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(8.6.1916 Vienna – 20.2.2008 Kilkeel, Co. Down, N. Ireland)

Surviving the Nazis, Exile and Siberia (excerpts)

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SURVIVING THE NAZIS, EXILE AND SIBERIA, Edith Sekules, Valentine Mitchell, London, 2000

Edith Sekules neé Mendel was born in Vienna in 1916 – the year following that of my own father's birth. Her family's origins were typical mixed Central European and she would marry a Viennese whose father had come from Western Hungary.

Then as now, Vienna was one of the world's leading musical cities. Working as a girl in one of Vienna's leading hotels, Hotel Bristol, Edith met, and obtained the autographs, of Arthuro Toscanini, Bruno Walter, Yehudi Menuin, Ricard Tauber, and the author Thomas Mann. Working elsewhere, Edith also met Marlene Dietrich. This glittering period ended in 1938 when the Nazi takeover of Austria made life a living hell for the Jewish people of Vienna. Edith, her husband and baby set out for Estonia where, for a short time, they were able to build a new life.

The German invasion of 1941 forced the family to flee again, this time to various camps, ending up in Karaganda in Central Asia, where the winters were long and bitter. Enduring many hardships, the family (now with two more children) were allowed to return in 1947. In a small Hungarian town on the way, a group of local Jews came on the train to welcome them. They exclaimed *'You still have children! Ours have all been killed by the Nazis.'*

After a few months in Vienna, the family moved on to London and then to Londonderry in Northern Ireland where they had been promised work in a factory part-owned by the brother of Edith's husband. Further strokes of good fortune which enabled Edith and her husband to set up a small knitwear business in the town of Kilkeel. With hard work, the business prospered and their fourth child, Esther, arrived in 1954. The business would export its wares to leading department stores in Europe, the USA, Australia and even Japan.

Edith and her husband were blessed with long life, and Edith finally committed this account of her life to paper. The Library of Holocaust Testimonies must take great credit, for it has made possible its publication, along with the testimonies of many other survivors, to remind us of Jewish life, with its many brilliant sides, as it used to be in Central and Eastern Europe.
Surviving the Nazis, Exile and Siberia
-James O'Fee, October 2002.

Chapter 9 – Estonia: September 1938 – June 1941

The Estonian authorities admitted us as tourists. As we were clearing our luggage a lady approached us and introduced herself. Shortly after that the director of the radio factory approached us, introduced himself and agreed to meet Kurt the next

day. There were no fewer than three cars at the airport waiting to take us into Tallinn! It was all quite bewildering and confusing.

The lady was Mrs Itskovits, president of the Women's Zionist Organisation in Tallinn. After she introduced herself she took baby Ruth in her arms and held her all through the journey to our hotel in the city. Luckily, she spoke excellent German and explained how she and the others at the airport knew of our arrival and of our background. The Chief Rabbi in Tallinn had received a telegram from our worried relatives in Vienna stating, 'Woman and baby arriving. Please help when landed.' The Rabbi notified her and she mobilised two friends with cars to meet us. The plan, in case of any difficulties, was that Mrs Itskovits would hold on to the baby and the Red Cross would claim the mother. Luckily there was no need to put the plan into effect.

We were the first Jewish refugees to arrive in Tallinn. No one could foresee how the authorities would react. We arrived with return air tickets and were admitted as genuine tourists, allowed to stay for three months. Consequently the strategy set up by Mrs Itskovits wasn't needed. However, the telegram from Vienna put us in touch with the right people from the start.

In 1938 Estonia was a democracy, headed by the much-loved President Paets. The country had been independent from the Soviet Union since 1920. The original population were Estonians with their own language which is akin to Finnish and Hungarian. After centuries of German occupation there remained a large German-speaking population with its own schools and its religious and cultural institutions. Then followed a Russian occupation, which again left behind another group, with its own language, schools and institutions. The fourth group was made up of Jews, most of whom had fled from the Russian pogroms at the start of the century. Again, they had their schools, clubs, religious and cultural institutions. These Jews had never forgotten what it was like to be persecuted and become refugees. Hence, they extended every possible help and kindness to us. At that time the different groups appeared to live peacefully side by side, particularly in the small capital city.

