

*EXCERPT FROM*

# Mulik the Zulik

by

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## Chapter 10: Nobody believed anything like this could happen

When the Germans invaded in June 1941, I was very unaware of what was happening. The only thing that I remember was in the morning some planes circled round the town but I cannot recall that there was any bombing, although I could hear some shooting. We stayed in the house and I remember Russian soldiers withdrawing: some of them on lorries, some of them walking and running. Straight away it was a panic situation, lots of tension, with the Russians trying to escape.

My father decided that most probably there was going to be fighting in town because of the army camp so it would be best to move into the countryside, to a farm. So for about the first few weeks we all went to the Wishemirsky farm, about 12 kilometres out of Pabrade. I don't know who stayed in our houses, but we left the places, all the furniture, everything. It was my family and my granny and her daughter, husband and child, also my mother's sister and her daughter. For me it was a welcome adventure to go by horse and carriage past the cemetery. This was the first time I had ventured so far. I remember the harvest hadn't been cut yet, it was like the Garden of Eden: the wheat, the green fields, the red and black berries, the forest. It was so nice.

Mr Wishemirsky was a little Polish farmer with a hunchback, a very nice, gentle friend of my father's. He had eight or nine children and I remember the oldest one vividly, Peter, he was probably about 17. It was a big farm and everybody slept all over the place.

Opposite the house was a well and a barn where they stored wheat and potatoes. On the right-hand side was a shed for the cows and the sheep and the horses. Quite a few of them. To the left was a big barn. I also recall that as I walked out of the house there was so much cow dung it was difficult to walk, especially when it was raining.

This was a completely new experience for me. I had never been on a farm. It was wonderful. There was a forest and a swamp. The Wishemirsky children were

very friendly and one of them, Karol, taught me how to ride horses. I fell quite a few times but became a good bareback rider. It was like a holiday. How we managed to eat and drink I don't know but I can't remember being hungry. I heard that my father brought a lot of things to give to Mr Wisheimirsky.

I don't know how long we were there, but we didn't hear any shooting. Then one day I remember they said some bandits were coming. Everybody ran to hide away. My father most probably returned home. Mr Wisheimirsky had a rifle but he didn't know how to shoot. He took the rifle and tied it to the fence and pulled the trigger. It made a big bang, and the bandits didn't come.

Some time later, we moved back to town. As far as I know, no one had touched our property but now the Germans started to flood in, going through on lorries, motorbikes, bicycles, on foot. They just flooded non-stop past our house. At some time they decided to put a petrol pump next to our house, so they dug a big hole for the petrol tanks, and two Germans came to live in our house in the entrance on the street level. From the garden I used to watch the Germans coming and coming and coming, and some of them wore black uniform. Often German soldiers stopped in town but they didn't touch anybody. I remember going to see them in unoccupied houses where they would stay overnight.

I got friendly with the two Germans in our house. Because Yiddish is close to German, I could converse a little with them. They were two different types. The one said within a few months they are going to take Moscow, they were going to wipe out the whole world. All kaput! He had a very nasty, arrogant approach. The other one said he didn't want to go anywhere, he wanted to go home. He didn't want the war but he wouldn't say this in front of his companion. He said he had never seen a Jew in his life, yet I felt that neither of them showed any hatred to me or my family.

In some ways it was a blessing that they were in the house. My granny had a German officer in her house, too. I say it was a blessing for the simple reason that the Lithuanians used to come at night and chase out some Jewish families if they didn't

have so-called German protection. They would take them out, rob them or shoot them. They started doing this straight away.

One night a group of over 60 Jews – mostly young people – were taken to a hill above the town by a group of Lithuanians and shot near the flour mill. Although some of the men tried to resist, everyone was murdered.

The Lithuanians continued to shoot Jews and take their possessions. There was no punishment for this. The young people they killed near the flour mill were the sort of people who might have resisted or organised a resistance. It was a situation of complete demoralisation and lawlessness. People lost their sense of reality. Nobody believed anything like this could happen. People thought this was crazy.

Probably very soon after the Germans came, they started making restrictions. Jews had to wear the star of David, and were not allowed to walk on the pavements. I refused to put on a star, and I refused to walk on the road. It was probably like a naughty boy's challenge. I can't remember if my family wore the star; they probably did.

A few weeks later, the Germans said everyone must move into one small area. The non-Jewish people were evacuated and all the Jewish people had to move in. We had to leave the house and go into a small place on the banks of the river. This little house still exists. We didn't stay there for long because wild rumours started to go around about what's going to happen. My father and another few men were connected with the German *kommandant*. Apparently there was some hinting about an *aktion* (the coming massacre); that they were going to kill all Jews. My father got to know something about this plan. Prior to this, people had been killed at a nearby town, Nemencine. Things now started to move very fast. From the beginning of July to October, most Jewish people in this area were murdered.

