Sam Benner- in his voice

CHAPTER 1 – THE PALE

I was born in 1903 in a small town called Motele in the Pale of Settlement, a poverty-stricken area of Imperial Russia, was where Jews, serfs and peasants lived under the boot of the Czar's government agents. The summers were hot and the winters were harsh with temperatures often dipping into the sub-zero range. The properties in Motele were spread out and connected by muddy, unpaved roads and paths. The town was surrounded by thick, dark, birch tree forests with streams, swamps and rivers laced within. The farms were small and poor, giving only a meager existence to the mostly, tenant farmers that scratched out a living during the growing season while raising a few pigs on the kitchen scraps if they were lucky enough to have them.

I was the fourth of nine children born to my mother Rivka and my father Abraham, who we called Aba. My father's ancestors had been in the glue and candle business and the Tsar gave us the surname Benner for the bones used to make the glue and tallow or for the candle light "ohr" in Yiddish. Before this the men were named by their father's surname. For example, David, son of Abraham, or David ben Avraham. This system was too complicated for tax roles so the Czar decreed that all of the peasants be given a name based upon his work or where he lived. This is how we came to be Bener or Benner.

Our home had a tin shingle roof, painted walls, and a porch with turned posts. Inside it was small but clean with three rooms, The main room which was occupied by a leather workshop for Aba, who worked as a shoemaker, as well as the kitchen, living and dining room with a large blue and white tile stove backed up to the bedrooms that was heat and cook stove for the family. Behind the house was a shed and storeroom. Our property extended beyond that into a long and narrow garden with a stream who's banks were lined with rushes and reeds, crossing the property about 50 meters from the shed. The upper loft of the shed contained two small rooms, one with a window and one without, that served as bedrooms for me and two of my brothers. We were the older boys. We slept here because the space in the house was small. Because we were Jews we were not allowed to own the property where we lived so we had a gentile agent who, at his own discretion, asked for a fee every year to represent us as owner of the property.

Like most families in Motele, we made the most of our little earnings during the much-anticipated market days, when the town's commerce came to life with villagers and travellers looking to spend some of their hard-earned kopeks. The major markets lasted two days with lots of activity selling foods, material, tools and anything that might be bought to raise a little money for the household. Our house was located right on the edge of the market square.

Aba was often busy during these times doing shoe repairs for the local peasantry. Occasionally he would sell a new pair of boots, but this was a major purchase. It

involved a long period of negotiation with the customer until a price and style was determined. If a deal was struck, Abraham would slap hands with the customer and by the next market the boots would be ready. The customers would always inspect the boots very carefully to detect any flaw that might merit a reduction in price. Time was invested in buffing the leather to a high gloss and the stitching was dressed to make it impervious to the wet clay mud of our Russian lands. Aba had a hired man who would take the tops and attach them to soles and heels to make the finished products. The new boots were good advertising at the marketplace, for potential customers who would stop and look, feel the leather, ask questions, and possibly order a pair for themselves or maybe a repair for the old ones that were cracked and worn. The wall of his shop area was always covered with patterns of cardboard that were used to cut the leather that went into the shoe and made up into the finished product. Each style had a nail in the wall on which it hung with the other pieces that made up that particular item. If a customer came to our house to get his boots on a Friday afternoon, he would see my mother's careful setting of our table with white linen on the Sabbath and with candles and china. My mother would carefully set aside special foods for each Sabbath to make that meal different from the rest of the week. This is part of what made us different from the gentiles and made them jealous and resentful of our circumstance.

The market days ran every other month for two days, and were a colorful scene and an exciting time for all involved. Each farmer and merchant set up a stall in the town square to sell thier goods and livestock. On summer market days the stalls would be filled with fruits and vegetables from local farms as well as crafts, cloth, and the tinner selling pots pans and all manner of metalwork. On winter market days members of the Eastern Orthodox Church would carve large ice crosses out of frozen lakes in the symmetrical style of their church, and set them up around the square where they glistened in the cold winter sunlight. In he morning we would see them as the horse drawn sleds came to the square, steam rising from the coats and nostrils of the horses as the men worked in concert to elevate the crosses and pack snow around them to hold them steady. This was the market of the orthodox Christmas in mid January. The square was always crowded with people, among them pickpockets, novelty sellers, magicians and entertainers all doing their best to make the customers smile and to perhaps get a few coins for their efforts. I was always excited to see what was there and who would be the star of our country market. We usually bought our firewood at the winter market because the supply had been exhausted by now and the cold was as penetrating as it was persistent. The fuel would keep our blue tile stove warm through the cold Russian winter.

