

# Feliks Nieznanowski

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Warsaw

Poland

Interviewer: Joanna Fikus

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*Mr. Feliks Nieznanowski is a retired officer. He comes from a poor family that lived in the Old Town in Warsaw. The home was moderately religious, yet all the high holidays were observed, Sabbath was celebrated, and, as a little boy named Fiszl, Mr. Nieznanowski used to go with his father to the synagogue. Mr. Nieznanowski remembers perfectly well the excitement of his bar mitzvah. He vividly recalls pre-war Jewish Warsaw where he often wandered with his friends. He went to a Jewish school at 34 Swietojska Street that was under the official patronage of the Jewish Community of Warsaw (this is where the brushmaking shop was located where Marek Edelman fought during the ghetto uprising). Mr. Nieznanowski sang in the boy choir of the Great Synagogue at Tlomackie Street. He survived the war in the Soviet Union. We spoke in his apartment in downtown Warsaw. Mr. Nieznanowski has lived here for fifty-two years, and he remembers the time when the house was being built by German POWs.*



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## [My family history](#)

My father came from Wloszczowa [small town in central Poland, ca. 250 km south of Warsaw]. His name was Mychoel or Michal Nieznanowski. Poverty meant young people were eager to go to Warsaw. Father came to Warsaw as a young man and there he met my mother. I never met my paternal grandparents, I don't even remember their names. Dad told me Grandfather was a merchant, took wares from the city to the country, was a traveling salesman. But I never visited Wloszczowa, never met them.

My grandparents' children lived in Warsaw. You'd think it's one city, a dozen streets, and yet we weren't in touch [with my father's siblings]. Where they lived, those were Jewish houses, streets like Sapiezynska, Franciszkanska; people had lived there for years, lived together, were born together, died together. We lived completely out of the way, though it was very close [on Podwale

Street].

Most of my father's relatives were poor people – shoemakers, hired laborers. I knew some of them. I knew an uncle, Benjumen, who was a coal provider. He carried baskets 50 kilograms heavy, had a special pole for that and used it to lug those baskets to the upper floors. He lived in Warsaw, at 16 Mila Street. A terrible drunkard. It was hard for me because my father often took me to Uncle's. He worked hard and drank hard, and his kids were so skinny, uncared-for, such poverty. And my mother would never go there, it was beneath her dignity. There were such animosities at the time.

Another of my father's brothers lived on Smocza. He had a shoemaker's shop, I remember, in the basement. That was poverty. His name was Jankiel. I remember him – a young man, and there was a baby. Father often took me there.

There was one more uncle on Walowa Street. If you look at Muranowska, there was the Kercelak [pre-war Warsaw's largest open-air market], which was for the Poles, and for the Jews there was the Walowka [open-air market at Muranowski Square in the Jewish quarter]. And he sold second-hand clothes there.

My father's brothers were religious insofar that every Jew believed it was his duty to go to the synagogue to pray, that on a holiday, whether it was Sukkot or some other holiday, you had to participate in the service, but they weren't Orthodox [1](#), like that they wore payes, dressed in black, prayed. They kept kosher as much as they could. It seems to me they were too poor to keep kosher all the time, but I can't say that for sure. Officially, when we visited them, there was chulent, never any pork. On ordinary days you didn't eat meat but bread, oatmeal, potatoes. Meat was eaten in Jewish homes only on Saturdays and on holidays. There could be goose lard, or you bought chicken giblets.

My mother was Hadasa Gutman from Przysucha [small town in central Poland, 30 km west of Radom]. There was a large family on my mother's side, too: eleven children from Przysucha. They found themselves in Warsaw and their business was tanning, as that is what Jews did for a living in the Kielce region. I know that during World War I my mother's brothers, the Gutmans, made leather belts and ammunition pouches for the military, for the Russian army, as well as horse harnesses. They made a lot of money that way.

I never met my [maternal] grandfather; he died when I was a child. He was a shoemaker in Przysucha. I even visited the workshop once when I went to Przysucha. Grandmother's name was Rachele, or Ruchl. A petite woman, she wore a wig. Their children left Przysucha, came to Warsaw, and prospered quite well here. Hence there was the family disharmony – the Nieznanowskis were poor, and the Gutmans were richer. My mother's eldest brother, Uncle Jojne Gutman, lived at 5 Gesia Street, I think he had as many as five rooms there. He was a really wealthy man. I remember the following episode – I came with my father and they didn't let us into the rooms but received us in the kitchen, served a meal for us, the poor people, there. I always felt a sense of distance. There was no family idyll, as it is typical for Jews. My mother's brothers were religious, observed the kashrut.

There was one more uncle, Dawid, a saddler. He had a saddler's workshop, on 70 Dobra Street, corner of Tamka Street [in Warsaw]. When Grandmother Ruchl came from Przysucha to Warsaw, she stayed in Uncle Dawid's apartment. A family gathering would then take place there, everyone

came to visit Grandmother. I went there, too, and she'd lie in bed and treat us to figs and sweets. That's it, I really don't remember much. I didn't even speak much Yiddish then. I learned to speak Yiddish fluently only when I was seven or eight. I spoke with Grandmother using a mixture of Polish and Yiddish. She spoke Polish. She died before the war, in the apartment at Dobra Street.

Uncle Samuel was a middleman, a business matchmaker, had no specific profession. There was also a younger brother, Benjumen, who, during the Great Depression [2](#), in the 1930s, immigrated to Belgium to work as a coal miner. He returned to Poland in 1938. He got married, they lived on Bugaj Street. A tragedy befell them when, during the air raids in [September] 1939, a shrapnel killed their baby virtually in their arms.

There was also Perla, my mother's younger sister. She married a guy named Benjumen. He had a machine that weaved embroidered epaulets for the military I always admired it, the epaulettes were silver, golden. You could hear the machine clattering in the basement. They lived on Kupiecka Street, later known as Rabin Majzels Street, it was a pass-through house from Nalewki to Zamenhofa Street. The street is no longer there. [Following the 1943 uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, the Jewish quarter was razed to the ground by the Germans. The present street grid doesn't correspond to the pre-war one]. My mother was close with her sister, she visited her often. They were close because of their similar social status. I also remember an aunt who lived in a small wooden house on Wolynska Street.

My father was born in Wloszczowa in 1886. My mother was six years younger than him, born 1892. Dad could read and write Russian. I don't think he served in the Russian army. I remember no mention or photo to that effect. When he was growing up, they all saw there were no prospects of a better life there, so everyone was eager to move to Warsaw. In Warsaw, they hoped one would be helping the other, as befits a family. Poverty, misery was causing people to go to Warsaw those days. My mother worked in someone's business, sold ice cream, cakes, in Warsaw, on Chmielna near Zelazna, it was called 'Cakes and Ice-cream.' It wasn't a café, you bought and ate standing. I know from accounts that my father bought cakes there, and that's how they met. I don't know when precisely they married, but it was before 1909.

In 1909 my sister Pola was born. She went to the Jehudiya girls' school [public gymnasium for Jewish girls at Długa Street]. She was an excellent student. She fell in love with a boy from a very rich family. That family obviously forbade them to meet, and my sister tried to commit suicide. We had gas at home. She put that gas pipe into her mouth, swallowed a lot of it. She survived, but her brain had been irreversibly damaged. It was a family tragedy. She was put into the Jana Bozego hospital, at Sapiezynska Street, where the church stands [a mental institution]. I went there with my mother. The place was run by monks, at the back of the Jana Bozego church. There was a large room with beds, on those beds sat the patients. I remember they organized exhibitions of the patients' works there - painting, wood sculpture.

Later, when there was no one to pay the bills for her, I come home one day - and she was back. She stayed with us. But there were no proper conditions at home to keep her. She wasn't aggressive, rather catatonic. There was no contact with her at all, and we loved her very much. So after she had been brought back home, we made efforts and finally took her to Choroszcz. It is a small town near Bialystok [ca. 200 km south-east of Warsaw]. There was a mental facility there that took patients and placed them with wealthy peasants. They worked for them, and once a week

the peasant was obliged to take the patient for an examination to the hospital.

My brother was born in 1911. His name was Josif, or Jozef. He completed a business school. He worked as a salesclerk at a Jewish textile store on Nalewki Street. And besides working there, he got increasingly involved in political activity, contracted the disease of communism. He joined the KZMP [3](#), the communist youth organization. He received several sentences before the war, and by 1939 had spent four years in prison. The uncles didn't like that. It was that kind of family in which such things were unwelcome. They didn't like the fact that he was a communist, was in jail, that we sent him food packages, fatback.

There was the so-called Swietojerski trial: a communist organization had been detected that had its headquarters at Swietojerska Street [hence the name]. My brother was a defendant in that trial. He received a six-year prison sentence. He was one of the leaders. When he was in prison, obviously we had frequent visits from the police, they came to search the apartment. I also remember we had visits from the MOPR [4](#), an international organization helping prisoners of conscience. They brought food packages and we sent those packages to the prison, it was allowed, the prosecutor would give us permission. I myself went to visit him with my mother once. There was a prison, a transfer facility, at Danilowiczowska Street. So before he was sent from Warsaw to Rawicz [major prison in western Poland, 40 km north of Wroclaw], I was actually allowed to see him with my mother.

I was the youngest, born in 1926. I lived my own life, the life of a boy, a teenager. Our family was tried severely by fate. Hence my childhood wasn't like the other kids'. There was no emotional closeness, no everyday affection. My mother was an impulsive, go-ahead person, and my father was the one supposed to earn the daily bread, provide for the family, while my mother ran the house. There was the ill sister, there was the brother. Making ends meet was difficult. My father learned the craft of a gas worker. He worked for some time for the city gas works, but from the 1930s sackings of Jews began. Then he started working on his own.

There was gas lighting in Warsaw before the war, with the kind of glowing mesh; there were gas stoves. In a lamp, there's this glowing element, there are small holes supplying the gas, and if you light it, the mesh glows and produces light. Dad went from home to home and [asked], 'Do you need any repairs, a new mesh?' He also repaired gas stoves. A door-to-door salesman, you could say, he usually worked the Jewish homes. He had a bag, all kinds of tools in it, nuts and bolts, and he carried it with him. One day he'd bring something home, another one he'd bring nothing. Which means it was a really measly existence.

### **Jewish poverty before the war**

Before the Great Depression, I guess, my parents must have had some money because they paid for my sister's and brother's education. But then they became impoverished. I experienced the misery period, but when my sister and brother were studying, there had to be funds for that. There was a tradition in Jewish homes that first of all you had to educate your children. It needs to be said there were such ambitions but then there came impoverishment, stratification, Jewish families became numerous, with nothing to live on. I remember Jewish poverty very well - when you walked those streets [in the Jewish quarter], with no sewerage, everything flowing down the gutters. Crowds of children in the courtyards.

I myself seldom went to the Jewish quarter but in 1939 I found myself there because they were bombing the Old Town and we moved to Wolynska, that's when I saw the extreme poverty. The girls went on the street as prostitutes, the boys as thieves. On Jewish streets, Zamenhofa, Nowolipki, Smocza, Krochmalna, there were diners, cheap eateries. You could come, eat for pennies. The girls were always cruising around those busy places. That was the underworld, the demimonde, shady Jewish misery. There was a song that went like, 'It's raining on Smocza Street, don't buy cigarettes there because they're wet with rain.' I seldom went there, you never left your neighborhood in Warsaw those days. It wasn't like today, that you board a streetcar and go. A streetcar cost 20 groszy! That was a lot of money.

We lived at 18 Podwale Street. Where the Kilinski monument stands today, that's precisely where the 18 Podwale house stood. It was a Polish, Catholic neighborhood. There were also some Jews. There was a synagogue on Podwale, an Orthodox church, and a Catholic one, all on one street. Five of the tenants in our house were Jews - one had a shop selling coal, firewood, that sort of thing. Another had a dime store. They kept quarreling, and he pimped his daughters. One was a wheeler-dealer, a gigolo, the police kept canning him. In fact, there were few decent Jews there. Whereas on another street, Kapitulna, there lived a good friend of ours who was a glazier. A Jew with a long, white beard. But those were isolated cases. We had very good neighbors, friends, acquaintances among the Poles, the goyim.

A woman called Jadowska, for instance, cared for me because she didn't have small children of her own. She'd always hug me, I was her boy. She'd really pamper me, she'd say to me, 'Come, Felus [from Feliks], you're such a poor little boy!' She'd give me food, she was a close friend of my mother's. Later she started bringing food to the ghetto wall, after my parents had been sent there, she learned about that. She made those soups and at an agreed hour they picked them up from her through a hole on Bonifratska. We found her after the war, after I returned to Warsaw. She was an old lady, we wanted to take care of her, put her into a home, but she refused; she died in her apartment on Grzybowska. Her son was a policeman before the war, and, surprisingly, a friendly one, who always came to warn my brother: 'Józiek,' he'd say, 'don't sleep at home tonight, they're coming for you!' He stayed in England after the war, was afraid to go back to Poland.

## **Growing up**

I remember the house on Podwale Street - the entrance was from the gateway, up the stairs. Such apartments were usually originally designed for the janitor. You walked down a long windowless corridor, and then there was a single room. It could have had 16-20 square meters. All life went on in that single room and a dark kitchen. When I brought the bean sprout from school to grow it, it never grew. There was another wall a meter from the window and there was never any sun in the apartment. When later they told me I had the English disease [rickets], I explained it to myself that it was obviously the result of the conditions in which we had grown up. But my sister was buxom, normal. I wasn't very tall, and my brother had the English disease [too]. There was a coal stove, water outside, an outhouse, and I remember, they bathed me in a washtub. There was gas lighting.

As my parents lived all that time in the Polish quarter, they spoke fluent Polish. They had no Jewish accent. At home they spoke Yiddish between themselves and Polish to me. But they weren't people for whom the idea of being Jewish, of Yiddishkeit, was an important one. The kashrut wasn't observed. True, I remember that on Saturday there was always fish and candles. My father's

religiousness was authentic, not fanatical. Sure, he observed all the rules, he participated in the service, but there was no fanaticism. On Sabbath he always went to the synagogue and took me with him. There was food and drinks, and then they debated. My father always participated in this. Some subject would be proposed and then they would analyze, discuss it from various angles. It always went according to that model: first the questions, then the answers to those questions. I sat and listened to all that. You didn't talk about politics in the synagogue, like you did on a walk in the Krasinski Gardens, but about various issues of religious nature. What happens if your wife is unfaithful to you, what happens if your wife doesn't observe the kashrut, that sort of thing. I understood perfectly well what they talked about, what I didn't understand was why they discussed it in such detail. After all, those were often purely theoretical deliberations.

