changed beyond recognition, which narrows her slim chance for release.

At times I get such jitters and heart spasms that I think I'm going insane or entering delirium. In spite of this, I cannot stop thinking of Mother, and suddenly I find myself, as though I were split in two, inside her mind and body. The hour of her deportation is approaching with no rescue in sight.

It rained a bit this evening, with some thunder and lightning, which did not lessen our suffering any. Even a torrential rain could not renew a torn heart.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In November of 1939, Jews and Poles were forced to give up their radios. Why do you think this rule was enforced?
2. What does Sierakowiak mean when he says "... the Germans will get entirely different people than the 25,000 they've demanded..."?
3. What happened to Sierakowiak's family and their relations to one another as a result of conditions in the ghetto?

The Last Morning

BY BERNARD GOTFRYD

The ghettos were essentially staging grounds for the concentration camps. As the Germans built more camps to provide labor for war industries, more and more slave labor was needed. The Germans rounded up able-bodied men for deportation. Eventually the round-ups took in all the residents of the ghettos as the Germans initiated their policies of annihilating all Jews. Bernard Gotfryd was a Polish Jew, born in Radom in 1920. He labored in six concentration camps, but survived the ordeal. After the war he emigrated to the United States and became a successful photographer. "The Last Morning" is a story about the roundups in the Polish ghettos. It is from Anton, The Dove Fancier *(1990), a collection of Gotfryd's stories and vignettes.*

I very clearly remember the day I saw my mother for the last time. It was Sunday the sixteenth of August, 1942, a beautiful day with a clear blue sky and hardly a breeze. That morning she got up very early, earlier than usual, and quietly, so as not to wake us, she went out to the garden. I was already up. I watched her through the kitchen window. She sat down on the broken bench

behind the lilac tree and cried. I always felt bad when I saw my mother cry, and this time it was even more painful.

My mother was going to be forty-four years old at the end of August. She never made a fuss over her birthday, as if it were her own secret, and so I never knew the exact date. She was of medium height, rather plump, with a most beautiful face. She had large brown eyes and long, dark brown hair sprinkled with gray, which she pulled back into a **chignon.**[1] She smiled at people when she spoke and looked them straight in the eye.

When she came in from the garden she walked over to me and caressed my face as she used to do some years before the war, when I was a little boy. Now I was in my teens. Then she went over to the kitchen stove and started a fire. The wood was damp, and the kitchen filled with smoke. There was no more firewood left; this was the last of the broken-down fence from around our garden. She stood next to the stove fanning the smoke and asked me to open the door and the windows to let the smoke escape. Her eyes were red and teary, but when she turned to face me she smiled.

Soon the rest of the family was up, and Mother served a **chicory**[2] brew with leftovers of sweet bread she had managed to bake some days earlier. There was even some margarine and jam, a great treat. We sat wherever we could, since the table was too small for the five of us. Because of limited table space my grandmother and my aunt ate their meals in their own room. None of us had much to say that morning. We just stared at one another as if to reaffirm our presence.

Suddenly my mother lifted her eyes and, looking at my father, asked him, "What are you thinking about?" My father, as if he had just wakened from a deep

[1] **chignon**—a bun worn at the nape of the neck.

[2] **chicory**—an herb, the root of which is used to flavor coffee.

sleep, answered, "I stopped thinking, it's better not to think." We looked at him oddly. How could anyone stop thinking?

My mother got up from the table and started to tidy up the room. Then she asked me to go up to the attic and find her small brown suitcase for her. I found the suitcase, and, alone in the attic, I hugged it many times before I brought it to her.

The tension in the house nearly paralyzed me. It was stifling. I left in a hurry and, running all the way, went to investigate the ghetto square. It was still early in the morning, and clusters of people were congregating at street corners, pointing up at the utility poles. During the night the light bulbs had been replaced by huge reflectors. The ghetto police were out in force, preventing people from gathering. I noticed a poster reminding all inhabitants of the ghetto to deliver every sick or infirm member of their families to the only ghetto hospital. **Noncompliance**[3] called for the death penalty.

My paternal grandmother was recovering from a stroke. She was able to walk with the help of a cane. I trembled at the thought of having to turn her in. The Nazis were preparing something devious. I knew the hospital wasn't big enough to absorb all the sick people in the ghetto.