Next day, in the lobby of the hotel, we met another refugee. We listened to the hotel radio and were just in time to hear Neville Chamberlain declare 'I believe it is peace in our time.' When Kurt went to comment, I stopped him at once. What if the other 'refugee' was a Gestapo spy? I was getting paranoid and still felt the intimidation of our recent life in Vienna under the Nazis. As it happened, the man turned out to be another hunted refugee like ourselves.

Kurt was not accepted by the radio factory, which was the largest in Tallinn. However, our new-found friends put us quickly in touch with important citizens and as a result, Kurt obtained a job within a week in a small radio factory. The staff comprised the working owners and about 20 employees. They produced high-quality radios and Kurt soon fitted in well. He had no communication problems because, luckily, the owner was highly educated and fluent in German as well as Russian and his native Estonian.

The next Viennese family to arrive consisted of an elderly lady and her two grown-up sons. The elder son set about learning the Estonian language and acquired a working knowledge in less than three months. This impressed the authorities so much that they granted the family a year's visa. We, however, had to continue to apply every three months for an extension. This was forthcoming because Kurt was in full-time employment.

Mrs Itskovits had decided that we shouldn't attract the attention of the Tallinn police and felt it would be safer for us to live in the country. She had arranged rent-free accommodation for us in a friend's house in a country village some miles outside the city. After a short train journey we arrived at our new home. It was a typical Russian datcha which had been used each summer by the owner, but was now let out. There were other tenants, all local people.

We were immediately accepted by our neighbours, who proved very helpful in the months ahead. We had the use of one large room where we cooked, ate, slept and did our laundry. Water came from a well in the garden which had a bucket attached to a strong chain. All my cooking had to be done on a primus stove, lent to me by a neighbour. The fuel was petroleum but required methylated spirits to ignite the proper flame. I never took to the stove as I could never work it efficiently. All water was boiled on it and my food often boiled over or got burnt. I just had to grin and bear it because nappies had to be washed, the baby needed to be bathed and Kurt needed a warm supper when he came home from work.

When I went shopping in the village store for the first time I had two wonderful surprises. I had worried about language problems, but discovered that the shop owner was a Balten-Deutsche (the term used for a German who had lived in Estonia all his life but had not taken Soviet nationality) and so there was immediate communication. The second surprise came when I discovered the price of food. At first I was shocked at the egg price which I assumed was for a single egg. In fact, it was the price for a dozen. It turned out that the food in Estonia was incredibly cheap, very plentiful and of the highest quality. Sour cream was so rich and thick that it could be carried home in paper, like butter. In the Tallinn market there was plenty of poultry, a wide variety of fresh fish and a great range of fruit and vegetables. At the end of each working week Kurt visited the market and bought a chicken and other items. We could live a modest and healthy life on his pay.

From the earliest days in the village our social life centred around visits from city friends of Mrs Itskovits and we quickly made friends with many of our neighbours. When they found out I was a good hand-knitter I got a number of commissions which allowed me to earn a little whilst I looked after Ruth. I remember clearly spending many weeks knitting a full-length dress of fine yarn which proved very difficult but gave me confidence and experience, which were useful in later years.

To maintain contact with relatives and friends, who were now scattered over several countries, we wrote frequent letters. We always made copies whether they were written by hand or produced by whoever had access to a typewriter, because we sent them to different addresses. Until early 1939 most of both our families still lived in Vienna and had to suffer the results of the infamous 'Kristall Nacht' in November 1938, when all the synagogues in the city were set on fire and all Jewish shops destroyed. Lotte, Aunt Frieda, her daughter Gerti and son-in-law Karl were the only near relatives who had emigrated at that time and all of them had settled in London.

A few weeks after settling in Estonia, we sent back our unused return flight tickets which enabled father to get a refund. This was a help in defraying the huge expenses he incurred by sending us a number of very large parcels by post. He even posted the pram, in dismantled form, which proved a real godsend. Father was especially diligent at keeping us up-to-date about who had left and about all current addresses and other details. However, as all letters were censored, the content had to be strictly personal, so that we never had any comments about 'Kristall Nacht' or other political events in Vienna. Lotte was also a faithful letter-writer and would send lovely little garments for Ruth, which she had personalised by embroidering a flower or a monogram.

