
My Father's Testament

Memoir of a Jewish Teenager, 1938–1945

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ONE MORNING in the fall of 1938, I was called to the railroad station of our city in Poland, Sosnowiec, to help some unfortunate Jews who had been forced to cross the border from Germany. Upon reaching the station, I saw a horrible scene: a mass of humanity prostrated on a cold cement floor, without food or blankets; hungry children screaming and searching for their parents; infants crying; some men and women in shock searching for their spouses and other loved ones; grandmothers and grandfathers staring with confused and glazed eyes, their faces caked with blood. They had obviously been beaten and were completely disoriented.

Without notice, Nazi Germany had rounded up German Jewish people of Polish descent; confiscated their homes, apartments, businesses, and all their possessions; and forced them to leave Germany. Polish authorities, who were not known for having warm affection toward Jews, refused their entry. Many of the German Jews had neither been born in Poland nor had ever seen that country. But Poland's weak political situation gave the Polish government no choice but to accept the expellees from Germany. The Polish authorities dumped the people near border cities that already had a Jewish population, assuming that the Jewish communities would help care for the unfortunate people.

Since Sosnowiec was near the German border, it was one of the cities to receive the expellees. For many, Poland was a strange country whose language, customs, and culture they did not know. We brought food and blankets and administered first aid to the people. We helped them by doing all kind of errands, including urging our parents to put a roof over their heads.

I asked my parents also to take in some of these fellow Jews. It was a custom in our family that on Sabbath eve my father would bring home from the synagogue a guest to dine with us, what we called an *Orech* for Sabbath. We would refer to him as a guest, though in reality he was a homeless person or a poor Jew who could not make it home in time for the Sabbath. For Orthodox Jews it is very important not to let a homeless or poor Jew go hungry on this day. The Torah specifies that the Sabbath is sanctified as a holy day of rest, to be observed with joy and delight. Thus, in spite of our large family, we were accustomed of having strangers in our home. So on this day, my parents picked a childless, middle-aged couple from among the people at the railroad station to stay temporarily with us. Our crowded apartment became their home.

Mr. and Mrs. Blatt were secular Jews from Germany, reserved, cultured, a very quiet couple. They spoke only German. In the beginning they more or less kept to themselves and spoke very little. I think they did not want to raise the noise level in our place. But they seemed to enjoy conversing with my father. It seemed strange to them when, at times, my father prayed at home instead of going to the *shtibl*, his small neighborhood prayer chapel.

Mr. Blatt, though born Jewish, had never seen Jewish men putting on a *tallis* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries) for the daily morning prayers. He became inquisitive. Instead of asking my father, he sometimes found it easier to turn to me, a little boy of twelve years of age. I believed that he was embarrassed to approach an adult because he knew so little about Judaism. He asked me all kinds of questions in regard to religious customs and practices. Once he wanted to know what those black leather boxes on the center forehead and left arm were about. "Is it some kind of superstition to ward off evil spirits?" he asked. I knew the answer

but preferred that my father respond. The following morning Mr. Blatt wanted me to help him put on my father's *tefillin*. I was not certain whether he did this out of religious conviction or out of respect for my father. Since we were a devout Hasidic family, traditional Judaism and prayers were our way of life.

The Blatt family immensely enjoyed Sabbath because it was a special day in our home. The moment my mother and my sisters lit the Sabbath candles, our apartment detached itself from earthly realities. The entire place became transformed, ascending to heaven, and was bathed in an aura of illuminated holiness and sweetness that seemed so real one could almost touch it. My mother and my father changed entirely, inwardly as well as outwardly. They had about them a Sabbath look or, better, a Sabbath face that radiated happiness, goodness, and kindness. God's commandment "Thou shall keep the Sabbath holy" was observed in a pleasant and meaningful way. It was a day of rest, a day the family spent together, sharing magnificent, special meals. Between courses we sang hymns—songs of joy and happiness and of giving thanks to God.

On Sabbath eve and the next morning, Mr. Blatt and I accompanied my father to the *shtibl* for prayers. It was my privilege to carry my father's *tallis* and prayer books. Although our city had an *eruv*, a demarcation by an overhead wire that symbolically enclosed the neighborhood so that Hasidic Jews would be allowed to carry special items on Sabbath, it was an honor for the youngest child, as long as he was under the age of thirteen, to carry his father's prayer shawl and prayer books.

Every Sabbath, my father arose early in the morning to study Torah. He would review with me certain segments from the weekly Torah portion, ask me questions, and then teach me the more difficult passages as well as the rabbinical commentaries. I always felt that my father was a superior teacher. He had a way of simplifying the most complicated texts. He made me understand the subjects better than any of my other Talmudic teachers.

Every Saturday afternoon I went to Reb Israel Shmul, who tested me on what I had learned in the *yeshiva* (Talmudic school) during the previous week. Reb Israel Shmul lived a short distance

away from us. He always had a very unpleasant and sad look on his face, and I felt very uncomfortable in his presence. I was somehow scared of him. He had dark, big, sleepy eyes and a thick black beard. He hardly ever spoke to me and kept yawning. When I greeted him with a "Good Sabbath," he would acknowledge me only by nodding his head, but he never replied.

One day I took up all my courage and confided to my father that I would rather not visit Reb Israel Shmul. I told him that he seemed unfriendly and that he hardly ever spoke to me. Only then did my father explain the reason: Reb Israel Shmul did not speak to me because he did not want to profane the holy day of Sabbath by speaking to me in Yiddish, the language of every day. "On Sabbath," my father said, "we should speak only the holy language. Therefore, he doesn't converse with you."

On Saturdays when we ushered in the new Jewish month, *Rosh Hodesh*, my father accompanied me to the *Bet ha-Midrash Hagadol*, the great house of studies. There the young students sat down on long tables and benches facing the *Baal Batim*, the scholarly men, grilling us on what seemed an endless series of difficult Talmudic questions. I always studied hard to receive the monthly prize. Father would be sitting in the front row, scrutinizing my replies, and listening with pride and joy. He would pinch my cheek, a mark of affection and approval. I observed God's laws and was anxious to study Torah.

When Sabbath departed, we were always a little sad. It was a beautiful day of rest for the body and spiritual nourishment for the soul. Sabbath made us forget all of our daily problems, and we felt closer to God.

The way we lived our Judaism was a great revelation for the Blatts. They learned to appreciate and love Sabbath fully. Mr. Blatt even regretted that his father had never taught him the meaning and the observances of Judaism. Slowly, the Blatts became an integral part of our family. But they were clinging to the belief that they would soon be able to return to their home in Germany. Mr. Blatt was a decorated veteran of the First World War and an assimilated Jew, a dedicated German national who firmly believed