

# Two Brothers: Parallel Lives and Divergent Paths

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**THE FOLLOWING STORY** is based on interviews conducted by Nina Talbot with two brothers, Betzalel (1929–2016) Wertenteil, a Holocaust survivor, and Jack (1921–) Wertenteil, a US Army veteran. Both men were born and raised in Dynów, Galicia, the town of Nina’s ancestral roots. In addition to her work with the Wertenteil brothers, Nina, a frequent contributor to the *Galitzianer*, has conducted a number of interviews with people from the Dynów area, two of which appear in prior issues of the journal (see June 2018 and September 2018). The story below was adapted from her book *Family Stories from Galicia*.

In 2013, I took my first trip to Dynów, where my grandmother was born, as well as many other members of my family. While there, I met a scholar who was gathering interviews of Holocaust survivors who were children at the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland. The researcher connected me with one of her subjects, Betzalel Wertenteil, whom I contacted after returning to New York. This phone call led to the first of many visits with Betzalel in his home in Queens, New York—and each time, he shared more of his story of survival with me. A couple months after our first meeting, Betzalel introduced me to his older brother Jack (Chaim Yaakov).



*Betzalel Wertenteil at home in New York, 2013*

Although separated by nine years, the brothers had parallel life experiences during early boyhood: the shtetl Dynów, where they both attended *cheder* (Jewish study house) and Polish primary school, the merchant and farming life of their father, the Yiddish life, the rebbe in Dynów, the apple trees, the church at the town entrance and the public school next to it, and the cherries growing wild near the narrow train track, the only reliable connection of the shtetl to the outside world.

After World War II, Jack and Betzalel again led parallel lives, this time within a few miles of each other in New York. But the decade in between, from 1939 to 1949, foisted circumstances upon the two brothers that changed the world, ended the lives of millions in Europe, and sent Jack and Betzalel on divergent paths. Jack was focused on adjusting to life in America and then returning to Europe as a member of the US Army; Betzalel was

focused on doing whatever he needed to do to survive with his family during the Holocaust.

## Jack's Story

Jack went to primary school in Dynów in a building that still stands today and is now used by the town administration. Jewish children went to school together with non-Jewish children, and at the time, the Jewish students had to sit in the back of the classroom. In the afternoons, the Jewish boys went to cheder. Yiddish was Jack's first language, and he also spoke Polish and Hebrew.

Jack left Dynów at fifteen and went to study at the yeshiva in Tarnów. He considered himself lucky to have had good teachers, who were dedicated to passing on the traditions of Torah and Talmud. These traditions are still the centerpieces of his life today—as a ninety-eight-year-old man living in Long Island, New York. During his time as a yeshiva student in Tarnów, Jack used to come home to Dynów on *yom tov* (Jewish holidays), which is where he was for six months before immigrating to the United States by himself in 1937 at the age of seventeen.

Jack and Betzalel's mother, Tila, died of throat cancer in 1939 before the Nazi invasion of Dynów. After her death, the family burdens fell to their father, Duvid, who was widowed with six children to care for. Duvid and his daughter Chancha, who was sixteen at the time, held the family together.

Meanwhile, Jack was working in a hosiery shop on Orchard Street in New York's Lower East Side. After leaving Europe, he said, "It took a few years to undo the religion, 'to unplug,' and the army did the rest." He was drafted into the US Army in 1941, returning to Europe as an American soldier and serving in England, Ireland, France, Belgium, and Germany.

## The War in My Shtetl

During one of our interviews, Betzalel explained:

In 1937, '38, '39, Jews had a rough time living in Dynów because Hitler came to power. All of Europe was threatened, especially Poland, which was the first victimized country. The Poles were the first people really fighting. Czechoslovakia gave up, so the Jews were the first victims. Are there people in Poland who believe there was no Holocaust, like they have in America? No.

The Nazis invaded Dynów during Rosh Hashanah in September of 1939. The Jews comprised one-third of the population of the town at the time, and on that day, about 400 Jews were killed. Most of them were rounded up and taken to two different locations where they were shot into ravines, including thirty-seven members of my family. Others died when the Nazis set fire to one of the shuls. Traumatized by that childhood memory, a friend of mine from Dynów, a Catholic man named Józef, told me that he recalled seeing Nazis pulling Torahs out of the shul and setting them ablaze in the *rynek* (town square). According to Józef, when an elderly rabbi tried to extinguish the fire by stamping on it, the Nazis tossed him into the burning synagogue. Among the dead in Dynów on that day were Jews from western Poland who had moved eastward to escape the Nazis, as well as Jews from neighboring towns who had come to shop, visit relatives, and attend Rosh Hashanah services at one of the three shuls located on the town square.

