

BEYOND THE GATES OF HELL



Colin Rushton

Author of "Spectator in Hell"

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by

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Chapter One

Over the last three years Mayer Hersh had become a good friend of mine. A survivor of the Holocaust, this serene and quietly spoken man had always sought to close down any enquiring sorties into that emotive subject. "It was a long time ago", was one of his more common closures.

In recent weeks I had noticed his sublime serenity had become seriously disturbed and I queried to myself the reason for this change in a quality that was essentially what he was all about. I was not to wait long for the solution to the puzzle. It was Tuesday April 9th 2002 as I awaited an answer to my ringing his doorbell. To my surprise, his wife, Judith, opened the front door. "He's gone to Auschwitz, left at 3am and won't be back till near midnight," was her surprising retort to my questioning his whereabouts. Judith went on to point out that she had genuinely tried to persuade him not to make the trip for fear of acutely distressing himself.

Mayer, however, had apparently begun to have thoughts of telling his story so that younger generations could be educated in exactly what happened in Europe at the hands of the Third Reich, no doubt influenced by some of the party of Manchester Jews with whom he had travelled.

Sensing the possible unfolding of a spectacularly moving account, I determined to contact Mayer two days later. On our first meeting I was surprised to find his serenity had returned in full and he was keen to talk. I immediately came to the conclusion that re-visiting Auschwitz had been an undoubted success and an experience he was so pleased he'd undertaken. "I had sworn never to see Auschwitz again for, in the fall of 1987, my best friend, David Josefowicz, and myself visited Chelmno." The strongest emotion crackled in his voice and he took a minute or two to compose himself. "Four hundred thousand Jews from Western Poland were killed and cremated there, my mother and three younger brothers amongst them. David and I were totally emotionally destroyed, and from that moment on, Auschwitz was never in our itinerary."

Asking whether I could tape the proceedings, Mayer nodded approvingly and I went on to state that he should tell his story for posterity and possibly help to prevent a repeat of those darkest of deeds in the history of man. "What better than a book, capable of doing that job even long after you've left this world," I countered. Mayer smiled his agreement and two friends had a pact.

For Mayer the return to Polish Silesia was akin to stirring a clear pool with a stick and disturbing the underlying soil, his mind was muddled with swirling emotions and memories. Two hundred and thirty five flew from Manchester to Krakow on Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Day in the Hebrew calendar, Tuesday April 9th 2002. Amongst this number were some non Jews and, after much pleading from numerous colleagues, Mayer agreed to return nearly fifty eight years after last setting eyes on the belching crematoria chimneys. He was the only survivor in the Manchester party and, after a two-hour flight and a one-hour road journey, in just three hours he was back at the gates of hell.

The 'March of the Living' from Auschwitz to Birkenau takes place annually and is a protest, an affirmation, that despite Nazi attempts to eliminate all European Jewry, some have survived. With other groups coming from France, Germany, North America and Israel, the latter group being by far the largest, they walked slowly with dignity, without hatred, and with pride.

Whilst making a post war return with his friend David Josefowicz to Chelmno, the two survivors broke down completely with acute mental anguish, so badly in fact that visiting Auschwitz was considered totally out of the question on that occasion and at any time in the future. Chelmno was the God forsaken place where nearly all of their relatives, schoolmates and indeed most of their hometown community perished, innocent people humiliated, prior to being murdered.

What then made him change his mind this time? "You've got to do it for the younger generations, you have got to give them the hope, the courage that Jewish people have survived and can do so in the future." That was the impassioned plea that finally persuaded him to make the trip to the ultimate destination of torment and brutality, utterly and totally devoid of any hope for the future.

He was so pleased he went, for the concern and sensitivity shown to him by the fifteen year olds on the visit moved him to tears. They were constantly watching Mayer, with sadness in their eyes, their sincerity expressed. They were so calm and dignified that he felt both great and humble sharing the moment with them. The youngsters clearly found it incomprehensible to understand how human beings could sink to such depths of total barbarity and depravity.