Towards the end of the day, after the men had concluded their business, the drinking began. Those who had a few spare kopeks would go to the government store where they would line up at the window where vodka was sold. By the standards of the time, it was a substantial building with walls of stone and a tile roof. The vodka seller stood behind a secure window with bars, built to protect him from the alcohol-mad villagers.

Men would wait in line until they got to the window, where they would pass a few kopeks through the bars and in return receive a small bottle of vodka. It was similar to a milk bottle but with a wax-sealed cork, which was dislodged by applying a firm slap of the palm, to the base of the bottle. Law forbid the villagers to open the bottles inside the building, so they would walk outside to the sturdy wooden porch before popping them open. There was a large barrel full of salt herrings on the porch for the customers to chew on as they drank. These herring were oily and salty and

not very appealing but they were free, and made the drinkers thirsty to drink more. The peasants would stick their arm into the barrel and withdraw a herring. With the free hand they would strip the greasy brine from the fish before biting into it. Sometime I would see the peasant's Adams apple bob up and down as he would consume the small bottle in one large series of gulps. Followed by a belch and satisfied "ahhh".

After a little while, the peasants would get drunk and get into fights or try to rob each other. Invariably somebody was killed. There were tears and screams from the family of the dead but life went on for the onlookers who reviewed the happenings of this particular incident. Those who were not killed attended the next market and tested their fate again. If there was a Jew from out of the village that happened to be at the market and had no place to go, my father would offer him our hospitality which was a bowl of soup at our dinner table and a place to stay warn and sometimes and place to sleep. That was life in the Pale.

During a holiday or for a special family occasion we would go to visit my father's brother, Mayer, who lived with his family and my grandmother, Rochelleah, in the nearby town of Telechany. Though it was only about fifteen kilometers from our house, this was an undertaking of major proportion. The planning included the rental of a horse to pull our wagon, as well as food and water for our family to travel an entire day. Our anticipation of the journey made us all giddy. We would have a chance to be with our cousins and to see grandma. Uncle Mayer was a candle maker and had his shop at his home as was typical for tradesmen of that time. We would prepare the day before and food would be packed and the wagon loaded. Early in the morning we would get the horse and hitch him to the wagon and we would get into the wagon and leave. As we left our yard the sun was just starting to show itself over the horizon in pink streaks through the clouds. For Rosh Hashanah, the birch trees would be yellow with many leaves gone and a cold bite in the air. By mid-day, when we stopped for lunch and to rest the horse, we were more than half way there. We would sing, talk, play jokes and run to burn off the energy built up after several hours sitting in the back of a bumpy and very noisy wagon. Then, after a rest, back in the wagon and on the path. In a few hours we arrived. The cousins were as excited as we. We hugged and yelled. We played briefly because the wagon must be unloaded and the parents set up the tables for our celebration. By late afternoon our fun was over and we had to repack and ride home because the next day was work and chores. No time to rest. Our arrival back at the house was in the dark and the horse would be returned by daylight so the owner would not charge my father extra.

The few rubles Aba earned through his shoemaking business, were routinely taken from the family by the Czar's greedy tax agents. Each year in the fall they would come on horseback into our yard with a policeman and two or three Cossacks. They would demand to see what we owned and then would ask what it was worth. If Aba said 400 rubles, the collector would say it's worth 800 rubles and the tax was due at once. If you could not pay the police took you away and your family had to come up with the payment to get you free. Often the families would beg from friends and relatives to raise the funds necessary to keep the tax collector happy.

Our family's meager income was augmented with vegetables and fruits from the garden and eggs from a few chickens. We would sell whatever we could at the markets and eat the rest. Mom was always busy preserving food in brine or in crocks that would feed us when there were no crops to harvest. We had a root cellar where most of our food was protected from summer heat and winter frost. Our garden was

carefully planned to produce what we needed without any space being wasted. Aba was an excellent farmer and the produce that came from the garden was ample and beautiful. Our harvest started early with cool weather crops and went all the way to fall when we dug the horseradish root for our spice, from the muddy banks of our stream through our property.

