

The Bug (prologue)

"Collect as much as you can. After the war they'll be able to investigate."

- Emanuel Ringelblum, historian

When giving the pigs their daily feed, the farmer's wife threw her families' scraps down by the trough in the barn. Through a small opening in the floor the food landed among five hungry people in hiding.

No one would think to look for Jews under the pigsty, her husband thought. He turned out to be right. Three of them survived the war, although upon liberation they bore little resemblance to the people who had knocked on his door three years earlier.

A human being can barely survive on a few leftovers once a day, and spending whole days crouching down is devastating to body and soul. The two who didn't make it had briefly left the hiding place in the village of Godlewo Wielkie to pick up some things they'd hidden near their own house. They were probably collecting them in the hope of buying more food from the farmer, or of protecting themselves better from the rats, the frost, the rainwater or the stench of the pigs' excrement. They didn't survive their excursion.

The farmhouse is still standing. It now serves as a shed in the garden of a more modern house. Decades of sun and rain have weathered the wood to mousy grey. Plaster flakes off the new farmhouse, about 16 yards away, revealing a few large, sloppily cemented bricks.

The shed points to a distant past, the farmhouse to a future that has also become past. It's effectively a miniature apartment block, square, with a flat roof, two floors and two identical little balconies. A satellite dish completes the picture. The balconies are so small they could only possibly serve to keep refuse sacks outside. *Kostka PRL-owskas* is the term the Poles use for these little farmhouses, or communist blocks, miniature versions of the apartment blocks that sprung up in the large cities under the Polish People's Republic (PRL), the so-called *bloki*.

For four years I lived in a city full of those apartment blocks, in Warsaw, Poland's capital. In my search for people and places from this gripping historical narrative, I travelled east, time and again, generally along the Bug River. During those excursions I tried to unsee those miniature apartment blocks, because one of the scarce certainties from the story I was chasing is the timeframe: it took place before 1946, in a time without apartment block farmhouses.

So there in the garden around 60 miles from Warsaw, I focus on the wooden shed, which functioned as the farmhouse during the war. From there I look for the pigsty, which must have been behind or beside it.

Those in hiding dug the hole along with the farmer and his young son in the summer of 1941, shortly after the Germans had also taken this part of Poland. The farmer, his son and those in hiding dug down almost six feet underground. It took them two days.

I can't find the spot where the pigsty stood. Unfortunately the current owner of the block farmhouse shows little interest in helping look for it. It strikes him as a strange story. He keeps on repeating that he never knew the owner from the 1940s, until I'm tired of hearing it. "I'm new here." He arrived in the 1950s.

I have a Polish friend with me to interpret. On the way back to Warsaw she asks me how the history of the farmhouse as a hiding place is relevant to the book I'm writing. I stammer a couple of answers, amounting to the fact that the Polish Jews who hid with the farmer came from Czyżewo. The little town is now called Czyżewo-Osada and was once the *shtetl* where the mother of my main protagonist and her parents came from. The farm in Godlewo Wielkie is four miles to the south. Moreover, I tell her, this story is about Jewish Poles who tried to survive in the Polish countryside, something my main character also tried to do for a few months.

My Polish friend smiles. If you're going to go down that route, she says, you might as well continue travelling. She calculates: in Czyżewo, 85 percent of the population was Jewish, which amounts to a couple of thousand people. Are all their attempts at survival relevant to my book? She continues: in 1939 Poland there were around three and a half million Jewish citizens, of

whom more than 250,000 attempted to hide in the countryside. "Do you want to know all their stories to evaluate that of your main character?"

The main character she's talking about is a lady in a suburb of Amsterdam who grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in a district of Warsaw that would later come to form the heart of the ghetto, a kind of public prison designed by the German occupier. She was the only member of her family to survive the war, not by living among pigs, but by passing as someone else, with different names and life stories, in a time when your identity determined whether you lived or died.

My Polish friend and I fall silent. I pretend to be particularly interested in the dozens if not hundreds of billboards we drive past. Often they separate the road and a dry ditch from low grassland and small, recently planted pine forests. The world between Czyżewo and Warsaw is fairly monotonous. "Do we still need to go to Wrocław, to speak to Czesław Cholewicki?" my Polish friend asks cautiously.

This guy Cholewicki is the son of the farming couple who hid people among their pigs in Godlewo Wielkie. After the war he moved to the west of the country, to a region that had previously been part of Germany and became part of Poland after the war.

Curiosity wins out over good sense. A few of days later, after another couple of hours in the car, we find ourselves sitting on the couch in a stone house in a farming village near Wrocław. There the 88-year-old Cholewicki tells us the story as he remembers it. He and his father dug a hole under the pigsty, placing two trees and heaps of twigs and mud over the top to make a new floor. The people in hiding got a bit of air through the adjoining doghouse and were allowed out briefly at night to stretch their legs. His father had taught the dog to take no notice of the people hiding there. The farmhouse was fortunately isolated on the edge of the woods so that the neighbors' dogs didn't immediately get worked up about every noise or movement. As for the eventual fate of the people who hid there, the man keeps it brief. The two who went searching for their things were found by his father a couple of days later in the woods, murdered. It's unlikely that Germans did that. There weren't that many of them in the area and no bullets had been used. "Germans were known for murdering with bullets, not with clubs or pitchforks."

The remaining three stayed where they were until two days after the liberation, in the spring of 1944. After that they returned to their plundered houses in Czyżewo, which, unlike the larger houses on the central square, had not been taken over by Catholic Poles. News of their return spread like wildfire. A group of armed Poles came by, in search of money, gold, or other valuables. "The thinking was that Jews who had survived everything must be very rich," Cholewicki told us. "But these people had nothing."

The armed Poles murdered the father, mother and daughter who had lived for two years in the hole beneath the pigs. Then they set off for the farmhouse in Godlewo Wielkie. The Cholewickis' dog announced their arrival. The young Czesław fled through the back door and hid in the bushes. From there he heard the Poles lay into his father.

"Where's the Jews' gold?!"

"Where've you hidden it?"

The men found nothing. "They beat Father so hard he couldn't get up." A couple of days later he died of his wounds.

My Polish friend is right, it's a digression, one of many. And yet that excursion was relevant, I feel. Not only because its depressing cruelty is illustrative of all digressions anyone might stumble across when travelling in time to the east of Berlin, but also because it was in conversation with Cholewicki that I first realized that I had been chasing an illusion. For a long time I had been trying to erase everything, the apartment block farmhouses, the billboards, the restaurants built as castles, the hundreds of traffic circles named after Pope John Paul II, the mint-green paint that residents of rural Poland so love to use on their plastered houses. By eliminating them from my mind I hoped to return to a time before 1946, to better be able to describe the world of my main character. But after yet another sad story I realized that I was looking for a backdrop that probably never was, a fixed vision, a fairytale world full of colorful settlements, surrounded by magnificent, hilly landscapes, leafy, green, with calm flowing streams, singing birds and swaying grain. Where life was plain and simple, yet filled with a rich sense of community.

