

# Helena Najberg

Helena Najberg

Lodz

Poland

Interviewer: Judyta Hajduk

Date of Interview: February - March 2005

*I met Helena Najberg in her house at 12 Gdanska Street in Lodz, where we talked for many hours. Mrs. Najberg is an ailing older woman now, she has problems with moving about and breathing. Each of the meetings was a real effort for her. When I asked her why she agreed for the interview, she answered that it was the right thing to do. 'Why not? If you want to know something about me, then you are welcome to it. Unless I'm very busy or very sick. If I'm not, then I'll do all I can. You're the one whose spending your time on me, because my time is not worth much.' Helena Najberg lives in an old tenement house. Her apartment, furnished with pre-war furniture, is very impressive. Mrs. Najberg takes good care of herself, she is modern, only her old jewellery speaks of better times.*

[My family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[Life in the Lodz Ghetto](#)

[In Auschwitz](#)

[In forced labor camps](#)

[After the war](#)

## **My family background**

I didn't know any grandparents, and no great-grandparents at all. Just one grandmother from Mother's side. She was my mother's mother. Her last name was Cederbaum, I don't remember her first name. I don't know where she came from or what she did. I wasn't particularly interested in her background. Besides, my parents didn't talk much about this. I didn't see Grandmother very often. She died when I was still a child, so I can't say much about her.

My father was Feliks Lasman. His real name was Fiszel, but I changed his name after the war. I'll later explain why. He came from Zychlin. It's a town near Lodz [54 km from Lodz]. But I don't know anything about his life there or his family. I only know that they must have spoken Yiddish at home for sure, because he only spoke Yiddish with his sister. But he had been living in Lodz for a long time. I don't know when he moved exactly. Probably with his entire family when he was still a child. But why? To make a decent living, that's how it used to be. My father was born in 1893, so he would be well over 100 years old now. He was raised in a rather orthodox family, but he wasn't orthodox himself. He must have gone to cheder, but I don't know exactly. My parents somehow never talked about the past and I never asked. When the war broke out, I was still a kid [in 1939 Helena Najberg was 16 years old], I wasn't interested in the past.

Father was tall. He dressed European style. He always looked decent, I can't say his clothing was very sophisticated, but he was always clean shaven and decently dressed. He didn't wear any sidelocks. He didn't pray at home. He belonged to a party, it was Bund [1](#). But he never said anything about this. I don't think that he was very involved in the activities of that organization. He died during the war, in a camp. After the war a cousin of mine, I don't remember, from my father's side I think, visited me and said that they sent Father to Mauthausen [concentration camp, set up by the Germans on 8th August 1938, located in northern Austria, near Linz. The prisoners worked in rock quarries; the camp was liberated on 5th May 1945 by American troops] and that's where he died, on 25th April 1945. Can you imagine, just a few days before the war ended. Yes, I got Father's death certificate from the Red Cross.

Father had three siblings. Two older brothers and a younger sister. I don't remember the names of the brothers, the sister's name was Iska. I only know that Father's oldest brother died even before the war and the second one died on the first day of September 1939. It was a natural death, heart failure, I think. And there was this story about this brother. When he died, his wife was left alone. I don't even remember what her name was, she was from the Cytryn family. They didn't have any children. And there is this law in Jewish religion that if a widow wants to remarry, the entire family gathers and the oldest brother has to give permission. Father was at that time the oldest brother and he had to give this permission. This was called halizah [1](#) in Hebrew. And Father had to recite some verses from the Torah and this he would have done, because it wouldn't have hurt anyone, but in addition to that there was also this stupid custom that he had to throw his shoe at the family members gathered there and whoever was hit with the shoe was supposed to die that year. And Father didn't want to do that. He said that under no circumstances would he ever want to cause anyone's death. Anyway, what he said was: 'This woman must be over 70 years old, if she was young, then perhaps I'd make this sacrifice, but does she really need to have a husband now? If she's lived this long without a husband, she'll survive a bit longer and I won't use these barbaric methods.' So he didn't do it and this Cytryn family really pestered us because of it. We were living in their basement during the war and had gas, the greatest thing we could get, but they cut off this gas. So we had to cook on a [wood] stove and this wasn't easy. There was nothing to use for fuel. Hard life. But Father didn't give in.

Mother's first name was Witla, her maiden name was Cederbaum. I also changed her name after the war, to Wiktorja. Just like Father, she was born in 1893, but in Lodz. She came from an orthodox family, just like Father. She didn't talk much about her childhood either. Perhaps if I had been more grown up, older, they would have talked to me about it, but they must have thought that a young

girl wouldn't be interested. Mother had long, dark hair, shoulder length, she didn't wear a wig. And she always wore this kind of a roll [hair tied into a bun at the back of the head]. This was fashionable at that time. You'd make this bun [by rolling hair] around a wire. Mother dressed very decently, like Father. Anyway, she'd sew for herself, so she could make whatever she wanted. I remember that when she'd leave somewhere she'd always have this set [of clothes, for special outings]. Mother died immediately after we came to Auschwitz, in a gas chamber. This was in 1944. I know for sure, because women were separated [from men]. If Mother had been alive, she would have been with me.

Mother had siblings. She had this aunt who didn't want to eat at our house, because it was not kosher. That was Mother's older sister. We'd called her Aunt Ryfka. A few years before the war she moved to France with her family. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps for bread [for economic reasons], as it usually was. I also remember one more cousin from Mother's side, but I don't remember whose daughter she was. Her name was Tola. She lived in Belgium. She moved there before the war, I can't say much about the circumstances. She got married there, but to a Polish citizen, a Jew, but he didn't speak Polish very well, because he spent his entire life in Belgium. I visited her once in 1974. She was very religious, even excessively. She wouldn't eat a piece of bread without saying all the prayers. Sometimes this took until 10 or 11 a.m. And she was very weak, sickly, she wasn't a young woman then. I'd always say to her: 'You either have to say those prayers earlier or eat something.' No way. 'If I don't say the prayers, I can't eat.' She was very pious. I remember that when she left for the prayer house on Saturday, this was when she was still living in Lodz, she couldn't even take a purse with her, because you couldn't hold anything in your hand, she'd pin the keys to her skirt with a safety pin. Everyone called her a rabbi, because she was the first one to come and the last one to leave [the prayer house]. Mother had supposedly done some great favor to her, so she kept writing to me and inviting me [to Belgium]. I don't know what favor it was, she wouldn't tell me, she only said she felt greatly obliged.

My parents got married in 1920 or 1921. Of course, I didn't attend the wedding, so I don't know what it looked like and whether it was a traditional one. Mother was 27 years old then. She got married a bit late. That's how it happened. I know she had some great love earlier. This man even came to visit us once, 2 years before the war. He was her cousin, but she loved him very much, she kept talking about him. When he came, she was very depressed after that visit. She walked around the apartment, she didn't know what to do. They say the first cut is the deepest. Mother told me that his man had to suddenly leave for South America and they lost contact. And later Mother met Father and they got married. Parents never talked about how they met. I think it must have been a marriage more out of reason than love, possibly a matchmaker could have been involved. But parents got along very well, there were no arguments, it was always peaceful at home. Even when this man came, Dad wasn't bothered with his visit, he was very tolerant. Both parents were very gentle. I can't say they were too gentle, but they never yelled at us, there were no rows in the house.

Father worked as an accountant at 44 Wolborska Street. There was a Dye-House and a Finishing Plant there, which belonged to Cytryn, my uncle and Father's brother-in-law. Unfortunately I don't remember his name. They didn't sew there, but they produced fabrics and dyed them there. But I can't say how this was done. And Dad worked there all those years, until the war broke out. I don't know how he learned to do it, but when I was born he was already in this profession.

Mother stayed at home. That's where her work was. She'd cook, clean, sew on the sewing machine. She could even make clothes for Father. And my clothes, they were all made by Mother. I remember till today that I had a dress made from Father's old pants, but it was so beautiful, there were colorful squares embroidered on the knees, I can still see it today. Or this winter coat with a fur collar. Mother made it herself, but her tailor, who used to sew coats and heavier [winter] clothes for Mother, he had a workshop on Zawadzka Street, was offended that she had gone to a different tailor to have this coat made. And she made it by herself. I don't know how she learned to sew like that. We had beautiful things, all of them made by Mother, mostly out of old things. Because all services [like having clothes made by a tailor] weren't cheap then.

## **Growing up**

I was born on 5th March 1923, in Lodz. And I have lived all my life in an area bordered by 5 streets. I was born at 9 Zeromskiego Street, we later lived on 11 Listopada [currently Legionow Street], later at 25 Zawadzkiego Street [currently Prochnika Street] and after the war at 12 Gdanska Street. I've been living here since 1945. We moved like this for financial reasons. Father must have gotten a raise at work and we started to make ends meet and Mother was very thrifty. I was born at home, with a midwife, it wasn't fashionable then to give birth in a hospital, but at home. I spent my first years at home with Mother.

When I was 7 years old I started attending a private gymnasium, Jozef Ab's gymnasium. That was in 1930. This school was located at number 8 Zielona Street. And I remember this Ab until this day from before that war [WWII]. He wore this tail-coat and a monocle. He came to our school, because he was the owner and the headmaster, but more of an honorary one, because I remember that headmistress Rajn dealt with everything. It was a Jewish school, but the classes were taught in Polish. We studied the history of Jews, Hebrew, so it was Jewish in this respect. But we also took all the regular subjects: mathematics, history, science, chemistry. All the normal subjects, like in the other schools. I remember that this school could not issue secondary school-leaving certificates [Polish, matura], so you'd have to take final exams at different schools. Only Jewish children attended that school and only girls, because it was a girls' school. I don't know why parents sent me to this specific school, it just worked out like that.

At school we were taught by teachers who were not always Jewish. My favorite teacher was the physics teacher, his name was Kojranski. I don't even know if Mr. Kojranski was a Jew. I only know that I liked him very much, because he played with me, he was like a grandpa. He carried us, that is me and a girl-friend of mine, on his shoulders, one on one shoulder and the second one on the other. And it once happened during a lesson that I wasn't able to answer a physics question correctly. And he said to me: 'How could you disappoint me like this? I thought you'd be the best one in the class.' And I was pretty good, this just happened once. And when I started crying, he took out a handkerchief, had me sit on his knee, wiped my tears and said: 'Don't cry, I'm sure you'll do better next time.' I remember this till today. He was my favorite teacher. But physics still wasn't my favorite subject. I am more of a humanist. So I liked Polish, history, the humanities. For example, I still remember that my essays were read aloud in class or when there was some kind of celebration. I was quite a good student. One of the best in the humanities. At math, physics, I was a bit worse.

