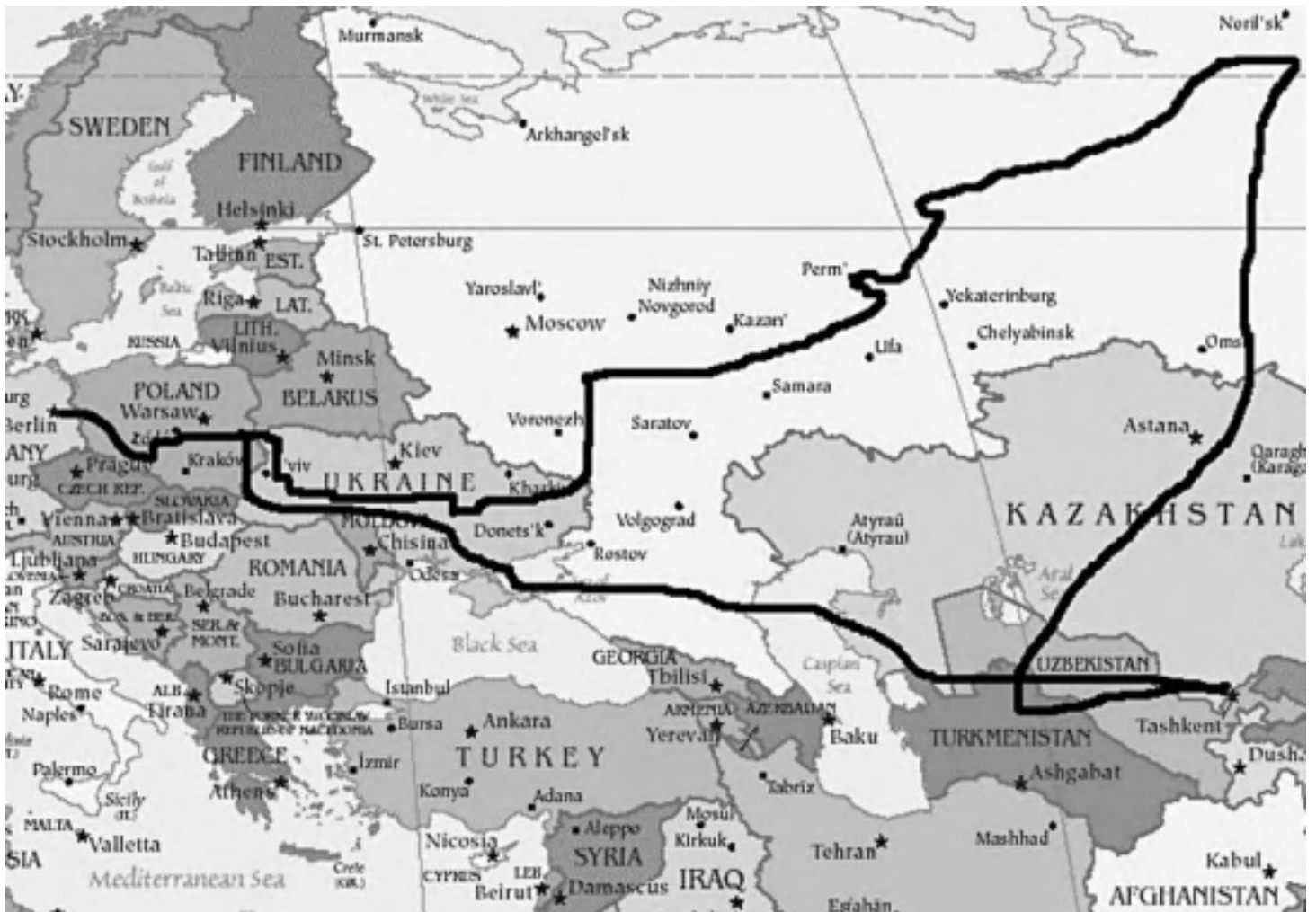




My hometown of Tomaszów. Courtesy of the Holocaust Center for Humanity, Seattle.



Gortler family journey (graphic courtesy Holocaust Center for Humanity, Seattle, from Josh's presentation)



Left: To the Jews of Tomashów, 1623-1943"
"Yehudei Tomaszów" [in Hebrew] Sculpture at Jewish cemetery Tomaszów.

