

## ONE

### Rumbula

On November 30, 1941, the first column composed of elderly men, women, and children, accompanied by fifty guards, was marched out of the Riga ghetto at 6:00 a.m. It was a cold winter morning, 7 degrees below freezing. The previous evening there had been a light snowfall. Not everyone could keep up with the pace set by the guards, and the column began stretching out, the oldest and weakest falling behind. Anyone not keeping up or stopping to rest was shot on the spot by the guards. Along the path followed by the column could now be seen the dead and the wounded. Spots of the victims' blood began to cover the snow.

Two days earlier the able-bodied men in the ghetto had been ordered into a four-block enclosure cordoned off by barbed wire, leaving the women, children, the elderly, and the infirm in the remaining ghetto area. It was from among them that a group had now been formed into columns and was being marched in the direction of the Rumbula Forest.

It was ten kilometers from the ghetto to the execution site chosen by the Germans on the edge of the forest. The first column arrived at Rumbula after three hours. The people were ordered to undress and deposit their clothing and valuables in designated locations. Dressed only in their underwear, they were then led to pits that had previously been prepared

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by Russian prisoners of war. In single file, ten at a time, they were ordered into the pits, where they were shot, falling on top of the bodies of those who had preceded them—many of those already in the pits still alive.

Fifteen thousand Jews from the Riga ghetto were killed on that murderous day, to be followed by another 10,000 eight days later. The executions had been planned and overseen by Friedrich Jeckeln, commander of SS Einsatzgruppe A. The *Einsatzgruppen*, literally “task forces,” were death squads that followed the German army as it advanced into the Soviet Union and were tasked with killing the Jews in the areas that had fallen under German control.

I was not there that day, although I might have been, together with my mother, Roza, and my younger sister, Miriam. We escaped the fate of the Jewish community of Riga, among them many of my friends and schoolmates, because my father, Tevye, an enterprising industrialist, was in New York with my older brother, Richard, when World War II broke out. Concerned for our fate in war-torn Europe, he cabled us to join him and my brother immediately in America. So on September 7, 1939, seven days after the German invasion of Poland—the Baltic countries as yet untouched by the war—we took a flight from Riga to Stockholm, and in the Swedish port of Göteborg boarded the SS *Drottningholm* for our journey to New York, landing there in late September.

On that bloody day in Rumbula I was attending George Washington High School in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, completely unaware of what was happening that day in Riga, the city in which I had grown to adolescence. Only some years later, as the dimensions of the Holocaust became apparent and details of the killings were published, did I learn the fate of the Jewish community in Riga. Since then, the scenes of the murders committed at Rumbula have haunted my thoughts almost as if I had been there. Hardly a day goes by that these thoughts do not enter my mind, accompanied by a feeling that a special obligation was imposed on me, as a survivor of the Holocaust, to do whatever I could to contribute to the security and safety of my people, the Jewish people. The German murder machine aimed at exterminating the Jews of Europe had also been directed at me and my whole family, and our good fortune had been to leave while there was still time. I have attempted to focus on that

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obligation for most of my life, so that what happened at Rumbula, at Babi Yar, in the Warsaw ghetto, at Treblinka and Auschwitz, and at the thousands of other locations in Europe where six million Jews were murdered by the Germans and their collaborators during the Holocaust, while the world stood by, could never happen again.