

This is my life

From Ruske Pole with love

Eva Parush

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Library

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To my grandchildren, for them to remember me by.

*Dedicated also to the memory
of my beloved parents and two small brothers
who were murdered in the Holocaust,
to my husband, Nelson, our son, Morry,
and to our daughter, Gilda, who gave us Ricky*

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Contents

1	The Slomovics	1
2	The Klein family.....	7
3	War Breaks Out.....	17
4	Auschwitz-Birkenau.....	24
5	The Factory Camp.....	34
6	Liberation.....	38
7	Back in Czechoslovakia	44
8	Australia	56
9	Ricky.....	70
	Slomovic Family Tree	87

27. IX. 1888 IRMA 1. IV. 1894 JINDŘICH 15. II. 1894 ERVÍN 30. VII. 1893 AARTEE 3. VIII. 1892 3. XI. 1941 FERDINAND
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 1879 19. X. 1942 RUDOLF 5. IV. 1887 MALVINA 21. V. 1886 1. V. 1942 ELSA 19. II. 1887 6. XI. 1943 JULIE 15. II. 1862 24. IX. 1942 KARLA 4. VI. 1869
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Memorial in the Pinkus Synagogue in Prague, dedicated to
 the 80,000 Czech Jews who died in the Holocaust.
 My grandparents' names, Chajim and Blima Slomovits,
 are in the centre.

One

The Slomovics

I was born in a very small village of only a few hundred people. Ruske Pole lies at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains in the far northeastern corner of the former Republic of Czechoslovakia. It is 131 kilometres north-northeast of Cluj-Napoca, Northern Transylvania, and is now called Poienile De Sub Munte.

Ruske Pole was called Vermezhayf in Yiddish. Across a big field lay another village called Little Ruske Pole. Tacovo was a six-kilometre walk away and the nearest big town was Uzgorod. The area is rich in wood, fruit, vegetables and wheat.

The Czechoslovak nation was established in 1918 at the end of the First World War, which also saw the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hitler took over Czechoslovakia then gave control of the region to the Hungarians. Then at the end of World War Two Stalin said: 'It's mine.' In 2006 it is part of the Ukraine because the region is too hard for the Czech Republic to claim now, as Slovakia lies between the Republic and the Ukraine. The locals used to say of our area: 'In the morning it's in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the afternoon it's Czechoslovakia and in the evening it's in the Ukraine.'

The Slomovics were the single largest, most widely branched Jewish family in all of Marmaros County in Romania. All of them are descended from two brothers who came from Lithuania and went to Galicia to follow Chassidism. After the partitionings of Poland in the late 18th century, they migrated through the north-south Carpathian Mountain passes into eastern Hungary.

Both my parents' families came from Ruske Pole and I'm pretty sure my mother, Chaya, was born there. My maternal grandfather's name was Chaim Dovid Slomovic. He and my grandmother, Blime, were very religious people. Blime wore a *sheitl*, as most married women would have. The town had around two hundred Jews and everyone was Orthodox. Chaim Dovid went to *shul* every morning. He wore *tzitzit* and put on *tallit* and *tefillin* every day. Of course they kept Sabbath and my mother was honoured with the words *eshes hayil*, meaning a woman of valour whose price is beyond rubies. She was an angel in everything she did.

Grandmother Blime's maiden name was Kahan and she came from Sziget in Romania, where the famous author Elie Wiesel comes from. In Yiddish *blime* means flower and she was also called Blanca or Blanche.

Blime Slomovic gave birth to fifteen children, but five of them died, leaving three brothers and seven sisters in her family. Julius was the eldest, then Berta, Margit, Etel, Chaya (who was also known as Helen), Ida, Zoli, Josef

and Rosina (also known as Shoshanna), and Anci, who is called Chana. There was a huge range of ages among the children. Berta was old enough to be Ida's mother. My mother was Chaya.

My Aunt Ida talks about her parents: 'My mother was such a *mensch*. She was fantastic. She had a delicate face. My father was six foot four inches tall, a fantastic looking guy, very clean and always in a tie. He worked for the state for many years as a meat inspector, a health inspector. Once someone took a photo of him in the main street in Prague and it appeared in the German magazine *Die Sturm*, with the caption: "How Jews look today in Prague." Of course that was propaganda.'

'The Slomovic family were all very good looking,' said my niece, Blanche. Margit won a beauty competition and the title Miss Prague before the war.

They also owned and ran a tavern on the road between Ruske Pole and another small village, Bustina. The place had no accommodation and did not serve meals. It was really a huge room just for drinking, or you could buy bottles. The Ukrainians living in these small neighbouring villages gained their livelihood mostly from working small fields. They loved to drink and spent their money at the Slomovic tavern. It was not a vodka-drinking culture. They drank schnapps and slivovic, made out of plums and apples. Many people made their own. If they couldn't afford slivovic they drank methylated spirits.

The family lived at the tavern for some time after I was born in 1927.

We went to the local Czech school, where classes were conducted in Czech until Hungary took over and the schools had to change over to Hungarian. We children always had non-Jewish friends at home and everywhere else in our lives. At home we spoke Yiddish.

Julius, Berta and Chaya were already married when their parents moved to Carlsbad with the younger children, around 1932. Ruske Pole was such a small place there was little opportunity to gain an education there, while Carlsbad was a city where the children could attend good schools and get trades. Carlsbad is a magnificent city, famous for its spa water which people, especially diabetics, came to drink from all over the world. There were Jews from every country in Carlsbad and the family rented a beautiful big flat.

Josef, whom we called Josl, got work in the fur trade, Zoli was in a Yeshiva, Etel and Margit worked together sewing. At first Chaim Dovid imported fruit, and when he fell ill with heart disease Blime and Ida ran that business for a while.

Carlsbad lies in the Sudetenland and many *Volksdeutsche*, German nationals, live there. It was one of the first regions to flare up against the Jews, so the family moved to Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia. Josl was making good money as a furrier and Etel and

Margit were really beautiful dressmakers. Zoli travelled all over Czechoslovakia selling medicines and did well. He was a tall good-looking man and not one Shabbat did he fail to come home to his father's *kiddush*.

Auntie Berta and her husband used to visit the family in Carlsbad every year during the school holidays and because she was the youngest child, my favourite cousin, Elza, went too. She remembers their apartment. I never went there myself.

Ida had been in business since she was thirteen and decided to open a coffee shop. 'You had to have a license so my father made me older in my papers to get one. I was sixteen or seventeen. The shop was one minute away from the Jewish quarter in Prague. My mother baked the cakes, my father organized things and the place was filled with young people,' said Ida.

Not long afterwards Ondrej Malinowski walked into the coffee shop. The two courted for two years and married in 1940. Theirs was a life-long love affair. Ondrej was born in Hungary but devoted himself to Ida's family because his own family had dispersed by the time he was a teenager. His father was beaten up by Russians and died of a heart attack. His mother had seven children and Ondrej was fostered out to relatives because she could not support them all. Somehow she managed to get each one into a trade. Ondrej was a furrier and when he turned eighteen he decided to go to Czechoslovakia,

where he met Ida. The Slomovics were tall and Ondrej was short. He was forever known throughout the family as Mali, which is short for Malinowski, but the word also means short in Czech.

All the children married very well and Etel married a very wealthy beautiful man in Prague before she was murdered by the Nazis.

During the First World War Julius (Yechiel in Yiddish) Slomovic was taken prisoner in Italy and held there for four years. The prisoners were kept on after the war to work as free labor in the fields and when he finally came home he met his new baby sister, Anci. He was married to a woman called Helen Usher and lived in Tacovo. They had five children: Moty, Etel, Hani, Berta and Josef. Like his father, Julius worked as a meat inspector and also in the fruit business.

Berta Slomovic married Abraham Ruttner and they also lived in Tacovo. The Ruttners also had five children: my best friend, Elza, and her big sister, Lily, and their brothers Julius, Josef and Mayer. Elza (Just) lives in Melbourne and besides being my cousin she is a very dear friend. Tacovo was a much bigger town than Ruske Pole, with around eight thousand people, of whom three thousand were Jews. The families were all very kosher and traditional and mixed only with each other. People sang anti-Semitic parodies to local Jews in the street.

Two

The Klein family

My paternal grandparents' names were Isaac and Esther Klein and they had a family of four boys and one girl. Laib was the oldest, then came my father, Moshe Chaim, and I think Pearl came next and then the two younger boys, Shmuel and Dudi. Pearl worked as a dressmaker in the village and died of tuberculosis while still in her twenties. The two younger boys died of typhoid while they were still young men. There were no cures for those diseases back then. My Uncle Laib's first wife was murdered in Auschwitz and he moved to Haifa after the war and married again. He was my father's only surviving sibling and very religious. He died in Israel.

