

My Mother's Words

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My mother's words, just a part of my mother's story. The following narrative is a translation of my mother's writings. She wanted to put on paper some of the true facts of her experiences before and after her arrival in America, and the problems she encountered.

The narrative was written in a very interesting way. As she was educated in Polish, but knew that I didn't understand that language, she wrote this in transliterated Yiddish, using what she called "Poilishe bukves." That is, the Polish alphabet that, when read, comes out as Yiddish, which I could understand. This includes a letter "c" that has a sound of "tz", a "t" that reads as "l", and "sz" that is read as the "tch" sound. Communication. It's language and it works.

I didn't change the words, just wrote what my mother said. I would have liked to add some of my feelings, reactions, and memories, but this is not the place for that. These are my mother's words.

Until 1939, I lived in Warsaw. In 1939, my husband went away to the army, but I found out that he was in Lemberg. The Germans were already in Poland, but we were still able to travel where we wanted.

I went with one of my cousins to Krakow, since I knew my husband was in Lemberg, and it was closer to travel there from Krakow than from Warsaw. I had relatives in Krakow, and I lived with my family on Grucke Street.

We were told that there was a train that went to Lemberg. The Germans told us that they would escort us to Lemberg, since the Russians were already in that city, but they lied. The train was full of German soldiers, armed with rifles. People already knew that we were in a trap.

At a small way-station, not far from Lemberg, one of the Germans allowed a pregnant woman to get off the train. As soon as she got off, I jumped off the train as well, just as the train started to move. But other people, having understood their plight, began jumping from the train windows and the Germans opened fire. I escaped, along with an 18-year-old boy and an elderly man.

We learned that there was a hotel not far away and we headed there. When we came to the hotel, we found it to be a large Christian hotel, and we were told by a woman there that we had chosen a very poor place to seek shelter. The hotel was full of

German Gestapo and they would kill us if we were caught. She told us that we were close to a river, approximately five minutes' walk, and a Polish friend of hers was going to cross the river with a girlfriend of his. If we would pay him, he would escort us across the river as well. We agreed.

In the middle of the night, my two companions and I went to the river which was about ten minutes from the Russian border. As we approached the river, we saw a German standing there. He immediately shot the young boy right before my eyes, and the old man fled, I don't know where. The German asked me where I was going and he pushed me - hard - but he let me go.

I got on the little boat with the Polish man's girlfriend, and they let me off at the Russian side. From there, it was a ten-minute walk to Lemberg. I arrived in Lemberg and found my husband, who had already been trading in German marks and selling gold rings and various other things. We lived there more than a year, in a furnished room, when the Russians issued an edict. Whoever wanted to go to Russia should get passports. In this way, they could travel freely to Russia. Whoever did not want to go to Russia, should register to return home. Nobody knew that they were killing all Jews. Many who did not want to go to Russia registered for travel back to their homes.

These were the people who were taken away in wagons by the Russians, in the middle of the night, and sent to Siberia. My husband and I had registered to return home and, as the Russians arrived, we threw rings and other precious objects down the toilet, for fear that we would be taken for black marketeers. They took us with the others since, as we did not want to take Russian passports, they said we were against them.

They took us away into a desolate forest, where no trains went and no homes were anywhere to be found. We were forced to build our own houses with wood and straw, just like gypsies. In each such hut, there lived eight people. The men worked with wood and were forced to drag stones from the water, while the women worked in the kitchen. I worked washing floors and tables, scraping the tables with a large knife until they were white. Other women worked in the woods near the prison. We remained there several years.

It was extremely cold, but nobody died there. Everyone was in fairly good health. Later, we were taken to Samarkand where we were freed. But it was very hot there, more than 100 degrees, and people threw themselves on any available food. They began dying like flies from typhus and malaria. The Russians laughingly said, "Why are these Polacks falling like flies?" Even there, we had already started trading for goods, and I saved many people.

