowsky manor house to the east of town to give reports and get instructions.

Convenient as the new house's location was for Piotr's work, though, his daughter, Zdzislawa, found it hard to sleep at night surrounded by so many who had already passed on from this world. Other than that, though, it was a wonderful life for the Polish children. Swimming in summer; sledding, skating, and skiing in winter. The family had a radio and received the daily newspapers from Vilna. Families were close and religion for them, as for the Jews, was the center of life. As a special treat, the children might be taken for a ride in Dr. Sadowski's Chevrolet, practically the only private car in town.

Zdzislawa attended the seven-year state school and when she started the eighth grade the family sent her to Vileika as a boarder with her aunt to continue her education. That's where the onset of war found her in 1939.

As the Niezabytowskis pounded on the door, it was not the signal of war for Poland, because Poland was already at war. Sixteen days earlier, on September 1, Germany had attacked. The Polish state was already doing everything possible to survive against overwhelming odds. Trenches were dug on farms, members of patriotic groups like Henryk Bilewicz given guns. Two men were stationed in the post office and town hall to prepare to destroy sensitive documents and to organize the evacuation of the town's people if the Germans approached.

But these were plans for a last-ditch defense of Dolhinov by Polish forces retreating ahead of the advancing Germans. Without troops or fortifications, Dolhinov couldn't hold out five minutes against a full-scale, surprise and stab-in-the-back Soviet invasion.

Accepting the inevitable, the local company of Polish border guards and the police raced out of town that morning, heading for Vileika to join the army in making a heroic but helpless stand.

In the nearby countryside, peasants were awakened by gunfire as the Soviets wiped out border police outposts. At 6 AM, two battered Polish soldiers from an outlying watchtower, one of whom still hadn't had time to pull on his boots, bicycled in from the village of Milcza yelling that the Bolsheviks were attacking. Overhead, Soviet reconnaissance planes with red stars on their wings looked down onto the countryside. As the town awoke, a Polish resident recalled, "The atmosphere was gloomy and terrifying….People were more and more depressed and sad."

Thirty miles away, Zdzisława Bilewicz--daughter of Piotr and Eugenia—awoke in Vileika, where her family had sent her to attend high school, to discover that the Soviet Union had invaded Poland. For more than two weeks, the Germans had been advancing into Poland from the west, prompting hundreds of thousands of people to flee east, Now, this morning, others were running westward as well.

Zdzislwa quickly dressed and went downstairs to the parlor. She was boarding with the family of the town librarian, a friend of her family. There'd been rumors of a Soviet invasion, she later recalled, "But nobody could figure out what that would mean." Were they coming to help Poland defend itself against the Germans, as some thought? But those who believed their country's old enemy would be its savior, an understandable exercise in wishful thinking, were outdated. Nazi Germany and Communist USSR were now allies. It didn't take long, Zdzisława said, "For people to realize this was not a friendly visit from Russia."

Meanwhile, though, refugees clogged the road and confusion reigned. Nobody knew what was happening. Polish radio stations had been knocked off the air. Almost no one had a telephone and calls could only be made by reservation at the local post office. That afternoon, a horse and carriage suddenly pulled up to the house where Zdzislawa was living. The driver hurriedly explained that Piotr had sent him to get her home safely. She was summoned to climb in as fast as possible, with no time to take much with her.

They set off immediately, driving past panicking crowds, crying children, carts heaped with possessions. She saw the chaos on the ground and sensed the fear in the air. Poles headed west, away from the Russians; Jews east, away from the Germans. Yet it all was, as a Polish writer later described that scene, the "road to nowhere." With Germans to the west and Soviets to the east, the noose was tightening by the moment.

Zdzislawa, however was in good hands. Despite the tangle on the roads, the carriage made good time. The driver, who knew every inch of the area, simply left the road and whipped his horse, bumping along through the fields. Finally, she arrived home, hugged and kissed by her relieved parents. Yet any sense of safety she felt was short-lived. There was the Niezabytowsky family still in their pajamas huddled in the parlor, fearing the worst.

Then, too, one of her own family members was missing. When the border guards and police had pulled out of town that morning, a few civilians too young to be drafted proudly ran away from home to fight alongside them. Henryk Bilewicz was one of them, along with his friends, 15-year-old Antoni Leszkiewicz, Adam Odorski, Witold Kuncewicz, Kostek Jackiewicz, Józef Szydło and Józefa Michałowska.

A week later, though, the soldiers and police from Dolhinov were surrounded and captured. The young people, however, did not give up so easily. While being transported to a prisoner-of-war camp in a horse-drawn wagon, they escaped. Travelling by night they returned home and created a secret organization called the "Strzelec" group and took an oath to fight for Poland's independence until death. And so, the Bilewicz family was reunited. But for how long?

During those first days of Soviet occupation, amiable but well-armed Russian soldiers milled around everywhere in the town, confused to find themselves outside their own hermetically sealed country for the first time. They enlisted men among them had no idea whether they were liberators or conquerors or if the townspeople were to be treated as comrades or class criminals.

Many Poles and Jews wanted to believe at the onset that the Soviets were coming to aid them in holding off the Germans. Some of the Byelorussians thought of the Russians as cousins who would help them in particular. Moscow itself claimed this was a mission to liberate the Byelorussian and Ukrainian—though not Jewish—minorities from the alleged horrors of Polish oppression.

What nobody in Dolhinov or among those soldiers knew at the time, or for many years later, was that the Soviets and Nazis had secretly coordinated their invasions in a new partition of

Poland. Hitler and Stalin were simply reenacting what their aristocratic predecessors had done in the late eighteenth century.

In seeking to conquer Europe, Hitler well knew that a two-front war, against counries to his east and west simultaneously, would put Germany in a disastrous strategic situation. True, Britain and France had engaged in appeasement, watching him march into Austria and Czechoslovakia. But clearly their willingness to surrender had its limits.

The Soviet Union had been his Great Satan. Yet in a sense while opposite in appearance, the two dictatorships did have a number of features in common, indeed in some ways Hitler modeled his movement on the Soviet Communist party and his state on the totalitarian USSR. The Soviets had developed an alliance with Germany before Hitler came to power, in the 1920s, since both opposed the existing European order. The Soviets helped Germany secretly build up its military, especially the air force, even after Hitler took power.

And so the Germans understood two essential things: they needed Soviet raw materials for their war machine and they had to ensure Soviet neutrality in order to launch their war. The strategy was to seize vast lands in the east at almost no cost, win the war in the west, and then at some point in the future to turn on the USSR. Hitler would thus become the master of Europe and plunge that continent, and indeed the entire world, into 1,000 years of horror. This required, however, that Stalin be first ally, then victim.

Stalin, whose purges had just decimated his own party and army, was also eager for a deal. He fired his Jewish foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov, as a signal of his turn away from making any collective security pact with the west Europeans, and as a symbol of his preparation to sacrifice the Jews. He is also pulling the rug out from under the French and British, who sent a last-minute delegation to Moscow to try to persuade Stalin to work with them. Yet, after all, they aren't going to turn over whole countries to his tender mercies; the Germans have far more to offer him.

It is surely a remarkable irony that the modern world's most murderously paranoid leader selected as the one man he could trust none other than Adolf Hitler. Did he do so partly out of some sense of psychological kinship, an idea made credible by the Soviet dictator's extreme, almost fraternal, credulity toward his counterpart?

At any rate, together they engaged in one of history's most remarkable partnerships. On August 23, 1939, German Foreign Minister Joachim Von Ribbentrop flew to Moscow to make the deal to carve up eastern Europe. Either ignoring orders, never getting them, or out of sheer disbelief, a Soviet antiaircraft unit near the border opened fire on Von Ribbentrop's plane, forcing it to land until matters were cleared up. One doesn't want to think of those soldiers' fate.

Von Ribbentrop finally did arrive in Moscow, met Stalin, and signed the fateful agreement. Dolhinov is too small to appear on the map by name, but perhaps Stalin pressed his pen or hand down on it as he writes. At that moment, the monstrous dictator squashes the little town he's never heard of and most of its people out of existence.

There is feasting and toasts. Stalin, with a big smile on his face—so wide as to be frightening but also showing sincere happiness—raises his glass to toast Hitler. What has just happened? Nominally, the two countries have signed a non-aggression pact. More than that, however, it is in fact an alliance. And it certainly isn't a non-aggression pact against Poland (to be partitioned between the two); Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia (to be swallowed up by the Soviets; and Finland and Romania (some of whose territory the Soviets seize). Those parts of the agreement are kept secret.

Only one week later, Germany marches into western Poland, thus setting off World War Two, in which an estimated fifty million people die. The Nazis don't have to worry about a two-front war—until they blunder into creating one for themselves. Soviet raw materials fuel the German war machine, bypassing the British blockade.[1] Would Hitler have gone ahead even without the pact with Stalin? Probably not.

And so the Germans invade Poland on September 1, 1939; on September 17, 1939, the USSR joins in the feast. Its share also brings Stalin control over two million more Jews.

Ten days later, Von Ribbentrop arrives back in Moscow's airport at 6pm. After a brief rest and refreshments he meets with Stalin from 10 PM to 1 AM and then again the next day from 3 to 6:30 PM. Business concluded, there's dinner at the Kremlin, time for one act of ''Swan Lake" at the Bolshoi—with the dying swans a fit prelude to the dead Poland—and back to work at midnight. The talks continue until 5 am when the agreement is signed. Von Ribbentrop takes a nap and then gets back on the plane at 12:40 pm.

The agreement signed is as brief as the visit. The two countries are "to reestablish peace and order in keeping with their national character" as they divide up Poland. For the Germans, the national character of the Jews is to die; the Slavs to be turned into slaves. For the Soviets, all are to have no more national character at all.

Stalin says that the Germans desire peace and he offers a toast: "I know how much the German nation loves its Fuhrer; I should therefore like to drink to his health." As the German foreign minister leaves, Stalin has some words of special importance for him: "The Soviet government takes the new pact very seriously. I guarantee on my word of honor that the Soviet Union would not betray its partner." It was one of the few promises Stalin didn't break. It was one of the many promises that Hitler did.

But what does this mean for the earth below, the little people on their daily round of existence, or lack thereof?

In Dolhinov, little Asia Hefetz, my distant cousin, has a child-like interpretation of what was happening. Hearing people speak of the Bolsheviks coming, she thought it to be an invasion by giants, since that was the Russian word for "big." Her father, Mendel, called a family meeting to explain: "We are now going to be poor people, very poor. But," with that optimism on the abyss's edge so typical of Dolhinov and other shtetl Jews used to that location, he added, "on the positive side, you will all have a chance to study."

The Soviets, he accurately predicted, would repeal the quotas on Jews entering universities. Indeed, he himself had only become a pharmacist by going to the USSR in order to study pharmacy. Having lived there, however, he also knew better than anyone in Dolhinov what life was like under Soviet rule. Mendel warned everyone to be very careful, "The walls have ears." Anything they said could cause terrible trouble.

"It was strange, when the Russians came," recounted Ida Friedman, "life became poorer but also more free. The years under the Poles were very difficult because there was a lot of antisemitism." For the Poles, however, it looked quite different. There was no bright side, only a descent from power to powerlessness.

Still, nothing they'd experienced in either Czarist or Polish times prepared the people of Dolhinov for the modern mobilization state. Previous governments, dictatorial or democratic, had wielded power lightly and from afar, leaving alone people's religious and personal lives. Now, in the Communist and Nazi regimes, they would face rulers determined to control every detail of their existence, kill large numbers of people, and tear apart the town's social fabric.

There is much, however, no one knows--in Dolhinov or anywhere else—about just how bad things are in the Soviet Union. The bodies are hidden so well, so deep, it will take many decades to dig them up. Within an hour's drive from Dolhinov, at Kuropaty near Minsk, daily executions are carried out from 1937 to 1941, Soviet-style a single bullet to the back of the head. There are as many as 100,000 corpses created by mass-production methods. For the first two years, they're Soviet citizens; during the last two, most will be Polish.[2]

Almost a score of years' earlier, counting back from 1939, there was no such distinction. Everyone in Dolhinov is nominally a citizen and definitely a subject of Russia, but that had not made them Russians, merely serfs of the Czar should his minions choose to notice them. Poles and Jews alike, they have not been Russianized, don't read Pushkin, don't see themselves as tied to Moscow, have never been in Red Square.

The 1921 treaty put Dolhinov just inside Poland's border. If the line had moved a mosquito's whisker to the east, everyone's fate would have totally different. Communism would have been implanted, like it or not. Three miles away is what claims to be utopia but between 1921 and 1939 the Soviet Union might as well be on the moon's other side.

Why was Dolhinov the first place to be captured and turned almost instantly into an integral part of the Soviet empire? Between 1921 and 1939, the Soviet Union began just beyond the town's eastern edge, stretching away from there into Siberia, all the way to China, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. A massive realm ringed by what would later be called an iron curtain but already as insulated from the world as any place could be made by human effort.

On the Soviet side of the border, photos, painting, portraits of Stalin glare down at you; you look up at him. The secret police look over your shoulder. As one of Stalin's subjects later put it, a man could barely speak honestly to his wife, in bed at night, and even then only with the covers pulled over their heads. It is a land of tyranny where a single word, even a joke, can plunge one into torture, slave labor in frozen starvation, death in a basement or open field.

Lyubov Gorelik, an accountant in Mogilev near Dolhinov but on the Soviet side of the border, got off easy: two and a half years' in prison in 1941 for telling a joke.[3] Four years later, a young Red Army officer named Alexander Solzhenitsyn would get eight years in a concentration camp for the same crime, but his joke was about Stalin and perhaps funnier.

Compared to this, Poland is a paradise of individual freedom, though politically it was an easy-going dictatorship. For Jews, university education was restricted and government employment closed. But the government recognized and even subsidized their religious and communal institutions, while Jewish political parties held many seats in parliament. In Dolhinov's government school, Jews, Poles and Russians were all welcome, and each could attend religion classes taught by the clergyman of their respective faith.

Perhaps people thousands of miles away can believe Soviet propaganda but not those who can practically look out their windows and see how like the USSR is to a prison. No one likely to be critical goes in, no one critical within still breathes, no one but trusted agents go out. So what do they have to hide over on the other side?

In 1939, the Soviet utopia came to them any way, reclaiming those who'd temporarily escaped its embrace. Now Dolhinov would experience everything Soviet in highly concentrated form: twenty years of Soviet indoctrination, repression, and social transformation condensed there in that many weeks.

The first Soviet priority was to hold elections in which the people "begged" them to annex eastern Poland. Committees were set up to ensure elections were conducted the "proper"

way. People were forced to attend meetings where speakers enthusiastically endorsed joining of the territory to the USSR. Not to vote was to court arrest and deportation. Ballots were often numbered or even already filled out. The pro-Communist councils so elected immediately asked for annexation and the Soviets complied.

"It took several months," the Polish historian Jan Gross later explained, "for the Jews, Ukrainians and Byelorussians to realize…that if there weren't any second-class citizens in these lands any more it was because all had been deprived of their rights and there weren't any citizens left there at all, only subjects."[4]

The pressure split the town, peeling away the old system of balances, opening up the gaps between communities. Byelorussians, at least at first, supported the Soviets; Poles opposed them; Jews were divided. Some Jews greeted the Red Army, others didn't. Similarly, while some Jews benefited, others were punished.

The Poles had no interest in Communism. They had the Catholic church as their national religion and know those on the other side are atheists. They had Polish nationalism as their creed and know those on the other side are Russians, who once ruled them repressively, then attacked them, and now want to overturn their society. So who cares that the Russians called themselves Communist, which in fact made them even worse?

There is no question, of course, that Poles are the worst-treated group. They know the Soviets were there to destroy their country, language, and religion. Understandably, to say the least, they don't like it.

Józef Leszkowicz, a Dolhinov resident, describes what happened to his family when the Soviets arrived:

"One day a furious Soviet soldier burst into our house, yelling at my father and asking why there was no red flag on the building. My father said we did not have one. The soldier shouted in Russian, `Give me your Polish flag!' My father went upstairs and brought the flag we used to hang out for Polish national holidays.

"The soldier grabbed it, angrily tore off the white half, and said "Here is your red flag! Hang it outside the house!" Desecrating a Polish flag was very shocking to me. It became a symbol of Poland torn apart by two invaders. There were a lot of these `red' flags made of damaged Polish ones hung out on our Mickiewicza street. I will never forget this awful experience."

Within days of the invasion, more than 4,315 people in Soviet-occupied Belarus were arrested, tried by three-officer NKVD juries, and always convicted, people who'd been on the Soviet arrest list before a single Red soldier lifted his foot over the boundary line. The first to go were ethnic Poles who'd fled the USSR after the revolution and Polish ex-soldiers—"military settlers"—who'd been granted land in Poland's wild east in recognition of their heroism in the war against the Soviets two decades earlier.

Tomasz Szczebiot, who fit both categories, must have been close to being Soviet public enemy number one. An ethnic Pole and former Czarist army captain who fought against the Communists in the Soviet-Polish war, he was living quietly in a village near Dolhinov where he was a deputy of the county supervisor. He was arrested, taken to the Vileika jail, and shot by firing squad in April 1940.

By the time the Soviets were driven out by the Germans twenty months later, almost 125,000 Polish citizens—Jews, Ukrainians, and most of all Poles, were deported. And this does not include the tens of thousands of people seized in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the rest of Poland. In Polish-ruled Belarus, as many as one in four Polish adult males were seized, beaten or tortured, thrown into vans or railway cars, and shipped off to Russia, few of them ever to return to Poland and none at all to Dolhinov itself.[5]

Used as slave miners, farmhands, and lumberjacks, with no quarter for the young or old, riddled with disease, they were given inadequate clothing and shelter in harsh climates. No wonder so few survived.

Among them were the widow and children of Niezabytowski and Jews as well, including the family of my great uncle, Mendel Hefetz, whose crime was being a moderately successful merchant. Aharon Rubin, another Zionist who had once been wealthy—he still lived in one of the town's few two-story homes--but lost everything in a business reverse, was accused of making a pro-Zionist remark to another man in synagogue and quickly found himself on the way to Siberia, too.

The Soviet authorities didn't care that the accuser, another Jew, was renting a house from Rubin and knew he'd become its owner as payment for his informing, even if he made up the story. There is, however, some justice in the universe. As a result, Rubin survived the war in the USSR; the man who got him deported died in the Dolhinov ghetto.

Most of the Soviet victims—instant enemies of the people—had been leaders of either the Polish or Jewish people. So of which people were they enemies? Anyone active in Polish politics or who could be described as being among the ethnic Polish elite--town officials and policemen; doctors and lawyers; teachers and landowners--were deported. Polish Dolhinov never recovered. It was more ethnic cleansing than class struggle.

What of the Byelorussians? After 20 years under ferocious Soviet rule, many ethnic Byelorussians and Ukrainians on the Soviet side of the border would later welcome and collaborate with the Germans. In Poland itself, though, Byelorussians did not yet have any grudge against the Communist system. Their bad experience has been with Polish, not, Soviet rule.

At times during previous years when Polish Power weighs on them, no doubt they think of Russian Power. The church they go to is the Russian Orthodox Church, some chauvinism they may imbibe from it. They will not go to Russia, but if Russia comes to them they will rally to it, cheer the Red Army, and work with the Soviet administration.

As head of the town council and chief of police the Soviets install Byelorussians from villages nearby, both named Kozak though they are not close relatives. The communal council moves into the post office building on the town's main square—it is still a post office today. In some Byelorussian villages, people erect welcome gates to show their pleasure at having the Red Army there. Even with these people, however, the Soviets will wear out their welcome rather quickly.

With the Poles mistrusted and Byelorussians lacking the necessary education to run the town and economy, the Soviets turned to Jews. Since there are no adult Communists in town, they ordered successful Jewish businessmen to take the administrative positions and respected Jewish artisans to run the workshops. Yosef Shinuk had more serious military experience than any other Jew in Dolhinov. During World War I, he'd been an Austro-Hungarian army officer and was captured by the Russians in 1917. He escaped from a near-by camp, made his way to

Dolhinov, and was hidden there by the Muschcart family. Yosef married one of the family's three daughters and stayed in Dolhinov after the war.

Shinuk was tall, strong, and spoke perfect Polish. In contrast to those who grew up in Dolhinov, he had a big-city background and socialized easily with the local Polish elite. He also was quite capable of throwing out any troublemakers. And so he took over maintaining law and order when the Poles pulled out, at the old government's invitation—according to his son—or at the new regime's order. The Soviets sent him for training, he was made a major, and became second-in-command for the district police, based in Krivichi.

Jews did have some indirect advantages from the Soviet standpoint. They didn't hold government jobs, weren't Polish nationalists, and preferred Soviet to German rule. So while almost all Poles could be considered enemies and Byelorussians perhaps friendly but lacking needed skills, the Jews could be divided into two categories. On one hand were the Zionists, Bundists, the extremely religious, and those judged to be bourgeois, who would be classified as hostile. The rest, including a tiny minority of Communists, could be coopted. And if Dolhinov did have anything that could be described as a proletariat it was overwhelmingly Jewish.

In addition, the Soviets correctly understood that the Jews posed little threat to them. In general, as one man from a nearby town put it, "The [Communist] Party knew that we Jews didn't have any political aspirations and only wanted to work and live in peace."[6]

At the same time, though, the Soviets were determined to destroy Judaism as a religion and the Jewish community as an entity. Poland had best treated Judaism and Jews when it left them alone and let the community continue to function. Jews might be discriminated against in the public sphere but were left their own private sphere. Despite their complaints against the system, Dolhinov Jews had thrived in this atmosphere. They are religious in creed; Jews first and foremost in loyalty; small businessmen or artisans in trade; traditionalists, Bundists, or Zionists in politics.

In the USSR, however, the most basic aspects of their way of life are forbidden: synagogues closed, religious education banned, all commerce is in the regime's hands. And thus the religious knew Communism is godless; the shopkeepers that their stores would be expropriated, Zionists and Bundists that their groups would be banned, themselves imprisoned. A few idealistic youths dream of utopia but that's about all the ideological forces Uncle Joe Stalin can muster in town.

The two leaders of Dolhinov's dozen Communists were Shmuel Halperin and Benny Feinsilber, both in their early twenties. The two men had much in common. Both came from financially secure families which had come on hard times due to the deaths of parents, were the youngest children, and the sole Communists in otherwise energetically Zionist and religious families.

Halperin was the son of a distinguished rabbi who had studied at the most prestigious yeshiva alongside Chaim Bailik, who later became Israel's national poet. But his father died when Halperin was an infant. Two of his siblings emigrated to the Land of Israel before the war.

Feinsilber had been taken as a teenager to Vilna by his older brother, Abrasha, who was working there. Growing up in a big-city atmosphere he was radicalized. Drafted into the Polish army in the late 1930s, Benny had been given a hard time, either for his ethnicity or his politics, and had fled to the USSR, returning to Dolhinov with the Red Army in 1939, then fleeing with them when the Soviets retreated in 1941.

Both of them broke with the movement after the war's end. Halperin was on his way to Israel in the mid-1950s when he was killed in an auto accident in Austria. His sister, Sonia, studied in Moscow and became a surgeon. But seeing the handwriting on the wall, got out of the USSR to Israel in the early 1950s just in time before Stalin's crackdown on Jewish doctors would have sent her to prison.

Feinsilber, too, made it to Israel after becoming a lawyer in the USSR. I had hoped he would give me a vivid picture of what it was like to be a Communist in Dolhinov and an inside story of the Soviet government in the town. At age 92, he was quite articulate until it was clear that I wanted an interview. Suddenly, he simply couldn't comprehend what I was saying. Time after time he found some excuse to avoid meeting. Even almost 70 years after he'd left Dolhinov just ahead of the Germans, the old underground training prevailed—or a desire to hide his past—and he kept his secrets to himself.

And so if Jews welcomed Soviet soldiers into Dolhinov in 1939 it was because they hoped to be saved from the Nazis and for the hope of going to university, relief from the antisemitism of late 1930s Poland, and the possibility of getting jobs hitherto barred to them due to discrimination. Polish nationalists may think every Jew is a secret Communist but that certainly isn't true. What is true, and will make a lasting and deeply negative impression on the Poles, is that many of the Soviet officials who come into Poland with the Red Army are Jews.

Though separated by that nearby border only 20 years, a huge gap has grown these two groups of Jews. Those on the Polish side are still religious, restricted to traditional occupations, and have primary allegiance to their own community. Across the border, their compatriots have undergone intensive secularization, modernization, and Russianization. They've been turned into atheists who still have some consciousness as ethnic Jews but know better than to talk about it in public. This is the price they pay for seizing chances the revolution offers and avoiding the punishments it so freely dispenses.

The Dolhinov Jews are simultaneously fascinated by this transformation, repelled by the extent they are no longer traditional Jews, amused by their smugness, appalled by their relative poverty and lack of social freedom, but impressed at their feeling of individual freedom. For them, the Soviet soldiers are more like Hebrews from the Bible: strong, confident, masters of their own fate, than ghetto Jews. Ironically, though they are working for someone else instead of their own people, these soldiers seem to embody the new Jew that the Zionists and Bundists want to create, Thus, Dolhinov Jews eagerly cluster around the Soviet Jewish soldiers asking them questions in Yiddish.

Yet once the initial shock of contact wears off, Dolhinov Jews also see how the Soviets deliberately show films Friday night, close the synagogue, and force them to work on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. The goal is simultaneously to seduce and bludgeon them away from their own religion and customs. As Esfira Dimenshtein, a little girl at the time, put it, "They closed the synagogue and we became ordinary Russians."

As a Polish soldier during the war, Abram Dimenstein had been wounded while fighting against the Soviets. Disabled, he received a government license to sell vodka, wine, and tobacco. But in 1939, his shop was confiscated, the family savings in Polish currency were now worthless, and he had to take a job as a herdsman for a while. As a suspected Polish sympathizer, his identification card marked him as an enemy of the state. He was briefly arrested and interrogated, though released.

In contrast, his Communist brother, Israel, who'd spent years in a Polish prison for the cause, was pleased when the Soviets arrived. But, like many dedicated Polish Communist his devotion to Stalin was questioned. He was quickly arrested and vanished forever into a Soviet concentration camp.

The schools are one of this culture war's main battlefronts. At the Jewish Tarbut school, Hebrew is banned to root out any Zionist orientation. Only Yiddish is used for instruction; and Russian replaces Polish as the second language. Classes are held—in contrast to previous practice—on Friday and Saturday. There is intense Soviet indoctrination in the classroom and through the new Young Communist organization.

Some students protest by refusing to write on Saturday and bring no lunch with them on Yom Kippur. They wear blue Zionist youth group shirts to school, make anti-Soviet jokes when no teachers are listening, write graffiti when none are watching, and pass around forbidden Zionist literature. Their most daring escapade was in rescuing Hebrew-language books stored away in the school and hiding them in safe places. But there was little they could do without endangering themselves or their parents.

The Polish state school was also transformed. Rather than graduate, students are put back two years. The Soviets claimed this is because their school system was superior; in fact, it is to give them a stronger dose of Communist indoctrination before going out into the brave new world of Soviet domination. Polish nationalist teachers were fired and the new headmaster is a Red Army captain. A night school for adults is opened, run by a uniformed NKVD officer, both to develop administrators and spot potential agents.

As the language of instruction, Russian and Byelorussian replaced Polish. The Soviet authorities removed crucifixes and Pilsudski portraits and lined the school corridors with anti-religious posters. Students were encouraged to report anyone who attended church. At first, Polish Catholic students prayed before class, but this was soon forbidden.

Clearly, a lot of the ethnic Poles blamed Jews as being the agents of the Soviet system. Polish students complained that the new teachers were unqualified Jews whose Russian was not fluent and whose accent in Byelorussian—a language they resented studying at all—was particularly vulgar. The Polish teachers had been gentlemanly, meticulously dressed in jacket and calling the boys "mister," a word associated with the aristocracy and now banned. In contrast, the new teachers, largely Jewish, are considered slovenly, a female instructor attracts particular ridicule in this regard as her undershirt is sometimes visible, sticking out at the waist.

While Polish antisemitism certainly existed before September 1939—in fact it was a major cause for how many Jews acted in the Soviet period—it was now intensified.

Of all Europe's countries, Poland has the most and largest proportion of Jews. They are ten percent of the population, 3.5 million people, more than anywhere else in the world except for America. In the midst of the modernization process, many already live in cities yet most are also still Yiddish speakers. For totally arbitrary reasons, for completely extraneous reasons, all of their world and almost every single one of those people is about to be eradicated. The Poles themselves will only narrowly escape that fate.

The best thing about Soviet rule, from the Dolhinov Jewish perspective, is that it isn't Nazi rule. Up until that moment when the Red Army enters its streets, they were expecting the Germans goose-stepping instead within a few days. Already, about 1000 Jewish refugees from further west in Poland had fled into town. The hardly prosperous Jewish community had to house

and feed them. And so the unexpected arrival of the Red Army had to seem to them a better alternative.

Moshe Kleinbaum a leader of the General Zionist movement, to which Mendel Hefetz belonged, on March 12, 1940, characterized the Jewish attitude: "We had been sentenced to death, but now our sentence has been commuted—to life imprisonment." He concluded, "At least 80 percent of the Jews think this way….Anyone who represents the response of the Jewish community of Eastern Poland to the entry of the Red Army differently distorts the truth."

` In some nearby towns the Germans had temporarily taken over Russian zones before the Soviets arrived so Jews there had a taste of what their rule would mean—looting, burning synagogues, beating up Jews One Jew explained, "I know who the Bolsheviks are. I know they'll take my property, but they will leave me with my life." "The main thing," said a Zionist in another town though he knew he would be subject to persecution "is that we escaped the predatory claws of the Nazi beasts at the very last moment."[7]

At the same time, though, the report of Jan Karski to the Polish exile government was also true. He explained that it was "quite understandable" that the Jewish proletariat, small merchants, artisans, and all those whose position has been improved structurally have "responded positively, if not enthusiastically, to the new regime." But he also noted the "worse cases" where Jews denounced Poles to the Soviet authorities were "quite common," more so than incidents "which reveal loyalty toward Poles or sentiment toward Poland"[8]

The doubts of Jews in Dolhinov and other towns about the glorious worker's paradise were quickly reinforced by experience. Having always enjoyed fresh food whatever deprivations suffered otherwise, they now had to stand in line to buy loaves of what they called, "Glue, not bread." Ida Friedman recalled, "Even bread was scarce and the bread that they did make was horrible. We had to go at 5 AM to stand in a long line for hours for a piece of inedible bread. Life was very poor and hard."

The worst advertisements for the Soviet system were the Red Army soldiers themselves, who so obviously came from a more backward society. To them, poverty-stricken eastern Poland was a land of plenty by comparison.

As one Jew in a neighboring town recalled:

"Soviet propaganda always depicted the working classes of other countries as hungry, deprived, and exploited. But when the Soviet soldiers occupied eastern Poland, they found stores full of food, clothes, shoes, watches, and other items, which the working class was buying without lines or restrictions. This baffled them and shook their trust in the validity of the stories they had been told all their lives. But when asked by the local population about the conditions in the Soviet Union, the soldiers always said: `Oh, yes, we have everything, even matches.'"[9]

Both amused and tired of hearing this, the same young man once jokingly asked a soldier who came into his shop whether there were "kadahat"—the Hebrew word for plague--in the Soviet Union. Not knowing the word but deciding it must be something good, he said, "Oh, yes, even more than you can get here."[10]

Clearly, the Soviets who came in were not just scared but had been genuinely successfully indoctrinated. At least those raised in a closed society, with neither memory of what had been before nor knowledge of what existed elsewhere, genuinely believed their doctrine and did indeed love Big Brother. At the same time, though, their human nature had not been

ennobled by Communism. Aside from antisemitism, in which they could hardly compete with the Germans, the Soviets were every bit as arrogant, brutal, and eager to steal.

While there was no persecution of Jews as such, this did not mean that, as became an article of belief in Poland, the Jews supported Soviet rule and benefited from it, apart from being given—through no intention of Moscow--safe haven from the Germans.

Here is a more typical story. In Brest, to the north, there was a simple Jewish man, a driver of a wooden cart pulled by a horse who had a contract to deliver food to the Polish army. This is all even the NKVD files accused him of doing. He was sentenced to be deported to Siberia and never came back. All three of the NKVD officers who condemned him-as they did many Poles as well—had Jewish names.

But on no occasion is any Dolhinov Jew accused of killing, or even beating, anyone else. Chaya Katzovitz recounted that one-day Rosa Shinuk told Chaya's mother that Yosef Shinuk, her husband, was quitting as the region's deputy police chief. Katzovitz asked, "Why should he leave such an important job at a time when jobs and money are so hard to find?"

Rosa replied; "They want him to make a list of the well to do Polish people to be sent to Siberia and he befriended them and made money from them for many years and he does not want to do it!" Yosef instead became head of Krivichi's bakery. This story could be taken as self-serving, but since it comes from a disinterested witness it rings true.[11]

The Soviets say they are mobilizing the poor in a class struggle but the workers of Dolhinov are mostly Jewish and self-employed. The regime dispossesses them. And in reality, what the regime actually does is to give opportunities for criminals, drunkards, bullies, the covetous, and those of bad character who are eager to take advantage of the situation. You need merely denounce someone and get their property, the same system prevailing under the Germans. But for the Poles the collaborators with the Soviets are largely perceived as Jews, a stereotype both exaggerated and true. When a Polish landlord is dispossessed, some of his furniture is stolen, a Polish resident recounts, "Later bought dirt-cheap by some Jews from Dołhinov," though they had to battle some ``heroic Communists" who wanted the goods for themselves.

Many Poles made little distinction between these two groups. Consider Maria Petrozhitsky Dubashinsky of Dolhinov who still lives there today, and remained in the town for almost two years under the Soviets, three years under the Nazis, another 46 years under the Soviets, and almost two decades in Russian-speaking Belarus. Even her name had to change for the Polish "sky" became the Russian "vitch." As she tells it in 2008, in fluent Russian of course, the most important year of her life was 1939, an unimaginably long time ago for almost all those who walk the earth today.

Her husband went off with the Polish army and never came home, probably killed by the Germans. Waiting for him, she is still living at home with her family and her beloved father, for whom her pride shines through a lifetime later. And if she exaggerates, it is not so much the bragging of status climbing but what borders on paternal worship.

He was the manufacturer of internationally renowned shoes, name known and respected in several countries for quality. By Dolhinov standards he was a capitalist on a major scale, employing four or five shoemakers. In pursuing his business, he spoke five languages—Polish, Belarus, Russian, German, and Yiddish. Known and loved by all, an important man by any measure.

It was a profile fatal under Soviet rule. He was quickly arrested, sent to Siberia, and never seen in Dolhinov again. Yet his arrest didn't just happen. He was, she continued, turned in by Jewish Communists who pointed him out to the NKVD. "That's what caused the hate," she explained, "the terrible things that Jews had done to Poles" or, more specifically, at that time to "Polish people who were wealthy or at war against the Soviet power." My translator looked uncomfortable; I think my wife actually gasped. Here was the famous Polish anti-Semitism.

And yet her words didn't bother me at all. For if her story was true it is logical for her to feel that way, no abstraction of history. Of course, she had already said and quickly added again, many of her friends were Jewish and everyone got along well. She tells the embarrassingly unlikely story that her husband wanted to hide a local Jew—but she had already claimed he was dead in 1939, long before they needed hiding.

The Jews paid dearly for the pretensions of Jewish Communists to make the masses love them by serving their "true" needs. They would do away with all religion, classes, and nations—first and foremost their own people—to make a better world. And what was the result? Their deeds helped to destroy their own community—directly in Communist lands, indirectly in those where the identification of Jews with Communism fomented antisemitism--the persecution of the whole population, dire damage to their countries, violence, death, and economic stagnation. To ignore or denounce what Maria said is to discard an important factor in understanding history and a lesson in avoiding the same mistakes again.

But how true was her specific story? Months later, I realized that I had not written her father's first name down, if she had ever said it. But nowadays such things are easily remedied and stories checked. To find his given name, I looked up the 1929 Polish business directory for Dolhinov, or in its Polish version, Dolhinów. On page 2073 there are those who engage in *obuwie*, shoe, manufacture: Alperowicz, S.; Gutman, Sz.; Kuperowicz, Z; Kuziniec, Sz; Ryjer, J. He isn't there.

So is this story of his prominence a myth? Was he a lowly shoemaker employed by someone else or did his rise simply begin after 1929? Still, whether he was a minor prince of shoes or a relative pauper of sole, the story was repeated thousands of time under the benevolent rule of the proletariat's champions in Belarus, 1939.

It wasn't as if the Soviets didn't need shoemakers. Shalom Yoran, from a town near Dolhinov and who later fled there, recalled how once after waiting in a long line to buy shoes, he was given two left shoes

"When I complained to the salesgirl she told me that was all she had and I'd better hang on to them in the hope that the next supply would bring right shoes, regardless of style or color, and I would then own two pairs. I never did get the right shoes."[12]

There is no doubt that the Poles were the main victims of Soviet occupation. Stalin's basic goal was to destroy the Polish elite to such an extent that the country could never rise again. If Soviet policy was not "genocidal" in the sense that—unlike the Germans toward the Jews—the goal was not to wipe out a whole people, it was to kill so many as to ensure their national existence would forever disappear.

Henry, Piotr's 18-year-old son, and his friends were not going to accept this situation. Far from being bowed by their experience with the defeated Polish army, they were still ready to fight, planning to sabotage the hated Russians. Piotr supported his son's courageous, dangerous efforts. From a sympathetic Jewish friend whom the Soviets had made a town official, he got

inside information. But such amateur efforts could not long escape the KGB's tireless search for enemies.

On February 10, 1940, around 3 a.m. loud shouts and crises could be heard from the direction of the military farmers' settlements on the Siarczysta river. The NKVD had begun rounding up the ex-servicemen and anyone considered a likely oppositionist. At 7 AM they got to the Leszkiewicz house. There was a loud knocking on the door. Outside were three Red Army soldiers with fixed bayonets and guns at the ready, two NKVD officers, and Adam Dubaniewicz, a local man working for the secret police.

They had come for Antoni, one of the leaders of the resistance group. He was hardly surprised, putting on a military-style suit and warm socks for the journey. His mother put a saint's picture in his pocket to protect him from evil. Searching the house, the soldiers took some books and magazines, then told Antoni to say goodbye to his family. His mother was sobbing and he tried to comfort her saying he was young, strong, and would survive and come home. He kissed the crucifix and told his family, "May God be with you!"

The soldiers pushed him outside where he said goodbye to the family dog who began to howl. They took him to the People's House where he was united with the members of his underground group, including Henryk. In all, 27 Polish families were deported from Dolhinov on February 10, including those of police officers and the Niezabitowskis. Others, including their friends, Dr. Sadowski's family, were to face the same fate in June.

But Henryk and Antoni along with their little amateur resistance group were too important to be shipped away without a thorough interrogation. Around noon they were loaded on sleds to be taken away. They burst into the Polish national anthem but the Soviet soldiers prodded them with their bayonets and silenced them.

Their destination was Vileika's prison. At 4 AM nine days later, came the pounding on the Bilewicz'sdoor once again. An officer and four Soviet soldiers pushed their way into the house and ordered the family to dress and pack their bags. But where was Piotr? The officer was nervous, concerned that he would be blamed if a dangerous enemy of the people escaped. He was at the mill, Eugenia, explained, called out on some emergency when equipment broke down. "Go find him. Fast," the officer snapped to one of his men. The soldiers stood in every doorway, rifles ready. In a few minutes, the soldier was back with Piotr in tow.

They all stepped outside their little home for the last time, never to return. It was incredibly cold, even by Dolhinov's tough standards. Outside there were farm carts, one of them driven by sixteen-year-old Victor Rubin, my cousin, pressed into service by the Soviets for the task. The family climbed aboard and slowly it set off, down May 5 Road, past the main market, down Pilsudski Street and off on the 11-mile trip to the Boreslav train station. It was one of the coldest days in Dolhinov history, 40 degrees below zero, Celcius.

There, they were loaded onto cattle cars, 50 people in each, for two solid weeks. With the Bilewicz's were many others from Dolhinov. The February Russian weather was freezing. They were given no water for washing and only two buckets a day for drinking. For bathroom purposes there was a hole in the car's floor. And the train stopped once a day so they could get some exercise. The prisoners caught lice and dysentery.

On arrival in Sverdlosk, things didn't get much better. The guards stole most of their remaining possessions, then they were forced to walk through the night and hit with rifle butts by the guards if they lagged behind. Once in the camp, they were put in barracks with 20 to 30

people, beds all around the walls. After a one-day rest, they had to work underground in a copper mine in the coldest weather, from 5 AM to 8 PM, with no warm clothing, and only bread to eat.

Heavy quotas had to be filled, with work extended up to two hours to make sure enough was produced. Workers too tired to continue were pulled out of line and shot. Several hundred thousand Poles die under these conditions, including two of the Bilewicz daughters by typhoid and dysentery. Every morning there were those who simply did not awaken. The only improvement was that they were moved into a barracks with small rooms for each family.

"To Poles," Zdzislawa remarked years later, "this treatment from the Russians was nothing new. Everyone knew what it meant when Siberia was the destination."

And there was one final irony. Since the Soviets were still allied with the Nazis, much of the food, coal, or other goods produced by the slave laborers in 1940 and the first half of 1941—up until the day of the German attack on the USSR--were shipped off to Germany.

When the Germans attacked the USSR, the prisoners' bread ration was further reduced. "Now you are allies," the guards told them, "so you should work harder." While this new war would kill so many townspeople back in Dolhinov, however, it saved the slave laborers in Siberia. For the USSR and Poland were now indeed allies. On July 30, 1941, the two countries signed an agreement which, among other things, said that all Polish prisoners would be released and those who so wished could join the Polish army.

In Riyazen, however, where he was imprisoned until September 1941, Henry knew none of this. One day, in September, Soviet secret police dragged him out of his cell, brought him to their interrogation room, and berated him for several hours, trying to persuade him to join the Red Army in exchange for being released.

When he refused, their tone changed from wheedling to threatening."If you don't agree," they warned, "you'll rot in prison until you die." They returned him to his cell to think about it for a while.

The next day they tried the same tactic for another two hours. When they finally concluded he'd never give in, they grudgingly informed him of the Soviet-Polish agreement. If he wanted to join the Polish army and fight the Nazis, the NKVD man told Henry, they'd let him go. To that, he quickly agreed.

And so he was escorted out the prison gates, with no idea where he might find the Polish army. Following a rumor, he somehow travelled 537 miles to Samara, only to hear there he must go to Buzuluk, another 900 miles. And in Buzuluk he was told to go to Totskoye, another 701 miles. But finally, he found the newly forming army of free Poland and immediately enlisted.

Unbeknownst to Henry, his family was undergoing a similar process. At their work camp, guards told the Bilewicz family they were now free to go wherever they wanted, provided they could pay for the train tickets. They sold whatever they could to get to Tashkent where Piotr and their remaining son joined the army. The whole family was put on a slow train through the USSR en route to Iran. As the train moved westward toward the Black Sea, it passed thousands upon thousands of refugees fleeing from the Nazis. Then they sailed across the Caspian Sea to Iran. The Poles were shocked to be back in a land of peace and plentiful food.

Now, they were in friendly hands at last. British army trucks picked them up and took them to three well-organized camps near Tehran. They were all undressed and had their hair cut, to destroy any lice or diseases they might be carrying. Their clothing was burned. The civilians were dressed in new duds sent from America; the soldiers in British uniforms. Everyone was inoculated against typhoid and dysentery. The Polish army and family members were then

shipped out to Jerusalem, ironically arriving there long before any of the Dolhinov Jews did. Then they went to North Africa, and fought in Italy and France. The Bilewicz family only reunited in England in 1947.

They couldn't go back to Dolhinov which was no longer in Poland, nor to Poland, which was no longer really ruled by Poles. Henry went to Canada; his sister emigrated to the United States with her American husband in 1955 and ended up living in Albany, New York. His friend Antoni Leszkiewicz who also survived the march from the Vileika prison, enlisted in the Polish army at age 17. Eventually, he arrived in England and trained as a pilot. He was killed in an air crash on May 23, 1944.

Quick cut to 70 years later. I'm just outside of Tel Aviv at a dinner after an Israel-India academic conference. One of the Indian participants has brought his aged and fragile father with him to visit Israel. It is truly moving to see this younger—albeit in his 40s at least—professor's solicitude for his father. But why, I asked, did he want to come here? The Indian professor explained that during World War Two his father had been stationed here as a young lieutenant with a British army transport unit. One of his jobs was to drive the soldiers and family of the Polish army, commanded by General Władysław Anders, from Tehran to Jerusalem.

"The Anders army?" overhears one of my Israeli colleagues. "My uncle was in it, too," but like many of the Jewish soldiers, he had decided to stay in the land of Israel.

Perhaps the Bilewicz's and the uncle were once in the same truck, bumping down the long road from Tehran to Jerusalem, while the Indian professor's father glanced at the map and directed the driver.

That's the texture of history.

And this is, too:

Perhaps one day, while back home in Dolhinov in 1939, Zdzislawa and her family were walking to or from church on Sunday and they passed a little girl who lived nearby. That would have been my fifth cousin, Asia, born in 1930. Though they almost certainly never met, I like to think of them passing each other on the street, glancing at each other for a moment in a tiny, forgotten event that exists in no memory but which only I can reconstruct in my own mind.

Asia's grandfather, Natan, was my great-grandmother's brother. Natan and his wife, Malka, had scrimped and saved in their little store. Since it was so hard for Jews to study in Poland, their son Mendel Hefetz, who had no Communist sympathies, made the bold decision to go to the USSR just after the revolution and came home in 1923 with his pharmacists' degree from the University of Tomsk. When his mother died five years later, he took over the store and turned it into a pharmacy.

Mendel did well financially by Dolhinov terms. While Mendel, his wife, and daughter Sonia had to work in the store, they were able to afford a village girl to act as maid and look after little Asia. But Mendel found time to be active in community affairs.

What he had seen in the USSR made him very skeptical about Communism. He was an active Zionist and headed the Jewish National Fund branch in Dolhinov. The Soviet occupation authorities took over the pharmacy and he had to find work elsewhere. The family could no longer afford their house and moved to May 3 Street. had to study in Yiddish rather than Hebrew at the Tarbut school.

Both because of his political activities and the fact that he had left the USSR, an unforgivable sin for the Soviets, he was on their list. His identity card warned all who could read the coded numbers that he was not on good personal terms with Stalin.

And so the NKVD finally showed up at the Hefetz home at 4 AM on June 20, 1941. Like the Bilewicz family, they were carted to the station. For Asia, the whole thing was like a dream. The train just stood in the station all that day. The family took what comfort it could in being together. Then the freight car door slid open with a screech and the light poured in. On the ground were NKVD uniformed soldiers, "Mendel Hefetz!" they shouted. A shudder ran through the family.

He turned to kiss them, murmuring some comforting words, "Only an interrogation….I'll be right back. Perhaps they are going to let us go home." He jumped to the ground, a soldier pointed out the direction he should go. Another one slowly slid the door closed as a shadow fell on his family.

Why had they taken him off the train? To ensure the supposedly dangerous middle-aged pharmacist didn't escape? They put him in a car and sped off, westward, to Vileika prison.

The next morning, his family was awakened not by Mendel's return but by the train's screeching wheels, the jerk forward and sudden stop of the brake test. And then the train began to move eastward. Their hopes of Mendel's return were shattered, but soon they had other worries. They did not leave that freight car for a month, all the way to the Ural mountains, to forced labor at a Soviet collective farm.

Henry was among the 2000 men and 200 women arrested by the Soviets sent to Vileika prison. In Henry's cell there were 50 men though proper room only for 15. There were no mattresses and not enough room for everyone to lie down on the floor.

The prisoners were awakened at 8 AM, stood for roll call, and then received 600 grams of bread and a half-liter of hot water. Then prisoners talked and picked lice off each other until lunch, at noon, which was one liter of fish soup and a few grains of groats; then, more conversation until supper which was a half-liter of broth. Much of the conversation must have been about home and the future. The present was too unpleasant to contemplate.

At night, the NKVD interrogators came and pulled prisoners out of the cell. They were taken to the interrogation room, accused of crimes they had not committed. If they refused to confess, they would be beaten until unconscious and sometimes thrown into punishment cells, naked with water up to their knees. There were no subtle psychological effects; no deals offered for implicating others. Whether accurately or out of youthful nationalist zeal that couldn't imagine any real Pole betraying his fellows, Henry claimed that all the informants among the prisoners were Jews.

This was not the secret police's elite force with some agenda of its own. The interrogators were just filling their quotas and punching the prisoners as a way of punching the clock. With no incentive for admitting anything, and given the deep national hatred involved, there were no confessions or trials. And with typical Stalinist irony, mistreatment was alternated with totally ineffective Communist education meetings trying to persuade the inmates that they should support the regime.

One day, the NKVD shoved in still another Jewish prisoner, Mendel Hefetz, the last one to be added. It probably didn't take long for the two men from Dolhinov to find each other. Not only were they from the same town but must have known each other through Dr. Sadowski, friend of Henry's family and source for much of the business at Mendel's pharmacy. Henry was eager for news of the town.

But they were not to remain together there for long. When they awoke the next morning after Mendel's arrival, they heard the astonishing news: Germany had attacked the USSR. What

did this mean for the prisoners? The Soviets weren't going to let them fall into German hands. The Poles might go over to the Germans to seek revenge; as for the Jews, the secret police didn't like to give up their property.

And so the first thing the prison authorities did when they heard about the German invasion is to order two large trenches dug, one in front of the women's prison, the other in the garden of the men's prison. On June 22, 12 men and 2 women were quickly tried for having aided the underground and sentenced to the firing squad. One of them, Eugeniusz Kosciukiewicz, a student, returned to the cell and announced his own death. They were all shot the next day.

Two days later, at 3 PM on June 24, guards entered the cell of Henry and Mendel and read a list. "The following prisoners, unfit to be evacuated, will remain in their cells….The following prisoners, are sentenced to death….The following prisoners will await sentencing under Article 120 of the penal code of the Soviet Union…." Each man who heard his name knew that his life was at an end.

"The remaining prisoners," continued the guard, "will prepare to leave immediately. You may take personal items but you cannot take straw, mattresses or heavy objects. Now, move!"

The cell door opened and the men marched out. About 1500 waited stood under the summer sun, waiting. Then an officer stood in front of them, and read 20 more names of those who wouldn't be going anywhere, ever again. Guards rushed around, organizing the remaining men into two groups. Again, the order to march was given, and they walked straight out the prison gates, but not too freedom.

"Halt and get down on your knees!" Down to the dust knelt 1500 men. From behind they heard sounds. From the other side of the prison, 400 women were marched out, to form the end of the column.

In the silence, the air pressed against their eardrums. All the prison guards, all the NKVD agents, all the interrogators, all the Soviet militia of the province stood at attention around them. Everyone was there except the few NKVD men who were busy murdering the remaining 108 prisoners and burying them in the trenches already prepared.

Henry and Mendel, the heirs of 500 years of Dolhinov history, waited. Up stepped the prison's director: "I am going to tell you how you will behave during the coming march," he said. "Anyone who breaks out of line will be shot. A step to the right; a step to the left; a shot to the head!" He paused to let his words sink in. "Stand up!" he shouted. And the column rose, the soldiers stood at attention, and off they headed eastward.

Down the hot, dusty roads they marched, accompanied by several horse-drawn wagons to carry supplies and some weaker prisoners that Moscow wanted for further interrogation. From time to time, a name would be called out "To return to Vileika," a euphemism for being taken aside and shot.

About noon of the next day, June 25, a Soviet plane came down out of the skies, lower and lower, until it seemed about to crash. Instead, it swooped down and landed on the flat ground. The reason why was soon apparent, three German warplanes, like hawks, had been chasing it. "Lie down! Lie down!" yelled the guards, as they themselves dived into ditches and bushes by the roadside.

They raised their rifles and machineguns at the planes and ineffectively opened fire. Many of the prisoners, Polish soldiers themselves, faces pressed against the ground, couldn't help but sneer at the waste of ammunition. But the fire drew the attention of the German pilots,

who dove on the column, unleashed their machineguns, and dropped some small bombs. None of the prisoners were hit but two of the NKVD men were killed.

And then chaos truly erupted. Frightened by the gunfire, the horses raced away, their wagons overturned. Panicked guards, who had never seen combat, began shooting in all directions, killing the horses. Afraid they were losing control of the far more numerous prisoners, they ordered, "Run! Run! To the woods! Carry nothing with you!"

The prisoners, spurred by the bombs, bullets, and bayonets, ran. If a guard saw a prisoner had anything in his hands, he'd thrust his bayonet at him until the item was dropped. Other guards riddled with bullets prisoners who'd fallen off the wagons. Some of the prisoners stepped on swampy ground and were too weak to break free of the mud. They, too, were shot down where they stood.

Into the woods they all went, forced into a run. From the rear, there was continuous gunfire as NKVD men with revolvers, enraged at their own display of cowardice and fearful that anyone escape, shot those who didn't keep up. For an hour, men dragged on their friends. Guards on horses covered the flanks, shooting anyone who even looked like they were thinking of escaping.

Yet somehow Mendel did. How did this pharmacist get away? One advantage he had was that he had been in prison for only a day and was still decently fed and in good health. Determined to find his family no matter what the risk, Mendel headed back to Dolhinov.

For Henry, though, there was no such luck. Only when they reached Pleszczenice at 1pm were they allowed to rest. And then took place one of those little dramas of history, of true heroism, which if not remembered dishonor all posterity. Czeslaw Siwicki, a high school student, had had enough. Knowing full well what would happen to him, he berated the guards for murdering his people. He shouted out his protest at the Soviet dictatorship trampling Poland.

The column was halted. Unlike all the other killings, Siwicki would get some ceremony. The prisoners were forced to watch as he was executed.

For four and a half days, 100 miles, with no crust of bread, drink of water, or stop for rest, they were forced onward, one-quarter of them dying along the way, just another of the many unrecorded atrocities of hidden Soviet history.[13]

The German army was advancing fast behind them and the guards had orders to kill everyone rather than let them be captured. Onward, the guards urged them, faster, prodding their bayonets into the prisoners. Suddenly, above, German planes could be heard, the screeching grew loud and everyone scattered. The spit of a fighter plane's machinegun increased the panic. By accident, though seemingly by design, seven guards but none of the prisoners were killed. The next day much the same thing happened.

Panicking themselves, the secret policemen wanted to get as far from the Germans as fast as possible. Older and weaker men fell onto the road. "Get up!" screamed a guard. And if the man didn't instantly rise, he was shot where he lay. Some of them were too tired and demoralized to care any more. Gradually, everyone dropped the bundles of their most precious possessions.

They came to the Beresina River, where Napoleon's army had left behind so many bodies. Unwilling to waste bullets, the guards bayoneted those who had fallen. Desperate men bit their lips to draw blood or drank their own urine to assuage their overwhelming thirst. Finally, they arrived at the Boreslav train station, just north of Dolhinov, where they were given four

pieces of hardtack and a drink of water. It was where Henry's family had been sent to Siberia 16 months earlier and Mendel's just a week before.

Chafetz had escaped but not seeing him any more Henry thought that the, "aptekarz Szejfer" had died somewhere along the road. Many others did: a lawyer and a landowner, a Treasury department employee and a deputy mayor; a student and an engineer; a farmer and Professor Kazimir Muraszko, director of Henry's school.

The prisoners were shoved into freight cars for an eight-day journey through Moscow to Riazan. Only twice during that time were the prisoners fed: crackers, four pieces of sugar each, and water. When Klaudiusz Mirowicz of Vileika died, the other men had to live with his body for three days, until they finally arrived and the guards told them to take it out and lay it on the station platform in Riazan. Józef Jaroszewicz, deputy postmaster in Vileika, driven beyond endurance by the thirst and pain, committed suicide.

As Henry's train clatters toward Siberia, we should follow Mendel for a moment to learn his fate. When Mendel returned to Dolhinov, he found his family gone and the Germans there. He was trapped. Perhaps he took some comfort in thinking they were safe far to the east. I very much hope so. Mendel moved in with his next-door neighbor, Aharon and Chaya Perlmutter, or perhaps Aharon was already dead.