The Kleins had a small grocery shop in Little Ruske Pole. They sold a little bit of everything – haberdashery, groceries, tobacco and all kinds of things. They were very nice people with a lovely house and we used to love to go there on weekends. My grandfather was slim and also quite tall. He wore a little beard. I'm sure my grandmother would have worn a *sheitl*. They worked in the shop together and also sewed clothes for the local peasants.

That part of Czechoslovakia was famous for growing apples and almost all our family had a hand in the fruit business. My father was a middleman, a kind of agent working in one of the biggest fruit dealerships in the region. He also owned some leases on fruit trees growing along the sides of roads. Here in Australia they put useless trees on the nature strips but back where we came from in the Carpathian Mountains, every road was lined with apple trees on both sides. You could lease them from the blossom stage until the fruit had ripened. Then you could sell off that year's crop, but you did not own the trees.

There was a kind of winter apple, which had a leathery skin but was the best tasting apple of all. You can't compare the Jonathans from there to those we buy now. If you were thirsty or hungry you just tore a couple of apples off a tree. Of course this was easier when they were not quite ripe, because as the fruit sweetened the people who leased the crop put guards on the trees. A town in Israel, Rehovot, has orange trees growing right along the streets and everyone can have them. It was like that all over our area of Czechoslovakia.

Besides apples, the most common fruits were stone fruits, such as plums, cherries, apricots and peaches. My father left home to go travelling around every week but he was always home for *Shabbes*. Sometimes he would bring home some fruit that didn't grow in our area, such as oranges.

Elza's father, Abraham Ruttner, was also in the same business in Tacovo. Besides leasing trees on the side of the roads, the Ruttners had orchards with a house for a peasant who looked after the trees. During the season Elza's parents hired one hundred people to pick the apples and another fifty to sort and grade them in a big shed. Then the apples were packed into huge cane baskets lined with soft hessian, so they didn't get bruised. The fruit was sent on trains all over Czechoslovakia and throughout Europe. There were literally thousands of customers and during the winter the families sat around a table together putting the orders into envelopes. My Auntie Berta, Elza's mother, also had a mixed grocery shop in Tacovo.

Moty's maternal grandmother, Ida Markowicz, and his grandfather's mother, Rivka Usher, lived with them. His mother, Helen, was the daughter of one of the biggest apple exporters in the district. Moty's house had a huge cellar the same size as the house and it was half filled with apples.

I was born on 27 November 1927, but I think that is a made-up birthday. When we came back to Czechoslovakia after the war we had no papers, so my Auntie Ida just made up a date when we needed to get passports. My name was actually Berta, but I decided I wanted to be called Eva. In the family I was always called by my Yiddish name, Bailu.

We lived in the Jewish quarter of Ruske Pole. I don't remember the address anymore. It was a one-horse town where everyone knew everyone else and what's cooking tonight. My father was quite a religious man, but he didn't wear a beard and went to the nearby *shul* in a suit and tie. There was a nice Jewish community in the town and we had our own rabbi who taught the boys and did their *bar mitzvahs* and we girls also received some instruction. Mindu and I still read a little bit of Hebrew to this day. Altogether it was a quiet, very Orthodox, small Jewish community.

My mother was more modern than her parents. She used to wear a scarf and her hair was not shorn off. She was very pretty, with lovely big dark eyes, curly hair of a light auburn colour and a nice neat figure. My father had blue eyes and his hair was reddish blonde in colour. He was slim and of average height. In the one photo I have of my parents they appear to be around the same size as each other.

I was their oldest child and my sister, Mindu, is about two and a half years younger than I am. She was born in 1929 and lives in Birmingham, England. We also had two younger brothers. The older one was called Julius or Yechiel in Yiddish, and Shmulie was the baby of the family.

Our house wasn't very old. It was a simple one-storey brick place, whitewashed like many other houses in the village. It had three rooms, an attic and a cellar. Our parents had one bedroom, Mindu and I had our

own room, and the two young boys slept in our parents' room. The other room was both dining and sitting room. There was a big tiled stove in the kitchen. In winter, when it was very cold and snow lay deep on the ground, you could put a blanket down on top of that stove and sit on it to keep warm. It burned wood, which we kept in a woodshed behind the house. We also had a big brick oven in which my mother made all our bread. In summer we used to cook in an outside shed where it was fresh and cool. We had electricity and running water.

There were steps leading up to the attic, where there was a special place inside the chimney where you could hang meats to smoke. Sometimes my mother hung a goose there. In Moty's house the smoking area in the chimney was as big as a room – you could walk around inside it.

The laundry was also done in a shed. We had a big copper to boil the clothes in and they were hung out in the garden to dry. Once a week a wooden bathtub was filled with hot water and we all had a bath. I think the two younger boys were bathed together. There was a toilet down the back of the garden and a special man came every few days to take the can away and empty it.

We had quite a big piece of land at the back of the house. At first we kept some goats, then we got a cow. My mother did all the milking and made sour cream cheeses and yoghurt when the cow was giving enough milk. Back then we never worried about eating fat and we loved our

sour cream. We also kept chickens and beautiful fat geese for our own use. We also kept a cat. Everyone had cats because everyone had mice – either in their garden or field mice from the surrounding land.

We had a truly wonderful big vegetable garden where we grew just about everything we needed. I loved picking vegetables, especially the green beans. We grew everything – tomatoes, kohlrabi, paprika, onions, potatoes. We also had some apple trees and a plum tree. Everyone had vegetable gardens and my mother was considered a particularly good gardener.

She did all the cooking and laundry and had no one to help her in the house. There was a *shochet* in the village, a ritual slaughterer, and we always took the poultry to him to be *schecked*. The oldest child usually took the birds there, but it was such a little town that anywhere you went was only a few doors away. There were no cars in our village but there were many horses and carts.

I remember learning how to keep everything separate when I helped wash the dishes at home. We had different shelves for *milchig* and *fleischig* because like everyone around us, ours was a kosher household.

Our mother was a very good cook and I liked everything she made for us. We didn't eat much meat and most days of the week we ate *milchig*. We had lots of vegetable soups with bread and butter that had been churned at home. That was a meal. Then you had your

beautiful sour cream. Moty still makes me a bean and potato soup, and I also remember having potato and carrot soup and wonderful blintzes.

Every Friday night we had soup with *lokshen* and my mother also made *lokshen kugel* and potato *kugel* for Shabbat. We took turns with our Jewish neighbours at making the *cholent*. One Friday night it would be in someone else's oven and one week in our oven. Some people put theirs in the baker's oven. You put your name on the dish and collected it when it was ready. If you took someone else's by mistake and if it was better than yours, then you ate it. The *cholent* we have now is not the real thing, which must be made with plenty of marrowbones, such as from the leg of a cow. That was delicious. They used to say it was 'a *cholent* to make you cry!' On Shabbat the whole street smelled of *cholent*. Such a beautiful smell!

My mother didn't sew. She bought our clothes in town. My sister and I had navy blue dresses with big white collars for *Yomtov*. We wore these with black shoes and white three-quarter-length socks. Those white collars were absolutely spotless. My blonde hair was quite long and when I was very young my mother plaited it. Later I tied it back with a ribbon. My mother was a real *balebuste*. She kept everything beautifully clean and wasted nothing. She was really a very able person.

My mother had a candelabra she lit for *Shabbes*. I just have two small candles. At Pesach we got new clothes and

our house was very strict and kosher. We put the freshly made *matza* up in the attic beforehand and we all helped clean the house.

There was no kindergarten or preschool or anything like that and I started school when I was about six years old, a bit later than children do now in Australia. We attended the Czech school in our village and also had lessons from the rabbi. There was no school uniform and we just wore our ordinary everyday clothes. We were all friends and played jumping games and ball games together. There wasn't so much to do in those villages. Mindu and I had the same friends. Children did not have so much free time as they do now and we had to help our mother in the house and garden quite a lot.

I don't think we had many toys. Maybe I had a doll when I was very young. We had little birthday parties to which a few friends were invited and I think we got some small presents. There were no luxuries but we got a little pocket money every week – the equivalent to about twenty cents. We spent it on lollies and an ice cream. A Hungarian man went around selling ice cream from a two-wheeled cart, calling out in Hungarian: 'Fresh ice cream!' It was actually *gelati*, made of ice rather than from milk or cream. You could have it in any flavour you wanted – chocolate, strawberry, whatever.

We attended school in the mornings until lunch, then the girls went home. We spoke Yiddish at home, and

school was conducted in Czech, then Hungarian, then German, so we spoke all those languages. I can still speak them.

After lunch the boys went into the *cheder* until 7.00 in the evening. Moty hated it. In summer it is still daylight at 7.00 pm, but in the winter it's dark by 4.30 pm. The *melamed* sat the boys down at a big long table and carried a stick long enough to reach each boy. If someone did not repeat the lesson properly he got a whack.