I know you did shopping at Swietojska Street, there was a covered market there, where the Industrial Design Institute building stands today. We went there, my mother bought giblets, goose stomachs and other stuff. I often accompanied her there. The Swietojska markets resembled the Koszyki ones [major brick covered market at Koszykowa Street in downtown Warsaw]. There was a vegetable section, there were stalls selling poultry, fish. There was also a ritual slaughterhouse, where they ritually slaughtered the chicken right on the spot. That was quite an experience - you brought a live chicken and the shochet, praying, slaughtered it. The market wasn't only Jewish but also Polish, a mixed one. My mother didn't buy vegetables there, for vegetables we went to Mariensztat [a district in Warsaw]. The poor peasants from around Warsaw came there, stood behind long tables and traded whatever they had - cottage cheese, dairy products, vegetables.

For winter you bought potatoes. Before my mother bought the potatoes for winter, she took one potato each from ten different peasants and boiled each of those to see whether they were tender enough. Then she returned and the peasant brought a sack or two of potatoes right to your home and didn't charge anything extra for that. Mother kept them in the cellar, as she did cabbage. Buns or marmalade for everyday use you bought in the local grocery.

Easter holidays, Pesach. The bustle had already begun, the preparations were under way. Mother was sweeping dust from all the corners, a general clean-up. Guys went around with cauldrons with hot water for scalding dishes, and my mother used that. There was only a single set of dishes because of that scalding [koshering, the everyday set could be used for Pesach]. And then the long-awaited Seder evening came. I remember it to this day. Firstly, I learned the Haggadah and answered the four questions that my father asked of me. It has stuck in my mind that an extra place would be set at the table and the door would be left slightly ajar. I'd ask, 'Why?' Because if it's left open, Messiah will come. That was fun for a kid. There was matzah, and I remember I'd make an exchange with the boys - they'd give me bread, I'd give them matzah. Felek, bring us some matzah! When our neighbors celebrated Easter, I visited them, too. Pesach was an opportunity for family meetings. If for weeks people didn't have time, didn't meet each other, everyone busy taking care of their business, for Pesach they always paid each other visits.

Another holiday - Chanukkah. That was a really big event for me, the lighting of the candles. Besides, the volunteers from the community council would come and bring us all kinds of gifts - sweets, tangerines, oranges, various kinds of cakes. There were packages and there were also fruit baskets. I guess they visited all the Jewish schools with those gifts. I remember how there was more and more candles. Dad lighted them. Later I learned to sing and I sang songs by those candles. Father and I would play various games, we'd dreydelekh, we'd play spinning top. On each

side of the top there was a different letter.

At Chanukkah there was also the tree. I remember as if it were today – you brought an evergreen tree from somewhere and decorated it. That was fun! You placed the tree, hung apples, candy on it. I went to visit my friends, there was a tree there, they came to visit me – ‘Look, Felek has a tree, too!’ There was no knowledge of tradition in all that, I learned only later what Chanukkah was all about, what it meant. But in the beginning it was – these guys profess this, those guys profess that. For a Jew, for instance, to go to a church and see the cross, is a horrible thing – the cross! For us, that didn’t matter. I mean, there was no cross at home, you burned the candles. There were two candlesticks and my mother always placed them on white tablecloth. But there was nothing to emphasize that it was a Jewish home, like in some places where you saw all those paintings of old Jews on the walls, the kind of family portraits. There was nothing of the sort.

Then I remember Purim, the shows. That was a major experience, as even my mother helped me prepare some costumes, decorations, and there were Purim shows at school. There was an orphanage at Sapiezynska Street, and our school had it for its partner. We went with a musical show there, to that orphanage.

I remember Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Father would reserve seats in the synagogue for himself and my mother, and we’d participate in the service. Usually the seats weren’t numbered, but on feast days everyone had their seat and I participated in this. I remember as if it was today, it was 14 Długa Street. At the corner of Kilinskiego and Długa was the Rena movie theater, and on the other side the Mucha theater, and there stood the synagogue. It was a great experience for me – the singing, the shofar playing, the chest beating.

I didn’t really understand everything, but later, when I went to school, I understood that what really united all Jews was those two days. They are crucial. Because the other festivals, they are kind of remembrance stories, whereas here it was a direct experience. I didn’t understand where I had sinned, what my sins were, but I saw how strong an experience it was for others, the self-flagellation, extreme self-criticism. Father fasted on Yom Kippur, spent the whole day in synagogue. And when I was still a little boy, I remember Father would put a few cookies into his pocket, I’d stand in the synagogue, take out a cookie and eat it. It was a genuine fast for the whole day, there was no question of eating anything.

There were no sukkot in our courtyard. They wouldn’t put one in Podwale for sure because it wouldn’t have survived – the gamins threw stones, cats etc. We went to Wolynska Street, where Aunt lived, and to Kupiecka Street for that. A sukkah was built there, but we didn’t go there each day because it’s quite a long way from Kozla to Wolynska. But I remember we also went to other places for Sukkot. That was also an experience for me. I thought, ‘Why do they make those shelters with planks, with boards, and the roof is covered with branches and leaves?’ The sun shone through, and if it rained, the rain trickled on your head. Later I found out what it was all about. I remember, I was moved because the boys, the gamins threw stones, made fun of it. That wasn’t anti-Semitism as such but only a desire to deride, to gibe.

There was no profound, traditional celebrating of the holidays, typical for small towns, for people who went to the cheder, the yeshivah. It was a middle-class, urban audience, not always educated, but open-minded. It identified with its Jewishness, but didn’t emphasize it with either looks, behavior, or accent. That’s why everyone later always wondered, ‘Your Polish somehow sounds so

normal?’ It sounded so because I lived in that community. I only felt Jewish after I crossed Franciszkanska, Nalewki, Nowiniarska. But when I walked down Podwale, around the Old Town – no, that Jewishness wasn’t so laid out into the open.

Dad was apolitical. He’d always ask himself: ‘Is it good for Jews or is it bad for Jews?’ It wasn’t important for him whether it was these guys or those guys. He knew that if something wasn’t good for Jews, then no way. He never joined any political party, but he liked to speak out. Well, a national trait. He liked to discuss politics, and I kind of caught the bug from him. There was a path in the Krasinski Gardens where Jews gathered and deliberated over global politics. There were like twenty parties there and they argued. Something like Hyde Park, but more interesting to look at. And father took me there. I saw that every each one of them, whether he knew or he didn’t, one had read something, the other had heard something, another had just been released from prison and found out, and all those bits of wisdom cumulated in that pathway in the Krasinski Gardens. To this day when I’m walking there I remember it as if it was today. It leads from the Krasinski Palace, diagonally, on the left side, a drinking pump stands on it. It’s there.

My father read the Haint [5](#). He also read the Bund newspaper Volkszeitung [6](#). He politicized – on the global situation, the Bolsheviks’ role [7](#), America’s role. He didn’t think about leaving Poland. There was a Keren Kayemet [8](#) box at home. It was sealed. An official came, opened it, took the money out, and sealed it again. He wrote on a piece of paper how much money he took.

A cousin from my mother’s side came to us from Przysucha, I don’t remember his name. He was staying with us and said I was growing up like an antichrist [sic] – neither was I being raised like a Jew, nor did I know anything. I was running with the boys both to the synagogue and to the church. You went to the church because the priest could give you something, an apple or a cake. You know, just like kids who have nothing to do. You didn’t go to the mass but only to visit. And so they started turning me into a Jew by force. The cousin convinced my parents and gave them money to pay for a rabbi to come everyday and teach me – alef, bet, gimel, and so on [Editor’s note: most likely a melamed came, not a rabbi]. He gave me assignments. And if I failed to do the homework, he slapped me on the hands with a ruler or the pencil case. He was an authority figure.

My parents certainly didn’t pay for this, as they wouldn’t have been able to afford it. They gradually started turning me into a Jew. Fortunately, I was circumcised, that’s what was left of my Jewishness. I spoke Polish with my parents. I understood Yiddish but couldn’t speak it. I was familiar with it. I heard my father speak it in various situations, like during the Krasinski Gardens debates. You rubbed against it, whether you wanted it or not. But it wasn’t a language I spoke every day.

I went to school when I was seven. I went to elementary school, it was a school operated by the Jewish Community of Warsaw. My parents fixed it so that I found myself there. There were several such schools in Warsaw, run by the Jewish Community. I don’t know where the others were, though. It was supervised by the municipal school inspector, but also by the Jewish community. There were also other schools, private ones. I should have gone to a Polish elementary school at 1 Podwale Street. That was school number 1, it was my district. But they decided I’d go to a Jewish school. It wasn’t a coeducational school, there were only boys, I remember. The curriculum was the same as in a Polish school, but also Yiddish, later Hebrew, then we started studying Rashi [9](#), the Tannakh, and slowly, slowly, I was deepening my knowledge about things Jewish, becoming a Jew.



I remember that in the beginning they saw me off to Swietojska Street, and later I walked myself, it was close. My mother escorted me when I was in the first and second grades, and later I had already grown into an urchin, a smart boy, so there was no need to escort me. School was free of charge. That was an advantage, that they didn't have to pay for me. At school I never talked about my brother, that would have been inappropriate, such things were unwelcome. Neither about my sister. Home was taboo, a private matter. It was our family's tragedy.

I remember neither the headmaster's [nor my] home-room teacher's name. There were seven grades. The school was in the third courtyard. There were three courtyards [at Swietojska 34], and the school occupied an entire floor. The windows faced the junction of Walowa and Swietojska. That's where the brushmakers' shops [10](#) stood during the war. They searched for the Ringelblum archive [11](#) there, but found nothing. The Chinese embassy stands there today.

The school was on the third floor. A typical class had twenty-odd to thirty students. It suddenly became terribly important to me, and I was impressed, because every student had to have a satin uniform and a white collar. You had to adapt and I was sort of uncouth, coarse, and suddenly I found myself inside that school rhythm of things. But I liked it. I was terribly determined to present myself favorably to the teachers. They didn't have to drive me to study. I did my homework so eagerly. Gradually they came to like me, told the other kids, 'Look at Felek, he doesn't have the conditions you have, you live in luxury, and yet you refuse to study, follow his example!' And because of that poverty, that misery, I started understanding things. All the students were Jewish, and they came from various backgrounds. I remember that every day we were given milk and a bun with marmalade. Every student got that. And the boys from the more well-off families brought sandwiches and shared with others. I was a good student so they'd invite me home to do homework together. There was always something to eat there, those were Jewish homes, well-off - something I never had at home.

The school wasn't just about going through the basic curriculum. The curriculum was rather packed. Besides the usual subjects, there were also the Jewish courses to go through, and they were treated as seriously as the others. So there was quite a lot of tension, a lot of homework to do. And, I remember it very well, the teachers were rather ambitious and were determined not to leave anyone behind. There were all kinds of jokes, and yet we disciplined each other. At the music lesson, we liked to make fun - the teacher came, played the violin... You know, like kids.

But how much that school gave us besides the formal education - it broadened our horizons! We visited the Belvedere [Belvedere Palace in Warsaw, official residence of Marshal Jozef Pilsudski until his death in 1935], the Royal Castle, which we saw like five times, the Okecie airport - they took us to all the important places by bus, by streetcar. The whole class went under the teacher's direction. It seems to me that school gave me much more than just the formal education, it introduced us to the world at large. They took us to the technical workshops, showed how young people studied there.

It was mine and my parents' dream that upon completing elementary school I'd go to a vocational school to learn the trade of a metal worker, a turner, or something like that. That would have been the greatest distinction [achievement]. I must say the teachers had a dialogue with the pupils. There was no drill like, 'You must obey and either you recognize my authority, or it's goodbye.' The atmosphere was friendly. I remember inspections from the Jewish Community and from the

municipal board of education, because the school must have been financed by both. And they were always satisfied with what they saw.

The school educated Polish-Jewish patriots. Polish Jews. There were no divisions like that you are Hashomer Hatzair [12](#), and you are something else. We spoke Polish and Yiddish at school. But mostly Polish. The lessons were also in Polish – math, physics, geography. And if it was a Jewish subject, then you spoke Yiddish. It wasn't a talmudic school, there was no memorizing. On Saturday and Sunday there was no school. They said it was a goy school, because there were no Chassids there, no Orthodox students.

There was a music teacher at school, Ajzensztadt [13](#). He was the father of Marysia Ajzensztadt, the nightingale of the Warsaw ghetto. A robust man, six feet tall, with a bit of a gut, he sported a small beard. Dignified. He wore a black hat, but otherwise dressed secularly. He was the conductor of the synagogue choir and was always on the lookout for talented boys, also from other schools. He probably also taught at other schools. I don't know where he lived, that was too high society for me. He was nervous, he conducted passionately. Had assistants in the choir, but for synagogue service he conducted himself. He was respected, the second most important person after the chazzan.

It was a stroke of luck – your voice usually cracks at this age – that I was chosen to sing in the synagogue choir. I remember they bought me a uniform of sorts – either the community or the synagogue. It was a great honor that someone like me sings in the choir, where Kusewicksi [14](#) sings, the famous one, and look, our Felek, our Fiszl, also sings in it! I remember vividly how they came to the synagogue by limousine, by car, by carriage, I said, 'Damn, it's Saturday, a holiday, and here they are in a car!' Well, yes, but it was his chauffeur driving, not him. The great bankers, industrialists, each had his private seat in the synagogue, their uniformed coachmen.

That was a very outstanding episode in my life. But the most interesting thing was that when the production started of The Dibbuk [15](#), the movie according to An-ski [16](#), the Ajzensztadt choir was asked to perform in it. I saw the film once, couldn't see myself, but I was there! I even remember what I sang there – Shir ha-shirim, the Song of Songs! In the synagogue, there was a gallery, the gods like in the church where the pipe organ is located. We stood there, you went up the stairs from the back. We only sang on Saturdays and the high holidays, not every day. The rehearsals took place at the back, where the ZIH [17](#) is located today. There was a press club [18](#) there, and the rehearsals took place in a room. I sang there for a year and a half perhaps, from 1937/1938 to 1939. That was in the final grade, and the whole thing raised my position, that honor, despite all those misfortunes.

There was also this geography and chemistry teacher, she lived on Panska Street, her name was Gienia [from Genowefa], I don't remember her last name. She'd take me home and I'd help her review the younger grades' notebooks. How great a distinction it was for me! She took me, a student, to her home, and I browsed through the notebooks and she gave the marks! She was making me proud. Whereas I never saw any interest from school in the students' family situation. There was a situation once where some teacher took me by the ear and half-tore it. I remember, my mother came to school and made a great fuss about how it was possible, to half-tear a child's ear?! But the whole thing settled down quickly.