When Asia told me this, 70 years after the events, I gasped. For years I had been searching for something about my grandfather's younger sister. And here the personal element collides with the profound closeness of that society. For in taking refuge, my uncle on my mother's side was now living with my aunt on my father's side. Was the fact that the two families were united by marriage—a marriage that would result in me—a factor here?

Then came the first massacre. About 1200 Jews stood lined up, waiting for hours to know whether they would live another day. Mendel, as a pharmacist, was important to the Germans; Aharon Perlmutter, as a horse trader, wasn't.

And so when the German commander read Mendel's name—as one of the experts who would be saved, for a while, as all the others went into the fire—he had an opportunity. The lists, prepared by the Soviets, showed he had a wife and two children. And the Germans had no way of knowing they were now in Siberia. He grabbed Chaya and the two Perlmutter boys, Jacob, 10, and Chaim, 12, and claimed them as his. Mendel, as well as Chaya, Jacob, and Chaim, were hustled away by the Polish police or Latvian SS men, looking back for the last time at their father. And their father could only take comfort in the knowledge that he would die in a few minutes but his wife and sons would survive. Everyone else was forced into the hay warehouses and burnt alive.

Mendel and the three he had saved lived on three months more and were among the last Jews to live, and die, in Dolhinov in 1942.

Meanwhile, Asia's aunt and her doctor husband had fled from the Germans to the USSR and were living in the Ural mountains. The aunt searched for Asia's family and finally found them--Asia studying in school; her mother working in the fields—and brought them to live with her. There, they received a letter just before the war ended, that Mendel was dead. In 1946 they returned to Poland and were resettled in a part of Germany taken over by Poland, supported by the uncle. Finally, on December 25, 1949, they arrived in Israel

One day, a couple of years later, Asia was visiting an uncle who was a doctor at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. While she was waiting in the lobby a man came up to her and said, "I know you from Dolhinov. I was the last one to see your father alive." He was a son of

the Hassidic rabbi who had been a liaison with the partisans. “I came into town and got medicine from your father for our soldiers. No sooner had I returned to the forest that I learned that afternoon the Germans had wiped out the last Jews of our town.”

But to go back to 1940, when a different dictatorship temporarily ruled Dolhinov. In every city and town, Polish intellectuals, political activists, businesspeople, officials, priests, and others were arrested and either deported to Siberia or killed. The order for murder came from the highest level: the Soviet Communist party’s Politburo, on March 5, 1940, which instructed the NKVD secret police to shoot 25,700 people including Polish army officers, government officials, landowners, police, factory owners, and others.

The most notorious killing ground was in the Katyn forest, x miles from Dolhinov, where more than 4,000 Polish officers and civilian notables were cold-bloodily murdered in precisely the same assembly-line fashion the Nazis used on Jews. The victims were trucked in carrying their possessions, herded into a small area, and then shot down with rifles and machineguns to be buried in mass graves. The Soviets hid the atrocity and most of the world has now forgotten it.

No compensation was paid; no one punished. The Nazi mass murders of Jews and others were the worst crime of World War Two, the Soviet massacres of the Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians is the worst forgotten and unpunished crime of that war in Europe.

Yet while focusing their fire on the Poles, the Soviets accorded no special privilege to Jews, who were judged solely on a class and political basis. Ponemarenko, secretary of the Belarus Communist Party—and soon to be commander of all Soviet partisans after the German invasion—lectured Yiddish writers in the conquered territories that the Zionists, Bundists, religious and bourgeois Jews had helped the Polish authorities divide the workers.

These forces, he insisted, must be annihilated along with right-wing Polish nationalists and fascists. And when a Stalinist official said “annihilated” he meant it literally. All those in the audience had to jump to their feet and applaud wildly lest they be numbered among those to be liquidated.[14] Thus, community-oriented Jews and antisemites were denounced in the same breath, and that indeed reflected Soviet policy.

Rabbi Mordechai Murock, a religious Zionist leader in Soviet-occupied Latvia, tried to gain the interrogator’s sympathy in early 1941 by pointing out his own active role in the anti-Nazi struggle. The Soviet official replied, “Hitler is our friend and ally. We do not wish to hear anything against him.”[15]

Peretz Markish, one of the most famous of Soviet Yiddish writers, was sent to annexed eastern Poland on a speaking tour. He asked one local writer for a private meeting to whisper the truth, but begging he tell no one: “They’ll leave you alone for a little while, a year or two, maybe more, and then they’ll wipe everything out.”[16] Less than a decade later Markish himself was killed by Stalin.

Jewish Soviet officials showed no favoritism to the Jews of Poland, out of both ideological conviction and fear of themselves being denounced as “nationalists.” Everyone had to fill out detailed questionnaires explaining every detail of their biographies, including any political involvements in order to determine their “class” status. And anything any Jew did during the Polish era would be used against them.

Those arrested included community leaders, town council members, officials in political or party organizations, Zionists, Bundists, businessmen, and even Jewish Communists. The chief rabbi of Warsaw was arrested and deported to a prison in the USSR where he died two years later. Moscow turned over Bundist leaders and escaped German Communists, mainly Jews, to

the Nazis as a gift among friends. Between 500 and 600 of those killed at Katyn as loyal to Poland were also Jews. Up to 300,000 Jews who were Polish citizens or living in the western USSR were deported eastward under suspicion of not loving Stalin enough. Ironically, this saved their lives because they weren't there when the Nazis arrived.

Jewish property was also nationalized. Employers were generally left unemployed or forced to take the most menial jobs, wasting their talents. Artisans like blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, and bakers were formed into cooperatives. They all worked in one place instead of going to separate workshops and elected a manager from among themselves. These leaders were Jews, hardly surprising since they comprised almost all the town's experienced skilled workers.

There was, however, one line Polish Jews would not cross. They could do nothing about the change of regimes but when the Soviets gave them a nominal choice—in contrast to the system's usual commands—they refused to accept Soviet citizenship. At the time, this insistence seemed like a futile gesture but in the long run it would save them. After the German attack, those who could join the Polish army got out of the Soviet Union, and later still—in the mid-1950s—a Polish passport would serve as their ticket out of the USSR.

Another cause of opposition was the Soviets' obvious cynicism in giving some Jews good positions during the transition period but getting rid of them as soon as possible. After all, Moscow had announced their invasion's purpose was to "liberate" Byelorussians and Ukrainians—not Jews--from Polish rule. Once they felt themselves firmly in control, the Soviets bid to please Byelorussian and—further south—Ukrainian majorities by removing the Jews from positions of political or economic authority, even playing on local antisemitism to court the favor of the majority population.

The most desperate of those Jews living in eastern Poland at the time were the hundreds of thousands of refugees who had escaped—1,000 to Dolhinov alone—the German sector. It was not unthinkable that the Soviets might send them back at any moment. In Dolhinov, they were dependent on the food and shelter offered by fellow Jews who had little enough of their own. Yet when Soviet authorities insisted they accept Soviet citizenship or return to the German zone, they almost unanimously refused. The Soviets then deported most of them deep into the USSR to become slave laborers. Uintentionally and ironically, this punishment saved their lives when the Germans attacked in 1941.

In all, the Soviets deported around 1,150,000 Polish citizens, about 30 percent of them Jews or around 345,000 people. Another 140,000 to 170,000 Jews had been able to escape into the USSR on their own.

Although the Polish Communist party was disproportionately comprised of people from a Jewish background—about 30 percent—this figure is misleading on two counts. First, the Jewish membership was matched by that of Ukrainian and Byelorussian citizens of Poland, though ethnic Poles focused their antagonism on the Jews alone. Second, few Polish Jews were Communists, roughly only 3,000 from a community of 3.4 million people. In comparison, about 130,000 Jews were in the Polish army, fighting both Germany and the USSR.

Nevertheless, the myth that the Jews were Communist traitors who hated Poland had fueled Polish antisemitism since the time of the Russian revolution and Soviet-Polish war, intensified to fever pitch by the Soviet occupation of 1939-1941. The reports made to the exiled Polish government at the time overwhelmingly blame the Jews for Soviet rule. Such claims became rationales for ethnic Poles who collaborated with the Nazis. As a result, when the Soviets retreated from the advancing Germans, hundreds of Jews were murdered by Polish

neighbors, notably in the July 10, 1941, Jedwabne pogrom. And the same phenomenon happened in Latvia, Lithuania, and other Eastern European countries.

To make matters worse, the real rivals of the Poles--Byelorussians and Ukrainians--also came to hate Soviet rule and blame it on the Jews. This was also not completely new. During the peasant revolts across the border in the 1920s, one of the main slogans of the Byelorussian and Ukrainian nationalist movements had been, "Down with the Communists and the Jews."[17] Yet it became far worse and laid the basis for massive collaboration with the Nazis and participation in mass murders of Jews.

Nothing could make a peasant angrier than to have their land taken away from them and forced into collective farms. Another factor was Soviet determination to crush local nationalisms, not only among Poles but also those of their rivals. Since the masses so often identified the Soviets and Communism with the Jews, this inflamed their antisemitism to new heights. The same was true for Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians next door to Poland. And these antagonisms would be successfully exploited by the Nazis a few months later.

There was one point, however, on which this conception had a material basis: many Soviet officials and officers, including in the repressive secret police, were in fact of Jewish background, especially those dispatched to Poland, since they came from neighboring parts of Soviet-ruled Belarus and thus knew the land and its languages better. For three centuries in Poland and twenty in Europe, the Jews had followed a simple rule: avoid becoming entangled in the quarrels of the Christians. Now that some were seeking an assimilationist solution by turning the world into an alleged classless utopia, the others would pay a terrible price.

During the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, many of the Jews of the old Czarist empire suffered first by Stalin's hands as accused enemies of the Soviet state, then by Stalin's hands in making the deal that turned western Poland over to the Nazis, and then to Stalin's foolishness at ignoring Hitler's threat to the Soviet Union, and then by the hands not only of the Nazis themselves but of those who hated Stalin and associated the Jews with Communism. There would be as many as a million Nazi collaborators in the lands oppressed by Stalin—Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, Russians, and even some Poles--about one-third of them as soldiers or police, and 70,000 of them as mass murderers.

Here is a point almost always missed in trying to understand the Holocaust. Traditional anti-Semitism was a very real force, based on Christian religious antagonism, the differentness of the Jews, commercial friction and competition, and questions of their national loyalty. But the most immediate issue used by Nazi propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe was to link Jews to the hated Communists and USSR, the enemy of all local nationalisms in the region.

Those so victimized, however, were rarely if ever Communists. After all, if they'd been part of the Soviet apparatus or its supporters, they would have been evacuated with the Red Army when the Germans invaded. Yet in Minsk on November 7, 1941, on the way to their mass murder, the Nazis forced Jews to parade down Shirokaya Street, carrying red flags and singing the Communist anthem, the "Internationale." An exhibition of looted Jewish possessions, entitled "Soviet Heaven," was organized at the former Soviet government headquarters to show Jews had prospered at the expense of local Byelorussians under "Jewish-Bolshevik rule."[18]

When, after the German invasion of June 1941, Stalin called his country's battle, "The Great Patriotic War," German radio responded that Moscow's rulers couldn't be Russian patriots because they were really Jews backed by "world Zionism" and that Germany's war was not with the Russian people but the Jewish Bolsheviks. If Germany would be defeated, they warned,

"Stalin and his Jewish helpers" in the secret police would return and massacre everyone as traitors.[19]

- Yet the Soviet leader's real attitude was not so much indignant anti-fascism but hurt feelings. After all, he had genuinely tried to help his Nazi ally only to be met by ingratitude. When the German ambassador came to present officially the declaration of war to Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, the latter blurted out, "Surely we have not deserved this."[20]

Thus, between 1939 and 1941, Stalin's regime wiped out Polish Dolhinov and helped lay the basis for doing the same thing to Jewish Dolhinov. What the Soviets and their all-wise leader didn't understand is that they were coming close to ensuring their own destruction as well.

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[10] Ibid.

[11] David Shinuk Story, "From The Gates Of Berlin To Kibbutz Aliya"

[12] Yoran, op. cit.

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[15] Lesser of Two Evils, cited 268

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[18] Migunova Elena "Anti-Jewish propaganda on the occupied Byelorussian territory in 1941-1943" p. 101-107 // Jews of Byelorussia (Evrei Belarusi): history and culture. Minsk 1998.

[19] Migunova Elena "Anti-Jewish propaganda on the occupied Byelorussian territory in 1941-1943" p. 101-107 // Jews of Byelorussia (Evrei Belarusi): history and culture. Minsk 1998.

[20] P. 310 Donald Grigor Suny, The Soviet Experiment NY 1998

CHAPTER SIX
THE SHOAH IN DOLHINOV

I hate everything that merely informs me, without increasing or directly stimulating my activity."
--Goethe to Schiller, December 1789

On Sunday morning, June 22, 1941, as Dolhinov's students nervously awaited for their final exam grades, Germany attacked a Soviet Union, totally unprepared for its ally's betrayal. The German army reached Dolhinov in just six days. Within a year, the SS would report that the "Jewish problem" in Dolhinov had been solved forever.

During the war, six million Polish citizens perished, half of them Jews. The Germans succeeded in murdering 90 percent of those Polish Jews unable to flee to the USSR before they arrived. Almost as many Jews would die in Dolhinov alone, more than 3000, as American soldiers on the Normandy beaches on D-Day. Fewer than 300 survived.

Briefly, it happened like this. On March 28, 1942, came what the SS called the First Action, and on April 29-May 1, the Second Action. Around 2400 Jews were killed in those two operations. The remaining approximately 200 survivors still in town, kept alive temporarily because the Germans claimed to need their skills, were murdered on May 21. A smaller number were killed in small groups throughout the German occupation. About 300 had escaped, before, during, and after the two main massacres to be hidden by peasants or partisans, though a number of these escapees did not survive the fighting and see the war's end.

In my own extended family, of 186 Rubins and Grosbeins alive in Dolhinov on June 22, 1941, no more than 15 would still be breathing on June 22, 1942.

Such statistics conceal the fact that the story of each who lived and everyone who died is an epic tale in itself. Moreover, the significance of these events—despite, or perhaps because of, decades of discussion about the Shoah—has been vastly misunderstood.

The conclusion most commonly drawn by contemporary society about the mass murder of European Jewry is that it shows the need for tolerance, diffusing into a sort of unfocussed niceness, hate-crime legislation, and Political Correctness. Ironically, by the early twenty-first century it often seemed the main beneficiaries of this view were those reviving the type of slanders against the Jewish people who perpetuated the massacre in the first place.

What clearer demonstration could there be then the April 2009 speech, coincidentally on the anniversary of Hitler's birth, by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at a UN-sponsored meeting supposedly fighting racism and anti-semitism. He had simultaneously denied the Shoah had happened while labelling Jews and Israel as the equivalent of Nazis. At the meeting's end, most of the world's nations passed an anti-Israel, and in many ways anti-Jewish, resolution. In short, the image of the Shoah had been turned against the victims while giving aid and comfort to contemporary spreaders of hatred, incitement, and violence against Jews, including as targets the survivors of the Dolhinov and other such massacres.

In contrast to the view of the Shoah that is so watered-down as to be rendered useless or, even worse, the reversal of lessons which justifies contemporary fascism and antisemitism is the concept of the German-born rabbi Emil Fackenheim. A Shoah survivor who later emigrated from

Canada to Israel, Fackenheim pointed out that if that state had existed earlier, Europe's Jews could have been saved.

Just before the 1967 Six-Day war—inspired by the threat to Israel's existence at a moment that threatened to repeat the events he'd lived through—Fackenheim stated, "Thou shalt not hand Hitler posthumous victories." And yet in our time the very memory of the mass murders he unleashed had become transformed into a tremendous posthumous victory for Hitler.

When I heard Ahmadinejad's speech, I thought of an event that happened in Dolhinov. It was May 1, 1942. A little girl named Esther Dokszycky's mother, Rivka, and sister, Roshke, had just been murdered by the Nazis. She had just seen a little boy shot down before her eyes and barely escaped death herself. Saved because her father was one of the few remaining skilled workers the Germans kept alive, she was taken by the collaborationist police to the house where the last Jews of Dolhinov were imprisoned.

One of the few remaining survivors was Ringa, Dokszycky's first-grade teacher from the Zionist Tarbut school. The young woman, sitting next to her own four-year-old son, the last two living in her family, was astonished to see one of her students alive. She hugged and kissed Esther, and with tears in her eyes, said to her: "Remember how I taught you about Israel. But we didn't have the opportunity to go there." A few days later, she and her little boy were murdered, too.

Those who lived and died in Dolhinov knew the lessons of the Shoah.

First, the mass murder was a specifically Jewish phenomenon and not some universal event. Jews were targeted based on a long tradition of antisemitism whose continuity endured despite shifts in its specific themes. It arose from the slander of Judaism and of what Jews did and sought. This doctrine was manipulated by movements seeking power and aggressive dictatorships. And these factors are still true today.

Second, it was also profoundly anti-pragmatic, based on passion and ideology beyond rational calculations. One of the main reasons Jews in Dolhinov expected not to be murdered was that killing them would damage the German war effort. Yet such "irrational" aspects of antisemitism continue to endure today, in which injuring the Jews overwhelms the more immediate material self-interest of those consumed by such hatred.

Even today, does the West understand Communism or fascism, pan-Arab nationalism or radical Islamism? For Western society, certainly in our time, has the greatest difficulty in understanding how anyone might believe anything that would cause them to act in any way that wasn't the most efficient, immediately rewarding for their material interests.

The West has prospered by following the road of pragmatism. Yet it has lost the capacity—indeed, the dominant worldview outlaws it—to understand that not everyone thinks alike. Addressing this non-ideological materialism contemptuously, shortly after the Iranian revolution took power in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini snorted at those who thought the upheaval took place to lower the price of watermelons, that is, to improve living standards.

The German fascists called their doctrine Weltanschauungskrieg, the war of ideologies. The Communists called it class struggle. The Islamists call it Jihad.

Third, as Fackenheim and Ringa, I'm sorry that I don't know her family name, understood, the Shoah showed the need for a Jewish state, a place where Jewish civilization could continue and which could offer protection to Jews in the face of inevitable incitement and efforts at persecution. While it could certainly be argued that the existence of Israel itself inspires antisemitism, the problem is that this is demonstrably untrue. At any rate, for Jews to cease to

exist as a people is a preferable alternative to being hated for living as one. Let those who chose otherwise follow their individual paths.

Finally, there is the all-important lesson from the Shoah that Jews must be willing and able to defend themselves from would-be repressors or murders. Moreover, others cannot be depended upon to provide such protection.

Today, it often seems as if the central lesson taken from the Shoah is the well-meaning but dangerous utopian notion of making "bad people" extinct through education, of breeding aggressiveness and intolerance out of society. The reality, however, is that "bad people," guided by greed and delusionary ideologies, will continue to exist, sometimes even the very product of such efforts. They must be defeated by force of arms if necessary, imperfect and impure as that means must inevitably be. And if no one else can or will defend you, you must defend yourself.

As Israel's Prime Minister Golda Meir once put it, "A bad press is better than a good epitaph." The world might be more kindly disposed toward dead Jews, but it is preferable to be alive and face criticism by those who either don't understand or don't care about the reality of your situation.

It is the morning of June 22, 1941. The Red Army retreats in disorder. German planes bomb the roads and villages where there are no military targets. Panzer tanks roar up the roads, forcing fleeing Soviet soldiers into fields and through the forests. Twenty-two-year-old Private Boris Kozinitz, a Jew from the town of Dokshitz, neighboring Dolhinov where he has many relatives, drafted into the Soviet army despite being a Polish citizen, moves through the forest with three comrades. Panting with exhaustion, perspiring with fear, they hide in the sheltering forests but are starving. Desperate, Kozinitz approaches a Polish farmer who generously fills his bags with food. The Germans, the man tells him, are trying to win over the villagers by giving them back all the property nationalized by the Soviets.[1]

But food brings the men little comfort. They are surrounded. His non-Jewish comrades want to surrender to the Germans but Kozinitz, knowing what would happen to him, refuses and decides to make his way home, 200 miles through German-occupied territory. Generous farmers give him food and old clothes.

Now, stomach full and dressed like a civilian, Kozinitz can pose as one of the many Soviet political prisoners freed by the Germans who crowd the roads heading home. He passes through seemingly deserted ghost towns where fearful Jews have locked themselves into their homes, which offer some illusion of safety.

The Germans warn against housing or helping Red Army soldiers or Jews. Refused help by peasants who've heard this decree, he finds a pigsty to sleep in. His appearance and accent mark him as a Jew, his shaved head as a soldier. Seeking his brother, Jacob, in Vileika, Kozinitz is pleased to learn that he and his wife escaped to Russia.

He stays the night in the attic of a woman who worked as cleaning lady for the NKVD. In the middle of the night, anti-Communist Poles break in to see if any comrades are hiding there. Kozinitz, who's no Communist but might be dead before convincing them of that, burrows beneath the hay. They don't find him. The next morning, as he leaves, the woman tells him that a Jew was shot to death for not giving his bicycle to the looters.

Finally, Kozinitz finds a farmer leading some cows to market in Dolhinov who lets him pose as a farm hand. Everything there is in chaos, as Polish and Byelorussian townspeople loot Soviet supply depots, including the ample stocks of vodka. Drunken men stagger through the

streets. He spends the night with relatives and the next day finally, after his six-day odyssey, makes it home to Dokshitz where no one recognizes him given his haggard appearance and ragged farmer's clothes.

"Little did we imagine," he later wrote, "that in a short while most of the town Jews would not be among the living." Decades later, after surviving the war, he would live not far from me in Tel Aviv.

Although it had only been been 18 months since Poland had been invaded by Germany and fought desperately against the Nazis, many Poles in the Dolhinov area exulted at the new German attack. Mikołaj Klementowicz from Polany village watched as Soviet soldiers ran east in panic, looking miserable "in their funny pointed hats and dusty uniforms." They kept getting lost, threw away their weapons, and split into ever smaller groups. None of them did any fighting.

In Dolhinov itself, Józef Leszkiewicz and a group of men went to the Communist headquarters, the People's House, to tear down the red star and hammer-and-sickle emblems from the roof. Armed with crowbars, they marched to the market square to break down the doors of the cooperative enterprises. Suddenly a woman shouted, "The Soviets are coming!" A Red Army armored car roared up to the main square. It fired some shots at the looters and killed one of them. Leszkiewicz ran and hid in the nearby church.

Order momentarily restored, a Soviet soldier made an excited speech to whoever would listen: "The day of great vengeance will come!" The Red Army would return to Dolhinov. But the soldiers didn't want to hang around any longer. Someone yelled that a German patrol was driving up Vileika street. The Soviets jumped back in their armored car, raced off north, and were not seen again in the town for three years.

Leszkowicz would later tell an interviewer that the, "Poor and some criminals kept demolishing Jewish stores, Soviet cooperatives and stealing goods," though he had apparently been that group's leader. Was he motivated by a desire to remove the hated Soviet symbols or to strike at the Jews? Such was the irony of Poland's fate, however, that Jozef was welcoming the German assault partly as revenge for the Soviets having deported his brother, Antoni. Yet three years later, that same brother would die as a soldier fighting the Germans as an ally, however reluctant, of the Soviet Union.

Bushke Katzovitz of Dolhinov was a college student in Grodno when German planes and artillery bombarded the city. On June 23, the Germans march in and the dormitory where she was living became their headquarters. Never for a moment did she think of fleeing the country. "I knew that I must be with my family," she explained. But how could she get back to Dolhinov without a pass issued by the Germans, whose police checked the passengers on every train?

She asked one of her professors, now forced to work for the Germans, to help and he got her the needed permit. Now she was sitting on a train heading north through the flat Polish countryside, a young woman wearing a big yellow star with the word "Jude" on it, as required by the occupation authorities.

A Polish Christian woman sat down next to her. They conversed in Polish, which Bushke spoke well, "Why are you wearing that star since it puts your life in danger for every moment. Take it off! You don't look Jewish and can pass as a Pole." Bushke listened to her, ensuring that she made it back to Dolhinov unscathed. When she arrived home, she thought, "I was very happy to be with my family, for better and for worst as long as we are together."

As long as we are together, she said, and that was the most important thing. Almost exactly 70 years later, I was in a passenger van, heading east through the Lithuanian countryside not far away from where Bushke had that conversation. My host, a young, tall and handsome Lithuanian man, looking like a Star Trek conception of some superior alien race, asked me a question that was the modern parallel of the one asked Bushke: Why didn't the Jews flee? Why didn't they fight?

I took no offense, understanding that he was genuinely puzzled. No one resisted the Soviets more than the Lithuanians, though many back then—often the same people—had found the Nazis more congenial. And here I want to give him a full and proper answer to his queries.

The first issue, why they didn't run away, is the easiest to answer. Of course, the Nazi attack of June 1941 was unexpected. Even after the invasion was launched, Jews living under Soviet rule in places like Dolhinov were assured until it was almost too late that there was no danger. No one could defeat the Red Army.

Shalom Yoran, in a town not far from Dolhinov, described what he saw on June 22.[2] While he was at work, someone rushed in and said that the Germans had attacked. Yoran stepped outside right into the middle of a crowd buzzing with rumors. Only at 4 AM the next morning did Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov make a radio speech announcing the attack, giving no details, and predicting inevitable victory for the USSR. It was broadcast repeatedly. And that's all the news there was.

By that time, German planes had strafed the town. Desperately spinning the radio dial to try to find some information, Yoran heard only music. The local Communist party office told everyone that there was good news: the Soviet army had pushed back the Germans and was advancing triumphantly toward Warsaw. "Our spirits rose," he recalled and he envisioned a quick victory.

But the next day, as claims of victory were continually repeated, his doubts grew. The roads were jammed with trucks and horse-pulled carts packed with Soviet soldiers and officials fleeing back home. Townspeople stood at the curbside, shouting: "Where are you going? The front line's the other way!"

No, the passengers yelled back, there is no more frontline. The Germans are getting closer and our army's crumbled away. No defender stands between you and the Nazis. Nobody wanted to believe it. Perhaps, said one man, these are just German saboteurs trying to demoralize us. But as more and more Red Army men and bureaucrats fled down the road, leaving only dust behind, the truth could no longer be denied. Relief turned into panic.

During the short time between realizing the Germans were on the way and the moment they arrived, escape was still difficult. The Soviets only evacuated their own personnel, who were packing their bags while reassuring the public that there was nothing to worry about. Local Soviet officials even threatened some Jews that fleeing would be interpreted as showing insufficnet faith in the USSR's power and could result in severe punishment.

Nevertheless, hundreds of Dolhinov Jews tried to get across into Russia, but were turned back by border guards as the Soviets sealed off the old pre-1939 frontier, fearing refugees would be spies or German agents. Only men without families and in good condition could sneak across and keep on running. The rest turned around and sadly walked home. They had nowhere else to go.

In the Katzovitz family there was a debate over what to do. At first, they didn't believe the "legendary Red Army would collapse in such a short time." Another reason was that they

knew their daughter, Buske, would leave her college in Grodno and come looking for them. By the time they got to the border, it was already closed.[3]

Batya Sosensky's brother Yosef's friends—including her future husband, Reuven Kramer--jumped on their bikes when they first heard about the German advance and crossed the old border before it was closed. Yosef asked his father if the whole family could go but he replied that with five children it was impossible to run away. So Yosef stayed with his family in Dolhinov.

Yakov Segalchick managed at the last minute to get on the last car of the last Soviet train leaving. But German planes strafed the train and the car he was on derailed.. He then walked to the border and saw:

"Thousands of refugees…. Some came by horse and buggy, some by foot. They were running back and forth, looking for a place to cross to the other side and save themselves from the disaster to come. However, Soviet guards stood with weapons ready at every crossing point. They demanded that everyone go back, saying that we were all causing unnecessary panic, and that we must return to our proper places."[4]

Hundreds of Jews from further west did flee the Germans but when they arrived in Dolhinov they reached the end of the road. With the Soviet border closed they could go no further. The Dolhinov Jews took relatives or strangers from other towns into their own homes and shared with them the little they had.

Once the Germans themselves had arrived, the question for the Dolhinov Jews became why they should assume an attempt to flee would be more likely to preserve their lives and how they would go about escaping. Although it might be hard to understand this in hindsight, the Jews of Dolhinov and other towns in eastern Poland knew very little about Hitler and Germany while holding warm feelings toward the Germans themselves.

It should be remembered that those dwelling in such small towns had little opportunity to get foreign news and no contact with people from abroad. Especially after 1939, they were cut off from the world by what later would be called the Iron Curtain. Indeed, the Soviet media during the 18 months of their rule over Dolhinov spoke quite positively about Germany and censored out any news of atrocities. One could argue that they should have known better but they didn't.

Even more important, however, was the failure to differentiate between Germany as they knew it and Germany under the Nazi regime. They might not have known much about the cultured Germany of Heine and Beethoven but they certainly believed in Germany as a model of civilized behavior. Older Dolhinov Jews had viewed Germany as a preferable alternative to Czarist Russia, a place where Jews had far more rights and prosperity.

This attitude was reinforced during World War One, when the Germans occupied Dolhinov. One of my relatives had been a Russian soldier in World War I. Shot in the hand, he had been captured by the Germans who had given him good medical assistance and treated him better than the czar's government. When the Germans arrived in 1941, he actually went out with bread and drinks for the soldiers. Another relative of mine had been briefly arrested by the German occupation authorities in 1917 but his wife had easily talked the kaiser's men into releasing him.

"Most Jews didn't expect the Germans to be so difficult," recalled Ida Friedman, "We were told that in World War I they were very friendly toward the Jews in Dolhinov. We didn't think it was possible they would be so bad."

Another powerful factor was an inability to leave homes and break up families. Many of Dolhinov's young men were working in Vileika at the time, where jobs were available, but though they could easily have boarded numerous trains heading for the Soviet Union in time to escape, all of them decided to return to Dolhinov for two reasons: to be with their families and, as one of them wrote, "We believed…there was no way that the powerful Red Army could be defeated."[1] Another who considered, but rejected, running away asked, "How do you abandon a house you have lived in all your life?" [5] Almost none of the Dolhinov Jews had ever been far away or to another country. Instead, countries—in the form of changing borders—had always come to them.

The hardest thing of all, though, was the break-up of families necessitated by going into the rough conditions of the forest. Men would have to leave wives and children; young people their parents and siblings to a certain death.

Boris Kuzinitz bought a World War One rifle and 14 bullets from a peasant and hid them in the cellar of the family house. Finding the cache, his father forced Boris to admit his plan to leave. Having been badly beaten by Germans, his father couldn't make the journey. "If we are together at least I'll know when we're killed," he said. Boris recalled that before he left, "He cried continuously, begged and did not leave me alone that whole night." Boris promised to return for him but his father was later murdered by the Germans, despite Boris's efforts to save him.

In the Friedman family of Dolhinov, the two youngest daughters missed their two older brothers who were in safe hiding places with peasants and cried so much that their father brought them back home, where they would all die together.

The Dokszycky family had a unique opportunity for escape that they rejected for this reason. An uncle with Soviet citizenship came through town while fleeing from Vilna, where he'd been working, just after the German invasion. He urged the family to come with him immediately. They refused. He begged to take his favorite niece with him.

Her parents refused. "Whatever will happen, will happen," they said. How bad could the Germans be? After all, the Russians hadn't been so good either?

"You'll find out!" he warned as he went out the door toward the border.

And who could say at the time which direction led to life? Batya and Haya Sosensky's cousin, Bluma, was married to a skilled shoemaker who the Germans designated as a valued specialist. After the first massacre, this status seemed a ticket to survival. The Sosensky family decided to give their youngest daughter, six-year-old Sima, to these relatives so that at least one member of the family would survive.

But Sima cried and refused to go with them. It turned out that the other family--both parents and four of six children--all perished while Sima, her mother and sisters survived. In other cases, the exact opposite happened.

Families refused to give up children or children refused to flee with relatives or hide in the countryside only for all to leave this world together. Dov Katzovitch, who became a partisan, put it best: "The best characteristics of the Jewish nation turned against it. Jews are very attached

[1] Fighting To SurviveYtzhak Norman

to their families and so many fathers and sons, having the chance to escape did not. In many cases partisans came back to the ghetto to die together with their loved ones."[6]

There is one other factor of which people at the time were very conscious. The flight of any individual to join the partisans might lead to the instant execution of his entire family. In Glebokie, for example, when two brothers joined the partisans, the Germans told their father to make sure they came back or the entire family would be murdered. He wrote his sons and they did return.

Obviously, anyone who has never faced such stark decisions cannot judge those who have.

It is also true that, at least during the early months, the Dolhinov and other Jews of Poland simply could not conceive of what the Germans were planning to do. That such a thing could happen was not only too much at odds with their personal beliefs—and faith that God would not allow it—but also with their personal and Jewish historical experience. Discrimination, repression, and even pogroms were things they knew about but in some ways that legacy of pain misled them into thinking such assaults would always be temporary and partial.

In the past, remembered by tradition as well as personal observations, it was always possible to bribe, outwit, and outwait. A sense of humor had also been a vital asset. As one Dolhinov wit put it at the darkest moment of 1942-1943, when the winter was especially cold and the rains unusually intense: "You know why the Lord made it so rainy this year? It is because Jews are outdoors in the forests." But it was also true that at times the old methods worked. Every Jewish resident of one Ukrainian shtetl occupied by Romanian troops, allied with the Nazis, survived by paying off the soldiers. The Germans were made of sterner stuff.

This basic approach was taken by the Judenrats, the Jewish councils either elected by constituents or appointed by the Germans. Like many Jews, these leaders thought the vast majority of the community could survive by proving their labor's value for the Germans, outwitting their tormentors, and the war's quick end.

I have never heard a survivor attack the Judenrats, though in some towns there was specific criticism of their Jewish police for being too harsh at times. In Dolhinov, survivors had no complaint about either institution. On the contrary, people recognized they were doing the best they could to stall for time and propitiate the Germans. In the words of Boris Kuzinitz, speaking of his nearby town, "The Judenrat people did all in their power to help and make things easier." Shraga Soliminski said of the council in his town of Lida, "They always did as much as they could to help everybody, and they informed the ghetto in advance of any impending disaster." Their strategy turned out to be profoundly wrong but they recognized that long before the end and almost all the members in each town paid for their mistake with their lives.

Speaking of Dolhinov, Avraham Friedman explained that the members of the Judenrat "tried to make the life of the Jews a little easier. If someone was arrested, they tried to obtain his release by giving gold and expensive presents to the Germans, and usually they succeeded. They did their work with dedication and self-sacrifice, but the problem was that they believed too much in the power of gold. They thought that they would always be able to buy the hearts of the enemy. I couldn't believe that even for one minute."

It was no accident that the two men who would emerge as the most determined fighters in Dolhinov—Friedman and Yigal Sigalchik--unlike most people in the town, had been

eyewitnesses to Nazi atrocities elsewhere during the first days of the war and thus understood what was happening.

Yet sometimes gold did have power, at least temporarily, to save lives. The Germans forced the Judenrat to send 20 young men from Dolhinov to Vileika to cut firewood for the army intelligence and SS offices. They were often badly beaten. The men met in March 1942 and sent a messenger to Dolhinov telling of their suffering and begging for help.Within a day, the Judenrat paid a bribe to the Germans and the men were allowed to return home.

Thus, while all the Dolhinov Jews, and those other other towns, wanted to live the question which had no easy answer at the time was: What strategy had the best chance of succeeding? The Hassidic rebbe of Zelechow told his followers, reversing the long-revered practice of "kiddush ha-shem"--accepting murdered, passive martyrdom to glorify God through showing one's firm belief--"Every Jew who survives sanctifies God." Staying alive was the highest form of resistance.[7]

But what to do once it was clear that the Germans were not going to go away soon and were striving to make the Jews go away from this world of flesh-and-blood?

Three main impediments came into play to fool Jews into thinking that they could survive—in fact, only could survive—by staying in place and playing along with their captors.

The first was the idea that running away effectively was either impossible for long or was even more likely to result in death. As Dov Katzovitch put it, "To escape the ghetto meant only the beginning of the fight for survival." Without help from non-Jews, no one could live long outside the ghetto. Your first mistake in trusting the wrong person—even being seen by the wrong person--would be your last. Even if you found a peasant willing to give you food or shelter—at the risk of his whole family being killed—for a day, you would have to find someone to do so the next day and the day after that.

Hundreds of Jews who fled to the forests were in fact murdered; others merely robbed or died from starvation, or cold. There were bandits in the woods, Soviet soldiers who deserted or escaped prison camps, driven to such acts by rapacity or antisemitism, who would rob, rape, or murder a Jew as fast as any German. When a group from the Vilna area escaped and reached the forest near Dolhinov in 1941, Russian deserters attacked them, took away their handguns, and killed them. Most often, refugees were merely told to go away and fend for themselves.

If turned in by a local person or captured by German soldiers or police those fleeing died quickly. In the ghettoes, Jews saw friends and neighbors return home, exhausted, to tell of their privations. And the Germans let them do so freely in order to demoralize the others.

When I think about this question, Gutte Markman from Dokshitz comes into my mind. Given her last name, she was probably a distant relative of mine by marriage. She was among the hundreds of people shot and left for dead during the big March 1942 massacre in her town, by the same men who two days later did the same thing in Dolhinov. They had somehow missed her. Slowly, painfully she crawled out from a large pile of dead bodies.

Full of fear and anguish every second, traumatized by seeing her entire family wiped out, she ran stumbling to a nearby village and found a farmer to hide her—I dare not think at what price, though perhaps that is unfair. Four days later he threw her out. In search of some help, she was caught by peasants who turned her over to the police. Within a few moments they rectified their previous bad aim.

Knowing the risks of flight, a majority chose to take their chances with the Germans. In the earlier days, at least, though, they didn't know fully the risks of not fleeing. This was also

partly due to the Soviet authorities' keeping the truth from them. Under Soviet rule, no news about Nazi atrocities was permitted, since Germany was Moscow's ally. Even after the German attack, Soviet officials spoke not a single word about the massacres of Jews or the need for special measures to save them. In 1942, the United States and Great Britain knew very little about the Holocaust; the Soviets—much closer to the scene—knew everything. Their soldiers had contact with thousands of witnesses of mass murder from hundreds of places. Yet little was done and nothing was publicized.

A second and powerful factor was the Jews' belief that their work's value to the German war effort would shield them. As one survivor put it, "A lot of young people thought that they had found a job that would keep them alive," because it was so useful to the Germans. The Germans themselves were well aware of this assumption, as well as the local Jews' ignorance about the nature of the Nazi regime. A German official reported in July 1941, for example that these Jews knew nothing of German antisemitic laws and expected they would be left alone if they worked. That hope was stoked by the Germans in the sign over the entrance of the Auschwitz death camp—"Work brings freedom," and this was precisely the illusion proferred and accepted in Dolhinov.[8]

If some of the German officers had their way that indeed might have happened. Commanded to live off the land, Army commanders needed civilians to grow food, repair roads, and perform a host of services. To squeeze the maximum output, they would mistreat and starve workers but had no interest in killing them.

And every day, as the Jews were driven to work, starved, beaten, the most needed technicians among them given special permits and minor privileges, they held the conviction that this life—terrible as it was—would go on until the Germans were finally defeated and driven from their lands. Why should the Germans destroy such a useful labor force, sacrifice millions of unpaid workers, an asset that might be the difference between victory and defeat in the war?

The answer was that the Nazi leadership believed in their ideology. They believed that Jews were vermin, that they were responsible for all the world's ills, that they were forever enemies. And they were willing to pay a high price for their destruction. All these features would be revived bu radical Islamists a half-century later.

There was one significant, albeit temporary, and very unlikely dissenter. His name was Generalkommissar Wilhelm Kube, a founding member of the Nazi Party and governor in Minsk for all of conquered Belarus. He had risen fast in the party but fell when caught trying to blackmail another Nazi official's wife. Dismissed from his post and even sent briefly to a concentration camp, Kube was brought back into authority in 1941 by no less a figure than the director of the Final Solution, Heinrich Himmler himself.

During the months following the German conquest, in the summer of 1941, Kube argued that Jewish labor was needed for the German war effort and that the Byelorussian people were being alienated rather than won over by the war against the Jews. His colleagues were scandalized, whispering Kube was a Jew-lover. Kube protested that he was unsurpassed by anyone in his hatred of the Jews and promised to move forward with the massacres. He faithfully implemented Hitler's policy until he was himself assassinated in a partisan operation, organized by Jewish members of the underground, on September 22, 1943.

The third, heartbreaking, thing that doomed the Jews was the timeline. The main killings in Dolhinov took place between March and May 1942, ending just as partisan forces were going into military action and establishing liberated areas. If the Germans had been slower, the Jews of

eastern Poland at least would have had a real chance for a safe haven or rescue. And it was one the last survivors seized whenever possible.

Yet even after all this there was one more thing that the Jews of Dolhinov and other such towns clung to in their desperation and helplessness: a disbelief that such mass murders could happen or were happening elsewhere.

Here's how Shmuel Kugel put his experience. In a village called Zembin, the Jews were forced to dig a large pit by the Germans. Then the adults were shot; children were thrown into the pit alive and buried, with the earth still moving from those struggling in vain to escape. Only ten Jews survived, one of whom arrived in Kugel's home town of Pleshchenitsy just one mile away. Kugel recounted:

"Such an act of evil seemed inconceivable. One wanted to think that it was…the act of a few crazed German soldiers in reprisal for some Germans found murdered there." But they heard of more and more such massacres: in Logoisk and Borisov, Smolevichi, Gorodok, and other small towns. "And so we realized that what happened in Zembin was not a chance occurrence, [but] that it was carried out on Hitler's criminal orders."

By that time, though, they were imprisoned in the ghetto. It was too late.[9] In fact, many Jews who did flee Pleshchenitsy went to a place they thought was safer: Dolhinov.

Such accounts of incredulity appear over and over again, reflecting natural human propensity to reject the unthinkable. "We knew," said Ida Friedman of Dolhinov, "but people didn't believe" even the stories of those who fled German rule for the Soviet-controlled sector in 1939.

Shalom Yoran put it this way:

"It was totally beyond our comprehension that a civilized nation in the twentieth century would be capable of taking an entire community—the workers who served them, the children, women, young and old people—and systematically murdering them for no other reason than that they were born Jewish….These crimes could not be concealed or tolerated. Didn't the murderers sense that they would eventually be punished?"

He perceptively understood why people had to think this way:

"We couldn't allow ourselves to believe what we had heard. To believe it would be to know that we were utterly helpless. It was winter, and we had no escape. My mother still had hope that somehow we would be saved, and because of her optimism people rallied around her. At the time we were totally unaware that we were part of a major scheme. We attributed the behavior toward us to the winds of war. We thought that as the German victories decreased and their military efforts failed, they were letting out their frustrations on the Jews.[10]

Noakh Melnik remembered that when he escaped death in his home town he went to a larger one, reasoning that there were 10,000 Jews living there, "They can't kill that many people in public."

Bushke Katzovitz of Dolhinov recalled:

"We knew that things were going to be bad, but in our worst nightmares we did not anticipate how bad things were to become. We expected that a set of rules would be

implemented and we will greatly suffer financially. But we could not imagine murders and organized annihilation of women, children and old. As we gradually realized that every day there is a new retribution and additional restriction imposed upon us, the indication that our end is near became harder to ignore. We knew that we must run and take cover. It would be the only means that we could save ourselves from undisputable death sentence. However we had to acknowledge the bitter recognition that there was no route of escape for us."

All of these factors made it harder for the Dolhinov Jews and those in other towns to flee or fight. In addition, of course, they had no experience in anything to do with military activities and owned no guns or ammunition. In each case, the actual period of mass killings lasted a very short period, also making it harder to react. There were uprisings in many towns, but mainly between July and September 1942, after Dolhinov had already been wiped out. They had no chance of inflicting serious casualties on the Germans, far less winning any battles. Still, it is clear that the later Jews survived, the more likely they were to have the organization and weapons to fight back.

And one final point in this regard, for the Jews still alive from Dolhinov by the time of the final mass killing, in May 1942, the only way they survived the next three years is because they did indeed fight.

It is hard to believe that all these events took place in less than a year.

Avraham Friedman was born in 1918 into a poor family and though he graduated from the Tarbut school in 1935, both of his parents were dead by the time he was 19 and he was sole support for four younger siblings. So he went to work as a blacksmith with his grandfather. When the Soviets came, they took away the shop so the two men went to work for the fox farm headed by Timchuk, from late 1939 to mid-1940. "I matured a lot that year," Friedman later wrote. Seeing the new opportunities opened up by the Soviets' system, "I realized that my future didn't belong in the blacksmith's profession." He entered an auto mechanics' course in another town—making the switch from horse shoes to auto motors overnight--which he attended from the end of 1940 until the day of the German invasion.[11]

Friedman first decided to walk to Minsk, assuming this would be a safe place since everyone thought, "The Red Army would organize and beat the Germans swiftly. Not in our worst nightmares," did he and his friends imagine what would come. But the German army blocked their way. On June 26, 1941, Friedman found himself in Rakov, where the Germans assembled everyone in the central square and divided them into two groups: Christians, on one side; Jews on the other. They were held all day and all Jews who could be identified as Soviet soldiers—including two friends of Friedman who'd been drafted—were murdered. The rest were let go.

On and on Friedman walked with a couple of friends, through town after town, heading toward Dolhinov to be with his family. On July 2, they encountered three Christians who knew him from having worked on the fox farm, carrying sacks on their way to loot Jewish homes. They recognized him and stopped a passing German army car, yelling, "They are Communists! Jewish Communists!"

Friedman and his companions ran; the soldiers fired, wounding Friedman, and chased them down. Three Germans stood around them with weapons ready to shoot, and Friedman thought his life was at an end. Suddenly, a German officer came by who dismissed the Christian

accusers and told the soldiers to let the Jews go. German officer had daily opportunities to save lives if he so wished.

And so Friedman lived to return to Dolhinov, be patched up by Dr. Kohler, and hide in his grandfather's house. A friend, an electrician who'd been assigned by the Germans to handle the radios confiscated from townpeople, got one for Friedman who was then uniquely able to discover what was happening in the outside world. The Germans told the local people that they'd captured Moscow, and without the BBC's Polish, German, and English service, Friedman and others wouldn't have known otherwise.

While Friedman was still trekking down the seemingly endless road home, on June 18, 1941, the German army had marched into—and through--Dolginov. The parade was led by three tanks. Hundreds of thrilled Poles and Byelorussians from the town and neighboring villages came to the Central Marketplace, the town square lined with Jewish shops, to celebrate liberation from the Communists. Women greeted the Germans with flower bouquets Jews closed their stores, went home, and shuttered their windows, but Haya Katzovitz, whose family lived on the square, watched silently the jubilation of her neighbors:

"Two German tanks went through and the non-Jews in the market stood and watched, shocked…Then they came with their motorbikes and big black boots and I was alone with my mother at home. So she asked me, "Why are you so pale? Are you scared? Let's go to sit with some other Jews so that we won't be alone." So they walked next door to be with their neighbors, "There everything was nice and clean. In their house everything was quiet. It seemed as if there were no Germans."

For the German army at that moment, Haya and her neighbors were of little interest. Dolhinov was just a wide spot in the road to Moscow and Leningrad. But it had a clear strategic value. From Minsk, headquarters of Army Group Central, the main road ran through Dolhinov. The railroad went just a few miles north of it to Leningrad. Thus, while Dolhinov was not exactly Times Square, it was a place the Germans needed, as so many armies had before.

The German supply lines through Dolhinov or the nearby railroad, stretched 1000 miles long to support a battlefront 1500 miles wide. For two weeks, every day at every hour, an unending stream of German soldiers passed through Dolhinov to the front. In trucks, tanks, halftracks, motocycles, bicycles, and on foot they marched, most hardly giving a glance to what they saw as a little town of no interest whatsoever. Like the soldiers of Ivan the Terrible, Stephen Batory, Charles XII, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Czar Nicholas II, Lenin and Pilsudski and Stalin, all were content to leave the town pretty much as it had been. But this time was different.

One day, a German soldier on a bicycle hit a bump in the road. The bike wobbled, he lost his balance, and crashed right next to the home of Nachman Friedman whose wife, seeing an injured man, another human being, went to help him. She took him into her home, tied up his ankle with a rag, and offered him water. The young soldier accepted her hospitality and rested on a chair in their parlor. After some minutes he stood, looked her up and down, and instead of thanking her, merely said, "Do you think this is going to help you? You Jews are going to `get it.' You'll see what we'll do to you," and stomped out. Almost 70 years later, her niece Ida Friedman who was there at that moment, told me, "I guess we saw that he was right."

Combat soldiers en route to the front and their own fates there yelled down from trucks to Jews working on the highway, telling them they should run away as fast as possible because Hitler was planning to kill them all, showing that average Germans were not quite so ignorant of

what was going to happen. A few bought tobacco from Jews and drank coffee with them, “I have nothing against you,” one said, “but things are going to go badly for you.” Others, riding by in trucks to the front, "Juden, Du habst dem Krieg Gewollt" ("Jews, you wanted the war"!) - well, there you have it." Others laughed: "Das ist das derweilte volk" ("These are the chosen people")[12]

For while it is true that some regular officers angrily complained that the mass murders dishonored the army and in some cases even kicked the SS out of their areas at least temporarily the great majority supported actively or passively the Shoah. Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau on October 10, 1941 announced, “The soldier in the Eastern Territories is not merely a fighter according to the rules of the art of war, but also the bearer of a ruthless national ideology….Therefore the soldier must have understanding of the necessity of a severe but just revenge on sub-humans.”[13]

In contrast to the situation of the Jews, the dominant feeling among Poles, as several eyewitnesss described it, was relief. “People cried of with joy. In our village the villagers prayed and thanked God for salvation. Then they cursed the Russians and wished them a defeat in the war.” The German troops seemed invincible and were warmly welcomed as saviors from arrests, deportations, and collectivization. The Poles and Byelorussians had no idea that they’d gone if not from the frying pan into the fire, at least into another frying pan.

Józef Leszkowicz describes the welcome for the German troops as enthusiastic.

“A magnificent welcome gate was made with an inscription `Heil Hitler!’ though it was written with a [spelling] mistake, it expressed the gratitude of the people for saving them from hated Soviet occupation. An orchestra waited next to the gate. First a motorcycle rider appeared on the road then an armored vehicle. It looked really threatening. Then suddenly the orchestra started to play a welcome march. Somebody approached the Germans with bread and salt. They didn’t understand the meaning of it so somebody explained to him that this was a Polish traditional way of welcoming guests. The atmosphere became more relaxed” and the German soldiers were pleased with the ceremony.

Only a dozen or so German soldiers were stationed in Dolhinov during that first year: one officer to run the militia they’d recruit from among local people; a few to run the bigger farms to produce food for the army, a squad of the Geheime Feld Polizei to supervise control of the Jews, and a four-man communications’ team to report back to headquarters on road conditions and the garrison’s needs. Police applicants, it was said in the posted advertisement, should have military experience and know how to fire a gun. The commander was an ethnic Pole from Kovno in Lithuania who, as one Jewish survivor put it, “was worse than the Germans.”

The Germans’ big radio set was installed in the Dubanevich family’s home because it was the first place on the south end of town. When the communications’ unit came into the house for the first time, the officer in charge asked Maria, the oldest daughter who sold tickets in the bus station, “Where’s your father?”

“He was arrested by the Soviets, sent to Siberia, and never came back,” she answered.

“Well, we’re going to stay here,” replied the officer.

“But there are six of us in the family. What are we going to do without our home?”

“We don’t ask permission,” came the reply from an officer not used to being spoken to that way. Yet these were Poles, not Jews, and their orders were to get along with these local people.

Evidently, though, the men felt sorry for the probably widowed mother, a victim of the Bolsheviks after all, and her five children. “You can stay here during the day,” they said, “but you’ll have to leave at night.” Having six Polish civilians around while the soldiers were asleep on the floor was a security risk. And so the Dubanevich’s went to neighbors every night and did their family activities around the little German military base in their parlor in the daylight hours.

Eventually, the Germans became friendlier and even brought them food from the military canteen. I hear the story sitting in the same room, two-thirds’ of a century later. The furniture probably hasn’t changed that much, threadbare rug, collection of crosses, big jars of pickled cabbage on the table, old radio playing—ironically—“Those were the days my friend, we thought they’d never end….” Standing on the very spot where these events had happened, perhaps molecules from the officer’s uniforn settling on my clothes.

The Germans immediately reorganized the local government, police, and created a militia. The police were volunteers from local Polish and the Byelorussian residents; others were ordered to join the militia, which was equipped with old rifles. During the initial phase, the main priority was to win over the Poles, playing on their anti-Soviet sympathies.

Every Polish and Byelorussian resident of the German-occupied territories (along with Ukrainians further south) had to decide how to deal with the new regime.

Those who passionately loved Poland could hardly be expected to welcome the German invaders, even among those who shared with them a hatred of Jews. Ironically, though, the Soviet repression had made the German occupation far stronger. The Polish communal leadership and patriots who would have resisted the Germans, like the Bilewiczs, had already been deported by the Soviets. As a result, a Polish national underground was never organized in Dolhinov during the German occupation.

As for the Byelorussians, some 20,000 volunteered for security police duty or the German army, where they formed the 29th and 30th Waffen Grenadier Divisions. Bylorussian nationalists participated in a puppet government headquarted in Minsk. Other Bylorussians were drafted into poorly armed local militia groups. A lot of their duties involved fighting the partisans, though the 30th Grenadier Division was moved to the Western Front where it was put into the line against U.S. forces in late 1944.

In the Dolhinov area, however, where Byelorussian was virtually synonymous with an educated and passive peasantry, there was no such political movement. Instead, the thuggish and opportunist who required no rationale took the lead. As a result, collaboration in this area, in contrast to the Ukraine or Lithuania, had no programmatic content. The motivating force was hatred of others—Jews, Russians, and, among Byelorussians, Poles as well—along with a love of money and material goods. But these are all attitudes more likely to be found in average human beings than the self-sacrificing courage of patriotic Poles which had met the Soviet conquest.

Many of those who joined the police were bullies and semi-criminal elements, attracted by the steady pay and the chance to loot Jewish property and beat up Jews. In Myadel, most of the local collaborators were Poles who declared, "All the Jews were Communists." They began torturing Jews before any Germans gave orders to do so. “In some ways,” Segalchik who was there at the time, “the local assistants were many times crueler than their German bosses.” When the bodies of two prisoners from Myadel killed by the KGB during their retreat were found, a big funeral was organized by the new police chief, with German soldiers as honored guests, along with fiery speeches blaming the Jews and demanding revenge.

Not long after all the Jews of Dolhinov had been killed or fled, Haya Katzovitz ran into a woman named Liza, who had been her family's housekeeper before the war. Haya asked her what it was like in Dolhinov now. She said, "All the Christian inhabitants of Dolhinov became wealthy. They confiscated the possessions that were left by the Jews."

Yet even when non-Jews had to go along with the Germans, each individual among them still had a choice between sullen necessity and enthusiastic cooperation. The German emphasis was on assuring that the police chief was an enthusiastic and usually sadistic collaborator, as were the majority of poice. In the ranks, though, there were some policemen who behaved decently out of humanitarian feelings, personal friendships, and Polish patriotism. There was no clear criterion for knowing how an individual would behave since people once on good terms with Jews might be among the cruelest of all.

In Dolhinov, at least three of the policemen hated the Germans, were friendly toward the Jews, hated the Germans, and were ready to help the Soviet partisans. A true hero was Vlodia Maslovsky, the nephew of Dolhinov's appointed mayor. The uncle asked Vlodia to join the police, but Vlodia who had many Jewish friends—he spoke German, Yiddish, and even some Hebrew in addition to Polish; had no desire to work with the Nazis. So he came to his friend Avraham Friedman for advice, proposing that if he did join he could provide information and warnings to the Jews, and Avraham agreed that this was a terrific plan.

Avraham was the only Jew in town who had a radio and heard General Sikorsky, leader of the Polish government in exile, announce his agreement with the Allies to raise a Polish army to fight for his country's freedom. Friedman and his friends immediately wrote three leaflets describing the news, hoping even antisemitic policemen would be stirred by patriotic feelings. One was left for Maslovsky and the others for two other friendly policemen, Takovitch, the secretary of the force, and Maletzko. Friedman's sister had the job of cleaning the police station so she snuck in the leaflets.

As soon as he saw it, Maslovsky realized it had been written by Friedman. He asked his friend, "How do you know this?"

