·CHOOSE LIFE·

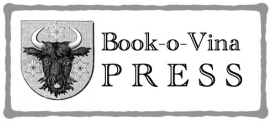
The Power of Mental Clarity

Joseph Bistritz

with Peter Weisz

Book-o-Vina
PRESS

Choose Life: The Power of Mental Clarity



Published by **Book-O-Vina Press**
an imprint of:

Peter Weisz Publishing, LLC
7143 Winding Bay Lane
West Palm Beach, FL 33412 USA
peterweiszpublishing.com

Bistritz, Joseph • All rights reserved
Memoir — Holocaust— Judaism— Biography — Self-Help

ISBN: 979-8269267661

Printed in the United States of America by Lulu Press
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

·DEDICATION·

dedicate this book to all my beloved family members who perished in the Holocaust. May their memories be a blessing.

To my beautiful wife, Pitzie, with whom I was blessed to build a life and a family filled with love, joy, and meaning.

To my dear children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, who I cherish deeply and who bring joy to my life each and every day.

To the memory of my oldest grandchild, Josh. Your time with us was far too brief, but you are always in my heart and in my memories.

To Edith Berger, who brought light into my life when it was shadowed by darkness, as well as to the entire Berger family for opening their hearts to me and welcoming me into the family.

EHOLD, I PLACE BEFORE YOU TODAY LIFE AND GOOD AND DEATH AND EVIL...I CALL ON HEAVEN AND EARTH TO WITNESS THAT I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU LIFE AND DEATH, THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE. NOW CHOOSE LIFE SO THAT YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN MAY LIVE.

— DEUTERONOMY 30:19

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·INTRODUCTION·

 ver the course of his long and extraordinary life my father, Joseph Bistritz, has been many things: a survivor, a forger, a smuggler, a rabbi, a merchant, an artist, a tailor, and a real estate developer. But of all his many identities, the one I cherish the most is that of storyteller. Since listening to his bedtime stories during my childhood, I have been amazed by his tales of triumph and tribulation.

My father's storytelling continued to entrance us even after we reached adulthood. Whenever my father visits our home, my friends are enthralled by his stories and his remarkable erudition. They always look forward to his visits to hear more, which made me consider aggregating my father's life stories in some way.

As my father is in his late nineties, I realize now is the time to preserve his stories, so that they need not disappear. I concluded that they must be written down. And thus was born the series of initiatives that eventually led to the publication of the

book you are holding. Thanks to this book, not only may his stories be shared with my father's children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and beyond, they may also be embraced by the world.

In many ways, our parents are strangers to us as we are growing up. We know them as supervisors, mentors, and as loving authoritarian figures. As youngsters, we know little of, nor are we interested in, their lives before our birth. So, when facts about the exemplary qualities exhibited by a parent are revealed to us, we are astounded.

I had gotten glimpses of my father's hidden talents here and there while growing up. I remember, as he helped me with a school project, being stunned at his masterful calligraphy skills and his knowledge of various typefaces and fonts. Of course, I did not realize, nor could I have imagined, that he developed such arcane abilities while serving as a master forger of documents to help Jewish Holocaust survivors escape to what would become the State of Israel.

And there was something more that was communicated in my father's stories. Something more than the factual content. Something intangible. To this day, whenever he speaks of the people—mostly family members he knew before the *Shoah*—who were lost in the flames, I can feel the closeness and the reverence in his voice. These stories are not maudlin or tragic. They are mostly recollections of pleasurable times with lost

loved ones. Hearing such stories piques my desire to learn more about their lives and share an emotional connection with them. This book has helped me to fulfill that fundamental and familial desire.

I recall a moment when I observed my father speaking to a Polish immigrant in his native language. "I didn't know you spoke Polish!" I exclaimed. I later came to understand that my father spoke at least seven languages and that he had learned English by memorizing a dictionary. What a revelation that was!

I also managed to view glimpses of my father's early life when I would occasionally meet someone who, like him, had survived the Holocaust and remembered him as a child at *cheder*. Sadly, almost all such eyewitnesses to my father's early life are now deceased, and this fact only serves to underscore the importance of chronicling his life in these pages.

Judaism extols the virtue of *zikaron* or remembrance. Our teachings emphasize the importance of memory in shaping our identity, preserving traditions, and connecting to the past and future generations. Remembering our history, both personal and communal, helps us learn from the past to better navigate our future and live in the present.

Growing up in a community that included many Holocaust survivors, I soon came to realize that they came in two varieties: those who refused to discuss their horrific experiences

and those who would talk of little else. My father falls between these two extremes. He did not dwell on his ordeals and countless struggles in the camps, but he also did not hide anything from me or from my siblings. By the time I reached my early teens, it was through his storytelling that I became aware of this dark period and came to appreciate the heroism of my father and others like him.

