

THE BIG WANDERING

by Moshe Pinchas SZPIRO, London

*Dedicated to the holy memory of my parents,
sisters and brothers, who perished on Kiddush
HaShem in the gas chambers and ghettos.*

the unknown tombstones and unknown tombs of these
martyrs.

1

Who could have imagined on September 1, 1939, when the first bombs had fallen on Kutno, that Holocaust and destruction would strike at Polish Jewry? And who could have imagined that, over the course of the six years of war, we, the Jews of Kutno, will be able to make such a great difference – across Poland, Russia, Persia, Palestine, Egypt, Africa, and North America, Canada and England? I believe that a similar war-fate befell not only me but also other fellow Kutners, who did not make it to the liberation. The following lines should also be a modest dedication on

The deadly attacks on Kutno lasted for two weeks – until the Germans occupied the city. Just as I was lying in the basement during the bombing, so people were afraid to show up on the street when the killers were already in Kutno. They did, however, have enough means to gather all the Jews in one place, each to assign a number and divide into different working groups. I and some other Jews were required for employment in the Gestapo.

It was raining heavily that day. They ordered us to lick the stairs with our tongues and clean them of the mud... Before we could finish the job, we hear the barking

of a dog, which had wandered in our yard. A Gestapo officer drew his revolver and ordered us to apprehend the dog. A race after the animal started. At last, it fell into our hands. The sadist pushed the dog into a sack, which he tied – and beat him with a stick, with all his might. The groaning of the beaten and tortured dog could have moved a rock – but not the petrified heart of the Gestapo. Suddenly, the dog became silent. The German commands to untie the sack. We execute his order – and the dog got out of the gap and started running. The sadist became beyond angry. He yelled at us "leprous *Juden*" – and orders us again to catch the dog. He's again inside the tied bag, and the sticks again beating him – now there is no doubt that the dog is dead. Again, an order: take out the corpse, put it in a box, dig out a grave, bury it, erect a tombstone... All this we carried out according to his commands. He had us lined up in equal rows and required us to play music with our mouth, a kind of mourning-march over the dog's death. Over the open grave, each of us had to say a few words, in the style, that "the dirty Jews caused the war", that Churchill is a Jew and Roosevelt is a Jew too. It was already night when we returned from the tomb. The Gestapo officer ordered us to go to sleep in the stable, together with the horses.

We were hungry and wet, tired and depressed. In such a situation, we could not sleep. It started to rain again. I proposed to flee from the stable, which was certainly not guarded. Once we were convinced that there was no guard around, helping each other, we managed to escape, jumping over the fence.

2

I'm off to my parents. In their eyes, I looked like coming from the other world. They did not believe that I was still alive.

That same night, the Germans set fire to the Kutno synagogue and forced the Jews out of their homes, to put out the fire. When we extinguished the fire, the Germans started firing at us. When I returned, I told my parents that I had to leave for Russia, that I did not want to live with the Nazis. My parents did not like the prospect. They did not want to leave me alone in such a dangerous way and they also did not want to stay in the open during those difficult days. But they knew that the Germans were catching young people at work – and they had no choice but to say goodbye and, together with some colleagues, we were allowed to go to Warsaw. From there, to the Russian border and we managed to enter Białystok. There, we found some young Kutners dwelling together, who arranged to live more or less like before.

When the Germans occupied France in the summer of 1940, the Russians began deporting Polish refugees from western Ukraine and western Belarus. One day I found myself in a well-guarded packed wagon, which was taking prisoners to remote Siberia.

I am now in a Soviet labor camp, along with criminals, who have previously been convicted by courts. Very little food is available, for the difficult forced labor. The mortality rate is high and the mood – oppressed and

depressed. Cutting trees in huge forests, during severe thunderstorms and snowstorms, led to work guarded by dogs and the little food that was only given at 8pm, after returning from work – most of the inmates rushed to desperate steps. I was in camp for 14 months, never undressing to sleep, because I was afraid that they would take away my clothes.

I looked like a skeleton – skin and bone. Finally, the camp doctor decided to send me to the hospital. This saved me from certain death.

3

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Polish citizens were amnestied from the camps and prisons. I went right away in the Soviet army and was assigned to a unit that was fighting behind Moscow. During a 40-degree frost, the Russians fought like lions and did not allow the Germans to occupy the capital.

One day, my captain ordered me to transport a German prisoner of war to the Urals. I saw the "invincible" German soldiers in all their pity and downfall. They died in transit from starvation and cold. They could not awaken any mercy in me.

After the rise of the Polish army (under General Anders) in Russia, in 1942, I mobilized there. Later, the army left Soviet territory and moved to Persia. Only then did my many travels and wandering begin.

From Persia our unit was sent to India, from India – to Saudi Arabia, then to Egypt. After the Suez Canal, we arrived in the Sinai Desert, and from there – to *Eretz Israel*, where I had the privilege of stay for six weeks. I have kissed the earth of the land, and have been amazed at all that my eyes have seen.

I also had to leave the land of Israel – this time for some countries of the Middle East. During several months I was on the front. Until I got a call to move to England, where there was a Polish division.