We escaped – the whole family – to a Polish farm surrounded by very dense forest, not far from the Wishemirsky farm; all my brothers and sisters, my mother, her sister and her daughter, another sister that lived in Vilnius with her daughter, the

daughter of my granny, but not my granny and not my father. I don't know why, but they stayed in town.

The farmer had two sons and a daughter, who were quite friendly to us although they didn't give us accommodation for nothing; they made a deal with my father, and were paid in money or in possessions.

We lived in a part of the big farmhouse. In the farmyard was a large barn, stacked with hay at one end. They made a passage underneath the hay and at the back a space so that if Germans or Lithuanians came, we could hide. When we were in there, nobody could see us, even if they stood on the hay.

We stayed there until autumn, when one morning we saw a lot of Jewish people walking past with their small possessions. They stopped at the farm for a drink and continued further into Belarus. This was the day the Germans and Lithuanians transported all the people in Pabrade to a place called Polygon, near the town of Svencionys. Fortunately, relatively few people in Pabrade were caught. Most had been warned, so many of them walked to Belarus because in the autumn of 1941 nobody had been touched there. My father and my granny managed to get out the same day and they walked to join us, even though my granny was in her 70's.

We stayed at this farm until December '41. That winter was the most severe in memory – a horrible, bitter-cold winter. It was  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ . During this time, something happened between the farmer and his sons and my father. What I overheard was that he told my family we must move away. He heard that the Germans were going to come and catch the family; yet the farm was in Belarus about two kilometres across the border. But they said if we don't go, they were going to eliminate us, something like that. They told us, "Go." They wouldn't give us a horse or anything. Nothing, not a sledge, not a horse, how must we go in  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$ ? Where must we go? They didn't care. We just had to go.

My father came to me and said that he cannot leave the family to go to the Wisheimirsky farm which was about three kilometres away, through a dense forest. He said to me if he went, what would happen to the family, because now the farmer

and his sons had changed their attitude and become hostile. My father said the only way was for me to go through the forest in the middle of the night along a road I didn't know, and go to Mr Wisheimirsky because the only hope we've got is to get a horse and a sledge from him. This was the biggest assignment of my life. I asked him, "What about the wolves?" The wolves were hungry and we heard their wailing and saw their eyes at night. The only way to protect oneself is that they're frightened of light. He gave me a box of matches and said, "If you see wolves around you, light a match." I went. I don't know how I managed to find the place. I did see some wolves on the way and I was quite frightened. But I went all the way to Wisheimirsky. When I got there, the dogs were barking like crazy but I managed to get in and knock on the door. Somebody helped me to get a horse and sledge and I came back like a big hero, the biggest hero. I was very happy to have achieved such a thing. Suddenly I felt I belonged to the adult family.

The whole family got onto the sledge which normally wouldn't take more than six people, and we were about 13. We went to a little town called Klusciany where my father had an older half-brother. This half-brother had many children but I can only remember two sons; the older one had saved me from drowning in the river. Opposite the town were a few houses on a small hill, and we stayed there with a Belorus family. Somehow my father made a connection with Dr Rozevsky and some other Jewish families from Pabrade who were also hiding on farms in the neighbourhood. After some time my father told them they must leave the farms because they were going to be caught and killed. He said we must all go to a ghetto. How he knew this, I don't know, but he was well-connected with non-Jewish friends. Dr Rozevsky came to us riding on a horse and my father warned him that he had heard these rumours and we must move away from this place, right away.

It was a horrible, frosty night. The older son of the people where we were staying said he would take us to Zolovo, which was a distance of about 20 kilometres. We got a sledge and a horse and he took all of us.

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(Zolovo is an area surrounded by dense forest and swamps, where some ethnic Russians and farmers who called themselves Old Believers, were living. Most of them were hard-working, bearded men, and the ladies were beautiful. They had been sympathetic to the Jewish people and rejected the cruel German occupation. The Polish dictator in the 1920's and 1930's was Marshal Joseph Pilsudski; he was born in Zolovo and was a great friend of the Jewish population in Poland.)

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I remember very vividly it was a bright night, very cold, and the horse was going slowly and the sledge made squeaky noises over the snow. A few days later we heard that the Germans and collaborators came to the place we had been living and killed everybody. They killed Dr Rozevsky, my friend, the partner to the little dog, and my father's half-brother and family. The Germans and Lithuanian collaborators murdered anybody they could find in the vicinity of these small farms.

My father said he was going to the ghetto at Kemelisky and that we must follow. I got another horse and a sledge, probably from Wishemirsky again, to take the family after him. I was the driver. I remember I came to a place where I didn't know which way to go: to the right or to the left. For some reason I went to the right which was actually towards Pabrade. After a few kilometres I got worried that maybe I'm wrong so I stopped in one of the villages and went to a house and asked which way to Kemelisky and they said the other way. In the house was a policeman but he didn't suspect that I was Jewish. I was a blonde little boy. He said, "I'll show you," and I said, "No, don't worry." I ran, quickly turned the sled around and we went towards Kemelisky. I was afraid that if my sisters saw a Lithuanian policeman, they might start crying.

