

September 1998

Dear Young People of the World,

I am writing to you as one of the few survivors of a horrible chapter in human history so that you and your children and your children's children will know what happened and never allow it to happen again. The setting for my story is the city Lvov, Poland, in Eastern Europe during World War II. The German regime under Hitler's Nazi rule was a world power determined to expand its boundaries at any cost. Its leaders had another diabolical plan in mind: the extermination of the Jewish people whom they believed to be an inferior and undesirable race that polluted the superior white Aryan nation they believed themselves to be. Unbelievably, many citizens went along with the program. Of those who didn't participate, the majority seemed to close their eyes to what was going on, as did much of the world. But a small, brave number risked their own lives to save the lives of those who survived, including mine. Many of these heroes paid with their lives.

Six million Jewish people and five millions others (including those who opposed the Nazis and of course those who helped Jews) were systematically removed from European societies and murdered over the course of the war—all with virtually no response from the rest of the world. That's 11 million people like the people in your lives: someone's teacher, coach, mother, father, sister, brother, grandparent, friend, doctor. In my case, every single person related to me was murdered. Can you imagine how your life would change if that happened to you?

This story I am about to tell you is true. It will be difficult to read sometimes, but I feel it is important to share it with you as you start out on your life's journey. Like you, I really had no idea what the future would bring, and like you I had hopes and expectations of a great life. In my wildest dreams I would never have imagined the course it took. This is my story:

SOMETHING IN THE AIR (1939)

It was the year 1939, the month of September, the Jewish High Holiday season. As a young girl of eighteen who had lived in Poland my whole life, I began to sense that a great change was upon all of us, a change for the worse. I had been a happy and popular school girl with lots of Polish friends, even boyfriends, and my life had been filled with wonderful and exhilarating activities like dancing and mountain climbing. But lately things were a bit different. One day I was loved and given hugs by my friends and the next day I might be shunned. I didn't understand it and I often felt hurt. Slowly it dawned on me that it was because I was Jewish...

Boom! Noises all around me as if great walls were caving in. We were a happy privileged family who had made an extremely nice life with extended family and friends, well accepted by people even outside of the Jewish community. My mother and father were successful business people who had inherited a soap and candle business, and had developed successful investments and properties.

They had married young and had three daughters. Lina, the eldest, married a highly respected doctor (a heart specialist who was later to be consulted often by the Germans). They were the proud parents of four-year-old Alma, whom I loved very much. Helen, my other sister, had married a successful lawyer. One of our maids, Hania, was a special

woman we considered to be part of the family as well. Our feelings for each other ran very deeply.

I had finished high school and my dream was to go to medical school. But I painfully learned there was no way Nina Gritz would be accepted to a university in Poland—they denied entrance to Jews, especially to medical school. My parents had been affected by the anti-Semitism that was ever present, but I had been carefully protected and had only caught glimpses of it here and there. Learning that summer that my chances were better applying to schools outside of Poland, I optimistically sent off applications and received some letters of acceptance.

But my dreams and hopes were about to be destroyed by the war.

THE GOOD LIFE IS OVER (1939-40)

I remember it was a Friday morning. My friends and I were calling back and forth on the telephone, planning an afternoon outing. My mother and Hania had gone out shopping for our traditional Friday evening meal. My father was at the factory. Suddenly there was a terrible explosion. The impact shook the room violently and I dropped the phone. Then one after another bombs started falling and exploding all around me. Like a little child, I screamed for my mother, hysterical, desperately wishing to see her face, wanting her to hold me and make me feel safe again. Up until that moment, my life had been sheltered and protected. Now I had never felt so alone. It was a very long hour when my mother finally returned. We hurried to the safest place we could think of: the cellar of our apartment building. No time to grab anything, not even food.