Before I arrived in London, I had to transport German prisoners of war (from Rommel Corps) to Madagascar. I spent several days there. I later went to Cape Town, in South-Africa. The Jews there welcomed me very warmly. From Cape Town I arrived again in North Africa. All for military missions. From here, I was sent to Boston, in the United States. Then I moved to New York, where the Jews showed a lot of interest in the fate of Polish Jewry. I didn't stay for long in the great American city. My Polish captain had to pack up again – going to Canada. From there, by ship – to Halifax and later Liverpool.

4

In 1943, I arrived in Scotland, where a Polish army was being formed. However, the antisemitism was so great and so outspoken that the Jews in the army suffered greatly. The common soldiers, the non-commissioned officers and officers, demonstrated step by step their hatred of the Jews. When my corporal expressed insult to the Jewish religion, I complained about him to a high-ranking officer. As a result, I was arrested for two months

for incitement against the Polish army. Here my patience ran out and I organized all the Jews in our department to flee from the antisemites.

250 Jews then abandoned the Polish army and we left for London and were asked to join the British army. Having suffered enough from the Germans and the Russians, we did not want now to endure the insults of the antisemitic Poles.

In 1944, when the second front opened, I was in the British Army. I was required to join the Desert Army in Normandy. I became very ill and was hospitalized for several months. I was so weakened that the English doctors discharged me completely from military service.

At the beginning of 1945 I returned to London. I helped organize a Jewish theater there. We have staged serious plays. But the youth had no understanding of a Jewish theater. As a general rule, Jewish-social life in England was very backward.

5

At the end of my memoirs, I would like to mention a few Kutners, with whom I managed to meet on my wandering ways. As far as I know, Eliyahu Braun was drowned in Russia, during work. Also, Eli Lifszyc was in Russia. Berel Trzmil returned to Poland from Russia and I know from a letter that he required to go to Israel.

And now – some biographical dates and facts about me and my extended family, Kutner residents for generations, who perished on *Kiddush-HaShem*, as well as some memories of the city.

I was born in Kutno, on the 14th of August 1914. My father's name was Aharon-Henech, my mother – Chaya-Sara. We were five children: Zyshe-Mordechai, Israel-Yehoshua, Yehuda-Leib, Golda-Raca and me (Moshe-Pinchas).

The Szpiro family has for generations held the office of *shochet* for the Trunk Rabbis of Kutno. At the time of Rabbi Yehoshua Kutner ztz"l, my great-grandfather Mr. Zyshe-Mordechai was a *shochet*. Rabbi Yehoshiele's son was named Moshe-Pinchas and the son of Moshe-Pinchas was Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda Trunk. My grandfather, Mr. Eliyahu, was a *shochet* under the son and my uncle, R' Yitzhak Meir, was a *shochet* under the grandson of Rabbi Yehoshua Kutner. My father was also a *shochet* for a while. Subsequently, he began to trade in leather, also having a shoe business. For a long time, we

lived on Zamenhof St 36, near the old market. Lately – on Królewska St 4. My father, as well as all of our family, were devout chassidim.

In Kutno, there was a beautiful Jewish life. The city produced great rabbis, cantors, writers, musicians, scholars, painters, and thinkers. The brilliance of Jewish culture and knowledge was ingrained in our holy city.

For Passover, the community provided the poor Jews with matza, wine, and whatever they needed. In winter, they distributed coal to those in need. The community also maintained the slaughterhouse, the *mikveh*, the *yeshivot*, the *cheders*, the *Beit Midrash* and the Great Synagogue.

On a hill, there was this very old cemetery, with old tombstones from hundreds of years ago. Next to it was the second cemetery. There was also the *ohel* where Jews used to throw in small notes. There laid Yehoshua Kutner, his son and grandson. The German barbarians destroyed both cemeteries, leaving no sign of the holy shrine. They also burned the synagogue.

Kutno still hails from Napoleon's time when he visited the city, on his way back from Russia. The house in which he was housed, the Poles never allowed to be altered or enlarged.

There were many parties in Kutno: Zionists, *Bund*, *HaShomer HaZair*, *Mizrahi*, *Aguda*, Revisionists, etc. I used to participate in dramatic circles. The city possessed a precious youth; From 8 to 9 thousand Jewish people lived there.

I remember Friday night, its blessing of the light, the *shamash* of the synagogue, Nuta Krajer, knocking with a stick on every door, so that people knew when to close the shops. Every house was so bright on Friday night, the candles were burning on the prepared Shabbat table. My dear mother's candle blessing is engraved in my memory, I will never forget her reciting of the *Techinah*. On Saturday afternoons, songs were heard in all the Jewish houses. After dinner, the children and parents strolled on Królewska Street. Chassidim were also seen in atlas silk capotes, walking to the Gur *shtiebel*. The Shabbat was so restful.

For *Slichot*, the *shamash* used to wake up at dawn. *Rosh Hashanah* was celebrated and people wished for a good year. Dad used to bless us before he went for the *Kol Nidrei* in the synagogue. The fear used to grip me then – what will the new year bring?...