Not wishing to reveal his source, Friedman said that some Polish teachers in nearby villagers had told him. But later, Friedman told him the truth and was able to supply another radio for the three patriotic policemen, it being kept in Takovitch's house. The Jewish and Polish groups began discussing how to resist the Germans. The police even offered to supply money so weapons could be bought and a joint partisan group established, though this plan was never realized.

All three of the policemen, along with Takovitch's brother who lived in a nearby village and hid Jews on several occasions, were able to save lives. For example, when the Germans invaded, Yosef Shinuk, a police official in Dolhinov under the Soviets, refused to leave without his family. He grew a beard, wore a black beret and glasses, and obtained a fake identity paper. For some weeks he hid at home but knew he finally fled to Kurinitz. A few months later, a collaborator there recognized him and informed a Dolhinov policeman. Fortunately, the policeman who took the report was Maslovsky who, instead of arresting Shinuk, told a Jewish friend to warn him. To rescue her husband, Rosa, Yosef's wife, dressed up like a peasant and walked 22 miles to Kurinitz to pass the message to her husband. He escaped to another town, where he died only when the ghetto there was wiped out.

Mayors were often forced to take this job and did not necessarily have pro-Nazi attitudes either. The village mayor of Zamshutzi, a village just outside Dolhinov, Julius Korianovich,

helped feed and protect Jews from the town who hid there. In nearby Dokshitz, the mayor, Sitchonk, was actually hiding a Jewish family named Kramer—who survived--at the moment he was carrying out German commands. Tragically, the partisans didn't know this and killed him in a grenade attack late in the war.

Dolhinov itself was at first lucky in this respect. The Catholic priest was a very ethical man who had never engaged in antisemitism. The first German-appointed mayor, Zygmund Volk and police chief, Anton Krosovsky, were also decent local people, with the added advantage that Krosovsky was happy to trade favors for vodka. As a result, neither of them lasted very long in their posts. The Germans fired the mayor and appointed Maslovsky's uncle, who was also no willing collaborator and whom they executed on a charge of sabotage within a year. As police chief, Krosovsky was replaced by a thug from Krivichi who had neither moral scruples nor local ties.

The truth is also that many Polish townspeople—especially with the town's most responsible and conscientious citizens deported by the Soviets--were eager to turn on and turn in their Jewish neighbors. Both they and Byelorussian peasants from surrounding villages were eager for loot. One day, a peasant came to the Telis house, a family she knew from having been a customer at their store, to point out their dim and very limited future. "You have a lot of clothes and you're not going to need them any more. Give them to me."

Aside from personal sadism, there were three main motives that impelled collaborators: hatred of the Soviet Communists, thirst for loot, and hatred of the Jews. The Germans tried to link these things but while very successful in recruiting individuals, they never could get a mass movement going. The most obvious reason is that their need to exploit the local people plus a doctrine viewing them as racially inferior ensured that the Germans squeezed them badly.

Publicly, lip service was given to helping the locals against the Germans' enemies but this rarely figured in reality. For example, General Lemelsen, commander of the 48th Panzer Corps, ordered his men to stop murdering (non-Jewish) civilians on June 25, 1941, explaining, "We want to free the civilian population from the yoke of Bolshevism and we need their labor force."[14]

But even Lemelsen admitted his order was not carried out. "This is murder! The German Wehrmacht is waging this war against Bolshevism, not against the united Russian peoples. We want to bring back peace, calm and order to this land which has suffered terribly for many years from the oppression of a Jewish and criminal group." Moreover, he warned, such behavior would lead to the execution of captured German soldiers and inspire the Russians to fight to the death and never surrender. This is precisely what happened.

For example, when two big sleds carrying German army supplies hit mines near the village of Ladomiry the Germans slaughtered the entire male population and burned down all the houses. Consequently, partisan activity in the area increased, not so much because the population hated the Germans more but because they knew that death was the only alternative to resistance.

What the Germans, including Lemelson, did do far more successfully was to link tirelessly the Jews and Bolsheviks as a twin menace—an idea central in Nazi ideology—and offer rewards to collaborators. In a 1941 report, the Polish nationalist agent Jan Karski, who courageously spied on the Germans and brought out the first news about their mass murder of Jews, told a revealing anecdote passed on to him by a Polish official.

This man had fired an employee of the German-sponsored regime who had robbed a Jewish jewelry store in Warsaw. The robber complained to the Gestapo who called in the official.

"Why," he asked the official, "did you fire him?"

Startled, the Pole replied that the dismissed man had committed a criminal act.

The German policeman responded: "It is permissible to take from a Jew verything….We are even anxious to see the Polish population made aware than any Pole may go up to any Jewish store" and take it for himself, "Whoever wishes may kill a Jew, and our law will not punish him for it."[15]

Given the realities of human nature, many responded to this call to enrich themselves. In a little town like Dolhinov, greed and covetousness seethed beneath the surface. Yet in such places there was also human decency and cross-communal friendships. In the occupation's early days, SS reports showed that many Byelorussians were not eager to attack the Jews. The most remarkable such event is contained in a report by a Soviet agent operating behind enemy lines.

On July 23, 1941, in the village of Rubezhevichi, a German army officer gathered together the 26 local Jews, made them dig a trench, then ordered the Christian villagers to bury them alive. The Byelorussians refused. He then demanded the Byelorussians change places with the Jews and ordered the Jews to bury the Beyelorussians. They refused. Flustered, he simply had his men shoot down the Jews where they stood.[16]

Did this really happen? One would like to believe it did. But either way the Jews were doomed.

Many peasants, both Poles and Byelorussians, would later help the partisans with supplies and information or even joined the units themselves—though this did not mean they wouldn't persecute or kill Jews if given the opportunity. Others hid Jewish acquaintances or even complete strangers.

Yet far more townspeople pointed out Jewish hiding places to the Nazis—leading directly to the deaths of the Jews concealed there; peasants turned in Jews they saw or even informed on other farmers, leading to the murders of both the Jews and their hosts, as well as served as German spies on partisan activities. Neighbors rushed to loot Jewish property at the first opportunityDov Katzovitch of Dokshitz, near Dolhinov, recalled an incident that says it all. Outside town on a work detail, when he heard the machinegun sounds of a massacre there, he headed back when quiet returned to see if his family had survived. He recalled:

"On the way I met two women holding big bundles, speaking Polish with each other and telling each other about what had happened. I recognized one of them for I had gone to school with her son. This son was…in the local police. It seems that the son knew beforehand what was to occur and advised the women to profit from [taking] the Jews' things. When she saw me she was shocked for a minute and then started to scream: `Why didn't you report with the rest of the Jews?' I did not answer and walked away."

For a Jew to be alive was an unacceptable effrontery.

Only compared with the Jews were Soviet prisoners of war better off. Hundreds of thousands were captured in the war's early days. As the German army marched east through Dolhinov, columns of captured Russians staggered west. A Polish resident named Klementowicz described the prisoners as "a horrible sight," the enlisted men staggered along like

ghosts, barefoot and so hungry they ate grass growing alongside the road. When one of them could go no further, the German soldiers shot him and left his body on the road. In contrast, though, the officers were transported by carts as a reward for surrendering.

Dolhinov's Jews watched and took pity. There was a prisoner camp, riddled with dysentery, on the town's eastern outskirts, next to the swamp and below the hill where the Jewish cemetery stood. One of the tasks done by Jewish forced laborers was to take them food and to bury the many dead.

Political commissars were shot immediately and some German army divisions also separated out and killed Jewish soldiers, too. Senior commanders authorized the killing of prisoners but only if done under orders. In the West, British and French prisoners were treated properly but in the East other rules entirely prevailed. Lacking good winter gear, German soldiers stripped the Russians of their warmer clothing and boots, leaving them shod only in crude wooden clogs, and ensuring they died of exposure. Fifty-seven percent of Soviet prisoners, about 3 million people, died in German captivity during the war.[17] The prisoners suffered especially during the area's deadly winters. Jewish burial crews were kept busy until the day they were themselves buried.

Now I have to write what I've been putting off as long as possible. Strangely, I feel that as long as I don't write about the deaths of specific people they are still somehow alive. If the tortures have not been set down on paper the victims are still untortured though all the deeds have been done long ago, the story is finished in the world of senses, and all has turned to dust. To write of this is to make their memory live but also in a sense to kill them once again.

The killings, which had been going on in German-occupied Poland for eighteen months now started in what had been Soviet-occupied Poland. Already, on June 30, just a week after the invasion, a German Justice Ministry memo explained, in paragraph 4: "It may safely be assumed that in the future there will be no more Jews in the annexed Eastern territories."[18]

The first phase of implementing this plan began in Brest on June 28-29, with the SS killing 5000 Jews; in Pinsk, August 5-7, 4500. In Slonim all 15,000 Jews were killed during those same two days; in Bobrusk, 25,000; Mogilev, to Dolhinov's southeast, 20,000; Vitebsk east of Dolhinov, 20,000; and in Slutsk, 18,000. In Rakov, they were burned alive in the synagogue. Himmler and Adolf Eichmann inspected the Minsk ghetto and ordered gassing vans. After this initial frenzy there was a pause, a stay of execution for the rest.

Yet even this was not all. For with their killing apparatus less developed further west and the concentration camps not yet fully ready, the Germans imported Jews to murder by gunfire.

Far away in the village of Turie, Czechoslovakia lived my cousin from my mother's side, Marie Dub, 64 years old, who ran a little shop there. She lived in house number 213 with her son Jozef Dub, 41, proprieter of the Eichenbaum Timber Company, and his wife, Ilsa Meisel Dub, 35, and their daughter Ilsa, 9. They had never been a few miles from home. Suddenly, they found themselves on a train to Lublin, Poland, deported by Nazi Germany's Slovakian client state—which actually paid the Germans to dispose of them—and shot down there. My even more distant cousin 64-year-old Olga Janniz Lowenbein, born 75 years to the day before me in Trumau, Bohemia, was taken from her apartment at Castlegasse 16, Vienna, and sent to die in the massacre of the Minsk ghetto on November 28, 1941.

Such individual stories mean something more immediate to us. Yet one must imagine football stadiums packed to capacity for town after town, in each seat one of them, everyone a human being a—as Jewish tradition puts it—universe in their own right.

Is there anything left to say about the Shoah after so much has been written? Yes, quite a lot. The prevailing image of the Shoah is from the west of Europe. The images are of urban Jews virtually indistinguishable from neighbors, assembled, put into cattle cars, transported by rail to concentration camps, selected out for life or death, and either gassed and burned immediately or forced to live in Hell for months or years until they die of starvation.

The east of Europe was quite different. The Dolhinov Jews were not trying to be French, German, Italian, Russian, or Polish. This was not some universalist parable of man's inhumanity to man: it was a massacre of people because they were Jews, based on all the ideas and claims that had always furnished—and still do—the rationale for such hatred, slander, and violence, and for that reason alone.

Not a single one of them went to a concentration camp. They were,either marched a few blocks through their own home town, past buildings they'd lived or worked among all their lives, then burned or shot to death. Or they were shot down in their own living rooms and yards, a medieval-style massacre far more like a serial killer's rampage than redolent of modern assembly-line methods. In a sense, the latter tragedy was far more bizarre than that of the camps.

In Dolhinov, they had continued to live in or near their own homes. Within the confines of those walls they lived as they had always done. One day the Germans murdered the next day—as if they were off-duty and had punched a time clock—they left everyone alone. One minute Dolhinov Jews were living their daily lives, wearing their own clothes, sitting at their dinner table, the next they were being machinegunned as many of their neighbors cheered.

And finally, unlike in the west, some would have a chance to fight back, but only when it was too late for almost all of them.

From the time of the Germans' arrival, in the words of Haya Katzovitz, "The entire Jewish population with no exception became outlawed."[19] Ida Friedman's father dryly remarked, "Don't think that they'll leave us alone." On the first day, when Esfira Dimenstein wanted to go visit her grandmother, a German soldier and local policeman stopped her and ordered her back inside until orders were issued on what the Jews must do.

Immediately, Jews were ordered to wear white arm bands. Then, on the Jewish fast day of Tisha B'av—the day when all the worst disasters of their history were said to have happened, starting with destruction of the First and Second Temples—the decree was promulgated in Dolhinov that all must wear yellow Stars of David front and back to brand them.

Jewish children were barred from attending school; Jewish adults from doing business or praying in synagogue. New decrees found creative ways to confiscate any financial assets held by Jews. The first to be killed were five men, four of them Jewish, who had worked for the Soviet administration. The Jewish community, including all of the children, was forced to stand in the market square and watch the executions.

Restrictions were endless. Jews could walk only in streets, or on sidewalks. Jews could not have their own businesses or work for non-Jews but only for the Germans. They could not be out after a certain hour, could not go to villages except with German permission, and could not buy food in the market. The food given them was half the smallest amount given to non-Jews on their rations' cards. Their cows, bicycles, and radios were confiscated as was warm clothing.

And in addition there were acts not part of Berlin's explicit plan: ceaseless extortion both by German officials and the police for gold and silver, diamonds and furs, gold and anything else of value. They demanded loot from the Judenrat which knew who had such things and could get

them. In exchange, they promised the Jews would not be killed. Such promises were worthless, but if such orders were not followed many would have been executed immediately.

Part of the Germans' goal was to demoralize the Jews;the rest was to isolate them and to convince Poles and Byelorussians to despise them. To help Jews in any way—even to give a potato to one—was punishable by death, not only the death of the individual but that of his entire family. Such a sentence, however, was generally limited to those who hid Jews or, later, helped partisans. In contrast, those who turned in Jews might be given a horse or cow; extra food, vodka, or tobacco, and perhaps a rare but prized bar of soap.

What most Dolhinov Jews experienced during the first eight months of the German occupation was grinding work, constant threats to their individual lives, and growing hunger. While a small number of those with special skills—the pharmacist, doctors, dentist, flax dealers, and a couple of the best tailors and shoemakers received passes and some privileges, the main two jobs were road repair and labor in the fields of peasants. Esfira Dimenshtein's uncle and father were set to shoeing horses, a vital part of the German military transport system as well as for peasants' needs. Her mother worked in the fields and the best day during this time was when a peasant gave her nine potatoes to take back to her family. Otherwise, whatever could bring in any money or traded was sold to buy food.

Esfira and other girls had the job of cleaning houses and doing laundry for the Germans. The soldiers threw them food scraps like dogs, some of which they ate and the rest brought the rest back to their families. Once, a German soldier hit her, dissatisfied by her missing places while cleaning under his bed. But the real problem was rape. At least one among their number was raped and murdered.

For Dolhinov's Jews, death was a daily companion but did not seem an inevitable host. Rather than walk in the road, it was better to travel through the backyards' of houses. Windows in each room were inspected for usefulness as potential escape routes. By staying in your home, avoiding contact with e Germans, and obeying their ordinances, one might hope to survive. Otherwise, as Gendel Kaplan of Dolhinov recalled, "There was only one punishment for breaking any rule—execution."

One day, an SS man passing through town lost his leather whip. The officer demanded it be found. Frantically, the Judenrat offered a big reward and bade people immediately bring to the mayor's office every conceivable whip, strap, or lash. But when the one he wanted could not be found, five—or eight, depending on the witness—were chosen more or less at random, were forced to dig a pit. The Jews were forcibly gathered to watch their execution.

Yet if individual Germans wanted to behave decently they were able to do so, at least when others weren't looking. Esther Dokszycky recalls a tall dark German who behaved very cruelly and a red-haired one who told her, "I promised my mother I won't kill anyone," and gave her a piece of bread telling her to hide it "or they'll kill me." He shook his head sadly, "But I don't know what they'll do to you."

At the same time, though, the Germans also knew how to keep the Jews off-balance in order to maintain control and wear down their victims. For instance, my cousin, Victor Rubin, then fourteen years old, had the job of going to the forest to cut firewood. One day in the winter of 1941, he hitched up the family horse to their cart and with his younger brother, Arieh, and another boy.

Intercepted on the way back, the police stole their horse, took their wood, beat them up, and threw them in jail overnight. The Judenrat heard about it and got them released, probably

saving their lives. Victor's face was covered with blood and he still carries a scar from that day. A council member took them to Dr. Kotler who fixed up the injured boys. The next day, when a German officer saw Victor's condition, he acted shocked. "Who did this to you?" he asked, as if offering to be his protector. Victor merely mumbled something about an accident.

Meanwhile, with blood still on Victor's face, the final decisions of the Final Solution were being made. At the January 20, 1942, Wannsee Conference of high-ranking German officials, a death sentence was passed on the remaining Jews in eastern Poland, whose number was there estimated to be 846,000 people. A map sent January 31 to the SS commander, marked with coffins with the number of Jews already murdered in each place. In Belarus, it said, only 230,000 had so far been killed. Much work remained to be done. None of this was known in Dolhinov, but people were starting to get the idea.

Everyone was looking for a way out but usually not finding one. Bushke Katzovitz's mother, Hana, for example, begged a Christian friend and offered to pay if she took in her daughter, who had already proven on her train ride home that she could pass as a Pole. The woman said "No." It was too risky.

Do I blame her? Not really. The houses are tiny, every individual is registered, and it would be hard to conceal someone very long in the outbuildings behind the homes. But the countryside, in isolated farms and villages, was the real place where refuge had to be found. Several dozen peasants in the surrounding villages did save people's lives, always at considerable risk to themselves.

Yet there was one notable exception in Dolhinov itself which revealed how courageous such an act could be and what terrible consequences it entailed. The wealthy Navoichik family hid Dr. Rabinovich, a refugee from Glebokie, his wife and two children. A neighbor informed on them. In the summer of 1942, German soldiers raided the house. They killed the Rabinovich family along with Mrs. Navoichik and two of her children who were home at the time. The soldiers then burned the house to the ground. Only Mr. Navoichik and one of his daughters who just happened to be outside of town at that moment survived. They fled to the partisans and along with many of the Jewish refugees, were evacuated to the USSR later that year.

The real problem—and opportunity—would have been to hide Jews for a few hours during the two big German killing sprees, which lasted, respectively, one and three days. Very few people to my knowledge did that simple service, though some at least didn't turn in Jews they found hiding in their outbuildings.

My complaint is not that so much that no townspeople hid Jews but rather that, when the time came, so many townspeople went out of their way to turn them in so they were murdered on the spot, and then stole all their property.

The first eight months of German occupation were horrible enough but it was just a beginning. Dolhinov Jews started to hear in late 1941 about massacres in one town after another. Just before dawn, one night in October, there was a knock on the Segalchick family's door. It was Aunt Rachel and her daughter Lyuba. They said that yesterday, on Yom Kippur, all the Jews of Plashensitz were taken into the forest and murdered. In the third week of October 1941, during Simhat Torah, in Dolhinov arrived news that 54 Jews were killed in Kurenitz, just 20 miles away.

Among the survivors arriving after the Plashensitz massacre was a Jew from Minsk named Leib Mindel who moved in with the Segalchik family. By that time Mindel, an energetic man with strong leadership qualities, had survived three German massacres. He became

Segalchik's close friend. Mindel and Segalchik talked about the certainty that death would soon come to Dolhinov. To prepare, they dug two hideouts: one a hole in the barn of neighbor Yosef Kremer, four by four yards, reinforced with sturdy wood posts, and heavily camouflaged. The second was inside the family cowshed, concealed by a false wall.

The only reason why the Dolhinov Jews were still alive was because the German military and the civilian ministeries responsible for the army's supply still needed Jewish labor. The Nazi leadership, however, demanded their ideology be fulfilled. A March 26, 1942, meeting of eleven German ministries sealed the book. Himmler declared: "The Eastern Territories will be freed of all Jews. I alone am responsible to the Fuhrer and do not want any discussion."[20] And that was that.

On March 3, the Germans murdered the Chabad rabbi and 22 other men. It is not clear precisely why, whether an act of random sadism or a deliberate attempt to destroy the community's leadership before the main massacre. But even if people thought their only hope of survival was to escape to the forest, they could not last more than a couple of days during winter

"Every day brought another terrible tale of destruction in the towns around us," Segalchik recalled. On Wednesday, March 12, survivors told of the wiping out of all the Jews left in Ilya, shot outside the town. There was no doubt that the time was drawing close when it would be their turn. About twenty young men were determined to try and they sent Mindel and Segalchik to talk with a friendly Christian village who they thought would help.

The two men made a mistake, however, and in this situation first mistakes were usually the last as well. On March 15, they walked out of town carrying axes, saws, and a letter from the mayor saying they were going to cut wood. But a half-mile out of town, a motley posse caught up with them: the police chief and a German officer on a sled, other police on horses and bicycles.

The pursuers yelled in Polish, "Stop and put your hands up!" There was no hope of outrunning them so Sigalchik and Mindel complied. Immediately, the police began beating them. One hit Mindel on the head with a rifle, knocking him to the ground unconscious amidst a pool of blood. Segalchik was badly beaten but only on the back and shoulders, as if they did not want him to relapse into the comfort of unconsciousness. One policeman hit him so hard that his rifle broke.

Dragging the two men, the police tied them to the back of the sled and turned the horses back to the town. The prisoners had to run behind. Then they lashed the horses so the two men fell and were dragged along. Back in town, they took them to a well and the police poured buckets of water drenching them and making them shake feverishly in the cold. The next stop was the police station where two German communications' officers, who maintained the telephone lines, were waiting. They delighted in beating up Jews for minor infractions like walking on the sidewalk or not taking off their hats in their presence. German regular army officers often delighted in persecuting Jews for fun rather than due to orders.

The German officers and the police chief beat Sigalchik and Mindel continuously asking about their contacts with partisans. The more they claimed to know nothing, the more they were beaten. Mindel, covered with blood, lost consciousness again while Sigalchik prayed for a swift death. As he lay on the floor, apparently dead to the world, Sigalchik heard the phone conversation between an officer, reporting the capture of two Jewish partisans, and the SS post in Dokshitz. Sigalchik could have no doubt what the other end was saying: Tomorrow we'll arrive to interrogate, then execute them.

The sun had set, the last they expected to see, when they were thrown into a cell, three yards' square with two big windows blocked only by bars, not glass. The night was cold and in the storm and their drenched clothes the two prisoners shivered. Thinking there was no chance of escape. The police didn't even bother to stand guard but merely locked the cell door.

No rest came to the two men. Silent midnight came. Suddenly, they heard steps outside. Sigalchik looked out the window and saw the seeming mirage of his oldest sister, Peshia Riva Katz. She crept up to the window asking, through her sobs, if they were still alive and if there was anything she could do to help. Sigalchik replied, "You have no time to cry now, you must do everything possible to get us out of here. Run home and bring an axe. It would be better if your husband Yerochmiel came to help us."

She ran to the house and after half an hour, Katz arrived with an axe hidden in his jacket. He tried unsuccessfully to break the bars, then pushed the axe inside to let them try. Suddenly, they realized that the bars were attached to the wall only by heavy nails. Pre-war Dolhinov had no need to imprison any criminals more dangerous than those who'd consumed too much vodka. In fifteen minutes, they twisted the nails free and removed enough bars to squeeze out. Then they ran to their hideout in the Kremer barn. There, Sigalchik tied a wet towel around Mindel's head and, exhausted, they fell asleep on a haystack.

What happened was this: SS men had arrived to continue the interrogation the next day and find their two prisoners had escaped can easily be imagined. They screamed for the Judenrat's leader and warned that if the men weren't returned fast the whole community would be wiped out. The Jewish police looked frantically but only Sigalchik's family knew where they were. Nobody talked.

Saturday passed with the town's Jews in a panic. The Gestapo men left that evening, emptyhanded. But not for long.

It is before dawn of Monday, March 28, 1942. In Vileika the regional headquarters of the SS is busy. Who is in the trucks and vehicles heading out for a day of murder in Dolhinov isn't precisely clear. It is probably an SS unit perhaps accompanied by part of the German Einsatzgruppe B and certainly by a Lithuanian or Latvian police company.

The four Einsatzgruppe exist solely to murder Jews. In charge of Belarus is the700-man B branch. Its commander is named Erich Naumann, a minor bureaucrat before the war. Far from being a collection of thugs and criminals, the unit had been assembled as a group of dedicated Nazi cadre. Many had been failures in civilian life but were distinct successes as cold-blooded killers. They included a bank clerk, opera singer, lawyer, Lutheran minister, and a dentist. Those who wanted to be relieved of this duty were easily able to obtain transfers.[21]

Backing up this German contingent were Lithuanian and Latvian volunteers of the security police units. Was it the 2nd, 3rd, or 12th Lithuanian Police Auxiliary Battalion; 15th Police Regiment or 255th Security Police detachment? Probably the best guess is the Latvian 18th Police Battalion. All had massacred Jews and Red Army prisoners and were stationed in the area. Jewish survivors would later always speak of Latvians or at least of soldiers who didn't speak German. But the Jews in Dolhinov were too busy at the time to examine their credentials more thoroughly.

By dawn, their trucks were roaring through Kurzenitz. Jews there heard them and knew that death was on its way. One can forgive their sigh of relief on realizing the trucks were rolling toward victims in other towns.

Perhaps the escape of the Sigalchik and Mindel made the SS deviate from its timetable. But the SS's follow-up report after the massacre admitted it wasn't satisfied with the outcome. They had come to kill all the Jews but caught "only part" because they unexpectedly found that their prey "had created real bunkers for hiding in during pogroms." One of these was three stories deep. But since the Germans found it in the end, we have no details from those who made and hid in it. It seems, if one could take pride in this, that of all the Jewish towns in Belarus, Dolhinov presented the toughest challenge for them. In the end, they only wiped out about half the community.

While they had no idea what day would be the fateful one, by this point the Dolhinov Jews knew what was coming. Too many rumors, too many refugees had reached them for illusions to survive. They knew the Germans would come before dawn, surround the town, and spring their trap in the morning. "Where could we find a shelter?" everyone asked. Shimon Gitlitz remembered that his house had a small basement closed up for years. He secretly dug it out and that gave his sister's family the same idea.

Someone in the family awoke to the sound of stamping boots, barked commands, the wails of children, and sobs of women. The rest were hurriedly roused and the parents rushed their five children into their basement, joined by the Shaingarts, their neighbors from across the street. Shimon moved a heavy water container over the entry door to hide it from view. But that meant he was also unable to enter himself. He ran to hide himself outdoors the whole day, and the cold weather badly froze his feet.

But the family had still another problem. David, the baby, was crying despondently and his mother feared the noise would give the family away. So she ran to a Christian neighbor, handed over her fur coat and promised if the woman would conceal her she'd bring a gold watch afterward. The woman refused, her attempts to find shelter failed, and the Germans killed her and the baby. Later, the Christian woman showed up at the Kazovitz's house claiming she had helped and demanding the watch. A single misjudgment about a person's character cost your life.

Meanwhile, the rest of the family hid undisturbed. When night fell and the Germans left, Yankel Furman, stepfather of the Kazovitz family, returned, knocked on the door and let them out. They crawled from the basement to realize with a shock how few of their friends remained alive.

Through the luck of the draw, Chana Brunstein might have had the easiest time that day. She was inside cooking when a German soldier entered. He should have forced her out to line up with the other Jews but instead—Humane? Hungry? Lazy?—he merely asked her for some eggs and left. Esfira Dimenshtein and her family were saved because a friendly Polish policeman—Maslovsky or Maletzko--had warned them that the Germans were coming the next day. They made a big hole in their grandmother's barn and stayed there until the morning of the second day.

Avraham Friedman took a dozen relatives and neighbors to the house of his friends, the policemen Maslovsky and Takovich, who said they'd hide him but it was too dangerous to conceal such a large group. So they ran to one of the barns behind a Christian's house, went inside, and locked the door. Friedman stayed in the policemen's house. When he finally emerged after two days, he found bodies strewn in the streets but his brother and sister, his aunt and her children had survived. The barn's owner discovered them but didn't turn them in.

Gendel Kaplan's relatives found the police less friendly. While most of the family had dug a hiding place, his 82-year-old grandmother, Rhoda, could take no more. Along with her

son, who perhaps thought his status as a craftsman might protect her, she stayed seated in the parlor. When the police entered, the uncle handed them his document and said as a relative his mother was also protected. They returned the document, nodded seriously, then shot her dead right in front of him.

But most Dolhinov Jews who survived did so only by hiding. Typical was the Friedman family, whose shelter was dug in the two-yard-wide space between their big stove and the wall. The resulting space was only 1 yard by 2 yards, and the family members had to sit crushed together for a full day, hot, uncomfortable but still alive.

My cousins, the Rubin family, were one of the few which had a hiding place prepared long before the First Action. Rasia Rubin's brother, Benjamin, had worked for the Soviets during their time in Dolhinov. Once the Germans arrived, the family hid him in a hole they dug. Knowing Dolhinov was too hot for him, Benjamin fled to Kurenitz, where he was finally captured and killed. But when the First Action came, the hole served the family well.

The least likely survivor in Dolhinov that day was Shmuel Kugel of Pleshchenitsy. Kugel had only escaped the massacre in his own town because he was outside with a work party. All day he had sat alone in the cold rain. That night, he went home to find his wife gone and the locks changed. One of his neighbors had wasted no time in grabbing the house. With only the clothes on his back he'd taken a sack for a hat, a branch for a walking stick and spent four days pacing through forests or fields, sleeping in haystacks, and being fed by peasants, "as they wept over my fate and their own."

Arriving in Dolhinov, he was taken in by relatives who were mourning one of their own, executed because of the SS man's lost whip. Now Kugel was in the middle of another massacre. Some of those living in the same building as him were so exhausted they didn't even try to hide. "You can't save yourself anyway," they said, "you're just torturing yourself." Nevertheless, Kugel and nine others hid in the attic. The Germans came in and looked around several times but never found them.

One woman, driven mad by fear, ran from her shelter and was caught by the Germans. They promised that if she showed them her family's hideout they would let the Jews there go free. Out of her mind, she did so. The Germans promptly murdered her entire family, then killed her, too.

Christian townspeople, of course, had no need to hide. Some turned their neighbors' distress into material gain, looting their possessions, even clothes. Others locked themselves in, trembling at their own fate. When asked many years later what went through his mind when they saw Jewish neighbors being dragged away, a Polish resident of another town replied, "We were thinking that we might be next."

That's what the Beyelorussian hospital maintenance man Leonid Andreyovitch thought on that day as he fearfully peered out the window. What he saw was remarkable: a parade of Jews, being marched down his street under the guns of German soldiers, Lithuanian or Latvian security police, and Polish or Byelorussian local police

Boris Kozinitz, who had relatives in Dolginov and escaped there a week later, told what it was like to be in that situation, as he had been when the same units wiped out the Jews in his town just 48 hours before.[22]

Germans and their collaborators grabbed Jews off the street, broke into houses and pulled people out until they assembled large groups which were then marched down the road,

surrounded by several ranks of policemen. As they walked toward the market square, the prisoners could see non-Jewish townspeople watching indifferently.

When they arrived by the square, where many of them had worked all their lives in the small adjoining shops, they were ordered to sit and wait. Some fell prostrate onto the ground and wept. Many prayed. Most hoped it was just some re-registration, minor humiliation, or even the execution of a small number who would be selected out of the group.

A few ran for it, and were shot down, one of them falling within reach of Kozinitz. Two men made a break for it and got pretty far. A submachine gun opened up on them, they fell down. But, when the shooting stopped, one got up and took off again. Police fire brought him down, too. None of those who ran for it escaped in either town.

What can one say in such circumstances? Kozinitz's friend, Gdalia Levin, had chronic tuberculosis and so was used to facing death. He whispered in Kozinitz's ear, "Take a good look at the trees and the houses, you shall not see them again. These will stay after we are gone, nothing changed, but we will not. The world will keep on existing but many Jews will not be in it."

One man, however, had some small role in determining his fate. A German officer pulled out a man named Lipkind, a member of the Judenrat. The officer said, "You, as a community elder must see all your community being killed and we will kill *you* last."

In response, Lipkind charged a Polish policeman named Komolka, hit him in the face and then went back to his place among the others. The officer asked Komolka if he wanted Lipkind punished. The policeman replied, "No, there's no need, he'll be shot soon anyway."

But how did Kozinitz and some of those in Dolhinov survive this fatal assembly? As he tells the story:

"I was approached by Sonder-Führer Hartman and was called aside. He called also my father, my stepmother Gutte and her daughter Haya. My brother, Haim, approached Sonder-Führer Ungerman presented his pass and added that he was employed by the Germans. As an answer he received a slap in the face. He began to run toward the Jewish cemetery and I clearly saw that he succeeded in reaching it. However, [local witnesses] told me later that my brother was killed by [the Polish policeman] Witwizky from Gleboki, who ran after him with a submachine gun."

Esther Dokshitsky was among those marched to the main square of Dolhinov. More and more Jews arrived. One said that the Germans would send them to a concentration camp; another insisted they would all be killed. A mother holding a baby was screaming. One of the Germans grabbed the baby, said, "We're not going to waste a bullet on this one," and smashed its head onto an electrical pole, then dropped the dead child on the ground.

The German commander began reading the names of men, the doctor, dentist, pharmacist, and others. Esther's father and uncle were flax merchants and on the list. Since his own two daughters and wife were safely in hiding, the uncle grabbed his sister and her two children claiming them as his. A policeman escorted them to a house and warned them to stay inside. Someone said, "Even if we survive, what will we eat?"

"I don't think we'll have to eat," answered Esther's father. "Why are we better than the other ones?"

After those who the Germans wanted to keep alive were removed, the soldiers and police opened up with rifles and machineguns and mowed down hundreds of people. They fell in place, a few living for a few seconds more. Others were forced into two hay warehouses on which gasoline was poured from jerrycans and then set alight. Having been used so long to store hay the buildings were infinitely flammable.

Anyone trying to escape was machinegunned. The screams of those burned were terrible, the cries of those who tried to escape were cut short by the bullets. At 6 PM it was quitting time, and the murders stopped. Any Jew caught after that was left completely alone, as if the Germans were indifferent to their continued existence.

How did the Germans, Poles, Latvians, and Lithuanians who did this deed feel about it? It didn't bother them at all. Probably, they enjoyed it. They did what they set out to do and knew what they did. After all, it was only one of many towns where they conducted their performance. Certainly, none were reluctant; no pangs of conscience plagued them. Do we need to know any more than that?

Is there some universal lesson here about whether they were mistreated as children, denied sufficient maternal affection, tasted poverty? For all practical reasons, this is rubbish. After all, there will always be such people and they will commit such deeds if afforded the opportunity, given justification, and assured of immunity. There will always be such childhoods and societies, always be such regimes and ideologies.

Philosophers, psychiatrists, and social workers have defined the world that creates such individuals. The point is to stop them.

They left, went back to the base and no doubt had a fine drinking party, recounting amusing incidents of that day.

Night fell in Dolhinov. And at dark, or in some cases only the next morning, survivors came out to see what and who remained. The Dimenshteins heard a cousin named Vichne Hodas, shouting, "Come out! They've killed everybody!" She'd survived in the home of a Christian neighbor but her parents were killed. Her father, who was very pious, decided he was ready to be a martyr if fate so willed and refused to hide.

Those who emerged found homes wrecked by looters, both uniformed and neighbors. It was like emerging from a bomb shelter after nuclear war. Esfira Dimenshtein saw people shredded by bullets, lying in pools of blood. She recognized friends, schoolmates, relatives. Gendel Kaplan recalled, "When we came out of our hideout we could not breathe. We were frozen with horror." The smell of dead bodies everywhere and, incongruously, feathers drifted threw the air languidly, torn from pillows cut up by looters in hope that treasures were inside. Blood smeared the cottage walls.

Esther Telis heard some of her non-Jewish neighbors discussing the event. "The Germans are not very smart," said one. "They should have killed the Jews in winter when it's too cold for them to run to the woods and survive. Instead, they waited until the spring and now it's too warm."

Surrounded by enemies, having seen so many horrors, it was hard not to be demoralized and give up entirely. "We the survivors," reflected Avraham Friedman, "became lost shadows living in the memories of the dear ones we lost. We walked around with no purpose. How could we ever overcome this torture and agony? "

A Jew from another town, Eliezer Shod from Krivitzi wrote of the same period, "

”We carried on feeling the deepest humiliation and not an ounce of self-respect. Every moment of the day passed through darkness and depression, and nights were filled with terror and nightmares. In the depths of disillusion, sometimes we felt that we were the living dead. We walked both in and outside the realm of the living.”

It was easy to succumb to this fatalism and passivity. To continue struggling for escape and survival took an almost superhuman effort.

And, of course, the Germans of the garrison and their police force were still there. They demanded that all the remaining Jews register and promised no more would be killed. The surviviors were made to collect the bodies as they grieved for lost ones and sobbed, not only for those who were dead but also for themselves. Their trials were by no means over. Only now they could have no doubt as to the verdict and sentence.

Haya Katzovitz’s account cannot be surpassed in the telling:

“We collected the bodies from the streets and the backyards, their homes and their hiding places, and buried them in a common brotherly grave. The survivors became shadow-like creatures. The fear from what we recognized were imminent atrocities against us, kept us awake at nights. People worked hard for the Germans hoping that they would be saved and the Germans promised the Judenrat that no more actions would occur. We all knew that we could not trust that promise; still the will to survive was very strong. There was only one case of suicide by a person who returned home after the massacre and found out that his entire family was killed.”

Sigalchik along with Mindel, the most unlikely survivors of all, sat in the hideout in his neighbor’s barn, knowing that every breath they drew might be the last, hearing the barking of German orders, the screams of those seized, and the shots that cut them short.

They emerged from their hideout to see “from afar the flames from burning barns. We could also smell burning fuel mixed with the smell of burning human flesh and clothing everywhere….There was a ghastly quiet on all the streets of the town, and we trudged amidst this deathly cold silence.”

Their breath before them in white clouds, deep white snow crunching beneath their feet, they walked to the forest. All night long, since it was unsafe to light a fire, they had to pace to keep from freeing, “like caged foxes,” according to Sigalchik’s telling comparison. Many times, after all, he had seen such foxes at the fur farm when he brought them food. They had no hope of escape but could only wait for their execution. And yet soon that very experience at the fox farm would save Sigalchik’s life and that of practically every other survivor of Dolhinov.

Meanwhile, the night goes on endlessly. What thoughts come to a man who has left behind his mother and siblings, his friends, whose state of life or death he knows not. For Sigalchik, more than any other Jew in Dolhinov there is also a sense of guilt, “Would they have not done it if my friend and I had sacrificed ourselves?”

Looking at other towns' experiences, it doesn't seem like it would have made a difference. This is what Sigalchik concludes rationally--“We knew it was only an illusion that the massacre could have been prevented”--but in his heart can he accept that not-guilty verdict entirely? Is this a factor in his restless need thereafter for revenge, to purge himself of a sense that somehow those murdered souls lost at least some days of life due to him? His paradox is another reminder of why it was so difficult for individual Jews to flee, saving themselves yet placing others in jeopardy.

No sleep, no rest, no comfort.

The day brings little warmth and they stay concealed. The next night they arrived at a little farmhouse on the forest edge and see candlelight in the window. They knock on the door and are met kindly. The farmer asks them to sit down, pulls down the heavy drapes so no one would see them. And then he tells his own tale. That very day he'd gone into town and saw the surviving Jews walking around, disturbed by no one. The two men want to stay in the forest but it's clear that Mindel, still bleeding from his head wounds, won't live much longer if they do.

Segalchik insists they return to town for a few days. Once Mindel heals and the weather improves, they will try again. They sneak back to find his mother, alive and whole, greeting them at the door of the family house. They hide in the barn but still hear the talk of the streets through Segalchik's relatives bringing food and news. "If it weren't for Segalchik and Mindel trying to join the partisans there would have been no disaster," people complain. The more sensible have a different version: their deeds merely made the massacre come sooner.

No sooner had the Jews buried their dead—of course, there were no casualties whatsoever on the other side or among non-Jewish townspeople--that the Germans, in early April, unleashed their new plague. All Jews must leave their homes and move into a small area along Borisov Street which would be their ghetto, into whose houses between 1500 and 2000 people must crowd into every corner. They're allowed to take only what might be fit into a wheelbarrow. The Judenrat makes housing arrangements. Ina Freedman's family moved into a house with six others. A dozen people or more would have to share a single room in the little cottages. Jail cells would have been more spacious.

But before they left their homes forever, Jews had one more task to perform. Like Haya Katzovitz's mother, Hana, they burned belongings they couldn't take so these don't fall into their rapacious neighbors' hands. It's an admission of knowing they won't return. Smoke rose from fireplaces of the Jewish houses. And then they walked to the ghetto area, a parade of Jews carrying the last of their possessions, but none of their hopes.

The Katzovitz family, the Riar family, and a refugee from the Polish city of Lodj lived in one room of a house; the family of Schreibman—Hana Katzovitz's brother, the family of Shimon Gitlitz, and his sister-in-law, the recently widowed Rachel Katz and her baby, dwelt in the other room. The kitchen, however, was not left lonely as two single people moved in there. The Friedman family, which like everyone else had their own small cottage, now lived in a dwelling of the same dimensions with six others.

Next, the prisoners are made to build a barbed wire barrier inside a wooden fence to make this area their prison. Jewish police patrol inside; a detachment of 10 local German-recruited police outside. Immediately, the Jews looked for weak points or, as Avraham Friedman and Sigalchik did, created and camouflaged escape routes as they worked on the fence. One they found was a little shed behind a house, with a long-forgotten door opening onto the street outside. It's marked down as a good escape route. But when the time came, perhaps it was not so forgotten after all—those who tried to use it were killed without exception. They also begin digging out holes and hiding places.

Observing Jewish law as best they could, they baked matzoh for Passover and said their prayers, more fervently than ever. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no harm, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me."

But of course death was their companion for every waking hour. Arieh Rubin continues his woodcutting. Accompanied by guards, the detail walked about three miles outside of town,

chopped down the trees, and dragged the wood back. It's backbreaking labor but also a privileged task. Not only did it allow him to get out of town into the fresh air and open fields, but there's a chance for encountering peasants who might gift a potato or two for his family.

On the morning of April 27, 1942, a strange feeling came over Arieh he'd never felt before. Some premonition made him feel that no matter what happened—even if the Germans came to shoot him in his bed—he must not go to work that day. His mother pleaded with him, fearful of what might happen if he didn't get up and report for work. Perhaps he'd be shot. Each decision, usually so trivial, had become weighted down with gravestones. But Arieh was far more fearful, albeit inexplicably so, of what would happen if he did.

The seven other men went out to the woods as usual. Everything seemed normal. When they were half-way back, the soldiers suddenly stopped and shot them all down. One of the men, Hersch Sperber, fell with a bullet in his head. A German soldier kicked him to make sure he was dead. But he wasn't. After all were gone—to the next world or back to their barracks, respectively--and darkness came over the land, Sperber awoke and found himself alive. He staggered to his feet, ran into the woods, and snuck back into town, reaching the hospital. Dr. Kotler cut out the bullet and saved him.

The next day, the Germans again surrounded the town in the Second Action. Sperber survived hiding in a hole. He eventually came to the land of Israel where he died only in 2007, almost six decades later, having fathered three children who would not otherwise have been born.

But the other six men were still dead. And so would Arieh have been, except for that strange, powerful feeling that he cannot explain to this day.

Only then were rumors starting to spread of Red Army soldiers in the nearby woods and the vision of their return. Not just bandits or ragged escaped prisoners, but a real army of liberation. The Germans themselves proved it by posting threats to kill anyone who helped the partisans. They circulated articles about alleged German victories over these guerrillas. Such efforts had the exact opposite effect: proving an effective force existed. At last, there a tiniest glimmer of hope for Dolhinov's Jews.

And yet it was too late for most, almost all, of them.

Early morning, April 28 1942, there's something of wrongness in the air, a tension among the police the gradual arrival of more soldiers until the ghetto is surrounded. It is the Second Action. The previous month's events are repeated. screams, chases, sounds of shots. Hiding places discovered, grenades thrown into them or Jews brought out and shot down. This time, the Germans and their allies are determined to do the job thoroughly. They stay at it for two full days and part of a third. By the end, there are survivors again but not many, except for the expert workers, given a short stay of execution by the Germans themselves.

Among the Dolhinov Jews, only one nuclear family survived, my cousins, and that was due to Shlomo Rosin. How many unsung heroes there were whose deeds deserve being sung.

Rosin had built a hiding place first for his brother-in-law who the Germans had sentenced to death, then for the family's use in the First Action. When it was left behind with their home as they moved to the ghetto, he made a new hiding place. They began by expanding the windowless potato cellar. But they decided that wouldn't suffice and so they closed it up and started over again.

This time they built in a less obvious hiding place for a hiding place: just inside the front door. A trapdoor was cut from a piece of flooring which blended in with the rest. A handle was fit onto its bottom so it could easily be opened, closed, and fit into place.

And so when the Germans came again, he told thirteen relatives, including my six-year-old cousin Leon, not to worry about him but to get into the shelter quickly. He then arranged a large pile of potatoes over the trap door--thus making impossible his own escape through it. "Don't worry about me. I'll manage." Those were his last words to them.

Rosin ran to the synagogue to hide. But unlike his cleverly constructed hiding place, that was all too obvious. The German searchers found him there with little difficulty. Leaping out a window in a vain effort to escape, Rosin was shot and killed. His family survived only because he sacrificed his life for them.

Blessedly not knowing this at the time, the Rosins and Rubins huddled in the hole. They heard soldiers enter searching for them as footsteps went right over their heads. The first thing the soldiers checked was the storage room, their original hiding place. If they hadn't changed plans everyone would have died. But the Germans never guessed that to reach that storage cellar they'd stepped right over the real hideout.

Hour after hour the families sat for three days, daring to talk only in whispers. Since they were close to the river, water constantly seeped in and they sat in puddles. There was no food or drink. Through small air holes Shlomo had cut, they could, however, see a bit outside. The sound of shooting was heard. So were their Polish neighbors telling the Germans that the families must be hiding somewhere in the house. Townspeople were pointing out the shelters of other Jews, ensuring their doom and the informants becoming heir to all their property. One of the families wiped out in this way was in the very next house, the Grosbeins, distant relatives of mine on my grandmother's side.

That first night, Shlomo's sister, Bilke, lost confidence in their sanctuary's safety and decided to join another group elsewhere. Shlomo's daughter, Rachel, decided to join her. After a while in that hiding place, Rachel missed her family and returned. A few hours later, the other place was discovered and all there, including Bilke, were killed.

Frustrated in not being able to find the Rosin-Rubin hideout, the Germans returned to the house and focused attention on the outbuildings stretching behind it. They set the woodshed afire, certain this was where their quarry hid and believing the flames would finish them off.

Smoke drifted into the breathing holes. At first the fugitives thought the house was burning down around them. Uncle Shlomki stood up, hunching under the low ceiling, and said he was going to leave. But Gavriel Rubin stopped him, calmly asserting: "It is better to be burned alive than caught by the Germans." Shlomki sat down again. They awaited better times.

The Katzovitz family also had a new hiding place. Since the Schreibams already lived in the area that became the ghetto, they remained in their home and could use the safe haven they'd built during the First Action. It was cleverly placed below a balcony and each of the nine people entering had to jump down to get inside.

But this was a place with only enough room for the women and children. The men took the biggest risk, ready if necessary to sacrifice themselves. They began by hiding in woodpiles but if they had a chance they agreed to get out the hidden gate door leading outside the ghetto which they'd noted earlier for use in just such a situation.

Down into the hideout jumped Feiga Shriebam; her sister Gita Gitlitz, the Katzovitz's sister-in-law, and her two sons; Mrs. Katzovitz and her daughters. The hidden women, too, heard

their neighbors guiding the Germans to other hiding places; the screams and futile pleas of captured Jews; followed by gunshots, grenade explosions, and deadly silence. Frozen with fear, they did not even dare to whisper. There were more screams and more gunshots, and more and more.

At one point, Mrs. Katzovitz whispered to her children: "If we are to be caught we should not cry my daughters, we should not beg them for our lives since it does not help anyway, we should not expect mercy from them. We should die with our self respect and dignity knowing who we are."

Then she stopped cold. There were the noises downstairs of police entering the house. The hidden ones strained ears to follow their progress. The footsteps moved away toward the other side of the house. Then came the sound of furniture being moved. Neighbors and police were looting everything. They didn't call the Germans lest the soldiers interrupt their enrichment and order them to return to the proper work of murder, at least before profit. Ultimately, cupidity, not love, saved their lives.

The next morning the Germans visited each house and discovered some of the hiding places they had missed, rechecking homes not fully inspected by the less-dedicated police. But the neighbors weren't satisfied. Some Jews obviously still lived. Townspeople, accompanied by Germans, came into the house and one was overheard to say, "It looks suspicious." They began knocking on the walls and one of them said, "Get an ax."

Just then, when all seemed lost, they began arguing among themselves. A soldier snarled, "What are you doing here, brigade number four?"

The reply came: "This is our territory. We are brigade five. Get out of here!"

As the first group left, a bugle blast sounded, calling all the Germans to assemble. All the soldiers left. The women had survived the second day.

Yet they knew it was only a matter of time before the Germans returned and caught them. Leaving was imperative. They climbed out of their hiding place and headed for the gate door but found it locked. Though they didn't know it until much later, that lock saved their lives. The door had been discovered and their husbands, sons, and fathers who'd gone through it the previous day had been shot down: the Katzovitz's stepfather, Yakov Foreman; and little Aron and Nachman and Shimon Gitlitz; and Feiga's husband Chiam, and son Chilik Shreibman. And so had been the Katzovitz's grandmother Feige Gitlitzther and their aunt Haya, Sarah and her son Gadalya Eidelman. "There was," as one survivor noted drily, "no time to mourn."

Meanwhile, Chana Brunstein, who had such good fortune during the First Action, decided not to try her luck too far this time. She joined a group of eight, including her brother, who decided to break out of the ghetto.

They made a run for it in the morning of the first day, before the Germans got too organized. Police guards fired at them but only one was lightly wounded. Panting for air, they raced several blocks away from the ghetto and broke into an abandoned house—it belonged to Yerachmiel Shapiro, who many of them had visited in better days—on May 3 Street and hid in the basement. The Germans weren't looking for Jews outside the ghetto and the fugitives could catch their breath there.

But after a few hours, they reluctantly but inevitably had to go on. They checked to make sure no one was watching—the townspeople were as dangerous to them as the SS—and ran once again.

And here is an image that I cannot get out of my mind, a small thing that took a heartbeat of time. But Chana Brunstein noticed and remembered it for more than a half-century despite it having come in her life's most terrifying moment. As they ran across Boimalach boulevard, they spotted an eight-year-old girl all alone who they knew to be from the Sandler family. They did not stop or divert their path. No one can blame them and no one can doubt that she did not live more than a few hours after that. This frozen image of a little girl, lost, confused, bereft, dazed, is a fitting image for the horror of those days.

The group's next stop was the attic of a house that belonged to the uncle of one of them. And finally when night came, they ran out of town altogether, to the granary of a farmer in the nearby village of Palant. The man had been a regular customer in the Katzovitz store and they knew they could trust him. They were right, which is why this story is being told and not gone forever, as are those of three thousand other children of Dolhinov.

He hid them in the potato storeroom under his home—oh, staff of life, indeed was that vegetable for them. And as an extra kindness during the daytime he took them upstairs to sleep by the oven. They would stay there until the massacre was over.

Like other menfolk, Esfira Dimenshein's father put sand on the floor to hide the entrance of the hole where his wife, son, and daughter was hidden. They spent two days inside and when they could breathe no more came out. Fortunately for them, they lasted long enough. Their father was dead and so were all their other relatives including their grandparents, relatives, and friends.

And then it was over, in every sense of the word. But I have not told one word of what is most important. It is easy to dwell on the stories of survival, because those people live and have stories to tell. It is comforting to hear the stories of survival, because they imply that if one had been there an individual survival could have been secured through smartness and luck. Yet for every one such name, there are a dozen who did not live.

Here is one small incident that took one minute and yet reveals the inescapable paradoxes and inevitable choices of Dolhinov Jews. Sigalchik's sister had saved him from jail but could not save herself in the second massacre. Pulled out of a hiding place by the soldiers, she begged them to let her live, saying she had young children.

They asked, "If you really have young children, where are they?" She knew that to answer that mocking question was unthinkable, and futile even so. She remained silent. She died. At least, in that last moment she knew they were still safe and might live. Such were the sole consolations available.

Esfira Dimenshtein had the experience closest to that of most Dolhinov Jews that day:

"They led us to a sandlot near the cemetery saying that we are going to work. There were Germans and [local] policemen. They made us stand in two rows and started shooting. I wasn't killed because I faint[ed]. I woke up…it was dark and it was very hard to breathe. I looked around and didn't see anyone, just dead bodies. There was a dead man lying on me. And I started creeping to the forest."

She hid for two days under haystacks, thinking that this dome of dried animal fodder would be her deathbed. On the evening of the second day, she decided to make for the forest. There she met some other escapees who told her that her brother and mother had been saved by the same Polish policeman whod rescued them in the First Action and now helped them to hide.

Sixteen-year-old Esther Dokszycky was hiding with her mother, Rivke, and sister, Roshkle, along with her aunt and her own two daughters, while her father and uncle hid behind a woodpile. The women heard the Polish family next door talking about where the Dokszycky's might be and then went off to bring the Germans. Rivke, said, "They'll find us." They decided to split up in the hope that at least a few would survive.

Rivke took off her wedding ring—the only thing of any value they had left--and put it on her daughter's finger. Had she a premonition of who would live and who would die in the next few minutes?

Then they raced out. Rivke and Roshke turned left and were shot; the aunt, her two daughters, and Esther turned right and made it to a neighbor's house where they hid in the attic. They heard people saying, "They have to be somewhere around here." And then the top of a ladder appeared, followed by German soldiers who dragged them out.

Esther's aunt cried out, "My husband is a specialist and you're not supposed to kill us!" Her effort worked.

"So why did you hide?" replied a soldier. "I'll take you to the SS commander."

When the officer had examined their papers and found out she was telling the truth, he asked her the same question as did his subordinate.

"I didn't want to be killed," she replied in fluent German.

The officer looked down at his clipboard. Yes, he said, your father and uncle are flax merchants and you are listed as having two daughters. But who, pointing at Esther, is this one?

"This is also the daughter of a specialist," she explained.

For a moment they stood there, the black-uniformed SS officer and his armed men face-to-face with a small Jewish woman and three young girls. Finally he decided, "Take them to the other specialists," ordered the officer.

"And what," the soldier asked of Esther, "should I do with this one?

"Let the little shit live," he answered. "I will kill her next time." The man led them off. A few moments later, as they were passing a house, some other soldiers brought out their cousin, a little boy of ten years old. He was an orphan, his father having been killed and his mother being the one who had committed suicide after the first action.

Quickly, the aunt said that he was also one of her children.

"Oh no, you don't," said one of the soldiers. "You watch!" And they shot him down before their eyes.

Finally they arrived at one of the three houses given over to the surviving Jews. There Esther found her father, who had blood all over his face. He had been caught, too. "They gave me a good beating because they said I wasn't supposed to hide," he explained.

"Father," she said to him, "I think that mother and Roshkle are dead." He already knew. "At least you're alive," he said, and they broke down in tears.

For 24 hours they stayed in that house, without food. They left only to bury the dead. In one wagon, Esther saw another aunt with her husband and four children; and in a second wagon was the bullet-riddled body of her six-foot-tall cousin, a college student, so big he needed a whole wagon for himself.

As I watch her describe that scene on the video screen at Yad ve-Shem, the Jerusalem museum of the Shoah, I think her story of the Second Action is over. But it isn't

At the very end, as the interviewer is winding things up and getting ready to turn off the camera, she adds one more thing. It is the most horrible of all the horrible things in her memory,

so incongruous with the luxurious Florida home in the background of the scene. Yet having told the rest of the story, she finds herself able to unburden the last terrible secret. She speaks.

There she is, back in the run-down house with the other experts, all shaken by their experiences of the day. A teen-aged boy has just come in the door, perhaps the last living Jew in the streets of town. He sees Esther and comes up to her, hesitating, but unable to restrain himself. The boy has something he must get off his chest.

"I was forced to bury the dead," he tells her. "Among them was your sister, Roshke. She was still barely alive and her eyes were open. But I couldn't bury her alive, so I asked one of the Polish police to shoot her. He refused.