The media were much in evidence with BBC Television, Manchester Evening News and Granada Television accompanying the party. This was not surprising really, for Auschwitz was, and always will be, very special, its dark deeds putting it into a classification of its own. It was here that young Mayer, then sixteen years of age, realised the vast scale of the Holocaust, for every nationality passed through its gates. Prisoners unable to comprehend the German language, and there were many in this category, were dead meat with no hope of survival, for there were no second commands given.

A few in the line were in wheelchairs and Mayer went over to one of these unfortunates, an unashamed lump in his throat, "I feel honoured to see a man in your physical state giving a smack in the eye to Nazism. If Hitler was alive today and could see some survivors of his camps, being accompanied by Jewish youth, and marching in Auschwitz with abundant sandwiches in their pockets, he would no doubt commit suicide.

The long line left Auschwitz and, at a slow walk, covered the approximately four kilometres to reach Birkenau, an extermination camp like none other, where millions were gassed and yet not one gravestone could be seen. This place had been Mayer's home for eighteen long months and the arrival there was to be his most painful moment. Prayers were said for all the innocent souls who had been converted to ash, which was liberally tipped in the nearby River Ner. This service took place at a monument near one of the crematoria and finished with an Israeli singing a prayer entitled 'I Believe', as beautiful as it was moving. He found what was left of his barrack D24, hut 24 in D camp, merely the concrete base with a fireplace and a chimney at each end. As he stood on the floor he had cleaned on numerous occasions, memories of single incidents flooded back and these constituted his most emotional moments. The fireplaces before the war had been lit in order to keep the horses warm but no such luxuries were afforded to the Jews. The multitude of cracks in the wooden walls through which the coldest of Polish winter winds would whistle, could not be seen, for all wood was commandeered after hostilities had ceased, for barns and stables. The end of D Camp was opposite the main railway ramp and the inmates of D24 had good views of the never-ending hordes of arrivals from all parts of Europe.

The gap between D24 and the next barrack was the site where all occupants of D24 were put through that obnoxious operation, roll call, twice a day, morning and evening. For inmates there accrued a multitude of painful memories with many sessions lasting hours in often extreme climatic conditions, this being yet another torment exercised by their Nazi hosts. There were two latrines in D Camp, each occupying the same area as a barrack holding one thousand men. Mayer's camp was maybe only two hundred yards, at its closest point, to the

nearest crematorium, all four dispatchers of evidence being cleverly disguised by poplar trees in an attempt to allay the fears of the new arrivals. Nevertheless only a blind man would fail to see the flames and smoke belching forth from their tall chimneys, but that stench of burning flesh would fool nobody. The watchtowers and the barbed wire fences, on which so many, who could take no more torment, electrocuted themselves, these were the sights that hit Mayer hard. Next to D Camp was the gypsy camp, E Camp, the visit revealing to Mayer something he never knew previously, that in fact Jews were also held prisoner in E Camp, all occupants of which were totally eliminated on one April day in 1944. Crossing over the railway track he visited a barrack in the women's camp and was amazed at what he saw. Half the barrack was for occupation by the prisoners and the other half was a latrine. The building was complete with the exception of the total absence of the timber bunk beds but, on leaving, his mind could not come to terms with trying to imagine the intolerable stench from that indoor latrine.

During his fifty-six years spent in the United Kingdom he had always been inwardly aware of the importance of survivors telling ensuing generations about the horrific Nazi persecution of the Jews during World War Two. He recognised that knowledge of what had happened was the key to preventing a repeat of the inhuman disasters but, being a very private person, he had never gone out to seek opportunities to fulfil his feelings. This was it, this was his acid test, his chance to tell the world of younger generations exactly how it was to have your schooling rudely terminated at the tender age of twelve. How it was to be dragged from the bosom of a close and loving family and, with one exception, never to see any of his immediate kin ever again. To be beaten and starved, and generally, to suffer the prejudiced wrath of numerous races simply because he was a Jew, albeit totally innocent of any crime.

