The day before my twenty-first birthday, German bombers circled over Lublin, filling the beautiful September day with an obtrusive, annoying murmur.

After strafing and bombing Lublin for eighteen hours, the Germans entered the city on the seventeenth of September. Their first visit to our house and to all the other Jewish houses was ostensibly to look for hidden weapons and concealed soldiers. In fact, these were nothing more than plundering expeditions. Confident in their rights as conquering German soldiers, they came to rob us of our belongings. They entered in bunches, anywhere from ten to twenty at a time, making lots of noise, then scattered through the apartment, rummaging through drawers and taking whatever struck their fancy. One soldier took a gold chain out of a box in my closet and informed me, while stuffing it into his pocket, that he was going to bring it home to his girl as a Reiseandenken (travel memento).

Reiseandenken. He spit the word out scornfully, and kept looking for further mementos without hurrying. Another soldier took a fancy to an indelible pencil. They took small items that were easy to hide, since robbery was not yet sanctioned by the German authorities during the first month of occupation.

Adapting to the new conditions, I took a job as a sanitation worker in the Jewish hospital in Lublin. It was a small hospital with about a hundred beds, some of which were set aside for the growing number of wounded, who soon outnumbered the available beds. Patients were lying on the floors, in the halls, and on the stairs. Wounded civilians kept coming in from the bombed-out neighbourhoods of the city, as well as the surrounding villages. We were also receiving huge waves of disoriented refugees from Warsaw, which was still being defended, and which the German predators were attacking by firing into crowds of civilians. Workers in the hospital had to walk carefully to avoid slipping in the large puddles of blood on the stone floors of the halls and the examining room. People died on stretchers before we even had an opportunity to dress their wounds. We quickly carried the still warm corpses out to the mortuary, but no sooner did we empty a bloody stretcher than it would be taken by another wounded patient. A young inexperienced nervous surgeon—who had been excused from military service for health reasons--worked day and night, amputating hands and legs; dressing terrible deep black wounds caused by bomb fragments; sawing; cutting; putting on casts; and finally, fainting from exhaustion.

I still remember the many wounded of the first days of that terrible storm which had broken on the world. I can’t forget the agonies in which so many died. For the first time in my life, I confronted death, and the confrontation made an everlasting impact on my psyche. After a while, though, I got used to seeing death around me constantly. For many years death and I were to walk hand-in-hand, so I learned to look him in the eye without fear, as I would any intimate companion.

Like all the personnel in the hospital, I worked without any sense of time and without thinking about which shift I was working on. Some days I worked twenty-four hours straight, without a moment’s rest. Occasionally I would drop in at home to take a bath and catch a few hours of sleep. While I was working at the hospital, many changes
had taken place at home. Our apartment had been commandeered by Colonel Herbert Schikora of the Bahndienst (German railroad service).

Colonel Schikora had requisitioned three rooms for himself, his orderly, and his chauffeur, but did not confine himself to these three rooms. He eagerly rummaged through our library and was enchanted with the books he found there. He also enjoyed listening to the radio in the library. He felt as if he were in ‘his own home’. He behaved like a man of culture and assured my mother she would not be subjected to any unpleasantness by the Germans, who had come here for the good of Poland and its inhabitants, and so on. Despite his promises and his civilized behaviour, mother was still uneasy.

Every day brought new bad tidings from the city. They had started evicting Jews from their apartments, requisitioning furniture, and here and there the soldiers had allowed themselves some fun at the expense of Jews. Some old Jews had their beards shorn on the street. Some of our acquaintances were ordered to move out of their apartments within ten minutes. Panic was widespread among the Jews. My mother and I decided to save our collection of books. Mrs. Gawarecka, the director of the Lopacinski Library, undertook to help us in spite of the grave danger to her own person. We started removing the books from the house systematically. So as not to offend the colonel, we carried out the transfer as unobtrusively as possible, removing twenty or thirty books each day.

Many of our friends and acquaintances left Lublin for the ‘other side’. It was only about sixty kilometres to the border, and one could obtain a pass without too much difficulty. My cousin went, and so did many of my best friends. They tried to persuade me to go with them but I couldn’t leave my mother completely alone, and in addition I decided not to run, but to stay and tough it out. I didn’t understand the extremity of the situation and felt I was needed right there in Lublin. I was still enough of an optimist to believe that the power of mighty England would straighten out this mess in a few weeks and put an end to the chaos.

A proclamation was issued to turn in all radios.

‘I’d rather chop it up and burn it than give it to them,’ I said to my mother, who instantly agreed to my proposition.

Yet how does one destroy such a wonderful mechanism? At that time we still retained a strong respect for property, and it seemed wasteful to deliberately destroy an item in good working condition. A few years later I snuffed out human lives without a second thought, but in 1939 I still had strong regrets at the thought of destroying a mere radio. After consulting our neighbour, the priest, who from the very beginning of the war was always ready to help in any way he possibly could, I took the radio to the rectory, where the tall thin nun in charge of the priest’s household took it off our hands. Wrapped in a colourful cloth, the huge Telefunken was hidden under the main altar in the church. Two years later, when that spot was needed for more important things, the radio was taken out and burned.

The empty apartment above us was taken over by non-commissioned officers from a newly arrived SS detachment. Their first evening in the apartment they had a drunken brawl. They had brought some girls to the apartment, and when the girls tried to get away from them they started chasing them up and down the stairs. Then, in their rage, they dragged a sixty-year-old Jewish woman from the next apartment and made her dance a Kozak, clad only in panties. Later, they returned to their apartment to continue drinking. I didn’t overhear the entire brawl because I was exhausted by my work at the
hospital and always slept like a rock, but shots from upstairs woke me up and got me out of bed in a hurry. After a few rounds fired from handguns, a deafening explosion resounded through the house. I was sure it was a bomb, perhaps British. I dressed quickly and spent the rest of the night discussing what it could have been with my neighbours, and wondering what we would do when the British started all-out bombing. My neighbours said that when a bomb like that explodes and doesn’t hit a German, it groans, ‘I’m sorry.’ To get through the night, we played the card game Carioca, which was popular at the time. The next morning we found out that the drunken SS men had been shooting at a beautiful clock that was part of a large bureau, and that they then threw the bureau and clock out of the third-floor window. That was the bomb! The British planes, unfortunately, had not yet arrived.

‘You can rest assured,’ I told my neighbours rather foolishly, ‘they know what they’re doing. We’ll soon be tired of British bombing.’ I wasn’t the only one who believed that.