"And then I asked one of the SS men. `Sure,' he said." He lifts up his machinegun and lets off a burst into her body. And then the boy picks her up, as gently as he can, and throws her into the mass grave, as respectfully as he can.

"I knew it was your sister," he explained to Esther, "because I recognized her beautiful blue eyes." And then he walks away.

Except for about 150 to 300 "experts" and their families, all those Jews who the Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Poles caught were put to death immediately, mostly shot down where they stood; some torn apart by grenades in their hiding places.

On the morning the massacre began, young Arieh Rubin was a stone's throw outside Dolhinov, seeking food for his family. He saw Yehuda Ginsberg of the Judenrat telling people that the Germans were calling for an assembly. And he also saw the unsual number of German soldiers. Wisely, Arieh ran in the opposite direction, into the woods. Wandering there, he met up with a group of other young Jews who'd escaped and were seeking the partisans. But he could not leave his family like that and did not join them.

Instead, he walked about a mile and a half to the house of a peasant who he'd often visited with his father who'd bought and sold in the countryside. Arieh hid and hesitated. Then around midnight he knocked on the door. The man came, and asked—a wise person did not open a door lightly in those times—"Who is it?"

"It's Arieh, the son of Gabriel."

The peasant was startled. It was the last thing he expected. Guests were sitting around the table in his parlor drinking and talking, friends but not necessarily men who could be counted on to keep a secret. No one could see him talk to a Jew. Merely to open the door could mean the death of not only of himself but of his whole family.

Who can see into the soul of a man? He made his decision, opened the door a crack, and said, "Go out by the place where the garbage is thrown and I will help you." Later, when all slept within, the man brought him a loaf of bread and jug of milk, promising to return the next day. Arieh slept on the ground. The same thing happened again when the earth had rotated once on its axis, the second day of the massacre.

Then, the peasant sent his wife to see what was happening in the town. She was too scared to enter but reported that the German soldiers had left. When Arieh heard that news he himself returned. On the outskirts he saw a Polish policeman too busy stealing clothes from homes in the ghetto to notice him.

Hard it was to enter that town of the slain. Everywhere, he saw the fallen where they lay like, as another survivor put it, strewn leaves fallen in autumn. Arieh entered a house and saw a dead woman lying on the bed, another on the floor. He rushed home, what courage that took, not due to fear of the Germans but fear of what he might—was almost certain—to find there. He

tried the front door. But it would not open. He went around to the back door, but that, too, was stuck.

And then in that moment of despair, the end of the world, he saw his mother and his father and his little brother, who had come out of their place of hiding and were now hiding in the backyard. They embraced, took what they could in a few moments, and fled. Telling me of that in the living room of his apartment in Ramat Gan, two-thirds of a century and a million worlds away, Arieh broke down and wept.

There was one being more with them on leaving than there had been when they'd gone into the shelter three days earlier. For when the Rubins and Rosins came out they saw the shattered hiding place of their next-door neighbors, the Grosbeins. Once again, the two sides of my family came together. The townspeople had led the Germans to the Grosbein's hiding place and when the Jews there didn't come out, they threw a hand-grenade in. They didn't bother to go inside themselves. Nobody, the Germans concluded, could have lived through that explosion, and there were more people to kill before their working day ended.

But there was one survivor, six-year-old Haim Grosbein. He had been sitting in a corner and the blast, which tore off the legs of a cousin sitting next to him, had left him unhurt physically. And so they took him into their family.

Are these terrible events hard to talk about for those who experienced them? Almost seventy years later, I heard the story again from Victor Rubin, Arieh's brother, at his dinner table in his home in Israel. Also at the table was his 40-something-year-old daughter. By that time, Haim Grosbein had grown up and old, was a pensioner with many grandchildren of his own. Victor's daughter turned to her father and said with a calm equanimity I found astonishing, "Oh, I knew you were close to Haim Grosbein's family but I never knew why before."

There were about 50 people left alive who came out of their shelters that night. The police were too drunk, confident, or sated with loot to care. The survivors broke down the ghetto fence and escaped toward the forest to the east. Someone started shooting but it was very dark and nobody was hit. They didn't stop until they found the partisans.

At that moment, Chana Brunstein and her seven companions were still in the farmer's potato room and they asked him, too, to go into Dolhinov. He knew their families and came to report that not one of them had survived.

She and her brother, also, had to see for themselves. Like the peasant woman, she put a wide scarf over her hair and let it droop over her face as a disguise. Some townspeople saw her as a ghost, "Eta Z'idovka!" they said in Polish, "She's a Jew!" Going to the hospital, they found the seemingly indestructible Dr. Kotler and his wife who had survived in hiding and were packing medical supplies to take. He hid everything of use they couldn't carry with the hospital's Byelorussian maintenance man, Leonid Andreyovitch. "I'm going to the forest," he told them. "Come with me." And they did, and joined the Partisans.

Not all the Dolhinov Jews went into the forest that day, however, and the tale of Jewish Dolhinov had not quite come to an end. About 150, like Esther and her father, were still kept alive by the Germans, the craftsmen and their families who had special skills particularly useful for the German war effort. There were only enough Jews left from a community that once lived in 400 houses, and then 40 in the ghetto, to fill just three. If anyone might be preserved by the Nazis, if any shred of pragmatism remained among them, then that tiny group would be kept working hard at their unpaid, productive labor. But there wasn't and they wouldn't

Among the last Jews in Dolhinov was my distant cousin on my father's side, Mendel Chafetz, and the neighbors he had saved as his supposed family, my great aunt Haya Doba Rubin and her children, Haim, 12, and Jacob, 10. We know what happened from the official SS report.

"On May 10 we conducted a Jewish action in Volozhin. The Jews there were not as well prepared as in Dolginov." But by now, with hardly any Jews left to murder, the SS had a new task on its hands: fighting the Red Army partisans. A detachment attacked a German air force communications' outpost near Dolhinov. And so they had to be still in that area. The SS unit failed to catch the partisans in an operation conducted on the night of May 20-21. But since they were in Dolhinov again, they decided to make good use of their presence to take care of unfinished business:

"On the next day we conducted our third action in Dolhinov. With it the Jewish question in Dolhinov was decided once and for all."[23]

Mrs. Katzovitz and a number of the older women had remained behind to witness the last days of Jewish Dolhinov. They watched Christian townspeople scrutinizing the ghetto, lighting bonfires at night to reveal any Jews trying to escape. One night they heard a loud noise and rumors spread that it was a bone-grinding machine which would turn into dust those few Jews who were soon to be killed there.

Realizing that the end, and their end, was at hand on May 10, Mrs. Katzovitz, her youngest daughter Sara, along with Gita Gitlitz and her sons Israel and Yehezkel finally made their escape. They urged another woman to go with them but she refused, saying: "Where am I to go? Who is to say how old I should be when I die? People could die in their forties, they don't have to wait for their sixties." Despite everything that happened, she and her husband still thought that their son being the sole qualified mechanic in the area would protect them.

As she headed toward the woods, the next to last thing Gita heard was the father telling the arriving German soldiers about his son's great skill. The last thing she heard was gunshots.

It was very dark. Gita and her sons, Israel and Yehezkel ran one way; Mrs. Katzovitz and Sara the other. The latter were soon in the Jewish cemetery where they met Zlata Dokshitzi and her daughter Haya. Together they hid in the fields for weeks, eating raw barley, moving ahead of the peasant mowers. One night, they were hiding behind bushes in the forest when they saw shadows moving, not Germans but other Jews from Dolhinov, including Gita and her two sons.

What had happened to her when she went left rather than right, or was it right rather than left? Gita and her sons had hidden in the fields, too. Starving, they were finally ready to give up and so desperate that they started back to Dolhinov to face their fate. Fortunately, on their way they ran into Gita's nephew who persuaded them to choose life, to return to the forest and not give up.

Finally, the whole group met up with the Red Army partisans and lived in the woods for the remaining two and a half years of war. When the Nazis and their allies were finally destroyed, they immigrated to Israel in 1948. Israel Gitlitz joined the army of the country that bore his name and was killed in the War of Independence in 1949. Only 18 years old, he knew what he was fighting for, and what he was fighting against.

And what of the others who were the last Jews of Dolhinov before May 21? If these people were not broken by this point, it was a miracle. Having lost his wife and other daughter, Esther's father had no desire to live but he wanted to save his remaining daughter. "Go to

Cybulski," he told Esther's older cousin, Peretz. He was a very poor Polish peasant who her father had befriended, letting the man grow crops on some land that he had leased for flax but didn't need.

Peretz snuck out of town and asked Cybulski to come see his father, who the Germans let meet peasants as part of his work for them. Cybulski took some flax with him as an excuse.

"Look," said Esther's father to Cybulski when they met at last, "I don't have too much left but whatever I have is yours. I want you to take my daughter and my nephew."

Cybulski was a very brave man and agreed. That very night, he returned to the ghetto. Esther said good-bye to her father and he promised to come to her when he could. He claimed that if he ran away his three brothers would be killed. But both of them knew this was only an excuse of a man who'd already made up his mind.

Then he turned to Cybulski and said, "Mr. Cybulski, I want you to be a father to my daughter."

"You should come yourself and do that," said Cybulski, himself almost in tears.

"I'll try but, just in case, we live in uncertain times."

And so they left her father and Dolhinov to go back to Cybulski's village. The next day, a third Jew arrived, a man in his mid-40s whose wife and two daughters were dead but who had made a different choice from Esther's father. Cybulski took him in also.

The farmer made a hole in the dirt floor of his cow's corral; added a wooden door with breathing holes; spread straw, and then—well there was the cow as a decoy. But he said to his wife, "I'm not going to put Esther in there. We will have to do something for her to stay in the house."

The rest of the summer of 1942, she spent in the attic, amidst the hay. And when the weather became cold, she hid in the space between the big oven and the wall. The two men stayed in the barn. If all seemed safe enough, at night all three sat with the family. On warm nights Esther would go out, like a ghost, amidst the high grain in the field.

Each day, Cybulski carried flax into Dolhinov and Esther's father would give him some money and clothing. Then came May 21. The shouting and the shooting was heard well outside town. Cybulski couldn't face going. He knew what he would find. His wife went instead and returned to report that everyone was dead.

"That night," Esther later recalled, "I was in the attic and I wanted to commit suicide." She felt as if, "The three of us are the only Jews alive." But she had no idea to commit suicide. Finally, Cybulski came to her and said, "I love you like my own daughter We will try to hide you and we will see what happens. And if they find you we will all be dead any way."

They hid there for 18 months, until November 1943. Then, one day an escaped Russian prisoner of war came to the house and begged for something to eat. Cybulski wasn't home but his wife and daughter were and they gave him some bread and milk. But they didn't let him know about the three Jews they were hiding. And he left

.He was captured and interrogated by the Germans and told them about who had helped him. The police commander from Dolhinov came to Cybulski's house and Esther recognized his voice from the attic. She was fully prepared to die. But suddenly, all was quiet. After some hours, Cybulski came upstairs and told her that he had been away when the police came but they had taken his wife and daughter to jail, and they might be shot.

Esther told the other two Jews that they would have to leave so as not to put the family into any more danger and persuaded them to do so.

Cybulski explained how to find partisans. First, he said, you go to the big river, the Vilaya and cross it.

But none of us know how to swim, they answered.

There is one place you can cross the river on foot, explained Cybulski. You will see a big oak tree. Cross there.

Off they went. But they came to a crossroad and Cybulski had forgotten to tell them about that. Once again, Esther had to choose between turning left or right, a matter of life and death. Suddenly, she knew what to do. On the right she could see auto tracks and the droppings of horses and cows. To the left, there was nothing. Where others don't go, that is the way to the partisans.

Two miles down the path they came to the big tree. And there sat a shepherd boy. He was scared by the sudden appearance of three extremely strange strangers. He got up to run away.

Don't run, little boy, said Esther in her most soothing voice. I want to talk with you.

"You're a spy!" he said accusingly.

No, she said, I'm not a spy. I'm Jewish and I'm running away from the Germans. Tell me where the partisans are.

"I'm not telling you anything. You're a German spy."

So Esther gave him the greatest treasure she had: a small piece of soap. His eyes widened and his mouth soon opened, too. "Go two miles to the village of Lesnicki," he told her, "and you'll find partisans."

And there indeed were the partisans. They took the trio to their commander.

"You want me to believe," he said, "that you hid 18 months in a peasant's house only a quarter-mile from Dolhinov and you're still alive? It's ridiculous."

"Look at us," they told him. And he looked at the three ragged, exhausted Jews, a little girl, a teenage boy, and a haggard man. "We didn't look human," Rachel later said, and they certainly hadn't been treated as such for a long time. They did indeed look like people who had hidden 18 months in a hole under the cloven hooves of a cow and in an attic filled with hay.

Then he smiled, "Such nice partisans you've brought here," he laughingly told the sentry who'd escorted them, "Such fighters!" Turning to the fugitives, he added, "You can work in the kitchen."

He turned to leave and walked away. At that moment, she heard a voice behind here say, "You're Rivka's daughter?" It was Avram Freedman of Dolhinov, who she'd known since childhood, who was now aide to the commander of the People's Avenger's partisan brigade.

And they were home again. Though they were hardly safe or in a real home for a very long time to come.

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[1] This account is taken from his account, "A Partisan's Story."

[2] Shalom Yoran, *The Defiant: A True Story of Escape Revival & Resistance* (Square One Publishers, 2002), pages 49-50.

[3] Bushke and Haya Katzovitz, "We Really Wanted to Stay Alive," Yizkor Dolhinov, p. 387-405. Translated by Ron Deutch and eilat Gordon Levitan
http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Dokshitsy/dok.314.html>

[4] Autobiographical

[5] Fighters of the Forest NY 1008 p. 22

[6] With the Partisans and In the Red-Army By Dov Katzovitch,
[7] 291
[8] 234. Of what?
[9] The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry Part 2: Belorussia The Story of an Old Man, prepared for publication by Vasily Grossman, pp. 183-186
[10] Shalom Yoran, *The Defiant: A True Story of Escape Revival & Resistance* (Square One Publishers, 2002):Pages 65-71 February 15-September 8, 1942):
[11] Avraham Friedman Chapters of Life as A Fighter with the Resistance

[12] With the Partisans and In the Red-Army By Dov Katzovitch.
[13] Jery. 210.
[14] Omer Bartov, The Eastern Front 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare NY 1986. P. 117
[15] P. 262. Find book
[16] Jews in Eastern Poland book.
[17] 316 Suny book
[18] cited on r-96 p578 Nazi Germany's War Against the Jews Seymoure Krieger AJC Parish Press 1946?
[19] http://www.jewishen.org/yizkor/Dokshitsy/dok314.html
[20] 217
[21] Gerald Reitlinger, The Final Solution second edition London 1961 p. 204.
[22] A Partisan's Story By Boris Kozinitz. I have made some minor changes since at Dokshitz, the Jews were forced into a hole previously dug and machinegunned there.
[23] David Meltser and Vladimir Levin, The Black Book with Red Pages: Tragedy and Heroism of Belorussian Jews, 2005 Cockeysville, Md 246-47.

CHAPTER SEVEN
"General" Timchuk and the Long March East

"We believe that the army assembled beneath our walls is capable of great things but we also think it is time that it did them." The people of Metz to the besieged French army there, 1871.

On June 21, 1943, Heinrich Himmler, head of the German SS, ordered the destruction of all remaining ghettos. About 800,000 people, one-quarter of them children, were killed. By September 25 Gauleiter Kurt von Gottberg informed Berlin there were no more Jews in Belarus.[i] That was true for the towns and cities but the genocide, though overwhelmingly complete, was not quite total.

Strange are the ways of fate and accidental are the makings of history. In 1940, Avraham Friedman, a tall, handsome young Jew from Dolhinov took the opportunity to work at a fox farm near Molodechno. He did a good job and came to the notice of the farm's director. As a result, there are about 1,000 people walking the earth today because of that simple fact who otherwise wouldn't be.

The director's name is Ivan Timchuk, a decent man despite being a Soviet official and Communist. He will be the single most important outsider in the history of the Dolhinov Jews.

"He was a Communist Party member but he was a very good person," so spoke Esfira Dimenshtein, one of the survivors from Dolhinov who took shelter with the partisans and survived due Timchuk's efforts, said of him.

That reflects the ambiguity of almost all Polish Jews. They had no illusions about the Communists or USSR, they knew that all ethnic Poles and many Byelorussians loathed the Soviets, and they knew that Stalin's men had behaved toward Poland and all of its peoples so brutally as to merit such hatred.

And they also understood well that there were corrupt Communists and antisemitic Communists and bureaucratic martinets of Communists and sadistic Communists. And then there were the idealistic Communists. Timchuk was one of those, and there were all too few of them.

But they also knew that only Moscow's forces could save them. And that's why, in mid-1942, Jews in eastern Poland were singing:

"Alas, how bitter are the times,
But deliverance is on its way;
It's not so far away.
The Red Army will come to free us,
It's not so far away."

Indeed, elements of the Red Army were only an hour's walk from Dolhinov if you knew where to look for them, still alive by then to seek them out, and able to dodge the Germans along the way.

There's no easy explanation for why Timchuk behaved differently than almost all of the thousands of other Soviet officers in a position to save Jews during World War Two. Certainly, he got along well with the Belarus Jews who he worked with before the war, though this does not answer the question of why he would want to be friendly with Jews, at least traditional ones, when his campatriots weren't. No doubt, too, he knew Jews from his childhood in the Ukraine. But so did hundreds of thousands of their neighbors who, at worst, collaborated with the Nazis; on average, did nothing; and at best, merely felt bad about the mass murder they saw around them.

Who is this man who simultaneously became the savior of Dolhinov's remnants, one of World War Two's greatest guerrilla commanders, and faithful servant of a tyrannical regime?

Born on February 1, 1901, in the village of Grushka in the Czarist Ukraine to an ethnic Ukrainian family, Timchuk is the eldest of eight children. His father, Matvey Timchuk, a machinist, works at a distillery on the Tudorivk estate.[ii] They family was a poor one, even aside from the need to feed ten mouths. When he is 13, Ivan goes to work as a laborer on the estate. And at 16 years of age, he leaves home to become a field hand working for wealthy farmers.

Here, then, is a child laborer who, at an earlier time, would spend his whole life at hard work and little reward, with no chance of peraonal advancement. He's precisely the kind of person who sees the revolution as path to a new life and Communism as his religion guiding the way.

And so when the civil war begins, Ivan eagerly joins the Red Army. Soldiering is something he's good at. By 1919, only 18 years old, he already leads the reconnaissance unit in the 37th Regiment of General Samar's Seventh Cavalry Division. Wounded several times, he is rewarded after the war by being sent to the Smolensk military-political academy and, in 1924, being allowed to jin the Communist party. Ivan sees the army as his profession, but it is not to be—or at least his military career is interrupted. By 1926, troubled by the lasting effects of his wounds, he has to resign.

How can the worker's state use such an eager, energetic, and dedicated young man? The former fieldhand in rags now received a free university education, graduating in 1929 with a degree in economics. He is assigned to the Bolshevik state farm in Minsk, the city of destiny for him. Ten years later, in September 1939, when the Soviets seize eastern Poland, he is entrusted with a mission of special trust: he is sent to newly annexed western Belarus s near Molodechno, to become head of an enterprise breeding foxes for their fur. The Servitch farm is near a little town of no great significance. Its name is Dolhinov.

This is a prize job and his selection shows the comrades must have thought highly of him. "An assignment where we need the best possible person, extremely honest and efficient," they must have said. Indeed, it's the kind of job that can take one right to the top of the ruling elite or to a secret police headquarters' basement for a bullet in the head. A man even slightly corrupt or lazy or incompetent will not bring in the expected profit. The temptation to steal a few pelts for sale on the black market must have been overwhelming. Stalin and his henchmen aren't merciful, If even one subordinate does it, the head of the enterprise is the head that will roll. Talk about a job like being a fox in a henhouse! But Timchuk does well and the enterprise prospers.

During the 1930s, anyone living in the USSR, and especially a party member, must do dirty things to survive. Praising Stalin to all excess was the least of it. Did he denounce colleagues or friends to the secret police, sending them to concentration camps and firing squads? Or did he merely slander those already arrested, expressing indignant contempt for comrade so-and-so who turned out to be a counterrevolutionary Trotskyist SOB?

Was he an enthusiastic Communist who really believed in the ideology, a survivor, or an opportunist? The evidence points to the former explanation but didn't seeing too much from the inside make Timchuk cynical? There's no evidence of that in Timchuk's case, though he knew how the system worked. Perhaps he thought all the abuses were merely temporary, potholes on the way to true communism.

At any rate, the Communist system took him from peasant lad to the highest positions with the greatest of privileges, from a hut's mud floor to a richly carpeted office. In between, would be the forest floor, as Timchuk became a partisan commander in World War Two, the man who would save the remnant of Dolhinov Jews purely because he wanted to do so.

Now 40 years old, Timchuk's career seems untroubled by the terrible purges gutting the party and terrorizing its cadre. On June 22, 1941, he is due to go to a meeting in Minsk. The German army intervenes. Three days later, they arrive at his farm. Everything is in confusion, with the Red Army in headlong retreat. Soviet units, foolishly told to hold their ground by a depressed and disoriented Stalin, are surrounded and taken prisoner. Mounting his horse, he barely escapes to Kholopenichi where the party has called an emergency gathering of 30 reliable men assigned to underground work. He draws Minsk, headquarters of the German army and occupation authority. Without hesitation, while most of his colleagues are fleeing to safety in the east, he heads into the lion's mouth.

His assignment: to organize an underground and commence sabotage. But from the beginning, Timchuk adds another task: to save Jews, whenever possible. With its large working class, the city had been a center of red power even in Czarist times. It was in Minsk that the first meeting of what became the Bolshevik party took place in 1898. In sharp contrast to Poland, Jewish workers had flocked to the party as the best hope to slay the monarchy which oppressed them and as promised harbringer of a new utopia. When the 1917 revolution broke out, Minsk was one of the first cities seized by local Communist forces. Unlike Dolhinov, Minsk had become part of the USSR and the Communist party had already been in power there for twenty years.

And so Minsk had a strong party apparatus many of whose most dedicated members were Jews. To build an anti-Nazi network, Timchuk had to protect his Jewish activists, most of whom had been already forced into the ghetto. He had to do so under the nose of the most ruthless and total dictatorship of modern times which watched the Jews there with special care. But the Communist party itself had decades of experience organizing an underground and then serving

the second-most ruthless and total dictatorship of modern times. Anyone who'd survived Stalin's purges possessed a closed-mouth caution that would prove useful in their new task.

At Chernyshesckogo Street 11, Timchuk set up headquarters and was quickly contacted by the underground Communist group already organized in the ghetto. So now, aside from direct anti-German activities, Timchuk had to organize food supplies into the ghetto and escapes out of it. In the countryside, Communist activists urged farmers to donate bread and vegetables which could be smuggled through the barbed wire. How did they do it? The ghetto wasn't guarded by German soldiers but by locally recruited Byelorussian police. And they readily took bribes. A dozen apartments around the ghetto were set up as safe houses for storing food until the right moment for getting it through.

Many now-forgotten people fought for the anti-Nazi cause and gave their all. Like the Emelyanyuks, Ivan Stepanovich and his wife, people in their 60s. As a veteran forest worker, he knew the countryside around Minsk and peasants well. They visited villages and collected food, telling people of the terrible conditions in the ghetto, until he was caught and executed by the Germans in 1942.

And there was Kazhdan, whose first name Timchuk couldn't remember, a party member and tanner in a leather factory. Along with daughters Maria and Lena, his job was to help people escape the ghetto and to get supplies for the partisans starting to organize in the countryside. One day, he arrived at a clothing factory with forged documents to pick up coats that would be diverted to the partisans. A suspicious policeman seized him, and both he and his daughter Lena were killed. Maria escaped to join the partisans.

Some underground tasks were mundane but no less important for being so. In the ghetto, Jews sewed socks, gloves, and warm hats during the winter of 1941 to clothe the future fighters. Responsible for the enterprise was Motuseich Pael, a civil engineer. One of the tasks assigned Jews by the German army was work at the Minsk railroad station. Nearby was a dump of captured Red Army weapons. As Jews passed the poorly guarded heaps of guns, they tried to pick up a rifle, ammunition, or gun parts which could be assembled later. Pael passed them to farmers coming into Minsk market their crops. They brought them to the countryside, hidden under straw in their wagons.

Timchuk's quartermaster in Minsk was Yakov Shimanovich, a Jewish factory worker. As a Jew, he should have hidden or fled to the countryside. Instead, he stayed in place for two years equipped with false documents. Dozens of people must have known his true identity but never betrayed him. One of his jobs was to obtain medicine and medical supplies from doctors, another was to obtain printing presses, paper, ink, and type.

By August 1941, Timchuk was printing leaflets and newspapers on equipment hidden in villages. Leaflets travelled from hand to eager hand calling for struggle against the Germans and promising ultimate victory. Once a comrade from Biyalystok, 250 miles away, visited Timchuk and said to him, "I'll show you something interesting. Look how far Soviet planes have been able to fly to drop leaflets!"And he handed Timchuk one of those pages printed near Minsk which had traveled so far and through so many people to reach such a distance without ever having been intercepted by the enemy.

A quiet and modest young man named Samuel Isaakovich Shapiro was the technical genius who made that propaganda effort possible.Shapiro had studied chemistry for two years at the university before the war began. He had promised Timchuk: "Give me one or two milk-cows and I'll organize everything you need for printing." Shapiro made caseine from the milk which,

when combined with glycerine, produced a mimeograph-sytle process for mass-production printing under the forest trees.

Once the Soviet underground began organizing the first partisan units, south of Minsk under the command of Nikolai Pokrovsky, Jews could be helped to escape there. During the first round, 120 people were brought out of the ghetto in groups of five or six. They were led to safe houses in near-by villages like Ostroshitsa, where a man named Shavel, in his sixties, was the host. He worked in the medical clinic and was loved by the peasants who he healed presumably including local, German-recruited police recruited who wouldn't turn him in. Dozens of Jews passed through his little house. He fed them and, if possible, provided fresh clothes that would make them look like peasants rather than city people.

Sometimes, Shavel was so eager to help those in flight that he'd constantly peer out his door. Then, on seeing someone likely approach, he'd say, "This one is coming to me," step outside, and ask, "Would you like a glass of water?" as if an old friend was making a casual visit. To infiltrate the operation, the Germans sent a spy to the good-natured Shavel who took good care of the man. Thus exposed, Shavel was arrested, tortured, and killed by the Germans. Later, Timchuk recouned, the underground caught the spy and took appropriate revenge.

Those Jews who made it as far as Shavel or some other village safe house would then be assembled into larger formations of 10 to 15 people for the 25-mile-long walk to the partisans. Among the guides for this leg of the journey was a 14-year-old boy named Vasya, son of a teacher and a Soviet soldier. living at Lugovaya Street 6 in Minsk. He'd walk about 300 yards ahead of them, glancing back to check the progress of the group strung out in a long line behind him. When they reached a partisan patrol, he'd leave them at the outpost and go ahead alone to the unit's headquarters, proudly announcing, "Comrade commander, I've brought you reinforcements!" He and his mother were both killed during the war.

But there's a problem in recounting these stories, though they should be told. While justly celebrating those who acted bravely and decently, it purveys a deceptive cheeriness, as if the Germans were a bunch of fools easily outwitted, that the chronicle of these days is one of success, and the typical story of survival. That's just not so. A few were saved; hundreds of thousands were murdered.

Here's the truly important event that took place in Minsk: on November 8 and 9, 1941, the Germans and their local collaborators committed mass murder on a huge scale. On the western outskirts of Minsk is a natural depression in the land, a little valley, a sort of amphitheatre. And there, Jews were taken on various pretexts, forced down into that grassy bowl, machinegunned by the thousands and buried, often alive. It is comfortable and comforting to read of those who escaped; the overwhelming main narrative is of those who did not.

Unless the underground could put armed men into the field, however, it would remain ineffectual. The time finally came in November 1941 when the underground's leaders met in the Minsk apartment of Vladimir Omelyanyuk and decided to start armed struggle north of Minsk.

Major Vasily Trofimovich Voronyansky, a Red Army man still on active duty, is appointed commander; Timchuk, a civilian, can only become the commissar. Just after New Year's Day, the two men leave Minsk to begin the fight. Yet by March 1942, as the Jews of Dolhinov are being murdered, there is no effective force to help them or provide refuge.

They call the unit the People's Avengers' Brigade. Its first task was survival, to hide in the woods. Nowhere in Europe was so suited for guerrilla warfare than those old, deep and silent forests of Belarus where trees often grew too thick to step between. They were so dense and

forboding as to be like the enchanted wood of fairy tales, so remote that they were the last stronghold of the auracs, sole surviving ancestor of the cattle, which had never been tamed. Sometimes the Partisans received food from supportive peasants and sympathetic Polish landowners; at others, they took what they needed by force.

At first, the Germans were too busy advancing, their fingers reaching out toward Leningrad, Moscow, and Stalingrad; too busy to murder the Jews; too busy to chase the Partisans. But this grace period didn't last long. The German units, their Baltic allies, and their local militias, were soon on the hunt for both. They were unwilling to enter the deep forests but they frequently cast out their nets. Time after time, they encircled the Partisans; time after time they escaped.

Like all guerrilla wars, the Soviet effort against the Germans depended on popular support, people ready to risk their lives not only by fighting but also by supplying food, guides, intelligence, and safe houses. As Timchuk well understood, such support could not be obtained by force. You needed people like the illiterate old farmer from the village of Inarovichi, south of Minsk, who in August 1941 somehow got his hands on a ton of German army TNT and buried it in the forest. In January 1942, he met Timchuk in Minsk and announced: "I know you are a Soviet official. I have a small present for you."

In Timchuk's unpublished memoir, and in all the materials published by the Soviets after the war, the masses are credited for their loyalty to the Soviet motherland. There are many stories depicting such behavior. Here's one such whose truth I don't doubt.

The date, April 30, 1944, Timchuk's unit is surrounded by Germans. Fighting has been continuous. Timchuk, his aide Avraham Friedman, and brigade commander Voronyansky are so exhausted that they ask an old peasant woman if they could rest in her house. She shows them into a small room, brings them straw to lie on, and they fall into uneasy sleep for three or four hours:

"When we heard the old woman light a stove we got up. She gave us soup and potatoes with chicken. After the meal we thanked her. Then we heard the granddaughter's voice: "Granny, have you cooked the chicken? May I have a piece?

"The old woman answered: `Ninochka, all the chicken I gave to the partisans. They are fighting for us. We will eat potatoes.' It was a hard psychological moment. She didn't leave even a piece of chicken for her granddaughter."

But matters weren't always so simple and Timchuk never could have succeeded if he hadn't understood that fact. Stalin had called on the people to rebel in his first speech of the war, on July 7, 1941, but nothing happened. Many Russians—and even more Ukrainians and Byelorussians--saw the Germans as liberators. If the Nazis had instead behaved less like a master race and more like their World War One predecessors, millions of people in Eastern Europe would have rallied to them.

Many veteran Soviet citizens and those Poles and others involuntarily given that status in 1939, hated the USSR. As Lithuanians or Latvians or Estonians, Poles or Ukrainians, they thought of the Soviet Union not as the workers' fatherland but as Russian imperialists who were surpressing their nations. Religious people, common among these groups, hated the Soviets as atheists; peasants, shopowners, and businessmen, hated the Soviets as Communists. A lot of them hated Jews, associating them with the Russians and Communists.

Thus, the Soviet partisans killed German-appointed mayors, police chiefs, and agents. They had to destroy assets belonging to local people which the Germans were using. If peasants weren't forthcoming with food, it had to be taken from them.

For their part, Jews had no choice but to help the Soviet side if they could. The Germans offered Jews only two alternatives: be killed or flee to the partisans. But everyone else in the German-ruled areas did have options. There was a delicate line to be trodden by men like Timchuk between the need to intimidate those opposed or indifferent to the Soviets while not alienating them so much that they would help his enemies.

By March 1942, Timchuk had between 300 and 450 people under his command, escaped Soviet prisoners of war, Jews, local Byelorussians, and some civilians who'd fled the Germans. But in April, a whole new and unexpected group arrived: hundreds of Jews who'd survived the massacres in Dolhinov and other towns.

One of those who'd survived the second massacre in Dolhinov was Chaia Kutzivitz who'd escaped with her mother and little sister Sarah from the ghetto's smoldering remains.

Chaia's family knew a farmer in Yashkova named Peter, and her Gitlitz cousins had been hidden by him during the First Action. As the sun came up the next morning, they hid in bushes outside town. Who knew whether the small shepherd boy they could see tending his flock nearby would be eager to turn them in to the Nazis.

The next night, they set off and as they walked Chaia's mother told the two girls, "You see my daughters, there is so much hatred and carnage around us. If anyone stays alive, the only place for us to go is Eretz Israel." Much later, Chaia remembered, "We thought of that statement as a commandment."

Finally, in the middle of the night, they found Peter's farm. He cried and hugged them. Though he knew he was risking his life, the farmer hid them in his barn's haystack for several days. After a brief visit back to Dolhinov to see who'd survived and what remained, they headed for the forest. A male cousin refused to go with them. Having lost his wife and three sons, he'd also lost any desire to remain alive himself. A few weeks later, he was dead.

The rest left for the forests, seven Katzovitzs: Chaia and Bushke, their mother and little sister, and Shimon, their uncle plus his two daughters. Mindel and Shula. Chaia knew a woodcutter who helped them hide during daylight. Hearing about the partisans, they—joined by Avram Dimenshtein—decided to go to them. Chaia and Bushke were sent to get supplies. They put on headscarves to look like "farm girls" and entered several towns, but they could find no Jews left alive. Some who saw them were suspicious and townspeople were searching for Jews to turn in to the Germans. They knew it was impossible to stay where they were much longer.

One night, a heavy rainstorm came and the small group of fugitives was drenched down to our bones, as were their last few possessions. The next morning, as they dried themselves in the sun, Avraham Dimenshtein said, "Who would take care of us when we will get sick? A death sentence is hanging over our head. Let's go and die amongst the Jews." And at last they found Timchuk's men and their family camp.

As one of them, Eliezer Shod of Krivichi, described life there, "It seemed that when they warmed themselves near the bonfires, they all put their yearnings and dreams and hopes for a better tomorrow into songs and declarations of loyalty to all that was left behind…. At first glance, we were part of a larger group, but at the same time we felt very lonely and isolated sitting at the table of strangers. Many, many of us were the sole survivors of families. We had no one remaining who we could love or declare our loyalty to."[iii]

The third place from which Dolhinov Jews escaped to join the partisan unit was the Karolin estate about five miles outside of town. The manager was a Pole named Cybulski. He decided that he would save as many Jews as he could and told the Germans that if they wanted a good crop to feed their soldiers he needed some Jewish workers.

There, on the same land their ancestors probably had labored on long before, five families from Dolhinov, totaling about thirty people, were so assigned. They included a tailor and a shoemaker, to make what peasants there needed; a blacksmith, from the Gultz family, to repair the tools; an agricultural expert to help run the farm; and the Sosensky family, which took care of the cows and horses.

All the Jewish families lived in one small house, each having a room to their own. These were terrible conditions compared to what they had been used to before the war but far superior to life in the ghetto. Food was plentiful.

The Germans didn't keep any soldiers or police at the small hamlet but they warned Cybulski that in supplying this labor there was one condition: Make sure they don't escape. Cybulski ignored this proviso. He didn't lock them up at night. Every day these Jews could see the huge forests across the narrow river, in what had been not so long ago Soviet territory. The local peasants said sometimes Partisans appeared in those very forests and they knew the Germans and Polish police were afraid to enter for that very reason.

As at the work camp, however, the Jews in Karolin had no incentive to escape until, after the second massacre in Dolhinov, German forces were coming there to complete their work. Cybulski warned the Jews of what was about to happen, and the five families escaped into the near-by forest.[iv]

Here then are 30 people, dressed in rags, wandering along the forest paths. It is like a dream, yet no more so than all the other bizarre and terrible happenings they had lived through. Sometimes they come upon other groups of Jews searching for the fighters. At any moment, they might meet up with bandits who will rob or even kill them. Or the partisans can be unfriendly and do the same. It is their good luck. The armed men they finally find are in the Peoples' Avengers Brigade.

The third escape route, and the hardest, was directly from Dolhinov itself. The biggest group that came to the People's Avengers began with a March or April 1942 meeting of about 20 young people. The leaders were Avraham Freedman and Sigalchik. Their goal was escape and resistance. But they faced huge problems. Hiding and feeding so many people in the forest was a major undertaking. Sigalchik and two friends snuck out to visit a friendly farmer named Anatosh Zutzman who promised to help them and told them amazing news: partisans wearing Red Army uniforms were crossing the river nightly to take food from farmers before crossing back.

In the evening they returned to the ghetto and planned to take all their friends out the next night. But that was the very day that the SS arrived to commit the Second Massacre, surrounding the ghetto. Some wanted to hide but Sigalchik insisted they had to leave immediately.

Avraham Friedman, Sigalchik, and their group went to a hidden exit, and removed bricks that had been used to camouflage it. But they saw there were two Germans nearby so they walked around the fence to the synagogue looking for a way out. Friedman saw two Polish police standing near the fence but were they friends or murderers? Their lives depended on the answer to that question. It was, indeed, Maslovsky and Takovich. Maslovsky whispered to him in Yiddish, "Where are you going?"

"I don't know what to do."

“As long as I am not replaced here, you can leave, but after I am replaced, there is nothing I can do.”

And so they broke out of the fence and under the protective eye of their two Polish friends, they lived.[v]

Immediately, though, Sigalchik realized that he’d left behind his best friend Leib Mindel and had to return. Friedman told him he was crazy but he turned around, went through an opening in the fence, and was back inside the ghetto. Walking through backyards and houses he reached the hideout he and Mindel had built and yelled, "Get out Leib! I found a way out!" All those inside followed him out the hole in the fence.

Like the Jews from Pharoah’s Egypt, they’d left so fast that they had no food or supplies. They scattered to make concealment easier. Friedman went to his friend, Takevich’s brother. Others found a safe place since Anatosh Zutzman’s held them in the bathhouse of Falian village. The sounds of gunfire reached their ears and they later found that the hideout they’d prepared, and would have used that day, under Yosef Kremer’s barn had been discovered and all there who’d arrived there after they left had been killed, including Sigalchik’s sister and her children. Fourteen others, including Sigalchik’s mother, survived in the cowshed hideout.

And yet, when the Takevich brothers told them that the massacre was over, back many of them went once again to Dolhinov to find out what had happened to their families and to seek supplies. They found bodies everywhere and neighbors looting their homes. Friedman assembled a group of 21, including Dr. Kotler.[vi]

They walked the five miles to Kamin, a little village by the river, and found a hiding place near the forests and swamps along the river. It was the usual jumping-off point for Jews fleeing to the partisans. It was also, remarkably enough, the place where almost 200 years earlier my ancestors of a dozen generations ago worked for the man who owned Dolhinov, the duke of Kaminsky. The village was still there on the river Vilya even though the Polish nobility wasn’t.

The refugees asked the peasants to row them across. Fearful of the partisans or willing to help, they did so, ferrying them three or four at a time in little boats across the rough half-mile river, swollen with the melted snows. And finally they were on the other side.

Wandering in the Malinkowa forest, some time later, they suddenly heard a yell in Russian: "Stop! Who’s there?"

"We are friends. We are Jews from Dolhinov."

“Stand where you are and don’t move,” said the partisan.

The unit commander asked suspiciously, "So you are from Dolhinov? Do any of you know Ivan Timchuk?"

"I know him very very well," answered Sigalchik confidently. "And others here also know him because he was our employer in the farm." Sigalchik supplied feed for the foxes while Moshe Forman, another member of the group, was the accountant. Both men considered Timchuk not just a boss but also as a friend. Sigalchik and Forman, who had no idea up until this moment that Timchuk was the partisan’s commander, had tears in their eyes.

They waited there in that remote spot under the watchful eyes of the patrol until six in the evening, when they saw three soldiers dressed in green uniforms approaching, with wooden-holstered pistols on their hips. As they got closer, the escapees stood at attention, trying to show they would be worthy recruits, shaking with excitement.

Segalchik realized it was Timchuk:

"He came towards us and shook our hands and kissed us. I could see that he was extremely excited and he had tears in his eyes. He was a man with a very warm soul….Timchuk couldn't stop asking about every minute and vital detail. How did we escape? Which of the people he knew were saved? Who was dead or missing?" He was particularly saddened hearing about the deaths of some of his friends. He shook his head, "Such great guys and they couldn't save themselves?"

Finally, Timchuk told them they would join a group of others, the one led by Friedman and Dr. Kotler, who'd also escaped from Dolhinov. "Rest for a day or two, then we will see what we can do with you. It's very bad that you don't have any weapons, but we will see. For now we must part, but we will see you later." An officer took them down a path in the forest to two tents camouflaged with branches and leaves, next to two barrels with fires inside being used for cooking the food.

Sigalchik saw Chana Bronstein stirring the food and Eliyahu Maisel guarding the camp. He was overjoyed at finding other survivors of Dolhinov. Maisel had gotten out leading a group of 15, which met up along the way with Friedman's and a few others. They sat down to eat with utensils made of wood, as far as they knew the three dozen sole survivors of more than 4000 Dolhinov Jews. There were more than they knew, but all too few.

Avraham Friedman and his group had run the same gauntlet. When he'd been stopped by a partisan patrol, trying to determine if he was a German spy, they asked, "Where did you work during the Soviet times?" The moment Avraham mentioned he had worked for Timchuk, a messenger was sent and the commissar immediately summoned him. With two men, probably NKVD agents, he met Friedman and the others. The refugees stared hungrily at their beautiful pistols.

Timchuk also pumped him for all the details about who had, and had not survived. At the end, he told the exhausted men, "Get some rest, and then you will be good fighters." For them, it was like being reborn. Friedman was assigned to Lieutenant Kisilov's squad. But soon, he'd be made Timchuk's assistant.

Friedman would accompany Timchuk for the rest of the war. The fact that Timchuk chose to trust this non-Communist Jew so completely--though Friedman had no military experience whatsoever before taking up arms against the Germans--says something about Timchuk's lack of prejudice. And Timchuk was not disappointed, either by the 24-year-old Friedman or the rest of the Jewish partisans. In fact, four of Friedman's brothers would also fight in the unit along with several cousins. His sister had already been murdered by the Germans; two of the brothers and a cousin would die fighting.

For Timchuk, while these reinforcements were welcome, they also gave him a difficult problem: how to feed, clothe, and equip these people through one of the roughest winters anywhere in Europe. Jewish refugees--mostly women, children, and older people—seemed to be a drain on partisans' resources. At best, other units turned them away, especially anyone who wasn't a young man bringing his own weapon; at worst, they murdered, robbed, or raped them.

Even Timchuk's own military commander Voronyansky didn't want to take in the Jews but Timchuk turned away no one. On the contrary, he established what was called a "family camp" and turned the refugees into a military asset. He detached 50 soldiers to protect it. The detachment's commander, First Lieutenant Gennady Safonov, took his responsibilities so

seriously, risking his life to protect the refugees, that he was later recognized as a Righteous Gentile by Yad ve-Shem.

For the civilians' added safety, the camp was situated five miles from the partisans's base. In the family camps lived all those who could not be armed partisans, the children, women, and elderly, including the local fighters' own families. Between 4,000 and 5,000 Jews survived that way, about one-third of them with Timchuk's unit.

Not all was idyllic by a long shot. They were still hungry, weak, and lacked winter clothing but at least they had a chance to stay alive. These were people in a desperate situation, who'd been through hell and whose continued existence balanced on a knife edge. One day, for instance, Batya Sosensky's father saw a very large Jewish man taking far more than his share of food. Courageously, he told the man to give back what he'd bullied away from others. The man began a fight in which Batya's brother was pushed down and badly hurt.

Given these rough conditions, Abraham Friedman told Esther Telis, a refugee from Dolhinov, that since he was friendly with her parents he wouldn't take her into his unit's family camp, because there was much fighting in the area. The real reason is that he knew girls there were sometimes pressured by soldiers into sleeping with them.

Otherwise, though, the family camp functioned as a support group for the soldiers: gathering food where possible, repairing shoes and clothes, doing laundry, making or fixing military equipment, setting up a hospital, even growing crops if possible. Despite all this, recalled one of the Dolhinov refugees, Gendel Kaplan, "Of course we were a great burden to the detachment. We hindered its maneuverability and drew away strength to guard us."

The civilians—including at least one Polish family from Dolhinov fleeing German persecution and Bylorussian peasants whose villages have been destroyed--were organized into "platoons" of 25 each. Timchuk found this support unit to be most valuable, later recalling, "Everything that was brought into the camp was redone, repainted, resewed and sent back to partisans by the best tailors in Eastern Europe. Ragged pants and jackets were cut up and recombined into wearable clothes; about 1000 pairs of boots were made a year. Timchuk reported, "We had good boots, warm gloves and hats." Nor did he forget the delicious bread and rolls baked in the camp by Jews who were professional bakers. Esther Telis's cousin, Peretz, was quickly accepted into the family camp after he shows his great skill making tasty sausages, learned from his father who was one of Dolhinov's butchers.

They even started a newspaper, using a printing press and equipment smuggled out of Glebokie in January 1943 by Avraham and Mitzia Friedman. Jewish refugees—including Moshe Forman and Gershon Yoffe from Dolhinov—wrote, edited, and printed the newspaper, pamphlets, and leaflets reporting news and mobilizing resistance.

Most valuable of all was Dolhinov's Dr. Kotler, for whom Timchuk had the highest words of praise. "Everyone loved him," the tough partisan commander said. Before Kotler arrived, the unit had only a lightly trained medic. With his wife as nurse, the couple never lost a patient, operating cooly even in the midst of German attacks.

During a typhoid epidemic, when she worked in the People's Avenger's hospital, Esther Telis was spotted there by Kotler. As a little girl, she'd been his first patient when he arrived in Dolhinov, treating her for measles, and was friendly with her family.

He asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm helping out."

"I don't want you here," he replied. "You'll get typhus." And the next day she was sent back to work in the kitchen.

In the end, she was one of the few who never caught typhus. But after all that she and the others had been through, how could one regard a bit of disease as frightening?

How did Jews from Dolhinov, about 300 in number and outnumbered ten to one by the corpses of friends and families back in town--and those from several other places--arrive still alive at the People's Avengers' at all through so much death and destruction? There were three ways, each of which was a remarkable story in its own right: from the work camp, Dolhinov directly, and from the Karolin estate.

Not all the Dolhinov Jews had been kept by the Germans in the town, nor were all under the Gestapo's control. The German regular army had established a work camp at a place called Kohina, twelve miles from Dolhinov, where about 100 young Jews from Dolhinov and Krivichi were sent. In that area, a lack of Jews had created a slave labor shortage for helping peasants whose crops went to feed the German army. To provide this work force, the Germans gave the Judenrat a quota, much of which was filled by volunteers. Dolhinov supplied around 50 at a time; the rest came from Krivichi.

Some of Dolhinov's young Jews decided to volunteer for several reasons: to get away from the horrors in town, to live under open skies and fresh air. They were treated well by the Polish peasants for whom they labored. The work camp was the closest thing anyone might have to a vacation. Though it involved all-day labor and backbreaking work, at least it was away from close German supervision.

It was also believed by a number of Dolhinov Jews—correctly as it turned out, though only by accident--that the survival chances there were much higher there than in town. Indeed, parents encouraged them to go. But they periodically came back for one reason alone—they missed their families, felt guilty for deserting them, and wanted to help them survive. For Ida Friedman and many others, that guilt would remain. For while she was in the camp, her entire family was killed in the Second Action.

Chaia Katzovitz had gone into the forest after the First Action. But she didn't find a group that would take her and returned to Dolhinov in May for supplies and to see her mother briefly. She told her mother how hard it was to survive in the woods, feeling like hunted animals, with no shelter from the weather, and constantly moving. "Don't go back," said her mother, "Work for the Germans in the Kaniha camp. The people in that camp seem to be treated well and so far they did not have any mass executions there." Chaia registered with the Judenrat to go there, though she was too homesick to stay long. Such were the limited choices the Jews of Dolhinov had in those days.

From dawn to dusk the young Jews worked in the fields, existing on the potatoes they dug up and hid or were given by peasants. The hardest work was pressing hay into bales. Others loaded railroad cars with grain at the train station about one hour's walk from the camp. But in the evening, if not too exhausted merely to sleep, their time was free.

The camp was surrounded by a double strand of barbed wire and included a barn where prisoners slept and a primitive kitchen. About 40 German soldiers were stationed about 100 yards away, but there main job was guarding the railroad. In addition, these soldiers were from a punishment unit, meaning either the soldiers were physically unfit to fight or they were not politically reliable men, perhaps pre-war Social Democrats.

The leader among the prisoners was Abrasha Feinsilber, a German-speaker from Dolhinov who passed them on to the others. Feinsilber was tall and handsome, blonde and blue-eyed, a naturally charismatic leader. In his early 30s, he was also older than the other workers who were mostly teenagers. Having worked as a bookkeeper for some years in Vilna, he fulfilled the same function for the camp's commander in an office housed in the railroad station.

Another older man named Hurewitz had the job of travelling into town to bring back food for them. One day he was murdered on the road by passing German soldiers, unimpressed with his protestations that he was on a mission for their army.

Those in the camp could have escaped at any time but, as what happened to Hurewitz showed them, it seemed more dangerous outside than inside the barbed wire. At any rate, where, in the early months of 1942, could they go? The partisans might kill them faster than the Germans, they had no close ties to local peasants, and to be outside the wall when not working carried the death sentence. Since no one was bothering them where they were, why not stay there except, as some periodically did, to sneak home?

In July 1942, all that was changed by a chain of events that seem unlikely, yet what was normal or logical about the year 1942?

He's young, lost, tired and hungry, cold in a country and countryside of which he knows nothing. His uniform, tattered as it is, is a death sentence as he scrambles through the fields, not sure where to go but always headed east, following the stars. Most of his fellow soldiers had called him the "Zoska of Estonia," the Jew from Estonia, a rarity in a country that has few Jews and in a Red Army that has few Estonians. His actual name, though, is Abram-Joseph Blechman. For days he has wandered from the prisoner of war camp he's escaped.

Breathing hard, he pushes aside the branches that slap at his face. Stepping onto a road is unthinkable. At any moment he might come face to face with German soldiers or a shouted challenge he cannot answer satisfactorily, followed quickly by flying lead that would lead him into the world to come. When he can't go on any longer due to exhaustion, he looks for a peasant's hut or farmer's house, watching a bit, unseen; trying to read the thoughts of those inside.

Who can he ask for food? Those within might fear the Germans or crave their reward. If they are Poles they might merely hate Russians, their traditional foes and recent oppressors. He doesn't even speak Polish. And if they are Byelorussians they might merely hate the Soviets who seized their land and commandeered their crops. Most would turn him away; some would turn him in. But so far Blechman has guessed right enough times to survive.

Only 20 years old, he has seen enough horror in the past two years to last a lifetime. The Soviets had seized the country where he lived in June 1940, then forced him into their army to be dispatched to occupied Poland in early 1941. Then he had fought in a losing war, been captured, badly treated, every moment facing death by disease or execution for being a Red Army man or Jew. Yet he had not lost his hope and courage. Perhaps that's why he'd survived this long.

Such a man on such a day in such a place expected little. But as his feet took him downward to the course of a little river and the cold stream waer flowed through his ragged shoes as if his feet were bare, he heard something. Sheep were bleating. Sheep meant people. Cautiously, he advanced, pushing the reeds apart and saw a vision, as much of a mirage as one might ever see in the muddy late winter of eastern Poland in 1942.

There were the sheep, of course, with their matted white winter coats of tarnished snow. But watching them, sitting on the grass, were two pretty young girls. Not just young girls, mind

you, for there were young girls enough in Poland, but Jewish girls. Joseph had grown up among the tall, fair Estonians, who were really just Scandinavians on the wrong side of the Baltic Sea. He knew the commonly Slavic, but usually distinguishable, Russians and Poles. In the army, he had met Tartars from the east and the other Turkic people of the Soviet Union.

But he knew Jews when he saw them. And if that was not enough they were speaking Yiddish.

At worst, this was a mirage, not a trap. He stepped forward slowly, talked to them softly. They were as startled as he. Yet they knew who they were and an escaped Russian prisoner, a Jewish one at that, did not seem as impossible as their being at that place. They were sorry that they had no food and their eyes showed they had been through as much as him. As to why they were there, it was their job from the work camp at Kohina. They pointed. No, there were not many German soldiers in the area.

He did not linger long but with a warm good-bye he continued on his trek, eastward again, leaving the two girls behind with much to talk about.

Some days later, Blechmann came to Timchuk's partisan unit. After an interrogation, he was welcomed into their camp, told to get something to eat. An officer pointed to where he should go, where the partisans' helpers, escaped Jews from Dolhinov were preparing food. He sat down to wait and, of course, they wanted to hear his news. His home, family, experiences, where he'd been, how he'd escaped, in what manner his feet led him to that very spot.

In the midst of his tales, Blechmann gave up his recent memory's prize treasure. "It was the strangest thing…" he began. The scene arose before his eyes and his words made it appear before his listeners. In great detail, he described the girls.

And one of the women listening asked him to repeat the story. And he did. And she said: "That's my daughter, Rachel." It was Rasia Rubin, she whose brother, Benjamin, had been slain because he'd worked for the Soviets, and whose brother Shlomo had died to save her family. To his astonishment, her son Arieh had found the family alive after the Second Action and they had fled to the partisans. Now she was in this camp, at this fire, hearing these words. But she had thought Rachel was dead, like all the others.

Rasia asked then she pleaded, with Blechmann to go back to the camp with Arieh, to bring safely back not only Rachel but her oldest son Victor, who she thought was there as well. She had no doubt, and she was right to have no doubt.

It was a lot to ask of a man who had himself just stumbled into safety after a long, hard ordeal. Could he even find the place? It would have been easy for Blechmann to dismiss Rasia's plea as the deluded fantasy of a woman who'd suffered too much and wished too freely, just another mother weeping for her lost children. But Blechmann had a mother, perhaps a sister, and he certainly had a lot of courage and a strong conscience. He agreed.

After a time of rest, some hours or not more than a day or two, Bleeeuchman and Arieh set out through the German-infested, collaborator-filled countryside with no map to guide them. They found the very place, the two girls watching the sheep. It was indeed Rachel. Arieh called out, "It's me, your brother, Arieh."

Understandably, Rachel thought it was a ghost and ran away. Arieh ran, too, pounding across the uneven grassy field, breathing hard until with a burst of speed he caught his squealing sister; held her in his arms; and convinced her that it was him alive, him and not a ghost, or a seraph or a messenger.

That night, Rachel helped them sneak into the camp, Arieh reunited with Victor, and the two visitors met with Feinsilber and the others. Blechman did most of the talking. Still wearing his Red Army clothes, he must have carried a special fascination for Jews who weren't used to their side having the uniforms. His very high forehead bespoke intelligence and his eyes burned with passion. Yet despite all he had been through he still looked very young and naïve.

With open mouths the young people listened to his stories about partisans and how they were helping those Jews of Dolhinov who had successfully fled to them. He said that the partisans, especially their commander, Ivan Timchuk, were ready to help save Jews. Many of those there had known him from before the war when their parents or older siblings worked for him at the fox farm.

Arieh Rubin and Blechmann, along with Rachel and Victor—going to be reunited with their family—were joined by three young men from Krivitchi who wanted to join the partisans and were willing to spy out the land. The rest were not so eager. There, it was as if the Germans had forgotten about them. At any rate, they were wards of the army, not in the clutches of the SS or security police.

They had heard enough about partisans to make them fearful and suspicious, even while hearing their praises sung in Yiddish. Their attitude was that of the ancient Israelites who rebuked Moses with what is the first Jewish joke: What! There aren't enough graves in Egypt that you brought us here? And so most decided to stay just where they were until they knew more about what to expect in the woods. It was just a small group of seven that headed back to the People's Avengers.

If Chaia Katzovitz had not already left the work camp due to homesickness, she would have run into her sister, Bushke. But at the time, Chaia had no idea whether Bushke was alive. Indeed, it was Bushke who had best expressed the paradox of the Dolhinov Jews up to that time: Only running away could save them from a death sentence but the bitter fact was there "was no route of escape for us."

