

The Lisogurski Family
by Daughter Chana
Lisogurski Broder
Polish Displaced People
and Holocaust Survivors



The Death of Heniek Krinski

My cousin Sidney phoned from Montreal to let me know that Heniek Krinski had passed away in Poland. Heniek's parents were the saintly people who hid our family on their farm in Morze during the Holocaust. Heniek was then a young man in his early twenties. His sister Krysza was thirteen years old, and I was four and a half.

We had escaped from Ghetto Semiatich on the night of Nov. 2, 1942. Our neighbor Mr. Rosenzweig was the chairman of the Yudenrat, the committee of Jews that the Germans had appointed to help them keep order in the Jewish community. After swearing them to secrecy, because his very life depended on it, he confided to my parents that the ghetto was to be liquidated early the next morning, and that all the Jews were to be sent to Treblinka, the nearest concentration camp. Many Jews from this area had already been sent there, but none had ever returned. No one knew exactly what their fate had been, but rumors were circulating that the Germans were lying when they said that Treblinka was a work camp. There were a few people who claimed that they had heard from reliable sources that Jews were systematically being exterminated at Treblinka. Many Jews refused to believe these rumors, arguing that civilized people like the Germans could not possibly engage in genocide, and that, furthermore, an enlightened world in the twentieth century would not allow such an atrocity to occur. My parents believed.

So we were among a group of Jews who snipped the barbed wire fence surrounding the ghetto in the middle of the night and fled into the Polish countryside. Some were shot by the Nazi guards almost immediately. Some managed to escape for quite a distance, and were then picked off by Nazi snipers or ran into a Nazi patrol and were killed instantly. Some lucky few succeeded in reaching the farmhouses that were scattered over the region, where the Nazis could not patrol so frequently. Of these Jews, many returned to the doomed town after two or three days, in utter despair, because no one would open a door for them or give them a drink of water or a bite of food.

My parents took turns carrying me on their backs. They each wore several layers of clothing because the night was cold, and because they

did not want to carry parcels. They wanted to have their hands free for any eventuality. The sweat streamed down their bodies as they tried to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the town, and at the same time, not to lose each other in the chaos of that night.

My Auntie Henia and Uncle Sruleh and my beloved cousin Shieleh also escaped the ghetto that night and so did my maternal grandparents. Unfortunately, we became separated, and my grandfather was shot to death in the morning. My grandmother had a bullet wound in her arm, but she survived. After several days, all the surviving members of our family reconnected, including my Uncle Shieh. His wife, however, had refused to go into hiding, and she and their two daughters went to Treblinka with all the other Jews of the town.

My mother, Rachel, had grown up in the village of Grodzisk, a few kilometers from Semiatich. She and her siblings knew many of the farmers in the area. Their parents had owned a general store and an inn, where the local farmers came to buy and to drink. My grandfather often gave credit to the poor farmers until their harvest was sold, and he was well liked by his neighbors. My Uncle Shieh had started trading goods for himself at the age of fourteen, and he also had many acquaintances in the countryside. Their hope was that one of these farmers would agree to hide us from the Germans.

We spent a night in one farmer's barn, a few days in another's attic. Winter arrived and it was too cold now to sleep out of doors. Eventually, after weeks of wandering from place to place, we found a farmer named Klemens who was willing to hide us in the loft of his barn on a permanent basis. It was clear to the adults, however, that he was not going to do this only for humanitarian reasons. Rather, he was very impressed by the things they had promised to give him -- the black suit which my father had worn to his wedding, sheets and tablecloths, and other items to which a poor farmer could never aspire.

We spent the whole winter there, in the relative warmth of the straw in the loft of Klemens's barn. Under the loft, there were separate pens where the cows, sheep, pigs and horses were kept. Once a day, Mrs. Klemens or one of her children would bring us food. We would save some bread for the next morning. Uncle Shieh did not stay with us, but he came to visit every now and then, bringing goods to give to Klemens. He looked out for our welfare. I remember my mother saying in later years, that without Shieh, we would not have survived.