I had quite a few girl-friends at school, but only one best friend. Her name was Lila Otelsberg. We were practically born together, because she was born in December on the 22nd and I was born in March on the 23rd. She is still alive, I even met her last year. She lives in the United States. There was also Wanda Rajn, the daughter of the headmistress. I also liked her a lot. She was always up to something, full of mischief, her mother couldn't control her. And she has visited me. She came after the war, with her husband. She was living in Israel, but I don't know where exactly. I don't recall going to any after-school activities with my friends. Each one of us would nicely go straight home, to her chores. We didn't go to any playgrounds.

I remember once there was a Latin test at school. We loved that [Latin] teacher. His name was Narcyz Lubnicki. He was an elegant man, and we were teenagers, so we really admired him. So there was this test and we all failed it. And the headmistress' daughter said: 'Girls, when classes are over, let's go to the teachers' lounge, steal those tests and change our grades.' And we did that. And it happened that the janitor showed up and all of the girls but I managed to run away. So I was devastated. I said: 'What will happen if he tells the teachers?', but somehow he was nice and didn't tell. But everyone caught on anyway. Because who would have changed the grades? The test was annulled, but I remember this event, because I was terrified all Saturday of what would happen if the teachers found out. There was no corporal punishment at school. I don't recall anyone ever getting flogged.

After school I studied English and took piano lessons. My cousin taught me. I think she was [a cousin] from my father's side. I only remember her name, I think it was Halina. She worked at the Genderman factory in Lodz. I don't remember her exact address. It was a Jewish factory, but there must have been some English partner. They produced sneakers. And that's where she learned English. Later, but before the war, she went to England and stayed there for 2 years, so she knew English very well. During the war the boss took her to England. And she disappeared without a trace. I don't know what happened to her later. And we had a piano at home, but it wasn't ours. Someone put it there, to store it. So I took piano lessons for 2 years and I could play some tunes and I took English lessons, but I didn't learn anything.

Ab's school was the only one I attended before the war broke out. And the only school I ever went to. I passed my 'small finals' [semi-final exams held in the middle high-school years], but that was it. I wanted to continue my education, there were such ideas before the war. I has a cousin in Switzerland, she was my mother's brother's daughter and she promised me that when I graduated from secondary school, she'll invite me there and I would be able to study. But, unfortunately, this didn't happen. After the war I wrote to her, at the address which I remembered. The letter wasn't returned to me, but I also didn't get a reply, so I don't know what happened.

My brother was 6 years younger and he was also born at home, on 19th November 1929. His name was Izaak, but we called him Jerzyk. We were very close. Yes, it was good between the two of us. I took care of him, as an older sister, of course. I was 6 years old when he was born and of course I was getting older, so when parents went out, to the theater or to visit friends, I looked after him. We spent all our free time together. Sometimes I was angry, because my girl-friends would go somewhere and I had to stay and look after my brother. He was 6 years younger, so you couldn't leave him alone. Most often we'd play Chinese checkers or other board games. That was all he could play. He also attended a Jewish gymnasium, the Kacnelson gymnasium [Icchak Kacnelson, 1886-1944, Jewish poet, playwright, translator and pedagogue. He wrote in Yiddish and Hebrew]. It

was, a boy's school. He didn't go to cheder at all. I don't know exactly how Jerzyk died. Probably in Auschwitz, but I don't even know when.

Our house was not a typical Jewish house. [We often hear this from non-religious interviewees, as if they want to explain why they are not Jewish enough, because they think they pre-war Jews were only Jews with sidelocks.] Parents only went to the synagogue once a year, for Judgment Day. That was the only time it was so traditional. Parents would fast all day long, go to the synagogue in the morning and come back in the evening. They never took us, children. After they got back, we'd all eat dinner and that's all I know about this holiday. It was done more for the sake of the family. Because both families, from Mother's side and from Father's side were very pious. If parents wouldn't have come, it would have been a tragedy. So they followed this tradition, so we had contact with it, we knew what those customs were. Parents also spoke Yiddish to each other at home. They did it mostly when they didn't want my brother and me to understand. That's why I knew Jewish [Yiddish], but only enough to somehow communicate. Now I barely, barely remember.

My parents were not in contact with non-Jews. That was the custom at that time. They were friends with Jews and family members. In this area where I live there weren't many orthodox [Jews]. Well, there were a few of them, but not many, no. What the Jews in my area did, it's hard to say, because we weren't so close with them [Jews who were not family members], but you could see the merchants on the streets. There were stores, different kinds, textile and grocery stores. Mother mostly bought from Jewish shops. Even though she didn't follow all those rules. I only knew the area of pre-war Lodz where I lived. I didn't go to the mikveh, or to the synagogue, I didn't even know where they were.

We didn't have a traditional house. There were some special meals for the holidays. But for example on Easter [Pesach], Jews shouldn't eat bread and we ate both matsah and bread, so the rules weren't observed. Parents didn't practice [religion], but they observed some rules. For example they never ate non-kosher meat and cold cuts, sometimes they'd only buy it for us, but other than that, they'd only eat kosher. Mother would usually buy cold cuts at Dyszkin's or Diamant's, these Jewish shopkeepers. But she didn't kosher the dishes. And she didn't light candles on Friday. I remember that someone once knocked on the door on Friday. Mother knew that when someone was knocking and not ringing the bell, it must have been family. And the candles were not lit. So then she rushed off to find the candlesticks, the candles and this took some time. And the 'guest' must have caught on. Anyway, they noticed that the candles had just been lit and since that time no one from the family ever visited us on a Friday. I remember that one aunt would sometimes visit us, she was Mother's sister. We called her Auntie Ryfka. And she never ate anything at our house, not even on a piece of paper. Mother was devastated, she'd say: 'Here, I'll give you this on a piece of paper, in a separate glass.' But there was no way, she never touched anything at our house, because she knew it wasn't kosher. And we didn't really go to family for dinner. We weren't invited. We spent holidays on our own [parents and children]. No one would have visited us anyway. Because we were kind of outcasts. Fridays and Saturdays were not special days. Well, Father didn't go to work on Saturday, but I can't say how we spent that time. But I remember that I took part in the Purim holiday. All the children from our street would dress up, the mother of my friend Lilia was very creative in that regard. We'd all dress up, because that was the tradition. We'd walk along a street, sing songs. In additions to Jewish holidays, we also celebrated Christmas. There were presents, I don't remember a Christmas tree, but I am sure there were



presents. I don't remember the other holidays. So much time has passed. And the older you are, the less you remember.

My mother was an excellent housekeeper. I liked her chulent the best. It was something wonderful. It was prepared at home and later carried to the baker where it would bake all night long. It was delicious. I can't describe it. There were potatoes, groats, beans and carrots. This was all mixed together, some fat was added, usually poultry fat, excellent dish. Mother made a royal chulent. And there were also these cold feet, this was called galer. These were cow's feet, you had to boil this first for several hours, the meat was then separated from the bones, ground and a lot of garlic was added. This was poured into a form, you'd wait and after some time it would solidify. Yes, I'd love to have some today, but I don't have the strength to make it. My mother was really excellent at making those dishes. She was a great cook. And then [when she cooked] she'd invite some guests, some friends. Especially for holidays. Jews, of course. In the dining room, the food would take up the entire table. She didn't invite family, because they wouldn't eat at our house anyway. But she made really great dishes, really. I can still remember the taste of those meals. Anyway, when she was cooking these dishes, she'd let me into the kitchen and explain what to do first, what next. And during these 'cooking lessons' of ours she'd also talk a lot about culture, customs, traditions and about her life as well.

The apartments we lived in were not so large. Only this last one [at 12 Gdanska Street] was nice and large. It was the caretaker's apartment, but he had vacated it. I remember it was devastated and we had to renovate it. But he lowered the rent and my parents rented it out. There were 4 rooms, but one large room was sublet to a tenant. So my brother and I had a room each, my parents had their bedroom and there was also the dining room. My parents found this tenant somehow. They took him for financial reasons. A 4-room apartment was quite expensive. So he also paid the rent and it was easier. But he was a very unpleasant man, even dogs didn't like him. He was a Jew, of course.

We were quite well off. Father had a decent salary for those times and he'd get packages from work for all the more important holidays. Because the Cytryns [the owners of the dyeing and finishing plant] were family to us, as I said. But when the summer holidays came around, Father had to borrow money on a bill of exchange. He'd borrow it and later return it. Even though he had a decent salary, supporting a family of 4 cost a lot, the rent, light, so there wasn't enough [money] for everything.

At first, when my brother and I were small, we used to go near Lodz, the name of the place was Slotwiny [Lublin Region, 187 km from Lodz]. Later, when we were a bit older, we'd go farther, to the mountains - to Muszyna [Cracow Region, 288 km from Lodz] or to Druskininkai [currently Lithuania, spa resort on the Nemunas River, 60 km from the current border with Poland], to a lake. Druskininkai is in the north, now it is Lithuania, but it used to be Poland. I remember we spent a wonderful summer there. We'd usually go with Mother. Father would only come for his vacation, because he had to work. So we went with Mother, my brother and I and my friend Liliana with her parents. Their name was Otelsberg. We lived in the same house, they on the first floor, we on the third. I grew up with Lila, we sat at the same desk, at school, we were very close, even closer than sisters. Her parents had a bookstore at 26 Piotrkowska Street [the main and longest street in Lodz] and they used to sell books there. And we even spent our summer holidays together. When we went somewhere to go swimming, Liliana's father would organize that. He taught us how to swim,

he led exercises every day. And in addition to that, when school was out, he'd take us [all the children] for ice cream. There was this delicious Italian ice cream. I don't remember where exactly. But I still remember how we'd wait for that day.

But once I went on vacation alone. When I was 4 years old I visited my aunt and uncle in Bytom [174 km from Lodz]. They were Juliusz and Greta Cederbaum. They didn't have children, so they wanted to have some for a few months. I learned to speak German there, because I was talented for this. They had this large dog that I used to ride, it was a great dog. His name was Woltan. I still remember how Aunt would give him a basket to carry in his mouth, there was some money and a shopping list in the basket. All the shopkeepers knew him, so they took the list and the money, put the products inside and he'd bring it home, very smart. He was a great dog. Really. I liked playing with him very much.