There were always celebrations at school of the traditional holidays and anniversaries. There were celebrations on the 11th of November [19](#), on Marshal Pilsudski's [20](#) birthday, all that you had in a normal school, plus Jewish holidays. Lag Ba'omer, excursions in the summer. We went for excursions to Wawer [summer resort near Warsaw], to the woods, to Otwock [summer resort near Warsaw]. A narrow-gauge train went there, and we'd go on that train to Otwock with a teacher who taught natural science. The natural science course included things such as practical topography, the art of recognizing trees, leaf collecting, and so on. I had, I remember, a very nice collection of leaves in a large album, the herbarium. Dried.

To play truant we went to the Krasinski Gardens. 34 Swietojska Street was opposite the park, so we often fled from school to the park. We played, gradually started talking with the girls. Krasiniak [Krasinski Gardens] was a community of the Jewish youth. You know how young people are - we liked to make excursions to the Krasinski Gardens, it was the closest place. There were no sanctions for truancy. We went there for the day's last lesson, or if a teacher had called in sick. I had many friends - Heniek, for instance, lived at 14 Nowiniarska Street, near the Forum movie theatre. Heniek's was a wealthy home - nice furniture, the table always set, cookies, sweets on the table. It was a different home than mine. I also had girl friends - I remember Rozia from the Old Town, her father had a siphon bottle-filling business.

I was nine or ten years old when I became interested in Hashomer Hatzair, but my family didn't like it, because they didn't like me coming home late. Why Hashomer Hatzair? Because it offered a lot of fun. There were various sections - for the adolescents, for schoolchildren. But no politicking. The purpose was to shape people. I knew a few girls who were members, they persuaded me to go. Those were girls I knew from the Krasinski Gardens. There were age groups, I was in the youngest one. They hinted it was about educating the future elites, that there'd be a Jewish state. We knew about it from history.

There were instructors. First some casual-style lecturing, then we'd play. It was like scouting. Excursions were organized, things that young people find impressive. For instance, swimming lessons. There were covered swimming pools on the Vistula with wooden floors, designed so that the water gradually got deeper and deeper. Those were commercial, private-owned swimming pools - Polish, Jewish. Cafes with tables on jetties, water in between. They took us there, and I learned to swim. The Vistula itself was dangerous, unregulated. That was under the auspices of Maccabi [21](#).

My family poverty didn't prevent me from becoming more and more deeply involved. Even if any membership fees were charged [by Hashomer Hatzair], they were minimal. I wouldn't have had the money to pay. Instructors came, elder people, already trained. It was them who took us to the kibbutzim in Grochow [part of right-bank Warsaw], showed us: 'Look, those are the people who'll be building the state!' There were kibbutzim in the Goclaw area, on Grochowska Street. We went there to meet young people preparing for aliyah to Israel [then Palestine]. I remember as if it was today. They had milking cows there, cultivated the land, grew vegetables. There were houses, dormitories, in which young people lived - not only from Warsaw, I guess, but from all kinds of places. They lived in military barracks-like conditions. The land must have been leased, and they cultivated it. They sold the produce and that's how they earned their living. The main idea was for them to learn, to prepare Jews for working as farmers. They had instructors and they were being trained to become conscious farmers. I remember, when we came, they laid various kinds of fruit

out on tables – their produce. It was their pride, that they had grown it all themselves.

Jewish football teams – Maccabi, Ha-Poel [22](#) – often played on the Polonia [leading Warsaw sports club] stadium at Konwiktorska Street, either against themselves or against Polish teams. Polish and Jewish fans would always fight. You actually went there with the thought that there'd be a fight. We were the aggressive ones. We'd force our way to the field through a hole in the fence, and one time I got through and suddenly a policeman hit me with a club on the back! I came home, my back was all black. Mother applied compresses, moaned, 'And why did you go there, why do you go there at all?'

We played war, we played tipcat. It's a game – you have a piece of wood, pointed at the ends. You hold a long stick, like a bat. You throw the piece of wood and strike it with the bat, and it flies. There are goals, and the closer it gets to the goal, the better. There are two teams, it's a bit like cricket. On Broni Square, where there was later a bus depot and a circus called the Barrel of Fun, we played rag-ball football. Such were our games. Earlier, I had a stove lid on a rod and ran with it, rolling the lid in front of me. In winter time, we made ourselves a sled with the other boys – two planks nailed down together, and when you went sledding head on down the slope at Mostowa Street, you got right to the Vistula bank! My dream was to have a bike. I never had one. There were velodromes [cycling tracks] in Jewish courtyards before the war. I saw kids ice-skating, but roller skates – that I never saw during my childhood.

I played with both Jewish and Polish kids. There was no division on Podwale. Problems would only arise if a stranger entered our turf. The neighborhoods had a strong sense of territorialism. But it wasn't like, 'Look, a Jew, let's give him a beating!' He was a friend, a homeboy. Parents didn't react either that, 'Oh, this Felek is a Jew but goes to the church for fun.'

There was an Orthodox church on Podwale. I lived 18 Podwale, and opposite, at 17 Podwale, near the palace, stood that church. I liked to go there because they sang nicely. At the corner of Podwale and Kapitulna streets was a restaurant, officers, merry, arrived with girls in hackneys.

I went to the movies, there was a cinema on Długa Street, it cost 25 groszy. You raised the funds by selling bottles you collected in the gateways – and you went to the movies. You often sneaked in for free if the usher wasn't looking. And when you were inside, you could sit there for hours because the movies played one after another. I loved to watch them, film fascinated me. I remember I was watching a movie called 'In the Year 2000' [USA, 1912, directed by Alice Guy], and there people fly like angels. And I thought, 'God, will I ever live to see the year 2000?' And when it came, I remembered that moment – I dreamed about it and I've lived to see it! They fly! Helicopters, they fly into space, and for me it was something unimaginable! There was Tarzan ['Tarzan and His Mate,' USA, 1934, directed by Cedric Gibbons and Jack Conway].

There were ship cruises to Młociny [Warsaw suburb, popular Sunday picnic destination before the war]. It often happened we sneaked in on board and got as far as Młociny, and from there, by the streetcar number 15, from Bielany, back to town. I was a terrible urchin! That's how I lived. I had no sense of fear, of being afraid of anything. I felt my blood boiling when the Germans entered and I saw what they were doing, how they were catching the Jew, cutting his beard off with scissors, how the Jew jumped from the Kierbedzia bridge into the Vistula.

When Pilsudski died [in 1935], I saw him six times [on the catafalque in the St. John Cathedral in the Old Town] before a queue had accumulated, as it was close to home. Before Poland found out, I was already making the turn, as you went around the catafalque there. All kinds of events, if something was happening on Pilsudskiego Square, I was immediately there, say, a military band marching. I knew all the Legion [23](#) songs in Polish. There were also Yiddish songs they sang on the street, and I'd catch hold of them, too. Or the so-called courtyard artists came, they also sang in Yiddish. But they seldom came to us because it wasn't a Jewish neighborhood.

The Vistula was a navigable river, all kinds of goods were rafted down the river on barges, from Cracow, through Warsaw, to Gdansk. In the fall, they brought apples and other farming produce from the south of Poland. Those barges would moor to the shore, Jews would come to trade, and you could buy apples, grain cheaply. The barges were called 'galars.' Life teemed on Powisle, Rymarska, Mariensztat, it was the poor neighborhood inhabited by Jews. The Vistula was nearby, you went to pick chestnuts to the Citadel [large military facility just north of Old Town/New Town, built by the Russians as symbol of their rule following the failed January Uprising of 1863], that was my neighborhood. I remember how the guards once caught me picking the chestnuts. Entry was forbidden, it was a military area. And we went there in a large bunch, all homeboys from the Old Town. We got a good whipping and then you had to broom the place. They gave us brushes, brooms. How did you get in here?!

We, the Old Town kids, also had our own garden plots. Mrs. Moscicka, the First Lady, allotted some land at Bugaj Street near the Vistula, and every child got a plot two meters by one. You seeded flowers there, bluebottles, that sort of thing. I remember, she'd come with a servant, he carried a basket with candy, all kinds of sweets. Handed it out to the children, you kissed her on the hand, the moment has stuck in my mind. She was accompanied by no bodyguards, as would be typical these days, she came just like that, it was just a short stroll to go down from the Castle to Bugaj. Or, I remember, they placed in the Old Town - a Christmas tree! How great fun! That was my childhood.

I never went anywhere with my parents, except to visit some relatives. Nor did we ever go out of town. There was no money. I once went with my brother to Przysucha, that must have been before 1935. There I saw a Jewish town - the market square, the small houses, a shtetl. And a church. Then Grandmother took us to the priest, we were allowed to go to the orchard, pick some fruit. But later that was a highly anti-Semitic area, the worst pogroms took place there [24](#). But before the war it was very, very poor.

I remember Grandmother's house. There was a sewer besides, a gutter, it smelled. And low, two-story wooden huts. She lived in one like that. I also remember there was a bakery nearby and you could smell the aroma of freshly baked bread and buns. Grandfather's shoemaking workshop was there. All the Gutmans [Mr. Nieznanowski's distaff-side relatives] came from Przysucha. She lived there, but the workshop was no longer there. They all knew each other. When Grandma walked with me down the street, she was proud she had a grandson like that, from Warsaw. She dressed the traditional way. Everyone greeted her, 'Hello, how are you,' very polite.

What has also stuck in my mind is that there was that bench, and on it sat people. So I ask, 'Who are those people, why do they sit on this bench?' Because, they tell me, they have been punished, have been sentenced for various petty offences to sit on this bench for three hours a day, and for

everyone to know they've done something bad. It was a form of punishment. To this day I remember that bench on the market square in Przysucha. It was for petty offences – someone has stolen an egg, someone else has snatched a pale from the fence. It was surely the town council that dealt out the sentences. A dunce's bench of sorts. [Editor's note: there remains to this day in the wall of the Przysucha synagogue a 'marten,' i.e. a metal hoop on a chain into which an offender was clenched for a period of time by order of the kahal court as object of ridicule. The bench, in turn, was a popular punishment for petty offences in rural Poland. Perhaps Mr. Nieznanowski combined the two facts. The existence of a 'dunce's bench' in Przysucha has not been confirmed.]

Grandmother had to speak to me Yiddish then. But she knew Polish, too. Those were mixed communities, and Jews in those towns knew Polish. They had an accent but spoke Polish. Grandmother, though religious, was a cultivated person. She never alienated herself, never backbit her neighbors. The relations were different. The antagonisms were later artificially fuelled, especially through envy, that Jews have it better, that they sponge on us, and, worst of all, that they have murdered Christ. That was poisoning thoughts and minds. Everything is alright, they are okay, but they are the Christ murderers.

We knew that stores were being demolished, but not in our area [25](#). That Jewish stores were being attacked, that there had been a pogrom in Przytyk – that we knew, that was being talked about. I was already a smart-aleck, I remember, I said, 'But on Miodowa they didn't touch a single Jewish store!' And on Miodowa Street was one fur store after another. The most expensive fur stores. The police always stood there, nothing could happen. But a poor shop, a nickel-and-dime, a shoemaker, that they'd attack, throw stones. Only we didn't really feel it because we had no business of our own, and among the residents such things didn't happen. I'd actually say there was no barrier at all.

In 1937 we moved to 11 Kozla Street, which was close to Franciszkanska Street, and that was the ghetto border. There everything was pulling me more and more deeply into Jewishness, I had it close to school. My parents had decided to move because the Podwale place was too expensive. They couldn't afford it. They searched, searched, and found the Kozla place. The house, its old part, has survived. I go there often. They found one room, no kitchen, on the first floor. A kitchen was set up behind a curtain, and there only lived the three of us in that room, as my brother was in jail, my sister in Choroszcz, in the hospital. When my brother wasn't in jail, he lived with us, he didn't start a family.

As I approached the age of 13 [in 1939], preparations started for my bar mitzvah. I remember, they wrote me the – it's called the drush, a speech, I was supposed to deliver it. The ceremony took place in the synagogue on Nalewki, I guess it was 24 Nalewki Street. It was a large synagogue. Our synagogue was at 24 or 28 Podwale Street, but my bar mitzvah took place at the Nalewki one. They gave me the tefilin, everything. You had to prepare a drush, a speech. A rabbi came, sent by someone, I guess, to prepare me. He gave me the theses, and I was supposed to write an essay about them. A 20-minute speech. He suggested corrections. It was like writing an essay at school. A major experience, and the worst thing was that I was supposed to make the speech in public. I had performed in school bands, in front of children, but to be in the synagogue, in front of an audience of a hundred or more, to stand on the bimah where they'll be reading the Torah and then I am to deliver a speech – that was inconceivable!

I long tried to persuade my father that I'd make the speech ten times at home, but not there! Until the last moment. But they just kept explaining to me 'Look, it will be the greatest honor of all!' And so I had the drush. Such great satisfaction! So many paeans, praises! It wasn't the kind of bar mitzvah you're likely to see today, 200-300 people, gifts and all, no! It was a purely religious, ideological ceremony to indicate that a boy has grown up enough to be a man. Something in this spirit.

I delivered the drush in Hebrew, very clearly, with proper articulation. I felt very important then, as if I was the chazzan. I felt like one! When they also read Torah fragments to me, it was... And the second part, the merriest one - though we were poor - but when I returned home, the table was all set and all uncles had gathered, both from my mother's and my father's sides, with wives, kids. I don't know, perhaps 15 people, that was a lot those days. I repeated the drush, I had it written on a piece of paper, kept it as a holy relic at home. Did Mom prepare a party! There was lokshen with yoych [noodles with chicken soup], then fish, and then the sweets. It was an event of great rank and great importance, they were saying everywhere, 'Oh, this Fiszl, this Felek will grow up to be a goen [Yiddish for 'genius']'. The uncles had acquired another Jew! It hadn't been clear what he would grow up to be, and look, he has grown up to be a Jew! Already an educated one, Hebrew-speaking.

Before the war I attended perhaps two funerals. It must have been some relatives. I remember us walking to the cemetery at Gesia. Members of my family were buried at Gesia, at the Praga one it was mostly Jews from Praga, poor ones, and our cemetery was there [26](#). Whose funeral was it? I can't recall. I only remember everything was clad in black. I remember the crying, there were special weepers that you hired for such occasions. Later, in the cemetery, I asked questions, and they told me - that you bury the person in a shroud, that there is an ablution, the washing of the body, the ritual, but I didn't see that directly. It never happened in the family, close. I asked why do you place them facing the east. I had such thoughts. But those are only episodes in my mind. I remember that, after some relative had died and we were in their home, everyone sat with their shoes off. You sat [shivah] for seven days. But when you are 10-11 years old, you pay little attention to such things. What has stuck in my mind instead are the merry things, the pleasant memories.