During our interviews, Betzalel shared his memories with me from September 1939. It was surreal listening to him, then in his 80s, recounting the most horrific events imaginable, as seen and comprehended by a nine-year-old boy. At one point during his description of the Nazi invasion, he said, "I didn't have a childhood."

After the Nazis arrived, Betzalel recalls running with his five siblings and his father through the back of the shul because the Germans were in front on the rynek. When the family got home, the Nazis were shooting, and the main road was full of soldiers, horses, cavalry, and wagons. The Nazis surrounded the town and sent up flares.

At one point during the Rosh Hashanah holiday, German soldiers came to Betzalel's house in search of Polish soldiers. Betzalel recalled that during that time, he was out playing in the train yard and saw German Luftwaffe warplanes flying overhead. He hid under a train parked in the yard and remembered seeing the German soldiers' black boots from his hiding spot. When the boots walked away, he scrambled up the hillside, back to his house. There was a drummer walking the streets—one method of making announcements to the townspeople—calling for the Jews to come to the rynek or they would be killed. At the time, nine-year-old Betzalel didn't understand, so he didn't tell his family. Then, he saw German militia with SS uniforms walk up the road from the family's house and turn the corner.

Betzalel remembered seeing Germans over the next few days celebrating while driving through town in their Mercedes. Meanwhile, once they occupied Dynów, they imposed a curfew on the residents. Betzalel said that his father was ordered to perform the task of picking up the bodies in the street of people shot dead for violating the curfew.

Soon after the invasion, Duvid took his six children and fled down to the San River, where they were able to cross on a raft to get to the Polish village of Bartkówka. The river was muddy, and people were trying to swim across. Many drowned—the elderly, mothers, and children. Betzalel said that after his family crossed, they stayed in a basement room, getting food from a soup kitchen set up to feed those fleeing from the Nazis.

## Refugees from Death-Saturated Lands

For the next ten years, Betzalel's growth into manhood was not simply a path through the developmental stages as we now know them, but a struggle through history, political upheaval, sudden changes in governments, different languages, shifts in attitudes toward Jews, border crossings and trips of thousands of miles, with little more than rumor informing him of what lay at the next stop and what tragedy or challenge awaited him in the coming hours—or even moments.

After the massacres in Dynów, Jews who made it across the San River to Bartkówka found themselves in territory controlled by Russian soldiers. The Russians, who considered the Poles traitors, forced them out of the area. For the Wertenteils and other families, that meant a long journey by rail and by raft along a convergence of several rivers through the Gulag. Toward the end of the journey, the Wertenteils' raft headed downriver in the current, far beyond their designated landing spot, eventually running into a sandbar, where villagers pulled the family ashore.

Duvid and his four sons (Israel, Meilech, Leib, and Betzalel) and two daughters (Chancha and Ettel) ended up living in log cabins in the Siberian town of Bodaybo. During that time, his son Israel was arrested for getting an unauthorized bread ration card and was sentenced to seven months in the Gulag. Betzalel remembered that when his sixteen-year-old brother, Meilech, made the journey to bring food to Israel in prison, he "drowned" in the snow on his way back. Meilech was somehow rescued, brought back to the cabin, and revived by their father, but after a year and a half of illness, he died of pneumonia. When Israel finally returned from the Gulag, he lay in bed for six months with a stomach swollen from hunger.

On June 22, 1941, the Germans invaded Russia in Operation Barbarossa. With that turn of events,



the Poles in Russia were considered helpful resources in the fight against the Nazis. The people in Bodaybo were sent into the hills to chop wood and mine for gold. Duvid was assigned to work as a night watchman for a warehouse in the forest. Betzalel recalled his sister Ettel picking icicles off their father's face and beard after a work shift in the freezing cold.

As the war progressed and the Germans retreated, the Wertenteil family gradually moved westward. In 1944, getting closer to Poland, the family remained for a time in the Volga area of Russia. Chancha, who had become like a mother to her younger siblings, found work in the city of Mari-ental, home to a German colony that had existed in Russia for centuries.

