

A tree of life

Roxanne Lambert

Kurt Chaim Shmatnik – now Charles German – was born in August 1936 in Czernowitz (now Chernivtsi), the capital of the Romanian province of Bucovina. He was an only child. His mother was a milliner and his father traded horses and carriages. The family lived a traditional middle class Jewish life under Russian control until 1941, when the Soviets withdrew and the combined Nazi and Romanian forces, under Antonescu's Fascist Iron Guard, took control.

The lives of the Jews of Czernowitz changed forever when thousands were loaded onto cattle trucks and transported to the town of Ataki on the banks of the Dniester River. The Nazis had decided to deport Romanian Jews to Transnistria – the area between the Bug and Dniester rivers. Charles was only five years old and he and his family were to be deported to Moghilev. At the shoreline, the Jews were herded on to a wooden barge with the German soldiers yelling 'schnell, schnell (hurry, hurry)'. The soldiers hit out at the many who were not quick enough to board, and they shot people at random. Many fell into the cold, raging waters and drowned. The barge was filled to capacity with standing room only and no one spoke. Fear and exhaustion took hold as people clutched their children and small bundles of possessions.



▲ Charles German

When the barge reached the other side of the river, mayhem ensued as everyone was herded together to begin their forced march to Moghilev (now Mohyliv-Podil's'kyi, Ukraine). It was freezing and wet and the mud was so deep that many lost their shoes and were forced to continue barefoot.

In Moghilev, the Jews were herded into synagogues and schools, where they huddled together on freezing floors. Food was scarce and, every day at the same time, a cart would pull up to collect the dead and pile the bodies in unmarked graves. Charles was now six and this routine became normal for him.

The Jews of Moghilev, just like those in other towns in Transnistria, survived by bartering their clothes and few valuables with Ukrainian peasants for food. By December 1942, it was bitterly cold and a typhus epidemic broke out. Charles's mother fell ill

and was too weak to walk. Charles fed her apples, to which he attributed her recovery. However, he could never recall where these apples came from or how he obtained them, something that would continue to trouble him.

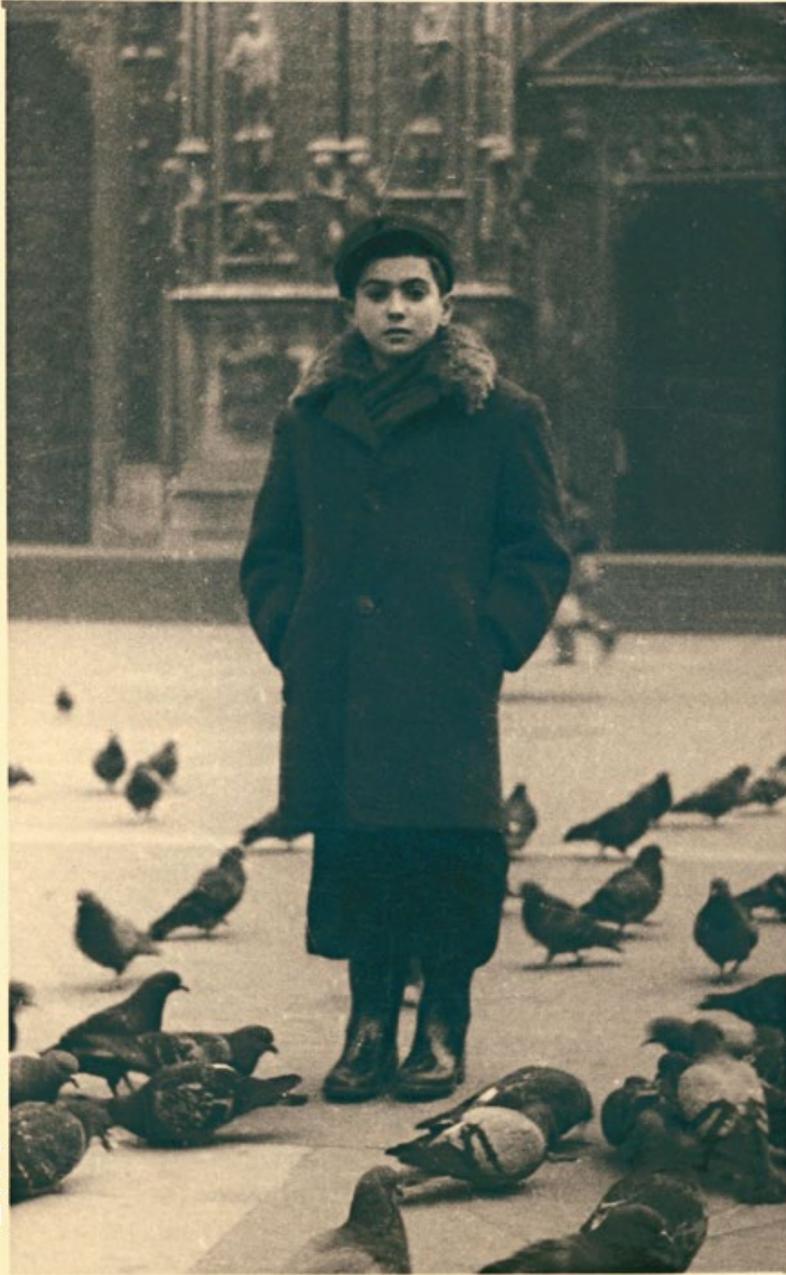
Those who managed to survive that first winter began to have some hope of surviving, but in spring, soldiers began rounding up groups of people. Charles and his parents were sent to Scazinetz (now Skazintsy, Ukraine) camp with a large group, assigned to build roads. Each morning the adults were taken to work and brought back at night, while the children remained in the camp surrounded by barbed wire, with guards stationed only metres apart.