### During the war

On 1st September 1939 [27](#), when the Germans started bombing Warsaw, my first thought was, 'Hey, I'm not going to school today!' I should have been starting seventh grade. I walked there two days later, one of the wings had been bombed, and there was no school anymore. I never turned up at Swietojerska again. We lost touch also with the rest of the family, except for spending some time on Wolynska at my maternal aunt's, I don't remember her name, she lived in a wooden house. Wolynska was all wooden houses. Two-story wooden houses.

When the war broke out, my brother was in jail, in Kalisz [town ca. 200 km south-west of Warsaw]. They already knew air raids had started, and the guards fled, leaving all documents laid out in the open on the central courtyard. The criminal prisoners started forcing the bars open. When they broke out in one place, they started freeing each other. And they freed themselves. The first thing they did was to pour gasoline on those documents and set them on fire, lest the Germans find them. And the flight from Kalisz began. We didn't know what was happening to Josif. Three days

after the Germans marched into Warsaw – which was around 30th September [the Germans indeed marched into Warsaw on 30th September, 1939, and on 1st October a military parade was held on the city’s central square, the Pilsudskiego Square] – there was a night curfew, suddenly there’s knocking on the window! We open the door – my brother walks in! Unshaven, scrawny, hands in bandages. As if he had been resurrected from the dead.

We found out they had been negotiating their way towards Warsaw during the whole of September but as long as the Germans stood around the city, they couldn’t enter. On their way, the fugitives split into groups. The criminals did well, and the political ones – everyone pulled in their own direction. There were many Ukrainians, Belarusians, and many Jews – from Lodz, from Warsaw. One day they were surrounded, was it the Poles who had denounced them? They hid in a cabbage field. The Germans picked them out, started interrogating them. Handcuffed them. But they escaped again, it was the front, they weren’t guarded closely. He worked his way, in those handcuffs, to some village, to a blacksmith, who unchained the handcuffs. But they had left bruises on his wrists, hence the bandages. It seemed the danger was over.

After the Germans entered, I traded a little – sold flowers, Germans newspapers, worked as a paperboy. In February 1940 they started catching people to send to Germany to forced labor. The ghetto hadn’t been set up yet, it was organized only in the fall [28](#). But already you had to wear the badge [cf. Armband [29](#)]. My brother was walking down the street, they caught him. Those caught on the street worked in the Sejm [parliament], loading documents onto trucks for transport to Berlin. A German came up and says, ‘You ‘Jude’ [German for Jew]! You were there, in that and that place [the Kalisz prison]!’ And my brother says, ‘Why, I’ve never been there!’ He told him to roll up his sleeves. My brother had no ID, nothing. Only some piece of paper. The German tells him, ‘I know where you live! Tomorrow at 11am you are to report at Aleja Szucha [Gestapo HQ].’ And he let him go.

And so the decision was made – we must flee immediately! There was no time to look back. We knew people were fleeing east [30](#), through Malkinia [town some 100 km north-east of Warsaw, between 1939 and 1941 the German-Russian border passed through there]. We discussed it and my parents decided to stay. ‘No, we were born here and here we’ll stay, it’d be a pity to forgo this old wardrobe, some old rag, we’re not going! But you go, save yourselves!’

And so in the evening, after the curfew, we set off, to save ourselves. We ran from Kozla Street, down the stairs to Koscielna, and there was Bugaj Street, the fishermen. We got to one of those fishermen and for two zlotys he took us to the other side of the river. He dropped us off near the zoo. It was dark. We waited there until 6am, in some bushes, the same kind of ones that are there today. At 6am we went towards the Wilenski train station. Country women in head scarves came to Warsaw with milk, they had those 20-liter cans, two cans each. They delivered the milk to their customers across Warsaw in the night and returned on the morning train. And we got through to the stock car among those women. They were returning home, and we rode among them.

There were checkpoints on the way, but somehow we managed to hide ourselves among them. Eventually we got to Malkinia, and my brother says, ‘Everyone’s getting off that side, and the Germans are yelling to be getting off the other side, so let’s follow the others.’ And we followed the women. We walked through the fields, and suddenly, ‘Halt!’ [German for ‘Stop!’] They started searching, ‘Jude, Jude,’ fished out a dozen persons from among those ladies and told them to go in



that direction. Us too. The women went their way, to their villages, their homes, and us they drove in another direction.

We walked perhaps a kilometer and we came upon a crowd of people, a huge crowd! Thousands of people sitting in the neutral zone. On the one side the Russians, in those tall hats of theirs, and on the other the Germans. If you entered the neutral zone, it was neither this way nor that, nor any other. There were several dozen thousand people there. It was cold, freezing, people were dying. Some delegation went to Moscow, they let them pass. There came orders from Stalin to let the Jews pass to Bialystok [city 120 km north-east of Warsaw, in Russian-seized territories between 1939 and 1941]. There were mostly Jews there and some Poles, communists, but not many. Those were refugees from all those places that the Germans had captured.

At first, no one thought about fleeing to Russia, nor did we believe in what the German Jews were telling us about the suffering they had gone through there. A great crowd of people had gathered. Then we managed to get by train to Czyzew [small town 25 km north-east of Malkinia on the rail route to Bialystok]. That's how we got through. There was no way of going back to the German side. Later people established transfer routes and paid to return, to bring their parents, friends with them. We didn't want to go back. Our friends, my brother's friends, went back to get their parents and visited ours to collect them, too. Our parents didn't want to go. There is this Yiddish saying, 'What happens to everyone will also happen to the bride.' They didn't want to, weren't aware what would happen to them.

And thus a new epic journey east started for us. I was 14, had had my bar mitzvah, my brother was 15 years older than me. We were in Bialystok. My brother went to Choroszcz, to our sister [Pola], and learned all patients had been taken away and there was no trace of them. The Russians decided all those patients had to be liquidated [Editor's note: There are no records of the Red Army murdering mentally ill patients. Perhaps it was a one-time action by an isolated unit]. We thus learned our sister was dead, something our parents knew nothing about.

A whole lot of people had gathered in Bialystok. There was no work, so people started trading, wheeling-dealing. The Russians said, 'There are many spies here, many enemies of the Soviet Union, we need to get rid of them, it's the border area, it's dangerous.' And they announced - people willing to go back to Germany should report there and there. And people bought that. Many signed up for return to Germany. Then the Russians said, street so and so, numbers from so to so, report with luggage at train station. They crammed them into freight cars tight like herrings in a barrel, sealed the cars, posted sentries, and off they went!

I later talked to those people, because we didn't go. We didn't sign up for leaving, but very many people wanted to go back. They said, 'We want nothing to do with all this communism, we have enough.' And so they set them up. They packed them all, sealed like herrings in a barrel, and they're riding. It's no more than 150-200 km to Warsaw. And they're riding, riding, riding... Until they found themselves in Archangelsk [city in northern Russia on the White Sea, major labor camp location since 1922], or in Murmansk [city in northern Russia on the Barents Sea]. There they took them to a forest, and said, 'You wanted to go to the Germans? Fascists! Now you've got your shovels here, your crowbars and pickaxes, you'll learn about life and work.'

People of leftist views, on the other hand, like my brother, said, 'It's the Soviet Union, the only salvation, we've got to save ourselves.' And they boarded the freight cars, but not under escort,

under guard. We rode for four weeks. We knew we were going into the Russian interior, to work, but as volunteers. On our way we stopped at several cities and there were the so called 'delousing stations' because lice were eating us away. Those are the kind of steam baths where they take your clothes away for boiling. They killed the lice to prevent typhus. Everyone stripped down completely, gave the clothes away for boiling, and took a bath. We went several times through such quarantine. After such bathing the lice actually came back to life, growing even faster than before, as they had what they liked - heat. And with such luggage, through the delousing stations, we got to the Ural, to Magnitogorsk [city in eastern Russia, in the Ural region, major industrial center, symbol of Stalinist industrialization].

In Magnitogorsk, they welcomed the newcomers, they didn't say 'from Poland,' but 'from Belarus,' who 'want to be building the Magnitogorsk industrial complex with us.' Some people survived that way. But some didn't like it, so they went back [to the General Government]. They actually decided to flee while in Magnitogorsk - and some made it. You could fix everything in Russia if you had the money, because it was completely corrupt. The authorities were corrupt, the police were corrupt. They went back to the ghetto! And they started writing letters. Until 1941, the postal service functioned normally. We sent two packages to our parents, to the 11 Kozla Street address. We got a confirmation they had received the packages, but we didn't know what was happening to them. From the people who got back there we knew a ghetto had been set up. But whether or not our parents were still there, that we didn't know.

I don't know whether it was out of naivety of something else, but people wrote letters to [Soviet] president Kalinin asking for families to be allowed to reunite. Kalinin [31](#) sent a reply, saying that the letters had been forwarded to Berlin and talks were under way on a potential reuniting program. That was before the outbreak of the German-Russian war, before June 1941 [32](#). The two countries kept normal diplomatic relations. When the war broke out - it was the end. Germany became an enemy, a treacherous invasion, and we were making tanks, weapons etc. to defend the country against the Germans.

I completed a carpentry course in Magnitogorsk. Then I was assigned to a brigade that built coke-chemical furnaces. Before the war, the Russians didn't have the technology of building such furnaces, and had to employ Belgian, Dutch, American specialists to build them. Special luxurious developments were built to house them. They were paid in gold. Those were the experts in building coke-chemical furnaces. During the war, when they started heating up one of such furnaces, it collapsed. And without coke you can't make tanks. It meant a great sabotage had occurred. All those foreign experts had gone home, they were foreign citizens, the Russians couldn't stop them. And so they set up special brigades for building those furnaces, and I was assigned to one of those. We knew how to lay those bricks, because those are the chamotte bricks, maximum tolerance is 1-2 millimeters, there can be no deviation, and there you cook coke. We learned to build those furnaces. We were at first like students, and those who had worked under those foreign experts were our masters. We became craftsmen. An enterprise was set up to build coke-chemical plants. So after the Magnitogorsk project had been completed, they sent us to Novosibirsk [city in Siberia, port on the Ob River]. The production cycle was six months.

My brother, in turn, became a construction worker. There's this concrete construction, you insert metal rods and pour concrete over it. He worked with reinforced concrete. We were in touch, but I worked in a completely different place. You worked 14-16 hours a day, no one asked you. There

was work to be done and that's it. War. I lost touch with my brother in Magnitogorsk because I was sent to Chelabinsk [city in the Ural, major industrial center]. From Chelabinsk to Novosibirsk, from Novosibirsk to Sverdlovsk [city in eastern Russia, former Yekaterinburg]. When they started liberating Ukraine [1944], and in Donetsk [industrial city in eastern Ukraine] there were such furnaces, they told us, 'Now your brigade will go to Ukraine.' And they sent us, two or three engineers and our group, about 30 people, from Siberia to Ukraine. That was 1944. As soon as the Russians captured Donetsk, the Donbass region [Donets Basin or Donbass, industrial region in eastern Ukraine, major cities Donetsk and Luhansk], they sent us there.

### **After the war**

There we found bombed out ruins, it was the turn of 1944 and 1945. A whole lot of German POWs had been gathered there, later also the kulaks [33](#) and others from the socialist countries, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, to tear down those ruins, and on that rubble we started building those coking furnaces. We were again in the spotlight there, because within half a year they started smelting iron in the Donbass again. It was ore, but without coke, so it's nothing. I was in touch a bit with my brother, he was in the Ural.

I got so Russianized in that work brigade - as I had been Polonized in the past, de-Judaized, so I became Russianized here. I could no longer speak Polish, because I hadn't been doing so, and I didn't speak much Yiddish either. Then I found out that the Union of Polish Patriots [ZPP] [34](#) had been set up and was signing people up for return to Poland. I met one more boy like myself, a victim, his name was Furman, from Pinsk [town in eastern Poland, presently in Belarus]. Interestingly, he was a Jew, and his father had been a sailor in the Pinsk Fleet. We were together in Ukraine. We were in Dnieprodzerzhinsk then [industrial city in Ukraine], that's a dozen kilometers from Dniepropetrovsk [industrial city in south-central Ukraine]. And one day he says, 'You know, let's go to Dniepropetrovsk, we'll find that ZPP office.' And so we've found it, are turning up, talking in Russian. They ask us, 'Where are you from?' 'I'm from Warsaw, and he's from Pinsk,' I say, 'Okay, but how do we know it? Do you have any documents?' I only had a school ID. And what does your friend have? And he had nothing. So I say, 'He's been with me all the time, since the beginning of the war.' No, he has to present some document. And so that school ID saved me, and him they didn't let go and he had to stay in the Soviet Union. No one gave you the benefit of the doubt there.

When I registered there, I told them I had a brother in Magnitogorsk, and that I knew he had been registered with the ZPP there. They checked that, and found out he was no longer in Magnitogorsk but in Moscow. He had been brought to Moscow alongside a group of Jews who were to prepare for repatriation to Poland [35](#). Because there was a problem - what to do with the Jews who were in Russia and when they return to Poland, where would they go? They had no families, no houses, nothing. So a group was set up in Moscow to prepare 'aliyah' from the Soviet Union to Poland. My brother and others had been brought there. He later found himself in the Lublin government [36](#), under the protection of Modzelewski [Zygmunt Modzelewski (1900-1954): communist politician, during WWII in the Soviet Union, 1947-1951 foreign minister of communist Poland].

The Lublin government sent him to Lower Silesia [region in south-western Poland], as a delegate for receiving the repatriates there. Before the war, he had served time together with Ochab, so he had good credentials. [Edward Ochab (1906-1989): communist politician, during WWII in the Soviet

Union, first secretary of the communist party between March and October 1956, head of state 1964-1968, member of parliament. Withdrew from politics in the aftermath of the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign.] When I was in Ukraine and read somewhere that Warsaw had been liberated in January, I thought, 'Why not?', scribbled a few words on a piece of paper, and sent that to Warsaw, to 11 Kozla Street, my parents' address. A reply came, 'House burned down, addressee absent.' Meantime, my brother got in touch with me to let me know he was in Lublin [city in south-eastern Poland, ca. 200 km south-east of Warsaw], and that he'd be in touch.

I returned to Poland in one of the [repatriation] transports, it was February 1946, arriving in a place called Rychbach, Reichenbach in German, Dzierzoniów in Polish [town in south-western Poland, 50 km south of Wroclaw, on former German territory. The main gathering point for Jews being repatriated from the Soviet Union to Poland after WWII]. I didn't go to Warsaw because to whom would I have been supposed to go there? My parents died in the Warsaw ghetto. No one survived of the whole Warsaw family. They were probably sent to Treblinka [37](#). My brother told me once there had been over thirty people in the family. Of those thirty-something, virtually only me and my brother have survived.

