We did not even really know when the war began. We heard bombs exploding and everyone said it was maneuvers. But when we saw people taken to the hospital we knew it was more than maneuvers. We ran away to the woods just the way we were, not taking anything with us. At this point the Poles were also running away. We stayed in the woods for a few days and when it was quiet and there were no longer any houses burning we started to walk back to town. I remember my father putting something on his face, covering his beard so the Germans would not see it. I do not know why he understood that this was a good thing to do, but he did.

We came back to find our house just as we had left it. The next day the Germans said that all the men had to line up in the market square and would work for them. On September 12, 1939, the Germans arrested a large number of Jews because they supposedly killed a German. They were forced to dig a tremendous hole and then start running. The Germans started shooting at them and about forty of them were killed. My uncle was one of those who was buried alive, so we knew right away what the Germans were out for.

There were other signs as well. We had to bring all our gold and silver to the Germans, which we did, except for a few small things that we gave to the Mayor’s wife, the woman who used to buy from us secretly because my father liked the Mayor and wanted to help him.

The day after they ordered all the men to the square we made a hole in the wall so my father could hide in a spare room in the back. We put an armoire in front of the hole and my father hid there. From the day the Nazis came my father did not go outside. My father refused to shave his beard but my brother shaved his and was taken to a work camp. My other brother was in Warsaw and could not come home.

The Germans closed down my father’s business but one day a Pole who used to buy leather from us brought some Germans to the warehouse and they piled all the leather we had onto trucks and shipped it back to Germany. We lived on the little money we had before the Germans came.

On the evening of the third day that the Germans were in the town we saw the outline of flames through the windows. The Germans had set our beautiful shul on fire! When the fire spread to the nearby houses they were afraid that the whole town would burn down and asked the Jews to put out the fire. We had no water in our house, so we had to go to the well and pump water. Everyone, including women and children, was part of the fire brigade chain.

While the fire was burning we felt as if we ourselves were on fire; it was the most terrible thing because that shul was like our heart. We worked all night and by morning the fire was out. My father had been in real danger because we lived so close to the shul, but he still refused to go out.

As soon as the Germans came to town they began to set up a ghetto. Since our house was already in the ghetto we had to take in other people from outside the ghetto. The house became terribly crowded and most of these people were sleeping on the floors, that is, when we could sleep. We would listen for the sound of German boots and were terrified that they would come to our house because we heard that they came to houses at night and took out people and shot them for no reason at all.

Because I spoke Polish without an accent I would sometimes leave the ghetto to go look for potatoes or any kind of food I could buy to smuggle back into the ghetto so we would have food for my brother’s children, an older boy and a younger girl.

Then one day we saw all the Jews coming in from all the small villages around our city, and the houses in the ghetto were so crowded that they could not even lie down at night;
they had to stand.¹

The Jewish police would watch us and were terribly distressed that they could not help because the Germans totally controlled them and used them for their own purposes. If a policeman did not do what the Germans wanted, he was shot. We knew we could not expect anything from them, but they tried to help the Germans as little as they could.

We lived in the ghetto for more than a year² and then one day the Judenrat (Jewish Council) ordered all the Jews into the market square to be resettled, telling us that any Jews left in the town would be shot. My father decided that I should run out of the ghetto and hide. I did not want to leave my family and my father and I argued about it for a whole day. My mother was crying and begging him not to send me away but he said, as if he knew what was happening, that I was the only one with a chance to survive because of my perfect, unaccented Polish, and he wanted someone in the family to survive. He told me to take good care of myself that winter, and in the spring, he predicted, the Germans would lose the war. He said it would last only one winter. His last words to me were:

“Remember to be a good human being because only the person [who has been hurt] himself can forgive you, not God. So please remember that.” Those words are always in my mind; every time I want to do something that is not right, or do not want to do something that I should do, what my father said comes back to me.

I felt terrible because I did not want to leave my family and I could not understand, or did not want to understand, why he chose me. But once it was decided that I would go by myself, we had to figure out how to do it. There was a 4:00 PM curfew in the town, which applied to Poles as well as Jews, but my father got the idea that I could leave by the sewers, and asked a Jewish policeman to be sure he closed the sewer cover after I went down.

