

## CHAPTER ONE

# Barbarians at the gate

*A rural road, northern Lithuania – Monday, June 23, 1941.*

**T**HE KRONs WERE REMARKABLY calm considering they were fleeing a hellhound in the shape of a massive Nazi invasion, bent on taking the ultimate prize for Hitler – Soviet Russia.

The Jewish family was trying to outrun the 3.5 million-strong force, which crossed the border at precisely 3:15 a.m. the previous day on foot, by bike, inside 3,350 tanks, riding in 600,000 motor vehicles and astride 750,000 horses, along a 1,080-mile frontier. Its aim was to subjugate Moscow quickly, create Lebensraum – living space for the expanding German peoples – and draw upon its vast natural resources to finish off the Allies.

If Meyer and Gita Kron had known of the overwhelming numbers involved in what was dubbed Operation Barbarossa, perhaps they would have taken their chances and stayed at home in Shavl, especially as their only choice of transportation was a horse and cart. This was a desperate attempt to steal a march on Hitler's henchmen, many of which would have a strong appetite for eliminating members of the Kron's ancient faith. Latvia would provide a temporary haven. However, it was Russia beyond that offered the most hope for their continued security, undesirable though its communist regime might be and despite its leader's anti-Semitic tendencies.

Meyer and his wife Gita walked, while their children, four-year-old Ruta, her two-year-old sister Tamara, and his widowed mother Shana clung uncomfortably to their spots on the rickety wagon. It was over laden with household goods and far too many personal belongings for there to be any speedier progress along the rural highway north to the Latvian border.

They were not alone on the road, which also made anything more than a snail's pace impossible. Hundreds of other Jews from their hometown and farther afield were making the same trek alongside, ahead and behind them as far as the eye could see. Fragments of the retreating Red Army, who moved somewhat more quickly, were

## RUTA'S CLOSET

also heading in the same direction to regroup and plan a counterattack against the tank-driven invasion.

Less than 50 miles away, there was frantic activity, the cacophony of the battle-front deafening all within earshot. Shells soared skyward, their eardrum piercing whistles providing an auditory account of their progress, soon swiftly silenced by earth shaking explosions and the screams of human beings torn apart by the fiery munitions.

In contrast, the Krons' journey so far had been quiet and uneventful, disturbed only by the barely audible murmur of anxious conversation from others on the road and the low hum of military vehicles, passing by.

Few words had passed between them, as they picked their way past the potholes on the poorly paved highway to the land of their Baltic neighbours. By the late afternoon, they were so lost in their own private thoughts that they let the bickering between their oldest daughter Ruta and her younger sister Tamara to continue longer than normally would be tolerated in the Kron household.

As the girls' shrill voices rose to a crescendo from the back of the cart, provided by their maternal grandfather Moshe Shifman, both parents snapped out of their individual dazes. Shana looked on as her son admonished the children.

In the quiet that followed the last of his sharp words, the couple simultaneously noticed the absence of Soviet soldiers. Their heads swivelled in opposite directions, turning back to face each other with questioning stares that conveyed their meaning without words.

Fleetingly, Meyer wondered why he had not noticed sooner, surely they had not vanished in the short time that the girls had distracted him. They stopped in their tracks and each surveyed the scene again, methodically panning like movie cameras producing mental pictures of what was around them. Their uniformed escorts had abandoned their vehicles and disappeared. The first signs of anxiety began to show in the Krons' faces as they turned their heads more quickly and cast searching glances towards the ditches. As their focus sharpened, they saw the occasional helmet bobbing about.

Meyer reckoned comrades elsewhere had radioed the soldiers to tell them that danger from above was approaching fast. It was intelligence not shared with their fellow travellers. Meyer's thoughts were interrupted by the muffled sound of what quickly he figured were artillery shells or bombs exploding in the distance.

People scattered in all directions, bumping into each other, tripping and falling headlong into the ditches. Startled horses whinnied noisily and kicked for their flared nostrils also smelled the danger. Carts overturned as the beasts attempted to take off to safety, their contents falling with a clatter to the road below. The old horse pulling the Kron cart remained remarkably calm. It was too old to follow the example of its younger brethren.

Meyer remained calm and steered his entourage off the main road, negotiating the cart's passage between artillery strewn across the road, abandoned by half a dozen

soldiers, now hidden in a nearby ditch. Their young, fear-filled eyes met Meyer's steely, determined stare as he passed; he doubted any of them had lived much more than half of his 36 years, few of their fresh faces showed any sign of whiskers.

The Krons parked the cart by a barn a short distance away from the soldiers. No sooner had the cart's rubber wheels made an impression on the spiky grass than the Krons and all about them got their first sight of the dreaded Junkers 87 dive-bomber – *Sturzkampfflugzeug* – better known as the Stuka. A formation of three of the distinctive planes, with the inverted gull-wings and fixed-undercarriage, was hurtling in their direction at high speed.