He was nervously fidgeting with his first United Kingdom passport as he prepared to start the tale of his marathon of miseries that would eventually stretch over more than fifteen hundred miles of cattle truck transport, covering five years two months of hard labour in no less than nine camps. Mayer Hersh explained how precious that first British document was, for it identified his family name, his biological birthright. Every subsequent passport had simply read 'Mayer Hersh' where that initial 1955 copy declared 'Mayer Hersh originally known as Herszkowicz'.

Mayer's family came from the town of Sieradz in pre-war Western Poland, only 75 kilometres from the then German border. They lived in a one bed-roomed flat on the second floor of a building in the oldest part of town, built around 1818, at number seven Ulica Sukiennicza, an address Mayer shared with his parents, sister and four brothers. In English the street name translates to Dressmaker Street, a leaning to distant times when certain trades concentrated in specific areas. Although economically times were exceedingly difficult, this very close knit, loving family enjoyed many very happy and contented times together, notwithstanding the ever-deepening shadows of anti-Semitism, rife in Poland, especially during the latter half of the thirties. Both Mayer and his father experienced exceedingly distasteful incidents of racial hatred at this time.

Chapter Two

Over the centuries Jews have always been a persecuted race, but when considering anti-Semitism existing in Poland during the thirties, one needs to appreciate the political background in that country. The Catholic church was at the forefront of this racial hatred, both before and during this decade, ably assisted by the aristocracy. It showed itself as hostile graffiti on public walls and pavements, a typical message declaring, 'go back to Palestine you dirty Jews'. Marshal Pilsudski was Prime Minister as the nineteen thirties opened their doors, presiding over the thirty five million Polish population, ten percent of which were Jews. He was not anti-Semitic and, being a very fair minded man, considered Jews born in or even merely living in Poland, as Poles. In the face of this racial animosity he had the foresight to believe that the great skills in trades and commerce that the Jews possessed would help build a better Poland. Unfortunately in 1935 this most popular and charismatic man passed peacefully away and Mayer missed one day's education as the whole school was taken to the cinema to see the funeral and national mourning of the people's hero. His position was filled by Szymgły Rydz, not as fair a man as his predecessor, so consequently the graffiti increased and many Jews, including Mayer himself, experienced violent verbal and physical attacks. The Jewish nation has always wandered the Earth and national borders were more open in those days than they are today, so consequently to cross from one country to another they need only be able to afford to reach the border. The Jews were always grateful for being allowed to live in that country and earn a living, thereby keeping their heads down and not looking for trouble. This passive attitude signalled to the world a reluctance to fight back. Throughout history they have been blamed for spreading epidemics and yet all they've ever wanted was peace and to be allowed to work. When the Holocaust came the Jews were not ready to fight.

Mayer went on to explain that the clouds of war had been gathering and ordinary people, Jews included, honestly believed war would take place, but there was no panic, for these people had experienced the first World War, when the German occupying forces showed exemplary behaviour and business with them was excellent. There was no way any of them could have foreseen the levels of brutality that went under the name, Holocaust. Nevertheless some of the more affluent Jews did leave the European mainland in the early part of 1939, travelling to countries like the Americas, both north and south, Britain and Israel, just in case the worst might happen. Later the borders to France and Holland were closed.

A neutral observer could have been excused for assuming that the more affluent Jews were more informed generally because there had been warnings, one as early as 1895 in Hermann Ahlwardt's speech to the Reichstag. *'The Jew is no German. If you say that a Jew is born in Germany, has obeyed German laws, has had to become a soldier, has fulfilled all his duties, has paid his taxes too, then all that is not decisive for nationality, but only the race out of which he was born is decisive.'*

'In 1933 Josef Goebbels coldly announced, *'As to annihilate German Jewry, let no one doubt our resolution.'* Three years later the same high-ranking official declared, *'A time of brutality approaches of which we have no conception.'*

On the third of March 1933 Hermann Goering stated, *'My measures will not be hindered by any legal considerations or bureaucracy whatsoever. It is not justice I have to carry out, but annihilation and extermination.'* On the twelfth of November 1938, the same Nazi showman had this to say, *'Kick out the Jews from the economy and turn them into debtors.'*

