

CHAPTER 1

David Rubinowicz

“The End of the World Will Soon Be Here”

The militia was in Slupia and arrested three Jews. They finished them off in Bieliny (they were certainly shot). Already a lot of Jewish blood has flowed in this Bieliny, in fact a whole Jewish cemetery has already grown up there. When will this bloodshed finally end? If it goes on much longer, then people will drop like flies out of sheer horror. A peasant from Krajno came to tell us our former neighbor’s daughter had been shot because she’d gone out after seven o’clock. I can scarcely believe it, but everything’s possible. A girl as pretty as a picture—if she could be shot, then the end of the world will soon be here.

The Nazis considered Poles subhuman and, after crushing the country “like a soft-boiled egg” in the fall of 1939, treated them with contempt. Young Poles, if allowed to live at all, were to be raised as beasts of burden, with just enough education as “would demonstrate to them the hopelessness of their national destiny.” Beneath them were the Jews. “They must go”; they had to be “finish[ed] off,” proclaimed Governor-General Hans Frank, the new power in Poland.

The killers were not to pass over any place, however small, or any person, however young. And so they swept into Krajno, a small village a hundred miles south of Warsaw, and laid their hands on David Rubinowicz. Today there are few reminders of David, who was fifteen when he disappeared into the gas chambers. No school bears his name, no tablet or plaque of any description marks his brief time on the Earth. No grave. The house he lived in no longer stands. All that remains is the diary he kept for two years. That, and a photograph. The photograph was taken during a school outing—the year was 1937, and David was in the fourth grade.

Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939. Right away came a decree forbidding Jewish children to attend school. “When I think of how I used to go to school,” David wrote in his diary on August 2, 1940, “I feel like bursting into tears, and today I must stay at home and can’t go anywhere.” He had just turned thirteen.

David was born on July 27, 1927, in Kielce. He had a younger brother, Herszel, and a little sister named Malka. His parents were Josek and Tauba. The five of them shared a small wooden house on Krajno’s main road. The Rubinowicz were country folk, no different from their neighbors, except that they happened to be Jews. Josek Rubinowicz was a dairyman; he owned a cow and a wagon, and ran a small shop. But a year after the German occupation, the dairy was no more. The cow had been sold so the Germans wouldn’t take it, and now the Rubinowicz were much poorer.

“WE’RE UTTERLY UNEMPLOYED”

David had an uncle in Kielce whom he used to visit regularly, and the Rubinowicz had lived there themselves before moving to Krajno. Like many Polish cities and towns, Kielce had a large Jewish population—in 1939, every fourth person was a Jew. On April 4, 1940, David went to see his uncle again. He got up earlier than usual and left after breakfast. On his right arm he wore “the four-inch armband in white with the star of Zion” all Jews over the age of ten had been ordered to display, at all times, on pain of imprisonment. As Jews were not allowed to travel on vehicles, he walked.

It was sad following the paths across the fields all by myself. After four hours I was in Kielce. When I went into Uncle’s house, I saw them all sitting so sad, and I learned that Jews from various streets are being deported and I also grew sad.

The following day he wrote in his diary: “I couldn’t sleep all night, such strange thoughts kept coming into my head.”

At first, the effect of the war on the Rubinowiczzes was mainly economic. “Today’s the first anniversary of the outbreak of war,” recorded David on September 1, 1940.

I remember what we’ve already gone through in this short time, how much suffering we’ve already experienced. Before the war everyone had some kind of occupation, hardly anyone was out of work. But in present-day wars ninety percent are unemployed, and only ten percent have a job. Take us—we used to have a dairy and now we’re utterly unemployed. There’s only very little stock left from before the war, we’re still using it up, but it’s already running out, and then we don’t know we’ll do.

That first year, and even for much of the second, there was still time to have fun. He began learning to ride a bicycle, but had to give it up when its owner would no longer teach him. He could even go out into the woods. “Some boys who were going picking berries in the woods, called for us,” he wrote on July 11, 1941. “We took a bowl along. Once there, we immediately began picking bilberries, only the midges and flies stung us badly. We filled the bowl and went home. We got five liters [a little more than a gallon] to start with.”