We were bombed day and night for three terrifying weeks, but it seemed like a lifetime. There were so many of us in the cellar that it was hard to move around, but that was the least of our problems. Our every thought was about survival. Explosions shook the city like violent earthquakes, keeping us from sleeping during the dark and lonely hours of the night. We had hardly anything to eat or drink; we had been caught unprepared. I dreamed of the delectable store of food sitting just a few floors above us in my mother's well-stocked pantries, one of which was full of luscious homemade pastries. Once in a while one of us would sneak upstairs for a bit of food and water, praying the whole way for our safety. But on one of those foraging trips, our neighbor was killed.

When those three long weeks came to an end, Poland had been defeated and divided into two sections by Hitler and Stalin and the part of Poland where I lived was taken over by the Russians. You can't imagine how our once beautiful city looked after the bombing.

We tried to put our life back into a certain order, but that proved difficult. Our life was permanently changed. I wasn't the same young, carefree girl with big dreams, I grew up overnight. I remember saying to my mother, "Mama, the good life is over." And so it was.

During the next one and a half years, we lived under the Russian invaders' rule. A Russian major took over our spacious apartment and my mother, father and I were forced to live in one room. Wisely, my mother treated him kindly, almost like a house guest. By that time our financial situation was quite bad because the Russians had confiscated nearly all of our money and possessions. Private businesses were forbidden and closed

down. Everyone had to work for the Russians or be sent to a desolate area in Russia called Siberia.

I found a job at a Catholic hospital run by nuns, working very hard at any job they gave me just to ensure I could work in the medical field, for I had not yet abandoned my dream. They were very good to me and put me on the children's ward. I remember one very tragic incident: a young girl of about 12 was post surgery and wasn't to have anything to eat or drink. She called me several times begging for something to drink. I was afraid to give her anything but spent time wetting her mouth with a moist napkin to help subside her terrible thirst. I went home that night and couldn't sleep thinking about her; I hadn't seen anyone suffer like that before. The next morning I noticed her bed was empty! My heart almost stopped beating. I ran to find out what had happened. I'll never forget that moment when they told me she had died. It was almost like someone I knew was gone. There were many more tragic situations to come in the following months and I eventually got stronger and learned to face the facts of life in a realistic way.

When it looked as though the Russians would be taking over the hospital, I studied Russian and statistics, determined not to let my lack of the language hold me back. Taking classes at night in statistics quickly led to a more secure job working for the Russian government in occupied Poland. I was almost fully supporting my family on the little bit I earned.

During this time my dear father was arrested during the night. We were all devastated. He was imprisoned by the Russians not as a Jew, but as an oppressive capitalist businessman--something the communist policy did not tolerate. I was beside myself with worry and had to do something, despite my mother's pleas. Knowing his employees were well treated and certainly not oppressed, I went to their homes and petitioned them to sign a statement to that fact (they all happily did)--to no avail. The major who lived in our house was a good person and helped get little food packages to him, until we lost all contact with him. We heard stories of more and more wealthy people who had been arrested or just disappeared. As bad as it was, though, we somehow found a way to make things manageable--we believed things had to get back to normal soon. We never imagined life would get even worse.

HE WHO HELPS A JEW ... (1941)

The bombs began to fall again. It was July of 1941, about four o'clock in the morning. I was shaken out of a dream and into a living nightmare by the horrifying sound of the explosions. I remember thinking, "What have we done to deserve this?" I soon learned the Germans were completely destroying Poland. The peace pact had been broken and the Russian armies ran away in panic. Chaos enveloped the city. Poles and Ukrainians welcomed the Germans with open arms because they believed their situation would improve when the Russian communists left. But the Jews were very afraid for their future.