The *melamed* used to go into the synagogue to pray every evening and during winter he turned off the kerosene lamp before departing, leaving the boys alone in the *cheder* in the dark for around three quarters of an hour. He did this to save fuel. Every boy had to bring a bottle of fuel once a week for the lamp. When the *melamed* returned, he lit the lamp again. Moty told me that one time he emptied the fuel out of the lamp and peed in it. When the *melamed* came back and re-lit the lamp, it burned for a minute then went out again. He went mad! He was yelling: 'Who did that!' But no one told and he had to send the boys home because there was no light.

We saw our Slomovic cousins in Tacovo occasionally, but not that often. The six-kilometer distance between Ruske Pole and Tacovo was quite a long way. My father used to go visiting them on his bicycle, but my mother could not visit so often because she had to walk there

and back. Our family could not afford bicycles for the children. After a time there was a train one could catch, but it was still a long walk to the train station from Ruske Pole.

A little channel ran past the back yard of Moty's house in Tacovo. It was a big house and had a lot of stairs leading to the front door, although it was only a one-storey place. Tacovo was on the border of Czechoslovakia and Romania and the river Tisza ran between them. There was Big Tacovo and Small Tacovo and our cousin, Elza Ruttner, lived in Big. She was my best friend and the same age as me – there is only about three or four months' difference between us. I think we used to write each other letters. Auntie Berta had to carry a passport to go shopping in Small Tacovo, which was in Romania. When the windows of their house were open, you could see all the mountains all around. When we went on holiday in Bright, it reminded me so much of Tacovo.

We had a little channel in our garden at Ruske Pole. It froze during the winter and we could skate on it. We also used to slide down the snowy hills on sleds. That was about all the sport I was ever involved in.

We were good children. I don't remember us doing anything naughty, like smoking or drinking. We were brought up to tell the truth to our parents no matter whether what we had to say was good or bad. The truth was very important.

Three

War Breaks Out

I had experienced anti-Semitism before World War Two broke out because the locals used to beat us up and swear at us, even when we were children. We knew the *goyim* didn't like us.

The first sign of war I recall was when men came to our house and took my father away to labor camp. I think that was in 1941. A draft notice arrived and then the men came to collect him. He was one of the first to go. We used the Hungarian word for labor camp, *munkaszolgalat*. At that time our school classes were conducted in Hungarian. My father was usually away during the week working in the fruit business and only came home at weekends, so they must have taken him either on the weekend or one evening when he was at home. If he wasn't working too far away he always tried to come home.

I was at home when they came for him. They said he was coming back, but he never came back. I was twelve years old at the time. A few other men from the village who were young and strong and of military age were taken away at the same time. First he was sent to a forced

labor camp – I think it was somewhere in Hungary – and came home once or twice. We got a couple of letters from him and then they stopped coming and we never heard from him again. The other women in the village talked together and at the time no one knew anything about that first group that was taken away. At least two years later I remember hearing someone say that he had been shot, that he was dead.

Years later we found out more. When my sister, Mindu, visited our Uncle Laib in Israel he invited a man to his house, someone who lived not far away from him, who was able to tell her more than anyone about what happened to those men who were taken away with our father. He said they were sent to the fronts ahead of the German soldiers and ordered to dig trenches, clear mines and load lorries.

At one point when the war was at its highest, a trainload of men from this workforce arrived in Poland. I think they landed in the Russian sector, though I'm not terribly sure of that. Russian soldiers surrounded the group and could not work out exactly who they were, as none of them were wearing the Star of David and all they carried with them were picks and shovels. Not too many questions were asked and they were all thrown into terrible Russian camps, where it seems ninety percent of the people died of typhoid and other diseases. So it seems likely that this too was my dear father's fate.

The ruler of Hungary at the time, Horthy, was collaborating with the Germans so the families of those men were left in their homes for another year and a half or two years. I'm not absolutely sure of the dates here. Records show that in 1941, before the men were taken away, Ruske Pole was home to three hundred and ninety-five Jews.

With our father gone our mother had to earn our living. She proved to be a very good businesswoman, buying vegetables from the peasants and selling them for a bit of profit. She used to go to Tacovo, where there was a market once a week on Wednesdays. She either walked there or caught a lift in a horse and buggy from local peasants. My mother was a very strong, healthy, beautiful, energetic and charismatic woman, but they were hard times and although we were very poor our mother kept us fed. I don't know how she managed to come home with bags of flour from which she made bread and *challah*.

The Germans occupied our district in 1942 and that's when we, together with all the people from the surrounding villages, were made to wear yellow stars, then taken away and put into a ghetto. Ruske Pole was too small for a ghetto. The ghetto in Tacovo included Huska Utca, the street where my cousin Elza's house was. It was a pretty big house, so all our other relatives moved in there together, but only for a very short time.

My mother and we four children were taken to another

ghetto not far away in the Ukrainian town now called Berehovo. The ghetto was called Kasim. I remember us living in a kind of a hayloft. We spent around eight or nine weeks there. I was about fifteen years old and remember the ghetto like it was a mental institution with so many people crowded together, no work, no school, only the food rations we were given to cook. We had our own clothes but no money. The camp was surrounded by soldiers who issued orders and often hit people with their rifles. We didn't know where our relatives were.

One day they loaded us all onto trains, telling us we were being resettled in a better place and could take just as much as we could carry. Everything else was simply left behind. We had no idea what was happening. They were cattle trucks with about fifty people crammed into each one. The big doors were barred from the outside and we had only the food and water we had brought with us. All our natural functions had to be completed inside as there was just no other choice.

We had absolutely no idea where we were going. All we could see through the tiny window was trees and emptiness. We were in those trains for about a day or so.



My parents,
Chaya Slomovic and
Moshe Chaim Klein



Margit Slomovic,
murdered in the Holocaust



Etel Slomovic,
murdered in the
Holocaust



My cousin Elza as a
teenager in Tacovo



Elza Ruttner is at far left and her sister Lily at far right. The taller figure of a man in a cap in the window behind may be their father, Abraham Ruttner. Their mother, Berta, is on the right of the two women standing in the background. Between the sisters, from left to right, are Sibi, Ety, Leah and Iranna, cousins from their father's side.

Taken outside the Ruttner family home in Tacovo when it was incorporated into the ghetto

Four

Auschwitz-Birkenau

The trains went straight to Birkenau, but we didn't know that. We didn't know where we were. The train stopped, the carriages were suddenly opened. Polish men in striped uniforms appeared and hauled us out of the carriages, shouting at us to bring our luggage with us. German soldiers were screaming and yelling: '*Raus Raus!*' The striped clothes looked like pyjamas and we thought we had arrived in some kind of asylum for lunatics. We didn't know anything. We didn't know that these men in stripes were called *Häftlinge*, prisoners, and that they were Jews whose job it was to unload the trains.

And we went like little lambs. Looking back, I still don't know why we were like that, so mild, so unresisting. We were just terrified. I will never forget the panic and fear that was in that carriage and in my mother's eyes. We were mostly a transport of women and children because the men had all been taken away. We were in a carriage of mothers and children and I think there was another carriage of grandmothers.

One of these men in striped clothes spoke to my mother in Yiddish and said: 'Which are your children?'

And she said: 'These are my girls and these are my two young boys.'

Then he said to her: 'Why don't you let these girls go ahead, you'll see them later, they will be okay.'

And because he spoke Yiddish my mother had some kind of trust in him and she told Mindu and me to do what he said.

So we scrambled down from the cattle wagon and this same man said to us: 'If they ask you your age, tell them you are sixteen or seventeen and that you are a seamstress. Now go ahead, you will see your mother.'

And I remember that we looked back at this enormous train and we waved to our mother. She was wearing a spotted headscarf. And she waved back to us. We still didn't understand what they were doing, but after that Mindu and I never saw our mother and two brothers ever again. My brothers were really young. Yechiel was about five or six and Shmulie just three years old.

Written in wrought iron over the gate were the words *Arbeit Macht Frei*. But of course once we got to those 'Gates of Hell' there was a selection. The mothers and children went to the left and the young and able went to the right. I suppose if we had seen our mother being sent to a different side to us, we would have created a fuss and just been sent along to the gas chambers with her.

None of us knew or anticipated even in our dreams what was waiting for us inside those gates. SS men with

viciously barking dogs shouted at us as we formed into rows of five and marched to the showers. It was all done very quickly. Then we were stripped and shaved. It was so terrible for us young girls, sitting naked while being shaved with men all around. We were given a dress and shoes but no underwear. We were not tattooed because there were a lot of Hungarian transports arriving around that time and I think they were in a panic to just move us. Then we were put into a barrack block.