Lotte managed to find mother a job as a cook in London and so she qualified for a visa. Mother left Vienna in February 1939 and was never to see my father again. Father and grandmother had no chance of a visa then and had to remain. They both died a few months apart in the following year -father from the effects of malnutrition and tuberculosis; grandmother from starvation and old age. I've always imagined that my parents' parting must have been extremely painful, because they both fully appreciated how bad things had become for Jews in the city. Mother never would talk about it in later years.

Mother started life in London as cook for a household with a little girl, her mother and her grandmother. Mother felt sorry for the little girl because she was forced to play alone in the house all day. Eventually, mother took the child with her when shopping to cheer her up. This led to a confrontation with the child's mother who rebuked mother for her cheek in taking the child away from the house. Thereafter, the atmosphere was, at best, businesslike.

Kurt's parents, his brother and his brother's wife left Vienna in spring 1939 to start a new life in Northern Ireland. This was to prove fateful for us to shape the major part of our lives. They had obtained visas under a British government scheme to establish new business in the province. They started a factory in Londonderry with a local partner to manufacture artificial flowers, a similar operation to their former business in Vienna.

Later in 1939 my mother's brother Fritz and wife Lily and her parents moved to France and then to England. They lived for most of the war in Bedford, but their wartime experience was blighted by the internment of my uncle and my cousin in a camp on the Isle of Man. This contributed to my uncle's untimely death in 1943.

Gradually the letters dried up. Every day I would ask my neighbours Kiri? (any letters?) in my best Estonian. Generally the answer was Ei ole (none), to my great disappointment. Most of what I found out about our family was learnt only after the war was long over.

Life had to go on, however, and we had to make the best of things. We missed our families very much and, at times, reminisced in great detail to counteract our loneliness and sadness. I missed the cultural and work activities that had made Vienna so vibrant for me when growing up. We both had urban upbringings and close intense family ties. Now we had to adjust to rural conditions in a strange country. It was difficult, but was made easier by the help we got from everyone. It was to prepare us for much more difficult times ahead. Of course, there were many good times, but they were always clouded by the uncertainty that there would be no end or no returning. The uncertainty ate into the mind as the weeks progressed with nothing hopeful on the horizon.

The highlight of our existence at this time was our weekly visit to Mrs Itskovits in Tallinn. We had a standing invitation for Saturday lunch. The family owned a large apartment building which had been completed shortly before we came to Estonia. The Itskovits were wealthy business people whose factory produced a range of curtains and household textiles. The husband, son Isi and daughter Berta all worked in the business. We were most impressed as this was the first time we had seen a private apartment with central heating, constant hot water and an electric cooker. In Vienna we had heated with coke and cooked with gas. Mrs Itskovit's mother and two sons lived in the apartment, and Berta, their married daughter, had her own apartment in the house. There was always a full table and lively conversation each Saturday.

At lunch, they all spoke in German to help us understand but, as the conversations developed, some would inevitably lapse into Russian or Estonian or

Yiddish. We had difficulty with these and, although we could understand Yiddish, we couldn't speak it. The food was kosher but typically Russian. Popular dishes were borsht (beetroot soup), pirogen (meat-filled pastry) and zimmes (meat with prune and apple stew). As the pudding had to be free of milk or cream, we had either stewed fruit or Rosa Manna, a fluffy creamy concoction of semolina and fruit juice. I can still imagine the taste of all of these, the culinary highlight of our week.

Another advantage of these visits was our ability to get foreign news. There was an excellent radio in the apartment which was tuned mostly to BBC News. It was from these bulletins that we learnt of the death of Sigmund Freud and of the landing in Scotland of Rudolf Hess. Sometimes we danced to the Lambeth Walk or Violetta, or other hits of the time.

I had yet to experience the Estonian winter. October and November 1938 passed without incident as the weather was still mild. All changed in December. We had strong winds, deep and driving snow and ice everywhere. My bucket would freeze to the rim of the well; the washing would go stiff on the line; the room was very cold, mainly because I didn't know how to light a woodfire in the large tiled stove. When Ruth cried almost continuously from the severe cold, I had to abandon my principle of not sleeping with the child and brought her into our bed to keep her warm with my body heat. The last straw was when the water froze indoors in the jug. I had had enough of life in the country. I took the train into Tallinn and looked for lodgings.