Meyer pushed Gita and their daughters, with uncharacteristic roughness, beneath the cart alongside his mother, who had already taken up her place there without need of encouragement. His rough handling scared the girls, who began to sob. They could not comprehend what danger specifically threatened but they sensed it must be bad for their normally gentle father to act in such a way. He barked orders to those in his care to lie flat and keep their heads down. He too sank to the ground without the cover of the cart's underside but he ignored his own advice and could not resist raising his head to follow the progress of the fast approaching planes.

The Stuka fixed in Meyer's stare was the last to roll into an almost vertical dive towards him. The eerie wailing of the so-called *Jericho-Trompeten* sirens affixed to the landing gear drowned the sounds of distant shelling.

Meyer whipped his head back to the point where he was staring directly up at the nose of the screaming Stuka. His brain failed to register the sharp pain in his neck caused by this sudden move. Meyer's youthful heart did not know whether to stop or continue pounding. He did not blink, for he could not afford to close his eyes for an instant. They both watered and his eyelids twitched. Through the blur, he saw the bombs released above him.

Now it was the turn of his ears to register pain as they rang with the high-pitched piercing sound emitted by the whistles fitted to the fins of the descending bombs, which grew louder and shriller as they closed in on their target.

"These will be the last moments of my life," a whisper, matter-of-factly, announced in his head. He silently prayed for his life but begged that if the bomb should take him it spare the nearby cart that hid his loved ones.

Meyer, an engineer specializing in leather production, would later joke that if he had been an aviation engineer he would have known his end was not near and not have wasted a prayer, as though there were finite limit on such calls to God. Even though the bombardier had released the bombs directly above him, the dive-bomber was pulling out of its rapid descent by then and the bombs flew by design, not vertically, but at a steep angle towards its intended target some distance from Meyer. They hit the discarded artillery on the road as desired by the pilot.

The barn nearby was in flames as was a cart on the road the family had left just minutes before. When the smoke from the nearby explosions cleared they

## RUTA'S CLOSET

revealed the bodies of the young soldiers, who had sought protection in the ditch. Shattered and mangled bodies covered the road. The screaming of the wounded all around was as chilling to listen to as the deafening sirens that heralded the fateful attack.



AS MEYER SURVEYED the scene of death and destruction, he considered his family fortunate to be still drawing breath. He wondered if he should push their luck any more. Would it be long, he asked himself, before he and his family would lay dead or dying at the roadside, maybe just a few miles farther along the road.

It seemed the only alternative was to return to Shavl and await the arrival of the German invading forces. Gita, always a voice of calm and reason squeezed the hand of the man she affectionately called Mara and spoke reassuringly.

“Mara, we don’t have a choice but to return. Surely, we will be killed if we continue along this road,” she said, her last remarks echoing those that had occupied his mind only moments before.

She continued, releasing her grip and shaking her free hand to emphasize her point: “At least back in Shavl you have the factory and whoever is in charge will need you.”

Meyer was not so certain of that. He coaxed the shell-shocked horse into action. Gita brushed off the dirt and grass from the children, as mothers habitually do, and they both lifted their most precious cargo back onto the cart.



AFTER A FURTHER brief exchange, in which the shocked Shana remained quiet, the family and most of the remaining stunned human caravan gave up their escape attempt and headed homewards. What none realized was those that reached the border would be turned away by the Soviets unless they could produce a communist party membership card. Not one of the Krons held such a piece of paper and they would have cause to celebrate that in the months ahead.

The weary travellers scanned the skies constantly for signs of more danger from aloft. A couple of hours later a welcoming darkness enveloped them. There would be no more visitations by the Luftwaffe that day. Gradually the numbers of those continuing their journeys decreased as one by one families sought places to rest their heads for the night.

When the Krons arrived in the small town of Ligum, it was already teeming with refugees. The gregarious Meyer soon struck up a conversation with a Jewish farmer, who was standing by the roadside as he had done for most of the day observing the flight and return. The older man invited the young family to spend the night in his barn. He had extended the same hospitality to a dozen or so others, the Krons soon

discovered. Nevertheless, they were grateful for the opportunity to rest and perhaps even sleep when their minds ceased racing.

Exhausted though they were, Meyer and Gita talked for hours about what had befallen them. Only a week ago, they had a good life. He was highly placed at Frenkel's leather factory. The Soviets had nationalized it shortly after they had marched in to 'protect' the Lithuanians but his job had not really changed. It was not long after this peaceful entry that the new, questionably elected communist government had asked Moscow to make Lithuania a full Soviet republic.

Gita, ten years his junior, who was fluent in Russian, worked as a translator at the court. She was extremely bright. If she had finished the legal training that she had begun, she would have been a lawyer by now. However, these were unsettled times; maybe in a few years she would realize her ambition, she had rationalized to herself many times.