I always had books at home. Mother really enjoyed reading poetry. Unfortunately, I don't remember what she read. And Father, well, he didn't have time for that. He'd come home from work tired, so he wouldn't reach for books, more for newspapers. I don't remember exactly what kind. Different ones. Both Jewish and Polish. My favorite pastime when I was a child was reading. Yes, I've been reading since I was 4. I can't live without a book. If I don't have a book for the evening, I can't sleep. It's still like this. My favorite book was 'Jean Christophe' by Roland [Romain Rolland (1866-1944). French novelist, biographer, musicologist, historian, critic, and dramatist, was a romantic in the nineteenth-century tradition. Best known for his ten-volume cyclical novel 'Jean-Christophe' (1903-1912), published in translation from 1910 to 1913. Pacifist and humanist, sought to unify nations through his writings, won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1915]. I remember how I admired that book. But, interesting phenomenon, I tried reading it after the war and I somehow couldn't, although before the war I was awed with that book, I really liked it. Romeo Roland is the author, 'Jean Christophe' and 'Enchanted Soul' [original French title: '*L'Ame enchantee*'] are his books which I just adored. They were about human life, mostly psychological. Before the war with some girl-friends of mine I wrote a letter to him. He was French, so we wrote him in Polish and someone translated that letter for us. I don't remember who. We wrote that we loved his works and so on. And, interestingly, he wrote us back. He sent us a postcard, in French, on the postcard there was his house and he was standing on the balcony and a few words saying that he's thanking us for our appreciation. And somebody translated that for us too. And we later drew for who'd get to keep the card. Well, there were four of us and, unfortunately, I didn't win. The friend who won disappeared during the war and so did the postcard.

I didn't feel any signs of anti-Semitism before the war. After all, I lived among Jews. The first impression was only after I came back [1945]. When I was on a train returning to Lodz [from Prague] I heard a conversation two men were having, complaining that Hitler had still left so many Jews. What for? And I was wearing those camp things then and they must have found out who I was. And they still said it. Some years later I couldn't forgive myself that I didn't get off that train and go somewhere else. Well, but I guess that was my fate.

I wasn't feeling anti-Semitism, but a kind of fear before the war, yes. Especially after Hitler came to power in 1933. In addition I had two uncles in Germany, one in Bytom, whom I visited in the summertime, and the second one in Berlin. And they came to Poland before the war, in 1933, because they couldn't stand it there any longer, in Germany. They were persecuted there. So I felt this atmosphere, this fear of what was to come, especially after that visit. Everyone knew who



Hitler was by that time. Ever since 1933 we were very scared, I remember. It was discussed, that we didn't know how we'd end up. Everyone talked about it all the time. This uncle from Bytom stayed in Lodz. He worked somewhere, I don't remember where and Aunt Greta she could knit very well, she made beautiful dresses, sold them and of course, made some money. But she was poor. She was sick with some spine infection and she had to lie down on a bed made of plaster. She pulled through but she had a hump, she gave birth to 2 children, in Germany, many years before the war, I don't remember exactly when, but they were both born with undeveloped rectums and they died. This was really hard on her. When they moved to Poland, they had to put the dog to sleep. It turned out that he was too old to get used to a new place. My aunt really cried over that dog and the children. My second uncle, Leon, went to Palestine immediately, that is still before the war. And he died there some 10,11 years ago.

### **Life in the Lodz Ghetto**

When the war broke out I was in Lodz. I was supposed to go to school on the first [of September]. But the schools were closed, because the war broke out. So we, kids, were glad because of that. It only turned out later who those Germans were and what they did to people. The breakout of the war was a strange moment for me. I was still a kid, I was 16 years old. At that time, there was already panic at home. We could hear that they were rounding Jews up in ghettos. We felt that they wouldn't leave us alone. They also opened a ghetto in Lodz. It was in Baluty [a poor district of Lodz], somewhere on Limanowskiego Street, Wolborska Street [3](#).

They chased us out into the ghetto in May 1940. I remember that a good friend of my father's, a German who worked in the factory with him, approached my father and told him that he'd take our furniture, because otherwise some stranger would. Better for some friend to do it. Well, we couldn't even react to that, because he was the master of the world then. And I remember that moment when they were chasing us out. We had this hand-held cart. No horse, of course, we had to push this cart. We could only take a few things. All the most important things. Mother had even prepared for this. I know that she had bought sugar, if she could still get such things, so we'd have it for later. We suspected that it could get difficult with food. And indeed that's what happened. I remember that in 1942 Mother took a suitcase from under the bed, because she wanted to take something out of it and she found 2 kilograms of sugar. There was such joy in the house as if we had found a treasure. Well, that was because you couldn't get sugar in the ghetto.

I don't remember who told us we had to move. I somehow don't remember how it happened that we had to leave our house. We moved to 44 Wolborska Street. To that building where the Cytryns were living. And at first it wasn't so bad. We lived in the cellar. It was really a basement, one room, small kitchen, even a kind of hall, we had a roof over our heads. There were beds, but I don't remember if there were cupboards. I don't think so, because we used to hang the clothes on the doors. It was a very small space, some 20 square meters. And there were 6 of us there: I, my brother, parents and my friend's mother with her son [the Otelsbergs]. Liliana was not there with us. She had left with her father for Warsaw. I don't remember why they went there. Such things happened during the war. I remember that at first we even had gas in this basement of ours, these Cytryns hooked it up. But when Father refused this halizah to that older woman, they cut the gas off. In early 1944 we had to move to Wolborska Street 36 and that was a normal apartment. We had to move, because our previous house was too close to the border of the ghetto and no one was

allowed to live there. And that's where we stayed until the end, until they deported us to Auschwitz.

At first life in the ghetto went on as usual. Mother was at home, she didn't work before the war either. And Father was somehow helping uncle's family [the Cytryns]. After some time we didn't have anything to burn in the stove and the Cytryns had a lot of wood, so Father would leave at night and bring us some of that wood. He was always so scared, pale as a wall, and he kept repeating: 'They didn't see me, did they?' I was more courageous than he was, so I'd say: 'It's as much yours as it is theirs. After all, you're family. And they should give it to you, because they know we don't have anything to burn in the stove.' That's how it is. In such harsh conditions, when everybody was being persecuted, they still harassed us. We weren't getting any closer with them at all.

Life in the ghetto was very hard. We'd go out with my brother, but with time [we'd go out] less and less. When you went out on the street, you'd mostly see dead bodies. After a few months you could see how people's food supplies had run out and some started dying. It's not that I couldn't go out, but I was afraid to. The corpses were everywhere, on the sidewalks. They were just covered with newspapers. These carts would later come and these bodies, without caskets, were packed one on top of another and taken to a cemetery. There was also this disease in the ghetto, it was called 'cholerynka' [infantile cholera], because it was similar to cholera and people died like flies. There were some doctors, but there were no medicines, so how were they supposed to treat people? My mother, she suffered from gallstones. She really suffered because of that. I remember how a nurse visited mother and probed her. She put this tube in her esophagus and got something out of her gallbladder. Mother would later throw up and she'd feel better. But she was ill with this until the end of her life. Also, there was great hunger. If someone had money, he could buy something on the black market, but we didn't have money, no one was earning money by that time. We received food in exchange for food stamps. It was too much to die, but not enough to survive. Yes, it was very difficult.

Rumkowski [Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski (1887-1944), head of the Judenrat in the Lodz ghetto] was the leader of the ghetto. I'd see him sometimes, walking on the streets. I knew about his concept of transforming the ghetto into a labor camp. After all, I worked for him as well. But I never had any close contacts with him. I can't really say a good word about him. He was this 'king.' And people would say that he really liked young girls, that he used to sneak up to windows at night and peep. The ghetto was horrible, indescribable. Firstly, hunger. Rumkowski, when he felt like it, would give out rations, these coupons for potato peels. Oh yes, that would be a holiday. We'd be so happy then. I would first wash these peels under the faucet, although it was freezing, later Mother would fry them in horse fat and we'd stuff our stomachs with this. But Rumkowski also died in Auschwitz. [He left the Radegast station for Auschwitz on 28th August 1944. It is not known how he died. There is a legend according to which Jews from Lodz recognized Rumkowski and threw him into the crematorium oven alive.]

At home we didn't talk about what was happening around us. I only remember that when they handed out these [food] rations, a piece of bread, or something. Because my brother was still a young boy, we shared what we had with him. In some families they'd steal from each other, but in ours it was the opposite, we'd give him some food, so that he'd survive. Well, unfortunately, he didn't survive.

I didn't go to school in the ghetto, but to work, and I took 2 shifts. At first I helped in the Otelsbergs' library. It was on Wolborska Street, opposite our house. They used to run a library before the war. The Germans allowed them to take quite a lot of books into the ghetto, so the Otelsbergs opened a library. And I worked there. I simply exchanged books, because you couldn't buy them anyway. Everyone who wanted to exchange a book, had to bring one of their own. The library was immensely popular. People didn't have anything to do, so they would read to forget, to dull the pain, the disgrace. Finally, they started arguing with me, because they had read everything and we couldn't get new books anywhere. So I'd say: 'And where am I supposed to get these books for you? From heaven? Somehow I don't see them falling from the sky.' So it was a stressful and hard job, because I had to search these shelves, looking for books. In the summer I could somehow stand it, but in the winter? Horrible. I had to sit there wearing gloves and shivering. Yes, I had to sit there several hours a day and I was always very cold. And later, since 1942, everyone had to work [for the Germans]. I helped out in a so-called 'shop' [German forced labor factories]. I'd stitch around button holes, in uniforms, of course. But when I got back from work I'd go to this library.

Nobody from my closest family died in the ghetto, but I remember there were several moments when I thought it was the end. One day the Germans came and told everyone to leave the house [great szpera] [4](#). Mother's friend was really afraid and she hid in a cupboard. But she said she wouldn't stay there alone, so Mother stayed with her. We were a bit worried about them, because they were up in years. Well, they weren't that old, they weren't even 50 yet, but it was a lot for the Germans. So, they stayed in those cupboards and we went downstairs. They gathered us in the courtyard and ordered to stand in a single file. But that wasn't all, because the Germans started walking around the apartments. The son of this friend of my mother's said he'd come by from time to time to check if everything was alright. And a German went in there and Mother thought it was him, so she stuck her head out and the German saw her. Luckily he didn't open the second cupboard, because this other woman would not have survived. They led Mother downstairs. God, when I saw Mother, I felt faint. But, fortunately, she still survived that.