I think they put something in our food, because within a few days I could no longer think, didn't know what day it was and had no reaction to anything. We slept sixteen to a bunker, eight one way, eight the other, head to toe. I think we were in Barrack 15.

I did not know at that time that transports were also coming to Auschwitz from Tacovo. My cousin Moty has a very good memory. He was in a transport that arrived on 25 May 1944 with his whole family, including his parents, Grandmother Ida and Great-grandmother Rivka, who was ninety-three years old. Auntie Berta, Uncle Abraham and their children were on the same train but in different carriages. In 1984 a woman gave Yad Vashem a photo album she found abandoned in the SS's quarters at Auschwitz after the war. It has been published as *Auschwitz Album* and there are several photos of the arrival of that exact transport my relatives were on. Moty can pick them

out in the photos. The records state that from mid-May in 1944, eleven thousand Jews were transported from Carpatho-Russia to Auschwitz in four transports.

My cousin Elza arrived in Birkenau before we did and she too was helped by a Polish man in striped clothing. This is what she told me:

‘On the side we saw a handsome man standing higher up above everyone. That was Dr Mengele. Then one of these men dressed in stripes – I will never forget him – he came up to my mother. She was a beautiful-looking woman, about forty years old and while she had already had five children, she still looked like our sister.

‘This man asked her: “Do you speak Yiddish?” She told him she did. We were a group of four – me and my sister Lily and Moty Slomovic’s two sisters, our cousins Hani and Etu. This man asked my mum if we were all her children. She said we were, but he told her not to tell the Germans that, but to say we are not related. This was because they liked to separate families, especially sisters.

‘Then he asked how old I was. I was just fourteen at the time but he told me to say I was twenty and told my sister to say she was twenty-six. Then he told us all to hold hands tightly and to look neither to the left or the right, but straight ahead. So we did. I believe his advice saved our lives then, because of course Mengele was selecting people for the gas chamber, telling them to go left and right.

‘I remember another man from that day, another Jewish Pole but a very different kind of man. He greeted us with this: “You came in through the gate but you will go out through the chimney.”

‘They took us straight away to a delousing unit where we were given a disinfectant shower and our heads were shaved. Then we were given a rag of a dress and a thin blanket and told to line up. Our group was not tattooed. They took us to Barrack C, which was empty when we arrived and then filled up with women from our transport. We slept on bare wooden planks with one blanket – no straw, no pillows,’ said Elza.

Meanwhile, Mali was sent to Terezin in 1941 on the first transport from Prague, where the men worked on extending the railway line. Ida and her parents arrived a year later. Chaim Dovid Slomovic died there of a heart attack. Theresienstadt, as the Germans called it, or Terezin as it is in Czech, was a *muster lager* where families were allowed to stay together and it was not a death camp like Birkenau. When they said Grandmother Blime had to go to Auschwitz, Auntie Ida and Mali said they wanted to come too, so she didn’t have to go alone. They all arrived in Auschwitz in April 1944. They had no idea where their relatives were. Mali was sent to a separate barrack.

Blime and Ida were in a barrack of around one hundred and fifty women. They were not given uniforms, but Ida was tattooed. They had barely arrived when they learned

their relatives were in another area on the other side of the electrified fence. Moty and Berta’s transport from Tacovo coincided with Blime, Mali and Ida’s transport from Terezin. Moty recalls being held in the gypsy camp, where someone called out the name Slomovic and he went to the fence and met Ida Malinowski for the first time.

Elza takes up her story: ‘It seemed our *blockowa*, the woman in charge of our barrack, had a sister in Terezin who was a girlfriend of my Auntie Ida. The woman knew a transport had arrived from Czechoslovakia so she went looking for her sister and found her with Ida. They were able to speak to each other and Ida asked the *blockowa* if she knew if Mrs Ruttner and her children were there. The *blockowa* came back to our lager and began calling out for Mrs Ruttner: “Mrs Ruttner, Mrs Ruttner!” But we were too scared to reply – we were warned not to say anything. But my mum was very courageous, so she stood up. The woman said to her: “Come with me. Your mother and sister Ida are in the Czechoslovak section.” Such a coincidence! We went to the wire but we could only wave.

‘They were only there one week and one morning we woke up and the *lager* was empty. We feared the worst,’ said Elza. Blime was sent to the gas chambers and Ida to an ammunition factory *lager* at Christianstadt in Lower Silesia. Mali was liberated from Auschwitz a few months later.

Moty was sent to work in a coal mine and went on a death march. Six thousand began that march and fifteen hundred survived it. His father, Julius Yechiel, was liberated from Auschwitz in January 1945.

‘After we had been there for about six weeks, we heard through the grapevine that another transport had arrived in C Lager, where we were, filled with girls under sixteen years old,’ Elza continued. ‘My mother knew that our other relatives from Tacovo, Bailu’s family, were also supposed to come to Birkenau. So she begged this same *blockowa* to help find her nieces among these young girls. She had a feeling they were there. They found Eva and Mindu and exchanged them for two other girls in our barrack. You could be whipped to death if you were caught making an exchange. Probably through the same woman, my mother knew all those kids were going to the gas chamber and during the night that’s where they were taken.’

So Auntie Berta found us and took us into her barrack where we found our four cousins, Elza and Lily Ruttner and Uncle Julius’s daughters, Hani and Etu Slomovic. She saved our lives and looked after us all like a mother hen. The two girls we were exchanged for died instead of us. They called Mindu and me ‘the children’ because we were the youngest of the cousins. We were not sent out to work but they called us to *Appel*, roll call, sometimes

ten times a day. During *Appel* we had to stand outside in rows of five for hours at a time, both when it was hot and freezing cold. If one person was missing they punished us by leaving us standing there in the sun or the rain until the count was exact.

It was a big camp and between each barrack was a big open place where *Appels* were held. Outside the barracks was a kind of street we used to go to the communal toilets, so we could leave the barrack buildings though not for long and we could not go far.

We spent about six or eight months in Birkenau and throughout that time we were always talking, putting our heads together about what we could do to get out of that place. They held selections every day, for work and for the gas. Young girls were selected to go and work in private German enterprises, so that was one way of leaving the camp.

The routine was that everyone had to get undressed and Mengele looked each person over and made his decision. If he didn’t think the person was useful they went straight to the gas chamber. We were desperate to get selected for a labor camp but there was a big question mark for us because of Auntie Berta. Her body was older than ours. Even though she was still young, her naked body showed that she had had five children. We were not scared for ourselves because we were all so young and beautiful. The main thing was we didn’t want to be

separated from Auntie Berta, so we decided she would go first and we would follow her where she was sent.

We had been through many *Appels* but we were only ever in one selection. We all walked past Mengele – and we were all selected for work! We got dressed again and had such a celebration because now we could get out of Auschwitz-Birkenau!

There were about one thousand of us, all women. We were loaded onto cattle trucks but the train had hardly gone any distance when it stopped and we were unloaded. Never at any time did you ever know where you were going or what was happening.

They set us down outside the Birkenau crematorium. A woman working in that block as a *Stubendienst*, a dormitory supervisor, suddenly recognized Auntie Berta. It turns out they were second cousins. She didn't know Elza and Lily, just Auntie Berta. This woman had been taken to Auschwitz from Belgium and had been there for about three years. I don't know her name.

She was sobbing and telling Auntie Berta that although the plan was that we were to be sent to a munitions factory somewhere else, the railway line near this factory had just been bombed and they couldn't get trains through. This was towards the end of the war. So they were going to get rid of us. What could we do? Nothing. This woman was sobbing and holding her head, but she couldn't do anything either.

A couple of hours later the guards came for us and we undressed again and were led to the gas chamber. The doors were open and we all went inside. It was packed full. The doors were shut and we were all screaming and crying and praying and holding hands, looking up at the ceiling for the gas to come – we knew all about that by then. Next minute the doors opened and the guards were screaming '*Raus, Raus!*' and we were taken outside.

We got dressed and straight away the whole one thousand of us were put into another train and sent away. The *Stubendienst* who knew Auntie Berta found us before we left and explained that the Germans had received a phone call that the railway lines had been fixed and the train could get through, so we were saved.

I think we travelled for about a day, during which we went past the city of Bremen, which was completely flattened by bombs. We could just see it through the tiny window in the cattle truck. It was very hard to date events in camp but it may have been around May 1944. There was no snow on the ground.

The Factory Camp

Our factory camp was in a beautiful big forest in a rural area outside Bremen. I don't remember what it was called, or even if I ever knew. It was like a little village made up of soldiers' barracks. Each of these contained a number of small rooms and we were put into them, about ten of us to a room.