We found a furnished room in the very centre of the city. There was barely room for the two beds, wardrobe, baby's basket, table and two chairs but it was all that we could afford. As I was allowed into the kitchen only to fetch water, I had to cook on my primus stove on the deep sill of the window in our room, which caused the landlady to worry that I might ruin the curtains. As we had no access to a yard, we had to cook, eat, sleep, launder and dry the washing in our tiny room. But there were compensations. We were near Kurt's place of work and nearby was an eating house which served inexpensive tasty hot meals. Kurt loved to eat there. His favourite dishes became the bouillon with chunks of beef in it and, for pudding, whipped cream topped with jam.

I began to adjust gradually to the severity of the winter but was once almost caught out badly. I had to go out in freezing weather with a sharp biting wind. Not far from our lodgings, a man stopped me, kept pointing at his nose and shouting 'Nina valge!' This meant 'white nose' and so he was warning me that I was about to suffer frostbite. I rushed home and held my nose under a cold tap. Luckily I was in time to avoid any lasting damage.

I saw the 1939 New Year in at the ball in the Jewish Club, as guest of the Itskovits. As president of WIZO (the Women's Zionist Organisation), Mrs Itskovits was very public-spirited and involved in many activities of the Jewish community, whilst her husband concentrated all his energies on the business. The ball was one of the highlights of her year and I felt honoured to be her guest. Kurt didn't object to his babysitting activities. The evening turned out to be a glittering affair and I was delighted that I had optimistically packed my one and only evening dress when we left Vienna. I travelled to and from the ball in a hired horse-drawn sleigh. As this was to be my last social outing for many years its impressions remain clearly. The company was wonderful, the food good and drink excellent, and we danced the night away to a gypsy orchestra and a dance band.

Occasionally through that winter, Kurt would babysit to let me escape for a few hours from our small room. I often went to a nearby coffee house where I could enjoy balalaika music, read German-language newspapers and feast on a plate of

Viennese sausages with potato salad. The meals were always very good value for money.

By the spring of 1939 I was fed up with our grumpy landlady and the space constraints of our room. I went apartment-hunting in the countryside and knew of available ones because they were marked with paper crosses on the windows. We found a tiny apartment in a datcha which had a beautiful garden. As we had very few possessions we could move house very quickly and I recall that over our two and a half years in Estonia we moved house six times. Our new accommodation was, in reality, only a flatlet on the first floor. It comprised a sparsely furnished room and a kitchen. A very pleasant Estonian family lived on the ground floor and, as the mother looked so young, I remember that, for a long time, I thought she was the sister of the teenage boys. We also had a friend within walking distance whom we could visit. The biggest asset was the garden where I could leave Ruth in her playpen. I had one major scare when she managed to undo the playpen clip and escaped on all fours on to the road. Luckily I got to her in time and picked her up unharmed.

After experiencing the arctic cold of the winter and the long cool spring, it was a treat at last to enjoy the warm summer. The daylight stretched far into the warm nights, which never became dark because we were so far north. There were lots of berries to be picked in the woods and a local swimming pool which we visited a few times. It was at this swimming pool that Ruth took her first steps.

During that summer I fell ill with chickenpox. Ruth was about 14 months at the time and the doctor advised that there was no point in separating the child from me. Ruth, luckily, did not contract the disease. This convinced me that breast-feeding, in our case for ten months, immunises a baby. We had to engage a nurse to look after me and the child. In due course the disease abated and the nurse sent me to a bathhouse and instructed me to scrub my skin until all traces of the rash had gone. It was my first visit to a Russian bathhouse. In one part of the bathhouse there were benches and wooden buckets that you filled with hot water which you poured over yourself after scrubbing. In the other was a steamhouse which was very popular with the Estonians and the Russians.

In July 1939 our request to go to Australia was approved and our entry permit arrived. We hoped to leave soon for Australia and our plan was to be united with my parents there. Father had packed and sent all my parent's furniture to storage in Italy to await further instructions for shipment to Australia. Our hopes were high.

Our optimism was soon shattered, however. War broke out at the beginning of September and, as German nationals, our permits became automatically invalid. We were faced with an indefinite stay in Estonia.