I and three other men traders were able to buy some leather, but one of the Jews informed on us and we were arrested. As we were being led away, I threw away the leather goods I carried on a belt around my waist. We were ordered to undress, and I was examined by a woman officer. By that time, I had nothing on me and was not arrested. But I was beaten by the Russians on many occasions. Always for being a black marketer.

My husband died in Samarkand. I was now alone. Later, I met a couple from our city who had known my father. I stayed with them and, together, we crossed the frontier and made our way to Backnang, near Stuttgart in Germany, where there was a camp and an office of the HIAS, an organization that helped displaced persons immigrate to America. The camp was run by Americans, and we were given a place to sleep. There I met my second husband, and we married in the camp. One year later, I gave birth to a daughter, and two years later I gave birth to a second daughter. We were in that camp more than three years.

We had decided to immigrate to Israel, but they wouldn't allow us to immigrate there as my second daughter was only six months old and, legally, we couldn't go there. I didn't want to risk illegal entry. My husband had family in America who had immigrated there before the war. He found the telephone number of his sister in America and called her.

My husband was one of eighteen children. Five had immigrated to America before the war and, of the rest of the children who had all stayed in Poland, my husband was the only one left, having spent five years in concentration camps.

My sister-in-law called my husband and told him that she would send papers so that he could come to America. He told her that he would not come alone, as he now had a wife and two children. It took some time, but we all got our papers. My younger daughter was already nine months old. We traveled by boat more than two weeks but when, with luck, we arrived in New York, everyone who was traveling with us was met by someone. Many people were taken by the HIAS organization. But no one had come to meet us.

I started crying, and my two little children started crying. A taxi driver had pity on us and he asked us if we had an address to go to. We gave him the address and, when we arrived, the reception we were given is better left unwritten. Imagine, the only remaining brother.

We stayed with my husband's sister for two weeks, but she said she couldn't stand hearing my babies cry. We knew that my husband had another younger sister who lived on Kings Highway in Brooklyn. She had five children herself, but they were all married, and she came personally to take us home with her. We weren't there more than three weeks when her husband said he couldn't stand having my

children around. He made himself out to be a sick man, but that wasn't the truth. He went to work every day and was not a sick man. So, my sister-in-law went to the HIAS and they took us. They gave us a room where we slept, a crib for the baby, and we ate our meals at the HIAS.

But we were not able to sleep. It was a tiny room and we all became sick. My husband called his older sister. Her husband came, as he was a better person than his wife. He saw how we were living, and got us three rooms in East New York. There were American families living there, but it was full of cockroaches. I scrubbed the apartment clean, but was constantly being bothered by the owner of the building, an old maid who didn't want children in her apartments.

In the meantime, the HIAS sent us checks to be able to survive. The grocery store owner told me not to worry, and let me have milk for the children on credit, until my check came. My husband had found some work and, since he couldn't stand the fact that the old maid landlady kept bothering him about the children, he told me to take the two children and find a house to live in.

My brother-in-law had asked my husband to be his salesman. He had a wholesale stationary business for many years, since he came to this country, and was worth more than \$100,000 at that time. He sold various school and office supplies. He told my

husband he would give him merchandise to sell. He was to go door-to-door, saying that he had two small children to support, so that people would buy from him. My husband answered him that in Lodz he had his own home and his own business, and he couldn't go selling door-to-door like that.

My husband continued working at his job. I got a Yiddish newspaper and found a house in Williamsburg, at 213 Ross Street. It was an old, three-family house and cost \$8,500. If we had a down payment, we could have had the house for \$7,500, but all I had was a \$50 down payment. I told the real estate broker, Mr. Drucker, my whole story. I told him that my husband was a carpenter and had a good profession, and that we would pay out the mortgage on my husband's \$120 a week salary.

We asked my sisters-in-law to help us, but they said "If you don't have any money, how are you going to buy a house?" They didn't believe it. But other people came to our aid. The broker, Mr. Drucker, told me not to worry and said that he would find someone to give us a mortgage. A man named Friedman, a kosher butcher who owned a butcher shop, paid in \$3,500 and signed his name as guarantor on the loan, saying that if we didn't pay he would. The lawyer, Mr. Arnold, told us not to worry about paying him, and to pay him when we could.