We were given shoes and socks instead of clogs, another dress, underwear and for the first time a proper coat. To identify us as prisoners, they had prepared the coats by swapping one sleeve. So a maroon coat might have a brown sleeve and vice versa. On that odd sleeve was a piece of white cloth with a number on it. Elza's number was 350. Mine was 3050. I will never forget that number.

We were put into army barracks with only six people to one hut and also given one blanket each and a pillow. We never had those things in Auschwitz. I was in the same hut as Mindu and Auntie Berta and the other four were just next door. We were still all together and the soup they served us was thick. But we were lucky – we were not in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the air didn't smell of burning

bodies and we had a chance. When I look back our small camp was like paradise compared with that.

We were separated into two groups of around five hundred each. One group made bombs and the others made aeroplanes. Our family group managed to stay together, Auntie Berta, Elza and Lily, Hani and Etu and Mindu and me. We were all in the same group sent to work on making bombs and we all went home to our barracks together.

Every morning we got up at 4.00 am and had *Appel* for about an hour then at 5.00 am we marched several kilometers to the factory, five hundred of us all together. Sometimes the guards made us sing German songs. But it was a funny thing – whenever the local Germans were working in the fields, and they were people of all ages, they never even turned around to watch us march by. It was as though we were a goods train, something not worth looking at. We were in a very quiet rural area but that's how the Germans didn't know what was going on around them – they didn't want to know.

It was incredible how the Germans had everything so organized. The factories were built underground so there was no sign from the air that they existed. And they were just huge, enormous. The work was really hard labor and we had to carry things from one department to another. Elza was particularly strong and athletic and she got a very bad job. To make the bombs they boiled up this yellow

poison in big kettles and the taller girls were chosen to fill up the shells with this stuff. That might have been picric acid, which was a yellow poison they used in making ammunition at the time. No one was given any masks or protective clothing and many girls had their lungs eaten out by the poison. After a few months their hair went red, their skin turned yellow and some of them went blind. When we finally got back to Czechoslovakia, Elza went into a sanatorium and today she only has one lung.

The shells were all on trolleys we had to take to another department along a passage which was so very long, like Kooyong Road, and then we had to bring back the empty trolleys. The factories were immense. We worked like that from dawn until 6.00 pm every night. The factory ran twenty-four hours a day. Sometimes we were on day shift and sometimes on night shift.

At lunchtime we went up above ground where there was a kitchen and a room with tables and that's where we received our daily supply of food. Besides soup we were also given tea at the factory and in the evening we got black coffee and some cheese. Once a week we were given four thin square slices of bread that had to last the whole week. You had to carry it all the time, otherwise it was stolen. If you put your bread under your pillow, it was stolen while you slept.

Towards the end of the war the Germans didn't have enough fuel and used to rope hundreds of us women

together and make us pull trucks and train carriages. Towards the end we had to do that nearly every day. I remember one day we were pulling trucks in the pouring rain, wearing only our light cotton clothes. All of a sudden a woman from Tacovo went crazy and began screaming: 'God, where are you? If you can look and see us here now, doing this, then you are a prostitute!'

Liberation

One day we heard planes bombing Bremen and we ran outside and took off our clothes and waved them at the sky. But nothing happened. Maybe they didn't see us. People said later that the Allies knew we were there.

We didn't know what was going on, but the Germans knew they were losing the war and they began running away and destroying the evidence of what they had done to us. We were just skin and bones, so why didn't they let us go? But no.

Once again they put us into a train, but for the first time it was an ordinary passenger train, not cattle wagons. Our train was travelling in the direction of Lübeck and the Germans put machine guns at either end of it. The Allies were very much on their tails and from the air they could see this train and the guns, so they bombed it. It was the most terrible thing. Half our girls were killed that day, just before we were liberated. To think they had survived the ghettos and the camps to die in the last moments of the war!

Mindu and I were in the same carriage and Auntie Berta and the others were in the next one. A bomb landed

in our carriage and I remember looking up and seeing that the roof was missing, feeling around for my sister, Mindu, and realizing that she and I were alright. Once again we were incredibly lucky to survive that. Almost no one else in our carriage did. When the Allied forces, I think it was the Americans, found out what had happened they were devastated to realize who was in that train. They thought it was an ammunition train. They knew there was an ammunition factory in the area but they never found it. We used to hear them flying above us looking for it.

We climbed out of the wrecked carriage, rolled down the sides of the high railway track and ran into the fields to hide. Mindu was a very energetic and lively person and I remember her patting herself all over to see if she was still alive. When it was quiet again we began looking for the others and soon we were all safe and together again.

Slowly the SS started to disappear and the *Wehrmacht*, the regular German army, took over the area. They were more decent people than the SS. One *Wehrmacht* soldier came up to Auntie Berta and we knew this particular man as he had been looking after us a little bit in the factory camp near Bremen. He told my aunt: 'I know these are your children. Lübeck is not far away from here and has already been liberated by the Americans. They are catching up. So don't go on any more trains. Just go into Lübeck and you'll be safe.'

But we were so scared we couldn't even listen to that

good advice and once again we went in the trains. As far as I know we were the last transport to be liberated, in late May 1945.

I think we travelled around for another few days in the same region. At one stage we were in a group of about one thousand Jews who were all put onto a boat for about three days. It was a very slow cargo boat, carrying livestock. We ended up in some little fishing village where we slept outside.

Finally, we decided that we will not go on any more trains or transports but will escape. So next time they moved us along we walked very slowly and managed to stay behind. We saw a nearby farm and ran to it. There was a barn where we all hid in the attic, the hayloft.

This farm was not far from a city. We knew the Americans were there, so maybe it was Lübeck. Lily and Mindu decided to sneak into town and find out what was going on. They managed to get there safely and saw American soldiers, who gave them some food and told them to go back to where they were hiding. They also told them to come back into town the next day and they would be able to give them some more news. That went on for about a week, with the girls going into town every day and coming back to us with food. I remember biscuits and chocolate. Then one day the soldiers came to the farm and told us that it was now safe for us to stop hiding.

We were so happy to be free at last. We walked into

the city and went to the organization known as UNRA, the United Nations Refugee Association, where they collected all those who had returned from the camps and put us into places where we could recover a little. We were in a group of about five hundred who were sent to a beautiful place right on the coast, near Haffkrug, north of Lübeck. That place had many beautiful villas, the property of some very rich Germans. Groups of four to ten of us were each given a villa to live in. They were beautifully furnished and ours was just magnificent. The beds too were beautiful and made up with the finest linen. Downstairs were cellars filled with preserves such as peaches, plums – everything! We pulled down the beautiful curtains and made clothes for ourselves by hand. There was also a communal kitchen set up where we were given good food by UNRA.

We were very careful about adjusting to eating good food again, though we suffered from diarrhoea many times. That couldn't be helped because our stomachs had to adjust. Auntie Berta was always telling us to be careful, to eat very slowly.

We spent about two or three months in that place and recovered. That was the idea. We also had to report to UNRA every day and slowly they collected from us all the information about who we were and where we had come from. While we were still there the Red Cross and UNRA compiled lists of who was alive and who was missing

and that's where we learned who had been murdered. We already knew our dear father was dead and that our dear mother and two little brothers had been murdered in Auschwitz.

Eventually they arranged transport to send us back to the countries of our birth and that's how we arrived back in Prague one day, on a bus. We were all still together, Mindu and I, Auntie Berta and her daughters, Elza and Lily, and our cousins Hani and Etu. We had survived.

Auntie Berta's husband, Abraham Ruttner, was murdered in a camp, as were their sons Josef and Mayer. Julius Ruttner survived. Moty's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, as well as the two youngest children in the family, Berta and Josef, were also murdered by the Nazis. Julius Slomovic was liberated from Auschwitz.

Other members of the family, including Margit and Etel, were probably taken to Treblinka or Galicia, as transports constantly left Terezin for those places. What most likely happened to them was that they were made to dig their own graves and were then shot into them. There was a story that Rudolf Hess was present at an early massacre of this kind and a speck of blood flew onto his face. Apparently he turned around and said this was too messy and slow a way to deal with the number of Jews they wanted to eliminate, and put engineers to work on the gas chambers.

When the Germans occupied Prague, my uncles Zoli

and Josl ran away to Belgium and joined the Czech British Legion. The soldiers in the Czech British Legion returned at the end of the war. Josl Slomovic was a furrier with a big business before the war and a real adventurer. Uncle Zoli was a Yeshiva student and very Orthodox. I don't know where else he served in the war but he was awarded one of the highest medals in the British army, the Military Cross, for his bravery in carrying a very badly wounded soldier over his shoulder through a heavily mined area.

On the same day the Germans occupied our country, Uncle Julius walked from Tacovo to Prague, then went home again.

Back in Czechoslovakia

In Prague we went to the UNRA office, where we were given medical examinations.