My mother studied my face when I came back from the square. There was a frightened look in her eyes. She asked me what was happening out there, what people were saying, and I lied to her. I didn't mention the reflector bulbs, but I could tell that she knew what was coming.

She had her suitcase packed, and her neatly folded raincoat was laid out on the couch, as if she were going on an overnight trip the way she used to before the war. No one said much. We were communicating through

[3] **noncompliance**—not following instructions or rules.

our silence; our hearts were tense. My father took out the old family album and stood at the window, slowly turning the heavy pages. I looked over his shoulder and saw him examining his own wedding picture. He pulled it out of the album and put it inside his breast pocket. I pretended not to see.

My mother started preparing our lunch, and I helped her with the firewood. There was no more fence left, and somebody had just stolen our broken bench. I found an old tabletop that Father kept behind the house, covered with sheets of tar paper. It was dry and burned well. I didn't tell my mother where the wood had come from; I was afraid she might not like the idea of putting a good table to the fire.

It was past noon, and my mother was busy in the kitchen. She found some flour and potatoes she had managed to save and came up with a delicious soup, as well as potato pancakes sprinkled with fried onions. Was this to be our last meal together? I wondered.

Some friends and neighbors with scared expressions on their faces dropped in to confirm the rumors about the coming deportation and to say good-bye. The Zilber family came, and everybody cried. I couldn't bring myself to say good-bye to anybody; I feared that I would never see them again.

It was getting close to four o'clock in the afternoon when my grandmother, dressed in her best, came out of her room. She was ready, she said, if someone would escort her to the hospital. My brother and I volunteered. She insisted on walking alone, so we held her lightly by the arms in case she tripped. She walked erect, head high; from time to time she would look at one of us without saying a word. People passed us in bewilderment. They seemed like caged birds looking for an escape. An elderly man carrying a huge bundle on his shoulders stopped us and asked for the time. "Why do you need to know the time?" I inquired. He looked at

me as if upset by my question and answered, "Soon it will be time for evening prayers, don't you know?" And he went on his way, talking to himself and balancing the awkward bundle on his shoulders.

When we reached the hospital gate my grandmother insisted we leave her there. She would continue alone. With a heavy heart I kissed her good-bye. She smiled and turned toward us, saying, "What does one say? Be well?" Then she disappeared behind the crumbling whitewashed gate of the hospital. I needed to cry but was ashamed to do so in front of my older brother. Determined to prove how tough I was, I held back my tears. We walked back in silence, each of us probably thinking the same thing.

I'll never forget coming back to the house after escorting Grandmother to the hospital. My mother was in the kitchen saying good-bye to one of her friends. I had never seen her cry as she was crying. When she saw us she fell upon us, and through her tears she begged us to go into hiding. She begged us to stay alive so that we could tell the world what had happened. Her friend was crying with her, and I felt my heart escaping.

A neighbor came in to tell us that the ghetto was surrounded by armed SS[4] men, and it was official that the deportation was about to begin. The ghetto police were on full alert, and it was impossible to get any information out of them.

My brother and I turned and ran out of the house. Without stopping we ran the entire length of the ghetto until, dripping with sweat, we arrived at the fence. On the other side of the fence was a Nazi officers' club; farther off in the middle of a field stood a stable. By now the Ukrainian guards with their rifles were inside the ghetto. We scaled the fence behind their backs and made it across to the other side. We entered the stable through

[4] SS—Nazis who served as Hitler's bodyguard and as a policing unit of the German army.

a side door. As far as I could tell, no one was there. The horses turned their heads and sized us up. My brother decided we should hide separately, so that if one of us was discovered, the other one would still have a chance. I climbed up on the rafters and onto a wooden platform wedged in between two massive beams. There was enough hay to cover myself with, and I stretched out on my stomach. Through the wide cracks between the boards of the platform I could scan the entire stable underneath me. I also found a crack in the wall that allowed me a wide view of the street across from the stable.

A mouse came out from under a pile of straw, stopped for a second, and ran back in. I lay there trying to make sense of every sound. As I turned on my side I felt something bulky inside my pocket. I reached for it and discovered a sandwich wrapped in brown paper. My mother must have put it there when my jacket was still hanging behind the kitchen door.