When the bombing ceased, the Gestapo (a vicious, Nazi organized police force) rolled in and opened up the jails. Rumor had it that every prisoner had been killed. We were ordered by the Germans to clean up the mess they had made with their inhuman bombing. Thousands of bodies were scattered throughout the city, mixed in with the rubble from the buildings. Anti-Jewish propaganda was everywhere. Big posters were

hung on the sides of buildings with the words, "He who helps a Jew is worse than a Jew and will be killed on the spot." The armed Gestapo roamed the streets, not afraid to shoot anyone. I became very frightened. The Gestapo ordered all Jews to turn in their valuables. I followed orders, which I later regretted, by turning in a satchel of expensive jewelry, gold, and other valuables. We had been saving our hidden stash in the hopes that it would prove helpful if we found ourselves in a desperate situation in the future.

As time went by the distinction between the Jews and the rest of the citizens became more obvious. We were singled out and abused. We knew that some Poles were collaborating with the Gestapo in identifying Jews and their homes and businesses. The Germans and non-Jewish Poles were even encouraged to punish and even kill Jews for any minor reason, without repercussions. I remember one instance when the Germans were beating an old Jew. I yelled, "Stop it!" only wanting to help, but they replied threateningly, "Who are you to tell us?" For a long time my conscience nagged at me because I was not able to help this poor soul in any way. The Old Testament saying, "Don't stay idle while your neighbor bleeds" echoed in my head. But I was powerless against this evil regime. This was when I first realized that it might come down to everyone for himself. The Germans were destroying our unity and our precious principle to treat each other with kindness and love.

I knew now that my people were in for a time of great hardship. I prayed for peaceful and more tolerant times. As I walked down the street one morning, trying to look inconspicuous, I came upon a spot that had once been a temple. From the time I was a young girl to merely weeks before, I had come to know this place of worship that lay before me. It had been completely destroyed. Sticking out of the ashes in various places were charred pieces of the sacred building and corpses of people who had been praying when the Germans had set it aflame. I could not help but think that God had taken sides with the Gestapo. At this moment, I felt very alone, very helpless, but most of all terrified of the future. Somehow I made my way back to the house; I could not call it home.

As days became weeks and life passed by me as if it were a horrible dream, the persecution against my people became increasingly worse. New Gestapo orders came out, and we knew we had to abide by them. We were to wear an armband that was six inches wide with an embroidered blue Star of David. I had seen the vicious cruelty Jews had received for not following orders. Their bodies had joined the masses in the filthy ditches that teemed with death.

Sometimes I would wear the armband and sometimes I would not. Either way, I was constantly terrified and witnessed many horrible scenes. The Gestapo had large, hungry dogs that they were set loose on Jewish children. There was no room for a mistake, for even the tiniest error meant a death sentence. Nonetheless, I was always taking chances. My life felt meaningless. I no longer cared if I lived or died.

The Germans established a "Judenrat" [pronounced YOO-den-raht], which was a Jewish city council set up to put all Jews to work doing the most horrible tasks, thereby pitting Jew against Jew. Jewish policemen were ordered to round up a large number of Jews for "work crews" but when it became apparent that these poor people were never seen again, people refused. One terrible day the Jews in our city were herded together to watch 12 of these policemen hanged in front of our eyes as a lesson. It didn't work: As a group we would not cooperate in this inhuman deed, even if it meant losing our lives. The Judenrat fell apart.

As things got worse, I became numb to the world around me and wanted to rebel. I learned very quickly that rebellion would get me nowhere but into a shallow grave. One day as I walked in a line to go to work, I asked a German soldier, "Where are we going?" He smacked me across the face with a fierce blow. Again and again numerous fists and objects struck me. I was beaten until I could not move from the spot on which I lay. My head pounded and my heart wept.

It was not long after my beating that we were all moved into a ghetto. By keeping us in one central place, the Gestapo could separate us from the non-Jews and make their selections for concentration camps. The old, sick and very young were disposable, the first to be taken away because they were physically unable to do hard labor. The children especially were a nuisance. Who needed Jewish children?