When I reached graduate school, I had connected with other children of Holocaust survivors. I found it fascinating to observe the different ways in which we responded to the experiences of and the lessons learned by our parents. I conducted research into the topic and would often lecture about it. In 1984, my research was published as a monograph titled *Trans-generational Pathology in Families of Holocaust Survivors*. In it, I noted:

> The particular pattern of behavior developed by any given family is a function of the adaptive and coping mechanisms of its members. Given that the massive trauma of the Holocaust produced such psychopathology as the concentration camp syndrome in the parents, these maladaptive mechanisms inevitably were incorporated into the child-rearing patterns of their new families.

My research showed that the degree of pathology among family members of Holocaust survivors depended a great deal upon the specific experiences of the survivor. For example, if a survivor had lost his or her immediate family, this factor had a

definable impact on the dynamics of his or her post-Holocaust second family. Further, much depended upon the survivor's willingness and ability to share his or her experiences candidly with spouse and children.

In this regard, I must count myself, as well as my siblings, as having been very fortunate. We all grew up relatively well adjusted, thanks, in large part, I believe, to my father's willingness to share his harrowing memories in a proactive, dispassionate, and objective manner. In other words, instead of burdening us with guilt, dread, and horror, he matter-of-factly shared his stories. And it is this precious practice that he continues to carry out on these pages.

In the making of this book, I discovered something else of considerable importance. My father was the family storyteller to my sister and two brothers, in addition to me. In later years, he fulfilled the same function on behalf of his grandchildren. However, he did not share the same stories with everyone. Hence, a few of us knew of some of his exploits while others remained ignorant of them. This became clear when I was talking to my younger sister, Aviva (Bebe), who has been working closely with my father in this book's production. I asked if they planned to include an account of the time our father was sent to a Toronto sanatorium for a year.

"What?" said Bebe. "I never knew about that."

“Really?” I responded. “I thought everyone knew about it.”

So, you see, this book is an ingathering of such errant tales that have been, over the years, randomly spread here and there. While I’m certain we have not been successful in capturing them all, the book is packed with endearing, inspiring, and often humorous tales drawn from my father’s unique and incomparable life saga.

The overarching theme, if there is one, is that in every situation, no matter how desperate or challenging, my father would never descend into despair or self-pity. In other words, he would invariably, time and again, opt for the positive, the practical, and the proactive course. As we are directed in *Devarim* (Deuteronomy), my father would always “Choose Life.”

I invite you to experience the joy of hearing a world-class storyteller recount the fascinating and inspiring episodes of his truly extraordinary life.

With all my love,
Janice Bistritz Mirsky
September 2025

·PREFACE·

A Note from Bebe

ssisting my father in writing this memoir has been more than just a project—it has been a journey of connection, discovery, and understanding. As we sifted through memories and stories, I began to see not just the father I've always known, but the layers of experience, resilience, and circumstances that have shaped his life.

There were moments of surprise, of laughter, and of quiet reflection. I heard stories I had never known and saw familiar ones through a new lens. In sharing his story, he opened the door to parts of his life that had long remained unspoken. In doing so, he gave me a deeper sense of who he is—not only as a father, but as a person.

This process brought us closer. It created space for conversations we might never have had and gave us a shared purpose in preserving his voice and legacy. I feel honored to have played a part in telling his story, and deeply grateful for the stronger bond we've built along the way.

With love and gratitude,
Your *mezinke*, Bebe
September 2025

·PROLOGUE·

ou've got to write a book!"

Has anyone ever told you that? I've been hearing it for decades. I suppose it's because I'm a natural storyteller and because my life has been both blessed and burdened with more than its share of unforgettable stories.

Over the years, I have come dangerously close to writing about my life's adventures, but I've always managed to procrastinate and put it off. Well, as I consider the fact that my age will soon be displayed in triple digits, I've concluded I shouldn't even be buying green bananas anymore. I could put it off no longer.

A few years ago, not long after losing my second wife, I made an audio recording of some of my memories starting from childhood, covering the dark years of the Shoah and up through my years in Baltimore and Florida. Several people who listened to the results agreed that it would serve as a fine basis for an actual memoir. I wasn't so sure. After all, I'm a great guy, but I'm no celebrity. Who would be interested in reading about the

life of a Jewish real estate developer? Then, someone pointed out something I had not considered. A book would not only be for the readers—presumably my family members and heirs—it would also be for me. It would give me an opportunity to look back and revisit some of those peaks and valleys of my life's journey. They say that doing so is therapeutic, good for one's mental health and so on. So, I decided to give it a shot. And guess what? They were right.

As you read my life story, you will learn that I was, at several key points, able to "choose life" in some extremely difficult situations. This raises the question of what provided me with the ability to do so. A question I seek to answer on these pages. Essentially, it has to do with my constantly striving to achieve mental clarity. To see things not only as they currently are, but also as they might become.