After the war I met my mother's brother, Awrum, and his children, who had survived in Russia. In 1920, a group of Polish Jews, communists, wanted to cross the border illegally to the Soviet Union. On the border they caught them as spies, enemies. It didn't matter they were communists. They were sent to the Siberia. Awrum did time before the war in a prison in Kharkov [city in eastern Ukraine], he took me [and showed to me] in which cell they kept him and fed him with herring. They lived in Kharkov. The elders are already dead, and their children have gone to America, Israel. If I was in touch with them at all, it's less so now, because with children it's a different story altogether.

My mother's cousin, Stella, I don't remember her last name, worked before the war as assistant teacher at the Korczak [38](#) orphanage. I don't know how she survived. She settled in America. It is from her that I have my mother's only pre-war photo. We got in touch, she came here. She knew my mother, she remembers me as a small moppet. She died recently.

Virtually no one's left of my generation. There was Janka Wiernik, daughter of Jojne Gutman, my eldest uncle. She was a communist in France before the war. She went there in search of work. She was active in the communist movement in a coal mine in Belgium and she met Gierek there [Edward Gierek (1913-2001): communist politician, before WWII worked in Belgium as coal miner, 1970-1980 first secretary of the Polish communist party]. I called her. 'Who's this?' I go, 'Do you know anything about Nieznanowski from Podwale?' 'And who are you?' 'I'm his son, Felek!' We got in touch. She's dead now.

On our way back to Poland, in Przemyśl [town in south-eastern Poland, ca. 350 km of Warsaw], we were being shot at by the Ukrainian gangs [official propaganda in Poland referred to armed Ukrainians active in the contestable territories in the post-WWII period as 'Ukrainian gangs'], on our way from Ukraine. We arrived in Rychbach, I looked around: it was full of Jews, hustle and bustle like before the war on Nalewki! And I'm standing there with my wooden suitcase, dressed in the Soviet-style quilted work jacket. 'Hey, who are you with? Wie alt bist du? [German for 'How old are you?'] Where you from?' I started to tell him. 'Wait, you won't be walking on foot! Sit on my bike, and I'll walk and carry your suitcase. Where do you want to go?' 'To Daszynskiego Street,' I said,

'my brother works there.' 'Daszynskiego?' 'It's where the Jewish Committee [39](#) is located.'

I went there, and there was a huge crowd in front of it, people had arrived in town and are waiting for lodgings, for food, because they had emerged within nothing from the train. I couldn't push through. Eventually I got through to the secretary, her name was Siedlecka, and I say to her, in Russian, I remember, 'Mrs. Siedlecka, my name is Nieznanowski.' She says, 'Oh, Nieznanowski, you must be his brother?' And my brother entered the room. We burst into tears. We hadn't seen each other since 1941. He says, 'Take these keys, there's an apartment, go there, I can't leave the office right now. You'll find some clothes there, get dressed.'

I entered the apartment, looked around - and there were swastikas, all kinds of German clothes. I opened the drawer - there's a gun. But, most importantly, there was a bathroom! A coal-fired stove. I fired under that stove, took a bath, dressed into those shorts, the lederhosen, and turned into something of a German boy. I went to the train station, and there stands the car in which I arrived. I say, 'What are you waiting here for, come on, let's go!' 'No, we're supposed to go to Klodzko [town in south-western Poland, 80 km south of Wroclaw, on former German territory].' So I said to them, 'We're not going to Klodzko, this is where we'll stay!' And they got off. The whole chevra [group], I have them in the photos here [40](#).

### **Life in communist Poland**

And so another Jewish epic story began, in Dzierzoniów this time. I was there in 1946-1947. I found myself in the center of things. There were so many kibbutzim, various ones, of various hues! And I had come as a leftist, from the Soviet Union. So I ask them, 'Which organization am I supposed to join?' 'The ZWM!' they tell me. Alright, let it be the ZWM [41](#). And the Jews were quarreling about who was to be in charge of distributing the things that are arriving, because through Gdansk there were arriving loads of stuff from the Joint [42](#): bales of fabrics, machines, products, food, all for the Jewish survivors. Really great amounts of stuff. And, typically for the Jews, they started quarreling who was to be in charge of all that. And each party wanted to be important. Finally, a decision was made - I have no family, I'm young, I will be the storeman. Because half of all that stuff had already found its way to the market. They were already dealing, doing gesheft, business. And so shipments were arriving - there's matzah, there's canned fish, there's kosher food. Loads and loads of stuff. You made lists and in the cooperatives, the factories, there were distributing the stuff according to those lists. But there were always some smooth operators who tried to get the stuff that wasn't theirs.

And someone told me, 'There's one man you can trust, and his name is Szpryngier. He is a German who saved the synagogue and the Jewish cemetery here, he was here throughout the war. He's the only man you can trust. Okay, Szpryngier or no Szpryngier, I had to deal with all kinds of people in the Ural. I introduced myself. I gathered all the Jewry - for in the meantime I had become an anti-Semite - and told them so, 'All the keys that you have, put them on the table! I brought locksmiths, all the locks have been replaced, and only me and Szpryngier have keys to them now, no one else is allowed to enter the storerooms.'

And then it started! 'What, he wants to introduce his rule here!?' They started tossing around, shouting. Started accusing my brother that he discriminates in favor of the Zionists. That, though he's a communist, he still shows favor to the kibbutzniks. A brawl started. It was the time of the so called rightwing-nationalist deviation. [Editor's note: At a congress in December 1948, the Polish

Socialist Party (PPS) and the communist Polish Workers' Party (PPR) merged to form a communist-dominated Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR). That became possible only because PPS members opposing the merger (or in fact absorption by the communists) had been accused of a 'rightwing-nationalist deviation' and ousted. An estimated one in four PPS members were marginalized or expelled from the party.] I was powerless. With such a crowd of people I had no power to control all that. I asked some of the younger ones to the side and tell them, 'Listen, I don't want you to be policemen, but please, keep a watchful eye. If you see someone selling chocolate on the market - where does he have it from? Or canned food?' Everyone knew it was a tactic to frighten. And they grumble, 'Look, such a young lad and such a zealot.' And bargaining began, like today - who is to have control over all that aid? Let's do a rotating presidency, first the Poalei Zion [43](#), then the Bund [44](#), then the religious organization. Ideology was mainly just a cover. I knew the kibbutzim needed to provide for the people, they had taken them under their roof, had to feed them, nourish them. It wasn't important for me whether someone was from this or that kibbutz - what was important was that they have enough food to feed their people. A major tussle started and then I said, 'Enough! I can no longer stand it here.'

In 1947 I was drafted into the army. I said, okay, if I've been drafted, then I'm going. What, to the army? Are you crazy? A delegation came from Wroclaw, the party secretary, Grudzien. He says, 'Felek, are you crazy, you, going into the army? One phone call and you don't have to go.' And I tell him, 'But I want to go! I don't want to be here any longer.' And so I bid farewell to all that and joined the army. I started with the barracks, from the lowest rank, from washing the johns. My brother they did in, too. As a supporter of Zionism, he was eliminated from Dzierzoniów. Since then I knew I wanted nothing to do with those people. In the army I started as a private, moving gradually up in active service. I went to a cadet school in Lodz. This impressed me, I've got to admit it - a working-class boy, from Warsaw, a Jew, and suddenly he becomes someone and is respected! But there were the ghetto commemorations, they came to Warsaw, we met, I kept in touch with them. Most immigrated to Israel, to other countries, and I was stuck in the military.

In 1952 I married Henryka. There's two years' age difference between us. She isn't Jewish. We met in Warsaw through a common friend. We just grew intimate. She didn't have parents, only the father, her mother died when she was a child, in 1937. During the war her father was taken prisoner, then found himself in a camp. She and her younger sister were living with relatives. My brother and whole family welcomed her really warmly, she saw a completely different atmosphere. Her family are simple people, but it wasn't a problem for them, they respected my brother. The problem of anti-Semitism didn't exist. What was under the surface, I don't want to know, though I'm not that stupid not to realize.

I've been living in this house, 82B Koszykowa Street, for 52 years now. I watched it being built. I had a studio flat, only the bed, there was no passage. If you wanted to pass, the other person had to lie on the bed. So narrow. But when we were expecting our first child, I went to my commanding officer, and I say to him, 'Comrade, we'll have a child, there's no room for three in that apartment. Please do something.' He immediately summoned an architect, a major, and says, 'This officer has been allotted an apartment, when is it supposed to be ready?' And he says, 'We could finish the renovation, but there are no stairs, we have no materials.' 'You'll get materials, everything, do it in two weeks.'

When I moved in, the stairs still weren't there, we climbed up the construction gangways, and German POWs were hurrying to finish the renovation. Then the second child came, a year and half had passed. I lived in the same staircase, only up a floor. I got one room, I wasn't due for more. There was some general, a bachelor, someone was interested in him getting the apartment, but they could only give him one room. And so we moved into that apartment, whose renovation had still not been completed by then. Our daughter Ewa was born in 1953, and a son, Witek, followed in 1954.

My brother had a wife, a Jewess, and three kids. His wife's name was Guta Rozenfeld, the kids - Michal, Hadasa, and Rachela. They lived in Zoliborz [district in northern left-bank Warsaw]. In 1954 - they could no longer stand it, because that daughter, Rachela - she's dead now - was a typical Jewess, dark-skinned, pretty eyes. They harassed her in school. She hit herself on the head, had to be treated psychiatrically. So they said, 'Enough! We can no longer stand it here!' A decision was made to leave Poland. My brother came to me and says, 'What do we do? Only the two of us have been left.' I say, 'I'm in the army, I'll go and tell them to dismiss me.' They still pretended to be nice then. They said, 'So what that your brother is leaving? But you have a wife, the army needs you, we won't dismiss you. It doesn't matter that your brother is leaving.' I say, 'What do you mean it doesn't matter? I know the rule is if you have anyone abroad, you yourself will never be permitted to leave.' 'No, nothing of the sort!' My brother said, 'Well, you have your family, you'll do as you like, but we're leaving.' And thus we parted. In Israel my brother worked in the Carit kibbutz. His daughter, Rachela, went to the swimming pool once, wanted to take a swim, they didn't notice, she drowned. Hadasa works as a teacher.

In 1954 my wife was working for the military. She was set up - they didn't know to get rid of me, the easiest way was through her. She ran the classified registry, one day they called her, said the baby had high fever in the nursery, she had to come and take it home. She went to her boss, handed over the keys, and returned only two weeks later, after the baby had gotten better. In the meantime, a top-secret document had gone missing - the dislocation of underground airfields in Poland. She had registered it and now it was gone. So they started interrogating her, an investigation was launched. I was in the academy in Poznan at the time, and she was crying, telling me, listen, so and so. I thought this way and that way, but those days it was difficult to extricate yourself from something like that. They still did it the soft way, because they trusted me, after all, so they just fired her from the job. She was left jobless.

It was then, being unemployed for the first time, that she signed up for an ORT course [45](#), a purse-and bag-making course. There she met Jews. At the time Jews were coming to Poland, repatriates [from the Soviet Union, being released as part of the thawing following Stalin's death], it was 1954, and with those people she participated in the course. Later they went to work. There was the Odrodzenie cooperative, the Optima cooperative, and there she worked in the bookkeeping department. I used to tell her, 'You're now more Jewish than I am!'

In 1967 I was told to report at the human resources department, and they asked me, 'So how's your brother in Israel doing?' 'You're asking me how he's doing? Legia, the football team, have just returned from Israel, you ask them how my brother is doing. They'll give you a detailed account, and I know nothing.' It really wasn't simple to be in touch those days.

Two years later, when the anti-Semitic campaign [46](#) had started in earnest, they tell me to report and say, 'Listen, we have to dismiss you.' I say, 'Now? Well, okay, dismiss me. I wanted to do it a long time ago.' The other officers were asking, why Nieznanowski is being dismissed. I was popular with the cadre. They say, 'What, you don't know? His brother is a high-ranking police officer in Tel Aviv! And you're asking why he is being dismissed?' It was only then I learned. I said, 'How is that possible? He's had rickets, he's my height, how can he be in the army?' But it didn't matter, it's enough that they'd said it. It was just sending a clear signal they wanted to get rid of me. But they had no pretext, so they had to invent.

Later they took care of me, they summoned me, and ask, 'How long have you been a major?' 'Eight years.' 'Eight years? And no promotion?' 'No,' I say, 'I'm of the wrong descent, that's why I've had no promotion.' 'Well, that's a scandal! We're offering you a higher position. You can immediately go to Bartoszyce, in the Mazury area [lake district in north-eastern Poland].' I say, 'To Bartoszyce? A very interesting proposition, but I can't decide [myself], I have a wife, children, a home.' 'But you're the head of the family, the decision is yours to make!' I say, 'No, I can't decide without my loved ones.' 'Alright, report tomorrow at 10am what you've decided.'

I already knew how they were fixing others. 'So, have you made up your mind?' 'Yes, I have, and I have decided not to go and not to accept this proposition.' 'And why?' 'My kids are about to complete elementary school, they won't be able to continue their education there. I know what kind of town Bartoszyce is.' 'Are you refusing to obey an order?' I say, 'This is not an order. I'm simply rejecting the proposition. If you offer me something here, in Warsaw, then okay.' Several dozen people were thus gotten rid of. Everything under pretext, and at Jaruzelski's [47](#) knowledge, because he was the defense minister at the time.

By 1968, when all that had hit us [the anti-Semitic campaign], I saw that spirit starting to circle around me. We were thinking more and more about leaving. My wife was very much in favor, because we saw - this one leaving, that one leaving, you went to the Dworzec Gdanski train station, bid farewell. I then said - if I am to go, then only to Israel, where I had a brother, there was family. I was full of ideology, I was thinking, there's no place in the world that's free of anti-Semitism. I knew it was in America, it was everywhere. On the other hand, there was the question of my wife going to Israel, of our children, as it wasn't clear whether they were Jews or not. It wasn't very clear at the time whether a goy woman would be welcomed in Israel, or the kids, whether my son would adopt the religion. There were many unanswered questions, though today they tell me it wasn't that bad. I don't know, perhaps I was wrong, in any case, that tilted the balance against going. Both my wife and my kids have held it against me to this day.

I got a weak kick in the ass, most people were getting a strong one, they started working on you, dissecting you, and in most cases it was turning out you were a spy. I avoided all that, but I knew what was going on behind the scenes. I knew who'd be summoned and who wouldn't, and I didn't decide to emigrate, though they were trying hard to persuade me to do it, to Sweden. Very many of my friends left then - they were going to Sweden, to Denmark, my neighbors. And we stayed.