And later, I don't remember, but Mother and Father weren't home, I don't know where they were. And the Germans were searching the house on Wolborska Street, where we were living. I was home alone. Two kripas [Kriminal Polizei (KriPo), criminal police] and I spoke German well, so we started talking. They questioned me what I was doing there, where I worked, I talked with them for almost half an hour. All our neighbors were sure I was already gone. But somehow we talked and talked and they didn't do anything to me. They could see I spoke German very well, so perhaps they thought I was a servant in that house. And I didn't straighten that out. There was a sheep-skin coat in the closet. It wasn't ours, a friend of Mother's had asked her to keep it. If they had found this fur coat, then I would be long gone from this world. Because you had to turn in all fur coats in the ghetto, the penalty was death. And somehow they kept talking with me and they didn't open the closets. And after about half an hour they went away. And later all the neighbors crowded into the apartment: 'Ah, you're alive? Has anything happened to you?', so I said: 'No, we talked a while and they went away.' But I was shaking all over.

So life in the ghetto was horrible, really horrible. They deported us in 1944. First, during all those transports, they took a lot of people. To Treblinka [5](#), to Majdanek [6](#), lots of people. There were just a few of us left. In 1944 it was the end. The ghetto was almost empty, but some 800 people hid in the cellars. They stayed there until the end. My brother-in-law was one of them, I don't remember

which one, but one of my husband's brothers. He hid in the basement and somehow survived until the end, until the Russians came. But they took me and my family. One of the chairmen, this bald guy, his name was Bibow [Hans Bibow (1902-1947), German officer, chairman of the Lodz ghetto], he made a speech and said he was sending us to a place where we would all work together and 'Not a hair will fall off your head' [you will be completely safe] and he showed us his head. Well, imagine that!

## **In Auschwitz**

Anyway, I knew about Auschwitz by then, because when I was working in that 'shop', where I stitched these button-holes, there were pieces of paper sewed into uniform collars with information about Auschwitz. They were written in Polish, clearly by those, who were dealing with uniforms there. Most often they'd say: 'This is so that you know where you are going, this is a death camp, everyone here will die.' So we were already prepared for that, but what were we to do? Maybe an uprising. There were some movements, but no one dared to do it. They sent us immediately to the train station, to these cattle wagons. I remember how they shoved us into the cars and closed them. I think it took us 8 days to get to Auschwitz. It was a horrible trip. Everyone was silent, or crying. It was horribly crowded. And we almost didn't talk. We felt those were our last moments together, that we would never meet again. We felt something. So I hugged my parents and I didn't want to leave them. Any my brother, even though he was younger, but very caring, kept saying: 'Don't worry, it will all be fine.'

And when we reached Auschwitz it was September 1944 [the last transport left Lodz on 29th August 1944]. I didn't receive a number. The transport I arrived with didn't receive numbers. [Indeed, not everyone received numbers, especially women from the last transports, because it was known they would be sent off further. In such cases meticulous records were not necessary. Such cases of not issuing numbers were common since 1944]. At first they hurried us out of the wagons and there was selection straight away: women separately, men separately. Children were taken from their parents, those were horrible moments. Mother died the very same day. All the women were together, but Mother wasn't with them anymore. Neither was her friend. They were older [Mrs. Najberg's mother was 51 years old] and there weren't suitable for them [Germans] for labor, so they went straight into the gas chamber and that was the end. I never saw mother again. This 'aufejzerka' [Polonized version of the German word Aufseher - guard, supervisor], this leader, a German, said: 'Do you see this chimney? That's where your mothers are frying.'

I was alone since that time. I didn't even want to talk to anyone. We didn't form friendships. It was difficult to have friends in such horrific conditions. You didn't even feel like talking. And these first days, after they separated me from my family, I didn't want to eat, I didn't want anything, I only cried. Women would approach me and say: 'Stop this or they'll kill you' and I'd say 'Let them, that's what I want, I want them to kill me.' But later I somehow got used to not having a family, not having my parents and my brother. You could somehow hang on, but you couldn't call it a life, of course.

We lived in barracks. They used to be horse barns. There was a stove in the middle, it wasn't high, and bunk beds on two sides. I think there were three levels of these bunk beds. We were 5 girls to one bunk bed. So we had to take orders while sleeping, if one turned on her left side, all had to turn on their left sides, if the right one, all on the right one, or we wouldn't have fit in there.

We were very hungry. They would often wake us up at 4 a.m., for roll call. We'd have to stand in fives [groups of five]. We'd all shiver, because it was already November, so very cold, and we were dressed lightly. I only had a skirt that I had to tie around my waist with a rope, because 2 could have fit in there, and a torn up blouse, without the back side, because that was torn out. And I had to stand like this for 4, 5 hours in freezing temperature. Once I just didn't have enough strength, so I said: 'I don't care anymore, let them kill me' and I sat down there in the five. The girls shouted: 'Get up or they'll kill you', I answered: 'Let them kill me, who needs such a life.' After roll call we got, I don't remember, but I think it was this one tiny piece of bread, too much to die, not enough to live.

And later, we had to relieve ourselves. You couldn't walk around the camp, just close to the barrack. Well, this is really indescribable. Literally. We could only relieve ourselves when ordered to do so, altogether, those Germans followed us and guarded us, we had no shame left. You couldn't do anything about it. And washing, when one managed to get to a faucet, she was happy that she could freshen up her face a bit. But you couldn't wash yourself like people normally do, there was no way. Perhaps that's why they gave us something to stop our periods. They added some pills to the food. Well, an epidemic would have broken out there if we all started menstruating. And we didn't even have underclothes. I only found out about this after the war.

For lunch they gave us this one bowl of soup for five people, without spoons, of course, and whoever managed to take a few sips, got to eat something, but I rarely managed, because I didn't like this pushing and shoving. I said: 'I won't fight, because it won't lead to anything.' And that's how it was. In the evening there was roll call and back to sleep. Sometimes I didn't even lie down on the bunk bed, but right next to the stove, there was a slab of concrete there and I slept on that concrete, in that blouse with the torn out back and in that skirt. Perhaps that's why I now suffer so much.

Some women, mostly older ones, couldn't stand it and threw themselves on the fence. And this was an electric fence. If you touched it, that was the end. It was a rather easy death. Once I witnessed such an event. I can still see her, hanging on those wires. Black hands, everything black. Head down.

I never had any contact with the Germans. That's what saved me. I know they called on some of them [the women prisoners] and they served them. In different ways. It never happened to me. We didn't work at all in Auschwitz. I was even surprised, because they took us there, because we were young and able to work, but they didn't give us any work. When you were there you had to have connections to get work, know one of those kapo [German abbreviation of Kamaraden Polizei, a function filled by inmates in Nazi concentration camps. Criminals and brutal prisoners were often selected for this function. Some of them were known for their sadism, however, some were members of the resistance. In exchange for serving the function, they kapos received, for example, additional food rations], one of those officers. Working in the kitchen was a dream come true. When one got a job in the kitchen, she was really happy.

I don't think we ever talked about gas chambers and what was happening there. I didn't see any transport. You couldn't see that at all. The Germans disguised everything, they'd tell you that you were going to a bathhouse. There were real bathhouses too. Right after we arrived they stripped us, shaved all our hair, gave us some rags and these wooden shoes for our feet. This took place in



the bathhouse. I only remember they shaved us with this machine, but it wasn't an electric shaver, oh no. They wounded our heads and other parts of our bodies, because nobody was looking there. I still have lots of these cysts on my head, perhaps because of that. These warts, cysts. They've operated on me several times [to remove them], but they always grow back.

### **In forced labor camps**

In November 1944 you could hear the front was getting close and that they'd do something with us. And they did. They took us out in trains to Ederan, to Germany [correctly Oederan, the city of Oederan is located in the Floha Landkreis (district) in the Chemnitz Kreis (region) in Saxony, approx. 70 km from Dresden]. It was a labor camp, smaller than Auschwitz. They organized a transport of just women, mostly young ones. Well, because we were going to work there, in an ammunition factory.

I operated a machine which made bullet shells. This machine had to operate constantly. If it had been empty, it would have broken down. And that's what I often did, I let it run empty. When someone let me know that the German foreman was coming, I'd put something in there. Of course, this was forbidden. I worked three shifts, at night too. But I don't know if the Germans had any use for those bullets, I doubt it, because we all did such things. We got away with it.

The conditions in Ederan were a lot better. First of all, it wasn't that cold, there was heating and the food was a bit better. They didn't shave our heads. They even gave us these coarse underwear, because it was wintertime. But we didn't wear anything on our feet, just these old twisted shoes. And they gave us coats. There was a belt on the back and the letter 'KL', Konzentrations Lager. I even wore this coat for some time after the war, because I didn't have money to buy a new one.

And then the front was getting closer, so they sent us to Terezin [7](#), to the Czech lands, where I waited out until the end of the war. They took us there in April 1945. It was the city of empress Theresa, a very old city. The Germans were supposed to put mines under this city, underground. Because it was supposed to be a death camp. But they didn't have enough time. I think it was all supposed to blow up on May 8th. We would have all died. But one German felt remorse and admitted it all. They took the mines out and we somehow survived until the end, until the Russians arrived.

The Russians arrived on the 8th of May, I think [8th May 1945]. They quarantined us for 6 weeks, because they were afraid of some virus or epidemic. We couldn't leave this Terezin. They did give us food, there was no terror, no force. But I had my share [of misfortune] there as well. From the Russians this time. You know, when you felt free, you started walking around with girl-friends, wherever you wanted to. And there was this guy. He was a Jew, he must have been getting money from the Russians, because he'd bring them young girls. And he recruited me with a friend of mine. We went with him. The Russians offered us some wine. It was this apple cider, very easy to drink, but you'd lose consciousness afterwards. So, when I woke up I saw this Russian trying to undress me. He had lots of medals on his chest. So I told him he should be ashamed of himself, an officer, so many medals. And I was wearing 2 watches on my wrists, they weren't mine, some friends gave them to me so I'd keep them for them. This officer saw those watches and he took one. 'If you don't want to give yourself to me, give me those watches' And he didn't do anything to me. I guess something I was saying must have made him feel guilty. I went to the barrack where some of my



'dear friends' were already telling everyone about how I was raped. I didn't even try to defend myself, because there was no talking with them. I had such 'luck' for some time. Once when I was sleeping at night in my bed, which was right next to the window, at the end of the room, some Russian got there and started undressing me. I made such a commotion that some men got out of the men's barracks and chased him away. Later the commander of the camp, a Russian, asked us to dress modestly and not provokingly, because those were hungry soldiers from the front, and to keep away from them. Well, we tried.