On July 5th 1938 the Western powers held the Evian conference in France where they did nothing in relation to the more and more threatening situations for Jews in Europe. Apparently it has come to light in recent years that the British government decreed that it would only attend this conference on condition that Palestine was not to be on the agenda. The following words were spoken by Adolf Hitler on January 20th 1939 as a direct reply to the lack of action from the Western powers. *'It is a shameless spectacle to see how the whole democratic world is oozing sympathy for the poor tormented Jewish people, but remains hardhearted and obdurate when it comes to helping them.'* The non committal attitude of the free world is best epitomised by considering the remark made by the Australian delegate, *'since we have no racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one.'* In a voice laden with sadness and emotion Mayer continued, mentioning that there is a saying which is most appropriate in this instance: "all that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing".

Finally when action against the Jews was well underway, the following statement came from the mouth of Josef Goebbels on the sixteenth of November 1941. *'By reason of their birth and race, all Jews are part of an international conspiracy against National Socialist Germany. The treatment we give them does them no wrong. They have more than deserved it.'*

Probably unbeknown to most ordinary folk, Nazism had, at its roots, the belief that Jews were evil parasites and sexual predators, grasping capitalists as well as Marxist conspirators. This perverted philosophy blamed the Jews of Europe and America for the First World War, the Great Depression and the spread of Bolshevism. This vile doctrine looked upon the Jewish race as one of lower standing, needing less room, less clothing, less food and less culture than a race of higher standing. Given all these distorted beliefs, and in hindsight, it was in all probability not surprising that the leaders of this dark age, with meticulous attention to detail, gave birth to the greatest monster of the twentieth century, 'die Endlosung', the final solution.

Sieradz had a total population of 12,000, of which 5,000 were Jews, a similar number of Catholic Poles and the remainder ethnic Germans. There was anti-Semitism in Poland before, during and after the war. Before the war the main culprits would be the Catholic Poles, whilst once the Germans had invaded and taken occupation, the ethnic Germans would be mostly the collaborators with the Third Reich. The main Schul, or synagogue, in Sieradz could hold a thousand Jews at worship, whilst the second in size for religious meetings was the Beit Hamidrash, a religious place of learning and for prayer. In addition there were numerous stiebels in the town, the word in German meaning room, which were not large, but served as prayer rooms.

Mayer's father, Isaac Lajb Herszkowicz, born in 1896 in Lask 33 kms away from Sieradz, had had a very religious upbringing and could speak Polish, German, Russian and Yiddish.

His mother, Riwka Rachel Szczukowska, was born in Kalisz, near Poznan, and approximately 50 kms from Sieradz. Kalisz was then in Germany until 1918 when it became part of Poland. She received Hebrew, German and Polish education and, although orphaned and losing her home due to the first World War, never felt bitter about that fact.

Isaac Herszkowicz had married previously but his first wife had died at the tender age of 22 years, leaving him with two babies, Yakov and Kajla. He was a happy being normally, often singing, but nevertheless was afraid of no man. He did, however, usually conform with his own mother's advice and, when she recommended a cousin of his first wife's as being of good stock, he married the lady who was to become Mayer's mother. Mayer himself was a shy lad, not particularly sports minded and somewhat withdrawn, being, metaphorically speaking, diametrically opposite to his elder brother, Yakov, who was a very outgoing person,

always with a good crowd of friends and very much into sports. He played football in bare feet because their father could not afford football boots, the lack of affluence of the Herszkowicz family earning them the description of 'quite poor'. Many Jews were significantly poorer, and some children went to bed half starved, waking up in the middle of the night from pangs of hunger, crying for a piece of dry bread. Yakov was a strong physical boy who helped his father with heavy fetching and carrying and also had keen sight to prevent pilfering by many Christians, a state of affairs polarised by the stark poverty present at that time. It is often stated by non Jews that there are never any poor Jews, but that was certainly not the case in Sieradz in 1939.

