

Michael Etkin's Life Story

Despite Everything...I had Won



My parents: Menachem-Mendel Etkin and Chava (Eva) Etkin (Kaminski)
on their wedding day - February 19th, 1932

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This book is devoted with lots of love to my dearest beloved mother, the brave Jewish Partisan – Chava (Eva) Etkin (Kaminsky), to my dear father – Menachem (Mendel) Etkin, to my dear twin-brother – Chaim-Shepse Etkin,
And to all members of the Etkin, Hodosh, Kabakov, Kaminsky, Geller, and Tchuchman families who perished in the Holocaust in Belarus (1939 – 1945)

-- May their memory be blessed forever --

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The Editor's comments to the readers

It was very important for me to publish this book in Hebrew and in English, and to send it to many Holocaust museums and organizations all over the world, so that it will be there forever – in order for future generations to be able to read it and learn about the history of our great family's roots.

It was a great privilege for me to be able to honor my dear beloved father by publication of his story, and to make that story accessible to all his descendants and to the entire world.

I also have donated this book to many public libraries, universities' libraries, and schools' libraries in Israel and abroad.

I already have been invited to many schools in Israel to speak about this book and to tell the story to the children. In the future, I hope to be able to lecture about it in different conventions, in JCCs, and in schools throughout the world.



Sincerely yours,

Menachem Etkin
(Michael's oldest son)
Ramat-Gan
Israel

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Introduction

Dear sons, our lovely daughters-in-law, and our wonderful grandchildren!

First of all, I would like to thank all of you for being here with me: My dear wife Rivka, My dear sons – Menachem, Haim, Nitzan, Amit, and Idan, their lovely wives – Mazal, Taly, Michal, and Meital.

Our wonderful grandchildren – Inbar, Shani, Eyal, Iddo, Keren, Hilla, Lior, Bar, Shay, Ben and Noam.

During the years I have been telling you, here and there, about what I had been gone through in some very difficult years in Europe until I had arrived in Israel. I told you about Krulevshchizna, about my family, about my escape from the burning Glubokie Ghetto. But always the story was told very partially, a bit here and a bit there...

In December 2002 I had reached the age of 70 and felt that it's about time to tell you the entire story: I would like you to know who was our family, from where are our origins, where was I born, why did I have to leave my house and my small town ("Shteitel") very quickly, who took care of me during these very difficult years in the forests of Belarus, etc...

A very short time after this decision, and maybe not accidentally, I dreamt an amazing dream.

In my dream, I am coming back to our wonderful house in the town of Krulevshchizna. From far away I can notice the big nice yard, the cherry trees, the birch trees, and the nice flowers which my mother Chava had planted there.

For one minute in this dream, it seemed as if I am there, where I was born, not far from the train station, where it all began.

By the house I see two kids playing in the yard. These are: my twin-brother Shepsele (Shabtai) and I – Michele (Michael), or as they used to call us:

Israel-Michele and Chaim-Shepsele – the twins (di zvilling in Yiddish).

We were born to the wonderful Etkin family, grandchildren to Shaul-Rafael Etkin and Chaya-Liebe Kabakov.

The dream was very short, but I had found it to be very significant.

I understood that these images, which I carry with me, and the story behind them, must be passed on to all of you – the next generations.

So that you will know what happened there to our family.
KNOW and NEVER FORGET!

I, Michael Etkin, feel that I represent with pride and with lots of love all of our family members, who had perished in the Holocaust.

I hope to succeed in this book to reflect my entire life story to all of you, my beloved family.

Hopefully, this book will not only be my life story, but become a monument, a partial reflection of a great wonderful world, which had existed in the past but does not exist any more.

Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Chapter 1:

My Childhood in Krulevshchizna

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How should I open my book?

Should I open it from the moment I was born in the small town of Krulevshchizna, which was built around a small train station in Belarus, or should I describe this terrible moment in the Ghetto, in which the bullets are whistling above our heads, and I must decide whether to stay there with my aunt Lea and my twin-brother Haim-Shepse, or to let go of her hand and run out of the burning Glubokie Ghetto to the nearest forest, to the Partisans ?

There are many ways to begin describing my life story. However, it seems that I will decide to begin it with my father's death – Menachem-Mendel Etkin, son of Shaul-Rafael Etkin and Chaya-Liebe Kabakov, in 1941, a few months before the Germans had arrived to Krulevshchizna.

Why do I choose to open my life story with this tragic event ? Because this event was actually a significant turning-point in our lives.

From this day forward everything would change. If until this day we lived as a prosperous, happy, safe and secure Jewish family, then – after the tragic death of my dearest father, for the first time in our lives, we started feeling a higher degree of fear and lack of security, and the events had rolled-on to the worst...

It seemed as if my father's sudden unexpected death had started the collapse of a long line of Domino cards. At first, the sudden death of a healthy, well-built Jewish young man at the age of 32. Then, living alone without a father, the collapse of the fake peace agreement between Russia and Germany, the invasion of the Nazis in the summer of 1941 to Belarus, and the total shutdown of the family business.

(I remember that for a long while, my twin-brother and myself could not digest our father's sudden death, and to clearly understand that he is no longer among us).

My father's death was, indeed, the breaking line. That was the event, which had assigned not only between my happy childhood – which ended too early – to the ongoing war horrors and the very difficult life we had then.

My father's figure had symbolized to me the physical and cultural wealth, the folklore, and everything we had, which was built with lots of efforts during many years, and all of a sudden had vanished

and gone forever. As if it had never existed. (How did it happen? Until today, I am still asking this question).

Although my father had passed away at the age of 32, I remember him very well. Menachem-Mendel Etkin was (probably) born in the city of Dokshitz, in Belarus, on August 5th, 1909 and died (probably) on March 25th, 1941.

His parents were: Shaul-Raphael Etkin and Chaya-Liebe Kabakov.

He was a handsome man, very well educated, clever, a good friend, and a wonderful father. He had a great sense of humor, and that's why so many people liked to be close to him. Because of his great commercial sense, all of the Etkin family members liked to work beside him.

The commercial sense had brought us good wealth, and our house was always full of everything: food, clothes, books, music, etc.

My father was involved in all of the Etkin family businesses: flour-mill, cutting wood for housing and furniture, furniture carpentry, and a small restaurant (belonged to my grandmother).

However, due to his vast business areas, father needed to travel a lot all over our region in Belarus. As a result of these frequent travels he was out of the house for a few days every week and we missed him very much. We wanted our parents to be with us, play and have some fun together, but they were very busy with their work.

However, our parents still had succeeded to find some free time, in order to tell us some interesting stories and tales.

It was a pleasure waiting for my father to get back home for the weekend, and to watch him getting down of his wagon.

To our grieve, our parents were only married for 9 years.

When father had died, at such a young age, all of us missed him very much.

As I had already mentioned, the war events (the 2nd World War) are a significant part of my life, and they are the main reason for writing this book.

From a certain perspective, this book is not only about my own personal life story, from the day I was born until today.

It is rather a monument for my parents, my twin-brother, the broader family members, and the people of Krulevshchizna – all of these people, who lived among us, worked, acted, were happy, and are no longer with us :



*My mother-Eva Kaminski,
by the Glubokie lake in Belarus*

- My mother – Chava (Eva) Etkin (Kaminsky).
- Her parents – Michaela and Israel Kaminsky.
- My aunt - Lea Kaminsky.
- My uncle – Aba Kaminsky.
- My aunt – Zina Kaminsky, and her husband:
Dr. Yehoshua (Shiye) Geller.
- My father – Menachem Mendel Etkin.
- His parents – Shaul Rafael Etkin,
and Chaya-Liebe Kabakov.
- My aunt - Gitl Etkin (who married with
Tana Hodosh).
- My uncle – Chanan Etkin.
- My aunt - Rachel Etkin (who married with
Chanan Pirivoskin).
- My uncle - Hirsh Etkin, and his wife Chaya.
- My uncle – Chaim Shabtai Etkin, who died at the
age of 19, after an illness.
- My uncle – Reuven Shimon Etkin, his wife and
2 daughters: Sheine and Feigele.
- My uncle – Yekutiel (Kushke) Etkin.

Chronologically, my life begins with my parents love story: Chava (Eva) Kaminsky (Daughter of Israel and Michaela), and Menachem-Mendel Etkin (Son of Shaul-Rafael and Chaya-Liebe).

My mother's family, who lived in Glubokie, was from a privileged origin.

For many generations, there were doctors and "flecshers" (healers in Yiddish) in this family.

Some of them were very wealthy. During these days, Jewish young girls did not leave their house. However, my mother went to the big city of Vilna, in order to study there in nursing school, she graduated her studies as a certified nurse, and found a job at the Glubokie hospital.

My father was born in Dokshitz, which is near Vitiebsk (in Belarus).

Already within his early childhood, Menachem-Mendel was considered as an excellent student in school. He graduated high-school with excellence at the age of 16, and together with his father and his brothers he had started to manage the entire Etkin family lines-of-businesses: A big sawmill of wood for the construction industry, a large flour mill, and furniture carpentry.

My parents, as opposed to many other couples in this time period, did not meet each-other via a "shiduch" (a matchmaker), but had married with lots of love.

Their fabulous wedding (on February 19th, 1932) – as I was told later on by my parents and by family relatives – was held during 3 days in my grandfather's wonderful house in the town of Krulevshchizna.

It was a very happy Jewish wedding, with lots of good food and plenty of drinks. During these 3 days the guests were dancing, and my beautiful mother – which had a very nice voice – sang many Yiddish and Russian songs, to the music of the Mandolins, the Balalaikas (a traditional Russian musical instrument), and the Accordions.

Many guests arrived to my parents wedding: Friends and family relatives from many



My uncle (father's brother)
Hirsh Etkin, and his wife Chaya.

towns and villages in our region of Belarus.

It was 74 years ago: February 19th – 21st, 1932.
A very short while after the wedding my mother got pregnant.

Nine months later we were born: First – my twin-brother Chaim-Shepse, and a half an hour later – I, Michael Etkin. We were born in the Glubokie hospital, in which my mother worked as a nurse.

Glubokie is a big town, which is located 18 kilometers north of Krulevshchizna (approximately 90 minutes drive from Minsk towards the north of Belarus).

Childhood in a wealthy home.

Many of those, which were born in Russia or in Eastern Europe, describe a childhood in a very poor house.

However, it was not as such in our family's home. The first time I had witnessed a shortage of food or clothing was during the war.

During my early childhood, until the age of 7, we knew only wealth and happiness in our family.

When me and my twin-brother were born, my father was only 23 years old but was earning a lot of money from managing the Etkin family businesses (as mentioned above).

In addition to those businesses, father had also been very busy with buying and selling real-estate for the farmers in our area, with the help of his brothers.

Due to his very diversified lines-of-businesses, he used to travel with his carriage from the beginning of the week until Friday, at which he would come back home in order to spend the "Shabbat" with the family. Even though during the week we were with my mother, grandmother and grandfather, we still felt the lack of my father very much.



The twins (me and my brother)
at the age of 10 months
October 1933



The twins :
Michael Etkin (on the left),
and Chaim-Shepse at the age of 3

Donations to family relatives and to many others

My father was a very generous person. As I had already mentioned above, he earned a lot of money, and I can still remember him coming back home on Fridays, getting down of his carriage, with his hands full of money bags, which were the fruits of his successful business week.

But father had also donated money to the poor farmers in our region of Belarus.

While making his way from one deal to the other, he would stop over here and there and give the poor farmers some money for their families.

The farmers were very thankful to him, and I presume that these very generous donations had made him a very well known figure in Krulevshchizna and in the entire area.

My father's wealth came mainly from his businesses, but also from his father's (Shaul-Rafael Etkin) well known house of traders.

The wealth was very well reflected at the Etkin family. First of all, it could be seen in our house. When I look at some old yellowing photos of my far childhood, I can see my father – a strong young man, with a calm face, showing security and awareness of his status.

At the same old photo (from 1936) my mother is standing, on the left side of us (the twins : my brother – Chaim-Shepse and myself), leaning on the birch tree, looking into the camera with her nice smile. My mother was a beautiful young lady. Many young men had courtshipped her when she was still single. She was very well aware of her beauty and her sex-appeal.

In the background of this old photo, there was our big house, in which we had beautiful wood furniture, silver plates, carpets, nice pictures on the walls, and all of those expensive things money could buy.



The Etkin family, in front of their house in Krulevshchizna (near Glubokie) in 1936

From right to left: Father (Menachem-Mendel), my twin-brother (Chaim-Shepse), me (Michael), and my mother (Eva Kaminski).

Around the house there was a wooden fence, and in our big yard we had some cherry trees, birch trees, rose bushes, Azedarach trees and many flowers.

(A short while after the war broke out, my mother had understood what is expected to happen, so she had given some of our furniture, silver and gold items to a few reliable farmers' families in our area. She asked them to keep it for us until the end of the war.

Indeed, in 1945, when I came back to Krulevshchizna looking for some of our valuable items, as a 12 year old child, those farmers welcomed me and wanted to give me back my family's possessions.)

Father is building a house for us

In the beginning there was only one house – my grandfather's house (Shaul-Rafael Etkin & Chaya-Liebe). Later on, very close to this house, my father had built another house for our family. Three years after we were born, my father had built another small house for us – the twins, which was connected to my parents house through a corridor.

When business meetings were held at my parents house (there were many of those), it was forbidden of us to disturb these meetings. We had to wait patiently in our wing of the house until these meetings would end, and only then we were permitted to come back to our parents' house.

Here I must emphasize :

It's not that the general atmosphere in our house was hard and tough. On the contrary : During every such business meeting, when we were asked to go into the back wing of the house, mother would bring us a good tasty drink, cakes and some fruit. When this meeting was over, she would signal us that we can come back to our parents' house.

The Etkin family house was surrounded with love, but had clear rules and boundaries of what is allowed to do and what is not allowed.

We (the twins) would not even think about disturbing our parents' guests, who are sitting with them in the living room having drinks and food together.

It was totally forbidden.

With father's authority and the very high respect we had felt towards our parents, we would never even consider doing any such forbidden actions.

Father was a first-class educator. He had never raised a hand on us. However, it was quite enough when mother would just signal us with her finger, stare at us and say: "Both of you, if you would not behave yourselves, then – I will tell father about it..." Immediately we would behave like two lambs (I was the naughty one). Father's influence was so strong upon us, even when he was miles away from home due to his businesses. More than a man of order and discipline, father was a man of education, and things he said and did then still influence my behavior today, 65 years after he had died.

Our house was not only filled with silver plates and nice cutlery, but also with Russian classic books (Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, and Turgenev), and of course with children's books which was quite rare during these far days.

Father encouraged us to learn about music and do some sports activities, which was not so typical for the European Jewish community during the years prior to the 2nd World War.

Russian Lyrics and songs

On one hand, there was my father – a man of education, discipline and order.

On the other hand, there was my mother Chava – a beautiful young lady, who sang to herself Russian songs during the whole day. Because she sang so nice, I wanted to be beside her for many hours and sing just like her. (It still influences me until today, as I love the Russian songs and lyrics, and I listen to them at home very frequently).

Mother was not only a beautiful lady, but had a very impressive esthetic look. She used to wear elegant clothes, according to the updated fashion in those days.

Already in her 20th, mother knew how to make the perfect match – sometimes almost impossible – between working as a nurse at the Glubokie hospital, and being a mother to 2 young twins, and a devoted wife to her husband.

Despite having her own opinions, she tended to give in to father's ideas and opinions, just for the sake of keeping a quiet warm house for the entire family.

Mother was a very good nurse, but first-of-all she was the perfect housewife.

Today, when people buy ready-made food in the supermarkets, I like to dive back into those far days, to the times my mother was standing in the kitchen : cooking, making some delicious marmalades, and pickles, which filled the shelves of the corridor between our parents house and the children's wing of the house.

The Youth-movement ("Hashomer Hatsair")

It seemed to me that my parents were one of the most handsome couples in Glubokie, and later on in Krulevshchizna. As I had already mentioned, my father was born in Dokshitz (Belarus).

He graduated his high-school studies in Vilna as an excellent student at the age of 16.

Mother was raised up in Glubokie. Both of them were members of the "Hashomer Hatsair" (= The "Young Guard") youth-movement, at which they had met each other for the first time.

Mother was a beautiful young lady, which was always surrounded by many courting young men. When we grew up, she told us that she preferred Menachem-Mendel (our father) on all of the others, not only because he was such a handsome man but also because he was a good kind man, who knew how to make her laugh. Later on, mother became his "right hand", helping him with everything : In the commercial arena and of course in educating and raising us (me and my twin brother).

After father's death, mother used to tell us that in the youth-movement our father was always in the center of everything: In parties, socializing with many young men at his own age. This characteristic had also helped him later on with his business. Father had never patronized on anyone, although he came from a high-class family. He always looked and spoke to people at the same eye-level, another positive characteristic which had made him such a popular loved person.

A big loving family

Not only our parents were there in our childhood. A big loving family was always there for us at the background, and actually both of us (the twins) were also raised by our grandparents (father's parents), which were at their 80th.

I remember them very well: Grandfather Shaul-Rafael and Grandmother Chaya-Liebe (Kabakov). I also remember many other family members, and a cousin called Avraham (Bomma) Kabakov, who had immigrated to Israel as a pioneer before the 2nd World War. He lived in Tel-Aviv and worked as a public bus driver at the "Dan" buss corporation. He was the first person who had located me in Israel at the "Magdiel" agricultural school, to which I was sent immediately after my arrival in Israel.

Another very significant character in my life was my Grandmother (my father's mother), who had 8 children (6 sons and 2 daughters). I remember her not only because she used to do our laundry, ironing, and taking very good care of the entire house maintenance (my grandparents lived in a big house, which was next to our house). As a child, I especially remember her wonderful delicious cookings, such as : Choulent, Koogel, and fish, which she used to cook for the Shabbath. I remember the wonderful smells in the air and the entire broader happy Etkin family joining together at the Shabbath dinner table, wearing white clothes.



My grandmother:
Chaya-Liebe Etkin (Kabakov)



My uncle: Aba Kaminski
(mother's brother).
He left to Argentina in
1930.

Jewish Holidays, Synagogue, and a nervous "Melamed"

We were considered as a religious family and in Saturdays all of us went to the synagogue, which was located in my Grandparents house, and was one of the two synagogues in Krulevshchizna. The synagogue was in the living-room.

A small room by the living-room became the women's wing during the prayers.

I also remember my mother lighting the Shabbath candels, as we still do in our family until now.

Unforgettable chapters in my life were the Jewish holidays. In "Rosh-Hashanah" we went to the synagogue, and I remember the family members – dressed in white – blessing each other "Shana-Tova" and "Hatima Tova".

However, the most beloved happy holiday for us was "Succoth". A few days earlier, father was calling his brothers to join him and they all went together to Grandfather's big yard. All of the family members were building a beautiful "Sukah" together. The women were hanging some nice old and new decorations, and also some different kinds of fruits. Speaking of religion and prayers, I remember that when I was at the age of 4 years old I started learning in the local "Heider" (a classroom, in which the Jewish children had learned to read Hebrew, Yiddish, Bible and Judaism).

I don't remember so much from this period. However, I do remember that our "Melamed" (teacher) would whip us every time we forgot to study our Bible chapter.

Even though, I can't say that he was a bad person. He was a tall smiling man with a beard. The discipline he tried to teach us was a regular habit during these days. One way or the other, since I was an excellent student, I did not suffer a lot from his whipping.

(I assume that I had inherited my learning talent from my father, who was an excellent student at the "TARBUT" High-school in Vilna, where he had also learned Hebrew after the "First World War"). I did not realize it then, but the very little studies I had learned in this "Heider" were the basis for the next 5 years. Only after the war, when I was already 13 years old, I went back to school to continue where I had stopped learning many years before. My fast learning talent had helped me again. Within a very short time, I had caught up all of my missing materials.

Life seemed very happy and without any worries. I remember that in the summer we were waiting to go to our annual vacation

in our "Dache" (a vacation hut) not far from our home town (probably near Dokshitz).

The vacation did not last only a week or so. It was a month or more.

We took with us in the wagon lots of food, beddings, and dishes, and we drove out to have some fun and enjoy in our "Dache", during most of the summer.

My Shteitel Krulevshchizna

When I look backwards in time, I can see some beautiful pictures of my entire family and of my small town ("Shteitel") Krulevshchizna (in Yiddish: Krulevshine), it's houses, people, shops and trading life.

Krulevshchizna had started it's existence as a central train station, in which trains from all over Belarus were passing through. Since it was a central junction of railways, many warehouses were built around the town of Krulevshchizna. It was only natural that the workers of this train station would build their houses close to these warehouses.

This was the main reason why my grandfather and my father had established their houses in this small town. Being clever business men, they had identified the great business potential in Krulevshchizna, and decided to build there the Headquarters of their businesses. A short while after this decision, they had built their big houses there. Later on, all of the rest of the Etkin family came to live in Krulevshchizna as well. All together there were 80 Jewish families living in this small town, mainly owners of some small businesses. Krulevshchizna was a very small town, with a main street paved with small stones. Around the clean streets, many wooden houses were built.