I have tried to pull open the curtain to reveal certain events in my past that will answer such questions as "Where did you learn this ability?" or "Who told you this?" As you will read, my earliest life lessons were delivered to me by my grandfather. He would stress the importance of clear thinking. For example, he would at times point to a half-empty glass. The fellow with a cloudy mind, he would tell me, began to worry when the glass was completely full. He worried that it would soon be only half full. And now, he worries that the glass will soon be completely empty, and then what will he do? But, a clear-minded person will rejoice, saying: "Look at what I have. I still have half a glass." As a result, I have always been the guy who doesn't worry about what I might lose. Instead, I'm the guy who looks

at what I have and feels thankful. This attitude is the mark of true wealth. As it asks in *Pirkei Avot* 4:1: "Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot."

The process of recollection was at times satisfying and at other time terrifying. I again mentally confronted some of the darkest moments imaginable. At the same time, the bittersweet memories of those whom I have loved and lost brought on a mixture of joy and heartache. It was an emotional roller coaster that has resulted in the creation of this chronicle. I hope that it might have a similar, albeit secondhand, impact on you, the reader.

As the title suggests, the theme of this book—as is the theme of my life—is to always "choose life," even when fate decrees that choice to be a difficult one. It is for this reason that this book is, at the end of the day, an exercise in remembrance. It is remembrance that gives Jews the courage to continue in the face of adversity. I am reminded of the words of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, who said: "Forgetfulness leads to exile while remembrance is the secret of redemption."

I invite you to experience the redemptive power of remembrance by joining me on this journey of a lifetime. I promise it will be a ride you will not soon forget.

—Joseph Bistritz
Deerfield Beach, Florida
September 2025

·CHAPTER ONE·

Honey Cakes and Cheder

"Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it."

— *Habakkuk 2:2*

can still taste the honey cake that my mother *(z"l)* made extra sweet that day. This was the day of my *upsherin,* a ritual held on my third birthday, when, in accordance with Hasidic tradition, my curly hair would be cut for the first time. An upsherin marks the point when a Jewish boy begins his Torah education by learning the *Alef Beis*. My mother had placed a piece of the sweet honey cake on the first page of a Hebrew primer. The page contained all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The idea was to make the letters, and thereby the Torah, "sweet upon the tongue." I gobbled the cake eagerly as the gathered friends and family cheered and shouted "Mazel Tov!" My mother had next placed a piece of candy from a little cloth bag onto each of the first few Hebrew letters. As instructed, I started with *alef* and began popping the candy into my mouth. Once I had reached *daled*, it was time for my father to do the honors. Using scissors and a comb, he quickly trimmed off my flowing locks, leaving behind only the two *payes* on either side of my head.

Once my hair was cut, I was no longer considered to be a baby. I would soon be wearing a *kippah* and *tzitzit* and headed towards cheder.

My father, who had decorated both the honey cake and the candy bag with Hebrew blessings, next grabbed me up in his arms to deliver me to the schoolhouse. Before leaving our home, he placed a big kerchief over my head, blocking my vision. Since this was a holy day, he did not wish for me to lay eyes on any *traif* animals—such as dogs or cats—on the way to school to officially begin my formal education.

My parents did not wish to waste a single moment when it came to my education. This act—whisking me off to school the very second I became eligible to attend—is emblematic of the high regard my family and our community placed on education. It's not for nothing that we are known as "The People of the Book." Scholars believe that it is this passion for learning and literacy that has—along with the divine hand of *Hashem*—accounted for our people's survival despite the best efforts of our enemies to wipe us out.

By the time of my upsherin, in 1930, Jews had been living in our little *shtetl* of Cârlibaba, Romania for more than three centuries. Situated in the Bukovina region, Cârlibaba sits tucked into the elbow of the scenic northeastern Carpathian Mountains. It had found itself governed by a diverse series of regimes over the years.

In 1774, Bukovina was conquered by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and developed into the province with the highest Jewish popula-

tion in the empire. Soon, this became a problem for the ruling Christians. By the early 1800s, the government began deporting Jews and revoking their citizenship. Despite the fact that the 19th century saw a large emigration of Jews from the region to the United States, they still comprised 12% of the population as of 1910.

After World War I and the collapse of the empire, Romania took control of Bukovina and began imposing harsh antisemitic laws that fueled another wave of Jewish flight.

The most well-known feature of our little community in those days was a memorial that had been erected near the St. Louis church when I was four years old. It honored Polish soldiers who fell in a battle against Russian troops during the First World War. The memorial was situated atop a small hill and accessed via an outdoor stairway rising about 25 feet. It was there, in 1932, that my older sister, Leah (Lottie)—who had been named valedictorian—delivered a poem she had written before her assembled seventh-grade graduating class.