As I replaced the sandwich I heard the door open and saw a man enter. He walked to the other end of the stable and deposited a small parcel inside a crate. Then he started to tend to the horses while whistling an old Polish tune. He must be the caretaker, I thought. He appeared to be still young, even though I couldn't clearly see his face; he walked briskly and carried heavy bales of hay with ease. I feared the commotion he was causing might attract attention; he kept going in and out, filling the water bucket for the horses to drink. I was getting hungry. I was about to bite into the sandwich when on one of his trips he looked up at the spot where I was hiding. I froze. Could it be that he had heard me move? I couldn't imagine what had made him look up, and I broke out in a sweat. I held on to the sandwich but was too upset to eat it. Every time he opened the door it squeaked, and the spring attached to it caused it to shut with a loud bang. He spoke to the

horses in Polish with a provincial accent and called each horse by its name. He lingered with some of them, slapped their backs or gently patted their necks. How I envied him. Why was he free while I had to hide?

I started to recall the events of the entire day. I realized I had run out of the house without saying good-bye to my parents. Seized with guilt, I started sobbing.

I must have fallen asleep. When I woke up I heard loud noises coming from behind the fence. I looked through the crack in the wall; it was dark outside. Suddenly a loud chorus of cries and screams rang out, intermingled with voices shouting commands in German. Rifle shots followed, and more voices calling out names pierced the darkness. The cries of little children made me shudder.

I imagined hearing the screaming of my four-year-old cousin, who was there with his mother; my aunt, her sister, with her two beautiful little daughters. They were all there, trapped, desperate, and helpless. I thought of our friend Mr. Gutman, who some years before had claimed that God was in exile. I wondered where he was and what he was saying now. I worried about my grandmother and what they were doing to her at the hospital. Frightened and burdened with my misgivings, I resolved to go on, not to give in.

I heard the squeak of the door and looked down to see the caretaker slipping out. He blocked the door with a rock to keep it open. The sounds coming in from the outside were getting louder; the horses became restless and started to neigh. Rifle shots were becoming more frequent and sounded much closer than before. All these noises went on for most of the night—it felt like an eternity.

I could picture my mother in that screaming, weeping crowd begging me to stay alive, and I could hear her crying for help. Was my father with her, I kept wondering, and where was my sister?

It was almost daybreak when the noises began to die down. The sun was rising; it looked like the beginning of a hot August day. Only occasional rifle shots could be heard, and a loud hum that sounded as if swarms of bees were flying overhead; it was the sound of thousands of feet shuffling against the pavement. Looking through the crack in the wall, I could see long columns of people being escorted by armed SS men with dogs on leashes. Most of the people carried knapsacks strapped to their backs; others carried in their arms what was left of their possessions. I focused on as many people as I could, hoping to recognize a face. I wanted to know if my mother was among them and kept straining my eyes until I couldn't see anymore. I wondered if my brother, at the other end of the stable, was able to see outside. As it was, we had no way to communicate.

I kept imagining the moving columns of people getting longer and wider until there was no more room for them to walk. As I pictured them they kept multiplying; soon they walked over one another like ants in huge anthills, and the SS men weren't able to control them any longer.

Suddenly I heard voices underneath me. Before I realized who was there I saw the caretaker climbing up toward my hiding place. I couldn't believe it. I stopped breathing. Two SS men wearing steel helmets and carrying rifles stood at the door watching the caretaker climb. He came close to the platform where I was lying and in a loud voice told me to get down. "They came to get you," he said. "I knew you were here hiding. You can't outsmart me." I was betrayed.

Next he walked right over to where my brother was hiding and called him out. The two of us took a terrible beating from the SS men before they escorted us back to the ghetto. The first thing I saw in the ghetto was a large horse-drawn cart on rubber wheels, loaded with dead, naked bodies. On one side, pressed against the boards, was my grandmother. She seemed to be looking straight at me.

No dictionary in the world could supply the words for what I saw next. My mother begged me to be a witness, however; all these years I've been talking and telling, and I'm not sure if anybody listens or understands me. I myself am not sure if I understand.

The following night my brother and I miraculously escaped the final deportation, only to be shipped off to the camps separately soon afterward. I never saw my mother again, nor was I ever able to find a picture of her. Whenever I want to remember her I close my eyes and think of that Sunday in August of 1942 when I saw her sitting in our ghetto garden, crying behind the lilac tree.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What do the family members do as they prepare for their deportation? What do their actions reveal about their personal qualities? about their relationships with each other?
2. Why do you think the caretaker of the stable leaves the narrator and his brother in their hiding places for so long?
3. What does this story tell you about the fate of families during the Holocaust?