Not far away from Motele is Lake Jasolda, a large and deep lake. The stream that passed through our garden ran into the flowage that fed the lake. The government owned and controlled the lakes, and would auction the rights for fishing and ice each year. The auction was won regularly by my great-uncle who was a fisherman and had an icehouse at the edge of the lake where ice was stored in a deep pit in the ground covered with straw. During the warm weather he sold the ice for preserving the towns food in their icebox or cold cellar. He saved a fresh fish for my mother every Friday for our Sabbath meal for our family table.

Three of my mother's brothers had gone to America some time before. Her father, Michael Pivovar, was an overseer for the Skermont family estate. He was a small but powerfully built man with a full beard and an intense look. He always had his pipe between his teeth. The Skermonts were high in the politics of Poland. They were rich beyond my imagination. My grandfather rode his own horse and lived in a beautiful home near a greenhouse where agronomists were developing new strains of plants for the area. The Skermonts were owners of lands that went on as far as the eye could see. They owned groves of trees, orchards, fields, and forests with wild game.

He would visit us from time to time, arriving on his horse that you could always recognize because it only had three horseshoes. The unshod hoof left a telltale mark in the dust so you knew it was Grandpa. Grandpa sat straight in his saddle making him look taller than his short frame really was, and always with his lit pipe clenched between his teeth.

Our house sat directly across the street from the residence of Chiam Weitzman who had been the leader of the Jewish community. Their home was a center for Jewish political activity, and Weitzman was working with Zionist pioneers like Hertzel and Buber to encourage the formation of a Jewish state. Weitzman left our town when I was a young boy and, much later, he would become the first president of the new state of Israel. Their home was the Jewish center of our town with all types of meetings and celebrations taking place there. My mother's uncle Meshe Kolodny, who was holder of the rights to the lake and ice house, bought the house from the Weitzman family.

Adjacent to our house lived an Eastern Orthodox priest. He had a wife and two daughters and numerous servants that took care of the family. The priest had a long black robe, a high hat, long curls of flowing hair and a full black beard. He had a large estate with a high wall around it and horses and other farm animals. He was a community leader because the Orthodox Church was in political control of the country and supported the Czar. We were told that they had fine furniture from Paris and Germany and were very rich.

Our life was fairly good for those times, despite the little setbacks from the local government. We had enough to eat and we had our community and each other.

CHAPTER 2 – THE BOMBARDMENT

In 1913 my family consisted of mom, dad, my oldest brother Morris, Ida, Goldie, me, Hennie, Manasha, Esar, Lazer, and Itzhak.

I was ten years old and was expected to do the chores that accompanied the age including gardening and helping with the housework. My brother Manasha was crippled at birth with a club foot and walked with a limp but still carried his share of the load in spite of an operation to correct his foot. Morris, Esar, and I slept in the loft of the shed. None of us wanted to sleep in the room without a window because it was dark and smelled bad from the rotting hay and stored materials in the shed. There was always a fight for the beds in the other room. Esar was smaller and usually got the short straw but Morris was easy and would let him have the better bed sometimes.

Jewish girls didn't go to school as they were expected to learn at the elbow of their mother. Jewish boys couldn't attend regular schools by government decree so we all went to religious school. The old teacher that trained us in Torah would walk up and down the isle between the tables and if we did not read correctly or provide a correct answer he would attack us from behind, twisting our ears hard and pushing our faces down into the binding of our books. We learned Hebrew and the testaments but spoke Yiddish at home.

It was hard but we got some education, and I was an exceptionally good student.

If a boy completed his Torah study at the local school and showed promise – and if his family could afford it – he would be sent to Krakow or Warsaw for higher education at a Yeshiva. This was a great honor and I was chosen for such a fate in 1914 at the age of 11. My parents spent hours examining their finances to see if it was possible for me to go. I was immensely excited. Just the thought of going to a large city had me so excited that it was impossible for me to concentrate on my chores.

But that prospect was forever forgotten when war came to Motele.

During the spring of 1914 the town was abuzz with rumors that the German army was advancing into our area soon. Some of the locals were convinced we would be assimilated and become part of Germany. Others said the Russian guard was unstoppable and would easily thwart the German troops. After the ice on the little stream broke up my father took some of us to dig horseradish root along the banks for our spicy condiment for the fish my mother would make. We heard wagons and horses come rumbling into our square.