When I arrived at the cheder sporting my fresh haircut, my father sat me down in the classroom and introduced me to the other boys, who would soon become my friends. Without hesitation, the rabbi who served as our instructor began teaching us the Alef Beis.

"This is an *alef*," he pronounced, pointing to a large Hebrew letter posted on the wall:

"*Kommetz Alef*. Say OOH," he instructed

This was my introduction to the world of learning. Everything begins with alef. From that point on, I attended cheder daily, traversing two bridges as I made my way to school on foot. I usually walked with a group of other students, but sometimes it was just me, alone and unescorted. Even though the cheder was within sight and directly opposite our house, I was required to use the two bridges to cross the Szamos River in order to get there.

While the river was frozen over during the winter months, it was used extensively for commerce throughout the summertime. The river's wide banks allowed for the transport of logs that emerged from the forest-covered mountains. At the logging camps, the massive tree trunks were bound together and placed onto large flatbed barges that delivered them—via the Tisza, the Danube, and finally, the Prut Rivers—to the sawmills in Czernowitz, Romania.

Those sawmills were typically owned by Jews who rented land on Christian estates, since Jews were forbidden to own property. The three largest sawmills in the region were Jewish-owned, including one that was the first to introduce steam-powered milling. I recall watching the swiftly moving barges sail past my cheder while dreaming about hitching a ride on a logging barge as I took off to see the world.

Next door to my cheder stood the *shul* where I would regularly attend *Shabbos* services with my father on Friday evening and Saturday. These humble institutions—my school and my synagogue—served as the two initial sources of my *limudei kodesh*. They stood at the starting point of my quest for Jewish learning—a process that has occupied my entire life and that today, at age 98, has not abated.

My father, Yisroel, was a tradesman. He designed, crafted, and sold all types of leather goods—a skill he would eventually pass on to me. As the family grew, he recognized the need to boost his income and decided to heed the advice of relatives who urged him to move to the larger community of Mihalyfalva, located in western Transylvania.

My Jewish learning continued after our family moved, in 1932, from Cârlibaba when I was five years old. Our new town had two names—as did all the towns in the mixed ethnic region known as Transylvania—a Romanian name and a Hungarian name. The Romanian name is Valea lui Mihai, which means Michael's Valley. In Hungarian it is known as Mihalyfalva or Michael's Town. It still sits today in the Körösvidék district, about six miles from the Hungarian border.

While Romanian was the official language back in Cârlibaba, we spoke only Yiddish at home and a formal German, known as *Hochdeutsch,* when communicating with the non-Jews. Now, in Mihalyfalva, the general population spoke only Hungarian. The Romanian tongue, a Romance language similar to Italian, was only used in

official government documents. The prevalence of Hungarian was still the case more than a century after Transylvania was ceded from Hungary to Romania. We continued to speak only Yiddish at home and now spoke Hungarian "in the street."

At age three, when I was in cheder, my *melamed* was Reb Shlomo. He was a gifted instructor who was able to take little children and teach them so well that, within two years, they were already able to *daven* from the *siddur*. At age six, I began walking by myself to *Talmud Torah* every day. Our second-grade rebbe's name was Reb Mendel. By this point, we were being taught a few *psukem* of *Chumash.*

After our morning prayers each day, all the students would stand around the table and recite the *Shmoneh Esrei*, also known as the *Amidah.* It was soon thereafter that we began to study *Gemara*. The Gemara is part of the *Talmud* and contains commentaries about the *Mishnah*. It was a rigorous program. The Gemara *shiur* began at 6:00 a.m. every day except for Shabbos.

It was a real struggle walking to the Talmud Torah class each morning, especially during the chilly winter months. My mother would awaken me each day and fortify me against the cold with a glass of warm milk. I recall how the freshly fallen snow would, at times, reach up to my chest. And there were no "snow days." No matter what the weather, it did not make any difference. You had to be there, no matter what, promptly at 6:00 a.m. While some boys failed to show up on time, I never missed a single day, nor was I ever

tardy. Perhaps the latecomers had parents who were a bit more lenient than mine. But, at our house, learning came before anything else, and I had to be there every day without exception. Yes, it was rough going on those frosty frigid mornings, but, looking back, I feel it toughened me up for what I would be forced to face later in life.

Perhaps the most grueling part of my walks to and from school was when I was required to stroll past the cemetery. As my feet stomped through the crunchy snow, a ghostly sort of sound would emerge with each step, convincing me that some *dybbuk* was surely following me.

When the temperatures dipped down way below zero, I would make it a point to stop midway along my morning trek. I would pop into the *Beis Ha'Midrash* to warm myself by the glowing potbelly stove. As I held my palms before the roaring flames, I would look around at the older boys who were busy learning before they *davened Shachris.* They ranged in age from 18 to 23; some were already married and had visited the *mikvah*. The stove served as their heat source as they spent the long day studying.

