

A JOURNEY REMEMBERED

Written by Kenneth Wetcher, MD
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G-d has blessed me with the ability to forget many of the bad things that have happened to me, although I retain a few of them. My first memory of the Holocaust happened when I was about four or five years old. I was with my mother in a cramped cattle car, standing room only, being held up on someone's shoulders so I could look through the only window available. As I looked curiously out that little window I saw some Nazi soldiers, prisoners of war, being marched by the allies. When the prisoners saw the train, they knew that it was filled with Jews leaving Russia and moving on to freedom. One of those prisoners caught my eye and ran his index finger across his neck. Even at that age I understood it meant "You Will Die, Jew". And yet to me at that time, the caring of the total stranger who held me on his shoulders and the love of my mother beside me imprinted a more lasting memory than the evil signing of that POW.

My parents lived in a shtetl (a small Jewish town) in Poland called Tarnograd, close to the Russian border. My mother, Yocheved and my father, Moshe were about 30 years old in 1939. She was beautiful and vivacious and rejected a match made for her by her family in favor of my father who had serenaded her with his mandolin. He had been to the Sorbonne where he studied chemistry and was working in a soap manufacturing factory. They had many friends, were well dressed and seemed very happy in the few photos I have of them from before WWII.



Yocheved Berlinska



Moshe Wetcher

In 1939 that all changed. The Nazis invaded Poland and took over their small town. The invaders immediately began rounding up Jews, killing those who protested. However, after a few weeks, they indicated that their maps were wrong and the correct occupiers were the Soviet Russians, who came in and took their place. The Russian soldiers were not as cruel as the Germans, but soon announced that the original map was correct and the Germans were to return.

That's when my parents decided to leave and follow the Russian army into Russia where they were captured and sent immediately to Siberia to a slave labor camp where I was born in 1941. By the 7th month of her pregnancy my mother could no longer work and as a result she was not offered any food rations. My father and some of the other slave laborers shared their food with her. Fortunately for my mother and me she went into early labor and was transported to a medical facility to give birth. As it turns out, she was in false labor and was able to stay there for over a month, getting the care and nourishment she needed until I was born. (See Map 1 below.)

When I was 11 months old my father was inducted into the Russian army, into a unit made up of Polish Nationals commanded by General Anders. My mother and I were allowed to leave the camp and were sent to Turkestan in Uzbekistan, which was at that time part of the USSR, and we lived there until the war ended in 1945. That's when we began our trip on foot and in

cattle cars through Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia until we arrived in Germany where we were housed in a displaced persons camp. (See Map 2 below.)

At the same time, Anders' Army was going to the African front since the Russians were now part of the Allied Forces. They traveled through what was then Palestine and is now Israel where my father was able to defect. My parents lost contact with one another for all those years and didn't know if either were alive.



Thanks to G-d's good fortune, my cousin, Milton Waltcher, a Major in the United States occupying forces in Germany, spent his free time traveling to displaced persons camps to see if any relatives were there. He located my mother and me, then sent a photo of us to his parents in the US. That resulted in my father's family facilitating the circle of communication between my father and mother.

Since he was unable to bring us to Israel due to the British mandate that was not permitting Jews to enter, my great aunt sponsored his immigration to the US and after a year he was able to send for us. We arrived in America in August 1947.

Uncle Milton Finds Us at DP
Camp

Although my father had been a Sorbonne trained Chemist he couldn't work in that profession when he came to Israel and had to learn a trade; he became an olive picker. Once in the U.S., he became a painter and then a butcher. My mother had been a

beautifully dressed and elegant young woman in Poland, but by the time we were in Germany was focused only on my needs and nurture. In America, they both immediately went to night school to learn English and were able to maintain their Jewish sense of self while learning the American way of life. They did what they needed to do to survive and to get me a good education.

On November 29, 1947, my parents and I sat quietly in the kitchen of our small apartment behind my cousin's kosher butcher store and listened to our radio as the United Nations was voting for the creation of the state of Israel. We held our breaths until it came to the vote of the United States. When ambassador to the United Nations, Warren Austin, on the order of President Harry S. Truman voted "Yes" to create a majority in favor, we stood up and cheered with joyful tears.

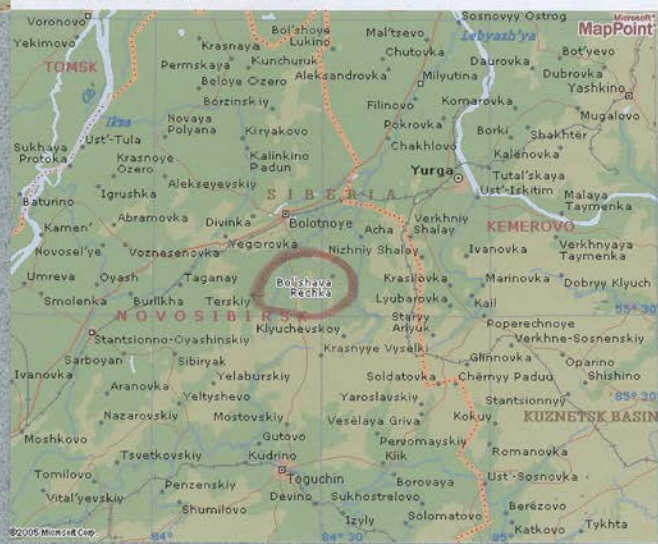
It was then that I realized that even though we must always remember to NEVER FORGET, we must also thank G-d and remember that WE WON!

The JOURNEY



Bol'shaya Rechka, Novosibirsk, Russia

My parents left their village, Tarnograd, Poland in 1939 to escape the Nazi invasion & eventually were sent to a slave labor camp in Bolshaya Rechka, Siberia



Map 1



April 16, 1941 (KW)
 I was born in the
 camp + secretly
 circumcised, my
 bris. mother + I left
 Siberia in '42. going
 through Samarkand
 Uzbekistan, going
 by cattle car + foot
 to a DP camp in
 Bad Reichenhal, Germany

Map 2



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