The Russians arrived first in Motele, with what turned out to be a minor outpost in our backwater of the war. It was apparent to us all from the beginning that they wouldn't stand a chance.

The Russian garrison consisted of some gun wagons and about two hundred soldiers. The soldiers were poorly dressed and had to forage for what they were going to eat. As a result they robbed the townsfolk, stealing and slaughtering their chickens and livestock. They would steal a coat off your back and say they were defending our motherland. They were dirty and poorly organized but had weapons and were threatening to the townsfolk.

After the initial fright, all was fairly quiet for several months. We heard some gunfire as the Russians got into some engagements with German troops in the woods but it didn't amount to much. The mood was still tense in town, but people began to get back to their normal lives until one night late in fall of 1915 when in the darkness we heard the bombardment begin.

In the dim candlelight I could see the frightened faces of my eight siblings and parents. The German troops were no more than fifteen miles away and the ground was vibrating as shells and bombs exploded. We were huddled together, hiding in our vegetable cellar, shuddering with each blast. My parents spoke in whispers as they planned for what-if and gave us each instruction in the awful case that they were killed or, worse yet, taken prisoner.

The terribly frightening night dragged on and on. From the sounds of the heavy artillery we knew that the unorganized Russians were either fleeing for their lives or being annihilated. The Russian soldiers that survived the battle were gone. Those that had not were lying dead in the streets.

The next day when all was quiet we emerged from the shelter. It was instantly apparent that the Russians had lost the battle. Fires burned in the distance. German military planes were buzzing overhead. A highly organized squad of German troops was moving down the street, stopping at every property on the way and speaking to those inside. They were dressed in uniforms with polished boots and side arms. Their equipment was state-of-the-art and very clean and impressive. They were polite and very well organized. We had no electricity but the German army had generators and steam engines and were able to produce their own power as well as set up a factory for processing the local forests into lumber to build their encampment and bunkers for the troops.

The first thing they did when they reached our property was round up all of us boys and put us to work clearing the bodies of the killed Russian and German troops.

The Germans set up two wagons. One for all the clothing, guns, ammunition and boots we found on the dead soldiers; the other for their naked bodies. The smell of death is one you never forget. We struggled to heft the bloated bodies up onto the wagon while the German officers supervised our squad of youngsters. The adults were put to the task of having enough food prepared to feed the village and the Germans as well.

It took one grueling week to strip and stack all the dead bodies. I was only twelve years old but worked, as expected, like a man.

CHAPTER 3 – HARD LABOR

A few months later the Russian army returned and briefly drove the Germans out of town. After the battle, I remember seeing several Russian officers standing under a tree discussing something when the air filled with the loud drone of a fast approaching German plane.

I looked to the sky and saw the plane flying towards us. It was so low I could clearly see the pilot and I watched his eyes as he lifted up what looked to me like a cannon ball with a handle and hurled it out the window. It landed right next to the officers

and exploded. I ran away so as not be involved in the killing. It had apparently killed them.

The bombing signaled the beginning of a renewed attack on the town by the Germans. We did not want to be in the middle of it so my father bought a horse, which was a huge expense. We packed a wagon with our possessions and fled. The preparations included sewing any valuables into the lining of our clothing. That way if the troops caught us we thought they might not inspect too closely and we might keep our belongings. We wore our clothing in layers to be warm while in the woods.

The way north looked safest so that is where we went. We crossed the Pina River, a small tributary that ran to the Jasolda River. We walked alongside the wagon until we got into the forest, where we hid and lived on wild mushrooms along with whatever my mother had packed into the wagon. The sounds of guns and bombs echoed around us for two weeks but the forest was deep and nobody even was seen during that time.

When the sounds finally died down we plotted our return home. I was chosen to go first and scout the town to see if it was safe. My mother had sewed the money that we had into the lining of my coat and I waded the river and snuck to the edge of Motale. The German garrison was back in the square. Many other families had also fled and the streets were empty and quiet. My uncle Mayer Benner and his family had lost their home to fire during one of the engagements of the war and had left their village of Telechaney and come to our house for shelter. My father found that one of our neighbors had fled leaving his house. The two brothers installed Mayer and family in the empty house and he began making candles to get some money for food.

