



Richard Arless

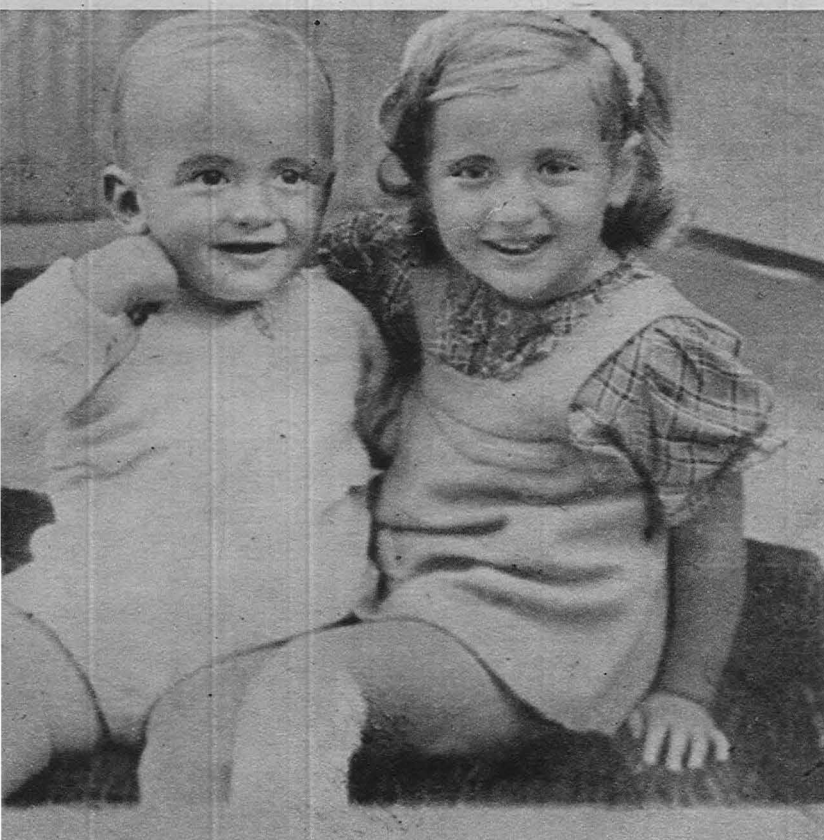
Leon Bukovinski and his wife arrive in Montreal from Poland to visit the Jewish family they hid from the Nazis in Warsaw in World War II.

The happy reunion on liner's deck includes (L to R) Chaim Borenstein, Mrs. Borenstein, Leon Bukovinski, Moses Borenstein, Mrs. Bukovinski.

# Their Friendship Survived

A Polish couple and the Jewish family they hid during World War II renew old memories

By Peter Desbarats



The two Borenstein children, photographed before the war, were kept indoors as much as possible, but inevitably mixed with neighborhood children to some extent. Every Sunday, for example, the little Jewish boy and girl went to church.

**L**AUGHTER and garbled scraps of song echoed in the almost deserted street as the horse-drawn carriage rattled through the night. Patrolling German soldiers stopped, listened and shook their heads in amazement.

Crazy Poles! A few glasses of vodka was all they needed to forget three years of war and suffering.

"Hey, driver!" roared one of the two passengers in the carriage. "Step on the gas. What is this — a funeral?"

The driver chuckled and touched his whip to the horse.

"Someone's going to feel like a funeral tomorrow," he said, turning to glance at his other, sober passenger. "The stuff they call vodka these days. It's enough to kill you."

Behind the driver's back, Leon Bukovinski reached out and touched his friend's arm. The "drunk" lifted his fedora for a moment. In the darkness, Leon imagined he could see the familiar curve of the Jewish nose and the sombre, frightened eyes of his friend.

Then the fedora slipped down again. Somewhere beneath it, Moses Borenstein began to tell a long, rambling joke.

Several eternities later, the carriage turned into Lukiska street, in the Warsaw suburb of Grochow, and stopped before a bomb-damaged house. Moses Borenstein stumbled up the walk to the front door, entered the house and disappeared for more than two years.

From 1942 to 1945, he was one of millions of European Jews who suddenly vanished from the face of the earth.