This story was a kind of final push, because contrary to my expectations, a realization had already long dawned that the absence of those billboards, apartment blocks, and rainy traffic circles would not conjure up that idealized world. I understood that eighty years ago it was also flat and wet here, nasty and cold, the people capable of terrifying ruthlessness, as they are everywhere, the poverty ugly and mean. It was with good reason that the little town of Czyżewo had a pair of people smugglers before the war, two men who, for a price, would enable you to emigrate to America, Canada or Argentina, or if necessary, simply to Germany or Czechoslovakia.

These people smugglers lived in Czyżewo alongside three egg merchants, a few roofers, bricklayers, peddlers, butchers and bakers, a watchmaker, two carpenters, a milliner, a smith and dozens of *Luftmenschen*, residents who depended on charity. In fact, organized aid was the only source of income for one in five Jewish Poles, a 1939 report explains.

Journalist Rafael F. Schard, who survived the war as a correspondent in London, was to dedicate himself in later life fulltime to spreading the knowledge of the Jewish world of his youth. In doing so, it was important, he said in countless lectures, to 'steer a straight course between nostalgia and reality.' Yes, he wrote, the three-million-plus Jews in prewar Poland formed the "largest, most vibrant and most creative branch of the Jewish people." They were "a spring from which there flowed a contribution to the literary, musical and scientific legacy of mankind, in disciplines as varied as Talmud studies and modern science." At the same time the Germans' crime was so great that it is impossible to exaggerate it by idealizing the past. Moreover, that idealization is an obstacle to knowledge of the historical reality.

That insight improved the conversations I conducted with the main character of this book, Mala Rivka Kizel, whose survival story guided me through the twentieth-century history of Central Europe. She is now named Marilka Schlafer. Place of residence: Amstelveen, The Netherlands. Born: February 1926 in Warsaw, the sixth in a family of eight children.

Mala is Mrs. Schlafer to me. I have visited her several times in her cozy yellow-brick terraced house in a district somewhere between the Bosbaan rowing lake and the river Amstel. She welcomes guests at a round table with cookies and coffee. On the wall are framed photos,

recent pictures of her children and grandchildren and of herself with friends from the local bridge club of Nieuwer Amstel. They stand around her smiling while a cheerful-looking Mrs. Schlafer holds up a silver trophy.

Mala is the daughter of Ester Doba Saper and Sender Itzhak Kizel. She outlines her childhood in colors and brushstrokes that don't belong in the dreamlike paintings of Marc Chagall, in which Jewish shtetl residents hover above colorful wooden houses, here and there a violin tucked under an arm, encircled by mythical, even laughing animals. Mala loved her parents. She mourned them and continues to do so, almost eighty years after they were killed, although she is also forthright in stating that her parents paid little attention to her, a girl. "It would have been better if I had been a boy." Her mother also had an infectious disease, probably tuberculosis, so they weren't allowed to go too close to her. When her mother was doing better, she was busy working in a toy shop she ran. "I didn't often see her," Mala tells me. "As far as I recall she once kissed my leg in passing, while tying my shoelace."

Her father devoted his life to studying the Torah and educating young Talmud scholars, all boys of course. "My father felt that you shouldn't really look at girls, not even your own sister. He made sure my brothers knew that, as of course they were meant to follow the precepts of their faith." The birth of boys was extensively celebrated, with gifts and treats. That of a girl passed in silence. "Father never so much as hugged me or patted me on the head."

Mala isn't tall, and neither slim nor stout, more robust. Waves of neat white hair crown a sharp, alert face. With surprising lightheartedness she tells me about events that expose the deepest abysses of human nature. I'd really never come across such things in papers or conferences about the holocaust. At the same time she's not trivializing anything: her survival story is about these deepest abysses. The editorial articles about what is now termed identity politics pale in comparison, or in any case take on a different color, as Mala's story is about that just that: the obsession with nation, state, race and identity.

I already knew the abridged version of her war history, through her grandson, an old friend of mine named Amir Swaab. We'd lost touch, but one day, I saw him sitting at a piano in Warsaw. A professional pianist, he was accompanying a Dutch cabaret performer who was singing songs about the life of posh people in Het Gooi, a well-to-do Dutch suburb, to an audience of Dutch expats in the Polish capital. Amir is a man with rebellious curls and a sensitive face, regularly lit up by a charming smile suggestive of a lightheartedness which cannot easily be explained from his fairly contemplative personality. After the performance he told me this wasn't his first time in Warsaw. His great grandmother was buried in the Jewish cemetery and he had already once gone in search of her grave. We decided to go there together the following day.

The cemetery, one of the few physical remains of the Jewish community in Warsaw, is vast. We found the grave. Amir, who spent some time living in Israel, read the Hebrew text on the gravestone stating that his great grandmother died in 1934. Her daughter, Amir's grandmother Mala, was just a young girl then. That sunny day Amir told me how that girl had survived the war. The story has gripped me ever since.

In the months and years that followed, I rarely succeeded in telling it coherently. I got lost in the details, because they seem to add so much value to a story which is as improbable as it is true. It's precisely the details that show how survival is an intense form of growing up, with all the chameleon-like skills that resilient teenagers acquire along the way and that prove to be a requirement in a life outside one's own group. For Mala grew up in a world dominated by people who, however different they were, all believed in the malignant nature of entire communities, in ethically decreed characteristics that can be ranked according to a hierarchy of background, nationality and race.

After that day with Amir in Warsaw, Mala told me her life story over a few sessions at her home. At that point she had also written it down as a memoir with the title *How I Survived The War*. I transcribed the recordings of our interviews and, with both memoir and transcripts in hand, embarked on a journey through time, looking for towns, villages, people, and buildings that appeared in her story and consulting documents, books and witness reports to fill in the gaps. That journey kept on raising new questions. I put them to Mala, either in person in Amstelveen or

by email, because Mala is a 90-something-year-old who responds immediately. Usually the answers were repetitive, memories she'd told me before.

Slowly it dawned on me that Mala couldn't pull additional facts out of a hat. As time went on I learned to bother her less frequently. I would have to make do with what she had told me, her notes, and what I discovered, in archives, books and interviews.

In Poland I learned something more. People really can disappear into history. More than elsewhere, in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine, entire families, small villages and communities were carried away on the current of time. Historian Timothy Snyder had good reasons for giving his book about the Second World War in Central and Eastern Europe the title *Bloodlands*. Soldiers and citizens perished in their millions, through murder, hunger, disease and exhaustion. One-sixth of the citizens of Poland didn't survive the violence in the eight years that followed. That percentage is the greatest sacrifice a country made in the Second World War. Further hundreds of thousands, if not millions, fled or were deported. An ethnic redistribution of unprecedented proportions took place. The ruins and mass graves in the region between Berlin, Minsk, and Kiev formed a blank slate on which totalitarian leaders attempted to construct a new, "pure" world. So just try and find the old world.

Mala's school is an illustrative example. She called it "the most beautiful in Poland" and even remembered the name of the street where it stood. Sounds like an easy enough task. Nevertheless, it took me weeks and I had to consult various experts before I managed to find the school. That is to say, before I set eyes on the first evidence of its existence. Not a single stone of the building itself had occupied that spot for 75 years.