Eventually, the situation in the hospital become routine. Those who were seriously wounded died. The others were assigned to various wards. We received considerable help from three Jewish doctors from Morava Ostrava in Czechoslovakia. The Germans had been detaining them in a camp but for some unknown reason they were released and ‘condemned’ to Lublin. One of them was a brilliant surgeon—Dr. Arpad Grossman. He saved the lives of some of the most desperately wounded, who were then murdered several months later. He would not have made such heroic efforts to save those people had he known the death awaiting them in the immediate future. He himself had suffered greatly. He had endured a long prison term in one of the more brutal prisons in Czechoslovakia. Every night there was a suicide in his cell, and in the morning the guards laughed merrily as they dragged out the corpse. In the evening they would throw a piece of rope into the cell, with the words, ‘Vielleicht will sich noch ein Jude aufhangen’ (Maybe another Jew will want to hang himself). At night there was always someone who would take advantage of the invitation and use the rope. These suicides took place in the presence of other prisoners without a word being spoken. Sometimes it was necessary to help the suicide hang himself; and very often the helper would later hang himself as well. At times when Dr. Grossman was tempted to take his life, he would think of his infant daughter, and that thought would draw him back from the brink. Somehow he had survived, and now he worked among us with total dedication to his calling.

The second Czech doctor was a gynecologist who had been prevented from practising his specialty by local obstetricians. Even in those terrible times, these people were not able to overcome their greed to stop thinking only of making a large fortune. Nothing mattered to them but money. The director of the hospital had taken over from my father, who had been mobilized. The new director was a local doctor who was part of the obstetrical clique. He maintained a set of very strict regulations designed to keep out competition. He was a short, dirty, vile man who started collaborating with the Germans at the beginning of 1940. He was a Gestapo spy and he died like a spy. The traitor’s name was Dr. Solomon Bromberg. I’ll have more to say about him later.

The third Czech, the youngest of the three, was a radiologist. He was a handsome man, musically inclined, who always had a smile on his face. He loved to flirt with the women. He entertained us by drawing wonderful caricatures on the frost-covered windows with his finger. He refused to accept the fact of death even though it was everywhere around him. I give these Czechs a prominent place in my narrative because
they were intimately involved in my first attempts to escape from German captivity. But again, let me not anticipate.

As things started settling down, domestic matters absorbed more and more of my time. The neighbours next door were thrown out of their apartment; the fat SS non-commissioned officer started grimacing at the Jewish-sounding names on our doorplates, and finally ordered us to take them down. We were now certain that even though ‘our’ colonel assured us of his protection, we would be thrown out of the apartment eventually. We started moving our books and other valuables with greater determination, packing off everything we could and giving it all to the ‘Aryans’—our former maid, the superintendent of the building, friends, to anyone we could think of. We packed our Persian rugs into sacks and hid them under the roof of the hospital morgue.

Finally, on 1 December 1939, a few SS men entered our apartment. ‘In 15 minuten raus!’ (Out of here in 15 minutes!), they shouted, pointing to the clock.

We hurriedly packed our valises, a few bundles, and a pillow, quickly discovering how much unnecessary junk we owned. We were now homeless and all our belongings had become superfluous. A little girl who lived in the basement started laughing at our plight.

‘Why are you laughing, little girl?’
‘At the way they are throwing out the Jews,’ she answered earnestly.

I told my mother to pay no attention, that the child was an idiot, and I put our things into the waiting horse-drawn carriage. We were on our way! We were given a room in the hospital, which was to be our home from then on. But who could know at that time what that meant!

We received good news from my aunt in Warsaw. She and grandma had survived the bombing, and they were back living in their beautiful apartment in Żoliborz, which had not been damaged by the bombing. I went to visit them when the first train resumed operating between Warsaw and Lublin. Actually, paying a social visit was not my sole purpose. I wanted to size up the situation in Warsaw and get some information from the Italian embassy. I wanted to find out if there was any chance of my returning to Bologna. I had spent a year studying natural science at the university there, so I had a valid passport and visa. I didn’t want to lose a year of academic credit. At my aunt’s house I met a very beautiful young girl who was going to play a very important role in my life. I am indebted to her for being alive now, and it is because of what she did for me that I am still searching for some meaning to human existence. The beauty of her soul enchanted me, and later, in times of despair, the knowledge that such people really do exist gave me the strength to endure the storms, misfortunes, and many evils I was fated to live through. Aside from this fateful encounter, I did not accomplish much in Warsaw.

I returned to Lublin, where I resumed working in the hospital. There were fewer and fewer wounded, but now another sort of patient started coming in: Jews who had been beaten in the Umschlagplatz (assembly point) at 7 Lipowa Place in Lublin, where a forced labour camp for Jews had been hurriedly organized. These new patients came in with green–purple swollen faces, bloody eyes, bullet wounds, and broken bones that had been inflicted in their places of work as well as at Lipowa Place: young frightened boys and old men in ritual long coats with burned beards. These were the first indications of the impending tragedy about to overwhelm the Jewish people, the initial victims of that terrible conflagration that was spreading slowly, mercilessly, and relentlessly throughout Europe.
Curfew hour was 19:00 (7:00 p.m.). Anybody caught outdoors after that hour was shot. I still remember one forty-year-old Jewish worker who was not released from work until a few minutes before 19:00 hours and who consequently had no chance of getting home on time. A German shot him in the stomach just as the worker was entering the ghetto gate. His wife brought him to the hospital; how she managed it, I never knew.

While he was lying on a stretcher in the hallway, Dr. Grossman examined him and ordered that he be taken to the operating room immediately.

‘Cut his clothes,’ he commanded anxiously.

The wounded man, who was still conscious while I was cutting away his pullover and shirt, looked at me curiously and said, simply, ‘It’s a pity.’ His wife seemed to be thinking the same thing as she tearfully watched our destructive work.

Throwing the articles of underwear at her, I said, ‘They can still be mended.’ In my heart I knew that the clothes could not be mended, and also that this man would not need them. In the operating room, the head nurse was still milling around, with an indifferent and even contented expression on his face. The orderly was sterilizing the equipment, while Dr. Grossman and a slender young surgeon, Dr. Zygielwaks, prepared to operate. The operation lasted more than an hour. One . . . two . . . five stitches, and so on. At the eleventh stitch the wounded man expired. He remained on the operating table--tall, naked, eyes opened wide, as if he himself were surprised at his own sudden demise. The doctors wiped the sweat from their faces. Anna, one of the nurses, told me to go downstairs and inform his wife. I always seemed to end up with that horrible job. I tried to deliver the news tenderly, and without causing pain. The woman downstairs did not want to believe me. How could it be that an hour earlier he had been healthy. He had never been sick a day in his life, and now the end had come so quickly. Later, the supervisor took her into the nurses’ room, so that she would not disturb the other patients with her lamentations.

The Germans issued orders declaring that all Jews had to wear a yellow, six-pointed star. They described the exact size of the star and also the precise spot on the right breast where it was to be worn. The noose was now tightened on the Jewish community. All the events that took place subsequently added up to a systematic, planned, gradual tightening of this noose. I decided that I wouldn’t wear the star. My mother thought I was taking an unnecessary risk, but I didn’t want to wear the patch, and in fact, I just could not pin that yellow patch on my person. I walked through the streets freely and without fear.