David loved the outdoors, and when he could not go out, there was always the window, where he liked to sit. The window faced the road beyond the yard, and beyond the road lay the fields. “It was nice looking out like that, when I hadn’t looked out of the window for a whole week,” he reported on July 7, 1940, after a bout of the flu. Four days later: “I feel well already. I went out into the yard; the sun was shining and it was hot. I stayed out the whole day, because I couldn’t stand being indoors.” Soon, fully recovered, he rejoiced: “Each day I get happier after this illness. Just as the days not get happier and sunnier.”

On March 24, 1941, David stood at the window and watched soldiers pass. “My head was awhirl with so many vehicles and cavalry. Heavy artillery was also on the move. It was fun... We hardly ever see soldiers in our parts.”

The fun did not last long. A few months later David was home by himself when German militiamen entered the house, searched “every corner,” and announced that his father was to report to the militia. Both parents went.

I looked out the window for hours on end, thinking they’ll soon be back, but the hours went by and still no sign of them. All sorts of ideas went through my mind—whether they’d been arrested, whether such militia didn’t really exist. In the end, I didn’t know what to think.

Someone told him that his father had been taken into “temporary custody,” and David “raced home with this bad news.” At the time, his uncle, aunt, and grandmother were living with them. “All were alarmed. Uncle went to the militia right away, and Auntie as well. We children stayed behind on our own, except for Grandma. We had no supper at all; at twelve o’clock I went to bed.”

Josek and Tauba had been taken to jail and were released the next day.

On June 17, 1941, the day after Josek and Tauba were taken into “temporary custody,” the Rubinowiczzes scurried to hide their valuables, linen, and clothing.

There was a terrible panic in the village, as if bandits were coming. And then they came. First they searched a peasant’s house, and then they left. When they were near to our house, I thought my heart would jump out, it was thumping so violently, but thank goodness, the militia didn’t enter the house, though they certainly meant to. But I said, If they come back, they’re bound to search our house. We were so afraid, we didn’t know what was happening.

“I WAS SO FRIGHTENED”

The Germans were a constant threat. One showed up at the family’s door with a motorcycle that had broken down near the house. “He couldn’t leave it just anywhere, so he pushed it into our hall,” explained David. “Just then along came some Jews who were on their way to Bodzentyn, and this militiaman began checking their papers, and in the process a Jew received a severe beating from him.” Another militiaman, starting to feel cold, just popped into their house to warm himself. “When he was inside, he said the Jews in Krajno should buy two sheepskins for him to make up into a fur coat.” On leaving, the German gave his mother a small bottle of vodka.

The militia came often.

December 26, 1941

Father was just dressing when a boy came up to him and told him to go into the shop, a militiaman was calling for him, but it wasn’t clear why. Father finished dressing and went into the shop. We were very frightened because we didn’t know why he’d called for him. Nowadays a person can be arrested for any trifle.

January 15, 1942

While I was having my dinner, I saw the same militiaman who'd been at our place, walking along the street. I ran out into the fields, fleeing because I thought he was coming to fetch us. Out in the field I thought I'd go to another village and stay there until they left. I set off; then I saw that the militiaman was walking in the same direction as myself. I couldn't run away, because he'd already seen me. I resigned myself to my fate, took off the armband so that at least he wouldn't recognize me from a distance, and carried on walking. When I entered the village, I thought I'd have a stroke, I was so frightened. I then went down the village street. At the other end of the village I met the same militiaman again, because he hadn't been going after me but had come up the other street. He didn't see me, however. You can imagine how terrified I was. He went past and I went home.

February 9, 1942

We had to shovel snow till evening. Father came from Kielce just as the German and the committee entered our house. They didn't make an exact search of the house. As they were leaving, they demanded two chickens and a bottle of vodka for supper. We had to hand them over a chicken and a bottle of vodka. So one day follows another—always expense and fear.

To the Rubinowiczes every German was a whip poised to strike, for a German could do anything—rob, beat, kill—and no questions would be asked. On November 1, 1941, notices went up in Kielce announcing the death penalty for any Jew who entered or left the ghetto without permission. The edict soon covered all the ghettos of the Government General, as the area that used to be Poland had been renamed. Shortly thereafter, David saw a sudden increase in murders, and his fear grew.