Our home was not damaged so we returned to try to pick up the threads of our lives. The Germans left us alone for a few weeks and then made an announcement: all able bodied young men were to report for labor duties. That, of course, included myself.

They had set up a steam engine-powered sawmill on the Ashinski canal and were cutting the hardwoods for timbers to send to Germany. The mill had eight saws driven by a steam ram and could virtually eat a tree in a matter of minutes. My job was to work beneath the saws with a shovel, removing the sawdust that would accumulate beneath the ram and clog the saws. I was given this dangerous duty because I was small and strong.

There were several hundred of us there from the surrounding area and we were given bunks in a large barn with no heat or light. We cut willow branches to make a soft bed of the bunks and had taken warm clothes from home that served as covers from the cold. We didn't receive food or pay so we were forced to steal potatoes and carrots from the local neighborhood gardens and whatever else we could use. Usually we would all put our stolen scraps together and make a large pot of soup. I didn't see a piece of bread for over a year. The work was hard and the German soldiers were not interested in our lack of food or harsh conditions. During the cold months of our forced labor we would build a fire on the dirt floor of the barn and use it to cook our food and give some warmth and light to our housing. In the mornings, we would have some of the warm water at the fire with whatever was available to eat before we began to work, often nothing at all.

One day during the summer while under the saws the smell of turpentine and the sap of the trees made me sick. I passed out and when I awoke I was in a German field hospital with a large bandage on my head and a splitting headache.

I asked the orderly what happened. He said I had fallen and fractured my skull when I passed out but would be okay in about a week. They sent me home to recover. That was the best gift of all.

I was very glad to be home with my family and have home-cooked food. But the situation in our town had gotten even worse after the German army had conscripted all the young men in the area. Only my crippled younger brother, Menasha, was left to help Aba around the house and it had all fallen into disrepair. While I was home I helped as much as possible around the house with what needed to be done.

As the days went by my sore head healed and my strength returned. I told Aba that I wouldn't go back to the labor camp but he said that was a bad idea. If I failed to show up they would come for me, and if they couldn't find me the rest of the family would be arrested. I had to go back, and so I did with much unhappiness. I left before our Succoth celebration and made my way back to the labor camp.

When I returned the officer in charge of the barracks asked how I felt. I told him that my head still hurt and I continued to feel dizzy. It was a very smart lie, because he decided to appoint me to a new, much easier job. My new duties were to record the rafts that were sent down the canal to the river, which would take the timber back to Germany. The rafts were huge floating islands of lumber that were lashed together with ropes so they could be pushed, by boats to the Vistula river. The boys that worked on the rafts were brave because this was the most dangerous job. If a boy slipped off the raft into the water he would be crushed by the logs or drowned beneath them.

Still, the conditions were rough. In fall the weather began to cool and we were forced to build a fire at our barracks in the middle of the floor for heat and light. Our coats were thin and the beds were made from birch and willow branches that gave no insulation from the cold. When we got up in the morning for work there were dark smudges around our nostrils and our throats would be sore from the soot of the fire. I often talked about escaping with my older cousin Chiam, who was in the same barracks.

On the eve of Succoth it was raining outside and we were especially lonely for our family. Along with two other unhappy workers, we decided to take action. We kicked a rotten board out of the wall of the barracks and fled outside. Gunfire echoed as we ran. I heard a bullet whine right past me as we raced into the forest in a heavy rain.

Within a few minutes we had gotten so deep into the woods that, although we could hear the soldiers calling out, we couldn't see them nor they us. The rain turned into an electrical storm, occasionally illuminating the path in front of us with bright white bursts of lightning. Through the black night we walked in the rain and mud. We took our shoes off when we reached the road so we could feel the wagon ruts underneath our feet and find our way home.

At the break of dawn we arrived at my house. My parents were thrilled, but after Succoth my dad said we had to go back. We sadly returned to the barracks to avoid putting our family in jeopardy. We walked back along the same road that had been

our escape route, only stopping long enough to steal some produce from a farm when we got hungry. Upon our return, we were questioned, about the escape, briefly, by the German officer. He was distracted and soon put us back to work with only a mild reprimand.

The war went on and I continued to work at the mill in different capacities until one day the corporal in charge of the camp made an announcement that the war was over and we would be released. We were told the German army thanked us and would pay us a fair wage for our time at the camp. I received three Deutsche Marks for almost two years of hard labor and was made to sign a "paid in full" receipt before being let go. I was so glad to be going home I just accepted and left as fast as I could. It would be good to be in my home and with my family again.