Let me give another example. In what is now Ukraine and until 1939 had been Poland, I sought out the little church where a priest gave Mala a baptism certificate. "You don't want to be baptized," he'd said to Mala. "You want to survive," and he gave her the certificate of a country girl whose name Mala still remembers. Not that that helped either. The archives of the churches in the area didn't survive the violence or the political upheaval. I sent letters to the diocese of Lviv, visited an abbey near the church, and attended an appointment with the ecclesiastical archives in Warsaw: nothing brought me any closer to the priest who had helped Mala.

The fact that I kept on trying is probably down to my training in journalism, where the prevailing mantra is that one source is no better than none. So I kept travelling, yearning for contemporary confirmation of this story from the distant past.

Fortunately I also had resources to turn to close to home, at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which grew to be the epicenter of this research into Mala's life. It's a rather miraculous institute, established after the finding of two milk cans and a couple of tin boxes a few feet underground, beneath the ruins of what had once been the ghetto. The historian Emanuel Ringelblum had hidden them in spring 1943 under the cellars of residential houses. Ringelblum knew that the complete physical destruction of the ghetto was coming, as he was aware of the plans of the final inhabitants to start a desperate rebellion with the few weapons they could get their hands on: the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

The papers in the milk cans and boxes included texts and statistics, which Ringelblum and his staff had written and collected from the imposition of the ghetto. Their aim was to gather as much information as possible about the final breath of the Jewish community in Poland and particularly in Warsaw. Ringelblum's team consisted of around fifty to sixty historians, writers, journalists and a few untrained volunteers. They collected German propaganda posters, children's drawings, food stamps, injunctions, concert notices, diary excerpts, even candy wrappers and tram tickets. They had doctors draw up reports on the effects of hunger in the ghetto, they themselves wrote reports on the decline in all its facets and they succeeded in finding out how the extermination camps Treblinka and Chel̓mno functioned; anything to prevent historians in the future having to make do with the reports of the culprits, collaborators and observers. The enormous intensity of labor and diversity of material was inspired by Ringelblum's view of history. He had also worked as a social worker and journalist and was well aware of the coloring and distortion every chronicler gives to their own description. "In order to achieve objectivity and present as accurate and complete a picture of the war events in Jewish life as possible," he wrote, "we have attempted to have the same incident described by as many people as we could. Comparing the various reports enables the historian to ascertain the historical truth, the actual course of events."

Three of Ringleblum's team survived the war. One of them helped look for the material, the "archive" under the ruins of the ghetto. In September 1946 the first milk cans emerged from the ground, followed a few years later by a second tranche. A third remains lost. The institute, which was named after Ringelblum, supplemented the 35,000 pages found in the cans and tins over the years with prewar documents that survived the disaster; marriage and birth certificates, Yiddish newspapers, the administration of aid organizations. The Ringelblum Institute also assembled a growing collection of memoirs and provided access to the dozens of digital databases of the most diverse range of organizations worldwide, with thousands of spoken and written survivors' memories. The institute thus enabled me to cast the net wider when Mala said in all honesty, "I don't know," or, "I can't remember," as she often did. She seemed rarely to give in to the temptation to weave stories into her memories that she had heard or read later on. In fact she only did that when I really begged for it, and it never resulted in valuable information. She told me what she remembered. If I wanted to know more, I would have to find it out myself. If I wanted to put her life in its historical context, then by all means—"go ahead"—but I would have to look elsewhere. "I've told you what I remember."

And so I threw myself increasingly often into her world alone, with people who had never known her or had any chance of meeting her. I immersed myself in the circumstances that propelled Mala on an odyssey that went from Warsaw and western Ukraine via cities such as Bremen and Magdeburg, to Łódź, Wałbrzych and the Israeli city of Lod. On my journey through these places I heard about the days that Mala stayed there and found leads to follow up at the Ringelblum Institute, back in Warsaw.

In the car travelling towards the Bug, along the river Brok, I try to justify to my Polish friend my reasons for the detour via Godlewo Wielkie, the search for the illusive pigsty in the yard. I tell her some good examples from other side streams that I've navigated in this investigation of Mala's world, as if to convince my friend that the farmhouse we have just left isn't such a distant branch of the great river of European history that carried my main character along with it. I tell her that the book I'm writing is more than just Mala's survival story: it is also a research report, explaining how I went in search of pieces of the wreckage, or shards of Mala's story, and regularly describe the shore on which I hope to find them washed up.

Before I realized it was best not to go back to Mala in Amstelveen too frequently with new findings, I was surprised by the absence in her house of books, particularly picture books depicting prewar Jewish life in Warsaw. Mala seemed no longer to possess anything to remind her of the period in which she grew up, although she can tell a perfectly lively tale about that time. So I decided to bring her a book of photos from the 1930s as a gift. Such books are immensely popular in Warsaw; the bookstores are full of them.

The photos show the streets around Mala's family home, in a district that was primarily home to Jewish Poles even before the war. They reveal bearded men in black coats with broad hats or fur caps. If you look closely you can see how the *payot*, the characteristic long side-locks in front of their ears, hang down over their beards. Mala and I went in search of photos of Nowolipki Street, where her aunt Surele lived and where, just two houses away, Ringelblum would later hide two milk cans of archive material. We searched for images of Miła Street, where Mala herself lived. We looked for the address on Dzika Street where she found an opening to come and go from the ghetto, the same street where her father was born.

It was a while before it dawned on me that she was showing little enthusiasm for our search. Rediscovering photos of a world that no longer exists is a job for nostalgic types or historians. It wasn't her thing, she was only doing it to please me. She harboured no illusions of an idyllic world in a distant past, such as I had carried along on my first trips east.

Twice she directly asked me, "What are you looking for in that world that no longer exists?" And that institute in Warsaw, what would you want there? What did it matter if they couldn't tell her *precisely* how her brothers and sisters were murdered? Because that was the only thing she really still wanted to know. But that information was nowhere to be found.

Staff at the institute tell me that Mala is not alone in her desire. The issue of the final minutes of family members is the question they are most often asked. "It probably has something to do with the precision and administrative diligence attributed to the Germans," Noam Silberberg of the institute explains. "But that's dreadfully overestimated. Most victims of the Nazis in Poland and further east were murdered without any paper trail." Fortunately, he agrees

with me that one might come up with additional reasons to attempt to rekindle a lost world with more than memories alone. He has his reasons for working for the Ringelblum Institute.

The question remains, how? Well, let me begin in Czyżewo, the shtetl beside the Brok, where Mala's mother Ester lived when she was married off at the start of the twentieth century to Sender Itzhak Kizel. This Sender, or Alexander, was a tall, ginger man, with a long red beard. Due to his height everyone called him "*hoicher* Sender", or "Tall Alexander." After a while in Czyżewo, he took Ester to Warsaw. He may have travelled by donkey, or possibly by the train line that had come to Czyżewo decades earlier, but certainly not by boat, as the river Brok, which connects the shtetl via the Bug and the Wisła to Warsaw and Gdańsk, was unnavigable, and remains so today.

