Restless Memories

Recollections of the Holocaust Years

by Samuel P. Oliner

JUDAH L. MAGNES MUSEUM
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

Cover design by Sarah Levin

Published by the Judah L. Magnes Museum
2911 Russell Street, Berkeley, California 94705

ISBN: 0-943376-28-9
Library of Congress Catalog Card: 85-082084

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

To my family martyred on August 14, 1942, in Poland. May their untimely death, as well as the death of six million other Jews and five million gentiles, serve as warning of what can happen again if we don't truly become our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

and sometimes crying. The Russians would say, "I have liberated you. Now let me have you."

Sometimes the farmers knew what the Russians were after and when they saw the wagon coming they hid their women. It was on one of these farms that a particular Russian's appetite turned from women to beef. He paid the farmer for his cow (the farmer had little choice), then took an axe from the back of the wagon and went into the barn. The cow was in its stall. The Russian led the cow out of the stall and tied it to a wooden post in the middle of the barn. Then he hit it between the eyes with the axe. The head of the axe flew off the handle and the cow fell to its knees with a terrible bellow. The cow just stayed there on its knees while the Russian searched the hay for the axe head. He finally found it and hit the cow again, and so there was food in the evening for the soldiers. The meat was cooked in a huge cauldron.

As spring finally came, the weather changed quickly. The snow turned soft and very wet. In some spots roads were covered with mud so deep as to reach the axle. I had to whip the horses constantly to keep them going. The fighting seemed to attract dark clouds which filled the sky and rain fell steadily turning the road into a quagmire of running water. The noise from cannon and machine-gun fire filled the air and bullets whistled close overhead. In addition to myself, there were other drivers—boys my own age from other farms—along this treacherous front. One of these drivers was killed by a stray bullet and there was no way of telling whether it was a German or a Russian who fired the shot.

The war was moving over territory previously occupied by the Germans. In the fields were the hollow shells and crumbling remains of farmhouses, and in spite of the ever present danger, my mind kept wandering: I thought of my

family, of Isak and Reisel, of my two mothers and of my father. Desperately I clung to the hope that someone else had survived somewhere, for the burden of their memory seemed too much to bear alone. The thought that I was all that was left made me feel desperately lonely and unhappy.

Driving near the front I witnessed many acts of cruelty: dead German soldiers dismembered, decapitated, hung in grotesque display. I was appalled, yet also morbidly gratified. The souls of murdered Jews numbered in tens of thousands. The more I found out from stories here and there, the more I was convinced that millions of my people had perished. At this point I learned of the existence of gas chambers all over liberated Poland and Russia. Compared to this, what was the mutilated body of a German soldier?

Yet, as *Gospodyni* had said, the Germans were people too: I struggled with conflicting feelings of compassion on one hand and desire for revenge on the other. My feelings became conflicting also with regard to the Russians. They were not so glorious after all. I certainly felt the thrill and joy for their victory, but those whom I had previously thought of as the "sweet luscious liberators" were just the other side of a well-worn coin. War was war, soldiers were soldiers; also the Russians sometimes raped, looted, and even murdered with impunity. I was not certain they would treat me any differently than the Germans would have if they found out that I was Jewish. I reached the conclusion that it was not yet safe to disclose my identity.

One night I decided I'd had enough. I was staying with a small contingent of soldiers at a newly-occupied village; in the middle of the night, while the drunken revelry was still going strong, I slipped out of the room where I was staying. The moon was hidden behind clouds, the night was very dark. Mr. Padworski's horse was in a barn with the other horses. The guard at the door was asleep and I

led the horse quietly out the back door. All night long I rode, through a countryside that was strange to me, in the general direction of Biesnik until I hit familiar territory.

The Padworskis were glad to see me. The Russians had moved on, taking all their equipment with them, and Mr. Padworski's bed was now back in the house. He was especially pleased I had returned with his horse, for as a result of the war, horses had become extremely rare. A farmer's livelihood depended upon this animal for ploughing and other farm chores. In addition to being useful, horses were symbols of status; and Mr. Padworski now had one of the few left in the village.