Most of them died in gas chambers and burning ghettos.

Moses Borenstein and his family were among the handful of Jews who spent World War II hidden in tiny attics and cellars, living invisibly beneath the eyes of the Nazis.

Part of their story already has been told in the words of Anne Frank. But the famous diary ended, as did hundreds of unwritten histories, with betrayal and death.

The story of the Borenstein family is one of the rare, continuing ones. Only this





Tom Blau

**Bukovinski family**, whose house in a suburb of Warsaw was a haven for their Jewish friends for more than two years, gather round their dining-room table. (L to R) Mrs. Jadwiga Bukovinski; Leon Bukovinski; elder son Bogdan; Amelia Tyszka, Mrs. Bukovinski's aunt; and younger son Tadeusz.

# The Test Of Terror

summer, a new chapter was written when Leon Bukovinski and his wife came from Warsaw to Montreal to visit their wartime "guests." For several months, the quiet, good-natured Polish couple enjoyed a Canadian holiday as the Borensteins tried to repay them, in part, for saving their lives.

In a comfortable Montreal duplex, over innumerable cups of coffee, the Roman Catholic Bukovinskis and their Jewish friends gradually reviewed wartime events. The story fitted together piece by piece until it became, to an outside observer, an epic of quiet endurance and bravery.

Although providence brought the Bukovinskis and Borensteins together in 1942, events leading up to the meeting started in 1939 when the German army swarmed over Poland. Shortly after the invasion, the Germans shifted their borders to incorporate a section of Polish territory.

One of the largest Jewish communities affected by the transfer was at Lodz, a city somewhat larger than Winnipeg is today and about 70 miles southeast of Warsaw.

When the Nazis marched into Lodz, Moses Borenstein was the owner of a prosperous spinning mill. He had married a beautiful blonde Jewish girl in 1934 and had two children: Ruth, born a year after the wedding, and Chaim, born in 1937.

When Lodz became part of Germany, thousands of its Jewish citizens emigrated to territory still under nominal Polish control. Borenstein, unable to travel because of illness, was forced to remain at home.

In November, 1939, German soldiers suddenly appeared on his doorstep and gave him two hours to vacate his home. The Borensteins, stripped of everything but money and jewelry hidden in their clothes, were thrown into the street.

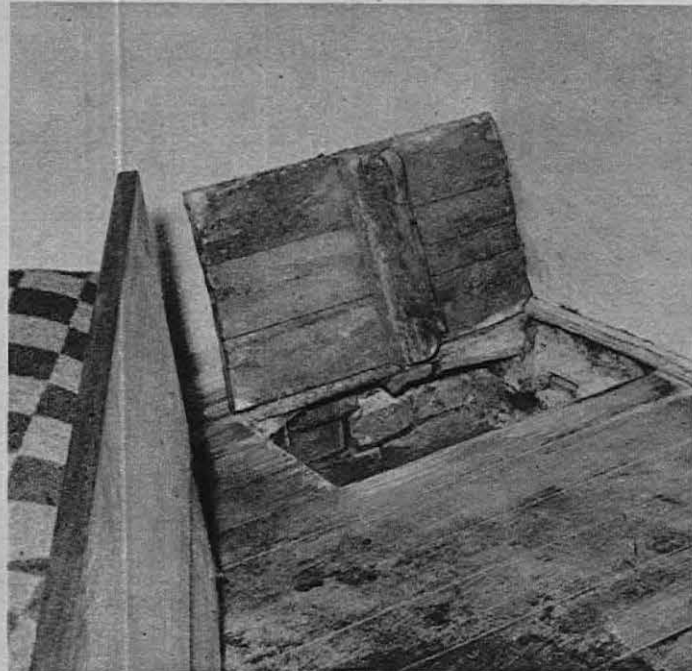
They stayed with relatives for several months until the Germans ordered all Jews in Lodz to move into a slum area set aside as a ghetto. There, the Borensteins shared a single room with 20 other people and began to plot an escape to Warsaw.