A large river was streaming along by our town, and nearby there were some nice farms with many kinds of animals (cows, sheep, horses and pigs), large wheat fields, plantations of fruit trees, and green fresh grass all over the area. Although I am telling you here about the 30th (of the 20th Century) – 1936, there were already some brand new cars driving around the streets



My uncle: Kushke-Yekutiel Etkin
(father's brother)

of our town, along with the wagons and carriages. On both sides of the main street there were shops. Among these shops, there was the kosher butcher's shop, where my mother used to buy the meat for the Shabbat and for the rest of the week.

Jews and gentiles lived together in Krulevshchizna, running a very good business relationship between each other and helping each other. The children were playing with each other in the streets. The adults were buying grounds from my father, sold him some houses, and obviously some of the town's prosperity came from the Etkin family businesses.

No wonder that the name of the Etkin family had become very famous within the entire region of Glubokie and Dokshitz (in Belarus).

Our house was always full of people, who came to do some business with my father. But not only businesses were the reason for it.

Already then, as a small child, I had realized and understood my entire family's well acceptance of every visitor who came to our house. Any vagrant, Jewish or non-Jewish, passing by our town knew that they can find a warm welcoming place in our house, or at my grandparents house, or at one of my uncles houses in our town.



The pioneer, Zirka Gordon-Shapira (sitting at the center), before traveling from Glubokie to Israel in December 1933. She came to say good-bye to her uncle - Shaul-Refael Etkin (my grandfather, who is sitting beside her) who was her mother's brother: Bat-Sheva Etkin. On the right: the twins (me and Chaim-Shepse) sitting on our mother's knees. Next to us is grandmother Chaya-Liebe Etkin (Kabakov), Zelig (Mike) Hodosh, Hirshel (Greg) Hodosh, and their mother Gitl Hodosh-Etkin (my aunt) - standing behind Zirka.

My parents were responsible for establishing such a warm welcoming atmosphere in our house.

All of the guests, who came to our house, had found it to be a warm home, with welcoming food and a listening ear. Very often, the needed guests had also received some money from my parents. I remember a house full of people and joy, in which the laughter and singing never stop. It was a pleasure to grow in such a house, with such wonderful beautiful parents. We (my twin-brother and myself) enjoyed to be with our parents, and we felt as if it's a holiday for us while being with them and with the rest of the family members.

The good memories from the Etkin family will stay forever with all of our friends.

(The name Etkin was very familiar within our entire region, and even after the war some people had invited me to come over and stay at their houses, until I will get stronger and recover from the horrors of the war).

A lethal blood infection

Father was a "real man" : strong, handsome, beloved and loving.

Having said all of the described so far, it's easy to understand that his sudden death at such a young age, had stroke all of us by surprise.



My father: Menachem-Mendel Etkin z"l,
in his 20's.



My father: Menachem-Mendel Etkin as a student.
He graduated high-school with excellence.

Until the age of 32 father had done a lot of business across our entire region in Belarus.

At this age, following a routine tooth treatment of a tooth removal, he got a blood infection. It happened a few years before the development of the Penicillin. There were no Antibiotics available yet at this time.

Money was not an issue at all. Since the entire Etkin family was very determined to save Menachem-Mendel's life, they had started traveling all over Eastern Europe, with cars and trains, searching for the best doctors in Vilna, Warsaw, Krakow, Polotsek, Vitebsk and Molodechna.

During a few weeks father took some medicine, visited doctors, and hoped to find a cure for this blood infection, which had threatened his life.

Although I was only at the age of 7, I remember very clearly the last few months of his life. I do not remember him lying in bed, pale or sick. If my memory is not misleading me, then – I remember that my father had continued with his businesses, but had slowed it down. He continued trying to cure himself.

I remember seeing him standing in the bathroom, gargling some kind of medicine in his throat. However, to me, as a small child, he did not seem as a very sick person.

For a while, we were all optimistic, because after father came back home from the visits at these doctors, he became a little stronger.

I found tracks of this false hope at the back of an old photo, which was sent by my mother to her brother –Aba Kaminsky – in Argentina (to where he had migrated in 1930). It was written in Yiddish: "When Menachem-Mendel will be cured, I will write a more detailed letter".

Father's last days had been at the Glubokie hospital, where mother worked as a nurse. I don't remember exactly what happened, because nobody told us (the small twins) that father is very sick.

Now I know that during his last days his situation became very critical very quick and unfortunately he died.

However, I clearly remember one thing: I requested to walk at father's funeral after the carriage (hitched to a horse), which had carried his coffin. The distance was 18 kilometers, until we reached the Glubokie Jewish cemetery.

I was at the age of 8.5 years old and father's death had hurt me very much.

(My parents were only married for 9 years, and I always had the feeling that we had the right to be with him for a too short period).

I remember these days in connection with Passover. Father had died in March 1941, and about a week or 2 weeks later we conducted the Passover "Seder" without him for the first time. His seat was empty and it hurt all of us a lot.

Father's death, as I had already mentioned, was one of the major events in my life. Not only because of the loss of a father to such a small child, but also due to his special and dominant personality in my life and in the whole family's life. Menachem-Mendel was a strong, stable man, on whom you could always lean on. That was the main reason why grandfather had chosen him, out of his 8 children, to be his right-hand in running and managing the entire diversified Etkin family businesses.

Menachem-Mendel was not only a good father and a loving son, but also an excellent husband. I can still hear my parents' laughter and their soft, loving voice until today. I am positively sure that father was the kind of a husband, which every young Jewish girl would wish to have.

Dear father: Even today – I miss you very much. We loved you so much, but had spent with you such a small amount of time. You were our beloved father for only 8.5 years.



In 1938, our cousin Boma Kabakov (in the center) had arrived for a visit from Israel to Krulevshchizna.

Storm clouds at the horizon

Father was a strong man, but only after his death we found out mother's real strength. Despite her mourning his death, she could not afford herself to cry in front of us, although I presume that she had shed many tears on her bed every night. In order to help her, she had asked her sister Lea to come and live with us in our house. Lea was already then an "old" maiden, and since it was clear to all that she will not get married, this new arrangement was quite convenient to all of us. Mother had gained some help, while Lea did not have to struggle with her loneliness.

Towards the outside, the Etkin family continued to function as usual. The family's financial strength was an advantage. Even now, we did not lack anything. However, far away at the horizon, we could see some storm clouds coming.

At the beginning these were only rumors. Traveling people, who were passing by our small town, had told us stories about conspiracies against Jews. When I was sneaking under the kitchen table, I could hear them speaking about bursting waves of Anti-Semitism, beaten Jews, and about Jews who had disappeared from their houses and sent towards the unknown. They also spoke about Jews who were murdered, which was hard to believe these days.

I could hear arguments: Should our family leave Krulevshchizna and wander to the North towards Siberia, or should we stay in our warm house, with our good family businesses and wait to see if the storm will pass above our heads (as happened in the past)? It was a very confusing situation and nobody knew what we should



On the left side, at the back of the photo: My parents - Chava (Eva) and Menachem Etkin z"l. In a vacation, at the Etkin family "Dache"(vacation house) near Dokshitzy, in the forest - with Grandfather: Shaul-Refael Etkin, and Grandmother: Chaya-Liebe Etkin (Kabakov), my aunt Rachel Etkin with her husband Chanan Pirivoskin. Summer 1934.

do now...

We were so naïve. After many arguments, regarding this issue, the Etkin family had reached the decision to stay in Krulevshchizna, convincing themselves that their good successful businesses would serve as their insurance policies in case of any trouble. The decision was: we stay in Krulevshchizna and wait to see what will happen.

We did not have to wait too long. On March 1941 father had died from this lethal blood infection. Only three months later, while we are still mourning his death, the Germans had broken the Molotov-Riventrop agreement and invaded Russia with a fast cruel blitz, implementing the plans of the "Barbarosa" operation.

The Germans were getting nearer and nearer to us. In June 1941 they had reached Belarus and a few months later, in October, all of us were sent to the Glubokie ghetto – the 20 Jewish families from our small town (80 people).

My childhood chapter had actually reached its end here, ten years before its time. From now on I will be facing a future of suffering!

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Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Chapter 2:

The War Breaks Out

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The war breaks out !

I would like to open chapter number 2 of my book with one of the most advanced technological means of those days: the radio.

It was the radio, which had announced the opening of the war between the German Nazis and the Soviet Russia, whose leader was Josef Visaryonovitch Stalin.

We lived in the small town of Krulevshchizna. Other family relatives lived in Glubokie, Dokshitz and in some other towns in Belarus.

Belarus was attached to the Soviet-Union in 1940.

I would like to briefly clarify some historical details for those of you, who may not be so familiar with this period. On September 1st, 1939 Hitler had invaded into Poland, and by doing that he had actually started "World War 2". Prior to this invasion, the foreign ministers of Germany and Russia – Ribbentrop and Molotov – had signed a mutual agreement, stating that none of these countries will attack the other. It was also agreed, within this agreement, that Poland's occupied territory will be divided into two parts: a half of it will belong to Germany, and the other half to Russia.

Russia had stayed at its tranquility, with its leader being positively sure that his nation is safe from the German dangers. However, he was wrong!

On June 22nd, 1941 – Hitler had broken the agreement, and invaded into the shocked Soviet-Union in a fast surprising move, called: "Blitz-Krieg".

I had a bad feeling with the opening of the war, that our lives will not be quiet any more.

We heard of the German invasion via the radio. I was 8.5 years old at this time.

During the next couple of days, we (my twin-brother Chaim-Shepse and I) were busy listening to the adults' conversations, regarding the coming war.

We felt that something bad is coming. We knew that the war had already broke out a year and a half ago in Europe, but as long as we did not hear the cannons shooting – nothing could have broken our peacefulness.

The pogroms had started and we began hearing the bombs'

echoes. A lot of destruction could be seen everywhere around.

Here and there we started getting some bad news from different resources.

Jews, who had succeeded to escape from the Germans, had told us about the murdering of Jews, about acts of massacre, and about German soldiers who were catching old Jews in the streets and cutting their beards.

We had also received information, regarding the destruction of Jewish families' houses, synagogues and Torah books burning. A few years ago, when we heard about "The crystal night", which happened in 1938, it was unbelievable – it seemed so terrible and on the other hand so far away from us, and certainly not threatening. As if these kinds of things totally do not belong to our quiet, safe world.

The radio news from that morning and onwards had actually broken, for the first time, our feeling of safety and quietness. Although we were only 8.5 years old, we could feel the panic atmosphere across Krulevshchizna, and across all of our broad family in the area. Furthermore, the Russian and Polish armies had started a draft of their reserve forces, among them were some of our family relatives.

Should we leave our house, or stay ?

The arguments among our family members began again and became much stronger now. Some of them claimed that we should sell all of our assets, as soon as possible, and move North – even to Siberia. The Germans will not reach this area – insisted those, who wanted to leave Krulevshchizna immediately. Despite my very young age, I had also interfered into these arguments and claimed that we must leave our town and move as far as possible from the fighting zones.

However, there were many others among our family members, who claimed that we should stay.

The elderly ones among us remembered very well the horrors of the First World War, which ended 23 years earlier. Then, too – it was very difficult for the Jews, so they told us. However, we overcame the troubles, reconstructed the businesses and life came back into its regular course. Jews were always killed here

and there, they told us then, and the Jewish people knew a lot of suffering during many generations.

Eventually, how awful, the voices of those who voted to stay had outbalanced the others. It was probably very difficult to predict the future, and we could not believe that such terrible acts of genocide can happen in Europe in the middle of the 20th century. There were very few of us, who decided to leave – such as my aunt Rachel, who was my father's sister. I remember her as a very practical woman. She had understood that we must leave our area immediately !

There were many others in our family, who agreed with her about it. However, unfortunately, they did not reach a final decision to leave.

Anyway, although the war broke out in June, we still had a 3 months "opportunity window" to leave. But we did not use it. The general feeling was that we should go on with our usual daily lives and wait for any developments.

Then too, I claimed again (as a very young child) that we should not wait any longer and that we must leave our house immediately.

So it happened that my father's role in managing all the family businesses was taken over by his brothers. They kept on running and managing the flour-mill, the carpentry, the sawmill, and the real-estate trading business.

Above the surface, life ran well and fine as usual. However, if there was "bad water" streaming under the ground – nobody wanted to admit it.

Our neighbors also continued with their daily routine lives. Our closest gentile neighbor, Skorocho (fast walker), kept smiling at us as usual.

The echoes of the war became closer and closer, but we refused to see the clear red signs on the wall in front of our eyes!

The "Red Army" retreats, the Nazis arrive at Krulevshchizna

In October 1941, my childhood had actually ended. Obviously, I could not know it then, but it actually happened with the Nazi army invasion into our region in Belarus.

Prior to this invasion, we saw the retreat of the "Red Army" from our region. They passed by our town with their tanks,

cannons and exhausted soldiers from months of very hard fighting and defeats. A short while later, the Nazi army had fully conquered our entire region.

Surprisingly, they did not harm the Jews. On the contrary, as much as it would seem unbelievable today, I can tell you that these German soldiers even gave us (on their way to East Russia) some sweet chocolate to the children and some cigarettes to the adults, who stood beside the roads and watched them passing by with their tanks.

However, I did not believe them. I remembered very well the stories about the German's cruelty. I also heard their soldiers' songs, telling about how they are traveling to Moscow, in order to drink coffee in the streets of the Russian capital. I saw their tanks and cannons, and waited fearfully to see what will happen next.

Most of the Jews felt that the worst is already behind us. Everyone waited for the Nazi army to pass by us, and returned back to their businesses and to the daily routine lives. Even the children returned to their regular games, and I continued with my naughtiness and my tricks, which were my trade marks.

Today I understand how sophisticated the Nazis were then, with their lies and cunning. They had a double target: to reach Leningrad, Stalingrad and Moscow as fast as possible, and to put the Jews "asleep".

So it happened that the Nazi army passed by Krulevshchizna and did not return to it for a few weeks. As already mentioned above, life continued regularly, and some people in our family said to themselves: We were right again. There is a war, but nothing bad will happen to the Jews (I only wanted that no harm will happen to our family).

Our calmness had been broken every once in a while by some pessimistic news. Traders, who moved around and beyond our region, and some refugees who passed by our town – told us about the horrors of the German army and its SS troops. Suddenly, everything seemed to be less quiet and calm.

We, the children, were instructed to be very careful from the German soldiers. The same soldiers, who just a short while ago gave us very tasty chocolates.

(Today I think to myself: Who needed their chocolates? Couldn't they just leave us alone?)

Storm clouds had begun to appear above our heads. Something in the atmosphere became more and more threatening. We had the feeling that from now on we are living on a borrowed timeframe.

When the German army returned to our region, with different commands, we were less surprised. Some of us had already understood that our future lives will no longer be as it was before.

Immediately as the Germans returned, they had issued their first command, stating that every Jew who wishes to go out of his house – must wear a white ribbon on the sleeve of his shirt.

The evacuation of Krulevshchizna from Jews

We never dreamt that we would ever have to leave our beautiful warm house. The Nazis did not give us any space or time for thinking. On the day they returned, they had immediately issued a clear command to the entire Jewish population in our region, stating as follows: All Jews must pack a few personal items and get into the trucks, which will take us to another city. This command was so sudden, so paralyzing – that we did not have any time for thinking, resisting or planning a rebellion or an escape to the forests.

It was very hard to believe what was happening at that time. Our entire energy was totally focused on survival efforts, trying to save as much as possible under these very difficult circumstances.

More than everything, I remember the panic. There was loud screaming. Jews were running everywhere around, speaking desperately, consulting with each other, trying to plan ahead. My mother and grandmother started planning what should we take with us and what should be left behind?

Furthermore, there was another important question: Should we all stick together, or should we split?

It was very clear to us that we can't take any furniture with us, or any large valuable items. These were deposited at our loyal neighbors' houses (as I had already mentioned it in the first chapter of this book, how our neighbors had kept these items for years until the end of the war).

The women took the minimal mandatory items: beddings, underwear, warm winter clothes, a few pots, jewelry and some

cash money (which they had hidden on their bodies). I will never forget this day. Within a very single moment we were disrupted of our calm sweet lives, separated from our warm beautiful house, our nice smiling neighbors, our successful diversified businesses, and most of all – from the secured calm feelings, which had so far characterized our quiet lives. (My father, my grandfather, and aunt Gitl were no longer with us. They had already died.)

But the worst of all was the uncertainty feeling. Some of us felt deep inside that we are leaving our house forever. Some others tried to keep us calm, saying that within a few weeks we will be back at home – as the Germans promised us.

However, none of them knew where are we heading to, and how long will it last?

I was among those, who thought that this is only a temporary separation, as the Germans had promised us: "As soon as we will finish handling this region – you will be able to return to your houses". (Only later on, we understood the meaning of "handling the region").

The sharp separation could not be perceived by us, and so were the Germans' cruel fast screaming commands. They separated the families' members: husbands from their wives, children from their parents, and it was very difficult for us to follow and understand their screaming. The adults, who were terrified themselves, tried to calm down the children, who were extremely terrified.

We did not know it then, but this day (I can't remember the exact date) was actually our farewell from Krulevshchizna, from our neighbors, friends and family relatives. Only many years later I saw their faces on some old photos, which were sent to me by good kind family relatives from the USA, Argentina (my mother's brother – Aba Kaminsky), and South-Africa.

It was all so sudden and quick. When the truck had arrived at our house, my mother and aunt Lea (her sister) rushed to load our belongings into it. A few German soldiers helped us getting into the truck and we drove away...

I looked back at the house, in which I grew up during my childhood – the yard, the trees, and the paved stone lane. I did not understand then, what I had realized later on: On this day, I saw our house for the last time in my life.

Glubokie

The ride was very slow and uncomfortable. I remember myself suffering from a strong stomach ache – probably because of the jumping of this old Russian truck. Luckily, it was not such a long ride – only 18 kilometers. After a short while, we had reached a familiar place – Glubokie, our mother's original home town. We were given a place of our own.

The term "place" is a bit exaggerated. After living for many years in a large, comfortable house, with many rooms – suddenly we had to get used to living in a small room. One room for all of us! There was a small kitchen attached to this small room. The toilets were in the yard.

In the beginning, we were totally shocked. We could not understand how within only a few hours, we had moved from our big house in Krulevshchizna to this small room in Glubokie, without any conditions of living and with a mutual yard for us and for many others. We did not know then, that one day we will miss this small room, in which nobody had chased us or threatened our lives. A place, in which we had some food and water, and even a yard for the children to play.



The Glubokie ghetto survivors at the brothers' grave in Glubokie.

From now on, the changes became more and more frequent. When we arrived at Glubokie, our mother was missing from the house more frequently, in addition to her work at the Glubokie hospital (in which she was very well known for years). She was leaving our small room in the morning, and came back in the evenings. As the months passed by, she began missing for the whole day long.

Sometimes, she would leave on Sunday morning and return only for the weekend. Aunt Lea (mother's sister) was the one who stayed with us and took care of us there.

Only later on, we understood that she was pretending as if she was going to the church, but was actually actively helping the Partisans in our region.

It did not help us. We were used to mother's presence, her voice and singing, her meals, her smile and her beautiful stories. We were always asking: "Mama Liubmaya, gdye ti?" (From Russian: Dear mother, where are you?)

Mother joins the Partisans to fight the Nazis

The Nazi's next move came very quickly. They fenced the whole area, in which we lived, and had actually turned it into a Ghetto. No one can get out of it or enter it without a permit from the Germans. Whoever was caught outside of the ghetto – took the risk of getting killed or thrown to jail.

Only after the war, I had started to put together pieces of stories and rumors, and I figured out the rest of it by myself. Mother, which was nicknamed "Briya" (In Yiddish: Brave), did not agree with the Nazi occupation, the humiliation of the Jews, and with the Red Army retreating to the North. She decided to act, without any hesitation, as she always did.

Until now, it's unclear to me how did she make contact with the Partisans in the forests. On the other hand, she had found some Jews who were working in the German's headquarters. These Jews were stealing weapons and ammunition from the Germans, passing it to my mother (and to other young Jews), who was going out to the forest and handing this very valuable equipment to another contact person, who was giving it to the Russian freedom fighters in the forests of Belarus. It was always a single weapon with a few bullets – so that the Germans will not be able to notice its absence.

Today I understand that she took a very significant risk on herself. Any person, who got caught stealing a weapon – was immediately killed by the Germans.

During these days, people were murdered for smaller crimes. Family members were punished as well. Therefore, our lives were on constant danger during this period.

Every once in a while, when she returned to our small room, mother would bring us some news. She told us that Germany and Russia are in a very tough war with each other. She also told us that the Germans are arresting Jews and killing them. "You must be very careful, kids" she used to tell us constantly. "We are now in a very difficult period, and you must be very careful from the German soldiers. If you don't want anything bad to happen to you – do not play far from our room or from our yard".

Furthermore, mother had warned us : "If the German soldiers will come here, asking you where am I – tell them that mother is not at home now, that you are also waiting for her, and you don't know where is she. Don't tell them anything!" Aunt Lea also kept an eye on us, to verify that we don't speak too much.