December 12, 1941

Yesterday afternoon I went to Bodzentyn to get my tooth filled and intended to stay there overnight. Early this morning the militia came. As they were driving along the highway, they met a Jew who was going out of town, and they immediately shot him for no reason, then they drove on and shot a Jewess, again for no reason. So two victims have perished for absolutely no reason. All the way home I was very frightened I might run across them, but I didn't run across anybody.

December 28, 1941

I was awakened from sleep by a knock on the window; I dressed and went to open the door. It was two Jews from Bodzentyn who were going to Kielce and had come to warm themselves. I asked them for news, and they said two more victims had been shot at Christmas, for no reason either....In the afternoon the clerk of the Jewish elders' council came from Daleszyce and said there'd been five victims that day, five Jews killed by the militia because someone had reported them for hiding their furs. The militiaman ordered them to be buried in a hole in their own yard. They were a father, three sons, and a daughter. In Kielce several people fall victim every day for leaving the Jewish Quarter. Under such terrible, bad conditions, days and weeks pass full of fear and terror.

January 8, 1942

In the afternoon I learned that there'd been two more Jewish victims in Bodzentyn. One was killed outright and the other wounded. They arrested the wounded man and took him to the local police in Bieliny, and there they'll probably beat him to death.

January 15, 1942

I learned that they'd manacled a Jew and taken him to the local police....They'd tied him to their sleigh and he'd been forced to run after it. Perhaps they'll shoot him—who knows? We sat there the whole evening, very sad and thoughtful. How many enemies are on the prowl after such a poor defenseless creature!...While he was tied to the sleigh, he couldn't run anymore, and they'd dragged him along behind the sleigh and then shot him—such an unhappy fate he'd had to suffer!

In March 1942, the Rubinowiczes were forced to move to the nearby town of Bodzentyn.

March 16, 1942

Someone at home said that in Krajno four Jewish persons had been shot while walking in the direction of Kielce. Two persons had only been wounded with bayonets, and two, a mother and son, were dead. When you hear endlessly of such atrocities, how can you live calmly, without fear? When you hear such things you really do get very frightened.

April 10, 1942

The militia was in Slupia and arrested three Jews. They finished them off in Bieliny (they were certainly shot). Already a lot of Jewish blood has flowed in Bieliny; in fact a whole Jewish cemetery has already grown up there. When will this bloodshed finally end? If it goes on much longer, then people will drop like flies out of horror. A peasant from Krajno came to tell us our former neighbor's daughter had been shot because she'd gone out after seven o'clock. I can scarcely believe it, but everything's possible. A girl as pretty as a picture—if she could be shot, then the end of the world will soon be here.

June 1, 1942

This morning two Jewish women, a mother and a daughter, had gone into the country. Unfortunately the Germans were driving from Rudki to Bodzentyn to fetch potatoes and ran across them. When the two women caught sight of the Germans they began to flee, but they were overtaken and arrested. They intended shooting them on the spot in the village, but the mayor wouldn't allow it. They then went into the woods and shot them there.

One of Hitler's major goals was to make hatred of Jews permanent. On February 12, 1942, David noticed the village policeman putting up a notice.

On it a Jew is shown, mincing meat and putting a rat into the mincer. Another is pouring water from a bucket into the milk. In the third picture, a Jew is shown stamping dough with his feet, and worms are crawling over him and the dough. The headline of the notice read: "The Jew Is a Cheat, Your Only Enemy!" And the inscription ran as follows:

Dear reader, before your very eyes,
Are Jews deceiving you with lies.
If you buy your milk from them, beware,
Dirty water they've poured in there.
Into the mincer dead rats they throw,
Then as mincemeat it's put on show.
Worms infest their homemade bread,
Because the dough with feet they tread.

David stuck around long enough to register the reaction of the people standing around. They laughed, and their laughter, he wrote, "gave me a headache from the shame that the Jews suffer nowadays. God grant that this shame may soon end."

EVACUATION

The biggest change in David's life was announced in January of 1942. Sitting at his window "watching the wind blowing across the fields," he spotted the village crier and "went to see what was the news." What he heard sent him dashing home: "All Jews were to be evacuated from the villages."