Instead of footnotes:

The opening quote of this prologue, "Collect as much as you can. After the war they'll be able to investigate," is something Emanuel Ringelblum said in 1941. Hersh Wasser, one of the three members of Oyneg Shabbos who survived the war, remembers those words. Oyneg Shabbos means something like "joy of the Sabbath." It's a traditional expression about the way pious Jews spend the Sabbath. It was also the name of the clandestine organization Ringelblum led. After concealing the material, Ringelblum himself was able to go into hiding with his wife and son in the garden of a Catholic family near the ghetto. They hid with a couple of other families in a greenhouse. It wasn't as safe as beneath a pigsty: they were betrayed on 7 March 1944, probably by gardeners or by the owner's aggrieved ex-lover.

Germans executed Ringelblum and his family, along with two non-Jewish Poles who had helped them go into hiding.

The statements by Rafael Scharf that I quote are from long after the war. He also said, "When one mourns the past, no good comes of idealizing it." He said this on 14 July 1991 in Krakow, in a lecture that was part of the summer course, "Tracing the Jewish Heritage in Poland", organized by the Research Center of Jewish History and Culture in Poland. His lecture appeared in Dutch translation in the collection *Wat zullen wij Mirjam veretellen?* (What shall we tell Miriam?, 1994). Scharf's aim was to disseminate as faithful a reflection as possible of the world

of his youth. In his lecture he drew on the "only authentic description" of that world: the Yiddish and Hebrew literature of the 1930s. That literature, he said, was "mercilessly critical." The authors "paint a picture of the precarious circumstances, the poverty, the powerlessness, the oppression, the obscurantism and they strike out robustly against it." The poverty was "terrible and widespread."

The academic Bernard Wasserstein conducted a study, the central thesis of which chimes in with Scharf's plea against idealization. In *On the Eve. The Jews of Europe Before the Second World War* (2012) he claims that the Jewish world on the eve of the holocaust was wrestling with an enormous crisis. It came from outside, he believes, due to growing antisemitism and exclusive nationalism, and at the same time from within, due to secularization, assimilation, demographic disaster and growing poverty. In the same impressive book he gives a wonderful description of the *Luftmenschen*, those of the Jewish community in Poland who owned nothing at all.

Everything Mala said in this prologue and that she will say in the nineteen chapters to come, is take either from her memoirs or from our conversations in her home in Amstelveen.

The Brok

"A mouse that's being hunted by a cat doesn't pause to reflect upon whether the cat is charcoal-colored or black."

- Michał Głowiński, a writer who survived the Warsaw ghetto

The River Brok was unnavigable, but the inhabitants of Czyżewo used it to float tree trunks to the nearby mills, where the wood was sawn into planks. Logging was the first economic activity in Czyżewo that required a system of organization. Later, the residents started producing prayer shawls, white garments the Orthodox Jewish men wear under their black coats. The knotted fringe on these shawls is a constant reminder to the wearer of his religious obligations. Among the Orthodox Jewish community in Eastern Europe, these prayer shawls are still called *tzitzit*, after the knotted fringe.

Because they were popular throughout the Russian realm, the production of these shawls was the first economic activity in Czyżewo that proved profitable. In time, these shawls were also exported to America and Canada. Before long, more than twenty-five percent of all Orthodox people worldwide were sporting *tzitzit* made in Czyżewo.

Around the time that Ester Doba Saper—Mala's mother—was born, thirty families were making a living from *tzitzit*, which could only be produced by men. Before that time—circa 1887—hardship had reigned in Czyżewo, more so than in other shtetls in the region.

"The only thing that set this shtetl apart was its poverty."

That quote comes from Czyżewo's commemorative book, its "Yizkor book." Many villages and cities populated primarily by Jewish people had such a memorial book, especially those that disappeared during the Holocaust. Czyżewo's Yizkor book was published in Tel Aviv fifteen years after the end of the Second World War. It contains remembrances of those residents who survived the war. Poverty also features in Czyżewo's statistics from the beginning of the twentieth century. Files in the provincial archives in the city of Białystok indicate that people were living in the shtetl as early as 1495. A shtetl is nothing more than the Yiddish word for a

settlement with a market, where the majority of the population is Jewish. Everyone in Czyżewo—except for 34 inhabitants—was of the Jewish faith.

The population remained stable for a long time, although families were large and had many children. Inhabitants often left for such cities as Łódź and Warsaw, which were then within the Russian realm, or they went abroad via the port at Danzig. The mortality rate among children was high, and the average age was low. Virtually every severe infection resulted in death. Water from the pump was so filthy it was only suitable for extinguishing the many fires that broke out in the wooden houses whose only light source was candles and petroleum lamps.

Czyżewo was an Orthodox shtetl. All the villagers—barring a handful of exceptions—adhered to the laws of their faith. There were, however, various branches of orthodoxy. At the end of the nineteenth century, a fierce conflict broke out between the followers of Hasidism and those known as the Misnagdim, about the ritual slaughter of livestock. The Hasidim won. Czyżewo's Misnagdim had no choice but to put on a brave face and consume meat they believed had been slaughtered improperly.

Mala's family was Hasidic. Her grandfather was an inspector for the area's religious schools. In Czyżewo, there was also a conflict within the Hasidic community, which involved the followers of a spiritual leader from Ger (or Góra Kalwaria, as it's known in Polish) and another group, known as Aleksanderers, who were followers of a rabbi from Aleksander. The followers of the rabbi from Ger could be identified by their pant legs, which were tucked into their socks. The quarrel led to both groups setting up separate places of worship.

People spoke "Jewish" among themselves, or more accurately, Yiddish. They used makeshift Polish when talking with the police, post-office employees, firemen, and other government workers, and with Catholics, whose number grew to approximately two hundred in the 1930s. The inhabitants also spoke Polish with the farmers from the surrounding area, who visited the village once a week to peddle their agricultural wares in the central marketplace.

Mala's parents married in 1905, first in Warsaw, and then in Czyżewo. Mala thinks her mother's marriage was arranged when she was thirteen. However, there's no record of that on the official marriage certificate. In the national archives in Białystok, the bride's age is listed as eighteen, two years above the minimum marriageable age. The groom, Sender Itzhak Kizel, was 24. The people at the archive told me it's possible an agreement had been made off the record by a matchmaker,

perhaps as early as when Esther was thirteen.

Mala also says that her parents first set eyes on each other at their wedding. Marriage certificates don't contain such details. However, they do reveal the location of the *kest*, the obligation to house the newlyweds temporarily. It was almost always the matchmaker who arranged such things, along with agreements about who brought what to the union: Shabbat candleholders, Menorahs, silver spoons, jewelry, etc. Mala's parents' *kest* took place at the bride's parents, which may explain why Mala's parents stayed so long in Czyżewo before moving to Warsaw. That was just before the First World War. Some would say they left in the nick time, because the *shtetl* was about to undergo a turbulent period.