Mother's warning was not vainly. Every couple of days, German soldiers would enter into our small room. They suspected her, that she is helping the Partisans.

I guess we were brave kids. Despite their uniform, and their scary guns – we did not lose our thoughts. We told them that mother is not here and we don't know where she is. I don't know if they believed us, or not, but they had always left us alone. They did not threaten us, or interrogate us.

Our parents' education began proving itself. Despite us being quite a wealthy family for years, our parents had always educated us to be satisfied with everything we have, and to be happy with it. At a very young age, they taught us how to struggle and stand solid in difficult situations. Indeed, it proved itself. I think that, despite of the difficult times – we were quite happy kids.



My uncle (mother's brother): Aba Kaminski,
and his wife Lua- in Argentina
He left Belarus to Argentina in 1930, before my
parents got married.
He was a musician, and played in the
Buenos-Ayres philharmonic orchestra.
He died in Buenos-Ayres in 2004 (Editor's
estimation).

Our poor life in the Glubokie Ghetto

Life in Glubokie, into which many deported Jews had arrived from all the neighboring villages, continued in a new routine, which became stronger during the two years we lived there (from October 1941 – until August 1943).

The Germans gave the Jews in the Glubokie ghetto vouchers with "points", by which they could purchase some basic food: flour, sugar, oil, bread, cheese and eggs – in a very limited quantity.

There were no fruits, vegetables or meat. Whoever wanted to purchase these, had to make contacts with the "black market". The vouchers food was never enough. The Germans deliberately managed it so that we will always be hungry. No wonder that some people were sneaking out of the ghetto at night, to the surrounding villages, in order to try to get some fruits and vegetables for the children – to enhance their nutrition, and to break their permanent hunger.

Sneaking out of the Glubokie ghetto was a dangerous act. Whoever got caught was immediately thrown to prison and not always was released later on. But somehow, life in Glubokie were still bearable. We had some food – though, poor and very little. Every once in a while, a "Melamed" (a teacher) would collect a small group of kids, running around in the streets of the ghetto, and taught them for a couple of hours.

Obviously, there was no official school in the ghetto. Therefore, every once in a while, the children were studying in such "private school" with a "Melamed".



From left to right: My mother – Chava (Eva) Etkin (Kaminski), the twins – Michael (myself) and Chaim-Shepse Etkin, and my aunt (mother's sister) – Lea Kaminski.
In 1939

My "Scar Latina" illness

Three events had broken our routine in the spring of 1942. The first one was my "Scar Latina" illness (This illness causes the peeling of the skin from the hands and legs, fever and pain, and terrible itching). I guess I was very lucky, because my mother was still working as a nurse at the Glubokie central hospital. I was hospitalized in it until I was cured. I can't bare the thought what would have happened to me without this good treatment in the hospital.

I was cured and after a few weeks I returned home. However, I did not return to the regular routine. During those days, the Germans started with their first "Actions". They had lists of all of the Jewish population in Glubokie, among which there were some who were suspected in Communism. These Jews were executed without their family's knowledge about it.

One of them was Dr. Yehoshua (Shiye) Geller, my uncle (he was married to my mother's sister - Zina), who was an excellent pediatrician. One day he disappeared and never came back home to his wife Zina (They did not have any children). Someone told us that the Germans took 200 Jews into the nearest forest, and murdered them there. Now we understood that the horrors had arrived to us as well. The smart ones among us knew that now it's only a matter of time. They were so correct !

During the coming weeks, we found out about many acts of murder in the small villages near Glubokie. Some farmers from our region told us about Jews who were murdered and thrown into a brother's grave (five or ten people, and even more). These stories made everyone in the ghetto very angry, and some Jews started seeking for ways of revenge in the Nazis.

The Nazis next move came very quick. They had fenced the entire area, in which we lived, and by doing so they had actually turned it into a Ghetto. Nobody can get out, and nobody can come in. Whoever got caught outside of the ghetto – took the risk of getting killed. From now on, we suffered more and more from lack of food and clothing. All of that had increased the depression and despair within the Ghetto's population.

From now on, the Nazis searching for Jews became more and

more often. It was so frightening. As soon as we heard the sound of the Nazis' boots in the streets, we would quickly sneak to the garret. We felt quite safe there. We were at the age of nine. There was hunger, depression, and lack of food and clothing. Some people wrote on the houses' walls in Yiddish : "Yidden, Nekama !" (Jews, Revenge !)

The beginning of the rebellion

I would like to clarify, emphasize, and say it again and again : The claim in which we went "like sheep to slaughter" is wrong ! It is wrong regarding the Glubokie ghetto, and I know that also for some other areas.

I had already told you about my mother's weapon smuggling. But she was not the only one. During our deportation from our house to Glubokie, the members of all of the youth-movements (Hashomer-Hatsair, HaChalutz, HaDror, and others) had secretly united and became the core of the rebellion against the bloody Germans.

The rebellion included more than weapons smuggling. Within a short while, groups of young organized Jewish men had started to make many ambushes to the German soldiers, who were patrolling in the streets of the ghetto. Especially at night time – it was very difficult to spot them. They would attack these soldiers, hit them, and take their weapons. Then, they would transfer these weapons to the Partizans in the forests. These young rebellions had succeeded to kill tens of Germans in the entire area.

In parallel, some people started to escape from the ghetto. Here I must mention that in spite of the usual German pedantic behavior, in the Glubokie ghetto they were very negligent. The ghetto's fence was made of white thin wood boards, which could easily be broken with one kick. As opposed to other places, the Germans did not install an electronic fence around the Glubokie ghetto.

Many Jews escaped from the ghetto. Among them was my uncle – Tana Hodosh, who was married to my Aunt Gitl (my father's sister). He escaped during the night with his 2 young children : Zelig and Hershel.

(I had joined them towards the end of the war, and lived with them for 18 months. Later on the Hodosh family had moved to the U.S.A. and settled down in Los-Angeles. Only a few years ago, in 2002, I found out that their family had escaped from the Glubokie ghetto on July 22nd, 1943 – a few weeks before the Nazis had burned it and totally destroyed it. They joined the "Shlachtonov" Brigade of Partisans, which fought against the Nazis in the huge forests of Belarus. This important information was brought to my attention by my oldest son – Menachem, who visited in Los-Angeles at the end of October 2002, and met Anthony Hodosh who is Tana's grandson.)

However, still many Jews had stayed in the Ghetto. The reason was not fear.

Today, looking 63 years backwards in time, it is very clear to me that if the Jews knew what was going to happen – they would have escaped from the ghetto during the first days after it was fenced.

Even at this point of time, we still did not believe that the worst of all can happen to us. The general atmosphere in the Glubokie ghetto was one of temporariness.

There was a general feeling as if within a few weeks the Germans will declare that our way home is open and that we would return to our house in Krulevshchizna.

I was only 9 years old, but I had already understood many things. I knew that we must do something, and do it immediately. A few times, I had told aunt Lea (who took care of us in the ghetto) : "Lets escape from here. The fence is already broken in a few places. There is no problem to get out of the ghetto." But aunt Lea had a permanent answer : "We are not going anywhere. We are staying here. Here we will live or die together." I felt that I must do something !

I guess that Jews, like other people, can adjust to every situation. Maybe aunt Lea was afraid, and also did not fully understand what was happening around us.

As I had already mentioned before, our life in the ghetto was still bearable.

Jews were working in the Germans' army bases : cleaning and repairing weapons, sorting the bullets, etc. Even the frightening "actions" were not very frequent. It's true that every once in a while some Jews had disappeared. We heard that they were

murdered. However, those bad things did not yet arrive at our doors. There were still many people, who did not understand how critical our situation is.

The 3 "Actions" (Killing) in the Ghetto

The hour of truth was very close now. It had arrived in the Hebrew date of the 7th day of the month of Nissan, 1943. It was the first big "Action" (Action of killing of Jews). The Germans started searching in many houses in the ghetto, looking for Jews who were suspected in helping and co-operating with the Partisans. They had very accurate lists, which were based on information (squeaking) they got from some local people. These people, who were taken out of their houses, did not return any more. At this point in time, we had already clearly understood that the Germans are murdering the Jews, who are being taken out of their houses.

2000 Jews were murdered in this "Action". The Germans put all of them in front of a big grave in the Barok forest (close to Glubokie) and shot them to death.

A few of them succeeded to save their lives. They fell into this grave, being injured, and hiding under the bodies. At night they had escaped from this grave to the Partisans in the forests, where they had received some medical treatment and help. They were so scared, they did not even think of going back to the ghetto in order to tell us what happened.

I guess they only thought how to survive.

There was one Jew, who passed by Glubokie, on his way to the forests, and he had told us about the horrors.

The second big "Action" took place 3 months later, on the 4th day of the Hebrew month of Tamuz, 1943. Now things became very clear to us.

It was clear to us that the Germans are planning to destroy the Glubokie ghetto completely !

However, the Germans still tried to deceive us by saying that Jews who will pay them some ransom will be safe. The German authorities had issued out a message stating that all Jews who have within their possession any gold, silver, jewelry, and diamonds – can give it to them, and in return their safety will be secured. The Germans took 6 kilos of gold and jewelry, which were transferred to the Latvian bank in Riga. On the cargo box the

Germans wrote : "FISH".

Still, for a very short while, life in the ghetto continued its course, even though they became very difficult and depressing. The stores were selling, children were playing in their houses, the men were working in the army bases, and the "Melameds" were teaching a Torah lesson every once in a while. The "Udenrat", headed by Lederman, contributed to this routine by organizing prayers, gatherings, theatre shows and other social activities. Jewish policemen were still patrolling in the streets of the ghetto with a white ribbon on their arm, in order to try and keep a normal manner of living.

There were still a few people who believed that the day will come and we will go back to our beloved house in Krulevshchizna.

However, this illusion came to its final end on August 20th, 1943.

This was the 3rd and the biggest "Action", which had actually destroyed the Glubokie ghetto completely.

In the next chapter of this book I will tell you about the destruction of the ghetto, about the brave Jewish uprising which began a week earlier.

I will describe how I had saved my life, and how I had joined the Partisans in the forests of Belarus at the age of 11.

Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Chapter 3:

The Young Partizan

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The young Partizan

63 years after the destruction of the Glubokie ghetto, and the death of my beloved dearest family, I can look backwards in pride and say : NO, we did not walk like sheep to slaughter. We fought and struggled with the Germans, and during these fights – which lasted for a week – we had succeeded to kill tens of German soldiers.

The Jews in the Glubokie ghetto decided to fight against the Germans.

The reason was the information, which had arrived to the ghetto's Jewish leaders that the Germans are planning to destroy the ghetto soon, and kill all the Jews in it.

In a way, we were lucky. While Jews from all over Europe were being sent by trains to the death camps (which we did not know then), the last 2 ghettos in Belarus which were planned to be destroyed were : Glubokie and Meer.

The horrors of the Germans were now all over Belarus. They had destroyed a few ghettos in our region : Dokshitz, Disna, and Bialistok. Most of the Jews there were not even put on trains. Men, women, and children were concentrated in the city center, and then were transferred to the nearest forest in a humiliating march. After they would dig for themselves a huge brothers-grave, they were shot to death. A few minutes later – the grave was covered.

Another great Jewish community had vanished. (In some cases, a few Jews had survived these killing at the last minute, after only being injured and succeeding to hide under the dead bodies).

We knew that bad things are happening to Jews all over Europe, but we could not estimate how cruel can the Germans be. Since the Nazis were specializing in lies and propaganda, they gave us the wrong impression that it's only a matter of time until we will be back at our home in Krulevshchizna. We hoped that the war will end soon and that we could go back home to our nice and quiet lives.

Some people said : "Jews, lets take revenge. Let's kill the Nazis and protect our honor".

The Glubokie Ghetto rebellion

This illusion came to its end in August 1943. The Jewish leadership of the ghetto had secretly notified us that the ghetto will soon be destroyed by the Nazis and that we should all be prepared to fight against the Nazis.

During our 2 years in the Glubokie ghetto, we had collected many weapons, ammunition and some "cold weapons". Some of it was parachuted into the ghetto and around it by the "Red army" planes (I learned about it later on from the adults). In parallel, the youth-movements teen-agers had received some semi-army training. It was quite obvious that the ghetto will not survive.

However, it was also obvious that we will not die without fighting and keeping our honor.

I would like to clarify, that a lot of data which is written in this book is a result of books reading years later, and long conversations which I had with friends and other Holocaust survivors from the Glubokie ghetto.

Then, as children at the age of 11 years old, we (my twin-brother Chaim-Shepse and I) did not understand exactly what all the riots are about.

We could notice that there was a lot of confusion in the ghetto. We saw many young men running around, and barricades are being built.

However, no one told us what was actually happening and what should we do.

Even if aunt Lea knew anything, she did not tell us about it. We were very frightened, and at night before going to bed – we would call our mother : "Where are you mother ? We miss you so much, and we want you to be with us."

Indeed, during those days we truly missed our mother very much. We missed her courage, her decision making, her determination, and her common sense.

Now I understand that she could not reach us from her fighting Partisans unit in the forests of Belarus.

The three of us were on our own in the Glubokie ghetto : My twin-brother Chaim-Shepse, myself, and aunt Lea Kaminsky (my mother's sister).

A week before the final "action" of the Nazis, which planned to

kill all of the Jews in the ghetto, the rebellion had broken out in the manner of throwing grenades towards the German soldiers, and shooting at their tanks and army vehicles. The Germans reacted immediately. They surrounded 3 sides of the ghetto with tanks. The side of the ghetto which was facing the forest – was left as it was (without tanks in front of it) because of the German's fear from the Partisans in the forests. Later on, I understood that it saved my life.

The rebellion lasted for a week. Young Jewish men were attacking German soldiers and kidnapping them. Jewish snipers killed many German soldiers.

Some Partisans, who succeeded to sneak into the ghetto, had also helped to fight against the Nazis.

The Nazis reacted very cruelly by bombarding the Jewish houses in the ghetto, ruining and burning everything.

We felt that it was "an honor" to see the Germans fighting with us, the Jews, which were considered to be weak and helpless.

The three of us (aunt Lea, my twin-brother, and I) were hiding at home, not knowing exactly what was happening outside. Every once in a while, I would sneak out to the street, collect some information and return home.

Some of my sneaking out was to our relatives houses, which were only a few minutes away from us. I would arrive at their house, speak with them a little, give them our best regards, and return home.

One day, I saw with my own eyes how German soldiers are chasing after Lederman's 2 sons (Lederman was the head of the ghetto's Udenrat).

The 2 boys (Motke & Yerucham) were running, while the Germans were chasing them with a motorcycle. I was running after them, being so curious to know why are the Germans chasing these 2 kids ?

Finally, the Germans killed one of them. The other boy succeeded to escape from them, and continued to snipe at the Nazis until his ammunition ran out.

Later on, he joined the Partisans in the forests.

The rebellion lasted for a week. At a certain stage, I guess, the Germans got sick of it. They decided to destroy the ghetto totally by bombarding burning bombs at the ghetto with their

tanks. Now, the entire Glubokie ghetto was burning. It was on August 20th, 1943 (until August 28th). Now, it was very clear to me : We should not stay here, and wait for the Germans to come and kill us. We must escape from the ghetto !



Some of the Glubokie ghetto survivors by the monument for the memory of the Glubokie ghetto Holocaust victims, near Jerusalem.

Among the survivors from the Glubokie ghetto was Michael Etkin, who was a teacher and a journalist from Kiriati-Bialik.

I escape and survive !

We stayed at home until this early Friday morning of August 20th, 1943.

Then, we went out towards the ghetto's wooden fence, which was already broken in a few places. Not only had we got outside of the house. The entire ghetto's population were preparing themselves for the big escape.

Some of the Jews decided to escape to the near forest (the Partisans were there), while some others ran towards the river. We only had 2 choices : To be burned alive in the ghetto, or to try to escape !

I did not want to die. I felt that we must escape.

But then we found out that the Germans are ambushing us, waiting for us to get out of our relatively safe houses to the bare

open fields.

Then, for the first time, I saw death with my own eyes : Jews were escaping from the ghetto, while the Nazis are shooting them with machine-guns.

I could witness seeing many figures running in the fields outside of the ghetto, some of them fell down after the Nazi's bullets had hit them. It was a purely death roulette.

This moment had frozen in my memory, and I can view it as if it happened only yesterday : My aunt Lea is standing in the middle, in both sides of her we are firmly holding her hands (my twin-brother Chaim-Shepse Etkin and me).

Only 20 meters from the ghetto's wooden fence. "We must run immediately !" I scream at her, as I understand that our valuable time is running out. But aunt Lea, frozen from fear, keeps standing still.

"We are not going anywhere", she commands at us full of fear.

"We will stay here, and live or die together".

"Can't you see that they are killing people ?" I try to urge her, feeling suddenly like an 18 years old young man (I was almost 11 years old). "Lets run !"

"No", she insists with her stubbornness. "Hold my hand firmly and don't move".

At this moment I understood that I must act according to my instincts, and not give up to my aunt's instructions. Without any further thinking, I cut off my hand from her gripping hand.

I don't remember if aunt Lea tried to stop me, or if she screamed after me.

I did not look backwards. At this moment I started running very fast through the broken wooden fence of the Glubokie ghetto, under the tanks' pipes, towards the far forest, which was the only chance I had to stay alive.

All of the people, who were running with me, wanted to survive. Life was very precious to all of us !

It was a race for life, as simple as that. Even until now, I can't understand exactly how I had survived it. Maybe it was due to an advise, which I had heard from one of my uncles, who told me : "If somebody shoots at you, then – you should run in a zigzag. This way the bullets will not hit you."

I caught this information in my memory. Now, when I was running

through the field, wearing a thick coat and heavy shoes, I did as my uncle explained to me.

When I felt that the coat and shoes are slowing me down – I took them off and kept on running in a zigzag very fast.

The wound. We arrive to the forest

I don't know for how long I was running. I remember, like in a movie, a lot of people running, the whistling bullets around me, the Jews who were falling in the field beside me when a machine-gun bullet would hit them to death.

I was lucky. Since I was a very athletic boy, I could run very fast. I understood that I must not stop running, until I will reach the forest, which the Nazis were afraid of getting near to it.

I did not stop running, even when I felt a sharp prick at my foot and saw the blood. I kept on running. When I passed through a small stream, I saw the blood flowing from my foot. My twin-brother and aunt Lea stayed back there in the burning Glubokie ghetto, with another 8000 Jews. I never saw them again, and to say the truth – I did not think of them at these moments of running through the big field towards the forest. Only one thought had instructed me on this early Friday morning : To survive and to reach the forest trees, which were now only 500 meters away from me.

However, I felt that my strength is weakening. It seemed that my wound was more severe than I thought it was, and the bullet had crushed some bones and flesh in my foot. The Germans did not chase us, being afraid of the Partisans, but it was clear to me that I can't stay there for a long time. I was lying wounded in the field, searching with my eyes for a saver, who would come and take me on his shoulders towards the near forest. My saver came very quickly. He was Motke Kraut, whom later on I met in Israel, and he became a part of our family. Without saying a word, he took me on his back and ran into the safe forest.

We knew that the Nazis will not come to the forest. We stopped, in order to rest for a while and decide what to do – which way should we go in this huge forest ?

I did not count how many Jews succeeded to escape from the ghetto with us, but they were not so many of them.

First of all, Motke had looked at my wound. Even though he did not have any medical experience, he took his shirt off and bandaged my wounded bleeding foot. I don't remember how long did we stay there. We were waiting for something to happen. From far away we could hear the echoes of the German tanks and machine-guns, which were systematically destroying the Jewish ghetto in Glubokie. We were lucky. Those Jews, who survived in the ghetto – were murdered by the Nazis later on. Those Jews, who were wounded in the field during their escape – stayed and died there.

(I would like to mention that for many years I was in good relations and contacts with my life-saver Motke Kraut, who had passed away a few years ago in his house in Holon, Israel).

We must survive !

After a few hours everyone relaxed. We did not have the slightest idea where we were. I would like to explain that a "Poshcha" (in Russian) is a huge forest, which spreads on a territory of tens of square kilometers, with rivers, streams, and a few small villages in it.

While the adults sat down to think what to do next, I had moved aside : very sad and depressed, and started to cry.

It was the first time I cried during these long difficult months. Only now, I could afford myself to unload this pressure from my heart, which had accumulated inside me for a long while. At this moment of despair, I did not know what had happened to my twin-brother Chaim-Shepse Etkin and my aunt Lea Kaminsky, although I had already estimated then that I will not see them alive anymore.

I did not know what had happened to all other family relatives and friends, which were my entire world. Why did the Germans shoot at me ?

However, I knew that I must be very strong from now on. Not a child anymore...!

But most of all, I missed my mother. I knew that she was alive, somewhere in the same huge forest where I was staying. I waited for her calming loving words, her soft comforting hand touch, her good caring advises, and the safety feeling she would always provide us. It seemed that my wound had started to ache now.

I asked myself : how will I be cured from this serious injury in my foot ?

Now I also started to inflict myself for leaving my brother and my aunt behind in the Glubokie ghetto.