My husband did some carpentry work for Mr. Arnold. Although my husband was never a carpenter, his father had a great deal of land, and he learned many skills. He found work in a large carpentry factory and joined the union.

And so we bought the house. My husband fixed up the basement, a room and a kitchen, and we rented out the three floors. A black man who worked with my husband helped him bring over what little old possessions we had, and we gave the few dollars we had for the house. We still owed \$39 dollars to our former landlady for the apartment in East New York, and I pawned two rings that I had. We asked my husband's sisters for the \$39, but were told that since we had a house, someone would lend us \$39 with the house as collateral.

It took us six months and we moved up to four rooms. In one year we had saved \$1000. The second year, we bought the rooming house next door, from our neighbors who were very good people. They had a daughter the same age as mine, and would watch over my children.

When my brother-in-law heard that we were going to buy a second house, and that we had \$1000 saved, he gave us a mortgage of \$1200. He didn't lend it to us outright, but as a mortgage. I think he did that because he had some repairs to do in his basement. He didn't want to tell us that he owned the house in

which he lived, but told us that he had a lot of papers in the basement, it was leaking, and he wanted to build a wall. My husband answered, "What do you care? To hell with the landlord. Let him fix it." My sister-in-law started screaming, "Don't curse like that, the house is mine!"

I used to bring wood boards home from a glass factory on Broadway, putting them on the baby carriage I had from the children and pushing the carriage from Broadway to the house on Ross Street, about three blocks. My husband used the boards to fix up the house, and would find other odd jobs to do after coming home from work in the factory to make extra money.

The children were now in school. I would take care of the rented apartments, washing the floors and windows, making beds, and polishing every week. But we were happy. I would make beautiful dinners and birthday parties. For my children, I didn't think of all the problems we had with the family. I invited my husband's entire family for all my childrens' birthday parties and, thank God, everybody always came. We lived on Ross Street for ten years and my children graduated from Hebrew school.

We had to move because of my children. They needed to go to a good high school and college. We were told that Midwood was a good neighborhood for children. We sold the two houses on Ross

Street in Williamsburg and bought a house on Avenue I and East 28th Street in Flatbush. We were happy there. I now have two good daughters, two good sons-in-law, and six sweet grandchildren.

When I read these writings, I asked my mother to give me more details of her life before 1939. She was very reluctant, but I insisted. She was angry, and wanted to concentrate on the above facts. The following is what I was able to glean from several conversations:

My mother was born in Bendine. Her grandfather, David Prawer, lived in Bendine and arranged a marriage for his daughter, Miriam, to Kalman Eisenberg from Radom who came to his new father-in-law's home to study Torah. Kalman was the son of Charne and Sosre Kalman, my mother's grandfather.

Kalman became a businessman, a wholesale fruit broker, and when his wife Miriam, my grandmother, died at age 39, he returned to his family in Radom with his children, Eva (my mother), Abraham, Israel, Shaindle, Yosele, and David. My grandfather, Kalman, took a second wife and had other children. When I asked my mother their names, she told me she didn't remember.

My mother did not get along with her stepmother, and returned to her family in Bendine. From there, she went to live with a cousin in Warsaw and worked as a manager in his restaurant. She met her first husband, Chenyik Richwool in Warsaw. She had a son, but the baby died in 1939 in Warsaw of an illness.

In 1939, my mother's husband went into the Polish army. He wore his civilian clothes, as uniforms were no longer being issued. The attitude was just come and fight the Germans. He deserted from the army and fled to Lemberg, doing what he did in Warsaw, dealing in gold, rings and watches.

This is all the additional information my mother wished to give me, and I respect those wishes, although there is so much more I would have liked to know.

So here, Mom, I hope I did justice to your words.