In the spring of 1941, the building in which we lived on Kołłątaja Street was to be converted into an army uniform factory called the Rosner Shop. All tenants were ordered to leave our apartments and move to the outskirts of Będzin, where a Jewish ghetto called Kamionka (and later called Środula Dolna) was later established. My family was given a small house with one main room, a tiny kitchen and an outhouse. My parents and I slept in the room. A young couple that we did not know was to sleep in the kitchen.

The Będzin ghetto lasted a little more than two years. The ghetto was liquidated in August 1943 and its inhabitants were transported to Auschwitz. A group of 150 Jewish men, guarded by the SS, were assigned to gather and ship our possessions—silver, furniture, sewing machines, clothing—to Germany. They burned our books, documents, photographs, and all else that remained. Later on, this group was sent to Auschwitz as well.

As early as mid-August of 1942, about one year after we had been forced into the ghetto, the first mass deportations of our community began. The entire ghetto population, including the young, the elderly, and the bedridden, as well as families who still lived on designated streets of the city, were ordered to assemble at the sports stadium on Kościuszko Street at six o’clock in the morning. Those who could not make it on their own were dragged to the stadium by the militia and the police. Every house, apartment, basement and attic was thoroughly searched. Around 30,000 people gathered in the stadium and waited for what was to come next.

At the stadium, we stood in a long line that moved towards a German officer cracking a leather whip and ordering people to assemble in different areas. One section of the stadium filled with children and older people, another with young, healthy-looking men and women, and a third with people of all ages. The first group was to be sent for extermination. The second group was assigned to work in labor camps, and the last group was supposed to remain in the ghetto. When my parents and I approached the selection officer, he motioned, “Old ones to the right, girl to the left.” As I took a few steps to the left I heard my mother crying and I turned around to go toward my parents. I never reached them. I was beaten and dragged back to the left side. The man with the whip had decided our destiny.

The traumatic scene was ruled over by police bearing whips and guns. In the late afternoon, they allowed the people in my line to return to our homes. At midnight, with the streetlights on, we watched the loved ones being herded like cattle towards the orphanage, where another selection process was to take place and transports prepared for Auschwitz. We knew people were being sent to their deaths, because we had already heard horrifying reports about the extermination camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, approximately forty-five miles from Będzin.

My parents were trapped in the selection process. I stood paralyzed, separated from them and surrounded by cries of grief. I spotted my mother. That day was the worst experience of my life, the first really deep wound I ever suffered. In time, more ghastly things would happen to me, but I hardened with experience and built a shield around my heart.

I was spared prolonged suffering. Probably because the Germans were not yet prepared to send so many thousands of people to be mass murdered in such a short amount of time, some people were released the next day and sent home. Among them were my mother and father. I don’t know how many thousands were sent to Auschwitz that week, but very few
of the elderly or the mothers with small children came back.

Soon after this round of deportations, my Aunt Regina, my mother’s younger sister, arrived at our place with five of her six children (four boys, ages four to ten, and a two-year-old girl). Her husband and oldest son, age 15, had been sent to German labor camps, along with other able-bodied men. Regina and the other children were quickly driven out of their little town of Jaworzno. Given no time to pack, they arrived at our doorstep empty-handed, with not one suitcase. Jaworzno was being “cleansed” of Jews, and the survivors like my Aunt and her children were “relocated” to Będzin. Because of its close location to Auschwitz, our region was used as a way station.

Not long after her arrival, Aunt Regina was deported to Auschwitz along with hundreds of others. Her four young sons (Majloch, Zelik, Izek, and Jakob) managed to run away and come back to us. Two-year-old Pauline stayed with us too; she slept with me on the sofa or in my parents’ bed. The boys slept on rugs on the cement floor in the entryway. We lived together in our cramped quarters with hardly any food, satisfied to eat a little watery soup that my mother would make.

The Będzin ghetto consisted of long rows of small houses, with one or two rooms each, without any bathroom facilities. Though the ghetto wasn’t fenced in with barbed wire, as many others were, armed police and guard dogs patrolled the space day and night. Their vigilance ensured that Gentiles did not enter or send supplies into the ghetto and prevented Jews from leaving unless one was part of a convoy of laborers walking to and from work. Any other activity that took a Jew out of the ghetto was forbidden under penalty of death.

Most of the previous owners of the houses that made up the ghetto were relocated to furnished apartments in Będzin that had been vacated by Jewish families. At the army uniform factory, in our former apartment building, thousands of Jews were put to work. Labor prolonged one’s survival, if only for a short time, because laborers were given food rations as well as identification papers, which stated that they were still needed in the service of the Third Reich.