Darkness had spread all over the forest. The adults among us decided that our group will stay where we were, while 3 men will go to the nearest village and ask for some food. The men reached this village. They impersonated to be Partisans and asked (with some threats) for some food. The threats had helped, and they came back with some vegetables, other food, and some cutlery, which they took from the farmers' houses. Now we had some food for the next couple of days.

I would like to tell you that this very plain food was so delicious to me. It was a very satiating meal. Immediately after it I felt very fatigue. Luckily for us, these were hot summer days of August, so there was no problem to sleep in the open under the sky, on some improvised mattresses of forest herbs. From a certain perspective, it was better to be in the forest, without any fear from the Germans. But I was without my parents, a home, or any relatives.

The young Etkin is sent to a "Healing place"

How long did we stay at the forest? I don't remember the exact number of days, but I assume it was between 2 to 3 weeks. We were safe from the Germans, because we knew that they will not approach the Partisans bases. We even had some food to eat. Another problem became severe: the wound at my foot, which got infected. Motke Kraut knew that we must do something about it very quickly. Otherwise, I might lose my foot.

One morning Motke came to me and said: "We are going to the village. I had found a shelter for you there." When we had reached one of the houses in the village, Motke knocked on the door, someone opened it and we were invited inside the house. "Why did you come here? What do you want? What is the boy's name?" asked the owner of the house.

"Etkin", replied Motke, "and we had escaped from the Glubokie ghetto".

"Oh!", the man became very friendly. "If this is Menachem-Mendel's son, then – there is no problem. He can stay here with

us, and he will get the best treatment."

When I remember these far days, I think of the well known saying: "Send your bread over the water, and one day you will find it."

I don't know whether my father gave some money to this farmer, helped him, or made a good profitable real-estate deal for him. Anyway, more than 2 years after my father's death – the villagers in our area remembered him very well. One of them had saved my life.

Due to the long time, which had already passed, I can't remember the name of this farmer, his children or their family name. One thing I do remember: I received a good medical treatment from them, and lots of warmth. They bandaged my foot; spread a special anti-infection ointment over the wound twice a day. Later on, they took me to the village's shoemaker, who made a special pair of boots for me: One regular boot for my healthy foot, and one larger boot which will contain the thick bandage around my wounded foot. I felt that they are taking good care of me.

Where did I sleep? This nice couple had arranged a small bed for me behind the door. Beside my bed there was a screen. I was resting there.

Every once in a while, I would get off my bed and walk between the farm's structures: looking at the chicken, the cows, and the different farm jobs. Sometimes I had helped them around the farm, as much as I could with my wounded foot. All of a sudden I had "parents". But I could not stop missing my mother, my twin-brother, and aunt Lea.

I stayed in this village for about 3 months. I was totally disconnected from my previous world, and from Motke Kraut. I did not know anything about what was happening around me. As if the war did not exist anymore. I called my adopting parents "uncle" and "aunt".

(After many years I wanted to return to this typical Belarusian village near Glubokie, in order to thank this wonderful couple, but I could not remember the name of this village and I could not locate it).

The Germans arrive to the village. My life is saved once again!

Most of the time I was not worried or afraid of the Germans. They did not come to the village very frequently. When they came to search for Jews, they did a very minor search (because they got a command to do it) and hurried back to their safe base.

However, my adopting parents had made it very clear to me that it is forbidden for the Germans or for any of the village members to know my real identity.

Furthermore, it was agreed between us that if the Germans will come to search our house, then – I will lie in bed, impersonating as if I am sick.

I knew I could count on my "parents", so I did exactly as agreed.

One morning, German soldiers knocked on the door. I hurried to get into my bed, covered myself with the blanket, and closed the screen beside my bed.

The Germans came into the house, searched it all over, and did not find anything. Before getting out of the house, they noticed my bed behind the door.

"Who is this?" I heard one of the soldiers asking. It scared me. It was a very scary moment. It was only a pace between me being expelled from the house towards the unknown. I already knew then what the Nazis can do to Jews. But my fear was in vain. "My uncle" gave them the perfect answer: "This is our son. He is sick with high fever, in a very critical situation. The doctor said that he must stay in bed, and nobody is allowed to get near him."

The German soldier thought for a moment, and said only one word: "Gut" (good) and he left the house together with his friends.

My life was saved once again!

Here I must say a few good words about the population and the farmers in the Glubokie area. As opposed to the Polish population, or the Ukrainian killers – the Jews in Belarus received a sympathetic approach from the rest of the population. In many cases the Jews were allowed to hide themselves for a few days within the different constructions of a farm: in a barn or a cowshed. Furthermore, the farmers gave the hiding Jews some water and food, so that they could continue on their way.

Most of the population in our area knew the Etkin family very well from before the war. I do not remember even one single case of informing against Jews or handing over any Jews to the Germans, within our area.

I join the Partisans

I felt good with my adopting parents in this village, but most of all I wanted to find my mother and some of my family relatives, whom I was very worried about. The winter of 1943 came closer and closer.

A few months after my wounded foot had healed in this family's house, Motke had arrived to see how I felt and to check if he can take me back to the Partisans bases in the forest. Motke thanked my adopting parents with a very excited voice, and told them that from now on the Partisans will protect them and will not take any food or horses from their farm. Then we all cried, and both of us (Motke and I) started walking together into the huge forest. I was very scared.

It was not clear to me where are we heading to.

We did not reach Motke's battalion. Maybe because it was too far away. Maybe because Motke was worried that such a long walk would exhaust me, slow him down and put him in danger from the Germans.

Therefore, we approached the nearest Partisans battalion, and within a very short while we arrived at a fence and a gate, which was guarded by a Partisan.

The guard refused to let us in. Maybe he thought that we are spies. I did not know which battalion was it, and what were these Partisans doing.

Motke did not give up. "Do you see this boy?" He asked the guard in Russian.

"He escaped from the Glubokie ghetto, was shot and got injured in his foot, he had healed and now he wants to join your battalion as a trainee."

The guard hesitated for a moment, and then called his commander via the radio device. The commander arrived at the gate and started to interrogate me, asking me: Where am I from? What are my plans? And why do I want to join them?

Now I believed that I will stay there. I said good-bye to Motke

again, and he went on his way. The commanders of this Partisans battalion told me that from now on I will be a trainee of a Partisan named Kulke, and that I must do everything he tells me to do. Luckily for me, there was another young trainee in this battalion. It was a 14 years old Christian boy. Despite the difference between our ages (I was only 11.5 years old) we became good friends very quickly. I assume that he was an orphan also, and like me – he found himself a shelter among this battalion's Partisans. Therefore, we became to be like "brothers with the same kind of problem", missing our families very much – Lost children in a big war!

However, there was no lack of food, and we also had some clothes – definitely not enough for a very cold Russian winter.

Me and Kulke under fire

Kulke was the ideal trainer: a very nice guy, very brave and calm.

I remember once, we were riding together on a snow-sled tied to a horse, while suddenly – in the middle of no where – the Germans opened fire at us. The horse panicked and the snow-sled, which was full of equipment, rolled over.

Kulke did not panic. He cocked his automatic rifle, which had a round magazine, and started shooting back at the Nazis, while shouting at me: "Turn over the snow-sled and put the equipment back on it. Don't worry, I am covering you."

Within a few minutes everything was over. I fixed the snow-sled and we hurried to get out of there, safe and well. This was my second time under fire. Some more will be coming.

I lived with the Partisans of the Rokosovsky brigade (named after the commander of it in the Ukrainian front) in the forests of Belarus for 7 months.

It is true that I was without my family and friends, and did not stop missing my dear mother, but somehow it was a good period for me there. There was a good atmosphere of fighters' spirit in this battalion, and I was part of it, although I was only a trainee, and although my useless "Karabin" rifle with a 10 bullets magazine did not shoot even one bullet. A few weeks later this rifle was given to another young Partisan.

(I remember that once I was allowed to participate in a rifle-range. One Partisan supported me in my back, to verify that I

will not fall from the blast, and I shot a few bullets with a good rifle).

As a trainee, I was given a few defined tasks. Although there were some women in our battalion, I was given the tasks of: peeling potatoes, cleaning, fixing the camp, doing the laundry of the Partisans' clothes, etc.

The camp was just a bunch of stations and bunkers, which were dug in the ground, and we lived there. Within these bunkers, which were supported by large wood sticks, the Partisans had installed some couches. We made a mattress from some forest grass, called "Moch". Some old blankets had protected us from the cold nights. The villagers in the area gave us some food, clothes and blankets.

Every morning, a few patrol groups would go out to search and try to find out where are some German army units located within our area. The others stayed in the camp, in order to guard it from any unexpected enemy penetration.

The women and children were doing all the maintenance work in the camp.

We had very difficult life conditions there in the forest, but we managed quite well.

During my period with the Partisans I could not stop thinking and worrying about my dear mother: How does she manage as a woman within her Partisans battalion? Does she have a toilette there? Is she cold? Where does she change her clothes? I assumed that she was managing quite well there, because there were some other women within her battalion as well, serving as nurses and doctors.

Our battalion strikes a German train

Every once in a while, our life routine was broken while going out of the forest for doing certain military activities. I remember very well this morning, in which our battalion went out for a mission of mining the railroad, in order to blow up a German train.

I was lying in one of the most inner lines of the Partisans, and waited to see what will happen.

The Partisans knew ahead of time when should the German train pass by. They stretched a long wire, put the mines on the bridge, and waited patiently.

A front spotting crew had reported us that the train is coming.

Then, one of the Partisans lit the end of the burning wire, and the fire started running on the wire very fast towards the mine. The mine exploded exactly when the train got on the bridge. It was too late for the Germans. The locomotive and the coaches had all fallen off the bridge into a deep abyss. Some of the German soldiers, who had survived it and were crawling wounded out of the coaches – were immediately shot by the Partisans with an automatic weapon. Some of them even succeeded to shoot back at us, but these were killed immediately with a very strong fire.

I think I was a passive participator in another such raid, but I am not so sure about it.

I must mention that in all of these raids the Partisans hand was on top of the Germans' one. They were very familiar with the area and hid very well between the trees, while the Germans were bare to the fire.

A letter from mother!

My life routine had been broken once again when one day I received a very important gift. It was a short letter from my dear mother. Later on, I found out that mother had heard from one of the Partisans that he saw a red hair child in one of the Partisans camps. She did not know whether it's me or my twin-brother, because she assumed that one of us is still alive. The letter was written on a brown paper bag, and it said: "My dear son, I had found out that you are in the forest not so far from me. Be a good boy. Behave well. We will meet each other soon. I love you very much – your mother."

I wanted to run immediately to find my mother in the other forest.

The letter was written in Yiddish, and one of the Jewish Partisans translated it for me. It was written in an unclear language on a dirty piece of paper, but still I kept it in my pockets for many months. It was the only life sign I had from my beloved dear mother, a sign of love, which had helped me a lot during those very difficult days in the huge cold forests of Belarus. This letter had strengthened me, and gave me a new hope. All of a sudden, it seemed as if a meeting with my dear beloved mother is only a matter of time.

I became very impatient, and one morning I notified Kulke: "That's it. I don't have any more patience, I am going out to the

forests in order to search for my mother and live with her again. I miss her very much."

Kulke looked at me with his very understanding look, and asked: "Boy, this is a huge forest. Where are you going? Don't you think that you may get lost in it?"

But I did not give up: "I will search for her until I will find her" I replied to him.

"Where are you mother?" I asked myself.

Kulke only smiled. When I started walking into the huge forest – he picked me up with his hands, and closed me inside the camp. I was very angry and I tried to resist him. However, now I understand that he had actually saved my life. There is no doubt that while searching for my mother, I would have lost my way in this huge forest, and maybe even get caught by a German patrol.

My mother's end

I did not stop searching for her until now. Despite many of my letters to try and locate her grave, I did not receive any positive answer about it until now.

I only know that on June 3rd, 1944 the Nazis caught her Partisans medicine troop. They took them to the center of Dokshitz, and hung all of them there.

My dear mother was among them. She was only 30 years old.

I do not know any more details about the death of my dear mother, Eva (Chava) Kaminsky-Etkin. However, as I knew her, it is very clear to me that she had tried to resist her captivity by the Nazis, she kicked them, spit on them, and did not stop fighting them until her last minute.

One of the dreams, which will most probably be with me until the end of my life, is to find her grave (probably a "Brothers grave"), visit it, put flowers on it, and tell her that despite everything, in our way, we had won the Germans, which we hate so much.

Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Chapter 4:

I am searching for my mother

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I am searching for my mother

I had started searching for my dear mother, Chava (Eva) Etkin (Kaminsky), on July 1944 (Actually, I really wished to see her from the moment I had escaped from the ghetto). "World War 2" was still running wild in some different fronts, but for us – the Partisans in Belarus – the fighting had ended. At last we could get out of the forests.

The Nazi threat had been removed. Now we were able to travel safely in trains and trucks, without fear from any German soldier who might have sneaked into the forest and may open fire at us. I decided to search for my mother, and I truly believed that I will find her.

The fear era had ended. No more did we need to wander 15 or 20 kilometers, in order to change our camp's location. We did not have to dig any more new bunkers in the ground, install the wooden couches again, fill our mattresses with forest grass, and prepare the guarding arrangements again. Now we could be relieved and let go of being on full alert 24 hours a day. It was a new positive and happy experience for us.

Our lives in the forest were safe, and we had arranged them so that we will be able to fight well and survive.

The Germans defeat did not surprise us. Our patrol units reported to us about the Germans' retreat. Our patrollers (maybe I did not emphasize their importance enough) were very brave and significant fighters. During the winter time they were dressed with white uniforms for camouflage, and in the summer time they were dressed with brownish & green clothes – like the colors of the forest, in which we were hiding.

These patrollers knew exactly when the German troops are passing by outside of the forest, and when a train full of Nazi soldiers will cross in our area – so that we can blow it with explosives. They also knew the timetable of the Germans' vehicles patrols, which were escorted by motorcycles with threatening Nazi soldiers wearing long black leather coats and helmets. BTW, many Nazi soldiers were killed or taken into captivity by the Partisans. Our patrollers knew everything, and told us that soon the hated German army will leave the territory of our beloved country – Belarus, which was in the "Soviet Union". The Russian soldiers and the Partisans were very brave fighters, with lots of good qualities and abilities.

The German army crashes and escapes

We also had some more sources of information. I had already mentioned that the Soviet army had parachuted into our area some basic foods, essential supply, and weapons. Together with these supplies a few new commanders had arrived into our battalion: Romanov, Dorminyev, and Nagamayev. These commanders, which were part of the group who had established our brigade, were equipped with relatively advanced communication devices, and kept an on-going communication with the "Rokosovsky" brigade headquarters, which included three or four battalions.

The information was very consistent and fluent, and brought us great happiness in this spring of 1944. "We are winning the Nazis in every battle" declared the broadcasters. "The German army retreats little by little, and we are chasing it".

"See you all in Berlin", another broadcaster got excited. I was happy with them.

Despite being a young adolescent, I felt that I am an equal fighter to the Russian soldiers, who had showed some very special acts of bravery.

The optimism of these broadcasters had penetrated into our fighting troops, gave them additional strength and bravery to go on until the end of this period.

This information was also confirmed by the Russian newspaper "PRAVDA" (truth).

It's true that this was a political newspaper, which sometimes was unreliable, but whoever knew how to select the truth between the propaganda lines, could understand that now this newspaper is telling the truth.

"We are winning, and soon all of us will be able to return home safely", it said.

I hoped to meet my dear beloved mother, and to return to our home in Krulevshchizna. I wanted to know whether our house still exists, and are there any of my family relatives still alive?

Burnt earth

Many years later, when I speak with people and read history books, I wondered what had caused the great German army to be defeated and crushed so strongly.

How come that what had begun as a "Blitz-Crig" (a fast war), which caused great destruction all over Europe and the death of many millions of people – of which six millions were Jews – had eventually lost its momentum?

How did the Red Army succeed to destroy the whole German war system?

My conclusion (and it's not only mine) is that the Germans had made a few simple mistakes. First of all, they did not act with pure military motives, but with ego ones and with insane impulses, which only wanted to kill, destroy, and conquer many large territories of the world. If they only took the time to think twice about it, they could have avoided doing these basic mistakes. Their mad leader had brought a disaster upon them! For example: The Germans' penetration deeply into Russia, without taking into consideration the very cold and cruel Russian winter. The Germans were not prepared for such a cold winter, which could not have been evaluated by them in June 1941. Their clothes were too thin for such a cold winter, their rifles and heavy weapons broke down very frequently (mechanical problems), due to the rough territory conditions: mud and dirt. The deep mud had also slowed down their movements. Lots of mechanical problems had also occurred with the fast German tanks, which won many battles, but now found it very difficult to cross the deep mud, rivers and lakes. These tanks could not move any more and were eventually abandoned in the battle field.

There is no doubt: Their mad Nazi leader had brought their end upon them, in a smashing strong defeat.

On the other hand, the Russian army had survived quite well, despite its inferiority.

The Russian soldiers knew the territory very well, got back-up from the local population, and were tougher fighters. They could sleep on the ground, eat a small quantity of food, and survive in very difficult conditions.

However, the German soldier, who might have been a good soldier, found it very difficult to adjust to the difficult physical

conditions of north Europe.

It's true that they had survived somehow the winter of 1942, but to the best of my knowledge, their forces got weaker and weaker. If they only tried to reach some conclusions, they would have understood that their soldiers will not survive another cold Russian winter. If they were only thinking reasonably, they would have withdrawn their army, in order to be better prepared for the future.

However, with their stupidity – they counted too much on their large quantity of army equipment, their tanks and artillery – but they had failed in all of the fronts.

count any more on any local supply of food and fuel. They continued to go deeper and deeper with their "Blitz-Krig" thousands of kilometers into Russia, but this deep invasion became very bad for them. If the German army generals counted on getting food supplies from the Russian villages, then – they were totally wrong about it.

What was known as the "Burnt earth" policy became a horror for the Nazi army.

During the Russians withdrawal, they had burnt everything and did not leave behind any sources of food, fuel, clothes or any other resource. It was quite obvious that the Red Army commanders had planned everything very smartly. The Germans' long supply chains started to collapse. If we would consider the second front, which was opened in June 1944 in Normandy (France), we would easily understand why Hitler's army began collapsing, and withdrew very quickly towards Germany.

Now it was the Red Army's great hour. Its soldiers did not only chase the withdrawing German troops. The Russian soldiers had set many ambushes to the Germans, shot them, and operated hidden mines which exploded without any warning. I remember once, when we had reached one of the villages in our area, and found a lot of meat in the kitchen of one of the houses – we were warned not to touch it. Our commander told us that this meat might be poisoned or with hidden explosives in it.

(The Russians hid many mines in advance in many roads and bridges, which caused lots of casualties to the Germans).

So, where is my mother?

Our war was over, but there was only one wish in my heart: to find my dear beloved mother. The short brief letter she had sent me was still in my pocket – a sign of life from her. Indeed, I had no doubt that my mother is alive, waiting for her child in one of the villages or the "Shteitels" (small towns) in our area. During the whole war I missed her and the rest of my family relatives, and now I had decided to go and find them.

Now that the fear was over, it was only natural that every one of us will return to think of his family members and friends, which stayed back there. Now I was not only thinking of my mother. I hoped in the bottom of my heart, that maybe my dear twin-brother Chaim-Shepse, aunt Lea, and some of my family relatives were still alive, waiting for me.

If I was more realistic then, I could have guessed that most probably all of them were killed by the Nazis. I saw the Glubokie ghetto being totally burnt, I heard the whistling bullets hitting the fugitives which were running in the fields towards the forest. But in August 1943 I did not want to be realistic. An 11 years old child wants to dream, to hope and to wait for the return of his beloved family members – and that's exactly what I did during those days.

Since I was always an active and initiative type of person, I had decided to devote my time from now on for searching after my dear mother. During those days, the Partisans in the forests started to get organized: they packed all of their belongings, loaded them onto wagons tied to horses, and started moving towards the town of Vileke, which was also in Belarus (close to Dokshitz, Glubokie, and my childhood town: Krulevshchizna). We did not say our farewell yet. Luckily for me, it went in stages (I did not have any family relatives. Kulke and the Rokosovsky Partisans brigade were my only family then). We got a command from the Red Army, saying that our Partisans battalion should stay in Vileike and wait for further instructions. Now I understand that the Soviet army wanted to make sure that the Germans (maybe in a last desperate attack) will not try to break through the front somewhere, taking advantage of the lack of alertness of the Red Army.

My long journey to find my mother

Our stay in Vileike was quite pleasant. Beyond our daily parades and guarding on our camp – we did not do anything else. During most of the day we took some short trips in the area and ate food, which was given to us by the local grateful population, who brought us fruits, vegetables, bread, fresh eggs, and even meat. I was happy that the war has ended, and that my mother will hopefully come to me.

Since I was a young Partisan in the "Rokosovsky" brigade, I was in this camp as well, but within a very short while I became impatient. If my mother is still alive, I told myself, she must be waiting for me and I must get out of this camp and start searching for her until I will find her.