I made another brief visit of several days to Warsaw. When I returned to Lublin I brought back some Italian books and read them on the evenings when I didn’t have a ‘meeting’ to attend. These evening meetings took place in the gynecological ward. A few of the young nurses used to gather in the delivery room, which was a warm, clean spot. The moaning woman about to give birth would lie on the delivery table, looking at us with hate in her eyes while we gossiped cheerfully at her side. The midwife, who would be boiling water, would offer us a cup of tea. The gynecologist would check to see how far the woman had dilated. We would stand around chatting pleasantly until we got the signal from the midwife. Then we’d snap to attention! A new citizen had been born. We could return to our dimly lit rooms.

The Czechs told me to be careful in the presence of Dr. Bromberg and not tell him anything that might be sensitive information because he was a spy. The truth of this allegation was confirmed a short time later. One beautiful day, six SS men came to our room and ransacked it. As they were leaving, they told us to send them the Persian rug.
Bromberg was the only one who knew that we had hidden one of the Persian rugs in the hospital. He revealed his perfidy in other little ways. I couldn’t restrain myself one day when he assured me warmly of his loyal friendship and complete sincerity.

I said to him, ‘Doctor, I think you’re exaggerating.’

He answered, ‘You don’t know how close I feel to you. You don’t realize that I love you as if you were one of my own family, my own wife, my own child.’

‘Things appear quite differently to me,’ I said, emphasizing my words.

He didn’t press the matter further but from that day we were enemies. He didn’t have to wait long for his revenge.

Terrible things were happening in the hospital. For several days, shocking things occurred, some worse than others. All the inmates of an old-age home outside of Poznań were evacuated to Lublin in an unheated car. Among them were a few elderly Jewish women who had been dumped in our hospital, unconscious. They had been crammed together in transit and now came to us not only unconscious, but smeared with feces and suffering from severe frostbite. One died a few hours after being admitted to the hospital. Another went completely mad. A third lived a few weeks; her daughter, who by some miracle found her just before she died, did not even recognize her. We were not given much time to think about the old people. On 10 February 1940, a transport of Jewish prisoners of war arrived in Lublin. There were more than five hundred enlisted men and officers in this transport. Those who had relatives in Lublin and who had all their medical records were free to go.

That same night, every one of those prisoners died. It was very cold and dark. A storm was raging, unloading heavy mounds of snow. The SS men, dressed in long fur coats, took command of the prisoners, who were lined up in rows of four, and then forced them to march all night, through mountainous drifts of snow. Their destination was supposed to be Biała Podlaska, 150 kilometres from Lublin. In the rear of the column was a truckload of SS men. Some of the SS who were mounted on horseback used the horses to prod the prisoners to march faster. Spectators who saw this march told me about it. While I did not see the march itself, I saw something else. I saw the dead bodies of those prisoners. The next morning peasants on their way to the city found the frozen bodies in Polish uniforms strewn along the road. They loaded them on sleds and brought them to the hospital. As the stiff lifeless ‘figures’ kept streaming in, the morgues of all the Lublin hospitals were soon filled and the cemeteries were soon filled also. Only nine of the prisoners were brought to our hospital. They had all been shot in the head. Apparently, those who fell behind or could not go on were finished off by being shot in the back of the head. The dead lay on the floor, military style. One was still clutching a little bag with something in it. You could see that another had had his head crushed by the wheels of a truck, because one terrible-looking blue eye had come out of its socket and just lay there staring horribly. The rest was a mass of flesh, snow, and blood. I touched the clutched fist of one of the soldiers, which was resting on his chest, and I heard a ghastly sound, like the echo of a hollow tree trunk. I sat in the morgue for a long time staring at those faces, and I still remember them. I swore then that I would avenge them and I had the good fortune to be able to do so.

I now started planning my escape just across the border. The Czechs had put me in touch with a professional smuggler who regularly brought them news from Moravska Ostrova and who was willing to guide me across the ‘green’ border. We decided to wait until the very cold weather let up, but the frost kept getting worse.
One day the hospital was alerted to the news of many accidental deaths and of an ‘epidemic’ on Lipowa Street. We immediately understood that some sort of Jewish transport had arrived. We became aware of the dimensions of this latest tragedy about an hour later, when carriages hired by the Judenrat started bringing in their terrifying-looking ‘baggage’: bales of straw laced with stiffened bodies and furs; blue faces, dishevelled hair, funny women’s hats and men’s hats that resembled melons. The orderlies and the health workers were unloading those inhuman forms. They carried them into the hospital on stretchers, in their arms, or as ‘bundles’ tossed over their shoulders. I rushed into our room and pushed my terrified mother away from the door.

‘Nothing has happened,’ I told her. ‘They’ve just brought some German Jews. Don’t you dare go into the hall,’ I shouted at her, slamming the door. A minute later, I entreated, ‘I beg of you, I beg you, don’t leave this room under any circumstances! Stay right here until I get back.’

I spoke calmly, but with such resolution that I was sure mother would do as I asked. I did not want her to see this vampire procession creeping through the corridors of the hospital. I remember the expressions on those faces, and the look in the eyes of those who were carried into the building and were ‘temporarily’ set down in any space available, as if they were piles of old rags. Some were groaning silently. Some, with high temperatures, spoke deliriously. The hospital personnel milled around helplessly among them. Nurse Anna, who was usually slow and phlegmatic, now made a quick decision, and her initiative enabled her to gain control of the situation.

‘All hands to their stations. Maly, Pola, Krysia, you stay here and give everyone a shot of morphine immediately. Krysia,’ she said, addressing me directly. I knew what she wanted. I meekly went to boil the needles.

The wounded were placed in two wards that were evacuated to make room for them. Since there were about fifty new patients, there was no way we could provide a bed and bedding for all of them. We did not even have mattresses. We scattered straw between beds and in the middle of the rooms. We then found some old blankets and retrieved scraps of quilting that had been taken out of circulation and stored in the attic a long time ago. Some of the new arrivals who were still able to talk told us what had happened. We found out that they had been deported from Stettin on a few hours notice. They had been permitted to take a few valises with their most valued belongings. The Germans provided some light snacks for the trip, along with a ticket reading Gesellschaftsonderzug (Special Social Train). Once the train was underway, the compartments containing about fifteen people each were sealed. The trip lasted several days. The cars were not heated and the trip was unnecessarily prolonged. The train would sometimes stop and remain standing for hours in the middle of nowhere, and then return to the station it had just left. It would go on to another station, depart, and then return to that station again. The train would proceed and then stop for no reason. Truly it was a Gesellschaftsonderzug. People fainted of thirst. They licked the ice on the windowpanes, and tried to scrape it off with frozen fingers. They fought over pieces of ice. Since they were not permitted to leave the crowded compartments to go to the toilet, they urinated and defecated where they stood. A few people went berserk and started howling, fighting, and screaming. The transport started out with more than a thousand people, but many died on the trip. When they arrived in Lublin the second act of the tragedy started. The Volksdeutsche, young boys from the Sonderdienst (an auxiliary police force made up of Volksdeutsche, created by Hans Frank), stormed into the cars and drove the occupants
out. Jews were told to leave their valuables behind. The women had their bags torn out of their hands and were kicked and hit with rifle butts.