ALONE (1941)

No one can ever really prepare for death. And no one knows when her time or the time of a loved one will come. I certainly wasn't prepared for what was to follow: my mother, at the young age of fifty-two, was murdered. The day was rainy but my mother went as usual to the cemetery to pray. Coming back from work I noticed the Gestapo herding some women and children near the cemetery. I took side streets home. I bolted in the door and asked where mother was. When my sister told me she was at the cemetery, I ran out without even closing the door. I raced to where I had seen the women and children rounded up under a bridge, screaming for my mother the whole way. Thousands and thousands of Jews, mainly elderly ones, were there now. They were being beaten and collected in a cellar. I was sure I heard my mother screaming and desperately tried to get into the cellar too. But the soldiers wouldn't let me. One screamed at me to run, but I refused. He shook me and ordered me to run-and I finally did, but I could still hear my mother's voice as I ran home. It is so horrible not to be able to help your loved ones. Words cannot describe the grief I felt.

Thank God I wasn't there to witness the horror of her actual death, for I probably would have taken my own life as well. To die would have been a privilege then. Sadly enough, hell seemed a preferable place than where I was at that time. My own death no longer frightened me. I actually looked forward to the day that God would call for me.

After the Nazis killed my mother, I was completely unable to function. I spent countless hours staring at a pictureless wall, repeatedly asking myself, asking God, "Why, why me? What did I do that was so terrible to deserve this?" I just wanted to be with my mother, wherever that might be. I had the small comfort of living with my older sister and her husband and little Alma, probably because the Nazis still needed my brother-in-law's medical skills. I was one of the few who lived with family, a situation that soon became a rarity among Jews. Because I was obviously traumatized by the emotional pain and agony of my mother's death, my brother-in-law treated my condition with strong medications. The pain never ceased, even today I still feel it, and never did the medicine completely pacify my inner hurt and fears. However, it calmed me down enough to go on.

Conditions worsened by the second. One by one, innocent victims vanished without any notice, day or night. They would go out and just never return. Probably they were killed, but no one knew anything, and if they did, they just weren't informing me.

At this time, Hitler's Nazis were given quotas to fill. They would sweep through the city with special commandos and vicious attack dogs, searching out hidden Jews, and with grossly inhuman tactics and murderous methods they were rounding up Jews. My brother-in-law heard about an upcoming sweep planned by the Nazis, so he sent my sister and niece away from the city, hoping they were going to safety. That was not to be so. I was distraught, for I didn't know where Lina and Alma were, and to make matters worse, my other sister disappeared. So I'm completely alone. I have no reason to believe anyone in my family is alive. Why am I alive?

Encrypted by solitude and hopelessness, I sat in a cold, dank room and wept my last tears until I was too weak even to cry, my eyes as dry as a desert. They were the last tears I was able to cry for years to come. My pain, both emotional and physical, was numbed by the shock of what anyone could have easily mistaken for a terrible nightmare.

I was the fly caught in a spider's web, with nowhere to turn and no one to turn to. I would much rather have had the spider quickly devour me than to have left me in suspense, trapped and tormented. I had neither desire nor determination to live. In desperation, many Jews committed suicide, only because they had the means to do it. I often longed to follow in their footsteps.

THE KILLING FIELDS (1942)

In 1942, the Gestapo ordered the relocation of the Jews, evacuating a poverty-stricken section of the Polish community, moving them into a better part of the city. Along with thousands of other Jews, I was forced to live in the newly abandoned quarters. The living arrangements were unbearable. We were allowed only the few layers of clothing on our frail bodies. A mere pencil was considered a luxury. Although the living arrangements forced constant interaction among the Jews, no friendships were established there. I was lonely and heartbroken. There was nothing to talk about. Any dreams and aspirations I had once bred in my young heart were abandoned.

I was forced to spend my days doing hard labor for the Germans, such as moving heavy bricks and supplies. I longed for basic elements like food or a bath. Sleep was impossible because of hunger and pain. Ironically, I kept myself alive with dreams of dying.