But first of all, as a soldier, I needed to get my commander's permission for it. I approached my battalion's commander - lieutenant colonel Romanov, with my request. Romanov listened to me very carefully and replied: "Whether you will find your mother, or not – I want you to promise me that after you will complete your family duties you will come back to our base here in Vileike". I agreed without any hesitation. I felt that my mother also wants to find her son, who had survived from the ghetto. There was no permanent transportation yet, and only a few trains were riding in this area without any schedule.

Romanov's request (command) gave me a good feeling. I knew that I belong to a certain group in this terrible world of great cruel wars, full of blood shed.

Lieutenant colonel Romanov gave me a good feeling of belonging and care. I knew that even if I would get into any kind of trouble or problems – I can always come back to my safe secure place with the Partisans. I was very connected to them.

Now I decided to travel to Glubokie, which was about 80 kilometers away.

There was no timetable for the trains. I waited at the Vileike train-station, and boarded a train, which I had believed will bring me to my dear noble mother who is waiting for me. However, I had a small problem about it: There was no money in my pockets, not even one Rubal (the Russian money). I tried to be as small as possible (maybe the conductor will not notice me)

and sat on one of the wooden benches in the train. The train whistled and started to move. Then, I was positively sure that I am going to meet my dear mother, whom I haven't seen for about a year and a half, since the summer of 1943. But before that, I had to meet another person on this train: the conductor. He came closer and closer, and I scare fully looked at his small scissors, which were punching the passengers train tickets. I asked myself: what will happen when he will reach me? I decided that no matter what – I will not get off this train, and I will tell him that I am searching for my mother. When he finally reached me, he said: "Your ticket, please".

I looked at him with a helpless look, and decided to tell him the truth: "I don't have any money, sir, and therefore I don't have a ticket. But I must get to Glubokie, in order to find my mother". The conductor looked at me, though for a moment, smiled and said: "O.K. boy, you can travel on this train without a ticket" (He had under-estimated my age, because I was quite short. I guess he thought that I was 8 years old, although I was 11.5 with a life experience of an adult person).

That was quite a relief. Such a trip to Glubokie was not an easy task anyhow, during those days. Traveling alone in a train, without an adult to accompany me, could have been quite dangerous. Gangs of criminals, who had no money, used to rob the passengers. I saw with my own eyes such a "Hooligan" (a Russian criminal), grabbing a suitcase which belongs to one of the passengers. After a few minutes, he threw it out of the train to his friend, who waited there for it. I was shocked and scared from what I had just seen. I only wanted to find my mother. It was a scary feeling, but after thinking about it logically I had reached the conclusion that nothing bad can happen to me. I didn't even have a small back pack, so nothing could have been stolen from me. Poverty was a disadvantage, but it seemed that it also had an advantage sometimes. Being a child had an advantage as well. Children and orphans usually received some help wherever they arrived. I was careful. I decided that if I would be attacked, then – I will shout for help and try to defend myself.

The disappointment

The slow ride took many hours. The train stopped at every station, and it seemed that it did not hurry at all to my meeting with my dear mother. Finally, we had arrived to Glubokie. After

asking some people where the Jews are living, I had reached the house of a Jewish family. "Your mother is Chava Etkin", he thought loudly, while my heart was beating very fast – "Yes, I think that she is alive. Go and ask the Jews in the Synagogue. I heard that some of your relatives are still alive, so maybe she is one of them."

I ran to the synagogue. I knew that very soon my journey will be over, and that within a few moments I will meet my dear mother. However, I was disappointed again.

"We don't know anything about Chava Etkin" they said. "But we know that your relatives, the Hodosh family, are in the town of Kurinyetz, which is not so far from here – about 2 hours by the train. You will definitely find there someone from your family." Despite being very tired, I did not wait. I ran to catch the train to Kurinyetz.

"Aren't you Chava Etkin's son?"

During my train ride to Kurinyetz, a Russian soldier whom I never saw before had approached me. Maybe he had just noticed me, and understood that I am hungry. He took out of his bag some sandwiches with meat, and gave them to me. But the real surprise was still waiting for me. "Tell me please, aren't you Chava Etkin's son?" he asked. I was totally amazed. How could he know it? How did he identify me? Maybe he knew my mother, and identified me according to a description she gave him? And maybe he confused between me and my twin-brother? Later on, I found out that indeed he knew my mother. They fought together in the Partisans. It seemed that my mother did not stop speaking about her red hair twins – an outstanding sign, which could easily be spotted. He also knew that one of the twins had succeeded to escape from the ghetto towards the forests.

I was very excited and I was shivering. "Did you know her?" I asked him with a shivering voice. "Yes boy" he answered. "Your mother was a wonderful woman, and an excellent fighter." I refused to digest that this soldier is speaking about my mother in past tense. "Where is she?" I started screaming with excitement in the middle of the train. "If you know where she is, then – let's go together to search for her!" I urged him, while I was shivering from deep excitement. I wanted to find my dear beloved mother.

The soldier looked at me, and kept silent. Most probably he could not find enough courage in his heart to bring me this unfortunate message, during my searches after my mother. Later on, he said good-bye to me and went off the train, keeping the secret in his heart. I stayed there on the train. I was very sad! I wanted and needed my mother so much! I missed her so much, and felt that I can't continue without her – I will not be able to live any more without her. I missed her so much during the war, the ghetto, getting wounded, and in the forests. She was the only person left alive from our family (that's what I thought at this time).

"Where is my mother?" I yelled at the soldier through the train's window.

He only waived good-bye to me, and went on.

A reunion with the Hodosh family

In Kurinyetz I was luckier. I located a Jew, who told me that I have some family members in this town: My uncle Tana Hodosh and his 2 sons Zelig and Hershel. Tana was my father's brother in law: He was married to my father's sister – Gitl Etkin. Needless to say that Tana was very surprised to see me at his door. He probably did not think that anyone of his family had survived the tragedies of the Holocaust.

I did not know anything about Tana before our meeting. He gave me a warm welcome, listened to my exciting story, and after I told him that I am searching for my mother – he suggested that I will stay at his house for a few days. "Why should you be in a hurry?" he said. "Stay with us for a while, take a good shower, eat well, and we will do your laundry. Then, you will gain some more strength in order to continue with your searching for your mother."

However, I had no patience. My mother was waiting for me somewhere (so I thought). Today I understand that I was quite desperate, and acted as a senseless child searching for his dear beloved mother. So, I said good-bye to uncle Tana, and took the next train back to Glubokie. Maybe mother got back there? But she didn't. I got sadder and sadder. I only wanted to find her! But I did not lose hope. As always, even in a very young age, I found my way out.

I refused to give up. Suddenly I remembered that mother had left some of our properties in a certain village. I decided to go

there – maybe someone there can tell me something about my mother, maybe I can use some of our properties somehow? I had no idea how many assets were there, or where was it hidden.

In the train, beside the locomotive driver

I went back to the train-station. Since I had no money for a ticket – I decided with a lot of courage to tell the truth to the locomotive driver. "Look" I told him after climbing up to the big locomotive, "I am searching for my mother, but I don't have any money. Can I travel here beside you?" The driver smiled kindly and allowed me to stay there beside him. This way I could point at the village, to which we were approaching after a while. I had a very good memory. I remembered the village's name and the name of the family, who kept our assets.

The driver stopped the train especially for me, and I went off by a water canal.

There was very heavy rain. Between me and the village houses there was a large field of a kilometer length full of water. I knew that it would be too risky for me to try and cross this muddy field – I might sink. I had to decide what to do next, and which way should I go?

I scanned the area and decided to find a shelter from the heavy rain under a bridge.

Tomorrow morning, I said to myself, I will get to the village. (I was only 12 years old).

What should I do with our family's properties?

I slept under this bridge at night, and in the morning I got to the village after a long walk in this muddy field. I found the house of my mother's friends, and they were very happy to see me. After they had changed my wet and dirty clothes, and gave me some food to eat – they showed me a closed room. "Here we had kept some of your family's properties, and you can take it back" she said warmly and opened the room's door, pointing at good furniture, carpets and expensive silver goods. I looked at all of these fine goods, and did not know what to do with it. I was a 12 years old boy, without anything, and I knew

that I will not be able to carry these goods with me during my traveling. If I only knew it – I would have sold these goods, and I could have some money, which could improve my situation. But I was just a little boy, so I had left all of these fine goods to stay there.

I did not understand how these goods could be changed to money. I told my mother's friends that currently I will not take anything, because I must continue my searching for my mother – Chava (Eva) Etkin. I guess that a few years later they sold all of these goods, and took the money for themselves. They gave me some food, took me for a hair cut at the barber, and gave me some new clothes and a pair of new boots. Again, I had to decide where to go next? The most logical decision was to go back to Kurinyetz, to uncle Tana's warm house, and to ask for his advice.

I got on the train again without a ticket (with the conductor's permission), and arrived at the Hodosh' house. It seemed that uncle Tana was very angry at me. "Where are you running around so much?" he asked me with anger. "Don't you know how dangerous it is for a small Jewish boy to run alone in trains these days? Don't you know that Russian criminals can kill you for nothing? What do you think you are doing?"

I had no doubt about it. I must continue my searching for my dear beloved mother.

Uncle Tana was probably a good person, but he did not know what to do with such a knotty independent boy like me. It was clear to me that his lack of ability to control me had caused him to become very frustrated about it.

Furthermore, he planned to leave Russia and migrate to America or to Israel.

Perhaps he thought that I would be a burden on him. I guess he had some personal problems as well. I know that he loved me like he loved his sons: Hershel and Zelig.

Anyway, I wanted to stay with them. They were my only family now.

I escape from the orphanage

Maybe Tana thought that he was doing the best thing for me, and one day he purchased 2 train tickets for both of us to the city of Vilna, which was quite far away.

It was a very long trip. In Vilna we arrived at a very big house, in which I was asked to stay. Only later on I understood that I arrived at a Jewish orphanage for children who lost their parents during the war. There were many children there, who needed to have a supervising of an adult.

relatives now.

But the supervising there was very poor. The Vilna orphanage turned out to be a very cold and heartless institution. The staff of workers there did not provide any warmth or love to the poor Jewish children, who stayed in it. We received a very small amount of food, and a lot of beating. The instructors were very young, uneducated, and without any experience – They were hitting us for nothing. They wanted to take control of us in this manner. It was clear to me that I must escape from there in the first opportunity that I will have.

My resourcefulness had saved me once again. I assume that if I was a different kind of child: weaker and passive – I would have stayed there, poor, miserable, and helpless. Not me! On this day I decided: I will not stay there any more.

The next day, at 05:00 in the morning, with the sunrise, I woke up. I felt weak and tired, but with a strong decision to leave this terrible place – It was not clear to me where should I go... I went out. There was no one there, except for the guard, who asked me where am I going so early in the morning? "One of the instructors asked me to buy something. I will return immediately" I replied. "Can you please let me pass the gate?"

The guard hesitated a bit, and then opened the gate. I sneaked out into Vilna's still sleeping streets. It was a smooth escape, indeed. Now I was walking around in a totally unfamiliar city, having no idea where should I go, without any money in my pockets, no food or water, sad and depressed. I had a bit of comfort knowing that I will not be back in this terrible orphanage, in which the children are starving and being beaten. It was obvious to me that I am also not going back to Tana Hodosh's house, because he might take me back to Vilna, to this terrible orphanage.

What should I do? Where should I go? I was very confused and depressed.

Back to the Partisans

Where should I go now? I asked myself.

Tana Hodosh's house is out of the question. My mother was not in Glubokie, not in Kurinyetz, and I had no idea where could she be. But I had to decide what to do next. I couldn't just stay in the streets of Vilna (which was a city with a great Jewish community in the past).

Suddenly, I remembered the Partisans and Romanov's (the commander) words to me: "After you will complete your searching for your mother – I command you to return to our camp in Vileika". I was very glad. In the middle of the far and unfamiliar city of Vilna – I felt that I am not alone in this world. Once again, I got on a train without a ticket, without any money in my pocket, and within a few hours I arrived at the Partisans' headquarters in the city of Vileika.

Romanov and his friends were very happy to see me. "We knew that we can count on you" they told me warmly. "You promised to return, and you kept your word". After they showed me where will I be sleeping, I found a new friend there – a boy at my age, and we went together to the fields out of the city, to pick some strawberries.

I did not find my mother yet, but now, being in a familiar place – I felt good again, safe and secure. I knew that after I will rest for a while and gain back some strength – I will continue my searching for my mother. It was very difficult for me to be alone again.

Farewell to my Partisan friends

I returned to the routine life of my Partisan friends. Every once in a while, this routine was broken when some German captives arrived at our camp's "prison". They looked so miserable, hungry, thin and helpless – a total opposite of the great proud German army, who passed through Krulevshchizna three years earlier. These German soldiers looked so poor, which caused some of their Partisan guards to treat them gently. However, some other guards, who hated the Germans very much – were hitting them every once in a while as a revenge.

After two months of routine soldiers' life, we received a command from the Red army's headquarters in Moscow, saying that all

Partisans units should stop all of their activities, and each one can go back to his home. The Partisans' job was over. I asked myself: Where should I go? I had my plans, and I believed that I will succeed.

Our joy was mixed with sadness. Those of us, whose families were alive and their houses were not hurt – were very glad to return to their houses, families and work. Some others, like me – were very sad. Not only that now I was about to lose all of my dear close Partisan friends, which were like a family for me during a very long period of war – I had no real warm house to return to. I was very excited from this new situation.

But I had no choice. Immediately after the dismantling of my Partisan's unit, I got on a train to Kurinyetz, to Uncle Tana Hodosh, hoping that he will not take me back to an orphanage, or to any other Jewish institution. I loved them very much (my uncle and his 2 sons: Zelig and Hershel).

Uncle Tana understood that I am a very independent child, and so I became to be a permanent member of his family at his home. He gave me a bed, lots of food, and I even got back to school when the Hodosh family moved from Kurinyetz to Glubokie, where we got a small apartment from the local municipality. I was very glad to go back to school. I always liked to study more and more, and to broaden my horizons in many fields. My grades were very good and I was an excellent student.

It's hard to believe how the Anti-Semitism had grown in Eastern Europe with the end of the 2nd World War. Even after Hitler was only a terrible nightmare in our memories – some Polish people, Russians and Ukrainians kept on killing Jews and robbing their properties in different occasions.

Every once in a while, our gentile classmates used to bother us. But I was not afraid of them at all. I was bigger than them and I warned them: "Whoever will try to bother a Jewish child here – will be sorry for it, and I will hit him."

My threats helped. Nobody bothered me anymore, and also the bothering towards the other Jewish children in my class was much less then before.

In parallel with our studies, we found ourselves a source of living. Tana Hodosh took advantage of his trading talents. He bought some clothes and shoes, and we sold them together in the

Glubokie market. Now, for the first time, we had some money to make a living. For a short while, we felt really good. We sold clothes, shoes and food.

Should I stay with uncle Tana, or continue all alone to Israel?

Almost a year after the liberation of Belarus in May 9th, 1945 – the war had ended. Peace was back in Europe, and then in the whole world. Everyone celebrated the ending of the war in singing and dancing in the streets. Now many Jews could think about their destiny and ask themselves: Where should we go now?

Tana Hodosh wanted to go back to Poland. There, he told us, our lives would be much better. While searching for a good place to settle in, we started traveling in trains all over Poland. We were also in Austria and in Czechoslovakia. In a certain stage we sneaked through the border into Germany (via the Austrian Alps), and arrived in a huge displaced camp in Fernwald. The streets names in this camp were like the names of some American states: New-York, Texas, Ohio, and Minnesota. In this camp, among many other Jews, Tana hoped to find a new direction in his life for him and his family. We felt very good and free there.



At the Fernwald transfer camp in Germany - 1946
From right to left: Mike Hodosh, Tana Hodosh, Michael Etkin, and Greg Hodosh.



Michael Etkin "on the tree",
at the Fernwald transfer camp
(in Germany)
after the war - 1946.

During this period, I felt that on one hand I was a part of uncle Tana's family, but on the other hand – I had the feeling that the Hodosh family will go on without me, leaving me behind. Meanwhile, we continued our studies at the camp with a nice young teacher from Israel, called Aliza. She told us about the Promised Land, but when she showed it to us in films I asked myself: They want me to go there, to this dry yellow land? What will I do in this desert land?

That's why when my uncle suggested to me to board a ship heading to this "promised land" – I refused to do it, despite they offered me a "Certificate" (a new immigrant document). First of all, because I did not want to go there. It looked like a very depressing place. Furthermore, it was very difficult for me to leave Uncle Tana Hodosh and his family. They were the only family relatives, which were left for me, after this terrible Holocaust.

But Hodosh had already prepared himself for my farewell. Together with tens of other orphans, I boarded a train, which will take me to France.

There, in the port of Marsei – a big wonderful tourist ship was waiting for us. The ship's name was: "Shampolion". This huge ship will bring me to the next stage of my life in the Jewish state of Israel.

I did not know it then, but – my mother had died about two months before the end of the war. I did not know it, and it was better this way. Many months will pass until I will finally understand that my mother was killed by the Nazis, and will never come back to me. Actually, until now I did not really digest the fact that she had died.

At the age of 72, I still miss her very much!

At least once a week, I listen to the nice Russian songs she used to listen to.

I really can't accept the fact that despite my longing to her – she will never be back with me.

I would like to tell you again, that my mother – Chava (Eva) Etkin (maiden name: Kaminsky or Kaminska), born on January 15th, 1913, was the daughter of Michaela and Israel, who were part of a family of medical doctors and nurses. She was a beautiful young lady, a very talented student, and an active member in the "Hachalutz" youth-movement.

Later on, mother graduated the nursing school in Vilna, as an authorized nurse, after three years of studies. She worked with lots of dedication in the Glubokie hospital, and even found the time to take care of me, as I was a small, weak, sick child.

She was an unforgettable figure, being loved by everyone: my father, her children (my twin-brother and I), her friends and all the broad family members.

She also loved all of them, and she used to host them very nicely and kindly in our warm house.

The house was full of light when she was there. Our house had an atmosphere of culture, due to the music and plenty of books in it.

Mother did not stop singing Russian and Yiddish songs in the house and also outside in our big garden.

I guard her figure and these songs in my heart until now.

Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Chapter 5:
**Should I go to Israel
or to America ?**

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Should I go to Israel or to America?

Today, when I remember those days – I reach the conclusion that maybe Tana Hodosh did not want to abandon me, but it was just more convenient for him to be only with his own two children. I was just an add-on for him: a very independent boy, who does not take any orders from anyone, and does things in his own way.

Tana loved me very much, but could not get along with me so well.

On one hand he offered me to travel with them to America, but on the other hand – he offered me to board the orphans' ship heading to Israel. This ambiguity reflected his attitude towards me (I must say that generally speaking I behaved myself quite well, and I made my very best efforts to be a good disciplined boy).

I can definitely say that I was quite afraid of the trip to Israel (in 1946). I did not know any facts about the land of Israel, but from watching some films about it – it seemed like a very dry land, which was not so nice to live in. I was still used to the huge Russian forests, its broad rivers, the snow, plenty of water, and the green views.

Obviously, I was worried of the unknown. I did not know where the train was taking us, which ship will be waiting for us at the port? And worse of all – who will be waiting for us at this strange new land, and what kind of a future is expecting me there? Could it be that some family relatives, who I am not familiar with – will find me there, or will I be a lonely 13 years old orphan alone in this world, missing his entire lost family?

With these tough feelings – I boarded the train to France, and during the first hours of this very long trip I made friends with some other children who were on this train.

All of us were orphans. All of our parents were killed during the Holocaust. This was the main reason why we received the certificates (Immigration permits to Israel) from the British authorities, who ruled in Palestine during this period. From now on we were like a new family to each other.

The trip to the city of Marsey (in the south of France) took about two or three days during those days. I can't remember exactly how many days did this trip last, but I do remember that we arrived at the port in the evening. We were taken immediately

to a transfer camp, which was a very nice neat place. Despite the big shacks in it – there was something calming about it. We felt that someone cares about us, and that there is order and neatness in everything. Young Israeli men and women, together with some British brigade soldiers – were running around the shacks, the synagogue, and the dining-room in order to verify that everything is OK. They also organized some dancing and singing in the evenings. The general atmosphere in this camp was very good.

A new future was waiting for me beyond the horizon, but it was very difficult for me to think about the trip to Palestine because of the uncertainty and also because of my mother and the other family relatives (not knowing what had happened with them...). I did not know then that most of my dearest beloved family members were not alive any more.

I still waited for my mother. Deep inside myself – I felt that she is alive somewhere.

Everyday I waited to receive a letter from her, or any other sign of life. I knew that if I will board the ship to the land of Israel – I will get far away from her, and if one day she will appear somewhere – I will not be there in order to meet her. My dear beloved mother was at the head of my thoughts at all times. The most common topic among the camp's children conversations was about our missing parents. Children at the ages of nine to fourteen told each other about their parents: what did father do? What was his job at work? How was mother? The memories were still very fresh in our minds.

During the day, we talked about our parents and brothers, who got killed during the war. While at night, some of us were screaming because of the nightmares, which did not let go of us. But the real problem was with the smallest children – at the ages of five, six and seven, without their parents, alone in the world. They did not stop crying, and it was heard all over the camp during the whole day. They suffered a lot and it really hurt our hearts. We truly wanted to help them, but we did not know how.