"Evacuation" of Jews had been going on practically since the German invasion almost two and a half years earlier, but till then the Rubinowiczes had been spared. "Now it's our turn to suffer," realized David. "How long, God only knows." Five days after learning that the seven Jewish families of Krajno were to be "evacuated," Krajno's mayor showed up at the house. "Father fetched some vodka and they finished it off together because he was a bit chilled." The mayor "said all Jews would have to be shot because they were enemies," and other things that took David's breath away. "If I could only write down a part of all he said at our house, but I simply can't."

Josek spent the final months in Krajno in a frantic, but doomed, effort to convince the regional Jewish council to postpone their "resettlement." The Jewish council administered the affairs of the Jewish community; it was created by the Nazis and answered to them. "We've put ourselves in God's hands and are ready for anything," wrote David at the end of this period.

The Rubinowiczes sold off items that were no longer needed; they retrieved the iron stove they had lent out; they hauled wood and ran errands; they laid in half a hundredweight of potatoes ("It's always cheaper to buy things in a village than in a town"), and David "took down the extension to the cowshed—it'll provide wood for a few days."

When the day of "relocation" arrived, it became clear just how well Josek and his wife, Tauba, were thought of in the village. The neighbors remembered their readiness to offer assistance to anyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. "There's hardly anyone in our village who's not sorry for us," David recorded in his diary on March 10 1942. "Many don't even want to come and see us—they say they don't want to witness other people's misfortune." But

others came anyway and wished them well. “Thinking of how we had to leave here, I had to go out into the yard. I cried so much that I stood there sobbing more than half an hour. When I’d quieted down a bit, I went back into the house. The peasants had already gone.”

David’s neighbors did not behave like the Jew-hating Poles of legend. His diary is filled with instances of Poles going out of their way to help Jews. Poles repeatedly tipped off Jews when Germans were out for blood, and just as often David ducked into peasant homes to stay out of the Germans’ clutches. This was true in Bodzentyn as well as in Krajno. In the tension-filled days of the following May, for example, when the German militia, the Polish police, and even the Jewish police were rounding up Jews for labor camps, David constantly relied on the help of non-Jews to avoid being captured.

The next morning a man came with a cart and the Rubinowicz family loaded their things. “When the carter had gone, it was as empty at home as a tunnel.” David said good-bye to the uncle and aunt who had been staying with them—they were going to Bieliny—and he helped them load their stuff as well. “This evening was very sad; there was no one here, only myself, Mother, and Father.”

After the house had been turned into an empty shell, David wished he was already gone. March 12 was the day. Early in the morning, David and his father went to get a cart. An hour later a peasant showed up with a horse. David walked the six and a half miles between Krajno and Bodzentyn in a daze, choking on emotions.

I went out without any armband on. As I left, I couldn’t say a word, my heart was so heavy. I walked perhaps five kilometers [three miles], almost unconscious—I didn’t know how I managed to walk so fast. The whole way the cart couldn’t catch up with me. En route I was terribly frightened—oh, God, if anybody had met us then!

FORCED LABOR

Bodzentyn was much bigger than Krajno, with houses viciously crammed together. The area the Germans had designated as the Jewish ghetto was particularly depressing. There the houses were older, uglier, and smaller, and the cobblestones higher. No wonder David felt stifled in Bodzentyn. Though his Jewish neighbors treated his family “like brothers,” he had a hard time getting used to his new surroundings: Bodzentyn was not home. Here there were no fields to run through, no forest to roam, no mushrooms to gather. “Here I go out into the street, but in no time at all I’m back—what’s there for me to do in the street?”

David missed Krajno terribly, and he would see it just one more time. He went there on April 28 with his father, scrounging for food.

While we were going along, I felt exactly as if I was going home, and soon I found myself lost in daydreams. But shortly after, I realized they were only idle reveries. Arriving, Father went to the village and I waited at our former neighbor’s. Later I went to our house; there Father was waiting for me. When I went in, the dwelling seemed so strange, as if we’d never lived there. Father gave me money to pay for the potatoes he’d bought. How glad I was to run along the path I knew so well! And again I felt as if I was just running back home, that my parents were there and all the others, but then it was all over. When I got back, Father was no longer there. I baked a few potatoes for myself and waited for him. Then I sat down at the window, specially to recall better the moments I’d once spent there. But I didn’t sit for long. Somehow I felt so sad that I went out; otherwise I’d have wept.