After this quarantine they sent us to Prague. There must have been some meeting point there. We took a train. This trip was in much better conditions than all the previous ones. First of all, we weren't afraid of getting killed at every step, this was important. I can't say how many women were there. I remember one of them, because we became friends, her name was Hania. I don't remember where she came from. Anyway, at the time we weren't interested in where you came from, but in where you were going. She stayed in Prague, she found a husband there, because her head hadn't been shaved and she had beautiful hair. The Russians paid for everything, for accommodation, for food and even gave us 50 crowns [Czech currency], so we could buy something for ourselves. These 50 crowns, it was enough to buy some food. So they were very nice to us. They even paid us for trams, for public transport, we didn't have to pay for that. But in Lodz, when I got back and got on a tram, the driver asked me to pay. I told him: 'Mister, you can see [the coat], I'm from a concentration camp, how am I supposed to have money?', 'So walk on foot.' And I had to get off the tram, he didn't let me ride it without a ticket.

We spent several days in Prague. It was then announced that the quarantine was over and that we could go wherever we wanted to. I wanted to go to Lodz. I was hoping to meet someone from my family. It was May 1945. And I thought to myself several years later that it was a shame that I didn't get on any other train and go anywhere else but to Poland, because I didn't expect I'd get a welcome like I did. I was shocked when I heard these words ['Why did Hitler leave so many Jews?']. From Katowice, because that's where the first stop was, I went to Lodz and I concluded that there was no point in going there. I didn't know anyone, I didn't have a place to sleep.

## **After the war**

I was the only one to survive the war from my closest family. It's difficult to explain how that happened. After all, I went through so many of those camps. Perhaps it was my strength of character which helped me? Because I am, by nature, an optimist. That's my character and maybe that's what saved me. Because there, in Auschwitz, many women threw themselves at the electric fence and died, because they didn't have the strength to live. I tried to overcome all that. It's difficult to say what gave me strength. I am still amazed until today that I survived all that and many years after that gave birth to children. I had doubts about that. Well, but luckily I somehow managed to conceive and give birth to my children.

The first thing I did in Lodz was go to the Jewish community. It was somewhere on Piotrkowska Street at that time, I can't remember where. There I got half a loaf of bread, half a kilo of sugar and 50 zloty. I could only survive for a few days with that money. It was a one-time ration. I asked if I could spend the night somewhere, because I didn't have a place, but I had to find that by myself. I met a friend whom I had gone to school with and she had some acquaintance in Lodz who let us spend one night. But that was one night and what next? Later I met another friend, her name was

Lola Szejnfeld, her brother was living at 139 Piotrkowska Street, so we stayed with him. Until he got married. Then that friend told me I had to leave. That's when I met this third friend, Fela, and her aunt and uncle, at Piotrkowska Street 35. I slept on the floor there, on this thin straw-filled mattress and mice danced all over me. Gosh, I was really afraid then. I mean, there was really nothing to be afraid of, but it wasn't a pleasant feeling. I had been staying there for some time when I met my husband, in September 1945. I never even went to my house. I haven't been there till today, in that house where we had lived, something keeps me away from it. I did meet the caretaker once and she was very friendly towards me. She even told me to go there: 'A doctor is living there now, but you can throw him out, because it's your apartment.'

After the war I started working at the Voivodship [District] Militia Headquarters. I had to survive somehow! Lola's brother, the one I was staying with, was the head of the personnel department there and he accepted me. At first he didn't want to, because he was afraid people would say he employs his Jewish friends. But his wife talked him into it: 'Listen, you won't have anything to be ashamed of.' She knew me, we talked often. So that's how I started working there and I made it for some twenty-something years, until I got my disability pension. At first I was a typist, then a secretary, later the director of a department. When you work a lot and work well, then you get promoted. I wrote all the reports about how the militia was functioning for the commanders. They really valued them, because these reports were top class, I can brag about it. Well, I always had all 5s [As] in Polish, I was the best in the class. It didn't hurt me in any way that I was Jewish. When they accepted me for this job it was even in fashion to accept Jews. As a form of compensation. Only later it became not so comfortable. But I received my disability pension really early, in 1967, because I had thyroid problems. I went to hospital twice, each time for a month, later some medical committee examined me and they declared that I couldn't work any longer. So I was 44 years old when I went on my disability pension.

After 1945 there were more signs of anti-Semitism. We had one acquaintance who was an officer in the army and they killed him in his apartment, when he was taking a bath. Poles killed him. Because he was a Jew. I don't remember his name. I remember there was even some investigation, but they didn't find anything. Jews didn't kill him, that's for sure, and there weren't as many foreigners then [as there are now]. It was a great shock. They killed him in his bathtub, he was bathing. I don't even know how they entered the apartment, how did they get the keys?

Jakub, my husband, was born on 2nd February 1918. His name was Jankiel Mojsze, but he was always known as Jakub. He came from Kielce, from a very orthodox family, but he had other views. When he was some 10 years old his parents moved to Lodz, it was about work for his father. But they weren't too well off even here. They lived on Mielczarskiego Street, not far from here. There were 6 of them and they had a very small apartment. The father was a tiler. He made floors. He was very hardworking, but he didn't make enough money for so many people. My husband's mother couldn't work, because with so many people she had lots of work at home. Unfortunately, I don't know anyone from his parents' generation, because they all died during the war. My husband used to tell me about his family, but I don't remember everything. I only know he had 4 brothers and 1 sister. He was the youngest one. The oldest brother died of stomach problems, before the war, I think it was in 1936. I don't remember his name. Then there were Joe, David and Irving [these are their American names]. They all lived in Canada. Joe left before the war and the two others shortly after. Joe died several years ago, I don't know what of. David died last year. I even

went to his funeral. Irving is still alive, he's 96 years old, but he's very weak. The sister died a long time ago, during the war, I think.

I never hid my heritage, God forbid. Well, I never really bragged about who I was, but when someone asked me I'd always tell the truth. I didn't have any problems because of that. I was well liked, I don't know why, but people never expressed hostility or any kind of disgust. But when I came back after the war I decided to change my name and my parents' names. I did it for my children. I didn't have them yet, but I was thinking about it. I didn't want them to have 'son of Chaja' or 'daughter of Chaja' in their documents. I remember that my son was very afraid of this when he went to school, but I told him not to be afraid, that he was 'son of Helena and Jakub.' I knew that if someone wanted to find out they could find out from his last name, but I didn't want my kids to be hurt. I'd rather not have them called names at school, as it sometimes happens. We've never been loved. Well, before the war it wasn't experienced as much, because there were over 300,000 Jews in Lodz [editor's note: approx. 220,000], there were lots of Jews, but it changed after the war, unfortunately. Some friends advised me to change my last name as well, but I said I wouldn't do it, because I have nothing to be ashamed of. My parents were honest people. I changed their names as well. It was in fashion at the time. After the war Jews changed their first names, last names, everything. [8](#)

My husband was more tolerant and liberal. I remember how he told me about how on Judgment Day, and there's a fast then, you can't eat anything, when his parents went to the synagogue he and some of his buddies got hungry. So they went to a store and bought some sausage and boiled it in a teapot, because they didn't want to use a regular pot. They later rinsed this teapot out, but when mother went to make some tea, it turned out it was greasy. She said: 'What happened here, why is this teapot so greasy?', 'No, you're imagining things.' I don't know how he came up with those ideas. I guess that was because of his environment, his friends. I quite liked him. He wasn't an ugly boy, quite handsome when he was young. He was of medium height, just a bit taller than me [approx. 1.6 m]. And he was a good man. He liked helping people. When someone needed help, he'd turn to my husband and he always got it.

He graduated from elementary school by the time the war broke out and after the war he was an extramural student and received his secondary school certificate. I still remember how he walked around the apartment with an icepack on his head and that it had to be so quiet that you could hear a fly. He had a strong will and he passed his final exams. He also tried to convince me to do it, but I wasn't motivated enough.

During the war he was also in Auschwitz. I don't remember exactly what years. But for sure longer than I was. He worked in construction work. The Germans were putting up some posts. My husband had good ideas and they liked taking him to work with them, because he made this work easier. He could always organize it, so it wouldn't be too hard. Putting up posts is not that easy, but he could always find a way.

I worked in the same department. I was a typist and he worked in the warehouse. Was it love? It's hard to say. At first I was a bit confused, but I saw he was a good man, calm, didn't drink. At first he did a bit of drinking, because of his buddies. So I thought to myself: 'why should I look for great love, a prince on a white horse?' I always joke that we were married three times. At first on the 26th of September, because my husband couldn't stand it that I was sleeping on a thin straw

mattress on the floor and mice run all over me. So he took me here, to this house. But we weren't married yet. There were no civil marriage offices yet. The wedding was on 19th January 1946. It was a great wedding, all the friends from work were invited. And some whom we didn't invite came as well. There were almost 100 people at that wedding. And the wedding was here, in this apartment. We carried out all the furniture, there were these benches along the walls and a table in the middle. Everything was temporary, of course. I went to my wedding in a borrowed dress, because I didn't have anything to wear. And then the third wedding, a normal civil marriage, on 2nd May 1946. So I never knew which anniversary to celebrate.

We never had a traditional wedding, but we went to one like this, it was our neighbors' wedding. It took place immediately after the war, I think in 1946. They had a traditional Jewish wedding, under the canopy, with a rabbi. I remember they asked me and my husband to walk around this canopy, because that's the custom, but we didn't know how many times to do it. So we kept walking and walking and finally they started tugging at our clothes that it was enough. Well, we didn't know much about this, because I had never seen a Jewish wedding before the war.