Following the First World War, the borders of Poland—a country that had been resurrected on the drawing tables of Versailles after a hiatus of 130 years—shifted to include Czyżewo. When the Russian armies retreated, they set countless houses in the village ablaze. A soap factory and four windmills were also destroyed. Then, the volunteer army of Jozef Haller, an anti-Semitic Polish nationalist, arrived. This "blue army" celebrated their victory over the infant Soviet Union (1919 - 1921) by humiliating and even torturing Jewish inhabitants, whom they accused of collaborating with the Bolsheviks. The men were beaten, kicked, had their beards shaved off, and were ordered to carry out senseless tasks, such as lugging livestock from one village to the next. Several of Czyżewo's citizens died beneath the heels of these so-called Hallerists. Soon, the manufacture of *tzitzit* also collapsed, because large swathes of Russian hinterland—a vital outlet for prayer shawls—were closed off by the new geopolitical situation.

The population didn't return to its former size until the 1930s when growing anti-Semitism in neighboring villages drove other Jewish people to Czyżewo. They felt safer together, circling the wagons, to use a metaphor from the Wild West. Those keeping watch, to continue in a western vein, could see various dangers approaching over the horizon. In Czyżewo in 1939, the first real threat came from the Soviets.

That's one largely forgotten aspect of the Second World War, although it's still fresh in Polish minds. The *Wehrmacht* attacked from the west on 1 September 1939, and the Red Army invaded from the east sixteen days later. The two superpowers had agreed on this beforehand in the treaty known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This nonaggression agreement included a secret article, which allowed Stalin and Hitler to carve up Eastern Europe. One half of Poland—

including Warsaw—went to Germany. The east, extending at that time as far as Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine, and containing Czyżewo, was destined for the Soviet Union.

The Germans and Soviets celebrated their victory with a joint military parade in Brest-Litovsk, which formed the new border between Germany and the Soviet Union. In the months that followed, the Red Army transported more than 300,000 inhabitants of the conquered area—especially intellectuals and landowners—deep into the Soviet Union. They chose their victims almost at random. In some towns and villages, the Soviet soldiers simply rounded up everyone who wore glasses—intellectuals, in other words. Or, they inspected peoples' hands: those with soft, refined fingers and manicured nails were transported immediately because they weren't fit for physical labor.

A few of the communists in the region helped the Soviets decide who would be transported, and who would stay. That was the case in Czyżewo, as well, where you could count the communists on the fingers of one hand. Communists were atheists, so why would they live in an Orthodox village? One of them, a large man with a chiseled jaw and close-cropped hair, had been a teacher before the war in the village's only public school. His name was Klar, and he was better known for his atheism than his communism. However, he made his fondness for the dictatorship of the proletariat clear in the early days of the Soviet occupation. He blew the whistle on people who had until recently been his friends, and whose children he had taught. Years later, some survivors, as reported in Czyżewo's book of remembrance, could still recall their disgust. What had possessed him?

The Germans turned up in Czyżewo almost two years after the Soviets. In the course of one summer, Hitler hoped Operation Barbarossa would bring the Soviet Union to its knees. The Wehrmacht stormed through, but they first received a warm welcome from the surrounding areas' Catholic Poles, who had erected an improvised triumphal arch on the western access road to Czyżewo. This turns up in reports written by a member of the Polish resistance. He was traveling at the time in the region around Białystok. The man was an officer in the Armia Krajowa, or "Home Army," the largest branch of the Polish resistance. It had a traditional command structure, and its leaders took orders from the government in exile. In the report he prepared for his superiors, the officer confirmed the government's worst fears: Poles in this region viewed the Germans as liberators. According to the officer, the situation was even worse further to the east,

in Lithuania, where he'd just visited.

The residents of the area around Czyżewo soon lost their initial enthusiasm for the Germans. Like the Soviets who'd preceded them, the Germans simply wanted to wipe the Polish nation off the face of the earth. They forced the locals to contribute to the war machine, either as farmers on land they owned or in the Third Reich's factories further to the west. And yet, during those early days, people expressed relief that the communists were gone. What's more, the area's anti-Semitic Poles had high expectations when it came to how the Germans would deal with Jewish people. Many in the region viewed the Jews as collaborators because, in 1939, a few—including the teacher named Klar, mentioned earlier—had welcomed the Red Army with open arms. The old rumor that Jewish people and Communists were cut from the same cloth had been reignited in the late 1930s by the Polish National Democrats, the "N.D." The Germans only had to fan the flames. The same Armia Krajowa officer reported that, "the animosity towards the Jewish population has grown to the point where the locals can't imagine how the relationship could ever return to normal."

The man reported no remaining Jewish citizens in Czyżewo. Some had fled with the Red Army. Others had "disappeared" on the road between Zaremby and Czyżewo, which runs through an area of lakes and gullies. A later reconstruction suggests that, soon after they arrived, Germans murdered more than two thousand of Czyżewo's inhabitants near Szulborze Wielkie. A group of Polish citizens saw the German soldiers' arrival as the starting whistle for a pogrom, which, with German oversight, soon turned into a massacre.

Historians explain why it is so difficult to get to the bottom of what happened. Reinhard Heydrich, who was then the head of the Reich Main Security Office, had recently issued a command, with the goal of instigating local pogroms without leaving any trace "so that later, local militias or farmers wouldn't be able to say they were acting under orders or some such nonsense."

Cholewicki, the farmer from the neighboring village of Godlewo Wielkie, the one whose son I'd tracked down, walked past a place where he'd heard hours of gun shots days after the Germans arrived. He saw the ground shifting, which he assumed was because of gases escaping from decomposing bodies. "A hellish sight," he would later tell his son. At least two members of Mala's family fell prey to this first gulf of murders, including Fraida Saper, her mother's twin sister.

Can anything be seen today of pre-war Czyżewo? Not really. A few old houses with sloped roofs give some indication of the era before the war, although most are now painted in colors unheard of to residents prior to 1941. Some even have bright blue roof tiles, giving them a Lego-like appearance. Running water didn't arrive until the 1950s; electricity a short time later. The small market square is easy enough to find, but now it's congested with traffic racing to Białystok in the east, or Warsaw in the west. The church is still there, a creamy yellow building broadly towering above the rest. It's also the only structure on the former market square with no billboards on its façade. Ads have even been plastered on a synagogue, one that survived the holocaust. Printed banners hang on its red brick, proclaiming, "Wipasz!" the name of a major meat processing company.

The village also boasts a monument. I found it opposite a blue-painted wooden house that serves as a post office situated on the corner of the former market square. The monument consists of an upright block of granite and displays a copper-colored memorial plaque. The text honors those "Poles who died fighting to regain our country's independence." It refers to the conflict, mentioned earlier, between the nascent Polish Republic and the fledgling Soviet Union. The Poles who died in that conflict weren't from the Czyżewo shtetl. So how did such a monument, erected in 1928, end up in a village whose population was almost entirely Jewish, folks who weren't very concerned about the restoration of Polish independence? One local historian pointed out that, in the region's shtetls, these sorts of monuments are not uncommon. They're trophies representing the anti-Semitic N.D. party's election victories. Jewish citizens were unable to vote because members of the party stood guard—armed with clubs—at the ballot boxes. As soon as members of the N.D. party made it onto the city council of a Jewish village, they erected such a monument, to thumb their noses at the local inhabitants. "Poland for the Poles, that sort of thing."