## Recent years

I was twice in Israel, in the 1990s. Once at my brother's initiative, who had died but left a wish to that effect and brought me and my wife to Israel. He had died sometime earlier, in 1987. I visited his grave, it was in the Sarid kibbutz, situated in the north of Israel. The second time I went with a



group on a social exchange program organized by the Jewish community here, to familiarize myself with the country. I contacted all those friends of mine and was received very heartily everywhere, and they started coming here. Poland has become something like a base. When in Poland, Jews go to places like Ciechocinek or Krynica Morska.

I can read Yiddish to this day. Before the war, I spoke it fluently. Later, in Russia, I got complete amnesia, I couldn't even speak Polish after returning from there. I spoke Russian and a bit of Ukrainian. But when I returned to the chevra, to the Jewish community, the knowledge of Yiddish came back to me. My Hebrew is only so-so. I studied in an ashkenazi school. In Israel today they speak Sephardi everywhere, but when I was in Israel for a couple of days, I quickly started to catch on, if I spent some time there, it would return to me. [Editor's note: the interviewee is referring to the more oriental Hebrew of today's Israel with regards to pronunciation and vocabulary.]

In 1990, Mostowicz [48](#) asked me, 'What do you do now?' 'Nothing,' I told him, 'I've retired again.' And I got involved in things Jewish. Old people started coming, I started reading, and the Yiddish language was revived in me. But when I went to Israel, I could only speak Yiddish with the religious ones, no one speaks Yiddish there. I've noticed it among young people - they study it at school, but it's a dead language, I believe. You can still buy a newspaper in Yiddish, but few people speak the language, hardly anyone can read it. There are a few old men who can, with whom I can talk, but that's about it. That's the fate of languages, they die.

I worked for the community for many years, but no longer. There's the social assistance committee, supported, among other things, by the Joint. Then for the Jewish Veterans' Association [49](#), Mostowicz had brought me there. Right now I'm gradually pulling out. I work for the Jewish Historical Institute and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, I'm the chairman of the auditing committee. So I'm still active, but these days I no longer want to involve myself too deeply. I also had to back out because of my wife's disease, because her Parkinson is developing, assuming various forms. In fact, whom am I supposed to live for? How much life do I have left?

My son, Witek, is in Sweden. He had been going there to earn money by picking berries, went again in 1980, and never returned. He worked at the psychiatric hospital in Uppsala. He started as a paramedic, but the doctors appreciated him and he was promoted, ran the psychiatric outpatient clinic. Last year he got promoted again and is the manager of the municipal department of psychiatry in Uppsala. So he ceased being a doctor and became an office worker. He attended English courses at the British Institute, where he was taught by his future wife. She obviously taught him to become her husband, and so they got married. His wife's name is Valerie, she's English. I went there, the wedding was in grand style. They traveled the world for ten years, and after ten years [they got married]. Then came the children. They have two daughters, Chana and Rebecca. Chana is 15, and Rebecca is eight years old. Unfortunately, they don't speak Polish.

My son started questioning me, 'Dad,' he says, 'the girls are supposed to write school essays about their roots, their descent, draw their genealogical tree. Start writing.' So when they asked me to record [for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation], I gave the whole tape to my son. He translated it into English or Swedish, and now they're proud of their grandfather who lives in Poland.

There is no problem in his family whether he's Jewish or not. I was in England, to visit his parents-in-law, I was received by an Anglican priest. Everyone knows my parents were in the ghetto. The

notion of anti-Semitism doesn't exist there at all, and we got really close with his wife, too. My son, in turn, has been more and more interested in his Jewishness. How so? Well, he's connected to Warsaw there through the Internet, reads the Polish press, and he's really absorbed with all those things. So I started sending him books, magazines.

My daughter, Ewa, lives in Poland. She went to school to Czternastka, then to Queen Jadwiga's on Wawelska [names of high schools in Warsaw]. She has a degree in agriculture. Then she got married, her husband works for a foreign company, he's got a degree in archaeology. They have one son, Bartek. A handsome boy, tall, 185 centimeters. He was born in 1988. He's studying inland construction at the Warsaw University of Technology. Ewa's husband is a Catholic, a boy from Ochota [district in left-bank Warsaw], he isn't dim, though his mother hardly ever leaves the church, but that isn't a problem. Since she's been to Israel, I'm an older brother in faith, I'm virtually as good as holy. The relationship is really okay. I meet my daughter, my son-in-law on an everyday basis, and with her parents-in-law we also get together from time to time.

I have this rule that I never advertise loudly that I'm a Jew, Felek Nieznanowski, but wherever something needs to be done, I never shun it. For instance, I worked for some time on a volunteer basis for the Polish-German Reconciliation foundation where I was in charge of Jewish affairs. I worked there with all kinds of people – from the AK [50](#), the NSZ [51](#)... Surprisingly, I've kept in touch with those people since then. They're from my generation. They like to see me, I like to see them. They used to be fierce fighters, broke up prisons after the war, served time in jail, and so on, today they're just elderly gentlemen. They look critically at everything, come from a completely different background than myself, but they like me and they keep calling me. One of them, a doctor, tells me, 'Felek, I come from an endek family, you know, there were endeks in Poznan [52](#). My father was an arms contractor for the Polish army before the war and I was brought up in the endek spirit. But the occupation period changed all that.' I tell him, 'Listen, I don't want to be the good Jew!' But God forbid! I am open.

I'm often in the Old Town, I like the place and if I have a foreign visitor, they have to take a photo where my house stood. I show to them the Kilinski monument, because that's where the house stood. Before the war, the Kilinski monument stood on the Krasinski Square, near Nowiniarska, where the Warsaw Uprising Heroes monument stands today. It disappeared under occupation, and after the war was moved from the Krasinski Square to its present location.

I recently talked to Krajewski [Stanislaw Krajewski, Jewish activist in Poland] and others and I say, 'Listen, you're younger than me, you could be my child. I look skeptically at things, though not completely hopelessly, but I'm no utopist. My only luck is that I'm already 80 years old. I only feel pity for the younger generation and their children. There's no place for them [Jews] in this country. This could serve as my credo.

## Glossary:

### **1 Orthodox communities**

The traditionalist Jewish communities founded their own Orthodox organizations after the Universal Meeting in 1868-1869. They organized their life according to Judaist principles and opposed to assimilative aspirations. The community leaders were the rabbis. The statute of their communities

was sanctioned by the king in 1871. In the western part of Hungary the communities of the German and Slovakian immigrants' descendants were formed according to the Western Orthodox principles. At the same time in the East, among the Jews of Galician origins the 'eastern' type of Orthodoxy was formed; there the Hassidism prevailed. In time the Western Orthodoxy also spread over to the eastern part of Hungary. In 1896, there were 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country,. In 1930, the 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities made up 30.4 percent of all Hungarian Jews. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 percent).

## **2 Great Depression**

At the end of October 1929, there were worrying signs on the New York Stock Exchange in the securities market. On 24th October ('Black Thursday'), people began selling off stocks in a panic from the price drops of the previous days - the number of shares usually sold in a half year exchanged hands in one hour. The banks could not supply the amount of liquid assets required, so people didn't receive money from their sales. Five days later, on 'Black Tuesday', 16.4 million shares were put up for sale, prices dropped steeply, and the hoarded properties suddenly became worthless. The collapse of the Stock Exchange was followed by economic crisis. Banks called in their outstanding loans, causing immediate closings of factories and businesses, leading to higher unemployment, and a decline in the standard of living. By January of 1930, the American money market got back on it's feet, but during this year newer bank crises unfolded: in one month, 325 banks went under. Toward the end of 1930, the crisis spread to Europe: in May of 1931, the Viennese Creditanstalt collapsed (and with it's recall of outstanding loans, took Austrian heavy industry with it). In July, a bank crisis erupted in Germany, by September in England, as well. In Germany, in 1931, more than 19,000 firms closed down. Though in France the banking system withstood the confusion, industrial production and volume of exports tapered off seriously. The agricultural countries of Central Europe were primarily shaken up by the decrease of export revenues, which was followed by a serious agricultural crisis. Romanian export revenues dropped by 73 percent, Poland's by 56 percent. In 1933 in Hungary, debts in the agricultural sphere reached 2.2 billion Pengoes. Compared to the industrial production of 1929, it fell 76 percent in 1932 and 88 percent in 1933. Agricultural unemployment levels, already causing serious concerns, swelled immensely to levels, estimated at the time to be in the hundreds of thousands. In industry the scale of unemployment was 30 percent (about 250,000 people).

## **3 Communist Union of Polish Youth (KZMP)**

Until 1930 the Union of Communist Youth in Poland. Founded in March 1922 as a branch of the Communist Youth International. From the end of 1923 its structure included also the Communist Youth Union of Western Belarus and the Communist Youth Union of Western Ukraine (as autonomous regional organizations). Its activities included politics, culture and education, and sport. In 1936 it initiated the publication of a declaration of the rights of the young generation in Poland (whose postulates included an equal start in life for all, democratic rights, and the guarantee of work, peace and universal education). The salient activists in the organization included B. Berman, A. Kowalski, A. Lampe, A. Lipski. In 1933 the organization had some 15,000 members, many of whom were Jews and peasants. The KZMP was disbanded in 1938.

#### **4 MOPR (International Organization for Aid to Revolutionary Fighters)**

Founded in 1922, and based on the decision of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, the organization aimed to protect workers from the terrorist attacks of the Whites and help the victims of terrorism. It offered material, legal and intellectual support to political convicts, political emigrants and their families. By 1932 it had a membership of about 14 million people.

#### **5 Haint**

Literally 'Today,' it was one of the most popular Yiddish dailies published in Poland. It came out in Warsaw from 1908-1939, and had a Zionist orientation addressing a mass of readers. In the 1930s it attained a print run of 45,000 copies.

#### **6 Folkszeitung**

one of the Yiddish dailies published in Warsaw between the wars.

#### **7 Bolsheviks**

Members of the movement led by Lenin. The name 'Bolshevik' was coined in 1903 and denoted the group that emerged in elections to the key bodies in the Social Democratic Party (SDPRR) considering itself in the majority (Rus. bolshynstvo) within the party. It dubbed its opponents the minority (Rus. menshynstvo, the Mensheviks). Until 1906 the two groups formed one party. The Bolsheviks first gained popularity and support in society during the 1905-07 Revolution. During the February Revolution in 1917 the Bolsheviks were initially in the opposition to the Menshevik and SR ('Sotsialrevolyutsionery', Socialist Revolutionaries) delegates who controlled the Soviets (councils). When Lenin returned from emigration (16th April) they proclaimed his program of action (the April theses) and under the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' began to Bolshevize the Soviets and prepare for a proletariat revolution. Agitation proceeded on a vast scale, especially in the army. The Bolsheviks set about creating their own armed forces, the Red Guard. Having overthrown the Provisional Government, they created a government with the support of the II Congress of Soviets (the October Revolution), to which they admitted some left-wing SRs in order to gain the support of the peasantry. In 1952 the Bolshevik party was renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

#### **8 Keren Kayemet Leisrael (K**

K.L.) in Poland: Jewish National Fund (JNF) founded in 1901 at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel. From its inception, the JNF was charged with the task of fundraising in Jewish communities for the purpose of purchasing land in the Land of Israel to create a homeland for the Jewish people. After 1948 the fund was used to improve and afforest the territories gained. Every Jewish family that wished to help the cause had a JNF money box, called the 'blue box.' Now these boxes are known worldwide as a symbol of Zionism. In Poland the JNF was active in two periods, 1919-1939 and 1945-1950. In preparing its colonization campaign, Keren Kayemet Leisrael collaborated with the Jewish Agency and Keren Hayesod.

## **9 Rashi**

Full name: Rabbi Shlomo Yitzaki (1040-1105). He was one of the greatest Bible scholars in Jewish history. His commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud are indispensable for those interested in studying Jewish literature. He was born in Troyes (France), and studied in the two famous yeshivot of the time, in Mainz and Worms (today Germany). In 1070 he founded a school that made France the center of rabbinic sciences for a very long period. This school gave room, among others, to his sons-in-law and grandsons, who were also renowned Bible scholars and founded the Tosaphist School, and their commentaries are an organic part of any Talmud edition today. Rashi wrote commentaries on almost every scripture book, and commented almost the entire Babylonian Talmud. His commentaries had such importance that the first book printed in Hebrew was made on basis of these commentaries. The letters used for this purpose have been called Rashi letters since then. According to tradition, he died while writing the word 'tahor' (pure) in the commentary he was writing on the Talmud Makkot tractate. He died on 29th Tammuz; the location of his grave is unknown.

## **10 Brushmakers' shops**

A complex of primitive production facilities (popularly referred to as a shops) set up by the Germans in the Warsaw ghetto. By mid-1942, it employed 4,000 workers recruited from among the ghetto's inhabitants: brushmakers, metal workers, and electricians. It was located in the quarter between the Bonifraterska, Franciszkańska, Walowa, and Świętojerska streets. During the ghetto uprising of April 1943, the brushmakers' shops were the area where Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) units led by Marek Edelman fought the Germans.

## **11 Ringelblum Archive**

Archives documenting the life, struggle and death of the Jews in WWII, created by Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-44), a historian, pedagogue and social activist. The archives were compiled by underground activists in the Warsaw ghetto. In his work preparing reports for the clandestine Polish authorities on the situation of the Jewish population, Ringelblum and his many assistants gathered all types of documents (both private and official: notices, letters, reports, etc.) illustrating the reality in the ghettos and the camps. These documents were hidden in metal milk churns, unearthed after the war and deposited with the Jewish Historical Institute. The Ringelblum Archive is now the broadest source of information on the fate of the Jews in the ghettos and the camps.

## **12 Hashomer Hatzair in Poland**

From 1918 Hashomer Hatzair operated throughout Poland, with its headquarters in Warsaw. It emphasized the ideological and vocational training of future settlers in Palestine and personal development in groups. Its main aim was the creation of a socialist Jewish state in Palestine. Initially it was under the influence of the Zionist Organization in Poland, of which it was an autonomous part. In the mid-1920s it broke away and joined the newly established World Scouting Union, Hashomer Hatzair. In 1931 it had 22,000 members in Poland organized in 262 'nests' (Heb. 'ken'). During the occupation it conducted clandestine operations in most ghettos. One of its members was Mordechaj Anielewicz, who led the rising in the Warsaw ghetto. After the war it

operated legally in Poland as a party, part of the He Halutz. It was disbanded by the communist authorities in 1949.