After warming myself, both physically and spiritually, I would quickly cover the remaining five blocks to the cheder. Our day was highly structured. After the first shiur, which started at 6:00 a.m., we next davened Shachris. Then we went home to eat breakfast. After our morning meal, we attended a regular school where we received our secular education. This school, which we attended from 9:00 a.m. till noon, was operated by the Jewish community and it was not

religious. This is where we learned arithmetic, geography, science, and languages. Our attendance was mandated by the government. At noon, we came home again to eat the main meal of the day. Unlike in the U.S., where dinner is normally the major meal, in that time and place, it was at lunchtime that the family would gather and break bread.

After lunch, at 1:30 p.m., I was back to the Talmud Torah carrying a little snack for later. We needed that snack because we would stay there until 8 p.m., and sometimes even later. We were given a break at six p.m., and that's when we would consume our snacks and play outdoors, weather permitting. During the summer months, I recall that the ice cream vendor would arrive to the school at this time ringing his little bell. Those boys who were fortunate enough to have a few *fillers* would buy some ice cream while the others watched. My friends and I were among the watchers.

Both the watchers and the ice cream eaters loved to play catch during our evening recess. We didn't have an actual rubber ball. We used what was called a "*guba,*" which was a round boiled dough bread from which we had removed the poppyseeds. After letting off some steam, it was back into the classroom for more learning. Our first class was writing. No, not creative writing or poetry, but actual penmanship. For about 45 minutes we would do nothing else but copy cursive letters of the Hungarian alphabet from a big instruction book. We were also required to compose and handwrite letters to our

parents. These lost skills were considered part of a proper education in those long-ago days before text messages and email.

After the last class of the day, we cleaned up and davened *Mincha* and *Ma'ariv* and then walked home. We arrived at around 8 p.m. and were tucked into bed by nine. The next morning at 4:30 a.m., the routine would start all over again.

What, you may ask, was the highlight of the school day? The answer is ... nothing. There was no highlight. It was always the same dreary pattern. Day after day. Year in and year out. One may consider it indoctrination, but it was not that exactly. The result of pounding our people's history and traditions into us in this unceasing manner was that we all emerged fully imbued and deeply immersed in our Jewish identities. This would become critical as we grew older—particularly during the Christian holidays.

Whenever Easter and Christmas rolled around, we had to brace ourselves for daily attacks by gangs of local Christian youths. They would lie in wait behind a fence and ambush us as we made our way home from school. At such times of the year, these guys had been worked up to an antisemitic frenzy by their church. The priests would spew out the classic blood libel tropes about how the evil Jews had murdered their savior. Branding us as "Christ-killers," these young "Christian soldiers" would come after us with clubs and fists. I'm proud to say that many times we gave as good as we got. But, outnumbered and underpowered, we usually found it wiser to outrun our tormentors and got away as fast as we could.

This is how our Christian neighbors chose to mark their holiday of “Peace on Earth and Goodwill Towards Men.” To them, the most meaningful way to celebrate the birth of “The Prince of Peace” was to savagely attack a group of innocent Jewish schoolkids. We used to say that Jew hatred was fed to Christian babies along with mother’s milk.

Of course, I did not know it then, but these hate-filled acts of bullying would seem trivial and tame when compared to the extreme evil we were to encounter in the coming decade.

·CHAPTER TWO·

A Legacy of Learning

"There is only one way to change the world, and that is through education."

— *Rabbi Jonathan Sacks*

he great Jewish philosopher and theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, once stated: "What we need, more than anything else, isn't textbooks but rather text people." I consider myself fortunate that, as my education advanced, my life was filled with such text people.

After completing our morning studies of Gemara at the shiur, our class moved on and was instructed by another rebbe who taught us a *blatt* of Gemara and a bit of *Shulchan Aruch*. The *Shulchan Aruch*, also known in English as *The Code of Jewish Law,* is the major collection of Judaism's legal principles. With what little time we had remaining, we spent it reviewing, writing, and studying the Chumash.

Up through the fourth grade, in addition to my yeshiva education, I still had to devote time to learning all the required secular subjects like geography, arithmetic, etc. For this we continued to attend a school run by the Jewish community.

My maternal grandfather, Dov Ber Berkowits, became a *yosom* about the time of his Bar Mitzvah. It was then that he was taken into the house of the elder Munkatcher Rebbe, Tzvi Hirsh Shpira, the author of the *Darchei Teshuvah.* Not only did my grandfather celebrate his Bar Mitzvah in the rebbe's house, but he also continued his studies and was married there.

Rebbe Shpira, my grandfather's mentor, was the head of a Chasidic sect made up mostly of Hungarian Jews. Rebbe Shpira served as the chief rabbi of the Hungarian town of Munkatch and hence his followers became known as Munkatcher Chasidim.