One morning in early April I saw someone waving to me from a hill about half a mile behind the barn. From the distance I thought it might be Staszek. As I moved closer I saw that it was, indeed, the son of Balwina. I ran up to him and we greeted each other warmly.

He said, "You know a Jewish man by the name of Peller?"

"Sure. He's my father's friend from Moszczenica. Peller had a wife and two beautiful children."

"When the Germans retreated from here, the Jews that were still alive came out of hiding. This Peller came to see my mother to find out if anyone in the Oliner family was alive and she told him you were alive and that you were to be found here in Biesnik. He's looking for you. That is, he wants to see you and my mother sent me to tell you that."

"I can't believe it. This is wonderful! Sure, uh, come with me. We'll—that is, I'll have to tell Mr. Padworski."

Staszek walked back to the farm with me. Mr. Padworski was recuperating from his illness and doing some light work in the barn. I told him my mother was sick again and needed me. He gave his permission for me to go and Staszek and I left immediately.

As I was walking with Staszek across the Biesnik-Bystra

ridges a very peaceful, satisfying, exciting feeling came over me. 'Now there is freedom for me,' I thought to myself. I was extremely happy at the prospect of seeing Peller. We walked very fast and Staszek had trouble keeping up with me.

When Balwina saw me she hugged me and made the sign of the cross and cried and kissed me. "The war is over," she said. "You're safe. You don't have to be afraid anymore. I will send for a man I want you to meet."

In a short while Peller arrived. We embraced and he then told me all about how he had survived the war in a village called Moszczenica in an attic above the stable of a kindly peasant widow. The woman had risked her life in the hope she might convert an infidel to Christianity. Then he told me what was happening in Gorlice. Out of many thousands of Jews only about fifty remained. Peller and several other Jews lived in a large house he had managed to rent from the occupying Russians and the newly established Polish government. He urged me to move in with them saying that now the war was over and it was all right to be a Jew and that in fact the Jews had to band together in order to get what was rightfully theirs: justice, freedom, and a rebuilding of their devastated souls.

I agreed with him. We parted and I made arrangements with Staszek to come back to the Padworski farm and help me pack. Then I returned to the Padworskis and told them my mother's illness was very serious and that she needed me near her, and therefore I could no longer work for them.

Leaving the farm was very painful. I had been as a son to the Padworskis. Mrs. Padworski cried and gave me a gift of grain, which was very valuable at that time. Mr. Padworski gave me some old clothing. He had a very strange look in his eyes when he said the final goodbye. I was wondering again whether they knew my true identity. I couldn't look them in the eyes as I felt a strong sense of

shame. If any of the Nazis had found out that I was Jewish, the Padworskis could have been killed. Because of me they had been in grave danger. Although Mr. Padworski had made a number of anti-Semitic remarks during the three years of my service, I sometimes felt that he didn't quite mean what he said. Maybe it was just the tragedy of war that made him say those nasty things. Some truths were better left unacknowledged, given the circumstances of war, I thought to myself. They had treated me like a son and even if they intuitively knew the truth, the fact of my deceit was a painful barrier between us. I had lived a lie and I left the Padworski farm for the last time with tears in my eyes.

Peller was a loving, caring, self-proclaimed leader of the surviving Jews in the city of Gorlice. I lived with him a short while and during this time we spoke only Yiddish because he wanted me to remember my roots. The words rolled off my tongue strangely. Sometimes they dropped heavily to the ground, other times they soared like birds. Gradually, I got the old rhythm back. Jusek Polewski stepped aside and I was Shmulek Oliner once more. Peller became my legal guardian. He went with me to the courthouse in Gorlice and helped me reclaim the land of my grandfather in Mszanka and of my father and stepmother in Bielanka, which I turned over to Balwina and her children. I never returned to Zyndranowa. Rumors circulated that Jews in that part of the country had been put into a ghetto in Dukla. One look at the land of my grandfather in Mszanka and to that of my father in Bielanka convinced me that I didn't want to see my grandfather Isak's farm. I couldn't bear to think of that house—once so full of life—now probably a hollow shell overgown with weeds; a haunted remain of the past, with broken windows, stolen doors, and empty chimneys.

