to typical Nazi barbarism. And after that, the Russians once again took over the city and the Gustmans fled for their lives.

“You will overcome them,” R’ Chaim Ozer had said, “both them (the Germans) and them (the Russians).”

The “Chief Physician” of the Warsaw Ghetto

Umschlagplatz was a dreaded word among the ghetto Jews. It meant “transfer point” for deportation, usually located near a railroad siding. Huge throns of people were pushed toward the barbed wires that divided the area in two. On the ground lay hundreds of men, women and children, valises, all kinds of possessions, bedding, prayer shawls, food packages, and single shoes lost by some who were caught in the latest round-up. Jewish police officers ran back and forth following orders from the Gestapo or the Platz-Kommandant. On the roofs of nearby buildings were machine guns manned by the S.S. and gendarmes. Bullets would whish by and wounded victims would fall to the ground. People would pass them by, step over the fallen, and step on each other. From the umschlagplatz, everyone knew, there was only one place to go - into the cattle cars. And when these were crowded to suffocation, the train left for what the Germans called “resettlement in the east.” Though the Jews did not yet know that they were heading for an extermination camp, they were full of dark forebodings about their unknown destination.

But one Jew from the Warsaw ghetto attempted the impossible and succeeded in rescuing hundreds, if not
thousands, of Jews already on the umschlagplatz, hours, and sometimes even minutes, before they were pushed into cattle cars. His name was Nachum Remba, a modest and scholarly man, described by those who knew him as a “saintly figure.” He embarked on a rescue operation worthy of the most daring adventurer.

He set up a pretend First Aid Station right next to the umschlagplatz. This “hospital” was staffed with trustworthy doctors and nurses. Remba donned a long white doctor’s coat and entered the umschlagplatz as head of the “hospital.” With great authority, he pointed out to the German officers the Jews he claimed were too weak to make the journey east, and demanded that he be permitted to take them into the “hospital.” Nachum hurriedly walked from one side of the platz to the other, from one German to another, rescuing Jews, pulling them out of the umschlagplatz and sending them back to the ghetto. Always calm, always smiling good-naturedly, he would appear where no one dared set foot, where one could get shot for merely standing there. Fearlessly and with dignity, he faced the German henchmen on the umschlagplatz and demanded that they free this very sick one or this malnourished young one, who were unable to make the difficult journey east. And the Germans, who valued authority and those in position of authority above all else, began to refer to him as “Haupt-Artzt Remba” - Chief Physician Remba - and acceded to his requests.

The new “patients” were quickly taken to the hospital, where the deception continued. In the “hospital,” the rescued were ordered to lie down on cots. Some were “bandaged” while others were treated with “medicine.” As soon as the path was clear, they were taken by “ambulance” back to the ghetto and reunited with their families. The nurses wore especially wide coats under which they were able to hide the
rescued children. It was frequently necessary to put them to sleep to make their rescue possible.

Remba kept a diary of life in the Warsaw ghetto, but it was lost. A few passages, however, are extant, thanks to the ghetto historian, Emmanuel Ringelblum. “At night,” Remba noted in his diary, “I imagined that I was hearing the thump of children’s feet, marching in cadence under the leadership of their teacher. I heard the measured steps, tramping on and on without interruption to an unknown destination. And to this day I see that scene in my mind. I see clearly the figures, and I see the fists of hundreds of thousands that will come raining down on the heads of the henchmen.”

How was Remba able to deceive the ever-vigilant Germans? “This is the irony of it,” writes one eyewitness, “that even the Germans, with their refined system of punctuality, were capable of being fooled, at least for a while. They never suspected that a Jew could pull off such a daring act. And until they caught on to the ‘Jewish trick,’ many a Jew was rescued.” Who knows how many more Jews Nachum Remba might have saved had he not been betrayed by members of the Jewish police, who saw in him a dangerous rival because he rescued Jews for nothing while they demanded heavy bribes from the victims.

In the spring of 1943, Remba was again on the umschlagplatz, this time not in his white doctor’s coat in the role of savior, but as victim. The Germans caught him during the Warsaw ghetto uprising and deported him to the Majdanek death camp. There, too, Remba did everything he could to alleviate the suffering of his fellow prisoners, according to witnesses. He was especially close to the children, telling them stories, taking them for walks, making them forget, if even for a while, their horrible surroundings. In the end, he went to the gas chambers with them.