It was difficult for us at first. We didn't make much money, the salaries were very low. I didn't have anything to wear. I only had what I brought with me and those were 'wonderful' things from the camps, because I didn't have money to buy anything. The first presents I got from my husband were 2 pairs of stockings. That was something, I had been walking barefoot, only wearing shoes. And these shoes had really twisted heels, so I looked 'wonderful,' like a 'princess.' And only later, slowly, slowly, you'd buy something, sometimes get something from Unra [UNRRA - United Nations Relief Aid - an aid institution for war-damaged Europe], some clothes. And later, when I got this pension and my husband did as well, it was easier for us, because we had more money.

I never really got involved in politics on purpose, but as soon as I started working I had to join the party [9](#). I don't remember who asked me to do it, but it must have been someone from the establishment. I had to read out my curriculum vitae at a meeting. My curriculum vitae was quite short, because I wasn't old, so only what I'd lived through during the war and that was it. I didn't know what the party was, what kind of a party. They told me to sign up, so I did. I was active in the party, I can't deny that, but those were short periods of time. I was in the so-called executive. Well, because I could speak well and write nicely, so they wanted me to be in it. I went to those meetings. I had to. Well, you wouldn't dare not to come. A bit out of fear.

My husband was also involved in the party. Until the 20th Congress [10](#). Later, he simply became depressed. Also because they fired him in 1967 [11](#), because he was Jew?! Jakub was so depressed that I was worried about him. I remember that my daughter would sit next to him, she was still a kid, stroke his head and say: 'Daddy, don't worry.' Well, and he finally got over it, but he still couldn't believe that something like that could have happened. It was really after this 20th Congress, when he found out what kinds of things Stalin did, that everything lost meaning for him. He said: 'Stalin?' You know, it also came as a shock to me when I found out. I couldn't believe it as well. These detention camps, gulag, I heard he killed some 20 million people there. I mean not personally, but it was his order. I still remember when Stalin died [5.03.1953 all countries of the Soviet Block were in mourning on that day. Stalin's death was the first sign of political changes to come], my son was 6 years old then, I can still see him sitting in front of the TV and crying that Stalin died. Yes, a six-year-old boy, but he already knew that Grandpa Stalin was someone. Only later did we find out who that 'Grandpa' really was. I really feel betrayed by that system. You'd

believe in Stalin like in God and what turned out? Stalin was no better than Hitler.

In 1967 they fired my husband, like I said, and I received some awful anonymous letters. Mostly in my name, I don't know why. Awful ones: 'Move out to Israel,' 'You've had enough of our Polish bread,' such things. When the mail arrived, I'd be shaking. I couldn't stand it. My husband started hiding those letters. Finally, he went to the party committee, he showed them, so they'd react somehow. But did anyone care? My husband knew who was writing those letters, but he didn't catch him red-handed. All I can say today is that it was an employee of the militia headquarters.

We were very glad to hear about the creation of the state of Israel with my husband. Yes, we were pleased. We'd say: 'If something happens, then we are, we can be, citizens of that country. So we're not bezprizorni [Russian, not belonging, homeless], as they say. We were happy, but we never thought about emigrating. Anyway, my husband and I, we never visited Israel. I wouldn't have been able to stand that climate. I hate heat. I wouldn't have survived there for long. I prefer very cold weather to heat. My husband was never drawn there either.

In 1974 I visited my Aunt Tola in Belgium. I've already said something about her, she was very religious. I stayed there for a month and a half. And we had to set some things straight right from the start. Because, for example, Jews cannot turn on light, or light a fire, since Friday evening. So I told her: 'Listen, I can't lie in the dark. I have to read in the evening, or I can't fall asleep. So I'll turn on my light. After all, you know that we didn't obey all these rules at our house.' There was this small 15-watt bulb in the bathroom that was on all the time, so you wouldn't have to turn it on, but not in my room. And she allowed me to do that. But she followed all those rules herself. Once there was a tragedy, because I used the milk cloth to wipe some meat pan and there were different cloths for that. I didn't know about it, we didn't have such things at home. So all dishes had to be koshered. I apologized to her for it. But when there was some holiday, there was a revolution in that house, everything had to be taken out of cupboards, washed, segregated. Well, this really exhausted her, but this was the spirit she was raised in. Unfortunately, she has already died and is buried in Israel. That was in her will. So she's buried there.

Our son Jerzy was born on 19th June 1947 and our daughter Lila 10 years later, in July 1947. Our children were very much planned. My husband loved children very much and wanted to have 5 of them, but I was working, so I'd say: 'How are we supposed to raise these children?' Our son is named Jerzy Bronislaw. After he was born I was the one who took care of him. Unfortunately, I only had three months of paid leave, so we had to employ someone to take care of the baby when we were not at home. We both had to work and we couldn't leave a baby alone. So after these 3 months we employed this German woman. My husband found her somewhere, I don't remember where. It didn't bother me that she was German. Anyway, she spoke Polish well. I had to have someone to help me and it was difficult to find someone then. But she didn't stay long with us, because she got sick. She had some serious disease. She was even in hospital and she died there. Social services buried her, because we didn't have money for that.

My son was active in Solidarnosc [12](#) We didn't forbid it. Later, when Solidarnosc became legal, he rode along Piotrkowska Street and appealed to people not to drink alcohol, he organized these anti-alcohol manifestations. Once they even arrested him for disturbing public order, because he was shouting at the top of his lungs that people should stop drinking. Now he's active in some conservative club. When my husband was alive and our son visited us I'd beg Jakub not to start



discussing political issues with Jerzy. Because they'd always argue. My husband was a leftist from before the war and my son was and still is a rightist, and a leftist and a rightist usually don't agree. They always had different opinions. And later they just talked about the weather, cars and such things.

My son changed his faith [to Catholic] several years after he got married [he got married in 1972 to Anna Gizgierz-Nawronska, a Pole, a medical student]. At first he changed his name, even before he got married. I don't know why he decided to do that. He asked us for permission to change his name. I think that was because of his wife. So I said: 'It's your will, you're an adult, you have to decide, we have nothing against it. It's your business.' Today his name is Nagorski [Polish translation of the last name Najberg]. They baptized their child in a church, so they're a Catholic family. I even attended the christening. My husband didn't want to go. His wife is Catholic, of course, but he was an even greater Catholic than she is. My daughter-in-law sometimes complained that he used to wake them up, that is her and their daughter, at 6 a.m. on Sundays to go to church. She'd say she could go later, that she doesn't have to go in the morning. But he insisted. Yes, they must go to church every Sunday, no getting out of it. He's a real neophyte.

My son didn't explain what he did. He asked for permission about changing his last name, but he only informed us about changing his faith, he said that he'd read a lot of newspapers about this religion, that he liked it a lot and that's why he decided to change his faith. Well, it's his life, he's an adult man. All in all, I didn't have anything against it, if he thinks that's what best for him, then why not. My husband wasn't that tolerant. He worried about all this, although he didn't practice religion himself. But what were we to do? Sometimes we talked about it, that it was perhaps our fault that it all turned out like that. We didn't teach our children any rules and we didn't follow them ourselves.

Later our relations were not good either. There were years when he didn't contact me at all. But now he calls from this Opole [174 km from Lodz], he comes here once a week, sits here for 2 hours, we talk. He brought me this walker, these crutches from Opole. Yes, I don't blame my son, but I do blame my daughter-in-law. Because I think she should call at least once a week, find out if this mother is still alive. But my dear daughter-in-law calls me once every 2, 3 months. Even though she's a physician and she knows my health is not good, that's how it has all turned out. We don't see each other often now, because my son works and he doesn't have time. Currently, he's the chairman of the Opolgraf printing company. He works in Opole like a mule, pardon my language. Yes, he can stay at work until midnight, or he goes for a walk somewhere, at 9 p.m., he calls me at 9.30 p.m. and he goes back to work then, or he works at home. He has a computer there as well. Such a hard worker he is. And he shouldn't be, because he's got heart problems and a pacemaker.

My daughter was 10 years younger than my son. We were planning a second child with my husband, but I had a miscarriage in 1955. It was a boy. And later I didn't become pregnant. I thought I'd stay with one child. But it wasn't to be. Lila was born on 25th July 1957. We named her after my childhood girl-friend. Like my son, she only spent the first 3 months at home with me. Later we had to find someone to take care of her. This time it was a Pole. Her name was Jadzia. I don't want to talk about her, someone must have recommended her to us. But it turned out she was a thief and also had venereal disease. My daughter started studying at the same elementary school as Jerzy. She was supposed to study as well as he did, but she did even better. She was a very diligent student. She later attended a gymnasium, but I don't remember which one. She was



finally accepted at the Polytechnics. She studied Applied Mathematics, but she didn't graduate, because she went to Canada and stayed there for good.

She left in 1981 or 1982. At first for a holiday, to visit her aunt and uncle. She came back to Poland. Later they asked her to come again. She did. That's when she met her first husband and she got married. I didn't like it, but I couldn't convince her. That family had somehow fooled her into it. And after she got married, it was too late. She was in love. Her first husband was a Jew, his name was Sztajnowicz. His father was from Poland. He was a friend of my husband's. And they met in Canada and he fell deeply in love with her, but after the wedding he became difficult to live with. I don't know if they even stayed together for 3 months. They couldn't work it out, so they got divorced. She got married again, I don't exactly remember when, but it was a few years later. Her current husband's name is Gery Blueston, but Lila kept her maiden name, she's still Najberg. She somehow didn't want to go through all those formalities again. She said: 'What difference does it make?' I helped her a lot with that wedding, because I happened to be there. It was a very nice wedding, but she had to borrow money to have it. There's a custom there that the guests, instead of presents, give money in an envelope. So she had just enough money to pay back those debts. She didn't have debts, but she didn't have presents either.

My daughter is not working currently. She's a sick person. She worked for several months in a boutique that was owned by this man, an artist. He designed all those things he sold, clothing, gadgets, jewellery. She liked that job, because those were beautiful things and she likes looking at such things. Perhaps she'll work there again. But Lila has stomach problems, problems with her intestines. She often gets these stomach aches, she can't eat, she can't walk, she has to stay in bed all day long and she also gets these migraines. What a poor girl. My daughter doesn't have children. Yes, she decided not to have them, because of her depression. It's all because life didn't turn out well for her in Canada and she became depressed. She said she wouldn't be able to raise children.