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This is a picture of me (second from right) with three other boys in Berlin, 1947. The older kid is probably sixteen or seventeen. The other kids may be eight or ten, or eleven like me. We are all in the same class, studying the alef-beis. That was the religious school. This photo was shot by an American soldier. They had cameras, and they came back and gave these pictures to the kids. They were a very, very big deal, these pictures. Courtesy of the Joshua Gortler collection.



September 7, 2017. On the occasion of their donation of a Torah scroll in honor of their parents, Josh and Morris Gortler celebrate with family at Makor Synagogue in Scottsdale, AZ. Josh performs the traditional celebratory act of inscribing the final letter in this Torah. From left: Nina Gortler Blockman, Sarah Gortler, Josh (seated), Morris Gortler, Marcelle Gortler. Courtesy of the Joshua Gortler collection.

READING #1

My mother, Estera Balsenbaum, was also born in Tomaszów. Jews in Tomaszów have a long and rich history, dating back to the 1600s. Just before World War II, the Jewish population of Tomaszów was approximately 6,000, which was approximately half of the town's inhabitants.¹

The Balsenbaums were businesspeople, involved in wholesale food distribution to the Polish army, hospitals, and other institutions. My mother's father, Szia Balsenbaum, would go early in the morning to the wholesale markets, and then sell produce and other groceries to his customers.

The area around Tomaszów was a place of dense forests.

My father, Yosef Gortler, was born in Krasnobrod, a smaller *shtetl* nearby. The Gortlers of Krasnobrod had been involved in the lumber business for generations. In his work, my father would meet with woodsmen in the forest and give them orders for the types of tree trunks he wished to purchase. He prepared the trunks for shipping by rail, from a station near Tomaszów. When my father married my mother, they established a home in Tomaszów, where my father continued in the family lumber business.²

My mother had a business of her own. She was an expert seamstress and dressmaker, and a smart manager. She employed about 15 women or young girls in her workshop in the front room of our house.³ They made men's underwear and shirts, as well as women's clothing. The business was especially active around the Jewish holidays in spring and fall, when people, especially the men, would want new clothing. She made her own patterns from each customer's measurements, using the fabric that they would bring her.

Her skills with a scissor would prove handy in my childhood. She taught me how to sew, and to this day I still know how.

Early each morning, my mother would make breakfast for my father, my brother Monyik, and me. Although she employed a girl to take care of us during the work day, she would never leave the cooking to the girl. She preferred to do it herself. She would often come back out of the shop during the day to keep an eye on us.⁴

p. 7-8, excerpts

All this changed in September of 1939, when German Nazi troops overtook Tomaszow Lubelski. We Jews were forced to leave our comfortable homes. And so began our extraordinary life of trying to survive.

There was a fierce air battle near our town. Our house was seriously damaged.

It was morning. My brother and I were home with our parents.

[We] started running with our parents as the bombs kept falling.

Our father was carrying whatever belongings he was able to grab. My mother wanted to protect our eyes from seeing the devastation. She used a shawl to cover our faces so that we would not see the horror, the dead people in the street. Like an eagle protecting her chicks with her wings, our mother covered us, her two young off spring.

[now on p. 8, mid-page:]

The Germans succeeded in occupying Tomaszow. We were gathered in a central holding place, to be

shipped

1 <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/t/51-tomaszow-lubelski/99-history/138161-history-of-community>

2 Sarah Gortler, interview with Gigi Yellen, April 4, 2019, reporting on conversations with her mother-in-law

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

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out to the Zamosc ghetto.

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From a Ghetto, Across a Border

Zamosc to Rava-Ruska

Fall and Winter, 1939

I have no idea how we got to Zamosc, but that's what my parents told me.

We were forced to live in extremely tight and unsanitary conditions. We spent the cold Polish winter in that crowded ghetto with other Jews. The adults were forced into slave labor, to help the Nazi machine in their war efforts. Suddenly, I, this lively little three-year-old boy, had to be kept quiet, forbidden to utter a peep.

Years later, my mother told my wife Sarah how terrible the conditions were in this ghetto and labor camp. They were so terrible that her teeth fell out, one by one.

My mother never told me this herself. She always wanted to protect me.

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READING #2

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Through my father's connections with the Gentiles outside of the ghetto, we were able to escape that place. Some of these connections must have sheltered and guided us in the direction of the border.