The only place my father could find for us in the ghetto at Kemelisky – which was just one street, from the market place to the Polish cemetery – was a wooden structure which had no proper walls for protection against the bitter cold. It was the same temperature inside as out. He made a big wooden bed for all of us to sleep, and I was assigned to get wood. We had to burn the oven 24 hours a day. I used to go and

break up fences – do anything to get wood. Opposite was a half burned-down synagogue so I said, “God forgive me,” and took wood from there. One day I went to an unfinished wooden house and went into the ceiling to bring down some wood. The owner of the house caught me. I was only a little boy but I started to argue with him that all my brothers and sisters were so cold that we needed the wood. I said to him, “Don't worry about the house; if the Germans want to, they will kill you and burn your house down.” He said, “No, they will never do that.” He couldn't understand my argument. I said, “They will never spare you, they will kill all of us.”

The local Jewish families were probably much better off than us because they lived in their houses. My granny and her daughter and son-in-law and their child lived in another house. My family lived in this wooden structure with my mother's sister but I can't remember what happened to her daughter. She just disappeared. Maybe she was taken to do forced labour or taken to a concentration camp! I don't think she was murdered in Kemelisky because I would have heard about it. I reckon not. She was about 17, 18 but I can't recall seeing her anymore.

The conditions were very harsh, and although food was scarce, it wasn't a starvation situation. We had saved money enough for food to eat. I don't know where my father got the money to buy the basic food but it was enough. We didn't go very hungry. They used to send me out in the morning to buy milk. I went to the farms and asked if they had any spare milk to sell. If I got a jug of milk, my biggest problem was not to touch the milk because it was for the smaller children. Oh, it was very tempting. Sometimes I used to take a sip of the milk, but I always felt guilty so if I drank some milk I would put a piece of snow in to make up the quantity.

My father was pulling strings somehow so that we didn't go hungry. Of course the living conditions were bad. There was no sanitation. The main preoccupation of my sisters was looking for lice and fleas in our clothes and hair. I remember on a reasonable day when it wasn't too cold, my father used to wash himself in the snow by rubbing the snow on his body.

When spring came, we moved to a small house that was opposite the church. Here we used to play on a big lawn, and some non-Jewish kids came to play with us and it was quite relaxed. Then I noticed some smaller children in town with big stomachs, swollen from malnutrition. There were families who had no food, nowhere to find food, nowhere to go.

At this time, my father was elected to be the head of the small community at Kemelisky. Many of the people living there in '42 were from Pabrade or other Lithuanian towns who had escaped across the border. By law we weren't allowed to leave the ghetto but I always went out. Personally I didn't care about these things. I don't recall if people had to even wear yellow stars. But when there was a small, weekly market next to the church, Jewish people were not allowed to go there or buy anything. Kemelisky was hardly police-controlled although there were Lithuanians and local collaborators acting as police, and sometimes they did take Jewish youngsters to work in the farms.

My father wasn't working during this time, so I don't know where the food came from. When spring started, I used to walk with my mother to the Wishemirsky farm which took us a day, and then to Pabrade. It was dangerous, anybody could catch us – the Germans or Lithuanians – and we were going back across the border. Bandits could kill us. It was a free-for-all. Once a few Germans came to Kemelisky and spoke to the people but then they left and didn't do anything. It was probably part of the preparation for the murders that were coming.

In Pabrade were no Jewish people; all of them had been murdered. We used to go there and sleep over at Aunty Danishevskas's house or the shoemaker's little place. She had some goods of ours and my mother used to sell these things to take back money and food to the family at Kemelisky.

Some people were living in our house, but there was nothing left of whatever we'd owned so the place didn't mean much to me anymore. It was very upsetting that strangers were living there, but what could my mother do? Anybody could report us,

and the Germans (or worse the Lithuanian police) would have killed us or deported us to the nearest ghetto.

I didn't realise at the time how dangerous these trips were. I knew it was illegal. I think my mother took me as an alibi because I was blonde and looked like a farm boy. She was very dark so she used to cover her face like a peasant by putting a scarf over her head.

On one of these visits I went to the town hall, quite a big wooden building, where they'd also screened movies. I can recollect my first dance there, probably at the end of the year before the war broke out in 1941. We lined up: little boys and little girls on each side. Then the music started playing and they showed us a big chocolate and said the best-performing dancers would win the chocolate. Really this dancing was just walking from side to side, boy and girl. I got very excited. I was the first to go with a girl and a little boy and girl on the other side. I went to the boy and said, "If you make a mistake I'm going to beat you up; I want the chocolate." He was petrified and he made a mistake and I beat him up on the stage. All the little girls started to scream and cry and the parents jumped on the stage; the result was we got the chocolate.