One day, we all froze in fear as the barn door opened and we heard voices speaking German. We were sure that this was the end, but nothing happened. The Germans spoke with Klemens for what seemed

like an eternity, and finally left. Klemens came back to the barn, on the verge of hysteria. The Germans had taken five of his fattest pigs, he said. But that was nothing compared to the panic he had felt. He told us that we could not stay with him any longer, that he would not be able to live through a similar experience again.

Uncle Shieh began to look for another hiding place for the family. It was decided that we should split up, that it would be easier to find two places for three or four people each. After much pleading, promising and bargaining, two new hiding places were found. My parents, myself and my grandmother moved to Krinsky's farm, and my aunt, uncle and cousin went into the woods until they found another family of farmers that agreed to hide them.

At Krinski's farm, a real bunker was dug under the barn. It was supported by wooden boards and lined with straw for warmth and 'comfort'. The hole was covered with earth and then with straw, so no one could detect it. The entrance was a trap door which could only be opened from the inside, and it led to an adjacent woodshed. Pieces of cut firewood were nailed to the trapdoor in order to camouflage it.

I was just able to stand up in the bunker; the adults had to sit all the time. There was not enough room for all of them to stretch out at night, so they slept leaning against the walls of the bunker. We used a lantern for light, and only at night did we go out for a few minutes to relieve ourselves and to stretch our cramped muscles. Mr. and Mrs. Krinski had a son of twenty-two, Heniek, and a daughter of thirteen, Krysza, who lived with them. Their married daughter, who lived in the village some distance away, was never told about the Jews that her parents were hiding. They were afraid that her husband might betray us. The farmer or his wife brought us food once a day. When Mr. Krinski milked the cows in the evening, he always brought me a cup of fresh milk.

It was much safer than our former hiding place had been, but also much more confining. I missed my cousin Shieleh, with whom I used to play. I also missed seeing the animals in Klemens's barn and just the sight of daylight.

One day, Mr. Krinski came to warn us that there were 'boys' from the National Army on his property, searching for Jews. The National Army was a Polish organization whose aim it was to 'purify' Poland of all foreign elements. They resisted the Nazis, but it was much easier to turn their energies against the few remaining Jews, so that Poland would be rid of them by the time it was liberated from the Germans. They would ferret out and kill Jews who were hiding and punish the Poles who were harboring them.

Krinski was shaking with fear when he came to warn us and ran off quickly. Perhaps someone in the village had become suspicious and tipped off these thugs -- a neighbor who was jealous of the new clothes the Krinskis occasionally wore, a friend of their son's who may have overheard something or received a confidence in the tavern. There were many possibilities, but the cause didn't matter any more. We in the bunker were bracing ourselves for the moment when the trapdoor would be forcefully opened and we would be discovered. I remember that my father took out his pocketwatch and buried it in the straw. 'For Krinsky,' he murmured. He blew out the lantern and we sat in total darkness, holding hands silently and waiting for death. I always remembered the unique fear I felt during those long moments as something different from anything I had experienced either before or after this event.

After an eternity of waiting in the dark, the trapdoor was pushed open. My heart jumped. This was it! But no, it was only Mr. Krinski, who had come to tell us that the hooligans had left. In his great agitation on his earlier visit, he had not closed the trapdoor properly, and so he was able to open it from the outside. Krinski was bruised and injured. He had been beaten, many items of relative value had been taken from his house, but he had not divulged our common secret.

My parents feared that the Krinskis would now ask us to leave, but to our surprise and joy, they were ready for us to continue staying with them, even though our presence put their very lives in danger. Mrs. Krinski was a very devout woman, and she believed that protecting us was her Christian duty. Mr. Krinski read the newspapers and reported to us that the Germans were suffering defeat after defeat, and that the front was coming nearer and nearer, so the war would soon be over. We remained with the Krinskis until the Russian army liberated us in July 1944.

My parents soon realized that we could no longer remain in Poland. The Jewish survivors were not welcomed by their Gentile neighbors, who had meanwhile moved into their homes and grabbed their property. There were also too many ghosts of those who had perished. After several years of wandering and waiting, our family immigrated to Canada, and settled in Montreal.

My parents arrived in Canada with nothing. They worked hard, spent very little and managed to save a little money. Eventually they bought a small house and many years later, a bigger one.