With the help of Peller I went to the Russian military

authority in charge of Gorlice and requested to be notified in the event any of my relatives were found alive. In this way I discvovered that a cousin of my father's had indeed survived the war and was presently living in another part of Gorlice. Peller couldn't go with me to look up this relative, so I went alone. The streets were narrow and winding, the houses all jumbled together, and I had some trouble finding where this distant cousin lived. As I entered the hallway of the dwelling which was my cousin's house I heard a woman talking rapidly, loudly, and in a somewhat agitated voice and saw a young Russian soldier inside a room; the door was open and the woman noticed me and looked extremely relieved. She shouted, "Shmulek." She must have heard from Peller about my survival. The Russian soldier saw me and mumbled something under his breath, turned and left, brushing past me. I noticed that the woman was embarrassed thinking about what might have happened had I not appeared on the scene. She immediately composed herself and embraced me saying, "You must be Aron's son, Shmulek." "Yes, I am," I said. Her husband showed up shortly. We embraced and for the first time since Bobowa I had a genuine feeling that I had a remnant of a family again. We started talking about what had happened to our families during the catastrophe. They knew of no other survivors in the Oliner family. This news was very disheartening. Nevertheless, when I left to go home that late afternoon, I felt pretty good. After all, I had found someone who belonged to my family and who cared. I felt useful and important in that I had been able to prevent an unpleasant experience to this woman who was my distant cousin. My stay and frequent visits afterwards were very pleasant.

From May 1945 through December of that same year I stayed with Peller and twenty-five other surviving Jews who

lived in the large house he had acquired. During this time Jews throughout Poland were coming out of cellars and stables and various other hiding places and some were trying to reclaim property that was rightfully theirs. During the war many Poles had assumed ownership of these properties and had no desire to give them up.

In the city of Kielce, about one hundred forty-five Jews survived the war. When they started reclaiming their property, the Poles countered by starting a rumor that the Jews were holding Christian children as captives to use in pagan sacrifices. This was all the justification the superstitious Poles needed: riots started and within a week many of the surviving Jews were beaten to death. Some of the Jews who escaped this tragedy went to the Catholic priest who lived there and begged him to go on the radio, denounce the rumor, and intervene on their behalf. Indeed he did go on the air, but what he said was: "I don't sympathize with the rioters. But the practice of blood libel has never been disproved, so I can do nothing."

In Gorlice some Poles resorted to similar excuses in order to defend their usurped properties. Their disappointment that Jews didn't entirely disappear became obvious. Through the heart of the city flowed the river Ropa. The rumor spread that a Christian child had been killed and the body dumped under the bridge. Outside the Peller house a crowd gathered, yelling: "Kill the Jews!" Peller immediately called the police which was under Russian command. Fortunately it just so happened that some of the Russian officers were Jewish. They had the police fire their guns into the air in order to disperse the mob. Peller, not wanting to let a potentially harmful situation simmer, pursued the story of the dead child. He traced it to a Polish prostitute whose child had died. She was paid to leave it under the bridge by the *Armja Krajowa* (land army). Peller demanded that the culprits be

prosecuted and so some of these reactionary anti-Semites had no longer a convenient excuse to kill the Jews.

There was considerable reconstruction going on in Gorlice and to meet my living expenses and get some spending money I did odd jobs. I delivered things here and there, carried messages for the Russian military authority and performed chores on various farms. My travels often took me in the vicinity of the Padworski farm and I may have stopped in to see them, had I not known that Peller had spoken to them about me and told them I was Jewish. Peller said they were not very surprised, but I was too ashamed to face them. Once, I caught sight of *Gospodyni* and I wanted to run to her. Mr. Padworski, who was with her, didn't look very well and I wanted to do something for him to show my appreciation for the three long years of protection on his farm. Instead, I put my hand over my face so they couldn't see me and turned around, quickly walking in the opposite direction.