### **13 Ajzensztadt Dawid (1890-1942)**

Composer and conductor. Music manager and founder and conductor of the choir at the Great Synagogue on Tlomackie Street in Warsaw. The choir's repertoire was very broad, including, among other things, the great classic composers: Bach, Händel, Haydn. Ajzensztadt performed on numerous occasions at the Warsaw Philharmonic and recorded for the Polish Radio. During the war, he organized a choir in the Warsaw ghetto. His daughter, Marysia Ajzensztadt, known as the 'ghetto nightingale,' was a popular singer. Both died in Treblinka in 1942.

### **14 Kusewicz Moshe (1889-1965)**

World-famous cantor, known as the 'king of cantors.' Born in Lithuania, he was appointed the chazzan of the Tohoret-ha-Kodesh synagogue in Vilnius at a very young age. In 1928 he moved to Warsaw and assumed the post of the senior cantor at the Great Synagogue on Tlomackie. He was also a singer of secular music, recorded for the Polish Radio. During the war in the Soviet Union, he performed at the Georgian Opera in Tbilisi. After the war he returned for a short time to Poland, before immigrating to the US where he continued his cantor career. He recorded many albums with synagogue music.

### **15 Der Dibuk (The Dybbuk, 1937)**

The play was written during the turbulent years of 1912-1917; Polish director Waszynski's 1937 film was made during another period of pre-war unease. It was shot on location in rural Poland, and captures a rich folk heritage. Considered by some to be the greatest of Yiddish films, it was certainly the boldest undertaking, requiring special sets and unusual lighting. In *Der Dibuk*, the past has a magnetic pull on the present, and the dead are as alluring as the living. Jewish mysticism links with expressionism, and as in *Nosferatu*, man is an insubstantial presence in the cinematic ether.

### **16 An-ski, Szymon (pen name of Szlojme Zajnwel Rapaport) (1863-1920)**

Writer, ethnographer, socialist activist. Born in a village near Vitebsk. In his youth he was an advocate of *haskalah*, but later joined the radical movement *Narodnaya Vola*. Under threat of arrest he left Russia in 1892 but returned there in 1905. From 1911-14 he led an ethnographic expedition researching the folklore of the Jews of Podolye and Volhynia. During the war he organized committees bringing aid to Jewish victims of the conflict and pogroms. In 1918 he became involved in organizing cultural life in Vilnius, as a co-founder of the Union of Jewish Writers and Journalists and the Jewish Ethnographic Society. Two years before his death he moved to Warsaw. He is the author of the Bund party's anthem, 'Di shvue' (Yid. oath). The participation of the Bund in the Revolution of 1905 influenced An-ski's decision to write in Yiddish. In his later work he used elements of Jewish legends collected during his ethnographic expedition and his experiences from WWI. His most famous work is *The Dybbuk* (which to this day remains one of the most popular Yiddish works for the stage). An-ski's entire literary and scientific oeuvre was published in Warsaw in 1920-25 as a 15-volume edition.

## **17 The Jewish Historical Institute [Zydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH)]**

Warsaw-based academic institution devoted to researching the history and culture of Polish Jews. Founded in 1947 from the Central Jewish Historical Committee, an arm of the Central Committee for Polish Jews. ZIH houses an archive center and library whose stocks include the books salvaged from the libraries of the Tempulum Synagogue and the Institute of Judaistica, and the documents comprising the Ringelblum Archive. ZIH also has exhibition rooms where its collection of liturgical items and Jewish painting are on display, and an exhibition dedicated to the Warsaw ghetto. Initially the institute devoted its research activities solely to the Holocaust, but over the last dozen or so years it has broadened the scope of its historical and cultural work. In 1993 ZIH was brought under the auspices of the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. It publishes the Jewish Historical Institute Quarterly.

## **18 13 Tlomackie Street**

Between the wars, 13 Tlomackie Street was home to the Union of Jewish Writers and Translators, which brought together those writing in both Yiddish and Polish. It also housed the Library of Judaistica and the Tempel progressive synagogue.

## **19 Poland's independence, 1918**

In 1918 Poland regained its independence after over 100 years under the partitions, when it was divided up between Russia, Austria and Prussia. World War I ended with the defeat of all three partitioning powers, which made the liberation of Poland possible. On 8 January 1918 the president of the USA, Woodrow Wilson, declaimed his 14 points, the 13th of which dealt with Poland's independence. In the spring of the same year, the Triple Entente was in secret negotiations with Austria-Hungary, offering them integrity and some of Poland in exchange for parting company with their German ally, but the talks were a fiasco and in June the Entente reverted to its original demands of full independence for Poland. In the face of the defeat of the Central Powers, on 7 October 1918 the Regency Council issued a statement to the Polish nation proclaiming its independence and the reunion of Poland. Institutions representing the Polish nation on the international arena began to spring up, as did units disarming the partitioning powers' armed forces and others organizing a system of authority for the needs of the future state. In the night of 6-7 November 1918, in Lublin, a Provisional Government of the Republic of Poland was formed under Ignacy Daszynski. Its core comprised supporters of Pilsudski. On 11 November 1918 the armistice was signed on the western front, and the Regency Council entrusted Pilsudski with the supreme command of the nascent army. On 14 November the Regency Council dissolved, handing all civilian power to Pilsudski; the Lublin government also submitted to his rule. On 17 November Pilsudski appointed a government, which on 21 November issued a manifesto promising agricultural reforms and the nationalization of certain branches of industry. It also introduced labor legislation that strongly favored the workers, and announced parliamentary elections. On 22 November Pilsudski announced himself Head of State and signed a decree on the provisional authorities in the Republic of Poland. The revolutionary left, from December 1918 united in the Communist Workers' Party of Poland, came out against the government and independence, but the program of Pilsudski's government satisfied the expectations of the majority of society and emboldened it to fight for its goals within the parliamentary democracy of the independent Polish

state. In January and June 1919 the first elections to the Legislative Sejm were held. On 20 February 1919 the Legislative Sejm passed the 'small constitution'; Pilsudski remained Head of State. The first stage of establishing statehood was completed, despite the fact that the issue of Poland's borders had not yet been resolved.

## **20 Pilsudski, Jozef (1867-1935)**

Polish activist in the independence cause, politician, statesman, marshal. With regard to the cause of Polish independence he represented the pro-Austrian current, which believed that the Polish state would be reconstructed with the assistance of Austria-Hungary. When Poland regained its independence in January 1919, he was elected Head of State by the Legislative Sejm. In March 1920 he was nominated marshal, and until December 1922 he held the positions of Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army. After the murder of the president, Gabriel Narutowicz, he resigned from all his posts and withdrew from politics. He returned in 1926 in a political coup. He refused the presidency offered to him, and in the new government held the posts of war minister and general inspector of the armed forces. He was prime minister twice, from 1926-1928 and in 1930. He worked to create a system of national security by concluding bilateral non-aggression pacts with the USSR (1932) and Germany (1934). He sought opportunities to conclude firm alliances with France and Britain. In 1932, owing to his deteriorating health, Pilsudski resigned from his functions. He was buried in the Crypt of Honor in the Wawel Cathedral of the Royal Castle in Cracow.

## **21 Maccabi in Poland**

Clubs of the Worldwide 'Maccabi' Jewish-Sports Association were created on Polish lands since the beginning of the 20th century, for example the club in Lwow was created in 1901, the club in Cracow in 1907, the club in Warsaw in 1915. In 1930, during a general assembly of the 'Maccabi' clubs, it was decided that 'Maccabi' would merge with the Jewish Physical Education Council and create one Polish Branch of 'Maccabi' with a strong Zionist character. 241 clubs were part of 'Maccabi' in 1931, with 45,000 participants. All Zionist youth organizations were part of 'Maccabi.' 'Maccabi' organized numerous sports events, including the 'Maccabi Games,' parades, instructors' workshops, camps for children. The club has its own libraries, choirs, bands and the Kfar ha-Maccabi fund for settling in Palestine.

## **22 Ha-Poel (Ha-Poel Jewish Workers' Sports Club, from Hebrew 'worker')**

An association of sports clubs founded in Haifa in 1924. Many of the members were European clubs. Ha-Poel was associated with the Poalei Zion Right party. The first Ha-Poel clubs in Poland were founded in 1929 in Lublin and Lutsk. In 1932, a nationwide organization was founded. The Polish clubs were particularly successful in football. In all, there were 120 Ha-Poel clubs in Poland before the war, with a total of 6,000 members.

## **23 Polish Legions**

A military formation operating in the period 1914-17, formally subordinate to the Austro-Hungarian army but fighting for Polish independence. Commanded by Jozef Pilsudski. From 1915 the Legions came under German command, but some of the Legionnaires refused, which led to the collapse of



the organization.

## **24 Pogrom in Przytyk**

The most notorious pre-war pogrom of Jews in Poland. It took place in Przytyk, a small town near Radom, during the spring fair on 9th March 1936. Because tensions in the town had already run high for some time due to a brutal boycott of Jewish shops carried out by the Polish nationalists, Jews organized a 20-strong, armed self-defense squad for the duration of the fair. On 9th March, following an incident with a nationalist urging the boycott of Jews, peasants attending the fair started demolishing the Jewish stalls. The self-defense squad intervened, shots were fired. A Pole, Stanislaw Wiesniak, was fatally wounded. That further aggravated the situation, with the peasants forcing their way into Jewish homes and stores, demolishing them, breaking windows; 20 people were heavily beaten up and two - Mr. and Mrs. Josek and Chaja Minkowski - were killed. Order was only introduced by police forces brought in from nearby Radom. Several weeks later a trial was held: the Jew accused of fatally shooting the Polish peasant was sentenced to eight years in jail, two others to five and six years, the Poles accused of murdering the Minkowskis were acquitted. The Przytyk pogrom sparked strong protests in Poland and abroad, becoming the symbol of Polish anti-Semitism of the 1930s.

## **25 Anti-Semitism in Poland in the 1930s**

From 1935-39 the activities of Polish anti-Semitic propaganda intensified. The Sejm introduced barriers to ritual slaughter, restrictions of Jews' access to education and certain professions. Nationalistic factions postulated the removal of Jews from political, social and cultural life, and agitated for economic boycotts to persuade all the country's Jews to emigrate. Nationalist activists took up posts outside Jewish shops and stalls, attempting to prevent Poles from patronizing them. Such campaigns were often combined with damage and looting of shops and beatings, sometimes with fatal consequences. From June 1935 until 1937 there were over a dozen pogroms, the most publicized of which was the pogrom in Przytyk in 1936. The Catholic Church also contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism.

## **26 Jewish cemeteries in Warsaw**

There were two Jewish cemeteries in Warsaw - at Gesia Street (presently Okopowa) on the left bank, and in the Targowek/Brodno neighborhood in the right-bank district of Praga. The Praga cemetery was in operation since 1780. In 1806, the Jewish Community of Warsaw, founded in the late 18th century, opened its own cemetery beyond the town embankments at the exit of Gesia Street. Some 150,000 people had been buried there by 1939. It is one of the last active Jewish cemeteries in Poland.

## **27 German Invasion of Poland**

The German attack of Poland on 1st September 1939 is widely considered the date in the West for the start of World War II. After having gained both Austria and the Bohemian and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that he could acquire Poland without having to fight Britain and France. (To eliminate the possibility of the Soviet Union fighting if Poland were attacked, Hitler made a pact with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.) On the morning of 1st September

1939, German troops entered Poland. The German air attack hit so quickly that most of Poland's air force was destroyed while still on the ground. To hinder Polish mobilization, the Germans bombed bridges and roads. Groups of marching soldiers were machine-gunned from the air, and they also aimed at civilians. On 1st September, the beginning of the attack, Great Britain and France sent Hitler an ultimatum - withdraw German forces from Poland or Great Britain and France would go to war against Germany. On 3rd September, with Germany's forces penetrating deeper into Poland, Great Britain and France both declared war on Germany.

## **28 Warsaw Ghetto**

A separate residential district for Jews in Warsaw created over several months in 1940. On 16th November 1940 138,000 people were enclosed behind its walls. Over the following months the population of the ghetto increased as more people were relocated from the small towns surrounding the city. By March 1941 445,000 people were living in the ghetto. Subsequently, the number of the ghetto's inhabitants began to fall sharply as a result of disease, hunger, deportation, persecution and liquidation. The ghetto was also systematically reduced in size. The internal administrative body was the Jewish Council (Judenrat). The Warsaw ghetto ceased to exist on 15th May 1943, when the Germans pronounced the failure of the uprising, staged by the Jewish soldiers, and razed the area to the ground.

## **29 Armbands**

From the beginning of the occupation, the German authorities issued all kinds of decrees discriminating against the civilian population, in particular the Jews. On 1st December 1939 the Germans ordered all Jews over the age of 12 to wear a distinguishing emblem. In Warsaw it was a white armband with a blue star of David, to be worn on the right sleeve of the outer garment. In some towns Jews were forced to sew yellow stars onto their clothes. Not wearing the armband was punishable - initially with a beating, later with a fine or imprisonment, and from 15th October 1941 with the death penalty (decree issued by Governor Hans Frank).

## **30 Flight eastwards, 1939**

From the moment of the German attack on Poland on 1st September 1939, Poles began to flee from areas in immediate danger of invasion to the eastern territories, which gave the impression of being safer. When in the wake of the Soviet aggression (17th September) Poland was divided into Soviet and German-occupied zones, hundreds of thousands of refugees from central and western Poland found themselves in the Soviet zone, and more continued to arrive, often waiting weeks for permits to cross the border. The majority of those fleeing the German occupation were Jews. The status of the refugees was different to that of locals: they were treated as dubious elements. During the passport campaign (the issue of passports, i.e. ID, to the new USSR - formerly Polish - citizens) of spring 1940, refugees were issued with documents bearing the proviso that they were prohibited from settling within 100 km of the border. At the end of June 1940 the Soviet authorities launched a vast deportation campaign, during which 82,000 refugees were transported deep into the Soviet Union, mainly to the Novosibirsk and Archangelsk districts. 84% of those deported in that campaign were Jews, and 11% Poles. The deportees were subjected to harsh physical labor. Paradoxically, for the Jews, exile proved their salvation: a year later, when the Soviet Union's western border areas were occupied by the Germans, those Jews who had managed to stay put,

perished in the Holocaust.

### **31 Kalinin, Mikhail (1875-1946)**

Soviet politician, one of the editors of the party newspaper Pravda, chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets of the RSFSR (1919-1922), chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR (1922-1938), chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (1938-1946). He was one of Stalin's closest political allies.