In 1940, the Soviets took the monument down and buried it, because destroying such a massive object is one hell of a job. But in 1981, the Poles found the thing and re-erected it.

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Mala's father grew up in Dzika, Warsaw, a few blocks south of where Mala spent her childhood. She thinks all of her father's family came from the capital. Her aunts—her father's three sisters—lived in the same neighborhood, in what was then a predominantly Jewish district. But the archives tell a different story. Sender's mother came from Tyszowce and his father from

Krasnobród. These two small towns are close to Zamość, a city some 125 miles east of Krakow, that had been vital to the Jewish community in Eastern Europe for centuries. On 8 July 1864, Mala's grandfather and grandmother got married in Tyszowce. They were both 22 years old, which in those days was relatively old for a bride. Statistics show that more than half of Jewish brides at the time were under 21. In subsequent decades, things altered rapidly, which goes to show that, while the world of Orthodox Jewish people may have seemed timeless, in reality, it was teeming with change.

Even more striking is the surnames on the marriage certificate of Mala's grandparents.

Grandmother: Kizel.

Grandfather: Kiessel.

As was explained to me, this variation in spelling was probably invented by the civil servant in charge. There's reason to believe the spouses were related to one another, which was not in itself uncommon, nor was the tendency of civil servants in such cases to come up with a different spelling. The archivist points to the surnames of the children born to that couple as proof of his hypothesis. In official documents, the children are called Kizel, their mother's documented surname, but most likely their father's name, as well.

"If the parents didn't share the same last name, you'd expect the children to be called Kiessel." It was a while before I grasped his point.

What's more, the archivist finds the language used on Mala's grandparents' marriage certificate even more interesting than the names. "This must be one of the last marriage certificates written in Polish." After another crushing defeat of an armed rebellion, the Russian rulers had—that same year—forbidden the use of Polish in government documents. And sure enough, when the son of these Kizels—Mala's father—got married forty years later, the official on duty composed the document in Russian.

What does this old certificate in Polish tell us? That Mala's grandfather no longer had a father. His mother made a living doing "manual labor" on property owned by a landlord, a member of the powerful Glogowski family, who, until 1944, owned the town of Tyszowce. The marriage certificate notes that this mother was the daughter of a grain merchant. However, the word "merchant" may be an overstatement. He bought grain from neighboring farmers, had it ground in a nearby mill, and then sold the flour to other villagers from his house.

The document finally tells us that there was no notary involved in the union because there

was "not enough property."

Tyszowce, the village where Mala's grandfather was born, wasn't very large, but it was better off than Czyżewo. In addition to its Jewish past, it also had a Polish history going back to the Middle Ages. The town was located on a trade route and was sufficiently attractive to have been thoroughly plundered and sacked on more than one occasion: by the Tartars around 1500, by the Swedes some hundred years later, and twice by the Cossacks. Each time, residents rebuilt it. In the eighteenth century, the town became known for a type of boot produced there, called *Tyszowiaki*, which had a useful quirk: the right and left boots were interchangeable. Jewish life flourished there thanks to a certain Jan Mier, the new owner of both the city and its surroundings, who lured Jewish residents with special privileges. He needed a middle class, traders, and people who could collect taxes owed to him by the region's farmers. The Jewish population was uniquely suited to those tasks. Unlike the Polish serfs, people of the Jewish faith were always able to read, albeit not necessarily in the script used locally. Even in the darkest hours, the "people of the book," kept teaching their children, because a person who could not understand the scriptures independently could not participate in religious life. In other words, you could only be Jewish if you were able to read.

Within the Orthodox Jewish realm, Tyszowce became famous for a scuffle that broke out in 1881. Hasidim hurled accusations at the local rabbi, who was from the Mitnaged branch of Judaism. The townspeople accused him of overcharging for his kosher meat, something the Mitnagdim didn't take lying down. Tensions grew to the point where, a year later, a fight broke out, leaving all the windows in the house of worship shattered. Russian soldiers were called in to restore order. Then the Hasidim tried handing over the rabbi to the Russian authorities. He had helped refusers of military service escape to the Habsburg Empire, just a few miles to the south. The Russians investigated the charge but found no evidence. And so, the Hasidim had to find other means of getting rid of the rabbi, who eventually did disappear, although no one knows exactly how. His position remained vacant for decades. During that time, the parents of Mala's father left Tyszowce. They moved to Warsaw, which was then a large metropolis in the western part of the Russian Empire.

Anyone visiting Tyszowce today will see shoddy brickwork dating from the 1950s, and

apartment-block-style farmhouses built in the 1960s, most adorned with rusty-edged white satellite dishes. The town had to be completely rebuilt following the Second World War, just as it had after the First World War. But this time, there were no Jewish residents. They would never return, even though a handful had survived the Holocaust deep within the Soviet Union. In September 1939, soldiers from the Red Army had offered to take Jewish residents east with them, shortly after they'd annexed the town, and before they handed it over to the Germans, as the two superpowers had agreed. Of the 1300 or so who stayed, Germans executed everyone who wasn't physically strong enough to work in a camp or on the banks of the Huczwa river, which, like the Brok, flowed into the Bug. Until October 1942, these conscripted workers had to reinforce the banks of the river to make it navigable. After that, they were loaded onto wooden carts and transported to Belżec, an extermination camp about 18 miles to the south.

Today, about 350 people live in Tyszowce, less than one-twentieth of the population in 1939. A park now stands on the location of the former town square. The village leader, or *soltys*, asserts that the cemetery remains Tyszowce's most important attraction.

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Mala grew up in a family of eight children. She was number six and just ten months older than her little brother. Another brother, Meir, was born two years later. Their mother died at the age of 47 when Mala was eight. She remembers her confusion: where had her mother gone? After the funeral, she asked everyone why her mother wasn't coming home. "They were all crying, but nobody took me aside to explain what was going on."

Sisters and aunts soon took her mother's place. When you consider the bitter poverty prevalent in Warsaw's Jewish quarter, the Kizels were doing alright from an economic standpoint. They occupied one floor of an apartment building; the daughters slept in one room, the sons in another. They didn't have hot water or a shower; even the toilet was outdoors, but her father could afford two housekeepers. Mala tells me, "the Pole came four days a week, the Jew, two."