From the start, it became painfully clear that the family would have to split up for the sake of the children. Ryna Borenstein's (Continued on Next Page)



**Blonde-haired "Aryan" look** of Mrs. Borenstein, shown in an identity-card photo, helped her to pass as Gentile.





Photos by Tom Blau

Hiding place hollowed out under the floor was reached by a trap door hidden from searching Germans by the large bed.

## Their Friendship Survived The Test Of Terror

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blonde hair and classic "Aryan" features were an obvious passport to safety. Her husband, on the other hand, carried all the fatal, identifying marks of his race — black curly hair, dark eyes and proudly arched nose.

"It isn't that I look Jewish," he says today. "It's just that every Jew happens to look like me."

Shortly after the Lodz ghetto was created, Borenstein persuaded a German business friend to visit him. The German entered the ghetto alone. When he left, he was accompanied, apparently, by his wife and two children. As soon as she was free, Mrs. Borenstein took the youngsters to relatives in Warsaw and waited, nervously, for her husband to join them.

Borenstein escaped from the ghetto by joining a group which received permission to visit family graves at a cemetery near Lodz. Bribe beforehand, German soldiers guarding the group simply turned their backs at a pre-arranged signal and allowed a few of their charges to disappear. Walking cross-country through sub-zero winter nights, Borenstein eventually reached his family in Warsaw.

The struggle for survival seemed to sharpen Borenstein's business ability. Soon he was the unofficial owner of a textile-remnants shop in a Gentile section of Warsaw. Papers classifying him as a technical expert enabled him to travel outside the walls of the ghetto during daylight hours.

During these years, many Jews adjusted to life in the ghetto. A natural desire to look on the bright side of things encouraged a spirit of false optimism.

In 1942, the picture darkened as Germans began to send regular raiding parties into the ghetto. Entire families were taken from their homes and herded into railway cars. No one knew, for sure, what happened to them.

In June, 1942, Borenstein learned that the Germans were going to cancel the pass enabling him to travel outside the ghetto. Now he felt the ghetto walls rising about his family, blocking out life. It was time to get out.

"Escape" — the word flitted through every corner of the Jewish community. But even as lips whispered it, shoulders shrugged hopelessly.

Borenstein was one of the few people who knew where to turn. Ever since 1940, the broad, Slavic face of Leon Bukovinski had remained fixed in his memory.

Bukovinski was a minor official in the Polish Department of Justice. His job gave him access to a municipal court building which straddled the ghetto boundary. This building, facing Leszno street in the ghetto and Ogródowa street on the Christian side, was one of the few places in Warsaw where Jew and Gentile could meet in the early years of the war.

In the corridors of the court house, in 1940, Borenstein met Bukovinski to discuss the sale of certain goods required by the Polish Underground movement. In the following two years, similar business brought them together two or three more times. Each meeting left Borenstein with a forceful impression of basic honesty and reliability.

In 1942, with the Germans tightening their grip on the ghetto, Borenstein decided to stake the lives of his wife and children on the Pole's good nature.

"I had to trust him," he said. "There was a rumor that the Germans were taking away our people to kill them. I believed it."

Bukovinski immediately agreed to help. With the aid of Irena Lachowicz, a secretary in the Department of Justice, he obtained papers to identify Mrs. Borenstein as Mrs. Roma



As a member of the Polish Underground, Leon Bukovinski had to be prepared for a search of his home at any time — yet he took the extra risk of harboring the Borenstein family.

Lachowicz, wife of a Polish colonel who supposedly had escaped to England at the outbreak of war. Chaim Borenstein became Woitek Lachowicz and his sister Ruth took the Christian name of Wanda.

In June, 1942, the Borenstein family officially vanished. Mrs. Borenstein and the two children walked down Leszno street, entered the court house and received their new papers from Bukovinski. They left with him by Ogródowa street, to all intents and purposes a typically Christian family. Bukovinski immediately brought them to his aunt at Radosc, a small village near Warsaw.

Soon after, Borenstein used his special pass for the last time as he turned his back on the precarious safety of the ghetto. For a few days he hid beneath piles of cloth in his store. Then, much to the relief of his Gentile business partners, he arranged to rent a room in a boarding house owned by Mrs. Sofia Swidzinska, wife of a Polish army officer and former business acquaintance.