We went to visit the town hall on one occasion and I was surprised to find a lot of Jewish youngsters from Vilnius cooking potato peels. They were very underfed. They kept asking me for food, for food, for food. I said, "Where can I get food from?" They asked me where I come from. I told them I'm a Jewish boy from this town and they couldn't believe it. They were there working on the railways.

I also met their superior, Margolis, who was with his wife and a child. There was only one German with a rifle guarding them. This German was not a bad guy, he wasn't SS, probably about 45 years old, and they used to call him Svejik – after the book, *The good soldier Svejik*. The story was that when he went to the toilet, which was an outside structure, he used to give them the rifle to look after. I heard from other people that he really was a good person.

These young boys and girls – about 17 to 20 years old – were sleeping on the floor. Each one had a parcel, just one parcel, that was their belongings. I told the young fellows, “Why don't you take the rifle and go into the forest to fight the Germans? They're going to kill you.” But nobody wanted to listen to me. They said, No, no. I don't know how as a small boy my perceptions were that nobody was going to be saved. I said, “Take the rifle and go to the forest!” They said, No, no, no.

When I came back two days later to say goodbye to them, they told me that children had stolen some of their possessions. I got very upset. How could anybody do this? That parcel was all they'd been allowed to bring with them. So I talked to my little Polish friends and asked what happened. They told me that some boys had stolen the parcels. Next to the hall was a soccer field and behind that was a small forest. Here we found the things hidden away. After that the Germans beat up the Polish boys badly, because they had broken a German *Ordnung*. Maybe the *Ordnung* was that you can kill Jews, but if you steal from them, then you are out of line.

I think my mother was worried about my being with these youngsters because she thought someone would say I'm also Jewish. Not long after this incident, we left Pabrade and walked to the Wishemirsky farm. They always gave us food, a place to sleep, and I remember once we went to the barn and Mr Wishemirsky brought us potatoes and some butter. His wife cooked potatoes with butter and a little salt, and I thought it was the best meal of my life. I couldn't believe how good it was. When we left the Wishemirskys, we had even more bags, especially if they gave us some wheat or bread. It was about three or four kilometres to the border, but it used to take us a long time because the bags were so heavy for me. We had to stop every few hundred metres to regain our strength. Next to the border was a farmer who was friendly with us and sometimes I stayed there for a while, looking after the cows.

Nobody ever stopped us on these trips. I don't know if it was just luck or whatever. We didn't go on the obvious routes but I can't remember anyone ever stopped us or tried to rob us or worse. From what I remember hearing, quite a lot of Jewish people were hiding away on farms. I know in 1944 when the Russians came

back, many of them said they been hiding for three years on farms. Some of them walked around like my friend, Tsvi, moving from place to place, from forest to forest, and didn't have a place of their own. Some Jewish people lived in the forest in holes they made under trees. Sometimes whole families survived in these places for three years.

Tsvi, who survived the war, comes from Canada every year to meet me at our hometown. He is a lost individual even until now, when we visit my home town. He often walks around in the forest and talks about the same memories, repeating them many times each day. Although he's got a family, a wife and two children, he never adjusted to his new life. He could never keep a job for long, always asks people to show some kindness and for my financial support. I call him "*the man who never left the forest.*"

## Chapter 11: You have to survive, you have to remember your family

I didn't understand why and what the hell was going on. I looked at it as an adventure: as a small boy who had to do things that were illegal and go places at night and sometimes hide during the day. My character fitted into this. I liked to be on the edge of things, to push things and see how dangerous it was and if I could get away with it.

One night in the ghetto in Kemelisky, my father had quite a few drinks. It was the summer of '42. He was sitting outside the house, singing Russian songs very loudly. I said to him, "It is dangerous to sing these Russian songs." He says he doesn't care. It was right next to the police station, and he was singing these Russian songs to make the police upset. He says I'm his big son – ha, his big son! I don't know how old I was! Ten? He said to me, "You, you are going to survive whatever happens. You have to survive. And you have to remember your family." It sounded like he knew he wasn't going to survive. He said to me, "You are going to survive, you are going to continue the family." I didn't answer him because I didn't know what to answer but the phrase worked on inside me: you must survive whatever happens. I was very proud of him that he dared to sing those Russian songs so loudly, knowing that the local police would hear him.

On one of my trips to Pabrade, in October '42, I came back with my mother from the Wishemirsky farm and we stopped at the farm near the border. The farmer's wife asked my mother to help her prepare food for that Saturday. So we probably got there on the Thursday. I remember she told my mother, please, they have got a memorial service on Saturday for one of the close family that had died, and she asked if my mother could help her to cook food. After the church service in Kemelisky, it was their custom that the family and relatives came back for a feast. My mother agreed to this in exchange for them taking me, with all the food we had bought in Pabrade, to Kemelisky.