These terms require some explanation. It would be more accurate to speak of a Catholic-Polish housekeeper and a Jewish-Polish housekeeper. Still, in Poland in the 1930s, everyone used the terms Jew and Pole, just as Mala did, and the inhabitants of present-day Poland still do. As

journalist Anna Bikont explains, "Here, you are either Polish or Jewish." She has railed against that view, because she sees herself as Jewish *and* Polish, in other words, a Jewish Pole. She has done so since she discovered, in her thirties, that her mother was Jewish. Bikont's mother owes her survival to false documents given to her by a non-Jewish Pole. The two fell in love, got married, and decided to spare their child the stigma of life as a Jew in Poland. Bikont wasn't happy about their decision. Now that she's aware of her background, she wants to stand up and be counted as a Jewish Pole. During a recent census, she discovered just how difficult that could be. "First, I had to answer 'no' when they asked if I was Polish before I could tick the box next to Jewish. You have to choose from a list, including Ukrainian, German, Belarusian, and a few other nationalities. In other words, in Poland, being Jewish is still seen as a nationality."

To get back to the Jewish-Polish and non-Jewish-Polish housekeepers in the Kizel household, whom I shall simply refer to—for the sake of convenience, and in the spirit of those times—as Jewish and Polish. Mala says that her father had more faith in the Polish housekeeper than the Jewish one because the Pole was better versed in the *kashruth*, or Jewish dietary laws. She kept a close eye on the children to make sure they didn't step out of line.

Mala's father ran a school from home. Their address was Miła (pronounced mi-wa) 21. From there, you could see the apartment block at Miła 18, an address famous because the last doomed fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943 fought to the bitter end there, among the barricaded rubble. Almost four years earlier, the street had been reduced to smithereens during the Bombing of Warsaw, a crucial component of the *blitzkrieg*. At least 22,000 people were killed, seventy more than in the attack on Rotterdam and the same number as in the Allies' infamous bombing of Dresden six years later.

Before the bombing, Miła was a street filled with five-story town houses built around a spacious courtyard where children could play among the laundry hanging out to dry. Muranów Square—the market—was at the end of the street.

Mala's father's religious school was called *Grodzisker Klojz*. Grodzisker referred to the rabbi who was her father's spiritual leader. He was from a Hasidic family with roots in Grodzisk, a shtetl not far from the capital. The words *klojz*, or *kloiz*, are Yiddish for a house of learning. In the innumerable Yiddish newspapers that flooded the market in the 1920s and 30s, I only found two items referring to the school. The first explains that four years after his wife's death, Tall Sender was in financial trouble. According to the report, the family was facing eviction and a

forced sale of their household goods. Mala remembers nothing of the incident. A few days later, another newspaper reports that the problems had been resolved—without mentioning how.

Mala does recollect that there was never any peace at home because of her father's school. From sunrise to sunset, the students read aloud, only interrupted from time to time by a lesson from the teacher. Mala vaguely remembers the presence of inspectors—a crucial part of every Jewish educational institution, or *yeshiva*. They made sure the students weren't wasting time or smuggling secular literature—novels or lighter fare—into the school. Of course, newspapers were out of the question. Mala: "Newspapers weren't good for us Orthodox Jews. All we did was pray and pray. That's what I was taught."

There were, however, plenty of books. Noam Silberberg, from the Ringelblum Institute, found Sender Kizel's name in Hebrew books, theological studies whose publication he supported. If enough people got together to raise money for publishing a book, they could "subscribe." The book would only be published if it had enough subscribers, meaning enough money. The donors' names would then be printed in the back of the book. It was crowdfunding before the term existed. Books filled their house from floor to ceiling. Mala can still picture the scene clearly. "Father used a ladder to reach the books he needed."

Unlike in the shtetls, Orthodox parents in the capital found it almost impossible to separate the life they had chosen from the turbulent, changing outside world. Of course, they tried. Fathers and sons battled it out in violent generational conflicts. Some daughters converted, so they could run away with handsome officers, or turn their backs on godly existence to sing, dance, and act in the capital's growing amusement industry. When this happened, some parents would choose to observe a period of official mourning, referred to as "sitting shiva." By making such an immense sacrifice—declaring a rebel daughter dead—they hoped to overcome their shame and restore the natural order. Those lacking the talent for self-delusion could see how futile that was. Everything was in a state of flux.

It was perhaps no paradox that the rise of the N.D.s and their acts of violence against the Jewish population went hand in hand with the emergence of Jewish political parties, cultural clubs, and nightlife. There were a growing number of writers and poets who could freely choose between the three languages available: Hebrew, Yiddish or Polish. In particular, the number of Yiddish publications grew exponentially. The opinions they contained focused on what we would

today refer to as identity politics: who are we? What is our role in society? How should we and others fulfill that destiny?

In articles dating from Mala's youth, it's clear that Jews in Poland had three options available to them: leave, assimilate into the Polish majority culture, or remain. Remain meant being true to who you were, that is, Jewish. Within those three possibilities were all manner of variations. For instance, did assimilation mean letting go of one's beliefs and language, or did it also involve converting to Catholicism? Could a Jewish person reasonably emigrate to America or Germany, or was the Holy Land the only option? And, did staying involve maintaining all the Jewish customs that had evolved on Polish soil through the centuries?

Men like Mala's father didn't have any trouble dealing with such questions. The customs, traditions, and religious beliefs his father had passed on didn't just shape his existence; they gave it meaning. So firm was Tall Sender in his convictions that, when his children decided to live their lives in ways that went against tradition, he didn't even notice. Take the example of Mala's older sister, Mira. Her father wouldn't allow her to go to secondary school, because if a daughter could write in Yiddish, that was more than enough. Women were meant to bear children and look after their husbands. A good wife also provided some satisfaction and happiness within a marriage, but that was a bonus, and not indispensable. Daughter Mira had a different idea. She wanted to further her education. Without Sender's knowledge, she attended a school that fulfilled the requirements for entering university. She earned money to pay for her schooling, sometimes working through the night, operating a machine that applied embroidery to pillows and duvets.

Today, it's hard to imagine how you could pull off a stunt like going to school without your father's knowledge. In this, her gender worked to her advantage. Tall Sender didn't scrutinize his daughters the way he did his sons. As Scharf, our guide to that vanished world, puts it, "parents focused their ambitions on the male children." So it's even more impressive that Azriel, their eldest son, managed to achieve something in the same vein. Tall Sender had hoped that all his sons—Azriel especially, a bright boy—would become rabbis, Talmud scholars further up the religious hierarchy. Sender and Ester had spent a fortune—in Sender's words—dragging the sickly boy from doctor to doctor, even to Vienna and back. What's more, they'd paid a handsome sum to exempt Azriel from military service. But their darling son failed to hear the calling. Instead, he signed up for technical school without telling his parents.

It wasn't Mala's father or mother who unmasked him, but Mala herself. She found the

bundle of civilian clothes her brother wore to go to the school, and she confronted him. She was eleven years old; he was in his early twenties. Her darling brother confessed. It had all started with a part-time job in a factory, he said. He made Mala promise not to tell Father.

Mala agreed willingly. There was enough tension in the family without his father getting wind of this.

Mala has trouble coming up with examples of those family tensions, although there's one minor incident she's never forgotten. One day, Azriel came home with a chocolate cake shaped like the Great Synagogue on Tłomackie Square. "Azriel thought the cake was beautiful, and he expected us to be delighted, and that it would taste good, too. But instead, my parents were peeved. They wondered how they could be expected to eat the synagogue?" No one took so much as a bite of the cake.