We were not seriously sick, just undernourished and we soon recovered from that. Well, we recovered physically, but not mentally.

As we were walking along the street in Prague one day, we met a friend of the family who had seen us going to UNRA. This person told us that Auntie Ida was living in a flat in Prague and gave us the address. We went along and found her there with Mali. She was already pregnant with her first child. Blanche was born in 1946 and her brother Tom in 1948, both in Prague.

We already knew who had not come back because there were lists every day saying who had survived, so Auntie Ida and Mali adopted Mindu and me. I wanted to go back to Ruske Pole but Mindu never wanted to see it again.

Thanks to that *blockowa* we had seen Auntie Ida in Auschwitz through an electric fence, but we had only been able to wave to her and could not get close enough to talk to her.

Ida and her friend Lotte had run away from Christianstadt before it was liberated. They walked to

Prague through forests and begged at farms. It took them three weeks. In Prague a non-Jewish friend of Lotte's sent his wife to the country and hid them in his flat for three months. That was very brave of him.

One day there had been a knock on Auntie Ida's door and it was Mali. He had been liberated from Auschwitz and gone immediately to Terezin looking for her. While there he removed two pastel drawings of Ida that hung in the Terezin courthouse. They were done by a well-known artist who had painted the Viennese royal family. One was made when Ida first arrived and the other not long before she left Terezin. They hang in Blanche's house today.

Mali went to the Council and got a wonderful big fully furnished flat that had been the home of a German family. It was on Lodecka Street. Without telling Mali she was already pregnant, Ida went to Tacovo to see who was there and found Julius Yechiel and Moty. She brought Moty back to Prague and his father followed a couple of weeks later. At first the whole family stayed in that flat. Auntie Berta spent six or seven months in bed there while she was ill.

Ida was a truly wonderful woman and ran a communal charity out of her flat. She cooked up huge pots of food and fed everyone who came there, after having gone around to all the neighbouring towns to beg for food. Josl and Zoli used to bring food all the time. Her place was full of people all the time and we slept on the floor.

Auntie Berta, Elza, Lily and their brother Julius went

back to Carlsbad. We stayed in Prague. Uncle Julius Slomovic got a flat nearby with Moty, Hani and Etu. Slowly, we inched back into some kind of normality.

Ida wanted the girls to look nice so they could get married. Lily was the first and Ida and Mali introduced the couple to each other. Moty's sister Etu married a nice man who, sadly, committed suicide. She and her father and Hani went to Israel, where Julius Slomovic died.

While with the Czech British Legion, Uncle Zoli found himself stationed outside Birmingham at Rosh Hashanah. There was quite a large Jewish community in Birmingham and it was a practice that if you saw a strange Jewish soldier in town someone would invite them home for the *Yomtov* dinner. Mr Goldstein must have known what he was doing when he invited Uncle Zoli, because he had three unmarried daughters at home, one of whom was called Hetty. Zoli and Hetty got to know each other and a year or so later they were married. He was extremely tall and she was a tiny woman.

Meanwhile, the situation for Jews in Czechoslovakia was becoming increasingly uncertain under the Soviet communist regime and everyone was on the move once again. Uncle Zoli thought he could help Aunt Ida out by bringing Mindu to England, so in 1948 she left to live with them.

She came into a loving, caring home in England. Her Uncle Zoli and Aunt Hetty gave her back her faith and the courage to get on with life. They had three daughters,

Madeleine, Elizabeth and Helen, and the family was very close. Ida and Mali eventually went to Australia and when they were able to arrange more permits for the family, they wrote to Zoli about Mindu coming out. He replied not to be too much in a hurry about it because Mindu had met a really lovely man and things looked good.

There were many Jewish community organizations in Birmingham after the war and through one of those Mindu met Alan Honig and they married in 1950. They changed their name to Hornick, to be more English. He is a lovely caring man and they have two married daughters, Nicola Foster and Jaqueline Herron. Their two grandchildren are Alexander Alan and Bibianna (Bibi) Foster, who are both at London University.

I didn't see Mindu for twenty-five years until I went over to England to meet her. There was an article in the newspaper about us meeting.

Mindu has helped me write this story for you, Ricky, and she would like to add a little greeting: 'Like so many survivors, it took me over fifty years to be able to confront what happened to me and to share it with others. I do so now because if people like me do not proclaim their experiences for others to hear and reflect on, then future generations will not learn the lessons of what were perhaps the darkest moments in European History.'

I stayed on in Prague with Auntie Ida and Mali. We planned to go to Australia together and had been promised

a permit that included us all, but when it came it was only for Ida, Mali and their two children. So I had to stay on in Prague and wait for them to send me another permit. When they left they sold the lease on the flat to a Czech family on the understanding that I would stay there too, in my own room, until I joined them in Australia. They were very nice to me and I was not much trouble because I ate at my relatives' house nearby.

Mali, Ida, Blanche and Tom sailed out of Genoa for Australia on the *Napoleon* in September 1948. It was a hard life for them when they first arrived here. They had a lot of trouble finding a suitable place to rent. It was easier to find places for single people than for families and they spent months in boarding houses. But Mali was a very good furrier and was soon in work.

After they left I stayed in Prague for a little under a year. It was very hard to travel around as the country was under communism. I went to a school and learned how to sew women's clothing as well as do cutting and designing. I got a job and was able to support myself. Before I left I went to stay with Uncle Josl in Carlsbad, where they fattened me up a bit, because I was sick for a while.

You never saw such a close family as all of us together in Prague, but when we arrived in Australia our circumstances changed and the family broke up.



The building in Prague where Ida and Mali had their flat



Myself in 1947, in the Czech
Tatra Mountain



Myself



Left to right: Blanche, Mindu, Elza and Tommy, in Prague



Left to right:
Myself, Ida and
Mindu, with Mali
and Blanche, in the
flat in Lodecka



Myself with Blanche



Left to right: Auntie Berta, myself, Blanche and Elza



Left to right: Elza, Blanche and myself in Prague



Best friends, Elza and myself in Prague



Blanche and myself in Prague

Myself and Lily in
Carlsbad



Myself with Mindu



Myself with Hani,
Moty's sister, in Prague



Myself and Berta in
Carlsbad



Left to right: Mindu, Josl's wife Vera and myself in Prague

Eight

Australia

Ida and Mali sent me a permit and I came here in 1949, sailing out of Genoa on the *Continental*. I think it was a Flotta Lauro ship.

When I first arrived I lived with Ida and Mali in Parkdale. That was their second address – their first was over a shop in Footscray. As I mentioned, they had problems finding accommodation when they first arrived. The guy who arranged their permit gave them such terrible information about coming to Australia. He told them to get a lift, which is a big cargo box, and put all their furniture and crystal and nice things inside and bring it all with them. So they did what he told them and it cost a fortune. But when they arrived they couldn't even find a room, let alone somewhere to put all this stuff in the lift. They had to hire storage space for that. Auntie Ida was beside herself.

Blanche was two and Tommy about one year old. One day she was sitting in the park with the children and crying because she had so many worries. An elderly lady approached her and asked if she spoke Yiddish. Auntie Ida said she did and they began to talk. The woman

asked her why she was crying and she explained that having received such bad information they had nowhere to live. So this woman said she had a tobacco shop in Footscray with a dwelling and Auntie Ida and her family were welcome to live there and pay just a little rent. That woman's name was Mrs Cooper. She had a son, Max, who had just married Norma. Mrs Cooper was already a widow when we met her and we remained friendly for many years until she passed away as a very old lady.

Mrs Cooper also gave Mali information about who the furriers were in town and introduced him to a man who gave him work finishing furs. Ida and Mali sewed for this man day and night. Soon they were able to sponsor Berta, Elza and Lily to come out to Australia.

The furrier Ida and Mali worked for owned a house in Parkdale he rented out and when it next became vacant he suggested they move in. I moved in as well and Elza visited us once a week, travelling by train, which took an hour.

Meanwhile, Moty was working as a furrier in Tel Aviv but he hated the weather. He went to London for a while until Ida sent him a permit to come to Australia. He stayed with them in the Parkdale house for a time before they moved to their home in East Bentleigh.

Moty married Chava in 1954 and they have two children, Johnny and Helen Slomovic.

Julius Ruttner also came to Australia, but lived in Adelaide, where he married and had two children, Caroline

and Mark. Auntie Berta moved to South Australia to be with them and died there, after which Julius moved to Melbourne, but he and his wife did not live long after that.

I was only in Australia for about six or seven months when I met my husband and he simply swept me off my feet. Nelson Parush was a lovely fellow and everyone liked him. He was so kind he would give you the shirt off his back. Norma and Max Cooper took me to a place where dances were held, the Maison Deluxe in Broadway, Elwood. Elza came too. Nelson came over and asked me to dance. I thought he was very good looking.