Very early on the Saturday morning they woke me up and I went with them on the cart. Near the entrance to the town was a little stream and over it a small wooden bridge. On the right-hand side was a big building that must have belonged to a rich feudal landlord. It was light, about seven o'clock: very pastoral, beautiful, the scenery magnificent. I was very happy because I was bringing a lot of food for the family.

On the outskirts of the town the farmer stopped to greet a farmer coming out of town. He said, "Who is this little boy?" And he was told this is a Jewish boy, a friend of my family. The farmer said, "Why are you taking him in? They are killing all the Jews in Kemelisky." This farmer who is our friend says to the other farmer to take me back to his farm. So I went with this man and when we come to the bridge we saw some people with guns. They weren't in uniform, but the farmer got such a fright he tried to throw me out of the cart. I say to him, "They don't know who I am, what are you worried about?" No, he wants to throw me out. I jumped down and went through the stream and when I came out on the other side I saw these people walking. They were not looking for anybody. They could have been collaborators, they could have been bandits, partisans, I don't know. I hid away and let them walk. After that I didn't go on the road. I kept to the edge of the forest. When I passed one of the farms I recognised two of my little friends digging up potatoes with their mother. They used to live over the railway lines in Pabrade. I told them what I'd heard. She said, "You're talking nonsense, it's impossible. We didn't hear shots, nothing."

Eventually I got back to my mother and told her what they said. She was shocked, she didn't know what to think. We waited until the farmer and his family came back for the late lunch, and he confirmed to my mother that they had been killing all the Jews in Kemelisky.

From the story people told me, they took everybody out of town. Most probably they didn't shoot anybody in the beginning because they were busy collecting people from the surrounding farms. But the first time I went back on a visit, in 1992, the mayor told me that the shooting went on the whole day. Somebody

who escaped, who is now in Israel, told me that they surrounded the Jewish quarters in the morning.

What happened I imagine wasn't different from what happened in other little towns. The Germans surrounded the ghetto while the Lithuanians did the shooting. They made the Jewish people dig the grave, they made them undress, they ordered them to the edge of the grave, and shot them there. Two young girls collected the clothes and put them in a lorry. Afterwards they killed the two young girls.

I heard that my father and another religious Jewish man tried to resist, and they were beaten up very badly. My father always wanted to resist, to say they can't get away with that. He never lost his spirit, he wasn't frightened of them. Also, I heard that on this morning my father wasn't in the ghetto. He came back of his own will when he heard there was trouble. He had six small children there, the smallest one was perhaps 14 months old. My grandmother was there, my mother's sister, my father's two sisters and their little son, and probably her husband. The only one who wasn't there was my aunt's daughter. She ran away to the forest in the beginning of 1942 with two young fellows, and is now in Chicago. She and the two fellows organised Jewish partisans.

I'm not sure how many people were shot on that day. I spoke to a woman in Kemelisky on my first visit back, and she said that she remembered the shooting. She was probably 12 or 15 at the time and it is difficult to take her evidence clearly. Unfortunately there are no accurate figures but it has been established that about 500 people must have been murdered. 500 innocent souls.

My mother disbelieved the killing. It was too much to take in. I didn't believe it either. It was too much of a shock. I hoped that something would happen to show that this was not true. I couldn't believe it. Not at all, not at all. That's why I never asked anymore about it. I never asked my mother. I didn't want to deal with it at all. That's a blank corner that I can't understand. It was beyond my imagination. The whole story was too much to take in. I thought it must be a dream.

I didn't go back to Kemelisky. I could have gone there, when the Russians came in 1944. I could have gone there, but I never had the desire to go. I didn't want to confront it.

## Some thoughts #5: On the absurd

Basically, for non-Jewish people life didn't change much during the War. Maybe it was harder but it was normal. They still went to school, they still worked, they still went to church. To single out Jews for whatever reasons didn't make any sense to me. If I could go back to my home town and play with the non-Jewish boys as if nothing had happened, then what was going on? At the time, the only thing that did strike me was that I didn't belong to the church, because they were accusing me of killing Jesus. That's the only thing I could make some sense of as a child.

On the farm one day, some Polish children said that the Jews killed Jesus. I asked, "Who is Jesus?" I didn't know who Jesus was. They told me a whole sob story that he was the son of God, and the Jews murdered Him. I asked, "Why did they do that?" What they had been brainwashed with they told me, but I didn't ask my parents anything about this Jesus. I knew there was a church in Pabrade which I never went to, and the church in Kemelisky which was opposite where we lived.

When we stayed for a day or two at the Wishemirsky farm, I used to ride their horses, or take the cart to the forest looking for mushrooms and berries. I became an expert knowing what mushrooms were good and what were bad. It was a short, happy time.