When the Second Action had ended with her still alive on May 1, 1942, Bushke chose to go to the nearby town of Kurenitz were still 1300 Jews lived. (They were not to be massacred until September 9.) Avram Dimenstein joined her on the long walk. Early one morning they arrived and some Jewish families took in the fugitives, despite the fact that they had nothing to eat, no space to stand, and giving safe haven to unregistered Jews would bring instant death to them all.

A few days later, while Bushke was walking in a field on the edge of town, a horse and buggy passed her. "Bushke!" yelled someone on board. She was surprised to see it was Feinsilber. Such was the paradox of the time that while thousands of Jews were being murdered everywhere, Feinsilber was given leave to consult Kurenitz's Jewish doctor about a minor illness he was having. He pulled the horse to a stop and jumped down to the ground. His news made Bushke jump. Both her mother and little sister had joined partisans in the woods, Blechmann had reported, and now Chaia had gone to join them.

Feinsilber felt so secure that he urged her to persuade all those from Dolhinov living, if one could call it life, in Kurenitz to come to the camp for safety. The German army men didn't care who came and went. Jobs could be found to replace those—including her own sister—who'd escaped. And if she chose to go to the forests, he concluded, it would be easier to do so from the camp than from the town.

Convinced, she, Dimenstein, and several others walked from Kurenitz to join the camp a few days later, sneaking in without any difficulty. Already, Blechmann had become a legend there, a young Moses who would lead them to safety. Soon, the boys who'd accompanied Blechmann returned. One of them was Eliyahu Bunimovich, who'd survived the massacres in Krivichi and come to the work camp with his sister, Shifra, children of Chana Rubin of Dolhinov.

Bunimovich was a large man, strong and determined to fight. When he and his companions returned in the first few days of August, they reported: It was all right. The partisans would accept them and treat them well. Everyone began planning their escape.

It was not a moment too soon. One day, some SS men came from their Vileika base to inspect the camp. They didn't stay long but there was no doubt what this meant. Such a pattern had been seen before in Dolhinov.

One guard, "Corporal Willy," was particularly friendly to the Jews. As a Jewish prisoner recalled, "He would never scream or curse or humiliate us….Almost daily he would secretly give us some food, like a few pieces of bread and leftover cooked food from the kitchen." He warned the Jews that his unit was being transferred and it was time for them to leave: "I don't want to be responsible for your deaths. The SS is coming soon and you must go." Willy even gave Bunimovich a primitive gun. Tragically, some time later, the anti-Nazi soldier would later be killed in a shoot-out with partisans.

That very day, the older prisoners held a meeting and decided to escape as soon as possible. During the day, when the prisoners were taken out to work, only the cook remained in the camp, with no guards around. Bunimovich became the cook and was able to cut the wire and then put it back so the break would be invisible.

Bunimovich counted carefully to make sure that all 82 Jews were together and ready at 9 PM, late enough for it to be very dark but early enough so that no guard would think it unusual that prisoners were still walking around. Feinsilber was working in the camp office and the plan was to collect him later. But one other person was also missing, Israel Katzovich, the youngest prisoner who was barely a teenager. Searching desperately through the camp, Bunimovich finally found him. Katzovich hadn't been feeling well and fell asleep in a quiet corner of the camp, not realizing it was time to go. Bunimovich quickly got everyone organized.

Fortunately, the weather was terrible, with rain pouring down heavily, and the guards on duty had stayed inside their shed, not bothering to watch the camp. Bunimovich went out first to check, making sure the way was clear then returned to send off everyone. In small prearranged groups, everyone went through the opening in the barbed-wire. They were armed with knifes, axes, pitchforks, bludgeons, and sticks to defend themselves if necessary.

But no guard noticed anything. They groups headed for a place a mile and a half away where they were to reassemble and be guided by those who'd returned from the partisans. But if anyone got lost they knew to walk toward the village of Lesniki, about 20 miles away, where the People's Avengers partisan unit had its base.

As the other prisoners scattered into the night, Bunimovich and two other men stayed behind on a rescue mission, his friend GedaliyaVolkovich, another bold young guy who'd gone with him to the partisans and returned to lead out the other prisoners, and the somewhat woozy Katzovich. While Katzovich kept insisting he was fine, Bunimovich wanted to keep a close eye on him to make sure he wouldn't collapse again. The trio headed for the camp office at the railroad station.

Hiding behind bushes, they snuck up to the window and peered into the office. There was Feinsilber and the German officer hard at work. At that precise moment, they heard shooting from back at the camp. The guards had finally noticed that all the prisoners had escaped. Wasting no time, the three men climbed through the window. Before the German could get to his rifle, Bunimovich grabbed it and pointed it at him. As the others checked the office, the German sat frozen, shaking with fear.

The four men picked up the entire camp treasury, in German marks, some clothes, and train tickets to Berlin that the officer had been intending to use while on leave. Feinsilber put on the officer's military coat and put the revolver into the pocket. As soon as they left through the window, the officer started screaming for help. But it was too late. The prisoners disappeared into the night.

The four men easily got away. On their own, they headed for the partisans picking up ten more Jews they found hiding in a village along the way.

But one thing went wrong. Somehow, Feinsilber became separated from the other three. He did make it to the forest and ran into a partisan patrol. They took one look at the German officers' coat he was wearing, decided he was a Nazi spy, and shot him dead on the spot. It was a tragic end for a brave young man who had shown exceptional leadership skills. He had helped save over 100 lives but was unable in the end to save himself. Bunimovich later became a heroic fighter, a demolitions' expert in charge of a partisan squad which sabotaged the German railroads.

But even with the best will in the world and taking as many Jewish refugees into his ranks as possible, how could the People's Avengers and neighboring units carry out their mission and supply their fighters while supporting and protecting hundreds of civilians, escapees from Dolhinov and other towns who kept trickling in through the forest? Fate, and military developments, provided an answer.

By now the Red Army was fighting back effectively, having stopped the Nazis at the very gates of Stalingrad and Moscow. Many of those Germans who'd ridden up the road through Dolhinov were now dead, the equipment wrecked. As the Soviet Third and Fourth Shock Armies advanced in September 1942, they pushed apart the German units facing them, opening a 25-mile-wide gap between the German Army Group North and Army Group Center. This passageway into central Belarus was called the Surazh Gates.

The Soviets made good use of the partial breakthrough, until the Germans closed the gap around September 25. Forward came guns and ammunition, medical supplies and trained soldiers. Back through the Soviet lines, new recruits for training and veterans in need of rest, and also civilians fleeing the Germans. Timchuk radioed headquarters with an idea: some of the Jewish refugees could be evacuated through the gates, the young men recruited into the Red Army, the rest sent to places where they could safely work to serve the war effort.

The partisan chiefs back in Moscow approved an operation. This was a highly unusual decision which can only be explained by Timchuk's prestige and persistence. All the Allies—American, British, and Soviet alike—always put priority on the military effort narrowly defined.

They argued that the greatest humanitarian deed, the best way to save lives, was to win the war as quickly as possible. They refused to diverge resources to bomb railroad lines leading to concentration camps. This was an understandable choice--professional soldiers saw any non-military action as a distraction—but it also doomed hundreds of thousands of Jews to horrible

deaths. Such thinking, however, was at times reinforced by a disinterest or outright contempt for Jewish lives in particular. There is no doubt about this in Stalin's case.

It is interesting that nobody on the Soviet side ever saw exposing the mass murder of Jews as being a good propaganda tool against the Nazis. Their Communist system supposedly rejected making distinctions on an ethnic basis, though this rule seemed to apply most often and completely when Jews were involved. After all, the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland had been justified as helping downtrodden Byelorussians and Ukrainians who had not even sought Soviet assistance, much less Moscow's trodding them down further. Part of the reason was that the Soviets never recognized Jews as a nationality; another part was the deep antisemitism of the Russian and other subject peoples. Trumpeting the truth about the Shoah would have made the Nazis more rather than less popular among them.

In contrast, Timchuk thought, aside from humanitarian considerations, in political and ideological terms. He didn't just like Jews in general, finding them faithful comrades, but was personally acquainted with those at risk. Yet he knew how such actions had to be put into a framework that would appeal to his superiors.

The rescue operation was justified, then, purely as a military measure. Young, old and women who were a burden on the partisans would be removed; new recruits brought out of German-occupied territory for enlistment and training. This fictional military unit was thus called the People's Avengers' Brigade Special Purpose Detachment "Victory." Timchuk sought the right leader for it and, on June 16, 1942, asked Lieutenant Nikolai Yakovlevich Kisilev, who accepted. Reportedly two other officers had already turned down the job as too tough, dangerous, or unmilitary.

Kisilev seems to have been an idealistic believing Communist very much in Timchuk's mold. As such, he was a logical choice for the mission. Born to a peasant family in 1913, Kisilev grew up in Bogorodskoe village, Bashkiria, coincidentally close to where the people he was about to save would be sent by the Soviet government.

Like Timchuk he'd been a beneficiary of the Communist revolution, which gave him the opportunity to study in the Academy for Foreign Trade.[vii] He had volunteered for the army, become a political instructor on the Belarus front, was wounded in battle and captured. The Germans always shot commissars who fell into their hands, so Kisilev either concealed his duties or knew he had to get away before being processed by his captors. He leaped off the train taking him to the prisoner camp, made his way to the forest, and had fought with the People's Avengers ever since.

Chaia Katzovitz was among the first civilians to find out about the plan. A group of Jewish partisan soldiers stopped by the family camp to visit relatives. Dressed in warm winter clothes—August in a Belarus forest is winter—they were carrying well-cleaned weapons and lots of ammunition, a far cry from the ragged undisciplined force of months ago. One of them was David Koplovich, from Vileika, who had been in Chaia's high school class and had a lot of family in Dolhinov, where he spent every summer. "Good news," he said, a commodity in especially rare supply in 1942 Belarus. There was a new plan to bring people out of German-held lands across Soviet lines to become soldiers or workers there.

But who was to go and who to stay? Yosef Sosensky wanted to go with his sister, Batya, and the remains of his family, but Timchuk persuaded him to stay with the unit. After all, Timchuk explained, even if Yosef survived the journey he'd just be immediately sent to the front

as an anonymous replacement and probably be killed there, whereas his knowledge of the terrain and local people near his home was far more useful to the People's Avengers. Sosensky agreed.

The almost 300 refugees originally selected would be accompanied by Kisilev and seven partisan soldiers, one of them, a local scout and intelligence-gatherer named Anya, would serve as guide for the initial part of the journey. The Jews came mostly from Dolhinov but also from the towns of Ilya, Knyazhitsy, Kurinetz, and Postav. All of them were Jewish except for one anti-Nazi Polish family from Dolhinov.

Among them were the surviving Kuzinitz family members, Chana and Yosef Kuznitz along with her husband's mother and that woman's daughter. The only intact nuclear family were my cousins on my father's side Gavriel, 49, and Rasia Rubin, 44, and their children, Victor, Arieh, Rachael, and Leon Rubin. Others were sole survivors, like the eighteen-year-old Teiba Dimenshtein, my aunt on my mother's side, though at least she had as protector a young man also from Dolhinov, her future husband, Shmuel Alperovitz.

But nothing was easy. After many rumors and some delays, the march was finally ready to start at the beginning of August when there came a devastating reminder that nowhere was safe. As the group was standing in line, about to leave camp, the ground shook with artillery fire and the rattle of machineguns. The Germans were launching an all-out surprise attack.

Civilians scattered in all directions, though bullets seemed to come from everywhere. Little Sara Kuzinitz is hit by a bullet in the cheek; Mordechai Hadash gets one in the leg. The seemingly indestructible Briana Katz, in her 70s, outruns the shots. Two are killed, beautiful Chaia Shulkin, a partisan and the last of her family, and a Jewish woman from Minsk.

The People's Avengers' shoot back and somehow the Germans, never too enthusiastic about fighting in the forest, are held. The resulting confusion and demoralization postpones departure for two weeks. Finally, for a second time, Kiselev takes the head of the column. Sara Kuzinitz isn't with them. She and her mother have to stay behind as Dr. Kotler tends the little girl's wounds. Chaia goes onward alone. They all survive the war. Hadash, also wounded, and his wife also stay with the partisans. They don't.

The Victory unit, despite its optimistic name, doesn't seem to have much of a chance. About 270 people actually set out. Only 6 of them were regular soldiers and another 20, mostly from Dolhinov, have some partisan experience. Their total armament consists of Kisilev's revolver, 15 rifles, 15 grenades, and 5,000 rounds of ammunition. There are about 50 fit young men en route to join the Red Army but most are children (35 of them under 12 years old), mothers, and old people used to hard work but not outdoor survival skills. And they're going to have to march ever eastward for two months through 750 miles of German-controlled territory, with all the twists and detours forcing them to cover double that distance.

During the day, they hid in the marshes; at night they stumbled eight to twelve miles through the forests, more when in particularly dangerous areas. Clothes were torn to pieces by branches and brambles. Shoes shredded by rain and mud to the point that some walked with feet wrapped in rags or in wooden clogs given them by peasants along the way.

Hiking through a Byelorussian forest is much harder than a pleasant saunter in a Western Europen or North American woods. Instead of tall trees with wide spaces between them, the trees are far slighter but as a result closer together, unpredictable in placement, surrounded by uneven ground. One can never quite keep in a straight line. This quality gives such forests their wild and romantic feel, yet also poses additional obstacles to exhausted, undernourished people

dragging along children and making their way at night. To run from bullets without smacking face-first into a tree is a daunting task. It could be made into a tough Olympic event.

They went around villages to avoid detection, especially German-garrisoned Vitebsk, through forests and fields, occasionally daring to turn onto backroads. Mostly, they subsisted on swamp water, berries and mushrooms they picked, and potatoes given them by peasants. When the villages were friendly and empty of Germans, farmers offered food and shelter—three or four refugees in each hut--for the night. This being the real world, and a particularly brutal variant thereof, the partisans used the threat of their guns to get food when necessary. Peasants were orded to ferry them by boat across rivers that couldn't be forded on foot.

"The people didn't have proper clothes and shoes," Kiselev wrote in his report afterward. "We had to fight Germans and police every day, sometimes just to get food."[viii]

What would you take on such a journey, when fleeing for your life on a difficult trek? Of all things to save what was most important? The Dolhinov Jews independently made the same choice: family photos. Batye Sosinsky had taken with her during the escape from the ghetto three pictures of her mother. Her brother, Yehuda, was carrying them in his backpack during one German attack. They ran for their lives, backpack left behind. And when Teiba Dimenshtein had come back to her house for a few minutes to find her family murdered, she'd scooped up some pictures including one of her brother, killed a few minutes earlier. She didn't have time to take the photo of my grandparents, sent from America to Teiba's mother as a present.

Another time when the Germans attacked during the march, Leon Rubin's father told the young boy to hold onto his jacket as they ran. Leon fell. So Leon's sister, Rachel, threw away her pack, picked him up, and carried him to safety. Much of the contents lost that day were all the family photos they'd taken from their house after emerging from their hideout hole in the moments before they fled Dolhinov.

The first part of the march was the toughest. Several people were killed crossing the treacherous Berezina river where Napoleon's army had come to grief during his retreat from Moscow. Bushke Brunstein remembered, "I was always in anxiety fearing that the person who was walking in front of me would become lost in the fog." In the Rubin family, the father went first, the mother last, with the children between them for protection. Leon would sleep while walking, pulled forward by one of his brothers or by his sister.

Sleeping on the ground during Belarus's rainy and cold late autumn was in itself a torture, and though the partisans barred bonfires at night lest they be sighted, no one could resist lighting some when the Germans seemed furthest and the chill night air closest. .

Once they reached Vitebsk, midway between the Germans' secure rear area and the front line, it became easier for a while since partisan units controlled much of the area. The population was friendlier and more willing to share food and let the refugees sleep on the floors of the few homes not already burned down by the Germans. Along the way, young men, volunteers for the Red Army, joined the column. Local police didn't know who these people were marching through their territory. But assuming the column was a large partisan unit they stayed away.

The refugees knew that at any moment during those weeks of journeying through hostile territory, the Germans could come down upon them. Physical hardships were surpassed by the sudden terror of two ambushes by regular German troops. Fifty people simply disappeared along the way, getting lost or killed by the Germans while running for cover. Several were left behind because they simply could not continue due to illness or wounds. Kisilev had to put first the whole group's needs.

Silence at critical moments meant the difference between massacre and survival. At one point, they were walking along a river where the Germans were known to be nearby when two-year-old Berta Kramer could not stop crying. Fear she could give them away was no fantasy. The tears of little David Gitlitz had fatally led the Germans to himself and his mother during one of the massacres in Dolhinov.

The Kramers pleaded with her to stop, without success. What should they do? The lives of 300 people hinged on their choice and time was short as German ears could pick up the screams and sobs at any moment. Could they really force themselves to throw her in the river and drown her to stop the noise?

Berta cried out, "I want to live don't throw me."

Hersh Shperber, also from Dolhinov, the sole survivor of the massacred woodcutters who had stayed alive despite all the odds, walked up beside her father, Joseph, and said in the most serious possible voice, "If you harm her I would not recognize you any more."

Kisilev himself ran over, took the little girl and carried her, whispering to her anything he could think of in order to calm her down. He succeeded and took her on his shoulder for most of the day. Both families survived and many years later when she was married, Yosef, called up the Shperbers to honor them under the huppa as, "The true parents of the bride who saved her life."

Dealing with such desperate, traumatized people and terrible circumstances, Kisilev became such a beloved figure because of his ability to blend tough leadership with sensitivity to their human needs. He psychologically mastered a situation in which he could not order civilians as he might soldiers but had to deal with individuals, constantly needing to switch from cajolery to severity, encouragement to leading by example.

One of those on the march was Jacob Rubin of Dolhinov who, as if all the other obstacles weren't enough, had a wooden leg. At one point when he was lagging, Kisilev insisted that the man ride on his horse. He refused.

"It's an order," said Kisilev."

Rubin turned to his wife, "You ride on the horse, I can't do it."

"No I won't do it either," she replied.

This was one time when Kisilev gave up.

The simple truth is that a lesser man would have simply abandoned his charges or let them fall by the wayside. To care about human life at all—especially that of people many or most of one's compatriots despised—in the Belarus of 1942 was no mean achievement.

On top of everything else, Kisilev had his own emotional entanglements on the march. He and the guide Anna Sirotkova, a Beyelorussian from one of the local towns who'd also volunteered for the journey, were probably already in love. They stayed together and were married after the war.

Yet the relative ease of the middle passage was only a prelude to the most intense terror of all at journey's end: running the gauntlet to cross the battlefront itself. The closer they came to safety, the more the German presence grew. At last, they were in the empty town of Padochi, abandoned by its own people who'd fled from the battles, where they dared spend the night.

The next day came the ultimate challenge. Cautiously but swiftly they advanced, through the German lines. Volleys of shots were fired at them and several of the refugees were killed at the very last moment after all their travails. Suddenly, unbelieveably they were through, among the Red Army's white-clad camouflaged soldiers who guided them to safety through the snows.

“We were freezing,” recalled one of those who made the trek, “heavy snow and we were still in and out of the forest. As soon as we exited the woods I saw a crossroads and a bunker of Russian soldiers. A woman soldier comes out, puts on her glasses and says, “Don’t run! Don’t Run.You’vebeensaved, you’re safe now. And that was it. That’s how it finished”

It was November 7, 1942. Almost one-third of them had perished along the way. And as they were led through the Red Army lines—no doubt to the astonished glances of soldiers who couldn’t figure out how scores of women and children had appeared out of nowhere—they could hear the sound of the German artillery bombardment. But at least for the moment no one was aiming at them. “We had no more strength left,” recalled one of the refugees. “Drunk with happiness we fell asleep.”

At least at first, however, the Soviets did not treat them as friends but as suspected spies. The first night, they were put up in the homes of local people in Talapietz. Then they were interrogated by the NKVD, imprisoned for three days in rooms with barred windows, given no food, and all their possessions down to their belts were taken away. The secret police were suspicious that they had no identity documents. Moscow radioed them that all was as expected. . The 218 survivors were set free at last.

Yet even now they were not yet quite safe. As the refugees waited in three groups to be shipped east, the Germans bombed the town and several more were killed. Little Leon, seeking some sense of security, ran ceaselessly between his parents, being one of the few who still had two of them.

At last, the young men were sent off to be enlisted in the army; the rest boarded a freight train. As the train rolled jolting from the station, the sound of motors came down from above. A moment later, German planes bombed the tracks and buzzed the train but no hits were scored, no one was hit. As the train headed east, the sound of explosions was heard through the night.

For many days and hundreds of miles their journey continued deep into the Soviet Union, leaving fighting and death behind, all the way to Kazakstan, near Tashkent. There was plenty of time to talk and wonder what their destinations, and futures, would be like. Their culinary imaginations had shrunk from privations to the point that, dwelling on possible luxuries, one of the main questions was, "Do they have potatoes in Kazachstan?" Even that they were to be denied. The discouraging answer was "no."

Too hot in the closed-in, overcrowded boxcars, too tired, and perhaps too desirous not to leave behind the potato-growing regions of this world, people got off at this station or that one. For some unknowable reasons, several families from Dolhinov who ould take no more of the rocking cars and grinding wheels descended into the little town of Sorozink, a place meaning nothing to them. Sitting there in the station they tried to decide what to do next.

Seeing the exhausted group on the platform, a woman living in the town named Shifra Gordon was passing by, astonished to see some fellow stranger Jews there. She approached and asked "Where are you from?"

Dolhinov was a small town, who’d heard of it? Jewish immigrants entering America or just travelling usually gave their previous address as the largest nearby city. And so one woman answered by saying, “Vilna.” But not content with that response, another interrupted, "No, from Dolhinov"

Gordon was shocked. She was from Dolhinov herself, having been one of several young Jewish Communists who had run off to the USSR in the 1930s and having no contact with the town for years.

“Wait here!” she said, “Wait here! I’m from Dolhinov and there’s another man from Dolhinov, too, Chaim Brunstein, working as a dentistry technician in Sorozink.”

“Chaim Brunstein!” said the refugees. “His wife, Chana, Chana Kuzinitz by birth, is on that train that just left the station!”

The fact that refugees from Dolhinov ran into Shifra Gordon in the middle of Siberia was remarkable enough. And what was Brunstein doing there? Drafted into the Polish army when the Germans invaded, Chaim’s unit retreated east until captured by the Red Army. They were taken to Katyn where officers were separated out and murdered. The Soviets told the enlisted men that they were free but then dragged them off to work in Soviet coal mines. Marched east again by the Soviet guards on their retreat from the Germans, Chaim was finally allowed to go to work as a dentist, living in the town with two other Dolhinov Jews who’d been released.

Gordon ran off, found the startled Brunstein, explained the situation in an explosion of syllables, and they ran back together breathless to the station. The train with his family was long gone. He asked the station master the train’s number and then ran off again. Finding his boss, the clinic manager, Brunstein explained the situation and was given a travel pass on the pretext that he was going to a dental course in Tashkent. For five days, with little sleep, he raced after his family.

And so it was that at 2 am in a little town on the Russian steppes, despite the efforts of Hitler and Stalin, Chaim Brunstein found a train standing in the station.

On board, Rafael “Fula” Sosensky was trying to figure out some way to keep his sleeping children warm when he heard knocking from outside. He slid open the door, looked out, and saw a man he didn’t recognize.

The man shouted at him: "Don't you recognize me Fula? I have been chasing your train for five days" He realized it was his friend, Chaim Brunstein.

Sosensky let in Brunstein, leading him to where his family was sleeping on the dusty floor. “Wake up! Wake up!” he told them. It’s your father, Chaim!” One of the daughters refused, muttering, “It must be a dream.” But it wasn’t. And they did. It was as close to being a miracle as a Jew could hope for in Europe during that terrible year 1942.

There were just a few more miracles left, enough to save at least two of those left behind by the march—one of them six years old, the other well into her seventies. The problem was that for Dolhinov there were only about 300 miracles and 4000 tragedies.

Still, there were so few good outcomes that each one must be counted. Chaim Grosbein, a distant cousin of mine on my mother’s side, was six years old in 1942, when his entire family was wiped out in the Second Action. Polish neighbors pointed out their hiding place to the Germans and a soldier threw in a hand grenade. Sitting in the far corner by himself, Chaim survived and after the massacre was rescued by the family’s other neighbors, my Rubin cousins.

He was taken by them to the forest with the partisans, and then on the march, where he was wounded and separated during one of the German attacks. All alone in the middle of the woods, he somehow managed to survive for some weeks—sometimes by stealing food farmers had put out for their livestock--before finally being rescued by other Soviet partisans. After the war, he was sent to a Soviet orphanage where he grew up, later joined the Red Army, and discovered his identity.

At the other end of the life cycle, Briana Katz survived the massacres in Dolhinov and escaped to be hidden by a Christian woman peasant in the village of Miltzia. After staying there some months, the woman asked her to leave and she found fellow Jews from Dolhinov in the

family camp. During the first German attack, she was wounded, could not go on, and was hidden in the bushes with hope the Germans wouldn't find her, but without any doubt that she would soon be dead of natural causes.

Katz was clearly a woman of great spirit and resolve. After a few days, one of the People's Avengers scouts found her. Avraham Friedman and Yigal Segalchik, who knew her from Dolhinov, rushed to the scene, cleaned the bullet wound in her leg, and cared for her. Katz told them, "If you want to keep me alive and save me, you must return me to the farmer in Miltzia." They carried her there in a wagon, telling the farmwoman to take care of her. Segalchik recounted, "The farmwoman made the sign of the cross and swore she would do her best."

A month later, the two partisans returned and found her able to walk. They returned her to the base and made her a cook for the unit. Thus, she spent the war. It is said that Briana Katz's triumphant, horseback entrance into Dolhinov with the partisans after its liberation was one of the most inspiring sights those present had ever seen. Thereafter she went up to the Land of Israel where she died at a very old age in a kibbutz among her children, 20 grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

When their march d ended, the survivors had said goodbye to Kisilev trying to find the proper words of gratitude. None of them ever saw him again. But they wrote a letter with everyone's name on it and sent it to Ponomorov, the partisan commander-in-chief, praising Kisilev and asking that he be rewarded for his deeds. For once in its history, the Stalinist dictatorship actually listened to the voice of the people. On January 14, 1943, the partisan headquarters awarded Kisilev and his soldiers a small financial prize and also the highest honor the Soviet Union could bestow, Hero of the Soviet Union.

But this being the real world, where good is so often not treated with good or evil with punishment, the plane carrying the medal was shot down and Kisilev never received it. And immediately after the war, he had to write a series of letters to the army to prove that he indeed had led the march, in the face of an imposter who hadn't even been there but who claimed credit for it.

Still, he did enjoy a happy life. He returned to active military duty, survived the war, married the scout, and had a nice career working in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Trade. He died in 1974. Kisilov's daughter recounted that he'd only mentioned the experience once, to say that he wondered what had happened to all those people he saved.

When we were talking about Kisilov's story one day, Leon turned to me and said, "It reminds me of what Jewish tradition says: If you save the life of one person, it's as if you saved an entire world. Consider how much Kisilov did, considering the number of people alive today who were descended from those surviving that trek!"

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[i] David Meltser, Belorussia, in Walter Laqueur, The Holocaust Encyclopaedia (New Haven 2001) pp. 60-66.

[ii] A major source for Timchuk's earlier life is http://www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=7319 by Valery Vorobyov; Heroes of the Soviet Union: A Brief Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 2, (Moscow, 1988) and . V. S. Petrukhin. On Danube Shores, (Moscow, 1974).

[iii] http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Krzywicze/kry327.html

[iv] David Meltser and Vladimir Levin, The Black Book with Red Pages: Tragedy and Heroism of Belorussian Jews (Cockeysville, Md) pp. 245-53.

[v] Among those in the group, aside from Freedman and Segalchik, were Moshe Forman, Mikhail Lankin, Yehuda Ginsburg, Kalman Salim, Reuven Kramer, Ariel Leibe Rothstein, and Shimon Alesh. Others who came in the second group included Abba, Beryl, and Elie Moshe Kuzinitz.

[vi] This group included Shimon Shapira, Chana Brunstein, her brother Yosef Kozinitz, the brothers Enshel, Meir, and Shimshon Meirsom, Reuven Kramer, Ariel Rothstein and Shimon Alesh, Chaia and Aida Shulkin from Kuznitz, Eliyau Maisel, Yosef Baksht, Mulka Kuritsky, and Avraham Yitzhak Shuster. Kuritsky fell in battle.

[vii] On Kisilev's life and the archival record on the march, one is indebted to http://www.sem40.ru/evroplanet/history/22438 *Inna Gerasimova,* "Kiselev's list: foreword and afterword.

[viii] Arkady Leyzerov, "An episode from the history of the Holocaus,t" in Evrei Belorussii: istoria I keltura (Jews of Byelorussia: history and culture), collection of articles III-IV. (Minsk, 1998) pp. 232-234.

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE PEOPLE'S AVENGERS TAKE REVENGE

"I will now praise devoted men,
our fathers, of every generation;
whom the Most High assigned great glory,
majesty, from days of old….

their memory will endure forever,
their faithfulness will not be blotted out….

Their bodies are laid away in peace,
their name lives on, age to age;
the assembly recounts their wisdom,
the congregation rehearses their praise."

--Ecclesiasticus 44:1, 7-15

On the moonless night of October 17, 1942, the 34-year-old Yigal Segalchik, recently escaped from Dolhinov and now a soldier of the People's Avengers brigade, set off for the first attack on the railroad just north of his home town. When he'd heard about the demolition teams being organized to sabotage the German supply trains, Segalchik had insisted on joining the operation. Timchuk had smiled at his enthusiasm and agreed.

Sigalchik was a huge, strong man. Born in 1908, he was much older and more mature than the young partisans in the ranks. He had been earning his own bread since the age of 14, when his father died. His brother and two sisters had gone to the land of Israel in the 1930s. But like many big men, he was shy. He had courted and married his wife at the age of 30, ancient by local standards, and when he had gone to the parents to ask her hand in marriage, he had perspired so freely and been so visibly nervous that they had at first wanted to turn him down. Yet if Sigalchik was a sheep in the parlor, he would be a veritable lion in the forests of Belarus.

"Choose three men you trust to go with you," Timchuk had said, and he took with him Blechmann; Mikhail Friedman, a cousin of Avraham; and a Russian named Kolke Doroshniko. They left camp with their commander's hurried good luck wave, carrying five pounds of TNT, a long fuse, and detonators. At 10 PM they reached the tracks. In the night's stillness, the metallic click-clack sound of turning wheels on rails signaled that a train had just passed. The sound of reinforcements and supplies heading for the German frontline slowly diminished toward the northeast, in the direction of far-off Moscow.[1]

Quickly, they followed instructions to the letter. Explosives were shoved under the right-hand rail, pushed down between two wood ties. The detonator was attached. They jogged backward for fifty yards unrolling fuse as they went, careful to stay close enough to the tracks to ensure it would work. Then they threw themselves down on the ground and waited.

Not that they had to wait long. In a few minutes there was a screeching sound in the up-to-then silent night, a grinding that set nerves on edge, louder and louder. How many trains there were now on this once-quiet line in the midst of nowhere, reflecting the desperate life-and-death

battle of German troops at the front, hard-pressed by the Soviets now battling back to hold Moscow and Stalingrad. Here, four men waged a war which straight up that ribbon of steel was being fought by 400,000.

At last, the men saw a locomotive headlight, made hazy by the night air. Steady! Steady! When the approaching train reached the precise point they'd agreed on in advance, Segalchik pulled the fuse hard and they all turned and ran. The explosion was astonishingly loud; the earth shook. The massive locomotive leaped into the air, off the tracks and plowing into the ground. Steel ribbons were lifted, twisted, writhing into the air. Momentum carried the cars forward, smashing and bending, falling over like wounded dinosaurs. Then came secondary explosions from the cargo of ammunition set alight, punctuated by the cries of the wounded, shouted commands.

Too few to challenge the train's surviving armed guards, who began firing wildly in all directions, the partisans kept running, not even daring to look back. They didn't stop for three miles until panting they came to the outskirts of a village where a peasant, dressed in worn homespun clothes, was waiting to hide them in his hut. Once inside, the silent men let out their excitement, happy at both succeeding and getting away. They couldn't sleep, playing the experience over and over in their minds and voices.

First thing in the morning, the peasant gave them some bread, cheese and onions then slogged the three miles back to see what had happened. Tense, the men sat on homemade wooden chairs. Now nervousness returned as their host didn't. The sun arched across the sky, over the hut, the railroad, their distant camp, and finally down over the far horizon. What could have gone wrong? Had their host been arrested, interrogated, given them away? At that very moment were German units racing toward them to surround the hut and machinegun them?

But finally the man returned with a satisfied expression. They gathered around as he told his tale. The train had been destroyed; rails crumpled; all traffic stopped along the line. Several German soldiers guarding it were dead.

German troops had sealed off the area until two work trains arrived to undo the damage. They grabbed every available peasant, including the saboteurs' host, to clean up the debris. Within fourteen hours the wreckage had been repaired. Their success was merely a small interruption, yet it was still sweet for those who'd been helpless so long, held in contempt by Germans, neighbors, and partisan comrades alike.

Each action was tiny, often seemingly futile. But such attacks multiplied by dozens weakened the German frontline army enough to help the Soviets push them back and finally achieve victory.

And there were some victories, albeit heartbreakingly small ones, to be won by Dolhinov Jews themselves for their own people. Soon thereafter, Segalchik and Michael Friedman, crossed the railroad line again, careful to do so more than two miles away from the earlier attack. Now the Germans were guarding the railroad better. As the two men crouched in the darkness they heard two guards shouting to each other. While knowing the enemy was so close was unnerving, it also told the partisans precisely where the guards were—and weren't. The two partisans slipped between them.

Once clear of the German outposts, they took the empty Dokshitz-Gleboki road to a farm owned by a Pole, Yashka Patzvitch, a trusted friend of Friedman and partisan supporter. In the midst of night, they knocked on the door, rousing the startled farmer. Never before had he seen Jews carrying guns, two things that simply didn't go together in his experience. But he quickly

accepted the notion, let them in to sit at his table, and fed them a big meal of fresh bread, fruit, hot soup, and cooked potatoes, the best dinner they'd had in two years.

The visitors wasted no time on small talk. They asked him to go into Gleboki, a small town about 30 miles north of Dolhinov, the next day and give a message to Friedman's two brothers and other relatives in the ghetto there. The farmer agreed, "I often visit the town," he explained, "and even see your brothers." So far, the Germans were letting them work, having concentrated there the last of the Jews—those with skills they needed--from other towns. Then the man walked them to his son's house a few steps away to stay the night.

But Friedman didn't sleep. Instead, he wrote a letter to his relatives, trying to pour all his persuasiveness into it.

"Don't stay in Gleboki any longer," he warned, "all the Jews in other towns have been wiped out. You are doomed to death at any moment….Don't waste any time. Come to us, to the fighting partisans. We have weapons and many dead Germans to our credit. We are waiting for you!"

Friedman and Segalchik stayed impatiently in their small hiding place all the next day, hoping for Patzvitch's return. At 3 p.m. Patzvitch entered with a letter from Friedman's brother and uncle saying only: "We will arrive at midnight." And they did. Quietly, they snuck through a weak point in the ghetto fence. The Germans know that the best way of keeping the Jews confined isn't their fear of being shot at the fence but rather the hunger, bandits, and lack of help that were all around them. Failure to escape and be able to survive had made many return defeated and many more, who saw what had happened, not try running away at all.

A direct personal appeal from a relative, though, couldn't be ignored. The three men had a warm reunion, the kind experienced by people amazed to find each other alive. Rumors about the attack on the railroad had reached the town, but when the two partisans said they'd done the deed, their visitors refused to believe it. The idea of Jews blowing up things and fighting a war was as strange to them as it had been to their Polish host. Segalchik had to pull the fuse and a detonator out of his pack and wave them in front of their eyes to convince them.

Having proved their credentials, the partisans urged them to form a group of young people, get weapons in any way possible, escape from the ghetto, and join the partisans. Segalchik asked that they talk to all the Dolginov people in town, including his own cousin, Yitzhak Koton, a giant of a man who would make a great fighter and whose father—like so many other Dolhinov Jews—had also worked with Timchuk at the fox farm.

But Friedman's uncle was horrified by the idea. He had a wife and two children. "I can't either take them into the forest to face the harsh winter or leave them behind," he insisted. Nor did he believe that flight was their only chance of survival. Many Jews thought the Germans would soon be defeated and it was best to be cautious and outlast their presence. His view, courageous in its own way, nevertheless turned reality backwards. To leave, he thought, meant certain death at least for his loved ones. It would be a selfish act on his part. But to stay would give some chance of survival. The risks were real but they didn't understand their only choice was between taking a huge risk and not surviving at all.

Still, the two men promised to help by recruiting others, especially those without dependents, who could leave more easily and with fewer guilt feelings. They returned to the ghetto before dawn.

Before the sun rose the follwing day, Segalchik and Friedman came to the planned meeting place at a crossroads, then hid there until nightfall. Sure enough, as agreed, 14 people, including 4 women, showed up precisely at midnight.

One of them was 17-year-old Levi Koton of Dolhinov. But what, you might ask, was he doing in Glebokie? Like other young people in Dolhinov he'd pondered whether it was morally permissible to abandon his parents and younger siblings in such dangerous times. Strong family relations and religious training made that question paramount for them. But urged by his mother to save himself, Koton snuck out of the house one night in April 1942 without saying good-bye to his parents.

For a week, he and a friend wandered the forests finding no aid. Conscious-stricken by having left behind his family, he returned home only to find they had all been killed in the second massacre. Koton had helped to collect the dead, find wagons, and bury them. Then he met up with two young local Communists who'd successfully hidden in Dolhinov from the Germans for nine months. Together with another girl, the four of them walked the 40 miles to Glebokie by night.

Koton joined his brother Isser there. Two months later, Isser and his family were all killed and with no close family to consider any more, Koton was ready to return to the forest and make a second try at fighting for his life.

This group of Jews from Glebokie brought with them the pitiful, yet still impressive under the circumstances, arsenal of three old rifles, one with no stock; another lacking a gunsight. But it was enough to get them admitted to a partisan unit, at least one run by more accommodating fellow Jews.[2]

Travelling at night, knowing they might be spotted or betrayed at any moment, the group finally arrived in a swampy area, the People's Avengers' camp. The Germans and their allies cannot find them but the two partisans know precisely where to go. The unit has finally built up enough fighters and weapons to begin operations. Gathered there are more than 150 armed men, 25 of them Jewish. Their clothes are rags, some have to wear captured German army or police uniforms, but morale is high and they are fairly well-equipped.

But there's also a sequel to this story. Among those who had escaped from the Glebokie ghetto and joined the partisans were two brothers, Yerucham and Mottel Lederman. The Germans told their father, a leading citizen in the town who had been pressed into heading the Judenrat, that unless his sons returned they would kill many Jews there. So their father sent them a note at Patzvitch's telling them that they had to come home. At the same time, several partisans, including the Lederman brothers, were urging another trip to the town to bring out more Jewish recruits. The four men, including Friedman, received their commander's approval, made the journey safely, and stopped off again at Patzvitch's house. The contact man gave the brothers their father's letter. Two days later, the four partisans entered the ghetto.

Weeks passed and no word came. The People's Avengers eventually heard, however, that the Lederman brothers had been allowed back into the ghetto by the Germans, without their two companions, in exchange for turning in their weapons. Apparently, they heeded their father's plea. The Germans, of course, broke their promise to let them be and ten days later came to arrest the father and two brothers. The father and Yerucham were killed; Motel escaped and went to another partisan unit. And of course, eventually the ghetto of Glebokie was wiped out by the Germans.

But what had become of Friedman and the other soldier? Searching for some answer, People's Avengers' scouts discovered their bodies hidden by the road into town. They were still wearing their boots and leather jackets. The Germans would have had no reason to leave them like that. The conclusion was that the Lederman brothers had killed them to get away in order to try to save their own family, perhaps after Freedman sought to stop such foolhardy behavior. How desperate and misguided could people become under such pressures. The brothers' crime had availed them not, nor any of their people.

The Germans and their allies had left the Jews no choice but to fight for their own lives. Yet, tragically, understanding this fact and having the ability to do so came too late for all but a few.

There wasn't a single Jew left in Dolhinov by then, but it was only the start of their war with the Nazis. Dozens would fight in the Peoples' Avengers' ranks; several hundred would support the unit as workers in its camps. An estimated 8465 Jews participated in the partisan movement or urban resistance in Byelorus during the war, of whom about 1000 died.[3] Ultimately, doing so was the only way to survive.

Until the summer of 1942, though, when it was already too late for most Jews, the partisans were still weak, uncoordinated, and poorly armed. When the People's Avengers began in September 1941, it had only eight soldiers, Timchuk managed to send another 200 from Minsk and brought just 13 more with him when he himself went to the forest in December 1941. Many of these recruits were rank-and-file Soviet Communist party members from Minsk with no military experience. Moreover, the weather was against them. It was a particularly harsh winter, and as if that weren't enough they lacked proper winter clothing—which led to injuries from frostbite--and didn't know well the area where they were operating.

Until supplies started arriving by airdrop, the main ways of getting weapons was to hunt for those left behind on battlefields or abandoned by Soviet soldiers running away during the initial German attack. Peasants had already mined these sites and had guns for sale, but often at very high prices.

At the start, these newly hatched partisans were so desperate for weapons and ammunition that one of their initial successes came when a small group of partisans spotted some German soldiers in a car pull up to a river, undress, and go swimming, leaving uniforms and weapons on the bank. Two partisans crept up, grabbed everything, and ran off. The Germans started shouting until one of the Russians fired a couple of rounds at them with one of their own guns, at which point they ran naked from the water, jumped in the car and drove off, tires screeching.[4]

It was the first time the refugees and escaped prisoners had been able to laugh at the Germans. This was early in the fighting. If the same thing happened a year later, or if the partisans had been Jews, I have no doubt the partisans would have shot them dead. But then a year later, the Germans wouldn't have gone swimming without leaving someone on guard duty.

But there was little to laugh about, especially in those early days. German agents infiltrated the unit. In February 1942, well-informed about the location and details of its main base, the Germans launched a successful surprise attack, killing many partisans and scattering the rest. Still, the People's Avenger's continue to grow, joined by soldiers who'd evaded capture or escaped prisoner camps; local Byelorussian volunteers, Jews escaping from ghettos; and smaller units that had formed in the area. Later, the Soviets infiltrate trained soldiers through the

German lines to join them. By May 1942 when he joined the unit, Avraham Friedman estimated that it had a total of 450 soldiers altogether.

Of course, Soviet partisans themselves were ultimately serving a ruthless dictatorship, and one which intended to seize eastern Poland for itself but this meant little as long as the fight was being directed against the Germans. And as long as that was so, Jews had to seek protection and fight in self-defense, indifferent to such longer-range concerns. Their longer-term prospect for staying alive at all was a doubtful proposition.

That the Lenin and For Soviet Belarus brigades were 20 percent, and the Stalin Brigade 10 percent, Jewish did not reflect ideology but survival needs. This was one more example of the classic Jewish bind, forced to take sides in a quarrel not their own and in which neither party had their interest at heart. They had to align with the Soviets because no one else would have them. They saw the Russians as liberators from Germany, not Poland. In general, their personal views remained or became Zionist from wariness and weariness at so often being caught in this trap.

Jews also knew that while the Soviet partisans were their only hope it was a badly flawed one. Undersupplied partisans, trying to survive themselves, considered non-combatant Jews—older men, women, children, and even adult men without weapons--as a burden. Moreover, there was a high level of antisemitism among the troops. With their propaganda promoting Russian nationalism in what was called the Great Patriotic War, the Soviets actually enhanced anti-Jewish feelings in their own ranks, including among Communists, regime officials, and those who grew up under the Soviet system.

Precisely because so many Jews had been murdered, partisans sometimes suspected survivors of being alive only because they were German agents. In a blend of medieval and modern antisemitism, there were also rumors rife among the fighters that Jewish refugees might poison their food or water. Polish partisan units, with few exceptions, were even more hostile to Jews.

Jewish partisans knew all this and could never be sure—and that sometimes did happen—whether Christian comrades would shoot them in the back. It was easy to give way to despair. One Jewish partisan later wrote:

"More than once we told ourselves that all efforts were in vain. We thought that no Jews would remain until victory, and that we too would be betrayed by our brothers in arms. But the desire for revenge on the Germans was stronger than anything else, and it encouraged us and strengthened our faith that not all was lost. Only due to that were we able to carry on."

If commanders criticized or punished such behavior, it was held in check but there are many cases of partisans robbing and murdering Jewish refugees or even fellow partisans who were Jews. Even when Jews were accepted into units they were often treated as second-class members, more likely to be punished, expelled, or disarmed.

Without a commanders' support, for even armed Jewish partisans to contest such treatment would risk their own lives. Anyone speaking out against antisemitism could be called a nationalist and ethnic chauvinist for criticizing other partisans' nationalism and chauvinism. When a Jewish partisan in the Stalin brigade, himself a veteran Communist, protested when his unit turned away a group of Jewish refugee women, making their deaths inevitable, he was court-martialed and shot as a "Jewish nationalist."[5]

Temporarily separated from his unit in May 1942 after a failed ambush against a German convoy on the road just west of Dolhinov, Littman Mor, member of the People's Revenge partisan brigade, thought, "A partisan detached from his regiment was in a bad situation. My situation as a Jew was even sevenfold worse. A gentile partisan could find shelter in some village, but for a Jew there was no chance for survival."

Back with his squad, Mor heard his comrades grumble that neither of the two Jews in the unit ever seemed to get wounded, as if this were a mark of cowardice. One fellow soldier grumbled to Mor about the war, "It's all because of you. It is you that the Germans are looking for." An hour later, a force of Germans and militia coming from Dolhinov attacked the unit and seven partisans were wounded, one of them the man who'd complained to him. Now, Mor had to help carry that man all night, on an improvised stretcher of belts and branches, through German lines.[6]

Understandably, Jews felt safest—and often only were safe—with units in whose ranks served a high proportion of Jewish soldiers. The best-known, and one of the few Jewish majority units, was that led by Tuvia Belsky of Novogrudok and his brothers. The Belsky unit originated the idea of "family camps," where partisans defended noncombatant Jewish refugees who gave them useful support, everything from cleaning and repairing clothing, weapons, and shoes; to running medical clinics for the wounded and ill; and even in some places growing crops. Belsky's force also pioneered in staging rescues from the ghettos, enough to save hundreds of lives but too late and too little to save thousands.

But wise partisan officers also understood the Jewish soldiers' special value to their units. They know the area well and have contacts with surviving Jewish or non-Jewish friends. Jewish partisans are often especially energetic and brave precisely because they want revenge against the Germans and know they must prove themselves. Besides, they have the greatest incentive of all for a soldier: for them, the choice is not to fight and perhaps die, but to fight or definitely die.

Since the partisans were also soldiers of Stalin, they need fear not only their enemy in battle but also the dreaded dictator's own apparatus of repression. The key link between Kremlin and the men on the battlefield was Colonel Stanislav Vaupshasov of the NKVD, Stalin's secret police.

Forty-three years old in 1942, he had enjoyed a truly remarkable career. Born in the Lithuanian village of Gruzdjay, he had joined the Red Army just after the 1917 Communist revolution, combining military work with espionage. During and after the Polish-Soviet war, he'd worked between 1920 and 1924 as an underground revolutionary in the Dolhinov area, daily risking his life. Returning to the USSR, he had spent 13 years in intelligence, then was sent as an advisor to the Republican forces in the 1937-1939 Spanish Civil War.

Stalin liquidated most of the Soviet agents who'd been in Spain, but Vaupshasov had somehow survived and was admitted to the Communist party in 1940. He was sent back to Belarus to oversee the anti-German resistance and help run the local underground Communist party as a Central Committee member. He did well enough to receive four Orders of Lenin and to become a Hero of the Soviet Union, the country's highest honor, in 1944.

Clearly, he was not a man to be trifled with and he'd taken a special interest in the largest partisan group under his authority from the moment he arrived around New Year's Day of 1942. Fortunately for Major Vasily Trofimovich Voronyansky, a professional Red Army officer who commanded the unit, and Ivan Mitveivitch Timchuk, its political commissar, he was favorably impressed with their work.

The 150 partisans were fond enough of Voronyansky to call him Uncle Vasya and themselves Uncle Vasya's boys.

"Dyadya Vasya, not a bad name," Vaupshashov chuckled, "Nice, even homey. But what about thinking up a new one? Something more aggressive." He was the man whose suggestions you followed lest you get a bullet in the head or a shovel job in Siberia.

"What do you suggest?" shuddered Timchuk.

"We already have a group called `People's Struggle.' You can become the 'People's Avengers.'"

"That's also a nice name," answered Voronyansky.

"Appropriate," agreed Timchuk. The fact that Timchuk—a man of outstanding courage and someone Vaupshashov liked—trembled in his presence was recorded by Vaupshashov himself, who apparently enjoyed his fearsome effect on people.

By accident, the name was perfect for the non-Jewish unit most friendly to Jews, for who had more need and reason for revenge than they?

Voronyansky, a regular army officer who'd been trapped behind German lines and helped set up the unit, seems to have been more of a technician responsible only for directing battlefield tactics. Timchuk, who combined considerable regular army experience with high status in the Communist party, seems to have been the real commander. From December 1942 to September 1943, he'd also head the underground party in a large area of Belarus.

Yet unlike most party bosses, Timchuk was never arrogant, greedy, or even cynical, never misused his power for ego or personal gain. He constantly reported corruption and incompetent commanders. And unlike Vaupshasov, Timchuk didn't get his kicks out of intimidating subordinates. He was a real believing, idealistic Communist. Certainly not handsome enough to be on a poster, he was nevertheless the self-sacrificing, modest kind of person who supposedly was the model of all a Soviet Communist should be.

Ironically, Timchuk looked more like a sandy-haired priest than a Communist commissar and military hero. He had a weak chin and his features seemed concentrated around his eyes, low full eyebrows, a Slavic nose so high as to lack a bridge, and he had a tiny moustache above the center of his upper lip. His receding hair made half his face seem to be forehead, Vaupshashov described this unusual collection of features as, "A big wise face and clever, little eyes."

Avraham Friedman of Dolhinov, Michael's cousin, is Timchuk's deputy, and Timchuk is particularly sympathetic toward Jews. Friedman who understandably worshipped his commander, wrote:

"He was very warm and loving and caring, and his warmth would be spread all around him. He was a good listener and quickly understood the motivations of people he met, and he had good analytical skills. First and foremost, the soldiers under him and the people above him respected him as a friend, not just a leader and I in my heart will always be filled with warmth and admiration for this man, Timchuk and all his missions to save people. Many people owe their lives to him."

This was especially true for many Jews, who he was not only willing to accept into his unit but also to make officers. The regimental doctor is Major Stcheglow, a Jew from Minsk, and its other doctor is Kotler from Dolhinov. Among its members, aside from the five Friedman brothers and several more cousins, were other Dolhinov Jews, with Avram Klorman, Yakov Ruderman, and Yigal Segalchik prominent among them.

This roster ensures the unit is not antisemitic, but that doesn't stop some of its soldiers and officers from mocking Jews or insisting they are not real fighters. Only Timchuk, a strict commander who fought against antisemitism, keeps them in line, ensuring the liberators don't murder or rob their supposed flock.

Indeed, even in the Avengers, the 33-year-old Shraga Solominski of Lida recalled, only by showing exemplary courage could the Jewish partisans try to refute:

"The libelous stories that were generally accepted, that Jews do not want to fight and that they avoid every military operation….In our presence no one dared badmouth the Jews. But the libelous stories did not decrease and despite our position in the regiment we felt isolated and orphaned. We were, after all, the sole survivors of each family….We knew that all that we had was gone forever. Although the will for revenge beat in our hearts and we proved our courage, it didn't have the ability to disseminate the atmosphere of suspicion and hatred.

"A deadly danger always accompanied the Jewish partisans. A Jewish warrior always needed to take double precaution: he needed to watch out not only for the Germans but also for the guns of his partisan friends who wanted to kill him. Dozens and hundreds of Jewish partisans were killed by their brothers in arms. It was an atmosphere of indifference to the lives of Jews, and most of the officers were also part of the anti-Semitic persecutions. This was due in large part to German propaganda that consistently declared that the war had erupted because of the Jews and that they were to blame for it. Even if the top officers wished it, they could not stop the murderous persecution of the Jews."[7]

Among the Avengers a special factor usually helped maintain strict discipline, the presence of the menacing secret policeman, Vaupshasov and his team. Yet his being in camp also means the unit enjoys Moscow's special favor. When it makes a request, attention is paid.

One morning at sunrise, just a week after Vaupshasov's arrival in early January 1942, he was awakened by the radio operator, Glushkov, shouting so excitedly that he can't get out all his words::

"Moscow has just informed….This night….Plane comes to us!"

Vaupshasov ordered, "Settle down, comrade!" He took the scrap of paper and read the message from Comrade Grigory in headquarters quickly. But Vapshasov was excited also. Now their battle could really begin. Quickly, he got dressed hurriedly and raced out of his tent. Everyone was still asleep. He headed straight for Voronyansky's tent. The commander was sleeping with his hand under the head, looking so peaceful and untroubled that even the iron-hard Vapshasov felt bad at awakening him.

Still, there was not a moment to lose in preparing, he shook Voronyansky:

"Vasily! Wakey! Good morning, Forest War Dog!." Voronyansky snapped awake and took the message from the colonel's hand. He smiled and said, "Good morning, Stanislav! You see, Moscow remembers us!" Then he leaped out of bed and dressed, as the two men discussed what to do next.

Quickly, they rounded up a group of partisans and NKVD men which would hurry to the village of Kreschanka to build a landing area. Vaupshasov gave his orders: "Be ready to leave in half an hour. Take ammunition and food for 2 days." The colonel was pleased with their quick response. The intelligence men scouted ahead as Vaupshasov, Voronyansky, and Timchuk led a group of 40 soldiers and 6 horses.

After a long but quick march, by noon they approached the village. Their peasant informants said no Germans were in the area. They'd chosen the drop zone carefully and cleverly as being at a place easy to guard and defend. On three sides it was surrounded by impassable swamps, on the fourth by a thick forest. A squad was sent off a mile away into the forest to ambush any Germans; another squad went into the village to make sure no one left to warn the enemy.

"Perfect!" exclaimed Vaupshasov's chief of staff, Captain Lunkov, "There are no Germans in the surrounding area. We'll put up our Moscow guests very nicely!"

In the evening, a milk-white fog enveloped the area. Bottles filled with kerosene, set out in the shape of an envelope, as headquarters had specified, to signal the plane could drop supplies. The soldiers awaited only Vaupshasov's order to set them alight.

Glushkov turned on his radio and put on earphones. After a half-hour, he received the message, decoded it and handed it to the colonel, "Are you ready to receive the plane? Gregory."

Vaupshasov wrote a reply: "We are ready and waiting for you." Glushkov put it into code and sent it. Everyone froze, tense, listening.

At midnight they heard airplane engines. Soldiers and officers exclaimed simultaneously, "Ours!"

"Light the fires!" ordered Vaupshasov. Men ran to do so. Immediately, the pilot saw the drop zone and started his descent, swung around and held his course right over their heads. Partisans enthusiastically pulled off their caps and waved them vigorously. Small white parachutes blossomed from the plane's rear door. After his pass, the pilot waggled his wings and flew back to the east.

One by one, the 12 cargo chutes landed. Even before they hit the ground, soldiers had doused the fires and then quickly cut the bags free. Two were loaded on each horse. After the euphoria of the successful airdrop the trip back to camp was tense, soldiers listening at every moment for the sound of German trucks or footsteps. They carefully circuited Kraysk with its German garrison.

By the time they got back to camp it was the middle of the night but not a single partisan was sleeping. As the convoy came in there was an excited murmur of greetings, and men rushed to reach out and touch each bag. Lunkov found a delivery list in one and they passed it around to increasing excitement: 300 pounds of explosive, automatic weapons, boxes of ammunition, extra radio batteries, tobacco, grenades, and even the latest newspapers! "Moscow," Vaupshasov concluded with satisfaction, "had sent us everything we needed."