In Bodzentyn the world of the Rubinowicz family completely unraveled. First they were robbed. “One misfortune—that’s easily borne, it is not until several combine that a human being is crushed,” reflected David. Then came the manhunts. The first anti-Jewish decree issued in Poland required “all Jews to work.” Jews between the ages of twelve and sixty-nine had to register with the local Jewish community leaders. Shirkers faced up to ten years of imprisonment. This “work” was forced labor, not unlike that performed by chain gangs in some prisons in the American South, only worse.

The raids intensified after the Rubinowicz family was forced to relocate to Bodzentyn. Bodzentyn had a Jewish council, and one of its main tasks was to supply Germans with Jewish labor. The council, however, had a tough time filling the orders, since Jews naturally tended to stay away. It was then that the militia and the Polish police, and sometimes the Jewish police as well, sprang into action, combing the streets and seizing Jews in their homes.

March 19, 1942

Today there’ve been rumors circulating that on Sunday six squads of Polish police are coming, plus the militia. Some say they’ll be making raids, others say otherwise; no one really knows. Raids of course not on Aryans, only on Jews.

Everyone goes around frightened, wondering where he can hide and find somewhere safe. But where can one feel safe nowadays? Nowhere at all.

April 14, 1942

Early in the morning, I learned that the militia had come to search through the Jew's dwellings. They've taken away three people from one house.... We were very frightened they'd perhaps visit us...and even though we don't own anything, we were very frightened.... While I was sitting at home, I saw a militiaman go past, and someone went into Auntie's place. I went to the stairway and heard the Germans were with Auntie and a policeman had come in from the yard. My heart began pounding like a hammer. I didn't go home, but instead walked along the street slowly.

May 6, 1942

About three o'clock I was awakened by knocking. It was the police already making a raid. I wasn't afraid. After all, Father and my cousin were in Krajno and knew what was going on. The other cousins had hidden. After a few minutes, I heard more knocking on the door and Uncle opened up right away. A Jewish and a Polish policeman entered. Immediately they began making a search; one of them eyed me and ordered my to get dressed. The other asked how old I was. I answered fourteen; then he left me alone. They rummaged around a bit, found no one.... I wasn't afraid; even so I was trembling as if I had a fit of the shivers.

May 8, 1942

Auntie came, saying they're also picking up people like me. At first I didn't know what to do, but then suddenly realized I had to hide. I went to our Polish neighbor's wife and stayed there. The slightest rustling and I was terrified it was them coming in.

May 15, 1942

At 4 a.m. several trucks arrived. We thought, Now they'll quickly be evacuating everyone. I got so scared, I got a terrible pain and had to go outside. Scarcely had I opened the door but I saw a German standing on the other side of the street, looking straight at me. I didn't go out but left the door open. I was very frightened, scared he'd come into our flat.

Though he was eligible for work himself, David worried most about his father. Every time Josek left the house, David was terrified. Had he been picked up in a raid? Where had he been taken? Did he have enough to eat, did he have his medicine? Would he return?

Still, David kept his head. What's more, he often was less flustered than others. A few weeks after moving to Bodzentyn, the Rubinowicz "were robbed of everything": three geese...fifteen kilos [about thirty-three pounds] rye, five kilos [eleven pounds] flour, and eight loaves." Devastated, they questioned a man who had been seen casing the house, but he denied everything. "I suggested we should go to his brother's place—perhaps there'd be some clue there.... There *was* a clue—near the house there were bloodstains everywhere.... He confessed everything and returned the lot."

David was extremely conscientious. He rarely reported anything he had not personally experienced or was unable to check for himself. When a boy told him that a German had ordered snow to be shoveled into a Jew's house "because it was so dirty inside," David did not believe it. "In the evening, however, I went and saw with my own eyes that it was really true." A stickler for accuracy, he routinely checked and double-checked his sources. Instead of saying "four Jewish persons had been shot while walking in the direction of Kielce," he wrote, "Someone at home said that in Krajno four Jewish persons had been shot...." Even the militia benefited from David's evenhandedness. When they turned Krajno inside out requisitioning food, David followed them and saw them entering a house, but whether they took anything he would not say—"because I don't know."