Somehow Charles managed to get to his parents at lunchtime and they would share their meagre rations with him. One day a German officer stopped them from feeding him and took him to a guard tower. 'Come at midday every day and I will give you food,' he told Charles. The officer continued to feed Charles for some time, but one day, when he went to the tower, the officer was not there. It was presumed that he was caught giving Charles food, and was shot for this act of humanity and kindness.

Many people died from the harsh conditions, but Charles and his parents managed to survive. In autumn, when the highway was completed, those who remained of the original group were returned to Moghilev.

In the spring of 1944, the Soviets liberated the camps of Transnistria, riding in with Russian-Mongolian soldiers on tiny ponies. Sadly this did not mean liberation for all, and Charles's father was one of the many male survivors forcibly recruited into the Soviet Army to fight the Germans on the front lines.

Charles – now nine years old – and his mother were left to find their way back to Czernowitz alone. They managed to walk and find rides with sympathetic Ukrainian peasants who fed them decorated, hardboiled Easter eggs – a luxury after they had only eaten potato peel and soup for four years.



▲ Charles German in Italy after the war

In 1946, Charles and his mother were smuggled into Italy through Yugoslavia with the help of the Bricha, the underground organisation that assisted Jews to migrate illegally to Palestine. These men worked to help thousands of Jewish refugees reach Marseille and ports around Italy so that they could go on illegal boats to Palestine. Jews from the British Mandate of Palestine had been allowed to join the British army, and they wore a uniform with a Magen David on the sleeve, which heartened the European Jews. The Bricha managed to commandeer a fleet of trucks which picked up survivors and delivered them to the ports. Italian guards were heavily bribed in the process.

It took Charles and his mother two weeks to walk through Yugoslavia to the Italian border. From there the Bricha moved them to a Displaced Person's camp where they remained for

three years. There were many DP camps set up by the Bricha, which provided accommodation and schooling. Charles had his first day of school in the DP camp and remembers the teachers treating the child survivors as precious objects. They taught Charles Hebrew and instilled in him his lifelong love of Israel. During his time in the DP camp, Charles was reunited with his father, but his parents' marriage had broken down and his mother had remarried an Auschwitz survivor whose surname was German. Charles later took his name.

In 1949, Charles's stepfather obtained sponsorship for the family to come to Melbourne and join family in Kensington. They travelled on a Greek ship, the *Cyrenia*. When they arrived, Charles began school at the Kensington State School without a word of English. Later he studied at Footscray Technical School and went on to enjoy successful careers, as a repairer of knitting machines, and as a real estate agent. He married his beloved Luba and they had one daughter. He has been a volunteer guide at the Jewish Holocaust Centre since 1994 and is the longtime president of the Katzetler Farbund Association of Holocaust survivors.

Despite having a fulfilling life in Melbourne, Charles always struggled with his childhood memories, and not having anyone to share them with. However, at a recent gathering, he found himself talking to two men of a similar age. Their names were Yaakov Haimov and Max Droukman and Charles was amazed to learn that they too came from Moghilev. All conversation around them then hushed as Yaakov proceeded to tell Charles that he credits his survival to stealing apples from the orchards surrounding Moghilev. Yaakov was the brave boy who had shared his precious apples with Charles, helping his mother to recover from typhus. These three child survivors had found each other and now share an immeasurable bond.

Roxanne Lambert is a volunteer at the Jewish Holocaust Centre.