I would spend many summers before my Bar Mitzvah at the home of my grandparents learning about the traditions of our people and about Chassidism. They lived in a tiny one-street Transylvanian village known as Viscri, about 45 miles northwest of Brasov. It was and remains an idyllic spot known for its traditional food and slow pace of life. We affectionately called the town *Tradam Radda,* which means "road to laughter." Back then, it had no electricity, and the only building of any size was the water mill along the Gorgan River.

By the time I was seven years old, I realized that I was special in the eyes of my grandparents. I was their first-born grandson, a fact that provided me with something of an exalted status in the family. They therefore believed that I was deserving of a proper education.

I recall my grandfather as a very sturdy and sweet man, unlike my *Bubby* Malka, who was quite the opposite. Bubby Malka was a cultured woman from a well-respected family by the name of Got-

tehrer. She was a very strict and precise person, not prone to compromise in any way. In her eyes everything had to be 100%. 99.9% was not acceptable. This personality trait often conflicted with my own since I was not such an obedient kid. I liked to take a shortcut now and then, and this tendency would infuriate my straitlaced Bubby. I was constantly in hot water with her, but it would always be my sweet *zaidie* who would come and bail me out.

One example was a traditional Shabbos dish prepared by my grandmother and known as *ei mit zwiebel.* This was a pâté composed of chopped eggs, raw onions, and occasionally goose liver. It would be prepared in advance and served cold as an appetizer before the customary Shabbos meal of *chulent*. Somehow, the gastronomic mixture of onions, liver, and baked beans did not sit right with me, and after each such meal I would invariably become nauseous and throw up. Nonetheless, I would consume a small portion each time it was served. To decline would not only offend my grandmother, but it would also run counter to established Jewish tradition. And although we didn't dance around the room singing about it à la *Fiddler on the Roof,* tradition was paramount at the house of my beloved Bubby and Zaidie.

My grandmother insisted, for example, that I always rise to my feet should an adult enter the room. She also taught me the proper way to respectfully address my elders. While my grandfather was equally devoted to proper behavior and tradition, his approach to teaching me was far more tolerant and philosophical. As explained in

the preface, he taught me the value of self-discipline and mental clarity. How to see the world as it truly is and not be misled by the distractions all around us.

My grandfather became my role model, and it was through his patient teaching of Gemara—and other such lessons—that I came to love him very deeply. Those other lessons included introducing me to the *Tanya*, which is a *Chabad* foundational text and based on Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism. We would also discuss philosophy deep into the night. Every Shabbos we would study from the *Ma'or va-Shemesh*, a mystical Chasidic text containing the homilies of Krakow *tzadik* Kalonymus Kalman Epstein. In it, Epstein recasts Torah episodes through the prism of the divine inner life of all existence.

Although I often felt that I was in way over my head with such esoteric material, my grandfather insisted that I learn it with him. I somehow sensed that I was privileged. I was being afforded a glimpse into a world that the other boys in my circle never had a chance to see. Even though I felt I was merely peeking in through the window of an elaborate mansion, I understood that I was privy to something important. A mystical world that existed outside of my own reality. Somehow this whole philosophy subconsciously stole itself into my young psyche. Seeds were planted. Seeds of ideas that would not see fruition until years later when I found myself in the camps.

This ability to absorb learning while being detached from my surroundings would serve me well during those years of extreme

struggle. Thanks to the training I had received at the feet of my grandfather, I found I was able to ignore everything that was going on around me. I could convince myself that I was not even there. This mental ability to transport myself out of my difficult surroundings and remain unaffected by them helped me a great deal during those years of darkness. Upon liberation, it was tragically clear that many of my fellow Jews were psychologically traumatized and deeply damaged by their experiences. But, thanks to Hashem and to Zaidie, I was able to carry on when my ordeal had ended. For this I give all the *zechus* to my beloved grandfather.

When I was nearly 12 years old, I stopped spending my summers at the home of my grandparents. One day, back in Mihalyfalva, my father packed me up with a little wicker suitcase and put me on the train to the town of Krula, near the Hungarian border. I was being dispatched to a yeshiva that had been founded by famed Grand Rabbi Yoelosha Teitelbaum, also known as the Satmar Rebbe. Emerging from the town of Satu Mare, the rabbis of the Teitelbaum family

were known for their highly conservative stances and their opposition to the Enlightenment, Neolog Judaism, and Zionism. Not long before my arrival, Teitelbaum left Krula and the yeshiva was now under the direction of Rabbi Moshe Gross.

After a five-hour train ride, I got off in Krula and, *schlepping* my little woven wicker suitcase, made my way to the place that would serve as my introduction to formal yeshiva life.