The Volksdeutsche lined the prisoners up in rows of four and, hitting them constantly, drove them from the station through the streets of the city to Lipowa Place. Any of the prisoners who had harboured illusions about the fate awaiting them lost those illusions now. These pathetic wretches were left without a home, without money, without the right to live. They were constantly beaten and driven like so many cattle. When they reached Lipowa Place some collapsed and some died on the spot. The living and the dead lay side by side. In fact, for them, the distinction between the living and the dead had practically ceased to exist.

As soon as order had been restored, the doctors started checking them. Almost all of them had frozen fingers and toes already gangrenous. These limbs would have to be amputated, but amputation had to be done at an appropriate moment. All of the new arrivals were suffering from diarrhea. The whole day was spent ministering to the people from Stettin, listening to their tragic tales, and running back and forth with bedpans. The night was a prolonged nightmare difficult to convey. Even ordinarily, hospital nights are not pleasant. I know that every murmur seems louder and every groan seems to float eternally in the darkness, stuffing itself into every corner and every crevice. But I had never experienced a more dreadful night than this one and have never experienced another to match it since. Six Jews from Stettin died that night. I was on duty at the time and felt as if death was always at my side. Death that night in that hospital was a ubiquitous and constant presence. The Angel of Death seemed to be sitting on every blanket, and would now and then pull the blanket down to uncover a lifeless carcass. The frightened nervous hands of the dying human being would dig into the blanket and try to pull it up; the hands would fall back in temporary defeat and then try again with fitful uncoordinated motions, only to go down to final defeat. Again and again there would be that tragic and futile pulling on the blanket. It was hard to live those days, but it was also hard to die. Those Stettinites died a horrible death. I dragged myself to the doctor on duty to report each death. He would confirm the death, and tell me to take the corpse to the morgue. Another bed was freed up. Then the agony would start again. The death throes of the next victim would be similar but not identical because no two deaths are ever exactly alike.

I remember Rosalia Lewin, an eighty-year-old woman who died that night. While I was giving her an injection I noticed black-and-blue marks all over her body from the beatings she had absorbed. Next to her a young woman died; she had tuberculosis and a black frostbitten nose. The young woman struggled to live, but died soon after midnight. Closing her eyes, I felt as if my fingers were made of lead. I was suddenly overcome by total exhaustion. I wanted to lie down next to that dead woman and sleep. At that moment an orderly called me to assist in a birth.

The midwife, who was alone, needed assistance. A difficult delivery had been in progress for a long time.

‘I beg your pardon,’ I said foolishly, ‘but I’ve just come from a deathbed.’

‘So please wash your hands,’ she answered, without making any effort to sympathize.

Of course she was right. The woman in labour was pale, drenched in sweat, and groaning like some animal. She kept repeating the same broken unintelligible sounds.

‘What is she saying?’ I asked.

‘She’s cursing her husband.’
The midwife burst out laughing, throwing me a clean towel.

‘Please keep an eye on the woman. I’m going downstairs to talk to the doctor; this has been dragging on too long.’

I am left alone with the woman and her agony. I sit on a chair, staring at her, helpless and completely exhausted. Suddenly the woman screams wildly. I jump up; my fatigue has been dispelled, at least temporarily. I see the head of a baby forcing itself out of the opening in her flesh. I start screaming myself. I call for the midwife, but no one answers. I grab the head, and before I know it I am awkwardly holding a screaming baby. Life enters the world with a bang and leaves with a whimper.

The next day was my day off but after what I had been through the previous night I wasn’t able to sleep. So instead of wearing myself out trying to rest, I shuffled back to the hospital to see what I could do for those poor souls from Stettin. I helped wash and feed them, and brought snacks to cheer them up. We got to know each other and struck up conversations. I promised to do what I could for them. One needed a towel, another a comb, someone else asked for a handkerchief. I followed Nurse Anna like a shadow, begging little favours for the Stettin victims. The surgeon had been amputating gangrenous fingers all morning. The operating floor was full of them. By noon he had amputated one hundred extremities.

The events of the last few days, along with news from my father, who was interned in Hungary, hastened my decision to smuggle myself out of the country. We held an important meeting in the room occupied by the Czechs. They had a large map, and we used pins to mark all the places where it might be possible to cross the border. The person who was going to serve as my guide nodded his head in disagreement with Dr. Grossman; he did not approve the proposition that we travel through Czechoslovakia. Such a trip would be too long and too dangerous. He decided that we should go through Jasło, and demanded 3,000 złotys to take me across the border. We arranged to meet the next Wednesday, and on the frosty morning of the designated day, we left.

We passed through Nisko, where there was a famous camp for Jews. I think this was the first concentration camp in our area. It was supposed to be a forced labour camp, but in reality was a first-stage death camp. People told terrible stories about that camp, but nobody believed them. At dawn the next morning we were in Jasło. According to plan, we continued the next leg of our journey on peasant sleds through the blinding brilliance of enormous snowdrifts.

We stopped in Sanok in the house of a former naval officer. This was the place of our rendezvous. We made contact with a group of Polish officers and cooperated in planning the rest of the journey. We decided on a day to begin the next phase of the journey, and paid Chodakowski, the handsome peasant boy who was to lead us. Meanwhile, the guide who had brought me this far, Sacewicz, had gone off in the direction of Cisny or Kryweg to scout the terrain. While waiting for his return, I walked around Sanok openly. Jews were sweeping the snow from the streets of the town.

Sacewicz did not return that day, nor the next. On the third day one of the officers burst into my room and told me there had been a big raid and Chodakowski had been arrested. The streets of the city were being guarded by gendarmes and Ukrainians. They were searching houses, arresting anyone without proper papers and any landlords who may have been sheltering illegal residents.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ one of the officers said, a note of command in his voice. ‘Take off in different directions. Every man for himself.’
The next day I returned to Lublin from my unsuccessful attempt to escape. Certain changes had taken place. Instead of wearing a star on their chests, Jews were now required to wear a white armband, and were supposed to bow to every German they passed, and to step down from the sidewalk into the gutter while permitting the Übermensch (superior being) to go by. The victims from Stettin were still in the hospital, recovering from their amputations. But not all of them recovered. Many of them died. The survivors went from the hospital to one of two small towns where they were resettled.

While I had been trying to escape from Poland, Dr. Bromberg had evicted my mother from the hospital room we had been living in. I caught up with her while she was looking for another room. We finally found a room with very good charming people and hoped we could live there in peace until the end of the war. Mother was earning some money by giving lessons and by knitting. I was out of work myself, and that depressed me. I stopped going to the hospital because of Dr. Bromberg. I was afraid of him.