In the autumn we moved back into the city to a room in a house that backed on to the radio factory where Kurt worked. He had only to climb over the fence to get to work. Another advantage was that, as we had agreed full board with the landlady, I did not have to cook. I was extremely glad of this as I was pregnant again and happy to take it easy.

By now we had many friends in Tallinn. They would often call alter work for a chat, knowing we would always be at home. This became our main form of entertainment through the winter and, as hosts, we always provided sweets and cigarettes. In those days most of the men were heavy smokers and had no idea of the health hazards. Everyone lived very modestly but at times of celebration seemed to go to extremes. I remember particularly going to a birthday party given

by our landlady. The table was laden with all sorts of fish dishes, cold meats and salads. As always the vodka was flowing and everyone ended up very inebriated.

With a second child due, we knew there would not be enough room in the present accommodation, and given our resources it was clear that we would have to move out to the country again to obtain an apartment with enough space. So, in March, I went apartment-hunting once more in the country. The baby was due in four weeks and I was determined to be well settled in before its arrival. I had to take the train from Tallinn to the country, where almost everything remained as nature had made it. The particularly long winter had left the village streets and country roads a sticky morass created by the melting snow.

The only way to carry out the search was to trudge from house to house. This was extremely tiring as I was eight months pregnant and, because of the conditions, had to wear heavy lined boots. I was on the point of giving up when I noticed, amongst a group of trees, a house with paper crosses on some upstairs windows. My hopes rose and I was elated when the landlady showed me a lovely ground floor apartment of two rooms and a kitchen. It was exactly what we needed. We moved in two weeks later and commenced the bout of cleaning and scrubbing to get everything ready for the new baby.

Some days after we had settled, I began to realise that I was going to give birth fairly soon. I got Kurt to organise our trip to Tallinn and went directly to the ltskoviis who had ottered to take care of Ruth whilst I was in hospital. They lived about five minutes walk from the hospital. I almost left things too late as my son Walter was born within an hour of my admission. All went well and, as soon as he was born, a very strong male nurse lifted me from my bed in the labour ward and carried me to a bed in a general ward. As they were constantly under pressure for beds, I had to leave hospital after five days. We returned to the Itskovits' apartment and remained there until the circumcision, which had to be performed on the eighth day after birth.

I was delighted to get back to our apartment in the country. That spring became one of the happiest times of my life. I loved our accommodation, the area was beautiful and peaceful and I concentrated on looking after my two lovely children. For Ruth's second birthday on 4 May, Mrs Itskovits sprang a delightful surprise. She brought a number of her friends out from the city for a party. They arrived laden with cake, sandwiches, cups and plates and, of course, birthday presents. I look back now and see her as one of the most generous and thoughtful people I have ever known. We were all blissfully happy on that warm spring day.

Our happiness was not to last. It was abruptly cut short in June 1940. Russian planes appeared in the sky to back up the Soviet army which rolled in from the east into Lithuania on the 17 June. Within a month the Baltic States had lost their freedom and independence. Suddenly we found ourselves inside the Soviet Union. It was all so reminiscent of Vienna in 1938, especially when the three states voted in July to become part of the USSR. I cried and became increasingly apprehensive about our future, and if, indeed, we had any future at all. All our neighbours tried to console me: 'Don't worry. The Russians are human. It will be all right', they kept saying. However, I was convinced a new chapter in my life was about to begin.

As the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin was then still in force we were not regarded as enemy aliens and so we could live and work as before. However, all our friends in business felt the changes at once. All factories and businesses were taken over by the state. The owner of the radio factory where Kurt was employed voluntarily handed over his firm to his workers. He was popular and

was retained as an ordinary employee. I thought him a lovely person as I had got to know him quite well. I had given him English lessons in exchange for Russian ones.

The living space for each person was decreed at nine square metres. If the police discovered any excess space they moved lodgers into the building. Our dear friends, the Itskovits, lost their business, their house and their apartment and were forced to live in one room. Mrs Itskovits found a job as a seamstress, but her husband could not find any work. This was an enormous change to their way of life.