Despite setbacks, the partisan forces steadily developed. On June 17, 1942, Vaupshasov organized a conference of officers from different units in the People's Avengers camp, and by September, the undisciplined bands had been reorganized into a full-fledged guerrilla force with propaganda, intelligence, communication, supply, medical, and even an aviation section. Its chief back in Moscow was P.K. Ponomarenko, who had been Communist party chief in Soviet-occupied eastern Poland before the German invasion.

They had began by attacking German supply lines, ambushing convoys and blowing up rail lines, or hitting small garrisons in towns, burning flour mills or other facilities used by the Germans. The Germans themselves began to go on the offensive against the partisans. But that's also what the Red Army wanted: to tie down enemy forces far behind the front line. As a result, in the summer of 1942, the Germans had to keep 25 divisions on rear-area duty plus 30 independent regiments and 100 battalions of police.

July 15, 1942, was a sweltering day in the People's Avengers camp. Vaupshasov, Voronyansky, and Timchuk were about to have lunch when, suddenly, the unit's intelligence chief Vladimir Romanov rode hurriedly into camp. He blurted out that 25 trucks full of German soldiers, perhaps 500 men, had just arrived in the village of Valentinovo, observed but not fired on by the partisan scouts. They were obviously drawn to the area by the Soviet airdrops.

This was serious news as the Germans were approaching across the partisans' escape route. To the unit's back was the river Ilya that formed Dolhinov's eastern border and had marked the prewar Polish-Soviet frontier. One officer was sent to get the whole camp mobilized; another to warn the neighboring partisan unit, Struggle, commanded by Sergey Dolhinov, a Byelorussian whose family carried the town name. Scouts were sent out with orders to watch the direction of the Germans but not fire. With both units plus a visiting Ukrainian platoon, Vaupshasov had only 278 men, another 100 or so were out on a mission.

Even worse news arrived by a runner coming from the scouts. Two convoys of SS units were advancing from the village. Did the Germans have informers who told them the camp's location or were they just moving blindly toward a place where planes had been seen? The officers held a quick council of war.

Major Voronyansky, who took over command during battles, yelled: "Man the defenses!" The Ukrainians were put on the left flank, commanded by Lieutenant Tsigankov; with the People's Avengers and NKVD men in the center, and the Struggle unit on the right. Just then, another runner arrived to report the Germans were heading straight toward the partisans. "Let them come as close as possible," Voronyansky ordered, and messengers spread the word.

Nearer and nearer advanced the German soldiers from the partisans' left, armed with both rifles and light machineguns, walking steadily forward in a long line. The partisans could see their new uniforms with swastikas on the sleeves. The partisans remained silent. Then they spotted the second enemy force approaching from the right. Voronyansky whispered to the colonel: "They plan to encircle us." He shifted his forces, sending the elite NKVD troops to strengthen the left flank.

Now both German forces were just 25 yards away. Suddenly, Vorinyansky yelled: "For our Motherland! Fire! Get those fascist beasts!" Immediately, the partisan force erupted in gunfire, every rifle and machinegun opened up, and the Struggle unit's mortar launcher fired at point-blank range.

Voronyansky's next order was one the partisans weren't used to hearing: "Don't worry about ammunition!"

Clearly, the Germans were not expecting to fall into this trap. Their line stopped and wavered as holes were torn into it. "Fire!" Voronyansky shouted again. The smoke was so thick nothing could be seen, but when a wind cleared it off for a moment, the partisans saw a number of German dead and the rest hiding behind bushes and firing back.

Suddenly, guns on the right flank went silent. Vorinyansky was concerned, perhaps he never fully trusted the Ukrainians and thought they might change sides. But just then a messenger ran in from that unit, "We're advancing to cut off the Germans from behind," he said quickly, all in one breath, and ran back.

The Germans were now overcoming their shock and putting up a spirited fire, they crawled forward while the partisans tried to press themselves into the ground. Suddenly, again all went silent. The Germans had risen to their feet to charge. Voronyansky, who'd gone to check on

the left flank, ran back as fast as he could to the command post, sweating profusely. “Let’s make things lively for them!” he shouted.

The Germans, firing as they ran, were only forty paces away. “Grenades!” yelled Voronyansky over the sound of battle. At that moment, Vaupshasov saw something behind the German advancing line: the Ukrainian partisans were in position. They hid behind pine trees and started shooting into the Germans’ backs. Panicked, the Nazis turned, just as the Avengers threw their grenades. With so much smoke in the air, nothing could be seen.

On the right flank, one of the captains stood up and shouted, “For the Motherland! Charge!” The Germans fell back, firing from behind any cover they could find. The battle raged for 90 minutes, and the Germans began firing flares. Vaupshasov pulled on Voronyansky’s sleeve: “They’re calling for reinforcements,” he said, pointing at the rockets.

“We better fall back,” the major replied, “What do you think?”

Just then, Captain Dolhinov arrived, covered with mud. “Do you have wounded?” he said through parched lips.

Voronyansky shook his head.

“Damn it! I have four.” Luckily they all could walk.

They agreed to drop back as more Germans would be arriving soon. Moving into the camp, they found four dead Germans near the kitchen where they had almost succeeded in infiltrating behind the partisan lines. The only man missing was the unit’s cook, Sapanov, who might have been killed before the skirmishers were wiped out.

Though the battle had gone well so far, they were in trouble. Behind them was the Ilya river’s muddy banks covered with thick nettles. They huddled around a map briefly. It was obvious they had no choice. Messengers were sent to warn units away from the camp on missions that they shouldn’t return but rather meet up in a forest near the village of Rudni. The sky was getting dark, covering the retreat.

With each step, the mud sucked down their shoes; their clothes, splashed with mud and water, became wet and heavy. Nettles collided with their faces and cut their hands. Dolhinov’s men led the way, followed by the NKVD hauling the wounded, next the Ukrainians and last the Avengers as rearguard. Finally, they got across the river and kept going for an hour when, exhausted, they halted to rest. There was no sign of pursuit.

“Quick, set up the radio,” Vaupshasov ordered. When all was ready he had the operator send Moscow an emergency message: "Today we can't receive a plane. At the landing area we had a battle with Germans. No one is killed. We have a few wounded. Wait for further reports."

An answer came in a few minutes: “Protect your forces. We won't send any more planes until your request." That night they regrouped in a thick forest just southwest of Dolhinov. The scattered forces arrived, even bringing in the cook, the only Peoples’ Avengers’ soldier wounded but who had survived the attack on his kitchen. Quickly, they sent out scouts to talk to the peasants, who reported the Germans were staying in the villages and not venturing out. One old man told them the Germans were claiming 100 partisans had been killed but no one believed them as there were plenty of German, but no partisan, bodies.

Once again, a military council was held, in the dark since they dared not light a fire. Voronyansky suggested that the next afternoon, when the Germans were still resting, then find a weak point and fight through the encirclement. They caught the Germans off-guard, then the partisan forces split to escape with the NKVD, Avengers, and Struggle units heading off in different directions. Later, the partisans claimed to have inflicted about 120 casualties on the

Germans in the two battles, compared to almost no losses for themselves. While that tally seems an exaggeration, the fighting certainly ended with a clear partisan success.

Timchuk's past connection with Dolhinov and the number of his soldiers from that town made his thoughts turn toward it repeatedly. Eidel Shinuk was one of those who'd worked with Timchuk at the fox farm and when the strong young man escaped the Dolhinov ghetto after the first massacre, Timchuk immediately took him into the unit. Eidel had studied to be a technician and had been outside Dolhinov when the Germans arrived that day.

Taking advantage of Eidel's absence, his younger, 17-year-old brother David survived by pretending to be Eidel, whose job skills put him on the Germans' no-kill list. Some Christians from the town complained that David was the son of a Soviet official and should be killed but since they didn't speak German the soldiers ignored them.

Courageously, Eidel repeatedly went into Dolhinov on missions to obtain information from Maslovsky, the Polish policeman who was helping the partisans. A mission to get boots for the partisans took him to the town the night before the second massacre. At dawn, the ghetto was surrounded and Eidel was trapped. David hid in one place; Eidel concealed himself under a pile of firewood. A neighbor led the Germans to Eidel's hiding place and they killed him on the spot. When David emerged after the massacre, all he could find was his brother's decapitated head, his hat still on it. After burying what remained of his brother, David was among those who want to join the partisan unit his brother had served.[8]

Two days later, in early May 1942, the People's Avengers decided to attack Dolhinov itself. It was no mere matter of revenge but now with well-informed townspeople able to act as guides, this seemed to be a sensible choice for the unit's first big operation. Avraham Friedman, his cousin Mitzia Friedman, and a few others were sent back into the town as scouts.

The best-informed surviving Jew there was Mulka Kuritsky, a skilled electrician spared by the Germans who frequently worked in the police station and army offices. The Friedmans met him that night at the safest place possible: the home of the friendly policeman, Maslovsky. There they sat over tea, Kuritsky drawing a precise map of the German headquarters with a list of weapons and the positions of the soldiers and police.

Friedman distracted Maslovsky so he wouldn't realize the implications of Kuritsky's labors. But Friedman had no desire to betray his old friend, who soon he might be shooting at otherwise. He urged Maslovsky to desert the police and join him in the forest. In the middle of the conversation there was a knock on the door. The three men froze.

But while Friedman and Kuritsky rushed to hide as best they could, Maslovsky answered the door. It was a messenger calling him urgently to report to the police station. He promised to follow quickly. Closing the front door, Maslovsky turned to his two guests who'd heard everything. Hurriedly, he promised Friedman that as soon as he'd finished at the station, he'd ride his bicycle into the forest to meet him, perhaps to join the partisans.

The two Jews left hurriedly; Maslovsky went off to his duties. Friedman waited for him a the rendez-vous as long as possible but Maslovsky didn't arrive. The two friends never saw each other again. Friedman later attributed this interruption to an alert, that the Germans knew an attack was imminent, though not about Maslovsky's spying activities.

For the 21 Jews from Dolhinov who participated in the attack on their own home town, it was—despite all that they'd been through—one of the strangest experiences of their lives. Here they were, returned as soldiers only 48 hours after helplessly fleeing for their lives, furtively pacing past the houses where they'd been born and lived, places they'd worked every day. Their

dreams had been, at least partly, fulfilled. They were returning as liberators, but who could believe it all might have happened so fast?

At first the plan went well. The five platoons met a half-mile outside Dolhinov. At 11 pm they cut down the telephone poles. Each entered town at a different place, travelling down Kriviczi, Vileika, Dokshitz, Viliya, and Budslav streets. But the element of surprise was lost. Had the Germans heard their plans from spies, or merely heard the sound of partisans chopping down the telephone poles? More probably the latter, for while they organized a more effective defense than if they'd been taken by surprise, the Germans had certainly not organized a trap.

Moshe Forman and Sigalchik were assigned to the platoon whose objective was capturing the police station. The squad snuck into position and grenades were thrown through the windows, their explosions meant to kill the police inside. But when the partisans stormed in, they found the building empty. It was clear the police had left fast, as shown by hats, clothes, and shoes strewn over the floor. Left behind, however, was a treasure 14 good German rifles, including the one broken over Sigalchik's head by a policeman beating him two weeks earlier. Among all the Dolhinov Jews acting as scouts, only Sigalchik was armed, and even he only had a pistol. They grabbed the guns and ran out.

The town was filled with gunfire. The police, including Maslovsky, warned ahead of time, had run to the German stronghold at the house of the Sadowsky family, headed by the town's Polish doctor, who the Soviets had deported to Siberia. The 11-man German army communication's unit combined with about 15 police was holding out there. Since they had automatic weapons, their little fortress was impregnable.

When the partisan platoon arrived to capture the house, the Germans had fired flares, lighting up the area, and opened fire. Units tried to attack the house but were beaten off, with three men being killed. Mistakenly thinking that the house had already been captured, Sigalchik's over-eager platoon commander fell dead at Sigalchik's feet along with the unit's sniper. Since the partisans were already short on ammunition, a retreat was ordered.

The inexperienced partisans had failed due to poor organization and bad communications among units. They'd also learned that the element of surprise was all important and that they could not win without sufficient ammunition. On the positive side, they now had fourteen more rifles, two of which went to Sigalchik and Abraham Friedman. The 21 Dolhinov Jews who participated were all now officially inducted into the ranks of the People's Avengers.

When the men reassembled far away after the battle, Voronyansky made a speech: "The enemy's agents now know we've received weapons from Moscow and are going to launch an offensive against us," he explained. "We must immediately disappear from this area. We're not yet ready for full-scale battles with the enemy. But if we do encounter enemy forces, you must all listen to your officers and not retreat in panic. I am sure we'll all work together as one brave unit, fighting alongside one another, shoulder to shoulder, until the last bullet."

After pulling out of the Dolhinov area, reassembling, and resting, the People's Avengers were ready for their next mission, aware now, however, that their strength lay in ambushes rather than frontal assaults to seize control of towns.

Sigalchik was assigned to a squad headed by Vlodia Kavilin, a Red Army officer who'd escaped a prisoner camp and formed his own guerrilla force before joining the People's Avengers. He was a fearless and energetic fighter despite being a heavy drinker, which may be why he was given such a lowly position. Like his commander, Timchuk, though, Kavilin had reason to feel good about having Jewish soldiers in his unit. He'd only escaped the Germans with

help from the Solominsky family of Ilya, one of whose sons now was fighting with the People's Avengers.

A week later, Kavilin lined up the squad and checked their weapons. Then with no further ado they set off on a more modest mission, better attuned to the partisans' capabilities. In a village there was a lumber mill worked by the German army. Big trucks came and went along the single road into the place. After a reconnaissance, the squad set up an ambush on a small hill. For two hours they waited tensely, hands burning from holding weapons tightly. Finally, at around 8 pm, they could hear the motors of some trucks which soon appeared, loaded with boards and with guards seated on the cargo.

The partisans open fire and killed the driver and guards before anyone had time to shoot back. A second truck came up behind, slowly, its motor's sound having kept those aboard from hearing the gunfire. Seeing the other truck wrecked across the road, it screeched to a halt, but too late to escape the same deadly barrage. Germans lay dead, in the cabin, sprawled over the unevenly piled lumber, draped over the sides, and fallen onto the road.

Quickly, the partisans ran up to the trucks. Within fifteen minutes they'd grabbed all the weapons and food, even stripping the dead of uniforms and—most valuable of all for the badly equipped partisans—good boots. The trucks were set on fire and the partisans set off, each laden with about 65 pounds of loot. As they passed through three villages on the way back to base they displayed their trophies to the peasants as a way of proving that the partisans could fight and win.

Back at the People's Avenger's camp, Kavilin dramatically jumped to attention, saluted Voronyansky and shouted, "Commander, your order was carried out. We burned two big trucks full of supplies and we killed nine Germans. We took 15 rifles, 10 pistols, 940 bullets, 15 pairs of boots, and 19 backpacks full of other supplies."

The People's Avengers were in business. Within a month, Sigalchik was leading the attack on the German military railroad as a full-fledged partisan.

But Segalchik and Avraham Friedman hadn't forgotten the need to rescue more of their people. Friedman had brothers and a sister in Postov. Sigalchik's wife and daughter were still stuck in the small shtetl of Myadel, where they had all lived together during the year before the war began. Myadel was said to have the most beautiful location in Belarus, isolated amidst pristine forests and on the shore of Lake Narotch. It was one of the last towns in eastern Poland where Jews were still alive.

In November 1942, Segalchik and Friedman asked Timchuk for permission to go to Myadel and other nearby towns to rescue relatives and, for the good of the brigade, bring back badly needed food supplies. Timchuk thought the mission risky but when he realized they were determined agreed as long as they would be back within three days. With them went Michael Friedman and the "Estonchik" Blechmann. They each took one pistol and a total of four hand grenades and set off on foot. Three days later, they rested in a village near Dolhinov and sent a local farmer to Myadel to find out if Segalchik's in-laws, wife, and daughter were still alive. It took two days for him to return.

Let's stop here with them in the village of Bakunik and ponder this a moment. Here is Segalchik who, just three years ago stood under the wedding canopy, envisioning a quiet life of hard work and happiness with his bride. A year later they have a little baby girl. And then the world conflagrates. He sees brutality and death, the town rabbi torn to pieces by German attack dogs, two dozen of his friends and acquaintances machinegunned before his eyes; travels hundreds of miles, almost all on foot, throughout eastern Poland; is a fugitive crouching in a little

hole in the ground listening to the sounds of massacre outside; his shoes crunching through the snow in flight, shivering through winter nights unprotected in the forest; thrown into jail with a death sentence due to be carried out the next day, flight and concealment again; breaking three times through the ghetto fence, and months of deadly combat.

And now he sits in a peasant hut waiting to hear word as to whether his wife and little girl are alive or have been slaughtered.

What goes through a man's mind in such circumstances?

In this case, at least, the judgment is favorable. The farmer arrives back and tells him that his little family still lives.

He and his three friends don't hesitate a moment. They pick up their packs and get out the door fast, back on the road to Myadel. But there's a slight unexpected detour.

When they arrive in a farmers' house near Zari, peasants flock there to complain, asking the partisans for justice. Bandits are roving the area, pretending to be partisans but robbing people instead. But Sigalchik's in an understandble hurry to get to Myadel and brushes them off. Fate, however, intervenes. Through the Malishka forest the four partisans pace, single-file, weapons ready to use at any moment. Suddenly, they practically collide with two men who are too careless, not spotting until after they're spotted. The partisans get within five yards of them.

"Stop!" orders Sigalchik. "Hands up!" The two men wisely comply.

"Do you have any weapons?"

"No," they respond.

"Michael, frisk them," commands Sigalchik. There's a loud metallic clack as metal hits the forest floor. One of the men had dropped a small pistol to avoid its being discovered in his pocket. Freedman found nothing else suspicious.

'Who are you and what are you doing in the middle of the forest?"

"We're looking for partisans. We want to join up."

"And what are your names?"

One of them said he was Mleczko from Dolhinov.

From Dolhinov! Segalchik was startled. Looking closer, he realized he knew this man. Mleczko was a criminal and German collaborator in killing several Jews there. But he didn't recognize Segalchik, who hadn't been living there for much of the last four years. Not letting on what he knew, Segalchik ordered them to come with his group and took them back to the farmhouse where they rested the previous night.

When they knocked on the door at 2am, the half-asleep farmer, was surprised to see Segalchik back, but positively startled to see him with Mlezko. Segalchik asked, "Do you know these men?"

After a moment's hesitation, he said yes. These two had been demanding money from the farmers, including him, threatening to burn down their houses otherwise. Segalchik took out the captured pistol, "Have you seen this gun before?"

Certainly, the farmer responded. The last time he'd seen it that pistol had been pointed at his chest by these two bandits.

Segalchik and his men discussed what to do, but they never had any doubt. They wrote down the farmer's testimony and that of his family, also roused from bed for that purpose. Then they marched the two men into the forest, shot them dead at close range, and pinned the reports on their bodies.

And with that they returned to the road. As they approached Myadel, Sigalchik asked friendly farmers what was going on in the town and ghetto. The two Friedmans went off to Postov, to rescue Jews there. Next, Sigalchik sent a farmer friend's wife into town with a note telling his wife that he'd be waiting that evening in the Nivisolki cemetery on the town's edge to take their daughter, and her own family to freedom.

Some hours later the woman returned with a message from his wife. Their daughter was sick and she didn't want to leave her, but her own father insisted she take this opportunity and promised to take good care of the baby until they could all be saved. Segalchik was saddened by the news but determined to do go on with his plan.

Around 8 pm as he crouched near the road, he suddenly saw a shadow. Sigalchik knew he should be cautious but couldn't contain himself. "Batya!" he yelled out. His wife ran toward him and the hugged and kissed. It was so that in those days of woe two people could never assume they'd ever meet again on this earth.

Almost 20 people also escaped from the Postov ghetto, including three of Friedman's brothers, his sister and her husband. In the dark, they'd missed Avraham, who was waiting for them, but had nonetheless made their way to safety. All of the Friedman brothers and cousins would become partisan fighters; two of them would die in battle.

In early October 1942, Sigalchik returned to Myadel with Timchuk's permission, sent a letter the same route to his father-in-law, urging him to organize all the Jews in the ghetto to escape. There were 144 in all, many of them either elderly or children since so many of the young people had already been slain. One group would meet him outside town, a second would be hide in the marshlands and among friendly peasants to be evacuated later, and the third group would be entrusted to Blechmann to lead out.

On a rainy, dark night, he went with Michael Friedman to guide out the first group. But halfway to the meeting place he heard sounds many people walking who were not used to keeping the quiet required by soldiers. He yelled out the name of his brother-in-law, Zelig, who he knew would be at the head of the column. Zelig ran to him, they embraced, and he took them to safety.

But there was to be a harrowing reminder that despite the easy rescue of Zelig's group, such happy results could not be taken for granted. Blechmann's group of about 50 people outdistanced any pursuers but after two days of walking the refugees,--already ill-fed, exhausted, and slowed down by their children—begged for a rest. Blechmann knew there were no Germans in the area and so agreed. They were on the very banks of the Vilya river and near safety. So he let down his guard, failing to post proper lookouts.

Their luck might have held but evil came upon them that day in the form of Jan Ruzietski, a local shepherd who saw them, jumped on his horse and ran to tell the Germans that there were Jews about.

Why did he do it? Hatred of Jews or hope of reward? Whatever the mix of motives, he did what he did. The Dolhinov German garrison ran to the spot, surprised the refugees, and killed about 28 of them. The rest, including Blechmann, fled and arrived back at the partisan camp. Not only had Ruzietski seen the Jews, however, but he was seen by some of the villagers mounting his horse and racing away to Dolhinov. In time, there would be a terrible vengeance—Sigalchik did not forget or forgive--but that would have to wait until later in the war.[9]

Sigalchik's abilities were remembered by the officers and Myadel itself was not forgotten either. On the evening of October 31, 1942, Sigalchik was called to brigade headquarters.

Standing before all the unit's top officers, he received news that couldn't have been more welcome. Colonel Sokolov announced that the brigade had decided to form an exclusively Jewish platoon that he would command. The Jewish refugees who had escaped from Dolhinov, Glebokie and other towns had a total of eight rifles, three of which needed to be repaired. They were given ten more.

Bursting with enthusiasm, he walked as fast as he could toward where the men were camped, making a mental list as he went on who he would recruit. He pulled together eighteen relatively recent arrivals, got them into military formation and marched them back to headquarters. An officer called the name of each soldier who snapped to attention and received a rifle. The commanders added ten names of more veteran soldiers, Jewish Red Army men who'd escaped capture or prisoner-of-war camps.

After the ceremony, Sigalchik was asked to return to headquarters alone. Then he was given the second remarkable news of that evening. The next day, November 1, 1942, he would lead his platoon including many soldiers from his hometown, Dolhinov, as part of the People's Avenger's attack on his former residence, Myadel.

Timchuk had come up with the idea for this all-Jewish platoon and its deployment in an immediate attack as part of a wider plan, even though it was totally at odds with his party's philosophy. Jews were simply not recognized as a nationality and, of course, the Communists did not accept religion as a basis for organization. Such an action could never have been approved by partisan headquarters and no doubt Timchuk never asked for permission.

While the fact that Timchuk wasn't a Jew himself shielded him to some extent from possible persecution as a Jewish "nationalist" or "chauvinist," the Stalinist system had done stranger things. He was taking a risk that required real courage. Yet such was the respect in which he was held, that no one back at headquarters ever raised such questions.

His immediate motive was clear. He knew that a lot of his soldiers were antisemites, and he knew what the Nazis were doing to the Jews—including people who were his personal friends. Timchuk wanted to break the prejudice of his own forces and to make full use of the skills and high motivation of the Jewish soldiers and civilian support workers.

Years later, looking back on the Miyadel attack, he would explain his plan in his own words:

"[Many partisans] said that Jews did not fight. In fact, their unit had the best discipline….Five minutes after the signal to attack the Jewish unit was inside the town. ...We freed many Jews on that day and killed many German soldiers and policemen. We burnt down their barracks and took their weapons and ammunition. I always said that a crowd without a leader in nothing. And our fight at Myadel proved it. After that several commanders asked me to give them some Jewish partisans to strengthen fighting spirit in their units."

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In effect, though no one spoke of ranks, Sigalchik was being commissioned as lieutenant and platoon commander. His sergeants were Dmitry Friedman and Yakov Blechmann, and his corporals were Michael Friedman, just 22 years old, and Moshe Rogovin. These were men in whom Timchuk had great faith, and three of the five were personal friends as well.

Blechmann, the Estonia-born escaped prisoner of war, was described by Timcuk as "a very brave young man" who succeeded in every task. The Friedman brothers had worked for Timchuk on the fox farm before the German invasion, and were brothers of his trusted aide

Avraham Friedman. As for Michael Friedman, Sigalchik's close friend, Timchuk saw him as the ideal scout, "He was fearless. He could enter any German-held town, talk to the people there, and report back to us."

Rogovin, too, had performed remarkable deeds. In December 1941, he organized a group of seven young Jews from his shtetl and taken them into forest. He then attacked the town, killing nine police and taking six more with him as recruits, presumably having talked them into defecting beforehand and they had helped in the attack. In the following weeks, he added 28 local Byelorussians to form his own partisan group before merging it into Timchuk's command.

Sigalchik and the others were excited. Not only were they being given a chance to prove themselves as both commanders and soldiers; not only were they going to have the chance for revenge on the Germans and their collaborators, not only had they found non-Jews prepared to treat them as human beings, but they were also going to have the chance to liberate some of their own people. For Sigalchik this was literally true since his wife's family came from the town, he had lived there himself, and already had organized one liberation operation of his own.

And yet there is a something about the attack on Myadel which reminds us of the enormous gap that still remained between Jews and Soviets. History books say or imply that the attack was staged to free the town's Jews. That is not quite so. The two main factors which brought about the operation were the hope of capturing military equipment and the expectation that the enemy would be caught by surprise since partisans hadn't operated in that area before.

According to Sigalchik and the other Jewish participants—the non-Jews, except for Timchuk, left no records of it and he says nothing on this issue—even then when almost all the Jews under German control had been murdered, even the People's Avengers command—the most favorable toward Jews of all the non-Jewish partisans--put not even a low priority on saving the rest. The orders were this: only a small group of Jews useful to the unit, including the town's doctor and dentist, were to be rescued. The rest were to be left to their unquestionably fatal fates.

On the night of October 31, Sigalchik was too happy and excited to think about this, or perhaps it was part of his calculations. Clearly, he was a man who knew when not to obey orders. He later wrote of his feelings that evening, "I swore to myself that my unit would be a symbol and example of loyal fighters for all Soviet partisans." But he had his own idea of what he would do to prove himself such a symbol and example, and Sigalchik also knew—quite properly—to whom he had to be most loyal.

The night has passed, though how much sleep the Jewish partisans had in those hours is doubtful, and a new day arose, passing in its own turn. It's now nine pm on the gathering night of November 1, 1942. The People's Avengers rose from their places and moved into formation. Three companies left camp and came to a ford across the Vilya river, whose waters continued southward toward Dolhinov. "Undress," came the order. Holding clothes and weapons above their heads, shivering in the November chill, they waded the cold river. Then they quickly dressed and ran a half-mile to warm up. Through the trees they marched, to the scenic town of Myadel, isolated amidst glittering lakes and dense forests, at midnight.

Within sight of the town they stopped to rest for a while as the officers made their final attack plan, using a detailed map of the town and its defenses provided by scouts.

Here were their orders:

The three platoons of Company A, commanded by Captain Sashka from Rozkov and guided by Sigalchik, whose Jewish platoon was part of it, would sneak in through the Niviolsky

Cemetery, silence the guard position there, and sneak up on the police station which was located in a two-story house without firing a shot. There they would wait for Company B to come up into position.

Company B would follow and surround a two-story house where the Lithuanian security police lived. And to show how personal this all was, that had been the home of the Alperovitz family, which was well-represented in the ranks of the People's Avengers. This was a very personal war.

And Company C, commanded by Captain Markov, would deploy five miles outside town to guard the road and block any German reinforcements which came in response to the attack. Markov was new to his post and so, though well-regarded, was given the less-challenging assignment.

Sashka called for volunteers. Shraga Solominski and Chaim Riar, two of the Jewish partisans, and a Byelorussian soldier stepped forward. Their job would be to take out the guard.[10] They were given guns with silencers. Under cover of the darkness and walking single file, with Solominski in the lead, they snuck up on the lone guard, patrolling the road as it entered town, getting very close. Solominski carefully took aim and shot him once, the home-made silencer muffled the noise. The man collapsed and the partisans leaped on him. As he moaned in pain, Solominski hit him hard with his rifle butt. One of the others ran back to say the guard was eliminated and the command was given, "Advance!"

Stealthily, Company A moved forward following Segalchik's platoon, which included Solominski, and Boris Kuzinitz. The town was very quiet. Not even a dog barked. Then a few scattered shots rang out from the Lithuanian security police who'd detected Company B's presence. The partisans opened up with everything they had. The barks of rifles, pistols, machineguns, and the boom of an occasional grenade split the air. The panicked police, many of them still in pajamas, took refuge in a church near the ghetto gates from which they continued shooting.

At the police station, those inside started shooting at Company A which opened up in response. A German soldier tried to run into the station for cover and Sigalchik shot him dead. Then a messenger arrived and said that Sigalchik's platoon must hurry to Company B's help bringing anything flammable they could find. Coming from an unexpected direction, they could set the church and policemen's house on fire, forcing the Germans and Lithuanians out of their strongholds.

Sigalchik reacted quickly. He sent Friedman with a few men to a field to get bales of hay and fifteen minutes later they had set the police's residence on fire. The Germans climbed to the top of the church steeple and were firing down on Friedman, so Sigalchik's unit directed its own fire to pin down the men in the tower while Kuzinitz; the 20-year-old Yitzhak Radoshkivitz, still another partisan from Dolhinov; and two other men placed hay around the church and set the bales ablaze.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Sigalchik took some men into the German army clinic, grabbed all the medicine and supplies they could, and set it ablaze. The houses and church were now burning brightly, and Sigalchik got back into position. As the enemy soldiers ran out the partisans shot them down.

But the police station was still holding out. It was a sturdy building of cinder blocks with a tile roof. The police were shooting from every window. Company B tried to charge the building with grenades but three of its men were killed and they had to fall back. For two hours,

they besieged the building but it was now 10 in the morning. The partisans knew the garrison had called for reinforcements and it wouldn't be long before they arrived. Suddenly, they heard the daunting sound of vehicles approaching.

Company C, guarding the road, had ambushed the reinforcements, knocking out their first tank. But the relief force was too big and it had to pull back. They send word of the approaching German force to Major Sokolov, commanding the operation in Myadel, and he ordered a withdrawal. This was Segalchik's moment of decision.

He turned to Friedman and asked about the ghetto. There were still about 90 people there, about 15 families the Germans had been keeping alive as specialists. Sigalchik knew they wouldn't have much longer to live. Among them were his widowed sister-in-law. Sigalchik had seen her husband gunned down by the Germans shortly before they'd arrived. As he later wrote, "I didn't ask for anyone's permission" but ran off to the ghetto with several men from his platoon.

Siglachik led his men at a run to the barbed wire and wooden fence around the ghetto and broke through with their rifles. Sigalchik ran to one house and broke in the window with his rifle, yelling in Yiddish, "What are you standing here for? Do you wish to die without trying to save yourself? Pretty soon they'll come here and slaughter you like sheep!"

Looking inside, he saw people—some of whom he knew personally—lying on the floor, "Get up! Run for your lives!" he yelled. "Run through the cemetery to the marshes of Yarmuling." The Jews got up and ran.

Kuzinitz knocked on the window of another house but no one answered until he yelled out in Yiddish. Someone opened the window and Kuzinitz told him that Jewish partisans were rescuing them and would take them to safety. All the inhabitants came out and followed him.

But Solominski ran into problems at the third. "Quickly," he told the startled Jews awakened by this stranger armed with a rifle, "Come with us. Escape to the forest." To Solominski's amazement, nobody moved. "Why are you running us to the forest to die of starvation," said one man. Another insisted, "Nobody should leave the ghetto! Our lives were secured until your invasion. We won't go!"

Their reaction eerily echoed Exodus 16:3, when those so long enslaved in the land of Egypt complained to Moses, 'Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

And indeed, though the Germans had reduced them to slavery for only a little over a year, the traditional strategy of passivity and avoidance to ward off external threats had asserted itself. That had indeed been successful for centuries, but it would not save them in the twentieth, that most bestial of all to date. Even Solominski, on reflection, called up a classical quotation from Jewish tradition, the local people's belief that "this, too, will pass and they [the Germans], too, will perish."

But at that moment, he was astounded and couldn't believe his own ears! Was it possible that these Jews didn't know their fate if they stayed? The Germans had fooled them, of course, with lies and promises, and then there was the innate wishful thinking—magnified in Jews by so little power and so much suffering over centuries—of human beings not wanting to face 'the disaster staring them in the face.

Then, too, they did have reasons for fearing the forest: the rapacity of some partisans, the robbers, deprivations, likelihood their children wouldn't survive cold or hunger, and the chance

of death in battle. If the Germans had not been bent on total extermination, their preference to stay—and possibly die—in their homes and among their families might have been the right one.

But with gunfire blazing and bullets ricocheting, there wasn't time for debate. Aside from the mere seconds still possible for escape and his determination to save lives, Solominski knew he could never explain to partisan comrades that they'd risked their lives only to be rebuffed. He begged those in the house to move fast, "The Germans won't let you live! If you don't leave the ghetto immediately your fate will be that of the Jews in other towns."

That still didn't work. Finally, he lost his temper and shouted: "We must clear the ghetto quickly and burn its houses. If you don't leave of your own free will we'll burn the houses on top of you. Go to the forest, and there we'll help you!"

Only then, did the Jews in the room move, grabbing such possessions as they could carry. And as they went outside, to be led by some partisans toward the forest, others set the decrepit houses on fire. It wasn't a moment too soon. German reinforcements came down the road, firing as fast as they could. The order was given for the partisans to retreat, taking with them not only the escaped Jews but also a pleasing haul of military equipment and medical supplies. For his part, Solominski took a pair of new boots off a dead German.

The battle was over and the People's Avengers, who could count it a victory, made their escape. Company B had lost five dead, one of them a Jewish refugee from Minsk, and thirteen wounded. The rest were unscathed. German casualties were estimated, perhaps slightly too high, at around 33.

But Sigalchik wasn't finished yet. Happy about saving 90 lives, he suddenly realized that on his way out of town he had just passed the house of the half Polish, half Lithuanian Litov family. They had been among the fiercest persecutors of the town's Jews. Sigalchik remembered when 22 young people, including his brother-in-law, plus the rabbi had been murdered how Mrs. Litov had run through the streets yelling, "Now the day of revenge on the Jews has come! Let's kill them all so they won't contaminate the town!"

Full of anger, he turned around and went back to the house. He yelled in Polish for her to open the door. Thinking it was one of the policemen seeking cover, she did so. Sigalchik shot her down in the doorway. Her blood formed a large pool on the steps. He then turned and ran to join the rest of his men. Later, since she'd been so helpful to them, the Germans sent her in an ambulance along with their own wounded and she survived her wounds.

As the partisans and the Jews from the ghetto ran out of town, German snipers on the roofs wounded some of the partisans and Jewish civilians. The dentist's wife, hit in the leg, couldn't go on. Two partisans lifted her up and carried her on their shoulders. Everyone dashed to the tree line as fast as they could and then kept going. There is an art to running in a Russian forest, which can feel something like being the little steel sphere in a pinball game. Trees and roots bunch so close together that it's hard to work up a good pace. One needs to do as much sideways dodging as forward progress, like a boxer bobbing and weaving.

But the woods were a welcome home for the partisans, whose best defense was German reluctance to go deep into the unwelcoming forest where they might easily be ambushed, as had happened in the earlier big battle between them and the People's Avengers. They couldn't take their trucks, tanks, half-tracks, or artillery there. Moreover, these were not usually front-line troops but support regiments or mercenary militias not eager to give up their lives for the Fatherland. Knowing this, partisans knew they were far more secure under branches than in the open.

But that advantage only applied deep in the forest and the Avengers, with refugees in tow, hurried to get as far as possible as fast as possible. Finally, they arrived at a friendly village, grabbed a wagon, and lay the wounded woman down on the flatbed, quickly resuming their trek back to camp.

The soldiers trudged forward, putting one foot in front of the other; the wagon wheels turned, creaking. Three locally recruited Byelorussian partisans began grumbling: "Why should we, returning tired from a military operation have to walk on foot," they said, "while the zidovka—a derogatory word for Jewess—gets to go on a wagon." The fact that she was a civilian, a woman, was wounded did not matter to them. For these soldiers of the Soviet Union, nominally of the anti-fascist cause, a Jew was still a Jew.

They ignored Solominski's pleas that she was wounded and couldn't walk, pulled her down, and climbed aboard themselves. Solominski later recalled, "We of course could do nothing but carry her all the way to the base."

But why couldn't they do anything? Was there no officer there, or at least one who would help? Was Solominski afraid that if he complained they'd just shoot him? Clearly, he was ashamed at his powerlessness. Even after having proven himself in battle he was still a second-class citizen. "It was as if someone slapped my face hard," he explained.

The Jews had seen both personally in their own life-times and collectively over centuries that turning the other cheek had ensured survival without making them respected or causing mistreatment to cease. Jewish partisans still had a lot in common psychologically—and they knew it—with the townspeople who preferred to be at the Germans' mercy than to rebel. And in both cases, these responses were conditioned because they understood their own weakness and the unwillingness of the majority around them to help.

As soon as they got back to base, Solominski protested to an officer, demanding the three men be put on trial. The officer said he was helpless to do anything, "Partisans will be partisans, what is one to do?" Solominski did not dare criticize such passivity. So like all Jews who had seen their demand for humanitarian behavior fail, he tried to appeal to the officers' sense of self-interest. If such soldiers weren't disciplined, he argued, they'd soon disobey orders or desert. The officer didn't answer. Solominski had no other recourse.

That's not the end of this story, though, by a long shot. A few days later, the three troublemakers did indeed desert. They set up a hideout from which they raided villages robbing, killing and raping. They were captured, court-martialed, and sentenced to death. Solominski had the pleasure of commanding the firing squad.

Lest this seem an unalloyed victory for justice, however, the suffering of the hapless dentist's wife was not at an end. While living in the family camp, she was raped by partisans who not only infected her with venereal disease but then accused her of infecting them. Only a strong and risky fight by Jewish partisans cleared her and resulted in the culprits' punishment.

Such was life, and death, in wartime Belarus.

As the months passed, the People's Avengers had been through many operations, ambushes and raids against the railroad, bridges, convoys, and German outposts. It built up a strong intelligence and supply network among Polish and Byelorussian farmers. But the Germans had just as many or more collaborators, including armed militias raised in each town. When catching someone helping partisans, the Germans would kill his whole family. In contrast, the partisans only killed those directly involved in spying or killing.

The People's Avengers also tried to figure out ways to take advantage of the German intelligence system. One was to send a few men through villages at night making noise and pretending to be a large unit in order to divert the enemy's attention from an attack taking place elsewhere. Informers then ran to tell the Germans who rushed their forces to the scene to find that nothing was going on there. Then, on finding they'd been fooled, the Germans stopped listening to their informants and sometimes beat them up. As a result, some of the informants would quit.

A more effective version of this strategy was thought up by Markov, a company commander from the area who had a Jewish wife. Two Jewish partisans were sent to a village called Swir, a mile from a strongly held police station, to pretend they were drunk and make a big stir. A German collaborator ran off to the police station in order to tell them about the intruders. Markov saw him go and happily whispered to the others hiding in ambush, "We did it!" Some of his men, not knowing the plan, raised their guns to shoot the informant but Markov ordered them to hold their fire.

A half hour later, the laughing Germans mounted their horses—some not even waiting to put on their saddles--and hurried down the dirt road to have some fun tormenting the foolish Jews. There were 150 partisans, including a couple of machine guns, awaiting them. Twenty Germans were soon lying dead along the road.

Another successful ambush was against the Dolhinov garrison and police when it was away from base. A partisan informant reported that soldiers and police were going to the town of Khachenchitz to collect supplies and taxes. The platoon spread out, hid among trees along the road, camouflaged themselves, then slept as best they could.

The next morning at dawn, scouts spotted the convoy returning to Dolhinov. There were about 40 soldiers and police guarding several trucks with conscripted workers. When the convoy was opposite the ambush, the commanding officer blew a whistle and they began firing. The surprised Germans jumped from the vehicles and ran for their lives, leaving behind 16 dead. Several others, including the convoy commander, surrendered. Freed, the workers raced down the road for home. The partisans seized arms and supplies.

But they quickly realized that the greatest prize of all was one of their prisoners, Ulshuk, the local police commander in Ilya who, along with relatives, had murdered Jews and stole their property in several towns. They took him around to different villages, telling peasants that he'd defected voluntarily. The partisans' goal was both to raise morale and in hope that the Germans might execute his relatives who were genuine collaborators but might now be seen as partisan spies.

Finally, they dragged Ulshuk back to camp, tried him before a partisan court, and sentenced him to death. The once-bullying police chief, who'd bragged that he'd never be captured alive, now fell to his knees and begged for mercy. The firing squad shot him any way.

Throughout the winter of 1942-1943, the partisans gathered confidence. By the time spring came, the People's Avengers brigade had grown to 500 combatants operating in seven districts. Now they were ready for a particularly daring operation which stirred the feelings of the 28 soldiers who had escaped Dolhinov: a second attack on that town itself.

As long as there had been Jews in Dolhinov, but few partisans outside it, there was no permanent German garrison there. During the first attack only six months earlier, there had only been about a dozen German soldiers in Dolhinov. Now, there were 200, quartered in the homes which Jewish families had inhabited for generations. Timchuk agreed that the Dolhinov men

could form their own unit for the attack, led by Segalchik, Abraham Friedman, and Dmitri Friedman. In the fighting, Dmitri particularly distinguished himself, being the first to break into the police station, where he seized all the weapons and destroyed the documents. Three-quarters of the houses in the ghetto were destroyed by fire. Between that and the disappearance of the Jews who had been most of its population for centuries, Dolhinov as a town would never recover.

There is, however, also a mystery here. Why was this highly praised combat unit suddenly broken up and assigned to routine duties guarding the hospital? The answer is this: In January 1943, a German agent--a non-Jew from Globoki pretending to be a Jew—infiltrated the unit. When he was discovered, two Jewish soldiers from the platoon were assigned to guard him. They both fell asleep and he escaped. Although the spy was recaptured, falling asleep on guard duty was a capital offense. All three men were executed and, as punishment, the platoon's soldiers were sent to other units. Only the one squad remained for Sigalchik to command.

But the partisans, reinforced by the survivors of Dolhinov and other towns, were steadily getting stronger. They could win small battles as long as they were on the offensive, fighting at a time and place of their choosing, striking where the Germans were weak or didn't expect an attack. To combat them, the Germans launched big encirclement operations, sending large forces into the forests in May-June and September 1943 and in May 1944. These assaults inflicted heavy casualties on the partisans but in a sense were also a victory for them any way. After all, if the Germans devoted considerable forces to combating partisans, they had to take men and supplies away from the main battle, and tying down more troops was precisely the partisans' goal.

On May 15, 1943, the Germans began concentrating forces for their first massive anti-partisan offensive. Dolhinov was filled with their soldiers, accompanied by Ukrainian and turncoat Russian troops, ready to advance into the forests. Four days later, they attacked. The People's Avengers and other units suffered heavy losses as they retreated into a region of dense forests and swamps. Precisely because so many partisans were concentrated into a small area, they urgently had to break through the encirclement or starve.

The People's Avengers hospital was in special danger since patients and equipment could not easily be moved. It was directed by Dr. Samuel Shtshegelov, who had escaped the Minsk ghetto in 1942, while Segalchik's platoon was responsible for defending it. For added security, the hospital had been put on an island in the swamps accessible only by boat. Local peasants brought supplies for the wounded including clean sheets and pillows. As long as Jews had remained alive in towns, those with access to supplies, like my pharmacist uncle Mendel Chefetz, smuggled out medical equipment and medicines. But with the ghettos emptied of life, everything now had to be captured from the Germans.

Full of wounded, however, its inaccessible location now proved a problem. There was only about 60 pounds of beans and 40 of dry bread left and the Germans were getting closer. By the evening of June 1, They had to evacuate immediately. The most seriously wounded had to be hidden in the area; the more lightly wounded were sent to another island with dr. Kotler, and those ten wounded men able to walk, along with some of the noncombatant staff, were accompanied by Sigalchik and his security detachment into the deepest marshlands.

Having no compass or map, Sigalchik's group was soon lost in the trackless marsh. They had been only able to take a little food. All around them, they could hear Germans shooting. To

avoid detection, they had to stand quietly waist-deep in stagnant water for hours at a time. When things were quieter, they'd walk in one direction, until hearing shots, then change course.

Only on the fifth day did they reach an island with a lot of grass, and so famished were they that they devoured it, even though it was bitter and didn't satisfy their hunger On they went until finally, on June 19, all shooting stopped. In the silence, Sigalchik was boosted into a tree to get a better view. So weak was he that he fell out. "We must continue," he told his group, "Although we don't know where we should go. If we stay still we will die of starvation."

Taking a stick to lean on and using all his remaining reserves of energy, Sigalchik began walking again and the others followed. He headed southeast, feeling he remembered the way. But after plodding on all day on June 20 they still couldn't find any recognizable landmarks. The swamp was silent, "like a huge, never-ending cemetery," Sigalchik called it. In the evening they arrived at a very muddy forest, lit a fire, boiled some dirty water to drink, and slept.

Finally, on June 25, 1943, they found a way back to their base, which had been burned by the Germans. But at least the medical unit had suffered no casualties. As they rebuilt their makeshift wards and operating room, they were also able to catch up with the news.

Ten days earlier, on June 15 at around 11 in the morning, while Sigalchik and his group was still wandering the swampland, the Germans finally caught up to the People's Avengers when they stopped to rest on the edge of a forest, brought their infantry up close in trucks, and attacked on three sides with about 1,000 men, a three-to-one advantage.

Since the attacking force had no cover while the partisans were scattered among the trees, the defenders held their own during the 45-minute battle, and were able to pull back into the forest. At one point, Timchuk, rallying his flank, was fired on by Germans just forty yards away. His life was saved by a Jewish machine-gunner and Communist named Aleksandrovich, a man in his 40s, ancient by partisan standards, who killed four of the attackers, forcing the other two to flee. Aleksandrovich later became executive secretary of the brigade's Communist party organization.

In August 1943, headquarters decided to bring partisan commanders in for a major planning and coordination meeting. On another moonless light, a Soviet plane landed. The men rushed toward it to unload the equipment; good-byes were hurriedly exchanged with those climbing aboard. Timchuk, feeling unwell from his old war wounds, couldn't go and an aide, Major David Keimah, a Soviet Jewish officer, went in his place. Also aboard were Colonel Voronyansky, commander of the People's Avengers, and Sonya Kotler, wife of Dolhinov's—and now the brigade's--Jewish doctor.

The last crate was thrown off and hustled away. The door shut. A hundred hands waved. The plane accelerated and rose from the ground, higher, higher but, alas, not high enough. It scraped the top of a tree, twisted, fell, and exploded in flaming wreckage, killing all aboard. Familiar with death had come again. How quickly joy turned to bleakest sorrow. Or were they all too numbed already to feel either? But life, and war, went on. Now Timchuk formally took Voronyansky's place as the unit's commander.

For Jewish civilians with the brigade, survival was much tougher during the German offensives. They had no guns to defend themselves and their only safety came from getting as far away as possible from the soldiers, scattering and hiding. During the September 1943 offensive, partisans could only take the civilians to a swamp and tell them to sit down in the water in hope the Germans wouldn't go to such places. For two days, they did so, having only bog water to drink and grasses to nibble on as shots echoed around them.

As the Germans approached, the partisan fighters held them off while the Jewish civilians ran in all directions, having no idea in which of them lay safety. Esfira Dimenshtein, her brother, mother, and uncle were all separated. Esfira knocked on the door of the first house she saw. The old peasant woman, named Stefa, who lived there asked, "Who is it?"

Dimenshtein cried out in Polish begging to be let in. The woman signaled her to come inside, dirty and wet as she was, peering in each direction to make sure nobody saw. Stefa had no idea she was Jewish as she was wearing peasant clothes and speaking fluent Polish. She was allowed to wash and directed to the barn to keep company with the cow and goat. A few minutes later, Stefa appeared, gave her a dress and told her to climb into the loft and hide amidst the straw. "You can stay until the partisans come," she said.

And so Esfira lay down and thought of all the relatives and friends who had been killed, thinking she was the last member of her family alive. Later, Stefa dug a hole in the barn in the cow's pen, covering it with manure and straw. All day, Esfira stayed there, coming out only at night. She lived that way for a year until the day that Stefa told her the Red Army had arrived.

Many others were not so fortunate. But hard-hit as they were, the partisans kept going and hundreds of Jews continued to survive in the forest. As the Germans finally pulled back, the units and their civilian workers reassembled, returning to their regular activities.

Back in the towns and farms of eastern Poland, though, life was equally hard. Frustrated at constant pinpricks from growing partisan bands and having no more Jews to massacre, the Germans also shifted their civil strategy. They were caught in a bind of their own making. In wiping out the Jews, the Nazis sabotaged their supply system and agricultural production by destroying much of their own labor force. This triumph of crazed ideology over cynical pragmatism would cost them dearly.

In dealing with the Christians of the occupied lands, the Germans had another economic and ideological paradox. The Germans needed to maximize the peasants' production of food while minimizing their income. They imposed high taxes and agricultural quotas. Each peasants family, for example, was only allowed to keep three eggs a week. There were taxes on dogs (150 rubles), wells (25 rubles) and on each family member (50 rubles). Not delivering crops or performing forced labor tasks, more frequent after Jews were no longer there to do them, were punished severely.[11]

By starving and brutally treating Poles and Byelorussians, the Germans ensured their growing hostility. Yet since they saw themselves as the master race, Slavs as inferior, and Poland as theirs, the Germans made no full-scale effort to reward local nationalism in order to mobilize it against the Soviets.

The German responded to the gradually turning tide of war by taking two steps. First, they began to repress Poles and court Byelorussians.

To keep up farm production in the Dolhinov area, the Germans originally used the remaining Polish landlords and experts who'd avoided deportation by the Soviets. They also kept in place many of the hated Soviet collective farms as being more efficient than the family-cultivated small plots preferred by the peasants. Grumbling at this system and at having to obey their traditional Polish overlords, Byelorussian peasants stole what they could and sometimes set the fields aflame.

Just as they had sought to gain popularity by persecuting the Jews, now the Germans employed the same tactic by cracking down on the Poles. In autumn 1942, hundreds of Poles were fired from their jobs; dozens were shot. Things got worse in 1943. In Bialystok alone, 2000

Poles were murdered. Polish landowners were thrown off their property and replaced by Byelorussian collaborators. The German-installed Polish mayor of Dolhinov and his chief agricultural expert were arrested and murdered, replaced by Byelorussians who were told to maintain order and food production or else.

When such measures failed to gain Byelorussian support and as some peasants helped partisans, the harshest measures were used against them. During the war, the Nazis burned more than 300 villages in Belarus and slaughtered most of their inhabitants, often by burning down their houses with the peasants inside, shooting anyone trying to escape.

Second, they reversed their earlier policy of harshly treating captured Soviet soldiers and began recruiting them into anti-partisan units. Lt. Colonel Gil-Ridionov, leader of the Russian prisoners who changed sides in the Dolhinov area, became commander of the 3000-man First Russian National Brigade.

But it was too late. Up to December 1941 the Germans had advanced rapidly on Leningrad and Moscow but then came winter and the Soviets held. The Germans made some gains during the autumn of 1942 but by June 1943 were on the defensive. With suspicion growing that the Nazis would lose the war and in the face of German material extortion and repression, many local people became convinced that they had more to lose by doing nothing than by helping the partisans.

This was also true for the Russian collaborators. In summer 1943, they began secret negotiations to return to the Soviet side. Moscow ordered Timchuk to deal with them. He set off on his horse with a dozen picked men, including Avraham Friedman and Koton. They were ordered to wear clean uniforms and not to shoot anyone without being ordered to do so. Koton guarded the meeting tent and was also assigned to socialize with Ridionov's entourage, drinking and chatting with men who'd been trying to kill him the previous day.

"I can't believe this is happening," Friedman told Koton. But the two sides succeeded in making a deal. To prove their good faith, Ridionovs's men, in their German uniforms, attacked the German garrison in Dokshitz, just north from Dolhinov, and partly burned it down. They then joined the partisans and accepted Soviet commissars.

Timchuk added them to his command and Avraham Friedman helped direct the reformed traitors. It must have been strange for Friedman to command soldiers he knew to be virulent antisemites. But the necessities of war required it. The returned soldiers did fightt bravely once again for the USSR in the Byelorussian forests. Stalin intended that as many as possible of them die, both as punishment and to ensure such unreliable elements never returned to his kingdom. And very few ever did make it back to the USSR.

As for Timchuk, he rose higher and higher as more partisan units were put under him, united in the First Anti-Nazi Partisan Brigade under his command. On January 1, 1944, he became a Hero of the Soviet Union, his country's highest honor.

He deserved it. By the end of 1943, his partisans controlled a large part—one estimate says sixty percent—of Belarus's rural areas. They tied down thousands of enemy forces who were thus unavailable to fight at the front. In direct terms, the partisans' contribution to victory—disrupting supply lines and materiel, causing casualties, demoralizing the enemy--might have been small but in indirect terms it was enormous.

The Germans, of course, did not give up easily. They would make one more huge effort to wipe out the partisans.

In April and May 1944, the fury of a Belarus winter gave way to the assault of its almost equally belligerent springtime. Ice melted to enlarge the swamps and turn roads into quagmires. Then the rains came to turn the land into soup. For the first time, the Germans took whole divisions out of the front line and for three weeks, 30,000 of their soldiers backed by Latvian, Lithuanian, Byelorussian, and Ukrainian mercenary or nationalist auxiliaries tried to strangle the 35,000 partisans. They advanced deep into the forests and swamps. Yet at that very moment, the Red Army was advancing from the east and the Allies were about to land on the Normandy beaches to the west. The Germans were sapping the might they needed elsewhere. This was, of course, little comfort at that moment to the partisans and civilians of eastern Poland.

The attack was a nightmare for them, even given all they'd already been through, because at any moment the Germans might appear. One's certain life span could only be measured in seconds. Nor was it much better for the peasants as the Germans set fire to every village suspected of helping the partisans. Aside from being tired and hungry, many were stricken with typhoid.

"Lay down your arms and surrender," said the German loudspeakers, "you are completely surrounded." The partisans responded with a wall of fire. For three days battles raged onward. With anti-tank weapons smuggled across the front lines, they managed to knock out several German tanks but could do nothing about the planes and artillery except trust to the trees to conceal themselves. Sent on a reconnaissance mission, Solominski and the Avengers' Jewish engineer Rotblatt rode horses to the home of a civilian supporter. She ran out and bravely warned them that the roads were blocked, filled with German troops who would arrive at any moment.

The warning was no exaggeration. No sooner did she rush back to her home that the two partisans were surrounded and the Germans began shooting at them. They galloped off as fast as possible. Suddenly, Rotblatt's horse slipped and he fell off. Solomnski yelled at him to run over and jump up behind him. But somehow Rotblatt managed to get his horse to stand, leaped on it, and the two raced off, galloping for more than five miles before shaking off pursuers. Some of their comrades, watching from a distance, were certain they'd been killed.

Both sides suffered heavy losses, and the partisans received orders to break off the fight and retreat as fast as possible to the Barzina river, just down the road from Dolhinov.[12] A few riflemen stayed behind to persuade attackers that the main partisan forces were still there.

This was the war of the forests: small groups of men, often lost, wandering among thick-set trees. Partisans tried to escape; Germans fired on whoever they saw, revealing their positions so their prey could escape. Small partisan units passed through ambush after ambush, without food or officers, carrying wounded and sometimes even having lost their weapons.

Katzovitch was with one of the groups staying behind to lead German troops in the wrong direction. Just when Katzovitch and his small unit thought they were in the clear, he looked down onto fresh footprints. At that moment, he turned around and saw three Germans sneaking up behind him, one within ten feet of him. Leaping to the side to throw off their aim, he ran between the bushes and escaped, bullets flying over his head.