In April I went to Warsaw to live with my aunt in Żoliborz, where we did not feel the terrors of war quite so severely. In October 1940, all Jews were ordered to relocate in an area that, at the time, they were not permitted to call a ghetto. Our tranquil Żoliborz existence came to an end. My best friend advised me to get hold of some ‘Aryan documents’ because terrible times were coming. It had become necessary to look out for one’s own survival. An acquaintance of my friend, Władysław Jagiełło, put us in touch with a friend of his who was a member of the Party, a young man who at that time was living under the forged name Józef Salach. I met him in my friend’s room. We chose an appropriate name from the phone book and a few days later I was equipped with an ‘authentic’ birth certificate and other essential papers. Later, when I was forging large numbers of false papers myself I realized how terribly botched my first set of phony documents had been. I helped my friend and my aunt to pack, separating out those things that were to be stored among the closest ‘Aryan neighbours’, who eagerly accepted the furniture and other things, expecting to keep them permanently instead of sincerely coming to our aid. My aunt and grandmother moved to Sienna Street, where they took a room with a doctor friend. My friend and her mother moved to Lesznia Street.

On 16 November 1940, the Germans sealed off the ghetto. Only the day before, people had been running nervously back and forth with ‘illegal’ belongings. Carriages, buggies, pushcarts, wagons, and vehicles of every description were hauling piles of forbidden furniture hidden under large colourful bundles of ‘things’ wrapped in large awnings and canvas sheets. People carrying valises, bundles, and sacks were running alongside the vehicles, desperately trying either to avoid or to bribe the oppressive police officer in the navy blue uniform.

At dinner, the day before the ghetto was sealed off, the family had been discussing our situation and our future possibilities.

‘What can you do,’ I said, trying to comfort my aunt. ‘Somehow we will endure. This can’t last more than another year at the most, and then you’ll return to Żoliborz.

My inherently pessimistic aunt did not believe we would survive. ‘They will kill us all right here,’ she said.

‘Have you lost your mind?’ I asked. Do you think they can murder a few hundred thousand people? The rest of the world won’t allow it. People in the outside world know what’s going on here. They wouldn’t have the gall to do something like that. They wouldn’t dare.’
My aunt remained silent. She didn’t agree with me. She was filled with tragic forebodings. Somehow, in the last few days, her beautiful soulful face had grown yellow and wrinkled. It was difficult for me to say good-bye to her and leave. I had lived a quiet, peaceful existence with them in Żoliborz these last few months, remote from the day-to-day unpleasantness and the daily worries of the war, and now I was leaving them to go, once again, to a situation that would be better for me. But my presence in Żoliborz wouldn’t have benefited them in any way. On the contrary, in the new situation, with the three of us squeezed into a tiny narrow room, I would only have been a nuisance. I decided it would be best to return to Lublin to be with my mother. The day before I left I said to my friend, as we were shaking hands in the dark stairway:

‘In case anything bad happens, you can count on me. I’ll answer any call, and I’ll do anything humanly possible. Once the ghetto is completely sealed, things will get very difficult here. Please look after my family.’

The next day the gates of the ghetto were locked: walls, barbed wire, police stations. It was impossible to get in and just as impossible to get out. My foolish and unfounded optimism vanished. It crumbled like dust under the hammer blows of reality. I was now consumed with worry about the people behind the walls, paralyzed by an overwhelming despair. Slinking down Marszałkowska Street I could see the walls and the upper floors of the buildings behind the walls. Outside the ghetto, things were still normal. Trams, cars, and carts moved calmly through the streets. Business was being carried on as usual. People went about their lives as though nothing had happened. On the other side of the wall, the streets were crammed with frightened people running fitfully in all directions. The people inside the walls were like animals caught in a trap, while on the ‘Aryan side’ I was free to do what I wished. I could walk on any street, turn down a side street if it suited my fancy, sip coffee in any coffee shop. All this just because I had blonde hair and a straight nose and counterfeit documents in my pocket. I felt as if those walls didn’t really divide me from the people inside. Rather, I felt a peculiar but painful solidarity with them. I walked despondently through the streets of Warsaw, but my heart was in the ghetto, and I felt that in life or death it was those people I belonged to. The feelings of kinship with the people inside the walls kept washing over me with greater frequency and ever increasing intensity. But I would not let myself be lured into that trap behind the walls of the ghetto. Though I ran from the vicinity of the ghetto as fast as I could, nevertheless I left something of myself behind those walls.

After my arrival in Lublin, the next few months were sad and difficult. The German authorities kept forcing my mother and me to move from one place to another, and each time the living quarters got worse. Our conditions steadily deteriorated. With every move our circumstances become more miserable, and the few possessions that we had started with were dwindling to nothing. We were constantly harassed by new German regulations. This bloody regime was being run by SS General Globocnik. Street roundups, beatings of Jews, and arrests for no crime were daily occurrences. My counterfeit documents lay in a valise, unused. It would have been difficult for me to show myself using a false name in a city where I had lived for many years, and in which I had many acquaintances. Nevertheless, I walked around without an armband, though there were stretches when I did not leave the house for days at a time.

Early in February 1941 I was able to return to Warsaw, and re-entered the ghetto there. I felt a powerful longing to see the relatives and friends I had left behind, to find out how they were doing. I got into the ghetto the same way others did at that time, through swarms of ‘Aryan’ smugglers who stole into the area, bought whatever they
could for pennies, and then stole out again with their wares. I paid for my trip to Warsaw by borrowing some money and selling some clothes. Once in the ghetto, I saw terrible things that I will never forget. I won’t try to describe what I saw, because those who lived through that hell already know what it was like; others have heard stories and know what happened from reading written documents. But no description can convey the enormity of the misery the ghetto dwellers had to endure. One had to experience it to understand it. At first I felt out of place walking through those crowded mournful streets filled with nervous, agitated people. But then I realized that this was not simply a crowd of strangers. I felt that my place was in here, with them. It was not just that they were imprisoned behind those terrible walls while I was able to walk the streets of the city without hindrance, take the trolley, the train, or a taxi. I did not set a great value on my life, but it certainly would have been pointless to remain in the ghetto and would not have done anybody any good. With such rationalizations I managed to pacify my conscience.

My friend and I went to a cabaret, one of the many local entertainments in this death colony. Once we had dinner at an elegant place in Lesznia. The hall was decorated in pleasant green and gold. The waitresses were well-groomed to please the sensibilities of the ‘society ladies’ who patronized the place. There was even an orchestra. I had to choke back the tears over my aromatic cutlet. This ridiculous luxurious pleasure palace should have been destroyed, hacked to pieces. The rooms should have been ransacked; the windows and mirrors should have been shattered; the meat, fish, salads, and sandwiches should have been thrown into the street. The streets outside the pleasure palace were populated with half-naked people swollen by malnutrition, dead bodies, spectral apparitions, and children howling with hunger. Starving children roved the streets while we sat in the restaurant with smiles glued on our faces, eating our tasty cutlet and indulging in light chatter. I felt only searing heat in my throat and salt on my lips and could think of nothing but the ubiquitous human suffering and my own personal impotence in the face of it.