My duties as messenger boy for the Russian officers in charge of Gorlice put me in contact with some officers who were Jewish, but denied the fact. Some of them had been among the Russian soldiers who had liberated Auschwitz and they were appalled at the atrocities inflicted upon the Jews during the war. They were particularly horrified at the complicity of some of the Polish informers who used to cripple and maim elderly Jewish women and men and then deliver them to the Gestapo tied together like sheep. Even though these Russians had no particular authority in the matter because there was now a newly-constituted Polish government, they decided to pay a visit to a couple of these informers, including the two men called Lega and Krupa.

It was Peller who first told the officers about Lega and Krupa. They had been the ones responsible for the deaths of the Schiff brothers. Also, Krupa had discovered and turned in

to the Gestapo the insane man who had escaped from the mass grave at Garbotz—the crazy man Simcha had told me about.

First, Krupa denied he had ever done such things. Then, when he was beaten and almost blinded, he admitted his guilt and begged for mercy, saying he needed the money the Gestapo had given him for his family and that otherwise he wouldn't have acted like this. He protested that the Russian officers had no right to beat him, that they had to go through the Polish courts and that he wanted his gentile, Christian lawyer. They kept repeating they were giving him the same justice he had given old man Menashi and many, many others. They reminded him of the deaths he was directly responsible for, one by one.

Not too far from Krupa's house lived the woman named Polka who had had a Jewish lover. In fact, this lover was one of the Schiff brothers whom Krupa had betrayed. The Nazis had shot the lover right there in the house and made the woman bury him there. Krupa cringed when the Russians went into details. He became white and shaky and crouched low to the floor. Telling the story made the officers madder than they already were and one of the officers crippled the wretched Krupa with a blow on the head with his revolver.

So that was the end of a Polish traitor. His fate didn't bring to life those he had killed, but there seemed some justice in it. One thing the war did was fill me with many conflicting emotions. Sometimes pity and compassion would emerge, sometimes shame and extreme sorrow, other times raw hatred.

In the town of Gorlice I was known as a "tough guy." I went around with a group of older boys who had survived the concentration camps and who had numbers tattooed on their arms. If a peasant was treating a Jew badly we turned the tables. In December I managed to get an apartment of

my own. There were a lot of empty houses, but most of them were too run-down to live in. This apartment was given to me by the newly-constituted Jewish Committee headed by Peller. It had lice and rats and no running water, but it was habitable and the door even had a lock that worked. I was fifteen years old. Some of the boys I hung around with were in their early twenties and whenever they wanted to make love to some girl they would come to me and get the key to the apartment. "I'll be back in an hour or so," they would say, with a wink, and I felt as a part of their adventures. These friends of mine included friendly Poles as well as Jews, and the girls they managed to pick up were peasants who came to town on market day with their fathers. In all of Gorlice there were only a couple of Jewish girls left alive after the war. One of these girls stayed locked in her room all day long and never saw anyone. She had had a total mental breakdown.

I was proud to be such an important person associating with men and grownup boys. There were times when I looked forward to the future and thought that perhaps the world would open up to me. One day I myself found an attractive peasant girl with very strong features. In order to get her to the apartment I had to bribe her with nylon stockings stolen from the black market. The apartment was broken down and roach infested, without running water or toilet—but then the living conditions of the peasants weren't much better. The girl was interested in the stockings; I gave her the stockings, but since I lacked experience, I didn't get anywhere with her.