Although a well-to-do Jew owned the flourmill in the town, most of them were experiencing hard times pre war, due, in no small part, to the restrictive legislation imposed on Jews over the centuries. Jewish people were thus forced to choose from the very narrow band of trades that were accessible to them, namely, tailoring, saddlery, glazing, shoemaking, joinery, shopkeepers, barbers and bakers. Too many people doing the same job led to too competitive a price to survive. His father was a tailor and a good one, who served his apprenticeship at Brzezín near Lodz. He was a canny man, for he would make cheaper suits, where his money was much safer, rather than their expensive counterparts, which would often lead to ruin for the manufacturer. He worked from home on the family's one and only table and, being an excellent manager and working on wafer thin margins, his keen prices put others out of business and he would often buy their stock at a discounted price. He made up stock for home and market and he worked so quickly that he could make thirty pairs of trousers per day on a treadle machine. He counted numerous farmers on his customer list and they would often come for funeral clothes, which were a most lucrative line due to people being superstitious and so would not bargain down. Most of his customers were non Jews and he would always ask after the family, or their livestock, impressing them all with his excellent customer relationships. Nevertheless he did have his competition, for there was also a tailor below on the first floor who was not above virtually dragging customers in off the stairs in pursuit of sales. Mayer's father took his daughter, Kajla, out from school early for she was an excellent worker with a keen brain and, with her help, the business prospered.

Mayer's mother was not particularly interested in business matters, partly due to the fact that she had to bring up seven children when she married his father who, as a widower, already had two children from his first marriage. His mother lost her first child when less than two years old but nevertheless continued to be the rock on which their happy family life was built. She cooked and cooked with love and was always extremely busy, so much so that he remembers asking her why she didn't ask the children to help her. She would buy chickens and take them to the slaughterhouse, for koshering the meat, by thoroughly draining all blood, was a meticulous job. For Passover his mother would buy many eggs and potatoes, storing the eggs in numerous drawers. She would manage the space and services of their one room flat, a space about 16 feet square, for the eating and sleeping habits of eight people and the self employed requirements of one tailor. Their attic room on the top floor of the building made the worst of Poland's widely varied climate. The unbearable heat of summer making sleep virtually impossible, whilst the extreme winter temperatures would freeze a bucket of water. There were two permanent and three collapsible beds and privacy for the parents was obviously at a premium. On Thursday mornings mother, with any of her children not in school, would take cake and chala, plaited bread for the Sabbath, to the bakers, from where they would collect the cooked product on Friday for Shabat. Also on Friday the children would take cholen, a big pot made up of chicken or other meats with potatoes and butter beans, or Kasza, a type of barley. This was collected about noon, after prayers, from the baker. It was a most delicious meal, the word 'cholen' believed to be derived from the French phrase 'chaud long', meaning staying hot.

Mayer attended the Powszechny mixed comprehensive school where he studied Mathematics, English, Geography, History and Music from a variety of good and indifferent teachers. One teacher stood out in his memory for the wrong reasons, his lady maths teacher, Najmanowa, born a Jew but who since had turned to Christianity. He had been off ill for two weeks and, on his return, the teacher asked him questions he was unable to answer because of missing the work. "That's your problem," was her abrupt reply, for which Mayer disliked her and could never forget or forgive her lack of human feeling. When a pupil met a teacher in the street he had to doff his cap but, when war broke out and the ghetto was formed in the Herszkowicz's part of the town, her conversion to Christianity cut no ice with the Germans for, in their eyes, born a Jew meant always a Jew. She was transferred to Mayer's building and it brought him great pleasure not lifting his cap to her again. Although a Jewish school, the staff were mixed and one of his favourite members of staff was Weichmanowa, a lovely ethnic German lady and an excellent history teacher but one who suffered somewhat for her inability to maintain discipline.