Summer and early autumn of 1940 was a sad period in my life. We got news that my grandmother Anna, father's mother, had died in Vienna and then, in September, we were told that my dear father had died in a hospital in Vienna. He was only fifty-nine. His tuberculosis became chronic as a result of the awful conditions imposed on Jews in Vienna in the last two years of his life. When mother moved to England in early 1939, father went to live with his mother. Grandmother was then eighty-five and needed constant help and companionship. Father never, ever, complained in his letters to us but we knew that, as a Jew, he was going through hell under the Nazis. I'm sure he gave his mother most of whatever nourishing food was available and didn't take enough care of himself. After Walter's birth in Tallinn he asked several times for photographs of his two grandchildren. I took some photographs but never sent them because I thought they were not good enough. Now it was too late and I felt very guilty. This prompted me to go to a professional photographer and to send copies to my mother in London. This was to be our last communication with my mother until the war was over. Looking back at those times from a distance I feel that perhaps father was lucky that he died when he did, as some months later the transportations from Vienna to the death camps were under way.

In the autumn of 1940 the apartment of a friend in Tallinn became vacant and we were offered the tenancy. It was part of a traditional-style Estonian house. The apartment had a cellar and a loft and at 36 square meters was the correct size for the four of us. The previous tenant had been able to raise three children there. We accepted the tenancy gladly, especially because we would not be forced to accept lodgers. It turned out to be a very cozy apartment. The tiled stove gave good heat in the hall and the two bedrooms. The kitchen stove heated a tiled wall in our living room. We knew this would be essential for the winter ahead.

As soon as the Russian occupation forces arrived their wives proceeded to buy up all the Western textiles, clothes and footwear in the shops. They knew that no new supplies would come into the country and so the shelves were emptied within days. This, of course, was hastened by the Soviet authorities who had told all the Russian immigrants that the shops were laden with merchandise because the Estonians were too poor to buy it. The Soviet occupation forces were well paid and could afford to do this. Soon the Estonians grew relatively poorer as their pay remained fixed while the price of food and everything else rose steeply. This created a divided society and much resentment on the part of the indigenous population.

We lived near the central markets which allowed me to shop frequently and stockpile as much as possible. As food got dearer and scarcer by the day I built up stocks of cocoa, chocolate, sugar, noodles, soap and much else. I dried mushrooms, made a lot of jam and rendered butter, which I stored in the cellar. I was always apprehensive about whether this would see us through the long winter.

I tried to make life as interesting and busy as possible. Apart from my involvement with the children my two main interests were reading and developing a small button-making business. There were many books in Estonian libraries in German and so I could borrow a range of titles. Two particular books that I

borrowed were to influence me in the immediate years ahead. The first gave me a great insight into life in Siberia, particularly into camp life. It described the flight of a White Russian officer from the communists. He had a number of encounters with Kasakhs and other tribesmen, and endured many hardships crossing the Taiga to reach India, his ultimate goal. The second book was Dostoevsky's *From a Dead House*, now also an opera, which describes life in the Siberian camp to which he had been exiled. Our experiences in the years ahead confirmed that conditions hadn't changed much in a century. Little did I know how relevant these books were to be.

I was offered the use of a button-making machine which I saw as an opportunity to earn some extra money. Soon I was so busy producing buttons for dressmakers that I had to engage a daily home-help. As I had a working knowledge of the Estonian language, I could do the daily round of my customers on foot and take orders, make deliveries and sort out any problems. In the evenings, Kurt and I made the cloth-covered buttons. Luckily, I had taken out a manufacturing license. Someone denounced me to the police for working illegally, but when they made their inspection, the police found everything in order.

The greatest advantage in living without a lodger was that we could listen in secret, with close friends, to the BBC. This was totally illegal and, if caught, would have incurred a severe penalty. As a neighbor was an Estonian officer we had to keep the sound to a minimum and restricted our listening to news only. It was the only accurate source of information on the war and the world outside; no one could believe what they read in the local newspapers. During that winter and the spring of 1941 we grew more apprehensive as we tracked the progress of the war. We wondered about Lotte and mother's fate during September's Battle of Britain. We had no way of knowing whether they had survived the terrible pounding of London. More ominous was the imprisonment of the Warsaw Jews into the ghetto in November. All through early 1941 we heard of German success in pushing across Eastern Europe and of further London air raids. As always, we feared that Jews would suffer in these territories. This was confirmed by news of many restrictions on the rights of French Jews from May.