Several of my relatives were buried in different parts of the country. Some of the local peasants, who were by and large now willing to prove their friendliness to the Jews, encouraged my distant cousin, Oliner, to exhume the bodies for reburial in a Jewish cemetery. Peller also encouraged us

to do this. In fact Peller was able to build in Garbotz a permanent memorial to the massacred people. The monument has the following inscription:

WTYN GROBIE MASOWYN
OTPOCZYWAJĄ SZCZĄTKI OKOŁO
1000 ZYDÓW Z GORLIC I BOBOWEJ
OFIAR RZEŻI HITLEROWSKIEJ
ZAMORDOWANYCH BESTIALSKO W
DNIU 14 ŚIERPNIA 1942 ROKU
WYSTAWIENIE TEGO GROBU I
OPIEKA NAD TYM USWIĘCONYM
MIĘJSCU MARTYLOGII ŻYDOWSKIEJ
JEST GŁOWNA ZASŁUGA
OB. OB. NACHUMA ORMIANERA
JAKUBA PELLERA PRZEDWODINCZĄCEGO
POWIATOWEGO KOMITETU
ŻYDOWSKIGO W GORLICACH

IN THIS MASS GRAVE
REST NEARLY 1000 JEWS
FROM GORLICE AND BOBOWA:
VICTIMS OF HITLERIAN BESTIAL SLAUGHTER
ON AUGUST 14, 1942.
THE ERECTION OF THIS MONUMENT
ON THIS HOLY GROUND
WAS DONE BY NACHUM ORMIANER
AND JAKUB PELLER, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE
COUNTY JEWISH COMMITTEE OF GORLICE.

Lacking sufficient money to acquire caskets, we made burial boxes of wood. A couple of peasants helped us locate bodies and exhume them. The bodies were by this time rotted and the stench was awful. Nevertheless, we took them by horse and cart to the cemetery. One time, I was arrested along the way by the local police for not having permission to transfer human bodies, but I was released soon after. In the end we did succeed in the burial operation.

During this time Peller was also busy. He had traveled,

along with others, throughout the countryside gathering money in any conceivable manner. When he had accumulated a sufficient sum, he purchased gravestones and placed them at the other mass graves in memory of the thousands of people buried there. Peller wore a pin-striped suit, riding boots and felt hat and I envied him for his strength and courage and leadership skills. Since the end of the war I had been busy reorganizing the ruin and chaos of my life, all the while trying to avoid confrontation with the village of Garbotz, over which hung the particularly dark cloud of personal disaster. Surviving the war had required a certain spiritual balance which was now, I felt, extremely fragile; I didn't think I could withstand a return to Garbotz. I was afraid—actually terrified—that my cool demeanor would crack under the relentless stare of the spectre of brutal fate.

Sooner or later, of course, I had to visit Garbotz. There was the final resting place of part of my family, at least; and I went there with the naive hope of exhuming the bodies and giving them a decent burial. Imagine the desolate loneliness I experienced while standing in a little wood looking at a small meadow, knowing what lay underneath the grass! I cried out loud, I yelled to heaven. No one heard my yells except the tall trees. I looked up towards the heavens and thought perhaps my family was there. After all, I had been told that there is life after death. There was a breeze that day that blew through my hair. The hopelessness of the task of ever retrieving the bodies overwhelmed me. My family had been taken from me. They were indistinguishable from the mass of a people diabolically slaughtered, and all I could be certain of was that I was a Jew. And yet, I thought, if I was a Jew, why wasn't I buried there with the rest of my people? There was no answer to that question. Life was, in a sense, no more logical than death. There were no ready-made answers; I had to live in order to discover why I had

survived. Before I left, I started saying the *Kadish* (the prayer for the dead) . . . the few words that I remembered. I now felt suddenly good. The dead were at rest and my family forgave me for not dying with them. Peller constructed the beautiful stone: inscribed on it was a statement of the slaughter and the date. I walked back to Gorlice feeling at peace with myself.

Gradually, an unrest grew inside me. I became surly and quarreled with my friends. I got frustrated with my apartment and moved in with the surviving cousins. My cousin and her husband were only too happy to have me. At first I enjoyed their company. It felt good to be in a family situation once again, where a man and a woman live together and make a home. But once again the unrest caught up with me.