CHAPTER 4 – PUMPKINS AND A PIG

When I returned home we were officially citizens of the new state of Poland. We were also in a terrible financial situation and my parents were worried they would lose the home. Our fees and expenses went on during the war while our earnings were nothing.

Lucky for us, Skermont became the Polish ambassador and my grandfather, Michael, remained the overseer of his estate. His property consisted of thousands of acres of farming land where many types of produce were grown as well as fine cigarette tobaccos. All of the labor was provided by a staff of employees that worked for a small salary plus a portion of the crops to feed their families.

As a present, Grandpa Michael sent us a wagon full of mouton tobacco seedlings to plant in our garden. We raised a beautiful crop in our garden and dried, bundled and cured it for six months in our shed. We sold the highly prized tobacco at an auction and made a good amount of money, now in Polish zloty. That fast profit saved our household.

My older brother Morris and I spent a lot of that year sleeping in the small loft attached to our shed in the garden. Besides working with the tobacco, we also harvested and set pumpkins on the south roof of the shed to cure in the autumn sun. The pumpkins were stacked in rows behind a board that was nailed to the eave to keep them on the roof. When the outside of the pumpkins got hard they could be stored for winter use and made a very tasty soup.

One morning before daylight I awoke to a huge rumble of explosions. I leapt out of bed as immense crashes rang out from all directions. It was the sound of war; the raging storm of a murderous battalion of horses and foot soldiers, punctured by the earth-shaking crush of cannon fire. Morris was also out of bed, and we were both certain it was the Germans again.

As we approached the front door, I was relieved to hear the intense barrage of noise outside was dying down to light crashes of falling shrapnel. The moments in between the crashes became longer, and with each pause I became more confident about my own survival. It sounded like the attackers were leaving.

We crept out around the side of the house and rounded the corner to the front of the shed. Suddenly I felt something break and crunch underneath my boot.

I took another step forward and felt it crunch again. I reached down with my hands and picked up a piece of soft leathery husk from the dirt. The thick earthy revolting smell of rotten vegetable filled my nose. My eyes were beginning to adjust to the dark and I could see the ground in front of the shed was entirely covered in broken pumpkin pieces.

I started laughing, quietly at first and then louder as I began to realize exactly what happened. Some of the front pumpkins had rotted and collapsed, causing the ones behind to cascade down the roof and onto the ground where they exploded as the shells burst.

It was a huge relief for us that evening but in the morning we cleaned up and attempted to salvage what we could of the crop for our winter food. Mom carefully took each salvaged pumpkin shard and wiped it clean for preservation and future consumption by our hard working family.

In the central part of our yard was a deep well with sweet water from the Jasolda river valley. It was built to be kosher, with a square wooden mouth about four-feet wide and wooden beams that extended close to 100 feet below ground and was lined with timbers and fitted with a wooden cover.

One day some mischief-makers let a pig loose in our yard. We tried our best, but we couldn't catch the quick little swine. Mom was hysterical. The pig would get into the garden and make everything unkosher. What would we eat? We boys devised a plan to surround the pig in the yard from three angles, using the well as a barrier so it could not get away. Unfortunately we neglected to close the cover of the well.

As we closed in on the pig it jumped to avoid our grasp and down the well it went. It squealed and scraped the boards on the sides as it slipped down the dark chamber and splashed into the water far below. We had a counterbalance log used to raise a bucket from the water so we tied a ladder to the rope and lowered it. After several tries, the pig got hold of the ladder and we pulled it up and out of the well. It squealed and ran out the gate and was gone. However, we were stuck with an extremely unkosher well. We spent the next two days draining and scrubbing the sides of the well until it met with mom's approval.

CHAPTER 5 – NO RETURN

One day at the Skermont estate there was a robbery and an employee was killed. The only evidence was a trail left by a three-shoed horse. Grandpa Michael, being the caretaker of the estate and the owner of such a horse, was in quite a fix. There was a trial and, despite his pleas of innocence, he was convicted of theft and of the murder, and was sent to prison. He was in prison for several months and we thought he might be there forever.