My first order of business was to seek out the *gabbai* and introduce myself. The gabbai recognized that I was the youngest boy in the class, and he reassured me with the words: "Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

I was soon assigned two study partners who would also become my roommates. We three were assigned a *chazor bocher*. Literally a "repeating student," a chazor bocher's job was to repeat what we had learned each week in the shiur. Along with my study partners, I rented a room in a Jewish house, and this is where we slept and studied. We would awaken each morning at 5:00 a.m. and were met by our chazor bocher. We were not required to travel anywhere. We learned and *chazor-ed* Gemara right there in the house.

After Shachris, we made our way to the yeshiva, where we would sit down for breakfast in what we called the *menza* dining room. On Shabbos most of the boys would eat at different houses of the various *balabatim*. I was fortunate because in the town of Krula there happened to live a wealthy fellow by the name of Shloima Edelman. He was my mother's second cousin, and when he learned

that I had come to town to study at the yeshiva, he sought me out and invited me, along with my two classmates, to join him and his family every Shabbos. Tragically, Shloima would lose his wife and children in the flames of the Holocaust. Eventually, he would become my brother-in-law by marrying my sister after the war.

My matriculation at the Krula yeshiva lasted for only one *zman*. At that point, I was required to return home to study for my Bar Mitzvah. Once there, I continued my yeshiva learning along with my Bar Mitzvah preparation. I was assigned a *pshetl,* which is a commentary on the weekly *parshah* that begins with a question and ends with a thought-provoking answer. I was required to prepare a *Dvar Torah* based on the pshetl and deliver it publicly during my Bar Mitzvah. Most pshetls were structured arguments about some detail or another found in the parshah. My pshetl dealt with the halachic concept of *mitzvos tzrichos kavanah,* the idea of having a proper mindset while performing a *mitzvah*.

Unlike the *minhag* these days, back when I underwent my Bar Mitzvah, I did not read from the Torah. These days, the Bar Mitzvah boy reads the weekly Torah portion, as well as a *Haftarah* passage, out loud from the *bimah* before the entire congregation. The parsha in my case was *Parshas Yisro*. Back in our day, everyone read the Haftarah to themselves. I was required to recite my pshetl out loud—not during the service, but afterwards at the *Malaveh Malka*. This is the name given to a meal that is held following the *Havdalah* service, immediately after Shabbos.

Addressing the large assemblage in the Beis Ha'Midrash was an intimidating task for a 13-year-old boy like me. Unlike today, where congregants sit and listen politely and let the Bar Mitzvah boy speak, in my case, listeners would stop me and ask me questions about my presentation. You can well imagine the type of stress and embarrassment that this practice caused. Nevertheless, that was the procedure, and I had no choice other than to carry on. I'm pleased to say that I was successful and, looking back, I recall the entire experience as being positive and quite beautiful.

What added to the beauty of the event were the fine cakes and pastries baked by my mother, Yehudis (Ida). She would prepare delicious French and Hungarian treats that everyone enjoyed and commented on.

My Bar Mitzvah took place in January of 1940. A year that will always be written in blood red ink in the annals of the Jewish history of Transylvania. June of that year saw the announcement of the notorious and short-lived Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This was a nonaggression agreement also dubbed the Stalin-Hitler Pact. The terms allowed the Soviets to annex Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Subsequently, Hungary attempted to regain Transylvania, territory it had lost in the aftermath of World War I. In consideration of Hungary's having joined the Axis powers, Hitler gave the green light for the Hungarians to take back all the territory they had been forced to relinquish. This was met with resistance by the Romanian government when it came to Transylvania. Despite the attempt to reach a diplo-

matic resolution in August at negotiations held in Turnu Severin, the conflict between Hungary and Romania escalated. Hungarian troops soon occupied much of Northern Transylvania.

Through the autumn of 1940, the Romanian Jewish population was targeted for antisemitic actions by Hungarian nationalist troops. Illegal arrests, tortures, lynchings, summary executions and other atrocious abuses took place. At the same time, the Romanian fascist movement known as the Iron Guard began a massive antisemitic campaign known as the Dorohoi pogrom. It was marked by the torture and beating of Jews and the looting of their shops. It culminated in a coup attempt in Bucharest that saw 125 Jews murdered.

Our town was soon taken over by the German-backed Hungarians. Although I was only 13, I was drafted into a labor brigade. I was required to report twice each week with a shovel on my shoulder. We were ordered to march down the street, bearing our shovels, and forced to recite pro-Nazi slogans. This was done simply to ridicule and demoralize us because we were Jews. We were then marched to the outskirts of our town to carry out our labor.

On one day we would be ordered to dig deep trenches and ditches. On the following workday we would be ordered to fill them back up with the same dirt we had previously removed. This was pointless work intended merely to show us who was the boss. They wanted us to learn that since we were Jews, they were going to make life very difficult for us. We all got the message.