I also stayed at the farm next to the border for some weeks in the summer, looking after cows in 1942. Those were nice people, very friendly to my parents. I remember that I slept in the barn, not in the house. One day the chain that let the bucket down the well broke and the bucket fell to the bottom. It was a deep well but I volunteered to go down on the chain. They put me down and I got the bucket and when they pulled me up the farmer said to me, "You must tell the Germans you have already been to hell and they mustn't touch you." I looked at him and said, "Why must I tell them that?" I didn't know what he meant. Now I understand that probably everybody knew they were killing all the Jews. He knew they were killing the Jews. He was making a bit of a joke. A cynical joke and he was our friend.

When I went with my mother on those expeditions to Pabrade, I was always happy to go back and see the old places and play around. I had a feeling the whole thing is a dream. I thought I'll go to sleep tonight and tomorrow everything is going to be like it was. I kept on thinking this. It was just a fantasy, a dream. I couldn't believe that people were being murdered. I couldn't settle this in my mind. This feeling followed me to the age of 17 or 18. The only thing I didn't do was to go back to school because the year during which I went there was hell for me.

What struck me after some years when I thought about it, was that the farmer and his friends were praying in the church while the Germans were rounding up the Jewish people in the Kemelisky ghetto. There was shooting going on while they were conducting *a holy service*. The church was right opposite where my family lived and about 900 metres from the killing ground. This is very disturbing to think about. To what merciful God did they pray?

## Chapter 12: No place where we belonged

At least when we lived in Kemelisky we had a small house, a sort of family life, with all the problems of food shortage and shortage of clothes, of danger, but we were still a family. When they murdered the family, my mother and I became nomads. We had no address anymore. No place where we belonged. We had to keep moving to find a place that would accommodate us. Mostly we went to people that knew us, that had great respect for the family and, in some ways, I thought, some fear that perhaps they won't get away with wrongdoing to the family. They knew the family had always been respectable and would not let people walk over them.

I can't recall where we went after we heard about the killings. I suppose we were always in touch with the Wishemirsky family. Maybe Mr Wishemirsky didn't fear the Germans. Maybe he thought that what was going on was wrong, or maybe his true Christian belief was that you had to help the needy whoever they are. His farm was always open, we were never sent away. Never. Or if there was danger, then he gave us some food and said there was danger, and that we must hide in the forest. They were a nice family, nice kids, and I didn't hear any anti-Jewish remarks from them. They were some light in the darkness.

We were constantly on the move from one dangerous place to another. Often we were separate. Mostly during the summer we were separated. I would look after the cows on somebody's farm, but my mother always used to find me wherever I was. I often didn't know where to find her but she knew where I was.

It must have been in the summer of '43 – I was at Zolovo staying on a small farm with a Russian brother and sister Kolya, and his beautiful sister, Marisha. They also had with them a Russian friend, an escaped prisoner of war. I don't know where my mother was. They were very poor people, I don't think they even had a horse. Their house was small. As one walked in, first there were a few cows on the left side, then one walked through the cow stable, and there was a door leading into the living space. Inside was a big oven and a narrow space between the wall and the oven, and

a little window in the wall. The only place to sleep was on top of, or next to, the oven. Old Believers they called themselves. As far as I know, they did not work on a Saturday or Sunday. In Zolovo were many of them, simple nice people; friendly to the Jewish community.

They used to make home-made vodka, called *samogonka*, which they brewed in big barrels, and drank until they got very tipsy. Often the neighbours came round and everybody would get drunk and they would be singing and happy until it ended in a fight and the happiness was spoilt.

I found out that Kolya and his friend were just like bandits. They had a gun and sometimes they went to the highway between Pabrade and Svencionys and ambushed Germans or Lithuanians. Whatever they took, they sold. I don't think they cared much about the war.

It was a fascinating place and they were very friendly to me. I remember one day Kolya went to Pabrade and never came back. Soon afterwards my mother came to fetch me and we started to move around. Always there were rumours that the Germans were going to make a big search, comb the forests, so we moved constantly. In the summer it wasn't such a harsh problem but wintertime was very bad. There was nothing we could do. We couldn't just knock on a farmer's door and sleep over, it was too dangerous. Fortunately, my mother spoke Russian and in winter, the last winter of the War, we used to walk from farm to farm. She would say that we were Russian refugees and beg for some food. By saying that we were Russian refugees, and because I didn't fit in with the stereotype of the dark Jewish boy, the people would normally give us something to eat.

The problem was having a fire. Often we just slept in the snow, covered ourselves with the snow to keep some cold away. But really we couldn't sleep like that. I remember one instance when it was bitterly cold so we went into little sauna cabin about 200 hundred metres from a house. I found some wood and a few pieces of coal and I made a fire inside. I couldn't care. What I didn't realise is that the fumes are poisonous and could kill us. We had to go outside to recover. The people in the

house must have seen the smoke but they didn't come out. I wondered if they were going to come and kill us for trespassing. But maybe they were too frightened, maybe they thought it was partisans or bandits. If somebody's got the cheek to do this, then he must be sure of himself.