At the same time a peasant that lived near to the estate was arrested over a dispute with his half brother. The peasant told police that his half brother had robbed the estate and killed the employee to get him out of the way of his ownership of a small farm that they shared. When the half brother was arrested he confessed to the murder. Grandpa Michael was released to go back to his job. It was a rare moment of justice for a Jew in an increasingly unfair time. He was favored because

he was the Skermonts man and as such, was more important than an ordinary Jew. The estate was happy to have him back because he was a good manager and shrewd planner. They had done nothing to defend him but welcomed him back to work for the estate.

Anti-Semitism was rampant all over Poland, and we were under threat from all directions. In Motele there were occasional pogroms by the Russians but the Polish were worse. They came around regularly, causing mischief like breaking down a fence or riding their horses through the garden. Occasionally they would question people and arrest someone, and the thought of being taken into custody was never far from our minds.

At this time the communists were causing trouble for the Czar and there was more talk of war. We didn't want to go through that again, and we spoke about leaving Poland and fleeing to a safer land. My father was very calm and assured us that this would all be resolved and we would soon return to a peaceful life.

My uncle Mayer had been making his own plans to leave for Palestine with his three young boys and my grandma. It was hard to bid my cousins farewell but we knew they would be better off in another place. They departed, travelling by train through Turkey and the Arabian lands where the rails had been blown up by Lawrence in his WWI campaign for the British army.

From that bitter time in Motele I have one very joyful memory. My sister Ida was about to get married to a very good man and they were a perfect match.He was a cousin by Gutah, grandpa Michael's sister. My mom's uncle, Morris Kolodney, who was living in the former Weitzman family house across the street let them use their beautiful home for the wedding. The wedding was wonderful, with fruit bowls on the tables and candle and torch light for the chuppa. I remember my grandmother Rochel-leah was so happy that she was dancing down the street.

During the wedding the whole family began talking about America. My uncles Frank, Joe and Sam had enchanted us with stories they had heard about the faraway land. They had said you could work unmolested and breathe free air. We all wanted to go as soon as possible. They were first to leave, taking their families with them.

At the end of the night I overheard my new brother-in-law Sam saying he saved Ida from becoming an old maid. She was only 19, just a few years older than me. I began to think of my future and what I should do with my life. Life here was precarious and I thought that I might find a new place that would be safe for us. All of the family, including grandpa Michael, were enthusiastically discussing the trip to America.

Things had not returned to normal but the Polish-Russian war was breaking out. We were in significant danger because the Polish government officials assumed that all Jews were communists on the side of the Russians. It was somewhat true except the Russians wanted nothing to do with the Jews. We were the only ones for ourselves alone.

We had heard that members of both the Polish Army and the Russian Cossacks were visiting local towns and conscripting young men for their opposing armies. The term of service was a death sentence for young Jewish boys because of the harsh conditions and their hatred within the corps. The mounted soldiers came to our door

and knocked with rifle stocks. When my mother answered they said "where are your sons? We need men for the czar's army. She told them that we were not there and to come back next week.

I knew that time was growing short and I needed to find a way to get out of Poland. Some of the family members had gone to the east and joined the communist party. They seemed to have had some success there.

My sister, my brother, my grandfather, one uncle and two cousins were making final plans to leave for America. They had their visas sponsored by my uncles who had gone there earlier but they couldn't sponsor everyone so I was left to myself.

My cousin Chiam, with whom I'd served with in the labor camp, was in the same situation and very frightened of what might happen. We heard of a man in Warsaw that was putting a group of boys together to go to Argentina. We couldn't get a visa to Argentina but we could get an exit visa from Poland, so we decided to try our luck. The cost of the trip was three hundred rubles, a fortune by our standards, and my father told me that he would need to be paid back to survive.

The hands were slapped and the deal was made, and after borrowing what he could, my dad sent the fee to Warsaw. A few days later Chiam and I along with another boy from the area were given a bundle with our clothing and a few zlotys to travel with.

It was an emotional farewell. We knew we would never see many of our friends and family again. As I left our house for the last time, my father said to me: "Go away from here son, and never come back". That was the start of my journey that would take me home.

My cousin Chiam, met me at my home and together with another boy from the vicinity, we three set out for Warsaw where there would be a train taking us to a ship in a few weeks. We planned to take a ferryboat on the Ashinski canal that would carry us all the way to Warsaw.

CHAPTER 6 — ON THE ROAD