My aunt was emaciated, wasting away. She was overworked, running from place to place to give private lessons. By evening she was completely exhausted, too tired even for conversation. Poor grandma was knitting a sweater someone had ordered from her, but she was constantly making mistakes. They were not very happy about the tiny room they had to live in. Even my aunt’s best friend, the physician who shared her apartment with my aunt and grandma, started grinding on their nerves. The life they led was not only difficult and sad, but hopeless. On the evening before I was to leave the ghetto, my friend accompanied me to my place in Sienna Street. We walked slowly, very slowly. Who could tell what the future had in store for us? Who knew whether we would ever see each other again? One of us said, ‘This may be the last time. . . .’
‘In case something hap . . . Remember. Remember!’
I had strong forebodings. Such a gloomy evening.
A navy blue sky hung heavily on the rooftops. There were no stars in the sky.
‘See. Even the stars don’t want to look at us,’ I said to her.
I urged my friend to try to get out of there, to escape somehow, to see about getting ‘Aryan papers.’ Of course, it’s easy to give advice. But she still believed it was still possible to find work in the ghetto and go on existing there.

I said good-bye to her and shook her hand. We parted from each other on a side street. Then I took leave of my aunt and grandma, hugging them one last time. I did not know at the time that this would be the last truly happy moment of my life. Of course, I
am fully aware of it now. At that moment my dear ones were still alive. Everything had not yet been lost. Deep in our hearts there still glowed some small spark of hope. What was to come later was only suffering and the knowledge of suffering.

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In Lublin, the persecution of the Jews had grown more vicious. A wave of bloodletting spread throughout the city. Jews were beaten and murdered without mercy. During those days we lived with an acquaintance, a doctor whose wife was in charge of a garment shop that had as its clientele the most highly-respected Germans in the city. The Germans were benevolent to those they needed for one reason or another. They showed kindness to a Jewish barber who shaved them without charge; they acceded to the entreaties of a Jewish manicurist who asked them to obtain the release of a friend who was in prison. They did favours of this kind for those who served their needs. To the Germans such generosities were mere trifles not worth mentioning.

One of the truly mighty people at that time was a Jewish paper hanger, Francos, to whom people made pilgrimages in groups, asking for favours and influence. Intelligent women offered him their bodies. He was treated to dinners and showered with flattery. He made mattresses for the beds of Germans, and fitted curtains for their windows. He did work for the chief of the district and for all the big shots. Because of his work, he had the opportunity to come in close contact with the superior beings, and he took full advantage of it to feather his own nest. He became rich and very pleased with himself.

At the assembly place near Lipowa and at the one on Proboštovo, groups of impoverished Jewish workers were being slaughtered. A horrible institution was formed: the Jewish death brigade, which went through the ghetto picking up corpses. In those terrible times the basest human instincts were given free rein. I saw a Jewish policeman and a law student beat the face of a starving old man because he was not able to stand up straight at a roll call. I saw a Jewish policeman hit and kick a fellow Jew and then force one worker to hit another. He tortured his own brethren just to win the approval of the fat German commander. It is a terrible shame that there were so many Jewish police, and that they consented to work for the enemy. They should have committed suicide before agreeing to help the Germans murder other Jews.

In spite of their racist ideology that held Jews to be an inferior race, the Germans were not above doing kindnesses to Jews they needed for procuring their own comforts. Our doctor’s wife had sized up the situation shrewdly, so she opened a lingerie shop for the express purpose of ingratiating herself with the Germans. She did not know the business herself and was not much of a worker, but she hired a very capable young seamstress and exploited her skill and labour. The doctor’s wife was a cunning shrewd person. Though she was selfish and self-centred, she was also charming, with a certain superficial warmth that she could turn on at will. Since she was fluent in German, it was not long before she had established some powerful connections. Thanks to these connections, she found out one day in mid-March of 1941 that the Germans were planning a massive deportation of the Jews from the ghetto the next day.8 She was afraid to share the news with anybody, but since we lived in the same apartment, she couldn’t help revealing her secret to us. I know she would have liked to keep the news to herself, but she let it slip out. The doctor’s wife tried to make light of the whole matter, but we didn’t want to deceive ourselves. We nervously started packing our valises, even though that did not do much to solve our problem, since we had no place to go.

The priest who used to be our neighbour had invited us to his house for supper that day. Throughout these bad times he had taken an interest in our fate, and always did
what he could to help us. My mother was too apprehensive that evening not to tell him about our new predicament. He told us not to worry. If there really was a deportation, he said, we would just stay with him until it was over, and then we would see what would have to be done. He said all this as though there were nothing complicated about it, as if the entire matter was self-evident, even though concealing a Jew was punishable by death.

We spent the night at the parish, and early the next morning I went out to investigate. Trucks were lined up in rows along all the streets where Jews lived. I watched from a distance, mingling with a group of curious spectators. Roused out of their sleep and forced from their beds, the Jews--men, women and children--were herded out of the houses and carrying ridiculous bundles that kept flopping all over the place. They were shoved into the trucks brutally, constantly urged on and beaten with blows from rifle butts. The crowd of spectators around me swelled, but no one said a word, not a single whisper of sympathy.

The deportations continued for two days. We found out that the Jews had been sent in various directions to nearby towns, and that groups of them were now returning to Lublin without any interference. The entire aktzia was conducted just to make it easier for the Germans to plunder Jewish property. We were later informed that this particular aktzia was conducted to entertain a new SS unit that had just arrived in Lublin. The Germans were only providing amusement for their new comrades.

I found the doctor’s wife in the upholstery workshop of Mr. Francos, where she and a crowd of other people had spent the last few days. She had already made contact with a German office worker from the Quartieramt (Housing Office) who used to be one of her clients, and the woman had promised to find her a new apartment. She offered to let us live with her if her new apartment should turn out to be large enough. My mother accepted the offer, but acting on the priest’s advice, I took my ‘Aryan’ papers from their hiding place, and on 15 March 1941, I embarked on a new life.

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Toward the end of May 1941, a frightening green truck full of German gendarmes arrived in our village. Arrests started. Two young priests; the mayor; the secretary; the teacher, who was also the translator for the local administration; and some peasants were taken. A few days later, Sister Helena came back from the administration office with a mysterious expression on her face, and all day she treated me with unusual kindness. That evening she told me the provincial government was looking for an interpreter and that she promised to speak to me about it. Since I had never worked in an office before, I started worrying that I would not be able to handle formal German. Still, it was a good opportunity to become independent of the nuns, get out from under their authority, and earn some money on my own. I decided to try my luck.

The next day, after scrubbing my hands, which were black from peeling potatoes, I went with Sister Helena to the municipality, where the assistant mayor and the secretary were in charged. A pile of untranslated writings and administrative papers were waiting for me. The office consisted of two rooms. The first room was full of cabinets. A few male and female clerks were sitting around behind the counter, while in front of the counter some peasants were standing and waiting. Near the window, someone was pounding away on an old typewriter. The second room contained two desks, one for the mayor and one for the secretary. They promised to pay me five zlotys a day. The hours were from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the evening, with lunch at 1:00. I was to start work immediately. I introduced myself to the workers behind the counter. One of the
ladies, skinny Marysia, who had a pale yellow face and pale blue eyes, and who was wearing a pale pink sweater, took an interest in me. She started telling me office secrets, like how hard it was to type on a certain old typewriter. I started sweating over the letters, trying to compose answers to them. It was difficult at first, but somehow I managed.