During this time we heard they were going to search the forest so we had to cross the river and move onto the other side of Pabrade which was 10 or 15 kilometres towards the Lithuanian border. To do so we had to go through Pabrade. Although it was winter the river wasn't frozen yet, so we had to go over the bridge, which was guarded by Lithuanian and German soldiers. My mother knew that some Jewish people from my home town were living in a hilly area not far from a village. They had dug a hole into the hill and covered the entrance. We slept over there a few nights, inside the hole where the warmth of the bodies kept everyone warm. At that stage I remember we were very hungry and the only food we had was a piece of fat from a pig. The place was guarded by a Jewish youngster who had a rifle and few bullets. A very good-looking boy, dark. I don't know what he thought he could do with that.

The whole of this area was full of Polish AK (Home Army underground in affiliation and support of the Polish government in London); they fought everybody – the Lithuanians, the Russians, the Germans, everybody. They wanted Poland back as it was before the War. Some of them even wore the old Polish uniform. They were all over the place, and for no reason at all they started to kill Jews. Sometimes we stayed with Polish people, and I remember hearing them talk about a big military operation to kill the Jewish people living in the hole. Not long afterwards they murdered all the Jews there. When we heard about it, we were on the other side of Pabrade not far from Kemelisky. One day we were walking through the forest and four Polish partisans came towards us on horses. They didn't suspect anything of us – we were dressed like very poor farm people. They stopped us and said they were lost and asked directions. I think at this stage my mother wanted to die. She said to them,

“No, we don't know, we're Jews.” They looked at us in disbelief. Why she said this, I couldn't understand. She could have told them anything. They were friendly and did not suspect us. Now they asked some more questions and I was sure they were going to kill us. Then they spoke between themselves for a while, said goodbye and rode off.

Now I can understand that at the time she gave up life. Yet I was so happy. I was the happiest kid in the world that they did not kill us.

During this same winter we stayed in a house and had to hide away from Polish AK under a big oven. I don't know how they knew about us. They came and searched and searched the house, and eventually found us. They weren't cruel. I thought to escape but because we'd been under the oven I wasn't dressed properly and it was a horrible winter outside. They took us to their headquarters for questioning which wasn't far away from where they killed the people in the hole. My mother said to me, “I don't think they will do anything to us because one of the high-ranking officers is the son of the Polish police commandant of Pabrade and he knows the family.” He said to my mother he would do everything to help us. Eventually they told us to go. We had to walk over a lake that was completely frozen. Somebody followed us with a rifle and I'm sure they had told him to kill us. He kept the rifle pointed at me but he didn't know what to do. “Just go away, disappear,” he said to us. It looked like a miracle that he didn't kill us.

We kept moving from place to place; nobody would keep us for longer than a week or two. Later during that winter we did live in a farmer's barn for a while. We stayed in there day and night because it was too dangerous to go outside. I remember lying there watching two dogs playing outside. I wanted to go out and play with them. They looked so happy, the two dogs. Playful. Two white dogs. I was so jealous about this. In the spring of '44 my mother found out that a farmer, Tomkewich, needed someone to look after his cows. So we went there. They used to wake me up early in the morning to take the cows out. There wasn't much food. Sometimes I was lucky to find an egg; but there were mushrooms in the forest. I could make a fire

without matches by striking flint stones, then grill the mushrooms. I had a little coarse salt, and that was my food for the day.

During this time I didn't see many people. The two brothers would be in the fields ploughing with horses. Quite cheerful guys who didn't join the Polish partisan movement. Sometimes my friend Tsvi, sometimes my mother, came to the forest. Actually it was quite a peaceful time for me, except that I wasn't sleeping more than a few hours a night so I was always tired.

The last time I saw my mother, she came and said she was hungry. I brought her milk and bread, hard brown bread, from the farm and she told me there was talk that the Russians may overrun the place soon. Afterwards she went away again. She didn't tell me where she was going which was wise of her. But I don't think she was far away. A few days later in the morning I heard two shots not far away, but I didn't know what it was. Then when I came back in the evening Mrs Tomkevich looked very sad. The next evening a friend of hers, a woman, came, and I overheard that a Jewish woman was shot. I put one and one together. In the morning I asked her if she knew anything about my mother. She admitted to me that my mother was shot.

I went to look for the place, which wasn't far away, probably one kilometre. There I found a farmer. He told me this was the place where the woman was shot. I asked him how she was dressed. He said she wore a green flannel dress. I knew this was my mother. I didn't know what to do. He told me they left the body so he came to bury it. There was a mound on the ground that I should have put some stones around. But I did not. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know the farmer. A few days later there were a lot of shots, artillery, and I heard from the other cowherds that the Russians had overrun the whole area.