The Gestapo closed the ghetto and I was sent to Janowska concentration camp where I witnessed an endless parade of torture and death. Janowska did not have gas chambers, the Jews were shot in masses, quickly and efficiently. We had no concept of time. I was a only a body with a number, living in a daze, waiting for a beckoning death.

The final solution was the complete elimination of the Jews. Not one was to be left. And now I am selected. The sun sinks into the ground and it may be the last sunset I'll ever see,. orange and red, then silver, then gone. We are taken by truck to a field in order to get rid of us as quickly as possible. No one says anything because to talk is to pretend innocence as to what is about to happen, to pretend that we are anything but problems about to be solved. Cracks of gunfire and another group is shot. The empty bodies are thrown into a mass grave like discarded trash. Other bodies are left in the dirt.

Panic grips me. I can hear screams and pleas over the gunfire. Mind freezes, body numbs. Arms feel like dead weights, extra pieces of skin, wings that know they once could have flown. Breathless, I am sure I am already dead. Ground is cold, I am lying

among bodies. Shooting stops, the wind picks up, the sound of moans, the smell of blood alerts me. I move my hand, I pinch my leg. Is this how death feels? Could I be alive? Instinct screams at me to get up and run, but my body fails to comply. "Move!" I scream at myself. "Move!" I begin to crawl between the bodies, luminescent in the moonlight. Some are still moaning and warm to the touch. The day before they had been people, full of dreams and smiles and tears.

I begin to run across the dirt, my feet falling behind me rhythmically, one after another, my heartbeat roaring in my ears, my lungs filled with needles pushing themselves in deeper with every breath.

I run harder and faster than I ever have in my life. A life or death marathon. Where is this strength coming from? Am I running from my death or to my death. Inside me, a small unseen seed of hope guided my blistered and bleeding feet to whatever was to be in front of me. Daybreak, and I hide beneath a bush, chewing twigs and leaves to stop the gnawing in my stomach. "It's daytime, I say to myself, "If they shoot me now, who cares?" Days and nights bleed together. As I looked up, a vision of a farmhouse appeared to me and a man came out.

"Hello, my name is Nina."

"I am Mr. Niekolawitz," he replied.

He held out his hand in greeting, and then I collapsed. Days, maybe even weeks passed, as I drifted in and out of consciousness lying on the attic floor. Eventually I became aware of my surroundings and inquired as to where I was. I spent my days in the attic, and at night I would talk with this kind family. I soon realized I would bring trouble to their home if I stayed too long. I was not willing to endanger them any longer. Leaving safety behind, one night I slip away, into the darkness and uncertainty. Where am I going now?

INTO THE MOUTH OF THE LION (1942 underground)

I traveled through the forest eating leaves and drinking from a stream, always hungry and cold, not knowing where I was going. Eventually I met up with a group of partisans in the underground in Poland, people infiltrating Nazi organizations, Poles, Jews and others working in secret units to smuggle out information about the Nazi Third Reich. We had no reliable source of information about what was going on around us, only what the Nazis wanted us to believe was happening. Correct information was almost impossible to obtain; anyone caught listening to news coming in from Western Europe or from the rest of the world could be executed. The underground helped piece together vital information that could warn Jews and others about pending raids or help secure hiding places or perhaps help create safe travel documents. I received secret instructions, which were not to be told at any cost, and waited to help the group. I was right for the role: I looked young and innocent-not at all like a "secret agent." My new name was Maria Kvasigroch. At last I had a purpose.

I was sent to work by the underground in a German post office deep in Russia in the city of Dnie Propetrosk. My job for the Germans was taking care of their mail, outgoing and incoming, and keeping important papers in proper order. My underground work was stamping travel papers whenever I had the chance to secretly use a certain stamp which enabled its members to travel with ease as German officials throughout the

occupied German Republic. It was a very dangerous job, but I didn't care. I risked all for the Resistance-it was one of the few things left in my life. I spoke perfect Polish and enough Russian and German to be a valuable asset. I was thought to be a non-Jewish Pole. All of my papers were precise, and for a while I aroused no suspicion.

