

## **MALINES** by Henny Lewin

“Maline” means “raspberry” in Yiddish and is a word of Slavic origin. In the secret parlance, or slang, of Jews confined to ghettos during WWII, it meant a hide out or a hiding place created to shelter people from Nazi raids. During the Holocaust, Jews developed a covert vernacular that the German speaking Nazis could not understand, as they could understand much of Yiddish because Yiddish is basically a Germanic language. Thus it was necessary to use certain words and phrases that only those who needed to know them, would understand.

My parents and I moved into the Kovno (Kaunas) ghetto in August of 1941, 2 months after the Germans invaded Lithuania. I was a year and a half old at the time. The house in which we lived had two floors, with a makeshift apartment on each floor. Several families were crammed into each apartment. In our apartment there was a staircase leading to the upper floor. Under the staircase was a large space that had served as an open walk in closet. It had previously been used as a pantry. My father closed off this space by building a wall over the entrance to it, and attaching shelves to the exterior side of the wall, on which were placed all kinds of items such as small appliances, kitchen utensils, tools, cans and more. There was a secret way of moving the wall so people could hide in the space. Only the inhabitants of our building knew of this secret place, and called it our *maline*.

While in the earlier days of the ghetto mothers and grandmothers walked with baby carriages in the streets and children played in the yards, by 1943, following the major Aktionen, the roundups,

selections and killings of most of the elderly and many children, the ghetto population had shrunk considerably and surviving children became almost invisible. Word had reached our ghetto that in Shavel, (Shaulai) the other large ghetto in western Lithuania, the Nazis had conducted a Kinder Aktion. Loudspeakers blaring in the streets announced that all children must be brought outside and that they will be taken for immunization shots. Then they proceeded to search the houses and drag out any children they found. The children were never seen again. Our entire ghetto began hiding their children. They realized that if the Germans did it there, sooner or later they would do it everywhere. But as the months passed by, and nothing happened, people began to relax. However my parents did not relax and sought an opportunity to smuggle me out of the ghetto to the Aryan side.

In the meantime, whenever my parents obtained work permits that required them to be gone all day, I would be hidden in the *maline*. There I would either play by myself or with my cousin Shoshana, who was a year and a half younger than I. I called her “Lalke”, the Yiddish word for “doll”, because she was so cute and had lovely black curls, like a doll. Eventually my parents also called her Lalke and continued to do so for the rest of their lives.

Sometimes other people hid in our *maline*. They were hiding from the Nazis for various reasons the main one being that they might have seen their name on a list of an east bound transport. After I contracted whooping cough my parents felt that it was urgent to smuggle me out of the ghetto. Several people who were hiding in our *maline* were afraid that because of my coughing all of us would be

discovered and shot. Ghetto children had learned quickly to cry silently because the sound of a crying child could be the cause of everyone's death. But to stop a child from coughing someone might have to place a hand over the child's mouth until the coughing and often breathing stopped altogether.

My father and the other men who lived in our building created a second *maline* under the basement floor. They dug a deep hole and every day carried off some of the earth on the way to their forced labor assignments, building an airport for the Germans outside the city. This hole was large enough to hide one or two people.

Luckily for me and for my cousin my parents succeeded in smuggling us out in the fall of 1943, half a year before the Kinder Aktion in our ghetto. I was hidden in a large suitcase placed among other suitcases and bundles of belongings of ghetto inmates. Little Shoshana was swaddled in a large shawl and tied to my mother's body, under a tent-like dress, as she passed through the checkpoint at the ghetto gate together with a women's work brigade. Righteous Lithuanian Christians had agreed to take us.

The horrible Kinder Aktion took place in the Kovno ghetto in early spring of 1944. Dozens of German Gestapo and Ukrainian soldiers, assisted by local Lithuanian collaborators, raided all the Jewish dwellings, and meticulously looked for any *malines* where children and old people might be hiding. Loudspeakers blaring from the streets announced: "Achtung! Achtung! You are all to remain in your homes. Anyone caught leaving his house will be shot!" They dragged out barefoot children and also the old and the sick, in their nightclothes. Large trucks with their windows painted black were

filled one after the other with the teeming multitude. Mothers who would not part with their infants, were attacked by specially trained dogs, their babies ripped from their arms and thrown into the trucks. Some mothers were simply shot and others shoved onto the trucks with their children. The old and the sick were forced to crawl on the ground, under a hail of blows, and if they couldn't make it to the trucks, they were attacked by the vicious dogs that were biting off chunks of flesh from their frail bodies.

My parents managed to escape from the ghetto rather than being sent east to their deaths, or taking a chance and hiding in a *maline*. Before escaping they buried in the hole under the building a large tin box containing my mother's silver candle sticks, family photos, and their wedding rings.

That summer the Germans decided to liquidate the ghetto realizing that they had lost the war and the Russians were coming. They set the entire ghetto on fire. People who emerged from their *malines* were shot on the spot. Others burned to death in their hiding places. All that remained of the ghetto were smoke stacks and a few brick buildings. Of the 40,000 Jews who were imprisoned here, only 2000 of us somehow miraculously survived. After my parents retrieved me from my righteous rescuers, we returned to the destroyed ghetto. They searched in the rubble of our burned building and dug out the tin box containing the precious items.

When my eldest daughter was born I was tormented by thoughts of what I would do, in order to keep my child safe. Would I have the courage, like my mother had, to give up my child to strangers in order to keep her alive, even though I might perish? Where in my house

would I create a *maline* if need be? Fortunately these were fleeting thoughts that recurred only after the birth of each of my 3 children. However, to this day, my large, walk in pantry, lined with shelves from floor to ceiling, is stocked with sugar, flour, rice, cans of tuna, soups, juices and a variety of other canned or bottled foods. Also, tools, paper goods, candles, flashlights, batteries and much more, just in case... My mother had a well-stocked pantry the rest of her life. The funny thing is that my daughters have them as well!

And, whenever I eat raspberries, which I love, the Yiddish word for them, *malines*, immediately pops into my head.