### **32 Great Patriotic War**

On 22nd June 1941 at 5 o'clock in the morning Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Patriotic War. The German blitzkrieg, known as Operation Barbarossa, nearly succeeded in breaking the Soviet Union in the months that followed. Caught unprepared, the Soviet forces lost whole armies and vast quantities of equipment to the German onslaught in the first weeks of the war. By November 1941 the German army had seized the Ukrainian Republic, besieged Leningrad, the Soviet Union's second largest city, and threatened Moscow itself. The war ended for the Soviet Union on 9th May 1945.

### **33 Kulaks**

In the Soviet Union the majority of wealthy peasants that refused to join collective farms and give their grain and property to Soviet power were called kulaks, declared enemies of the people and exterminated in the 1930s.

### **34 Union of Polish Patriots (ZPP)**

Political organization founded in March 1943 by Polish communists in the USSR. It served Stalin's policy with regard to the Polish question. The ZPP drew up the terms on which the communists took power in post-war Poland. It developed its range of activities more fully after the Soviet authorities broke off diplomatic contact with the government of the Republic of Poland in exile (Apr. 1943). The upper ranks of the ZPP were dominated by communists (from Jan. 1944 concentrated in the Central Bureau of Polish Communists), who did not reveal the organization's long-term aims. The ZPP propagated slogans such as armed combat against the Germans, alliance with the USSR, parliamentary democracy and moderate social and economic reforms in post-war Poland, and redefinition of Poland's eastern border. It considered the ruling bodies of the Republic of Poland in exile to be illegal. It conducted propaganda campaigns (its press organ was called 'Wolna Polska' - Free Poland), and organized community care and education and cultural activities. From May 1943 it co-operated in the organization of the First Kosciuszko Infantry Division, and later the Polish Army in the USSR (1944). In July 1944, the ZPP was formally subordinated to the National Council and participated in the formation of the Polish Committee for National Liberation. From 1944-46, the ZPP resettled Poles and Jews from the USSR to Poland. It was dissolved in August 1946.

### **35 Repatriations**

Post-war repatriations from the USSR included displaced persons deported to the Soviet Union during the war, but also native inhabitants of what had been eastern Poland before the war and

what was annexed to the Soviet Union in 1945. In the years 1945-1950, 266,000 people were repatriated, among them around 150,000 Jews. The name 'repatriation' is commonly used, despite the fact that those were often not voluntary.

### **36 Polish authorities in Lublin in 1944**

On 22nd July 1944, in Lublin Chelm the Polish Committee for National Liberation (PKWN) announced the assuming of power in Poland. The Committee was founded two days earlier in Moscow, was an organ completely dependent on Stalin and dominated by communists. A manifest published by PKWN described a temporary system of power in Poland. The function of a Parliament was assumed by the National Council - also dominated by the communists' joint representation of left-wing organizations. PKWN was the only executive authority and could issue decrees with a power of laws. It began creating local administration, at first in the form of national councils, later bringing back the institutions of voivodes and prefects. PKWN also began organizing Milicja and local Offices of Public Safety (political police). It also commanded the People's Army, created by combining the Polish division of the Red Army and the underground army (communist People's Army and Polish units of Soviet partisanship). On 31st December 1944, the PKWN was converted into the Temporal Government and considered by the Soviet Union to be the only authority in Poland.

### **37 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 so-called 'Grossaktion' [great liquidation campaign] in the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942. In addition to 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 2nd August 1943 an uprising broke out there with the aim of enabling some 200 people to escape. The majority died.

### **38 Korczak, Janusz (1878/79-1942)**

Polish Jewish doctor, pedagogue, writer of children's literature. He was the co-founder and director (from 1911) of the Jewish orphanage in Warsaw. He also ran a similar orphanage for Polish children. Korczak was in charge of the Jewish orphanage when it was moved to the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940. He was one of the best-known figures behind the ghetto wall, refusing to leave the ghetto and his charges. He was deported to the Treblinka extermination camp with his charges in August 1942. The whole transport was murdered by the Nazis shortly after its arrival in the camp.

### **39 Central Committee of Polish Jews**

It was founded in 1944, with the aim of representing Jews in dealings with the state authorities and organizing and co-coordinating aid and community care for Holocaust survivors. Initially it operated from Lublin as part of the Polish Committee of National Liberation. The CCPJ's activities were subsidized by the Joint, and in time began to cover all areas of the reviving Jewish life. In 1950 the CCPJ merged with the Jewish Cultural Society to form the Social and Cultural Society of Polish Jews.

### **40 Jews settling in Lower Silesia after World War II**

The Jews of the German province of Silesia either emigrated or were killed during the Nazi regime. In 1939 there were 15,480 Jews living in the region, most of who perished during the war. A new influx of Jews began in 1945 after the region was incorporated into Poland. Of the 52,000 or so Jews that arrived there (mostly from Eastern Poland incorporated into the Soviet Union), 10,000 settled in Wroclaw (Breslau), others moved mainly to Legnica (Liegnitz), Dzierzoniow (Reichenbach) and Walbrzych (Waldenburg).

### **41 Fighting Youth Union (ZWM)**

Communist youth organization founded in 1943. The ZWM was subordinate to the Polish Workers' Party (PPR). In 1943-44 it participated in battles against the Germans, and hit squads carried out diversion and retaliation campaigns, mainly in Warsaw, one of which was the attack on the Café Club in October 1943. In 1944 the ZWM was involved in the creation and defense of a system of authority organized by the PPR; the battle against the underground independence movement; the rebuilding of the economy from the ravages of war; and social and economic transformations. The ZWM also organized sports, cultural and educational clubs. The main ZWM paper was 'Walka Mlodych.' In July 1944 ZWM had a few hundred members, but by 1948 it counted some 250,000. Leading activists: H. Szapiro ('Hanka Sawicka'), J. Krasicki, Z. Jaworska and A. Kowalski. In July 1948 it merged with three other youth organizations to become the Polish Youth Union.

### **42 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)**

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during World War I. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported cultural amenities and brought religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from Europe and from Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

#### **43 Poalei Zion (the Jewish Social-Democratic Workers' Party Workers of Zion)**

In Yiddish 'Yidishe Socialistish-Demokratishe Arbeiter Partei Poale Syon.' A political party formed in 1905 in the Kingdom of Poland, and operating throughout the Polish state from 1918. The party's main aim was to create an independent socialist Jewish state in Palestine. In the short term, Poalei Zion postulated cultural and national autonomy for the Jews in Poland, and improved labor and living conditions of Jewish hired laborers. In 1920, during a conference in Vienna, the party split, forming the Right Poalei Zion (the Jewish Socialist Workers' Party Workers of Zion), which became part of the Socialist Workers' International and the World Zionist Organization, and the Left Poalei Zion (the Jewish Social-Democratic Workers' Party Workers of Zion), the radical minority, which sympathized with the Bolsheviks. The Left Poalei Zion placed more emphasis on socialist postulates. Key activists: I. Schiper (Right PZ), L. Holenderski, I. Lew (Left PZ); paper: Arbeiter Welt. Both fractions had their own youth organizations: Right PZ: Dror and Freiheit; Left PZ - Jugnt. Left PZ was weaker than Right PZ; only towards the end of the 1930s did it start to form coalitions with other socialist and Zionist parties. In 1937 Left PZ joined the World Zionist Organization. During WWII both fractions were active in underground politics and the resistance movement in the ghettos, in particular the youth organizations. After 1945 both parties joined the Central Jewish Committee in Poland. In 1947 they reunited to form the strongest legally active Jewish party in Poland (with 20,000 members). In 1950 Poalei Zion was dissolved by the communist authorities.

#### **44 Bund in Poland**

Largest and most influential Jewish workers' party in pre-war Poland. Founded 1897 in Vilnius. From 1915, the Polish branch operated independently. Ran in parliamentary and local elections. Bund identified itself as a socialist Jewish party, criticized the Soviet Union and communism, rejected Zionism as a utopia, and Orthodoxy as a barrier on the road towards progress, demanded the abolition of all discrimination against Jews, fully equal rights for them, and the right for the free development of Yiddish-language secular Jewish culture. Bund enjoyed particularly strong support in central and south-eastern Poland, especially in large cities. Controlled numerous organizations: women's, youth, sport, educational (TsIShO), as well as trade unions. Affiliated with the party were a youth organization, Tsukunft, and a children's organization, Skif. During the war, the Bund operated underground, and participated in armed resistance, including in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as part of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) led by Marek Edelman. After the war, the Bund leaders joined the Central Committee of Polish Jews, where they postulated, in opposition to the Zionists, a reconstruction of the Jewish community in Poland. In January 1949, the Bund leaders dissolved the organization, urging its members to join the communist Polish United Workers' Party.

#### **45 ORT in Poland**

(Abbreviation for Russ. Obshchestvo Rasprostraneniya Truda sredi Yevreyev, originally meaning "Society for Manual [and Agricultural] Work [among Jews]," and later-from 1921-"Society for Spreading [Artisan and Agricultural] Work [among Jews]") It was founded in 1880 in St. Petersburg (Russia) and originally designed to help Russian Jews. One of the problems which ORT tackled was to help the working Jewish youth and craftsmen to integrate into the industrialization. This especially had an impact on the Eastern European countries after World War I. ORT expanded during World War II, when it became a world organization with branches in France, Germany,

England, America and elsewhere, in addition to former Russian territories like Poland, Lithuania and Bessarabia. In Poland it operated from 1921 as the Organization for the Development of Industrial, Craft and Agricultural Creativity among the Jewish Population. It provided training in non-commercial trades, chiefly crafts. ORT had a network of schools, provided advanced educational courses for adults and trained teachers. In 1950 it was accused of espionage, its board was expelled from the country and its premises were taken over by the Treasury. After 1956 its activities in Poland were resumed, but following the anti-Semitic campaign in 1968 the communist authorities once again dissolved all the Polish branches of this organization.

#### **46 Anti-Zionist campaign in Poland**

From 1962-1967 a campaign got underway to sack Jews employed in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the army and the central administration. The background to 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 a lack of loyalty to the state and of publicly demonstrating their enthusiasm for Israel's victory in the Six-Day-War. This address marked the start of purges among journalists and 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. After 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.

#### **47 Jaruzelski, Wojciech (1923)**

Politician and general, First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party and President of Poland. From 1943 he served in the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR, and from 1944 in the Polish Army. In 1956 he became the youngest general in the Polish People's Army. From April 1968 to November 1983 he was minister of defense, from November 1983 to December 1990 Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces in time of war. He was responsible for the use of the army in the bloody suppression of the December incidents on the Baltic coast in 1970. From October 1981 to July 1989 Jaruzelski was the First Secretary of the PZPR's Central Committee, and then until December 1990 President of the Polish People's Republic (subsequently the Republic of Poland). He took the decision to enforce martial law in Poland in 1981-83 and later made unsuccessful attempts at moderate political and economic reforms, while keeping the state system intact and applying limited repression against the political opposition. In 1988-89 he was one of the initiators of the Round Table negotiations. Following the parliamentary elections in June 1989 he did not oppose the relinquishment of state power to the opposition.

#### **48 Mostowicz, Arnold (1914-2002)**

Writer and cultural activist. Born in Lodz into a Jewish family; his father was an industrialist but also a cultural activist and theater director. Mostowicz studied medicine in Toulouse, and returned to

Poland shortly before the outbreak of World War II. He worked in the Lodz ghetto as a doctor. He was imprisoned in Auschwitz. He did not return to medicine after the war, turning instead to writing. He wrote science fiction novels and popular science books. He was also a journalist and publicist. He is the author of the novel 'The Ballad of Blind Max,' and the volume 'Lodz My Forbidden Love,' in which he revealed his ties with his native city. He was the president of the Monumentum Iudaicum Lodzense Foundation.

#### **49 The Association of Jewish War Veterans and Victims of Prosecutions during World War II (Stowarzyszenie Żydów Kombatantów i Poszkodowanych w II wojnie)**

An organization of Jewish war veterans, who had taken part in armed struggle against Nazi Germany, and were victims of Holocaust persecution. The organization was founded in 1991. It has 13 sections throughout Poland, and 150 members. Its aims include providing help to Jews who were victimized during the war and spreading knowledge about the struggle and victimization of Jews during WWII. The Association established the Medal of the 50th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which is granted to persons who have made important contributions to Polish-Jewish life and dialogue.

#### **50 Home Army (Armia Krajowa - AK)**

Conspiratorial military organization, part of the Polish armed forces operating within Polish territory (within pre-1st September 1939 borders) during World War II. Created on 14th February 1942, subordinate to the Supreme Commander and the Polish Government in Exile. Its mission was to regain Poland's sovereignty through armed combat and inciting to a national uprising. In 1943 the AK had over 300,000 members. AK units organized diversion, sabotage, revenge and partisan campaigns. Its military intelligence was highly successful. On 19th January 1945 the AK was disbanded on the order of its commander, but some of its members continued their independence activities throughout 1945-47. In 1944-45 tens of thousands of AK soldiers were exiled and interned in the USSR, in places such as Ryazan, Borovichi and Ostashkov. Soldiers of the AK continued to suffer repression in Poland until 1956; many were sentenced to death or long-term imprisonment on trumped-up charges. Right after the war, official propaganda accused the Home Army of murdering Jews who were hiding in the forests. There is no doubt that certain AK units as well as some individuals tied to AK were in fact guilty of such acts. The scale of this phenomenon is very difficult to determine, and has been the object of debates among historians.

#### **51 National Armed Forces (NSZ)**

A conspiratorial military organization founded in Poland in 1942. The main goal of the NSZ was to fight for the independence of Poland and new western borders along the Oder-Neisse line. The NSZ's program stressed nationalism, rejected fascism and communism, and propounded the creation of a Catholic Polish State. The NSZ program was strongly anti-Semitic. In October 1943 the NSZ had some 72,500 members. The NSZ was preparing for an armed uprising, assuming that the Red Army would occupy all the Polish lands. It provided support for military intelligence, conducted supply campaigns, freed prisoners, and engaged in armed combat with divisions of the People's Army and Soviet partisans. NSZ divisions (approx. 2,000 soldiers) took part in the Warsaw Uprising. In November 1944 a part of the NSZ was transformed into the National Military Union (NZW), which was active underground in late 1945/early 1946 (scores of divisions numbering 2,000-4,000



soldiers), fighting the NKVD, UB (Security Bureau) task forces, and divisions of the UPA. In 1947 most of its cells were smashed, although some groups remained underground until the mid-1950s.

## **52 Endeks**

Name formed from the initials of a right-wing party active in Poland during the inter-war period (ND - 'en-de'). Narodowa Demokracja [National Democracy] was founded by Roman Dmowski. Its members and supporters, known as 'Endeks,' often held anti-Semitic views.