One border city, Rava-Ruska, was originally Poland. It was occupied first by the Germans, and then reoccupied by the Russians. We were able to cross the border into Russian-occupied Rava-Ruska by walking, and by horse and buggy.

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From Rava-Ruska, we once again began our journey to...somewhere. None of us knew where.

p. 15

A NARROW ESCAPE

How fortunate we were to leave Rava-Ruska when we did. According to historical documents, not long after the date of our departure from Rava-Ruska, the Germans reoccupied that town. The Jewish inhabitants were forced to dig trenches, and all the Jews were massacred.

By that time, my family and I were long gone. We had been transported by train, in cattle cars, deep into Siberia.

p. 17

Siberia

Summer 1940-Spring 1942

[In Siberia, t]he adult men were forced to work as lumberjacks, even though most of them had no such experience. Many Jews lost their lives because of falling trees, including my uncle Eliezer, who was somewhere else in Siberia. Many more of these so-called lumberjacks were injured and maimed by falling trees. Fortunately, my father had some knowledge of falling trees, thanks to his work in the lumber business.

There were no sanitation facilities. Disease was very common.

p. 18

The extreme cold of Siberia left many people with frozen fingers and toes, which had to be amputated. I saw people with no thumbs, and no fingers.

Years later, while I was watching the movie Dr. Zhivago, I felt that bone-chilling cold again, as the wagons on the movie screen traveled across the same terrible snow.

Under the law in the Soviet Union, any kind of religious practices were prohibited. As a result, Jewish boys who were born in Siberia during this period were not circumcised. Prayer was prohibited. I remember seeing Jewish men huddle in clandestine groups, with the prayers led by one person who knew them by memory. They had no prayer books, so others would repeat after him. I saw people on the lookout making sure that the Soviet guards would not see what they were doing.

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READING #3

p. 19

From Cold to Hot, A Confusing Train Trip:

Siberia to Tashkent

Springtime, 1942

When the cold was getting less harsh, Soviet army trucks arrived, with Russian-speaking soldiers in them. They piled us into the trucks and moved us away from the huts where we had found shelter. They drove us to the closest railroad junction, where we were piled into what we called waggonim, the railroad cattle cars. There was some straw on the floor, but no seats. No hygienic accommodations. No heat. There were no provisions for food. Ours was one of about half a dozen waggonim.

We sat for several days at the junction, not moving.

Out of nowhere, a black locomotive showed up, and the wagons started to move! Some people were actually out in the fields, collecting whatever they could find to eat.

p.20

Some people were left behind. Families were broken up. My father was one of those people in the field at the time. I still remember the fear I had that he might not make it back into the wagon."

Peasants in the fields noticed the train. Some actually helped bring something to us. Other turned their backs and said ivrieskies, "Jews," in a derogatory tone. There was another term that was more derogatory: parkhaty ivreiskies, "disgusting Jews."

After about a month of this back and forth, we arrived outside of Tashkent, in Uzbekistan....We were loaded onto trucks.

We arrived in a kolkhoz.

p. 23

The Muslims who lived there were very kind to us.

I remember one shepherd who saw me. I must have been this pitiful, sickly-looking, dejected child, carrying my little bowl. He motioned for me to come over. I watched the way his fingers moved, milking the goat. He filled my bowl with milk straight from the udders. The milk was warm, and I took a sip right then and there. The rest I brought back to my family.

I was so different from that shepherd, so unconnected to his world. And yet he took pity on me. To this day I remember the kindness he bestowed on me.

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READING #4

p.27

Uzbekistan to Tomaszow:

Going "Home"

May 1945

p. 27

The local authorities gave the refugees a choice: we could remain in the kolkhoz or return to our place of origin. For us, there was no question. We were going home. Home, to Tomaszow Lubelski in Poland.

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Of course, we were hoping that our neighbors would welcome us with open arms, would open the doors for us.”

p. 29

THIS DID NOT HAPPEN.

Of course, we had thought of Tomaszow as home. Where else? We tried going back to our house. But our house had strangers living in it, and they weren't about to give it back to us. The neighbors didn't want us back. What are you doing here? That was their attitude.

There was a complete changeover in attitude towards Jews, even from people who knew us, after the war. They were the same old neighbors, but now they were so different.

We had been at home in Poland, or so we thought. Our country had been attacked, and its people had fought back. But the war had unleashed old hostilities. Now we were the objects of that hostility. Jews were not wanted back in Poland.