My work in the city hall was interesting enough. I was getting more familiar with the German language, my typing skills were improving, and I got to spend most of the day away from the Sisters. Miss Marysia was a very sweet girl. She was a graduate of the gymnasium, but the war had interrupted her plans. Whenever the mayor and the secretary went to Lublin, Miss Marysia and I would have very pleasant conversations. The rest of the workers were not as interesting, though they were interesting enough in their own way. Miss Genya, who did the taxes, used to yell at the boys with a shrill voice, and Mr. Marian took care of the tithes the peasants were supposed to pay the Germans. The hunchback Jan was the minister of industry and business.

In addition to my pay, I received a clothing ration card (bezugschein) and with a feeling of great triumph I bought five metres of black woollen cloth, which cost me 54 zlotys. I felt a sense of satisfaction because I was working and earning money. I was greatly relieved to be off the dole, and once in a while allowed myself the luxury of a trip to Lublin. Whenever I had the chance, I would take a bottle of milk or sour cream to my mother, then quickly return to the office in the village.

A unit of German flyers arrived in our village. My days were now fully occupied interpreting for them. I had to arrange housing for the uninvited visitors. About a thousand of them came to our village, and I had to accompany the quartermaster to all corners of the district, interpreting for him and explaining orders and ordinances, while he requisitioned apartments. One of the rooms they requisitioned belonged to the Sisters. The German flyers, who were very pleasant and well-behaved young men, nevertheless took over every building in sight, including the local church. They set up beds and tables everywhere. The women in the village complained bitterly because it was June and the occupiers were interfering with their beautiful prayer services.

One day the secretary’s sister-in-law came to pay a visit. The next day he asked me if I had attended gymnasium in Lublin, because his sister thought she knew me from somewhere. I was not thrilled with the idea that somebody had recognized me, since I was passing for somebody from Lvov, and did not admit to being from Lublin. I answered very cheerfully that it must be some mistake, but my peace of mind had been shaken. I now realized that since the village was only sixteen kilometres from Lublin, I might experience an unpleasant encounter at any time. I was endangering not only myself, but also the Sisters and the priest who had protected me. I had to avoid meeting people and therefore was once again forced to hide in the kitchen of the convent. Having given the matter some thought, I left my job in the municipality. I couldn’t risk being exposed to the public.

I now started freelancing, and worked at keeping the records of the tithes, writing and rewriting long columns of numbers. I wrote and counted, and somehow the days passed. With my pay of eight zlotys daily I began to think of the immediate future a little more optimistically. By writing petitions, I could earn an extra five to ten, and sometimes even fifteen zlotys a day on the side. I paid the Sisters out of my earnings. Housework did not interest me anymore. For the first time in my life I bought a pair of boots with my own money. I had dreamed about those leather boots for months while slogging through the village mud. From time to time I wrote letters to the Warsaw ghetto without putting a return address on them, dropping them in the post during my visits to Lublin. A
Ukrainian woman worked in the village post office, so I had to be very careful about mailing and receiving ‘dangerous’ letters. At that time, the letters I wrote to the ghetto were cheerful and filled with descriptions of the good village life I was living. I rarely received an answer to my letters. When I did get one, the sender was always thoughtful enough to conceal the return address. My aunt was working. My best friend had rented some land on which she had opened a school and was performing pedagogical miracles with the children of the ghetto. Life was sad. Receiving and reading the letters from the ghetto, I felt guilty. I kept reminding myself of the wretched lives being lived behind those walls. They suffered while I roved free in the meadows and pastures.

I was familiar with all the country paths; I enjoyed life with others my age; I was free and sated. I forgot about danger. I forgot about death. This was not fair. But I took comfort in the belief that after the war everything would balance out. All they had to do was survive. I did not doubt that they would endure, so I carried on my carefree life, enjoying all the pleasures of the village. When the municipality received an order pertaining to all the blacksmiths in the district, I became a technician and started drawing up the plans for executing the order. I felt very proud. Fifty zlotys. That was a far cry from five zlotys for a boring petition! Since there weren’t many blacksmiths in our district, my wonderful earnings soon disappeared.

On my birthday I went to see my mother in Lublin. Because mother’s living quarters were woefully inadequate she spent the whole day in the hospital garden, and was able to resume this relatively pleasant way of life because our enemy, the informer Bromberg, had been arrested and killed by the Germans. I sat with my mother in the hospital garden, talking with her about this and that, taking advantage of the peaceful twilight hours and of the last warm sunny days of early autumn. Lying stretched out on the bench, I told her that things would be good again. . . . The local doctor solicited me to donate blood for a transfusion for a very sick woman. I have O-type blood, and was known as a good universal donor. This deal earned me three hundred zlotys, which made me very happy; I wanted to leave part of the money with my mother, but she would not agree to take it, even though things were very hard for her financially. She didn’t want money earned from my blood on my twenty-second birthday. At the time it struck me as a peculiar prejudice.

That same day I spent a pleasant afternoon with the Gabriels. I want to say something about that young Jewish family from Stettin who became my mother’s good friends. Fritz Gabriel worked in the Judenrat. He was a courageous and honest human being; his wife was a good housekeeper. They had a seven-year-old daughter named Puppi who played foolish tricks fearlessly and studied the letters of the alphabet diligently while dreaming of her return to the little room she had in Stettin. Their Lublin room smelled of the German Heim. The dwelling was cozy and pleasant in spite of the German ordinances and in spite of the war. A birthday supper was prepared for me, consisting of a delicious pudding, cookies, and coffee. I was really moved. I believed those pleasant beautiful people would live through the war and would return to their homes.

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In December 1941 my acquaintance, the commissioner in charge of tithes, offered me a job related to agriculture and commerce. The idea was for the municipality to send me as an official representative to serve as a controller and inspector of the shearing of horses. The Germans, who were exemplary managers, cut the horses’ manes and tails twice a year. The horsehair was stored not far from the office of agriculture and
commerce, which was responsible for the whole operation. I accepted the proposition cheerfully, thus starting my new career, which required me to travel to all the villages in the district. In each village I would help with the shearing and record the weight of the hair contributed by each farmer, notating the weight of the manes and tails separately. It was not an easy task. I had to wake up while it was still dark, ride as far as eleven or twenty kilometres in a wagon or a sled in cold and rainy weather, and then freeze for five or six hours at the little table with the scale, where I had to feel the horses’ tails to make sure that the hair was being properly cut, five centimetres below the cartilage.

I used to circulate among herds of horses, dodging kicking hooves while listening to the peasants’ jokes. My fur got soaked through and through with moisture and became completely stiff. My fur, my clothes, and my whole being soaked up the strong smell of the stable. After the shearing, the mayor invited us to a reception. I drank a lot of vodka and got myself into a good mood by eating hot salami served on a big plate. I held my liquor well, a virtue much admired by the peasants. The peasants liked me, and in turn, I liked them. In spite of everything, I was still an optimist and continued to believe in the goodness of people. Eventually, however, I was forced to give up this naive belief.