On the morning of 15 June I was surprised by a strange event in the yard at the back of the apartment. The people from the house opposite were being rounded up and herded into a lorry parked in the yard. Shortly after, the guards got back on to the lorry which drove quickly away. I had no sense of foreboding; I was merely puzzled. What crime had the whole family committed? Then Kurt returned unexpectedly from work at 10 a.m. He brought the shattering news that all the so-called 'bourgeoisie' were being rounded up and transported to Siberian camps. His former boss was amongst them. The event earlier now made sense to me. The people opposite were arrested because they used to own a shoe shop.

I immediately thought of our great friends, the Itskovits, who had done so much for us and other immigrant Jews. I rushed to their apartment house but I was already too late to see them. They had been arrested during the night. I next sought out their daughter, Berta, who had a room not far from us. She told me that her parents had been taken to Tallinn harbour to await transportation. We decided to go there together. At the harbour there was a large and noisy crowd trying to break through the cordon of soldiers to reach the trains containing the prisoners. Eventually we succeeded in getting through and then came face-to-face with a scene which really shocked both of us. The prisoners were all locked up in cattle trucks. Women and children were staring through the grills of the small windows. On another track were the trucks with the men, also locked up. After a long search we

found Mrs. Itskovits. We managed to give her some money, photographs and a watch. Apart from saying a tearful goodbye, that was all we could do. I was glad I had seen her but greatly disturbed that she would shortly be on the horrific journey to Siberia with all those other unfortunate people.

When I came home and described to Kurt what I had witnessed, we decided that we should be prepared for the worst. We suspected that foreigners like ourselves were likely to be next to be sent into exile. We bought suitcases and leather strappings. The following night we heard many heavy footsteps on the wooden stairs. My heart pounded wildly and I said to Kurt, 'This is it!' I was certain it was our turn. sHowever, no one knocked on our door. Next morning we learnt that our neighbor, the Estonian army officer, had been arrested.

Shortly everything was to change for ever. On 22 June Hitler broke the non-aggression pact and attacked the Soviet Union. We were now converted into enemy aliens. Soon after, when we were listening to BBC news with friends, another friend came to collect her sister. The NKVD (the secret police) were at their apartment to arrest them.

Chapter 10 – Harju Camp, Estonia: July 1941

We did not have long to wait for the knock on our door. A high-ranking Soviet officer and two soldiers had arrived to arrest us. Because we could not understand Russian, a neighbor was instructed by them to act as interpreter. Their message was abrupt and succinct: 'Pack what you'll need for a year away from here!'

We took a long time to pack because we had planned to take as much as possible. We filled our suitcases and then made up bundles. We packed summer and winter clothing, bedding including mattresses, cooking utensils, bowls and buckets, the indispensable primus cooker, the baby's pushchair and most of our hoarded provisions. When our home-help heard of the arrests of enemy aliens, she calmly said to me: 'When you're arrested, I'll take the bed of the master and the standard lamp!' In the end she got nothing because the secret police locked up the apartment. We got no opportunity either to settle her outstanding wages.

When the officer counted our 17 cases and bundles he sent for a lorry. Whilst we waited, the first ever air-raid alarm sounded. We all went down into the cellar and sat in the dark until the all-clear was given. At the time we did not realise how lucky we were to be able to take so much with us. Later, we discovered that, as the war heightened, people could only take what they could carry. Many, too, were arrested on the streets and transported without any belongings.

Finally, when the lorry was loaded, the four of us had to sit atop all our worldly goods. Kurt held Ruth and I nursed Walter; Ruth was then three and Walter was 14 months. It was a bright summer morning. Kurt and I were not depressed but rather excited at the beginning of an unknown adventure. We were driven to Harju Detention Camp about 20 miles east of Tallinn. The camp was in a row of barracks attached to a large prison. In the detention camp were about 150 enemy aliens rounded up from all over Estonia. Included were many nationalities - Austrian, Czech, German, Slovak and, of course, Balten-Deutsche. Almost half of the total were recent Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany.