Later, Mala remembered another example, involving a red-headed teenager from Czyżewo. The boy's parents had sent him to Tall Sender's from the shtetl, so he could continue his study of the Talmud while improving his deplorable posture. At least, that was their hope. Like many young Hasidim, the boy's physical condition was deplorable. Some explanation is required. The sons of Hasidim got an early start on their education. As soon as they could talk, their mothers began teaching them *berakah*, or blessings. Then they moved to their fathers' laps, and, if the father was a scholar like Sender, he was often at home, bent over his books. That's how a boy would become familiar with the singsong style of study. He would follow his father's example by bobbing his upper body while leafing through the texts. From the age of three, the boy would attend a *cheider*, or kindergarten, exclusively for boys, where the Hebrew alphabet, and first prayers were taught. The boy would then sit in the same position as his father, bent over the same scriptures. There was no time for running or playing outdoors: the child had to spend about ten hours a day studying. According to Scharf, a young Jewish boy from the shtetl would be in the teacher's home from eight in the morning until six in the evening, five days a week—plus a half-day on Friday—in a shabby, musty-smelling room crammed with fifteen or twenty children of various ages.

"Plenty of Hasidim had bent backs from so much sitting and studying, but this boy was in much worse shape," Mala tells me that although he was a teenager, the boy had the posture of an old man. His parents in Czyżewo realized something needed to be done, so they sent the young yeshiva student to cousin Ester's family in the big city. Because didn't her husband, Tall Sender,

have a cousin who taught physical education? Besides, this Sender was deeply religious, so they felt reassured about entrusting their son to him. Sender himself, however, had a trick up his sleeve. He hoped that the religious boy from Czyżewo would pass some of his profound beliefs on to the less pious gym teacher, who happened to be Sender's nephew. Things didn't turn out as expected. It seems the boy was considerably less convinced of God's omnipotence than expected. The gym teacher felt certain he didn't exist. And unlike Tall Sender's sons, the red-haired boy made no effort to hide his inner doubts about the faith. He came home from every session at the gym filled with disturbing questions for Tall Sender. The situation deteriorated; the boy's faith lapsed, and Sender sent a telegram to the family back in Czyżewo. Mala doesn't know what it said exactly. She was, however, an eyewitness to the response from the shtetl. "I can see it like it was yesterday," Mala says. "Suddenly, a large man with a long gray beard loomed in the doorway. He was seething. The boy was sitting at the table. I was doing something else, I forget what. The man strode over to his son, whacked him with flat of his hand, pulled him to his feet, and hauled him away. All without a single word." The father dragged his son back to Czyżewo; they'd have to learn to live with that slumping posture. Mala: "I never saw the boy again."

Mala looks back on the incident with affection; she'd thought the gym teacher was a likable man. His name was David Rosenblatt. Mala had an especially warm bond with his mother, Aunt Surele (Sarah), her father's sister. The fondness was reciprocal. Surele called Mala "Mamele" because Surele's mother had predicted Mala's birth when she was on her deathbed, saying that Mala "would be a girl with my soul." No surprise then, that Mala was named for her paternal grandmother, Mala Rywka (Rivka) Kizel.

Aunt Surele lived at Nowolipki 51a, five blocks away in the direction of the old city center. Mala was a frequent visitor when she was a little girl. Surele took care of her when she came over. "She washed my hair. No one did that at home." Mala couldn't mention these visits, because her family looked down on Surele. Mala's mother couldn't stand her. Surele wasn't raising her children with enough sense of piousness, and worse, she wasn't upfront about it. Mala's mother even instigated a boycott against Aunt Surele, to avoid secularization, which was lurking everywhere.

That was proven by one of Mala's older sisters, who, even more than Surele and her athletic son, forced Mala's parents to face the changing world. This sister, named Sure—not to be confused with Surele—was, like Mala, blond. Like Mala, she spoke fluent Polish without an

accent, which she'd learned at a good Polish school she'd attended without her parents' knowledge, or perhaps thanks to their indifference. She was socially successful and ran her own nursery school. One day she fell in love with Henriek Trager, a man from an assimilated family who didn't speak Yiddish. That's when Father intervened. He locked up his daughter for a month. It was bad enough that she didn't want to marry a Hasid; a non-Orthodox man was unthinkable. But a nonbeliever with no respect for his own culture?

While Sure was locked up, her clients, the mothers of young children, showed up at Tall Sender's door, wanting to know where the nursery school teacher was. Her father didn't dare face them.

Some eighty years later, Mala can't be sure if her father genuinely thought that a month's separation would quell the infatuation. Maybe the punishment was simply a knee-jerk reaction to his powerlessness and panic. Mala does, however, remember Henriek's notes, which she secretly passed to her sister. Mala: "He paid me. After four weeks, my father set Sure free. He said she wouldn't get a penny of her dowry."

But he had lost the battle. Sure's will was steadfast.

A bit of luck came in to play. One of her mother's cousins, an industrialist, had made his fortune in Berlin. In the fall of 1938, the Nazis deported every Jewish person with a Polish passport. Some 17,000 people—including the cousin—were forced to return to Polish soil. Poland was unwilling to take in these Jewish refugees, so most were housed in a facility set up by an international Jewish organization, called Camp Zbąszyń. Life there was no picnic. Mother's cousin, a brush manufacturer from Berlin, had enough cash to leave the camp. He moved instead to the Bristol Hotel. It's one of Warsaw's most elegant hotels: a creamy white, neoclassical structure with a miniature rotunda on the roof, situated along the chic Krakowskie Przedmieście, a long, broad avenue linking the king's seventeenth-century summer residences with the medieval city. According to Mala, her mother's cousin was always dressed in a white suit. He was crazy about Sure and paid for her wedding. He even found a house for Sure and for her assimilated, freethinking husband. According to Mala, he put up two years' rent in advance and furnished the place from top to bottom, right down to the toothbrushes. This wealthy family member even persuaded Tall Sender that the marriage between Sure and Henriek wasn't so bad.

What's more, it turned out Sure's new husband had a good head on his shoulders. When Sender walked to the synagogue on Fridays, the tall headmaster liked to have all his sons—

including his sons-in-law—by his side. The unbelieving Henriek Trager was happy to comply. Father-in-law Sender even gave him a tallit (or prayer shawl) to cover his head and shoulders while in the synagogue, and Trager wore it.

In fact, of all his sons, the only one who lived up to father's expectations was Alter. He was just a few years older than Mala, and, in the first year of the war, when he was nineteen, he became a rabbi. Mala describes him as brawny, handsome, and blond. He took Jewish law seriously. "He never put a set of keys in my hand, for instance. He always placed them on the table to avoid touching my hand. The hand of his little sister!" Eighty years later, Mala still sounds slightly perplexed.

To grasp the conflicts within the Jewish community during the 1930s, it might help to understand that to Tall Sender, Alter and other Hasidim, the worlds of marriage, relationships, school, and visits to the cinema were inseparable from their daily life, dominated by the study of the Torah.