Mayer also followed his Hebrew education by attending the Cheder school where discipline was strict. One tall male teacher, nicknamed 'Stoik', made liberal use of a cat o' nine tails with the full permission of all the fathers of the pupils. This man also doubled as a doctor, although not a physician in the true sense of the word, he was well respected in his secondary profession and once tended Mayer with tonsillitis, issuing a prescription to cover necessary treatment. One day Mayer addressed him by his nickname and the teacher chased the boy home with his cat o' nine tails, the pupil hiding up in the house until passions cooled somewhat.

Mayer did not have any great ambitions but, since he showed some academic ability, his father promised him higher education, secular as well as Hebrew. To this end he sent him to another Hebrew teacher and paid for the privilege. This man was an excellent teacher in Jewish history and taught even on Shabat afternoon in classes of between ten and fifteen. Even without this extra paid education, school was a six-day week, Shabat excepted, with primary school starting at seven years of age and running from 8am to 1pm. Hebrew school started for pupils of five years and lasted for three hours in the afternoons.

Mayer's very best friend was David Josefowicz, whose mother had died pre war in the thirties, and who lived in Castle Street with his father, Henoeh, and his brothers and sisters. They had what currently one would describe as a terraced town house which was much more upmarket than the Herszkowicz's flat in Dressmaker Street. David's dad bought livestock from farmers, usually chickens and geese, which were kept in their own backyard, a precious possession denied many of the poorer people. Henoeh was an entrepreneur, a taker of risks, and it was soon to become apparent, during the occupation, that David shared that same quality with his father. With the acumen of a specialist, his father would buy off whole orchards of green fruit on the edge of town. He would then be responsible for the successful growing on of the fruit, including watering, spraying and marketing. There was always an element of risk in fruit growing, some years doing very well, others not so well. In July during the school holidays Mayer and David passed many happy days picking fruit, usually soft fruit like gooseberries, bilberries and cherries. Both the young lads enjoying the companionship, not to mention the fruit!

Mayer remembered those pre war days as being basically happy but marred by the anti-Semitism endemic at that time. His father, a good man who more than once helped a poor neighbour with money for food for their hungry children, and yet was verbally abused and physically attacked just because he was a Jew. Likewise Mayer himself endured this evil malice when a boy pushed a piece of non koshered sausage into his mouth and another lad kept continually taunting him with the despicable phrase, 'you dirty Jew'. Now Mayer was, and still is, the most mild mannered of men and one of the last to lose his composure, but

eventually that name caused him to snap and drop a brick on the youth's head. The latter never called him a dirty Jew ever again.

Jews were restricted to certain trades and, in order that this restriction be maintained in the future, as far as possible, only ten percent maximum of Jewish applicants for higher education were to be granted such a privilege. This percentage figure was arrived at due to the Jewish population being ten percent of the full Polish population. Consequently if in any one year, one hundred Jews applied for higher education, only ten would be given the opportunity of advancement in their chosen career, be it doctor, vet or lawyer. Having said anti-Semitism existed extensively in the thirties, Jews got by because non Jews always wanted their best deal and these more privileged citizens knew that a more attractive price was always to be had from a Jew, their skills in trading and business in general already being legendary.

He remembered a number of the neighbours in those days when events in Germany were casting an ever-lengthening shadow over the rest of Europe. There was a very religious Jewish family on the ground floor who ran a haberdashery stall in the market on Tuesdays and Fridays. The wife of the family would deliver children in the neighbourhood and actually officiated in the births of his three younger brothers.

Mayer could picture in his mind Mordechai der wassertreger, the water carrier, who also lived on the second floor, as an old man, although probably only in his forties. He would deliver water to people who could afford to pay, in two wooden buckets attached to a yoke around his shoulders. There was another water carrier in the town, a more up market version, whose horse drawn tanker was quite an advanced improvement for a small town like Sieradz, both collected their product via the pumps in either Market Square or Castle Street. Mordechai was a poor man who, out of necessity, existed on bread and kasza (barley). In winter when the temperature dropped to very low levels one, or even both, pumps would actually freeze up, causing significant inconvenience, not to mention putting two hard workers out of a job.

