Bill Kay

Wartime Experience: Sent to an orphanage in Russia

I was born in 1928 to Sara and Pesach Katz, in Pultusk, Poland. My name was then Shlama. For our family, the war and the Holocaust started September 1, 1939. It is a long and complicated story; I will cover only the first month, September 1939.

Try to imagine yourself in my place, an eleven-year-old. I loved school, and I was looking forward to starting fourth grade in September. We kids had a normal, fun summer. We played soccer, swam in the river, picked wild berries or mushrooms in adjacent woods, etc. During that summer, the adults were preoccupied with talk about possible war.

On September 1, the day school was supposed to open, the Germans invaded Poland. It was well known that the Germans persecuted Jews. Therefore, my parents decided to leave our home and seek a safer place, away from the advancing German military. There was no public transportation, so we planned to walk about 45 miles to Warsaw, the capital of Poland. In the early morning we each took a bundle of things, and our parents carried the two youngest children. When we reached the main road, we found the Polish military occupying the center of the road, and civilians like us were using both shoulders, all moving in the same direction, to Warsaw. We soon discovered that we could not continue walking with everything we carried, so we started leaving things behind. Progress was slow, but we kept moving.

From early morning, we experienced the state of war. Formations of German planes were flying on the way to bomb Warsaw. Later in the day, we started hearing the exchange of artillery flying above our heads. Later we started seeing damaged properties, a soldier with a bandaged head sitting in a horseless wagon, a dead horse, sparking downed electric wires on the road. Children were crying, we were exhausted, but we were determined to reach the next town before dark. As we got closer to our destination, we saw columns of smoke rising from parts of the distant town. When we reached the town, we looked for a place to spend the night and planned to continue our journey the next morning. We joined other refugees in an abandoned building. Exhausted, even with the continuous, loud artillery noise, we slept all night.

In the morning, my father came back from scouting the area and told us that the bridge across the river was blown up and that we were trapped in this town. The men went out to look for food. They found a bakery with some flour and baked enough bread to feed all of us. We settled down for another night. Early the next morning, we were awakened to loud screams: “The building is on fire, get out.” We quickly left the building. We were met by a German soldier with a pistol aimed at us, motioning us to walk in front of him to the main street. We joined the assembled crowd. People were coming from all directions. Soldiers ordered the formation of a column. Armed soldiers on horseback on both sides of the column were guarding us. As soon as we started moving, they made us move faster. Those who couldn’t keep up were shot. We were not allowed to talk; the road was very dusty and there was no food and no water. The

forced march continued almost the entire day. Our parents desperately tried to keep us together. I vividly remember father looking down, dejected, helpless, unable to help his family.

At dusk, we entered a large farm with several buildings in the yard. Men were separated and led to a distant barn. Women and children were left in the yard for the night. In the morning, mother went to the barn to see father. The barn was empty. The Germans told her that the men had gone to work. Later in the day, we were ordered back on the road and marched to a small, secluded valley down from the road. Soldiers with machine guns were positioned on high grounds. We were sure they were going to kill us there. Mother was concerned that father would never know what had happened to us. Later, officers arrived. They whispered in a huddle, and we expected the shooting to start any minute. Then an officer stepped forward and announced: "You are free, but you must stay on the road, walk all the way to Pultusk, and the men will be there waiting for you".

It was a miracle; we were returning to our hometown and father would be there! We returned on the same road we had walked a few days ago. When we reached town, my brother and I ran up the stairs, full of anticipation, opened the door, and entered the house; father was not there. The place was exactly as we had left it. Mother went to the German military office a few times to inquire about father. They threw her out and warned her not to return. Now, mother's biggest challenge was to feed the family. One morning, she sent me to pick fruit about half a mile from home. On my way there, a soldier stopped me and ordered me to follow him to the local high school courtyard, now used for the military headquarters to help clean the yard. I was released later in the day, after the work was done. I returned home without fruit. I knew mother was worried about me.

A rumor in town was that the men, including father, who had been taken away by the Germans two weeks earlier, had been taken to the woods, shot, and buried in a mass grave. It was a big shock to us. We were hoping for a miracle; we were hoping that it was not true. On September 27th, less than one month since the war had started, an officer showed up at our home and ordered us out. Mother was pleading with him to let her take a few things for the baby, but the response was a stern and louder "out!" We joined other Jews assembled in the street. The Germans marched us to a fenced-in park and formed a single line leading into a small building. There, they ordered everybody to put all their money and jewelry into buckets lining the wall. Mother was ordered to take off her wedding band. Those who resisted were beaten. Then armed soldiers led us out of the park, across the bridge and out of town.

In one day, all the Jews were expelled from the town. The 450-year-old Jewish community of Pultusk ceased to exist. My mother, brothers and sisters, and I trudged east. We managed to cross the Russian border, and settled in the small town of Lakhovici, Belarus. Mother became ill with tuberculosis and could not take care of us. Desperate to provide a better life for her children, she made the ultimate sacrifice. She gave us up to an orphanage and only my oldest brother, Shalom, remained with her. As a reward for being a good student, I was sent to summer camp for the month of June 1941.

On June 22, 1941, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. Two days later they overran western Belarus. My entire family was again under the ruthless rule of the Germans. Those of us in summer camp were evacuated east, away from the front. I spent the rest of the war in Russia: two years in an orphanage, and two years working in a factory.

When the war ended, I returned to Lakhovici to search for my family. At that time, I learned that in the summer of 1942, the Germans had rounded up and shot all the Jews. At the time of their murder, mother was thirty-nine, brother Shalom was sixteen, brother Shymon was fifteen, sister Sima was twelve, sister Lea was ten, sister Rachel was seven and little brother Benjamin was only six. I alone survived.

I came to the United States in 1949. My wife Rachel and I live in San Rafael, California. Our daughter Rena and her family live in northern California.

The events of the Holocaust and the tragedy of my family have always been on my mind. I remained silent for over forty-seven years. At the urging of my daughter, I decided to put my memories in writing and make my story a part of the public record.