Nelson came to Australia from Bialystok just before the war and joined the Australian army. He was not sent overseas but deployed to work on the docks, loading and unloading ships. His uncle, Malke Parush, lived in Melbourne and had sponsored him to come to Australia. Malke had four daughters, Sonia, Bertha, Rosa and Ray, who were already married when Nelson arrived. Uncle Malke wanted a son, so he wrote to Nelson's father about it and they sent him over. They planned to bring out the rest of the family but it was already too late. Both of Nelson's parents were murdered. He also had a brother and a sister, but I do not know their names.

Just six or seven months after we met, Nelson and I were married. I was living in the Parkdale house at the

time. I had a big engagement party somewhere in a hall, with music and dancing.

We married under a *chuppah* in the Carlton synagogue and then had the legal marriage in the registry office. The date was 26 February 1952. I wore a pale blue suit and a pale blue hat and a white blouse. I have a photo of my wedding, which was quite small compared with our engagement party. Only family attended and the ceremony was followed by a luncheon. The wedding was very kosher because my husband worked in kosher poultry in Carlton for his uncle, Malke Parush. Godel Wroby and his brother-in-law later bought that business and expanded it.

We stayed at the Warburton Guest House for our honeymoon and when we returned we lived in half a house in Alma Road, Caulfield, belonging to Jack Kornhauser's father while we waited for a flat to become available. They were very hard to get at that time. Eventually, we got a flat in Denmark Hill Road in Camberwell and our son, Morry, was born in December 1952. We named him after my father. Our daughter, Gilda, was born three years later on 14 July 1955 and named after Nelson's mother.

We lived in that flat for quite a few years; then our landlord put it up for sale and of course we didn't have enough money to buy it. The agent got us another flat in Camberwell but further down Burke Road, near Camberwell Junction.

My cousin Elza was living in an old two-storey house in Kew Junction, which she and her husband, Henry Just, had converted into twelve little bedsitters. Elza ran them as a business, renting them out and cleaning them while she looked after her son Andrew, who was born in 1956.

I stayed at home looking after the children until they went to kindergarten, when I had to go back to work. I did clothing finishing work from home until then. Morry attended a private kindergarten set up by a Czech man. It was a wonderful place called Children's Paradise in a mansion in a beautiful street filled with mansions. It was expensive and very exclusive. The Czech man picked the children up in the morning and dropped them off at their homes in the afternoon. I think he was the first in Melbourne to understand private kindergartens. The children received hot lunches and the staff were just terrific, but it was expensive.

Gilda didn't go to that kindergarten but to another only two doors away from where we lived in Burke Road. By the time she was old enough more people understood the business of looking after small children in crèches and kindergartens.

After the children started school I worked in clothing shops and did that for many years. I enjoyed it very much. There was a dress shop in Toorak Road and another in Collins Street in the city. For a long time I worked for

a Hungarian fellow, a Mr Knop, who owned a shop in Acland Street, St Kilda, selling clothing, knitwear and fabric. I loved selling and was extremely good at it.

I also worked for Mali for a short time. He had a fur factory and a shop, Arctic Furs, at an excellent location in Burke Street in the city.

Ida and Mali's children, Blanche and Tom, grew up with my children. 'We lived in Pascoe Avenue in Bentleigh and I used to love to go to Bailu's house, because my mother was always working,' said Blanche. 'I would have been about ten when Gilda was a baby. Bailu used to let me help look after her and I loved that. She used to come to our house every Saturday afternoon and we'd sit in the garden if it was warm. Sometimes Nelson came too. He was a lovely, funny man who told jokes and made everyone laugh. I remember him falling asleep at *Seder*. He was a very likeable person and Ricky looks a lot like him when he smiles – he has the same Parush cheekbones and Bailu's colouring.

'Bailu was a fastidious housekeeper and you could eat off her floors. I remember that her cupboards were just perfect and we kids had to play outside. She was also a great cook and very fussy about what her children ate. They were always dressed immaculately. I used to love going there because Bailu was glamorous, always beautifully presented, with long strawberry blonde hair. She was a fantastic dressmaker and made all her own

clothes. I think she also made my baby clothes.

‘Bailu was a super saleswoman and never without work. She bought everything in that house with her own money and was very stoic, putting things on lay-by and slowly paying them off. She loved Nelson, but he was not good with money. Bailu has lovely taste in things – she still has and buys lovely clothes for the children, even today.

‘When I look back at my childhood I see that my parents were very proud of speaking Yiddish and defiantly Jewish. Eva still speaks all those languages she learned as a child. My parents spoke to each other in Yiddish and in Hungarian if they didn’t want us to understand. Sometimes they broke out into Czech, and when my mother spoke with her sister Rosi in Israel it was in German, because she doesn’t speak Yiddish,’ said Blanche

Blanche married Aaron Zaitman in 1967 and they had two daughters, Lani and Dina. Her brother Tommy married Goldie and they had three children, Joel, Oren and Ellie. Tommy then married Brenda and they had another son, Josh.

Nelson continued working in the poultry shop in Carlton and when it was sold he stayed on with the new owners for a while. When he left them he started up a business selling car seat covers from stalls in three markets: Victoria Market, Dandenong Market and the South Melbourne

Market. The markets all operated on different days, so on Tuesday he was in Dandenong; on Wednesday, South Melbourne; and on Thursday, Friday and Saturday he was at his stall in Victoria Market. After a few years I stopped doing the sales work and began working with Nelson in the markets. That proved to be a very profitable business.

When the children were old enough they went to Mount Scopus College, starting in their preparatory years. It was expensive and I worked to pay their fees. Morry matriculated from Mount Scopus, then spent two years studying accountancy at RMIT. Then he gave up that course because he didn’t like it. He wanted to work for himself and set up a business selling leather goods in the Victoria Market, wallets and purses and such things. He is still there and has done very well.

When he was twenty-seven Morry got married. However, he and his wife divorced after four or five years. They had no children. He has not remarried and says he does not intend to.

Gilda had very good, strong, thick, auburn-coloured hair, just like my mother’s. Her eyes were grayish blue. She cried a lot as a baby and was not an easy sleeper and from when she was a small child she had a temper. Gilda did well at school. She left Mt Scopus in Grade Four and went to live with my sister in England for six months. Mindu had two girls around the same age as Gilda. When

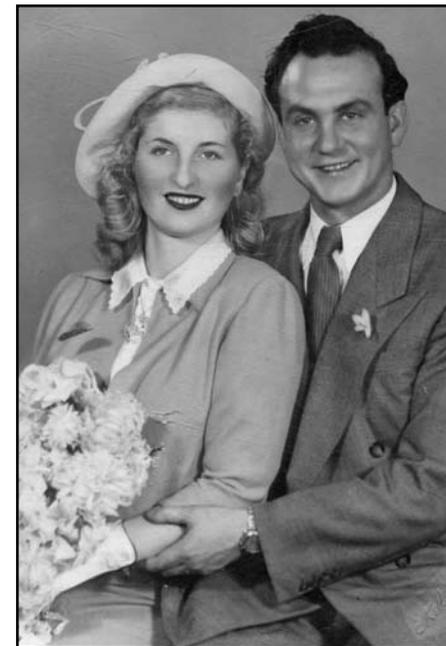
she returned she attended Elwood Primary School, then Elwood High School. By that time we were living at 21 Mitford Street, St Kilda.

Gilda was a talented and clever girl who always spoke her mind. She had a great personality and was very outgoing, friendly and gregarious and had a range of really wonderful talents. She was a singer, a ballet dancer, excelled at ice-skating and playing the piano. She completed Fifth Grade piano examinations at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. We had a piano at home for her and it was very nice when she played it. Then she gave it up. She had so many talents but she didn't know how to use them. Morry started violin but he gave it up, he didn't like it. He was never any trouble.

Everyone decided it would be for the best if Gilda became a secretary, so she went to Stotts Business College, where she came first in the state in shorthand. Of course, that was before there were computers and when secretaries who were good at shorthand were very highly regarded. But she could never settle down. Her nature was unstable and underneath her outgoing manner was great vulnerability. She was very self-conscious about her weight and her appearance, even though she was beautiful.



My husband, Nelson Parush



Our wedding day, 26 February 1952



Myself on right holding Morry, with a relative of Nelson's holding her baby



Gilda at kindergarten



Elza's wedding to Henry Just, with her mother Berta on the left and myself on the right



Alan and Mindu's engagement



Uncle Zoli and Aunt Hetty at Mindu's wedding



Alan and Mindu's wedding, 1950



Gilda and Mindu in England

Nine

Ricky

Gilda was good at anything she wanted to do. She was a clever girl and good looking too, but she was not a happy person and married for the first time when she was only nineteen.