But a few miles away, his younger brother, who he had so lovingly rescued from their home town, was surrounded. He fired until he ran out of ammunition, then laid down on a hand grenade and waited until they came to capture him to blow himself up.

The main force of the People's Avengers, tired and hungry—they hadn't eaten for three days--finally arrived on the river bank. Knowing the Germans would see any campfires, they could cook no food that night. It was the very place where the Russians had almost finished off

Poland forever by smashing Napoleon's army 130 years earlier. Now the Russians were the ones who seemed caught in a trap.

Any day now, they knew the Soviet army would begin its grand offensive, but until then the pressure was on. Split up and break out in any way possible, was the order. Thousands of fighters and their Jewish civilian helpers sprang to action. In a series of hundreds of small, unknown bloody skirmishes they fought back, losing many casualties but tying down Germans as the Red Army got into position for the big breakthrough.

The hospital was overwhelmed with casualties. When a partisan stepped on a mine and received a serious leg wound, it took three days to get him there. By that time he had blood poisoning and the leg had to be amputated. Although Shtshegelov had no anesthetic left or proper equipment, the choice was between operating or watching the man die. So he took an ordinary saw, sterilized it in fire.

The patient was put on a table, two men held his hands and head; and a third held his other leg. The patient screamed and cried that he was being tortured during the half-hour operation. But he survived. As the Germans approached, the staff carried him and five other severely wounded men to a nearby hiding place, a task that took more than two hours. The last wounded man and his stretcher-bearers was only 50 yards from the camp as the Germans arrived.

In their hiding places, the soldiers, staff, and patients were close enough to hear their enemies' voices. One patient shot through the lungs groaned all night. But somehow the Germans never heard him. The partisans, several of them from Dolhinov, could see Soviet planes dropping bombs on the island and the sound of their own artillery. They had to stay concealed for many days until scouts reported that the Red Army was approaching.

That the partisan forces were badly disrupted by the German offensive didn't matter now: the great Soviet offensive was on and the German army would be swept out of the entire area.

In the first half of 1944 Belarus became the war's most important front. Although pushed back in the south and north, the German army held its ground in the center. In a two-week attack starting about 100 miles east of Dolhinov during June and July 1944, the Red Army achieved total victory, destroying the entire German Army Group Center, the force which only three years earlier had so triumphantly marched to the gates of Moscow.

Once again, the Nazi empire's fortunes rested on Hitler's imperious judgment which at times in the past been triumphantly correct and at other times—like this one--disastrously wrong. He was certain the Soviets were on the defensive and that any attack they did stage would come further south, in the Ukraine.

This was a foolish mistake. The big bulge of the German line just east of Dolhinov—dubbed the Byelorussian balcony—invited Soviet attack and German commanders knew it. Seeing the Red Army's build-up, those on the scene urged withdrawal to a stronger line along the Berezina river. Hitler refused. The more the Soviets strengthened their line, the more desperately generals begged Hitler to let them pull back but he insisted every position be held, dreaming of some future renewed German offensive against Moscow.

Thus, he did precisely what the Soviets wanted to ensure the success of their Operation Bagration, named after a Russian prince who fell in Moscow's war against Napoleon, to which Soviets often compared the current conflict. From the north, a Red Army force would strike from Vitebsk down the Dolhinov road toward Minsk. To the south, a second pincer would advance through Borisov via Bobruysk into Minsk. The Germans would be crushed along a 400-mile front.

The Red Army planned carefully, carrying out constant reconnaissance to check German positions, coordinating ground attacks with artillery and massive air support. The partisans, too, had their role. On June 10 the partisans were ordered to step-up intelligence-gathering, destroying communications' lines, and cutting supply routes to ensure the Germans would be weakened when the offensive began. Starting on June 19, they began to blow the railroad lines, too.

German officers on the front became positively frantic about what they were sure was about to happen. The German Ninth Army War Diary, for example, records the belief that the Red Army was massing for "another mighty battle." But the high command was moving forces away from the likely point of attack. "We are so short of troops as to make…containment of deep enemy penetrations unthinkable," the reports wailed in response. Especially dangerous, Hitler's designated certain towns as "firm positions" which could not be abandoned but must be defended to the last man and bullet. Going far beyond what one would expect in a Nazi dictatorship, officers wrote in official documents of their "sense of bitterness" at their leaders' incompetence.

They were quickly proven right. On the night of June 22, deliberately chosen by the Soviets as the anniversary of the German invasion three years earlier, the huge artillery barrage began, pinning down German defenders. A Red Army infantry and tank force advanced. The rest was an unbroken chain of victories over the next two weeks.

"My request has been turned down again," German Field Marshal Busch told the Third Panzer Army's headquarters, after Hitler wouldn't let him withdraw to form a new line.[13] Vitebsk must be held, said the fuehrer. And when that town fell he said the same about Borisov. Meanwhile, four and a half German divisions were being surrounded and destroyed. By June 28 a big hole was opening in the German lines as the Red Army pushed both northwest and southwest at a weak point, creating a gap between Army Group North and Army Group Center. The Soviets were cutting them off by seizing key bridges and roads.

"This is a madhouse!" cried out the German Ninth Army's chief of staff. The 252nd Infantry Division was down to 300 men; whole battalions mustered only 50 soldiers each. Along a 20-mile front the Germans could fire just 44 artillery pieces. When the Germans fell back through Lepel, they were too disorganized to blow up the bridges over the Essa river.

On and on, relentlessly, came the Red Army down the road toward Dolhinov. On July 1, the Fifth Army crossed the Berezina where just two weeks previously the People's Avengers had taken refuge exhausted and far behind the German lines. The Germans now tried to form a new line from Borisov through Dolhinov itself to block the two roads into Minsk. It was too late. Having run out of regular combat units, to plug holes in the front lines, they had to send rear-echelon troops like the 391 and 201 Security Divisions and 330th Security Battalion, formerly used only to chase the partisans, Rather than pull back, battered German units followed orders in futilely trying to defend every town and crossroads.

The Soviet Fifth Army crushed everything in its path. On July 2 alone, it advanced 20 miles freeing dozens of towns and villages. Dolhinov was captured on July 4, the Germans having retreated so quickly that they left behind two trucks full of ammunition. For the third time in two decades, the Red Army seized Dolhinov once more.

It had been just over three years, almost to the day, since the Germans had arrived in Dolhinov to find it peopled by 4,000 residents and 1,000 refugees. Only a few hundred of them remained. The town that stayed basically unchanged for four centuries was no more. Much of its

center had been burned in partisan attacks. All the Jews, two-thirds' of the population, had been murdered or fled, only a handful would briefly return. Many of the Poles, most of the other one-third, had been deported by the Soviets or run in fear of the Red Army's return visit, never to return. Among the Byelorussians, those who'd served the Germans in the militia or other posts also fled, though some managed to join the Red Army to conceal their past deeds.

Just as they were entering Dolhinov, the Red Army also captured Minsk, Belarus's main city, to the south. To the north, they stormed into Vilna. The offensive had destroyed 25 German divisions, killed or disabled 350,000 Nazi soldiers, and captured 57,000 prisoners. Rather than slow up their advance to guard these prisoners, the Soviets simply told them to head east and give up to the first garrison they reached. In Moscow, a victory parade was held on the scale of a Roman triumph.

With Belarus cleared of German forces, the war entered a new phase. All partisans were ordered to Minsk and in the old SS headquarters now the NKVD office they were interviewed by intelligence officers, formally enlisted in the Red Army, and given proper uniforms. A grand partisan parade was held in the main square of the mostly destroyed city among cheering crowds. A Red Army general read out, as the Order of the Day, a list of their exploits.

Among the Jewish partisans, however, feelings were mixed. As one of them recalled:

"Waves of joy overtook all hearts, and we too, the surviving Jewish partisans, were swept by it. But in the secrecy of our hearts there was sorrow and bitterness. The Order of the Day mentioned everybody, Russian and Byelorussians, Lithuanians and Poles, Latvians and Tatars.... Only we, the few solitary Jews, remained anonymous. We fought as Russians and Byelorussians and Poles, but not as Jews. So we stood and marched in the parade. Behind us were rivers of blood, our loved ones' graves, being orphaned, loss and bereavement. In front of our eyes were waves of joy, the sound of the crowd cheering. And on this occasion, too, we were foreign and anonymous. The victory is ours, but not the joy!"

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[1] A major source for this chapter is Y. Segalchik, "Memoirs of a Partisan," http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/dokshitsy/dok274.html, page 274.

[2] A somewhat different account is given in Dov Katzovitch, "With the Partisans and In the Red-Army." But after careful comparisons and interviews I found Segalchik to be more accurate.

[3] I. Gerasimova, We rose and stood shoulder to shoulder (Jew in partisan movement in Byelorussia. 1941-1944). Minsk: Asobny Dach, 2005.

[4] Crocodile #4 (04.02.1975)

[5] A key source for this and following paragraphs is Leonid Smilovitsky, "Äntisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941-1944: The Case of Belorussia" Holocaust and Genocide Studies Vol. 20, No. 2, Fall 2006, pp. 207-234.

[6] The War for Life, Littman Mor http://davidhorodok.netfirms.com/Mor/ch-12.htm

[7] http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/ilya/ily373.html

[8] David Shinuk Story, "From The Gates Of Berlin To Kibbutz Aliya"

[9] See Chapter Eight.

[10] http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/ilya/ily373.html

[11] Leonid Smilovitsky, "Jews and Poles Among Belorussian Partisans,"

[12] With the Partisans and In the Red-Army By Dov Katzovitch, Petach Tikva

[13] 89 By Gerd Niepold Published by E.S. Mittler, 1985 German edition of above. David Glantz, Harold Orenstein, Belorussia 1944 Soviet General Staff Study123

CHAPTER EIGHT
BACK IN THE BSSR

The story is told that long after he left Dolhinov and became a distinguished rabbi in America, Yakov Kaminetsky was one day sitting in a doctor's waiting room when he spotted a Jewish boy who was obviously not religious. He grabbed a ball and began to play with the young boy. His assistant was amazed and later asked the rabbi why he had done that. Kaminetsky replied, "I saw that with this boy, it was useless to talk about *Yiddishkeit* or mitzvot. He came from a family so far removed from anything Jewish. I just wanted that to make him feel that a religious Jew is a good person. So I played ball with him. Who knows, perhaps this impression will one day have an effect on him and he will come closer to Torah and mitzvot."

Eastern Poland was now free from German occupation but once more under Soviet occupation. For the Soviets, nothing had changed from June 1941 and this land was now part of the Belarus Soviet Socialist Republic, the BSSR.

Regular German soldiers were treated as prisoners of war but those in the German-backed police, informers, or collaborators were now doomed unless they ran westward first. The Soviets held military trials in which torture victims and relatives of those murdered testified, some of them crying from the painful memories recalled. Those convicted were hung before a cheering crowd of local people, including Jews returned from the forests. The tables were turned.

Partisans, including the Polish Jews among them, became regular Red Army soldiers. After a short training course, they fought through the rest of the Poland, across Czechoslovakia and into Germany itself; passing and seeing concentration camps like Auschwitz, until the last day of the war and happy encounters with British and French troops who'd crushed Germany from the west.

The last of all the Dolhinov Jews freed from German bondage was Ida Friedman. She'd been one of those who'd escaped from the work camp in 1942 to join the partisans. In late 1943, she ran with the other civilian workers to escape a German encirclement operation. Two of her new friends, non-Jewish Russian women, invited her to come live with them in their near-by village. Since she spoke Polish fluently, she'd pretend to be a Polish Catholic refugee, named Ada Wishnovska who was living with them.

No sooner then they'd arrived to the village, however, than the German army surrounded it, seized 80 young people—including Ida and her friends—and sent them as slave laborers to Germany. All the villagers knew she was Jewish but her two friends told them to say nothing. And to one woman known to hate Jews their message was stronger: "If you inform against Ida we'll kill you," they threatened. She remained silent.

In Germany, they were separated, put into dormitories, and set to work with captives from a dozen different countries. Of course, Ida kept to her Polish assumed identity. One day she awoke after dreaming she was back with her family to see a dozen women gathered around her bed staring at her. They had never heard Yiddish before and thought her a spy "Why," one worker asked, "were you speaking German in your sleep?" She covered herself by saying she'd studied the language at school.

Ida turned her ability to understand German into an advantage. When the women didn't understand their supervisors' orders quickly enough they were beaten, so Ida was able to turn her ability to understand German into a way to protect them.

One of the workers was a woman from Warsaw who—they were not so rare, after all—hated Jews with a passion. It is impressive after Ida had been through that she could say, "I've seen a lot of antisemites in my life but that one was the worst." The woman insisted that she could tell a Jew every time, even from far off. Tempting fate, Ida came closer to her and asked innocently, "What did you say?" Fortunately, the woman's intuition on such matters was not as keen so keen as she claimed.

Finally, in 1945, they were all liberated by the American army. She had no family, no home, nothing. But at least she wasn't alone. Two months after the war ended, still in the same dormitory, the antisemitic woman said to her, "Can you believe it? All this time we never knew that Mira is a Jew!"

Ida was so shocked she ran to find the woman who she'd been living with every day without ever guessing their mutual secret. They embraced and sobbed together for a long time. Joined by a third hidden Jew among the workers, they met up with the Jewish Brigade of the British army who helped smuggle them to Italy. There she met a Greek Jew who had survived Auschwitz and together they went up to the Land of Israel.

Some Dolhinov Jews were able to follow this same route to the newly independent country. Chaim Brunstein, who'd been a prisoner-of-war in the USSR, reunited with his family by amazing coincidence, gradually worked his way ever westward. His wife Chana, with too many memories, refused to return to Dolhinov. As a Polish army veteran, he was repatriated to that country. The Brunsteins, along with many other Dolhinov survivors and relatives, sailed from Europe across the Mediterranean to Israel in 1948 and 1949, a journey about which their ancestors had dreamed for 2,000 years, 500 of them in Dolhinov. A far smaller number steamed across the Atlantic Ocean to North America, to join long-separated relatives there..

But while in Western Europe the war's end brought peace, in the east, the Soviets liberated each land from the Germans only to unliberate it by imposing a dictatorial regime controlled by Moscow. As victory neared so did the likelihood that Poland itself would remain defeated. The old bitter Polish-Russian antagonism reemerged after a two-year intermission for fighting the Nazis. To discredit Polish rule, the Soviets slandered them collectively as social reactionaries, collaborators, and antisemites.

For their part, the Poles accused Soviet partisans of looting farmers and attacking villages not for being pro-German but for being Polish nationalist. The historian of Polish life in the east, Professor Franciszek Sielicki, who himself grew up in Dolhinov and wrote often of the town, complained in a 1997 book:

"Villagers couldn't stand Soviet partisans because they conducted shameful robberies. They stole whatever they could, even children's toys [as well as] horses, cows, pigs, underwear, etc. There were many cases, when faced with resistance they hanged poor peasants by their legs, upside down, to force them into giving something."[i]

Whether or not this happened further north or west around Dolhinov, in that area most of those from whom supplies were taken or vengeance exacted were Byelorussians. Between June 1941 and the end of 1944 the Soviet emphasis was on fighting the Germans, not the Poles. This

is not to say that the partisans always treated the local people well—the regime never even treated its own people well--but the motive for criminal behavior was individual greed, not political maneuvering.

In contrast to the actual behavior of the regime he represented and some of his comrades who abused their power, Timchuk was an idealist. His own life story, rising from the most dire poverty and oppression due to the revolution, made him a true believer. On May 1, 1942, he gathered his men in a circle, sitting on the ground in the middle of the forest, and gave them his best commissar's speech:

"The Day of the Workers! The day of the Proletariat! The day of the International Brotherhood of the Working Class! In every place, everywhere in the world, it is a celebration. We must celebrate it with victories and military achievement against the invading enemy. We didn't come to the forest to hide from the enemy and to be parasites on the farmers, or even the large estate owners who recently returned to the area under the wings of the enemy. We must attack the Germans and the collaborators in every place that our hands can reach. We must attack the traitorous policemen and the mayors who are enemies of the people."

And he did not hesitate for a moment about carrying out the death sentences of which he spoke. In his memoir he wrote:

> "We didn't have mercy for those who helped Germans. We killed them and it couldn't be any other way….Those who were against our Motherland should be killed. We killed…district chiefs, heads of police. Of course, Jews also helped in organizing these killings."

In writing this, Timchuk was seeking to honor his Jewish fighters, to convince a Soviet regime and people which had underestimated their contribution that they, too, loved mother USSR and had done a lot to help achieve victory. But these deeds also had their cost, being seen—and magnified—by Poles as well as Lithuanians and other nationalities caught between Germans and Russians as proving the thesis that all Jews were Communists and enemies of the countries where they had been living.

It was simply one more example of the historic Jewish dilemma: the attempt—usually futile—to please one group simply produced more hatred among others. During the Czarist period, Poles and other captive nationalities accused Jews of being agents of Russian power. Then, some Jews became revolutionaries to create a new society in which all would be brothers, sacrificing their own community to show they were not aliens. The result was the massacre of the Jewish Communist leaders by Stalin, on one hand, and even more resentment by the nationalities victimized by the regime. Similarly, Jews had fought for Poland and been loyal citizens, but the ascendancy of right-wing nationalists in the mid-1930s had led to even more discrimination and oppression.

The Jews had tried to become good Germans only to unleash antisemitism by the belief they were corrupting the true German culture and identity. They had sought to prove their loyalty as Frenchman and the most assimilated and loyal of all, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, became the national scapegoat. Even at best, acceptance came largely by a jettisoning of their own identity so extreme that most could no longer even remember what it had been like to live within a

wholly Jewish community. And always the push to go further and farther, to prove one was really a citizen of the globe, or selfless patriot, or benefactor of others, or architect of a brave new world of utopian social justice.

The wartime choice made by the Jews of eastern Poland was a rational one, costly as it was in some ways. With the Polish nationalists either unable to offer much or outright hostile, adherence to the Soviet side was the only hope for survival from the German onslaught during those terrible years. In the Dolhinov region, this decision was an even easier one. They rarely ever encountered Polish partisans.

On one occasion, spotting the People's Avengers in the forest and not knowing who they were, a unit of Polish Home Army opened fire and killed the scouts' two horses. An exchange of gunfire continued until both sides, thankfully without loss of life, realized the other's identity and a truce was arranged. The two sides went off in different directions, fighting the same enemy but fighting separate wars.

Back in London, General Sikorski's government-in-exile made a real attempt to be fair, aware that the best course of action was to turn Polish Jews into an ally. But the passion from the field was too intense and the Poles' lack of resources too great, at least in the eastern part of the country. The reports arriving in London vilified Jews as enemies of Poland.

Talk of "Jewish bandits" is a mainstay of Polish partisan reports. Polish intelligence claimed that 90 percent of those being held in ghettoes were "pro-Bolshevik"[ii] A dispatch of December 20, 1942, claimed that bands of Jews alongside Byelorussian partisans attacked farms, robbing, raping, and killing civilians, terrorizing the population with "special cruelty"[iii]

Yet while Poles did suffer at the hands of partisan groups, internal Soviet reports—which have every reason to exaggerate the Jewish role—show that abuses came from non-Jews, corrupt ethnic Russian Soviet army officers. While Jews no doubt had their scoundrels, too, they were simply not in positions of power and, even more importantly, too fixated on fighting and winning the war rather than being diverted into looting, corruption, or ensuring Soviet imperial aims.

For a half-century after the war, the partisans were always treated in Soviet literature as stainless steel heroes without exception. Yet the Soviet Union's fall brought to the surface many long-hidden internal reports which shed light on abuses that did occur.[iv]

Timchuk's job, as secretary of the Logoysky region Communist Party Central Committee, was to act as watchdog. The Soviet system was always ripe for abuse, since there was no division of power or independent oversight, freedom of criticism, or a legitimate opposition viewpoint. At least if an honest man was at the helm locally, malefactors could be punished or intimidated. Timchuk did not hesitate to report abuses.

A focal point for misbehavior was the partisans' procurement system. Armed groups were going to take what they needed; peasants, tired of expropriations and worried about their own livelihood, weren't eager to give a lot away. This was why partisans had to be disciplined to take only what they needed so as not to turn the populace against them.

Timchuk understood this, and saw how sometimes unfair and greedy commanders created unneeded antagonisms. "Last year," he wrote of one area, the peasants, "were wonderful people ready to do anything for us. Now they are the exact opposite." In Radoshovitch village, just outside Dolhinov, peasants were so mistreated and frightened that, "on seeing partisans, they ran to hide in the forest."

But even running away did not help them if partisan officers were rapacious. In summer 1943 a partisan detachment went on a military operation in the Logoysk area. When the battle

ended, officers, seeing no people in the village, ordered that likely hiding places be searched and possessions found there seized. Timchuk wrote, "This action led to hard and hostile feelings among the people who come back from the forest and know that partisans have taken their property."

To avoid such situations, in summer 1943, Timchuk had the regional party committee issue orders that partisans take no more than a half-liter of milk and ten eggs from any one household. From any one farm they could take no more than 520 pounds of grain and 725 pounds of potatoes. Commands and punishments brought some results, Timchuk recorded. The local peasants stopped referring to the Death to Fascists unit as "Death to Pigs and Fright to Cows."

The unit with the worst problem was the Kutusov brigade, formed in December 1942, whose operational territory included Dolhinov. The implication of that late start date was that all the top officers were Red Army men sent out from headquarters. Its behavior was so bad that the group's top commander and one of his chief lieutenants were shot for their crimes.

Brigade commander Mitrofan Krasenkov became a major black marketeer. First, horses, cows, sheep, bread, and other things were confiscated from peasants under the guise of being used to provision partisans. Then the items were sold in Minsk, the money earned used to buy vodka, cigarettes and tobacco, ladies' hosiery, shoes, and leather coats that were handed out among the top officers.

Expanding the operation, in April 1943, Krasenkov hired two gypsies as front men. When Timchuk learned about these schemes in July and opened an investigation, Krasenkov ordered one of his men, a soldier named Nasedkin, to kill the two gypsies because they knew too much. The excuse used was that they had betrayed the location of underground safe houses to the Germans.

Another officer in this unit, Tsygankov, was also sentenced to death for a range of additional crimes. Having lost a battle with the Germans, a report charged, "He burst into rage and ordered Staiki village be set on fire. Half the homes, 64 in all, were destroyed. The unit's chief of staff, Vladimir Kobylkin, gave a whipping to a 60-year-old farmer only because the man made him a hat "which was different from what he'd ordered." The farmer wrote a letter of complaint, fatalistically saying, "Well then we have to suffer from such adversities because there's no one higher than he is so he can do whatever he wants with anyone".

Timchuk insisted on personally seeing the victim's wounds and despite all the horrors he'd already witnessed was appalled: "It was something awful. All his body was black and blue." Later, Timchuk was clearly pleased to tell the surprised peasant that Kobylkin had been executed partly as a result of his testimony.

In some of their shenanigans the ill-fated Krasenkov and Tsygankov also roped in Timchuk's own military commander, Voronyansky. The three men were married to sisters and they spent too much of their time partying at their mutual mother-in-law's house. But that wasn't all. Voronyansky's marriage was already married with children. Himself over 40, his new second, wife Lisa Babitskaya was just 22. He figured that since he was probably going to get killed any way he might as well have a good time, so reported Voronyansky's own chief of staff Captain Sergin who had worked with Timchuk to try to block these bigamous weddings.

Timchuk wrote: "Women are used wrongly in partisan groups. Usually they work as cooks or `wives,' [that is, paramours] of officers. These `wives' have a bad influence on fighters who try to get better food and good clothes from local people. When you take boots, pans, and a

shirt from a civilian you are already halfway to disaster. But when you take a woman's dress from a family it really causes anger."

Local Byelorussian women who shacked up with the Russian officers were able to provide their relatives well with material goods. Chief of Staff Yakov Chumakov, one of "Voronyansky's lickspittles," even ordered two partisans to find his wife two outfits, a mission resulting in the death of one of them, a soldier named Egorov.

Sergin disgustedly reports that Voronyansky's wife was awarded the Order of the Red Star for "sleeping with the commander and cooking for him." While Voronyansky had organized a coterie of "lickspittles" which always backed him up, the medal affair nearly split the group. Some asked to hold a meeting to discuss the issue; about three dozen others just transferred to other units. Voronyansky got away with it, was promoted to colonel, and tried to get rid of Timchuk, who he'd obviously recognized as a party-pooper. That was a big mistake on his part given their relative standing with the party and NKVD. Only the fact that Voronyansky was killed in the August 1943 plane crash saved him from being called to account.

It is no mere cliché to say that Russians are fond of vodka and "hard drinking is the biggest evil of the partisan movement," Timchuk complained. In spring 1943 he sent all commanders an order "to disarm and arrest drunkards." Any local farmers who made alcohol could be sentenced to death, though this was never enforced. Indeed a Byelorussian journalist sagely noted much later, "It does not seem that such restrictions could frighten people who were on the edge of death. It would have been more dangerous to follow the orders and face angry men demanding vodka."

Strong drink became even more important because the partisans had so few opportunities for entertainment. One of the rare such chances was when they captured a camel that had been part of the private zoo for a landowner whose estate they raided. Their chef suggested cooking it as it would feed the whole unit but most thought it would make a better mascot than meal. They put posters on the hump, on one side reading, "Death to the German occupiers!" and on the other, "Danger! Mines!" in Russian and German. Then they released the camel just outside a town with a German garrison.

This was an occasion when misinforming the enemy was welcome. But for the partisans it was unacceptable to lie about their own operations.

On one occasion, a People's Avengers company commander named Sergey Prochko was given a detachment of ten partisans and sent on a mission. "Instead of completing the task he spent a month going from one village to another because he needed to find boots for his wife." After returning to camp he was awarded the Order of the Red Star.

Reporting exaggerated accomplishments was commonplace. In early summer 1943, a group of partisans commanded by a soldier named Drapek blew up a train. They claimed to have having destroyed a locomotive and 14 cars. Timchuk wrote sarcastically:

"In an hour this report had been revised to say 19 cars were destroyed. After conversing with the commander, Krasenkov, the next version of the report said that 39 cars had been blown up." This number was raised to 64 cars. Meanwhile, another unit claimed to have blown up the same train with 57 cars."

Worst of all was military incompetence. Here's a critical report by Timchuk from May 1943, at the start of the German offensive:

"There was complete confusion among the officers. The worst was in the People's Avengers and another brigade. Two 'heroic' officers retreated. The first left ammunition and TNT behind in his camp. The second lost his radio operator. The local people were quite critical of us. A group of farmers told us: `If you're running from the Germans, give us guns. We'll defend ourselves.'"

The modern age seems to hate heroism. Nothing about these failures and human frailties really detracts from what the partisans achieved. It does not prove they were not heroes but only that they were human, that power corrupts, that always some men are bad, and that all need proper discipline and supervision. Indeed, these stories show that the great majority who resisted temptations were even more heroic and devoted than they've been given credit for.

There's something else that stands out here as well. Abuses were conducted by Soviet citizens who were ethnic Russians, products of the Stalinist system. Far from home, they'd escaped the dictatorial restrictions under which they lived while having the chance to become little dictators themselves. Moreover, living it up was justified by hard struggles and constant brushes with death which meant they soon might not be living at all.

For the Jews among the partisans, though, this war was serious business. These men were not careerists looking for enrichment or promotion. And for them words like "fascists" were no mere slogans. They were in it for three things: survival, winning the war and destroying the Nazis; and revenge on those directly responsible for murdering their people and their own families. As the first two goals were fulfilled, the importance of the third goal rose, especially for Sigalchik:

"The need to get revenge on all the killers without uniforms who were running free, people who were our neighbors and then became our killers, could not let go of me. So I used every free day. I had to get revenge."

His first step was to ask Timchuk to let him find the killers in the village of Kamin. Here is this little place again, where my family worked 300 years ago, where Cybulski saved so many lives, the place by the river that helped Jewish refugees get across the river to the partisan. But it also harbored some of the killers who had gone into Dolhinov to help the Germans and to loot.

And there was one man in particular Sigalchik wanted, who stood out even amidst the many collaborators and murderers: Jan Ruzietski.

Ruzietski was the man, who out of hatred or for reward, had gone to the Germans to tell them how to find a group of refugees, mainly old people and children, fleeing Miyadal under the Blechmann's leadership. Due to his deeds, 37 died, many of them Sigalchik's friends or acquaintances.

Timchuk sighed and said, "If we will spend this time taking revenge, we will have to punish about 90 percent of the population for collaborating with the enemy on the killings. You can go to Kamyin and bring Jan Ruzietski here, but you must not kill him. All I will allow you to do is to beat them up so they will remember that they must respect human beings."

For once, Timchuk was speaking outside the Marxist perspective that seemed to govern his life. This was not in the framework of some class struggle where the masses were rising up

against the fascist aggressors. It was the cynical view of a man who had seen too much human nature break the proper boundaries, even among his closest comrades.

Sigalchik later wrote, "I understood his message."

But I'm not quite sure what Sigalchik meant. The most obvious reading was that Timchuk was saying something like, Do what you want but I'm not responsible for it. Or: Let him be shot trying to escape.

Yet I'm not quite sure. If Sigalchik accurately recorded the conversation he certainly wasn't saying: Bring him in for trial. So perhaps Sigalchik's implication was right. Yet given later events—and Sigalchik must have known where this would lead—I still have my doubts.

At any rate, Sigalchik took ten men and arrived at the village around midnight. They simply knocked on the door of Ruzietski's house. An old woman was there and told him Ruzietski wasn't. He slept in Dolhinov, perhaps because he felt safer under German protection, or maybe for some extraneous reason, one of a thousand details authors should not be careless in assuming.

Disappointed, Sigalchik went on to his secondary target, the Novtisky family who had looted the Jews of Miyadel. Once again, he knocked on the door and it opened. Sigalchik ordered them to return their ill-gotten gains. Only when his men started the beatings did they bring out items. Three later died from their injuries. Hidden from behind the oven came clothes stained with blood, the boots of little children, the dresses of women.

Ruzietski would have to wait.

Was what Sigalchik did wrong? It certainly was against orders. All the details I don't know, but these people continued to be German informants, activity the partisans punished with the death sentence. Death for looting seems excessive; death for involvement in mass murder seems right. Sigalchik's next case was beyond question.

A man named Ignolia lived in the village of Dubricka. He and his daughter helped the Nazis by informing on Dolhinov's Jews and then robbed the victims. In the summer of 1942, he met a young Jewish woman from Dolhinov named Resa Schmerkovicz who had escaped from the ghetto. He beat her up, stole her money, tied her up and tortured her. Then she took her into Dolhinov and turned her over to the Germans and local police who tortured her to death. This story reminds us of why Jews simply didn't flee into the countryside.

In February 1943, Sigalchik's group knocked on the door of Ignolia's house. An old woman opened the door and said he was sick. Sigalchik replied with bitter irony that he had with him a doctor who could cure any illness and pointed to one of his men, David Glasser, who looked like he might be of the medical profession.

They found Ignolia leaning on the oven with his head covered by a wet towel. When Sigalchik ordered him to stand, Ignolia said he had typhus and couldn't. So Sigalchik and one of his soldiers named Menashe Kaye pulled him up by his hair. Glasser counted blows as they hit him while Sigalchik recounted his crimes. So important was Ignolia as a German informant that a large party of police came and took him to the hospital in Dolhinov. But he died the next day.

And then in mid-March 1943, Sigalchik was made commander of the brigade medical unit, with 12 armed partisans under him to ensure the hospital and patients' security and gather food and supplies for them. This allowed Sigalchik to travel around the countryside where he wished, giving him ample opportunities to pursue his other, self-assigned mission.

One day in the fall of 1943, Segalchik with Avraham Friedman and two other men was sent on a foraging expedition near German-held Krivichi. They decided to enter Protniki village,

which partisans had always avoided because it was near a German army barracks. There resided a family named Kamaiko which had helped to catch and kill many Jews. Leaving the supply wagons nearby, the partisans broke into the house and found it full of furniture, money and other stolen goods.

They gathered up anything useful for the hospital then beat up the thieves, only stopping due to lacking official permission to shoot them. Later, Sigalchik found that one had died and the rest had been hospitalized for a long time. He felt some justice had been done but did not intend to stop there.

Once again Sigalchik's thoughts turned to Ruzetski and he had some new information. Friendly villagers, whose lives were also threatened by the informers' activities, told Sigalchik that Ruzetski often slept at his aunt's house in Kamyunka. Early one morning, Sigalchik led a detachment there. A young man of about 20 years old was sleeping there. The woman claimed he was her son. Sigalchik said that if this was her son she should be punished, too. She admitted he was her husband's nephew.

Sigalchik tied Ruzetski's hands behind his back and took him to villagers who affirmed that he was the one who was the German agent in Dolhinov who'd had betrayed the Miyadel refugees.

"You can choose your death," Sigalchik told him, "If you will confess immediately we will shoot you. If not, we will cut you up." He said nothing, so they took him to the river, where the Myadel refugees had been killed.

When they got there, with the rushing water's incongruously soothing sound contrasting with the tension of the small group of men, Sigalchik ordered, "Tie his legs together!" They threw the rope over a high branch on a pine tree and hauled on it so Ruzetski was hanging upside down. While he was kicking and screaming, a couple of Sigalchik's men searched the area and collected torn pieces of clothing still there from the murdered Miyadel victims. Two more gathered dry sticks. The last remnants of his victims were used to kindle a fire under him. The fire flared up and Ruzetski died horribly as the partisans watched. In Sigalchik's words, "He was burned next to his victims' graveyard. We stuck a document to the burnt pine tree that said, `Revenge of the People,'" both a sentiment and the appropriate name of their unit.

Strange what had happened to the quiet, passive Jews of Dolhinov who for centuries had never engaged in violence, always turned the other cheek. Later, when almost all of them were dead, the world professed to have liked them that way. But it did not protect them in that habitat and so, on the verge of extinction, they had to change their ways to survive at all.

It would have been easy for Sigalchik to turn over the collaborators and agents to the partisans for trial. But then it would have been the Soviets who were dealing out justice. What were they to him? Why should a new dependence be placed on still another foreigner's will by people no longer accepting powerlessness as a badge of honor?

Still, if I had been there I would have simply put a bullet through Ruzetski's head. Such actions, it should be remembered, were not mere revenge but also part of the war effort, to destroy the Germans network of informants.

Finally, Sigalchik was ready to go after the main murderers in Dolhinov itself: Mikhail Proclowicz and the Tarahovitz brothers who he described as "men who showed no mercy, not even to children." Gathering intelligence, Varovka, a villager who hated them, found out that Proclowicz had returned to his farm after a year in hiding, assuming that he was now safe.

One clear, cold night in December 1943, Gershon Yafeh, Biyanish Kuzinitz, Dimka Traikovsky and Sigalchik travelled by sled to Proclowicz's home. They knocked on a window and he opened his door clad in fur coat and boots, surprised to be facing their gun barrels. "Hands up! Get inside!" they ordered. Sigalchik recounted what happened next:

"We turned on lights, and when he recognized us he started shaking. He begged us not to shoot him, but he saw that his death was coming. I asked him how many Jews had he killed and where were all the possessions that he had stolen from his victims. I ordered him to return everything, saying, `If you will return all that we want, we won't kill you. We'll just beat you up.'"

"He called his wife and told her to return all the possessions from the hideout, which he'd buried in a deep hole in the ground, which was covered with snow. We sent one of our men with her to check on it, and we found a large amount of robbed possessions about a hundred meters from the house. I became furious. I yelled, `Confess and tell us how many Jews you killed! How many mothers asked for mercy for their babies?' I started cursing at him violently and uncontrollably. I was crazed. `You must take responsibility and die the death due to an evil and wretched person.' I shot him in his head and he dropped dead."

Now came his last, most important revenge on the murderers of his own mother. In May 1942, Sigalchik's mother along with Gashka and Nyakha Katzowitz were fleeing to the forest. The Tarhovitz brothers and Dolhinov's police chief chased them down on bicycles and forced them back to town, beating them on the way. After hours of torture they were shot near the Jewish cemetery. Segalchik had also seen personally their involvement in the death of the Shimshel, Dukshitzi, and Leviczi families.

But how? They lived on Dolhinov's far edge right next to a house which had been turned into the main German stronghold. Sigalchik bided his time. Finally, an opportunity came to him. In mid-February 1944 an important delegation was coming to the brigade's headquarters and he was asked to get supplies for properly feeding the guests. Sigalchik told an officer that this was a very difficult mission and there was no place near the base such luxury items could be found. He'd have to take a force into Dolhinov of 16 men in order to assure success.

The plan was approved and he was given a squad headed by Major Tzonkov plus the four most trusted men from his own unit. At sunset they left on four large sleds harnessed to fast horses, arriving near Dolhinov at 10 pm. After Sigalchik paid a short visit with his informant, Varovka, they deployed near the large home of the Tarhovitz brothers. Two snipers were detached to watch the road to the center of town and the German barracks, ready to pin down with accurate fire anyone coming from that direction.

The assault team went on to the Tarhovitz brothers' compound. The pounded on the door, ordering those inside to open the door, turn on the lights, and close the curtains. Forcing their prisoners to open the cowshed and horse stables, Segalchik delegated six men to herd the six cows and four horses to the forest. The other four partisans loaded bread, lard, flour, salt, beans, and other foods onto the sleds. They also took pillows, blankets, and sheets looted from Jewish homes for use in the hospital.

Then Sigalchik ordered the brothers, barefoot and dressed only in their underwear outside. They were forced to run along with the retreating raiding group through the freezing winter night. The wives of the kidnapped men began to scream and the confused Germans next

door opened up with automatic weapons. But it was too late. The group was already outside town and racing away at top speed. After they were in the clear, Sigalchik quickly ordered the procession onto a side road, shot the two men right in front of the surprised Tzonkov and his men--who had no idea what Sigalchik was doing--and headed back to their base as fast as possible.

Sigalchik, having procured ample supplies, thought all was well and returned to the hospital. He was surprised the next morning to be summoned to headquarters. Tzonkov had reported the shootings, which seemed random acts of violence in what was supposed to be just a food-gathering mission. The top officers of the People's Avengers brigade and the Kutuzov brigade, responsible for Dolhinov, were standing inside staring at him with hostility. Sigalchik snapped to attention and saluted, "Commander of the hospital unit here as ordered, sir!"

The officers had no idea of why Sigalchik had acted as he did during the raid. The brigade commander asked, "Who gave you permission to shoot two peaceful residents?"

He replied:

"No one gave me permission. My conscience and my need for revenge gave me liberty to do that. I only did what was my duty, which was to get revenge for my murdered mother and my people who fell at the hands of those two cruel, evil murderers who you called peaceful citizens. They killed my mother, my sister and Jewish brothers. They were wading elbow-deep in the blood of Jews. I had to do it, and I did it as a loyal son to my mother and my nation."

If Sigalchik recorded his words accurately, it was curious he used the phrase "my nation," which would have been enough to have him condemned for reactionary nationalism and shot even if he'd done nothing else. I suspect that is what he thought but did not actually use that phrase. He knew that everything had to be justified in the interest of the Soviet, not Jewish, people. And that, of course, was part of the bind that the Jewish partisans and refugees were caught in.

The commander called his assistant and ordered him to be arrested and his pistol confiscated. And so, under guard, Sigalchik was taken off to the brig, a dark, dank mud hut. Sigalchik thought his good record and many friends among top officers would protect him. Still, he also had no regrets and told himself that if the worst came, "I will not be afraid. I will look them straight in their eyes before my death."

After a few hours, the head of the NKVD unit, Girshenko, came to interrogate him. Sigalchik saw this as a good omen since Girshenko was an old friend he'd once cared for in the hospital. The secret policeman asked for Sigalchik's account of what had happened and wrote it down in his file. As he left, Girshenko chortled, "Don't worry, Segalchik. Everything will turn out ok."

The prisoner was taken back to the brigade office, with all the top officers standing there. And a junior commissar made a speech:

"Your crime was very severe as far as the political managing and morals accepted by us. Even if those men deserved a capital punishment, you were forbidden from doing it in such a way. The way you did it vilified the image of our cause and its struggles in the eyes of the population, which is being oppressed by an invading force. I have no doubt that you deserve the most severe punishment. Talking truthfully we must put you through a quick trial here in the

field, and I have the authority to give you a summary execution. But when I look at your past, which is clear of all crimes and I take into account all your great deeds and achievements in the fight of our Soviet Union, and consider your service to the brigade of partisans that you belong to, we have decided to forgive your huge crime with a warning that you must never in the future do what you have done."

Not long after, on June 26, 1944, the People's Avengers linked up with the advancing Red Army. And eight days later, Dolhinov was liberated from the Germans though not necessarily liberated by the Soviets.

Hearing that Dolhinov had been recaptured, some of the Peoples' Avengers partisans took teenaged Esther Telis, the last survivor of her immediate family, back there. She was the first Jew to return openly in more than two years. Looking for her family home, she found only an empty lot. A neighbor family whose son was in the police had taken it apart and reassembled it on their own property.

The little girl could not visualize demanding back her whole house, and there was no one left to live in it. But at least she could get something back. Those who collaborated were now afraid of the ghosts they had helped persecute. Having merely served in the collaborationist police now carried with it a death sentence. Telis marched up to the policeman's mother, sitting outside watching her every step closer with clear hatred and growing dismay. Right in front o her, Esther stopped and announced in a loud voice: "I know you have my bicycle so give it to me or else!"

"Ï have it! I have it!" the woman admitted with panic in her voice and ran to get the bicycle. She quickly brought it out and handed it to Telis. And so Esther, who lived temporarily outside town with the peasant family that had hidden her, possessed no family, no home, and seemingly no future, but at least she could feel like a queen, riding around on her bicycle after so many months of concealing herself behind a stove, marching through the forests, and hiding in the swamps. She soon headed westward.

One night during that terrible time during the war when survival for another year had seemed as if it would be the most marvelous of all miracles, Esther had pondered the future and decided, "If anybody survives this war everybody will love everybody and it will be a real utopia." But within a year of the war's end she would be hiding from a pogrom in Poland.

That same collapse of expectations, or at least disappointment of hopes, came to many in those days. Despite the commissar's fine words at Segalchik's trial, the Soviets had never been particularly picky about legality or courteous in their treatment of Poland's people. Even before the Germans had been expelled from eastern Poland, Soviet authorities were announcing that their 1939 annexation of eastern Poland was valid. The Poles still rejected this but were powerless to do anything.

Hitler had been defeated but the Polish-Russian battle to follow was conducted in the same spirit as Germany's pre-war aggressions. Stalin demanded almost half of Poland, all the land he'd seized with his Nazi allies in 1939. Beyond that, he was imposing his direct control on Poland itself. The Soviet goal was Poland's destruction as a truly independent nation, whether or not it still appeared on the map. Unwilling to confront their needed Soviet ally--either to disrupt the war effort or end up having to fight a new one--the United States and Britain agreed. No one bothered to inform the Poles themselves, who continued to fight heroically believing they were liberating their country.

In July 1944, the Polish underground in Warsaw rose in rebellion, ironically the same day the Polish Armored Division arrived in France to fight its way home. The Polish Home Army knew the Soviets were just a few miles away and assumed they would continue to advance, leaving the Poles themselves in control of their capital. Instead, Stalin ordered his armies to stand still for six weeks until the Germans crushed the rebellion.

Moscow turned down British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's appeals to at least let Allied planes drop supplies for the Poles. The same goal that shaped Soviet collaboration with the Nazis to partition Poland still prevailed. Except now, with no other dictatorship to split with, Stalin wanted everything for himself. The Americans and British did not have much trouble accepting Stalin's demanded border rather than endanger their alliance while Hitler was still in power and perhaps start a new war afterward.

Dolhinov was back in the USSR or, more specifically, in the BSSR—the Byelorussia Soviet Socialist Republic.Most of the Jews who had survived in the Dolhinov area wanted to sail away from Europe altogether, tired of fighting other people's battles while being unwelcome guests in other's people's countries. They wanted to go to the land of Israel. But that, too, would be a long and perilous road and some would remain unwilling guests of the Soviet Union for more than a dozen years more.

Belarus was so devastated that it would take fifty years for the population to return to the prewar level. Indeed the region might have been more damaged by the fighting than any other place in Europe. One-third of its people had been killed, deported, or fled; half of those left were homeless. The Jewish population had fallen by 80 percent. Of 900,000 Jews, 700,000 had died and few of those who survived would ever return. The gaps were filled by ethnic Russian settlers.

As for those few Jews who wanted to return to the shtetls where would they live and how could they make a living? Their homes had been destroyed or stolen by neighbors who disassembled building to fix their own houses, or even physically moved the small houses onto their own property. To get stolen property returned was almost impossible. One returning Jewish refugee girl marched up to a neighbor and successfully demanded back her bicycle by implying she'd turn them in as looters otherwise. A young man who demanded his family's house back was shot dead by a Soviet soldier, bribed with a bottle or two of vodka by the neighbors who'd seized the property.

As for businesses nationalized by the Soviets in 1939 or even the surviving synagogue buildings and ritual bath, these were now state property and there was no hope of having them returned. Religious structures built and paid for by the community were now warehouses.

For Sigalchik, now working for the NKVD, bitterness was mitigated by the reuniting of his family. His daughter, hidden with a peasant family during the war, was returned to him. In October 1944, he was summoned to town hall; told, "Your wife is alive!;" and handed a postcard from her. With great excitement and shaking hands he read the note written in Stalingrad and was elated. After some months he received permission to go bring her back with him. Her father-in-law who Segalchik once rescued, however, had died in a partisan camp during the war.

Only ten Jewish families returned to Dolhinov--three dozen people where there'd once been a hundred times that number. Among them were Sigalchik and Avraham Friedman. None of the deported Poles came back. So many had left, so many died, so much destroyed, that the once-thriving town was now little more than a large village.

Sigalchik gave Dolhinov's eulogy: "Alone, I walked along the ruins. Nothing was left of my mother's house. The town had once excited our hearts with its colorful character, giving us once-youthful dreamers hopes a better future, but now it lay under my feet, burnt and silent."

Was there, however, a better future under Communism? The BSSR united eastern Belarus, under Soviet rule since 1917, with the western lands ruled by Poland until 1939. Before the war, the Belarus Communist party in the Soviet sector had been 21.6 percent Jewish, though they comprised only 8 percent of the whole population. By 1945, however, after their decimation and the party's expansion, Jews were only 9.2 percent of members. But Jews held many good jobs, being 16 percent of professional employees in the BSSR's scientific and cultural institutions; 23 percent in media and publishing.

There were elements here of the traditional social pattern in which Jews had little or no political power but filled middlemen roles. As in Poland before the war, these were jobs other groups wanted so traditional antisemitism mixed with economic resentments.

Unlike pre-war Poland, however, the Communist system claimed to integrate all peoples on an equal basis. Nationalism and religious distinctions were not permitted subjects of conversation in the USSR even though this was the true nature of the conflict. Instead, though, antisemitism traveled under the guise of ideology. Jews had been reviled in Poland as agents of Communism. Now, in the USSR, they would be persecuted as alleged agents of capitalism. Equally, having abandoned language, religion, and community from a mix of Communist convictions, repression, and indoctrination, Soviet Jews were now charged with being nationalists who put their people's own interests first.

The state refused to recognize them as a community. Thus, no special Jewish suffering or contribution to the victory could be mentioned in their defense. As a result, Jews were accused of having been shirkers and cowards who'd done little to win the war. Since the Shoah was also a banned topic, Jewish victims could request no special help or compensation. Monuments to the dead merely mentioned "peaceful civilians" or "Soviet citizens." No inscription could be in Hebrew or Yiddish.

As for religion, it was no longer supposed to exist. In effect, Judaism itself was banned. Only three synagogues were allowed to be open in all of Belarus, and those all in big cities, inaccessible to anyone living in towns. Kosher food, matzot, religious weddings or funerals, the training of rabbis, the education of children, and the production of religious literature were all either illegal or virtually impossible. Only the Nazis had undertaken such a systematic suppression in modern times.

On top of all this, it was forbidden for Jews to make accusations of antisemitism since this was defined by the regime as existing only under capitalism and something which no longer existed in the worker's homeland. Jews as individuals might do well—albeit, in many cases, only temporarily—but as a group they were helpless, dependent on the good will of the state and the majority population to a greater extent than under Polish rule.

In August 1946, the Soviet Communist party's chief ideologue, Andrei Zhdanov followed by decisions of the Central Committee opened the assault by criticizing Jewish writers for lacking proper ideology and displaying nationalism. An anti-Jewish campaign was launched blaming Jews for being too interested in their own heritage, pro-Western, and undermining Soviet (which really meant Russian, or in Belarus, Byelorussian) culture.

While Soviet paranoia was intensified by Israel's creation as a Jewish state, this does not explain a campaign against Jews and antisemitic policies which began well before Israel's independence in 1948 and even at a time when the USSR supported it.

In fact, far from being only a product of Stalin's personal paranoia, the campaign was actually a continuation of Czarist-era antisemitism with the additional factor of seeking to make the regime more popular with ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians. It also revived the traditional Jewish paradox. On one hand, Jews were accused of being "rootless cosmopolitans," that is, in effect, not real Russians. On the other hand, they were accused of being bourgeois nationalists, that is, in effect, real Jews.

The ethnic conflict had been cushioned and limited for centuries by Dolhinov's tri-national society and largely by Poland's laissez-faire policy. Then the Germans had launched an all-out war on the physical existence of Jews. Now the Soviets sought to break the identity of the Jews as people and religion while also destroying the professional advantages they had achieved through hard work and education. This goal was pursued by the destruction of all religious, social, and educational institutions as well as by banning their language, Yiddish.

If anyone might have led an organized protest, it was Salomon Michoels, director of the Moscow Jewish Theater, and chairman of the Jewish Antifascist Committee of the USSR. That is precisely why Stalin ordered him murdered by staging a phony auto accident in January 1948 during Michoels' visit to Minsk. The committee was dissolved and Michoels posthumously denounced as a traitor. In Belarus, remaining Jewish cultural institutions were closed; Jews working in the mainstream ones were fired.

In the film industry, for example, Soviet leaders accused Jews of bringing "alien" influences. Alien nominally meant capitalist and not Communist, but what it really meant was: Western, not Slavic; Jewish, not Russian. Jewish officials were accused of incompetence, greed, venality, nepotism, and pursuing selfish national aims to the detriment of the people's interests. For some reason, their non-Jewish colleagues seemed to evince none of these characteristics.

In 1947 the BSSR's Minister for Cinematography Nikolai Sadkovich complained that Jewish employees prevented the employment of Byelorussians, presumably by holding the jobs themselves. He demanded that Jewish directors be fired and replaced by politically proper—that is, non-Jewish—cadre. If those now hired were not qualified professionally, it was more important that they were qualified by their ethnic background.[v]

Sigalchik was among those who lost their jobs in these purges. One day he was called into headquarters and fired on the grounds that he had relatives living outside the country, a rule often used to get rid of Jews. This was just the beginning. Having lost his family's house in Dolhinov, Sigalchik had built a new one in Radishkovicz, a nearby village He had hired people to help in this work, including a German prisoner-of-war (tens of thousands of them were kept for years in the USSR after the war). Now Sigalchik was charged with the criminal offense of using a prisoner for personal profit. He was sentenced to a long prison term.

The irony was thick. Having risked his life on behalf of the USSR for four years in wartime, he had now lost his own freedom to it. In prison, he found that most of the other inmates were Jews who'd also been purged and arrested. Soon, he was sent as a slave laborer to sub-Arctic Siberia, helping to build a bridge in hellishly icy weather. But by this time, Sigalchik had become an expert on survival. He befriended a prisoner who was a barber and persuaded the man to teach his trade. And so when Sigalchik was transferred to Murmansk, he talked the local

barber—his way smoothed by a bribe--to give him a job as an assistant. And so Sigalchik passed eight years in the Gulag.

Meanwhile, after a brief hiatus, the Soviet anti-Jewish campaign intensified in the winter of 1952-1953 with a bloody outcome. Several dozen Jewish writers and artists were murdered between August 1952 and January 1953, including two Hebrew teachers after whom the street I live on is named as a memorial. Others died in prison. In January 1953 several doctors to the Soviet elite were arrested and charged with murdering some of the country's leaders and planning to do away with others.

Especially in the first three months of 1953, Jews lived once again in an atmosphere of fear within and hatred all around them. As Leonid Smilovitsky, the historian of Belarus Jewry, put it, "The illusion of having re-established a `normal' life after the suffering of the Shoah was painfully shattered." Only Stalin's death in March 1953, many experts believe, stopped wholesale deportations of Soviet Jews.

There is one small detail I find especially chilling. One day during this period, Leon Rubin and other Jews in Dolhinov saw the visit of a delegation of high-ranking KGB officers, who stood out in their expensive, distinctive white shearling coats. They toured the town and made lists of Jews for future arrest and expulsion from the area. It was an eerie reenactment of how the SS used to operate before a massacre, taking a look over those they were about to wipe out.

And yet, such is the power of indoctrination that Leon, the youngest Holocaust survivor in Dolhinov, among the last three Jewish children to grow up there, was so conditioned that he cried when Stalin died. In that new version of that traditional Russian belief that if only the czar knew what was going on he would step in and save the people, Stalin was held blameless for what his underlings were doing. Perhaps this was in part a last refuge of that powerful human self-soothing mechanism we call wishful thinking, the only hope of those who had no other, an echo of those in the ghetto yearning for divine rescue.

For Sigalchik, however, there was a real savior; two of them in fact. While he was imprisoned, his wife and two small children had no source of support and barely hung on to half the house he'd built. His old friend Leib Mindel, whose life he'd saved by going back into the ghetto at great risk to his own life, supported them while also sending food packages to Sigalchik in prison.

After a great deal of hesitation, fearing rejection or worse, he approached his old commander, Timchuk, now a high-ranking government official. Timchuk's reaction was sharp but hostile in a totally different way from what Mindel had feared. Rather than rebuking Mindel for approaching him at all, Timchuk angrily asked, "Why didn't you come sooner?"

Immediately he wrote a request that Sigalchik be pardoned, describing his fighting record and many medals earned. Miraculously, it worked. In May 1956, Sigalchik was released from prison. But he knew there was no future for him in the USSR.

While Sigalchik was running afoul of the KGB, Leon Rubin was growing up Soviet in Dolhinov. His father simply hadn't been able to decide where to go after the war. Returning home was the easiest alternative. Leon was not only active in the Young Communists, he was the group's leader in his high school, which he finished in 1953, the year of Stalin's death.

All that time, Leon realized years later, he'd never visited the Jewish cemetery, where his ancestors were interred, or thought about the site where hundreds of Shoah victims were buried in a mass grave, though he was living just five minutes' walk from those places.

Then everything changed once again. In 1956, the Soviets felt so confident of their domination over Poland that they agreed to allow pre-war Polish citizens to leave the USSR and return there, even if their hometowns were no longer located in that country. No apology or compensation was offered for their being held unwillingly in the USSR for 11 years after the war.

Everyone was eager to get out of the Soviet Union. Ethnic Poles wanted to return to Poland, but Jews thought of it only as a gateway out of Europe altogether. Leon, who'd since taken his master's degree in physics in Vilna, easily shed his youthful indoctrination. His brother Arieh was already in Israel, having literally walked from the USSR to Italy in 1946 to take a ship there. Leon and the rest of the family finally were able to get out of Poland and join him in 1958. He met them at the pier. It was the first time the family had been reunited in 15 years. Leon expected that Israel was all desert and he would be driving a tractor amidst camels. Instead, he became a high school physics teacher.

By the war's end, the Katzovitz family was scattered all over the USSR. Chaia Katzovitz and her mother both wrote Dolhinov's mayor who put them in touch with each other. They didn't find her sister Bushke until 1946. Together they were finally able, in Chaia's words, to go "to reach the place mother determined we should live in during the very dark days" when they had been hiding in the bushes from the Nazis, "We arrived in Eretz Israel."

Everyone who had survived now had their own story of how they escaped from Communist Poland or the USSR. David Shinuk, having been on the Kisilev march, enlisted in the Red Army and was sent to a unit using the new Katyusha rockets. One day, he was ordered to headquarters where a high-ranking officer screamed at him that he was a traitor. The reason was that Shinuk had supposedly served in the Austrian army in World War One fighting the Russians. David logically pointed out that he was only nineteen years old and they'd confused him with his father. It didn't matter. He was told his alternatives were prison or to join the Polish army. He chose the latter.