Boarding the ship to Israel

We stayed at this camp for about a week, and I got adjusted to it very well. We could not stay there any longer, because many other new immigrants from all over Europe were on their way to it. Whoever was already registered and got organized there – had to leave the camp, in order to make room for the new comers.

The "Shampolion" had already waited for us at the Marseilles harbor. It was a great French ship (according to the terms of this period), which used to sail regularly between Marseilles and Beirut. (Three months after this ship had brought us to Israel; it hit a sandbank and sunk).

We left Marseilles with some "property": every one of us got two bottles of French wine, and 300 French Francs. It was the first time in my life, in which I had some money in my pockets. I sold the wine bottles, and after a short while I boarded the ship. I don't remember why, but I and some other children were located to sleep on the ship's deck, and not inside the cabins. Maybe it was because of the fact that the ship was too crowded, or because of the hot weather. Anyhow, as young children – we quite enjoyed sleeping on the deck.

For me, the cruise to Israel was quite easy, despite its length of almost three weeks.

The sea was quite calm, but many children were sea sick and did not stop vomiting until we reached the Haifa port in Israel. I felt quite well during the entire cruise.

The cruise had started probably on April 10th, 1946. Our first stop was in Bizarta in Tunisia. Our second stop was in Alexandria in Egypt. During the cruise we enjoyed walking on the huge decks of the ship, trying to make some conversations with the ship's crew. We also enjoyed looking at some other ships, which were passing by ours.

Being on a cruise together with another 2000 children was an unforgettable experience.

Disinfection at the Haifa harbor

We arrived at the Haifa port around noon time. I remember that it was a full day light, and that about an hour earlier we had gathered on the ship's deck, waiting to see the shores of our country.

From a distance, Haifa seemed like a very big beautiful city. The ship was tied to the pier, but we were not allowed to get off yet. A group of inspectors, British soldiers, and Jewish Agency clerks came on board. They checked our immigration certificates, the sanitary conditions, and verified that none of us were infected by any kind of a disease. Only a few hours later, they allowed us to get off the ship to the shore, in which we passed an unpleasant process of disinfection and got a few injections. It was difficult and very unpleasant, but we overcame it.

Each one of us held in his hand a small package, which contained in it some clothes and other personal belongings. Except for my clothes, I had some photos from the camp in Marseilles, which were taken by a photographer, who happened to be there. So, at least – these were the only first photos I had with me. (Later on, I succeeded to collect some more family photos from family relatives, who migrated to the U.S.A. and Argentina before the war, and my parents sent them those photos from my early childhood in Belarus).

At the Haifa port we boarded on a few buses. Nobody told us where we are heading, but after a short drive we arrived at camp called: "Shaar Aliya" (immigration gate) – in which we stayed for about a month. The uncertainty feeling became more and more frustrating and burdensome: Who will take us? Where will we go to? Who needs to take care of children at the ages of 12, 13, or 14?

Despite all of the well organized activities, I started missing my home in Belarus, the Partisans, and Tana Hodosh who was like my own family. I was neither here nor there – just somewhere in between. I was already disconnected from my previous world, but still did not build my own new world in Israel. Furthermore, I did not have any real new good friends yet.

Today I understand that my reception process in Israel was not too long, but also not an easy one.

Luckily for us, our instructors at the camp were quite aware of our difficult situation. During the day, we had some physical-education, history, and Hebrew classes. I was lucky, because I spoke Hebrew quite well. I learned it before the war at the "Tarbut" (culture) school in Belarus, and also at the "Fernwald" transition camp in Germany.

Our instructors had helped us to get well absorbed in our new country.

The next stage was in Atlit (about 20 minutes south of Haifa), in this famous transition camp, which tens of thousands of new immigrants from the Holocaust had passed through it on their way to a new future in Israel.

At this stage they explained to us that we have two choices for absorption: The first choice was going to live in a Kibutz, depending on which youth-movement we belonged to (even then – there was politics everywhere).

The other choice was: going to study in an institution for young new immigrants, who survived the Holocaust.

I chose the second option. Since I did not belong to any specific youth-movement, I had made friends with a few children who were members of a pioneer Zionist movement, and was absorbed into their group.

One day, we boarded a bus which took us to the "Ben-Zion Mosinzon" institution in Magdiel (close to the city of Hod-Hasharon).

Together with me in the same group at this institution were Haim Nadel and Efraim Hiram (Pichotka), who later on became very high officers in the Israeli army. We are very good friends until now. (Later on, Pichotka was elected to be the mayor of Ramat-HaSharon).

My first school in Israel – Magdiel

Magdiel seemed to me then like a small oasis. These were very hot days, and the fields in Israel were yellow. However, our institution was full of wide areas of green grass, which surrounded our blocks. Tall eucalyptus trees were in every possible corner, as a memoir of the Jewish pioneers who tried to dry the deep swamps of the Sharon region. Beyond our living blocks were all of our institution's facilities: the mutual laundry room, the cowshed, the hen-house, the sewing-house, the kitchen and

dining-room, the management offices, and the mutual clothes warehouse.

The physical conditions were quite good. In every room there were 4 children. The beds were covered with clean white sheets. Despite all of us did not have parents, some of us felt that finally we are at home. We knew that we will be staying here for more than a week or a month. We felt that we are definitely staying here for quite a long period, and there will be no need for us to keep wondering around in many different places any more. Indeed, that's what happened. We became acclimated in Magdiel, we grew up, got stronger and healthier towards our new lives in Israel.



The 27 members of our group at the Magdiel (Mosinzon) agricultural school in Israel, in a reunion which was organized there by Michael Etkin in 1950.
Michael is kneeling first on the left side of the photo.

Meanwhile, I worked in the cowshed. I think that working with the cows had cured something inside me. I loved waking up very early in the morning, going to the cowshed, holding the milking bucket (there was no automatic milking machinery at this period) and enjoying the warm milk streams filling up the buckets.

Life in the Magdiel School

In general, our lives in the Magdiel School – during the years 1946 until 1950 – were good, rehabilitating, healthy, and curing the wounded soul of the small Holocaust survivors. The Magdiel School was not only studying and working. We had lots of cultural activities there, such as: Classical music, public-singing, Shabbat ceremonies, Jewish holidays' ceremonies, and many trips around Israel with young Israeli guides.

During this period I started developing a new hobby: painting. I knew that I had this talent, because I loved painting even before the war. I painted quite a lot in Magdiel, and some of my paintings are still kept with me until now. Most of these paintings are of views like mountains and lakes, a baby playing with a toy, and some very well known figures as: Moshe Sharet, Yigal Alon, and Stalin. People who saw my paintings told me that I have quite a good talent for it.

A few months had passed, and I felt that I was getting absorbed quite well in my new country. I became to be an expert as a cowman, an athlete, an excellent football player, and I also liked to study. My favorite subjects at school, in which I had excelled, were: Sports, Geography, and English.

Working in agriculture

During those days we started to earn some money for ourselves. Without asking for permission from anyone, we would sneak out of Magdiel to some farms in the area.

One of the children from Magdiel – Menachem Perl – told us that his father will be happy to hire us to work for him, and indeed he did. We dug holes for planting trees in the orchards. It was a very difficult job, but we earned quite a good salary for it: about 3 cents for an hour – it was quite a good fee for children at our age, during those years.

I was at the age of puberty, but regarding girls – I had no experience at all. I was a thin and shy boy, who did not dare to approach the girls. However, I noticed two nice girls in Magdiel: Batia Factor, and Ilana Zaft. Ilana was a very skinny girl, and I

liked her very much. But probably due to our shyness – nothing had developed between us.

I found some new family relatives in Israel

In parallel, I started locating in Israel some family relatives, who immigrated to Israel before the war (before 1939). One of them was Zirka Shapira z"l (mother of Robi Shapira z"l, who was the owner of the "Hapoel" Haifa football team), who was my grandfather's nephew. I spent many holidays and weekends at her house, and she gave me a very good feeling of having a family. (She and her husband lived in a very small apartment of 1.5 rooms in Haifa. Later on they moved to a 3 room's apartment in a neighborhood for veterans in Bat-Galim, Haifa). There was a radio program in Israel, which helped people to locate their family relatives.

Via this radio program, Zirka heard that a boy with the family name of Etkin had arrived to Israel.

After checking it at the Jewish Agency, she found out that the boy's name is Michael, and then she understood that one of her family relatives had survived the Holocaust.

Both of them, Zirka and her husband Dov z"l, gave me a good feeling of a real home at their small apartment.

Other family relatives, who found me in Israel, were from the Kabakov family – my grandmother's family. It was Avraham (Boma) Kabakov – a healthy well-built young man, who worked as a bus driver at the "Dan" corporation. He was driving a double-decker bus on the line between Tel-Aviv and Petach-Tikva.

I found some more family relatives, who lived in Kfar-Hasidim (near Haifa) – the Bar-Massada family (related to the Chuchman family), and the Dreizin family, who lived in Sde-Yaacov (near Kiriath-Tivon). I used to stay with them sometimes during holidays and weekends, and felt at home there.

These family relatives were very important and significant for me, despite the fact that I did not know them or met them before in Belarus. Finally, I had a family. Not a brother, parents, nor cousins – but still a family.

Some of the children, who studied with me at the Magdiel agricultural school, had no family relatives at all in Israel – so, they stayed in Magdiel during the weekends. I was very glad to

have these family relatives, which I could visit during the Jewish holidays and the weekends. They provided me with a good feeling of warmth and security, which I needed so much.

"The Black Shabbat"

One of the events, which I remember very well from the Magdiel period, is the "Black Shabbat".

I would like to remind the readers of this book, that on June 29th, 1946 the British forces, who ruled in Israel, started a very wide operation of searching for weapons all over the country. They searched everywhere, scanned and dug every suspicious place – and they found an enormous amount of weapons and ammunition. They also arrested some Israeli fighters, and leaders of the Jewish community in Israel.

They did not leave Magdiel out of this search. Someone must have informed them about some weapons, which were hidden in our school. A fact that was true indeed. On this Shabbat, at the end of June 1946, the British soldiers with their red berets (nicknamed: "windflowers") came into our school and started searching for weapons everywhere. It was a very frightening experience.

For those of us, who were Holocaust survivors – our fears came back to us once again.

The British soldiers decided not to give up. I remember them digging at a certain point near our school's dining-room, trying to find the hidden weapons. But, they did not find anything there.

The weapon was hidden somewhere between the cowshed and the hen-house. So, eventually – they left back to their base without finding anything.

Shootings and a bullet in my room's wall

Now I was almost 15 years old. At the end of November 1947 there was an historical event:

The United-Nations voted for granting a Jewish state to the people of Israel.

There was only one radio machine (there was no television) in our entire school, which was connected to a few loudspeakers

which were spread all over our school. All of us were crowded outside, counting the votes of the different countries. Then, when the formal result was announced – we ran out to the streets of Magdiel, and joined all the people who were dancing and singing.

The entire Jewish community in Israel was very happy and celebrated the establishment of our Jewish state – the state of Israel.

In general, the security issues were always there in the background as a reminder for us having many hostile Arab neighbors – such as in the near Arab village of Bir-Ades. A short while after the voting in the U.N. – the Arabs of this village started to shoot towards Magdiel. During one of those shootings, it was very close to me: A bullet broke my room's window and hit the wall. I was so scared of it: I lied flat on the floor, and found a cover under my bed.

The Independence war broke a few months afterwards (in May 1948). Since we were still underage to be drafted to the army, but we were already 15 or 16 years old – we were first drafted to the "Hagana" units and then to the "Gadna" (youth-troops). We contributed our part to the military efforts, as runners between the different stations – which served as a lot of help to the fighters (we provided them with important information). Since there was a lack of communication devices and a lack of vehicles at this period – we had a very important role. We were running between the headquarters and the different stations: transferring notes, instructions, weapons and food. We were not fighters, but – I remember that we were very proud to do this role.

BTW – we did it without getting any permission from our instructors at school.

Another event, which I remember very well from those days, is the snow in February 1950.

I remember waking up very early in the morning, seeing the ground covered with white snow, which was familiar to me from the forests of Belarus. Suddenly, I remembered that we left the cows outside of the cowshed. I ran to wake up my friends, and together we gathered all of the cows into the cowshed, so that they will be protected from the snow.

I remember the years in the Magdiel School as happy years. After the very difficult period of the Holocaust in Europe: the hunger, the shortage, the constant fear from the Germans, and the strong feeling of a lack of home – came Magdiel and provided me with almost everything I lacked so much before. The manager and the very dedicated instructors' staff gave us the good feeling that we have a family, "parents", and a home in our own land.

Going to a Kibbutz

The years passed by, and we were at the beginning of 1950. I was 17 years old already, and we started thinking about our future. During this period, and within the agricultural atmosphere in which we grew up, it was very clear that all of us were facing the same very important national mission: implementation of the Zionism. In our case, it meant going to a Kibbutz. Some of us went to strengthen an existing Kibbutz, while others dreamt about establishing a new Kibbutz – preferably far away from the center of Israel.

I was very glad to be a part of the group which went to the south part of Israel: a very small Kibbutz located between the city of Ashkelon, Yad-Mordechay, and Gvaram. This small Kibbutz was called: Talmey-Yafe (named after the Zionist leader: Shmuel-Leib Yafe). After a long drive – we arrived there. This was a very young Kibbutz, but we were not the first group which had arrived there.

Another group, which arrived there a few months earlier, had already started working in the fields, and built a few shacks and tents. Our group was called a "complementary" group.

Luckily for me, I had some agricultural experience – since I was nominated to be in charge of the cowshed in Magdiel. I would like to mention that during our studies in Magdiel, every once in a while, we used to go out to some working camps – a wonderful experience, which taught us a bit about the Kibbutz' life. My group, which was called "group C", went to Kibbutz Talmey-Yafe (in the South of Israel), which belonged to the "Zionist worker" stream.

Our lives in the Kibbutz were good. For a Holocaust survivor like me, at the age of a teenager, having frames was very

important. I had the feeling that now life has its order, and everything is running quite smoothly and calmly. Furthermore, there was a pioneer atmosphere in the Kibbutz during those years. We had the feeling that we are "saving" our land, and building our new young country – which was true indeed!

All of us were young (between 18 – 20 years old), very enthusiastic, and willing to do whatever it takes to achieve and build a successful Kibbutz. During the day we worked very hard, and in the evenings we used to sing, dance, and organize members' meetings to discuss many important issues.

I was working in the cowshed, together with a Romanian guy called Kotch.

Later on, we started developing the vegetable garden, the plantations, and the rest of the Kibbutz' branches. I am very proud to say that I was one of this Kibbutz' founders, and the chairman of the sports and cultural activities committee. Today Talmey-Yafe is a successful agricultural village.

Playing Football in Maccabi Tel-Aviv

Already then, before going to serve in the Israeli army, my love for sports started beating inside my heart. In 1950 the "Maccabiah" games (the Jewish Olympics) took place in the city of Rechovot, and I had the opportunity to go there and watch these impressing games. I watched the football teams of Argentina and Brazil, and the US basketball team.

The football "virus" did not let go of me, and I had a dream: to be a famous football player in a well known Israeli football club, and to score many goals.

One day, while watching a Maccabi Tel-Aviv football game, I decided to dare. I went to one of the team's managers and told him: "I can play football very well, and I would like to join your team."

He looked at me, gave me a ball to kick around the field, and then said: "Very well – you can join our club, but you will not start to play in games yet. First of all, you need to practice with the team, and then we will see what will happen."

So, while living in Kibbutz Talmey-Yafe, I used to take a bus once a week for a very long ride to Tel-Aviv, in order to practice football with the Maccabi Tel-Aviv youth football club. This pioneering fulfillment had made us very mature people. During those days some famous football players were playing

at the Maccabi Tel-Aviv adults' football group, such as: Shiye Glazer, Yosele Merimovitch, Eli Fux, Yitzchak Shneor (who later on became the coach), Ivanir – the goal-keeper, and some more famous well-known football figures.

It was not easy for me to get to Tel-Aviv for these football practices, but I really wanted to play in this great famous football club.

My draft to the Israeli army

I can imagine that if I would have continued to practice there for a longer period – then, I could have become a football player in the famous Maccabi Tel-Aviv adults' football club. However, fate routed me in a different direction.

On March 11th, 1951 I was drafted to serve in the Israeli Army, and I felt very proud about it.

Luckily for me, one of the drafting officers there was Shneor, who knew me, and said to me: "I give you an exemption from the recruit service. It will be a waste of time for you. I am sending you directly to a sports instructors' course." However, in spite of his decision – after a year in the army I had to pass a course, which was similar to the recruit service.

I was less lucky with the length of my army service period. Whoever was drafted two weeks before us – served only 2 years in the Israeli army. We were the first group, which was drafted for an army service of 2.5 years.

But beyond everything, I can say that I had a wonderful army service period. I was in an excellent physical shape, and I was a sports instructor of some of the best army units, such as: The famous 101 unit, with its famous commander – Arik Sharon, who later on became to be the Israeli Prime-Minister (I remember him as a very brave, dedicated commander, who likes his soldiers but was managing them with a tough approach), the Navy commando, officers courses, and Battalion commanders' courses.

As time passed by, I had acquired an expertise in the field of army Judo, and face-to-face fighting.

Another field, in which I had excelled, was: Obstacles passing.

I was loved and very well appreciated wherever I was. My commanders loved me so much, that even while checking our personal weapons (if they are clean, or not) – they never punished me if my weapon was not clean enough. I simply did not like to clean my weapon very well.

I remember one weapon order, in which my weapon was found to be quite dirty. I was told to go and clean it immediately. A few minutes later, I returned with a clean weapon. "Is it your weapon?" asked my commander.

"No, sir" I replied sincerely. "It's clean because it belongs to my friend."

If it would have happened to any other soldier, then – he would have been punished immediately.

However, I was told (with a forgiving smile) to go and clean my personal weapon, and to be back within 2 hours with it for a check-up. This time I did exactly as I was told to do and never broke the army rules any more.

In parallel to my army service, I continued practicing football in Maccabi Tel-Aviv. But I did not have enough free time for it. So, at a certain point – I received a hint from the management of this football club that I should consider moving to another football club. I started playing at Maccabi Netanya, but my career as a football player was already in decline. I was only allowed to participate in the practices, but not in games. I still loved to come and watch football games, during my army service. I wore my ironed army uniforms, fold my shirts' sleeves until above my (lowest) army rank as a private (so that people will think that I am a sergeant), and enter the football stadium with a warrior's pride.

The ushers, who knew us very well – allowed us to enter the stadium without a ticket.

I enjoyed the games very much: If not as a player, then – at least as a thrilled spectator.

Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Chapter 6:
**From my army service
until building my family**

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The "101" unit

I would like to emphasize that I did not spend most of my army service watching football games. I made very intensive efforts to teach physical-education & Judo to many special army units, which I had the privilege to instruct at the army's special training base for physical-education.

During my army service, I also instructed at the famous "101" unit. I don't remember the soldiers in this special unit, but I do remember the commander of it: a young major, called Ariel (Arik) Sharon. He was nice and friendly, but also very tough with his soldiers. During this period, some well known figures served in this special unit: Aharon Davidi, Meir Har-Zion, Moishele Stempel, Danny Mat, and Supapo – whom I had a personal acquaintance with. (Later on, Supapo was killed in one of the army raids in Gaza). These very good soldiers became to be high commanders in the Israeli army.

We felt that we are doing our job on the best side of it. We were so tired at the end of every day's work, that instead of going to meet some nice young girls – we fell asleep very quickly on our iron beds until the next morning.

Sometimes, we would go out to see a movie in the city of Netanya, or have some fun elsewhere.



Michael Etkin as a soldier in the Israeli army, at the "Nachal" unit in 1952

The Shapira family

During those days, the army became to be my second home. But there was also a first home for me. In this period, I had already disconnected my relations with Kibbutz Talmey-Yaffe, and in my vacations from the army (during weekends and holidays) I would go to the Shapira family, who lived at the Bat-Galim neighborhood in the city of Haifa.

Zirka Shapira was my father's cousin, but treated me so well as if I was her own son, just like her 2 sons: Robi z"l (who was a famous business man and the owner of the "Hapoel" Haifa football club. He died in December 2003.), and Yossi z"l (who died at a very young age from cancer).

This small apartment was sold to the Shapira family within the frame of a neighborhood, which was built for the army veterans. In terms of those days, this small apartment was considered to be a real "palace". However, in today's terms – it was a very small apartment, which included: a small living-room, and 2 small bedrooms. Whenever I had arrived to visit them, during my vacations – I was sleeping on a folded army bed, which was brought by Dov z"l (Zirka's husband) from the Brigade. They treated me so well, that I felt great in my new home. We enjoyed each other's company. Sometimes, when Zirka & Dov wanted to go out in the evenings – I would stay and take care of Robi & Yossi (who were younger than me). Although Zirka Shapira was not of a first degree family relationship to me – she treated me in an extraordinary well manner. Not only she had opened her house for me, but she also gave me some pocket-money every once in a while, and bought me shoes and clothes whenever it was needed. I knew that they do not have a lot of money. Zirka worked as a kinder garden teacher in Haifa. Her husband worked as an accountant at the Haifa port. Despite it, she never spared anything from me,



Zirka Shapira z"l, and behind her is Rachel Shapira – her daughter in-law (Robby's wife) - 2001.

although I was not a child any more.