The Polish owners of the house we now lived in had been given an apartment on Środula Street, which divided the ghetto from the rest of the city. Lotti, who had worked as a live-in maid for my parents before the war, moved into this same building on Środula Street. One day I left the ghetto illegally and went to plead with both Lotti and the former owners of the home we now occupied to take in my two-year-old cousin Pauline, an innocent and beautiful toddler. With her blue eyes and blond hair, she looked like a typical Aryan child. I begged them to help her. Instead, I was ordered to get out of their homes and never come back.

Life went on. Most of us were forced to work in factories set up by the Germans, making shoes and sewing uniforms, shirts and other clothing for the German army. We were marched under guard to work in the mornings and marched back at night. But we never knew if we’d live through the night because that’s when the Germans would barge into homes to make random arrests and send people away to unknown destinations. No reasons for the arrests were ever given. No charges were made. These veritable kidnappings were part of the Nazi terror campaign. Nobody knew when his or her turn would come. After a while, many of us thought about bunkers where we could hide and postpone the “end.”

Broken families, broken hearts, hunger and sickness. I came down with paratyphoid fever, an even worse case than my sister Helen had survived. I was 17 years old and felt that surely I was going to die. “At least I’ll die in my own bed,” I remember thinking at the time. I also recall that although I was semiconscious, I recited poems from Greek mythology that I had learned in school. Fortunately, a makeshift hospital had been established in the ghetto, and the staff was able to take care of me. Because I was bleeding internally, I needed a transfusion, but there were no blood banks, of course, or equipment or intravenous solutions. My friends from the youth movement offered to donate blood for me, but in the end my sister Helen became the donor. They put her arm next to mine and did a direct transfusion, cutting into us to find the veins. This saved my life, though I had lost 30 pounds and was too weak to walk. Friends and family brought me whatever food they could find to build up my strength. Gradually, I recovered and my parents rejoiced to have their “little girl” back again.
A few months before I fell sick, the Judenrat had gotten permission from the German authorities to cultivate several acres of fields that had not been used for many years. The idea was to plant vegetable plots with potatoes, beans, groats, and so forth and use the harvest in a soup kitchen, where we’d feed people and allay the starvation. My friends from the Zionist youth group volunteered to help, although we knew absolutely nothing about farming. Under the supervision of one Mr. Strochlic, a graduate of an agriculture school, we tilled the soil with spades, rakes and our bare hands. We awoke before sunrise to plant and water seedlings. Our garden grew plentiful with carrots, parsley roots, radishes, cucumbers and tomatoes. Watching the plants grow and harvesting them filled our hearts with hope. We used natural fertilizer like horse and cow manure and also excrement from the outhouses and the ghetto. We “golden youth”—former high school students and graduates—mixed soil and fertilizer by hand (we had no gloves). The wind blew it all over our legs and the smell was putrid, but the garden kept growing. At the time, nothing seemed too difficult or impossible for us. We were young, still together, and still singing and joking in spite of everything. We slept in separate barracks for girls and boys.

One sunny morning we were tending to the potato plants, when I heard someone whistling beautiful clear notes from a field on the other side of the road. Recognizing several familiar melodies, mainly classical music, I joined in. Now there were two strong and clear whistles, mine and, as I soon found out, Janek’s. He was a youth group instructor, about four years my senior, and all the older girls had a crush on him. It felt like our whistling was drawing us together. I suddenly felt so alive and happy to be working in the green fields on a glorious summer day that I could almost forget reality. It was like a breath of freedom. Janek and I went on and on, whistling one melody and then another, until a clanging bell signaled the time to leave the fields. Still whistling, Janek came from his field and I from mine, and together we walked slowly towards our barracks. Janek jumped into a little creek on the side of the road and picked a handful of forget-me-nots for me. We talked and held hands. We were falling in love. Four years older than me, Janek had graduated from high school in 1939 and had been preparing to immigrate to Palestine, where his older brother lived on a kibbutz, but the war put an abrupt stop to his plans. Now, two summers later, against a backdrop of terror, we spent long evenings together, sharing our love, worries and frustrations. But we were unable to plan for the future because we knew there would be no future for us.

The recognition of the depth and breadth of our hopeless situation marked a turning point, not only for me, Janek and our other friends in the Będzin ghetto, but apparently, in many ghettos. It became the pivotal moment when—after many of our family members and friends had been killed, after we were thoroughly isolated, after all hope had disappeared and there was nothing left but desperation and determination to save a few individual lives—acts of resistance rippled throughout the ghettos, Będzin among them.