The caretaker of the block of flats was the only non Jew, Kazimierz Kruk, a heavy drinker who would beat his wonderful wife with a knotted towel or belt. He could not keep money and Mayer's father and others helped them manage their finances. Kruk visited Germany and he returned overwhelmed with the medical benefit system they enjoyed and was most impressed with how well off the German people were with their high standard of living. He enjoyed making a dramatic statement in the courtyard to a group of anxious Jews, Mayer could still hear his words, 'when the Germans come in, they'll cut off all Jewish heads.' Sadly his prophecy came true. That the Germans would invade there was little doubt, this state of affairs being enhanced when 15,000 Polish born Jews, who had lived in the Fatherland for ten, twenty and even thirty years, were given notice of eviction. He remembered early in October 1938 when the Polish government stated that all Jews who had lived outside Poland for more than five years would have their passports revoked. The Germans immediately announced there would no longer be a place inside their country for these 'stateless' people. On October 18th 1938 these hapless and helpless people were forced to leave their homes with just one suitcase per person and escorted to the nearest railway station, leaving the rest of their belongings behind. They were transported through the night to the German/Polish border and forced over at gunpoint.

Sonheim was the landlord who lived with his family on the ground floor in more spacious accommodation with his own toilet but, like the tenants, had no running water. His married children and extended family would occupy separate flats within the block of flats. The property owners were very good hearted and compassionate people. If some of the tenants had difficulties with the rent payment they would always show understanding. Since nobody in those days possessed a fridge, the landlord would allow Mayer's family to use his cellar for some of their cooked food. Using an oil press in the basement, Sonheim also made money on oil from rapeseed and on residual cake to farmers for cattle feed as well as revenue from

his granary situated in his backyard. One night the German soldiers raided a few homes including the Sonheim family. All these people were so chosen because they were influential and respectable in the local community and, materially, better off than most. These deportations the Germans euphemistically described as aussiedlung, meaning resettlement. The victims were either murdered on arrival or died in the gassing vans, to be cremated at Chelmnó.

Most Jews in Sieradz were orthodox with a small minority of liberal persuasion, these being mainly ethnic German Jews, who had their own Schul and lived in the better part of town.

Mayer respected his father greatly and could picture him beavering away in his very ordinary suit and a cap and always sporting a short beard. During the week he was usually quite tense but Friday and Saturday saw him more relaxed and happy. He was a courageous man and afraid of nobody. Yiddish was spoken in family circles whilst outside and in school Polish was used.

Another person who was a familiar caller to the Herszkowicz household in the late thirties was Arnold Kupfer, a young man in his twenties born in Germany and whose father was a Polish Jew. He was going out with Mayer's sister, Kajla, and reasonably soon the two became engaged. Both wanted to emigrate to Palestine, for Arnold was of the opinion that the future for Jews in Europe was black indeed, but they encountered strong resistance from Kajla's father, not wanting to lose his daughter for she was such an asset to his business. As early as 1936/37 Mayer's sister and elder brother, Yakov, wanted to emigrate to Palestine but unfortunately the British Mandatory Authority would not give permission. In March 1939 Arnold managed to obtain emigration papers for Uruguay but her father continued to insist that she could not go. Arnold wrote often to Kajla from South America but by then it was too late for his fiancée, trapped by the war. Years later, Arnold eventually reached his goal, Israel.

Immediately before war was declared Mayer witnessed a horrible example of anti-Semitic behaviour that cast a shadow over Sieradz like a black cloud before a storm. A young Catholic priest, an educated man, went to the market and told customers not to buy from Jews. In minutes the market place was deserted, for most of the customers were non Jews and to them the word of a priest was to be obeyed in preference to that of the police. This man of God, who preached to his congregation to love thy neighbour, had lost his way with respect to his calling and it served as an ominous warning to Jews of the dark days ahead that they were about to endure. In those tension charged weeks in late August 1939 Jews were stung visibly by anti-Semitic slurs, especially from a man of the cloth. The following market day, however, the non Jews wanted their best prices once again, and all the customers returned.

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