

## Escape from the Tarnow Ghetto by Ruth Chevion

When the lights were finally turned off on the train, Alex, my uncle, who was 19 years old at the time, pulled his cap down over his face, and allowed himself to think over the first few hours of his escape from the ghetto.

Overall, it was a success. There was one mistake for which he castigated himself. He had made brief eye contact with the Gestapo officer who inspected his identity booklet. Curiosity had overcome his determination. It could have ended right there. Luckily, the German moved on.

If a woman made a mistake like this, she could probably get away with it. But for men, arousing any suspicion could lead to the inspection of body parts. Polish men were not circumcised. Later on, Alex would undergo a surgery for this, but for now, it was imperative to simply pass for Polish without suspicion. Eye contact was forbidden.

He went over it in his mind. He had snuck out of the ghetto after dark, wearing a dark overcoat with the yellow Jewish armband attached to the sleeve, a traditional Polish cap with visor on his head. He carried a small (mostly empty) suitcase. He walked unhurriedly.

Once outside the ghetto wall, at the first opportunity, he removed the Star of David armband. Suddenly he was free. Suddenly he was not a Jew. It was strange to be without the armband. After years of wearing it, he had become accustomed to being a slave. Everyone wore it. Being a slave had become ordinary. Now suddenly by ripping off this rag, he was free. Amazingly free. This new freedom was exhilarating. In the moment he controlled his excitement, but he would talk about it for the rest of his life, as though there were not enough words to describe the first taste of freedom.

At the same time, he had been terrified, with good reason: 1. He was outside the ghetto without permission, 2. without an armband or patch, 3. after curfew, 4. on a street forbidden for Jews to walk on, and 5. carrying false ID without the word JUDE stamped on it - all five actions punishable by death.

While walking thus to the train he suppressed any thoughts of his mother. Her tears, her entreaties were heavy on him. The special close relationship he shared with his mother was over now. He must not think of it. Thoughts reveal emotion. Emotion reveals the Jew.

By contrast, thinking of his brother's insulting words the previous night, words like "snot-nose kid, irresponsible adventurer" and so on, actually had the opposite effect. For some reason, those words bucked him up. Alex was actually doing something, not sitting in the ghetto waiting for help from God.

This business of how to think had been a major part of Alex's preparation in the months before his escape. Observing Jews, Germans, and Poles, he had come to the realization that people's thoughts were not concealed by their skin and their clothes. He realized that if he was going to survive on the Aryan side he had to think like a Pole. He had to become the Jan Migon he was impersonating. Not just pretend to be Jan Migon, but actually be Jan Migon.

One person Alex observed during his preparation was his Uncle Ephraim. Alex liked Ephraim. Ephraim was soft and kind. A religious man with beard and peyot who made his living assisting his wife in their fabrics shop, Ephraim might have been replaced by a rolling ladder, as his only duty was to bring down bolts of cloth when so requested by Raisel, his wife. Ephraim mumbled a lot,

talked to himself. Occasionally he would hum bits of a tune and move his head from side to side with his eyes closed. There were occasional outbursts of joy. Ephraim never looked at the Polish girls who came in for fabrics. His stooped figure, his averted inward gaze, all of him was Jewish. From him, Alex learned how not to feel Jewish, and consequently how not to look Jewish.

Raisel, Ephraim's wife who manned the counter and waited on the customers, was another useful subject for how Jews behave. Her specialty was humor. She had an irreverent way of imitating people and making fun of them. Even her own children were treated to funny, even cutting nicknames. She was irrepressible, one of these people whose lips seem always poised to laugh or sling a comment. From her Alex learned to stay away from humor, especially that cynical type of irony that can be identified as Jewish.

Similarly, he studied Polish men, what they said about their families, what they bragged about, how they held their backs and arms when walking, how they looked at women, sometime even turning around to get another view, all of which helped Alex deduce what their thoughts were, especially their sense of privilege.

You have to wonder, as I did when Alex described all this, why he had felt it necessary to be so careful. After all, at this time in 1943 the Jews did not yet know about Auschwitz and ovens. What he said was that he had read Mein Kampf from beginning to end, and he believed what he read in there.

To me it's ironic that when the fear of death came upon him, the strategy Alex resorted to was study, reading, making observations, and applying logic. In a way, underneath the Polish persona, the studious Jew was still there.

I have to note that just before Alex left, his mother gave him a thousand zloty, money he used to get a hotel room and food for the first few days. But she had done something more significant to aid his escape. Prior to the Holocaust, my grandmother Miriam and my grandfather Elchanan had insisted that their children have secular education in addition to Hebrew school. Without that, none of Alex's cleverness would have gotten him out of the ghetto. This was not universal among Polish Jews of the time. In fact, my grandmother's own brother Jakov refused to speak to his sister for over 15 years because she sent her children to secular school.

Dear reader, let me sadly let you know that Raisel and Ephraim with their four children perished. They spoke only the Polish they needed for their business so there was no option for them to attempt escape. As for my father, his sister Chava, and Grandmother Miriam, six months after Alex escaped, they followed his example. They escaped with false papers and through several instances of sheer luck, ultimately survived.



Top row 2<sup>nd</sup> from left is Ephraim.

Top row 3<sup>rd</sup> from left Grandfather Elchanan

Middle row 2<sup>nd</sup> from left is Raisel.

Middle row last right Grandmother Miriam.

Bottom row 1<sup>st</sup> from left my father, Paul

Bottom row 2<sup>nd</sup> from left is Alex