This oppression persisted for the next two years. In the meantime, I continued my studies in the yeshiva in Mihalyfalva. The yeshiva was home to 100 boys, and while it afforded valued education, the administrative system was very lax, and we were not well supervised. Students came and went as they pleased with no consequences for missing classes. The one shining ray of light in this chaotic community was the *rav,* Yechezkel Schoenfeld, who was a great *talmid chacham*—a beloved learned Torah scholar who was well versed in Jewish law.

As in my earlier schooling, we devoted a good portion of the yeshiva day to the study of Gemara. In addition to theory, we also put our studies to practical use by learning the laws of *shchita* and *treyfos*. We were taken to the local abattoir and taught how to put water into the lungs of slaughtered animals. The purpose of this was to ensure that the lungs did not contain any imperfections. If bubbles were detected in the water, the animal would be declared as traif. If no bubbles were seen, it was deemed to be *glatt kosher*. Glatt means that there is no possible question about the "smoothness" of the animal's lungs.

We were also instructed in the removal of any *sirchot,* adhesions that cross the lung from side to side and resemble scabs. If there are any sirchot on the lungs, this is a sign that there may once have been a lesion in that area that was later sealed by the *sircha*. These must be removed to ensure that the animal is kosher.

Today kosher butchers do not suffer if their meat is deemed to be traif. They simply sell it to a non-kosher butcher at full value. But back then there was no such option. If a kosher butcher's cow carcass was found to be traif, he would be required to sell it to a non-Jewish butcher for less than half what he had paid for it, costing him bitter financial loss.

We had a butcher shop in our community that was supervised by the town's rabbis. The front of the building had two entry doors. One was labeled "Glatt" and one was labeled "Not." The meat that entered via the second door was 100% kosher, but it was not glatt. It was not glatt because the lungs or chest wall had a sircha or some other lesion.

According to *Halacha*, if the sircha is carefully separated and removed from the lung or sidewall of the animal leaving no hole, and if the lungs are then inflated and submerged and no bubbles appear, the animal is deemed to be kosher—but not glatt kosher. Kosher butchers sold both kosher and glatt kosher meat, the latter being slightly more expensive.

Our community also had a lovely mikvah, a ritual bath, that boasted an adjoining *shvitz*. They were both heated with a steam engine to which a loud train whistle was attached. Every Friday, at ten minutes before candle-lighting time, the whistle would blare, alerting the town to the approaching Shabbos. The sound of the mikvah whistle signaled all the shopkeepers to bring in their wares and shut their doors.

The whistle would blow for ten minutes, and when it stopped, we knew it was time for *licht benchen*. Shabbos had started. Jewish life in my hometown was not as idyllic as depicted in stories by Sholom Aleichem. Yet, it was still an undeniably exquisite way of life—despite the hardships and deprivations. This was especially true whenever a *simcha* came around. If there was to be a wedding, for example, formal invitations would only be sent to close friends and family. But news of the simcha was transmitted throughout the community via word of mouth, and the entire town would show up.

Was there poverty? Of course there was poverty. Speaking of Sholom Aleichem, it was he who pointed out that life is a dream for the wise, a game for the fool, a comedy for the rich, and a tragedy for the poor. Even though ours was not a wealthy community, we always supported the poor via the practice of *tzedakah,* which not only provided them with sustenance but also preserved their dignity. In the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *chesed*, the poorer members of our community were always invited to weddings and other special occasions. They would be afforded their own tables alongside all the other guests and were always served first. It was truly a beautiful thing to behold.

It was during this period that my father was conscripted into a Romanian forced labor camp along with our neighbor and many other able-bodied Jewish young men from our community. They were required to report to a military-style camp, but they were not issued any arms, only shovels that the conscripts used for digging ditches

and building protective embankments. Although he was only gone for six months, we and the other families had no way to communicate with him, so we were unable to learn of his condition and how long he would be required to serve. At that time, those who had sufficient funds to bribe the officials would manage to get themselves into the horse-mounted cavalry rather than the regular labor force. But, alas, we did not have such an option.

Life became more difficult during my father's absence, but his conscription was not considered any cause for alarm. Other relatives had likewise been called up, and we took it in stride. Another family member, Shaya Kluger Gottehrer, was recruited to operate the factory during my father's absence, and we tried to go on with our lives as best as we could.

Finally, after six months, my father returned home. His emaciated body bore witness to the fact that he had suffered severe deprivations at the labor camp. And his clean-shaven face revealed that he had been forced to abandon his religious practices during his incarceration. Happily, he was soon able to resume his Torah studies.

The glue that held our community together was Torah learning. You could, for example, walk into the Beis Ha'Midrash at any time of day after 4:00 a.m. and there you would invariably find people studying and reading. To my young eyes, the shul was a magnificent structure that served as a palace of learning. This is what was lost in the flames of the Shoah. Buildings and bodies all turned to ashes. But what was not incinerated was the legacy of learning that I carry with

me to this day and that I have transmitted, with G-d's help, to the coming generations. It is to preserve that precious legacy that this book is being written.