At first our contacts were difficult. Well, because my daughter moved often, we could only stay in touch by telephone. Now she calls every day, at 8 p.m. If the phone rings at that time, I know it's Lila. At first, we didn't talk so regularly, but now we do. Also, my daughter visits Poland often. Now she comes in May, June and later takes me there with her. Last year I didn't go, because of my sickness and I don't know if I'll be able to go there this year. It's a long trip. She'd like me to live with her, in Canada. But I wouldn't be able to manage that. You don't uproot old trees.

At first my son was very close to my daughter. There were 10 years between them. I remember when Lila was born he took care of her very carefully, really. I only left some food and drink and told him how to heat it up and he fed her himself, changed her diapers, he took care of her like a father would. Even though he was a young boy. But when he met this wife of his, it all broke off, so to say.

Our children knew who they were, they knew of their parents' past, they knew about Jewish customs, tradition. We told them about it, my husband more than me. Especially my son would listen with his mouth open when my husband told those stories. Because he had a lot to tell. And he could tell interesting stories, it was impressive. We talked and my son would say: 'How could you have survived all that?', because it was difficult to believe that we managed to survive for so many years together afterwards.

But we didn't even take them to the synagogue. Well, when my daughter moved to Canada she'd go to the synagogue sometimes. When I visited, we'd go together. But we could never stand those sermons. I never celebrated any Jewish festivals with my children. My children knew there was a holiday, because there'd be matzah at home, but there'd always be bread next to the matzah. But we always celebrated non-Jewish holidays. There was always Christmas, a Christmas tree, presents, like in every Polish house.

I have one granddaughter. She is my son's daughter. Her married name is Braun. She works at the ABW [Agency of Internal Security], she's a lawyer. She's over 30 years old now and she has a son, Macius. My great-grandson was born 3 days after this horrible accident at the World Trade Center [09.11.2001]. My son was in the States then and he couldn't get back to the country, because there were no connections. He flew in several days later, when his grandson had already been born. They're a Catholic family as well. They had a church wedding. The child was baptized in a church. I didn't go to Agnieszka's wedding, because I wasn't feeling well and they told me I wouldn't be able to stand the wedding. And the wedding went on until 5 a.m., so I wouldn't have been able to stand it for sure. I see my granddaughter when her parents invite me for dinner once every several months. She almost never calls me. Well, she called me on Grandmother's Day and she wished me well. I asked my son to convince her to stop by with the little one from time to time. I told my son: 'Can't Agnieszka put him in the car and drive him here at least for an hour and sit here?' But no response. Agnieszka knows her father's roots. I don't know if my son told her about it, but I know she knows. Sometimes, when I'm there, we talk about different things and I can see that she knows she's a half-blood Jew. She's very polite about it. She doesn't let me feel it. They're very cultured people.

Jakub died in 2002, it's now going to be 3 years in August. My husband was very sick with his heart. He died and I didn't even know he was dead. He complained of headaches at night, and of stomachache. I suspected it must have been a serious heart attack, because I've heard that's what the symptoms are. And I finally called emergency rescue in the morning. The physician said that the stomach and the head were fine, but that the heart was very weak. And he barely left when my husband died. I didn't know that, of course, he was lying on his side, with his hand under his head. I thought he was asleep, because he couldn't sleep at night, so I thought: 'Maybe he's asleep.' But it seemed suspicious to me, I came up to him often, examined his forehead, his chest, it was all still warm. The doctor who finally arrived told me: 'Ma'am, your husband has been dead for several hours.' It's good that my son was there with me, because I don't know what would have happened. I started falling on the floor, but he held me up, the doctor gave me an injection, my daughter-in-law called a funeral corporation, they arrived, I couldn't bear to watch them take him. I still feel faint when I think about it. And I had to move him from that funeral home, because he's buried at the Jewish cemetery. There's a special funeral house there, different traditions. I had to move the body, pay some 300 zloty for having it moved. Well, you know, Jews are not buried in their clothing but in this special white shroud. You have to know how to make that. Now people are buried in regular caskets, but it used to be either on a board, or in a box made of boards. The Jewish community arranged for a very nice casket. This Mrs. Szyfman from the community, she ordered a wreath and she practically organized that funeral.

So my husband had a traditional burial. There was a rabbi [chairman of the Community Symcha Keller] and he spoke very nicely. First we said goodbye to him at this funeral parlor. The coffin was

there and the rabbi said something there as well, but I wasn't listening. Later, we went to the cemetery. My husband is quite far from the gate. There were quite a few people at the funeral. Even our daughter came from Canada. We waited especially for her. Because there is this custom in Jewish tradition that someone who dies should be buried the following day. So he should have been buried on Sunday, because he died on a Saturday, but the funeral was put off until Friday because of my daughter. Oh, how she cried. She really loved her daddy. His death was very hard on her. My son with his family also came, of course. My son held one of my arms and a friend of my husband's, Mr. Bromberg [the Centropa Foundation has also recorded an interview with Mr. Bromberg] the other. There were also those who read the obituary, because I placed one in 'Dziennik' [Dziennik Lodzki, one of the oldest newspapers in Lodz, published since 1884, cooperates with Wiadomosci Dnia]. I called some closer friends, all my daughter's friends came. Friends from university or from work. And later the rabbi asked my son if he would recite this prayer for the dead, the Kaddish. He didn't know it. He said that he wouldn't recite it, unfortunately, but there was this cantor there who sang it. But I had to give him 200 zloty for that. But the rabbi didn't even take a penny from me. A very pleasant man. I meet him sometimes when I go to the cemetery, he always talks to me, asks how I'm doing. I don't go there often now, because it's very difficult for me. I used to go with this special walker, it helped me get there. When I got tired, there is this seat there, so I could sit down.

This was a traditional burial, because such was my husband's wish. That's what he wanted. At the end of his life he only talked about this cemetery: 'Remember, I want to be buried at the Jewish cemetery, because at the Polish cemetery, after 20 years, if you don't pay, when you're not there, they'll pack someone else in there with me,' but at a Jewish cemetery they can't move anyone. If someone's been buried, he can lie there until the end of the world, he can't be touched. I don't know why [he said that], something must have appealed to him, he must have liked something about this tradition. And that's why I buried him there and I asked them to reserve a place for me somewhere close to my husband. We lived together for 57 years!

I can't say much about how the Community functions in Lodz, because I wasn't in touch with them. Well, when my husband died, they really helped me, they organized the entire funeral and I'm grateful for that. I wouldn't have been able to do it myself. And although I don't know them so well, I think there's a need for them in Lodz. I think some 200 Jews live here, so they'll always need some help.

I live alone now. But my apartment was always a two-family apartment. When I started living here, there was a common kitchen and bathroom, but later, I don't remember which year it was in, they renovated everything and now I have a separate kitchen and bathroom, so we only share the same hallway. It's difficult to say whether this is good or bad. Anyway, I don't see my neighbors often now. I don't go out. I wake up early in the morning, I wash, I get dressed. This man who takes care of me comes later, he folds my bed linen, because I can't carry it myself, he opens the curtains, because that's difficult too, you have to use a stick for that, he makes me breakfast, washes the dishes and leaves after breakfast. He later comes around 4 p.m and makes dinner for me, because I get my meals from the Kolbe Foundation, it's about Polish-German reconciliation ['Polsko-Niemieckie Pojednanie' - 'Polish-German Reconciliation' is a foundation created in 1991 by the government of the Federal Republic of Germany to, among other goals, help victims of nazi crimes] and he brings me the bed linen, so I have it ready for the night. I don't listen to the radio much,

only in the morning, when I get up. I prefer television. I usually watch the news. I solve crossword puzzles. Sometimes I read biographies, but I can't concentrate on them. I used to read serious books, but today it's mostly romances. With regards to newspapers, I only buy one on Saturdays – my neighbor brings me 'Dziennik Lodzki' and I get that mostly because of the TV guide. I don't have patience for newspapers. I used to be able to read a newspaper from cover to cover, now I don't have the patience.

I am completely alone, except for my children who contact me. But there's no one with me every day. And there no one who can help me. I only have one friend left now, but we only talk on the phone, because she walks on crutches as well and it's difficult for her to move about. Her name is Hania Stepniewska. She's Jewish, but she was in hiding in a village somewhere near Warsaw and she took her caretakers' Polish name. I think her family name is Goldman, but I don't know for sure.

My neighbors do my shopping, or this man who takes care of me every day. His brother used to live here on the 4th floor and he would visit him. And once we were in the hallway with my husband when he walked down. And because my husband really liked talking to people, he started talking to this brother, saying how difficult it is for us to clean the house and whether he could come and help us once a week. And he said he could. And he started coming. At first he used to come once a week. And now, since my husband died, he comes to me every day. Of course, I pay him for it, but he looks after me like after a mother, I tell you, he makes my dinners, he does everything. He always prepares something for the weekend. I wonder sometimes if he'll ever forget. But he never does: 'Ms. Helenka, what are we cooking today?', I say 'Don't bother, I'll eat something', 'No way, you have to have the strength to be healthy' and he cooks for me.

I have problems with moving about. I don't go down at all. I don't remember the last time I was out on the street. I am simply afraid. It's slippery. Even if someone holds me up, I'm still afraid. I went through too much after that accident, after breaking my leg. Because I had a serious accident in 1972. I got off the tram, not at a tram stop, but a bit earlier. Another tram was in front of our tram and I didn't want to wait. There were no mechanical doors then, you'd open them yourself. So, unfortunately, I stepped out right in front of a car. A small truck. It hit me. I broke my thigh bone. I remember this poor driver, how he was standing above me pale as a ghost, because he was afraid he had killed me.

There's always been anti-Semitism in Poland. I'm not afraid to say this. There always was, there is and probably there'll always be. Perhaps it's not expressed as much now, but it is a fact. Nobody likes us, I have to admit. I don't know why. What have we done wrong? Jews are usually not liked all over the world. They're cheaters, they're the worst kind of people. But why the heck is it so? Who did we hurt?

I only regret one thing in life – that I couldn't go to university and couldn't really achieve something. I was gifted in the humanities, I wrote poems, I thought perhaps I'd be a writer, but my life didn't let me do that. I now regret this very much. Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do now.

Even though I wasn't raised in a religious home, there were such moments in my life when I turned to God. Even now I do it sometimes when something is hurting me, I turn to God, so he'd help me. There's always something like this in you. I'm not really a believer, because I've never talked to anyone who had been there and has come back. But I instinctively feel there is some power which can help me. And in such moments I turn to it, but I don't know if It can hear me and if it listens.