WE HAD BEEN REPLACED.

My parents knew that we would have to find a new home. We would become refugees, “displaced persons.”

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My Home: Three Camps
June 1945-June 1951

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I had an explosion of education. I was ten years old when the light bulbs went off in my mind I suddenly realized I could put together the letters on a page to make a word. I learned that putting words together is reading. Suddenly, I could not only count with my fingers but I could also write numbers on a page, and I learned that this was arithmetic.

p. 47

STREET LEARNING

At the same time, I was learning coping skills. Running out and finding apples. Hustling chickens. Going out to the farms, making deals, selling stuff. Bartering with chocolate and cigarettes. I was smoking, everybody was smoking.

After all we had been through, we were developingchutzpah. All these years, I hadn't strayed far from my parents, but now I had a chance to discover what I could do on my own. We kids were finally free to start discovering the world.

p. 49-50

THERE WERE NO SOCIAL WORKERS FOR THE CHILDREN

As a child, it was in your face that you shouldn't forget what you had just been through, but there was no one helping you learn the tools to cope with what had happened to you or your family. Nevertheless, I saw something that would influence me to make the professional choice that eventually directed my life. I saw social workers."

They did not work with the kids.

Just as I had to acquire essential skills at a relatively late age, people in late life often find themselves unprepared for the challenges they have to face. As a social worker in service to the geriatric community, I have been able to use my experiences to help people and their families.

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READING #5: Two especially meaningful DP camp experiences

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MY AUNT AND THE UNDERCOVER TURKEY

I had this aunt, Brocha. She was a real trader. She could sneak anything under

her big coat. It was Erev Pesach. It looked as though there would be no meat for our seder.

But then, an hour before sundown, I saw my Aunt Brocha walking in, singing the Partisan Song, with a turkey's face sticking out of her coat!

We had kosher meat for our seder!

p. 77-78

WEDDINGS AND GOOSE PIMPLES

In the DP camps, there were so many weddings, and so many births. It wasn't unusual to have weddings a couple times a week.

The Jews felt that they were liberated from slavery, just like the Jews of ancient Egypt. We knew that 6 million Jews had been destroyed, and we had to reproduce a new generation of Jews.

When there was a wedding, you didn't get an invitation. An announcement would come over the camp loudspeakers: "ACHtung! ACHtung! *Sibn a nacht vil zien a chassene, alle menschen ken kummen!*" Attention, attention! At seven tonight, there will be a wedding! Everyone can come!

And everybody went! The food was—a piece of cake. There was no sit-down dinner. There was *challah*. Maybe some *leikach*—a sponge cake. And some schnapps. And some wine.

There were six white wedding dresses that were sewn by the women. One of the seamstresses was my mother. I'm not sure what the material was. Sheets that they found? Maybe they found satin from the Germans somewhere? These dresses belonged to the camp, so to speak, not to any individual person.

Each of these gowns was made in a different size. When the bride walked down the aisle, dressed in white, there were five other girls, or young women, walking behind her. Each of these girls was carrying one of the other five gowns. They were not wearing them. These five, with the bride, were representing the 6 million Jews that died.

I have goose pimples as I talk about it, because I see it in front of me so clearly. Some of the girls who married were able to walk with their parents down the aisle. Some were not.

THE CHALLAH DANCE

Then the wedding dancing began. The dancing I saw is an experience we don't see at a strictly Orthodox wedding in America, where the men surround the groom and the women surround the bride, sort of in the background. In the DP camp, everybody participated. It was coed.

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And that challah!

For the wedding, the women would bake a challah. They made a big, big *challah*, a huge challah.

After the wedding, the women would hold up this challah, and dance in front of the *chosson* and *kallah*.¹ And then we would eat it. I don't know what the symbolism is, maybe that we have bread, we have prosperity, but the challah was a very central part of the ceremony, the women dancing with the enormous challah.

It reminds me of an important moment in the Torah, when we read the song of Miriam and the women (Exodus 15:17-21). The Jews have escaped from slavery in Egypt, the sea has miraculously split, and as they complete their safe passage, Miriam comes out, leading the women. You see her dance with the tambourine. And now, here in the DP camp, you had the women dancing with the challah.

You know, I've read so many books about the Holocaust, but I don't remember that imagery anywhere that I read. I saw that dancing every time somebody got married. It was a celebration for all of us.

¹ Groom and bride