I went to complain to my brother about what my father wanted me to do, and I saw his children lying in bed crying with hunger and I said to myself, “I’m going to make my father happy and go, but I’ll probably never survive because they’ll find me and shoot me.” My father made sure I had warm clothes and boots, which had been my sister’s, and he gave me all the money he had. And I remember that when the family was preparing to go to the market square my mother asked my father what she should pack for the family and he said that all he needed was a clean shirt, tāllis ³ and tefillin ⁴ “in case I’m going to be able to daven [pray] once more.”

When I got down to the sewer where the water was up to my knees, I heard voices and I was scared to death. But when a voice asked in Yiddish, “Who is it?” I was not afraid anymore and I answered, “It’s me. I’m Jewish,” because I realized they were afraid that I might be Polish. There were actually quite a lot of people in that sewer, all with the same idea of escaping.

At night we would go out searching for food. We knew there was a Polish cooperative farm nearby and we asked the same Jewish policeman who had helped me get into the sewer safely to help us make a hole in the wall so we could get into the egg storage area without cracking the lock. We were hiding in the cooperative farm when we saw all the Jews being taken out of town. We also heard people rummaging through the houses and shooting people who were hiding. The policeman came by the window where we were watching and threw us a box of hard candy and told us, “They’re sending us all away. You’re on your own.”

We used that candy to stay alive because there was no more food. Every day each of us got one piece of candy and we used it to wet our mouths when they were dry. Even today

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¹ Several waves of refugees arrived in the town – from Łódź in 1939-40; from Plock in February 1941, and from the nearby small towns and villages in summer-fall 1942.
² The ghetto had been closed apparently in spring 1941, and the author is probably referring to this as the period from which she is counting “more than a year.” The deportations to Treblinka were in November 1942.
³ Prayer shawl worn by men during morning prayers.
⁴ Phylacteries, two small leather boxes containing prayers and worn on the weaker arm and forehead by men during morning weekday prayers.
when I take a candy in my mouth I never finish it; I take it out of my mouth, which is a habit left over from those days. At night it was essential to be quiet and one of us would serve as guard to make sure no one was snoring.

Suddenly we heard a noise. It was the Poles rummaging through the apartments where the Jews had lived and taking what the Germans had left. The Poles knew more about hiding things than the Germans and they soon discovered where the bricks had been removed to let us into the cooperative farm. We started to run and the Poles shouted to the Germans, “Juden.” We scattered all over. I knew exactly where to go; I ran quite a distance to my friend’s backyard, which had a big outhouse. I went into one of the toilets, locked it, and stayed there until it got dark. When I went out I did not know where to go or what to do, and I was terrified because I did not think there were any Jews left.

My first idea was to go to the Mayor’s wife and ask her for help. On the way there I met my homeroom teacher from public school. She belonged to the Sokolnia, a very patriotic nationalistic Polish organization. She was an antisemite and I was afraid she was going to turn me in. She asked me if I had been resurrected like Jesus because I looked like I had come back from the grave. I told her that I was hiding and I had not eaten or combed my hair, which was in braids down to my knees. I was very surprised when she said, “Come with me,” and she took me to her house and told me to wash up and comb my hair and gave me something to eat. She said she knew there were some Jews—the stronger ones—working on a big farm at the end of town. She told me I would be able to bribe a German to let me work there, which I somehow had the courage to do. I stayed there for about four days, and I think I was in the egg cooperative for about a week, although I am not at all sure of the lengths of time involved.

Then we heard rumors that even this farm was going to become Judenrein, and this time I did run to the Mayor’s wife. By then I had become obsessed with the need to survive, and I told her that my father had chosen me to be the family member to outlive what was happening. We both knew I needed Polish papers. She got them from her husband’s office and gave me a new name, Grubman, which could be either Polish or Jewish. I spent the night there and when her husband came home he told me there were some Jewish men working for the Germans, picking up scrap iron, and that maybe I could stay with them. The Mayor and his wife went out and I knew that if the Germans caught me there they would kill them, so I had to leave.

I left a note, filled my pockets with all the food I could find, and went to where the Jews were working. I stayed there for a few days and then the Germans started talking about sending the men away because they did not need the iron any more. The Jews were talking about going to Szydlowiec, a town not far from mine, where the Germans were concentrating the Jews as they made the small towns nearby Judenrein. At first I thought I would go there too but then I decided to go into the woods and join the partisans who were fighting Hitler.