The brutal acts of the German enforcers in the Polish countryside took up many an entry, but David also recorded those rare moments when the soldiers appeared to him in a human light. The militia had been "quite decent," he commented after one of their frequent raids; "they hadn't bawled a single person," and paid eighty zlotys for the bicycle they took from his cousin, "and my cousin had to sign for it." They didn't take anything from his cousin's sister, "only the five meters [a little over a yard] of material because they simply had to confiscate the material." On one occasion Jews even sent a cart with "presents for the militia because they were kind people." David also had nice things to say about the German who helped his mother retrieve the things the militia had seized in a raid, as well as for the militiaman who "tore his hair" because he was sorry for what he had done—shooting a person on the run. On April 21, 1942, David reported that his uncle had to pay a fine of twenty zlotys for failure to clear the yard of manure, but added: "I didn't actually hear that myself."

A TERRIBLE DAY

Living under the gun took its toll. Murders “for no reason,” arrests “for any trifle,” and humiliations and beatings and requisitionings and roundup and fear, always fear. “If only you could have one quiet day,” he wrote on April 9, 1942. “My nerves are utterly exhausted; whenever I hear of anyone’s distress, I burst into tears, my head starts aching, and I’m exhausted, as if I’d been doing the hardest possible work. It’s not only me; everyone feels the same.”

Everyone included his family. “Uncle and the other in the house nag us constantly. We’re not even allowed to chop wood in the yard, and on top of that various trivial things that really aren’t worth mentioning. But we live at a time when you can’t speak out; all you can do is keep quiet and swallow everything.”

Everyone included his mother, going to pieces before his eyes. “Mother is exhausted by today’s events as if they’d been going on for a whole month,” David wrote about the day she spent at the police trying to get back the things that had been taken from them in a raid. One day, after her husband had been taken to a labor camp and the Jewish council kept giving her the runaround, she came home, “her eyes red with weeping,” and “the whole day [went] around crying. You can imagine how I feel.”

Everyone included his father. Jozek Rubinowicz was an old-fashioned man, accustomed to obedience and by nature somewhat irritable. The strain on the head of the household was enormous. One day Jozek Rubinowicz’s nerves snapped. May 1, 1942:

While I was in Krajno I got several clumps of chives. Today I had time to plant them in flowerpots. I still wasn’t finished when Father called me to help with the grinding. I was to leave everything in the yard just as it was—my brother could clear up. After grinding, I went into the flat. When Father came, he began to be very angry at me—why had I scattered the wood all over the woodshed?—and beat me. I told him I hadn’t had time to tidy up the wood, and he beat me even more. I was very upset at him beating me without cause. And finally, when he’d beaten me so hard several times with his belt buckle, I began crying, not so much out of pain as anger. I got real bruises that hurt badly. Finally he ordered me to start grinding. But how could I grind when my arm hurt so much I couldn’t move it?

Now it was David’s turn to snap. “Father doesn’t love me at all, and he wouldn’t be sorry if something happened to me. All he feels is his duty; it doesn’t cross his mind there might be more to it than that.”

David could not forget the beating, nor the thoughts he had about his father. May 6: “A terrible day!” Their place had been ransacked, their food seized, and, worst of all, the eldest Rubinowicz was picked up in a raid. Filled with remorse, David sobbed, “They’ve taken Father from us, they’ve taken our property, and now I feel such a yearning for Father....”

Two trucks came up and one had a trailer. When I saw it I immediately thought they were taking Father away in it, and began weeping terribly. How can you help weeping. Father told my brother he should bring him food, some clothes, and a little mug. And again I couldn’t help crying when I saw him taking those things....The truck was already at the other marketplace. I burst out crying, and as they came up, I cried out: “Papa! Papa, where are you? If only I could see you once more.”...And then I saw him on the last truck; his eyes were red with weeping. I kept on looking at him until he disappeared round the corner; then I had a sudden fit of crying, and I felt how much I love him and how much he loves me. And only now did I feel that what I wrote on May 1 about him not loving me was a beastly lie, and who knows if I won’t have to pay for doubting him when it wasn’t true at all?...I cried a very long time, and every time I thought of Father’s tear stained face, I began sobbing all over again. The dearest person in the whole world we had, they’ve taken away from us—and ill as well....