I became frustrated with Gorlice, and when I thought of Poland in general a sense of desperation gripped my mind. For me Poland was nothing but a graveyard. Some of my friends seemed to feel the same way and we envisaged the possibility of leaving Poland. "Go west," we counseled each other. "Where there is opportunity, where there is an end to desolation and chaos." Of course, leaving Poland was easier said than done and many of my friends would never make the move.

Perhaps I would not have made the move either, had Peller not been in the habit of visiting the people I lived with. I learned that three of them were planning to leave Poland. They were going to journey west by looping through Germany and, in spite of the fact that I felt sorry for those I was leaving behind, I decided to go with them. In fact, the idea of leaving gave me a great deal of satisfaction: the Germans had marched their armies through the Dukla Gap, and now I, a Jew, was going to walk on German soil.

The German mark was a useless currency in Poland: mere paper and readily available. In Germany, however, General Eisenhower (the Commander-in-Chief in Europe) had reinstated the value of the mark as legal tender. My three friends and I set about collecting marks and stuffing them into the false bottom of a suitcase. When we had gathered a few thousand of these marks we went to the Czechoslovakian border.

As it turned out, Germany was already full of displaced persons and the guard at the Czechoslovakian border turned us back. The money was still safe, hidden in the false bottom of the suitcase, and we escaped by night into Czechoslovakia. Through this country we hitchhiked getting many rides from American GI's and in this way we reached Germany.

My friends left me in a displaced persons' camp in Germany called Fernwald, near Munich. When they were gone, I knew they would not return and my future seemed bleak and hopeless. Forsaken and forlorn, I greeted each day as if it were an unfaithful friend. Only the feeling of unrest which had first come over me in Gorlice spurred me on.

In the displaced persons' camp the supply of food was very limited. As in the ghetto, personal status was based on the amount of luxuries a person had and theft was common. I bummed around a lot and had some dealings in the black market. Many people were lost, wandering from camp to camp. Very often I would take an American Army truck driven by black G.I.'s to the surrounding camps and search for possible relatives. I never did find any relatives and the return to camp was often depressing.

The displaced persons' camp needed some coal and I was asked to help in getting it. With a couple of men I went to the railroad station and we unloaded coal from a boxcar onto a truck. The truck was easily recognizable as a displaced persons' camp truck, and as we were driving towards Munich

to make the delivery, a German boy along the road started yelling, "Hey *Jude, Jude.*" He was about my age and I certainly understood what he meant, Jew, Jew, dirty Jew! My anger was so great I grabbed a piece of coal. I threw it at him and my aim by chance was so good that I hit him in the eye. And I felt good about it. Deep down inside me was a sadistic pleasure that I had managed to hurt a German.

The British government, with the help of the Jewish Refugee Committee of England, decided to accept several hundred refugee orphans from camps throughout Germany. Since I had been unable to locate any surviving relatives, I signed up to go to England. After several weeks of waiting I decided one day to leave the camp and visit a friend of mine who was in another camp called Feldafing, about sixty-four kilometers from Munich. That very day the British Air Force planes arrived to pick up the boys who had signed up for England. Fortunately for me the fog was bad and the planes couldn't take off. Someone telephoned the camp I was visiting and they rushed me to the airport just in time to catch the flight.

In England we were greeted with great warmth and kindness by the British Jews and the government officials. We made the British newsreels. Only in England did life begin for me. In an old mansion, which served as a temporary youth hostel, I was one of hundreds of children given decent food, kindness, and the opportunity to rebuild their spirits. Education was made available to us and at the age of fifteen I took the first small step toward literacy. From about the time I was nine, when the Germans first entered Dukla, until I was fifteen, when they were driven out of Biesnik and defeated, I had lived in a state of darkness, of uncertainty, of primitivity, in a state which was a complete void; I knew only misery, killings, and bad experiences. Reaching England in 1945 was like reaching paradise for me.