

LIFE UNDER THE SOVIETS

The Second World War

The rhythm of life in Rozhishch was to change drastically, and within a very short period of time. At the end of August 1939 all the carefully nurtured plans and hopes were cruelly nipped in the bud with the black clouds of war descending over all Europe. On September first Hitler's troops invaded Poland. Confusion and the fear of what lay ahead increased steadily. The state of war continued two weeks and then the Government of Poland fell.

In the second half of September 1939 the Red Army crossed the western Ukrainian border to the banks of the Bug, which marked the boundary between German-occupied Poland and the western Ukraine, which was then annexed to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. Life under the Soviets took on a completely different aura.



THE SOVIETS ARRIVE IN ROZHISHCH

As told by **Daniel Golombka**

In the summer of 1939 rumour was that war was about to break out. One day a few of us gathered in Geller's cafeteria to listen to the news on the radio, there being no radio sets in private homes. We heard Hitler's hysterics as he threatened disaster to all who stood in his way. He referred particularly to the Jews (die Juden, die Juden) as being responsible for everything.

The following Friday the market place was crowded with Gentiles who had come from the villages. The news came that war had broken out. All the farmers immediately dispersed; trenches were dug inside the market. That evening the President of Poland and the Polish Chief of Staff broadcast over the radio, declaring that Poland would never give an inch and calling for courage.

On Sunday, masses of Jewish refugees started arriving from Warsaw and western Poland. The town was bombed by the Germans,

one bomb falling on the railway station. Many people left their homes to seek safety in the villages. My mother took some food and the Shabbat candlesticks and we made our way to the village of Tschuben where we stayed with a Gentile lady.

The communist youth had packed their things planning to proceed towards the Russian border. In the middle of the night the rumour spread that the Russians were coming. We all returned to our homes. The immediate danger had passed.

The following morning found the communist youth, Jews and Ukrainians, rejoicing in the streets. We, members of Betar, immediately went to the clubhouse to burn the membership registry and destroy other documentation which may prove to be incriminating.

The communists set up a militia of local youth. They enthusiastically decided to form a guard of honour to welcome the Red Army, decorating the square with pictures of Stalin and the communist greats and bringing the fire brigade orchestra. But instead of the victorious Red Army, a train arrived bearing a load of Polish troops who apparently had not heard of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement. The newly-formed militia enthusiastically set out to capture the Polish troops. Shooting and general chaos followed with all those in the vicinity taking cover, including those who had gathered to welcome the Reds. The Soviets assured us that under their regime there would be equality for all, that they did not differentiate between Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, etc. They issued an order to open the shops and to trade as usual. The Soviets, themselves, buying everything they could lay their hands on and in short order emptying the stores. Many merchants then started hiding some goods because it was possible to obtain food from the peasants only in exchange for goods. Soon the police started conducting searches for hidden goods. They were aided by locals who had been communists still in the days of the Poles, and who had been forced to work for the secret police. When concealed goods were found, public trials were held and the sentence was deportation to Siberia. This sentence had a very depressing effect on the town because Siberia was synonymous with hard labour and death from cold and starvation.

Among those sentenced were Yankele (Shuster) Greenboim's sons, Haim and Motel, Aharon Tepper and his brother Wolf. After great efforts on the part of Lazer Shapira, Wolf Tepper's sentence was squashed. But fate would have otherwise — Aharon Tepper and Haim and Motel Greenboim who were sent to Siberia, survived the war, whereas Wolf Tepper who remained in Rozhishch, perished together with all the Jews of the town at the hands of the Nazis.

One day I was ordered to come to the police station. I was told that it was known that I had belonged to the "Zionist-Fascist" Betar. I replied that I had, but that now times were different and I was a-political. I was pressured to join the secret police, but managed to get out of that.



Daniel Golombka and wife.

Those who in the past had been Zionists, members of Hehalutz or Betar, were disturbed from time to time. We were awakened in the middle of the night to do snow removal or other similar hard physical labour. This situation lasted for about two months until the Soviets sent people from Russia to take over the civil municipal administration and these latter removed the locals from positions of authority.

I received an identity card classifying me as a merchant, an unpardonable sin under a communist regime. This made it impossible for me to obtain work, and suffering lay in store for me. But salvation came from an unexpected direction. As I had been an excellent football player, I was asked to play on the local football team...

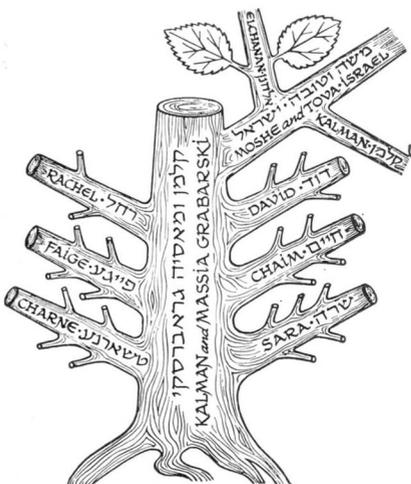
I later received a call-up notice together with many youths. I served in a unit of the Soviet Liaison Corps. While I was serving in Lutsk, the war between Russia and Germany broke out. Although we had been ordered to proceed to the front, a confused retreat ensued and the officer in charge told us we were free to fend for ourselves. The Ukrainian soldiers in the unit happily took off for their homes. I rejoined the unit in the Korosten woods until the receipt of Stalin's order dismissing all the troops from the territories annexed under the Ribentrop-Molotov agreement from the Red Army. We were sent to forced labour camps near Saratov where we did extremely difficult physical labour and were given terrible food. We literally starved, Hershel Katz dying of hunger there. Later we were sent to Omsk in Siberia.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Moshe Grabarski