The shearing in our district lasted nearly fifteen days, and by that time I was able to hand over twenty-five kilos of hair to the authorities. At the same time, I managed to earn more than two hundred zlotys for myself by ‘embezzling’ three kilos of horse hair. Since the horse hair was much in demand by the brush makers in Lublin, I was able to sell it on the black market for seventy zlotys per kilo. I was rich. I had a paid-up apartment, an income, and a few hundred zlotys in my treasure chest.

Winter passed and the spring of 1942 started, but not very auspiciously. One of the Sisters returned from Lublin with chilling news. Heaps of dead bodies were lying in the streets because for several days now, a massive slaughter of Jews had been underway. Blood was flowing in the gutters. Ukrainians working in conjunction with the SS would burst into apartments and slaughter entire families. They threw children out of windows, forced sons to hang their parents, and husbands to hang their wives. People were being picked up on the streets and were being deported to a concentration camp, Belżec.9

‘Your mother probably is not alive any more,’ the Sister informed me, ending her story.

This was certainly possible. I was prepared for the worst. In the morning I had a talk with Marysia, who promised to help in case of need. She had heard about the massacre in Lublin, which had been the subject of discussion in the municipality. One boy from the village almost fainted when he was in Lublin and saw a naked dead child sliding down a platform full of dead bodies.

Marysia promised to look in the archives the next day to find the necessary documents—a birth certificate and a marriage certificate—and to make a temporary ID in that name. My plan was to take the documents to my mother and with the aid of an acquaintance help her find a hiding place. Since there was a lot of work the next day, Marysia wasn’t able to get to the archives, but she managed to arrange the documents the following day, which was Sunday. On Monday we went to Lublin. Marysia was afraid to let me walk around the city by myself, so she dressed me in a big shawl and equipped me with a peasant basket, and the two of us took the train to Lublin. An usually long freight train passed us by with small barred windows, and through those little windows we could see people with battered faces. These were the Jews of Lublin being taken to Sobibór.10 We held each other so tightly that our hands started to cramp. Without saying anything to each other, we knew we were thinking the same thought: ‘my mother might also be on
this transport.’ A man’s face went by with a black eye, or maybe the eye was missing entirely. A little girl’s face went by, probably being held up to the window by an adult. She was wearing a light green coat and had blond curls. Out of that grey mass of people being herded to a tragic death only two faces seen in a flash remained in our minds: the one-eyed man and a child. Years have passed and many things have happened to me during those years, but I will never forget those two faces. I may forget the faces of close friends and the smiles of loved ones, but the faces of those strangers seen by chance will remain with me forever.

The first thing I did in Lublin was to go to the priest, who kept in touch with mother. He told me that he had not heard from her. Terrible things were going on in the Jewish quarter; to go there was out of the question. The four of us sat there together: the priest, Sister Pelagia (his housekeeper), Marysia, and I. We considered what to do next. As we sat pondering, the bell ran, and in walked my mother. She had come to say goodbye to the priest and to solicit his continued guardianship over me. She brought a letter and her wedding ring to be passed on to me. She was under orders to report to Majdanek that afternoon. This was the day they were taking Jews whose names began with the letter ‘M.’ The priest tore the armband off her sleeve and said to her calmly, ‘You’re going to stay here.’ Mother stayed in the priest’s house. A tremendous effort was made to disguise her as an Aryan. Sister Pelagia taught Mother the prayers, and in a few days they sent her, accompanied by one of the Sisters, to Międzylesie, outside of Warsaw, where the Sisters had an outpost. This outpost was usually used as a retreat where the Sisters went to mortify the flesh. It consisted of two small houses connected to each other with a garden, and was administered by one Sister. It was quiet, really an ideal spot. Mother lived there as an elderly lonely widow who was a displaced person. For the time being I felt somewhat relieved but not entirely free of worry and uncertainty.

About that time I started working for the municipality again, this time not as an official, but as a typist, filling out Kennkarte (ID cards). I had to risk this job to earn my keep. For filling out each ID card with all the attached papers I was paid fifty grosz; the sum was later raised to seventy grosz. I could fill out thirty to forty cards a day. Working for the municipality also entitled me to a food card that enabled me to buy flour, twenty decagrams of sugar, and groats. I sent the food to mother.

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At the end of May, I met an acquaintance who was a secretary in another small municipality. He was looking for an interpreter, and offered me the job. I decided to take it, since my situation with the Sisters was deteriorating. Moreover, the close proximity to the city threatened me every day and every minute with the possibility of meeting someone I knew. The new place was past Lublin, past Lubard, past Ostrów—the last station on the line. Then it was another twenty kilometres by way of a sandy road through sparse woods and poor villages stretched out along sad-looking lakes. On the way we passed four large wooden buildings, two along each side of the road.

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1. Translated from ZIH [Bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw], #31 & 33. In this number of ‘Bulletin, ZIH [Jewish Historical Institute]’ we publish the first installment of selections from Krystyna Modrzedeska’s memoir. Born in 1919, the daughter of a Lublin physician, she studied at the University of Bologna. The editors have revised the text for the sake of clarity and stylistic consistency [Note in Bulletin, ZIH. Unless otherwise indicated, all endnotes are translations of notes added by ZIH editors].
2. On orders from the SS, Odilo Globocnik, Chief of Police in the Lublin District, set up a camp for Jews in December, 1939.

3. The Wehrmacht started removing Jewish prisoners who had served in the Polish army from prisoner-of-war camps, turning them over to the SS. The SS command interned them in a camp in Biała Podlaska, shooting many of them in transit. The author of this memoir is referring to one group of these prisoners.

4. A special train that the German government used to deport Jews from Stettin on 17 November 1940. About 1,000 Jews were deported to Lublin. The list of those deported can be found in the archives of ZIH in Warsaw [Joint Act Jewish Organization in Lublin].

5. During the first few months of the occupation, the German authorities brought a few transports of Jews from Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Śląsk to Nisko on the River San. This was intended to serve as a reservation for Jews in the East.

6. On 15 November 1940, the Germans sealed the Warsaw ghetto, which at that time contained about 400,000 Jews.

7. According to other witness accounts, this place on Lesznia was patronized by members of the Judenrat, the Jewish police, the Gestapo, and smugglers.

8. At that time the Nazis ‘resettled’ some 15,000 Jews in the Lublin district. The remaining 30,000 were squeezed into the completely inadequate space of the ghetto.

9. On 17 March 1942, there was a massive deportation of Jews from Lublin to the concentration camp at Bełżec. The aktzia lasted, with interruptions until 20 April 1942. Thirty thousand people were taken in that aktzia. After that the Lublin ghetto was liquidated, and the 4,000 Jews remaining were settled in Majdan-Tatarski, near Lublin. ZIH note.

10. The Jews of Lublin were exterminated not at Sobibór, but at Bełżec. The camp at Sobibór was not opened until May, 1942, while the camp at Bełżec had been in operation since 1 March 1942. ZIH note.