Women and children were locked up separately at night from the men. I remember the first time when it really struck me that I was now a prisoner. I was refused permission to go to the toilet and was made to wait until several women were to go together. We were escorted by camp staff. Apart from the separation at night, the regime was relatively lax. We were all allowed to mix during the day and they decided to give us access to the prison bathhouse. In general, the camaraderie was very good in the first few days and a few people there became life-long friends. Eggs and milk were on sale. I worried so much that my children would suffer from malnutrition that I fed them too many eggs. Walter, not used to eggs, broke out all over in a rash, causing me to alter his diet at once.

The Nazi advance eastward was so rapid that it was necessary, after only ten days at Harju, to move us by train further eastwards into Russia. As a special concession, because of the young children, I did not have to walk to the train like all the other prisoners. The three of us were given a lift in a Black Maria. It was a very gruesome experience, being shaken about in the dark, because of the blacked-out windows and not knowing where we were going or how long the journey would take.

When we arrived at the railway point, a cattle train was waiting. There were no steps or ladders on to the high trucks. Unless you were very athletic and young you required a helping hand to board the train. Each truck had two-tiered bunks at each end, small windows with grills and a hole in the floor, which served as a toilet. The toilet arrangement was particularly dehumanising and embarrassing because, on this journey, men and women traveled together, with 25 of us packed into each truck. The six trucks required a seventh to hold our luggage and kitchen facilities.

I can still recollect the almost unbearable humidity and discomfort traveling in the July heat. The children grew very restless and I had to take Walter's clothes off and sponge him down. Suddenly, and without warning, we heard the German planes coming from the south-west. We were eastbound on the line running almost parallel with the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland and approaching the town of Narva, on the old Soviet border with Estonia. The train contained a series of fuel tanks and was an obvious target.

We stopped abruptly. We then saw all our accompanying soldiers scurry into the nearby woods. They were well aware of the fatal explosions should the fuel tanks get bombed. We were left fully exposed on the line and locked into our trucks. It was then we realised how dispensable we had all become. Shortly after the bombing started, a bomb scored a direct hit on one of the trucks and blew the door off the adjoining one. Luckily the fuel tanks escaped.

Shortly after the explosion someone unlocked the door of our truck. We scrambled out and ran into the woods to hide. Walter started howling because his naked body was attacked by a horde of midges. One woman saved the day. She lent me a sheet to protect him and he quietened down.

We could see that one of the bombers had circled back to have a second look. The pilot must have been satisfied with the destruction or perhaps all the bombs had been used. The plane kept going westwards. Sadly ten people died and 11 were injured in the truck which suffered the direct hit. Amongst the dead was a mother whose son and husband escaped unhurt. Amongst the injured, who had to be left behind in Narva, were an eminent cancer specialist from Berlin and his two daughters. A mother and daughter ran away as, presumably, like most of the German population in Estonia, they welcomed the invading Nazis as salvation from the Soviet occupation.

When all went quiet the Soviet soldiers returned and herded us back on to the train. We then began our 800-mile journey which ended four days later in Gorki

(Nishny Novgorod). The heat and humidity was made a little more bearable because we were now allowed to leave the truck door open. It was impossible and futile to try to escape, because each truck was heavily guarded and, if we did get away from the train, we would have had a very brief freedom in Soviet territory. Our diet consisted of 'dry rations' as no cooking was done on the train. These included bread, salted fish, biscuits and a little tea substitute. This diet exacerbated our thirst in the heat because of the high salt content in the fish and the lack of enough tea substitute. We didn't dare drink unboiled water. Now that our door was open we could look out - and people looked in. At times we stopped alongside trains taking Russian evacuees eastwards. When they saw our children they spontaneously handed over chocolates and other 'goodies'. I also remember seeing a train with convicts who were treated very roughly and other trains which were so crowded that some people were sitting on carriage bumpers and roofs. Once, one of our companions had the temerity to sing a very popular song which translated means: 'I do not know of any country where man breathes as freely as here'. One of the soldiers heard it and, furious, slammed the door of our truck shut as a punishment. Tension built up throughout the journey because we never knew where we were, where we were going or when our frequent stops would be over. The journey was a series of delays and movements. We assumed that the railways were giving priority to Soviet army movement of troops and equipment because we were generally relegated to night travel with interminable stops in between. We had travelled south-east, skirted Moscow and then went eastwards for about 300 miles to Gorki. At first we thought it was just another stopover, but, as soon as the train stopped there, we were ordered to disembark.