Borenstein stayed in the house for several months, never leaving the room. Curious neighbors were told that Mrs. Swidzinska's maiden aunt was deaf, dumb and seriously ill.

In the village of Radosc, neighborhood curiosity was more than a nuisance. After staying there for a month, Mrs. Borenstein learned that people in the area were speculating, in a typically small-town but dangerous way, about the origin of the new arrivals. Finally, expecting a Nazi search of the village at any moment, she turned again to Bukovinski.

**B**Y this time, the good-natured Polish clerk had reached the limit of his resources. He was unable to locate another Christian family willing to accept the Borensteins. The decision he had dreaded for weeks was squarely before him: Either he had to bring Mrs. Borenstein and her children into his own home or abandon them.

True to his instincts but against his better judgment, Bukovinski agreed to accept them. There were many sound reasons against the move.

As a member of the Polish Underground, Bukovinski had to be prepared at all hours of the day and night for a search of his own home. The existence of Jews under his roof, if discovered incidentally during a Nazi raid, would be enough to seal the fate of both families.

His decision also would involve his wife and two sons, Bogdan, 11, and five-year-old Tadeusz, in illegal activities for the first time. With all but two of the rooms in his house destroyed by a German bomb earlier in the war, it would be impossible to prevent the two families from being in daily contact with each other.

On the other hand, Mrs. Borenstein's forged papers and Gentile appearance made her a comparatively good risk. Bukovinski decided to gamble on these factors, provided that Borenstein remained apart from his family.

The condition was kept until September, 1942, when Borenstein's hiding place was located by the Nazis. No one ever will know exactly how it happened. Possibly there was outright betrayal at some point. All Borenstein remembers is the sound of footsteps climbing the stairs of Mrs. Swidzinska's boarding house, a knock on the door and the faces of three S.S. men.

By a miracle, one of the faces was familiar. As soon as the plainclothes police entered his room, Borenstein recognized their leader as another

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business acquaintance from Lodz. Fortunately, the man was still willing to talk business.

In the next few minutes, there was a hurried exchange of greetings, money and jewelry. For the sake of appearance, the German police marched Borenstein out of the house and down the street. At a signal from his "old friend," Borenstein darted into an alley and rushed back to the boarding house.

"My God, not again!" said Bukovinski when he was called to the telephone a few minutes later. "Yes, yes—I know where it is. I'll come."

So Bukovinski brought home his Jewish friend, singing, laughing and with his hat falling over his face. The convincing masquerade was dropped only when the two men stepped into the bomb-shattered house on Lukiska street. Then, in a moment, Borenstein turned from an apparently helpless drunk into a man overcome with emotion. His eyes filled with tears as he held out his arms to his wife and children.

"The first thing my father did," recalls Chaim, "was pick up a piece of sausage and stuff it into my mouth."

It wasn't strictly kosher but it was symbolic. The provider was home again.

**B**ORENSTEIN spent the rest of the night carefully prying bricks from an upper corner of the bedroom wall. By morning, he had made a hole large enough for him to crawl through. He climbed up a ladder and disappeared through the hole into a small air space between the outer roof and the ceiling of the bedroom. While he crouched there, his wife carefully replaced the bricks and removed the ladder.

That night, Borenstein came down from the attic and ate a hurried supper. Then he crawled beneath a large bed in the corner of the room and began to saw through the floorboards. Working with a child's shovel, he scratched at the earth beneath the floor for two nights until he had hollowed out a tiny bunker. The earth was taken from the house in buckets every day when Mrs. Borenstein crossed nearby fields on the way to a communal water pump.

A second, large bunker was constructed later beneath the first pit. Boards from old packing cases were used to line the second bunker and provide the upper level with a false floor. Eventually, Borenstein dug an escape tunnel from the bunker to a pig sty at the back of the house.

"The tunnel wasn't very sensible," he admitted. "There really wasn't anywhere to escape to, if the Germans made a thorough search. But we didn't always act logically in those days."