She had a really nice wedding, not like me. There was a reception for about one hundred and twenty people in a beautiful hall. Her first husband was an Israeli and they were married for three or four years, but had no children. He was not of good character and he did not treat her well. She was very young and inexperienced and tried to leave him many times. When she finally escaped from him she was a very different girl and her confidence was shattered. Her problem was nerves. No matter what happened, she was a very unhappy person. She turned to help, but to the wrong kind of help. She turned to drugs. Then she met her second husband, another Israeli. He was a very mild, gentle person and a few years younger than Gilda, but that marriage lasted less than a year.

Gilda was not happy and was often unwell. In hospital she met John Nievaart, an Australian of Dutch origin. They spent about five years living together in a unit John

was renting. They had been together for about three years when Ricky was born. He has three half-brothers, Mark, Laurie and Kevin, with whom he maintains contact. After Ricky was born, John and Gilda's relationship went okay for twelve months, but they began fighting on and off – she would leave and then go back to him.

Ricky looked exactly like Gilda when he was born on 9 July 1993. He was a peaceful, easy baby and I spent a lot of time with him and Gilda, every spare moment. They were living in a flat in a block of units beside McKinnon High School in McKinnon Road. Nelson died in April 1989 and I was living in my own flat in Irving Avenue, Windsor. I had a car so I could get around.

Gilda was always taking Ricky for lovely walks and reading him stories. She was a very devoted mother and always worrying for him. She had always felt she was an outsider but with a child all her own I thought she would become a different person.

Ricky loved keys – he was always picking up everyone's keys and carrying them around and I can't tell you how many times he lost the car keys because he was playing with them. He loved shoeboxes too. He'd take all my shoes out of their boxes and just play with the boxes.

Hannah Brandt is a very good friend of mine. Once she was with me in the car when we picked Ricky up from the kindergarten near Gilda's. He jumped into the car and said: 'Can I call you Hannah?' Hannah loved

Gilda and Ricky too, from the day he was born.

Ricky was a very active child, as well as outspoken and courageous. He always said exactly what he wanted to say and you couldn't get him to back down because he had real willpower. He is a bright and spirited child, a leader. He led all the other children, even when he was four years old. He sensed that he had weak people around him and became protective of them.

My niece Blanche remembers Gilda as a really caring mother. 'She was always talking about the things he did and Ricky used to come over to my house and play with the keys and open cupboards and doors. Gilda had a very nice way with him and was always very gentle and patient with him. The last time I saw her was at St John of God Hospital in Brighton. She was very sick,' said Blanche.

When Ricky was four years and two months old, Gilda died, on 10 September 1997. She was just forty-two years old. That was a terrible time for all of us.

Lani Castan takes up the story: 'I knew about Gilda's drug problems and her constant struggle to overcome them. I met Ricky when he came to our wedding. Gilda brought him over to my place for dinner. John's youngest son, Kevin, who was about twelve years old, came too. I remember Ricky sleeping on my bed. Gilda was trying to reestablish family ties, which had been badly broken and I wanted to help her. That dinner was the first and really

the only social occasion we had together as family. The idea was right but tragically, it came too late.

'I went over to Gilda's house in McKinnon about six months before she died. She was really good and managing well, though she was so emotional and worried constantly. Ricky was really cute, happy and cheeky. Gilda just adored him and everything he did interested her.

'The morning Gilda died everyone went around to her apartment and so did I. Oren called early in the morning to tell me the terrible news. Eva was there at the time and other relatives. Ricky was just sitting on the floor and I had a very vivid vision that I was going to have him. I thought: I am going to be looking after that boy. He is going to be my son. Little did I know that I would never sleep in again – well, not for many years.'

The next day Lani and Steven Castan came to visit me, and Ricky was with me. Lani saw him and asked if she and Steve could take him with them for a coffee. They didn't have any children of their own at that time. So they went off and when they returned I asked her how Ricky had been and she said he was just beautifully behaved and asked me if he could come and sleep over at her place. I said yes, if he wants to. Ricky said he did want to. He could make up his mind at the age of four with no hesitation. During that time he spent one night at my nephew Tommy's house. Tommy had a little boy, Josh, who was around the same age.

Then I had to go into hospital and Lani said she'd keep him until I came out. While he was there, the Jewish Welfare rang Lani. They were very friendly and wanted to see if they could help in any way. Lani went to see their social worker, who asked about her family and very quickly got a picture that she and Steve would be great parents for Ricky.

Lani rang her mother, Blanche, who was in Israel at the time and said she and Steve had been chatting and were thinking of keeping Ricky permanently. 'They had only been married about a year. I nearly fell off my chair and spoke about the responsibility,' said Blanche.

'We spoke to Steve's dad, Ron Castan, and asked him what he thought,' said Lani. 'He told us it was our decision but added that if we decided to do it, it would be the best decision of our lives.'

Lani went around to Gilda's and picked up Ricky's clothes and that was that. Steven and Lani became his mum and dad.

Gilda is buried in the Chevra Kadisha's cemetery at Springvale. Her grave is three graves away from Nelson's and when we bought his plot we bought one for me beside him, so we will all be together.

Ricky is still a very strong-minded child. When he was eight he decided he wanted to come and see me. Lani wouldn't let him go because she was too busy that day. He carried on and Lani got really mad at him and told

him to get in the car and she'd take him. He got in the car and threw a huge tantrum, so she gave him a dollar and put him out on Alma Road. She thought he would follow her but he walked all the way to Windsor, crossed Dandenong Road on his own, knocked at my door but no one was home. So he bought himself something to eat with the dollar, went to the phone box and dialed 000. He told the operator he was lost, that his Nanna wasn't home and he didn't know where to go.

By that time Steven and Lani were beside themselves. They didn't know where he was. Eva answered the door to a knock and there were the police, looking for Ricky. By this time he'd already started walking home and Steven picked him up along the way. Lani was just home from hospital with Ricky's new brother, Remy.

Ricky now has two brothers. Remy was born in 2002 and Milan in 2005.

Lani and Steven have sent Ricky to King David School since Prep and his name is now Ricky Nelson Parush Castan.

In 2006 Ida is aged ninety-five and still lives in Melbourne, as do Moty and Elza. Anci and Shoshanna live in Tel Aviv. Josl is ninety-two and lives with his wife, Vera, in Vancouver, Canada. They have two adult children: Peter is married to Ruth and they have two children; and Susan married Nadjib and they have one child.

I live in the Classic Apartments, a beautiful retirement community in East Brighton. Ricky has always been a very loving grandchild to me. He shows me constantly that he cares for me. For example, he calls me on the telephone all the time and tells me what I should do, what is best for me. He will really argue with me about important things.



Gilda at work



Myself with Gilda
as a bride



John Nievaart and Gilda



Ricky



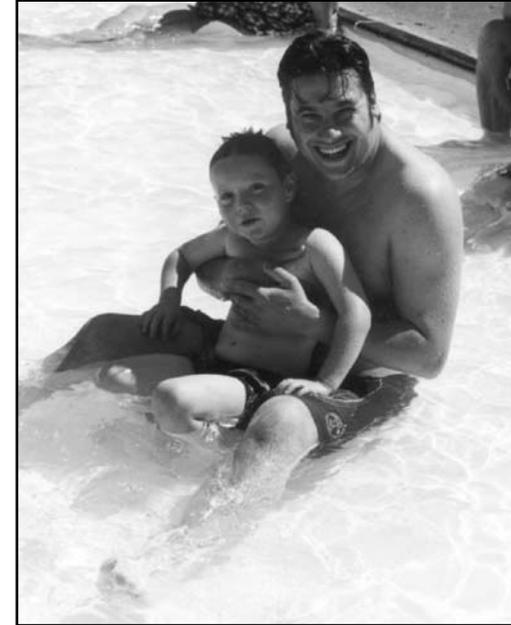
Gilda and Ricky



Left to right: Myself, Gilda holding Roslyn Eldar's baby, Elza, Ida



Myself and Milan Castan



Steve Castan holding Ricky



Lani arriving at her wedding to Steve Castan
with her father, Aaron Zaitman



Ricky at far right, with Castan cousins



Mindu with her daughters, Jaqueline and Nicola



Ricky and his father, John Nievaart



Back left to right: Laura Eldar, Roslyn Eldar and David Eldar
Front left to right: Alexander Foster, Bibianna Herron and
Dina Zaitman



Ricky starting school at King David School



Ida and myself



Morry Parush



Ida and myself with Ida's dear neighbours, Freda and Johnny,
at 38 Pascoe Avenue Bently



The Castan family



Left to right: Oren and Danielle holding Emily, Tom and Brenda, Josh stands in front of Joel, Lani holding Milan, Ricky is in front of Alan, Blanche, Ellie.
Seated: Ida, myself and Steven holding Remy