## Reencountering His People in Europe

That same year, Jack's unit landed in Normandy, eleven days after the invasion. He was stationed in an administrative post in a US military dental office in the city of Étampes, near Paris. During our interview, he described the scenes after the liberation of Paris in August 1944. He said that Jewish people were living in train stations all over France. They were refugees who could not go back to the places they had lived before the war because their homes had been destroyed or taken. He added, "When they got off the train, people screamed and hugged each other, [saying], 'I didn't know you were alive!'"

On Yom Kippur of 1944, Jack went to the Great Synagogue of Paris on Rue de la Victoire, which had been bombed by the Nazis three years earlier. Jewish Allied soldiers and a couple thousand Jews who had survived the camps packed into the sanctuary. Services were led by Rabbi Judah Nadich, the senior Jewish adviser to General Eisenhower, who was instrumental in getting Jews from the DP (displaced persons) camps into Palestine and the US. As Jack explained, "He helped Jewish people

who could not return to where they came from." Jack would never forget what he saw in the shul that day, nor would he ever forget the scenes in the train stations.



*Betzalel and Jack's sister Ettel working as a seamstress in Siberia, circa 1942*

## There's No Going Home

While Jack *witnessed* refugees unable to return home, his father and siblings *were* refugees who could not go home. By 1946, Poland was under Russian control, and Polish citizens, including Jews, were given permission to return to their home country. But after the Kielce pogrom on July 4, 1946, when forty-two Jews were killed, the Wertenteil family was on the road again. Betzalel said he could "smell the hatred of Jews." It was easier to hide in the woods than stay in the towns.

The family eventually made it to the Czech border, where Betzalel remembered hiding for three days, awaiting the opportunity to cross. After arriving in Czechoslovakia, he recalled walking through fields, coming to Bratislava (now capital of Slovakia), and then taking a train to Austria. In Vienna, the family was brought to Admont, a DP camp near the Enns River in Linz, which Betzalel said consisted mostly of Jewish survivors from Hungary.

A few weeks later, they took a train to Munich and ended up in Feldafing, the largest DP camp in Germany, which was under the control of General Patton and was primarily made up of concentration camp survivors. Betzalel recounted the camp gained notoriety when Patton had it surrounded with German military police, fearing that the Jews would take revenge against the German prisoners of war within the camp population. But Eisenhower intervened and had the German police removed. Betzalel and his family also lived for a time in other DP camps, including Bamberg, Eichstätt, and Traunstein.

In July 1949, the family finally set sail from Hamburg to the US, arriving on July 14. They traveled on the S.S. Marine Shark, a military ship used for transporting survivors. Their passage, paid for by the Joint Distribution Committee, cost \$210 for the entire family—a lot of money at the time.

## Brothers Reunited in America

When Jack returned to the US in 1945, he went back to work on the Lower East Side at the hosiery store where he had worked when he first arrived in New York City. He made \$50 a week, working six days a week. A few years later, he and a partner started their own hosiery business, which grew into a large company. Meanwhile, Betzalel adjusted to life in America and ended up pursuing a lengthy career as a satellite engineer at Lockheed Martin in New York.



*The Wertenteil siblings, New York, 1994: Jack, Israel (1925–2001), Betzalel, Leib (1934–1995), Ettel (1923–2013), and Chancha (circa 1919–2014)*

In 1954, Jack married a woman named Phyllis, whom he had met several years earlier. The newlyweds introduced Betzalel to Phyllis' friend Helen, a Holocaust survivor whose experience was very different from Betzalel's. Helen was born and raised in Antwerp, Belgium, and had been hidden in a convent during the war. Betzalel and Helen were married in May 1955.

The first time I met the Wertenteil brothers together was at the Bagel Boss restaurant in Roslyn, New York, in November 2013. By that time, they were both retired—Jack was ninety-three, and Betzalel was eighty-four. Betzalel passed away a couple years later in February 2016. He had been married to Helen for nearly sixty years, and the couple had four children and many grandchildren. Jack is now almost a hundred years old.

Despite the utter disconnect between the lives of the two brothers between 1939 and 1949, it was hard to believe that either of them had ever lived anything but the American Dream of the Galitzianer in the *goldene medina* (golden land). And those New York bagels, which we quickly devoured at that first gathering, proved it.