My mother corresponded with Mrs. Krinski and sent them parcels of clothing whenever she could. Mrs. Krinski reported that Krysza got

married. Heniek, however, drank, ran around with women and did not settle down. Eventually, both of the elder Krinskis died. Heniek continued the correspondence with my mother until one day, he wrote her that they must stop writing to each other because it was causing him trouble. It was never clear to us whether the trouble was from the Communist government of Poland or from his friends and neighbors. Perhaps both.

In 1972, my husband and I and our children came on aliya. My cousin Shieleh, who had become Sidney, remained in Montreal. His mother, my Auntie Henia, had never lost contact with the family that had hidden them. When my aunt passed away, Sidney continued the correspondence.

In 1997 he informed me that he was planning a trip to Poland and asked whether I was interested in joining him. My first reaction was that I never wanted to set foot on that cursed land again. Eventually, however, I began to realize that I did not remember anything of our town; I had been too young. Sidney was seven years older than me and he remembered where we had lived and how things had looked. If I ever changed my mind, there would be no one to show me all these things. So after much hesitation, I decided to go. In the end, we were a group of ten people - my cousin, his wife and son, myself, my husband and our son, and a few other cousins. Before our trip, I tried to locate Heniek Krinski, but to no avail.

We visited Semiatich and Sidney pointed out to all of us where his family had lived and where my parents had lived, a few doors away on the same street. We visited the cemetery where the only remaining grave was the mass grave in which our grandfather was buried, along with all the Jews who had been murdered running away from the ghetto.

Our next stop was at Zigmund Krinski's house in the village of Krinki. He was the one whose family had hidden Sidney and his parents. They knew that we were coming and they received us warmly. Zigmund beamed at the sight of Sidney. They had been young boys who had worked and played together. He was now living in the same house where his parents had lived, and they showed us the various hiding places they had used and the barn where the wheat had been threshed and the well from which they still draw water. It was all very emotional and we all cried, including our Polish guide. His wife had prepared a big lunch for us on her wood-fed stove, which we really enjoyed.

When we asked Zigmund if he knew where we could find Heniek Krinski, he said that he was back in the village of Morze after having been away for many years. Stashek, his son, went with us to the village of Morze to

show us the house where Heniek lived. At first, Zigmund was going to go with us, but his son advised him against it. Having hidden Jews during the war is not considered a badge of honour among these people, and they still keep it a secret. It creates bad feelings and jealousy among neighbours, even after so years.

An elderly man came out of the house.

Sidney said to him in Polish, 'Are you Henryk Krinski?'

He said, 'Yes.'

Sidney asked, 'Do you remember a family named Lisogurski?'

He said, 'Yes.'

Sidney asked, 'How do you know them?'

'They were here. Rachela Lisogurski.'

Sidney pointed at me and said, 'This is Rachela's daughter.'

Heniek and I hugged and kissed each other. I introduced him to my husband and son. The cameras and video cameras were rolling and the tears were flowing. Heniek told us that his parents' house and the barn under which we had been hidden had been about a kilometer away and no longer existed. He had moved in with his widowed sister when his house fell apart. The house they were living in at the time was very small and extremely bare. I don't think they had electricity. His younger sister Krysza, who was a few years older than me, had died. I had not believed there was any chance of my meeting Heniek, so this whole experience was very gratifying and extremely emotional for me.

When we returned to Israel, I could not correspond with him because I no longer know any Polish and he knew only Polish. Once a year before Christmas, I would send him a sum of money and I would ask someone to write him a letter in my name. Then I would receive a letter from him, thanking me for the money which, he said, was a great help to him because he was living only on his meager government pension. I had to ask an acquaintance to translate the letter for me. Occasionally, he would send me a card for Christmas or for Easter.

And now Heniek had died. Of all the characters who took part in that drama in the village of Morze, only I am left. My grandmother died a few months after our liberation, even before the war ended. Heniek's parents died many years ago, and his younger sister Krysza is also dead. My

father died in 1982 and my mother in 1998. Now that Heniek has died, in his 80's, only I am left.

Heniek never married, even though he was reputed to have had many women. He has no children. Who will mourn him? His sisters' children? I couldn't help shedding a few tears. Were they for Heniek? For all those others who had died before him? All I know is that it is the end of a chapter.

Chana Lisogurski Broder
Tel Aviv, April 2005