By this time I had learned that France was part of the ever expanding Nazi Third Reich and that Italy's fascist leader, Mussolini was now a Hitler ally. The evil Nazi power was spreading. My feelings of despair were growing. I was overwhelmed by all of the feelings inside me: grief mixed with uncertainty and loneliness. Everything I had come to know in my life had either been destroyed or had turned against me. Yet I struggled on. Somewhere deep inside I didn't want to give up hope.

By the winter of 1944, there was an increasing amount of chaos among Germany's forces. But that was not entirely good. With order slipping out of the Nazi's fingers, they became increasingly suspicious. While working at the post office, I had the feeling that one of my Polish coworkers, Henrick, who was in charge of hiring office employees, was Jewish, too. My suspicions about him were confirmed when I met his girlfriend, Danusha-the collar of her coat had obviously been trimmed, a sure sign there was once fur trim on it, now no doubt in the hands of the Nazis. (The Nazis had forbidden Jews wearing any fur-having even a tiny trim on a coat cuff could be a reason to be shot.) I carefully kept my distance from them.

One day Henrick came up to my desk and told me he was going to put the newly arrived Danusha in my position. Obviously he was trying to save her. I was terrified at the prospect! The underground had put me in this fairly secure position. I had no way of getting into contact with them to get another job, my fake papers were in the hands of the Germans, I'm deep in Russia and have absolutely no place to go and I am in an extremely dangerous situation. When I told my supervisor Mr. Skoda that someone else was taking over my job (I didn't name names) he was enraged and assured me no one else had the authority to take me away from his office and that I would be going nowhere. He liked me very much and trusted me as a good worker. Soon after, an angry Henrick approached me, enraged that I had spoken to my boss. He warned me that he would get back at me. Desperate, I resorted to the only tactic I could think of: I said that perhaps he should keep in mind that I knew we were both in the same situation­implying that I was Jewish and knew he was as well. With that he stomped away.

One morning soon after Henrick was arrested. By noon a frantic Danusha was at my desk begging me to help her get away. So that she wouldn't make a scene, I told her to meet me at the train station. I pretended to go and pick up the mail and met her there. As she was boarding she threw me a key--the one to the room she and Henrick were sharing! I quickly buried it. Had anyone seen us together or found the key on me, it would have surely meant a disastrous end for me. Luckily no one noticed I was gone. By the end of the day, it was clear to everyone that Danusha was missing. Since I was a fellow Pole, I was asked about her disappearance. I said I couldn't imagine where she had gone since I wasn't close to her as she had a boyfriend. They didn't seem convinced. I was now under suspicion.

I was in an amazingly dangerous situation of being discovered and one day I was brought in for the dreaded interrogation. Fear was not the right word for what I felt, perhaps terror better describes it. It went on every day for a week or more. I tried to convince them that just because we were all Polish was not a reason for them to confide

in me. My supervisor intervened and said he really needed me back at work and would take responsibility for me so I was released. After all, they had no solid evidence connecting me to Henrick and Danusha.

I had a pretty good job, my supervisor was more protective of me than ever after the interrogation, and he was pleased with me and my work. I could see he felt that he saved an innocent girl from harm. In fact, he told me I remind him of his daughter. At one moment I felt so close to him that I nearly confided that I was Jewish--luckily I changed my mind. Regardless of all that, something was driving me to get away, even if it meant being in a worse situation somewhere else. I felt the ground burning under my feet and escape was all I could think about. What could I do with myself? I knew we were close to the Romanian border and I decided I had to get to the other side. (By this time the Germans had retreated and Nina's job had moved far westward to the city of Vinnica) I carefully made myself some travel papers in preparation. We were approaching New Year's Eve and at the spur of the moment I chose that night for my escape when the German guards and officials were very drunk. I slipped away unnoticed in the dark of the night trying to look inconspicuous by carrying just a small satchel to the train station, my only way out of the area. Somewhere along the way I lost my false travel papers. I waited for a train on the deserted platform, covered in deep snow. To my horror, a train pulled in full of uniformed Nazi soldiers! Can you imagine? A small Jewish girl alone about to step onto a train filled with hundreds of armed soldiers whose agenda was to kill Jews--the "final solution." But what could I do at this point? To run away would have caused suspicion. I ordered myself to be strong.