Jozek Rubinowicz had been taken to Skarzysko Kamienna, a forced-labor camp located twenty miles north of Bodzentyn operated by a German explosives manufacturer. Jozek was put to work felling trees and digging up stumps. Contact was maintained with his family via the Jewish council, which shuttled back and forth with parcels, dirty laundry, letters, and money. The first news from him came four days after his capture. It was a letter delivered by a man on a bicycle who identified himself as the overseer of Jews in Skarzysko. “Many people gathered immediately around.” The letter said that Jozek was well, that the work was tolerable, and that he worried about David. David recorded his father’s instructions: “At all costs they shouldn’t pick me up. I was to see I hid well.” Jozek asked for money and food, and that “things be sold off to rescue him.” In a subsequent letter, David’s father again urged him to hide: “He wants me to put on girl’s clothes.”

Despite all this, David continued to have mixed feelings about his father. “Why has such a terrible fate befallen my father?” he asked himself six days after Jozek was seized. “Perhaps God is giving him his deserts.” At the same time, he missed his father terribly. “Not an instant passes but I think of Father,” he wrote the day after he was taken away. Whenever trucks returned with prisoners, David was the first to rush out, hoping that his father would be on

one of them. On May 8, he went to synagogue with his family—“after all, it *is* Friday”—and was overcome with sorrow because his father was not with them. When he got home, he was “dreadfully sad.” Somehow the family managed to set the table for the Sabbath. “But when I see Father’s place, and he’s not sitting there, then grief and sorrow break my heart.” That same feeling of utter desolation overwhelmed him two weeks later, during Shavuot, the feast day that celebrates God’s giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses. While praying he

...felt a deep yearning for Father. I saw other children standing with their fathers, and the parts of their prayers that they didn’t know were told them by their fathers, and who is there to tell me? ...Only God alone. God, give me good thoughts and lead me in the right way. Never before have I felt my prayers to be such a burden to me as today. How could they have been so before? If only God would allow Father to return safe and sound.

A HAPPY DAY?

Finally David’s prayers were answered. After weeks of anxious waiting, after beating a path to the police station and seeing only other men returning; after calls, letters, and cards, and fruitless attempts to raise money to buy his release—after all this, his father finally came back. It was June 1. “A happy day.” David was at a neighbor’s making slippers for his sister when he “heard a truck approach, and singing.”

I ran out, and right enough! There they were, driving up. From far away you could see them waving their arms, their caps; I saw my father waving too. I threw everything down, ran to meet them, and arrived at the same time as the truck. I immediately took Father’s bundle from him, and he got down from the truck....I entered our flat and couldn’t even greet Father, I was so glad. No one can imagine our joy, only someone who’s been through the same experience will understand. It was all like in a film, we experienced so much in almost a second. The place was immediately full of people—they all came for the good news. Father had injured his arm—that’s why they’d let him out....At first I was very frightened, thinking he’d been very badly wounded. It’s hard for me to describe everything Father related. The first week was the worst, until he’d got used to things. The work wasn’t so terrible, only the discipline; if a man doesn’t march well or sing, he gets beaten. Reveille is at 4 a.m.; at 5 p.m. work ends. For thirteen hours at a stretch the men aren’t allowed to take a rest, anyone who sits down receives a terrible beating. There was no end to his account; we stayed up till 2 a.m.—it’s impossible to describe how it was. Father didn’t look too bad, he’d had as much to eat as he needed.

The happy day is the last entry in David’s diary. Dated June 1, 1942, the entry breaks off in mid-sentence. Whether he continued to write in his diary during the three and a half months the Rubinowiczses managed to hold out before being gassed, we do not know. Between September 15 and 21, the Jews of Bodzentyn and those brought there from neighboring towns—5,000 in all—were made to walk the fifteen miles that lay between Bodzentyn and Suchedniow. On Monday, September 21, Yom Kippur, 4,500 of them were crammed into the cattle cars that would take them to Treblinka, the death camp located thirty-five miles northeast of Warsaw.

A document added to the Polish edition of the diary lists the train schedules for the final weeks of September. Schedule 587 informed railroad employees about the number of “special trains” available to transport the “settlers” from the district of Radom, the district in which the town of Suchedniow was located. The train that carried David left Suchedniow at 4:18 p.m. on the 21st, a Monday, and arrived at Treblinka at 11:42 a.m. the next day. In a little over a year, from July 1942 to September 1943, Treblinka swallowed 850,000 Jews. Fewer than forty survived.