

# *Midnight Rides to Deliver Coal by Ruth Chevion*

Before the war, my Dad's father, Elchanan Fessel, would take my Dad along with him on midnight rides through the back streets of Tarnow to deliver coal. There were Jews in the city too poor to heat their homes in the winter. Of course, my Dad, Pelek, loved these outings. He would sit next to his Dad on the box seat as horses pulled the coal-filled wagon.

Elchanan kept records of who needed the coal. His file box was color coded. The people who regularly received coal deliveries were coded green. These people knew they would get free coal. Their deliveries could be made in daylight. But the people whose paperwork was coded red might be ashamed to have free coal delivered to their homes. They might be new to poverty. Their coal had to be delivered secretly, during the night.

Grandfather's coal deliveries were not a personal project. He was doing his part as a member of the Kehila (Kuh-**Hee**-luh). The word "Kehila" literally means "congregation," but back then it was not a religious organization. It was not a temple. It was a decision-making body for the Jewish community. In Tarnow, The Kehila had maybe 30 members - influential worldly people elected by popular vote of local Jews. It provided a safety net for Jews. The Kehila gave Elchanan the names for free coal.

But providing a safety net was only a small part of what The Kehila did. It was The Kehila who decided which schools and which libraries needed funding, which synagogues needed repair, where to hold Yiddish theatre, which writers to bring in for lectures, which musical performances to support, etc. The Kehila was so busy in Tarnow that they even had their own multistory building in which to conduct business.

Elchanan was an active member of the Tarnow Kehila. His main project was Jewish education. He was a leader in the establishment of Yavneh, which was elementary school education for Jews. And he was a staunch supporter of Safa Berura, the Jewish gymnasium (secondary school) where subjects were taught in both Polish and modern Hebrew. (Safa Berura means "clear language" in Hebrew.) An additional personal motivation for Elchanan was that he had three teenage children in school. Pelek and Alex were already enrolled in Safa Berura; Chava would enter there when she was old enough. Elchanan was an ardent Zionist. He advocated educating young people for a future in the land of Israel.

I'm sure you can detect dear reader, that I am proud of my Grandfather Elchanan and all his accomplishments, but when the Germans came into Tarnow, on September 8, 1939, one week into the invasion of Poland, all Grandfather's accomplishments were black marks against him. Along with the other members of The Kehila, he was targeted as a leader in the Jewish community. Hitler had standing orders that when his army entered a place, the first order of business was to kill the leaders. Execution style, shooting on the spot with bullets. This applied to Jews and non-Jews alike.

Sure enough, within days of entering Tarnow, German soldiers burst into the family apartment on Olearska Street. They ransacked the place. They ran from room to room opening every closet, looking behind every curtain to find my Grandfather. They knocked over plants in the greenhouse, searched the pantry, looked under everything, behind everything, beds, tables, the maid's room, the bathtub. They ran upstairs to the laundry room. They crawled under the big vats there, searching behind the wringer and the drying racks, shouting angrily about what they would do to when they found him.

But Grandfather was not there. Neither was my Dad nor my Uncle. In the weeks before the invasion of Poland, Grandfather had organized a group of Kehila members, and they had collectively bought a bus. By the time the German soldiers were ransacking the home on Olearska Street, Elchanan Fessel and his two teenage sons were long gone, on a bus, on their way eastward toward Russia, as far away from invading Germans as possible.

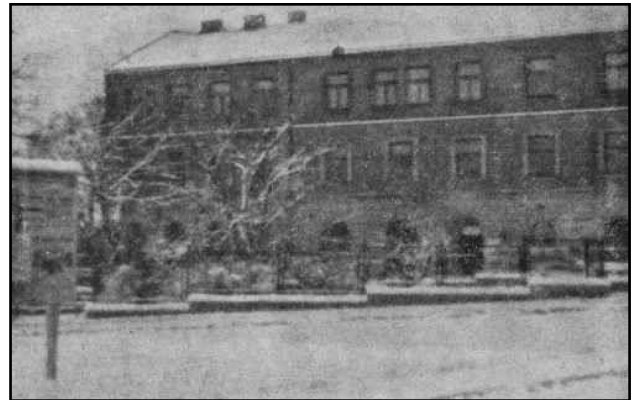


Photo of Safa Berura, my dad's high school on St. Anne Street in Tarnow