An officer stepped off the train and asked me what a young girl was doing there alone in the middle of the night. I came up with the story of how I was trying to get to my aunt who was on her deathbed that very night. My fate lay entirely in his hands. After a long moment he waved me onboard. He had me sit next to him where he assured me he would personally see me safely to my aunt's door! My mind raced as I tried to figure out how to get out of this dangerous situation. By the time the train reached my "aunt's" town, I had a scheme. As promised, he walked with me and one point I said to him, "What would happen to my reputation if my family saw me arriving with a handsome officer in the middle of the night on New Years Eve?" He laughed and walked back to the waiting train.

UNDER THE RUSSIANS AGAIN (1943-44)

In Romania I wandered for awhile hungry, dirty, cold and starving amidst terrible bombing between the Russians and the Germans. Eventually, the Russians occupied the city I was in and set up a temporary hospital facility. I needed to work and wanted to get a job there but I had no identification papers. Somehow, for better or worse, I found someone else's documents, erased the name, filled in my own and turned in my application. My papers were soon discovered as false and I was threatened with detention in Siberia. Of course, they wanted to know who I really was. What should I tell them? Should I be Nina Gritz the Jew or Maria Kvasigroch the Pole? Which one would be safer? I chose the truth. They didn't believe me! I couldn't believe I was in the position of trying to convince someone of what I really was--a Jew! What irony!

Someone told me that the head of the hospital was a Jewish doctor, a major. I told her my story. A strange expression came over her face and she stared blankly at me. Terrified, knowing that my fate lay in her next words, I tried to stay strong. She said she didn't believe me, but rather than send me to Siberia I would be assigned me to a military camp near the front where I would be constantly watched. I was overjoyed.

I was immediately sent to a military camp near the Russian front. My home was a stable, an awful place with the worst living conditions--but anything was better than being under Nazi control. I soon got into the routine of going to work and returning to the stable. But when I realized I was infested with lice, I decided to live on the streets, though there was constant bombing there.

Then one day I arrived at work one morning to a surprise: nothing was left of the facility from the night's bombing. Thankfully I had been off work at the time--other nurses, doctors, and many patients were killed or wounded. Those of us who were left quickly set up temporary facilities, but the bombing worsened and more and more soldiers were brought in. The doctors and nurses and I worked around the clock, with only two or three hours of broken rest. This went on for several months. As the Russian front moved, we moved with them bringing me a little closer to my homeland. I was yearning more and more for my family. I was sure some must have survived, as I had. If only I could get to Lvov! Then one night I could wait no longer, I left on the only transportation there was--a cattle train.

GOING HOME (1945)

As I sat on the hay, dirty and hard beneath me, contemplating my surroundings, I couldn't even imagine what lay ahead of me. But I was soon lulled by the rhythm of the train into the past.

My mother was beside me. Her soft aging hands running through my yellow hair, tickling my neck and back. The house is warm and dry and bathed in a beautiful yellow light. I am wearing a new dress that shimmers as I move. I am laughing with Lina and Helen and the dear baby.

Happy Chanukah!

Papa kisses me, his mustache brushes against my cheek like wire bristles. Over the mantel the family menorah burns with its eight flames, and I realize this is the source of the golden glow in the room.

A present is thrust into my lap, and I finger the bright paper and bow.

"Open it, Nina," Mama's wise old eyes stare into mine. No, I think to myself, the warm light is coming from Mama's eyes. Eagerly I rip the paper open.