Every once in a while, I used to visit other places and relatives during the weekends.

Naturally, I visited the Magdiel agricultural school, in which I had spent five happy years. Beyond it, there were some family relatives, who lived in the religious villages of Sde-Yaacov (the Dreizin family & the Chashmonay family) and Kfar-Hasidim (the Bar-Massada family) near Haifa.

But there is no doubt that the Shapira family house was always just like my own house.

The Table-Tennis

During my army service, I passed through several stations: Instructing the special units, the "Nachal" unit headquarters in Jerusalem – in which Motta Gur served as our commander, the Beit-Darras camp – in which Supapo served as the commander (He refused to give me vacations for any sports events), the "Nachal" camp in Juara – in which Major David Zehavi served as the commander (He was very happy to see me again there, after I was his sports instructor when he learned how to be a battalion commander).

It was a wonderful period. During my army service, I had specialized in some sports fields, such as: Football, and Volleyball. Although I was not among the tallest guys – I even excelled in Basketball.

But there was one game, which I loved the most: Table-Tennis. During my army service, I won the "Nachal" Table-Tennis championship, and during many years I had a dream: when I will be married and have kids – I will have my own table-tennis table at my home. Indeed, this dream came true many years later. During the years, I had participated in many table-tennis activities and contests in the army and all over Israel, and won some medals.

First steps as a civilian

The army service was nice, exciting and even enjoying, but despite my commanders' recommendations to send me to attend an officers' course – I had decided that I do not want to tie my destiny with an army career.

On September 11th, 1953 I finished my 2.5 years of army service, and decided to start studying at the "Wingate Institute", which already had a very good reputation as an excellent academic institution.

I was not sure if they will accept me to study there, although I was an excellent athlete and had lots of experience as a sports instructor.

My great wish was to become a physical-education teacher in schools, and a coach (in different sports fields) within the Haifa region.

In the meantime, I started to work as a sport instructor in a few schools, among them was: the famous agricultural school of "Mikve-Israel", and another school in the city of Lod. In parallel, I rented a single bedroom apartment in Givat-Aliya, near the city of Bat-Yam. These were my first steps as an independent person.

I earned quite a good salary as a teacher, and even gave some English private lessons to children. I learned the English language at the Fernwald transfer camp in Germany, and in Israel as well.

It was a wonderful period. For a few years, I had some money in my pockets.

A few of my friends had even asked me to loan them some money. Most of them paid me back after a while, but there were a few who "forgot" their debt. I forgave them.

Today I understand that I was very lucky then. These were the fifties (of the 20th century). It was a very difficult period in Israel, called: "Zena".

The lucky ones were those, who succeeded to get a job of 10 to 15 days a month.

The real successful ones were those with a steady full time job. My friends always wondered: "We don't understand it. How come that we are looking for a job during a few weeks, while you are getting one job after the other?"

I did not have an answer to this question. I only knew that I do not have any problem in finding a job. I believed that I will always find a job – in any situation. This belief had always justified itself. Probably, the recommendations I had about the manner in which I taught – had helped me in getting a job. I always received very good recommendations everywhere during 35 years of working in many different schools.

Studying Physical-education at the "Wingate Institute"

In general, I was lucky during this period – not only economically, but in other fields of life as well. For example: in my studies. During my army service, I reached a decision about my future. I knew that I wanted to study physical-education at the "Wingate Institute", in order to become a certified physical-education teacher, and a certified Volleyball, Basketball, and Table-Tennis coach. It was not an easy task to be accepted to study there. I only had one "small" problem: money. These studies costs were very high. I knew that I can't ask for any financial help from anyone. My relatives in Israel lived a very modest life, like everyone in Israel during this poor period.

However, as always – this did not stop me from approaching one of the Ministry of Education inspectors, which I knew from before, asking him to give a good recommendation about me to the "Wingate Institute" management.

After passing a series of tests at the "Wingate Institute", I crossed the first obstacle.

I was accepted for the first year of my studies there. I raised all the money I had, and paid for the first semester.

More than 50 years had passed since then, but I still remember that I was the happiest person on earth during those days. Me, Michael Etkin, a Holocaust survivor who had just finished his army service in the Israeli army, who has some money in his pockets, have a steady job as a teacher, and now was accepted to study at one of the most prestigious academic institutions in Israel. Could anyone ask for more than that?

I had a small miracle at the "Wingate Institute". As mentioned above, I had paid for my first semester, but I knew that I have no more money to pay for the rest of the year. I was very anxious

about it. I waited and waited, but nothing had happened. I guess that the management of the "Wingate Institute" was well aware of my financial status, and did not ask me to pay for the rest of the year, neither for the second year of my studies there. So, after 2 years of studies – I had graduated the "Wingate Institute" with an official certificate of a physical-education teacher, and a certified coach for a few sports: Volleyball, Basketball, Table-Tennis, Swimming, and Athletics.

Meeting Rivka

During my studies, having a steady job – I felt free to search for a girlfriend.

I must admit that until then I had met some girls every once in a while, but I never had a real girlfriend. I looked for a good special friend for life – something which I lacked for a long time. The turning point came 2 years after I finished my army service. I was 22 years old, educating the "GADNA" students. Together with them, I marched in the Independence Day march in Tel-Aviv in 1954.

At the end of the march, we started dancing in circles at the famous Dizengof square with our khaki clothes. Then, we went to the beach and started singing. My friend Zvi from Kibbutz Gan-Shmuel was with me. We started categorizing the young ladies, which were there with us: who looks lovelier, and who doesn't?

When Zvi asked me who do I think is the prettiest girl there, I stared at a beautiful sweet young lady.

Although I was not so "brave" with women – I approached her. There was another boy sitting next to her. I decided that nothing will stop me from reaching her.

I don't know how did I dare, but I approached her and asked: "Hello, my name is Michael. What is your name?"

"Rivka Levy, nice to meet you." She replied to me.

"Nice to meet you" I replied, "We don't know each other, but I would like to see you again, in order to know you better." My eyes were thrilled, in view of her beauty.

There were many other girls there, but I wanted her only. I am sure that she was the right choice for me then and today. My love forever.

Rivka levy surprised me. Not only that she did not reject me,

but – she even agreed to meet me again, and tested me. In our first date, I waited for Rivka (being very excited) at the square in the corners of Alenby Street and King George Street in Tel-Aviv. I arrived a few minutes before the time of our date. A half an hour passed, but Rivka Levy did not arrive.

I don't know why I continued to wait there, but after 2 hours Rivka arrived suddenly, and asked me: "Are you still waiting here for me?"

I was 22 years old. Rivka was 18 years old – a seminar student at the "Givat-HaShlosa" seminar. She wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. It happened 53 years ago, and we are together since then.

But courting Rivka Levy was not so simple. In our second or third date, she asked me: "What do you think that my family will say about you?"

I was very excited to hear this question, but had no answer for it. I thought that there is no need to wait for my answer. I ordered a taxi, and we drove to Rivka's house at the "Pardes Rosenblum" neighborhood in Givat-Shmuel.

Rivka's family welcomed me very nicely. The suspicious one was her grandmother.

After introducing myself, we went out to seat in the terrace. The old lady had joined us, and watched like a guard to verify that I will not touch her beloved grand-daughter. (I must say that later on my relationship with this grandmother became to be a real "love story". She loved me so much, that every time I came to visit them – she would prepare for me some special jam (from roses), and a very tasty "Chulent" (a traditional Jewish food, mainly eaten in Shabbat).

In Saturdays, I liked to go to the synagogue with Rivka's father – Noach Levy z"l.



Rivka's parents: Noach Levy (1907-1977), and Rozana Levy (Rubisa) from Saloniki, Greece (1912-1992).



The Noach Levy alley in Givat-Shmuel (near Ramat-Gan), named after Rivka's father who was the first teacher and educator in the town of Givat-Shmuel.

Today I suspect that the Levy family did not accept me with enthusiasm, at least not in the beginning. A short while after we started dating, Rivka's older brother – Yitzhak asked her: "What are you doing with this red-hair guy? Are you sure that he is the right guy for you?"

Rivka insisted: "I want him, and I will continue dating with him!"

As mentioned above, the Levy family lived in Givat-Shmuel then, in a very small 2 bedroom apartment (with 5 children). A short while after we met, a friend of the family (who was a milkman) came to the house and told Rivka's father about a new neighborhood, which was being built close to "Pardes Rosenblum" for the new immigrants from Besarabia. "I registered for it", said the milkman – Simantov Miterani. "Why don't you do it as well?"

"But we are not from Besarabia. As you know, we came from Saloniki in Greece."

"So what?" said the milkman. "I am not from there either, but it did not stop them from taking my advanced payment for it."

This milkman had also offered Rivka's father a loan, so that he will be able to pay the first payment for the new apartment, into which the Levy family moved later on.

During this period Rivka's youngest sister – Rachel was born. She was the 7th child of the Levy family. This move to the new bigger apartment was very important and helpful for the Levy family.



Noach Levy z"l – Rivka's father.



The graves of Noach and Rozana Levy at the Holon cemetery in Israel: Block (Gush) 17, Zone 2, Row 3, graves number 4 & 5.



Michael Etkin

Rivka Etkin (Levy)

The wedding

We dated for a year and a half. Then, we decided to get married. So, I came to Noach, Rivka's father, and asked for her hand. Since the end of the war, I wished to meet a special nice girl, and to build my home and my family with her.

Noach was very practical, as always, and asked me: "How will you manage yourselves financially? Rivka is still a seminar student."

"There is no problem" I replied. "I had already finished my studies at the Wingate Institute, and I am teaching in a few schools."

"May I ask, how much money do you have in your bank account?" insisted Noach.

"80 Liras." I replied. "It will be enough for paying the rent during the next few months. Soon I will get another 300 Liras, and this will give us a good start."

Rivka's father agreed, and we got married on August 20th, 1956 in Tel-Aviv.

Rivka's mother was Rozana Rubisa, from Saloniki, Greece.

(See at the Appendix of this book – the page about the Rubisa family from Saloniki, who was killed in Auschwitz during the Holocaust period in Europe.)

13 years after the Glubokie ghetto was destroyed and totally burnt – at the very same date (in a very accidental manner) – I got married with my beloved lovely wife in the Jewish state of Israel. Maybe because of this coincidence (the ghetto was burnt on August 20th), I felt the closing of a circle: The Nazis wanted to destroy me together with all of my family, but I won and I am continuing here, in Israel, the Etkin family (which will hopefully last forever).



Rivka and Michael Etkin on their wedding day -
August 20th, 1956

All of my best friends from Magdiel attended the wedding. Some of them were already high rank officers in the Israeli army. Haim Nadel, who later on achieved the rank of a Brigadier-General (we are in very good contacts until now). General Ephraim (Pichotka) Hiram, who later on became to be the mayor of Ramat-HaSharon, Israel Bargil (Freilichman), Yaacov Sarid (Sredney) z"l, and many others. I was proud of myself. I was proud of them. We sang and dance until the morning. It was a very happy wedding!

As I had already mentioned above, this was a very poor period in the young state of Israel. Even in this poor period, there were some rich couples who would order a catering service to their wedding. However, I remember very well how all of the Levy family (Rivka's parents: Rozana & Noach, and their children) worked very hard for three days, in order to prepare the food for our wedding. They bought vegetables, fruits, and meat, and prepared all the food. A small music band was playing inside the "Nachalat-Binyamin" wedding hall, a photographer was taking some nice photos, and for us it was the perfect wedding. I knew that I was very lucky to marry Rivka, and I was positively sure that we will have a good life together. I thanked god.

We spent the first night, after the wedding, in a small hotel located in Alenby Street in Tel-Aviv. On the next day we went to spend our honeymoon in the North city of Nahariya. We got a ride on a truck, which took some people to the North of Israel, because there was a buses' strike. We arrived at Nahariya (which was known as a city populated mainly by Jews who emigrated from Germany – nicknamed as: "Yekes"). I did not book any hotel room in advance. "I don't want to stay in a hotel" I said to Rivka. "We will find a nice Zimmer when we get there". We found a nice Zimmer, which was located very close to the beautiful Nahariya beach. We had a great honeymoon there for the next 5 days.

When we returned from our wonderful honeymoon, we rented a small one bedroom apartment in Haifa: in Massada Street, near the old "Technion" Institution. We had no economical problems. Later on, the Germans had offered to pay us – the Holocaust survivors – some compensation money. I must say that when it was first offered to me – I did not want to hear about it. However, later on I reconsidered it due to my friends

persuasion efforts: "It's better that you will receive this money, rather than it will stay at German hands". I would like to mention that this money did not really enhance our financial status significantly, but it helped us a bit here and there. I saved a small portion of my salary every month, for the future.

Moving to Haifa

During this period, as opposed of today, we were not so picky – we went to live wherever we could find a job. At the Ministry of Education they explained to me that there are more job opportunities for me in the Haifa area. So, we hurried to Haifa, and rented this small apartment there. I started to teach in 2 schools in Haifa: the "Carmeli" school - located in the "Wadi Salib" neighborhood, and the "Shalva" school – located in the "German village" neighborhood. In order to make some more money, I started teaching in a school in Kiriati-Tivon as well, and later on I added a fourth school at the Kibbutz of "Shaar-HaAmakim" (near Kiriati-Tivon). Later on, I started coaching Volleyball at "Hapoel" Haifa.

As a reader of this book, you probably understood already that sports were not only a job for me. It was a hobby and a great love. Except for my dear beloved family, sports were actually the essence of my life during all the years.

A short while after coming to live in Haifa, I had established the "Hapoel" Haifa Volleyball team, and organized a national Volleyball tournament, called: "The Independence" cup, which included 4 top teams from the first league. I was the only Israeli coach, who organized a large national Volleyball tournament.

2 months after we got married, the Sinai war broke out (in October 1956), and I was drafted to the reserves military service – to guard the border between Jordan and Israel. I swore that I will survive this war as well, and that when I will be back home after the war – I will organize in Kiriati-Tivon a national sport event.

When I returned home, after the war, I found out that Doron Segal – the mayor's son got killed in the Mitle battle in Sinai. I decided to establish a sport event, and dedicate it to him. I established a race (running), and called it: the "Sinai race". This race was established by me in 1957, and it takes place every

year until now (50 years already) in Kiriat-Tivon (a small city, located approx 40 kilometers east to Haifa). This is the most old timer sports event in Israel, which was established together with "Hapoel" Kiriat-Tivon sports club, and the local municipality of Kiriat-Tivon.

My colleagues in "Hapoel" Kiriat-Tivon objected it at first, because it seemed that the production costs of such an event would be around 80 Liras, which was quite a large sum of money during this period. But I insisted (as always). I suggested raising this money from many local residents of Kiriat-Tivon. The Segal family donated a nice sum of money, and the local municipality helped in raising some more donations for establishing this important sports event.

The race was very impressive, and well attended by runners from all over the country.

The birth of our children

Sports and work had influenced the route of my life. When I was told that in Kiriat-Tivon I will have more job opportunities – we decided to move there, and later on we bought an apartment there.

In parallel, our children were born. Our first son – Menachem (who is the editor and translator of this book), named after my beloved father, was born on August 3rd, 1957.

Obviously, I was not present in the delivery room (so it was during those days), but I remember very well that after we brought him home from the hospital – I scanned his entire body with my eyes, and counted his fingers, in order to verify that my first born son is perfect. It was a tough birth, and Rivka stayed at the "Rotchild" hospital in Haifa for a month – until she got stronger.



Our first son-Menachem (named after my dearest father), riding a wooden-horse at the age of three-1960

Three years later, on August 6th, 1960 – our second son Haim (named after my twin-brother: Haim-Shepse) was born. Both: Menachem and Haim were born in August – the month in which I had saved my life during the Holocaust.

Haim's birth was much easier. This time, I decided that Rivka should rest for a month at a convalescence house. It was not an easy task, because we did not have a lot of money. However, we succeeded to manage it, and Rivka got stronger and recovered at the "Elisha" hospital in Haifa.

We were very happy with both of our wonderful sons.

First home in Kiriat-Tivon

We had a good life in Kiriat-Tivon, and one day I had the opportunity to buy our first home. I heard that Dr. Shraga Zuriel – the "Rottery" president in Tivon – wanted to sell his apartment. However, when I heard the price – I understood that I have a problem. But again, I did not give up, and went to the doctor's house. I told him that I want to buy his apartment, but I don't have enough money for it.

The doctor thought about it for a few minutes, and then said: "No problem. How much cash money do you have now?" "500 Liras" I replied.

"That's O.K. – you seem like a very nice and credible person. Pay me the 500 Liras now, and the rest will be paid according to the contract: 300 Liras every month."

That was it – we bought this apartment. Now I had a wonderful family, a good job, and finally – a house of my own.

Traveling to the U.S.A. in 1966

The years passed by, and in 1965 Menachem was 8 years old, Haim was 5 years old, and our 3rd son Nitzan was born on October 12th, 1965.

I decided that I need to go forward, learn some more, and take advantage of my good professional potential within the sports and physical-education arena. I knew that I can do more than what I did until then.

A friend of mine told me that there is a possibility to study for a high physical-education degree in a high quality school at Kent

state university, in Ohio, USA.

Despite having 3 children already, I decided – with the support of my wife Rivka – to go to America. I got a scholarship from the university, and with 200 dollars in my pocket we flew to the USA in August 1966 – to a new future. Nitzan was only 10 months old.

However, in June 1967 the "Six-day war" broke out (Between Israel and the Arab countries surrounding it: Egypt, Jordan, and Syria) and put an end to our plans in the USA. We listened to every radio broadcast about the situation in Israel. Immediately as the war broke out, the nostalgic to Israel came over me. I felt that I can't "abandon" my country. I spoke about it with my wife Rivka, and we decided together that in such times one should "put aside" any personal plans, and contribute for the nation. So, we packed up everything we had, finished any open issues, and flew back to Israel after completing my first academic year of studies at Kent State University. Prior to flying back to Israel, we flew to Los-Angeles – in order to visit the Hodosh family, whom I did not see since we separated in Europe after the war (in 1946).



Greg z"l & Dolores Hodosh on their wedding day in Los-Angeles, California - 1965

Looking backwards, I understand that it was a wrong decision. The "Six-Day War" was so short, so that when we arrived back to Israel – the war had ended already.

It was not so practical now to go back to the USA. So, we returned to live in Kiriati-Tivon, and I returned teaching physical-education in a few schools. I was also very active in the "Hapoel" Kiriati-Tivon sports club: coaching football, table-tennis, and gymnastics.



Michael Etkin with Anthony Hodosh,
who is the oldest son of Greg & Dolores Hodosh from Los-Angeles.



Zelig (Mike) Hodosh z"l with his 3 daughters (Janet, Sally, and Keren)
and one of his grandsons - Los Angeles, California.



Michael (in the center) with his cousins in Los-Angeles:
Dr. Stuart Hodosh (on the left) and his brother Herald.

Moving to Kiriat-Bialik

On March 29th, 1971 our 4th son – Amit was born. Our small apartment in Kiriat-Tivon was not big enough for such a family. Me and Rivka slept in a closed terrace, and our four boys slept in the 2 bedrooms. So, we started searching for a new bigger house for the family, but the prices in Tivon were beyond our financial ability.

I heard that a certain contractor: Haim Bin-Nun was building a few new houses in Kiriat-Bialik (near Haifa).

Once again, I was lucky. This contractor's son-in-law was my student once, and he told the contractor: "You can give the apartment's key to Michael now. You can count on him absolutely. If he says that everything will be OK – you have no reason to worry about it."

This apartment's cost was: 103 thousands Liras. I paid some of it from our savings, and we took a mortgage for the rest of it. We moved from Tivon to this new apartment in Kiriat-Bialik in August 1973, and we still live in it happily until today.

The "Olympia Israel" sports club

We started getting established in Kiriat-Bialik, and I stopped working in Tivon.

I taught in a school in Kiriat-Bialik and in another one in Kiriat-Haim. On May 13th, 1975 our 5th son – Idan was born.

In parallel, I established the "Olympia" sports club in Kiriat-Bialik, which offered many different sports activities to the children in the area. This sports club was active for 5 years, until 1981. Two other coaches and my sons had helped me operating it.



Michael is giving swimming lessons to children in Kiriat-Tivon, Israel.

This was a very good financial period for our family. I earned one salary as a teacher, and another good payment from the "Olympia" sports club.

I felt that life was smiling to me.

At a certain stage, I had the opportunity to close a historical

personal circle. I found out that in the agricultural school at Magdiel (in which I studied after coming to Israel as a Holocaust survivor) they are searching for a youth instructor. I loved the idea of the possibility to work there. I knew that I was going to give others what I was given in this place many years ago. At the same day, I called the manager: Mr. Shraga Milstein. "When do you want to start working?" he asked me. "I can start tomorrow." I replied without any hesitation. "Then, you can start tomorrow. But remember one thing: these are not the same kind of children, who learned here during the period you had learned here." He emphasized. I told him that I am willing to work with any kind of children.