I never found the partisans, so I was alone, hiding in the wheat fields at night and looking for blueberries in the woods during the day. This went on for a summer and half of the winter, and when they cut the wheat and it no longer covered me I slept in the woods. After the blueberries were gone I ate raw potatoes. The whole time I was terrified that a German or a Pole would find me.

One night I went to the train station and used my Polish papers to go to Szydlowiec. I was told to go to an old dilapidated leather factory that my father used to do business with and I stayed there for a while until somebody heard that I was from Końskie. He asked if I knew someone named Oksenhendler who he used to deal with. That was my family name and I became very excited. He told me that my brother-in-law was in Radom, that they had taken away my sister—the one I used to go to school with—and the children but not him because he was young and strong.

In Szydlowiec I met three girls, one of whom said she knew how to smuggle us into Radom and that it has to be on Sylvester Night (New Year’s Eve). “All the Germans are drunk,” she told us, “And they don’t know what they are doing. I’ll show you how to get into this little ghetto with a high fence, which you have to be prepared to jump.”

We got on the train to Radom and sat there terrified. The train was dark because the
Germans were afraid of being bombed, and they were all over singing songs about killing the Jews, bragging that this one killed so many and that one killed so many more.

The four of us smuggled ourselves into the Radom ghetto and then we all ran in different directions looking for people we knew. When I found my brother-in-law we were so emotional we could not talk for a while. We were just crying. Then we began reminiscing. He told me what happened to his family and I told him what happened to mine. We did not sleep at all that night; we just talked and cried.

He went to work early in the morning and I stayed in his tiny room without any food, just as he had told me to do. He returned with the news that the Germans had caught two of the girls who had smuggled into the ghetto with me and that they had told the Judenrat that if the other two did not come forward they would take out ten Jews and shoot them. This was a nightmare.

I knew I could not go right away because it was after the curfew when Jews were not allowed on the street. Early in the morning my brother-in-law took me to the Judenrat. As the officer was calling the Gestapo to say they had me, the fourth girl walked in. Both of us knew we could not let innocent Jews die for us and we thought we would be shot as soon as we came forward. After we had been sitting at the Judenrat for about an hour, an SS man came and took us to the Gestapo office where the other two girls were already waiting.

The SS man said, “Now you’re all together, tell us how the partisans communicate.” Because of the partisans they were afraid to go into the woods. We told them the truth, which was that we knew that the partisans lived in the woods but we had no idea how they got ammunition. The Gestapo men did not believe us, and they called each of us to a different room to interrogate us individually. They spoke to me as if I were a little girl and promised that if I told them the secrets of the partisans they would send me to Palestine to live. They offered me anything they could think of, but I kept telling them, “I don’t know their secrets because I don’t belong to the partisans.” I did not want them to know that I had come because of my brother-in-law because I thought that would put him in danger.

They tortured me by chaining me to the leg of a bed and putting food just out of my reach, which they said I could have if I told them what they wanted to know. They beat me too. Then they took me to another room and a different SS man came and started to beat me in the worst way, and then, finally, I said, “I’m Jewish and you can shoot me and it’ll be over with.” When one of the SS men heard this he said, “What? There’s a Jew still alive? Let’s shoot her and stuff her and put her in the museum.”

The following day they put me in a truck by myself and said, “You’re very lucky. They didn’t shoot you. You’re going to jail.” I was terrified. I did not know anything about jail. It was a subject we never talked about at home, but somehow I had the idea that in jail I would be eaten alive by rats. I kept asking God why they did not shoot me and asking my father why he had made me leave and run away to be so scared of rats.

When we arrived at the jail, they put me in a room with the other three and we were all black and blue and swollen from the beatings and we all cried together. There were rats, but we were covered up and when we saw a rat we started to move and the rat ran away. We sat in jail without being beaten and without working but also with very little food, living mainly on the few scraps of bread brought to us by the Judenrat. The Judenrat also told us that the Germans were going to make the area *Judenrein* by taking the Jews to Treblinka, which we later learned was one of the killing camps.

One night a guard told us to get dressed and leave our cell. We were terrified because we had heard people being shot in the night and we thought this was about to happen to us. One of the guards said to me, “What’s wrong with you people? Why are you crying? You’re going to a place where you’ll have a chance to live out your life.” They put us on a truck with a lot of people, all Poles, no Jews, people who were killers and robbers and political anti-Germans.