Chug. Chug. Chug.

Inside the cattle car it is dark and cold and gray and the chill wind is biting my thin shoulders. Passing fences and barbed wire gape at me, casting ferocious shadows on the walls.

"I love you, Mama!" I cry out into the black sky. I collapse in exhaustion.

Chug. Chug. Chug.

I open my eyes as a sharp light is thrust into my face. Two beady, suspicious eyes peer into mine. The train is still. A whistle blows and steam whines.

"Get up! What are you doing here?"

There before me was a hunched and withered old man, staring at me with a lantern and walking stick as if he were Lucifer himself. He repeated his question this time thumping his stick with each syllable in what I suppose he thought was a threatening manner.

I smiled wryly. My back ached, my fingers were numb and my head pounded from all the times it had bumped up and down on the cattle car floor. I had been riding the rail for over two weeks, stealing food where I could and eating, leaves when there was nothing else. I had been bombed at, fired upon, driven away, starved and beaten. I had faced foes so great and powers so vast that I could not comprehend them all. Years ago, before the war, I would have buried my head in the filthy hay and prayed to the cows to save me. Now I reacted with no more than a turn of my head.

"I am trying to go home. " My voice sounded strange. How many days had it been since I had spoken to another person?

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I am a Jew," I replied. His face softened and he looked down at me with pity in his eyes. He gave me a little piece of bread and some directions.

I continued on and eventually made my way to my beloved hometown of Lvov only to find it in ruins. Nothing was left of my childhood, not a person, place or thing. I searched for a year. I felt so angry with the Polish people who had survived, when my people hadn't. And I felt angry with myself. Why should I have been the one to survive?

EPILOGUE (1945-88)

Towards the end of the war I met a kind young Polish man. Despite being half-starved, sick, exhausted and war-weary, Josef and I connected. After a few days together, he was sent to the front in Berlin as a soldier I begged him to take me with him. I was very angry when he said it was impossible. I was still mad when we parted and certainly never expected to see him again, but he promised to find me if either of us survived. After the war, I spent a year in Lvov looking in vain for my family. I then went on to another town on the Polish side of my country after hearing that there were some organizations there set up for finding loved ones. One memorable night I answered a knock at the door where I was staying and was astounded to find Josef smiling down at me. He had searched for me for a year around Lvov and finally decided to look for me on the Polish side. Our reunion was a happy one.

Life was very difficult for the surviving Jews. Everyone had lost most if not all of their family members. Many of their homes and possessions had been taken over by the Poles. Relations between the surviving Jews and Poles was often terribly strained. Many Jewish survivors ended up in Palestine (settling in what would become Israel) and in various other parts of the world including the United States.

Our journey together took us to various parts of war torn Europe including a couple of years in a displaced persons' camp in Austria where I was treated for scarlet fever, meningitis, and a myriad of health problems suffered in the war. Life went on and with hard work we eventually built a new life in the United States. We raised a family and were together for the next 42 years until my dear Josef's death in 1988.

CONCLUSION (Today)

And so, dear young people, as I am writing this letter to you, it occurs to me that perhaps its message is why I am still here. I am an elderly woman with just these memories to share. The pain of the Holocaust and losing my entire family to it is still with me every hour of every day. Incredibly, I have met people who didn't believe it ever took place and many young people I speak with know nothing or very little about it. In a few years there won't be any Holocaust survivors to tell you their stories firsthand, including me. My hope is that this letter will speak for me in the future. I encourage you to go to the library and learn more about the Holocaust on your own, to become fully informed.

This was racism at its most terrible. A madman who led his people like sheep into believing the Jews were an evil and lesser race of man needing to be exterminated. That all of its innocent victims, like my dear little Alma, will not be forgotten in vain, I ask just one thing of you: that you tell your own children about this hideous and shameful period of the twentieth century. And perhaps they will tell their children, and they theirs, that history will never have a chance to repeat itself.