I stayed on the farm looking after the cows. Eventually I mentioned to one of the brothers that maybe I should go back to Pabrade to see what's going on. He said he would go first and have a look. Some days later he came back. He said to me: don't go. I asked why. He said because the Russians also are killing Jews. I think another few weeks passed. Then a man who knew me, a Jewish man, Narocki, came to the forest near the farm. I had seen him during the winter hiding with his wife and kid. There was a bigger son that somebody had murdered. Narocki didn't go to the farmhouse and he told me not to tell the farmer that he'd been there. He said, "Why don't you come back? You can stay in my house." I said that I heard the Russians too were killing the Jews. He said no, it's a lie. I didn't tell the farmer's sons about Narocki's visit.

One morning I left the farm and walked back to my hometown. The Narocki family had a dilapidated house, they were very poor people, but they welcomed me. Very bitter people, very sad, but they shared what they had with me.

Thinking about it now, this is why I've got reservations about the farmer. I don't deny the danger of employing me, but they also took me on for very selfish reasons, for otherwise the daughter, Olga, and her two brothers would have had to take out the cows. I was a convenience for them. So I have mixed feelings because of the lie. I was at this farm for not longer than three months. By now, the only survivor of the family is Olga, who portrays herself as my saviour despite the fact that I had been on the farm for only a few months from Spring to Summer in 1944.

Tomkewich didn't elaborate about my mother after she was murdered. They didn't try to help me in any way to find out who did it. There is a great possibility that they knew. That other farmers knew. Only when I questioned Mrs Tomkewich about who was the Jewish woman, did she say that it was my mother. She was crying, but she didn't tell me straightaway. If I hadn't overheard the story, maybe she wouldn't have told me.

I was grateful for the work with the cows. It was a very dreamy situation – the forests, the beauty of the summer, plenty of berries and mushrooms to eat. The forest looked a fascinating place with big wolves and sly foxes.

The Tomkewich farm doesn't exist anymore. They had to move to Pabrade because the ground wasn't fertile enough for them to make a living.

## Some thoughts #6: On primitive hatred

During my second visit to Lithuania, I happened to be on a plane with a middle-aged couple who were coming for their first visit to their homeland since emigrating to Australia after the Second World War. I got to talking with them, and was sickened to find that they too, like so many murderers, justified their actions by blaming the Jews. Even now, many years after the atrocities, they hung on to the justification of their sickening deeds. His reasoning, and with the full support of his wife, was that Jews in Lithuania had it very good, there was no discrimination before the war, Jews held important positions in Lithuanian society, and there were even Jewish officers in the army, Jewish doctors, lecturers and intellectuals.

He said that when the Russians took over the Baltic States in 1940, all the Jews became Communists and co-operated with the Russians. He told me what he called a very “valid point” that when he and his lady friend went to the Jewish grocer, he was told to wait until the shopkeeper had served a Russian officers first. Of course, to him this kind of insult required revenge, so when the Germans arrived he most likely took the view that it was right to take revenge by murdering the grocer’s family and taking possession of his business; and this “reasoning” justified the killing of all Jewish shopkeepers and their families. Conveniently, he did not mention that in fact for many generations, discrimination was rife. Especially in the late 1930’s with the influence of the anti-Jewish propaganda orchestrated by Germany, discrimination and anti-Semitism was a fashionable pre-occupation, and when the Russians arrived and some Jewish youngsters joined the Communist movement, the Russians offered them completely equal citizenship rights, which they had not enjoyed for many generations. He also failed to mention that many Lithuanians joined the Communist movement; especially the working class. The fact is that the Jewish community in Lithuania was 90% Orthodox, staunch believers in the Almighty and deeply religious, and as such, this great majority could not and would not destroy their tradition by joining the atheist Communist movement.

The fact that only 5% of the Jewish population survived in Lithuania speaks for itself. Most of the murders were committed by the Lithuanian police and civilian volunteers.

After the war there was no educational programme in Lithuanian schools, and it was not mentioned that Jewish people had been living in the country for generations. But they can hardly conceal the Jewish houses and communal properties and so many old cemeteries—in many cases partly destroyed but many still exist. If you are Jewish, you have difficulty restoring citizenship, even if you were born there. There is very little provision to claim any properties that belonged to you and your immediate family. Otherwise it is a democratic country, with the exception that if you are a Communist, you are looking to be prosecuted. However, for a war criminal, the government would provide all the facilities for defence, dragging out the court proceedings for years until such time that the accused departs from this world, without coming to any conclusion.

I have no doubt that this man and his wife ran away to Australia to avoid justice, and as such they labelled themselves, in my opinion, as cowards. None of these murderers stood up and said, “ I am prepared to stand up in court because I feel I was on the right side.”

Today there are hardly any Jews left in Lithuania! Why is the animosity still there; is it a kind of phobia? Is it the influence of the Catholic Church? Is it a kind of fear that most people from other religions are bad? Throughout my life, I have come across good and bad people of many nationalities and religious denominations. I have met many rotten characters, and it would be primitive and stupid to pass judgement on all their kinsmen or countrymen as a result; I would degrade myself to behave like these primitives.

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