## GLOSSARY:

**1 BUND - The short name of the General Jewish Union of Working People in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, Bund means Union in Yiddish)**

The Bund was a social democratic organization representing Jewish craftsmen from the Western areas of the Russian Empire. It was founded in Vilnius in 1897. In 1906 it joined the autonomous fraction of the Russian Social Democratic Working Party and took up a Menshevist position. After the Revolution of 1917 the organization split: one part was anti-Soviet power, while the other remained in the Bolsheviks' Russian Communist Party. In 1921 the Bund dissolved itself in the USSR, but continued to exist in other countries.

**2 Halizah - a custom connected with the duty of a man of marrying the widowed sister-in-law, if she is childless, in order to conceive children with her to 'rebuild the house' of the deceased brother**

In case of a refusal the halizah ceremony takes place, during which the widow takes the sandal of her brother-in-law and spits in front of him. Afterwards, she is free to marry someone else. Initially, the ceremony of the halizah was supposed to shame the brother, but is now a routine one, because levirate marriages (marriages with the childless widow of a deceased brother) are not permitted. The brother who has the duty of levirate is in Hebrew called Yabam (brother-in-law). When he refuses to fulfill the duty, he receives the name of halutz hah-naal - 'sandal-less, barefoot'. In the eyes of the followers of the Kaballah, a child born from such a union was the reincarnation of the dead brother, which assured the tikun (restoration) and the peace of his soul. The first male child of a levirate marriage was named after the deceased. This law is older than the law of Moses.

**3 Lodz Ghetto**

It was set up in February 1940 city in the former Jewish quarter on the northern outskirts of the city. 164,000 Jews from Lodz were packed together in a 4 sq. km. area. In 1941 and 1942, 38,500 more Jews were deported to the ghetto. In November 1941, 5,000 Roma were also deported to the ghetto from Burgenland province, Austria. The Jewish self-government, led by Mordechai Rumkowsky, sought to make the ghetto as productive as possible and to put as many inmates to work as he could. But not even this could prevent overcrowding and hunger or improve the inhuman living conditions. As a result of epidemics, shortages of fuel and food and insufficient sanitary conditions, about 43,500 people (21% of all the residents of the ghetto) died of undernourishment, cold and illness. The others were transported to death camps; only a very small number of them survived.

**4 Wielka szpera ['Great Curfew'] on 4th September 1942 the residents of the Lodz ghetto learned that according to an ordinance of the German authorities, all elders above 65 years of age and children below 10 years of age would be deported from the ghetto**

Chaim Mordechai Rumkowsky, head of the Council of Elders of the Lodz Ghetto, made his most famous speech then: '(...) In my old age I have to hold out my hands and beg: Brothers and Sisters,

give them away! Fathers and Mothers, give me your children!' On 5th September 1942 Rumkowski implemented a curfew (German Sperre - closing, blockade, curfew). The resettling committee began its work of preparing elders and children for deportation. The Jewish police, whose members were assured their children would not be deported, also participated in the action. Policemen with lists of names dragged children and old people out of their homes. Sick people were also searched for by teams of Jewish physicians and nurses. Small children were torn from the hands of desperate mothers, sick people were dragged out of their beds. At the time everyone was conscious that the fate of the deported would find its end in the death camp in Chelmno upon Ner.

## **5 Treblinka**

village in Poland's Mazovia region, site of two camps. The first was a penal labor camp, established in 1941 and operating until 1944. The second, known as Treblinka II, functioned in the period 1942-43 and was a death camp. Prisoners in the former worked in Treblinka II. In the second camp a ramp and a mock-up of a railway station were built, which prevented the victims from realizing what awaited them until just in front of the entrance to the gas chamber. The camp covered an area of 13.5 hectares. It was bounded by a 3-m high barbed wire fence interwoven densely with pine branches to screen what was going on inside. The whole process of exterminating a transport from arrival in the camp to removal of the corpses from the gas chamber took around 2 hours. Several transports arrived daily. In the 13 months of the extermination camp's existence the Germans gassed some 750,000-800,000 Jews. Those taken to Treblinka included Warsaw Jews during the Grossaktion [great liquidation campaign] in the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942. As well as Polish Jews, Jews from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Yugoslavia and the USSR were also killed in Treblinka. In the spring of 1943 the Germans gradually began to liquidate the camp. On 2 August 1943 an uprising broke out there with the aim of enabling some 200 people to escape. The majority died.

## **6 Konzentrationslager Lublin, KL Majdanek**

a German concentration and POW camp in Lublin, operating between 1941 and 1944. The proper name is KL Lublin, the commonly used name 'Majdanek' comes from the district of Lublin where the camp was located (Majdan Tatarski). The camp was constructed by Jews, POWs of the Polish army from 1939 and Soviet POWs. The camp consisted of 6 fields with prisoner barracks. In August 1942 the construction of gas chambers began and finished in October 1942. In total there were 5 gas chambers operating on gas introduced from gas bottles or Cyclone B granules. Some 300,000-360,000 went through the camp. 230,000 died, including approx. 100,000 Jews. The Germans began the evacuation of the camp on 17th July 1944. Even on July 22nd, the date of the liberation of Lublin, the Germans deported approx. 1000 prisoners, including women and children to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In 1944 the Polish National Liberation Committee (PKWN) in cooperation with the USSR created a Special Polish-Soviet Committee for the investigation of nazi crimes in Majdanek. The committee secured evidence and accused 6 perpetrators who were taken captive when the Germans were being pushed out of Lublin. The National Museum in Majdanek was created in the fall of 1944 in a section of the former concentration camp. This was the first institution of its type in the world.



## **7 Familienlager Theresienstadt, Getto Theresienstadt, less often Konzentrationslager Theresienstadt - a complex of two concentration camps created in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, in the town of Terezin, in an Austrian fortress from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries**

The complex consisted of a ghetto for Jews and a so-called transfer camp. Operated between 1941 and 1945. Theresienstadt ghetto was a place of martyrdom of Jews. At first the ghetto was planned as a place of detention for all famous Jews, who could be supported by foreign countries. The elite of Jewish cultural, political and scientific life were detained in the ghetto. Later transports of Jewish families started arriving at Theresienstadt mostly from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, but also from the Reich, the Netherlands, Denmark and in the last period also from Slovakia and Hungary. Over 140,000 people passed through Theresienstadt during the 4 years of the camp's existence. The death toll is estimated for 34-60,000. On 3rd May 1945 the camp became controlled by the Red Cross and on 8th May Soviet forces entered the city.

## **8 Polonization of Jewish first and last names**

the Polonization of first and last names in the 19th century was mostly an effect and a symptom of assimilation. Representatives of the so-called assimilatory trend changed their names or added a Polish element to the name. Later, this tendency was not restricted to the assimilatory circle. In the interwar period Jews often had two names: the Jewish name (in the Hebrew or Yiddish version): the official name, written down on the birth certificate and the Polish name, used in everyday contacts with Poles, but also among family. The story of the Polish-Jewish historian Schiper is an interesting case of the variety of names used by Polish Jews. Schiper published his works under three different names: Izaak, Icchak and Ignacy. After WWII many Jews who survived the Holocaust in hiding under false names never returned to their pre-war names. Legal regulations after the war enabled this procedure. Such a situation was caused by the lack of a feeling of security and post-war trauma, which showed itself in breaking off ties with one's group. Another reason for the Polonization of names after WWII was the pressure exerted by the communist authorities on Jews - members of the communist party and employed in the party apparatus.

## **9 Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR)**

communist party formed in Poland in December 1948 by the fusion of the PPR (Polish Workers' Party) and the PPS (Polish Socialist Party). Until 1989 it was the only party in the country; it held power, but was subordinate to the Soviet Union. After losing the elections in June 1989 it lost its monopoly. On 29th January 1990 the party was dissolved.

## **10 20th Party Congress of the CPSU**

14-25th February 1956 became a turning moment for the communist movement. Facing a harsh battle for power Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971, Soviet politician, party and state activist, 1st Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1953-1964 and the prime minister of the USSR in the period 1958-1964) presented a secret speech at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in which he condemned some of Stalin's crimes. The speech began the process of destalinization, which revealed Stalin's crimes and dramatically criticized the system he created. The process led

to the 'thaw' which included the entire Eastern Block and gave hope for deeper changes.

## **11 Gomulka Campaign**

a campaign to sack Jews employed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the army and the central administration. The trigger of this anti-Semitic campaign was the involvement of the Socialist Bloc countries on the Arab side in the Middle East conflict, in connection with which Moscow ordered purges in state institutions. On 19th June 1967, at a trade union congress, the then First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party [PZPR], Wladyslaw Gomulka, accused the Jews of lack of loyalty to the state and of publicly demonstrating their enthusiasm for Israel's victory in the Six-Day-War. This marked the start of purges among journalists and people of other creative professions. Poland also severed diplomatic relations with Israel. On 8th March 1968 there was a protest at Warsaw University. The Ministry of Internal Affairs responded by launching a press campaign and organizing mass demonstrations in factories and workplaces during which 'Zionists' and 'trouble-makers' were indicted and anti-Semitic and anti-intelligentsia slogans shouted. Following the events of March purges were also staged in all state institutions, from factories to universities, on criteria of nationality and race. 'Family liability' was also introduced (e.g. with respect to people whose spouses were Jewish). Jews were forced to emigrate. From 1968-1971 15,000-30,000 people left Poland. They were stripped of their citizenship and right of return.

## **12 Solidarity (NSZZ Solidarnosc)**

a social and political movement in Poland that opposed the authority of the PZPR. In its institutional form - the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union Solidarity (NSZZ Solidarnosc) - it emerged in August and September 1980 as a product of the turbulent national strikes. In that period trade union organization were being formed in all national enterprises and institutions; in all some 9-10 million people joined NSZZ Solidarnosc. Solidarity formulated a program of introducing fundamental changes to the system in Poland, and sought the fulfillment of its postulates by exerting various forms of pressure on the authorities: pickets in industrial enterprises and public buildings, street demonstrations, negotiations and propaganda. It was outlawed in 1982 following the introduction of Martial Law (on 13 December 1981), and until 1989 remained an underground organization, adopting the strategy of gradually building an alternative society and over time creating social institutions that would be independent of the PZPR (the long march). Solidarity was the most important opposition group that influenced the changes in the Polish political system in 1989.