On May 4, 1941 the Soviets took most of the Rozhishch youth for 90 days military training and physical labour. I was sent with a building unit to the village of Uzhovo where an airfield was being built. The work was hard and the conditions extremely difficult. During this period the war broke out unexpectedly, and the confusion and disorder were great.

Together with several officers, I ran away in the direction of Rovno eventually making my way to Zhitomir. Then the order from Stalin came dismissing all the residents of the western frontier region of the USSR, including those from Volhynia, from the army because they were considered to be untrustworthy, many of the Ukrainians having defected to the Germans who had promised them independence. We were sent to work, always under difficult conditions and in dangerous locations. We were under the command of an antisemitic Ukrainian officer who led us to the work site. We had to walk forty kilometers to work each day. We were sent from one location to the other, some being extremely remote.



The Kalman Grabarski Family Tree. Only one of the family survived, to build his home in Israel.

Eventually word reached us that a Polish army was mobilizing and that there was an enlistment office in Saratov. I, Moshe Klimbrod, Hershel Shneider, and others ran away from our work village, without certificates and without money. We were fortunate to find a high ranking Jewish officer who assisted us. We succeeded in reaching Saratov where there were many Polish refugees returning from Siberia. It was here that we joined the Polish army.

We trained and served in the army, all the time suffering the antisemitism of the Poles. We served with Anders' army in Iran, Iraq and later in Eretz Israel, from where we were to prepare to be sent to the Italian front. But having so long suffered discrimination, humiliation and degradation, we decided to leave the Polish army and to remain. We were finally able to breathe the air of freedom.

IN THE SOVIET PERIOD

Zvi Roiter

The Soviets classified my parents as "bourgeoisie" which signified expulsion to Siberia. Through great effort and bribery, this sentence was cancelled. I started to study at the Russian school, but was not accepted into the "Pioneers", the communist youth movement, because of my father's background. In school we received military training along with our studies.

During that period many Jewish refugees who had escaped from Central Poland arrived in Rozhishch. The local Jews received them well and helped them in obtaining work, housing and certificates. Five people from one family lived in our home. They were superior shoemakers, opened a workshop and received residence rights. From time to time rumours would reach us of the Nazi treatment of the Polish Jews.

With the German invasion, the Russians started a confused retreat. Many refugees, as well as townspeople started fleeing to Russia.

A Russian pilot was living in our home at the time. He offered to take us all to Russia in his plane. We decided to escape with him. Our bundles were already packed. But, at the last minute, Mother changed her mind. She did not want to leave behind the fruits of an entire lifetime. We brothers refused to leave without her. My brothers, Haim and Leibel, were conscripted into the Red Army, but returned after a short while, because their units had broken up because of the lack of order and discipline.

THE SOVIET PERIOD IN THE SURROUNDING VILLAGES

told by **Pnina Korn** from Berezelup.

The reception of the "liberating" Russians in September 1939 was festive and jubilant on the part of the poor and of the proletariat;



Zvi Roiter (standing) during a reception at Beth Rozhishch.

whereas the rich received them with reservations, wondering what awaited them under a Bolshevik regime.

Within a short period, hundreds of officials and party workers started arriving from Russia, setting up all the administrative mechanism with the assistance of the local communists.

We tried to live our lives as usual. An order was issued to sell the goods in our store at pre-war prices and for Polish currency. All the stock disappeared almost immediately.

At that time there was large traffic of Jewish refugees who had escaped from the cities captured by the Nazis, and from time to time my father would bring some refugees home with him on his return from one of his visits to Rozhishch. In our home we had no food problem. We still had some left over from our farm, and mother would cook large quantities of food as she had been used to doing in the days when all the family would come home to the village on vacation. The atmosphere in our home was good. Two of the refugee boys staying with us even managed to bring their fiancées over from across the border and to marry in our village. And so they continued to live with us until the authorities started taking too great an interest in their activities and in their identity cards. They were forced to move on to another location.

After the Russians had dug into the cities, they started realizing their policies in the fields of economics and agriculture. Tens of workers were sent to the villages in order to organize Kolhozes. The farmers' land, as well as our fields and those of grandfather were quickly transferred to the communal ownership of the Kolhoz. The family was left with only a vegetable patch. Grandfather's large home was expropriated and the village council offices set up there. He and his family were allocated cramped living quarters.

The adult petit bourgeois generation suffered much from the Russians. On the other hand, for the young generation, new perspectives were opened in acquiring education and professions. The government financed studies, which I even managed to continue. And so two years passed, without anything special happening.

This different, inconvenient, but not unendurable way of life continued until June 1941 when the Germans attacked the Russian army and marched into the western Ukraine.



Pnina Korn with mother.