Back to the Magdiel school

The manager was right. It was a different population now learning there. These were mainly children from "broken" problematic families, behaving wildly – certainly not an easy task at all to work with them. However, I found a way to their hearts, and a way to control them. I forced an army discipline upon them, and indeed it proved itself.

Working in Magdiel required quite a lot of traveling for me. I would go back to my house in Kiriath-Bialik three times a week. I had a lot of satisfaction in this work!

During this period I also completed my studies for the degree of a senior teacher, and I gave lectures at the "Wingate Institute" – which was actually another circle closing after 40 years.

In 1982, at the age of 50, I made an early retirement from the Ministry of Education, but continued working for another 16 years in many other jobs, such as: Teaching in the "Amal" schools (Geography, English, and Physical-Education), lecturing at the Holocaust studies school in Haifa, at a religious "Talmud-Tora", at the "Gilon-Misgav" school, and as a Volleyball coach in Kiriath-Bialik and in the area.

In 1998, at the age of 66, I decided to retire from work, due to some health issues, and since then I am a full-time pensioner at home: walking four times a week, having free time to spend with my wife, my sons and my grandchildren, and most important: I feel quite OK and I thank god for having achieved all of the above.

I feel that this book has reached its end. Maybe some of the things were not told here, perhaps some were forgotten during the years – but I feel that the essence of it exists between these pages.

I would like to say that I did not write this book just as my life-story for all of the future generations to come in our family. Finally, I wanted you to know the source of our family's roots, who were your grandparents (which you never knew), from where did I come, and how did this wonderful rich world which was totally destroyed and burnt during the Holocaust look like.

Many Thanks!

I would like to thank my sons, and especially to Menachem and Haim, who pushed me and convinced me to write my life story, and without them this book would not have been published.

A special thanks to my dear wife Rivka, who supported me during this entire process. Everything I had achieved was thanks to you.

Thank you my dear.

Thanks to all of you, my dearest beloved family, for being here with me, and continuing the wonderful Etkin family forever:

- To Menachem and Mazal, and the children: Inbar, Shani, Eyal, and Iddo.
- To Haim and Tally, and their daughters: Keren, Hila, and Lior.
- To Nitzan and Michal, and their children: Bar, Shay, and Ben.
- To Amit and his son Noam.
- To Idan and Meital.

Thanks a lot to Zirka Shapira z"l, to the Dreizin and Hashmonay families from Sde-Yaacov, to the Bar-Massada (Chuchman) family from Kfar-Hassidim, to the Kabakov family, to the entire Hodosh family from Los-Angeles, and to all members of the Noach & Rozana Levy family from Givat-Shmuel.

God bless you all.

*With lots of love to all of you – forever yours
Father and Grandfather Michael Etkin.*

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Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Chapter 7:
**Photos from the past
and the present**

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The Michael Etkin family.
From right to left: Idan, Rivka, Nitzan, Michael, Amit, Haim, and Menachem – February 1996



The Haim Etkin family. From right to left: Lior, Taly, Haim, Keren, and Hila – 2005



Michael Etkin as a swimming teacher.



Michael and Rivka Etkin with their grandchildren:
Eyal (on the right) and Iddo (just born) – Menachem & Mazal's sons – February 2001



Michael's grandchildren. From right to left: Eyal (Menachem's son), Shay (Nitzan's daughter), Iddo (Menachem's son), and Bar (Nitzan's daughter) – 2004



Idan Etkin – Michael's youngest son.



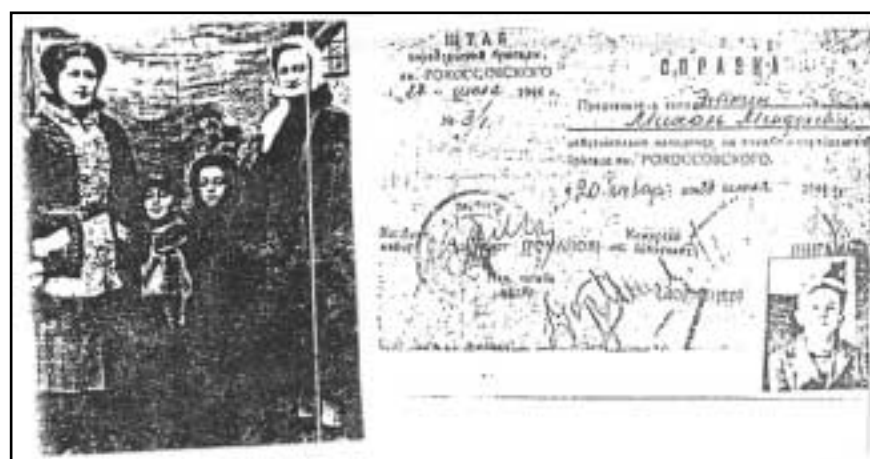
Michael Etkin, who was the initiator and the establisher of the "Sinai Race" in Kiriati-Tivon – for the memory of Doron Segal z"l, who was killed in the "Sinai War" in 1956.
This great athletic event is being held every year in Kiriati-Tivon, from 1957 until today.



Michael Etkin is managing the "Sinai Race" in Kiriati-Tivon.



An invitation to the annual remembrance day (Yorzeit) for the Jewish people, who were killed in the Glubokie ghetto and in this area during the Holocaust.
On the left: The monument for our dear beloved ones, who were killed in the Glubokie ghetto – located in the Holon cemetery in Israel.



On the right: Michael Etkin's Partisan certificate, from the "Rokosovsky" Brigade in Belarus – 1944
On the left: The photo of the twins (Michael & Chaim Etkin) with my mother on the left and her sister Lea.

112 Photos from the past and the present



Our private summer camp in Kiriati-Tivon – 1968
On the top-right: Rivka Etkin. On the bottom-left: Michael Etkin.
On the second row, the third boy from the right is our son Menachem.
The small boy with the hat on the first row (second from the left) is our son Nitzan.



Michael Etkin at the "Kdoshim" (saints) forest
near the "Yad-Vashem" Museum in Jerusalem – 1960



The Kabakov family (my grandmother's family).
Standing in the center is Bomma Kabakov.



Michael Etkin in a vacation from the army service, at the "Bat-Galim" swimming-pool, which is located by the Haifa beach – 1951



Michael with his school students.



Michael Etkin as the champion of Kiriat-Tivon in Table-Tennis – 1960



Michael Etkin by the memorial monuments for the Dokshitz and Glubokie communities (in Belarus), which are located within the Holon cemetery in Israel.



115 Photos from the past and the present



Some of Michael's & Rivka's grandchildren: Iddo, Eyal, Bar, Lior, Shay, Hilla Etkin – 2005



Menachem's family with Nitzan's family by the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem – 2005



Eyal & Iddo (Menachem's sons) with Bar & Shay (Nitzan's daughters)
on the beach in Israel – 2005



Amit Etkin with his son Noam – 2005



Menachem Etkin (Editor of this book) and his family:
Inbar, Shani, Iddo, Mazal, and Eyal – 2005



The Etkin family with Brenda & Bob Gold (family relatives from the
Kabakov side of the family from Memphis, Tennessee)
in Israel – 2005



Menachem Etkin with his family – 2004



Amit Etkin with his son Noam – 2005



Michael Etkin celebrating the Israeli Independence day
with his entire family in a nice picnic – 2005



Menachem Etkin with his 4 children: Inbar, Shani, Eyal & Iddo – 2004

120 Photos from the past and the present

Height: 132
 Color of eyes: 10/10
 Color of hair: 2/20

No. 11
 הסוכנות היהודית לארץ ישראל
 THE JEWISH AGENCY FOR PALESTINE
 IMMIGRATION DEPT.

Name: ETKIN MICHAEL
 Nationality: 1932
 Age: 1932
 Original residence: 1932
 Place of birth: 1932
 Address of residence: MÜNICH, GERMANY
 Registered for: 4.4.46

Signature of holder: 8.4.46
 Place and date: 8.4.46

- That I hereby certify that the above-named person is a Jew and is eligible for immigration to Palestine as a Jew.

Michael Etkin's immigration (to Israel) certificate – April 1946



Sitting: My grandfather – Shaul-Rafael Etkin, and my grandmother – Chaya-Liebe (Kabakov) Etkin.
 Standing on the left side is my dear mother: Chava (Eva) Etkin (Kaminski)
 At the bottom of the photo from right to left: my cousin Greg (Hirshel) Hodosh,
 my twin-brother Chaim-Shepse Etkin, me – Michael Etkin, and my cousin Mike (Zelig) Hodosh.
 Standing are: my uncles and aunts with Bomma Kabakov,
 who came to visit them in Krulevshchizna, Belarus – 1935

121 Photos from the past and the present



Michael Etkin as a student in the "Wingate Institute" in Israel – 1953



Michael Etkin as a teenager, wearing a typical Russian shirt.



From right to left: Michael Etkin, Menachem Etkin (standing), Robi Shapira z"l, Zirka Shapira z"l, and Rachel Shapira (Robi's wife).
At the "Brith" ceremony of Eyal Etkin – Menachem's son – February 1996



Michael Etkin with his grandson Iddo (Menachem & Mazal's son) – December 2005

123 Photos from the past and the present



Michael Etkin & Rivka Levy, a year before their wedding – 1955



All of the Levy family at the wedding of Rivka and Michael Etkin – August 20th, 1956
Sitting from right to left are: Yitzchak (Rivka's oldest brother),
Rivka's grandmother – Malka (Noach's mother), Michael and Rivka,
Rivka's mother – Rosanna Levy (Rubisa), and uncles.
Standing behind Rosanna: Noach Levy (Rivka's father).
Kneeling from right to left: Rafi Levy (Rivka's brother), Rachel Levy (Rivka's sister),
Yossi Levy (Rivka's brother), and Shem-Tov Levy (Rivka's brother).
Standing on the left side of the photo is: Ahuva Levy (Shweiki) – Rivka's sister.



My oldest son – Menachem Etkin visited the Hodosh family in Los-Angeles in October 2002
Standing: Menachem Etkin (the editor of this book), and Mike (Zelig) Hodosh z"l
Sitting from right to left are: Greg (Hirshel) Hodosh z"l,
his oldest grandson – Gabriel, his wife – Dolores, and his second grandson – Ethan.



Anthony Hodosh (Greg's oldest son) and his family – Los Angeles, California,
USA – September 2005
From right to left: Ethan, Anthony, Susan, Judy, and Gabriel Hodosh

125 Photos from the past and the present



From right to left: Menachem, Nitzan, Haim, and Michael Etkin in Kent, Ohio, USA – 1967



Michael Etkin in Marseilles, France during his journey from Europe to Israel after the war – 1946



My uncle (father's brother) – Chaim-Shabtai Etkin z"l.
Born on June 9th, 1908 and died in 1927 at the age of 19



The grave of Chaim-Shabtai Etkin z"l (father's brother) –
it's probably located in Krulevshchizna or in Glubokie.

127 Photos from the past and the present



My grandparents (father's parents): Shaul-Rafael Etkin z"l,
and Chaya-Liebe Etkin (Kabakov) z"l.



My grandmother (mother's mother) – Michaela Geller (Kaminski).



Michael Etkin at his home in Kiriati-Bialik – 2005



Michael and Rivka Etkin – 2005



Rivka Etkin is holding her youngest grandson - Ben Etkin (Nitzan's son) - May 2007



Idan and Meital Etkin on their wedding day in Haifa, Israel - March 4th, 2007

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Michael Etkin/Despite Everything...I had Won

Appendix

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They do not have a grave

We miss them very much, but they don't even have a grave, which we can visit, cry, and talk to them.

Some of them are buried in a "Brother's Grave", but its exact location is unknown.

My dear beloved mother – the brave Jewish Partisan: Chava (Eva) Etkin (Kaminski) z"l, who was killed by the Nazis during the fighting in the forests of Belarus, in the area of Dokshitz and Glubokie, on June 3rd, 1944

My mother's parents: Michaela and Israel Kaminski z"l.

My dear beloved father: Menachem-Mendel Etkin z"l, who died at a young age (32) (before we were transferred to the ghetto) on March 1941. He was buried in the Glubokie Jewish cemetery. But now most of the tombstones at this cemetery are totally ruined (so I heard from some friends, who had visited there), and most probably his grave can not be identified.

My dear beloved twin-brother: Chaim-Shabtai (Shepse) Etkin z"l, who was killed by the Nazis near the fence of the Glubokie ghetto, on the day of its destruction – August 20th, 1943.

My grandfather: Shaul-Rafael Etkin z"l, who died at the age of 81 in April 1941.

My grandmother: Chaya-Liebe Etkin (Kabakov) z"l, who was killed by the Nazis in the Glubokie ghetto on August 20th, 1943.

My uncles and aunts: my father's brothers and sister, with their wives and husbands and their children – were all killed by the Nazis in the Glubokie ghetto on August 20th, 1943.

My aunt Lea Kaminski z"l (mother's sister) and her family (the Kaminski and Geller families), who were killed by the Nazis in the Glubokie ghetto on August 20th, 1943.

All of them are deep inside our hearts. We remember them every day, and will continue remembering them always and forever !!!



Glubokie is here



- There are a few different ways of writing "Glubokie" : Glubokoye, Hlybokaye, Glebokie, Glubokoje, Glubok, Hlybokaje, Glembokaye.
- Krulevshchizna is located approx. 18 kilometers south to Glubokie.

The Rubisa Family from Saloniki, Greece

Rivka's (my wife) father – Noach Levy (who was born in Jerusalem, Israel in 1907, and died in Israel in 1977) came from Israel to Saloniki in (an estimation) 1932, in order to work as a Torah and Hebrew teacher there.

He met Rozana Rubisa there, and they got married in Saloniki in 1933.

Their first son – Yitzhak (named after Noach's father) was born in Saloniki in 1934 (died in Israel in 2006).

Their second daughter – Rivka (my wife) was born in Saloniki in June 1936.

At the end of 1936, the Greek authorities issued an order stating that all foreign residents must leave Greece immediately. So, Noach (who was a foreign resident in Greece) & Rozana and their two children left Greece and went to live in Beirut, Lebanon. All the rest of the Rubisa family (Rozana's parents, brothers & sisters) stayed in Saloniki.

When the Nazis invaded into Saloniki, they took the lists with all of the names and addresses of the Jewish families, who lived in Saloniki, from the chief Rabbi of the city.

The Nazis took all of the Rubisa family, together with all of the Jews, by very crowded trains to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

The names of the members of the Rubisa family, who were killed in Auschwitz, are as follows:

Yom-Tov Rubisa – Rozana's father.

Perla Rubisa (Elazar) – Rozana's mother.

Salomon (Shlomo) Rubisa – Rozana's brother.

Joseph Rubisa - Rozana's brother.

Alegra Rubisa – Rozana's sister.

Only one of their sons – Albert Rubisa (Rozana's brother) succeeded to survive in Auschwitz, due to the fact that he was a very strong person, and the Nazis took him to work in the Crematorium with the "Zondercommando" (The Nazis built a special Jewish unit in Auschwitz to work in the Crematoriums).

After the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945, Albert Rubisa returned to Saloniki and got married there.

He had 2 children: Lina z"l, who was severely injured in a car accident and died after a few months in 1998 at the age of 44. She left a husband and 2 children in Saloniki. Yom-Tov Rubisa, who still lives in Saloniki.

Albert died in Saloniki in 2003.

May the memory of all members of the Rubisa family from Saloniki be blessed forever!

The Etkin Family from Glubokie and Dokshitz in Belarus.

Shaul- Rafael Etkin (my grandfather) was born on February 5th, 1860.
Died on April 10th, 1941 in Krulevshchizna, Belarus.

Shaul-Rafael Etkin's wife was: Chaya-Liebe Kabakov.
They lived in a small town in Belarus, called: Krulevshchizna, which is in the region of Glubokie.
Chaya-Liebe was born on March 10th, 1865,
Died: August 20th, 1943 at the Glubokie Ghetto (*) in Belarus.

***The Glubokie Ghetto was burned and totally destroyed by the Nazis on August 20th, 1943. - Most of the Etkin family were killed there on this tragic date !!!**

Shaul-Rafael and Chaya-Liebe Etkin had 8 children, as follows:
The oldest son was: Reuven-Shimon. born on August 15th, 1888.
Died on August 20th, 1943 in the Glubokie ghetto.
His wife was: Pesia they had 2 daughters: Sheyne (14), Feygele (12).
All died in the Glubokie ghetto together.

Gitl Etkin. born: May 20th, 1890.
Died : June 10th, 1940 in Krulevshchizna, Belarus.
She married Tana Hodosh on May 10th, 1915. Tana was born on 1880 in Belarus.
Died in Los-Angeles, California, USA.
Gitl & Tana Hodosh had 2 sons, which lived in Los-Angeles, California.
as follows:
Zelig Hodosh (Mike). Born in Belarus in 1924. Died on Sept. 2005 in L.A., California.
Hirshel Hodosh (Greg / Gregory). Born on 1927 in Belarus.
Died on July 2005 in L.A., California.
Greg married: Dolores Kwiatt in 1965.
They have 2 sons:
Anthony, born : May 15th, 1966 in the USA.
Robert , born : October 27th, 1969 in the USA.
Anthony had married Judy Rubin on May 26th, 1996 in LA.
They have 3 children : Gabriel , born : April 1st, 1997.
Eithan , born : May 13th, 1999. and Susan.

Rachel Etkin. born: June 25th, 1895.
Died: August 20th, 1943 in the Glubokie ghetto.
She married Chanan (Chonke) Pirovoskin, on May 5th, 1925.
He died in Krulevshchizna before the war.

Chanan (Chonke) Etkin. born : July 30th, 1907. died : August 20th, 1943 in the Glubokie ghetto.

Chaim- Shabtai Etkin. born: June 9th, 1908.
Died : 1927.

Yekutiell (Kushke) Etkin. He fought as a soldier in the "Red Army" in Siberia.
Hirsh Etkin. He married Chaya. both died in the Glubokie ghetto, on August 20th, 1943.

Menachem-Mendel Etkin (my father). born: August 5th, 1909.

Died: March 25th, 1941 from a blood infection, due to some teeth treatment (there was no Anti-Biotics drugs at that time).

He married Eva (Chava) Kaminsky, on February 19, 1932. She was born on January 15th, 1913 in Dokshitz. She was a brave Jewish Partizan.

She served as a nurse in the Partizans. Her troop was captured by the Nazis in the forests of Belarus, close to the area of Glubokie, and they were hanged by the Nazis on June 3rd, 1944 in the forest.

Eva had a sister : Lea Kaminsky, who was taking care of the twins (Michael & Chaim - Eva's children) in the ghetto, during her absence from the ghetto, due to her professional duties in the Partizans.

Menachem-Mendel and Chava (Eva) Etkin had 2 twin-sons, which were born on December 25th, 1932: Chaim-Shepse, who died in the Glubokie ghetto on August 20th, 1943. and myself - Michael (nick names : Michale, Mishka). I had escaped (*) from the burning Glubokie ghetto on this early Friday morning of August 20th, 1943.

* My escape story is an amazingly great story of survival.... !!!

I had married Rivka Levy on the very symbolic date of August 20th, 1956 in Haifa, Israel.

Rivka was born in Saloniki, Greece on June 6th, 1936 .

- She worked for many years in Israel as a kindergarten teacher.

I worked for many years in Israel as a Physical-education teacher, a Volleyball coach and many other sports activities (swimming coach and referee, table-tennis, spokesman in the Radio in Israel about Volleyball, and more).

Michael & Rivka live in Kiriath-Bialik (close to Haifa), Israel.

They have 5 sons, as follows:

1. Menachem- Shabtai (named after my father). born: August 3rd, 1957 in Haifa, Israel.
Menachem had married his first wife : Lia Gertz on February 17th, 1981 in Tel-Aviv, Israel. They had 2 daughters:
Inbar- Chava, born: September 24th, 1982 in Ramat-Gan, Israel.
Shani, born: May 9th, 1987 in Ramat-Gan, Israel.
They divorced in 1993.
Menachem had re-married with Mazal Gorino, on September 18th, 1995 in Hertzelia, Israel.
Mazal was born on March 2nd, 1958 in Haifa, Israel.
Menachem & Mazal have 2 sons: Eyal-Avraham. born: February 19th, 1996
IDDO-Noach. born: February 19th, 2001
2. Chaim- Yehoshua. Born : August 6th, 1960 in Haifa, Israel.
He married Taly Kloizner , and they have 3 daughters: Keren, Hilla, and Lior.
3. Nitzan- Hanoach. Born : October 12th, 1965 in Haifa, Israel.
He married Michal Meir, and they have 2 daughters : Bar, and Shay
and a son: Ben.
4. Amit- Rafael. Born : March 29th, 1971 in Haifa, Israel.
He married Ruth (Reut) Avitbul, and they have 1 son: Noam.
They had divorced on 2005.
5. Idan- Reuven. Born : May 13th, 1975 in Haifa, Israel.
He married Meital Ben-Margo.

The Etkin Family Tree