All of the family doted upon their daughters. Ruta was a bright, inquisitive child. Tamara might have added 'bossy' to that description, if she had known the word, to describe her big sister's *attentiveness*. Tamara was still very much the baby of the family. She was cute and put a sparkle in the eyes of all, except Ruta who was perturbed by the loss of her position as the only child and thus the centre of attention. Their family life was almost idyllic.

The decision to make a run for it was no spur of the moment decision. Meyer and Gita had witnessed how the Nazis treated Jews in 1935, while honeymooning in Germany. They were visiting the places where Meyer had trained as a chemical engineer, spending a particularly disturbing two weeks in Frankfurt.

In between touring galleries and attending concerts, the couple walked the streets and witnessed the early outrages of the Nazi regime. They were stunned to see bearded religious Jews roughly jostled in broad daylight, their assailants showering them with venomous insults. Occasionally they caught a glimpse of the hate-filled attackers pushing their victims into alleys, barely out of public sight, where they would no doubt suffer a vicious beating.

At any sign of trouble, the Krons would retreat into a store, often a quiet bookstore where they made themselves inconspicuous, thumbing through the pages of their favourite authors' contributions to literary history. Sadly, Frankfurt's bookstore shelves no longer heaved with the masterworks of past and present civilizations. Exactly two years earlier the first of what became commonplace public book burnings had taken place. Any work that represented what the Nazis perceived as promoting decadent western, liberal values was kindling for those with the gasoline and matches.

The Krons choice of restaurants was also severely limited as patronage by 'their kind' was frequently unwelcome. Owners posted notices to that effect in their windows.

The Krons had not suffered any overt personal discrimination, though truthfully they never tested their luck by trying to go anywhere where it was clear they were not welcome. Maybe Gita's blonde hair saved them, a feature that certainly would help in the years to come.

## RUTA'S CLOSET

Meyer was not sure the nature of the conversation was helping either of them. It reaffirmed the wisdom of their choice to leave but now they were going back to face uncertainty.

Eventually, Gita drifted off to sleep but Meyer lay awake worrying about what fate held for them. Seeking the protection of Joseph Stalin was the right one. Yes, his own family had suffered at the hands of Tsarist and Soviet Russia in the recent and distant past but it still seemed the lesser of two evils.

If only they had heeded the advice of family and friends, thought Meyer, he would not be tossing and turning now fearing what tomorrow might bring, but observing from the safety of the West. Meyer recalled how horrified they were to hear on the radio about the events of November 9, 1938 – *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass. In one night, 91 Jews were murdered, 200 German synagogues destroyed and thousands of Jewish businesses were ransacked in a pogrom coordinated by the Nazis. Subsequent news of the advance of Hitler and his bloodless takeover of Austria raised more than an eyebrow but still it seemed so far away.

Later in the summer, his cousin Milton Shufro visited the family from Chicago, before heading home via Prague where he witnessed the German takeover of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. After he had returned to the States, the astute young man wrote pleading with them to flee to North America. The Krons had even begun the immigration process but then decided to stay put when Gita discovered she was pregnant with Tamara.

There were so many other warnings the couple had ignored. The rise of nationalism in Lithuania in the early 1930s was also a sign of things to come. Ruta's birth in July 1936 had pushed those threats to the back of their minds.

The meek surrender in 1939 of the German ethnic region on the Baltic coast known as Memelland – Klaipeda in Lithuanian – to the Reich should have been the final straw. That was just a couple of hours' drive away.

"How could we have been so blind?" Meyer tortured himself. He dozed off with that unfathomable question echoing in his mind.

### *Ligum, Tuesday, June 24 1941.*

THE SUN ROSE again on the Tuesday and shone brightly on the rural village of Ligum, just as it had the previous day. Somehow, that did not seem right given the dark events of the day before.

The Krons rose with the sun also, if somewhat gingerly. They gently awakened their offspring and Gita tapped her still slumbering mother-in-law on the shoulder. Shana awoke with a start and then surveyed the depressing scene before greeting her protectors. Meyer broke up some stale bread and passed it around. Ruta grimaced as she took her first mouthful but knew better than to complain. Tamara was less astute and spat it out. Ruta was surprised, and perhaps a little disappointed, that this

act did not bring admonishment. The fact is both parents were too tired and worried about what lay ahead to take umbrage.

They were ready to continue their journey back to territory that was familiar but to a future that was unknown. They began to retrace their steps along the 20 miles of road between Ligum and Shavl. They had no protection this time, not that the Russian soldiers had offered much in the end. Their calmness of exactly 24 hours ago when they set out was replaced by high anxiety. In their minds, every rumble from the not so distant fighting heralded the imminent arrival of another aerial assault.

Some passers-by, heading in the opposite direction, heightened their anxiety with stories about partisans, with white armbands, who were reportedly seizing and shooting every Jew and suspected communist they encountered. How bizarre, Meyer thought, that these fanatical anti-Semitic partisans could call him a communist, especially after what had befallen other family members a week earlier.