Returning to Poland after the war and being the only Jew in his unit, he had faced a lot of antisemitism and, in reaction, become very distant from his Jewish roots. He constantly heard that Jews were not "real fighters." Ashamed of being Jewish, on leaving the army in 1946 he registered under a false name as a Polish Catholic. Then one day while on leave, by accident, he met Eli Maisel from Dolhinov. Shocked by Shinuk's story, Maisel convinced him to help the Zionist cause. Shinuk helped Jews escape from Poland, went to Israel himself, and served in the War of Independence.

The last of those Jews who made it back to Dolhinov in the mid-1950s was Chaim Grosbein, whose family had been murdered when he was only six years old, was lost on the march, and survived all by himself in the forest for month. When he finished his service in the Red Army, he only remembered one word from his past: Dolhinov. Arriving there, he knocked on the door of one of the remaining Jewish families. People were shocked as if by seeing a ghost since he looked like his dead father. He, too, made it to Israel where he built a warm and loving family to replace—as much as one can do that—the one he'd lost and barely remembered.

As for Sigalchik, he couldn't wait to get out and at last succeeded in doing so, though this required considerable bribes. And so he ends his autobiography:

"Finally, on October 20, 1958, we arrived in Israel. It would be very difficult for me to express the deep emotions I had when I arrived in the country. A few years later I had a successful farm with cows and other livestock. With the hard toil of my wife and son we were very successful and I was able to give an education to my children. It seems like everything was fine….It seemed that no dark clouds would come to our lives. We would see happiness in our children and grandchildren."

But Sigalchik was not yet able to be at rest. After some years of peace and happiness, he quite ill, had to sell his farm, and move to the dry desert climate in Arad. He died there in 1982.

Almost on that exact day in far-off Minsk, Timchuk also died, on October 17, 1982. He had headed Belarus's Committee for Governmental Planning from 1960 to 1968, and then the State Committee for the Protection of Nature, possibly in tribute to all the years he'd spent in the forest. He remained until the end a deeply pious Communist rather than a careerist accumulating power and wealth for himself. Probably that's why Timchuk never obtained a real position of power in Communist Belarus but instead went into such idealistic pursuits as planning for a better future and environmental concerns. That, too, speaks well of the man.

Vladimir Naumovich Tikhvinsky, one of Timchuk's soldiers who'd gone through the war with him, wrote his former commander on one of those many war anniversary celebration days back in 1975: "If we managed to survive those days as partisans we'll live forever." They will, albeit in memory as among those who once saved the world.

Some months after Timchuk left for that great collective in the sky, Avram and Yochnet Dimenstein died in Dolhinov, the last Jews to live there until the Messiah comes and raises up all those interred on the cemetery hill and the victims of massacres buried together at its foot. In 1971, Dolhinov was downgraded from a town to a village, with only about 1400 people living there. By 2003, now part of the independent country of Dolhinov, there were fewer than 1200.

Among Timchuk's papers were several letters from a woman named Galina Fedorovna Keymakh, the non-Jewish widow of one of his Soviet Jewish officers. David Keymakh had replaced the ailing Timchuk on the August 1943 plane flight that crashed, and thus died in his place, at age 35. For, Galina, Timchuk was one of the few connections she had with her martyred husband.

The same number of years later that her husband had on earth, on his birthday, November 7, 1978, Galina went to a town called Velikie Luki. She walked through a military exercise field into a small memorial park to the war dead: twenty-two columns, each holding small metal plates with the name of an honored hero who'd died for the Soviet motherland. There was dust everywhere, the sound of cars from the nearby street, the noise of live shouting soldiers from a later generation.

Pushing the gate open, she passed through, gravel crunching under her feet. Consulting the memorial book, she found her husband's name. Then she made her way slowly, counting down the rows. If she was weary or overcome by emotions, the state had not provided benches for those mourning its heroes. Galina was obviously a very considerate woman. There was, she noted, no place to leave flowers since they would have blocked the names inscribed at the columns' bottom section.

Her husband's name was listed as being sealed onto the seventh column, sixth line from the top. Yes, this was the one. She stopped, the sound of her steps stirring up the stones of the earth ceased, and her eyes fell and transversed line by line. But it wasn't there. Someone had

unscrewed the plate with his name and taken it off. “I suppose,” she wrote Timchuk, “that is done by people who do not like non-Russian names.” Keymakh had fallen for the motherland but his memory was not wanted there. And then the motherland itself fell.

The Russians had oppressed the Jews; the Poles had either left them in welcome peace or persecuted them; the Germans had killed them. The Soviets harassed or forcibly assimilated them. The Jews had left.

Precisely because the status quo was so largely accepted, hatred had been almost always pushed over the margins, was not central to anyone’s existence. People were too busy living in their own world. Change comes from outside, not inside.

In the czar’s day, the Poles were overshadowed; in those of Polish power it was the Byelorussians’ turn to submit. Then the Soviets arrived and eliminated many of the Poles. Then the Nazis arrived and wiped out the Jews. Finally, the Soviets returned, almost all the remaining Poles fled and the Byelorussians were overwhelmed by a new Russian immigration taking the emptied houses and filling the vacant jobs.

All like some rendition of the Passover song, “Had Gadya,” itself a parable for ancient history’s progression of rulers and regimes:

“Then came the Holy One who
Smote the Angel of Death
Who slew the slaughterer,
Who killed the ox,
that drank the water,
that extinguished the fire,
that burned the stick,
that beat the dog,
that bit the cat,
that ate the goat,
which my father bought for two zuzim.”

Or, if one wishes to adjust it for the history recounted herein,

“Then the Holy One returned home the exiled children and
Smote Stalin,
Who slew Hitler,
Who killed Poland,
that drank the Soviets,
that extinguished Byelorussian nationalism,
that burned the kaiser’s men,
That beat the czars,
That bit the Polish-Lithuanian empire,
That ate still other czars,
And all of them consumed the town,
which my forefathers bought with their blood, sweat, laughter, and tears for 600 years.

But which still lives within me, whether I knew it or not, and the same—adjust for your specific circumstances—is true for you.

As for Dolhinov, it had proved only a temporary abode for those who, one way or another, had gone home at last.

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[i] Professor Franciszek Sielicki. Wrocławskie Studia Wschodnie, Wrocław, 1997

[ii] [43]

[iii] [42]

[iv] The following is drawn from a newspaper series using archival documents, Unknown war // Byelorussian newspaper, 2002 by Ankudo Elena
http://www.belgazeta.by/20021125.46/220050752;
http://www.belgazeta.by/20021202.47/220050752
http://www.belgazeta.by/20021216.49/220090322
http://www.belgazeta.by/20030120.2/060162140

[v] Leonid Smilovitsky, "The Participation of Jews in Life in the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in the Early Post-War Period, 1944-1954."

CHAPTER TEN
Everyone Dies; No One Need Be Forgotten

"There were so many good people at that time. I can't now name everyone. I've forgotten. Our writers should write about such people. Unfortunately our writers keep silence."
--Colonel Ivan Timchuk, Partisan Commander, Memoirs, 1946

When the time came that Joshua Sprayregen decided to leave Dolhinov, he went to see the Hasidic rabbi whom he considered the "wisest man in town." He feared—given the many stories he'd heard--that if he went to America he would cease to be a Jew. "Do not fear," said the rabbi, "you will go to America and you will remain a Jew."

It was a question many were asking from the 1880s on. Few Dolhinov Jews moved to nearer cities, either those of Russia, closed to them by the Czarist regime, or of Poland, which seemed about as remote as the "golden land" across the sea.

The departures of immigrants to America—and later Canada, South Africa, or the land of Israel itself before 1939--were attended with ceremony. On Shabbat, those departing were given the honor of reading from the Torah. As Shlomo Bar Tzvi Milikovsky put it brilliantly in his memoir about growing up in the nearby town of Ivenets:

"All the worshippers watched them with great pity and compassion. Everyone tried to imagine what he would feel like if he were in their shoes, having to leave his beloved wife and children, and go on such a long journey…arriving at a strange land….In the homes people spoke about it the entire day. The women commiserated with the wives of the immigrants, and some broke into tears….

"On Sundays they would get up early, and after prayers and a meager breakfast, they would take their tefilin bag and put it in their satchel, along with a loaf of dark bread…and they left. After some three months the first letter arrived….He…became a presser, for which he earns 8-10 dollars a week, and he hopes to make more."

"The family rejoiced with the letter, and particularly with the 25 dollars…inside the envelope. A few weeks later a second letter arrived, this time with 40 dollars, with a picture of the tailor dressed in a new suit and wearing an elegant hat, his beard trimmed, and his posture upright. As a result, his wife's status in the town grew higher, and the butcher became more attentive to her, whereas before he used to scold her when she asked for a bone, to give the soup some flavor, since the lungs she bought from him had no flavor. Now he gives her a choice cut, and says a pleasant goodbye when she leaves." [i]

Ultimately, tickets arrive for the rest of the family to follow. As the descendant of a family that left in the 1930s wrote, describing things that would have been precisely the same a half-century earlier:

"There was one Shabbos left until she would leave home. Would she ever come back again? Everyone tried to be cheerful….Rachel looked around the table wanting to retain it as an indelible picture. The thought of leaving each one brought with it a painful, choking lump in her throat and a burning, tight feeling in her stomach,

"Rachel's large green trunk was packed and repacked many times….It wasn't easy to say goodbye and she hugged each one in turn and all promised to write. Her mother took her in her

arms and with tears said, `I did not know what a treasure I had.' Her father gently took her to the waiting cart and horse and they made their way to Minsk.

"They arrived at the station as the train was chugging in, the steam blowing with the cold wind….It was one of the most difficult leave-takings of her life. No words would come as they clung to each other. The whistle blew and Rachel jumped onto the train ran into her compartment and pressed her face against the cold windowpane. She looked at her father's dear face, remembering his words. She gave him a tearful smile. Would she ever see him again?"

She didn't. In fact, he died not long after she left and, though inaccurate n the strictest medical terms, it is easy to diagnose the cause of death as a broken heart. Almost no one who left ever saw again those left behind. And when that distance was permanently sealed by the wartime massacres the guilt became too painful to speak again of the Old Country. So that I was told—and many have said the same to me—that I had no relatives who died in the Shoah. My lack of aunts and uncles and cousins could only be assumed to reflect, making an analogy from the much later society around me, the very small numbers of children families had.

"Unfortunately," but typically, writes a descendant of Dolhinov immigrants, Diane Frankel, "I don't have any stories to share of their lives in the `old country.' My Dad died at 60 in 1968. My grandparents spoke hardly any English, only Yiddish….I was a child so I didn't know enough to ask questions. I have vivid memories of them and the very lengthy Seders and Shabbat dinners."

Those dinners were lengthy enough for them to have told her a great deal. And at those Seders how could they read about the Jews leaving another land of bondage and even the passage about how one must answer the questions of children who knew not enough to ask without speaking?

True, they tried to keep to the customs and life they had left, but large parts of that effort quickly dissipated. The necessities of survival and the attractions of their new lives were too powerful. Keeping kosher was hard; shops had to be opened and garments sewn on Shabbat. For them, it was assimilate or starve. In many cases, their children were at least a bit ashamed of their accents or lack of education or awkwardness in negotiating the land of the parents' migration and the children's birth. More often than not, the thread was broken, or at least what survived of their identity, history, and religion were altered and adapted.

The courage of the emigrants did not end with their decision to leave and sail into the unknown. Simon Fine, a Dolhinov immigrant to Canada, finished his yeshiva studies in Minsk, served in the Russian army in World War One, was captured, and badly treated. Arriving after the war in Toronto, he attended one year of high school to learn English, passed his pre-medical exams the following year, and became a doctor. Later, he was the medical director of the city's Jewish hospital, which hired Jewish doctors who would not be employed elsewhere.

Of course, there were those who faced hard times, others who failed to earn a living or simply didn't take to a strange place and returned home. Those who stayed searched out others from Dolhinov. In New York, they founded a synagogue and burial society on the Lower East Side's Ludlow Street, Congregation Beth Abraham Anshei Dolhinow. About 400 were buried together when the time came.

The other main center was Washington DC. There, Dolhinov immigrants, mainly small store owners, joined Ohev Sholom congregation. From 1892 for three decades, their cantor was Moshe Yoelson whose son, as Al Jolson, would become famous as one of America's most famous entertainers in the 1920s and 1930s. He starred in the first fully talking film, "The Jazz Singer," about the contending pulls of assimilation and community. While Yoelson's family wasn't from Dolhinov, the film's true background and ethos was. So in a sense Dolhinov made American cultural history.

In 1887, Leib Rubin was my immediate family's first member to immigrate to America. Avoiding being forced into the Czarist army was clearly a motive—one of his brothers would be taken, the other, my great-grandfather, barely escaped. But his main goal must have been to secure better opportunities and a higher living standard.

His nephew and my grandfather, Yakov Yeremayahu Rubin was born December 15, 1889. A metal worker, whose only education was the heder, making keys was the pinnacle of the craft. When he became an adult he somehow made his way to Bremen, Germany, took passage on the good ship Brandenburg, and arrived in Philadelphia on November 17, 1910. He described himself as being of dark complexion, 5' 6" and 161 pounds, with black hair and brown eyes. In photos, though, he appears as a man of slim build with a mournful, almost ascetic, look in his eye.

The family story is, and on such matters these are true more often than not, that he was following his sweetheart, Chaya Grosbein. Her father opposed the marriage. But he couldn't have been too much of a tyrant since presumably he let two of his daughters go off to the New World. Or did they run away? Possible. Whether Chaya and Jacob agreed to marry before she left with her sister is one thing I will probably never know.

The sisters quickly changed their name to Brown, so thoroughly that I think her own children never knew her actual name. It is a myth that names were changed for immigrants at Ellis Island, a place none of my ancestors ever passed through. The immigrants did it themselves, advised by those who had gone before. But it was not family names that were so often changed but given names, from Yiddish—especially if they weren't the best-known Biblical ones--to names that would be recognizable to English-speakers. Yakov merely became Jacob; Chaya, Anna.

At first, the two sisters went into the grocery store business and when Chaya married Jacob in 1912 the couple set up their own store, all of them just five minutes walk from the U.S. Capitol building There are only three things I inherited from my grandfather: his pocket watch, his ticket stub from the crossing of the Atlantic, and a Congressional pass from the 1920s when he got to sit in the balcony and watch the House of Representatives in action. Of his world view, hopes, and dreams, I know not a word.

Where did they get the capital from to get started so quickly? Certainly not from home. Jacob may have been helped by his uncle; Chaya by her uncle who had also become a grocer. There must have been word about this in Dolhinov as the thing to do. Go West, young man, and open a grocery. The Hebrew and Yiddish word for such an enterprise translates as a place where everything can be found.

A tiny store, a little outlay for stock, generous credit, and willingness to work long hours made this an ideal business for recent immigrants with few marketable skills but a readiness for hard, though not heavy, work and some entrepreneurial skill. That's still true today, as Korean, Indian, and other immigrant show. When I told Albert my local grocer in Tel Aviv the story a century later he understood perfectly.

Twenty years later they moved the small store uptown to a much wealthier neighborhood. A new streetcar went up the road just past their door. Laboring from 7 am to midnight, they lived in a tiny apartment upstairs. But the neighborhood was prospering; they saved their money; and used it to buy property. They even made enough to build a beautiful new home.

Just when all seemed to be going well, though, just eight months after moving into the house, Jacob suddenly died of appendicitis in January 1933, on the precise day Hitler took power in Germany. In his will he left an amount to be paid monthly to his sister and mother. At least, after a quarter-century in America, the former metal-worker and grocer got to be called in his obituary: a "Real Estate Man."

But remarrying Hyman Eckhaus several years later brought in more capital and they built stores on their property in the late 1930s, the work being managed by my father. As war was being fought in Europe, they set up their own company. In 1937, my father went himself to Europe though his itinerary, and whether he ever considered the idea of going to Dolhinov, a place he never set foot in, isn't clear.

According to the family story, he was traumatized by what he saw in Europe on the verge of fascism and genocide—though I don't know whether he went to Germany—and he certainly never had any desire to go back. He never said a word about that and all that remains is a photo of him on a bicycle, a skill he never mentioned possessing, in what looks to be Holland.

By the time I was born, it was too late by eight years. Jewish Dolhinov was all but gone, and behind the Iron Curtain to boot. The old family ties either faded in the 1930s or with the deaths of that immigrant generation, in my family at least though not in others. I didn't know, for example, that the fat boy who bullied me mercilessly all through school was a cousin and no doubt he didn't either. My life would probably have been easier otherwise.

Similarly, except for being told so vaguely, I didn't know that the owner of the big store where we bought shoes or the richest Jewish businessman in Washington were also relatives who had once helped my family when both were of considerably lesser stature. Indeed, the only reason I was born was that one of them got my mother a job in a government agency in 1944, the thing that brought her to Washington in the first place. To have maintained those links would have made our lives richer even if those forgotten relatives hadn't been.

Other Jewish immigrants from Dolhinov were also doing well. In fact, one of the most interesting events of twentieth century Western society and culture was the explosion of talent that would come out of places like that which would transform life and thought. Those talents had been there all along, in a society focused on learning, highly disciplined, extremely adaptive people who knew how to cross class and national lines along with long-stifled ambitions.

Even the rabbis did well. Yakov Kamenetsky, the "Dolhinov Genius" who in 1902 had left to study in Minsk, went to America in 1937. During the next half-century, he taught many who themselves would become great rabbinical scholars. His son heads the yeshiva in Philadelphia and four of his grandsons—two in that area; two in Israel—are also respected rabbis and teachers.

His cousin and fellow student at the Dolhinov yeshiva, Yakov Halevi Ruderman, made the journey to America in 1930, become head of the yeshiva in Cleveland for 54 years. Ruderman even taught some of Kamenetsky's grandsons, while Ruderman's own grandson, David, became professor of modern Jewish history at the University of Pennsylvania and established Judaic studies programs at Yale and the University of Maryland.

This Jewish factor has long been discussed and analyzed, but one original point I might add is this: a lot of these skills must been the re-emergence of abilities from earlier centuries which had gone into hibernation as eastern Europe declined.

It strikes me as partly distasteful to list those of greater celebrity or achievement since that does not show proper respect to people who worked hard, lived honest lives, took care of their families yet did not engage in pursuits conducive to celebration or snobbishness. Out of Dolhinov came pre-World War Two immigrant families whose descendants were distinguished doctors, professors, winners of Grammy awards, the first female commercial airline pilot, and enough professors to staff the faculty of a small university. That applies to those who went to the United States, Canada, and one family to South Africa.

As to those who went to the Land of Israel, they—mainly as farmers, small businesspeople, and when necessary as soldiers-- just built up a country, the one their ancestors had dreamed of for two millennia. That is an impressive enough accomplishment in itself. And a number of descendants of those who had emigrated from Dolhinov to other places in time also find their feet drawn to that land as well. Their pious ancestors—and all of them in Dolhinov were pious--would be pleased to know that.

But I have to relate one specific story. Amidst my research, I start receiving phone calls from a television show, the American edition of a British program on genealogy, which I've enjoyed watching on television in Israel, called, "Who Do You Think You Are?" The theme is to take celebrities and help them discover their ancestry. The ancestors are far more interesting than the bland television personalities usually featured and it's easy to imagine who you'd rather spend an evening with.

The producer have a secret project and won't tell me who they are going to profile. But I, of course, know precisely who is the mysterious guest. Sensationalism almost always triumphs.

I can help them a lot because—as you will see--I know a lot about his family, the Friedmans. In fact, it would make great television and allow the guest star to preen and exploit his connections with military heroes. But while I have heard very nice things about his mother, he has to promote himself denounced and slandered his own people, something each Jew always has as an opportunity, an ultimate career move.

I'm disinclined to get involved, that and the way any contact with television leaves one feeling dirty. The last time I was in this position, I was called by producers interested in making a show using my book about Turkey and the Balkans during World War Two. Great, said I, and what sort of payment did they envision for their making a big profit off my work?

A couple of years later, after having given a talk in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a Turkish professor congratulates me on the show about my book he'd seen on television. What show, I asked in astonishment. He sends me a videotape. They had done it with enough care to avoid a law suit, but with no credit whatsoever.

So I talk with this new crowd feeling suspicion and the exchanges bear out all my negative feelings. Not only do they refuse to discuss any payment for my services—which is always amusing coming from people who make far more money than I do—they want me to sign an agreement not to discuss the subject until the program airs, which could be a couple of years in the future. Finally, they send me the contract, according to which I get nothing but have to pay $5 million if I reveal anything, including all the things I already know.

I say "no." I'll save the story for you. That most notoriously disreputable child of Dolhinov, Jerry Rivers, better known as Geraldo Rivera, will have to fend for himself.

It is 2009. I sit in the parlor of Sigalchik's daughter, Carmella, the only one of his three children who remains alive. It is an elegant house, practically the nicest I've ever seen in Israel, which means it is like a wealthy suburban home in America. Carmela married a bank manager. They live on an old moshav agricultural holding, with three houses on the property. There's even an orchard at the front on the backroad which looks like a street scene in Dolhinov. The one behind their home was lived in by her mother until she died at age 92 in 2007.

When I came in the house and met her for the first time, it was a shock. Carmella looks startlingly like my great-grandmother, dark slightly curly hair with the hairline a slight semi-circle, something I've only seen on my grandmother, her daughter, and a couple of cousins. Unlike her father, she is normal-sized.

We sit on the sofas, drink coffee, and eat pastry. All she knows is what she's read in her father's short memoir and she doesn't remember all of that. So Leon and I fill in Carmella and her husband, who shows a keen interest in the story. His family comes from not far away. And they are about to go on their first trip to those places since she left a half-century earlier. We bicker amiably about details of her family's post-war house and where she lived, claiming improbably—but possibly accurately—to know more than she does.

Then she mentions in passing the piano. The piano stands up against the wall, just inside the front door. It's a simple one, obviously cheaply made and compact yet its light brown, highly polished wood is not unattractive for all that. On it is written "Belarus" in Cyrillic letters. On top are sculptures from distant Africa, a vase of artificial flowers. A banal scene of what some writer from decades past would call bourgeois domesticity if there ever was one.

But this instrument is a memorial to a very close and special friendship, forged in the most horrifying days of 1942 between two men whose survival at that moment was miraculous and whose future was apparently going to be short and dim.

Mindel, too, must have been a remarkable man to have survived as many as five Nazi massacres and his own scheduled execution. Sigalchik had gone back into the ghetto to save him once, and returned to Dolhinov to save him another time when he was wonded. But all salvation in this world is temporary. Mindel died in Minsk in the 1950s. His two sons came to Israel in the 1970s and, of course, looked up the Sigalchik family. Since their daughter was just the right age, the Sigalchiks bought the Mindel family piano which had come through the Iron Curtain and sailed all the way across the Mediterranean.

Stop reading a moment. That is, continue reading but pretend to stop reading. Think of the objects in the room around you. Raise your eyes and move them across in front of you, left-to-right, if you favor the Romance, Germanic, or Slavic languages; right-to-left for the Semitic ones or Yiddish. Examine the objects that meet your gaze. Each one has a history. I have a little Persian brass pot somewhere given to me by an Iranian school friend who died young. I have a pair of scissors that travelled with my grandmother twice across the continent.

What tales they have to tell. So sad we don't care so much about the real stories, preferring to be entertained by the made-up ones. So sad we are not more obsessed to know the stories about ourselves, preferring to be entertained by those of others who not only we've never met but who often don't exist at all.

Yet sometimes those stories are too terrible to recall. Sigalchik wasn't able to save his mother or his sister, but he knows he could have done things slightly differently. A shift of five minutes or ten on the night he fled the ghetto and all would have turned out in some other way. Does the film run through his head continuously or does he fight it off? That is why some men resort to alcohol. Sigalchik had his own will power.

But he and his wife did not want to recall and they did not want to pass on those stories. Who transplants nightmares to loved ones? They hardly ever spoke of those years, said nothing. Not almost nothing; not just a few things. No, nothing at all, not a word.

For that generation the goal was to preserve their new lives intact, to exterminate the horror. Not to think about it; not to speak about it. The nightmare must die so what must sometimes have seemed like a daydream could live. So their children could be secure and happy. In a few days, Carmella will return to the places in Europe where her father walked, ran, hid, and fought, for the first time since leaving them almost a half-century earlier. One reason for the delay was that she'd been caring for her mother for a very long time, to whom sixty-five more years were granted, because Yigal was able to save her.

I ask to see the family photo book. This one is plastic-covered, small and relatively cheap compared to the many others I've seen, probably it had been the property of her mother. There are photos of both sides of the family, group shots of the 1920s and 1930s, her mother as a young woman looking very serious; of the two brothers as students in Vilna, one is wearing the small glasses that marked intellectuals in those days; there is a tiny photo of Yigal, probably from his Soviet identity card, and a couple with family before they left the USSR. Sigalchik is wearing a white shirt of stupendous size that floats down his side like ski slopes on a snow-covered mountain. Then more snapshots in Israel, at a certain point turning magically to color, adding in new generations.

To have seen him fully enraged must have been terrifying and there are men who died because of that. But I sense his daughter has never viewed him in that mood, something else he had put behind him forever.

But at last, just before the candy-colored Kodachrome begins its somewhat acid assault on the eye, there it is. What I've been looking for. It is 1980, the last picture probably ever taken of him. Sigalchik holds his baby granddaughter, his wife and daughter stand in front of him, behind him is his cattle pen. He is on his own land, underneath his vine and fig tree, as the Bible puts it.

He is wearing work clothes. After arriving in Israel, Sigalchik was asked if he would like to open a small grocery store. He replied, "It is better to deal with cattle rather than customers." Like many big men, Sigalchik knows how to be gentle, has trained himself in that art. The huge man has his strong hands protectively around the tiny baby's legs, holding her firmly, as he had held his own little daughter—the baby's aunt--40 years earlier after he took her down from the horse on which she'd been carried through the war-torn countryside. Did he think, too, of that moment?

Yet there were too many images on the other side inside his head: the death of his mother, his sister and her family, of so many friends, of so much revenge, of so much bloodshed. There was even the death of that very rescued little first daughter of pneumonia in 1948, only six years after she'd been swept up onto that fairy-tale horse to what passed for safety in 1942.

How could this country boy from Dolhinov, married only at age 30, owning almost no possessions and losing all of those, imagine that his grand-daughter would grow up to marry the son of Israel's parliament speaker, work for the Foreign Ministry in Mauretania, and then be employed by the Tourism Office, trying to convince people to visit the country which was his first real and final home and refuge.

Nevertheless, in the picture, Yakov Sigalchik is smiling. There is one thing in particular that Carmella recalls her father saying repeatedly, a favorite phrase: "It's enough what I have. I don't want more."

There remained for me, after all this, one more duty. Of all the children of Dolhinov after that victory parade in Minsk in July 1944, none remained unaccounted for. All had either been murdered by the Germans and their collaborators, or died fighting in the partisans, or had lived mostly to come to Israel.

Yet there was one remaining, a young man who I felt unaccountably close to, who had come from afar and been caught up in the tale of our town. His name was Joseph Blechman, or as I was to learn more fully Joseph Abraham ben David Blechman, the Estonchik.

Everyone had liked him; all respected him. Far from his own family and his own small town, which was no doubt suffering their own torments, he had helped so many others' lives, including two of my cousins.

And to be honest, too, I wanted to test both my abilities and the resources we have today. Could a man who disappeared be traced after two-thirds of a century when virtually no one remembered his name at all? Did some trace remain of a man brave and upright?

Blechman, as I now know, was born in 1920 in Rakvere, Estonia. The family must have been poor. His uncle was a shoemaker. He had seven years of schooling and then went to work at the age of 16. At 20 he was drafted into the Soviet army, which had only recently annexed his home country. At 21 he fought in Poland against the invading Germans and was captured. At 22 he escaped and through a chain of circumstances I will tell about in my book, "Zosia of Estonia," as he was nicknamed, participated in saving the lives of around 200 Jews, including two of my relatives and a number of people I have met who still live today.

As a partisan he survived a deadly ambush when Germans shot down almost 40 unarmed Jewish refugees he was trying to escort to safety, smuggled Jews out of ghettoes in several towns, fought with tremendous courage, and earned the admiration of all those around him. Promoted to sergeant in the Jewish platoon of the People's Avengers, he participated in many battles. People who knew him described him as handsome, sweet, and innocent, naive despite all he'd been through, as kind as he was courageous.

Here is how Avraham Friedman, himself a man of tremendous bravery and intelligence said of him:

"The Estonchik was very famous among all the survivors in the area….He was a real brave guy and helped rescue many Jews from the ghettoes, from Kriviczi to Ilya to Kurenets, and also Dolhinov, Myadel, and Globocki. He was everywhere. He was always walking in the forest….He planned many transfers of Jews across the front. He somehow always knew how to escape from the Germans."

In July 1944--almost exactly 65 years ago today--he participated in the liberation of Minsk, which effectively ended the war in Belarus. All the other partisans were mustered into regular units which went on to capture Berlin. But alone of them Joseph disappeared. No one knew what happened to him. Few remembered his name, though my cousin Leon Rubin discovered it.

I was determined to find him. Since there had never been more than 5,000 Jews in Estonia, the task seemed possible.

By an amazing coincidence, I had just that day received a new book by Efram Zuroff, the hunter of Nazi war criminals who lives in Jerusalem. There is a whole chapter on Estonia. He referred to his expert on that country, a man named Yakov Kaplan, who lives twenty minutes

from me. Zuroff couldn't have been friendlier or more helpful. When I mentioned Kaplan's name, he laughed warmly. I was soon to discover why.

Kaplan seemed like the ultimate Yiddish altekokker, a wonderful type of whom few remain. He pounced on my question and wouldn't let me go until he had gleaned every possible fact and then held forth, Ancient Mariner style, till I would have despaired of any escape if I hadn't shared in the obsession.

Consulting his personal records, Kaplan quickly found the birth notice of a man named Abraham Joseph Blechman. He was precisely the right age. And this was a key to the mystery. In those days, Jews often had a double first name. Not a first and middle name but two names that might be used interchangeably. So to find Joseph Blechman, I had to look for Abraham Blechman.

But what precisely became of Abraham Joseph? Might he still live today. Might I fly thousands of miles or walk three blocks from home in Tel Aviv and shake his hand?

The trail had not gone cold despite this being a very cold case indeed. I found the answer within minutes. It wasn't the one I preferred. Armed with his full name, Abraham Joseph Blechman, I went to the Yad ve-Shem registry of names of those killed in the Shoah. There are said to be three million names with more added every time. Blechman's name is there, but it shouldn't be. . After looking at thousands of entries this was the first time I've ever seen anything like that. It was a one-in-a-million coincidence—or rather an error—made for me to find.

Abraham Joseph Blechman was killed at the Battle on Sonnemarra in October 1944. I had never heard of the place. But before I could look it up, an email arrived in response to one I had sent a week earlier to the Estonian Jewish community.

A kind Jew still living in Estonia, whose name I'll leave out and will explain why later, helped me fill in all the details.

What must have happened is this: Worried about his family, when he got up to the NKVD desk at the big white building in Minsk, where partisans reported for reassignment, Joseph begged for transfer to a Soviet army unit further north, hoping to get back home and find them. The secret police, perhaps figuring it would be useful to have one more soldier who knew the territory, agreed. He was put into the 917 Rifles. In fact, he became a second lieutenant, commanding the first squadron's third platoon

On October 5, 1944, he came ashore with the 2nd Battalion of the 917th Rifles, in the Red Army's only amphibious attack of the war, on Saramaa, one of several small islands that control the entrance to Talinn harbor.

It must have been terribly cold. As night fell, they were advancing next to a dirt road deeply cratered by the Germans to prevent the Soviets from using it. The exhausted men's boots crunched forward step by step through the unfamiliar terrain. In the confusion, a German unit, the 2nd Battalion of the 67th Potsdam Grenadier Regiment, more than twice the size of his battalion, fell in alongside. The Germans, looking for some way to break out of the Soviet encirclement, were marching just 200 yards away. The Soviet soldiers' mistake was no doubt due partly to the fact that the Germans had with them a captured Red Army U.S.-built M3 Stuart light tank, a big red star on the turret.

Suddenly, the enemies realized their proximity. Flares lit up the night. Shots were fired in every direction. After having survived more than 40 months of constant combat, Blechman's skill was of no use to him here. He fell dead; his unit was decimated.

But the Germans soon ran up against stronger Soviet defenses. There was desperate hand-to-hand combat with both sides suffering heavy losses. The Germans lost about 200 men; the Soviets took no prisoners. While the fighting continued for several weeks, the Germans retreated late on November 23, crossing the frozen waterway back to the mainland.

"Yes," my Estonian Jewish correspondent informed me in his email. "On the island of Saaremaa is the tomb of a warrior named Blechman."

He is still there near the causeway connecting Muhu and Saramaa islands, by the straits of Väike-Väinö, places I had never even heard of that morning. There's a stone with his name on it among the 90 men buried there, one-third of his battalion lying side by side. I hope to stand there one day, lay some flowers on his grave, and say thanks.

Of course, Blechman is not a hero in Estonia itself. It is a Soviet war memorial, an island of Russia in an—understandably--unfriendly country. The Soviets are hated for what they did to the country. As a semi-official history of neighboring Latvia, where the same factors applied, put it, the brutal Soviet occupation of 1940-1941 had "created such ear and hatred in the populace that in a very short period the common view of the Germans as the Latvians' primary enemies—developed over the centuries—as suddenly replaced by the view that the primary enemy was Russia and the Communists."[ii]

The Soviets' return in 1944 for another almost half-century of occupation had only intensified such feelings. While many Jews had been Estonian—and Latvian, Lithuanian, or Polish—patriots to some extent, the association of Jews with Communism and the USSR intensified antisemitism then and now. It was a major factor, too, promoting collaboration with the Nazis in genocide.

Matters remain very delicate today for Jews who still live in those countries. Indeed, Estonian Jews begged me not to refer to the Soviet presence as "occupation" in my writing, feeling it only added fuel to that fire.

In other words, I wasn't going to persuade the Estonian government to put up a plaque or museum exhibit in Joseph Blechman's honor.

On the other hand, though, Joseph Blechman knew who he was. And he'd no doubt be both pleased and appreciate the irony of the fact that when my research assistant, Katya Minakova, checked at the Soviet military archives in Moscow, she found his service record. Born and died in Estonia, kidnapped into the USSR, fought in Poland. And his nationality is listed as none of these but as Jewish.

But back to the Yad ve-Shem entry. There are basically two kinds of sources for those listed at Yad ve-Shem as being murdered in the Shoah. One is taken from lists—German records or immediate post-war documents—which simply provide a name and a date of someone who was deported or died. The others are forms filled out by relatives many years later. Blechman's name, and that of his brother, Moshe, was put in by his niece, Riva Shubinsky, who had written it in Russian fifteen years earlier.

Since she was in Israel but writing in Russian, her own story was instantly clear to me. She had been caught inside the USSR at the end of the war and not gotten out until the early 1990s. Since her father was ten years older than Yoseph and himself had also died in 1944, there was a small chance she might remember her uncle.

But could she be found? She was not living at her old address and a search of phone directories found far too many Shubinsky's to interrogate.

Then, drawing of a lifetime's watching of television shows and films, the answer came to me: hire a private investigator. Licensed detectives have access to the national population

registry and thus can find anyone unless they are really, really deliberately hiding. At that precise moment, the daughter of a lawyer friend was in the next room playing with my daughter. Dudu is just about the only lawyer I have ever met who is actually happy in his profession. Always good-natured, wiry and quick-moving, he's an energetic guy who gets thing done.

Contrary to all clichés, his detective friend is precisely the same. Instead of the burly, tough-talking guy, the detective has a somewhat high-pitched voice, is balding, slight, and scrupulously polite—which in Israel is quite noticeable in any profession. He promises to find out the answer within 48 hours and he actually does so.

I nervously await the call. Is she alive? Will she speak to me? Does she know anything? She's on a trip, says the detective, in fact she's in Estonia at the moment. And any way, she only speaks Yiddish and Russian. But here's her son's phone number.

And so the next link in the chain. I instantly like the son, Boris, the names given people are so often such an indication of a point in history. If he were 20 years older, he'd have a Biblical/Yiddish first name; 10 years younger, a Hebrew one. He's intelligent and articulate, his Hebrew unaccented and his English quite fluent also. Clearly, he has a job of some import, as his phone rings constantly in the background. Clearly the lineage, like mine, has come up a long way since the shoemaking days of 75 years ago.

Boris says he has heard something vaguely about an Uncle Joseph and promises to discuss it with his mother when she returns. I let five days go by and then telephone him. Yes, he says, I have the right Blechman, but there are no photos of the uncle and no direct memories either.

There's only one thing she remembered, one tiny detail that I find profoundly comforting.

After the Red Army took the capital, Tallinn, and thus simultaneously liberated and re-enslaved Estonia his mother somehow made it back there. Her older son had already died in the Red Army's ranks. Somehow, too, there was a reunion. Joseph, on leave, found his mother and they were able to be together one last time before he went off to fight and die a few days later. She talked about it for the rest of her life.

History is both an attempt at truth and a form of respect. Or, at least, it should be. It gives us the opportunity to resurrect at least the memory of those who have done great deeds and earned great merit, though they gained nothing material from it. In a world obsessed with pop stars who drug themselves to death or screen stars who pretend heroics, we would do better by honoring those of no fame, no wealth, no power who really deserve our admiration and emulation.

People like Joseph Blechman, and Moshe Blechman, too, and many others who did what they had to do and did it both well and honorably. There can be no reward for them except how we feel and what we remember.

END HERE * *

Sigmund Freud's most important insight was that he put into scientific terms the poet William Wordsworth's common-sense observation that "the child is father of the man." The experiences of childhood shape each person. But the wisest thing Karl Marx ever said, which stands despite the errors of practically all the rest of his philosophy, was that even the educator must be educated. What is taken for granted had to somehow come into being in the first place.

Childhood was not the only factor shaping each one of us from the beginning. What unseen influences—genetic, behavioral, blows struck, decisions made, status held, geography inhabited—did so as well? All of that which matters most centrally, most overwhelmingly, in shaping who you are, where you are, what you are? In short, what is your personal prehistory?

Imagine yourself afloat on a little bubble of history which began when you were born. You know some tales of your parents, a detail or two about your grandparents, and that's about it. Of course, you know a certain amount of macro-history—of state, world, and society--learned in school but that's detached from your own personal life. You are a little piece of a little place of a little time. I am, wrote Philip Roth, the American Jewish novelist, no man's father and no man's son. In this constipated context, as William Shakespeare put it, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

Given that isolation, that lack of inherent meaning, all that is left is some form—no matter how socially useful it may be—of hedonism. No wonder this is a time when reality is said to be arbitrary, society or history to be constructed, the individual capable of infinite malleability, since the dominant thought and behavior had wiped away everything that tended to demonstrate the contrary proposition. Or, in Bob Dylan's words, it took the view: "Propaganda; all is phony."

In Woody Allen's joke which plays on the idea that there is nothing worth being passed on by those who have passed on, his character Zelig, in the film of the same name, recalls that his own father can only explain on his deathbed that "life is a meaningless nightmare of suffering, and the only advice he gives him is to save string."

Now, however, the pendulum has swung too far, in effect throwing out the ancestors with the bath water. According to the dominant post-religious, post-national, post-modern, and quite possibly post civilizational ideology in the West is that any homogenous community, at least if that of Westerners, while once the foundation of civilization and the basis of progress and success, is now reduced, in the words of one wit, to the last refuge of bitter people clinging to guns, religion, "and antipathy to people who aren't like them…." Sure enough, both religion and the homogenous community gave rise to abuses, to dislike or fear of those outside of it.

Is that all there is to be said? Is all of previous history such a farce and shame? Is there no legacy worth passing on, or inheritance worth receiving? For in the sense of solidarity, the ability to communicate so easily among the similarly-minded, the security of consensus, the comfort of continuity, the beauty of belief, arose most of what is good and stable and successful in today's world.

Of course, such communities did not prosper most successfully as a completely closed and stagnant system. Variety and rebels were always a necessary spice, a catalyst for progress. But there was a balance maintained between inside and outside, mainstream and avant-garde. One takes a sledgehammer to this whole way of life only with the greatest peril.

Moreover, all sin is not on one side. If the eleventh century can be said to show the perils of overweening religion, the much more proximate twentieth century proved, with all its horrors, the opposite. "If God does not exist," the Russian novelist Feodor Dostoevsky wrote prophetically on the verge of that abyss, "everything is permitted."

Yes, a belief in religion, community, and nation has caused a great deal of bloodshed and conflict in the world, yet abandoning all these beliefs—as Communism, among other things, showed—can be equally harrowing. And if some continue in this path and others engage in unilateral disarmament, so to speak, jettisoning one's historical treasures can lead to anarchy, tyranny, or other undesirable things as well.

The cost of destroying community and ridiculing homogeneity has not been just a Western problem either. In writing about why African states failed, Richard Dowden, the leading journalist specializing on the area, concludes the "chief cause" was "the lack of a common nationhood" in "concocted countries" created by forcing together "hundreds of different societies

with their own laws and languages. They lack what we take for granted: a common conception of nationhood."[iii]

Yet Dowden's last point—the assumption that European societies remain whole while African ones disintegrate--is sadly anachronistic. Loss of faith in nation, people, and religion has been endemic, potentially suicidal, in much of Western Europe. When in 2005 the Norwegian journalist and human rights' activist Hege Storhaug asked Lise Bergh, Swedish government representative of immigration policies, "Is Swedish culture worth keeping?" Bergh made a face and said, "What is Swedish culture?...I suppose I have answered the question."

Six months earlier, speaking in a mosque and wearing a veil, that country's former minister for integration Mona Sahlin said that many Swedes are envious of the immigrants because they, unlike the Swedes, have a culture, a history, something which ties them together. The Swedes, she concluded, only have some foolish anniversaries and such folly.

Many similar statements can be cited from Western Europeans. Ironically, though, shouldn't those who are fervent believers in "multi-culturalism" believe that they themselves possess one of the cultures worth preserving? Yet in the Western elite's war on its own past, the traditional idea of nation, people, and religion are in disrepute. Indeed, the idea of nation or community has often come to be defined as racist even when those being defined as outside that grouping (or in the pejorative newspeak, the "other") are of the same race.

And, it might be added, the new antisemitism and often irrationally passionate hatred of Israel arise in large measure from the fact that the Jews, once reviled as supposed enemies of these concepts, are now derided as their embodiment.

Of course, we understand why the old order has broken down. Great things were achieved by intellectual, scientific, or political rebels who broke with traditional society. As people's vision widened in time and space, they saw there was more than one way to think and live, and perhaps one's own perspective was not the repository of all truth.

The Austrian philosopher of Jewish background, whose own family had converted to Christianity, Karl Popper, perhaps put it best:

"The breakdown of magic tribalism is closely connected with the realization that taboos are different in various tribes, that they are imposed and enforced by man, and that they may be broken without unpleasant repercussions if one can only escape the sanctions imposed by one's fellow men."[iv]

And on a more popular culture level—and serving almost like a manifesto for the anti-Jewish Jewish intellectual—is Woody Allen's speech from his 1997 film, "Deconstructing Harry":

"They force on you the concept of the `other` so you know clearly who you should hate….If a Jew gets massacred does that bother you more than if a Gentile gets hurt, or a black, or a Bosnian. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every group didn't go around thinking it had a direct line to God."

But only a Jew would talk like that! Only a Jew would try to live up to such a high standard of universalism. And here is an unassailable paradox: If Jewish history produces people with such exquisitely Politically Correct worldviews, why abandon that fountainhead?

In a similar way, one of the main Jewish characteristics was a constant consciousness of time and space, a special intellectual and psychological connection with history and with different cultures and places. These were characteristics well into deficit in American culture, which often seems to live in a brief temporal bubble, rife with its presentism and parochialism.

The feel-good slogan that today is the first day of the rest of your life really does reflect this zeitgeist. In essence, it preaches the irrelevance of the past, a bogus freedom to make anything happen. Such attitudes certainly leach into American Jews, too. Yet here traditionally derived attitudes are also worth preserving, as society is far poorer without them.

Moreover, how was it that those so determined to desert one tribe entered another. Why had Popper's family converted? Why did Allen Konigsberg become Woody Allen and Robert Zimmerman become Bob Dylan? Perhaps belonging to a "tribe" was not so easily dispensed with but that some "tribes" offered greater advantages. While Groucho (Julius) Marx, in a profoundly assimilationist Jewish statement, said he would not want to belong to any club that would have him, very few consistently follow that belief. Historic community is nominally abandoned on behalf of universalism and diversity. It's actually being abandoned for conformity and benefits.

Indeed, the newly formed "tribes" of Marxists, or multiculturalists, or indeed those who follow any lifestyle and hold any strong belief exhibit just as much intolerance and group behavior as any ancient clan flourishing its spears at the "other."

No one better than Jews should know, and nothing more than Jewish history should indicate, the pervasive nature of such choices.

Peretz Smolenskin, the Russian Jewish novelist and editor, records a personal experience from around the 1870s. A wealthy Russian Jew visited him to ask advice on what to do with his daughter, who'd joined the terrorist revolutionary movement. Smolenskin, responded that the real cause of such problems was a failure of parents, not children:

> "How did you bring up your daughter? You had governesses and tutors, teaching her foreign languages. You sent her to high school, where she learned about other peoples. Did you teach her about our own people? Did you teach her our own language? Did you interest her in our own history? Did you want her to know about our own people and our own national aspirations? To whom, then, should you bring your complaints, if not to yourself?"[v]

While modern Westerners, especially Jews, can boast of tremendous academic credentials, this has been accompanied by a serious growth of ignorance, at least on topics concerning their own society's historical development, practical skills, relating abstract ideas to reality, and individual life philosophy.

Here's a typical story of this phenomenon based on direct observation. The great-grandparents were pious Jews who knew Hebrew and Yiddish, loved study as the highest human activity, and were at home with their own tradition and community. The grandparents were secular, highly educated, banally leftist, and very ethnically Jewish. The father had no connection to Jewish life or interest in intellectual things, and intermarried.

The daughter is a graduate student, lost in life, indoctrinated with post-Marxist leftism, lacking any personal identity, and—despite academic degrees—without intellectual orientation. On attending a Friday night Kiddush, she asked sincerely if the wine being drunk there represented the blood of Christianity's founder.

This kind of generational sequence is devolution, not the steady advance of progress. Knowledge—or at least its appearance in degrees, credentials, years of schooling—that departs too far from real life turns to ignorance. This is the gap between "smartness" and wisdom.

There is not merely a disengagement from both the historical and spiritual but an absolute loss of ability to do so at all. When Adin Steinsaltz, who many think is the world's most brilliant contemporary rabbi and one especially adept at communicating with the secular, visited the United States during the late 1980s, the good Jewish burghers of Washington set up a lecture for him. To ensure a crowd they invited Ted Koppel, then at the height of his fame as anchorman of the "Nightline" television news show, to be host.

The auditorium was packed. At the end of Steinsaltz's stunning talk, Koppel said, "Thank you for a most entertaining evening."

Steinsaltz quickly but mildly replied, "It was not intended to be entertaining." What Koppel thought merely a pleasantry revealed profoundly how religious knowledge and philosophy—determining one's place in the universe—as central to one's life had been reduced to the level of a television show, film, or sporting event.[vi]

Similarly, when after an author made a passionate presentation about making aliyah to Israel at the synagogue I attended as a youth, the young, hip rabbi said: "Thanks for an entertaining talk. And next week we'll have another exciting program, on Broadway show tunes."

Yet, of course, people still feel the need for more—roots, belief, community—even if they don't totally understand or are even unaware of it. Having no sense of my own history, coming from a family which had tried to obliterate its own past, I became a historian.

The lack of history and prevalence of mystery in my own life gave me a passion for truth, for finding out, understanding, and explaining. Many people simply don't comprehend that attitude. They think everyone choses a side then bend the facts to fit it. Or perhaps they have to lean over backward, always or often rule against their own backgrounds so as to "prove" their objectivity precisely by abandoning that virtue. This seems to be particularly a Jewish curse, as others are not expected to do so, and is becoming a more general American one as well.

One can see the American-approved solution in a 2008 comic film called '"Don't mess with the Zohan." It is the most Jewish film Hollywood is going to make in this era. The main character is a terrorism-fighting Israeli secret agent who verges on being a super-hero. Burn-out, he emigrates to America where he of course falls in love with a Palestinian woman and fights against the ultimate approved contemporary villains: a real estate developer, a pompous conservative politician, and a group of neo-Nazis, all white of course. So one can only be approved in Jewish or Israeli terms if one immediately assimilates them away.

Parallel to this was the 2005 serious film "Munich," assigned to an outspoken anti-Israel script writer. Here the plot is about Israel secret agents chasing those who murdered Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic games. The agents and terrorists are viewed as equally moral, or immoral. And even the Israelis are filled with guilt at going after those who murdered their countrymen in cold blood. Here, too, everything must be precisely balanced to make clear that the filmmakers could not possibly think that those defending their own people—at least if representing the Jewish national idea—were any better than terrorists.

What the mostly Jewish filmmakers of these two projects had in common with their predecessors who Hecht had battled so many decades earlier was a particular cravenness. The old movie moguls hid their Jewishness by never mentioning it and extolling a small-town America of which they were not be a part; the contemporary ones hid theirs under a Political Correctness which distanced themselves from real Jewish feeling or Israel even as they paraded it.

Yet doing otherwise does have major career costs, even in contemporary America—or perhaps one should say far more in America today than a couple of decades ago. When I held my first job at a Washington think tank, at a time when I'd never undertaken any Jewish or Zionist involvement, I discovered that one of the top officials there was spreading the rumor that my mfother was a "Zionist leader." In fact, in every sense of the word, my parents were among the most apolitical people I've ever met. A little later, when interviewing for a --university job, one of the professors started screaming at me—in a diatribe that could only have been based on my name—that I could "never teach fairly the Palestinian narrative."

Yet Jewish tradition taught that neither the rich nor poor should be favored in court. That fairness and balance was vital, neither the class-based victory to the rich and powerful, nor a misplaced sense of social justice always leading to a ruling for the underdog. It is easy to be cynical about such a philosophy and hard to maintain it. Still, it was the very foundation of the Enlightenment, the basis for modern liberal, democratic civilization. Or, at least was until recently.

Why did Jewish immigrant families bury their backgrounds? The answers are not hard to find: native-born children's shame for their parents' accents and foreign ways; desire to avoid discrimination and reap the benefits of assimilation, to scale the social ladder. The son of Bert Lahr, the comedian best known for his role as the Cowardly Lion in "The Wizard of Oz," once heard his mother tell his father, "You aren't Jewish, Bert, you're a star!" Even in the living memory of baby boomers, America has had three secretaries of defense and a secretary of state whose parents had converted largely for social purposes to advance themselves.

There were also longer-term forces at work. The immigrants themselves felt guilty at abandoning loved ones who they would never see again, of failing to save them from the Shoah, of abandoning a passionately loved cultural and religious life style for convenience, profit, and conformity. Grandchildren felt totally alien from funny-looking, inconveniently pious or old-fashioned grandparents.

Then, also, to a greater extent than outsiders realize, Jews also internalized their sense of inferiority. Benjamin Disraeli, the child of converts who rose to become one of Britain's greatest prime ministers once quipped in the late nineteenth century that his ancestors had been high priests in the Temple in Jerusalem when the forebears of the British had been significantly less elevated. Yet a few years later, far more Jews were trying to bury the fact that their far more recent relations had been poor tailors, ragged peddlers, and lowly small shopkeepers.

The power of such stereotypes is well-illustrated by the incomprehension of Ben Hecht. A remarkably successful Hollywood screenwriter in the 1930s an 1940s, combative champion for rescuing Jews from Nazi Europe when almost all American Jews were silent, and an outspoken supporter for creating the state of Israel, of all those of his generation, Hecht should have best understood his immigrant ancestors.

Yet he wrote of his own mother: "It was odd that this woman, born as a peasant on a farm in southern Russia and come of a long line of humiliated Jews should have acquired such a baggage of pride or faced a life of poverty with such a sense of security."[vii]

Even Hecht thought of Eastern European Jews as demoralized outsiders. But if they were humiliated from without it did not penetrate into their inner beings, far less than it did for their far more privileged descendants who feared having everything might be taken away from them. Yet people like Hecht's mother felt a sense of superiority in her people, religion, and history. Their security came from trust in God and a sense of identity and place. I don't mean to

romanticize what was so often a poor existence but only to stress that it was also a subjectively secure and psychologically rich one.

Trying to identify with the more powerful nation, privileged society, cultured culture, and fashionable religion were all among the reasons for the abandonment of identity or at least its transformation into something hitherto unrecognizable. Remembrance, one of Judaism's most basic tenets was often restructured into deliberate, systematic amnesia. And when coupled with this clamber upwards, the addition of a patina of leftism and universalism allowed such Jews to have their snobbery while feeling virtuous at the same time.

There are reasons—especially for Jewish intellectuals—where such exploration can be dangerous territory for three reasons. For one can find secularism challenged by religion; universalism by peoplehood; and leftism by the reality of experience and the actual behavior of people and governments in the world.

The default position for Jewish intellectuals in Western Europe and North America is a leftist or liberal concept drawn from the experience of antisemitism--perceived as always coming from the political right--and assimilation--the historical antagonifst perceived as always being conservative, with the bright future of Communism or multiculturalism being compensation for abandoning one's own religion and community. The highest formulation of this concept was by the soft-on-Stalin neo-Trotskyist, Isaac Deutscher, and the various philosophers of the Frankfurt School of Marxism which, ironically, reached the power of their influence—even rising to hegemonic levels—after the death and discrediting of Communism itself.

Rosa Luxemberg, radical heroine, was the thoroughly spoiled daughter of the richest Jewish family in Zamosc, Russian Poland. Outspoken in her rejection of anything Jewish, she equally denounced Polish nationalism in favor of the grand abstract of the international proletariat. Yet despite her desire to distance herself from the Jewish people as far as possible, her involvement in anti-nationalist activity in Poland fueled Polish antisemitism just as her revolutionary action in Germany helped stir up the fascist anti-Jewish reaction there. And this most un-Jewish, arguably anti-Jewish, revolutionary is overwhelmingly present on the Internet today on antisemitic websites as proof that all Jews are Bolshevik wreckers of Western civilization.

Not only did Jewish involvement with the radical left lead to bloody, ultimately failed revolutions but also seriously damaged the lives of other Jews who came to live under Communist regimes, through subverting the survival of the people whose interests they oppose, and also by fomenting hatred of Jews among those who hate their politics. Today, their spiritual descendants continue this tradition.

Yet there is nothing like talking to relatives who actually lived under Communism, suffered under its depredations, and saw its extraordinary hypocrisies to serve as an antidote to such abstract ideas. Nor is there something so useful as the dose of reality from those who were formed in unbroken communities in Europe and who have gone through Israel's history.

When my highly educated and cultured in-laws were singing the praises of Stalin on Manhattan's Upper West Side in the 1930s, their relatives were starving and being threatened with concentration camps; and by the early 1950s, those in the USSR were directly experiencing the threat of a new antisemitism which might well have turned into an, admittedly far milder, version of what Germany had carried out during the preceding decade.

That is why real Jewish history and Israel are so feared and reviled by Jews--no matter how removed they are from any such identity--on the left, though this does not apply to mainstream liberals. It is a form of kryptonite to their delusions about the nature of the world, the

behavior of people, the glories of nice-sounding ideologies, the realities of populist dictatorships, and the glories of rootlessness.

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[i] http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/ivenets/ive001.html

[ii] Daina Bleiere et al, History of Latvia: The 20th Century (Riga, 2006), p. 260.

[iii] Richard Dowden, Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles (NY, 2009, p. 3).

[iv] Karl Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies, Volume 1, page 60.

[v.] Lucy Dawidowicz, The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe (NY, 1967), p. 142.

[vi] When I was writing this I suddenly recalled a remarkably parallel experience. I went to hear my friend Zev Chafetz give a talk at the synagogue I attended as a youth on making aliya to Israel. At the end of his passionate presentation, the young, hip rabbi said: "Thanks for an entertaining talk. And next week we'll have another exciting program on Broadway show tunes."

[vii] Ben Hecht, autobiography, p. 27.