Borenstein spent most of the daylight hours crouching in the tiny "attic" or in the bunker. When the house was supposedly empty, even a footstep heard by neighbors or a shadow against a drawn blind could mean death. Mrs. Borenstein, pretending to hold a regular job, left the house for at least three or four hours every day to shop and visit a few trusted Gentile friends who knew her real identity.

At night the whole family often moved into the attic, partly for the simple joy of being together and partly to avoid being taken by surprise if the Germans made a sudden search of the street. The Bukovinskis used to seal up the brick wall in the evening and release their guests early in the morning.

The chances of inadvertent betrayal were enormous. Although both children were kept indoors as much as possible, they inevitably mixed to a certain extent with neighborhood children. Every Sunday, for instance, they went to the local church and the Jewish boy and girl were raised in a completely Roman Catholic tradition.

"We were very religious," says Chaim. "After the war, my parents had a difficult time convincing me that I was Jewish."

There was constant danger of a slip by the Bukovinski boys, who became close friends of the Borenstein children. Eventually all four youngsters were taught to refer instinctively to Borenstein as "the godmother," even when they were talking among themselves.

Borenstein remained in the house continuously for more

than two years, except for an incredible, three-week "business trip" into the ghetto in 1943. With the help of Bukovinski and Jewish friends, he was smuggled into the ghetto to enable him to acquire enough money to provide for his family. When his business dealings were completed, he not only escaped from the ghetto but brought a Jewish lawyer with him. Felek Rockman, who practices law in Brazil today, became a member of Bukovinski's "invisible household" for several months.

Rockman left the two-room house on Lukiska street soon after Borenstein's brother-in-law was added to the group. Bukovinski, in another "moment of weakness," had agreed to help his escape from a German military garage where he was kept as a working prisoner. He remained concealed in the Bukovinski house until the end of the war.

There were numberless narrow escapes. During one of the regular German searches of the neighborhood, for instance, Borenstein almost had to suffocate his daughter when she threatened to sneeze as soldiers were milling about the house only a few feet beneath the terrified family.

"It was dark in the attic and I still don't know how I realized she was going to sneeze," he says. "I've never moved more quickly or more quietly in my life."

But the Borensteins, like many Jews who survived the Nazi occupation, seem to have trouble remembering such details. It is almost as if memory deliberately overlooks the nightmare years. There is only a single impression of fear and nerve-racking strain which reached an unendurable pitch when the Russians approached Warsaw in the fall of 1944.

With the end in sight, the Borensteins faced a real threat of discovery for the first time. Lukiska street was taken over by the Germans for military purposes. All residents were given a few hours to pack up their belongings and leave the area.

Mrs. Borenstein was frantic. With German troops moving into the street, it was impossible for her husband to leave the house. If she left him there, hunger and thirst eventually would drive him from hiding.

In desperation, she put her two children to bed and called for a doctor. A smallpox quarantine sign was nailed to the front door.

**W**HEN the deadline for evacuation arrived, Mrs. Borenstein had decided to stay with her husband, even if it meant discovery and death. Then, at the last moment, the German troops received an order to withdraw three miles to the east. Shaking with relief, Mrs. Borenstein peered out the front window of the house as the last of the German soldiers disappeared. They had gone for good.

Victory in 1945 is remembered as a series of confused, happy events. There was the triumphant return to Lodz aboard a fire engine from a neighboring town. There was Mrs. Borenstein's reunion with her mother, who had spent the war years posing as a deaf-an-dumb servant for a rich Polish family.

In July, 1945, Mrs. Borenstein gave birth to twin boys as the family looked forward to a new life—but not in Poland. Too many bitter memories hovered over the land. Even in Paris, where the family settled for a few years, war seemed only as far away as the Iron Curtain which divided Europe. In Canada, in 1949, the Borensteins discovered a secure home.

Today, Chaim is a law student at the University of Montreal. Ruth gave birth, last summer, in New York, to the Borensteins' second grandchild.

The Borenstein children today have everything their parents were denied—peace, security and freedom. But it was evident that the older Borensteins and Bukovinskis, when they met in Montreal this summer, possessed something their children will never share: a friendship of unimaginable depth, tempered in the fire of Nazi oppression.

This is the "war trophy" of an honest and courageous Pole and the Jew who trusted him. ▽